

Building Citizenship

6th YEAR

A SEA

of words

Short stories by 17 young writers

A Sea of Words - 6th year

Building Citizenship

Short stories by 17 young writers



European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)

Girona, 20
08010 Barcelona
www.iemed.org

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Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation
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A Sea of Words

Coordination:
Maria-Àngels Roque, Hoda Omera

IEMed Working Team:
Blanca Gago, Martina Bernabai

Design:
Núria Esparza

Layout:
Sintagma, Creacions editorials

Acknowledgements:
Elisabetta Bartuli, Jamila Hassoune, Katja Knezevic, Pere-Antoni Pons, National Networks of the Anna Lindh Foundation

Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures

Bibliotheca Alexandrina
P.O. Box 732 El Mancheya
Alexandria 21 111 – Egypt
www.euromedalex.org
info@euromedalex.org

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Andreu Claret

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Foreword

Senén Florensa Executive President,
European Institute of the Mediterranean

The project “A Sea of Words” began in 2008, jointly promoted by the European Institute of the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation. The objective was to help foster dialogue between the countries of Europe and the Mediterranean through the exchange of experiences and knowledge between young people. Every year, the contest adopts a different motto, and this sixth year we have chosen “Construyamos ciudadanía” / “Building citizenship”. Thus, the short stories explore participation, citizenship and democracy. In the framework of the European Year of Citizens and after the processes known as the Arab Springs in several southern Mediterranean countries, the latest contest has sought to focus on a theme that values the development of participatory democracy, freedom of expression and the rights owed to all citizens, both men and women. The participation of 240 youths from 35 countries renews confidence in the idea that young people realise that we can only build a society in which the expression of universal and shared values of liberty and modernity emerges out of the efforts and participatory activism of civil society.

The richness that comes from the existence of different cultures and traditions in the Euro-Mediterranean area deserves to be preserved as one of our most valuable assets. Enhancing knowledge and education related to this great heritage is a necessary route to developing citizenship in each one of the countries and regions, both north and south. Therefore, it is important for the actions of dialogue to create greater interaction between individuals, whether they are possible “narrators” or potential “listeners” to written tales, just as we propose with the publication of the finalists’ stories.

Once again, the project “A Sea of Words” reflects the need to strengthen and prioritise a more structured cultural exchange in order to involve citizens from the Euromed zone – and, particularly, young people – in the management of the complexities of our socio-political reality and call their attention to the need for more direct intellectual involvement in the active participation of civil society. Thus, the short stories in the contest – both those based on reality and others that are purely fictional – deal with the development of social solidarity and the participation of civil society in the consolidation of the democratic processes that in many Mediterranean countries are beginning to tentatively move forward. Unfortunately, there is still much to do, and proof of this is the message we received from the finalist Sayed Ismail, living in Gaza, who told us why he could not attend the awards ceremony and the activities held in Barcelona for the 17 finalists of the contest. Sayed wrote: “I would be glad to be among you now in Barcelona, but I can’t. I am still in Gaza, because the Rafah border was closed six days ago. Going to Barcelona was a big dream for me as I would be able to explain the horrible situation in my country. To visit the Rambla market and eat delicious seafood, to see the statue of Columbus, the harbour from which the three ships set sail to discover the new world, to contact with many

young writers from many countries and tell them that we can't travel freely like them, and how we try to have our normal daily life, during wars, crises, and bloody conflicts, but there's no chance..." This moving account reflects civil society's struggle to ensure that in the future young people will not have to give up their dreams and be able to live freely, exercise their rights, learn and relate to each other without fear.

In their stories, the three young winners of this year's "A Sea of Words" have clearly shown the spirit of open citizenship that we have encouraged at the IEMed. The short story "Zmajski Most", by Daniel López Bončina, uses the first person to relate the experiences in the life of a young Argentinean man travelling to Slovenia, the land of his mother. There he has to struggle to adapt to the new country, language, work, friends and love. The second winning story, "Errors Allowed", by the Greek Christoforos Pavlakis, describes the feelings and memories of a prisoner who gains his freedom and must confront a new world and a new life after 30 years in prison. The third award went to the story "Water City", by the Montenegrin Dragana Tripkovic, and reflects how an old man sees the changes experienced by his city through his meeting with an immigrant girl.

The 17 short stories selected in the sixth "A Sea of Words" show the importance of and need for dialogue between societies and citizens as a basis for learning and coexistence. Therefore, at the IEMed and the Anna Lindh Foundation we will go on working in this direction, using the tools within our reach, in an effort to offer the young people of the Euro-Mediterranean region a future full of possibilities.

Foreword

Andreu Claret Executive Director,
Anna Lindh Foundation

It has been in Egypt, more than in any other place, where I have discovered that literature can be a powerful source of knowledge. When I arrived in Alexandria five years ago, I was supposed to land in one of the most stable countries in the world. This reflected not only the traditional (and quite Orientalist) stereotypes about the existence of a supposed immutable Orient, which I had put aside a long time ago after reading Edward Said, but also the conclusion of dozens of analysis articles I read about Egypt, posted on the websites by the most important think tanks, and written by the most reliable experts. One of them told me: “You are a lucky guy! You will enjoy long weekends in Upper Egypt and Sharm el Sheikh.” With a few exceptions, that was the main prediction. It was based on the idea that the Mubarak regime would be there as long as the clique in power decided on the system of succession ... by his son of course.

As everybody knows (now) things are quite different and, in the last three years, there have not been many weekends available for trips to the Sinai beaches. From what was supposed to be the most stable country in the world (a kind of Arab North Korea) I found myself, a few weeks after the assassination of Khaled Said (June 2010), witnessing one of the most turbulent times of my professional and personal life: the so- (and wrongly) called Arab Spring. A fascinating opportunity to witness the historical, unexpected and unpredictable changes experienced by the Arab societies.

Unpredictable, for sure. But really unexpected? According to the established thinkers, yes. But essays are not the only source of knowledge. Literature (Egyptian literature) was very helpful for me to understand that “something” was going to happen. I remember at least three novels which were decisive in this regard. The inevitable *Yacoubian Building* by Ala el-Aswany, read before packing, but also *Taxi*, by Khaled el-Khamissi, and *Zaat*, by Sonallah Ibrahim, both of them read during my first year in Alexandria. The three authors convinced me that there was something missing in the expert analysis and that behind the image of a country in which Gross Domestic Product growth was close to two digits, deep tectonic movements were going to shake Egyptian society sooner or later. The death of Khaled Said and the uprising in Tunisia set the plates in motion and provoked a social and cultural tsunami which is still affecting the region.

I apologise for focusing my speech on a personal experience, but I think that it can be interesting for all of you to give an example of a real impact of literature as a source of knowledge. Literature is, of course, more than that. More or less. Some very good works I have had the pleasure to read in my life did not intend to make any social or political impact, even to facilitate knowledge or to anticipate tsunamis. But your work can play this role because, as a general trend, literature has the capacity to go beyond, to go deeper into the understanding of human or social feelings, to give us a glimpse of what life can be, for better or for worse.

So, please let me end by thanking all the participants of the literary contest “A Sea of Words” 2013 for making our societies more understandable, which is a first step to making them better places to live. And to live together in diversity (which is, by the way, the purpose of the Anna Lindh Foundation). Let me also thank the IEMed for sharing this contest with the Anna Lindh Foundation. The fact that this is the sixth “A Sea of Words” shows better than any speech the interest in a contest which this year has attracted 280 participants. I thank all of them for participating and for showing through all these stories how we can build citizenship in the Euro-Mediterranean region.



Visit to Girona by the young winners of the 2013 "A Sea of Words".

Zmajski Most

Daniel López Bončina. Eslovenia

Seres mitológicos de miles y miles de leyendas. Su sola mención bordea el sendero de los sueños y nos adentra en la fantasía. Existen alrededor del mundo, a veces ignorados, viajan, se mezclan entre culturas hasta ser guardianes de historias.

En Egipto, el dragón se convirtió en la sabiduría y el renacer. Aunque muchas veces su grandeza se opacó al provocar miedo y desolación, como ese que San Jorge venció... Cierto es que algunos dragones abrazan culturas mientras otros las destruyen. Extraña su intención de imponerse a ellas por la fuerza. Existe un grupo excluido, uno que vivió siempre en conflicto con sus orígenes, su simple existencia representa *el choque* luego de la conquista.

En Sudamérica, los dragones andinos, misceláneos, no volvieron a ser iguales fruto del encuentro de culturas y grandes guerras. Su naturaleza mutó en algo indefinido. Cenizas del pasado fusionadas, petrificadas... fueron los cimientos y un punto de partida para comenzar su renacimiento.

*...Jasón blandió su espada y rescató a la princesa. El dragón se transformó en un símbolo en-
vuelto en un sinfín de susurros urbanos.*

Sonrisa y cara de asombro. Así terminaba mi abuelo la leyenda que no me cansaba de escucharle.

Hoy, en este puente con cuatro dragones de bronce, aquellas palabras son ecos lejanos.

Hace unos días recibí el correo de un amigo. Finalmente me consiguió el puesto en su redacción. Un sueño cumplido luego de mucha espera. Algo que me rebobinó hacia algunos momentos...

Mi infancia fue como la de cualquiera. Mi mamá era hija de eslovenos que se conocieron luego de dejar su país en guerra.

Nací en Buenos Aires, aquella ciudad ya no era cosmopolita pero, aun así, muchas colectividades se esforzaban por guardar las tradiciones de sus abuelos. Una regla fundamental era casarse entre miembros de la comunidad, de la cual mi familia no formó parte. Tal vez porque mi mamá se casó con mi papá: un argentino sin descendencia eslovena.

Era chico cuando mi abuelo falleció y muy distraído cuando mi abuela se fue con él. Nunca supe mucho de ellos, solo que ella adoraba al Mariscal Tito y él lo detestaba. Incomprensible, pero se casaron en Argentina. Su pasado siempre fue tabú, incluso para su círculo más íntimo.

Al crecer y terminar mis estudios de periodismo, ese legado esloveno-argentino de alguna forma convivía conmigo. El único conflicto eran las fiestas de la colectividad, donde solo íbamos mamá y yo. Mi papá no se sentía cómodo en ese ambiente. Hijos y nietos de inmigrantes aparecían luciendo extravagantes (el trabajo de generaciones) y pronunciándose sobre su «eslovenidad», muchos ni se reconocían argentinos, catalogaban su lugar de nacimiento como un simple accidente. Se divertían criticando a la nueva inmigración latina, sin pensar en que

muchos de sus progenitores estaban presentes. Al escucharlos entendía lo sencillo que fue para mi familia alejarse de la comunidad. Pero no todos eran así, algunos guardaban un perfil más humilde para conversar.

En el último evento al que asistí buscaba la soledad, comía algún que otro canapé, pero mi mamá no se cansaba de comentarles que había terminado la universidad y, entre otras cosas: «el lunes bailará en un salón de tango en San Telmo», decía. Al escuchar sus comentarios deseaba tener un caparazón donde esconderme. Esas actitudes eran irritantes. No comprendía porqué seguíamos yendo a esos eventos. Ella podría haber viajado a Eslovenia cuando se democratizó y así dejar de vivir esos falsos simulacros de realidad patriótica. Sin embargo, nunca entendí por qué se quedó.

Por suerte llegó Ivan, el mejor amigo de mi abuelo, casi no podía moverse. Estaba con su mujer Mara. Caminé hacia él y lo primero que hizo fue felicitarme:

–Tu mamá me contó...

–...

Susurró que me estaba escribiendo una carta de recomendación para una beca de estudios en Ljubljana. Hace tiempo le había comentado que quería continuar mis estudios allá, pero él sugirió que primero mejorara mi esloveno. Lo entendía, el idioma no era algo que practicara todos los días. Le agradecí, pero ya no estaba en mis planes emprender un viaje, la crisis no se estabilizaba y el euro cada día aumentaba centavos.

–Además, un amigo prometió buscarme un puesto en su redacción –expliqué.

–¿Quién? ¿El muchacho que se va a España?

–No. El que viaja es Gonzalo, un ex compañero de la universidad a quien le dieron la ciudadanía por una ley que repara algunos daños de la guerra del 36. Y aprovechó...

–¡Bah! Eso se llama oportunismo político para juntar más votos –replicaba Ivan como había hecho el abuelo de Gonzalo, un republicano de nacimiento. Pero a Gonzalo no le importaba, ya se había ido a probar suerte en Girona.

Ivan fue cortante:

–Las crisis son eternas, siempre hay más o menos. Con esperar a que esto se acabe te vas a ser viejo sin haber visto nada. Si tuviera tu edad... –sonrió y soltó una de sus miradas de cansancio.

Pocos días después sonó el teléfono, Ivan había sido internado. En el hospital solo mi mamá pasó a verlo y me aconsejó que no entrara. Al día siguiente falleció.

Luego del funeral acompañamos a Mara hasta su casa, se mostraba serena como si se hubiera preparado hace tiempo. Tomamos un café y antes de irnos me dio un escrito que Ivan había firmado antes de ser internado. Era la carta de recomendación para la beca de la escuela de esloveno en Ljubljana. Apliqué para el curso de idioma y la beca que cubría los gastos de alojamiento, ya que entre los requisitos pedían tener ciudadanía eslovena y una carta de recomendación de un miembro de dicha comunidad en Argentina. La obtuve sin problemas y, aunque quería irme, no estaba muy seguro.

Hubo una nueva crisis en el sector agropecuario. La inflación subió, todos hablaban de corrupción y del advenimiento de un nuevo 2001. Estaba diplomado y sin trabajo, proyectar un futuro en medio de tales desastres económicos inclinó la balanza. ¿Cuánto tenía que esperar para que

las cosas cambiaran? Vendí mi auto, compré todos los euros que pude. No tenía ni un plan definido ni certezas, aun así soñaba con la tierra prometida.

Mi familia se resistía a verme partir, pero ya había decidido tomar las riendas del azar, estaba diplomado y la única atadura en Argentina eran ellos.

En el aeropuerto papá decía que esté preparado para todo, mamá no dejaba de llorar y abrazarme. Repetía: «Cuidate», y todas esas cosas que suelen decir las madres al ver a sus hijos abandonar el nido.

Fue traumático, dejaba mi hogar con la esperanza de encontrar la independencia en lo desconocido. Lejos de sus caras, mientras pasaba por migración, una angustia se atoraba en mi garganta convirtiéndose, por momentos, en terror vivo. Lejos ya, muy lejos, una escala antes de Ljubljana, en Frankfurt, cayó de mis ojos alguna lágrima que apañé al instante dentro de un baño. La impresión de ese aeropuerto gigantesco era muy diferente al que conocí en Ezeiza.

En la escuela, durante las mañanas teníamos clases y en las tardes se organizaban excursiones a las que nunca iba. Aprovechaba el tiempo para buscar departamento, me comunicaba con los propietarios que solían pedirme pruebas de mi ciudadanía, al parecer mi acento era muy diferente. Muchas veces me encontré que al hablar esloveno con nativos, me contestaban automáticamente en inglés. No sabía si era por fatiga o por hacer fácil la comunicación, prefería pensar en esta última opción. Mi inglés mejoró bastante.

Por primera vez no podía definirme, lejos de mi casa mi identidad era eslovena o argentina, supongo que un papel decía algo que en mi cabeza parecía más complejo.

En la escuela conocí gente de Serbia, Perú, Italia y Bosnia. En su mayoría eran descendientes o estaban en pareja con eslovenos.

Una compañera de Perú me ayudó a encontrar un lugar cerca del centro, y aunque era un sótano, por el momento estaba bien.

Comencé a relacionarme con muchos inmigrantes de la ciudad, entre los cuales conocí a un montón de españoles que buscaban trabajo huyendo de la crisis desatada en su país. Juan, un profesor de literatura, era uno de los indignados. Preguntaba mucho sobre Argentina, los derechos humanos y la memoria.

—Algunas políticas encubren problemas como la mega-minería, en el norte de Argentina. Es financiada por empresas extranjeras que pactan con el gobierno, por una onza de oro destruyen montañas, envenenan el agua... —le contaba yo—. Soy pesimista, a pesar de los derechos humanos... el progreso es lento.

—Aunque sea existen políticas sociales. En España estuvimos adormecidos. Y aunque hubo estruendos de insomnio por los terroristas, creo dijimos basta demasiado tarde. No sé si se puede reparar el daño, también hay problemas ambientales por la construcción, pero la realidad es que, hoy, la política agoniza. La crisis se aviva como fuego hacia todos lados, hasta mi título está devaluado.

—No sé, acá respiro y vivo una crisis diferente, muy diferente a mi recuerdo del 2001.

—...

Finalmente, Juan viajó a Argentina.

Por mi parte, para sobrevivir trataba de ahorrar cada centavo mientras buscaba trabajo, pero nadie quería un periodista que no dominara a la perfección el idioma.

Es cierto que cualquier trabajo dignifica. Uno olvida los prejuicios heredados y con hambre hace lo que sea. Bajé mis expectativas de empleo. Trabajé de barrendero, hice mudanzas, empaqué ropa... en su mayoría, trabajos físicos. Aunque hablar español resultó ser una ventaja. Tuve que disfrazarme de dragón en *Zmajski Most* para una agencia de turismo y contar la leyenda de Jasón a grupos de españoles. Un día, mientras los españoles se divertían amenazando con tirarme al río para comprobar si los dragones también nadaban, pasó una chica con el pelo despeinado y se detuvo al escuchar el griterío de los turistas a mi alrededor. Repartió unos papeles que llevaba en la mano y desapareció mientras aquellos a quienes trataba de contarles la leyenda metían hojas en mi máscara.

Al caer la noche, limpiando el traje de dragón, encontré uno de esos papeles. Se promocionaban clases gratis de esloveno para extranjeros, fui sin dudar. Estudiar idiomas, sin beca, era caro.

Las clases las daban estudiantes en la Facultad de Filosofía y entre los organizadores estaba la despeinada. Hicieron una prueba de nivel y nos fueron separando en grupos después de una entrevista individual. Fui el primero.

Estaba solo en el aula, sentado y golpeando los dedos sobre una mesa, la puerta se abrió y entró ella. El tiempo se detuvo mientras de fondo sonaba una balada, como en esas películas donde la cámara sigue lentamente a la chica sin dejarnos parpadear. Se sentó suavemente como caen las hojas de otoño cuando no hay brisa. En pocos segundos la reconocí, estaba peinada, todas sus facciones eran dignas de ser admiradas y detalladas una por una, pero eso es cosa mía. Tomó mi examen, sacó sus gafas y leyendo mi apellido compuesto, preguntó de dónde era... al terminar calificó para un nivel avanzado y dijo que mi problema al hablar eran los nervios. Y cómo no estarlo junto a ella. Antes de irme le pregunté su nombre, se llamaba Vita.

El español volvió a ser útil cuando mi profesora, una estudiante de filología hispánica, me propuso hablar con ella una hora en español y otra hora esloveno. Un buen canje.

Con mi familia me comunicaba por Skype, siempre obviaba los detalles más deprimentes, tal vez por eso las conversaciones eran breves. Aunque el solo oírlos aliviaba la nostalgia de Buenos Aires. ¿Cómo serían aquellos días sin mí?

Estábamos en las últimas clases. En dos meses, Vita comenzó a saludarme normalmente aunque no habíamos vuelto a hablar desde la entrevista en cámara lenta.

Cuando la nieve cayó sin tregua, del sótano brotó una humedad que ennegreció las paredes. Enfermé. Algunos amigos venían a cuidarme de vez en cuando. Ese grupo, formado por mexicanos, españoles, tres chilenos, Sara, la chica de Serbia, y Peter, un abogado esloveno, fue mi gran apoyo; eran mi familia adoptiva. Con ellos pasé Navidad y Año Nuevo, enfermo pero contento.

En Fin de año, Peter llegó con Noelia, su novia, una argentina que estudiaría en la universidad por tres años. Resultó que ella también bailaba tango pero no tenía compañero de baile. Cuando sané, fuimos a bailar y resultó ser muy buena. Decidimos probar dar clases de tango pues, en ese mundo, mi cotidiano podía ser tan exótico como lo era para mí vivir en una ciudad con castillo.

Comenzamos a tener muchos estudiantes, su novio nos ayudó con los papeles debido a que éramos extranjeros, fue entonces cuando blandí mi ciudadanía en la municipalidad como si fuese una espada.

A una de las clases fue una pareja de argentinos descendientes de eslovenos. Dijeron ser argentinos y preguntaron:

–¿Cómo llegaste a Eslovenia?

–Mi mamá es argentina-eslovena.

–¿Cuál es tu apellido?

–...

–Ah, no *sos* puro...

Noelia escuchó el comentario, ajena a todo, dio por concluida la clase y no los volvimos a ver.

Última clase de esloveno, al anochecer fuimos a festejar a un bar. Sara conoció a un chico y fue la primera en irse. Entre el griterío de los Erasmus intenté conversar con Vita. Ella hizo señas de no oír... y salimos del bar. Las palabras salían con fluidez, hablamos y hablamos, y caminamos hasta la fuente Robba. Ahí encontramos a Sara llorando; el chico le había gritado *čefurka*¹. Fuimos hasta su casa conteniéndola hasta que se fue a dormir. Después acompañé a Vita al departamento que compartía con otras estudiantes. Nos despedimos hasta el miércoles y, en un juego de miradas nerviosas, nos dimos un beso en la mejilla. Aquí la gente suele darse la mano y dejan los besos para ocasiones especiales.

En el sótano tenía un mensaje de Argentina. Aquel amigo finalmente me había conseguido el puesto en la redacción. Me esperaba hasta el martes. Una mezcla de sensaciones se atoró nuevamente en mi garganta, y solo dos imágenes eran claras: Vita y el trabajo. Me sumergí en un mar de confusión y como nunca me abandoné a los pros y los contras.

Pros: Vivo en una ciudad segura y limpia, hice nuevos amigos, enseño tango.

Contra: Extraño mis costumbres, a mis viejos amigos, no vivo del periodismo, ella no vive allá.

Esperando en este puente donde la vi por primera vez, cae el atardecer... rodeado de cuatro dragones que me dan la espalda. Vita viene caminando como una princesa, nos encontramos a mitad del puente y antes de decir *Živjo*, la abrazo y tiembla levemente. Se tranquiliza. Vamos hasta una *kavarna*, difícil de encontrar la noche del miércoles, hablamos de cualquier cosa...

–Sabías que *Zmajski Most* fue construido después de que un terremoto destruyera el puente anterior... hace más de un siglo y continúa sin un rasguño... no se esperaba que aguantara tanto.

–Será por los dragones... –le sonrío y al ver sus ojos, mientras toma sorbitos de café, comprendo por «quién» mi mamá había decidido quedarse. En aquellas páginas de historia familiar, lo que se veía como tabú en realidad era un ilusionado renacer.

¹ Expresión despectiva utilizada en Eslovenia para referirse a los naturales del sur de los Balcanes.

Zmajski Most

Daniel López Bončina. Slovenia

Mythological beasts from thousands and thousands of legends. Their mere mention borders the path of dreams and takes us into fantasy. They exist around the world, often ignored; they travel and mix between cultures until becoming guardians of stories.

In Egypt, the dragon became wisdom and rebirth, although its grandeur was often tarnished as it provoked fear and desolation, like the one defeated by Saint George... It is true that some dragons embrace cultures while others destroy them. Their attempt to impose themselves by force is surprising. There is an excluded group, one that always lived in conflict with its origins. Its simple existence represents *the clash* after the conquest.

In South America, the miscellaneous Andean dragons were never the same after the meeting of cultures and great wars. Their nature mutated into something undefined. Ashes of the past merged together, petrified ... they were the foundations and starting point for their rebirth.

...Jason brandished his sword and rescued the princess. The dragon became a symbol enveloped in countless urban whispers.

A smile and a face of astonishment. That's how my granddad finished reciting the legend I never tired of hearing.

Today, on this bridge with four bronze dragons, those words are distant echoes. A few days ago I received the email from a friend. He had finally got me the job in his newspaper office. A dream realised after a long wait. Something that took me back to certain times...

My childhood was like anyone else's. My mum was the daughter of Slovenians who met after leaving their country at war.

I was born in Buenos Aires, a city that was no longer cosmopolitan, yet many communities tried to maintain the traditions of their grandparents. A fundamental rule was to marry within the community of which my family didn't form part. Perhaps because my mum married my dad: an Argentinean not of Slovenian descent.

I was a boy when my grandfather died and very distracted when my grandmother went with him. I never knew much about them, only that she adored Marshall Tito and he hated him. Incomprehensible but they married in Argentina, although their past was always taboo, even for their most intimate circle.

When I grew up and finished my journalism studies, this Slovenian-Argentinean legacy somehow stayed with me. The only conflicts were the community festivals, which only mum and I attended. My dad never felt comfortable in those surroundings. Children and grandchildren of immigrants appeared extravagantly dressed (the work of generations) and asserting their "Slovenianness". Many, not even seeing themselves as Argentinean, regarded their place of birth as a simple accident. They amused themselves criticising the new Latin immigration, without thinking that many of their progenitors were present. Listening to them, it was easy for me to understand why my family kept themselves at a distance from the community. But they weren't all like that, some held back a more humble side for conversation.

In the last event I attended, I was seeking solitude, eating a canapé or two, but my mum insisted on telling everyone that I had finished university and, among other things, that “on Monday he’s dancing at the tango hall in San Telmo.” Hearing her comments I wanted a shell to hide in. Those attitudes were irritating. I didn’t understand why we still went to those events. She could have travelled to Slovenia when it became democratic and stopped living this pretence of patriotic reality. But I never understood why she stayed.

Luckily, Ivan arrived, my grandfather’s best friend, who could hardly move. He was with his wife Mara. I walked over to him and the first thing he did was to congratulate me:

–Your mother told me...

–...

He whispered that he was writing a letter of recommendation for a scholarship in Ljubljana. Sometime in the past I had told him that I wanted to continue my studies there but he suggested that I should first improve my Slovenian. I understood the language but it was not something I used every day. I thanked him but I was no longer planning to travel, the crisis was not getting any better and the euro was stronger every day.

–And a friend promised to find me a place at his newspaper – I told him.

–Who? The lad who’s going to Spain?

–No. It’s Gonzalo who’s travelling, a former university mate who got citizenship through a law that offered compensation for the Civil War. And he took the opportunity...

–You’re joking! That’s called political opportunism to get more votes – replied Ivan, as Gonzalo’s grandfather had done, a Republican by birth. But Gonzalo didn’t care; he’d already gone to try his luck in Girona.

Ivan said sharply:

–Crises are eternal, they’re always there. If you wait for it to end you’ll be old before

you’ve seen anything. If I were your age... – he smiled and wore one of his tired expressions.

A few days later the phone rang, Ivan had been admitted to hospital. Only my mother visited him and advised me not to go in. He died the next day.

After the funeral, we accompanied Mara home. She was calm as if she’d been prepared for some time. We had coffee and before leaving she gave me a document Ivan had signed before going into hospital. It was the letter of recommendation for the Slovenian college grant in Ljubljana. I applied for the language course and the grant that covered accommodation costs, as the requisites included Slovenian citizenship and a letter of recommendation from a member of this community in Argentina. I obtained it without problems and, although I wanted to go, I did not feel very sure.

There was a new crisis in the farming sector. Inflation rose, everyone spoke of the corruption and the advent of the new 2001. I was qualified and unemployed; planning a future in the middle of economic disasters shifted the balance. How long would I have to wait for things to change? I sold my car and bought all the euros I could. I had neither plans nor certainties but I still dreamed of the promised land.

My family tried to stop me going but I had decided to try my luck. I was qualified and they were my only tie to Argentina.

At the airport dad said I had to be ready for anything; mum kept crying and hugging me. She repeatedly told me to “take care” and all those things mothers usually say when their children fly the nest.

It was traumatic. I was leaving my home in the hope of finding independence in the unknown. Far from their faces, as I passed through immigration, anxiety choked my throat, gradually turning into a living ter-

ror. Far away now, one stop before Ljubljana, in Frankfurt, I shed some tears which I immediately wiped away in the toilets. This gigantic airport was very different to the one I knew in Ezeiza.

At the college, we had classes in the mornings and in the afternoon there were outings I never went on. I used the time to find an apartment. The owners usually asked for proof of citizenship, as my accent sounded very different. I often found that when I spoke to natives in Slovenian they automatically answered me in English. I never knew if it was laziness or to help communication, but I preferred the latter option. My English improved a lot.

For the first time, I could no longer define myself. Far from my home, my identity was Slovenian or Argentinean. I suppose a piece of paper said something that in my head seemed more complex.

At the college I got to know people from Serbia, Peru, Italy and Bosnia. Most of them were descendants of or married to Slovenians.

A fellow student from Peru helped me find a place near the centre and, although it was a basement, it was fine.

I started spending time with lots of immigrants in the city, and got to know many Spaniards looking for work, fleeing the crisis in their country. Juan, a literature teacher, was one of the *Indignados*. He asked me a lot about Argentina, human rights and memory.

–Some politicians cover up problems like the mega-mining, in the north of Argentina. It's funded by foreign companies that make pacts with the government. For an ounce of gold they destroy mountains, poison the water... – I told him – I'm pessimistic. Despite human rights ... progress is slow.

–Even though there may be social policies, in Spain we were inactive. And although

there were wake-up calls because of the terrorists, I think we said enough too late. I don't know if the damage can be repaired, there are also environmental problems because of construction ... but the reality is that today politics is failing ... the crisis is spreading like wildfire everywhere ... even my qualification has been devalued.

–I don't know, I'm relaxed and experiencing a different crisis here, very different from my memory of 2001.

–...

Finally, Juan went to Argentina.

In order to survive I tried to save every cent while looking for work, but nobody wanted a journalist who wasn't fluent in the language.

It is true that any kind of work dignifies. You forget the inherent prejudices and hunger makes you do anything. I lowered my employment expectations. I worked as a road sweeper, a removal man, clothes packer ... mostly manual work, although speaking Spanish was an advantage. I had to dress up as a dragon in *Zmajski Most* for a tourism agency and explain the legend of Jason to groups of Spaniards. One day, while the Spaniards were threatening to throw me into the river to see if dragons also swim, a girl with ruffled hair passed by and stopped when she heard the uproar of the tourists around me. She handed out some papers she was holding and disappeared while those to whom I was trying to explain the legend stuffed the papers in my mask.

After nightfall, cleaning the dragon costume, I found one of those papers. It advertised free Slovenian language classes for foreigners. I went without hesitating. Studying languages without a grant was expensive.

The classes were taught by students of the Faculty of Philosophy and among the organisers was the ruffled hair girl. They gave us a level test and separated us into groups after an individual interview. I was the first.

I was alone in the classroom, sitting and drumming my fingers on a table. The door opened and she came in. Time stopped while a ballad played in the background, like in those films where the camera slowly follows the girl without allowing us to blink. She sat down softly like falling autumn leaves when there is no breeze. After a few seconds I recognised her, her hair was combed, her features worthy of admiration and detailed, but that's just me. I took my exam. She took off her glasses and looking at my double surname asked where I was from... She put me in advanced level and said my problem when speaking was due to nerves. And why wouldn't I be nervous next to her? Before leaving, I asked her name: it was Vita.

Spanish became useful again when my teacher, a Hispanic philology student proposed we exchange an hour of Spanish for an hour of Slovenian. A good deal.

I communicated with my family by Skype, always leaving out the most depressing details, which is perhaps why the conversations were brief. Although just hearing them relieved my nostalgia for Buenos Aires, I wondered what those days would be like without me.

It was the final classes. After two months, Vita started greeting me normally although we hadn't spoken since the slow motion interview.

When it snowed without respite, the basement was filled with a humidity that blackened the walls, and I got sick. Some friends came to take care of me from time to time. This group of Mexicans, Spaniards, and three Chileans, Sara the girl from Serbia and Peter, a Slovenian lawyer, were a great help to me, my adopted family. I spent Christmas and New Year with them, unwell but happy.

New Year's Eve. Peter arrived with Noelia, his girlfriend, an Argentinean who would study at the university for three years. Turned

out she also danced tango but had no dance partner. When I got better, we went dancing and she was very good. We decided to offer tango classes as, in this world, my everyday existence could be as exotic as it was for me to live in a city with a castle.

We started having many students. Her boyfriend helped us with the papers as we were foreigners, and this was when I brandished my citizenship at the town hall as if it were a sword.

In one of the classes there was an Argentinean couple of Slovenian descent. They said they were Argentineans and asked:

–How did you come to Slovenia?

–My mother is Argentinean-Slovenian.

–What's your surname?

–...

–Ah, so you're not pure...

Noelia heard the comment, unaffected, ended the class and we never saw them again.

The last Slovenian lesson. In the evening we went to celebrate in a bar. Sara met a boy and was the first to leave. Among the shouts of Erasmus students I tried to talk to Vita. She indicated she couldn't hear ... and we left the bar. Words flowed effortlessly, we talked and talked ... and walked to the Robba fountain. There we found Sara crying ... the boy had called her *čefurka*.¹ We took her home, trying to calm her down until she went to bed. Later, I accompanied Vita to the flat she was sharing with other students. We said goodbye until Wednesday and, exchanging nervous looks, we kissed each other goodbye on the cheek. People usually shake hands there and reserve kisses for special occasions.

In the basement, I had a message from Argentina. My friend had finally found me a post in the newspaper office. I'd wait until

¹ Scornful expression used in Slovenia to refer to natives of the southern Balkans.

Thursday. A mixture of feelings choked in my throat again, and only two images were clear: Vita and the job. I sank in a sea of confusion and abandoned myself to the *pros* and *cons* as ever.

Pro: it's a safe clean city, I made new friends, I teach tango.

Con: I miss my traditions, my old friends, I don't earn my living from journalism.

Con: she doesn't live there.

As I am waiting on this bridge where I had seen her for the first time, dusk is falling ... surrounded by four dragons with their backs to me. Vita arrives walking like a princess, we meet in the middle of the bridge and

before saying *Živjo*, I embrace her and she shivers slightly. She relaxes. We go to a *kavarna*, hard to find on a Wednesday evening, and talk about anything...

–Did you know that *Zmajski Most* was built after an earthquake destroyed the old bridge...? It was more than a century ago and it continues without a scratch ... people didn't think it would remain standing for so long.

–Must be because of the dragons...
– I smile at her and, when I look into her eyes while she's sipping coffee, I understand "who" my mum had decided to stay for. On those pages of family history, what I saw as taboo was in fact a hopeful rebirth.

Errors Allowed

Christoforos Pavlakis. Greece

I've slept more than seven thousand three hundred times on this bed. Not counting the naps. And no one has ever come to check the state of the mattress. I guess I've never really complained. I've spent as much time between these four walls as everywhere else during the first half of my life. Spent. That's all time does here. Slowly. People too. Noiselessly.

The math is simple: I'm forty and I've been here for twenty years. Result: two decades gutted, emptied, wasted for a hold-up that went wrong. Especially for the cashier. Poor girl... And for the cop too. He shot at me; he had coming it. He was just doing his job... What a waste. All of that for a couple thousand bugs. What would I have done with it? I always wonder. There was just enough to buy a secondhand BMW; it really wasn't worth it. But I couldn't have known. I had been told the van came by on Fridays. Had it gotten away with it, would I have lived holed up, like some rapid animal, just waiting to start over? All of my acts would have brought me here in the end. As if I only ever existed for this. How could I have been so stupid?

Twenty years of prison is, above all, twenty years of solitude. And believe me, time seems very long when it's not shared. Of course, I had contact with some of the inmates, but most of them were just stopping through and were not very talkative. In here, feelings swallow themselves before being perceived and words quickly fall into line. The masonry teacher was nice to me, but the training was stopped the day some guy tried stabbing a trowel into his head. We never saw him since. My mother is the only one who visits. Every first Sunday of the month between ten and eleven o'clock we meet in the parlor. It's sort of like mass for us. Or perhaps our confessional. My mother leaves her house early, walks to the train station, in the summer or winter, where she takes a train into town before getting into the bus that drops her across the street from the prison. Four hours one way to talk to me one hour. Who else would do that every month for twenty years? She was forty seven when I was locked up and today, although she's never said so, this all becoming painful for her. I've always welcomed her visits, even if I never have much to tell her. What could I confide to her? My semblance of a life, my nothingness, my boredom? You don't speak about such things. So, instead of talking about my slender hopes, I listen: one of her cats was run over in front of her house, she left flowers on my father's grave, she adopted a new cat, but doesn't dare give it a name for fear of losing it, a cancer is growing in the neighbor's throat, ivy is spreading around the house and nobody is there to trim it... None of this really interests me. But I drink up her words, taking in everything that can help pass the time. Every second is a victory. Against what? One essential difference separates free people from the rest: while the former dream of time slowing down, the latter desire its acceleration. Besides mom, no one has ever come. At first there had been a few friends or members of the family. They seemed awkward seeing me there. It had been too long. Nothing was foreseeable. I suspect some took advantage of me being here to see what reality was like on the other side. They never looked me in the eyes.

Sometimes I find myself talking to John, the warden who brings me my lunch on weekdays. I've often caught myself waiting for him. My stomach is like clockwork. He always knocks between 12:23 and 12:29 and asks me through the peephole if everything is right.

–It could be better... – I answer artlessly as the empty tray from the morning is exchanged with the new one, never full enough to my taste. John always call me by my name. Sometimes we talk about the weather, a modification about the internal regulations or football results.

Twenty years ago, I naively thought that money would make me endlessly happy. It turned out otherwise. Twenty years, that was also the age of the cashier. The first shot went off by itself, but nobody believed me. As for the next shots, I wasn't really myself anymore. Twenty years is short. It's long too. It depends which side you're on. As always.

My cell is my only horizon. Eight square meters with a narrow view onto the yard, a bed, a table, a chair, a shelf, a toilet, a sink, a mirror and a television. While the mirror is the best way to observe the passing of time, the TV has become the most comfortable way to endure its passing; I watched it quite a bit the first few years, when the mess of time facing me seemed insurmountable, but I gradually lost interest. Those people, beautiful, rich and free, consuming without concern for the future or for me, complaining of everything and nothing, oblivious to their fortune and happiness – this profoundly disgusted me. Whether they are real or fiction doesn't change much. I was suffocated by those cities, those bodies, those seas that I could neither touch nor feel. Do the program creators consider the poor, the insane and the convicts who watch them? Perhaps they think only of us. But why then do they feel no guilt? Money questions, money answers. Integrating television into prison cells is a constitutive element of the punitive system, aiming to ceaselessly remind us of our past and our condition. Why would I have punished myself? One sentence is enough.

In my absence, so many things must have happened in the world, as I spent every day watching the same square of sky, blue, now gray, often black. I know nothing of the world that awaits me and I would be a poor contender on “Who wants to be a millionaire”. When I was twenty I was very educated, but since then I've become an ignorant champion. In all categories. Prison sort of works like an artificial coma. What was the quizmaster's name? Mom, who watched it every day, liked him. I'll ask her. Maybe one day we'll watch it together. Although it would be surprising that after all this time the show still existed.

It is difficult to be interested in a world that excludes us. As soon as I am part of it again I will have to adapt. And fast. Is it ever possible to catch up?

Eight years ago, they opened a library in wing D. To have access you had to be in Category I – which means “inmate with low aggressiveness potential” – then make a written request to the director and wait patiently for the answer that would eventually arrive. I've always wondered what the director does with his time. If the answer is positive, a warden accompanies you at your given time slot. Most of them only go once, borrow a book they don't read and never go back. I made my written request a few months after it opened and a couple of weeks later I've got my pass. Being surrounded by those imposing piles of books that all looked the same to me was disarming at first; having

never finished one, it was quite hard for me to choose. Since the warden exhibited tangible signs of impatience, I picked three or four of the thinnest ones at random. I don't remember the two or three I only read half-way, but I clearly recall the last one. It took place in Miami and it was the story of a cop, a good guy who was only a little crooked, in charge of finding a missing person. The least you could say was that his investigation was floundering. After some incredible suspense you find out that the man he's looking for didn't even exist; I read it until the very last sentence in almost a single sitting. I experience a pleasure unknown to me. As soon as I closed the book I wrote another request to the director, hoping that his reply would be faster this time. After a few months, I was reading faster and I threw myself into detective and adventure novels. Since the library didn't renew its stock very much, I often re-read the ones I liked most. Never mind the book, the hero, the author, the time and the place. One day I was lost at sea with an old man and a swordfish, the next I was travelling on a train with a detective, later I was shipwrecked on island with natives... I felt free with them. Perhaps I had never been free. Still, my condition always overtook me and I always ended up closing the book. How many times could I have circled the earth in twenty years?

We aren't put here for that, but nobody can stop us from dreaming. It's our ultimate freedom. So we shut our eyes. And we wait for it to come. Why are we put here? Twenty years of detention have not given an answer.

I'll have to find a job. Anything. As long as it is legit. I've lost enough time. I'll have to move about and earn my way. But what could I possibly do, me, who's never done anything, who's too old to do things I would still have to learn? Four years ago I took a masonry class, but I can't deal with walls anymore, I've had enough of them. I could be a bus driver. Or a trucker. Crossing Europe by track; I could see the world. I'm forty years old and I've never crossed the border. I wonder what it's like on the other side. I have such a thirst for freedom. With my first salary, I'll buy myself an encyclopedia. Or a dictionary. Something big with lots of volumes; I could read them lying in the sun.

How will I find my friends? In twenty years time, everything must have changed for them. Are they still in town? Most of them will have a career, will have built a family, a house. Without ever finding time to think of me. The only certainty: my mother still lives in the same place. It will be a starting point. I'll need a phone book; I hope she has one. I'll need to remember their names. I'll contact the ones whose names I remember first. Maybe they will help me find the others. They probably won't welcome me with open arms. Will they let me come near their children? Will they see an old friend, the twenty-year-old kid they knew or an ex-convict? Maybe at first I will be alone.

The strangest part of a long wait is that once it's over, you sort of forget how long it lasted.

Who knows what it's like to wait twenty years for deliverance? How long does it take to get impatient on the other side? Fifteen minutes?

I'm forty and I don't know the world anymore than a twenty-year-old kid does. You only have one life; it would be stupid to die an idiot. Where will I be in twenty years?

My freedom starts on the other side of the door. But where does it stop? These past years, travelling through books has satisfied my needs. I didn't really have any choice. In truth, I would have been happy to get out, if only for few hours. But my requests were always denied. Soon, if I want to, I'll be able to buy a plane ticket to any destination and fly away. Far. This simply possibility moves me. Wouldn't it be remarkable to roam across India, Australia or the United States? It would be a beautiful revenge. I have the right to a second life.

As for the first sunrays reach my cell, sleep overwhelms me. I am entering the liberation phase. There is a knock at the door:

–George, get your things ready. Here are a few bags. We'll be back for you in a half hour. Be ready.

I didn't sleep much and I need some time to understand what is happening. I don't have many things. I only need a few minutes to stuff them into some bags. After twenty years of doing nothing I am suddenly struck with the anxiety of having to wait a couple of minutes. I open the window and light a cigarette. The sun is now above the women's quarters, while a fly passes before me. My gaze follows its flight. At eight o'clock sharp, the sound of keys in the lock is followed by the door opening. I am happy to see John. In the hall, I try speaking to him, but nothing comes out. He takes me to the secretariat where an employee has me sign a few papers and returns my personal things: some coins, three keys, a lighter and my ID card bearing my juvenile portrait. I say:

–Not twenty anymore...

The employee, not so talkative, answers with an understanding smile. I stuff everything into my pockets, go out to the hall and walks towards the door. John is gone. I would have like to shake his hand. The automatic unlocking is triggered. All I have to do is push. On the other side, life does not wait.

Vodeni Grad

Dragana Tripković. Crna Gora

Teški su bili posljednji dani starog Milutina, bivšeg radnika pošte. U lučkom gradu Baru, noć ga je zatekla na rivi, gdje je oholim turistima nudio bočice maslinovog ulja, pomiješanog sa ljekovitim biljkama, za sitan novac. Svaki put kada se bližio kralj ljeta, prisjećao bi se jedne posebne godine kada je upoznao ljubav svog života na igranci u vili blizu grada, koju je priredila njegova tadašnja služba. Dvije godine je proveo sa njom, nakon čega ga je ostavila. Više nikad nije tako volio, a svaka sljedeća žena u njegovom životu, morala je po nečemu da liči na nju. Više nikad je nije vidio, niti je išta čuo o njoj.

Milutin je svoja ulja spravljao s velikom brigom. Maslinovo ulje je kupovao od jednog majstora iz Ulcinja koji je, kažu, bio najbolji. On mu je nekada davno objasnio kako “100 kila maslina najviše može da dâ deset litara ulja” i da su sva ostala ulja iz regije ili razblažena, ili su masline ostavljane duže da zriju, ne bi li se njihovo meso dobro nakupilo ovom rajskom tečnošću. To ulcinjsko ulje je bilo mnogo skuplje od ostalih, ali Milutin nije žalio. Od kad je otišao u penziju ovo mu je bila najvažnija stvar na svijetu. Sadržaj ulja je zavisio od godišnjeg doba. Milutin je tako u svoja ulja stavljao vrganj, suve smovke, lavandu, kantarion, orah, ruzmarin, neven... Da su samo nesmotreni sezonski kupci znali kakve eliksire dobijaju, platili bi mnogo veću cijenu.

Te noći je umorno pokupio neprodane bočice u platnenu torbu i krenuo kući. Njegov rodni grad Bar nije bio opterećen turistima koliko su to bili ostali gradovi na Jadranu. Ipak, ljeti se ta slika katkad znala promijeniti ako je sezona dobra, pa su se na njegovim teškim lučkim ulicama mogle vidjeti gologuze posjetiteljke i njihovi dlakavi pratiodci. Obično se namjenski nije dolazilo na ljetovanje u Bar. Turisti su često bili rođaci stanovnika ili siromašniji građani iz okolnih zemalja kojima se nudio jeftin smještaj na moru. Milutina je veselila slika turista u svom gradu. Izgledalo mu je kao da odjednom stanovnici nekog ozbiljnog kontinentalnog grada skrenu pameću i obuku svoje kupaće kostime. Zamišljao ih je kako u kostimima idu na posao. Ređale su mu se slike šalterskih službenica u jedenodjelnim kupaćim kostimima sa animalnim printovima, vozači taksija u speedo šortsevima ili pak slika velikog okruglog stola za kojim sjedi bord direktora neke velike korporacije, poput Luke Bar – svi u havajskim gaćama. Okolina grada je, ruku na srce, otkrivala prelijepe plaže.

Noć je Milutina zatekla nespremnog. Obuzeo ga je strah od mogućnosti da je u jednom trenutku ispred svoje male plastične tezge sa bočicama ulja, zaspao. Čovjek ne može nekontrolisano da zaspe, mislio je. Pogotovo ne na radnom mjestu. U vrijeme kad je on bio radnik barske pošte, sigurno bi kaznili onog kojeg bi zatekli kako spava. Ili je to kraj ljeta označavao skraćene dnevne svjetlosti. Kako god, svijest o vremenu znači svijest o sopstvu. Kada čovjek počne da gubi oštrinu, prepušta se smrti. To nema veze sa godinama. To se može i u mladosti, ako je duša stara. Ova nesmotrenost je Milutina značajno uzdrimala.

Odlazeći kući, ostavljao je iza sebe rivu i lučke dokove. Kvart u kojem je živio zvao se Makedonsko naselje. Tamo je Milutinu nakon 20 godina službe dodijeljen stan. Odslužbovao je

još toliko. Stan je bio na prizemlju veoma stare zgrade. Zgrada je napravljena mnogo prije velikog zemljotresa 1979. Te stare konstrukcije, kažu, odlično odolijevaju vremenu i nevremenu. U zgradi je bilo dosta njegovih starih kolega, ali se vremenom struktura stanovišta mijenjala. Sada su tu uglavnom njihova djeca i unuci. Ovi što su ga poznavali bili su veoma ljubazni. Ovi novi, jedva bi mu nazivali “dobar dan”. Nije važio za čangrizavog komšiju, ali mogće je da su novajlije o njemu imale prljave misli. Ljudi tako hoće da u nečemu o čemu ne znaju puno vide najprljavije slike sopstvenog uma. Samo zato što ne znaju.

Milutin je prilazeći ulazu zgrade na samom pragu zatekao plavokosu djevojčicu kako sjedi i čeka. Oči su joj sijale kao u mačke, a lice joj je bilo umrljano cjelodnevnim igranjem. Kad ga je primijetila, djevojčica je ustala naglo i krenula mu u susret.

–Vrati mi loptu – rekla je plava djevojčica.

–Kakvu loptu?

Milutin je bio zburjen. Djevojčica je pokazala rukom na prozor u prizemlju. Prozor je bio polomljen, a lopta je ostala u uglu pored parčadi stakla.

–Aha! Znači razbila si mi prozor. Loptu ću da vratim tvojim roditeljima. Reci mi gdje živiš i donijeću je sutra. Sad treba da ideš kući. Pao je mrak.

–Kod Kanala – povikala je djevojčica i trkom otišla u noć.

Mnogo puta je Milutin u životu razmišljao o djeci, pogotovo posljednjih godina kada mu se bližila smrt. Bio je srećan što je čak i kao starac zdrav i što može da se bavi sobom bez ičije pomoći. Kroz život je prošao bez puno stresa. Od mladosti je naučio kako da svakodnevicu podredi sebi, a ne sebe nekom izmaštanom životu iz kataloga ili sa televizije. Nakon one velike ljubavi imao je još nekoliko žena. Međutim, ni jedna od njih ga više nije uspjela uvjeriti u praktičnost zajedničkog života. Nikada sa drugom ženom nije proveo više od nekoliko mjeseci. Onda, kada bi one počinjale da lukavo donose svoje stvari u njegov stan, strast prema njima bi se smanjivala proporcionalno donešenim sitnicama. Ono što mu je u mladosti pričinjavalo ogromno zadovoljstvo, vremenom se pretvaralo u neprijatnost, u nešto poput kopiranja prošlosti. Ni jedna nova žena nije ga mogla uvjeriti u svoju originalnost. Za njega su sve one bile riznica tuđih uspomena. On je smatrao samo jednu ženu svojom uspomenom. I sebe njenom.

Milutinu nije smetalo što je sam. Bio je vrijedan radnik, ali nije imao volju da radi za bilo koga osim za sebe. Nikad to nije smatrao sebičnošću, već sudbinom. Onim što zaradi od prodaje ulja u ljetnjim danima, jedva uspije sebi da kupi ogrijev za zimu. To nije život koji bi mogao da ponudi bilo kome, znao je to odlično.

Bio je 22. avgust. Ustao je oko 5 i po sati. To je navika iz radnih dana. Svjež miris sa mora i buka lučkih mašina su bili isti godinama. Prozor je polmljen, pa ga otvara sa oprezom. Njegova kuća je uvijek uredna. On ima stare stvari, ali naviknut je na njih. Svaka promjena, čini mu se, unosila bi nered. Komadi namještaja su tek ponegdje izbljedjeli od godina i korištenja. Nema slika, osim jedne reprodukcije mrtve prirode kupljene u robnoj kući, tek da popuni bjelinu zida. Nema fotografija. Nema ničega. Napravio je sebi bijelu kafu i odlomio komad hljeba. Danas će otići na rivu i izložiti svoju kolekciju ljekovitog ulja prolaznicima. Prije toga, gledaće se u ogledalu nekoliko trenutaka. Svakodnevno posmatranje sebe u ogledalu po nekoliko mintu mu ne dozovoljava da ostari. Sebi je iz dana u dan isti. Prije toga popiće svoju bijelu kafu i pojesti koru hljeba uz vijesti sa radija. Najviše ga interesuje prognoza. Kažu da će danas živa u termometru dostizati 38 stepeni Celzijusa. Bliži se kraj ljetu i vrućine se lagano spuštaju ispod 40. Uskoro će i neka kiša pasti, siguran je. Ljeta su ovdje ista. Prije nego izađe iz kuće mora dopuniti današnju

ponudu ulja. U platnenoj torbi su gotovo sva ulja od juče, izuzev par bočica sa lavandom. Lavandu najviše kupuju. Spakovao je svoju malu montažnu tezgu od plastike. Uz nju privezuje stolicu na kojoj sjedi. Prije nego ode na rivu odnijeće loptu djevojčicinim roditeljima i tražiće naknadu štete. Zamoliće ih, naravno, da je ne grde i da se svakom djetetu to može desiti. Djevojčica je djelovala uplašeno ali i po malo divlje. Sjetio se njenih očiju što svijetle. Gdje je ono rekla da živi? Kod Kanala. Nije siguran gdje tačno kod Kanala. Tamo nije bilo zgrada. Mada u tom dijelu grada nije se našao vjerovatno više od 30 godina. Kod Kanala su nekad momci vodili djevojke prije nego ih ožene ili ostave. Onda su počeli da se skupljaju Cigani. Kanal sa svojim katakombama i čudnom arhitekturom mnogima je bio sklonište. Policija je uvijek nekoga otud tjerala. Smatrali su Kanal opasnom zonom. Govorili da može doći do pucanja zidova i izlivanja vode. Međutim to se nikada nije desilo. Milutin je na ramenu nosio torbu, u jednoj ruci tezgu, a u drugoj loptu.

Sebi je izgledao smiješno. Loptu nije držao u rukama od kad je bio mladić. Idući prema Kanalu, zagledao je i okretao. Probao joj je težinu. Bila je to mala dječija lopta. Poželio je da njom lupi o tlo. Nasmijao se sebi na tu misao. Zamisli da ga neko vidi. Starca kako lupa loptom. Ali želja ga je savladala. Tražio je pogodan prostor i udario loptom o beton. Lopta odskoči u krivo i starac potrča za njom. Srce mu je lupalo kao da je napravio kakvu štetu. Hitro je uzeo loptu i nastavio put. Ponovo se nasmijao samom sebi. Približavao se Kanalu. Sve je izgledalo kao i prije 30 godina. Možda sa nešto više rastinja. Bilo je rano ujutru i grad je još uvijek bio miran. Pitao se da li su ljudi kod kojih ide uopšt budni. Nije prije razmišljao o tome.

Linija horizonta koju u daljini stvara Kanal počela je da se nazire u starčevom oku. Približavao se ali nije bio siguran u to što vidi. Stavio je ruku na čelo kao da želi da zakloni pogled od sunca. Iz pravca mjesta kojem je išao u suret do njegovih očiju dopirale su nevjerovatne boje. Pomislio je da je nešto pogriješio, ali prepoznatljiva arhitektonika starog Kanala kojim voda sakupljena sa raznih strana otiče u more, ga je razuvjerila.

Kanal je bio širok 20 metara, a dugačak ko to zna... U njegovom tijelu i utrobi nalazile su se mnoge prostorije, čija funkcija običnom čovjeku nije bila jasna. To su više bile neke nasumično raspoređene sobe sa ogromnim cijevima iz kojih stalno kaplje voda. Te vodene “sobe” sa cijevima bile su zaštićene čeličnim ogradama. Ove druge “sobe”, bile su otvorene i predstavljale su svojevrsne šare na kanalu. One su bile poput hotelskih apartmana u zgradi kojoj nedostaje jedna strana. Više su bile kao arhitektonske šare na ogromnom tijelu barskog Kanala. U svakoj od ovih soba živio je po neko.

Starcu je zastao dah vidjevši prizor pred sobom. Stvari su mu skoro ispale iz ruku. Mora da je bilo dvadesetak porodica. To nisu bili Cigani. Fasada Kanala se šarenila od neobičnog pokušaja. Milutin se sjeća da su Kanal i njegovu okolinu znali da nasele Cigani, odnosno njihovih par porodica, ali ovdje se radilo o mnogo većem broju ljudi. Do nekih soba su čak bile stube za penjanje, tako da su i najvišočiji djelovi bili nastanjeni. Izgledalo je sve kao neobična košnica ljudi. Čudio se kako su vlasti dozvolile ovo, ali se sjetio da su se već godinama njegova interesovanje za realnost zaustavljala na prognozi. Pitao se da li je ovo samo njemu čudno i da li iko zna za ovaj neobičan grad. Odlučio je da priđe. Lopta u njegovim rukama sad je izgledala beznačajno, ali bila je dovoljan povod za to. Ipak mnoštvo ga je uplašilo i shvatio je da bi trebao da bude oprezan i prvo osmotri okolinu. Kanal je izgledao kao ogromni nasukani brod, čija posada ne želi da ode od njega. Starac je krenuo u obilazak.

Život se budio u Kanalu. Osim što su lokacija i raspored stanova bili neobični, sve ostalo je ličilo na bilo koje drugo naselje u okolini Bara. U jednom dijelu Kanala bile su, reklo bi se,

male zanatske radnje. Majstori i njihove žene iznosile su bakarno posuđe, nedaleko odatle su bile tkanine i tepisi, predmeti od drveta, namještaj, plastika... Stigao je odnekud kamion namirnica. Čula se graja žena koje su širile veš i pravile hranu. Sve je djelovalo sasvim normalno. Sunce je uveliko najavilo vruć dan.

Milutinu je krenuo nazad. Prvi put u životu mu se činilo da ostaje bez kontrole. Ovo mora da ima veze sa onim jučerašnjim spavanjem. Plašio se da je prizor koji je upravo ostavio iza sebe proizvod njegove mašte. Stigao je na rivu. Odlučio je da nastavi svoj život kao da ništa nije bilo. Ako djevojčica dođe po loptu vratiće joj je i gotova stvar. Došao je na uobičajeno mjesto gdje prolaznicima nudi svoja ulja. Loptu je stavio pored sebe i pokušao da se smiri. Oh, kako je to sad bilo nemoguće... Nije bilo osobe koju je mogao da pita da li grad kod Kanala zaista poistoji. Činilo mu se satima prolazili su samo turisti. Nadao se da mu lice ne odražava unutarnji nemir, zato je duboko udahnuo nekoliko puta. Neobična slika nije htjela nikud iz njegove glave. Policajac se kretao pravo prema Milutinu. Pomislio je da je to dobra prilika. Njega će moći da pita. On je javni službenik, shvatiće ga ozbiljno ili će se makar sažaliti na ludog starca. Javni službenik je došao do tezge i prije nego je Milutin nazvao "dobar dan", pitao ga je odsječnim glasom da li ima dozvolu za prodaju.

–Ovo je samo ulje. Jeftino je – kazao je starac.

–Ovo ću sad da zaplijenim, a ti se kupi odavde prije nego sam te uhapsio i nemoj više da te vidim. Je li jasno?

Milutin je bez riječi gledao policajca. Mislio je da ima previše godina da bi se neko ovako ophodio prema njemu. Šta se desilo sa ovim svijetom, pomislio je, i gdje je to do sada živio.

–Izvinite molim vas. Možete li da mi vratite moje ulje? Jako sam ga skupo platio. Molim vas da mi vratite moje ulje – bio je uljudan i ponizan Milutinov glas.

–Budi srećan što te nisam strpao u zatvor! Nema ulja stari. Ovo će te naučiti da više ne trguješ bez dozvole – rekao je policajac trpajući bočice u torbu.

Starac je bio slomljen.

–Molim vas da mi vratite moje ulje – ponovio je tiho.

–Stari, jesi li gluv? Zapljena, hej! Kad nabaviš dozvolu vratićemo ti ulje – policajac gestikulira. Milutin je sklopio tezgu i stolicu. Uzeo je loptu ispod ruke. Policajac čeka da napusti mjesto.

–Samo još nešto da vas pitam, molim vas. Znete li nešto o ovom naselju kod Kanala? O onim ljudima što žive tamo?

–Kod kanala?

–Da. Ima ih baš puno – kazao je starac.

–Nikad čuo – odgovori policajac i pokaza rukom starcu da ode.

Milutin se na putu do kuće borio sa mnogim mislima. Ušao je u stan i odložio stvari. Legao je na svoj veliki krevet u sobi. Kakav dan, reče na glas. Izgubio je dosta ulja, ali nema veze, nadoknadiće. Za par dana moći će da se vrati na isto mjesto. Policajac će ga zaboraviti.

Čuo je kako neko baca kamenčiće na njegov prozor. Otvorio ga je oprezno jer je već bio polomljen. Dolje je bila ona plavokosa djevojčica sa svijetlećim očima. Milutin joj se nasmijao i ona mu je uzvratila. Otišao je po loptu. Bacio joj je oprezno i mahnuo u znak pozdrava. Djevojčica je zadovoljno otrčala kako samo djeca mogu da odu u igru. Starac se vratio u svoj krevet.

Odlučio je sutra da ode u grad kod Kanala. Iskreno je to poželio.

Water City

Dragana Tripković. Montenegro

The last days of Milutin, an elderly former post office worker, had been difficult. In the port city of Bar, night found him on the boardwalk, proffering bottles of olive oil mixed with medicinal plants to arrogant tourists for tiny amounts of money. As at end of every summer, he was reminded of the year he had met the love of his life at a dance party organized by his former office in a villa near the town. They had been together for two years, then she had left. Never again had he loved so fully, and each new woman in his life had been in some way a reminder of her. Never again had they met, nor had he ever again heard anything about her.

Milutin would make his oils with great care. He would purchase olive oil from one of the masters of Ulcinj, which, they said, was the best. Long ago he had heard it explained that “out of every 100 pounds of olives, one gets ten liters of oil, at the most” and that all other oils from the region were diluted, but here the olives were left to ripen longer, so that their flesh was full of this heavenly liquid.

This Ulcinj oil was much more expensive than the others, but Milutin had never complained. Ever since he had retired, this was the most important thing in the world for him. The ingredients were dependent on the season. So, in season, Milutin would add mushrooms, dried figs, lavender, amber, walnut, rosemary, marigold... If only the careless seasonal shoppers knew what those elixirs contained, they would willingly pay a much higher price

At night he would wearily pack the unsold bottles in his duffel bag and head home. His hometown, Bar, wasn't as loaded with

tourists as other cities on the Adriatic coast. However, if the season is good, the aspect of the city in changes in the summer, and the wide port streets are filled with half-naked girls and their hairy companions. Most have chosen to vacation in Bar with no reason. Tourists were often the relatives of residents, or citizens of poorer neighboring countries looking for cheap accommodation at the seaside. Milutin was amused by the tourists in his town: he would imagine that all of a sudden the inhabitants of a serious Continental city had turned mad and dressed in their swimsuits. Then he would imagine them going to work like that: a slideshow of counter clerks in one-piece animal-print swimwear, taxi drivers in the Speedo shorts or Boards of Directors of some large corporation such as the Port of Bar directorship, all seated at some huge round table – all in Hawaiian shorts. The city is, in all honesty, surrounded by beautiful beaches.

Nightfall had caught Milutin off guard: overcome with the fear of the very possibility of falling asleep at some point behind his small plastic table covered with bottles of oil. One cannot fall asleep uncontrollably, he thought. Especially not in the workplace. When he had been an employee of the Bar post office, those found asleep at work had inevitably been punished. Was it because the end of summer is marked with a shortening of daylight? A sense of time means an awareness of self. As a man begins to lose his sharpness, he begins to die. It has nothing to do with age. This can happen in his youth, if his soul is old. Milutin was considerably shaken by such thoughts.

Going home, Milutin left behind behind the waterfront and harbor docks. The neighborhood he lives in is known as Macedonian village. After twenty years of service, Milutin had been assigned an apartment in this area. He remained in service for another twenty years. His apartment is on the ground floor of a very old building. The building was built long before the great earthquake in 1979. These old structures, they say, superbly withstand the test of time and bad weather. The building had been filled with his old colleagues but over time the nature of the population had changed. Now there were mainly their children and grandchildren. The ones who knew him were very polite. But newcomers hardly ever greeted him with a “good day.” He is not known as a grumpy neighbor, but newcomers might have some bad ideas about him. People who do not know anything about one tend to imagine bad things in their minds to fill the void. Just because they do not know.

Approaching the building entrance, Milutin spotted a blond girl sitting and waiting on the stoop. Her eyes shone like cat’s eyes, and her face was smeared by all-day play. As soon as she saw him, the girl abruptly got up to meet him.

–Give me back my ball – said the blond girl.

–What ball?

Milutin was confused. The girl gestured to the window on the ground floor. The window was broken, and there was a ball in the corner, surrounded by glass fragments.

–Aha! So you broke my window. I’ll return the ball to your parents. Tell me where you live and I’ll bring it tomorrow. Now you need to go home. It’s already dark.

–By the canal – cried the girl and ran into the night.

Often in life Milutin had thought about children, especially in recent years as he began approaching death. He was happy that

even as an old man he was healthy and able to take care of himself without assistance. Throughout life he had not encountered to much stress. Even in his youth, he knew how to subordinate everyday life to his own needs, and not the other way round, he had not reduced himself to a life imagined from catalogs or TV. After his one great love, he had known quite a few women. However, none of them had been able to entice him into the convenience of living together. He had never spent more than a few months with any of those women. Whenever they had coyly begun to ease their things into his apartment, his passion for them would begin to wane as a result. What had been a great joy in his youth, time had turned into a nuisance, somehow a cheap copy of the original past. No woman had proved herself to be the original person. To him, they were all the treasure troves of somebody else’s memories. He had considered only one woman in his memories. And vice versa.

Milutin did not mind being alone. He was a hard worker, but he had no desire to work for anyone but himself. He never thought his self sufficiency selfish, but rather merely his destiny. What he earned selling oil in summer was barely enough for firewood in the winter. That was not a life he could offer anyone, and he knew that well.

The day is August 22. He wakes up at about five thirty – a habit left over from his working days. The fresh scent of the sea and the noise of port machinery has been the same for ages. The window is broken, so he opens it warily. His house is always neat. His stuff is old, but he is used to it. Any change would only bring chaos. Just here and there the furniture shows signs of wear after so many years of use. There are no paintings aside from a reproduction bought in a store just to fill the white space on the wall. There are no photos. No decoration. He makes himself coffee

with milk and breaks off a piece of bread. Today he will go to the waterfront and present his collection of medicinal oils to passersby. Prior to that, he will check his reflection in the mirror for couple of minutes. Daily observation in the mirror for a couple of minutes prevents him from growing old. To himself, he is always the same day by day. But first he will drink his white coffee and eat a bread crust listening to the news from the radio. He is mostly interested in the weather forecast. Today, they say, the mercury in the thermometer will reach 38 degrees Celsius. The end of summer is nearing and the heat slowly drops below 40 C. Soon, the rain will fall, for sure. The summers here are all the same. Before leaving the house he must supplement today's supply of oil. His canvas bag contains almost all the oil bottles from yesterday, except for a couple of bottles made with lavender. Lavender sells the best. He packs up his little plastic counter table. Then he straps to it the chair on which he will be sitting. Before going to the boardwalk, he will pay a visit to the girl's parents to claim damages for his window. He will, of course, ask them not to be too harsh on her, as it can happen to any child. The girl seemed scared but also a bit wild. He remembered her bright eyes. Where did she said she was living? The Canal. He is not sure where exactly. There are no apartment buildings he remembers, although he hasn't been in that part of the town for more than 30 years. Once upon a time guys used to take girls over there before marrying or just leaving them. Then Gypsies started to gather there. The Canal, with its catacombs and strange architecture, was a shelter for many. The Police was always after someone and Canal was considered a danger zone. They used to say that the walls might crumble and water may spill, but it never happened. Milutin carries a bag on his shoulder, pastic table in one hand, and the ball in the other.

He seems ridiculous to himself. He hasn't had a ball in his hands since he was a youngster. Heading towards the canal, he turns it and looks at it. He feels its heaviness. It is a small children's ball. He wants to bounce it off the ground, but smiles to himself at the very thought. Imagine if someone were to see that! An old man bouncing a ball! But the desire to do so is overwhelming. He looks around for a suitable place and then slams the ball to the concrete. The ball bounces the wrong way and the old man runs after it. His heart is pounding as if he has done something bad. He quickly picks up the ball and goes on. Again he laughs to himself. He is approaching the canal. It is just as it was 30 years ago. Maybe with a bit more vegetation. It is early morning and the city is still quiet. He wonders whether the people who he is going to visit are awake yet. He hadn't thought of it earlier.

The skyline, created in the distance by the canal, starts to appear in the old man's eye. He is approaching it, but he is not sure of what he sees. He puts his hand to his forehead as if he wants to shield his eyes from the sun. From the direction of the place he is going to, amazing colors drift towards his eyes. He thinks there was something wrong, but is reassured by the recognizable architecture of the old canal that collects water from a variety of sources and flows into the sea.

The canal is 20 meters wide and who knows how long. In its body and womb there are impeccable areas whose function is not clear to the common man. They are like randomly assigned rooms with huge pipes from which water drips constantly. These aquatic "rooms" with pipes are protected by steel railings. Other "rooms" are open and are a kind of ornament on the canal. They are like hotel suites in a building that is open on one side. Like like architectural ornaments on the vast body of Bar Canal. In each of these rooms someone was living.

The old man gasps when he sees the scene in front of him. He almost drops what he is carrying. There must have been about twenty families. And they were not Gypsies. The Canal facade was full of unusual furniture. Milutin knows that the Canal and its surroundings are inhabited by Gypsies and some of their families, but this is a lot more people. There were even stairs to some rooms so that even the highest parts are inhabited. It looks like a peculiar beehive of people. He wonders how the authorities have allowed this, but remembers that for years he was interested in no more than the forecast. He wondered if this was strange only to him, and if anyone else knows of this quaint town. He decides to approach. The ball in his hands now seems insignificant, but it gives him enough of reason to do be there. Still, the whole thing scares him and he realizes that he needs to be careful and assess his surroundings first. The canal resembles a huge beached boat, whose crew did not want to leave it. The old man walked around.

Life is waking up in the Canal. Although the location and layout of apartments is quite unusual, everything else looks like any other village in the vicinity of Bar. In one corner of the canal are, as one might call them, small workshops. Owners and their wives are hanging copper cookware, not far from where they have laid fabrics and carpets, wooden items, furniture, plastic... Suddenly a food truck arrives. There is the clatter of women spreading clothes and preparing food. Everything seems quite normal. The sun is heralding a hot day.

Milutin turns back. For the first time in his life it seems like he is out of control. It surely has something to do with yesterday's sleep. He fears that the scene he has just left behind was a product of his imagination. He arrives at the boardwalk and he decides to continue with his life as if nothing had happened at all. If the girl came for her ball, he

would just return it to her and that would be it. He arrives at his usual place, where he is to offer his oil to passers. He places the ball next to him and he tries to calm down. Oh, how impossible it seems now... There are people he could ask whether the Canal city really exists. It seems to him that tourists just pass by for hours. He hopes his face does not reflect his inner turmoils, so he takes several deep breaths. The strange images do not want to leave his head. A police officer is heading towards Milutin. He thinks it might be a good opportunity, for he will be able to talk to him. The police officer is a public servant, he will take Mulatin seriously or might even take pity on a crazy old man. The civil servant approaches the counter, but even before Milutin can greet him with "good day", he is asked in a harsh tone if he has a licence to vend.

–It's only the oil. Cheap too – says the old man.

–It will now be confiscated, and you had better get lost before I arrest you, and never again show yourself before my eyes. Is that clear?

Milutin stares speechlessly at the policemen. He had thought he was sufficiently old not to be treated that way. What happened to this world, he wonders, and when did it get so far from what I knew?

–Excuse me, please. Can you give me back my oil? I paid dearly for it. Please give me back my oil – Milutin's voice was courteous and humble.

–Be happy that you havent gone to jail! No oil for you, old man. This will teach you not to trade without permission – says the policeman stuffing the bag with bottles.

The old man is broken.

–Please give me back my oil – he repeats softly.

–Dude, are you deaf? It a seizure, hey! When you obtain permission, you'll get the oil back – the policeman exclaims.

Milutin folds his counter and stools, placing the ball under his arm. The police officer waits for him to leave.

–Just one more thing, please. Do you know anything about the canal resort? About the people who live there?

–By the Canal?

–Yes. There are quite a lot of them – says the old man.

–Never heard of it – says the officer and gestures him to leave.

On his way to home, Milutin struggles with numerous thoughts. He enters, and puts down his things, then lays on his bed in a large room. What a day, he says aloud. He's

lost a lot of oil, but it does not matter, he can repair the damage. In just a couple of days he will be able to return to the same place. The police officer will forget about him.

He hears someone throwing rocks at his window. He opens it carefully because it is already broken. There is the blonde girl with glowing eyes. Milutin smiles at her and she smiles back at him. He gets the ball, than he throws it carefully and waves in greeting. The girl runs away happily, as only children running to play are able to do. The old man returns to his bed.

Tomorrow, he decides, his will go to the Canal city. By all means.

من أجل زيارة فلسطين

خديجة هماني . الجزائر

ليس الواقع من يحرمنا من عيش أحلامنا و ليس دائما العقل من يفودنا إليها... إنه القلب... القلب الذي يُسيطر علينا و يفودنا إلى أهوائه بغض النظر عن الواقع... إخترت أن أسسلم إلى قلبي أن أتركه يشعُر بالحُب بدون أية عوائق و بغير إكتراثٍ لكلام الناس أن يكون حبا نقي خالي من الشعور بالذنب، لقد إخترت أن أحب و أعشق و أتزوج الرجل الفلسطيني الذي أسرني... وألهمني...
إنها الحياة التي أريد أن أعيشها و لن أختر سواها...

... تساقطت قطرات المطر و بدأت رائحة الثراب الدافئ تنبعث، إستنشقتها بكل شوق و حُبٍ بقُوم الشتاء، عُدتُ باكراً إلى البيت إنها غطلة مدفوعة الأجر بمناسبة اليوم العالمي للمرأة حاملة معي هدايا من قبل تلاميذي وروود كانت معظمها...

نزلت إلى الشوارع المزدحمة ذهاباً و إياباً المارة شوش تفكيرى، فجأة بدأت الأمطار بالتهطل بغزارة، تسارعت الناس للبحث عن ملجأ للإختباء، ابتسمت لغرابة الأمر لأني أخيراً تمكنت من السير بدون الإصطدام مع أحدهم، رفعت وجهي إلى السماء و تركت قطرات المطر تلامس وجهي إجمرت و جنتاي من شدة البرد المفاجئ لم أرذ الإختباء عن شيء ساجر كتنساقط المطر... أردت أن أتمتع بكل لحظة من خيرات الله... ما أروع رؤية ماء عذب ينزل من السماء... أردته أن يعسل أحراني الدقيئة، إشتياقي الكبير المكبوت، أردته أن يُزيل همومي و يساعدي على النسيان...

أعددت القهوة الساخنة عند دخولي المنزل كم شعرت براحة غريبة خاصة بعد الإستحمام و كأني حقيقة أزلت ثقل كان على كاهلي، شرعت في تصحيح أوراق الإمتحانات و تفقدت بريدي الإلكتروني و فحنت بورود رسالة عنوائها الغريب و القريب إلى ذاكرتي جعلني أتصفحها بكل شعف لمعرفة محتواها " ...إنقشع الضباب و إحتفت الأحران، خرجت الناس من كل فج لرؤية الشمس تطلع على مدينة السلام.... " صدمت لقراءة محتوى الرسالة التي ثلثتها ملاحظة - لئعد إحياء مشروع من أجل زيارة فلسطين.

الرسالة كانت واردة من إحدى الأصدقاء الذين تعرّفت إليهم من خلال رحلتي إلى مصر أين أطلقنا فكرة من أجل زيارة فلسطين و لكن تناسينا الفكرة لكثرة إشغالاتنا و إهمامنا بحياتنا الخاصة تذكرت كم كنا متحمسين و عملنا بجهد و حماس من أجل تحقيق المشروع، نظرت ملياً إلى أوراق الإمتحانات المترامية أمامي و قلت بصوت خافت و متردد... إنها ليست بالحياة التي أردت أن أعيشها...

تقدمت إلى النافذة لنظر إلى تهطل المطر المنهمر في الخارج، بعض القطرات تنزلق برقة على الزجاج تبعثهم بنظراتي... غرقت في التفكير و تساءلت يا ترى ما الذي جعلني أتقبل حياة الروتيني

هَذِهِ؟ و أنا الشَّخْصُ الَّذِي يَحْلُمُ أَكْثَرَ مِمَّا يَتَنَفَّسُ مَا الَّذِي جَعَلَنِي أَتَوَقَّفُ فَجْأَةً عَنِ الحُلْمِ؟ و ما الَّذِي جَعَلَ قَلْبِي يَتَوَقَّفُ عَنِ الحُبِّ أَيْضًا؟...أهو الهُرُوبُ مِنَ الوَاقِعِ و الإِسْتِسلامِ؟...أه لَقَدْ تَغَيَّرَتْ...أصَبَحْتُ امْرَأَةً حَاصِبَةً لِمَجْتَمَعٍ لَا يَنْفَكُ عَنِ الإِنْتِقَادِ و رِفْقَةٍ لَا تَكْفُ عَنِ التَّدْمُرِ...

تَغَيَّرَ فَجْأَةً العَالَمُ بِالنِّسْبَةِ إِلَيَّ، تَنَاسَتْ النَّاسُ الذِّكْرِيَّاتِ المُوَلِّمَةَ بِالرَّغْمِ مِنْ أَنَّهَا لَا تَزَالُ تَتَأَلَّمُ إِلَى حَدِّ الآنَ ، تَنَاسَتْ أَنْ زَوْجِي السَّابِقُ إِرْهَابِي و لَكِنِّي لَمْ أُسْتَطِعْ...نَعَمْ لَمْ أُسْتَطِعِ النِّسْيَانَ كَيْفَ يُمَكِّنُنِي ذَلِكَ و أَنَا مَنْ قَتَلْتَهُ بِكُلِّ يَدِي، لَمْ تُتِمَّكَ السِّنِينَ مِنْ مَحْوٍ و لَوْ لِحِظَةٍ مِنْ تِلْكَ اللِّحَظَاتِ الأَلِيمَةِ إِذَا كَانَ إِخْتِيَارِي الإِنْعِزَالَ عَنِ العَالَمِ و عَيْشِ حَيَاةِ الرُّوتِينِ هَذِهِ مُتَجَنِّبَةً كَلَامِهِمْ و نَظَرَاتِ الإِزْدِرَاءِ نَحْوِي...نَعَمْ ، لَمْ أَتَجَاوَزْ قَطُّ فِكْرَةَ أَنِّي قَتَلْتُ زَوْجِي مُدَافِعَةً عَنِ مَا أُعْتَقِدُ بِهِ و عَنِ مَا وَجَدْتُهُ صَاحِبًا مُهْمَلَةً شُعُورِي و حُبِّي الكَبِيرِ لَهُ.

حَقِيقَةٌ أَنِّي تَمَكَّنْتُ مِنَ المَسِي فَدُمًّا و لَكِن لِحِظَةٍ إِطْلَاقِ الرِّصَاصِ و رُويَةِ الدَّمِ تُعْطِي وَجْهَهُ و تَتَقَاطَرُ عَلَيَّ لِحِيَّتِهِ و أَنَا أَرْكُضُ مُسْرِعَةً نَحْوَهُ أَضْمُهُ بِقُوَّةٍ نَحْوَ صَدْرِي طَالِبِنَا الغُفْرَانَ...تَسْكُنُنِي و تُرَافِقُنِي أَيَّمَا كُنْتُ عِنْدَمَا أَعْمِضُ عَيْنَايَ.. أَوْ عِنْدَمَا أَكُونُ وَحِيدَةً و أَغْرُقُ فِي التَّفَكِيرِ، فِي كَوَابِسِي و حَتَّى فِي أَحْلَامِي...

لَمْ أَشْعُرْ يَوْمًا بِحَمَاسٍ نَحْوَ شَيْءٍ كَهَذَا المَشْرُوعِ لَقَدْ كَانَ بِالنِّسْبَةِ إِلَيَّ كالدَّوَاءِ لِالأَمِي و جِرَاحِي كَانَ لِي مَلْجَأٌ لِي لِأَقَاوِمٍ مِنْ جَدِيدٍ و أَشَارَكَ بِشَيْءٍ يُنْبِئُ بِحَيَاةٍ جَدِيدَةٍ...أَرَدْتُ أَنْ أَشَارَكَ حُبَّ وَطَنٍ و النِّضَالَ مِنْ أَجْلِ شَيْءٍ إِفْتَدَيْتُهُ حُبِّي و أَمَلِي و

...دَخَلْنَا غَزَةَ عِبْرَ مَعْبَرٍ رَفِجٍ كَانَ اليَوْمَ حَارًّا جَدًّا و سِيَارَةَ الأَجْرَةَ عَتِيقَةً تَقْذِفُ اصْوَاتَاو بخَارًا كَثِيفًا تَصْبِيبَتْ عِرْقًا مِنْ شِدَّةِ الحَرِّ لِتَصِقَ شَعْرِي بِجِبْهَتِي و رَقَبَتِي المَتَعَرِّقَتَيْنِ مِنْ شِدَّةِ الحَرِّ بَدَأَتْ أَرْوَحُ بوشَاحِي الخَفِيفِ و إِسْتِرَاقِ النِّظَرِ مِنَ النَافِذَةِ مِنْ حَوْلِي تَوَقَّفْنَا عِنْدَ أَوَّلِ نَقْطَةِ تَوَقِيفٍ يَتَقَدَّمُ العَسْكَرِي إِلَيْنَا بِخَطِي مُتَبَاعِدَةً بِشِيرٍ بِأَصْبِعِهِ لِسَانًا بِالنِّزُولِ و فَتْحِ صَنْدُوقِ السِّيَارَةِ كَانَ حِذَائِهِ الكَبِيرِ مَعْطَى بِالغُبَارِ أَمَا قَمِيصُهُ الأَزْرَقُ الحَائِلُ لَوْنُهُ إِلَى الأَبْيَضِ كحالِ وَجْهِهِ المَتَغَيِّرِ لَوْنُهُ إِلَى الأَسْوَدِ مِنْ شِدَّةِ الحَرِّ و ضَرْبَاتِ الشَّمْسِ تَمَكَّنَ بِصُعُوبَةٍ مِنْ فَتْحِ عَيْنِيهِ لِمَخَاطَبَتِي بِصَوْتِهِ الخَسَنِ...

- يلا... جوازات السفر؟

عَبْرْنَا المَمَرَ أَخِيرًا، مَشِينَا عَلَى طَرِيقِ مَعْبَدِ كَأَنَّهَا مَدِينَةٌ خَالِيَةٌ، السِّيَارَاتُ كَانَتْ قَلِيلَةً، و صَلْنَا المَدِينَةَ بَعْدَ قَرَابَةِ السَّاعَةِ مِنَ السَّيْرِ، نَزَلْتُ مِنَ السِّيَارَةِ و مَضَيْتُ فِي السَّيْرِ فِي شَوَارِعِ غَزَةَ و كَأَنِّي زَرْتَهَا مِنْ قَبْلِ، الشَّوَارِعُ لَمْ تَبْدُو لِي مَطْلَقًا غَرِيبَةً رُويَةً الأَطْفَالِ و فِضُولِهِمُ الكَبِيرِ نَحْوَ حَقِيبَتِي الكَبِيرَةِ، صَوْتُ البَاعَةِ تَدْوِي مِنَ الشَّارِعِ المَقَابِلِ فَتِيَّاتٍ يَعْبرْنَ الطَّرِيقَ رَاكِضَاتٍ حَامِلَاتٍ مَعَهُنَّ كُتُبَ يَهْمَسْنَ بِكَلَامٍ فِي اتِّجَاهِي و يَضْحَكُنَّ مُحْتَشِمَاتٍ.

تَنَشَقَّتْ هَوَاءَ غَزَةَ المُفَعَّمِ بِالحُرِّيَةِ، المَدِينَةُ الَّتِي عَانَتْ الكَثِيرَ لِكُنْهَا لَا تَزَالُ قَائِمَةً لِصَلَابَةِ سُكَّانِهَا، جُلْتُ جَمِيعَ الشَّوَارِعِ وَكَأَنِّي أَمْشِي فِي شَوَارِعِ العَاصِمَةِ حَتَّى تَقُلَّ حَقِيبَتِي لَمْ يَمْنَعْنِي مِنَ السَّيْرِ، فَجْأَةً و مِنْ

حَظِي رَأَيْتُ مَقَرَّ الْجَمْعِيَّةِ الَّتِي نَسَيْتُ حَتَّى أَنِي قَدِمْتُ مِنْ أَجْلِهَا، رُؤْيَا الْبِنَائِيَّاتِ وَالنَّاسِ تَعِيشُ حَيَاةَ عَادِيَّةٍ أَبْهَرْتَنِي.

قَرَعْتُ الْجَرَسَ وَانْتَضَرْتُ مَطْوِلاً وَ لَكِنْ لَمْ يَجِبْنِي أَحَدٌ، نَزَلْتُ الدَّرَجَاتِ وَجَلَسْتُ هُنَاكَ وَغَطَسْتُ فِي نَوْمٍ عَمِيقٍ وَهَادِيٍّ عَلَى حَقِيْبَتِي وَفَجْأَةً أَيْقَظَنِي مَحْمُودٌ إِنَّهُ عَضُوٌّ مِنْ جَمْعِيَّةٍ "نَحْنُ نُحِبُّ غَزَةَ" نَظَرْتُ إِلَيْهِ بِالكَادِ تَعْرِفَ إِلَيَّ وَ سَأَلْتُهُ هَلْ حَلَّ اللَّيْلُ؟

نَهَضْتُ بِسُرْعَةٍ أَنْفَضْتُ الْعُبَارَ الْمُلتَصِقَ عَلَى فُسْتَانِي وَ تَعْدِيلَ وَشَاحِيٍّ مِنْ عَلَى رَأْسِي... إِبْتَسَمَ إِلَيَّ وَقَالَ لِي هَلْ أَنْتَ هُنَا مِنْذُ زَمَنٍ؟

- نَعَمْ أَنَا هُنَا مِنْذُ الْعَصْرِ...

- أَنَا جِدُّ أَسْفَافٍ لَقَدْ كُنْتُ فِي إِجْتِمَاعٍ خَارِجِ الْجَمْعِيَّةِ وَ لَمْ أَعْلَمْ بِقُدُومِكَ... لَكِنْ هَلْ جِئْتَ وَحَدَاكَ أَيْنَ الْآخَرُونَ؟

- سَيُوفُونَنِي فِي الْآيَامِ الْقَادِمَةِ...

دَخَلْنَا الْمَقَرَّ وَ نَحْنُ نَتَكَلَّمُ... غَزَةَ مُخْتَلِفَةً عَمَّا تَصَوَّرْتَ ...

- أَهْ صَحِيحٌ؟ وَ كَيْفَ وَجَدْتَهَا؟

- إِنَّهَا حَزِينَةٌ وَ لَكِنهَا تَنْمَسُكُ بِالْأَمَلِ وَ تُؤْمِنُ بِطُلُوعِ شَمْسٍ جَدِيدَةٍ كُلَّ يَوْمٍ...

- نَظَرْتُ إِلَيْهِ مُطْوِلاً.. إِبْتَسَمَ إِلَيَّ وَ أَجَابَنِي... إِنَّهَا كَذَلِكَ...

بَدَأْتُ أَتَكَلَّمُ مَعَهُ بِشَغْفٍ كَبِيرٍ وَ أَتَبِعُهُ وَ هُوَ يَرْتَبُ الْأَشْيَاءَ مِنْ حَوْلِي، أَتَعْرِفُ مَحْمُودَ يَجِبُ عَلَى الْعَالَمِ أَنْ يَرَى هَذَا؟ أَنْ يَرَى أَنَّ غَزَةَ مَدِينَةٌ مَفْعُومَةٌ بِالْحَيَاةِ وَ سَكَانِهَا كَذَلِكَ... لَيْسَ عَلَيْهِمْ رُؤْيَا غَزَةَ دَائِمًا حَزِينَةٌ وَ تَعَانِي، عَلَيْهِمْ رُؤْيَا الْأَشْيَاءِ الْجَمِيلَةِ الَّتِي تَبْقَى سَكَانِ غَزَةَ أَحْيَاءً...

تَوَقَّفَ لِلْحِظَّةِ وَ نَظَرَ إِلَيَّ وَ قَالَ لِي أَنْتَ مَفْعُومَةٌ بِالْحَيَوِيَّةِ وَ الْأَمَلِ وَ شُغُوفَةٌ أَيْضًا سَتَسَاعِدُنَا كَثِيرًا...

كَانَ مَحْمُودٌ فِي مِثْلِ سَنِي شَابِ فِلَسْطِينِي ذَكِيٍّ يَحِبُّ التَّنْظِيمَ كَثِيرًا وَ طَبِيعِي يَقُولُ كُلُّ شَيْءٍ يَجُولُ فِي خَاطِرِهِ دُونَ التَّفَكِيرِ وَ كَثِيرِ الْفُضُولِ.

كَانَتْ الْأَشْيَاءُ الصَّغِيرَةُ تَأْتِرُ فَيَا وَرُؤْيَا بَحْرِ غَزَةَ مِثْلًا جَعَلَنِي انْزِفَ الدَّمُوعِ... رُؤْيَا الْأَعْلَامِ تَرَفَّرَ عَلَى الزَّوَارِقِ وَ الشَّمْسِ سَاعِطَةً عَلَى الْبَحْرِ وَ تَرْمِي بِرَيْقِهَا هُنَاكَ... نَظَرْتُ الْفُضُولَ الصِّيَادِيَّيْنَ نَحُونَا وَ هُمْ مَتَفَرِّغِينَ فِي حِيَاكَةِ الشَّبَكَاتِ...

بَعْدَ يَوْمٍ شَاقٍّ مِنَ النَّشَاطَاتِ الَّتِي فُئِمْنَا بِهَا فِي الْمَدَارِسِ وَ مَرَاكِزِ الْإِيْتَامِ جَلَسْنَا عَلَى السَّطْحِ نَتَرَقَّبُ غُرُوبَ الشَّمْسِ عَلَى مَدِينَةِ غَزَةَ وَ إِذَا بِالْخَيْطِ الْأَخِيرِ مِنَ الشَّمْسِ يَزُولُ مِنَ الْأَفْقِ يَجُلُّ الظَّلَامُ وَ سَطَّ الْمَصَابِيحُ الْمُسَاعِدَةُ عَلَى ذَوِي آذَانِ الْمَغْرَبِ.

كَمْ كَانَ الْمَنْظَرُ رَائِعًا وَ نَحْنُ نَتَبَادَلُ أَطْرَافَ الْحَدِيثِ الْهَادِي.

...كَانَ الْحَدِيثُ حَوْلَ كَيْفِيَّةِ الدُّخُولِ إِلَى الْفُدْسِ.

كُنْتُ أَجْهَلُ الْكَثِيرَ عَنِ فِلَسْطِينِ... وَ لَازَلْتُ أَجْهَلُ الْكَثِيرَ عَنْهَا أَيْضًا وَ لَكِنْ لَمْ أَدْرِكْ قَطُّ أَنِّي أَجْهَلُ الْكَثِيرَ عَنِ بَلَدِي الْجَزَائِرِ أَيْضًا... لَمْ أَنْفُكُ التَّفَكِيرَ فِي الْقَصْفِ الَّذِي عَرَفْتَهُ هَذِهِ الْمَنْطِقَةُ أَرْوَاحَ الضَّحَايَا كَأَنَّهَا تَتَادِينِي أَوْ تَسْتَعِيثُ بِي تَصَاحِبُهَا ضِحْكَاتٍ وَ مِنْ ثَمَّ صَرَخَ... قَهْقَهَاتِ أَطْفَالٍ... وَ هُنَافُ رِجَالٍ... كَانَتْ تَجُولُ فِي عَقْلِي وَ تُشَوِّشُ أَفْكَارِي فِي أَنْ وَاحِدٍ... فَجَاءَتْ رَأْيْتُ صَبِيًّا يَرْكُضُ نَحْوَ بِنَايَةِ مَهْدَمَةٍ يَلْتَفِتُ وَرَائِهِ كَأَنَّ أَحَدَ يِرَاقِبِهِ يَتَسَلَّقُ الْأَدْرَاجَ الْهَشَّةَ، فَضَوْلِي الْكَبِيرَ دَفَعَنِي لَتَنْبَعِهِ، فَفَزْتُ مِنْ عَلَى السُّورِ الْمُتَحَطِّمِ وَ سَلَكْتُ طَرِيقًا آخَرَ لِلْبِنَايَةِ ، عَلَّقَ ثَوْبِي بِالْأَسْلَاقِ الْمُتَصَدِّعَةِ مِنَ السُّورِ الْمُحْطَمِ ... جَذَبَتْهُ بَقْوَةٌ لِيَتَمَرَّقَ أَسْفَلَهُ أَكْمَلْتُ عَلَيْهِ وَ حَرَّرْتُ نَفْسِي، صَعِدْتُ الدَّرَجَاتِ بِحَذَرٍ شَدِيدٍ لِعَدَمِ إِصْدَارِ أَيِّ صَوْتٍ وَ لَكِنْ نَعَلِي الْجُلْدِي الْمَتَعَرِّقُ كَانَ يَصْدُرُ صَوْتًا وَاضِحًا... نَزَعْتَهُ وَ حَمَلْتَهُ بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ... إِسْتَرَقْتُ النَّظَرَ لِلْمَصْطَبَةِ وَ رَأَيْتُ مَجْمُوعَةً مِنَ الشَّبَابِ مَجْتَمِعِينَ، الصَّبِيِّ كَانَ بَيْنَهُمْ، لَقَدْ كَانَ بِالْأَحْرَى وَسَطَهُمْ، لَمْ أَتَمَكَّنْ مِنَ الْإِسْتِمَاعِ إِلَى حَدِيثِهِمْ وَ لَكِنْ وَجُوهُهُمْ الْمَغْبِرَةَ وَ الْمُنُورَةَ فِي أَنْ وَاحِدٍ، نَظَرَاتِهِمُ الَّتِي تُثِيرُ الْخَوْفَ وَ لَا تُشْعِرُ بِأَيِّ خَوْفٍ، نَبْرَاتِ أَصْوَاتِهِمُ الْخَشْنَةَ وَ هُمْ يَتَنَاقَشُونَ ، سَمِعْتُ شَيْءَ يَتَكَلَّمُونَ عَنَّا، عَنِ غَرْبَاءٍ... نَحْنُ لَا نَرِيدُهُمْ لَا نَرِيدُ شَفَقَتَهُمْ وَ لَا رُؤْيَا دُمُوعِهِمُ الْخَادِعَةَ... أَهْتَزُّ بَدَنِي لِسَمَاعِي ذَلِكَ... كَانُوا مَعَ إِسْرَائِيلَ وَ الْآنَ هُمْ مَعَنَا ... لَا نَرِيدُهُمْ هُنَا... تَزَايَدَتْ نَبْرَاتِ أَصْوَاتِهِمُ الْمَكْبَلَةَ بِالْغَضَبِ.

تَرَجَعْتُ إِلَى الْوَرَاءِ وَ إِذَا بِالزُّجَاجِ الْمُحْطَمِ يُحَدِّثُ صَوْتًا وَ يَلْتَصِقُ بِقَدَمَيَّ الْحَافِيئِينَ... لَمْ أَتَدَارِكْ الْأَمْرَ وَ نَزَلْتُ رَاكضًا وَ الصَّبِيَّةُ تَلَاخَقُنِي أَرْكُضُ دَاخِلَ الْأَبْنِيَةِ الْخَالِيَةِ فَجَاءَتْ، يَدٌ تَجَذَّبُنِي بِقُوَّةٍ وَ تُعَلِّقُ فَمِي، مِتُّ مِنَ الرَّعْبِ إِلَّا أَنْ رَأَيْتُ الصَّبِيَّةَ تَمُرُّ مِنْ أَمَامِنَا دُونَ أَنْ تَرَانَا، لَقَدْ كَانَ مَحْمُودٌ... أَفَلْتُ مِنْ بَيْنِ ذِرَاعِيهِ... لَقَدْ أَرَعْبَتْنِي ! كَيْفَ عَلِمْتُ أَنِّي هُنَا؟ وَ مَنْ كَانُوا وَ لِمَا هُمْ مَتَغَاظُونَ ؟؟ يَمْسِكُ بِذِرَاعِي بِقُوَّةٍ وَ يَسْحَبُنِي وَ يَقُولُ لِي لِنَتَكَلَّمْ بَعِيدًا مِنْ هُنَا...

- أَنَا لَا أَحِبُّ التَّكَلَّمَ عَنِ السِّيَاسَةِ كَمَا أَنِّي وَ لَمْ أَرْغَبُ التَّكَلَّمَ فِي الْأَمْرِ مَعَكَ مِنْ قَبْلِ وَ لَكِنْ هُنَاكَ جَزَائِرِيُونَ قَامُوا بِعَقْدِ صَفَقَاتٍ تَعَاوَنَ وَ إِتْحَادَ مَعَ إِسْرَائِيلِ... إِقْشَعِرُّ بَدَنِي لِسَمَاعِ ذَلِكَ، لَمْ أَتَمَكَّنْ مِنَ الصُّمُودِ مِنْ شِدَّةِ الصَّدْمَةِ، إِسْتَعْنَتُ بِعَمُودِ الْكَهْرِبَاءِ وَ سَأَلْتُهُ، وَ لَكِنْ مِنْ؟ وَ لِمَاذَا؟

لَيْسَ لَدَيَّ مَعْلُومَاتٌ كَافِيَةٌ وَ لَكِنْ مَا أَعْلَمُهُ أَنَّهُمْ مَعَ عِلَاقَةِ بِالْمُوسَادِ وَ كَثِيرٌ مِنْهُمْ مِنْ يَأْتُونَ إِلَى إِسْرَائِيلِ ...

كَيْفَ يُمْكِنُهُمْ فَعَلَ ذَلِكَ؟ كَيْفَ تَتَجَرَّأُ تِلْكَ الْمَتَغَطَّرَةُ فَرُوجَةً عَلَى التَّحَالِفِ مَعَ إِسْرَائِيلِ أَعْرِفُ مَعْظَمَهُمْ مِنْ تِلْكَ الْجَمْعِيَّاتِ الْغَيْرِ الْحُكُومِيَّةِ ، عَمِلْتُ حَتَّى عَلَى الْبَرْنَامِجِ الْإِرُومْتُوسَطِيِّ رَفَضْتُ كُلَّ تَعَاوَنٍ مَعَ إِسْرَائِيلِ بَيْنَمَا هُمْ قَبْلُوهُ، لَا أَعْرِفُ مَا أَقُولُ لَكَ يَا مَحْمُودُ... أَشْعُرُ بِغَضَبٍ كَبِيرٍ...

يبتسم لي و يمسح بعض الدموع التي تنسال على خدي بتردد و تهذيب كبير...

- إهدأي فأنت لا تعرفي شيئا، حتى أبناء بلدنا خانونا مع إسرائيل، عندما نذهب إلى القدس سوف تكتشفين كل شيء ...

- ماذا تعني محمود...

نهضت باكرا شعرت بأرق طوال الليل لم يتركني التفكير أعرف الهدوء، شيء يوجعني في بطني أمسح وجهي و أعدل شعري أحضرُ الشاي و أحطهُ على النار و أهْمُ لغسل وجهي أنظرُ مطولا في المرأة و فجأة أسمع فيضانا الشاي من على الفرن، جلست على الشرفة و سببت الشاي الساخن و رُحْتُ أتأملُ شروقَ الشمس من على المدينة، كانت أشعة الشمس تخترق الضباب الندي على الأفق و تترك بريقا مشعا... أدرت أغنية فيروز و رُحْتُ أستمتع بالصباح الباكر و أنا أحلم بالأشياء الرائعة...

سيكتب لي عهد جديد... مسكت بإكليل ورق الزيتون و رحلت ألامسه بلطف بأناملي خائفة من إتلافه لبست الفستان الأبيض ذيله الطويل يثير في كأي أميرة عصر ما كان، ضيق في الصدر و عريض عند الركبتان أكامه العريضة كجناحين ظهر الثوب مكشوف يبرز خانتني في وسط ظهري شعري المنسدل إلى الوراء واضعتا مشبكا من القصة المزينة بأحجار المرجان، كان المشبك من مدينة تيزوزو قلب القبائل و الحضارة الأمازغية أحضرته من هناك عندما زرت المدينة لأول مرة في مهرجان الحلي كان اليوم ربيعي، النساء كلهم في زيهم المزركش بالألوان والأصفر الفاقع اللون حافيتي الأقدام يمشين على العشب النضر وسط الجبال الذائبة ثلوجها و على أكواعهم خلاخل يوزعن الكسكسي بابتسامتهم العريضة و يسقينه بالمرق الساخن و قطع اللحم أما الأخريات فكن يحملن على كتوفهن جرارير اللبن يحطهن فوق الأرض و يركضن لقد كنت معهن أحظر جرارير اللبن و أوزعهم على الضيوف كنت واضعتا مجوهرات كثيرة و لكن المفضل كان الذي كنت أضعه على جبھتي قطع المرجان الذي تنسدل على عيوني عندما أتحرك أو أهز رأسي أو الخلاخل السمكة التي كنت أضعها في قدمي، كم أحب محمود فتيات القبائل كان يمدحني فيهم لأنه يرى أنهم جميلات الجزائر لم يعرف أي من أصولهم و أي ورثت الكثير عنهم صحيح أي لا أتحدث اللغة الامازغية و لكن أجدادي كانوا أمازغيين و تزوجوا من عرب...

...خرجت من العرفة نحو الحديقة و جئتأي محمرتين من الخجل تحت نظرات أصدقائي و هم ينظرون نحوي و يبتسمن لي بريق عيناوي المخططين بكحل المشعين بأشعة الشمس الساطعة نزلت بعض الدرجات و أنا التقى التهاني رايته من بعيد بابتسامته محمود يخجل كثيرا كنت امشي تحت نظراته و كأي احلق لم اشعر بان ركبتي تحملاني كنت اشعر و أي احلق فوق أحلامي اشعر بالفرحة التي تنبعث من عيني و حبه الذي يدفني و يجعلني ابتسم و اوم براسي لشكر المدعويين ترش علي الأرز اليابس تحت الزغاريد لو كنت في الجزائر لخرجت بالحايك و لو رشت أمي عليا ماء الزهر بدل الأرز، عاداتهم تختلف عنا و لكني لم أشعر بالإخلاف كثيرا و إنما بالاندماج فزفاقي هو كالحلم كم تمنيت أن أعيش في منزل كبير وسط الحقول وأشجار الفاكهة أعنتني ببساتيني و دواجني كم حلمت بتربية أولادي في الطبيعة بعيدا عن ضوضاء المدينة... محمود يعد خطواتي و ينظر إلي كأنه غير مصدق بأننا أخيرا معنا و اليوم زفافنا يمك يدي كالأبطال في الروايات التي لطالما

قرأت عنهم أنا متأكدة من أنه قلد أحد ما... لقد كان كل شيء تمنيت... الرجل البسيط و المتكبر في نفس الوقت... الرجل الطيب و المجنون ، الرجل الذي يمكنني معرفة إحساسه فقط بالنظر إليه... رجل شغوف و عفوي لا يكف أبدا عن إنبهارى... محمود يمسك يدي يداعب أنفي... فجأة يطرق الباب بعنف إنها طبيعته يطلب الإذن بالدخول أسمح له و لكنني نسيت أن ألبس وشاحا و لكن محمود لا يبالي مثلي فهو يجدني دائما تقليدية... يُربكني دائما دُخوله يَحْمِلُ الكرسي بيد واحدة و يجلس أمامي يتردد في الكلام و يقول لي :

- يجب أن تغادروا في الحال...
- و لكن لماذا؟ ماذا يحدث؟ و المشروع؟
- سأشرح لك كل شيء لاحقا...

عند حلول المساء و من أجل عدم لفت الانتباه، باشرنا بالمغادرة، أفومُ يسحب حقيبتني من على الرصيف تعثرتُ فجأة من على المَجَارِي يأتي محمود مُسرِعاً و يُسَاعِدُنِي على تحريرها نظرتُ إلى محمود مُطولا بحُبٍ كبير و إشتياق قبل أوانه ابتسمت إليه بدون أن يراني في هذا الوقت ذَهَبَ تفكيري بعيداً... لقد جئتُ إلى هنا واثقة في نفسي من إحداث تغيير ما و بأي طريقة كانت و ها أنا الآن هاربة خوفا من التورط في المشاكل، لست أنا من تخاف من الواقع، لستُ أنا من تستسلم بدون حوض التحديات، لن أتقبل العيش في الندم مرة أخرى... نظرتُ إلى محمود مستمعة لما يقول بدون الإنصات إليه، يدخلني في السيارة و يغلق الباب، يرمقني بنظرة وداع كأنه لن يراني مجددا...

- لا يمكنني المجيء أنت تعرفين لماذا...

لم أقل شيء ... إكتفيت بالنظر إليه، انطلقت السيارة مبتعدة عن محمود وسط الظلام و الندى البارد، إبتعدنا عن المدينة المظلمة إنه حتما توقيت انقطاع الكهرباء... نظرات الأسف من قبل أصدقائي إتجاهي... شعرت أنني فقدت شيء ما و بدأت أفقد القدرة على التنفس... تشابكت الأفكار و لم يعد لي أي منطق طلبت من السائق التوقف أنزل حقيبتني من الصندوق و قال لي هل أنت متأكدة؟

عُدتُ مشياً في الظلام بفرحةٍ لا يمكنُ وصفها أهو تحرري من الحواجز أم أنه الحُب بكل صديق، إقتربت من المقر و إذا بمحمود جالس على الدَرَجَات، رأسه بين أرجله كأنه نائم أو حزين، تذكرت أول مرة قدمت إلى هنا و كنت جالسة مكانه أترقب مجيئه ، تركت الحقيبة و إقتربت إليه بهدوء الدُموع تفيضُ من عيناى أمسحها بمرفقي و ألمس مقدمة رأسه برفق يرفعه مضطربا يحاول سؤالي لكنني امنعه و اجلس بين قدميه ممسكنا يدها الباردتان و المرتعشتان... لن اذهب إلى أي مكان من دونك... لن أتففس الهواء الذي لا تتنفسه... لكن ماذا ستفعلين هنا ؟ أنت طموحة جدا و هنا ليس المكان الذي يلائمك... أنظري حولك نحن نعيش في الظلام...

- محمود... أريد أن أفعل الكثير أولاً علي تعليمك الفرنسية يا إلهي كم أنت سيئ في هذه اللغة... سوف أدرسُ هنا كما كنت أفعل هُناك، ستكون بجانبني، أرجوك... ينزل رأسه إلى الأرض كأنه يرفض الفكرة، فجأة تشتعل المصابيح... أقوم برفع رأسه برفق من ذقنه و أحبيه... أرجوك لا تحرمني من وضع إكليل الزيتون إنه رائع، لو فقط رأيتة... ينظر إلي مستغربا عن كل شيء و عن

Visiting Palestine

Khadija Hamany. Algeria

It is not reality that prevents us from living our dreams and the mind does not always lead us to them. Rather, it is the heart ... the heart that controls us and makes us surrender to its whims. I've chosen to surrender to my heart and make it feel unrestrained love and indifference to people's warnings, a love free of guilt. I've chosen to love, adore and marry the Palestinian man who has inspired me. It is the life I love living and I'm not going to choose another.

The rain drops had fallen and I started feeling the warm dust. I felt it with great love as a sign of the arrival of winter. I returned home early because it was a public holiday to celebrate World Women's Day with lots of gifts from my students, mostly flowers.

I went through the streets full of people. The coming and going of the pedestrians confused me and suddenly the rain started falling heavily and the people hurried to find shelter. I smiled because I was able to walk without bumping into anyone. I looked up at the sky and let the water drops touch my face. My cheeks blushed because of the cold but I didn't want to hide from something as charming as the rain. I wanted to make the most of every moment of God's kindness. How wonderful to see the sweet water falling from the sky. I wanted it to wash away my buried pains, my great repressed desire. I wanted it to wipe away my concerns and help me to forget.

Once home I made some hot coffee and felt an extraordinary quietness as if I had removed a heavy burden from my shoulders, especially after having taken a shower. I started correcting the exams and checked my

emails and was surprised when I saw a message with a strange title which made me read it eagerly: *The mist has cleared and sorrow has vanished. People have come from everywhere to see the sun warming the city of peace.* I was shocked to read the content of the message followed by the note: *engage to re-launch the project and visit Palestine.*

The message had been sent by one of my friends I had met during my trip to Egypt, where the idea emerged of visiting Palestine but was dismissed because of the commitments of our personal lives. I now remembered our enthusiasm, the efforts we made to carry out the project. I stared for a long time at the exam papers piled in front of me and said to myself in a low and hesitant voice: "It's the life I want to live."

I approached the window to look at the rain falling outside and I watched drops dripping down the glass. I lost myself in thought and wondered what made me accept this routine life. Me, a person who dreams more than she breathes: what made me suddenly give up dreaming? What made my heart stop loving? Is it the need to escape or to capitulate? Ah, I'd changed... I'd become a woman submitted to a society that always criticises everything and colleagues who never stop complaining.

The world suddenly changed for me, I forgot the people and the painful memories although they still hurt me. I tried to forget that my ex-husband was a terrorist but I couldn't. No, I couldn't. How could I forget that I killed him with my own hands? The years have been unable to erase a single instant of those painful moments. I chose to isolate myself from

people and live this life of routine avoiding their words and looks of despise... I did what I thought right dismissing my feelings and the great love I felt for him.

It is true that I could have left before but when the bullets began flying and I saw the blood that covered his face and was flowing over his beard I ran towards him, took him in my arms and asked him to forgive me, to relax and to always be with me wherever I am when I close my eyes... Or when I am alone drowned in my own thoughts, in my dreams and even in my nightmares.

I had never felt as passionate about anything as this project. For me, it was the medicine for my pains and my wounds. It was a new refuge in order to go on and participate in something to build a new life... I wanted to participate in the love for a country and fight for something redeemed by my love and my hope.

We reached Gaza through the Rafah crossing on a very warm day. The taxi was very noisy and produced steam. I sweated a lot because of the great heat. My hair was stuck to my forehead and my neck. I started to fan the air with my light headscarf and to look around me through the window. We stopped at the first checkpoint. The soldier moved towards us in long strides telling the driver with his finger to get out and open the car boot. His big shoes were covered with dust but his blue shirt appeared white as his face was changing to black because of the sweltering heat and sunstroke. He could barely open his eyes and spoke to me loudly.

–Come on... Passports.

We had finally gone through the crossing and taken a paved road leading to Gaza. We arrived at an almost empty city after around an hour. I got out of the car and began walking in the streets of Gaza telling myself that I had already visited it. The streets didn't

look at all strange to me: the children and their great curiosity about my big suitcase, the booming voices of the salesmen, the girls running across the road carrying books and mumbling at me and laughing.

I breathed the freedom-filled air of Gaza, the city which has suffered so much but still exists because of the strength of its residents. The weight of my suitcase did not stop me walking and suddenly I saw the headquarters of the association. I had almost forgotten that this was why I was there. The buildings and the people living a normal life surprised me a lot.

I rang and waited for a long time but nobody answered. I went down the staircase, sat down on my suitcase and fell into a deep sleep. Suddenly Mahmud, a member of the association "We Love Gaza" woke me up. I looked at him and asked him the time.

I stood up to brush off the dust stuck to my clothes and to adjust my headscarf. He smiled and asked me:

–Have you been here for long?

–Yes, since the early afternoon.

–I'm really sorry. I went to a meeting outside the association and didn't know about your arrival... Did you come on your own? Where are the others?

–They are coming in the next few days.

We went into the headquarters.

–Gaza is different from what I imagined...

–Really? And how do you find it?

–It's sad but it clings on to hope and believes the sun rises every day.

He looked at me for a long time, smiled and said:

–That's exactly how it is.

I started talking to him and followed him while he was arranging things around me:

–You know, Mahmud, everyone should see it. They should realise that Gaza is a city full of life and people... They shouldn't

always see Gaza sad and painful. They should see the beautiful things that the people always keep alive.

He stopped for a moment and said:

–You are very vital and full of hope and passion. You will help us a lot...

Mahmud was a young Palestinian of my age. He loved order, always said what was on his mind without thinking and was very curious.

Small things had an influence on me. For instance, seeing the Gaza Sea made me cry, as did the flags flying on the boats and the shiny sun throwing its splendour on the sea or the curious gazes of the fishermen sewing nets...

After a long day in the schools and orphanages, we sat down on the roof to wait for the sunset. Once the sun had completely disappeared below the horizon, it began getting dark and the lamps began to be lit amidst the sound of the Maghreb call to prayer (the sunset prayer).

The scene was magnificent and we shared a quiet conversation, talking about how to get to Jerusalem.

I didn't know a lot about Palestine... but later I realised that I didn't know too much about my own country, Algeria... I've always thought about the bombing of this region. The spirits of the victims called or shouted to me, accompanied by the laughter of the children and the cheers of the men, which haunted my spirit and filled my thoughts.

Suddenly, I saw a child running towards a destroyed building and looking behind him as if he was being followed, climbing the ruinous steps. My curiosity made me follow him. I passed the broken wall and took another path towards the building. My dress got stuck on the barbed wire of the broken wall... I pulled at it firmly, tore it and was released. I went up the staircase careful not to make noise but my

leather shoes squeaked loudly. I took them off and carried them. I looked at the *mastaba* and saw a group of young people and among them the boy. I could hear them talk and saw their dusty yet illuminated faces. Their expressions frightened me. I understood that they were talking about us, the foreigners... *We don't want them. We don't want their pity or their false tears.* My body shook as I listened. *They were with Israel and today they are with us... We don't want them with us.* The tone of their words full of rage worsened.

I went back and the broken glass made noise and stuck to my bare feet. I wasn't paying attention, I was running through the empty buildings and the boys were following me and suddenly a hand grabbed me and covered my mouth. I was going to die from fear but I saw the boys passing by without seeing us. It was Mahmud... I freed myself from his arms. He was frightening me.

–You scared me! How did you know I was here? Who are they and why are they angry?

He took me firmly in his arms and pulled me along while telling me that we would talk far away from here.

–I also don't like talking about politics. I didn't want to tell you about this but there are Algerians who have made cooperation and solidarity agreements with Israel.

I got scared when listening to it. I was overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation and leaned on the electricity pole. I asked him:

–But who? And why?

–I don't have enough information. All I know is that they are in contact with Mossad and many of them come from Israel...

–How can they do that? How does this arrogant Farogah form an alliance with Israel? I know that many of them are non-government associations. I have even worked with the EuroMed programme. I have refused any cooperation with Israel while they have

accepted. I don't know what I'm saying, Mahmud... I'm very angry...

He smiled at me and hesitantly and politely dried the tears that were flowing down my cheeks.

—Calm down, you don't know anything. Even the sons of our country have betrayed us to Israel. When we go to Jerusalem, you'll understand everything.

—What do you mean, Mahmud?

I woke up early after a sleepless night. My mind couldn't rest. Something was burning inside of me. I wiped my face. I arranged my hair. I prepared the teapot and turned on the oven. I started washing my face. I looked at myself a long time in the mirror waiting for the tea to boil. Once ready, I sat on the balcony and poured the hot tea and looked at the sun rising over the city. The sun beams crossed the mist and sparkled on the horizon... I put on Fayrouz's song and began enjoying that fine morning and dreamt of wonderful things...

I will write a new era... I was holding the olive leaves delicately in my fingers, careful not to destroy them. I put on a long white dress which made me look like a princess from an ancient era. The dress clung to my chest, audaciously at the level of the knees, with long sleeves like two wings. The back of the dress was open and made my waving hair look like a horse's tail. I put on a silver earring adorned with coral stones. This earring came from the town of Tisiouzou, the heart of the Amazigh tribes and civilisation. I bought it there on my first visit to the town during the Carnival of Ornaments. It was springtime. All the women were walking barefoot on the grass among the mountains with ankle bracelets, distributing the couscous with a big smile as well as the hot bouillon and the pieces of meat, while the others carried the milk pots on their shoulders, putting them

on the ground and leaving. I was with them. I prepared the milk pots and handed them out to the guests. I was wearing many jewels and my favourites were the ones on my forehead, hanging over my eyes when I moved or shook my head, or the big ankle bracelets. Mahmud really liked the young girls of the tribes. He praised my beauty because he thought they were the prettiest in Algeria. He didn't know that I share the same background as them and that I have inherited a lot from them. I don't speak Amazigh but my grandparents were Amazighs and married to Arabs.

I went out of the bedroom towards the garden. My cheeks blushed with shame at the gazes of my female friends, who smiled at me. My eyes were painted with kohl and shone under the sun beams. I went down the steps receiving compliments. I saw Mahmud in the distance, smiling. He was very shy. He looked at me. It was as if I were flying. I felt as if my knees would give way. I felt that I was flying upon my dreams. I felt the joy that emerged from his eyes and his love embracing me. He made me smile and I made a sign to the guests who were throwing the dry rice under the youyous. If I were in Algeria I would have worn the *hayek* and my mother would throw rose water on me instead of rice. Their customs are different from ours. However, I didn't feel the difference but rather a sense of fusion. My wedding was like a dream. I wished to live in a big house amidst the crop fields and the fruit trees, to look after my garden and my hens. I always dreamt of raising my children among nature, far from the noise of the city... That's what I wanted... A simple yet proud man... A good man, whose feelings I could know by just looking at him... A stubborn yet spontaneous man who never stops amazing me... Mahmud was holding my hand, caressing my nose... Suddenly, he knocked firmly on the door as he usually does. He asked me if he

could come in but I forgot to put the headscarf on. However, Mahmud doesn't worry like me and thinks I am too traditional... His arrival embarrassed me. He was carrying a chair and sat in front of me. He hesitated and told me:

–You need to leave immediately.

–But why? What happened? And the project?

–I'll tell you later.

We left in the evening, to avoid attracting attention. I put my suitcase on the pavement and suddenly I put my foot in the gutter. Mahmud came quickly to help me. I looked at him for a long time with great love and concern. I smiled at him without him seeing me and at that moment my thoughts flew further away. I came here in the hope that it would be a change for me and now I was trying to evade myself overwhelmed by problems. I am not a person who is afraid of problems; I am not a person who leaves without facing challenges. I could not accept the regret again. I looked at Mahmud and listened to what he was saying without paying attention to him. He made me get into the car and closed the door. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye convinced that he would not see me.

–I can't come. You know why.

I didn't say anything... It was enough for me to look at him. The car left Mahmud far behind, amidst the darkness and the cold dew. We were moving away from the dark city immersed in the blackout ... with my friends' looks of regret towards me. I felt as if I was losing something and started to lose the ability

to breathe... My thoughts became entangled and illogical. I asked the driver to stop, to take my suitcase from the boot and asked myself:

–Are you sure?

I returned to the darkness with a joy that I could not describe. Was I releasing myself from the obstacles or was it true love? I was approaching the headquarters. Mahmud was sitting on the staircase with his head between his legs. He seemed asleep or sad. I remembered the first time I had come here when I was sitting down waiting for him to come. I left the suitcase and gently moved closer to him. I wiped the away tears flowing from my eyes with my sleeve and delicately touched his forehead. He looked at me with concern trying to ask something but I stopped him and sat at his feet holding his cold and troubled hands...

–I couldn't go anywhere without you... I won't breathe the same air as you...

–What will you do here? You're very ambitious and this is not a place for you. Look at the darkness.

–Mahmud, I want to do many things. First, you must learn French. Oh my God you are so bad at this language. I will teach here as I used to do there. You will be at my side, please.

He lowered his head as if dismissing the idea and suddenly the streetlamps were lit. I gently lifted his head and told him: –Please, don't stop me from wearing the olive leaf crown. It's beautiful.

He looked at me surprised.

–I'll tell you later...

Jučer mi se dogodilo nešto famozno

Marina Giunio. Hrvatska

Iden na faks, stres mi je u glavi i grč u želucu, krećen za 4 dana, a ništa ne ide kako sam predvidjela. Pomišljan čak da odustanem od putovanja, ali kasno je za promjene, pa odlazim kud puklo da puklo. Još uvijek kašljen i ne osjećam se najpoletnije pa odabiren tramvaj umjesto bicikle. Ne znam uopće zašto idem na posao na neradni dan, uglavnom da bi umirila savjest, a manje zato što ću stvarno nešto spomena vridno učiniti u subotu popodne. Trudin se maknut misli s negativnosti, čitam Terapiju, znaš onu knjigu koju već mjesecima neuspješno pokušavam pročitati, vucaram je svugdi sa sobom, donila sam je i doma za Uskrs? E, uglavnom, nekidan sam je išla produžiti po 3. put, ali nisam više mogla, znaš kakvi su Nijemci sa pravilima, ne može pa ne može, iako je niko nije posudio valjda u dvaestipet godina kako je izašla. Tako da sam je vratila na jedan dan i onda opet podigla idući. Rupa u zakonu, ni Nijemci nisu savršeni. Zainatila sam se i moram je pročitati do sride, makar na užtrb spavanja i sl.

I tako, čim se tramvaj odmaka jednu stanicu od centra, nije bilo više ljudi, vagon se ispraznio, sila sam i čitala u miru. Odlučila sam pričekati drugi tramvaj na banhofu. Inače to ne volim: čekati na mistu nego krenem pješke do iduće stanice, pogotovo kad je ladno ka ovih dana, ali morala sam završiti knjigu tako da sam sila na prazno mjesto na klupi pored jedne muslimanske porodice. Zapravo, samo otac i 3-4 djece, bez supruge. On je imao onu kukičanu kapiću, gustu bradu i bilu opravu do poda, a najstarija kćer je čak nosila veo. Uvijek sam se pitala kad se žene počnu pokrивati, pretpostavljan nastupom spolne zrelosti. Ali ko to može znati, osim cura samih? Ovlaš bi procijenila da nema više od 12 godina. I oni su sidili i čekali. Jaketa mi je srećom bila dovoljno duga da sidnem na nju jer je metalna klupa bila ledeno hladna. Ušuškala sam se, izbavila kažiprst iz ralja knjige u koju sam ga ugurala da ne bi zaboravila da sam stala i nastavila čitati.

Toliko sam se zadubila u roman da nisam ni primjetila nekog starčića koji je došao konzultirati vojni red iznad moje glave. Tek u pauzi između dva poglavlja, kad sam digla pogled da provjerim na displeju kad dolazi šestica primjetila sam ga, ima je dvije štace i očigledno je čekao tramvaj. Digla sam se i rekla „zicen zi“, nadajući se da sam pogodila lice, a opet da sam rečenicu dovoljno opteretila naglaskom da bi ga obeshrabrila da priča sa mnom jer a) ne znam njemački, b) taman je došlo do najnapetijeg dila- glavni lik mi se razvodi.

On je odmahnuo glavom, napućio usne govoreći nešto u stilu „nema potrebe“, maha je i štakom, mahala sam i ja i rekla „ne ne“ i tvrdoglavo ostala na nogama. Nekad se to uljudno ustajanje starijima u Njemačkoj pretvori u nadmetanje ko može dulje bez da sidne (nisam sigurna je li zbog ponosa ili praktičnosti), ali na kraju uvijek ja pobijedim. Kad je vidio da neću odustati, sija je i zahvalija, a ja više nisam znala kako se kaže „nema na čemu“ na njemačkom, pa sam rekla „you are welcome“. Sada više nije bilo sumnje da sam strankinja šta ga uopće nije obeshrabrilo i nastavio je veselo rogoboriti sebi u bradu. Starčić je imao velike uši i nos, a kad se nasmiješio primjetila sam da ima i ogromne zube koji očigledno nisu bili umjetni. Pomislila sam kako bi i ja rado u njegovim godinama imala svoje zube. Uvijek sam voljela svoje zube i grozila sam se dentjera. Nadam se da će stomatologija do tada evoluirati, a ja ću ih u svakom slučaju pratiti.

Ovaj naš mali igrokaz je zabavio obitelj na klupici i mladi par koji je stajao nedaleko od stanice, svi su se nekako razvedrili. Više nije svatko bio zadubljen u vlastito čekanje nego smo komunicirali. Bez riči, doduše, ali osmijeh je čarobna stvar. Nemaš pojma koliko je to rijetko u ovoj državi di ti se ni tercijarno osoblje, kojima je to u opisu posla, ne može prisiliti nasmijati. Nekad se nekome iskrivi usnica u smjeru u kojem bi treba bit osmijeh, ali to na kraju više izgleda ka da je osoba pojela limun nego kao iskren izraz odobravanja i prepoznavanja. Jedini se smiju penzioneri, valjda zato šta napokon guštaju.

Nasmiješio se i pater familias, a on je ima najlipše zube koje pamtim. Pravilni, veliki i sniježno-bijeli. Moguće da su mi se učinili bjelji nego što jesu zbog kontrasta s bojom kože, ali to uopće nije bitno.

Naslonim se na stup od stanice i nastavim čitat, bilo me je straj da se glavni ne razvede bez mene.

Nisan ni uvatila nit, osjetin da mi je neko priša s desne strane i ugledan velom sakrivenu glavicu u ravnini knjige koju san držala naslonjenu na prsi. Djevojčica je nešto promrmljala, na njemačkom s teškim naglaskom, to čak i ja mogu prepoznat, i rukom pokazala na upražnjeno mjesto pored oca koji se i dalje smješkao, ovaj put ponosno. Ne treba naglašavat da san se oduševila ovon geston i da bi je najradije bila ono zagrlila, odigla od poda, zgnječila i zavrtila koliko sam se razgalila, ali se aktivirao čip rezerviranosti, moj pokušaj prilagobe na sjevernjake, a koji se na vlastito razočarenje, palio sve češće. Umjesto toga mi je uteka osmijeh, rekla sam „nein nein danke“ zatresla glavom dva puta šta je trebalo značiti „vrti se i slobodno sjedni, dolazi mi tramvaj za 2 minute“. Naravno, svi pristuni su se smijali i šutke sudjelovali u ovom momentu. Sad smo bili ekipa.

Uto je došla šestica u koju nije ušao nitko osim mene. Instantno sam se rastužila jer je ova ljubavna priča s banhofa tek počinjala. Sjela sam uz prozor i pokušala uhvatit pogled djevojčice, ali ona se već bavljala nečim drugim. Možda nije osjetila što i ja. Zapravo, niko od ekipe nije gleda u mom smjeru. Tek sekund prije polaska tramvaja otac me primjetio, zatreperila san prstima, onako kako missice to rade, a on je uzvratio najširim osmijehom i spontanim mahanjem kakvo vidam samo još kod dice. Znaš, ono nekoordinano mlataranje rukama, znaš da je iskreno po tome koliko je nezgrapno i necenzurirano.

An Awesome Thing Happened to Me Yesterday

Marina Giunio. Croatia

I'm about to go to university, stress in my head and a knot in my stomach. I'm leaving in four days and nothing is going as I planned. I'm even thinking about giving up on the trip, but it's too late to change anything, so I'm leaving, come what may. I still have a cough and do not feel too peachy, so I choose the tram instead of my bike. I don't even know why I'm going to work on a weekend, mostly to appease my conscience, and not really because I'm actually going to do something worthwhile on a Saturday afternoon. I try to take my mind off the negative, reading *The Therapy*, you know that book that I've been unsuccessfully trying to read for months, dragging it with me all over the place, the one I even took home with me for Easter? Well, anyway, the other day I went to renew it for the third time, but I wasn't allowed to do it again. You know how Germans are with their rules, it can't be done, no way, although I'm sure nobody else has borrowed it in the twenty-five years since it came out. So I returned it for a day and borrowed it again the next. A loophole in the law, even Germans aren't perfect. I was hellbent on reading it by Wednesday, even if my sleep had to suffer for it.

And so, as soon as the tram moved away one stop from the center, there were no more people, the wagon was empty, I took a seat and read in peace. I decided to wait for another tram at the *Banhof*. I don't normally like that: waiting in place instead of walking to the next stop, especially when it's as cold as it has been these days, but I had to finish the book so I sat down on an empty seat next to a Muslim family. Actually, just the father with three or four children, no

wife. He was wearing that crochet cap, had a thick beard and a white robe reaching all the way to the floor, and the oldest daughter even wore a veil. I always wondered when those women started covering themselves, I guess when they become sexually mature. But who's to know that, except for the girls themselves? Off the top of my head, I would guess she couldn't have been over 12. And so they sat and waited. Luckily my jacket was long enough to sit on because the metal bench was ice cold. I pulled it closer around me, released my index finger from the jaws of the book that I had pushed it into so as not to forget where I had stopped, and went on reading.

I was so into the novel that I didn't even notice an elderly man who came to consult the timetable above my head. Only in the break between two chapters, when I raised my eyes to check the display for number six, did I notice him. He had two crutches and was obviously waiting for the tram. I stood up and said "zitzen zee", hoping I had gotten the grammatical form right, but also that I had burdened the sentence heavily enough with an accent to discourage him from talking to me because a) I don't speak German, and b) I had just reached the most gripping part – my main character is getting a divorce.

He waved his head and pursed his lips saying something like "no need", waving his crutch as well. I waved too and said "no, no" and stubbornly remained standing. Sometimes this polite getting up for the elderly in Germany turns into a competition of who can last longer without sitting down (I'm not sure if it's because of pride or practicality), but

eventually I always win. When he realized I wouldn't give up, he sat down and thanked me, and I could no longer remember how to say "you're welcome" in German, so I said it in English. Now there was no more doubt that I was a foreigner, which did not discourage him at all and he went on mumbling into his chin. The little old man had big ears and a big nose, and when he smiled I noticed he also had huge teeth which were obviously not artificial. I thought to myself that I would love to have my own teeth when I get to be his age. I always liked my teeth and dreaded the dentist. I hope dental medicine will have evolved by then, and in any case I will keep brushing them.

Our little sketch amused the family on the bench and a young couple standing not far from the tram stop, and they all somehow brightened up. They were no longer enveloped each in their own waiting. Now we were communicating. Without words, but a smile is a magical thing. You have no idea how rare it is in this country that even employees in the service sector, who have this in their job description, cannot force themselves to smile. Occasionally you see someone's lip curve in the direction of where a smile should be, but it ends up looking more like the person has eaten a lemon than as a sincere expression of approval and recognition. The only ones who smile are retired people, I guess because they're finally enjoying themselves.

The *pater familias* also smiled, and he had the most beautiful teeth I had ever seen. Regular, big and snow-white. They may have appeared whiter to me than they actually were because of the contrast with the color of his skin, but it doesn't really matter.

I leaned against the tram stop pole and went on reading, afraid the main character would get divorced without me.

Before I could get back into it, I felt someone approaching me on the right and saw a veiled little head at the level of the book I was holding on my chest. The little girl mumbled something, in heavy accented German (even I could tell), and pointed her hand to the empty seat next to her father who was still smiling, this time with pride. Need I say that I was thrilled at this gesture and wanted to hug her, lift her off the floor, squeeze and spin her, so delighted was I, but I felt the activation of my aloofness chip, my attempt at adjusting to the Northerners, which, to my great disappointment, happened more and more often. Instead of that I let out a smile, said "*nein nein danke*", shook my head twice, which was supposed to mean "go back and feel free to sit down, my tram is coming in two minutes". Of course, everyone around me was smiling and silently participating in this moment. Now we were a team.

Just then the number six came and nobody got on but me. My spirits instantly sank because this love story from the *Banhof* was only just starting. I sat next to the window and tried to catch the little girl's eye, but she was already entertaining herself with something else. Maybe she didn't feel what I felt. Actually, no one from the team was looking in my direction. Just a second before the tram left the father noticed me. I waved my fingers, the way beauty pageant contestants do, and he reciprocated with the biggest smile and the spontaneous waving that I only see in children. You know, that uncoordinated arm flailing, the kind you know is sincere by how clumsy and uncensored it is.

الرائعتان

سندس جمال . مصر

يومها قمت من فراشي أرتجف.. وصوت أمي يأتيني من الصالون يناديني.. ارتديت السترة الصوف الوردية ذات التطريز السماوي.. ورحت أتمتم كلمات تذمر عن قدومنا للأسكندرية في أجازة يناير وكل أصدقائي ذهبوا إلى أسوان وإلى شرم الشيخ.. سمعتني هي فوبختني وسببتني بألفاظ عدة.. أحمر وجهي غضباً وأرتفعت حرارة جسمي وقد استيقظت بالكامل واختفت آثار النوم من وجهي كلية.. لكن لم أرد.. فسحبتني أمي من ذراعي وأجلستني على السفرة وهي توبخني لأنني لم أتسحر بعد وأذان الفجر سيبدأ بعد نصف ساعة فقط.. فاكلت في صمت وغيظ وأنا أتمنى ألا أسمع صوتها ثانية.. كانت تشتمني بالإيطالية التي كنت أفهمها بطلاقة.. ولا أتحدث بها مطلقاً.. وكنت أعلم أن أمي لا تفهم شيئاً لكن تدرك المعنى من تعبيرات وجه جدتي نونا التي قالت لها أنني صغيرة وليس من المفترض أن أصوم.. نفس الحوار اليومي.. في الأغلب كانت أمي تبتسم بلا رد.. وأحياناً كانت توافقها على ذلك وتقول لها أنني لو جعت ساكل..

كانت تعشق رمضان في الأسكندرية.. لم أكن أدري لماذا.. حتى حين كانت تقول أنه يذكرها باحتفالات رأس السنة في شبابها لم أكن أجد ذلك التشابه.. ما علاقة زينة رمضان وصلاة التراويح الليلية باحتفالات أعياد الميلاد في أوروبا.. وما وجه الشبه بين الفوانيس العملاقة في كل عمارة بشجرة الأرز.. كل ذلك كنت أندش منه.. لكن أن تشبه جدتي أذان المغرب بأجراس الكنائس فهذا يعد من غرائبها المتعددة.. التي من المفترض أن نصمت أمامها مبتسمين كما علما أبي حتى لا تغضب نونا سريعة الغضب..

كنت أراها تقف في التراس بلا حراك لساعات.. وسألتها أكثر من مرة كيف لا تؤلمها أقدامها فكانت لا ترد وتتظاهر بعدم رؤيتي من الأصل وعينيها معلقة بالبحر.. وفي مرة قصت علي أنها هي عروس البحر.. وأنهم أخرجوها منه لذا ساجدها غداً ميتة.. يومها لم أستطع أن أنام من الرعب.. ورحت أتقلب في الفراش محدثة خربير تكرهه نونا حتى تستيقظ ولا تموت.. وحين سببتني لأكف عن هذا اطمأن قلبي.. وفي الصباح وجدتها في التراس تراقب أسراب الغربان فوق البحر الهائج.. كان الهواء شديداً.. ولاحظت أنها تخفي كأس مثلجات بالليمون وتأكل منه كل برهة.. فجريت نحوها أصرخ فرحة أنني قد أمسكت بها مثلبسة تفر في رمضان.. وجريت أخبر كل من في المنزل بالقصة حتى جاء أبي ونظر لي نظرة غاضبة وأمرني أن أكف فوراً وإلا حبسني في غرفتي.. وحين نظرت إلى نونا وجدت على وجهها لأول مرة تعبير الخجل.. فخلجت من فعلتي التي خمنت أنها فعلة شنعاء.. رغم أنني كنت قد علمت أن نونا مسيحية حين إلتفت حولي زميلاتي في المدرسة يسألنني عن الصليب المعلق في رقيبتها ويضحكون على شعرها الأحمر.. يومها لم أفكر في الأمر وجريت باكية أحتمي بسيارة أبي التي كانت نونا بصحبته فيها بالصدفة.. وكنت أعلم أيضاً أنها كانت تحرص على ألا تأكل أمامنا في نهار رمضان لكن لم أكن قد فهمت الفرق بين كونها تشاركنا وبين أن تكون غير صائمة من الأساس..

أكثر ما كان يزعجني هو مفاجأتها الليلية لي بأن أنزل معها الآن فوراً لنتمشى على الكورنيش.. في البداية كنت أتوسل إليها بأن تنتظر الصباح لأن الجو بارد بشكل لا يحتمل.. فكانت تلبسني السترة الوردية فأبكي لأنها للبيت فقط.. ولكن كالعادة كنت أرضح في النهاية وأجد نفسي على الكورنيش وبشرتي تكاد تتجمد.. فأشعر بنشوة عجيبة والشارع خالي والبحر غاضب وليس أمامه من يبيث في قلبه الرعب سوى أنا ونونا.. عندما كنت أصف لها تخيلاتي تلك كانت تسخر مني.. وتقول لي الجو هنا ساخن جداً مقارنةً بجنوا.. جنوا الرائعة.. جنوا الفاتنة.. جنوا العريقة الساحرة.. لم تكن تنطق اسم جنوا إلا ملتصقاً بوصف من تلك الأوصاف.. وحين كبرت قليلاً أدركت أن حبها لأسكندرية نابع أصلاً من حنينها لجنوا.. أي أنه حب مشكوك في أمره.. فانزعجت كثيراً.. وشعرت بالغيرة.. وقلت لها أن جنوا تلك مدينة الأشباح غير موجودة أصلاً.. وأنتي قد بحثت عنها في الخريطة فلم أجدها.. وأن الاسكندرية هي الرائعة.. وبالطبع كان يوماً أسوداً في طفولتي السعيدة..

أسعد أيامنا هي حين تزورنا ذات الشعر الذهبي.. عمتي ماري.. كان كل أصدقائي في المعادي يتجمعوا عندنا في الفيلا.. فقط ليسمعونها وهي تتكلم.. فهي وبالمعجزة تتكلم العربية مثلنا.. رغم كونها ذهبية الشعر زرقاء العينين.. لم تكن تشبه أبي مطلقاً.. وكنت أشعر أن نونا تحبها أكثر منا لكن كنت أتمس لها العذر.. كيف لا وهي شقراء طويلة ضاحكة تجلب لنا الشيكولاتة العجيبة من أمريكا؟.. كانت نونا تجلس معها على فراشي تتسامران وتضحكان.. كنت ألمح ساعتها الشبه الكبير بينهما.. وأصدق أن نونا كانت جميلة في أيام عزاها.. وكنت أصاب بالحزن لأنني لست ملونة مثلهم.. قمحية البشرة كأمي سوداء الشعر كأبي.. باختصار كالوان كل المصريين.. بل وحين أخبر أحداً أن جدتي إيطالية لا يصدقني البتة.. فأسيه بالإيطالية وأعدو متصورة أن الجميع يعرف ما قلته.. مرة سألتني أنت إن كانت عمتي ماري مسلمة أم لا.. أتذكر كيف انزعجت يومها؟ كنت قد أصبحت أشبه أبي في كرهني للأسئلة الفضولية.. رغم ذلك سألت نونا وقالت لي أن ماري مسلمة لأنها مثل جدي وأبي.. وأنهم قد اتفقوا على تسميتها ماري على اسم مريم العذراء.. وفي نفس الوقت على اسم ماري القبطية زوجة الرسول محمد.. لتجمع في قلبها حب كل البشر.. حين نقلت لك حديث نونا اقترحت أن نسمي ابنتنا الأولى ماري.. لكنني رفضت خوفاً من أن لا توافق نونا التي لا تحب تكرار الأسماء في العائلة..

تغير كل شيء حين رحلت ذات الشعر الذهبي.. لون الحياة نفسه أصبح باهتاً.. نونا لم تعد تصر على شيء.. ولا حتى على الذهاب إلى الأسكندرية في يناير.. حتى الثلجات لم تعد تشعرها بتلك الفرحة الطفولية القديمة.. كثير ما كانت تنادينني بماريا.. وأصبحت تحب أن تتحدث معي بشكل أكبر.. كانت فقط تتحدث عن جنوا وعن حبيبها القديم.. كنت أخفي غيرتي لأنها لا تتحدث عن جدي مطلقاً.. وكنت أسمع منها القصص مكررة في نفس المجلس بصبر.. كنت أعلم أنها قد يأست من الذهاب إلى هناك.. حيث الجمال والفن.. فأسرتنا تعتبر متوسطة الحال.. رغم أننا نسكن في فيلا كبيرة.. إلا أنها إيجار قديم.. لا نملك مدرخرات تمكننا من السفر إلى الخارج.. الأسعار غاية في الغلو.. ولم يعد المصريين يتمكنون من التنقل والتنزه في أوروبا كالسابق.. ولولا وجود نونا في حياتي لما كنت قد رأيت أجنب مطلقاً.. وكثيراً ما كنت أشعر أننا معزولون بحكم ظروفنا المالية.. مهوورون بحكم كوننا أقل علماً.. وحين كنت أحاول شرح ذلك لنونا لم تكن تفهمني.. أو بالأحرى كان بغضبها ذلك وتردد أن المصريين متحضرين ويفهمون في الجمال..

كان الكل قد فطن إلى أنني نسخة من عمتي ماريانا.. نفس القوام وطول الشعر والعيون الصغيرة المسحوبة.. الفرق كله في الألوان.. فكنت أقول لأمي أن نونا تحبني حب غير صافي.. مثل حبها للألكندرية بالضبط.. بينما كان كل تفكير أمي ينصب في أنها تتشائم حين تتناديني نونا بماريانا.. وكان أبي يسكتها بنظرة ترجي ألا تعلق على كلمات نونا..

اندهشت حين قالت لي أنها تود أن تزور مجمع الأديان في مصر القديمة.. رحبت بالفكرة وقررت أن أصطحبها معي أنا وزملاء الجامعة.. فقد كانت تكره جلسات الكبار في العائلة وتحب أن تجلس مع أصدقائي أكثر.. كنت أشعر في عينيها أنها لا تكبر.. وأني أكبر منها في العمر لذا علي أن أجاريها ولا أسفه كلامها أبداً.. وحين ذهبنا إلى الكنيسة المعلقة راحت تصلي وتبكي.. كانت تلك أول مرة تذهب فيها إلى أي كنيسة في مصر.. واندهشت أنها لم تصر على الذهاب إلى كنيسة كاثوليكية وصلت في كنيسة قبطية أرثوذكسية.. وفي الطريق راحت تحكي لنا عن أيامها في كاتدرائية سانت لورانس.. فهتمت من حديثها أنها تحب كل قديم.. لذا أحببت مسجد السلطان حسن بنفس درجة حبها للكنيسة المعلقة..

كان أبي يشعر بالقلق من كون نونا لم تعد تتحدث إلا عن الماضي وعن شاطئ جنوا وقصر سترادا نوفا وقصر بيانكو، وعن قصة حبها التي اشتعلت معها الحرب العالمية الثانية.. كانت قد بدأت تنسى كل أيامها في مصر.. وبدأت لا تتذكر الأسماء.. وتكثر من الحديث بالإيطالية.. قال الأطباء أن زيارة قصيرة لجنوا قد تفيد في انعاشها.. فقرر أبي أن يجمع كل مدخراتنا وأن يضحى بالسيارة الصغيرة في سبيل رحلة بحرية بأن نمضي أسبوعاً في الأسكندرية ثم نتبعه بأسبوعاً في جنوا.. حين سمعت هي بذلك عادت ضحكتها تشبه نفسها قبل رحيل عمتي ماريانا.. وراحت تحضر حقيبتها وتعدنا بنزهة العمر في جنوا.. تحمست أنا وأمي بشكل هائل.. وأخيراً سنرى ساحة دي فيراري في يناير..

الأسكندرية كانت كالعروس في استقبالنا.. ونونا كانت قد تزينت واشترت ملابس جديدة.. ووضعت لأول مرة منذ زمن عطر البحر كما كنت أسميه في طفولتي.. كان عطرا منعشاً معتقاً برائحة الليمون والمسك الأبيض.. وكان لونه سماوي تماماً مثل لون الأمواج.. وأعجبته التسمية وأصبحت تطلق عليه أيضاً عطر البحر لأنه يذكرها بحبيها الذي أهداه إليها غير عابئاً بقنابل الإنجليز..

قامت الثورة المصرية ونحن في الأسكندرية.. وامتلاً شارع الكورنيش بالدماء.. وتحول نظر نونا من البحر إلى الشباب الذين يهتفون ويستقبلون رصاص بصدورهم.. وراحت تهتف بالعربية من التراس بالحرية لمصر.. سألتها باسمه إن كانت تحب مصر.. سبنتي وهي تقول كيف لا أحب وطني.. أخفيت ضحكتي وأنا أعلم أن ذاكرتها لم تعد كالسابق.. وفي المساء حين سمعت أصوات الرصاص راحت تصرخ بأن الإنجليز سيدمرون جنوا الجميلة.. جنوا الرائعة.. حاولنا انعاش ذاكرتها بأننا في الأسكندرية.. فراحت تصرخ بأن الأسكندرية الرائعة ستندمر.. وراحت تنادي فليسقط أعداء الجمال.. مدمري التاريخ.. كارهي الحضارة.. راح أبي يهدأ من روعها ويخبرها أن الجمال لا يمكن أن يتدمر.. فهدأت قليلاً ونامت..

وفي الصباح اتشحنا بالسواد وعدنا للقاهرة حزاني.. كانت نونا معنا في صندوقها المنقوش الملون..

بعدها بأيام كانت كل كلماتها تتابع أمامي كموج بحر هادر.. وفرحت حين علمت أن حبيبها القديم هو نفسه جدي.. وأنها كانت تحب الأسكندرية فعلاً.. وعندما علمت انها قد تركت لي زجاجتي عطر البحر تأكدت أنها كانت تحبني فعلاً..

هل علمت الآن لماذا اخترت أن يكون شهر العسل الخاص بنا رحلة بحرية تبدأ من الأسكندرية إلى جنوا بالذات؟ .. لأنني يا عزيزي أراها كل يوم تتطلع إلى ما بعد البحر وترجوني أن أزورها في جنوا.. لا لم أجن بعد فلا تبتسم تلك البسمة الهائلة.. نونا في جنوا الآن وعمتي ماريّا معها ينتظرنا ليشاهداننا نقضي هناك رحلة العمر ونحصر أوجه الشبه بين جنوا والأسكندرية.. حتى لو لم تصدق يا عزيزي فأنا أعذك.. فأنت مشغول دائماً لم تفتح قلبك لبلدان العالم التي تشبه بلدنا ولم ترى بداخلك ذلك الجزء المنير الذي يحتوي على ذاكرة الأجداد والتاريخ.. حتى لو لك تدر شيئاً عنه فهو موجود.. وستصدقني حين نبدأ رحلتنا..

The Two Superb

Sondos Gamal. Egypt

That day I got up from my bed and I was shaking ... my mother's voice was calling me from the lounge. I wore the pink woolen suit with the light blue embroidery and muttered some complaining words on our arrival to Alexandria in the mid-year holiday; all my friends went to Aswan and Sharm El-Sheikh. My mother heard me, so she reproached and insulted me with several words. My face turned red out of anger and my body temperature rose so I became fully awakened and the signs of sleep totally disappeared from my face, but I did not reply. She grabbed me from my arm and seated me on the dining table while reproaching me because I have not yet eaten my *sohor* and the Dawn Call to prayer will begin after only half an hour. I ate in silence and rage while hoping not to hear her voice again. She was insulting me in Italian which I fluently understand but which I never speak. I know that my mother does not understand anything but understands the meaning from the facial expressions of Nona, my grandmother, who told her that I was still young and I am not supposed to fast ... the same daily dialogue. Mostly, my mother smiles without replying, and sometimes she agrees with her and says that if I become hungry, I will eat.

She adores spending Ramadan in Alexandria. I do not know why, but when she says that this reminds her of the New Year's Eve celebrations in her youth, I cannot understand that similarity. What is the relationship between Ramadan decorations and Al Taraweeh prayers and the Christmas celebrations in Europe? What is the similarity between the giant lanterns in each building and

the cedar tree? I was surprised by all that, but my grandmother's likening Al Maghreb Call to prayer to the churches' bells was one of her multiple odds before which we are supposed to be silent and smiling as my father told us so as not to enrage the quick tempered Nona.

I was used to seeing her standing in the terrace for hours without moving. I asked her more than once how her legs did not hurt her but she did not reply and pretended not to see me; her eyes were staring at the sea. One time she told me that she is the Mermaid and that they took her out so I will find her dead tomorrow. That day I could not sleep out of horror and moved a lot in bed and caused a babble – which Nona hates – to awaken her so as not to die. When she insulted me to stop that, I felt reassured. In the morning, I found her in the terrace watching the flocks of crows over the raging sea. The wind was strong. I noticed that she conceals a cup of lemon ice cream and that she eats it every once in a while. I ran towards her while I was happy that I caught her red handed of not fasting during Ramadan. I told everyone in the house the story till my father came and looked at me angrily and ordered me to stop that immediately, otherwise he will lock me up in my room. When I looked at Nona, I found her face expressing shyness for the first time. I felt ashamed of my heinous deed although I have learned that Nona is a Christian when my school colleagues gathered around me and asked me about the cross hanging in her neck and laughed at her red hair. That day I did not think about it and ran crying and took refuge in my father's car where Nona was accompanying him by chance. I also knew that

she was careful not to eat before us during the day in Ramadan, but I have not understood the difference between her sharing and not being originally fasting.

What bothers me most is her night surprises; when she asks me to go, now and immediately for a walk along the Corniche. At first, I beg her to wait until the morning because it is extremely cold. She, in turn, dresses me the pink suit. I cry because I wear it only at home, but in the end, I – as usual – acquiesce and find myself standing on the Corniche and my skin is almost freezing. I feel a strange ecstasy when I find the empty street and the angry sea – that sea which does not find anyone to terrify it except Nona and me. When I describe my imaginings to her, she makes fun of me and tells me that it is very hot compared if compared to Genoa ... the wonderful Genoa ... the fascinating Genoa ... the charming majestic Genoa ... she never uttered the name “Genoa” without one of those descriptions. When I grew up a little, I realized that her love for Alexandria stems originally from her nostalgia for Genoa... I mean it is a questionable love. I was much annoyed and felt jealous... I told her that Genoa – the city of ghosts – is non-existent; that I have searched for it in the map but did not find it, and that Alexandria is the wonderful city. Of course, it was a black day in my happy childhood.

Our happiest days were when the golden-haired visited us: my aunt Maria. All my friends in Al Maadi met in our villa only to hear her talking. She was speaking Arabic like us despite being a golden haired with blue eyes. What a miracle! She did not resemble my father at all. I was feeling that Nona loves her more than us but she has an excuse. She is the laughing tall blonde one who brings us the amazing chocolate from the United States. Nona sat with her on my bed and they talked and laughed. At that time, I noticed the great resemblance between

them, and I believed that Nona was pretty in her youth. I became sad because I do not look “a foreigner” like them... I am tanned like my mother and black haired as my father ... in short like all Egyptians, and even when I tell anyone that my grandmother is an Italian, he/she does not believe me at all. Accordingly, I speak in Italian and run while perceiving that everyone understands what I said. One time you asked me if my aunt Maria was a Muslim or not. Do you remember how you annoyed me that day? I became, like a father, hating officious questions. However, I asked Nona and she told me that Maria is a Muslim because she is like my grandfather and father, and that they agreed to call her Maria after the Virgin Mary, and at the same time, the name of the Coptic Maria, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad so that she can love all people. When I quoted Nona to you, you suggested calling our first daughter Maria, but I refused, fearing the refusal of Nona who does not like the repetition of names in the family.

Everything changed when the golden-haired died; life becomes pale; Nona no longer insists on something, not even going to Alexandria in January, even the ice cream no longer causes her to feel that old childish joy. She often calls me Maria, and desires more to talk to me. She was only talking about Genoa and her old boyfriend. I hid my jealousy because she does not talk about my grandfather at all. She repeated the same stories in the same session and I heard them patiently. I knew that she despaired of going there, the homeland of beauty and art. Our family is from the middle class; although we live in a large villa, it is an old rent. We do not have savings enabling us to travel abroad. Prices are extremely high and the Egyptians are no longer able to move and promenade in Europe as in the past. Were it not for the presence of Nona in my life, I would have never seen foreigners. I often feel that we are iso-

lated because of our financial conditions ... compelled because of being less educated. When I try to explain that to Nona, she did not understand me ... or rather this annoyed her and she repeats that the Egyptians are civilized and can understand beauty.

All have noticed that I am a copy of my aunt Maria: the same figure, hair length and the small narrow eyes. The only difference is in colors. I used to say to my mother that Nona does not love me honestly like her love for Alexandria. However, my mother's thinking focused only on the pessimism she feels when my grandmother calls me Nona Maria, but my father makes her silent by a look indicating his hope that she would not comment on Nona's words.

I was surprised when she told me she would like to visit the religious compound in Misr Al Qadima. I welcomed the idea and decided to take her with me and my university colleagues. She hates sitting with the family adults and loves to sit with my friends. In her eyes, I feel that she does not grow old and that I am older than her, so I have to agree with her and never to stultify her words. When we went to the Hanging Church, she began to pray and cry; that was the first time she goes to any church in Egypt. I was surprised that she did not insist on going to a Catholic church and that she prayed in an Orthodox Coptic one. On the way back, she began to tell us about her days in the Cathedral of St. Lawrence. From her words, I understood that she likes all what is old, so she likes the Sultan Hassan Mosque equally as the Hanging Church.

My father was worried because Nona only talks about the past; the Genoa Beach, Strada Nova Palace, Bianco Palace, and her love story with which the World War II erupted. She began to forget all her days in Egypt as well as the names and she speaks in Italian a lot. The doctors said that a short visit to Genoa may refresh her. As a result, my father

decided to gather all our savings and sell the small car for a voyage; we will spend a week in Alexandria then another week in Genoa. When she heard that, she restored the same smile she had before the death of my aunt Maria, and she began to prepare her suitcase and promise us of a wonderful promenade in Genoa. My mother and I became greatly enthusiastic: finally, we will see the Piazza de Ferrari in January.

Alexandria welcomed us like a bride. Nona adorned herself, bought new clothes, and wore the perfume of the sea – as I called it in my childhood – for the first time since long ago. It was an antique refreshing perfume smelling lemon and white musk and its colour was light blue, exactly just like the waves. She likes the name and she also calls it the perfume of the sea because it reminds her of her lover who dedicated it to her while being indifferent to the British bombs.

The Egyptian revolution erupted while we were in Alexandria. The Corniche street was filled with blood and Nona's eyes were transferred from the sea to the young people exclaiming and receiving the bullets with their chests. From the terrace, she began acclaiming in Arabic: freedom for Egypt. I asked her while smiling if she loves Egypt. She insulted me and told me how she cannot love her homeland. I hid my chortle as I know that her memory is no longer as before. When she heard the sound of bullets in the evening, she began to scream that the British will destroy the beautiful Genoa ... the wonderful Genoa. We tried to revive her memory that we are in Alexandria. She shouted that the wonderful Alexandria will be destroyed and she began exclaiming: overthrow the enemies of beauty ... the destroyers of history ... the haters of civilization. My father tried to calm her down and told her that beauty cannot be destroyed. She calmed down a little and slept.

In the morning, we were girded with black clothes and returned sadly to Cairo. Nona was with us in her colored engraved coffin.

A few days later, all her words were flowing in front of me like a roaring sea. I became pleased when I learned that her old lover is my grandfather and that she really loved Alexandria. When I learned that she had left two bottles of the perfume of the sea for me, I became sure that she actually loved me.

Do you know now why I decided that our honeymoon would be a voyage starting from Alexandria to Genoa in particular? My dear, I see her every day looking at the other

side of the sea and requesting me to visit her in Genoa. No, I have not yet become crazy so please do not smile those mocking smiles. Nona is in Genoa now with my aunt Maria; they are waiting for us; they are waiting to see us spending our lifetime trip and numerating the similarities between Genoa and Alexandria. My dear, if you do not believe me, I am excusing you. You are always busy; you did not pay attention to the world countries that are similar to our country; you did not notice the lighted part inside you that includes the memory of ancestors and history. And even if you know nothing about it, it is existent, and you will believe me when we begin our voyage...

Meidän kodissa asuu vieras mies

Anna-Maria Emilia Ikonen. Suomi

Vanhempaintapaaminen tarkoittaa sitä, että opettaja istuu toisella puolella pöytää ja äiti toisella. Minä istun omassa pulpetissani, se natisee, vaikka yritän olla hiljaa. Äiti katsoo välillä minuun. Yritän olla vielä hiljempaa. En tiedä, mitä äidin katse tarkoittaa. Puhe muuttuu hiljalleen muminaksi. Äidin tukka heilahtelee, kun se nyökyttää opettajalle. Koko ajan nyökyttää, koko ajan.

Kaikki kestää niin kauan. Maa sulaa jalkapallokentällä. Kohta on pesäpalloa ja kuraliejua. Poika on ulkona, se vetää kengänkärjellä maahan viivaa, joka saa veden virtaamaan. Haluaisin mennä jo pois, tekemään kesälle tilaa. Pulpetti narahtaa, kun opettaja sanoo nimeni. Äidin tukka ei heilu enää, se katsoo enkä vielääkään ymmärrä.

Äidin suu puhuu. Se sanoo, ettei tiedä mitä tehdä, mitä pitäisi tehdä, se kysyy opettajalta. Vasen kulmahampaani heiluu, etuhampaat ovat uudet. Iso tyttö se on jo, kyllä se helpottaa ajan kanssa. Opettaja sanoo sitä tottumiskysymykseksi, vaikka ei se ole kysymys ollenkaan eikä minun edes odoteta vastaavan mitään.

Isässä parasta on, kun se hakee koulusta ja ajetaan rallia. Isän kyyti pompottaa, se ei osaa ajaa hiljaa. Parasta on kun saa istua peräkärjyssä, mutta silloin reunasta on pidettävä kovaa kiinni, vaikka kuinka naurattaa. Mutta eivät ne sitä kysy. Kysyisivät minulta niin sitten saattaisin puhua ja sanoa, että haluan isän takaisin kotiin. Hammas lonksuu, mutta en uskalla repäistä sitä irti.

Muta muuttuu maaksi ja saappaat tennareiksi. Isä ei ole hakenut minua koulusta pitkään aikaan. Opettaja osoittaa minua joka päivä monta kertaa ja käskee vastata. Katselen vain kun opettaja höyryää. Vieruskaveriani naurattaa. Isästä ei kerrota mitään, eikä äiti edes yritä soittaa, on vaan. Silloin kun isä paiskasi oven kiinni, minä paiskasin omani. Kun isä suuttuu, suutun minäkin. Isä ei ole avannut ovea kertaakaan sen jälkeen, isä ei ole tullut takaisin. Arvaan kyllä, miksi isä lähti. Silloin kun opettaja höpötti ja äiti nyökytti, päätettiin, että äidin on hankittava minulle uusi isä.

Opettaja varmaan luuli keksineensä sopivan rangaistuksen sille, etten viitannut ja ettei äiti tiennyt mitä tehdä. Mutta minä en aio ottaa mitään uutta perhettä ja unohtaa isää. Leikki-isä osaa sanoa vaan moi moi ja katselee, kun minä teen jotain. Sitten hermostun ja menen muualle tekemään. Ennen se seurasi perässä, mutta ei enää. Osaan olla oikein vihaisen näköinen, vaikka ei vihastuttaisikaan. Nyt äidillä on uusi tehtävä, kun se puhuu vain väärää kieltä ja laittaa outoa ruokaa, hymyilee minulle, vaikka irvistän. Se yrittää olla iloinen ja pyytää minua ääntämään hölmöjä sanoja. Minä katselen vaan enkä tykkää yhtään, minulla on ikävä kaikkea entistä. Äiti ei osaa suomea kohta ollenkaan.

Kaikki pitäisi tehdä nyt uudella tapaa, minä en halua kaikkea uutta vaan ajaa rallia hiekkatiellä. Kirjoitin oveeni lapun, jossa lukee STOP. Uskon, että sen verran jokainen ymmärtää. Minua ärsyttää, että nyt meille voi kuka vaan tulla isäksi tai veljeksi tai ihan keneksi vaan, eikä kukaan kysy siltä lapselta, että sopiiko. STOP. Äiti toistelee sanaa tottumiskysymys, minä pihi-sen ja yritän ajatuksen voimalla siirtää leikki-isän kauas pois.

Kun tarpeeksi suututtaa, karkaan kotoa, ajan rallitietä kaksi kilometriä polkupyörällä. Mummi puhuu suomea ja tekee suomalaisia lettuja mansikkahillolla. Siellä telkkarissa on tutut

uutiset ja Suomen kartassa joko sadepilvet tai aurinko. Mummin talossa ei ole vieraita ihmisiä, on vain minä, mummi ja kissa piilossa ison sohvan alla. Kun olen ollut tarpeeksi kauan karkuteillä, palaan mutkitellen takaisin kotiin, jossa äiti ei ole vihainen. Minulla on maha täynnä mansikkaa ja herkkuja ja vahingossa minua hymyilyttää.

Mummi muistuttaa usein olevansa vanha ja viisas. Siksi sitä pitää kuunnella, niin se sanoo. Aluksi en kuuntele yhtään vaan mietin muita juttuja. Mummi muistelee, kuinka se oli pienenä lähetetty sotaan pakoon Ruotsiin. Siellä jokainen lapsi sai uuden kodin, vaikka oma oli täällä Suomessa. Mummia ärsytti, ettei kukaan kysellyt eikä puhunut suomea tai Suomesta, mutta vähitellen kaikki se vieras muuttui tutuksi, ihan itsestään. Kun sitten tuli aika palata takaisin omaan kotiin, mummin teki melkein mieli jäädä. Mummi sanoo, että siltä olisi mennyt paljon hyvää siellä Ruotsissa hukkaan, jos se ei olisi päättänyt olla ihmisiksi. Ja niin se oli ja noin hyvä siitä tuli. Ajattelen, että olisiko mummin kannattanut olla enemmän itsepäinen ja kiinnittää vaikka STOP-merkkejä huoneensa oveen. Kun ei kaikkeen kannata ryhtyä, pitää vaan päättää ja pitää sitten päänsä, niin.

Katselen mummia kun se tiskaa, hyräilee vähän ja sanoo sanan isä. Mummi uumoilee, että saan vielä istua sylissä ja alkaa pelottomaksi rallikuskiksi, mutta eihän kukaan rallikuskeista pelkää, mietin. Eikä isä lähtenyt uuden isän takia, sen mummi sanoo vielä uudestaan, kun väitän vastaan, ei vanhaa isää kukaan yritä minulta viedä. Lettukasa kasvaa ja tuttu sävel kuuluu mummista, kun sen jalka naputtaa rytmiä lautalattiaan.

Mummi aloittaa taas uuden jutun, mutta minä olen muualla jo. Haukkaan lettukäärylettä lautasen reunalta ja kulmahammas kilahtaa. Piilotan kääryleen vieressä lymyävän maitohampaan housuntaskuun. Huomaako sitä? Laitan mehupillin kulkemaan tyhjästä kolosta ja saan lasissa aikaan punaisen pyörremyrskyn. Voiko yhtäkkiä noin vaan kasvaa isoksi, mistä sen huomaa? Muuttuuko sitä toiseksi vai pysyykö samana? Ikenessä tuntuu sileä pinta, pistävä kulma.

Kesäkuun ensimmäisenä päivänä koulu loppuu. Vieruskaveri pulputtaa taukoamatta. Sillä on vinot hampaat ja se tulee lähelle. Onko kivaa kun on uusi isä, se on ihan oudon värinen, eikä olekin, poika sanoo ja toljottaa. Sitten se aloittaa uuden jutun kertomalla mitä se aikoo, lomalla kun voi tehdä pellehyppyjä laiturilta alas, istua saunassa kaikista pisimpään ja uida naapurisaa-reen ilman kellukkeita, vähintään. Se luulee olevansa eniten kaikkea, eikä silti saa kymppejä mistään. Nyt se palaa paikalleen, puristaa todistusta vasten vatsaansa, sen katse kaartee, ei naura. Piristän poikaa kysymällä pelleilystä ja se innostuu taas niin, suu mekastaa ja nauraa räikeästi ja se esittää esimerkkihypyn pulpetilta alas. Koko luokka nauraa, se on unohtanut seiskat ja kutoset jo kokonaan. Se poika aikoo isona pelleksi, niin se sanoo ja nauraa vaan.

Unohdun koulun pihalle, muut ovat jo menneet. En oikein tiedä mitä tehdä. Iltahämärässä keinun ees taas. Tennarin nauhat ovat auki, rusetin teko takkuua vielä. Ei haittaa mitään, kunhan ei kävele. Täytyy pysyä tässä vaan, ees taas. Jos jäisin tähän, huomaisiko kukaan?

Hiljalleen hämärästä erottuu kaksi silmäparia, niin voisi pikkuinen luulla, ei näkisi auton silmiä vaan pedon ja pelkäisi. Minä en pelkää, vaan tunnistan tutut silmät. Se on äidin auto, joka kaartaa pihaan. Tiedän, että minua odotetaan. Repussani on kevättodistus ja kaikki viime vuoden kuvaamataidontyöt ja mielessäni on vahva ajatus siitä, että minua odotetaan. Äiti on jättänyt minulle vapaan paikan etupenkille. Autoa ohjaa leikki-isä. Se ei kaahaa, kääntää vain radiota lujemmalle ja hyräilee mukana. Niin minäkin.

A Stranger Lives in Our Home

Anna-Maria Emilia Ikonen. Finland

A parent-teacher meeting means that the teacher is sitting on one side of the table, and the mother, on the other. I'm sitting at my desk, which is squeaking, even though I try to be quiet. Mom looks at me from time to time. I try to be even quieter. I don't know what my mother's look means. The conversation changes gradually to mumbling. Mom's hair sways when she nods at the teacher. All the time she is nodding. All the time.

Everything takes so long. Snow is melting on the football field. Soon there will be nest ball and mud. There is a boy outside, he makes a ditch on the ground with the toe of his shoe so that the water starts flowing. I would like to go out already, to make room for the summer. The seat squeaks when the teacher says my name. Mom's hair does not sway anymore, she looks at me and still I don't understand.

Mom's mouth speaks. She says she doesn't know what to do, what she should do, she asks the teacher. My left canine tooth jiggles, my front teeth are new. She is a big girl already, it will be easier as time goes by. The teacher says it is a question of adjustment, even though it is not a question at all, and I'm not even expected to answer anything.

What I love most in my dad is when he picks me up from school and we drive like we are in a rally race. Dad's driving is a bouncy ride, he can't even drive slowly. The best part is when I am allowed to sit on the trailer, but then I have to hold firmly onto the edge no matter how much I want to laugh. But they are not asking about that. I wish they would, so I could speak and say that I want my dad back home. The tooth jiggles, but I don't dare to tear it off.

Mud becomes dirt and boots become sneakers. Dad has not picked me up from school for a long time. The teacher points at me every day, many times, and orders me to answer. I just watch when the teacher is steaming with anger. My friend next to me is laughing. No one tells me anything about my dad, mother doesn't even try to call him, she just goes on. When dad slammed the door, I slammed mine. When dad gets angry, so do I. Dad has not opened the door since, dad has not come back. I think I know why he left: when the teacher was rambling on and my mother was nodding, it was decided that mother has to get me a new dad.

I guess the teacher thought she came up with a suitable punishment for me since I didn't raise my hand, and mother didn't know what to do. But I'm not going to take any new family and forget my dad. The so-called-dad can only say "hi" and watch me when I'm doing something. Then I get upset and I go somewhere else to do my stuff. He used to follow after me, but not anymore. I can be very angry-looking, even though I'm not angry. Now mother has a new role since she only speaks the wrong language and makes weird food, smiles at me even though I grimace. She tries to be happy and asks me to pronounce foolish words. I just stare and don't like it at all, I miss everything from the past. Soon my mom won't be able to speak Finnish at all.

Now everything should be done in a new way, I don't want everything new, I just want to drive rally on a sandy road. I wrote a note on my door that says STOP. I believe that everyone understands that at least. I'm

upset that now anyone can come here and be father or brother or anything, but no one is asking the child if it is okay. STOP. Mother is repeating the word adjustment, I'm in a rage and trying to make so-called-dad go away with the power of thought.

When I am really angry, I run away from home and I drive the rally road two kilometers on my bicycle. Grandma speaks Finnish and makes Finnish pancakes with strawberry jam. There is familiar news on TV, and either the sun or rain clouds on the Finnish map. In Grandma's house there are no strange people, just me, Grandma, and a cat hiding under a big sofa. When I have been on the run for long enough, I meander back home, where mother is not angry. My stomach is full of strawberries and sweets and accidentally I feel like smiling.

Grandma often points out that she is old and wise. That is why I should listen, that's what she says. At first, I did not listen at all, I was thinking about other stuff. Grandma remembers how she was sent as a child to Sweden, away from the war. There, each child got a new home even though they had their own here in Finland. Grandma got annoyed that nobody asked questions about Finland or spoke Finnish, but eventually all the strange became familiar, all by itself. When it came time to return to her own home, Grandma was almost tempted to stay. Grandma says that if she hadn't behaved over there in Sweden, she would have missed a lot of good things. And so it was, and so it went well. I wonder, if she should have been more stubborn and, for example, attached a STOP sign on her door. Since you can't do everything, you should decide on one thing and then don't give up.

I watch Grandma when she is doing the dishes, humming a little and saying the word dad. Grandma believes that one day I will sit on dad's lap and become a fearless rally driv-

er, but I think that there are no rally drivers that are afraid. And dad didn't leave because of the new dad, Grandma repeats when I disagree, no one is trying to take my dad from me. The pile of pancakes grows, and I hear a familiar tune from Grandma while her foot taps the rhythm on the wooden floor.

Grandma starts a new story again, but I'm already elsewhere. I take a bite of pancake from the edge of the plate and the canine tooth clangs. I hide the tooth that lays next to the rolled up pancake in my coin pocket. Can I see it? I put the straw through the slot between my teeth, and I set off a red hurricane in the glass. Can one suddenly just grow up, how do you notice it? Do you then change into another person, or remain the same? My gum feels smooth, the edge is tangy.

On the first day of June, school ends. The boy next to me chatters constantly. He has slanted teeth and he comes close. Is it nice to have a new father, he is a strange color isn't he, the boy says and stares. Then he starts a new story by telling what he is going to do, since on vacation he can do clown jumps from the dock, sit in the sauna longer than anyone and swim to the neighboring island without floats, maybe even farther. He thinks he is the greatest of all, but still he doesn't get the best grades in anything. Now he returns to his seat, squeezes the diploma against his belly, his eyes are wandering, he is not laughing. I cheer him up by asking about his clown tricks and he gets excited again, his mouth is jabbering and he is laughing shamelessly and showing an example jump from the school desks. The whole class is laughing, he has forgotten the sevens and sixes on the diploma. He wants to become a clown when he grows up, so he says and laughs.

I'm forgotten in the school yard, the others have already left. I don't know what to do. At dusk I swing back and forth. Sneaker

laces are open, tying the bow is still difficult. It doesn't matter as long as I don't walk. I have to stay here, back and forth. If I would stay here, would anyone notice?

Little by little two sets of eyes shine out from the dusk, a little child could think, would not see a car but the eyes of a beast, and become afraid. I'm not afraid, but I recognize the familiar eyes. It is my mother's

car that curves into the yard. I know that I'm waited for. There is the spring diploma and all the artwork from this year's art class in my backpack, and in my mind there is a powerful thought that I'm waited for. Mother has left the front seat for me. The so-called-dad is driving the car. He is not speeding, just turning the volume up and humming along. So do I.

Le soleil est écrasant

Samia Hathroubi. France

Le soleil est écrasant. Impossible de se mouvoir. Elle est lasse. Elle rêve des températures raisonnables de sa Normandie maternelle. Mais que fait-elle ici ? Elle a toujours eu en horreur le rituel de la sieste méditerranéenne que lui imposent ses grands-parents. Elle n'est plus une enfant tout de même.

Les températures avoisinent les quarante degrés. La terre est rouge, toute trace de verdure a disparu, toute vie est éteinte. Elle s'est toujours demandée comment ces lieux avaient pu être les « greniers » de Rome. L'horizon est morne. Personne n'ose s'aventurer dehors. Les chiens n'ont même plus la force de bouger leur queue et cherchent un peu d'ombre sous l'eucalyptus derrière la maison.

May ne cesse de souffler. Le regard vide, elle contemple les murs et le plafond blanc chaux de la demeure familiale. Elle tente de trouver un peu de fraîcheur grâce au vieux ventilateur qui marche au ralenti. Comme chaque été, ses parents l'ont traînée dans cette demeure, perdue à l'intérieur des plaines de son pays d'origine. « Pour ne pas perdre ses racines », lui rabâchent-ils.

Ses racines à elle, May ne les voit que sur le littoral français, à Nice ou à Antibes. Elle rêverait de retrouver ses amies de lycée. À chaque rentrée scolaire, elles lui racontent leurs rencontres, leurs folies, leurs délires estivaux pendant qu'elle, May, périt dans sa campagne.

Elle enrage. Elle bout littéralement de l'intérieur comme si la chaleur infernale dans laquelle elle se trouvait ne suffisait pas. C'en était trop !

Plus jamais, se dit-elle, je n'aurai à périr dans ce lieu désert. Étudiante, elle était parvenue à persuader ses parents de la laisser travailler et elle avait réussi à acquérir son indépendance. Durant ses études de biologie, elle avait ainsi pu admirer et découvrir les merveilles de la rive nord de la Méditerranée. Elle s'était émerveillée devant la Sierra Nevada espagnole et devant la beauté de la nature provençale française.

Après ses quatre années à la faculté de Caen, elle avait réussi avec succès son concours. Enseigner avait longtemps été une évidence pour elle. Pendant ses quatre années d'étude, elle avait donné des cours d'alphabétisation à des vieilles femmes immigrées analphabètes de la banlieue de Caen. Ces vieilles femmes lui rappelaient sa mère, elle aussi analphabète, qui avait longtemps porté comme un stigmate d'avoir été retirée de l'école trop tôt par son oncle paternel au lendemain de l'indépendance de son pays. Aînée de la famille, elle avait dû s'occuper de ses jeunes frères et sœurs qui, enfants de paysans, avaient réussi malgré tout à gravir les échelons de l'administration.

Le travail au sein de cette association lui avait procuré un sentiment de plénitude, surtout en voyant progresser les vieilles femmes et en étant témoin de leurs efforts. Désormais, ces femmes n'auraient plus besoin de demander l'aide de leurs enfants pour lire le courrier, ce qui avait longtemps été pour elles un fardeau. Souvent aussi, elle voyait dans ce travail une manière de prolonger la relation maternelle qui devenait de plus en plus distendue. Elle renouait avec ce qu'elle avait de plus ancré en elle.

Sa première année la propulsa dans un environnement radicalement opposé à tout ce qu'elle avait pu vivre auparavant. Bousculée, elle avait finalement atterri dans la capitale. Loin. Très loin de sa province natale.

Les jours se ressemblaient. Chaque soir, elle rentrait épuisée mais le cœur rempli du travail bien fait. Elle s'endormait souvent comblée et n'imaginait pas faire autre chose. Rien ne pouvait briser le cycle de son quotidien routinier, pensait-elle.

Ce soir-là, de retour du cinéma, la sonnerie de son téléphone avait retenti. Depuis longtemps, les proches de May avaient intégré qu'elle avait un sommeil chaotique et léger. Pour rien au monde, ils n'auraient pris le risque de le perturber.

Dans le combiné, May avait entendu sa mère sangloter. Elle était restée un long moment silencieuse. Comme interloquée. Tous les scénarii se bouscuaient dans sa tête. Son père était mort. Non, il avait quitté sa mère. Non, c'étaient ses grands-parents. Elle s'imaginait déjà devoir faire ses valises et chercher les raisons qu'elle invoquerait à son proviseur pour justifier ses prochaines absences. Elle se disait qu'elle devrait d'ores et déjà envoyer un email à ses élèves pour les examens finaux qui approchaient à grands pas. Non, il ne s'agissait pas de cela.

Quand sa mère finalement se calma, elle bredouilla quelques mots. « Il est mort. » May ne comprit pas. Elle n'était pas informée des soubresauts qui agitaient la rive sud de la Méditerranée. Son monde clos, connu, et son horizon quotidien lui suffisaient. Elle n'avait de toute façon jamais marqué beaucoup d'attention aux secousses et aux soubresauts de l'Histoire. Elle se fichait pas mal de ce qui pouvait se passer à des milliers de kilomètres de chez elle.

Après avoir raccroché, elle suivit les conseils de sa mère et alluma la télévision. Elle vit alors défiler sous ses yeux hagards la photographie de l'ancien dictateur et homme fort de son pays. Bien que désintéressée par la chose publique, elle connaissait ce visage : il était placardé dans tous les lieux publics de son pays maternel. Elle avait grandi avec cette figure familière, ce portrait géant qui l'accueillait chaque été dès le port.

Elle fut prise d'un sursaut de panique. Sans trop pouvoir expliquer pourquoi, elle ressentit de l'anxiété. Elle se rua sur son ordinateur. Entra sur les réseaux sociaux. Sur chacun de ses comptes, elle vit que la nouvelle se répandait telle une traînée de poudre. Tout était allé très vite. Ses cousins, ses cousines, ses amies, ses amis avaient posté des photos. On les voyait brûlant le portrait du défunt. Ils dansaient. Ils chantaient. Une grande communion de folie. On exorcisait le passé. Pourtant, elle était abasourdie. Elle semblait incapable de comprendre ce qui se passait sous ses yeux. Elle semblait être la seule incapable de participer à l'hystérie qui s'était emparée de ses proches. Tout cela n'avait aucun sens enfin. Pourquoi ce théâtre ?

Elle passa la nuit à lire, à consulter les sites d'informations. Les analyses se succédaient. Les schémas étaient esquissés par les politologues et les journalistes. Les mots de « transition », « armée », « généraux » étaient lâchés. Le tableau de la situation s'éclaircissait. Elle ne ferma pas l'œil de la nuit. Elle se sentait exténuée mais ne voulait plus perdre une seconde. Elle dévora littéralement toutes les dépêches rédigées sur ce petit pays qui n'avait jamais vraiment fait couler d'encre.

Elle découvrit un tableau de son second pays qu'elle ne connaissait pas. Elle ne soupçonnait pas que derrière des paysages lunaires, des littoraux dignes de cartes postales se cachait une société tout droit sortie de l'imagination de George Orwell. Big Brother l'avait contrôlée, elle aussi, sans qu'elle ne s'en aperçoive. Sans qu'elle ne y prenne garde.

Les jours suivants brisèrent la monotonie de sa vie. Elle courait les conférences et les événements organisés autour de ce qu'on voyait dès lors comme un moment majeur de l'Histoire. Son histoire aussi s'en trouva ébranlée.

La fin de l'année était proche. Les examens terminés, elle devait s'envoler pour aller voir le théâtre de ce changement. Au fond d'elle, un bouillonnement faisait rage et lui enjoignait de se rendre sur les lieux. Rien n'y faisait, elle devait y répondre. Ici et maintenant, se répétait-elle intérieurement.

Elle appela sa mère pour lui annoncer son départ. Elle parvint tant bien que mal à la rassurer. Elle ne voulait pas passer son temps dans la demeure familiale comme par le passé. Elle prit donc un hôtel tout près de la médina, au cœur des faubourgs de l'ancienne ville coloniale. Sa cousine Yasmine, qu'elle n'avait pas vue depuis une dizaine d'années, était informée de sa venue. Et la présence de la jeune étudiante en Histoire rassura quelque peu May.

Elle débarqua vers quatorze heures. Le soleil était à son zénith. La période estivale était habituellement grouillante, bruyante. Longtemps, May avait été agacée par les hordes de touristes qui se déversaient sur les plages de sable fin. Cette fois-ci, un calme morne et reposant régnait dans les lieux, tout semblait marcher au ralenti. Déjà à la douane, la photographie de l'ancien dictateur avait disparu. Les agents avaient été cordiaux, presque sympathiques. Le changement est saisissant, pensa-t-elle.

Elle ne s'attarda pas à l'aéroport et fila tout droit prendre un taxi. Au moins les taxis ne changent pas, les chauffeurs sont toujours aussi loquaces.

Elle trouva aisément son hôtel. Après avoir récupéré ses clefs, elle monta dans sa chambre au confort sommaire mais dotée d'un outil indispensable à cette époque de l'année : la climatisation. Ici aussi, constata-t-elle, c'est trop calme.

Après une sieste, elle retrouva tous ses esprits. Elle décida de se promener dans la ville. Pour la première fois, elle n'avait plus à rester scotchée devant la lucarne de son téléviseur face aux informations. Elle pouvait – et voulait – voir, écouter, lire de ses propres yeux, elle voulait voir éclore et jaillir cette nouvelle société.

La ville lui paraissait comme neuve. Elle connaissait bien les lieux pour les avoir longtemps fréquentés pendant ses vacances au pays. Tout y semblait changé. Était-ce son regard qui était différent ou bien un monde avait-il bel et bien basculé ?

Elle finit par s'arrêter devant un taxiphone pour appeler sa cousine Yasmine : elle seule était dans la confidence et savait que May était rentrée.

Quarante-cinq minutes plus tard, les voilà attablées dans un de ces cafés fréquentés par la jeunesse du pays et qui s'y retrouve autour d'un narguilé et d'un thé. Yasmine vient tout juste d'obtenir son master d'Histoire. Même si les cousines ne se sont pas vues depuis longtemps, une certaine intimité s'installe très vite entre elles. Les langues se délient.

Le regard de May se pose et s'attarde sur les tables avoisinantes peuplées de jeunes femmes et de jeunes hommes. En fond sonore, elle reconnaît Om Kalthoum et son trop fameux *Ente omri*. Sa mémoire voyage en Orient et comme une réminiscence, elle se revoit et rêve de l'ambiance si particulière des cafés d'Amman et du Caire qu'elle aime tant.

Yasmine la sort de sa torpeur.

« Je suppose que toi aussi tu es ici pour faire partie de l'Histoire, pour être témoin de notre nouvelle démocratie. Tu n'y as jamais cru toi non plus, hein ? » lança-t-elle comme un défi.

May tenta de bredouiller quelque explication mais elle se ravisa avant même de sortir un quelconque son. Elle était là pour écouter et tenter de comprendre. Une longue tirade de sa cou-

sine s'ensuivit durant laquelle elle parla avec véhémence et conviction comme elle l'aurait fait pour défendre les droits de la personne bafouée devant un auditoire. Elle parla de cette nouvelle société à construire, de fondations, de culture démocratique et citoyenne à bâtir et à forger.

May comme subjuguée découvrit une figure de sa cousine qu'elle ne soupçonnait pas. Transfigurée en héraut des aspirations de ces hommes nouveaux et de ces nouvelles femmes, Yasmine avait happé May dans une quête initiatique.

Les jours qui suivirent, accompagnée de sa cousine, May rencontra étudiants, activistes, épiciers, chauffeurs de taxi, ouvriers, enseignants. Elle parlait à tous, écoutait tout le monde. Elle voulait tout comprendre. Une soif insatiable s'emparait de la jeune normande. Littéralement.

Chaque soir de retour dans sa chambre d'hôtel, elle notait chaque bribe de conversation, chaque mot, chaque lieu. Comme un besoin irrépressible de tout garder. Garder trace de ce qu'elle voyait, de ce qu'elle vivait, de ce qu'elle comprenait. Il arriva aussi qu'elle y annote ses commentaires et remarques. Pendant très longtemps, elle n'avait eu qu'un attachement familial, presque ancestral, avec cette terre. Consciemment ou non, elle ne s'était jamais interrogée sur la destinée historique et politique des hommes et des femmes qu'elle croisait chaque été, de ses concitoyens.

Ce questionnement dès lors ne cessait de la hanter.

La fin de son séjour approchait et May appréhendait. Elle avait été transformée par cet événement elle aussi et elle allait partager une part de la quête initiatique dans laquelle son pays avait été transporté. Le jour du départ arriva. Yasmine vint la chercher pour prendre le petit déjeuner. C'était leur moment préféré. Autour d'un jus d'oranges frais, de galettes et d'un café fumant, elles décidèrent de continuer à communiquer aussi régulièrement que possible. Pour May, il n'était plus question de rester loin de son pays. Une nouvelle appartenance s'était forgée en elle. Son identité s'en trouvait plus complexe, inextricable, foisonnante. À l'image des personnages d'Amin Maalouf.

De retour à Paris, May resta de nombreux jours cloîtrée chez elle à ruminer les dernières semaines de sa vie. Tout avait été si intense. Un tourbillon l'avait emportée et elle n'était pas la seule. Une révolution copernicienne avait eu lieu en dehors et en elle. Persuadée que sa vie ne pourrait plus se résumer à ce qu'elle fait vécu antérieurement, elle décida de prendre une année sabbatique. À la rentrée scolaire, elle ne retrouva pas le chemin de son lycée. Ses proches, qui ne comprenaient pas les tourments et les nouvelles préoccupations de la jeune femme, en furent très surpris.

Les premières élections démocratiques avaient été annoncées. May avait appris cette nouvelle historique par sa cousine Yasmine qui trépignait de joie et d'excitation en lui révélant l'information. C'était une première. Les partis politiques pullulaient. La campagne électorale était déjà lancée avec plus de six mois d'avance. On n'y comprenait pas grand-chose mais tous étaient passionnés. Yasmine lui apprit que même ses grands-parents étaient inscrits sur les listes électorales, ce qui fit longtemps rire les deux jeunes femmes.

De retour au pays, May se fit volontaire auprès d'un groupe de jeunes qui arpentaient tous les villages, même les plus reculés, pour expliquer aux jeunes et aux moins jeunes les règles du vote démocratique. Elle avait pour rôle d'amener chacun de ses concitoyens à comprendre les enjeux de cet événement et à y participer. Elle eut même la chance d'aller dans le village où elle avait passé tant d'étés. L'effet fut jouissif.

C'était l'automne. Elle revit ses grands-parents dans les oliveraies, occupés à cueillir les olives des arbres séculaires qui les avaient vu grandir elle, ses parents et des générations avant. Le soir venu autour de la galette traditionnelle et de l'huile d'olive fraîchement pressée, elle partagea la première dispute autour des élections avec ses grands-parents et ses oncles. Elle sourit en écoutant le dialogue de ses aïeux qui dans la vie quotidienne comme en politique avaient le don de ne jamais être d'accord.

The Sun Is Stifling

Samia Hathroubi. France

The sun is stifling. It's impossible to move. She is weary. She dreams of the mild temperatures of her native Normandy. But what is she doing here? She has always disliked the ritual of the Mediterranean siesta imposed on her by her grandparents. But she is not a child anymore.

Temperatures are close to forty degrees. The earth is red, all traces of green have disappeared, all life extinguished. She has always wondered how these places could have been the "breadbaskets" of Rome. The horizon is gloomy. Nobody dares to venture outside. The dogs even lack the strength to wag their tails and seek some shade under the eucalyptus behind the house.

May is breathing deeply. She is looking vacantly at the whitewashed walls and ceiling of the family house. She tries to cool down a little with the help of the old fan. Like every summer, her parents have dragged her to this house, lost in the hinterland of her country of origin. "So you don't lose your roots," they keep repeating.

May only considers her roots to be on the French coast, in Nice or Antibes. She is dreaming of seeing her secondary school friends again. At the start of each new school year, they tell her about their summer encounters and hare-brained adventures while she was dying in her countryside.

She is furious, boiling inside, as if the infernal heat were not enough. She's had her fill!

Never again, she tells herself, will I have to die in this deserted place. In her time as a student, she had managed to persuade her parents to let her work and had finally

achieved her independence. So, during her biology studies she had been able to discover and admire the wonders of the northern Mediterranean shore. She had been astonished by the Spanish Sierra Nevada and the beauty of nature in Provence.

After her four years at the faculty in Caen, she had passed the public examination. For a long time she had been aware that teaching was her vocation. During her four years studying, she had given literacy classes to old immigrant women on the outskirts of Caen. These old women reminded her of her mother, also illiterate, who for a long time had endured the stigma of her paternal uncle taking her out of school too soon after her country's independence. Her mother, the elder of the family, had had to look after her younger brothers and sisters who, although farmers' children, had nevertheless managed to enter the civil service.

Her work had given her a feeling of fulfilment, especially when seeing the old women progress and the efforts they made. From now on, these women would not need to ask their children to help them read letters, which for them had been a heavy burden for a long time. She also often saw this work as a way of extending her relationship with her mother, which was becoming more distant. She strengthened her deepest roots.

Her first year took her to an environment radically opposed to what she had been able to experience before. After many destinations, she had finally ended up in the capital. Far away, very far away, from her native province.

The days were all the same. Every evening, she returned home exhausted but her

heart was full of work well done. She would fall asleep fulfilled and did not imagine doing anything else. She believed that nothing could break the cycle of her daily routine.

That evening, after having returned from the cinema, her phone rang. For a long time, May's relatives and friends had always thought she slept erratically and would never have disturbed her without a good reason.

May heard her mother sobbing and kept silent for a long time. All possibilities were buzzing around her head. Her father might have died. No, he might have left her. No, it was her grandparents. She already saw herself packing and thinking of the reasons she would give to the headmaster to justify her next absence. She told herself that she would have to send an email to her students for the final exams which were just round the corner. No, it was not that.

When her mother finally calmed down, she mumbled some words. "He's dead." May did not understand. She was not aware of the uprising shaking the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Her enclosed familiar world and her daily routine were enough for her. However, she had never paid much attention to the upheavals and convulsive movements of History. She did not care about what might happen thousands of kilometres away from her home.

After hanging up, she followed her mother's advice and turned on the TV. Then she saw the picture of the old dictator and leader of her country parading before her distraught eyes. Although not interested in public affairs, she knew that face: it hung in all public places of her native country. She had grown up with this familiar figure, this giant portrait that welcomed her every summer at the harbour.

She felt a surge of panic. Unable to explain why, she felt upset. She rushed towards her computer. She logged on to the social networks. On each of her accounts, she saw that the news was spreading like wildfire.

Everything had gone too fast. Her cousins and friends had uploaded photos. You could see people burning the dictator's portrait. They were dancing. Singing. A large communion of madness. They were exorcising the past. Yet she felt stunned. She seemed unable to understand what was happening before her eyes. She seemed to be the only one incapable of participating in the hysteria which had seized her friends and relatives. In the end, this had no meaning at all. Why all this drama?

She spent the night reading and consulting the news websites. The analysis kept on coming from political experts and journalists. The words "transition", "army", "generals" were everywhere. The situation was becoming clearer. She could not close her eyes all night long. She felt exhausted but she didn't want to miss a second. She literally devoured the dispatches written about this small country which had never really been in the news before.

She discovered a picture of her second country that she did not know. She did not suspect that behind the lunar landscapes and picture postcard coastlines there was a society which had just escaped George Orwell's imagination. Big Brother had been in control without anyone realising because they had not paid attention.

The following days overturned the monotony of her life. She attended the lectures and events organised on what from then was considered a major moment in History. Her history was also turned upside down.

The end of the year was approaching. Once the exams were over, she had to fly to see the theatre of this change. Deep inside, she felt an overwhelming urge to go there.

She called her mother to announce her departure. She managed the best she could to calm her down. She did not want to spend her time in the family house as she used to. She booked a hotel room close to the medina, in

the heart of the old colonial city. Her cousin Yasmine, who she had not seen for more than ten years, knew she was coming. And the presence of the young History student reassured May a little.

She arrived around two in the afternoon, when the sun was high. Summer was usually bustling and noisy. For a long time, May had been irritated by the hordes of tourists who poured out onto the fine sand beaches. This time, a gloomy restful calm reigned everywhere, and everything seemed to move at a slow pace. In customs, the photograph of the old dictator had disappeared. The officers had been polite, almost friendly. The change was striking, she thought.

She did not linger too long at the airport and went straight out to find a taxi. At least taxis had not changed, and the drivers were always talkative.

She found her hotel easily. After picking up the keys, she went up to her room, which was modest but at least had air-conditioning, essential at that time of the year. Here too, she realised, it is too quiet.

After a siesta, she recovered her presence of mind. She decided to walk through the city. For the first time, she did not have to remain stuck to the television screen watching the news. She could – and wanted to – see and hear for herself. She wanted to see this new society emerge and blossom.

The city seemed new to her. She knew the places well because she had visited them often during her holidays in the country. Everything seemed to have changed. Was it her perspective that was different or had the world well and truly turned upside down?

She finally stopped at a public phone to call her cousin Yasmine: she was the only one who knew that May had come back.

Forty-five minutes later, they were sitting at a table in one of those coffee shops frequented by the youths of the country, who

meet for a *narguilé* and a tea. Yasmine has just finished her master in History. Even if they had not seen each other for a long time, some intimacy quickly grew between them. They talked easily.

May gazed at the neighbouring tables full of young women and men. In the background, she recognised the music of Om Kalthoum and his hit *Ente omri*. Her memory travelled to the East and she dreamily revisited the unique ambiance of the coffee shop in Amman and Cairo that she loves so much.

Yasmine shook her out of her torpor.

‘I imagine you’re also here to form part of History, to be a witness to our new democracy. You had never believed in it, had you?’ she said challengingly.

May tried to mumble an explanation but she changed her mind before uttering a sound. She was there to listen and try to understand. A long monologue by her cousin followed during which she spoke vehemently with conviction. She spoke of this new society to be built, of foundations, of democratic and citizen culture to be constructed and forged.

May, captivated, discovered an unexpected aspect of her cousin. Transfigured as a herald of the aspirations of these new women and men, Yasmine had dragged May into a journey of initiation.

The following days, accompanied by her cousin, May met students, activists, grocers, taxi drivers, workers and teachers. She spoke to all of them, she listened to everyone. She wanted to understand everything. An insatiable thirst took hold of the young Normandy girl.

Every evening back in her hotel room, she wrote down every piece of conversation, every word, every place. Like an irreplaceable need to keep everything. To keep a record of what she saw, of what she experienced, of what she understood. She also wrote down her comments and remarks. For a long time,

she had only had a family, an almost ancestral link, to this land. Aware or not, she had never asked herself about the historical and political destiny of these women and men she came across every summer, of her fellow citizens. Since then she had not stopped wondering.

The end of her stay was approaching and May had learnt many things. She had also been transformed by this event and she was going to share this journey of initiation her country had begun. The day of her departure arrived. Yasmine came to pick her up to have breakfast. It was their favourite moment. Enjoying freshly-squeezed orange juice, pancakes and a steaming coffee, they decided to keep in touch as regularly as possible. For May, it was out of the question to remain far from her country. A new belonging had been forged within her. Her identity was now more complex, inextricable, and resplendent, like Amin Maalouf's characters.

Back in Paris, May spent many days cloistered indoors, ruminating on the last few weeks of her life. Everything had been so intense. A whirlwind had swept her up and she had not been the only one. A Copernican revolution had taken place outside and within her. Convinced that her life could not go back to what she had experienced before, she decided to take a sabbatical year. But she never returned to school. Her family and friends, who did not understand the torments and new concerns of the young girl, were very surprised.

The first democratic elections had been announced. Yasmine jumped with joy and excitement as she told May about this historical milestone. It was the first time elections were being held. The political parties multiplied. The electoral campaign had been launched more than six months before. People did not understand much but they were all very excited. Yasmine told her that even her grandparents had registered on the electoral roll, which made the two young girls laugh for a long time.

Back in her country, May volunteered for a group of youths who went from village to village telling the young and not so young all about the democratic elections. She was responsible for making each of her fellow citizens understand the challenges of this event and participate in it. She even had the chance to go to the village where she had spent so many summers, which she enjoyed.

It was autumn. She saw her grandparents again in the olive groves, picking the olives from century-old olive trees that had seen her parents and the previous generations grow. In the evening, around the traditional pancake and the freshly-pressed olive oil, she had the first argument about the elections with her grandparents and aunts and uncles. She smiled while listening to the arguments of her grandparents who in daily life and politics had the gift of never agreeing.

Politics Class

Emily Watton. Germany

Mrs Shore's Politics class is made up of twelve Europeans. Today is vote day. Mrs Shore tells everyone about the importance of participating in a general election, and even brings in a tray of cakes to celebrate these young adults having their first opportunity to take part in the democratic process. She asks the students to consider what's important to them, and to make an informed choice, because every vote makes a difference.

The first European strides into the polling station, places a confident cross by his favourite candidate, and strides home. The party promises growth, and jobs, and independence. It's straightforward and clear. When he walks past the local museum he doesn't think of the wonder of visitors to the Louvre or the galleries of Vienna. When he throws pebbles into the water at the local beach, he doesn't see the children dipping their toes into the waves breaking against white sands on the east coast of Bulgaria, and when he strolls along with his dad in the English countryside, he doesn't think of the mountains rising out of Austria's evening clouds. He sees straight ahead.

The second European will be celebrating her eighteenth birthday in a week. She's been reading about politics for years and supports numerous pressure groups as well as campaigning for the protection of human rights in her local church. She spends the day telling everyone about each party's policies to make sure they're fully informed and tries to be unbiased because she wants everyone to have a free choice. She drives home quickly so she can monitor the results closely, and reluctantly passes the polling station with no vote. She'll have to wait until she's deemed old and mature enough to make a political decision.

The third European has lived in England since she was two years old. She's wanted to vote since she joined Mrs Shore's Politics class and was so inspired by reading her favourite party's manifesto. She was born in Turku, Finland, and is not a British citizen. Everyone in her little family tried the British Citizenship Test, but they didn't know about the tiny details of the political and social system, or the specifics of British history that the test required, so their applications were refused. She can't vote but looks forward to the local and European elections, when her voice will finally be heard.

The fourth European votes tactically. When he thinks about what kind of country he'd like, he thinks of peace and freedom and, if he's completely honest, more money for the arts so that his favourite theatre on Shiphay Road doesn't have to close down. He thinks he's found a party he could support, but the electoral system means small parties never have any success. He puts a reluctant cross next to one of the major parties – the one he dislikes the least. He feels defeated but promises himself he'll write a letter of complaint to whichever Member of Parliament is elected for his area. He wants to protect his Thursday evening trips to the theatre. He hopes, more than anything, that one day he'll be able to visit a theatre in Brussels or Amsterdam.

The fifth European takes the long route home, so he can walk through the woods and sit next to the river for five minutes before he finishes his Geography homework. He's been spend-

ing the day trying to persuade people to vote for his favourite party, because he doesn't want another government to place economic growth above environmental protection. He wants people to stop pouring oil into oceans and treating the planet like it's theirs to abuse. He never feels more accepted than when he talks to environment campaigners from several different countries online and they organise international action together. He's confident in his vote but sceptical about the future success of his chosen party.

The sixth European speaks four languages and spends all of her time learning vocabulary. Above all, she dreams of travelling and getting to speak with people who come from a different culture and understand more of the world. She's unsure about her vote because all of the parties seem to be moving away from European integration, and she wants to keep exchanging ideas and experiences with those who see everything a little differently. She's so unsure that she just votes for the same party as Mrs Shore, because she wants to have some sort of say but doesn't trust herself to make the right decision.

The seventh European supports socialism in secret. Socialism isn't popular in his country, and he's worried others will think he just wants to take away their freedom and individuality, but it's not true. He just wants people to stop being defined by their income. He hasn't had a conversation with his step-mother in four days because she works until midnight to keep the family going and to promote her small business. He wishes they could spend some time playing cards or driving along a quiet road with the windows open, but there's no time for that. He doesn't think any of the parties will help him, so he doesn't vote.

The eighth European doesn't really care. She just wants to talk to her friends and feels under so much pressure to succeed from her parents; she just wants to relax. She considers voting, but when she walks past the polling station, she sees the queue and decides she doesn't want to be late for Britain's Got Talent, so she goes home. She hopes that people around the world are enjoying Denmark's Got Talent or Slovenia's Got Talent, too.

The ninth European gave birth to her baby when she was fifteen years old. She's trying to build a better future for her child so she still goes to school full time and works in a supermarket at the weekend. She relies on some government benefits so that she doesn't have to keep asking her family for money and can still afford to go to school. So many people have told her that she doesn't deserve the money she gets, that she shouldn't have gotten pregnant in the first place, that she's a bad mother. She doesn't feel welcome in her country and doesn't feel like she deserves a vote. She leaves Mrs Shore's lesson and goes home.

The tenth European hasn't been listening in Mrs Shore's Politics lessons. He doesn't know anything about what the parties do and he's not really sure which one will benefit him and the people he cares about the most, so he's very confused by all of the media campaigns and televised debates. He loves science and particularly astronomy, and he'd like the government to spend more money on promoting science among young people, because when he gazes at the stars and imagines sending a rocket up into the air one day, he feels very alone. Yet, at the same time, he feels connected to all those who lie on the grass of their garden in Prague or St Petersburg or Budapest, and who watch the stars flickering into the sky as the evening light fades. He places a random cross next to a random party, because he doesn't really understand politics.

The eleventh European has been wandering the streets every afternoon with his hands full of promotional leaflets, frantically putting them through as many letterboxes as possible in order to make everyone aware of the daily problems faced by his community, and the solutions

he sees as just beyond the horizon but never beyond reach. He's full of national pride, but it's not the colours of the flag that define him – it's his enthusiasm for tradition, stability and pragmatism – the whitewashed buildings of his English seaside town could easily be the red brick roofs of a north German village on the edge of a forest; it's the happiness of his neighbours that motivates him.

The twelfth European asks everyone to tell her about the parties so she knows which one to choose, because she really wants to know how to improve the healthcare system so her mother gets the support she deserves. She scours the party websites to be sure of her choice; she's so thankful that she has an opportunity to make a difference with just a small cross on a page. But when she leaves school, she goes straight to her part-time job; her boss needs her to stay for an extra hour and the polling station closes at the end of the day. She misses the vote.

Mrs Shore walks into her lesson the next morning. There are mixed emotions in the room. Everyone disagrees. The results of the general election have been announced. The large majority of Members of Parliament are still men from the same ethnic, social and economic background. Twelve Europeans feel unrepresented. The democratic process continues.

Nemzetek iskolája

Gabriella Szaszko. Magyarország

Hatalmas méretű tornateremben tartották a tanévnyitót. A fényesre csiszolt fapadló szinte bántotta a korán kelő nebulók szemét a rövid, mégis vontatott szünet után. Az atombunkerben a nyár is csak kreált fogalom volt, az állandó 23 fokos hőmérséklet mellett semmilyen változást nem jelentett.

Egy tizennégy éves fiú büszkén húzta ki magát a sorban osztálytársai között. Feltűnő jelenség volt tágra nyílt kék szemével és világosszöke hajával. Magasabbra nőtt kortársainál, ami még zavarta, de nem sok kellett hozzá, hogy megtapasztalja előnyeit is.

A sok unott arc mellett Attila szeme érdeklődő volt. Nyakát nyújtogatta, kezét tördelte, hiszen nemsokára megkezdődött a többi osztály bevonulása, azzal a tanévnyitó ünnepség is. Büszkén állt osztálytársai körében a piros-fehér-zöld zászló alatt. Az év során ez volt az egyik olyan esemény, ahol hosszú időn keresztül láthatták a többi osztályt is.

Perceken belül bevonultak a szerb gyerekek. Elöl a zászlóvivővel, aki az előző év legkiemelkedőbb tanulója volt. Nemzetenként legalább tíz tanár tartózkodott a fiatalok között, hogy képesek legyenek kordában tartani a haza megmaradt utódjait, akiknek büszkén adták át a nemzeti tananyagot.

Attila egy lányt keresett vizslató tekintetével. Első osztályos kora óta rajongója volt a szerb Milicának, akivel még sohasem beszélgetett. Nem nézték jó szemmel a tanárok a nemzetek érintkezését, így volt ez a 2038-as nagy atomháború óta.

Kevés ember maradt életben a civilizált világban. Európában négy atombunker létesült, amelyek igazi földalatti világrészekként működtek. A megmaradt vezetők úgy döntöttek, hogy a nemzeti identitás megőrzése rendkívül fontos, ennek pedig egyetlen esélye a nációk külön tanítása és a szeparált élettér biztosítása. A nemzeti kincs megőrzése fontos céllá vált, így az oktatás főleg a nemzeti történelem, a nyelvi kincs és a kultúra körül forgott. Idegen nyelveket nem tanítottak, ez ellent mondott a nemzeti kincs megőrzési alapelvnek.

Attilának és kortársainak ez már nem volt különös. Ők az atombunker falai között születtek, sohasem látták meg a napvilágot. Mesterséges fényben, teljesen művi világban élték le életüket. Ennek ellenére a fiú hétéves kora óta teljes megszállottja volt Milicának, aki nyílt barna tekintettel és lágy, szabályos arcvonásokkal büszkélkedhetett. Hullámos haja könnyedén omlott vállára, karján büszkén viselte a piros-kék-fehér zászlót. Más volt, mint a többi lány. Mindig szelíden mosolygott a magas Attilára, amikor összetalálkozott tekintetük.

A fiú legnagyobb öröme mindig a szerbek mellett álltak a tanévnyitón és a tanévzárón egyaránt. Milicia ekkor szinte karnyújtásnyira volt tőle. Egész nyáron gondolkodott azon, hogy meg kellene szólítania. Össze akarta szedni a bátorságát, hiszen már utolsó éves volt. A következő tanévben speciális magyar iskolában folytatja majd tanulmányait, így talán sohasem láthatja viszont a visszafogott Milicát. A nevét is csak két éve tudta meg, amikor egy másik szerb lány szólította meg a szépséget.

Amint megérkezett Milica Attila hatalmasat sóhajtott, elkapta a tekintetét a lányról, aki aznapra hosszú varkocsba fonta hosszú haját. Egy szemvillanásra újra felé pillantott, majd előre

a fényes terembe. A magyar zászló könnyedén hullámozott előtte. Időközben bevonultak a lengyelek a szerbek mellé, akik fehér-piros zászlójuk alatt büszkén foglaltak helyet. Az ünnepség hamarosan kezdetét vehette.

A fiú szíve a torkában dobogott, úgy érezte túl szoros a nyakkendő, amit reggel anyukája kötött meg. Visszanézett a lányra, aki halványan mosolygott rá. Hosszasan időztek el így, egymás szemébe nézve. A lány törte meg a csendet:

–Kako se zoveš?

Attila körbenézett, hiába tudta, hogy neki címezték a számára érthetetlen kérdést. Visszanézett Milicára, majd lassan megrázta a fejét, és kis mozdulatokkal széttárta a karját. A lány felsóhajtott, majd ő is csóválni kezdte a kobakját. Percekig nem szólalt meg újra, de utána magára mutatott.

–Zovem se Milica – mondta. –A ti?

A fiú arcán mosoly terült szét. Értette a Milica szót, amitől hatalmas megkönnyebbülést érzett.

–Attila – válaszolta.

–Attila – ismételte a lány, majd kisimított egy kibújt tincset az arcából, és ő is elmosolyodott.

–Ekkor felcsendült az osztrák himnusz, amire a magyarok mellett álló fiatalok azonnal elhallgattak és kihúzták magukat. Csendben kellett lenni a többi nemzet himnusza alatt is, ez volt a szabály. A kötelező tiszteletadás elmaradhatatlan volt, akkor is, hogyha az érintkezés alig volt lehetséges.

Milica felemelte mutatóujját a szájához, majd előre nézett, Attila követte volna a példáját, de akkor oldalba lökte a mellette álló Ákos:

–Beszélgetsz a szerb csajjal? – kérdezte suttogva, mire Attila felhúzta a vállát. –Belőled nem néztem volna ki, hogy csajozol!

–Nem csajozok – mondta Attila a kellenél hangosabban, mire kapott egy megvető pillantást a legközelebbi tanáruktól.

A fiú elpirult szégyenében, majd újra előre nézett. Megkezdődött a hosszú, német nyelvű tanévnyitó, amiből szintén nem értett semmit. Csak a tisztelet miatt kellett meghallgatni a többi nemzet érthetetlen mondandóját. Persze ilyenkor a tanároknak nagy erővel kellett csendre inteniük saját nemzetük tagjait, a sugdolódzás elkerülhetetlen volt. A diákok saját tanévnyitó beszédük alatt is unták magukat, nemhogy a másén.

Attila újra Milica felé fordult, aki pillanatok lefolyása alatt kitüntette figyelmével. A fiú összeszedte a bátorságát, hogy most ő mondjon valamit a lánynak:

–Unalmas – szája elé emelte a kezét, mintha ásítana, erre Milicia fojtottan felnevetett, hevesen bólogatva mellé.

Milica mellett egy kevésbé szabályos, kicsit pattanásos arcú, kövérke lány álldogált, aki óvatosan oldalba bökte a társát.

–Dobar momak – szélesen vigyorgott a Dragoslava nevű lány. –Šteta što nije Srbin!

–Ne tako glasno! – suttogta neki Milica összehúzott szemöldökkel, majd újra Attilára nézett.

A fiatal fiú zavarban érezte magát, hogy semmit sem ért a két lány beszélgetéséből. Ennek ellenére fenn akarta tartani a kapcsolatot Milicával.

–Szép vagy – súgta oda a lánynak, mire az mosolyogva megrázta a fejét.

Attila megvakarta az üstökét. Milicára mutatott, szélesen elvigyorodott, és felmutatta hüvelykujját tetszése jelenként, mire a lány elpirulva sütötte le a szemét. Ekkor lépett oda Emese néni Attila mellé. Összehúzta szemét, majd erősen gesztikulálva, mégis suttogva szólt a fiúnak:

–Nagyon gyorsan hagyj ezt abba, kisfiam! Nem elég, hogy nem tiszteled meg az osztrákokat, még ismerkedsz is a szerb lánnyal? Ne akard, hogy a vezető tanár elé vigyelek! Értetted?

–Értettem – mondta Attila, majd amikor Emese néni elment, szomorúan visszanézett Milicára, és megcsóválta a fejét. A lány nem válaszolt vissza semmit.

Felcsendült a magyar himnusz. Attila nemzete kemény vigyázzba vágta magát, a zászló büszkén terpeszkedett a sor elején. Hamarosan a vezető tanár lépett a pulpitusra megkezdve évnnyitó beszédét. Sánta Árpád idős férfi volt, már a hetvenhez közelített. Kopasz feje vakítóan csillogott a neonlámpák fényében. Erősen megköszöri a torkát, majd a fiatalokra nézett nyájas mosollyal:

–Kedves magyar honfitársaim! Elérkezett egy újabb tanév, amikor büszkék lehetünk arra, hogy mi, megmaradt magyarok ápoljuk a nemzeti kincsünket. A kelet-európai atombunker több mint ötvenezer magyarral büszkélkedhet. Mi vagyunk nemzetünk utolsó megmaradt tagjai, ezért a legfontosabb, hogy iskolánk magyar tanulói szép eredményeket érjenek el évről évre. Legyetek büszkék a Szent Koronára, adjátok tovább nemzeti kincseteket gyermekeiteknek. Mindennél fontosabb, hogy büszke magyar családapák és családanyák legyenek belőletek, hiszen ez a záloga nemzetünk fennmaradásának! Ápoljátok az idej tanévben is a magyar nyelvet, gyomláljátok ki az idegen szavakat, tanuljatok sokat a történelmünkről! Egy Kölcsey Ferenc idézettel engednék útjára titeket:

Négy szócskát üzenek, védj jól kebeledbe, s fiadnak
Hagyd örökül ha kihúnysz: A HAZA MINDEN ELŐTT!¹

Amint Sánta úr lelépett a szószékről, Attila azonnal megkönnyebbült, újra sóvárogva Milica felé fordult. A lány kihúzta magát nemzeti himnusza felcsendülésére. A fiú elnézte sima, hibátlan vonásait, melyek évről évre nőisebbek és szebbek lettek. Beszélgetni akart vele közös nyelven, meg akarta ismerni Milica lelkét, amit legalább olyan gyönyörűnek gondolt, mint a fényesen csillogó haját.

Naponta egyetlen nagyszünet volt, amikor az ifjúság szabadon kimehetett a mesterségesen kialakított parkba, ahol a régi idők kedvéért pár műanyag növény hevert, a természet látszatát keltve.

A nemzeti osztályok egyetlen lehetséges találkozási pontja ez a fél óra volt. Ezt a szünetet sem ennek érdekében hozták létre. A tanárok ugyan névlegesen támogatták a nemzetközi összetartást, de ferde szemmel néztek azokra a tanulókra, akik barátkozni próbáltak az „idegen” gyerekekkel.

Nem is igazán volt rá nagy az igény. Mindenki saját nációjára volt büszke, saját zászlóját hordta a karján. Éveken keresztül azt tanulta, hogy ő a legjobb mind között. Emellett a nyelvi akadályok igazán nagy problémát jelentettek.

Attila azonban nem adta fel. A reggeli beszélgetés óta képtelen volt kiverni Milicát a fejéből. Hiába szerette az iskola első napját, alig tudott figyelni az új tanórákon. Csak a lány bársonyos barna haját látta maga előtt, és alig várta a szünetet.

¹ Kölcsey Ferenc (1790-1838): Emléklapra

Szemével kutatni kezdett Milica után, osztálytársait teljesen figyelmen kívül hagyta. Nem kellett sokat várnia, hiszen az hamarosan megjelent egy csokor lány társaságában. A fiatalok java hangosan vihogott, amíg Milica csak visszafogottan mosolygott.

Attila osztálytársait és a szabályokat hátrahagyva lépkedett a csapat szerb lány irányába. Sok tekintet a fiú felé szegeződött. Egy csoport lengyel fiú összesűgött a háta mögött, arcukon furcsa döbbenet terült szét, szemük hatalmasra kerekedett.

–Co on robi? – kérdezte érthetetlen nyelven egy szőke hajú, Mieczysław nevű fiú.

–On totalnie stracił rozum! – válaszolta egy másik, majd gúnyosan felnevetett.

Attila igyekezett figyelmen kívül hagyni az idegen beszédet és a viháncolást. Pillanatokon belül elhallgattak a többiek Milica körül. Hirtelen lett átható a csend. A fiatal fiú szíve a torkában dübörgött, rámosolygott a lányra, aki, ha lehet, még szebb volt, mint reggel.

Milica óvatosan a füle mögé sodorta a haját.

–Atila – mondta, majd a fiúra mutatott. Kiejtése egyáltalán nem volt tökéletes, de a fiú boldog volt, hogy megjegyezte a nevét.

–Milica – mondta viszont. –Hogy vagy?

A lány széttárta a karját, majd megrázta a fejét. Attila lebiggyesztette a száját, de elmosolyodott. Rajzolt egy kérdőjelet a levegőbe, és Milicára mutatott, mire a lány felmutatta a hüvelykujját. Egyszerre nevettek el magukat.

–Ne bi trebala to da radiš – mondta Dragoslava hangosan, vadul gesztikulálva. –Znaš dobro da to nastavnik ne voli!

–Radim šta hoću! – válaszolta Milica erős hangsúllyal, megvetően pillantott osztálytársára, majd leintette.

Egy csapat kék-sárga-piros karszalagos lány is elhaladt a furcsa páros mellett, hangosan nevettek és ujjukkal mutogattak Attilára, aki csak egyetlen pillantásra méltatta őket, majd visszanevezett Milicára. A lány felhúzta a vállát, megcsóválta a fejét.

Attilának ideje sem maradt tovább „beszélgetnie”, mert hirtelen erős kéz ragadta meg a felső karját. Élesen hasított belé a fájdalom, és erősen elpirult, amikor megpillantotta Emese nénit.

–Te meg mit csinálsz itt, kisfiam? – kérdezte éles hangon a nő. –Azt hiszem a legjobb lesz, hogyha ezt Sánta úrral beszéled meg!

A szerb lányok szemlesütve folytatták a beszélgetésüket, csak Milica nézett Attila után az iskolaudvaron. Az osztrák fiúk hangosan felnevettek az udvar másik oldaláról:

–Dummkopf! – ordította oda az egyik, mire meg is kapta a maga büntető pillantását Dietricha asszonytól.

Attilát mindenki szeme láttára hurcolta végig az udvaron Emese néni, egyenesen be az iskola egyszerű, sötét épületébe. Ablakok nem voltak rajta, hiszen csak mesterséges fény létezett. Odabent végigvezette a hosszú folyosón, amelynek csillogása bántotta a fiú szemét.

Egy magyar zászlóval díszített iroda felé vezette, amely Sánta Árpád vezető tanár úr székelye volt. Benyitott az ablaktalan, neonlámpás helyiségbe, ahol Emese néni végre elengedte Attila karját.

–Probléma van a fiatalúrral – jelentette ki a tanárnő. –Folyamatosan egy szerb lánykával heteg.

Sánta úr hangosan megköszönte a torkát, majd megpördült a hatalmas bőrfotelben.

–Foglalj helyet, fiam! – mondta, mire Attila remegő térddel ült le a kisebb székre az asztal másik oldalán. Emese néni a sarokban állt karba font kézzel. –Mesélj nekem erről az ügyről!

Attila a kezét tördelte, majd hatalmas kék szemét az igazgatóra emelte. Az asztalon sem volt semmi dísz, csak irathalmok unalmas sokasága. Nagy levegőt vett, majd beszélni kezdett:

–Nem történt semmi! Csak össze akartam barátkozni egy szerb lánnyal. Az nem tilos.

Sánta úr végigsimított rövid kecskeszakállán, majd a szemüvege mögül sandán a fiúra nézett.

–Nem, nem tilos.

–Akkor nem értem – mondta Attila.

–Nem tilos – emelkedett fel Sánta úr az asztal mögül. –Ugyanakkor nem javasolt. Minek is barátkoznál te egy szerb lánnyal, fiam? Nem is beszéltek egy nyelvet, nem ismered a kultúráját sem, így sosem értenéd meg a gondolatait.

Emese néni hatalmasakat bólogatott a sarokban. Attila újra szóra nyitotta a száját:

–Én szeretném megérteni a gondolatait. Szerintem meg is tudnám! Szívesen tanulnék az ő történelmükről is. Biztos érdekes lehet!

Sánta úr újra visszapillantott Attilára, immár sokkal élesebben. Szeme körül a barázdák hirtelen elmélyültek.

–Nem elég érdekes neked a magyar történelem, az egy igaz haza története?

Attila újra a kezére nézett, félt a büntetéstől. Ennek ellenére összezavarodott.

–Attól, hogy mások is érdekelnek, az nem jelenti azt, hogy nem érdekel a magyarok története. De szerintem többet tudnék a világról, ha megismerhetném másokét is.

Sánta úr és Emese néni hangosan felsóhajtott, majd egyszerre megcsóválták a fejüket, mint a bábok.

–Meg kell értened, hogy különleges idők különleges módszereket kívánnak meg. Mi vagyunk nemzetünk utolsó képviselői, nem engedhetjük meg magunknak azt, hogy a keveredés lesöpörjön minket a történelem színpadáról. Éppen emiatt muszáj lesz, hogy megbüntesselek.

Attila halkán felnyögött, sejtette, hogy ez lesz. Sánta úr visszahanyatlott a bőrülésbe, majd a fiú szemébe nézett:

–Otthon írnék egy fogalmazást arról, hogy miért is jobb magyarnak lenni, mint másmilyen nemzetiségűnek! Emellett ezen a héten már nem mehetsz ki szünetre, a himnuszt kell szavalnod abban a fél órában hangosan a teremben, érthető?

A fiú lemondóan bólogatni kezdett, emellett újra felderengtek előtte Milica szabályos vonásai. Sokkal szebbek voltak, mint a magyar osztálytársnőié. Ettől furcsán kavarogni kezdett a gyomra. Már az ajtóban állt, amikor hirtelen visszanézett Sánta úrra.

–És ha nem jobb? – kérdezte, mire az idős férfi visszanézett.

–Mi nem jobb?

–Magyarnak lenni, mint más nemzetiségűnek?

Sánta úr ökölbe szorította kezét, majd hangosan a fiúra ripakodott:

–Ilyet kérdezni se merj! Hát nem erről tanultál több éven keresztül?

Attila újra bölintott. Nem tehetett mást, érezte a vita parttalan természetét. Sánta úr még egyetlen mondatot vetett oda a fiúnak:

–Azonban el ne felejtse, hogy tisztelni kell a többi nemzetet is!

A fiatal fiú erre nem válaszolt. Kifordult a neonoktól fényes folyosóra, ahová már nem követte Emese néni sem. Leült a földre a fém szekrényének árnyékába. A többiek még nem érkeztek vissza a szünetről, ahová egy hétig nem mehetett velük. Megdörzsölte homlokát, és szemét behunyva igyekezett visszagondolni Milica hajának selymes barnaságára.

Perceken belül hangzavar töltötte el a folyosót, beáramlottak a különböző nemzetiségű gyerekek csakis a saját klikkjeikhez csapódva. Mindenki a tanterme felé igyekezett, ahol saját nemzeti címere díszelgett büszkén.

Milica szomorú pillantást vetett a földön ülő fiúra, majd bement a szerb osztályterembe. Attilának is ezt kellett volna tennie, ehelyett ő a fejét törte. Csak azon gondolkodott, hogy mivel is jobb magyarnak lenni, mint más nemzetiségűnek.

Arra jutott, hogy semmivel.

School of Nations

Gabriella Szaszko. Hungary

The school year's opening ceremony was held in the huge gymnasium. The highly polished wooden floor practically hurt the eyes of the early-rising students after the short but nevertheless slowly passing break. Summer too was only a created concept in the atomic bunker and meant no change to the permanent temperature of 23 degrees.

An eleven year old boy sat straight and proud in the row of his fellow classmates. He was a striking sight with his wide, blue eyes and light blond hair. He had grown taller than his contemporaries, which bothered him for the moment, but it wouldn't take long until he would experience its advantages.

Among the many bored faces, Attila's eyes seemed to show more interest. He craned his neck and wrung his hands; the other forms would soon start to march in, and that meant the start of the ceremony which in turn marked the beginning of the school year. He stood proudly among his classmates under the red, white and green flag. This was one of the few events during the year when they could see the other forms for a longer period.

A few minutes later the Serbian children began to file in, led by the flag-bearer, who was the most outstanding student of the previous year. At least ten teachers stood among the students from each nation so that they would be able to keep in check the remaining progeny of their homeland, to whom they proudly presented the national curriculum.

Attila's gaze searched for a girl. He had been a fan of the Serbian Milica since first grade but he had never spoken to her. The teachers did not approve of contact between nations, not since the atomic war in 2038.

Few people had survived in the civilised world. Four atomic bunkers had been established in Europe, which operated as true underground continents. The remaining politicians had decided that the preservation of their national identity was of paramount importance, and the only way this could be achieved was through the separate teaching of each nation and by providing separated living space. Preserving the national treasure became an important objective, and so education centred mainly around national history, the linguistic treasure and culture. Foreign languages were not taught; it contradicted the fundamental principle of national treasure preservation.

This was nothing special to Attila and his classmates. They had been born within the walls of the atomic bunker; they had never seen sunlight. They lived their lives in artificial light and in a totally artificial world. Despite this, since the age of seven the boy had been totally obsessed with Milica, her open, brown countenance and her soft, even features. Her wavy hair dropped lightly to her shoulders, and she wore the red, blue and white flag on her arm with pride. She was different from the other girls. She always smiled placidly at the tall Attila when their gazes met.

To the boy's great pleasure, they always stood next to the Serbs at both the opening and closing of the school year. At times like this, Milica was practically within his reach. He had spent all summer thinking about the fact that he should somehow talk to her. He wanted to pluck up courage, because it was his final year after all. He would be continu-

ing his studies in a special Hungarian school the following year, and perhaps he would never see the reserved Milica again. He had only discovered her name two years earlier, when another Serbian girl had called the beauty by her name.

When Milica arrived, Attila heaved a huge sigh and tore his gaze from the girl, who had chosen to wear her hair in a long pigtail that day. He glanced back at her for a moment, and then again towards the glaringly bright hall. The Hungarian flag rippled softly before him. Meanwhile, the Poles had filed in and taken their places next to the Serbs, standing proud under their red and white flag. The ceremony could now begin.

The boy's heart was beating in his throat, and he felt that the tie which his mother had knotted for him that morning was too tight. He glanced back at the girl, who smiled at him faintly. They remained like that for what seemed like hours, staring into each other's eyes. The girl broke the silence:

–Kako se zoveš?

Attila looked around, confused, despite knowing that the unintelligible question had been put to him. He looked back at Milica, slowly shook his head and shrugged his shoulders inconspicuously. The girl sighed, and she too started shaking her head. She remained silent for minutes, then pointed to herself.

–Zovem se Milica – she said. –A ti?

A big smile appeared on Attila's face. He understood the word Milica, which gave him a huge feeling of relief.

–Attila – he replied.

–Attila – the girl repeated, flicking an escaped strand of hair from her face, and then she too broke into a smile.

And then the tones of the Austrian national anthem roared up, to which the children next to the Hungarians immediately fell quiet and stood up straight. Everyone had to stay quiet during the national anthems of the

other countries; that was the rule. The compulsory show of respect was a requirement, even if contact was hardly possible.

Milica lifted her forefinger to her lips and looked to the front. Attila would have followed her example but he was poked in the ribs by Ákos, who was standing next to him:

–Are you talking to the Serbian girl? – he asked in a whisper, to which Attila shrugged his shoulders. –I wouldn't have thought you'd be one for meeting girls!

–I'm not – said Attila a little too loudly, for which he received a contemptuous look from the closest teacher.

The boy blushed in shame and looked straight ahead again. The long opening ceremony began in German, of which he also didn't understand a single word. It was only out of respect that they had to listen to the unintelligible speeches of the other nations. Of course, it was up to the teachers to work full time to keep their students quiet; it was impossible to stop them whispering. The students were bored during their own opening speeches, let alone those of the other nations.

Attila turned to Milica again, who granted him her attention within moments. The boy plucked up the courage to say something himself:

–Boring – he said, lifting his hand up to his mouth as if he was yawning, to which Milica stifled a laugh and nodded wildly.

A plump girl with a few pimples and not so soft features stood next to Milica and now poked her companion's side.

–Dobar momak – giggled the girl, who was called Dragoslava. –Šteta što nije Srbin!

–Ne tako glasno! – Milica whispered to her with a frown, then looked back to Attila.

The boy felt embarrassed for not understanding anything of the girls' conversation. Despite this, he wanted to maintain the conversation with Milica.

–You’re pretty – he whispered to the girl, who shook her head, smiling.

Attila scratched the top of his head. He pointed to Milica, smiled broadly, and showed her a thumbs up as a show of approval, to which the girl looked to the ground, blushing. This was when Miss Faragó came over and stood next to Attila. She frowned, and gesticulating wildly but still whispering, she told the boy:

–You stop that this instance, boy! It’s not enough that you’re disrespecting the Austrians, but you’re talking to a Serbian girl too? I’ll end up dragging you before the head teacher! Understand?

–I understand – said Attila, and when Miss Faragó had gone, he looked back at Milica sadly and shook his head. The girl didn’t do anything in reply.

The Hungarian national anthem began to play and Attila’s nation stood to attention, the flag spreading out proudly before them. The head teacher soon stepped onto the pulpit and began his opening speech. Árpád Sánta was well past middle age, close to his seventies. His bald head shone blindingly in the light of the neon lamps. He cleared his throat loudly, then looked at the young students with an endearing smile.

–My dear Hungarian countrymen! Here we are at the beginning of a new school year at which we can be proud that we, remaining Hungarians, continue to cultivate our national treasure. The Eastern-European atomic bunker boasts over fifty thousand Hungarians. We are the last remaining members of our nation, and so it is most important that our students attain excellent results year by year. Be proud of the Holy Crown and pass on your national treasure to your children. It is essential that you become the fathers and mothers of proud Hungarian families because this is the key to the survival of our nation. Continue this year to cultivate the Hungar-

ian language, root out the foreign words, and learn much about our history! Let me set you off on your journey with a line from Ferenc Kölcsey’s immortal poem:

*Four little words I send you, engrave them
on your heart and leave them
as a legacy to your sons: Fatherland before
all else!*¹

As soon as Mr. Sánta had stepped off the podium, Attila immediately relaxed and again turned longing towards Milica. The girl stood up straight when she heard the first notes of her national anthem. The boy looked at her smooth, perfect features, which had become more womanly and beautiful with each passing year. He wanted to talk to her in a common language, he wanted to get to know her soul, which he imagined to be as beautiful as her bright, shiny hair.

There was just a single, long break during the day, when the students could go out into the artificially created park, which was dotted with a few plastic plants to give a semblance of nature.

This half an hour was the only possible point of contact for the national classes. But of course the recess had not been designed for this purpose. Teachers may have supported international solidarity in theory, but they looked with disapproval on those students who tried to make friends with “foreign” children.

And there was no great demand for it either. Everyone was proud of their own nation and bore their own flag on their arm. For years he had learned that he was the best out of all of them. In addition to which the language barrier was a huge problem.

But Attila didn’t give up. Since the short conversation that morning, he had been

¹ Ferenc Kölcsey (1790-1838): *Emléklapra* (For a Testimonial)

incapable of getting Milica out of his mind. No matter how much he liked the first day of school, he couldn't concentrate during the new lessons. All he saw before him was the girl's velvety brown hair, and he could hardly wait for the break.

His eyes darted around in search of Milica, and he ignored his classmates completely. He didn't have to wait long because she soon appeared in the company of a small group of other girls. Most of the students were laughing loudly, while Milica only smiled demurely.

Leaving his classmates and the rules behind, Attila started walking towards the Serbian girl. His movements were accompanied by many gazes. A group of Polish boys began whispering as he passed them, a look of strange shock on their faces, their eyes opened wide.

–Co on robi? – asked a blond boy called Mieczysław in an unintelligible language.

–On totalnie stracił rozum! – replied another, and began to laugh mockingly.

Attila did his best to ignore the foreign talk and giggling. The others around Milica fell immediately quiet. The silence became suddenly acute. The young boy's heart was thumping in his throat as he smiled at the girl, who, if possible, seemed even more beautiful than she had that morning.

Milica carefully swept a lock of hair behind her ear.

–Attila – she said, and pointed to the boy. Her accent was far from perfect, but the boy was glad she had remembered his name.

–Milica – he replied. –How are you?

The girl shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. Attila frowned, but then broke into a smile. He drew a question mark in the air with his finger and then pointed to Milica, to which the girl gave him a thumbs up. They broke into laughter in unison.

–Ne bi trebala to da radiš – said Dragoslava loudly, gesticulating wildly. –Znaš dobro da to nastavnik ne voli!

–Radim šta hoću! – Milica replied with emphasis, casting a scornful glance at her classmate and motioning her to be quiet.

A group of girls with blue, yellow and red armbands passed by the strange couple, laughing loudly and pointing their fingers at Attila, who only looked at them for a moment before turning back to Milica. The girl shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

Attila had no more time to “talk”, because suddenly a strong hand gripped his arm. He felt a sharp pain and blushed deeply when he saw Miss Faragó.

–And what are you doing here, sonny? – The woman asked in a sharp voice. –I think it's best if you discussed this with Mr. Sánta!

The Serbian girls continued their conversation quietly; only Milica followed Attila with her gaze as he crossed the school yard. The Austrian boys at the other end of the yard began to laugh:

–Dummkopf! – One of them shouted, to which he received his own stern glance from Miss Dietricha.

Miss Faragó dragged Attila across the yard under the full gaze of all the other children, straight into the simple, grey building of the school. It had no windows, as of course all light was artificial. Once inside, she led him along a long corridor, the brightness of which hurt the boy's eyes.

She led him to a door that was decorated with a Hungarian flag; this was the study of Head Teacher Sánta. She opened the door into a windowless, neon-lit room, where Miss Faragó finally let go of Attila's arm.

–There's a problem with the young man – the teacher declared. –He keeps gallivanting with a Serbian girl.

Mr. Sánta cleared his throat loudly and then spun around in his huge leather armchair.

–Take a seat, young man – he said, to which the boy sat down, his legs shaking, on

the smaller chair on the other side of the table. Miss Faragó stood in the corner, her arms crossed. –Tell me about the matter.

Attila wrung his hands and then lifted his huge, blue eyes to meet the Head Teacher's gaze. There were no ornaments on the table, only a boring mass of files. He took a deep breath and began to speak:

–Nothing happened! I just wanted to make friends with a Serbian girl. That's not prohibited.

Mr. Sánta stroked his short beard, then looked askew at the boy from behind his glasses.

–No, it is not prohibited.

–Then I don't understand – said Attila.

–It is not prohibited – Mr. Sánta stood up from behind the table. –However, it is also not recommended. Why would you want to make friends with a Serbian girl anyway, my boy? You don't even speak the same language, you don't know anything about her culture, and so you would never understand her thoughts.

Miss Faragó nodded heavily in the corner. Attila opened his mouth to speak once again:

–I'd like to understand her thoughts. And I think I could too. I'd be glad to learn something about their history as well, it must be interesting!

Mr. Sánta glanced at Attila again, only this time much more sternly. The wrinkles around his eyes became suddenly deeper.

–Isn't Hungarian history, the history of the one true fatherland, interesting enough for you?

Attila looked down at his hands again; he was afraid of being punished. Nevertheless, he was confused.

–Just because I'm interested in others too doesn't mean I'm not interested in the history of the Hungarians. But I think I'd know more about the world if I could also get to know the history of others.

Mr. Sánta and Miss Faragó let out a loud sigh, and then began to shake their heads in unison, like puppets.

–You must understand that special times require special methods. We are the last surviving representatives of our nation; we cannot allow intermingling to sweep us off the stage of history. And for this reason I'm afraid I'm going to have to punish you.

Attila let out a quiet groan; he had guessed this would happen eventually. Mr. Sánta slumped back into his leather chair and looked the boy in the eye.

–Write an essay at home about why it is better to be Hungarian than any other nationality! In addition, this week you shall not be allowed to go out during recess; you will spend that half an hour reading the national anthem out loud in the classroom, understand?

The boy began to nod resignedly, while at the same time Milica's smooth features appeared before him once again. They were much prettier than those of the Hungarian girls in his class. It made his stomach start to feel strangely queasy. He was already standing in the doorway when he suddenly turned back to face Mr. Sánta.

–And if it isn't better? – he asked, to which the old man looked up at him again.

–If what isn't better?

–To be Hungarian than any other nationality?

Mr. Sánta clenched his fists and snapped at the boy loudly:

–Don't you dare ask questions like that! Isn't that what you've been taught here at school all these years?

Attila nodded once again. He had no choice; he recognised the futile nature of the discussion. Mr. Sánta had one last piece of advice for the boy:

–But don't forget that you must respect the other nations as well.

The young boy didn't reply. He went out of the office into the neon bright corridor where he was not followed by Miss Faragó. He sat down on the floor in the shadow of his metal locker. The others hadn't come back from recess yet, somewhere he wouldn't be going with them for the following week. He rubbed his forehead and, closing his eyes, tried to conjure up the silky brownness of Milica's hair.

Minutes later, the corridor was filled with sound as the children of the various nations flowed inside, all sticking to only their own

clique. Everyone was hurrying to their own classroom, above which their own national coat of arms was displayed proudly.

Milica glanced sadly at the boy sitting on the ground, and then went into the Serbian classroom.

Attila should have done the same but instead he sat there racking his brains. All he could think about was what made it better to be Hungarian than any other nationality.

He came to the conclusion that the answer was: nothing.

זר בשדרות

אילנה קישקו. ישראל

בשישים שנות קיומה, שדרות מעולם לא הפכה לעיר יפה. אפשר לומר אפילו שהשנים לא עשו לה טוב. בחצר האחורית של מדינת ישראל קשה להזדקן בחן, ויחד עם שחיתות, אבטלה ועוני מחרידים, שדרות הפכה לנערת הפוסטר של מקום שאתה ממש לא רוצה להיות בו. אפילו החמאס החליט לתרום את חלקו בירי קאסמים שאולי ימחקו את העיר. לא עבד, אגב, אך תרם לכמה שיפוצים. אבל כל זה ממש לא הטריד את לואי. הוא הסתובב ברחובות העיר כמי שזכה בלוטו עם ראש מורם וחיוך נצחי בלתי אפשרי. לא היה לו מושג שבקרוב הכל ישתנה.

גם לי למען האמת כל הטירוף הזה לא ממש שינה. גרתי שם כסטודנטית בשכונה הכי ענייה בעיר, ונהינתי מכל רגע. כי אני גדלתי בערד, ומשם קשה לרדת נמוך יותר. ערד היא בערך בסדר גודל של שדרות ב 25 אלף תושבים, אבל הרבה יותר מבודדת. אותה עיירה קטנה מהסרטים האמריקאים שהחלום הכי גדול של תושביה הוא לברוח ממנה. לי מעולם לא היה רצון לברוח, אבל כן הייתה תהייה מתמדת איך ההורים שלי עזבו את חייהם במוסקבה, עיר בירה הקוסמופוליטית ועצומה בגיל 38 ונחתו בחור באמצע המדבר. ההורים שלי דווקא כן ברחו מברית המועצות שבשנת 1990 עמדה בפני פירוק, והורי מספרים שכל יום היה מפחיד יותר לחיות שם, כי אף אחד לא ידע מה יביא המחר. והעובדה שהם היו יהודים בודאי לא עזרה ברוסיה האנטישמית. אבל למרבה הצער, כמו הרבה יהודים אחרים, 2000 שנות גלות, סבל ורדיפות תהיה להם סימפטיה לסבל של אחרים, אז זהו, שלא.

כן, שנות ה 2000 סימנו בריחה המונית של פליטים אפריקאים לישראל. ועד שנת 2012 עשרות אלפים שהו בישראל, ולואי ביניהם. אף שבערד ובשדרות לבדן היו אלפי פליטים, אני מודה שגם אני כמו כולם פשוט הנחתי שהם כולם בורחים מהמלחמה בדארפור, לא הבנתי שיש פליטים מאריתראה, אתיופיה, קונגו וכן גם מסודן. כך התייחסו אליהם בישראל. לא כאל פליטים או מבקשי מקלט, פשוט סודנים.

לואי היה בכלל מחוץ השנהב. הם היו עשרות פליטים ממלחמת האזרחים שם. הוא ברח לאחר שהשתתף בהפגנות נגד המשטר לאחר שאחותו נהרגה בידי חיילים צרפתים, והוא עצמו נורה ברגלו. נרדף על ידי השלטונות הבין שהדרך היחידה להפסיק לברוח בבית היא לברוח החוצה. וסיפור ההגעה שלו לישראל הוא חומר קלאסי לתסריט הוליוודי. היה זה משחק כדורגל בין נבחרת חוף השנהב למצרים בקהיר, שסידר ללואי כרטיס יציאה. הוא טס למצרים בתואנה שיראה את המשחק, ואכן באיצטדיון פגש איש עסקים מארצו שסידר לו עבודת ניקיון אצלו בבית, אך לא שילם לו. אז הוא התגלגל בין עבודות ניקיון שונות, חי מהפה ליד, ישן גם ברחובות בלילה קרים במיוחד, מזכיר לעצמו שעוד יבוא יום ויחזור לעבוד במשרד כרואה חשבון. בגיל 30, לואי קפקה רנה החלה את האודיסאה הראשונה בחייו.

בזמנו בקהיר, הוא אכן הגיע לעבוד במשרד. הוא ניקה משרד של קבלן מצרי עשיר שהיה לו בן מכור לסמים. ההיכרות איתו לא בישרה ללואי טובות, ואכן יום אחד, בסיומו של יום ניקיון בביתו של הקבלן, חבר הגיע לאסוף את לואי, ואז בנו של הקבלן נעל אותם באחד החזרים הרבים בבית בדרישה לכסף. הם צעקו לו שאין, ללא תועלת. הם היו נעולים בחדר עד הלילה, עד ששוטרים פרצו את הדלת בבוקר. אך לא את הבן מכור לסמים אלא את לואי וחברו. שם הוחזקו עוד יומיים עם עשרות אנשים, בצפיפות,

טזוקים, ללא אוכל או אף יכולת ללכת לשירותים. שם לואי החליט ששוב עליו לברוח והפעם לישראל. הוא יצר קשר עם בדואים בעובדים בהרחות מחצי האי סיני לישראל של סמים, נשק, נשים לעבודה בזנות וגם פליטים. תוך חודש תכנית מתוכמת תוכננה.

תחילה נסע כל הלילה עם פליטים תחת שמיכות באחורי הטנדר עם עוד שבעה פליטים לשארם אה שייה. שם שהו בדירת מסתור חודש עד שהגיע המשמרת של החייל המצרי בגבול שהיה חלק מהעסק. אחרי חודש, שוב נוסעים כל הלילה, הוצים את כל חצי האי. בשלוש בבוקר חייל מצרי מוריד אותם מהטנדר ומלווה אותם בנשק דרוך לגבול עם ישראל. הוא הסביר להם שיש שתי גדרות וכשחוצים את הגבוהה יותר, זוהי ישראל. החייל העביר עליהם את מבטו לשנייה ואז לחש "יאללה". הם התחילו לרוץ בכל הכוח, פחדו שהחיילים המצריים ירו עליהם, ורק אחרי שהתרסק על הקרקע וגם ריסק את הקרסול בקפיצה מעל הגדר ההגבוהה, לראשונה מזה חודשים נשם לרווחה והתחיל לבכות. לא מכאב אלא מאושר.

משם הסיפור הוא של לואי הוא סיפורם של כל הפליטים בישראל. חיילים אוספים אותם בג'יפ, שבועות הם שוהים בבסיס הצבא שבועות עד חודשים עוברים תשאולים ובדיקות רפואיות. לואי זוכר את התקופה בבסיס "קציעות", שהוא גם כלא לאסירים בטחוניים בזמנו הפנוי, כנפלאה, לא פחות. אז החיילים נושאים נשק בעוד הפליטים נמצאים בתנאי מאסר אף שאינם פושעים. אז מה? החיילים היו מאד נחמדים, שיחקו עם הילדים, היו מים ואוכל בשפע, טיפולים רפואיים. "אז מה אם הייתי במעצר? בנפשי לראשונה בחיי הייתי חופשי" לואי נזכר. הדאגה היחידה שלו אז הייתה שיחזירו אותו למצרים. אכן מזרח תיכון חדש זה כאן, מתחת לאף. אבל ירח הדבש בין לואי לצבא הגנה לישראל נגמר לאחר כשבוע. העלו אותו יחד עם קבוצה של 30 פליטים על אוטובוס שלקח אותם לבאר שבע, ושם החייל המלווה בפנים מבושות אמר להם שהוא מצטער, אבל הם חייבים לרדת כאן. הפליטים רצו מהאוטובוס, אף שלא היה להם מושד קלוש היכן הם, כי שוב הבינו שהם חופשיים, והפעם מהכל. וכך בגיל 32, לואי פפקה רנה החל אודיסאה נוספת בחייו.

הוא עוד יפגוש פעם אחר פעם את הפנים הרעות, הגזעניות והאלימות של ישראל. אבל באותו יום, יום הולדתו של לואי החופשי, את המזל האירה לו פנים. הוא ושני חברים ניגשו לנהג מונית שירות, ושאלו אותו על המקום היחידי שכל הפליטים ב"קציעות" דיברו עליו תל אביב. אותו נהג, משופשף כבר ורגיל לראות מחזה קבוע של אוטובוסים שפליטים נפליטים מהם מדי שבוע. "לפני שאני אקח אתכם לתל אביב" הוא אמר, "אתה מוכן להסביר לי למה חבר שלך נועל רק נעל אחת?!" ובכן, גדרות הגבול אינן ידידותיות לרגליים. לואי ריסק את הקרסול את הקרסול ועדיין צלע, וחברו "רק" איבד אחת מהנעליו בקפיצה מהגדר. בודאי יחד נראו כאילו ברחו מקרקס מוזר בנושא רגליים. בלי לדבר, נהג המונית הוביל אותם לחנות סמוכה, שם קנה לחברו של לואי נעליים חדשות. לאחר מכן לקח אותם לתחנה המרכזית הישנה בתל אביב.

תל אביב היא המיקרו קוסמוס של הפליטים בישראל, ולואי החל להרגיש שוהא דג במים. הם הגיעו מיד לארגון "לבנה" המטפל בפליטים, שם ישנו שבוע ודרכם מצא עבודה בניקיון ישיבה בירושלים. אחר כך עבד במפעל והחל לשלוח כסף למשפחתו בחוף השנהב מדי חודש. קהילת הפליטים הגדולה בתל אביב הייתה לו קהילה חמה. החיים נצבעו אט אט בצבעים בהירים, ולואי נשם ונשם אויר והרגיש איך האויר ממלא את נשמתו באור. בדיוק ברגעים כאלו בחיים, יש לעצור לרגע ולהסתכל מעבר לכתף, כי שם ביש המזל עומד, מעשן סיגריית נובלס זולה, מחכה להזדמנות לבור ולחרב הכל.

לאחר שלושה חודשים, לואי נתפס על ידי משטרת ההגירה. זה היה רק עניין של זמן, כל פליט באותה תקופה עבר תחת ידיהם. אבל אותו הם לא גירשו, אפילו לא הרביצו או קיללו. לא, לא, הוא נלקח לתחנת המשטרה, שם השוטר הדליק סיגריה, נתן אחת גם ללואי ופתח מפה. "אתה רואה כאן את בצפון את העיר חדרה? ופה בדרום את גדרה?" שאל את לואי. "על פי נוהל חדרה גדרה, אינך יכול להמצא בתל אביב. או שתלך לצפונה מחדרה, או דרומה מגדרה". לואי שאל אם יש שם עבודה, והשוטר ענה "הסתדרת פה, תסתדר גם שם". לואי ראה את שדרות במפה, וביציאה מתחנת המשטרה התקשר לחבר שגר שם. החבר אמר "שיש שנופלים שם טילים בשם קאסמים, אבל אין שוטרים". מספיק טוב בשבילי החליט לואי.

בשדרות חיכתה ללואי יופי של קבלת פנים. הוא הגיע לשכונת "נווה אשכול" בעיר, שאם היו גטאות או סלאמס בישראל, "נווה אשכול" הייתה זוכה בתואר "הגטו המכוער במדינה". לואי היה בדרכו לדירה בבניין שלי, אותה חלק עם עוד 5 פליטים. בדרך תפסה אותו אזעקת "צבע אדום", המודיעה שטיל קאסם עושה את דרכו לעבר העיר. חברו הסביר לו שמרגע השמע האזעקה, יש 15 שניות לרוץ ולהסתתר. רק שלואי לא ידע איפה. הוא ראה אישה רצה ורץ אחריה. הם התחבאו בכניסה לבניין וכך לראשונה הוא הכיר את ביתו החדש.

אנחנו הכרנו דווקא בזכות הכלבה השטנית שלי, לרוב מעשים טובים אינם מנת חלקה. היא הייתה צמונת המראה של החיים בשדרות. היא נולדה בעיצומה של מלחמת עופרת יצוקה, מצאנו אותה כגורה קטנה, עור ועצמות, גוססת בחורשה בבוץ. לאחר שהשתקמה אצלי, התברר שחוף מפחד מובן מקאסמים, היא פחדה מרצועות, מדרגות, כבישים, מדרכות, חתולים וכלבים, בני אדם וחרקים. אני לא יכולה להוכיח זאת, אבל נראה כי היא פחדה גם מאוויר. לכלבה הייתה פוסט טראומה עמוקה כמו האוקינוס והיא רצתה שהעולם ידע זאת.

לכן בכל פעם שהיא ראתה את לואי בבניין, היא נבחה עליו כה חזק, כאילו הוא אשם בכל הצרות שלה. אני הייתי מתנצלת בלי סוף ומרגישה זוועה, אבל הוא רק היה מחייך חיוך מבוויש ואומר, לא נורא. קשה לה". כך, בזכותה, הפכנו את אט לחברים. הוא סיפר לי על חייו בחודשים האחרונים בשדרות. על העבודה הקשה של ניקיון כבישים, על כך שהחלו ארבעה פליטים ונותר רק הוא. חבריו טוענים שבכביש "אי אפשר לפגוש אישה". זה נכון, הוא אמר, אבל אני מקריב את עצמי עכשיו בשביל עתיד טוב יותר. עוד כמה שנים של עבודה, והוא יוכל לחזור לחוף השנהב עם מספיק חסכונות לפתוח בחיים חדשים ובכלל, הוא כבר לא נרדף ולא בורח, יש לו פה שקט. על איזה שקט עם כל הפיצוצים והאזעקות הוא דיבר היה קצת קשה להבין.

אבל פיצוץ מסוג אחר לגמרי עמד להתרחש. לשדרות בשיא המתיחות הבטחונית, הגיעו עוד ועוד פליטים. לי המראה שלהם בשכונה דווקא היה טבעי מאד. שכונה שבמו כל עיירת פיתוח בישראל הייתה מלאה בכל טוב מהגרים מברית המועצות לשעבר, בוכרה, קווקז, מרוקו, אתיופיה, הודו וארגנטינה. זו הייתה שכונה מטורללת וצבעונית, צעקנית ומבולגנת כמו מסט סרט של אמיר קוסטריצה. לא פלא שכלבתי היקרה עם כל השריטות בראש שלה היתה שם כוכבת. וכפי שאני, סטודנטית יחידה בכל השכונה וגם עולה מרוסיה הייתי אטרקציה, היה זה אך טבעי בעיני שמבקשי המקלט מאפריקה ישתלבו מהר מאד בכל התפאורה הסוריאליסטית של שכונת "נווה אשכול". אך המציאות איך לא, המציאות הייתה שונה מאד.

העצבים של תושבי שדרות ושל תושבי השכונה בפרט. רוב הפליטים הלכו בבוקר לעבודה וחזרו בערב, אך כל ריב בדירותיהם, או מראה של פליטים היושבים לשותות אלכוהול בלילה ברחובות, עוררו זעם עצום אצל תושבי השכונה בה מכות וצעקות היו דבר שבשגרה, 3 אלכוהוליסטים חיו בה, 2 מהתושבים ישבו בכלא, אחד במעצר בית, וזו רק הספירה שלי. אולי הייתה זו תגובה צפויה למען האמת. כשאתה חי כל חיך בחצר האחורית של ישראל, אשר טובעת בעוני והזנחה והמדינה אינה יורקת לכיוון שלך, תוך כדי זה טילים מתחילים ליפול לך על הראש, אתה תמצא משהו חלש ודפוק יותר אפילו ממך להאשים.

וכך היה שהשכונה, תחילה בשקט החלה לעלות באש. כל פליט נתקל במבטים עוינים ברחוב וגידופים. השיחות נסובו סביב האוכל המסריח של האפריקאים האלו, דירותיהם המטונפות, המראה המפחיד שלהם וחוסר תרבותם. זה לא היה משנה כלל שכל השכונה כמעט הייתה מורכבת ממהגרים מכל קצוות תבל, חלקם ברחו ממולדתם בדיוק כמו הורי. זה לא שינה שהם הכירו על בשרם את הכאב של להשאיר את כל מה שאתה מכיר מאחוריך, ולצאת אל עבר ארץ חדשה שכלל לא מחכה לך. סיפור מסעו ההירואי של לואי לא עשה על אף אחד רושם וההצעה שלי להפוך אותו לסרט לא התקבלה. לא, "אנחנו הגענו לישראל כי אנחנו יהודים" השכנים היו אומרים לי. מה יש לשחורים האלו להגיע לכאן ולגנוב לנו את העבודות, ולספר אגדות על מלחמות אזרחים? הם כולם שקרנים". באמת, חשבתי לעצמי, הפליטים הולכים חודשים במדבר, מסכנים הכל, את חייהם, כספם ובני משפחתם בשביל להגיע לפה ולעבוד בעבודה הנחשקת והמוערכת של ניקוי כבישים. וכשכל הפליטים ילכו מכאן לעזאזל, כל הישראלים ירוצו לעבוד בסיעוד ולהחליף לקשישים טיטולים.

וביום חמישי אחד, לאחר מטח של כ 40 קאסמים אל עבר העיר, התושבים החליטו לארגן הפגנה נגד הפולשים מאפריקה, הרבה לפני שזה הפך להיות טרנד לווהט בדרום תל אביב. ירדתי לטייל עם הכלבה, וראיתי עשרות מתושבי השכונה מתגודדים צועקים לא ברור אאל מי או על מי, "שחורים החוצה", כל אחד בשפתו היו. ילדים וזקנים, בני נוער שאמורים להיות בבית הספר, שני האלכוהוליסטים ואף תינוקות בידי אמהותיהם. היו אף שהשקיעו בשלטים שנכתבו עם שגיאות כתיב. עקפתי אותם והתקדמתי לעבר הדשא כשמרחוק הבחנתי בלואי חוזר מהעבודה. הוא היה מלוכלך, ועם מבטו נעוץ באדמה, הוא נראה עייף ושפוף. בשבועות האחרונים הוא עבד מבוקר עד לילה ואיכשהוא הצליח להתחמק מכל מפגני השנאה בשכונה, אבל היום הוא חזר מוקדם, ישר אל הקלחת הרתחת. עדיף שהוא לא יראה את זה חשבתי לעצמי. אך לא הספקתי להגיע אליו, המפגינים הקדימו אותי. הם רצו אליו עם השלטים, בצעקות ונפנפי ידיים, שיעוף מכאן לאפריקה שלו. ואף שהעברית של לואי הייתה כבר לא רעה, לא מספיק אמנם להבין מה המפגינים צועקים עליו בעברית רצועה, היה ברור שהוא מבין את כוונותיהם. כי שפת הגוף שלו אצנם מותרת שלוהה, אך יותר ממה שפניו הביעו פליאה, עיניו היו מלאות פחד.

רצתי אליו וניסיתי להרחיקו, אך המפגינים חסמו אותנו. פניות ללב כשל "אנו היהודים מבינים הכי טוב סבל של אחרים, הוא לא עשה לכם כלום" לא עזרו. האווירה השתלבה, וההמון הקיף אותנו צעק חזק יותר, קרוב יותר וילדים החלו לירוק עלינו. כלבתי שמצאה עצמה איתנו באמצע המעגל האדיר וסביבה צרחות של עשרות אנשים, החלה לנבוח בהיסטריה. ומזלי הטוב שגודלה בטנק קטן, שכן תוך כדי צעקות אנשים החלו להתרחק מאיתנו מעט, תוך שהכלבה חושפת שיניים. זו ההזדמנות שלנו לרוץ הביתה אמרתי לו בלחש והתחלתי ללכת תוך שכלבתי מובילה לנו את הדרך ואני גוררת את לואי בידי השנייה אחרי.

מטרים ספורים לפני הבניין שלנו הרגשתי שידי נעזבה. הסתובבי אחורה וראיתי שלואי מחזיק את ידו על ראשו והיא מלאה דם. סביבו היו זכוכיות. משהו זרק עליו בקבוק בירה ופתח לו את הראש. ועוד לפני

שהצלחתי להבין מי זה היה, נשמעה אזעקת "צבע אדום" וכולם החלו לברוח. ותודה לחמאס לכנראה לראשונה בהיסטוריה הציל ולא לקח חיים. רצנו אלי הביתה ושם ראיתי שתודה לאל הפצע לא עמוק, שכן ללכת למרפאה היה בלתי אפשרי עכשיו. בזמן שחבשתי את ראשו, לואי רק מלמל "אני חייב לעזוב את השכונה הזו".

לא האמנתי שהוא יתן להם להפחיד אותו, אבל לואי, לוחם ותיק במפלצות החיים עזב לאחר שבוע, ללא תלונות וכמעט בהחבא. הוא מצא דירה קטנה בשכונה שקטה, כחמש דקות הליכה מהבניין שלנו. שם התעסק לו בענייניו, יצא מהבית רק לעבודה ויום אחד אף אימץ צב שמצא ברחוב שיפיג לו את הבדידות. הקשר ביננו התרופף יותר ויותר, כי אני הייתי עסוקה בלימודים והוא בעבודתו. אך לאחר כשלושה חודשים כשבאתי לבקר בדירתו הקטנה והנקייה, הוא היה שמח בחלקו. הוא גילה ששכנה קשישה בקומה הראשונה בבניין דוברת צרפתית, והם בילו יחד שעות על גבי שעות, שמחים לדבר בשפת ביתם. הוא עזר לה בכל עבודות הבית, היא לימדה אותו על ישראל. הם הפכו לחברים טובים על אף גילם.

לאחר כחצי שנה לאחר ביקורי, לואי התקשר. אני רוצה לספר לך חדשות חשובות אמר. הוא הגיע אלי נוהג בפג'ו קטנה, טרנטה מתפרקת בצבע שפעם היה לבן. "של מי האוטו?" שאלתי. "שלי" הוא אמר. "וואו! אלו החדשות הטובות?" "לא", השפיל מבט, סימון נפטר. "כשבוע אחרי שהיית אצלי". "אוי לא. זה נורא" אמרתי. "נכון, זה באמת היה נורא. ביתה הגיעה לפנות את הדירה שלה ועזרתי לה. את כל קורות חייה קיפלתי לארגזים". הוא הרים את מבטו מהרצפה ועיניו נצצו. "שבוע שלם עזרתי לנטלי, ביתה של סימון. קיפלנו ודיברנו ובסוף השבוע לא רצינו להפסיק לדבר. היא גרה איתי כבר חצי שנה, ובאתי להזמין אותך לחתונה שלנו". "היא תתקיים בעוד חודשיים אחרי שנחזור מקפריסין". אנחנו צריכים למהר כי נטלי כנראה בהריון, וכדאי שלפני שהילד יוולד תהיה לו משפחה נורמלית, לא?"

וכך בגיל 34, החל לואי קפקה רנה את האודיסאה האחרונה בחייו.

Stranger in Israel

Ilana Kishko. Israel

In its sixty years of existence, Sderot never became a beautiful city. One might even say that the years did not serve it well. It's hard to age gracefully in the underbelly of the State of Israel. And with the horrific corruption, unemployment, and poverty, Sderot became the poster child of a place you would definitely not want to live in. Even Hamas decided to contribute its share of Qassam fire that might wipe the city off the face of the earth. That didn't work, by the way, though it did lead to some renovations. But all that really didn't bother Louis. He walked the streets of the city like someone who had won the lottery, with his head held high and an impossible, permanent smile. He had no idea that soon everything would change.

To be honest, all this madness didn't matter to me either. I lived there as a student in the city's poorest neighborhood, and I enjoyed every minute ... because I'd grown up in Arad, and from there it's hard to go any lower. Arad is about the same size as Sderot, twenty-five thousand inhabitants, but much more isolated. It's that small town from American movies in which the residents' fondest dream is to escape. I never had the desire to escape, but I did wonder constantly how my parents had left their lives in Moscow, the huge, cosmopolitan capital city, at the age of thirty-eight and landed in a hole in the middle of the desert. My parents did escape in 1990 from the Soviet Union, which was on the brink of collapse. And my parents say that every day it grew more frightening to live there, because no one knew what the next day would bring. And the fact that they were Jews certainly didn't help in anti-

Semitic Russia. But unfortunately, as with many other Jews, two thousand years of exile, suffering, and persecution that should have made them sympathetic to the suffering of others, well, it didn't.

Yes, the 2000s were marked by the mass escape of African refugees to Israel. And by 2012 tens of thousands were living in Israel. One of them was Louis. Although there were thousands of refugees in Arad and Sderot alone, I admit that I, like everyone else, simply assumed that they were all fleeing the war in Darfur. I didn't understand that there were refugees from Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Congo, as well as from Sudan. That's how they were related to in Israel – not as refugees or asylum seekers, simply as Sudanese.

Louis was from Ivory Coast, one of dozens of refugees from the civil war there. He fled after taking part in a demonstration against the regime, after his sister was killed by French soldiers and he himself was shot in the leg. Hounded by the authorities, he understood that the only way to stop running away at home was to escape to another country.

The story of how he arrived in Israel is the stuff of classic Hollywood movies. It was a soccer game in Cairo between the Ivory Coast and Egyptian championship teams that gave Louis a ticket to leave. He flew to Egypt on the pretense of going to see the game, and in the stadium he met a businessman from his country who arranged for him to work as a cleaner in his house but didn't pay him. Then Louis went from one cleaning job to another, living from hand to mouth, sleeping in the streets on nights that were bitterly cold, reminding himself that a day would come when

he would go back to working in an office as an accountant. At age thirty, Louis Kafka Renee began his first odyssey.

Indeed, he got an office job in Cairo: he cleaned the office of a wealthy Egyptian contractor who had a son who was a drug addict. The acquaintance with the son bode no good. Once, as Louis finished a day of cleaning the contractor's home and a friend came to pick him up, the contractor's son locked both of them in one of the many rooms in the house and demanded money. They shouted to him that they didn't have any, but to no avail. They remained locked in the room until policemen forced the door open the following morning. But instead of arresting the son who was a drug addict, they arrested Louis and his friend. The two were held for another two days in a space crowded with dozens of people, handcuffed, with no food and no chance to go to the toilet. There Louis decided that he had to flee again, this time to Israel. He contacted Bedouins who worked in smuggling from the Sinai Peninsula – drugs, weapons, women for work in prostitution, and refugees. Within a month there was a sophisticated plan.

First he traveled all night, hidden under blankets with another seven refugees in the back of a pickup, to Sharm e-Sheikh. There they stayed in a safe house for a month until an Egyptian soldier on the border who was part of the scheme was on duty. Again they traveled nearly all night, this time crossing the entire peninsula. At 3 a.m. an Egyptian soldier took them off the pickup and accompanied them, with his weapon cocked, to the Israeli border. He explained to them that there were two fences and that when they had crossed over the higher of the two, that was Israel. The soldier looked at them for a moment and then whispered, “Yalla!” They started running with all their might, afraid that the Egyptian soldiers would shoot

at them, and only after Louis had crashed to the ground from the higher of the two fences, smashing his ankle, did he breathe freely and start crying, for the first time in months. Not from pain but from joy.

From that point on, Louis's story is the same of that of all the refugees in Israel. Soldiers pick them up in a jeep, they remain in an army base for weeks, they undergo questioning and medical examinations for weeks and even months. Louis remembers the period in the Ketziot base – which is also, in its spare time, a prison for security offenders – as nothing less than wonderful. The soldiers carried weapons and the refugees lived in prison conditions even though they were not criminals. But so what? The soldiers were very nice. They played with the children. There was plenty of food and water and medical treatment.

“So what if we were in jail? In my soul, for the first time in my life, I was free,” Louis recalls. His only worry was that he would be returned to Egypt. Indeed, a new Middle East is here, right under his nose. But the honeymoon between Louis and the Israel Defense Forces ended after about a week. They put him and about thirty other refugees on a bus that took them to Beersheba, where the soldier accompanying them shamefacedly told them that he was sorry but they had to get off the bus there. The refugees ran from the bus, though they didn't have the slightest idea of where they were, and again they understood they were free, and this time of everything. At age thirty-two, Louis Kafka Renee began another odyssey in his life.

He would yet meet, again and again, the evil, racist, and violent face of Israel. But that day – the birth day of Louis the free – the goddess of luck shone on him. He and two friends approached a jitney driver and asked him about the only place that refugees in Ketziot talked about: Tel Aviv. The seasoned

driver was used to seeing the drama of buses disgorging their refugees week after week.

–Before I take you to Tel Aviv – he said –, can you explain to me why your friend is wearing just one shoe?

Well, the border fences are not kind to feet. Louis had smashed his ankle and was still limping; his friend had “only” lost one of his shoes in the leap from the fence. Together they looked as though they had escaped from a weird foot circus. Without another word, the driver drove them to a nearby store where he bought Louis’s friend a new pair of shoes. Then he took them to the old central bus station in Tel Aviv.

Tel Aviv was the microcosm of refugees in Israel, and Louis began to feel like a fish in water. He and his friend immediately found Levana, an organization that takes care of refugees, on whose premises they slept for a week and through which they found work as cleaners in a yeshiva. Then he worked in a factory and began sending money to his family in Ivory Coast every month. The large refugee community in Tel Aviv offered him communal warmth. Gradually life began to take on light colors and Louis breathed and breathed the air and felt how it was filling his soul with light. At just such moments in life one must stop and look over one’s shoulder, because bad luck is just standing there, smoking a cheap Noblesse cigarette, waiting for an opportunity to destroy everything.

Three months later, Louis was caught by the immigration police. It had been just a matter of time; during that period they got their hands on every refugee. But they didn’t deport him. They didn’t even beat him or swear at him. No, he was taken to the police station and there a policeman lit a cigarette, gave one to Louis, and opened a map.

–You see here in the north the city of Hadera? And here in the south Gedera? – he asked Louis. –According to the Hadera-

Gedera regulation, you cannot be in Tel Aviv. Either you go north of Hadera or south of Gedera.

Louis asked whether there was work there, and the policeman answered:

–You got along here, you’ll get along there.

Louis saw Sderot on the map, and as he exited the police station he phoned his friend who lived there. The friend said that “rockets called Qassams fall there, but there are no police.” Good enough, thought Louis.

A “lovely” welcome awaited Louis in Sderot. He arrived at the Neveh Eshkol neighborhood, which, if there were ghettos or slums in Israel, would have been awarded the title of “ugliest ghetto in the country.” Louis was on his way to the apartment he would share with five other refugees when a Color Red siren, announcing that a Qassam rocket was headed toward the city, caught him. His friend had explained to him that from the moment the siren was heard one had fifteen seconds to run and take cover. But Louis didn’t know where. He saw a woman running and ran after her. They took cover in the entrance to a building. And that was how he was introduced to his new home.

We got to know each other thanks to my diabolical dog; good deeds are not her thing. She was the mirror image of life in Sderot. She was born at the height of the Cast Iron war. We found her as a tiny puppy, skin and bones, dying in the mud in a grove of trees. After she recovered at my place, it turned out that apart from an understandable fear of Qassams, she was afraid of leashes, steps, roads, sidewalks, cats and dogs, people, and insects. I can’t prove it, but it seems that she was even afraid of the air. The dog had post trauma as deep as the ocean and she wanted the world to know it.

So every time she saw Louis leave the building she barked at him as hard as if he

were to blame for all her troubles. I would apologize incessantly and feel terrible, but he would only smile his bashful smile and say, “It’s okay. She’s having a hard time.” Thus, thanks to her, we gradually became friends. He told me about his life over the past few months in Sderot. About the hard work of cleaning the roads. That four refugees had started and only he had remained. His friends had said that on the road “you can’t meet a woman.” That’s true, Louis said, “but I am sacrificing myself now for a better future.” Another few years of work and he would be able to return to Ivory Coast with enough savings to start a new life. And, in general, he was no longer persecuted and no longer fleeing; here he had quiet. Just what quiet he was talking about with all the explosions and sirens was a little hard to understand.

But a very different kind of explosion was about to happen. More and more refugees arrived in Sderot at the height of the security-related tension. Seeing them in the neighborhood seemed perfectly natural to me. It was a neighborhood that, like every development town in Israel, was full of all kinds – immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Bukhara, the Caucasus, Morocco, Ethiopia, India, and Argentina. It was a nutty, colorful, noisy, and chaotic neighborhood, like the set of an Emir Kusturica movie. No wonder my dear doggie with all the scratches on her head was a star there. And just as I, the only student in the entire neighborhood and also an immigrant from Russia, was an attraction, it seemed natural to me that the asylum seekers from Africa should integrate quickly in the surrealistic stage set of Neveh Eshkol. But the reality – how could it be otherwise – was very different.

The nerves of Sderot’s residents, and those of the neighborhood’s residents in particular, were frayed. Most of the refugees went to work in the morning and re-

turned in the evening, but every argument in their apartments, or the sight of them sitting and drinking alcohol in the streets at night, aroused tremendous anger among the residents of this neighborhood where fights and shouting were routine, where three alcoholics lived, two residents were in prison, and one was under house arrest – and that was just in my immediate vicinity. In truth, perhaps the response was predictable. When you live all your life in Israel’s least desirable place, which is drowning in poverty and neglect and the state won’t even spit in your direction, while rockets are starting to fall on your head, you will find someone weaker and more down-and-out than yourself to blame.

And so it was that the neighborhood, quietly at first, started to heat up. Every refugee encountered hostile looks and insults in the street. The conversations were about the stinky food of those Africans, their filthy apartments, their scary appearance, and their lack of culture. It didn’t matter at all that almost the entire neighborhood consisted of immigrants from all corners of the earth, some of whom had fled their homeland just like my parents. It didn’t matter that they had themselves experienced the pain of leaving behind everything they knew and going to a new country that was not at all waiting for them. The story of Louis’s heroic journey didn’t impress anyone, and my proposal of turning it into a movie was turned down.

No, “We came to Israel because we are Jews,” the neighbors would say to me. “What reason do these blacks have to come here and steal our jobs, and to tell made-up stories about civil wars? They’re all liars.”

Sure, I thought to myself, the refugees walk through the desert for months, endangering everything – their lives, their money, and their families – to get here and do the highly desirable and esteemed work of cleaning the roads. And when all the refugees leave

here and go to hell, all the Israelis will rush to start working in nursing care and changing old people's diapers.

And then one Thursday, after a volley of forty Qassams aimed at the city, the residents decided to organize a protest against the invaders from Africa, long before such protests had become a fad in southern Tel Aviv. I went down to walk the dog and saw dozens of neighborhood residents gathered together. They were shouting – at someone or about someone, it wasn't clear which – “Blacks get out,” each in his own language. Children and old people, teenagers who were supposed to be in school, two alcoholics, and even babies in their mothers' arms. Some had even made the effort of preparing signs, which they wrote with spelling mistakes. I had walked around them and onto the grass when from a distance I spied Louis coming back from work. He was dirty, his eyes glued to the ground; he looked tired and depressed. Over the last few weeks he had been working from morning till night and somehow had succeeded in avoiding all the hate protests in the neighborhood, but this day he'd come back early, straight to a scalding shower. It would be better for him not to see this, I thought to myself. But I didn't manage to reach him. The protesters had gotten there first. They ran to him with their signs, screaming and waving their hands, telling him to get out of here and go back to his Africa. And even though Louis's Hebrew was no longer bad, though not good enough to understand what the protesters were shouting at him in broken Hebrew, it was clear that he understood their intention. Because although his body language remained calm, his face showed surprise, and even more than that, his eyes were fearful.

I ran to him and tried to get him away, but the protesters blocked our way. Trying to touch their hearts by saying “We, the Jews, understand best the suffering of others; he

didn't do anything to you” didn't help. The atmosphere became more charged; the crowd surrounded us, shouting louder and closer, and children started spitting at us. My dog, finding herself with us in the midst of an enormous circle of dozens of shouting people began to bark hysterically. My good luck was that she had been raised in a small tank, because although the shouting continued, people started backing off from us a bit, while the dog bared her teeth.

–This is our chance to run home – I whispered to Louis and starting walking, with the dog guiding us and me pulling Louis by my other hand.

A few yards before our building I felt that he had let go of my hand. I turned and saw that Louis was holding his hand on his head and that it was all bloody. There was glass all around him. Somebody had thrown a beer bottle at him and cut his head. And even before I could figure out who it was, a Color Red siren went off and everyone started running. And thanks to Hamas which, probably for the first time in history, saved a life rather than taking one. We ran to my apartment and there I saw that the wound was not deep, thank God, because going to the clinic was impossible. While I bandaged his head, Louis only murmured, “I must leave this neighborhood.”

I didn't believe that he would let them frighten him, but Louis, the veteran fighter against life's monsters, left after seven, without a word of complaint, almost stealthily. He found a small apartment in a quiet neighborhood five minutes' walk from our building. There he minded his own business, leaving the house only to work, and one day even adopted a turtle he had found in the street, to relieve his loneliness. Our connection grew weaker and weaker because I was busy with my studies and he with his work. But three months later, when I came to visit him in his small, clean apartment, he was content. He

had discovered that an old woman on the first floor speaks French, and they spent hour after hour talking, happy to be speaking the language of their homes. He helped her with all her housework, she taught him about Israel. They became good friends despite the difference in their ages.

Six months after the visit, Louis called.

–I want to tell you some important news – he said.

He came to me driving a small Peugeot, a jalopy that had once been white.

–Whose car is this? – I asked.

–Mine – he said.

–Wow! Is that the good news?

–No – he said, looking down. –Simone died. About a week after you were at my place.

–Oh, no. That’s terrible – I said.

–Right, it is really terrible. Her daughter came to clear out the house and I helped her. I folded all her life story into boxes.

He raised his glance from the floor and his eyes glistened.

–For a whole week I helped Natalie, Simone’s daughter. We folded and we talked and at the end of the week we didn’t want to stop talking. She’s been living with me for half a year, and I’ve come to invite you to our wedding. It will take place two months from now, after we come back from Cyprus. We have to hurry because it seems that Natalie is pregnant, and before the baby is born he should have a normal family, right?

And so, at the age of thirty-four, Louis Kafka Renee began the last odyssey of his life.

Lo specchio

Eugenio Dacrema. Italia

Ci sono delle volte nella vita, assai rare a dire il vero, in cui uno crede, nel profondo, di aver capito¹. Seduta su quella panchina, in quella città straniera tiepida e umida, guardava l'altra donna allontanarsi a passi lenti. Si chiedeva se l'avrebbe mai rivista, e la ringraziava per quel lato del mondo che le aveva fatto scoprire durante quella lunga, a tratti angosciante, conversazione.

Aisha era partita da Tunisi tre giorni prima, di mattina presto. Ricordava benissimo la giornata prima della partenza. L'aveva passata a cercare qualche vestito carino da poter indossare durante la sua vacanza in Italia. Non aveva mai amato lo shopping in modo particolare, ma diamine, Milano era la capitale della moda, e lei non voleva sfigurare. Certo, se prima lo shopping non l'aveva mai particolarmente entusiasmata, ora era diventato uno stress di cui il più delle volte avrebbe volentieri fatto a meno. Era maggio e faceva già caldo, ma una ragazza, coi tempi nuovi che erano cominciati con la vittoria elettorale degli islamisti, sapeva benissimo di doversi coprire per bene per girare da sola per strada. E anche così difficilmente avrebbe potuto evitare qualche molestia. Molto tempo prima era stata abituata ad andare il sabato pomeriggio, verso il tramonto, a passeggiare con sua cugina sulla spiaggia vicino al loro quartiere. Andavano semplicemente in maglietta, si toglievano le scarpe, e spesso si scoprivano le gambe fino al ginocchio per passeggiare lungo il bagnasciuga e bagnarsi i piedi. Quel ricordo le appariva ora vecchio di centinaia d'anni, come proveniente da un altro pianeta su cui era stata, e da cui era mestamente tornata ormai da quasi due anni. Ora non sarebbe bastato presentarsi coperte fino alla punta del naso per evitare le molestie. Semplicemente due ragazze, da sole, sulla spiaggia non ci potevano più andare.

Non doveva andare così. Non avrebbe mai immaginato che sarebbe andata così. Ricordava ancora quello che aveva pensato quando due anni prima aveva letto delle prime manifestazioni su internet. Il paese si stava muovendo. Il fuoco che aveva consumato quel ragazzo di Sidi Buazaid aveva acceso qualcos'altro, una scintilla era caduta sulla paglia vecchia e secca lasciata per anni e anni ad accumularsi in silenzio dentro la società tunisina. La notizia della sua morte era stata come lo scatto delle dita che lasciano andare la corda di un arco dopo averla tesa fino allo spasimo.

¹ Questo racconto nasce da una duplice esperienza. Durante l'università ho insegnato per molti anni come volontario in molte scuole di lingua italiana per stranieri e ho conosciuto la realtà dell'immigrazione nel mio paese e nella mia città. Ho avuto e ho ancora molti amici stranieri, soprattutto arabi provenienti da luoghi più poveri del Nord Africa. In seguito, lavorando per il centro studi italiani di politica internazionale ISPI ho potuto incontrare molti giovani intellettuali degli stessi paesi. Ho stretto molte preziose amicizie, che mi hanno aperto gli occhi sulla realtà sociale di questi luoghi e sulle fortissime divisioni dentro queste società, che spesso portano ad una vera e propria mancanza di conoscenza reciproca. I personaggi di questo racconto sono entrambi ispirati alle mie conversazioni con amici e amiche nord africani. Ho scelto due personaggi femminili perché con l'esperienza ho constatato che le donne certe cose le capiscono molto più velocemente.

Avrebbe voluto andarci anche lei da subito con gli altri nelle strade ma nei primi giorni suo padre era riuscito a trattenerla. Lui di paura in quei giorni ne aveva tanta e Aisha non poteva fare a meno di comprenderlo. Suo padre era un alto funzionario del ministero dell'istruzione. Aveva «ereditato» quel posto da suo padre, che l'aveva ottenuto in quanto maggiorenne del partito di Boughiba negli anni subito dopo l'indipendenza.

La storia della sua famiglia e la posizione di suo padre le avevano sempre procurato un certo imbarazzo interiore. Insomma, quando conversava con gli altri ragazzi all'università sulla corruzione della dittatura, della famiglia del presidente e di tutti quelli che guadagnavano dall'opprimere il resto del paese, anche lei manifestava indignazione e disgusto come gli altri, ma a volte, dentro di sé, non poteva fare a meno di pensare che molti di quei rabbiosi discorsi potevano in un certo senso adattarsi anche a lei.

Negli ultimi giorni della rivoluzione il padre non era più riuscito a frenare il suo entusiasmo. Aisha aveva raggiunto i suoi amici in Bourghiba Bulevar dove si era trovata circondata da tantissime persone; non pensava che l'intera Tunisia ne potesse contenere così tante. Di quelle ore, oltre agli scontri, ricordava l'attesa. Non avevano idea di cosa sarebbe successo, ma sapevano che qualcosa sarebbe successo, e sarebbe stato qualcosa che fino a pochi giorni prima non avrebbero mai potuto nemmeno osare immaginare.

Ebbene quel qualcosa era successo. Mentre rincasava suo giro di shopping in centro aveva passato il tragitto a ripercorrere nella sua mente quegli avvenimenti di due anni prima. «...ma poi le cose non sono andate nel verso giusto». Aveva sentito quest'ultimo pensiero colpirla al petto, dove immediatamente senti spandersi il dolore della delusione che sovrastò l'orgoglio e la fierezza che aveva provato ricordando i giorni della rivoluzione. Ma non voleva intristirsi in quel momento. Il giorno dopo sarebbe partita per l'Europa, per Milano! Due settimane via dagli imbecilli discorsi sulla religione e sulla morale, dall'economia in rovina, dalle molestie per strada, dall'assurda politica che aveva preso il posto della dittatura.

Nour quella mattina si era vestita in fretta, si era sistemata il velo sulla testa, ed era andata al supermercato vicino all'edificio dove abitava con la sua famiglia, a Milano. Per certe cose come la carne, le salse o il pane andava tranquillamente alla bottega della famiglia egiziana a un paio di isolati; *Jazara islamiyya wa mini markit Abnoub* campeggiava sull'entrata, macelleria islamica Abnoub e mini market.

Quella mattina però dagli egiziani non ci poteva andare. Suo marito si era raccomandato di prendere certe cose al supermercato, quello normale dove andavano gli italiani. La frutta e la verdura là costavano meno, e in quel periodo dovevano tirare la cinghia. Ad Ahmed, suo marito, la cooperativa aveva ridotto ancora le ore al lavoro.

–C'è la crisi – avevano detto – dobbiamo fare tutti sacrifici.

Suo marito lavorava con un contratto part-time – giusto buono per il permesso di soggiorno – ma stava in cantiere anche 12 ore. Tornava distrutto, e spesso quelle ore non glielo pagavano neanche in nero. Si chiedeva quanti sacrifici facessero i padroni della cooperativa.

Nour detestava andare al supermercato italiano. Non trovava mai niente. Non sapeva leggere l'italiano e non poteva chiedere. Quando non trovava qualcosa detestava chiedere al commesso e poi ritrovarsi a dire sempre «eh?» «eh?» «eh?»... quello si innervosiva, e lei anche.

Trovò velocemente la frutta, la verdura e il latte, ma ben presto si accorse che fagioli e ceci non erano più dove li aveva trovati l'ultima volta. Girò venti minuti. Niente. Il problema

era che oltre a non sapere dove fossero doveva guardare attentamente gli scaffali cercando di riconoscere i barattoli giusti attraverso le figure sulle etichette. «Ful... in italiano è Fajilu», una cosa del genere. Ma Hummus... era impronunciabile... sese, sesi... boh!

Dopo mezzora di inutili ricerche si arrese. Cercò una donna con la divisa bianca, che aveva imparato essere quello che contraddistingueva i lavoranti del supermercato. Ci mise un po' a trovarla, quella mattina erano per lo più uomini. La faccia della donna italiana, capelli rosso fuoco tinti, un po' abbondante, non le piacque da subito. *Ansuriya*, razzista. Ormai aveva imparato a riconoscerle subito.

–M-i... Scusi... Dove Fajilu? – bastava trovare i fagioli, i ceci di solito non stavano lontani.

–Scusi?

–Fajilu... scatola di Fajilu... – dall'espressione dipinta sulla faccia della aveva capito che sarebbe stata una dura conversazione.

–Fajilu? Non capisco... vuol dire fagioli? Vuole i fagioli?

–Io... si... Fajuli!

–Bene, allora deve andare.....

Ecco, dopo le prime tre parole non stava già capendo più niente.

–Eh?

–Signora, è lo scaf... in fond... destra, no scusi sinistr.....

–Eh?

Sembrava che la donna facesse apposta ad accelerare la sua parlata. Sembrava che volesse metterla in difficoltà per poi avere una scusa per irritarsi con lei.

–Insomma... non vorr... la port... per man...!!! è facile... in fon, il secondo corr...

La signora razzista stava cominciando ad alzare la voce. Fu allora che comparve l'altra donna, all'inizio le sembrò italiana, ma poi la guardò meglio. Riccia, mora, pelle leggermente più olivastra di quella degli italiani. E qualcosa nel modo di fare che le ricordava il suo paese. La donna si rivolse gentilmente alla commessa. Non capì, ma dalle poche parole che poté intendere le chiedeva se era tutto apposto. Poi si rivolse a lei. Ma non in arabo. In francese. Capi solo *tunisienne*. Era una domanda. Il suono di quella lingua le suscitò subito un moto di risentimento. La squadro' meglio. Cominciava a capire chi era, cosa era. Mora, ben truccata, elegante, ma non solo nei vestiti. Aveva quella eleganza che l'Imam del suo villaggio preferiva chiamare *Muta'jrif*, arroganza, supponenza.

Rispose in arabo, in tono piatto, ostile.

–Sono tunisina, cerco i fagioli ma non capisco cosa mi dice questa donna... Alla risposta in arabo l'altra ragazza si irrigidì. Nour se l'aspettava. Quelli come lei, quelli del nord, con l'arabo non sono molto a proprio agio. Figuriamoci con il dialetto del loro stesso paese.

La donna si rivolse alla commessa nel supermercato in italiano. Quella sembrò rilassarsi. Indicò un corridoio gesticolando.

–Dice che devi andare al secondo a sinistra, in fondo trovi i fagioli – l'altra ragazza le fece un sorriso di cortesia.

Nour afferrò il suo cestino, passò fra le due donne davanti a lei, e si diresse verso il corridoio dei fagioli senza dire una parola e senza degnare nessuna delle due di uno sguardo. Mentre si allontanava sentì su di sé lo sguardo interdetto dell'altra ragazza. Dopo un po' la sentì rivolgersi a lei.

–Certo un grazie sarebbe gentile!

Nour si girò appena.

–Si lo sarebbe.

Vide l'altra che stava per dire qualcosa, ma poi si fermò e se ne andò.

Nour finì la sua spesa, pagò con i soldi che le aveva dato il marito e tornò a casa. Aveva poco tempo per iniziare a preparare il pranzo e poi andare a prendere i bambini a scuola.

Aveva due bambini, Samir e Mohamed. Avevano nove e otto anni e andavano alla scuola elementare. Erano arrivati con lei l'anno prima. Suo marito invece era in Italia da molto prima, sette anni. Era stata dura per Nour. Non sapeva dove andare, quella grande città la frastornava. La gente correva dappertutto, sembrava che non passassero più di cinque minuti insieme a un'altra persona. Sembravano tutti soli, tutti insieme. Ma quando si parlavano in un attimo diventavano anche troppo spigliati e amichevoli per i suoi gusti. E la cosa più strana era che spesso subito dopo ritornavano a essere degli sconosciuti.

Usciva quasi solo per andare a prendere i suoi figli. Avevano iniziato ad andare in una scuola italiana, con altri bambini italiani. Era incredibile quanto velocemente avevano imparato la lingua. Le sembrava che parlassero come degli italiani veri. Lei invece non aveva imparato. D'altronde come avrebbe potuto? Ma le andava bene così. Aveva la sua famiglia, e qualche altra amica araba. Non era mai stata abituata a niente di più.

Quel pomeriggio c'era il sole. I bambini avevano voluto andare al parco a giocare con i loro amici di scuola.

Lei stava seduta a guardarli su una panchina a lato del parco. Quel giorno c'era un bel odore nell'aria. Era maggio, e suo marito le aveva spiegato che malgrado Milano puzzi di smog gran parte dell'anno, a maggio prende un buon odore.

Aisha nel parco ci era andata per noia. Era venuta a Milano a trovare un'amica italiana, Nadia, che aveva conosciuto un due anni prima quando avevano frequentato insieme un master in economia a Parigi. L'italiano è incredibile. Erano state coinquiline per 10 mesi e lei lo aveva imparato abbastanza bene praticamente per osmosi.

Nadia però doveva lavorare quel giorno, l'avrebbe raggiunta la sera. Aisha quella mattina era uscita per comprare qualcosa da cucinare. L'incontro con la giovane donna tunisina al supermercato era stato molto sgradevole.

Dopo pranzo se ne era andata al parco vicino a casa di Nadia per passare il tempo in attesa dell'amica. Ed eccola lì la donna sgradevole di quella mattina. Se ne stava seduta, guardando un gruppo di bambini che giocavano. Se si fossero trovate a Tunisi avrebbe tirato dritto ignorandola. Ma il fatto che un incontro del genere fosse successo a Milano la turbava. Non qua... no, in questa occasione non avrebbe lasciato correre. Questa vacanza l'aveva desiderata troppo e le avrebbe fatto pagare di averla turbata.

–*Salam...*

L'altra si voltò di colpo. Quasi si spaventò trovandola seduta accanto a sé sulla panchina, ma durò un istante. Quando la riconobbe riassunse immediatamente quell'espressione ostile che le aveva visto in faccia quella mattina al supermercato.

–Cosa vuoi? – anche il tono non era cambiato.

–Voglio che mi spieghi perché mi hai trattato così stamattina. – La frase le era uscita strana, Aisha si sentiva fastidiosamente impacciata. La sua lingua madre era sempre stata il francese, anche in casa. L'arabo lo capiva perfettamente, ma non era abituata a parlarlo. Temeva che usandolo in una discussione animata avrebbe potuto suonare ridicola.

–Che ti importa? Stasera uscirai, berrai l'alcol e di dimenticherai tutto, come ti sei dimenticata la tua lingua – l'altra donna aveva scandito quella frase scimmiettando la sua pronuncia impacciata. Aisha senti salire la rabbia.

–Ma cosa ti ho fatto? Ti ho aiutata, e tu mi tratti così. Ti sembra una cosa giusta? Scommetto che Dio non è contento di te! – l'ultima accenno a Dio le era uscito con ironia, spinto dalla rabbia. Tutto nell'altra suggeriva religiosità, no anzi... bigotteria.

–Lascia Dio fuori da tutto questo! Sei blasfema, oltre che arrogante e prepotente... Se ti interessa saperlo, è proprio per questo che con quelle come te non voglio averci a che fare... Vuoi così tanto il mio grazie?? Bene! Grazie! E ora lasciami in pace! – dicendo le ultime frasi non l'aveva nemmeno guardata in faccia. Aveva ricominciato a guardare i bambini che giocavano, invitandola silenziosamente ad accomiarsi.

Aicha fu sul punto di andarsene, ma qualcosa la trattenne. Prepotente? Arrogante? Non capiva perché l'altra donna le rivolgesse aggettivi del genere, dandoli come per scontati per qualcuno come lei. Da dove veniva tutto questo odio? Ok, sì. Lei era della città, sapeva di apparire benestante, e infatti lo era. Che fosse solo invidia?

–Beh... io ora ti lascio in pace. Ma devi prima sapere che io non sono una persona ne prepotente, ne arrogante. Durante la rivoluzione io e i miei amici eravamo in piazza, in prima linea. Ho preso il fumo dei lacrimogeni in faccia anche per rendere liberi quelli come te! E ora mi dici che sono una prepotente! Io dico che sei solo invidiosa... – questa volta le parole le erano uscite più fluide.

–Ah... hai fatto la rivoluzione...

–Già, la rivoluzione! E tu dov'eri? Quelli come te, o sono arrivati dopo, o non sono arrivati proprio...

–Dov'ero io?! Io ero qui! Ero qui con mio marito, come ogni brava moglie! Eravamo qui perché al paese non riuscivamo nemmeno a sopravvivere! E questo per colpa di quelli come te! – stavolta aveva smesso di guardare altrove, si era voltata e guardava Aisha dritta negli occhi.

–Quelli come me?? Io non ti ho fatto niente! Io ho contribuito a liberarvi! Era la dittatura a farvi questo! Ben Ali e i suoi amici ladri e imbroglioni!

–Cioè voi...

–Noi? Noi l'abbiamo buttato giù! – Aicha era oltraggiata. Ricordava ancora l'odore dei fumogeni e la paura. Non ci stava a farsi trattare così da una che nemmeno c'era.

L'altra donna rimase in silenzio un momento. Poteva vedere la rabbia nei suoi occhi ora. La fissava e si preparava a rispondere.

–Voi l'avete buttato giù? Ah sì? Per voi non era altro che un gioco. Avete mangiato insieme a lui finché non avete deciso che volevate ancora di più. Lui vi ha fatto giocare a fare i francesi dell'Africa... ha costretto le donne a pensare che era un male portare il velo, che dovevano perdere il rispetto per se stesse per essere «moderne»... ma non vi bastava. Volevate che la Tunisia diventasse come l'Europa, per potervi ubriacare e parlare solo francese... ecco perché l'avete buttato giù... di noi non ve ne è mai importato niente. Ma adesso ci pensa Ghannouchi a voi!

Aicha rimase interdetta, paralizzata. In un istante ripensò a suo padre, suo nonno... tutti i dubbi che aveva avuto. Tutte le sue auto-justificazioni... Era come se tutto fosse andato in pezzi. Una impalcatura fragile che si era costruita negli anni e che l'altra aveva infranto col soffio di poche parole. Si era seduta per far riconoscere all'altra donna le sue colpe, la sua gratuita cattiveria. E invece eccola lì, era lei senza parole, piena di senso di colpa. Non voleva dargliela

vinta, mostrarsi vulnerabile, ma ci pensò troppo tardi. Già sentiva le lacrime inumidirle gli occhi. Si prese il viso tra le mani per nasconderele.

L'altra lo vide. Inizialmente il suo sguardo si fece ancor più arrabbiato, come oltraggiato dalla mollezza dell'altra. Ma durò poco, la sorpresa per l'effetto che le sue parole avevano avuto fu più forte. Quella ragazza era ferita. La guardò meglio. Era vestita semplice in fondo. Certo, non come a lei avevano insegnato che era giusto. Ma non aveva pizzi e merletti addosso. Quella mattina l'aveva anche aiutata, senza neanche conoscerla... Improvvisamente si sentì in colpa.

–Perdonami. Non volevo farti piangere... è che sono arrabbiata... la rabbia ci fa dire cose che non vogliamo. E poi non son nemmeno arrabbiata con te...

Aicha sollevò timidamente lo sguardo.

–E allora per cosa sei arrabbiata?

Nour volse la testa verso il prato. Perché era arrabbiata? Non ci aveva mai seriamente pensato prima. Sapeva di esserlo, insomma... con tutte i sacrifici e le fatiche che lei e Ahmed avevano dovuto superare le sembrava giusto esserlo. Ma non si era mai chiesta le ragioni precise.

–Beh sono tante cose... Il paese, la povertà... tutto ciò che siamo costretti a sopportare. Scommetto che ti senti a tuo agio qui. Forse più a tuo agio che in Tunisia... ma io ci sto male. È tutto diverso dal mio villaggio, tutto quello che volevo era rimanere lì, e vivere la vita che quand'ero bambina avevo visto vivere alle persone più grandi intorno a me. Niente di più. Ora invece qua mi sento un pesce di fiume in un oceano.

Aisha fissava quella ragazza con lo sguardo perso in direzione del prato. La colpiva che in quel rozzo dialetto potesse esprimere cose così profonde... perché in fondo sì... lei era un'arrogante... e in fondo a se stessa aveva sempre considerato impossibile che quella gente potesse pensare davvero...

Intanto Nour rimase in silenzio qualche secondo e poi riprese:

–E lo sai cosa mi spaventa di più?

–Cosa?

–I miei figli... stanno venendo su diversi... qui vanno a scuola, parlano l'italiano. Ogni giorno li vedo più diversi da me e Ahmed alla loro età. Non pensavo che un pesce di fiume potesse mettere alla luce un pesce di mare... a volte mi chiedo se riusciremo a parlare ancora quando cresceranno...

Aicha si asciugò gli occhi. Quel pomeriggio parlarono per ore. Parlarono delle loro vite, della rivoluzione, di politica. Aicha spiegò quello che succedeva alle ragazze a Tunisi da quando erano andati al governo gli islamisti, mentre Nour le spiegò che tutto quello che voleva la gente come lei era un paese che somigliasse più a loro, e con facesse di tutto per somigliare a qualcos'altro.

Aicha la invitò a cena da Nadia ma lei le rispose di no... Ahmed tornava dal lavoro fra poco.

Non si diedero un altro appuntamento. Forse tutte e due dovevano prendere del tempo per digerire quell'incontro in terra straniera con l'altra faccia del loro paese. Ma qualcosa era cambiato. Quella faccia ora era diversa, meno oscura e minacciosa. Era semplicemente un'altra giovane donna, non tanto diversa da quella che ogni mattina vedevano riflessa nello specchio.

The Mirror

Eugenio Dacrema. Italy

There are times in life – quite rare, to be honest – when you believe, deep down, “I understand”¹. Sitting on the bench, in that strange city, the weather warm and humid, the other woman looked away slowly. She wondered if she would ever see her again, and thanked her for that perspective on the world that she had only just discovered during that long, sometimes painful, conversation.

Aisha had left Tunis three days ago, early in the morning. She remembered the day before her departure very well. She had gone to look for some cute outfit she might wear during her vacation in Italy. She had never liked shopping very much, but heck, Milan is the capital of fashion, and she did not want to look out-of-place. Of course, if she hadn’t really enjoyed shopping before, now it was especially challenging, and she’d normally have wished she wouldn’t have to at all. It was May and it was already hot, but every girl, due to the

new era brought by the Islamists’ victory at the elections, knew very well that she had to cover herself to walk alone in the street. Even then, it was impossible to avoid all harassment. Long before, she had been accustomed to go out on Saturday afternoon, right around sunset, to take a walk with her cousin on the beach near their neighborhood. They simply wore t-shirts, took off their shoes, and often revealed their legs up to their knees as they walked along the beach, getting their feet wet. That memory seemed to her now hundreds of years old, as if from another planet, one which had now been gone for almost two years. Now, it would be impossible to wear enough layers to avoid all harassment. Simply put, two girls on their own could not go to the beach anymore.

This was not what was meant to be. She had never imagined that this might happen. She thought back to what had been in her mind two years earlier when she first read the news on the internet. The country was up in arms. The fire which had consumed the poor boy in Sidi Buazaid flared; it was as if a spark had fallen on old straw left to dry for years and years, accumulating in silence in the Tunisian society. The news of his death rang out like the snap of a bowstring stretched to its breaking-point.

She had immediately wanted to go out into the streets with the others, but, in the early days, her father had forbidden it. He was afraid, and Aisha could not blame him. He was a senior official in the ministry of education. He had “inherited” the position from his father, who had sided with the Bourghiba party in the years immediately following independence. This part of the family history had always

¹ This story comes from two real experiences. During college I taught for many years as a volunteer in a number of Italian language schools for foreigners, and I came to terms with the reality of immigration both in my country and in my town. I had, and still have, many foreign friends, especially Arabs from the poorest places in North Africa. Later, working for the Italian Research Center of International Politics (ISPI) I was able to meet many young intellectuals in the same countries. I have made many valuable friendships which have opened my eyes to the social reality of these places and the strong divisions within them, divisions which often lead to a real lack of mutual understanding. The characters in this story are both inspired by my conversations with North African friends. I chose to have two female characters because, in my experience, I have found that women understand certain things much faster.

been a source of some embarrassment. When talking to the other students at the university, criticizing the corruption of the dictatorship and all others who oppressed the country, she had always expressed outrage and disgust, just like the others, but sometimes, on the inside, she could not help think that the same criticisms might apply to her.

In the revolution's last days, her father was no longer able to curb her enthusiasm. Aisha joined her friends in Bourguiba Bulevar, where she found herself surrounded by so many people. She didn't think Tunis could hold so many! Thinking back on those hours, in addition to all of the fighting, she remembering the waiting. They had no idea what would happen, but they *knew* that something would. It would be something that, a few days ago, they would never have even dared to think about. Well, that something happened. On her way home from her shopping trip in the city center, she retraced that day two years prior in her mind. "But things didn't go the right way." This last thought was a painful one, recalling the disappointment that overshadowed the pride she recalled of the days of the revolution. But she couldn't let herself get too depressed – the next day she would be leaving for Europe, for Milan! Two whole weeks away from the idiots blabbering about religion and morals while the economy lay in ruins, two weeks away from harassment in the street, that awful policy which had taken the place of the dictatorship.

Nour dressed in a hurry that morning, placed the veil over her head, and went to the supermarket close to the building where she lived with her family in Milan. For certain things, like meat, sauces, or bread, she always quietly went to an Egyptian family's store a couple blocks away, the words *Jazara Islamiyya wa Mini Market Abnoub* (Abnoub Islamic Butcher and Mini-Market) emblazoned above its door. That morning, however, they didn't go

there. Her husband suggested that she go to the supermarket where the normal Italians went. The fruits and vegetables were cheaper there, and, for the time being, they had to tighten their belts. The company which employed her husband, Ahmed, had just reduced his hours at work. "There is a crisis," they had said, "and we all have to make sacrifices." Her husband worked part-time – just enough to maintain a residence permit – yet was also on-site 12-hours daily. He came home each day utterly exhausted, having been paid only a fraction of what he was due. He wondered what sacrifices the company's owners were making.

Nour hated the Italian supermarket. She couldn't find anything. She couldn't read the Italian labels, and couldn't ask the people around her. When she absolutely needed to find something, and asked the shop assistant, they always both found themselves repeating, "Huh? Huh?". He was clearly flustered, as was she.

She was able to find the fruit, vegetables, and milk quickly, but soon found that the beans and chickpeas were no longer where they used to be. Twenty minutes of searching passed. Nothing. The problem was that in addition to not knowing where to look, she also could only recognize the right tins from the figures on the labels. Fu... Ful... Fajilu beans are a thing, in Italian, right? But hummus? Unpronounceable. Gah!

After a half hour of fruitless searching, she surrendered. She tried asking a woman in the white uniform supermarket employees usually wore. It had taken her a while to realize that most of the morning workers were men. She had a bad feeling about this Italian woman's face, the dyed red hair, from the start. *Ansuriya*. Racist. By now she had learned to recognize them immediately.

–Ex... Excuse me. Fajilu where? – She just had to find the beans. The chickpeas couldn't be far from them.

–Excuse me?

–Fajilu... box Fajilu... – From the expression on the woman’s face, she knew it would be a rough conversation.

–Fajilu? I do not understand... You mean *Fagioli*? Beans? You want beans?

–I... you... Fajuli...

–Sorry, lady, I have to go.

After all this, she still couldn’t understand.

–Eh?

–Madam, is the scaf.... right... no, I mean left...

–Eh?

It seemed like she was interjecting on purpose to speed her up. It seemed like she wanted to make things difficult for her in order to have an excuse to get irritated with her.

–So... will not want to... for man... easy... according to...

Mrs. Racist began to raise her voice. It was then that the other woman appeared. At first she looked Italian, but better. Blackberry hair, and olive-colored skin slightly darker than Italians. Something in her mannerisms reminded her of her own country. The woman turned kindly to the employee. She didn’t understand much, but from the few words that she did, it seemed that she was asking if everything was alright. Then she turned to her. She spoke, not in Arabic, but in French. She only heard *Tunisienne*. It was a question. The sound of the language instantly aroused a wave of resentment in Nour. She was beginning to understand who she was, what she was. Well made-up, elegant, but not only in the clothes. She had that elegance that the Imam of her village often called *muta’jrif*: arrogance, haughtiness.

She replied in Arabic in a flat, hostile tone.

–I am Tunisian, and am trying to find where the beans are, but I do not understand what this woman is saying to me.

Hearing the Arabic, the other girl stiffened. Nour had expected this. People like her, those in the north, are not very comfortable with Arabic. Let alone with the dialect of their own country...

The woman turned to the clerk in the supermarket and spoke briefly in Italian. That seemed to calm her down. She pointed to a corridor, gesturing.

–She says you have to go to the second left, at the bottom are the beans – the other girl gave her a polite smile.

Nour grabbed her basket, passed between the two women in front of her, and walked into the aisle where the beans were without a word and without looking back. As she walked away, she heard the woman speak to her.

–You know, a ‘thank you’ would be nice.

Nour turned slightly.

–Yes, it would. – She saw that the other was going to say something, but then stopped and walked away.

Nour finished buying groceries, paid with the money her husband had given her, and returned home. She had little time to start preparing the kids’ lunches before getting them to school.

She had two children, Samir and Mohamed. They were nine and eight years old and went to elementary school. They had come over with her the year before. Her husband, however, had been in Italy well over seven years. It was hard for Nour. She did not know where to go in this enormous confusing city. People were running everywhere, and it seemed that they never spent more than five minutes together with another person. They seemed all alone, all together. But when they spoke in a moment everything became at once too brisk and friendly for her tastes. And the strangest thing was that soon after the same people often returned to acting like strangers.

She left to pick up her children. They had started going to an Italian school with other Italian children. It was amazing how quickly they learned the language. They seemed to speak the real thing! But she had not learned it. Really, how could she? But that was fine. She had her family, and some other Arab friends. She had never been accustomed to anything more.

That afternoon the sun came out. The children wanted to go to the park to play with their friends from school.

She was sitting on a bench looking at them at the side of the park. There was a pleasant smell in the air that day. It was May, and her husband had told her that, unlike Milan's usual odor of smog, in May, everything became much fresher.

Aisha had gone to the park mostly out of boredom. She had come to Milan to find an Italian friend, Nadia, whom he had met two years earlier when she had attended a master's degree program in economics in Paris. Her Italian was incredible. They had been roommates for 10 months and she had learned it fantastically, as if by osmosis.

Nadia, however, had to work that day, and would be free in the evening. Aisha had gone out that morning to buy something to cook. The encounter with the young Tunisian woman in the supermarket had been very unpleasant.

After lunch she had gone to the park near Nadia's house to pass the time waiting for her friend. And there was the woman she'd had the unpleasant encounter with that morning. She sat, watching a group of children playing. If they'd been in Tunis she would have walked past, ignoring her. But the fact that such a meeting had happened in Milan bothered her. Not here ... no, on this occasion she would not let it go.

–*Salam...*

The other turned abruptly. She seemed almost frightened sitting beside her on the bench, but she gradually accepted it. She rec-

ognized immediately the semi-hostile expression that she had seen in her face that morning at the supermarket.

–What do you want? – Even her tone had not changed.

–I want you to explain to me why you treated me so this morning. – The phrase came out a little oddly, for Aisha felt uncomfortably awkward. His mother tongue was always French, even at home. She understood Arabic perfectly, but was not used to speaking it. She was afraid that using it in a lively discussion would have sounded ridiculous.

–What do you care? Tonight you go out, you will drink alcohol, and you'll forget everything, just like you forgot your language. – The woman punctuated that sentence mimicking her awkward pronunciation. Aisha felt her temper flare.

–But what did I do? I helped you, and you treated me like that. Don't you think the right thing? God cannot not pleased with you! – The last mention of God came out with irony, driven by anger. It didn't imply religiosity so much as bigotry.

–Leave God out of it! You are blasphemous, and arrogant, and overbearing... If you really want to know, it is for this reason that with those like you do not want to deal with anything. You really want my thanks so badly? Well, thank you! And now leave me alone! – She said the last sentence deliberately avoiding the other's gaze. She began to watch the children playing, silently inviting her to say goodbye.

Aisha was about to leave, but something held her back. Overbearing? Arrogant? She did not understand why the other woman was addressing her like this, especially when she hardly knew anything about her... Where did all this hate come from? Okay, yes. She was in the city, she knew that she appeared wealthy, and indeed she was. Was this just envy?

–Well... I'll leave you in peace. But I'll have you know that I am not over nor am I arrogant. During the revolution my friends and I were in the square, at the forefront of everything. I, too was tear-gassed, to make people like you free! And now you're telling me that I'm a bully! I say you're just jealous... – This time the words came out a little smoother.

–Oh, so *you* caused the revolution...

–Yeah, the revolution! Where were you? The people like you ... had you already gone out, or...

–Where was I?! I was here! I was here with my husband, like any good wife! We were here because we couldn't survive in our real country! And that's all because of people like you! This time she had stopped pretending to look elsewhere. Rather, she turned and looked directly at Aisha.

–People like me? I haven't done anything! I helped get rid of it! It was the dictatorship which made things like this! Ben Ali and his friends; thieves and crooks, all of them!

–I mean you...

–We'?! Knock it off! – Aisha was outraged. She could still remember the smell of smoke and fear.

The other woman was silent for a moment. She could see the anger in her eyes now. She stared at her and was preparing to reply.

–You went out to protest? Oh yeah? For you, it was nothing but a game. You ate at his table until you decided that you wanted even more. He made you play with the French in Africa ... he forced women to think it was a bad thing to wear the veil, and told them that they had to lose respect for themselves to be “modern”... but that wasn't enough for you. Tunisia had to become like Europe, you had to be able to get drunk and speak only French ... that's why you went out to demonstrate... You never cared about any of us. But now we're happy to leave Ghannouchi to you.

Aisha was dumbfounded, paralyzed. In an instant she thought of her father, his grandfather ... all the doubts that she had always harbored. All of her self-justifications... It was as if everything suddenly broke into pieces. She had built this fragile scaffolding over years, and this other woman had brought it crashing down with a few words. She had sat down in order to convince this other woman of her own faults, and that she herself was blameless. But here she was, speechless, full of guilt. She did not want to concede defeat and be vulnerable. Yet these thoughts came too late. Already she felt the tears moisten her eyes. She covered her face with her hands to hide them.

The other woman saw. Initially, her eyes grew even more angry, as if outraged by the softness of the other. But it did not last long, for her surprise at the effect her words had had was stronger. The girl was clearly wounded. She looked better. She was dressed in simple bottom. Of course, it was not as if she had ever been taught that what was right. That morning she really had helped her, without even knowing... Suddenly she felt guilty.

–Forgive me. I did not mean to make you cry... I was only angry... Anger makes us say things we don't mean. And then, I'm not even angry at you...

Aisha timidly lifted her gaze.

–So who are you angry at?

Nour turned his head towards the lawn. Why was she angry? She had never seriously thought about it before. She just felt it intuitively ... with all the sacrifices and hardships that she and Ahmed had had to overcome, anger seemed to be right. But she had never asked for the exact reasons why.

–Well, there are just so many things... This country ... poverty ... everything that we are forced to endure. I bet you feel comfortable here. Maybe more comfortable than in Tunisia ... but I feel bad. It's completely dif-

ferent from my village. All I wanted to do was stay there and live the life that I had seen when I was a child living with the older people around me. Nothing more. But now, here, I feel as though I'm a river fish forced to live in the ocean.

Aisha stared at the girl. It was utterly striking that, in that uncouth dialect, she could express things so deep... Because basically, yes. She was arrogant. Yet in her hearts and hearts, she had always wondered whether people could really think it...

Meanwhile, Nour was silent a moment and then said

–Do you know what scares me the most?

–What?

–My children ... are growing up differently... They go to school here, and speak Italian. I did not think that a river fish could give birth to a fish of the sea... I sometimes

wonder if we'll still be able to talk when they grow up...

Aisha wiped her eyes. That afternoon they talked for hours. They talked of their lives, the revolution in politics. Aisha explained what happened to the girls when the Islamists took over the government, while Nour explained that all people wanted was a government that better represented them. Aisha invited her to Nadia's for dinner, but she politely refused. Ahmed was coming home from work shortly.

They didn't set up anything appointment. Perhaps both of them needed some time to digest that meeting, in a faraway land, with the other side of their country. But something now had changed. That face was now different, less dark and threatening. It was just another young woman, not so very different from what she saw in the mirror every morning.

Skābie apelsīni

Agnija Kazuša. Latvijas Republika

Naktī pirms viņas ierašanās Fatima kāšēja tik stipri, ka šķindēja trauki un drebēja ārdurvis. Abi viņas dēli gulēja. Bija trīs naktī, taču pēc tam, kad sievieti bija pamodinājis klepus, miegs viņai vairs nenāca. Kā tas būs? Fatima pie sevis domāja un ar acīm pārlūkoja viesistabu – televizors, dīvāniņi, kuriem uzlikts jauns pārklājs, sniegbalts galdauts. Uz tā stāvēja trauks ar svaigiem apelsīniem. Tagad februārī tiem bija sezona, tāpēc varēja nodinģēt diezgan lēti. Pārējais viss vēl būs jāsapērk no rīta, kad Fatima ar vecāko dēlu Muhamedu dosies uz vietējo tirgu *suk*, lai paspētu visu sagatavot līdz... vakarā ieradīsies viņa. Ārzemiece. Svešiniece. Kas tāds notika pirmo reizi Fatimas dzīvē. Pateicoties Imadam. Viņas jaunākajam dēlam, kurš bija iesaistīts brīvprātīgo aktivitātes organizēšanā Kenitrā. Nebija jēgas vairs iet gulēt. Tāpat viņa celtos piecos uz lūgšanu. Fatima paņēma savu izšuvumu un vājā gaismiņā šuva krāsainus rakstus.

Diānai darba nebija. Bija tikai viņas bakalaura diploms, kur burti izšūti skaisti kā krustdūriens, nelielā pieredze oficiantes darbā kādā Rīgas kafejnīcā un no tās laikiem – iekrājumi, kas strauji tuvojās uz beigām, nestabilitāte un dzīvošana pie vecākiem un pāri visam – uzmanīgās domas par to, ko darīt tālāk. Interneta lapas bija pilnas ar brīvprātīgā darba piedāvājumiem, un Diāna nolēma tās izpētīt. Kad aukstajā vēla decembra dienā viņa pamanīja iespēju mēnesi mācīt angļu valodu bērnu namā Marokā, Diāna iedomājās tas būtu labs veids, kā uzsākt jaunu gadu. Dalības maksa tikai 25 eiro, dzīvošana viesģimenē, dažādas kultūras aktivitātes un ekskursijas uz Rabātu, Marakešu. Pašam vien jānopērk aviobiļete. 80 eiro vienā virzienā.

Sākumā šķita absurdi – tērēt savus pēdējos iekrājumus, lai brauktu strādāt uz Maroku, taču sēdēt mājās bezdarbībā likās vēl lielāks grēks. Diāna pieņēma lēmumu februāri pavadīt Marokā. Viņu domās jau sildīja Marokas saule, kas, iespējams, atnesīs idejas par to, ko darīt tālāk.

Vilcienā no Kasablankas uz Kenitru Diāna sajūsmas pilnām acīm skatījās ārā pa logu un pamanīja daudzos apelsīnu kokus, kas viņu sveicināja Marokā. To dēļ vien bija vērts braukt. Meitene nodomāja. Lai redzētu, kā ziemā siltajās zemēs aug apelsīni.

Kenitras stacijā viņu sagaidīja Imads. Tumšiem matiem kā nakts, tumšbrūnām, domīgām, nedaudz noraizējušām acīm. Mugurā viņam bija pelēks ziemas mētelis, kājās – melnas bikses un glaunas, melnas lakas kurpes, kas aiz sevis atstāja patīkamu klaboņu.

–Tu paliksi manās mājās – Imads nopietni teica Diānai, puīša acīm raugoties meitenē, lūpām nesavelkot ne kriptaiņas smaida.

–Labi! – Diāna viņam atbildēja satraukuma pilna.

Tūlīt pēc tam nošļāca pamatīga lietusgāze, un Diānai, kas uz siltajām zemēm bija ieradusies paplānās drēbītēs, likās, ka apelsīni par viņu kokos smejas. Imads ātri nostopēja taksi, viņi salika tajā Diānas mantas un devās uz puīša mājām. Viņš dzīvoja ar mammu un vecāko brāli. Tēvs nomira pirms diviem gadiem.

Taksis apstājās. Kā tāda šaura spraudziņa, kur vasarā bērni spēlētu paslēpes, izrādījās iela, kur divās ailēs vienas pretī otrai skatījās daudzu māju durvis. Imads savējās atpazīna pat tumsā un lietū, kad viņi ieradās pie viņa mājām. Aizslēpusies aiz durvīm, tā pat neizskatījās pēc mājas, un kad Diāna iegāja iekšā, bija sajūta kā mazā aliņā. Viņai pretī iznāca maza auguma sieviete, baltā lakatā ap galvu un rozā apmetnī mugurā – Imada mamma. Viņa smaidīja un spieda roku, viņas acīs spīdēja satraukums un prieks. Pretī iznāca arī kāds puisis zaļā sporta jakā un pelēkās treniņbiksēs – Imada vecākais brālis Muhameds. Arī viņš smaidīja, atņēma Diānas „salam alekum” un aicināja meiteni nākt tālāk iekšā. Vispirms viņi iegāja tā saucamajā marokāņu istabā, kur telpas vidū bija liels galds un pie sienām dīvāni. No turienes Diānu ieveda vēl kādā istabā – ar maziem dīvāniņiem pie sienām. Tur jau bija iekārtota ārzemnieces gulta. Tad meitene tikai aicināta atpakaļ uz marokāņu istabu, kur uz galda tika likti vakariņu šķīvji un televizorā rādīja *Al Jazeera* ziņas. Diāna apsēdās pie galda un sajuta drēgnumu un slapjas kājas, taču tūlīt pat Imada mamma atnesa viņai mīkstas segas, kur sevi ievīstīt. Sasedzās arī viņa pati un abi brāļi. Šai aliņā – bez apkures un logiem – patiesībā bija aukstāk nekā ārā. Lietus turpināja pakšķēt. Dažas pilītes no griestiem pamanījās iespraukties istabas vidū tām speciāli sagatavotā traukā. Viņi ēda kuskusu un sildīja vēderus, un ar Imada palīdzību (jo viņš ģimenē vienīgais runāja angļiski) sarunājās.

Diānas brūnās kedas nākamajā rītā bija slapjas. Viņai līdzī vēl bija tikai sandales, tāpēc viņa āva kājās vien tās pašas kedas, cerot, ka saulīte, kas apzīlbināja viņas acis, izejot ārā no Imada mājas, apavus izžāvēs. Jau atkal Diāna apbrīnoja apelsīnu kokus un beidzot izteica Imadam.

–Es gribu noplūkt vienu apelsīnu!

Imads atbildēja, ka tie nav ēdami un esot skābi kā citroni. Meitene tam nevēlējās ticēt, tāpēc piegāja pie koka, palēcās, noplūca vienu oranžo augli un sāka to mizot. Viņa ielika mutē vienu šķēli un saprata, ka Imadam bija taisnība. Tie varbūt bija pat skābāki par citroniem. Viņa to tūlīt nometa zemē.

–Kā tas var būt? – Diāna jautāja.

–Īstie apelsīni aug dienvidos. – Bija Imada atbilde.

Ziņas par apelsīniem nenošokēja tiki ļoti kā ziņas no galvenā organizatora, kad kopējā tikšanās Diāna satika arī citus brīvprātīgos – eiropiešus. Izrādās, sākotnēji minēto 25 eiro vietā jāmaksā 100 eiro dalības maksa. Visi kā viens samaksāja, bet jau pēc dažām dienām brīvprātīgie, kas nebija vēl ne reizi bijuši bērnu namā, kā arī piedalījušies nevienā organizētā aktivitātē, sāka uzdot jautājumus un celt iebildumus.

–Kur paliek mūsu nauda?

–Kāpēc tā netiek viesģimenēm, lai tās varētu mūs pienācīgi uzturēt?

–Kāpēc manā mājā nav normālas dušas un tualetes?

–Kāpēc manā mājā nav siltā ūdens?

–Kāpēc mana viesģimene nenodrošina mani ar pietiekami daudz ēdiena?

–Kāpēc mājās nav apkures?

–Kāpēc neviens no manas viesģimenes nerunā angļiski?

–Kāpēc, kad mēs ejam uz medīnu, mana viesģimene liek man maksāt par viņu pirkumiem?

Kņada problēmu neatrisināja. Galvenais organizators tikai pateica, ka Marokā par naudu nerunā. Tās vai nu ir vai nav. Arī Diāna apklusa un Imadu nevainoja. Šajās dienās viņa bija redzējusi puisi starp cigarešu dūmiem un kafijas tasēm, gaidot naudas sūtījumu no onkuļa. Kad Diāna pajautāja, kāpēc viņš šādu brīvprātīgo projektu piekritis organizēt, Imads atbildēja:

–Lai redzētu bāreņu sejās smaidu.

Pagāja vēl vairākas dienas, kad brīvprātīgie tika sadalīti pa bērnu namiem – bija puisi un meiteņu bērnu nami. Diānai piešķīra 15-17 gadus vecus pušus. Pirmajā dienā bērnu nama vadītājs izvadāja brīvprātīgos pa savu namu, kur dzīvoja bez vecākiem palikušu vai trūcīgu ģimeņu zēni. Vadītāja vārdi krita kā zeltaini saules stari. Viņš stāstīja, cik ļoti mīl šos zēnus un rūpējas par tiem un ekskursijas beigās uzaicināja visus brīvprātīgos, kā arī organizatorus skolas pagalmā dzert tēju un ēst cepumus. Visi liksmoja, vien apelsīni kokos aizdomīgi noraudzījās, it kā par kaut ko brīdinātu.

Vakaros, kad saule norietēja, te bija pavisam citādāk. Diāna un citi brīvprātīgie, kas mācīja pušu bērnu namā, tika aicināti vispirms uz vakariņām ap sešiem un tikai tad notiktu pati mācīšana. Vakariņās skolotāji sēdēja kopā ar bērniem. Lielajā un drēgnajā ēdamzālē bija iestumti apmēram divpadsmit apaļi galdi, uz kuriem saliktas novārītas olas un baltmaizes klaipi. Pie pavārēm varēja dabūt putru. Kad visi bija paēduši, uz galdiem, kā arī zem tiem mētājās olu čaumalas, un olu aroms spēcīgi spiedās nāsīs, netikdams ārā pa logiem.

Bija jau satumsis, kad Diāna devās uz savu klasi. Tā bija vēl drēgnāka telpa nekā ēdamzāle, kur saplētās logu rūtis aicināja iekšā vēju spēlēties ģiptīgi zaļajās sienās. Apgaismojums bija vājš, un telpa atgādināja vecu, vientuļu, dzīves piekusušu koku. Pašā telpas vidū, kur galdi bija sastumti kopā, viens pie otra sēdēja zēni. Viņu mirdzošās acis un jaunavīgās, cerību pilnās sejas bija vienīgais, kas telpu kaut nedaudz atdzīvināja. Diāna šajā telpā sēdēja savā plānajā rudens virsjakā, zem kuras bija savilkti visi iespējamie džemperī. Tie nepalīdzēja cīņā ar vēja rotaļām.

Pirmo reizi zēnu skolotāja bija ārzemiece. Nebija pat svarīgi, ko un kāpēc viņa māca. Lielākā daļa pušu angļu valodā zināja pateikt vien dažas sarunvalodas frāzes, tomēr bija kāds puisis Juzefs, kurš angļiski runāja krietni labākā līmenī. Skolotāja pamanīja, ka šis zēns ir arī labāk ģērbies nekā pārējie – melnā ādas jakā, melnos džinsos, ādas korpēs. Viņš atklāja, ka pa vasaru strādā vietējā Makdonaldā, tāpēc atšķirībā no citiem var nopelnīt naudu. Pateicoties viņam, visi varēja uzdot skolotājai jautājumus. Ne par angļu valodu, darbības vārdiem un lietvārdiem. Viņi gribēja zināt par Diānas dzīvi, Eiropu, par to, kā viņi varētu tikt prom no bērnu nama, no mazās, nospiedošās Kenitras, no Marokas. Diāna nākamajām reizēm nopirka klades, lai vismaz kaut kas no šī kursa paliek pierakstīts. Diez vai puši iepriekš bija brīdināti, ka pie viņiem uz mēnesi viesosies angļu valodas skolotāja no Eiropas.

Diāna Kenitrā bija pavadījusi jau divas nedēļas. Viņas kedas bija slapjas. Stundās joprojām ciemojās vējš. Naktī sala pat zem trim segām. Istabā lietus laikā no griestiem pilēja mūžīgā pile, it kā telpai būtu piemetušās šnaukas. Un tad tās piemetās Diānai. Sāka sāpēt arī kakls. Viņa domāja, ka nebūs nekas nopietns, tāpēc taupīja naudu, kura jau tā bija neparedzēti daudz iztērēta, dzēra tējas un ģērbās silti. Fatima pat paaicināja Diānu uz publisko vannu *hamam*, kur sieviete nenogurdama berza meitenei muguru, un viņas abas cerēja, ka karstums un svīšana palīdzēs. Taču nepalīdzēja. Šnaukas atnesa temperatūru un kādu nakti, kad Fatimu trijos naktī bija uzmodinājis pastāvīgais kāss, viņa sadzirdēja vaimanas no Diānas istabas. Viņa tūlīt uzmodināja Imadu, un abi atrada meiteni, grozāmieš no vieniem sāniem uz otriem, vaidām no mokām. Diānai sāpēja auss. Dūra bungādiņā tik stipri kā ar nazi. Fatima gribēja vest meiteni uz slimnīcu, taču Diāna protestēja. Viņa zināja, ka nevienam vairs nav naudas. Nekādu zāļu ģimenei mājās nebija, tāpēc Fatima pienesa Diānai pie gultas mazu, baltu vates pikucīti, ko ielikt sāpošajā ausī. Tad vecā sieva apsēdās blakus un klusējot skatījās meitenei virsū. No meitenes acīm ripoja asaras, un seja

no sāpēm kļiedza. Fatimas plauksta pieskārs Diānas pieri un sajuta uz tās karstumu. Tad viņa salika abas rokas klēpī. Bezspēcīgi. Žēli. Tās vairs nevarēja paberzt muguru. Tās vairs nevarēja uztaisīt kuskusu. Viņa kādu laiku sēdēja, sajūtot Diānas klātbūtni. Bezpalīdzīgi viņas saskatījās. Tad Fatima sakārtoja Diānas segas, cieši sasedza svešo meiteni, un, vēl uz brīdi atskatīdamās, izgāja no istabas. Diāna bija Imadam pateikusi, ka nav pirmā reize. Pāries.

Kad viena auss pārstāja sāpēt, tie paši dūrieni sākās otrā ausī. Izturējusi mokas, Diāna no rīta piecēlās ar vates pikučiem abās ausīs, kas bija aizkritušas. Vien sāpes tajās atstājušas dīvainus trokšņus, kas radīja ap viņu svešādu sajūtu. Imada mamma piesteidzās pie meitenes klāt un centās noskaidrot, vai auss vēl sāp. Diāna vāji pasmaidīja un, paceldama īkšķi uz augšu, lika noprast, ka nesāp, lai gan meitene zināja, ka sākusies infekcija.

Brokastu laiks piederēja Fatimai un Diānai. Abi dēli bija jau pabrokastojuši un, kad modās Diāna, tas bija signāls Fatimai momentā nest no mazās virtuvītes baltmaizes klaiņus, kurus vajadzēja lauzt gabaliem un mērcēt olīveļļā. Kafiju viņa pasniedza mazā, šaurā toverītī, kuru vispirms pielēja ar karstu pienu un tad ļāva Diānai pašai piebērt kafijas graudiņus. Tā kā Diāna bija slima, Fatima vēl vienā traukā ielēja saldenu jo saldenu tēju. Sieviete ar Diānu kopā nekad neēda. Tikai skatījās, kā ēd Diāna. Viņas sēdēja un nerunāja. Runāja televizors, kas turpināja stāstīt par ēģiptiešu revolūciju arī šai aliņā bez logiem, saules, ar slimībām un valodas barjerām. Bija 2011. gads. Kad Diāna iepriekš bija jautājusi, vai revolūcija sāksies arī Marokā, kā bagāti, tā nabagi atbildēja, ka karalis viņiem labs. Nesāksies.

Fatima tagad Diānai uz angļu valodas stundām deva līdzīgu deķīti, ar ko sasegt kājas, taču ilgi tas nepalīdzēja. Kamēr skolotājas mute turpināja stāstīt par angļu valodas laikiem, viņas ausīs vējš spēlēja krāšņu trokšņu koncertu. Diāna saprata, ka ausis būtu jāatrāda dakterim. Vajadzēja braukt mājās.

–Skolotāja Diāna, mēs negribam, ka jūs aizbraucat – Diānai pēc nodarbības pakal skrēja Juzefs.

–Man tiešām žēl, Juzef – Diāna skumīgi teica. Viņa bija izgājusi ārā no nama, un Juzefs turpināja skolotājai sekot.

–Vai tev nav jāiet atpakaļ pie pārējiem? – Diāna uztraucās.

–Nē, es jūs pavadīšu uz mājām – viņš bija apņēmies.

–Paldies, bet tas tiešām nav nepieciešams. Ej vien atpakaļ.

–Bet es gribu. Gribu jūs pavadīt.

Diāna redzēja viņa acīs spītu, milzīgu vēlmi un atļāva puisim nākt līdzī.

–Skolotāj, mēs negribam, ka jūs aizbraucat – viņš turpināja.

–Es zinu, Juzef. Zinu...

–Skolotāj, nav tā, kā direktors jums stāstīja. Direktors mūs sit, lamā, ir bargs. Mani ne tik ļoti, bet īpaši jaunākos zēnus. Viņiem ir zilumi – Juzefs runāja ātri un pārlicinoši, it kā baidīdamies, ka kāds šo brīdi viņam varētu atņemt.

–Kā tad tā?

–Nezinu, viņš tāds ir. Mēs neviens te negribam palikt. Visi gribam prom.

–To es redzu. Un man tik ļoti žēl.

–Mēs cerējām, ka jūs...

–Piedod, Juzef.

–...ka jūs, brīvprātīgie, kas šeit atbraucāt, mums palīdzēsiet.

–Jā, arī mums par šo brīvprātīgo programmu bija citādāks priekšstats – Diāna atbildēja. Viņa patiesībā nezināja, ko teikt. Viņai blakus gāja 17-gadīgais puisis, kurš savu skolotāju uzlū-

kojā kā cerību, kamēr Diāna – saslīmusi, iztērējusi savus pēdējos iekrājumus, bez darba – nevarēja pat pabeigt solīto angļu valodas kursu. Bija tikai šī vējinā februāra nakts, gājiens no bērnu nama uz Imada mājām un skaudrās sarunas. Neziņa par rītdienu. Tad viņi apstājās pie Imada mājām un kādu brīdi stāvēja viens pretī otram.

–Skolotāj, izārstējieties un brauciet atpakaļ – Juzefs piekodināja. Diāna vāji pasmaidīja.

–Tiešām, skolotāj. Mēs visi jūs gaidīsim. – Viņa seja bija nopietna. Tāpat kā viņa vārds. Puiša brūnajās acīs sēdēja skumjas un pavisam maza cerības liesmiņa. Diāna negribēja to izdzēst.

–Es ceru. Tiešām ceru, ka atbraukšu.

Diāna piegāja pie puīša un cieši viņu apskāva. Tas bija neveikls, tomēr silts brīdis, ko puišs nebija gaidījis, un Diāna saprata, ka šādu brīžu Juzefam nav bijis daudz. Savus vecākus viņš nekad nebija redzējis.

–Vai tu zināsi ceļu atpakaļ? – Diāna uztraucās.

–Zināšu. – Viņa vaigos bija iedegusies uguntiņa. Puišs kautri smaidīja. – Paldies, skolotāj, viņš pateica un pazuda tumšajās Kenitras ielās.

Naktī, pirms viņas aizbraukšanas Fatima kāšēja tik stipri, ka šķindēja trauki un drebēja ārdurvis. Diāna piecēlās ap septiņiem un kā katru rītu sieviete, viņu pamanot, sāka klāt brokastu galdu. Diāna izdzēra divus toverīšus kafijas un apēda olīveļļā mērcētās maizes. Ar katru reizi viņa jutās vainīgāka, ēdot ēdienu, ko sarūpējušas trūcīgas, bet dāsnas rokas visšaurākajā virtuvītē kādu Diāna bija redzējusi. Pēdējās brokastis. Tad Diāna vilka savas kājas tajās pašās mitrajās kediņās, kad sajuta Fatimas pieskārienu sev aiz muguras. Viņa momentā paskatījās. Vecajai sievietei rokās bija divas gaiši zaļas kokvilnas zeķītes. Ar sirsniņu acīs Fatima tās sniedza Diānai. Imads, kas jau stāvēja pie durvīm, tulkoja mammas teikto.

–Tā ir manas mammas dāvana tev. Viņai žēl, ka tu saslīmi, bet viņa grib, lai tev turpmāk vienmēr ir sausas kājas.

Diāna pateicās vecajai sievietei. Viņa paspieda viņai roku un tad ļāvās ciešam apskāvienam. Turpat bija arī Muhameds, Imada brālis. Arī viņš paspieda roku, lai atvadītos no viešņas.

–Tu vienmēr esi aicināta atpakaļ, bet tev jābrauc vasarā, kad ir siltāks – Imads turpināja tulkot Fatimas atvadu vārdus. Diāna tiem piekrita, veltot pēdējo acu skatienu Fatimas gaišajās acīs. Tad durvis starp Fatimu un Diānu aizvērās, un viņa kopā ar Imadu devās ceļā uz vilcienu staciju, no kurienes meitene brauks tālāk. Diāna vēl pēdējo reizi apjūsmoja apelsīnu kokus, kur skaistie, oranžie augļi eleganti sēdēja zaļu lapu kostīmos. Ja nepagaršotu, neviens nezinātu, ka tie ir skābi.

–Imad – Diāna pēkšņi iedomājās – es gribētu noplūkt vienu apelsīnu un aizvest mājās.

–Kam tev? Tu taču pati redzēji, cik tie ir skābi un neēdami. Tad jau labāk nopērc uz tirgus saldus.

–Nē. Es gribu tos no koka. –*Tie ir Marokas apelsīni! Kenitras apelsīni!* Meitene nodomāja, pieskrēja pie koka, izstiepa garu roku, palcās un noplūca vienu skābu apelsīnu.

Sour Oranges

Agnija Kazuša. Latvia

The night before the foreigner's arrival, Fatima had such a coughing spell that her dishes rattled and the entrance door shook. It was three o'clock in the morning, but once she had been awakened by her coughing spasm, she could no longer sleep. What will it be like? Fatima wondered and her eyes slid over the living room – a television, couches, recently recovered, a snow-white table cloth. On it was placed a bowl with fresh oranges. Now in February, they were seasonal, therefore, one could bargain for a better price for them. The rest Fatima needed to still buy in the morning, when she would head with her oldest son Muhammad to the local market – the *suk*, in order to get all the necessary things to be ready for her. A foreigner. A stranger. It was the first time this was happening in Fatima's life. Thanks to Imad, her youngest son, who was involved in organizing volunteer activities in Kenitra. It made no sense to go back to bed. She would be getting up at five a.m. anyway for prayers. Fatima took her embroidery work and in the weak light began to embroider colourful ornamentation.

Diana didn't have work. She just had a B.A. diploma, with letters as beautifully decorative as if made by cross stitch, minor experience as a waitress in a Riga cafe and from that period – limited savings, which were rapidly nearing zero, a lack of security and a need to continue living with her parents and, above all – obsessive thoughts about what to do in the future. Internet pages were filled with volunteer work advertisements, and Diana decided to research these. When on a cold December day she noticed an ad of-

fering the opportunity to teach English for a month in a children's orphanage in Morocco, Diana thought it would be a good way to start the new year. The participation cost was only 25 Euros, with living accommodation provided by a sponsoring family and it included various cultural activities and excursions to Rabat and Marrakesh. She just had to buy her plane ticket. 80 Euros one way.

In the beginning it seemed absurd – to spend her last savings to go to work in Morocco – but to sit at home unemployed was a greater sin. Diana made the decision to spend February in Morocco. In her fantasy she was already being warmed by the Morocco sun, which possibly, would also bring ideas about what to do further.

On the train from Casablanca to Kenitra, Diana, gazing with enthusiasm out of the window, noticed many orange trees, which seemed to welcome her to Morocco. For them alone it was worthwhile to come here, the girl thought, just to see how oranges grow in a hot-climate country in the winter.

In Kenitra's railway station Imad was waiting for her. With hair black as the night and dark brown, thoughtful, somewhat worried eyes. He was wearing a grey winter coat, black pants and elegant black patent shoes, which made a pleasant clattering sound as he walked.

–You'll stay at my home – Imad said in a serious tone, looking at Diana with his boyish eyes without even the slightest of smiles at the corners of his mouth.

–That's good! – Diana responded, full of excitement.

Immediately afterward, they were met by a heavy downpour of rain and to Diana,

who had arrived in the warm country in a flimsy outfit, it seemed that the oranges in the trees were laughing at her. Imad quickly hailed a taxi, placed Diana's baggage in it, and bid the taxi drive them to the young man's home where he lived with his mother and older brother. Their father had died two years earlier.

The taxi stopped at a seemingly narrow alley, where children were playing hide-and-seek, which turned out to be a street, where the doors of many dwellings faced each other in two rows. When they arrived at his home Imad recognized his door even in the dark and the rain. What was hidden behind the door didn't even look like a house because when Diana entered she felt as if she was in a small cave. Imad's mother, a woman of small stature wearing a white head kerchief and a pink caftan came out to meet them. She smiled and clasped Diana's hand, her eyes lighting up with excitement and joy. Also Muhammad, Imad's elder brother, a young man in a green sports jacket and grey sweat pants, came forward to welcome her. He too was smiling, and responding to Diana's "*salam alekum*", he invited her to come in further. Into their home. First they entered their so-called Moroccan room, where a large table stood in the centre of the room and along the walls were several couches. From there Diana was led into another room – with small settees lining the walls. There the foreigner's bed was set up. Then the girl was asked to come back to the Moroccan room, where plates were laid out on the table for dinner while the *Al Jazeera* newscast was being broadcast on the TV. Diana sat down at the table, feeling the dampness of her rain-soaked clothes and her wet feet, but Imad's mother immediately brought her warm blankets to wrap around herself. In this little cave – without heating or windows – it was colder inside than outside. The rain continued to pitter-patter. Some drops man-

aged to make their way through the ceiling in the centre of the room but they splashed into a bowl specially set out for such an eventuality. They ate a couscous, which warmed their stomachs, and with the help of Imad (because he was the only one who spoke English) they talked.

The next morning Diana's brown sneakers were still wet. She only had a pair of sandals with her and so she put on the same sneakers, hoping that the sun, which was dazzling her eyes on leaving Imad's home, would dry them out. Once again Diana was impressed by the orange trees and finally said so to Imad.

–I want to pick one of the oranges!

Imad replied that they were not edible and were sour like lemons. The girl did not want to believe that, hence she approached the tree and with a slight jump she reached up and plucked an orange and began to peel it. She put one segment in her mouth and immediately understood that Imad was right. They were maybe even more sour than lemons. She immediately tossed it on the ground.

–How can that be? – Diana asked.

–The real oranges grow in the south – was Imad's response.

When Diana met the other volunteers who were all Europeans the information about the oranges seemed less of a surprise than other news from Imad who was the main co-ordinator of the volunteer work project. It turned out that instead of the originally stated 25 Euro participation cost the volunteers had to pay 100 Euros. All as one paid the amount, but already a few days later, the volunteers, who had never been in an orphanage nor had they ever participated before in such a volunteer activity, began to ask questions and make objections.

–Where does our money go to?

–Why doesn't it go to our sponsoring families so they can adequately put us up?

–Why does my guest home not have a normal shower and toilet?

–Why don't I have hot water in mine?

–Why doesn't my sponsoring family make sure I have enough to eat?

–Why isn't there any heating in the houses?

–Why doesn't anyone of my sponsoring family speak English?

–Why do we have to go to the *medina* and why does my sponsoring family make me pay for their purchases?

The uproar did not lead to a resolution. Imad only managed to say that in Morocco no one talks about money. That is how it was or was not. Diana too fell silent and did not blame Imad. During these days she had seen the young man through cigarette smoke and above coffee cups, while waiting for money to be sent by an uncle. When Diana asked, why he had agreed to organize such a volunteer project, Imad had answered:

–In order to see smiles on the faces of the orphans.

Several days passed, during which the volunteers were split up and sent to various orphanages – there were orphanages for boys and ones for girls. Diana was allocated to an orphanage that housed 15 to 17-year-old boys. On the first day the orphanage director led the volunteers on a tour through his building, which housed boys who had lost their parents or were from needy families. The director's words fell like golden sunbeams. He described how much he loved these boys and how he took care of them. At the end of the tour he invited all the volunteers as well as the organizers to have some tea and cookies in the orphanage's courtyard. Everyone was having a good time, only the oranges in the trees gazed on suspiciously, as if anticipating something untoward about something.

In the evenings, when the sun had set, it was totally different in the orphanage. Diana and other volunteers who were teaching

there, were invited first for dinner around six p.m. and only then the actual teaching was going to take place. At dinner the teachers sat together with the children. In the large and damp dining hall about twenty round tables had been pushed together, on which were placed boiled eggs and loaves of white bread. From the cooks one could get porridge. When everyone had eaten, eggshells were scattered on the tables as well as under them, and the smell of eggs, trapped in the room, aggressively assailed one's nostrils.

It was already dark when Diana went to her assigned class. It was an even damper room than the dining hall, where broken window panes invited the wind in to play on the toxically green walls. The lighting was poor, and the space was reminiscent of an old, lonely, weary-of-life tree. At the very centre of the room, where desks had been pushed together, one abutting the other, sat the boys. Their shining eyes and young, hopeful faces were the only thing that gave some life to the room. Diana was sitting in the room in her thin fall jacket, under which she wore all the sweaters she could. They didn't help in the battle against the games of the wind.

The boys had a foreign woman for the first time as their teacher. It wasn't even important, what and why she taught. The majority of the boys only knew how to say a few everyday phrases in English, but there was a boy by the name of Juzef, who spoke English at a substantially higher level. Diana noticed that this boy was also better dressed than the rest – in a black leather jacket, black jeans and leather shoes. He revealed that during the summer he worked at the local Macdonald's, therefore, unlike the others he could earn some money. Through him, all the other boys were able to ask the teacher questions. Not about the English language, nor about verbs or nouns. They wanted to know about Diana's life, about Europe and about how they

could get away from the orphanage, away from the small, depressing Kenitra and away from Morocco. For the next teaching session Diana brought along some notebooks, so that the boys could note down at least something from this course. The boys had probably not been warned that an English teacher from Europe would be visiting them for a month.

Diana had already spent two weeks in Kenitra. Her sneakers were still wet. The wind continued to visit her lessons. She was cold at night even under three blankets. In the room where she slept during rainy periods there was an eternal dripping, as if the space had caught a cold. And then Diana was infected by it. Her throat began to ache. She thought it wouldn't be anything serious, so she did not spend any money to treat it since she had already spent beyond what she had planned, she drank teas and tried to dress warmly. Fatima even invited Diana to the public baths – the *hammam*, where a woman tirelessly rubbed the girl's back, and they both, Fatima and Diana, hoped that the heat and sweating would help. But it did not help. Along with the runny nose came a fever and on one particular night, when Fatima had been woken up at three a. m. by her customary coughing fit, she heard moans emanating from Diana's room. She immediately woke Imad, and the two of them went to the girl's room to find her tossing and turning, and groaning with pain. Diana's ear was hurting. She had as piercing pains in her eardrum as if someone was stabbing her with a knife. Fatima wanted to take the girl to the hospital, but Diana protested. She knew that no one had any more money. There was no medication in the family's home and so Fatima brought to Diana's bed a small wad of cotton wool, to place in her hurting ear. Then the old woman sat down beside the bed and in silence gazed at the girl. Tears were rolling down Diana's cheeks, and

her face was distorted from pain. Fatima's had felt Diana's forehead and saw how hot it was. Then she crossed her hands in her lap. Helplessly. In sorrow. Her hands could no longer rub Diana's back. They no longer could make couscous. She sat for a while, feeling Diana's presence. Helplessly they looked at each other. Then Fatima smoothed down Diana's blankets, tucked the girl in, and looking back briefly once more, left the room. Diana had said to Imad that this was not the first time that she was so sick. It would pass.

When one of her ears stopped hurting, the same stabbing pains began in the other ear. Having survived the night of suffering, Diana got up in the morning with cotton wool wads in both ears, both having gone deaf. Only the pain had left odd sounds in them, which created around her a strange sensation. Imad's mother hurried to the girl to find out if her ear still hurt. Diana smiled feebly and raising a thumb upward, made it clear, that she no longer was in pain, even though the girl knew that infection had set in.

The breakfast period belonged to Fatima and Diana. Both of Fatima's sons had already eaten and, when Diana woke up, it was a signal for Fatima to bring from the small kitchen loaves of white bread, from which one broke off pieces and then dipped them in olive oil. The coffee was given to Diana in a narrow-topped small boiling pot called a *kanaka*, in which first hot milk was poured, and then Diana was allowed to add coffee granules herself. Because Diana was sick, Fatima also poured in another bowl the sweetest of teas. The woman never ate together with Diana. She only looked on as Diana ate. They sat and did not talk. The TV talked, continuing to bring them news about the Egyptian Revolution, even in this small cave without windows, without sunlight, with illness and language barriers. It was 2011. When Diana

had asked previously if a revolution would also start in Morocco, the local people replied that their king was good. There would be no revolution.

Fatima now gave Diana to take along to her English lessons a blanket to cover her legs, but it did not help for long. While her teacher's mouth continued to talk about the English language, in her ears the wind played a splendid cacophonous concert. Diana understood that she had to have a doctor look at her ears. She had to return home.

–Teacher Diana, we don't want you to leave – Juzef pleaded as he ran after her after class.

–I'm truly sorry, Juzef – Diana sadly said. She had left the building, and Juzef continued to follow her.

–Do you not have to go back to the others? – Diana said anxiously.

–No, I'll accompany you home – he was resolute.

–Thanks, but that's really not necessary. Go on back.

–But I want to, I want to accompany you.

Diana saw in his eyes stubbornness as well as great conviction, and allowed the boy to come along with her.

–Teacher, we don't want you to leave – he continued.

–I know Juzef, I know...

–Teacher, it's not like the director told you. The director hits and scolds us, and he's strict with us. Not me so much, but especially the younger boys. They've got blue bruises – Juzef talked fast and convincingly, as if fearing that someone would take this opportune moment away from him.

–Why is that so?

–I don't know, but he is like that. None of us want to stay here. All of us want to leave.

–I do see that. And I'm so very sorry.

–We were hoping that you...

–Forgive me, Juzef.

–...that you, the volunteers, who've come here, would help us.

–Yes, we too had a different preconception of this volunteer programme – Diana replied.

She in reality didn't know what to say. Walking beside her was a 17-year old boy, who viewed his teacher as a hope, while Diana – sick, moneyless because she had spent her last savings, and unemployed – couldn't even finish the promised English language course. What remained was only this windy February night, the walk from the orphanage to Imad's house and the bitter conversation. Uncertainty about tomorrow. Then they stopped at Imad's house and for a brief while stood facing each other.

–Teacher, get well and come back – Juzef urged. Diana smiled feebly.

–Really, teacher. All of us will be waiting for you – His face was serious. As were his words. In the boy's brown eyes one could see sadness had settled and just a glimmer of hope. Diana did not want to extinguish the latter.

–I hope... I truly hope that I'll return.

Diana approached the boy and hugged him. It was an awkward but a warm moment that the boy had not expected and Diana understood that such moments were rare for Juzef. He had never seen his parents.

–Will you know the way back? – Diana worried.

–I'll know. – His cheeks glowed blushing. He smiled shyly. –Thank you teacher – he said and vanished in the dark Kenitra streets.

The night before her departure, Fatima coughed so violently that the dishes rattled and the entry door shook. Diana got up at seven a.m. and like every morning the woman, on seeing her awake, began to set the breakfast table. Diana

drank two *kanakas* of coffee and ate the bread soaked in olive oil. With each passing moment she felt more guilty eating the food that had been provided by needy, but generous hands in the narrowest kitchen Diana had ever seen. The last breakfast. As Diana put on the same damp sneakers, she felt Fatima's hands on her back. She glanced behind her. The old women held in her hands a pair of bright green cotton socks. With sincerity shining in her eyes Fatima handed them to Diana. Imad, who was already standing at the door, translated what his mother was saying.

–This is my mother's gift for you. She's very sorry, that you fell ill, but she would like you to always in the future have dry feet.

Diana thanked the old woman. She squeezed her hand and then let herself be clasped in a warm embrace. Imad's brother Muhammad was also there. He too shook her hand in farewell.

–You always are welcome to come back, but you have to come in the summer-

time when it's warmer – Imad continued to translate Fatima's words of farewell. Diana agreed, with a last look into Fatima's bright eyes. Then the door between Fatima and Diana closed, and Diana accompanied by Imad headed for the railway station, from which the girl was to depart. For the last time Diana expressed her enthusiasm about the orange trees, whose beautiful orange fruit elegantly sat costumed in green leaves. If one did not taste them, one would never know that they were sour.

–Imad – Diana had a sudden thought. –I'd like to pick one orange to take back home.

–Why would you? You already saw how sour and inedible they are. Then it would be better if you bought some sweet ones at the market.

–No, I want the ones from the tree. – They are Morocco's oranges! Kenitra's oranges, the girl thought to herself, ran to the tree and jumping up extended her arm and picked a sour orange.

شيء عن "ناتالي"

سيد إسماعيل. فلسطين

" هل تعرف لم أنت هنا؟؟ "، جاءني صوت المحقق العميق من مكان جلوسه أمامي، فيما كنتُ جالساً على كرسي غير مريح، مقيد اليدين إلى الخلف، معصوب العينين بقوة. وجدتُ نفسي أهتف داخل جدران ذاتي: "ليتنى أعرف..!" طوال ذلك الوقت كان سؤال يَدُكُ رأسي بقسوة: ما الذي فعلته لكي أعتقل في مقر جهاز الأمن الداخلي، التابع لحكومة غزة؟! أنا مجرد ميكانيكي "غلبان"، أسعى وراء لقمة عيشي، وكل شخص في مخيم الشاطئ للاجئين في مدينة غزة حيث أسكن يعرف هذا الأمر جيداً. لم أعتنق أي فكر سياسي أو ديني، ولم أنتم إلى أي تنظيم كان. لم يكن لي أي نشاط سياسي على الإطلاق. لمَ أنا هنا إذن؟!

لقد بدأ المحقق بمجرد دخوله غرفة التحقيق بأسئلة عامة: أين تسكن؟ ماذا تعمل؟ هل أتممتَ دراستك الجامعية؟ أين أتممتها؟ قبل أن يضيف سؤاله الأخير.

كرر السؤال ذاته مرة أخرى: " لقد سألتك: هل تعرف لم أنت هنا؟؟ ".

- لا والله.

- كيف هي علاقتك مع الفرنسيين؟ أقصد الفرنسيات؟؟

قالها بلهجة ساحرة، فيما بقيتُ أنا معتصماً بصمتي، وأنا أحاول حل هذا "اللوغاريتم": ما الذي يُلْمَح إليه هذا الرجل؟؟

وجدتُ لظمة قاسية على وجهي. المشكلة أنك لا تستطيع توقع من أين سنأتيك الضربة طالما أنك معصوب العينين. عاد صوته يأتيني من جديد: " أجب عن السؤال! ".

سألته بصوت ضعيف: " لم أفهم ما الذي تقصده يا سيدي؟؟ ".

كأنني ضغطتُ على زر ما بداخله، لتنهال علي الضربات والصفعات التي بدأ يصيها علي بعد أن نهض من مكانه، وهو يردد صارخاً: " أنتغابي معي يا حيوان؟ (ضربة) ها؟! (صفعة) تعتقد أنك ذكي؟! (ضربة أخرى).."، وهكذا دواليك.

لم أعد أحتمل المزيد بحق. قلتُ له: " لو سمحت توقف عن الضرب. والله العظيم أنا لا أفهم عم تتحدث .. يا سيدي اسألني سؤالاً مباشراً وسأجيبك.. ".

- ما هو نوع العلاقة بينك وبين ناتالي؟

اسمها وحده نقلني إلى عالم آخر. أشعر برأسي يدور حول ذاته كالمروحة. كسرتُ حاجز الصمت الذي خيم على الغرفة، وأنا أردد اسمها: " ناتالي؟؟ "

- نعم يا حبيبي: ناتالي لوفري.. أتعرفها أم لا؟؟ "

من أين يعرف اسم ناتالي واسم عائلتها أيضاً؟! لا أحد يعرف بعلاقتي معها سوى والدتي بالتبني وحدها.

أجبتُهُ: " مجرد صديقة على "الفيس بوك" .. "

يبدو أنني ضغطتُ على زر اللطامات والضربات من جديد! توقف قبل أن يجذبنني من ياقة قميصي بقوة: " أيها الحثالة هل ستمثل دور الغبي معي؟! قل لي ما هي طبيعة العلاقة بينكما بالضبط؟! "

قلتُ له بصوت لاهت: " هي صديقتي على "الفيس بوك". حدث بيننا إعجاب قوي، وتعلق كلانا بالآخر. تحدثتُ معها مطولاً عبر "الفيس بوك" و"السكايب" .. ولكن لِمَ هذا السؤال؟ لِمَ تسألونني عنها هي بالضبط؟ "

أقلت ياقة قميصي، ليلقي "فئبلته" هذه المرة: " لقد أمسكنا بها بمجرد أن دخلت قطاع غزة عبر الأنفاق الحدودية مع مصر، ولما سألناها عن سبب قدومها إلى هنا قالت بالحرف الواحد: لقد أتيتُ من أجل رشيد أحمد..! ومن خلال المعلومات التي أعطتنا إياها خلال التحقيق معها، قمنا بتحرياتنا إلى أن وصلنا إليك. هل فهمت الآن؟ "

أصبح سرعة دوران رأسي أكبر. لأول مرة في حياتي أشعر بهذا الشعور. لم أعد أحتمل. شعرت بخطين من الدموع يواصلان طريقهما على ذقني غير الحليقة. لِمَ فعلت ذلك يا ناتالي؟! لم تخبريني بأنك ستحاولين فعلها أبدا!

- هاه؟؟ هل ستخبرني الآن بما لديك؟!!

انتزعتني صوته من دوامة تفكيري. سألتُهُ: " ماذا تريد أن تعرف؟؟؟ "

- قصتك مع ناتالي.. "من طقطق للسلام عليكم". بالمناسبة: أهي يهودية؟؟

- أبدأ. إنها مسيحية تنتمي للمذهب الكاثوليكي.

- إذن أبدأ بالحديث.. كلي آذان صاغية..

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كل شيء بدأ عبر "الفيس بوك" .. لو سألتني ذات يوم: ما هو أروع اختراع في القرن الحادي والعشرين؟؟ لأجبتك فوراً: "إنه الفيس بوك"! لقد أتاح لي أنا "المسجون" في قطاع غزة، والذي لم

يسافر في حياته، أن أعرف على آلاف البشر من الجنسين، بمختلف أقطار الأرض، وأن تصبح رؤيتي للعالم أكثر شمولاً..

ساعدتني معرفتي الجيدة باللغة الانجليزية بشكل كبير في التواصل مع الآخرين. كانت إضافة الأشخاص، خلال السنوات الأولى من عمل "الفييس بوك" سهلة للغاية، مما أتاح لي إضافة الكثيرين. لم يعد هذا الأمر متاحاً اليوم للأسف الشديد. لقد أهداني هذا "الاختراع المذهل" أعظم هدية حظيتُ بها في حياتي: ناتالي. رأيتُ صورتها للمرة الأولى في حسابها بـ"الفييس بوك". كانت جميلة حقاً: العينان واسعتان، تحار في لونهما إن كانا خضراوان أم رماديان أم مزيج من هذا وذاك! شعرها بني فاتح مائل للشقرة. الوجه أبيض ومستدير. كانت ابتسامتها في الصورة بأسنانها الناصعة وشفثيها الورديتين الممثلتين ساحرة بالفعل. أضفتها لقائمة أصدقائي من باب "التعارف" ليس إلا. لكنني لم أكن أتوقع أبداً إلى أين ستنتهي بنا الحكاية!

سألثني في أول محادثة بيننا: " من أين أنت؟ ". كَتَبْتُها بالإنجليزية التي كانت تكتبها وتتكلم بها بشكل صحيح وبلا أخطاء تقريباً.

- "من فلسطين"، كَتَبْتُ لها. رَدَّتْ بسؤال آخر: " فلسطين؟ أين يقع هذا البلد؟؟ " .

كثيراً ما قابلتُ هذا السؤال في حواراتي مع الأجانب بشكل عام، وخاصة من الشباب صغار السن. أحببتها على سؤالها بأفضل ما أستطيع، قبل أن أسألها بدورها عن بلدها، فأجابت: " فرنسا".

كانت هي أول صديقة فرنسية أتعرف عليها، كما كانت فرنسا بالنسبة لي بلداً يحظى بسمعة أسطورية: إن به باريس، هذه العاصمة التي تعد مضرب المثل في الجمال والروعة. يكفي أن بها برج "إيفل"! هذه التحفة التي لا مثيل لها من وجهة نظري.

سألتها: " من أي مدينة أنت بفرنسا؟"

- " من مدينة ديجون..".

كانت المرة الأولى التي أسمع بها بهذه المدينة. طلبتُ منها من باب الزيادة في التعارف أن تحدثني عنها أكثر، فراحت تخبرني بالمزيد: إنها أكبر مدن مقاطعة "كوت دور"، الواقعة بإقليم "بورغونيا". حكّت لي عن ذاتها: هي من أسرة غنية، تقطن ببيت جميل بديجون، أرثني صُورَه: كان عبارة عن "فيلا" ضخمة، والتي أظن أنها تفوق بيتي في المساحة بعشرين مرة على الأقل! كما أخبرتني أنها تدرس في كلية الحقوق بالجامعة.

أرسلت إلي ناتالي عدة صور لمدينتها الموجودة شمال فرنسا. كانت مدينة رائعة بحق: تختلف طرز البناء بين كل حي وآخر. كانت مدينة ساحرة بمبانيها المتنوعة ما بين الطراز القوطي، بعضها الآخر بني بعصر النهضة، فيما كان هنالك الكثير من المنازل المبنية في القرن الثامن عشر. رُحْتُ أبحث عبر "جوجل" على المزيد من المعلومات عن ديجون: كانت قد احتلت مرتين في تاريخها، المرة

الأولى خلال الحرب الفرنسية- البروسية عام 1870، والمرة الأخرى خلال الحرب العالمية الثانية من قبل الألمان منذ عام 1941. لقد ذاقتم طعم الاحتلال إذن مثل بلادي!

أخبرتني ناتالي بأن مدينتهم مشهورة بـ"المسطردة"! هذا "المنتج" الذي لم "أكتشفه" إلا بعد وقت طويل من تلك المحادثة، فقد كان الحصار الإسرائيلي وقتها شديداً على قطاع غزة، وكانت الأصناف التي تدخل إلينا عبر المعابر محدودة للغاية، لدرجة أن المياه الغازية و"الشوكولاتة" و"الشيس" و"المكرونه" كانت أشياء نراها في التلفاز فقط، إن وُجِدَتْ الكهرباء أصلاً!!

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في بداية علاقتنا سوية، سألتني يوماً: "رشيد. لم تخبرني الكثير عن حياتك؟"

وجدتني أسرد كل شيء ترغب بمعرفته. حدثتها عن مكان ميلادي: "القرية السويدية" الواقعة أمام ساحل البحر، عند بقعة مجاورة للأسلاك الحدودية بين قطاع غزة ومصر. القرية عبارة عن عشرات الأكواخ القذرة، التي لم تزد مساحة أي منها عن أربعين متراً مربعاً، مسقوفة إما بألواح الصفيح المعروفة بـ"الزينكو"، أو ألواح "الإسبست" التعسة التي لم تكن تقينا جميعها برد الشتاء أو هجير الصيف. لم يكن هنالك بلاط لبيتنا، بل كانت الأرض مكونة من الإسمنت فقط. لم تكن هنالك حولنا مرافق للعب أو مستشفيات أو حتى عيادة صغيرة. أخبرتها كيف كنتُ أقطع الطريق الطويل يومياً إلى مدرستي التي كانت تبعد عن قريتنا عدة كيلومترات وأنا حافي القدمين، مهما كانت ظروف الطقس. كنتُ الابن البكر لوالدي، اللذين لم يرزقا بأطفال غيري، وكان هذا الأمر غريباً بالفعل في قريتنا التي لا يقل عدد الأطفال في أي أسرة بها في الغالب عن خمسة! إلا أن السبب هو أن والدتي كانت مريضة بشدة، ولم أستطع وأنا بعد في ذلك السن الصغير معرفة كنه مرضها المجهول بالنسبة لي حتى اليوم!

أخبرتها كيف أصبحتُ يتيم الأبوين: توفي والدي في حادث غامض خلال رحلة عمل معتادة له كصياد، فيما لحقته أُمي المريضة بعدها بشهور معدودة. لم تحتمل صحتها المنهارة هذه الصدمة. هكذا فقدتُ والدي وأنا في سن السابعة. أخبرتها أيضاً كيف تركتُ قريتي عندما أرسلني أعمامي إلى دار لرعاية الأيتام، قضيتُ فيها أربعة أعوام، دون أن أرى أيًا منهم إلا خلال الأعياد أو المناسبات. كنتُ قد تحولتُ إلى طفل هادئ وصموت وكثير كالقبر تماماً، فلما عرفتُ الابتسامة طريقها إلى وجهي. إلى أن حل أبو غالب في حياتي: كان عمره وقتها في منتصف العقد الخامس، وقد جاء إلى صديقه، الذي كان مدير دار الرعاية، كي يتبنى هو وزوجته طفلاً منها، لأن أبا غالب لم يكن قادراً على الإنجاب. زكّاني له المشرفون الذي رأوا فيّ "طفلاً هادئاً وذكياً". استطاع تسوية مسألة التبني مع أقاربي، ولأول مرة عشتُ أحلى لحظات السعادة في عمري مع عائلتي الجديدة.

كان واضحاً بأن قصتي استهوتها بشكل كبير، فراحت تسألني عن المزيد من تفاصيل حياتي، فرحتُ أخبرها: حكيتُ لها كيف تولى أبو غالب وزوجته مسألة رعايتي، حيث انتقلتُ إلى منزلهما الكائن بمخيم الشاطئ للاجئين بمدينة غزة. كانت المرة الأولى في حياتي التي أشعر فيها بأني جزء من "أسرة حقيقية" تقلق علي: لدي أب وأم لم يعاملاني قط كابن متبنى لهما. شيئاً فشيئاً انغمستُ في عالم أبي غالب، حتى أنه صار يصطحبني خلال الإجازات الصيفية ليعلمني أسرار "الصنعة"، التي

تشربتها خلال وقت قياسي، لدرجة أنني أصبحت "ميكانيكياً محترفاً" بشهادته هو، وأنا في السنة الأولى بالجامعة!

كان عام 2007 عاماً حزيناً لي، ليس بسبب الاشتباكات الدموية التي وقعت بين حركتي فتح وحماس فقط، ولا لأن الانقسام بين الضفة الغربية وقطاع غزة قد حدث في منتصفه فحسب، بل هناك ما زاد الحياة سواداً بالنسبة لي: وفاة أبي غالب. هكذا أصبحت يتيماً للمرة الثانية.

كان الجو دافئاً يومها، رغم أننا كنا في أواخر شهر ديسمبر. بصعوبة بالغة أخرجنا جثمانه من أزقة مخيم الشاطئ للاجئين حيث كان منزلنا، الواقع أمام زقاق لا يزيد عرضه عن متر واحد تقريباً. لو كنتَ بديناً لكان من المستحيل أن تلج زقاقنا ذلك. بصعوبة تدبرتُ شاحنة بمبلغ باهظ لنقل الجثمان برفقة عدد محدود من الأهل والأصحاب لكي ننقله إلى المقبرة، فالحصار قد بدأ منذ شهور، وكانت هنالك أزمة شديدة في المحروقات كافة. لم يكن هنالك مواد بناء في الأسواق لبناء قبره بشكل لائق. حتى كفته الأبيض تدبرنا أمره بصعوبة. لم تكن ظاهرة تهريب ما نحتاجه من البضائع عبر الأنفاق الحدودية مع مصر قد ظهرت للوجود بعد..

بوفاة أبي غالب، أصبح حملي ثقيلاً بالفعل: كان علي تولي شؤون الورشة، للإنفاق على نفسي وأمي. لم أكن قد عرفتك بعد يا ناتالي. كان مقدرًا لي أن أعرفك بعدها بشهور، وقبل العدوان الإسرائيلي على غزة بفترة وجيزة، والذي جرى أواخر عام 2008. ما لا أنساه لك أبداً هو تواصلك المستمر معي خلال عبر "الفيس بوك"، بقدر ما كانت تسمح لنا الكهرباء التي كانت "مقطوعة" جُلَّ الوقت.

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ازداد تعلقنا ببعضنا البعض إلى أبعد حد يمكنك تخيله: كنا نمضي ساعات طوال أحياناً، بعد رجوعها من الجامعة، حيث انتهت هي من دراسة الليسانس خلال سنوات صداقتنا، لتقوم بإكمال دراستها العليا بـ"الماستر"، فيما أكون قد رجعتُ من ورشة الميكانيكا، منهكاً متعباً لكنني كنتُ "عطشاً" إلى لقائها دوماً!

فاتحتني أمي بالتبني بموضوع الزواج مراراً بالعبارة ذاتها: "أريد أن أفرح بك يا ولدي قبل أن أموت! أنا على استعداد أن أبيع حُلِّي الذهبية، ولدي مبلغ ادخرته من المال. لا بأس به لكنه يكفي بإذن الله للتكليف بتكاليف زواجك من "بنت الحلال". حيث ستسكن أنت وإياها معي بهذا المنزل، فما رأيك؟؟". رحنتُ أتهرب منها كلما حاولت فتح الموضوع معي مجدداً. كانت قد مضت على علاقتي بناتالي أكثر من أربع سنوات. لقد صار ملحوظاً تعلق كل منا بالآخر إلى حد كبير. لذا، قررتُ أن أحدثُ أمي عنها للمرة الأولى، بعد أن بقيت علاقتي معها سري الخاص الذي لا يعرفه أحد سواي. فوجئتُ بموقفها المعارض حتى لمجرد التفكير بالزواج من ناتالي: "يا بني هذه الفتاة "مش من توبنا ولا إنتا من توبها". هي مسيحية وأنت مسلم. هي تقيم في فرنسا بـ"فيلا" أقرب إلى القصور، وأنت تعيش في بيت بائس بالمخيم. هي ابنة أسرة غنية اعتادت على الأبهة و"الفخخة"، وأنت يتيم ذقت مرارة البؤس والعوز منذ الطفولة. ثقافتها ليست كثقافتك أو عاداتك. هل فاتحتها بالموضوع؟؟ هل أنت واثق بأنها ستقبل المجيء إلى غزة وأن تحيا معنا هنا، في بيتنا البائس هذا؟؟". لما وجدنتي ممتنعاً عن

الجواب، واصلت هي: " كن عاقلاً يا ولدي وانسها. ابحث عن فتاة أخرى تقبل الزواج بك، ولتكن من غزة. دعك من الأوهام والخيال ..".

المشكلة أن كلامها كان منطقياً تماماً! لقد اكتشفتُ أنني كنتُ أحيا في "الأحلام الوردية" كل تلك المدة، متناسياً "سواد الواقع الكابوسي" الذي أحيا به! بعد هذه المحادثة، لم أحظ بنوم هائئٍ لأسابيع، وأنا أفكر إلى أين ستنتهي هذه العلاقة العجيبة بيننا نحن الاثنين. في النهاية قمتُ باتخاذ قرارٍ نهائي، وفعلتُ التالي: أرسلتُ إلى ناتالي رسالتي الأخيرة والتي كان مفادها بأن علاقتنا لا يمكن أن تستمر، فكل منا لديه دينه وعاداته وتقاليده المختلفة تماماً عن الآخر. دُكرتُها في رسالتي بطروفي "الكارثية" التي تعرفها جيداً، وأنها تحيا في "الجنة"، فيما ظروف حياتي بغزة أقرب إلى الحياة بـ"جحيم" معسكرات الاعتقال. لا مجال للالتقاء بيننا أبداً.. ذلك مستحيل. قمتُ بعدها بحذفها من قائمة أصدقائي بـ"الفيس بوك". وتجاهلتُ تماماً كافة رسائلها التي أرسلتها لاستعطافي وسؤالي عما حدث. قالت لي في إحداهما: " أنا أحبك يا رشيد وأنت تحبني فلم تعذب نفسك وتعذبني؟! ". لم أرد. طالما أن حبنا محكوم عليه بالموت، فليمتُ الآن! سنتعذب قليلاً، لكن النتيجة ستكون أفضل لكينا. هي جميلة تستطيع أن تجد ألف شاب بديجون يتمنونها، خاصة وأنها غنية أيضاً. أما أنا فشاب فلسطيني تعس يحيا بغزة، ويبحث عن رزقه من خلال ورشته، في ظل بطالة كاسحة جعلت من شهادتي الجامعية مجرد ورقة لا قيمة لها. تَوَقَّعتُ عن الكتابة لي، فيما واصلتُ أنا حياتي المغمسة بالعذاب المستمر. أه يا ناتالي! يا عذابي الأزلي. ليتك رأيتني بعدها كيف تعذبتُ طويلاً بسبب قرارٍ هذا. ولكن ما كان يعزيني أنني كحبتُ جراح نفسي كي تُسعدَ هي مع شخص آخر غيري. لكنني فوجئتُ بأنها تحبني إلى هذا الحد، وأن هذه "المجنونة" قد أتتُ إلى غزة من أجلي أنا! لقد كان هذا آخر ما كنتُ أتوقعه..!!

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استمع المحقق إلى حكايتي التي لم يقاطعني خلالها أبداً. كم مضى علي وأنا مستمر في سردها؟ لست أدري. لكنني لمستُ مع انتهاء الحرف الأخير منها مدى تعاطفه الشديد معي و"معها" في الوقت ذاته. قال لي: " لا بأس. سيتم إخلاء سبيلك اليوم يا رشيد. نحن آسفون لإزعاجك..". شعرتُ به ينهض من مكانه قبالي. صحتُ به: " لحظة يا سيدي! ما الذي حدث مع ناتالي بعد أن قمتُ بالإمساك بها؟ ".

- هل أنت مُصيرٌ على معرفة ذلك؟

- بالتأكيد..

التقط نفساً عميقاً، أطلق بعده زفرة طويلة في هواء الغرفة، وهو يجيب: " بعد التحقيق معها، قمنا بتسليمها لأجهزة الأمن المصرية. لقد تسللت إلى قطاع غزة، ولم يكن لديها أي تنسيق مع الجانب المصري يخولها بالقدوم إلى هنا. أتوقع أنه قد تم ترحيلها بعد تدخل سفارة بلادها بالقاهرة، لذا لا تقلق بهذا الشأن. إنها في نهاية الأمر "أجنبية"، وتنتمي إلى دولة ذات ثقل ومكانة كبيرين في العالم. لكنني أتوقع أيضاً أن اسمها سيوضع في "القائمة السوداء"، مما يعني عملياً أنها لن تتمكن بعد ذلك من دخول الأراضي المصرية.. لوقت طويل على الأقل".

تركني الرجل بعدها وسط دوامة أفكارني، ولم أزل مقيداً معصوب العينين بعد. سامحك الله يا ناتالي! لم فعلت ذلك؟ برغم كل شيء، سأظل أحبك إلى أن ألج مثواي الأخير. حبك هو قدرني الذي لا مهرب منه. بدأت بعدها أفكر: ما الذي ينبغي علي فعله عندما يفكون قيودي ويدعونني أرحل من هذا السجن؟ هل أرسل لك رسالة أطلب منك فيها مسامحتي عن كل الآلام والمعاناة التي تسببت لك بها؟ أم أمضي في حياتي التعسة، وأترك الأمور كما هي كيلا أزيد من ألامك أكثر؟؟ لست أدري ماذا سأفعل.. حقيقة لست أدري..

Something about Natalie

Sayed Ismail. Palestina

–Do you know why you are here?

This was the investigator’s deep voice... He was sitting in front of me while I was sitting on an uncomfortable chair, handcuffed to the back and strongly blindfolded. I found myself crying inside the walls of myself: “I wish I know!” During that time there was a question harshly hitting my head: What have I done to be arrested at the headquarters of the Internal Security of Gaza Government? I’m just a “poor” mechanic, seeking my living, and everyone in Al Shatiaa refugee camp in Gaza City – where I live – knows this well. I do not adopt any political or religious ideology/thought and did not belong to any organization. I never had any political activity. Why I’m here, then?

Once he entered the interrogation room, the investigator began with general questions: Where do you live? What do you do? Have you finished your university studies? Where? Before adding his last question. He repeated the same question:

–I’ve asked you: Do you know why you’re here?

–No, I swear.

–How is your relationship with the French? I mean the Frenchwomen?

He said it in a sarcastic tone while I held firmly to my silence and tried to solve this “logarithm”: What does this man refer to?

A harsh blow hit my face. The problem is that you cannot expect from where the blow will come as long as you’re blindfolded. His voice comes to me again:

–Answer the question!

I asked him faintly:

–I did not understand what you mean, Sir.

The matter seemed as if I pressed a button inside him; blows and slaps were poured on me after he got up from his place. He was shouting:

–Do you pretend stupidity before me, you idiot? (blow) Hey?(slap) Do you think you’re smart?! (another blow) – And so forth.

I really no longer endure more blows and slaps. I told him:

–Please, stop that. I swear I do not understand what you are talking about. Sir, ask me a direct question and I will answer you.

–What is the kind of relationship between you and Natalie?

Her name alone took me to another world. I feel my head spins like a fan. I broke the silence that reigned the room by repeating her name:

–Natalie?

–Yes, my dear: Natalie Lovri... Do you know her or not?

From where he knows the name of Natalie and her family name too? No one knows my relationship with her except my adoptive mother.

I replied:

–She is just a Facebook friend.

It seems that I pressed the button of blows and strikes again! He stopped before he strongly grabs the collar of my shirt:

–You scum, will you pretend foolishness before me? Tell me what is the exact nature of your relationship with her.

I answered with a gasping voice:

–She is my Facebook friend. We strongly admired each other; we were attached to each other. I had long chats with her on the Facebook and Skype. But why is this question? Why you ask me about her?

He left the collar of my shirt to throw “his bomb” this time:

–We have arrested her as soon as she stepped inside the Gaza Strip through the frontier tunnels with Egypt, and when we asked her about the reason of her coming here, she said literally: “I have come for the sake of Rasheed Ahmed”. Through the information she gave to us during the interrogation, we carried out our investigations till we reached you. Do you understand now?

The spin I feel becomes faster. For the first time in my life I feel such feeling. I could not bear it anymore. I felt two lines of tears continue their way on my unshaved chin. Why did you do that, Natalie? Why did not you tell me that you will do it?

–Hey? Will you tell me now what you know?

His voice returned me to the reality. I asked him:

–What do you want to know?

–Your story with Natalie from A to Z. By the way: is she a Jewish?

–Never. She is a Christian belonging to the Catholic doctrine.

–So start talking. I’m all ears.

Everything started via Facebook. If you ask me one day: What is the most wonderful invention in the twenty first century? I will immediately answer you: It is the Facebook! It had allowed me – the “imprisoned” in the Gaza Strip and who had never travelled in his life – to know thousands of people of both sexes in various countries in addition to making my vision of the world a more inclusive one. My good command of English helped me greatly to communicate with others. During the first years of the work of the Facebook, the friends’ addition was very easy and this allowed me to add many. Unfortunately, this is no longer available today. This astounding invention granted me the greatest gift in my life: Natalie. I saw her image

for the first time in her Facebook account. She was really beautiful: she had wide eyes whose color perplexes you; you do not know whether they are green or grey or a combination of both colors! Her hair is light brown, tending to be blond. She has a white rounded face. Her smile in the picture with her clear teeth and rosy full lips was really captivating. I added her to my list of friends only for making acquaintance. But I never expected where our story will end! In our first chat, she asked me:

–Where are you from?

She wrote it in English which she writes and speaks correctly, almost without errors. I wrote to her:

–Palestine.

She replied with another question:

–Palestine? Where is this country?

I often met this question in my chats with foreigners in general, and especially from young men. I replied to her question as best as I could before you asking her, in turn, about her country. She answered:

–France.

She was the first French friend to know. Besides, France was, for me, a country enjoying a legendary reputation: it comprises Paris, this capital exemplary in beauty and splendor. Suffice it has the Eiffel Tower; this unmatched masterpiece, from my point of view. I asked her:

–In what city are you living in France?

She said:

–In Dijon.

It was the first time to hear about this city. To increase our acquaintance, I asked her to tell me more about it and so she did: It is the largest city in Côte-d’Or province, located in Burgundy territory. She told me about herself: she is from a wealthy family and lives in a beautiful house in Dijon of which she showed me its pictures: It was a huge villa which I think its surface area exceeds

my house with at least twenty times! She also told me that she studies at the Faculty of Law. Natalie sent to me several pictures of her city located in northern France. It was really a wonderful city: the construction models vary in each district. It was a charming city with its diverse buildings: some were built according to the Gothic model while others according to the Renaissance and there were a lot of houses built in the eighteenth century. I started searching via Google for more information about Dijon: it was occupied twice in its history; the first time during the French-Prussian war in 1870, and the second during the Second World War by the Germans since 1941. Thus, it has tasted occupation like my country! Natalie told me that her city is famous for mustard; this product which I only discovered after a long time of that chat. The Israeli siege of the Gaza Strip at that time was severe, and the food items permitted through the crossings were extremely limited, to the extent that the carbonated water, chocolate, chips and macaroni were only seen on TV, if there was electricity ever! At the beginning of our relationship, she asked me that day:

–Rasheed, why did not you tell me a lot about your life?

I found myself recounting everything she likes to know. I told her about my birth place: the Swedish Village located in front of the sea coast, at a spot adjacent to the frontier wires between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. The village composes of dozens of dirty huts of which the surface area of each does not exceed forty square meters. These huts are roofed either by tin plates known as *zinco* or the *asbestos* unfortunate plates, and all did not protect us from the winter coldness or the summer heat. There were no floor tiles in our house; otherwise the floor was only composed of cement. There were not any amusement facilities, hospitals, or even a small clinic around us. I told her how

I walked via a long road every day to my school which was several kilometers far from our village while I am a barefoot, whatever the weather conditions were. I was the eldest son of my parents who did not have other children, and this was in fact strange in our village as the least number of children in any family was five! However, the reason is that my mother was severely ill, and I could not know in that young age the essence of her unknown illness till today. I told her how I became an orphan: My father died in a mysterious accident during a usual business trip as a fisherman, while my ill mother followed him a few months later. Her collapsed health could not bear this shock. And thus, I lost my parents at the age of seven. Moreover, I told her how I left my village when my uncles sent me to an orphanage where I spent four years without seeing any of them except during feasts or occasions. I had turned into a quiet, silent and depressive child exactly like the grave; the smile rarely knew her way to my face. This continued till Abu Ghalib enters my life: at that time he was in the middle of the fifth decade. He came to his friend, the orphanage manager, to adopt with his wife a child, for Abu Ghalib was sterile. The supervisors nominated me to him; they saw in me a “quiet and intelligent child.” He was able to settle the matter of adoption with my relatives, and for the first time I lived the happiest moments in my life with my new family. It was clear that my story attracted her to a great extent; she continued to ask me about more details in my life, I told her: I narrated to her how Abu Ghalib and his wife cared for me when I moved to their house in Al Shatiaa refugee camp in Gaza City. It was the first time in my life to feel that I am part of a real family that is concerned with me: I have a father and mother who never treated me as an adopted child. I was gradually immersed in the world of Abu Ghalib; I even accom-

panied him during the summer vacations to be taught the secrets of workmanship which I learned in record time and he witnessed that I became a professional mechanic while I was in the first year at the university! The year 2007 was sad to me, not only because of the bloody clashes that took place between Fatah and Hamas; not only because the division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip took place only in the middle, but also because of something which increases the life blackness before me: the death of Abu Ghalib. Thus I became an orphan for the second time. It was a warm day, though we were in late December. We took his corpse with great difficulty out of the alleys of Al Shatiaa refugee camp where our house is located in front of an alley whose width does not exceed almost one meter. If you were fat, it will be thus impossible to enter our alley. We hardly obtained a truck with an exorbitant amount to transport the corpse – accompanied by a limited number of family members and friends – to the cemetery. The siege began months ago and there was a severe crisis in all fuels. There were no building materials in the markets in order to properly construct his tomb. Even his white shroud was obtained with difficulty. The phenomenon of smuggling the goods we need via the frontier tunnels with Egypt was not yet known. By the death of Abu Ghalib, I had indeed a heavy burden: I had to take over the workshop affairs to provide money for myself and for my mother. I had not yet known you, Natalie. It was destined to know you months later, and shortly before the Israeli aggression on Gaza which took place in late 2008. What I can never forget is your continuous contact with me via Facebook upon the presence of electricity which was cut off most of the time. Our relationship became stronger as far as you can imagine: sometimes we spend long hours after her return from the university. She finished the licentiate studies during

the years of our friendship and she completes the postgraduate studies till I return from the workshop, exhausted, tired. But I was always “thirsty” to meet her! My adoptive mother repeatedly talked with me on marriage, always with the same phrase:

–I want to feel assured before I die! I am willing to sell my jewelry; I have an amount of money. It is not a large sum but it is enough, God willing, for the costs of marrying “a good wife”. You both will live with me in this house, what do you think?

I evaded her whenever she tried to talk with me on that subject. At that time I had been knowing Natalie for more than four years. Our strong attachment to each other became to a large extent remarkable. So, I decided to talk about her with my mother for the first time, after our relationship remained my special secret which no one knows except me. I was surprised by her opposing attitude regarding even just thinking of marrying Natalie:

–My son, this girl is not your equivalent and so are you. She is a Christian while you are a Muslim. She is living in France in a villa resembling palaces and you live in a miserable house in the camp. She is the daughter of a wealthy family accustomed to pomp and splendor while you are an orphan who tasted the bitterness of misery and destitution since childhood. Her culture is not like yours or your habits. Have you talked with her on that subject? Are you sure that she will accept to come to Gaza and live with us here, in our miserable house?

When I refused to answer, she continued:

–Be wise, my son, and forget her. Find another girl who will agree to marry you, and let she be from Gaza. Forget illusions and fantasies.

The problem is that her words were quite logical! I’ve discovered that I was living in rosy dreams during all that period, al-

most oblivious to the blackness of the nightmarish reality in which I live! After this conversation, I did not enjoy blissful sleep for weeks as I was thinking where this bizarre relationship will end. In the end, I have made my final decision and I did the following: I sent my last message to Natalie; its significance was that our relationship cannot continue. Each of us has his religion, customs and traditions which are quite different from the other. I reminded her of my catastrophic situation which she knows well, and that she lives in paradise while my life in Gaza is closer to life in the hell of concentration camps. There is no common factor between us... This is impossible. I then deleted her from my Facebook friends list and I completely ignored all her messages in which she sentimentalizes and asks me about what happened. In one of them she said:

–I love you, Rasheed, and you love me, so why you torture yourself and torture me as well?

I did not answer. As long as our love is doomed to death, let it die now! We will be tormented a little bit, but the result will be better for both of us. She is beautiful and can find thousands of young people in Dijon who desire to marry her, especially as she is also rich. As for me, I am an unfortunate Palestinian living in Gaza and earning his living from his workshop under sweeping unemployment which made my university degree just a worthless paper. She stopped writing to me while I continued my life immersed in constant torment. Oh, Natalie! Oh my eternal torture. I wish you have witnessed how long I was agonized because of my decision. But what was solacing me is that I controlled myself so that you could be happy with someone else. But I was surprised to know that she loves me to this extent, and that this crazy came to Gaza for my sake! This was the last thing I expected.

The investigator listened to my story and did not interrupt me. How long have I sat while narrating it? I do not know. But with the end of the last letter, I perceived his extreme sympathy with both of us. He told me:

–Never mind. You will be released today, Rasheed. We're sorry for bothering you.

I felt him standing up from his place opposite to me. I shouted to him:

–One moment, Sir! What happened to Natalie after you arrested her?

–Do you insist to know?

–Certainly...

He took a deep breath after which he released a long exhalation in the room air and answered:

–After investigating her, we handed her over to the Egyptian security services. She penetrated into the Gaza Strip without any coordination with the Egyptian side which authorizes her to come here. I expect that she will be deported after the intervention of the embassy of her country in Cairo, so do not worry. In the end, she is a foreigner and belongs to a state enjoying great significance and status in the world. But I also expect that her name will be placed in the black list, which practically means that she will not be able to enter the Egyptian territories ... for a long time at least.

Then the man let me amid my thoughts, and I was still handcuffed and blindfolded. May God forgive you, Natalie! Why did you do that? Despite everything, I will continue to love you till I go to my final resting place. Your love is my inescapable fate. Then I began thinking: What should I do when they take off my handcuffs and release me of this prison? Do I send her a message asking her to forgive me for all the pain and suffering I caused to her? Or do I continue my miserable life and leave things as they are so as not to increase her pain? I do not know what to do... Really, I do not know...

Papel Decalcado

Ana Do Vale Lázaro. Portugal

Sabes quando eramos crianças, e decalcávamos um objecto sob um papel... com uma moeda?

A pouco e pouco iam surgindo as formas e os contornos sob a superfície branca e vazia...

Sabes quando debaixo dos dedos a rugosidade aparece como um jogo interminável de uma fábula contada em braille...

Sabes aquela sensação de entender o mundo com o tacto, de colocar a atenção na ponta dos dedos, para encontrar na impressão digital todos os segredos das coisas...

Lembras-te do silêncio dessa expectativa, o sorriso a espreitar do canto da boca enquanto a mãe na cozinha assava as batatas quentes...

Lembras-te de guardar a folha de papel com o desenho decalcado, e a moeda, mais precioso o primeiro do que a segunda: uma, o tesouro, a outra apenas o instrumento para o escavar.

Lembras-te de deixar o papel dias e dias, a tremer com o vento que entrava pela janela do quarto, a ganhar pó sobre as formas decalcadas, a ranger à passagem das nossas cabeças húmidas de sol e de brincadeira?

Lembras-te da voz do pai a chamar para irmos comer as batatas, a gritar mais alto, quando esquivos, fingíamos que as suas palavras tinham ficado perdidas por entre as árvores do campo, e não tinham chegado até nós. Lembras-te das mãos papudas dele, a puxarem as nossas orelhas de carne tenra, numa dor suportável perante o pecado saboroso de ganhar mais uns minutos de brincadeira?

Lembras-te, do bocado de terra e sangue do teu cotovelo arranhado, arrancados os pedacinhos microscópicos de pele, pela rasteira que te passei na minha ânsia de te roubar a bola. Lembras-te do carimbo que deixaste na folha branca feito de suor e de terra e de sangue, quando te atiraste a fazer fita sobre o beliche do quarto?

Lembras-te dos olhos escancarados do pai, e da palmada na minha cara, que tu espreitaste entre os dedos, arrependido de teres feito tanto alarido, sabendo de certeza que a força da palmada não era proporcional à dor do cotovelo raspado. Lembras-te de te ter cuspidido com a língua de fora quando o pai saiu do quarto, e das pequenas gotinhas de saliva terem voado disparadas para a folha branca com o desenho?

Lembras-te do desenho decalcado?

Eram dois paus com duas cabeças – dois paus que eram dois corpos, dois rapazes, nós!

Duas pedras que eram duas cabeças, duas caras de menino, dois irmãos, nós!

A moeda com que carreguei sobre os paus e as pedras, para decalcar o desenho, era uma moeda pequena e escura e cheirava a ferro. Deixava os dedos cheios desse cheiro, depois de a carregar sobre o papel.

Ainda tenho a moeda. Está no meu bolso. Ainda tenho o instrumento, mas já não tenho o tesouro...

Perdi o desenho quando nos mudámos da casa da avó. Quando vieram, estávamos a jogar à bola entre as árvores e a avó já tinha partido. Lembras-te? Nesse dia o pai não estava para ber-

rar por nós, para perdermos as palavras dele por entre as árvores. Só estava a mãe com o lenço na testa, e a cara molhada e os fardados a dizer que tínhamos de ir embora, que nem tive tempo de levar a folha para a casa pequena.

Será que voou entre a confusão? Ou ficou esquecida entre os móveis que ficaram da avó?

Na casa pequena que não havia espaço. Nem para os móveis velhos da avó, nem para o fogão das batatas da mãe, nem para os nossos beliches... “Só para o essencial” dizia o pai.

Às vezes parecia que não havia espaço para quase nada. Nem mesmo para alegria da mãe, ou para a voz do pai. Parecia que só havia espaço para palavras curtas. Não havia espaço para jogarmos à bola também, e ficávamos a rolar a moeda pelo chão do quarto.

Não havia pedras e pauzinhos para decalcar dois rapazes no papel.

Houve uma altura em que achei que a casa parecia enfeitada: parecia encolher cada vez mais. Dentro dela as coisas diminuía também: a roupa nos armários, pequenas para o nosso corpo de rapazes crescidos... Os brincos antigos da avó no guarda-jóias da mãe, as ferramentas do pai, as batatas no prato... Um dia bateram à porta os fardados e eu achei que nos iam levar para uma casa ainda mais minúscula. Só eu, tu, a mãe e o pai numa única cama. Mas não: entregaram uma carta. O pai não disse nada mas baixou a cabeça e deixou cair a voz para o chão. Nunca mais ouvi um berro do pai. Acho que a voz lhe caiu quando baixou a cabeça, e rebolou para debaixo dos móveis, como o papel do desenho...

Perguntámos o que se passava e ele, pôs as mãos papudas nos nossos ombros ossudos e disse que tínhamos de fazer o essencial. E eu não sabendo o que queria dizer essencial percebi que significava qualquer coisa que deixamos para trás para fazer outra coisa mais importante. Porque a escola já não era essencial. Então ficámos adultos com roupas de rapazes e fomos trabalhar.

E o pai ficou doente.

E mãe não tinha moedas para ir às batatas.

E o essencial não chegava.

Parecia que toda a terra estava enfeitada... Encolhia tudo: os ramais nos campos, as cores nas casas, a comida nos mercados, as pessoas nas ruas.

Parecia que havia cada vez menos pessoas.

E depois, havia menos moedas, e pareciam que só os bolsos ganhavam espaço.

Eu só tinha aquela moeda. Ainda a tenho.

Um dia a mãe entrou no nosso quarto – nesse dia não estavas lá. E eu percebi que havia um preço a cumprir por se nascer primeiro. Porque sem o pai saudável para tomar conta de nós, eu era o homem mais crescido da casa. E a mãe abriu a mão mágica cheia de moedas, e falou com os lábios a tremer como galhos na tempestade. E chamou-me “mais velho” e “homem feito” e disse-me que tinha de ter coragem. E apertou-me com as mãos geladas e deu-me as moedas quentes, que cheiravam a ferro e sujavam os dedos. E mandou-me embora.

E não deixou que tu chegasses, para não me veres partir. E disse que se voltasse para trás eu já não era seu filho, e eu engoli as palavras dela como se engole a seiva ácida de uma flor venenosa, que te amarga o estomago e deixa doente.

E levei as moedas e a roupas e as palavras dela, e fui-me embora pesado de dor e incompreensão.

Quando entrei na camioneta velha que saía em direção à fronteira, nenhum de vocês estava para assomar adeus à janela. Pensei no que te teria contado a mãe, e imaginei que tivesses

ficado zangado por veres que parti sem avisar. Como quando ficaste zangado por a avó ter ido embora sem sequer se despedir de nós. Mas desta vez era diferente – porque eu estava vivo, e sabia-te em casa, e por vezes o que mais desejava era ter comigo o papel com o nosso desenho decalcado, feito de paus e pedras...

Os homens do Stanislav estavam do outro lado da rua e olhavam para nós dentro da camioneta com a atenção vigilante de um pastor que conta o gado, e verifica que não perdeu nenhuma das suas criaturas. Um deles aproximou-se e bateu no vidro. Entregou-me um papel com um número.

–A tua mãe é uma mulher sensata – disse entre o bafo desdenhoso do cigarro – Contou com a nossa ajuda. Isto é quanto nos deves. São os juros a pagar por te darmos liberdade.

Olhei para as moedas na mão e contei-as. Pensei em quantos milagres de multiplicação elas teriam de sofrer, até atingirem aquele número escrito no papel. Senti o peito apertado e as roupas coladas ao corpo. E perguntei-me que espécie de liberdade me tinha comprado a mãe.

A camioneta arrancou e levou a minha angústia pela paisagem móvel. Nem reparei o quanto é bela a nossa terra. Nem me despedi dela, ficaram só guardadas, em recantos da memória, as imagens esquivas e embaciadas e que me esqueci de apreciar para lá da janela.

Quando nos largaram do outro lado da fronteira, tivemos de atravessar os campos a pé. E tínhamos de andar cautelosos, e de nos baixar para não sermos vistos, a escondíamo-nos nem percebia do quê, comportando-nos como rastejantes. Enquanto descansava deitado no chão com a boca seca, uma centopeia subiu para o meu sapato e coloquei-a sobre a palma da mão. Pensei em ti e nos teus olhos pestanudos e em quando contavas as patas das centopeias, desapontado por não serem exactamente cem:

–Esta centopeia está estragada! – dizias, enquanto eu sorria protector sobre as tuas desilusões matemáticas. Vi as tuas pestanas nas patas da centopeia, e por uns longos passos do trilho do campo imaginei que aquela centopeia eram os teus olhos pequenos a seguir-me no caminho.

Depois de atravessarmos o rio, encontrámos a carrinha grande e fechada que nos esperava como um grande bisonte pronto para nos devorar. Dentro do corpo do bisonte, estava escuro e fazia calor. Fechei os olhos para ter o meu próprio bocadinho de escuridão no meio dos corpos encolhidos e suados dos outros. Acabei por adormecer e correr por entre as arvores que guardavam a voz do pai.

Só nos largaram muitas horas abafadas depois, pela madrugada, em frente a um grande aglomerado de contentores no meio de um descampado.

Não tive medo.

Desse dia em diante foi uma enorme caminhada, por entre estradas desertas, terras sem nomes, plantações e rios secos pelo frio. Não olhava para trás dos ombros quando um barulho estranho rompia o silêncio do percurso, ou quando os motores de algum camião nocturno de olhos luminosos afrouxavam nos meus acampamentos improvisados rosnando como um cão de guarda. No entanto, de dia para dia a solidão aparecia como uma alergia que se espalha pelo corpo, e um a um contagia, todos os tecidos. Como daquela vez em que pisaste as urtigas com os pés descalços e os teus dedos dos pés ficaram vermelhos, e a comichão se estendia pelas palmas, pelos tornozelos e depois pelas pernas. Não conseguias andar e eu agarrei-te dobrado: um corpo pequeno a carregar um fardo quase do seu tamanho. Havia momentos em que a solidão parecia espalhar-se assim, desde o meu peito até aos dedos dos meus pés inchados e feridos. Nessas alturas mal conseguia pousar os pés no chão. Um formigueiro invadia-me o corpo, como se o

sangue corresse ao contrário. Como se em vez de avançar, o peso me puxasse para trás. Nessas alturas demorava mais tempo do que o habitual a carregar os quilómetros de estrada na coluna, a suportar o peso da mochila com as latas de comida e as roupas e os talheres que arranjei pelo caminho.

Quando cheguei ao frio do Natal decidi parar. Não tinha conseguido em tantas noites dar nome ao meu destino. Pensava que quando se empreendia uma jornada, havia sempre um fim definido. Mas não. A mãe não me dera um mapa, e os homens do Stanislav apareciam e desapreciam das cidades de paragem. E os outros que tinham ocupado a carrinha até à fronteira, dispersavam pelo horizonte desconhecido das paisagens. Nunca soubera o lugar exacto onde resgatar a minha liberdade. Onde reaver as moedas mágicas da mãe. E multiplicá-las noutras tantas. Aquele Natal tinha luzes contra a neve, e velas das janelas das casas. Pensei que era um bom destino para o meu percurso. Uma data, e não um lugar – tinha caminhado até ao Natal. Tinha-me guiado até uma cidade de casas enormes, e avenidas imaculadas, de pontes desenhadas a esquadro, como num postal do quiosque da vila. Havia comboios que rompiam por entre o final da tarde, atravessando o silêncio gelado da neve, e faziam tremer as passagens quentes debaixo do chão.

Pensei-me dentro de uma daquelas carruagens velozes, coberto de sacos e de moedas. Cheio de cadernos com páginas de papel branco para riscarmos e decalcarmos, e de batatas para a mãe. Imaginei a tosse do pai a diminuir de vez, e a sala a ficar maior para receber os meus sacos.

Naquela cidade, as madrugadas tinham um gelo que cobria até os pensamentos, e não deixava o a cabeça acalmar para o sono. Foi então que conheci o Ylli que me mostrou um lugar quente para a noite, e me apresentou ao patrão. Então ganhei uma pá para poder limpar a estrada, e romper a neve, e pouco e pouco ter moedas. Muitas vezes pensava que melhor tinha feito a mãe se te tivesse deixado vir comigo. O Ylli falava-me de um outro que era para ele assim como tu para mim, colados de nascença. Tinha-o acompanhado na viagem para vir até aquela cidade do Natal. Mas em vez de um bisonte de camioneta, tinham entrado num barco. E o mar, que não é tão previsível como a estrada, tinha virado o barco, e tinha roubado o irmão ao Ylli. Desde o dia em que ouvi sobre o mar do Ylli, nunca mais desejei que tivesses vindo. Não fosse a estrada roubar-te também. E prometi que iria rapidamente ganhar o essencial, para apanhar o comboio, para levar os sacos, para te dar os cadernos.

Mas nessa cidade, o inverno lento hipotecava os sonhos e o trabalho. Por muitas horas de trabalho árduo sobre as estradas de gelo, poucas noites de sono assegurado eu ganhava. E as moedas chegavam para pouco mais do que o meu sustento. Com a Primavera veio a Luz, e a neve desapareceu. Substitui a pá por uma tesoura e podava as ervas travessas que cresciam na beira da estrada. Com a luz os vizinhos começaram a reconhecer melhor as feições que eu guardava por baixo do capuz durante o Inverno. Começaram a medir melhor os gestos daquele vulto escuro de capuz que não lhes causara desconforto enquanto limpava as estradas à passagem dos seus carros aquecidos no Inverno. Um dia uma mulher de cestos de compras na mão, parou diante de mim e das ervas. Dirigi-me palavras incompreensíveis a que não soube responder e limitei-me a acenar com um gesto esquivo. A mulher olhou fixamente os meus olhos claros, olhos translúcidos onde se lê a nossa terra e afastou-se. Quando voltei a ouvir passos eram os dos guardas diante de mim, que me agarravam para levar numa carrinha moderna e para me pôr do lado de lá da Fronteira, definitivamente afastado da terra do Natal.

Com este desterro vieram outros, de outros vizinhos a denunciarem o meu esforço carente de documentos, pelas cidades fora.

Um dia os homens do Stanislav encontraram-me numa dessas cidades. Estava magro e cansado e por pouco não me reconheciam.

–O dinheiro tem chegado escasso à tua mãe... sem dinheiro, os contractos escrevem-se com sangue... – Agarraram-me pelo colarinho e atiraram-me um pacote de documentos –A ver se com os papéis te tornas mais ágil. Se a policia vier, mostras isto!

Foi o que fiz, mostrava os documentos enviados pelo Stanislav, quando a polícia chegava. Penhorada a minha liberdade, fui pagando a prestações a vida que queria resgatar. A um emprego somei outro, e aos dias somava as noites para trabalhar. A pouco e pouco multipliquei as moedas, conheci um homem bom que me pagava de direito, e uma mulher da nossa terra que revia os nossos campos nos meus olhos translúcidos, e me aqueceu com companhia.

Houve um dia, que me dirigi á estação dos correios. Não tinha sacos de prendas, mas um envelope cheio de dinheiro para vos enviar. Pedi à mãe que me devolvesse uma imagem vossa, uma fotografia do pai, dela, e de ti, risonho junto deles na promessa do futuro. Finalmente, chegou a carta. Dentro dela a fotografia esquecia o essencial. Só a mãe, vestida de escuro, sentada de olhos baixos junto ao pai na cama da sala. A casa mais pequena ainda, sem espaço para ti. Nas costas da fotografia as palavras amarguradas da mãe. Os empréstimos tinham um preço. Na ausência de prestações, os homens do Stanislav tinham-te levado: confiscavam um filho para assegurar a rentabilidade de outro... “sem dinheiro, os contractos escrevem-se com sangue”. Nunca tinhas regressado.

Olhei para a moeda dos desenhos, furioso por teres ido sem te despedires de mim. Voltei para a minha casa que crescia por magia, juntamente com a barriga da minha esposa, a cama de bebé, as molduras, o televisor, os móveis novos a brilhar. As minhas mãos parecem enfeitiçadas, tudo cresce à sua volta. Pousei a moeda e a fotografia. Peguei num papel branco, e decalquei dois paus e duas pequenas pedras. O papel permaneceu branco. Os contornos das pedras e dos paus invisíveis e disformes.

Ainda tenho o instrumento, mas falta-me o tesouro.

Rubbed Paper

Ana Do Vale Lázaro. Portugal

Do you remember when we were children, how we used to rub an object under a paper with a coin? Little by little, the forms and contours would appear on the white empty surface...

Do you know the feeling of apprehending the world through touch, of diverting your attention to your fingertips, to find in the fingerprint every secret of things?

Do you remember the expectation ... the smile lurking at the corner of the mouth while in the kitchen mother roasted potatoes...

Do you remember keeping the piece of paper with the rubbed image, and the coin? More precious the former than the latter: one, the treasure, the other merely the instrument to dig it up.

Do you remember leaving the paper hanging for days, shaking in the wind that came through the bedroom window, gathering dust over the rubbed shapes, as our heads, wet with sun and play, passed by? Do you remember father's voice calling us to eat the potatoes, and shouting when we elusively pretended that his call had been lost amongst the trees in the field and had failed to reach us? Do you remember his stubby hands pulling the tender flesh in our ears and causing pain that was bearable in exchange for a few more minutes at play? Do you remember the scraps of earth and blood from your scratched elbow, the microscopic bits of skin torn as a consequence of my making you trip in my eagerness to still the ball? Do you remember the stamp of earth and blood that you left on the white paper, when you jumped crying on to the bunk in the bedroom? Do you remember father's wide open eyes and the slap on

my face that you espied through your fingers, sorry to have caused such a fuss, knowing for sure that the strength of the slap was not proportional to the pain in the scratched elbow? Do you remember having spit with the tongue sticking from your mouth when father left the room, and the tiny drops of saliva that flew upon the paper with the drawing? Do you remember the rubbed drawing?

They were two sticks with two heads – two sticks that were two bodies, two boys, us! Two stones that were two heads, two boys' faces, two brothers, us!

The coin with which we pressed the sticks and the stones, to rub the drawing, was small and dark and smelled of iron.

I still have the coin. It's in my pocket. I still have the instrument, but I no longer have the treasure...

I lost the drawing when we moved to grandmother's. When they came we were playing ball amongst the trees and grandmother was already gone. Do you remember? That day father was not there to shout at us, for us to lose his words in the trees. Only mother was there, her handkerchief on her forehead, her face wet, and the men in uniform telling us that we had to leave, so that I didn't have time to take the drawing to the little house.

Has it flown away in the muddle? Or did it remain forgotten between grandmother's remaining furniture?

There was no room in the little house. Not for grandmother's old furniture, not for mother's potato stove, not for our bunk ... "Only the essential", father said.

Sometimes it seemed that there was no room for anything at all. Not even for moth-

er's joy, nor for father's voice. It seemed as though there was room for short words only. There was no room for us to play ball either, so we tolled the coin on the bedroom floor.

There were no stones or sticks to rub two boys on the paper.

There was a time when I thought that the house was jinxed: it seemed to shrink more and more. Inside, things shrank too: the clothes in the closet, too small for our grown up bodies; grandmother's old earrings in mother's jewel-box; father's tools, the potatoes on the plate...

One day the men in uniform knocked at the door and I thought they were going to take us to an even tinier house. Only you and I, and mother and father, in a single bed. But no. They delivered a letter. Father didn't speak, he merely dropped his head. Never again did I hear father shouting. I think that his voice fell when he dropped his head, and rolled under the furniture, like the drawing paper... We asked what was going on and, putting his stubby hands on our shoulders, he told us we had to do the essential. I didn't know what essential meant, but I realized that it meant something we leave behind, in order to do something more important instead. Because school was no longer essential and we became grown-ups in boys' clothes and went to work.

And father got sick. And mother had no coins to get potatoes. And the essential was not enough.

It seemed as though the whole land was cursed... Everything shrank: the branches in the fields, the food in the markets, and people in the streets. There were less and less people. Then, there were fewer coins, only the pockets got bigger. And I only had that one coin. I still have it.

One day, mother entered our room – you were not there that day – and I understood there was a price to pay for having been

born first: without a healthy father to look after us I was the older man in the house. Mother opened her magic hand full of coins and spoke through trembling lips. She called me “the eldest” and a “grown-up man” and told me I had to be brave. And she hugged me with her frozen hands, gave me the coins and sent me away.

And she did not let you come, so that you would not see me leave. And said that if I came back I would no longer be her son, and I swallowed her words as one swallows the sap of a poisonous flower, that embitters one's stomach and gets one sick. So I took the coins and the words and left, heavy with pain and incomprehension.

When I entered the old van leaving towards the border, none of you was there to wave goodbye at the window. I thought about what mother would have told you, and I imagined you angry with me for having left without warning you. Like when you were angry because grandmother had departed without saying goodbye to us. But this time it was different – because I was alive and knew you were home. Sometimes the thing I wished most was to have with me the paper with our rubbed drawing, made of sticks and stones...

Goran's men were on the other side of the road and looked at us inside the van with the vigilant attention of a shepherd counting his flock to make sure he has not lost any of his animals. One of them came closer and struck the window pane. He gave me a paper with a number.

–Your mother is a wise woman – he said puffing on his cigarette. –She counted on our help; this is how much you owe us, it's the interest for giving you freedom.

I looked at mother's coins and counted them. I wondered how many miracles of multiplication they would have to undergo before reaching the number written down on that paper. I felt my chest heavy and asked my-

self what kind of freedom mother had bought for me. The van started and took my anguish along the mobile landscape. I did not even notice how beautiful our country is, I did not even say goodbye.

When they dropped us on the other side of the border we had to walk across the fields. We had to be careful not to be seen and we would hide I did not exactly know from what. While I crawled on the ground, my mouth dry, a centipede climbed on my shoe and I put it on the palm of my hand. I thought of you and your long-lashed eyes. I saw your eyelashes in the legs of the centipede and for a long stretch of route I fancied that that centipede was your small eyes following me along the road.

Beyond the river there was a large covered truck awaiting us like a big bison, ready to devour us. Inside the bison's body it was dark and hot. I closed my eyes, to have my own piece of darkness amidst the others' retracted sweated bodies, and I ended up falling asleep and running among the trees that used to hide father's voice. They only left us out many stuffy hours later, at dawn, in front of a vast clearing.

From that day on, it was a long walk along desert roads, nameless localities, plantations and rivers frozen in the cold. I was not afraid. I didn't look back when some strange noise shattered the silence on my way, or when the engines of some glary eyed night truck slowed down close to my improvised camping, snarling like a watch dog. Nevertheless, day after day loneliness emerged like some kind of allergy spreading throughout the body infecting the flesh. Like that once when you stepped on nettles with your bare feet and your toes went red and the itching spread to the ankles, then to the shins. You couldn't walk and I carried you, bending over: a small body carrying a burden almost its size. There were moments when the lone-

liness seemed to spread like that: from the chest to the toes in my swollen, sore feet. I could barely put my feet to the ground. A pricking sensation invaded my body and it took me long to carry the road miles on my back, to suffer the weight of my backpack with the food cans and the clothes I had got on the way.

When Christmas cold came, I decided to stop. I was still unable to name my destiny. I thought that when one went on a journey there would always be a definite end to it. Not so. Mother had given me no map and Goran's men came and went away in the stopover towns. The others that had come in the van to the border dispersed in the horizon beyond the fields. I never knew where exactly I would redeem my freedom, where I would retrieve mother's magic coins and double them.

Christmas brought candles to the windows in the houses. I thought that was a fine destination for my journey: a date instead of a place. I had walked till Christmas. I had dragged my body to a city with huge houses and immaculate avenues, like a postcard. Trains ripped through the evening, crossing the snow's frozen silence. I imagined myself inside one of those fast carriages, under a pile of bags and coins. With plenty of notebooks with blank pages for us to scribe and to rub, and with lots of potatoes for mother. I fancied father's cough finally diminishing and the room getting bigger and bigger to welcome my bags.

In that city, ice covered even one's thoughts, and wouldn't let one calm down and go to sleep. That was when I met Ylli, who took me to a warm place for the night and introduced me to the boss. I was given a shovel to clean the road, take the snow away and earn a few coins.

I often thought that mother would have done better to let you come with me. Ylli spoke to me of another who was to him like

you are to me, linked from birth! He had accompanied him in his trip to that Christmas city, but instead of a bison or a truck they had been on a boat. And because the sea is less predictable than a road, it had turned the boat over and had stolen Ylli's brother. Ever since I heard about Ylli's sea, I stopped wishing you had come, lest the road would steal you too. And I promised I would quickly make the essential to catch the train, to get the bags, to bring you the notebooks.

However, the slow winter hypothecated my dreams and my labour. Long hours of hard work on the iced roads earned me a small profit and the coins were barely enough for me to eke out a living. With spring came light and the snow disappeared. The shovel was replaced with scissors and I would trim the naughty herbs that grew along the road. In the light, neighbours began to know my features better, my features that I kept under a hood. They began to notice the gestures of that shade that caused them no discomfort as he cleaned the roads to let their winter heated automobiles pass through. One day, a woman carrying a couple of shopping baskets stopped in front of me, looked fixedly into my light coloured eyes, translucent eyes where our homeland is engraved, and stepped back. When again I heard steps, they were those of the guards who grabbed me and took me in a modern van, to put me on the other side of the border, definitely away from the city of Christmas.

Similarly, other expatriations came, triggered by other neighbours who reported on my undocumented efforts, throughout the cities.

One day, Goran's men found me in one of those cities. I was scrawny and tired, they almost didn't recognize me.

—Money to your mother has been scarce... And without money, contracts are written in blood...

They threw me a pack of documents.

—Maybe with proper papers you will become defter. If the police come, show them those!

So I did, I would show the documents Goran had sent me when the police arrived. My freedom thus impawnded, I slowly paid the installments of the life I wished to redeem. I added a job to another and to the days I added nights to work. Little by little I multiplied the coins, I met a good man that paid me fairly, and a woman from back home who could see our fields in my translucent eyes and kept me warm with her company.

One day, I went to the post office. I was not carrying bags full of gifts, but an envelope full of money to send you. I asked mother to send me some images of you, photos of father, of her, of you, smiling by their side in a promise of future.

At last the letter arrived. Inside, the photo left out the essential. Only mother, dressed in black, sitting looking down by father, on the bed in the living room. The house was even smaller, with no room for you. On the back of the photo, mother's saddened words: loans cost. Without regular payments, Goran's men had taken you. They had confiscated one son to ensure the profitability of the other... "Without money, contracts are paid in blood." You had never come back.

I looked at the drawing's coin, furious that you had gone away, without saying goodbye.

I went back to a home that magically grew like my wife's abdomen, the baby's cot, the frames, and the shining new furniture. I took the coin. I took a piece of white paper and I rubbed two sticks and two small stones.

The paper remained white.

The contours were invisible and shapeless.

I still have the instrument, but I lack the treasure.

لأناي فضاءات

لين سعيد رحاوي. سوريا

ككلّ حالمة كنت في الثامنة عشرة من عمري، تريد أن تكون، كان حلمي أن أترك أثراً مفيداً في الناس، وأن أرضي جميع من أحبّ، وأن أكون ناجحة. لم تكن "الأزمة" في بلدي كما يسمونها في المحطات التلفزيونية المحلية قد أثرت على حياتي بعد ذلك الأثر الذي أخذ مجراه في نفوس غالبية الناس. كنت أسكن في أكثر مناطق العاصمة أماناً حيث لا يجرؤ أحد على إثارة الفوضى، إذ أنه إن حدث ونجح، كانت لتكون نهاية النظام الحاكم. لا أسأل كثيراً، كفتاة مثالية في نظر المجتمع، بل أقوم بواجبي، أدرس فأنجز، ولا أثير المتاعب في المنزل إلا ما ندر. كنت أحبّ أن أكون مميزة لكنّي لا أسعى إلى ذلك إذ لم أكن أجد السبيل. كان لبيّ قد عُجن ووضع في قيد التجمّد، إذأ كان وضعي طبيعياً. أنا إنسانة في نظرهم.

جيداً إلى حدّ الآن.

الوحدة تثير فينا الأسئلة وتحرّض على استكشاف الوجود، الوحدة تغيّرنا وتعجن كياننا في قالب الخيال المتمدّد المتقلّص. لقد بدأت أسألتي وشكوكي منذ سنة تماماً حيث كنت أحضّر لفحص الشهادة الذي يخولني لدخول الجامعة، والتي تُفرض عليّ من بين الخيارات المحدودة لا حسب العدد بل حسب الاهتمام. صراحةً هذا ما كنت أعتقد، لكنّي بدأت أشكّ اليوم أنّ خيالي استرسل، ومنطقي تاه، وأسألتي ركبت قطار المقطورات المتتالية اللامتناهية، حين شيدت سكةً من حروف التساؤل عن السبب، حين تركتُ للقلم أن يحثّ كلماتي على سياسته في تدشين بياض الورق. كانت سنة مفصلية في حياتي اختبرت فيها ما أكون في أردل الحالات، وتعرّفت على إرادتي، تلك الحيوان الشرّس الذي لا يروّض إلاّ مع شخص واحد، ويحفّ الغموض هذا السلوك، لكنّ المشكلة الأعظم هو ألاّ يتعرّف الحيوان على صاحبه إن غيّرته الدهور، لذا وصلت لمرحلة ما لا تحمّلي إرادتي فيها حتّى على الحركة بعد أن تخطّيت امتحان الشهادة، ودخلت الفرع الذي وجدت نفسي أقدم أوراق تسجيله دون وعي، وإلى الآن تظنّ تلك الحقبة منعزلة في رقعة مبهمّة من ذاكرتي ولا أقوى على استحضار تفاصيلها، أو أتّي أخاف اكتشاف خطأ في قراراتي اللامبالية فلا أقوى.

في شهادتنا نُضطر راضين أن نُسجن لمدة شهر ونصف في منزل رحب، أو في غرفة مكعبّة البناء، أو في فناء الدار، أو السرير، وأحياناً في مجمّتنا حيث ازدحام التلافييف، لنترك لها أن تخطيط الشكّ حول رؤوسنا. كنتُ ممّن حُبسوا بين جبال الكتب وسلاسل الأسئلة. كان شهراً عصبياً لا أذكر فيه سوى أنّ رشدي ربّما فقد شيئاً من وقاره وأثزانه. يقولون إنّه اختبار للمسؤوليّة، وانتهى امتحان المسؤوليّة ذاك مجتازة صعبه وذارفة دموماً على تعب ضاع بعضه، كما طننت حينها. إلاّ أنّي صرت طالبة جامعيّة فرحة بلا شيء إلاّ لاعتبارها مسؤوليّة كما أعربت نتائج الفحص! لأصدم بأنّ ما حصل لي كان العكس تماماً. في متاهات الصدمة حيث الهزّات الارتدادية في تزايد تقوّض أركان يقينك، لا تدرك السبب، ولا يملك إدراكك أن يفكر سليماً، فكلمّا حاول الاستقرار داهمه ارتجاج يسقط كلّ احتمالات الحلول، وهكذا كنت قبل أن أصل لإلام أنا عليه الآن، الشّخص الذي بدأت تصحّ معالمه بعد همود غضب الطّبيعة.

الكواكب لا تسبح دون نظام في الفضاء، هكذا أفكر الآن.

ففي بداية الفصل الدّراسي الجامعيّ وجدّتي نفسي ثقيلة رغم أنّي أصبح دون قيود تائهة في الفضاء، مبعثرة كنت، مع أنّ المرأة تعكس غير ذلك كلّ صباح. لم يعدْ يهَمّ شيئاً والطّموح قد مات ولم يعبأ به أحد فما هو إلاّ رقم واحد

وهناك آلاف الأرقام التي تموت كل يوم؛ طموحي، كما الأرقام على الشريط الإخباري لضحايا " الأزمة "،
وفداء النظم، تلك التي يبتلعها الناس مع مرارة قهوتهم الصباحية.

لا أستسيغ القهوة ...

كنت أستيقظ كل يوم وأسأل نفسي نفس الأسئلة التي يطرحها الطفل البريء، أو الجاهل في السياسة، أو حتى من يعيش في كوكب آخر. قد كنت كوكباً آخر في مجرة ما لم يُكتشف بعد سر توازنها. لم الظلم؟ الله صامت؟ لم نعيش إن كان مصيرنا الموت؟ أياحسنا الله إن لم نخطئ في حق البشرية؟ أ وجودي بهم؟ أم أنه مجرد مصادفة، ولي الفرصة أن أخلق فرصتي في الخلود على طريقي، وكما هو معنى الخلود في معجمي؟! اللروح ثقها حين تتعري من جسدها؟ أ أراهم بعد الموت؟ أ وحيدون حتى أقصى درجات الخلود؟ وإن كان الله حقاً لماذا خلقتنا؟

أصبح طموحي إيجاد منتهى لأسئلتني الكثيرة التي يرفض الناس الاعتراف بحقي في طرحها، كما يأبون إفساح الحياة بحرية لمن يخالفهم أو يختلف عنهم. وظل لا شيء بهم بعد الآن في وقتها، وأتساءل الآن: منذ متى بدأ ذلك الآن؟!

الذكريات لا تترك لنا مجالاً للسلام مع الحياة. الذكريات هي الشيطان الوسواس لها، ونحن الجنّة، تحيا الحياة بين ربوعها وتنفث النار من صورها إلى أخلبتنا، ومن مجرياتها إلى صدا الماضي الذي لا يزول متى رطب الزمن داخل باطننا. وما حدث في الحياة ضمن البلد ليس تماماً من شيم الذّاكرة، إذ توفّق الزمن منذ بدء الدماء وتناحر الألوان في الأعلام، ولم تتبيس الذّاكرة عند آخر لحظة لدوران عقارب الساعة في عقولنا، تلك التي لم تعد تصدق شيئاً، بدءاً من أحاديث الصباحيات صادرة من أفواه النسوة والرّجال، مروراً بمذيعي الأخبار المُنميين مغناطيسياً، أو الذين يتفنون التمثيل إيماناً منهم بتأثير الصورة على المشاهد، فتأثّر ونصبح مثلهم، لا تمثيلاً، بل واقعاً، فيعودون إلى أسرّتهم هرباً من الشائعات إلى أحلامهم المضرّجة بأسنة الحروف انتهاءً بما يحدث حقاً، أفي وهم نحن أم حقيقة. كان أول سؤال يعرض عليّ نفسه آنذاك: ما الكذب وما الصدق في عين الحقيقة؟ هل نلبس ما يفصل لنا؟ يكذب العدو، وقد تكذب أمي، قد يكذب أبي... ولم تعد تفرق اللحظات. الشمس تحرقنا بأشعتها الحمراء حين تشرق، والياسمين بطعم الطين. والأرواح تتكاثر عند آخر الليل لتُحمل إلى فضاءات الغيب، وتُقلب الصفحة عليها ترجع بيضاء، لكن أشعة الشمس قاتمة، ثاقبة، والهواء رقيق. يعود الضوء ليحرقنا في الغد، والسّماء تقبع في حناياها آثار حبر الورق والفجوات.

قالوا: سمحنا لكم بالحلم من باب الحرية إن أردتم. وقلنا: خلّمنا بالحبّ أكبر من أحلامكم كلّها. أنتم... نعم أنتم الذين تُرقدون الحلم قبل أن تناموا خوفاً من صعوده خشبة المسرح فوق رؤوسكم، والنجوم...

-ألا تكفيكم حياتكم إذ مازالت تجول في ملعبكم؟

-أن نحيا ليس أن ينفذ الهواء من الرّنات بسلام، ليس أن نقضي النهار والليل نودّع من نحبّ وننغو الأمل ونصبح كل يوم أملاً بالخير والوطن...

كيف وأنتم تعيشون على أرضه؛ الوطن الذي يرفضنا، ولا يشرّفه أن نعيث في أرجائه...!!؟

ما زال الماديّ عند عقولكم وعيونكم يستبيح جوهرية المعنى، إلا لن تصبحوا أبداً على أرض بين رموش الذكري، أو وطن.

الرّد يصطدم بجدران الخوف والصمت الثقيل بهتاناً، والياس على عتبات الأفواه التي كان أحرى بها أن تتغير. خلقت أفواهنا لتترجم أفكارنا إلى المحيط. وأتساءل لم خلقتنا.

الهواء ثقيل، وكلّما تفاقم العنف والفوضى، وكلّما أسرع قطار الموت، تضاءلت أحلامنا. أصبحت الأمور خارجة عن السيطرة، وعن أحلامنا بتغييرها جذرياً نحو المجرى الذي نصبو إليه. ما زلت أشتّم الياسمين كلّما صادفته في طريقي إلى الجامعة.

لذا لم يعد هناك طعمٌ لكلّ الأحلام. اعتراني اليأس. كنت أرغب بالإعلام بظنّي أنّها أفضل الدروب إلى الكتابة، كنت أعشق الكتابة، وعشقت كاتباً، لكنّي الآن أرى خطواتي تجرّني كلّ يوم إلى اختصاص آخر، وأخاطب سريرتي أن ما الذي أودى بك إلى هناك؟ كان عليك أن تتقضي قرارات أهلك التّعسّفية في حقّ حرية مستقبلك الذي تريد.

ما غيرني إلى الثوريّة الحماسيّة الحاملة التي أنا عليها اليوم هو نفسي التي رأت الواقع من منظور آخر، ليس الموت هو النهاية، النهاية أن نترك الحياة أسفين عليها، وعلام تكون بعدنا.

تحيرني هي التي سأكون، أعاتب نفسي على حياديّتها الدائمة حين أنام، حتّى أشك أنّها تهربّ الحلم إلى حياة لاحقة حيث لا أجمل من الحلم حتّى لو كان كابوساً، قد يوهمني الحلم بصور عن تلك التي أرغب أن أصيرها، فأسعى إلى ما يضيف معنى إلى حياتي.

أعاتب الشرود الذي يعترني تبدّل رؤياي، كلّما شاهدت صور مولدي كأنّه يفتح الباب لعنان خيالي، فيتعلّق بالسّماء، حيث أرى كثيراً عن أناي، كثيرٌ لا أستطيع تجرّعه. لا أرى سوى التفاصيل والخواطر، وأنّي أمدت شرب القهوة!

أرى مشاهد كاملة، عبثيّة، تصطادني وكأنّها سهم مسموم بالشكوك واليقين، مصوّب من حاضري في لبّ مستقبلتي المكتوب من أفكار، مستقبلتي الفلسفيّ في مجازات برمجيّات الأدمغة.

وضعتُ إناء القهوة على النّار.

الصّورة هنا أمامي.

طفلة كالبرتقالة يحمل رأسها وجنتان تطفوان على سكينته الافتراضية، وجنتان قدرهما على أيّ وجه رسّتا هو الصّياح في الأسئلة والمصير.

جنين .. رضيعه .. أنا .. هي .. هي التي تضحك منّا جميعاً

وتدور عقارب السّاعة في عالم آخر.

أيقظته الحياة بغصّة.

كان قبلُ يتنفّس ذاكرته، أحشاء، وبعضٌ من نبض الأم حنوناً، حتّى أتى المخاض.

كان يبكي لفراق الرحم الدافئ. لم يكن مستعدّاً بعد للخروج سافراً. لم يعرف هنا سوى الدفاء. تلعثمتُ أصابع يديه بتواتر لا منتظم معرّباً عن ضالة الجسد القادم إذ تستقبله الحياة بنسيمها، وأحرفها، وضحكات ساكنها. وتلعثمتُ دموعه، وسمّعه كذلك، إلى أن أيقظته صفة المؤذن، لم يكن يدري أنّ ذلك أنّه المؤذن ذاته أبوه.

أرهبته حُلَّة الإبهام التي اكتسهاها المحيط، أنفاسه تحسُّ ولا تخطئ، وههنا تتفعل حاسة الرَضِيع التي لا يدري لها الإنسان رقماً أو حيزاً من الوجود، إلا ضمن حوارات الرُّوح مع وهم الرُّوح الأخرى، في محاولة يائسة لاستشفاف سرِّ الشُّرود البليغ في نظرة الرَضِيع. حاسته تسعف الاطمئنان بين فرائضه. حظُّ الرَضِيع أنه مغشَى على رؤياه، فتغيب معها معالم الوجوه القاسية التكوين.

وللميت حظُّ إطباق جفنيه...

ارتطمت أنفاسه بشواطئ الحياة، حيث تتكسر الأسئلة على صخورها. كانت أسئلة الماض جدّ مختصرة. قد يكون تساءل: ما داعي الرُّكل وقد شارفت على الحياة... يا ولدا! لم يدغدغه الفضول لاستكشاف مساحات لثيه، وكم من تلافيف الذاكرة والمستقبل تستوعب سعته. فكَر: ليس الجنين الوحيد على ما يعتقد. فالشعور المشترك بالأشياء يفقدها هيبته أو يذلّها. هما سؤالان قصّاً مضجع الألفة في أركان حاضنته إذ بادراه. ما الحياة؟ وما مصير الأحياء!! أسئلة عديدة تندرج تحت قائمة المجهول والغيب. السؤال الآخر: أتراه الجنين الوحيد الذي يهّم بالإقبال على هكذا مرحلة تثير الوجع والتذرع بوسيلة الإيمان بالسّنين سنة الأخرى، هو الرَضِيع الوحيد الذي مسّه الجنون فتبادره هكذا أسئلة! أمه التي تحصي ازدواجية النّبضات مع كلّ نفس وتبتسم، لا تعير تساؤلاته اهتماماً، إنّما ستحسن تغذيته وترعاه دون أن تسمع، قد تجهضه وهي أسفة. الرّحم أجوف لا يردّد صدى الخواطر، إنّه في عزلة، أخاطبك يا أمّاه! فمن يكون الأصمّ؟!

تلقّفتها الأيدي إذ رأت نفسها رضيعاً، ولم يأت أحد في عزلتها ليخبرها عن حقيقة تكوينها أو عن طبيعة وجود جنين للإنسان، فطرتها دعتها إلى التكيف مع العزلة، ولم يزلها الغذاء إلا أوهاماً تغذي مصدره وأسئلتها دون أن تشبع، إلا أنّها مع مضيّ الزّمن خارج حقل سطوته إذ ينعدم ثقله، أدركت أنّها لا تزداد إلا تقلاً كلّما اكتمل أحد أعضائها. تتناقل على أبسطه دموع الفرح والمباركات. الطفلة المعجزة التي أثبتت أن يفعل الله ما يشاء حين كانت ولادتها صعبة... على شرفة العزلة تُبجل المعجزة، أمّا الطفلة فلها أن تبكي وتنزع عن رثتها ثقل انتزاع الحبل السريّ وتوجّسات الغيب، وتسخر فيما يلي من تأويل كلّ جديد.

إذا تلقّفتها الأيدي هكذا تُظهر الصّور بين يديها، إحداها تقلّب، والأخرى تمسك بزمام خيالها والصّور. ارتشفت مرارة قهوتها باستلذاذ. تمرّ على خيالها شتى الصّور متحركة متبعية بتحاليل وأسئلة لا تدري من أين تنبع، وحين لا تجد جواباً أو ناشلاً لها من درّامات تجليات أفكارها في البريء من الصّور يزداد إزعاج الطّجل. هاهي تبكي. الطفلة في الصورة تبكي. حتّى البكاء كان متفجراً، يعمل قضمًا في الحياة؛ رنينها وهوانها. كان يشتهي الحياة! حسناً، حين أغدق والديها على طفلتهم الصّور حتّى يأتي اليوم وترى نفسها في كلّ الأطوار، لكنّ أطوار روحها لم تجد مصورها قط...

أمّا الرَضِيع الأنثى فكانت تبكي من شدّة الأسف للفرق، تبكي من شدّة الانفعال والمواساة إذ لم تكن وحيدة كما خيل إليها في حياتها الفانية السابقة! والأسئلة زالت إلى أبد الآن! لا مجال للسؤال إذ تُقبل الحياة، كحرمة السعال إذ يُرفع الستار ويبدأ العرض في مسرحٍ ملحمي الأجواء.

صمتت قليلاً.

لا مجال للسؤال في بعث الحياة.

“حسابنا أن نحيا” هكذا خاطبتهم رضيعاً في مهدها بصمتٍ بليغ حين تجمهرت العائلة ومن استطاع من المتطفّلين سبباً فوق الرأس الصّغير الهشّ ليبدو كأنّ به مسامات، تتبخر الكلمات أثناء نفاذها منها. قالت لها أمّها

كنا نلقبك ببرتقالتنا حين نلاعبك لأن رأسك كان مدوراً وشعرك المحمر يزينه كقشرة البرتقالة. لا، لم يكن رأسها مصمتاً كالبرتقالة. رشفة أخرى من الفنجان تُجهض الذكرى قبل أن تُولد، وترديها في قاع اللا موجود إلا في سبيل الأرحام.

هاهي اللقطة التي طالما أضحكتها حد القهقهة، هي طفلةٌ وقد غسلوها لتوهم في المشفى وأودعوا مهدها لا تغادره إلا إلى حضن والدتها انتفخت وجنتاها واحمرتا حتى بدا أنهما اللتين تحملان وجهاً. كانت تلك الصورة تلهيها عن التفكير الساند في لحظة كهذه بدرجة ملانكيته وملامستها السموات لحنقتها. سبق أن أرث أحدهم صورتها وكلها أملٌ بإضحাকে حد الغشاوة مثلها وخاب رجاؤها حين قوبلت بمجاملة ناتجة ربما عن نرجسية تفكيرها. اللحظة التي تتلو ضحكتها تشابه صدمة كهربائية أو ماض لحظات قبل تاريخية أو لحظات ما دون الصفر حيث الجسد والروح والزمن خفاف يمتزجون في العدم. لا تشعر بشيء سوى ببقعة الأفكار التي دامت بعد زوال الومضات. تلك الرقعة التي تفرش بها الذاكرة وتثبت أسئلة الأزل. الصورة جامدة قاسية إلا من ثنية أحدثها إبهامها الملقط. تتكلم الرضية وتتحرك ممزقة الصورة بالأمواج الصوتية المنبعثة، وتبقى الصورة ثابتة متماسكة بتعبيرها المادي، أما الزمن فيعمل تقويضاً لذاكرتها الخرفة، أهي ذاكرة أم صورٌ مبتدعة من هلوسات الخيال تحت تأثير تنويم الزمن؟ لم لا ترى شيئاً من ذاكرتها الفعلية؟! أنفتها في سرايب النبذ!

الطفلة تنام بعد أن أخدمت هواجسها، ولا تدري شيئاً إلا أنها سوف تنسى كل كوابيس كهف المبيت ذي التسعة شهور بعد أن ظننته آنذاك أرذل العمر وما هو إلا إحدى البدايات.

لم تعبر الرشفة بعد أسفل الحلق حتى توّجست من حلول الذكرى من جديد كما الصورة والضحكة وكما رقعة التساؤلات. ما الموت؟ أحياء بعد الموت تكون واردة؟ أوحيدون في الأرض وما دون الأرض وإن صدق الوعد كيف تكون أرواحنا فوق أعالي السماوات؟ أفكارها شعناً تدعوها إلى استعطاف الجنين الذي كانته يوماً ليرشدها إلى أصل الوجود علّه يرتبط بالنهاية، وعلها نقطة واحدة تُخلق وتُخلق وتُفنى بذاتها، وليس من العدم. أفكارها الشعناء تغريها بخطيئة الاستفسار عن هدف الوجود بالنسبة إلى كائناتٍ ترتجف من ظلال ذاكرتها الثقيلة وغارات التساؤل. أتتبع أفكارها من باطن رأسها فقط، فعيش عزلة جماعية ونصرخ حتى يملأ التراب جماجمنا ونسمع صراخاً لا يكون إلا صدى الصرخات إثر ارتطام وارتداد النداء بالعظام، لكن لا أحد ينجت الصرخات؟ أمجنونة أنا وكلهم عقلاء؟ !

تعبير المرارة بسلام أسفل المريء وتضمحلّ أضغاث الذكريات. أما الرضية فلترقد هنيئة الجفنين. تستقر بقايا الطحل أسفل الفنجان ويتشبث الباقي على الحواف بتجسدٍ صنمي، لكنها ليست بقارئة للطالع ولن يقدر لها تنبؤ مرآت صحو الرضية داخلها وكَم إعادة طرح السؤال. ليس السؤال بحد ذاته ما يربكها عند هذا الفجر المنعش في مزيج ألوانه، وكان ليلة حافلة غادرته لتوها، ما يضيف على قهوتها العلقم الذي أنسته حلواً هو انبثاق الذاكرة...

تتوه في دوامة المتتاليات التي لا تدرك لها لا سابقاً ولا لاحقاً؛ أيّ النّار وعود الكبريت سباقٌ في الاشتعال؟ ويحترق السؤال بالذكري. الملل والفراغ يثيران شبق الذاكرة لإثارة الأخيلى، فلتستحمّ. أرخت شعرها على الكتفين ونظرت في المرأة، كنيبة كانت، ورأت قلبها يعتصره الجفاف. أسندت رأسها إلى الجدار كأنها صخرة شاهقة وتركت قطرات الماء تغمرها كشلال. وانهارت الأفكار في رأسها كتلة أو ذرة، وقد كانت أفكارها طينية كلسية وتارةً بصلاية البلورات وربما بنفانها!! أسدلت جفنيها وتركت الماء يعانقها، ثم افترأ بفجائية العناق، إذ لا يجوز أن تتعم بدفء المياه لأكثر من دقيقتين في هذا الحمام. اعتدلت ثم سحبت نفساً عميقاً وابتلعت أبخرته لتتحمل مزاجية المياه، وتندرد جسدها بهول الارتجاف. قطرة تلي قطرة تداعب كتفها وتمحو الواحدة أثر الأخرى.

أحست بالبقاء... بالاستمرار... بالاندثار...

تماوجت تحت أجيال القطرات بعد أن ألف إهابها عبثية الطبيعة، وأدركت حين رسبت أفكارها وهواجسها عند أسفل القدمين أنهم لم يبرحوا وجودهم وإنما قد اغتسلوا وتبرؤوا من تعصب القناعة، ربّما يغيّر سقوطهم وربّما يدمر! أم أنّه مجرد برزخ انتظار لتشرّب محتوم من قبل سديم النسيان. القطرات تندثر وتُمْتَصّ بحرقه، تسمع خريرها خافتاً. تصيح أن أرسلينا إلى الأغوار ولا تربطينا بحبل الأجنّة ولننتهي فهذا قدرنا المحتوم.

لم تسمع شيئاً ولم تتوهم ذلك أصلاً!

وما زالت الرضّيعه مستسلمة إلى نومٍ مثقل تحلم بحتمية حياتها المقبلة بعد تجسدها من خلف ثنايا ستائر عينيها المسدلتين.

الماء يسيل وبعض الأفكار تنهمر وتهمد بعد رعشة بعثها على الكتفين في طريقها إلى القدمين. تفجّر الصمت. هي لا تهاب الموت بل الاندثار. أجل ستحفظ ذلك. ذاكرتنا هي الأمّ وهي أصل إدراكنا وشعورنا وتفكيرنا، لذا تخاف أن تنسى، ألا تولد، ألا تحيا، فما الميّت، ما الطّفّل في الأمنيات؟

نديّة بشرة الطّفلة والماء دمهّا.

فرغّت. نظرت إلى المرأة واستعدّبت جمود الرّؤيا. نظرت إلى المرأة في حيرة النّبي؛ أينزلني الوحي حقاً؟!

لا تقطر المرأة سوى الماء، أما عرق الجبهة؟ أتمطر الجبهة حياتاً؟ أنتكاثف الحياة هكذا وسط الجفاف في زراق الخواء؟

الطفلة تبلّل السرير من زحم الأمانى، وما زال الأمل بالحياة حبلاً معلقاً بجسدها.

تلحفت بشعرها وبعض من قماش، ومضت تقطر حافية، وللآثار شفافية المعنى.

سيارتها مركونة أمام مدخل البناء، إذ لها خصوصية امتلاكها وحيدة، شغلت المحرك وانتظرت حتّى تحمى في خضمّ نفثات البرد القارسة المنبعثة من كلّ الأرجاء وإن أغلقت النوافذ. لم تتأخر يوماً عن عملها. تحبّه، ولم تسأل نفسها إن لم تكن، يبدو الأمر أجلى في ظلّ الجليديات المحيطة.

نفحة خيبة وزفير رجاء. حياتها سعيّ بسعي. إلى أين؟ لا تدري... الأجل الحياة يستحقّ أنها البرد والدفء؟ الحبّ والتعاسة؟ الأمل واليأس؟ يعلو بكاء الطّفلة بعد استيقاظها تريد حصّتها من حليب الأمّ.

لحظة.

أستفيق من غيبوتي لأضيق في عبثية الرّؤيا. ها قد غلت القهوة. أعدّها.

لا بأس بالمحاولة. تتردّد شفتاي، وأقول هيّا. تصطبغ المرارة بامتعاضي.

لا تواتيني القهوة... فليسعفني خيالٍ متوحّد آخر...

The Farthest Spaces

Leen Saed Rihawi. Syria

As all dreamers, I was eighteen years old; I want to exist. My dream was to leave a beneficial impact on people, satisfy all whom I love, and to be successful. The “crisis” in my country – as they call it in the local television channels – has not influenced my life after that impact which found its way in the hearts of the majority of people. I was living in the securest areas of the capital where no one dares to raise chaos, and if he succeeded, it was to be the end of the regime. As an ideal girl in the social perspective, I did not ask too much. Instead, I did my duty: I studied, succeeded and rarely caused trouble in the house. I loved to be unique, but I never sought that when I did not find the way. In normal cases, my heart was exhausted and frozen. In their point of view, I am a human being.

Good so far.

Loneliness arouses questions inside us and incites us to explore the existence. Loneliness changes us and mixes our being in the shrinking expanding imagination template. My questions and doubts started exactly a year ago when I was preparing for the certificate authorizing me to join the university, which is imposed on me among the limited options available not according to number but concern. Honestly, that’s what I think, but today I began to suspect that my imagination felt free, that my logic went astray, and that my questions rode the infinite successive trailers’ train; when a path was constructed by the letters questioning the reason; when I allowed the pen to push my words on its policy regarding the inauguration of a blank paper. It was a decisive year in my life where I tested myself in the most despicable cases,

and got to know my will: that fierce animal which is tamed only by one person. Mystery enveloped that behavior, but the greatest problem occurs when that animal does not recognize its owner when affected by ages. Accordingly, I reached a stage where my will did not even help me to move after I passed the certificate exam and joined the branch in which I found myself unconsciously registering. Till now, that period remains isolated in a vague distance in my memory and I cannot summon its details, or I fear to discover a fault in my careless decisions and thus I cannot.

To obtain our certificate, we are – contented – forced to be imprisoned for a month and a half in a large house, or in a cubic room, or in the house yard, or in the bed, and sometimes in our skulls where the crowded brain gyri sew doubt around our heads. I was among those who were locked up between the mountains of books and chains of questions. It was an acute month of which I remember nothing except that my rationality might have lost something of its dignity and balance. They say it is a test of responsibility, and it ended and I passed its difficulties and shed tears over some lost fatigue, as I thought then. However, I became a university student pleased with nothing except being responsible, as the test results mentioned! I was shocked that what happened to me was quite the opposite. In the maze of shock where aftershocks increase to undermine your certainty corners, you do not realize the reason and your recognition cannot think properly. Whenever it tries to become stable, it is attacked by a shaking which overthrows all the

possible solutions. That was my case before my current one: the person whose features started to become clear after the inaction of the nature rage.

Planets do not move in the space without order; that's what I think now.

At the beginning of the university semester, I found myself heavy, even though I move lost in the space without restrictions; I was scattered although the mirror reflects otherwise every morning.

The people who die every day, my ambition, the number of people on the news ticker indicating the victims of the "crisis", and the regime redemption, those numbers which people swallow with the bitterness of their morning coffee.

I do not enjoy coffee

I wake up every day and ask myself the same questions posed by the innocent child, or the ignorant of politics, or even who lives on another planet. I was another planet in a galaxy whose secret of balance was not yet discovered. Why injustice? Is God silent? Why we live if our destiny is death? Does God bring to book us if we did not harm humanity? Does my existence matter? Or is it just a coincidence, and I have the opportunity to create my immortality on my way, the meaning of eternity in my dictionary?! Does soul have weight when it leaves its body? Will I see them after death? Singles till the maximum immortality levels? And if He is really God, why did He create us?

My ambition was to find an end to my several questions which people refuse to recognize my right to put them forward. Besides, they refuse to leave those who disagree with or differ from them to live life freely. Nothing mattered anymore at that time, and now I wonder: when did that start?!

Memories do not leave us a room for enjoying peace with life. Memories are the obsessive devil of life, and we act as the par-

adise: life lives throughout it and emits fire from its illusions to our imagination and from its course to the past rust which never disappears whenever time moistens it within us. What happened in life within the country is not completely a habit of the memory; time stops since the start of the bloodshed and colors' rivalry in the flags. Memory did not become hard at the last moment of the clock rotation in our minds; those minds which no longer believe anything, starting from the morning conversations of women and men, and passing by the news broadcasters – those who are hypnotized or who perfect acting while believing in the impact of the image on the viewer so that we become affected and become like them, no acting, but a reality, then they return to their beds to escape from the screens and go to their dreams suffused with the spears of letters – ending with what really happens; are we surrounded with an illusion or a reality? The first question which presented itself before me at that time was: What are lying and veracity in the eyes of the truth? Do we wear what is sewed for us? The enemy is lying; my mother may lie, my father may lie ... moments no longer make difference. The sun burns us with its red rays when it shines, jasmine tastes mud and spirits support each other at the end of the night to be carried to the unseen spaces, and the page is turned, perhaps it can return blank, but the sunlight is gloomy and penetrating and the air is thin. Light returns to burn us tomorrow, and the sky preserves the traces of the paper ink and gaps within its sides.

They said: if you desire, we allow you to dream out of freedom. We said: our dream of love is greater than all your dreams. You... Yes you who put the dream to sleep before you sleep fearing of its climbing onstage above your heads, and the stars...

–Are not you satisfied with your life which is still wandering in your court?

–To live is not to exhale air safely from the lungs, not to spend the day and night bidding farewell to who we love, reprimanding hope and getting up every day aiming at well-being and homeland...

–How can that be while you live in it; the homeland which refuses us and is not honored to welcome us within its corners?

–Materialism in your minds and eyes still permits the meaning substantiality; you will never stand up on a land among the memory lashes, or a homeland.

The reply collides with the walls of fear; the heavy silence slanders; despair stands on the thresholds of the mouths which were more likely to change. Our mouths were created to translate our ideas to the surroundings. I wonder why we were created.

The air is heavy, and the more aggravating the violence and chaos are, the faster the death train is and the more dwindling our dreams are. Matters became out of control and our dreams estranged themselves radically of the course we aspire. I still smell jasmine whenever I encountered it on my way to the university.

Accordingly, all dreams no longer have any taste. I become desperate. I was aspiring to media as I thought it is the best route to writing. I adored writing, and fell in love with a writer, but I now see my steps dragging me every day to another specialty. I ask myself: what has driven you there? You had to get rid of the arbitrary decisions of your family concerning the freedom of choosing the future you desire.

What changed me to that dreamy revolutionary spirit which I have today is myself that saw the reality from another perspective: death is not the end; the end is to leave life regretfully, and what will it be after us.

That new self confuses me. I blame myself on its permanent neutrality when I sleep till I doubt that it escapes dream and goes

to a later life where nothing is more beautiful than the dream even if it is a nightmare. Dream may purport me with images differing from those I desire, so I seek what gives meaning to my life.

I reproach the divagation of the indolence of my vision. Whenever I saw my birth pictures, they unleash my imagination; it hangs to the sky, where I see a lot about the farthest things, a lot which I cannot comprehend. I only see details and thoughts, and that I become addicted to coffee!

I see complete scenes, absurd, hunting me like an arrow poisoned with uncertainties and certainty, pointed from my present to the core of my future composed of written ideas; my philosophical future in the brains software metaphors.

I put the coffee pot on the stove.

The pictured is here, in front of me.

A girl like an orange; her head is held by two cheeks floating on its presumptive quietness; two cheeks whose destiny – whatever face they rest upon – is the confusion among questions and fate.

An embryo... a baby... me... she is... she is the one who laughs at all of us.

The clock rotates in another world.

The life awakens him with a lump.

Before, he was breathing his memory, bowels, and some of the tender pulse of a loving mother, until it is time for childbirth.

He was crying for leaving the warm womb. He was not yet ready to get out. He knows nothing here except warmth. His fingers hawed with an irregular frequency, thus expressing the diminutiveness of the coming body, while life receives him with its breeze, letters, and the laughing of its residents. His tears and hearing hawed as well till he was awakened by the slap of the crier. At that time, he did not know that the crier was his father.

He was terrified by the ambiguity garment worn by the surroundings. His breath feels and does not err, and here the baby's sense is activated; that sense of which man does not know a number or an existence space except within the spirit dialogues with the illusion of the other spirit, in a desperate attempt to perceive the secret of the strenuous divagation in the baby's look. His sense provides him with restfulness. The baby is lucky as his vision is overlaid, and thus the features of the cruel faces disappear.

And the dead is lucky for having his eyelids closed...

His breathes hit the beaches of life, where questions break on the rocks. The birth questions were very brief. He may have asked: What is the need of kicking while I am about to come to life ... you, boy! Curiosity did not tickle him to explore the areas of his heart and how can the gyri in the memory and the future accommodate its capacity. He thought: he is not the only fetus. The common sense of things makes them lose their prestige or humiliates them. Once presented themselves, these two questions dissolved the familiarity couch between the arms of his nurse. What is life? And what is the fate of the living!! Many questions falling under the list of the unknown and the unseen. The other question: do you see that he is the only fetus who is about to come to such a stage which raises apprehension and in which faith in sixties is the norm of the others; is he the only baby who got mad so questions attack him in such a way! His mother counts the duplicity of pulses with each breath and smiles. She does not pay attention to his questions; instead, she will feed him well and care for him without hearing. She may have miscarriage while being sorry. The womb is hollow; it does not echo the thoughts; it is isolated. I talk to you, mama! Then who is deaf?!

The hands received her when she sees herself an infant. While isolated, no one came

to tell her about the fact of her composition or the nature of the existence of two human sexes. Her primitiveness invited her to adapt with the loneliness, and the food only increased her illusions; it fed its source and her questions without saturation. But over time, outside the field of its ascendancy where its weight ceases to exist, she realized that she only becomes heavier upon the completion of one of her organs. She slacks on the joy and blessing tears' carpets. The infant prodigy who proved that God does whatever He wants when her birth was difficult ... on the balcony of isolation, she reveres the miracle, and the child has the right to cry and remove the weight of the umbilical cord and the unseen apprehensions away from her lungs; she also has the right to laugh at the following interpretation of the all-new.

The hands received her. The pictures between her hands show the following: one turns her over, and the other holds the reins of her imagination and the pictures. She enjoyed the bitterness of her coffee. Various animated images pass by her imagination followed by analyses and questions which she does not know where they come from. And when she does not find an answer or a person to pick her up of the swirl of the manifestations of her ideas in the innocent images, the annoyance of the angry increases. Here she is crying. The child in the image is crying. Even crying was explosive; it was biting life; its resonance and air. He lusts for life! Well, her parents lavished pictures on their baby until it is time to see herself in all phases, but the phases of her spirit never found her cameraman...

The female baby was crying and regretting parting heavily; she was crying out of the intensity of emotion and sympathy; she was not single as she imagined in her previous mortal life! And questions ceased to flow now and forever! No room for question as life is accepted exactly as the cough sacred-

ness when the curtain is raised, and the show begins at an epic atmosphere.

She paused a little.

No room for a question when you come to life.

“Our account is to live” that is what the infant in its cradle said with severe silence when the family and whoever was able to find his way above the little fragile head gathered. That little fragile head seems to be porous where words evaporate during their permeation. Her mother said to her “we were turning you over like an orange while tickling you because your head was rounded and your red hair adorned it like the orange rind. No. her head was not solid like an orange. Another sip from the cup aborts the memory before its birth, destroys it in the bottom of what exists only in the wombs.

Here is the snapshot which has caused her to laugh to the extent of guffaw: a child bathed in the hospital and placed in its cradle which she does not leave except to go to her mother’s arms. Her cheeks swelled and reddened until they appeared the supporters of her face. That image distracted her from the prevailing thinking in a moment like this with its angelic and blessing degree. She once showed someone her image while hoping to make him laugh till vision blurs, but she was disappointed when he met this with a courtesy which may be the result of her narcissist thinking. The moment which follows her chortle resembles an electric shock or a pre-historical moments’ flashlight or sub-zero moments where body, soul and time were light and mixed with the nothingness. She does not feel anything but a spot of ideas that lasted after the disappearance of flashes. This spot covers the memory and sprouts the eternity questions. The image is rigid and cruel except for a fold created by her thumb. The baby speaks and moves and the image is torn by the emitted sound waves. The image

with its material expression remains fixed and solid. As for the time, it undermines her wacky memory. Is it a memory or photos created out of imagination hallucinations under the influence of time hypnosis? Why cannot she see anything of her actual memory?! Did she exile it in the basements of ostracism?!

The baby sleeps after putting out her obsessions and she knows nothing except that she will forget all the nightmares of the nine-month cave after she thought then that it was the feeble old age while it is only one of the beginnings.

No sooner have the sip passed the bottom of throat than she feared the re-advent of the memory as took place with the image, chortle and the questions distance. What is death? Can life after death be possible? Lonely in the universe and under the earth – and if the promise is true – how can our souls take their place over the high heavens? Her ideas are unkempt and invite her to implore the fetus who she preserved one day to guide her to the existence origin so that it may be linked to the end; perhaps it is a point which creates, is created and perish by itself, not out of nothingness. Her unkempt ideas seduce her with the sin of inquiring about the goal of existence regarding beings which fear the shadows of their heavy memory and raids of questions. Do her ideas stem from the inside of her head only, so that we live in collective isolation, cry till dust fills our skulls and hear screaming which is only the echo of the cries following the collision with bones and the throwback of the appeal, but no one listens to the cries? Am I crazy while all of them are sage?!

The bitterness passes safely down the esophagus and the confused memories fades away. As for the baby, let her sleep peacefully. The coffee remnants settled at the bottom of the cup while the rest were dispersed on the edges in an iconic embodiment, but they are not a horoscope reader; they cannot pre-

dict the times of the baby's waking inside her and the re-asking of the question. The question in itself is not what confuses her in that fresh dawn with its mixing colors, as if a full night had just departed. What adds the gall she enjoyed to her coffee is the memory emanation...

She got lost in the swirl of the sequences of which she cannot decide a beginning or an end; which is faster in burning: the fire or the match? The memory burns the question. Boredom and emptiness raise the memory rut to agitate illusions. Let her take a shower. She loosens her hair on her shoulders and looked in the mirror; she was gloomy and felt her heart pressed by drought. She rested her head on the wall as if it was a towering rock and left the water drops flow on her like a waterfall. Ideas collapsed in her head in the form of a block or an atom. Her ideas were sometimes muddy and calcareous and sometimes solid as crystals and may have their purity!! She closed her eyelids and left water embrace her then she was weakened by the hug suddenness; she is not allowed to enjoy the warmth of the water for more than two minutes in that bathroom. She straightened up, took a deep breath and swallowed its vapors to withstand the water mood and warn her body of the quivering horror. A drop after drop caressed her shoulder and the one wiped the other.

She felt staying... continuation... extinction...

She moved like waves under the generations of drops after the absurdity of nature got associated with their integument. She realized that when she deposited her ideas and concerns at the bottom of her feet, they will not leave their presence; instead they washed up and recovered from the conviction intolerance. Their fall may change and they may be destroyed! Or is it just a waiting isthmus for an inevitable absorption by the forgetfulness nebula? Drops disappear and are absorbed

bitterly. You can hear their faint babble. They cry: send us to the hollows and do not tie us to the fetuses' rope and let us die; this is our inevitable destiny.

She did not hear anything; she did not even fancy that!

The baby is still resigning to a laden sleep; she was dreaming of the inevitability of her coming life after being embodied from behind the folds of her downcast eyes' curtains.

Water flows and some ideas pour down then subside – after causing a shiver – on the shoulders on their way to her feet. Silence explodes. The ideas do not fear death, but extinction. Yes, our memory will keep that. Our memory is the mother and it is the origin of our realization, feeling and thinking, so it fears oblivion, non-birth, non-living. What is the dead? What is the child in the wishes?

The girl complexion is dewy and the water is its blood.

She finished. She looked at the mirror and found that the vision rigidity is pleasant. She looked at the mirror while confused like a prophet; will the revelation really descend on me?!

The mirror drips only water, but what about the forehead sweat? Can the forehead rains life? Does life condensate in such a way amid the drought in the vacuum cyanosis?

The child wets the bed with the wishes congest and hope of life is still a rope hanging to her body.

She wrapped herself with her hair and a piece of cloth, and went dripping while being barefoot and the effects contain the transparency of meaning.

Her car was parked in front of the building entrance; she has the privacy of its sole possession. She ran the engine and waited till it became warm amidst the chilling cold breathes emitted from everywhere, although the windows are closed. She was never late for work. She loves it, and did not ask herself

if she does not. The matter is clearer under the surrounding ambient glaciers.

A whiff of disappointment and an exhalation of hope. Her life is an endeavor quest. Where to? She does not know... Does her ego – aiming at life – deserve the coldness and warmth? Love and unhappiness? Hope and despair? The baby crying rises after getting up; she wants her share of her mother's milk.

One moment.

I wake up from my stupor to get lost in the absurdity of vision. Here is the coffee boiling. I prepare it.

Attempt is no wrong. My lips hesitate and I say come on. Bitterness is dyed with my resentment.

The coffee does not suit me ... let another solitary imagination help me...

ميكروفون بلا رصاص

ايمان فجاري. تونس

تشاءبت زيفها و هي تهتم بدخول استوديو البث المباشر. كانت قد نهضت من نومها متأخرة قليلا عن العادة و لم يتسنى لها الوقت كافيا كي تفيرك جمالها المتواضع امام المرأة. غاصت الى داخل ثوبها الاسود ثم ترددت قليلا.

"الاسود لون الحزن القبيح... لون صالح اكثر لمجون الليل او رقيه"

خلعت الفستان و رتمته دون اهتمام الى جانب السرير و بعد ان استعرضت تشكيلة الثياب خاصتها اختارت ان ترتدي ما تيسر من اشياؤها و خرجت مسرعة.

كان التقني من وراء البلور الشفاف يشير اليها كي تستعد عند انتهاء العد التنازلي لانطلاق البث. زينت صوتها بقدر من التفاؤل و رسمت على شفثيها ابتسامة عريضة مررت عبرها ذلك الاندفاع الشقي الى احتضان الناس جميعا .

بدأت شارة البداية تستفز هدونها ثم انقض صوتها الدافئ والرصين جدا على اذان القليلين ممن يستمعون اليها . بدى لها الكون ضيقا جدا وهي تصطنع حب الحياة و تجتث ما تبقى من بلاهة المستمعين كي يمارسوا حياتهم اليومية.

شوارع المدينة كانت تحتفل بفرحة الكلام الاولى فتتصاعد الاصوات تكسر كل الحواجز و تتحدى القدر العتيد و تصر ان الوطن للجميع دون استثناء.

تتشابك الايادي تمهد للموت الرابض عند اعلى البنائيات كل الفرص المتاحة للانقضاض على الحناجر و لعق دماء الشعب السعيد جدا بفرضيات الموت الرائع من اجل الارض.

كان عادل ببذلة الشرف ينظم الصفوف الاولى صحبة زملاؤه من المحامين و يستحث الهمم و الاصوات للانقضاض على التاريخ و تفكيك كل شفرات الحرية الممكنة. في قلبه الصادق كان يفكر فيها لطالما تمنى ان تكون معه تغرس كفها الصغير الدافئ في حضن يده المتعركة و ينشدان معا معزوفة الكرامة للوطن و لأطفال العالم و لكنها لم تستطع القدوم . لقد اضطرت الى تأجيل حلمه قليلا كي تزور والدتها المريضة و تمكنها من حفنة الانسولين اللعينة ثم تلتحق بركب الزاحفين نحو المستقبل.

كانت الاصوات تشتد ترج كينونة الاوحد و تنفي معادلة البقاء للأقوى والأشرس والمتعالي فتنتفح نوافذ منازل كان عادل يظن انها مهجورة و اطلت رؤوس الشعب هاتفة بوجع السنين الطوال الميتة. جابت المظاهرة كل شوارع المدينة مهددة اصحاب البطون الجشعة و استقرت الرصاص الرابض في الجيوب . كان عادل يقتنص السعادة المتفجرة في الشرايين و المتحللة في دماء الشعب فينتشي و يلعن وجه المتوحد البائس يتصور ارتعاشه و خوفه المتصاعد .

كانت حياة تتمق برنامج حصتها بحسب المناشير و البلاغات الواردة إليها , أما زميلها فكان يختار من الموسيقى مقاطع صاخبة ركيكة يجمع بها ما تفتت من شخصيته الهشة المنكسرة الى قسمين متنافرين. و تواصل حياة حبكها الرديء لأخبار العالم و سردها لكل البلاغات المطمئنة. في داخلها كانت متأكدة ان الوضع بات لا يحتمل و ان القدر ان له ان يعيد ترتيب اوراقه وإنها هي الان تجمل

ما استطاعت من قبح الانسان و تهدئ دون جدوى قلوب الخائفين على اشيائهم و افعالهم.
انتهت الى ماهر يشير اليها بالاستعداد كي تقرا البلاغات الواردة منذ لحظات . استعادت بعض
الجدية و هي تستحضر الوجه
الحقيقي للصورة و جذبت اليها الميكروفون و تنحنت قليلا ثم قالت:

" ورد علينا هذا البلاغ منذ قليل حيث يمنع على كل المواطنين الخروج الى الشارع او التجمع او
التظاهر في الساحات العمومية او التنقل في مجموعات تتجاوز الثلاث افراد و كل من يخالف هذا
البلاغ يعرض نفسه الى عقوبات سنها رئيس دولة المحطة التي انتم بصدد الاستماع إليها "

كان الوجد الرهيب يتصاعد الى عقلها فيحرك انسانيته التي تخثرت و تتالت الاسئلة سخية في
مخيلتها: هذا الشعب الصغير العدد عريق التاريخ يتحدى الكون كي يصنع مستقبله و يضمن انسانيته
التي بدأت تتآكل فهل اصبح الشعب يهدد الدولة متى تاق الى الحرية ؟
كان عادل في الشارع دائما بنفس النشاط الخارق يرى المدينة تتفتح على نشوة غريبة ظنها غير
ممكنة بالمرّة. تضاعفت اعداد المتظاهرين و زمجرت اصواتهم مدوية ساعية وراء نداء الشرف و
الحرية . عرجت الكتلة البشرية نحو الشارع الكبير المؤدي الى بناية النظام. حلقت كل الطيور الى
السماء و تفجرت اصوات الرصاص تدمر الحناجر وتحرك الموت الذي كان رابضا في اعالي
البنائيات يصطاد فرائسه و يحصد الرؤوس و الاجساد المصرة على التقدم.
كان عادل يصيح بالناس بالخائفين "لا تتراجعوا لقد انتصرنا ... المستقبل يقف في الامتار الاخيرة لقد
انتصرت اردتنا سنصنع وطننا حرا ...

فجأة احس بوخزة في مؤخرة رأسه رفع يديه كي يتحسسها فتمرر الخدر الى كامل جسده.

كانت حياة تستعد لمغادرة الاستوديو بعد ساعات من المجاملة و الامل الكذوب حين اندفعت زميلتها
من قسم الاخبار الى الداخل اشارت الى التقني بإشعال الشارة الحمراء..... تسمرت حياة في مكانها
و هي تسمع زميلتها تقرا البلاغ الاخير.

"على اثر الاستفزاز الواضح و الصريح الذي جرى عشية اليوم في المدينة اضطر رجال الامن
للتصدي الى مجموعة من المخربين الذين تحدوا البلاغ الصادر صباح هذا اليوم بمنع الخروج الى
الشارع و التجمع و التظاهر و الاعتداء على هيبة الدولة و ممتلكاتها مما تسبب في وفاة خمسة
اشخاص و اصابة اكثر من مائة شخص بجروح متفاوتة الخطورة و فيما يلي اسماء المتوفيين

اسماء العايش

الحبيب البرقي

سماح الهادف

محمد الطيب النقاش

و أخيرا عادل المــــــادل المــــــزي"

كان الصوت يأتي حياة مستفزا متقطعا ينفذ الى وعيها فيصير حقيقة لا زيف عليها. تتخدر اطرافها

ويعود الفيلم الى الماضي فصلا للحدث و لا تذكر شيئا فقط جزئيات ضوئية تتمطط فتغمر المشهد تماما.

كان المنزل الصامت يتذمر غيابها و يستقبل حزنها. حين دخلت غرفتها كان الفستان الاسود لا يزال عند جانب السرير. اندست داخله و بحثت عن وشاحها الاحمر و استدارت مغادرة عندما اصطدم نظرها بالصورة المنتصبة امام المرأة صورة الزواج التي تخلد ذاكرة الحياة القصيرة جدا. عادت الصورة تجتاح كيانها كانت تنوي المرور إلى منزل والدتها كي تحقنها بالأنسولين ثم تلتحق به في المسيرة لكن هاتفا مستعجلا استدعاها إلى العمل كي تعوض واحدة من زميلاتها.

الان بدت الحقيقة متجلية امامها لقد صار الموت في وطني ثمنا للحرية و حان وقت الكلام سيكون الصوت طريق الانسانية و سيصبح الميكروفون بلا رصاص فلتحيى الحرية ...

A Microphone without Bullets

Imen Fejjari. Tunisia

Hayah stifled a yawn just before entering the studio. She had got up a little later than usual and did not have enough time to fabricate her humble beauty in front of the mirror. She slipped into her black dress, and then hesitated a little.

“Black is the colour of offensive sadness ... a colour more suited to the shamelessness of the night or its elegance...”

She took off her dress and threw it indifferently over the headboard and, after inspecting a variety of clothes, she decided to wear something simple and quickly left.

The technician behind the transparent glass signalled the countdown. She decorated her voice with optimism and drew on a large smile to convey that mischievous desire to reach everyone.

The start of transmission tested her coolness and then her warm and extremely plain voice rushed into the ears of her listeners. The universe seemed very narrow to her, as she feigned a love of life and fooled the listeners into thinking she was part of theirs.

The city streets celebrated the joy of the first words, the sounds grew and broke all the barriers, challenging fate and insisting that the country is for everyone, without exception.

Hands intertwined, oblivious to the threat of death yielded by the security forces ON the top of the buildings. Any occasion is right to spill the blood of the people, and they are happy to sacrifice themselves for their country.

Adel, wearing legal garb, organised the demonstrators with his colleagues. He called

on them to embrace history and fight for freedom. In his heart, he longed for her, wanted to be with her; to hold her small warm hand in his own hand, wet with sweat, and sing together the song of dignity for the country and the children of the world. But she could not come. She had to delay her dream of being with him a little longer to visit her sick mother and give her an insulin injection. Then she would join the procession of those crawling towards the future.

The sounds became louder and merged into a single voice, refusing the idea of the “the survival of the fittest, the most ferocious and pretentious.” Adel thought the houses were empty but windows opened and the heads of the people appeared, crying out the sorrow of the long dead years.

The demonstration passed through all the streets of the city, threatening the greedy and challenging repression. Adel was exuberant as the blood of the people flowed through him, imagining the solitary miserable face of the dictator trembling with fear.

Hayah adapted the programme according to the news she received, while her colleague chose delicate or noisy music to embellish the fragments of her fragile personality broken into two inharmonious personalities. She continued her poor presentation of the real news alongside all the reassuring stories. She was sure that the situation had become unbearable; that it was time for destiny to take another direction and that she was simply embellishing human ugliness and vainly reassuring the hearts of those who hide from reality.

She realised that Maher was waving to her to get ready to read the news received a few minutes ago. She adopted a serious expression, opened the microphone, cleared her throat and announced:

“We have just received this communication prohibiting all citizens from going into the streets, rallying and demonstrating in public squares or forming groups of more than three people. Anyone who violates this order will be subject to the sanctions issued by the President.”

A horrible pain grew in her heart and mind and moved her coagulated humanity. Her head swarmed with questions: these few people with a majestic history are challenging the universe in order to establish their future and ensure their fast diminishing humanity. Have the people become a threat to the state by aspiring to freedom?

Adel had always been in the street involved in the same miraculous activity. He had seen the city opening to a strange rapture that he believed impossible. The numbers of demonstrators had multiplied, their voices angrily calling for honour and freedom.

The human mass moved towards the long street leading to the regime’s headquarters. All the birds were flying in the sky while death awaited them on the top of the buildings. The bullets began to fly, to hunt their prey and prevent them from moving forward.

Adel cried to the frightened people:

“Don’t turn back, we have won... The future is at hand... Our will has triumphed... We will establish a free nation...”

Suddenly he was hit, he felt the back of his head and his body collapsed.

Hayah was about to leave the studio after the hours of pretence and false hopes when her

colleague in the news section ran inside. She waved to the technician to turn the red light on. Hayah stayed where she was and listened to her colleague reading the last piece of news.

“Following the clear and explicit provocation that took place this evening in the city, the security forces have been forced to respond to a group of vandals who defied the order issued this morning, prohibiting all protests and demonstrations or attacks on the sovereignty of the state. This has resulted in the death of five people and over one hundred injuries of varying severity. The names of the deceased are the following: Asmaa Al Aayesh, Al Habib Al Barqi, Samah Al Hadeef, Mohamed al Tayeb Al Naqash and, finally, Adel Al Mazzi.”

For Hayah, the sound was piercing, penetrating her consciousness and becoming an inescapable reality. Her legs gave way and her mind went blank. She was lost in the darkness.

The silent house lamented her absence and received her sorrow. When she went into her room, the black dress was still on the headboard. She concealed herself in it and searched for his red scarf. When she turned to leave, her eyes found the photo in front of the mirror – the wedding photo which perpetuates the memory of a very short life.

The photo has invaded her existence. She had planned to go to her mother’s to give her an insulin injection and then join him on the march, but an urgent call summoned her to work to stand in for a colleague.

Now, the truth is clear to her: in her native country death has become the price of freedom. It is time to speak out. The voice will be the medium of humanity. The microphone without bullets will cry out: long live freedom.

... illustris dno p[ro]p[ri]o Academi[ae] Medice Venet[ae] / Qua[m] & honorabil[em] v[est]ra[m] Consilio[m] & Cor[por]e v[est]ro
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