Moulinville, Sfax

Nothing about Childhood

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It lives on endlessly in me and yet, in truth, the traces of it are long gone. Since they have disappeared, been swallowed up by memory, I’ll spare you a tale about the sun, whitewashed houses, the sea, and the scent of jasmine.

I don’t know how to tell that story. I can’t. It’s been erased.

Just as my adult memories, very recent ones, are erased as quickly as I write them down. I can’t tell whether I’m writing to remember or whether I’m writing to create memories for myself.

And yet Sfax is in my memory. I was born there, in that seaside town, as were seven generations of my kin, poor folks, true believers, or as the locals say in Arabic, hayfen rabi, God-fearing people . . .

I was four when my parents left Sfax to go live in Paris. They didn’t want to leave. They liked their zenka, their neighborhood, the people around them; they delighted in the land’s bounty. The flavor of olives never left their lips, nor did the taste of fresh fish still wriggling in the fishermen’s nets.

When they talk about Tunisia, my parents recall a time when time meant something and weighed nothing. Then they never fail to add that, ever since they got to France, they haven’t stopped “running.” Early on, they would always repeat: here in Paris, unless you keep running, you’re a loser, mchyam, done, dead.

Gradually, they began to sense that time itself had gone awry since their exile; that time flew by faster than before, as if swept by the wind; that days and nights ran together; that months melted into years, and years vanished. In short, they realized that time had left them, along with their dreams, in the dust.

In fact, since they’ve been in Paris, everything seems more difficult, harder to manage. They made a long list of reasons to explain this mystery. Reason number
one, the most serious: there is no sun in Paris, no real light, the white kind that stings your eyes and sucks the sweat from your pores, the kind that separates day from night and marks the horizon. Reason number two: the city is huge, and to get from one place to another, you have to take the metro, the bus, sometimes both. Reason number three: the more you work, the more you spend, and the
more you spend, the more you work. In other words, there's no more time to take your time. Before, at least, even though we were poor, we savored life.

I listened to them talk.

Their words fell into me like stones into a well. Their words filled the well of my childhood. Each utterance had its own weight, and each produced emotional impact. The words resonated with each other. And they still resonate because, bizarrely, the well of my childhood can never be filled. The more words pour in, the more it demands. The more details it records, the thirstier it is to hear more.

I was four years old.
I should remember quite a lot.
And yet I can recall nothing.
The land of my birth is disembodied.

I know—because I’ve been told—that I must have been a very precocious little girl, since at the age of three I ran away from home, fleeing my father’s house during the siesta to go to my grandfather’s. Alone. On my chubby little legs. I crossed one sidewalk, then another. I went past the Simca garage. No sooner had I arrived, proudly, at my grandfather’s doorstep than he scooped me up by the waist, sat me on the handlebars of his bicycle, and pedaled me right back home to my parents, who had been searching for me high and low. They had alerted the neighbors, scoured the narrow streets nearby, gone up to the rooftops, all in the hopes of finding me.

As a child, I loved hearing them tell the story of my escape.
This escape became a symbol.
Of an entire past that had been severed.
Though only a child, I understood that we’ d been uprooted. Understood that on one side, there was the tree, the family tree that sought to regain its verticality, its balance, and that on the other, there was a hole, the place where our roots had once thrived, a gaping hole, over there, far away.

Why?
Because they didn’t want Jews in Muslim lands anymore?
Because there was Israel?
Because we had become Westernized?
Because the arrow of history was pointing in a different direction?
I’m fifty years old today.
I’m constantly creating questions and answers for myself. I’m constantly constructing images for myself.

This way, sometimes I feel like I’m “seeing” my grandfather’s synagogue. I feel like I’m “seeing” myself playing in the street, I feel like I know the Sfax seaside where, according to my grandmother, sailors from the four corners of the world would make stopovers. I am steeped in old, yellowed photographs, mostly in black and white.

Another thing.
The Bourguiba government had prohibited Jews from taking their assets with them when they left. So as not to leave their entire fortune behind, the Jews bought
objects. My parents had blankets woven for themselves in Gafsa, blankets that were heavier than carpets, so heavy that we felt crushed beneath their weight. Even better, our cousins had hundreds of drums of olive oil shipped to Paris, a stock that took years to consume, whose empties then served as tables and chairs.

We had left Tunisia, but Tunisia didn't want to leave us. As my father used to say, as he headed out to Belleville every Sunday to meet up with Tunisians, to buy a sandwich overflowing with harissa, to bring back a box of zlabias and a pack of pistachios: the lion left the forest, but the forest is still in the eye of the lion.1

From circle to circle, we tried to reach the center, to recover the core of existence, to rest our heads on the breast of the lost land and hear its beating heart.

The truth is, mine is a strange people, torn between a lost country—a country for living, marrying, working—and a promised land. A strange people caught between the past, the present, and prophecy.

At what point did I realize that something irreversible had taken place? I have to admit that we were swimming upstream, unwilling transplants in a society where we had no choice but to adapt.

We were here and there at the same time.

We tried to change, to blend in, to naturalize, but the old ways die hard.

My grandfather roamed around the house in his saroual and kabouch.2 We ate couscous, halelem, pkila, nikitouche, merguez, hasbana, koukla, and akoud.3 No pot-au-feu at our place, no cassoulet or foie gras, no tarts or crepes.

And everything we did during our first years in Paris was almost, dare I say, suspicious.

Some examples?

Here's one I took years to shake off.

Back in Sfax, my grandfather performed animal sacrifice. He slaughtered chickens, hens, sheep, and cows for the butcher, in accordance with the laws of Moses. Naturally, he brought his sharp knives and whetstones with him when we moved to France.

Our very first week in Paris, my mother walked the length and breadth of the city to find a live chicken to purchase for Shabbat.

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1. A typical Tunisian sweet, zlabia (sometimes zalabia, or zylabia) is a fritter: dough is sweetened with some combination of sugar, honey, and rose or orange-blossom water, and then deep fried in oil. The dish is found, with slight variations, throughout South and West Asia, and in North and West Africa.

2. Saroual (sarwal) are baggy, dropped-crotch trousers that gather at the ankles; a kabouch (kabbous or kabous) is a hat similar to a fez.

3. Halelem (hlalem): a handmade pasta used in a spicy soup; pkila (pkaila): an aromatic stew of beef, white beans, and spinach, often served on Rosh Hashanah; nikitouche (nikitoosh): homemade pasta, commercially called Israeli couscous, traditionally served in broth; merguez: spicy lamb sausages; hasbana (osbana): a traditional sausage using sheep intestines as casing and stuffed with lamb, chickpeas, parsley, and spices; koukla (koookla): semolina-based egg dumplings spiced with harissa and dried mint; akoud (akood): a spicy, tripe-based stew.
She finally bought one down on the quays. 
Outrageously overpriced.

We kept the bird for a few days under the sink in the kitchen of our tiny apart-
ment on rue de la Roquette. It crowed at dawn. Our curious neighbors searched
the entire building for the rooster. They questioned my mother: had she heard a
rooster crowing? No, she answered, suddenly gripped by fear, and, as soon as the
door was shut, she turned to my grandfather: “Kill the bird, and make it quick, so
I can cook the thing and be done with it. In this town, they send the police after
people who keep live chickens in their apartments.”

At the age of fifty-eight, my grandfather ended his career in animal sacrifice
with this rooster.

But we still made our own harissa at home.

I remember those summers when the peppers would be drying in the sun,
when my eyes and throat would burn as my grandmother pounded the dried pep-
pers in her bronze mortar and pestle.

And while other people’s balconies were brightened with pots of geraniums,
ours was piled high with basins, buckets, cardboard boxes full of Passover dishes—
because we had three sets of dishes, one for meat, one for milk, and the one that
never came in contact with bread, and which was used only one week per year.
And for years, we dried meat in the sun on a line. We call it kadid: first it marinates
in oil, cumin, and cayenne pepper; then, once it’s dry, we steam it for serving.

In our building, they called us the Tunisians.

One day, it occurred to me suddenly that we were foreigners.

I realized then that we had been ejected from a country, like someone ejected
from a plane, without a parachute.

What my eyes saw, I’m unable to recover. What my skin felt, I can’t bring back
to life.

But Sfax draws a little closer every time I speak in Arabic, every time I say filamen, tmenik, malaraha; every time I leave one of my children with a “rabi maak”; evey time they sneeze and I murmur a “tahîch,” or when they hurt themselves and, I say “smalla” . . .

I’m from there. From Sfax.
It’s written on my ID.
Born in.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

4. Filamen: see you later; tmenik: you’re kidding!; Malaraha: good riddance!; rabi maak: Godspeed; tahîch (from the Arabic ta’îsh): may you live long; smalla (an abbreviation of bismillah): may God protect you.