Childhood in Casablanca is a film in color. It’s a coproduction in Technicolor and in stereo sound, with many extras. Everything there is colorful, musical. Everything there is double, divided, multiple, split; the places, the holidays, the first names, the languages, and even the dreams.

Then, there is the world of parents.

It is the outside world. We give them our hand, and we walk up the large avenues that cross the city, punctuated by palm trees. We hear the noise of the palms in the wind, and when we lift our heads, we see them shake their disheveled heads. We stroll on the rue Blaise-Pascal, on Saturday afternoons, when Jewish families flow in peaceful streams along the boulevard lined with fashion boutiques, and stop to introduce their future grooms and their eligible young women. In winter, we go by car for coffee on the Corniche and watch the sea, waiting for summer. In summer, we spend long days at Fedala, on the beach, and we don’t come back till nighttime, drunk with sun and skin burnt with salt.

Our family ritual is to go to the cinema on Saturday night. Once we have walked up or down all the steps of the great temple, when the heavy red-velvet curtains with golden fringes have slowly pulled back, the Metro Goldwyn Mayer lion roars, again and again, to greet us, because he recognizes us as well.

Time is punctuated by family celebrations. For a marriage, there are almost always two parties. The first night, the bride wears a velvet dress, embroidered with gold, with gauzy sleeves; we are told that this is the great dress that belongs to the whole family, that it comes from Spain, and that we too—my female cousins and I—will wear it later. The women put henna on the palms of their hands as they sing, accompanied by the Andalusian musicians. The women have raucous voices that are unfamiliar to us.
There are organs at the Algerian synagogue, just like in church. The beadle, who is the caretaker but also the master of ceremonies, wears a tri-corner hat and a coat festooned with golden chains; the children march after him shouting “Napoleon!” When the benediction is pronounced, there are festive but timid ululations, and the bride’s mother cries with emotion under a great wide-brimmed hat of organza.
Morocco

The little girls wear white bobby socks, polished shoes with mother of pearl buttons, and petticoats that make their embroidered English dresses swell like flowers. Their male cousins wear tuxedos that make them look like little penguins.

Next, the bride dances with her father, while the musicians in red jackets play tangos and paso dobles. Around them, all the couples of the family move to the beat. The children find this very funny. They besiege the dance floor; they chase each other with loud cries; they weave between the couples and dive under the tables covered in sumptuous dishes. Old women catch them mid-flight and hold them close, just long enough to bless them, in Arabic, in Hebrew, in Spanish, and to prophesize a future marriage as beautiful as this one. These elderly women are all our aunties, and we have to call them “signora.”

When it isn’t a marriage, it’s a bar mitzvah. In our world, we didn’t say “bar-mitzvah” but rather “communion,” even “first communion.” The same musicians, the same dancers, the same blessings, the same discreet tears.

At home, it’s the world of the grandmother, an enclosed world. Its borders are the walls of the villa. Time is marked by Jewish holidays whose cycle does not challenge the other calendar, but rather duplicates it and intensifies it. The children and grandchildren respect the time over which the grandmother presides and of which she is the keeper, all the while bringing it into harmony with what she calls “French time.”

For Christmas, we get presents and are photographed with a nice old man who has a cotton-wool beard. We dream of snow, a snow that none of us has ever seen and that will fall in big flakes, just like in the movies. But at almost the same time, at home, Hanukkah, the emotional festival of lights, brings us together at nightfall, around a song sung from night to night and before a lamp for which my grandmother has prepared long wicks soaked in oil.

And at almost the same time as Carnival, for which we were bought masks and party favors in the joke and novelty store owned by an Italian behind the place de France, there was Purim, which brought together all her grandsons and granddaughters around an immense children’s table.¹ For the occasion she made strange breads in the shape of faces, with two round, white eyes—two eggs imprisoned in a little pastry lattice that looked at us with an empty and terrifying gaze. These eyes, she told us, were Haman’s. For dessert, we also had Haman’s ears: rosette pastries dipped in honey. Before this cannibalistic dinner, she told us of the beauty of Esther, the courage of Mordechai, and the perversity of Haman who wanted to kill all the Jews. The children were much more moved by these stories than by the incomprehensible prayers that accompanied the meal, and it was with conviction that they banged their spoons on the table, each time the name of Haman was said. One of the uncles didn’t miss the opportunity to name a contemporary Haman: it

¹. As recounted in the book of Esther, the holiday of Purim celebrates the Jews’ escape from the evil Persian official Haman, who sought their destruction.
was Hitler, or Nasser, who threatened Israel, or an irascible neighbor, or even the most boisterous of the male cousins.

Everything was shared, festive, all mixed up together. Yes, that was it. To be a Jewish child, at that time and in that place, was perhaps to have the happy awareness that worlds, rituals, layers of memory could be overlapping, superimposed, mixed up in a joyous incoherence. But it was also to hear a secret feminine voice talking of another time in the orphaned language that had found refuge in my grandmother. For my grandmother spoke the other language, the despised one, and she shared the dreams and words of her exiled language with the youngest granddaughter, the one who was too little to go to school. The others, the brother and the sister, only lived in the world outside, the world in French. They knew how to read and were bought copies of *Spirou, La Semaine de Suzette,* and *Mickey Mouse.* But as soon as the villa was invaded by the huge mauve shadows of dusk, the grandmother would make the little girl sit next to her, on a little wooden bench, and without ever turning on the light, she told stories. The child waited without speaking, so as not to frighten away the words.

*Kan ma kan.* Everything always began this way. On her neck, the little girl felt the shiver of beginnings. The tales took place in a city, always the same, with terraces and fountains, guarded by one hundred Black slaves. Veiled in blue, his silver dagger at his side, Haroun al-Rashid strolled through the city every night without escort. He stopped before his subjects’ windows to hear their confidences, their complaints, and their dreams. He granted the wishes of some, punished others. In the other language, the voice made itself elegant to describe the way that the king’s wives were perfumed, that they were massaged with essence of sandalwood, amber, and musk. The voice made itself mysterious to evoke the tortures inflicted on wrongdoers. They were killed, said the voice in a strange formula, “hair by hair.”

But most often the tales celebrated the lofty deeds of miraculous saints. The little girl understood that the saints had established a sort of direct communication with God. It was like a telephone call, but one that took place at night, in their dreams. As soon as they closed their eyes and they fell asleep, they saw the place where treasures were hidden or victims buried, they saw who was guilty of unsolved crimes. They were told of dangers to come and they sometimes warned

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2. *Spirou* was a francophone Belgian comic magazine that published weekly comics, including some of the best-known serials such as *Lucky Luke* and *Les Schtroumpfs* (forerunners of *The Smurfs*). *La Semaine de Suzette,* a bi-weekly French magazine whose target audience was young French Catholic girls, is notable for having created the character Bécassine, a simple young girl from Brittany.

3. A variation of the Arabic expression *kan ya ma kan,* which is used in a similar way to the English expression “once upon a time”; its literal meaning is “it was or it was not” or “it happened or it did not.”

4. Harun al-Rachid was an historical figure, a legendary Abbasid caliph who reigned in Baghdad (763–809), during which time the city reached a cultural apex. Al-Rachid signifies “the just,” the upright, or the “rightly guided.” He is the subject of many legends and tales; certain episodes from *One Thousand and One Nights* are based on Harun and his court.
the grandmother through signs that she knew how to recognize and interpret. When they didn’t dream, they cared for and cured the daughters of the king, and these women would then treat the Jews with goodness. They rode lions, they hid in caves subsisting only on dates for years, sometimes they made giants out of terracotta, and on their foreheads, they wrote the word “emet,” which means “truth.”

Soon, too soon, one would hear the sound of the big entry gate and then the key in the lock, and the child felt as though torn. Her mother, as soon as she arrived, would turn on all the lights in the villa. She spoke loudly, hammered the floor with her high heels, and she chased away the shadows, the signs, and the dreams. Then the child blinked her eyes, dazzled, deafened by these shouts, before running, delivered and relieved, toward her mother, as though she had escaped from some danger. Ungrateful, without a care for the grandmother, she took her distance from the twilight world. She wasn’t aware that it had dug paths within her, woven its weft deep in her soul, installed voices that would call out to her at night in her sleep, that would call her from beyond space, exile, and forgetting, toward the matrix language and toward the time that existed before that of Snow White and Little Red Riding Hood.

But try as she might to respond to their call, she could never reach them. Even in her dreams, the film of childhood is henceforth a silent movie in black and white, from which the actors have disappeared and whose surface is crisscrossed with silver streaks that mark the place where the image of memory has been touched and corroded.

—Translated by Robert Watson