

The Last Exile

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The most beautiful stories are written in pencil! Do you know why? So we can erase them; so they can disappear without leaving a trace, allowing us to heal or perhaps become more miserable! I no longer know exactly.

She was at the center of the room. She occupied it, almost filled it with her presence and her existence. Her presence erased every other existence; she wiped out the life around her to become life itself. I have long believed she was the center of the universe, that she created God and propelled Him into me to believe in Him! I thought she hid the sun around her neck and hung it in the sky every morning, and at night she stretched her hand to the sky and hung the stars and the moon. I thought she gave life to all beings: birds, cats, dogs, butterflies and the neighbors' children. I imagined that she cut off a piece of herself, boiled it for hours and fed us with it! I thought every drop of milk in the world dripped from her heart, and I have always believed that the umbilical cord that attached me to her was never detached! I believed that she was God! I adored her the same way our ancestors adored Tanit, Astarte or Aphrodite.

I was sure that I drew light from her eyes and inhaled life from her breath. Yes, I believed, and I wish I had remained ignorant and illiterate, blind and falling into the depth of my disbelief and ignorance, enjoying my existence next to Her Silent Highness!

She was in the middle of the room, crouching with all her weight over a sheepskin, the sheep from the last Eid. I called it *Rizk* (livelihood) since my dad always repeated "this Rizk is Halal... it is Halal". My mother pursed her lips without really smiling, forcing herself to smile moderately.

The weather was very hot that afternoon. She was running the mill with all her patience and strength while its noise deafened our little ears. She bent forward with all her might, then slowly backwards like a dancer moving her waist for a living. But my mother was capable of moving the whole world to calm the hunger of our stomachs and the howling of our hollow mouths.

Under the millstone there was another sheepskin. I didn't know that sheep's name! I imagined my mother might have given birth to him before I was born. That skin was called *Rok'a* (patch)! The flour fell from both sides of the millstone and gathered on *Rok'a's* hide with a magic movement that made me stare without knowing what I was seeing. The mill turned, and in her hand she held the wheat, then fed it into the opening of the mill. It turned like a Sufi dancer seized by passion. The more it turned, the louder the noise became, as if it emanated from the depths of the earth. It turned the same way the universe revolves around itself to create the concept of time and,

as such, the mill turned so we could live and so life could go on.

It turned, and its noise carried me to the past, to pre-civilization. I thought the secrets of the world were in the hollow of the millstone and you could get dizzy staring at it. It was like a fairy in ancient times: the louder its noise got the deeper your stare would pull you into the void. The world revolved around it and I knew that if my mother wanted the sun to rise in front of the house instead of behind it, the sun would obey voluntarily, and the millstone kept on turning.

To this day, I don't know if this stone machine originally belonged to the Berbers, the Byzantines, the Romans, the Arabs, or if it was manufactured in China! As for all the objects I see around us, I flip them over in a curious manner to read that clumsy phrase "Made in China"! Resentful and sarcastic, I would say: "Poor people! Their mother's name is so ugly: 'China'!" My mother's millstone wasn't manufactured there; she got it from her father's house, as it was passed down from one generation to the next. I used to ask my friends in the neighborhood and at school if they owned millstones. They used to make fun of me and I would pity them!

How could they not know this part of the earth? The stone that could shake a mountain when moved.

It's round like the earth and divided into two parts like the moon, with both parts halved by a circle. A small wedge is placed at its core, and on the top half there is a small loop-shaped part to which a rope is attached, with a stick connected on the other side. It's made entirely of stone, and has an unrivaled design because it's created from absolutely nothing. You can see the wilderness of nature in it, in all its abstractness, frivolity and its legendary, burning love of life. The earth turns so time goes by, and in our home the millstone turns so we can live!

The day I don't hear its noise, I will know that we are dying of hunger, and that there is no wheat at home, no fire to burn and no bread to bake or eat. That stone would be crying for us, and would fear that if we didn't find anything to eat we would end up eating it!

Her image is stuck in my mind. She doesn't resemble anyone, not even my late grandmother. I walked along without covering my face, and the sand blinded my eyes – that poisonous sand from that rotten city. I knew one day I would return to the far-away village I left behind. I won't lie and say: "Those green and flowery slopes shining in their natural beauty!" No, I will not lie! I will not try to cheat you into this, you'll end up not believing and you'll never go there! I'll be honest with you, so you can believe me when I say that it's a barren patch of land, dark even in daylight. Its inhabitants have abandoned it voluntarily, they thought of it as barren rather than virgin land; a remote and poor village, so arid that all it contains could not feed even one goat!!!

My mother was born there; she was a child of the mountains! She didn't tell me any of this, but all her traits resembled mine: her dark skin, her curly hair, the wrinkles on her face, her hands that resembled the mountains' slopes, the breadth of her shoulders, the size of her hands, her steadfastness, patience, silence, and soul – which hid the secrets of the universe. The green tattoo on her forehead and chin that tells the story of eternity. She used to laugh and say, "This is free and eternal gold that nobody can steal from me!" She laughed as she looked at her wrist, which was covered with Berber drawings, and perhaps told the story of a nation!

She dressed like a gypsy, either in a black quilt or a blanket covered with mysterious Amazigh markings. She wore a belt she'd made of cotton threads, it was not really a dress, it looked more like a coffin! However, it was not a coffin of death, but a coffin of life! Perhaps they



Berber tapestry (Assia Elkadhi).

knew that we've been going from one coffin to another, from above the ground to beneath it, and from the cradle to the grave, since the beginning of time!

Your eyes will certainly not miss the two triangles holding her dress at the shoulders, and if you look closer, you will see the symbol of Islam placed between them, with a star and a crescent! Believe me, she was stranger than fiction!

Everything in her evoked history; every vein in her hand, every gesture, every wrinkle on her face summed up a story forgotten by time. She was the last granddaughter of a desert tribe, the sole survivor of a genocide, like the last letter of a holy book that survived despite the fire that almost turned it to ash! She is like the last prophet preaching to a deaf and mute nation, like the last planet in a galaxy, and like the last star in the sky. When you look at her, you feel that time's relativity is summed up in

the light of her eyes, and you fear that if her eyes were to shut, it would destroy everything on earth and transform all beings into dust.

She was in the middle of the room, and the sun drifted over our neighborhood, sending people outside and heating the skies.

The three of us were playing in the shade that was barely a meter long when my father suddenly shook the door and started screaming loudly, his voice almost shaking the pillars of our house. He went towards her, took the millstone stick and started beating her. That day I was small, but I was the eldest among my brothers. I turned my head towards the wall and fixed my eyes on it without moving; I overlooked the scene. I was absent, blind, silent, hiding my grief, my misery, my tears, my sorrow, my consciousness and unconsciousness. That day, I didn't know why that happened. Later, once I'd grown up, she told me about that incident – the day she was crying so bitterly

that it tortured my soul and ripped my heart. Years after the incident, she told me about it laughing: “He beat me up because I went out without my *Safseri*! The men in the café told him. May God punish them.” She was rebellious and disobedient, so she was repressed, just like our homeland!

They say “You grow up and you forget my child” but what a lie! I’ve grown up and I haven’t forgotten. I’ve been waiting to forget for several years, like a barren woman waiting for a miracle child! I was waiting to be hit by Alzheimer’s, but this didn’t happen. Whenever I pass by, the story of my life plays out in front of me, as if I were dying. I keep hoping, saying, “death will make us forget, I am sick of forgetting, so dear death be merciful to us!”

I sat in my office – an isthmus of exile. My memory was feeding on some corroded pictures and, while I wrote, something was suffering inside of me, maybe it was death calling. I felt an inner fire burning the cigarette I was puffing on with fake pleasure. While I wrote, things started falling around me, my eighty years weighed heavily on me, the lines I wrote were no longer clear, my words were all scattered.

I have decided today, after fifty years, to write about the painting hanging in front of me. It wasn’t done by a famous artist; it was done by my mother who forgot, as usual, to sign it. It’s a square drawing of a woman bending over a millstone placed between her legs, a woman with green eyes, adorned with Berber ornaments, her extremities covered with henna, and life shining from her eyes! Was she recording that memory? Or is this how time has stopped? Actually, it’s a cloth embroidered with wool or *Tohma* as my mother used to call it, that she pulled from the ruins of our house, a house that was destined to fall apart. I carried this cloth with me from my homeland to the country of my exile and hung it right in front of me so that it would remind me of going back. Though I was offered huge sums, I refused to sell it, since no one understood its meaning! They could not understand, could not know the truth about it. I hung it in front of me so my memory could assassinate me every day, so I could be a victim of my pens and papers, so my blood could serve as an ink that would heal those who are torn between civilization and nation.