

14th Edition

A SEA *of words*

Youth and Mobility

Towards a
Euro-Mediterranean
Citizenship



IEMed.
European Institute of the Mediterranean

 **Anna Lindh
Foundation**
— EUROMED —



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A Sea of Words

2021 edition – 14th year

Youth and Mobility: Towards a Euro-Mediterranean Citizenship

Short stories by 10 young writers

IEMed.
European Institute of the Mediterranean

 **Anna Lindh
Foundation**
— EUROMED —

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Foreword

The contest “A Sea of Words” was launched in 2008 by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) in collaboration with the Anna Lindh Foundation. This initiative brings together the voices of young people, who are essential agents of change, on topics of social, cultural, economic or political dialogue, which prompted the 1995 Barcelona Declaration.

This contest gives a voice to young people from the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries and the European Union, promoting debate around common problems and shared values.

“A Sea of Words” encourages the participation of youths from both shores of the Mediterranean and expresses different challenges and goals of each country in the region. In the 14 years that the contest has taken place, 3,004 stories written by youngsters between 18 and 30 years old have been presented. 1,373 stories came from the northern shore and 1,599 from the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. With the goal of encouraging the voices of youths, the project has the objective of creating new socio-political narratives that strengthen the culture of peace in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Each edition focuses on different current topics concerning young people from all over the Mediterranean, making their realities and conceptions known with a creative tool: writing. Through stories about real or fictitious experiences, young people provide a personal, historical or anthropological vision of issues and realities that, despite geographical or cultural distances, are common to the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Despite the restrictions derived from the COVID-19 pandemic, 139 young people from 23 countries of the Euro-Mediterranean region participated in the fourteenth edition.

The authors of the 10 best texts – selected by an international jury – were invited to Barcelona on 30 November 2021, in the framework of the Mediterranean Day, to participate, for three days, in the awards ceremony, creative workshops and other cultural exchanges to develop common meeting spaces.

Historically, the Mediterranean region has been a place of movements and migrations (sometimes forced) of its populations, which have forged the societies we now share. Mobility enables us to get closer to and know the social and cultural diversity and richness of the two shores in such a way that we discover shared values and challenges. Thanks to the flows of people, differences can become authentic richness, which allows a future of peace and stability in the region to be created together.

Through this edition we wanted to reflect upon the importance of mutual knowledge and exchange to advance towards the creation of a citizenship that embraces the entire Euro-Mediterranean region.

Mobility means exchanging, getting closer and knowing each other.

In the 2021 edition “Youth and Mobility: Towards a Euro-Mediterranean Citizenship” the vast majority of the texts had a common base: learning through mobility. It is indeed a learning experience because of the new contexts mobility brings us, on a bus through a city, a motorboat on a sea strait, or in an airport. It takes us to new realities from which we can learn. It is through mobility that we discover new places, new people, and can usually leave difficult life experiences behind.

One clear example is the mobility between the two Mediterranean shores: the way different people contrast in terms of rights, economic stability and personal security shows us the diversity, differences and inequalities that still exist in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

It is through mobility and discovering new contexts that we find out that they are mostly not pleasant but harsh and challenging, as shown by the texts in this year’s contest. The maturity of the authors is reflected in their stories and the courage to move across the Mediterranean in search of new places that provide better opportunities. Mobility is the means to achieve emotional maturity by creating new social relations and overcoming adversity.

Out of Tune

Hala Kabalan. Syria

I

The persistent sunlight tickled her tired eyelids, initiating the undeniable realisation of a new morning. She hesitantly got up to check the world outside the window beside her bed. The Mediterranean was resting peacefully outside, stretching wide and uniting with the horizon in a natural harmony. She listened carefully as the distant music of *Soli*¹ filled the atmosphere with random lyrics: “*Il mondo dietro ai vetri sembra un film senza sonoro*”.²

Passing by the dusty mandolin behind the door, she poured herself a cup of hot espresso. It used to make things better, she thought to herself, but not anymore. She checked her phone only to find the numbers of her digital clock staring back at her. No messages, emails or exciting missed calls. In that moment, there were only the smell of strong coffee and the salty breeze of August.

She could feel herself slipping into the empty space between her own thoughts. The silence was intolerable. *Soli* came to an end and left her alone with her mind. She has been avoiding this silence for a while now. Her isolation was magnifying the heaviness in her heart. The monster of sadness was sitting there, waiting for any opportunity to take over. In her mind, she was looking for someone or something to blame, only to be faced with nothing but clear facts.

She recalled the memory of her mother occasionally coughing and telling her “It’s just a cold”. She witnessed her deteriorating every day until she was unable to take a single breath. After a short and exhausting fight, her mother finally surrendered. Leaving her behind, alone and terrified. A wave of unpleasant goose bumps ran over her body as the flashbacks disappeared. The scars of loss are yet to be healed, and no one truly understood how it felt. She was allowed to feel numb. These days, she was destined to exist on the margin of life, waiting for time to pass.

A reckless gust of wind blew a blue ticket off the coffee table. She grabbed it quietly, reading the words aloud in her head with a desperate attempt to overcome the deafening silence. There was an exhibition in town. She vaguely remembered buying the blue ticket solely for its colour. It was that specific shade of blue, the one in her mother’s eyes. The blue ticket served as the perfect bookmark for her version of *The Prophet*. She wasn’t planning to go anywhere, not anymore at least.

Checking the empty capsules of her antidepressants, she realised she had to leave the house today, a simple mission that became rather impossible. The world right outside her house seemed as far away as the sun. Everything required a massive amount of energy that she didn’t have. Getting out of bed, drinking water, sometimes even blinking was too much of an effort to handle. She was in a

1. Alone; an Italian song by Toto Cutugno.

2. The world outside of the window seems like a silent film.

continuous state of absolute exhaustion, forgotten and alone. Warmth and happiness turned into a distant memory that calmly, yet surely, dissolved in her heart.

An hour later, she put on her floral sundress, grabbed her book, and headed out to catch a bus.

II

She did not belong.

The streets were crowded with children and their parents since it was the summer break. Happy screams and loud laughs filled the air and distracted her from the music in her ears. The sun was rising majestically over this town near the sea as the breeze tickled her dress and demanded to be acknowledged. She paused the music and listened to random conversations between middle-aged women, who were picking their mandarin oranges with impressive delicacy. Everyone around her belonged to someone or something around, children to their parents, pets to their owners, the sun to the sky. Their loud laughs declared their joy. Still, the world in her eyes seemed like a silent film.

After getting her prescription, she headed back to the bus stop where she grabbed her book to read on.

“That’s one impressive bookmark you got there.” The voice of a stranger caught her off guard. “*The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.*” He recited one of her favourite quotes of *The Prophet*. “An impressive book as well.”

Unable to process his words, she looked around to make sure he was talking to her. The guy with curly brown hair smiled generously, as if he was expecting her to start singing his favourite song.

The stranger looked like her somehow, she thought, they could braid their hair together and no one will know which is which. He was using his right hand to fix his glasses, while the slim fingers of his left hand rested on the brown mandolin case beside him. His yellow T-shirt and green shorts merged him with the trees and the sun surrounding the street. She glanced at her floral dress. It was black, and just like her, it did not fit the scene either.

For a brief second, she envied him. It must feel good to be the guy in the yellow T-shirt. He looked like he belonged to that specific moment, to that place, to that small town near the sea.

“I’m opening for the exhibition on your bookmark.” He smiled as he patted his mandolin tenderly. “My mother is one of the artists.”

Her envy grew stronger as she grasped all the privileges the guy in the yellow T-shirt was enjoying. How does it feel to easily belong to people and places? she wondered; how does it feel to be okay? Shyly smiling, she nodded in silence. She was not ready for random conversations with lucky strangers. She secretly sighed in relief as the bus showed up with its usual noise. Finally, she’s going back home.

The empty bus stopped with a much-anticipated heaviness. As they got on board, they sat opposite each other. Thankfully, he understood she did not want to be bothered. She opened her book again and stared at the blue ticket. What day was it anyway? She was about to start reading when the guy in the yellow T-shirt played a tune she knew. He was good, she thought, but he failed to notice his mandolin was out of tune.

“Your E string is out of tune.” She found herself pronouncing these words across the empty bus.

“No way, I used an app to tune it just now.”

“Half a note lower than it’s supposed to be,” ignoring his claim completely.

He took his phone out of his pocket to check the tuning. Strumming the double E string, he turned the screen to face her with his eyes in genuine shock. E was half a note lower than it’s supposed to be.

The conversation that followed felt like a dream of some kind. She found herself tuning the mandolin while advising him to check it again before his big performance. She only found herself answering his questions without having the time to ask him anything, not even his name or where he’s from. He kept smiling and greeting every new passenger with his confident *Buon-giorno!* There was something about this stranger who got life figured out. Such a lucky stranger, she thought to herself.

Reaching the 3rd station, he packed his instrument and declared: “Give me a thumbs-up in case tuning is on point. I’m counting on you.” She was puzzled as she looked down to find the blue ticket still in her hand. It’s today, she realised, the exhibition in the national park on 3rd station was about to start.

III

There was a laidback charm to the park that slept in the middle of her town. The great oak tree stretched skywards as the roots were unapologetically making their way between scattered groups of people. She looked around to find sunshine turning into chattering and greetings while everyone spoke a different language. Still, they looked like her somehow. If one braided everyone’s hair together, no one would know which is which.

A number of artists from different ages stood beside their paintings with a sense of pride that was almost materialised into a painting on its own. Walking beside her, the guy in the yellow T-shirt made his way to the humble stage in the middle of the park. People gathered around cheering for the band and went silent after a while. The lucky stranger, who looked like he belonged to every oak tree in her town by the sea, plucked each of the strings of his mandolin. Instantly looking at her, he gently raised his eyebrows and tilted his head to the side asking for her confirmation.

Life stood still for a second. She asked herself what she was doing here, a rush of guilt and uneasiness taking over her veins. She felt the weight of the medications in her bag as she remembered her mother walking underneath the great oak tree. *Soli* started playing again in her mind, but this time it was out of tune. She was alone, descending into a deep ocean of sorrow and grief. She closed her eyes and wished she did not exist anymore, nothing meant anything anymore. There was nothing but silence.

Plucking his strings with renewed determination, the familiar progression of notes forced her to open her eyes again. He snatched her out of her despair, his strum felt like a life jacket of some kind. He was still there, smiling with raised eyebrows and a tilted head. She raised her right hand in front of her nose in secret, and gave him a thumbs-up. The band started playing a cheerful collection of songs and the crowds were happily applauding whenever they got the chance. Ending the show with a song in a strange language, the band greeted the audience and quickly found their way off stage.

The guy in the yellow T-shirt was heading towards her mouthing the words “thank you”, when a distant voice seemed to call his name. “That’s my mother!” he said as he reached her side. “You have to check her painting. It’s our story.” Unable to shake off her persistent envy, she followed his footsteps in silence. They passed by the big sign at the entrance that said, *Crossing the Mediterranean: An Exhibition*, and reached the woman with brown hair by the tree. Behind her, a large oil painting was on display.

The painting was horizontally divided into two parts. The lower section portrayed a mess of confusing shades of grey. As she looked closer, she understood it was a scene of ultimate destruction. Bombed buildings, gigantic tanks, scattered tombstones, deadly rockets, and monstrous clouds. This was war. This was death. The terrifying prospect of this scene being real sent a shiver down her spine. Her eyes looked for the upper section in a desperate attempt to find consolation, and they finally did. It was that shade of blue, the one on her ticket, and the one in her mother’s eyes.

It was the sea. It was the Mediterranean that lay by the horizon outside her room. A small orange boat was painted on the blue background of the upper half. A woman and her child stood on board, turning their backs to the destruction behind and looking straight ahead.

“We were the only ones left. My father and sister were killed in an airstrike.”

He said as he wrapped his arm around his mother. “Everyone here has lost someone, but they’re all survivors.” When she looked around at the paintings hanging on old oak trees, the artists from across the sea looked more like her than ever before. She was not alone, she realised, and their pain was the same as hers. The woman interrupted her track of thoughts, murmuring a sentence in that strange language. The guy in the yellow T-shirt smiled and said “She said you look like a survivor too.”

In that specific moment, she almost felt like she belonged somewhere.

The End

بدوي في أرض أوروبا

محمد بنمبارك .المغرب

الساعة تشير إلى السابعة بتوقيت وارسو، كنت أول النازلين من الطائرة، إذ مقعدي بالصف الأخير، نسيم الريح كان غير الذي اعتدت عليه في صحرائنا، بدت لي السماء بصفائها كأني أراها لأول مرة، ابطنت خطواتي حتى يتقدمني بقية المسافرين إذ لا علم لي بما يجب فعله بعد النزول من الطائرة. اصطفت في طابور طويل مخصص لحاملي الجوازات الغير أوروبية، حتى إذا وصل دوري استقبلني شرطي الحدود بابتسامة مقتضبة سرعان ما ازدادت انشراحا لما طالع نص الدعوة التي وجهتها لي وكالة الثقافة والتربية البولندية لتمام دراستي في بولندا منوهة بتميزي الدراسي وموصية بتيسير الإجراءات الدارية لي، ليختم جواز سفري مع كلمة "مرحبا بك في وطننا" قالها والفخر يكاد ينطق من عيناه، استقبلتها بكل حب وامتنان.

لأواصل اقتفاء خطى من تقدمني من الناس نحو صالة المتعة، سحبت حقيبتي لأجد نفسي أمام قاعة أشد رحابة، مكتظة بالناس، صبية صغار يركضون من جمالهم تحسبهم ملائكة أطهار، وكبار سن تكاد تستشف من تقاسيم وجوههم ضراوة الحروب التي عاشتها بولندا بعد الاحتلال النازي غير انه سرعان ما ينتشلك الأمل مع مشهد شباب متأنقين منهم من يحمل وردا وآخرون بزي رسمي شبه موحد يحملون أوراقد دونت عليها أسماء فهمت بعدها أنهم انقو سيارات الأجرة، رحت ألقى النظر لعلني أبصر اسمي، فإذا باسمي العائلي على ورقة تحملها فتاة شقراء الشعر، باسمه لمحيا، مجرد رؤيتها كان كافيا لأنسى تعب الطريق، دنوت منها ملوحا بكفي الأيمن فقابلتني بابتسامة لعمري ما رأيت جمل منها قط، تصافحنا على مهل وقلبي البدوي يكاد ينفطر من رقتها وعقلي شارد يسائل من هذا العبقرى الذي اصل فينا نحن أهل الصحراء أنّ المرأة إنما هي البدينة السمينه وأن غيرها من النحيفات لا يعدن من النساء أصال، فصارت النحيفة تعامل معاملة المنبوذة وأسرهن في اجتهد لدفع العيب عنهم تارة بصنع مستخلصات طبيعية مرة المذاق، عسيرة على كبد الليل فكيف بكبد فتاة لم تكمل العشر سنين بعد، وتارة بإجبار الفتاة النحيفة بالقيام بتمارين رياضية شاقة، سرعان ما ايقظتني يوستينا من شرودي بسحبها القوي لحقيبتي قائلة " يبدو أنك متعب، ناولني حقيبتك لأساعدك" ثم ناولتني قطعة حلوة يبدو أنها من صنيع مطبخهم العريق، ابتلعته على مضض ومشاهد قريباتي ممن كانت النحافة قدرهن تطارد خاطري المرهق.

صعدنا بعدها حافلة النقل العمومي ولتخبرني يوستينا اننا سنصل القامة الجامعية بعد "عشر دقائق" أجبتها بابتسامة عريضة "لا عليك، قد قضيت أكثر من أربعة عشر ساعة من التنقل منذ ان غادرت بيتي حتى وصلت هنا".

وأسررت في نفسي أن ثانية واحدة في حضن العلم أفضل من قرون في أحضان الجهل والتخلف. وصلنا بعدها القامة الجامعية حيث وجدنا موظفتين اثنتين في انتظارنا راح بعدها الثالثي النسائي يتحدثن بالبولندية بشكل سريع كالبرق وكلمة "طاك ... طاك ... طاك" تتردد بينهن، استلمن نسخة من جواز سفري ثم ناولتني احدهن مفتاح غرفتي قائلة "مرحبا بك في وطننا" ودّعنتي يوستينا بقبلة على وجنتي اليمنى وتركت اليسرى بعدها محرومة.

صعدت الدرج نحو الطابق الثاني وأنا ألقى بصري يمنية ويسرى باحثاً عن غرفتي رقم 206 لأجده في منتصف الممر، فتحت الباب وأنا أتذكر آخر باب أغلقته قبل رحلتي هاته كان لغرفتي بإقامتي الجامعية بعاصمة المغرب الرباط، كان الفرق شاسعاً بين الغرفتين وفعل المقارنة غير صائب من أصله، غرفتي الجديدة متسعة في ركنها الأيمن سرير بكامل متاعه، وفي الركن الآخر كرسي ومكتب وللغرفة شرفة تطل على حديقة خضراء سرعان ما ذكرتني والأسى يكاد يحرق قلبي بما ستراه من أزيال وقاذورات إذا ما أنت يوماً فكرت في أن تطل من إحدى نوافذ غرف إقامتنا الجامعية بالرباط، ساءلت نفسي بعدها من المسؤول؟ وهل يمكن الحلم بغد أفضل؟

لم ادري كيف؟ غير انه سرعان ما تجلّت لي شاخصة كلمات موظفة القامة وشرطي الحدود "مرحبا بك في وطننا" وشعور الفخر حين يقولونها، أحسست أن الحكاية إنما هي قائمة على ضمير "نا" ولفظ "وطن" إن المرء حين يستشعر انتماءه للوطن باعتباره بيته الأكبر يبذل لذلك كل جهده حتى يكون حال البيت الأكبر كحال بيته الأصغر مؤمناً بأن استقراره الشخصي مرتبط باستقرار وطنه وأن رغبة من رغب الوطن ورفاهيته.

لكن يا نفسي، كيف لنا ان نفقّع جموع الشباب ومعاشر الشيوخ في بلداننا بذلك؟ كيف لنا ان نقنعهم بأنه يمكن التغيير؟ وأن الامر إنما هو مرتبط بصدق الرادة وقوة العزيمة. هناك فقط توقف عقلي عن إيجاد جواب يشفي الغليل وأحسست بأن العياء قد بدأ يدبّ في جسدي النحيف، رحت أثقل الخطى لأستحم في حمام تنقسمه غرفتي مع غرفة مجاورة وإذا بي في طريقي بفتاة قصيرة القامة، سوداء الشعر، بتتوردة خفيفة حيثني بكل فرح وسألتنني "هل أنت الذي ستسكن هنا؟" مشيرة إلى غرفتي رددت "نعم" قالت "مرحبا بك، انا اسمي بيرغيت، وأنا يهودية أمريكية الجنسية وأصلي من هنا بولندا، وأنت؟" قلت "اسمي محمد، وأنا من صحراء المغرب" فكادت تطير فرحاً لما سمعت كلمة المغرب قائلة "ذاك موطن جدتي لأمي، دائماً ما تحدثنا أُمّي عن احتضان المغرب لليهود والاحترام الكبير الذي يحظون به عند عموم الشعب والاسرة الملكية" رددت محرّكا رأسي نعم بابتسامة ظاهرها التعب وباطنها شعور رهيب بأنني بتجربتي هذه كمولود جديد يقذف لعالم جديد. ودّعنتي قائلة "دعنا نلتقي مجدداً" رددت "نعم، بالتأكيد".

دخلت بعدها حمام الغرفتين متجرداً من ثيابي وفي عقلي عشرات الأسئلة تتقاذف. أين هي أوروبا التي حذّرتني منها الكثيرون من شبابنا؟ لماذا لم تعاملني اليهودية بتهجم وأنا المسلم وبيننا اختلاف عقدي شاسع؟ كيف تسافر بيرغيت وحدها؟ وكيف تعلّمت يوستينا تلك الشهامة والقدرة على التصرف بشكل يفوق الرجال؟ وأهلنا في الصحراء يقلن ان النساء خلقن للفراش وإن ارادت الخروج يوماً فالمطبخ يكفيها لذلك. ماذا لو رأى أهلي جمال كل من بيرغيت القصيرة ويوستينا النحيفة، هل سيتوقفون عن تسمين الفتيات كأنهن عجول البشر؟

لبست بعدها لباسي وغادرت الحمام وأنا أتأمل كيف انه لم يكن مجرد حمام للبدن فقط، وإنما دعوة مستعجلة لحمام فكري أيضاً، رميت بجسدي المنهك على سرير يري وأنا اردد دعاء السفر الذي أنستني سرعة الاحداث ذكره.

رَنّ بعدها منبه الهاتف، إنها السادسة صباحاً من أول صباح لي في بولندا، لبست لباسي واتجهت نحو قاعة الفطار حيث صادفت جارتني بيرغيت بعطر مميز وهندام أنيق، اقترحت علي ان اطلب الخيار

الثالث في قائمة الفطور لأنه الأفضل صحياً، تبادلنا الحديث حول التخصص الذي سيدرس كل واحد منا فوجدنا ان كلانا في مدرسة العلوم والتقنيات مع اختلاف طفيف في مواعيد بعض الحصص، قررنا الذهاب بعدها معا لمعرفة قاعات الدروس التي ستبدأ بعد يومين، كان المسير معها ممتعاً، كان فتاة ناضجة على رغم صغر سنها، شديدة الاطلاع بالثقافات والتاريخ، بارعة في إيصال فكرتها، دقيقة في اختيار ألفاظها، تخطينا الكثير من الدروب والازقة دون شعور بذلك، أحسست لحظتها انني للتو أمارس فعل الحياة بصدق، جمال العمارة البولونية أضفى لمسة خاصة على المشهد وانا المتيم بفن العمارة.

وإذا فجأة بكلمات عربية نابية تقع على مسامعي، التفت نحو اتجاه الكلمات فإذا بشابين يتوسدان رصيف إحدى الساحات، بجانبهما قنينة خمر يتصارعان عليها أصابني المشهد بذهول وخيبة أمل سرعان ما قاطعتني بيرغيت قائلة "ها قد وصلنا لمبنى الجامعة، انظر هناك يوجد المبنى حيث سيكون درس يوم الاثنين" ثم قالت "هيا بنا إلى مقهى الجامعة لنستريح قليلاً". فإذا به ساحة واسعة الفناء، تحيط بها أعمدة مطرزة على نمط العمارة الرومية وفي أعلى كل عمود وجه إنسان منحوت فهمت لاحقاً من الخبيرة بيرغيت انهم لمفكرين وعلماء بولونيين، شعور الفخر بالماضي والاجداد ماثوث في كل شبر من هذا المكان.

سألنتي بعدها بيرغيت "لماذا تجعلني اتحدث أكثر منك؟ وتختار الصمت والاستماع، رغم أنني انا أيضاً احب ذلك، لكن نحن هنا لتبادل الحديث ويتعرف بعضنا على الآخر" أجبتها بكل عفوية ويريق عينيها قد زادني تحفيزاً لذلك "أنني فتى من فتیان الصحراء، نشأنا في طبيعة قاسية، أغلب وقتنا في رعي البلب واقتفاء أثر الماء، لا تأتي خيامنا إلا ليال، وهذا اول يوم لي بأوروبا - أرض غير المسلمين - كما عرفتها دائماً". قاطعتني وهي مبتسمة "لا يهم من أين أتيت وما طبيعة أصلك او معتقدك، ما يهم هو ان يكون قلبك مليئاً بالحب وان تنظر للناس جميعاً بعين الانسانية والمودة، العالم اليوم يراهن علينا نحن الشباب لقيادة البشرية نحو مستقبل ملئه السالم والرخاء لنا وللأجيال القادمة دون إضرار بالموارد الطبيعية للعالم".

ثم توقفت برهة لتبتسم ابتسامة الفتاة العاشقة قائلة "أنت مدين لبولندا" أجبت بدون تردد "نعم، وبشكل يفوق مقدرة الالفاظ والكلمات، لقد كانت هذه الساعات القليلة التي قضيتها هنا كفيلة بتغيير الكثير من المفاهيم وتصحيح الكثير من الأفكار الخاطئة التي كانت تزوج ببالي، مشهد الشابين قبل قليل كان كفيال لفهم تخوف الحكومات الأوروبية ودعوتها المتكررة لضرورة الاندماج، أدب شرطي المطار كان كفيال لفهم ان هذه القارة تحترم القانون وترحب بكل ما هو قانوني وتشجع عليه، الثقة التي منحنتي إياها دولة بولندا بتقديم منحة مالية شهرية ومسكن ومأكل دليل واضح على رغبة الحكومات الأوروبية في مد اليد لشباب دول الجنوب لتطوير مهاراتهم وخدمة بلدانهم، ثقافتك الواسعة وطريقة حديثك وعرضك لأفكار بانث لي أن ما قد تبغله المرأة هو أكبر بكثير مما قد يستوعبه عقل بدوي مثلي، وأن الانثى لم تخلق للجنس فقط وإنما هي كائن إنساني راق يستطيع تقديم الكثير"، لتردّ بابتسامة توحى على النصر، وحاجبي عينيها نحو الاعلى "وأخيراً، تحدثت أكثر مني"، لتدنو بعدها أخذة بيدي مانتة إياي قبلة على وجنتي اليسرى التي باتت ليلتها محرومة، فرددت ساخراً "قبلتك هذه أحب عندي من منحة الحكومة" لتغادر بعدها المقهى على غير الحال الذي أتيت إليه به.

A Bedouin in Europe

Mohamed Ben Mbarek. Morocco

It was seven o'clock Warsaw time. I was the first to step down from the plane, for my seat was the last row. The breeze was different from what I was used to in our desert. The sky was clear and it seemed like I was seeing it for the first time. I slowed down so the other passengers would step ahead, for I had no idea what I was to do after disembarking. I took my place in a long queue of non-European passports. When it was my turn, the customs officer welcomed me with a quick smile, which soon became more cheerful when he read the invitation extended to me by the Polish Agency for Culture and Education to pursue my studies in Poland. It stated that I was an outstanding student and recommended that all administrative procedures be facilitated for me. He stamped my passport with a warm and proud "Welcome to our country." I received it with all due love and appreciation. I continued to follow the people in front of me towards the luggage belts, where I soon found my suitcase. I then found myself in an even more spacious hall with a crowd of people. Youngsters, as pretty as angels, were running about; the features of the elderly seemed to reflect the burden of the wars witnessed by Poland under the Nazi occupation. Then you were soon distracted by a group of well-dressed young people who carried flowers, and others who seemed to be dressed in a uniform, carried papers with names printed on them. I soon understood that these were cab drivers. I scanned the papers, wondering if I would find my name, only to find my family name carried by a blond smiling girl. Her sheer look was enough to make one forget the

tiredness of the trip. I approached her, waving my right hand, and she met me with a smile I swear I never saw the likes of. We greeted each other, while my Bedouin heart seemed to explode at her delicacy. My mind was distracted, wondering who the genius was who had engrained in us, the people of the desert, that a woman had to be fat, and that the slim ones did not count as women. Slim women were outcast, and their families driven hard to clear them of such deficiency. At times they would make natural bitter extracts, too hard for camels to digest, not to mention a girl's liver who was not even ten yet. And at other times, they would force the slim girl to undertake tough exercises. Youstina soon recalled me from my reveries, as she pulled at my suitcase and said "You seem exhausted. Please let me help you with the suitcase." She then gave me a piece of a sweet, which seemed to be made in their famous cuisine. I swallowed it reluctantly, my mind haunted by the images of the girls in my family who were doomed to slimness. We got onto a public bus, where Youstina informed me that we would reach the university dorms in ten minutes. I smiled back, "Don't worry. I spent over fourteen hours on the go since I left my house to arrive here." I told myself that spending one moment in the halls of knowledge was better than centuries in the arms of ignorance and backwardness. We arrived at the university, where we found two lady employees awaiting us. The three ladies then spoke in Polish, firing away, with "tak tak tak" recurring amongst them. They received a copy of my passport, and then one of them

gave me the key to my room saying, “Welcome to our country.”

Youstina took her leave, pecking a kiss on my right cheek, and leaving the left one deprived.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, looking left and right in search of my room, number 206. I found it in the middle of the corridor. I opened the door as I remembered the last door I closed before my trip. It was the door to my room in the dorms in Rabat. There was a huge difference between the two rooms. The comparison was not right in the first place. My new room was spacious. In the right corner was the bed, in the other corner a desk and chair. The room had a balcony that overlooked a green garden, which soon reminded me, with grief burning my heart, of the garbage and waste you would see, were you ever to look out one of the windows in the dorm in Rabat. I asked myself who was to blame? Was it possible to dream of a better tomorrow?

I didn’t know how, but soon the words of the dorm employee and of the customs officer materialised in front of me, “Welcome to our country.” The sense of pride as they spoke the words. I felt like the whole issue lay in the pronoun “our” and the word “country”. When one has a sense of belonging, one considers the country like a big home, and all efforts are exerted to make it as wonderful as the small personal home. It was the belief that personal stability was related to the stability of the country. The prosperity of the country was related to their personal prosperity. But my dear self, how are we to convince the young and old in our countries of this? How are we to convince them that change was possible? That it was an issue of honest will and intention? There my mind failed to find a sat-

isfying answer. I felt that the exhaustion was taking over my slim body. I dragged myself into the shower, which was located in a bathroom I shared with the neighbouring room. Suddenly I ran into a short girl, with dark hair, and a light skirt. She welcomed me merrily and asked, “Did you move in here?” She pointed at my room. “Yes,” I replied. “Well, hello. My name is Birgitt. I am an American Jew, from Poland. You?”

“My name is Mohamed,” I said. “I’m from the Moroccan desert.” She seemed to be ecstatic at the mention of Morocco, and said, “That’s my maternal grandmother’s homeland. My mother always told me how Morocco hosted the Jews, and the great respect they enjoy with the people and the royal family.” I nodded and said, “Yes.” My smile seemed tired, but contained an overwhelming feeling that with this experience I was a new-born thrown into a new world. She excused herself saying, “Let’s meet again.”

“Yes, sure,” I said.

I went into the bathroom and took off my clothes, while my mind tossed about hundreds of questions. Where is the Europe everyone was warning me of? Why did the Jewish girl not treat me warily, me the Muslim? There was such a difference between our religions. How could Birgitt travel alone? Where did Youstina learn all this gallantry and the ability to handle any situation better than men did? My people in the desert insisted that women were created for pleasure in the bed. If a woman wanted to go out, the kitchen was good enough for her. What if my folk were to see the beauty of Birgitt the short, or Youstina the slim? Would they cease fattening our girls as if they were cattle, not humans?

I then got dressed and left the bathroom, wondering how it was not only a bath for the body, but a pressing invitation for an intellectual bath, too. I threw my tired body on my bed, reciting the prayer for travelling which the speedy events had made me forget about.

The alarm clock on my phone rang. It was 6 am; my first morning in Poland. I got dressed and went to the breakfast hall. I met my neighbour Brigitt, neatly dressed and a distinctive scent emanating from her. She suggested I order the third option on the menu, saying it was the healthiest. We chatted about the discipline each one of us was specialising in. We discovered that we were both at the faculty of sciences and technology, with a slight difference in the times of our classes. We decided to go together to find out about our lectures, which were due to start after two days. It was fun to walk with her. She was a mature girl, despite her young years. She was well-read about other cultures and history, clever in communicating her thoughts, very accurate in her choice of words. We went through many paths and alleys, not even noticing. I felt like I was only then performing the act of living. The beauty of Polish architecture added a special touch to the scenery, for I was a lover of architectural arts. And then suddenly I heard foul words in Arabic. I turned towards the source where the words came from, to find two young men sitting on the pavement of a square. Next to them was a bottle of wine they were fighting over. I was stunned by the scene and disappointed. Brigitt interrupted me, "Here we are at the university. Look, there's Building A, where Monday's class will be." She then added, "Let's go to the cafeteria and get some rest." It was a huge yard surrounded by columns

in Roman style. At the top of each column was the engraved face of a human. I later understood from the expert Brigitt that they were Polish thinkers and scientists. It was a sense of pride in the past and the forefathers engrained in every inch of the place. Brigitt later asked me, "Why do you let me speak more than you? Why do you prefer to remain silent and just listen? I, too, love that, but we're chatting and getting to know each other." Her shining eyes stimulated me and I said spontaneously, "I'm a man of the desert. We grow up in a tough environment. Most of our time we tend the cattle and search for water. We don't return to our tents until night. This is my first day in Europe – the land of non-Muslims – as I always knew it." She interrupted me smilingly. "It doesn't matter where you are from, or the nature of your origins, or your faith. What counts is that your heart holds love, that you look at all people through humane and friendly eyes. The world today counts on us, the youth, to lead humanity towards a future of peace and prosperity for us and the coming generations, without any harm to the natural resources of the world."

She paused for a moment, to smile that smile of a loving girl as she said, "You owe it to Poland." I replied without thinking, "Yes. Beyond the ability of words. The few hours I had spent here were enough to change many concepts, and correct many wrong ideas that occupied my mind. The scene of the two young men a while ago was enough to understand the fear of European governments, and their repetitive call for essential integration. The decency of the customs officer was enough to understand that this continent respected the law and welcomed, and encouraged, anything that was legal. The trust that the Polish state granted me when it offered

a monthly stipend, housing and food was evidence that the European governments wished to extend their hand to the youth of the south to develop their skill and serve their countries. Your culture is far-reaching, your style of conversing, the way you present your ideas, all these showed me that what a woman can reach by far exceeds what the mind of a Bedouin like me could grasp. Females were not created for sex alone. Females are sophisticated humans who can offer a lot.”

Her smile seemed to express victory, her brows moved up, as she said, “At last you spoke more than me.” She then lent closer, taking my hand, and pecking a kiss on my left cheek, which I had been deprived of that night.

I replied, sarcastically, “Your kiss is more precious to me than the scholarship.” We then left the cafeteria, totally different from how we had come.

رسائل لم تُكتب

محمود جمال احمد مقدادي. الأردن

أمي الحبيبة...

أمل أن تكوني بخير، وأنك ما زلت تراقبين مركبات البحر، متسائلة أيها ستحملني لوجهتي... لقد خطوتُ خطوتي الأولى. تدبرْتُ قسماً من النقود، من عملي في محجر قريب من الميناء. والقسم الآخر، أعطاني إياه صاحب بقالة، اعتدتُ الشراء منها وقت استراحة عملي. بطريقة ما، أدرك حقيقة ما أخطأتُ له. قام بإعطائي النقود قائلاً أنه سيسامحني، إن لم أوفِّ بمغامرتي. لكن إن وُفِّتُ، وصرتُ من أصحاب الأموال، فلن يقبل فقط بنفس قيمة المبلغ، بل يريد أن أُحوَّلَ بقالته الصغيرة، لمركزٍ تجاريٍّ كبيرٍ. قال ذلك وهو يضحك، لكني رأيتُ دمعاً مُوارباً في أعماق عينيه، فتذكرتك.

اتفقتُ مع صاحب قارب. اشترط الحصول على النقود مُقدِّماً، بحجة الاتفاق مع جماعة الضفة المقابلة. لم أرتح له. لكني إن تراجعْتُ الآن، فلن أتقدم ثانية أبداً. مع فجر الغد، يجب أن أكون في القارب، فادع لي.

أمي الحبيبة...

دُهلْتُ لِمَا رأيته فجراً. ربما كنتُ أنا الأوفر حظاً، لأنني وحدي ولستُ مسؤولاً عن أحد. ظننتُ أننا سنكون بضعة أشخاص، وبالسداجة ما ظننت!

كم شعرتُ بالأسى يا أمي... رأيتُ كهلاً رفقةً امرأةً تحمل رضيعاً. لم أدر إن كانت زوجته أم ابنته. كما لم أعرف جنس الرضيع. ما الذي دفعهم للمغامرة برضيع كهذا؟ إن مات، فلن يدر بشيء. وإن عاش، فسيكبر ليعتبرنا همجاً.

هناك شاباً رفقة أخيه اليافع. كلَّمَنِي الشاب. أخبرني أنَّ أخاه عبقرٍ، وقد أنهى سنته الدراسية السادسة بتفوق. وسيبذل قصارى جهده، ليجعل أخاه الصغير، يكمل سنته الدراسية السابعة في ألمانيا. قال بثقة مطلقة، أنَّ الألمان سيُذهلون من نبوغ أخيه، وسيصبح مستقبلاً من أبرز علمائهم.

غريبٌ يا أمي تعليق هذا الشاب، لجميع آماله على أخيه الأصغر. أما هو، فلا مشكلة لديه في عيش حياة التسكع، وتهيئة الفرص لأخيه، إلى أن يكبر، ويصبح من أبرز علماء ألمانيا.

هناك طفلة صغيرة تقبض بقوة على دميته. وعجوز ينقر بعكازه على الأرض نقراتٍ سريعةٍ كما لو يستعجل البدء... لماذا يهجر الوطن؟

هنالك رجلاً سميناً، مازحه آخرُ قائلاً "ستحظى الأسماك بوليمة دسمة". ومخمورٌ تأمل طويلاً هدوء البحر، ليقول في النهاية "بالسكينة هذا القبر!".

تكدسنا في القارب. جلسْتُ بين المغمور، والأخ الأصغر. شعر منكوش، وشعر مُسَرَّح. رائحة خمر، ورائحة عطر. أحلامٌ مُعَيَّبةٌ، وأحلامٌ مُحَفَّرَةٌ.

انطلقنا مع إقامة صلاة الفجر، كما لو كنّا نوّدي طقساً دينياً. كان البحر هادئاً وادعاً، يحملنا على صفحة ماء رائق. حبَسَ الموجُ كراماً لنا، واتفق مع الرياح ألا تُقْضُ مضجعنا. لكنْ بعدما غابت اليابسة خلف ظهري، أحسستُ بوخزة في قلبي. كما لو أنني تركتُ بملء إرادتي ثروةً نفيسةً، لن أتمكن من استردادها أبداً.

شعورٌ موحشٌ حين يكون الماء فقط سيد الجهات الأربع. مساحة حرية حركتي بضعة أمتار فقط. سجنٌ جدرانه بشرٌ يُساومون الموتَ على حياة أفضل. بكى الرضيع، وألْقَمَتِ المرأةُ ثديها، مُتَسَرِّرةً بنسوة لم تتوقف شفاهين عن التَّمتمة بأدعية خافتة. ودفقة ريح قوية أطارت الدمية من يدي

الطفلة. حاولتُ اللحاق بها، فأفْهَمَها أنها ستغرق، وتموت إن فعلتُ. أكانت تعني الغرق؟ أي فكرة تحملها طفلة صغيرة عن الموت؟ نظرتُ لأصابعها الغضّة الطَّريّة، وقد شاختُ دفعة واحدة بعدما فارقتها الدمية. ثم نظرتُ للدمية تَهْدَلُ فوق الماء، قبل أن تدفعها موجة للأعماق... أولى الضحايا.

فجأة ودون سابق إنذار، اختلف الوضع كلياً. اضطرب البحر. وبدأت موجات غاضبة تُطَوِّحُ القاربَ يميناً ويسرة. بكاء، صراخ، عويل، تعالى دفعة واحدة. الشاب احتضن أخاه الأصغر. المغمور انكمش عند قدمي، وراح يُقْسِمُ لله أنه سيبترك الشَّرب. والعجوز رفع عَكَازَه عالياً، صارخاً "هو الذي أنجأكم من البحر... وخذوا الله... ادعوا الله". وحين نظرتُ لحيث يتجه القارب، رأيتُ طيف يابسة. ها هي جئتُنا تلوح أمامنا، لكننا لا نضمن عبور الصُّراط المؤدي إليها.

أمي الحبيبة...

نصف بحرنا، كان رؤوفاً بنا. حتى ونحن نهاجره ونرفضه، لم تُطاوِعه نفسه بايذائنا. وعلى العكس منه، النصف الآخر. لم يستسغنا. لم تعجبه رائحتنا، ولا ملامحنا المصبوغة بالشقاء والأمانى المستحيلة. أي قلب لهذا البحر! لا يلين ليكاء النساء، ولا صرخات الأطفال. أرسل أمواجه تُقَرِّبُنَا من اليابسة أكثر، وفي الآن ذاته، تُهَيِّئُ رسل الموت لحصد الأرواح. اليابسة تكبر أكثر وأكثر، وسعي البحر لقلب القارب يزداد ضراوة. أشرتُ للجَمْع بالثبات، قائلاً أننا قاربنا على النجاة. رحتُ أبحث عن جماعة الضفة الأخرى الذين تكلم عنهم التاجر، فلم أرى أحداً. توجهتُ للتاجر لأستفسر منه، وكم كانت صدمتي موجعة حين تتبهِثُ للمرة الأولى أنه ليس بيننا. أدركتُ عندها كم كنت ساذجاً. أردتُ طرد القهر من داخلي بصرخة، لكن موجة كبيرة كانت أقرب. قلبتُ القارب رأساً على عقب. صار الماء فقط ما يطوّقني، وأبصرْتُ عبره كيانات سوداء، هم رفاق قاربي. الماء يجرفهم، والموت يحصدهم أمامي، وأنا عاجز عن إنقاذهم. كانت هناك أيدٍ تمتد من هنا وهناك، تبحث عمن ينقذها. أتذكرين حين أخبرتك أن أديباً روسياً قال أن الإنسان عند لحظات الموت، قد يجول بخاطرهِ أشياء أبعد ما تكون عن رهبة اللحظة؟ هذا بالضبط ما حصل معي. فحين شعرتُ بالأيدي الكثيرة، جال بخاطري قول محمود درويش "قد يخمش الغرقى يداً تمتد كي تحمي من الغرق". انتشلتُ يداً، وسبحت بها للسطح. كان

الأخ الأصغر. بعدما أفاق من صدمته، راح يسألني عن أخيه، ويكي صائحاً باسمه. الوقت لم يكن مناسباً لمواساته. رحتُ أبحث عن البقية. في البعيد، رأيتُ الرجل السمين، يُغرِّقه الماء تدريجياً. كانت الطفلة بين يديه، كما الدمية التي كانت بين يدي الطفلة. رفعها عالياً فوق رأسه، على أمل اكتفاء البحر بابتلاعه، لكن عبثاً، غرقتُ هي الأخرى. حاولتُ الإدراك، لولا الموج المعاكس لرغباتي، والأخ الأصغر المتشبث برقبتي. الرضيع رضع ماء البحر. والسمين سيصبح فعلاً وليمة للأسماك. والمخمور أتمنى أن يجد السكينة في قبره المائي. غادر الجميع يا أمي. صرْتُ أنا والأخ الأصغر فقط ما يطفو على سطح الماء، إضافة لِعُكَّاز العجوز، وزجاجة المخمور، كشاهدان على هذه المقبرة الجماعية. أما القارب، فقد ظهر فجأة. هكذا بكل بساطة يا أمي. وربما لن تصدقيني إن أخبرتك أنه عاد غير مقلوباً، لكن خالياً هذه المرة. دفعتُ بالأخ الأصغر نحوه، ثم صعدتُ أنا. بدا واسعاً الآن لأنحرك فيه كيف أشاء، لكنّه زرع الضيق في نفسي، كما لو كان جاثماً على صدري. البحر هدأ. والأخ الأصغر أراح رأسه على صدري، وغفا. وأنا راقبتُ اليابسة تزداد معالمها وضوحاً، حتى غلبني النوم.

أمي الحبيبة...

لقد وصلنا. إنها الجنة التي طالما طمحتُ إليها. إلا أنّ هناك مشكلة، فهي مُحاطة بحاجز كهربائي، ومن وراء الحاجز رجال مجهزون بأحدث الأسلحة النارية... أيقظني الأخ الأصغر، قائلاً كمن لا يصدق نفسه "الشط... الشط...". جرينا ونحن نصرخ فرحاً ونطلب المساعدة. ثم توقفنا لرؤيتنا الرجال، والحاجز الذي يتقدمهم، أشبه ما يكون بأسلاك شائكة. قاموا بإلقاء شيئاً عليه، فاحترق. يخبروننا أن الكهرباء ستحرقكم، إن تقدمتم. فأين نذهب إذا؟ حتى القارب، ضربوه بقذيفة، فصار رماداً. أخافوا عودتي والأخ الأصغر إليه؟ أم خافوا جلبه لمزيد من أمثالنا؟ وربما كان برأيهم مجرم، ويجب إعدامه؟ لا أدري. ما أدريه هو أننا ظللنا أياماً على هذه البقعة الصغيرة من الرمال الصفراء. كهرباء من أماننا، وبحر

من خلفنا. تدهورت صحة الأخ الأصغر. صار يكلمني عن الموت والله والجنة والنار. يسألني هل أخاه في الجنة. ثم يكي متوسلاً لي الاجتماع به في الجنة، وكأنني أملك له ذلك. جفّت شفّته، وغارت وجنتاه. صار يقبض على يدي، ويشد عليها بما تبقى له من قوة واهنة. أنظر للرجال، أصرخ وأبكي "أنقذوا الطفل، إنه يموت". لكنهم لا يبالون بتاتاً، ولا يبدون أيّ ردة فعل، لدرجة شككت معها بأنهم آلات. رفع رأسه للأعلى ميتسماً، وقال بسرور "انظر، إنه أخي عزّام". الآن فقط عرفت اسم الأخ الأكبر. أمّا الأخ الأصغر، فظل اسمه مجهولاً بالنسبة لي. لقد ذهب مع أخيه، وتركني وحيداً. حفرتُ له قبراً في الرمال الصفراء. وأثناء قيامي بذلك، رأنتي امرأة كانت تمر بسيارتها. نزلت وشرعت بالتصوير.

أمي الحبيبة...

ليست المعضلة في الأشخاص، بل في القوانين والتعليمات. أول امرأة مرّت من هذه المنطقة النائية، جعلتها قبلة للجميع. رأيت الناس يتجمعون ويتكدون. يرفعون لافتات عليها صورتي وأنا أدفن الأخ

الأصغر. كاميرات تسلط عليّ من كل مكان. محاولات لرمي الطعام والشراب إليّ، لكن للأسف، يحرقها الحاجز الكهربائي، ومع هذا أشعر بالشبع والارتواء. هتافات، قبضات مرتفعة. لكنّ الحال فعلياً لم يتغير. فالرجال لم يسمحوا للناس بالاقتراب كثيراً. سمحوا لهم بالتعبير عمّا يجول في وجدانهم، لكن منعوهم من تقديم مساعدة حقيقية. الغريب أنّ الرجال المسلحين، كانوا ينضمون لجمهرة الناس، عقب انتهاء دوامهم، ويعبرون عن رفضهم لما أعانيه، ثم يعودون لتأدية وظيفتهم، عندما يحين عملهم! أترين يا أمي؟ لقد أخبرتك أن العلة في التعليمات والقوانين، أما الأشخاص، فالجميع يحلم بالعيش في عالم يكون الجميع فيه سعداء، لكن كيف وصلنا لهذا الحال؟

أمي الحبيبة...

لقد ملّ الناس. الأمر مشابه تماماً لما يحصل في بلداننا العربية. قضية رأي عام، تأخذ صدى لأيام قليلة، ثم تُنسى كأنّها لم تكن. يعود الجميع لحيواتهم الشخصية، والاهتمام بمشاكلهم الصغرى. لست ألوهم في ذلك، ففي هذا العالم من المآسي والمعاناة، ما يفوق طاقاتهم على التفرغ لها بشكل كامل. بضعة أيام فقط، تُريح ضمائرهم، وتُشعرهم بأنّهم أدّوا واجبهم تجاه تلك القضية أو تلك.

تدريجياً، بدأ يعود المكان لملاكه الحقيقيين، الرجال، الحاجز الكهربائي، أنا. اختفت الكاميرات. رحل الناس. والقبضات المرتفعة نزلت. حتى الرجال، صاروا يعودون لمنزلهم، عقب انتهاء دوامهم، بدلاً من الوقوف قريباً، ومناصري.

لا أقصد فطر قلبك يا أمي. لكنّها نهايتي. أنا موقنٌ بذلك. أنا متأكد أنّ شفتيّ يَبَسَتَا، ووجنتيّ غارتا. وأكثر ما يحزنني، أنّ لا أحاً ولا مُحِبّاً سبقني للجنة، ليأتي ويأخذني إليها.

الآن فقط أتمدّد على الرمال، لامبالياً بما سيجيء.

أمي الحبيبة...

استيقظت على وقع أقدام. نظرت للبحر، ورأيت عليه أناساً يخوضون سباق ماراثون. كانوا يقصدونني. وحين وصلوني، ساعدوني على النهوض، وجعلوني أجري أمامهم، حتى وصلتُ خط النهاية. كانت الجماهير تصفق وتهتف لي. والبعض قفز من بين المدرجات، وركض لمعانقتي وتقبيلي. اعتليت المنصة، وتم تكريمي بالميدالية الذهبية، وبقاعة ورد. كانت فرحتي لا توصف. إلّا أنني تعبت أيضاً من كثرة الجري، فسقطتُ مغشياً عليّ.

أمي الحبيبة...

فتحت عينيّ في مستشفى. لم أتمكن من التحرك والتكلم. ربما هو مخدر، أو راحة لم أُنلها بعد. الطبيب بجانبني فهمتُ قوله لطبيب آخر "الكهرباء لم تؤثر على بعض الأعضاء. ما زال بإمكاننا الاستفادة منها". الطبيب الآخر قال متأثراً "يرفضونك حيّاً، ويَقْبَلونكَ ميّتاً". للحق، لم أفهم مغزى

كلامهم بالكامل. سأنتظر استعادة عافيتي، لأسألهم.

أمي الحبيبة...

غريب هذا المستشفى. لا يتفقون مرضاهم. فأنا منذ أيام، لم يدخل أحدُ غرفتي. لكنّي اليوم استعدتُ قدرتي على الحركة والكلام. ناديتُ بدايةً على أي طبيب أو ممرض، فلم أتلُقَ إجابة. فتحتُ الباب، وسرتُ في ردهة لم تلبث أن غرقت في ظلام دامس. عدتُ أدراجي صوب الباب، فما وجدته. بحثتُ عنه كثيراً دون طائل. أنا الآن في عالم من الظلام. أمشي فيه كما لو أمشي في أرض شاسعة لا حدود لها. منذ أيام وأنا على هذا الحال. وربما منذ سنوات... ما هذا؟ مرحى يا أمي، مرحى. أرى في البعيد مساحة خضراء، يملؤها الشجر والورد والماء. سأسير إليها يا أمي. لكن أتمنى منك أن تدع لي. ادع لي ألا يكون هنالك رجالاً مسلحون ولا حاجزاً كهربائياً... أرجوك يا أمي ادع لي... ادع لي...

Letters Unwritten

Mahmoud Jamal Ahmed Miqdadi. Jordan

Dearest Mother,

I hope you are well, and are still watching the boats, wondering which will carry me to my destination. I have taken my first steps. I managed to secure part of the money, working in the stone-pits near the port. The other part I got from the grocer's. I used to do my shopping there in my lunch breaks. He realised the reality of what I was planning, and gave me the money saying he would forgive me if I did not succeed in my adventure. But if I were to make it, and became wealthy, he would not only expect the same sum back. Rather, he would expect me to transform his little shop into a huge mall. He said so laughingly, but I caught a glimpse of a tear hiding at the bottom of his eye. And I remembered you.

I made a deal with the boat owner. He insisted on getting the cash up front, claiming there was a deal with the guys on the other shore. I didn't like him. But if I pulled out now, I would never make progress again. With the crack of dawn, I have to be on board. Pray for me.

Dearest Mother,

I was amazed at what I saw at dawn. Maybe I was lucky because I was alone and not in charge of anyone. I thought we would be a number of people. How naïve!

I felt so sorry, Mother. I saw an old man with a woman who carried a baby. I didn't know if she was his wife or daughter. Nor did I know if the baby was a boy or a girl. What made them venture with the baby like that? If it died, it would know no better. If it lived, it would consider us savages.

There was a young man with his adolescent brother. The young man approached me, saying what a genius his brother was. He had just completed his sixth school year with flying colours and he would exert his utmost efforts, to get his little brother the chance to pass Grade 7 in Germany. He spoke with utter confidence, believing the Germans would be amazed by his brother's genius. In the future he would become one of their most prominent scientists.

It was weird, Mother, how this young man placed all his hopes on his little brother. As for himself, he didn't mind living an idle life, creating opportunities for his brother. Until he grew up and became a prominent scientist in Germany.

There's a little girl who holds on to her doll. And an old man who tapped along in rapid knocks with his crutch, as if in a hurry to get started. Why would he emigrate?

There is an obese man. Another told him jokingly, "The fish will get a feast." And a drunkard, who looks long at the calm sea, to say in the end, "How serene this grave!"

We crowded on the boat. I sat between the drunkard and the little brother. Dishevelled hair, combed hair. The smell of booze, the scent of perfume. Frustrated dreams, encouraged dreams.

We set sail with the dawn prayers, as if we were performing a ritual. The sea was calm and gentle; it carried us on its clear surface. The waves held some dignity for us, for they agreed with the winds not to disrupt our sleep. But once the land vanished behind me, I felt a pang in my heart, as if I had just, of my own free will, left a wealth behind me. A wealth I would never retrieve.

It's a dreary feeling when only water rules the four corners. The space for free movement was only a couple of metres. A prison whose walls were humans who were haggling with death for a better life. The baby cried, and the woman gave it her breast, finding refuge behind the other women whose lips didn't stop murmuring prayers. A strong gust of wind snatched the doll from the girl's hand. She tried to catch it, but they explained to her that she would drown. She would die if she did. Did she even grasp the meaning of drowning? What idea did the child have of death? I looked at her tiny soft fingers; they aged suddenly when they lost the doll. I looked at the doll floating in the sea, before a wave swallowed it into the depths. The first victim.

Suddenly, without any warnings, the situation changed. The sea roughened, and the angry waves started tossing the boat left and right. Weeping. Crying. Wailing. All at once. The young man hugged his little brother. The drunkard shrunk at my feet. He swore to sober up. The old man raised his crutch and shouted: "He saves you from the sea. Pray to God." When I checked the boat's direction,

I glimpsed the silhouette of land. There was our paradise, hovering ahead of us. But we were not sure we would be able to cross to it.

Dearest Mother,

Half our sea. It was merciful to us. Even when we desert and reject it. It would never hurt us. The other half was very different. It did not like us. It was offended by our smell. It did not like our features, coloured with suffering and impossible wishes. What heart did that sea have! It did not soften to women's tears or children's crying. It sent its waves to throw us towards the shore, and at the same time it prepared the messengers of death to reap our souls. Land grew, but the sea sought to capsize the boat more and more ferociously. I told the people to remain calm, for we were very close to survival. I looked out for the people of the other shore, the ones the merchant had spoken of. I saw no one. I turned to the merchant to ask him, but alas! I was shocked to realise for the first time that he was not among us. Only then did I realise how naïve I had been. I wanted to vent the frustration within me in a scream. But a huge wave was faster. It capsized the boat, and all that surrounded me was water. I glimpsed black figures through it. My boatmates. The current was sweeping them away. Death was reaping them in front of my eyes. I was helpless to save them. Hands reached out from here and there, searching for a saviour. Do you remember when I told you of a Russian writer who once said that Man at the moment of death sees things in his mind's eye that were farthest from the horror of the moment? That is exactly what happened with me. When I sensed the many hands, my mind wandered to Mahmoud Darwiche: "Those drowning extend a hand

to protect them from drowning.” I grabbed a hand, and pulled it to the surface. It was the little brother. When he came to, he asked for his brother. He wept as he called his brother’s name. It was not the right time to console him. I went in search of the rest. Far away, I saw the fat man. The water was pulling him down gradually. He held the little girl in his arms, like the doll she had been holding. He held her above his head, hoping the sea would be satisfied in swallowing him alone. But to no avail. She drowned, too. I tried to manage. Had it not been for the waves working against me, and the little brother clinging around my neck. The baby had suckled the water of the sea. The fat man was indeed becoming a feast for the fish. I hoped the drunkard would find serenity in his watery grave. Everyone was gone, Mother. Only the little brother and I remained afloat. And the old man’s crutch. And the drunkard’s bottle. Two gravestones of this mass grave. The boat suddenly bobbed up. Just like that, Mother. You may not believe it if I told you that it was no longer upside down. But this time it was empty. I pushed the little brother to it, then I climbed in myself. It seemed spacious now, allowing me to move as I wished. But it made my chest contract. As if it crouched on my chest. The sea calmed, and the little brother put his head on my chest. I watched the land getting closer and becoming clearer. Until I fell asleep.

Dearest Mother,

We had arrived. The paradise I had always aspired to. But there was a problem. It was fenced in with an electrified fence. Behind it were men armed with the latest weapons. The little brother woke me, saying as if he did not believe himself, “Land, land.”

We ran, shrieking with happiness, calling for help. We halted when we saw the men and the fence between us. It was more like barbed wire. They threw something on it, and it burnt. They tell us the electricity would burn us if we approached. Where should we go then? Even the boat they had shelled, and it was powdered. Had they feared that the little brother and I would return to it? Or had they feared it would bring more like us? Was it a criminal in their eyes and needed to be executed? I don’t know. What I know is that we remained for days in this tiny spot of sand. The electricity in front of us, and the sea behind us.

The little brother’s health deteriorated. He started talking of death and God and heaven and hell. He asked if his brother was in heaven. Then he cried begging me to be re-joined with him in heaven. As if I could fulfil that wish. His lips dried up. His cheeks hollowed out. He held onto my hand with what little strength he had left. I would look at the men, and cry and weep, “Please save the child. He’s dying.” But they couldn’t care less. They showed no reaction, so much so that I suspected they may be robots. He raised his head and smiled. Then he said joyfully, “Look. My brother Azzam.” Only now did I learn his brother’s name. But the little brother’s name remains unknown to me. He’s gone to his brother, and he left me alone. I dug a grave for him in the sand. As I did, a woman passing by in her car saw me. She got out and started filming me.

Dearest Mother,

The issue is not in the people but in the laws and regulations. The first woman who passed by this remote place made it a destination for

everyone else. I saw the people gathering and crowding. They put up banners with a photo of me as I buried the little brother. Cameras were pointed at me from every direction. There were attempts at throwing food and drink to me. Unfortunately, the electrified fence burnt everything. And yet I felt sated. Cheers. Raised fists. But the situation did not change. The men did not allow the people to come closer. They allowed them to express what they felt, but they prevented them from offering real help. The strange thing is that the armed men joined the crowds after hours. They voiced their rejection of what I suffered from. Then they would return to their duties when it was time to work again. Can you see that, Mother? I told you, the problem was the regulations and the laws. But the people – everyone dreams of living in a world where we can all be happy. How did we ever get here?

Dearest Mother,

The people got bored. Just like what happens in the Arab World. An issue of public opinion. It echoes for a few days. Then it is forgotten as if it never was. Each returns to their personal lives. Caring for their petty problems. I don't blame them. In this world of suffering and grief there is so much that is beyond their ability to control. Just a few days to appease their conscience. It makes them feel they have done what they can for this cause.

Gradually the place returned to its real owners. The men. The electrified fence. Me. The cameras vanished. The people left. The raised fists were lowered. Even the men. They returned home after work, rather than standing by and supporting me.

I don't mean to break your heart, Mother. But this is my end. I am certain of it. I am sure my lips are dried. My cheeks are hollowed. And, what saddens me most, there is no brother or beloved who preceded me to paradise to come and take me.

Only now I lay down on the sand. I don't care about what is to come.

Dearest Mother,

I woke to the sound of footsteps. I looked at the sea and saw people running a marathon. They were heading towards me. When they reached me, they helped me up, and made me run in front of them. And I reached the finishing line. The public were cheering. Some jumped down from the seats and ran to embrace and kiss me. I ascended the platform, and received the gold medal. And flowers. I was over the moon. But I was also exhausted with the running and lost consciousness.

Dearest Mother,

I opened my eyes in the hospital. I couldn't move or speak. It may be the anaesthesia or the lack of rest. I heard the doctor telling his colleague: "The electricity did not affect some organs. We can still make use of them."

The other doctor said sadly, "They refuse you alive, and accept you dead." To be honest, I didn't understand all they said. I'll wait until I'm well again and ask them.

Dearest Mother,

This hospital is very strange. They do not check on the patients. I've been here for days, but no one entered my room. Today I regained my ability to move and speak. At first I called for any doctor or nurse. But I got no reply. I opened the door and walked down the corridor, which was soon drowned in darkness. I retraced my steps to the door. What I had found, I had searched

for often but to no avail. Now I was in the world of darkness. I walk through it as if through a vast wasteland. I have been like that for days. Or maybe for years. What is this? Mother, dear Mother. I see much green in the distance. It is full of trees and flowers and water. I'll walk there, Mother. But I hope you will pray for me. Pray for me that there won't be any armed men or electrified fences. Please, Mother, pray for me. Pray for me.

Гласовете Им Чувам

Кристина Станкова. България

Тихо. Излагаш ни. Излагаш се. Нищо не разбираш. Махни се оттам. Барабар Петко с мъжете. На момичетата не им е тука мястото.

Сега ми се струва съвсем логично, че исках да избягам. Да си тръгна. Да не съм там повече.

Отраснах зле. Не достатъчно, че да се намеси някой, но точното количество, за да погледна от ръба на менталното си здраве и да залитна към бездната. Родих се в София, в семейство от средната класа и растях на територията на голям, мръсен и стар апартамент. По-големият ми брат ме пребиваше редовно. Не на шега. Майка ми мразеше свекър си, с когото живеехме и съответно се караха непрекъснато. Не знам кой спечели в крайна сметка. Баща ми *беше* (отскоро имаме напредък) неспособен да изразява емоции вербално. За пръв път чух от него думите „Обичам те“, когато преди месец реших да му споделя всичко, което чувствам. Разговорите ни до този момент обикновено се изчерпваха с това кой какво е сготвил. Страст, която споделяме. А! И да не забравя да добавя, че първият ми сексуален контакт беше насилствен. Бях на петнайсет и не казах на никого. Беше ме срам и бях сигурна, че или ще ми се подиграват или няма да ми повярват. Чувствах, че на всички преча и нещо не ми е наред, за това ми се струваше заслужено да се отнасят зле с мен и с тялото ми. На никого не пожелавам да се чувства така. Трябваша ми години в развито и толерантно общество, само за да си дам сметка, че случилите ми се неща са нередни. Хората не бива да се държат така един с друг. Просто не е нужно. После прочетох една книга: „Посттравматичен стрес“ на Христо Попов. Измуках триста и четиридесет страници сякаш му бяха поверили тайната на живота. Бях изумена колко просто е всичко, а само колко необратимо и неразрешимо ми се струваше. Всяка една мисъл, емоционално състояние, реакция, дисфункционалност, които бях приписвала на характера ми, на мен самата – бяха там. Изредени като симптоми на хроничен посттравматичен стрес.

Така си мечтаех някой да ми каже, че съм нормална. Прекарах толкова време в мъгла, страх и унижение.

Питах ме какво е мобилност за мен? – Надежда за живот.

Сега съм далеч и всички спомени ми се струват мъгляви и объркани. Но помня съвсем ясно мечтите ми. Никога не мечтаех за лъскава сватба, съпруг, деца или семейство. Мечтаех да пътувам. Четях много и си представях моите бъдещи приключения из целия свят. Виждах се като изследовател, учен или спортист. Исих да опитам всичко и да отида навсякъде! Да вечерям в Париж, да танцувам валс във Виенската опера, да плавам с ветро-

ход в Балеарско море, да катеря испанските Пиринеи с колело, да видя океана, да спя под дърветата, да пиша, да живея свободно!

Мисля че е чудо, че всичко изредено (с изключение на валса...за сега) е част от настоящата ми реалност. Успях! Тръгнах си от тази болна държава България и последвах мечтите си. Прекрахих прага и оставих старата тъмната лепкава реалност. Замених я със слънчевите брегове на Каталуния. Без дори да си давам сметка колко ми е тежало бремето на гърдите ми. Просто грабвах всяка възможност, която ми се изпречваше, защото бях убедена, че на четиридесет ще изгубя разсъдъка си. Тъй че гледах да не губя време. Кандидатствах за какво ли не и се съгласявах на всякакви предизвикателства.

Живее в Испания от четири години и пътувам из Европа от шест. Обожавам живота си тук. Имам приятели от целия свят, които често ми предлагат невероятни приключения. Говоря четири езика почти всеки ден и ям храна от всички кътчета на планетата ни. Чувствам се на мястото си и съм щастлива. Там, където се родих не беше за мен и ми беше позволено да опитам пак на ново място. Приеха ме, дадох ми образование, работа, социален живот и никой не протестира срещу моето присъствие. Благодаря на себе си за всяко едно от решенията, които съм взела, но истината е, че не беше никак трудно. Все пак съм бяла жена, която се е родила на територията на държава членка по настоящем на Европейския съюз. Аз не съм допринесла особено за придобиването на тези мои характеристики и не мога да не се замисля колко е нечестно спрямо тези с по- лош късмет. Колко ли по-страшни истории от моята имат съвсем различен край? Колко ли жени и мъже са в бездната и нямат същото това право – на надежда? Не успяват никога да си тръгнат от това, което ги дърпа надолу. Прекарват животите си на място, към което не принадлежат. И какво ли не, много по - страшно. А малицината, които поемат риска на нелегалната миграция едва ли знаят, че с пристигането им, мъките им тепърва започват. Години без дори надежда за документи и легална работа. Непрестанно появяващата се мисъл: „Ще ме върнат ли насила?“. Чудя се аз дали бих могла да се справя с това напрежение, знаеки колко е несправедливо.

Понякога никак не разбирам хората. Имам чувството, че умишлено си създаваме проблеми и след това прекарваме излишно дълго време преструвайки се, че не можем да намерим решението им. Човешката мобилност е факт от началото на съществуването ни. Вътрешният порив да изследваме и откриваме нови земи, да срещаме различни хора, да търсим спасение, образование, работа, любов е нещо, което почти никога не е било спирано напълно успешно от законодателната власт на която и да е държава в Европа. Не знам защо продължаваме да се преструваме, че има смисъл от рестрикционни политики в областта на миграцията, след като те хората си се движат. Те са тук. Барселона например е пълна с нелегални имигранти до толкова, че навсякъде по стените из града можеш да видиш графити надписа *sin papeles* (без документи). Тези хора остават, въпреки всички трудности на неуреденото им легално пребиваване. Доказателство за това колко сме склонни да жертваме за възможността за ново начало.

Their Voices I Hear

Kristina Stankova. Bulgaria

Quiet. You are embarrassing us. You are embarrassing yourself. You don't understand a thing. Get out of there. You don't belong with men. Girls don't belong here.

Now it seems quite logical that I wanted to run away. To leave. Not to be there anymore.

I grew up badly. Not enough for someone to intervene, but the right amount for me to look from the edge of my mental health and stumble into the abyss. I was born in Sofia, in a middle-class family and grew up in a big, dirty and old apartment. My older brother beat me regularly. And seriously. My mother hated her father-in-law, with whom we lived, and so they quarrelled constantly. I don't know who won in the end. My father *was* (recently making progress) unable to express emotions verbally. I first heard the words "I love you" from him when I decided, a month ago, to share everything I felt with him. Up to then, our conversations had usually been about who cooked what. A passion we share. Ah! And I mustn't forget to add that my first sexual contact was violent. I was fifteen and I didn't tell anyone. I was ashamed and I was sure they would either make fun of me or not believe me. I felt that I was bothering everyone and something was wrong with me, so I thought I deserved to be treated badly – me and my body. I don't want anyone to feel that way. It took me years in a developed and tolerant society, only to realise that what had happened to me was wrong. People should not behave like that with each other. You just don't have to. Then I read a book: *Post-Traumatic Stress* by Hristo Popov. I devoured the three hundred and forty pages as if he had been entrusted with the secret of life. I was amazed at how simple everything was, after seeming so irreversible and insoluble to me. Every thought, emotional state, reaction, dysfunction that I had attributed to my character, to myself, was there. Listed as symptoms of chronic post-traumatic stress.

I so dreamed of someone telling me I was normal. I spent so much time in fog, fear and humiliation.

You are asking me what mobility is for me?
– Hope for life.

I am far away now and all my memories seem hazy and confused. But I remember my dreams quite clearly. I never dreamed of a shiny wedding, husband, children or family. I dreamed of travelling. I read a lot and imagined my future adventures around the world. I saw myself as a researcher, scientist or athlete. I wanted to try everything and go everywhere! To have dinner in Paris, to waltz at the Vienna Opera, to sail in the Balearic Sea, to ride the Spanish Pyrenees on a bicycle, to see the ocean, to sleep under the trees, to write, to live freely!

I think it's a miracle that everything listed above (except for the waltz... for now) is part of my current reality. I made it! I left this sick country of Bulgaria and followed my dreams. I crossed the threshold and left the old dark sticky reality. I replaced it with the sunny

shores of Catalonia. Without even realising how heavy the burden on my chest was. I just grabbed every opportunity that came my way because I was convinced that at forty I would lose my mind. So I tried not to waste time. I applied for everything and agreed to all kinds of challenges.

I have been living in Spain for four years now and have been travelling around Europe for six. I love my life here. I have friends from all over the world who often offer me amazing adventures. I speak four languages almost every day and eat food from all over our planet. I feel that I am at my place and I am happy. Where I was born was not for me and I was allowed to try again in a new place. I was accepted, given an education, a job, a social life and no one protested against my presence. I thank myself for each of the decisions I made, but the truth is that it was not difficult at all. After all, I am a white woman who was born in the territory of a current member state of the European Union. I haven't contributed much to the acquisition of these characteristics of mine, and I can't help but think how unfair it is to those with less luck. How many scarier stories than mine have a completely different ending? How many women and men are in the abyss and do not have the same right to hope? They never manage to get away from what pulls them down. They

spend their lives in a place they don't belong to. And, maybe more, much scarier. And the few who take the risk of illegal emigration hardly know that with their arrival, their suffering is just beginning. Years without even hope of documents and legal work. The constantly re-occurring thought, "Will I be forcibly sent back?" I wonder if I could handle this tension, knowing how unfair it is.

Sometimes I don't understand people at all. I have the feeling that we are deliberately creating problems for ourselves and then spend too much time pretending that we can't find a solution. Human mobility has been a fact since the beginning of our existence. The inner urge to explore and discover new lands, to meet different people, to seek salvation, education, work, love, is something that has almost never been completely stopped by the legislature of any country in Europe. I don't know why we continue to pretend that there is a sense in restrictive migration policies once these people are moving. They're here. Barcelona, for example, is so crowded with illegal immigrants that you can see graffiti on the walls of the city, with the inscription *sin papeles* (without documents). These people remain, despite all the difficulties of their unsettled legal residence. Proof of how much we are willing to sacrifice for the possibility of a new beginning.

Μέχρι το επόμενο κύμα

Γιώργος Γεράσιμος Μαντζιώκας. Ελλάδα

Ο ουρανός είχε ένα γκριζο χρώμα που προκαλούσε κατάθλιψη. Το ίδιο χρώμα είχε πάρει και η θάλασσα, μιμούμενη στην εντέλεια το ουράνιο στερέωμα. Πάνω από την θάλασσα περνούσε ένα κρύο αεράκι που πάγωνε το σώμα και προκαλούσε ανατριχίλα.

Οι συνθήκες δεν ήταν ιδανικές για μπάνιο, παρόλα αυτά ο Τάσος ήταν αποφασισμένος πως δεν θα έφευγε από την μικρή παραλία χωρίς να βουτήξει στο νερό. Στην τελική είχε κάνει μπάνιο και σε πιο μουντές ημέρες στο παρελθόν.

«Έτσι είναι η liaκάδα στην Νορβηγία», αστειεύτηκε και χαμογελώντας στραβά έβγαλε την μπλούζα του και διπλώνοντας την προσεκτικά την άφησε πάνω στην ξεφτισμένη ψάθα, που είχε φέρι μαζί του. Ύστερα στερέωσε πάνω της ένα μεγάλο βότσαλο για να μην την πάρει ο αέρας.

Κατευθύνθηκε αργά προς την θάλασσα κουνώντας δεξιά και αριστερά τα χέρια του για να ζεσταθεί. Το κορμί του τρεμούλιαζε στο άγγιγμα του παγερού αέρα αλλά δεν του έδινε ιδιαίτερη σημασία.

Το νερό άγγιξε δειλά τα πόδια του και πανάθεμα το ήταν σκέτος πάγος. Τι το 'θέλε και αυτός Μάιο μήνα να πάει για κολύμπι; Σε ξεγέλασε κυρ Τάσο η αρχική καλοκαιρία και νόμιζες πως θα πάει όλος ο μήνας έτσι; Ή μήπως πίστεψες πως η ζέστη της Άνοιξης θα είχε θερμάνει την θάλασσα; Η θάλασσα, κυρ Τάσο μου, είναι πάντα κρύα και θα 'πρέπε να το είχες μάθει τόσα χρόνια τώρα.

Ο Τάσος έκασε για λίγο ακίνητος, με το νερό σχεδόν να καλύπτει τα γόνατα του. Μπροστά του απλώνονταν η πελώρια θάλασσα, απέραντη και μουντή. Άλλοι θα είχαν σηκωθεί να φύγουν, εκείνος όμως παρέμενε. Του φαινόταν σαν πρόκληση, σαν μια μικρή περιπέτεια.

Τελικά, το αποφάσισε. Προχώρησε και βούτηξε το γερασμένο του κορμί μέσα στο κρύο νερό. Η αίσθηση του παγωμένου νερού που τον τύλιγε ήταν αναζωογονητική. Άρχισε να κινείται γρήγορα μέσα στο νερό, μέχρι να ζεσταθεί το σώμα του και να συνηθίσει τη θερμοκρασία. Ύστερα αφού συνήθισε άπλωσε τα χέρια του και κολυμπώντας γοργά ξανοίχτηκε στην θάλασσα.

Έχοντας φτάσει σε ικανοποιητική για εκείνον απόσταση από την ακτή, άλλαξε πορεία και άρχισε να κολυμπάει παράλληλα στην αμμουδιά. Συχνά, μικρά κύματα έρχονταν από τα βαθιά και έπεφταν πάνω του. Όμως μέχρι και αυτά εκείνος τα λάτρνευε. Τον άρεσε που κάθε φορά καλούνταν να τα αντιμετωπίσει, να τα ξεπεράσει, αν και γνώριζε ενδόμυχα πως δεν αποτελούσαν σοβαρά κίνδυνο, ίσως ούτε καν πρόκληση.

Μα να, ένα νέο κύμα εμφανίστηκε πάλι στον θαλάσσιο ορίζοντα, ούτε πέντε μέτρα μακριά. Ήταν μεγαλύτερο από τα προηγούμενα, κάτι που κέντρισε ακόμα περισσότερο την διάθεση του Τάσου να αναμετρηθεί μαζί του. Προκειμένου να το προλάβει, άρχισε να ανεβοκατεβάζει τα χέρια του πάνω στο νερό με μεγαλύτερη ταχύτητα. Βιαζόταν να πέσει πάνω του, να νιώσει την βία της θάλασσας και να την νικήσει τελικά στο γήπεδο της.

Υπήρχε όμως και ένας άλλος λόγος που του άρεσε αυτή η αναμέτρηση με τα κύματα. Όταν πλησιάζει το κύμα αρχικά σε κατεβάζει σε ένα χαμηλότερο επίπεδο από αυτό που βρισκόσουν μέχρι τώρα. Η θέση σου δυσχεραίνει. Προσωρινά όμως. Γιατί, αν καταφέρεις να κρατηθείς πάνω από την επιφάνεια της θάλασσας, τότε στην έξοδό του το κύμα σε ανυψώνει πιο ψηλά από εκεί που βρισκόσουν αρχικά. Σου δίνει μια ώθηση προς τα πάνω και μια δύναμη που πριν δεν είχες.

Τελικά, ο Τάσος πρόλαβε το κύμα λίγο πριν αυτό τον προσπεράσει, διαπιστώνοντας κάπως αργοπορημένα πως ήταν μεγαλύτερο από ότι του είχε φανεί αρχικά. Το νερό έπεσε πάνω του με μεγάλη ορμή καταφέροντας να τον τυλίξει μέσα στην υγρή του χούφτα. Απροετοίμαστος καθώς ήταν δεν πρόλαβε να αντιδράσει και η δύναμη του νερού κατάφερε να τον βυθίσει γυρίζοντας τον ανάσκελα.

Καταβάλλοντας μια όχι και τόσο αμελητέα για την ηλικία του, προσπάθεια, βγήκε ξανά στην επιφάνεια της θάλασσας. Η καρδιά του χτυπούσε γρήγορα και η αναπνοή του έβγαине με δυσκολία. Αποφάσισε να περιμένει λίγα λεπτά μέχρι να επιστρέψει η καρδιά του στην θέση της.

Άθελα του το βλέμμα του περιπλανήθηκε στον ορίζοντα και σταμάτησε πάνω στην ακτή. Ένιωσε την καρδιά του να σφίγγεται από κάποιο συναίσθημα που δεν ήθελε να αναλύσει περισσότερο. Το προσώπου του συσπάστηκε σε μια γκριμάτσα δυσαρέσκειας.

Η ακτή του θύμιζε ότι σε λίγη ώρα θα έπρεπε να βγει από το νερό και να φύγει για να γυρίσει στο σπίτι του.

Η ακτή του θύμιζε ότι την Δευτέρα θα έπρεπε να γυρίσει πάλι στο γραφείο και στις υποθέσεις της δουλειάς.

Η ακτή του θύμιζε ότι ο η Μαρίνα, η κόρη του, μάλλον τελικά θα έπαιρνε διαζύγιο από τον άντρα της.

Η ακτή του θύμιζε ότι η τράπεζα είχε απαντήσει αρνητικά στην αίτηση του για επιχειρηματικό δάνειο.

Η ακτή του θύμιζε ότι...Θεέ μου...το σπίτι ήταν άδειο και ότι την προηγούμενη Κυριακή είχαν κάνει το μνημόσυνο της Αναστασίας, της γυναίκας του.

Ο Τάσος γύρισε την πλάτη στην μικρή ακτή και άρχισε θυμωμένος να κολυμπάει προς τα βαθιά. Ήθελε να ξεφύγει, έστω και για λίγο αν ήταν δυνατόν, από αυτές τις σκέψεις, από αυτές τις ανάγκες.

Έβαλε το κεφάλι κάτω και άρχισε να κολυμπάει μανιασμένα, αλλάζοντας πολλές φορές κατεύθυνση πότε στα δεξιά, πότε στα αριστερά και πότε ευθεία μέσα στην θάλασσα, αλλά ποτέ προς τα πίσω στην ακτή.

Κάποια στιγμή ένιωσε μια κρύα και βαριά σταγόνα νερού να πέφτει με δύναμη πάνω στο κεφάλι του. Ένιωσε το σώμα του να ανατριχιάζει. Σταμάτησε το κολύμπι και έκατσε για λίγο ακίνητος. Πολύ γρήγορα, μια δεύτερη σταγόνα κατέβηκε με φόρα από τον ουρανό και έπεσε με δύναμη στο κεφάλι του. Ύστερα και άλλη και μετά άλλη μια και ξανά κι 'άλλη. Μέχρι να το καταλάβει, μια δυνατή μπόρα ξέσπασε.

Ένα μπουμπουνητό αντήχησε από μακριά και σε λίγο μια αστραπή χαράκτηκε στον ουρανό. Ο Τάσος γύρισε το σώμα του προς την ακτή και άρχισε να κολυμπάει μανιασμένα. Όμως η ακτή ήταν πολύ μακριά.

Μεγάλα κύματα άρχισαν να σηκώνονται σαν μικροί λόφοι από τον δυνατό άνεμο που έφερε μαζί της η μπόρα. Τώρα όσο και αν προσπαθούσε ήταν αδύνατο να τους ξεφύγει. Έπεφταν πάνω του με μανία, το ένα μετά το άλλο και τον βύθιζαν μέσα στο νερό. Κάθε φορά που έβγαζε με αγωνία το κεφάλι του από το σκοτεινό νερό έβρισκε πως το κύμα τον είχε μεταφέρει πολύ μακριά από την προηγούμενη θέση του.

Αυτό έκανε την κατάσταση του ακόμα πιο επικίνδυνη. Γιατί, η ακτή ήταν μικρή και μετά από λίγα μέτρα τελείωνε δίνοντας την θέση της σε μια σειρά από μυτερά βράχια. Έτσι αν έφτανε κοντά στα βράχια, κάποιο δυνατό κύμα μπορούσε να τον πετάξει κατευθείαν πάνω τους.

Προσπάθησε να πολεμήσει τα κύματα να κολυμπήσει κόντρα στον άνεμο, αλλά κουράστηκε και σταμάτησε να προσπαθεί να τα νικήσει. Γρήγορα βρέθηκε στο έλεος των κυμάτων, τα οποία τον σήκωναν μόνο και μόνο για να τον βυθίσουν ξανά και ξανά βίαια μέσα σε αλμυρούς αφρούς.

Κάθε φορά που νόμιζε ότι ο άνεμος έφευγε και ήταν ευκαιρία για να κολυμπήσει πίσω προς την μικρή ακτή, τότε πάλι ο άνεμος δυνάμωνε και ένα νέο κύμα σηκωνόταν κόβοντας του τον δρόμο και πηγαίνοντας τον ακόμα πιο μακριά.

Άραγε όμως έτσι δεν συμβαίνει και στην ζωή; Εκεί που νομίζεις πως κάτι κατάφερες, πως έφτιαξες κάτι σημαντικό, έρχεται το επόμενο κύμα και στα διαλύει όλα, πηγαίνοντας σε ακόμα πιο πίσω. Και είχε χτυπηθεί ο Τάσος από πολλά τέτοια κύματα τα τελευταία χρόνια.

Η επιχείρησή του, εκείνο το μαγαζί ρούχων, που άνοιξε ο συγχωρεμένος ο πατέρας του την δεκαετία του '70, την χρονιά που ήρθαν στην Αθήνα από την Αρεόπολη της Λακωνίας, αυτό το μαγαζί, στο οποίο δούλευε από τότε που τελείωσε το Γυμνάσιο, είχε σχεδόν χρεοκοπήσει. Όλα τα χρόνια έκανε την δουλειά του όπως ήξερε και στο τέλος της πίστωσης είχε πάντα τα λεφτά που χρειαζόνταν. Ξαφνικά, μια χρονιά δεν τα είχε και έτσι πήρε δάνειο. Τον επόμενο χρόνο πήρε νέο δάνειο για να καλύψει το προηγούμενο και έτσι έμπλεξε για τα καλά. Τώρα, ύστερα από δέκα χρόνια πολέμου με τα δάνεια και τις πιστώσεις τον ενημέρωσαν πως άλλο δάνειο δεν

έχει και πως πρέπει να προσέλθει για διακανονισμό. «Δεν θα σας το φέρω μαλακά κύριε Ανδρικόπουλε, πολύ δύσκολα θα διασώσετε την επιχείρησή σας», ήταν τα λόγια του υπαλλήλου της τράπεζας. Αυτό ήταν και το πρώτο χτύπημα που είχε δεχτεί ο Τάσος. Το μαγαζί, η κληρονομιά από τον πατέρα του, σαρωμένο από το κύμα της οικονομικής κρίσης.

Με κόπο έβγαλε το κεφάλι του πάνω από το νερό, μα πριν προλάβει να διώξει τους αφρούς από τα μάτια του, ένα δεύτερο κύμα τον έχωσε πάλι μέσα στο νερό.

Η Μαρίνα, τους είχε χτυπήσει το κουδούνι έντεκα ώρα τη νύχτα. «Δεν τον αντέχω, όλη την ώρα τσακωνόμαστε», τους είχε πει. Χαζοί καβγάδες ως προς την αιτία, αλλά με ιδιαίτερα σοβαρή ένταση. Ο Τάσος και η Αναστασία δεν κατάλαβαν ποτέ ποια ήταν η σταγόνα που ξεχειλίζει το ποτήρι ή ποιος έφταιγε περισσότερο. Έβλεπαν μόνο την κόρη τους στεναχωρημένη και αυτό αρκούσε. Τελικά, η Μαρίνα τα ξαναβρήκε με τον Αλέκο και επέστρεψε πίσω στο σπίτι τους. Η εκεχειρία όμως δεν κράτησε για πολύ. Ύστερα, από δύο μήνες επέστρεψε πάλι στο πατρικό της και αυτή την φορά η παραμονή κράτησε περισσότερο. Ύστερα έφυγε, αλλά δεν άργησε να επιστρέψει και πάλι.

Η αίσθηση ότι η οικογένεια της κόρης τους διαλύεται ήταν ένας διαρκής πόνος για τους δυο γονείς. Μια πικρή γεύση που δεν φεύγει ποτέ από το στόμα.

Όμως το τρίτο κύμα, που χτύπησε τον Τάσο ήταν και το πιο δυνατό. Αυτό τον εξάντλησε σχεδόν ολοκληρωτικά.

Η Αναστασία, η γυναίκα του, στα εξήντα δύο της χρόνια υπέστη ένα ιδιαίτερα σοβαρό εγκεφαλικό και ύστερα από λίγες μέρες σε κωματώδη κατάσταση, κατέληξε. Εκείνος είχε αισθανθεί σαν να έχανε την άγκυρα του. Το μικρό λιμάνι που τον περιέμενε πάντα γεμίζοντας τον ασφάλεια και σιγουριά.

Ο Τάσος βυθιζόταν μέσα στο παγωμένο νερό ολοένα και περισσότερο. Τα πόδια του είχαν σταματήσει να κλωτσάνε το νερό για να τον ανυψώσουν. Σκέφτηκε, πως αυτό ήταν. Είχε νικηθεί. Τα κύματα είχαν αποδειχτεί πολύ δυνατά και εκείνος πολύ αδύναμος για να ανταπεξέλθει.

«Θεέ μου», σκέφτηκε, «αν τα παρατήσω τώρα; Αν σταματήσω να παλεύω ενάντια στα κύμα και ανελέητα κύματα, θα φταίω; Έχω άραγε κάποιο λόγο για να παλεύω ακόμα;»

Ο Τάσος άκουσε, ή νόμιζε πως άκουσε, πάντως οι λέξεις στο μυαλό του δεν αντήχησαν με την δική του φωνή. «Ο Ιώβ είπε: Ο Κύριος έδωσε. Ο Κύριος πήρε. Ευλογημένο να είναι το όνομά Του στους αιώνες».

Και τότε κατάλαβε. Δεν έφταιγε εκείνος για όλα όσα του είχαν συμβεί. Θα έφταιγε μόνο όταν δεν θα προσπαθούσε. Θα έφταιγε μόνο όταν θα παρατούσε την προσπάθεια. Καταθέτοντας τα όπλα πραγματοποιούσε μια μεγάλη αμαρτία. Αρνιόταν την πρόνοια του Θεού. Αντιθέτως, έπρεπε να παλέψει και να αφήσει τα υπόλοιπα σε Εκείνον, γιατί Εκείνος ξέρει.

Προσπάθησε να κουνήσει τα πόδια του για να πάει προς τα πάνω, και τότε τα πόδια του κινήθηκαν με μια δύναμη που δεν ήξερε πως την είχαν. Έφτασε στην επιφάνεια της θάλασσας πολύ γρήγορα, και εκεί αντίκρουσε ξανά τα πελώρια κύματα.

Δεν ήξερε πόσο μακριά τον είχε παρασύρει η θάλασσα αλλά σίγουρα βρισκόταν μακριά από την ακτή. Λίγα μέτρα μακριά του πρόσεξε λίγες βάρκες που παιδεύονταν πολύ από τα κύματα. Οι καρίνες τους ανεβοκατέβαιναν μανιασμένα, ακολουθώντας της προσταγές των κυμάτων, αλλά παρέμεναν σταθερά προσηλωμένες στις θέσεις τους, όντας δεμένες γερά σε βαριές άγκυρες.

Ο Τάσος προσέγγισε την πιο κοντινή με προσοχή και κατάφερε να γραπώσει τα χέρια του πάνω της. Στην μικρή της πλώρη διάβασε, το όνομα της ζωγραφισμένο με μεγάλα κόκκινα γράμματα, «Άγιος Νικόλαος».

Όμως η θέση του δεν ήταν καλή, με κάθε ταρακούνημα της βαρκούλας αυτός κινδύνευε να χάσει το κράτημα του και να βυθιστεί στο νερό. Έτσι αποφάσισε να ανεβεί μέσα στην βάρκα.

Έσφιξε τα δόντια του, και έβαλε όλη την δύναμη στα χέρια. Σηκώθηκε και έσπρωξε όλο το βάρος του μέσα στην βάρκα, καταφέροντας να κυλήσει μέσα.

Γύρισε ανάσκελα και κοίταξε τον, καλυμμένο από μαύρα σύννεφα ουρανό. Σταδιακά η βροχή που έπεφτε πάνω του άρχισε να μοιάζει με χάδι δροσερό από απαλό χέρι. Λίγες χρυσές αχτίνες ξέφυγαν από τα σύννεφα και έφτασαν μέχρι το πρόσωπο του. Ο Τάσος άνοιξε τα μάτια του και αντίκρουσε τα σύννεφα να αποχωρούν το ένα μετά το άλλο. Δίνοντας την θέση τους στον ήλιο, που κάπως δειλά πρόβαλε φωτίζοντας θάλασσα και ακτή.

Ένα αχνό, κουρασμένο χαμόγελο φάνηκε στο πρόσωπο του.

«Τελικά, ήταν μόνο ένα μπουρίνι», ψιθύρισε.

Until the Next Wave

George Gerasimos Mantziokas. Greece

The sky was depressingly grey. The sea was the same glum colour, perfectly mimicking the celestial dome, a cold breeze sweeping over it, freezing his body and giving him the chills.

The circumstances were anything but ideal for swimming, but Tassos was determined to not leave the small beach unless he first took a dip. After all, he had gone swimming on much more overcast days than this before.

“This is what a sunny day must be like in Norway,” he said in jest, a crooked smile on his face while taking his shirt off, folding it neatly and placing it on the old beach mat he had brought with him. He placed a stone on the mat to keep the wind from sweeping it off.

He made his way leisurely to the water, swinging his arms left and right to warm himself up. His body was shaking at the touch of the cold wind but he took no notice.

The water timidly touched his feet and, boy, was it ice-cold! Why on earth had he decided to go swimming in May? Did the first sunny break fool you, old man, and you thought the entire month would be like that? Or did you perhaps think the seasonal torridity of springtime could warm up the sea? I say, the sea, old man, is always cold; you should have known this by now.

Tassos stood still for a while, the water almost up to his knees. An immense sea was all

around, infinite and overcast. Others would up and leave, not him though. It all felt like a challenge, a bit of an adventure to him.

He made up his mind. He went ahead and plunged his old body into the cold sea. The feeling of chilled water enveloping him was refreshing. He started moving fast inside the water to get his body warm and accustomed to the temperature. Then, he spread his arms out and by swimming swiftly he went further out at sea.

Being now at a distance from the beach he was content with, he shifted and began to swim parallel to the shore. Often little waves would come from afar and crash against him. He loved this anyway. He enjoyed it every time he had to measure up and take on the waves, although he knew, deep down inside, they were no real danger, maybe not even a challenge.

There it was, another wave rearing up on the horizon, hardly five metres off from where he was. It was bigger than the previous ones, which made Tassos even keener on tackling it. To catch this wave, he started swimming faster, pulling at an even greater speed, looking forward to throwing himself onto it, to feel the violent force of the sea and then to beat it at its own game, on its own turf.

There was yet another reason why he loved this showdown with the waves. Wherever a wave closes in, at first it gets you to a level that is inferior to where you originally were. You're in trouble but it's only temporary. If

you manage to keep yourself afloat, above sea level, the wave, upon subsiding, will eventually get you even higher compared to where you had been when it first found you. It gives you a boost upwards and a power you did not have before.

Tassos finally caught the wave just before it passed him by, and what struck him, albeit belatedly, was that it was bigger than he had expected. The water crashed on to him with sheer force and caught him in its wet grasp. Totally unprepared, he had no time to react as the overwhelming power of the water flipped him over.

By making an effort, hardly negligible given his age, he managed to resurface. His heart was racing. He could hardly breathe. He thought he'd better wait for a couple of minutes until he got his heartbeat back in rhythm.

Unconsciously, his gaze wandered off and around before it stopped at the sight of the shore. A feeling which he didn't really wish to explore was wringing his heart, the sharp contortion of his face indicating his disenchantment.

The shore was reminding him that he had to get out of the water soon in order to leave the beach and go back home.

The shore was reminding him that he needed to be back at the office on Monday to deal with business affairs.

The shore was reminding him that Marina, his daughter, was probably going to divorce her husband.

The shore was reminding him that the bank has turned down his request for a business loan.

The shore was reminding him that... Oh Lord...the house was empty and last Sunday was the day when they had organised a memorial service for Anastasia, his wife.

Tassos turned his back on the beach and started swimming angrily towards the deep ocean. He wanted, even for a little while, to escape his thoughts and needs.

He immersed his head and started swimming frenziedly, shifting his direction multiple times, sometimes going left, sometimes right and sometimes straight out towards the open sea but never once heading back to the shore.

There came a moment when he felt a cold and heavy drop of water fall hard on to his head. He could feel the goose bumps all over his skin. He paused and stayed still for a little. Pretty soon, another drop fell right down from the sky and bumped into his head, and then another and another and then came more. Before he knew it, there was a big storm.

The sound of thunder came from afar and momentarily a thunderbolt lit up the sky. Tassos turned around to face the shore and started to swim like a maniac. But the shore was too far away.

Huge waves began to rear up like little hills owing to the powerful winds the storm was bringing with it. Now, no matter how much he tried, it was impossible to escape the waves. They were pounding him with fury, one after the other, engulfing and submerging him. Every time he anxiously reared his head from the dark waters it would turn out the waves had carried him even further than where he had been last.

This was making his predicament more dangerous. The shore was small and after a handful of metres of sand there was a bunch of sharp rocks. If he, by any chance, got too close, a strong wave could send him crashing against the rocks.

He tried to fight the waves and to swim against the winds but he got tired and eventually gave up trying to beat them. Soon he was at the mercy of the waves which kept coming by the score, pulling and lifting him up only to submerge him with sheer force and violence into the salty sea that frothed and foamed.

Each time he thought there was a window for him to swim back to the tiny beach, the wind would grow stronger and another wave would appear, cutting him off and taking him further away.

But isn't life like that? Whenever you think you have made it, when you have managed to do something great, the next wave rolls and sweeps everything off, dragging you along, taking you back to the starting point, if not further backwards. And Tassos had been hit by too many waves in recent years.

His own business, the clothes store his late father had opened back in the 70s, when they moved to Athens from Areopoli, Laconia, the very store where Tassos himself had been working all along after his graduation, had gone under. All that time he had been doing his job the way he knew he should, and he always had enough to pay off debts on time. Out of the blue, there came a year when he couldn't meet payments, so he took out a loan. The next year he had to take another to repay the previous year's loan, which is how he got himself caught up in this mess. And now, after ten years of battling loans and

creditors, he was told there can be no more loans and he must come to the bank to settle his debt and negotiate the terms. "I will be blunt, Mr. Andrikopoulos, it will be very difficult for you to save your business," was the very first thing the bank clerk had told him. That was the first blow Tassos had taken. The store, his father's legacy, had gone under the waves of the economic crisis.

He worked hard to get his head above water. Hardly had he had time to clear the salty froth from his eyes when another wave came along, drowning him once more.

One evening Marina had knocked on her parents' door at eleven. "I cannot take this anymore; we are arguing all the time," she said. Those stupid quarrels were really intense. Neither Tassos nor Anastasia ever figured out what the last straw had been or who was to blame. All they saw was their distraught daughter, which was enough. Subsequently, Marina worked things out with Alekos, and went back to her home. The ceasefire didn't last long. Two months later she was back in her parents' place and she stayed on. Then she left again but before long she was back, living with them, once more.

The feeling that their daughter's family was falling apart was a source of constant pain for the couple. There was this bitter aftertaste which lingered.

But the third wave was the hardest of them all. It drained Tassos.

Anastasia, his wife, suffered a major stroke, age sixty-two. After a few days in a coma she passed. It felt like he had lost his anchor. The small haven, which had always been there to make him feel safe and secure, was no more.

Tassos was sinking deeper and deeper into the ice-cold waters. He was no longer kicking to go up. A thought crossed his mind: that was it, he had been defeated. The waves had turned out to be too strong and he had been too weak to cope.

“Oh, God”, he thought, “what if I gave up now? What if I stopped fighting off these cold, merciless waves? Would that be my fault? I wonder whether there might be a reason for me to keep on fighting?”

Tassos heard, or thought he heard, in his head, an utterance from a voice that he knew was not his. “And Job said: ‘The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh. Blessed be the name of the Lord.’”

And then he knew. What had happened was not his fault. It would have been his fault had he failed to make an effort. It would have been his fault had he given up trying. By surrendering his weapons, he would be committing a huge sin. He would be refusing God’s providence. He needed to keep on fighting and let God take care of everything else for He knows best.

He tried to shake his legs to go upwards and he kicked with a force he never knew was there. Having reached the surface really fast, he was facing the huge waves again.

He had no idea how far the sea had taken him but he was definitely far from the

shore. He noticed, a few feet from where he was, a handful of boats being rocked dreadfully by the waves. Their keels were going up and down in a frenzy, at the pace the waves set and yet they stayed on, right where they were, thanks to their heavy anchors.

Tassos carefully got to the nearest boat and managed to grasp and hold on to it. Its little bow read, in big red letters, “St. Nicholas”, the patron saint of seamen.

He was not safe as with every jolt he risked losing his grip and sinking deeper. So, he decided to get on the boat.

His jaw clenched, he applied all the physical strength he had to his arms. He lifted and pushed himself into the boat, leaning forward to climb inside.

He then rolled over, looked up and saw a sky full of black clouds. Gradually the rain started to feel like a soft caress. Some golden sun-rays were slipping through the cracks of the clouds straight to his face. Tassos, his eyes wide open, saw the clouds disappear one after another. They were giving their place to the sun, which was shyly emerging, illuminating sea and shore.

A faint, tired smile appeared on his face.

“It was just a squall,” he whispered.

الجدة والبحر

جنى سليقة. لبنان

كنت حزينة جداً عصر ذلك اليوم، أميل برأسي نحو ظلي المترامي على المقعد الخشبي قبالة بحر بيروت، أغمض عيناوي وأستمع إلى صوت الأمواج كمن يصغي إلى أغنية. فتحت عيناوي فجأة فرأيت يداً سمراء اللون، متناهية الرقة تعطيني قطعة حلوى. رفعت رأسي قليلاً، وإذ بي أراها. إنها هي، تلك العجوز الجميلة، جارتني في البحر.. منذ شهرين وأنا ألتقي بها في مثل هذا الوقت كأننا على موعد ما. تجلس على المقعد المجاور لمقعدني، وتتقاسم البحر معنا. كنت أراقبها دائماً وأتمنى أن أتحدث معها. وها هي اليوم تقدّم لي بسمة مع قطعة شوكولا. قالت الجدة: "إنها شوكولا بلجيكية. نحن البلجيكيون مشهورون في صناعة الشوكولا. للشوكولا سحر خاص... إنها بارعة في المواسة! تناولني هذه الحبة يا بنيتي." تناولت القطعة اللذيذة بخجل، ابتسمت للجدة، ابتسمت هي ومضت. شعرت بتحسّن مفاجئ. استطاعت أن تفهم حزني وتمتصّه مثلما يفعل البحر دائماً... تلك الجدة اللطيفة!

هي بلجيكية إذا؟! بالأمس فقط خطر لي أنها قد تكون من تركيا، وأنها تزور لبنان مؤقتاً، لأنّ ملامحها لا تشي بكونها لبنانية. كانت تقرأ رواية باللغة التركية.. تمسك الكتاب بين يديها كأنه طفل مدلل، تعبت بصفحاته قليلاً، ثم تستقرّ على صفحة واحدة، تطالعها بحب، وتتوقّف في منتصفها تقريباً.. ثم تغلق الكتاب نصف إغلاقاً.. تحكي شيئاً للبحر.. وتعاود قراءة الصفحة. أعتقد أنها قرأت عشرين صفحة بمثل هذه الطريقة. ثم وضعت الكتاب، ومعه هاتفها الخليوي، في حقيبة يدها المصنوعة من القشّ ومشت. عندما غابت عن ناظري، تنهت إلى أنني أمضيت العصر كلّهُ وأنا أراقبها متجاهلةً البحر التابض في الحياة الممتدّة أمامي. هذه الجدة تجبر من رآها على تأملها بلا توقّف أو ملل تماماً مثلما يفعل البحر.

قبل يومين، ظننتها إسبانية. كانت بصحبة طفل في الثامنة على أبعد تقدير.. تحاول إعطائه درساً في الرسم. قالت له بلهجة عربية مكسرة: "نحن الإسبان معروفون بعبقريتنا في الرسم. تذكر بيكاسو، سلفادور دالي، بارسو، وغيرهم." رسمت شيئاً أمامه... ثم عاود الصبّي رسمه. أعتقد أنّ ما رسمه كان مميّزاً لأنّها ضحكت من أعماق قلبها. في مساء ذلك اليوم، عندما انتهت زيارتي إلى البحر، حاولتُ رسم أشياء كثيرة، ووردة تتفتّح في الفجر، شمس تخضع لليل فتغيب، أو عجوز يشكو غربته للنجوم. غريب أمر هذه الجدة، إنها تذكّرني بالفنّ بالأحلام الجميلة، بالورود، بالأطفال والعجائز، بالبدائيات والنهايات.. تماماً مثلما يفعل البحر.

حيرتني تلك الجدة... عجوزٌ في الثمانين من العمر على الأقلّ.. كيف تعرف كلّ هذه الأشياء؟ وكيف تواجه الحياة بمثل هذا الأمل؟ إنها تتحدّى الصورة النمطية للعجائز التي أعرفها. العجائز الغاضبات، اللواتي يزجرن الحياة بعصاهم المهشمة، يمقطن الصّيف بسبب البر غش، والليل بسبب الخوف، والشتاء بداعي البرد. وينزعجن من البحر لأنّه غدار، ومن الأطفال لأنهم صاخبون، ومن

التكنولوجيا لأنها لعنة... العجائز اللواتي يعشقن حديث الدواء والألم ويعتقدن أن حياتهن توقفت عند ماض بعيد غني بالذكريات والأحلام.

كنت متأكدة أنها تخبئ قصصاً وأسراراً كثيرة مثلما يفعل البحر. نعطيه أسرارنا مجاناً مطمئنين لكونه بلا حنجره، فيحتفظ بها في أعماقه لتزيده عمقاً.. أسرار بريئة وساذجة، وأخرى خطيرة ومدمرة.. أسرار تتوق إلى صوت، وأخرى تفضل الصمت. هذه المرة، كنت مصرة أن أعرف السر الذي يربط الجدة بالبحر، وأن أعرف وطنها الأصلي. فلامحها غامضة، ولهجتها العربية مبهمه، وأحاديثها تزيد من فضولي. ولذلك عزمت على محادثتها في اليوم التالي. سأبدأ المحادثة بشكرها على الشوكولا البلجيكية!

هذا ما حصل، شكرتها ثم سألتها عن وطنها. قالت الجدة أنها تمتلك أوطاناً كثيرة، تحفظها في قلبها بعناية. قالت أنه ليس مهماً أين نولد، المهم إلى أي أرض نقرر أن ننتمي، وأن انتمائنا لبلاد كثيرة ليس نبذ لبلادنا بل هو غزل لطيف بها، وهو ليس انتقاص من وطنيتنا بل إغناء لها... ثم حدثتني عن أوطانها تلك، وكانت ملامحها تتغير عند كل وطن. نثرت السعادة في عينيها ذرات حماسة كبيرة حين أخبرتني عن حضارة اليونان العظيمة وفلاسفتها، عن تاريخ بريطانيا، وعن فراعنة مصر وأساطيرهم. ثم انتابها حزن مبالغ، وازداد عمق الأخاديد في وجهها حين ذكرت الحرب في وطنها سوريا على حد قولها. ما أسرع ما يتحول وجه هذه العجوز من الهدوء إلى الغضب، ومن الإنشراح إلى القلق... تماماً مثل أمواج البحر التي تثور وتسكن بين الفينة والأخرى، وفي ثورتها غضب، وفي سكونها رقة.

كيف يمكن للمرء أن يشبه البحر؟ أكاد أجزم أن هذه المرأة تشبهها. لها هيئته ولامحه وصوته. على وجهها سحنة الصيادين وصبرهم، وفي عينيها فرح الأطفال وهم يبنون قصور الرمل على الشاطئ، وانكسارهم حين تذري الرياح كل ما بنوه. لها القدرة على قول الكثير دون أن تقول شيئاً. تضم بروحها شمساً مشرقة وليال طويلة مثلما يطوي البحر الشمس ثم الليل كل مساء. وهي مثله، كل محاولة لفهمها غير مجدية، تشعرني أنني أجهلها أكثر كل مرة وتجعلني ألوح بعجز أمام حقيقتها.

دعنتي الجدة إلى بيتها في اليوم التالي. استقبلتني رائحة شهية عند الباب، ولحن قديم أثار في حنيئاً غريباً. عرفت لاحقاً أن هذه الرائحة هي رائحة توابل مغربية تحبها الجدة وتستخدمها في وصفات كثيرة، وأن المعزوفة هي معزوفة رومانية قديمة تنتفن الجدة عزفها بشكل لا يصدق. بيتها رائع ويشبهها، لا شيء فيه اعتباطي، بل كل شيء مهندس ومقصود بشكل جيد. على أحد رفوف مكتبتها الضخمة، تتواجد مجموعة صور متناسقة بشكل يثير الدهشة... أمام كل صورة وردة صغيرة. تقول الجدة أنها تحب الزراعة كثيراً، وأن كل مدينة زارتها تذكرها بوردة، وأن عبير تلك الوردة هو امتداد لوجود المدينة بالنسبة لها. فالزنبق يذكرها بتونس، والجوري يذكرها بباريس.. وهي تربط الدنمارك بزهرة دوار الشمس التي تبعث البهجة باستمرار، وببروت بزهرة النرجس التي تمنح الحب دون مقابل... صورة واحدة أثارت انتباهي بشدة من بين تلك الصور، صورة لفئة عشرينية رائعة الجمال تجلس في سفينة مع رجل مسن، وأمامها زهرة بيضاء ذابلة.

قالت الجدة أنها هي تلك الفتاة، وأن الرجل المسن هو والدها. كان والدها بحاراً وأمضت شبابها كله بالسفر إلى البلاد التي يضمها البحر الأبيض المتوسط. قالت الجدة أن البحر لا هوية محددة له، ولكنه

يجمع هويّات كثيرة.إنّه متمرّد ومدلّل يختار وطنًا كلّ يوم حسب مزاجه الصّباحي،مثلما ننتقي نحن فطورنا...فيومًا يكون بحر بيروت،وآخر بحر فرنسا أو إسبانيا أو مصر.البحر يجمع معارف كلّ تلك الأوطان لأنّه ينتمي إليها جميعها،مثلما يجمع ضوء الشّمس ألوان الطّيف لأنّها كلّها جزء منه.قالت الجدّة أنّها أحبّت البحر،حتّى صارت تشبّهه،وصار وطنها الذي يذكّرها بأبيها وطفولتها ورائحة النّجاحات والإخفاقات الأولى...السّفر أستاذها الذي علّمها أن تنتقي من كلّ وطن أفضل ما فيه،لأنّ كلّ وطن جميل ومتفوّق على طريقته الخاصّة... السّفر علّمها الطّبخ،واللّغات،والفنّ،والموسيقى،والرّسم،والكتابة،والزّراعة...وأهمّ من ذلك كلّهُ:الشّغف،التّجدّد،والشّعور باتّساع الأرض وكثرة الإحتمالات. لقد علّمها أن تحلم ما دامت تعيش.وعندما سألتها عن حلمها،أشرق في عينيها لون البحر وقالت:أن أساعد الشّباب أمثالك على اكتساب العلوم وفهم الحياة بالسّفر...وحلم آخر، حلم والدي... أن يجمع البحر ما فرّقته الحدود.

Grandma and the Sea

Jana Slika. Lebanon

I was very upset that afternoon. I turn my head to my shadow, which was extending across the wooden seat along Beirut's sea. I close my eyes and listen to the sound of the waves like one listening to a song. When I suddenly open my eyes, I see a tanned hand very gently giving me a sweet. I lift my head a bit and see her. It was her. That pretty old woman. My neighbour in the sea. I've been meeting her for two months now, always at this time, as if we had an appointment. She would sit on the seat next to me and we would share the sea. I always watch her, and wish to speak with her. Here she is today, offering a smile with the chocolate. The grandma said, "It's Belgian chocolate. We Belgians are famous for chocolate. Chocolate has a special magic. It consoles. Have a piece, my child." I shyly took the delightful piece and smiled. Grandma smiled back and went. I suddenly felt better. She had understood my sadness, and had absorbed it as the sea always did. That's the sweet grandma!

She is Belgian, then. Only yesterday it crossed my mind that she may be Turkish, on a temporary visit to Lebanon. Her features were not Lebanese. And she was reading a novel in Turkish. She held the book in her hands like a spoilt child, fiddling with the pages and then turning to one in particular. She looked at it with love, and then halted about midway. She half closed the book, said something to the sea, and then returned to her reading. I think she finished around twenty pages like that. Then she put the book, with her mobile phone, into her straw handbag and walked

away. When she was gone, I realised I had spent the whole afternoon watching her. I had neglected the vivacious sea stretching out in front of me. This grandma demanded the full attention of anyone who saw her. They would look at her ceaselessly, just like the sea did.

A couple of days ago, I thought she may be Spanish. A child of no more than eight was with her, and she was trying to teach him how to draw. She said in broken Arabic, "We Spaniards are known for our genius in painting. Remember Picasso, Salvador Dalí, Velázquez and others." She drew something, and the boy traced the lines. It must have been very special, for she laughed from the bottom of her heart. That evening, when my visit to the sea was over, I tried drawing many things. A flower blossoming at dawn. A sun succumbing to night and setting. An old man complaining to the stars of his loneliness. What a grandma! She reminded me of art, of wonderful dreams, of flowers, of children and old people, of beginnings and ends. Just like the sea did.

The grandma was very confusing for me. She was in her eighties. How did she know all these things? How did she face life with all this hope? She challenged the stereotype of the elderly I was familiar with. Angry elderly who grumbled at life with their sticks, who hated summer because of the mosquitoes, and hated night because of their fear, and hated winter because of the cold. They got disturbed by the sea because it was treacherous. And by children because they were

noisy. And by technology because it was a curse. My stereotype of elderly women who loved discussing their medication, their pain and who believed their lives had come to a standstill in some distant past redolent with memories and dreams.

I was certain she hid stories and secrets, as plentiful as did the sea. We give it our secrets gratis, in the firm belief that it has no tongue. It would keep them in its depths. Innocent and naïve secrets; dangerous and destructive secrets. Secrets that seek to find a voice, others that prefer to remain silent. This time, I insisted on finding out the secret that links the grandma and the sea, and to find out about her origins. Her features were mysterious, her accent enigmatic, her talk whetted my curiosity. That is why I made up my mind to talk to her the following day. I would start by thanking her for the Belgian chocolate!

And that is how it happened. I thanked her and then asked her about her homeland. The grandma said she had many homelands. She kept them in her heart. She said it was not important where we were born, but to which land we decide to belong. Our belonging to many countries is not a rejection of our own but rather a gentle flirtation. It is not a detraction from our patriotism but rather an enrichment. She then told me of these homelands. Her features changed with every homeland. The joy in her eyes sowed atoms of great enthusiasm when she told me of the great Greek civilisation and its philosophers, of the history of Britain, of the Pharaohs of Egypt and their legends. Then she was suddenly overcome with sadness, which etched more wrinkles into her face, as she told of the war in her homeland Syria. How quickly the old woman's face changed from serenity to anger, from joy to

anxiety. Just like the sea waves that would rise one moment and then calm the next. In their arousal there was anger and in their calmness was gentleness.

How could a person be so like the sea? I vow the woman was very much like it. She had the form, the features, the sound of the sea. Her face reflected the visage of fishermen but also their patience. Her eyes held the pleasure of children as they built their sandcastles on the beach. But also their disappointment when they are scattered to the wind. She had the ability to say so much without saying anything. She embraced bright suns in her soul and long nights, just like the sea would engulf the sun and then the night with every evening. Like the sea, every attempt to understand her was futile. With every attempt, I felt more ignorant, and she made me admit incompetence in the face of her reality.

The grandma invited me to her house the next day. An appetising aroma welcomed me at the door. And an old tune that evoked a strange nostalgia in me. Later, I discovered it was the aroma of Moroccan spices, which the grandma loved and used in many a recipe. The tune was an old Romanian melody, which the grandma mastered to perfection. Her house was wonderful, just like her. Nothing was haphazard. Everything was in its place with full intention. On one shelf of her huge library was a set of nicely ordered photos. In front of each photo was a tiny flower. Grandma said she loved gardening, and every city she visited reminded her of a flower, and the scent of the flower was an extension of the city for her. Lilies reminded her of Tunisia. Damask roses reminded her of Paris. She connected Denmark with the sunflower, which evoked constant joy. Beirut was connected to amaryllis, which offers uncondi-

tional love. One photo stood out; the photo of a beautiful girl in her twenties. She sat on a boat with an elderly man. In front of her was a white wilted flower.

Grandma said she was the girl, and the elderly man was her father. He had been a sailor, and she had spent all her youth travelling and visiting the countries embracing the Mediterranean Sea. Grandma said the sea had no specific identity. It brought together many identities. It was rebellious and spoilt, choosing a different homeland every morning. Just as we selected our breakfast. One day it would be the sea of Beirut; another the sea of France; or Spain; or of Egypt. The sea brought together all these homelands for it belonged to them all. Like the rays of the sun brought together the colours of the spectrum, for they were all part of the sun. Grandma said she had loved

the sea, until she became like it. It became her home that reminded her of her father, her childhood, the smell of the first successes and failures. Travelling was her master, who had taught her to pick from every homeland the best it had to offer. For every homeland is beautiful, and stands out in its own way. Travelling has taught her to cook, languages, art, music, painting, writing, gardening. But most importantly, it taught her passion, renewal, perceiving the spaciousness of the earth and the potentials it had to offer. It taught her to dream for as long as she lived. When I asked her about her dream, the colour of the sea touched her eyes, and she said, "To help young people like you acquire knowledge and to learn about life through travelling. The other dream is my father's dream. To allow the sea to rejoin what the borders have put asunder."

حوار في المطار

أحمد عمران بن عمران. ليبيا

في المطار، أعدادٌ كبيرةٌ من المسافرين بين قادمٍ ومغادر، كلٌ منهم يحمل معه حقيبته أو يجرها خلفه، ملايين الوجوه، وفي كل حقيبة حكاية، وفي كل وجهٍ إذا دقت رواية، في طرف مساحة التدخين، يجلس شابٌ عشرينيٌ أشقرٌ يضع أمامه كوباً من القهوة، يفترش الأرض، يراقب هبوط وإقلاع الطائرات في عتمة الليل، يستمتع بنسبة صيفية تلطف قليلاً من حرارة الصيف، يشعل سجارته بينما يستمر في مراقبة الطائرات، بجانبه حقيبة ظهرٍ يسند ذراعه عليها، أمامه جهاز حاسوب محمول يضعه على قدميه، يقترب منه شابٌ آخر يبدو أكبر منه سناً، أسود الشعر، طويل القامة، ينظر الشاب الأشقر نحوه، يبتسم الشاب الآخر قبل أن يقول:

- "كرسيّ جميل"

يضحك الأشقر قليلاً قبل أن يجيبه وهو يشير إلى الأرض:

- "خذ واحداً"

- "أخاف أن أعطلك عن شيء"

يرد عليه الشاب الواقف

- "لا، إطلاقاً"

يزيح الشاب الواقف حقيبته من على كتفه قبل أن يضعها أرضاً ويجلس بجانبها،

- "تدخن؟"

يسأل الشاب الأشقر وهو يقدم علب السجائر نحو الجالس بجانبه، يسحب منها الشاب الآخر سجارة .
يشعلها لها الشاب الأشقر

يربت الآخر على يده مشيراً إلى أن السجارة قد اشتعلت . يبتسم الأشقر قائلاً:

- "في مجتمع المدخنين لنا نفس العادات باختلاف ثقافتنا"

يبتسم الجالس بجانبه موافقاً إياه الرأي قبل أن يقول:

- "كأننا متحدون"

بصمت الشابان قليلاً قبل ان يسأل ذو الشعر الأسود:

- "رأيتك قبل قليل في البوابة 212، هل انت من هناك؟"

يجيبه الأشقر:

- "هل تقصد من البوابة ذاتها؟ أم من الوجهة المنطلقة من تلك البوابة؟"

- "لا يمكن أن تكون من تلك البوابة؟ تخيل أن تعيش في بوابة مطار؟"

يضحك الإثنان معاً قبل أن يقول الأشقر:

- "في الواقع لقد عشت في بوابة مطار لثلاثة أيام ذات مرة، تأخرت حدث عطل في الطائرة قبل الإقلاع، ولم تستطع شركة الطيران ارسال طائرة بديلة قبل ثلاثة أيام"

- "ولم تعوضكم الشركة أو تنتقلكم لفندقٍ ما؟"

- "في الواقع عرضت الشركة نقلنا لفندق خارج المطار، ولم أستطع الخروج لأن جوازي يحتاج تأشيرة دخول، فوجدت نفسي عالقاً في المطار أنتظر المجهول"

صُدم الشاب ذو الشعر الاسود قليلاً فسأل بنبرة استغراب:

- "ولم يبلو غكم بموعِد عودتكم"

ابتسم الشاب الآخر قليلاً ثم أجاب قائلاً:

- "سألنا موظف الشركة فأخبرنا بأنه لا يعرف وأن الأمر خارج سيطرته لكننا معتادون على مثل هذه الأشياء في بلادنا"

- "ومن أين انت؟"

- "أنا من بلادٍ كثيرة الأزمات والمشاكل، يموت فيها المريض دون أن يجد علاجاً، ويموت فيها مواطنهاً جوعاً دون أن يجد غذاءً، انا من بلادٍ يضربها الفقر والجهل، دون أن يفكر أحدٌ في إيجاد حلٍ لكل هذا."

- "المضحك المبكي هنا أن هذه المواصفات تنطبق على عددٍ كبيرٍ من الدول بما فيها بلادي، لا يمكن أن تكون من بلادي أليس كذلك؟ لماذا نتكلم بالإنجليزية إذن؟"

يضحك الإثنان معاً قبل أن يعود ذو الشعر الأسود للحديث قائلاً:

- "إذا كنت لا تريد الإفصاح عن بلادك فأنا أتفهم ذلك، لكن قرب لي المسافة على الأقل، فلنأخذ البحر المتوسط مرجعاً مثلاً وحدد لي منه في أي اتجاه تعيش"

- "أعيش في ساحله الجنوبي، وأنت؟"

- "شعرت أنك تعيش في دولةٍ مثل دولتي، أنا أعيش في ساحله الشمالي"

ينظر الجنوبي نحو الآخر قليلاً ثم يقول:

- "أتسمي نفسك أورياً بهذا الشعر الأسود؟ يا صديقي أنا أوريُّ أكثر منك"

يعودان للضحك مرة أخرى.

يسال الشمالي من جديد:

- "إلى أين وجهتك؟"

- "عائدٌ لبلادي حتى أقضي الصيف هناك، وبالعودة إلى سؤالك، نعم كنت في تلك البوابة أنتظر طائرتي"

- "لا أؤمن بالصدف كثيراً، ولكن هذه حقاً صدفة، فأنا أيضاً في انتظار تلك الطائرة؟"

- "عملٌ أم سياحة؟"

- "في الواقع سياحة"

- "أتترك كل دول العالم وتقصد بلادي للسياحة؟"

- "بلادكم جميلة!"

- "من الخارج فقط جميلة، أنتم معشر السياح لا ترون الجانب المظلم في الدول التي تقصدونها"

استغرب الجنوبي قليلاً فتسائل قائلاً:

- "ماذا تعني؟"
- "أعني انكم لا ترون معانتنا، تذهبون لأماكن لا يمكن للمواطن العادي دخولها، تشترون هدايا وتذكارات لا تعرفون كم من شخصٍ عانى حتى تُصنع"
- "ولكن هذا الأمر في كل الدول، أنت مثلاً إذا ذهبت لبلادي كسائح ستفعل نفس الأشياء"
- "عزيزي أنا من جنوب المتوسط، حتى أزور بلادك فأنا أحتاج لمبلغ مالي، لتأشيرة، ومجموعة من الأوراق حتى أحصل على تأشيرة، ثم موعدٌ في السفارة ثم بعد كل هذا، من الممكن جداً أن يتم رفض طلبي بحجة أن شخصاً من نفس بلدي قام ذات يومٍ بعملية إرهابية"
- يعم الصمت بين الإثنين قبل أن يعود الجنوبي للحديث مرة أخرى.
- "أنتم ترون بلادنا كمكانٍ تقضون فيه إجازة الصيف، بينما نحن نرى بلادكم أرضاً لتحقيق أحلامنا البسيطة"
- "وماهي أحلامكم"
- "أن أدرس، أن أتزوج، أن أعمل، أن استقر، أن أحقق ذاتي، عندما كنت صغيراً كنت أحلم أن أصبح لاعب كرة قدمٍ محترفٍ يمثل منتخب بلاده ويجلب لها الأمداد"
- "هي نفس أحلامنا، أنا أيضاً أحلم بكل هذا، أحلم ربما بكل ما تحلم به، عندما كنت صغيراً كنت أيضاً مثلك أحلم أن أكون المنتخب الوطني، لكن والدي حينها رأى أن دراستي أهم، كان يقول أهتم بقطار دراستك، وسيأتي قطار الأحلام لاحقاً، وعندما أنهيت دراستي وظننت أنني سألحق بقطار الأحلام وجدتني أنتظر قطار العمل وقطار الزواج، صرت أنتقل من إنتظارٍ لإنتظار حتى كثرت القطارات التي أنتظرها ونسيت قطار أحلامي"
- "لقد كانوا يخبرونني بذات الشيء، بأن أنتظر قطار الأحلام والحق بقطار العمل"
- "وماذا حدث؟"
- "لم يكن هناك قطاراتٍ في بلادي، فنحن لا نملك سكة حديدية أصلاً"

يضحك الإثنين مرة أخرى قبل أن يقول الشمالي:

- "انا سعيدٌ حقاً للقائك، لم أكن أتصور أبداً أنه بالرغم من البحر الفاصل إلا أننا نتشارك ذات الأحلام والطموحات ربما"

- "إنه سرٌّ من أسرار المتوسط يا صديقي، ربما لو كانت حركتنا لبلادكم أسهل لما إعتقدنا بوجود فوارق بيننا"

- "صحيح، ربما لوجدنا فعلاً بأننا نتشارك في اشياء عديدة، ولركزنا مثلاً على هذه القواسم المشتركة"

ينظر الشمالي لساعته قبل أن ينهض مسرعاً قائلاً في هلع:

- "بسرعة يجب ان نلحق بالطائرة"

يجيبه الجنوبي بهدوء

- "اهءء فهذه الطائرة كالقطارات التي ننتظرها، ستتأخر"

- "وما أدراك بذلك"

- "لو كانت هذه الطائرة يا عزيزي القادم من شمال المتوسط متجهة لبلادك، لخرجت مسرعة في موعدها، ولكنها تعود لبلادي، وكعادة كل الطائرات القاصدة لبلادي، ستخرج متأخرة، حتى الطائرات تشعر بأن بلادكم أفضل، أجلس الآن ودعني أدعوك على كوب قهوة ولنكمل حديثنا عن أحلامنا"

عاد الشمالي للجلوس في إنتظار طائرتهما، يتبادلان أطراف الحديث، يضحكان من حين لآخر، بينما ظلت الطائرات في الخارج تقلع وتهبط حاملة العديد من المسافرين الذين يحملون قصصاً مختلفة ربما تشبه قصتنا هذه، وربما تختلف عنها، الأكيد، هو انه باختلاف الساحل الذي نعيش عليه، سنظل من سكان المتوسط، وستجمعنا ذات الأفكار والأحلام كما جمعنا ذات البحر.

A Conversation at the Airport

Ahmed O. Benomran. Libya

At the airport, there are huge crowds of travellers, arriving, leaving. Each is carrying a bag or pulling a suitcase behind them. Millions of faces, and every suitcase tells a story. Every face, if you look closer, is a novel. In the smoking area, a young man in his twenties, with blond hair, sits on the floor with a cup of coffee in front of him. He is watching the take-off and landing of the planes in the dark night, enjoying a soft summer breeze as it soothes the summer heat. He lights a cigarette as he continues to watch the planes. His backpack lies next to him and he leans on it, while his laptop rests on his legs. Another tall young man, slightly older with dark hair, approaches him. The blond man looks up, and the other young man smiles as he says, "Nice seat."

The blond one laughs, then waves at the floor and says: "Be my guest."

"I don't want to distract you."

"No, not at all."

The standing man takes off his backpack, places it on the floor and sits down next to it.

"A smoke?" the blond one asks, offering his cigarettes to the one sitting next to him. Taking one, the blond man lights it for him.

The other one pats his hand, thanking him for lighting the cigarette.

The blond one smiles.

"As smokers we all have the same habits, even if we come from different cultures."

The young man next to him smiles in agreement, and then says: "As if we were united."

The two young men fall silent, and then the dark-haired one asks: "I just saw you at Gate 212. Are you from there?"

The blond one asks in turn: "You mean the gate itself? Or the destination designated by that gate?"

"It can't be the gate itself. Imagine living at an airport gate!"

They laugh. Then the blond one explains, "In fact, I did once live at an airport gate for three days. It was late, and there was something wrong with the plane just before takeoff. And the airline could not send a replacement flight until three days later."

"And you were never recompensated? Or at least taken to some hotel?"

"They did offer to take us to a hotel outside the airport. But I couldn't go because my passport requires an entry visa. So I found myself stuck at the airport, awaiting the unknown."

The dark-haired man was taken aback and wondered: "And they never told you of the time?"

The other one smiled. “We asked the airline officer in charge, but he claimed he didn’t know and that it was out of his hands. We’re used to these things in our country.”

“Where are you from?”

“From a country abounding in crises and problems. A country where the diseased die for lack of treatment, where the citizen dies of hunger for lack of food. I am from a country where poverty and ignorance prevail. And no one thinks of finding a solution.”

“It’s funny, but this description applies to many a country, including my own. It can’t be my country, can it? Why do we speak in English, then?”

They laugh, and then the dark-haired one resumes their chat. “If you don’t want to name your country, I understand. But help me along. Let’s take the Mediterranean as a reference point – in which direction do you live?”

“The southern shore. And you?”

“I felt it was a country like mine. I live on the northern shore.”

The southerner looks at the other one a while, then asks: “You call yourself European with that dark hair? My friend, I’m far more European than you are.”

They laugh again.

The northerner asks: “Where are you headed?”

“Back home for the summer holidays. To go back to your question, yes, I was at that gate awaiting my flight.”

“I don’t believe much in coincidences, but this one is certainly a coincidence. I, too, am awaiting that flight.”

“Business or pleasure?”

“Pleasure, to be honest.”

“Of all the countries of the world, you come to my country for tourism?”

“Your country is beautiful!”

“Only on the outside. You tourists never get to see the dark side of the countries you visit.”

The southerner was a bit surprised, and then asked: “How do you mean?”

“I mean you don’t see our suffering. You go to places no regular citizen can access. You buy gifts and souvenirs, but you don’t know how many people toiled to produce them.”

“But that applies to all countries. If you come to my country, for instance, as a tourist, you would do the same.”

“My dear friend, I’m from the southern shores of the Mediterranean. To visit your country, I would need oodles of money, a visa, endless paperwork to get the visa, an appointment at the embassy. And after all that, they may simply reject my application under the pretext that one day a man from my country committed a terrorist attack.”

Silence falls for a while before the southerner continues: “You see our countries as a place to spend your summer holiday. We see your countries as the land where we may fulfil our simplest dreams.”

“What would those dreams be?”

“To pursue my education. To get married. To find a job. To settle down. To fulfil myself. When I was little, I dreamt of becoming a professional football player who would play with the national team and achieve glorious victories for my country.”

“We have the same dreams. I, too, used to dream of this. I probably dream the same dreams as you do. When I was little, I, too, dreamt of playing with the national team. But back then my dad thought that my education was more important. He always said focus on the path towards education. The path to your dreams will come later. When I completed my education and thought I could now change to my dream path, I found myself on the path towards a career and marriage. I found myself moving from one waiting point to the next. The paths I was waiting for had multiplied endlessly, and I forgot about the path of my dreams.”

“They used to tell me the same. To take the career path and let the dream path wait.”

“And what happened?”

“There aren’t any paths in my country to follow!”

They, yet again, and the northerner says: “I’m really glad I met you. I never imagined that despite the big blue sea that separates us, we have so many dreams and aspirations in common.”

“It’s one of the charms of the Mediterranean, my friend. Maybe if the mobility towards

your countries were a bit easier, we would not believe that there were so many differences between us.”

“True. We may, indeed, find that we have many things in common, and we would focus more on these commonalities.”

The northerner looks at his watch, only to get up in a hurry, panicking. “Hurry up, we have a plane to catch.”

But the southerner looks at him calmly and says: “Calm down. This plane, like the trains and paths that we’re awaiting – they are always late.”

“How would you know?”

“My dear friend who comes from the north of the Mediterranean. If this plane were en route to your country, it would leave on time. But it’s heading back to my country. Like all planes heading towards my country, it will be delayed. Even the flights know that your country is better. Now sit down and let me get you another cup of coffee and we can chat a bit more about our dreams.”

The northerner sits down again, and they wait for their flight. They chat and they laugh, while the planes outside take off and land, carrying travellers with diverse stories. They may be very similar to our story, or very different. But no doubt, regardless of the shore we live on, we’ll remain the inhabitants of the Mediterranean. And we’ll be brought together by similar thoughts and dreams, just as that sea has brought us together.

The End

Domy na hraniciach

Miroslava Kulková. Slovensko

Mikelis zastal uprostred cesty. Autá trúbili, vodiči naňho kričali *vlákas!*, ale on nič z toho nevnímal. Po chodníku na druhej strane kráčala jeho matka, ibaže o tridsať rokov mladšia.

Odlepil jednu nohu, potom druhú a vykročil k prízraku. Bol čoraz zmätenejší. Pred ním totiž kráčali rovnaké šaty, ako mala jeho matka na starej fotke. Gombíky na tých istých miestach, zašité roztrhnutie na sukni, keď jeho matka preliezala susedov plot kvôli nezrelým pomelám. Iba opasok chýbal, no na šatách ostali putká, ktoré si ho pamätali. Žena mala dokonca rovnaký zostrih vlasov, ako v mladosti nosievala jeho matka. Až keď ho do nosa udreli asfaltové výpary a pach hnijúcej zeleniny, uveril, že to nie je sen a on sa skutočne nachádza blízko trhoviska v starej časti Nicosie.

Načiahol ruku. Šaty boli na dotyk prekvapivo drsné a trochu vlhké od potu.

Cemaliye sa zľakla a inštinktívne odskočila. V šoku ani nezačala kričať, iba si mladíka s olivovou pokožkou premerala veľkými čiernymi očami. Prečo sa díva, akoby videl nejaké zjavenie? Očami sa skontrolovala od sandálov až po prsia – nič, vyzerala úplne normálne.

Mikelis stál s natiahnutou rukou, oči doširoka otvorené. Cemaliye si vpravala, že vyzerá trochu prihlúplo, ale inak neškodne. Bol veľmi príťažlivý. Celkom ju zaujímalo, prečo na ňu takto hľadá.

„Ahoj, ja som Mikelis. Môžem ťa pozvať na frappé?“

V páse zeme pár desiatok metrov širokom a niekoľko desiatok kilometrov dlhom je zakonzervovaná minulosť. V zaprášených výkladoch bledne sortiment zo sedemdesiatych rokov. Červená Toyota Corolla, úplne novučičká v sedemdesiatom štvrtom, má na tachometri už desaťročia 32 míľ. V medzichase sú uväznené automobily, veľké televízory s anténou či rádiá.

Mŕtvou zónou, ako ju domáci nazývajú, opatrne kráčajú iba vojaci v modrých baretoch. Sú to skôr diplomati ako bojovníci, trénujú ich viac v umení zmierovania, ako v boji zblízka. Mladí Briti, ktorí sú vycvičení na vznietlivé púštne krajiny, sa tu učia nuansám. Bedlivo strážia vrecia s pieskom, ktoré označujú hranice gréckej a tureckej časti. Ak ich ráno nájdu o pár centimetrov posunuté, opäť ich vrátia na miesto. Rýchly zásah zachraňuje životy. V zime striehnu na zbieračov divokej špargle, ktorá prekvitá v nedotknutej zemi medzi dvoma zákopmi. Dávajú pozor na pašerákov a poľovníkov. Zabudnutá mína, ktorá by rozkúskovala akéhokoľvek Cyperčana, by

vyhodila do vzduchu i krehkú rovnováhu na rozdelenom ostrove. Okrem výbušnín sú pre vojakov Spojených národov najväčším nebezpečenstvom padajúce časti budov, ktoré bez ľudskej ruky chátrajú. Hrdza pomaly rozožiera vývesné štíty, reklamy a ploty.

Modré barety deň za dňom osamelo hliadkujú v zemi duchov.

Ani mačky, mýtické tuláčky, týmto časopriestorom neprechádzajú.

Pred domom s hnedou doškovou strechou stál mŕtvý strom. Z mora ho ovieval slaný vzduch a horúce cyperské slnko ho zafarbilo do čierne. Vyzeral ako z pekla, ale to v sedemdesiatom štvrtom pripomínal celý Cyprus.

Cemaliyínym rodičom dom pripomínal ich vlastný, ktorý opustili v Pafose na juhu. Utekali pred bojmi. Grécki Cyperčania túžili po samostatnosti už dávno, a keď im ju medzinárodné spoločenstvo odmietlo dať, vzali si ju sami. Následne sa na severe vyloďili tureckí vojaci s príkazom zastať sa svojich jazykových príbuzných. Grécki Cyperčania opúšťali svoje domy na severe iba v pyžamách a s pár rodinnými fotkami. Na krutosť tureckých vojakov sa medzi gréckymi Cyperčanmi nikdy nezabudne. Veľa z nich doteraz nezistilo, čo s ich rodinnými príslušníkmi urobili.

Cemaliyin otec bol turecký Cyperčan z Pafosu, mama Turkyňa z pevniny, ktorá sem pred rokmi prišla za prácou. Na juhu ostať nemohli.

Prvé roky si predstavovali, ako asi vyzerala rodina, čo tu bývala predtým. Žena mala krásne šaty, ktoré sa ale Cemaliyina mama hanbila nosiť. Až Cemo ich o neskôr našla schované v podkroví a rozhodla sa ich prevetrať. Mama jej o ich pôvode povedala len toľko, že ich našla vyhodene pri smetiaku v Kyrenii.

Desať rokov žili v dome ako duchovia. Každý deň čakali na návrat pôvodných majiteľov a boli pripravení okamžite odísť. Nič nemenili, ani neopravovali.

Po narodení Cemalyie si uvedomili, že ostrov sa rozdelil nenávratne. Nikto sa už do rodného domu nevráti.

Na jeseň, keď začala Cemo chodiť do školy, dom prvý raz premaľovali.

Na mŕtvom strome sa objavil zelený púčik.

Mikelis Cemaliye ukázal komiks Sandman asi po polroku chodenia. Bol to jeho najobľúbenejší predajný artikel v kníhkupectve blízko hraničného prechodu Ledras v rozdelenom hlavnom

meste, kde pracoval. Cemaliye sa príbeh o pánovi snov okamžite zapáčil. Aj ona sa cítila ako cestovateľka medzi svetmi. Každé ráno cestou do práce na ploche niekoľko sto metrov zmenila sim kartu aj abecedu. Vymenila ťahavý spev muezína za grécke popové piesne. Prekonala celé svetelné roky. Turecká časť rozdelenej Nicosie bola oproti gréckej ako desivý sen, kde je všetko podivne povedomé, ale zároveň úplne cudzie.

Mačkám v tureckej časti trčali rebrá, tváre mali zbrázdnené jazvami a v očiach lačný výraz divých šeliem. Ľudí sa báli. V gréckej Nicosii sa mačkám leskli kožušky, jasné oči im nekalil hlad ani choroby. Boli to malé domáce bohyne, ktoré kdekoľvek nakŕmili a kedykoľvek pohladili. Raz sa so svojim pozorovaním zdôverila Mikelisovi. „To je jasné, keď sa Turci nevedia postarať o ľudí, ťažko sa budú o mačky.“ Potom vstal, objal ju a do vlasov jej zašepkal prepáč.

Cemaliye pracovala v neziskovke, ktorej cieľom bolo naviazať dialóg medzi mladými z oboch komunít. Mikelis bol pre ňu malým zázrakom. Nadchla ho pre rôzne projekty a rád jej s nimi pomáhal. Pripadali si ako Rómeo a Júlia, ktorí svojou láskou spoja rozhnevané rodiny.

Cemaliye je vzrušená a nedočkavá. Konečne je to tu.

Mikelis sedí v aute vedľa nej a s rozšírenými zreničkami sleduje každý detail cesty. Odfrkne nad niekoľko desiatok metrov veľkou tureckou vlajkou, namaľovanou na kopci pri diaľnici z Nicosie. Provokácia. Cemaliye sa zahanbene pomrví na sedadle.

Dnes predstaví Mikelisa svojim rodičom. Ukáže mu svoj rodný dom a Kyréniu. Cestu lemujú vysoké hory, je jar a všetko kvitne. V diaľke sa ligoce azúrovo modré more.

Cemaliye sa chce vyhnúť tradičnej zápche na hlavnej ceste do Kyrénie, a tak to vezme po bočných cestách cez chudobnejšie predmestie. Hrá jazz na CD – grécke rádio po prechode hranice vystrieda znenie a turecké púšťať nechce.

Mikelis ohromene pozoruje rozostavané budovy a špinavé ulice.

Pozrie sa na ňu a Cemaliye nemôže ignorovať ten krátky záblesk zadost'učinenia, ktorý si ani on sám neuvedomil. „Vedel som, že nič nemáte!“

Vysvetlí mu, že na tureckej strane sa veľmi dlho budovy neopravovali, pretože dodnes nie sú vyriešené majetkové vzťahy. A Severocyprskú tureckú republiku okrem Turecka nikto ako samostatný štát neuznáva. Nemôžu teda žiadať o žiadne fondy a dotácie od Európskej únie, ako ich grécki bratia. V poslednom čase sa tu ale buduje vo veľkom, najmä obrovské hotely pre turistov.

Po chvíli ju Mikelis nežne pohladí a nechá dlaň na jej kolene.

Cemo uvidí známe obrysy stromu i doškovej strechy a srdce sa jej rozbúši. Rodičia vyjdú na prah, oblečený vo sviatočnom. Usmievajú sa. Mama drží otca za ruku. Až keď Cemo zaparkuje blízko dverí, všimne si, že mamine hánky sú od pevného stisku úplne biele.

„Cemo, toto je váš dom?“ Mikelis ju pustí a strnulo hľadá pred seba.

Cemaliye nechápavo prisvedčí.

„Odvez ma naspäť.“

„Čo sa deje, láska?“

„Chcem sa vrátiť.“

Cemaliye ho chytí za ruku, Mikelis sa vytrhne.

„Keď moji rodičia utekali pred tureckými vojakmi z Kyrénie, vzali si so sebou iba jednu malú tašku. Iba to, čo za pár minút stihli pozbierať. Bol v nej jeden kabát, zopár fotiek a mamine šperky. Tie fotky máme zarámované. Visia v kuchyni. Na tento dom sa dívam odmalička.“

Cemaliye sa mu vystrašene pozrie do očí. Tuší, že ju do svojho prenajatého bytu v Nicosii už nepustí.

Mikelis s tichou rozhodnosťou nastúpi do auta a prekríži si na prsiach ruky. Cemaliye vykročí k rodičom, objíma ich a zašepká: „Nepôjde to. Bývame v dome jeho rodičov.“

Strom sa začína triasť a na auto padajú sýtozelené listy. Cemaliye nastúpi, naštartuje a pomaly vezie svojho Rómea naspäť, odkiaľ prišiel.

Necháva za sebou lysejúci strom, ktorý ešte dlho nezarastie, a plačúcich rodičov, ktorí jej zanedlho vyrozprávajú skutočný pôvod šiat v podkroví.

Border Houses

Miroslava Kulkova. Slovakia

Mikelis stopped in the middle of the road. The cars were honking and the drivers were yelling *vlákas!* at him, but he heard none of that. His mother was walking down the street on the other side of the road, but she was thirty years younger.

He lifted one foot, then the other and he walked towards the apparition. He was growing more and more confused. Walking in front of him was the same dress that his mother was wearing in an old photograph. The buttons were in the same places, there was that sewn-up part that she had ripped when she was climbing over the neighbour's fence to pick a few unripe grapefruits. Only the belt was missing, but the belt loops that recalled the belt were still on the dress. Even the lady's hair was in the same style that his mother used to wear it when she was young. It was only when the smell of tar and the stench of rotting vegetables hit him on the nose that he realised that he wasn't dreaming and that he was actually near the marketplace in the old part of Nicosia.

He reached out with his hand. The dress was surprisingly rough and also a little moist with sweat.

Cemaliye was startled and instinctively jumped back. She was so shocked that she didn't even start screaming. She simply took a good look at the olive-skinned youth with her big dark eyes. Why is he looking at me as if he was seeing an apparition? She took a look at herself, all the way from her sandals

up to her breasts – nothing, she looked completely normal.

Mikelis was standing there with his hand stretched out and his eyes wide open. Cemaliye thought to herself that he was looking rather silly, but pretty harmless. He was very attractive. She was quite interested in finding out why he was staring at her like this.

“Hi, my name is Mikelis. Can I invite you for a frappé?”

The past is conserved in a strip of land that is several metres wide and several tens of kilometres long. Goods from the 1970's are growing pale in dusty shopping windows. A red Toyota Corolla, which was brand new in 1974, has shown 32 miles on the mile counter for decades now. There are cars, large TV sets with antennas or radios trapped in this temporal limbo.

Only soldiers wearing blue berets carefully walk through the Dead Zone, which is what the locals call this place. They are more diplomats than fighters, getting more training in peace-making than in close combat. Young Brits, who were trained to survive in explosive arid areas, learn about nuance here. They carefully guard bags of sand that mark the border between the Greek and Turkish part. If they find they have been moved by a couple of centimetres in the morning, they move them back to their original position. A quick inter-

vention can save lives. In winter, they are on the lookout for people who come to pick wild asparagus that grows in the untouched land between the trenches. They watch out for smugglers and poachers. A forgotten landmine that would blow any Cypriot to pieces would also blow up the fragile equilibrium on the divided island. Apart from explosives, the greatest threat to UN soldiers is falling parts of buildings, which have been falling into a state of disrepair without humans to take care of them. Rust is slowly eating away at signs, ads and fences.

Day after day, the lonely blue berets guard this land of ghosts.

Not even cats, the mythical wanderers, walk through this space-time.

There was a dead tree standing in front of the house with a thatched roof. Salty air was blowing at it from the sea and the scalding Cypriot sun turned it black. It looked like a tree from hell, but the whole of Cyprus resembled hell in 1974.

To Cemaliye's parents, the house resembled their own house they had abandoned in Paphos in the south. They ran away from the fighting. Greek Cypriots had been longing for independence for ages and when the international community refused to grant it to them, they took matters into their own hands. Then Turkish soldiers arrived in the north of the island with orders to protect their language compatriots. Greek Cypriots had to leave their homes in the north in their pyjamas and only with a few family photos they managed to grab. The cruelty of the Turkish soldiers will never be forgotten among the Greek Cy-

priots. Many of them have never learnt what had happened to their family members.

Cemaliye's father was a Turkish Cypriot from Paphos and her mother was from mainland Turkey and she had come to the island seeking work years ago. There was no way they could stay in the south.

For the first few years, they kept imagining what the family who had lived here before them may have looked like. The lady of the house had beautiful dresses but Cemaliye's mother was ashamed to wear them. It was Cemo who found them hidden in the attic later and decided to give them a go. The only thing her mother had told her about where the dress had come from was that she had found it at the waste dump in Kyrenia.

For ten years they lived in the house as if they were ghosts. Every day they expected the original owners to return and they were always ready to leave immediately. They made no changes, no repairs.

After Cemaliye was born they realised the island had been divided for good. Nobody was coming back to their house ever.

In the autumn, when Cemo first started going to school, they redecorated the walls in the house for the first time.

A little green bud appeared on the dead tree.

Mikelis showed Cemaliye the Sandman comic book about half a year after they started dating. It was his favourite item that was sold at the bookstore near the Ledras border crossing in the divided capital city where he

worked. Cemaliye fell for the story of Dream immediately. She also felt like a traveller between worlds. Every morning on her way to work on the span of several hundreds of metres, she changed her SIM card and switched the alphabet on her phone. She replaced the lengthy singing of the muezzin with Greek pop songs. She travelled light years. Compared to the Greek part, the Turkish part of the divided Nicosia was like a scary dream where everything seems familiar, but at the same time absolutely strange.

The cats in the Turkish part were so skinny you could see their ribs. Their faces were covered in scars and they had in their eyes the hungry look of wild beasts. They were even scared of people. The cats in Greek Nicosia had shiny coats and their bright eyes weren't dimmed by hunger or disease. They were little domestic goddesses who were getting fed and cuddled everywhere they went. She once shared this discovery with Mikelis. "It's simple. If the Turks cannot take care of their own people, they will hardly be able to take care of cats." Then he got up, hugged her and whispered "Sorry" into her hair.

Cemaliye worked for a non-profit organisation that was trying to start a dialogue between young people in both communities. Mikelis was a small miracle for her. She got him excited about various projects and he liked to help her with them. They felt like Romeo and Juliet whose love would bring together two quarrelling houses.

Cemaliye is giddy and excited. The moment has finally arrived.

Mikelis is sitting in the car next to her and, with his eyes wide open, he is watching every detail of the road. He scoffs at a huge Turkish flag that somebody had painted on the hill next to the highway from Nicosia. Provocation. Cemaliye squirms in her seat with shame.

Today, she will introduce Mikelis to the parents. She will show him her birth-house and Kyrenia. The road is surrounded by high mountains, it's spring and everything is in full bloom. In the distance, you can see the sky-blue sea.

Cemaliye wants to avoid the traditional traffic jams on the main road to Kyrenia, so she is taking the back roads through the poor neighbourhoods. Jazz music is playing from a CD – the Greek radio was replaced with static after they crossed the border and she doesn't want to turn on a Turkish radio.

Mikelis is watching the buildings under construction and the dirty streets with amazement.

He looks at her and Cemaliye cannot ignore the short moment of satisfaction he himself failed to realise. "I knew you guys had nothing at all!"

She explains to him that the buildings on the Turkish side haven't been repaired for a long time because the ownership issues haven't been settled yet. And the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus isn't recognised as an independent state by anybody but Turkey. This means they cannot apply for funds and subsidies from the European Union, as opposed to their Greek brothers. However, recently there has been a lot of construction activity going on, mainly huge hotels for tourists.

After a while, Mikelis gives her a tender caress and leaves the palm of his hand on her knee.

Cemo sees the familiar outline of the tree and the thatched roof and her heart starts pounding. Her parents walk out onto the doorstep, dressed in their Sunday clothes. They are smiling. Mother and father are holding hands. It's only when Cemo parks close enough to the door that she notices that mum's knuckles are all white from how hard she is clutching father's hand.

"Cema, is this your house?" Mikelis lets go of her and keeps looking motionlessly.

Cemaliye agrees, not understanding what he means.

"Take me back home."

"What's going on, my love?"

"I want to go back home."

Cemaliye grabs his hand, but Mikelis breaks free.

"When my parents were running away from Turkish soldiers from Kyrenia, they only managed to take with them a small bag. Only the things they managed to put into it in a few minutes. One coat, a couple of photos and my mum's jewellery. My parents had those photos framed. They are hung in the kitchen. I've been looking at this house since I was a little boy."

Cemaliye looks him in the eyes, frightened. She feels he won't be letting her back into his rented apartment in Nicosia.

With silent resolve, Mikelis gets into the car and folds his arms over his chest. Cemaliye walks towards her parents, hugs them and whispers: "It won't work. We are living in his parents' house."

The tree starts trembling and dark green leaves start falling on the car. Cemaliye gets into the car, starts the engine and slowly drives her Romeo back to where he came from.

She leaves behind a bare tree that will not be covered in leaves for a long time to come and her crying parents, who will shortly be telling her about the true origin of the dress in the attic.

Confío en ti

Patricia Jimeno Fernández. España

Hace frío, a pesar de que el sol brilla en el cielo; siento mi cuerpo pesado, pero son mis ropas las que me fuerzan a hundirme; yo, tengo miedo.

Y ahora, me arrepiento.

Solo había seis espacios en el bote, y ellos me regalaron uno; me miraron a los ojos, y me dijeron que confiaban en mí, me dieron lo último que les quedaba, la esperanza de seguir vivos, al menos, hasta el día que yo muriera. Parece mentira que esto tan solo haya pasado unas horas atrás.

¿Qué habrá sido de ellos?

Era aún de noche cuando la barcaza comenzaba a hundirse, yo estaba dormida, el movimiento de las olas me relajaba, y sobre el regazo de mi madre descansaba confiando que este viaje sería el inicio de una vida mejor para ambas. Mi padre había desaparecido un día, llevaba mucho tiempo diciéndonos que viajaría hasta España, y que una vez llegase nos ayudaría a nosotras, primero con dinero, y luego sacándonos de Libia. No sé si llegó a España, no sé qué le hizo pensar que estaríamos mejor sin él, pero con dinero; mi papá nunca más regresó, y ahora, mi mamá, nunca más regresaría.

Estoy cansada, pero aún siento sus ojos mirándome, mientras me levantaban en volandas, y rápidamente me sacaban de la barcaza. Creo que nunca seré capaz de transmitir lo que en ese momento sentí; no espero que el que hoy me escucha lo entienda, solo necesito contarle, y compartir este peso que me honrará de por vida.

Cuando la incertidumbre acecha, el ser humano solo puede reaccionar de dos formas, con miedo, o con amor.

– Malak, hija, ¿y tú? ¿Cuántos años tienes? – Una voz me gritó desde la otra punta de la noche.

– Tengo catorce, los cumplí hace unos meses. – Nos estábamos hundiendo, y estas personas solo hablaban de sueños y anhelos. Teníamos poco tiempo para salir de allí, el capitán de la barca nos dijo que había un bote salvavidas, y que solo salvaría a cinco personas junto a él.

– ¿Y por qué quieres vivir, Malak? – Me gritó otra voz. Mi madre llevaba un rato congelada, sin decir nada, llorando en silencio, mojándome la cara ya húmeda por las salpicaduras de las olas. Sus lágrimas no tardaron en mezclarse con las mías, cuando contesté:

– No lo sé, solo sé que no quiero morir aquí. – Ahora me pregunto, por qué no dije lo que sentía, por qué no salvé a mi madre conmigo, yo solo quería que nuestro sueño se hiciese realidad, y poder empezar juntas nuestra nueva vida.

Un silencio sepulcral catacumbó los últimos momentos de esperanza, cuando las manos empezaron a levantarse, en votación de los elegidos para ocupar esos cinco puestos en el bote salvavidas. Eran cuatro los que habían convencido al resto de que, a pesar de que sus vidas eran tan valiosas como las de ellos, ese día el cielo estaba de su parte. La barcaza se hundía lentamente cada vez más, como el frío del agua que se introducía en nuestros tobillos.

– Malak no merece morir aquí. Tiene que descubrir aún por qué ha de vivir, y nadie merece morir sin saberlo. – Dijo en voz grave y potente el hombre que se sentaba a nuestro lado. No paraba de mirarnos a mi madre y a mí, y yo no supe qué decir. – Soy médico, y mi vida es valiosa porque seré capaz de salvar muchas otras, pero qué clase de médico sería, si no soy capaz de entregar mi vida, mi cuerpo y mi alma, por alguien que la necesita más que yo mismo. Cógela y llévatela barquero, y asegúrate de que llega a buen puerto, porque en su nombre está escrito, ella es el ángel que llevará nuestras almas hasta la gloria del cielo.

– Malak, sé feliz y fuerte, recuerda de dónde vienes, y quiénes dieron la vida por ti. – Una persona que no atiné a ver, me susurró mientras cruzaba la barcaza.

– Chica, que tu vida honre la vida de la hija que perdí por las fiebres en Libia. – Gritó una mujer mientras llevaba mi mano a su frente, y con un alarido desgarrador comenzó a llorar.

– Te quiero. – Y con un beso, mi madre soltó mi mano, para que me sacaran de una vez de aquel ataúd en el que se había convertido nuestro pasaje de ensueño.

Recuerdo esta sensación, tengo la boca muy salada, como si aún siguiera en el regazo de mi madre, mientras ella lloraba y sus lágrimas llegaban a mis labios.

Nadie piensa que ese será el día en el que tenga que morir, nadie imagina que haya que hacer una entrevista con la parca, para explicarle si es tu vida o la de tu vecino la que tiene que tomar. No puedo olvidar cómo subimos al bote, habíamos ganado esa partida, pero a cambio de cargar el mayor peso que imaginamos sobre nuestros hombros.

Estoy cansada, mis piernas cada vez se mueven menos.

El barquero nos había engañado, y nos obligó a saltar en mitad del mar, cerca de la costa que aún no divisábamos, y a punta de pistola, nos dijo que él ya había cumplido, y que fuera Dios el que ahora se apiadase de nuestras almas.

Tengo miedo. ¿Ahora qué? Si muero, todos habremos muerto, nunca podré ser médico, y salvar las vidas de otras personas, nunca podré tratar de encontrar la felicidad y honrar la memoria de aquella hija. Yo... nunca más abriré los ojos, y entonces, mi madre tampoco. ¡No!

—¡Ayuda! ¡Por favor! Por favor... sacadme de aquí. — Mi boca se llena de nuevo de agua, toso, y me callo.

No sé si es el sonido de las olas invadiendo mis oídos, o el eco que aún sigue retumbando dentro de mí. Pero mi madre está gritando “Te quiero”, mientras me alejo, y escucho poco a poco su voz apagándose. Mamá, gracias... Gracias por todo, porque has sido tú la que me ha enseñado a ser fuerte, a estar orgullosa de estar viva, y a luchar por la vida que todos nos merecemos. Todas esas personas, murieron aquel día en el Mediterráneo, en una barcaza que no había sido diseñada para cruzar en mar abierto a cincuenta pasajeros. Cada uno de ellos había pagado religiosamente su billete, para un viaje de no retorno, hasta la muerte.

—El Mediterráneo se ha convertido en el cementerio del mundo. La incertidumbre de si mañana también podremos comer, de si mis hijos podrán seguir estudiando, o si mi mujer no morirá dando a luz, empuja a una orilla del Mediterráneo a cruzar todo el mar con la esperanza de que sus miedos desaparezcan, y encontrar el sueño europeo, que los mismos europeos queríamos años atrás encontrar en Estados Unidos. Yo he sido superviviente de una barcaza que naufragó 20 años atrás, y he sido superviviente de un traficante de vidas humanas, que me obligó a saltar de un bote en plena mar. No pido que entendáis mi sufrimiento, solo pido que me ayudéis a cumplir todos los deseos que aquel día mis compañeros de viaje depositaron en mí, solo quiero que me brindéis vuestro apoyo, y busquemos entre todos una solución al éxodo que presencia cada pocas semanas el Mediterráneo. No necesito vivir muchos años, porque es humanamente imposible cumplir todos los que aquel día esas personas de sus vidas me entregaron. Pero, por favor, hagamos algo. Porque aunque me llamo Malak, que significa ángel en árabe, es aquel pescador el ángel que me salvó la vida, y, por desgracia, no hay tantos ángeles para vidas que salvar.

Hola, me llamo Patricia, soy de Granada y siempre he tenido una vida feliz. Tuve la suerte de nacer en España, el lugar que muchas personas desean alcanzar. Os preguntaréis por qué he decido escribir esta historia, y tengo una buena explicación que dar.

Decidí realizar un voluntariado en el cuerpo solidario Europeo en Turquía, en Ankara, y allí hicimos una actividad que me marcaría para siempre.

Todos los voluntarios nos sentamos en círculo en una habitación, y cerramos los ojos, pensamos en nuestros familiares, en las personas que más queríamos, y a las que más nos dolería no volver a ver. Escribimos cómo nos despediríamos de ellas en una carta, y solo nos dieron tres minutos para ello. Recreábamos que nos encontrábamos en una barcaza a punto de hundirse, y era el momento de explicar por qué los demás deberían salvar nuestras vidas. Yo no supe qué decir en ese momento, solo que deseaba vivir, y deseaba que todos lo hicieran, y que nunca habría razón suficiente para condenar a otra persona en mi lugar. Votamos, pero lo hicimos entregando un papel a cada una de las personas que pensábamos que merecían vivir, y mientras las mirábamos a los ojos, les decíamos: “Confío en ti”. Este acto, tenía un doble filo, porque al mismo tiempo, mientras mirabas a los ojos de los que condenabas, debías decir: “Lo siento, no confío en ti”.

Todo el mundo había explicado por qué su momento aún no había llegado, pero aún así, de algún modo, estábamos ignorándolos, y juzgando qué vida era más valiosa. No esperaba ser salvada, pero cuando abrí la mano para contar los votos que había recibido, una plaza del bote salvavidas era mía. Me subí al bote, y mientras mis compañeros me miraban con tristeza y confianza, ese día supe que mi vida había cambiado; y que siempre, y cuando menos te lo esperas, tienes que estar lista para luchar por ti y por todas las personas que alguna vez en ti han depositado sus esperanzas, que te han confiado sus secretos.

No fui capaz de mirarlos a los ojos sin que los míos se llenasen de lágrimas, y con toda la gratitud que pude mostrar en ese momento de fragilidad, les agradecí uno a uno su voto. Aún a día de hoy, me imagino que esta historia que aquí escribo hubiese sido realidad, y entonces recuerdo que lo es, y que son miles de personas las que a diario dejan su casa para, con esperanza, encontrar un lugar mejor, si al menos no para ellos, para sus hijos o compañeros.

Las casualidades solo existen para que un bien mayor se haga realidad, y este es mi momento para contaros mi historia.

Gracias

I Trust You

Patricia Jimeno Fernández. Spain

It's cold, even though the sun is shining in the sky; my body feels heavy but it's my clothes that make me sink; I'm afraid.

And now I regret it.

There were only six places in the boat, and they gave me one. They looked me in the eye and told me that they trusted me; they gave me the last thing they had left, the hope of staying alive, at least until the day I died. It seems incredible that this only happened a few hours ago.

What happened to them?

It was still night-time when the barge began to sink. I was asleep, the movement of the waves lulled me, and I rested on my mother's lap, trusting that this journey would be the beginning of a better life for both of us. My father had disappeared one day, he had been telling us for a long time that he would travel to Spain, and that once he got there he would help us, first with money and then by getting us out of Libya. I don't know if he got to Spain, I don't know what made him think that we'd be better off without him but with money. My dad never came back, and now my mum would never return.

I'm tired, but I still feel their eyes staring at me, as they lifted me up, and quickly pulled me off the barge. I don't believe I will ever be able to explain what I felt at that moment, I don't expect anyone listening to me today to understand, I just need to tell the story,

and share this burden that will honour me for life.

When uncertainty lurks, human beings can only react in two ways, with fear or with love.

"Malak, daughter, what about you? How old are you?" A voice shouts at me from the other end of the night.

"I'm 14, my birthday was a couple of months ago." We were sinking, and these people were just talking about dreams and longings. We had little time to get out of there, the captain of the boat told us that there was a lifeboat, and that it would only save five people along with him.

"So why do you want to live, Malak?" another voice shouted to me. My mother had been frozen for a while, saying nothing, silently crying, wetting my face already damp from the splashes of the waves. Her tears were soon mixed with mine, when I answered:

"I don't know, I just know I don't want to die here." Now I wonder why I didn't say what I felt, why I didn't save my mother with me, I just wanted our dream to come true, and to be able to start our new life together.

A deathly silence buried the last moments of hope, when the hands began to rise, voting for those chosen to occupy the five places in the lifeboat. There were four of them who had convinced the rest that even though their lives were as valuable as theirs, on that day

heaven was on their side. The barge slowly sank more and more, like the cold of the water that was creeping up our ankles.

“Malak doesn’t deserve to die here. She still has to discover why she has to live, and no one deserves to die without knowing that,” said the man sitting next to us in a serious and powerful voice. He kept looking at me and my mother and I didn’t know what to say. “I’m a doctor, and my life is valuable because I’ll be able to save many others, but what kind of doctor would I be if I couldn’t give my life, my body and my soul for someone who needs it more. Take her, boatman, and be sure she makes it, because in her name it is written, she is the angel who will take our souls to the glory of heaven.”

“Malak, be happy and strong, remember where you come from, and those who gave their lives for you,” whispered a person I couldn’t see as I crossed the barge.

“Girl, may your life honour the life of the daughter I lost to the fevers in Libya,” a woman yelled as she put my hand on her forehead, and with a heartbreaking scream began to cry.

“I love you.” And with a kiss, my mother released my hand, so that they would take me out of the coffin our dream passage had become.

I remember this feeling, a very salty taste in my mouth, as if I was still in my mother’s lap, while she cried and her tears reached my lips.

Nobody thinks that this will be the day they have to die; nobody imagines that they have to have an interview with the grim reaper; to explain to him if it is your or your neighbour’s life he has to take. I can’t forget how we got into the boat; we had won that game

but in exchange for carrying the heaviest burden imaginable on our shoulders.

I’m tired, my legs move less and less.

The boatman had deceived us, and forced us to jump in the middle of the sea, near the coast that we still couldn’t see; and, at gunpoint, he told us that he had already done his part, and that it was now God who must have mercy on our souls.

I’m afraid. Now what? If I die, we will all have died, I can never be a doctor, and save other people’s lives, I can never try to find happiness and honour the memory of that daughter. I... will never open my eyes again, so neither will my mother. No

“Help! Please! Please... get me out of here.” My mouth fills with water again, I cough, and I fall silent.

I don’t know if it is the sound of the waves invading my ears, or the echo that is still rumbling inside me. But my mother is screaming “I love you” as I move away, and I hear her voice fading little by little. Mum, thank you... Thank you for everything, because you have been the one who has taught me to be strong, to be proud to be alive, and to fight for the life that we all deserve. All those people died that day in the Mediterranean, in a barge that had not been designed to take fifty passengers on the open sea. Each of them had dutifully paid their ticket, for a journey of no return, until death.

The Mediterranean has become the graveyard of the world. The uncertainty of wheth-

er tomorrow we will also be able to eat, whether my children will be able to continue studying, or whether my wife will die giving birth, pushes one shore of the Mediterranean to cross the entire sea in the hope that their fears will vanish, and find the European dream, that those same Europeans wanted to find in America years ago. I was a survivor of a barge that sank 20 years ago, and I have been a survivor of a human trafficker, who forced me to jump out of a boat into the open sea. I don't ask that you understand my suffering; I only ask that you help me to fulfil all the wishes that my travel companions placed in me that day. I only want you to give me your support, and for all of us to seek a solution to the exodus that the Mediterranean witnesses every few weeks. I don't need to live for many years, because it is humanly impossible to fulfil all the years given to me by those people that day. But please, let's do something. Because although my name is Malak, which means angel in Arabic, it is that fisherman who saved my life who is the angel and, unfortunately, there are not enough angels for all the lives that need to be saved.

Hello, my name is Patricia, I'm from Granada and I have always had a happy life. I was lucky to be born in Spain, the place that many people want to reach. You may wonder why I decided to write this story, and I have a good explanation.

I decided to volunteer for the European Solidarity Corps in Turkey, in Ankara, where we did an activity that would mark me forever.

All the volunteers sat in a circle in a room, and we closed our eyes. We thought of our

relatives, of the people we loved the most, and those who it would hurt the most not to see again. We wrote how we would say goodbye to them in a letter, and they only gave us three minutes for it. We recreated a scenario where we were on a barge about to sink, and had to explain why others should save our lives. I didn't know what to say at the time, only that I wanted to live, and I wanted everyone else to live, and that there would never be enough reason to condemn someone else in my place. We voted, but we did so by giving a piece of paper to each of the people we thought deserved to live, as we looked them in the eye, and said: "I trust you." This was a double-edged act because, at the same time, while looking into the eyes of those you condemned, you had to say: "I'm sorry, I don't trust you."

Everyone had explained why their time had not yet come, but still, somehow, we ignored them, and judged which life was more valuable. I didn't expect to be saved, but when I opened my hand to count the votes I had received, a place in the lifeboat was mine. I got on the boat, and while my companions looked at me with sadness and trust, that day I knew that my life had changed; and that always, and when you least expect it, you have to be ready to fight for yourself and for all the people who have ever placed their hopes in you, who have entrusted their secrets to you.

I was unable to look them in the eye without tears filling mine; and, with all the gratitude that I could muster in that moment of fragility, I thanked them one by one for their vote. Even today, I imagine that this story I'm writing here would not have been a reality, and then I remember that it is, and that thousands of people leave their home

every day in the hope of finding a better place, if not for them, at least for their children or companions.

Coincidences only exist to make a greater good come true, and this is my time to tell you my story.

Thank you

“Gracias” Arkadaşım

Alara Tuğçe Egesoy. Türkiye

Elli beşinci yaş günümün haftasında dostlarımla birlikte planladığımız bir kahvaltıya dahil olmuştum. Sonunda herkesin koşuşturması arasında bir araya gelebileceğimiz bir hafta sonunda karar kılabilmiştik. Öyle ya, yılın geri kalanında arayıp soran sayılı olsa da yaş günleri için herkes bir vaktini bulur, yanınızda olurdu. Toplananlar on kişiyi geçmezdi. Gençken sık sık birileri eklenip eksilirken zamanla pek değişmeyen, sabit bir gruba sahip olmuştuk. Son zamanlarda bu nadir gerçekleşen buluşmalarda konuşulanlar ülkenin gündeminden ve çeşitli konulardaki şikayetlerimizden ileri gitmez olmuştu. Sofra hazırlandığı sırada dostlarımla birkaç hararetli bir tartışmaya girmek üzere görünüyorlardı. Aynı fikirde olduğumuz zamanlarda bile herkes tartışmanın heyecanı ile seslerini yükseltiyordu. Bu durum yorucu olduğu kadar gülünçtü de.

Artık herkes tabaklarını türlü türlü yiyeceklerle doldurmaya başlamıştı. İnsanın bizdeki bu kahvaltı sofralarını görünce hemen iştahı açılırdı. Bense son zamanlarda pek yeme içmeye meraklı değildim eskisi gibi. Bir parça peynir, birkaç zeytin, biraz da reçel. Küçüklüğümde beri çok severdim vişne reçeliyle peyniri birlikte yemeyi. Farklı bir konu daha açıldığı sırada tabağımdaki beyaz peynirden bir lokma almakla meşguldüm, ağzıma attığım anda ise hiçbir şey duyamaz oldum. Bazı tatlar ve kokular beni oldum olası başka yerlere taşımıştır, bazen bir anının, bazen bir hissin, kimi zamansa hayatımın bir döneminin içine çekivermiştir beni. İşte şimdi, hepsini bir arada tecrübe ettiğim bambaşka bir yerdeyim.

“Feta peyniri” dedi ev sahibi Nuran, “Bir arkadaşımız geçen gün gittiği Yunanistan’daki köyünden bize de getirmiş.”

Şimdi içindeki mektupla birlikte denize atılmış mantar kapaklı bir cam şişe gibi süzölmüş gitmişim oralara yeniden. Bundan tam otuz sene önceydi. Büyük şehirde büyümüş, Türkiye’nin pek çok şehrini gezmişim. Fakat, adını daha önce hiç duymadığım küçük bir Yunan kasabası olan Ksilocastro’daki bir projeye gönüllü olarak katılacağım zaman hem heyecanlanmış hem de yabancı bir ortamda bulunacak olmanın endişesine kapılmışım. Kaldı ki, daha önce Yunanistan’ın herhangi bir yerine de seyahat etmemişim. Bir zamanlar birlikte yaşadığımız bu insanlarla çokça şey paylaştığımızı biliyor, bir yandan da hiç tanıımıyordum. Yabancı dilime güveniyor ama yabancı olmaktan çekiniyordum.

Ağustos ayının başıydı, yılın en sıcak, güneşin en yakıcı olduğu zamanlardı. Atina havaalanından birkaç aktarma yapacaktım. İlk izlenimim beni şaşırtmıştı. Bizim sandığımız gibi sarışın değillerdi, hatta bize oldukça benziyorlardı. Sonunda hayatımın beni derinden etkileyen birkaç ayını geçireceğim bu kasabaya vardığımda hava çoktan kararmıştı.

Ben bunları düşünürken dostlarımın dalgınlığımdan dem vurduğunu duydum. Oysa şu an burada olmak ne kadar da gayritabii gelmeye başlamıştı. Kendimi toparlayıp konuşmalarına katıldım. Fakat içimde çekip gitme arzusu uyanmıştı bir kere. Üstelik bu sofradan değil, doğup büyüdüğüm bu koca şehirden. Buluşmanın sonuna gelene kadar zor bekledim. Herkesle teker teker sarılıp vedalaştım, iyi dileklerini kabul ettim.

Eve döndüğümde ne yapacağımı biliyordum. Bir seyahate çıkma düşüncesi içimdeki büyük coşkuyla birlikte zihnimi ele geçirmişti. Kendimi o kısacık zamanda en çok evimde hissettiğim yer orasıyken nasıl da bunca zaman tekrar gitmediğime hayret ettim. Pasaportumu raftan alırken anın heyecanı ile üstünde eşek resmi olan bir defteri yere düşürdüm. Bunu Korint'teki küçük bir kitapçıdan almıştım. Açıp bir sayfasını okuduğumda gülmekten kendimi alamadım. “Burada insanların neden İspanyolca konuştuğunu anlamadım. Sabahları girdiğim fırında, küçük butiklerde, süper markette, kısacası girdiğim her yerde insanlar beni ‘*gracias*’ diyerek selamlıyorlar. Üstelik bu kelime teşekkür anlamına gelmiyor mu? Dükkanımıza geldiğin için teşekkür ederiz mi demek istiyorlar? Yine de durumu kabul edip girdiğim her yerde insanlara ‘*gracias*’ demeye başladım.” Oysa sonradan benim “*gracias*” diye anladığım sözün doğrusunun “*ya sas*”, yani Yunancada “merhaba” ve “hoşçakalın” demek olduğunu öğrenmiştim. Artık çat pat Yunancamla “*pita*” mı, kahveni sipariş edebilir olmuştum.

Orada bulunduğum sürede bir kaç yer daha gezmiştim. Lefkada'nın o meşhur bembeyaz taşlı, denizin renginin bir başka olduğu sahiline götürdü hatıralar beni. Ege sahilleri güzeldir, ama burası gördüklerimden çok başkaydı. Orada tanıştığım ve kısa zamanda dost olduğum insanlarla akşama kadar yüzdükten sonra yakınlarda bir tavernaya oturmuştuk. O sırada çekilmiş bir fotoğrafımda güneşten kızarmış yüzümle uzun zamandır hissetmediğim kadar mutlu görünüyordum. Yemeklere henüz başlanmamıştı. Daha sonradan birkaç defa yapmaya çalışıp aynı lezzeti bulamadığım “*buyurdi*”yi ilk kez orada tadıp kendimden geçmişim. Yaşadığım yerde bulamadığım bu tatlara buradaki insanların sıcacık ruhları tesir etmişti sanki.

Tabii pek çok ortak yanımda da vardı. Yanında bir lokumla içmeyi çok sevdiğim Türk kahvesini orada Yunan kahvesi diye sipariş eder olmuştum. Zaman zaman ortak tatlarla ilgili ufak tefek çekişmeler yaşansa da sonunda hepimizin aynı toplumdaki, aynı coğrafyadan olduğunu kabul edip tatlıya bağlıyorduk.

Artık düşünmeyi bırakıp plan yapmalıydım. Bir acentayı arayıp biletimi alacaktım. Ama önce orada çok sevdiğim bir arkadaşım olan Eleni'yi arayıp haber vermeliydim. Telefon defalarca çaldı ama yanıt alamadım. Yaşadığı yeri iyi bildiğim için gidince bulacağımı düşündüm ve hala aynı yerde yaşıyor olmasını umdum. Bir günden fazla bekleyebileceğimi düşünmüyordum. Ertesi güne biletimi aldım.

Atina havaalanına iniş yaptığımızda içimde müthiş bir heyecan vardı. Yıllarca uzak kaldığım evime dönmüş gibiydim. Burada sayılı insan tanıdığım halde hiç yabancı hissetmiyordum. İlk kez geldiğim zamanki hislerimle şimdiki biribirinden çok farklıydı. Artık tanıdık, bildik ve hatta özlenmiş bi yerdi burası.

Pasaport memuru “*ya sas*” dediğinde istemsizce gülümsedim. Yunanca devam ettiğini anlayınca “*den milao Ellinika*” diye cevapladım. Gülümseyerek İngilizce olarak “ama şimdi konuştunuz” dedi ve pasaportumu hızlıca kontrol edip Türk olduğumu gördükten sonra bu sefer o Türkçe olarak “güle güle” diyerek geçmeme izin verdi. Şimdiden bu insanları neden bu kadar çok sevdiğimi ve onlara bu kadar yakın hissettiğimi yeniden anımsamıştım.

Birkaç gün sonra elli beşinci yaşımı bitirecek olmama tezat bir şekilde kendimi çocuklar gibi hissediyordum. Oradan oraya koşturma isteğime mani olamıyordum. Sadece bir yaşma daha burada basmak değil, burada yaşamak istiyordum.

Aradan uzun zaman geçmesine rağmen yolumu kolayca bulabildim. Hava kararmadan Ksilo-kastro’ya varmıştım. Eleni’nin evi Sykia’daydı ama orada inmek yerine yürümeyi tercih ettim. Her şeyden önce biraz buranın tadını çıkarmak, ormanlık alanda yürümek, tuzlu havasını solumak istiyordum. Gönüllülük yaparken tüm bu ormanlardaki çalı çırpıları temizlemiş, sahil şeridindeki çöpleri toplamıştık. Etrafın temizliğine bakılırsa hala bunun için gelen gönüllüler olmalıydı. Zamanında buradaki ağaçlardan keçi boynuzu toplayıp yemeye kalkınca şaşkın gözlerle karşılaşmıştım. Sabahları erken uyanıp temiz havada çıktığım yürüyüşler de dün gibi gözümün önündeydi.

Bir süre yürüdükten sonra Eleni’nin evine vardım. Beni tanıyıp tanıyamayacağını bile bilmiyordum, kim bilir görünce nasıl şaşıracaktı. Kapıyı çaldıktan sonra bir süre bekledim ve pencereden birinin seslendiğini duydum. Genç bir kız kim olduğumu soruyordu. Eleni’yi aradığımı söylerken taşınmış olma ihtimalinden korktum. Sonradan adının Alkisti olduğunu öğrendiğim bu kız beni içeri davet etti. Annesini geçen sene kaybettiklerini, fakat ölmeden önce bir kutu bırakıp eğer bir gün gelirsem bana vermesini tembihlediğini anlattı. Ben bu durum karşısında ne kadar şaşkınsam, o da benim sonunda gelmiş olmamdan dolayı bir o kadar şaşkındı. Eleni kızına benden çok bahsetmişti ama ben bir kızı olduğundan bile bihaberdim.

Alkisti bana kutuyu getirdi. Açtığımda gözyaşlarıma engel olamadım. İçinden çıkan yıllanmış “*Mavrodafni*” otuz sene önce birlikte gittiğimiz Patras’taki şarap mahzeninden alınmıştı. Eleni bu oldukça tatlı şarabı ne çok sevdiğimi bilirdi. Fakat beni asıl ağlatan içinden çıkan tek kelimecik nottu: “*Gracias* arkadaşım”. Demek ki bu hayata veda ederken bile beni unutmamış, üstüne bir de kıvrak zekasıyla benimle bir kez daha dalga geçmek istemişti.

“Hadi,” dedi Alkisti, “madem ki doğum gününüzmüş, bunu kutlamalıyız. Limana gidelim, orada çok beğeneceğinizi düşündüğüm bir buluşma var.” Birlikte limana doğru yürüdük, “Akdeniz Buluşmaları” adını verdikleri bu etkinlikte farklı ülkelerden onlarca insan bir araya gelmişlerdi. Herkes ilgisini çeken konuya göre bir oraya bir buraya dahil oluyordu. Pastamın üzerindeki mumları üfledim, herkes kendi dilinde doğum günümü kutladıktan sonra uzunca sohbetler ettik.

Radyodan “*Avgoustos*” şarkısı yükselirken yine kendimi geçmişe dönmüş buldum. Tıpkı buraya ilk kez geldiğim o ağustos ayında duyduğum hisleri yaşıyordum. Geçmiş beni hiç tanımadığım

bunca insanla bir araya getirmişti ve ben geçmişe dalıp giderken şimdi çevremdeki bu gençler o hayali yaşamakla meşguldüler. Bu zamanların ne kadar değerli olduğunu bilmelerini diledim.

Bir sonraki şarkı Orfeas Peridis'in çok sevdiğim "*Fevgo*" şarkısıydı. Artık gitme vaktinin geldiğini söylüyordu sanki bu şarkı. "*Fevgo*" dedim ben de, gidiyorum demekti bu. "*Ya sas!*". Bu kelimeyi herkes öğrenmiş, hep bir ağızdan onlar da bana hoşçakal demişlerdi. Sadece aradan tek bir kişi, Alkestis, "*gracias*" diye bağırıyordu. Fakat bu sefer benle dalga geçmek için değil, geldiğim için teşekkür etmek istediği için yapmıştı bunu. İçimden tekrar ettim, burada geçirdiğim bütün zamanlar ve tanıdığım insanlar için: "*Gracias arkadaşlarım!*"

“Gracias”, My Friend

Alara Tugce Egesoy. Turkey

In the week of my fifty-fifth birthday, I attended a breakfast planned with my friends. Finally, we were able to decide on a weekend where we could come together amid the hustle and bustle. Well, even though few people call in the rest of the year, everyone would find time for birthdays and to be with you. The gatherings did not exceed ten people. When we were young, we had a stable group that didn't change much over time, while people were added and dropped frequently. Recently, the conversations in these rare meetings had become no more than the agenda of the country and our complaints about various issues. As the table was being set, several of my friends seemed about to have a heated argument. Even when we agreed, everyone was raising their voices in the excitement of the discussion. This was as ridiculous as it was tiring.

Everyone started to fill their plates with all kinds of food. When one sees these breakfast tables in our house, one's appetite would be whetted immediately. I haven't been keen on eating and drinking lately, like I used to. A piece of cheese, some olives, some jam. Ever since I was a child, I have loved eating sour cherry jam and cheese together. When another topic was brought up, I was busy taking a bite of feta cheese on my plate, and when I put it in my mouth, I couldn't hear anything. Some tastes and smells have carried me to other places, sometimes they have taken me into a memory, sometimes a feeling, sometimes a period of my life. Now I was in a completely different place where I experienced them all together.

“Feta cheese,” said the host, Nuran, “a friend of ours brought it to us from his village in Greece, where he went the other day.”

Now, with the letter inside, I went there again, drained like a cork-cap glass bottle thrown into the sea. That was exactly thirty years ago. I grew up in a big city and had visited many cities in Turkey. However, when I was going to volunteer for a project in Xylokastro, a small Greek town I had never heard of, I was both excited and worried about being in an unfamiliar environment. Besides, I had never travelled to any part of Greece before. I knew that we shared a lot with these people we once lived with, but I also didn't know them at all. I was confident in my foreign language but I was afraid of being a foreigner.

It was the beginning of August, when the sun was the hottest in the hottest year. I was going to take some transfers from Athens airport. My first impression surprised me. They weren't as blonde as we thought but even looked quite like us. It was already dark when I finally arrived in this town, where I was going to spend the few months of my life that had a profound effect on me.

While I was thinking about this, I heard my friends talking about my distraction. However, it was starting to feel so unnatural to be here right now. I gathered myself and joined in their conversation. But once I had a desire to walk away, not from this table but from this huge city where I was born and grew up. I barely waited until the end of the meeting. I

hugged and said goodbye to everyone one by one and accepted their good wishes.

I knew what to do when I got home. The thought of going on a trip had taken over my mind, along with my overwhelming enthusiasm. It was the place where I felt most at home in that short time and I was amazed at how long it was before I went again. While taking my passport from the shelf, I dropped a notebook with a picture of a donkey on the floor in the excitement of the moment. I bought this in a small bookstore in Corinth. I couldn't help laughing when I opened it and read a page. "I don't understand why people speak Spanish here. In the bakery I went to this morning, in small boutiques, in the supermarket, in short, everywhere I go, people greet me by saying "gracias". Besides, doesn't that word mean thank you? Do they want to say thank you for coming to our shop? Still, I accepted the situation and started saying "gracias" to people wherever I went. However, I later learned that the correct word for what I understood as "gracias" was "yia sou", meaning "hello" and "goodbye" in Greek. Now I could order my "pita", my coffee, with a smattering of Greek.

I visited a few other places while I was there. Memories took me to the famous white stone beach of Lefkada, where the colour of the sea is different. Aegean beaches are beautiful, but this place was very different from what I saw. After swimming until the evening with the people I met there and became friends with in a short time, we sat at a pub nearby. In a photo taken at that time, I looked happier than I had felt in a long time, with my red-hot face. Meals had not yet begun. I tasted "buyurdi" there for the first time, which I tried to make a few times later and couldn't find the same flavour, and I passed out. It was as if the warm

spirits of the people here had influenced these flavours that I could not find where I lived.

Of course, we also had a lot in common. I used to order Turkish coffee, which I love to drink with a Turkish delight, like Greek coffee there. Even though there were minor conflicts about common tastes from time to time, we accepted that we were all from the same society, the same geography, and we loved it.

I had to stop thinking and plan. I was going to call an agency and get my ticket. But first I had to call Eleni, a dear friend of mine there, and let her know. The phone rang several times but I got no answer. Since I knew where she lived well, I thought I would find her when I went and hoped that she would still live in the same place. I didn't think I could wait more than a day. I bought my ticket the next day.

When we landed at Athens airport, there was a great excitement inside me. It was as if I had returned to my home, where I had been away for years. Even though I knew few people here, I never felt a stranger. My feelings when I came for the first time were very different from now. It was now a familiar and even missed place.

I smiled involuntarily when the passport officer said "yia sou". "Den milao Ellinika," I replied, realising that I was continuing in Greek. He smiled and said in English "but now you speak it" and after quickly checking my passport and seeing that I am Turkish, this time he let me pass by saying "goodbye" in Turkish. I had already remembered why I loved these people so much and felt so close to them.

In contrast to the fact that I would be turning fifty-five in a few days, I felt like a child. I

couldn't help the urge to run around. I wanted to live here, not just to be here for another year.

Even after a long time, I was able to find my way easily. I reached Xylokastro before dark. Eleni's house was in Sykia, but I preferred walking instead of getting off there. First of all, I wanted to enjoy this place, walk in the woods and breathe the salty air. While volunteering, we cleared the brushwood in all these forests and collected the garbage on the coastline. Judging by the cleanliness of the surroundings, there must still be volunteers. Once, when I tried to collect goat horns from the trees here and eat it, I was met with bewilderment. I woke up early in the mornings and took walks in the fresh air, as if it were yesterday.

After walking for a while, I arrived at Eleni's house. I didn't even know if she would recognise me, or if she would be surprised to see me. After knocking on the door, I waited for a while and heard someone calling from the window. A young girl was asking who I was. When I said I was looking for Eleni, I was afraid that she might have moved. This girl, who I later learned was Alkisti, invited me in. She told me that her mother had died last year but before that she had left a box and told her to give it to me if I came back one day. She was as surprised as I was by the fact that I had finally come. Eleni had told her daughter a lot about me, but I didn't even know she had a daughter.

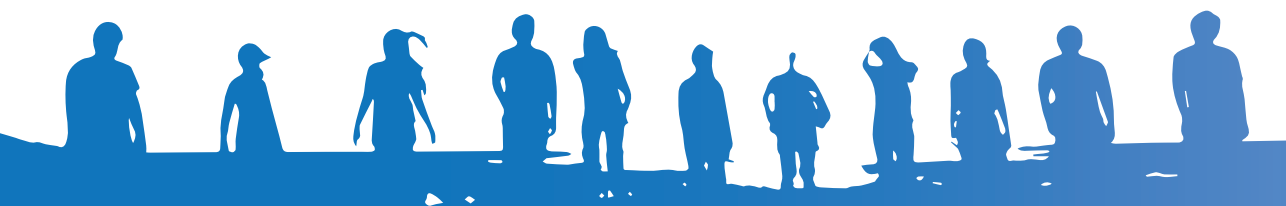
Alkisti brought me the box. When I opened it, I couldn't stop the tears. The aged "Mavrodafni" that came out of it was from the wine cellar in Patras, where we went thirty years ago. Eleni knew how much I loved

this very sweet wine. But what really made me cry was the one word note that came out of it: "Gracias friend". It means that even when she said goodbye to this life, she did not forget me, and on top of that, she wanted to make fun of me once again with her quick wit.

"Come on," said Alkisti, "since it's your birthday, we should celebrate it. Let's go to the port, there's a meeting there that I think you'll like very much." We walked together towards the port. In this event they called "Mediterranean Meetings", dozens of people from different countries came together. Everyone was involved here and there according to the subject that interested them. I blew out the candles on my cake and we had long conversations with everyone celebrating my birthday in their own language.

As the song "Avgoustos" played on the radio, I found myself returning to the past. I was experiencing the same feelings I had in August when I first came here. The past had brought me together with so many people I never knew, and while I was diving into the past, these young people around me were busy living that dream. I hoped they knew how precious this time is.

The next song was "Fevgo" by Orfeas Peridis, which I loved very much. It was as if this song was saying it was time to go. "Fevgo," I said, which meant I was leaving. "Oh sas!" Everyone learned this word, and they said goodbye to me in unison. Only one person, Alkisti, shouted "gracias". But this time she did it not to make fun of me but because she wanted to thank me for coming. I repeated in my heart, for all the time I spent here and the people I knew: "Gracias, friends!"



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