

## The Last Exile

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

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

I was sure that I derived light from her eyes and inhaled life from her breath. Yes, I believed, and I wish I remained ignorant and illiterate, blind and falling into the depth of my disbelief and

ignorance, enjoying my existence next to the silent Highness!

She was in the middle of the room with all her weight, laying on a sheepskin, the sheep of the last Eid. I called it « Rizk » (livelihood) since my dad always repeated «this Rizk is Halal... it is Halal». My mother pouted her lips without really smiling, she forced herself to smile moderately.

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

Under the millstone there was another sheepskin. I did not know that sheep's name! Maybe my mother gave birth to him before I was born. That skin was called «Rof'a» (glory)! The flour fell from both sides of the millstone and gathered on «Rof'a's» leather with a magic movement that made me stare without knowing what I was uttering. The mill turned and, in her hand, she held the wheat then versed it into the opening of the mill and turned. It turned like a Sufi dancer hit by passion. The more it turned, the louder the noise became, as if it emanated from the depth of the ground. It turned the same way the universe revolves around itself to create the concept of time and as such the mill turned so we can live and so life could go on.

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

To this day, I do not know if this stone machine belonged originally to the Berbers, the Byzantines, the Romans, the Arabs or maybe fabricated in China! As for all objects I see around us, I flip them over in a curious manner to read that clumsy phrase "made in China"! In a resentful and sarcastic manner, I would say: Poor them! How ugly is their mother's name «China»! My mother's millstone was not fabricated there, she got it from her father's house, as it was inherited from one generation to another. I used to ask my friends in the neighborhood and at school if they owned millstones, they used to make fun of me and I used to pity them!

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

It is round like the earth and divided into two parts like the moon. Every half is mediated by a circle and in its core a small wedge is placed and on the upper half there is a small loop-shaped part to which a rope was attached, and a stick connected on the other side. It was

integrally made of stone. It was an unrivaled design because it was created from absolutely nothing ... You can see through it nature's wilderness with all its abstractness, frivolity and its legendary and burning love for life. The earth turns so time goes by and in our home the millstone turns so we can live!

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

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

My mother was born there, she was a child of the mountains! She did not tell me any of that but all her traits resembled mine: her dark skin, her curly hair, the wrinkles on her face and

her hands that resembled the mountains' slopes; the breadth of her shoulders, the size of her hands, her steadfastness, patience, silence and soul that hid the secrets of the universe; that green tattoo on her forehead and on her chin that told the story of eternity. She used to laugh and say, "This is free and eternal gold that nobody can steal from me!" She laughed as she looked at her wrist covered with Berber drawings that maybe told the story of a nation!

Her dress was like that of gypsies, made up of either a black quilt or a blanket covered with mysterious Amazigh signs. She wore a belt she made of cotton threads, it was not really a dress, it resembled mostly a coffin! However, it was not a coffin of death, but a coffin of life! Perhaps they knew that we were going from one coffin to another, from above the dust to beneath it and from the cradle to the grave, since the beginning of times!

Your eyes will certainly not miss the two triangles, which held the dress at the shoulders, and if you give it a closer look, you will see the symbol of Islam interposed on them, with a star and a crescent! Believe me, she was stranger than fiction!

Everything in her evoked history, every vein in her hand, every gesture, every wrinkle on her face sums up a story forgotten by time. She was the last granddaughter of a desert tribe, the sole survivor of a genocide, like a last letter of a holy book that survived despite the fire that almost turned it into ashes! She is like the last prophet reciting his prophethood to a deaf and mute

nation, like the last planet of a galaxy, and like the last star in the sky. When you look at her, you feel that time's relativity is summed up in the light of her eyes and would fear that shutting her eyes would destroy everything on earth and transform all beings into dust.

She was in the middle of the room and the sun wafted on our neighborhood, scattering people outside and heating the skies.

The three of us were playing in the shade that barely covered a meter long and suddenly my father shook the door and started screaming loudly, his voice almost shook the pillars of our house. He went towards her, took the millstone stick and started beating her. That day I was small, but I was the eldest among my brothers. I turned my head towards the wall, I fixed my eyes to it without moving, I overlooked the scene, I was absent, blind, silent, hid my grief, my misery, my tears, my sorrow, my consciousness and unconsciousness. That day, I did not know why that happened. Later when I grew up, she told me about that incident as that day she was crying bitterly and that tortured my soul and ripped my heart. Years after the incident, she told me about it laughing: «He beat me up since I went out without my 'Safseri'! The men of the café told him, may God punish them.» She was declaring rebellion and disobedience, so she was repressed, just like our homeland!

They say «You grow up and you forget my child» but what a lie! I have grown up and I did not forget. I have been waiting to forget for several years like a

sterile woman waiting for a miracle child! I was waiting to be hit by Alzheimer's, but this did not happen. Whenever I pass by, the story of my life plays in front of me, as if I were dying. I keep hoping and saying, «death will make us forget, I am sick of forgetting, so dear death be merciful to us !!»

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

I have decided today, after fifty years, to write about the painting hanging in front of me. It does not belong to a famous artist, it was made by my mother who forgot, as usual, to sign it. It was a square drawing on which a woman was bending on a millstone placed between her legs, a woman with her Berber ornaments, with green eyes, her extremities covered with Henna and life was shining from her eyes! Was she recording that memory? Or is this how time has stopped? Actually, it is a cloth embroidered with wool or "Tohma" as my mother used to call it, that she pulled from the ruins of our house that was destined to fall apart. I carried this cloth with me from my homeland to the country of my exile, I hung it right in front of me so that it would remind me of going back. I was offered huge sums to sell it, but I refused, since no one understood its meaning! They could

not understand, they do not know the truth about it. I hung it in front of me so that my memory would assassinate me every day, so I would be a victim of my pens and papers, so that my blood would serve as an ink that would heal those who are torn between civilization and a nation.

*\*This story was awarded 1st prize at the literary contest "A Sea of Words" 2018 edition. It is released online as a preview before its final release.*