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With the rain still pouring, I flashed down and came see her right away. I called her and she told me to calm Jewish Quarter of the Old City. I somehow I was referred to Rachel, an towel, and warmed them up. We were all still alive. She started leading to the house next door to ours. On a rainy and thundery night I was year after Francesca and I got married. years before she was born. She wanted Cécile loved seeing the photos of twenty cans of sardines so she could feed each cat as we strolled through the alleyways. She was ten back then. Cécile loved seeing the photos of kittens in our family albums from the years before she was born. She wanted to know her stories, and was particularly interested in a kitten named Baby, who lived in the years after Francesca and I got married. On a rainy and thundery night I was on my way back home when I saw six kittens that led to the street corner, like in the Old City of Bordeaux, Cécile was fascinated from Bordeaux, Cécile was fascinated with the way of calming them, and leaving them to wonder in their own imaginations, something she loved doing in her work as a schoolteacher. I had never liked kids, or more so boys. I already heard too many voices in my mind, and kids disturbed my search for silence. But I didn’t want to be stuck in time, to live in a loop and defend the same thoughts again and again. It was only when Francesca turned thirty, and knowing how much she wanted to have her own baby, that I felt I couldn’t deprive her any longer. When she told me she was pregnant, I jokingly asked her if it was mine. Now, looking back, I think she should’ve slapped me. But this was life with Francesca; we were open with each other, she knew how to live with my insecurities. Upon Cécile’s first breath, I felt instantly responsible for her. Even though I had my issues with birth and the brutal procedure of cutting the umbilical cord, I couldn’t miss this unique moment in life. I hid behind the curtain, with my camera glued to my face — I was afraid to look with my eyes. I watched her through the lens as she emerged. She was calm and stage for our relationship. Cécile wanted to learn Arabic, but I couldn’t deliver the words needed to make up a sentence or convey a feeling. Every time I tried, I felt I was an actor on stage, consciously trying to be a speaker. Cécile never cried. I kept thinking about the fact that we shared the same DNA. Yet it seems that DNA wasn’t enough to establish a father-daughter relationship. We got worried when Cécile couldn’t breastfeed for nearly two days after birth. But once she found her way, she didn’t stop till almost four years later. Francesca and Cécile were very attached and developed their own secret language — Swiss German. I wasn’t able to speak with Cécile in Arabic like Francesca spoke with her. Till the age of three she only spoke and understood her mother’s tongue. Francesca and I spoke our own version of English together, creating our own verbs and syntax. Maybe one day, the grammar we invented will be recognized. I always felt insecure with my English and didn’t want to pass on an incorrect language to Cécile. Cécile’s eyes were filled every time I wanted to express something to her. And when I tried in Arabic, the words that came out were — so it seemed to me — rehearsed, stripped from emotion. The three of us lived under the same roof, yet we spoke and understood different languages. I felt like a foreigner in my family, a stranger at home, constantly asking.

What are you talking about?

Francesca and Cécile were not in an alliance, but we found ourselves in an unfortunate, unexpected situation. The consequences of my not speaking with Cécile grew increasingly problematic every year, until Francesca was regularly called in to translate for us. A frustrating start for an alliance, but we had found ourselves in an international family, a stranger at home, constantly communicating difficult. The London sky was gray, making the communication difficult. She would often feel out of place. Once, she put on Francesca’s shoes and climbed onto the living room’s window sill to look through the barred window. The London sky was gray, making the facing residential building more dull than normal. I was sitting at my desk next to the window and watched her fall into her thoughts. Cécile’s eyes seemed to surrender to a different landscape she saw in her mind— one I had already surrendered to. This was where we finally spoke in a language of our own—the language of exile.

Cécile looked at me and said, Papa bring mi hei, z’rüg i mis Land.

I looked at Cécile and said, Tell her: can you imagine the distance between here and the stars?

Cécile’s room was hardly double the size of her bed, branching out from a communication difficult. She would often feel out of place. Once, she put on Francesca’s shoes and climbed onto the living room’s window sill to look through the barred window. The London sky was gray, making the facing residential building more dull than normal. I was sitting at my desk next to the window and watched her fall into her thoughts. Cécile’s eyes seemed to surrender to a different landscape she saw in her mind— one I had already surrendered to. This was where we finally spoke in a language of our own—the language of exile.

This heartbreak scene only stopped after Francesca picked her up and carried her in her arms out of the house. It was hard for Cécile to leave. Later, she would develop a connection to Jerusalem that was so strong that we regularly returned to visit family. For years she blamed us for uprooting her, and she told us so in her own way. When she was asked where she came from, she would answer, I come from Jerusalem.

Cécile and I drifted apart, aware of our alienation. She became foreign to me. My presence was absent, even when the two of us sat in the same room. Francesca thought that I had personal issues warming up to my daughter. I tried to correct the mistake of not speaking to her in Arabic, but I always felt it was too late and this frustrated me. I never had any patience. I wanted change right away. It took me time to learn that change happens at its own pace.

When Cécile turned two we sent her to the YMCA, one of the few kindergartens where kids were still allowed in both Arab and Hebrew. Cécile picked up some words, but continued to communicate in Swiss German. It was strange to hear her Shalom once me.

When we left Jerusalem for London, Cécile was almost three and a half. She couldn’t understand the transition. When it was time to leave the house, she waved goodbye to almost everything.

Good-bye light bulb, good-bye toilet seat, good-bye wall, good-bye window . . .

Later, she would develop a connection to Jerusalem that was so strong that we regularly returned to visit family. For years she blamed us for uprooting her, and she told us so in her own way. When she was asked where she came from, she would answer, I come from Jerusalem.

The more I distanced myself from Jerusalem, the more our city of birth found a place in Cécile’s heart. It took time for her to adjust to life in London. She longed for return. But there was no return.

***

We lived in an international postgraduate house, Goodenough College. The flat that was allocated to us was small. We had no choice. Cécile’s room was hardly double the size of her bed, branching out from a communication difficult.
Jerusalem. Papa, take me back home to my country: Jerusalem.

I knew what she meant. She wanted to go home. We finally understood each other. That unique moment of communication inspired me to make a gift for her. I drew a picture of flowers. I appreciated it one day. I snuck into her room, looked through her drawers and cupboards and chose fourteen blue, green, pink, and turquoise skirts with flowers, skirts with holes in them. I cut a piece of fabric from them with scissors and made two sides that faced each other from both sides, the outside and the inside. I wanted to tell her that no matter what happened, she and I would always be together. We sat just like the two sides of a piece of cloth—there is always the other side.

Using colored threads, I stitched the cut pieces of her clothes and the photos onto the pages of a book I'd handmade for her. The photos of the opposite sides of a piece of cloth—two sides that touched the skin and the sides that were visible to the eye—faced each other, creating a dialogue with the other hidden in each of us.

Cécile was becoming real to me. I asked her to handwrite her full name, Cécile El Zein Salloum, and I had it embossed in gold lettering on the cover of the book. I fixed a square embossed in gold lettering on the other hidden in each of us.

—

Before our first Christmas in Jerusalem, Cécile brought home a bunch of her drawings collected from the walls of her kindergarten. She showed them to us, but hid one from me behind her back. That night, after I tucked Cécile in, I found out from Francesca that it was a drawing of an Israeli flag. Her teacher had asked the class to draw the flags of their home countries. Cécile told Francesca, Don’t show this to Papa. I know this flag makes him sad.

In Jerusalem, the Israeli flag was unavoidable, flying high as an intentional statement to prove authority and stake a claim, especially when settlers occupied a house in an Arab neighborhood. Ironically, the Palestinian flag was effectively illegal, even after Israel instated and recognized the Palestinian Authority. I never saw meaning in flags, nor did I surrender to their empty symbolism, something I was hoping to pass on to my daughter. But she is on her own journey.

In 2009 I took Cécile with me to Jerusalem. I was working on my thesis for my second master’s degree, which was the subject of the whole family’s attention. For the middle of the book, I wrote a statement in Hebrew where I came from. I said, Ani Ba Meepo. He asked, I come from here. Hearing them caught the landlord by surprise, and when I was done talking he came over to the fence and asked me in Hebrew where I came from. I answered, Ani Ba Meepo. I come from here.

He asked, Where exactly is here?

I said, From Bab Huta. From the Old City of Jerusalem.

I considered my time living in the shtetl a story, but an unsettling one. There was no information or record of who had lived in the house before 1948. The current residents had no clue and didn’t seem to care. Its memory was erased. Now, photos of Jewish grandparents, parents, and children hang on its walls.

After the failure of the Second Intifada, a sense of fear and stagnation set in. While Israelis felt more and more into their paranoia rooted in fear, and justified their actions in the name of security, Palestinians plunged into a deeper psychological defeat, into a state of numbness toward life under Israeli occupation. Irgun and Lehi underground militia reached a point where they were no longer able to imagine that they could live in freedom. The colonization on Palestinian land was obvious, but what was hidden was the colonization of the imagination.

The more I lived under occupation, the more its effects sickened me. It made me question myself, forcing me to act, to play, in order to survive. To imagine that I lived in a place. To find myself performing in scenes I didn’t choose. Good actors lived a less humiliating life. Driving through checkpoints was an act. If caught, you would be stopped, searched, and have your ID number registered. Getting on an Israeli bus was an act. If noticed, you might risk getting shot at and harassed, and if you complained, you might end up being arrested just for being Arab.

I didn’t want Cécile to have to act to live in her own city. In many ways we shielded her by leaving Jerusalem. This might have been an early start in her realization of the meaning of belonging and the suffering that comes from being uprooted. But in many ways leaving her birthplace might have been a necessary step in her feeling like a global citizen today.

***

Only a few houses remained in Deir Yassin after that fateful day in April 1948, as the majority of them were flattened by dynamite during the attack. The few remaining village buildings became part of the Kfar Shaul Health Center, an Israeli public psychiatric hospital. I often wondered what kind of treatment and recovery were possible there.

Cécile’s presence in my life motivated me to consciously return to my childhood to confront it. I didn’t take her with me. There was no playground in my imagination for her to play in. Cécile suffered from my depression. She scared her. Sometimes, when she and Francesca would come home, they would find me sitting alone in the dead, frozen, unable to speak. Driving through checkpoints was an act. If caught, you would be stopped, searched, and have your ID number registered. Getting on an Israeli bus was an act. If noticed, you might risk getting shot at and harassed, and if you complained, you might end up being arrested just for being Arab.

I didn’t want Cécile to have to act to live in her own city. In many ways we shielded her by leaving Jerusalem. This might have been an early start in her realization of the meaning of belonging and the suffering that comes from being uprooted. But in many ways leaving her birthplace might have been a necessary step in her feeling like a global citizen today.