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THE PARACHUTE PARADOX

By Steve Sabella

The following is chapter eight of a memoir tracing the artist's journey from living under Israeli occupation to exile and liberation. The entire story will be released in 2016.

In the old town of Medina, Marrakech, which we reached after a long road trip from Bordeaux, Cécile was fascinated by the countless stray cats on every street corner, like in the Old City of Jerusalem. She asked me to buy over 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 their stories, and was particularly interested in a kitten named Baby, who came into our lives a year after Francesca and I got married. On a rainy and thundery night I was on my way back home when I saw six kittens thrown out onto the steps leading to the house next door to ours. They must have been discarded right after birth as their umbilical cords were still attached. Some were moving in the small puddles of rain they lay in. I looked around but couldn't find their mother. I picked them up, one by one, and placed them on a piece of cardboard I'd found nearby.

I hurried inside to Francesca. They were all still alive. She started cleaning their bodies while I prepared a hot water bottle, wrapped it in a towel, and warmed them up. We didn't know what to do next — we freaked out. I called every animal organization in the phonebook and somehow I was referred to Rachel, an Israeli cat expert who lived in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City. I called her and she told me to calm down and come see her right away. With the rain still pouring, I flashed

over to the Jewish Quarter. In her living room she gave me tiny nesting bottles and kitten formula. She showed me how to feed the kittens and how to wipe their bottoms afterwards using cotton soaked in warm water to help stimulate urination. She said they had a slim chance of surviving because they'd never drunk their mother's milk. Back home, Francesca and I took turns feeding and cleaning them. Yet over the next week, we watched five of them gradually get sick and die. One by one, we buried them under the lemon tree.

In the end, only one kitten remained. Baby lived to be two weeks old, against all odds. She was getting stronger. When I brought her a bottle, she would wrap her miniature pink paws around its nipple, suck the milk out quickly, and fall asleep on either Francesca's chest or mine.

After being locked in the house for seventeen days, we took a break and strolled to the cinematheque down the road from Jaffa Gate. When we came back, Baby was starving, meowing, and moving around anxiously in her box. I prepared a bottle and fed her. She drank too quickly, and milk came out of her nose. She was writhing around, choking. I put her in my palm and swung her upside down to help her spit up. After she threw up she was completely still. Worried, I put my ear on her tiny chest to see if she was still breathing. She was, but we rushed her to the vet anyway. After the examination the doctor explained that milk had filled her lungs, cut off the oxygen to her brain, and permanently paralyzed her. He gave her an injection to put her to sleep. We wrapped Baby up and returned her to her box. Francesca and I cried all the way home, until we buried her next to her brothers and sisters. For a long time afterward we felt guilty for going out that night. For many years, I left Francesca hanging in the air. My rejection to

marriage and having kids was engraved on biblical stone — I believed in open relationships. Maybe it had to do with my depression, or not wanting to be responsible for someone else's life. But kids loved being around Francesca. She had a 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, and 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 clean and calm. When she was almost out, she tilted her head and looked at me. I lowered my camera and looked back at her. 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. My tongue was tied 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 had found ourselves in an unfortunate, unexpected situation. The consequences of my not speaking Arabic with Cecile grew increasingly problematic every year, until Francesca was regularly called in to translate for us. A frustrating start 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 father who spoke Arabic to his child. My bad acting did not mirror my true feelings for Cécile. When she asked me how much I loved her, I told Francesca,

Tell her: can you imagine the distance between here and the stars?

She looked at Mummy and said,

No.

I looked at Cécile and said,

This is how much I love you. You can't even imagine how much.

The older she got the more difficult it was for me to play with her in parks or read her bedtime stories. I rarely changed her diapers, gave her a bath, or helped her choose a dress to wear. I couldn't understand why she cried around me until Francesca explained it to me later on. I often regretted not doing these things even though, somehow, I could have.

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 to happen right now. 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 instruction was given in Arabic and Hebrew. Cécile picked up some words, but continued to communicate in Swiss German. It was strange to hear her Shalom me once.

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 . . .

This heartbreaking 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.

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 corridor, a punishment compared to the space she had had in Jerusalem. The first few months were difficult for all of us, especially for Cécile, who still only spoke Swiss German. We knew she understood English, but she never spoke it. This made 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.

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 Cécile, hoping she would appreciate it one day. I snuck into her room, looked through her drawers and cupboards and chose fourteen blouses, skirts, and trousers. I picked clothes with patterns, colors, and those with holes or stains on them. I cut a piece of fabric from them with scissors and photographed the squares from both sides, the outside and the inside. I wanted to tell her that no matter what happened, she and I would always be connected, 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 — the 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 Elise Sabella, and later had it embossed in gold lettering on the cover of the book. I fixed a square piece of one of her garments under the title. Inside, the photos seemed as real, as tactile, as the cloth on the cover. But they were images, in search of their own reality. For the middle of the book, I asked Cécile to make a drawing. She drew me dressed in a skirt, with long hair, smiling, playing with her in a garden filled with flowers, with our home standing behind us. My stitches penetrated the blue sky of her world, like lost flying birds, hovering above scattered flowers. I was finally telling her a

story, my story, and as difficult as it was, it allowed us to join hands and escape to our world. On the first page of the book, I wrote a statement in pencil and then half erased it, in the hope that one day we will rewrite it together.

After almost three months of living in London, I was taking care of Cécile one evening while Francesca worked late. Cécile and I were sitting on a couch across from each other in our cell of a living room. I told her in English that we were going to have dinner with friends at the student house on the other side of the garden. What happened next stirred me. Cécile replied back in clear British English,

No, I don't want to. I don't feel like it. They are garbage.

Those were her first English words, and I had no idea where they came from. She kept speaking, and we started having a long conversation together. I had never felt more understood by her, and I paid attention to every word she was saying. From that day onward, English became the main spoken language in our house. God bless the Queen!

Before our first Christmas in London, 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 required field research in Palestine. Given that we were going to stay for over five weeks, we chose to rent a house instead of staying with my family. After contacting friends, Francesca found a flat for rent by an Israeli family. I contacted them and found out they were looking for someone to rent the house as well as to water the garden and take care of their two dogs. We agreed.

The house was in Ein Karem, one of the few Palestinian villages that remained intact after the 1948 War. Before and after the establishment of the State of Israel, Jewish forces depopulated around 500 Palestinian villages, erasing many of them off the map and settling in others. Ein Karem was one of those in which Jews settled. The village evacuated women and children early on, fearing they would suffer a destiny similar to that of the inhabitants of Deir Yassin, a neighboring village, where the Jewish Irgun and Lehi underground militia groups massacred over one hundred residents on April 9, 1948. The men of Ein Karem remained to fight to keep their village from Jewish forces, which forced them out in mid-July. Survivors and historical records of Deir Yassin have revealed accounts of pregnant women cut open with swords, of rape, mutilation, and bodies thrown into wells. Later that day, the militia held a

victory parade and Palestinian residents were loaded onto trucks and paraded through the streets of Jerusalem, after which they were all shot dead in a stone quarry. A massacre etched in the mind of every Palestinian ever since.

Not one Palestinian family was able to return to Ein Karem. The residents must have felt they had no choice but to flee after they heard of the horror in Deir Yassin. All their homes were quickly settled with new immigrants, and over the years the village became a hub for Israeli artists and artisans.

The house we lived in stood on a cliff, overlooking a valley covered with trees. The family we subleased from was renting it from an Israeli settler who lived in the second part of the house, which had its own entrance. Only a fence separated our gardens. He could hear my conversations. One day at sunset, Cécile was resting on a hammock with the two dogs while I was watering the plants and trying to teach her some words in Arabic. 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 sublet house a victory, 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 period of uncertainty and stagnation set in. While Israelis fell 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. Palestinians 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 playact, in order to survive. For many years, I ended up performing in scenes I didn't choose. Good actors lived a less humiliating life. Driving through checkpoints was an act — only those who acted like Israelis passed without being stopped. Only Israelis had the balls to pass through military checkpoints without slowing down — I did the same. I was rarely stopped. Trying to enter Israeli malls without “looking Arab” 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 spit at and harassed, and if you complained, you would get 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 depressions. They scared her. Sometimes, when she and Francesca would come home, they would find me sitting alone in the dark, dead frozen, unable to speak, not even to say hello. I was locked in again. I didn't know what was wrong with me, or why I couldn't breathe. Each episode would last longer than the preceding one. Later on, when I could stand on my feet again, I realized that I had won another battle. Yet, there was still a war inside of me, and I knew it would never end as long as I dealt with its side effects rather than its cause. But who really wants to face his own demons?