Soukaina HABIBALLAH

Anatomy of the Rose

When the rose perceived the distance between itself and the earth, it brought forth its thorns.

When the rose realized that a single leg couldn’t take it anywhere, that it was voiceless and mostly had no echo, it thought of fragrance.

The blooming petals: a navel. The stem: a rope that binds it to the earth’s deep womb. That rose will be born someday in a lover’s hand or between the shores of a book.

Translated from the Arabic by Kareem James Abu-Zeid
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Chapter 10

That day I stood next to one of the banana trees near her house. She sits crouched, her back to me, petite, speaking to herself in a low tone, as though talking to someone and reproaching him; continuing her speech without waiting for an answer. She wasn’t crazy, she was just lonely. Why did I go to her? I didn’t know. Was it because she was friends with my mom, and in these kinds of situation we need a mom? Or because I knew deep inside that she patiently made me wait for this day, and here it came, and she should know it did.

I stood there, watching Ti Mun while she grabbed a handful of rice from the colander and put it in the aluminum pot next to her. She shook the container upside down, and her chickens trotted over to start picking the small white grains off the ground. The sound their beaks on the cement floor echoed in my ears for years, an echo of a will.

At the time I didn’t have a lot of thoughts or opinions about life or even people. I look at the calluses on Ti Mun’s small feet, and feel like I could disappear inside of them, as if they’d fold me in. They remind me of the long days under the sun and in the rain spent in the tea fields or on the road to school, a road like an jumbled thread that doesn’t lead to anything and which one ultimately tosses and forgets. It also reminded me of the heaven which Faqih Mahjoub is always telling us about, emphasizing that I will find a warm bed there, after I complained about the cold floor of the corn storage room. Heaven was frightening, for he always described it as a place, and places could never measure up to paradise. In that moment of reminiscence, it occurred to me that what would happen was the best thing that could happen.

“`We will be back in a few days,”` I told her without moving from my spot, or thinking. The phrase escaped my mouth as if it had been there the whole time, right from the beginning, and decided to come out by itself, like when plates suddenly fall from the cupboards. Was I serious when I mumbled “`We will be back”` to her? That was the easiest phrase, and I had no desire to look for a more accurate expression. That’s the way my father and his friends used to say it. They were used to saying it happily, mysteriously, deliberately: “`We’ll be back.”` We, too, had to repeat it, but in a different state of happiness. They will return to their countries, while we—us mice floundering in a trap—really wanted to be allowed to go somewhere else.

We would go back, but to where? I didn’t know. “`We will go back to our land,”` my father said, after the Moroccan delegation forced him to bring me with him. How was it our land when we didn’t plant it? How could land be ours? We didn’t fall down and hold onto its stones while trying to walk for the first time. How could it be our land if we’d never set our foot on it? Why couldn’t Vietnam be my land, with my mother buried under in soil, and for which they so ardently fought?
I didn’t think about any of this while standing near Ti Mun’s place. I was just flabbergasted at the sight of her smiling face, a smile I was seeing for the first time. She looked happy and beautiful, emanating some sort of amnesia. She quickly cleaned her hands by rubbing them against her knees, and stood up. She came closer to me, quickly, like a chicken, and pecked my cheek as though I was one of those extra rice grains. In Yên Bái, and generally all of Vietnam, exchanging kisses neither was a custom nor a habit when greeting people; a smile or a simple bow usually did just fine. But my mom’s friend did kisses, the only widow without any kids, and grabbed my hands and said in wretched tone: “Yes, yes... this is supposed to have happened a long time ago. You should go back to your country, Son Nam.” Rooted to my spot, I repeated after her, “Yes, yes, that’s what’s supposed to have happened a long time ago.”

Everyone was determined to call it “the Return,” except Thanh Thuy. When she heard about it, she hurried to me in the tea field and, her tiny eyes shaded by her conical hat, only her wet cheeks visible to me, said, “This is not a ‘going back,’ Son Nam, this is emigration. You are leaving your land behind and emigrating. That’s not fair. You were created by this land, not by the one you are going back to. Land is for everyone, and you should stay here. Don’t listen to them. Please, don’t leave me here alone.”

I sat down exhausted, putting down my basket full of green tea leaves. It was done: I would start the New Year there. I should go back, for people here call me ‘black European,” and that is tiring. This continuous moving from one house to another, the fear, and the war tired me out too--everything tired me out, but above all the mere fact that I understood nothing. Grabbing my hand, shivering, she said “You are just repeating what you’ve been told. You are convinced by all this, but these tea leaves aren’t from here, either. Maybe they were brought from China the first time, but then grew up from this land and from the rain of this sky.” She held tight onto my hands and said, “Your mother is Vietnamese. You are from a Vietnamese womb. How do you not understand that?”

Her words sounded echoless, like a beautiful song in a foreign language, like those sounds coming out of Elmiloudi’s mouth when he drinks too much ba moua ba. I moved my head in the rhythm, but the meaning had nothing to do with me, and never touched me. Thanh Thuy—‘Clear Waters’ in traditional Vietnamese—was my first love, a love of my two small eyes, large and scary, as Ti Mun used to say. Eyes that could neither love nor hate anyone, always bigger than the scene before me. I couldn’t love a woman: that’s the reason I lost Thanh Thuy, just like I lost Fatima and many others that came later on and met the same destiny. What was a woman in the end? That creature that brought me to this world and disappeared, like kids ringing a doorbell and running away, so when the door opens we only find an empty plastic bag the wind has blown in from somewhere far away. I was that plastic bag the wind played with, at the end of the day shredded and stuck on a tree branch.

When my mother decided to marry my father, right after she met him at a kolkhoz near Hanoi, everyone was forced to give their blessing. The orders of Commandant Hồ Chí Minh were too firm to be declined. Years before that, it would have been impossible for a Vietnamese family to let their daughter marry a stranger, or even someone from a different minority group. But the first Indochina war made a lot of things possible, among which the death of Ti Mun’s husband, shot by an African sniper serving in the French army. The grieving widow persuaded herself that the bullet came from the rifle of her friend’s husband--my father, one among hundreds of snipers dispatched to protect that co-op. Yet, she insisted that he was the sole culprit. She believed that no one could take her husband down but that Moroccan who was said to have the ability to snipe an ant off a tree. One of the lady neighbors told me: “She came to your mother and told her that she shouldn’t set forth with her marriage to El Miloudi. She said: He won’t ejaculate inside you semen, but the blood of my husband, you will be cursed. But your mother married him. Your father didn’t look Vietnamese, not only looks-wise but also he didn’t act like one. He was someone from a place afar that she knew nothing about, all he said was that it’s a place full of...
fields, although scarcely as green as here. He was different, I mean more different than the rest of the Moroccans. He treated women as weak creatures that you can’t count on. Exasperated by the situation she was living in-- working in corn fields, milking cows, taking care of a big family--your mother took the chance when your father hinted he was looking for a wife.”

My father’s plan to marry didn’t come out of the blue; it was put in his mind in Morocco, by all the times spent peering at women down by the lake Sunday mornings. These images were etched deep inside him, tormenting him. At his first and last proposal in his hometown, he was turned down. That trauma caused any fantasy of marriage he may have had to hide deep inside of him, only resurfacing later, in Vietnam.

Those women in Vietnam were nothing like their counterparts in Belaid. Nothing on them swings or pops out when they run or bend over. As he explained it to himself, those curveless shapes were connected to the war; a gigantic sharp machine fell on their bodies from above, slicing off all those surplus bulges, both back and front. In Elmiloudi’s eyes-- and those of the rest of Moroccans--all Vietnamese women looked alike. All the women in the co-op had the same face, and the same body shape.. My mother was no exception. Nevertheless, she was desperate, overwhelmed with sorrow, worn down, eyes always directed to the ground as if she were tracing something. He saw defeat in her eyes, and worked his way through its depth to get her to marry him. During that night back in 1952, my father sprayed the blood of Ti Mun’s husband into her womb. Eight months later, I was born and she was dead.

I was born two months after the victory at Dien Bien Phu, under a sky the color of foggy glass. Under a sky like this a star could never see and choose me. Because of the victory at Dien Bien Phu, no one grieved my mother’s death. The agricultural co-op was like a fisherman whose baskets were full of fish, indifferent to the worn shoe stuck on the hook.

It was hard for me to settle on a convincing version of my story, where I came from and where I wound up. That’s why I had to collect it from many households, as if Halloween candy. I would stand in front of doors, waiting for someone to fill the countless gaps in my memory with stories.

For a few years, I lived at my granny’s house. She used to sit me on her lap, looking at me with sympathy, and often with fear. “You don’t ask about anything, Son Nam, you should ask”, she would tell me, stroking my shoulders with her hands. I would just stare at her, and at the wall behind her, peering into surrounding corners, trying to find something amidst all the furniture that would spring my curiosity and push me to ask a question. “Your mom, for instance, Son, don’t you want to know anything about her? Doesn’t it bother you that the rest of the kids have mothers?” That didn’t bother me at all, because, at the end of the day, we were all together in the co-op, with mothers or without, running barefoot in the fields, eating the same rice, the exact same rotten fruit, and cold tea. “Who doesn’t have a father, doesn’t have a roof, “ I often heard Vietnamese people say; but the only time I looked up at the ceiling and found myself in the open was when my grandmother passed away. I was only six.

She told me about the look on my father’s face after she took me to him, like someone staring at the fire devouring his harvest, scared, unable to stretch his hand and touch me. The only thing he could do was delve into the nearest forest to drink, and smoke before his Moroccan friends would catch up to him, and encircle him: soon, words would start to come out from under their mustaches, their huge palms slapping the back of the newly widowed, in a sympathy almost never seen on their faces.

She was eighteen, grinding her teeth, trying to push me out. Some of the kolkhoz women surrounded her bed, on top was her own mother. In fear they waited for the baby’s delivery, repeating prayers in
hopes they will protect the newborn and his mother from the havoc of evil spirits. When mom let out her last cry, and I let out my first, the palm trees swayed, and a flock of birds standing nearby took flight. When it came to Ti Mun, she was standing by the weeds next to the pigsty, wailing, walking back and forth, wringing her hands. She only calmed down when my grandmother appeared, confused, grabbing my umbilical cord, her heart thumping painfully in her chest. Ti Mun didn’t look shocked. Instead, she looked like someone standing by the door of a morgue, waiting for a corpse. With a vanquished and weary sigh, taking from her the plastic bag, she said to my grandmother, “This kid who killed his mother, no one knows where his grandmother’s bed is; his soul will remain tortured forever.”

After he carefully studied my nose, my dad had decided then and there that he would make no decisions about me—whether about my umbilical cord or about my future. Only later, after we returned to Morocco, did I learn the secret of nose, when that woman visited us on our farm in Beni Yahya. She saw me coming from afar, bringing back the meager flock of sheep from the pasture. She stood up, beat her chest, took me in her arms, imprinting kisses all over my face and shoulders, her words mixed with tears as her hands were touching my nose. I understood later that I have a nose exactly like her mother’s, El Miloudi’s mother, my paternal grandmother.

During the night of the day I was born, outside the hut where my mom was laying dead after her short life, with me beside her, a baby with big closed eyes, the women around were following the advice of Montesquieu: “We should weep for men at their birth, not at their death.” In unconscious complicity, they dried their tears before leaving. Maybe the only thing I got from Vietnam is the ability to distance myself from feelings. Outside, as she was stepping away from the threshold, Ti Mun’s words hit my granny’s ears like perfectly aimed stones: “His soul will remain tortured, don’t seek the help of a shaman. She won’t be able to fix anything”. As she spoke, she stopped by the barnyard, and anxiously emptied my umbilical cord from the plastic bag into the pigs’ feeding trough.

My granny couldn’t care less about Ti Mun’s words. A few days later, she brought a shaman to protect me from misfortune and give me a name. The shaman put me in a cradle by her side, and chanted for the full hour, the stool swinging under her like a horse. She wandered for many years, and knocked on every door she used to know until she was hoarse. A trace of shiver slithered down my back and I suddenly felt a strong shudder. She got up from her chair and looked at me sleeping before moving past me. Then, she turned to my granny:

- This hasn’t happened as far back as I can remember, but no one from among the ancestors wants to give him his name. Where is his mother?

- She died while giving birth to him.

- So where is his grandmother?

- I am his grandmother.

- Are you sure you buried the umbilical cord in the ground, at the foot of your bed?

- Oh, no, I am his grandmother from his mother’s side.

- Then where is his grandmother?

- No one knows... it is quite complicated...

- What about his father?
- He doesn’t want to take him. You know, men when their wives die, they become like a straw.

- So what did you do with the umbilical cord?

The shaman extracted an answer from my grandmother’s silence. The cord had not been buried underneath the grandmother’s bed, so the newborn’s soul can’t find its way back to her home after death, to be born again. It will remain tortured, wandering. One place sending it off to another, like a bird accidentally trapped in a tiny room.

‘How hard is it for a person to live one life only’, said the shaman, taking her stuff and leaving behind all the offerings families gave her to soliciting her blessings. She left everything she received, and muttered to herself in disbelief: ‘No’ one among the ancestors wanted to give him his name’. My granny escorted the shaman to the door, and begged her not to tell anyone; then she stood there looking at her as she disappeared, looking at the horizon as if seeking some unspoken messages from some vaster world behind the fog. When she came back, deciding definitely that she will call me “Son Nam”.

During my first years in Morocco, it was hard for me to turn when someone called me by my Moroccan name. I didn’t know the roots of that weird name my father gave me when my grandmother asked Faqih Elmajhoub to convince him to go and register me in the birth records. Besides being an elder, Elmajhoub was an educated man, and that alone was enough to earn him huge respect among Moroccans. They would go to him when they fought, and when two Moroccans died—one of them Thanh Thuy’s father—he arranged the funeral and took care of everything. Before that, I don’t ever recall having seen anyone pray: maybe they did in their houses, in private, or maybe they didn’t. Back in those days, before going back to Morocco, I felt like Islam was a religion of death worshippers for the only prayer I ever saw was during funerals. Death was my mother and my grandmother, she who gave birth to me and who raised me: it had a big place in my heart.

Two months after my birth, my father hadn’t registered me yet. No one succeeded in convincing him, not my grandmother, not the cheikh of the Moroccans. Only when he found out that the government provides generous financial support to Vietnamese kids of Moroccan fathers did he decide to get going. Call him “Son Nam,” that is what his ancestors named him,” my grandmother assured him. A few hours later, he came back with a paper, in which he underlined the line he wrote. It appeared the officer was wrote down the name he dictated to him letter by letter: Bouchaib Elchehab.

*Translated from the Arabic by Mohammed El Wahabi with Alyssa Cokinis*