Soukaina HABIBALLAH

excerpt from the novel [The Barracks]

Chapter 10

That day I stopped near one of the banana trees by her house; it was the second time I had approached her from that place. She squatted with her back to me, slender as always and speaking to herself in a low voice as if she were asking someone a question and then reproaching them, continuing to speak without waiting for their response. It was like she was talking to someone who had been away for decades, and she now had tons to say to them. She wasn’t crazy, despite her long talk with herself. She was only lonely. Why I went to her, I don’t know. Was it because she was my mother’s friend, and in these situations, one needs a mother? Or perhaps because I knew in the depths of my heart that she made me eager for this day, and here it came, and she knew it. I stayed and watched Ti Mun scoop up the rice with both her hands, moving it from the colander to the aluminum pot beside her. She shook the colander upside-down over the earth, kicking up dust with the consecutive movements, and her chickens hurried over with their funny steps and pecked the small white grains from the earth. For years I heard the sound of their beaks, the sound of pecking like a commandment.

I didn’t have many thoughts at that time, no position in life, or even attitudes about people. I look at the cracks in Ti Mun’s small, callused feet and feel as though I could disappear within them, as if they could swallow me whole. They remind me of the long days beneath the sun and the rain, the days we spent in the tea field, or on the road to school which twisted and turned until it was like thread that was no longer of any use but to set aside and forget. They remind me of the days spent in fear of waking in the heaven that Faqih Mahjoub spoke of, where he promised me I’d find a warm mattress when I complained of the cold floor in the corn storeroom. It was a terrible heaven, for he always described it as a place, and places could not be heavenly, no matter what. Remembering all of that, it seemed to me that what would happen was the best thing that possibly could have happened.

“We’ll be back in a few days,” I said to her without thinking or moving from where I was standing. The sentence left my mouth as if it had been waiting there the whole time, since long ago, and decided on its own to escape like a stack of plates sometimes decides to fall from the cupboard. Did I mean it when I said “We’ll be back?” That was the easiest thing to say - I had no desire to search for a more accurate phrase. This is the way my father and his friends used to say it, cheerfully, but in a way that was at once mysterious and profound: “We’ll be back.” And we had also to repeat it, but with a different sort of happiness. They would return to their countries, and we, like mice in a trap, struggled, wanting only to escape to any other place.

We’ll be back, but back where? I don’t know. We’ll return to our land, my father had said, forced by the Moroccan Delegation to bring me with him. How could it be our land, land which we had not farmed? How could it be ours if we had not tumbled and grabbed onto its pebbles the first time we tried to walk, how could it be ours if we had never even set foot on it? Shouldn’t Vietnam be my land, where my mother was buried, and for which they all fought so desperately?

I didn’t think about any of this standing near Ti Mun’s house. Instead, I was surprised to see her looking joyful for the first time. She looked lovely and full of bliss, as if she had lost her memory. She quickly brushed her hands against her skirt, then pressed them against her knees and stood up. She then hurried over to me like a chicken and pecked my cheek, as though I were another grain of rice. In Yen Bai, as in Vietnam in general, it was not by any means traditional or normal to exchange kisses as a form of greeting - a small smile or bow sufficed. My mother’s friend, however, greeted with kisses, the only widow without any children, and who had never liked me before now. She put her hands on mine and said in a shaky voice, “Yes, yes, this should have happened long ago. You should return to your homeland, Son Nam.” I felt as though I was in a trance, and repeated after Ti Mun, “Yes, yes, this should have happened long ago.”

Everyone but Thanh Thuy was determined to call it *returning.* When she learned I was leaving, she hurried over to me in the tea field, her small eyes hidden beneath her conical hat so that all I could see of her face were her wet cheeks, and said “This is not a return, Son, this is migration. You’re leaving your land behind, and that’s not right. You were created by this land, and not by the land to which you are supposedly returning. The land is for all, so you should remain here. Don’t listen to them, I beg you. Please don’t leave me alone here.”

Exhausted, I sat down and set aside my basket of tea leaves. The matter was decided, I would begin the new year there. I have to return - everyone here calls me a black European, and that is exhausting. Moving from one place to another tires me also, as does the fear, and the war. Everything tires me, most of all my failure to understand. Trembling, Thanh Thuy grabbed my hand and said, “You repeat what you hear. You aren’t satisfied with all this. These tea leaves aren’t from here either. Maybe they came from China the first time, but they grew here on this land, under the rains of this sky.” She squeezed my hand tighter and continued, “Your mother is Vietnamese. You came from a Vietnamese womb. How can you not see that?”

Her words sounded but did not resonate, as if she were repeating a beautiful song in a strange language, like thesounds that escape Al-Meloudi’s mouth when he overindulges in corn wine. I nodded my head to the tune of her words only and not to affirm their meaning, which did not even touch me. It was Thanh Thuy, or “Clear Waters” in traditional Vietnamese, who was my first love, a love of two small eyes which, despite their size, could see my view completely. I, on the other hand, had wide honey-colored eyes, large and frightening as Ti Mun used to say. I had eyes that couldn’t share love or even hatred with anyone, and which were always larger than what was bin front of them. It wasn’t possible for me to love a woman, and for that reason I lost Thanh Thuy, like Fatima before her, and many other names that would come later on and meet the same certain fate. What is a woman, in the end? That being which brought me into the world, then disappeared, like children who ring a doorbell and run away, so that when the door opens there is nothing to be found but some plastic bags carried by the wind from a far-away place. I was already that empty plastic bag, carried away by the wind, torn, and stuck in the branch of a tree.

When my mother decided to marry my father after meeting him in a kolkhoz[[1]](#footnote-2) near Hanoi, everyone agreed to it begrudgingly. The commands of Hô Chi Minh were stronger than any refusal. Years before that, a Vietnamese family could not have permitted one of their daughters to marry a stranger, or even someone belonging to a different minority group. But the Indo-China War allowed many things to happen, one of those things being the death of Ti Mun’s husband who was killed by a shot from a unit of African snipers in the French army. he was forever convinced that he was shot by the rifle of her friend’s husband, who was my father. My father was not the only sniper in that unit, there were dozens, but she remained adamant it was him. She thought no one could possibly kill her husband except for the Moroccan, who was said to be able to shoot an ant from a tree. One of the neighbors told me, “She came to your mother and told her that she must not marry Al-Meloudi. She said, “When he ejaculates, it will not be semen inside of you, but the blood of my husband, and you will be cursed!” But your mother married him. Your father was unlike the Vietnamese - not only in appearance, but even in his way of being. He was coming from a far-away place she knew nothing about, and all he told her was that it was also a place of many fields, though rarely as green as here. He was different, and I mean more different than other Moroccans. He treated women as weak and unreliable creatures. Your mother had already been working - in the corn field, milking cows, and caring for a large family - and she did not want someone to rely on her. So it is like this that she married your father, after he once hinted to her that he was looking for a wife.”

My father’s decision to marry did not come suddenly; it was the result of many stolen glances at women and girls near the river on Sunday mornings, which gathered up in his eyes, and other places, in the same tormenting way. His first and last proposal was met with refusal, however, and that made all these fantasies retreat and not to return--until Vietnam. The women in Vietnam were not like those in Belaid. No part of them shook when they ran, or was revealed when they bent over. He told himself that this was a result of the war, a giant sharp machine that descended vertically upon their bodies and chopped away all the excess, slicing from in front or from behind. In the eyes of Al-Meloudi and perhaps other Moroccans, the women in the collective were all alike, their bodies and even their faces were the same. But when deciding to play with the idea of marriage,
Al-Meloudi chose my mother because in her he saw the epitome of that woman. Her features were exhausted with worry, and her eyes were always downcast, as if she were following something on the ground. Most importantly, it was the defeat he saw in her eyes that reached his core.

On that night in 1952, my father sprayed the blood of Ti Mun’s husband into my mother’s body. Eight months after that, I was born and my mother was dead. I was born two months after the victory at Dien Bien Phu under a sky like steamy glass. It would have been difficult for any star to choose me, or even see me through a sky like that. Because everyone was occupied with the victory at Dien Bien Phu, no one grieved my mother. The kolkhoz was like a fisherman whose nets were full of fish, with no interest in the torn shoe on his hook.

It was difficult for me to arrive at a satisfying version of my story, the story of where I came from and where I would go. That is why I had to gather it from many homes, like Halloween candy in the movies, waiting in front of doors for someone to fill the many gaps in my memory with stories. I lived with my grandmother for a few years. She would sit me in front of her sometimes and look at me with pity, sometimes with fear. “You don’t ask about anything Son Nam,” she told me, putting her hands on my shoulders, “You should ask.” I stared at her, then at the wall behind her, and all that was around it, so that I might find something among the sparse furnishings in her home that would provoke me to ask a question. “Your mother, for example. Don’t you want to know anything about her? Doesn’t it bother you that the other children have mothers?” It didn’t bother me at all, because in the end we were all in the kolkhoz together whether or not we had mothers, running barefoot in the fields, eating the same rice and the same fruit and drinking the same tea. “The person who doesn’t have a father, doesn’t have a roof overhead.” I often heard the Vietnamese echo this phrase. The only time I felt incomplete, the only time I looked up to the ceiling and found only a void, was when I was six and my grandmother passed away.

She described the look on my father’s face after bringing me to him, like someone staring at a fire consuming his harvest, terrified, unable to reach out his hand to touch me. The only thing he could do was charge into a nearby forest to drink and smoke before his Moroccan friends could find him. They surrounded him, and coarse words began to come out from beneath their mustaches, and they slapped the widower on the back with their enormous palms, their faces unusually affected.

She was eighteen years old, grinding her teeth, fighting to push me out of her. Some of the kolkhoz women sat around her, with her mother at the head of her bed, waiting in terror for the baby to arrive. They repeated prayers to protect the child and its mother from the ruin of evil spirits. The banana fronds covering the ceiling shook, a flock of birds scattered in silence when my mother let out her last cry, and I my first. Ti Mun stood in the reeds near the pig barn, pacing back and forth and slapping her hands together, making promises. She didn’t calm down until my grandmother appeared with my umbilical cord, and a small whimper arose in her chest that was cut off by little cries. Ti Mun did not seem surprised, she looked like someone who had been standing for a long time at the door of the morgue, waiting for a body. She snatched the plastic bag from my grandmother and said, “No one knows where the bed of this child's grandmother lies, this child that killed its mother, and its soul will be tortured forever.”

After examining my nose, my father decided then and there that he would make no decisions about me, whether about my umbilical cord or my life to come. Only later, after our return to Morocco, did I learn the secret of my nose. A woman visited our farm in Beni Yahya and saw me bringing in a small flock of sheep from a distance. She stood up, struck her chest, and took me into her arms, kissing me all over my face and shoulders. Her words and her tears mixed together as they came out while the woman was touching my nose with both her hands. I would learn later that it was the same nose as her mother’s, Al-Meloudi’s mother, my grandmother.

That night after I was born, the kolkhoz women surrounded the hut where I, a baby with large, closed eyes, was lying beside my mother. The women were heeding the advice of Montesquieu, who said: “We should weep for men at their birth, not at their death.” They adhered to his words without realizing it, drying their tears before they left. Perhaps the only thing I took with me from Vietnam was the ability to quickly rid myself of emotion. As she stepped down from the threshold, Ti Mun’s words struck my grandmother’s ears like perfectly aimed stones. “His soul will always be tortured. Do not seek the help of a shaman, for she won’t be able to do anything for him.” Before stopping at the barn, Ti Mun uneasily shook out the plastic bag with my umbilical cord into the pig’s trough.

My grandmother did not care what Ti Mun had to say. Only a few days later, she brought a shaman to protect me from evil and to give me a name. The shaman cradled me beside her and chanted for a full hour: the stool moved underneath her like a horse while she sifted through many years, knocking on every door she knew, until she was exhausted. A small shiver went down my spine, followed by a strong and sudden shaking. The shaman got up and looked at me while I was sleeping before putting me down and turning to my grandmother:

-This hasn’t happened to me for a very long time, but none of his ancestors wish to give him a name. Where is his mother?

-She died in labor.

-Then where is his grandmother?

-I am his grandmother.

-Are you certain that you buried the umbilical cord well beneath the ground, underneath the foot of your bed?

-Oh, no, I am his mother’s mother.

-Then where is his other grandmother?

-Nobody knows. The situation is somewhat complicated.

-What about his father?

-He doesn’t want to take the child with him. You know that when their wives die, men become like straw.

-What did you do with the umbilical cord?

The shaman inferred the answer from my grandmother’s silence. The umbilical cord had not been buried at the foot of his grandmother’s bed, therefore it would be impossible for the infant’s soul to prove its place in the world and be born again. The soul will be doomed to wander, tortured, to the ends of the earth, and one place will push it over to another, like a bird trapped in a small room. “Such difficulty in life’s passing for him who has only one life to live!” said the shaman, gathering her things and leaving behind all the offerings of the family seeking her blessings. Without thinking, she spoke again, “Not one of his ancestors will give him a name.” My grandmother walked the shaman to the door of the hut and asked her not to tell anyone, and she promised that she wouldn’t, and the matter stayed between the two of them. Then my grandmother watched as the shaman disappeared. She looked toward the horizon, to whatever lurked behind the fog, and when she returned to me, she had already decided on my name: “Son Nam.”

During my first years in Morocco, I didn’t know to turn when someone called me by my Moroccan name. I had no idea about the reason for that name, which had been given to me because my grandmother had asked Faqih Al-Mahjoub to convince my father to register my birth formally. In addition to serving as an elder, Al-Mahjoub was an educated man, and that earned him enormous respect with the local Moroccans. They went to him when fights broke out among them, and when two people died--Thanh Thuy’s father being one of them-- he took it upon himself to organize the funeral. I don’t think I had ever seen anyone pray before that. Maybe the men had been praying at home, or in some other private place, or maybe they weren’t praying at all. In those days, before my return to Morocco, I thought that what this religion worshipped was death, for its only prayers were funeral prayers. But death was my mother and my grandmother, who bore me and raised me, and because of that it always had a big place in my heart.

More than two months passed before my father officially registered my birth. No one was able to persuade him, not my grandmother, nor the Moroccan sheikh. It was only when he learned that the government was granting financial support to Moroccan parents of Vietnamese children that he could be convinced. “Call him Son Nam, for that is what his ancestors named him,” my grandmother asserted. After a few hours, however, he returned with a paper on which was written a confusing line. It seemed as if the official responsible for the documentation had heard him dictate the name letter by letter: Boushaib Al-Shahb.[[2]](#footnote-3)

*Translated from the Arabic by Kaylee Lockett*

1. a Soviet agricultural collective or cooperative farm [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. This name sounds similar to a phrase in Arabic that means “the scattered pieces of a fallen star.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)