

A Letter to Grandmother

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My dear Grandmother,

I am in the new Berlin apartment with the French balconies that remind me of Alger. It is the third time I've started this letter, on paper. In my head, I've been writing and re-writing it since I was told that your memory was failing and that you were asking for me.

There are days when I write feverishly, without sleep, and I have nothing other than black coffee and, every now and then, something sweet. This, black coffee and something sweet, is a combination that you, too, love. You would caution me, if you were here, if it weren't for the thousands of kilometers of land and sea separating us... You would say I am impetuous and unsteady, qualities not appropriate for a Kabyle woman, and the heaviness of the script dictating your words would be overridden by the love in your voice. I lived for these moments of conspiratorial sisterhood.

I left for Germany shortly after Mother died; Father took me, with your permission. Mother is buried in the family graveyard fenced with cacti and olive trees. Even today, I almost never enter. But I go sit under the olive trees that define the austere beauty of the mountainous fortress that you, and I at times, call home. Kabylia was the last territory of what later would become Algeria to fall to France in the 19th century... In the 20th, it was one of the first to send its daughters and sons away in the hope of a future... I remember crying and begging you not to have to leave.

Unlike Father, who migrated to the GDR in the 1980s, I arrived in East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. He was the first in his family to study, and the first to raise a daughter on his own. We lived in a small one-room apartment in a high-rise building — not unlike the ones you know from Alger, the ones constructed by the French — and Father moved from one temporary research assignment to another, to justify our existence in a country where the streets were grey and the sun's rays cold; its people seemed in a continuous revolt, I remember recognizing that.

I got lost in the supermarket once. I had been distracted by the abundance of things, sweets in particular, and lost sight of Father who was moving through the aisles with an ease

that I, at the time, found disconcerting... Father must have found me after a few minutes, as terrified as I was. I can't remember ever experiencing a similar loneliness again.

Over the years, I have seen strangers serenade your martyrdom as if it were theirs. I have seen you join their laments and give them consolation in return. I would try to interiorize the words, unaware that their purpose was to conceal — not reveal — what no one outside of this almost invisible covenant of witnesses to the fall of a deadly empire should know. The world you have conceived for your daughters and granddaughters has not come to fruition; your revolution has lost its glory.

It had only been a matter of time until Alzheimer's would overtake you: Great Aunt Nwara had it, as did your mother before. That's how you made sense of it for yourself and for me. I brought it up with you once, in a premature attempt to assure you that I had accepted it and that you wouldn't have to worry about me.

»And Nna Nwara was in France«, you played along, to assure me in return that there was really nothing that could be done. *They can have their France, if it only were to keep you from leaving me*, I thought, only to be appalled to see this self-indulgent side of me.

We had a similar conversation a few times after that: repetition would become a deceptive comfort. Even now that you are in your eighties, you still call your sister Nna. This honorific, you use it not just out of respect, as I have only recently understood... After France, it was death keeping you two apart. I am ashamed that I have never seen this loneliness of yours.

You have always had your own bed, as far as I remember, even when Grandfather was still alive. Your bed was large and wooden, it stood on the left side of the spacious but sparsely furnished room. Grandfather's bed stood to the right, next to the window. As teenagers, Warda and I, inseparable during the summer, slept on the floor, in the narrow aisle between both of your beds. We whispered and giggled until you made us stop, reminding us, with a tinge of ostentatious boredom, how us girls were expected to behave. We understood that you were the vanguard of something that neither my cousin nor I would want to explore. By that time, our grandfather had found God and almost never raised his voice. When he did, it felt as if the person who had elicited this impious reaction incurred a transcendent wrath not only upon themselves but also on everyone else in the room.

One night Warda ignored your warning and continued to make me laugh over some silliness.

»What is it?« Grandfather asked, without raising his voice.

»It's nothing«, you said, knowing we would not dare to answer.

My dear cousin and I got away that night the way we did a few other times when, each of us encouraged by the presence of the other, youthful daring led us to explore what was possible. Now that I think about it, this was probably when I came to the conclusion that belonging had to be negotiable — my cultural-political work in Germany as well as my writing have been driven by that — and that every move was a win, even if it was as small and volatile as Grandfather's conciliatory silence in those moments.

It must have started shortly after your sister-in-law, whom you had taken care of despite her increased propensity to violence, died of Alzheimer's, too. It was around the same time that the end of the Hirak movement, which some have declared a peaceful version of your War of Independence against France, had announced itself in the midst of a global pandemic.

It was at the beginning of the Hirak in 2019 that I had last seen you, before the symptoms started to show. I had secretly come to Alger to demonstrate: against Bouteflika's fifth mandate, for a better Algeria, in honor of you and all the other ever-grieving poetesses.

A Letter to Grandmother

I remember you rebuking me for not telling you I was going... I smiled carefully, and I felt my heart bursting when you returned that smile. Your eyes were more weary than usual.

I just returned home to Berlin from a visit with you a few days ago. You seemed embarrassed when I told you that I was writing about you. You claimed that you knew nothing, since your father hadn't allowed you to go to school, and you got to talking for a bit about how you and your sister used to herd the cows when you were little girls, and that your cousin went to school but she didn't do well in it, and that your father took care of you as best as he could.

The heat has become unbearable in Kabylia; our neighbor's well has run dry... The olive trees are enduring, for now at least. You started crying the night before my departure. I didn't, for the first time in 30 years. I will always be your favorite, and you mine.

Love, Amel

