

Silence Reigns

Tunisia, 1953

She didn't wait for the clock to ring. She woke up long before. She woke up from another dreamless sleep, a strange feeling in her chest, but it was her belly that she caressed, and the life inside it that she felt. It was a boy. That's what the wise women and men of her village in Kerkennah told her. They also said that by the time her boy would come, they would have driven the French away from their land. They even promised her that he wouldn't be born colonized; that he wouldn't be called uncivilized. And she believed them.

The clock on the pale wall of her room struck midnight. She felt an increasing uneasiness in her chest. She looked at the clock again. She wanted to freeze it until the prophecy of her fellow villagers became reality. But it was too late. The hands of the clock moved on, announcing another day: December 25th, 1953. She had promised herself not to give birth in that month, for it was a month of death, not life. Farhat Hached had died the previous December. He was Kerkenien, like them. He left the island for the city to fight against the colonial system that was crushing them. He established the first Tunisian workers' syndicate. He called for equal rights between Tunisians and French. And when he led the independence movement with Bourguiba and Ben Youssef, his fellow islanders inside and outside Kerkennah rallied behind him until they heard of his assassination by the French that took place in December 1952. After his death, she gathered with other women and men in the village and listened in tears as they pledged to carry on Hached's legacy and to free the country by his first anniversary. And she believed them.

The clock's hands seemed to be moving too fast, as if following her quickening breath and rapid heartbeat. She pursed her lips, tightened her fingers around the fabric of her dress, then shook

her head several times. Each time, she seemed to be saying no, not now; each time, she seemed to grow more adamant. But he, who was inside, was more adamant than she was, for he kicked hard. And with her screams, all promises were shattered. Soon, the women from the village surrounded her. Their faces were yellow in the dim lamplight. “Push, push,” they all cried. She did not believe them this time. She did not push. She just screamed in pain as he squeezed his way out of her. Her scream soon mingled with his cry. But as she held him against her chest, they looked at each other in silence. Nothing was left to say. Silence reigned.

Morocco, 1984

The baby had grown into a man.

And now, it was his turn.

He walked into the living room and sat next to his wife. In silence, they watched the news about his country, Tunisia. Men and women filled the streets there. They protested against their president Bourguiba and his policies. Soon they were chased by police and by the bullets flying out of their guns. More than sixty were dead, the journalist said. She turned off the TV, but the images continued to roll through her head. She watched them again and again, then wrapped her hands around her belly, as if to protect her unborn child from the chaos in her head. She turned around, looked at him, and pressed her hands even further against her belly, as if to tell him that she would never take her baby to that chaotic place he called his home country.

He looked back at her, smiling, then told her that those who come to life in silence were never born; that he was born in the loud chaos of Tunisian independence; that he was actually born in 1956, not in 1953. And in the 1970s, when Bourguiba, the liberator, had turned into a dictator, he too walked in the streets with his Tunisian compatriots. Together, they claimed back their

country with loud shouts. But the police chased them. And the dictator wanted to silence them. Forever. So he ran and ran until he found himself out of the country, first in Niger, then in Morocco. Now, he told her, as he sat in his apartment in Casablanca, it was time to return, for the dictatorship was about to fall.

He was about to walk out of the living room when she started to breathe hard. She wrapped her hands around her belly and screamed loud. She screamed at him that it was time. She screamed in pain in the delivery room. She screamed in fear when she saw her baby silent in the nurse's hands. She screamed until she heard the cry of her baby girl. She held her tight to her chest, and watched her cry. She then turned around and gave her to him. He took her in his arms and lulled her to sleep, humming the songs of Bob Marley, for those were the only ones he knew: songs about the revolution and the better future he promised his baby girl.

Tunisia, 1987

The baby girl had a sister.

The sister was me.

And the he was my father now.

When my father held me in his arms for the first time, Bourguiba was still in Tunisia; the dictatorship had not fallen. When my father held me in his arms, he didn't hum any song, for he had stopped listening to Bob Marley by then. All his generation had. They stopped singing about the revolution. They stopped talking about the revolution. Instead, they smoked and bitterly mocked their dictator. Instead, they drank wine and whiskey and cursed their world. And in the ears of their newborns, they no longer whispered promises, for deep down they had accepted silence. And in silence, I was born.

Tunisia, January 2011

There was another birth. A new beginning. Or end?

Both, or neither?

I don't know.

All I know is that it was my turn now.

I ran very fast in the streets of Tunis. I ran with the crowd, then alone, and only stopped when I saw our apartment door. I collapsed on the floor, panting for air, my heart throbbing hard, and the words of the crowd still echoing in my head; "Down with the dictator! Down with Ben Ali!" I shook my head and rummaged through my bag for the keys before bringing myself to my feet and opening the door. When I stepped inside, I saw my father and my mother standing in front of me, quivering. They looked at me with angry eyes. I told them I was all right. And as the day started to roll through my mind, I felt a warmth inside my heart. That's what hope must feel like.

I sat next to my parents in the living room. In silence, we watched the news about Tunisia. It was January 14th, 2011. My father switched from one news channel to the other, keeping count of the dead, until he heard the journalist say that Ben Ali had left the country. "He left!" we all cried in disbelief. At that moment, I had the strange feeling that everything was possible. That's what freedom must feel like — or maybe rebirth. So I started counting the newborns. And by the end of the night, as my father was having his usual glass of wine and cigarette, I told him the final count; we were ten million born that night. My father patted my head and let out a laugh, whose bitterness I did not understand, not back then.

I did not understand. Instead, I rushed to university the following day, dreaming of our new democracy and eager to start rebuilding our country. But the university was empty that day, and

the day after, and the day after that. And when students finally came back, they split into many groups. In one, I heard students parroting Marx's words and promising their comrades a heaven on earth. In the second, I heard others parroting the words of the Koran and promising their brothers and sisters a heaven above the sky. In the third, a student declared that we needed another Bourguiba to lead the country. In the fourth, they all cursed Bourguiba, the seculars, and the enemies of Islam. And in the last, they prayed for Ben Ali to come back.

I did not understand, even when I saw this happening in the whole country during the following months.

I did not understand even that day in June, when I walked to the exam room and heard the classmate who always spoke in French, and never in Arabic, explain to her friends that all the problems and miseries in our country were the result of colonization and the ongoing Western conspiracy against the Arab world. I did not understand, even when I walked inside the room and sat next to the girl who often joked that we should have remained colonized for nothing good could come out of us. No, I did not understand, even when I saw the contempt in her eyes as she looked at all of us in that exam room.

I only understood when I looked up at the clock on the wall and saw its unmoving hands, for in them I suddenly glimpsed our past, present, and future and realized how unborn we all were. And when I finally understood, I bent over my paper exam, like everybody else.

Silence reigned.