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The Gift

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The Gift

A note from the translator: This story was originally published in 1987 in a collection of historical essays and memoirs on the Algerian war, Alger: ville de guerre. It was written by Anatole Villeneuve, the correspondent and novelist, on the occasion of his return to Algiers after an absence of twenty-five years. Villeneuve died in December of 2001 while on assignment for Le Monde. He and his Algerian driver were killed—their throats had been cut—when their car was stopped by Salafist extremists at a roadblock on the way back to Algiers from Blida. He was doing research for a long article of analysis on the decade of sad and heavy violence that Algeria had endured at the hands of militant Islamic groups.

—Raoul Mention

I was born in Algiers to French parents in the summer of 1949.

I grew up by the side of the sea in a postcard world beneath a high and open sky of transparent blue. The baffling maze of the city straddled the virid hills that ramped up from an immense, incurving harbor. Dazzling beaches skirted endlessly to the north and south. The air bore the giddy, evanescent perfumes of flora and the ever-present marine odors that surged up from the bay, and the city, hovering between illusion and reality, shimmered under the terrific onslaught of North African sunlight.

For the first years of my life, I lived with my father and mother and our aged housekeeper, Madame Corday, in a vast, airy apartment on the Boulevard du Télemly.

My early childhood knew an unbounded, an unfettered, happiness, then life changed.



On November 1st of 1954, the Algerian war broke out.¹
Where was the war?

It was not in the palmettos that thrived in the handsome terraced gardens in the well-tended French parts of the city. I did not find it in

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the endless thrum of cicadas that dwelled unseen in the cypresses in the park across from our building. The glut of blinding, unrefracted light along the arcaded seafront was insufficient to illuminate its dis-tempered face.

Where would I, at so young an age, find this war?



It was late on a September afternoon in 1956. The warm lemony-yellow sunlight filtered through the languid air heavy with sea-damp. My radiant young mother and I had been strolling down the Boulevard Michelet not far from the university where my father taught. Her step was unhurried; we were on our way to pick him up to go to the cinema and we were early. She paused for a lingering moment, her smiling green eyes drawn to a display of parti-colored dresses in the window of a boutique. I dashed ahead and rounded the corner and flattened myself against a wall, attempting to conceal myself behind a pilaster. We played this game often.

There was a shattering explosion. The building against my back trembled seismically.

I rushed back and beheld my mother, fallen onto the sidewalk. I saw only her and was deafened by my own overwhelming horror. She wore a boldly striped dress in vivid ultramarine and brilliant white—I still see this detail with exceptional clarity—and appeared unharmed. Small, insignificant pieces of debris were scattered around her, some across the top of her. Nothing was of a size I imagined possible to cause a mortal injury. I knelt next to her and picked a tiny stone from her russet hair. I shook her bare, freckled shoulder doubtfully, then with increasing vigor. I cried out, "*Maman*," but got no response. Again and again I called to her, but she lay unquestionably still.

My reaction to this—and this was the fallen wonder of the world—was intuitive, visceral. My entire body jerked with breathless, disconsolate grief. I burst into tears, heaving convulsively. I was much too young to apprehend in full the nature, the gravity, of what had occurred, and I could in no way fathom why.

A small carmine spot appeared on her dress above the belt. My nose was beginning to run and I watched, hushed and immobile, as

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the specter grew larger. Mere elastic seconds had passed and everything felt arrantly different.

A gendarme pulled me away from her. I clutched her hand as he brought me to my feet, and called her name once more, though I knew she could not hear me. He unloosened my grasp and gently lowered her arm and led me away.

My mother and six others were killed by the blast of a bomb hidden inside the pannier of a bicycle that had been left leaning against a lamppost near the tables on the crowded terrace at a café.



My mother's brother, Philippe Quant, was a businessman. He made his home in Menton, but traveled often. He paid irregular visits to Algeria and, when in town, always stayed at our apartment. This practice continued even after the death of my mother. Though he and my father could not have been more different in appearance and conduct, their relationship—contrary to what might have been expected—had deepened following her death.

My uncle was everything my father was not. He towered in my mind like a monolith, some massive, unshaped stone that men before time had raised up for some human purpose that would forever remain unclear. He was a large man of imposing dimensions and a military demeanor, always tan and muscular. Impulsive and instinctive, my uncle was a man of action not given to contemplation. He made an effort to appear garrulous and warm and outgoing. His very otherness drew me to him like iron to lodestone.

I looked forward to his sojourns, which came without exception as a surprise. He would simply arrive unannounced and unexpected, but always welcome. His presence sparked a festival atmosphere; his company was enough to brighten all our moods. I welcomed his visits, his talk, as he sat at the table after dinner or paced across our balcony with a view of the Mediterranean and spoke of the excitements of his faraway world.

He never failed to bring me a gift. As it would any child, this pleased me tremendously. The bestowal of the present always took place in a carefully structured ritual of generosity. Following an elaborate dinner in our apartment the first night of his visit, he would

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excuse himself and disappear into his bedroom. He would return a minute later with pretty wrapped boxes of various sizes—gifts for everyone. This included Madame Corday, who was especially susceptible to his charms and had grown rather fond of him in a motherly way and catered to him shamelessly during his visits.

Each would be presented his or her gift in an unvarying sequence. My uncle set the box on the polished table in front of the beneficiary, in the spot occupied only moments earlier by the emptied bowl that had held dessert. Each present was to be unwrapped and acknowledged before the next one was handed over. Before her death, my mother had always come first, then my father. Madame Corday was summoned to the dining room and given her gift, which she opened, then retreated to the kitchen muttering her effusive thanks.

I always came last. The wait was a torment.

“And finally,” he said, “this is for you.” My gift was put before me.

Over the years, he had given me an illuminated globe, a telescope, postage stamps from around the world, a wrist compass, a leather-banded wristwatch, silver and gold coins, rich-colored and practically valueless foreign currency, an unwieldy French-Latin dictionary, and a legion of toys. In time, I came to understand how my acceptance of these gifts acknowledged obligation to my uncle and to his authority.



My father was a professor of philosophy. His was a world of ideas and books and reflection. He never spoke without first carefully choosing his words.

In my earliest memories, I saw him reviewing a manuscript at the cluttered desk in his study congested with books. They lined each wall from floor to ceiling and stood in tall, precarious stacks on the floor. He hunched within the bright loop of light cast by the desk lamp, his face inches from whatever he was looking over. From time to time he would sit up and take a long, thoughtful drag off of his cigarette, then replace it deliberately in the ashtray by his side. He removed the thick-lensed eyeglasses that he needed for reading and rubbed the bridge of his nose where the frames left wine-colored impressions in the skin if he wore them for long periods of time.

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I loved my father, of course, but it was the expected filial love foretold by the relationship of a child to a parent. A sense of pity prevailed in my feelings for him. It was as though something inside him, something essential and irremediable, had disintegrated when my mother was killed.



My uncle fascinated me. I was too recklessly callow to be skeptical of him, too hopefully young to know any better.

He was prone to unforeseeable shifts in temperament and, a number of times, I had observed an abrupt change in his mood in discussions with my father. They disagreed unequivocally on the matter of Algerian independence. When aggravated by something my father had said, his face turned a deep purplish-red and his breathing became noisy and uneven. Though seething and impatient to speak his mind, he said nothing if I were in the room. Their discussions were continued in loud, impassioned whispers long after I had gone to bed. He was not the kind of person to whom one could tell things he did not want to hear.

In the morning he was once again his jovial self and acted as though nothing had taken place the evening before.

When asked what he did, my uncle's answers were vague, unsatisfying. "Import-export" had been his customary response for many years. Later, this was changed to the no less inexact "construction."

He had been in the French army and had served as a junior officer in Indochina. He often told me rambling, captivating stories about the military and about life during wartime, but was little inclined to speak with me about what he had specifically done. He made it all sound like some magnificent glorious adventure, like wondrous scenes from a movie. His tales made me long to go where he had gone, to do what he had done. In many ways, he became my model.

He had witnessed the humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the loss of French hegemony in Indochina. Two years later he served for a brief period in the confusing intervention in Suez. Following these two embarrassments to French international prestige—one coming so soon after the other—he left the army.

He was a gambler and an irredeemable liar. He was a chauvinist,

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above all in that which concerned Algeria—the last significant interest of the French Empire—and a racist.

Once, outside the train station at Bab-el-Oued, his fury erupted against an Arab vendor selling candy and cigarettes who had given him incorrect change. He had purchased dragées for me, Chesterfields for himself. My uncle struck the Arab, whose left leg had been amputated at mid-thigh, with such sudden and surprising force that the man lost the balance his crutch provided and tumbled to the ground. His fall upset the wooden tray that held his wares. Packs of French and American cigarettes and small boxes of matches skittered across the sidewalk. Brightly colored balls of hard candy bounced into the street. My uncle stood above the man, who shielded his ears and face from the repeated blows with his upraised arms, and accused him of theft. He screamed an unending sequence of lashing racial slurs, the mildest of which, *sale arabe*, expressed clearly his contempt, his hatred, of the autochthonous Algerian population.

My uncle was a soldier and a patriot, both fiercely proud and critical of France. He remained confident that, despite the setbacks that had so demoralized him, he would once again see the mother country reclaim the glory that had been lost in the defeat and occupation of 1940.

He was a Roman Catholic and an alcoholic.

He was a terrorist.



For my twelfth birthday, he brought me a knife, keen as a razor. It was a United States Marine Corps combat knife. My father thoroughly disapproved of it. I prized it above all else that my uncle had given me.

It was a perhaps unwitting acknowledgement of the primacy of the position my uncle occupied in my life that I ignored my father's frequent requests that I not carry it with me. I was completely under the imprecise spell my uncle had cast; I breathed the heady perfume of disobedience.



One dreary, wet afternoon in March of 1962, I answered the ring of our bell—Madame Corday had taken the day off, she had gone to

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Hydra to visit her sister—and opened the door on my rain-soaked uncle. That sad year had been uncharacteristically damp and cold.

He showered, changed and borrowed one of my father's coats. Before leaving he asked that I say nothing of his visit. I looked into his eyes and saw the urgency in his request. I could not refuse and I was flattered to be included in what I imagined to be some sort of benign conspiracy. I agreed without a moment's thought.

"Will you be back for dinner?" I asked eagerly, expecting his affirmation.

His look was furtive. "I'll see you tomorrow." His manner was brusque and he turned on his heel and strode out of the apartment.

The next afternoon, at the end of my school day, I was walking with a group of my classmates down the arched passageway that led to the Rue Franklin. When I reached the sidewalk, I spotted my uncle waiting for me across the street.

"*Mon oncle*," I cried excitedly to my friends. I caught his eye and he took a last anxious draw on his cigarette, then ground out the stub on the pavement.

I had often boasted of him to them. On frequent occasions I had brought out the knife he had given me and held it before them. I exulted in their reverential and envious admiration of it.

I parroted his opinions on all matters, most fervidly on those concerning Algerian independence, and I spoke assuredly, almost arrogantly, as if his beliefs were both unassailable and genuinely my own.

I never mentioned to anyone my father's sentiments on the matter. He believed that greater violence would do nothing to remedy the injustices of the past, and that Algeria's eventual destiny did not lie in French hands. He was in agreement with de Gaulle, arguing that the days of French Algeria were ineluctably numbered. These were manifestly unpopular—and for me, dishonorable—attitudes for a *pied-noir*² to have held in the spring of 1962. I was not sufficiently mature to have thought through the issue and to have formed well-reasoned opinions of my own. Myopically, I took the side of my uncle in this matter.

Among those my age, there was unquestioning support for the

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OAS.³ Its members seemed to me admirable, even romantic, heroes fighting for a worthwhile cause, though I truly understood little of what it was that they did. Because of the susceptibilities and inclinations of someone so young—I was that spring not yet thirteen years old—it was easy to ignore what I had heard about the methods the OAS employed. I believed that the end—the continuation of French authority over Algeria—justified the means. In those years my sympathy did not extend to the enemy.

Without looking, I darted toward where my uncle stood on the far sidewalk. A battered black Renault Dauphine skidded to a shrieking, sidling halt—I froze. The passenger door stopped only inches from me. The two men in the car had blanched, startled faces. My heart raced crazily; my whole body shook like the branches of a tree.

My uncle ran to the car, reproving the driver in harsh language for not driving more carefully. The driver turned a steely face to him and said not a word. My uncle became silent at once and the rabid color drained from his face. A look of recognition that neither man was able to conceal reciprocated between them.

"*Vas-y*," my uncle said in a diminished voice. The driver engaged the starter and it took a long while before the engine finally caught. He stared at me with slow-burning anger, then chose first gear with a hard gnashing crump and tore away from us.

I noticed that a shopping bag had fallen onto the floor behind the front seats. Some objects had spilled from inside of it—a baguette, a few oranges and a package wrapped in newspaper and bound with twine. I thought nothing of it at the time.

"Anatole?" a voice shouted.

Reluctantly I turned; some of my classmates had observed what had happened. They stood in a tight pack in front of the school.

"*Ça va*," I said in a wavering voice that I hoped sounded unconcerned to my friends, though my ear heard only the distress and the shame that my words contained.

"Are you coming?"

I waved at them to go on without me.

Once back on the sidewalk, my uncle put one strong hand on

each of my shoulders. "You must be more careful," he admonished. His words held a harsh edge. I turned my attention toward my friends as they raced toward the corner, hollering gladly. The bite of his grip doubled and began to hurt. "You could have been killed."

I writhed, twisting out of his grasp, and stepped back into one of the soggy mounds of half-burnt rubbish that had been accumulating for days on the sidewalk. I slipped and fell onto my buttocks into the reeking trash. With a bone-jarring blow, my elbow slammed the ground. The hardness of the concrete took my breath away and the pain brought hot, mortifying tears that I was unable to restrain. I looked anywhere but at my uncle.

He stretched his hand down to me and began in a softer tone, "Listen to me..."

His words were buried by the deafening thud of an explosion from the direction of the Avenue de Bouzaréah. He reacted without hesitation.

I struggled to my feet and struck out after him and reached the intersection a few seconds later. My uncle was kneeling in the cobbled roadway, attempting to help one of my classmates. Henri Beyle, the boy who had called out to me, lay in a pool of dark, glistening blood and both his legs were gone below the knee. I saw him blink. His face had an oyster-gray tint and I found it unimaginable that he made not a sound. In his hand he still held his leather satchel.

Long orange flames and dense smoke of an extraordinarily rich blackness—the disjunctive thought came to me at the time that the billowing smoke and the bright jumping fire were somehow quite beautiful—lifted from the back of the Renault that had, a minute earlier, almost hit me. It was terribly mangled, its tires flattened, all its glass missing. Its right rear door had been blown open and dangled outward, held only by the lower hinge. It was the third car back in a chain of cars that had stopped to let my classmates cross the street.

A thinner grayish smoke, galling and caustic, clouded the air. My eyes watered, my vision blurred. I stood on the corner stock-still, trying once again to grasp the incomprehensible.

In the car behind the Renault, its front end twisted and scorched by the explosion, the driver still sat in his seat, his head canted back

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and to one side, his impassive face bloodied. The windshield had splintered and had been blown in against him. A man and a woman lay without moving on the sidewalk.

The ground where I stood was strewn with long slivers of glass from the goldsmith's windows. Across the street the tables and chairs at the Bar Palace were toppled and twisted and scattered in disorder along the sidewalk and into the street. The umbrellas that had once shaded the bar's patrons were in tatters.

From afar I heard the rueful wail of a siren and slowly I moved into the street. My uncle had unlaced his boots and fabricated crude tourniquets for Henri's legs. He went from boy to boy, helping those he could and offering words of encouragement to those less severely hurt. I was capable of doing nothing more than wander in a numb stupor among the moans and the weeping of the injured and stare at their wounds so grotesquely red and black. My emotions were confused, blunted by everything I heard and saw.

Often, I had imagined my uncle in battle, but what I now beheld bore no resemblance to the blithe portraits of martial life he had painted when I was younger.

This was merely one of several bombings that had taken place that day in Algiers. The only thing to differentiate it from the others was that so many of my friends—boys that had been companions for most of my life—had been victims. In addition to losing his legs, Henri Beyle suffered horrific internal injuries. He died two days later.

Four others died that afternoon in the explosion—the two men in the Renault along with a young couple who had been walking arm in arm along the sidewalk.



Sirens approached and with haste my uncle ushered me into a parked car and took me home. I didn't have the presence of mind to inquire where he had gotten a car, much less the fuel to put into it—a pronounced shortage of gasoline vexed Algeria. When we had stopped in front of my building, he held out my father's coat. "Here," he said.

Without a word I took it and his massive hand gripped my leg above the knee as I turned to open the door. I did not look at him.

"Don't tell anyone that you saw me."

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I very quietly said yes.

"This is not a game," he said gravely.

I waited for a long time in great indecision before I said, "You're OAS, aren't you?"

"Is that what you believe?"

I was unable to give him a clear idea of what I was thinking. One knotted thought succeeded another and supplanted it before the earlier one had had a chance to take root. I couldn't have spoken without appearing to talk nonsense. I nodded, murmuring an indistinct sound.

"Do you think France cares any longer what happens to Algeria?" He awaited my reply, but I was silent. "No one else can save this country."

Speech was impossible.

An expression of savage resentment passed across his face, as if spurred by a sudden disagreeable thought. "De Gaulle has betrayed us. We alone control our destiny." There was frenzy in what he said and I was, for the first time in my life, scared of him. "We are fighting to safeguard a Christian influence in Algeria." His breathing was broken and loud and a froth of saliva had accumulated below the lip in one corner of his mouth.

I made a move to get out of the car and he let go of me. I did not watch as he drove away.



I mounted the stairs to our apartment in a thoroughly downcast mood. My uncle had, for many years, been my idol. He had satisfied needs the existence of which I was consciously unaware and had served a role that I could not define. I grew up without a mother, and the emotional aspects of the relationship with my father had always remained in the shadows of the intellectual.

Nothing explicitly linked my uncle to what had occurred on the Avenue de Bouzaréah; it was simply something I felt. The thought I could not banish was that he knew the man in the Renault and had played some not insignificant role in the bombing that had injured my friends and had taken the lives of others. The corollary was that he shared responsibility for these casualties.

My sadness sprang from an abrupt awareness of how little I truly

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knew about my uncle and a sentiment that I could no longer trust him.

In the foyer I put down my books and went to the closet to hang up the coat he had returned. As I was putting it onto a hanger a small piece of paper fell to the floor. On it were written a date—four days away—a time and the name of a market near the medina.



These were the details of my uncle's life. So much of what he had told me was a bright, silver-tongued lie.

In Indochina he worked in intelligence. What this meant was that he questioned captured Vietminh guerillas. Many of the same methods of torture employed by the French to gather information in Southeast Asia would later be used systematically in North Africa.⁴

After the Suez Crisis in 1956, he had not retired from the army because of his disgust with French foreign policy and military failures, but had been court-martialed for insubordination. He was one of a small band of recalcitrant officers who had attempted to resist the withdrawal of French and British troops when the United States steadfastly opposed the Anglo-French intervention against the Egyptian nationalization of the canal.

He was a gunrunner. He sold weapons to almost anyone. His only scruple was that he would not knowingly sell arms or ammunition to any faction in opposition to French forces. This activity explained his peripatetic travels.

He suffered from depression, which he labored mightily to conceal, and was beset by an overarching pessimism. He was proud and arrogant, yet plagued by ingrained feelings of inferiority.

He came to the OAS shortly after it was organized in February of 1961. His principal areas of operation were explosives and finance. In March of that year, he had a role in the bombing in which the mayor of Evian was killed. He had coordinated the efforts to rob several banks, both in Algeria and in the *métropole*, to subsidize OAS operations.

In 1962, as the sodden winter came to a close, my uncle was summoned to Algiers.⁵

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For the third and last time the detonation of a bomb in Algiers figured significantly in my life.

Late on a Sunday afternoon, the 18th of March,⁶ I walked downhill in fitful spring sunlight. Though the rains of that morning had stopped, the sky was interspersed with occasional heroic clouds, pearl-gray and cadmium-white. I followed the many twists of the Boulevard du Télemly toward the sea. Few cars circulated. Here and there a rare store was open. A silent, stationary line of about a dozen European women trailed away from the locked door of a bakery. Buildings bore the scars of combat and the markings of the warring partisans. The black-painted slogans of the OAS were sometimes covered over by the green of the FLN. Their message though was the same: "We will win."

On the sidewalk ahead, not far from the Chemin des Sept Merveilles, three women were sorting through clothes that another tossed down to them from the balcony of a second floor apartment with every one of its windows shattered. A dress in black toile fluttered down and landed in my path. I stopped and caught the dark cautious look of one of the women as she peered at me from within her haik and veil; her eyes glinted with covetousness. I wanted to kick the dress into the street, to rip it into scraps. I suppressed my rage and stepped over it. The women averted their gazes and moved aside. As I passed, I caught the flash of a hand embellished with intricate designs in henna, and saw the ringed fingers clutch the fabric like a claw. Her heavily braceleted wrist jingled.

Further on, the pavement was littered with photographs and with envelopes, their brightly colored airmail stamps cancelled with jet-black postmarks. Broken toys, shivered dishes and glassware, kitchen utensils disfigured beyond recognition. Torn clothing spilled from the broached carcasses of plundered suitcases and trunks. A motionless cat lay in the gutter; its tongue lilled a bit and a trickle of blood from its mouth formed a short stream.

My descent continued. The desolate quiet of the afternoon was broken by the buzz of a 2CV climbing the nearby Rue Rovigo. The

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noise lingered like an echo, a faint, uncertain palpitation in the heavy stillness that followed. A foul, stray wind from the south brought to me the stench from the morgue at the Hôpital Mustapha.

I stood in the doorway of a pharmacy at the bottom of the Boulevard Gambetta, a usually busy pedestrian thoroughfare, an almost perpendicular escalade of four hundred steps on the edge of the Casbah. At the end of the deserted street, corresponding to what was written on the wrinkled scrap of paper that had fallen from my father's coat, was the Marché de la Lyre. The market, frequented by the Arab population, sold fresh produce and flowers, and was untended at this hour on a Sunday.

Parked near the steps at the south entrance of the market was the sapphire blue Citroën DS my uncle had been driving a few days previous. A jeep with a pedestal-mounted machine gun rounded the corner, its long aerial whipsawing as it came to a stop next to the empty car. The soldier in the passenger seat spoke into the handset of his radio, then waited. The driver grabbed a rifle and with a swaggering gait walked over to a group of Arab men loitering just outside the market. The gunner kept the vented barrel of his automatic weapon trained on the men. Above circled a helicopter. With a brash wave of his weapon, the driver dismissed the men, and, without argument, they turned their backs on him and walked away. He got back in and with a lurch the jeep hurried off.

I waited for perhaps five minutes, minutes that felt like hours; no one returned. The clock at St. Augustine's rang the hour. In the sky, saturate blue and clear now, the sun was low and the violet shadows of the sudden North African sunset were lengthening rapidly, the air starting to cool. With the approach of nightfall, my solitude, my isolation, weighed more heavily and my thoughts focused on getting home before the curfew at eight. I had only two hours. The helicopter vanished. I listened purposefully. The clap of its rotors, simultaneously both sharp and dull, receded, leaving me alone with the sound of my breathing. A faint onshore breeze crept up—the odor of diesel from the fishing boats and that of their catch.

A long, anxious silence prevailed.

From within the market a thundering blast rang out, the air

shook. Though it was a sound I had grown up with, I had never become fully accustomed to it, especially at such close range. An explosion never failed to quicken the rate of my pulse, to shake my nerves, to make me anticipate. When, where, will the next one be?

Preposterously, without concern for myself, I ran inside the market. Weak light filtered down from the grimy clerestory windows. Dust was everywhere in the air. I stumbled forward in the half-light, groped along the low wooden counters covered with canvas, finally hearing a slight grunting and a thumping, scuffling sound. After a while I located the source. My uncle sat on the ground attempting to push a fallen beam with his shoulder. He strained and groaned, but made no progress. The body of another man lay with fatal languor a few feet away. I approached and saw that the deep wooden beam had collapsed in such a way that my uncle's right hand was pinned.

Without a word I went to his side and tried with all my might to dislodge the beam. Even with the two of us working in concert, we could not budge it. We tried several approaches, each as futile as the one before.

He howled, a long string of indignant epithets suggesting a trapped animal.

Again we tried, and again.

I sat down after a while, breathing hard and thoroughly exhausted, and looked at my uncle's face, smeared with sweat and smudge and dust. "What happened?" Nothing had been said up to that point except words relating to our efforts to lift the beam.

My uncle ignored me, glaring with spite at the timber. He glanced around. "Get that." With his free hand he indicated a long wooden shaft. I followed his instructions to create a lever and how best to position my weight for greatest advantage. This I then did and, with a heartsickening snap, the shaft cracked and I plummeted to the ground.

A flicker of defiance continued to burn, fed more by tenacity than logic. Once more he strained against the implacable beam until it seemed the veins in his neck would burst. Suddenly, as if something vital had snapped, he went limp and let out an agonized moan.

After a long moment he asked, "Do you have your knife?"

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I removed it from my jacket pocket and slid the long blade from its sheath. "I always carry it." We exchanged a glance without a word. "You can not let them find me alive."

I realized immediately what he meant,⁷ but I wasn't sure what he wanted me to do.

I heard voices jabbering in Arabic. He grimaced and closed his eyes.

"I don't understand." I could barely get the words out, my ungainly tongue caught and stuck inside my mouth.

He shook his head slowly, then opened his eyes and stared directly at me. "You must kill me," he whispered. And though he spoke with precise directness, the effect was almost that of absolute blandness.

I was stunned. My inclination was to refuse, to proclaim my inability to do any such thing, but I had no time to express my disbelief, my bewildered surprise. Again, the unnerving voices in Arabic—where were they coming from, were they any closer? I was unable to tell. My uncle's look was imperative, not just imploring but commanding me to act. I knew that he expected not to be disobeyed and in his eyes I saw real fear, something, certainly, he was not in the habit of displaying.

My chest was hollow, my heart clamoring like hammers on steel. Though light-minded and utterly confused—I was nonetheless certain we would both be killed if we were caught—I hesitated only an instant. Not knowing still from where the impulse came, I pressed the blade against his flesh, shut my eyes, and slashed with all my might.

Through the shaft of the knife, I felt sinew tear, then a slight, only momentary, resistance. There was a quick jerking release and I felt bone break. This brought an odd dissonant sensation into my fingers. All of this occurred in a single continuous motion that had taken place within a fraction of a second. I had severed the captive hand from his wrist.

Pain subverted his features. The anesthesia of shock was not immediate and the sound of his screams made me recoil and shudder. My intestines and rectum contracted. He was breathing loudly in ago-

nized, rapid gasps and tried to say something. I leaned in toward his lips. All I could make out were the words, "It's you."

"That's right," I said in a way I hoped would reassure him. I removed one of my bootlaces and lashed it around his forearm—it seemed to me that no one could survive the loss of so much blood. "It's me. I'm right here." I cut a swatch of fabric from my jacket and dressed the wound.

"That's not what..." His eyes bore into mine.

Suddenly, I understood.

The voices moved closer.

"You've got to get up." I spoke in a way I had never spoken before. All doubt was gone—I spoke with authority and certainty.

He made a first effort to stand and, drawing on strength I knew not existed, I hauled him to his feet and dragged, more than led, him to his car. Though I continued to hear distant voices from time to time, we encountered no one. Gradually, the throbbing murmur of a helicopter grew louder. From somewhere quite close, the dull thud of mortar fire drilled at my nerves. Once inside the Citroën, my uncle lapsed into complete unconsciousness. Though I had never before driven, I somehow got him to the Hôpital Maillot.



My father decided that I must leave Algeria. On another Sunday, the 8th of April, I sullenly boarded an Air France Caravelle. I flew first to Marseilles, then rode on a train bound for Paris. Another took me to sunless Lille, where I lived with my paternal grandmother until I was eighteen.

After Algiers life seemed far less remarkable, less new.

My uncle was tried by a French court and found guilty of sedition. He served eighteen months in the prison at Toulon. He died in an automobile accident in the north of Spain in 1975, four days shy of his fiftieth birthday. He had been supplying arms to Basque separatists, the ETA.

Though I wrote to him numerous times, he didn't answer my letters. I never learned what went wrong that day at the Marché de la Lyre.

My father believed the propaganda spouted by the FLN before

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independence. He was confident that a new Algerian government would welcome—indeed, it would have need of—those Europeans who desired to remain. He assured me that I could return home, should I wish, once the political situation stabilized.

His usual perspicacity was clouded by his optimism that the two communities could fashion a harmonious coexistence and by his sentimental attachment to Algiers—he had come there for the first time with the Free French during the Second World War and returned afterward. He failed to recognize that independence would represent a complete reversal of the patterns of existence for the French community, which had enjoyed the franchise of 130 years of colonial domination. On the Arab side, coexistence would demand the suppression of the instinct for vengeance that this domination would have inspired, an instinct made all the more sharp by eight years of savage war.

Not long after the creation of the Algerian republic, my father's mutilated body was found inside a sack at the foot of one of the red clocks in the Place des Trois Horloges. Three days earlier, he had been abducted when leaving his office at the university.⁸ A letter from him, dated the day before his disappearance, spoke of the promising, though still volatile, situation in Algiers. He expressed cautious optimism that he would see me before the end of the year.



The Algiers I loved was sensual—scents, colors, sounds.

The fresh nimbus of cloud and light at sweet-smelling sunrise, primrose and pink. The magnetic blue of the whispering sea with its uncounted moods and scents. The irrepressible heat, the weight, of summer. The faintly irised light of the midday sun in cooler, damper weather. Winters were brief with rain, silvery white and chill, driven by a bawling northwest wind crossing the bay, sky and water the same grief-stricken tint, slate-gray and indistinguishable. And at night the silence breached by the barking of dogs, the long, swelling wail from the horns of departing steamers.

But was the city more than this—a succession of unreal, intoxicating sensations, images not only recallable, but which return all by themselves?

Algiers was my infancy, my youth. My life there was a movement through the long, opaque years of childhood, a movement toward intensifying clarity. Algiers was also a place, a city, a marvelous landscape, where I first began to develop the memory of self and to grapple with the problems of necessity and possibility.

This was the place that has remained eternal in my heart, a city that has long ceased to exist.

Notes

¹ On that day, the FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*), an indigenous nationalist movement, organized attacks on French military installations and public works. This initiated a campaign of terror that soon took as its primary target those who could not fight back—the civilian European population. The FLN's purpose was to bring the plight of Algeria to world attention with the ultimate goal of securing a sovereign Algerian state. Kidnappings, assassinations, and, above all, bombings became routine occurrences.

² Someone of French ancestry born or residing in North Africa, particularly in Algeria.

³ The OAS (*Organisation Armée Secrète*) was a mutinous faction of the French military and those that shared its determination to maintain Algeria in French hands.

⁴ The use of torture in interrogations during the Algerian war is well documented. General Jacques Massu, the commander of French forces during the Battle of Algiers, admitted without equivocation and without apology to the use of torture in his account of the campaign, *La vraie bataille d'Alger*. His justification was the immediate need to obtain FLN operational information to save innocent lives. The memoirs of General Paul Aussaresses, who served in Algeria from 1955 to 1957, have unrepentantly confirmed Massu's assertions. The name of Jean-Marie Le Pen, a frequent French presidential candidate from the extreme right, most recently in 2002, is often linked with the use of torture in North Africa. Le Pen served as a paratroop lieutenant for a brief time in Algeria in 1957. In 1962 Le Pen admitted to having participated in torture, a statement he later retracted, claiming that his

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actions did not warrant that characterization.

⁵ The OAS was responding to an escalation of violence by the FLN. The OAS sought, as a final desperate measure, to trigger a direct confrontation between the Arab and European communities, which would, in turn, provoke the French forces of order to intervene. They adopted as their own the very same blind terrorism that had worked so effectively for the FLN.

⁶ At six o'clock that evening, Algerian television announced the signing of the Evian Accords and the cease-fire between France and the FLN. For the *pièdes-noirs*, this signaled their indisputable abandonment by de Gaulle. The frantic response of the OAS was without precedent.

⁷ It was a common practice of the FLN to cut off the sex organs of their prisoners, then to insert the genitalia into the victim's mouth.

⁸ In the first few months after the Algerian war came to an official end, over 20,000 Europeans lost their lives in the violence that continued after independence was won. Of the over 3000 kidnapped in that period, a little more than 1200 were released.

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