

L'Ambiance

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L'Ambiance

A strange spring day was unfolding in the streets of the city. The air was filled with small, white clouds up high. . . but the normally cloudy Tessala mountain was clearly visible. Without much effort even its narrow pathways, surrounded by pines and conifers, could be seen. The trees lining the streets between the city center and the national gendarmerie were covered in white balls of fluff which seemed about to burst with green buds.

It was Wednesday.

I pushed through the colorful beaded curtain and entered l'Ambiance. For a short moment I heard the soft sound of the beads crashing into each other behind me. I sat in a corner and ordered a quarter bottle of Rosé. Then I took out a book.

Yusuf was alone.

He put down my bottle and glass, sat down, and smiled (his face was triangular, thin and shaven). He opened the bottle (his fingers were long and bony), and pushed it towards me (his sleeves were clean but worn). I looked at him (his eyes were small and brilliant). I poured him a small glass (his shirt was cotton and squared).

"Thanks, but I don't drink," he said.

"Beer... or something else?"

"No, I never drink... I never drink alcohol."

The cold wine tasted almost sweet. After the I finished first glass, I felt I really needed another.

"What are you reading?" Yusuf asked.

"I'm trying to read a French book."

"And here we are, wanting to learn Arabic."

I poured myself another glass. Yusuf came closer to me and smiled.

"You don't hide anything," he said.

"Well, I know many things."

"Do you know me?"

"Yes."

"Who told you about me?"

"Many people."

"I heard that you write..."

"A little."

"So are you going to visit me?"



Suddenly, an old Spanish woman screamed. She had been sitting on the square facing the Palace of Justice. She grabbed her empty bamboo basket and started running towards the network

of alleyways running between the square and the faraway boulevard next to the de Lattre de Tassigny-building. She looked like she was about to go into shock.

“Bombs! Bombs!”

Meanwhile, explosions shattered the windows of the cars parked in the street by the Cameroon café. Then the sound of sirens started to descend from the municipal theater up high. Soon two ambulances came driving through, wailing dismally. Two tanks and an ambulance came from the barracks by the public park. That was a Sunday.

In the busy Cameroon café the Europeans were watching the grand lotto results while drinking glasses of Ricard which rattled to the sound of fast music. On the other side, exactly in the center of the city, a banner was raised on a tall wall, reading in huge letters: ORGANISATION AVENIR STABILITE. Meanwhile a basket under the counter at the Cameroon café exploded. Dozens of bottles, plates and chandeliers flew around – piles of bodies and torn suits filled the café. The only thing left intact was the gramophone, the record skipping on a last bit of dancing music.

On the square and in nearby bars, people cowered to the ground.

On the square in front of the Palace of Justice, where bicycles now stood twisted like a coil of barbed wire, one bicycle sped to another square close to Sfisef and Bouhanifia street. Riding it was a skinny Algerian boy.

“It’s him... it’s him...”

A fire-engine dispersed the astonished crowd that had gathered around the smoky remains of the Cameroon café. Paramedics rushed out from the open backdoors of the ambulances. Foreign Legion soldiers, armed to the teeth, jumped out of two tanks and started marching in step through the area between the city center and the American dancehall.

“It’s him... it’s him...”

Dozens of hands were pointing to the square near Sfisef and Bouhanifiya street, where only a little while ago a bicycle had been seen rushing away...

One of the ambulances driving away from the Cameroon café filled the square with its dismal staccato wail while a Foreign Legion soldier checked people’s identity cards. A Frenchwoman chased after her dog crossing the street towards the central market. The dog was caught.



L’ambiance is located between the central market and the municipality or, to be exact, in the second street from the municipality when coming from the market. It opens in the early morning to serve its many customers coffee, milk and home-made bread or a small glass of red wine. But between eight and twelve o’clock there are only one or two tramps, or a Liberation Army veteran, or a farmer visiting the city from a nearby farm. The gypsy who roams the city selling salted almonds comes in for his break every afternoon, drinking a small glass of beer. Between twelve and two o’clock the bar is bustling with rushers who drink one or two glasses of wine, Ricard, or Cristal, or a small bottle of beer that fits exactly in one glass. Around this time there is a short lunch break before the second round of work.

In the evening, starting at six, the bar serves grilled sardines with wine, Ricard, Cristal or beer – two sardines per glass. Inside and outside the bar, lights are ignited to the sound of records. The smell of smoke and wool floats through the air. The robe-donning, hood-wearing farmers and Liberation Army veterans are regulars, even though they don’t spend much... The smell of grilled

sardines permeates the bar. A fisherman's net hangs down, enveloping the empty record cases stacked on top of a long row of bottles... the bar has an intense marine atmosphere – despite it being in a city 80 kilometers away from the sea.

The regulars clash with the furniture and the heavy, wooden décor: tall, fixed chairs; broad, sturdy tables; walls covered in wood to match the furniture; dark wooden chandeliers with lights hanging from them... The only appropriate place for them is the crowded counter, which actually extends all the way from the entrance to the back door, into a small attached courtyard which takes up about a third of all the space of the bar. Customers have more freedom to move out there, as nearly two-thirds of the inside is taken up by three solid tables and tall chairs evenly spread around them.

Yusuf is always behind the counter, smiling and talking a little, while operating the cash register. Every evening, farmers and Liberation Army veterans stand before him. When they leave, they leave in droves, disappearing in the gloomy streets and country roads, loudly or quietly, bolstered by their cloaks and their coarse leather faces, saying a final goodbye to Yusuf, exchanging an apologetic glance, already mutually understood beforehand. When the last of them has disappeared, stumbling in the flickering light outside the bar, Yusuf sighs and pours himself another small cup of mineral water. Then he starts counting the takings, while watching two men clearing the counter and the floor below him of tiny bits of sardine, matches and cigarette butts.

At one in the morning Yusuf turns off the lights in l'Ambiance, and he too disappears in the streets. He turns into the road that runs between the Allal pharmacy and the Philips police department. He heads home silently, tiptoeing like a cautious cat.



The last city building disappears just under three kilometers away from Sfisef and Bouhanifiya square – this is where the seemingly unending, vast countryside suddenly begins.

The Atlas mountain range begins here, with a simple incline that is hardly noticeable. Still, it really separates the city from the country.

Yusuf leaves his bicycle in the back of an abandoned farm shed housing farming machinery. He goes off the paved roads, into the fields. High spikes of wheat rustle solemnly in the light breeze.

His legs ache.

During the final spins of the bicycle's wheels his legs had felt as if they were doing exactly the opposite of what he wanted. So much cold, sticky sweat had gathered between his feet and the soles of his boots that he was sure his shoes would slip off at any moment. His legs felt like two long slabs of meat hanging from the sides of the bicycle – no pulse, no response.

Although the explosion had only been five minutes late, that Spanish woman had managed to point out his absconding bike.

“It's him... him...”

But he had needed the bike to carry out the plan – that is, if it had gone as intended. He had needed those five minutes to reach the Arabic quarter. Then he could have gone into the first or last house and stay there as long as he liked – as long as his cell ordered. This bike had caused the whole problem. He could have carried the bomb in his hand and put it in the designated spot in the Cameroon café five minutes, or at least a little before it was supposed to go off. But the bike had a flat rear tire. That rear tire really messed up everything.

Yusuf reaches the foot of the endless rolling spikes of wheat with their fragile, black needles. Standing at the back, left-hand side of the hills, on his long, sticky legs, he sees a cloud of black smoke floating across the yellow earth running between the city's river and the hills... He hears the army patrol cars thundering and throws himself on the ground. Covered in high spikes of wheat, Yusuf hears his heart race uncontrollably, heartbeat after heartbeat – so loud to him that he is afraid someone else might hear it, too. His dry throat starts stinging at the onset of thirst. He starts crawling on his stomach, down through the wheat.

Three armored vehicles speed past.

It sounds like they are not going to stop. The sun shines so brightly that it blinds Yusuf, while the pungent smell of the earth beneath him penetrates his nose and enters his head like hot herbal tea. An unexpected calm takes over his body, and he manages to moisten his throat a little with his spit.

He pushes the distant thought of sleep from his mind.



In the early, rainy evening, l'Ambiance was permeated with the smell of wood and coffee, before the smell of grilled sardines would take over. A smoky haze engulfed the heads of the customers and the ceiling, siphoning off through the half-closed door to the courtyard.

Yusuf was alone.

I sat on a tall chair with no armrests, leaning my elbow on the counter while ordering a small beer. Yusuf smiled, opened the bottle and pushed it towards me.

"It's too early for sardines."

"Thanks."

All of a sudden Yusuf left his spot behind the counter and went to the front door:

"Welcome... welcome... Sidi Mahmoud."

Sidi Mahmoud sat next to me, on another tall chair, and slowly slipped off the hood of his cloak, uncovering a head of messy, curly hair. He turned to me:

"How are you?"

"Not bad."

Yusuf poured a large glass of coffee and offered it to Sidi Mahmoud.

"How are you, Sidi Mahmoud?"

"Not bad."

"And the farm?"

"..."

"In prison I longed for it- I remember that. Because I did go to prison."

"What about now?"

"I found out – the ones who didn't go to prison told me."

Yusuf poured himself a cup of mineral water and downed half of it. Then he brought his face closer to that of Sidi Mahmoud.

“Do you smoke?”

“No. I stopped.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to help my brother get into high school.”

“Is he there now?”

“No, he wasn't admitted.”

“Why not?”

“I had paid for the books, but not the uniform. They want everything for themselves.”

“Who?”

“The socialists.”



More army cars are driving through the wide street inbetween the wheat fields. An APC halts and releases some Foreign Legion soldiers who cautiously spread out into the area.

Still crawling through the wheat fields, Yusuf has already covered some distance. He is far away from the street now, but now he cannot see it very clearly anymore. He quickly raises his head and looks. A number of Foreign Legion soldiers are driving through a narrow, ascending country road to a faraway forest, while others are on a road going across the wheat fields, towards a farm building flanked by a large square of willow trees. Another group of them is facing the abandoned shed where Yusuf has left his bike.

If only he had a weapon on him to settle the matter.

His cell had repeatedly refused to give him a weapon: “Yusuf, you're only fifteen.” But those soldiers now looking for him are convinced he has one.

Only a week ago there had been a battle lasting three whole hours, where the bridge between Sidi al-Hassan and al-Amtar was blown up.

Some of those soldiers might have fought in that battle.

Once again thirst attacks Yusuf. He tries to find something to generate spit and moisten his desiccated throat. He starts digging into the small cracks between the spikes of wheat. Nothing green, the sun has dried up everything. Eventually he manages to pull out a small shoot which was mixed in with the grains and almost completely buried in the earth. He puts it in his mouth and chews. It tastes sour, spoiled and bitter, but holds traces of water.

Once more he lifts his head.

A group of soldiers go into the field.

Yusuf starts crawling away.

The soldiers halt.

Armored cars are driving on the wide street back to the city. Some soldiers get on them, then follow the rest to the city.

When Yusuf lifts his head less carefully, he sees the tree-lined street glittering from far away. He shivers a little, thinking back to the cold hills and the red, black and white rain that fell during the first days of summer.

Everything around him is silent.

Even the now faraway street is deserted, not even a single car going by.

The spikes of wheat swaying lightly become a fixture before his eyes.

The sky is an odd shade of blue.

He listens intently.

A mysterious rumbling is coming from the hilltops, invisible but constant.

A helicopter!



The woman came in the early afternoon.

She opened the beaded curtains with unintentional force and stood between the counter and one of the empty tables. She was wearing a white abaya. Only one of her eyes was visible.

She leaned on the table with her hand and asked me:

“Are you from the cantina?”

“No.”

“Where’s the owner?”

“He’ll be back in an hour.”

“Tell him that Fatima, Sidi Bekkai’s wife was here. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

Once more I heard the shrill sound of the beaded curtain, and the white abaya with the woman asking for Yusuf in it disappeared instantly.

Fatima, Sidi Bekkai’s wife.

When Yusuf came back from the municipality after paying rent for l’Ambiance, he quietly sat next to me on a tall chair.

“A while ago a woman came asking for you,” I told him.

“What did she want?”

“She didn’t tell me. She only said that her name was Fatima and that she was Sidi Bekkai’s wife.”

Yusuf shuddered and got up from his seat. He walked to the front door, turned around and said:

“I have to go now. Stay here until I come back. I won’t be long. You don’t know Sidi Bekkai, or do you?”

“I’ve never heard of him.”

"He was arrested after the explosion at the Cameroon café and taken to the palace of death, which was a farm on the road between Gambetta and Ditré. I saw him in the evening, after they had caught me. He was paralyzed. He wasn't paralyzed before."

"If only the helicopter hadn't come. If the helicopter hadn't caught me, then Sidi Bekkai would also have died and been buried in some hole in the basement of the palace of death... If only I had known I would be caught so quickly. I would have told him to just give them my name... but it would have been futile. He would never have told them my name."

"Do you know what his life is like now?"

"The municipality gives him money every month – his wife visits the municipality every month and waits in the long line, together with the blind and the poor."

"Stay here. I won't be very long. You don't know Sidi Bekkai."

A little before twelve o'clock, two of Yusuf's colleagues came in. When they didn't see him, one of them went to stand behind the counter, while the other went into the courtyard and stayed there.

"Where's Yusuf gone?" the one behind the counter asked me.

"To Sidi Bekkai. Maybe he went to his house – his wife came asking for him earlier," I said.

"But Sidi Bekkai died," he said.

"When?"

"Half an hour ago. The ambulance driver told me."

"Where did he die?"

"In the hospital."

"Yusuf loved that man."

The one behind the counter stammered a little and quickly wiped one of his eyes. "Yes, of course," he said, "they had been together in the palace of death. Later they were brought to the prison camp of Baudin. Eventually they were sent to prison and sentenced together at the Palace of Justice for the Cameroon affair. Sidi Bekkai was paralyzed and had to be carried into the hall in a chair – you know the verdict, prison for Sidi Bekkai and execution for Yusuf."

"But as you know, Yusuf was very young, only fifteen. By law, the death penalty can only be given to those 18 or over. So Yusuf was sent to prison instead, for about three years until they could put his head under a guillotine. But they never did put his head under a guillotine. He and Sidi Bekkai left prison together after the Évian Accords."

It was almost twelve o'clock when a skinny young man came into the bar. He approached the man behind the counter and said:

"Yusuf says he's not coming. He also said that the bar should be closed today – and he wants the keys."

"Where is he right now?"

"At Sidi Bekkai's house."

The man turned his face away from the boy. I could tell that behind his long eyelashes, he was trying to hold back the tears.