



EXILE AND LIVE OAKS

Stories Whispered from the Trees

IT WAS ONLY YEARS LATER THAT I LOOKED BACK AT MY LIFE AS AN EXILED writer in Houston and realized that I had been fortunate to have landed in the peaceful, shady, Rice Village neighborhood and not somewhere else. As disoriented and fatigued as I'd been in the summer of 1987—bent under the responsibility of tending my six year old, who had already changed three countries—two, war-infested—I could still appreciate the geographic location I'd been thrown into by forces beyond my will. Houston was not the desert of the Western movies with a few cacti and plenty of dust, but one of the greenest places I'd ever seen, only comparable to lush tropical India, where I'd lived for a year.

My first residence—a tiny garage apartment—was at the end of a cul-de-sac off Kirby Avenue, not far from the Village. It was a wooden box that seemed to hang from a strong branch of an oak, suspended in mid-air. When the wind blew, the house shook, as if in an earthquake; the walls creaked, and my son laughed with joy and anxiety. At night, after singing a lullaby for him and tucking him in bed, I lay down, my body here, my soul somewhere else. I closed my eyes and tried to open the many locked doors behind which I'd left my dear ones. I envisioned my beloved hometown at the foot of Mount Alborz—a home I could never return to. As I lay brooding in the silence of the summer night, I heard the tender branches of a live oak caressing the roof. They were whispering to each other—the tree and the roof—and I heard them all through the night, speaking in a hushed dialogue. It might have been the fatigue or the homesickness that made me feel the need for consolation. I thought that the dialogue of the oak and the roof was meant for me and that the tree tried to bring me back here to tell me that my life had to root in this land, and that I had to stop pounding on locked doors. It would bring nothing but despair.

My first job was in the heart of the Village, near the campus of Rice University. This was temporary work until I'd found something in my field.

Again, looking back, I realize that I had been so disoriented that I couldn't find a teaching job. I'd been a college professor back home and even as a refugee in Afghanistan, I'd taught at the University of Kabul. But now the financial need was urgent; the food stamps were not enough and I needed to work somewhere—anywhere. So the job developer, who could not find a teaching position for me, sent me to a bagel shop to begin working. This didn't last more than three days. As a playwright I hadn't learned how to make bagels. The second job was disastrous too. I'd thought that the owner of the flower shop would let me arrange the baskets or wrap colorful bouquets at the counter. But he wanted me to carry the heavy clay pots to the customers' cars and sweep the shop and hose down the sidewalk with a heavy bo of a hose. At last, when I developed a back injury the owner let me go. So the third one seemed like bliss. At a small company, by the name of Melissa's Paw Print, I stood at a craft table all day, painting T-shirts for two dollars a piece. The more shirts I painted, the more my wage was. I remember my agony now—how with a shaking hand I rushed to fill the blanks with green paint to create Christmas trees. I had to work as fast as I could to be able to take a decent wage home. If a drop of paint fell out of the lines, I had to pay the price of the ruined shirt.

At lunch break, I went downstairs to the sidewalk and sat on a bench under the umbrella of an oak tree and immediately drifted back to those locked doors, pounding and pounding. But they were sealed and bolted. How could I survive here? How long could I paint childish designs for a meager income? Hadn't I been a writer? Why had they kept my stories behind those doors and flung me, empty-handed, over the oceans? This deprivation, not of means, but of the soul, was so immense that every bite of the sandwich I took turned into stone when I swallowed my lunch. Now the oak leaves above my head hissed and whispered, as if calling my attention: You're thrown here—but soon you'll be free. Don't let exile destroy you. Don't pound on locked

doors. It brings nothing but despair.

At the end of that summer, I enrolled my son in Poe Elementary School at the edge of North Boulevard, an exquisitely beautiful street surrounded and roofed by ancient live oaks. Soon, I realized that this was the city of oaks. I fell in love with the trees and often thought about their origins, their past. Had this place been a forest once? Long ago—even before Texas belonged to Mexico? Or had the saplings been brought from somewhere else and planted here, like myself? Had these trees rooted deep into the earth and claimed the land? Now I walked among them, thinking of them and gazing at their strong roots, bursting the earth open, showing gigantic talons—like those of legendary birds—mythical Firebirds. The Phoenix. The Simorgh.

Julio Cortazar, the exile of the Argentinean Junta, wrote that exile is an abrupt ending of a love affair...

the exile and unhappiness walk hand in hand. In those days, I was in the grip of sadness. The beloved was beyond the oceans. I was here with no wings to fly. These lines of Rumi often reverberated in my head: "Since I was cut from the reedbed/ I have made this crying sound." Like Rumi, away from his beloved, I had turned into a "nay"—a flute, who made lamenting songs.

And the struggle had to go on. The absurdity of the shirts—the Halloween pumpkins on children's shirts, the fat turkeys on Thanksgiving shirts, candy canes hanging on Christmas trees. I'd become faster now, a painting machine, but I couldn't produce more than ten shirts a day. And the news from behind the locked doors was not good. My father had been arrested and tortured. As a result, he had gone through a succession of strokes and had lost the sight of one eye.

But the ultimate shock arrived a year after I'd settled in Houston. In September 1988 Khomeini ordered the mass execution of four thousand political prisoners—my comrades were among them. Had I stayed, I would have been buried in a mass grave in "Heaven of Zahara," Tehran's infamous cemetery.

This was when my recurring nightmares began.

At night, after my customary lullaby—folksongs of my remote land—I lay in my narrow bed, opposite my son's bed and watched him weeping in his dreams. He had developed the habit of beating his pillow to near death before he fell asleep, exhausted. He cried in that small dark universe of his nightmares. I'm not sure what he saw—his lost father, or the three countries he had left behind? I had to save him, but how? The house rocked and creaked with the slightest autumn breeze and my oak spoke to the roof. But her story was meant for me. Don't pound on locked doors. It brings nothing but despair.

It was during my long morning walks on North Boulevard, after dropping my son at school, when at last the seeds of a story sprouted in my head. Soon, I began planning my first novel—a novel whose images had appeared to me in recurring nightmares. I walked in the hallways of Evin, the central prison of the "Holy Republic," a guard pulling me by a leash. Now, I strolled on the boulevard to the rhythm of my heart and listened to the cry of bluejays and tapping of woodpeckers. At times, I stopped to observe the interwoven branches that had created a roof above the street. They were long, muscled arms embracing their siblings. I gazed at the play of light and shadow between the gleaming leaves and travelled to my dark alternate universe—the maze of corridors, the torture chambers, the wall of execution. They were all there—my dead ones. So, I wove a story that unveiled itself to me every night when I closed my eyes and took shape the next morning when I watched the oaks and listened to them.

Years passed and wounds almost, if not entirely, healed. The Paw Print days were behind me. I had entered graduate school for the second time and taught some courses, but mainly I supported myself and my son as a waitress—ironically, in the sidewalk café of the Alley Theatre, where I had hoped once, in vain, to work as a dramaturge. When I went up to the lobby of the theater to bring more wine and beer for the café, through the crack of the double door I watched rehearsals of my favorite plays. I couldn't help but remember my full-length play that was banned just before I went in exile. I thought about the promising career that had been abruptly canceled as it had just begun. The flute sang in my throat as I served wine to the Houston elite. What a harsh instructor exile had become—it taught me humility.

NOW GRIPPING THE WAIST OF THE TREE IN ONE HAND—AS IF SHE WERE A LOVER—AND LISTENING TO THE CAREFREE LAUGHTER OF YOUTH, I SUDDENLY AND UNEXPECTEDLY FELT AT HOME.

But a short while later I finished my novel. I had changed my creative language from Persian to English and had overcome the linguistic block. But more than anything, this achievement was a proof that my imagination and craft had not been mortally damaged by uprooting. I had won the battle with exile.

In the years that passed fast and slow at the same time, my son moved from elementary school to middle school and then high school. We relocated from our tiny cage to a slightly larger apartment surrounded by tall oaks. But I was still an alien, uprooted from my land, someone who had been "flung away," but not "set free," as Victor Hugo (himself an exile) describes. I admired and embraced the environment that I'd been thrown into, but I did not belong.

Until one day (and I even remember the day, because I took a mental note—I said to myself, "Mark this!") strolling in the Village, I reached Morningside Drive and looked up at the former Melissa's Paw Print. It was strange, but I felt nostalgic for the hard years of poverty and alienation. I crossed the street and approached the umbrella-shaped oak under which I had swallowed painful bites of sandwiches. I caressed the rough skin of the tree, as if she were the representative of all—the one bending over my former garage apartment, and the many along North Boulevard. Joyful people entered and exited an Irish bar that had opened on the first floor of the building. Now gripping the waist of the tree in one hand—as if she were a lover—and listening to the carefree laughter of the youth, I suddenly and unexpectedly felt at home. This was home, and I did not belong anywhere else. I belonged to this place, and all those closed doors had vanished.

This revelation happened twelve years after I'd arrived from the refugee camps of Afghanistan and India. But now another twelve years have passed. I have written a few more books—more as gestures of defiance. I have taught in American universities. I have overcome the exile's disease, the linguistic schizophrenia. But I have not forgotten the locked doors. True, I don't pound on them anymore, but they're there, somewhere in the horizon, suspended in midair, above oceans. I'm happy now, if happiness for a writer means remaining productive. I live in a different apartment, located under the gigantic umbrella of an oak. I have a loving companion and a dog who won't sleep at night if I don't sing him a lullaby—the old folk songs. My son has long gone—married. He is an accomplished man.

So, this all means that I've grown thick roots here, and as I'm aging, these roots may burst the metaphorical earth open and show gigantic talons. Like the Persian mythical bird, the Simorgh, the Phoenix that burns and rises from its own ashes. c