

The day Camille lost her mind

they pushed her onto the balcony and left her to face the sun alone. It wasn't a punishment for startling everyone with her trembling hands and lips, or for disrupting meals with sudden outbreaks of crying. It was just that the balcony seemed the obvious solution. Marie and her husband had no garden, or lift, and no one was strong enough to carry 80-year-old Camille up and down three flights of wooden stairs every day.

Marie was advised to leave her mother alone. She was better off on the balcony. Nothing, even the doctor agreed, could be done for her. He warned Marie to expect little more than nuisance from Camille from now on. That's the way it was with old people. One moment they were there, the next they were off, jabbering nonsensical words. And you were saddled with them for the rest of their days. "It comes full circle", Marie's husband said. "She's a child again." He regularly dragged his wife away from Camille's side, even if she was sure she could still make sense of a few of the words her mother spoke, words that sounded like French, but which slipped back, each time, into her furrowed face, untranslatable and dried. While her doctor and friends gave up, Marie continued trying. Often, in her mother's half-syllables and moans, she felt she could hear her name, a sudden, consoling sound, like birdsong in the rain.

Marie knew that her mother hadn't gradually given in to old age as everybody believed. Of course, Camille had been battling with the stairs for some time. She had complained about her back for weeks, and her breathing had become shallow and hoarse, but those were not the ailments that had brought her down. Illness hadn't crept up on her out of the blue. The neighbours all had their theories. "It's the August sun." "She went to the market last week. That tired her out

too much.” “It happened to the mother of a friend of mine. It’s flu.” “They’re gone once they start behaving like this.” Marie said nothing to the neighbours, or to her husband who observed his mother-in-law unperturbed. Marie had seen the moment Camille changed, the way everything fell apart. Her mother wasn’t worn out or sick. She had simply given in, because nothing made sense to her any more.

Camille and Marie had been in their apartment together. Loud noises had started up in the street below. A crowd was surrounding a woman, her long black hair loose over her shoulders. Camille had seen the woman the week before. She had noticed her North African clothes as she approached shoppers with boxes of dye, offering women the chance to have their hands decorated with henna tattoos. She had set up a rickety cardboard stall outside the supermarket. Camille had told Marie the woman would get no trade in their street where no-one stopped for beauty, where people kept their hands tightly in their pockets, gripped around their money. The woman had been there several days in a row, setting up her stall, morning after morning, approaching pedestrians, winding her way in and out of the cars. Now she was hemmed in by a crowd.

Camille and Marie watched as a middle-aged man stepped forward out of the circle of bystanders and yanked a bag off the henna woman’s shoulder. He emptied it onto the pavement. “She robbed me,” he shouted. He rummaged through the spilt contents of the bag, kicking each item away, sending them into the gutter, down the drains, into the corners of the street. Money and papers blew under cars, stuck in the pavement cracks. Finding nothing in the bag, the man lunged to search the woman’s pockets. He ripped the jacket from her shoulders. When she fought back, he shoved her to the ground and slapped her face. The crowd moved forward, standing over her bruised eyes, her split lips and bleeding mouth. Marie went to close the window. “Let’s call the police to sort it out,” she said, but Camille blocked the window with her hand. She let out a wail, a scream from above. “Leave her alone,” she screeched. The crowd turned to stare. The henna woman looked up at the third floor balcony and then sped away, darting under the menacing arms, slipping into the streets beyond. Camille clutched at the balcony balustrade.

“Come in,” Marie said, but her mother began to wheeze and cough, her chest convulsing. Marie tugged at her sleeve. “Come in.” Camille only latched herself further onto the balustrade, as if

to stop herself toppling over the edge, downwards, onto the tarmac below. The doorbell rang. They could hear the man from the street banging on the door. "That thieving bitch got away because of you." He pummelled the wood with his fists. Marie and Camille stood still. When the man had gone, Camille staggered to the kitchen. She fished a plastic bag out of the larder drawer and handed it to her daughter. "Be quick," she said, "hurry downstairs." Marie protested. She didn't want to gather up the woman's scattered belongings. People might stop her. They could accuse her too. She had nothing to do with all this. "Quick," Camille insisted, "we don't have much time."

In amongst the passers-by and cars, Marie crouched down and picked up the broken pieces of a scent bottle, a cloth purse, packets of henna, stencils and several photos. Flattened against the steps of a butcher's shop, she found a few ripped identity papers. Beside an overflowing bin lay a pile of letters layered with dirt. Under the wheel of a car were a pen and a bus pass. As she scabbled from car to car, she could see her mother leaning over the balcony, looking down, her face and hair unlike anything she had seen before, burning with the sun and light. She barely recognised her, a woman she had never seen, never known. Marie laid the gathered belongings on the kitchen table in the apartment. Camille examined each one: official papers in Arabic with the photo of the woman and an official Algerian stamp, a Marseille bus pass, two biscuits crushed inside their thin plastic cover. Letters in a mix of Arabic and French. There were also three black and white pictures of a young boy. In one he was standing in front of a village, on a dry rocky path. In the other, the boy was beside other children at a school. In the last, he was being held up as a baby by a man.

Marie left the apartment and walked quickly towards the train station and then down to the sea harbour. She began to run, and she cried as she ran, not because the Algerian woman had been beaten or lost her belongings, but because something alarming was happening. The woman with the hennaed hands had come for a reason. She couldn't explain it or describe it exactly, or even work out why she knew. There was nothing to the woman, she barely existed – a few broken things, torn papers at the bottom of a flimsy plastic shopping bag – but she had come for something. Marie reached the quayside and looked through the masts out towards the sea. She wandered to the shopping arcades and studied the shaded, dark doorways of shops. She listened to a man playing a violin with

a basket at his feet. She passed by her husband's estate agency. She didn't enter. She had nothing to say to him. What would her husband understand of a woman who sold cheap henna on their street, of her beaten face and the yelling crowd? How could he know, as Marie did, that her mother was folding inwards, retreating into a life she had never shared with her daughter, into a past she never named? She would be alone from now on.

Tests were carried out. It appeared Camille had not suffered a stroke, or fallen prey to a virus. Dementia, Marie was told, can appear quite suddenly. The loss of mobility was harder to explain. The doctor ordered a wheelchair and two days later Camille was sitting on the balcony in a new, black mobile seat. It had taken five days, Marie counted, for her mother to change beyond recognition. Camille flicked her fingers against the wheels of the chair. She pushed herself gently backwards and forwards with her heels, a new rhythm to replace the words she no longer wanted to speak. Marie put a row of flower boxes in front of her, and a watering can with a large handle. Then the moans came, strange, violent complaints that Camille poured onto the street below. Passers-by looked up to see the frail old woman dangling her cries towards them. She muttered words that evaporated into the air. They were full of longing for things Marie knew nothing about, swirling into a web of fears and thoughts mapped out on the buildings. The balcony had become a last opening onto Marseille, a precarious ledge hanging over the city.



The crowds were coming back. Camille had no doubt. She had seen them before, over there, across the sea, gathering in size and violence. She had heard them scream their fury in Algeria. Some calling for "L'Algérie Française", others for freedom from France. Blood to cancel out more blood. She would sit behind her locked shutters and closed doors, the streets shaking with the pounding of guns. After the tanks and shots came a false stillness, then the shouts and clashes returned, stronger than before. France, her friends trusted, would bring peace, restore calm and order. Camille knew that all order had already broken down. The war had gone on too long. Nothing would be as before. No-one spoke of the French leaving, no-one even thought it were possible. The mere mention of it was catastrophe enough. Camille had warned her colleagues at her school. There would come a time when most of them would have to

leave, when the coexistence that seemed possible a few years before would become untenable. The other school-teachers hated her for her words. She had swapped sides, they said. She was betraying them with her cowardice. Was she not French herself? She would regret her ideas and backstabbing. Her warnings walled her in silence and excluded her from the running of the school where she worked. Her remaining family chastised her for her opinions too. Was this what her husband and boy had died for, to build this land for nothing? Was that what she thought each time she visited their graves in the cemetery on the hill? What kind of future did she want for the new child she was carrying? Yet the leaving began. Crowds of French families shunted and herded quickly down to the port where boats were ready, massing with people, more and more people. The city was slipping into the sea, crammed boats bound for France. Camille hung on. This was her country. She had nowhere else to go. What did it matter if her grandparents had originally come from France? Algeria was inside her, it was all she had. Soldiers combed the streets urging people to leave, to take what they could. What did these young French recruits know of this country she was born in, of who she was? The roads and streets were full of fleeing. Everyone was leaving. She would wait for things to change. The boats were packed, pushing down into the water.



And now the crowds were returning, to Marseille this time. On her balcony, Camille struggled to shout the words she remembered from Algeria, the words she'd heard up in the villages and hills, in the schools she taught in. It was all back in her mind, too insistent, the heat and this city that she'd never wanted to belong to. And her son-in-law who never talked to her, who lined his pockets with people's meagre savings. Others, just like him, had robbed her when she'd arrived in the city, a pregnant widow, taking the money she had managed to salvage, removing her rings right there in the port. After the queues full of humiliating questions by the authorities, there were the stares in the city, the suspicion and anger, the shopkeepers who looked her up and down. Was this the motherland they had all talked of, the place that would save them? She had arrived in a foreign land. Emotions, the past, smells and memories, all were confused in her head now, resuscitated images, fading and strong. Camille rolled her thumbs along the tyres of her wheelchair. Her body was letting her down. A final capitulation. The henna woman would

return. That's all she knew. She was walking the streets towards her. Leave, she would call to Camille, come with me.



The other inhabitants in her block of flats in Algiers had been evacuated. She was alone in the building, apart from the cheerful concierge who remained in her lodgings in the garden. She often thought she could hear her heavy footsteps up the stone staircase and the puffing of her breath, but each time she peered through the crack in the door there was no one. She didn't dare walk down to the garden. She would have liked to have talked to the woman, like before, discussing her school and every new twist of the conflict, feeling the blast of the hot stove, smelling the scented rosewater on the shelves. They talked for hours when her husband was found shot in the hills. She had brewed a special tea so she wouldn't lose the baby from the shock. One boy gone at birth was enough. That's what she said to her. And that the new child would be a girl. Of that she had been right.

The soldiers had been one night and shot the looters raiding the apartments. Their bodies lay in a heap in the courtyard at the front. The soldiers had left them there for her, in view of her

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window, in a pile just for her, so she'd understand that it was all over and she had to go. She would hold on though. She would open up her flat again, with people, with noise, not this eerie, stifled quiet, punctuated by shooting and wounds. All in front of her the city was shifting, sliding apart, swopping roles – spaces filling as others emptied. Then the time came when she had to cover her ears from the screaming, from the blasts that blew death down the streets. Her friendships with the traders and children in the street, her longstanding closeness with the concierge, were no longer any guarantee of safety. The dead were replaced by fresh dead, the living by survivors. She was lumped with the army generals, the oppressors, the executioners. The soldiers came each evening. They banged on the door, telling her it was pointless to resist leaving. Her time had come. Her building had been targeted. She was the only one in the street now. She barricaded her door all the more, her child kicking inside her belly. One night, though, she opened the door and walked up and down the stone staircase of the building. The devastation from each apartment flowed onto the dim landings. Furniture was thrown across the tiled floors, books ripped apart, their strewn pages marking an uneven path. In her neighbour's apartment above, the food cupboard was torn from the wall, a sack of rice stabbed and bled clean. The grains crunched under her feet, cracking into fine powder. Her neighbour's clothes were on the bed, each pocket turned inside out, the mattress eviscerated, its stuffing pulled apart. In the bathroom, a wig clogged the sink plughole, stagnant brown water matting the hairs together, strands stuck to the enamel sides. Mosquito larvae wriggled and clustered round the loose plug chain.

On the top floor, in an apartment that had belonged to the street's dressmaker, she sat on the only unbroken chair and swept up the pins and measuring tapes. The rooms of the lawyer on the second floor were filled with flies, a loaf of bread was furry with mould, the tabletop around it coated with the same bluish grey rot. She carried on down the main staircase, pausing on the landings to listen to the slightest noise. With each new flight of stairs, she hesitated. Her child was no longer kicking and she had got in the habit of twisting and banging her belly until the baby moved again. She checked the front door to the street was locked. She thought of her husband's grave, and how she hadn't been to visit it for months, how she often imagined him sleeping too, alongside their infant son. As she came into the hallway, she saw that the stained glass windows of the front door had been smashed in. The plant that had stood by the row of letterboxes

had buckled in two, its dried brown leaves rolled up like smoked cigar ends. In the concierge's lodge, in the corner of the garden, she found the feathered skeletons of the woman's birds at the bottom of their cage. On the wall above the small stove was a calendar with portraits of film stars. She opened the back bedroom door and saw the crushed bare legs of the concierge, her iron bed broken across her chest and face. One arm was stretched out on the floor, an intricate pattern of henna, like latticework, flowering on the palm of her lifeless hand.

Retreating soldiers accompanied Camille to the port. She was no different from them now, another Frenchwoman running from disaster. She held her bag, a few clothes, a bundle of papers, not enough to fill the canvas pockets. There were other people with her, hangers-on, disbelievers, remnants of the devastation. They formed a short line on the quayside, a column of lives, becoming a column of dust across the sea. The boat took them too soon. It robbed her of her last image of Algiers. She watched the white city streak the sky with its sloping roofs, the light rising from the port up into the clouds. And it was gone.



Marie asks Camille what she is saying. She breathes in her mother's soft, guiltless hands and strokes her face. She rests her face on her mother's lap. Camille pushes off from the balcony so that the wheelchair slides back into the wall. Camille could push herself up and down the length of the balcony, but it's not the balcony that's important. It is only a piece of driftwood now, a raft barely afloat. She can see herself, a thousand pictures of herself, turning, mirrors linked to more mirrors buried in the past. Her mind is curved, repeating and chasing its shadows, echoing and doubling. She watches a remote, isolated figure, a shadow scribbling on a blackboard in Algeria. The dryness of the cracked earth breaks under her feet. She is drawing chalk letters, perfect French phrases, passages of history made pointless through time. The village children, lined in front of her, repeat her sentences, accented voices, mimicking her. She already has the contours of defeat and sorrow in her, they the face of cheated retribution. Death was coming even then, spreading, flowing from the ground, from within her. She had married it, given birth to it. An inert, lifeless boy with a beautiful, lost face. With one arm, she touches Marie. Where is this place? She needs to stare at the street and find something tangible to remind her – a pavement stone, the façade opposite, a shop front, a passer-by. It's draining from her, the sense of order, of time.

A strip of curtain is hanging from a window opposite. No breeze disturbs it. Inside Camille's head it is cold. She can hear Marie talking next to her. Marie, born of a father she never knew, with a brother dry in the ground. Her daughter's pleas are growing louder, a bewildering rustling. It seems to Camille that the flies on the plants of the balcony sing a more understandable tune. Marie stares and shakes her. At the end, in Algeria, they stared at her too as if she'd never belonged, as if she had only just arrived to leave again. Yet she had never known anything other than the sloping, cobbled streets of Algiers, the dry rocks of the mountains and the piercing blue of the sky at midday. She should have defied the soldiers who spurred her on towards the port. She should have floated into the new Algeria, her daughter and her, two lost souls drifting into independence. She can again feel the weightlessness of her bag on the boat, the vanishing coastline, the disappearing contours of all that she knew.

Only the woman with painted hands is real now. She is running through Marseille. Marie begs Camille to come in, to stand up out of her wheelchair. She tries to push it, but Camille winds her fingers round the spokes. "It's getting dark, *maman*, it's time to eat and go to bed."

Camille turns from her daughter. Does she not see or understand? She grips the plastic bag even tighter. She picks out the photographs of the boy, the official picture of the woman on her papers. She runs her fingers over the face. She fishes out the shards of smooth, coloured glass in amongst the spilt henna. She pieces the glass together on her lap in the shape of a bottle. She opens the cloth purse: a coin, a folded banknote. Camille is mumbling again. Marie fights to understand. "Shall I call the doctor? Why are you doing this?" she asks. Her mother won't reply. Marie runs to her room. Camille calls after her. "Marie," she splutters. "Wait for her with me." Her words slam into each other, inarticulate. She can no longer stand. Her legs won't carry her. Marie locks her bedroom door. She lies on her bed, a pillow over her head, and nothing in the suffocating darkness she has created can help her describe what is happening. Her own life cannot hold her mother back. She isn't enough. She has never been enough compared to her father, her brother, to the past. She, too, has been too light, too insubstantial. Another stillborn child in her mother's eyes – a stillborn who was never able to become a proper daughter.

Tumbling, contorted noises haze over Camille as night comes. She pulls herself forward to hold onto the railings. Her legs shake, weak slithers of flesh. The dark pulls the balcony into its warm layers. The street is empty. A car drives past without stopping. Soon the crowds will come, massing in the port, pushing in from the edges of the city, chanting. Camille hears a noise in the street below. The woman with painted hands is there, looking at her. She is dressed in the same clothes as before, her hair over her shoulders. She smiles at Camille. She reaches up towards her, decorated palms spinning, pulling at the rays of the streetlamps, motifs of light crossing and interlacing. She glances round to check the street. No-one can see her except the woman on the balcony above. She runs her hands along the gutters looking for her belongings. She forages in the drains, she pokes her fingers between the metallic shutters of closed shops, touching, looking. She prods the earth of flower pots, reaching under benches, rummaging between the pavement stones. She can find nothing. She searches a dustbin. She folds and turns the piles of scrunched paper, reaching deeper and deeper into the bin. Her nails touch the bottom and begin to scrape at the wedge of refuse, her fingertips smearing with filth. Camille can hear the sound of it. Her ears are bursting with the clamour of this engraving. New smudged designs appear on the woman's hands, unclean motifs stained with grime. Camille unhooks the plastic bag from the back of her wheelchair and hurls it into the air. The photographs fall out and float downwards. The woman catches them, one by one. Run, Camille shouts, run. Her voice is lost in the city. Her eyes can no longer see.

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