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JOYCE ZONANA

Chez les arabes

for Mervat

It is a bright Saturday afternoon, crisp fall weather outside, and I am in my small New Orleans kitchen, preparing stuffed grape leaves for the annual English Department party. My task began late last night, when I rinsed a cup of chickpeas and placed them in a bowl, covering them with fresh spring water. This morning, I peeled the chickpeas one by one, rubbing each swollen kernel between my palms until the dull skin slipped off to reveal the bright yellow core, plumply wrinkled, like an ancient stone goddess. Now, while the beans simmer, I mince four yellow onions, a head of garlic, two bunches of parsley, six tomatoes. My worn wooden cutting board is soaked in red juice, stained a deep green. In a large glass bowl, I combine the onions, garlic, tomatoes, and parsley with raw white rice, freshly-squeezed lemon juice, olive oil, allspice, and the warm, just-cooked chickpeas.

The filling for my grape leaves is ready at last; time now to “stuff.” With deliberation, I spread a vine leaf—veined side up—on a plate, snip off its stem with my thumbnail, and place a spoonful of the filling at its base. With both hands, I fold in the leaf’s sides; then, keeping the folds in place with my right hand, I roll with my left, working to create a tight, narrow cylinder. I have two pounds of grape leaves to prepare in this manner—perhaps a hundred, two hundred leaves, I always lose track. As I complete each little packet, pressing firmly to seal it, I place it in the cast iron pot where it will simmer for an hour, fitted snugly in even rows beneath a plate weighted with stones.

“Never again,” I say to myself, “never again.”

The skin on my fingers is puckered and raw; my back hurts, my eyes burn, and the music I put on earlier has begun to cloy. I am tired, bored

with my task. A few hours ago it was absorbing, but my interest has waned. I wonder when will I be done. Will I have time to clean the kitchen, shower, relax before the party? Will I have a chance to read? Work on my *Jane Eyre* essay? I lose my focus and the leaf I am rolling loses its shape. Bits of rice and onion and tomato stick out from the sides. I undo the cylinder, absently chew the leaf, lick the tart, sweet juice from my fingers. I am thinking about Jane, her ambition and desire. The next leaf tears as I peel it from the stack. I cannot use it. Abruptly, angry with myself, I bring myself back. Slowing my pace and concentrating, I separate the next leaf from the stack, gently laying it on the plate, using both hands. I fill a tablespoon with the rice mixture.

Hours later, once they have cooked and are cooled to room temperature, I arrange the dark green rolls, piling them high onto silver trays, garnishing them with slices of lemon, tomato wedges, black olives. I bring these trays to the party, place them on the table beside bowls of chips, raw vegetables, sour cream dip. Maybe no one will eat them, I think, and I'll be able to take some home, rationing them to myself for lunch and dinner during the week. But I'm not that lucky. At the end of the evening, my platters are empty, though there are still chips in the bowls beside them. A few colleagues comment on my creation. "Delicious," they remark, "really delicious."

"Never again," I say to myself, "never again."

Still, six months later, I hear the words come out of my mouth, as I stand in a group planning a party.

"I'll make grape leaves," I say, "I'll bring stuffed grape leaves."

My mother made stuffed grape leaves at least once a month. She used beef, not chickpeas, and so she was spared the soaking and peeling that take so much of my time. But she rolled her leaves more tightly, making tiny, narrow cylinders. We ate the trim delicacies greedily, unconscious of the effort enfolded in each. My mother didn't mind, she encouraged our greed, offering "more," "more," "have some more," she always said. Along with the grape leaves she served *fila à fromage*, small baked pastries of crisp filo dough wrapped around a tangy filling of Parmesan and feta cheese; and *kobéba*, deep-fried, crunchy bulghur dumplings stuffed with chopped beef and pine nuts, flavored with pomegranate syrup. This wasn't the main meal, just the appetizers, *les mézzés*, which also included home-

made pickled vegetables—turnip, artichoke, lemon, and cauliflower marinated in brine or vinegar—along with *tahina*, pita bread, and—for those concerned about calories—unadorned, raw slivers of carrots and celery.

Cooking was my mother's passion, the force that led her, guiding her choices. If we couldn't have the whole of the life she had left behind in Cairo in 1951—if we couldn't have the heavy wooden furniture that filled her parents' apartment on the Rue Suleiman Pasha, or the blue sky over the Nile, or the sounds and smells of Groppi's, or the silent majesty of the pyramids guarding the desert, or her mother and father themselves, her sisters and brothers and cousins—we would have the food, all the food, in its complex, abundant, aromatic intricacy. In Cairo, there had been servants and relatives and friends to help prepare the elaborate dishes. In Brooklyn, my mother labored without assistance to produce *bamyia*, *loubyia*, *m'ggadereh*, *cousa be gebna*, *hamoud*, *kobéba*. Alone in our narrow apartment kitchen, she chopped and peeled and simmered and stewed, shelling pounds of beans, trimming hundreds of artichokes, spreading what must have been, over the years, acres of fine *filo* dough. Her strong large hands were red, rubbed raw from repeated immersions in water, prolonged contact with the skins of acidic fruits and vegetables. And they were covered with blisters, large puckered blisters that seemed never to heal: she persistently burned herself, picking up skillets with bare hands, letting hot oil sputter onto fingers and wrists.

Long before every holiday meal—and there were dozens, it seemed, each year throughout my childhood, bright havens of warmth that marked the seasons of Jewish life—she would begin to formulate a menu, balancing the requirements of tradition against the vagaries of the market. At each festival she would serve seven or eight dishes, along with the carefully prepared ritual foods—deep red pomegranates and quince jelly for Rosh Hashanah; date-filled, wine-soaked *charoseth* and an airy, unleavened nut cake for Pesach; honey-dipped *beignets* to break the fast on Yom Kippur. On ordinary nights as well, we had an abundance of selections. My mother's offerings were gloriously varied—never the spare balance of meat and potatoes—but always the generous harmonies of rice and lentils simmered with onions and topped with yogurt; a salad of lettuce and tomatoes seasoned with cumin and fresh lemon juice; a shimmering cornstarch pudding scented with rosewater and studded with pistachios. Tomatoes

and zucchini were stuffed with rice or beef; dried apricots and prunes were soaked and stewed with chicken; filo dough was brushed with butter, filled with cheese or spinach or ground meat, then baked until crisp. Cooking was my mother's art, her sacrament. She dreamed food, lived it, even as today I dream words, seeking sustenance.

"Eat," my mother says, hovering anxiously between stove and table. "Eat. Do you want more?"

"Read," I beg my friends, as I place a manuscript before them. "Read. Do you want to see more?"

For five years now, I have been piecing together a memoir, assembling the fragments of my story and the story of my family, attempting to roll them together into tidy packets, letting them simmer in the juice of imagination. Language, I like to think, will make my past present, bringing continuity and coherence to a life marked by loss. I write to tell my story, though I wonder if my (American) English words have the savor of *kamoun* and *kuzbra* and *bhar*.

We ate well in our Brooklyn home, but we ate differently. Our neighbors were Irish, Italian, and Jewish—but the Jews were Ashkenazy, Eastern Europeans with ancestors from Russia and Poland and Germany or Austria-Hungary—nothing like our Mediterranean tribe. With the exception of my father's cousin Sheila, who arrived from Cairo with her family in 1960, there was no one else in all of Shore Haven (and it was a huge housing complex, with some twenty buildings, each six stories high, eight apartments to a floor) who ate as we did. I smelled the complex aromas of marinara sauce for meatballs and spaghetti served by the Italian families who lived above and beside and below us, and I longed to eat as they did, but I was not puzzled by the differences in our foodways. We were Egyptian and Jewish. They were Italian and Catholic. That explained things. But what about the other Jews? I had difficulty understanding our culinary divergence. And for them it was even more difficult.

"You mean you're Jewish? And you don't know about *gefilte* fish?"

This from my best friend Debbie's mother, who, on Friday nights, cooked chicken soup, *kugel*, *kishke*, *latkes*—a tempting array of textures, colors, and aromas. I begged permission to visit the Saltz's apartment, just across the courtyard from ours, so that I might enjoy the pleasures of their Sabbath kitchen. The Saltzes kept kosher; they had separate plates for

meat and dairy, as well as a special set of glass dishes for Passover. Debbie taught me to distinguish among the sets, warning me never to put dairy on a meat dish. And she explained, to my puzzlement, that fish could be *either* dairy or meat. Apparently, all the Jews in the neighborhood kept kosher, except for us. When I asked my mother why we didn't, she said it wasn't important, "What difference does it make?" But I knew. Real Jews kept kosher—that was how one could tell they were Jewish. Much as I enjoyed our *tabbouleh* and *hamoud*, if we were really Jewish, we would be eating stuffed cabbage, not stuffed grape leaves. I wanted to stand in line at the corner deli with everyone else on Sunday mornings, to take my number in the busy store loud with good-natured *kibbutzing*, to order bagels, cream cheese, lox, whitefish. Instead we had *ful mudammas* and *tahina*, served with a wilted salad in warm pita bread.

"What kind of a Jew are you?" a schoolmate would challenge during recess.

"Sephardic," I would say, "I'm Sephardic." Although I had no concept of the word's meaning, I knew it was the right one. Our kind was Sephardic; the others were Ashkenazy. "We're from Egypt," I would assert boldly.

"But all the Jews left Egypt a long time ago, isn't that what Passover is about?"

"No," I would say, having been taught the words by my father. "Some Jews went back when they got kicked out of Spain. The Jews did very well in Egypt."

"There are no Jews in Egypt," my little friend would retort. I never heard of any Jews in Egypt. You can't be Jewish."

It was puzzling, I knew, but I could find nothing further to say at this point. Aside from a handful of relatives, I didn't know any other Jews from Egypt either. An Egyptian Jew. To my neighbors, it seemed an exotic contradiction in terms. To me as well. What was the Egyptian part, what the Jewish? How did they fit together? Maybe I wasn't really Jewish.

"Egyptian, wow. I never met an Egyptian before. Does that mean you're related to Cleopatra?"

That was another question. Was I? It didn't seem likely. But in what way was I Egyptian, then? I knew nothing about Egypt or Egyptians, except for the occasional anecdote my parents let slip. I had been told that I was born in Cairo, that my mother took me to the Pyramids when I was an infant, that I learned to swim at *Ras-el-Bar*, a sand bar in the Nile delta.

“Did you live in a pyramid?”

“Did you ride a camel?”

“Did your mother wear a veil?”

The questions would come, faster and faster, and I could answer none of them. I was a mystery to myself, confused and ashamed. My parents told me I was both Egyptian and Jewish, but on those Brooklyn streets, I could be sure of neither. The two identities collided, threatening to cancel each other; I feared I had no authentic claim to either. Baffled, stymied, I retreated into our apartment, found my way to the kitchen, asked my mother for some *halawah*.

My mother bought the fruits and vegetables that were the core of our meals at the open-air Italian market that lined the sidewalks below the elevated “subway” on 86th Street—the old West End line that ran from the tall brick buildings on 57th Street in Manhattan to the sweeping boardwalks and wide beaches of Coney Island. Before I was old enough for school, and later, on Saturdays, I would accompany my mother, walking the long blocks in rhythm with the clattering wheels of the shopping cart she pulled behind her.

Each week, my mother and I browsed the full length of the market street, some five or six blocks, before deciding which vegetables to buy. My mother would resist all attempts to entrap her prematurely; she would inspect *everything* before making a choice, carefully comparing price, quality, and size—looking for the perfectly balanced buy, the most for her money. Taking her time, she would fill brown paper bags with her individually chosen selections—tiny artichokes, bright green and compact; tender, barely sprung-from-the-vine black-eyed peas and okra.

“Lady, you’re going to drive away all my customers,” an irritated green grocer would say.

Initially impatient, in time the vendors came to respect my mother, setting aside the finest produce only she could appreciate.

“I have something I think you’ll like, Mrs. Zonana,” they would call out, as we began our survey of the street. “Look, isn’t this beautiful?” “I don’t know,” my mother would reply, noncommittal. We continued in our usual manner to the end of the street, stopping on the way back only if we had found nothing better. Painstakingly, then, my mother would count her coins (she still did her numbers in French, translating every sum), pulling a needlepoint purse from between her breasts.

I loved these trips to the market with my mother, partly because I loved being out, released from the cramped intensity of our small apartment, and partly because I was entranced by the variety and abundance of the vegetables, the busy life of the street. Once home, though, I lost all interest in the food we had amassed. The adventure was over and I refused to participate any further: I would not help my mother in the kitchen. Before the age of seven I had determined I would never marry, and I stubbornly resisted my mother's efforts to pass on her domestic skills. Dusting, vacuuming, ironing—I could not avoid these household chores. But cooking, I refused. I would not, I told myself, become a housewife. I wanted freedom, an unscripted life in the larger terrain of America that beckoned beyond our immigrant home. Resolutely, I turned to books, imagining they might open the path into my future—away from our family's unarticulated but painful and constricting past.

My desk and my notebooks took the place of my mother's stove and mixing bowls, words substituting for vegetables and spices. Like the kitchen cabinets crammed with jars of beans and grains, the shelf above my bed overflowed with dictionaries and encyclopedias. I spent hours examining words, exploring etymologies, pronunciations, meanings. As my mother compared artichokes on 86th Street, squeezing them between her fingers, I evaluated synonyms in my bedroom, rifling through an old thesaurus, sampling the sounds: *Hunger*, I said to myself, *appetite*, *craving*, *greed*; *identity*, I pondered, *agreement*, *likeness*, *self*. Bilingual by the age of two, I knew from the start that some things could be said only in one language, that translations were always approximate. “*Il n'y a pas de quoi*,” we said graciously in French, when Americans muttered a bare “you're welcome”; “*comme il faut*” we said to praise proper behavior, while Americans only said “good.” French was a storehouse of beautiful phrases, but I wanted to learn more: I dreamed of one day studying a variety of languages—Japanese, Italian, Russian, German—so that find I might find words to express every nuance of emotion and thought.

Although we spoke French at home, I had quickly mastered English—on the streets, learning from the grandchildren of the elderly Russian Jewish woman from whom we rented a room after our arrival in the United States. Proud of my new skill, I became my parents' precocious interpreter, helping them negotiate the intricacies of speaking with shopkeepers and officials—always careful to enunciate clearly, with no trace of an accent. (Even today, acquaintances are surprised to learn I grew up in New York;

“you have no accent,” they say. “I know,” I tell them. “I planned it that way.”) At school, I excelled in English, writing compositions to showcase the arcane vocabulary and complex syntax I acquired from reading too many nineteenth-century novels. In choosing language, I chose the path I thought would lead *away* from home and its unresolvable ambiguities of identity, unaware that in the end it would pull me even more inexorably back.

When I moved into my first apartment at eighteen, I brought books and clothes. No pots or pans or even recipes. Somehow I managed to avoid learning to cook until I was well into my twenties—and then it was only because I was invited to write a cookbook, a collection of recipes from inexpensive restaurants in New York. Although I protested that I knew nothing about cooking, the men who hired me to be their ghostwriter promised I would learn as I went along. Tempted by the opportunity to be paid for my writing—even if it *was* only a cookbook and not a novel or a dissertation, and even though my name would not appear on the title page—for two years I roamed the city, interviewing the owners and cooks in small, ethnic restaurants. The women and men I met were not unlike my mother—recent immigrants to the United States who revived their pasts in the form of carefully remembered and recreated food. And because many of my informants knew little English—and because I did not know Greek or Russian or Chinese—food finally became our medium of communication.

With one refugee from Hungary, I spent several afternoons savoring the delicacy of her *paprikash*, chicken simmered with tomatoes and peppers; in a tiny Mexican restaurant on the Upper West Side, I was introduced to *cilantro fino*, a delicate herb with a strong lemon-sharp taste; on the Lower East Side, an elderly Russian Jewish man showed me how to prepare mushroom barley soup, sweetened with sugar and mellowed with warm butter. Often unable to ascertain the names of ingredients in English, I memorized the look and the scent of them, went out into markets with Spanish or Japanese or Russian syllables at the tip of my tongue. In this way, I learned to cook. Not from my mother, but from her surrogates. And not because I cared about cooking, but because I wanted to write. From time to time, while working on the book, I would call to ask my mother’s advice: what exactly is a “pinch,” I would ask, how big is an “average” clove of garlic? In time, I began to ask for *her* recipes, wanting to recreate

for myself the *cousa be gebna*, *m'gaddareh*, and *rose ou loubia ou hamoud* of my childhood. Like the other cooks I met, my mother found it difficult to explain exactly what she did. I had to watch, to taste, to try—practicing patience as I drafted and revised. Over time, I began to acquire my mother's skills; I learned how to feed myself.

A recipe my mother couldn't share, though, was the one for *ful mudammas*, the staple food of Egypt. For *ful* was my father's specialty: only he knew its dark, musky secrets. Throughout my childhood, once a month, on a Sunday morning, he would preside over its ritual preparation. My mother would have gathered the ingredients in advance: canned fava beans imported from Egypt or Lebanon; hard-boiled eggs, parsley, cumin, fresh lemon juice, *tahina*, and a spicy salad of wilted lettuce and tomatoes. But it was my father who assembled these elements in the distinctive manner that gave the *ful* the texture and flavor I loved.

At exactly 9 a.m., he would summon us to join him at the polished mahogany table that dominated our living room. He sat at one end, before a bowl of warmed fava beans, with hard-boiled eggs, cumin, salt, lemon juice, and olive oil arrayed nearby. Using the tines of a fork, he mashed the beans, working the eggs in one by one. As the dark brown of the beans softened, mellowing with the yellow and white of the eggs, he would begin to add the condiments, mixing and tasting after each addition. My role was that of judge: were the proportions exactly right? "No," I would say, after taking a taste. "It needs salt." Or, "You need to add lemon juice. More cumin." I was insistent about the cumin—*kamoun*—for more than any one else in the family, I loved its pungent, sharp flavor. If I could choose only one spice to represent for me the rich taste of my childhood, the taste of my parents' remembered Egypt, it would be *kamoun*—dark, grainy, freshly ground *kamoun*.

We could only purchase the ingredients for *ful mudammas*—along with the spices, breads, and other imported delicacies that gave our meals their special character—in one place: "*chez les Arabes*," my mother would say, "at the Arabs," on Atlantic Avenue in downtown Brooklyn. "*Ahtlahntique Ahvenue*." The name of the street, pronounced with the distinctive French-Arab lilt of my parents' speech evoked for me dreams of vastness, of ships carrying spices and preserves, of a realm of adventure and enterprise just beyond our horizon. *Ahtlahntique Ahvenue*. We went there once a month,

always on Saturdays, so that my father, whose long working hours usually prevented him from partaking in family activities, might accompany us. We took the car, because it was too long a trip on the subway, and we always came home with multiple bags of groceries to put away.

On Atlantic Avenue, where the plaintive sounds of Arabic music wafted from storefronts and second-story windows, where the men seemed gentler than the women and the children played freely on the sidewalks, my parents relaxed their usual guard, moving easily through the crowd, joking with shopkeepers or talking quietly with one another. Here, more than anywhere in New York, they seemed to belong.

“Ezayyak?” “How are you?” the dark-eyed man behind the glass case at Sahadi’s would ask my father as we entered. And he would nod towards all of us.

“Quías,” my father would reply. “Fine.” His eyes had a sparkle I seldom saw, and he too would nod his head almost imperceptibly, then hold it back up proudly.

“How’s business?” he would ask the storekeeper in Arabic.

“Can’t complain. Mahbsouta,” the shopkeeper would reply with a shrug. “Good enough.”

The two men would go on to genial comments about their health, the weather, their families. The store was inevitably crowded, with customers clamoring for service, but the man at the front always had time for this talk with my father.

“Itfaddal,” he would say to us all with a generous sweep of his arm. “Come in.”

“Ahlan wa sahlan,—welcome.”

While the men chatted and my mother began the serious business of selecting cheeses and *halawah*, I would drift over to the large barrels of olives pushed against the side wall. There were green, black, greenish-black, big, small, smooth, wrinkled olives—all hidden just below the surface of the dark brine. I wanted to plunge my hands, to submerge my face in the dark sweet water, to let my tongue explore the varied textures and tastes. Beside the olives were bins of grain—bulghur in three different grades (we would buy the fine for *tabbouleh*, the medium for *kobeba*, the course for *burghul* and *kibbe*), along with rice, millet, semolina, couscous. Nearby were dried beans in an assortment of shapes and sizes, a kaleidoscope of muted colors. I loved the red, yellow and brown of the flat round

lentils, the green of the kidney-shaped favas, the gold of the spherical chickpeas. I had to resist running my hands through the bins, feeling the hard beans, letting them fall through my fingers, clicking against one another. And as if all this wasn't dizzying, delicious abundance enough, there were also the burlap bags filled with spices and herbs—cinnamon, cumin, coriander, dried mint—mingling their scents with that of the dark, finely ground Turkish coffee stored behind the counter.

I hated to leave Sahadi's, knowing we might not return for a month, but my parents always saved the best part of Atlantic Avenue for last, our descent into the bakery where we would buy the fresh Arabic bread, "*pain chammy*," we could not do without. In the 1950s in Brooklyn, the only place one could find Arabic bread was on Atlantic Avenue. These days, packaged pita bread is available in most supermarkets—yet I cannot bring myself to buy it. In New Orleans, I make my way to the "Daily Pita Bakery" that supplies the local Arab community.

"What do you call this bread in Arabic?" I ask the soft-spoken Palestinian woman who serves me. "Isn't pita the Israeli name for this bread?"

"Yes," she says, "in Arabic it's called *chammedz*."

"*Chammedz*," I repeat after her until I get it right. "*Chammedz*. That's so strange, that Americans call it pita, when it's mostly Arabs, not Israelis, who bake and sell it. You must find that strange."

"Yes," she agrees quietly, "it's strange." The restaurant adjacent to the bakery/grocery store is adorned with a mural of the Dome of the Rock; anti-Israel sentiment is strong here, yet the owners welcome me. They know that I was born in Cairo, and that my family is Jewish. We look directly into each other's eyes when we talk about events in the Middle East and I ask for news of their families on the West Bank. "Where have you been?" the owner asks if I have not come by for a while. "We missed you."

The trip to the bakery on Atlantic Avenue had for my family the aura of pilgrimage. Reached by a narrow flight of concrete stairs leading below the sidewalk to a basement, the bakery was in a low-ceilinged, dark room, with barely space to stand. To the left was a long glass counter, behind which white-shirted men talked briskly in Arabic as they mixed and kneaded the dough. Behind the counter and to the left—I had to lean way over in order to see it—was the huge brick oven, built into the wall, glowing red, into which flat circles of dough were inserted on long-handled wooden platters. Once in the oven, the loaves ballooned upward, transforming from white

disks to pale beige spheres, lightly flecked with brown. Within minutes, they would be slipped out again; on the counter, they slowly deflated. We always bought our bread hot, fresh. It had a fine layer of powdery dry flour on top; inside it was warm and soft, pulling apart into fine sticky webs.

Returning from Atlantic Avenue, smelling the bread and spices in the back seat of the car, I would be deeply satisfied, at peace. For on Atlantic Avenue I had found the accents and aromas and inflections of home, out in the world, beyond the narrow confines of our apartment. On this street no one asked me what kind of person I was, and I had nothing to explain. I saw people who looked like me and ate like me, dark-skinned children and adults with eyes like mine. Here my parents lapsed into the rhythms and gestures of their own childhoods, and I too could let myself go. It seemed clear on Atlantic Avenue that I was Middle Eastern, Egyptian. For a moment, I knew who I was.

Yet even then my confidence was flawed, a gap prevented my complete identification. It was not simply that I retained an awareness of being Jewish, conscious that the Arabs were—what?—“Musulman,” Muslim, I had been told in French. Much more significant was the fact that I could not speak the language of these people I so obviously resembled and with whom I felt such an affinity. I could utter not a word of Arabic. So when my father spoke to the store owner, I didn’t really know what they said. When the man helping my mother asked her a question—perhaps it was about me—I could make no sense of her reply. I was, indeed, at home on Atlantic Avenue, but it was the pre-linguistic at-homeness of someone who can neither understand nor make herself understood.

Although they spoke it occasionally between themselves, my parents never taught me to speak Arabic. I heard greetings, prayers, invocations, thanks: *salaamtek*, *inshallah*, *hamdulillah*, *mabrouk*. The word used most often by relatives to describe me, *aroosa*—bride—was Arabic. “*Inshallah aroosa*,” “god willing that you will be a bride,” they always said. But my parents didn’t think it necessary for me to learn the language they reserved for expressing their strongest feelings. What occasion would I have for it, they wondered, when I told them I wanted to learn it. The obvious answer, to speak with other Egyptians, did not arise.

“If you’re from Egypt, then how come you don’t speak Egyptian?” acquaintances still ask, and I struggle to explain the racism and elitism that shame me.

“The middle class Jews in Egypt,” I say, “wanted to distinguish themselves from the Arabs, they wanted to stay separate. So, if they could afford it, they sent their children to French schools. The French had set up schools in Egypt in the nineteenth century, after Napoleon invaded the country. French became the preferred language of the middle-class Jews, allowing them to think of themselves as “European” rather than Arab. And besides, there is no such thing as ‘Egyptian.’ The language Egyptians speak is Arabic.”

“You mean you don’t speak Yiddish?”

I’m back in the schoolyard again. How can I explain?

“No, we spoke French at home,” I repeat, irritated, embarrassed. “We didn’t speak Yiddish.” Yiddish was another one of those markers of true Jewishness our family failed to possess. But speaking Yiddish is beside the point. It’s Arabic I don’t speak, Arabic I need to learn.

My father speaks perfect Egyptian Arabic, having worked for nearly twenty years as an interpreter in the Mixed Courts in Cairo. In New York, while I was growing up, he occasionally contracted to do small translation jobs, bringing his assignments home, spreading papers and dictionaries around him in the living room. He admires and appreciates the language, boasting to me of its flexibility, its poetic resources. To indicate that a woman is beautiful, for example, one can say, “The distance between the bottom of her earrings and the top of her shoulders is very great.”

My mother is less fluent, cannot read or write Arabic, her formal education having been in French and English. For a few years a teacher in her *lycée* made an effort to teach the girls Arabic; when they came to a certain passage, early in the grammar book—“*Ahmadou grimpe sur le palmier*” (Ahmed climbs on the palm tree), my mother recalls the exact words in French, but not in Arabic—they gave up and went back to the beginning. When I asked her why she didn’t try to study on her own, she says Arabic is an ugly language, like German, with its harsh gutturals. She tells me that *les Arabes*, those generous people we saw on Atlantic Avenue each month, are not like us. They are not *comme il faut*—proper. “*Ils ne sont pas éduqués*,” she says, as if this will clinch it, “They are uneducated.” Indeed, my mother continues, Arabs live like animals; they are dirty, dangerous, dark. In the 1940s, they had threatened the Jews in Cairo; today, they menace the state of Israel. Why would I want to speak their language?

I strive to understand my mother's perspective, to make allowances for her experience. Growing up, she had few opportunities to interact with non-Jewish Egyptians other than servants or merchants, and these people she had been taught to keep at a distance. Dark-skinned, dark-eyed, and dark-haired herself, she might easily have passed as a true native: her father regularly upbraided her for being too dark, calling her "*un poux dans du lait*," "a louse in milk."

I recall our trip to Brazil when I was eight years old, to visit my maternal relatives who had emigrated there in 1956. After a week at the beach with my mother and her sister, we returned to Sao Paolo where my grandfather pointed at my knees and told me they needed scrubbing. I washed them roughly with a stiff cloth. When I returned he told me I was still dirty. I washed again. The third time I came into the living room, he pointed at my knees again, and raised his voice in anger: I looked like "*une Arabe*" he shouted, my mother shouldn't have allowed me to stay in the sun. Confused and ashamed, I wondered what I had done. What was it to be "*une Arabe*," and why was it so bad? If these people were so different from us—and somehow worse—why did we eat the same food? Why did my parents speak their language? How could a whole people be bad? My mother told me to be silent, to behave myself. She knew about these things, she said, and maybe when I got older I would understand.

But of course as I have gotten older, I have understood less and less. I am fifty years old, with a Ph.D. in literature and a good job at a university. I have studied French, German, Latin, Greek. When I traveled as a child with my family to South America, I found myself easily acquiring bits of Spanish and Portuguese. In Italy a few years ago, I spoke comfortably with taxi drivers and waiters; in Hungary, I managed on an amalgam of French and German. I am never so happy as when I am learning a new language. Yet I have never applied myself to the study of Arabic. Once, in my early twenties, I persuaded my father to teach me. After a few evenings struggling to shape the letters, I gave up. The distance was too great, the syntax too foreign—and I could sense my mother's disapproval.

Because I have never learned the language of my homeland, there has been a strange lacuna in my identity, a wound I have been unable to heal. I cook Arabic food and shop in Arab markets, but I cannot, must not it seems, speak the words of the people who also eat that food and shop in those markets. The Jewish part of my identity is by now relatively unprob-

lematic. Whether or not I grew up eating *gefilte* fish or keeping kosher, I know that I am, by birth and custom and some fragments of belief, Jewish. But the Egyptian part remains unfulfilled, incomplete. To claim it, I must do more than stuff grape leaves, buy fresh Arabic bread. I must learn the language of my homeland.

Living away from the East Coast of the United States for the past fifteen years, I have been lonely for my kind. But who are my kind? When I meet Jewish women from New York, we instantly gravitate towards one another. We appreciate each other's jokes, understand references, share a rhythm and a style. For a brief moment, I can feel that I am not too loud, that I am not at all pushy, that I can let my intelligence and wit have free rein. I am at home. And I think, yes, that's who I am, I'm a Jew from New York.

But recently I found myself in different company. I had arranged a meeting with a new friend, an Egyptian Muslim who teaches in Washington, D.C. Mervat had brought along a friend of hers, an Egyptian woman who teaches at Cairo University. We were together to explore what it might mean to imagine a community of contemporary Egyptian women that includes both Muslims and Jews. We had tea at my brother's Georgetown house, then met a few days later for coffee at Union Station. (I had offered to cook a meal—I was thinking of *hamoud* and *loubya*, perhaps some *ba'alawa* or *fila au fromage*—but Mervat said briskly, “No, you're on vacation, you don't need to be slaving away in the kitchen! I'll bring pastries and you prepare the tea.”)

Sitting with Mervat and Hoda, women who look more like me than anyone I have met before, I find myself relaxing in a new way, the way I think my father must have relaxed all those years ago at Sahadi's. We speak to each other with our eyes, our hands, the play of a muscle above an eyebrow. Our words in English barely skim the surface; something else is going on. When Hoda and Mervat confer with each other rapidly in Arabic I listen hungrily, hovering on the brink of understanding. At one point, Hoda insists on paying for my coffee. At first I protest, then I acquiesce. She has made a slight gesture with her hand, indicating it would be discourteous of me to deny her this pleasure. I understand the gesture and the lifting of her eyebrows. An Arabic gesture. An Egyptian impulse of hospitality. What would happen between us, I wonder, if we could speak together in Arabic, entirely bypassing the European tongue?

I notice my handwriting now as I hurry to capture these thoughts. It is a highly stylized, sweeping script. I see with new eyes its elaborate flourishes and loops, the dots over my i's that could be dashes, the stops and starts as letters are connected or not. Although I write with a lead pencil, there is subtle shading as well, with some lines thicker or thinner, as if I were using a calligraphic pen. If I squint, if I look at a certain angle, I can see my writing moving towards another ideal, a different alphabet. Aleph. Ba. The names of the letters in Arabic. I make the commitment. I will study Arabic.

At the university where I teach, I sign up for a course in the evening division. My instructor is a young graduate student from Jordan; he has the bright black eyes and dark skin that remind me of the men in my family; he could be my brother, my cousin. Twice a week, I repeat with him the sounds I have heard since childhood, only now they are accompanied by the grammar and spelling, imbued with meaning. Painstakingly, I learn the alphabet, practice reading from right to left. At night, I listen to tapes before going to sleep, I write out vocabulary on small cards and test myself. I learn the numbers from one to ten; the days of the week; standard greetings; the words for man, woman, child. But my other obligations press. There are papers to grade and lectures to prepare. After a year, I have made little progress, though I remain fitfully committed. At the very least, I console myself, when I finally go to Cairo I will be able to read a street sign, I will know how to order tea, *be n'ana*, with mint. In the market, I will know how to find *kamoun*. I will know the Arabic words for grape leaves. And the next time I am invited to a potluck party in the United States, I will again make the dish I love so much. Only this time I will be chatting in Arabic with new friends; we will move in concert as we bend to the rhythms of peeling, mincing, stuffing, rolling. Each leaf will fall easily into place, for I will at last be able to nourish myself with words, aromatic words that fill my mouth with their rich consonants and moist vowels, words that fill my belly with the sweet, rich juice of communion.