

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

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To Bear Witness:

Algeria, 1998

HALA HAMITI TOOK A SHAKY BREATH as she climbed out of the car. She was here, in the beautiful coastal city once known as Philippeville. Looking at the peaceful scene, the rolling hills and fishing ships in the distance, it was hard to believe her childhood friends had died here during the War for Independence.

"Are you all right?" Hala's grown daughter looked worried. And why not? It was August 20th, Hala's 50th birthday, but she never celebrated it on the actual day. How could she, when her best friends had died on that day?

Even forty-three years later, Hala still couldn't think of this town, this date, or the war without missing her friends. *Annette. Zafir*. Children who'd been murdered.

Yet Hala was alive. Why had she survived when they hadn't?

"I'm all right," Hala lied. "Could you drop me off? I need to go on alone."

The look on her daughter's face indicated that the *last* thing she wanted to do was leave, but she understood that sometimes people needed to face their demons on their own.

"All right." She started the car as Hala climbed out the passenger's seat. "I'll pick you up in an hour."

Once the blue car had disappeared in the distance, Hala was alone. She could smell the salty air off the Mediterranean, feel the sun burning down on her head. The sky was bright blue, the breeze offered a welcome cooling effect, but all Hala could think of was her friends.

Annette and Zafir. They'll always be eight and thirteen years old. So why do I still feel like the youngest one? Why do I still feel like the little girl they knew me as?

Hala gripped the bag she was carrying closer to her body, protecting it as she had not been able to protect her friends.

Several minutes later, Hala found herself at a secluded spot on the beach, away from tourists and fisherman.

After all this time, Hala had come back to say goodbye, to put her own demons to rest. She opened the bag and took out the items she'd brought. In one hand was a fistful of acacia plants. Annette used to collect acacias. The other item was a small branch from a cedar tree. Zafir said he'd used to climb in the cedar trees near his family's farm, before he became an orphan.

Hala carefully wove the cedar branch and the acacia plants together into a messy bouquet. She gathered it in her arms and approached the sea's edge.

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

But now, as Hala stood there, she couldn't throw it into the water. She couldn't let go.

"What's wrong with me?" Hala muttered. She had come here especially for this private ceremony. Why couldn't she go through with it?

Hala gazed down at the entwined acacia and cedar branches. If she threw it, what trace of her friends would remain? She had never told anyone about them, not her husband or children or grandchildren. It was too painful; the idea of being asked tough questions and retelling the story over and over again was too much.

But Hala was getting older. When she eventually died, her memories of Zafir and Annette would die with her.

"Hello?"

Hala nearly jumped out of her skin at the voice behind her. She spun around, almost dropping her 'bouquet'. Behind her was a young woman, no older than twenty, with thick black hair that she had tied up with a blue ribbon. The newcomer had a satchel, a camera, and a curious expression.

"I didn't mean to startle you," the newcomer said. "I was...well, I was wondering what you're holding there."

Hala bit back a sharp retort. How was any of this her business? But the expression in the girl's deep, black eyes was gentle, as if she sensed she was intruding on something important. Hala softened the tiniest bit. "It's a memorial for my childhood friends. I was going to throw it into the sea. Say goodbye to them."

"I'm sorry," the young woman said. Her gaze lingered on the bouquet. "What happened, exactly?"

"Hasn't anyone ever told you not to ask personal questions?" Hala demanded.

The girl looked embarrassed. "Sorry...again. Look, we're getting off on the wrong foot. My name is Amina. I'm studying to be a journalist." Seeing the glare Hala was giving her, Amina held up her hands. "Not a nosy journalist! I'm working on a worthwhile project right now. I'm recording Algerian legends, folklore, and the stories of people who've lived here. Oral history has always been part of our culture, and I wanted to help make sure nothing's ever forgotten."

Hala was silent. Amina's task was a noble one. She was too nosy in her questions, but Hala could see she meant well. And had she herself not been fretting a moment ago about her friends being forgotten?

Maybe it wasn't a coincidence that Amina had come to her. Maybe Hala was meant to tell her what had happened.

Much to her own surprise, Hala found herself gesturing to Amina's bag. "Do you have a tape recorder?"

Amina perked up and nodded.

"I'll tell you why I'm here, but only if you make me a copy of the tape." Hala didn't want to explain that the tape would be the only way she'd be

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

able to let her family know of her heartbreak. Thankfully, Amina didn't require an explanation. She nodded again, pulling out the tape recorder. She pushed a button and gestured to Hala. "What is it you want to say?"

Hala took a deep breath, closed her eyes, conjured up the images of her friends.

"I want to say that Algeria's War of Independence may have brought us freedom from France, but it also took my two best friends away." Hala sighed. "Annette was eight years old. She was from a wealthy French family. My own family lived outside Philippeville in a cabin. Mother used to be a housekeeper for Annette's parents, and they allowed her to bring me along. While Mother worked, I played with Annette. She was a lovely girl, she had long blonde hair, a sweet smile, and a wisdom beyond her years. We were also friends with Zafir, a thirteen-year-old Algerian orphan who also worked for Annette's family. He had the widest grin and told the funniest jokes of anyone I've ever known."

"What happened?" Amina whispered, already entranced by the two children she didn't know.

"1955 happened. The year I grew up...."

Algeria, 1955

Seven-year-old Hala couldn't remember when she'd been so happy. She was playing with her best friends in the world, it was a warm afternoon, and tomorrow would be her 8th birthday!

What more could she ask for?

"Come on, Hala!" Zafir waved a hand. "I need help finding Annette!"

Hala shook her head in amazement. Every single time they played hide-and-seek Annette was *always* the last to be found. Hala was starting to wonder if she had magic powers.

"Annette!" Hala peeked under the car in her parents' driveway... Annette was so lucky to have a car!

"Annette!" Zafir called, checking in the bushes. Hala and Zafir tromped across the swaying grass, heading towards the shed in the distance.

"Boo!" Annette dropped from a tree-limb and landed right in front of them.

"Ah!" Hala shrieked.

"Got you again!" Annette giggled.

"You scared Hala!" Zafir accused, hiding his own surprise behind concern for Hala.

"Sorry." Annette went serious immediately. She linked her arm through Hala's, something other Europeans would not approve of. But neither girl cared. Zafir linked his arm through Hala's right arm, and she was sandwiched between her best friends.

"Tomorrow's my birthday." Hala announced proudly. "I'll be eight."

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

"Happy birthday!" Annette smiled.

Zafir ruffled Hala's hair. "Eight. You won't be our baby anymore."

"I'm not a baby!" Hala's older brother always called her that too, and she hated it.

"Whatever. Happy birthday, little one."

Hala opened her mouth to snap that she wasn't little, but Annette, always the mediator, jumped in. "Let's play school. Be the teacher, Zafir!"

He grinned. "Okay." The girls plopped down onto the grass, trying to look attentive the way pupils should. Zafir stood on a long, flat rock in front of them, adopting the pose he always did when he took the role as the teacher.

"All right, listen up students." He managed a perfect imitation of Annette's mother's bossy voice, and the girls giggled. "We will be learning *very* important things today! We will learn to write, to speak ancient Egyptian, and calculus..."

"What's calculus?" Hala interrupted.

Zafir shrugged. "We will get to that last." He moved on quickly, before either girl could figure out that he really had no idea what calculus was. He again impersonated Annette's mother. "Work fast! Work hard! Learn!"

"That's what Mama says all the time," Annette rolled her eyes. "It annoys her that I don't enjoy my lessons much."

"Silence students!" Zafir rapped a stick on the rock dramatically. "Or you will be given *dancing lessons!*"

"Not dancing lessons!" Annette and Hala both called out, and then they started laughing again.

"Children?"

The kids immediately sobered when Annette's mother approached. Zafir's eyes widened with worry. But Annette's mother didn't seem to realize her strict attitude was being mocked. She looked worried.

"What is it?" Annette's face had turned serious.

"I need to speak with you, daughter. There are some new developments about the war."

Zafir and Hala exchanged glances but said nothing. All Hala knew was people like Annette's parents didn't want Algeria to be independent, they wanted France to govern it. But Hala's parents wanted it to be independent. There had been fighting for a year now, between people who either supported Algerian independence or rejected it. Hala wasn't sure which side was right, or why she and Zafir were technically on one side while Annette was on the other.

She shook her head, dislodging all the confusing thoughts. It didn't matter when it came to her friendship with Zafir and Annette. So what if Annette was French? So what if Zafir supported independence? They were her best friends. And wasn't her family always saying how important friends were, especially in these trying times?

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

Annette's mother took her daughter's hand, and she smiled politely at Hala and Zafir. "Your mother's coming out soon, Hala. She'll bring you home. Zafir, I believe my husband is looking for you."

Playtime was once again interrupted by the grown-ups. Hala, Annette, and Zafir all gazed at each other with *adults-are-weird* expressions.

"All right." Annette waved to her friends and followed her mother inside.

Zafir tousled Hala's hair again. "I'd better get going. Bye, shorty!"

Usually, Hala would yell at Zafir about being called shorty, but something seemed different today, in Annette's mother's behavior....and now, in Hala's own mother's worry as she pushed the front door open. She was getting off work early today.

As her mother took her hand, Hala called to Zafir, "See you tomorrow!"

On the way home, Mama silent. She kept tugging on her headscarf, which she rarely did except when she was very worried.

"What's wrong?" Hala finally asked.

"Oh, it's to do with the war. There might be some fighting nearby in the next few days."

"What?" Hala tugged Mama's arm. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know for sure, honey. Annette's mother said she's been hearing rumors about fighting between the FLN and the French. But it could be misinformation."

"Will Annette and Zafir be safe?"

"Hala, oftentimes in war, mistakes are made and rumors fly. It doesn't mean anything." But she couldn't look her daughter in the eye when she spoke.

And the next day brought shock and fear.

Hala woke up late in the small cot she slept in, hearing her parents' voices in the kitchen. As Hala got to her feet, rubbing her eyes sleepily, she overheard pieces of the conversation. "Attack...FLN...screaming.... knives...Philippeville."

Hala's stomach dropped. *Philippeville*. Where Annette and Zafir lived. She hurried out.

"What's happened in Philippeville?" she demanded.

Mama looked stricken. "Go back to bed, Hala." Which was an insane order, because when Hala glanced at the clock, she saw it was noontime. She should've been up hours ago.

"No." Papa interrupted. "We can't hide this from her. She'll hear about it sooner or later." He turned to Hala. "The FLN is attacking Philippeville. I don't know what's happening exactly, but it looks bad."

"Annette? Zafir?" Hala whispered.

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

"I don't know." Papa's said softly. "Not all Europeans and Algerians get along as well as you do with your friends. Just pray, Hala. That's all you can do."

Hala went to stand in the front doorway, looking in the direction of Philippeville. Was it her imagination, or could she hear rumbling gunfire? Did the sky to the north have a blood-red tinge to it?

Hala swallowed hard, fighting the fear roiling in her belly. Where were her friends? They were somewhere out there, in the direction of gunfire and blood-red skies.

No, Annette's the best hide-and-seek player ever. And Zafir is smarter than anyone I know. They'll be fine. They'll be fine.

She stood in the doorway all day, ignoring her mother's pleas to come inside. Ignoring the growing realization that her friends were not safe. Hoping her friends were all right and would get word to her soon.

But by the time evening darkened the sky, Hala knew, somewhere deep inside, that they were never coming back.

It was Hala's birthday. She was eight. And she was a baby no longer.

Algeria, 1998

"What happened after that?" Amina sounded sad as she asked Hala this question. She knew enough about that event to know the ending couldn't be good.

Hala wiped a stray tear. "Annette and her parents were killed by the FLN. They'd taken shelter in their house when the fighting started, but the FLN broke in. They slaughtered many innocent families. Most of the Europeans who'd died were hacked to death...but not Annette's family. One of the men who broke in had a gun and he shot them all to death. Papa used to tell me that they were the lucky ones, at least they died quickly and weren't tortured or raped the way others were. I'm grateful for that.... but Annette was eight. That's too young a death to be considered 'lucky' in any way."

Amina was silent a long moment. "What about Zafir?"

"Zafir survived the initial attack. How, I don't know. All I know for sure is that he hid somewhere and came out when the French arrived the next day. I think he was looking for help, maybe trying to get the soldiers to look for Annette's family. But the French soldiers were enraged and brutal. They shot at any Algerian who moved. Zafir was thirteen. He had no weapons. He was looking for help. But they shot him dead, along with tons of other Algerians, without even checking to find out who were the killers and who were the innocents."

Amina had nothing to say to that. Hala wiped at her eyes again.

"I still miss them. Even now, all these years later. I can't celebrate my birthday on August 20th...I have to do it a day earlier."

"I'm sorry for your friends." Amina said softly. "I can't imagine how horrible that must have been for you."

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

"It's been very hard to deal with. I'm happy with my family, my children, but I still mourn my friends. I'm angry that warmongers on both sides tried to justify killing children. I'm angry that their lives were stolen. No one will ever know what Zafir and Annette could have accomplished, who they would have become, if they'd been allowed to live. All I know is I miss them each day. Though I've never spoken of them until now."

"Really?" Amina seemed surprised. "You've *never* spoken of them?"

"No. Which is why I want a copy of your tape. So my family can listen to it. I don't think I could tell it again."

What Hala didn't say was that she couldn't stand to think of her friends' last moments, the terror they must have felt, the shots that cut them down. She could never again speak of how they died.

"So...why did you tell me?" Amina asked.

Hala glanced down at her bouquet. "I guess for the same reason I made this. To bear witness. To honor them."

"You did the right thing." Amina assured her.

Hala couldn't be sure. But there was something comforting in the fact that, if Amina had her way, Zafir and Annette's stories would be written down on paper. Shared with others. Remembered.

Hala got up and approached the water, bouquet in hand. As the waves lapped at her feet, she closed her eyes again. She saw a blonde girl with serious eyes, and a tall skinny boy with a big grin. She could hear them wishing her a happy birthday.

Maybe they could see her now, from heaven. Maybe they were thankful she'd finally told their stories to someone else.

Gently, Hala lowered the bouquet into the water. She watched as the makeshift memorial was slowly drawn out into the peaceful blue sea, taking with it some of the burden she'd carried in her heart for all these years.