

A Gallic Book

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Sirte, District Two
Night of 19 October 2011

When I was a boy, my uncle – my mother’s brother – sometimes took me with him into the desert. For him it was a journey that meant more than going back to his roots. It was a cleansing of his spirit.

I was too young to understand the things he was trying to instil in me, but I loved to listen to him.

My uncle was a poet, uncelebrated and unassuming, a touchingly humble Bedouin whose only wish was to pitch his tent in the shade of a rock and sit listening to the wind whistle across the sand, as stealthy as a shadow.

He owned a magnificent bay horse, two watchful greyhounds, and an old rifle he used to hunt mouflons, and he knew better than anyone how to trap jerboas (for their medicinal properties) as well as the spiny-tailed lizards that he stuffed and varnished and sold in the souk.

When night fell, he would light a campfire and, after a meagre meal and a cup of too-sweet tea, he would slip into a reverie. To see him commune with the silence and barrenness of the rock-littered plains was a moment of grace for me.

There were times when I felt as though his spirit was escaping from his body, leaving me with just a scarecrow for company, as speechless as the goatskin flask that dangled at the entrance to the tent. When that happened I felt utterly alone in the world and, suddenly scared of the Sahara's mysteries, swirling around me like an army of jinn, I would gently nudge him to make him come back to me. He would surface from his trance, his eyes sparkling, and smile at me. I shall never see a smile more beautiful than his – not on the faces of the women I have graced with my manhood nor those of the courtesans I have raised in their station in life. Reserved, almost invisible, my uncle was a man of slow, gentle gestures who rarely showed his feelings. His voice was barely audible, though when he talked to me it resonated through me like a song. He would say, his gaze lost somewhere in the glittering heavens, that there was a star up there for every brave man on earth. I asked him to show me mine. His finger pointed unhesitatingly at the moon, as though it was obvious. And once he had said it, every time I raised my eyes to heaven I saw the moon as full. Every night. My full moon, nobody else's. Never less than perfect, never hidden. Lighting my way. So beautiful that no other enchantment came near it. So radiant that it put the stars around it in the shade. So splendid that it looked cramped in the infinity of space.

My uncle swore that I was the Ghous clan's chosen one, the child who would restore to the Kadhafa tribe all its legends and former lustre.

Tonight, sixty-three years later, I seem to see fewer stars in the sky over Sirte, and of my full moon only a greyish wisp remains, hardly wider than a nail clipping. All of the world's romance is being smothered in the smoke billowing up from the burning houses, while the day, weighed down by dust and fighting, cowers miserably beneath the whistle of rockets. The silence that once lulled my soul has something apocalyptic about it now, while the gunfire that shatters it here and there is doing its best to challenge a myth far beyond the reach of any weaponry, in other words myself, the Brotherly Guide, the miracle boy who became the infallible visionary, who people thought was abnormal but who stands as firm as a lighthouse in a raging sea, sweeping with its luminous beam both the treacherous shadows and the gleaming cauldron of foam.

I heard one of my guards, concealed in the darkness, say that we were living through 'our night of doubt' and ask himself whether dawn would reveal the eyes of the world upon us or our bodies delivered to the flames.

His words upset me, but I did not reprimand him. It was unnecessary. If he had had the slightest presence of mind he would not have uttered such blasphemies. There is no greater insult than to doubt in my presence.