

Chapter from Chabha Ben Gana's novel Amsebrid
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VI (pp. 52-66)

Tilleli went out to the orchard surrounding the house, to warm herself by April's sun. It had broken the coldness of winter, the wind was warm. She wore a white, knee-length dress, and she laid a tissue under a big peach tree that occupied half the orchard. The tree bloomed, and its flowers were pink. Tilleli leaned against the tree and started to read Albert Camus's *La Peste* (*The Plague*). She placed it on her chest, which was adorned by a cute little silver chain. She looked up towards the beautiful blue sky, where small spots of clouds were gathering. Her eyes shifted from one mountain to another and from one hill to another. If only it were possible, her eyes would not miss a thing. She dazed off while looking at a special flower that had bloomed between the rocks, and which intrigued her. Even though it was surrounded by pebbles and stony ground, it stood tall to see the light, to meet the sunlight. It proudly opened its petals to play with the wind; it was defying nature, she told herself: "*Between flowers or between rocks, on flat or steep ground, I'm here!*" (The personification of the flower in this sentence may create ambiguity with Tillelli.)

Tilleli was right: if she threw herself into nature's arms, that meant it was spring! Winter had ended; it picked up its tattered remains and cleared out. Great Kabylia appeared like a rainbow, the snow which covered the mountains had melted. Only a little snow remained on the mountaintops and in the places that have turned their backs to the sun. Even the sky shone in her face (this is not the original meaning). Waterlogged springs and streams flooded, plants stood tall, and flowers started to bloom. The migratory birds returned at dawn to occupy the trees, to line up on the branches, and to unleash their singing. Days started to get longer, the day got up early, the moon, the moonlight, and the stars decorated the sky. Every night, they became the torch that illuminates the earth.

In spring, nature becomes Man's psychologist: just let your gaze wander, the heart will release, and the mind will cool down.

When she was about to close her eyes to doze off, and to picture some beautiful memories in her dreams, she heard Lkaysa calling her from the window. She jumped up and immediately headed towards their room. Tilleli found her by the doorstep, waiting for her.

- Tilleli! Come and read this message that Mhanna has sent to me.
- Wait until we close the door! Mom shouldn't hear, or she'll kill you!

Tilleli closed the door and Lkaysa jumped on the bed. She replaced the two strands of hair which were falling on her lovely face, tanned by the March sun. She rolled up her sleeves as if she were about to make food, one eye on Tilleli and another one on the precious old phone that she secretly owned.

- Tell me! What did he write?
- Wait at least until I read it!
- Don't you ever hide a secret from me, and don't forget anything, dear sister.
- He's telling you: *"I'm doing great, everything is going well, if I didn't message or call you, it was because of lack of time, not because I forgot you. I miss you a lot, in a few more days, they will give me a leave..."*

Lkaysa's eyes shone with happiness, they were filled with tears, she missed him so much. Tilleli was silently looking at her, pursing her lips. Lkaysa begged her to keep reading what he had said.

- He is telling you... He is telling you... -He is telling you, He, he, he, he is telling you...
- What is he telling you?
- Telling you, not me!
- Yes, what is he saying to you... or is he talking to me? Stop that Tilleli, it is not the right time for joking, people do not joke about that.
- Alright, all is well! He is telling you: They will give me a leave, and I'm going to ask for your hand in marriage from your parents.
- Oh Tilleli, I told you that it was not the right time to joke around right now.
- Unless it is he who is joking right now, it is not me; I just read what he has said.
- You swear to God?
- I swear to God!

- Keep going, keep going...

- "... *I will ask for your hand in marriage from your parents, when my remaining six months at the army will come to an end, I will bring you to my house. Stay in peace, my dear. I love you.*"

She jumped up from the bed, walking all around the room like a spider that weaves its web. She walked from the door to Tilleli. She grabbed the phone out of her hands, looking at the message Mhenna had sent her as if she could read.

- I can't bear such happiness! Is it reality or am I dreaming? What should I write him? What should I answer? What...?

- Sit down here, take a breath, relax and tell him how you're feeling.

- You are right. Help me, my dear.

- This is not cooking or housework, honey; this concerns you, it is about your feelings. How can I help you?

- So, please set down exactly what I say and tell him: "*I'm happy that you are okay, I'm waiting for you, don't worry.*" Please, do not forget, tell him: "*I will wait for you until I tire of waiting. Do not go back on your words, do not betray me. If you leave me, I will lose everything that is good in my life; both my happiness and hope are tied to you. I cannot wait for the day we will be living under the same roof... Stay in peace, my dear. I love you.*"

That night, Lkaysa did not sleep. From time to time, she asked Tilelli to again read the message Mhenna had sent her, and other times she held the phone against her chest like a child. Tilell was rocked to sleep by her sister's story; she dreamed of living the same story someday.

Taken by a desire, an elusive desire, impatient, she stretched out her hand towards her phone and grabbed it. She searched for the picture she had secretly taken for Asirem, she stared at it and let her mind wander. Some time later, she received a text on Messenger; it was he who had sent it. He wrote:

"Hello Djurdjura's spring, I hope you are doing fine. Do not forget, tomorrow we will be heading down early to Tizi Ouzzou. Hayat has invited us for lunch, it is Asalas's birthday. It is late, go to sleep...!" She answered: "*Hello old saint, I did not forget, do not worry, I'll be waiting for you in the town tomorrow at 9 am, I have things to do there. Good night, sweet dreams...*"

Asirem and Tilleli had become as thick as thieves; they had broken the silence that had once imprisoned them. Their hearts were overflowing with love, but neither of them dared to tell the other. For her part, she had no idea of what he was feeling for her, she only knew that he cared

for her and worried about her; she also knew that she loved him more than she loved herself. As for him, he was eager to enjoy Hsen's company; at the same time, he was waiting for her to finish her studies.

Tilleli checked her watch. Time was passing by, but for her it seemed as if the day had frozen in place because of her eagerness to see him. Though this was not their first meeting, her heart still beat and her knees were shaking. She was as nervous as the very first day he had asked her out on a date.

Sunlight finally started to appear; its light was reflected on the window. She got up, took a shower, arranged herself in front of the mirror, and went back to her closet looking for something to wear. She grabbed a white shirt, the one Asirem preferred on her. She added a pair of blue pants and white sneakers. Then she went back to the mirror, and started to fight with her hair in an attempt to find a way to tie it down. She remembered the day he had taken away her hair clip, and he had told her: "*Hair is the charm of a woman, it increases her beauty by half, and such hair should not be tied up.*" She let down her hair and passed through the door, and went out of the house.....

Asirem reached the town, he took the way to the cinema, knowing that it was the road Tilleli usually took. He had not even taken two steps when he spotted her. She was hurrying down, to be on time.

- You woke up early today! He looked at his watch, and saw that it was exactly nine, as she had told him.

- I did not even sleep.

- Why? Are you okay? Are you sick?

- I've got insomnia.

- Was there something on your mind that kept you awake?

With a smirk that hid the truth, she answered:

- No, sleep and I have been fighting for a while now, it is not the first night I spend turning in my bed until rays of light start filtering through the shutters.

- This is a mystery! I can't believe this. Only someone who is troubled or plagued by worries struggles to sleep.

Silence; he gazed at her while waiting for an answer, she lowered her head and kicked the stones with her foot.

- What about your mother? What did the doctor tell her yesterday?

He understood that she had changed the subject because she did not want to tell him what was wrong, so he did the same to make her feel at ease.

- My mother is exhausted, she has to rest.

- Youth exhaustion waits for old age to take its revenge , may God grant her recovery.

- Recovery? May god keep her away from the crutches and the wheelchair.

- May god keep the worst away from us. Nna Aldjia is an amazing woman, she is patient, she has done nothing but good since her birth, and this is not what she deserves today.

- Nobody has ever told you that it is always the nice people who suffer! God inflicts suffering only on those who are familiar with it. Come on, let us go, Hayat is waiting for us for lunch...

Asalas was walking back and forth towards the balcony door that faced the road, waiting for them to arrive, Hayat crossed her legs while looking at the clock. The food was on the table. She knew that they were not far, they were going to knock on the door at any minute. Mhend, Hayat's husband, was reading a newspaper. He was also excited about their arrival, his stomach was growling from hunger, he had not eaten anything since breakfast at seven in the morning.

They arrived near the house and climbed the stairs. Tilleli was shy, she was not used to coming when (this is not the original meaning) her husband was at home. Asirem was laughing about her, realizing that she was acting shy, he continued to to make fun of her:

- Toady, she had even invited her in-laws and their uncles.

- Ow! You did not tell me, you rascal!

- Do not be scared, there aren't many of them, only five!

She felt like the world was falling on her head, her feet froze where she stood, (this is not the original meaning), her blood sugar rose, and her face felt hot . She was looking for an excuse to walk away and to cancel her visit. Asirem put his hand on her forehead, and whistled:

- You are burning! You are all red! What is happening to you?

- Just keep walking! I'm fine; we walked too fast, that is all. I will not stay for too long, I have to go back early. Kahina is waiting for me at the library.

- As soon as we see the family and eat with them, we leave. I have work to do as well, we will go together.

They entered the house, Tilleli greeted them, and looked around to spot the guests. She neither saw nor heard anyone, only Asalas was making noise. Asirem winked at his sister:

- Are your guests here? Or are we early?

Playing along, Hayat answered:

- Yes! It is you who are early! come and sit down, they will be here soon.

Since she said hello, Tilelli had not spoken again. They took the opportunity to make a joke out of her, until Mhend intervened out of pity for her. He reassured her that nobody was coming and that the others were only joking with her.

When she understood that Asirem only wanted to make a fool out of her, she grabbed a bottle of water which was near her and ran after him, pouring it down his back as he fled. They made a racket together. Hayat stared at her brother; it had been awhile since she had last seen him so happy. That quiet kid who would run away every time he saw a girl (whether they were his cousins or the girls from his village) became a completely new person in Tilelli's presence. Whenever she disappeared from his sight he would search for her, asking where she was and where she was going. Hayat realized that he liked her. What a joy if what she imagined might actually happen! No one knew Tilleli the way she did. She might not exactly lead him down the right path, but she would never take him down the wrong one, at least she could be sure that he would have a good woman who would take care of both his mom and dad, and who would not leave them alone.

Asirem was the only one who showed affection to Hayat. She relied on him alone. She was fed up with the broken fraternity, forgotten by time and by the brothers. Even her brothers were not looking for her, and if they looked it was solely for their own interest. As Newwara said: "*You remember Tassadt only for chores.*" While her parents were alive she was not considered, and now after their death, things were only worse for her. Even with her sisters, she could not talk freely. Each one thought only about her own self. Thank God Tilleli was by her side to alleviate some of the weight she held on her shoulders. This was not the only thing that preoccupied her: she also cherished Asirem and Tilleli, she wished only the best for them, and she wanted to see the two lovebirds united forever. She saw Asirem in Tilleli, and Tilleli in Asirem, as one person. They are wise, generous, and devoid of any perfidy...

They left Hayat's house and got back on the road, joking and chatting about various subjects that interested them concerning society and life in general. When they were about to reach Mouloud Mammeri's university, they found an old man wearing a blue beanie and white sneakers.

His beard was white as well, thick like soft wool, he wore glasses, and had a slight paunch. (this not the original meaning). From afar he seemed educated. He was sitting on a rock under an eucalyptus, selling old books of every kind. If there were passers-by, he would tell them the prices of the books and the authors' names, otherwise he would lean against the wall and read a French book. As soon as Tilleli saw him, she stopped and called him:

- Hello *intellectual*, how are you doing?

He turned around, she looked up. He seemed happy that she had noticed him.

- Hello my daughter, I'm doing great. How about you, how is your life going? It has been awhile since you last passed by.

- I'm doing well, thank you., I'm sorry, I did not have time, I had obligations, and I have not yet finished the books that I bought from you last time.

- (This is not the original meaning) No worries Tilleli, come back once you finish them, you will find me here, and I will exchange them for you.

- I will come back to buy others, I will keep those for myself, I love collecting the books I have already read!

- As you wish, this is your home.

- Thank you, goodbye, may God bless you.

- Leave in peace. Come back from time to time to see what's new.

- Alright!

She smiled and waved at him, then continued her way. Asirem, who seemed jealous, turned and said to her:

- I see that he even knows your name...

- Yes! Since I got into university, I have only bought books from him. That was four years ago, so obviously he knows my name. He is a brave man.

- So, during these four years, how many books have you bought?

- A lot! I did not count them; I buy one or two each month.

- You read them all?

- I read them! I even read some of them again if I particularly like them, for the others I only remember their covers.

- Do you love books that much?

- Yes, and even more than that.

- So Thursday, when we go up to the village, you will come to my house and see the little bookcase I have in my room. Maybe something will catch your eyes. You may read them, but you must give them back to me. Like you, I love keeping books I have already read...

She nodded, and they laughed...

They reached the main gate of the university and parted ways. He continued down towards his workplace, and she went off towards the library; Kahina had been waiting for her for an hour.

Tilleli's love started creeping out in broad daylight. It found a crack from which to escape, it started crawling like a baby who, despite its fear of falling, kept at it because of its desire to walk. She had never expected that they would reach this stage. As for Aserim, he started to have a feeling different from the other feelings he knew until now, love had invaded his life. That was what had lightened those teenagers' days. Yes! They are light, colorful, beautiful, floral days, blooming like the spring. Even though they were separated by distance, they were joined in dreams they were meeting in the country/land of love which occupied their minds. The hope that life will bring them together ran like a spring in their heart. Nothing could ever stop them now.

He opened the door of his room. There was a single bed which faced the door, covered by a purple piece of fabric. Near it was a night stand on which a lamp was placed. On the left, there was a two-door closet, and on the right there were three shelves hung on the wall one under another, occupying the space between the windows; books were placed on them. Near the door, there was another table on which a computer was put.

- Is this your room?

- Yes, it is my room.

- I thought that your room was the one I slept in last time!

- That one is my room as well. I sometimes sleep there because it is near my parent's room, so I can keep an eye on them. You saw how sick your uncle is, his condition can change from one minute to another.

- And this one?

- I use this one when I want to isolate myself and need some silence, or when I have work to do.

Tilleli went straight to the books. She looked at them the same way a child looks at sweets, her eyes shining. She did not know which one to look at first; she dropped one to grab another

until she had checked them all. Lying down on his bed, Asirem was watching her: how she laughed, moved, and grabbed the books so softly. She felt that he was gazing at her; she turned and told him:

- Books let you travel without spending anything. Without any paper, you will live in a different society. You will see other people and know how they think, how they live, and how they spend their day. You will discover the decorations of their houses and penetrate their intimacy, you will even explore their secret thoughts. In each novel, there is a moral to seize on and something to pick up. You will leave your own life and enter another one. You will live among people and share their happiness and pain. You regain hope if it ends well, and if it ends badly, you will say that finally it is the same thing for everyone, to each his own pain. As you know, there is always some realism in every piece of writing. It is from our experience that writers get their inspiration.

Asirem kept silent and listened to her. He liked her words, he enjoyed her way of thinking, he wished that she would never stop talking. She felt like she exaggerated, so she paused.

- What was the first novel you read?

- “*Le Fils Du Pauvre*” (The Son of the Poor) by Mouloud Feraoun. My French teacher gave it to me in high school since he noticed that I had a thing for literature. I read it again in Kabyle once it was translated. It was from there that the idea of translating Fatma At Menseur’s novel “*Histoire de ma vie*” came to me. It is my wish and my goal for the future.

- I hope that you will fulfill your wish because it is a good thing. What are your other wishes?

- I wish that my name will figure among those of Kabyle writers.

- I know that you will get there someday, you are resourceful! Apart from literature, what does Tilleli dream of in her private life?

- It is obvious: finish my studies, find a job, and be independent.

- That is all? Or is there something else?

- If I start telling you about all that I wish, I do not think we are going to get out of here.

- I personally have all the time, it is up to you to see if you have more time.

They both laughed. Asirem nodded, he asked her to sit at the edge of the bed, to get closer to him. He had many things to discuss with her.

- Don’t you dream of founding a family like all the girls of your age? (This is not the original meaning.) The son of a prince will come in his white horse

She turned crimson and stumbled upon her words...

- Who does not dream about that? But I personally do not want the son of a prince. I want a man who would be the king of my heart, the one with whom I would take the path of life. When I reach a fearful, terrifying place, he would tell me "I'm here, do not worry." If I ever stumble I would find his hand to support me, I would hold it. If my path darkened, he would be the light by which I see the way, with him I would face all the difficulties of life.

Tilleli was not a young woman who had objectives, she did not link her life to marriage, wearing a wedding dress, putting on henna, having kids, raising them, eating, drinking, wearing nice clothes, and once she got older, she would wait for death to cover her wrinkled body and her closed eyes. Tilleli enjoyed and cherished her life, she was not born to die but to live, to live the dreams of her youth, the ones that she would add to with age, to have a status in society, to be the archetype of her own children and the children of her whole nation.

- How lucky is that man who will marry you! You will be the flower that will beautify his life .

- I do not want to be a flower...

- A pearl, then.

- I do not want to be a pearl.

- Why? What would you like to be then?

- I neither want to be a flower that loses its petals and which people would mow down at the harvest season, nor do I want to be a pearl that people would fight for, and which may be bought by evil money. I want to be a Kabyle woman who combines the virtue of a woman and the charisma of a man. I want to be the only woman of one man, who should be the only one, if this someone does not exist, I want to stay alone.

He kept silent, frozen, paralyzed; he wanted to bring her against him. As for her, she had her eyes glued to the ground, unable to maintain his gaze...

- May God bless you, do not worry, you are already that woman.

Just then, Nna Aldjia came to tell them to come downstairs, as lunch was ready.

Tilleli went back to her house, but her shadow remained there; it became Asirem's shadow. Wherever he went, it followed him, it refused to leave him, or perhaps it was Asirem who refused to let it go. Her sweet voice was still ringing in his ears; everything she had told him was repeated in his mind like poetry he had learned by heart.

She was in a hurry to close her door and open the door to her dreams, to join that day's images with the ones from the previous days, and add to them some imagination, and what her heart desired.