

# ALGERIA

Is BEAUTIFUL like

# AMERICA



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FOR MY MOTHER.

— OLIVIA

FOR JUDITH AND ZÉLIE.

— Mahi

1

AT LAST, I'LL SEE FOR MYSELF



I GOT THE IDEA FOR THIS TRIP TEN YEARS AGO.  
FOR TEN YEARS, I HAD BEEN PUTTING IT OFF.



THE NEWS WAS FILLED WITH STORIES ABOUT TERRORIST  
ATTACKS, ASSASINATIONS...



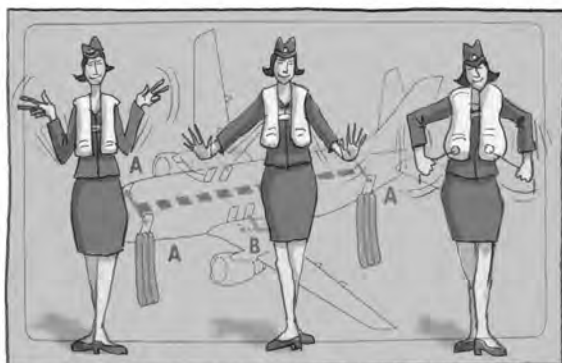
IT WAS NEVER THE RIGHT TIME.



WHEN I FIRST MENTIONED GOING ANYWAY,  
MY MOTHER FLEW OFF THE HANDLE. A  
WOMAN, ALONE IN THAT BACKWARD, UNSTABLE  
COUNTRY? I HAD NO IDEA WHAT I WAS DOING!



THE TWO MONTHS BEFORE I LEFT WERE ROUGH: FIERCE  
ARGUMENTS, MESSAGES FROM LOVED ONES TRYING TO CHANGE  
MY MIND...



SO TO CALM THE FLURRY OF TEMPERS, I PROMISED NOT TO VENTURE  
OUTSIDE ALGIERS.

BUT THAT WAS A LIE. I HAD TO SEE IT. I DIDN'T KNOW WHY, BUT I DID.

IT WAS FINALLY TIME TO GO. AND DESPITE MYSELF, I WAS TERRIFIED.





ALGERIA. I'D IMAGINED WHAT IT WAS LIKE SINCE I WAS A CHILD.



IT WAS EVERYWHERE IN MY FAMILY, ESPECIALLY AT MY GRANDMOTHER'S PLACE IN BANDOL, FRANCE, ON THE FRENCH RIVIERA, WHERE I SPENT EVERY VACATION.

SHE AND MY GRANDFATHER LIVED IN THE AURÈS MOUNTAINS IN ALGERIA UNTIL THE WAR BROKE OUT. THEN THEY FLED TO THE CAPITAL CITY OF ALGIERS. THE AURÈS IS A HIGH MOUNTAIN PLATEAU IN THE EASTERN PART OF THE COUNTRY. THOSE VILLAGES, THOSE HOUSES, AND THE STORIES OF WHAT THEY ONCE CONTAINED... THAT'S WHAT I'M AFTER. TO SEE WHAT IT WAS REALLY LIKE.

IN 1965, MY GRANDPARENTS MOVED TO MARSEILLE, WHICH THEY HATED. THEY SAID IT WAS TOO DIRTY, AND THERE WERE TOO MANY ARABS! MY GRANDFATHER GOT SICK, AND MY GRANDMOTHER FELL INTO A DEEP DEPRESSION...

BUT THEN THEY FOUND A PERFECT LITTLE SEASIDE RESORT WHERE THEY COULD SPEND THE REST OF THEIR DAYS.



FOR ME, BANDOL WAS HEAVEN. FOR MY GRANDMOTHER, EVERYTHING THERE REMINDED HER OF ALGIERS, JUST NOT AS NICE. SHE THOUGHT THE PALM TREES LOOKED SCRAWNY, AND THE LEMON TREES WERE LESS FRAGRANT.



AT THE BEACH, SHE'D MISS THE LIMPID BLUE OF THE SEA AND THE FINE BLOND ALGERIAN SAND SCORCHING HER FEET.



A BLUE BLUER THAN THE BLUE OF MY CHILDHOOD BEACH? I COULDN'T EVEN IMAGINE!



THE FIGS, PEACHES, AND WATERMELONS WEREN'T BAD THERE, BUT THEY DIDN'T HOLD A CANDLE TO THE ONES BACK IN HER MOUNTAIN VILLAGE.



SHE MISSED ALGIERS, WITH ITS HANDSOME APARTMENT BLOCKS, RESTAURANTS, AND STYLISH CAFÉS.



I WASN'T AS ENAMORED BY EVERYTHING SHE TOLD ME ABOUT. FOR INSTANCE, HOW HARD HER FATHER AND HER HUSBAND WORKED TO CLEAR THE ROCKY SOIL IN THEIR VILLAGE IN THE AURÈS. THAT SOUNDED LIKE A PAIN.



In the winter, it would snow a lot, and in the summer, it was 113° in the shade! And then there were the swarms of locusts that would descend on our crops in a black cloud with a terrible crackling sound! The Arabs would drum on empty barrels to scare them away, but in a few hours, everything would still be destroyed. What a disaster!

WORST OF ALL WAS WHEN SHE'D TALK ABOUT THE "INCIDENTS." THE WORD WAS VAGUE TO ME, BUT IT COVERED THE FIRE THAT TOOK THEIR FARM, THEIR LOSING EVERYTHING, THEIR EXILE... FROM THE SADNESS IN HER EYES, I SAW THAT HER LIFE HAD BEEN TURNED UPSIDE DOWN.





I PREFERRED THE STORIES ABOUT THE BEAUTIFUL HOUSES THEY'D BUILT. WITH STAIRCASES AND MARBLE FLOORS THAT THEY'D WATER ON SUMMER MORNINGS WITH THE BLINDS DRAWN IN ORDER TO KEEP COOL.

IT ALL SEEMED BIGGER AND BETTER THAN THEIR APARTMENT IN BANDOL, WHICH I ALREADY LIKED A LOT. BUT WHAT I ABSOLUTELY ADORED WAS MY GRANDMOTHER'S STORY ABOUT HER FIRST BALL.

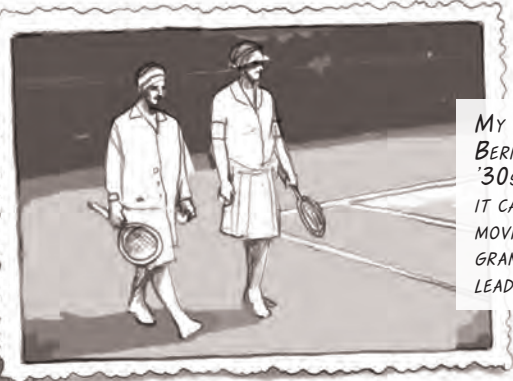
Grandma?  
Were your dresses prettier  
back then than they are now?











MY GRANDMOTHER AND HER SISTER IN BERNELLE, IN THE AURÈS, IN THE EARLY '30s. THIS PHOTO ALWAYS LOOKED LIKE IT CAME STRAIGHT FROM AN ENGLISH MOVIE ABOUT THE CARIBBEAN. MY GRANDMOTHER WASN'T MARRIED YET, LEADING A PRETTY CAREFREE LIFE.



MY MOTHER, ON THEIR APARTMENT BALCONY IN ALGIERS, IN 1960. SHE WAS SIXTEEN, SMILING IN FRONT OF THIS FABULOUS VIEW. BUT DOWN THERE IN THE STREETS, IT WAS WAR. I'VE ALWAYS DREAMED OF STEPPING OUT ONTO THAT BALCONY.



1917. MY GRANDMOTHER WAS FOUR YEARS OLD. SHE'D THROWN A TANTRUM, CRYING AND SOBBING, AND THE PHOTOGRAPHER HAD A HARD TIME GETTING A GOOD SHOT OF THIS DECORATED, MODEL FAMILY.



IN CORNEILLE, IN THE AURÈS, 1949. MY MOTHER AS A CHILD, DRESSED AS A WOMAN OF THE EAST. WHAT DID THE GOODYLY ALGERIAN WOMAN BESIDE HER THINK?!



THE ALGERIAN FAMILY PORTRAIT WAS COMPLETED IN AUXERRE, FRANCE, AT THE BUSY FAMILY GATHERINGS MY GRANDMOTHER'S SISTER USED TO HOST WITH HER HUSBAND, A FORMER MILITARY COMMANDER. THERE WAS ALWAYS A LOT OF LOUD TALK AND LAUGHTER.

THAT PART OF FRANCE, KNOWN AS YONNE, IS EVEN FARTHER FROM ALGERIA THAN BANDOL, BUT LIFE WAS OFTEN MERRY IN THAT FIXED-INCOME APARTMENT TOWER WHERE THEY HAD ENDED UP.



LEFT TO RIGHT: FOUR COUSINS, MY MOTHER, ME, MY MOTHER'S FRIEND, ANOTHER COUSIN, MY GREAT-AUNT, HER BROTHER-IN-LAW, MY GRANDMOTHER, AND MY GREAT-UNCLE.



Don't leave me with all this food!



...and then Ahmed says, "but miss, it looks like your butt is eating your dress!"



TOWARD THE END OF THE MEAL, ALGERIA ALWAYS REARED ITS HEAD. INEVITABLY, NASTY JOKES ABOUT ARABS, OR PATOS\* WHO'D BEEN SO UNWELCOMING TO US, SO STINGY AND STUCK-UP. WHEN I REALIZED THAT I WAS, IN THE STRICTEST SENSE OF THE WORD, A PATOS MYSELF, I'D SHRINK INTO THE SEAT.



...a river of blood in the streets!



But no one here ever talks about it!

ALONG WITH THE CHEESE PLATTER CAME CODED NAMES THAT QUICKLY CHANGED THE MOOD OF THE GATHERING. MENTION OF THE FELLAGHAS,\* THE RUE D'ISLY,\* AND THE OAS\* BROUGHT BACK MEMORIES OF THE WAR, AND WITH THEM, GRIEF.



My life simply ended in 1962.



PATOS - A PEJORATIVE ALGERIAN SLANG FOR FRENCH PEOPLE BORN IN FRANCE.  
FELLAGHA - MILITANT SOLDIERS FIGHTING FOR ALGERIAN INDEPENDENCE FROM FRANCE (BETWEEN 1954 AND 1962).  
RUE D'ISLY - ON MARCH 26, 1962, FRENCH SOLDIERS OPENED FIRE ON PIED-NOIR, OR "BLACK FOOT," PROTESTERS, FRENCH-BORN ALGERIANS OPPOSING ALGERIAN INDEPENDENCE, ON THIS STREET IN ALGIERS.  
OAS - ORGANISATION ARMÉE SECRÈTE (SECRET ARMY ORGANIZATION), AN UNDERGROUND ORGANIZATION FORMED BY SEVERAL FRENCH GENERALS AND OTHER POLITICIANS COMMITTED TO MAINTAINING CONTROL OF FRENCH ALGERIA. THE OAS USED EVERY MEANS NECESSARY, INCLUDING TERRORISM AND MURDER, IN BOTH ALGERIA AND FRANCE ITSELF, TO OPPOSE ALGERIAN INDEPENDENCE.



OVER AFTER-DINNER DRINKS, THE OLDER GENERATION WOULD RECALL STORIES OF FRENCH SOLDIERS FOUND MUTILATED, CEMETERIES DESECRATED... IN SHORT, EVERYONE AGREED THAT THE ARABS WERE "BARBAROUS." I TRIED TO PICTURE IT AND GREW TERRIFIED.

BUT I ALSO HEARD HEROIC STORIES. ONE BRAVE ALGERIAN, ALTHOUGH A MEMBER OF THE FLN,\* HAD SAVED MY GRANDFATHER'S LIFE. ANOTHER HAD ENTRUSTED THE CARE OF HIS CHILDREN TO A FRENCH FRIEND BEFORE GOING UNDERGROUND. THERE WERE COUNTLESS OTHER EXAMPLES OF THE POSSIBILITY OF FRIENDSHIP WITH ARABS.



FLN - FRONT DE LIBERATION NATIONALE (NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT), AN ALGERIAN SOCIALIST PARTY FORMED IN 1954 FROM THE FUSION OF VARIOUS SIMILAR ARAB AND NORTH AFRICAN NATIONALIST GROUPS. IT WAS THE DRIVING FORCE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE, AND THE PRINCIPLE INSTIGATOR OF THE ALGERIAN WAR.



SOMETIMES, WHEN THE WHOLE FAMILY HAD GATHERED TO DIGEST IN FRONT OF THE TV, MY GREAT-AUNT WOULD SHOOT UP LIKE A ROCKET AND CHANGE CHANNELS...



I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT WAS GOING ON, BUT I FOUND IT PRETTY FUNNY.



NO ONE IN MY FAMILY COULD STAND DE GAULLE.



"NAADINE MOUK!" - AN ARAB SWEAR MEANING "CURSED BE YOUR MOTHER'S RELIGION!"



MY MOTHER NEVER SPOKE TO ME ABOUT ALGERIA EXCEPT WHEN WE WERE BOTH IN PARIS.



BUT WHEN SHE WAS WITH HER BLACK FOOT FRIENDS, IT WAS A DIFFERENT STORY ENTIRELY!

MY FATHER HAD VANISHED SHORTLY AFTER I WAS BORN, BUT THERE WERE ALWAYS LOTS OF FRIENDS AROUND THE HOUSE. I'D LISTEN TO THEM JOKING AROUND AND YELLING AT EACH OTHER, FASCINATED. THEY'D PLAY UP THEIR ACCENTS AND THEIR RACY EXPRESSIONS. SOME OF THEM HAD MET IN HIGH SCHOOL IN ALGIERS. TIME AND AGAIN THEY'D SHARE MEMORIES I NEVER QUITE UNDERSTOOD: PUTTING UP POSTERS, SELLING VEGETABLES AT THE MARKET FOR THE OAS, A FRIEND SHOT DOWN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREET... THE VOLUME WOULD TRIPLE WHENEVER THEY TALKED ABOUT THE WAR, THE STATE OF THEIR COUNTRY TWENTY YEARS LATER, OR THE POSSIBILITY OF EVER GOING BACK TO VISIT. WHATEVER THE TOPIC, IT SEEMED LIKE THEY WERE ALWAYS ARGUING.







I LIKED HER MEMORIES OF AIX-EN-PROVENCE BETTER, WHERE THEY'D ALL WOUND UP IN 1962 TO START COLLEGE. THEY WERE TWENTY YEARS OLD AND FRESH OUT OF A WAR ZONE.

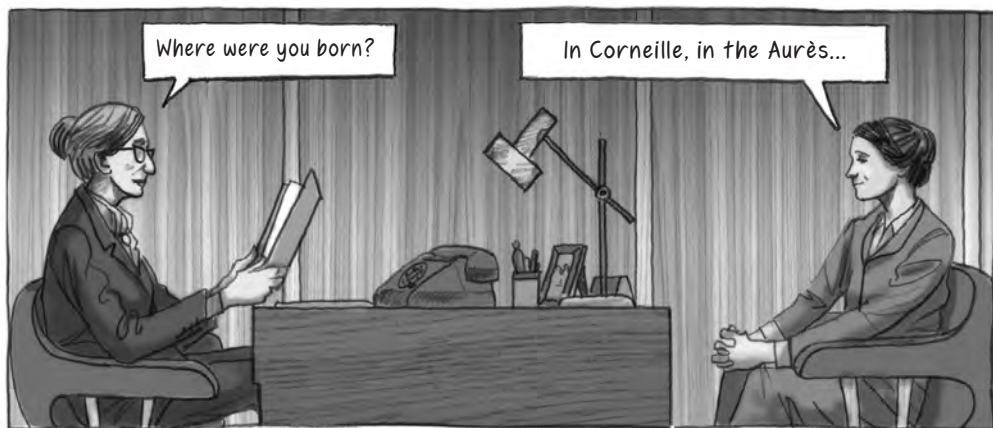


THEY'D WEEP WITH LAUGHTER TALKING ABOUT THE ICY WINTERS, EATING OUT OF TIN CANS IN DECREPIT RENTALS, THE FIGHTS WITH THE COMMUNIST STUDENTS, NIGHTS OUT AT CLUBS, AND THE HOURS SPENT IN VARIOUS CAFÉS.



THEY DID SO MUCH LOAFING AROUND, I WAS SURPRISED THEY EVER FOUND JOBS.

IT WAS ON ONE OF THOSE NIGHTS THAT I STARTED FEELING LIKE THE DAUGHTER OF A BLACK FOOT. ONE EVENING, MY MOTHER TOLD HER FRIENDS ABOUT A JOB INTERVIEW SHE'D HAD EARLIER THAT DAY. AT THE END OF THE SESSION, THE RECRUITER ASKED:



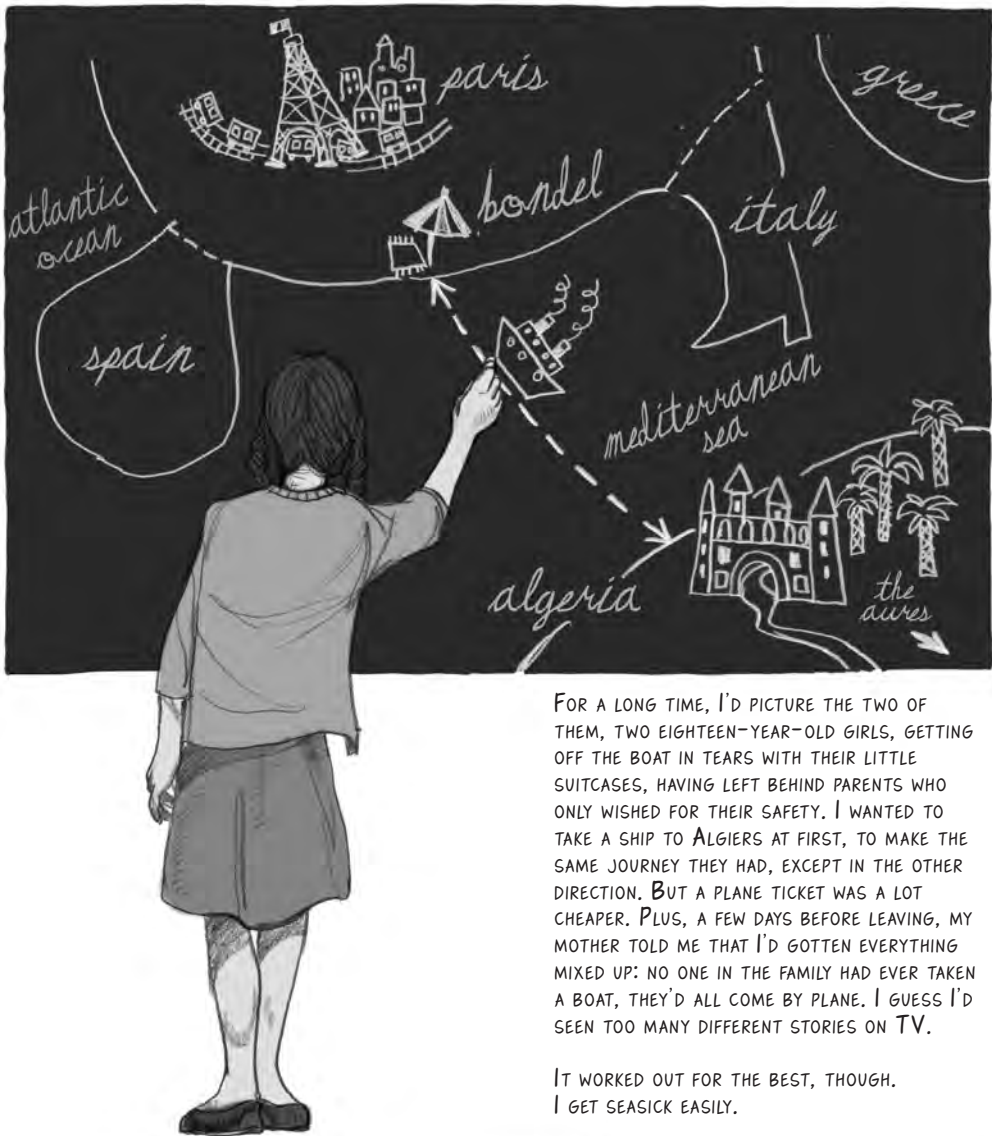
THE LIVING ROOM FULL OF STUNNED FRIENDS FELT LIKE IT WAS READY TO START A RIOT.



THAT WAS SOMETHING MY MOTHER HAD NEVER  
GOTTEN OVER. SHE OFTEN BROUGHT UP THE TIME  
SHE AND HER CHILDHOOD FRIEND FIRST ARRIVED IN  
MARSEILLE IN 1962, AND THEY WERE GREETED BY  
TWO RICH DO-GOODERS WITH PERFUME SAMPLES...

"...AS IF WE WERE REFUGEES!"









MY PICTURE-POSTCARD IMAGE OF ALGERIA WENT UP IN SMOKE WHEN I STARTED HIGH SCHOOL. I HAD AN AMAZING HISTORY TEACHER AND MANY FRIENDS, MOSTLY FROM LEFT-LEANING FAMILIES, WHO INTRODUCED ME TO POLITICS... BECAUSE, YOU KNOW, MY MOTHER NEVER TALKED ABOUT IT. IN FACT, SINCE COMING TO FRANCE, SHE'D NEVER EVEN WANTED TO VOTE. AND ADD TO ALL OF THAT A TEENAGER'S NATURAL URGE TO QUESTION EVERYTHING, AND SUDDENLY ALL OF THOSE FAMILY STORIES BECAME PROBLEMATIC.



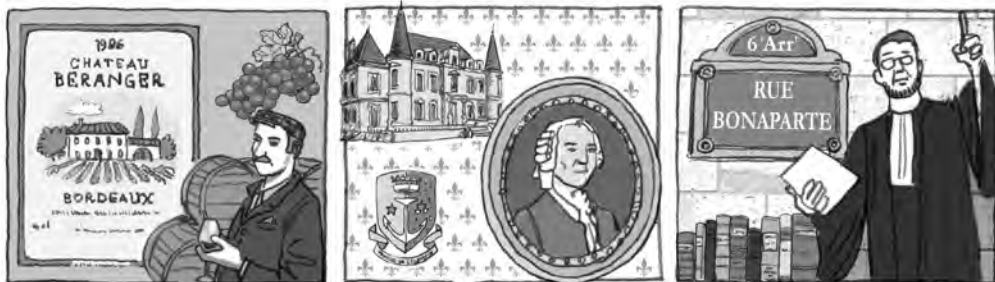
CASE IN POINT: I WAS FIFTEEN AND INVITED MY BEST FRIEND DOWN TO BANDOL FOR SCHOOL BREAK. FLORENCE'S PARENTS WERE SOCIOLOGISTS, AND SHE WASN'T SHY ABOUT HER OPINIONS. ONE DAY, SHE INTERROGATED MY GRANDMOTHER ABOUT HER LIFE IN ALGERIA.





I PUT AN END TO THE SOCIOLOGICAL INQUISITION WITH A WELL-AIMED KICK UNDER THE TABLE. BUT DEEP DOWN, I WAS SHAKEN. WHAT HAD MY GRANDPARENTS REALLY BEEN DOING BACK OVER THERE?

I WAS EVEN MORE DUMBFOUNDED WHEN MY FRIENDS SHARED THEIR OWN FAMILY HISTORIES.




Me? My mom's a Black Foot.



- That's weird...
- Why?
- Well, uh... how should I put this? You don't look...
- Look like what?
- Well, you don't look like an Arab!
- WHAT?!

I SUDDENLY FELT VERY UNCOMFORTABLE.



BUT THE PEAK OF DISCOMFORT CAME IN COLLEGE. ODDLY ENOUGH, I'D NEVER OPENED A BOOK ON ALGERIA TILL THEN. BUT OTHER STUDENTS TOLD ME ABOUT THE BLACK FOOTS: RACIST EXPLOITERS, FASCISTS... TORTURERS, EVEN. I HAD A HARD TIME PLACING THOSE DESCRIPTIONS WITH WHAT I KNEW ABOUT MY FAMILY. I DIDN'T KNOW WHOM TO SIDE WITH ANYMORE.





NOT TO MENTION BLACK FOOT ENTERTAINERS LIKE ENRICO MACIAS, MARTHE VILLALONGA, OR ROBERT CASTEL: CHEAP, VULGAR LOUDMOUTHS, ALL OF THEM. I MEAN, JUST LOOK AT THEM, RIGHT? RIDICULOUS HICKS WITH THICK ACCENTS AND CRAZY MANNERISMS... THEIR JOKES WERE NEVER FUNNY. THEY WERE KIND OF... SHOWBOATERS, RIGHT? ARROGANT AND CHAUVINIST, AT THE VERY LEAST. WITH A SENTIMENTAL STREAK A MILE WIDE! AND THOSE ACCENTS!



I WAS ALSO TREATED TO ANNOYING COMMENTS ABOUT ALGERIAN CUISINE, ABOUT GARLIC AND OLIVE OIL, WHICH WE USED A LOT. IN THE LATE '70s, GARLIC AND OLIVE OIL WERE NEITHER CHIC NOR HEALTHY. THEY SMELLED AND DIDN'T DIGEST WELL. AND HOT PEPPERS? WELL, THOSE WERE JUST OBSCENE. I WAS TORN BETWEEN RAGE AND SHAME.





AS A RESULT, I HAD A HARD TIME EVEN SAYING THE WORDS "BLACK FOOT." IT'D GET STUCK IN MY THROAT. IT CRACKLED WITH NEGATIVE ENERGY. I MEAN, AS FAR AS SYMBOLS GO, FEET ARE A FAR CRY FROM YOUR HEAD OR YOUR HEART. AND AS FOR BLACK... WELL, DO I NEED TO DRAW YOU A PICTURE?



BESIDES, IT'S NOT LIKE ANYONE EVEN KNOWS WHERE THE EXPRESSION CAME FROM:



THE COLOR OF THE BOOTS FRENCH SOLDIERS WORE WHEN CONQUERING ALGERIA IN 1830?



THE COLOR OF FRENCH WINE-GROWERS' FEET AFTER THEY TRAMPLED THE GRAPES?

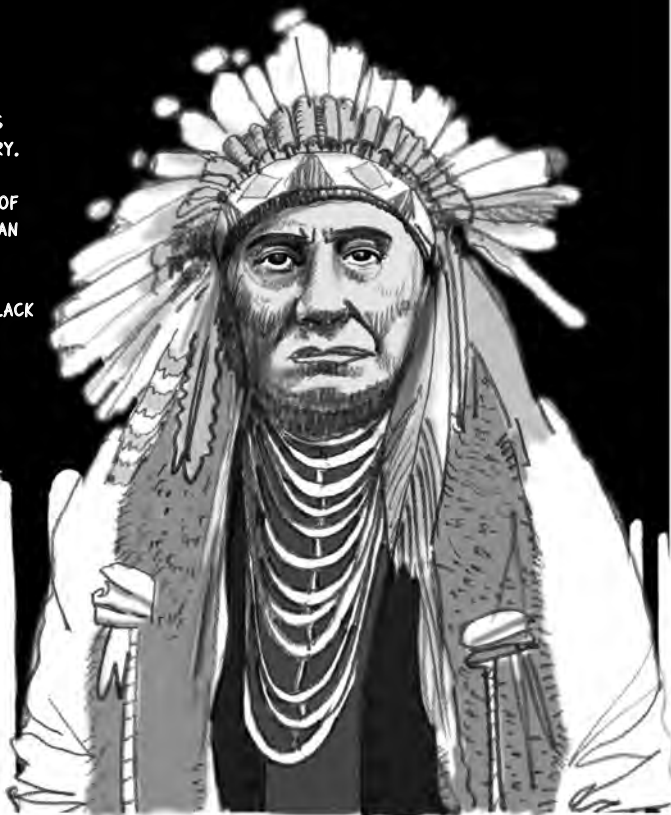


OR THE NICKNAME GIVEN TO FRENCH PEOPLE IN 1956 WHO WERE AGITATED BY THE MOROCCANS' CLAIM TO INDEPENDENCE?

IN ALL THREE CASES, THE ORIGINS HAVE NEITHER GLAMOUR NOR GLORY.

"BLACKFOOT" IS ALSO THE NAME OF A FAMOUS NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN TRIBE.

EXCEPT THAT IN ALGERIA, THE BLACK FOOTS WEREN'T THE NATIVES.





I GOT A LITTLE PARANOID.



I'D DEFEND MY FAMILY AGAINST OUTSIDE ATTACKS, BUT BACK AT HOME, I STARTED LOOKING SIDWAYS AT ALL THESE PEOPLE WHO ACTUALLY DID TALK KIND OF LOUD, MAKING RACIST JOKES, SINGING THE "CHANT DES AFRICAINS"\* OVER DESSERT.



CHANT DES AFRICAINS (SONG OF THE AFRICAIS) – ORIGINALLY A MILITARY SONG OF THE FRENCH AFRICAN ARMY DURING WORLD WAR II, IT WAS ADOPTED BY BLACK FOOT PARTISANS DURING THE ALGERIAN WAR.



FINALLY, I ASKED MY MOTHER, WHO FILLED ME IN ON THINGS BETTER THAN HER PARENTS COULD. SHE HAD BUILT A LIFE FOR HERSELF AS A GROWN-UP IN FRANCE. BUT THEY HAD LEFT THEIR LIVES BEHIND IN ALGERIA.

So, uh, Mom... were you against Algerian independence?

These days, the course of history seems totally normal, but it's true: back then, I was all for Algeria staying French... just like everyone else around me!



Actually, I had zero political awareness. My family wasn't leftist, that's for sure. But more than anything else, we couldn't come to terms with the idea of leaving behind the sunny, wonderful French territory where we'd all been born! We lived modestly, sure, but our quality of life was amazing.



So why didn't you stay?

The last two years of the war were very, very violent in Algiers. Attacks every day... you can't imagine! Lots of deaths... we were afraid! Yes, before the war we got along with the Arabs, but despite everything, we had very different cultures: religion, the place of women in society, the way they viewed work... no thanks!



But if they had been given the right to vote...

No way!

Why not?

There were nine times as many of them! You couldn't possibly understand! You never lived there. You don't know what Arabs are like. Just look at what's happened to the country since...



I ALSO STEPPED IN IT WITH MY GREAT-UNCLE IN AUXERRE.



Uncle, is it true there was torture back in Algeria?



It could happen. Like in any war. On both sides.



They never talk about the atrocities the FLN committed against the French or even their own countrymen. The victims number in the thousands.



A WAR LIKE ANY OTHER, THEN: END OF DISCUSSION. I LOVED THAT MAN. HE COULD BE SO INCREDIBLY SWEET AND SO FUNNY. THE THOUGHT THAT HE COULD'VE TORTURED ANYONE HAUNTED ME FOR A VERY LONG TIME.







AFTER ALL OF THESE MISUNDERSTANDINGS, I WITHDREW INTO SULLEN SILENCE. I TRIED TO SAY AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE AROUND MY FRIENDS. AND AROUND MY FAMILY, I'D MUTELY LISTEN TO THEM BROOD. ALGERIA BORED ME AND HAUNTED ME AT THE SAME TIME. I COULDN'T SHARE THEIR PAIN OR THEIR NOSTALGIA, BUT THEY BOTH RAN THROUGH ME, ENGULFED ME. AT THE MERE MENTION OF THE WORD "ALGERIA," MY HEARTBEAT SPED UP. I HAD INHERITED A WAR I HADN'T EXPERIENCED.

SOMETIMES, I WISHED I HAD BEEN BORN INTO A REAL FRENCH FAMILY, FROM BRITTANY OR LYON OR SOMEPLACE LIKE THAT, WITH A CLEAR FAMILY HISTORY GOING ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE MIDDLE AGES, DEPICTED IN PAINTINGS ON THE WALLS OF SOME HUGE MANSION. A FAMILY OF INTELLECTUALS OR FREEDOM FIGHTERS. PEOPLE I COULD TALK ABOUT WITHOUT EMBARRASSMENT. A LINEAGE FULL OF IMPRESSIVE DEEDS, MONUMENTS IN SHADY CEMETERIES, AND FANCY LACQUERED FURNITURE...



...AND THEN, ALGERIA FELL OFF MY RADAR. I WENT ON WITH MY  
LIFE AS AN ADULT AND BECAME A FRENCH PROFESSOR.



THE HORROR STORIES THAT REACHED US DURING THE DARK DECADE\* SADDENED THE BLACK FOOTS THAT I KNEW. BUT I ALSO FELT IT WAS A KIND OF KARMA: SEE WHAT HAPPENS? "APRÈS MOI, LE DÉLUGE." — "AFTER ME COMES THE FLOOD." I HEARD REMARKS ABOUT WHAT SAVAGES THOSE OUTSIDERS WERE, AND HOW THAT MUCH HAD ALWAYS BEEN OBVIOUS...



AS A WHOLE, FRANCE ITSELF REMAINED AS DEAF TO THE NOISE AS MY FAMILY. ALGERIA, RWANDA... THOSE PLACES ARE SO FAR AWAY AND FEARSOME. LET THEM KILL EACH OTHER.

*THE DARK DECADE* - A TERM FOR THE 1990s, DURING WHICH ALGERIA WAS RAVAGED BY A MURDEROUS CONFLICT BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND VARIOUS ISLAMIST GROUPS.



AS ALGERIA LIVED ONE NIGHTMARE, I WAS LIVING ANOTHER: IN THE YEAR 2000, MY GRANDMOTHER DIED.

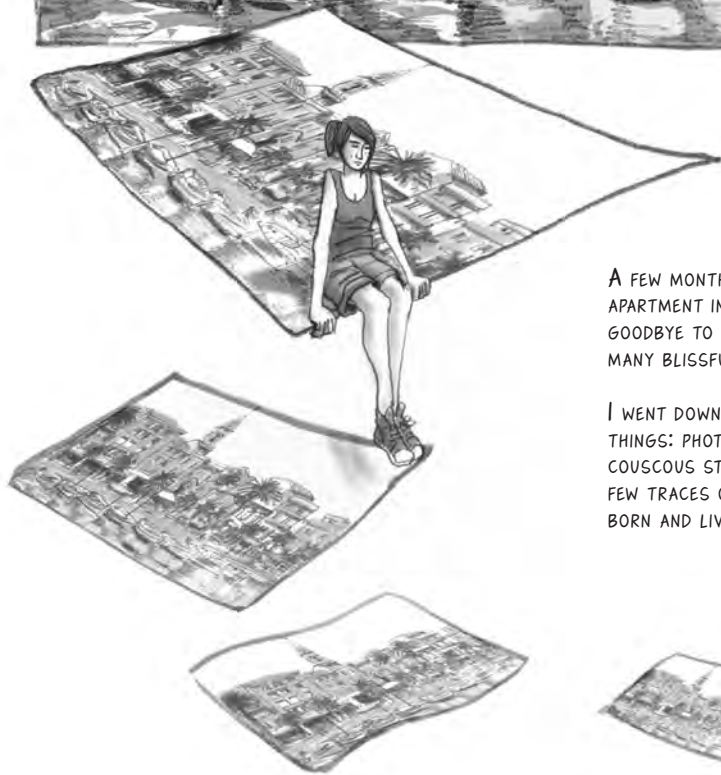


ON HER HOSPITAL DEATHBED, SHE ASKED ME TO GRAB A LITTLE SACHET OF DIRT FROM HER APARTMENT.



SHE'D BROUGHT IT ALL THE WAY FROM BERNELLE, HER VILLAGE IN THE AÛRES.





A FEW MONTHS LATER, WE DECIDED TO SELL HER APARTMENT IN BANDOL. IT WAS HARD SAYING GOODBYE TO THE PLACE WHERE I'D SPENT SO MANY BLISSFUL VACATIONS.

I WENT DOWN FROM PARIS TO SORT THROUGH HER THINGS: PHOTO ALBUMS, AN ORIENTAL TEAPOT, A COUSCOUS STEAMER... IN THE END, I FOUND VERY FEW TRACES OF THE LAND WHERE SHE'D BEEN BORN AND LIVED FOR FIVE DECADES.







THEN, OPENING THE SECRETARY DESK, I STUMBLED ACROSS A FOLDER LABELED WITH MY NAME: "FOR OLIVIA." I COULDN'T BELIEVE MY EYES. INSIDE WERE FIFTY-SOME PAGES COVERED IN SHAKY HANDWRITING... HER MEMORIES OF ALGERIA, WHICH I'D ASKED HER TO PUT ON PAPER A HUNDRED TIMES AT LEAST!

AT FIRST, IT HAD JUST BEEN AN AFFECTIONATE SCHEME TO GIVE A LONELY OLD WOMAN SOMETHING TO DO. THEN, AS TIME WENT BY, I STARTED REALLY WANTING TO KNOW THESE THINGS, FOR FEAR OF SOMEDAY LOSING HER STORY. EVERY TIME I VISITED, I'D PESTER HER, AND SHE'D RESPOND WITH A TIRED SIGH.



BUT TO MY SURPRISE, SHE OUTSMARTED ME! SHE'D BEEN WRITING IN SECRET THIS WHOLE TIME, JUST FOR ME. MY FAMILY HAS ALWAYS LIKED SURPRISES, AND SHE KNEW ME ALL TOO WELL. I DEVoured THE PAGES, A HEROIC SAGA OF FAMILY HISTORY, FULL OF HEARTBREAK AND LOVE FOR A LOST LAND. THAT WAS THE TURNING POINT: ONE DAY, I WOULD GO TO ALGERIA. AND TEN YEARS LATER, I LEFT FOR ALGIERS.





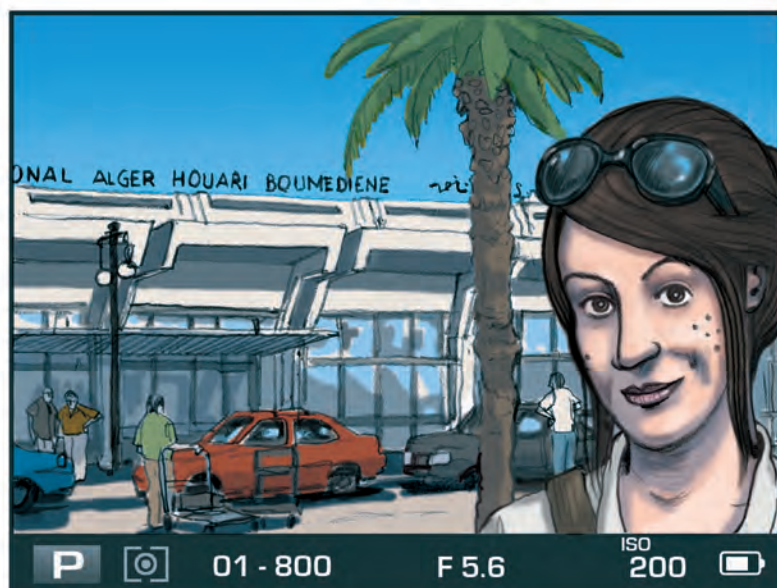
I STUCK HER PAGES IN MY LUGGAGE. THAT WAY, I WAS BRINGING A PIECE OF MY FAMILY WITH ME AND A FEW POINTERS TO HELP ME FIND THE PLACES I WAS LOOKING FOR. OR SO I HOPED. I ALSO BROUGHT ALONG A TAPE RECORDER, SOME BUG SPRAY, A HEALTHY DOSE OF GUILT, AND THE NUMBER OF SOMEONE TO CALL ON WHEN I LANDED: A MAN NAMED DJAFFAR.





## ONE FOOT ON THE GROUND







Terrific!  
Welcome!







RATHER THAN BE ALL ALONE AT A HOTEL, I WAS ENCOURAGED TO STAY AT THIS RETREAT FOR SCHOLARS AND ARTISTS RUN BY FRENCH PRIESTS.

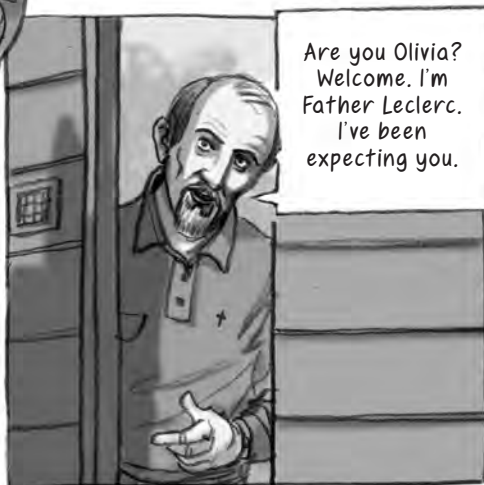
I WASN'T SURE ABOUT IT, BUT IT WAS CLOSE TO DOWNTOWN, AND CHEAP. PLUS, THEY WERE WILLING TO TAKE ME.



TO THINK I WOULD BE LIVING WITH PRIESTS!



I USED TO SUPPRESS A SNICKER WHENEVER MY GRANDMOTHER WOULD TELL ME ABOUT HER VISITS TO THE BISHOP IN CORNEILLE. SHE WAS SO PROUD THAT HE'D STOP BY LIKE CLOCKWORK EVERY FEW DAYS JUST TO SAMPLE HER COOKING...



Are you Olivia?  
Welcome. I'm  
Father Leclerc.  
I've been  
expecting you.



We were just having coffee out in the courtyard...



...let me introduce you:

ZOUBIDA WAS FROM ORAN AND ORGANIZED PROFESSIONAL TRAINING FOR WOMEN.

NACERA, AN ARCHEOLOGIST, LIVED DOWN SOUTH BUT WORKED IN ALGIERS.

FATHER ALBERT HAD APPARENTLY BEEN THERE FOREVER.



ZORA, A HISTORIAN, WAS FROM TLEMSEN.

Olivia's here on a pilgrimage...

Let's call it reconnaissance!

Your family was born here?

Yes, in the Aurès. They moved to Algiers when the war started...



The war! I wasn't even born yet. But the Aurès? Don't tell me you're headed there all alone?



I'm not sure yet. I've got the name of someone here...





What you need is a guide!  
That area is kind of cutoff...

You know it?

No!

Nope!

Not a bit!

Meanwhile, keep an eye  
on your camera when  
you're downtown, and  
try to be back here by  
seven o'clock.

There's no official curfew,  
but the town becomes a  
graveyard at night.

Definitely don't go walking  
around alone in the dark...

Daytimes are OK  
now. Better than  
they were ten  
years ago.

Back home, they used to hand out  
pamphlets threatening women to  
wear a veil or wind up dead! So  
walking around in broad daylight  
was seen as an act of defiance!

Wow, what did  
you do?



I never wore one in my life! I remember running into other women with their faces bare. We wouldn't talk to each other, but we'd exchange these proud looks. That's how we'd give each other courage.

Why didn't you just leave?

I wanted to fight back in my own way.

Besides, it's easier for an Islamist to get a visa for France!

But still... it stays with you.

I was in bed last night when I saw the doorknob jiggle.

I ran over to block the door.

Then...

...there was a knock.

It was my neighbor Henry, the American student. He just had the wrong room!

Ever since the Dark Decade, I've had weird reflexes. Back then, I'd hide my family's things every night so the apartment looked empty. At the slightest sound, we were all ready to go hide in the basement.

Welcome to Algeria, Olivia!



No. At mass I get about forty, mostly expats and Lebanese.



We don't proselytize. I even discourage young girls from converting. It could make their lives hellish. But we do offer refresher courses in Arabic and provide housing for researchers who don't have the means to live in Algiers.



How long do you plan to stay?

As long as I can!

I have no desire to go back to the insane individualism in Europe. I've found common ground with Islam here, where sharing and helping your neighbor are respected.



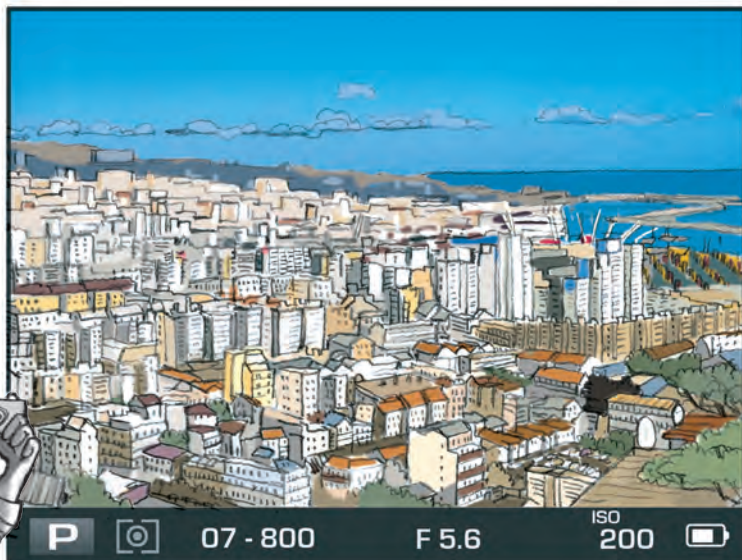
Okay... back to work!



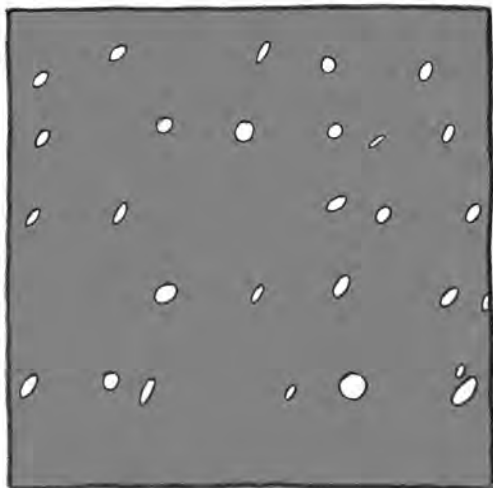


I ARRANGED TO MEET  
DJAFFAR AT SIX. HE WAS  
AN ARCHITECT, LIVING  
IN PARIS, BUT VISITING  
ALGIERS FOR THE MONTH.  
I HAD BUTTERFLIES IN MY  
STOMACH... WE DIDN'T  
KNOW EACH OTHER, AND  
THE SUCCESS OF THIS TRIP  
DEPENDS A LOT ON HIM.

I HEADED DOWNTOWN FOR THE  
FIRST TIME. I COULDN'T WAIT  
TO SEE IT.













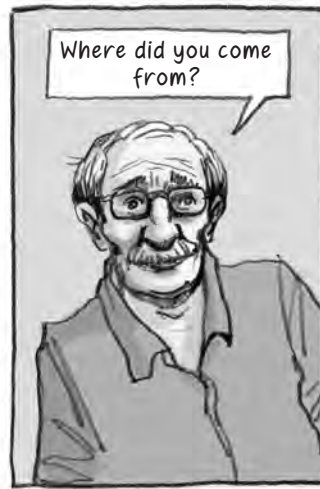




AT LAST, I REACHED THE JARDIN D'ESSAI, A FRENCH-STYLE BOTANICAL GARDEN.

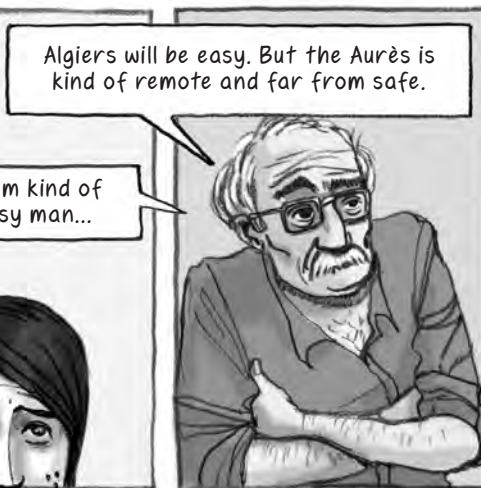


IT WAS GOOD TO SEE THE GREENERY AND THE MIXED COMPANY AT THE CAFÉS.









I'm sure I can figure it out.  
There are trains here,  
right? And hotels?



What? Are you insane?  
What'll your mother say  
if I let you take a train  
all by yourself?!



Do you want my sister  
to kill me?!



I've traveled before!  
I'm not a child. And I  
want to see the Aurès.



Listen to me... You can't  
just show up out of  
nowhere out there. You  
have to know someone.  
That's how things work  
around here.



I'll make some calls and get  
back to you when we're good.

So... you're coming with me?

Yes, but it will have to be quick.  
Three days max. I have work.







THAT EVENING, DJAFFAR CALLED ME BACK: HE MADE SOME CONTACTS OUT THERE.



All the hubbub France made about going out and colonizing new territories, and making barren land fertile was a big factor in turning my parents into pioneers. Their plot of land was located in a remote and dangerous region, a rocky desert filled with stones!!

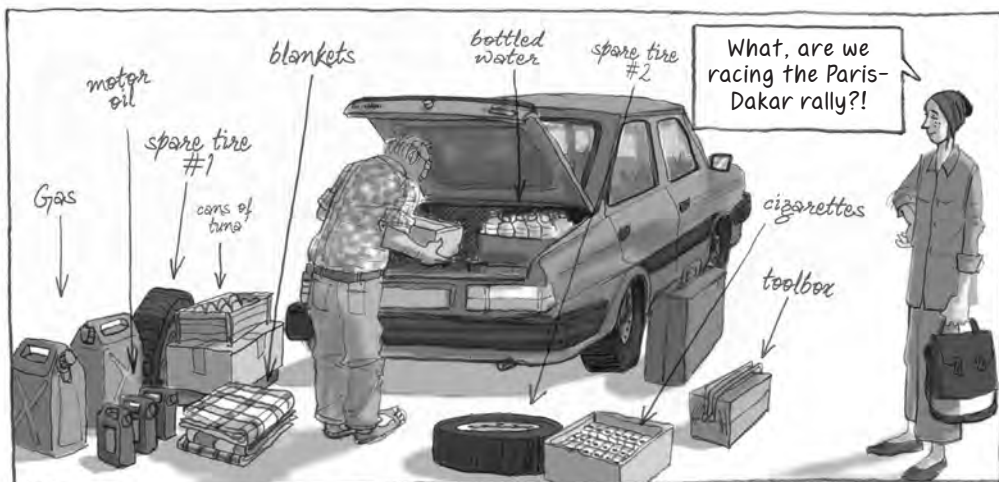
WE LEFT IN THE MORNING.



## DESTINATION: THE AURÈS







Your people live in the middle of nowhere! And there is nothing on the road, NOTHING, except maybe police roadblocks... and you better hope they're real police!





Look at all these fools in their cars! There are more cars than there are people in this country, and I'm counting the children! A few years ago, the government launched a one percent credit program meant to help young people "realize their dreams." So what happened? Everyone used the money to buy a car! The entire goal of the program was to suppress any desire to revolt by handing out money...



And you see that bullshit? This is the shore, but you can't even see the sea! Just warehouses! In the '70s, there were restaurants here, nightclubs on the beach. We partied hard all night, with an ocean view!

There's construction everywhere!

Yeah. Modern apartments with balconies. Just like in Monaco. But no one's on those balconies because they hide women away up there. And once the towers are finished, they put up satellite dishes!







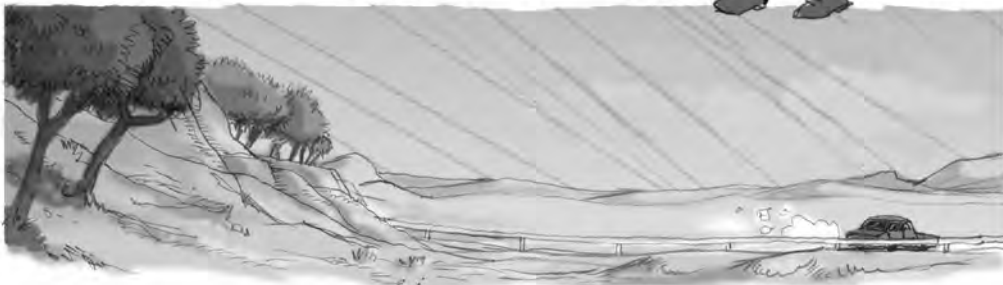
Wow!  
Beautiful!



The Palestro Gorges. Does the name ring a bell?

Vaguely...

Your grandfather never told you? This is where the French Army got ambushed by the ALN\* in 1956. They were boxed in. Twenty dead, just like that. It was a big blow to public morale. The press kept talking about the mutilated bodies. It didn't take long for a response: three days later, forty Algerians were rounded up and killed.

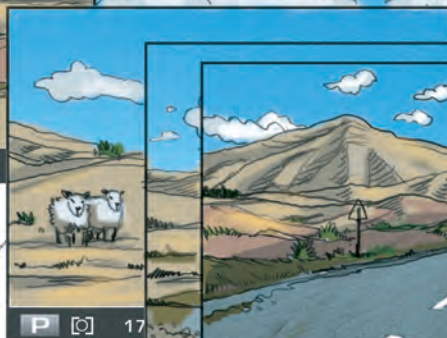
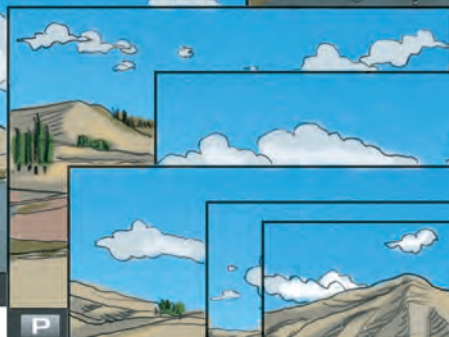
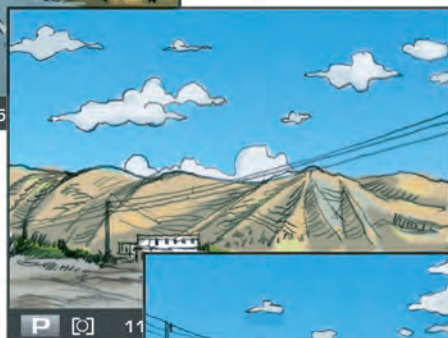
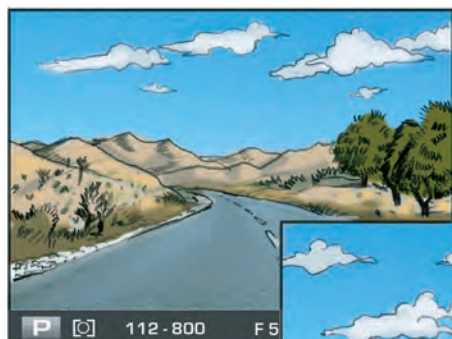


ALN - ARMEE DE LIBERATION NATIONALE (NATIONAL LIBERATION ARMY), THE ARMED WING OF THE FLN.











*As a child, I often heard talk of dynamite, which they use to blow up rocks and the deep, dried roots of the desert scrub.*





Change of scenery? To become a landowner? France really talked up the colonies in the nineteenth century...

The land was cheap! Where did they come from?

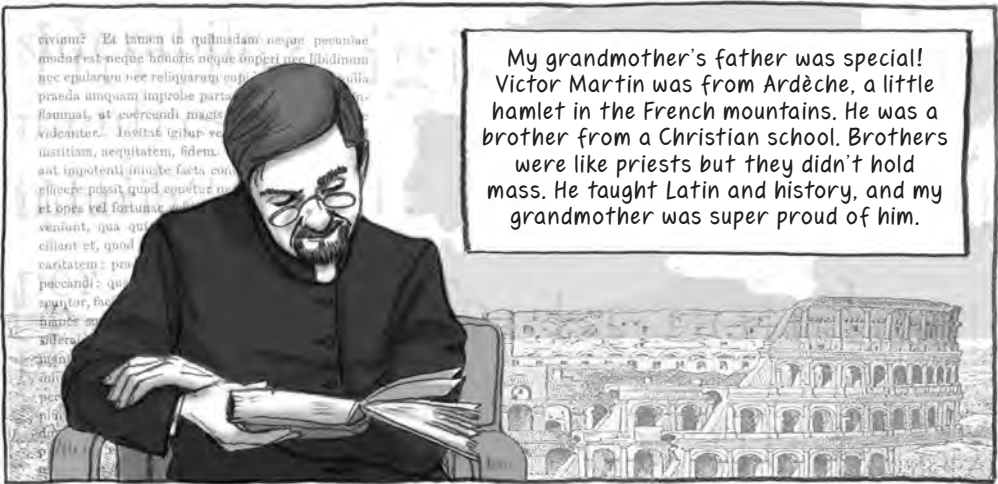


Poor little French towns where they were starving to death. My grandfather's father, Hippolyte Fabry, was a saddler in Isère, near Lyon. He came to Merouana, Algeria, in 1900. He was one of the first colonists in the village.



He started out as a baker, then purchased a plot of land near Corneille. Bit by bit, he grew out his property until he was the biggest farmer in the area.





He came to Algiers on a mission in 1898 and a few years later, found himself out of work after the separation of church and state. His school basically shut down. So he applied for some land. And according to my grandmother, he didn't want anything near Algiers.



According to my mother, he had a taste for adventure, a real pioneering spirit! Weird, I know. He had owned fifty brooms in his life but never touched a pickax! Once he got his land grant, he went back to Ardèche to find a wife. He found a single woman of thirty who agreed to follow him to Bernelle... I guess it's now Oued El Ma, today.

They had three daughters, including my grandmother, Jeanne, the youngest.






Hippolyte and Victor became the richest colonists in their respective villages, Corneille and Bernelle. The two towns were very close, so they married off their children, Paul and Jeanne, my grandparents, to merge their family properties together.

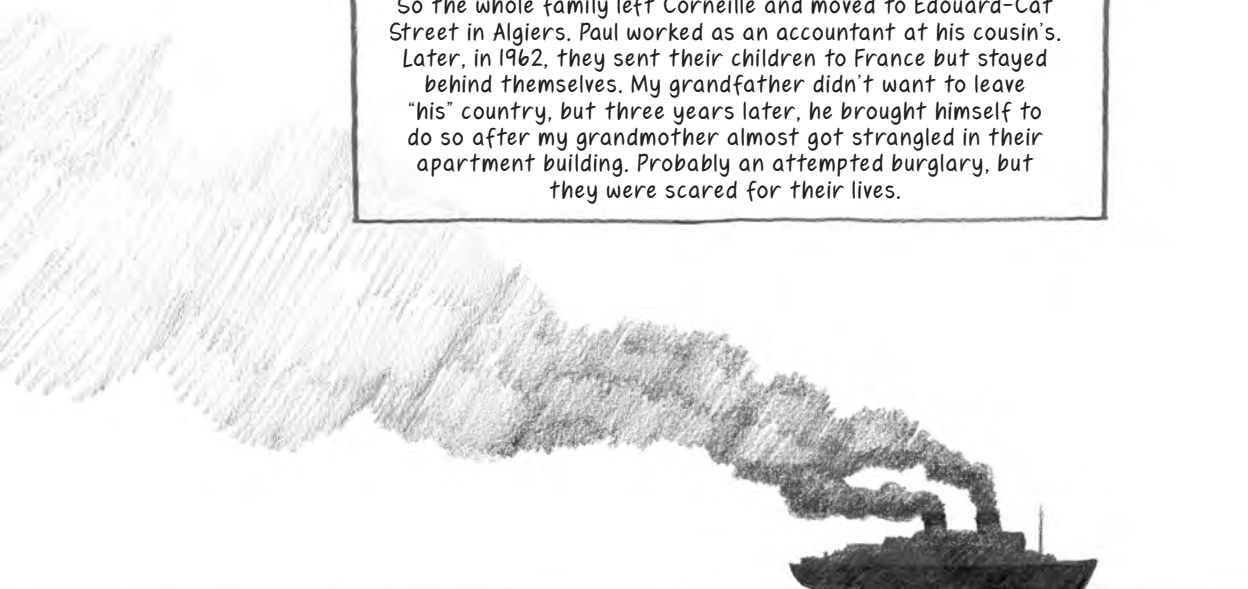
My grandfather Paul developed the farm after that. Apparently it was pretty big. My mother always heard talk of "a thousand hectares and a thousand head of sheep."



It wasn't as fun for my grandmother. She told me once that she would've rather lived in a city, traveled, led a more sophisticated life. But they were stuck in their small town homestead.



One night in 1955, a worker came to warn my grandfather that he was on the blacklist, and his farm was going to be burned down. In fact, the guy was actually a FLN member who was going to be part of it!



So the whole family left Corneille and moved to Édouard-Cat Street in Algiers. Paul worked as an accountant at his cousin's. Later, in 1962, they sent their children to France but stayed behind themselves. My grandfather didn't want to leave "his" country, but three years later, he brought himself to do so after my grandmother almost got strangled in their apartment building. Probably an attempted burglary, but they were scared for their lives.



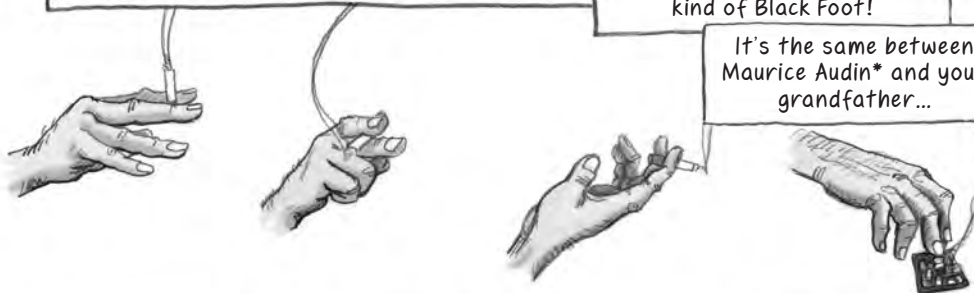


That's a made-up identity. It covers a lot of very different experiences.

From the Jews who've been here for centuries, to the guys who showed up from Ardèche, Italy, and Spain...

Someone who grew up in Oran and someone who grew up in Merouana aren't the same kind of Black Foot!

It's the same between Maurice Audin\* and your grandfather...



...there weren't a lot like Audin out there. But in general, the Black Foots did have some things in common, yes: ties to the land and the native peoples, and the right to vote. They all shared the same sense of superiority...



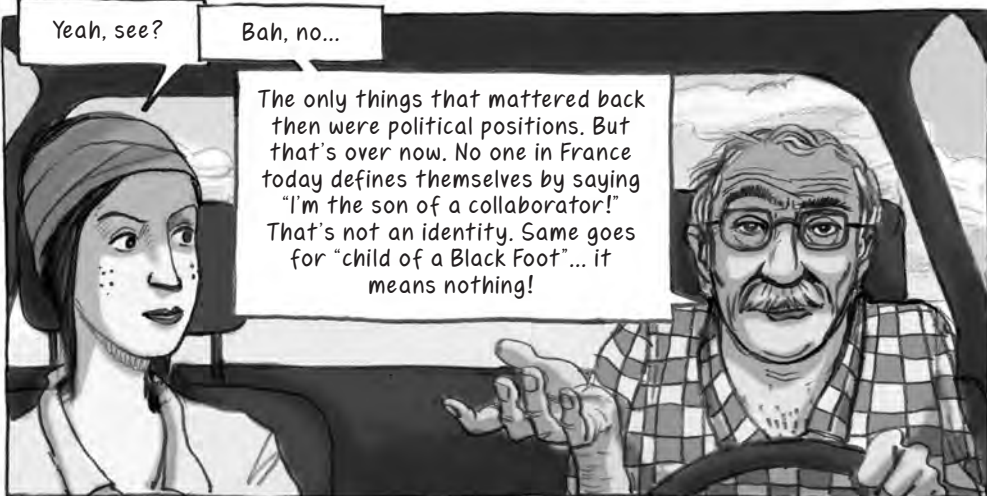
...and it wasn't just a feeling! It was very real! Like concrete!



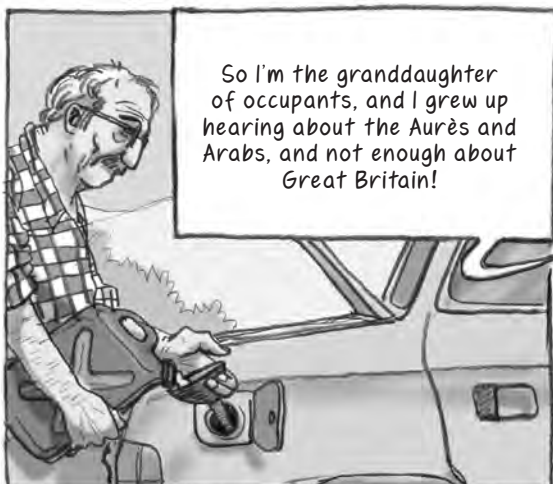
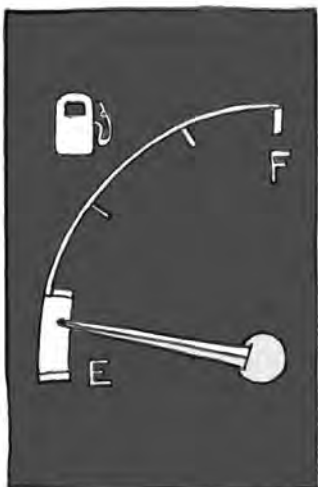
Yeah, see?

Bah, no...

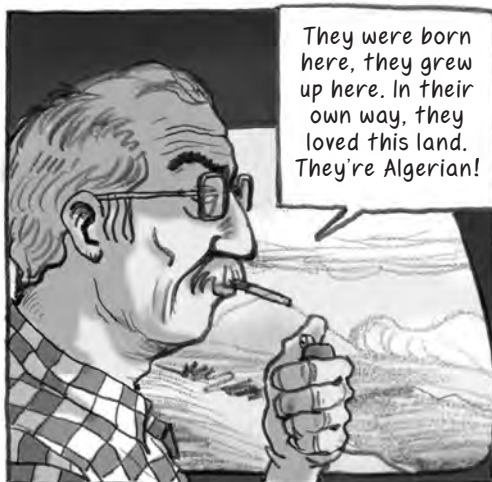
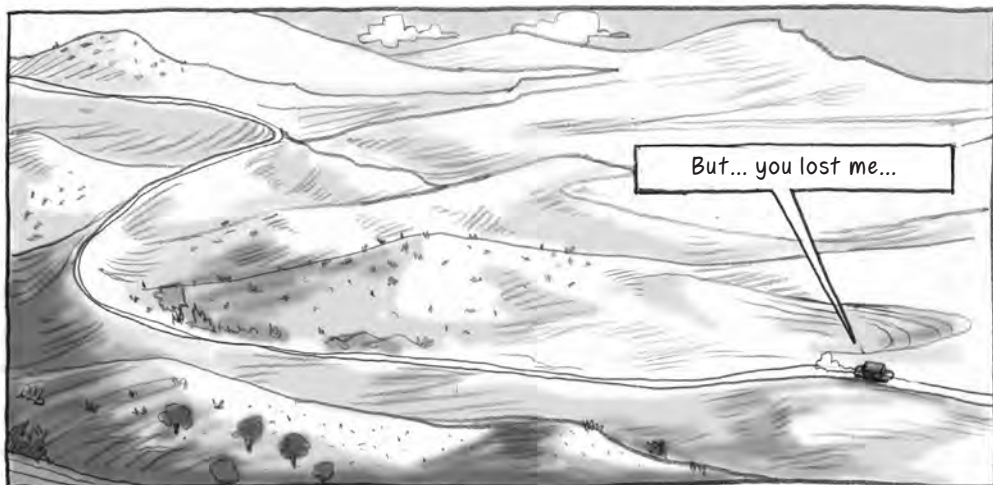
The only things that mattered back then were political positions. But that's over now. No one in France today defines themselves by saying "I'm the son of a collaborator!" That's not an identity. Same goes for "child of a Black Foot"... it means nothing!

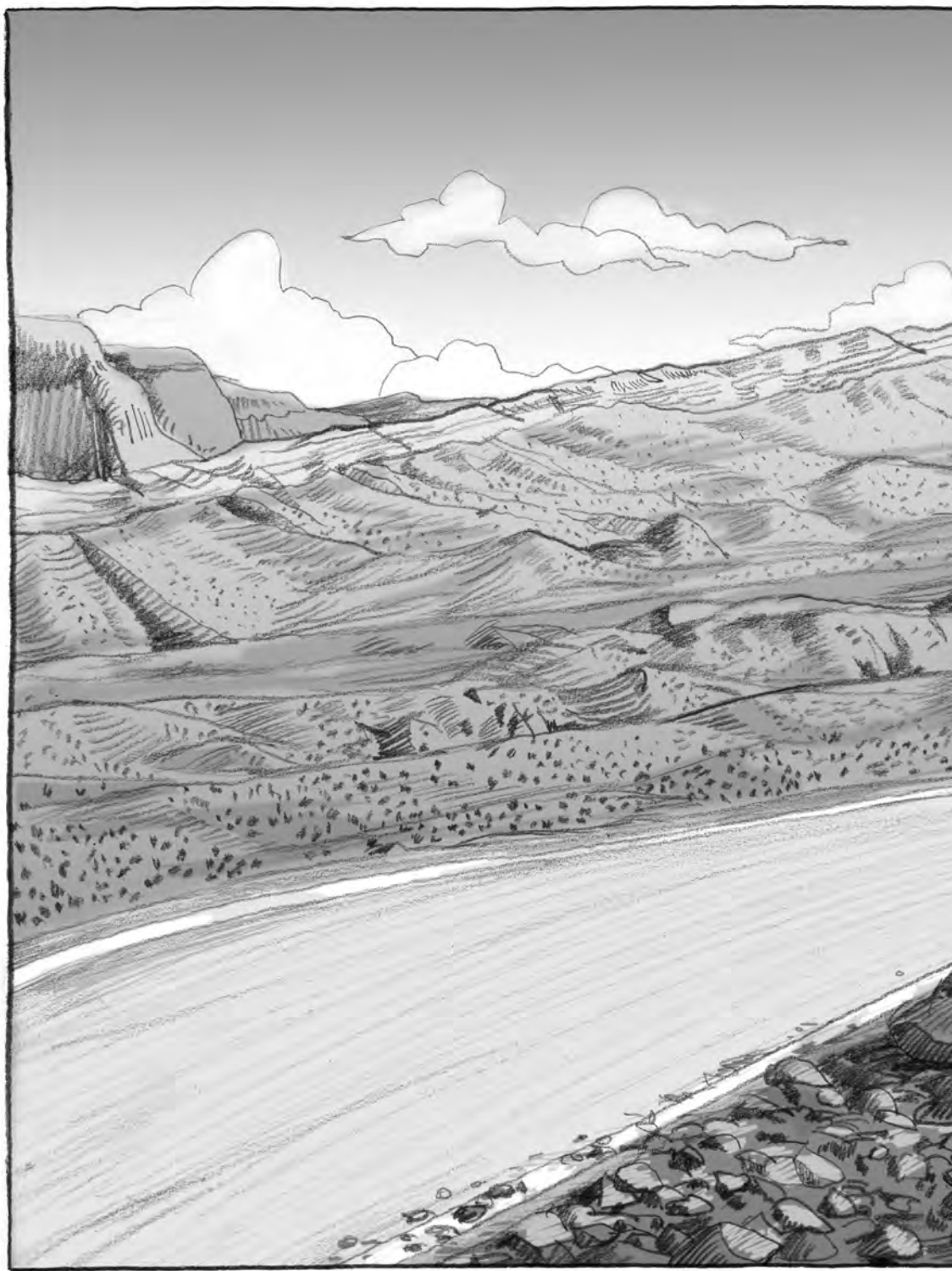


MAURICE AUDIN (1932-1957) - A YOUNG FRENCH MATH PROFESSOR AND MEMBER OF THE ALGERIAN COMMUNIST PARTY WHO CAMPAIGNED FOR ALGERIAN INDEPENDENCE. HE WAS ARRESTED IN 1957 AND TORTURED BY FRENCH PARATROOPERS. EXACT DATE OF DEATH UNKNOWN.





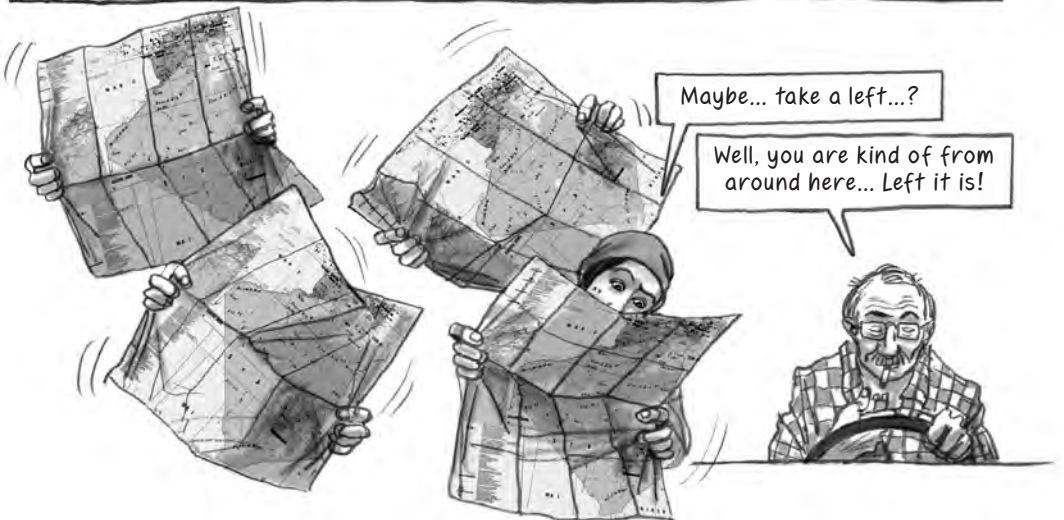
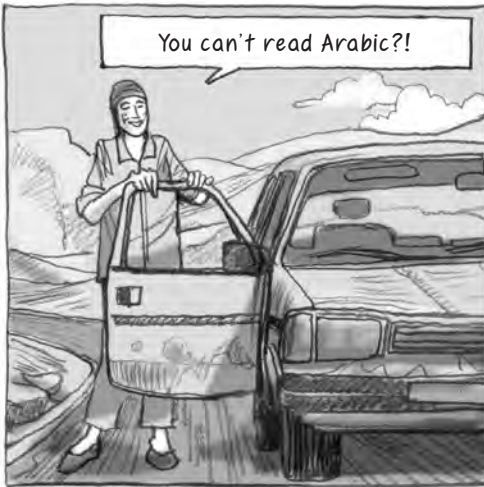














That village looks like an abandoned slum!



That village is fifty years old....

*A mirage, once glimpsed from the road by Corneille on a scorching summer's day... clustered apartment complexes extending to infinity. A white city that seemed as if it was floating...*



Hey, Hamid!  
It's Djaffar. We're here.  
Just outside town.  
Okay, we'll wait.



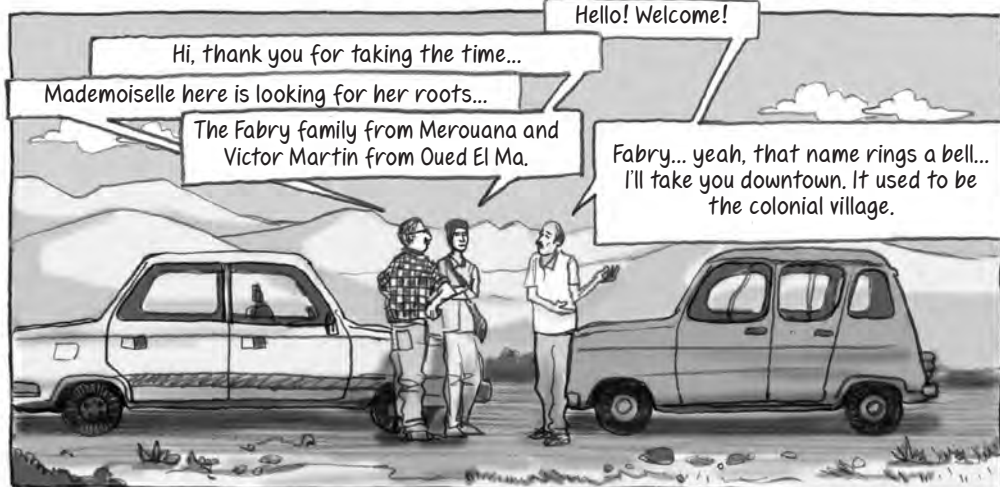
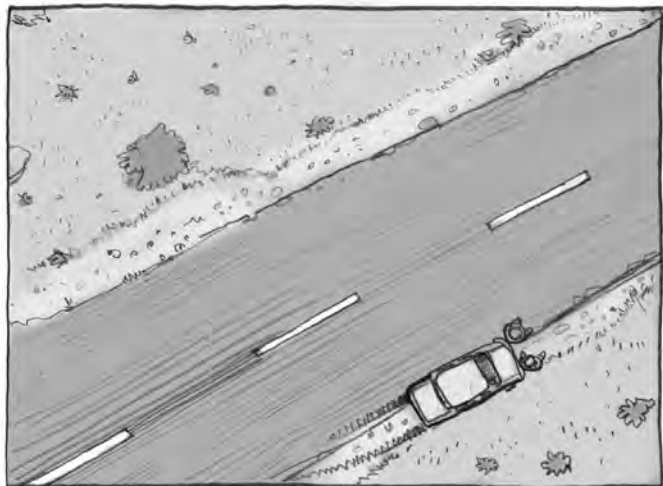




IN WITH BOTH FEET





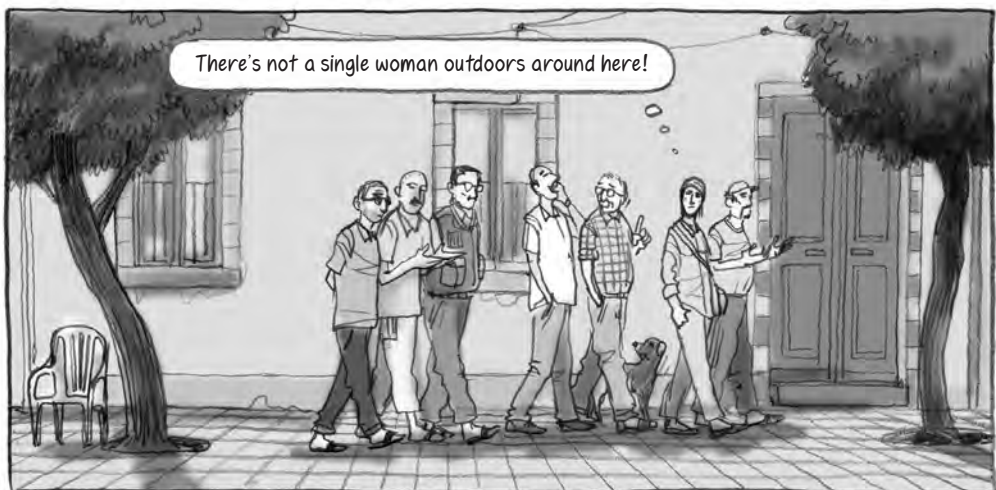




*The village we lived in was created from scratch, made of parallel roads divided by perpendicular roads with town squares and a park. The farm and our lands were three miles away.*











NOT THIS PLACE!



Are you sure this is the Fabry house?



I thought it was over that way...

ما ظننتش

Wasn' Moha

Let's go back the way we came...

والسقة الجامع



What if it's gone?

الحنقة  
Is this right?

The Fabry house? No, that's not it at all! Follow me...

Yes!



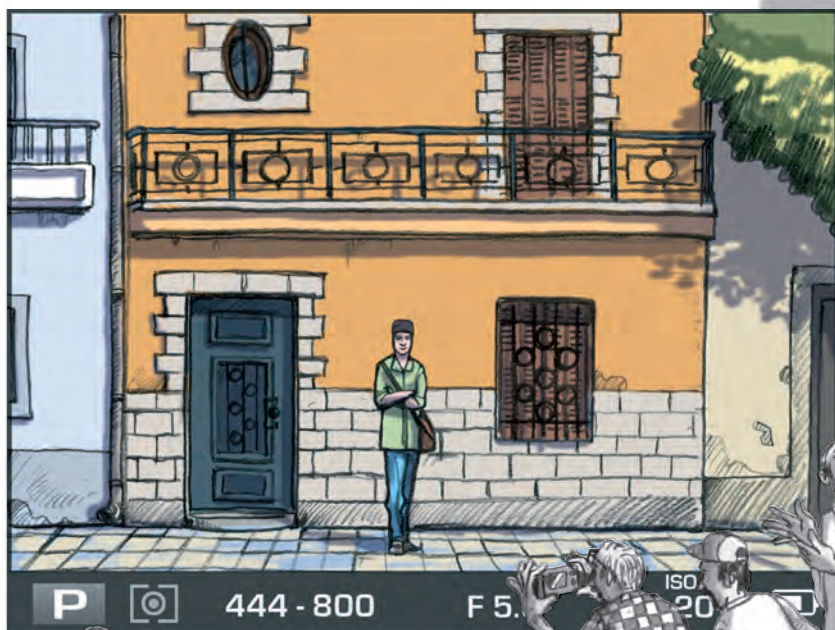








TRUE, THE HOUSE WAS NEAT AND CLEAN, BUT WITHOUT ANY CHARM. SOLIDLY BUILT, WITH A SECOND STORY, WHICH WAS RARE ON THAT STREET, IT WAS A FAR CRY FROM THE PALACE I'D IMAGINED GROWING UP. HOW DID THEY LIVE HERE? WHAT WOULD MY MOTHER DO AFTER SCHOOL? I HAD A HARD TIME PICTURING HER AS A CHILD IN THIS TINY VILLAGE AND CONNECTING THAT TO HER LIFE AS A GROWN WOMAN IN PARIS.





We can see the cemetery if you want. It's shared by two villages.



I have to warn you, though... it's not in very good condition. It was damaged in the '90s, by terrorists.



Kind of creepy!



*I had heard that the graves were desecrated, the bodies taken away. Vandals must have thought they'd been buried with their gold, like the parashas...*





Fabry...? Martin....? Fabry....? Martin.....? THERE! Hippolyte Fabry!



Good thing grandma's not here to see this. Or anyone else in the family, for that matter.

Well, at least there's one left!

You OK?

Yeah, fine.



In fact, graves never meant much to me...



Ow!



Shit!



Noooooooooooo!





Not to rush you, but we should move on. Ever since the '90s, we've avoided being out at night. I booked you a hotel room in Batna.



DAILY SUMMARY: ONE LOCKED HOUSE AND ONE GUTTED GRAVE. I'M HAVING A HARD TIME CATCHING MY GHOSTS.





THE NEXT DAY, WE MET UP WITH HAMID AND RACHID IN FRONT OF THE OLD SCHOOL IN OUED EL MA, FORMERLY BERNELLE, WHERE MY GRANDMOTHER'S PARENTS, THE MARTINS, LIVED. THE TOWN LOOKED A LOT LIKE MEROVANA, BUT SMALLER. WOULD THERE BE ANYTHING LEFT HERE?





BANG BANG BANG  
BANG BANG BANG



HA HA HA HA HA  
HA HA HA HA HA



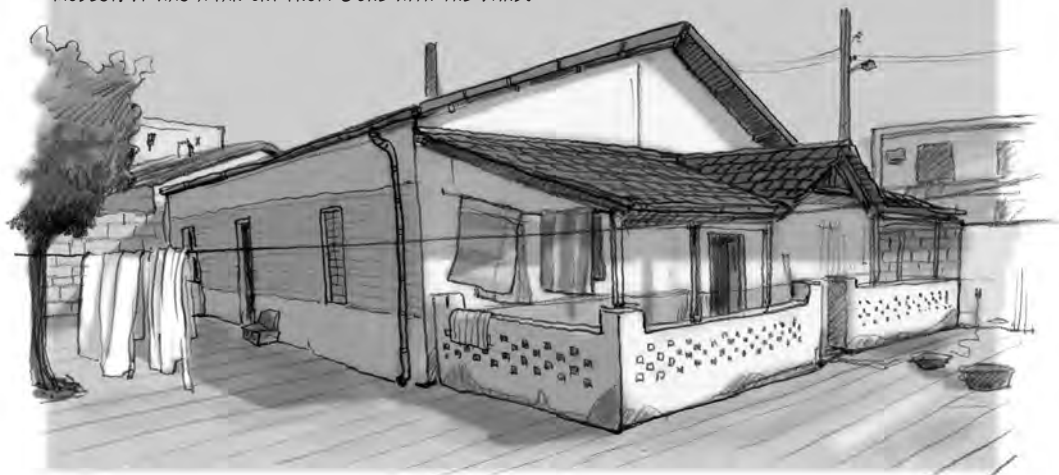




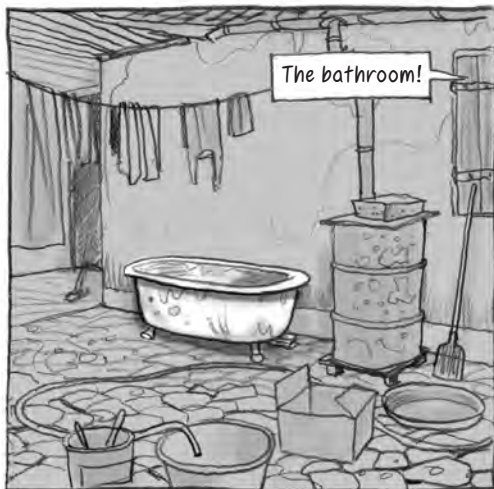




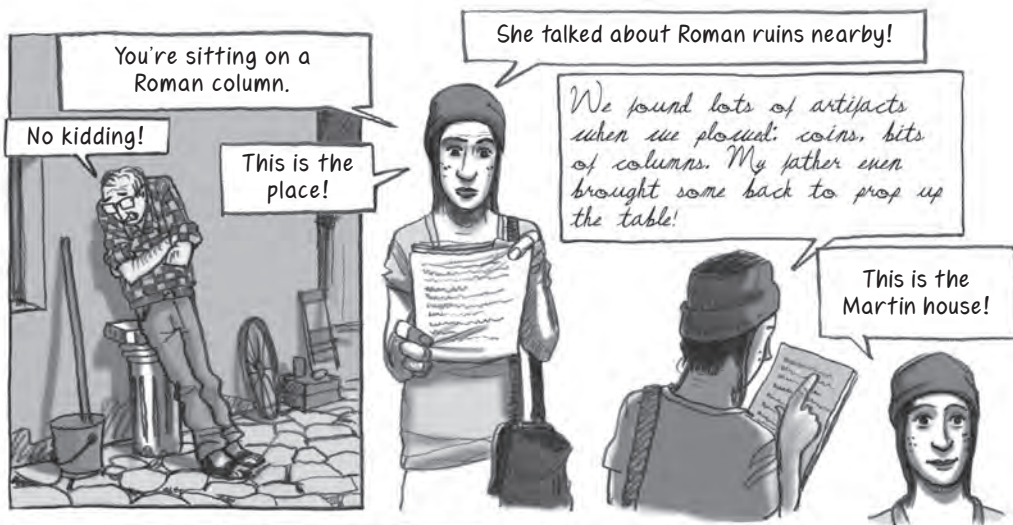
EVERYTHING LOOKED SMALL AND UGLY TO ME. IT WASN'T HOW I'D PICTURED IT. NOT THIS RUSTIC. NOT THIS MODEST. IT WAS A FAR CRY FROM *GONE WITH THE WIND*!











IT WAS HARD TO GET AWAY. THE FAMILY EVEN INVITED ME TO THEIR SON'S WEDDING IN SEPTEMBER! I MUST'VE THANKED THEM TWENTY TIMES FOR THEIR WARM WELCOME, BUT DJAFFAR CUT THE GOODBYES SHORT, SAYING WE WERE EXPECTED IN MEROVANA.

CONTACT No. 2: THE SEGHIR FAMILY HAD US OVER FOR LUNCH. THEY WERE FRIENDS OF FRIENDS OF FRIENDS OF DJAFFAR'S! THE HUSBAND WAS BORN IN MEROUANA, THE WIFE WAS FROM CHERCHELL, ON THE COAST. THAT WAS ALL WE KNEW WHEN WE GOT THERE.





We weren't allowed to play with French children!

Really? My mother said she had Algerian friends as a little girl...

Yeah, it's true, we played with French children, but not at school. We went to a native school. But we'd play with them in the streets and around.

At their houses?

No, we weren't allowed to go over to their houses. But they came over to ours! Hah! They were in charge!

In Algiers, I went to school with French friends. But after school, everyone went to their own homes.

How many French families were there in Merouana?

Not many... twelve?

Did your father ever talk about work?



Yes, he was a gardener for the André family. My mother did the cleaning...



The André's didn't treat their workers very well. You worked all the time and kept quiet, or else you got fired, that's it. His mother wasn't allowed to touch certain fruits and vegetables: strawberries, peanuts... Potatoes and onions, yes, but the rest, no. They lived in poverty under the colonists.



Ah! At least you speak your mind!



The Black Foots say they gave the people around here work. That before they came, there was only poverty...



I don't know about before. That was too long ago.



Nonsense. All that is pure myth.



One thing's for sure, there was certainly money in Algiers! That's what motivated the conquest! Algiers was rich from slaves and buccaneering. France was in debt to Algiers after Napoleon borrowed so much money to feed his troops. Since France couldn't pay it back, they invented the "fan affair"... they said there was nothing in Algeria but mosquitoes...!



"FAN AFFAIR" - In 1827, the Dey of Algiers held an audience with the French consul and demanded his due. The interview took a bad turn, France claimed the Dey slapped the consul with his fan, using this as a pretext for war. The ensuing diplomatic escalation led to the invasion of Algiers in 1830.

"Arabs and ants!" the French would say. They put us in the same category!



My daughters-in-law!



هيا وجدوا  
القهوة ازربوا !



Why don't they join us?

This would bore them!



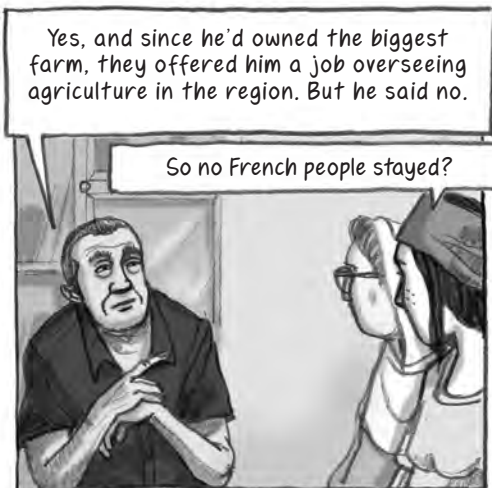
So what about the Fabrys? Any memories?

Monsieur Fabry was older than me, so we didn't speak much.



But people said they were a proper family. And he could read and speak Arabic.







But really, you couldn't be pro-independence if you were a colonist. Unless you had some exceptional political consciousness, it was unthinkable. If schooling had been encouraged for Algerians, they might have managed to converse on equal terms. But as things were... no chance.



What did you do for a living?

I was a contractor, a stonemason. I left school at twelve, but my younger brother got a degree. They're the ones who benefited most from independence.



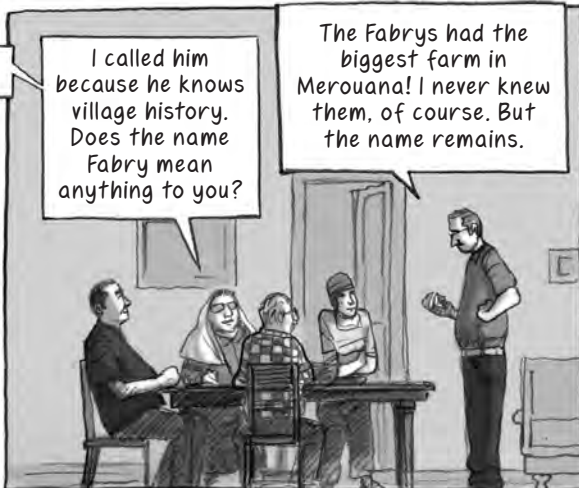
Hello!

My son-in-law!



I called him because he knows village history. Does the name Fabry mean anything to you?

The Fabrys had the biggest farm in Merouana! I never knew them, of course. But the name remains.



There's even a proverb...!



Really? What is it?

Can I...?



غار فابري تحل  
كاس بيرا خير  
من مطيرة.



It means: "A glass of beer from the Fabry well is better than rain from above!"



That's because he kept buying up land over the years, and that made a lot of people suddenly very rich! And some of them drank that money away!

Hah! So it was like a magical well, then?



Or poisoned. And people still say it today.



I've got a friend in France who's into history. He's done research on the area. Give me your e-mail address. He might be able to tell you more about your ancestors.

Gladly!



Well, now, do you want to go see your inheritance?

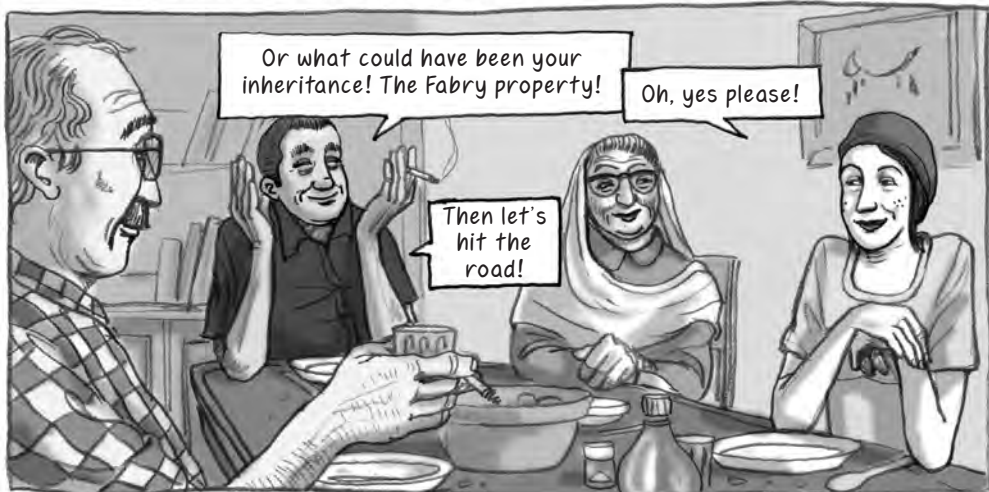
Excuse me?



Or what could have been your inheritance! The Fabry property!

Oh, yes please!

Then let's hit the road!





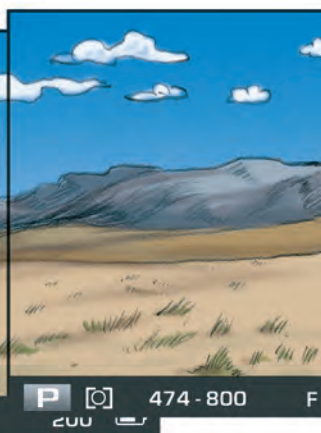
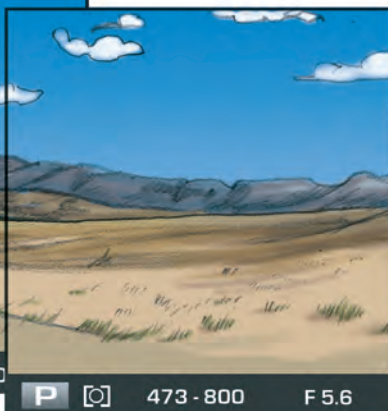
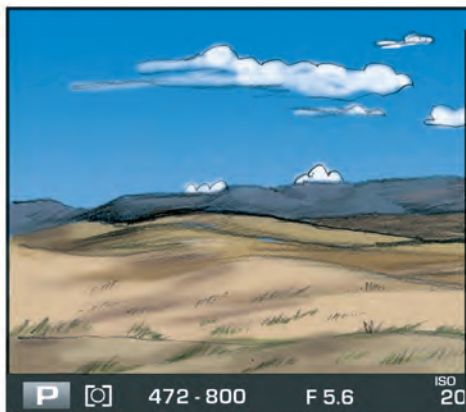
Voilà, the Fabry lands!

But... how far?

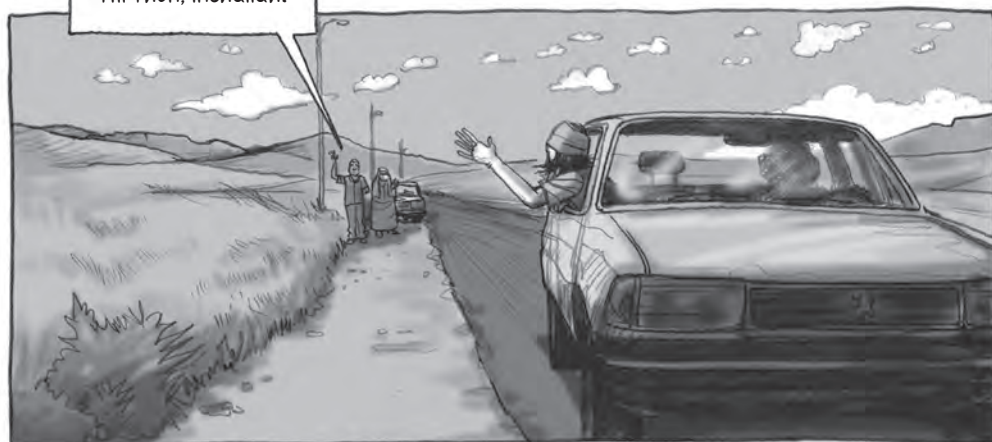
All the way to the mountains.

Where's the farm?

Torn down.



Come back anytime!  
Till then, inshallah!







SO THIS IS THE LAND MY GRANDFATHER AND HIS FATHER ROAMED ON HORSEBACK? MY ANCESTORS, THOSE GAULS, PROUD OF THEIR SUCCESS, FAR FROM THE CITIES, FEARFUL OF BAD WEATHER, AND SO SURE OF THEIR RIGHTS...

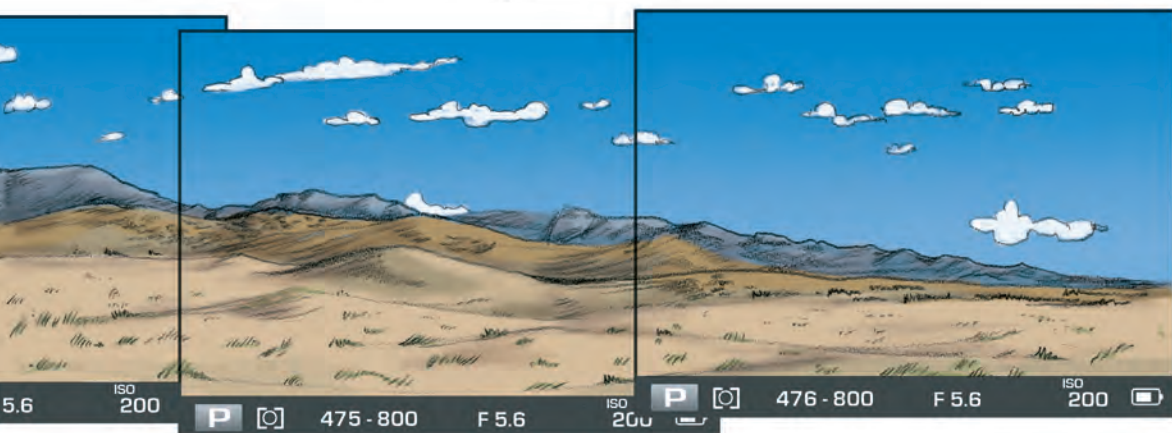
*a thousand hectares and a thousand head of sheep*

What are you doing?

Soaking it in.

You should fill a bottle and take it back to Paris!

...we should probably get going soon...



Huh?

We're not going to Algiers!

Oh no! We'll never make Algiers by nightfall!

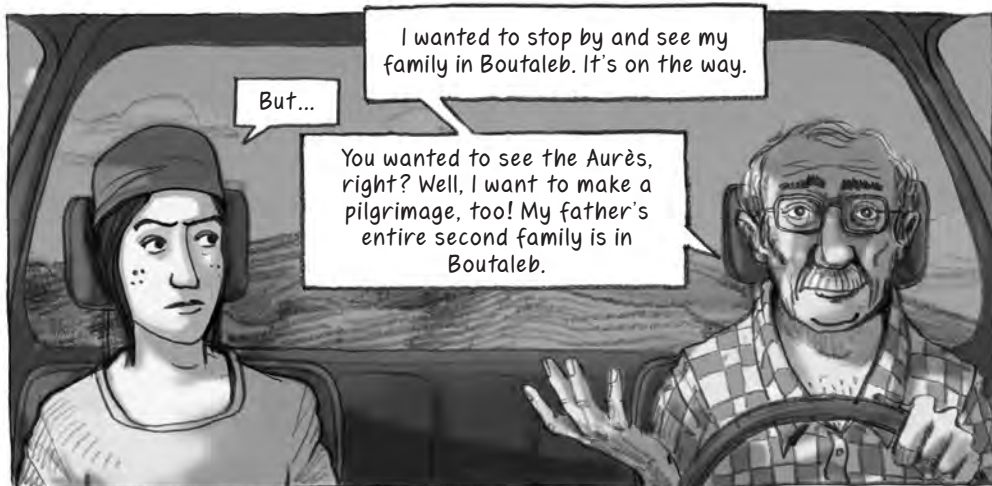




## OFF THE BEATEN PATH







ACTUALLY, I WAS FINE WITH IT. I DIDN'T WANT TO GO BACK YET. THESE BARREN LANDSCAPES REMINDED ME OF OTHER ROCKY STRETCHES BY THE MEDITERRANEAN WHERE I ALWAYS FELT AT HOME.

AND THEY REMINDED ME OF MY MOTHER...



Look at that golden reflection! That's what I want when I retire. And some olive groves and fruit trees!



...I won't lie, with your budget, it'll be a fixer-upper at best...





THE SEARCH IN PROVENCE TOOK TWO YEARS...



...ALL FOR NOTHING.



SO MY MOTHER STARTED LOOKING INTO OTHER REGIONS THAT WEREN'T AS EXPENSIVE OR SUNNY.  
FRIENDS HAD TOLD HER ABOUT A PRETTY FISHING VILLAGE IN BRITTANY...





...SO WE WENT TO SEE.



THEN SHE FOUND OUT ABOUT LARZAC IN CENTRAL FRANCE. THOSE GREAT OPEN SPACES REMINDED HER OF THE AURÈS. EXCEPT IN THE LARZAC, THERE WERE NO HOUSES FOR SALE...



SHE'S BEEN LOOKING NOW FOR TEN YEARS, AND IT'S DRIVING ME CRAZY. BUT NOW I SEE WHAT SHE CAN'T FIND IN FRANCE: ALGERIA.







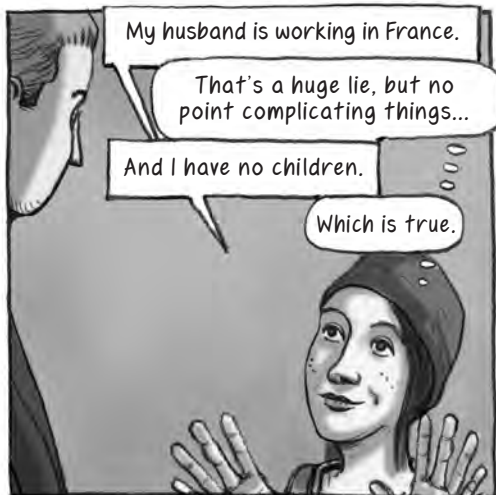


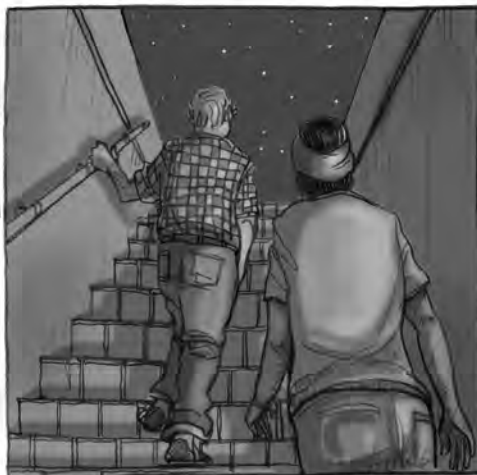












So how's the reunion?

Belkacem's a good guy.



He built this house, y'know. Piece by piece, every summer, saving up from his job as a stonemason in Martigues. And I wasn't going crazy, they had to leave the village up in the mountains. It was too cutoff from the world and too vulnerable to terrorist attacks.

I'll tell you one thing: he hates those bearded types. He's seen 'em up close. They killed lots of his friends around here. They'd come shake him down, steal his cows. Know what he did? He handcuffed 'em and said he lost the key!



Do you know his children very well?

No... we haven't seen each other for at least twenty years. His eldest is sixteen and pregnant already! I gave him an earful about not sending his girls to school. He just doesn't push them. So I promised I'd send them a computer.

Funny how your paths separated...



That's for sure! Where I came from, my future was all laid out. I should've gotten married at eighteen, too... to a woman my mom picked out at the hammam in my neighborhood in the Kasbah... had a boatload of kids... But then there was this major incident along the way: the war. And that turned everything upside down.



What did your dad do in Algiers?



He left these parts real young because there was no food. Started working at the port. Then he ran a café. Then a newsstand and finally a hair salon. Did well for himself. Couldn't read but wanted us to go to school. The boys, I mean. I had no use for school, myself. Didn't understand what they were going on about. Except for geography! I liked that because I learned about things I hadn't known about before: Mont Blanc, altitude, snow...

I also remember a drawing class where we were supposed to draw a boat. I put an Algerian flag on the mast, and the teacher slapped me across the face. Called my father in. So he comes in, all dressed up. Looks at the drawing, gives me another slap. He apologizes to the principal, who backs off and says he'll overlook it. But then, on the way out, my dad pulls me close and says, "You were right, that was the right flag, you just can't let on to them." When they arrested him, I had to go to work. I sold newspapers and then apprenticed at a printing plant.



He was involved with the FLN?

Yeah. Took delivery of weapons through the port and distributed them. Medicine, too. He found safehouses for major fighters, with my brother's help. I'd run errands for him without knowing what for, carrying a covered basket in my hand, just following him around.



My brother was the first to be arrested. He came back after a week, the ends of his fingers red and round as cherries. They'd torn off his nails with a pair of pliers. Soon after, he left to join the underground, and I never saw him again until the independence.





For my father, it lasted two years. He got ratted out once, in 1957. It took us a while to figure out where he was. We finally found him in a detention camp. He couldn't open his mouth. He was lying there, a guy on either side of him holding his head up, and a third feeding him pre-chewed food by the mouthful like a mama bird. That's the state he was in. Later, he told us that during his torture, one thing obsessed him, just one thing and he'd have spilled it all: he was afraid of cockroaches. Absolutely terrified. So he fixated on that. As long as no cockroaches showed up, everything was fine!

He held out.

And you?



I got arrested in '61. The military had a file on me because of the print shop. One of the guys there was printing pro-FLN pamphlets at night, but I didn't know anything about it. They questioned me for a few hours, hit me, shoved sand in my mouth, but that was it. Maybe they thought I was too young, but I got off easy. I stayed in a holding area outside Algiers for four months, no one knew where I was. Came home to factions, struggles between leaders, and us underlings... we didn't understand a thing. It was brother against brother among Algerians. The government never talks about that. It was terrible. Really disgusted me.





Then what?

After that came independence. For me, the turning point was summer '62. A guy from the print shop tipped me off about a youth trip to Europe. What a shock! The girls...! That's when I started questioning our traditions. For me, a girl who went out on the street bareheaded was a whore. So at first I had no idea what was going on. Then I had some experiences! A few years later, I left for Germany on a mechanics internship, and I ran into a woman there I'd met in Algiers, an intellectual interested in the philosophy of Frantz Fanon. I felt like an idiot next to her friends. Marx, Engels, Freud... I didn't know who they were talking about, I'd never read those books. Ashamed, I asked to borrow some. That was the beginning of a thirst for knowledge. My inferiority complex. Back in Algiers, I had a hard time because I couldn't accept society the way it was. I left Algeria for good in 1970. Went to Paris. There, I lived with a psychoanalyst and started school.

So women were your salvation!

You joke, but it's true!



You see, I'm Algerian, of course, because my history is here. But after a while, I get bored with my family, or my friends in Algiers. I can talk the talk, but I don't have any deep ties anymore, and I don't care. Maybe a bit for the young boy down there, the one who speaks English. He might have a chance...

Depends on the computer...

And what he wants. I think there are two kinds of things in life: what you enjoy and what you endure. Only the first interests me. Things are either solvable or unsolvable. And the latter is out of my hands.



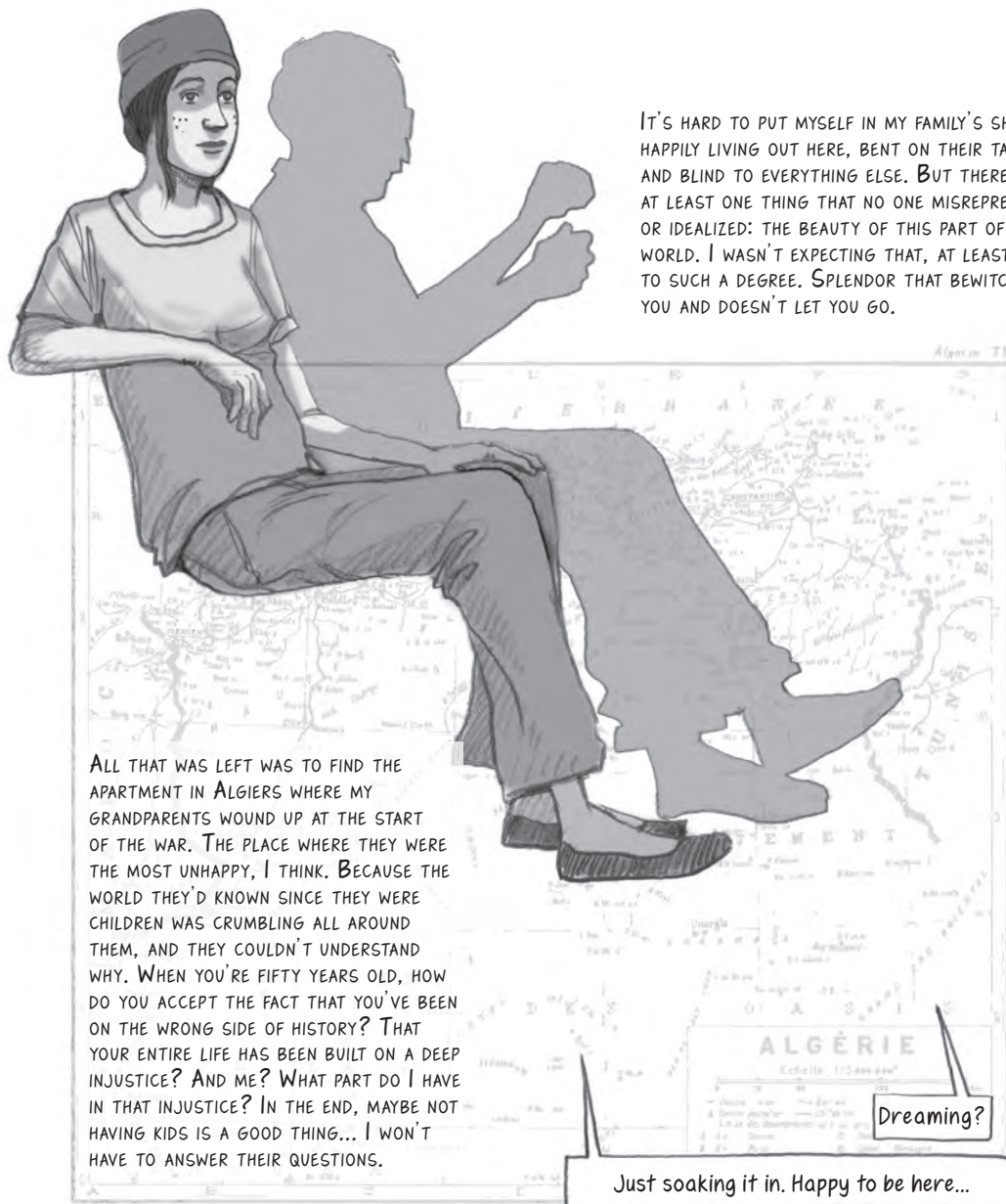




THE NEXT DAY, WE SAID OUR GOODBYES TO THE BELKACEM FAMILY. THEY MADE DJAFFAR PROMISE TO COME BACK BEFORE ANOTHER TWENTY YEARS WENT BY. HE PROMISED THAT, AND A COMPUTER.

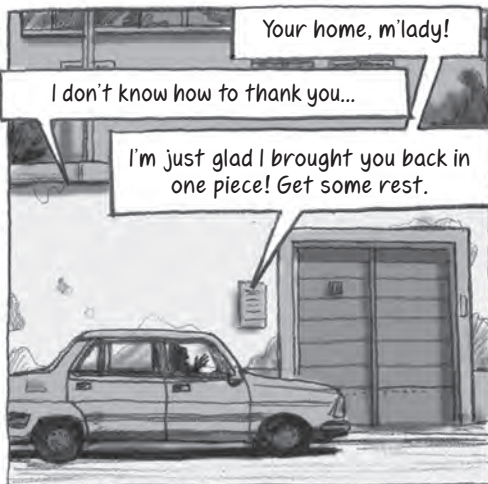
THE AURÈS ALREADY SEEMED FAR AWAY.

I WANTED TO SEE CORNEILLE, AND SO I SAW MEROUANA. I WANTED TO SEE BERNELLE, AND SO I SAW OUED EL MA. AN EL DORADO TO MY FAMILY, A PUZZLE TO ME, ONE THAT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE TO EVER TRULY FINISH...



ALL THAT WAS LEFT WAS TO FIND THE APARTMENT IN ALGIERS WHERE MY GRANDPARENTS WOUND UP AT THE START OF THE WAR. THE PLACE WHERE THEY WERE THE MOST UNHAPPY, I THINK. BECAUSE THE WORLD THEY'D KNOWN SINCE THEY WERE CHILDREN WAS CRUMBLING ALL AROUND THEM, AND THEY COULDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY. WHEN YOU'RE FIFTY YEARS OLD, HOW DO YOU ACCEPT THE FACT THAT YOU'VE BEEN ON THE WRONG SIDE OF HISTORY? THAT YOUR ENTIRE LIFE HAS BEEN BUILT ON A DEEP INJUSTICE? AND ME? WHAT PART DO I HAVE IN THAT INJUSTICE? IN THE END, MAYBE NOT HAVING KIDS IS A GOOD THING... I WON'T HAVE TO ANSWER THEIR QUESTIONS.

Just soaking it in. Happy to be here...







A BALCONY IN ALGIERS









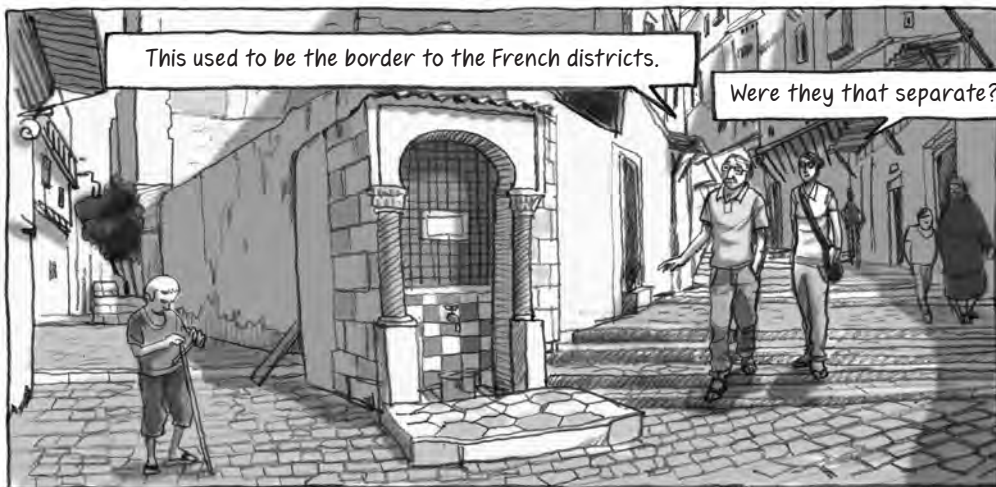
There are architectural treasures here. This area's a UNESCO World Heritage site.



But the houses are in ruins! Why? Simple. Because the money never goes where it's supposed to! It just disappears!



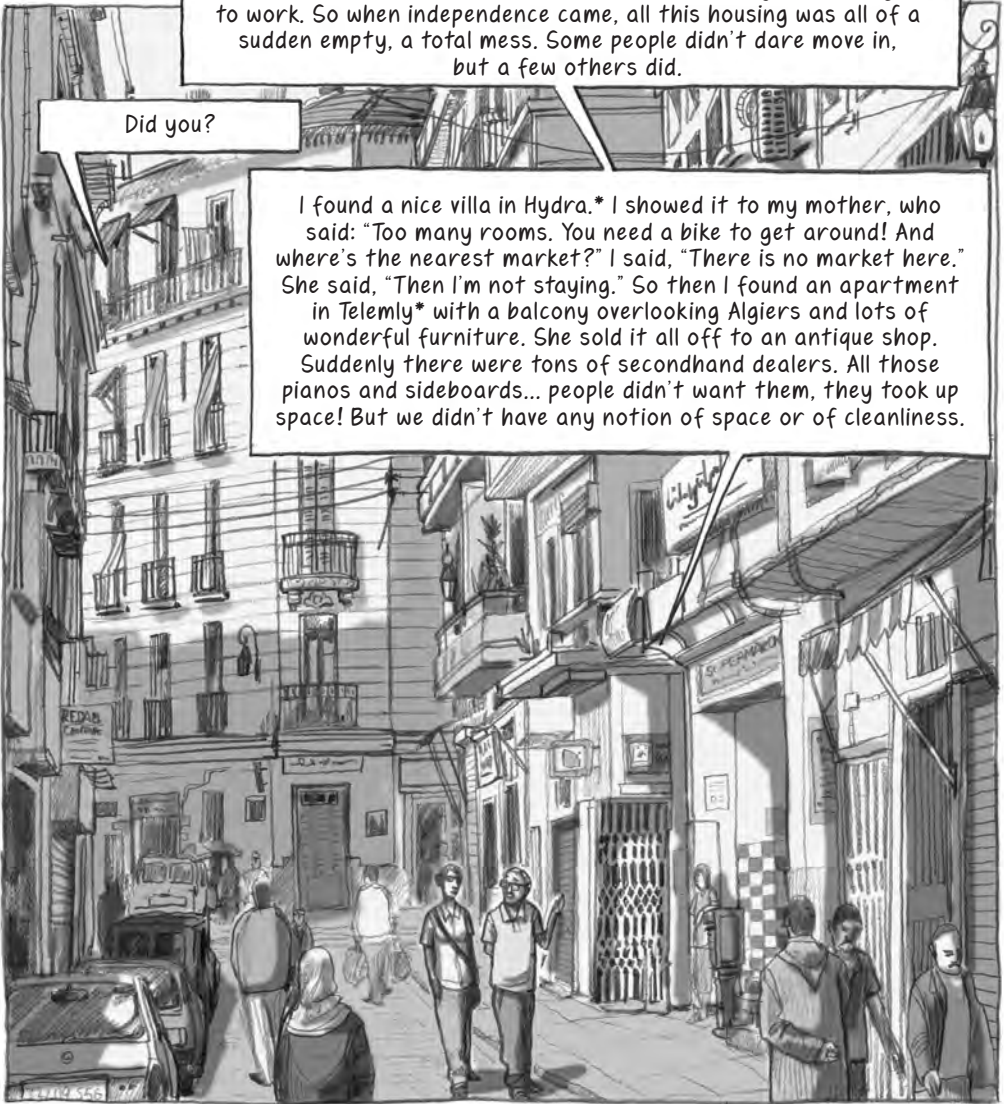
This used to be the border to the French districts.



The French never came to the Kasbah, and we only left it to go to work. So when independence came, all this housing was all of a sudden empty, a total mess. Some people didn't dare move in, but a few others did.

Did you?

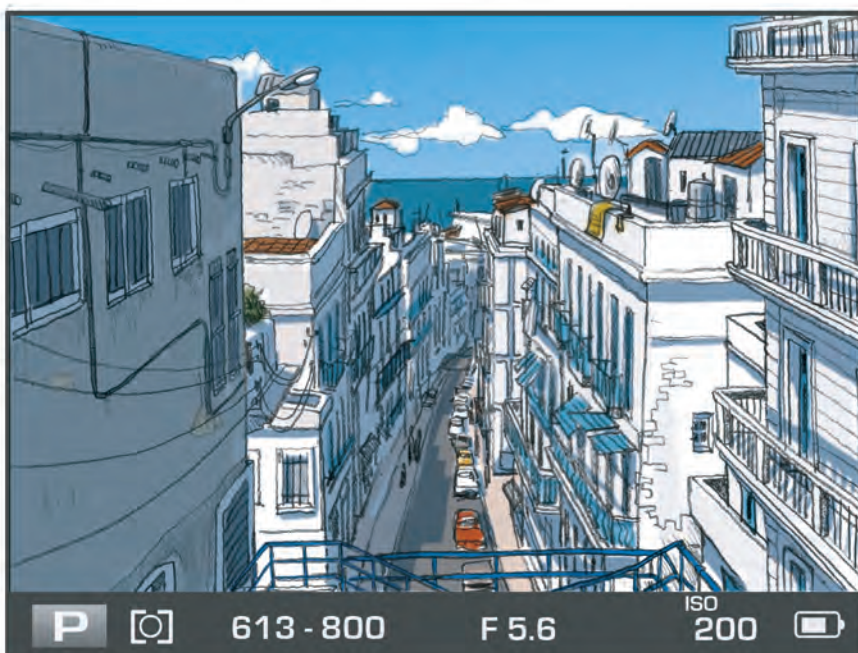
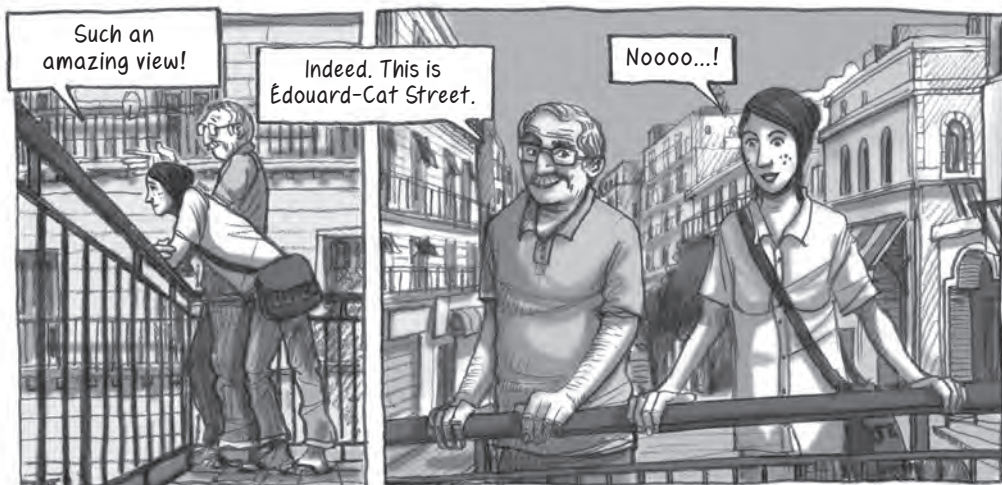
I found a nice villa in Hydra.\* I showed it to my mother, who said: "Too many rooms. You need a bike to get around! And where's the nearest market?" I said, "There is no market here." She said, "Then I'm not staying." So then I found an apartment in Telemly\* with a balcony overlooking Algiers and lots of wonderful furniture. She sold it all off to an antique shop. Suddenly there were tons of secondhand dealers. All those pianos and sideboards... people didn't want them, they took up space! But we didn't have any notion of space or of cleanliness.



HYDRA - A CHIC NEIGHBORHOOD IN THE HEIGHTS OF ALGIERS.

TELEMLY - AN UPPER-CRUST NEIGHBORHOOD IN DOWNTOWN ALGIERS.







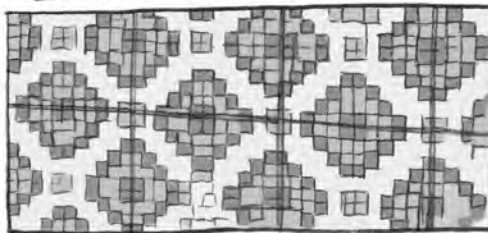


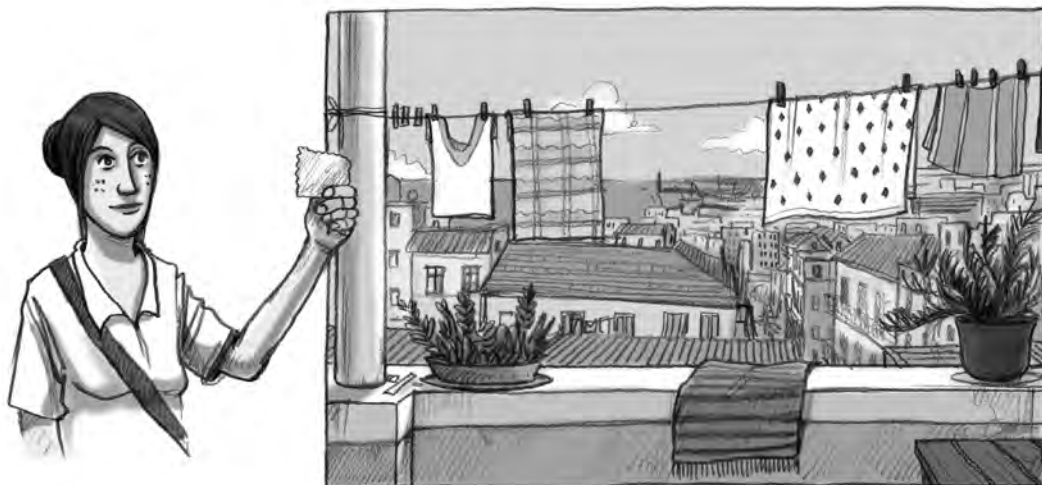












Thank you!

To think I didn't  
bring anything! Not  
even flowers...

Flowers? What are  
we, goats? Well, if he's  
on his way, I better be  
going, too.



Come back anytime. Part of this place belongs to you!



Coffee?



I just wanted to say... I know it's kind of weird, showing up like this. I just wanted to see where my family once lived, that's all.



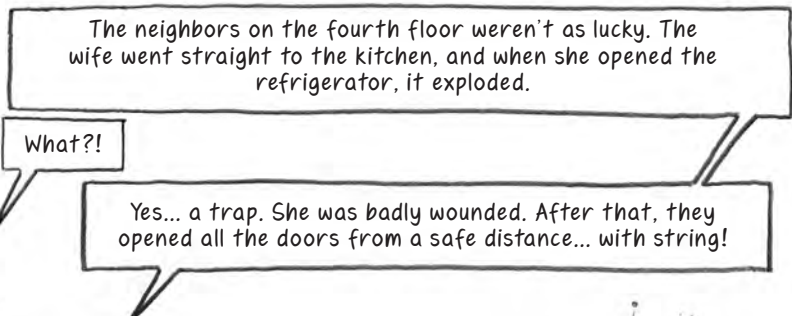
I understand perfectly. We have a proverb that says: "When you don't know where you're going, take a look at where you came from."



Oh yeah?







It was the war. It made everyone crazy.

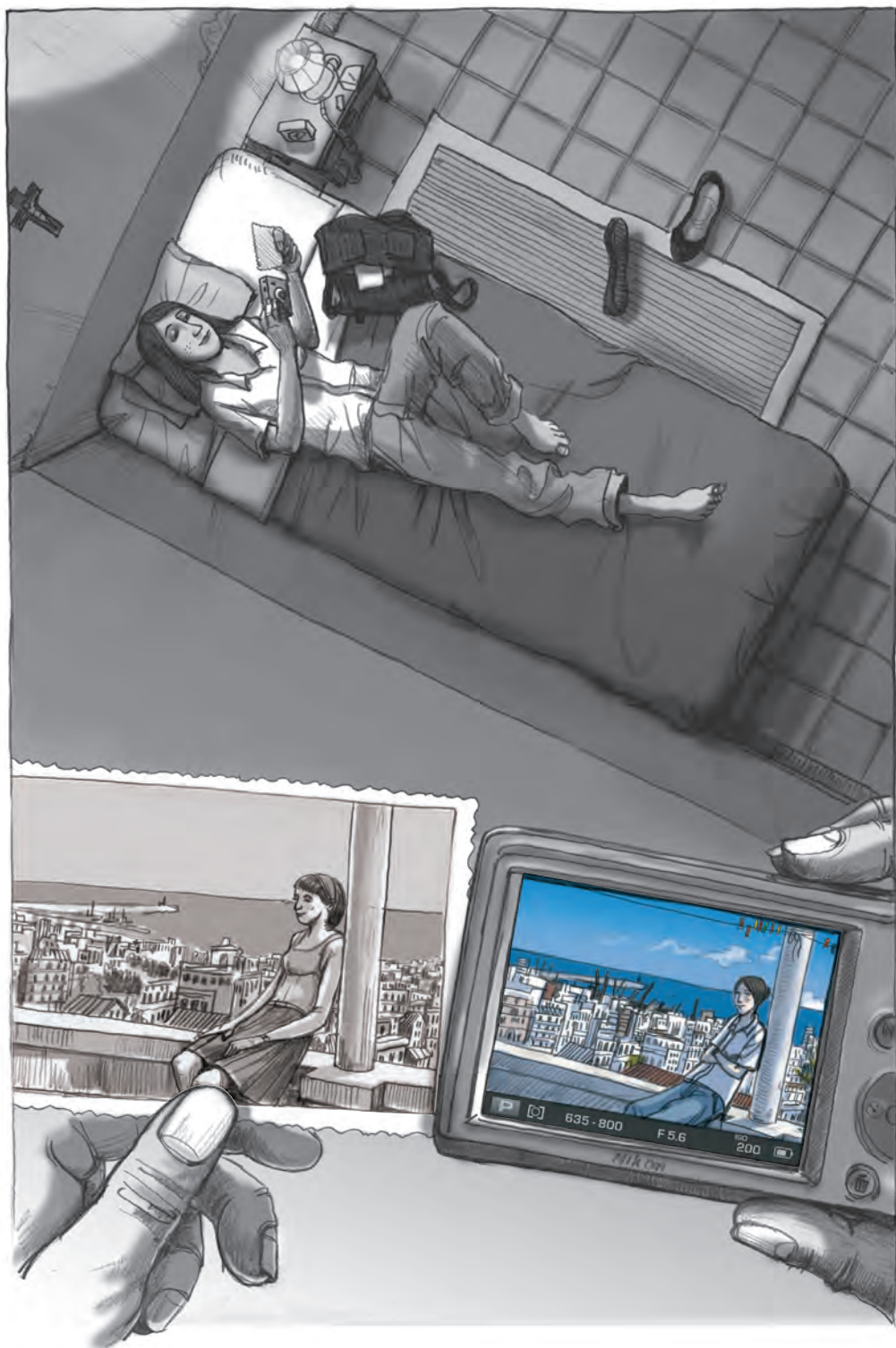
Neither you nor I are to blame for any of it.  
We must simply move on.

And you were right to come back.









WELL, I SAW IT.



A MAGNIFICENT LAND. A TRAUMATIZED LAND. VERY COURAGEOUS PEOPLE.



I LEAPT FEETFIRST INTO BLACK-AND-WHITE MEMORIES THAT WEREN'T MY OWN.



I WAS STUCK IN THE FAMILY ALBUM, CAUGHT IN A NARRATIVE LOOP.



I'M LEAVING WITH MY OWN ALGERIAN STORY, WHICH DOESN'T HAVE MUCH TO DO WITH MY FAMILY.

BUT IT'S MINE. IT'S IN COLOR AND PULSATING WITH LIFE.

I ALREADY WANT TO GO BACK.









WITH MY OWN EYES











Wait...



CLIC CLIC

No way...



Grandma?!





WE BOTH CAME A LONG WAY, DIDN'T WE? STILL, IT'S STAGGERING, ALL THESE TIES BETWEEN TWO DISTANT SHORES...









...and that's the highway to the Aurès. You were right! It's just like the American West!



No, it's even more beautiful than America!



Your house in Corneille...

Not bad! Hasn't changed much.



Oh, and guess what? Grandpa's name is part of a proverb now!

Really?!



Yeah, something about him buying up land and people spending the money to drink...

Alcohol? That's odd. But I guess it means they remember him.



Yeah. And this is the Martins' house in Bernelle.

Oh no! It's in terrible shape!



Mom, it's been fifty years...

And this is the cemetery. Not much to see.



Move on! Next!







Our balcony didn't have a pergola.

A what?

The vine-covered gazebo.

They said they had lots of work done. They could have added it.

This was the apartment on the right, after the elevator?

Yeah...

All the way to the right? The rightmost, or the middle right?

Was there a little hallway to the left after you went in?

Yeah, I think so.

Nope. No hallway to the left.

I SUDDENLY DON'T FEEL SO GOOD.

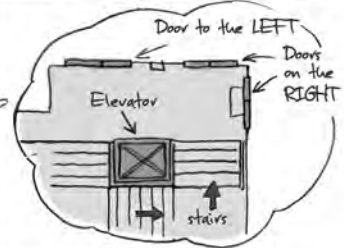
But does the view look familiar?

Yes, sure. I mean, I think so.

You said they were really nice?

They invited me to come back and stay with them!

Did I mess up?



I GOT THE WRONG APARTMENT!



THIS WHOLE CIRCUS OF A PILGRIMAGE TO SOMEWHERE NO ONE  
IN MY FAMILY'S EVER SET FOOT!

I CAN JUST PICTURE ZYMA AND HER BROTHER'S FACES  
WHEN THE REAL FAMILY SHOWS UP...



That sounds nice. Maybe we could go back  
together, with the cousins?

Uh, sure...



ALL THOSE EMOTIONS... SUCH JOY AT FINDING THAT  
PLACE, BEING WELCOMED, DESPITE THE PAST...

We'll have to have Djaffar  
over for dinner to thank him.

Yes, of course.





...ALL BASED ON A MISTAKE...



I GOT IT WRONG.



BUT IN THE END...

...WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

















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“Men build too many walls and not enough bridges.”  
— Newton