

Ainsi parlait ma mère (In My Mother's Words), by Rachid Benzine
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1

You're surely wondering what I'm doing in my mother's bedroom. I, the literature professor from the University of Louvain. Who never settled down. A book in hand, awaiting the possible stirring of his life-giver. A weary mom, tired, ravaged by life and its vagaries. The book is *La Peau de Chagrin*, by Balzac. An ancient copy, so battered that the ink is rubbing away in places. My mother can't read. She could have developed an interest in any hundreds of millions of other works. So why this one in particular? I don't know. I've never known. She doesn't know, herself. But this is the one she asks me to read to her when she has a free moment during the day, when she needs to be comforted, when she wants simply to get a little enjoyment out of life. And out of her son.

A ritual that has become imperative at night, before bed. She curls up against her pillow in the fetal position, closes her eyes. Like a child who knows, having heard it dozens of times, that a story will amaze or shock her. *La Peau de Chagrin*, I must have read it two hundred times now, myself. She discovered it on an audiotape that I borrowed from the library a good twenty-five years ago. I endeavored at one time to help her discover literary treasures this way. From cassettes usually intended for the blind or those with poor eyesight. She listened to dozens of them, but this one had been far and away her favorite. Right from the start. I had barely returned it to the library when she asked me to buy it for her. Then to read it to her on a regular basis. To ease the strain on my time, and worried about her fascination with this single work, I brought her other formats. At first I bought videotapes, then DVDs, of interpretations of the work in grand opera, lyric opera, ballet—various, diverse film and television adaptations. But nothing pleased her so much that she could do without my reading.

When I wasn't there, my mother returned time and again to the audiotape, of which I had already bought several copies, she wore them out so fast, listening to them nonstop—I had copies made myself but these, too, were worn out quickly. And then, one day, I couldn't find them anymore. They had stopped selling them. I went to flea markets hoping to see one turn up. With no success. I even lied to the library, letting on that I had lost their copy. But that tape, too, finally gave up the ghost in its turn. So I became obliged to read to her daily. I even tried to record the text myself, but I soon came to understand that my mother would not be contented with this. I paid an actor to record it in a sound studio. I asked him to copy it onto a cassette tape, because my mother is hopeless when it comes to technology. This version didn't get her blessing, either. She could only abide either the tape that introduced her to the book, or my live readings.

And then my mother suddenly began succumbing to age. One time she left the gas on. Another time, she let herself be sold three miracle vacuum cleaners in the same week. Still other times she fell heavily to the floor, unable to get back up. As the only single one among my brothers, fifteen years ago I drew one final X through any possibility of a love life and I moved back in with my mother, in the little two-room in Schaerbeek where I came into this world fifty-four years ago. My four brothers, all much older, had long since moved to other regions. They all have families and grandchildren. I've been living with her since she was seventy-eight and could no longer live alone.

For fifteen years, I've cared for her, changed her, washed her, dressed her. Several times a day I attend to her "intimate needs." A nice, neutral expression to describe an act that I would never have imagined doing when, fifty-four years ago, my wailing, blood-covered head popped out of that same "intimacy" for its first contact with the open air.

In these moments, my mother takes my hand. She smiles sadly. We're both embarrassed and happy at the same time. A curious feeling. Apart from the caretakers who come and go from her bedside during the week, I'm the only person she lets clean her like this—certainly humiliating, but she knows it's necessary.

I remember the first time I had to take care of it. Her caretaker couldn't make it, she had had an accident, and she couldn't find a replacement before the next day. I saw the distress on my mother's face. She asked me to give her a quick wash in the meantime, just with a glove, to clean her face, her neck, her arms. But I knew what it cost her not to wash fully, as she had always made a habit of doing. So I looked at her and told her that I would handle it. She said nothing—her eyes were moist, but she said nothing. Then, delicately, I picked her up from her bed, and I washed her. My hands trembled. Was it the sudden awareness of the terrible fragility of my mother, who gave herself over to me entirely, for such intimate acts? Was it the sense of her embarrassment, her vulnerability? We didn't speak. We shared that emotional moment, both of us sheltered within our own humanity, one offering assistance to the other uninhibited by the judgment of conventional barriers. The situation was liberating for her, after a fashion. Yes, she could fall back on her own for everything, she who hated to ask for anything. Her own was me, because none of my brothers, I think, would have agreed to such a task. We all do what we can.

Because of all this, I completely gave up on accepting invitations or going out, my sole life outside beginning and ending with the thirteen hours of courses I taught on campus. From then on Balzac and his *Peau de Chagrin* would constitute my only intellectual and emotional pursuits when I was by my mother's side. Even so, I'm still able to read other things. Because books are all I have.

Fifty-four years with my nose in a book. The first ones I read with my bum. They served as diapers during my earliest infancy. I even contracted impetigo on my buttocks because of the ink, diluted by my excrement. My father worked at the pulping plant, near Brussels. He spent his days destroying tons of unsold stock in all genres. From paperbacks to local newspapers. Political journals to children's comics. Erotic magazines to old prayer books. Books, magazines, journals, he would gather them up each day. As many as he could carry. We used them for everything: heat, weatherstripping for the windows, wedges to prop up the furniture, toilet paper, and then diapers for the little ones. But neither my mother nor my father could read French. They had left Zagora, in Morocco, to come to Belgium in the 1950s. At a time when people didn't really emigrate. And if they did, they went to France, not to this flat country. I never quite understood the migratory route of my parents. But hadn't I wanted to, at least? My parents and I had lived together but never shared an era.

Even though they were deeply invested in my four brothers' education, as well as my own—I came late, a "staff of old age"—from early on I made to disappear beneath piles of books that accumulated in the storage room in front of our home, in Schaerbeek. A neighborhood in the city where in the end we were pretty lucky, all things considered. A two-room hidden in the back of an alley, with a front staircase and a courtyard about five hundred meters square, paved haphazardly. A permanent obstacle course, in which you could crash against rocky projections or slip and fall after just three drops of rain. An incredible playground, as well. For my four brothers. There, they could let off all their steam. I never left my tower of books. My father topped it off every night when he came home from work. I was fascinated by the size of the works, their pictures, their colored drawings. I adored the sensation of running my hands across them, eyes closed. And I learned to read with them, before ever starting school. My brothers, who already knew how to read, sometimes took the time to teach me a word or two. I interpreted the other sounds all on my own. My father also learned to read this way. He liked the magazine *Modes et Travaux* in particular, for which the target audience was clearly printed: the fashionable Parisian housewife. My father would get lost for hours in the fashion advice, home décor,

cooking and beauty tips. He lingered on the pages dedicated to couture, particularly the knitwear. Sometimes he would chat briefly with my mother about it. Nothing more.

I never felt that his reading impacted his life in any real way. He lived like every other immigrant worker at the time. But we had reading in common without ever exchanging two words on the subject. He wasn't interested in what I read. I didn't understand how he could find interest in what he read, either. My nascent scholarly cultivation was already developing in me an unconscious yet very real classism. Which stains me still today and of which I am soundly ashamed.

In short, from a very young age, I devoured books like others did pasta. To turn certain intoxicating desires into reality. The quest for another life, basically. Which always distinguished me from my brothers, who were struck early on by the need to contribute to the welfare of the family. Indeed, my father died a few days before my seventh birthday, crushed by a pallet of books. A fate which I did not hold against the books. Just against pallets. And yet.

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When it comes to death, my mother has a particularity all her own—even if it happens to be shared by all the disconsolate hypochondriacs on this earth, clinical nosophobes and the lifelong invalid. She has already died many times The first time, I must have been eight or nine years old. She came home from her thousandth doctor's appointment. I was hungrily reading an adventure comic, buried up to my ears in the sofa. Completely sucked into the action, the characters' costumes, and the quest of the moment. If I noticed my mother pushing open the door to the house, it was from a great distance. But I did, on the other hand, quite clearly hear her collapse into a chair. I looked up. Her right hand lifelessly let her handbag slide to the floor. She cast her head back and burst into sobs. Suddenly aware of a tragedy unfolding I threw myself at her feet. She gave me a desperate look, and cried: "I'm dying!" before taking me in her arms and breaking down once more in tears.

My mother didn't die that day, or in the months that followed. And in time I got used to her melodrama, to the production of her imminent death, which she endured with the utmost sincerity, usually not understanding a word of what the doctors told her on the state of her health. And I never saw her without her bag of pills, which she tried her hardest to take conscientiously at the intervals prescribed by her medical team. They certainly must have been having the intended effect, because as I write these lines, I'm now fifty-four years old and she . . . ninety-three.

Have no doubt. Still today, her imminent death is frequently announced. No longer by her, but by the doctors. Contritely, they explain to me that the thing they've just diagnosed my mother with will ultimately kill her. They could operate—without much hope—to prolong her life a little bit. But considering her age and the state of her heart . . . they won't operate on her. It would kill her. She who has already died so many times. Great irony of life . . . In any case, she only has hours, at best days, left to live. Hearing the decisive conclusions of the specialists, our family doctor raises his eyes to the sky and makes a face at me. "I don't know what to tell you anymore. I've announced her death so many times over the past twenty years . . . I think she'll bury us all."

I don't know what a medical professor told my mother at her appointment the day she declared her impending death to me . . . forty-six or forty-seven years ago. My mother never fully understood the French language. So when a doctor, government worker, social security rep, or schoolteacher asked her a question, she always answered "yes," every time, with no further concern as to the consequences of her response. This caused us problems with the entire world: the police, the tax bureau, social services, the bank, the hospitals and every single administration office. How many times did my brothers and I insist she not respond in the affirmative to a question she hadn't fully understood? How many times did we beg her not to go to an appointment without one of us there . . . ?

She always gave us so much, but never dared ask us for anything. Because sacrifice is her only course of action. And service toward others her second nature. When she immigrated in the mid-50s, neither her papers nor my father's were entirely in order, which undoubtedly contributed to the forging of this character. I always saw her bow her head in respect before men and women in hats, with aristocratic names, with nice cars, with any car at all, even those in social housing. Because for us, all seven of whom lived in two rooms with no hot water or WC, a renter in the rabbit hutches of social housing was already a bourgeois and should be respected and greeted like one. And the little shopkeeper on the corner a parvenu whose social status seemed unattainable to us.

My mother's less-than-approximate grasp of the French language added to her feelings of being less-than-nothing. The simple act of anyone sparing a word for her was already an honor in her eyes. She learned the language of Moliere in jolts and humiliations. Her foulmouthed bosses of course openly

overworked the little “Arab” with, at the time, no visa. In forty years of working relentlessly in the homes of unscrupulous employers, from floor to ceiling my mother probably polished the circumference of the Earth several times over. A modern slavery that was amplified by my father’s death but which allowed her five sons to survive, and even thrive. Until the very recent past, my mother never spoke to us about the suffering she has endured.

Humility and the fear of being a nuisance were my mother’s two spiritual guides. Never, for no earthly treasure, would she have dared ask anyone for their time or attention. She always tried to find her way out of any situation on her own, because, she’d say, “I don’t want to be a bother.” But I think that deep down she also had another fear, less visible, less utterable, but just as profound: showing vulnerability. Because for my mother, asking for help was to confess her limits, her fragility. One day, when I expressed my amazement at how quickly she had memorized all the bus and metro lines in the city where she had just found new clients for her housecleaning, she told me, eyes on the floor and hands working her woolen blanket, about an incident that remained engraved in hot iron in her memory. It was a winter morning, before I was even born. Like every morning, she had left the house very early, leaving the teapot on the stove for my father and my big brothers, and warm bread on the table, to go out into a society where she cleaned houses. Upset by a fight with my father the night before, she took the wrong bus and found herself in an unknown neighborhood on the outskirts of town. Lost and worried about being late, she had stopped a man, bundled up in his coat and walking quickly, to ask for directions to her work. Upon hearing my mother’s accent and the way she struggled with her syntax, the man turned . . . to lecture her in no uncertain terms. He told her that at her age it was time to learn to read and find her own way like a grown-up. “I didn’t understand everything he said, but his tone of voice and the meanness in his eyes were worse than what he said, anyway,” my mother breathed to me in a long sigh, recalling this memory. And that day she had sworn to herself that she would never ask anyone for anything ever again, and that wherever she went, she would learn to handle things on her own. I gently explained that my brothers and I weren’t “anyone.” She just smiled, bringing a hand to her heart. She had given us so much, but had never dared to ask us for anything.

My mother learned a vague sort of French by doggedly repeating syllables—for which she understood neither the meaning nor the rules of construction—that she decoded in the magazines her bosses threw away, and that she fetched out of the trash in secret, as if they were a glorious treasure. Surprisingly, she hadn’t shown the slightest interest in reading when my father was still alive and unloading kilos of written works on us that he saved from the pulping plant. And after he died, the magazines saved from the trash heap by my mother became the only new material available to me.

Soon, my brothers and I started taking turns helping her make sense of what she was reading. And of course we openly made fun of her improbable accent, which betrayed her foreign upbringing—but even we couldn’t determine its origins simply by ear. Our desire to help our mother learn to read never overtook us enough to pursue it seriously, and so my mother made hardly any progress. We were content to teach her the few words that really interested us, like the ones that would permit her to recognize confections, cakes, and other sweet things we would stuff ourselves with, or the name for the packs of Panini soccer cards, for which we would have sold both our parents.

But still it wasn’t her illiteracy that embarrassed us the most about my mother—there were few opportunities for this to come to light in our everyday life. It was her strong accent, for which any and all correction seemed permanently impossible. And the way she constructed her phrases out loud, which revealed foreign origins and an irreparable rurality. We knew that my mother and father were Moroccan, originally from Zagora. My mother had often recalled the shame she felt at expressing herself in Berber with the city men who only spoke Arabic, and who pinched their noses at that brat in rags who slept in

the stable with her sheep in the winter. She recalled, too, her status of village idiot, awarded her by her playmates, who made her pay cruelly for her innocent, unflinching kindness.

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In the 70s, after twenty years of working, my mother was able to buy us a television. And so, in our conversations, in the middle of a sentence that would be an awkward mix of Berber, French, and Arabic, we wouldn't be surprised to hear a sudden "quite right, darling," or an "oh, but I insist, after you," which she sometimes used correctly but quite often misused, invariably provoking peals of laughter from us. She would feign vexation for a few moments before brimming with happiness at the sight of our delighted faces and bursting out laughing in turn.

My mother has always been captivated by variety shows. I wonder sometimes if she wasn't the one to invent karaoke. Indeed, every Saturday evening she would sing along with the day's top stars, melodies for which we had scribbled down and repeated the lyrics to her over the course of days. These were the only times we felt that she was truly happy, transfigured. Sheltered inside some magical parenthesis, far from everyday worries and obligations. At times like these, she was totally committed to her singing, to that moment of recreation, which she worked so hard to attain. We all knew it. And none of us would have dared destroy those magical moments when she seemed to live within the balance of some eternal bliss. Time felt suspended, and she forgot all the things that had shaped her internal suffering: as village idiot, as foolish little immigrant, then as widow raising her five boys alone.

As she concentrated on her performance, for just a few minutes she became Sheila, Adamo, Joe Dassin . . . Dalida. She knew nearly all of the songs by Caire . . . I will never forget my mother's face as she sang "Helwa Ya Baladi," that song about exile, a loving ode to a country to which one aspires always to return, to rediscover the light of the past and memories of early loves. My mother liked that song very much. She would close her eyes, tilt her head to the side, sway to the rhythm of the quiet melody, and I felt her transported, seeking images, colors, and smells from the village where she was born. She became such a part of that song that we would fall away, apart from her, apart from the moment and apart from ourselves. Until my mother once again opened her eyes and came back to us.

Our viewing of the Saturday variety shows actually began the Sunday morning prior. My brother Nourredine was in charge of buying the TV guide. Yliès studied the names of the songs that would be performed the following weekend. Slimane did the rounds of our friends to gather up magazines featuring musical artists, in which you could find lyrics for their current hits. He then copied them down in a special notebook, which we carefully looked after. My mother's sacrosanct musical encyclopedia, which she thumbed through regularly to hum a few songs. Since she couldn't read the lyrics or the titles, we would glue on a photo of the singer, along with some element from the song that would help her identify it. Her memory and a handful of words she could decipher did the rest. A picture of my brother Nourredine in front of a cake with eighteen candles in it symbolized "He Just Turned Eighteen," by Dalida. A picture of a doll meant "Wax doll, Rag doll" by France Gall. A telephone helped her understand that she was looking at "Tears on the Telephone," by Claude François. One time I got in trouble when, to indicate "Your Hands on My Hips" by Adamo, I thought it fitting to cut out part of a picture whose erotic element completely escaped me, but which my mother immediately identified as being neither appropriate for my age nor for our values. A detail which did not prevent me from singing the song without restraint.

Farid was put in charge of borrowing, for a few hours at a time, the maxi-singles that would wear down prematurely in our portable record player, and Nourredine, Yliès, and I were responsible for repeated the titles to my mother and at the same time explaining to her what the songs meant that she would be singing in front of the TV on Saturday night.

She was serious about not singing just any old nonsense. She demonstrated a preference for only belting out those songs that seemed appropriate in a moral sense, and which she felt embodied a high caliber of artistic – or, moreover, philosophical – skill. Her tastes coincided rarely with those of her five sons in this, but we would always respect the choices of our family opera singer. My friends often made fun of me, laughing at my “old fashionedness,” but if I knew so well the musical repertoire of those years, it’s due to – or thanks to – my mother.

I also discovered her openmindedness through song. Indeed, sometimes she would allow herself an unsolicited comment on the meaning behind certain lyrics that went over our heads. So, when Charles Aznavour’s “What Makes a Man” was played on the radio for the first time in 1972, she said simply: “Allah made every person as they are. If any of you turn out to be homosexual, I’ll love you just the same.” I was only six years old and I didn’t understand the weight of this opinion. But I could tell that my brothers didn’t see it in the same way. Even today, I feel that my mother was more modern in her approach to life than my four brothers together ever have been. If the meaning of “What Makes a Man” was over my head, when she sang “La mamma,” by the same artist, I would hide straightaway under the table. So she couldn’t see the tears I failed to stifle, streaming down my face. That song has always been taboo for me. The mere mention of it reminds me of the deep distress it caused me, in contrast to the scenes from Moliere’s *The Imaginary Invalid* that my mother played out for us regularly and which I had no real trust in. I had no desire to bear witness to the tragic circumstances of that family from South Italy or the parents who at any rate might never have left Zagora, in my home. No more than I do now, when I hear her struggling to breathe or when envisioning life without her seems inevitable, but still completely unimaginable, revolting, excruciating. And, to be completely honest, insurmountable.

Of all the variety shows that my mother watched so enthusiastically, her favorites were undoubtedly those that gave Sacha Distel the headlining slot. After my father died, she had hung pictures of him all over the house; I think she was secretly in love with the singer. In fact Sacha Distel probably taught her more French than anyone else. She never missed one of his television appearances. I feel like his biggest hit, a French cover of “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head,” had been written for her. I also believe that my mother performed it on every stage in the world: her kitchen, her kitchen, and her kitchen.

One day, I and my brothers gave her an enormous surprise. It was May 27, 1977. The exact day my mother turned fifty years old. By an extraordinary coincidence, Sacha Distel was appearing that very day at L’Ancienne Belgique, a storied concert hall on the Boulevard Anspach, in the center of Brussels. My brothers combined forces to pay for her ticket and mine. In the front row. I was only eleven at the time. My mother suspected nothing about the gift, since she didn’t discover where we were going until we were right in front of the building.

I’ve never seen my mother so happy. Radiant. Glowing. No adjective could do her justice. And I’ve never seen her so free. She sang along to every song at the top of her lungs, with her Moroccan accent. Certainly encouraged by the hundreds of other energized women in the audience singing in unison.

I remember the incredible moment when Sacha—who in the end had probably heard my mother and her untraceable accent amid the crowd—descended the stairs that separated him from the public, all while continuing to sing. He took my mother by the hand, brought her onto the stage with him and together they improvised, both with tearful voices, “La vieille dame,” one of my mother’s favorite songs. The room, probably moved by the singer’s generosity and my mother’s earnest innocence, didn’t laugh at her accent, like my brothers and I did, but cheered to bring down the house. An unforgettable triumph that Mom would never agree to talk about with anyone. She kept it deep down inside her;

bringing it up outside of the family circle, as if she were boasting about it, would have undoubtedly seemed sacrilegious to her. I, on the other hand, recounted the event at great length to my brothers, to all our cousins from Morocco, to my school friends and the entire neighborhood. A story I exaggerated a bit more every time I told it, as if it were one of Sinbad the Sailor's many voyages. But it's true that I very carefully avoided revealing anything if my mother was around, so as not to desecrate the memory.

When other people asked her to tell them the story of that unbelievable moment, she would dissemble to minimize the encounter. She allowed me to brandish theatrically the article in the paper *Le Soir* that gave this report of the concert: "[. . .] the wild and moving moment when a citizen of Brussels sporting a delectable Eastern accent joined the artist, cheered on by a crowd completely won over by this improvised duo." Even today, whenever I sense that she's lost a bit of morale, I hum the first few bars of "La vieille dame," and her face brightens. She hums along, and our tears and laughter inevitably combine to punctuate our return to that day, long past but so deeply bound up in pleasant memories that it's anchored within her, within those lyrics that she can still murmur with the slightest movement of her lips.

I think my mother never realized she had an accent, and never quite understood why she made us laugh so much when she spoke or sang. If she had known, considering how modest she was, I think she never would have dared open her mouth again in her life.