*The Impossible Return* by Nathalie Hadj (Mercure de France, 2023)

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**PART ONE: Departures**

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He’s lying there on his bed, arms crossed on his chest, eyes vacant but intense, filled with emotions that he suppresses under his drooping eyelids. His lips look sealed, they don’t even open to exhale. The smiles that so often stretched across this fleshy mouth have left two lines on his otherwise unwrinkled face, like knife marks dug into his hollow cheeks. From time to time, his eyes wander around the room, the moldings on the ceiling, the muted television, the chair where his things have been placed, and then return to the window that offers him a little corner of sky.

My father is silence, a distant, thick silence, the awkward silence of someone who fears words and holds them back like food that is chewed with difficulty and cannot be swallowed. A long time ago he decided to say nothing, to fade into the background, so discreet you can barely notice his presence. He is forgotten and this doesn’t bother him. He never blames anyone for anything, as if his slipping away into transparency were only to be expected.

For his entire life he never wanted to go to the doctor, and now he seems almost pleased to be hospitalized. He thinks the room is like a hotel room and the nurses are very nice. Thomas and I didn’t tell him this, but since we wanted to make sure he would be treated properly, without being judged for his dark skin, his kinky hair, his two gold teeth—his Arab appearance, basically—we have put him in a private clinic. Here, they are required to smile at him, to act interested. Most importantly, visiting hours are not restricted—I can be at his side all day long, even if we hardly speak. He knows I’m here and I can sense that this does him good. That’s all that matters.

He doesn’t seem to be in pain. He accepts, without even flinching, all the IVs, blood tests, injections, and examinations the doctors order. Though he is so frail, so thin and fragile, and hobbles when he moves, he suddenly seems endowed with a steel skeleton and incredible strength. In an instant, he has become once more the hero he was to me when I was a little girl, especially when the needles sink into his flesh and he silently raises his sphinx-like profile as the metal penetrates his trembling vein. And because he doesn’t seem to suffer, I tell myself it’s nothing serious, he’ll pull through. However, the first test results seem to indicate the opposite. He has low blood pressure, although for years he has been treated for high blood pressure. He’s very anemic, his kidneys are barely functioning, and his liver is enlarged. I catch the doctor frowning as he looks at the lung X-ray.

“Has your father had pneumonia frequently?” he asks me.

“*Frequently*? I don’t remember him having it a single time.”

“Did he have tuberculosis?”

“No, not that I know of.”

He doesn’t seem to believe me and drops his gaze, which holds resignation tinged with pity. He must be wondering what family history is hidden behind my ignorance. If he decided to actually ask me this question, I would answer that I don’t know anything about my father except what I have witnessed myself. Nothing about his life before, his childhood in Kabylia, his youth in Paris, his family history, his love life. As far as illnesses go, that’s a category I have never had access to. In any case, I never saw him sick. Never stuck in bed with the flu, no fever, not a single sick day in forty years of work. Like a butterfly collector, I’ve had to catch bits of conversation in flight to reconstruct my father’s past. With these scraps, I’ve put together a patchwork of his life, but there are pieces missing, and I’ve realized only now, talking to this doctor, that my father is like a book whose first pages have been ripped out and, in order to understand him, I’ve had to imagine what I haven’t been told.

The doctor continues his diagnosis. There seems to be internal bleeding but they don’t know why. He is so weak that they’ll have to wait for the blood transfusions to take effect before running more tests. My father seems so calm, so serene, that it’s hard for me to believe that inside him everything is out of whack.

“Does your father drink?”

“No, not for years.”

Once again, I can tell that the doctor’s shifty gaze and the paper rustling in his hands conceal comments I can easily guess, like, “You poor thing, do you really have no idea what’s going on? Are you pretending or is it just too hard for you to face the truth?” Sure, I’ve always buried my head in the sand; when you get down to it, this is practically the only way to survive in this family. Look away, don’t put words to what’s wrong—it’s a strategy I learned very early to keep pain at bay. Anyway, I’m the only one who has always defended my father when my mother and my brother complained about his drinking. To me, he didn’t drink more than anyone else. He went to the café every night after work, like all the men in our neighborhood. He paid Jeanine for a round and came back for dinner, with *France Soir* under his arm and a baguette that he’d put down on the table. When he got home, he was cheerful, smiling, hugging my brother and me and joking around, seemingly oblivious to my mother bustling behind him and complaining about how late it was and how he spent too much money on drinks for the good-for-nothings in our neighborhood.

It’s strange: all his life he hid his tattoos under long-sleeved shirts that he didn’t take off even at the beach, but here he no longer has that modesty. I see once more, after so many years, this blue-inked rose on his forearm, which seems to be fading away just like him, and a symbol I assume to be Kabylian that has four lines, like the ends of a cross, and a date, 1956, which I imagine must be when he came to France, during the Algerian War. But it could be something else, because I don’t even know what the marks on his body mean, and this ignorance is all the more painful because it makes me face a cruel fact: I barely know the man whom I love most in the world.

“You see, Papa, the doctor says that alcohol has hurt your liver.”

“He’s full of it, like all doctors. I haven’t had a drop for years, and, anyway, I never drank on the job, never in my life.”

When my father wants to be categorical and convincing, he accompanies his words with an energetic gesture, a sweeping *no* that he makes in the air with his arm, his index finger pointed toward the sky like the invisible baton of an orchestra conductor.

“You know, at Harmis, if I had messed up cutting the fabric even one time, they would have sent me packing. Never in my life did I drink on the job. That’s just more bullshit from your mother.”

“But, Papa, this doesn’t have anything to do with Maman, it’s the doctor saying it.”

“Well, he’s full of it like your mother!”

*1956*

Karim was seated on the deck of the ship. Huddled on the damp wood with his head wedged between his knees. He closed his eyes, not to cry—men don’t cry—but just to hold on to the last images of his family, keeping them in his mind with the clarity that recent memory would still allow. He wanted to hold them like an imprint on his memory because he knew that time would act like a sponge and their faces would end up diluted like a watercolor in the rain. He saw once more his mother’s sharp face, her delicate, luminous skin of the very palest olive, with Berber tattoos on her forehead and chin, and he already regretted trying to act like a man and not letting himself cry like the child he was and nestling in her arms.

Karim was starting to fear the vastness of this ocean surrounding him and the noise of the waves hitting the black hull of the *Ville d’Alger* that was taking him to Marseille, but if there was one thing that tied his stomach in knots and shut his diaphragm, practically suffocating him, it was his inability to imagine what was waiting for him on the other side of the Mediterranean.

It had all happened very fast. Only the day before, his view of the world was so narrow that it was limited to his village, perched in the mountains of the wilaya of Tizi Ouzou. Beyond that, a void. And then suddenly he found himself here, propelled on this boat, without any notice, in the middle of this hostile sea, his only weapon against an uncertain future his language, French, which he was so proud to speak without any accent and to write flawlessly. He had nothing but that to survive, except for the address of an uncle in Paris, scribbled on a scrap of paper.

A few days before, at dawn, he had roamed the tiny streets of his village, occasionally pressing his back against the walls of ocher stone to catch his breath and constantly making sure that he wasn’t being followed. Alone, in this dying darkness, he could feel nothing but the silence that had just crushed the noises coming from the houses all night long. The initial howls of pain had turned into wails and then into moans before completely disappearing. This lack of sound held a suspicious tranquility, the serenity that is attained only when death has arrived in every home.

When Karim reached the fountain, Hocine was already there, impatient, a bundle of clothes on the ground in front of him, nervously using a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his forehead and the back of his neck. His agitated eyes continually scanned the surrounding mountains.

“It’s about time! Where were you? We have to leave, they’ll be back any second and this time nobody’ll be spared. Where’s your stuff? You didn’t bring anything? Okay, it doesn’t matter, come on, we gotta go, hurry up!”

Karim didn’t dare take another step, or even lift his head to look at his friend. His eyes riveted to the ground, he didn’t know what to do with his hands—he put them in his pockets and took them out again and tried three times to light the cigarette that was dancing between his fingers. Finally, he put it to his lips and inhaled anxiously, hoping that his exhaled smoke would express the words he couldn’t bring himself to say. This was Hocine, his oldest friend, his playmate, who had been there for all the first times—their first cigarette behind the shrubbery, the first time they got plastered, and the secrets they shared after each spent the night with a woman for the first time. Not a single experience without him.

Hocine stood there facing him, his green eyes focused on the countryside where he planned on hiding until he could meet up with the fellagha rebels and join them in the revolution, as he liked to name this nameless war. For months already Hocine had been talking of nothing but Messali Hadj and his promise to liberate the country from the French. This had become his only topic of conversation. In the fields where he took his goats, Hocine would describe to Karim in detail the imaginary battle for the liberation of their village. He would act out the gunfire, spraying saliva as he imitated the noise of the bullets. Sometimes he would launch into an intimidating speech to an imaginary French soldier, adopting a serious, commanding tone, but the scene would always end in bursts of laughter because it was so unlikely that he would ever be able to keep it up for more than five minutes. To him war was just a game he wanted to play, a rite of initiation that would make him a man, like a game of cops and robbers. He wanted to take his place in the struggle that was happening in the region in order to finally exist. Hocine thought that young people like them would be more useful to the revolution off in the mountains than working the land of the colonists. But Karim didn’t intend to fight for a country where he no longer wanted to live. Of course, he wanted it to be free from subjugation, from this fake identity that had no meaning, but most of all he wanted to be free himself, free to choose his life, and his choice had been made—he wanted France. Instead of fighting, he wanted to leave, especially so he could avoid an arranged marriage with a cousin—an unmentionable, unheroic motivation at a time of war.

“I’m not leaving with you, Hocine, I’m sorry,” Karim finally said with his head down. “I can’t. They’ll end up killing us and I don’t want to die. I want to live, I want to have a good life somewhere else—we have no future here. They’ve filled your head with the desire for independence, but open your eyes, Hocine, the French will never leave. They’ve been here for generations, they call themselves French but they don’t know France any more than we do. They won’t ever go away because to them this land is as much theirs as ours.”

“You want to live, Karim? Is that it? You want to live? Then come with me or you’ll end up like Abdel yesterday—you have no choice. You saw the same thing I did, you heard him scream when they tortured him in front of his kids in the courtyard of his house. They shot him down like a dog. They’ll kill us one by one, day after day. We can never live together again, it’s too late. Hey, look, here they are again. It will never end.”

A trail of dust was still descending the mountains, the kind airplanes trace in the sky, after the paratroopers sped down in their jeeps. They were announcing new reprisals, banging on doors with rifle butts and making the villagers come out and gather on the square to wait for the day’s event—a threat, an arrest, or perhaps an execution.

Now the soldiers arranged themselves facing the crowd, pointing their guns randomly at a grandfather, a man, a woman, a child. Anyone would do. A few villagers looked toward the mountain, awaiting an attack by the fellagha or simply unable to bear the anxiety-filled eyes of the soldiers across from them, who felt death lurking and were just as afraid of it. The soldiers kept shifting their weapons in their hands; liquor enabled them to endure this war but made their rifles unsteady. The fear of dying was as palpable as the fear of killing.

The commanding officer put an end to the suspense by announcing that the act of burning down the paratroopers’ camp in the neighboring village would not go unpunished. He strolled over to Hocine, stood in front of him, and asked why he had a bundle with him. Hocine didn’t answer but he immediately carried out the order he was given to pick up the shovel tossed on the ground and start digging. Once he was done, Hocine, exhausted, leaned on the shovel to stay upright and asked:

“And now what should I do?”

“Now?” the officer replied. “Now you die because you’ve just dug your grave.”

And he emptied the magazine of his rifle at Hocine who fell on his back, covering his bundle with blood.