Excerpt from

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Translated by Jennifer Jenson,
Recipient of the 2021 Gutekunst Prize of the Friends of Goethe New York

2. Marie

It was my country, my land. I knew every corner of the fields, the hidden paths, the meadows covered with poppies in the spring. I knew when water flowed through the *oued* and when it was just dry sand. I knew every olive tree, oleander shrub, and bird's nest. I always knew which cactus had ripe fruit and which cat had just had a litter, and I took care of the kittens and the baby birds and the jasmine blossoms, because it was all going to belong to me. That was what your grandfather told me. It was a warm summer evening after a blistering hot day and the sun was just setting. We stood on the terrace in front of our house and looked over the wheat-filled hills. I stood with him, matching his wide stance, wanting to measure up. I can still remember it perfectly: "All of this will belong to you one day, *ma petite chérie,*" he told me, stroking my head, "this will all belong to you."

Ah, my Lisa, I'm not sure—what do you want to know? It's a long story, after all. A long story. I had a wild life in Tunisia, *ma petite chérie*. I roamed the fields alone, free from any watchful eye, and I spent most evenings with the Arabs: with Ulima's family. Ulima was our nanny, our *nounou*. She spent the days with us; I was very fond of her. She would wrap me in a bedsheet and then pull on one end, spinning me quickly so that I tumbled out onto the bed. I found it very amusing; we played it often before my sister Solange was born. Most evenings she and her family ate with us, as Mamie insisted on cooking the most magnificent dishes: *poulet au citron*, roast veal, lamb cutlets, *cassoulet*, and of course her famous couscous. My father would ring the bell and then the workers would come in from the fields, clean themselves up, and sit down at the table with us. They enjoyed eating with us, my *nounou*, her husband Suleiman, and their three children. I never played with the two boys, but I loved Aisha, their oldest daughter. Aisha was my own age; we grew up like sisters. By age three we were fighting over who got to play with the kittens. I admired her glossy, dark black curls. My hair was also black, but straight and boring, and while Mamie always cut my hair short in Tunis,

Aisha's hair tumbled down her back, the curls often falling into her face as her almond eyes glared out at me. On the Fridays my *nounou* didn't come to dinner, I would go to their small house at the end of the chili field (my father grew chilis along with the wheat). I would run down the hill and then the small path along the wheatfield—not the boring, wide lane our car always took, but the narrow path that went along the neighbor's olive trees—and I'd start to sprint: olives to my right, chili peppers to my left, and the red earth below me so wonderfully firm that I believed I could feel myself dancing on the globe as it spun. Sometimes I stopped, picked a ripe pepper, and brought it to Aisha, knowing full well that she would make me take a bite of it. And of course I would bite it—I had to prove to her that I was a real Tunisian, like her—and then the heat would burn my tongue and my throat. I never asked for bread or water to cool it, though, never. I showed her I was one of them.

We usually ate couscous at Ulima's. Although I would never say it out loud, it tasted almost better than Mamie's, because we ate with our hands and tasted with our fingers. I would stuff the sauce-drenched couscous in my mouth, take a bite of the merguez sausage, and then lick the red, greasy sauce from my fingers while smiling at Aisha, whose mouth was also completely red. Aisha would teach me some Arabic, most of which I've forgotten. *Khobz* is the word for bread—see, I still know that. I was always jealous of how Aisha and Ulima would move fluidly between French and Arabic. In the middle of a sentence they would suddenly switch languages and I would no longer understand until they—equally suddenly—would speak French again. Aisha felt sorry for me. You couldn't go through life only speaking French—that would be sad, she told me, so we would sit on our two stones under the lemon tree that Mamie had planted in the courtyard and study. The lemon leaves smelled so good when you rubbed them between your fingers; some words still carried their sweet scent into my nose long afterward. I even knew a couple of sentences, you see, but I've forgotten it all. My, that was all so long ago.

Mamie liked that I spent so much time with my *nounou* and Aisha, "with the Arabs," as she put it. That was just fine with her, so long as I was out of the house. She did

sometimes think I was a bit filthy when I would come home, red sauce on my fingers and feet covered in dirt; “Were you with the Arabs again, you dirty little mudlark,” she would say, and then send me off to take a bath.

You know, I think Mamie cursed life for saddling her with a daughter, just when she had finally freed herself from her first husband and two sons. Not that her first husband, who she lived with before your grandfather, wasn’t decent—he was. At least, she never told stories of him beating her or anything like that, and she would never have kept it a secret if he had mistreated her. We would have heard about it, over and over again. No, he must have been a decent man, but she was still unhappy with him. It must have been the boredom. Her first farm was in the middle of nowhere in southern Tunisia, almost on the Algerian border. I never showed you the area, *ma chérie*, it’s a dismal region. No mountains, no green—even the ocean is far away, and everything is dry and dusty and somehow beige. Visitors never came, Mamie was never invited to dinner, and the closest movie theater was an hour’s drive away. Of course, she had improved her social standing, just as she had wanted to ever since she was a little girl; her father was a postman and now she was part of a small farm. But she was simply too lonely in the desert. She had two sons there, as you know, your Uncle Antoine and your Uncle Maurice, and they spent their days out in the fields. They also had a nanny that took care of them. Mamie spent her days depressed in bed. She faded with boredom in her beige life, until my father—your grandfather—came. Claude.

Claude was a friend of the family. He wanted to take care of the equipment around the farm, because, as you know, your grandfather always had a hand for automobiles, tractors, and machines. He could fix anything. He learned that in agricultural college, and so his father would send him out occasionally. Mamie fell in love immediately. He was attractive, your grandfather. You’ve seen the photos, with his pitch-black hair combed elegantly backwards, his strong chin and prominent cheekbones. His delicate face appeared perhaps a bit feminine, but not at all weak. His clothing was elegant and he had enjoyed a good education in Tunis; when he first laid eyes on Mamie, he was awestruck. Claude’s visit lasted two weeks, and then he wanted to return to his parents’

farm near Zaghouan, not too far from Tunis. When Mamie kissed him on the last evening, he kissed her tenderly in return. “Cautiously,” she would always say. He left the decision to her. “I want to go with you,” she said, and he smiled, heaved her suitcase in his car, and took her with him. And that’s how Mamie left her first husband. She told me that Antoine and Maurice weren’t at all sad as she bid them farewell. If you ask me, I can imagine how my brothers silently and emotionlessly stared at her, but I am sure in their beds at night they cried their eyes out. Mamie quickly taught us not to reveal our sadness. She was always angry when we cried, so we hid it.

A few months of happiness awaited Mamie in the country in Zaghouan. The small house that Claude received from his father was humble—not like *Bou da*! *Mondieu, Bou da*, my grandparents’ magnificent estate, was quite the villa. On the street to Depienne, painted entirely white and crowned with a belltower, the villa shone over the fields for miles around. The window shutters and the door were as blue as the sky above. A few stairs led to the entryway, which opened into a large drawing room, a chandelier hanging from its high ceiling. The house had two kitchens, both of which were needed to serve ten workers and a large family. There were two baths and at least six bedrooms, each of which had a small fireplace. When you climbed the stairs all the way to the roof, you could see over the fields all the way to our small hill. On the other side, you could even see as far as the mountains of Zaghouan, which shimmered with heat in the summer and were caressed by clouds in the winter. When my grandfather rang the large bell from *Bou da*, the sound carried all the way to Depienne.

The house that Claude’s parents gave him and Mamie was called *Mezreg*. It wasn’t half as large as *Bou da*. There were precisely two tiny bedrooms, a small kitchen, and a drawing room. When Mamie moved in, though, she felt like she had made it. She now belonged to the Bellanger family, and the family enjoyed a considerable reputation in Tunis. That Claude’s parents rejected her from the start as new money was irrelevant to her. She had gotten want she wanted: a bit of prestige, access to the good circles of French society, and a husband that she not only adored but who also left her her freedom.

My father spent the days in the field or office and the evenings in the garage, where he tinkered with automobiles and tractors. He loved engineering, this enormous potential in his hands. That's how he saw machines: enhanced manpower "that brought us a bit closer to the gods," as he would say. One day he bought himself a camera, a rarity that only a few could afford in those days. He bought it for himself and began to record the plowing of the fields. He filmed close-ups, from every side, as the iron plow tore up the lush earth, as the former burrowed itself into the latter, as the plow and earth played with each other: a game of love for the elements. He had an almost pornographic view of the landscape, your grandfather. He imagined impregnating the ripe Tunisian earth like the body of his wife. And he loved that with technology he could even climb into the air. He didn't want to conquer the sky—it wasn't about power, I believe. He simply loved to take off, to distance himself from the earth that held him at bay, that kept him bound; and he loved to feel the strength of the motor vibrating beneath him.

On the weekends he would drive to the airport and fly over our estate. He looked good in his aviator hat, and Mamie fell in love with him again each time she accompanied him to the airport. But she never joined him in the plane, never. Your grandmother preferred to stand with both legs firmly on the ground. She read her books until Papa returned from the sky.

It was a happy life, Mamie would always tell me, until she awoke one morning with awful feeling in her stomach. Everything in her contracted tightly. She held her hand in front of her mouth, jumped out of bed, and ran to the toilet. She vomited, violently. With shaky legs she teetered back to bed and pulled the covers over her nose. She knew immediately what that meant. The nausea persisted and her period simply wouldn't come. Under no circumstances did Mamie want to be pregnant. She hated her belly for growing ever slowly larger. In the evenings she would angrily drum it with her fists. What can I say—even then she had her fun hitting me.

But I also have to say that I understand her a bit, Lisa, really, I understand her. She was afraid. She wanted to finally enjoy life, alone, without any more children. She wanted to lead a life that centered around herself, and she had a right to that, didn't she?

Contraception wasn't as easy back then as it is today, you know. The feeling of her body being overtaken by a foreign power must have been overwhelming. Mamie felt conquered by the strange being in her abdomen that settled itself there against her will. She wanted to be alone in her body, to have control over it. She wanted to have her peace and to enjoy her quaint life with your grandfather, and on no account did she want to share him with some unwelcome creature that would destroy her quiet life with screams and shrieks. She cursed my father's seed and she cursed her own fertility.