

Moshe SAKAL
from Yolanda

Prologue

When I was nineteen, I added something new to my weekly routine: every Friday at noon, I went to visit Yolanda.

I was in the army then, stationed in the Kirya in Tel Aviv, and her house wasn't too far from there, an old corner building on Graetz Street with light blue shutters rising almost to the first-floor ceiling, their slats lined with brown masking tape - a vestige of the Gulf War and a defense against the drafts blowing in from the sea.

Every time I reached her house, I'd whistle our family whistle from outside, Yolanda's high-pitched voice would respond from within: "*Qui est-ce?*" and I would answer, "Me." Then I'd take the key out of my pocket, climb three steps in the dark stairwell and enter her apartment.

Yolanda lived in a one-and-a-half room apartment built in the early 1950s. You entered, crossed the living room and walked down the hallway past the cabinet adorned with pictures of all her children and grandchildren and reached the bedroom. There, on a mattress covered with three layers of pastel-colored linens that lay on the bedstead made of cream-colored wood, Yolanda would be perched on two pillows, wearing a white summer nightgown with a blouse thrown across her shoulders to shield them from the drafts that might somehow get through the bars, closed windows and balcony door.

After kissing both her cheeks, I'd sit down gingerly on the small armchair for guests that stood next to her dressing table. On the table were boxes containing combs, hair rollers, small mirrors and old postcards. Makeup was stored in a red, heart-shaped tin box. Behind all the boxes rose a tall, triptych mirror. From the time I was a child, I was the only one of her grandchildren permitted to sit on the chair in front of the dressing table mirror. First I would look straight ahead, then I'd shift my eyes to the side, examine my right profile, then my left, glance at my doubled reflection on both sides and then bend my head to play with the boxes on the table until Yolanda rebuked me. In the end, she would lose patience and ask me to get up from the chair. Then she would climb out of bed and sit down at the dressing table, draw herself a pair of skinny eyebrows with a brown pencil, paint her lips with shiny red lipstick, stick rollers in her hair, turn her head towards me and smile.

Every Friday at exactly two in the afternoon, the phone would ring. I'd hand it to Yolanda and she'd pick up the receiver and say, "*Bonjour, Odette.*" She'd have a brief conversation with her sister, Aunt Odette, and give her my regards. The minute she hung up the phone would ring again and Yolanda would pick up the receiver and say, "*Bonjour, Louisette,*" then talk to her sister Louisette. Then Aunt Louisette would hand the receiver to her twin sister, Aunt Pierrette, who lived in the apartment next door to hers. After speaking with her three sisters and giving them all regards from me, Yolanda would call Aunt Giselle and her youngest brother, Albert, and finally, she would purse her lips - she always pursed her lips - and call her older brother, Uncle Edmond.

Uncle Edmond's wife, Aunt Havazelet, was always the one to answer the phone. Aunt Havazelet was born in Istanbul, and her name was Nilüfer. Every time she answered the phone - her "hello" was pronounced with a Turkish accent that the entire family loved so much to imitate - Yolanda would exchange a few words with her, then ask how her older brother Edmond was. The conversation would end with a quick "*Shabbat shalom,*" after which Yolanda would heave a sigh. I'd stand behind her, both of us looking in the mirror, and I would stroke her shoulders, which were covered with skin that was soft and wobbly, like crème caramel.

One Friday, when I'd already finished my army service, Yolanda called Uncle Edmond as usual, and after his wife, Aunt Havazelet, answered, tears welled up in her eyes. She lowered the

receiver to the hollow of her neck with trembling hands. When they finished speaking, I had to call my father and he passed on the news of Edmond's death to the rest of the family and sent me straight home. Two days later, as we all stood around Uncle Edmond's fresh grave, a whisper buzzed through the crowd of mourners. Then, as if a signal had been given to lament something related to the deceased, though not necessarily the death itself, that whispering ceased as abruptly as it had begun. Present at the funeral were Edmond's sisters and brother, along with their children and grandchildren, myself included. Only one person was absent: the widow of the newly deceased, Aunt Havazelet. It was obvious to all of us that what we saw there, the unexpected catastrophe we discovered, had to be kept secret. As we stood and looked at the final trick devised by Uncle Edmond - the most admired and hated of all our aunts and uncles - we breathed a sigh of relief that Aunt Havazelet's feet had not managed to make their way among the headstones to discover that, in the end, there was no place for her there, at Uncle Edmond's side, and, clearly, not over him or under him either.

Aunt Havazelet stood outside - not outside the cemetery, but outside the rows of plots at the spot where the living and the dead converge. Fortunately, Aunt Havazelet wasn't able to walk further than a few steps past where the car had left her, and remained standing at the entrance, near the round basin where mourners washed their hands. A few days earlier, Aunt Havazelet had had a heart attack and almost died, but Uncle Edmond, who had always been as healthy as a horse, had beaten her to the punch and, since he removed the sting from her death, she remained alive. When Uncle Edmond's funeral was over, nothing could be hidden any longer, even if we wanted to pretend that nothing had happened. The grave had been filled with earth, and now several men were packing it down until it became a smooth, soft surface, the kind that, under different circumstances, you'd like to jump into. Now it was clear to me beyond any doubt that there was no room in the grave for anyone else, not even Aunt Havazelet. I stood there staring at the heap of earth and thinking that there was one less person in the world I could call "Uncle," one less person to phone on the holidays and memorial days, one less person to bear witness to the magnificent dynasty of our family - a dynasty whose roots were somewhere in Russia and Jerusalem, its glory days in Cairo, and its decline in cities like Bat Yam, Tel Aviv and Netanya.

Aunt Odette mumbled two or three times, "*C'est la vie*," and I realized that the world of my aunts and uncles was disappearing, those family members who spoke French with a rolling 'r', knew a few words in literary Arabic, and one day, a few months before the State of Israel was established, had abandoned their spacious homes in Cairo and their summer homes in Alexandria and gone to settle on the golden beaches of Palestine.

Several months before Uncle Edmond died, I published a collection of short stories that related a bit of our family's history. But it was only then, at the funeral, when the curtain fell on the life of the oldest and most enigmatic of my aunts and uncles, did I say to myself that one day I would have to write more about them, and also about us, the nieces and nephews and their children, and perhaps also about the different life I might have had if they had settled elsewhere, in America for example. We all retraced our steps in silence. My father told me not to walk back the same way we had come so that death, which had seized Uncle Edmond, would not be able to get me in its clutches. When we reached the end of the path, we collected the newly widowed Aunt Havazelet, who stood there leaning against the round basin. Her normally heavyset body had shrunk recently and her face looked like a candle flame about to go out. The aunts' and uncles' children quickly led her to a bench, admonishing each other for having left their aunt standing at the entrance to the cemetery without making sure that she was sitting down while the funeral was going on.

When Aunt Havazelet finally sat down on the bench, we all gathered around and looked into each other's eyes as if to ask what we should do with her now. Meanwhile, we waited silently for her to speak, but Aunt Havazelet deliberately remained mute. A minute later, her eyes rolled back and a strange wheeze emerged from her mouth. At that exact moment, sounds came from the direction of the entrance to the cemetery and we all turned to look. At first I didn't recognize

the people entering the cemetery gates. But after a few seconds, there was no mistaking it: they were walking toward us. When they finally reached us, they glanced at Aunt Havazelet's shrunken figure and broke through our circle. Now I clearly recognized them: they were Aunt Havazelet's 6 Turkish relatives - her nieces and nephews and their children - who, it turned out, had come to snatch her away from us. When they stood in front of her, Aunt Havazelet opened her eyes. She gave her newly arrived family members a strange look, then dropped her hands and let them take hold of her arms and legs. Without a word to us, they carried her off.

Aunt Havazelet was driven to Ramat Aviv in north Tel Aviv. Her family took her up to an apartment in a tall, concrete apartment building, put her to bed and guarded her as if she were a valuable hostage. The next day, as a representative of the family, I went there to pay a sick call on Aunt Havazelet and also to offer condolences in the name of the entire family.

I went up and knocked on the door. After a somewhat sour reception, one of her nephews led me through the apartment to Aunt Havazelet's room. She was lying on the bed, her tiny body wrapped in white sheets. She and her nephew exchanged glances and she gestured for him to leave the room and give her some privacy with the only representative of Uncle Edmond's family. Before he left, the nephew managed to whisper to me that Aunt Havazelet hadn't said a single word since the day Uncle Edmond died. When he was finally gone, I sat down at her bedside. She waved her hand and I hurried to support her as she sat up and then instructed me with a silent gesture to put a pillow behind her back.

Aunt Havazelet's glance wandered around the room. I smiled at her and wiped the sweat from my forehead. That was because, despite the oppressive July heat, all the windows and shutters were, as usual, closed against the threat of the *courant d'air* - the draft. Aunt Havazelet's glance continued to roam, until she finally clenched her lips and uttered two syllables: "Momo." She clutched my hand with her dry fingers. I smelled the fragrance of eau-de-cologne that rose from her skin, I saw her dyed brown hair up close, I could see my reflection in her large green eyes. "Momo," Aunt Havazelet repeated, and this time she seemed to be trying to say something. I felt her fingers tighten around mine. The pungent smell of sweat rising from her body made me dizzy. "Momo," Aunt Havazelet said for the third time and I asked myself if that was all she was capable of saying. Yes, sometimes God takes away a person's words, leaving him with only one or two, which he utters over and over again like a kind of final lament, until he gives up the ghost. Was that all Aunt Havazelet could say? "Momo?" Finally she opened her mouth and out came an almost unbroken stream of words: "You know, Momo, that when I came to this country I studied painting. I wanted to be an artist, but there was nothing to inspire me - everything around me was so ugly. In the end we went to England and I found a job doing restorations of paintings in museums." She gave a small chuckle, cleared her throat as if she were trying to remove something from it, then continued: "When I saw you, when you were still a child, I said to myself, look, God has sent me the model I've always been waiting for. You were as beautiful as a beautiful girl. I wanted to paint you, but your mother and I... I don't know if they told you what happened between us. It was a long time ago. But I, Momo, never forgot what happened. Only the dead forget. Yes, I agreed to patch things up - but only because of you. In any case, it's a long story. And I want you to know that if I were to paint anyone, I would paint you." I thought for a moment that she had finished saying what was on her mind, but after a short pause, she suddenly whispered, "Momo, I.. I read your book." My book? I glanced quickly at the night table beside Aunt Havazelet's bed and there it was, the edge of my book of short stories sticking out from under the boxes of 8 medicines. "Momo," she said, "I read the book," she spoke slowly, "and I think it's... I'm going to say a word now that I've never said before." Aunt Havazelet, I knew, was one of those people who are stingy with superlatives. But the moment she decided to use them, no superlative was too exaggerated, too grandiose. I listened to her curiously. "Your book," Aunt Havazelet said and clucked her tongue as if her mouth were dry, "It... it's shit. "Shit," I repeated, totally surprised by Aunt Havazelet's last word, and I felt guilty, as if I, not she - my aunt - had spat out the word "shit." For a moment I asked myself if I'd heard correctly. After all, Aunt Havazelet had always spoken with a

thick Turkish accent, and she even pronounced her Hebrew name, which she had chosen for herself when she was a young girl, with the stress on the last syllable, making it sound breathy and coquettish, as if it had an exclamation point at the end of it: “HavaseLETTE!” But no, I was sure I’d heard correctly. Aunt Havazelet had read my book and had decided to bad-mouth it to my face – to me, the only one in Uncle Edmond’s family who came to visit her!

I can no longer remember what I really meant to say to her then because just as I opened my mouth to speak, Aunt Havazelet’s eyelids snapped shut. Her small hand dropped out of mine and her chest rose and fell slowly. I got up quickly and opened the window. The light wind that came through the half-closed shutters swirled through the room, and I thought I could see relief on Aunt Havazelet’s tormented face. Her eyes moved under her large, wrinkled eyelids, then finally grew still, and only the sound of her deep breathing could be heard in the room. I sat down beside her again and straightened the blanket on her small body. Suddenly I realized why Christians watch over the body of a newly deceased person all night. Aunt Havazelet was alive – as witnessed by her deep breathing – but it was clear to me that our conversation was the last one she would ever have, and that the word she had spewed out at me was the last word she would ever speak. I heard the family talking quietly in the adjacent room and a few minutes later, one of the men knocked at the door. When he came in, I told him everything: all that I’d seen in the cemetery, every detail of the catastrophe Uncle Edmond had perpetrated from inside his single grave. Ultimately, they had the right to know what had happened. When I finished, I heard for one brief moment that Aunt Havazelet was choking and I looked down at her. At that instant, a yellow light flooded the window and endless motes of dust whirled around the room. I nodded in a gesture of farewell and left.

Friday noon of that same week I went to visit Yolanda. I left the Kirya and wound my way through the Tel Aviv streets until I reached the end of that narrow street where the tightly closed, light blue shutters were. I whistled the family whistle, heard Yolanda’s high voice ask, “*Qui est-ce?*”, replied “Me,” took the key out of my pocket, opened the door and kissed Yolanda hello. I sat down across from her and drank a cup of tea. At two o’clock the phone rang. Yolanda picked up the receiver and a few seconds later, I heard her say, “*Oui, oui,*” then sigh and add, “*C’est la vie*” two or three times. When she hung up, I didn’t ask her what had happened. I already knew.

I got up from the armchair and went to sit on the chair in front of the dressing table. I looked at my face reflected in the mirror, once on the right and once on the left, then twice, and four times and eight times and so on... I noticed a wrinkle or two on my forehead, but looked away. I was as beautiful as a girl.

Chapter One: Bedrooms

In January 2006, Yolanda Koenig moved out of her apartment and left me three plastic lawn chairs, two portable radiators and a cabinet full of toilet paper. I stacked the chairs on my apartment balcony. I placed the large radiator against one of the balcony walls and put the small one in my living room, behind Shauli’s baby grand. Yolanda, like us, had lived on the ground floor. She’d spent decades sitting on the balcony every day between the rows of light blue shutters, looking out at Arlozorov Street and the parking lot that had once been the Dan bus depot and would soon have a skyscraper built on it. Under her window was an uncared for garden where the plants grew wild, and where, one day Yolanda found a used condom there, right under her balcony. The very next day she saw to it that the bushes were trimmed and paving stones put down in the garden, and since then, there haven’t even been any flowers there, under her window.

As a child, I loved climbing into her apartment through the balcony to see how terrified she was that the neighbors might see her grandchild entering her apartment through the window like a thief. I’d grab the railing and hoist myself up – and there I was, already planting a kiss on each of her cheeks. As soon as I started riding the buses myself, when I was about ten, hardly a day went

by when I didn't cross the Yarkon River on the number twenty-five. The bus would stop at Dizengoff Center, where I got off and walked north, through Dizengoff Square, to her house. Yolanda sat on the light-blue-shuttered balcony waiting for me. It was hard for her to walk, even though she was only fifty-something then. When she was two years 11 old, in Cairo, she came down with polio, and when I went alone to see her, I preferred not to wait at the door for her to walk all the way over with her gray cane to open it for me.

We sit in the kitchen. I rest my hands on the oilcloth-covered table and Yolanda asks me to move them so she can spread sheets of paper they send her from the paper factory in Hadera. Grandpa George worked there until he retired. When I was seven, Grandpa George came to live with us after an argument with Yolanda. He has his own room in our apartment and a plastic leg. He sits in an armchair all day, his plastic leg stretched in front of him, reading books in French. He's bald, has a gray mustache, hates all music except when it's played on a violin, and tells me that he was thrown into an Egyptian prison for spying for Israel. Since the separation, Yolanda has never spoken of Grandpa George. She spreads the paper sheets from the Hadera paper factory on the oilcloth and puts two slices of white bread in the toaster. I love everything about her: the cottage cheese and the mayonnaise and the cucumber and the tomato and the spread she makes from raw tahini and honey, and the *kunafa* cake made of noodles with lots of sugar and peanuts. I love the shutters that are always closed against the "draft," and all the objects that are covered with aluminum foil and plastic - for hygienic reasons. When I go to the bathroom, she turns off the transistor radio so she can hear whether I've washed my hands. I let the water run for another minute or two, so she'll be satisfied. Did you wash your hands?

Yes.

She looks at my fingers. She's so beautiful. She speaks French to me. I would start learning French in school when I'm thirteen. Only then would I dare to speak that language, which I always heard at home, but I have a Moroccan accent because of the teachers at school. I love that language; I'm connected to it. It had traveled a long distance - from France to Cairo, and from Cairo to Tel Aviv, and finally to me. Since then, I've been speaking French to Yolanda. My French is correct grammatically, but terrible in every other way. I insist on speaking French to her, and Yolanda has come to accept my Moroccan accent. A few years later, I moved to Paris and adopted a Parisian accent, and ever since, Yolanda looks at me and doesn't understand a word. She could understand, but she doesn't want to.

I was already thirty when she left her apartment. We took everything out of it: the dressing table, the cabinets, the toiletries and the hairpins she kept in the heart-shaped box I gave her as a gift, the bed, all the plastic bags, toilet paper, cotton rolls and aluminum for the hygiene.

I, her oldest grandchild, received the plastic chairs, the two radiators and the toilet paper. I put the toilet paper in the bathroom cabinet of my apartment. That is my inheritance: not a couch, not a cabinet for the living room and not a set of dishes, but toilet paper. So much toilet paper, an almost endless amount. Like rich people who never stop spreading their wealth - that's how we are with Yolanda's toilet paper: we'll never be able to use it all up.

Translated from the Hebrew by Sondra Silverston

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