EZZA
AGHA MALAK

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH YOUR KIDS, *DAD*?

Translation
By
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This book was written with the complicity of Eric.
He has just turned twenty-three.

And his sentence serves as a point of departure:
"The more I uncover my father's true nature, the more I venerate my mother."

It is easier for a father to have a son than for a son to have a good father.
John Paul XXIII

The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother.
—Theodore Hesburgh

An example,
That's all a father can provide
for his children.

—Thomas Mann

1

It was sunny and yet cool on this budding August morning when Mama pulled my little sister and me much too early from our sleep! I didn't yet know that it would be a morning...full of unforeseen surprises and adventures. The sun poked its rays behind the mountain, projecting a light golden reddish array, resembling my mother's hair. They reflected off the foliage of fruit trees that proudly carried their overripe fruit, crowned with the morning's dew. A softly warming wind picked up the salty waters. It tickled my barely awakened nose. At the foot of our hill where our white house stood, the sea unfurled. My Mediterranean that we went to each summer vacation, and which we were deprived of this year.

For unspoken reasons.

Almost shameful.

The waves unleashed their force on the sandy beach and broke into a white muslin.

I had the impression that they smiled at me as they enveloped me with their fluid particles.

As she had always done for me, my sea, my sweet Mediterranean.

Our garden was marvelous that summer.

The branches of the young medlar tree bent under the weight of the orange medlar fruit, already overripe. It is MY tree; MY fruit. My sister didn't like medlars. She didn't find them as tasty as I did. I did, as you did, Papa! They retained for me (for both of us) a completely singular taste, of a rare flavor, velvety, sugary, and exotic...in short, a taste that I would not find in any other fruit. They flowered with great beauty that year. I would have liked for you to be there to witness with me the fascinating metamorphosis.

You would have loved it.

I climbed up the twisted trunk of my tree while Mama's voice rose up from inside the house: "Children! Come quickly! Quickly!"

She cried loudly with her thin voice.

And urged us to hurry.

For we had to leave, Papa!

Yes, leave! Travel far away, far from you.

But the echo of her soft voice dissipated over the tender branch that I was trying to straddle and that gracefully bent under my twenty-five kilo, tall, thin child's body.

I secured myself on the highest branch, fascinating by so much fruit, so much splendor, closing my ears to my mother's repeated cries. I didn't want to leave this fabulous place, my tree, before taking my fill of its taste, and...nostalgia.

Once we had arrived, at this faraway promised continent, I would surely be invaded by this visceral lack and this silent desire called *nostalgi*a.

My *Akidenias*!![1]

My medlars...already round as tops!

This year, I would leave them to over ripen on their "mother," the medlar tree. Some of them were still green. They would ripen after our departure.

When we have left your country, Papa.

Our absence and the loss would surely be felt, as no one would come to gather them and they would fall to the ground.

I wouldn't be there to pick them up.

You wouldn't either!

I gathered ten or so *Akidenias* and I stuffed them into my pocket, after eating one, all yellow, perfectly round, like a full moon.

The taste of it was an incomparable pleasure.

Light but firm texture.

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[1] Lebanese for medlar fruit.

A sweet taste akin to a liqueur.

Its smooth pulp, surrounded by extra fine skin.

I savored it thinking of you, Papa, who loved this marvelous fruit as I did.

2

My pockets were growing by leaps and bounds.

I knew it wasn't a good idea to keep them, that I would be scolded for soiling my clean traveling clothes. But the idea that I was leaving (probably forever) this world of vegetation so attractive, that was so dear to me, this childhood place that was almost happy, pushed me further, to deafen my ears and forget the reprimands that could wait.

"Where can they be, these kids, for heaven's sake?"

Nervous questioning to which the echo of other calls responded:

"Children! Where are you? Let's go! Come quickly! We have to leave and your suitcases are not yet ready...!"

My mother's tender, nervous voice (that seemed to address her own mother as well, our grandmother, whom we also had to leave), rose up again, while my little sister was trying to climb the plum tree, HER tree, and gather plums. HER fruit.

She also wanted to have her fill of nostalgia before leaving this place!

Medlar and plum, like all the other fruit trees in our garden, from the apricot to the olive, not to mention the peach, the walnut, etc., with all the flora that surrounded us, it was Mama who had planted them upon our arrival from

France, in this Lebanese city. The garden of the big house bought by the two of you, Papa (do you remember?) was then a desert; no vegetation stood out. Devoured by weeds and nettles, it had quickly regained its human face of an orchard, in an unparalleled exuberance. Even the scented herbs, aromatic plants, and all the natural vegetation of herbal plants grew luxuriously and budded generously. Thanks to Mama's good care, who despite her work at the hospital and university, dedicated herself to creating this *garden of Eden*, as she liked to call this good patch of earth, a good portion of her time and her heart. She cultivated it with love.

And it is love in all its meanings that made these plants grow. It cloaked them in beauty, made them pretty and gave them a human face, soft and smooth.

Love, Papa! Do you understand?

I see her still, my little Mama.

Under hat and gloves, she trimmed, pruned, handled the trimmer like any professional. You were proud of your rosebushes, your honeysuckle, your jasmine, your bougainvillea, your gardenia, your double begonia...You, Papa, told her she had a *green* thumb, and you congratulated her for her talent at caring for plants with her soul!

You passed your hand over the enormous tufts of lavender and you shook their so very blue flowers with admiration. You then brought your hands to your nose, your nostrils flared, to deeply breathe in their perfume. You smiled at me, saying, "She is strong, Mama, eh?"

And I shared your smile by responding, "MY Mama! But of course!"

3

We perched on our branches that bent under the weight of their multicolored burden (the fruit and us), my grandmother's head appeared at the entrance to the garden, calling to us: "Quick, quick, children, don't tire your mother; she's upset. The taxi is waiting! And...you've got to take off. Now, go! If you don't it will be too late! Let's go! Hurry up! Ah...".

And the echo of her words that ended on a note of exasperation, skimmed our branches and our indifferent ears.

What would be "too late"?

I didn't exactly know why we had to take off so quickly and *depart* from this place in such a hurry, why this *need* to hurry.

And that prudent fear that my mother carried!

The bombings, we heard them clearly, it's true, but they were far off.

And yet... Even though our villa was situated outside the area of conflict, a vague and unsettling premonition swept through me in hearing the orders given by Mama and my grandmother's pleas that were becoming more and more insistent. My premonition told me that there was in the air the threat of a peril that would fly over our heads if we didn't hurry, if we didn't respond right away.

This peril that I understood a bit later, it was you, Papa! We were afraid that you would turn up, wanting to shackle our departure at any price, our well-arranged flight, as you had done before, to stop Mama dead in her tracks.

We had to flee.

Flee from YOU, Papa, and be out of your reach, your sight, all of you!

Flee your harassment, your humiliations, your assaults.

How many times had I seen you approach my mother, your hand raised as a threat, to grab and twist hers? Like a wounded animal, she whimpered in a plaintive voice, barely perceptible. Then, out of pride, her head high, she stood herself up to release herself from your painfully long grip. My little sister, on her knees, begged you to let her go, wrapping herself around your leg, slapping your still raised hand. But she spoke in vain (You know why I like medlars, Papa? Their name incarnates your negative side). And you, still menacing, you insulted us and pushed away our supplications.

That urgency to flee, something of the greatest importance, and gravity, was upon us: we were being taken.

OUR kidnapping.

You, superior man in your Middle Eastern society, you the male, you had a privilege, fully masculine: *custody*, our custody, the right to take us.

Legalized by the religious authorities.

Legitimized by the legal system.

Your laws, Papa, sectarian, macho...

Unjust, above all.

At the time, I didn't realize the cruelty of these laws. I was only ten when you left us. Eight when your tricks and whims began. I couldn't understand; even the clear explanations of Mama's lawyer: in case of a couple's separation, it is the father who would have custodial rights over the children, from nine years of age for girls and seven for boys. I heard these words without understanding their implications, the danger that could ensue. All that I could grasp was that my Mama's lawyer could do nothing in that event to counter these...*Koranic* laws!

Today, probably unbeknownst to you, I have just turned fifteen. I have done this far from you, far from our garden where Mama celebrated our birthdays, far from our Lebanese house. At fifteen, one is much more able to grasp things that escape a child of ten.

Today, everything is becoming clear in my mind and I understand the imbroglio of our situation, where you had plunged us and that had endured for seven years; the serious nature of the threats and the cruelty of the unspoken, your behavior...

Today, I understand better the atrocity of your country's laws, of your religious sect, their inhumanity, their injustice towards women.

I mean to say, mothers.

4

What are the women of your country waiting for to denounce such laws?

To refuse them, to reject them, change them?

Change their legislation?

What are they waiting for to denounce the "mal" of the superior male?

The custody law, I think it is terrible!

Without even mentioning that of *repudiation!*

To pull a child from the mother who gave him birth, to give him to the careless and irresponsible father, who had left home for his mistress...in order to follow his desire, an instinct...

What an aberration!

After having carried and nourished him in her womb, bringing him into the world with all the troubles that creating a child and giving birth entails...after breastfeeding him, teaching him to crawl, to walk, to speak, to confront life's situations and take responsibility for his existence... How can these cruel laws intervene to deny all her efforts and cut her off from this crucial development by taking the fruit of her womb?

This woman represents life and the world in the eyes of her child; how can laws and men force the surrendering of her treasure to someone so uninterested, who has voluntarily walked away, abandoned, betrayed him?

By which laws would she endure the suffering of loss of custody?

The injustice of it kills me.

One day, I will become a lawyer to defend one cause and one cause alone: the injustice done to women; that of men...that of laws...your law...you, Papa!

"Children! Do you hear me? Come quickly now! Right now, I say!"

The echo of my grandmother's voice once again hung in the air. The same urgent tone, and for me, the same feeling of danger.

I called to my little sister still solidly planted on a branch, and begged her to comply.

Both our pockets stuffed with soft fruit, we each slid down the trunk of our tree, like two flying squirrels, to reach Mama, surrounded by our grandmother and her own grandmother.

The three women were in the hallway by our little rolling suitcases, still open. They gazed at us suspiciously without noticing anything at first.

We quickly began to empty our pocketfuls of fruit pell mell into the bottom of our suitcases, among the clothes.

Mama noted our cleverly contrived actions:

"What is this, what?" she cried, looking at our harvest strewn among our clothing. Take that fruit out of your suitcases! No, you can't take that! Don't you see how ripe and...sticky they are? Your clothes will be soiled...".

Braver than I, my little sister chimed in:

"Please, Mama, I love these...let us take just a few. There where you are taking us, we won't find any plums..." she implored so well with her soft voice.

"...No medlars, either!" I added, sulking.

"Too bad, this is not the time to think about treats...No whining, let's go!"

Sad, slowly, we proceeded to remove all that we had secured under our pile of tee shirts. We didn't want to go against Mama and make her feel bad. She had already had enough...pain.

Because of you...Papa!

"But let them have them, dear! It's not so terrible, see here!" declared my grandmother, tears in her eyes. They can keep this fruit and put it in a bag, that will protect them, they can eat them tonight, or tomorrow, or even...

But our gtandmother's persuasive remarks failed and Mama was all the more determined:

"That's out of the question... And tonight we'll be sleeping at Jacky's in Beirut. Tomorrow morning we'll be on the military ship. We've got a long way to go, don't you see? No, it's out of the question..."

"Well they can just take them in a separate bag to eat them on the boat! Or even in the taxi! Yes, why not in the taxi... Or even right now..."

Grandmother insisted on this as if asking for a favor.

"Now, it's impossible. And the suitcases have to be closed. Here! Put those books in! You'll need them on the boat... *Come on*!" My mother's voice was filled with pain.

It's as if she were on the point of crying.

"Let's go, my dears. Do what your mother says," pleaded our grandmother, while winking at us.

We saw her discreetly stuff our fruit into two plastic bags that she hid in our suitcases, among our clean and neatly folded clothes.

5

Just like someone caught up in a dizzy spell, or in an uncontrollable drunken state, Mama teetered from one room to the next, lacking a precise destination, only to return to our two small suitcases. She didn't know what to add or remove. She examined their contents, picked them up, set them down. Fifteen kilos maximum allowance per person! "Take only what is strictly necessary...", recommended the woman from Lebanon's French Embassy responsible for the evacuation of French citizens.

Then I saw her enter her room, your shared bedroom, Papa, where you both made all sorts of plans and projects for our future, and even savings plans designed to pay for our future college studies.

She came out quickly, repeating, "Let's go...let's go! There's no time to lose...". She said it unconvincingly, as if she were pursued by a ghost. She barely turned around to take a last look, like one who would have wanted to lower the curtain on a sad piece, end a heavy sorrow: your shared past most likely, with its smiling and happy beginnings that had turned hellish when you found a rival for her: your mistress, the scandalous woman.

I didn't know then that the *phantom* that could track us and of whom we were so afraid, was actually you!

Why would a husband deny his past in such a underhanded way, become mean and spiteful, in a word, *bad,* as soon as he had fallen into the arms of a scandalous woman?

Was it because she was *bad?*

Why would he play at hatred while feeling manipulated by the new woman?

Do you enjoy this game of manipulation, Papa?

Manipulated by *her,* you manipulate us in return.

As if to seek revenge on your own person transformed into ten avatars of yourself.

This was communicated through your actions and attitudes.

My mother's innocence, her devotion, her goodness, her faithfulness...had you had enough of that? Did it bother you to live with an honest woman?

As you grow older, are you looking for something new? For renewal? To play the villain? For a bit of sadism? To play predatory games?

Today, I allow myself to ask (you) such questions.

I'm no longer a child!

I've just turned fifteen, Papa.

Today. And you are unaware of this.