I AM MICHEL, TOO

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Novel

Preface

My name is Janice. On 16 February 2036, I turned thirty. I was born in Antwerp. My parents are called Joena and Arthur. My mother did not choose my name by chance. There was a story behind it, one I would only discover much later. But this book is not about me. It is about my grandfather.

His name is Michel Ghafari. He was born on 3 December 1968 in Bethlehem, a Palestinian city in the West Bank, a few miles from Jerusalem. His birth came less than eighteen months after the Six-Day War, which had profoundly changed the lives of the city's inhabitants. The city in which he grew up bore the scars of a conflict his family had not chosen, but from which no one could entirely escape.
In Bethlehem's narrow streets, among limestone houses weathered by time, everyday life continued against a constant backdrop of uncertainty about the future.

Yet many people would later know him by another name. In the circles he moved in, he was known above all as "Patron". Over the years, the nickname became an identity in its own right. To me, though, he remained my grandfather.

Much of his life unfolded before I was born. What I know of him comes from many sources: my mother's stories, letters and photographs, family memories, and what he told us himself. Not every detail can now be verified, and not every recollection is equally clear. That is the nature of family histories spanning countries, wars and decades.

My grandfather knew poverty and wealth, power and powerlessness, love and bereavement, freedom and imprisonment. He made choices that caused others pain, choices for which he himself bears responsibility. This book does not seek to excuse them. It tries to understand how the boy he once was became the man people called Patron.

My mother grew up with a father who was often absent. For a long time, she knew him chiefly as a businessman who travelled a great

deal. She had no idea what really lay behind his money, his connections and his sudden disappearances. At birthdays, celebrations and ordinary family evenings, what she noticed most was the empty chair where he should have been.

When he was arrested in Belgium in 2001, the family tried to conceal as much of the truth from her as possible. My mother was about thirteen at the time. What the adults regarded as protection felt to the child above all like absence and uncertainty. Only later did she understand how much of her father's life had unfolded beyond her sight.
His absences were not due solely to prison. Both before and after his detention in Belgium, he was frequently away. Africa, Europe, the Middle East and, later, China: his life was divided between airports, hotels, meetings and business deals. He said he wanted to give his family the life he himself had never known. Yet the very way he pursued that ambition so often took him away from the people for whom he claimed to be doing it.

To me, that is one of the most painful contradictions of his life. He wanted to build a secure existence, yet had chosen a world fraught with risk. He wanted to give his family everything, but along the way he lost much of the time he might have spent with them.

My name connects me to a part of my grandfather's past that our family spoke little about for many years. My mother named me Janice in memory of the Belgian woman who had been her father's great love. For years she was no more to me than a name, until I discovered the place she had occupied in his life and how enduringly her memory had remained with us.

When I was born, in 2006, my grandfather was not yet in prison in China. His imprisonment there would not begin until more than twenty years later. That distinction matters, because family memories can so easily become entangled.

When he was arrested in China in 2028, I was twenty-one, almost twenty-two. I no longer knew him only through other people's stories: we had formed a relationship of our own, even if our contact remained irregular.

After his conviction, contact became limited again. My mother managed to speak to him briefly by telephone and to exchange letters under supervision. Letters sometimes took a long time to arrive; telephone calls were governed by strict rules over which we had little control. Prison had not created the distance between my mother and her father, but it gave that distance a new and more painful meaning.

Meanwhile, the world beyond the prison walls was changing too. The war that had entered a new phase in 2022 with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine spread to other parts of Europe in 2028. My parents then decided to leave Belgium. Together we went to Los Angeles, where we tried to rebuild our lives.

For my father, who had left Russia behind years earlier, it was another wrenching departure. My mother was leaving Antwerp, the city where she had grown up and where I had been born. I was twenty-two, old enough to understand that we were leaving behind not just our home but part of our past. I also had to interrupt my law studies at K.U.-Leuven before completing them. Fortunately, some years later I was able to resume my legal education in Los Angeles, where I eventually fulfilled my ambition of becoming a lawyer in the United States. Thousands of miles from Antwerp, we remained deeply worried about my grandfather. His imprisonment in China continued to cast a shadow over our family life.

As I write these lines in 2036, that war is still raging. A few years earlier, Vladimir Putin was overthrown in a coup, but his fall did not bring the peace so many had hoped for. Quite the opposite. His successor proved even more ruthless. He established a totalitarian regime in which the slightest criticism was treated as treason. The population lives under a pervasive system of surveillance and terror, while the conflict continues to spread to more European countries. His ambitions go beyond restoring Russia's former sphere of influence: he dreams of subjecting the whole of Europe to Moscow's will. What began in 2022 as the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has become a conflict devastating large parts of Europe. For my generation, war no longer belongs to the history books. It

has become a reality that has changed our lives, and those of our families, for ever.

As I write, my grandfather is still in China. No one knows what awaits him after his imprisonment. I do not want to invent a future for him that has not yet happened. Perhaps that is one lesson his story teaches us: we can only see the whole of a life once it has come to an end.

I do not admire everything he did. Some of his choices still elude me; others I will probably never be able to accept. But neither do I believe a human being can be reduced to their worst decision. To understand is not to excuse. It is simply to try to see how circumstances, character, desire, fear and ambition intertwine to shape a life.

My grandfather was a boy who learnt to survive at an early age. A man in pursuit of wealth and influence. A father who loved his daughter but was absent far too often. A partner who sometimes confused love with possession, desire and freedom. A man who crossed boundaries, each time convinced he would get away with it, until he discovered that no network of connections can protect anyone for ever.

To the world, he was Patron.
To me, he remains my grandfather.

Janice, Los Angeles, February 2036

1. The Box Without an Inventory

On 19 February 2036, exactly three days after my thirtieth birthday, a cardboard box was waiting outside the door of my apartment in Los Angeles. For several years I had been living alone in a modest flat on the third floor of an old building, not far from the city centre. My parents lived on the other side of the city. We saw one another regularly, but each of us had built a life of our own. My mother had evidently left the box there. There was no letter, only my name in her familiar handwriting and a strip of brown packing tape running twice across the lid. At first I could not understand why she had not handed it to me herself. I left it unopened that evening. Not because I was afraid of what it contained, but because, deep down, I already suspected what I would find inside: my grandfather's past.

The following morning, I put the box on the kitchen table and carefully cut through the tape. Inside was an assortment of objects that, at first glance, seemed to have little connection with one another. Photographs, expired passports, notebooks, hotel cards, business cards belonging to men nobody in our family knew any more, a few letters from Belgium and two yellowing postcards from Bethlehem. There were also crumpled scraps of paper bearing words in Lingala, receipts from cities my grandfather had visited and a small leather diary, some of whose pages were blank while others were filled with names and telephone numbers, without a word of explanation.

I took the objects out one by one, not knowing where to begin. This was no archive: there was no order to it at all. It was more as though somebody had left a room years earlier, turned off the light and closed the door behind them.

My mother, Joena, had put off sorting through her father's belongings for years. Sometimes she would talk about him for hours: his travels, his peculiar habits and the occasions when he had made her laugh. But there were also periods when she barely spoke of him at all. Only later did I understand why.

Not all her memories were happy ones. They also carried the disappointment of his repeated absences and the pain of everything

that had remained unspoken between them. She loved her father, but had never quite managed to accept the choices he had made in his life.

At the top of the pile was a photograph of Michel as a young man. He was standing beside a bicycle in a Belgian street. On the back, in blue ink, someone had written: 'Wilrijk, first winter'. His coat was too large for him, and he was not looking at the camera. Anyone who knew nothing about him would have seen only a thin immigrant shivering in the cold. Anyone who knew what happened later might imagine they could make out all sorts of signs in that same photograph: stubbornness, ambition, danger. That is the trap of hindsight. Once you know how a story ends, you look at its beginning differently and wonder whether the clues were there all along.

My grandfather made bad choices. Some were serious. He disappointed people, crossed boundaries and spent years persuading himself that a good intention could excuse a bad method. But I did not want to portray him, from childhood onwards, as a man destined for crime. A child is not a warning of the adult he will become. A refugee cannot be summed up by his criminal record. Nor is a prisoner necessarily nothing more than the sum of the accusations brought against him in court. So I began not with police reports or newspaper cuttings, but with the personal possessions he had left behind. They might not tell me what he had done wrong, but they could help me understand who he had really been.

A wooden rosary. A Brussels metro ticket. A yellowing receipt from Lints bakery in Antwerp. A menu from a restaurant in Kinshasa. A photograph of my grandmother Natalia holding my mother as a baby. Another photograph, taken years later, showed Janice, the Belgian woman, standing beside Michel at a picnic. Between them sat a boy I recognised immediately: Rutger. My uncle, although the word sometimes seemed strange to me because he belonged to a generation so close to my own.

The Belgian Janice was the woman I had been named after. It had never been a secret at home, but neither had anyone said much about it. As a child, I thought names passed from one generation to

the next like dinner services or jewellery. Only later did I understand that a name could also be a trace. The woman in that photograph had known my grandfather before people began calling him Patron, when he was still trying to work out what sort of man he could become in Europe.

As I leafed through his diary, I noticed that her name appeared nowhere in it. That surprised me. My grandfather had made a habit of keeping even the names and telephone numbers of people with whom he had done business only once. Yet I could find no trace of Janice. When I mentioned it to my mother, she shrugged. Perhaps he simply knew her number by heart, she said. I wondered whether there might be another explanation. Perhaps Janice was someone he had never needed to find in a diary because he had never truly put her out of his mind.

Beneath the diary was an envelope containing documents from the late 1980s. Application forms, registrations, copies of identity papers, proof of address. Among them was a letter from John, the social worker who had helped Michel during his first years in Belgium. There was nothing remarkable about it. No confession, no warning, no prediction. John wrote that Michel was making progress with his Dutch, that he was looking for work and that Christine would be delighted to have him round for Sunday lunch again the following week. The tone was warm and practical, as though the writer took it for granted that, given patience and discipline, life would eventually begin to take shape.

My grandfather had kept that letter for more than forty years. That detail moved me more than the expensive watches, hotels and names of political figures that later emerged from the box. We keep the things we do not want to lose. Perhaps, to Michel, John was proof that there had once been a time when someone had looked at him without an ulterior motive. Not as a contact, a middleman, a supplier, a suspect or a prisoner. Simply as Michel.

I rang my mother to ask why she had given me the box just then.

'Because you've always asked so many questions about your grandfather,' she replied.

'But I used to ask you questions before, didn't I?'

'Yes. Only back then, I still thought I could give you the answers.'

'And you don't think so now?'

'Now I know I can only tell you how I knew him. If you really want to understand who he was, you'll have to do your own research. Perhaps you'll discover a man very different from the one I remember.'

That was how this book began. Not with my grandfather's birth in Bethlehem, nor with his arrival in Belgium, nor with the events that would eventually lead him to a Chinese prison. It began one morning in Los Angeles, when I opened the box my mother had left outside my door.

Among the photographs, letters and yellowing documents, I found the first traces of a life of which I had previously known only fragments. My mother had passed her memories on to me; now it was up to me to discover what lay behind them.

Thousands of miles away, in a Chinese prison, was the man whose life I was trying to piece together. I knew I would not find answers to all my questions, but at last I wanted to understand who he had really been.

Not merely the businessman known as Patron, nor the prisoner about whom so much had been written, but above all the human being behind those stories. Michel Ghafari. My grandfather.

From such a distance, I had to attempt to reconstruct a life. Not in chronological order, as though events could be arranged neatly one behind another on a shelf, but in the way memories really survive within a family: in fragments, in stories, in silences and in objects that acquire meaning only when someone chooses to linger over them. At the bottom of the box lay a loose sheet of paper. A single sentence was written on it in Michel's handwriting, without a date.

Never believe that one door is the only way out.

My mother did not recognise the sentence. Perhaps he had heard it somewhere. Perhaps he had invented it himself. Either way, I recognised in it the man who emerged from all the stories. Not because he always found a way out, but because he could not bear the thought that there might be none. That was his strength. It would also become his downfall. For anyone who believes long enough that every locked door must have a hidden exit will sooner or later begin opening doors that would have been better left closed.

In the box I also found documents and personal information that I eventually decided not to include in this book. Some contained names and telephone numbers of people who might still be alive. Others concerned events whose precise circumstances I did not know. I wanted to avoid jumping to conclusions or unfairly linking people to my grandfather's past. After all, the things someone keeps do not necessarily tell the truth about what really happened.

That distinction became essential once I began writing. My grandfather liked stories in which, looking back, events followed one another logically. One connection led to another; a chance meeting turned out to be decisive; a failure later became a lesson. But people reconstruct their past as novelists do: they erase the dead ends. Those dead ends were precisely what I did not want to erase from his story.

The weeks when nothing happened. The business ventures that never got off the ground. The people he met once and never saw again. The occasions when he thought he had made an important connection and turned out to be mistaken. Without those failures, his life would look too much like a path laid out in advance towards the figure of Patron.
Nothing is decided beforehand. No one comes into the world with a destiny they need only fulfil. My mother had often told me so. She had devoured the books of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and felt a particular affinity with his existentialist thought. One phrase she often quoted stayed with me: 'Existence precedes essence.' Sartre had developed this idea, among other places, in his famous lecture of 1945, published the following year under the title

Existentialism Is a Humanism. In his view, human beings are not born with a predetermined nature or calling. First they exist, and then, through their choices and actions, they gradually shape who they are.

My mother found the idea both liberating and terrifying. Liberating, because no one is condemned to remain a prisoner of their origins, their past or other people's expectations. Terrifying, because freedom also brings responsibility. We cannot so easily blame our actions on fate, our upbringing or our circumstances.

'We don't choose where we're born,' she would sometimes say. 'We don't choose our parents, our childhood or the world we grow up in. But that doesn't mean everything that happens afterwards is inevitable.'

Whenever I asked her at what point my grandfather had begun to change, she rarely gave me a direct answer. To her, the question already rested on a false assumption: as though somewhere in his life there must have been a precise moment when he ceased to be one man and became another.

'That's not how it works,' she would say. 'You don't wake up one morning as a completely different person. You change through what you experience, the decisions you make and, sometimes, what you choose not to do. Most of the time, you don't even notice it happening.'

Perhaps that was the greatest mistake I needed to avoid in telling his story: believing that a life can be divided into a before and an after, on either side of one decisive event, as though everything that came before had merely been preparation for what was to follow.

My grandfather was not a character being led by a writer towards an ending imagined in advance. He was a human being making choices without knowing how they would turn out. Some opened doors. Others closed them for ever.

'Every day we have to make choices,' my mother would say. 'We make decisions because they seem right at the time, because we

believe they'll bring us closer to what we want or to the person we hope to become. But choosing also means giving up other possibilities. Sometimes that means disappointing people, even those we love most. We can't always avoid it. It's part of our freedom, but also of the responsibility that goes with it.'

I understood what she meant. And yet a question continued to trouble me. How long must we keep looking back at the choices we have made? Afterwards, we may regret our decisions and wonder what our lives might have been like had we taken another path. But the past cannot be rewritten. All we can do is try to understand why we acted as we did, acknowledge our mistakes and accept that some consequences cannot be undone.

Perhaps taking responsibility also meant knowing when to leave the past behind. Not in order to forget our mistakes or absolve ourselves of blame, but to prevent yesterday's choices from stopping us from living on. In the end, what matters is not only the choices we make, but also how we deal with their consequences.

And whenever I was tempted to find an inescapable destiny in his past, I heard my mother's voice again.

'Don't confuse what eventually happened with what was bound to happen.'

The man who could hold Joena in his arms for hours when she was a baby was the same man who would later miss her birthdays. The refugee grateful for Christine's help was the same man who, years afterwards, would regard rules as obstacles. The father who wanted to protect Rutger was the same man whose choices would bring danger into his own home.

Sometimes what remains unchanged is more disturbing than what changes.

A few years before her unexpected and tragic death in 2028, I had telephoned the Belgian Janice from Antwerp. We had not spoken for a long time. Her voice sounded older than I remembered from

childhood, but I recognised it at once. I asked her how she thought I ought to look at Michel.

'Not the way he'd write his own story,' she replied.

'How would he write it?'

'With too many reasons.'

I laughed.

'And how would you write his story?'

She was silent for a moment.

'With the consequences.'

Those two words became my method.

Reasons and consequences.

Not merely what Michel felt or intended, but what his choices meant for others. Not just why he left, but who stayed behind waiting. Not simply how much money he made, but what he failed to see while making it. Not only those who helped him, but those who later had to live with the decisions he had made himself.

That is why this novel begins with a box. A box forces you to sort things out before drawing conclusions.

2. Belgium on the Horizon

In our family, there are more stories than photographs of Bethlehem, in Palestine, the city where Michel was born. He spent the first years of his life there, among hills, stone houses and olive trees, in a place where neighbours knew one another and life revolved largely around the family. Michel grew up in a large household, with little opportunity for solitude, where meals often gave way to lively conversations in which everyone tried to speak at once.

My mother, Joena, who was born in Antwerp, knew Bethlehem only through her father's stories. What stayed with her above all were his memories of a noisy, bustling family life. Whenever Michel spoke of his childhood, the same relatives and incidents would recur, although the details sometimes varied from one telling to the next.

It is now impossible to establish with certainty all the places where the family stayed during those troubled years. Faced with relentless violence and uncertainty about what the next day might bring, Michel's parents were forced to leave familiar surroundings on several occasions. Sometimes they found refuge with relatives or acquaintances in Palestine, but at other times they crossed the border to stay temporarily in Lebanon. Often, when they set off, they had no idea how long they would be away or when they might return. Their places of residence changed according to the security situation, the availability of somewhere to stay and the willingness of others to take them in. For Michel, who had scarcely known any other way of life, these constant moves eventually became a natural part of existence.

When Michel spoke of his childhood in later years, he seldom mentioned the beauty of his native region. What remained most vivid were the practical concerns of everyday life. He remembered which streets to avoid when the violence flared up, where to fetch water when the supply failed, and which relatives could shelter them when their home became too dangerous. His memories consisted of scattered incidents whose precise order he could often no longer recall. Sometimes he told the same story in different ways. It was as though the uncertainty in which he had grown up, rather than the events themselves, had left the deepest mark on him.

At a very young age, he suffered an accident whose consequences would remain with him for the rest of his life. One day, his elder brother Jacques was carrying him on his shoulders when he accidentally dropped him. Michel was seriously injured and left with a disability affecting the right side of his body. Certain movements demanded greater effort, and his impairment remained visible to others. Yet he refused to be treated differently. On the contrary, the more those around him tried to spare him, the more determined he became to prove that he could manage despite his disability.

My mother said that, as a boy, he organised contests he stood little chance of winning. Racing against children faster than himself. Throwing stones with his weaker arm. Walking on one leg along a low wall. Whenever he lost, he wanted to try again. Not because he believed defeat was impossible, but because he hated the thought that any result should be final.

One of the few childhood stories Michel liked to tell concerned a Chinese girl named Ma. He had met her during one of his family's stays in Lebanon. Ma's family was also living there temporarily. Although the two children shared almost no common language, they managed to communicate, mainly through gestures. Ma taught him a few Chinese words, while he taught her Arabic swear words that, he claimed, he was scarcely allowed to utter himself.

I can no longer verify whether events really unfolded that way. Within families, childhood memories easily grow into little legends. Yet Ma appears so often in Michel's stories that I cannot simply dismiss her as an invented character. The war subsequently erased many traces of those years, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish reality from imagination.

The tensions and violence that marked Michel's childhood in Palestine had political and military causes whose significance a child could scarcely grasp. For him, they first took the form of very practical prohibitions. Don't go down that street today. You won't be going to school tomorrow. Keep away from the window. Lie flat if you hear that noise. Wait until someone comes to fetch you. Michel

learnt early on that you did not have to understand a danger to recognise it, and that reacting before you even knew what to fear could sometimes mean the difference between life and death.

One afternoon, he came home and scarcely recognised the house in which he had grown up. It had been hit by a bombardment. The fact that no one in the family had been inside at the time would always be regarded afterwards as a miracle. Part of the building was still standing, but rooms had been torn open, furniture was charred and the walls were blackened by flames. His mother searched through the rubble for anything that could still be saved. His father gazed at the damaged roof as though trying to calculate, simply by looking at it, how much of their home might be rebuilt.

Among the debris, Michel spotted a small metal spoon, blackened by fire and warped by the heat. He picked it up, rubbed it with his thumb and slipped it into his pocket. Why had that particular spoon caught his attention? He would never be able to explain it. Perhaps because, after a catastrophe, children instinctively search for something to keep, some small, tangible proof that not everything has vanished for ever.

Had he been able to save his mother's paintings, he would undoubtedly have taken them. But the flames had consumed the canvases and wiped away for ever the colours into which she had poured so much care and love. Of everything that had once been such a natural part of his world, all that remained to him in the end was a little piece of twisted metal.

The spoon accompanied him over the years, crossing borders with him and passing through his different lives. My mother remembered that much later, in Belgium, it lay in a kitchen drawer among knives, forks and other cutlery.

The contrast was strange: that fire-blackened object among all those gleaming utensils, as though two worlds with nothing in common had happened to meet there by chance. Nobody used it. Nobody asked why it was there. And nobody thought of throwing it away. Perhaps that was the most remarkable thing about the little spoon. It had lost its original purpose, but in doing so had acquired another

meaning. What had once been an ordinary object had become the silent witness to a vanished world.

My grandfather rarely spoke of what he had lost during the war. Perhaps he did not need to. Sometimes an object, simply because someone keeps it throughout a lifetime, says more than that person could ever put into words.

That object was not among the things in the box I received. It had probably disappeared during a move. Yet I often think about that little spoon, because it illustrates something official accounts of war tend to overlook. Losses are not only immense or spectacular. They also consist of thousands of small things one will never see again.

The family had to leave repeatedly. Sometimes they found shelter with relatives for a few weeks; sometimes they stayed temporarily in Syria or Lebanon before returning to Palestine. It is impossible now to reconstruct every journey or stay with any precision. Michel grew up never knowing whether an address would remain his own. Perhaps that was why travelling came to feel more natural to him than staying in one place. Being on the move was not an interruption of ordinary life but an integral part of it. Hotels became familiar places, and keeping a travel bag half-packed seemed to him not an inconvenience but a sensible precaution.

Yet his childhood was not made up of war alone. I think it is important to say so. When people speak about those who come from conflict zones, they easily describe their past as though they had lived under bombardment every moment of their lives. There, too, there were birthdays, quarrels over trifles, first loves, football matches, family jokes and moments of boredom. Michel helped his mother carry the shopping.

Even as a boy, Michel discovered his talent for trading. Anything that possessed a little value or could be exchanged, he knew how to turn into something else: marbles, cigarettes for adults, spare parts from toys, or fruit he managed to obtain from neighbourhood gardens. Sometimes he even got his hands on a few Mars bars, a coveted treat that the war was making increasingly difficult to find. Without hesitation, he sold them for twice what he had paid. Where

others saw only scarcity, Michel spotted an opportunity. It was a trait that would stay with him all his life.

He found it hard to accept that anything could be without value. If someone wanted to possess an object, he reasoned, then surely it must have a price. Perhaps, then, his first commercial talent was not selling but observing. Who needed what? Who had something to spare? Who knew someone who might be able to help?

He understood very early that, even without money, you could obtain things when people trusted one another. A neighbour lent him tools in gratitude for a lift Michel's father had once given him. An aunt was given medicine because someone knew her brother. A driver agreed to take an extra passenger because a meal would be waiting for his family at home.

In a community under constant strain, networks of personal relationships were not a luxury. They were a second infrastructure.

Later, Michel would develop that talent on an altogether different scale. He thought of human relationships as roads. Some were official, others were little more than back lanes, and some could only be travelled if you knew whose door to knock on. In his childhood, this way of thinking helped families through difficult times. In adulthood, it would teach him that rules often seem less restrictive when you know the right person.

The distinction is a fine one when everyone is simply trying to survive. It becomes dangerous when someone begins to regard exceptions as his natural right.

When Michel began to realise that his future probably did not lie in Palestine, he turned his thoughts increasingly towards Europe, where his brothers Elias and Vartan were already trying to build new lives. His four other brothers — Jacques, Robert, Carlos and Pierre — had not survived the violence and hardships that had struck their family.

Belgium was not a dream destination for Michel. He knew almost nothing about the country, except that Janice had returned there after

her time in Lebanon, where their paths had crossed. She would have preferred to stay, but her father, a diplomat, had been recalled to Brussels to resume his duties at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Through Janice, Belgium had acquired something familiar in Michel's eyes, although he knew it only from her stories. It was not a country he had dreamt of for years, but somewhere to which he felt connected in one way or another. Above all, it offered him something he had begun to long for more and more: the possibility of leaving his past behind and making a fresh start elsewhere.

His mother did not oppose his departure, but neither did she welcome it. She had already lost too many sons: some taken by war, others carried away by the distances of exile. Even a son who left alive left an emptiness behind.

On the night before his journey, Michel barely slept. He wandered through the house, trying to commit to memory the details no one consciously notices while they still expect to return the following day: the strip of light beneath a door, the sound of a tap, the place where his father put his shoes, the way his mother covered the bread with a cloth.

At dawn, he said his goodbyes.

Years later, he told my mother he had not cried on the way to the airport. She did not believe him. Neither did I.

3. What Cannot Be Arranged

Brussels greeted him beneath a grey sky, with a persistent drizzle that made the streets gleam. The following morning, the sun suddenly broke through the clouds, as though the city had decided to show him an entirely different face. Michel soon discovered that the Belgian climate was as changeable as it was unpredictable. Rain and sunshine sometimes alternated several times within the space of an hour, and a radiant morning was no guarantee of a dry afternoon. In Belgium, he learnt that it was best never to leave home without a jacket, even when the sun was shining. It was one of the first peculiarities of his new country to which he would have to grow accustomed.

That detail appears in three different family accounts, which leads me to believe it is true. Michel had arrived with a single suitcase, a coat unsuited to the climate and the address of one of his brothers in his inside pocket. He had imagined that his family would help him overcome the first difficulties of settling in. He was mistaken.

His brothers had families of their own, problems of their own and their own ideas about the obligations they still owed one another. Michel was able to stay with Elias for the first few days, but it soon became clear that the arrangement could not continue. Vartan had no room for him either. What had seemed self-evident in his Palestinian family — that family members took one another in and protected their own — now came up against the realities of life in Belgium: cramped flats, partners, financial constraints and lives that had gradually developed apart.

Michel took the rejection more deeply to heart than he would later admit. It was not that he thought his brothers were bad people. Rather, he was discovering for the first time that geographical closeness did not guarantee emotional bonds. People could live in the same city and feel further apart than they had during a war.

Through the reception services, he eventually found himself at the Petit Château, the Brussels reception centre for asylum seekers. There he discovered a new way of waiting. During his childhood in Palestine, waiting had sometimes meant listening for signs that the

danger had passed. In Belgium, it meant forms, appointments, counters, numbers and sentences he could not understand.

John was one of the first men Michel met in Belgium who saw him as something more than a refugee. He worked with newcomers and, according to Michel's recollections, almost always wore a raincoat, even when not a drop of rain was falling. It may seem an insignificant detail, but those are precisely the little things that remain lodged in our memories. Imaginary characters are given distinguishing features. Real people have habits.

At first, John spoke slowly to him in French, supplementing his explanations in English whenever necessary. Gradually, he began speaking Dutch more and more often. He believed that Michel should learn the language too if he wanted to build a life in Belgium. Michel readily accepted the challenge. Languages interested him, and Dutch soon became far more than a practical necessity: it offered a way of better understanding the world in which he had arrived.

Christine, John's wife, helped him tackle the practical difficulties of his new life. She explained how to reply to official letters, which documents to bring to an appointment at the municipal offices and why certain procedures required patience. Whenever he grew irritated by a form or an incomprehensible rule, she calmly took the time to work out with him exactly what was expected. But above all, she taught him something else: a favour need not create a debt.

At her home, a meal would be waiting without anyone asking when he intended to repay it. At first, that made him uncomfortable. In Michel's world, people remembered almost every favour they received. Not necessarily out of calculation: reciprocity was part of the social order. Christine could offer him soup, give him a coat or find him a second-hand wardrobe, then behave as though nothing between them had changed.

Michel had already thanked her several times for everything she did for him. Each time, Christine smiled as though she considered his gratitude a little excessive.

‘You don't need to thank me all the time, Michel. I'm simply doing what I think is right.’

‘But without your help, I wouldn't be where I am today,’ he replied. ‘I'll never forget that.’

Christine looked at him for a moment, then put down her pen.

‘Do you know the Gospel according to Saint Matthew?’ she asked.

Michel nodded hesitantly.

‘In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says something I've always found particularly beautiful: when you give to those in need, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.’

She allowed her words to sink in.

‘Do you know what that means? That we should be capable of doing good without expecting anything in return. Without feeling the need to tell everyone about it. And without making the person we help feel indebted to us for the rest of their life.’

Michel remained silent. He had often observed that a favour was seldom entirely disinterested. Whoever received something was expected to return the favour sooner or later. That was how he had come to understand the world.

‘But everyone expects something in return, don't they?’ he asked.

‘Perhaps,’ Christine replied. ‘But I'd like to believe there are also people who help others simply because those people need help. Not because they want to oblige them to return the favour one day.’

She pushed the documents towards him.

‘So, if you really want to thank me, make sure you build something of a life for yourself here. And if one day you meet someone who needs the same help you need today, remember this conversation.’

Michel lowered his eyes to the papers before him. He could not yet imagine how often Christine's words would return to him over the course of his life. Not because he would always put them into practice, but precisely because he would gradually discover how difficult it is to give without hoping, even unconsciously, to receive something in return.

A few months later, he obtained his first home in Wilrijk, on an ordinary street opposite a park whose name seemed almost too beautiful to be true: the Garden of Eden Park. It was precisely that ordinariness that felt luxurious to him. A door of his own, which he could close behind him. A bed that would still be in the same place the following morning. After so many years in surroundings where everyone knew everything about everyone else's lives, he found it almost liberating that his neighbours simply left him alone.

What surprised Michel most in Belgium was not the great differences but the little things to which nobody seemed to attach the slightest importance.

Children, for example. They played peacefully in the street, kicked footballs against walls and sometimes disappeared from their parents' sight for several minutes. Nobody called them back anxiously. Nobody seemed constantly to wonder what danger might be lurking around the corner. For Michel, who had grown up in a country where a game of football could be abruptly interrupted by gunfire or an explosion, that carefree attitude was almost beyond comprehension.

He could not then have imagined that this sense of safety would itself be profoundly shaken in Belgium a few years later. In the summer of 1996, the Marc Dutroux affair would shock the country. The horrific abductions and murders of young girls would awaken a fear in countless parents that had perhaps never before been felt so intensely. For many, letting children play outside alone would no longer seem quite so natural.

But that belonged to another story, one that would unfold only several years later. For now, Michel was still at the beginning of his new life. He watched the children at play and marvelled at a

freedom he had scarcely known in his homeland: the freedom to be a child without constantly having to remain on guard.

The shops astonished him too. It was not that he had never seen well-stocked shops, but here the shelves were replenished every morning. Bread, milk, fruit, chocolate. People bought what they needed without wondering whether those products would still be available the following day. They became annoyed when something was sold out, as though its absence were a personal insult.

One morning, he saw a woman leave her purse on the counter of a bakery while putting her purchases into her bag. The shopkeeper quietly drew her attention to it. She thanked him, smiled and left. Michel stood still for a moment. It was not the baker's honesty that surprised him, but the casual way the woman had left her money unattended, even if only for a few moments.

It took him longer to grow accustomed to the sounds. Whenever a door slammed unexpectedly, he instinctively looked up. Hearing an aircraft flying low overhead, he sometimes found himself slowing his pace without realising it. The people around him did not react. They heard an aeroplane. He heard something else first, something that faded only when he reminded himself where he was.

Some habits were equally difficult for him to understand. Belgians complained about the rain, about politics and, above all, about delays to public transport. One day, he heard a man indignantly protesting that his tram was already seven minutes late. Michel could not help smiling. Seven minutes. In his homeland, he had sometimes waited for hours without even knowing whether anything would turn up at all.

But what struck him perhaps most of all was the ease with which people spoke of the future. They made plans for the summer, discussed holidays and arranged to meet at birthday celebrations that were still months away. Nobody felt the need to add: if circumstances permit.

Little by little, Michel began to understand that peace was more than the absence of war. Peace was also the freedom to worry about

trivial things. To grumble about the weather. To make an appointment without first having to wonder whether the road there would be safe.

And yet he did not immediately feel at home. The streets were safe, but the people remained strangers. In the region where he had grown up, he had learnt that people needed one another in order to survive. Here, everyone seemed chiefly concerned not to inconvenience anyone else.

He discovered that a person could feel lost in two very different ways: in a country where danger threatened at every moment, and in a country where nobody wished him harm but where, for the time being, nobody was waiting for him either.

4. The Price of a Favour

My mother has no personal memory of the first house she lived in at Wilrijk. She was still too young. Everything she knew about it came from Natalia's stories and the little details that were mentioned time and again within the family. It was a modest house in Vaderlandstraat, with windows overlooking the street, a small kitchen and a radiator which, during the winter months, regularly made clicking sounds, as though someone behind the wall were tapping the heating pipes with a teaspoon.

Michel liked that sound. At first Natalia found it strange that something so ordinary should reassure him, but to him it meant much more than the mere presence of hot water in a radiator. It was proof that some things simply worked as they were supposed to. You turned a knob, the pipes grew warm and a few moments later heat spread through the room. Nobody had to intervene. No telephone calls, favours, negotiations or complicated arrangements were needed.

Perhaps that was one of the greatest differences between his former life and his new one. In Belgium he could increasingly rely on things continuing to function without his personal intervention.

Family life imposed a regularity on him that he would never have chosen of his own accord. His days were now shaped by feeding bottles, nappies, medical appointments, shopping and the small worries that come with a young child. Joena had ultimately survived her difficult start in life, but her frailty remained a particular cause for concern during the first few months. Natalia carefully recorded the times when her daughter needed feeding, how much milk she drank and her appointments at the hospital.

Michel admired the natural ease with which she organised it all. Where he saw every day primarily in terms of new possibilities, Natalia saw what needed to be done that day. She could plan an entire week without losing sight of what mattered. He preferred to imagine everything that might become possible during that same week.

That difference sometimes caused minor tensions, but it also made them complementary. Natalia gave their life a rhythm. Michel tried to broaden its horizons.

During the day he spent more and more time at his brother Elias's garage. The motor trade was an excellent school for him, not merely because it taught him about vehicles and their technical characteristics, but above all because he met people who did business across borders.

Some customers came from France, others from the Netherlands or Germany. There were dealers who bought cars to resell elsewhere, middlemen looking for particular models and buyers who knew exactly which vehicles were especially sought after in which countries.

Michel discovered that the same car might have a very different value in Brussels, Marseille, Antwerp or Kinshasa. These differences could not be explained solely by transport costs, taxes or customs duties. Local preferences, the availability of spare parts and the reputation of certain brands also played a role. A vehicle that attracted almost no interest in Belgium might be much sought after elsewhere. Conversely, a model that sold readily here could struggle to find a buyer in another country.

Gradually, however, Michel began to understand that the car itself was only part of the transaction. Everything that came before and after the sale was at least as important. Who would arrange transport? Who knew a reliable driver who kept his promises? Which freight forwarder knew how to prepare the paperwork properly? Which insurer understood the problems that might arise when a vehicle had to cross several borders? Who would still answer the telephone outside office hours if a delivery risked being held up?

Michel was constantly asking such questions. He listened closely to conversations others considered uninteresting and remembered names mentioned in passing. He learnt who knew whom, which people had worked together before and whom to approach when the usual procedures led nowhere.

His knowledge of languages proved particularly useful. He spoke Arabic, managed in French and had by now learnt enough Dutch to hold simple conversations. When words failed him, he substituted gestures, a smile or lengthy explanations. His sentences were not always grammatically correct, but people generally understood what he meant.

And, just as importantly, he often understood what others meant even when they did not say it outright.

That was how he gradually made himself indispensable in situations where people could not easily understand one another.

He accompanied a foreign trader to a government office because the man spoke hardly any French. He helped a buyer explain a complicated insurance problem. He found a garage for a driver who had broken down and introduced two dealers because he sensed they might be useful to one another.

Not every intervention earned him money. Sometimes he received an invitation to dinner, sometimes a modest fee, sometimes merely a handshake and a promise that he would not be forgotten. But almost invariably he gained something he considered at least as valuable: a name and a telephone number.

To Michel, telephone numbers were a form of capital. He wrote them on scraps of paper and in small notebooks he carried everywhere. Whenever he met someone, he wanted to know what that person did, whom they worked with and how they might one day be of use to him.

One evening, sitting at the kitchen table, he finally set about organising the papers that had accumulated in his pockets and drawers. Before him lay a new address book into which he carefully copied names, addresses and telephone numbers.

Natalia watched him for a while.

“Do you really know all these people?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“I don’t believe you. You’ve probably met some of them only once.”

Michel smiled without looking up.

“Once can be enough.”

“Then why are you so determined to keep their telephone numbers?”

“Because you never know when you might need someone.”

Natalia was silent for a moment.

“And what happens when they need you?”

“They call me.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

He put down his pen.

“What do you mean, then?”

Natalia gently pushed the address book aside and laid her hand on it.

“Every name you write down can become an obligation. You can’t keep asking people for favours without their eventually expecting you to return them.”

Michel shrugged.

“That’s normal, isn’t it? That’s how people help each other.”

“Yes,” she replied. “But you still need to know where helping each other ends and obligation begins.”

He burst out laughing.

“You make things far too complicated.”

To him it was simple. People who helped one another formed bonds. And the more people he knew, the less he had to rely entirely on himself. Natalia sensed something he preferred not to see: a network of reciprocal favours could also become a network of mutual dependencies.

My mother knew this conversation only through Natalia’s recollections. Yet she often retold it, believing it revealed more about her father than many detailed accounts of his commercial successes. Michel saw a possibility in every new acquaintance. Natalia wondered about the responsibilities that might follow. Neither was necessarily wrong.

Meanwhile, business progressed slowly. Much more slowly than later accounts of Michel’s first years in Belgium would suggest. Those stories sometimes gave the impression that he had arrived with an exceptional commercial instinct that had led almost naturally to success. The reality was less straightforward.

There were months when cars remained unsold, customers withdrew at the last minute and payments arrived long after the agreed deadlines. Sometimes Michel bought a vehicle only to discover that he had paid too much. He trusted people who failed to keep their promises and entered into agreements whose consequences he had not sufficiently considered.

Sometimes he himself aroused suspicion. He was young, spoke French with an accent and tended to express great confidence on subjects in which he still lacked experience. Some older traders thought him too forward. Others saw little more than Elias’s younger brother, with a great deal still to learn about life. It hurt him more than he let on.

But Michel was not a man to dwell on disappointment. When a sale fell through, he sought another buyer. When a customer broke his word, he called someone else. And when he realised his knowledge

was inadequate, he did everything he could to remedy the deficiency as quickly as possible.

One more journey. One more conversation. One more telephone number.

That was how he gradually acquired a reputation as someone able to resolve problems that others preferred not to confront.

A missing consignment note, an incorrectly completed form, a delivery sent to the wrong address: to Michel, none was sufficient reason to abandon a transaction. First he tried to understand precisely where the problem lay, then he looked for someone who could help.

When a clerk told him to come back the next day, Michel asked whether another department was still open. When a delivery was delayed, he sought an alternative. And when a customer could not pay on time, he explored whether other terms might be agreed and properly recorded in writing. He found that many difficulties were less insurmountable than they initially seemed. Often it was enough to ask the right person the right question.

There was nothing objectionable about that in itself. Quite the opposite: much of entrepreneurship consists precisely in finding practical solutions to difficulties that others resign themselves to. But an approach that helps someone advance in one situation may lead them down a dangerous path in another. In Michel's case, that shift did not happen suddenly. It began with small exceptions.

One day, a customer was at risk of losing an important deal because an administrative deadline had expired. Under the normal procedure, the entire application would have to be resubmitted, causing a substantial delay.

Michel now knew someone who worked in the relevant department. He called the man, explained what had happened and asked whether there really was no alternative. The man hesitated, but eventually suggested that he might be able to process the application after all.

Michel regarded this as a victory. The customer had been helped, nobody appeared to have suffered and the transaction could proceed.

What struck him most was the ease with which a seemingly insurmountable problem had disappeared once he had found the right person. He gave little thought to why his customer had been granted an exception that might not be offered to others.

It was only a minor incident, without the dramatic significance one might easily attribute to it in hindsight. Yet it revealed a conviction increasingly taking hold in Michel's mind. Rules were no longer, in his eyes, merely requirements to be obeyed. He increasingly regarded them as procedures whose application depended on the people entrusted with implementing them. And with people, there was always room for discussion.

Meanwhile, Joena was growing up at home, unaware of the world of contracts, deliveries and telephone conversations that occupied more and more of her father's attention.

To her, Michel was simply the man who lifted her into his arms, pulled faces and invented funny noises to make her laugh. Some days he came home early and took all the time he wanted to play with her. On other evenings, he promised to return before dinner, but she had been asleep for hours by the time he finally came through the door.

It was not so much a missed appointment that upset Natalia. What worried her was the constant unpredictability.

Michel left home each morning with a schedule that could be completely overturned by noon. An unexpected telephone call, an interesting meeting or a delivery problem could disrupt the rest of his day. He considered that perfectly normal. Business opportunities came when they came.

Natalia, however, believed that a family could not remain permanently at the mercy of those opportunities. Even so, she understood his ambitions. Michel wanted to go beyond the modest