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## The Last Lie of Pinocchio

Everybody else calls him « Pinocchio ». Not me, no! Besides, very few in town know his real name. It would take an inquiring ill-advised stranger the better part of a day to locate Mr. Kamel Bourwila, but less than five minutes if he used the infamous pseudonym instead. Obviously, he is not made of wood. His similarity with Pinocchio, people believe, is rather abstract and temperamental. His Roman nose keeps shape and size even when he is in the middle of the inventive, creative process of “pinocchiation.” There must be some revealing signs, however. Villagers can tell a hen is laying egg by the squeaking cackle it makes, but they fervently disagree as to the symptoms on Kamel’s face and body when mendacious rabbits jump out his mouth; some believe it is his eyes that start blinking nervously, others argue it is the sweat beads that emerge and twinkle on his forehead, whereas two or three elderlies would bet their last dinar it is the flickering, villainous smile on his thin bluish lips. They have known him ever since he was a baby, when his beautiful mother, Zoulikha, barely eighteen, fled her old awful husband in the Roma caravan.

We called them *Gitanos* back then, and we waited their late summer arrival on mule-drawn carriages with some impatience, each for different reasons. Some in order to fix their farm tools, and sharpen their cleavers, others to trade their rags and utensils for some big-uddered goat or mean-tempered dog, women in particular to foresee their tragic future and twisted fates, and a handful guys, tired of their ageing wives, to mess around with exotic, tattooed, richly perfumed hookers. Even this far in time and place I clearly remember Zica’s delicate features and long, wavy, dark-brown hair. She was appealingly slender, her eyes two screaming shimmering sapphires, her pouting, rouged lips a luscious strawberry. It hurt me like a knife that Djillali, my neighbor, had his way with her. I so hated him but there was nothing I could do about it, except telling his retarded son who didn’t give a damn, but could in a moment of lucidity report to his mother. I found my way into the Gitano’s tents once to consult a seer of wide renown at my mother’s request. Having just passed the “sixième,” Ma was so curious what the stars had in stock for me, her only boy. She entrusted me with a black rooster and some coins and sent me running to their camp in the scorching heat of an August afternoon, when Father was having a nap. The ferocious barking dogs almost convinced me to retrace my steps. Griba’s place was pitch dark and stuffy. I had to wait a couple of minutes, suffocated with incense, paralyzed by fear, before I could make out her face and everything about her. Her haggard face was cobwebbed with a bluish grid, and furrowed with the plow of time. My eyes avoided it and resided on the

rifle hung behind her. She threw her cowrie shells, turned up her cards, studied my hand, and lifted up her face to contemplate mine.

“What is your name, kid?” She asked with a husky liquid voice betraying decades of pipe-smoking. I thought it ridiculous that a fortune teller of her caliber failed to know her clients’ names.

“Khaled!” I was about to give my full name when I remembered she knew most of the women in town. “Son of Wahiba”, I added instead.

All I wanted then was to put distance between me and scary, mustached Griba. I hated the bony touch of her hand, I misunderstood her gibberish too.

“You will be saved, Khaled! I see you standing firm, alone, when the swarm around you flutters to the burning fire. Beware, boy, when the creek reaches the river! When the ripe fruit is back on the branch, and the lost bird returns to nest!”

Father wouldn’t be happy. Our parents warned us against the *Gitanos*. They were godless, they cast spells, drank alcohol, bathed naked in the river, kidnapped children and had no scruples whatsoever; but they were desperately needed too. They brought us mysterious news from distant lands, but prime hashish too. They told us saucy tales and bawdy jokes, but helped us with the end-of-season toil as well. We loved to hate them, but couldn’t completely. Kamel’s mother, however, took the plunge with Loco, a dark lean young fellow with glittering black eyes that spelled awful secrets and brazen debauchery. He fled with our Helen leaving her baby to his puzzled father, Ammi Abdakka, and a gossip-mongering community. Ammi Abdakka didn’t believe in karma and had never heard of the universally acknowledged wisdom: “If your women are made of desire, don’t throw the others’ with libido”. He was suspicious of Mourad, her loving cousin, not of Gypsies. Laden with shame, he just disappeared one rainy day.

Three years earlier, Mourad had been sent seven thousand miles away to punish the Vietnamese for their effrontery, their refusal to be civilized. He had been captured, trained and recruited (all in three weeks) by the French who had been civilizing Algeria for over one century. The French didn’t dare to face angry swarms of “Gooks” alone. They called them *bols de riz, faces de citron*, but there ended their bravery, at the slur level. They used the North Africans and the Senegalese as cannon fodder; starved soldiers on the front not even knowing where they were. Death was a piece of cake in Nam, one felt it all around, smelled it, tasted it, touched it. One stepped on a branch only to discover it was a gook in ambush, peed on a trunk only to realize it was an enemy in disguise, leaned on a rock only to find out it was a platoon of communists in camouflage. Mourad and three lucky compatriots were captured alive in a battle where twenty-five clueless soldiers were killed. *Bleu, Blanc, Rouge* meant nothing to them, nor did *La Marseillaise* for that matter; they were not *enfants de la Patrie* and their only real *jour de gloire* would be the day they saw family and friends again. The Vietnamese understood from the little French he spoke that he was Algerian. “You couldn’t free your own land, and here you come to fight for your masters?! What kind of

base slaves are you?" They led them through the densest jungle he had ever seen. His hands tied behind him, his head banged down with a stock of a Kalashnikov every time he wanted to locate himself or gather some sense of direction. Crusted blood on his left temple, Mourad knew he was going to dance some steps to electric shocks, or sing heartily to some enthusiastic pinches and curious pokes. He thought of suicide by trying to escape, a hail of 7.62×39mm would be so kind and welcome, like the hug of a sister. Reaching the makeshift headquarters, he was an exhausted specter, a mere shadow of former healthy, handsome Mourad. A tall and lean captain came out; the escorts addressed him in French! He ordered them to untie the captives. Mourad examined his bruised, swollen hands, knowing his nails were about to be pulled off. He was astonished when the captain offered them hot lentil soup and half a chicken. It was the most delicious meal in his entire life. Before long, he dropped like a log and wished to die in sleep, full, warm, and snug. Two hours later, they were awakened, and the captain, beret removed, looked so un-Vietnamese! Besides, he started to speak in Arabic, Algerian Arabic! Mourad could swear it was his very local dialect. Jaws dropped when he told them he was Algerian too, brought by force to fight the Viets, before he deserted and joined the "enemy". He fought with remarkable zeal and bravery, and was soon made chief of his Company. The chief was in hysterics when he realized Mourad was from the same village, Miliana: two villagers, almost neighbors, meeting for the first time half a world away, in battle, with the ghosts of death so heavy in the air, and the scarlet of blood so fresh in wounds and garments. Life is crazy! Who would he meet next, his mother in a Hanoi bistro? Zoulikha in a rice picking hat?

Mourad was released after two months of captivity and came back from Indochina but the Captain remained there till well after the intervention of the Yankees and the Independence of his country. Villagers asked him about their young sons, their husbands, and their brothers, shipped like stock many years earlier, never to be heard of. He broke so many hearts, and kindled many flames of hope. Mourad was treated like a hero by most. Ammi Abdakka, however, hated his return and started to observe Zoulikha's behavior very intently. He was on the lookout, sniffing the least change in her tone and habits, fearing a possible secret meeting on her way to fill the water jar, or to offer candles and coins at the local shrine of Sidi Bouderga, the revered saint, the silent witness of so many infidelities, the host of countless trysts, innocent and not so innocent. He received with the same indifference (or was it tolerance?) the pious who came to pray and the daring who came to love. Poor old Abdakka! For all his long years, he never knew women enough, never took in their incredible acting talents, their stealth and rock-breaking patience before they hit at the very opportune moment.

Mourad was completely shattered with the news! Ammi Abdakka, of all men! Wrinkled, hunch-backed, and stubborn as he was! Mourad despised her father, Si Lakhdar, for selling her like that; he couldn't bear the look of him anymore. Zoulikha heard of his smothering pain,

she crumbled in grief, but made sure to keep it to herself, deep inside, in one of those tight dark compartments in a woman's heart, like safe-deposit boxes at a Swiss bank, under lock and key, inaccessible, ever. She couldn't fool herself however; she knew she secretly reveled in his desperate sorrow too. His love was grand and genuine after all. What young woman does not feel flattered and proud to be the object of such devotion, hopeless as it might be? But Zoulikha could barely conceal her daunting agony when Mourad, desolate and exasperated, crossed the Mediterranean on a creaky boat and settled in the outskirts of Paris, commuting for a menial job at Renault, in Boulogne-Billancourt. She knew something had to be done in revenge, to spite her father, disgrace her husband, and shame her village. She had to wait however. Something was kicking inside her. And she waited. Four long, miserable months before the baby arrived. Pinocchio took his first breath on July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1954, the very day 22 FLN leaders decided they'd had enough with "*L'Algérie Française*", and wanted to deal the colonizer the same blows and strikes General Giap had delivered in Dien Bien Phu. Abdakka was delighted with the baby, but Zoulikha was calm, so ominously calm, a stalking prowling predator, an imminent storm, a coiled up cobra.

I didn't witness any of that, however. I was a toddler then. I am a couple of years Kamel's senior and we played and herded the villagers' sheep together. Shepherding is the best training a child can get, ever. It works one's whole body, one's voice, patience, and vision. It makes you cautious and alert. So long ago when a fellow student "playfully" threw a snow ball at me from a fair distance, I knew for sure and told her at once, regardless of her adopted urban manners and borrowed city dialect, that she must have grown up in a farm house. I explained that no city girl threw a projectile that hard, only a herding country girl could develop that strength, range, precision and technique, for my shoulder blade was nearly dislocated with her playfulness; mistaking me for some straying ram, no doubt. She hated me ever since, Miss Hayseed, a dry and withered carob pod trying to look banana, smell banana and taste banana. I am ashamed to admit that ever since that incident I couldn't help producing some teasing *baa's* whenever my shepherdess was around. The kettle calling the pot black?

But shepherding also builds and cements trust between co-herders. That was how I came to know Kamel very well, in his "pre-pinocchio" phase, and that is why I trusted Kamel alone and solicited his advice every time I fell in trouble. I was poor and he was worse, an orphan raised by a poor, childless uncle. He did all the housework, he milked the cow (only girls did that in my village), he collected firewood from the forest, fetched water, fed the dogs and chickens, swept the stable, he did everything. His uncle was far from a savior or benefactor, he was worse than a colonizer. I used to look at him, skinny and miserable, a cowlick in his hair, toiling in his greasy smelly rags, his feet rotting in nylon boots all the year round, not leaving them even when ripped, having to mend and sew them several times, and all of a sudden my life seemed so lucky and very pleasant to me. They were

very daunting days, even for the best of us. The insurgents, then called 'el khawa' (the brothers), taxing us so dearly, eating at our tables, sleeping in the little warmth of our beds unbeknownst to the colonial authorities, while we kept watch for fear of the French.

Kamel was no liar, no matter what everybody else tells you, well... no more liar than any one of us. He was rather more of a victim of both his ignorant surroundings and his weird personality. He never minded people's opinions, and barely considered communal reputation. He was self-contained, and finite, and had no place for town folks and their rumors! People for him were agents he bought from or worked for, neighbors he greeted every morning or occasionally helped with their harvest. People didn't treat him any better; they liked to make fun of him and recount the latest of his outrageous absurdities. They needed to despise his fibs; they gauged their correctitude against his deviation. He gave them security and self-satisfaction. They would certainly have invented a Pinocchio had there been none. They were all liars, and he was their greatest lie.

It all started one freezing morning when Kamel told his peers in the Koranic School that he had narrowly escaped being crushed by a falling tree one week earlier. "It must have missed me by less than a foot," he claimed. It was not windy that day. Wind storms in our town are a rarity, and there are more people in our communal annals who died with laughter or were kidnapped by aliens than victims of falling trees. For most of fellow pupils, it was a brash attempt at self-advertisement, a pathetic hankering for public attention. You can say anything you like in my town if you are rich and glamorous, and people would buy it voluntarily, and even repeat it with genuine interest and fervent belief. Not just my secluded town I'm afraid. But Kamel was an orphan and miserable, a potential liar, that is. Why would any tree in town choose *him* for drama? When he countered their disbelief by naming an eyewitness, his audience bent over with laughter at his shameless brazenness. Ever unfortunate, his witness, Ammi Boualem, had died two days earlier unbeknownst to him. Liars are advised to scatter their witnesses afar, the farther the better, and here was Kamel doing even better: killing them altogether! Yet I knew he was completely truthful.

Kamel ventured deeper in his fantasy world. People gave up any faint wishes they might have entertained about him maturing up out of his shameful sin when, at twenty, he swore to his unbelieving listeners that one boulder he had first seen a long time before grew much bigger. Even before he was done with details, furtive glances at one another turned to shrieks of laughter and much head shaking. Even in Lewis Carroll's wonderland, stones and rocks refrain from doing that. Kamel didn't care to explain but once again I knew he was completely truthful.

The army had discovered in him an excellent marksman, a disciplined, trustworthy soldier. His commanders had urged him to engage, and listed the advantages of his so doing, but he declined. He learnt carpentry in their workshops and left after the two compulsory years, to work in the fields and restaurants and building sites all over

the country, for long, long years. He was away most of the time, and never was homesick or hesitated to take a job because of distance. He toiled and travelled and struggled till he saved enough money for the carpentry workshop and the tools he needed. That was before he decided that the best place was home, and the best friend and companion was Kahlousha, his German shepherd, long dead and replaced by her lazy son Tito, himself far from young now.

As if to make up for the long absence, he rarely left home now: working till evening, smoking his pipe at the gate under the kind observation of his dog. The village was bleeding its youth. The country was deeply enmeshed in civil war and young men were dying on both sides. Something different seemed to torment him however. He returned from his travels a different man. There were those mysterious, monthly, two-day-long absences. Idle loafers couldn't fail to notice them, and the curious didn't hesitate to ask, but Kamel had long ceased to mind people's questions. He just urged them to mind their own business. I liked to pop up once in a good while in his workshop and talk a little. His dog deaf with all the noise it succumbed to over the years.

Pinocchio had always been Kamel to me; I had known him too well to doubt his veracity. He was as honest and truthful as an altar boy, all along, even about the tree that tarnished his image. Our colleagues in school didn't know Toto and his ways. A homeless fool, Toto used, at chilly nights, to build fire on trees bordering our path, to get some warmth. That fated morning of the accident, fire had eaten away most of the tree's trunk, and poor young Kamel, heading to school so early in the morning, tricked death by a few inches. It didn't have to be a storm. As to the rock, Kamel meant the sediment boulder in Hammam Bouhnifia, a distant sauna he'd visited first as a child with his uncle, and then, twelve years later, solo as an army drafter in that region. Every year, hot streaming water coated it with a few-centimeter-thick layer and Kamel was impressed by the growth. But Kamel was not fully honest about his maid.

Confident of his eternal celibacy, I advised him one day to get himself a help, a woman to take care of his beddings, and food. He gave me a surprised look, grateful that I asked maybe! He had never agreed that quickly. Two weeks later, a woman was there. She was way too old however! I knew he couldn't pay a young woman to do his chores without the whole nousey town brandishing its slanderous tongues with a million infamies. But this Hajja Z'hor who must have been quite attractive back in her day, was too frail for the job. She rarely ventured out herself. Kamel told me she was a prodigious cook, and I had opportunity to see for myself. Her *H'rira* is certainly better than any I have tasted, but her *M'hajeb* and *Shakhshoukha* are beyond par, almost exotic. She must have been for faraway places and worked in many a household before my poor friend's. When Pinocchio died of lung cancer three years later, I was devastated with sorrow and she cried her eyes out. Everyone believed he had been so good to his old maid. But I knew he was untruthful and that she was his biggest lie. I kept his secret ever since. Kissing her head on his funeral day, I asked

her to work in my house, and as I write this testimony, I watch her tattooed arms prepare me an excellent coffee with rose water and clover. And I am so tempted to ask her about Zica.