

# Kolea. Somewhere between the town hall in the centre of town

and the surrounding hills there used to be, some years ago, a neighbourhood called Tombourouf. Who remembers it today? The small house where I am welcomed is sad. Nonetheless, the sky is blue and the smell of the mimosas makes me think of spring. The family are all there to listen to their mother. To interrupt her, to make sure that she doesn't talk about certain things. The words they say, caught by my sensitive microphone, lend a breathing space to a period that's too short. A break in the middle of anxiety. A pause.

It's clear that the mother doesn't want to cry. Her weakness doesn't matter. The story is enough. An ode to someone absent. "I knew that he'd be arrested sooner or later. As soon as people started talking about the arrests, I asked him to shave off his beard. His older brother even begged him to go to the countryside for a few days. You see, in June he stayed quietly at

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home. But this time he went out every evening. I don't even know where he went. He'd come back late at night. Sometimes, I didn't speak to him at all for two or three days. Ramadan without him is going to be sad. Politics? Of course, he was involved. Like all the boys in the neighbourhood. They're all FIS here. Except the children of the jeweller. Yazid, my boy, didn't get on with them much, because they preferred HAMAS. As for me, I don't understand anything. All I know is that he's down there in the south, and I don't know when I'm going to be able to see him."

The older brother explains things. Yazid was the most active and the most militant of all the boys. He makes an open gesture. "Of course, they left school too early. That's normal. I'm also FIS, but we never agreed on all points." Yazid was arrested at night as he was coming home. His family saw nothing, knew nothing. It was a neighbour who told them. Sighs from the mother.

"It seems that he wanted to let me know, but the soldiers refused. I don't know if I should believe all that because the neighbour exaggerates.

"But why didn't they tell me? Even if he did a thousand stupid things, I've the right to go see him. And who knows if he's in good health? He's not even 20 years old, and I'm afraid for him.

"Prison is Hell. Now I ask of everyone, even you, to make a prayer of supplication for him. So that he return safe and sound..."

**El-Biar**, the infamous housing estate of Africana. Yesterday, people said that it was the territory of young delinquents, prowlers and car thieves; today, other things are said. The new term "Islamist" isn't used yet. A tiny two room apartment.

Curiously, there's nothing framed on the wall, not even a verse of the Quran. The mother's eyes are hostile. Her son told her that journalists always lie.

"They came at ten o'clock in the evening. We were watching TV. From the way they knocked at the door, I understood. He did, as well, and he turned pale. At first,

everything was alright. One of them told him to be cool and everything would be fine. And then my son called them Jews. The first time they pretended not to hear. Then he said it again, louder, and their chief slapped him. I screamed, because it was as if they had hit me.

"His father tried to calm them, but it was too late. Even the neighbours came down to see what was going on. My son was screaming and so were they. They called him every kind of name, but other than that one slap they didn't hit him again. I don't even know what he did other than that he was with the *khwanjiya*—the Muslim Brothers. Maybe it's because of that, but his father and I know nothing of what he and his brothers do. As for the girls, they stay at home. In their case at least we know, but when the boys go out it's finished. Maybe the imbecile did do something, but don't you think that's normal? Look how crowded we are. He wanted to get married this summer, and his father refused because it's impossible for one more woman to live here. So he started going out all the time, went into politics and the mosque. I was happy because he wasn't going out to get drunk or into trouble. Tell me, do you think that the people who go to bars are also being sent to the south?

"I'm scared. Because what they're doing will do no good. When he gets out, he'll start all over again. Because he has nothing else to do. They say that there's going to be work for all the young people, and housing. But if he stays down there too long, he'll miss all that. Do you think that he'll be able to get a job after all that?"

**Hydra.** The real neighbourhood of the smart set where Farid rode around in a VW Golf and had everything that a young *hittiste*—a street-corner boy—dreams about. Farid, the son of a bourgeois bureaucrat, belonged to and was an active militant in the FIS. His story is much more common than one might think.

His mother is an English teacher. For the last year there has been a long hostile silence between her and her son. Then he was arrested. Her words are hard.

"He had become so intolerable that all I wanted was for him

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to leave the house. At first I thought he was going through a bad patch, but things got worse and he began to try to control our lives.

"I didn't think that he'd get carried away. I suspected that he was close to the Islamists, that he was making lots of things available to them, like for example his computer; but to go from there to thinking that he was an activist... His father and I tried to find out where he was, but at those moments doors are closed and you can count your friends on one finger. So we waited. Do I seem worried? I am and I'm not, at the same time. I can't believe it. Not really. I think to myself that they just want to frighten them, that it's a lesson; but sometimes I imagine him alone and unhappy, and then I go to pieces. His father says that this will teach him a lesson. I don't know. Where he's at, they're all together, and I fear that when he comes back he'll be even further from us. They'd better not hurt him."

The father intervenes, mentions the League for the Defense of Human Rights and Amnesty International. She's reassured, falls silent. The cigarette almost drops from her hand. She shakes her head. "The worst thing is that I'm sure that deep down inside himself he's happy about what has happened to him. He never stopped talking about Afghanistan. We did nothing for him to get a reprieve, and so he hasn't been able to get released. But, there, imprisoned with all those FIS people... That will be his future glory.

"I miss him, and despite all that I've just said my only wish is that he come back soon. Very soon."

The housing estate of **Montagne** seems to sway under the rain. Life there takes on a predictable appearance. A serene facade. Nothing more to say, to write about this neighbourhood. Too many words, clichés. In this family there's another kind of unease.

Their son hasn't been arrested, at least for the moment. Their story is interrupted by sobs. "When Chadli resigned, my son became infuriated; then two or three days later he calmed down. His eyes were full of laughter. One evening, he prepared a basket, didn't say a thing, neither where he was going, nor what

he was going to do; before leaving he spoke with his brother, that's all. He asked me to make an invocation to God for His blessing, and since then we've had no news. A friend of his who worked with him at the post office told me that he'd cashed in all his savings; he left me a bit of money, but he kept a lot of it. One morning the gendarmes came; they didn't want to believe me. They questioned all of the neighbours. You know, it's impossible to get on with everyone; perhaps some of them said something. I don't know what's going to happen.

"He could be anywhere, even in prison without our knowing when or why. I've no longer any desire to do anything, even for Ramadan.

"Luckily my sister's here to help me. For her, it's her husband; but at least she knows where he is, and maybe she'll go to see him. By talking to you, I hope that my son will read your newspaper and at least let us know where he is".

This woman's son has chosen to disappear. Maybe into the Kabylia, or maybe abroad. Who knows? Myths and rumours are already widespread; false papers, false passports, contacts for getting abroad. "Whatever he does, he's my son. And I'll defend him till the end. His brothers will stick by him in the same way."

**Khemis El-Khechna**, or Algeria exposed. Here all of the bombastic slogans of yesterday, today, and tomorrow snap and break into a thousand pieces. The people living here are accustomed to uniforms. First of all there are those who regularly pass through in lorries on their way to training in the mountains, and then there was the Bouyali Affair. The police roundups. October, June, and now again. At present all that is of no special interest to a mother whose son wasn't involved. In February 1991, there was a sad story in Dellys. A brawl between the bearded and the unbearded. He was one of those arrested. A verdict of 18 months in prison. Another long story to tell. "He knew nothing, not even about what was going on at the time. In prison, he was with common prisoners. He wanted to be moved. In August he asked to be moved to Blida with the sheikhs, the Islamist leaders. His lawyer told me it was impossible. Then,

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after the October mutiny, they transferred him from El-Harrach to Constantine. I know nothing about all this. I don't understand.

"All I know is that life is difficult. Prices are high. Life in this world is expensive. My son, he wanted all of this to change. They must forgive him. They should pardon the lot of them. They are their own children. The people of the government, some of them participated in the war of liberation, they have to pardon these kids. A little mercy."

**Boufarik**, the oranges, the doughnuts, and the trabendo—the blackmarket in agricultural goods. A few years ago their son was a local hero, at least in the neighbourhood called Afghanistan.

His return there just before October 1988. The euphoria of military battle. And then Iraq. That strange war and the volunteers for the Battalion of Islam. His arrest was expected, inevitable. There was a sense of relief for his mother, relief from fear. "His travels, his reputation, all that had gone to his head. I'm sure that he would have done ...things. In June 1991 he came home wounded. Yes, wounded. Bleeding. We were frightened.

"We didn't want him to go to the hospital, so a cousin tried to take care of him. I'm sure he would have done the same thing again. At least for a while now he'll be calmed down, and his younger brother is going to school rather than wanting to be like him. Maybe now everything will be alright, but do you think they'll pardon him and the others? After all he's no thief."

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