IN DEFENSE OF MY MEMORY

AMIRA HAMOUDA

From a very young age, I have often been accused of having a bad memory. The first accusations came from my cousins, whose conception of a fun indoor game consisted of identifying people in the framed pictures that hung from the walls of my grandmother’s house. They attributed my lack of interest in such an activity to my poor memory. What started as childish taunts turned into a serious concern when my aunt, the mother of the cousins in question, shared with my parents the alarming observation that I couldn’t even answer the question, “Who is the little girl in the picture?”

In this way, my reputation for having a bad memory came about and somehow managed to survive all these years. I should warn you, however, that all the rumors and accusations you have been exposed to so far are mere allegations, and that my memory has been a victim of a great injustice. As a matter of fact, my memory was not to blame for my lack of enthusiasm for my cousins’ game; rather, the dullness and absurdity of it were the real culprits we should condemn. How was jumping around and shouting the names of family members whose identity I certainly did know an amusing thing to do? How can one engage in such a repetitive and tedious pastime without insulting one’s imagination?

Whenever my cousins left my grandmother’s house before me, the first thing I did was pluck those names from my head and walk under the wall of photographs, pretending it was the Bardo museum that my father used to tell me about. I would pause in front of a framed figure, usually a black and white one, and admire the composure of a lady’s stance or examine the perfectly trimmed mustache of the man in jebba and tarbush.
Thanks to what my childish mind thought of as a secret power, the figures soon came out of their frames, and depending on the roles I assigned to each of them, rode their horses in the battles against the Ottoman or French enemy, or just walked in their palaces that stood on the hills overlooking the sea in Carthage. They were no longer the family members I knew or heard about, but rather mysterious, brave, and handsome Beys, Bechas, Sultans, ladies, and princesses from a different era and a different world – a magic world!

To be fair to my cousins though, I feel compelled to share with you some details about my aunt, for I think she is somehow responsible for their taste in games. My aunt is actually an antiques collector and is known among family members and friends for her collection of rare family photographs that she used to lock in her old living room cabinet under the Chinese porcelain set; she did not let anyone touch them, and only showed them to close family and friends or to important visitors. These photographs, together with her husband and children, were the pride of her life. My aunt was also a firm believer in the importance of preserving history for posterity. The piece of wisdom that says that the only way to build for the future is by learning about the past was repeated so many times by my aunt that the first time I read *1984*, I had the strange impression that George Orwell had plagiarized her. In my mind I read the sentence, “He who controls the past controls the future” in her voice. When I buried myself in the huge and ugly chair in my grandmother’s living room listening to family names flying around the room, the connection between my aunt and the excitement with which her children blurted out those names was established in some corner of my mind. Learning about heredity in my science class as a teenager, I finally put the label “gene transmission” on that connection; the genes responsible for my cousins’ excitement for that hideous game were transmitted to them from their mother.

Back to the false allegation raised against my memory, and to respond to my aunt’s accusation that I never answered the question, “Who
is the little girl in the picture?” I shall proceed by saying that the idea of seeing myself trapped in a frozen moment of time did not particularly please me. I had no trouble recognizing and remembering anyone; the only trouble I was faced with, whenever shown one of those pictures, was the loss of its secret power to set people, including myself, free from the pictures they were locked in. No matter the tricks my mind played, I couldn’t get myself out of that picture and into the magic world where the majestic figures from the black and white photographs dwelled. Our pictures, it seemed, had neither the mystery nor the charm that shrouded the black and white ones; we were forever stuck in that moment of time and in that piece of paper. The realization filled me with horror. My refusal to answer the question “who is the little girl in the picture?” was simply a refusal to admit that confinement. As a kid, I wondered whether my cousins’ enthusiastic answers to similar questions were an expression of an ignorant submission to that horrid reality, or an act of defiance against time.

In that sense, have you ever asked yourself about the use of pictures? Are they really means to preserve memories, or pathetic attempts to defy the passage of time? Can we even consider pictures as some form of genuine memories? I know that I never did. To me, they have always been fake, sometimes grotesque, imitations of reality. They are, therefore, unworthy of my own memories. My memories have sounds, smells, feelings, and thoughts that are interwoven into them. When I want to remember my childhood, I seldom look at my pictures as a kid; instead, I close my eyes and go back to my grandmother’s living room. Soon after, I start hearing my cousins’ voices and my grandmother’s laugh while savoring the jasmine smell sneaking from the window; I walk under the walls of the house smiling at the white and black figures. But most importantly, I recognize flecks of consciousness born in each corner of that house and marvel at the awakening of my childhood consciousness.