

Abdelkader Benali - Letter to My Daughter

Translated by Scott Rollins

*For Saida*

Dear Amber,

I have put off writing this letter for weeks now. Before getting started, I built a monument of procrastination around it. Fathers are good at that, I have noticed. Is that a trait of nervous expectant fathers to endlessly postpone the moment of exposure?

I was waiting for rain. And when, just before you were born, thunder began to roll uncomfortably above the city of canals, I took that as an exhortation to make work of what I can't call work: making you into the compass of our lives, and writing that compass down on paper. To follow the jumping needle.

And listen to the echo of our hearts. Perhaps this letter captures all those silences in between heartbeats. In silence your mother is breathing deeply in and out in the room next door. The past few days she has been in a lot of pain.

I was wondering who you are, because if I know who I have before me, then it makes it easier for me to get closer to the beginning. A great deal of time went into getting a precise idea of who you are to me. Because to find out who you are to me, I first had to examine myself and dare to define who I am myself. That way I would be better able to sense what I have to give. What I find out, charges me and electrifies the matter. Current. I never actually knew how to handle that compression of experience and sorrow, history and anecdote, life and love, failure and frustration – one thick, unfathomable paste, that is ready to be kneaded into shapes, until while waiting for your imminent arrival I began to reflect on what I would like to tell you, without any hesitation. Without further delay.

There was also a fear I had to overcome, the fear that coolly and patiently waits amid hope: that every beginning also heralds the end of something. The knowledge that I would irrevocably change with your coming. I would become another man; I would become a father. You who were the embryo, will become daughter. This letter will become the desire for your presence.

It is a sultry night in the city of canals. A sonorous song resounds from the darkness. I believe I can hear the accompaniment of birds chirping. By speaking to you, I land softly on the moss and can walk towards you to reach you, to say to you that loving you is easy.

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The impassioned letters are written to exorcize something – a fear, an irrational love, a silent pain; that is why writing works better than the strongest painkiller, because by entrusting your most intimate thoughts to paper they travel, and what you feel moves slightly away from you, confusion congeals, doors open to the next rooms, rooms we have to go through to discover the next rooms where we can lay down our pain. The pain that we feel when what we undertake does not always yield what we had hoped. Life is learning how to fail. And you are opening a new room in our lives, Amber, a room that houses a palace. Where the pain is given so much space it seems to disappear inside it.

My urge to write you also stems from a desire to be a step ahead of time. I know I am going to lose but taking on the competition produces potent stuff. You are still a dream whose meaning I have yet to fully grasp, and so I must write to give meaning to it. I begin by writing to someone I am quite fond of and can tell everything to. To you. I pause, reflect, and let go to merge into you.

Until recently I saw myself as a ragbag of history; through migration and random circumstances, with here and there a bit of luck added to a sometimes stubborn curiosity about the secrets of life and so knowledge of life, I have - voila! – become myself. But because I know you will be here soon, I long to get an even better understanding of myself. You want to know who I am? I will tell you. Whisper it in your ear. So that you will know where that protective shadow comes from that falls over you. And to find out this: where I was, where we come from and whether I am capable of parachuting into the future, from a horizontal position on the sofa.

(bld. 7 t/m 10)

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Your grandparents were born in a country that in previous decades had been part of European colonial politics. Your parents were born from a migration flow that exposed their own individuality and at the same time put it into perspective. And you? You were just born because you were born. Still it is very important to me that you know your parents have a history and what is even more important: that I have done my best to shape that history and at times question that history, doubt or even adapt or correct it. The last thing I want is for others to represent my story because I would not be able.

One of the sentences that fascinated me when I was growing up, was the suggestion by the Dutch Jewish journalist Ischa Meijer that those Jews who had returned from the World War II concentration camps - you will learn all about that later at school – hoped their children by being successful would be able to soften or maybe even forget the suffering caused, that was encapsulated in his sentence: “The little boy that would make everything good.” I am always reminded of that sentence every time I stand performing on stage like a man possessed. There is something heroic about it, but you also hear how impossible it is. Boys or girls cannot make anything good. Life is not some reparation; the best you can do is catch up on some overdue maintenance here and there. And yet, that sentence appealed to me. It also held a promise, namely: might I be that special, unique person who against all expectations could make something good? Perhaps ... It expressed immense hope, and that is nothing but laudable. And yet, I would certainly not want to expect you to make anything good. I hope that you really don't make anything good. I hope that you never feel obligated to be better than the rest, from some false sense of obligation that you owe something to history.

What we migrant children were not allowed, was the freedom to make our own mistakes. I can somewhat understand that our parents could not let us do that, because they could not give up their desire to protect us. But that does not really make it okay. The stress associated with preventing problems reassured our parents, it confirmed their feelings they were doing something sensible, but the idea that taking a single step off the beaten path could never happen without any repercussions, and that in turn stressed out us kids, made us into stunning little monsters.

To keep us from having to face the consequences of our actions, that of course would turn out to be mistakes, our parents consciously kept our world quite small. We saw very little of it, sometimes you literally looked out through the mail slot to get some idea of what was going on out there. Flying shoes, leather belts and knuckles demarcated the boundaries of the

world. I felt how my body gave the signal when the coast was clear; I felt how my body would cringe whenever there was something to dread.

The first time I escaped parental authority, I was six years old. I walked over to where they were fishing on the Mathernessersingel and sat down next to a fisherman to have a little chat. It was fantastic: I felt the freedom of a child to make a new world his own. I could feel my father coming, even before I saw him. What I wanted most was to become invisible. It worked and it did not work. I did not become invisible to him, but I did to myself. My father had not exactly gently pull me back to the little house in Messchertstraat and kicked my ass. He beat me like fathers do to keep it from ever happening again.

But freedom cannot be demarcated by fear, that is what I would learn in the years that followed, because once I had had a taste of freedom, I wanted even more. Freedom was climbing in a tree that was a little too tall for me. Freedom was not just walking to the canal to watch the men fishing; it was in finding out the kind of world in which I was living. And I know for certain, that my parents saw the fingerprints that world left on me, and that it drove them crazy by constantly trying to wipe off those fingerprints. In the end they would not succeed. The fingerprint of the world is here to stay.

(bld. 35 t/m 38)

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It was not until I arrived in the Netherlands at the age of four that I was really born. The Netherlands adopted me without knowing it. I want to write to you about that country that is also your country. That land that was certainly not where the Aleph came from.

The four years I had spent in the village beforehand, came to an abrupt end by the flying machine that carried my mother and sister and I to a flat land, where your grandfather was already making a good living. The land of cows and windmills, polders, and canals, green in spring, black in winter – a land in which water added light to the entire surroundings. The transparency with which the land lies there, mirrors the thinking of its inhabitants. When you fly over the Netherlands, you see a calculated landscape where not a single patch or piece escapes the attention of the small gods. Action is taken whenever the devil of untidiness rears its ugly head. It is also idealistic, in a sometimes pushy, self-serving way, that has its charms at times, though I hope that your built-in southern temperament will also make you a little allergic to that assertive and condescending tone. I know for sure this will be the case, because you would have to be born a Calvinist, reformed, or a tad Protestant, to truly be touched by that cold fire that makes you view the world as a vessel full of contradictions, rather than communicating vessels.

The downside to so much historical success – and a country where Montessori schools sprout from the earth more easily than tulips is a success! – is the notion that in paradise the best places can be occupied by everyone, regardless of their origins. That is not the case; I already said that earlier. Right from the start I saw that that so-called modesty and that egalitarian tone were more often a question of form than the result of content and facts. And even though I am convinced you will be able to step up to be a man or woman, I am still afraid that something will happen to you that happened to me: maybe owing to circumstances, aptitude and talent you are so able to adjust, to so easily find a way in that transparent society, that you are no longer able to clearly see the inequalities and backwardness that really exist.

The occupation of writing is both a gift and a prison; the danger exists that you isolate yourself from the efforts others have to make to command recognition – which you receive from what you articulate on paper - somewhere else, if they get the chance. For that reason I increasingly see my authorship as a way to be a voice for all those people, my contemporaries, brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces, male and female friends, kindred spirits, who day in and day out live and work with the realization that at any moment, without any excuse or any embarrassment, they can be held to account for the actions of their group.

As a child of a minority I hope you will be spared having to constantly explain yourself, solely because you are a member of that group. It pains me to say this, but freedom is not freedom when at least part of it is granted by someone else. There is no stronger feeling of imprisonment than when because of the color of your skin, your ethnic background or religious conviction you are interrogated by a stranger – or even a friend, which only makes it even more painful – about the actions or words of others. This often happens with a directness that overwhelms you, which makes your confusion be regarded as uncertainty. Which it is not. It is the reaction of a person seeing his innocence called into question.

I have had hundreds of these kinds of conversations. Your father is asked by strangers to hand in his Moroccan passport, is called to account for the attacks on the Twin Towers and asked why ‘his’ faith knows no mercy; he is phoned by countless editors to come and speak about ethnically related drugs criminality, while when it came to individual achievements of those of his own ‘ethnic’ sort the telephone never rang. People mean well you often hear; it is about getting acquainted, getting to know and better understand one another, and yet it seems to me that precisely this kind of contact can never be progressive. When I was younger, I occasionally accepted an invitation to come and explain what is going on with those Moroccans. I know now that was a mistake, because acting as a representative (the articulate version of the monsters) caused the misunderstanding to perpetually get in the way of the truth. To the suspicious person anyone trying to give a nuanced view of the matter was part of the problem itself. At the time I thought that with my giftedness and the ease with which I acted in front of the camera, that reason would be brought back into the debate. And that was what happened, but at the same time I aroused totally insane reactions, that had nothing to do with me. All hell broke loose. I too was dragged into the maelstrom of fear.

Amber, I wish you safe surroundings, in which you can passionately tell of your origins, without what you say being put down to some hysterical tale of intimidation and fear. And yet I fear the worst. Even though you are born a generation later, as far as this is concerned it won’t be made easy for you. Maybe not for anyone.

(bld. 116 t/m 120)

Here in Tangiers I am sitting on the blue sofa where your existence began and wonder whether we are children of the Beginning or, as the terrorists would have us believe, of the End. If you are of the beginning, then optimism is your companion, because you can see your own hunger for the beginning reflected in everything. And I associate that beginning with growth and new chances. In the beginning enthusiasm seems to come of its own accord and when something fails, that is not seen as an end point, but only one of the many ways in which beautiful things can be achieved. How devastatingly different it is with the pessimists, who are obsessed with the end, the apocalypse, the Yawm al-Qiyāmah, the Day of Judgment. For them there is no other choice than to take the necessary measures to hasten the end of the world market, to settle scores and in so doing secure the feeling of having chosen the right side of history: the side where history ceases to exist. But this thought is based on the misconception that history has an end. I think that we live in a continual state of beginning. No sooner has one story been told, than another one is already waiting to be told at length.

A couple of hours from now, dear Amber, I will be going to a Dutch boat in the Moroccan harbor, to hear a story about a young girl, still a child, who during her confinement in the great war in the Netherlands, kept a diary. Her name is Anne Frank. Someone will be giving a talk about her to an audience of Moroccans and Dutch and those who feel they are both. In the end Anne Frank was murdered by people who believed that for the Glorious End of history, the 1,000-year Reich of the Nazis, an end first had to be put to those people who got in its way. The people who betrayed her in Amsterdam were ordinary citizens. They may not have intended to murder Anne Frank, but they did it anyway. Why? Because the state had promoted fear into a state ideology. What frightens me is that a day will come in which the state will fall into the hands of malicious people and, helped by surveillance techniques and unlimited wiretapping of citizens, will choose you to set an example. I do not want to have that fear. But still. The state is blind.

I associate fear with the end, because the moment that emotion has control over us, the suicidal feeling forces itself upon us that everything we have built up, our fleeting happiness, the monuments to love, the rose nurseries of our inner feelings, the gardens of our earthly delights, have all been in vain. Fear is one of those Horsemen of the Apocalypse who know how to eliminate our emotional life and thoughts with a single firm blow. And when we feel afraid, we look through each another because that fear blinds us to what is actually close by. The road to radicalization is traveled when you can no longer accept the comfort of your loved ones and seek solace in the poisonous desire to subject the world to your despair.

But fear is totally at odds with what we felt when you came into our lives. You brought a lightness with you that radically turned me away from that fear. We are living from now on because of you, for you. I will turn forty in a couple of days in this city. I have never felt this optimistic in my life ever before, and that while we live in an age in which more and more people are looking for solutions to our great problems. But you are not a problem solver, not for me. You are yourself, first and foremost, and we, your mother and I, want to walk along your path with you. We will put you on our shoulders, so you can have a view of what lies in store in the distance of the future. We carry the beginning.

Anne Franks' diary survived the war and is read by millions of people all over the world. I think that has to do with fact we are delighted that someone who at such an age had every right to become angry, turned out to have the capacity to empathize and the style to give form to her fear and oppressive issues. She wrote because she believed in the beginning. That gave her wings. And that is what I hope for you, more than anything else. That is the only reason for what I am writing here.

What I have tried to do in this letter, is to explain where I came from, where your mother and I created a beginning together and what this world has to offer you, so that, you can visualize perhaps more clearer than you may be able to invent later, what you have to offer the world. A lot, a whole lot.

(bld. eind 163 t/m halverwege 167)