

**Mouna Ben Haj Zekri:**

Mouna Ben Haj Zekri is an actress and director. She is a graduate of the Tunisian National Theatre Acting School. She holds a master's degree in cultural management and a BA in modern French literature. Bel Haj Zekri has co-written and acted in several plays, including her latest project, "The Blind Spot," "Madame M" and "On la refait refait" by Essia Jaibi, and "Fenêtres Sur..." by Raja Ben Ammar. She has also appeared in various independent films. Self-narrative and memory are at the heart of her creative process.

La Dolce Vita**by Mouna Bel Haj Zekri**

I have been having the same bad dream for days. Every night, for two weeks now. I wake up panting and sweating. I am suffocating and my size is that of a little boy who was left alone. The dream starts at dawn. The sun is coming up and I'm crossing a forest trying to reach the sea. The more I advance the further the shore recedes and the light that I could see on the side of the water fades away and the trees multiply and the forest becomes denser, and I'm trapped. At first, I thought I was alone. Then I started to feel somebody walking beside me or behind me, I can feel him hovering around me. I can't see clearly, it's getting dark. Then, suddenly, somebody pushes me from behind. I find myself in a candle lit tunnel and I still can't see the person behind me pushing me forward and saying, "keep going, do not look back". My body is so tense, it aches. I cannot not turn left or right. I can't see anything. The man shoves me so violently I find myself falling down a bottomless pit. That's when I wake up. My heart beating the drums, I look at the walls in my room. My brain is still dazed by the dream and I'm more terrified. I wake up with my whole body hurting: my belly, my throat, my heart. The pain continues for an hour and a half or two hours. To soothe the pain, I start smoking avidly one cigarette after the other. At 7:00 in the morning I leave the bed. I have a cold shower. I get dressed and head to the Bardo station. I carry a sign with my phone number and the words "unclogging drains" with my orange jacket holding a cleaning wire. Usually there are four or five of us waiting there the entire day. Each day brings its own bread.

Today I logged into Facebook and in the Memories, a picture from two years ago popped up. A picture of me and Mariam. I remember that day in detail. It was her birthday and she wanted us to spend the day at La Goulette. She loves La Goulette. When she was still at high school, she used to skip classes, hop on a metro then a train and go to the beach by herself. She used to do that whenever something bothered her. Looking at the sea calmed her down. We took a big blanket, she made lemonade, breakfast, lunch. God did we love that day. I sang *Amal Hayati* (an oldie by Um Kalthoum translated to My Life's Hope) to her. The coffee shop across was playing it. I used to feel that Mariam was the only woman to whom I could sing *Amal Hayati*. When the night fell, we lied down for half an hour looking at the sky. I almost felt like the beach was our beach and that we were the only people left in



the world. I used to tell her about everything and so did she. It used to ease me to unload my heart. The words and stories that I would tell her! God I never thought I could tell them to anybody. I haven't had any news from her for two years now. I don't know where she is. She changed her number and blocked me on Facebook. I wonder if the picture came up on her newsfeed too.

Oh it's 1:00 PM! The elegant woman is bound to pass by anytime now. I reckon she is coming out of the bank behind us. She works there. A banker. Her hair is ever so soft, and her fragrance makes me dizzy. She's always clicking her heels as if she were walking on clouds. She's wearing her red dress today. One, two, three, now she's going to turn around, smile, and say hi to me: "how are you today?". I don't know if she's over 40. She doesn't look old, but she looks like a woman.

The boys and I haven't been to the beach for over a month. The last time we went, it took off a load of my heart. We sang our hearts out. We were scorched. I feel that the sun heals me. It cleanses me from the inside. When I dive into the water, I feel like I was reborn. I lose track of time and forget all my troubles with it. We were like kids poking fun at each other. You could hear our laughs and songs from far away. I dive and swim underwater until I'm out of breath and rush back up. I gulp for air, then dive again and swim away until I become invisible from the shore. It's just me and the sea and this voice inside of me telling me to leave. The alcohol level drops, I go back to the beach, and I drink some more. Adel doesn't come with us to the beach since the last *harga* (Tunisian word for illegal immigration which literally means to burn), he still doesn't want to tell us what happened exactly. There's nothing I love more than a nap lulled by the sound of the waves. I feel like I'm back in my mother's womb where nothing can hurt me.

I came across a film once. It drove me mad. It's called *La Dolce Vita*. That's when I started dreaming about leaving. I could see myself living there. I started learning Italian and I became very fluent. But they ask for a lot of papers for the visa, and I don't have them. I began to consider *harga*" I've been collecting the money for years. Still not enough. My uncle is my only option. He should sell the piece of land and give me my share. I feel like he's hiding something from me. He's been beating around the bush for days. It could be because I've annoyed him. I keep calling him every couple of days. This feeling of being in between, my mind there and my body stuck here, it's tiring me out. My imagination runs wild. I dream about a life I'm not even sure of. I'm focusing all my effort in leaving. I can't accept my life here anymore. Why did Mariam go? Now that my mother and father passed I have no reason to stay here. My roots dried up. They turned into dust scattered around by the wind.

Two days ago, I started screaming for absolutely no reason. I was just sitting there when I started shouting so violently: I've had enough! I have had enough God please take me!". The boys were trying to comfort me. They were scared that the security guards of the parliament nearby would close in on us and arrest me. I shouted for half an hour nonstop then I just left. I'm always pretending to be fine. I laugh and make people around me laugh, I tell jokes, I smile. I'm patient as a rock and inside



me the fire rages on. I was silent for way too long and one day I burst. I can hear them gossiping about me and I can hardly stop myself from bashing one of their faces in.

The *harreg* (the smuggler) called me. I called my uncle. He said to give him two days, he'll find a way. Every minute that passes gnaws at my bones. It's getting worse. I can hardly catch my breath. It's almost coming true. I'm tired of waiting on this pavement for a job that might come. I'm sick of the run down Bardo fountain with never any water coming out. I'm tired of this construction site that would never end, the train rails, the broken asphalt, the barbed wire around the parliament. My throat is filled with a roar striving to come out. And how about this dream that I made-up in my head, could it be true? What if I drown or reach the other side and get caught and brought back? My brain must be lying to me. My brain fabricated this story, and I believed it. But what do I have to lose? I should try. I have nothing to lose. It'll work, I'm sure it'll work. I am always up for a laugh and a good time and people take kindly to me, thank God. When I laugh, I have two dimples on my cheeks. The women there would have a crush on me. And I love singing. I have a voice that would make a stallion of a man break into sobs.

It's been 2 days. At 10:30 in the morning my uncle calls me to drop by and get my money. I do. I burst into tears. "But nobody is forcing your son! Come and stay with us. Open a small store. Get married be happy and forget about this whole thing. You have no idea how it will end." I rushed out tripping and falling every two steps. I leaned against the wall and cried my eyes out. I've been alone for two years. Cooking alone, eating alone, sleeping alone, watching TV alone. The feeling of solitude devoured me raw. I'm not running from anything, really. I just want to go to Rome and roam around until I'm tired.

At this point in time I have no idea how my story will unfold. It can't be worse than what it is now. I feel like I've paid my dues with life. I'm done.

I'm crossing the forest, and the sea keeps getting further and further. Every step counts. I can barely make progress. I feel like the sand is sucking me down. I can see people overtaking me, and I'm slowly drifting behind, the last one in the line. I'm at the shore. The water is so dark you can't see the bottom. We get aboard a small boat, all crammed together. Everyone is holding on to their bag. I can no longer hear or see anything. My heart is beating so violently I can feel it tearing out of my chest. Next to me is a guy who's my age or maybe even younger. Smiling. Where did he get the courage? Why is he leaving? Where is he going? Is he dreaming of Italy, too? My bones start to hurt, I'm holding the bag too tight. The further we go the scarier the sea gets. The waves are violent and high. Every ebb and flow feels like a beating down. The sound of the waves is bleeding my ears. Like they're shrieking. Like glass is breaking. Like Thunder. I don't recognize it. "Leave it to God". *La Dolce Vita*. I can see Sylvia dancing in the middle of la Fontana di Trevi and calling me, prompting me to go to her. I reach her. She holds me. We are dancing with our feet planted in the water.