

HANGING IN THE CELL



My toes were barely touching the ground. I'd hung there since the morning, my hands tied by a rope to the ceiling, naked, cold, hungry and miserable. My shoulders strained, and my entire body ached from burns and lashings from a whip.

I was here for the same reason that had led me, two days before, to go out and look for tire repair shops that could spare some inner tubes. I had heard of a trick that I wanted to try, because the next day I planned to be at the front of a potentially violent demonstration. After asking several shop owners, I came upon one that had an abundance of inner tubes. I took several home and started cutting them into long strips that soon filled the storage room of our apartment building. The next day I wrapped my arms and legs in the rubber, put my clothes on top, and immediately looked like I had the muscles of a weight lifter. I became Hercules overnight.

The following day was cold and cloudy. When I arrived on the campus of the University of Tizi-Ouzou in northern Algeria,

Djaffar Chetouane

some of my fellow students noticed how chubby I looked, so I told them of what I had done. We were gathering to march on the municipal building where the governor of our province had his office. There were a few hundred of us, and we anticipated being joined by a bigger crowd in the center of the city. I was not the only one who had taken precautions against violence. I and others had hidden knives in our pockets, and I could see that others had also “bulked up,” using my same strategy. Berbers don’t know how to have peaceful demonstrations, after having been disenfranchised as citizens for many centuries.

We Berber students were protesting against the city government for not allowing us to have a concert on campus. Supporters of our movement had invited singers and speakers to commemorate April 20, 1980, the “Berber Spring,” a turning point in the modern fight for our people’s rights in Algeria. We held this celebration every year, but this year, 1986, city representatives had warned campus officials not to allow it, for fear of having the city turned upside down. As the crowd started to move, we chanted, “*Anarez walla anaknou!*” “We prefer to be broken than to bow!” a well known Berber proverb.

About a kilometer away from the center of town we saw the police barricades: officers standing shoulder to shoulder, with batons, big plexiglass shields, water tank trucks parked nearby, and most frightening of all: Dogs. These dogs were the reason for the inner tubes. They were German Shepherds, trained to attack and have no mercy on anyone. In Algeria, dogs are rarely kept as pets. They are working animals, like those the mountain peoples raise to guard their fields and livestock. Police dogs, like those we faced that day, are fierce and hungry, used in any demonstration as the most effective way to disperse a crowd, no matter its size.

Donkey Heart Monkey Mind

We continued our march towards the police lines, and soon what we had expected occurred: the police unleashed several dogs that looked fearless and eager to rip us apart. I pulled my knife out of my pocket, and as soon as the first dog jumped on me, I gave him my arm to bite. His jaws were like a vise, but the rubber had done its work. I didn't feel any teeth. I jammed the knife into his belly and the dog fell to the ground. To my dismay, as he fell his eyes were staring straight into mine, and I watched them going blank as he died. I had never killed anything before (or since), and the image of his eyes remains seared into mine to this day. But there was no time to feel sorry for the poor animal. All around me other people were struggling to fight off the dogs. Some were being dragged to the ground, some were screaming for their lives, and still others were fleeing to safety. Another dog jumped on me, and I stabbed him as I had the first. I saw some people trying to help their friends on the ground by sticking their knives into the attacking dogs' bellies. Next, the police started to shoot tear gas grenades and then they turned their water cannons on us. The pressure from the water seemed powerful enough to knock down a concrete wall, never mind people. In a matter of minutes, protesters were running every which way through a chaos of acrid smoke.

I made my way home safely, and only a few hours later I was enjoying the comfort of my mother's *shurba*, a traditional Algerian soup. The hot liquid was more soothing than ever after the morning's events. As I ate, my mother called out that someone was knocking at the door, and my 10-year-old sister, Souad, hurried to open it. She told my mother that it was the police, and my heart started to pound. I had no doubt about the reason they had come. I stood up from my chair and looked around for an escape route. There was no other door, and we lived on the third

Djaffar Chetouane

floor of our building, so it would have been a disaster if I had tried the window. I tried to hide in the bathroom briefly, but that didn't work. The policemen gave my mother a moment to retreat to another room, since it would be indecent for her to be seen by strange men, no matter the circumstances, and then they came straight in and handcuffed me. As they dragged me to the police van just outside our building, I heard my mother quietly instruct Souad to find my brother, Brahim, and send him to tell my father about my arrest.

When I got to the police station, I was herded into a large cell with about two dozen others, some bleeding from dog bites and many still coughing from the tear gas. The cell was foul smelling and filthy, and the walls were covered with the graffiti of those who had passed through before us. Some writings were phrases from the Koran, some were about the pain the writers experienced while they were there, and some writings were Berber proverbs that spoke of patience and tolerance and having faith that all will pass. We all had some idea of what was coming. I was only 18, and I was about to get first-hand experience with how the government had dealt with Berber people for more than two decades in Algeria.

Imazighen (ⵎⴰⴷⵉⴳⵉⵏ), meaning "Free People," is the correct name for the ethnic group usually known as "Berbers." My people, the Kabyles, are one of eight Berber tribes in Algeria and throughout North Africa. (Most English speakers cannot pronounce the word *Imazighen*, especially the "gh" at the end, as there is no alphabetical equivalent in English for the way these two letters sound in the Afro-Asiatic and Middle Eastern languages. A close approximation might be the guttural German "r," produced at the back of the throat.) Berber is an English word derived from the Latin word *barbarus*, meaning barbarians, uncivilized, or used

Donkey Heart Monkey Mind

to describe a cruel, warlike person. Although many books will tell you a different version of Berber history, the Romans dubbed my people this when they wrested control of North Africa from its Berber rulers in 200 B.C.E. *Imazighen* are an ancient people, and they had ruled the region since at least 10,000 B.C.E. However, control of the North African coast is crucial to control over the Mediterranean Sea, and so the coast has been invaded over and over again, not only by Romans, but also by Phoenicians (who founded Carthage), Greeks (mainly in Cyrene, Libya), Vandals and Alans, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans, and the French and Spanish. Under the Arabs, the Berbers were heavily taxed, their lands were taken from them, and some were even enslaved. The Berber language and culture were gradually replaced by those of the Arabs, except among certain pockets of the population, such as that in which I grew up.

It was the Arabs that gave the Berber peoples of my particular region the name *Qabīlah*, plural from *Qaba'il*, meaning "Tribes." In French we are known as "*Les Kabyles*," and in English, the Kabyles. Kabyles are concentrated in the highlands of northern-central Algeria, especially in the province of Tizi-Ouzou, also known as Greater Kabylia. The capital city of the province is also called Tizi-Ouzou, which is the name of a beautiful flower that grows in the mountain pass. The city lies within a valley in the northern Djurdjura Mountains, 35 kilometers south of the Mediterranean Sea. Like many highland peoples, the Kabyles who live here have remained a pocket of resistance to both conquest and assimilation throughout Algeria's history. Neither the Romans nor the Ottoman Turks ever fully succeeded in controlling our region, and our language, *Tamazight* (written in the *Thifina* alphabet), and Kabyle culture survived even the broad Arabization of most of North Africa.

Djaffar Chetouane

Ironically, some of the deepest conflict came to our region after the most recent colonists, the French, were driven out of Algeria in 1962. As a backlash against French language and culture, the young Algerian dictatorship stressed the Arab identity of the country, and there was no room for recognition of its Berber roots. Arabic was made the official language, and the teaching of *Tamazight* in schools was forbidden. The new Algerian government sought to strip local tribes of traditional rights of self-governance and violently crushed any expressions of Berber cultural pride and political autonomy.

On April 20, 1980, when I was 12-years-old, I got my first lesson in repression. In the early morning, just before 6 a.m., as I was walking to get bread for my family from the bakery about half a kilometer away from our apartment, I came across a military convoy coming from the direction of the University of Tizi-Ouzou. The soldiers were returning from raiding the dormitories during the night and savagely beating the students in their beds, arresting many of them. A little over a month before, in March, the government had banned a prominent author from giving a talk on campus on the use of *Tamazight*, and students and professors had occupied the university in response. The violent April 20th arrests were the government's reply. After the city of Tizi-Ouzou awakened and heard about the bloodshed, there was a General Strike and massive protests against the government forces. Many young men and women were arrested, including my older brother Mustafa. Some 30 participants were killed and hundreds injured. Eventually, the whole city was occupied by the military. These events came to be known as *Thafsouyth Imazighen*, or Berber Spring, and April 20th, the date of the original attack on the students, has been commemorated by the entire province of Tizi-Ouzou every

Donkey Heart Monkey Mind

year since. Kabyle singers and poets have written many songs and poems about that day.

From that day forward, I was intrigued by my own people and why my language, history, and culture were forbidden by the Algerian government. I was one of a handful of youths courageous enough to secretly learn to write *Tamazight* during my high school years. When I entered the University of Tizi-Ouzou in 1985, I was eager to learn more. I joined the Berber movement, rallying people to support and promote Berber language and culture. We agitated for the teaching of Berber history in schools, the broadcasting of Berber television programs, and other similar measures. I continued to study the writing of the forbidden language through other students and professors. After I was well-versed in *Tamazight*, I started to write articles and promote Berber language and history to other students. I joined in organizing protests on campus and distributing fliers about meetings. I never did anything secretly, because I wanted other students to see my devotion to the cause.

I was arrested several times at protests, but I was always released within a few hours, a day at the most. But April 20, 1986—when I wrapped myself in inner tubes and faced down the police dogs—was different. As usual, the spark was government refusal to permit a Berber cultural event on campus, and the result was predictable: protests, arrests, more bloodshed, and me huddled with my fellow students in a jail cell, hoping that my sister had gotten word to my father that I had been detained.

One by one, the police called people's names and took them away. It was about two hours before my turn came. Two policemen marched me into a small cell, where the first thing I noticed was the rope hanging from the ceiling. The very next thing I noticed was the blood all over the floor. There were no windows, and the cement

Djaffar Chetouane

walls had darkened over the years. The policemen immediately stripped me naked. They tied my hands and hoisted me up by the rope, making sure only my toes were touching the ground. Then they simply left me hanging for a while. Finally a third policeman, a big, mean looking brute with a moustache, came in with a leather whip. The first thing he said to me was that they saw me killing their dogs and that I would pay for it. He also said he had my father's permission to beat the hell out of me.

As soon as he hit me the first time, I saw stars in front of my eyes as I felt the whip. The burning sensation was so painful, I screamed as if my lungs would come out of my mouth. But he kept hitting me. Each lash made me scream even louder. I pulled myself up and tried to kick him with my feet, but I couldn't reach him. I was used to being hit on my legs; my own father had beaten me on them countless times, and I could stand the pain there. But the lashes on my naked back were something new. Worse yet was the way the fiery, snaking leather would curl around my torso and bite into the skin of my chest. I could do nothing but scream, so scream I did, as loud as I could. And the man continued hitting me until he was tired. He was fat and out of shape, and he broke out in a serious sweat as he worked me over. Still, I could see the pleasure on his face as he left the room, leaving me hanging there, crying and yelling, muscles aching and flesh stinging.

After the cuts and welts on my body had cooled down a bit, I could finally breathe. I expected the man to return for more, but he never did. After a long while, I became convinced that they would soon take me back to the cell. But that never happened. I was kept hanging there for the entire day and throughout the night. My shoulders started aching. I tried many times to lift myself up to ease the pull on them, but I was too weak and exhausted to manage it.

Donkey Heart Monkey Mind

The very muscles and ligaments that I needed to lift myself up were being slowly stretched to their limit by the weight of my body. As the night went on, the pain escalated and became excruciating; now the whipping didn't seem so bad at all. Eventually I wished death would come upon me to simply ease the pain.

In a stupor of pain and exhaustion, I wasn't aware of how much time had passed when the same moustached man returned and slapped me on the face, asking how my night was. As soon as I became aware of him, I began begging him to release me from the rope. Though I didn't see the whip in his hands, I said that he could hit me as long as he wanted with anything he wanted, if only he would let me down from the rope. The words slurred heavily from my mouth; even my facial muscles had been clenched in pain since the day before. The man's answer was that I was going to remain hanging there, because I needed to really feel and understand what I had done. If I ever did it again, he said, the next time would be even worse. I continued begging, and he continued to ignore my pleas.

"I'll send someone to shower you," he grunted as he left. In a short while someone came and splashed a bucket of water over me. The water gave me some temporary relief from the continued burning of my skin, but the searing of my shoulder joints did not abate.

I was left hanging for a long while, eventually losing all sense of awareness and time, until I was awakened by my fellow demonstrators in the big cell. Our captors had dragged me back to the cell unconscious. I noticed the new pain in my shoulders the moment I woke up. Despite their being released, I couldn't move them at all. I also noticed that my pants were on; the people in the cell had put them on for me while I was unconscious. I lay down on the cement floor, and there I would remain for two more

Djaffar Chetouane

days before I would find the strength to stand up and take stock of my surroundings. It was then I saw there were others around me, suffering just as I was.

During the two days I spent on the floor the only thing I kept asking myself was why my father hadn't intervened for me. A successful cab driver, he was well known and well respected in the city and knew many government officials. Furthermore, he carried the title of "Hadj," since he had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, which greatly increased his influence. However, he had always supported the very government that had turned the dogs on university students and that still held so many of us wretched and bloodied in this cell. Still, I was his son. Everyone in our village would have a fair idea of what was going on within these prison walls. It was no mystery how the government treated Berber dissidents. Still I wondered: What father would let that happen to his son if he could stop it? What true Muslim would let it happen, for that matter? But my father was a cold, hard man. He cared far more about his place in society than he did about the welfare of anyone in his family, and I knew deep down that I would be here in this cell until the police were good and ready to release me.

It was the next day, thankfully, that I heard my name bel-
lowed from the other side of the door.

"Come out. Your father is waiting for you!"

I knew I was being released. As I walked towards the door, I looked at the other people in the cell and felt tears on my cheeks. I was so sorry for them. Some of them I knew very well. I even thought of not leaving and staying with them in solidarity, but I didn't dare. However confused and sorry for them I felt, I kept walking.

Emerging into the sunlight, I saw my father waiting in the car. His eyes stared at me coldly. I met them with a look of pure

Donkey Heart Monkey Mind

hatred and kept walking. Never in my life had I hated anyone as much as I hated my father that day.

“Get in the car!” he barked. I ignored him and pointed myself towards home.

The walk to our house was less than a kilometer, but it felt like a hundred. I was so tired and weak I could barely put one foot in front of the other. But I wasn't going to give in and accept a favor from my father now. He drove away, and I plodded on with determination. When I finally got home, my father was already there and had informed my mother that I was coming. I headed straight to the single mattress in my room that I shared with my two brothers and collapsed. I had my pants and my shirt on, and no one could see the marks on my body. My mother followed me into the room and asked how I was doing.

“Ask El Hadj. He let it happen,” I said to her.

“Don't speak too loud. He might hear you,” she said. She had been beaten by my father as many times as her children had, and she was wary of his displeasure.

I lifted my shirt and spoke as loudly as I could, to make sure he would hear me. “Would he do any worse than this?” I asked. When my mother saw the marks she screamed so loudly she startled me. I myself had not been aware of how bad I looked.

“What have they done to your son, Hadj?” she asked my father. My two sisters and my brother Brahim came into the room. My father stood in the doorway wearing the traditional white *djellaba* he always wore at home and during prayer. His big, hairy stomach was visible through the fabric, and he looked mean and satisfied. I hurriedly pulled my shirt down, so he couldn't see my wounds.

“Let me see,” he insisted from the doorway. My mother tried to force me to lift my shirt; she even tried to lift it herself.

Djaffar Chetouane

“Look at what they’ve done!” she said to him, displaying my broken, bloodied skin.

My father simply turned his head and said, “I hope he learned his lesson.” Then he walked away.

My mother left too and came back a moment later with a bucket of water. She asked me to sit up so she could wash the blood off my body. I forced myself up, took off my shirt, and saw my mother start crying as she gently cleaned my torso.

“I’m going to live with my grandmother,” I said to her. “I’ll never share a roof with him again, I hate him so much.”

“Quiet, I don’t want him to hear you,” she urged. I wanted so much to tell her that if he ever tried to hit me again I would jump on him, but it only would have frightened her. Nevertheless, from that day on, I no longer believed I had a father. (And he never did try to strike me again.)

I stayed in my room for three straight days. The only person who kept checking on me was my mother. Either no one else cared, or no one else was willing to risk my father’s anger by coming in to speak to me. During those days I kept thinking about what I had experienced. It was a beating that would make anyone forget their name. Of course, the police could have done much worse to me than they did. Over the brief but violent course of Algeria’s history since independence, the government has been known to pull out a person’s finger or toenails, cut off their nipples, or burn their genitals. At least my shoulders were still in their sockets. So even though my father had done nothing directly, I probably benefited from his connections. Others who participated in the march were held and beaten for more than two weeks.

From then on I saw my life from another perspective. I was a second-class citizen in a third world country, and I saw no

Donkey Heart Monkey Mind

future for myself. There were hardly any jobs to be had in Algeria, so what likelihood was there that I would have an actual career, even if I did stay out of prison long enough to finish school? And if, against the odds, I were to become a doctor or a lawyer, I would still be living in a brutal dictatorship where it was forbidden to learn or teach the language of my mother and grandmother. The police had done their job: I was going to keep a low profile in terms of politics from then on. I lay in bed imagining my life elsewhere. I was 18, barely an adult, and all I wanted was to leave my country and my father behind, no matter how I managed it.

And I did. A short three years later I found myself on a new continent with a new life before me, a life that could never have been possible in Algeria. But the way there was not at all what I imagined it would be. I had to learn the skills that my father was most proud of: taking chances, putting myself first, and exploiting other people. I took risks I had never imagined before, and I also suffered more than I ever thought I would. I spent time in and out of jail in Sweden, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Israel and, worst of all, in my own Algeria again—but the last time was not a city jail. It was a military base camp in the middle of the Sahara.

What started as the angry wanderlust of an embittered young man became a desperate run for my life.