

sàhara

for Sonia Memetea
who got me to read Paul Bowles

Europeans were rare but not unknown in the village. They must have money to have come so far, and they usually were remarkably careless about their expenses. If you shaved a sou here and a sou there they hardly noticed. The professor was an exception. He counted out every expense precisely and never paid more than he had to. He said he was poor, but they could hardly believe it of a European, especially one treated with respect by the other Christians. His care with money earned a certain respect, though they thought it unseemly for one of his kind. That was not the strangest thing about him, though. His leg and his pole were stranger, and in fact uncanny. They generated both fear and contempt.

He had only one leg. Now. Some said he had been born with only the one, others that its brother had been lost in a riding accident. Instead of a wooden leg from the other thigh he used an immense wooden pole, taller than he was. And to compound the strangeness he held this pole with both hands not on the left side where his missing leg should have been, but on the right, held at a distance from his body as if it were another leg descending from another hip. And he walked and balanced, moving remarkably quickly. The effect was not really of a man with a pole and a missing leg, but of a many-legged animal one of whose legs could rarely be seen. Little boys took poles and tried to imitate him, but they never got more than a few steps before they fell over, giggling.

Every morning he would leave his room in the hotel, descend the stairs

without a stumble, and cross the street to Malika's shop for a cup of mint tea. He would drink it slowly, never ordering more than one. People would often approach his table and talk to him for a while as he told stories and made plans in a mixture of Arabic, French, and Spanish. His visitors were curious about his history, his professedly meagre resources, why he was living in the village, and above all about his leg, his pole, and his gait. He was forthcoming about all except the last, though he never gave the same explanation twice. Sometimes he was a retired linguist, interested simply in hearing how people spoke. Sometimes he was an anthropologist, finding out how they thought the world worked and how people fit into it. His questioners found this utterly puzzling: of course they thought the world was the way it is, and good people do good things in it while evil people do evil things. And sometimes he was working for the government, noticing corrupting influences and dangerous precedents. The next day he would deny he had said any of these.

It was a little girl who got him to speak about his leg. His adult questioners had been leading by devious and roundabout paths towards the question, but he always saw them coming. When seven year old Aisha brought him the tea her mother had just made, she simply handed it to him and as he was reaching for it said "why don't you have a left leg?" He spilled a drop, looked her in the eye, and began to talk.

"When I was a student I needed money, and so I worked in a circus. I had a remarkable sense of balance -- I still do -- and so I would ride my unicycle along a tightrope suspended above the lion-training show. The audiences loved it, and I found it magic that I could balance on the wobbly rope in a slight breeze with the band playing and the lions roaring. There was also something magical about the thrill I got from concentrating on staying upright with all this going on, pretending to lose my balance from time to time, with the audience alternating between screaming in delight and fear

and attending with hushed silence. There was no danger at all. If I fell I could just grab the cable and hold on until I was slowly lowered to the ground. And the lions were completely harmless. Their 'tamer' and I would often play cards in their cage, and he would say that his hardest task had been getting them to roar convincingly."

"One evening the circus was interrupted by a fanatic with an axe, who wanted to demonstrate that he was under the protection of Allah by conquering six lions single-handed. He had a seat in the front row, and rushed towards the enclosure while the lion-tamer and I were finishing our act. He slipped through the entrance as the tamer was closing it, and confronted the lions with his axe. The startled beasts huddled in a corner while the tamer raced back in and positioned himself between the madman and his victims. The fanatic swung wildly and his axe cut the rope tensioning the unicycle cable. Down I came, between the two of them, and the next blow landed on my leg. Luckily the lions were not hurt, as the fanatic fainted at the sight of my blood and was easily taken away. But it was the end of my circus career."

Aisha understood very little of this. She had no idea what a circus or a unicycle was; lion-taming was an idea she had never met; even the idea that one could spend years in one's youth away from home, studying while taking jobs that would not become one's occupation for life, was alien to her. But she caught the word *sàhara* - magic - since he had used the Arabic. And she gathered that he had lost his leg in a struggle with a follower of the prophet. That was more than anyone else had been able to extract from him, and she recounted it to her mother and her friends.

When the professor walked around the village in the daytime, a crowd of small children would often follow at a safe distance, out of range of the pole, though he had never been known to strike anyone with it, pretending to walk

on one leg while balancing with broomsticks or against one another. When he walked at night he was alone. The moon was full on the Wednesday following his tale to Aisha, casting long shadows of his one leg and his stick. As he walked down the main street a group of young men followed at a distance, but the shadows disturbed them and they did not dare approach him. One ran around by a different route and called out in a falsetto from a lane. "Help, please help; I am injured." He glanced over his shoulder and entered the lane. The moon did not penetrate between the closely spaced houses and he stumbled around searching for the groans coming from the far end. It is hard to balance in the dark. A foot kicked away his pole, and while he fell he turned and saw a dozen men approach. As the axe descended he thought "balance, axe, Islam, and I suppose they are lions of a kind."