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Abstract

My mother-in-law Fatima sends us cardboard boxes filled with biscuits all the way from Algiers. Amine, my husband was so excited the first time one of these boxes arrived, he raced home from work on his bicycle, the box tucked under his arm and waving triumphantly with his other, the bike doing crazy zig-zags along the road. I was waiting on the wall outside our apartment for his return. We hadn't been married for long.

MICHELLE HAMADACHE

Armouries of Love

My mother-in-law Fatima sends us cardboard boxes filled with biscuits all the way from Algiers. Amine, my husband was so excited the first time one of these boxes arrived, he raced home from work on his bicycle, the box tucked under his arm and waving triumphantly with his other, the bike doing crazy zig-zags along the road. I was waiting on the wall outside our apartment for his return. We hadn't been married for long.

'Look, look — it's arrived! *Finalmente!*' Finally. He wheeled the bike inside the grand old wooden doors that led into our building. We'd been living in Piazza Morlacchi almost a year, a quiet pocket right in the *centro storico* of Perugia, a mountain city in Umbria. Amine dropped the bike under the stairs and waited impatiently for me to unlock the door. He raced straight over to the bed, patting it for me to sit down. The package was wrapped in brown paper and tied firmly with string. Amine tried unsuccessfully to break the string with his teeth; I opened a drawer and passed him a knife. Two layers of aluminium foil followed and finally a grease-stained, slightly swollen cardboard box was revealed. Numerous paper doilies lined the box and covered over its contents, Amine, who had torn through the outer layers, now paused, slowly and carefully lifted the edge of each doily until he reached the biscuits.

'*Tcharak Ariane, Makrout — Haluat talia!*' Amine's voice was raised and mellifluous, words that I'd never heard rolled off his tongue in near ecstasy as his hand rested lightly over each biscuit. I sat silent; scrutinizing the contents of the box. The infamous biscuits that I'd heard so much about. I noted they were very large biscuits, not at all the size I'd imagined. *Tcharak Ariane* were shaped like small croissants, sprinkled with finely chopped peanuts. I learnt later they were filled with crushed almonds, orange-blossom water, cinnamon and sugar. The *Makrout* were slabs of deep fried semolina, all sticky with honey in silver foil wrappers and the *Haluat Talia* were shaped like starfish, the size of a man's palm and twice as thick. They were iced with white and pink icing and had silver cashews embedded in their centre.

'Aren't you going to eat any?' I asked.

Amine shook his head, 'Tomorrow, for breakfast. I'll keep them for then.'

I shook my head and shrugged. 'But you waited so long for them to arrive; don't you want to have just one?'

Amine shook his head, 'You have one, go on.'

I shook my head. The biscuits were ornate and each one formed with precision, even after their postal delivery they still looked like something out of a swish

boulengerie. I'd seen photographs of Fatima, none of them smiling, all with an imperious tilt of the head and a clear, firm gaze. She was a decade or so younger than my mother and the sort of woman whose beauty was in the structure of her face and left unchanged with time.

Fatima was also the mother of eight children and the woman Amine spent every Friday night with at SIP, the Italian public phone room. Their conversations were always lengthy and animated. I would lean against the outside of the phone booth smoking cigarettes, Camel after Camel. Fatima's voice would spill out of the receiver, an impenetrable sing-song that would set my nerves on edge as the clock ticked over and Amine would push another *cinque mille lire* at me to swap for another phone card. It didn't matter how exciting the conversation had seemed to me as I listened or even how many times my name was mentioned followed by laughter or exclamations I recognized like, '*Wooallah, sah*' I swear to God it's true, or '*mesh kitch*', at the termination of the call his answer to my question, *Well? What did she have to say?* was always the same.

'*Niente, non molto.*' Nothing much. Amine would slump back out on the street deflated and silent. It always took him a good half hour to recover after a phone call home.

My stomach knotted as I stared at those biscuits smooth and smelling of almonds and strangely of flowers in their box. I was repelled at the same time that I itched to chip off a piece of pink icing from the *Haluat Talia* or break a tip of the *Tcharak Ariane*. Having plainly declined to take a biscuit, I could hardly press my finger into the crumbs at the bottom of the box and then bring it to my tongue. I estimated that box contained a full three days labour; finger curling, palm pressing, hand rolling labour. That box was an armoury of love I couldn't and wouldn't breach.

Two years later Fatima came to visit us in Perugia all the way from Algiers. She arrived one afternoon in the height of summer, dropped off at our door by an Algerian friend with a car who had picked her up from the airport in Rome. Amine wasn't allowed a day off work. We had moved to a self contained *monocale* or bed-sit in Corso Garibaldi and my anticipation of Fatima's arrival was dampened by the thought of sharing a room with my mother-in-law for two weeks.

Within minutes of her arrival, Algerians from all over Perugia began turning up on our doorstep. I had barely managed a shy greeting, hanging back behind Amine, when our apartment was flooded with young men, freshly shaven and bashful. Unperturbed, Fatima settled herself on our bed, Amine at her side and our unexpected guests encircling Fatima, on chairs, the floor, while some remained standing. Their eyes glistened and the timbre of their voices became uncertain, yet eager and boy-like. Enraptured they listened, as I did, seated at the window in the furthest corner of the room, to Fatima's every word. They anticipated the punch line to her stories with slaps on their thighs and trembling laughter. A mother, any body's mother was a precious and rare commodity then.

I would have been daunted, afraid even, but not Fatima. She was right at home with an audience. Elegantly dressed for travel in an emerald green tailored dress with small white polka dots, her hair smooth raven black and her hands like swallows, never still but never uncontrolled in their movements, she kept her audience on tenterhooks. The Algerian dialect that I'd listened to so much of between Amine and his friends, melted on Fatima's lips. It became a language of enchantment, animated and full of sounds that I could never reproduce. I sat mesmerized and envious. Not of Amine's clear, strong affection for his mother but rather for the seemingly unending endowments of grace and beauty, humour and confidence that had been bestowed upon Fatima, no doubt at birth.

I was too self conscious at twenty-two to competently fuse the little French and Algerian I knew with the languages of mime, body, and expressions that may have allowed Fatima and me the opportunity to talk. For a first encounter between mother and daughter-in-law, perhaps that was a blessing in disguise.

Amine worked long hours at a car wash just outside of Perugia and Fatima and I were left to while away the hours with no shared language. The evenings in particular had seemed interminable as Mother and *femme* would lean out the window of our second storey apartment awaiting his return. We both enjoyed dissecting the people passing below. Fatima, I noted was verging on acerbic in her criticisms. Perhaps I simply minced my words more.

Fatima disliked being idle and not having thought to bring her sewing with her, would pace uneasily. She was not one to take coffee out just for the sake of it or to meander through the streets with no purpose other than to kill time. The dimensions of our *monocale* had never seemed so confined as those days shared with Fatima.

I worked cleaning and doing errands either mornings or afternoons most days for an elderly woman, La Signora Crivelli-Visconti. The mornings I was home with Fatima were easy enough to fill with cooking and cleaning. I thanked God I had been working some time for Signora Crivelli. I was somewhat prepared for Fatima, who every morning swept and washed the floors, stacking furniture on the bed, moving aside cupboards and dusting in crevices that have probably been untouched for centuries. I aided her as best I could but mostly tried to look unimpressed as though this were something I did each morning too.

The afternoons that I worked I would dawdle over the simplest tasks exasperating the poor Signora Crivelli-Visconti until she would order me from her house shaking her head and half laughing.

'Return home to your mother-in-law, there's a sheep's head stew waiting for you!'

Mildly chastened I would lollygag along the length of the street, pick up a few bananas, some eggs. Often as not stop and have a *café coretto alla sambuca* and a cigarette for fortitude. Yet I would still fail to return home later than Amine.

Fatima is like Amine. They will do anything to make you laugh but nothing to make themselves appear undignified or foolish. Occasionally Fatima would mime an action, describe a certain unheard of fruit with her hands but she always knew instinctively, unconsciously where to draw the line. Her small competent hands once rose to trace the arc and pull of a needle and thread with exquisite ease, 'You want a needle and thread? You want to buy a needle and thread? Let's go! *Sortire?*'

I took Fatima directly to the haberdashery section of a supermarket. She looked nonplussed. '*Pour ...*' I wriggled and jerked my finger and thumb joined together. Fatima shook her head. I took her to another shop and another each time performing the same frantic movement. Fatima just wanted to see some examples of Italian handiwork. It's no wonder I can't sew, I made it look difficult even without a needle and thread.

Fatima earned an income from her beautiful and lavish embroidery skills. She also hand made clothes and jackets for wealthy clients, some of whom were French — *pied noir*. A story Fatima told with pleasure was of a particular Madame Vernou who came for measurements one morning.

'Ahh, *c'est bien*. Madame's house is very beautiful — so clean. Madame has no children?'

'*Mais oui* — I have eight.'

* * * * *

The last time I saw Fatima, I was nearly thirty and had my own son, three years old, named Nouredine after his paternal grandfather. Fatima had been widowed nearly four years by then. We arrived at the airport in Algiers, from Sydney where we had settled some years prior. Amine's brother-in-law dropped us off at Fatima's apartment in Bab Ezzouar. Bab Ezzouar is a suburb on the outskirts of Algiers and it was the last place on earth I would have imagined Fatima or Amine coming from.

Apartment building after apartment building, all decrepit, and all twelve, fifteen stories high rose out of the dirt and blighted the skyline. A road of faded tar dribbled its way through gouged pale dirt and swarms of discarded black plastic bags hovered close to the ground. Rubbish was piled high outside each group of apartments, putrefying in the heat whilst cats and kittens wound their way around individual garbage bags. Behind us, on the other corner was a café with alfresco seating. My glazed and feverish eyes skated over the clientele who were all men sitting watchful and motionless in the blazing heat. Children stared at us from the gutters and between piles of garbage scattered amongst the ruins of those hideous, crumbling buildings that sprung out of the dirt every few metres or so.

We climbed the staircase up eight flights, me dragging my heels and squeezing Nouredine's hot little hand, scuffing my feet in the dust and grime on the stairs. As we reached the seventh floor, the stairs shone like polished marble, I lifted

my head and the door above me flew open and there was Fatima. She was still beautiful. It was like a butterfly had enveloped Amine who had bounded up ahead. Fatima's housedress was all billowing fuchsia and the rainbow colours of Kabyle embroidery. It was my turn next, to be embraced, drab and travel wearied, and then Nouredine who recoiled and refused to be extracted from my legs.

Once inside I sank into the salmon velour of the modular settee and closed my lids an instant longer than a blink. I allowed my gaze to flit with caution about the room. It was an oasis of gleaming surfaces, ornate but elegant furnishings, arched doorways and silk flowers. Photos that I had sent of Nouredine took pride of place above the television. No sooner had I settled than Fatima walked over, standing in front of me,

'*Ter cul*, Michelle?' Will you eat? She asked awaiting my response. I had understood her question but slowed with fatigue and a violent case of *deja vu*, I remained silent and unblinking. Fatima repeated her question. I was thinking of the time she'd visited us in Italy. She'd brought hand sewn stomachs stuffed with rice on the plane with her, a favourite of Amine's I learned. They travelled well and were obviously meant to be a pale green as neither she nor Amine suffered food poisoning the next day. I had declined as politely as I knew how the *halal* sausages — *mergez* — and olive studded salami and nibbled delicately on *Tcharak Ariane* instead. I am conservative when it comes to meat travelling on planes.

* * * * *

For the next thirteen days Fatima manned our kitchenette. She was heavy handed with an Algerian form of lard and being poor back then we could only afford to buy offal or mince, neither of which are my favourite cuts of meat. For the following ten days I learned to dread mealtimes. My heart would sink when Fatima would utter those words, '*Ter cul*, Michelle?'

The eleventh morning of her stay, Fatima had risen early. Amine and I were sleeping on the floor beside her, so when she made her way to the kitchen, I had woken. For two hours, until seven when I could bring myself to surface, I had listened to her quiet labours. I had felt like the miller's daughter in Rumpelstiltskin when I opened up the door. The backs of our kitchen chairs and table were covered with t-towels and strung over these were pale coils of *rechta*. *Rechta* are noodles finer than vermicelli and lighter. Inside your mouth they maintain their spring and then dissolve to nothing in an instant. Later that same day Fatima had made cous cous. Mouth ajar, eyes wide and inept hands tucked firmly out of sight, I watched a pale grind of semolina transformed beneath the deftest fingers of them all. Even in Algiers Fatima's dishes are famous for their levity. They were the best meals I have ever eaten. She had cooked enough to fill our freezer for weeks after she had gone.

So as she stood before me in her own lounge room uttering those words, '*Ter cul*, Michelle?' Will you eat? I paused, considering the odds. I was famished but

could I face a plate of stomachs? Or brains? What if it were *rechta*? Could I say yes, and then change my mind depending on what was on offer? I decided not. I shook my head,

‘*Non, merci, ca va.*’

I should have known Fatima would prepare something she knew I liked for our first meal in Algiers. Amine and Nouredine had sat down to bowls of *rechta* with cinnamon spiced chicken and chickpeas. Nouredine had picked up handfuls of the noodles and pushed them into his mouth ‘til he could barely chew. Fatima’s face had shone with pleasure, she had cooed around him heedless of the mess and filling and refilling his bowl. I watched them from the balcony that adjoined the kitchen.

Fatima sent me a recipe book not long after our stay with her. It is a small paperback book all in French, a language I don’t speak. *Recettes de Cuisine Algerienne* by Farida Yahyaoui-Bakhti. It has chapters on soups, vegetables, chicken, lamb and fish. The very last chapter is devoted to biscuits. When the book arrived I flipped through its pages until I got to the chapter entitled Patisseries. *Makrout, Ghribia, M’Hancha, Katayef*, they were all there in un-biscuit like black and white. I peered through the titles, sounding them out phonetically until I could recognize what biscuit they denoted. The very last recipe was for *Tcharak Ariane*. I searched through old boxes of books until I came up with a French dictionary and painfully, laboriously translated the list of ingredients and the instructions that followed. Exhausted I left it until the following day to gather my ingredients — *eau de fleurs d’oranger*, almond meal and flour are simply not staples in my kitchen.

As I mixed up the filling and the fragrance of orange flowers drifted up from the bowl, the spoon I wielded seemed light in my hand. It was summer and a bright late morning light streamed through the Venetian blinds. The mix was gritty and sweet, almost divine. The pastry, too, was simple and as I rolled it out *tres mince* I imagined Amine’s pleasure when he came home from work for the first time in nearly ten years of marriage to find a stash of homemade biscuits. I visualized him on the phone to his mother,

‘*Wooallah-sah!* Michelle made biscuits — *son tres bien*. I swear to God, it’s true.’ Much laughter would follow that news, I was sure.

The first two biscuits went well, not perfectly but still they were recognizable, a little bulbous for croissants but undoubtedly *Tcharak Ariane*. The problem was it had taken me nearly twenty minutes to make them, to cut just the right sized square, to find just the right amount of filling to allow me to roll them, to pinch the ends just enough so nothing would spill out yet retain the integrity of the biscuit. My feet began to itch, my palms sweated and just the slightest tremor went through my stomach. I had things to do; washing, some cleaning, and a book I wanted to finish. Things that had to be done before Nouredine woke up from his morning sleep. I wanted to go to the beach after lunch; I wanted to visit

my mum. On I ploughed through the pastry that began sticking to the roller, to my fingers, and to the laminex. Too much butter, I feared, perhaps not enough? I was hardly an expert. The biscuits got bigger and bigger and still the pastry would not finish. When I had fifteen biscuits I slammed the oven door shut on them and rested my back against the wall. I threw the remaining pastry in the bin and ate up the almond meal filling with a spoon. I would never make those biscuits again, I vowed. The kitchen was all flour and empty bowls and butter softening in the summer heat, sweat ran freely down my face but I had to laugh as I watched the filling seep out the tips onto the oven tray.

‘I made some biscuits this morning,’ I said to Amine when he’d been home from work a while. ‘You might like some.’ He must have heard the quaver in my voice because he nodded although he rarely has afternoon tea. I put the biscuits on a plate and carefully centred them on the table.

‘*Tcharak Ariane!* No! You made *Tcharak Ariane!*’ He took the biggest and ate it all and then another. They didn’t look like Fatima’s but they did taste the same. I blushed and smiled and felt quite bashful, something I hadn’t felt for years.

‘*Tcharak Ariane!* You could make some for Foedil — you know he’s all by himself here.’ Amine looked at my face and smiled. ‘Perhaps not. These are good you know — a bit of practice...’ he trailed off again as my brows knitted and my jaw set.

There have been no more *Tcharak Ariane* from my kitchen. Occasionally I’ve turned to the page with its miniscule scrawlings of English in the margins but the very sight of it is enough to make me quickly shut the book up tight. Instead, I await Fatima’s parcels. Now postal security is so tight they often arrive wrapped in garish red plastic, with green stickers notifying us the parcel has been opened and searched. Sometimes the biscuits are no more than a box full of pastel icing splinters and crushed biscuits. Silver cashews, unstuck and rolling haphazardly about the bottom of the box like loose marbles.

I feel great sorrow and anger when I see that carnage caused by the hands of strangers. I know the postal system is looking for anthrax and bombs and the parcel is from Algeria after all, but still there’s something vandalous, senseless and cruel in such destruction. Occasionally a searched parcel of biscuits does arrive unscathed. The biscuits then seem both miraculous and fragile, doubly handled. I imagine the gentle, knowing hands that lifted each biscuit, turning and replacing it with care before sealing the box once again with tape and only then placing it in its red plastic bag. Now I don’t care the biscuits have been touched, travelled fourteen thousand kilometres and were baked a month before, I’m the first one to reach in and help myself to the biscuit that takes my fancy. And if the taste is not as fresh, a little stale, it is all the more sweet.

Tcharak Ariane

INGREDIENTS

1 jeune d'oeuf

Pour la Pate:

2 tasse d'farine

8 cuilleres a soupe de beurre

pincee de sel

1 oeuf

3 cuilleres a soupe de sucre

Pour La Garniture:

1/3 tasse de sucre

1 tasse d'amandes moulues

2 cuilleres a soupe d'eau de fleurs d'oranger

½ cuillère a café de canelle

METHOD

1. Préparation de la garniture: Mélanger les amandes, le sucre, l'eau de fleurs d'oranger et la canelle. Incorporer assez d'eau pour obtenir une pâte ferme. Laisser reposer.
2. Préparation de la pâte: Dans une terrine, mélanger l'oeuf, la farine et la beurre. Ajouter assez d'eau pour obtenir une pâte souple. Pétrir jusqu'à ce que la pâte soit lisse et élastique.
3. Étaler la pâte au rouleau en une baisse très mince. Détailler en carrés (10 x 10cm). Prélever un peu de garniture et rouler en forme de cylinder.
4. Disposer un carré de pâte sur un plan de travail. Placer un cylinder le long d'un de ses côtés. Rouler ensuite pour en faire un cigare. Mouiller un peu pour souder les bords. Replier les extrémités de façon à obtenir un croissant. Utiliser un pinceau et passer le jaune d'oeuf sur le croissant.
5. Continuer jusqu'à épuisement de la pâte. Disposer les croissants sur une plaque et mettre à four moyen préalablement chauffé. Laisser cuire jusqu'à ce qu'ils soient dorés.

Yahyaoui – Bakhti, Farida, *Recettes De Cuisine Algerienne*, (1995) Tous droits reserves à Farida Yahyaoui-Bakhti.

Tcharak Ariane

INGREDIENTS

1 egg yolk

For the Pastry:

2 cups flour

8 tablespoons butter

pinch salt

1 egg

3 tablespoons sugar

For the Filling:

1/3 cup sugar

1 cup ground almonds

2 tablespoons orange blossom water

1/2 teaspoon cinnamon

METHOD

- 1. Filling preparation: Mix the almonds, sugar, orange blossom water and cinnamon. Add enough water to make a firm paste.*
- 2. Pastry preparation: In a terrine, mix the egg, flour and butter. Add enough water to make a pliable dough. Knead until the dough is flexible.*
- 3. Roll out the pastry very thinly. Cut it into squares (10 x 10cm). Take a bit of filling and role it into a cylindrical form.*
- 4. Lay a square of pastry on a work-top. Place a cylinder along one of its sides. Then roll it up to make a cigar. Wet it a bit to fuse the edges together. Fold up the ends as you would to make a croissant. Brush the yolk over the croissant.*
- 5. Continue until the pastry is finished. Put the croissants on a tray and put them in the oven, pre-heated to moderate. Leave them to cook until brown.*