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The Trilogy of Alfonse

Helmi Ben Meriem

Seeing Paris from London

Charles De Gaulle Airport. Gate Two. I am Alphonse M. from Paris. I have lived there for the last thirty years. Writing novels in English. Not in French, mind you. English helped me to reach more readers. But now, being in my early sixties, I decided to forget about the world and go seek a new life in a faraway land. I think Ocean is a better word for it.

A long journey I have in front of me to reach my last destination. On the other side of the world lies my new life. I have enough money to settle in my new home and support myself for the remainder of my life.

Paris. Dubai. Sydney. Suva. Cassidy Airport. Three days to get there. I had to make a stop in Suva waiting for the Beechcraft twin-engine airplane to come from Cassidy Airport. The airport staff told the nineteen passengers, including me, that the airplane is refueling and soon to take off. Soon I will be in Paris. Again. Not really. This is my new Paris. A smaller, less developed, less modern, and quieter Paris. I am fed up with the hustle and bustle of Europe. I want silence to invade my world and to settle in my heart. I want to hear my heart beats as my eyes see but two colors: blue and green. Fresh air that will surely make me sick for the first days. My lungs will think the air is poisonous. Only after a week or so will my lungs discover the true meaning of breathing healthy, clean and heavenly air.

We landed in Cassidy Airport at five p.m. It was New Year's Eve. It was the New Millennium's Eve. It was the start of a new life for me. Here in Paris I shall write and read. When I told my Algerian friend Mokhtar that I am going to Paris-Kiribati, he asked me one question:

“For somebody who spends all of his time reading and writing, you will find much difficulty getting books to read. Don't you think, Alfonse?”

“Not really, dear Mokhtar. I have decided to bring all of my books with me, and turn one room into a public library for the people of Paris.”

My books have been shipped a long time ago; they shall arrive in two days. I have already made arrangements and bought one medium-sized house that shall serve as my Parisian cottage and my gift to Paris.

The bus took the eighteen passengers, who were UN deputies in charge of helping poor nations, to nearby London—another rich European city rechristened thousands of miles away in a lost atoll in the Pacific Ocean. A patch of green land in the midst of blue waters. When we reached London, I told the driver that I was going to take a ferry—I call it so but it is just a fishing skiff—and go on my own to Paris. He welcomed the idea; it saved him the trouble of going down the ring-road that is built along the coastal line of the atoll. I can see Paris from

London. But only this small channel connecting the lagoon to the ocean separates me from my new home.

I asked a man sitting in front of his skiff if he could take me to Paris. He agreed to it. I gave him eight Kiribati Dollars, about five Euros. I had changed my money into Kiribati and Australian Dollars, since both currencies are accepted here. When we arrived in Paris, I took my two suitcases and asked someone to show me the way to my house, which I have been told lies at the North Point of Paris. After some effort, I managed to get to the house; actually three houses, for in Kiribati every household has three houses within the same compound: one for cooking, one for storage and one for sleeping and daily living. There were no fences, mere pandanus palms that used to cover the roofs of the houses. One of the houses had a corrugated metal roof with concrete walls. I decided that I should make that one house the library. Books would be safe there. I have been told that at times when it rains it pours.

I went inside the middle house, where a bed, a sofa and a table with four chairs were placed; I put my suitcases on the sofa, took my shirt and pants off and lied on the bed. So tired. I woke up the next morning on the gentle touch of young woman trying to wake me up.

“Hello, Sir. I am Teata. I was sent by my father to tell you he is coming later to meet you.”

“Hello, Taeta. OK.” I was half-asleep, and I wanted to go back to sleep.

“OK. He will be here in an hour. He is now in Poland’s Church for a mass in celebration of the New Year. He will be finished by two p.m. I hope you understood everything. Good bye.”

“Wait, what time is it now?”

“One p.m.”

“Thanks. And Good bye, Taeta.”

“Good bye.”

I have overslept. I sat by the bedside, and looked around me for my clothes. Where did I put them? Oh, there they are. I put my shirt on and went looking for the toilet. Found it at the back of the cooking room. One small window. Not like the one I had in France. In my new Paris, the toilet is very different from that in my old Paris. Two posts made each of two cement-hollow-block are put on the left and right side of a medium-size hole. On top of the two posts stretch from one side to the other two wooden boards, on which one would sit while defecating. It is not as easy as one might think. But I shall get use to it. A bucket filled with water sits next to the toilet with a bar of soap and a piece of cloth on a four-brick-improvised table. Done. Cleaned. And now I can start my day. What to have for my brunch?

Days passed by so quickly. My library was established in the ex-storage room. Students from Paris, London and Poland would come and read masterpieces written far-far-away about places they have never seen. Reading becomes their way to travel without leaving the luxury of being secluded from the rest of the world. In this atoll, they only know the Ocean and its

might. They have never seen a mountain where the snow reigns, a valley where snakes rule, or Saharas where one is surrounded by an ocean of sand.

Years have gone. Seventy-one is the number of years I had lived. Dying with cancer, I told no body of that. I was diagnosed a year ago in Suva. I am possessed with one thought: “Who shall carry my legacy?”

Resurrecting Alfonse

Poland. Church of Saint Stanisław. South of Paris. Today is the funeral of a French tenant, who lived in Paris for almost a decade. Alfonse was his name. We used to call him Benson. The house he used to occupy is located on the north-west point of Paris called Benson Point. My father likes Benson so much; they became friends instantly.

Inside the small church, named after a Polish sailor—who landed here decades ago, people were seated looking at the casket put in the middle of the pulpit. Prayers were recited in honor of the benevolent Alfonse. People in Paris, Banana, London, and Poland love him. He is the one who gave their kids a chance to explore the world thanks to the library he established in Paris. Alfonse, our Benson, has put our towns, our atoll, and our country on the map. People did not know anything about us before. A bunch of scattered atolls and islands in the middle of nowhere, that is what the world thinks of us.

Alfonse’s death was a surprise to all of us. He was always cheerful and sociable. Telling jokes. Enacting passages from Shakespeare, Albee, Marlow. Walking everyday from Paris to Banana and back to Paris. Swimming between Benson Point and Bridges Point. He was full of life. People have many speculations about his death; some say that he was dying with cancer but never told anyone.

I do not believe that. Why would not he share his health problem with his people, that is, us? I think that he was tormented because of the state that Paris has ended up in. The government has asked the townspeople to evacuate the town. Rising sea levels was the cause. An atoll cannot survive the Ocean’s high tides. We were, all of us, supposed to resettle in London. Even though, we can see London from Paris; no one wants to leave Paris. How can one leave one’s home, one’s life and one’s childhood behind oneself and just go?

The government decided to squeeze us between London and Banana—a small town by Cassidy Airport. The land allocated to the Parisians is in-between Cape Manning and Wilkes Lagoon. From there, we can see in the distance Paris. How can we see Paris and not be there? One would want to stretch one’s hand, take a hand-full of sand and sniff it.

The houses were dismantled weeks after the funeral of Alfonse. Our homes were lost. Paris was lost forever. We cannot turn the time back. The Ocean is devouring our town. The Pacific is claiming our homes. How dare it do that? Paris is ours not its.

The new town would not last forever either. The whole atoll is dying under the hammer of the Pacific. Hammering the coast day and night. Losing the atoll inch by inch. Live fading as more people are leaving the atoll to settle in the capitol. The capitol of Kiribati is turning into a big slum. Houses in Paris soon to be covered by pandanus palms and then water. Washing Paris off the maps of Kiribati. Never to be washed from our hearts.

The town, which now accommodates the Parisians, is called Alfonse's Paris. In memory of Benson. The center of town is occupied by a house, which holds between its four corners tons and tons of books. This is the new site of Paris' Library. A big picture of Alfonse with young boys and girls crowns the Northern wall of the library. The faces in the photo are looking southward in the direction of Paris. Reminding all of us of our homes.

Life here will never be like the one we had in Paris. Life here will not satisfy us. But we have to accept the wrath of the Ocean—our mother. The Pacific, like a blanket, wraps our atoll. We might not like what is happening, but our mother is filled with love—hugging the atoll so tightly.

Soon, in the upcoming years, we will have to leave the atoll, where East Europe met West Europe, and where our two Saints are Europeans. Would Europe welcome us as we welcomed its citizens and took them in like brothers? Will we be able to settle in Paris and found our own Paris within the walls of Alfonse's old Paris?

Questions and more questions. Future uncertain. Good byes will be uttered as we all are packed into small ships. Lost Paradise. Who will carry the legacy of friendship? Who will carry the legacy of Alfonse? And most importantly will we still be called Parisians or Kiribati?

Where is *Sons and Lovers*?

April 1999, early morning, in Alfonse's apartment in Paris—France.

Hamlet: "What do you think will happen to us, *The Temptation to Exist*?"

Temptation: "I do not know. Did not you hear what Alfonse has just said?"

Hamlet: "I heard what he said. Leaving Paris. Going elsewhere. But why?"

Temptation: "There was a time when the artist mobilized all his defects to produce a work which concealed himself; the notion of exposing his life to the public probably never occurred to him."

Walden: "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude."

Temptation: “My point exactly. Maybe he wants to be alone. Escape the chaos of Paris and modern life. Go somewhere far. Go and lose himself in the open space of a far-far-away land.”

Politics: “‘Everyone thinks chiefly of his own, hardly ever of the public interest.’ What about us? He said he is going to a remote atoll in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Who shall read us?”

Hamlet: “But are you not thinking only of yourself, *Politics*? You ‘dread of something after death, The undiscover'd country from whose bourn No traveler returns, puzzles the will And makes us rather bear those ills we have Than fly to others that we know not of?’”

Temptation: “Fear not the unknown. For in the unknown one might find one’s heaven.”

Walden: “Who wrote that the one crossing from the light side to the dark side might be more afraid from the one crossing from the dark to the light side?”

Temptation: “Where is *Sons and Lovers*?”

Hamlet: “In the other room, last week, it was taken there.”

Temptation: “It could have been of great help. Anyway we should not be afraid of what is to come.”

Politics: “Quite! Alfonse is coming.”

Roughly two months later, late afternoon, in Alphonse’s library in Paris—Kiribati.

Temptation: “*Politics*. Are you awake?”

Politics: “Who is calling me?”

Temptation: “It is me, *Temptation*. Do you remember our conversation in Alphonse’s flat in France?”

Hamlet: “Of course he does. He forgets nothing.”

Politics: “I do remember it, *Temptation*. I do. I guess I was mistaken, thinking that we are heading to the dark side.”

Temptation: “Speaking of the dark side. *Sons and Lovers*! *Sons and Lovers*! Where are you? I have a question for you?”

Giovanni’s Room: “It is not here. A young boy from London borrowed it this morning. It will not be back till next week.”

Temptation: “Why is it that we cannot find *Sons and lovers* whenever we need it?”

Almost a decade later, late morning, in the same library

The Left Hand of Darkness: “Let us all remember that ‘it is good to have an end to journey towards, but it is the journey that matters at the end’. Our Alphonse had a great journey and his death will not change the fact that he is seen by the atoll’s people as a saint.”

Silence. Sign of approval of what *The Left Hand of Darkness* said.

After three decades, Mussau Island, Alphonse’s Reading Hall in The National Library of Kiribati

Pride and Prejudice: “Where would we be if the people of New Papua Guinea did not give the people of Kiribati Massau Island as their new home?”

Native Son: “Who knows? Maybe burnt in a kitchen fireplace. The Bronte Sisters helping some women to get some soup to boil or some fish to be grilled.”

Giovanni’s Room: “Good Heavens. May we never see such atrocities.”

To Kill a Mockingbird: “The people of Kiribati have carried the legacy of Alphonse. As long as there people to read, his memory and legacy shall not be forgotten.”

Giovanni’s Room: “We are his home. We are Alphonse’s room. A Room of his Own.”

Suddenly Teata comes in. Grabs *Canterbury’s Tales*. Opens it to “The Monk’s Tale”. Sits by the window and reads.