Flight by Phyllis Carol Agins - 2006

Hanina lives in Philadelphia now. Ever since her son decided she couldn't take care of herself anymore and imported her like a jug of olive oil.

"Like a fine old wine," he tells her the one time she complains.

He works for a French drug company that sells homeopathic medicines. Just like the drops and ointments her mother once bought in the Arab quarter all those years ago in Algeria—back when Arabs and Jews believed each other were friends, and before the French created a greater wedge than any differences about Mohamed and Moses.

Hanina counts her 80th birthday in her son's Philadelphia row house. No one speaks to her all day. Her son is working and his children are abandoned in France, along with his ex-wife, who would never add Hanina to her daily obligations, now that the marriage is over. Hanina understands.

Every day she dusts his furniture and folds away his newspaper. Red circles dance across the pages to mark the words he wants to look up.

"I've started a new life here, *Maman*" he says.

Hanina feels too old to start anything new. But here she is, living in a foreign country for the second time in her life, wondering how she got from Constantine to Toulon to Philadelphia all in the space of 80 years when not one of the decisions was hers to make.

Once, she was in charge of the small daily decisions—like what to make for dinner for her husband and son. Or what fruit to buy at the market. Or what route to take home with the day's shopping in a basket looped over her arm. Like a passport to the city around her, that basket opened time so she could disappear for hours. Allowed her to wander to Toulon's port or to the cinema where she'd tuck the basket, filled with onions and apples, under her scat and take in the latest Bridget Bardot film that her husband would never permit. *Indecent*, he'd cry, *not for the eyes of a virtuous woman.*

She remembers all this as she prepares her son's dinner He makes her life easy, he says, by ordering the groceries delivered to the house each week. Her son won't admit that he still welcomes the Sephardic cooking she's imported with her. He brags about the French food and wine he impresses his clients with over the long lunches that have added pounds to his lean frame. But Hanina knows not to think out loud. There's always the danger he'll send her back to France to some *maison de retraite* where she'll languish, forgotten. So she remains silent.

The mailman rings the door each day with some package for her son.

"how are you?" she tries, dragging the words from her mouth that could slide easily over French and once even recited poetry in Arabic.

"Good day. Missus," the man replies. Then he adds something about the weather—too hot, too cold.

"Bad today," Hanina says and points to the sky where the cold rain has formed ice crystals on the man's hat.

She wants to offer him tea like her own mother would have brewed in Constantine—sweet and fragranced with fresh mint. But she's afraid of what her son would say, or more, of what she could say to this man with her bad English.

"Watch television, *Maman*" her son instructs each day. "You'll learn English that way." Before he leaves, he hugs her like the Americans—with a broad clap to her back.

Some nights he takes her out so she doesn't have to cook. From her meticulously organized closet, she pulls a fine silk dress, polka-dotted with lime and tangerine. Her eyes are rimmed lightly with kohl and her

lips are glossed peach. Once, even in winter, her skin would have been polished bronze by the Mediterranean sun, but now she rubs rouge onto her pale cheeks. She will not join the other American women in baggy pants and loose shirts.

She sits across from her son in the Italian restaurant. From the kitchen, she can make out some of the Spanish words the dishwashers mix with the empty plates.

“How was your day, *Maman?*” her son asks.

“I watch the stories on television,” she answers.

“How many words did you learn today? Remember when you were a little girl, and you learned some English from the Americans who were in Constantine during the war?” He smiles at her as if he’s discovered a secret and wants to share it.

“How-do-you-do?” Hanina repeats in English, remembering the Americans who were pleased to still be alive.

She watches the other people eat the Italian food that comes from the Spanish-speaking kitchen. They eat carefully, balancing their forks in one hand with the other hand quiet in their laps. Like dead birds. Not like Europeans, who use both hands to eat, knife and fork in constant motion, so that each morsel is tasted and enjoyed.

She looks down at her hands resting near the veal Parmesan the waiter has raved about. Oil pockets against the fried meat. She saws away, not even hungry.

In the moment she pauses, she sees the old hands that belong to her now. The veins jump and wobble under the fragile skin. Then she allows herself to examine her wrists. She doesn’t think about those two deep lines often, or how they came to be. She can’t even see the stitches that once bound them together, even though the black thread had shocked her more than the lines themselves. They are camouflaged by time and age. By all the other cuts on her hands from chopping onions or grating oranges for a cake. From braiding bread and scrubbing floors. Those two deep lines have almost disappeared.

Her son is watching with a familiar narrowing of his dark eyes.

“Maman” he pleads, “there’s a cake here, made by a French baker. Let me order it for you—for your pleasure!”

She crosses her wrists in her lap as he calls the waiter to their table.

Hanina is 37 and lives in Toulon now. Her husband is a policeman in this south-of-France port. Her son goes to school with all the French children. Her mother-in-law stays home with her all day while Hanina tries to make a new home in France along with the other refugees from Algeria. There are only two tiny bedrooms in the apartment that is half-buried in the hills above Toulon. Her husband is proud that he can see the Mediterranean from their apartment—even if only a blue sliver when he thrusts himself from the balcony.

Her mother-in-law is unhappy with everything—even with the larger of the two bedrooms her husband insists they abandon for his mother’s comfort. Hanina’s son sleeps in the smaller bedroom, which she fills with books and toy cars and French flags. He would prefer tanks like the French recently used against the Algerians, who stubbornly insisted on their own independence. It is 1962, and she and her husband sleep on the pullout couch in the salon. He still wants to make love each night although she is tired, and his mother will surely hear his grunting. She covers his mouth with her hand, but he bites her and then sucks her nipples so hard, she is the one who cries out.

She tries to call the other woman mother, as her husband has requested. But the word seems reserved only for her own mother, who died just before Hanina boarded the plane for France and was buried next

to Hanina's older brother. *He was simply walking home,* the family sages would recount as if telling a story from the Torah. Killed in an Arab riot because the French *pied noir* favored Jews over them.

"Weren't we all friends once?" Hanina asked.

No one would ever say, but Hanina knew that brother had bled to death. His throat slit against the walls of their synagogue, like some lamb in a ritual slaughter, killed on an altar of hatred. Incomprehensible, that her brother should die so, the one who danced like a Bedouin to Oriental music, who shook his shoulders with pleasure, who played the flute like a street performer, who studied late each night to learn science, who brought her honeyed sweets from the market. Unforgivable, that her mother wailed as she washed his body for burial, not trusting the others to perform this last gift.

Unforgivable.

Hanina escapes from the apartment in Toulon with her basket over her arm. She knows her mother-in-law counts the hours until she returns and reports the missing time to her husband. *What does she do in the street all morning?* her mother-in-law whispers over and over. Each night, her husband climbs onto her to reclaim those lost hours.

He watches her with uneasy eyes. He's a policeman here, just as in Algeria, just like his father before him, and can understand peoples' secrets, he insists one morning before he follows her to the market. Slouching behind a post, he waits as she chooses vegetables and bread that some stranger bakes now. He calculates the minutes she spends watching the sea recoil with the same blue force that once gave her such pleasure on Algeria's coast. He watches until she boards the bus that will take her back to the apartment buried in the hill.

Hanina knows her husband has decided.

"You will no longer leave the house without me," he announces one day, as his mother peers from the kitchen. "It isn't safe on the streets. Young women are tai'gets now—the French hate us for coming here."

"But our food?" Hanina manages to ask.

"Mother will go. "She is more clever than you and older. The French will leave her alone."

It takes one week for Hanina to form her escape. She will kiss her son good-bye and tuck a special treat into his pocket for his snack. In the corner of his small room, she hides a note to try to explain. It will make no sense to him now—he's only nine; but later, she believes, he'll come to understand. She will wait until her mother-in-law places the basket over her arm. Hanina will only have a few hours before her son is back for lunch, and her mother-in-law returns from the market. Only a few hours.

She dresses carefully as if she might travel back to Constantine to see her old friends and her lost brother. She smoothes her stockings and pins her hat carefully across her brow. She pulls the veil down across her face as she's seen Ingrid Bergman do in the movies. She passes through the bathroom on her way to her mother-in-law's bed.

Hanina doesn't think much before she drags the razor blade across her wrists. The burning of separated skin doesn't surprise her. She remembers how she burned when her son escaped her body. She carefully cuts through her veins, first one wrist and then the other. The pumping blood doesn't surprise her, either. Hadn't her own brother bled like this on that long-ago night?

She lies against the pillow and places her wrists downward on her mother-in-law's bed. Until she sleeps, Hanina thinks about the sea and Constantine. About her mother who baked each Friday. About her own fingers in that dough, learning to braid it in the ritual way for the Shabbat table. The dough is warm and rises against her hands, just as the blue tide rises against the shore. Hanina floats on a loaf of challah, and cradled against the deep braids, she safely rides the sea. Far away.

She is so far from shore that she can no longer see the hills of Algeria in the distance. Her brother calls: “Come, come.” First from a distance and then in her ear. “Come back,” the voice demands. Hanina turns her head.

“Maman, please come back.” She hears someone crying. Then fierce hands hold her wrists in the air as someone binds kitchen towels around them. A body falls across her chest, but it is not her husband on his nightly errands. Her son’s chest rises and falls with her own reluctant intake of air. She can hear men cursing because the stairs are too narrow for a litter, and they must carry her down the three flights of stairs that circle the building. She tries not to bleed on them.

After a year in the hospital, the doctors say she can go home. She has told the doctors about her brother and the challah. About the basket and her mother-in-law. She has finally cried out loud, and, at night, they let her watch old movies. Ingrid Bergman remains beautiful as she boards the plane from Casablanca. To do her duty, Hanina knows.

When she returns home, her mother-in-law has been moved to a daughter’s apartment in the next village. Hanina has her own bed in the large bedroom now where her husband holds her in his arms and cries into her nightgown each night.

When she leaves with the basket on her arm, her son begs to come. He grasps her hand as they walk, even though he is 10, and the other boys his age run from their mothers.

Hanina is 13 now and still lives with her parents in Constantine. Her older brother goes to the university each day and brings her a treat from the market when he returns at night. Sometimes it is a book from the antique stalls; one time it was a yellow bird that sang each morning when the swallows began their acrobatics in the sky outside their terrace. She has been bleeding for a year and her mother presented her with a box of chocolates to celebrate the occasion. She and her mother mysteriously cycle together.

“It is God’s way,” her mother laughs.

So she bathes away the stains of womanhood each month at the same time as her mother. Most of the women are naked in the *hammam*. They are still comfortable with each other, the Jews and the Arabs. Each month her mother chats with the same Arab woman. They talk about their children and laugh behind hands pressed closely to their mouths when they mention their husbands’ names. Hanina knows they are sharing women’s secrets. Sometimes, she prays the secrets will be hers, too.

Every afternoon she and her friends run through the streets of their quarter. They laugh when they see a group of boys who stand smoking on the comer and choose their sweethearts. The same boy watches Hanina each day with blue eyes that turn away whenever she notices. She knows all about his family because there are few secrets in her quarter. His father is a policeman and his mother was known as a great beauty, and the quarter tingles with the idea that this woman should have made a better match. Some kind of love, the women laugh again.

Some afternoons, Hanina slips away from the knot of friends and wanders the narrow streets until she reaches the Arab market. She is pulled by the scent of flowers and spices. The cinnamon and cumin reach out from their open sacks where they rest like the pollen of exotic flowers.

I’ll travel the world, Hanina thinks. I’ll follow the route of spices mid silks until I reach their origin—like a great explorer. Maybe I’ll go to America.

She has just read about Sir Richard Burton, who obsessively searched for the Nile’s source. Beyond the mountains of Constantine, a desert unravels for thousands of miles. She will marry that young man on the corner and have two boys and two girls. But first, she will earn her education. Many Jewish women in Constantine live like the Arab women, inhabiting the world only of their homes—a place bordered by high walls. No matter how sweet the fountain in the courtyard, Hanina will not be captured.

Every Friday, her mother, who doesn't know Hanina's desires for the world, teaches her daughter the skills of maintaining a Jewish home. They prepare the Shabbat meal, the couscous and chicken stewed with prunes and honey. Most importantly, they bake bread together as Hanina's mother teaches her the mysteries of yeast and dough. It is to Hanina's smooth hands that her mother entrusts the braiding of the bread. Hanina is transported by the dough's heat and the smell of fermenting yeast. She carefully sections the three parts and begins to plait the dough as if she were dressing her own black hair for a festival.

As the bread bakes, Hanina stands on the terrace watching the swallows move across the sky. They soar and dive, filling the sky as they cry out to each other. The terrace is so high that the swallows fly directly in front of her. She can watch their spiked tail feathers spread while they catch the currents under those angular wings. Hanina knows they have begun to build their nests again. As they have for centuries.

Her mother places the dishes and silver on the table for her to arrange. Before Hanina leaves the terrace, she takes the cotton from her pockets and tosses the pieces, one by one, into the sky, so the birds can bury the soft material in their nests.

The cotton floats in the air for an instant before a swallow swoops down to catch it in its beak. One by one, the squealing swallows dive towards Hanina as she throws the last of the cotton into the air. One last time, the swallows pass in front of her, the cotton trailing behind them like gossamer flags.

Hanina watches with joy as those birds disappear into a flock that soars freely in the direction of the sea.