

The Universe on the Corner

by Leona Francombe

Rafik came to Brussels 30 years ago and still bears the label of his birthplace. “Go to the Syrian for tomatoes,” a neighbour says to his daughter. “The Syrian keeps my beer under the counter for me,” confides the old woman with the cane, her eyes impish behind huge glasses. The Syrian is Belgian now. His children are Belgian. But though he speaks French and Dutch and other languages besides, he will never truly belong. He exists in the immigrant’s limbo: a land of fading images and closed doors of which only a small box of memories remains, to be pulled out fondly at night and concealed at dawn with a sigh.

The old lady’s back is rounded and hardened like an ancient hill. While the local *bonnes femmes* hustle past, her cane probes the cobblestones at every step, as if she has lost a treasure. She is unwashed, and her long, greasy hair swings slowly with her gait. She carries a small plastic bag of rubbish destined for the bin in front of Rafik’s Ixelles shop, and a borrowed umbrella hooked over her wrist. You would give her money if she asked, despite the silver watch she keeps on a chain around her neck. She always has trouble navigating the *chaussée*, a racecourse of nerves and arrogance, but as soon as Rafik spots her coming he hurries from behind his display of vegetables and helps her cross. She rarely thanks him. He nods to her anyway, his smile wistful, and expects nothing.

Rafik’s courtesy is of antique provenance, bred slowly, like figs and olives, in the dusty sunshine of generations. No reward is required – certainly none of the tiresome tit for tat that so often passes for generosity in our culture. Though it is clear, through a subtle ballet of gesture and restraint, that he is not fond of the old woman, Rafik treats her with deference, as if she were the centre of his universe. If she is unwell, he leaves her beer on the tiles of her hallway. She lingers in the gloom of the stairs until he is gone and never invites him up. He brushes off the slight. The two have danced this way, without music or warmth, for many years, but even so Rafik never speaks ill of her, and the old lady herself would find life impossible without him.

Small immigrant shops dot the city like oases. They can be found as readily on certain grimy corners behind the South Station as in the tangle of streets below Avenue Louise, where

little *épiceries* stay open late into the night and glow like phosphorescence in the narrow, shuttered straits. They may be run by dark men in singlets and sandals with the heat of the desert still warm on their skin, or by young women with urban ways who see far beyond the vegetable stand – far enough to study hard at night for the chance to leave it behind.

Surrealism has a proud home in Belgium, and one encounters daily reminders of why this is so. A Turkish grocery adrift in Flanders or Egyptians grilling lamb near the church create a wondrous dissonance that delights and confounds. But beneath the surreal marriage of kebabs and waffles, mint tea and beer lies the revelation, uncomfortable for some, that those obscure, unreadable foreigners cast a net over the neighbourhood and draw it snug. Customers first visit the shop out of necessity, grab what they need and hurry away. But in a week or two, lured by curiosity, they come back, buying flat bread or a bag of shrivelled olives and smiling coolly as they pay. Years later, they may even grudgingly succumb to a sort of dependence, like the old lady, but not without a clinging shred of doubt: their trust in an immigrant will never reach the depths of family – Belgians reserve this privilege for their own blood. But the national identity is intricate, in itself a paradox of estranged intimacies. A foreigner can be a window through which all sorts of familiar conflicts may be glimpsed. In the obscurity of his thoughts, and lurking in the strongbox of his memories may lie the strength locals have long sought to confront their own tenuous sense of belonging.

Rafik casts a loose and velvety net over his neighbourhood. There is no hard sell, no offence taken. He draws an unlikely clientele: a wealthy cheese heiress and tattooed Gypsy, merry chef and melancholic barman are all likely to gather in the shop to chat. Rafik folds his arms and listens. He never indulges in gossip. He is the perfect host, smiling indulgently from behind his melons and cucumbers, pleased with his little egalitarian cosmos.

Someone mentions that they saw an ambulance in front of the old woman’s apartment the other day. “She died in her sleep,” says the gypsy flatly, nursing his Stella. He also reveals something else: she left her silver watch on the nightstand, with Rafik’s name scribbled on a paper beside it.

Rafik only smiles wistfully, and puts her beer back on the shelf.

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