

Nouha Homad

## **Everything that Happens Is Again and Again a Beginning**

My great-uncle Jim is a linguist of sorts. He speaks English and dog language. When I was a boy, Uncle Jim claimed that he could understand what his dogs said and could answer them right back. His pack howled and growled and bared their teeth, frightening us children most deliciously. Uncle Jim would roll his eyes at us then launch into a word for word translation of their dog language, something we could relate to somehow. We would sit there clutching our knees, fascinated by his superior knowledge.

A long time back, when still a young man, Uncle Jim went to Paris. It was exotic at the time to say the least for anyone to travel so far as the next town, and Uncle Jim became a valiant adventurer and hero. He was there for a while, but when he came back, to the great horror of the town folk, he brought with him a French wife, Francine. His family viewed the attachment with no uncertain disfavour, even suspicion and hostility. She was a foreigner, who spoke an outlandish tongue, wore eccentric French clothes and was unashamedly free in her behaviour. In short, she was not a great hit with his family. But Uncle Jim loved her dearly.

And then the tragedy happened. Francine walked out of the house one day taking two of Uncle Jim's dogs with her. She did not return. My great-uncle was beside himself with anxiety and grief. It was a marshy area and Uncle Jim was afraid that she had perhaps hurt herself and could not get home. But the dogs would have returned to lead him to her, he reasoned. He feared the worst. Taking out his pack, he combed the countryside but it was to no avail. The search was eventually abandoned. Even Uncle Jim's dogs were not able to comply and come up with the goods. He was heartbroken and he never mentioned Francine ever again. It seems that people often humorously remarked on which was worse for my great-uncle, losing his wife or his dogs. However, they were circumspect in their witticisms and took pains that none of the gossip reached Uncle Jim's ears. As years went by, all talk ceased and the town forgot Francine and the dogs. Uncle Jim became for them a symbol of the happy-go-lucky bachelor who had not a care in the world.

Then, as we got older, we kids drifted apart, our ways diverging. Uncle Jim became a family legend in our memories. On our trips back home we would go to see him. He still had his pack of dogs and insisted that he understood every word they said. We now laughed but were doubtful. How can dogs have a language, we would say to each other out of earshot? All they do is bark, or howl, or whine. He saw the look of suspended disbelief on our faces but insisted even more that they had their structured language, and that he was the mediator between them and the world of humans.

Time went by. Visits to family grew less frequent as life engulfed us almost entirely. We were suddenly no longer just irresponsible students but men and women flung into the sea

of life, as the metaphor would have it, and expected to swim. Languages had always been my forte and over the years, I had acquired the skill of interpreting the gibberish of other people into something more intelligible. No accent, no matter how unfathomable to others, was beyond me. It would seem that I had unwittingly inherited Uncle Jim's facility of interpreting the indecipherable. In my turn I also went to Paris. My cousin Amanda and I trotted off to make something of our lives. She had Spanish from her mother, and college French. I had my smatterings of myriad dialects, some Arabic from when my family lived in Beirut, and French. We took rooms in the Latin Quarter, rue des Carmes, a seedy run-down foyer that charged the earth just for being where it was. I worked as a freelance translator to keep myself afloat in Paris while I polished those interpretation skills held in such high esteem by so many organizations. It was a competitive business, long hours of midnight oil-burning application. During all this, Uncle Jim never flagged in his encouragement: he sent me long humorous letters to the effect that I should keep up the good work, and maybe then I could acquire enough skills to interpret dog language.

It was during my second year in Paris that I was summoned home. My grandmother had been taken seriously ill and was not expected to live through the week. She had asked for me in particular. 'Don't follow in your uncle Jim's footsteps,' she whispered hoarsely when she saw me. 'Don't marry a French woman. She won't fit in. She'll make you so unhappy.' I squeezed her poor limp hand. It was assurance enough. She closed her eyes, seemingly content. That Uncle Jim had shocked the community by marrying a French woman was a *secret de Polichinelle*. Where was Francine now? Ever since I could remember, Uncle Jim had been single, the envy of all the men in town. He hunted, swore and talked to his dogs: no wife ever told him to heel. It was curious how our roads kept crossing, his and mine.

My grandmother did not die. She miraculously pulled through and was soon well enough to sit on the porch after dinner and enjoy the evening breeze. I wanted to hear more about Uncle Jim and the mysterious woman who had made him so miserable. But I could not bring myself to broach the subject. A few days before I was due to go back to Paris, my grandmother called me to her side when everyone else had gone into the house. She gave me an impish smile and said, 'We don't talk much about that French woman and your uncle Jim. You can keep your own counsel, can't you?' She looked straight ahead with her faded grey eyes. 'It was way, way back, before your mother was born. Come close and I'll spin you a yarn.' I settled down beside her, fascinated. The crickets sang away as my grandmother began her tale.

'I had just got engaged to your grandfather when your uncle Jim left home. He went away to France for a stretch...when he reappeared, he had this skittish young girl he called his wife hanging on his arm and speaking a heathenish tongue that God-fearing folk just can't understand. She was a pretty enough slip of a girl, mind you. She charmed everyone silly. She had both my papa and mama, God rest their souls, eating out of her hand in no time.' She was silent a moment, staring ahead, dwelling on the past, perhaps. Something seemed to be bothering her. A slight frown creased her white papery forehead.

'But you know, she soon tired of us. There's nothing much round these places, nowhere to go, no fun. She was dreadfully unhappy, so young, so far away from everything she knew,

everything she was used to. Even her clothes....next to the dowdiness of ours...they were so foreign.’ She gave a rueful little laugh, remembering. ‘I pitied her and blamed your uncle for bringing her here. Well, there wasn’t really a great deal I could do. I was a new bride myself and had my own problems: I kept losing my babies; couldn’t get past the first eight weeks. It was about the time when the doctor thought that my pregnancy was doing well that she disappeared. She just walked out of that door and did not come back. Your uncle Jim was frantic. He really loved that gal. He looked for her everywhere, with his dogs. What we didn’t know was that there was a child. Jim had no idea or he would’ve been more careful of her. Well, he wasn’t; he treated her like a wife...she wasn’t used to that...I suspect a Frenchman treats his wife differently. There were rows, terrible rows. I was laid up at the time to keep off my feet, to avoid yet another miscarriage. Your grandfather was thrilled about becoming a father and wanted nothing to upset me. So I wasn’t much use to either of them. She and I got on pretty well.’ She leaned her head back on the rocking chair and closed her eyes. I noticed how her slender throat sloped gently to the slim shoulders. Her vigorous white hair was pulled smoothly back from her face into a bun at the nape of her neck. She was still a handsome woman, but her serene beauty was one of graceful lines and delicate bone structure. My mother does not take after my grandmother: hers is a wild sort of beauty, flashing tawny eyes and golden brown skin. Her hair, which I have inherited, is unruly and grows into tight little curls, which has always seemed amazing to me since both my grandparents have fine silky hair.

‘Well,’ she resumed sitting up, ‘all this happened a long time ago. Your uncle was never the same after his wife disappeared so suddenly. I’d hate you to face the same fate!’ I asked her what had become of Francine. She hesitated. ‘No one really knows. She could be anywhere. Jim wanted to believe that she and the dogs were lost in the marshes. However,’ she said, giving me a piercing look, ‘she was not.’ I could see she was debating with herself whether to tell me or not what seemed to be weighing heavily on her mind. ‘She went back to France.’ I was excited by this new revelation but fought back my curiosity for fear of alarming her into silence. ‘No one else knows about this but your grandfather...and now you,’ she continued looking straight into my eyes. We paid her fare back to France, your grandfather and I. She left with the dogs.’ She was pensive for what seemed like a long time while I held my peace, unwilling to break into the flow of her stream of thoughts. ‘She came here one night looking wild and dishevelled. She’d had a fierce quarrel with your uncle Jim. My, how those two could fight. She begged me to help her-she’d already made up her mind not to go back to your uncle. She wanted to go back to France. She made us promise not to tell Jim, or anyone. She looked so unhappy, poor lamb. We kept her here until she was well enough to leave. Then your grandfather smuggled her out. We’ve not heard from her since.’ I could see that my grandmother was agitated. However, she gave me a radiant smile. ‘Now you know all! Have I convinced you against marrying a French woman?’ I told her that I had no intention of marrying anyone yet. She seemed pleased with my answer. Then she mused, speaking almost to herself, and a faraway look came into her eyes. ‘It was a very difficult time. We’ve all come a long way-we had to begin our lives all over again, to readjust to the inevitable. A tragedy is always a bliss for some. For us, Francine’s departure meant a wonderful new beginning, we could start a new life.’

‘In itself, starting is always so beautiful,’ I thought to myself. I couldn’t remember where

I had read that but it didn't seem to matter. And hadn't Borges said something about history thriving on repetitions? Here was an elderly woman expressing the sentiments of famous writers who wrote to be noticed and read. But what she said somehow did not quite make sense. Surely it was not a happy beginning for Uncle Jim. Surely he must have suffered indescribable sorrow. Nor could it have been a happy beginning for my grandparents watching someone they loved go through so much pain. Clearly her poor mind must have strayed. She looked exhausted and I overrode my curiosity and suggested that I make her a hot drink and escort her to bed. She yielded gratefully and that was the end of our conference. She did not allude to our conversation in the next few days before my return to Paris in spite of my hopes of the contrary. However, I was relieved to see that when I left, she was already looking less pale, healthier.

Spring is a good season in Paris, the city of lights. The weather was warm that year and love was everywhere in the air. But I had no time for any of that. I had missed classes while I was away and had a lot of catching up to do. My cousin Amanda was a great support to me during this period, supplying me with the material and sitting with me through long sessions of simultaneous interpretation. She was invaluable, a real angel to give up so much of her time to help me out in spite of having met someone she really liked to spend quality time with, a charming Argentine who had made his home in Paris. The three of us would often go out to grab a bite after a long day's work and then join other friends and acquaintances in one of the sidewalk cafe Paris was so noted for. Our evenings would often stretch into all-night discussions over cold beers and tiny espressos after which I would return to my 'catching up' with renewed energy. And thus my time in Paris passed pleasantly at times, disagreeably at others, with little time for romance or much else besides work. I was the exemplary scholar, seeker of facts. My grandmother would have been thrilled to know that no French temptress had lured me away from the straight path!

The time to go back home was soon upon me. I had finished my education and my degree testified to the fact that I was now safe enough to be let loose onto the world, to translate and interpret the workings of their mind and their slips of tongue. My cousin Amanda was staying on with the Argentine who was now her husband. Her family had not been too pleased at the prospect of seeing her only once or twice a year, provided she could even manage that. But she had taken a decision and so we said our good-byes. The day before I was to leave Paris I walked around the city, sadly, taking leave of all the places that I had called home for so long. There was an ache in my heart: Paris had been a safe haven for me from the big world out there. Now I would have to connect with the human race in their struggles to survive, perhaps even become a rat among rats. The vision did not exactly fill me with joy. My inclinations were somewhat more noble but I knew I still lived in the ideal world. Thus, dwelling on the relative disadvantages of joining the work force, I failed to notice that I had become an object of interest to a tall woman with a shock of greying curls and her three magnificent dogs coming toward me across the crowded avenue. Her eyes were glued to my face. She seemed to be completely oblivious to the shouts of the people around her as they pointed at a fast oncoming car headed in her direction. Suspended in an instant of timelessness and unreality, I had a momentary powerful impression of my mother as she would probably be in years to come before I was brought back with a jerk to the here and now by the screech of brakes as the car came to an abrupt halt amidst the loud

cries from passers-by, and by the sickening meeting of metal and flesh. Like many others attracted by the collision, I ran forward, my heart beating furiously. I was one of the first few to arrive by her side. The elderly woman lay in a crumpled heap, blood trickling down the side of her face. Her dogs, unharmed, stood around their mistress, whining. She lay with her eyes closed, her face deathly pale. I stood there looking down on her, wondering at the impression I had got of a striking resemblance to my mother. Was it perhaps her hair? Her eyes flew open suddenly and they looked right into mine. She seemed to recognize me as she attempted to raise her hand to me, whispering something almost inaudible. Then her hand fell back and recognition died as her eyes glazed over. Someone bent over to feel her pulse. Someone else closed her eyelids. The dogs put up a heart rending howl. The group of curious pedestrians began to disperse at the approach of the sirens and move away, carrying me along to the sidewalk. The plump woman with black eyes who had been standing next to me at the site of the accident turned abruptly to me as we got to the pavement and said in a business-like manner, 'Elle vous a reconnu, n'est ce pas?' I told her that I did not know. I certainly had never seen her before in my life. She pressed on, doggedly, 'Mais qu'est ce qu'elle a dit? J'ai pas entendu.' I shook my head. What I thought I'd heard made no sense. Surely I was mistaken. 'Jim.....peut-etre?'