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*A flawed yet adored parent*

So many bitter adult sons write stinging memoirs filled with lingering resentments for long gone overbearing fathers. Not 68-year-old Denis Guenoun. He is an extraordinarily talented and creative Algerian born author and playwright and professor of French literature. His fiercely personal story is mostly a rendering from memory of his larger than life father, Rene Guenoun, also born in Algeria in 1912. Rene Guenoun was a defiant Jewish son who chose to relinquish all remnants of Jewish ritual and tradition from his familial home, much to the displeasure of his own aging mother who was more traditional. Instead, he seemed to be able to embrace simultaneously belief systems that often seemed to be at odds with one another. For example, he felt great empathy and kinship for his Arab neighbors and supported their fight for independence from French colonial rule which existed in Algeria from 1830. At the same time, he preached frequently of his love for France and the French language and the culture it brought him; Rousseau and Malherbe and Jean Gabin. He enjoyed the privileges of full citizenship that Jews in Algeria were granted in 1870. But most of all, he embraced Communism and would never let it go. He felt it was fair and just and righteous and had the potential to change the world. When evidence mounted to challenge this, he ignored it and remained loyal to his view of its original dream. He taught high school science and his students revered him; as did his wife and two sons. He was fearless and provocative and spoke with rhetorical flourishes of brilliance that were almost rabbinical in a secular sense; asking himself aloud one question after another which only prodded further contemplation. There was a sense of specialness about him; a feeling that perhaps he was destined to do something splendid; and he is remembered tenderly by his son on every page of this spellbinding book.

Guenoun's writing is custom made for contemporary memoir. It is sleek and spare and enticing. His narrative style can be purposefully messy and chaotic; he is not a man looking to tie up loose ends but rather follow where the loose ends lead him. He actually places question marks in the middle of some of his sentences; a concession to the fragility of memory. This uncertainty fuels his narrative with a special intensity. For example, describing his father he writes simply this: "A tall man. His face. (My father. This is about my father.) Athletic-looking, like his own father, but bigger. Slender at twenty, I see in the photos. But broad-shouldered, well-built. A big, strong guy with a scary temper. A stentorian voice---an orator, leader of children, of youths, of men. A noble, upright bearing..." Guenoun

continues describing his father by explaining his father's affinity for the Arabs. He writes that his father liked "their dignity, smile, language, the percussive sounds of their words in their mouths---pieces of the South. Their bodies---chiseled heads and features, the crease alongside the nose. Their smooth, syncopated elegance, a life that dances..." There is a musical rhythm to Guenoun's writing; a jazzy beat that feels like improvisation. Guenoun understands that when we remember anyone, even those we love dearly, we are only catching glimpses, snapshots; perhaps a short riff. Coherence and consistency are elusive ideals; Guenoun knows he can't really know who his father was; only perhaps who his father was to him.

Guenoun always worried that perhaps he and his brother and mother were not enough for their father; that perhaps they held him back somehow from some other grander fate. We can feel that young Denis Guenoun wanted very much to impress his father, but perhaps at times it was hard to hold his attention.

Some of Guenoun's most moving remembrances involve the ongoing game of verbal volleyball he played with his father; questions about identity. Who precisely were they? Were they Jews? Israelites? French citizens? Atheists? Anti-materialists? Communists? Or some hybrid form. He does have a definite recollection of his father explaining to him that when Hitler and Petain killed the Jews, they asked them no questions about their individual preoccupations; they simply slaughtered them. But other than this persistent feeling of Jewish vulnerability, he doesn't recall his father probing his Jewish identity for any other type of sustenance. He simply made sure that young Denis was equally well versed in math and science as well as the humanities since he felt this would make him more viable if they should have to move. And Jews always have to move.

The family did leave Algeria shortly before Algeria declared its independence in 1962. A bomb was thrown into their home almost killing all of them and his father ran to the huge gaping hole left by the explosion and screamed a piercing howl his son can still hear. It was an awful sound; one that contained a lifetime of disillusionment. The bomb was most likely thrown by those who disliked his politics. His father fled with his wife and sons to France where he spent his remaining years adrift; playing bridge and reading and missing Algeria which always was the only place that felt like home. Many Jews and French citizens fled to France in 1962 as the government in Algeria began harassing them. Years later, in 1994, the "Armed Islamic Group" expelled the few that had chosen to stay, leaving less than 100 Jews in Algeria.

Guenoun still misses his father. And his mother too. They were a particularly loving and tight-knit family thrown around recklessly by history, war, exile, and anti-Semitism. The author admits scars still linger; he is afraid of many things; doctors, anesthesia, and other floating anxieties that surface when he is alone. He has channeled his grief into this masterful book where he seems to be almost

praying for relief; not only for himself, but also for his dead father. He admits to wishing he could rewrite the script of his father's life so that he could alleviate some of the suffering he endured but he knows he can't. Still, he writes movingly " I want the house, our place, restored, rebuilt on its foundations like a film projected backward. I want my childhood redeemed, brought into the light. I want an end to the grinding terror." So do we.

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