



The Memory of Flight

By Anita Doron

When I met Camille B., she was no longer able to fly. She stood atop the damp coffee house, the tips of her red sneakers just over the edge so that she could bend her toes into the void below. She imagined unfolding her wings, knowing well that all she could feel now is the stinging, excruciating sensation of phantom limb pain. It came at her suddenly, overwhelming her small frame.

Her wings were the most beautiful objects she had ever seen. She used to marvel at them drying on the grassy earth, resting after a long flight. Youthful skin covered the main bone structure, which split at the humerus. The distance between the ulna and the radius was wide and it splintered into tiny, clear cells, divided by artificial metal veins and held together by a transparent film-like substance. There were no feathers, just a complex pattern of these monocrystalline silicon patches. They glistened from the rain. At sunsets, they absorbed the gold hue. When the wind blew underneath, they omitted a gentle vibration. For Camille B., it sounded like the ancestral flutes of a forgotten tribe. She heard music when she flew.

Camille B. was seventeen years old when she first took flight. She was barefoot and wore black, cotton pants and a bathing suit top that allowed for her wings to open and close. She had a

leather string around her neck, holding a small talisman she received from her mother. She stood on a grassy mountain. Down in the valley, she could hear grazing animals and the sound of a motorcycle. She began to run, and took on a relaxed motion forward with her body in a tall, elongated position. As she approached the take off point, she lifted her knees higher and maintained her speed. With her left leg leading, she jumped up, driving with her arms. She waited until she was airborne before she unfolded her wings. The first ten seconds were the hardest. She had to control the rotation of her body and make sure the wings would not collapse, sending her plummeting into the valley. Her tights and stomach were bruised and scarred from the many previous attempts in which she simply could not sustain the flight and fell.

She leapt and opened her wings. She hardened her leg muscles and held her arms tight against her torso to stabilize her body. Past the ten seconds she was still in the air. Slowly, she felt in control. She lowered her left wing an inch and her body dipped in that direction. She saw the grazing sheep and a teenager cutting grass in the valley. They were tiny.

The feeling of that first flight surpassed any intensity she had ever experienced before. She had no frame of reference for this emotion, and she experienced it akin to a newborn, devoid of analysis, pure in the sensation of the moment. She had no thoughts, nor words floating in her mind. There was only silence and awe.

I've been coming to the café for three weeks when Camille B. shared the story of her captivity. We were sitting at the back, after the daily bustle had died down. She had a patch of flour on her chest, in the shape of an unidentified country. Her hands still glistened from the sunflower oil she used earlier to coat dumplings. We stared outside, watching the market wrap itself in the evening dust.

"On the last day of my freedom, I fell from the sky," she said. "I couldn't walk... They captured me just like a dying bird."

She showed no emotion as she spoke.

"They used a saw to cut my wings off. I lost a lot of blood, but never my consciousness. I wanted to be weak and fade, but my mind kept me going. I couldn't shut it off. I had the strangest thoughts. Irrelevant, empty, fleeting little thoughts."

Camille B. looked at me to check if I was paying attention. Maybe she wanted to see if I understood her... if I was the right audience for what she needed to say.

"They kept me in a cage for three years. They asked me questions. They brought in a translator. A priest. A monk in a blue suit. But I said nothing. After a while, I wasn't sure if I could even speak any more."

This was the first time I noticed she had a tiny speech impediment. Just the way she swallowed her vowels, almost imperceptibly. I wondered if this was due to her three years of silence. As if her throat rejected the notion of talking.

"When they finally let me go, all I had left were two shiny scars."

I wanted to see her back, but I was afraid to ask. Maybe the scars have healed since, it's been long enough.

"They are still there," she said, as if seeing through my thoughts. "Though not as shiny any more."

A customer called from the front. An older woman in dark rimmed glasses. She wanted another drink and some fresh dumplings.

Camille B. took one last glance at the evening market before she walked away.

I ran into her ten years later. I was there with my family, buying brightly tacky mementoes at the market. Then I saw the café and remembered. We were hungry, so I took my family inside.

Nothing much changed. Dumplings and fresh juice, steaming coffee and hot chocolate with chili peppers. After we ate, I asked about Camille B. I was told she no longer worked here, but that she lived down the street, in a house with the lavender garden in the front.

I left my family at the café, lingering over their hot chocolates and ran down the street. The lavender scent hit me before I even saw the house.

Camille was home. She was out back, varnishing a table she painted. I did not know what to say to her, but I had to see her. We set under a linden tree and drank ice water. She smiled.

"I have lived an ordinary life. Without my wings, there's nothing special about me. So I do as I please."

She seemed happy. Free.