

Jody Olsen
Tunisia 1966-1968

The sound of the hand of Fatima knocker against the carved wood door echoed throughout the house, reverberating against the painted floor and wall tiles in the eight rooms located just inside the Medina. Each noon, I knew that sound would take me out of medina market crowds with smells of cumin and ground hot red peppers in burlap sacks and the deep black olives stored in large clear jars, and into the Zinelabedine family's daily life.

Mahmoud would answer my knock each day, open the door boldly and with his loud laughing voice, shout '*allsemd** and then "*tafuthal*", the all purpose word that at this moment meant "come in." He was a very large man, and with his white Tunisian robes, he looked gigantic. It must have been why he commanded total order among his Arabic language lycee students, unlike my chaotic English classes at the same school.

Every day our ritual was the same. As we walked up the stairs to the dining room, Mahmoud would describe that day's noon meal and how excited his wife, Suad, was with the meat and vegetables her father had bought that morning. In the house without her "*Sofsauri*" (veil like covering), Suad was the gentle center of the lives of her parents, her husband, and two young children.

We would then greet the grandparents in the small living room, and Suad's father would draw phrases and comments based on the Koran. Suad mother's strongest feature was her bright, bright red henna colored hair. I could always find her, even in the Medina crowds, with the red wisps showing from under the veil.

The noon meal at the Zinelabine's was the highlight of my day. The basic was couscous, but the seasons provided the variety, one month of eggplant with a week overlap with zucchini. Then zucchini changed to artichoke, which changed to tomatoes. Tomatoes and oranges stayed the longest. The *blood oranges* turned redder and after six months, almost rivaled the tomatoes. The meat truck arrived each morning at seven a.m. with freshly butchered animals for the meat shops. The shops would then display the head of animal featured that day: cow, sheep, goat. Never pork. Purchasers chose the

part of the animal they wanted and it was butchered on the spot. Suad's father would complete his shopping with something sweet for dessert, my favorite was baklava dripping with honey. Everything for dessert was dripping with honey.

Food shopping ended by ten so Suad had two hours to cook. Couscous steamers, pans, fires, tangeens, olive oil, and hot peppers were the core necessities of any good meal.

Our meal (except during the month of fast) was two hours, and the entire family was there. The schools closed to ensure that this was a family time. For me, it was stories, of discovering a place on the sea, a place in time, a place in people's histories, a place in a world I had known nothing about.

But every day was not quite the same. The Zinelabedines and I seemed to change a little each day. It was very formal at first. Mahmoud would give me a short Arabic lesson and then suggest I stay for the meal. We each had an assigned spot around the table. Because only he spoke French, and I spoke almost no Arabic, the meal was relatively silent except for Mahmoud's booming voice and laugh as he mixed English, French, and Arabic. Each day a few new Arabic words would join my vocabulary, and with the words, Suad's smile got wider and the grand parents would enter the conversation.

With the daily conversations, we relaxed in our chairs, we leaned back more often, Suad easily went back and forth into the kitchen, and she started laughing. And our conversations discovered so much more about each other.

After several months, Mahmoud excitedly told me that Suad and her grandparents were preparing a very special meal for me later that week. Each day, the family would mention how wonderful this meal would be, that it is rarely served because it is so difficult to cook, and they felt proud to be able to do this for me in honor of my being part of their family.

On the scheduled day, I arrived a few minutes early and knocked more aggressively. Mahmoud's "*tafuthal*" seemed even more gracious and warm. Suad greeted me at the top of the stairs, and the children and grandparents were already seated. After our usual beginnings, with everyone looking at me, Suad stood up, went into the kitchen, and proudly brought out the meal

they and I had anticipated for so long: a cow's head, perfectly formed, complete, and cut in half. I knew in the first few seconds, when they were all looking at me, that I could not eat it.

I looked at everyone, I groped for words, I hoped I could make sense. I suddenly felt so out of place. I mentally sought words not in my Arabic vocabulary as I described how I knew that the meal was probably delicious, but for psychological reasons I could not eat it. I stumbled, I blubbered. That is when I realized that I trusted them to understand, that our time together was much more important than this cow's head. Suad took me into the kitchen, helped me create a meal of beef chunks, olive oil, and grass like leaves. I loved it.

Closeness came over time around the dining room table. I had come to Peace Corps from Utah with a Scandinavian and Mormon heritage. My flight to Tunisia was only the second time I had been on a plane. I brought with me the knowledge and experience of the Salt Lake valley with its pioneers, desert mountains and salty lake and now found myself in a place where the Sahara dessert meets the Mediterranean Sea. Tunisia had known the Punics (what is the adjective?), the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Arabs, the Turks, the Germans, the French and two World Wars. How these histories shaped us was our conversation.

We talked about why I didn't have coffee or tea or smoke and why they didn't eat pork and why we both didn't drink. I teased Mahmoud about his coffee and his smoking; he teased me about the chamomile tea Suad carefully prepared for me each day. I stopped eating pork.

I brought my stories and family pictures to the table; bonfires after sledding down canyon roads in the winter, building forts in the back yard, looking down nervously from the top of a Ferris wheel. I gave them all the stories I had. They gave me their stories, the grandfather's Hajj, school in Cairo, the proper way to steam couscous, the way to wear the veil and why it was freeing for Suad. In our stories I found a respect for differences. We tried not to judge, just discover.

I dreaded leaving Tunisia, leaving the Zinelabedines. They took extra time to teach me how to cook couscous and tangeen, take me to the donkey market, and to teach me how to weave pile rugs. They gave me the gift of time and of themselves, and in doing so changed my life.

On that last day, the day of good-bye, I had small gifts for everyone, but nothing could be adequate for the experience. I handed Mahmoud a small can of *metrical*, a weight watcher's drink, in honor of his size. We had laughed about his size, my size, all our differences sizes for almost two years. He put the can in the small refrigerator to drink later. We all knew we would not see each other again.

Fifteen years and occasional letters later, I went back to Tunisia on Peace Corps business. Unexpectedly, I found time to walk through the Medina in Sousse to the Zinelabedine house not knowing if I would find them. The echo of the knocker seemed even more hollow. At last, the door opened and there was Mahmoud, older, thinner, a former Mayor of Sousse. "*Tafuthal*" was suddenly the most beautiful sound I had ever heard.

After an hour of conversation with Mahmoud and Suad, Mahmoud stood up, went into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and came out, holding the small can of *metrical* I had given him 15 years earlier. He said, "I saved it for you, I knew you would come back."