

*400 brieven
van mijn moeder*

Joseph Oubelkas

*Life, my child, knows many barriers you have to cross.
Most of the time, you will be warned.
But every person falls once in his lifetime
over an invisible barrier.
After that, my son,
you stand up and keep on walking
and you will see between the darkest clouds a part of heavenly blue
and flowers that will bloom in their full beauty.
Lots of love, mama.*

Contents

PROLOGUE

PART I

2004, 2005

PART II

2005, 2006, 2007, 2008

PART III

2009

EPILOGUE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



PROLOGUE

The cars were parked strangely, as in some kind of fan, around the gate. Something was going on, that much became clear as soon as I got out of my car and walked up to the gate. I saw people crying, and dozens of men in uniforms. The men, whom I recognized as customs officers, were walking and running around with their guns in their hands. I heard screaming and saw frightened looks everywhere.

What is going on?

At the gate, I waved a few times to the customs officers until one of them came up to me.

'Who are you and what do you want?' he asked surly.

'Uh, my name is Joseph and I work here for a Dutch company,' I replied and I saw the customs officer watching me in surprise. 'What is going on?' I continued asking.

'Follow me', the officer snarled.

And that is how my nightmare started.

PART I
2004, 2005

1.

My name is Joseph Oubelkas – my friends call me ‘Sef’ or ‘Joe’ – and before the end of 2004 I had not suffered a lot of misfortune.

I was born on September 10th, 1980 in a small village called Raamsdonksveer, in Brabant, the Netherlands, in the middle of nowhere. In this village, I had a wonderful youth.

I have a great mother, a caring father, a great group of friends and a lovely girlfriend.

At the age of sixteen, I started college to study computer science in Breda and four years later, I am one of the youngest IT-engineers of the Netherlands. I start my own company, which is a success from the very beginning.

My study, work, love, everything was going great, but then it went wrong.

In December 2004 something happens that completely changes my comfortable life. Something that can, apparently, happen to anyone. A business trip to Morocco turns out to be a catastrophe with unimagined consequences.

2.

Monday, December 20th, 2004

My mother was staring around restlessly, sitting on the couch in the living room. I could see she was worried.

‘Mom? Are you ok?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know, Joes. I don’t know what’s wrong, but I’m so nervous...’

‘Don’t worry, mom,’ I said comforting. ‘You don’t need to be afraid, do you?’

I had just packed my bags and was about to leave for another week in Morocco. This trip was not planned, but since one of my colleagues could not go, my employer Freshfruit – a large import- and export company in fruit and vegetables – asked me to go in his place.

I looked at my watch and saw I had to go. The plane was to leave from Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam in a few hours. I was late again.

‘Mom, don’t worry, ok? Nothing will happen to me...’

I paused and smiled at my mom. ‘I am looking forward to Christmas! I’m leaving now. See you on Friday!’

My mom walked me to the door. ‘Make sure you’re safe, my child,’ she said on the doorstep.

‘Will do!’ I stood there, smiling on the path with my red suitcase in my hand. My mother smiled back, but the serious look in her eyes stayed.

‘Bye, mom! Love you!’ I ended. I checked my watch again and rushed off.

What I did not know back then and never could have known, was that my life would be completely different from that moment on – and that I would never return to the house I just left.

3.

The winter sun was shining bright and stood quite low on the bright blue horizon. It was fairly busy on the highway, that late on Monday morning. The A27 highway from Breda to Utrecht was busier than the A2 highway towards Amsterdam is nowadays.

From the speakers I heard well-known songs by Lenny Kravitz, Bruce Springsteen, Nickelback and Pearl Jam. I skipped the house- and R&B music; I was not in the mood for that. Of course I was going to take the cd’s with me to Morocco.

I parked my car in the ‘Long Term’-parkinglot of Schiphol Airport.

I took my red suitcase and checked my watch for the thousandth time. I was still on time.

On time for my standards, that is, because when I arrived at the check-in desk, a lady in a uniform kindly told me that I had just missed the last call for my flight.

‘Ok, but can my suitcase still be taken with me?’ I asked very kindly.

‘Yes, I will weigh your suitcase very quickly,’ she replied with a modest smile. ‘Gate 9B is where you have to go.’

'Thank you!'

The people were already busy getting in the plane. Head scarves and djellaba's¹, I was at the right gate for sure. Almost three hours later I was on the airport of Oujda² in Morocco. Here I was again, in my father's country. I felt at home in Morocco, although I never looked forward to the dejected faces of the Moroccan customs officers.

It was half past five on my watch, but in Moroccan winter, the clock was set two hours back.

Therefore it was half past three.

The driver of one of Freshfruits many contacts was ready to pick me up. He was a nice guy. And, even more important, he safe and careful. That was rare in Morocco.

From Oujda to Berkane was a drive of about forty minutes.

They don't have traffic jams here. The highways are almost empty. In the city, however, it's full of cars, cabs, buses, cyclists, pedestrians, donkeys, horses and handcars. Here, an accident happens easily.

When I arrived in the rented house that Freshfruit employees could use, I threw my suitcase on the bed and quickly freshened up. The driver then brought me to one of the packing stations to pick up my business car. My working week started that very afternoon.

4.

When I explain the work I did in Morocco, I often joke that I held people's hands to guide them in doing their job. Actually, it is not a joke, because I really did guide them. Freshfruit has bought a bunch of mandarin fields in the region of Berkane. The company knew me through my former employer. The board of Freshfruit immediately wanted to hire me for the project in Morocco, because I had many pros for them: I am a Dutchman with a Moroccan father, I speak French, I worked on the vegetables department of a supermarket in my teenage years and they knew from my former employee that I am a good and serious worker. In fact, it had nothing to do with my background as IT engineer, but it was a nice extra on top of the income of my own company. Furthermore I liked the change and I liked working abroad, especially in my father's country.

One of the largest problems Freshfruit was experiencing, was that people in the Moroccan (working)culture did not take the concept of time very accurately. Today, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, it is all the same thing to them. This did not comply with the punctual way of working that we are used to in the Netherlands, so I was asked to guide the process from gathering to export.

Another problem was that the packing stations, where Freshfruit got its fruit packed, claimed to follow the instructions, but nine out of ten times did not. I never did find out why that was.

The packing stations are large halls where hundreds of people are busy sorting and packing the mandarins. With a checklist, I made daily visits to several packing stations, in order to make sure that the packed fruit was of good quality and correctly numbered. I discussed the things that went well and the things that went wrong with the directors and gave feedback to Freshfruit.

The pallets with fruit were transported by trucks to the port of Nador, a city near the Mediterranean Sea, about 80 kilometers from Berkane. I regularly visited the port to see whether the pallets were stored in good conditions and whether they stood in the right order to be loaded on board of the ship. When the boat was moored, I had to make sure the pallets with the right number were loaded in the right cargo hold. As soon as the boat left, we got ready for the next load.

5.

Thursday, December 24th, 2004

The days flew by. It was Thursday, early in the morning. Most people remember some days and those days will stay with them forever. Days with a certain date. Days that you will always remember like yesterday.

¹ A djellaba is a long, loose robe with long sleeves and some kind of a hood.

² Oujda is pronounced as 'Woozjdah'. This town is in the north-east of Morocco, near the Algerian border.

I still remember how I woke up in a good mood that Thursday. The alarm clock went off at six o'clock in the morning. It would be the last busy day. I had prepared and planned everything.

It was very cold in the house. After I got up, I walked to the radio on my toes and turned on one of my cd's. It was a cd with hits by Lenny Kravitz from the nineties. *Are you gonna go my way* and *Fly away* sounded from the speakers. I quickly stepped under the shower and started to wash myself while singing and beat boxing. The shower quickly transformed into a second Atlantic Ocean. I was in such an euphoric mood that I didn't care about the mess. Normally, I kept everything tidy, although that was unnecessary, since a maid came over to clean every day.

I already packed most of my bags and I was excited for Christmas. I was to fly home the next morning for a long weekend full of eating, having fun and unwrapping presents.

I stepped out of the shower whistling and left for one of the bars at the main boulevard, where I ordered breakfast every morning. After that, I started my round – as usual – at the packing station called Melika Fruits. In my business car, there were no Lenny and Bruce, just some cassette tapes with Moroccan and Algerian music. Not my favorite genre, but I did hum along with the funny tunes while I drove down the long straight road just outside of Berkane, towards Melika Fruits. My euphoria was rampant, until I came to the main entrance of the packing station. I saw that the gate was blocked by some cars. The cars were prepared so that it looked as if all of them wanted to drive in at the same time.

What is this? I wondered.

I honked a few times, but when no-one responded, I got out of my car. My euphoria would soon enough change.

64.

On Friday night, around nine in the evening, we arrived at the end station: the Salé prison. Jeremy and I tried to look out the windows to see as much as we could. We slowly approached the walls, which were maybe even twelve meters high, while the bus drove through an immense passageway. I could see a lightened look-out, high at the prison's corner, where a black silhouette gave the armed guard in there away.

The bus stopped. It hissed loudly as the engine was being turned off. The heavy roaring was suddenly gone and silence fell in. Jeremy and I quietly looked at each other. There we were.

There were only six of us left in the bus. The barred cage was opened and we were ordered to stand up and walk outside. We kindly obeyed.

I was in front and I got out of the bus first. I looked around in surprise and I felt the sultry summer warmth in my face. I blinked a few times, since the air was really dry. It was the perfect temperature to be on the Great Market in Breda, drinking a cold Red Bull.

High walls and long paths with palm trees surrounded us. I could see barbed wire, lots of barbed wire. It was on top of the walls, the roof and even attached to the side of the walls. Everywhere we looked, the stinging iron welcomed us coldly. The local DIY must have had some kind of sale: 'Barbed wire. Buy five, pay one.'

The complex was built systematically. It reminded me of the pink building of the Zaio prison, which had a similar building, but which looked more like a Barbie-prison compared to this prison.

The handcuffs were taken off while I was still impressed by my surrounding. Jeremy was surprised as well by the size of this storage depot for criminals. The massive building was both fascinating and frightening.

Where did I arrive this time? I wondered. I did not yet know that the following weekend would be one of the worst weekends in my life.

65.

Our group was assigned to three prison guards. The bus guards got back in the bus, after which the driver started the transfer bus and drove backwards through the prison gate. These men had finished work for today.

The guards brought us inside the building.

I carried my luggage and rolo with some effort, just like Jeremy and the other guys. We were exhausted after this hell of a trip, without any food or drink. We were lead through two barred doors and arrived in the 'arrival hall'. This hall was in surface as big as the two courtyards of the Berkane prison together.

The three guards commanded us to take off our shoes and socks. They were searched thoroughly. Soles were taken out and socks were turned inside out. We had to take off our coats, which were being searched just as thoroughly. Then our bodies were searched cap-a-pie. I bit my teeth and tightened my jaw muscles when I felt the searching hands between my legs. One of the guys was caught hiding money in his underpants. I saw the four hundred dirham quickly disappear in the guard's pocket.

'Please...' I heard the boy begging. 'This is all I've got.'

'It's either this or isolation!' the guard shouted, raising his hand.

The boy cringed and kept quiet.

After this, the guards started searching our bags. I told the guard, who was searching my stuff quite roughly, I did not carry anything prohibited.

'We'll decide what's prohibited and what's not!' he snarled.

All bags were completely emptied. Te guard held my Discman and CD's in his hands. He did not say anything, but he clearly wanted the two packs of Marlboro cigarettes in my bag in exchange for

allowance. He looked at it in greed. Soufian gave me those packs. 'You'll probably need those to pay some jerk of a guard,' he explained right before I left. He was right.

I nodded to the guard as a sign that he could take the packs. He looked around skittishly. I looked with him and I saw the other two guards greedily grabbing through Jeremy's bags and those of our fellow prisoners. 'Coast clear' he must have thought, since he rapidly took the cigarettes from my bag and stored them in his pocket. After this, my bag full of mail had to be searched, but the guard quickly went through that. He grabbed one of the notebooks where I kept my diary and as an automatic response, I tried to take it from him. The guard grinned at me and asked, while browsing it, what this was. I looked somewhat embarrassed and I told him it was my diary. The guard laughed mockingly.

What's so funny, dude? I thought.

'Hmpf,' the guard snorted, after which he threw my diary on the ground without any respect. I would not have wanted to do anything else than kick this guard between his legs. Asshole.

He did not pay any attention to it and he seemed to be satisfied with his income of two packs of cigarettes.

My stuff was spread all over and I had to pack everything myself again. I really hated this.

When everything was packed again, we were ordered to wait at a barred door leading to a courtyard.

A courtyard surrounded by lightened cells.

Our new home...

66.

We had to wait at that door for half an hour. Our legs were tired. The door was finally opened by two guards on the other side. We walked over the courtyard and I looked around. I could see about seven cells and bunks and people behind the various barred doors. There was barbed wire on this roof as well. Apparently there was enough fright of escapees.

We were guarded to a dark cell. The door opened with the familiar 'click'. One of the guards switched on the light. A musty room with a toilet in the corner became visible. It was all empty, except some garbage, papers, banana peels and apple cores here and there. A few large cockroaches were the only inhabitants.

We had to stay here until we were called up. No-one could answer the question on when that would be.

The cell door closed with another loud metal bang. Another sound that had become familiar to me. It seemed to me that everything had become normal.

We stood there, slightly awkward and uncomfortable, looking around in our cell. It turned out to be the collect- or distribution cell, also known as the 'rookie space'. This cell held all new prisoners, awaiting their registration at the prison administration and their placement on one of the departments. Few rookies in here, I thought, looking at our group of six, not knowing we were the first that weekend.

We cleaned the dirty concrete floor, where we would lay down our rolo's, using papers one of the guys took with him.

Jeremy and I were starving and thirsty, so we took our ration. We sat down on our rolo's and looked at all the food we had. I had water, cheese, baguette and yoghurt drink. Jeremy had lemonade, cookies, chocolate and crisps.

'Is that all you live on?' I teased Jeremy.

'No, your baguette should do,' Jeremy laughed, while he waved my flabby baguette around as if it were a sword.

'Sure, Zorro, at least it's healthier than what you've got.'

I grabbed my baguette back and divided in two unequal pieces – not on purpose. I looked at the two pieces and gave the shortest bit to Jeremy – on purpose. Jeremy watched my larger bit and then looked at me.

'Hey, my piece is smaller!' Jeremy almost cried.

I smiled as wide as I could. I did not say anything.

'Ok, ok, no problem,' Jeremy said. 'But that'll be less chocolate for y—'

'No problem!' I said, even before Jeremy could finish his sentence. I then attacked the cheese. I opened the yoghurt drink and at the same time, I grabbed one of Jeremy's cookies.

We ate greedily.

Jeremy and I shared our experiences about the searches by those jerks of guards. We spoke with our mouth full. Jeremy grinned about the fact that they did not find his money.

'Where did you hide it, then?' I mumbled with my mouth full.

'In my anal cleft,' Jeremy said. He laughed and pieces of chocolate flew from his mouth.

I almost choked. 'Gross, dude, I'm eating!'

'You asked me where I hid it.'

'Yes, just spare me the details.'

We stopped chewing for a second and we looked at each other. We both laughed and continued eating.

I let go of a loud burp afterwards. This was a bad habit which I could not let go of. Jeremy watched me wide-eyed.

'What?' I asked, stretching my arms.

'Nothing,' Jeremy said smiling and he shook his head.

We were getting ready to go to sleep.

We were exhausted.