Thomas Meaney

either, a word in the books of Paul Bowles, Albert Camus, Boualem Sansal, Alistair Horne. It’s still true what Camus said: the sun knocks you down each time you look down the end of an avenue. But now the blazing views of the Mediterranean are crowded with tankers and cranes; the aquariums are antique wood-and-iron contraptions that rattle up through cracked buildings. The subway is vast and sterile and always seems empty; the cab drivers are too unused to visitors or too honourable to know how to begin to cheat you.

Algeria is still scarred from its années de braise. Twenty years ago, an Islamist populist party was poised to win the country’s first elections, but the military wouldn’t have it, and went to war and won. The city still feels dicey at night; the habits of martial law die hard. Small groupings of men play dominoes for hours under the blue fluorescent lights of shopfronts. Sometimes you can hear the cries of couples on the beach. In the rich neighbourhoods, the ex-pats and wealthy Algerians pack into discos at the bottom of hotels to party. “People would rather talk about the 1960s than the 90s, haven’t you noticed?”, a French lawyer tells me at the bar of the “clan” restaurant, Cascade. That’s what I want to understand. I am back in Algiers for an academic conference, but I spend the mornings searching for a name.

Ali Benhadj was born in Tunis to Mauritanian parents in 1956. He was the rock star of 1970s Salafism, able to riff on the Qur’an, it was said, for ten or twelve hours at a time. By the time of the civil war in the 1990s, he could fill football stadiums with his fire sermons. “Ideologies must be irrigated by blood!”, he shouted. He was a natural with Algerian youth and became one of the leaders of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). The other FIS leaders had all eventually fled to the Gulf States, or been killed, but Benhadj stayed on. He was imprisoned for twelve years and has been sporadically jailed since, but the Algerian government now lets him run on a leash.

I hear rumours that Benhadj can be found preaching in the Koubia district on Fridays. An ex-pat who is trying to speak to him about the fall-out of the Arab Spring, since Benhadj had helped instigate his own Spring in 1991. On YouTube I find videos of him still with the same wrinkled face of his prime, the flapping arms, the wagging finger, the unblinking eyes, preaching to small gatherings on the side streets of Algiers. But I don’t know how to begin looking for him.

Each morning, I leave my room on the top floor of the seedy Hotel Régina and browse the books at the Librairie du Tiers Monde in the Place emir Abdelkader. Bourdieu gets pride of place on the tables. The speeches of Patrick Lumbumba are stacked next to Camus and Fanon, but all are outsold by Understanding English Grammar. At the Milk Bar I order two chalky croissants. The waiter, Salim, makes a habit of reminding me every time we meet that he is not an Arab. He comes from Tizi Ouzou and claims to be 100 per cent Kabyle. I explain to him that I’m looking to meet Benhadj. Salim mumbles something and agrees to help. He goes through the shoebox he keeps in the backroom of the Milk Bar and hands me the grimy business cards of newspaper correspondents going back decades. He seems let down that I have no card for the collection.

A week passes with no progress on Benhadj, when Farid, a regular at the Milk Bar, tells me he knows someone who can take me to him. Adil Inshane is twenty years old, and he pours ketchup on his pizza in the Algerian way. “You’re not from CIA, are you?”, he asks with mild curiosity, as if it were a region in the US. He tells me his brother is close to Benhadj and he can take me to him tomorrow. When young Adil first went to Algiers three years ago, the history of the city seemed written in its street names: Avenue Ben M’Hidi, Avenue Mourad Didouche, Rue Frantz Fanon, Boulevard John F. Kennedy. They told a story of revolution and torture; great hope and greater disillusionment. The old capital of anti-colonial revolution and torture; great hope and greater disillusionment. The old capital of anti-colonialism had welcomed everyone from Nelson Mandela to Timothy Leary into its training camps. But the more time you spend in Algiers, the more the traces of 1960s wear off. “He’s going to follow her!” Other names are more familiar. “You’re not from CIA, are you?”, he asks with mild curiosity, as if it were a region in the US. He tells me his brother is close to Benhadj and he can take me to him tomorrow. When young Adil first went to Algiers three years ago, the history of the city seemed written in its street names: Avenue Ben M’Hidi, Avenue Mourad Didouche, Rue Frantz Fanon, Boulevard John F. Kennedy. They told a story of revolution and torture; great hope and greater disillusionment. The old capital of anti-colonial revolution and torture; great hope and greater disillusionment. The old capital of anti-colonialism had welcomed everyone from Nelson Mandela to Timothy Leary into its training camps. But the more time you spend in Algiers, the more the traces of 1960s wear off. “He’s going to follow her!” Other names are more familiar.

Once Adil has dispensed a few numbers using his system, we drive back to his family’s house in Mer et Soleil, a suburb on the outskirts, built as a project to relieve the congestion of the working-class districts of Algiers in their colonial heyday. Chez Adil, it’s a brief nod to the four women of the household, followed by quarantine in the main room. The view gives out to a large concrete lot, filled with disused railway cars. In the distance, I see men on their way back and forth from prætions, patting each other on the arms like friendly white ants. I sit three hours in the room, chain-smoking tisane, until the door opens. Laughing and grinning, his arms around Adil’s father and brother, stands Ali Benhadj. The name suddenly has some body. He asks: “So, we begin?”

And the interview? It barely gets off the ground. The old revolutionary is a masterly deflector. Every question, on whatever subject, receives a counter-question or a technical parry about politics. Only a magazine devoted to the Maghreb would be interested in it. There must be one out there somewhere, I tell myself.