Clockwise from top: Olivia Stren's mother and grandmother in Morocco, in the 1940s; Stren and her mother in Marrakech, in 2011; Stren's mother, aunt and grandmother in Casablanca, in the '40s; Stren's mother and grandmother in Rabat, in the '40s.

"I WAS SEEING MY MOM IN EVERYTHING."

Olivia Stren *grew up hearing tales of her mother's Moroccan childhood. But only when they travelled there together could she understand why its memories proved impossible to shake off.*

WHEN MY MOM was nine years old, she, her sister and her mother moved from their home of Casablanca to Morocco's capital, Rabat. They left behind my mother's father, and also Casablanca's vast boulevards and its bleach-white art deco buildings for the clamour and colour of Rabat's Jewish ghetto. There, they moved in with my mother's grandmother, Marie (whom I later came to know as Meme), and her great-grandmother, Luna (whom everyone affectionately called Mama Luna). Meme and Mama Luna lived in a tiny apartment that, overnight, was rendered even tinier by its three newcomers.

Growing up in Toronto, I often heard about my mom's childhood neighbourhood: its confusion of coiling streets, with petals of sunshine slipping through the palm fronds that hung over them. There, she told me, men sat cross-legged among baskets heaped with bergamot oranges and lemons, while others pushed wooden carts bearing hillocks of quinces and barbary figs. She said moving in with Meme and Mama Luna not only welcomed her into a universe of women, but also to the exotic world of her Andalusian ancestors. I was introduced to this world—one she was forced to leave for political and religious reasons more than 50 years ago—through her stories.

I never met Mama Luna, who died long before I was born, but I did get to meet Meme. I was three years old and she was in her early 70s. She was abundant of joy and warmth—and dress size. I had never met anyone quite so fat as Meme. And I loved it. My mom was (and remains) very slim and one of my earliest memories is of being hoisted onto her pointy hip. It was almost painful, like sitting on a tree branch. Climbing onto Meme's vast, cushiony lap felt like lounging on a sofa for the first time. I loved curling up with Meme, stroking her collection of soft chins, like I might a cat. It amused her: I'd stroke, she'd giggle. That warmth I felt with Meme extended to the Morocco of my mind—the only one I knew. I'd come to think of my mom relocating to Toronto as being like a citrus →

tree replanted in a snowbank. But I could never fully appreciate the scope of her uprooting until a couple of years ago, when she and I finally visited her homeland together.

It was winter, which in Rabat means 20 degrees and gloriously sunny. We walked through the giant copper-studded doors to the souk (an open-air market), on a scavenger hunt for her family home. With anti-climactic ease, she spotted her old apartment building. Its face was scabbed with peeling paint and draped with drying laundry. "Everything here looks dirty and neglected and out of place, like it's all been jumbled," she said. For me, beholding this place was to un-jumble a story that had so richly, if blurrily, coloured my own. We stood for a minute outside the apartment building where four generations of women had spent so many years together. We considered asking the current owners for a peek inside, but my mom preferred to leave, perhaps afraid the present might bully itself too aggressively upon a fragile past.

We left the souk and headed into the modern city, once confected by the French government to resemble a tropical Paris. In its prime, broad avenues were embroidered with movie theatres and apartment buildings were covered in bougainvillea. But this part of town too—like the past itself—seemed largely forgotten and rundown. "I'm seeing the absence of things," my mom said, sadly. I, on the other hand, was seeing my mom in everything: Like Rabat, with its contrasting cultures, my mom is also made up of Occident and Orient, of mismatched parts and various lives.

Then, as if in consolation, vestiges of her world began to introduce themselves. We went to the banks of the Bou Regreg, a river my mom crossed by rowboat with Meme in springtime to pick cornflowers, poppies and sheaves of wheat. We wandered the Avenue Mohammed V, still smartly accoutred with wrought-iron lampposts—a street she and Meme promenaded on Sundays in their best dresses. We also spotted the Cinema Renaissance, where my grandmother used to work selling tickets to Hollywood movies, and my mom's high school, which opened up onto a courtyard lavished in sunshine and lush with orange trees. "You had citrus trees and a pillared courtyard?" I asked her, thinking of the cement parking lot next to my Toronto high school.

We discovered more citrus groves at the Chellah, an ancient Roman necropolis. The gardens there were so lush and primordial, they seemed like the kind in which you might encounter a snake doing a hard sell on an apple. "I used to come here after school to dream," my mom said. I thought about the convenience stores I used to visit after school for sour-key candies. She mused on my secondary school experience: "I suffered at the thought you spent so many hours amidst such ugliness." If I felt badly about the poverty of her childhood, I realized she had taken pity on the different sort of poverty she perceived in mine.

I had prepared myself to be struck by the poverty of Rabat—and I was. But what struck me more were its physical riches. On our last afternoon there, we sipped mint tea at a seaside café terrace in the Kasbah and watched the Atlantic waves tossing themselves against a rocky shore. My mom, who has a bionic talent for adhering any experience to a quote by a tragic French genius, summoned one of her favourites, by Albert Camus: *"I grew up in the sea and poverty was sumptuous, then I lost the sea and found all luxuries grey and poverty unbearable."*

"We were not rich, but we had sunshine and colour and flavour, and the mystery and magic of the sea," my mom said. I had grown up feeling—and somehow adopting—her sense of loss, and wondering if nostalgia itself was genetic. I also felt impatient with her longing, wishing she'd be happier in Toronto. But as I looked at her that day, reunited with her tea and her sea, I came closer to understanding the loss she must have felt in Canada.

When my mom arrived in Toronto on April 27, 1969, at the age of 27, the city she encountered was not the multicultural metropolis it is today. People had never heard of coriander. I heard all about the horrors of this Toronto, with its uncivilized spring blizzards and coriander-less supermarkets. "Now Moroccan food is very fashionable," she says. "You can even find barbary figs at Whole Foods."

If only the past could be so easily retrieved. g