



Lost and found

ALBA ARIKHA

ONE AFTERNOON IN THE SPRING, I went to pick up my daughter from her father's flat. It was an unseasonably warm day. I parked the car outside my ex-husband's building, just as he and my daughter appeared. They were lugging heavy bags, a guitar and various other things, including a bulky cardboard box, which my ex-husband explained was in fact mine. He had found it by chance, as he was packing up in anticipation of his return to Italy. It seemed that I had left it behind (or perhaps the movers had) when we separated, fourteen years earlier. Now, unexpectedly, it had reappeared. "There are a few things in there you'll find interesting", he said.

When I moved out of the house we had shared for fourteen years, I took everything that belonged to me apart from a few household objects which we divided between us. An invisible demarcation line was quickly drawn between my life then and my life as it was about to become. I can still remember the day I entered my new flat, keys in hand, with my two children in tow. It overlooked the rooftops of the Greek Orthodox church on Moscow Road in Bayswater, and was flooded with sunlight. I felt an immense wave of happiness, which I was aware was not shared by my children. They had not wanted their parents to separate. They had not wanted to be closing or opening any cardboard boxes.

But I did. I wanted my new place to feel like home, both for them and for me. And as I began the process and unpacked one object after the other, I was overcome by the strange feeling that although I had only parted with my belongings a few days before, they felt different in this flat, this light. As if they, just like me, had been given a fresh lease of life. Their new setting had somewhat altered what they represented to me. Everything seemed clearer now and soon the novelty of my surroundings

melded into a routine my reluctant children eventually adapted to, then came to view as normality.

In that same flat, I began taking notes for the book I had been struggling to write for some time. It was mainly about my adolescence in Paris, growing up with artistic parents: the painter Avigdor Arikha and the poet Anne Atik, who had both emigrated to Paris in the 1950s - my mother from the US, my father from Israel via Bukovina, a German speaking part of Romania. I described their high-minded friends, my father's low tolerance of pop culture, my mother who strove to make herself heard - not always successfully.

But it was also about the war, my father's youth spent in a concentration camp, and about how our realities clashed with each other, like jarring notes on a piano, as those of many parents and children do. The principal setting for the memoir was Paris, where my sister and I went to school, but the story would straddle other countries - the town of Czernowitz, in Bukovina, Eastern Europe, the US, and Israel, where we spent our summers.

As part of the research for the book, I sought out family documents in order to gain further understanding of those years. Although I did find most of what I was looking for, some valuable things were missing: certain letters, some folders of my own writing, photographs of my parents when young, and of my paternal grandmother.

A section of this memoir, called *Major/Minor*, was published in 2011. It delves into my father's relationship with Samuel Beckett, who was his close friend over many years. My father drew Beckett and illustrated some of his writings: for example, *Nouvelles et textes pour rien*, published in 1958. (Avigdor Arikha died in 2010; Beckett in 1989.) When I was born, Beckett became my godfather, and in the book I related the (cringeworthy) fact that as a budding writer, still in my teens, I used to send him poems and stories which I bashed out on an old typewriter. Occasionally he wrote back to me, handwritten

cards of encouragement in black ink. More often than not, my submissions went unanswered. There were other cards from him, which had to do with more mundane matters: birthdays, graduations, invitations to attend a play.

They were all kept somewhere safe. At least I thought they were. Because one day, I cannot say when, I lost them all. For years I searched, but in vain. And now I began to wonder whether they could have been stashed away with those other family documents and left in some forgotten container in the house I used to share with my ex-husband. More than once I asked him about it, but he said he hadn't come across anything. By then, he too had moved flats and the matter was dropped - until the day last spring when he told me about the cardboard box.

As soon as I returned to the Bayswater flat with my daughter, I tore it open. There were a few sheets of newspaper at the top which I disposed of quickly, before I was greeted by my son's *Star Wars* memorabilia. Below this there was a stack of letters and pictures. It didn't take long to realize that the time capsule I was staring at was, in fact, my long-lost box: here were my parents in Jerusalem in the 1970s, sitting in a garden wearing sunglasses. Here was the photograph of my paternal grandmother, holding my sister and me as we leaned against the balcony of her nursing home in Haifa. There was some correspondence with the French historian Marc Fumaroli, who died recently. Drawings by my then small daughter. A tender portrait my father had done of my husband and me, shortly after we got married. A picture of my mother looking young and glamorous, my four-year-old self at her side. Around her neck is hanging an African stone necklace which I had just recently worn to a party.

Today my mother's memory is deteriorating rapidly, and she has entered her own penumbra. Gazing at the picture, I can remember her as she was then. The stones of the necklace against her skin must have felt as they had against mine.

There were more photographs, from the late 1990s. And, tucked beneath a New York Hospital folder containing a series of ultrasound scans of my unborn son, a stamped envelope bearing my name. I recognized Beckett's handwriting instantly. The envelope contained pictures of us together, as well as three notes from him to me - one of them about my literary efforts. All the cards were written in the 1980s. Two are in English, one in French (he and I spoke both languages together). As I recall, there were a few more, which I hope might one day reappear, just as these have done. Seeing them imbued me with the feeling that something precious had happened. I held them delicately and read them several times. There were his congratulations on my twenty-first birthday. A note about my graduation from college - "Dear Bachelor Alba", he writes - and about beginning a new job in New York: "your engagement with Marlborough (Gallery)". The third one, in French, was about a play I had sent him when I was twenty. It is dated August 15, 1986. "Chère Alba, Lu ta pièce avec plaisir. Brava! Love t'embrasse."

Did Samuel Beckett really read my play with pleasure? To say it has left me dumbfounded is an understatement. As far as I can recall, the plot was about a modern-day Oedipus, set in a Left Bank café. I find myself wondering whether he actually meant it. Then again, given all the times he remained silent, I'm justified in thinking he might have. What matters most is that I was reunited with those cards, and in the strangest of times. I can see Sam sitting in the armchair (which, family legend had it, might have once belonged to Ingres) of our Parisian living room sipping his Irish whiskey, an enigmatic smile on his face. My father and he are listening to a Beethoven sonata. Sam lights a cigarillo. There is a diminuendo in the strings section. He closes his eyes.

My lost and found box is part of my past, certainly. And I'm glad to have recovered it for that reason alone. But what it also contained was my continuity. ■

Postcard from Samuel Beckett to Alba Arikha

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Alba Arikha's books include *Major/Minor*, a memoir. Her most recent novel, *Where to Find me*, was published in 2018