PART ONE

Social Breakdown in the Projects
My own personal history undoubtedly influenced my understanding of these young women's position. I was born in Auvergne, a reputedly austere region in central France where people are reserved but also capable of a profound and discreet generosity if you know how to earn it. To identify myself more precisely, I was born in Clermont-Ferrand, a working-class city steeped in popular culture, where almost everything revolved around the Michelin Tire factory. When I was a child, work, housing, schools, the very lives of a great many men and women in Clermont-Ferrand took on the rhythms of the factory. During these years, manufacturers treated their employees with a certain paternalism under the watchful eyes of the mayor, Roger Quillot, who was, I might add, a specialist on the writings of Albert Camus.1 I am very attached to the region of

1. [Trans.] The French novelist and philosopher Albert Camus (1913–60) was born in Algeria and moved to France several years before
my birth and if, in the present debate over identity politics, I were asked to define myself in terms of a certain category, in the end I would call myself a “woman of Auvergne”!

I come from a rather typical North African family of ten children, six boys and four girls. My father was tough with all his children, and authoritarian and strict in terms of their upbringing—respect meant a lot to him and he imposed it and taught us to value it. Nevertheless, he made a clear distinction between how a girl should behave and what was expected of a boy. The gender differences in personal freedom of action were patently obvious: my oldest brother had nearly all the rights; my sisters and I almost none. As for housework, we had to do everything; he was never asked to do anything, except perhaps to assume his responsibilities as the eldest son. In this way the relations between my oldest brother and the other siblings became completely warped. Caught in this role and bound by patriarchal tradition, my brother found himself progressively isolated and, as he grew up, started a slow drift toward prison. While this drama left an indelible mark on the family, strange as it might seem, it also made relations with my oldest brother somewhat easier.

World War II. During the German occupation, Camus worked for the Resistance clandestine newspaper *Combat* and is best known for his enigmatic novel *L’étranger* (1942; *The Stranger*) that takes place in Algeria. His work evolved toward a philosophy of moral consciousness that put him in opposition to communism and existentialism, defended notably by Jean-Paul Sartre. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957.
My sisters and I could not leave the house when we pleased, a situation many women of my generation faced whether or not they were from immigrant families. For example, when youth workers organized camps in the countryside, my brother had an easier time getting permission to go, while for us girls, such trips required endless discussion and negotiation. We had the same problem for the movies, where we had to begin discussions two weeks before going. And it was often my mother who interceded on our behalf, taking on the role of both advocate and peacemaker as far as I was concerned. She was continually smoothing things out.

This distribution of roles was in fact classic and common in our milieu. But, like many of my girlfriends, I did not understand why this gender difference existed and I considered it an injustice. I constantly challenged it and during my adolescence I never stopped questioning it. Thus my father and I had harsh and frequent clashes. By contrast, my sisters were calmer and more given to discussion and negotiation and were able to maintain a dialogue with our parents.

My father had a rather simple idea of everyone’s place in society: men and women were certainly equal before the law, but men belonged to the outside world and women to the private one at home! This was the conception of the world that he had inherited from his Berber education; it was a very common vision among immigrant workers. When my father arrived in France, how could he realize that this model was no longer accepted in the modern society in which he had come to live—a society
where women could go out, work, and organize their lives—since he was settled in a housing project that sheltered only immigrant workers from North Africa like himself? Berber fathers like him came from a patriarchal and male chauvinist society where the men were obliged to provide for the needs of wives. In turn the women had to remain at home to raise the children. There was a division of labor within the couple: the man took charge of the family’s financial needs through work and the wife stayed home to look after the children and manage the domestic space. Women never left home, except to do errands and pick up the children at school. Daughters were supposed to follow the same model. My father would never have allowed his wife to work outside the home. He would have experienced this as a personal inability to provide for his family, calling into question his place as head of the household. And then, there was the question of what others would see or say, of public opinion.

My mother suffered a great deal from this situation. She was twenty-two years younger than my father and longed for some financial independence, for some freedom of decision, and for some pocket money to buy herself a “few trinkets,” as she said. This subject often provoked small disputes at home. Among ourselves we sisters and brothers were able to settle this problem later on, by sending her some money every month.

Yet I don’t at all hold this against my father: he sincerely believed he was doing the right thing for his daughters. Even though I was very much afraid of him, I tried instead to understand why he reacted this way. I always had a special curiosity about him, a desire to know more about his family history, and
about life in Algeria, his country of origin. As my parents never had enough money to take all their children during summer visits, only a few of my sisters and brothers went there, and it is a country I know very poorly and discovered later in my life. My father’s emigration experience is rather ordinary. He left Aït Yussef in the mountains of Little Kabylia and arrived in France in 1955 to look for work in construction. My mother joined him in 1960 after their marriage. She was sixteen, and she had her first child very rapidly. Then other children followed, when she was seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old. When my parents arrived—like many other immigrants who responded to France’s need for more workers—they were “parked” in a transit city. Herbet, the housing project where my parents settled and where I grew up, was located in the southeastern suburbs of Clermont-Ferrand. It was not a large complex but rather a small popular neighborhood, a half-hour from the city center, and it housed one hundred and fifty families. It was, in fact, a shantytown that had been transformed into temporary housing in the late 1960s and underwent repeated refurbishing. I remember it as a prototypical village where everyone knew and helped everybody else, and the children grew up together. Even though the foreign population had been grouped together, I never felt we lived in a ghetto. Even so, 90 percent of our housing project was populated by Algerian immigrants, all of whom held residence

2. [Trans.] As noted in the introduction, France conquered the city of Algiers in 1830 and colonized the vast territory of Algeria during the nineteenth century. Algeria was considered an integral part of France until 1962.
permits. Just opposite, two streets away, was a neighborhood called la Condamine where a large Portuguese community lived.

From childhood I realized certain things weren’t right. For example, there was a slaughterhouse near the place we were living and it swarmed with rats. At school, along with the other children from the housing project, we were called the “kids from Herbet,” which was a way of identifying our neighborhood as the Arab quarter. I did not understand these distinctions and these labels because I never felt any problem of identity. To be sure, I was named Fadela, but I was born in France, in Clermont-Ferrand in 1964. Like many other kids, I was lulled to sleep with fairy tales, stories, and legends in which monsters played a large part. Like many other schoolchildren, I read *Poil de carotte* (*Carrot Top*) and *Le petit prince* (*The Little Prince*) and I adored listening to the story on tape of Peter and the wolf, read in the marvelous voice of Gérard Philippe (I was in love with him for a long time). Christmas was also an important holiday for us—and for all the other families in the projects—and each year I waited impatiently for Santa Claus to bring gifts and sweets. Like everyone else, my brothers and sisters and I made bets with candy as to who would be the first to see him. We spent some very short nights! But the magic always worked when we awoke in the morning and discovered the gifts spread out in secret. It was the same at Easter time. My mother scattered Easter eggs and chocolate chickens and bells around our little backyard. It was like a treasure hunt, and I must admit that of all of us, it was my mother who had the greatest fun watching us search everywhere and cry out with joy when we found a treasure.

So on occasion I was surprised to find that others perceived me as different, as coming from somewhere else. Over time such thoughts took form and became discrimination, exclusion,
racism—the Far Right’s favorite themes. But, deep down, I knew with certainty that this was not France. My own France—a view shared by a great number of people from immigrant families—is the France of the Enlightenment, the France of the republic, the France of Marianne, of the supporters of Alfred Dreyfus, of the Paris Commune, of the Resistance. In short, the France of liberty, equality, and fraternity, a secular France where the only principle that prevails is the advancement of social conscience and nothing else. But by chance it was in France’s republican melting pot—the school I attended as a child—that I truly felt for the first time that I was a foreigner. It occurred one day when a teacher, who wanted to make a list of foreign students in the class and who certainly believed she was doing the right thing, asked me to raise my hand. And yet, according to the law issued from the Evian accords, I was a French citizen.

My parents themselves remained Algerian—my father chose to do so at the time of Algerian independence; one of my brothers, born before 1962, still holds a residence permit; and my oldest sister obtained French nationality through marriage. My family is thus a real puzzle of nationalities, much like many other immigrant families.

We lived in Herbet in relative poverty. But my mother was infinitely resourceful. To make our life easier she did her utmost

3. [Trans.] Amara refers to republican triumphs over threats to the country’s values, including the Dreyfus affair, a crisis of religious intolerance and discrimination in late nineteenth-century France.

4. [Trans.] The Evian accords, signed in 1962, marked France’s recognition of Algerian independence; they included safeguards for Algerians in France and for French settlers and their property in Algeria.
to manage with what she had. She invented games, baked sweet cakes, sang popular songs for us by Enrico Macias, Claude François, Sheila, Rabah Dreissa, and each with the appropriate accent, no less! At home, as was true in the rest of the housing project, we lacked many things and we could not eat meat at every meal. Even so, there were always potatoes on our plates, cooked in many different ways. And I confess that I never grew tired of them!

I remember my father coming home on Friday evenings and counting his wages—there were no paychecks then—he would make small piles: one for the food budget, another for miscellaneous expenses, a third for savings, in case of emergencies. These are memories that mark your life. I hold this image of my father: serious, painstaking, someone who never smiled. My mother was just the opposite: almost childlike, always smiling, and sociable. Her gaiety compensated for my father’s somber temperament.

SHORTENED SCHOOLING AND CAREER OPTIONS

Trapped at home, I tried to make my way to freedom in the outside world. But I never found the means to succeed in what school offered. Instead, I had a chaotic school career, as many other young people in my neighborhood did. School always seemed so disconnected from our life outside. I read a great deal—my mother would say, “My daughter always has her head in books”—but I was bored sitting in a classroom. I had gotten it into my head that I would prepare a baccalaureate in literature because French was the only subject that interested me; in other subjects, I was hopeless and undisciplined. In fact, I was physically present in class but constantly thinking about something else! Immersed
in those childhood dreams that carried me away into a brilliant future, I imagined becoming a star dancer in the Ballets du XXe siècle directed by the great Maurice Béjart. How many classes flicked through my head while I dreamed of a pas de deux with the wonderful dancer Jorge Donn! But things turned out differently. In any case, I did not understand, for example, why we could not talk in school about real problems, about life. I remember the death of a kid in the projects where the police had been involved. I had tried to talk with my teacher about why the cops were allowed to get away with such brutality. We all knew young men who had gone to prison for theft, and the image we had of justice was of a double standard. Only much later, in the context of a project involving Solidarity House and the Youth Recreation Center run by Bob Sametier and his team of policemen, was I able to revise my image of the French police. I realized that most of the police were dedicated women and men who took risks so that everyone could benefit from a fundamental right in a democracy, the right to security. The only answer the teacher gave me was “We don’t talk about this type of subject in class. We are here to learn and to work.” I began to tune out of school.

I was expelled from secondary school at age sixteen and directed toward “the real world.” To keep me from total alienation (la galère), my mother pushed me to get a vocational

5. [Trans.] This new term from the inner city or suburbs, as Richard L. Derderian explains, “is a highly volatile sense of detachment and frustration among suburban youth produced by an environment that excludes, alienates, and stigmatizes” them. North Africans in Contemporary France: Becoming Visible (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 148. See also the film La Haine (1996), set in the suburbs north of Paris, which depicts the violence this alienation may trigger.
diploma (certificat d’aptitude professionnelle) as an office worker. Since my father’s financial situation had somewhat improved, he was able to enroll me in a private Catholic girls’ school. Knowing my rebellious temperament, he did not want me hanging around outside the house. He was afraid I’d come up against the court of neighborhood opinion, people would say I talked too much, and I was always protesting. He knew such a reputation had consequences: men would never ask to marry you. So for him, the only successful path for a woman was to marry and to have a family. I did not fit this model at all, so I needed a makeover.

The Catholic girls’ school was a shock for me. The rules were very strict and every morning we had to say prayers. It was a requirement that was not negotiable. So I bent myself to the rules, but as a Muslim I recited my prayers in Arabic. My teachers did not appreciate this, and their reflections soon turned into judgments. Intolerance takes many forms. I had to repeat the year, failed my vocational exam, and ended up in the national unemployment agency. On a daily basis, as a way of hanging on, I read. This immoderate taste for reading was a legacy from my teacher Madame Peyron, who had given me my first book. Since then I have never stopped reading. From Victor Hugo to Alfred de Musset, from Alexander Dumas to Emile Zola, from Martin Luther King to Gandhi, by way of Marguerite Yourcenar, Hermann Hesse, Khalil Gibran, and many others. I especially liked the talented Kateb Yacine, who evoked for me the story of my parents.6

During this period you signed in every month at the employment office. Watching everyone line up to justify the meager unemployment benefits they received made me sick, especially for older people who looked so exhausted as they waited. I found it scandalous that a country like France could not find work for them. I was ready to let go the thousand francs they handed out at the time in order to escape such humiliation. I knew my life was not going to be easy, particularly as I was starting with few qualifications. But since I had brought this on myself, I had to take responsibility for it. I struggled on by stringing together several fixed-term contracts and various types of part-time work.

SHOCKED INTO BECOMING A MILITANT

I really found myself through collective action. My commitment as a militant began with the shock caused by the death of one of my brothers when I was fourteen years old. It happened in 1978, when my little brother Malik, the youngest in the family, was run over by a drunken driver. I saw how the cops were able to mistreat people simply because they were Arabs. When my mother saw her son on the ground, she fell apart and began to shriek with pain. The cops arrived and one of them caught her and shook her. I was standing next to my brother, holding him in my arms and talking to him to tell him Mother was there and not to worry. When I looked up, I saw this cop roughing up my mother and bullying my father. Then, after the ambulance had taken my little brother to the hospital, I went over to hit the cop and shout insults at him. I screamed and forbade him to speak to my parents this way. I can still hear his response: “These bougnoules
(Arabs) piss me off!” It was like electroshock: I completely blew up. Young people from the nearby project were out of their minds with fury and began attacking the drunken driver and roughing him up. The police protected him and, instead of trying to calm things, began to call us “dirty Arabs” and shout that no Arabs were going to order them about.

My little brother died later that night at the hospital. He was five years old. This episode left its mark on the housing project. For a long time after this event there was tension between the police and the young people of our neighborhood. When the cops descended on the project, they came not to teach us a lesson but to clamp down on us in a violent way. They would break into people’s homes by knocking down the doors, pick up some young man, and haul him off to prison. During this period vans of the special riot police would suddenly block off the two entrances to the housing project; they would take out their billy clubs and cut loose. During my entire adolescence I lived with this image of cops swooping down on the project to make some family unhappy. But there was such strong solidarity that when they questioned one of us, it affected the whole housing project. So even if a few kids were doing stupid things, it was hard on all of us.

And so for a long time Herbet, our housing project, had a reputation that clouded the life of its inhabitants. Many young people of my generation were victims of discrimination. During this period, social mobility through schooling was extremely difficult. Very few continued on to the university since it was too expensive. Because I could not agree to this injustice, this outsider’s view that systematically reduced me to my social and

7. [Trans.] In French slang, bougnoules is a very offensive term for Arabs.
ethnic origins, I had to do everything in my power to change it. I wanted to prove that despite our differences we had the ability to live together, and that this was possible in a secular republic with full citizenship rights.

Thus, after the death of my little brother, I decided to make something happen. At this time one of the rare environments where young women had a sense of being on an equal footing with men was in the housing project. So this is where I took my stand. At seventeen I organized with some women friends a “civic march” to register young people to vote. The objective was twofold: to demonstrate our sentiment of belonging to the nation by participating in the elections, but also to gain the respect of local elected officials. Four hundred young people joined us, and our delegation was received by the mayor. This was itself a first victory. Soon afterward, in 1982, we created an association with the help of the municipality, the Association des femmes pour l’échange intercommunautaire (women’s association for ethnic relations). Our motivation was to create a space for collective exchange and solidarity, to enhance daily life in the projects. Our goal was to have our fathers, mothers, and all young people help promote our neighborhood in order to change its public image, and to give everyone a stake in our collective work.

Then there was the Beur March. During the winter of 1983, a small group of young men from the Minguettes, a suburban neighborhood of Lyon, decided to organize a march to denounce the racism that immigrants’ children experienced. At that time, not a month went by without some racist crime being committed, either by fascists or by the cops. The organizers of the march had the support of Father Christian Delorme, a priest working in the housing projects who had a major role in the initiative’s success. The march
had an enormous impact both in the projects and on the rest of French society. For the first time, immigrants’ sons began to denounce the hatred that targeted them and demanded their integration into French society. Like my friends, I participated when the march stopped over in Clermont-Ferrand. But I did not go to the national demonstration when they reached Paris because my father was totally opposed to my going. I had to watch it on television.

But afterward, when groups assembled for the next march, I didn’t join in because I couldn’t identify with them. I felt that the men were too “macho”: they wanted the women to march but hadn’t the slightest interest in equality between men and women. When we told them that they should change their behavior, that the march should include both Beurs and Beurettes, they turned a deaf ear. They could not accept the idea that women might demand something. I preferred investing my energy in my own neighborhood, where my women friends and I put together a plan to fix up housing that had fallen in disrepair. The electricity was so substandard and the buildings were so damaged that a catastrophe might happen at any moment. We fought to have the town set aside a budget for substantial restoration. We also worked a lot on job placement, because unemployment had already had such disastrous effects on these neighborhoods.

JOINING SOS RACISME

It was during this period that I met several activists from SOS Racisme. This association, well known because of its phrase “Touche pas à mon pote” (Hands off my buddy), was created in December 1984 in the wake of the second Beur march. This march, called Convergence 84, sought to promote solidarity