

The Box of Marvels

Ahmed Sefrioui

1/1/1954

Translated by Bethany Bijonowski

Translator's Preface

In French, Ahmed Sefrioui's 1954 novel is richly poetic and poignant in its banality. The reader is transported to twentieth century Morocco through the unfaltering, non judgmental, brutally honest gaze of a little boy, Mohammed. His life, the life of any child from this era, is deeply profound, utterly magical, and ultimately breathtaking. I approached this translation with one main goal in mind: I wanted to transfer the feeling that was evoked by the French to the reader who would only be exposed to the English text.

So how could I capture capturing this sensation in English?

On the one hand, I could adhere to Lawrence Venutti's ideal of foreignizing the text, intentionally choosing words to stand out and prove, in a sense, that the work is, in fact, foreign?

Or I could take the route of domestication, smoothing out any and all linguistic hiccups the text might take on during translation to the point where the reader has no idea the novel wasn't written by an American?

In the end, I strove to find some middle ground.

In line with a foreignizing approach, I strove to remain true to the cultural specificity and in so doing I left certain words in French and others in Darija, or Moroccan Arabic. *Chérif, msid, fqih*: these were the words that gave me pause as I translated. I struggled to find an English equivalent and ultimately concluded that it didn't exist. The best way to translate these words was to leave them as they are in their original state because they reflect an aspect of the culture that we don't necessarily have. This is especially the case with the book's religious themes, which are as inescapable in the text as they are on an average street in Morocco. The tenets of Islam make up

a large part of daily life, from morning greetings, to deaths, to Friday lunch to regular conversations. The theme of religion is as ubiquitous as it is complex. The narrator's very name, Mohammed, signals how deeply religious he is. Even as a child, he often gets carried away in his own passion for Allah. One of the first things we learn about Mohammed is that his most cherished desire is to die, so that he may be "reborn on banks of the river Salsabil" (8). Yet, just a few chapters later he works himself into a frenzy about his mortality after witnessing the death of a neighbor (67). Just as paradoxically, he is as likely to "dream of making a pact with the *jnouns*, the ones that only a powerful sorceress could control" as he is to imagine angels, "millions of them dressed in white silk" attending his funeral procession (8, 68). It's clear that the kid is a bit confused. But who could blame him? He witnesses his neighbor performing demonic rituals and then he trots off to recite Koranic verses at school the next day. Religion is heady stuff, and every member of society is pedaling his or her own specific brand. I wanted to make sure that these elements that color Moroccan society and so heavily influence the life and emotional well-being of the protagonist were portrayed as accurately as possible. So I left many of the words associated with Islam intact, untouched and untainted in in my translation.

But, on the other hand, this foreignizing approach runs the risk of coming across as wooden or heavy handed. French and English grammatical structures can be quite different, and an elegantly constructed sentence in French may be reduced to a sprawling mess in English, if the translator is not careful. Sefrioui takes full advantage of the French predilection for linking clause after clause to a sentence, spinning a beautifully complex web of subordinate clauses and adverbial phrases. In instances where Sefrioui's text felt simply too complex to be supported by English, the translator became the surgeon. I carefully and delicately reworked sections, amputating a clause here, and transplanting it there. My intention was never to change the text

into something unrecognizable: rather, it was the exact opposite. By rearranging things in a few places I intended to make the text more itself. Consider the following example. At one point in the story, the protagonist, commenting on the interactions between his mother and his neighbor, states:

Aux soupirs de ma mère, elle répondait par des soupirs, aux hochements de tête par des hochements de tête. (30)

My minimally invasive translation results in:

She sighed in response to my mother's sighs, shook her head when my mother shook hers. (60)

I've cut the prepositional phrase off the front and redistributed it into the middle of the sentence.

It may not seem like much, but without the artful rearranging the English might read:

To my mother's sighs, she responded with sighs, to head shakes with head shakes.

It's not wrong, but it's certainly not right. Without a bit of surgery the graceful French becomes clunky and odd in English, decidedly different from the original.

But my work wasn't all about cutting and slicing either. In some sections it was necessary to introduce a few words here and there to keep the rhythm and tone that was naturally implicit in the French. At one point the protagonist's mother is relaying a rather longwinded tale to her husband. The French reads:

Les babouches brodées jouissent auprès des femmes de Fès d'un grand succès. La production de Moulay Larbi et de son ouvrier avait bonne réputation. Abdelkader songea à se marier. Moulay Larbi l'encouragea dans cette voie et Lalla Aïcha lui trouva une jeune fille digne d'éloges. Les mariages coûtent toujours très cher. Malgré ses nuits de veille, Abdelkader n'avait pas su

économiser. Il se trouva assez gêné lorsqu'il fallut une dot à sa fiancée. Il eut recours à son patron. (25)

This section gives the impression of a gossip relishing the details of a particularly juicy tidbit. The tone is conversational and the sentences seem to flow together seamlessly. I wanted this section to have the same fluidity in English, so I added the disfluencies we all use in everyday speech to join our thoughts up into coherent stories.

Their embroidered slippers were a huge success with all the women in Fez. Their reputation was impeccable. But then Abdelkader decided to get married. Moulay Larbi encouraged him and Lalla Aicha found him a young lady with all sorts of fine qualities. But weddings are always so expensive. And even though he had spent all those nights up working, Abdelkader didn't know how to save up. He found himself in a tight spot when he found out that his fiancée required a dowry. So he went to his boss for help. (Translation part 4 pg 3)

No, the original text does not contain words like 'so,' 'but,' or 'then,' at least not explicitly. But they are implied. Without them the passage would lose its conversational appeal, and who wants to listen to disjointed, choppy, even robotic sounding gossip?

But moments like these are important on another level as well. In this case the narrator's mother is gossiping to his father, a very stereotypical interaction. Still to this day, but especially during the period when this book was written, men and women have rigid, defined roles in society. They have their own specific domains, with women as the rulers of the home and men taking over on the streets. When someone is outside their domain, they must defer to the other sex. For example, without a woman's permission, a man cannot go into a house, even if it is *his own* house. On several occasions we see this rule in play, as the men will always ask first before

entering. In the same sense, women don't often leave the home. They don't even go grocery shopping. In Mohammad's case, his father's employee brings food to the family on a daily basis (28). And if a woman does happen to venture outside, she must adopt a different set of behaviors. "At home, they made the walls shake talking about their slightest problems, they had steel vocal cords; but in the street, they became mute and simpering" (20). So where does Mohammed fit in to all this? He's only a child, so he's still in a sort of limbo. The strict gender roles don't quite apply to him yet. But even at the young age of six we still see him struggle with wanting to fit into these norms. He wants to grow a beard and he worries that his mother will find him too effeminate just for wanting a mirror (34, 85). He knows, already, how he should act and he strives to do it, even though he repeatedly assures the reader that he doesn't fit in, and that he is completely isolated from society. This isolation in itself comes to play a key role in his comment on society, and his ultimate exclusion from it. This is expressed most notably through the author's tone, which, in spite of some major lexical changes and syntactical reworkings, I aimed to mimic as closely as possible.

In the end, translation is an art. And there is no way to translate something without adding a little of yourself to it. I hope the reader of this text will find that I was able to effectively convey the emotion that plays such a strong role in the French, but in doing so I mingled my own voice with Sefrioui's, as all the translators that I admire do. The words are not mine alone, but they are, in part, mine. The story, emotional intensity, and heart of the work have been supplied by Sefrioui, I have merely created a frame within which to show them off.

Ultimately, my goal was for the English to read with the same poignancy as the French all while conveying the same meaning. I hope the reader will see my efforts come to fruition in the final work.

Chapter 1

At night, when everyone sleeps, the rich in their warm blankets and the poor on the steps of the shops or under the palace arches, I don't. I think of my solitude and feel its full weight. I've been lonely as long as I can remember.

From the chill of an ever-present shadow, I see a little boy set a trap for a sparrow he will never catch. He wants this little sparrow so badly! But not to eat it or kill it, he only wants to make it his friend. His feet bare on the damp earth, he runs to the end of the alley to watch the donkeys pass, and returns to sit on the step of the house. He waits for his sparrow that will never come. At night, he goes home with a heavy heart and reddened eyes, his copper wire trap swinging along beside him.

We lived in the home of the *chouafa*, the fortune teller. She lived on the ground floor, and was well known in many circles. Women of all walks of life would come to ask her advice, even those from the farthest reaches of Morocco. She could see the future and do a bit of sorcery. She had been taught by the brotherhood of *Gnaouas*, so her magic came all the way from Guinea. Once a month she held a ritual of sorts, people would come and dance to the darkly mystical music she played. Smokey clouds of benjamin root filled the house. The rattle of maracas and the twang of *guimbris* kept us awake all night long.

I understood nothing of the complicated ritual that played out on the ground floor. From our window on the second floor, through the spiced smoke, I could distinguish the movements of the silhouettes. They played their strange music and I heard their high pitched calls. Their robes were sometimes sky blue, sometimes blood red, and occasionally a flamboyant yellow. The days after these parties were always mournful; more sad and gray than ordinary days. I studied at the

Msid, a Koranic school just a few paces from the house. And on the mornings after the *chouafa*'s rituals I would wake up to the sounds of the night still rolling in my head, the odor and smoke of the incense still intoxicating me. Around me, the *jnouns* prowled, the black demons that the sorceress and her friends had evoked with an almost delirious frenzy. I felt them brush me with their burning fingers; I heard their laughter as though through a stormy night. My index fingers in my ears, I shouted the sacred verses traced on my chalkboard with a tone of despair.

The *chouafa* lived in the two main rooms on the ground floor. On the first floor lived Driss El Aouad, his wife Rahma, and their daughter, who was one year older than me. Her name was Zineb and I didn't like her. This whole family shared only one room, so Rahma did the cooking out on the landing. We shared the second floor with Fatma Bziouya. Our two windows were opposite and looked out onto the old patio; its tiles had long since lost their colored enamel and now resembled bricks. It was washed everyday with plenty of water and swept with a palm leaf broom. The *jnouns* liked the cleanliness. The *chouafa*'s clients got a good impression from the entrance, an impression of cleanliness and peace. It made them relax and share their secrets- which helped the fortune teller to unveil their future with more certainty.

There weren't clients every day. As inexplicable as it may seem, there was an off season and you could never tell when it would be. Suddenly, the ladies ceased to have need of love potions. They worried less about their futures and the pain in their hips, backs, and stomachs ceased. They were free of the demons that habitually plagued them.

The *chouafa* chose these few months of rest to worry about her own health. She discovered some pains that even her art could not relieve. Sometimes the demons would overpower and bewitch her. They would command her to wear this color caftan or that, or to burn this herb at

this time. Cloaked in the darkness of her cloth-draped bedroom, the *chouafa* would howl, moan, and beg for mercy; she numbed her pain in clouds of incense and fragrant smoke.

I was perhaps six at the time. My memory was like wet cement and even the least significant events engraved permanent images within it. Even today these memories brighten my solitude and reaffirm that I am, indeed, still alive.

At six years old I was alone, perhaps unhappy, but I had no measure to allow me to define my existence: neither loneliness nor unhappiness.

I was neither happy, nor unhappy. I was a solitary child. That much, I knew. Shy by nature, I struck up timid friendships with the children from the Koranic school, but their duration was brief. We lived in different universes. I had a penchant for dreaming. The world seemed to me a fabulous realm, a spectacular fairyland where sorceresses held regular meetings with invisible powers. I wanted to experience the mysteries of the invisible, beyond the tangible reality that surrounded me. My young playmates from school contented themselves with the visible, especially when the visible took the form of sky blue or sunset pink candies. They loved to nibble, suck, and crush them with their teeth. They also loved to play war, to take each other by the throat to imitate murder, to shout to imitate their father's voice, to insult each other to imitate their neighbors, or to order each other around to imitate the schoolteacher.

I didn't want to imitate anything, I wanted to understand.

Abdallah, the grocer, told me the exploits of a magnificent king who lived in a country of light, flowers, and perfumes, that nestled between the Seas of Darkness and the Great Wall. I used to dream of making a pact with the *jnouns*, the ones that only a powerful sorceress could control. I

wanted them to take me to that place between the Seas of Darkness and the Great Wall so that I could live in the country of light, perfumes, and flowers.

My father told me about Paradise. But, to be reborn there, I would have to die first. My father added that killing oneself was a terrible sin, and those that did it would never be allowed into the kingdom. So, I had only one option: to wait! I had to wait to become a man and finally to die in order to be reborn on the banks of the river Salsabil. To wait! All of existence is merely waiting. When I realized this, I was no longer afraid of anything. I woke up each day and did as I was told. At night, the sun disappeared and I returned home to sleep so I could start again the next day. I knew that one day would turn into another, and that the days would turn into months, and that the months became seasons, and the seasons the year. I am six years old, next year I will be seven and then eight, nine and ten. At ten, you are almost a man. You can roam the neighborhood by yourself and talk with the shopkeepers. You know how to write-or at least how to write your name. You can even consult a fortune teller about the future, or learn magic words and make talismans.

But my waiting isolated me. I was alone in a crowd of children with shaven heads and wet noses in a swirling vortex of sacred verses and vociferations.

The school was at the *Derb Noualla* gate. The *fqih*, a tall thin man with a black beard and a terrifying gaze, lived on Jiaf Street. I knew this street. At the end of a dark, humid passage way, there stood a low gate from which escaped a continual brouhaha of women's voices and children's cries. The first time I heard this noise, I burst into tears. I recognized in it the voices of Hell, just as my father had described them one night. My mother tried to soothe me, "I'm

taking you to the baths. I promise you an orange and a hardboiled egg if you quit braying like a donkey!”

Still hiccupping, I said, “I don’t want to go to Hell.” She raised her eyes to heaven and said nothing, confused by so much nonsense.

I don’t believe I have ever again set foot inside a Turkish bath since my childhood. A general sense of apprehension and uneasiness has kept me from ever crossing the threshold. Upon reflection, I realize I hate Turkish baths. The promiscuity, indecency and sloppiness that people feel obligated to affect in such places drives me away.

Even as a child, I smelled upon this milling mass of wet bodies an odor of sin. An ill-defined sentiment, especially at an age when I could still accompany my mother to the Turkish bath, but one that provoked in me a certain uneasy dread.

Upon arriving we hiked over a vast platform covered in mats. After we paid seventy five cents to the cashier, we started to undress in the tumult of shrill voices. There was a continual coming and going of half dressed women, free of their enormous bundles of caftans and *mansourias*, shirts and pants, and white silk *haïks*. All of these women spoke loudly; gesticulating passionately and emitting inexplicable and unjustifiable shrieks.

I removed my clothing and stayed completely silent, my hands on my stomach, I stood in front of my mother as she argued with an old friend. There were many other children, but they seemed at ease. They ran amongst the damp thighs, the hanging breasts, and the mountains of bundles, proudly showing off their bloated bellies and their gray *fez* hats.

I felt lonelier than ever. I became more and more convinced that I was in Hell. The hot rooms, the steamy atmosphere, the temperature, and the nightmare characters moving about within, all left me devastated. I sat in the corner, trembling with fever and fear. I wondered what was accomplished by these women who whirled about, running in every direction, trailing large wooden buckets overflowing with boiling water and splashing me as they passed. Hadn't they come to wash? There were one or two who tugged at their hair, seated with their legs extended, complaining in a high-pitched voice, but the others ignored them and continued their eternal voyages with their eternal wooden buckets. My mother, caught in the turmoil, from time to time emerged from a mass of arms and legs, shouted an order or an insult that I couldn't quite catch, and disappeared.

In an empty bucket were a horn comb, a well-polished copper cup, some oranges, and some hard boiled eggs. I timidly took an orange, peeled it, and sucked on it for a long time with a blank look. I felt less aware of my naked body in this state; I watched it become covered in fat drops of sweat and forgot about the women thrashing about, their wooden buckets, and their inexplicable trips around the room. My mother swooped down on me. She plunged me in a bucket of water, covered my head in fragrant clay, and despite my cries and tears, drowned me in an onslaught of insults and fire. She pulled me out of the bucket, threw me in the corner like a sack, and disappeared into the turmoil once again. Free from her clutches, I seized a hardboiled egg, a delicacy of which I was particularly fond. I hadn't even finished nibbling the yolk when my mother reappeared, splashed me alternately with boiling water and ice water, covered me in a towel and brought me half-dead to the fresh air on top of the platform full of bundles of clothing. I heard her tell the cashier, "Lalla Fattoum, I'm leaving my son with you; I haven't gotten a drop

of water to wash myself with yet.” And to me, “Get dressed onion-head! Here’s an orange to keep you busy.”

I was alone, my hands crossed over my burning stomach, more dumbstruck than ever in the middle of a crowd of strangers and their expansive bundles. I got dressed.

My mother appeared for a moment to tightly wrap my head in a towel that she tied under my chin, told me to do several things at once, and then dove back into the hot, noisy rooms through the door opposite me.

I waited on the platform until nightfall. My mother finally came back for me, seeming exhausted, and complaining of a violent headache.

Happily for me, these trips to the baths were rather rare. I was a clumsy and awkward child and my mother didn’t want the embarrassment.

During her absence, I was free to pursue my timid daydreams. I ran barefoot in the grass, imitating the rhythmic clip clopping of a horse, I whinnied proudly, I kicked. Sometimes, I simply emptied my Box of Marvels onto the ground and I inventoried my treasures. A simple porcelain button sent my senses into ecstasy. I looked at it for a long time and I caressed the material with respect. Within this object there was something that could not be captured by the eye or the touch, a mysterious untranslatable beauty. It fascinated me. It made me feel completely powerless when I gazed at it. I could feel a strange, invisible, impalpable thing all around me. It brought me almost to tears. I couldn’t taste it with my tongue, but it had a taste, and the power to intoxicate. This porcelain button was the incarnation of some strange, invisible force. It had a soul and the virtue of a talisman.

In the Box of Marvels there was a crowd of incongruous objects that only made sense to me: some marbles, some copper rings, a tiny lock with no key, some nails with golden heads, some empty inkwells, some decorated buttons, and some plain buttons. There were some made of a transparent material, some made of metal, some made of mother-of-pearl. Each of these objects spoke to me in its own language. They were my only friends. Of course, I had legendary friendships with heroic princes and tender hearted giants, but they lived in the hidden corners of my imagination. As for my marbles, my buttons, and my nails, they were there at a moment's notice, in their rectangular box, ready to soothe me whenever I desired.

The day after the bath, my mother described it to the entire house in excruciating detail. She mimed the gestures of some well-known *chérifa*, a daughter of the Prophet, or the walk of some neighbor she didn't like, or she praised the cashier, or ranted about the masseuses, those troublemakers and cheats never that never bothered to move a drop of water. The Turkish bath was the natural place for gossip and rumors. There, you might meet women who weren't from the neighborhood. The baths were as much for self purification as for keeping current on what people were doing and saying. The whole neighborhood would judge a woman based on a single utterance. Two or three times, my mother witnessed a truly heated argument. These scenes were perfect material for her little reenactments. For a week, my mother mimed the argument in all of its stages in front of the women in the house, passer bys, and neighbors. We were treated to a prologue followed by the presentation itself, each character with her own stance, her physical flaws, her vocal tics, her mannerisms, and her look. We each witnessed the drama begin, develop, peak, and finally finish in embracing or tears. My mother was a huge success with the neighbors. I didn't really like the spectacles. My mother's excessive cheerfulness always led to

unfortunate consequences for me. In the morning, she never lacked for enthusiasm, at night, she never lacked for a reason to fight or cry.

My father came home late and rarely found us in a good mood. He was almost always treated to my mother's lovingly pessimistic retelling of some event from the day. Sometimes an incidence with the slightest importance took on catastrophic proportions. Like when Rahma diabolically plotted to do her laundry on Monday. It was a well known fact that this particular day belonged exclusively to my mother. Early in the morning, she took over the patio, blocking it off with wooden troughs, big basins for boiling the wash, buckets for rinsing, and sacks of dirty laundry. Shabbily dressed in *séroual* pants and an old ripped caftan, she set to work around an improvised fire, stirring the contents of the wash boiler with a long stick, and complaining about the wood that gave off more smoke than heat. She always accused the black soap vendors of having cheated her, and called all sorts of nasty curses down upon them.

But she didn't even limit herself to the patio. She climbed up to the terrace as well, and hung her clotheslines from the blackberry branches, and came back down covered in clouds of soapy bubbles. That day, my mother rushed me off to school with just a shirt under my *djellaba*. Lunch was sacrificed too. I had to make do with a quarter of bread smeared with rancid butter and three olives. Even our room lost its usual look. The mattresses looked abandoned, without their blankets, and the pillows without their covers; even the window seemed naked without its red flowered curtain.

The night was dedicated to folding clothes. My mother took a sun scented and rumpled shirt, spread it over her knees, looked it over, folded it forcefully with the sleeves inside. Sometimes, she had to redo one. She didn't like sewing; even I preferred to see her carding her wool or

working at her spinning her wheel. The needle was to my eyes a symbol of idleness. It was a tradition in our family that the noble female profession was working with wool. So much so, that the needle seemed like a betrayal. We lived in the city for convenience, but we stayed faithful to our mountain farmer origins. My mother never hesitated to bring up our lineage during fights with the neighbors. She even dared to claim to Rahma that we were authentic descendants of the Prophet.

“Papers exist,” she said, “to prove it, papers that are carefully guarded by the *imam* of the town’s mosque. Who are you, the wife of a plow maker, with no pedigree, to dare to put your lice infested laundry next to mine? I know what you are, a beggar amongst beggars, a lackey amongst lackeys, you barefoot, muddy, flea-ridden, greedy tramp! And your husband! Talk about being deformed, with his beard eaten up by mites, he smells like a stable and brays like a donkey! What did you say? Say it to your husband? Do you think that I’m afraid of your husband? Send him over! I’ll show him what a woman from a good background is capable of. As for you, give it up and go get your old rags. All the neighbors are on my side. You started this. I’m not a little girl to let a woman like you insult me.”

From our window on the second floor, pale with anxiety and fear, I watched the scene and my impressionable mind recorded the violent words.

That night, dazed with sleep, I heard my father come up the stairs. He came in as usual and went straight for his mattress in its usual place on the floor. My mother prepared dinner, set the round table, and set out the stew and bread.

You could feel her brooding.

My father started eating without a word. My mother still sulked. Then, she suddenly raised her voice and said, “It means nothing to you, that they drag us through the mud, that they insult us, that they insult our family, our ancestors that could make other tribes shake in fear! It means nothing to you when low class people try to badmouth our family, and our proud lineage!”

Still silent, my father continued to eat.

My mother kept it up, “Yes, it means nothing to you. That your wife puts up with all these insults, your appetite isn’t affected and you eat like normal. I have so much pain in my heart that I will never eat again in my life.”

My mother, hiding her face in her hands, let out a long sob and started crying hot tears. She moaned, she lamented, she slapped her thighs, she sang in a sad, monotone voice about all of her troubles. She enumerated the insults she’d gotten, the names she’d been called, and started again the inexhaustible eulogy to her ancestors who were equally offended.

My father, swallowing his last mouthful, took a drink of water, wiped his mouth, pulled a pillow under him to lean on and asked, “Who did you argue with this time?”

His words worked like magic on my mother. She stopped crying, lifted her head, and, with an explosion of fury, answered my father, “With that tramp from the first floor, the plow maker’s wife! That disgusting creature soiled my clean laundry with her smelly rags. She never bathes, she goes three months without washing her clothes, but just to start a fight, she chose Monday, my laundry day, to take out her rags. You know I’m patient, I always try to avoid trouble, I’m always courteous; I get it from my family, we’re all polite. People who try to insult us are wasting their time. We know how to stay calm and keep our dignity. Then that flea bitten woman had to...”

Rahma's voice tore through the night, "Flea-bitten! Me! Do you hear that, Muslim people? Today wasn't enough for her! Now the men are home and can witness before God which of the two of us has crossed the line."

What happened next can't be described with words. First there were sharp, prolonged cries of rage, endless sounds without meaning. Each of the antagonists, leaning out of her window, gestured into the emptiness, hurling insults that no one understood, tugging at her own hair. Possessed by an anger beyond reason, they contorted strangely. The neighbors came out of their rooms and added to the furious cries. The men, in their deep voices, demanded they calm down and insisted that they renounce their demons, but their wise advice only riled them up more. The noise became intolerable. It was a tempest, an earthquake, the release of dark forces; it was the end of the world.

I couldn't handle it anymore. My ears were overwhelmed, in my chest my heart beat forcefully against my ribcage. I choked on my tears and collapsed at my mother's feet, unconscious.

Chapter 2

Tuesday, an evil day for students of the *Msid*, leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. For me, every Tuesday is the color of ash.

It was cold; nightmares had chased me all night. Disheveled women threatened to scratch out my eyes and screamed insults in my face. Sometimes, one of them dangled me out the window and I dropped heavily into the abyss. I cried out. A hand was gently laid on my forehead.

In the morning, I went to the *Msid* as usual. The *fqih* looked as he did every Tuesday. His eyes held no pity. I grabbed my chalkboard and started droning aloud the two or three verses written there.

At six years old, I was already aware of the world's hostility and my fragility. I was familiar with fear, and the pain of the wooden rod. My little body shook in my too-small clothing. I dreaded the night we were to spend reviewing our lessons. As usual, I had to recite the few chapters of the Koran that I had learned since starting school.

At lunch time, the teacher gave me the signal to leave. I hung up my chalkboard. I slid on the slippers that awaited me by the door to the *Msid* and I crossed the street.

My mother greeted me rather coldly. She was suffering from a terrible migraine. To relieve the pain she had little bits of paper thickly smeared with flour paste stuck to her temples. Lunch was improvised and the kettle sang timidly from the stove. *Lalla Aïcha*, a former neighbor, came to visit us. My mother greeted her with complaints about her physical and moral pains. She adopted the weak voice of a convalescent, went on about the sufferings in some part of her body, and violently gripped her scarf-wrapped head with two hands. *Lalla Aïcha* gave her all sorts of advice, she told her about a *fqih* in a far away neighborhood whose talismans worked miracles. I stayed timidly silent in my corner. The visitor remarked on the pallor of my face. "What's wrong with your son?" She asked. And my mother responded, "The world is so terrible, the gaze of the envious has extinguished the light from his face, it used to remind me of a bouquet of roses. Do you remember his crimson cheeks? And his long lashes, black as a crow's wing? God as my witness, His vengeance will be terrible."

“I can give you some advice,” said *Lalla Aïcha*, “let’s all three go this afternoon to Sidi Ali Boughaleb. This child cannot tolerate the *Msid*; if you took him to drink water from the sanctuary he would get back his happiness and energy.”

My mother still hesitated. To convince her, *Lalla Aïcha* told her all about the pain in her joints, her legs that wouldn’t obey her anymore, her hands as heavy as lead, the difficulties she had turning over in bed, and the nights she had spent moaning like Job on his pallet. Thanks to Sidi Ali Boughaleb, patron of doctors and barbers, her pains had disappeared. “*Lalla Zoubida*, God sent me to help you, to show you the path to healing, I love you, you and your son, I could never eat or drink again if I abandoned you to your sufferings.” My mother promised to take me with her to visit Sidi Ali Boughaleb that very afternoon. *Lalla Aïcha* heaved a satisfied sigh.

The two women stayed to chat for a long time. My mother went up on the terrace and came back with an armload of aromatic plants that she used to grow in chipped pots and old enamel cookware. She perfumed her tea with verbena and sage and offered *Lalla Aïcha* a bit of leafy absinthe to put in her glass. She refused politely, declaring that the tea was already a veritable springtime. I put all sorts of aromatic plants in my tea. I let them steep for a long time. My tea turned bitter, but I knew this drink soothed my frequent digestive problems.

My mother stood up to get ready. She changed her shirt and her *mansouria*, she grabbed an old embroidered belt in a faded green from the bottom of the trunk, found a piece of white cotton that she used as a veil, and draped herself elegantly in her freshly washed *haïk*.

It was, truly, a great day. I got to wear my white *djellaba* and take off the one I used every day, a vaguely gray one, with constellations of ink marks and grease spots. *Lalla Aïcha* had all sorts of difficulties peeling herself away from the mattress where she sat. I remember this woman

vividly, wider than she was tall, with a head that rested directly on her trunk, and short arms that fidgeted constantly. Her smooth, round face inspired in me a certain disgust. I hated it when she hugged me. When she came to our house, my mother made me kiss her hand because she was a *chérifa*, a daughter of the Prophet, and because she had been rich but kept her dignity when her luck changed. An acquaintance like Lalla Aïcha flattered my mother's pride.

Finally, everyone started down the stairs and out into the street. The two women walked slowly, sometimes leaning into one another to whisper. At home, they made the walls shake talking about their slightest problems, they had steel vocal cords; but in the street, they became mute and simpering.

Sometimes I got ahead of them, but they caught up, telling me to be careful and giving me all sorts of advice. I shouldn't rub against the walls: they were dirty and I had on my impeccable white *djellaba*, I should use the beautiful embroidered handkerchief that hung from my neck, I should stay away from donkeys, never be behind them because they might kick and never in front because they took an evil pleasure in biting little children.

"Give me your hand," my mother said. And five steps later, "Go on ahead, your hand is all wet." I'm took back my freedom but just for a short time.

Lalla Aïcha offered to guide me through the crowd. She walked slowly and she was voluminous. It didn't take long for a bottleneck to form. Passer bys shot us all sorts of unpleasant remarks but ended up helping us. Strangers lifted me off the ground, passed me overhead, and let me down in an open space. I waited a long while before seeing the two immaculate *haïks* emerge from the crowd. The scene was replayed several times during the trip. We crossed nameless, unremarkable streets. I heeded my two guides and stayed out of the way

of donkeys, inevitably bumping into people's knees. Every time I avoided an obstacle, another appeared. Finally, we arrived at the cemetery that extended around *Sidi* Ali Boughaleb's property. I gave a shy, happy skip.

The marigold covered tombs glowed in the sun. Here and there vendors presided over their pyramids of oranges. In the distance you could hear the jangling of a singer's tambourine mixed with the water salesman's little bell. In the little courtyard, some country people were selling wood for laundry, terra cotta braziers, and dishes for cooking *galettes*. The sweets stalls caught my eye. There were roosters and chicks made from yellow sugar decorated with pink ribbons, transparent teapots, tiny slippers, and bellows. These magnificent objects reminded me of my Box of Marvels. My father sometimes bought something for me; but, before I got it home, it would crumble or turn gray and dusty, unworthy of my Box. They were beautiful there, in the sun, surrounded by the buzzing crowd.

The green roof tiles of the mausoleum stood out in the tender blue sky, against a background of whimsically shaped white and pink clouds. On the steps of the main entrance, women sat chatting and chewing fragrant gum under their veils, occasionally calling out to their children playing in the dirt. They clumped together to let us pass.

We soon found ourselves in a courtyard that, to me, seemed immense. In the center stood four terra cotta urns full of water. My mother found a cup and made me drink. She poured a bit of liquid into her cupped hand, passed her fingers over my face, my eyes, my knuckles, and my ankles. During the ritual, she murmured vague prayers and invocations, told me to be still, and reminded Lalla Aïcha of this or that incident from our walk. I endured it all with my typical patience. I turned to watch an army of cats give themselves up to a wild dance inside this strange

temple. The courtyard opened into the *Zaouia*, the prayer room. On each side of a square room containing a Saint's bier were two doors that led to rooms for pilgrims. People who had come from far away to alleviate their pain lived there with their children while waiting to be healed.

Standing in front of the bier, Lalla Aïcha and my mother called out to the saint for help. Each was ignorant of the other's words, each venting their small miseries, hitting the wood with the flats of their hands, moaning, begging, railing against their enemies. Their voices rose as they slapped at the bier with more force and passion. A holy delirium seized the two women. They enumerated their pains, lamented their weaknesses, asked for protection, sought retribution, disavowed their flaws, and proclaimed the mercy of God and Sidi Ali Boughaleb in calling upon his pity. Exhausted by their fervor, they finally stopped. The mausoleum's guardian came to compliment their piety and add her prayers to theirs.

"Your wishes will be granted and your desires fulfilled," she concluded, "God is generous, He soothes all sufferings and tends all wounds. His kindness extends to all creatures. Is it not a sign of His generosity that he sent us Prophets to turn us from evil and show us the path to Paradise? It was His generosity that revealed to us, through the intermediary of Our Lord Mohammed (salvation and peace be with him), His venerated Word that teaches us the capital virtues: charity, love of one's parents, and kindness towards all creatures. Those who have practiced these virtues with integrity become the Friends of God and intervene in our favor. Sidi Ali Boughaleb is among the most worthy. He loves all of God's creatures, but he holds a special tenderness towards cats. We currently have more than fifty. They come to us sick, mangy, and emaciated. A short time later, health and joy return to them. To please the Saint, we must feed them and care for them."

My mother searched through her clothes. She took out a handkerchief with a large knot. Slowly, she undid it, several times using her teeth. Lalla Aïcha whispered something mysterious in her ear and my mother nodded her head and offered two francs and this explanation to the *Moqadma*: “This is for me and the *chérifa* who came with me.”

The guardian opened her two hands to receive the donation and began a long prayer. A few women from outside joined our little group to benefit from this moment of grace, and profit from the uplifting spirituality that enveloped us.

Slowly, I slipped away from the gaggle of women to go caress a fat tomcat stretched out along the wall. He looked at me with his yellow eyes, purred, and scratched majestically with his claw. He drew blood. My hand started to sting horribly. I let out a cry. My mother hurried over, wild with worry, muddying her *haïk* as it trailed behind her.

The wound was painful and I couldn't stop screaming. The women questioned me, pitied me, offered me an orange for consolation, called me their little rose, their jasmine bouquet, and their *petit fromage blanc*. Far from calming me, the tornado of faces made me dizzy. I sobbed heartbrokenly. A moist hand was placed on my face. A towel dried my tears and nose. The coolness of this hand calmed my tears, but I didn't stop sniffing the whole way back.

My mother put me to bed as soon as we got home.

My father was always the first to get up. In the nascent light, I vaguely saw his silhouette dancing slowly. He encircled his waist many times in a goat hair belt, flinging his arms out wide. . He then proceeded to arrange his turban, put on his *djellaba* and leave in silence. My mother slept. That morning, I heard him whisper to her, “don't send him to the *Msid*, he seems so tired.” My mother agreed and curled back into her blankets.

The whole house went back to sleep.

Two sparrows came to perch on the patio wall, I heard them jumping from one place to another, smacking the air with their short wings. They talked passionately and I understood their language. It was an intense dialogue, each affirmation spoken with conviction:

“I love dry figs.”

“Why do you love dry figs?”

“Everyone loves dry figs.”

“Oui! Oui! Oui! Everyone loves dry figs.”

“Dry figs! Dry figs! Dry figs!”

Their wings rustling, the two birds left to continue their conversation on another roof.

I understood the language of the birds’ and of many other animals too, but they didn’t know and always ran away when I came near. It was very lonely for me.

Two buckets banged together and jangled on the patio. The *chouafa* got up first which was lucky for the rest of us. The shadows of the night still hung around the fountain, the well, the toilets, and the immense water closet where each tenant took a turn getting ready.

The *chouafa* knew the right words to render these shadows harmless. Every Thursday night, she burned herbs and sprayed every corner with milk or scented water, chanting long incantations.

A door slammed. Zineb, Rahma’s daughter, started to moan. Her mother gave her a loud slap and an onslaught of insults. “At your age! Aren’t you ashamed of wetting the bed almost every

night? I should tie you out in a stable instead of washing your blankets every day.” The *chouafa* interrupted, “Have a happy morning, Rahma!”

“May your day be bright, Lalla!”

“How are you today?”

“I thank our Lord, He gave me a terrible punishment the day He gave me this catastrophe of a girl. I thank Him for his numerous gifts. I thank Him in joy and suffering.”

“May you be distanced from all your grief. Be patient! This child will get better; she will be your consolation in this miserable world.”

“I hope God hears you, Lalla! May He lavish His innumerable blessings upon you and those you hold dear.”

My mother turned over in her bed, coughed, and finally sat up. She stood up and opened the window. The light shocked me and hurt my eyes. I heard Fatma Bziouya’s shutters open. In a tired voice my mother delivered the string of greetings she used every day for our neighbor across the way. She wished us a happy day with her usual formula. Neither one listened to the other. Each recited their patter in a monotone voice without enthusiasm. They asked questions to which they already knew the answers. During three years of living together they had repeated the same phrases every morning. Sometimes they changed a word or alluded to some recent event, but those circumstances were rather rare. Invariably my mother asked: “How are you today? Your head doesn’t hurt too much? Your sleep was peaceful?” She’d end with “Health is a wonderful thing, my sister! Nothing can replace it!”

That day, she added, “My son isn’t well today. God distance you and those you hold dear from all suffering, and scratch out the eyes of the envious.”

The *chouafa*’s voice rose up from the ground floor, “Lalla Zoubida! May your morning be blessed! God distance you from all kinds of suffering and keep you, and those you hold dear, in excellent health!”

My mother responded, “May your day be luminous and full of blessings! How do you feel this morning? God will watch over your happiness and that of those close to you.”

The *chouafa* added, “Don’t worry about your son, God’s friends will watch over his health. He has protectors in the visible and the invisible world. I know that benevolent powers hold him dear. When he is grown, he will be a sword amongst swords, an invulnerable warrior, a honeycomb sought after for his appeal and his charm.”

“Lalla,” said my mother, moved, “honey and butter flow from your mouth and your breath has the scent of Paradise.”

My mother, ecstatic, added, “Lord, hear me in heaven, bestow your inexhaustible treasures, oh Master of all treasures, on this kind woman: let her be venerated in this world as she deserves and let her benefit from your generosity in the Other. Let her life be crowned by the pilgrimage to places that are dear to us, your slaves to which you have revealed the Truth through the intermediary of the Prophet (Salvation be upon him, upon his companions and those close to him, salvation and Peace!) Amen! Oh God of the Universe!”

“Amen!” responded all the women together. During this ceremony, I had gotten up and put on my *djellaba*. My ears rang a bit, but I didn’t feel more tired than usual. The prospect of staying

home all day, far from the *fqih* and his wooden stick, made me very happy. It was Wednesday, the following day we usually had off and school didn't open until after midday prayer on Friday. I had before me two and a half days, two and a half days to live like a prince. My mother helped me to perform my ablutions and started a fire in our little nook of a kitchen. The whole house resounded with the sound of the bellows until the fire burst into life. The table was soon set. There were eggs fried in olive oil and fresh bread. We started eating. Allal, Fatma Bziouya's husband, the gardener, called from the main entrance.

"Is anyone there? Can I come in?"

Rahma answered, "No one's there. Come in!"

His footsteps thumped up the stairs. We were finishing eating when his wife came into the room. She had an earthenware plate with two Moroccan beignets. They were my favorite. My mother stood up to welcome her guest. With a bored face and a pinched mouth, she rattled off the required niceties.

"Fatma! You shouldn't have! I can't accept! We have more than enough, thank God! Two beignets! It's too much! My God, I couldn't accept. "

Our neighbor tried to dispel my mother's hesitation. She took her hand and hotly protested, "It would be rude to refuse. Give them to Sidi Mohammed; God grant him health! You can't say no, it's nothing, really!"

Finally my mother thanked her, "God will reward your kindness and let you taste the fruits of paradise that he keeps for his chosen few."

"God will offer all his treasures to us both."

Fatma went back to her husband and my mother pushed the plate with the beignets in front of me.

“You eat them, since you love them so much,” she said, “My stomach won’t tolerate them.”

I happily munched away.

My father’s apprentice, well known as grumpy Driss, knocked at the main door. He asked for a basket to do our shopping. My mother shrilly ordered him to pick a cut of meat without too many bones and only the tenderest fava beans. My father’s situation was actually quite prosperous. We could afford to eat meat three or four times a week. My dad came from a rural, mountainous place just like my mother. His village was about fifty or so kilometers from the big city. After leaving, he had had trouble making a living for himself and his young wife. In the countryside, you were a thief or a farmer. In Fez, you had to be a part of some sort of industry or start a small business to survive. In our family, buying and selling had always been considered the least noble profession. My father remembered, for a short span of his youth, having been in a workshop owned by one of his uncles on his mother’s side, the blanket weaver. So he bought the least amount of material possible, rented out the corner of a workshop, and became a weaver himself. He was an honest businessman, improving his production every day. Soon, his wares were sought after and our household enjoyed a certain level of comfort. My father employed an old laborer to help him with his work; grumpy Driss resupplied the bobbins of thread and took care of the errands. He also came to the house twice a day. Once in the morning to buy groceries and again in the middle of the day to get his boss’s lunch. My father ate at the workshop. He only came home at night after the last prayer. Friday was the only exception. On

Fridays, my father worked until about noon, paid his employees, went to the Mosque for the special prayer, and then we ate lunch as a family.

Driss returned with his heavy basket. My mother took inventory. The grump hadn't forgotten anything. The meat looked good and the beans were mouthwateringly green. The basket also held garlic, parsley, and several little spice packets along with about a month's supply of oil, coal, and flour. When my mother talked about "the gaze of the envious" she was surely thinking about these luxuries. Our less fortunate neighbors were a bit jealous of us. No detail of our domestic life escaped their scrutiny. My mother, for her part, knew everybody's situation: each household's financial state, the debts they had, their daily expenses, and the quality of their meals.

The beans were dumped onto a large wicker tray.

"You'll help me shell them," my mother told me. I did as I was told and set to work, but I quickly tired of the task. I went to sneak a glance into Bziouya's rooms. She was rolling couscous. A variety of vegetables were piled in the corner: turnips, carrots, squash, and onions. Our neighbor adored me. She left her couscous for a moment to rummage through a basket. She smiled and handed me a huge ruby red radish. I smiled my thanks, and sunk my teeth into the pink flesh of my treat. The flavor was so sharp that tears sprang to my eyes. I said nothing, backed away, climbed the steps to the terrace, and threw the beautiful radish over the wall that separated us from the other houses.

The sun was bright and hot. A black and white cat was resting on the wall, following my movements through half-closed eyes. I didn't approach it. The scratch I had received from Sidi Ali Boughaleb's resident tomcat taught me to beware of cats purring in the sunshine. My

mother, already worried by my absence, called me loud enough for the whole building to hear. I started down the stairs but someone barefoot was coming up. The soft padding of feet and the murmur of clothing came closer until Rahma appeared. My mother had refused to speak to her after their fight and the two were avoiding each other. I didn't know whether to smile or run away. I flattened myself against the wall and let the course of events decide for themselves. Rahma stopped at my stair, stroked my cheek, and slipped something into my hand. The object was cool and smooth. Delight washed over me at its touch.

"For you," she murmured.

I said nothing and ran back to my impatient mother. Still clutched in my hand, the object emanated the cool freshness of spring water. Once I was safely tucked into the corner of the room, I finally dared to look at it. It was a big hunk of polished glass, cut into facets like a diamond. A strange and fabulous jewel, it surely came from some subterranean palace where the invisible spirits dwelled. Was it a message from that distant realm? Was it a cursed stone given to me by our enemy to enrage the demons against us? What did I care if all the demons in the world were angry at me?

I held in my hands an object of unbelievable value. It would come to take its place in my Box of Marvels and I would discover all its virtues. My mother found me in my corner. She tossed me a weary glance and said, "Another piece of glass! Be careful not to hurt yourself!"

Chapter 3

These two and a half days of rest would pass very quickly. Friday after lunch, I found myself back at school howling Koranic verses and punctuating the words with slaps against my little chalk board. One lock of hair adorned the right side of my head. It eddied around as I frantically drummed out my lesson. My fingers hurt from banging against my wooden board. Each student completely surrendered themselves to the task. The teacher dozed, his long rod in hand. The noise of the repeated striking on the boards intoxicated me. My cheeks were hot. My temples throbbed. An pale yellow sun spot lingered on the wall in front of me. The teacher woke up, distributed a few smacks with his rod, and went back to sleep.

The sun spot shrunk.

The children's shouts became a torrential barrage of noise.

The sun spot disappeared.

The teacher opened his eyes and yawned, distinguished from amidst all the voices the one that distorted a sacred phrase, corrected it, and looked for a comfortable position to fall back asleep. But he noticed that the sun had disappeared and rubbed his eyes. The sleep left his face, and he motioned us closer with his rod. The noise ceased suddenly. All of us together, in front of the *fqih's* dais, chanted the first chapter of the Koran. The youngest knew it just as well as the oldest. We never left school without reciting it first. On Fridays we usually followed it with a few verses of Bnou Achir, devoted to ritual ablutions, and one or two prayers imploring God's mercy for our parents and relatives living or dead.

We were happy when these litanies began. They signified the end of our suffering, and the beginning of our flight through the humid little alleys back home. Finally, the teacher set us free one by one. Before we could go, we each had to present ourselves in front of the teacher's dais to say goodbye and kiss his hand.

Each of us took his little bundle from the shelf by the classroom doorway and left. It was already dark when I got home.

While waiting for my father to get home, I ate a piece of dry bread, took out my Box of Marvels and lost myself in the contemplation of my riches. The polished glass piece still fascinated me. I couldn't stop touching it, looking at the light that filtered through it, and cradling it tenderly against my cheek.

My mother lit a giant candle stuck inside a copper candelabrum.

That night, Fatma Bziouya's room shone with an unusual brightness. My mother noticed. Without moving from her seat she called to our neighbor, "Fatma! Is someone getting married over there? Why are you burning so many candles?...What did you say? A lamp! Wait, I'm coming over. "

My mother stood up and headed to the room across the way. I followed her.

Oh! What a Marvel! In the center of the wall hung a gas lamp. A peaceful, white flame danced imperceptibly in a gently curved glass. A mirror, set behind it, intensified the brightness. My mother and I were stunned. Finally, my mother said, "Your lamp gives off a lot of light. But aren't you worried it might explode? Or start a fire? And I've heard the gas smells terrible. "

Bziouya timidly replied, “I don’t think there’s any danger. There are a lot of people in the neighborhood using these lamps now. They seem very happy with them. You should buy one, it makes the room seem so much warmer and happier.” My mother replied through pinched lips, “Yes, certainly the lamp is very bright, but it’s not as pretty as a copper candelabrum.

Her curiosity waned. My mother took my hand and led me back home. She didn’t say anything more until my dad came home. She made dinner like normal, put out the little round table, and assembled the tea set close at hand.

When my father stepped into the room I jumped up to greet him. His face beamed. He grabbed me under the arms and lifted me up to his face. “He’s getting heavy, this little infidèle! He’s almost a man!”

“No,” I said, “I’ll be a man when I have a full beard. During watermelon season I rubbed my cheeks with their juice. But no hairs sprouted.”

“Try again next season,” said my father, “you’ll see some results! Then you’ll grow a beautiful black beard.”

“You have two white hairs in your beard, dad. You’re getting old.”

“No,” he said, “No, that was just my afternoon snack. But it’s better to spill a drop of milk in your beard than to have a fig or a bunch of grapes hanging under your nose.”

That comment inspired great peals of laughter in our home.

Dinner was delicious, a spread that I preferred above all the rest: sheep’s feet with chick peas. We ate a ton. When the table was cleared my mother poured us mint tea and talked about the minor events of the day. My father sipped his tea and responded infrequently. The light

flickered for a moment and my mother snuffed the wick with a pair of rusty scissors. My mother took the opportunity to announce that the candles weren't good quality anymore, you needed a new one every three days, and the room looked gloomy with all the shadows looming in the corners.

"All the 'right kind' of people are lighting their homes with gas," she finished.

This utterance left my father in a state of complete indifference. My ears burned with curiosity.

As I awaited his verdict I internally admired my mother's cunning. But I was to be disappointed.

Without a word, my father got ready to sleep. Tucked in my own bed, I dreamt of a beautiful white flame that I had managed to trap inside my faceted glass jewel. The next day, when I returned home from Msid for lunch, I jumped at the joyful discovery of a gas lamp, identical to our neighbor's, hung in the exact center of our room.

That morning, grumpy Driss, on his way to pick up the grocery basket, had given it to my mother. He had bought the lamp, a bottle of gas, and a funnel.

The *chouafa*, whom we called 'Aunt Kanza,' came up to see our new acquisition and wish us all sorts of blessings. My mother radiated happiness. She must have felt life was wonderful and the world was filled with infinite goodness. She hummed, stroked a stray cat sweetly, and laughing at nothing. For my mother, such joyful moments were often followed quickly by tears. The occasion for which didn't take long to arrive that day. She could, as she used to say, 'soothe her heart with sadness.'

Rahma, the wife of the wheelbarrow maker, had left that morning for Kalklyine with her daughter, Zineb, to attend a baptism. She returned in tears. She wailed from the entrance to the house, slapping herself loudly on the cheeks.

“Tragedy! Tragedy has struck! I am the most miserable mother; I’ll never survive the pain! No one can soothe my sorrow!”

Questions rained down from each window. The women had stopped their work. They begged her to enlighten them as to the nature of this catastrophe. My mother forgot that Rahma was a flea-bitten beggar among beggars. Moved, she leaned out of the second story crying, “My sister! My poor sister! What has happened?”

“Maybe we can help. Stop crying, you’re breaking our hearts.” All the women surrounded Rahma in her misery. She was finally able to describe what had happened: Zineb had disappeared, lost in a crowd. In vain, her mother had searched for her in the small, complicated side streets. She had evaporated. The ground had swallowed her without a trace. The news of her disappearance quickly spread through the neighborhood. Unknown women crossed their patios to share in Rahma’s pain. Everyone cried loudly. Each of the helpers howled, lamented, recalled the most difficult moments of her life, and focused on her own fate. I was caught up in this group of crying women and I dissolved into sobs of my own. No one bothered with me. I disliked Zineb and her disappearance made me happy, I was crying for other reasons entirely. First of all, I cried because everyone else was crying. It seemed to me that decorum demanded it. I cried because my mother was crying and because Rahma, who had given me my beautiful glass gem, was sad. But perhaps the most important reason was the one I gave my mother when she finally stopped, exhausted. All the women stopped and wiped their faces, some with their

handkerchiefs and some with the bottoms of their shirts. I continued to let out prolonged cries. They tried to console me.

My mother told me, “Stop! Sidi Mohammed, we’ll find Zineb, stop! You’re going to hurt your eyes with all those tears!

Hiccupping, I responded, “I don’t care if we ever find Zineb, I’m crying because I’m hungry!”

My mother grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me away, fuming.

I ate lunch by myself and went back to school. For me, that afternoon passed like all the rest: I shouted the verses and banged on my chalkboard. That night, after reciting the lesson, I went home. I expected to find it in a state of chaos. It wasn’t. Silently, the women stoked their fires and prepared their meals, crushing their spices in their copper mortars. I didn’t dare to ask my mother what had happened to Zineb. My father arrived, as usual, after the Aacha prayer. The meal played out normally, but at tea time, my mother brought up the events of the day.

She began, “Poor Rahma had such a terrible day. We were all badly shaken.”

“What happened?” asked my father.

My mother replied, “You know Allal, the baker who lives in Kalklyine? Yes, yes, you should know him. He’s married to Khadija, Rahma’s sister. A year ago they spent a week here at their relatives’ house, they’re good people, pious and raised right. They have been married for three years and they desperately wanted to have a baby. Poor Khadija consulted healers, *fqihs*, sorcerers, and *chouafas* without anything to show for it. A year ago, they made a pilgrimage to Sidi Ali Bou Serghine. Khadija bathed in the spring and promised to sacrifice a lamb to the saint

if God answered her prayers. She had her baby. After six days, the joy of the household is at its peak. Tomorrow they will make the sacrifice.” My father dared to remark that he saw no reason for anguish in any of this. But my mother interrupted him to announce that he was incapable of listening until the end of a story.

“Just wait!” She said, “I’m getting to that part. You interrupt me all the time.”

So, Rahma was invited to the baptism and the naming ceremony. Her husband bought her a beautiful dress with all these multicolored flowers strewn about on it. She took out her wedding scarf, the pretty red one with the birds, dressed her daughter Zineb in all new clothes, and they left together early this morning. They went by Mechatine, Seffarine, El Ouadine...”

“You don’t have to tell me all the streets in Fez.” my father said simply.

I exploded with laughter. Her eyes blazed at me for a moment before she continued, “They got to Rsif. The crowd blocked their way. A merchant was selling fresh fish for one franc and fifteen cents a pound, (in Joutyia, fish were usually sold for two francs and twenty five cents.) People were fighting each other to get it. Rahma and her daughter got caught up in the crowd. Once she got free, Rahma fixed her haik and noticed Zineb was gone! She called out, and cried, and shouted for help. The merchant stopped selling and everyone tried to help the stricken mother, but her daughter couldn’t be found.

Rahma came home crying, we did our best to console her. Allal, the gardener, went out to go get Rahma’s husband. Two town criers ran around all over, shouting out the girl’s description, promising a reward to whoever brought her back to her parents.

During all this, us poor women, we couldn't do anything but cry, and offer our compassion to the poor thing.

My heart was heavy. Fatma Bziouya and I went to Moulay Idriss. In situations like this, you have to knock on God's door. God's door is always open to the stricken and grieving. An old woman heard our pain and asked us why we were crying. We told her all about the terrible event. She took us by the hand and brought us to Dar Kitoun, the home of the Idrissides, a sanctuary for abandoned girls. We found Zineb there. The *Moqqadama* had taken her in and fed her for the love of the creator. We gave her a *rial* and thanked her for all her kindness and care. Rahma was so happy when she reunited with Zineb."

"Praise God!" concluded my father, "now make up this boy's bed, he's falling asleep."

Under my covers, my eyes open, I imagined the house of the Idrissides as sleep began to fall softly over me. I pictured a vast residence with faded mosaics, buzzing like a hive with the voices of rejected women, unhappy young girls, and lost children.

I was lost too, in a ghost town; I looked in vain for asylum. I felt my loneliness grow heavy enough to suffocate me. I cried out. A softly spoken word came from the distance to quiet my agitation and I sunk back into the darkness, relaxed, my breathing calm.

The following Thursday, to thank God for returning her daughter, Rahma organized a meal for the poor. All the women in the house lent their support. Lalla Kanza, the *chouafa*, helped by her most devoted disciple, Fatouma, washed the ground floor and covered it with used mats and rugs. Fatma Bziouya, Rahma, and my mother swept around pots and couscous dishes. They

cooked out on the patio, over wood fires. One of them refilled the water, another peeled the vegetables, and the third, armed with a giant wooden ladle, stirred the sauces that boiled in their copper cauldrons.

Zineb and I, left to our imaginations, ran from one room to the next. We puffed up the stairs to receive reprimands accompanied by huge clouds of smoke in our eyes. So we ran back down to seek refuge on the landing, unsure of what to do with our liberty. We couldn't wait for lunchtime and the arrival of the beggars.

While Rahma's big ceramic platters were heaped with broth-soaked couscous and topped with a pyramid of vegetables and meat, Driss El Aouad left to retrieve the guests from the Riad Jeha home for the blind, in Moulay Idriss. Soon we heard a hubbub of clacking canes and bursts of voices in the main hallway. Driss appeared first on the patio. He was followed by a blind man with a white beard, guided by a young boy of about twelve. Behind him came a flood of beggar men and women. The first man exercised a royal command over his tattered crowd. Everyone obeyed him. They showed great regard for their patriarch.

I had, before my very eyes, the beggar king surrounded by his clan.

Everyone sat on the old mats and rugs. Before they were served, they intoned a psalm about the happiness that awaited believers with a generous heart, those who feed the less fortunate and honor the Heavenly Host. The poem ended in invoking blessings on our home and its inhabitants. Men, women, and children joined hands, palms toward the ceiling. They recited the first chapter of the Koran. I knew it well and recited it passionately:

Praise God

Creator of worlds

We passed our hands over our faces. The couscous was served. The beggars gathered to eat around the platters which were set directly on the mats. Tar embellished terra cotta bowls filled with water were passed around. The beggars ate and drank with dignity, without haste, or agitation. Full, they carefully licked their fingers, or wiped them with towels.

At a signal from their chief, they began a psalmody from a chapter of the book of Saints. The walls of our house, which had so often echoed with the sounds of the rattlesnake and the tambourine that were so dear to the chouafa, were blessed by the sacred verses. The chosen chapter was particularly long. It was sung with a majestic rhythm. The blind, in their rags, calling up the word of God with so much conviction evoked a nobility and grandeur that struck the imagination.

After one last invocation, pronounced by the patriarch and punctuated with amen by the choir of assistants, the assembly stood, their canes tapping against our faded tiles.

The beggars left, thanking and blessing us all.

Rahma, radiant, invited over the neighbors and a few women from other houses, grouped them into her room, and served them an excellent chard ragout, chickpea couscous, and a sweet cinnamon orange salad. My mom prepared the mint tea. They all chattered happily, laughed loudly, teased each other jokingly, and let out you-youing calls.

Before they met back up for the meal, my mother and the neighbors went to change. They pulled shimmering caftans and ornately flowered *dfinas*, delicately woven caftans, from their trunks

along with headscarves made of a rich silk. The party lasted until sunset. It ended on the patio with more you-young, goodbyes, and the promise to see each other soon.

During all this time no one had bothered with me. I had eaten with Zineb from a small platter that my father had given me on the Eve of the Feast of the Sacrifice. We had successfully snuck some tea into Zineb's tin play teapot. We finished the day by fighting with each other.

That night, silence settled back over the house. I could feel everything intensely. I took out my Box and emptied it on the corner of my mattress, looking at my things one by one. That night, nothing spoke to me. They lay there, lifeless, dull, and vaguely hostile. They had lost their magic and become mistrustful, secretive. I put them back in the box. Once the lid was replaced, they awakened in the darkness to play extraordinary, intricate games without me. They were unaware that the walls of my Box of Marvels couldn't shield them from my thoughts. My innocent glass gem expanded to the proportions of a fantastic palace, draped in precious fabrics. The nails, porcelain buttons, pins, and pearls were transformed into princesses, slaves, and rogues. Inside the palace, they played sweet melodies, and dined on refined dishes. In the gardens they played on swings together, and flew among the trees while munching on fruit, until finally they disappeared on the wind in search of adventure.

I opened the Box with infinite caution so that I might enjoy the show more intensely. The spell was broken. There was only the glass gem, some buttons, and some nails with no soul and no mystery. The realization was cruel. I burst into tears. My mother appeared, said something about me being tired, and took me to bed.

Chapter 4

During the first days of spring, my mother and I went to visit Lalla Aïcha. We had been invited to spend the day. A few days earlier my mother had made cookies from finely ground semolina, rolls with sugar and anise, and some *sellou*, toasted flour mixed with butter and various spices.

We brought all the sweets with us. We left the house in the morning; grumpy Driss came for us at my mother's friend's house, burdened with the basket of groceries and a rather good looking chicken. Driss also brought sweet bread, a packet of tea, and an armful of mint leaves.

Lalla Aïcha protested and reproached my mother for spending so frivolously. She had been expecting our visit and had already gone shopping.

Lalla Aïcha lived in the *Zankat Hajjama* cul de sac, in a house with a low doorway. In certain ways, the house was reminiscent of Lalla Aïcha herself. They had both seen better days; they both had a certain stiffness, and an old fashioned elegance.

Lalla Aïcha lived in two small rooms on the second floor. Bordered by a wrought iron banister, a balcony off the patio led to the main room. The stairs led directly into the other room which was used mostly for storing winter provisions. It was also where Lalla Aïcha did the cooking. The main room had two windows; one overlooked the patio, the other the neighboring terraces and the spires of a nearby Mosque. The room, which was twice as long as it was wide, was meticulously clean. Cotton sheets printed with leaves covered the mattresses. Enormous, finely embroidered cushions wrapped in transparent silk were heaped here and there. The wall was decorated with painted shelves, topped with European ceramic bowls, plates adorned with lush roses, and glass goblets. A grandfather clock in dark wood, finely carved from the pinnacle to the

pendulum, occupied the place of honor on the wall. The floor was covered by a jute mat. Over the mat, a vividly colored carpet was spread.

All of this was bathed in an atmosphere of ease and tranquility. It certainly wasn't luxurious, but in terms of comfort, it was a cozy nest sheltered from the wind.

When we arrived, Lalla Aïcha served us cookies and mint tea. Then she brought up the joint pain that was acting up again, the toothache that had driven her crazy the week before, and her lack of appetite. My mother happily responded to her thousands of questions, got caught on a detail here or there, trailed off topic, and ended up miming out a scene. Naturally, our neighbors were the subject. My mother spoke without malice, but with a certain liberty. She compared Rahma's husband to a donkey that had eaten too much bran and Fatma Bziouya's to an anxious rat. My father, whom she referred to as "the Man," didn't even escape her verbal onslaught. His height, his strength, his silence were exaggerated to the point of caricature. I loved my father. I found him very handsome. His lightly golden skin, his black beard, his coral lips, his deep and serene eyes, everything about him was wonderful. It's true my father spoke little and prayed often, but my mother spoke too much and prayed too little. Certainly, she was more entertaining, happier. Her dancing eyes reflected a child's soul. In spite of her ivory complexion, her generous mouth, her short, well-shaped nose, she wasn't vain. She strove to look older than she was. At twenty two, she behaved like an experience-hardened matron.

In turn, Lalla Aïcha told us about the people in her house. She sang their praises. One was modest and pretty, another clean, frugal, and a good cook, another pious and dignified; to hear her speak one might think they rivaled the angels for sainthood. But she quietly whispered her true feelings into my mother's ear. She pronounced, "God blessed me when he led me to live in

this house where all of us laugh together like sisters.” Voices rose up from the ground floor, called out from rooms to thank Lalla Aïcha for her kind words. Lalla Aïcha and my mother complimented them again in chorus.

The children who lived there came to invite me to play. There were four boys and three girls in their group. I never knew their names. The oldest, a nine year old, took me under her protection. We scampered around on the terrace. With some old goat skin covers we quickly created a parlor.

A rusted can of preserves set up on three stones played the role of samovar; some other stones placed on a paper circle were tasked with being teacups. We gravely sipped a mythical, yet delicious tea, ate imaginary cookies, and complimented the eldest girl, our hostess.

Then, we decided to have a pretend wedding. The littlest girl was chosen to play the bride. The eldest happily played the *negafa*, one of the women who is an expert at wedding planning. She went to find a scrap of cloth for a scarf, some blush for the cheeks, and some finely ground antimony to darken the eyes. The bride settled onto a cushion. In a din of you-youing and improvised singing, the *negafa* started on the young fiancée’s hair and wardrobe. She swathed her in a blanket draped like a dress, fixed her hair, adorned her with papers decorated to look like huge jewels, and stepped back to admire her work.

One of the boys, motivated by a malicious instinct, grabbed a handful of dirt and threw it in the face of our bride. Tragedy had struck. The bride and her guests started wailing, fighting, and running in all directions, her face smudged with tears and mud. I shouted with all the rest without knowing why. I tried to escape the arms of the biggest girl who was trying in vain to calm me.

One of the women came up, dished out slaps and insults, called us demons, tucked me under her arm and delivered me back to my mother like a package.

In Lalla Aïcha's room, I was subject to even more unfair reproaches. My mother threatened to never bring me anywhere again.

My mother and her friend went back to talking about Rahma, the wife of the wheelbarrow maker, Fatma Bziouya, and Aunt Kanza, the clairvoyant.

My mother retold the story of her reconciliation with the neighbor from the first floor, Zineb's escapade, and the meal for the poor. She praised Rahma up and down. She lamented the bad mood she had been in that had caused the fight. Rahma became a charming young lady, so helpful! So honest!...

And , said my mother, she's so pretty! Always smiling, always lively. Her husband can thank God for giving him such a delightful brunette. Don't you love her skin, it's so soft and tan, and her big, laughing eyes? Doesn't she have just the prettiest mouth, with her pouty lips?

Lalla Aïcha agreed, nodded her head, and sighed contentedly.

But my mother didn't stop there, "Our Creator didn't forget about Fatma, my neighbor from across the way either. What beautiful eyes, just drowning in sweetness.

Her eyebrows are perfectly curved! She glows like honey! But I don't like the tattoo on her chin."

"She also has the benefit of youth," added her friend. Stuck still in my corner, I listened. I was stunned to hear my mother's descriptions of our neighbor's beauty. I felt their beauty, but I could never have translated it into concrete expressions. I was grateful to my mother for

expressing, in precise terms, what had floated through my imagination as vague, incomplete images.

For Aunt Kanza, the two women contented themselves to merely shaking their heads with a look of understanding in their eyes. Aunt Kanza, the *chouafa*, for me, belonged to another species. She was regale. Jackals felt unworthy before this lioness. Strange is the beauty of queens! Not the queens of ephemeral kingdoms, that invite lust, greed, and hunger, but the virgin queens that are enveloped by divine justice.

Her big eyes, on her delicate parchment skin, fascinated her clients and commanded the respect of those she disliked. In all honestly, I was slightly afraid of her. In my dreams, I associated her with dark powers and with the masters of the invisible with whom she had regular dealings. I believed she possessed limitless powers and I considered it a great privilege to live under the same roof as such an esteemed person.

Moulay Larbi, Lalla Aicha's husband, arrived unexpectedly. We heard him say the hallowed phrase from the doorway "Is anyone there? Can I come in?"

Three voices responded at once, "Come in! Come in! Come in!"

His footsteps resonated on the stairs.

He came directly into the small room. He had been told ahead of time about our visit and he was not allowed to see my mother. His wife hurried to greet him. A confused murmuring, interrupted with silences, buzzed in the little room. It lasted a long while. Mom and I sat there, unmoving. We didn't know what to do. I told my mother about our games on the patio and the

drama that had followed. She listened to me distractedly, gave me vague responses about how one should behave in public.

She got up to look out the window. Her eyes met those of the neighbor, who was also leaning on the banister, contemplating the empty courtyard. The two women said hello and talked about the tiresome weather during the beginnings of spring. The stranger took advantage of the moment to recall aloud the memory of a *nzaha*, an outdoor party she had been invited to. It had been several years since. The countryside was covered in flowers and smelled like honey. Birds fluttered from bushes to branches. Women ran barefoot in the grass, splashing in the streams, and singing breathtaking cantilenas. In the middle of the afternoon, an unusually violent storm descended upon them. Hurriedly, rugs and blankets were gathered up. Everyone grabbed something: empty plates, tea ware, and jugs of fresh water. The group was composed of two men and five women, all related. The rain was welcomed by some as a blessing, for others it struck like a catastrophe. “We were in a sad state of affairs when we got back. My beautiful dress was covered in mud. It was an apricot caftan; they don’t make them like that anymore. And then I had on a tunic embroidered with mauve flowers and...”

Lalla Aïcha came to get us, her face had fallen. She signaled my mother to follow her into the darkest corner of the room. I stayed at the window. The woman who was telling her story waited a moment for my mother to come back. Judging me too young to appreciate the sumptuousness of her clothes, and not seeing my mother come back, she left her sentence unfinished. Sighing, she lifted her eyes to God that He may witness the incomprehensible ignorance of humanity, and disappeared back into the velvety darkness of her apartments.

My mother whispered hotly with her friend. I didn't dare go closer. I heard the word "pacha" several times during their mysterious conversation. The word made an impression on me, it left me ill at ease. The pacha? Wasn't he the one that had people beaten at his will? Put them in a dark dungeon with nothing but bread and water? Let them get eaten up by the rats? The word "pacha" made the little people tremble. He was associated with limitless tribulations, torture, cries and lamentations. They indebted themselves to pay his henchmen, suffering at the hands of the court and often seeing, what they considered to be their rights, cleverly twisted against them. None of these considerations stopped them from bringing forward their own futile quarrels. They rushed to the "pacha" to air their petty grievances. They often left unhappy, rebuffed.

Lalla Aïcha started silently crying. She hid her head in the sleeve of her dress and sniffled. My mother gave in, put her arm around her shoulders and spoke to her as she would have to a small child.

What a sight it was. Lalla Aïcha, the older of the two, let herself be comforted; she turned into a little girl crying on her older sister's shoulder. It made me want to laugh, but I knew I shouldn't. The humor in the situation forced me to flee out into the stairway to avoid looking rude. I had hoped I would run into the young stranger who played the *negafa* so well. We would have had some fantastic adventure together in an enchanted land. Alas! Even then I was condemned to loneliness. I sat on a stair and improvised a nonsensical song:

The pacha!

Ate up Lalla Aïcha

Oh Night! Oh Night!

Oh my eye!

Cries from the loneliness.

My mother called to me from the other side of the room and asked me if I planned to keep on braying all day long. I stopped, leaned back against the wall, and quickly fell asleep.

I felt someone waking me up. An unsympathetic hand dragged me into Lalla Aïcha's room where the table was set. I was so tired I could hardly stand. My mother forced me to eat, but I couldn't swallow anything. The chicken and carrots tasted like straw. I got an enormous grease spot on my *djellaba* and I was soundly yelled at for it. Finally, they abandoned me on a mattress where I could snore to my heart's content.

By the time I woke up, the sun had disappeared, and the candles flickered creating fantastic shapes on the walls.

My father came to get us. I went down the stairs, stumbling on every step. The streets were poorly lit. My father had brought a stained glass lantern, the tin beautifully pierced to let the light shine through. Silhouettes emerged from the night, took on human form, and disappeared behind us an instant later, devoured by the night. I heard footsteps echoing in the distance. They approached, and dissolved. A dog barked. Cats fought loudly on a terrace. The two enemies challenged each other, each proclaiming his bravery and courage, and spitting angrily. Their cries faded into the distance. Alone, our footsteps, the rustling of our clothing, our breath coming in quick puffs, animated the ghost town.

When we arrived home my mother put me to bed. Sleep crashed over me.

The following Friday, my father came home for lunch, as usual. He wore a button down *djellaba* made from a snowy white wool and a new turban, stiff with decoration.

My mother served lunch. She had taken particular care with the menu. We ate lamb and wild artichokes, couscous with cinnamon, and finally a delicious orange and citrus salad served in olive oil.

We sipped multiple cups of mint tea. In the center of the tray, two Ispahan roses bloomed in an old porcelain cup.

My mother took a breath and turned to my father, “Sometimes fate is so cruel. Rich and poor, good and bad, everyone is at the mercy of destiny. I’m so upset! Every time I think of Lalla Aïcha my heart bleeds. I didn’t want to bother you last night with all the terrible things that happened during the day.”

My father listened attentively. She continued, “Moulay Larbi, Lalla Aïcha’s husband, had a fight with his associate, some Abdelkader, God only knows who his parent’s are...”

She looked to the heavens, “God guide us, and our children, and our children’s children, away from all the sinners with a smile on their faces to hide their hearts full of evil intentions. Be our protector and our guide: Amen! That Abdelkader, son of a cheater, Satan’s disciple, he didn’t even have a clean shirt when Moulay Larbi took him on in his workshop in Mechatine. He welcomed him, lent him money, and fed him lunch and dinner all the time. Abdelkader pretended to be polite, deferential even. He sang Moulay Larbi’s praises, complimenting his generosity, his good character, and his noble heart. They both worked hard together. Their embroidered slippers were a huge success with all the women in Fez. Their reputation was impeccable. But then Abdelkader decided to get married. Moulay Larbi encouraged him and

Lalla Aicha found him a young lady with all sorts of fine qualities. But weddings are always so expensive. And even though he had spent all those nights up working, Abdelkader didn't know how to save up. He was in a pretty tight spot when he found out that his fiancée required a dowry. So he went to his boss for help. Moulay Larbi was able to put together twenty five rials. He gave it to him out of the goodness of his heart. But he made the mistake of giving him the money without writing up a loan agreement first. He even made him an associate of his business to help him.

“Do you know how that good for nothing repaid him?”

My father didn't know.

But she didn't even pause long enough for him to respond. She continued, “No! You would never guess in a million years! Those shameless, faithless tramps that offend God and his followers with their dishonesty and scheming, they'll pay the price on judgment day.

Abdelkader lied, plain and simple, he even pretended to have put up half the capital for materials, the leather and gold thread, for Moulay Larbi's business. There's no way the Pasha knows all the details to the story. Of course he didn't take either of them at their word. One of his guards was supposed to investigate, but all he did was talk to the two of them. He charged them a ridiculous amount for the time he spent, too, for reconciling them, he said. They paid it. Then the whole business was brought up before the marshal. And he sent one of his men to investigate but they refused. ‘Only the Corporation's experts could make sense of this dispute’ they said. So all the experts got together. They deliberated into the night. Finally, they ruled in favor of Abdelkader. What has happened to society? There's no more justice in the world! You probably think it's not the judges' fault. It's hard to pick up on all the intricacies of a case like

this. How could you judge anything if you don't have all the facts? I know, that's just how the world works, we need judges and they need crooks to keep them in a job. But it's always the honest people who lose out."

My father interrupted, "Not always! Sometimes judges are wrong. Even judges are human; they make mistakes like any man. Only God is infallible."

"There is no power except through Him, the one true God, who has no equal," she added, "We were so shocked. Lalla Aicha cried so hard she had a pounding headache that night."

Silence followed.

I could hear the clicking of prayer beads as they passed through my father's fingers one by one. Rahma tapped on her bread to test if it had risen properly. Zineb played with her pet, a sickly black cat which the family had adopted on the whim of their daughter. I could hear what she was telling him. She was questioning whether to feed him honey and butter, jelly filled pastries, or almonds and chicken thighs; her precious baby would have a velvet burnous and a silk turban.

What a fool! Since when did cats like honey? A cat in a silk turban would be the most ridiculous thing in the world. A girl as weak minded as Zineb couldn't come up with anything intelligent or amusing. She didn't know how to play, in my opinion. She was useless and I despised her.

As for me, I had hidden treasures in my Box of Marvels. I was the only one to know its wonders. I could escape the constraints of this world, with its pachas, marshals, and corrupt lackeys, and seek refuge in my kingdom full of harmonious music. I had heroic princes and heroes as my companions. I promised myself to one day go see Abdallah, the spice merchant, to hear all about their new exploits. I had never seen Abdallah in person, but he held an important place in my universe. All the marvelous stories I had ever been told, I attributed to him. I was

sure Abdallah existed. My father, who rarely spoke, dedicated a whole night to describing Abdallah and his stories to my mother. My father's tale excited my imagination; it was the obsession of my entire childhood.

It was winter; the wind slammed the patio door and blew through the stairway. I was resting my head on my father's knee. I listened. He spoke slowly, in his deep voice.

Here is his tale:

“Abdallah knows millions of stories. Those he tells are strangely enthralling. They end abruptly, with no regard for the effects they have on the listener, and no apparent conclusion.

“In a strange way Abdallah's stories resemble the man himself. There is a certain poetry and mystery about him. He has a shop in Haffarine, in that little street that's so cool in summer and so little traveled no matter the season.

“Abdallah sells all sorts of dusty, faded things, hung crookedly from shelves that are no less dusty, and no less faded. He has few clients, but many friends. From morning till night, Abdallah sits cross legged on a mite-infested sheep skin, and swings his fly swatter to and fro.

“He moved into the neighborhood a long time ago. His merchandise consisted of two bundles of palm leaf brooms, a dozen baskets in three different sizes, a packet of string, and some tin boxes that I guess were filled with spices.

“Since then, his beard has turned white and his brooms have shriveled a bit, he still has the two rows of baskets, and the string and the spices, he's never had a chance to use any of them up.

“What wonderful stories Abdallah has told since his arrival! He never repeats them and it seems as though his supply is inexhaustible. He tells them to children, grownups, townspeople, and country folks, even to those he’s just met.

“Abdallah’s stories are sometimes fifteen minutes long; sometimes they take up the whole morning. He tells them straight-faced, to the steady rhythm of the fly swatter. He talks without interruption, without stopping to drink, without clearing his throat, without gesturing, or fidgeting.

“None of the prayers that are so beloved of Arab storytellers are sprinkled into his tales. He recounts strange battles, marvelous idylls, fantastical adventures through fairy lands, a shop owner’s dispute with his neighbor, a tramp spending the night out in the elements, or a beggar’s meal.

“Some love them, some secretly hate them, but everyone listens, enthralled.

“Abdallah seems detached from it all; neither their love nor their disguised hatred can pull him from his indifference. His friends call him Abdallah the wise, Abdallah the poet, and even Abdallah the clairvoyant. His enemies call him a liar, a hypocrite, and sometimes even a sorcerer. So what is he?

“He’s a spice merchant who tells stories.

“A particularly malevolent person of note had asked the district chief to come and listen to his stories because he thought he had picked up on some critiques against the beloved Maghzen.

“On the other hand, someone else claimed the Maghzen paid this spice merchant, who never sold any spice, to befuddle people with his stories and keep them from getting involved in the Empire’s affairs.

“Abdallah responded to all of this with more stories. The district chief became his most assiduous critic and made quite a case about his supposed agenda. Abdallah had no agenda, because, as he says, a true savant doesn’t tell stories, he tells the truth; tells it and writes it.

““One day, a savant, who had dedicated his life to a work of great importance, took all the pages from his books and put them up on the roof of the Kâaba, the house of God. One year later, the pages were still there, unblemished by the rain or any other of the elements. The ink was still fresh on the pristine white paper. He had refused to publish his great work until it passed his ultimate test. And he was right to do it: nothing can destroy, erase, or alter the truth.”

“And then Abdallah added, ‘I am not a savant; my stories go in one ear and out the other.’”

“But is that absolutely true? Is there no exception?”

Of course not.

“Abdallah’s stories have the same fate as all the stories mankind has ever passed down through the ages. Some of them are recieved with laughter, some of them with tears; some of them with careful words and poetry, and some of them in the hopes of interpreting the signs from above.

“Abdallah told a story to some children. One of them told him, ‘I read a much better one in my reading book.’ ‘That’s quite possible,’ responded Abdallah, ‘it’s just that the story you read is in a book. All your classmates have this book, and can read it. But the one I just told you is only in one book, the one here...’and he tapped his heart.

“Abdallah closes his shop every night and hobbles quietly off. No one in town knows where he lives. Si Abdennebi, a terrible gossip, claims to have seen him go into an ordinary fondouk, a big house.

“Lahbib, on the other hand, had followed him, and retold his curious adventure like this: ‘Our dear Abdallah is a friend of God. I followed him, God forgive me, to Seffah, on the other bank of the river in West Fez. In a cul de sac, he went in a zaouia (an Islamic religious institution) covered in green terra cotta tiles. I waited a minute and then followed him in. I looked for him in vain. The zaouia was empty. I prayed for long while and left in defeat. Now I won’t listen to what those ignorant people say, because I already know, yes I know, that the friends of God dwell in hidden places.’

“Maybe Lahbib is right. Abdennibi, who was there at the time, responded with this: “Lahbib has listened to too many of Abdallah’s stories, his brain is weak because of them. Allah is the only savant. Abdallah doesn’t even act like a true Muslim. Have you ever seen him pray? Does he leave his shop for mealtime? Does he respect Friday as the holy day? Does he ever say a pious word? He’s a corrupter, a devil in a turban, a demon with a white beard who deals in lies like a pig wallows in muck.’

“Lahbib, despite his peaceful nature, flushed with indignation. He cried, ‘does someone have to look like you to deserve to be called a Muslim? You pray, we’ve all seen you, you leave your shop for meals, you respect Friday, and everything you say is peppered with Koranic verses and hadiths. We have all seen these things you do. But you also spit venomous slander, disgusting libel, and other deadly, destructive things. You’re not Satan, because none of your deeds carry

his special seal of grandeur. You're nothing but a sewer rat that has rolled himself in white flour. You think it will make you pure, but it just soils the flour.'

"Abdennebi jumped up to hit him; Lahbib, a blacksmith, caught his fists and unflinchingly continued his rant. 'You see, the weak always resort to violence. I handle iron with these hands, I'm not afraid of fire; but I would never use them to crush cockroaches like you. I'm not defending Abdallah the spice merchant, I'm just trying to enlighten you, who pretends to be so holy! But your skull is too thick and your soul is unclean. You're a rotting corpse and I don't like touching carrion.'

"Lahbib tossed Abdennebi against the wall and left. He fasted for more than a week to cleanse himself of his anger.

"Abdallah heard about all of this. At first he stayed silent, solemnly swinging his fly swatter, and then he told a story."

Chapter Five

I had never seen the *Msid* teacher as happy as he was that Wednesday. Not a single student got the rod. The wooden stick was reduced to an accessory, some useless object to fidget with.

I recited my lesson as usual. The teacher congratulated me, "Well done, my child," he said, "God willing, you'll be a student of science, always in pursuit of truth. May Allah open the doors of knowledge to you, my taleb!"

Before we went to lunch, the *fqih* signaled us to be quiet. When it was silent, he told us about *Achoura*, the New Year's celebration. According to tradition, we were supposed to celebrate it in a dignified manner. Our *Msid* would be lit up from midnight on. All the students would come

to ring in the New Year and all the joy and work it would bring. We would have fifteen days to prepare for the celebration.

Everyone had to bring an olive oil bowl's worth of kerosene for the lamps, the school would be whitewashed, and the old mats would be replaced by new ones. The *fqih* asked us to let our parents know about all of the arrangements he had made. He was counting on their generosity.

Finally, to our great pleasure, we were dismissed for the rest of the day. What Joy! I ran home to announce it to my mother. Fatma Bziouya told me she wasn't there. Lalla Aïcha, her friend, had come to get her about an hour ago. My joy turned to apprehension, and then to worry. Certainly this visit had something to do with the business about Moulay Larbi, Lalla Aïcha's husband. Maybe some new disagreement had come up between him and that demon Abdelkader, the son of God knows who. Had they locked him away in some dark prison? It smacked of the pasha, the marshal, and their henchmen.

My mother had left the key in the door to our room. I went in. Our furniture seemed different to me, hostile and unfamiliar. It amused itself by frightening me. It transformed into monsters, then back to familiar objects, then into apocalyptic beasts. Terrified, my throat parched, I hid under the mattress to await my mother's return, the only one who could break the curse. I didn't move for fear of provoking the retribution of the creatures that spied on me from behind every object in our home. What felt like centuries passed. The sound of my mother's shuffling footsteps drifted up to me from the ground floor. I heard her cough. The room turned back to normal. A ray of sun brightened the faded mosaics.

My mother stopped on the landing, out of breath. I jumped up to meet her. Fatma Bziouya was filleting little fish, their scales shone like jewelry. She set down her knife, rinsed her hands,

wiped them on the rag she used as an apron, and without a word, waited for my mother to explain where she had been.

Very mysteriously, my mother swore her to secrecy. Then she leaned in to whisper the story in her ear, miming things out with dramatic gestures, sighing, and shaking her head repeatedly.

Fatma listened intently, her eyes following every gesture, her fingers twitched unconsciously.

She sighed in response to my mother's sighs, shook her head when my mother shook her's.

When the story had finished, Fatma placed her right hand on her cheek and her left on her heart, repeating, "Allah! Allah! Allah! God! God! God!"

"I know!" said my mother, "I know! It breaks your heart! No good Muslim could ignore it. I wouldn't wish what happened to poor Lalla Aïcha on my worst enemy, but a true believer should thank God, even in hard times."

Finally, she noticed I was there. She told me to follow her. She took off her haïk and her black leather shoes. "I'm going to make you something to eat," she told me, "you must be starving."

She took a red-brown jug out of our stores, plunged her forearm in and pulled out a long strip of cured meat. I loved cured meat. She served it to me in big, fat pieces, bathed in a delicious grease she had reheated with care. The bread was fresh and smelled of anis. I ate by myself.

My mother disappeared. I knew she was off somewhere whispering to Rahma, our neighbor from the second floor. She was telling her the news about Lalla Aïcha, after swearing her to secrecy. I also knew that I had only to wait. I caught a word here and there, I knew the gist. I finished eating quickly. I went to find my mother out on the patio where Rahma, sitting in a shady patch on a goatskin, had been combing her hair. She had stopped to listen. Her black hair,

coated in olive oil, was spread freely over her shoulders. My mother was saying, “The poor woman has sold everything. Even the rats have nothing left to nibble on.”

“And the money?” asked Rahma.

My mother hastened to inform her, “The money will go to buying material and setting up Moulay Larbi’s new workshop.”

Rahma nodded in approval, “That’s very good! Very good to hear!”

Feeling encouraged, my mother explained, “Lalla Aïcha is a *cherifa*, she couldn’t let her husband lose respect from his fellow artisans and turn from a boss back into an employee. A true believer will run into many obstacles in this life, the most important thing is to overcome them without ever losing faith in the Creator. Moulay Larbi is a generous man, he deserves a high minded wife who would gladly give up all her jewelry and her furniture just so that he doesn’t lose face with his peers. Lalla Aïcha is doing the right thing. God will reward her one hundredfold on the Day when the son can’t help his father, the Day when the father can’t shield his children from Supreme Judgment. Only our good and bad deeds will tip the Scale. Weak and small as we may be, we can only trust in the grace of Allah, the all powerful.”

Rahma echoed her, “Praise him! There is no God but Allah!”

Silence fell. Rahma continued to tug at her hair with a horn comb. My mother stood up, let out a long sigh, and finally said, “I’ve given my all to helping Lalla Aïcha. Now I feel sad and tired.”

My mother and I started down the stairs.

Screams and wails broke the calm. The storm of tears and prayers intensified. The noise was coming from the neighboring house. We ran back up the stairs. When the shock had worn off, questions were fired from everywhere, “Who died? Who died?”

Groups of women formed outside the walls that surrounded our neighbor’s patio. They chattered, exclaimed, gestured wildly, and leaned forward to hear more sobbing.

Through all the racket, one tormented voice called shrilly above the rest. Women came from distant terraces, jumping over the walls, making do with a too-short ladder. Some stayed straddling the wall, others let their legs swing over the side. An old *negress*, who was hidden from me except for her head and her two bare arms silenced the crowd of women. Her luminous black skin and pink palms fascinated me. “I know who died” repeated the old slave, “Sidi Mohammed ben Tahar, the barber. He had been sick for two months.”

“What did he die of?” asked a young woman in a yellow headscarf.

“God only knows,” responded the *negress*, “but it was definitely Sidi Mohammed ben Tahar, the barber, who died.”

The women fell silent. The *negress*’s head disappeared from view. Her hands paused for a moment, and then vanished in turn.

Everyone in the neighborhood knew Sidi Mohammed ben Tahar, the barber. He was always dressed in white, had a strange beard, and his lips were eternally upturned in a smile. He did his shopping himself and our paths had crossed many times in the cul de sac. He would be carrying a woven basket full of seasonal vegetables, sometimes a red piece of meat, some onions, or garlic.

The sobbing had subsided and the din had turned into low, steady wailing, an innocent sort of chant.

My mother went down to our room and came back up, her head wrapped in a light scarf. She told Rahma, "I'm going over the wall. It would be good for me to go cry for a while."

"Mé, take me with you," I said, "I want to go cry too."

"No," my mother said decidedly, "you're too young and you're a boy. Soon they will come to chant verses from the Quran and you can go with them."

"But I want to cry!" I insisted.

"Here, I'll give you a reason to cry."

This phrase was accompanied by a slap across the face.

I started sobbing. Rahma intervened on my behalf. Finally she convinced my mother to take me with her. They helped me over the common wall. I stopped crying. I took the stairs two by two to meet up with the mourners on the ground floor.

There were about twenty of them, each loudly proclaiming her pain. Cushions and mats were spread on the ground. More mourners came, announcing their arrival with piercing cries. Those that were already in the house responded with more shouting. The barber's wife, her voice hoarse, howled and slapped herself across her cheeks and thighs. I was so fascinated with the spectacle that I had forgotten my reason for coming. I had come to cry and I wasn't crying. I tried to make out what an old disheveled woman was murmuring. She lowered her gaze to the floor, then lifted her eyes and sang rhythmically:

You were the pillar of my house

You were my parasol and my shield

You were my knight in shining armor

Without you, the house will be empty

Without you, the sun will feel cold

Without you, my eyes will be blind

My eyes will never again be dry

My eyes will cry tears of blood

My eyes will wither and I'll wander in the darkness

A young stranger kept herself hidden in her haïk. She repeated in multiple tones, "Oh my mother! Oh my poor mother! Oh my mother! I loved you most in the whole world!"

Some of the mourners sniffled wordlessly, others called upon the saints, fervently praying to God and his Prophet. Off in a corner, some children were whimpering. I went closer to them.

I found Zineb. She was trying in vain to act like the others, she rubbed her eyes but not a single tear fell from them. They were just as bright and clear as when she was playing some prank on me. I looked at her for a moment, and with a movement as sudden as it was unexpected, I struck her in the nose. Her face was immediately flooded with tears. Her cries rose above the tumult. I ran to safety out on the patio.

I had lost sight of my mother. I knew that she would want to cry at her own leisure, without worrying about her neighbors.

The psalmists were announced at the entrance of the house. The women fled to the second floor. They cried silently while the psalmists intoned a long chapter from the Quran.

Finally, my mother came for me, took me by the hand and helped me to recross the separating wall.

We went back to our room.

Fatma Bziouya came to ask my mother how the barber's wife was. Who had come to mourn? Was the barber's mother still alive?

My mother told her about the barber's wife's pain, listed off the names of a few who had been in attendance, and admitted that she had no idea whether or not the mother was alive.

Lalla Kanza, the *chouafa*, took part in the conversation from her room on the ground floor.

Everyone came away from the conversation with the same eminently philosophical conclusion: everyone is mortal; sooner or later our time will come.

The hum of the psalmists resonated through the walls. Occasionally, the barber's wife let out a long howl. Each of her cries drew a powerful sigh from my mother. I didn't dare to play. How could I take out my trinkets the day that Sidi Mohammed ben Tahar, the barber, well known personality in our cul de sac, forever left his loved ones, friends, and clients?

Soon, after the ritual cleansing, he would be dressed for the last time in white. Some men would carry him on a comfortable cedar litter to be buried in the humid earth. The earth would close eternally over Sidi Mohammed ben Tahar, the barber. I imagined it all from our window sill. A

great sadness overcame me. Fatigue crept into my limbs. I asked my mother for permission to lie down on the bed. She said yes. I threw myself onto it and continued to think about the barber's burial. I saw him, stretched out in his white cotton, rigid in his coffin, traveling in a sea of turbaned heads, accompanied by a symphony of invocations and prayers. I had seen funeral processions pass down our street before. Sometimes, the men walked slowly, solemnly singing a hymn in voices as deep as the abyss. Sometimes there were only a few and they walked quickly, merely repeating in a normal tone the *chahada*: there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his Prophet.

I had even seen the uncovered bodies resting on the litter with no one to accompany them to their final resting place. It had filled me with an infinite sadness.

When I told my father about it he told me this story to console me:

“In a very busy *souk*, Sidi... (I forgot the name) had a little shop. This man was pious, honest, and polite to everyone. Every time a funeral procession passed through the *souk*, that saintly man put on his slippers and accompanied the dead man to the cemetery. One day, two undertakers went by carrying the body of a beggar. There was no one, friend nor family, to walk beside him. The man took his slippers from under the shelf where he kept them but didn't put them on. Finally, he put them back. The shop owners all decided he was uncharitable.

“‘He only joins rich people's funeral processions,’ they said

“Sidi... who overheard their whispering, asked them, ‘Are you believers? Then listen, I couldn't go with that brother to his grave. I was planning on it when I picked up my slippers, but behind the body I saw a crowd of incomparably beautiful beings. They were the angels, descended from

paradise. I'm nothing but a humble sinner; I didn't dare walk in their heavenly light. A friend of God was enveloped in the Grace of his Creator and I was happy to see it. But I belonged here, with my spices.'"

After that, whenever I saw two undertakers carrying a lone body, I chanted with them: "May God be with you, oh stranger on this earth!"

Mentally, I would add, "There goes his crowd of incomparably beautiful angels." And I wouldn't feel sad anymore.

Meanwhile, the wailing grew in intensity. It breached the walls, crashing over us like waves, or the roaring of a storm.

The women in our house left their chores undone. They started crying, sobbing into their braziers and cooking pots.

The body had most likely been brought out of the house. It was a somber moment. I could still hear the psalmists chanting. The sun was hidden behind a cloud; the earth was shadowed by a formidable sorrow. I broke down in tears. My mother forgot about the barber and his burial and anxiously asked me why I was crying. Worried, she asked, "Did you hurt yourself? Did a bug bite you? Is your stomach upset?"

I sniffled harder and didn't answer. The fit lasted a long while. I refused to eat. My mother had cooked lentils with tomatoes and onions. Usually, I liked them, but I wouldn't even touch them then. I stretched out on the bed. My mother spread a blanket over me; it was made of silk and wool and had red stripes around the edges. I dozed until my father got home, late in the evening. I agreed to drink a glass of milk and hid back under the blanket.

My father seemed very worried about me. He felt my forehead many times, took my hand, and rearranged my blankets with a careful gravity. I saw his lips moving, and I knew he was saying a healing prayer or verse.

“Maybe I too will die,” I thought. “Maybe there will be angels as beautiful as the sun behind my procession!”

I imagined it then: some people from the neighborhood, the *fqih* from the Quranic school, my father more serious than ever, and the angels, millions of them dressed in white silk. At home, my mother would let out throat-rending howls and cry for days on end. She would have to wait alone at night for my father to come home.

No! I didn't want to die!

“I don't want to die!” I cried, sitting up in bed. “I don't want to die!”

I threw off my blanket and stood up, shouting it with all the air my lungs could gather. My father put me back in bed, soothing me with gentle words. My mother, her eyes swollen, repeated, “My little one! My little one!”

As I calmed down, my ears started buzzing. I heard, through the watery droning, my mother talking about the events of the day: the death of Sidi Mohammed ben Tahar, the barber, Lalla Aicha's misfortunes, and the sale of her jewelry and furniture. She said Sidi Larbi L'Alaoui was going to set up a workshop and go back to work. She praised Lalla Aicha's courage and generosity, and cursed the hypocrites and crooks like Abdelkader, the son of God knows who.

During all this, I saw from behind the fringes of my eyelashes, some beautiful white angels descend from above. The silvery feathers of their wings caught my eye. One of them set my

Box of Marvels on my bed. It grew immeasurably, taking on the shape of a coffin. Happily, I crawled inside. The lid fell. Inside the Box, I could smell the fresh scent of roses and orange blossoms. The Box traveled beyond the clouds into an emerald palace. All the birds were singing. I saw the two sparrows that woke me every morning. They were discussing the usual subject.

“I love dried figs!”

“Why do you love dried figs?”

“Everyone loves dried figs!”

“Oui! Oui! Oui!”

“Everyone loves dried figs!”

“Dried figs!”

“Dried figs!”

“Dried figs!”

A burning sensation on my eyelids caused me to open my eyes. A ray of sunlight was shining through the window onto my face. The sparrows sang the virtues of dried figs.

“May your morning be blessed, little one!” said my mother with a big smile. “You’re feeling better now; you had a bit of a fever last night. Today you must promise me not to overdo it.

“You won’t go to school.”

“But I’m not sick,” I told her.

“I know! I know! Just play quietly in your corner. Eat this beignet while it’s still hot.”

I took the beignet.

Grumpy Driss called up to us from the ground floor. He had come with our groceries for the day. My mother went down to get them. I heard Fatma Bziouya saying, “Mallow already! It’s such a beautiful green!”

I couldn’t catch my mother’s response. She went into her kitchen, moved some baskets, worked her bellows, and ground her spices with her bronze mortar.

On the second floor Rahma was working on the landing. She was also stoking the fire and grinding herbs. Someone was humming. Our old bellows was put to work again as well. But it was tired and only knew how to say the words:

“The wasps!

“The wasps!

“The wasps!”

Rahma’s had a more varied repertoire. Sometimes it took pleasure in repeating:

“Sizz-zzle!

“Sizz-zzle!

“Sizz-zzle!”

Or sometimes:

“All work!

“All work!

“All work!”

I stopped listening to the bellows. Other noises distracted me instead. Sparks exploded and rolled like marbles over the ground in mosaics. Fatma Bziouya carded her wool. Some whispered words drifted up from the ground floor. Lalla Kanza was consulting with a client. A peal of laughter disturbed the calm. Luckily, it was brief and inconsequential. A pigeon cooed on the terrace. He said such beautiful things that it made me smile up at the angels. I noticed two flies outside chasing each other. They stopped for no reason, and then continued their adventure. Someone banged the knocker on the entryway door to the house.

“Who’s there?” asked several voices.

Whoever it was I had no desire to find out. A brittle tone drifted down to me from heaven, a song with a thread-like fragility. The *Moudden* announced the prayer. From a faraway minaret the phrase *Dieu est le plus grand!* washed over me in ululating waves.

The song died off, melted into the blue heavens, reaffirmed itself with vigor, and dissolved again into the spring air.

A fat, metallically black bumblebee dropped down through the opening over the terrace, crashed into the wall, and then violently threw itself through the window of our room into our gas lamp.

The glass pinged but didn’t crack. The insect left as quickly as it had come. I was enchanted by this visit. I started laughing and clapping my hands.

The noises in the house drew my attention once more, but I quickly grew bored of the game. My mother came to see me, smiled in satisfaction at my restful activities and improving health, and then went back to work grinding her herbs.

To occupy myself, I recited what little of the Quran I knew, at first quietly, and then as loudly as my vocal cords would permit. I chanted the words of the holy book passionately until my memory ran dry. I hesitated a moment before starting again, even more fervently, with the psalms. I invented my own Quran. Meaningless, mismatched words took flight, spinning into the room, flickering towards the sky like a richly colored cloud of butterflies.

My mother came to see me again. She advised me to dial back the intensity of my recitation or I might relapse and have another fever. She took from her pocket a green tinged copper chain and held it out to me. "Add this to your Marvels," she said.

The finely worked chain entranced me. I contemplated it for a long while and decided to clean it. I knew how to transform copper, worthless material that it was, into pure gold. I went out onto the landing. In a dented can of preserves, I found some finely ground sand perfect for cleaning round tables and tea platters. I set to work. My fingers hurt by the time I had achieved the result I wanted. I rinsed it several times in a bucket of dirty gray water where a little palm frond brush floated.

My chain became a golden jewel. I wrapped it around my wrist to admire it. Holding it by the two ends, I draped it around my neck, over my forehead, and made a bracelet out of it. I took out my Box and spread all my riches over a blanket.

Even the humblest of my buttons and nails, through some magical process to which only I possessed the secret, transformed into jewels.

Absorbed in the contemplation of my treasures, I didn't see Zineb's cat come in. It yowled at me, but I wasn't afraid. I decided to share my joy with him, to open the doors of my universe to him. He was solemnly interested in what I had to say, he stretched out his paw to touch my cut glass jewel, and regarded my golden chain with astonishment. I made a necklace for him out of it. At first, he stood up proudly. Then he tried to claw it off, but it wouldn't break. He got mad, panicked, and ran off like a shot, his tail on end and his eyes big with worry. I ran after him to reclaim my prize. That wretched cat ignored my pleading. He wanted nothing to do with me. Climbing the stairs, he spat threateningly.

I ran and told my mother, asked Fatma Bziouya for help, asked Rahma; I even went to my enemy Zineb, the demon beast's owner. Everyone rushed out to the terrace but the cat, ignorant to why we chased him, clawed his way up a dizzyingly high wall. I was furious with that cat. The women tried to console me.

"He'll come back tonight. Zineb will return your chain."

Zineb! Zineb! She was the one who had sent him to me in the first place, to take advantage of my kindness and steal my most beautiful jewel. Indignation and anger choked me. I couldn't control my rage. I jumped on top of Zineb. I sunk my nails into her cheeks, pulled out tufts of her hair, and kicked her viciously in the stomach. She defended herself violently, the brute; she pulled on my ears, threw me to the ground, and stepped on my chest. The women shrieked, tried to pull us apart and got punched and head butted for their trouble.

Finally my mother was able to get a hold of me. She brought me to the room, plunged my head into a bucket of water, and wiped my face with a rag. Then she sent me to bed.

My chest still clenched in a sob, I fell asleep almost immediately.

Chapter 6

There were four stairs to get to the classroom. A long, vaguely rustic room, the *Msid* also had a large attic. There, the teacher set up two glazed jars to collect the olive oil that the students brought in bottles and bowls. The big kids were responsible for pouring it in.

In regards to buying new mats, everyone contributed what they could. One of the student's fathers worked at a lime kiln. He donated as much lime as his donkey could carry. Monday, eight days before the *Achoura* festival, the old mats were relegated to the attic. The teacher put us in teams and picked out the captains. We borrowed buckets and palm leaf brooms.

We set to work. In a whirlwind of insults, exclamations, tears, and bursts of laughter, some students took up the brooms, extended by reeds, and struggled to clean the cobwebs off the walls and ceiling.

Two enormous buckets of whitewash were prepared. A dozen students, armed with brushes, took on the task of layering it onto the walls.

They handled their brushes boldly, splattering whosoever dared to get in their way. The livid lime got in their eyes and made them howl and abandon their work. Others replaced them, taking over the work with vigor. Fights broke out. Everyone was shouting at once. Sometimes the teacher's voice rumbled over the melee. The noise would stop for a second, then return at a higher, more exasperated pitch.

I successfully snatched a brush for myself. I plunged it gleefully into the whitewash and attacked the wall, eager to show all those insects how a serious painter worked. I threw myself against a rampart of pink arms, open mouths, and eyes bulging with intensity.

Hands gripped my brush. I held on with all my strength, but the struggle was useless. I released the precious instrument and found myself sitting in a puddle of water that froze my bottom.

Crying was not an option; I stood back up and decided to reclaim what was rightfully mine. I threw myself into the scuffle, but the teacher's voice cut through the confusion.

We all paused, shaking with anger. Reaching out, our fingers spread; we tried to explain the misunderstanding. We each demanded justice, our voices competing to be heard over the rest.

The teacher silenced us, and relieved us of our duties. Seeing our dejected faces, he told us to wait until he needed our help. We waited in a corner. The *fqih* declared that only the big kids would be allowed to paint the whitewash onto the walls. We waited until nightfall for the teacher to ask us to help with even the smallest of tasks. But he didn't want us to do anything!

The walls were whitened. The next day, new teams were formed. Each group had a special purpose. I was named captain of the scrubbers, the most important member of my team. We started washing the floor. Twenty or so students, burdened with enormous buckets, were put on water duty. They were sent back and forth to a fountain in a *zaouïa* about fifty paces from the school.

The floor was flooded. I took my work very seriously and, to set a good example, I maneuvered my brush energetically. My lower back ached. From time to time, I stood up, my face blazing red. The muscles in my arms hurt. When I took a break I could feel the muscles shaking. In water up to my ankles, barefoot, jostled from one side, insulted from the other, I was happy!

Adieu lessons, *adieu* group recitation, *adieu* stiff, hostile, inhumane chalk boards! We scrubbed the clay floor, grime and dirt encrusted as it was. It was patterned here and there with starbursts of lime that stubbornly resisted even our most vigorous scouring.

“Hey! You elbowed me in the eye!”

“Pay attention! You got me all wet!”

“Look at Driss, he fell in the bucket!”

“Ha ha! He’s drowning! He’s drowning!”

“You’re a lazy scrubber!”

“No I’m not, you are. Our corner is cleaner than yours.”

We wiped everything down with jute rags.

That night I went home dead tired but proud of all my hard work.

I bragged about my many exploits to my parents.

I succeeded in convincing them that without me, nothing would have been accomplished. My father congratulated me. He told my mother I was growing up to be a real man. I went to bed.

During my sleep, I sat up and shouted orders and insults. My mother tucked me back in tenderly, with loving words.

The next morning as I got ready to leave for school, my mother stopped me. She told me she needed me to go with her to la Kissaria, the fabric market. It was time to start planning my holiday outfit. I enthusiastically agreed.

“Will I get a new shirt?”

“You will get a new shirt.”

“Will I get to wear a braided jacket?”

“You will wear a braided jacket.”

“Will I get to put on my white *djellaba*, the one you store in the trunk?”

“You will wear the white *djellaba*, and some new slippers that Moulay Larbi, Lalla Aicha’s husband, will make for you, and a handsome embroidered satchel.”

I stood up as tall as I could, I puffed out my chest; I even tapped out a few steps to some barbaric dance. I didn’t allow myself such eccentricities except under the most unusual circumstances. I even you-youed a bit, before my mother scolded me and told me to act in a more dignified manner.

Fatma Bziouya laughed heartily. Her laughter didn’t upset me. That morning I felt a certain kindness, a sense of indulgence; I felt an endless generosity. I forgave Zineb in my heart of hearts for all the terrible things she had done to me. I forgave her cat, who had returned only after removing his collar, my beautiful golden chain. I forgave Tuesdays for being so long. I forgave the rod for biting my fragile ears so often. I forgave laundry day for being especially cold and sad. I forgave the whole world, or at least, what little I knew of the world.

I let my mother tend to her many chores before she got ready to go out. I went out on the patio where no one could see me scatter my overflowing joy in all directions. I ran, I sang, I violently fought the walls with a stick I found by some happy accident. The stick became a saber. I handled it deftly, stabbing invisible enemies, and cutting the heads off pashas, their marshals, and their henchmen. The stick became a horse and I paraded, wiggling my bottom, and kicking my legs. I was a valiant knight, dressed in an immaculate *djellaba* and a braided jacket. My

embroidered satchel hung on my shoulder, heavy from my supply of cartridges. I dropped my stick and stumbled down the stairs. My mother was calling me.

By the time I heard her, she was already calling me a Jew, a mangy mutt, among other unflattering names. This must not have been her first call. She must have, as always, tried first to entice me with gentle words. Phrases like:

“Has my little *chérif* played enough?”

“My *chérif* won’t answer his mother?”

“Come down now, my *chérif*!”

“What are you waiting for, you donkey?”

“You don’t hear me, you ugly donkey?”

“What’s going on, you mangy mutt?”

“Just wait till I come up there and get you, you miserable Jew!”

In the heat of the game, the intoxication of the moment, I hadn’t heard her at all. Only the insulting terms Jew and mangy mutt had been able to drag me abruptly back to reality.

I went to my mother, my ear tucked away, my elbow up to ward off any attempt at violence.

She contented herself to taking me by the shoulder and shaking me as she scolded me for my behavior. She was ready to go out. Swathed in her white *haik*, black slippers on her feet, she quickly veiled her face in white cotton and we left.

Rahma asked her to check the current price of certain fabrics, specifically the price of a muslin called ‘parsley’ and that stylish satin that went by the beautiful moniker ‘sultan’s bouquet’.

We were already well on our way, just about to turn the corner, when Lalla Kanza, the *chouafa*, called us back.

My mother hated to retrace her steps. She asked her from afar what it was that she wanted. The principle tenant of our house wanted to renew her stock of robes *de confréries*. She needed a specific amount of cubits of black satinette to keep the great, benevolent spirit, the king Bel Lahmer, happy. For some time she had also been feeling a dull ache thanks to Lalla Mira’s mysterious workings. To stop the pain, she would need a flaming yellow dress. And then there was the good Sidi Moussa to take care of as well, his color was a royal blue, but last year’s robe might still work.

“Give my son the money.”

My mother pushed me towards the house.

“I can spare you all the running.”

The *chouafa* gave me the money. She only wanted the black satinette. Finally, we set out on the road again.

Near Sidi Ahmed Tijani, that mosque with richly decorated doors, a woman pounced on my mother. She was bubbling over with joy. She thanked God for putting us in her path. She leaned over and pressed her rough veil against my cheek to hug me. She lived next to Lalla Aicha, my mother’s friend. The two women leaned up against the mosque and struck up a long conversation about the Moulay Larbi affair, which thanks to Lalla Aicha’s sacrifice, had come to

a happy conclusion. Besides, Moulay Larbi deserved just such a sacrifice. As soon as his workshop started making money, he would buy his wife jewelry, furniture, and tapestries. He was not a man who easily forgot favors. Just before parting ways, the neighbor left us with this perfidious thought: "But who can trust men? I've been married three times and every time my husband has only been interested in separating me from what little money I had. Let's just hope that Lalla Aicha hasn't come across one of those ungrateful snakes."

"God alone can judge," my mother said sententiously.

And with that we abandoned the chatty neighbor. The markets had an air of festivity. A crowd of city dwellers and country folk alike mobbed the spice merchant's shop, the notary, and the dry fruit stand. Frail looking donkeys, heavily burdened with sacks of sugar, cases of candles, reams of cotton, porcelain dishes, and little knick knacks were driven through the crowded streets.

At every intersection a hopelessly complicated bottleneck formed. We ended up snaking through groups of gawkers. I had to take off my slippers so that I could slip by more easily. I stowed them in my hood. With every step my mother reminded me to be careful. I might lose them in the rush or they might get stolen. I reassured her that I could feel them bumping lightly against my back as I walked.

I spotted the first fabric shops. We could pick them out from far away. To attract more clients, the merchants had attached silk banners, faded knits, and embroidered handkerchiefs to their awnings.

La Kisaran, meeting place to all the most elegant people in our town, seemed to me to contain the fabled treasures of Solomon, son of David. Amethyst caftans, lace and silk-buttoned jackets,

voile *djellabas*, and sumptuous burnouses mingled with taffetas, shimmering satins, wildly colored cretonnes, and tulles as iridescent as dew-anointed spider webs.

The ladies' cheerful chatter lent an indescribably intimate atmosphere to the place. The merchants were different than those from other *souks*. Most of them were young, attractive, well groomed, and courteous. They had endless patience and never got angry. They would go to all the trouble to pull a material from the highest shelf and unfold it, then refold it and put it back when their client spied a better one at the top of a pile of silks.

We visited five or six shops before buying three cubits of white cotton. It would be enough to have a shirt made for me. It was cotton of the best quality, '*poisson*.' My mother would accept nothing less. The merchant showed us, printed in blue on a rather long piece of fabric, a fish with all its scales. The purchasing process went much quicker than when we bought the red braided jacket.

We stopped in front of dozens of stores. The merchants rushed to show us piles of jackets in my size. Every shade of red was paraded before our eyes, none of them exactly the one my mother desired. Finally, she decided on a cherry red jacket, lavishly embellished in lace flourishes of a slightly darker shade.

She pulled my *djellaba* over my head and buttoned me into the jacket up to the throat. She stood back to admire it, turning me left and right. She took an infinite amount of time to unbutton it, balled it up and thrust it violently back at the shopkeeper. He asked, "Were you happy with it?" "That depends on the price," she answered.

"Then I'll wrap it up; I always offer a discount to serious clients. This jacket goes for five *réaux*, but I'll give it to you for four."

“Let’s cut this short, I’ll give you two.”

“I wouldn’t even make a profit, I swear! I can’t let it go at that price. I’d have to go beg in the streets to feed my family tonight.”

The shopkeeper had finished gently folding the jacket and reached for a paper to wrap it in.

“Listen,” said my mother, “I’m a mother, I take care of my home, I don’t have as much time to waste as you do. Would you give me the jacket for two and a quarter *réaux*? My son would really love to wear it for the *Achoura*.”

“I like the kid so I’ll do you a favor. Give me three and a half *réaux*.” He extended his hand to receive the money.

My mother turned on her heel, took me by the wrist and dragged me a few paces away. “Come on!” she said to me, “there’s no lack of jackets at La Kissaria. We’ll go find a shop where they know how to be reasonable.”

The merchant called to us. “Come back, Lalla! Come back! Your son liked the jacket.

I’d give it to you for free rather than deprive him of it. Sure, there are lots of jackets in shops all over La Kissaria, but are they this good quality? Look how perfectly finished all the seams are. Look at how the buttons are sewn on...Take the jacket. Just pay me what you think is fair. You seem to me like a *chérifa* with her fair share of blessings. Just think of me when you say your prayers so that the Prophet will intervene in my favor on judgment day.”

My mother lost it whenever someone called her *chérifa*. She fumbled in her pocket for a rag that had been knotted many times over. It took a good while to get it unraveled. She took out two

and a half *réaux* and held it out to him wordlessly. She grabbed the package and pulled me along, not pausing to listen to the shop keeper's protests that he deserved more.

We wandered once more through the *souk*. My mother noted the price of fabrics, new trends, and various patterns.

We left the splendor of la Kisaria and headed to the spice quarter. We were near the *médessa* Attarine, that beautiful house where the students live, when I reminded my mother about Lalla Kanza's, the *chouafa*'s, satinette. She congratulated me for having such a good memory and reversed course. The whole way there she cursed all the *chouafas* on the earth, those disastrous women who never waste an opportunity to poison your life. She listed off the things she could have done with that wretched sorceress's money. Lalla Kanza could easily have done her own shopping, if she had wanted to. She stood in the corner of a shop, looked around listlessly, got irritated, then angry, cursed again all the *chouafas* and their acolytes, and finally dug the money out of her caftan pocket.

It didn't take us long to find a place to buy the satinette.

Without even asking about the price, my mother ordered several cubits. She paid and we left.

My mother's good mood had evaporated. She scolded me about nothing the whole way home.

She gave Lalla Kanza her black satinette and her change, and puffed up the stairs.

Rahma came out onto the landing. She invited us into her room. She asked my mother to show her what she had bought.

Rahma's room was the same size as ours. A wooden partition, discolored with age, blocked off three quarters of the room. Behind the partition, Rahma stock piled her winter provisions. It

mostly consisted of gray-pink salted bread loaves and bunches of onions. The poorly furnished room was home to lumpy mattresses over a jute rug and, as the sole luxury, a long, garishly painted shelf. Upon it were supported a dozen flowery porcelain bowls, two plates adorned with roosters standing at attention, and half a dozen goblets.

Zineb was playing in the corner with her cat. She presented him with a small mirror. The animal looked at it fixedly, his eyes open wide. Nervously, he stretched out his paw, but his claws slid over the smooth, glass surface. He tried two or three more times and looked behind the mirror. The mystery remained intact. He detected a fraud, got mad, spit vulgarities in his language, and was off like a shot, tail on end. Zineb burst into peals of laughter.

I had wanted for a long time, a small, round mirror like the one she had. I didn't dare ask my mother to buy me one. She would have assumed I wanted it to look at myself and she would have called me as effeminate.

Rahma complimented my mother on her purchases and admired my jacket. It was dark in their room. The red in the jacket took on a velvety crimson shade: a deep, beautiful color, discreet, yet regal at the same time. It enchanted me. I felt myself fill with a noble pride. It was mine. The day of the *Achoura*, I would blow them all away. The students of the *Msid* would defer to me. Legendary princes, big and small, are to be addressed with respect.

Wouldn't I be a legendary prince with the sumptuous jacket, the fine shirt that was being made especially for me, and the pair of slippers promised to me by Moulay Larbi, the best slipper maker in town?

My mother leaned down towards our neighbor, whispering against her cheek. She wasn't looking at me. Whatever was whispered mysteriously by women in a dark room held no interest for little boys who dreamed of becoming legendary princes dressed in velvet cloth.

Zineb made a face at me. I made an even scarier one back. She started screaming, loud enough to deafen the whole neighborhood, "*Maman! Maman!* Sidi Mohammed is making faces at me!" I tried to defend myself, "She started it! It was her!"

No one believed me. I burst into tears. Furious, my mother grabbed me roughly by the arm and dragged me back to our room. She complained loudly about her terrible lot in life, the cruel nature of destiny, and the hell she had to put up with because of me.

I asked myself earnestly what terrible thing I had done to make her so unhappy. She abandoned me in the corner and shut herself in the kitchen, leaving me to sniffle at my leisure, with swollen eyes and a heavy heart. Crying silently made me hungry. Besides, lunchtime had long since come and gone. I lay on my back and started to imagine a lavish menu for the day when, recognized and beloved as the prince I was, I would welcome guests of my high standing. I thought for a moment and said to myself, "Princes eat very well at their own homes. I won't invite them. My guests will be beggars, homeless people, and psalmists, who rarely have a good meal. I'll give them beautiful clothes: intricately embellished red jackets, milky-white *djellabas*, and saffron yellow slippers that squeak with every step. On top of all that, I'll offer them muslin turbans. As for me, I'll be dressed in white. On my head, I'll wear a purple-red pointed hat. The kind reserved for members of the court and dervishes. On porcelain platters, black slaves will serve us..."

"Will you sit down to eat?"

I stood up. My mother had set out the low, round table. Turnips and meat! I hated turnips! I imagined myself refusing the pitiful meal. My mother was already so unhappy anyways. But I would have unleashed a new disaster and I didn't feel brave enough. I did justice to the meal. The hunger that was devouring me transformed the turnips into a delicacy.

Someone out on the terrace started singing. Some snippets of a cantilena reached us, carried softly on the budding spring wind. My mother stopped chewing and turned her head to listen. The voice became more distant. A moment later, it burned back to life, warm, enchanting, and nostalgic as a whiff of incense.

My mother went to lean out the window. She called, "Fatma Bziouya, do you know who's singing like that?"

"Lalla Khadija, Uncle Othman's wife."

"I don't understand how she could be so happy when she's married to a man old enough to be her father."

"She's not unhappy! Uncle Othman does everything for her. He treats her like his daughter."

"And her? How does she treat him?"

Our neighbors all laughed loudly.

"Oh I know how she treats him. The old woman M'Barka, Uncle Othman's former slave, told me a hilarious story. But it's too long to repeat the whole thing," added Rahma.

"Tell it, tell it," the women demanded in unison.

Rahma let them beg a moment. Then she started:

“You all know Uncle Othman, he’s seen better days. When his parents died they left him a large fortune. But when he was young, he was reckless with his money. He has nothing left but that little house that butts up against ours. Faithful M’Barka stayed with him through thick and thin. Si Othman has been married several times, but none of his string of wives understood conquest quite like Lalla Khadija. She was the only one who was able to really tame him, to get him to eat from the palm of her hand, like a little sparrow. Although she may not be rich, Khadija has her youth and her charm. Just wait, because I’m getting to the good part.”

I went to lean out the window next to my mother. Everyone had abandoned their work to prop themselves up on the bars or railings of their balcony. Lalla Kanza took an old prayer rug out onto the patio, and sat down on it to listen.

Rahma, hidden from view except for her head and shoulders, continued her story.

We all waited with bated breath.

“Othman went out early last Friday to do his shopping. He was happily carrying his basket, greeting some with his hand on his heart and others with a big smile. He knows everyone in the neighborhood. When he got to Joutyia, only one butcher’s stall was open. Needless to say, there was a crowd around it. It was Salem, the black butcher’s stall. He was brandishing an impressively large axe, and a rather large knife. He was carving up big hunks of mutton that quickly disappeared into the customer’s baskets. The crowd was huge, as I said. They happily stepped on each other’s feet, and courteously exchanged venomous words. Si Othman waved his arms in the air to get Salem’s attention, plastered a big smile across his face, and shouted something that could have been “Swallow that butcher’s knife, will you” or maybe “you ought to

be beaten” or perhaps merely “give me a leg.” The furious black man threatened him from afar with the axe and kept working.

Everyone laughed until they cried. Rahma could certainly tell a good story. She continued, celebrating her success, “Si Othman started back up a moment later. Salem barred his teeth, lifted his axe up high, and struggled with his competing urges to hurl it at the head of the unpleasant client, and to continue serving his patrons. Thankfully for Si Othman, duty won out in the end. A dog, because there’s always a dog hanging around a butcher shop, came to sniff at Si Othman’s heels. Irritated, he kicked it so hard his slipper went flying. The dog grabbed it with his teeth and took off. Si Othman limped after him.”

We were all overcome with laughter again and Rahma had to pause before continuing.

“He finally got the slipper back around Bin Lemdoun Bridge. When he got back to Joutyia, he realized that the crowd around the butcher had left. The black man was sleeping, his fez over his ear, his flyswatter still in his hand. Big pieces of fat hung off of hooks for the cats. He saw that all the vegetable sellers were sleeping too, in between empty crates or behind their stalls where radishes were yellowing. Si Othman didn’t dare come back empty handed. God only knows how Lalla Khadija would have reacted. In a *fondouk*, he spotted something rather curious. There were a few people conscientiously washing their feet. Some little fish would pop up in the splash of the water, floating upside down for a moment, and then disappearing again. Si Othman, a simple soul, waited a long while, expecting a miracle. But the miracle was taking too long, and his nose started to itch intolerably. He left the market in search of the closest tobacco stall. He figured a good amount of snuff would get his itch. Maybe he had taken too long to buy tobacco. Because when he finally got back, there were more fish and more customers.

The women couldn't contain themselves. I was hopping from excitement. I begged for her to continue.

"Keep going! Keep going!" said my mother. Rahma continued.

"Si Othman got mad then; several people heard him shouting curses. He shook his fists and said, 'that damn old man! Did that cuckold have to tell me the whole story of his wedding day? What on God's earth does his sister's death and his daughter's engagement have to do with me?' He ended up heading back the way he came. Near the mint seller on the intersection of Sagha road, he stopped in his tracks in front of a beautiful rose. He thought maybe if he gave it to Lalla Khadijja she would forgive him for not bringing home any groceries. I was in the street when he got home; proud of his beautiful, fragrant rose and I saw with my own eyes how it all played out. He went in. Then the door reopened almost immediately, the rose crushed underfoot. Si Othman, pale and defeated, reappeared, followed swiftly by his turban. He picked it up, took a long sniff of the rose, and when he spotted me watching him, gave me a big smile."

We laughed so hard it hurt.

Rahma finished, "His rose, his turban, and his behavior all intrigued me and I asked M'Barka what had happened. I discovered that day how Lalla Khadijja treats her old husband."

Everyone congratulated Rahma on her marvelous ability to make even the most insignificant detail stand out. She certainly had a way with words.

All that evening Rahma's story occupied my mind. That night, I dreamed about it.

