

THE STORYTELLER  
OF MARRAKESH

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Page 7: “What matters in the end is the truth” is a reworking of “The truth is what matters,” from Tahar Ben Jelloun, *The Sacred Night* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1989, p. 1).

Page 266: “Ce qui importe c’est la vérité,” from Tahar Ben Jelloun, *La nuit sacrée* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987, p. 5).

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*For Nicole Aragi and  
Alane Salierno Mason  
in gratitude*

THE STORYTELLER OF  
MARRAKESH

MARRAKESH  
*Place Jemaa el Fna*  
Evening

WHAT MATTERS in the end is the truth.

And yet, when I think about the event that marked the end of my youth, I can come to only one conclusion: that there is no truth.

Perhaps there is reason to believe the philosopher who realized, to his dismay, that the truth is precisely that which is transformed the instant it is revealed, becoming thereby only one of many possible opinions, open to debate, disagreement, controversy, but also, inevitably, to mystification.

In other words, there is no truth.

Put differently, truth is that which inevitably contradicts itself. Perhaps that is what is borne out by my story in the end. That might explain why, instead of the truth, I offer you a greater consolation: a dream.

*Msa l'khir.* Good evening. Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Hassan. I am a storyteller, monarch of a realm vaster than any you can envisage, that of the imagination. My memory is not what it used to be, but if we can settle on a democratic price, I will tell you a tale the like of which I promise you have never heard before. It is a love story, like all the best stories, but it is also a mystery, for it concerns the disappearance of one of the lovers or the other, or perhaps both of them or neither. It happened two years ago, or it might have been five or ten or twenty-five. These details are unimportant. The pink dust hung suspended in the air that evening just as it does tonight, the light from the spice and fruit stalls cast bright plumes like desert wraiths, the restless throbbing of drums rose and fell like bodies in the sand, and, in the end, the events surrounding the lovers brought an entire fabled city to a standstill and transformed for ever the character of its renowned meeting place,

the Jemaa el Fna, perhaps the most mysterious, most storied city square in the world.

Let me repeat: the truth of my story is immaterial, as is whether or not a woman vanished or a man or both of them or neither. What matters in the end is life, the breathing of air, the breasting of waves, the movement of sand on dunes and surf, each grain of sand a mirror of conflicting perceptions and testimonies.

What language do you speak, stranger? English? All right, I will try my best, though my French is better, and, of course, Arabic would be the easiest. Tell me where you are from. From far away? I see. It doesn't matter. Here in the Jemaa everyone is an outsider. I don't mean to pry, but these are preliminary introductions, necessary to set the tone. Sit down, please, and join my circle of listeners. The ground may seem hard in the beginning but I will weave a magic carpet of words that will soon take you away from this place. Permit me to pour you some mint tea to accompany my narration. We have our traditions of hospitality. There are ways in which things must be done. If I don't make you comfortable, how can I expect you to listen to what I have to say? A story is like a dance. It takes at least two people to make it come to life, the one who does the telling and the one who does the listening. Sometimes the roles are reversed, and the giver becomes the taker. We both do the talking, we both listen, and even the silences become loaded. From a small number of perfectly ordinary words a tapestry takes shape, suggestive of a dream, but close enough to a reality which, more often than not, remains elusive. It is a feat of mutual trust, of mutual imagining. What matters is whether or not we can believe each other's voices, and the test of that will lie in the story we make together. It will lie in the pieces of the past that swim into the present. Maybe it is precisely what we don't remember that will form the kernel of our tale, imparting to it its grain of truth and transforming memories into mythology.

But these are ruminations that travel in circles without beginning or end, like smoke in the air. They are good for passing long, introspective evenings with friends in the green valley of Ourika, in the High Atlas Mountains, where I am from, though I might also be from white-walled Essaouira, on the Atlantic coast, or from sand-coloured Zagora, where the last rock-ribbed mountain roots give way to the Sahara's golden desolation. These are all very beautiful places, and I come from them according to the needs of the particular tale I am engaged in telling, its flavour, atmosphere and circumstance. It's the way we set our mark, you see, with one eye on reality and the other firmly fixed in fantasy. It helps to broaden the compass of the narrative, especially since I haven't travelled much, certainly not as much as you, nor, for that matter, my brother, Mustafa. But I have been to Rabat and to Casablanca, and one day I intend to visit more distant places like Meknès and Fès and Tangier. Fabled names, fabled cities: they have long and illustrious histories, and their attractions beckon. Meanwhile, I make this trip to Marrakesh every winter to escape the bitter cold of the highlands, the desert or the sea – depending on where I might be that year – but also because I am driven to come to terms with what happened that night, here on the Jemaa, when there was a scent of something amiss in the air, and this even before the two strangers made their first and, as it turned out, final appearance.

For I am haunted by them.

## Jemaa

**D**USK CAME EARLY THAT EVENING. The sun congealed on the horizon in a thick red clot, and dark, low clouds added to its intensity. Spirals of woodsmoke rose from the clustered roofs of the souks, and the calls of the muezzins rang across the square. It was the hour of prayer, of ablutions, when shopkeepers shutter their stores in the souks and head homewards. So it was on that

evening two or perhaps five or ten years ago, just as it is tonight. I had set up on the south-eastern side of the square, near where the Rue Moulay Ismail leads into the Jemaa, past the pink stone steps of the post office, past where the Chleuh boy dancers perform their sexual routines and offer themselves up to clients, their movements leaving nothing to the imagination. I say this neither as a moralist nor as a prude, for I am not easily shocked, but I must admit that sometimes I have to look away, even as I benefit from the crowds that gather around the boys.

Since the events of the night of which I am about to speak, however, I no longer sit in my old location. It may be that I am superstitious, but the memories associated with the place are too painful. So nowadays I lay down my kilim on the other side of the square, next to the brightly lit citrus stalls and adjacent to the police station. It allows me to relate my stories in peace even as I keep a cautious eye on the goings-on around me. There are times when the sight of a young female tourist, often the merest glimpse of a shoulder, or a glint of dark eyes mirroring the sulphur lamps is enough to bring back that dreadful evening and throw off my concentration. Then I have to scramble to retrieve the threads of my lines and remember what it was that I was engaged in telling. But this happens only rarely. I am well known among the storytellers of the Jemaa for the ease of my narration, the strength of my lines, the versatility of my imagination, and for pausing only for queries from children. Or, at least, that is the way it used to be before those two unfortunates vanished into thin air, irretrievably changing the course of many lives, not least my own, and leading to the disgrace of my headstrong brother Mustafa's arrest and imprisonment. But I'm getting ahead of myself, and perhaps I ought to defer for a moment to the fortuitous appearance of my friend Aziz, who was among the first to sight the strangers that evening before they ventured into the chaotic darkness of the square.

## Riad

AZIZ HAD BROUGHT a pot of mint tea and a few glasses. As he passed them around, a flock of pigeons swept over our heads to the far end of the square, where a group of brightly clad tourists was emerging from the souks. The birds advanced in a frenzy of wings, and Aziz stood watching them for a moment. The twilight air was rose-tinted and clear, and you could still see through the gathering darkness. The pigeons moved in a funnel across the square and one of the tourists, a young woman with long blond hair, ran after them, laughing. Aziz followed her with smiling eyes; then he took a seat in the middle of my circle of listeners and I suddenly noticed that he had on the same olive-green jellaba he'd been wearing on the evening of the disappearance. It induced in me an unexpectedly physical sensation of being transported back in time. I recoiled a little, which Aziz must have noticed because an uneasy look crossed his face. He was silent for a moment longer than manners merited, and when he began speaking, it was in an undertone of distress, even regret.

Thank you for inviting me to speak, Hassan, he said, and paused, his dark eyes glittering. What do you want me to tell your listeners? Perhaps I should begin with a word about myself? All right? Very well. My name is Aziz. I come from a small village near Laayoune, in the Western Sahara. I am a waiter in the restaurant of the Riad Dar Timtam, in the heart of the medina, and on the night that Hassan speaks of, I was nearing the end of my workday.

He paused again, searching for words, his gaze remote with the effort of remembering. I did not intervene but let him take his time, recognizing the importance of accuracy. His words softer than before, he went on: It was around seven in the evening. I was nursing a headache occasioned by the strange dream I'd had the previous night, of walls of sand advancing on the Jemaa and swamping everything in their path. It was terrifying, and I recall sharing it with you, Hassan, in an attempt to understand its meaning.

He did not look at me as he spoke, his eyes half-closed in concentration. Sipping his tea slowly, he continued: I was still thinking about that dream when they came in from the street – the two outsiders – from the direction of the Souk Zrabia, where, in the old days, the slave auctions were held in the hours before sunset. As they hesitated on the threshold, casting long shadows, I hurried forward to greet them. At once I sensed something different about them. The girl was a gazelle, slender, small-boned, with large, dark eyes, and considerably shorter than her companion. She did all the speaking, accompanying her words with graceful gestures and appearing to anticipate perfectly his wishes. The boy was darker, his skin the colour of shadows cast on sand. He reminded me of an Arab nobleman, tall, with thin limbs and black hair, with something in his erect carriage that suggested otherworldliness. They seldom looked at each other, but when they did, their eyes seemed transfixed by the other's presence.

Aziz took another sip of tea and I glanced at our rapidly growing audience. They sat quiet and attentive, their faces thoughtful in repose. The moon had just come out, the air was soft and luminescent, and Aziz threw off his blanket and straightened his back, obviously growing in confidence as he recalled concrete details.

They asked for a quiet setting, he continued, and since it was crowded inside the restaurant, I escorted them to the courtyard, where there was a scattering of tables amid citrus trees and flowering shrubs. They chose an especially dark spot in the corner – they seemed to gravitate towards darkness. I brought them water, and when they looked at me, their eyes shone like candles. That disconcerted me, and when the slender youth asked me a question, I couldn't meet his gaze. His companion's eyes had the equally unnerving quality of seeming to rest on me and on something else at the same time. That was when it occurred to me, with a kind of guarded premonition, that Death had entered the Riad in the guise of that beautiful youth and maiden.

Unsettled, I pleaded a sudden bout of fatigue and asked my friend Abdelkrim to attend to them instead. He agreed that there was something exceptional about them. He told me later that even as they ate, he recalled, abruptly and without reason, the flowering trees that had greeted him many years ago when he'd first come to Marrakesh. It was the strangers' gentleness that most moved him, he said, unlike the effect they'd had on me. I found his equanimity reassuring, and when the couple had finished eating, I returned to serving them myself. They asked for mint tea, which the youth drank thirstily, without looking up from his glass, while the maiden gazed at him with a tenderness that set my own heart racing. The winter night fanned a cool breeze. There were no other guests. I went back to my station and let them be with their thoughts amidst the courtyard's lanterned silence.

Aziz had spoken in a level, restrained tone and now he glanced at me as if to seek my approval before continuing. I nodded, and he resumed speaking, but in a higher voice that betrayed a note of anxiety:

These were my thoughts as I watched them leave that evening. They went out as quietly as they'd come in. She held his hand while he walked erect like a sentinel. The streets breathed darkness; they were swallowed up by it. I recall glancing up at the sky: the clouds had formed a double ring around the moon, which was a peculiar shade of red.

When I returned to the courtyard to clean their table, I saw that their glasses were ice cold, with condensation forming around the rims, even though I had served the tea steaming hot. I brought it to Abdelkrim's attention and his eyes grew wide in disbelief. Then he pointed to the ice inexplicably encrusting the mint leaves at the bottom of the teapot.

Aziz shook his head slowly, his gaze fixed on the ground.

I went out into the street to smoke a cigarette and calm myself. The night had turned hazy and cold. Most of the shops in the souks had shuttered their doors. Only a few shafts of light from lanterns pierced the shadows. I sat on a stoop, nursing my cigarette and attempting to convince myself that there is simply no explaining some things.

## Truth and Method

AZIZ SIGHED AND LOOKED about the square as if trying to find some escape from the memory. He moved his shoulders uneasily, glancing at me in the hope that I would offer some explanation. But I said nothing. What could I have said? His experience had been of the same order as everything else that evening.

Aziz sighed again. Without trying to convey the association of the ideas behind the words, he said: I suppose there is always the expectation that telling others will help in understanding.

Understanding what? I asked, and he flushed as if I had posed a particularly obtuse query. Why, what happened to them, of course, he said.

I felt the need to reassure him. I hadn't realized the memory of his encounter was so fraught with misgivings. Rising to my feet, I walked over and embraced him. In a reassuring tone of voice, I said: Those two young unfortunates weren't visitors from the netherworld, my dear Aziz, they were human in every sense. To contend otherwise would be to give way to errant superstition, and there's been enough of that already concerning the events of that evening.

Aziz shook his head and said mournfully: What you fail to see, and what I have probably failed to communicate adequately, is the great distraction those two strangers have been for me. Unlike you, I'm no teacher of life; I'm a humble man, a waiter in a café, and a modest devotion to duty is all I can offer to complement your storytelling expertise. When something happens for which there is no explanation, it unmoors me.

I understand, I said.

He cast a despondent glance at me. Do you, really? Perhaps you do. After all, you're a master of memory. More than most, you know about these things. All the same, can anyone truly know what it means to be human in this day and age? Is it possible to know what darkness resides in the heart of man? I ask these questions because it seems to me that there are times when the truth hardly matters any more, though of

course one cannot dispense with it. It's what makes sense – what really makes sense to oneself – that counts for me.

I'd been standing next to him; now I moved away and addressed my circle of listeners. I didn't speak to any particular member of the group, but my gaze fell on each in turn as they sat cloaked in their blankets and *hanbels*, rapt absorption in every line of their faces. Speaking slowly, in an even, unhesitating tone, I said:

Certainly it is possible to know what elements constitute a man. Consider me, for instance. You know me as Hassan, the storyteller, for that is how I've chosen to introduce myself. I come from the highlands, and I am here to entertain you, because that is my calling, as it was my father's and his ancestors' before him. All around me the city spreads out its wares – its many narratives – and I survey them as if from a high place and determine which are worth the telling and which must remain untold, consigned, perhaps with good reason, to the darkness of oblivion. You have gathered around me in the expectation that my imagination is what it used to be, that you can rely on it and on my powers of narration. Tonight, however, I have set up things differently. Tonight I invite you to marry your memories with mine and trace an event altogether unlike any other in our experience. What will that entail? More than anything else, our trusting one another, because it is this element of trust that will give our investigation its freedom, its boldness and tenacity. But who can be the guarantor of its truth? And who among you will stand up and testify that there was indeed a story such as the one that we are now engaged in telling? For each of us carries deep within ourselves a chamber filled with secret memories, and it is a place we would rather not reveal.

## The Crow Tree

I PAUSED FOR A MOMENT to catch my breath, and as I did the moon crested the ramparts of the medina, its light bringing the houses surrounding the Jemaa into relief. A chill came with its ascent. I put

on my cloak, and some of my listeners, loosening the blankets tied around their jellabas, drew them over their heads. One of them, a heavily bearded cleric, now raised his hand and spoke quickly and with an intensity that commanded attention. He was a swarthy man of middle age. Although he wore rustic clothing, his voice was remarkably sophisticated, and I felt in him a keen and discriminating intelligence.

Of course what you say sounds reasonable, he said quizzically, but there's a plan behind it. It's patterned to a particular end, and that is the absolution of your brother from the crime he freely admitted to committing.

I gazed calmly at him.

If a pattern does exist, I replied, it is aimed at one thing only: the investigation of the truth – the simple, vital truth at the bottom of all experience. As for my brother, I will not conceal my hope that if each of us can be true to our memories of that evening, if we spare no pains and recount everything thoroughly, we will end by lighting on what now lies concealed. And we'll do much better work if we return to the same starting point, if we dig deeper every time and go a bit further in understanding.

My interlocutor remarked politely and non-committally that he found my faith in imagination touching.

It isn't as much imagination as memory, I answered.

Which is nothing but imagination, he countered, isn't it? Our imagination spins dreams; memory hides in them. Memory releases rivers of longing; the imagination waters the rivers with rain. They feed each other.

I refused to be provoked.

I am driven by the need for truth, I replied firmly. My brother is in prison for a crime he did not commit. I want to find out what put him there. It is a difficult task, I agree, but it isn't impossible.

His smile was sceptical.

You don't seem to realize that your truth is a paradox, because memories can be imagined, he said. Armed with your arsenal of intentions,

you are setting out to explore the events of that evening – but as fiction, not as remembered fact. Where is the centre, the point of orientation, in this game of shadows?

The centre is where the heart is, I replied determinedly.

His mouth turned down. He drew his blanket around himself.

You're weaving a mythology around a crime. I'm sorry to be so blunt, but that is how it seems to me. Faced with the terrible fact of your brother's guilt, you are attempting to spin a web between yourself and reality. When the memory is indistinct, the imagination becomes infinite – and the beautiful illusion is always preferable to the truth, especially if it is ugly.

I am not weaving anything, I responded. If it is a spider's web, it isn't one of my making. My endeavour is different. I want to unravel it.

For a moment he stared at me with a disconcerting intensity. The rest of my audience might not have existed for all the sign he gave of acknowledging their presence. Abruptly he bent his body in a stiff bow and a faint smile of irony seemed to crease his lips. When he straightened up, he waved his hand and said coolly: You have great faith in language and its ability to communicate.

One must believe in something, I said quietly.

But what if the narrator is flawed and his motives unreliable?

I hesitated for an instant, aware of the danger of alienating my audience before the evening had even begun. Deciding to qualify myself, I said conciliatorily: I'm sorry. Perhaps I haven't explained myself well. Surely the evening's narrative will assuage your suspicions?

He did not acknowledge the apology but said instead, all the while maintaining a stand-offish tone: *Inshallah*, we shall see.

I returned his courtesy, my head held high.

After a short pause, I resumed speaking:

Allow me, then, to take you back to that evening. Although it seems unlikely that we should lose our way on this journey, rest assured that, given the nature of the event, we will. Our varying recollections will

erase every familiar landmark: the mosques and the minarets, the souks and the *qaysarias*, the square speckled with pigeon droppings and the maze of alleyways leading into it. Beneath our feet, the very ground will crumble to dust, while overhead, the red sky of Marrakesh will undergo so many metamorphoses that we will consider ourselves fortunate in the end to have any sense of orientation left.

But all that is in the future. For the moment, our point of departure is the needle of the Koutoubia Mosque as it casts its shadow in the direction of the Jemaâ. We commence tentatively as in a dream, following the needle as it inches across the Avenue Mohammed V and past the row of *calèches* that wait patiently for customers through the heat of the day and the coolness of the evening. Between the seventh and eighth carriages, in the shadowy darkness of the Place Foucauld, a noble cypress dwarfs its neighbours, mirroring, as it were, the mosque's towering minaret. I call that cypress the Crow Tree, owing to the multitude of desert crows that nest in its branches. It was the latter that alerted me to the unusual nature of events that were to follow that evening, their agitation a sure sign that something was amiss.

There were other signs. The city smelt of ashes. The rose-carnelian moon was full, with a ring of light around it. An unnaturally damp wind blew down from the mountains, soaking the head in chill. Later, a red fork of lightning dried up the air, its splatter of light flaying the streets.

Despite all these omens on the evening of the strangers' disappearance, I set up in my usual place, with an obtuseness that still surprises me, and prepared to begin my session of storytelling.

## The Acrobat

WHO WAS IT THAT FIRST drew my attention to the streak of lightning? Or to the disconnected clap of thunder at twilight which preceded the lightning rather than the other way around? Was

it Tahar, the trapeze artist? Let me think; this imperfect memory will be my failing.

I remember now. It wasn't Tahar, who appeared on the scene much later on, and in ambiguous guise. It was the acrobat, Saïd, who lives in the small room with the sky-blue door that adjoins the Bab ed-Debbagh, perhaps the oldest of the gates piercing the ramparts around the city.

Saïd is unusual in more ways than one. It is rumoured that a dog ran away with his afterbirth before it could be buried, which might explain his preference for dwelling in the air rather than on the ground. More: he is an acrobat who wears glasses. You might have seen him performing around the square, his glasses fastened precariously with a string tied around his head. He is a dancer of the air, someone who has liberated himself from everyday constraints to give full rein to his imagination. When I watch him perform, I am always amazed by the ease with which he moves around his palace of dreams. My friend Driss says that Saïd, in the veracity and magnitude of his leaps, is the closest amongst us to God. He doesn't hesitate; he doesn't falter. He is a natural, gifted with grace. None of us who knows him has ever seen him angry or despondent. He is one of those whose elemental joy in living is manifested by an ever-present smile and, more often, laughter.

So when I tell you that it was this same Saïd who came to me with a look of great concern, speaking in distress about the unusual fork of lightning – shaped like a sand snake, he said, with a head at both ends – it caught my attention. He said that he had already folded away his trampoline and his ropes and poles, and, for the first time since his arrival in the Jemaa twelve years ago, had decided to stop performing before his usual hour of nine in the evening. There was something about that fork of fire, he said, that was worthy of fear; it signified pain and destruction.

And look at that orange moon with that perfect ring around it! he went on excitedly. It's like a visitation from Saturn, that baleful entity. You can almost taste its burn on your tongue. In its ochre light we've

stopped casting shadows, or haven't you noticed? There's something wrong here! These are auguries that must not be ignored. That moon has robbed us of our traces! It has made us empty.

I tried to reassure him. I tried telling him that the Jemaa is like a field of smoke; it transforms everything, even the moon. As for the red fork of lightning, it signified fire, and the element of fire, even as it destroys, holds the key to purification. So he should linger and listen to the story that I was about to tell, for I would banish his fears with the cooling stream of my imagination.

If you delve into fear, I said soothingly, you can turn it around so that the predator becomes the prey. Have faith in yourself. Trust in my ability to transform what terrifies you.

But Saïd would have none of it. He said that, in the middle of a leap, he had glimpsed the ground where the lightning had struck. In the smoke and ashes he had read warnings that we were all in grave danger. He said that it was imperative that we leave immediately.

I watched him go. Then I waited as usual for my audience to gather, but my heart was uneasy.

## El Amara

MARRAKESH, EL AMARA, imperial capital, red-walled oasis between the desert and the mountains. Here the ochre expanse of the sky is mirrored in the *tabia* bricks and façades, and, especially at dawn, when silence cloaks everything, there is no more satisfying way to greet the new day than to stroll along the ramparts and watch the camel trains arrive from the south and the east. In the distance lie the dark fringes of the Palmeraie. Beyond, hues of cinnabar, rust, crimson, vermilion settle on the snow-capped peaks of the High Atlas Mountains.

It is a landscape filled with allegories, where the imagination is law, and storytellers can spend entire days resuscitating mysteries. We sit cross-legged on our kilims and craft chronicles from the air in our sonorous

voices. The kilim is our castle for the evening. It is our luminous heart, the crucible for our imagined histories. It is our winter in the Jemaa, our summer in the mountains, our perennially fruitful season that we carry everywhere we visit. It is our home, our kasbah, our *makhzen*, our sanctuary. The door is always open; we wait inside and also outside it, fitting all possible tales into chronicles of our making.

## Voyage

ON THE EVENING OF THE STRANGERS' disappearance, I'd decided to use the colour red as the theme for my storytelling, for red was the shade of the ringed moon, as it is of fire and, of course, of blood and of sacrifice. Turning my face towards the Jemaa el Fna – which, in our tongue, has two meanings, “Assembly of the Dead” and “Mosque of Nothingness” – I spread out my kilim and prepared to begin. Surrounding me were the usual implements of my trade: the battered leather trunk that held my parchments, the mirror with which to reflect my listeners' faces, the knotted piece of thuja wood from which I derived inspiration, the dream symbols in the form of sheaves of wheat and carved wooden rattles and glossy black pebbles shaped like snake heads and porcupine quills. The kilim was a gift from my father. It had been in our family for generations, its faded red weave patterned with stars and bordered by black clouds of precisely configured geometry. I customarily sat in the centre and arranged my collection of story sticks in a half-circle in front of me. Each stick was carved out of ebony and notched with ivory rings. The sticks represented particular storylines and the rings stood for themes. I waited for dusk to see which stick the setting sun would light upon first and thereby determine the story I would be telling.

The Jemaa was especially crowded that evening. Busloads of villagers had arrived from the interior, from the mountains as well as from the desert as far south as Tan Tan and Tafraoute. Pilgrims are good for my line of business: they prefer the magic of make-believe to their

own dreary reality. They go for epic tales, with plenty of digressions to postpone the return to the quotidian.

I usually wait until I have at least eight listeners. As a rule of thumb, the larger the audience, the greater their credulity. Then I begin to speak very softly so that my words, as if melting into the air, promise an unimaginably intoxicating voyage. To travel thus is to live a dream. My story forms the vortex, which, for the space of the evening, delivers the peasant, the sharecropper and the drover from their dull and cheerless existences. Gradually my voice rises to offset the noise of the Jemaa. I find my rhythm and settle into a steady cadence. By nightfall, my audience is mesmerized for the rest of the journey.

That evening, to my right, a father and his four sons had begun to pluck subtle Andalusian melodies on their ouds and violins. Farther away, a group of Gnaoua musicians had set up with their long-stemmed guitars and iron clanging hammers. They were accustomed to performing for hours on end, inducing in their listeners a trancelike state akin to ecstasy. Tonight they were accompanied by three fiery youths who danced in white-stockinged feet, gyrating their heads in time to fixed rhythms. After a brief interval, however, the Gnaoua moved to a better spot near the centre of the square, leaving me with the more appropriate stringed Andalusian accompaniment with which to launch my tales and sustain their mystery. The Andalus were from the north, near Tangier, and they played with superb finesse, their mournfully introspective tunes dissolving into the air, leaving no trace save the barest intimations of longing.

Inspired, I took out the customary piece of ambergris from my jel-laba, filling the air with its fragrance. I slid off the hood of my cloak, tilted my head to one side, and strained to hear the voices that I knew would soon resound through me. My listeners gathered. I placed my collection box on the ground, the bejewelled hand of Fatima on its lid glinting its blessings. Studying my audience, I noted their faces – their eyes and gestures and expressions – to determine the level at which to pitch my story. Then I took a deep breath and commenced speaking.

## The Strangers

**M**Y TALE, I BEGAN, is entirely true, like life itself, and, therefore, entirely invented. Everything in it is imagined; nothing in it is imagined. Like all the best stories, it is not about conventions, plot or plausibility, but about the simple threads that bind us together as human beings...

With that relatively brief and straightforward prologue, I went on to talk about El Amara, the crimson city, crucible of so many dreams. I was just getting into my stride, my voice taking on the lilting stridency of the practised storyteller, when I noticed a restlessness on the part of my audience, many of whom were craning their necks to make out what was going on behind them on the northern edge of the square.

I followed their gazes.

That was the first time I saw them.

That was the first time I saw the two foreigners.

They had emerged into the open space of the Jemaa from the direction of the Rue Derb Dabachi, from within the souks, and their entrance instantly caused a lull in the commotion of the square. All eyes, including mine, swivelled in their direction. The more modest amongst us immediately cast down our glances, as if abashed. Others, more bold, continued to stare and to follow them hungrily with brazen eyes. There was something about the intrusiveness of our collective response that left me ashamed. It was as if we were already implicated in their story, as if it were part of our own biographies, and hardly in the most complimentary of ways.

Perhaps it had to do with the woman's beauty, which was the first thing that everyone noticed. It was unnatural, and it made us uneasy. It seemed to cast a glow as they made their way across the square, and, as if in homage, the crowds fell silent and parted before them. As my brother Mustafa later recalled, it was a beauty possessing the purest intimation of grace. My own sense was that such beauty was worthy

of respect, but from a guarded distance. One had to have courage when faced with it. But one also had to have probity. Mustafa did not agree with me, and this discord would come to weigh heavily on my mind in judging his future actions.

## Mustafa

MUSTAFA WAS NOT AN INHABITANT of Marrakesh. He lived in the small fishing port of Essaouira on the Atlantic coast. He owned a shop in the medina where he sold lanterns he'd made. Every month, on the fifteenth, he would supplement his earnings by taking the bus to Marrakesh to sell his wares and, flush with cash, visit the whores who waited for him. He was young and handsome – and incorrigibly hot-blooded. A stranger to despair, incapable of being a spectator in the game of life, he usually enacted his desires in the most impulsive and yet perfectly natural ways. His vision was energy, his poetry was genuine, and true poetry is all-consuming.

When he was young, I once saw him rising naked from the lake near our village, the water streaming off his back as he paraded before the girls who had gathered to admire him. He let them touch him one by one. I caught up with him on the outskirts of the village and gave him a hiding. It wasn't as if I was a puritan, but his vanity astounded me.

I didn't speak of the incident to our father, nor did either one of us refer to it again. But deep in my heart I knew that Mustafa would always hold it against me. I had injured his pride, and I think that he attributed my actions to jealousy. From that day onwards a wall descended between us, a mutual reserve. Until his departure from our village at the age of eighteen, I was determined to keep my peace and look the other way if such a thing should recur, but he was careful never to let me catch him in a compromising situation again.

When we first heard that he, a child of the mountains, had decided to settle in seaside Essaouira, far from his native environs, I took

the initiative to reassure my parents about him. Let him be, I said with equanimity. The salt air will calm him. Meanwhile, you have two other sons who will look after you in your old age and tend to your needs.

A year later, Mustafa and I met in Marrakesh, and he informed me, with an air of defiance, that he was living with a woman but had decided not to marry. I didn't think it my place to comment but merely wished him happiness. At our next meeting, a few months later, he said with a smile, as if as an aside, that he'd left his companion, whose importunate demands on his time and affection had begun to annoy him. Instead, he was living on his own in the heart of the medina, where his bronzed skin, curly hair and easy-going ways had made him popular with the tourists. He'd taken up a sport called windsurfing. Some Frenchwoman named Sandrine had taught him. She lived on the beach; she was a free spirit like him. Once again, I refrained from commenting.

That's why, when I saw Mustafa rising to his feet from the edge of our circle that evening in the Jemaa, it attracted my attention. His face was a conversation without words: it betrayed the ardent and disconsolate thoughts that permeated it. His eyes glittered; they told a story where the strangers were already distillations of the desire barely contained within. It was as if, in a matter of seconds, my brother's lust had mastered him.

Mustafa! I cautioned, don't act in haste. Our religion is gentle. It does not permit transgressions and vice. It has strong conventions of hospitality. It emphasizes modesty.

He glanced at me with scorn. Scared of losing your tourist trade, Hassan? When I declined to dignify his accusation, he burst out: What is the point of my freedom if I hesitate to use it? There's nothing sordid about passion!

I must disagree, I said with gravity. Unbridled passion breeds anarchy.

Well then, he said heatedly, I must tell you that in your presence this wide-open square feels like a prison cell to me! But my heart is racing, and I must follow its call. What you see as surrender, I see as victory.

You are my brother, I said calmly, and your rashness will be your undoing.

You are my brother, he replied, and I find your timidity womanish. The first mark of a man is boldness, and I intend to exhibit it.

You reprobate! I retorted, finally losing patience. There is no more luminous pleasure than that which is muted. Animals rut. I expected more of you than this head rush that is clouding your judgement.

He laughed in response and left without answering.

## First Love

**M**USTAFA HAD NOT ALWAYS BEEN so impetuous when it came to women. Or perhaps he had. As his brother I suppose I'm too close to him and it's difficult for me to tell. Perhaps I should simply relate a story about him and leave it up to you to judge.

This happened many years ago. Mustafa was five years old at the time, I was ten, and my middle brother, Ahmed, was eight. Our village was visited by a medical team from Rabat as part of a nationwide flu prevention campaign. They arrived in our house first thing in the morning, even before the sun had come out. Initially, when we heard noises in the courtyard, we thought it was the postman bringing a letter from Mother's older brother, Uncle Mounés, who worked in a factory in Salé, and periodically wrote to us. But then we heard a woman's clearly educated voice asking if anyone was home, and we scrambled out of bed, all agog with curiosity. I was the first out, which was appropriate, since I was the oldest son, then Mustafa, followed by circumspect Ahmed bringing up the rear. Wiping the sleep from our eyes, we emerged into the dawn light to behold a young lady doctor in a pink silk headscarf and smart white medical coat. She was beautiful, tall, with full lips and high cheekbones, and her fair complexion was in striking contrast to the brown, weather-beaten women we were used to seeing. Confronted with this unexpected apparition, we halted uncertainly and gawked at her. Now that I think

back on it, I realize we must have looked like a trio of village yokels with our sleep-tousled hair and our sooty woodsmoke-stained faces.

When Father emerged on our heels, tall and stern, with his *gandoura* hitched up to his knees, the doctor apologized for intruding at this early hour, before going on to explain that since ours was the most outlying house in the village, we were the first on her round of calls. In a pleasant but brisk and no-nonsense manner, she proceeded to introduce herself and her companions. The man on her right, unshaven and hard-faced, but also in a white medical coat, was her assistant, while the uniformed soldier with the raw shaven head was the driver of their medical van which was parked right in front of the rickety wooden gate that gave entrance to our courtyard.

Father didn't say anything at first, but I could tell that he was ill at ease at the prospect of dealing with a woman in a position of authority.

The doctor must have sensed his discomfort, because she immediately explained why they were there, on account of the flu raging through the region, and why it was necessary to inoculate us. She demonstrated the procedure on her arm and said that we'd all be done in a few minutes.

While she'd been speaking, her assistant had brought out a folding chair and a metal table from the van, on which he now arranged a medical kit bag, an instrument case, a siphon box, a metal pan, a metal tray with cotton wool and swabs and a few bottles.

Catching a glimpse of the row of shiny needles in their sealed plastic packets, Ahmed began to edge towards the house, but Mustafa overtook him and re-emerged moments later with a cushion which he plumped onto the doctor's chair.

This *glissa* is for you to sit on, he informed her.

Thank you, little one, she said, taken aback, her businesslike demeanour relaxing perceptibly.

It's my pleasure, he piped up, and extended his arm. May I go first?

Of course!