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Woman Country

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p 7-31

Younes and the West: the Sea

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My beloved Mariam,

If you read this letter, it will mean I'm nearer to reaching my goal. It's proof that I set out on the billowing sea, and defied and traversed it in order to be closer to you. I've bridged the distance because I want to be near you.

Khalil Gibran was wrong: distance does not make the heart grow fonder.

I know that my unanswered letters and the things people who run into you often say about you prove that you have pursued your life without reserving a place in it for me. But I want to hear it from you directly. I don't want to believe that our time together was a whim, a trifle. We promised to be true to each other forever, remember? And since our separation five years ago, I've lived for that promise.

I won't stay if you don't want me to, but I must be sure you don't want to continue with me. I must see your face and hear your voice one more time, though rejection would be painful. But I must do this, my dear Mariam, to be able to move on with my life.

So you see, I've crossed the sea – alone. All by myself. For you. For my dream. I'm one step closer. The waiting drove me mad. My life would have been over before I knew it. I had to do something. I kept yearning for the future, but was imprisoned in a now that had resolved never to end, never to become the past. Like a fetid pool of stagnant water. It took a lot of courage and many sacrifices on my part, but I finally managed to awaken from that deceptive stupor, in which neither reality nor dream showed its true colours. I'm taking my life into my own hands now. I'll prove to you that my love for us is genuine. Do you remember, Mariam, the gift you gave me?

When love beckons to you, follow him,
Though his ways are hard and steep.
And when his wings enfold you yield to him,
Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.
And when he speaks to you, believe in him...

I'm carrying it with me on this journey – as your prayer for me.

Till soon, my dearest Mariam,

Younes

Nourdin hung over the railing constantly, vomiting his intestines out and moaning that he should never have left. After the coastline vanished behind him and the sea became darker and rougher, he leaned towards Younes, swearing on his mother, in a faltering voice, that he'd pay three times as much to be able to return. Younes said nothing, and felt the heavy stone in his stomach as Nourdin doubled over again to vomit bile.

Nourdin hadn't really needed to come, Younes reflected guiltily. He hadn't been set on crossing to the other side. Younes wanted to hug him, hold him close, kiss his head and ask for his forgiveness.

For his thoughtlessness.

For his mad and egotistical plan.

For his friendship, which at times was nothing more than a haughty sufferance of Nourdin's presence.

Sometimes he ignored him for days on end because he could no longer bear his endless optimism. To ask for his forgiveness because he often preferred to see the back of him! It had taken a supreme effort on his part to conceal his disappointment when Nourdin had ecstatically announced that he too had registered at the University of Oudja. His only consolation was that Nourdin hadn't registered in the same faculty; literature wasn't his thing.

Younes had often wondered where the friendship came from, where it had begun. It seemed so natural; they had lived beside each other and gone to the same elementary and secondary schools. The friendship had always existed; they'd never had to work at it. An entirely self-evident lifelong bond born out of a series of mere coincidences.

'Are you really going to do it?' Nourdin had asked, filled with awe.

Younes had nodded.

What was the point of departing alone or staying behind alone? From the moment Younes had told him about his plan, Nourdin had become an accomplice, had been in on it. It had become Younes and Nourdin's plan. It had been a long time since they'd made such a grand plan together.

Their last great undertaking had been during their student years at Oujda, when they'd set out for the south together, the Western Sahara, in honour of Omar. A fellow student, a Sahrawi.

He had died in a car accident.

Omar was always the first one to get up. He'd throw the curtains open so the sunlight would suddenly flood into the room unhindered, much to Nourdin and Younes's annoyance.

Nourin and Younes would instantly make themselves as small as they could, pull their blankets up over their heads, pin a corner of them tightly between their legs and clutch the edges as firmly as they could with their hands. Ready for what was to come.

Then Omar would turn to face the sleepers, move towards them and suddenly rip off the blankets with all his force. The boys never knew where he'd start, but neither of them managed to hang on to their blankets. Younes never gave up and half fell out of bed in a vain attempt to hold on to that corner of blanket that he'd managed to keep locked between his feet or in his fist.

'Get up, sleepyheads! The Sahrawis are at the city gates.'

'Get lost!' mumbled Younes, grabbing blindly for his blanket, which by now was lying on the floor. Nourdin made no effort at all; he just rolled over uncovered and tried to fall asleep again.

Omar left for classes that morning as he had on all the previous mornings, with a smile on his face. They would only see him again towards evening – in the hospital mortuary.

Except for a slight bruise on his chin, Omar looked as he always had. Younes even thought he detected a grin around his mouth, and sat staring at him for a while holding his breath, convinced he would leap up at any moment and mischievously embrace them with a triumphant 'Fooled you, didn't I?'. But he didn't jump up. And Younes and Nourdin didn't go back to their room that evening.

They had very little money, though at the time it seemed an inconvenience they could ignore with impunity. The only thing that mattered was the memory of Omar. After the accident, Younes had put Omar's personal possessions into a box, which he then stored under his bed.

They had resolved to take the box to Omar's mother in Oum Dreyga.

That trip, from the north to the deep south of Morocco, had opened their eyes. They had never expected the beauty of the desert to be so overwhelming and so impalpable.

The Sahara.

A Sahra.

It was a landscape that wouldn't let itself be shaped by man.

It was man who had to adapt to the desert if he wanted to survive.

That was also where they saw the infamous Moroccan Berm for the first time, their own Berlin Wall. Only a few stones high at some places and simply ceasing to exist at others. As if disappearing

briefly under the sand to make clear that this boundary ran deeply, and wanted to separate everything that lay above and below the sand. Once and for all.

A bit farther along, the line resurfaced and continued on its uncompromising path; the demarcation line between occupied and unoccupied territory. Every time they entered a village, they were warned about the thousands of landmines littering the landscape. Omar had made himself unpopular with the students and professors by not mincing his words about the matter. He couldn't care less about Younes and Nourdin's warnings to mind what he said because terrible things could happen to him if he ran into the wrong people.

'What ever could happen to us that could be worse than having our land taken from us?' Omar always replied. Younes never had an answer for Omar. But today, in this boat, he did.

He would tell him there was something far worse than a people without a country.

It was a country that deprived its people of all hope.

It was a country that offered no future to its youth, a country that crushed the dreams of its young people.

That forced you to leave it any way you could.

To leave, to go somewhere else, if you wanted to have a life. Younes hated this country that was his, this country where he had been born but that offered him so little, that remained so uncompromising and inflexible despite all his efforts to make it his own. That's what he would have said to Omar if he'd been able to turn back the clock. And if he could have turned back the clock, he would have left silently, without involving Nourdin.

Only the African at his side remained icily calm, as if accepting what was to come. Younes couldn't see the features of the tall dark man against the menacing sky with its fluorescent clouds. He was staring ahead, motionless, as if he knew what was to come and was completely prepared for it. Things were the way they were.

They had tested fate. And fate had decided to be merciless.

He looked strong, very strong. If anything were to go wrong tonight, he would have the best chances of survival. With his strong arms, he was better equipped to withstand the overpowering waves. With his body, he would be able to resist the raging waters that had no beginning and no end. Younes thought his own chances of survival were very slim – there was no need to delude himself. Even now, still sitting in the little boat, he felt weak and lost. His hand on his chest, he realised it was an unequal fight and that if it came down to it, even the African would have to concede defeat.

The letter, his money and his identification papers were all tightly sealed in plastic and taped to his body. He wouldn't regret losing his money or his papers, so long as he could take his letter safely to its destination.

A few weeks ago he had searched like a madman for an empty notebook, a piece of paper to write the letter on.

There had been no paper anywhere in the house. It was night-time and everybody was sleeping, and here he was with all these words and all these thoughts for her and nowhere to put them.

He'd already torn out all the empty pages from his school notebooks. All that were left were pages and pages filled with mathematical formulas, grammatical exercises and *tafsirs*, commentaries from the Qur'an. Every line was filled, there wasn't a blank space to be found where he could write her name or declare his love for her. He looked everywhere, turning page after page, patiently, occasionally even reading a sentence or formula before quickly leafing on through the ink- and letter-filled notebook, never pausing for the memories that the words or numbers evoked.

Then he stumbled upon a page on which he'd drawn a wind rose with blue and red ballpoints. He'd marked the four directions of the wind and written a caption beside each:

EAST: the past, and the great stories

NORTH: timeless, and the great void

SOUTH: the present, and the black horror

He vividly recalled having hesitated about which was north and which was south when he'd drawn the blossoms and thorns.

Upon rediscovering the page now, he still wasn't sure.

As he saw it, the south was the horror because things were going from bad to worse there. Especially since the world had started invading their living rooms via the satellite, so that now they were bombarded non-stop with the myriad faces and manifestations of prosperity. It was painful to watch how the pale beauties, in a relentless stream of Standard Arabic, revealing a high level of education and an elevated culture, were now spurring the viewers on to buy low-fat yoghurt, washing powder, exclusive sportswear and electronic gadgets. Even the barren infertility of the desert dunes, on which they were promoting cross-country vehicles, appeared sumptuous. Even the loose sand, every last grain of it, seemed vivid proof of the abundant prosperity.

They would cast their almond-shaped eyes upwards in his direction, as if he were more than just a spectator.

'Extend your hand, it's within reach, everything you ever wanted.'

They talked to him, deceptively and sweet-voiced.

'Danone or Nestlé? Samsung or Nokia? Hyatt Hotels and Qatar Airways, *Marhaba*, welcome, Mister Younes. *Dash* washes whiter than white the world over. Yoplait, Adidas, Nike, Mercedes, Pentium computers, the most powerful and the fastest.

Colgate for a gleaming smile, radiant like us. Beautiful, flawless. L'Air du Temps. There's no squalor, no illness, no death in our world. Enjoy.

The whole time he watched these advertisements he suffered the ultimate humiliation: he was filled with an all-consuming jealousy.

Not even hate.

But envy.

Low, miserly, dishonourable, humiliating envy, so that he even averted his eyes when looking in the mirror. For fear of being confronted with something: that which made him unable to have what they had. Perhaps his glance wasn't self-assured enough. Perhaps his lips revealed weakness. Perhaps his chin wasn't suggestive of decisiveness.

Jealousy.

It was the same feeling that had possessed him when the Sapherians, the second-generation migrants in their thirties and forties, had descended on their homeland in huge fancy limousines that made everybody turn green with envy. But that illusion was quickly shattered. Thanks to Al Jazeera. Thanks to that same satellite.

He saw how they lived there in the *banlieus*, the suburbs. How they were even stopped from entering the heart of the big cities.

How time after time they didn't get the job.

He heard how the Europeans talked about them. How they were invariably labelled as the fifth column. How political parties unashamedly and brazenly grew in size and popularity thanks to the unbridled hatred for their community.

He wasn't jealous of them. He pitied them. It was their own fault. He would have done it much better.

The envy he felt as a spectator of the perfect life of those who spoke perfect classical Arabic was more far-reaching.

He too spoke a poetic and rich classical Arabic. He too knew his history, that there had been Phoenician and Carthaginian trading posts on the Moroccan coast. He too knew the genealogy of the Almoravids and the Almohads, and when the Abassids had defeated the Omayyads of Damascus. And how, after that, the Banu Abd Shams had fled to Al-Andalus, where, together with the Imazighen, they had forged an empire the likes of which had never been seen before.

He knew his religion.

So why could he never become like those Arabs?

Why didn't he belong to the *oemma*, to the world of the consumers?

Why, like countless others, was he condemned to being one of the masses of dreaming, passive spectators? Why was he condemned to the world of those who were only allowed to see the images? Who sat glued to their chairs as they gaped at the real lives unfolding on the screen in front of them? Together with them, he was imprisoned in a bad film, a film with no plot and no happy ending. They were the ones who lived on the wrong side of reality. There, on the screen, that was where real life happened. That's where they should be, not here. The people in his world looked far from perfect. Their skin wasn't flawless and the bags under their eyes revealed their

nightly brooding. Their wives were never dressed in pastel shades and never bore the scent of spring flowers. On the contrary. Their hands were coarse and unwelcoming.

Their days were not orderly and structured, which often made them ill-tempered and much less radiant than the characters on the screen. The figures of *Sandouq L'Ahjaab*, the 'magic box', as his grandmother called the television. She refused to eat while the television was on. 'They can see us eating, and it's inappropriate to eat while others are watching,' she said.

But was it not also inappropriate that they, unsolicited and unabashed, showed that they were really living in decadent abundance and we weren't?

And then they're shocked when the towers collapse, Younes kept on thinking.

Once, he'd put his face very close to the television and pushed his nose right up against that of the unsuspecting woman newsreader. He'd stared into her eyes, insistently and at length, as her warm, human voice emanated from the loudspeakers on both sides of the screen. That was when he'd seen that she wasn't real.

That her skin, the green irises of her eyes and her perfectly sculpted brows were made up of thousands of tiny dots and lines in the most diverse colours. Her face was like an extremely complex puzzle comprising thousands of pieces. Behind every pixel he saw a little man who controlled the face. Who made it laugh, her lips curl up, little dimples appear in her cheeks. Who made her eyelashes flutter, her eyes twinkle, her head tilt ever so slightly. She wasn't real.

But she was still realer than he was.

Like a fairy-tale – that world there.

Inaccessible.

And yet ...

Sometimes a childlike belief took hold of him, a conviction that before long the wave of prosperity that had already reached the shores of distant Arabia would also come to his godforsaken village. That the wave would engulf it and, ultimately, deliver its people from the loathsome and oppressive thirst that had haunted their bodies for generations. Water would flow in the Wadi Idar again and its banks would once again be green and lush.

A breeze would bring coolness to the dead who'd been resting on the right bank for decades. Everybody would look younger and more beautiful. And he, the village bard, would sit under a fig tree, composing the most beautiful poems on his laptop.

Mariam would become his wife and share his house. Who would refuse a place in paradise?

It was only a dream. A cruel, childlike dream.

He kept asking himself why that wave hadn't come. He'd drawn a maze of whimsical blossoms and prickly branches around the wind rose.

He'd pressed his pen into the paper so hard that the dents on the back formed contours of bluish nerves and red veins. His passion, his fire, flowed through them. And her name was written everywhere –in red only – between the flowers, next to the prickly branches and in large calligraphic letters at the top of the page:

MARIAM

Formal, like a title, like the starting point of everything. And just below her name, in capital letters:

WEST: *the future, and love*

Simple – and true.

A wasted page, he'd thought at the time, as he continued his search for an untarnished piece of paper.

His diploma hung in a cheap frame on his bedroom wall, between two other frames. One frame, profusely decorated with golden flower-and-leaf patterns, encompassed against a black background the ninety-nine divine names of Allah in silver dust, which glittered most brightly when Younes switched on the pole lamp. The other frame was more sober and contained his poem, which had been published in the student newspaper *Talaba* or 'Student', and with which he had won the first prize in the Arabic faculty's annual poetry competition. The first prize had consisted of a well-worn collection of poems by the Palestinian writer Mahmoud Derwish and ten empty notebooks with squared pages.

Younes tapped the frame holding his diploma to straighten it.

But the frame defied his attempts to restore symmetry and immediately hung crookedly again. Younes took it down from the wall to see what was the matter.

That's when he saw that the back of it was white and inviting.

He hesitated for a moment. His diploma had filled him with hope. He had thought it would give him the key that would grant him access to his real life. The magic key to the magic box. From then on everything would be in Technicolor.

A life in which he would no longer passively have to undergo things. A life in which he would not have to wait endlessly. On the contrary. A life in which time would be much too precious to be wasted hanging around street corners or in internet cafés. He'd buy a handsome diary in which to keep everything organised.

A diary that showed all twenty-four hours of every day. From midnight to midnight. Everything quantified and neatly arranged.

There was a time for everything.

Going to bed on time: he would always go to bed on time.

Waking up: he swore that from then on he would let his day begin at *Fajr*, at dawn.

For his general education, before sitting down to breakfast every day he'd recite a passage from the Qur'an (yes, even God had to be put on the agenda). After that, he'd read those thousands of books by world-famous writers and poets. A different book each day.

Work: with abandon.

Love: with passion and intensity.

Friends: in moderation.

Everything would fall into place and the more money he would earn, the less time he would have.

In those days he was impressed by the elegant signature under the headmaster's name and the numerous stamps placed on the diploma to give it status, to make it into an official document that would command awe and respect. After all those years, the stamps had become transparent like ghosts. Only the signature was still prominent, gleaming brightly like the malicious stubborn liar who persists in his anger to camouflage his deceit. Everything was fraud and deception. On paper he had a Master's degree in Arabic literature, but here and now, in this house, in this damned life, he was nobody, nothing. He was Younes, twenty-seven years old, who had done nothing, absolutely nothing, that made a difference.

He was angry – at himself, at the cheats who'd led him up the garden path with a piece of paper.

The diploma laughed in his face. Louder and louder.

'What an idiot you are! Only now? Is it only now you've discovered what you're worth? You thought it would be so easy to become someone! You believed what the dealers-in-hope told you when they put your name on a shoddy piece of paper! It was the stamps, wasn't it? They always do the trick, boy. A blue Kingdom-of-Morocco stamp has a magical effect on farmers' sons when they come to the big cities to study. Put a stamp on a piece of paper and they think Ali Baba's cave will open up for them.'

Decisively, Younes removed the diploma from the frame, turned it over and wrote Mariam's name on the back. His fear that the document might lose its value vanished completely. If the stamps and titles couldn't help him to have a life, he'd put the document to a different use.

Every word he would add to it would enhance its importance. Not the stamps, but his verbally transmuted longing and heartfelt sentiments would reveal who he was and what impelled him.

Only now would it become invaluable. A document that signified something. A document that could change something.

By dawn he'd finished the letter and reread it at least ten times.

He would personally carry the letter across the sea. And travel all the way to Belgium – if necessary, by foot – to deliver it to her with his own hand. The letter was much too important to go unanswered, like the hundreds of other letters he'd already written her.

He had sold his stake in the land that he'd inherited for much too little, so as to pay those who transported the fortune-seekers.

It meant absolutely nothing to own land in a country where you couldn't be happy, where your gaze was forever focused on the West. But despite that simple conclusion, it had pained him to accept the thick wad of dirhams from an elated fellow-villager, who immediately hastened to demarcate every corner of his land with posts and wire.

The piece of land no longer belonged to Younes. It had given him that last nudge. There was no way back.

Apart from the letter and the banknotes and the jacket he was wearing, he now had absolutely nothing to his name.

His decision made his mother ill. She'd refused to say goodbye to him and threatened to curse him if he didn't abandon his plan. Would she have cursed me, he wondered, when the night enveloped him on every side like a cold, impenetrable sheath with a metallic scent, the harbinger of the ultimate, cold darkness?

Would she have appealed to the Almighty and begged him not to let her son reach his destination?

He had never heard his mother utter a profanity or curse against him. He had never heard her say something, like some mothers did, about wishing he would never arrive there. Most mothers regretted their wish they moment they uttered it. But a curse once voiced could never be retracted.

'There' was never given a name, never made concrete. It could be any place at all, real or symbolic. But both the curser and the cursed knew how to interpret it. 'There' could be a café, happiness, the mercifulness of God's shadow. And it could be a place on the other side of the sea.

Stubbornly, Younes continued with the preparations for his departure.

He had had enough. He would leave. And he did – together with Nourdin and the taciturn African from the heart of the continent who had walked for weeks on end until finally being halted by the sea. His strong body had withstood heat and drought as he had walked unflinchingly for days, through deserts and barren plains. Now he had met the sea and found it stronger than he was, and was compelled to accept the help of others. Younes had introduced himself, shaken hands with him and made a silly joke about their undertaking.

No one had laughed.

Nourdin had invoked his faith, a thread of saliva dripping from his chin. The little boat was thrown upwards by the mountains of water, then quickly sucked back into the deep. The mountains grew higher by the moment and the valleys deeper. Water was everywhere, raging water, water that bellowed and screamed, cursed and frothed. Water that wanted to kill and crush. Water, Younes knew, that could never be contained.

And then, when they were in a deep trough again, the mountain collapsed. A giant boulder hit Younes and dragged him downwards at breakneck speed. He could no longer hear the bellowing of the sea.

He sank deep into the darkness. It's calm again, he thought.

He breathed deeply, angry that for all the water streaming into his lungs, there wasn't a single bubble of air. He gasped again. The silty water burned its way through his mouth and throat.

The crushing feeling in his lungs and the increasingly sharp pains terrified him. The pain crept upwards, as if his brains were exploding. Upwards, away from here, to heaven, he thought wildly, as he flailed his arms madly in the water, trying to push it away with his arms and feet, trying to create a passage through which to escape. But he kept sinking, and felt water everywhere. Breathe again. His eyes were wide open. The water had a dark menacing colour, a near blue-black that wasn't empty, that seemed alive, that seemed to breathe and rustle. But he was alone. All alone.

Thousands of brightly coloured stars fluttered down around him like fireworks. He abandoned his struggle. The pain in his head and chest ceased instantly. The bitter taste in his mouth vanished. The water became pleasingly warm.

I'll never know her answer, he thought, as he surrendered fully to the sea that now rocked him willingly and stroked him softly as he sank deeper and deeper.

When day broke in Los Barrios, it promised to be beautiful and tranquil. No one expected to stumble on the lifeless bodies of two Africans on the immaculate white beach.

At night the sea had abandoned her victims on the shore, the way a spoiled child throws away its toy because the newness is gone, because it's bored.

***

The season of the chickens, that's what they called the holiday period.

The chickens were the boys and girls who descended upon Morocco in the months of July and August.

They came from all over Europe.

France.

Those were the hard, no-nonsense youth, with the '*va te faire ...*, *fils de ... en crache ton venin*, go-...-yourself, son-of-a-..., spit-your-poison' vocabulary.

Germany.

Lethargic and mostly whiter and fatter than the others. They usually didn't speak a word of Tamazight or Arabic. 'Come on, say "chicken" in Tamazight! Come on, say it!' Amid great hilarity.

The girls from 'Olanda'.

Sharp-tongued and the gift of the gab, verbal karate blows to your groin if you went too far.

The girls and boys from Belgium.

Introvert, a bit naïve, the most Moroccan of all. Every year the girls bought expensive new handmade takchitas to show off at wedding parties in Antwerp or Brussels.

Italy.

Shocked by modernity, these women returned home with short haircuts and sleeveless tops, only to be confused and shocked once again when they discovered that this form of modernity had not travelled with them to their villages.

Those from Spain.

'We're Spaniards.'

And they came too – though in much fewer numbers – from Denmark and Norway, the United Kingdom and even the United States.

There were many of them, more than you could count. The boys had made a sport of assigning them a country.

Cool Adidas training pants, black with white stripes? France!

Beige shorts and light-blue polo shirts? Germany!

Masses of curls, on both the boys and girls? Holland!

Pastel-coloured headscarves, skimpy T-shirts and tight-fitting jeans? Belgium!

Moroccan leather jackets? Spain? Wrong! Beni Nsar!

Despite their differences they looked like each other, as if they had just rolled off the same assembly line.

Assembled in the great multinational known as Europe.

The 'indigenous' young people felt ill at ease for the first few days. Should they be condescending? Indifferent? Fake-friendly? They found it hard to conceal their envy. It was an injustice that they, who had had so much more education, found themselves left behind in the dust again when yet another of those chic automobiles took off with a screech.

But later they had reconciled themselves to the invasion of the *Marocains Résidents à l'Étranger*, the MRE.

They had the time of their lives during those months at the seaside.

There was always something happening.

That summer there was Mariam.

He hadn't noticed her at first. He had been more interested in her cousin. And he wasn't alone. Everyone in Saidia wanted to win her favour. Her beautiful slender cousin, with the soft silky hair that glittered in the sun like in the television ads. But after he had tried to have a normal conversation with her a few times, he had been hugely disappointed to discover she was no more than a giggly bird-brain. A very beautiful bird-brain, mind you. But that would only have charmed him for a day.

Mariam, on the other hand, was interesting. At the time he had even imagined the superwoman that Marian's intelligence and wit combined with her cousin's beauty of would have made.

Mariam's beauty had only barely revealed itself. She was different, had a different kind of beauty.

At the end of the first week of that unforgettable summer he was so much in love it was embarrassing. He had never been so happy before. After discovering what they had in common during the first week, they spent most of the second learning what the other thought of the crucial questions in life. He discovered she loved Khalil Gibran.

When love beckons to you, follow him,

Though his ways are hard and steep.

And when his wings enfold you yield to him,

Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.

And when he speaks to you, believe in him.

She had recited the verse in French, a language that didn't quite do the poem justice. It was so much more beautiful in Arabic, he had found out much later. But it sounded like music coming from her mouth.

And he believed every word that came from her mouth; she nodded, she whispered, and he was lost. He would have walked into the sea and kept on walking if she had asked him to.

'How many children do you want, Mariam?'

'What do you mean, how many children? Shouldn't you ask me first if I want children at all?'

'Oh, sorry, for a moment I forgot life isn't so self-evident in Europe. Everything is questionable. First, everything is questioned.'

'That has nothing to do with Europe, Younes. It has to do with the free, thinking individual, and that is universal.'

'Why would you question having children?'

‘Because there are already so many of them, and because the world isn’t a nice place for a child to be in, for example.’

‘What’s the point of everything then?’

‘The point? You of course. It’s you.’

‘Me?’

‘That’s the most important pronoun in Europe, Younes. ME. It you get that, you can fly.’

Younes had thought about this conversation for a long time after.

‘ME, *ANNA* in Arabic, *NECH* in Tamazight.’

That was the secret of progress, of success. Of freedom, she had told him.

‘Nourdin, she’s just perfect.’

‘She’s just a little chicken, man. It won’t be long now and she’ll fly back to her roost.’

‘Oh God, of course you’re right!’

‘See, I knew you’d come to your senses. By the end of the summer, when all the hormones are gone, you’ll see everything in perspective again.’

‘No man, I’d completely forgotten she still has to go back. It’s like she’s from here. It’s like I’ve always known her. What am I supposed to do now?’

‘Try and get all you can out of it. Enjoy, man, enjoy the chickens from Europe. They’re so much more direct and adventurous than the birds from here, who chew gum and talk in veiled terms. It drives me mad sometimes. They never say whether they love you or not. They think love is full of mysteries. Half-mysteries then, because they never finish their sentences, you have to fill the rest in yourself. Before you’ve solved the mystery, they’re already married and have two kids. Just so much hassle.’

‘Should I dare ask it already?’

‘Ask what?’

‘If she’ll marry me, of course.’

Nourdin sat up and arched his brows in amusement. Abdelkader was walking towards him.

‘Wow! Younes wants to marry a little chicken and fly on her wings to Europe! Very ambitious, man.’

‘Him too?’ said Abelkader disapprovingly, as he lay down next to Nourdin. ‘Is he also prepared to give up his honour and pride for the sake of a residence permit?’

Nourdin lay back again in the sand. With his hands behind his head, he scanned the black sky for the star that shone the brightest, meanwhile continuing: 'You know – at least I hope you do – that these chickens can only fly after you've coughed up a hefty dowry. You know how much Sadiq's little chicken cost him? I hardly dare tell you because it will be such a rude awakening. All I can say is he still sends his mother a huge amount every month to pay off the creditors. And that was three years ago, man.'

'Don't call her a chicken. And I couldn't care less about Europe. I'm graduating soon and I'll create my own Europe. I love her, man, she's the love of my life and I won't let her go. I'm asking her to marry me.'

Abdelkader look at him in silence for a moment, then shook his head pityingly. 'What fellow accepts subservience? I'm serious now! So you're prepared to give up your dignity for the sake of Europe?'

'It's not about Europe, I keep telling you.'

'Oh yeah, that's what they all say. But I don't buy it. There's not a single bastard here who doesn't stare across to the other side drooling. It's not the girl you see, it's a walking European passport. And what do you think you'll find there? Paradise?' Abdelkader dug his heels angrily into the damp sand, and carved deep troughs with them. 'You'll go there and the first thing that girl will say is: "This is my country, I brought you here, so be quiet and do as you're told, and if you dare to protest I'll have your papers taken away and send you straight back to where you came from." You're not going to Belgium or Holland, you're going to WomanCountry. She's the boss there and you're the *schmet*, the loser.'

'*Wallah al'Adhim*, Allah the Almighty,' echoed Nourdin.

'*I despise those fellows who come here acting like kings and dressed like goons while they trail along behind their women.*'

'It's impossible to talk with any of you.' Younes stood up and brushed the sand off his trousers, then left, waving dismissively. Abdelkader called after him that he had better keep something on hand for the fever. 'The chicken virus can be persistent and vicious!'

Younes heard them laughing.

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p 80-84

Abdelkader and the East: the Big Stories

A friend was supposed to be waiting for Abdelkader at Central Station. It was a drizzly day. He shivered, though it was warm in the train. He noticed the two policemen on the platform, standing waiting near the train. They came towards him right away.

'*Papiers et billet de train, s'il vous plaît.*'

Abdelkader pulled his wallet out of his backpack and gave them his Spanish passport and train ticket.

'*Quelle est la raison de votre voyage*?'

'Family.'

The policemen studied the passport meticulously, looked up at him a few times, then at the photo, and talked with each other. Abdelkader felt a big knot in his stomach though there was no reason for it at all.

'*Suivez-nous, s'il vous plaît.*'

Here we go, thought Abdelkader, as he followed them silently to the station.

'*Comment est-ce que vous avez obtenu le passeport*?'

'From the Spanish authorities.' He wanted to show them his weathered hands that had laboured for years for a bully of a market gardener before he had finally been naturalised and, a few years later, given Spanish citizenship. With the help of God and these hands, he had wanted to say to them, not through guile and deception. Not thanks to a woman.

The policemen started talking with each other again as they examined the passport page by page. One of them started to make a phone call.

'*Je peux prévenir un copain qui m'attends à la sortie*?'

'*Non.*'

It took until the afternoon before he got his passport back. The Spanish embassy and the Aliens Office had held up faxed copies of its pages to the light to check the authenticity of each letter. Had shone a special light on the blurry photo in search of an expression in his eyes, a facial feature that would reveal what they were so eagerly looking for – that this man wasn't real, that he was a forger. That he should immediately be taken into custody and put on a flight back to Africa without a moment's hesitation. It didn't matter to which country. Just back.

They didn't find anything.

The Spanish embassy searched its list of suspect Muslims for the third time and, with a sigh, were obliged to tell the agents it was a real passport and the man with the Moroccan name really was a full-fledged innocent citizen of the Kingdom of Spain.

They had no grounds at all to hold him, so he was allowed to leave.

The knot in Abdelkader's stomach became smaller and softer when he stepped into the daylight outside the station, but it didn't dissolve.

Just as he had expected, there was no sign of his friend. Abdelkader decided to get a cup of coffee and phone him. Fifteen minutes later he saw Mounir heading towards him. He was shocked by his appearance; he had a beard and was wearing jogging pants under a mid-length robe. He got

up and walked towards him. They embraced. Mounir gave him his condolences on the death of Younes.

‘I wouldn’t have recognised you, you’ve changed so much!’

Mounir laughed. ‘The older the wiser, right?’

‘I guess so.’

They walked towards the car.

Abdelkader stopped and looked at the car, grinning. ‘A Toyota! You must be kidding! Mounir driving a Toyota! Man, you really have changed! Where’s the Mounir who terrorised Saidia with his high-powered BMW?’

Mounir pulled out his keys.

‘He woke up on time and hoped God would forgive him for all those horrible years.’

In the neighbourhood where Mounir lived, posters of politicians hung everywhere. His friend explained to him that municipal elections would be held soon.

He noticed there were a lot of coloured faces and strange names on the posters.

In his city in southern Spain foreigners in politics were rare.

Politics was a question of being able to oversee everything. That was why Abdelkader had no illusions. It would take a long time before you would see smiling foreign faces on election posters in his southern Spanish city. The work in the greenhouses kept their backs bent, their eyes fixed straight in front of them focused on the detail.

‘Don’t be deceived by the photos, Abdelkader. They may pose and win votes but you seldom see them in important political posts. It’s probably a good thing too because most of them are opportunists, disbelievers, traitors. Look, there’s Mariam.’

He pointed to a wall covered with posters of a smiling young woman with a head of curly shoulder-length hair.

‘Is she married?’ asked Abdelkader.

‘Not that I know of, but she doesn’t live with her parents anymore.’

‘Is that what’s it like here then?’

‘My friend, you’d be amazed at all the things we *mgarba*, we Moroccans do. *Al-Munker*, bad stuff, my friend, *al-Munker*, bad stuff.’

‘And that’s what they call emancipation, is it?’

‘For the misguided, yes, that’s emancipation. But for us, unfortunately, it’s one of the five signs the world is coming to an end. When a woman knows no more shame and begins to act like a man, the end isn’t far off.’ Mounir parked the car and let Abdelkader step out, then started walking towards a terraced house where he rang the bell twice before opening the door with his key. Following his friend’s example Abdelkader took his shoes off in the hallway, before they entered the Moroccan parlour. He heard a little child whimpering but no woman’s voice comforting it.

His friend showed him the way to the bathroom, then left the parlour.

Adbelkader looked around the room. One wall was covered with an impressive bookcase filled with Arabic and Dutch books on the Sunnah, Hadith and *tafsir*. Some were cheap editions, others had black covers with impressive titles written in gold calligraphy.

Abdelkader shook his head in disbelief.

A few years earlier Abdelkader, Younes and Nourdin had become friends in Saidia with ‘the chicken that lays the golden egg’. Mounir was a serious bon-vivant at the time. During the day he would conquer the sand and sea with his jet ski and in the evenings he would scour the discotheques with hordes of girls in his wake. He was lavish with his friendship and money; he had flitted through palaces and villas in the summer months without batting an eyelid.

Money that was haram was superficial and had to disappear quickly in business or activities that were equally superficial like alcohol, sex or drugs.

And here he was living in a modest rented house. ‘I can’t bring myself to take out a mortgage to buy it. There’s still too much disagreement among the authorities so I’m playing it safe’, he had told him.

Mounir came into the parlour again with a tray of tea and cookies.

‘I don’t know where she lives, but I can find her through her political party.’

Mounir opened his laptop and typed in her name.

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p 96-103

Mara and the West: Freedom

She smelled the sea, heard it roar.

But she was standing on a vast plain, desolate and barren. There was a wind rose on the ground and there he was, walking in the distance without coming closer. He looked more

handsome than ever. He came to her night after night in her dreams until she couldn't even get him out of her head during the day.

Mara had forgotten him. It was a century ago already. In fact she had forgotten him right after after he had declared his love to her. He had said it clumsily, in Tamazight first: '*Takhsegh chem*', literally – 'I want you'. It had made her laugh uncontrollably. She found that language so uncool, so blunt. He had recovered quickly and stammered '*Je t'aime*'. He was a handsome boy, the most handsome of all. Her girlfriends and especially her cousins could hardly believe he was darting around on the beach at Saidia next to her of all people.

But he was hers and hers only. It was a wonderful summer holiday. Like a dream.

And when he asked her to marry him, laughing she said yes. He loved poetry. She would be leaving to return home in a few days. The dream had to be perfect like in a Bollywood film. The sea was calm and blue, there was music, brightly coloured skirts billowing in all directions, rivalry, adolescent infatuations. Anything was possible.

It never occurred to her what it would mean to marry. And she was going to marry him! It didn't matter much to her – him or somebody else – marriage went with the job. Her only ambition was to be chosen. Not to be left behind.

And here she had the opportunity to choose someone herself, who then had to choose her. Life was playing prince and princess, mummy and daddy.

How could she have known that she was no more and no less than just another character who would soon take part in a tragi-comedy that had been staged since time immemorial. The most she would do would be to add a few pieces of decor – seldom a test of character – but it would be the same play and she would play the role that was expected of her. With ups and downs, children who would be born, the angry mother-in-law, the interfering aunts and the husband who nine times out of ten would prove to be an authoritarian and unsympathetic man.

And during the fleeting moments of happiness she would hear a Bollywood song blaring.

When she returned home, she developed her holiday snapshots and talked a-mile-a-minute to Najla and all her girlfriends at the Catholic Saint Godelieve Institute about 'the coolest holiday of her life with the coolest guy of all time'.

But when she stuck the dog-eared photos back in the album and hid the album safely under the night-table next to her bed (because she didn't want her mother or anybody else to see how skimpily she had been dressed and who she had been hanging out with during those months), she forgot the dream completely. The intoxication was over.

Until the moment she received his first letter. A few weeks after the summer break – it was autumn and her last year at school had just begun – he wrote her a lovelorn letter on squared pages. You could see he had done his utmost to write beautifully, in form and content.

How funny, she thought when she read his salutation 'My beloved Mariam'. What old-fashioned gallantry. Above all else she was a sister to him whom he would treat with the proper respect. That he loved her and couldn't sleep any more since she had gone back leaving him behind in no way marred his heartfelt and noble intentions.

In love it was important to be careful and well-mannered. She was his dearly beloved sister who set his heart aflame.

Mariam no longer even found it worth letting her best friend Nalja read the letter. She stored it with the pictures under the night-table and forgot about it immediately. It was only because she sometimes felt nostalgic that she hadn't just thrown it away. More letters arrived; she didn't even read most of them. After the second year one came every six months. There were no letters during the fourth year – she hadn't even noticed – and in the fifth year Mounir phoned her to say he urgently needed to talk with her about Younes.

'Younes who?'

'Younes from Berkane, that Younes.'

'Younes from Berkane? Don't phone me any more.'

Mara wanted to hang up.

'He died, drowned. Wanted to come and see you and remind you of your vow.'

Mara stiffened and said nothing more.

'I'm coming to your office with his cousin Abdelkader. He wants to speak with you. And either you give us the time or I'll wreak such havoc you'll never dare show your face there again.'

The Mounir she knew was capable of wreaking havoc of the worst kind. He was the boy who knew no fear, who couldn't care less about rules. And Mara couldn't care less about him. But the dreams that haunted her every night made it impossible for her to ignore Mounir and Abelkader.

The 'I will' she had said to Younes didn't count in her eyes. At that time and in that state no decision she had made could lay claim to any validity. And so she had assumed Younes too had been fully aware of the casualness of their promises, the transience of their passion and feelings. Only somebody with no sense of reality would cling so desperately to something that wasn't real, to a game played by a boy and girl at the beach in the summer.

She watched as Mounir and another young man walked towards her. He had seen her right away and approached her table.

Nonchalantly bringing her cigarette to her lips, she scanned him from head to toe.

'You too?' Mounir looked at Mara, uncomprehendingly.

'What?'

'Well, the right path, the pure heart, the good deeds and the *Masha'Allahs*, the God-has-willed-its ...'

'Have you been drinking or something?'

'Since when do you dress like that?'

‘Since *Alla Subhana Ta’ala*, Allah the Great and Glorious saw me and accepted me.’

‘And why are you dressed like that? You’ll never find work that way. Don’t they stare at you?’

‘I choose to live according to the Sunnah of our Prophet.’

‘Oh, so you came here by camel too, did you? Where is he parked?’

‘I have no time for jokes. This is Abelkader, Younes’s cousin. He wants to talk to you.’

‘How did you find me?’

‘I conjured you up. You’ve got quite a list of achievements, that’s for sure. The *Nsara*, the non-Muslim whites, must be proud of you. It’s just a shame you haven’t learned via Google how much shame you’ve brought on your parents. Your father doesn’t even dare to open his mouth in public any more.’

Acting as if she didn’t hear Mounir, Mara scanned Abdelkader from head to toe, deliberately blowing her cigarette smoke is his direction. ‘What does he want to talk to me about?’ she asked Mounir, her eyes glued to Abdelkader.

‘He’s standing in front of you and speaks Tamazight, Spanish and French. Ask him.’ He turned to Abdelkader. ‘I’ll be waiting outside.’ She exhaled her cigarette smoke and watched him go.

Idiot, she thought. What right does he have to come here and try to make me feel guilty? Asshole.

Abdelkader kept standing there. She looked at him now. He was all dressed up. Looked like a typical newcomer. A Moroccan leather jacket, well-made but light-years out of fashion, smart but cheap jeans and expensive trainers.

Fake, thought Mara.

Without waiting for her invitation, he sat down uncomfortably at the table on the edge of his chair, averting his glance.

Mara smoked her cigarette calmly, showing no signs of making it easy for him by being the first to speak.

‘Do you speak Tamazight? My French isn’t too good.’ Mata drew boredly on her cigarette without looking at him.

‘Younes died four weeks ago. We’re lucky the sea returned his body.’

‘*Allah I Rahmu*, Allah have mercy.’

‘*Amin*, Amen,’ replied Abedelkader.

‘One often hears such stories, it’s awful for those young boys.’

‘He was coming to you.’

‘He was coming to Europe.’

Adbelkader said nothing for a while, as though he were looking for objective arguments to show her she was the only reason for Younes’s desperate deed. He held the beer mat from the table in front of him in his right hand. Maes pils.

Abdelkader tried to remember the brand of beer he had drunk with Younes and Nourdin just before he left for Spain, to mark his departure. It had been undrinkable. The better beer brands were far too expensive. In Spain he had all the choice in the world but he didn’t drink a drop of it.

There was text written on the back of the mat with a ballpoint. He tried to decipher it but didn’t recognise a word of it. Suddenly he realised Mara was sitting opposite him.

‘A few days after he died I started dreaming about him. I mean he began visiting me in my dreams. At first I thought it was normal. He was my cousin after all. We grew up together and went to the same school. But after a few nights I started to realise Younes had a message for me: I had to take you to him. That’s what he wanted to say in that dream. Of course I tried to convince myself it was just a dream, but every night his request was repeated and his voice became louder. From the moment I decided to go to you, the dreams stopped.’

Mara stubbed out her cigarette.

Younes said nothing in *her* dream. He was light-years away from her. Apart from the giant wind rose drawn in the sand between them, there was nothing.

She thought it was a strange coincidence Abdelkader also dreamed about him. But his explanation – that it had to do with the fact that they had been like brothers – made sense to her. He had a long trip behind him, all the way from Spain to tell her about his dream. But if that was part of his coming-to-terms process, then that’s the way it was.

So as not to reinforce his belief that Younes was trying to send him messages from the other side, she said nothing about her own dreams.

‘I’d like to ask you to go with me to the place where he was found.’

‘To do what?’

‘I don’t know what he wants from you. All I know is he wants you to come.’

‘You’re serious, aren’t you? Do you really think I’d go with a complete stranger to some little village in southern Europe to ... to .... to do what? Wait for some ghost to appear or something? He’s dead, I think that’s terrible, life goes on, but that’s the way it is.’

‘Don’t you have any heart at all? He made the crossing for you, for you and only you, and you couldn’t care less! You really have adopted the mentality of the westerners, cold and heartless!’

Mara pushed her chair back and took a long look at Abdelkader, then got up and walked out.

Mounir was waiting outside. She looked the other way as she walked past.