

# A Jihad for Love

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**An extract pp (5-45)**

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**p 5-45**

**Jihad** (adj., *m*)

(Arab.: *jihād*, effort, struggle on God's way)

1. Effort every Muslim must make to combat his own passions. (Referred to by the prophet Mohammed as the "greater jihad")
2. Struggle to defend the domain of Islam. (Referred to as the "lesser jihad".)

*Larousse*, Dictionnaire de français.

Loubna, my dearest,  
Nothing has flavor anymore, nothing has purpose anymore.  
My dreams were yours, your dreams were mine.  
Growing old together, hand in hand.  
Watching the children grow up, in joy and love.  
That was our path, drawn out by the One who holds the pen of fate.

At least that's what we thought.

But, to our great sorrow, a different fate was waiting for us.

You were my mate, my confidante, my best friend.  
Love of my life, mother of my children, the one with whom I always laughed.

Our relationship was serious, but we never took ourselves too seriously.  
Our story was built on love, trust and respect. Simple, but powerful love.

What an extremely rare pearl I had.  
She brought me so much joy, simply by being beside me.  
What luck to have such a beautiful, intelligent wife with such a big heart...  
We always protected our children against war and madness.  
But the worst of it, alas, has come over us.

Face to face with what no one can comprehend, what am I supposed to tell the children?

## That day

I had the day off.  
She took the metro.  
One of her girlfriends rang the bell.  
She said there had been an attack.  
Right away, I had a bad feeling about it.  
I saw that the 9:10 had never gone online.  
Then I knew all I needed to know.  
I went to my parents'.  
Wrapped in a blanket, I collapsed.

For the rest, I have a sort of amnesia.  
I'm in a different dimension.  
That is the only way I can go on living.

## The evening

Once they're all in bed, I write sometimes, on the screen of my telephone. Texts and sentences that flash through my mind, poems sometimes.  
Writing, finding words, true words.

By writing about love, I come closer to your shining face.

## The night

It's the middle of the night.  
I go down the stairs.  
Everything is spinning.  
Where am I?  
The littlest is awake.  
He's crying.

He's hungry.  
He is three years old.  
Our youngest.  
We have three.  
Three sons. Ten, eight and three years old.  
Our children.  
"My children," I should say now.

Her name is still beside the doorbell.  
Of course. This is her house.  
Even if she doesn't live here anymore.  
Even if she's doesn't live at all anymore.  
She was a light sleeper, I slept soundly.  
When we were first married, I had to get used to that.  
There was so much to get used to.  
The regular routine, the living together, all those things.  
I liked to fall asleep reading a book.  
I had to learn that light can bother others.  
I had to learn to think more of others.

Now I don't sleep anymore.  
Without pills, I can't.  
I barely eat.  
I've lost pounds, don't ask me how many.  
I was a medium, now I'm a small.  
I had to give away a whole pile of clothes.  
The boy is awake.  
He's crying.  
Everything spins.  
It's because of the pills.  
I fall.  
I go down the stairs.  
I get the bottle.  
I fall again.  
I fall.  
This is how I live now.  
This is where I'm standing now.

## My voice

I don't know if I'm going to come back to life,  
real, living life.  
I'm here for my children.  
Just consider me a dead man.  
A dead man giving a lesson in life.

## My parents

Do I really have to talk about my own life?

Anecdotes are unimportant; I already know them all.

Details no longer count: this is not a biography.

But there are a few elements that might help to throw open the windows of my message.

I am a product of the first wave of immigrants.

My father knew poverty. He was born in 1940, not far from Nador, in northern Morocco. The Rif. His family moved to Oran, in French Algeria, like so many Moroccan families did back then. After that he left for France, then to Germany. In 1963 he arrived in Brussels, with a friend who would later become his brother-in-law.

My mother's family had moved to French Algeria too, to find work. That's where my mother was born, in 1951. After Algeria became independent in 1962, the family went back to Morocco and settled in Oujda, close to the Algerian border.

My parents got married in Morocco and my eldest sister was born there too. Like the rest of my brothers and sisters, I was born in Belgium, in Sint-Agatha-Berchem, not far from Molenbeek. That was in 1980. I'm the sixth of eight children: five girls and three boys. We've always lived in Molenbeek. Our house was on Bevrijdersplein, close to Jubelfeestlaan.

My father worked as a tram driver in Brussels, later he got a job in a factory. Then he became a shopkeeper, he had a grocery shop in Schaarbeek and in Molenbeek. Because he'd had such a hard time growing up, he always stressed how lucky we were to be living in Belgium, a country where we had the means to grow. Getting an education gave us new opportunities. We needed to be grateful to this country, and at the same time to hold onto our own culture.

## Language

My father spoke French with us. That wasn't the obvious thing for him to do, because his native language was Tamazight, what they also call "Berber".

But he insisted that we speak French, so that we would have a thorough command of the language. He had learned French while he was in Algeria. Later on, he taught himself Arabic, from books. He learned the alphabet in order to read the Koran.

My parents spoke Tamazight with each other. That was useful when they wanted to talk about something the children weren't supposed to hear. But now that's a handicap for us. I can follow a conversation in Tamazight, I understand it a bit, but when I open my mouth and try to speak it, I sound ridiculous. My Arabic is limited too. When I go to Morocco, that complicates things. My accent is that of Oujda, so people tend to think I'm Algerian.

French is really my native language. I always speak French, with my brothers and sisters, at school and at home. Of course, our French has some Arabic words in it. In Brussels we say *drari* for boy

and *sahbe* for friend. When someone lets himself be fooled, he's *h'ché*, and when he's done something stupid he's *hayak*. And when someone doubts what we say, we say *wallah*, I swear. By God!

## Faith

I'm a Muslim, first of all by birth, then by conviction.

I inherited Islam. The faith played a major role in our family. My parents stressed its moral values: uprightness, friendliness, a sense of honor and keeping one's word. At home, we prayed five times a day. Our father introduced us to it at an early age, but everyone did with it what they wanted.

We took Arabic lessons, in order to learn Arabic and be able to recite the Koran. That went in the old-fashioned way: boys and girls in separate classrooms, at a local mosque close to our house. We had to learn the Koran by rote – not by heart. In fact, we recited it without understanding it. In the 1980s, anyone who felt like it could call himself a teacher. Ours was old and strict. He slapped our fingers with a ruler. He hit me too, a few times. The worst thing was when my friends would organize a football tournament and I had to go to Arabic lessons. So that Arabic school didn't last too long. I still know a few suras, maybe thirteen or fourteen of them, only the ones essential for saying my prayers.

The Koran is poetry, in Arabic it's a beautiful text. The Arabs used the Word and the poetry to make contact, to discuss, to convince. It was beauty. It was art. In this religion, poetry plays a crucial role. How someone who was first a shepherd, later a merchant and then finally a mystic discovered poetry as his driving force.... You may criticize the Koran, but as poetry it is without equal.

## My school

I went to a Catholic primary school, because it was close by. Saint-Joseph Saint-Rémy. That went fairly well. In the late 1980s, a lot of children from the Moroccan community went there. Of course, we got lessons in the Catholic faith and learned about Catholic values. But my father said: "It's just like with us, except Jesus is not the son of God and we have an extra prophet."

Voilà, it was as simple as that.

Christmas was a lovely time, that atmosphere of brotherhood, peace and love. I was always a little jealous of the other children. At home we didn't have a Christmas tree and no presents either. But we watched the Christmas stories on TV together. Wonderful films for the whole family. It was magical.

I've never considered becoming a Catholic. I already felt connected. We see Christ as an earlier prophet, so we already had a bit of Christianity in us. I felt it would be a loss to turn my back on Islam. We were taught that the Koran was the word of God, while the Bible, the New Testament, was just a story.

# Compassion

As a Muslim, I was lucky enough to share some lovely moments and to receive a lot of loving care from the teaching staff at my Catholic school.

As an adult, I feel only the deepest fondness, admiration and friendship for the Catholic community. Those expressions of love and charity are not something one quickly forgets.

So I encourage Muslims to show the same kind of charitable spirit towards followers of other faiths: Christians, Jews, Buddhists, atheists and agnostics. This is the best possible answer to those who want to sow dissension among us, the Muslims of the West. I oppose religious fundamentalism – no matter whether it comes from Muslims or from people of other religions.

Would God really blame us for showing love towards people who think differently from us? After all, He is the creator of all peoples and nations. As the Koran puts it so beautifully: “O mankind! We created you from a single male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other.”

\* The Koran, Al-Hujraat, 49:13

## The Koran

In the Koran one finds a timeless, vertical storyline that has to do with our relationship with the Supreme Being, with God.

And then you have certain passages with a horizontal orientation, the ones that deal with rules. When it comes to those passages, it is important to be reasonable and to look at the context: the texts, after all, date back to the seventh century.

Islam assumes that the people it is talking to are reasonable people. Some texts even say: “And those are the ones endowed with understanding.” That, after all, is what distinguishes us from the animals, as Aristotle said long ago. We have been given reason so that we can think, and thinking is a divine gift. The problem is that it is possible to know a lot without being reasonable. The point is to be able to put those two things together!

On the one hand, one has the Prophet while he was still in Mecca, on the other is the Prophet who has gone to Medina. The Prophet in Mecca is a mystic whose message doesn't differ much from Christ's: focus on God. But in Medina, where he had fled, he was asked to mediate between the different religious communities. Because of his reputation for being just, he became a leader, whether he liked it or not.

Imagine that Christ, with his beautiful message, had suddenly become a tribal or national leader. Would his message have remained the same? Wouldn't his vision have changed? When you are forced to practice politics, everything suddenly becomes so much more concrete, so much more worldly.

The Prophet operated in a specific historical context, in a world where slavery was still common and where having a daughter almost amounted to a curse. Still, he plead for the emancipation of slaves and women. To the moment of his death, he remained a humanist and a feminist. He was a Prophet who remain very much open to others, who entered into a dialogue with his age.

For us, as Muslims with common sense, it is obvious and necessary to see the belligerent passages in the Koran as historical words from the seventh century. It would be an absolute mistake to try to claim that they are universally valid. And they may never, ever be used to harm another person.

Let's act with our reason and with our hearts! There is nothing spiritual or transcendent about murder or war: they have to do with relationships between people, with territories you want to defend or expand. Is a military victory a victory for God? Are the cries of the dying a symphony to the greater glory of God? What's religious about one people exterminating another people?

\* The Koran, Az-Zumar, 39:18

## Reflection

So Muslims were going to go to Paradise, but not the rest of the world? And unbelievers, like my teachers at school, so they were doomed too? I couldn't figure that. I still can't figure that.

At primary school we learned about Mother Teresa. So that woman, who gave her life to others, who set aside her own life in order to perform good works, so she was going to Hell too? I asked my father about it. He said: "People like her will not suffer in their graves. But they're not Muslims, so they won't go to Paradise." That seemed unfair to me. Why not her, while a common, everyday person who never did anything for anyone else would find the gates of Paradise opened wide for them, simply because they're a Muslim?

My father's answer puzzled me, but I didn't want to play the part of the Che Guevara of the family. My father stuck to the sermons of our imam, and I can understand that. His primary task was to raise his children well and to connect our religion to the values of this country, not necessarily to carry out endless philosophical and theological discussions.

But in my circles, when one questions something, the answer is still often enough: "You don't have enough knowledge and insight to give your opinion." I don't agree with that. Each one of us has the capacity to reflect, we have been given intelligence in order to ask relevant questions. Some people have lots of knowledge to fall back on, but still have a closed mind. But tell me, isn't an open mind more important than pure knowledge?

The ability to think is a gift from God. You need to cherish that, you may use that. So many people have developed insights that have helped mankind to advance; that is a divine wonder. To just shove that all aside because it doesn't happen to be Islamic truly shows a lack of respect for the rest of humanity, which forces you to ignore all kinds of valuable things.

# Curiosity

As far as I'm concerned, wisdom begins with curiosity.

I've always been curious about the history of the West and the East. I've always had a desire to learn and to meet other people. At school I was a rather playful pupil; I was full of humor and naughtiness. I liked to joke around when we were supposed to be working, when we were supposed to be serious, and so I had to stay after sometimes. But I was wild about the classes in world-orientation; they were about the universe, about history, about the Celts of ancient Gaul. I read comic books based on Greek mythology, I was a fan of Asterix.

One who succeeds in stimulating a young child's curiosity is in fact inviting that person to find out about others.

I truly love history. Ancient history, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the colonial era. And by that I mean history without biases: a son is in no way responsible for his father's mistakes. But history has to be known and acknowledged, so that we can all make progress together.

The future? It starts with history.

# History

Generally speaking, Muslims don't know much about the history of Islam. But human thought evolves. Islam is a religion about which people have done a lot of thinking and, obviously, about which a lot more thinking will take place. By learning the history of Islam, you find out that there have been all sorts of varying opinions, all different varieties of openness. Tenth-century Baghdad was an amazing place. Scholars there analyzed the thinking of the Greeks, the Indians, the Persians...

Islam is not one thing. It has many faces.

These days, many Muslims are afraid of getting lost. "Don't ask so many questions! It will only confuse you!" That shows how unsure people can be about their faith. Some of them measure the credibility of an imam by the length of his beard. Please, abundant growth on the chin isn't a sign of wisdom, is it? When you're sure of yourself, you can go very far and still always find your way back.

I have a lot of respect for Martin Luther: you have to be awfully sure of yourself to turn against the Church like that! Risking his own neck, he still did it, because he was god-fearing and devoted. When he saw the contrast between the "poor entering the Kingdom of Heaven" and the riches of the Vatican, when he understood all that business about paying indulgences... he asked himself a couple of highly relevant questions.

The history of religion in Europe is filled with violence. The Inquisition, the Reformation, wars...



# Self-confidence

It seems to me that there's a lack of self-confidence in my surroundings. Among my friends there is a fear of being wrong, of making errors in reasoning, of seeing things incorrectly.

I've had that same feeling myself. As a child, I sincerely believed that blonde girls were better than brunettes; I clearly had a complex about the color of my skin. Added to that, our parents were constantly emphasizing that we owed something to Belgium. There was always a sort of sense of obligation towards this country that had welcomed us – even though we had never asked to be born here, or anywhere else for that matter!

I was six the first time someone called me a “dirty Moroccan”. It was a neighbor of ours, a man of Greek origin, who shouted it from a balcony across the street. It was meant as a joke, but it hurt me. I went inside and closed the doors to the balcony. Since then I've heard it a few times. But the good thing about Molenbeek was that we were all together. The residents of Belgian origin had all bailed out, there weren't a lot of them left. We had Flemish neighbors who never spoke to us. My father said they were racists; he had tried to strike up a conversation with them. I think they were in a state of shock, after that sudden wave of immigrants. And I can understand that. Change is always frightening.

I didn't know what to say back to that “dirty Moroccan”. At school they didn't teach us that Belgium needed immigrants. If they had, I could have said: “Hey, listen, it's your country that asked my father to come and work here!” So instead of self-confidence, I felt more like I was on a lower level, that I owed something to others.

And during adolescence, of course, you start doubting everything. Why should you feel grateful to a country where you happened to be born, just like everyone else, but where other people still called you a “dirty Moroccan”, even though that same country invited your father's generation to come and work there?

# Travel

In secondary school, I was a miserable student. Mathematics made me sick. I had a real phobia when it came to numbers. I went to public secondary school; that, of course, is what our hardworking, proletarian fathers really wanted. Their dream was that we would go to college and become lawyers or doctors. But the teachers didn't pass that passion along to us, that hunger for learning. I flunked my third year and then my fifth, and at the age of eighteen I dropped out of school without a diploma. My parents weren't happy about that, but I did it gradually. I told my father that I was going to explore other possibilities, but in fact I went right from the classroom to my first job. I went to work as a temp at the airport, doing night shifts and sorting mail for the TNT. That allowed me to travel, just by looking at all that mail. There were destinations all over the world, written on the front of those envelopes.

# Meeting

One day she came into the shop.

By that time, I was selling cell phones in Anderlecht. She came in to buy a phone. I remember that first time we met, her eyes.

There was no play of seduction involved.

I was simply interested and curious.

I wanted to get to know her, she seemed very pretty and very intelligent. Not a made-up kind of beauty, no, a natural beauty, someone with nothing artificial about them.

Neither inside nor out.

I was twenty-three.

She had a beautiful face, big eyes, a lovely nose, a sweet mouth that was made even prettier by her beautiful smile that ended in a dimple at both ends.

Her face radiated so much love, so much goodness.

Loubna...

# Relationship

I gave her my number, without much hope, really. But a few days later, she called. That first time we went to drink something at the old covered market, the Sint-Gorikshallen. The weather was warm.

She had just completed teaching college, to become a physical education instructor. She was nine months younger than me. In the period that followed, I saw her regularly. She was an intelligent girl with a very open mind, which was a good match for my own way of looking at life. My family came from the Rif, in the north, where people are generally more withdrawn. She was from Salé, close to Rabat, where people tend to be more open. But it clicked between us, right from the start. She was a Muslim too, but she didn't wear a headscarf, she didn't feel that was necessary for the path she meant to follow in life.

She lived in Schaarbeek. Six months later we became engaged. We announced it officially to the family. My parents went to her parents and asked for her hand. It was hard for my mother to accept my leaving home.

On November 20, 2004, we had the civil ceremony, a few weeks later we threw a party and invited everyone. After the civil wedding and after receiving the imam's blessing, we moved into an apartment in Schaarbeek. It wasn't far from where she worked, at the Islamic Al-Ghazi School. There weren't a lot of female gym teachers.

# Living together

Living together went well, but we had to get used to it. I loved to cook, but I always dirtied about twenty pans. The food was good, but the kitchen looked as though a hurricane had hit it. I was so much sloppier than she was. I'm a sort of Diogenes. She was very organized. I had to learn to temper myself a bit.

We also had to learn how to communicate. When I read that book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, it came as a revelation to me. We men sometimes get things all wrong, we don't always understand what women mean. When a man gets lost in a strange city, for example, he'll make a decision and follow the traffic signs. But then the woman says he needs to turn here or there, so the man thinks: What is this? Does she think I can't find my way? He sees it as an attack on his masculinity. Even though the woman's only thinking: I love him, I'm going to help him.

You have couples where the man is constantly trying to prove to the woman what he's capable of, but he forgets what it's really all about. Sometimes a woman doesn't need anything but a shoulder, a willing ear or attention, and not someone who tries to give her the world on a platter.

I'm all for equal dealings between men and women, that's enormously enriching. But there's no denying those differences in sensitivities and experience. You have to keep working constantly on understanding each other, on getting to know each other better.

Love is something you have to work at, absolutely. And you have to nurture her, just like you do your faith.

In the first few months we had fights about senseless things. Later we stopped fighting almost altogether. Loubna and I dealt with each other very peacefully. We fit well together, we were totally in contact. We shared the same ideas about the world, about things and about Islam. We shared the same love for others.

Loubna, in fact, is speaking through everything I say here.

What's more, we supported each other in our plans. We called each other at work every day, to ask how it was going. I had found a job as a metro rail driver. I worked from afternoon till evening in that dark, underground Brussels, but when we had a break we called each other. We were like a couple of overgrown children. We were always pulling jokes on each other. One time, I replaced one of her girlfriends' numbers with mine, in the contact list of her cell phone, and when she called I imitated her friend's voice. Sometimes I would start talking like an elderly Moroccan, or do an African accent. Man, we laughed so much during those twelve years.