

# Tell Someone

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## An extract

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One evening he appeared at my door. I had just kicked off my shoes, tidied away my portfolio and started to warm up some leftovers from the night before. It had been a good day and I was in the best of moods. I was not only extremely satisfied with the work I had done, I was also pleased the sultan's office had finally granted me the long-awaited permission to draw in the palace garden. It had taken great effort to persuade the French officials to intervene on my behalf. Why should they use their influence to help a simple sketch artist like me? How would it be to their advantage? I wasn't a wealthy merchant or property baron for whom they would gladly wear out their shoe leather.

I had already reconciled myself to the fact I would never see behind the palace walls. The lucky few who had seen the garden swore it was breathtakingly beautiful and filled with the most unusual plants. But I wasn't interested in the flora. I had already seen all manner of curious vegetation in the plains and valleys around Fez and Meknes, and I didn't expect to discover anything out of the ordinary in the sultan's landscaped garden. What I really wanted was access to the palace itself. Permission to work in the garden was the first step towards something much bigger. I wanted to draw Sultan Yusef ben Hassan and his entourage. Perhaps I could even get a glimpse of his famous harem. I had already drawn a flattering colour portrait of the sultan. Once inside, I would make sure it reached him. I was convinced it would only be a matter of time until he sent for me to thank me. I would then suggest sketching a family portrait worthy of his rank and status.

Anything was possible now I had received permission to enter the garden.

Just as I was about to spoon the leftovers onto a plate, there was a knock at the door. I looked through a crack in the wood and recognised the wiry young lad I often saw dashing around the city as I sat drawing. He was a runner for one of the sultan's askars. I could tell from the seal on the letters and parcels he delivered.

A week earlier, he had stopped at a fountain where I was sitting. He had cupped the clear water in his hands and drunk it carefully. When I had returned to my sketch, I had felt him look over my shoulder at my drawing. I turned around and saw a sparkle in his grey clay-coloured eyes. He had jumped, as if he felt he had been caught.

Without saying a word, he ran down an alleyway. I was left with a feeling I couldn't quite describe. Much to my annoyance, I lost interest in my sketch of an exquisite cedarwood awning etched with Jewish symbols and didn't finish it. Not a single newspaper back home would want it anyway. They preferred pretty young girls or fierce Amazigh fighters. Those were the only kind of drawings that paid well.

I also saw him in the street where I was staying. He entered an ugly building, a mosque for a small, obscure Sufi sect, at Maghrib time. He was in a hurry and I thought he hadn't seen me, but I

now realised he had been watching me for some time and knew where I lived. I often came across him as I worked in the shade somewhere. I had a strong feeling he had been looking out for me secretly as he delivered letters and packages across the city. For some inexplicable reason, I kept an eye out for him too, searching for him in crowds at the Bab Boujloud, or in squares in the Andalusian quarter. We never exchanged a single word, but whenever I passed him in the street, we glanced fleetingly at each other, as though we had something in common. And now he was standing at my door.

‘*Chkoun?* Who’s there?’ I asked.

He mumbled his name, but I didn’t quite catch it.

I opened the door and he looked at me, uncertain. He said hello and asked if he could see my drawings. I’m not usually in the habit of letting any old stranger in, especially not that late, but, as I said, there was something about this lad I couldn’t quite explain. There was something about him that stayed with me long after he disappeared from sight.

I let him in, and he followed me down the narrow hallway to my studio. His eyes darted around the room when he saw the walls covered in drawings, newspaper cuttings, and photos from magazines. He looked about seventeen or eighteen at most. He was immediately attracted to a large drawing hanging in the middle of the wall, one of my few colour drawings. He was enchanted, as though he wasn’t just in a dingy room, but rather a majestic salon in a magnificent stately home with Great Masters in gilt frames decorating the walls.

‘That’s a horseman from Ras El Ma,’ I explained. ‘Ras El Ma is a coastal town in the North, I drew this during the *lab el-bar-oud*, the Gunpowder Game.’

He went right up to the drawing and held his breath as he examined the powerful, tensed muscles of the horse’s legs. ‘How did you manage to copy the horse so well?’

‘With a lot of practice and close observation.’

I couldn’t immediately place his Arabic. It was clear he wasn’t from Fez. I already had a feeling he was Amazigh, and that he had only learned Arabic later in life. He wasn’t very fluent, much like me in fact.

‘Would you like some tea?’ I asked.

‘I need to get back to the barracks before they lock the gates. Can I come another time?’

I nodded. ‘I’m out a lot though.’

‘I’ll be here around the same time,’ he said and left.

Over the next few days, he returned after Maghrib prayers. He couldn’t get enough of my drawings and wanted to know everything about them. He wanted to know all the places I had been and if there were others like me who travelled the country to draw everything.

I began to enjoy his company and even found myself rushing home towards the end of the afternoon, just in case he appeared at my door earlier than usual, but he never did. When he finished his day as a runner, he had a few hours free to come and pray at the mosque in my street before calling at my door.

He told me his father, a Zayane, had died in a battle I’d never heard of. I told him my own grandfather had fought under Napoleon, and that he had been kept a prisoner of war by the British for a long time. I showed him a detailed drawing of the *Redoubtable* warship – the ship on which my grandfather had served until it was sunk by the British. He was amazed that even seas could be transformed into battle fields.

‘Only the sky is free of war,’ he said. I nodded and refrained from explaining that not even the skies were free of war now. I didn’t want to unsettle him with stories of French planes spewing fire on people and herds of animals in the north of his country.

One evening he noticed a pile of Arabic books. He picked up the top one and flicked through it. 'Do you read Arabic?'

'Yes, I learned Arabic, but my knowledge is rather limited,' I said.

I had assumed he was illiterate, so I was amazed when he read the title aloud.

'I learned to read and write from a sheik,' he said. 'Show me some drawings of your country.'

I truly wanted to show him my world. I was proud of it. The first time I left my own region, I had been ecstatic. I was excited and couldn't wait to travel the world, following in the footsteps of our visionary leaders. Had there ever been a grander or more honourable undertaking than to transform the uncivilized world into a place as beautiful and noble as our own fatherland? Back then, a flame burned within me, a flame that still surprises me now. I hadn't doubted for an instant that we were the greatest.

Back then, I didn't realise that leaving was neither heroic nor romantic. Leaving is a calamitous loss, the impact of which is only fully revealed at the moment you are no longer able to return.

I went back to where I was born, but it was gone. I came home to a village where I didn't recognise anyone, and where small things, details, reminded me my world was lost forever. It felt as if I had imagined my past and taken a wrong turn, ending up in a world I recognised, but which no longer felt familiar.

My mother died when I was in Africa. The sight of her black woollen coat hanging on the hook without a purpose made me reel.

When I stood at her grave for the first time, I scrabbled around in vain for something to grasp. Everything had gone and, with all that remained, life was tough. I was brusque with anyone I passed in the street, so they eventually stopped greeting me.

'I have a beautiful drawing of my region,' I said, pulling out a folder from under a tall stack of books. I looked for a drawing that showed both Fourgères castle and Nançon valley. As I searched for it, the lad poked through the piles of drawings and folders. I didn't mind. He looked at the drawings, occasionally asking me to explain them before returning them carefully to where he had found them. I finally located the drawing I was looking for, and when I turned towards him, I noticed he'd gone pale and was reaching for a chair. He had a drawing of the sun girl in his right hand.

'Yemma,' he said before collapsing on the chair.

I knew very well he wasn't any old passer-by, just another one wanting to admire my talent.

I have never been religious. Nor have I ever really known fear, even though I have been in the most perilous of situations. However, when I saw him holding my drawing of his mother, I was sure he had come to settle a debt I never thought I would have to repay. God never forgets. I had separated myself from my kind and my culture.

Could he have been my son if I had raised him in my faith and my language?

Could I have saved him?

What if I had been able to save him? I'd have saved him before he was born. I'd have saved *her*, the sun girl. I'd have been a man who saved his wife and child. I'd have been a husband and father who shouldered his responsibility. But I had not, because how can you be a father to a child who is not one of your own? It felt like an evil charm had been cast on the pair of us in that room. He stared at the drawing as I tried to suppress the doubts welling up within me.

I cursed the day he had first looked over my shoulder at my drawings. What did he want from me? For a long time, I had told myself I didn't need to look back. Only the future mattered, the past was gone and meaningless. Just as the truth had vanished and was of no significance to anyone.

'Why did you draw my mother?' he asked.

I tried to hide my confusion and told him I had lived in her village for a while, that I had drawn everything I could, including the girls and boys.

He wanted to know the name of the village and where it was. He asked if I had witnessed the attack by the sultan's askars. His mother had apparently fled the village with him during the attack. He had only been a few weeks old, and they had never returned to their village.

There hadn't been any animosities when I lived there. I remembered the village as a place where time seemed to stand still. Nonetheless, I had sensed that some young men were suspicious. They didn't trust me and my sheets of paper. The amghar, the village chief, made it extremely clear to them at the time that I was welcome and could come and go as I pleased. Most of the young men's suspicions gradually waned and some were even friendly towards me.

I hadn't come to the village to forge friendships or understand how those people lived and thought. There wasn't really much to understand; they believed in fate. Things either happened, or didn't happen, and all they could do was say Inshallah.

'Did you know my father?' he asked.

'No,' I said as I put the drawing of Fourgères away. 'She wasn't old enough to marry when I lived there.'

His mother had apparently told him a story that didn't include a foreigner. His father was a Zayane - that was his truth. The tension that had risen within me when I saw him with that drawing started to ease. He didn't know anything.

He and I inhabited two different worlds. Different rules and beliefs applied in our two worlds. The truth didn't really matter here, at this point. My reality could never be his, and his truth could never be mine.

'You can keep the drawing if you like.' I didn't dare ask him about her, even though I wanted to know how she was, if she was still alive, if she was happy. But I was afraid I would raise his suspicions.

He thanked me for the drawing and left. I later learned he deserted the barracks that very evening to go to his mother's village.

I knew he would come back with more truth in his head than he could cope with. He would hold me to account. But I no longer wanted to flee. I would wait for him.

He had told me he spent several years as a sheik's pupil, studying the word of his God. He knew, therefore, that everything had a time and a reason. The reason may escape us when our hearts burn and we overflow with rage, but order and reason exist, and we must accept them. If we do not, we call down evil upon ourselves. He and I were living proof.

His mother, the sun girl, had caught my eye the very first day I arrived in the village. A sun had been tattooed between her eyebrows. She walked like a goddess and, unlike the other girls, rarely laughed. She wasn't afraid of animals or people and most certainly not of spirits. The sun girl dared come to the well just as dawn broke; almost everyone else avoided the water source just before sunrise and just after sunset. They believed those were the very moments when devils and demons crawled out of their hiding places, gathering around the well to pounce on the unsuspecting and take possession of their bodies. The rest of the villagers only dared approach the well once the sun had driven away the darkness and shadows. But the sun girl had no use for childish superstitions. It was as though she didn't want to squander a single moment of the new day.

I adopted her routine and she often found me at the well when she arrived with her earthenware jar on her back. I would greet her, she would nod back and begin to draw water without paying me much heed. From time to time I brought her a gift, a piece of fruit or a beaded necklace I had bought because I liked the colours, but she never accepted anything I offered her. I searched her dark eyes for some sort of connection, but she remained as unfathomable as the Eastern beauties I had seen in the sketchpads of men who had been to Asia. I dreamed of drawing her portrait, just like Delacroix's scantily clad women in harems. One morning I was bold enough to walk right up to her and stroke

her cheek. She let me commit this trespass. I was afraid she wouldn't return to the well after I had been so forward, but I was pleased to see her there the next morning, so I took her hand and kissed her on the lips. She simply went on with her work, as though it was a perfectly normal greeting.

I drew her as she filled her jar with fresh water. And with each bucket she poured into the jar, my soul felt like it was being purified with the crystal-clear water. I was light and joyful.

I thought about her day and night. I was afraid I was losing my mind. Not a day went by when we didn't meet at the well before dawn. It became our secret ritual. We never spoke. She drew water and I drew her. Or I simply watched as the rising sun made her skin glow so that it looked like she was made of gold.

I knew I was playing with fire. In these wild parts, white men had been killed for less than even a passing glance at a woman. But I was unable to quell the fever in my body with any reasonable argument. One morning, I took her by the hand and led her to a secluded spot behind some tall reeds. She followed me, smiling shyly, as though silently urging me on. I pulled her dress up over her head and gasped. In the light filtering through the reeds she looked like a southern Indian goddess carved out of stone. Her skin was as white and cool as those perfectly sculpted age-old images. She was like a slave in the sultan's harem, an image of a forbidden beauty come to life. I laid her carefully on the soft moss. She kept her eyes shut the entire time and lay there, motionless, as she let me have my way. I couldn't believe I was holding her breast in the palm of my hand, breathing in the sweet smell of her navel. I had often dreamed of her skin, trying to conjure up the curves of her thighs, and here I was kissing her neck as she lay before me.

I shuddered. I hadn't been in this country long and each new valley and tribe I discovered made me cocky. I never doubted that I could go anywhere I wanted, to the Sahara or beyond, that I would see things no white man had likely ever seen. I had always felt entitled, even though the only thing I had beyond my drawing kit was my race, my origins, which gave me the freedom to come and go as I pleased.

Everything was possible. I was an adventurer who held nothing sacred. An entire continent lay at my feet for me to discover.

I explored her skin and had the feeling I had finally reached the heart of this dark land.

She stopped coming to the well after that, but I couldn't get her body out of my mind. I made all sorts of attempts to approach her, discreetly at first. Then I took greater risks, like sending a young boy to her house with a beautiful cotton cloth she immediately sent back. I drew her constantly. I only needed to close my eyes and she appeared before me. I sent her the drawing I felt best captured her beauty and was pleased when the boy returned without it. But I never saw her again. It was as if she had never existed.

I walked around the village forlorn, afraid my feelings would drive me to reckless, foolhardy actions. I knew I had to leave.

It was the first time since my arrival that I considered returning to Fez to seek out the company of fellow Frenchmen. I missed long conversations in my own language and wanted to find out what was happening at home.

The night before my departure, I dug out the bottle of wine I had saved for so long and drank it dry. I reached a pleasant state of inebriation. I wasn't drunk, but I had the feeling the mild night meant well with me. I stood outside the house where I was staying and delighted in the calm. The gentle breeze carried a soft sound. At first, I wondered if I had really heard it. Perhaps the wine was playing tricks on me.

When I held my breath, I could clearly hear girls' voices. I stepped out into the night to find out where the sound was coming from. It was faint, yet everywhere, as though it came from the sky. I closed my eyes to hear the voices better. One voice sang a line, followed by several other voices. The song reminded me of a flock of starlings painting a glorious, occasionally fanciful, yet always

harmonious pattern against the blue sky. I knew I had to leave if my body were to find peace once more.

A few days later, I left for Fez, hoping I would be cured of the fever I felt each time I thought about her. I only returned to the village a year later. I wanted to know what had happened to her, but I couldn't just ask about her without offending the men. In the Amazigh culture, it is indecent for a man to ask about a woman. The young boy who had taken my gifts to her told me the sun girl had been sent away because she was with child. A young man who had travelled from village to village to help on the land was presumed to be the father. The boy said the sun girl's aunt had returned a few months earlier without the sun girl but with a child instead, a girl. When the boy appeared at my studio, I thought I had remembered incorrectly, and that the aunt had returned with a boy. What I didn't yet know was that the sun girl had borne twins. A boy and a girl.

I wanted to believe I hadn't been the only one. That if she had given herself to me so easily, then there must have been others to whom she had given away her honour.

When I passed her family's house, I felt the pain surrounding it, like a hedge with jagged thorns that could harm me if I got too close. Less than a week after my arrival, I left again, never to return.

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