

# The Reward

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## 1

I'm known by many pseudonyms, but let's start with the name I was given when I was born. I'm Zakaria, a thoroughbred Belgian of Moroccan origins – fortunately I don't look like a Moroccan – and like my parents, brother Bilal and sister Leyla, I was born and brought up in this Belgianland. As a child I went through life as a cheerful, sociable and extremely civilised boy. Mum taught me at an early age that good manners were of essential importance. Despite her temperament, to her, politeness was the olive oil that eased interpersonal friction. She also made great fried eggs with it, olive oil from the first pressing.

Speaking of pressing, I just thought of something that I should mention in this introduction, not a shocking event as such, but one with big consequences: the day I let go of my politeness. I squatted in the bath tub, clenched my fists, closed my eyes tight, pressed down with all my might, and heard my warm diarrhoea flow into the bath tub. A blissful moment, this form of rebellion. I felt strong, courageous, happy. Rebelling did me good. It also made me careless. I didn't hear my father come in. A knock on my head. My smile disappeared.

I looked at him in surprise. Why this attack out of the blue? Even the child of a Moroccan father has a right to privacy. And why *one* knock? Surely you knock on a door a couple of times? If someone knocks once on your door, do you open up? Never. Was it just me or did dad have a screw or two loose? I was confused, felt that something wasn't quite right upstairs in me either. Probably a little door that would no longer shut.

Dad stared at the bath tub, retching, and then resolutely turned on the shower to rinse my rebellious bum. I leapt out of the bath tub, landed badly and slid across the wet floor, landing slap-bang on my tailbone. I felt like screaming, but the mutineer in me managed to control himself. So much pain for something so useless. A real tail would have enabled me to keep my balance, and I could have smacked him with it or used it as a fly swatter. Any father would ask his son if he was ok. Dad didn't even look at me. He obviously thought I'd got what I deserved and dryly washed away the deluge.

Mum had also heard the lonely knock, she stormed upstairs with the peeler she used for carrots, potatoes, onions and green apples. She saw me in all my helplessness, rushed up to her prey and bellowed, 'How dare you touch my precious, gentle little bunny! I'll peel your head like a potato.'

My father had just turned the tap off. He tried to fend her off, bellowed at her to calm down, in vain. Having thrown a few hooks, head-butted and kneed each other several times and done

everything permitted in mixed martial arts, they fell to the bathroom floor, exhausted. Mum wouldn't let go. Dad tried to parry her potato peeler, her teeth, her knees, her nails. It was a battle of life and death. Man or woman. Mum or dad. Child or spouse. All or nothing. No place for politeness here. Meanwhile I took the time to wipe my buttocks clean, washed my hands and sat down on the toilet seat to watch comfortably from the place of honour as the fight of the century played out. Dad got hold of the knife and threw it out of her reach. But you mustn't ever underestimate mum, she doesn't need a knife. She grabbed her husband by the hair, shook his head back and forth, kneed him sharply, only let go when exhaustion prevented her from continuing.

She stood up, wheezing, rearranged her curls, smoothed her dress and hissed, 'Don't you ever touch my little bunny again, I'm warning you.'

'What will the world come to if our children are allowed to fill the bath with shit?' dad mumbled.

'Speak up, I can't hear you.'

'It's your fault if your son goes off the rails. It's your fault, clear enough?' dad yelled.

'Blame the mother, where have I heard that before?'

Mum shuffled away triumphantly to make dinner. Dad disappeared cursing into the garden, where he lit one cigarette after another.

I was enjoying the afterglow of an exciting fight, between two well-matched parties, with my mother as the deserving winner.

Anyone who touched her child would meet the fate of a potato, peeled and mashed.

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One of my father's brothers who I only recognised from an old photo came for a hospital visit after my father's death. He was large and thick-set, wore an ugly brown suit with white Adidas tennis socks underneath and worn-out slippers. He sauntered across the room emanating an air of saintliness. He took his sweet time with every word, as if he were saying something extremely momentous. The man seemed particularly impressed with himself and after every sentence he laughed uproariously, exposing his filthy teeth. He wanted to pay for the funeral, he proclaimed so loudly that they could have heard him all the way to the mosque. On condition that everything was done according to the rules. Which meant he'd take dad ASAP, wash him ASAP, wrap him in white sheets ASAP, bury him – coffin or no coffin – ASAP. There were beautiful Muslim cemeteries in Belgium, which would save a load of money. The flights to Morocco currently cost a fortune. Mum hid her bald patches under a headscarf. That made a big impression on my uncle. He took the headscarf as an advancement in her piety. Nevertheless mum wasn't permitted to go along to the funeral: women just cause a fuss. Fuss, that's the collective term for the typical things women do at funerals: crying hysterically, beating themselves, ripping their clothes to shreds, leaping around like wild witches, seductively beckoning to men who just want to express their grief in peace. Besides, women would disturb dad's rest with all the commotion. Mum briefly made so bold as to protest. My uncle, who I only knew from an old photo, growled that mum shouldn't be so selfish. There was no place for long-drawn-out drama at a brief half-hour burial. The rules are clear. Women were banned. If you started letting women in, next thing you knew you'd end up a cemetery full of wagging pets. My uncle could understand that some men liked to have their pets present, but a woman at such an event is a thing you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy.

Mum trembled with rage, sadness and impotence. She wanted to lash out as only she knew how. My uncle, who I now knew from more than just a photo, was going to get an earful, but she collapsed before she got that far. Leyla cried out. Mum had no sense of time or space, she stammered that she would never say good-bye to dad. That way he would remain in her heart for eternity.

My uncle, who I wished I only knew from a photo, shook his head disdainfully. He struck my jaw with the palm of his hand and yanked me up by the ears, to teach me a lesson. As a man my presence at the funeral was mandatory, otherwise I wasn't a real man, just a little slut. Leyla, who could take a penalty to make many a professional footballer jealous, had meanwhile crept up to him and given him a hard kick between his legs. My uncle wobbled on his worn-out slippers and roared. He was about to give Leyla a beating, when my brother threw a chair at his head. Billy set off at a run. To distract my uncle, I too threw a chair at his head. He tried to beat us with his leather belt. Leyla screamed blue murder. My father's devout brother was restrained by sturdy nurses. Meanwhile the Giant Nurse winked flirtatiously at me. Leyla saw her chance and scored another magnificent kick between the legs. My uncle, who I would no longer recognise from that photo, was unable to laugh about it with us. This treatment was against Islamic regulations, but promises lead to debts: he paid for the funeral. I still couldn't believe that God had made up those rules. My uncle was taking advantage of the moment to stand in for God.

The wink from the Giant Nurse kept me awake. To boost my confidence I asked mum for dad's hat. Unfortunately in an attempt to process her grief she'd cooked it up and eaten it, liberally sprinkled with salt and pepper. That way dad would remain in her heart for good. It would be fine without the hat, I told myself. The main thing was not to turn up late.

A few days later the mountain didn't come to Zakaria, but Zakaria went to the mountain. I rang the bell punctually. She opened the door with a mischievous smile and a cute gleam in her eye.

'Hello, little Moroccan.'

'Hello, madam. You're mistaken, I'm a Belgian.'

'You're a funny little Moroccan too,' she grinned.

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## 2

'Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to bid you a warm welcome. It's splendid to see so many of you. I feel my heart growing, I feel it leaping with joy. For those who don't know me, I'm Mr Janssens, but please call me Jan. All that formal fuss brings me out in a rash.' Here Mr Janssens paused for laughter. No one laughed.

'Let's jump right in!'

The man had a blowfly face. The public applauded. I watched Jan with a certain admiration.

'As usual, I'll begin the auction with a solemn promise.

I promise not to disappoint you. It breaks my heart when I see doubt in people's eyes. Believe me, not only do we have the keenest prices, with us you're sure of top quality too. Aha, our fresh products are already being placed on the podium.

As you can see, today we have some magnificent pieces. Some with a natural beauty, others less so. But beauty is relative, the exterior remains a matter of taste. This year's beauty can just as easily become next year's... But I have no understanding of fashion. Our motto remains: fat, thin, poor or wealthy, with us they're always eminently healthy. Corny joke? I know, I know. But that doesn't make it any less true.

Well anyway, dear friends, you should see our products as the perfect dough. Dough that you can kneed, long and hard, until you get the right shape. Your shape, your ideal standard.

Then you let it rise, put it in the oven, breathe in the delicious smell, take it out of the oven, behold the shape, warmth, flavour. An indescribable feeling. Then you butter the bread, toast it, dip it, do what you want with it. After all, it's your bread.'

Someone raised a hand to ask a question, but Jan ignored them.

(...)

'Dear friends, for today only – and I repeat: for today only – I have a temporary offer of the keenest prices.'

A wave of enthusiasm rose among those present. I stood waiting with my fellow bargains and got the giggles.

Before we went on stage, Mrs Janssens had given us a little pill, which had enchanted us. I felt like Messi, ready to shine in a packed-out Camp Nou.

On the podium we stood to attention like smiling soldiers. We had numbers pinned to us. I was 8, which I thought was a lovely number.

I had to laugh about Mr Janssens. Not only did he have a blowfly face, he also spoke and moved like a buzzing dung fly. Meanwhile I looked to see if there was a fly swatter lying around. I felt like squashing him. If only I had a tail now! He wore an immaculate white suit, with a golden yellow tie and white patent leather shoes. That suit was crying out to be splattered with blood. Just then he'd compared us with delicious bread. That made me hungry, especially when he said they could butter us, toast us, dip us. The idea that I could be of such varied use cheered me up, strangely enough. I smiled at the audience, blew them kisses. The other children also did their best to look as good as possible.

Leyla giggled at a man in the audience who couldn't keep his eyes off her. They'd pinned a number 1 on her. Today I harboured no grudges, today she could be number 1, just for today.

My brother was number 4. He stared ahead with a broad grin. Bilal could look so tough. I wanted to kiss my brother and sister, but Mrs Janssens would give us what for if we dared move.

Jan Blowfly waved a little hammer. He called Leyla's name, the audience went wild, yelling, raising their hands in the air. They bid up the price. There was a great deal of money involved. Going once, twice, Leyla was sold to an elderly woman with grey hair, an owl face and what looked like a pair of ivory goggles. Leyla was to go with her. Full of enthusiasm she raised her hands in the air, gave us a quick wave and skipped into the arms of the grey-haired lady.

'What love!' bellowed Jan Blowfly. 'Our fiery parade horse has found her rider.'

Number 2 was less of a storm, number 3 even less so, but there was still plenty of bidding. When it came to Bilal, the engine revved up again, he was sold to a younger couple who burst into tears as soon as they were allowed to touch him.

By number 5 half the audience had left. By number 6 a quarter remained. My jaw ached from smiling. Number 7 was practically a giveaway, they'd have thrown me in for free, but the customer wasn't bothered.

Jan Blowfly brought the hammer down on his head, his arm gestures were growing ever wilder, his intonation went from aggressive to pathetic until it brought a lump to my throat. He managed to say a great deal about my qualities. My thin body and oversized head were an expression of my real strength and athleticism, as well as my enormous endurance. My obedient, penetrating eyes showed that I wasn't one of the clever ones, a big advantage in little Jan Blowfly's view. No applause, the few remaining audience members left the room.

An elderly man with a grey hat and a wiry walrus moustache was staring at me. He removed his hands from his trousers, which were too short, pulled his white sports socks up, fiddled a bit with his wiry moustache.

'Sir, I see you're seriously interested in our final product!' cried Mr Blowfly.

The man raised his bristly eyebrows.  
'I'm actually looking for a puppy.'  
'You can use him as a pet too. He's very obedient. If you take a good look, you'll see he has something of a beaten dog about him.'  
'Now you mention it.'

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In the first days after the attack we were front-page news and it was hotly debated whether it was an ordinary heist with fatalities or an act of terror. That made it all far worse. Various terrorist groups had claimed the attack. That's the way they are: let someone else do the work and then take all the credit. During the act we'd spoken a few words of Arabic. The profile of the culprit made it clear that the robbers were merciless. That was even less helpful. They were misogynists and lovers of bestiality. This was a terrorist attack by a special unit aimed at filling the coffers of Al Qaida and IS. We'd have to keep quiet for a long while. But Gregor convinced me that I wasn't in any danger with my new image.

He dragged me along with him, introduced me to his friends and said, 'This is Zaki, he looks like a little Moroccan, but he's not.'

And then I'd laugh and say, 'I'm not.'

They all spoke fast, wore magnificent 1930s suits and had the same close-shaven haircuts with a dead-straight parting. Meanwhile Tupac Shakur made even more effort to disappear. He sought out contact with old friends on the edge of society who had no idea about the attack. I got the feeling he wanted to leave Belgium again, but he didn't mention it to me. He didn't need to say it, I knew what he was thinking. I was too much of a burden to him.

Due to all my new social contacts, Tupac Shakur and I drifted apart until we completely lost touch and he vanished like a thief in the night. I was used to him doing that, and then resurfacing at the drop of a hat.

'It's in his nature,' Gregor said. 'He's never learnt to say a proper goodbye. Shake your hand and say, "Gregor, it was really nice to stay with you. Thanks for your hospitality." Short and sharp. A couple of friendly words are clearly too much to ask.'

'You're right, Greg,' – he now let me call him Greg – 'such rude behaviour is simply in his nature. I think he's gone to his wife in Morocco.'

'Is his wife pretty?' Greg asked.

'Pretty's an understatement.'

'Typical Tupac, when it comes to women he always had good taste.'

Mens sana in corpore sano. A healthy mind in a healthy body. Greg tortured his body in the gym almost every day, and to elevate my physique to a higher level I had to train with him. He and other close-shaven haircuts with gorilla chests were attempting to create the perfect body. At first I was intimidated by their jungle noises; loud burps and silent farts escaped their gorilla buttocks as they lifted enormous weights. Greg's friends put me at ease and they soon became my friends too. They encouraged me to train harder, eat well and get enough rest. That was the only way to get a killer body. After a few weeks I was fed up with lifting the same weights the whole time. But because I'd never had so many real Belgian friends, I kept it up. Between chest exercises Greg told me that he felt disadvantaged as a white man. Especially by feminists – always hysterical, as if they were just too late for the sale at the shopping centre – who expanded their power by belittling the white man. A dark-skinned man can still defend himself by yelling things like 'racist whores', but a white man is empty-handed. Women naturally have the verbal upper hand because they say an average of twenty thousand words a day, whereas men don't even get to seven thousand. Greg had clearly immersed himself in the issue. This terrorisation by vocabulary made men increasingly

subservient. Manliness was seen as a punishment, almost a shortcoming. That was because of the feminists – always hysterical, as if someone were pulling their hair – on a crusade against the real man. I gave Greg a manly pat on the shoulder and said I completely understood. Of all men it's the whites who suffer the most.

'I think it's simpler to be a Muslim. The women are obedient and recognise the value of a man.'

Suddenly the fight between my parents came to mind, mum on the point of peeling dad's head like a potato.

'What's wrong with an old-fashioned strong man who takes responsibility?' Greg yelled.

'Nothing, nothing whatsoever,' I replied.

I had the feeling Greg was acting out of character – I'd never seen him so emotional.

'And if you place your wife on a pedestal, protect her, worship her, if you're a saviour in times of need, then you're a piece of sexist filth. I'm scared, Zaki. Scared I'll always be alone. It's all the feminists' fault – always hysterical, as if they're chasing away crows – dripping with misandry. I'd rather go down fighting than give in to hysterical feminists.'

'And I'll stand by you to my death, brother.'

'Only real men do that,' Greg smiled.

As we worked on our shoulders, I told him about my affair with the Giant Nurse.