

Whitefly

Abdelilah Hamdouchi

Translated by
Jonathan Smolin



In the good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. And even if it is not significant, it has the potential to be so.

—Paul Auster

1

THE RAIN LET UP AROUND three o'clock. Detective Laafrit of the Criminal Investigations Unit approached his third-floor office window and looked out over the boulevard. Bright beams from the sun disappearing behind the rooftops slipped through the two buildings opposite him. The main police station here in Tangier was strangely quiet—the typewriters were silent, all meetings were postponed, and the offices were empty. If not for the security guard standing by the front door brandishing his gun, it would have been easy for anyone to come in off the street and wander around.

Through the glass, Laafrit became immersed in the back alleys. He could see the port clearly between the two buildings when he moved his head to avoid a large billboard. This glimpse of the port always enticed him to follow the boats setting out from Tangier to the other side. Each time, he'd wonder why they didn't shoot this captivating view for postcards since the boats looked from here like they were sailing between the buildings. Laafrit could also hear piercing sirens that drowned out the traffic. They were coming from ambulances, fire trucks, and police cars, exactly like the buildup to the climax of an American movie.

The scene now in Tangier was the real thing. It was in all of today's newspapers. *The Bride of the North* put two huge headlines on its front page: "Hundreds of Unemployed Youth Await News at Employment Office Gate" and "Hundreds of

Unemployed University Graduates Organize Protest March.” According to reports from informants who had flocked to the police station that morning, hidden hands were coordinating the two groups so they would combine into a huge demonstration marching toward City Hall.

Detective Laafrit, until now, had been spared from the police mobilization. The reason was that he had to finish off an urgent report on a case of premeditated poisoning that had claimed three victims. Laafrit had to highlight the criminal evidence so the file wasn’t added to the accidental poisonings that had happened recently in a number of cities, the result of people eating rotten salami. Nonetheless, he was expecting the phone to ring at any minute.

As for Laafrit himself, there was a lot to say. He was a little over forty, had got married seven years ago, and had a beautiful daughter named Reem. He was, to be more precise, of medium height and had a belly that protruded more than it should. His skin was fair, tending to pale, thanks to his incessant late nights. His eyes were melancholic and troubled, with that provocative look you’d expect to find on a cop. It was a look that seemed somewhat ambiguous—affected to a certain extent—but what he was known for most these days was his addiction to sucking on menthol lozenges after he’d quit smoking. His real name was Khalid Ibrahim and he got his nickname “Laafrit,” meaning “crafty,” from his professional and linguistic aptitude: he was the only cop in Tangier who spoke Spanish fluently and with a remarkable nimbleness, something that qualified him to work with the Spanish police as part of bilateral cooperation to fight drugs and illegal immigration.

When Laafrit reached the crowd of unemployed university graduates in front of one of the trade unions’ headquarters, the clash was about to break out. Ten minutes earlier he had received the commissioner’s orders to join in. Despite the

speed with which Laafrit had driven his Fiat Uno, the commissioner—who was sixty years old, on the brink of retirement, and suffering from diabetes—greeted him with a scowl that revealed his deep agitation. Laafrit had never seen the commissioner like this before. His hair was disheveled, his tie was crooked, and he was looking around wildly, as if he couldn't grasp the details of what was about to happen.

Laafrit sensed the confusion. A quick glance over the scene told him that the cafés, businesses, and shops had all shut their doors and hundreds of bystanders were flooding the middle of the street where the demonstration would presumably erupt after a few minutes. The labor-union headquarters was simmering with the crowd of unemployed graduates. Leading them were protestors raising long banners written years ago, still bearing the same slogans, all of them demanding work and criticizing the government. Only a few meters away, all kinds of police squads were lined up, led by helmeted riot-control officers stroking thick clubs. Other police units blocked off the outlets of alleys and streets. They had instructions to break up the crowd and attack as soon as protestors were ten paces from the union headquarters.

Laafrit noticed that the security forces, despite their confident appearance, wouldn't be able to repel the demonstrators if they decided to confront them. He quickly figured out there were so few men here because the other squads were in front of the employment office. And with the same alertness, he realized the back streets were almost certainly jammed with military vans. He glanced down at his watch, as if he had an appointment.

"I'll try to talk to them," Laafrit said, addressing the commissioner.

The commissioner seemed not to hear.

"I said I'll try to talk to them," repeated Laafrit. "Even if it's just a reminder, I'll make it clear their demonstration's illegal."

“No need for a reminder,” responded the commissioner hopelessly. “Dozens of them are law-school graduates.”

Laafrit’s conviction increased.

“We don’t have anything to lose,” he said. “If we can calm them down, we’ll explain that mixing their demonstration with the demonstration of unemployed protestors without university degrees will weaken their position and diminish their value.”

Some interest flashed across the commissioner’s face.

“I’m sure most of them have no idea what’s happening down at the employment office,” added Laafrit.

It suddenly all made sense to the commissioner, and his eyes sparkled. He looked around at the demonstrators and the riot police.

“Go try,” he said, increasingly desperate because of the position he was in. “If you bring them back to their senses, I’ll owe you for the rest of my life. I don’t want to cap off forty years of service with a massacre.”

Laafrit took a deep breath, abandoned his provocative expression, and approached the crowd confidently. One of the demonstrators confronted him, but before he could speak, Laafrit patted his shoulder in a friendly way.

“Are you one of the protest reps?” asked Laafrit.

“Yes,” replied the demonstrator tensely. “Who are you?”

“Who do you think I am?” said Laafrit, smiling. “One of the cops who tortures protestors?”

The guy had never heard anything like this from the police before. Three more representatives of the unemployed university graduates—including a woman—joined him. Laafrit appeared to be surrounded.

“I came to talk to you voluntarily, as your brother,” said Laafrit deftly, filling his eyes with sympathy. “I’ve also got an unemployed brother in another city. I know what he suffers . . .”

A piercing siren went off in the distance. One of the protestors started chanting a slogan but was cut off by a signal from one of the representatives.

“Are you talking as a cop?” the girl asked Laafrit in a resolute, combative voice.

“I’m talking in the name of the law. Your demonstration is unlicensed. I’m telling you, as your brother, that they’ll pulverize you if you take ten steps from this spot. This show of strength you see in front of you isn’t a scene out of some movie. I’m not trying to scare you. Out of sympathy, I’m trying to give you advice.

“There’s something else you might not know,” Laafrit continued after a pause. “A crowd bigger than this of unemployed workers without degrees is in front of the employment office. They came from everywhere to sign up to go to Spain for nine months of farm work. We know from our sources these jobs don’t exist—just rumors going around. There’s total chaos, smashed windows, and unemployed youth determined to organize a demonstration like yours that’ll end in front of City Hall. Between you and me, we’ve got irrefutable evidence that hidden hands orchestrating everything chose the timing.”

The girl’s face grew red with anger.

“Fifty jobs in this city were given to people with connections while our association wasn’t even consulted!” she blurted out. “Some of us have waited over seven years for a decent job!”

“The agreement between us and the town,” said another, “stipulates our candidates would get those jobs!”

“I didn’t know this,” said Laafrit. “Do you have proof?”

“Names, dates, and positions. Anything you want. They’ve been toying with our misery. We’re ready to put our ribs to your clubs. We don’t have anything left to lose.”

The commissioner and some inspectors joined in.

“Your ribs are all you have,” said the commissioner, commenting on the last sentence. “Without them, you won’t be able to work, even if jobs are plentiful.”

His comment elicited a few smiles. The commissioner sensed he was beginning to get a grip on the situation and was encouraged to keep going.

“Listen, if what you say about shady hirings is true, I’m ready right now to guarantee you a meeting with the prefect. But only if you put an end to this demonstration.”

“Give us a minute, okay?” one of the representatives interrupted.

The commissioner opened his arms wide in agreement.

The deliberations lasted for more than fifteen minutes, and afterward the representatives of the university graduates came back.

“We demand that the prefect meet us right here and now,” their leader said in an official tone.

The commissioner didn’t respond. He turned away and lifted his cell phone while Laafrit put a menthol lozenge in his mouth. A uniformed police officer stopped in front of him.

“Sir, Inspector Allal wants to talk with you. He just got a report from Central that another drowned body’s washed up near the Malabata shore.”

Laafrit was dumfounded. Only yesterday two corpses had washed ashore, one at Ashkar and another near the city beach. And the day before, a body had washed up on the stretch between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

The commissioner looked relaxed after he hung up. He straightened his tie and told the representatives of the unemployed university graduates the prefect was waiting for them.

“The prefecture will send a private car for them,” the commissioner boasted to Laafrit, as if he’d accomplished a great feat.

“Fantastic,” said Laafrit. “Problem solved.”

The commissioner patted the detective on the shoulder gratefully.

“If you don’t need me here any more,” said the detective, “I’ve got to go. Another body just washed up, this time at Malabata.”

The commissioner was silent, as if he were considering what he just heard. All his attention was still fixed on what was going on around him.

“What a time for another body to wash ashore,” he said, waving the hand clutching the cell phone. “Damn it! Get out of here.”

Laafrit crossed the street to a Fiat Uno bearing the word “Police.” He found Inspector Allal sitting in the driver’s seat deeply immersed in his thoughts. His lips were moving mechanically, without revealing his ideas or feelings, as if they were working on their own.

At three years away from retirement, Inspector Allal was considered one of the sturdiest characters in the business. But he’d had prostate surgery last year, and afterward he discovered his life was meaningless. He stopped smoking and going to bars, and even gave up watching soccer games on TV. His friends suspected the old Allal really died when he joined a religious group whose followers were government employees, functionaries, and a variety of middle-class types. They called for a modern Sufism that could be practiced in the workplace.

Laafrit sat down in the car next to the inspector but he didn’t say anything. It was enough to steal a glance at the small prayer beads sliding quickly and skillfully between his fingers. While waiting for Allal to finish his repetitions praising God, Laafrit listened closely to the police radio. Reports were coming in about the chaos in front of the employment office and the police intervening with force to disperse the demonstrators.

Finally, the inspector’s lips formed the last sentence of his invocations. He put his prayer beads in his pocket.

“You called?” asked Laafrit jokingly.

“Of course, and with God’s guidance as usual.”

“And?”

“And may God free you from sucking on those lozenges just as he freed you from smoking.”

This was something Laafrit had heard many times.

“Other than that?”

“Other than that, someone found another drowned body, this time on the Malabata shore, only a few meters from Café Rif.”

“Fourth corpse in three days,” said Laafrit. “Notified forensics?”

“They might beat us there.”

“Start the siren to clear the road,” said Laafrit.

The car eased slowly through the crowd of cops and then cut through a narrow street to avoid the congestion. They went up a hill leading directly to the boulevard near the main post office. The road was now passable all the way to Malabata.

“Up till now, we haven’t heard about a patera setting out,” said Laafrit.

“Not as far as I know,” responded the inspector. “But it’s strange the patrols were reinforced after the trial of the coast guards who were taking kickbacks from smugglers.”

“Add to that the dangerous sea,” said Laafrit. “It’s crazy a boat would risk setting out. But the corpses just keep washing up.”

When they reached the beach, they drove out to the farthest dry point opposite the sandy shore. It was a hill of rocky ground with gaps full of thistles. Despite the wetness of the area, strong winds were blowing sand and pebbles all over the place. The waves made a sound like slamming doors. The beach was empty except for the outlines of some people standing far away, under the wooden awning of Café Rif, which was practically abandoned.

The body tossed up on the beach was a male of about thirty. His features were clear and his clothes were distinctive. He had on a leather jacket with big pockets and dark khaki pants, like those soldiers wear. His shoes were authentic new Nikes, as if the guy had bought them just to drown in them. The corpse was laid out on its back and the tracks where it had been pulled from the water were visible on the sand.

Laafrit turned toward Café Rif and saw the bystanders had taken off.

“No doubt they’re the ones who pulled him from the water,” said the inspector.

“I hope they weren’t messing with the body before we got here,” said Laafrit.

Before he finished his sentence, a taxi pulled up and someone from forensics got out. He hurried over with a leather briefcase under his arm. Humpbacked, with a face concealed under thick glasses, this was the shortest cop in Tangier. His name was Abdellah, but when he wasn’t around they called him “the Dwarf.” Panting, he stopped in front of the body without paying it the least bit of attention.

“All our cars are busy with the demonstrations,” he said bitterly. “That bastard wanted to charge me.”

“Did you take down his plate number?” Laafrit asked, laughing.

“Of course. I’ll make his life hell with the traffic cops. He’ll rue the day he became a taxi driver.”

Inspector Allal moved away from the two. He snuck his prayer beads out of his pocket and gazed humbly at the sea.

“This guy and the others were duped,” said Abdellah, looking down at the drowned body. “Human traffickers take them out from the Atlantic coast and toss them into the Mediterranean just opposite Tangier, telling them they’ve made it to Spain.”

“If it’s like you say, other bodies will definitely turn up,” said Laafrit.

“Who pulled him from the water?” asked Inspector Abdellah.

“We don’t know. Maybe the guy who reported it. There were some people in front of Café Rif but they disappeared as soon as they saw us.”

“Don’t worry about them. They’re just hash smokers.”

Abdellah pulled a black camera with a big flash out of his bag and took a wide-angled photo of the body. He took pictures of the face and then shots from the front, side, and back. Laafrit walked over to Inspector Allal.

“God be praised,” Laafrit said to him.

Allal quickly put the beads back in his pocket. He seemed to be having a hard time leaving his inner thoughts behind.

“The ambulance is late,” said the inspector absentmindedly.

“Why don’t you radio them again?” asked Laafrit.

Allal lowered his head and walked toward the car. Laafrit leaned over the corpse.

“No need to dirty your hands,” said Abdellah. “They call themselves harraga, the people who try to cross illegally, because they burn their IDs before setting out on the patera so that no one will know who they are or where they came from if they get caught. This guy isn’t any different from the rest.”

“Everyone knows that,” said Laafrit, continuing to inspect the body. “At any rate, this poor son of a bitch and his buddies took a wrong turn. Maybe they had a crooked compass or just some bad luck. They should’ve washed up in Algeciras. They’d have made it to paradise, even if they got there DOA.”

Laafrit finished searching the corpse’s pockets and wiped his fingers in the sand. When he got up and looked at the car, he was annoyed to see Allal sitting inside with the heat on.

“I’m not happy with him these days.”

“You’ve got to keep in mind everything that’s happened to him, Laafrit. Leave the guy alone.”

“All this because he joined that group of Sufis?”

“I myself go with him sometimes,” said Abdellah, as if revealing a secret. “There are rituals, like dhikr, hadra, amdah, and banquets. Can’t you see I’ve gotten fat? I used to be weak, but the remembrance of God whets the appetite more than any glass of wine. It bestows tranquility and calms the heart.”

The Dwarf’s unusual eloquence confused Laafrit and grabbed his attention.

“Are you trying to recruit me too?” asked Laafrit.

“Come at eight o’clock. At least fifty people will meet up at the villa of a rich man for a banquet after dhikr and amdah.”

“I can understand Allal,” said Laafrit. “But did you have prostate surgery too?”

“This is sheer disinformation, the result of ignorance,” said Abdellah, lifting his hand angrily. “The prostate is the equivalent of a woman’s womb and by simple deduction, it’s clear that just as woman doesn’t desire man with her womb, man doesn’t desire woman with his prostate.”

“Where’d you get that from?”

“I asked an herb doctor.”

Laafrit laughed.

“You should ask Allal,” he insisted.

Abdellah leaned toward Laafrit.

“We’re the ones who caused his depression and made his situation terrible. He knew what we were saying behind his back and this affected him a lot. But the truth is simple. Allal didn’t lose his manhood during the surgery. Instead, he saw death close up so he decided to get to know his Lord. He went on the hajj and found what he was looking for with the Sufis. He took the lesson he learned to heart.”

The ambulance siren in the distance jolted them back to reality.

“Take off his jacket,” Laafrit commanded.

Abdellah looked disgusted. He hated touching corpses, even though he’d been in this line of work for more than twenty years. While Abdellah was hesitating, Laafrit took a long look at the body and, for the first time, had a funny feeling about it. This one seemed different from the others, as if the expression of death had been traced on his face before he drowned. His long hair was knotted on top of his head and despite it being covered in sand, it looked thin, obviously the kind of hair that didn’t need a comb. What clearly distinguished him from the other drowned bodies that had washed up this week were his new clothes. They caught Laafrit’s attention because they were totally inconsistent with the cheap clothes harraga typically wore.

Laafrit took a deep breath. He wasn't sure whether he should pay special attention to the guy's appearance or ignore it, but he found himself bending over the corpse, checking it out at close range. The forensics agent moved away.

"I'll inspect him," said Laafrit.

He took prints from both hands. Laafrit couldn't get the wet zipper of the jacket open, so to speed things up he lifted the jacket over the torso and kneeled down to look at the body.

Laafrit's face went pale.

He let out a whistle. Abdellah came over and also dropped to his knees. He pressed on the corpse's stomach with his fingers and began counting.

"The first one in the heart, the second below the liver, the third in the stomach, the fourth—"

Laafrit didn't give him time to finish. He pulled the jacket and shirt off the body.

"The fourth," the forensics agent went on, "pierced his right side. We can't exclude the possibility it passed right through him."

Abdellah got up, reeling, and pulled out his camera again. While he was taking a bunch of photos, Laafrit lifted the leather jacket and examined it closely.

"It seems he wasn't killed," said Laafrit. "He was executed."

Abdellah looked at him, confused.

"No bullet holes in the jacket."

Abdellah pursed his lips the way he usually did when he didn't get something.

"The killer emptied a gun in him and then put his jacket on," said Laafrit.

"Any more surprises?" asked Abdellah.

Laafrit turned the corpse over and saw his back was unscathed. Abdellah tightened his lips and resumed taking photos.

"This isn't the corpse of a harrag. We're looking at a murder and, most important, it was committed with a gun," said Laafrit.

Wearing a look of exhaustion, Abdellah didn't even try to add anything. He just stood there next to Laafrit as the two contemplated the savagery of death, with the rough sea in the background.

The corpse was rushed to the morgue. When the Criminal Investigations Unit made it back to the station at five thirty, Laafrit had a hard time getting through the corridors to the commissioner's office. They were filled with dozens of people who had been arrested at the demonstrations at the employment office. Some had visible wounds from the cops' violent intervention. There were some children there too, crowded together in a sitting room. They were put far from the offices so they wouldn't annoy the police with their crying. Laafrit stopped in front of them.

"Even they were demanding work?" he asked a uniformed cop.

The cop smiled and walked ahead of Laafrit to open the commissioner's door for him.

"These little shits were pelting us with rocks," he said.

Laafrit glared at them provocatively.

"A hundred lashes on the rear for each one!" he yelled, feigning seriousness and trying to scare them.

The kids' cries turned to screams. The cop let out a laugh, baring his rotting teeth.

The commissioner's office was wide, with a large window overlooking the city's pearly lights. The desk, chair, and other furniture evoked the unspoiled air of Tangier from its international-zone days. Everyone said the furniture should have been in a museum but had been sent to the main police station instead, due to budget cutbacks.

The commissioner stood up abruptly to greet Laafrit, despite his lower rank. Their relationship didn't follow the normal protocols.

"I heard today's drowning victim was shot to death," he said.

The commissioner couldn't hide his shock, and was still in denial about what had happened.

Laafrit swallowed the lozenge in his mouth and gave the commissioner the details. The commissioner kept silent, though his excitement was evident.

"Where'd the negotiations with the prefect lead?" asked Laafrit, taking advantage of the opportunity to ask about the unemployed university graduates, and hoping for some praise.

"I've got no idea. They're still meeting. All that matters for us is that the demonstration's over."

Laafrit relaxed in his chair and rubbed his belly.

"And everyone in the corridors?"

"We'll release some and charge the rest."

"What about the kids?"

"We won't let them go until their parents show up."

Laafrit felt like the demonstrations were ancient history.

The commissioner carefully set his pen on his desk and then quickly brushed it aside. He wasn't deep in thought as much as he was enraged.

"Four drowned bodies in less than three days, one full of lead," said the commissioner, as if trying to convince himself of the situation. "What does it mean?"

"It means we're standing in front of a mountain of work," said Laafrit in frustration.

"What lead should we follow? Smugglers, harraga, or what?" asked the commissioner, his features tightening.

"In my opinion, the two intersect," said Laafrit. "My first impression about the drowned bodies is they're harraga. All evidence points to it, but what doesn't make sense is the one who washed up shot dead. He didn't even look like a harrag since his clothes were new and expensive. And it's incredible the bullets didn't go through his jacket—"

"Could he have gotten mixed up with harraga by accident?" asked the commissioner, cutting him off.

“Hard to say. We’ve got to wait and see if the sea spits up any more bodies. Pateras only set out if they’re crammed with twenty or thirty harraga.”

“Does the murder victim look like he’s been in the sea longer than the others?”

“Not much.”

The commissioner was disgusted and a look of loathing appeared on his face.

“If a boat full of harraga went down, it definitely happened near our shores,” he said.

“So far,” said Laafrit, who was at a loss, “we haven’t gotten any news of a patera sinking.”

The commissioner put a hand over his mouth and yawned with exhaustion.

“If a boat went out,” he said, “it wouldn’t have left from the beaches around Tangier. The patrols are too heavy there. Even the fishermen help us out. But who knows?”

The commissioner let out a desperate sigh that sounded more like a moan.

“I don’t give a shit about harraga,” he said bitterly, waving his hand suddenly. “I want the investigation to concentrate on the gun. Where’d it come from? How’d it get into the country? Where’s it now? I want that gun even if it’s in a fish’s stomach.”

These fits weren’t unusual for the commissioner. They indicated his blood sugar was low.

They heard a knock on the door and then it opened. A uniformed cop appeared and they could hear the kids’ screams and crying behind him.

“Is this a fucking daycare center?” yelled the commissioner.

The cop was confused and hesitated. He looked over at Laafrit.

“Sorry to disturb you, sir. Detective Laafrit, could you tell the kids we’re not going to whip them? They haven’t stopped screaming and crying since you left.”

2

THE NEXT MORNING, LAAFRIT FOUND the medical examiner's report on his desk, together with a plastic bag containing the three bullets extracted from the victim's body and a description of their trajectory showing the murder victim took the shots from the front at very close range. As for the two bodies from the day before, the autopsy established they died from drowning, just like the first one, which had washed up two days ago. The report posited they'd all been in the water for between one and three days.

Laafrit tossed the report aside. It was hastily written, lacked precision, and didn't shed any light on the investigation. He picked up the phone and called the medical examiner. After the fourth ring, he heard Si Abdel-Majid's voice, indolent as usual and laden with formalities.

"Professor Abdel-Majid from the Autopsy Division."

"Good morning, professor," said Laafrit cheerfully, trying to lighten the formalities.

"Good morning. I sent you the report on the drowned men. There is only one problem. I don't know how the shooting victim wound up with them."

"We don't know either. I'd take your report seriously if it actually helped us develop a single lead—"

"I carried out my job as required," said the medical examiner, cutting him off. "If you had read my report attentively, it would have been easy for you to understand that the murder

victim took the bullets in vital organs, except for the one in his side that didn't cause a mortal wound. As for the others, they died from drowning and there are no signs of violence on them."

"That's clear from your report," said Laafrit, annoyed with Si Abdel-Majid's arrogance. "If you would, I'd like an analysis of their stomach contents."

"For the shooting victim too?"

"For them all. Thank you."

The detective hung up quickly so as not to give the medical examiner time to object. He put the first lozenge of the morning in his mouth and then called Abdellah into his office.

It was clear Laafrit hadn't slept enough. He kept yawning and rubbed his eyes, which were surrounded by dark rings. Laafrit didn't like the taste of the lozenge so he took it out of his mouth and put it in the ashtray.

Abdellah came into Laafrit's office with a pale face, clenching his teeth. Laafrit glanced at him and told him to sit down.

"Something wrong?"

Abdellah shook his head.

"My stomach," he said, in a voice interrupted by groaning. "I haven't slept a wink. Every time I leave the bathroom I've got to run right back."

"Allal complained about the same thing," said Laafrit, with a look of surprise. "He asked for permission to go to the pharmacy."

Suddenly he hit his forehead as if he'd just remembered something.

"Did you two go together to the banquet yesterday?" he asked.

"To the circle of amdah and dhikr," said Abdellah, correcting him in a weak voice. "At a circumcision party, I ran into a gentleman who honored us with a banquet unlike any other."

Abdellah forgot his ailment and continued talking exuberantly.

“A couscous you eat with your fingers because of its incredible deliciousness. Afterward, tagines with lamb and plums, then chicken with olives and pickled lemons. We broke up the meal with filali sweets and then had plates of all kinds of fruit. But what gave us diarrhea were the cups of milk mixed with rose water.”

Laafrit looked at him suspiciously.

“Okay, I’ve got other things to do than sit here listening to stories of Ashaab al-Tamaa, the unwanted dinner guest,” he said. “Take these things in front of me and add them to the fingerprints. Send everything to the crime lab in the capital.”

Abdellah took the bag with the bullets and looked at it carefully. He stared at the medical examiner’s report and was surprised to see it was only a few lines long.

“What does Professor Abdel-Majid have to say?”

“When you recover, we’ll talk,” said Laafrit despondently.

Abdellah’s face twitched and thick beads of sweat glistened on his cheeks. He sat pinned to the chair as if something serious was preventing him from getting up. Laafrit looked at him perplexed.

“Sorry,” said Abdellah weakly.

He left the office and ran to the bathroom.

Laafrit went downstairs slowly. He didn’t notice the greeting of the guard brandishing his machine gun at the station’s entrance. The detective stood on the sidewalk and looked up at the sky. It was a beautiful day with a clear sky and light, warm winds. Yesterday’s rains had washed off the streets and trees.

Laafrit looked at his watch. It was now ten thirty and nothing was moving in the case except for a lackluster report from the morgue. If things kept going this slowly, Central would send in a special unit to take over. That was the last thing he wanted.

Laafrit thought about going to the café across the street for a cup of coffee but he reconsidered. If someone saw him there, they’d think he was on vacation, and at a time like this. Finally, the black Fiat pulled up in front of him. Inspector Allal opened the door and Laafrit got in, hiding his anger.

“Please don’t tell me I’m late,” said Allal. “The tank was empty and I had to stop for gas.”

Laafrit cringed but kept silent. He knew he needed his assistants today and any tension between them might undermine their work. He pretended to be in a good mood.

“How’re your intestines now?” he asked.

“Fine. That banquet cost us a lot,” Allal said. “But it was worth it.”

Laafrit feigned interest.

“The Dwarf told me cups of milk mixed with rose water were the culprit,” he said in a tone filled with derision.

Allal glanced at the detective, but all of a sudden he fixed his eyes on the road as a black Mercedes driven by a man with an ugly face cut them off. Allal slammed on the brakes, which let out a screech. The car shuddered. Laafrit shut his eyes as a kind of madness hit the inspector, who began cursing, almost jumping out of his seat.

“Let’s get him!” he screamed. “Do you give the order?”

“No,” said Laafrit. “He had the right of way.”

Rage dissipated from the inspector’s face and calmness unexpectedly took its place, as if he’d outsmarted his nerves.

“*There is no power and no strength save in God,*” he repeated several times.

He drove through a number of side streets and stopped to let an old woman pass in front of the car. He was careful to slow down while moving behind a bus, even though he could have easily passed it. Laafrit got annoyed. He thought this meekness on the road was in response to him not letting the inspector go after the Mercedes.

“Stop at the newspaper kiosk,” said the detective, irritated.

Laafrit got out of the car, leaving the door open. A few minutes later, he came back with a stack of Arabic and Spanish newspapers.

“Hurry up,” he told Allal. “We’ve got to get to Ksar es-Seghir before noon.”

Laafrit flipped through the papers. There was no news at all about the negotiations that had broken up the demonstration of the unemployed graduates, even though the front pages of all the papers highlighted the cops' violent intervention against the crowds in front of the employment office. He flipped through the rest of the papers carefully but found nothing in either Spanish or Arabic about a sunk patera. A strange front-page headline, however, made him smile. Laafrit read it aloud:

“Farming Tomatoes in Morocco, a Disease Curling and Yellowing Their Leaves. Morocco Will Soon Become a Tomato-Importing Nation.”

The headline didn't pull Allal out of his thoughts, and Laafrit realized Allal was immersed in his dhikr.

The car slowly approached a street that merged on a terrifying slope with a two-lane road opposite the sea. On the right, tourist hotels with dark glass towers came one after the other, with red-brick buildings between them. At the end of the road, the hotels gave way to abandoned warehouses. The road then narrowed and the buildings receded into empty space: hills on the right and a rocky shore with a rusty sign warning against swimming because of pollution levels on the left.

Laafrit couldn't finish the article about the tomatoes. It was too scientific and full of virus names. It was enough for him to read the sections describing the scope of the catastrophe and estimates on the loss of crops in the Doukkala region, which was just south of Casablanca. He folded the newspaper and put it in front of him. He then turned to the inspector and decided to draw him out of his silence by force.

“What do you think about this catastrophe?” he asked. “Imagine a Morocco without tomatoes!”

The inspector laughed bitterly and then was silent as he passed an old truck that looked like a moving wreck.

“Anything's possible,” Allal said indifferently. “Here's Morocco today, a country without fish because Spanish fleets

have cleaned out our seas. Thousands of their fishermen make their living off our shores while our children fatten their fish with their corpses.”

Laafrit turned toward the inspector.

“I spent last night surfing the Spanish TV channels. No news about harraga or a patera sinking off their shores. You hear anything?”

The inspector shook his head. Trying to hide his annoyance, he asked: “Then why’re we going to Ksar es-Seghir? What’ll Layashi do for you?”

“It’s been a long time since I disturbed his calm little life,” said Laafrit sarcastically. “Besides, we don’t have any leads. Should we just sit around and do nothing?”

Allal didn’t buy Laafrit’s explanation. He knew from experience that Laafrit always downplayed what he did, without revealing his intentions. He’d pretend he wasn’t watching or listening closely and act like he was distracted. He’d move according to a clear plan but give the impression he was fumbling around.

Half an hour later, the car came up on Ksar es-Seghir. In summer, as in winter, the town was calm and pleasant. It overlooks the sea, which almost swallows it up. It’s the closest point in Morocco to Spain, and even on cloudy days the banks of Europe can be seen, enveloped in thick fog.

Laafrit told the inspector to wait for him at a café, which had a wall being repaired.

“Have a mint tea,” he said. “We’re not doing anything official, just checking things out.”

Allal was happy to oblige.

As Laafrit scaled stone steps carved into a hill, three guard dogs suddenly surrounded him, as if they’d been waiting for him. He thought about backtracking, but to get to Layashi’s he had to climb a surprising number of steps. Layashi’s house was built on a hilltop, as if it were a saint’s mausoleum.

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