

# A Rare Blue Bird Flies with Me

Youssef Fadel

Translated by  
Jonathan Smolin



To the martyrs of the extermination prison camps in  
Tazmamart, Agdz, Kalaat M'Gouna, Skoura, Moulay  
Chérif, Kourbis, the Complex, and Dar Moqri; those among  
them who are living and those who are dead.



## Foreword

ON THE MORNING OF 10 July 1971, General Mohamed Medbouh and Lieutenant-Colonel M'hamed Ababou led a convey of army cadets into the Skhirat Palace, located on the Atlantic coast some twenty-five kilometers south of the Moroccan capital Rabat. It was King Hassan II's forty-second birthday and he was hosting hundreds of dignitaries, both Moroccan and foreign, to celebrate. According to memoirs published years later, the cadets began that day thinking that they were participating in military exercises with live ammunition. As they approached the palace, Medbouh and Ababou told the cadets that the king's life was in danger and that they had to shoot to kill in order to save the monarch. Following the orders of their superiors, the soldiers entered the palace and fired immediately, killing dozens in the ensuing chaos. According to the memoirs published later, the soldiers had no idea that they were participating in a coup. Despite the high death toll, Hassan II survived the attack and outmaneuvered Medbouh and Ababou, both of whom were killed during the coup attempt. A number of captured soldiers were executed on live television and hundreds of cadets were arrested and tortured. After a farcical mass trial, seventy-four were given sentences ranging from less than two years to life in prison.

Barely a year later, on 16 August 1972, pilots from the Moroccan air force attacked Hassan II's Boeing as he was returning to Rabat from a vacation in Europe. Even though

the royal plane was shot multiple times, its captain miraculously navigated through the attack and managed to land safely at the Rabat airport. Once on the ground, Hassan II gained the upper hand. The suspected mastermind of the second coup, General Mohamed Oufkir, reportedly committed suicide after meeting with the king later that day. Pilots and others suspected of participating in the coup were arrested, tortured, and put on trial. While most were acquitted or given light sentences, eleven were executed and five were sentenced to between ten and twenty years in jail.

The convicted soldiers from both coups were initially jailed in the Kénitra civil prison. But at 2 a.m. on 7 August 1973, fifty-eight of these men were blindfolded and put on an airplane. They believed that they were going to be thrown from the plane to their deaths, but instead, they were taken to Tazmamart, a prison built especially to house them. Today, Tazmamart is seen as the most infamous prison in the Arab world, a word synonymous with unimaginable suffering.

Located in southeast Morocco near the desert town Errachidia, not far from the Algerian border, Tazmamart consisted of two buildings, each with a central corridor around which twenty-nine cells were located. Each prisoner was kept in solitary confinement in a three by two and a half meter cell with a hole for a toilet and a cement slab as a bed. Because the prisoners only had the clothes they arrived in and two old blankets, they were almost defenseless against the freezing nights and blazing hot days of the desert, not to mention the scorpions, rats, and other vermin. Since the only light that entered the cells came from small cracks in the ceiling and doors, prisoners lived alone in near total darkness, almost never leaving their cells.

Fifty-eight soldiers entered Tazmamart and when they were released eighteen years later, only twenty-eight had survived the inhuman conditions. Tazmamart was a secret prison and the Moroccan public would not learn the full details of the suffering

that took place there until the late 1990s. Nonetheless, for those who had heard of it in the 1970s and 1980s, the mention of the word Tazmamart provoked terror and the prison today symbolizes the cruelest excesses of authoritarian rule.

The soldiers at Tazmamart were not the only political prisoners in Morocco during the 1970s and 1980s. These decades, known in Morocco as the Years of Lead, were a period of widespread and flagrant human rights violations. Freedom of expression was stifled and fear spread through the country. Farcical mass trials and disappearances became the norm. During this time, thousands of student activists were arrested, tortured, and detained in notorious centers such as Derb Moulay Chérif. Youssef Fadel, author of *A Rare Blue Bird Flies with Me*, was among the young men and women who were held there during the 1970s.

Some political prisoners, however, were detained in locations that remained secret for years. Students Mohamed Nadrani, Abderrahman Kounsi, and Mohamed Errahoui, along with several of their peers, were abducted in Rabat on 12 to 13 April 1976 and accused of undermining state security. After nearly a year and a half of preliminary detention and intermittent torture, they were transferred to Agdz, a town in southeastern Morocco, without a trial. Instead of a prison, however, Nadrani and his fellow detainees were held for nine years in the old casbah of Pasha Thami El Glaoui and other sites in the region. Years later, when news spread that the Glaoui casbah had been used to hold political prisoners, the residents of Agdz were shocked and appalled.

Despite the horrors of the Years of Lead, political conditions began to improve in Morocco during the 1990s. With the arrival of the Alternance government, led by former political prisoner Abderrahmane Youssofi, in February 1998, memoirs from political prisoners who had been tortured and detained during the Years of Lead began to emerge. While several daring novels and accounts had appeared earlier, they

were confiscated and banned. Starting in 1998, however, dozens of memoirs, written in both Arabic and French, emerged, breaking the silence about the abuses of the Years of Lead.

Among these works were a number of high profile memoirs by prisoners who had survived Tazmamart, such as Ahmed Marzouki and Mohammed Raïss. Former detainees at torture centers like Derb Moulay Chérif published dozens of accounts and novels, testifying to their years of abuse. Mohamed Nadrani, Abderrahman Kounsi, and Mohammed Errahoui also published memoirs about their experiences of torture and imprisonment in the Glaoui casbah in Agdz.

Testimonies from the Years of Lead did not only appear in book form; a number of television documentaries and celebrated films were made about the period, some of them adaptations from, by then, well-known memoirs. And in late 2004, the sessions of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, which focused on the abuse of citizens by state authorities between 1956 and 1999, were broadcast live on radio and television. While there is much to criticize about the lack of prosecutorial jurisdiction of the Commission and the interdiction on those testifying from naming torturers, it was an important step forward in the history of human rights in Morocco. For the first time, citizens spoke on live television about their abuses during the Years of Lead. Moreover, these sessions were conducted mostly in colloquial Arabic and not Modern Standard Arabic or French, the languages of the elite, ensuring that they reached a wide audience.

Youssef Fadel's *A Rare Blue Bird Flies with Me* should be read as part of this collective experience of human rights abuses, testimony, and reconciliation in Morocco. The novel, which was shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (also known as the Arabic Booker) in 2013, is the second part of Fadel's trilogy that explores Moroccan history and culture during the 1970s and 1980s. Like the dozens of memoirs about Tazmamart, Derb Moulay Chérif, Agdz, and other sites

of torture and disappearance, *A Rare Blue Bird Flies with Me* recounts the incredible suffering endured. Unlike other works about the period, however, Fadel does not focus on a single real-world site of torture or the experience of one individual. Instead, he breaks new ground by weaving together details from dozens of accounts into a single novel. While traces of the real-life suffering at Tazmamart and Pasha Glaoui's casbah can be read on nearly every page, Youssef Fadel has transformed the Moroccan prison memoir into something entirely new. He has created a narrative that reflects the collective consciousness of the country during the Years of Lead. Even though Tazmamart has since been razed by state authorities and Pasha Glaoui's casbah in Agdz is closed to the public, works like *A Rare Blue Bird Flies with Me* ensure that Morocco's experience of torture, abuse, and political imprisonment during the Years of Lead cannot be forgotten.

*Jonathan Smolin*



# 1

## Zina

Monday, 21 May 1990, 8 p.m.

*I*

A MAN I DON'T KNOW is standing in front of the bar. He acts as if he wants to tell me something, but I ignore him. I prefer to ignore what goes on in men's minds. As I approach he seems about to open his mouth, but he stops when I move away again. I avoid getting too close so I don't have to hear what he wants to say. I pass him from behind the counter, and whenever I open a bottle for a customer, I try not to get too near to him. Or to stay far enough away so I can't hear him. I look at the watch on my wrist. It's eight o'clock. I open a bottle and put it in front of another customer, though he hasn't asked for it.

But this won't change the words in the man's mouth into water. Or make his ravenous stares less insistent or decrease my caution. Finally, as I pass, the man I don't know leans on the counter, toying with his glass, and over the commotion of the bar, the loud music, and the noise of the pinball machine, he asks me whether I like flowers. I don't respond. I try to steer clear of problems. I've got enough problems of my own. I've learned how to hide my thoughts from people, to keep things to myself. For a day when the weather's clear. And besides, I don't know if I like flowers or not.

I move away again, uninterested in him and his question. I'm not someone who likes starting conversations for no reason. Customers are busy with their drinks and talking about the drought. His question doesn't interest anyone. No

one cares about flowers in a season without rain. Though it's May, the man is wearing a thick djellaba striped black and tan. It's as if he's sprouted up here in the middle of the bar at the wrong time and place. He's wearing black sunglasses that don't hide the traces of smallpox dug into his face. He follows my movements with his gaze and waits for me to come close so he can start talking again, but I don't pass in front of him. He plays with his glass, waiting for me to go by. I count the words he might say. It might be only four words, like the last time: "Do you like flowers?" It seems he isn't waiting for me to respond. He came to speak, not to listen. That's what I read in the movement of his fingers playing with his glass of water. And in the faint smile emerging on his lips.

Then I pass him. I hear: "There's a flower festival in the south this time every year. Single women go there to get married."

It takes me longer to pass this time, because I listen to all these words. As if the game's started to entice me. Will I go by a third or fourth or fifth time to listen to more of the man's prattle? I'm not single and I don't care if there's a time every year for single women to get married. I'm interested in the man's words like I'm interested in the drunken chatter every night in every bar. There's a gravedigger who only likes talking about the number of dead people he buried that day. And there's a carpenter who dreams every night of a wardrobe he escapes with, disappearing into the forests where the wood he uses comes from. When you stand behind the counter at Stork Bar, you're ready for every kind of chatter that pounds on the door of your head. My sister Khatima, on the other side of the counter in front of the register, talks and raises her hands, chuckling, not caring what this or that customer might say. She doesn't put a red rose in her hair like Madame Janeau, the former owner of the bar, but she gives customers a free drink or two from time to time. Maybe Madame Janeau used to get her flowers from the festival the man was talking about. I'm not like my sister. I'm wary of everyone who's interested in me in any way.

I approach him when I see him take a piece of paper out of his pocket and put it on the counter. I look at the paper and see it doesn't indicate anything. This time the man starts looking around like he's going to say something illicit. He looks like he wouldn't know how to laugh. I put a bottle in front of him. He looks around again and says, "Am I drinking it on your tab or are you drinking it on mine?"

Neither. Men like women who drink with them but I don't drink. My sister Khatima doesn't drink either.

I see now he's laughing. As if he's reading my mind. He has glimmering gold teeth, which make his presence here stranger. I see the piece of paper's still there. I open the bottle, but before I move away I hear him say: "At the top of the mountain overlooking the village that welcomes loud wedding parties, there's a casbah where widows and married women who lost their husbands in the coups go."

I remember an old dream. A memory lights up my mind. I understand. Before he whispers in my ear, I understand. All of a sudden, I'm disturbed. All of a sudden, I take the letter. All of a sudden, I turn to my sister Khatima at the other side of the bar. All of a sudden, the man whispers again in my ear: "You've got just enough time to catch the nine o'clock bus from Fez."

A man of around fifty who hasn't come here before. He doesn't stand at the bar longer than the time it takes for his compressed words to ignite inside me. He keeps standing, looking at me. As if he's waiting for me to jump over the bar to catch the nine o'clock bus. I disappear into the kitchen and open the letter. I know Aziz's handwriting. What am I going to do with his letter? Should I toss it in my mouth as if it's a seed of idle talk and chase it down with some water? I look at my watch.

I thought I'd forgotten. I was broken. I understood. I calmed down. I forgot. I thought the idea of looking for him again had died out, disappeared, and was extinguished.

I haven't left Stork Bar and the house above it for four years. Since Madame Janeau died and left the bar to my sister

Khatima. My sister took care of her more than Madame Janeau's family, which used to come every six months from France to see if the old lady had died yet. But instead of leaving the bar and the apartment on top to them, the old lady gave everything she had to Khatima, who took care of her and buried her in the grave they bought together in her final days. We threw ourselves into the harsh work that running the bar requires. And its daily problems with drunks, cops, secret police, and soldiers. From seven in the morning until the middle of the night.

How time has passed! All these years. And the idea of finding him hasn't left my head. The idea is still as fresh and insistent as it was when I began my long search for Aziz. I always thought he hadn't died, that the earth hadn't swallowed him up, that I'd find him one day. I began my search for him at sixteen. I'm now thirty-four and I'll keep at it until I'm sixty or seventy or older. I'll find him in the end. I love to imagine myself victorious one day. This feeling fills me with great happiness. I once went all the way to the Maamoura woods after a phone call from a man who said he knew where Aziz was. All I got was a fleecing to add to all the previous ones. I wasn't weak and I didn't despair. The false news gives time meaning. It keeps the flame burning. The false news spares the flame of memory, burning like the torch bearing it, and moves forward. I didn't hesitate for a moment before the Maamoura news, just as I don't hesitate now. I've got just enough time to catch the nine o'clock bus from Fez, as the man said. I go back to the counter without deciding whether I'll tell my sister Khatima or not. I don't have a good reason to tell her, or not tell her. I didn't tell her the previous times. Meanwhile, the man's left the bar without drinking his bottle.

2

At the station, the nine o'clock bus from Fez hasn't arrived. There are few travelers. They don't look like they're heading to a flower festival or a marriage festival. Three men are

smoking and four women in ornate clothes sit on top of packs. There are some carts with thick sacks on them and dogs sleeping below. The ticket window is closed. One of the three men says it's been closed for years and points to a man standing under an electrical pole. The moment I see him, the man throws his djellaba hood over his head and turns his back to me. I think he's the same man, even if he's selling tickets. Black sunglasses, a pockmarked face, and the same black-and-tan-striped djellaba.

I approach him, and all of a sudden he takes out a ticket and hands it to me. Like any ticket seller, as though he wasn't just at Stork Bar. I look closely at him so he can recognize me. He seems confused when I tell him I just saw him at Stork Bar. My words annoy him. Yes, he was getting drunk, he says, but at another bar, and he begs me not to tell his boss so he doesn't get fired. There isn't the slightest hint of joking in his voice, even though the situation is almost a joke. Continuing to talk about it won't lead anywhere. So I ask him about the bus, when it'll come. He regains his confidence and energy and says: "It'll arrive at nine." I look at my watch. It's nine fifteen.

"The bus from Fez arrives at the station at nine," he says.

"Yes, it usually arrives at nine, but now, when'll it arrive now?"

"Nine, as always."

"But it's late."

"How's it late? It always comes on time."

"But it's past the scheduled time."

"What scheduled time? It's never past the scheduled time."

There's no way to come to an understanding with the ticket seller. There aren't a lot of travelers at the station, as I said. I ask one of them: "Has the nine o'clock bus come?" Just to be sure. I try to calm down. I sit on the curb and close my eyes to collect my thoughts and see more clearly. Did the news make me happy? Before, my heart would beat violently

and my nerves would get upset whenever I heard news about Aziz. Simply imagining I'm getting news about him being somewhere, even if it's somewhere that doesn't exist at all, as happened a number of times. Just the idea would make me uncomfortable, whether I'm sitting or standing. My blood would pump wildly through my veins. As if it had lost its mind. Now, though, I have the feeling that my anxiety has subsided. That my previous energy has begun to dissipate. It's as if I'm sorry for Aziz. I was expecting a bigger flare-up in myself. Why didn't I take the news as I expected? It came to me just like that, in passing, without an effect, without a trace. Maybe it's the last four years I spent drowning in work, imprisoned in Stork Bar. Four years without a single piece of false news.

## 2

Aziz

10 p.m.

*1*

TIME PASSED WHILE I WAS having a lot of fun watching life in the corridor. When I was in good health, I could move to the door. Life's moving from side to side a few steps from me. Cockroaches play. They move behind each other like a drunken train. Their long wings move in every direction like finely made radars. Near them are scorpions with tails erect, waiting to ambush them. The cockroaches dance around them, indifferent to their threatening weapons. Rats surprise them and they flee. Some are saved in the cracks while others spread their wings to land on the highest point on the wall. The rats that think they're playing, they too attack them, pouncing on them, biting, sinking their teeth into the flesh of some, producing horrible noises, and eating others. Then the snakes appear, so the rats surviving the massacre are now forced to flee. After a while, you don't know who's running after who. Who's hunting who and who's eating who. A whole life near the cracks in the door.

I don't care about snakes. They've got plenty of provisions in the corridor. More than they need. It's the scorpions that concern me. Their poison, to be exact. They're peaceful creatures. I used to play with scorpions on my uncle's farm. They didn't sting me. I'd spread my palm out to them and let them crawl on it however they wanted. When a scorpion stung my uncle, I saw him make a wound at the site of the sting and let his blood flow. Scorpions sting when forced. The scorpion doesn't know my intentions, but

I have a clear plan. My idea is to surrender a finger to it, to spare myself from future stings and the stings of everything like it. If a scorpion stings you once you become immune to its poison. That's my intention. I won't waste my blood like my uncle. There's no blood left in me to shed. Forty-eight hours of delirium, then a week in bed. When I get up, my body will be immune to scorpion poison. And snake poison. And all poisons. My plan's clear to me. But the scorpion doesn't have the same idea.

There's a gap at the bottom of the door. Between the door and the ground, where dishes and a pitcher of water are pushed in. The scorpion peers out through the gap now, raising its tail and waiting for I don't know what. Then it moves, holding onto the wall, like something fleeing a trap, and stops. It looks at me and I look at it. It doesn't make any movement to betray ill will or a desire to cause me pain. I reach my palm out so it can stretch out on it, as I used to do in the countryside when I was a child. It skirts my palm with cunning generosity, avoiding me entirely. It doesn't pay me the least bit of attention. I can't say: Come here, scorpion, dig your stinger into my flesh so I can save myself from your coming poison. It has to understand this on its own without me explaining it. But it didn't do that before, when we were young, so why would it change its behavior now? It lowers its tail and begins climbing the wall.

I look at the scorpion on the wall. I know the hilarious conclusion to this expedition. It'll go up until it thinks it's reached the ceiling and then fall, because it's not a cockroach or a bat. What's the connection between scorpions and walls? I like the echo its fall makes. *Baf!* I then see it frozen in its spot, and it looks at me as if it's ashamed. That's another pleasure. It gathers itself, trying to guess what's going on in my head. I think that maybe it's finally understood my idea and it'll move to my palm. The scorpion keeps watching me. Instead of moving forward, it starts climbing again. When I hear the sound of it hitting the ground a second time, I let out a loud chuckle so it can hear me clearly. So it knows I don't need its

poison. I hope its back is broken or its tail is smashed. I hope from my heart something horrible that happens to scorpions happens to this one. Its poison is enough for me.

My health is as good as could be, but my head doesn't have hair any more. Its surface is dug out like a pen where hungry pigs play.

2

The scorpion didn't sting my palm, as I'd hoped. As I was returning from my hopeless anticipations a rat bit a toe on my right foot.

Before the rat bite, I was passing time: enumerating the advance of time in different ways. These are some of the stages I passed through.

The first stage I imagine might have lasted for eight years. When it was difficult for me to remember the number of years I spent in this kitchen, when I lost count of how many, I found myself using a map to follow the escape of time. It became clear to me that time is a single expanse without day or night. Since that realization, my idea changed away from a sun rising or a day beginning or a night falling. All this is only present in the mind of human beings. Do you know when something begins and when it ends? Can you determine when something has ended and something else has taken its place? I understood that what human beings think about everything in existence is wrong. Nothing begins and nothing ends. Day doesn't follow night. And night doesn't follow day. Both exist at the same time as you embark on each consecutively. They're intertwined behind you, if it's night. Then raise your eyes a little, raise your eyes just enough so you can distinguish the rays of the day filtering between the cracks of the wall. It's not completely daytime. Maybe a sign indicates daytime is present somewhere. And memory is what you see before you.

The matter is simpler in this kitchen. A thick multilevel gloom, extending from darkness to darkness. There's no dawn

for me, and no noon or late afternoon. A long line of nights of varying blackness. When I thought about it like this, I made a dawn and a dusk for myself, so after a while I could say this is the last bit of the day's light. My daytime. This is the beginning of nighttime light, my nighttime. I discovered that my days and nights in this respect have become full of all kinds of entertaining adventures. My new way of grasping time seems complicated and charged to me.

The second phase, when my activities were varied, might have lasted the same number of years. I spent part of it interpreting my dreams. I see myself in the bedroom with my mouth full of hair and I spend a long time trying to crack this riddle as if I were pulling apart a ball of tangled hair. There's another way to spend time: Counting the raindrops falling incessantly from the ceiling. They fall on my head even after the rain has stopped. There are days when I reach dizzying numbers, hundreds of thousands. When I think I've reached a state of delirium, I replace the number of raindrops with the total. Calculating for the purpose of calculating, without needing the raindrops. It takes about half an hour to count from zero to a thousand. I'd make a mistake deliberately so I'd have to count again from the beginning. Then I trace the number on my palm so I remember it. This is another link I use to bind time so it doesn't escape.

Then prayer. Not because of faith. Since I'm in this hole, I think I don't owe God anything. Why pray? Am I thanking Him? For what? Does the blind man thank the one who gouged out his eyes? Even if he does, I don't have the strength to fathom this kind of behavior. I pray as a kind of exercise in this narrow kitchen.

As for the rat bite, hunger is the reason. I'd given up thinking about eating a long time ago. Just as the rats and other annoying animals gave up hope of discovering a piece of stale bread among the heaps of my accumulated filth. Until the moment when I felt the rat gnawing on my toe. It started like that: With some idea in the rat's head about a piece of bread. Then the

idea turned into a real rat bite. Before the rat bite, I'd been passing time in a number of inventive ways, as I said. But now I spend time counting the pulsating beats of my foot as it swells up. *Tak tak. Tak tak. Tak tak. Tak.* Three and a half beats during the night. A stench of rot rises up with the swelling. The stench doesn't spread all at once. Little by little. Followed by violent shaking in my foot and sharp stinging. A disconnected pain, but without the stench at first and then, little by little, with the stench as it starts rising from the toe that looks like a festering wound.

"What's this stench?" asks the cook from behind the door. I don't respond. I don't tell him it's me. The stench of my big toe that the rat bit because of stale bread he thought I was hiding from him. Then I don't smell any stench. I don't see the toe because my foot, which has swollen up too, is blocking it out. It's blown up completely and turned blue. A shining spot has appeared on the skin. It's hot to the touch. As if something's cooking inside it.

Since the stench began spreading in this disgraceful way, not a day has passed without me thinking about death because there isn't anything else for me to think about. I've gone through everything else. This is something new: I spend time thinking about death. My death in particular. And then death in general. About the disintegration of the body, its decomposition, and all the stenches it gives off during its life. These stenches erupt all at once, dragging an earthquake behind them. I don't see the cook's face. I hear his mumbling and his disgust. Sometimes his raving. Is he the same cook? Sometimes he pretends like there are many of them. Sometimes like he's the only cook. There's no way to know for sure.

Here's another idea: Does anything remain from the body after death except the stench?

*Tak tak. Tak tak. Tak tak. Tak tak. Tak tak. Ta.* Five and a quarter pulsating beats during the night.

Am I okay? I now have this new way to classify time. I wonder if I'm okay. I measure the stench of my inflamed toe, the stench of my pain, beat by beat. The lack of oxygen has begun

to affect my nerves. I'm touching death. I'm moving alongside it. Hunger, bitter cold, germs, poisonous animals of all kinds. Disease in my leg, rising up. Death maturing. Pain throbbing with life. The body resisting. As if it lives upside down.

I cross the only possible path I have: From the door to the right corner. I limp. The line of life. My leg hurts. Or is it my thigh? I sit. I raise my thigh in the air to let the pain get its balance. Then I raise it up high so the pain will ease a little. My limbs fascinate me, so I raise my hand. I extend and raise my thighs together so I can see the difference. I repeat the motion seven times, but I count only three. I play with my hand a little. I raise my knee and press on my ankle. I know it's my knee and I say it's my ankle as I play with it in the air. Other than that, I don't know it. Daylight doesn't come into my kitchen. I listen to my body. I listen to its light beating. I seize the slightest vibration in it. I observe its continuous change. I don't smell the stench. It's mixed with other stenches anyway. The stenches of ten years. The cook smells it because he's on the other side of life.

The cook's the one who pointed out my raving when, from behind the door, he asked who I was talking to. I told him maybe I was talking in my sleep.

"No, two people were talking and making noise as they were moving around."

"Cook, maybe I was raving."

"No, two separate voices. The voices of two different people. The steps of two different people."

"What were we talking about, me and the person you think was visiting me, cook?"

His response doesn't clear up the mystery. He only insists someone else was visiting me at night to share the kitchen with me. I then hear what sounds like rattling. Rattling of anger? Or is the cook crying? I limp over to the door cracks and extend my neck. I can't see his face. A tear falls on the ground. Yes. He's crying. It's incredible. This hasn't happened in all the long years I've spent here, and they are many.

### 3

## Baba Ali

10:15 p.m.

WE'RE PLAYING CHECKERS, BENGHAZI AND me, although my mind is busy and my ears are focused on the outside. We're playing in one of the two rooms on the other side of the casbah. It's an old casbah of Pasha Glaoui, or some other pasha, with a number of wings, like a small city. Every wing has its own courtyard, rooms, and kitchens. The commander lives in the wing where the pasha used to live. He's a soldier and doesn't like to appear without his military clothes. Benghazi and I occupy the slaves' wing. There are a lot of ruined rooms crammed into it, some of them on top of each other. If you see it from above, it looks like a well. Our two rooms are at the bottom. Two old and ravaged rooms where we eat, where we sleep and play checkers, Benghazi and me. We're not friends. Even though he tells me: You're my friend and my brother. His words are sometimes unintelligible, like he never learned to speak. His sentences are incomplete, and even when he finishes them they're meaningless. He says he speaks like this because he didn't go to school. I say that's not a reason. I'm also not educated but my speech is clear and understandable. That's why I don't trust him. That and other reasons. He'll come to a bad end in any case. He's a big gambler. He borrows money from everyone to bet on horses and dogs and to play the lottery. He borrows to pay back a debt and he doesn't pay it back. This won't end well. The people he owes money knock on his door and his wife has to tell

them he's traveling. And on top of this, he's a salesman. He tells the commander everything that happens in the casbah, even though nothing happens. The commander barely leaves his office. He tells him what isn't happening so he can stay with him in his office. The commander listens to him because they're both from the same village.

We play checkers but my mind's busy with the sounds coming from outside. From time to time I hear what sounds like crying.

I turn to Benghazi: "You don't hear anything, Benghazi?"

Benghazi's absent. He's busy too. He has a black-and-white checker in his hand and instead of playing it, he tosses it in the air, catches it, and says if it's white side up, it'll be a boy. If it's black, it'll be a girl. The commander's dog, Hinda, comes in.

Benghazi calls the commander uncle to endear himself to him. Benghazi loves to be submissive and meek. The crying continues outside. I ask Benghazi if he hears it.

"You don't hear anything, Benghazi? Like someone crying?"

I listen closely again. But the crying has stopped. It's as if Benghazi hasn't heard what I said. He's busy with the checker he thinks will indicate the baby's sex. Instead of putting it on the board so we can keep playing, he tosses it in the air. The lamplight around the table dances back and forth. The features of Benghazi's face are also dancing. Busy with his wife, who's about to go into labor at home. He puts his hand on the dog's back, as if he's remembering his wife. And his son who hasn't arrived yet. The dog moves away. She flees from his hand, which was about to touch her back. She runs out.

This time, Benghazi looks at the checker, eyeing his future in its two colors. He puts it on the board.

"Benghazi, you don't hear someone crying?"

"Where?"

"In the courtyard."

"That Rifi, as they call him, who . . ."

“The crying’s coming from the courtyard. The Rifi died last week.”

“Or Aziz. Even he’s got two cries left.”

“It’s coming from the courtyard, Benghazi.”

“Or the owl.”

What’s the man saying? Owls don’t cry.

“They sound like they’re crying.”

“Someone’s crying, Benghazi. And it’s not an owl.”

We play for a while. The light dances between us. The face of Sergeant Benghazi dances. I wait for the sound to return. His features are dancing. I see some of them. I wait for the sound to come back to see if it was an owl, as Benghazi said. Or something else. The sergeant starts laughing, in an unexpected way. His face, half lit up, keeps laughing. I tell him to play as he laughs. I’m talking to the dark half of his face while the other half keeps chuckling. The dog comes in and sits down, looking at him. Benghazi laughs to disturb the game. I know him and his tricks. He keeps laughing to confuse me. In the end, he says: “I beat you.” I tell Benghazi: “This time, whether you beat me or not, this time you’re the one who’s going to check out the prisoner, not me.”

He doesn’t hear me. We play for a few more minutes.

“You know my wife’s about to . . .”

“Play.”

“Tonight, I told myself. My wife’s going to give birth. Today or tomorrow.”

“Play, Benghazi. You’re not going to confuse me.

We play for some time. I tell him he won’t trick me by talking about his wife and he laughs again. “What’s wrong with you, Benghazi?”

“I beat you.”

I leave the room. Where’s the sound coming from? From the kitchens? The courtyard? Behind the palm trees in the courtyard? The well to the south of the casbah? A big wing extends south of the casbah. The pasha’s kitchens. The dog

follows me. She doesn't like Sergeant Benghazi either. I don't hear a sound from the kitchens. Or from anywhere else. I say: *In the name of God the Merciful and the Compassionate*, and step forward. I don't like crossing the courtyard at night. It's full of the dead. I don't like the night here. I like the day. During the day, I see the sky. And the palm trees. I'm calm. But at night? You don't know what you're treading on. There isn't a spot you can put your feet without there being a dead body underneath. Or dead bodies. We've been burying them for twenty years. One on top of another. Dead on top of dead. For twenty years or more. No one knows how many. Because we don't bury them as they bury the dead in cemeteries. We toss them on top of each other. You can't be sure about this kind of dead. They can leave their holes at any moment. *Tful* May God curse them at night. This dog's following me. She slips between my thighs, almost throwing me on the ground. She's scared too. She also knows the dead leave their holes at night. They leave from every place, since they're everywhere. Under every palm tree. In every hole and in every crack. Without graves, as in the rest of the world.

I stand in the middle of the courtyard. As if someone put his hand on my shoulder, I stop. Something like a high-voltage current travels through my body. *I take refuge in God from Evil Satan*. I stop. The damned dog jumps back and forth and circles me. I don't know if she feels what I'm feeling. Did some of the current lighting up my blood and making the hair on my head stand on end hit her too? I try to grab her but she flees. If I'd grabbed hold of her, I'd feel safer. Me and the dog, it'd be two of us. But she took off. I kicked at her to make myself feel better, but only hit air. I left Sergeant Benghazi smoking his hash pipe and blowing smoke on his dreams. And here I am in the courtyard, kicking the darkness. Even the dog's disappeared. I turn in a circle and say: *I take refuge in God from Evil Satan*, and I step toward the kitchens.

This time, it's as if the ghost passes in front of me. The ghost's shadow passes before me. I stop again. It does the same

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