

TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

Ma Vie, mon Cri

(Rachida Yacoubi)

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Avant-Propos

Ce mémoire est avant tout un travail de traduction. Le livre à traduire, *Ma Vie, mon Cri* de Rachida Yacoubi, est très long (355 pages). Il fallut beaucoup de travail, de révision et de discussion avec mes deux directrices pour finir la traduction. Je suis très reconnaissante de leurs conseils et je tiens vivement à remercier Vanessa Everson et Carole Beckett. J'appris davantage en discutant certains problèmes précis et épineux avec elles, qu'en étudiant la théorie de la traduction. Cette tâche nous a même diverti puisque la traduction est souvent comme un jeu stimulant si on se passionne pour les mots et l'expression exacte! En dépit des difficultés associées à un changement de directrice, je profitai de deux points de vue, parfois différents, mais toujours intéressants et enrichissants. L'aspect pratique de mon mémoire fut renforcé par les cours sur la théorie de la traduction (Translation 810, animé par le Professeur D.Z. van den Berg). L'activité de traduction est un art plutôt qu'une science dans le sens que la traductrice est obligée de se servir de ses connaissances linguistiques (mesurables et ainsi scientifiques), mais surtout de son imagination afin de trouver le mot / la phrase juste pour recréer, pour ne pas dire reinventer, l'atmosphère et les émotions transmises par un autre¹. La traduction parfaite n'existe pas. C'est pourquoi j'ai employé le verbe « finir » au lieu de « perfectionner ». En effet, ce n'est peut-être pas vraiment possible de « finir » une traduction, mais en fin de compte, la question du temps disponible s'impose. Il me semble que Newmark exprime bien mon dilemme :

« You can compare the translating activity to an iceberg : the tip is the translation – what is visible, what is written on the page – the iceberg, the activity, is all the work you do, often ten times as much again, much of which you do not even use. »²

En ce qui concerne ce mémoire, c'est la qualité de la traduction même de *Ma Vie, mon Cri* qui est donc d'une importance primordiale. D'où, pour juger cette traduction, il est impératif de se référer au texte original.³ Dans l'introduction je peins le contexte général de *Ma Vie, mon Cri* et dans le commentaire j'expose

mon approche et mes raisonnements en tant que traductrice. Vu que j'étudiai la théorie de la traduction en anglais, et que la langue cible de la traduction est l'anglais, le commentaire est aussi en anglais.

Notes

1. Beckett, C. 2000. Translating poetry : Creative art or semantic science ? A case study. *Liberator* 21(3) Nov. 2000 : 75-89.
2. Newmark, P. 1995. *A Textbook of Translation*. Hemel Hempstead : Prentice Hall Europe : 12.
Je le juge inutile de traduire les citations en anglais car ce mémoire se destine à un lecteur bilingue (français / anglais). En plus, la théorie de la traduction fut étudiée en anglais.
3. Une photocopie du texte en français accompagne ce mémoire.

INTRODUCTION

Choix du livre à traduire

Il y avait trois raisons principales pour lesquelles je choisis *Ma Vie, mon Cri*. Le français est une langue africaine du fait d'être employée comme langue officielle en maints pays africains, ce qui étonne toujours beaucoup de Sud-Africains. À cause de notre histoire, l'Afrique du Sud fut très longtemps isolée du reste du continent, et surtout de l'Afrique francophone. La « Nouvelle Afrique du Sud » ne veut pas seulement s'ouvrir à tous les pays africains, mais elle se promouvoit comme leader de la « Renaissance Africaine » qui opère dans bien de domaines. Une langue commune de communication reste un problème à résoudre parce que la majorité de Sud-Africains ne comprennent pas le français, ainsi la littérature francophone en version originale est inaccessible. Pour élargir les horizons des Sud-Africains, je voulais donc traduire un livre africain. Deuxièmement, malgré le fait qu'il y ait une grande communauté musulmane en Afrique du Sud, l'Afrique islamique est peu connue ici. Voilà pourquoi le choix d'un livre maghrébin, à la fois africain et islamique, me semblait logique et utile. Le troisième déterminant de mon choix de livre était mon intérêt personnel concernant les droits des femmes. Dire que c'est un intérêt « personnel » ne diminue en rien son importance capitale en Afrique aujourd'hui, où les femmes restent pour la plupart opprimées. L'Islam intégriste connaît actuellement un nouveau dynamisme dans le monde entier, et la façon dont il est pratiqué dans la vie quotidienne menace encore plus les droits des femmes maghrébines. Je voulais faire connaître en Afrique du Sud la voix d'une femme francophone et musulmane de l'Afrique du Nord. Rachida Yacoubi elle-même exprime une forte volonté de communiquer son message :

« Aujourd'hui, je te demande, à toi mon cher lecteur, d'être mon confident et de bien vouloir transmettre mon message à toutes ces femmes que tu connais de près ou de loin, et qui comme moi ont vécu l'humiliation de divorce, puisque dans de nombreux pays encore, ces deux mots sont liés.

Je souhaite que ma voix s'élève à travers toi, lecteur, pour atteindre chacune d'elles. C'est pour vous femmes, que je déroule mon passé, que je l'étale dans l'espoir de sauver nos filles, cette partie de nous, et de leur éviter les pièges de la vie. » (55)¹

Comme choix de livre à traduire, *Ma Vie, mon Cri* répondit donc à toutes mes critères – oeuvre africaine, islamique et écrite par une femme dont le but est de transmettre un message.

Bref, *Ma Vie, mon Cri* est un témoignage. Rachida Yacoubi raconte l'histoire de sa vie pendant les années quatre-vingts au Maroc, une vie de femme répudiée et divorcée avec quatre enfants. La société marocaine, et surtout l'attitude des hommes, rendent cette vie pénible, presque insoutenable. Ce qui distingue Rachida, c'est qu'elle reste constamment fidèle à son rôle de mère et à sa foi musulmane, tout en cherchant l'indépendance et la liberté rarement accordées aux femmes de sa culture. C'est une « *mou-e-mina* (vraie dévote) en jean ». Elle révèle l'hypocrisie de sa société à travers ses expériences. Comme on constate sur la couverture du livre :

« Aussi ce cri est-il quelquefois violent, dérangeant, comme toutes les choses sorties du coeur, bien plus viscéral que littéraire, mais aussi bien plus propre à provoquer des réflexions, voire des remises en cause. »

Cependant le choix de ce livre se montra problématique par la suite. Le Professeur Serge Ménager, chef de section à l'époque où je m'inscrivis et spécialiste de la littérature maghrébine, suggéra le livre parce qu'il eut rencontré Rachida Yacoubi au Maroc. Le livre n'était pas disponible en Afrique du Sud et il fallut le commander du Maroc. Quand le livre arriva après plusieurs mois d'attente, j'étais plutôt déçue. C'est un témoignage, mais pas ce que l'on pourrait appeler une oeuvre littéraire dans le sens critique du mot. Son importance et son intérêt se basent bien plus sur son contenu et son message, que sur sa forme ou sa valeur esthétique. Cela ne veut pas dire qu'il ne mérite pas d'être traduit, mais la difficulté pour moi était ma réaction personnelle envers

l'écrivain et le personnage principal, Rachida Yacoubi. Je ressentais de la sympathie pour elle et j'admirais son courage, mais je ne pouvais m'identifier ni à son style, ni à sa personnalité. Quand on traduit, on passe énormément de temps à se mettre « dans la tête » de l'écrivain (et surtout quand le texte est de 355 pages !). Tout témoignage est à priori de nature très personnelle et, c'est peut-être parce que mon identité (femme occidentale, croyante sans être dévote, sans enfants) est tout à fait différente de la sienne, j'avais quelquefois du mal à transposer sa voix en anglais. Hélas, le Professeur Ménager mourut avant que la traduction ne soit finie et je ne pouvais bénéficier ni de ses connaissances ni de discussions avec lui. Néanmoins, dans l'introduction qu'il écrivit pour son entretien avec Rachida, il répondit à ces soucis et justifia la valeur de ce livre maghrébin :

« Le texte de Rachida Yacoubi était un étrange mélange. Je ne suis pas certain que le lecteur occidental puisse l'apprécier sans réserve dans son entier. Il y a une certaine naïveté dans la forme de l'expression ... Il y a une sentimentalité très proche du mélodrame que les feuilletons télé égyptiens diffusent à grand renfort de larmes sur les récepteurs du pays. Cette diffusion souvent hors de proportion pour un spectateur d'une autre culture, n'est cependant pas sans rapport avec la réalité. L'exaltation des passions se retrouve dans la vie de tous les jours et il me paraîtrait malvenu de juger le récit de Rachida Yacoubi uniquement dans une perspective esthétique occidentale. Ce qui fit une très forte impression sur moi à la lecture de ce récit, ce fut la pureté du regard porté sur les événements et les personnages décrits. Le beau visage de Rachida Yacoubi qui illustre la couverture de son livre confirmait la nature passionnée qui sous-tendait toute son écriture... »²

Au début j'avais l'intention de publier la traduction de *Ma Vie, mon Cri* pour mettre cette voix francophone à la portée des anglophones, mais au fur et à mesure que je travaillais, j'avais des doutes quant à la valeur de ce projet. J'hésitais, mais vu les trois justifications mentionnées en tête de cette section, et

vu les commentaires de Ménager, j'espère bien que ma traduction éveillera l'intérêt des lecteurs non-francophones en mettant à leur disposition une façon de vivre qui leur était étrangère jusqu'alors.

Notes

1. Toutes les citations de ce format se réfèrent aux pages dans l'édition française : Yacoubi, R. 1995. *Ma Vie, mon Cri*. Casablanca : Eddif.
2. Ménager, S. *Femmes du Maroc Années 90*. Inédit : 57. Toutes les références se rapportent au texte inédit que je remercie Vanessa Everson de m'avoir prêté.

Contexte : Rachida Yacoubi - femme du Maghreb

Ce n'est pas l'intention de ce mémoire de faire une étude approfondie du Maghreb ni de la littérature maghrébine, mais une certaine connaissance du contexte sociologique du livre, aussi sommaire soit-elle, est nécessaire pour mieux le comprendre et pour pouvoir le traduire. Rachida Yacoubi est une des femmes « qui écrivent sur la condition de la femme au Maroc, et qui la décrivent parce qu'elles la vivent ». ¹ Ce qui suit sont des considérations à grands traits sur des aspects culturels, juridiques et religieux de cette condition de la femme, surtout par rapport aux expériences décrites par Rachida Yacoubi dans *Ma Vie, mon Cri*.

Monego décrit d'une manière générale la réalité amère de la femme au Maghreb :

« ...every stage of a woman's life is governed by restrictive laws and customs... essentially a woman is a household utensil for childbearing, childrearing, and housekeeping... Once married, her prestige... depend(s) on her capacity to bear many children, especially sons... Divorced, widowed, or abandoned, an aura of shame and humiliation attaches to her and her future is bleak. If she has no family members to support her, she will be forced to work, occasioning further loss of self-esteem in the eyes of the community. Whatever the circumstances of her existence, she is clearly relegated to a position of inferiority and effaced within society. »²

Tout au long du livre, les expériences de Rachida confirment que sa vie est typique de celle des femmes maghrébines, surtout de celles qui sont divorcées et qui doivent par conséquent faire face à une vie solitaire. Bien sûr ses origines bourgeoises, et donc privilégiées, influencent sa façon d'affronter son sort, et certainement aussi sa décision de raconter sa vie dans un roman autobiographique, mais elle considère souvent « sa peau de bourgeoise »

comme un désavantage. Quelques exemples tirés du livre suffiront pour montrer jusqu'à quel point la vie de Rachida représente celles des autres.

Vu son importance primordiale dans la vie d'une femme maghrébine, on considérera en premier lieu le mariage. Selon Monego :

« Schooling has a modernizing effect on girls, and helps them to achieve new self-concepts and aspirations. Male-dominated Muslim society prefers to keep women from understanding the world, or from realizing their capacities or opportunities... In order that a husband be better able to manage his wife, it is best that she not know too much about life. Certainly she should not be allowed to see that there are alternatives to the type of existence that tradition dictates for her. Social pressure makes it clear to women that marriage is the only desirable position in life... it is customary to arrange for a girl's marriage at a very early age. »³

Rachida se maria à l'âge de quatorze ans sans avoir terminé ses études scolaires et elle parle de ses dix-huit ans de mariage comme une période d'esclavage, de « martyre » (227). Elle surnomme son premier mari « donneur » (227) parce que sa contribution à la famille fut limitée au rôle sexuel d'engendrer ses enfants. Sa deuxième femme (âgée de quinze ans) n'est qu' « un autre receptacle entre les mains » (228). Quand Rachida le quitte, elle n'est pas bien équipée pour mener une vie indépendante – « J'ignorais tout de la vie, de la rue, cette rue où je me suis retrouvée à l'âge de trente-deux ans sans armes ni défense... » (81). Plus tard, elle refuse de donner sa fille en mariage à l'âge de seize ans parce que « je ne tenais pas à ce qu'elle subisse le même sort que le mien » (331).

Quand Rachida rencontre Lary, elle est attirée par le fait que, « Ayant vécu dix ans à Paris, il avait l'esprit très ouvert et une grande expérience auprès des femmes » (300), mais quand il la demande en mariage, elle craint la répétition de sa première expérience et elle a « la chair de poule » (301). Cette négativité envers le mariage se révèle bien fondée parce que ce mariage se termine aussi

en divorce, en grande mesure à cause de l'attitude de la société marocaine. Rachida ne devient pas de nouveau une femme traditionnelle au foyer : « Je ne fus pas obligée de me plier à certaines contraintes. Je restais libre de mes actions, rien ne changea dans ma vie de femme d'affaires » (302-3). Au début ceci ne gêne pas Lary. Ce couple s'est choisi l'un l'autre mais ils sont entourés de personnes « qui ignoraient tout du terme 'chérie' prononcé sans répit par un mari amoureux de sa femme » et « mon mari devint tout de suite leur *mesquine*, une victime embobinée par une mère de quatre enfants » (310).

« The notion of the 'couple', as it is known in Europe and other Western countries, is rare. The notion of a mutually fulfilling physical / emotional / intellectual relationship, of mutual enjoyment and genuine rapport is almost unheard of. »⁴

Le couple atypique de Rachida et Lary ne survit pas à la pression sociale. Ce n'est qu'un mariage *orfi*, devant Dieu, donc pas reconnu par la loi. Rachida ne veut plus de contrat civil de mariage par crainte de perdre les enfants de son premier mariage. Malgré le fait que son premier mari n'ait jamais payé de pension alimentaire, la loi marocaine ne permet pas à une femme d'éloigner les enfants de leur père.⁵ Elle pourrait se trouver coincée entre les droits des deux maris : obligée de quitter le Maroc avec Lary sans ses premiers quatre enfants. Lary, « blessé dans son orgueil de mâle » (337), insiste et comme femme Rachida n'a pas de choix : « Ou vous l'épousez, ou vous serez accusée d'adultère... Et vous savez très bien ce qui peut vous attendre » (338). Il est bien connu qu'une femme musulmane ne peut prendre l'accusation d'adultère à la légère, mais n'est-ce pas de nature un péché à deux ? Il n'est pas question d'amour lors de ce mariage civil forcé. Rachida parle de la « surenchère » et dit à Lary, « Tu veux m'acheter, alors tu y mettras le prix » (339).

« Custom dictates that at the time the marriage contract is signed the male pay a certain sum of money... it puts a price on a woman and makes of her a 'thing' to be bargained for in a commercial transaction. »⁶

En tant que femme, Rachida n'a même pas le droit de signer toute seule le contrat de mariage⁷ ; elle a besoin d'un homme, dans ce cas son propre fils

Younès qui, lui au moins, est conscient de l'ironie : « Moi, ton tuteur, qui l'aurait cru ? » (339). Rachida tient à résister à Lary, qui n'est plus son mari devant Dieu, mais « En fait, je lui revenais de droit avec tout ce qui m'appartenait et ce que je pouvais rapporter... Que pouvais-je faire en tant que femme, sinon me plier aux caprices de cet homme, fort par la loi ? » (341). Le comble, quand ils divorcent finalement, est que c'est Rachida qui doit régler les frais du divorce ! (342).

Même si le mariage n'est guère attirant pour une femme maghrébine, dans une société où les femmes ne se valorisent qu'en se mariant, le statut de divorcée est pire. Après son premier divorce, Rachida porte « la croix du déshonneur, du péché, l'étiquette noire de 'divorcée' » (149). Malgré toute la force dont elle fait preuve, Rachida cherche une deuxième fois la protection sociale de mariage. Dans son entretien avec Ménager elle avoue :

« Je ne sais pas si je suis arrivée à l'expliquer dans mon ouvrage mais pour moi, c'est une façon de me cacher, ce remariage. Cet homme, c'est plus un paravent qu'un mari. C'est pour pouvoir avoir la paix, pour pouvoir à nouveau jouer le rôle de la femme mariée et gagner le respect de cette société... Voilà, je me suis remariée. Bon, si vous voulez qu'on parle d'amour, je l'ai aimé après, mais au début c'était plus cette couverture qu'autre chose »⁸

Après l'échec de ce deuxième mariage, sa situation s'empire : « Un deuxième divorce ! Ce n'était plus une étiquette que l'on me réservait, mais un drapeau noir flottant sur ma tête pour signaler : 'zone strictement interdite'. Une femme qui avait raté deux fois sa vie ! » (342). Rachida n'accepte pas le jugement de la société qu'une femme qui divorce rate sa vie. Elle se considère plutôt comme une « femme qui avait osé opter pour l'authenticité, qui avait osé être vraie » (343). Ce choix lui coûte cher et sa souffrance en tant que femme divorcée est le sujet essentiel du témoignage.

Dans la vie quotidienne, les hommes considèrent une femme divorcée soit comme une mauvaise influence sur leurs propres femmes soit comme une « pute » disponible à tous : « Si pour les uns j'avais la peste, pour les autres j'étais un mets délicieux » (19). Généralement les hommes la punissent quand elle les repousse, ce qui entraîne bien des ennuis. « J'étais un peu comme un mur de béton armé et quand ils rentraient dedans, ils recevaient un choc qu'ils ne pouvaient me pardonner. Ils devenaient de plus en plus agressifs ».⁹ Ils ne s'attendent pas à la réaction de Rachida et se sentent personnellement visés : « Oh ! sale pute, pourquoi les autres et pas moi ? » (19). Il semble que la majorité de femmes acceptent leurs propositions : « Croyez-moi, c'est la première fois que je me retrouve devant une femme qui me repousse, et en plus une divorcée. Et dire que des femmes mariées ne se gênent pas ! » (246). Laïla, une des amies de Rachida, confirme cette idée : « Oh, c'est une erreur de divorcer ! Tu aurais dû vivre ta vie, cachée sous ton statut de femme mariée ! » (14). Même quand Ali, le mari de Laïla, découvre ses infidélités, il attaque Rachida comme symbole de la révolte féminine : « C'est toi qui la dirige vers le mauvais chemin, celui que tu as emprunté... Nie que tu es une pute ? Comment as-tu fait pour te remettre sur pied ? D'où as-tu eu tout cet argent ? » (191).

L'agression d'Ali montre aussi l'insécurité des hommes face à une femme financièrement indépendante. Rachida ose assumer des rôles traditionnellement réservés aux hommes : « Ils ne me pardonnaient pas de remonter la pente alors que c'était ma fin qu'ils attendaient. J'osais me hisser au rang des chefs de famille et cela les révoltait » (283). Une femme musulmane ne devrait pas chercher à se faire valoir hors du foyer : « Mon premier et principal rôle était celui du père dans la peau d'une femme... On me demandait l'impossible, réussir tout en étant tenue à l'écart. Je devais vivre enfermée entre quatre murs, me retirer de la vie extérieure et me battre contre la misère. » (152).

En effet on a raison : la majorité de femmes divorcées n'arrivent pas à « remonter la pente » sans « faire le trottoir » d'une manière plus ou moins ouverte. Fati, par exemple, travaille comme caissière dans une boîte de nuit et elle est la maîtresse de deux hommes (20). Nora est la maîtresse d'un homme important et sa petite soeur Maria va de temps en temps à Koweït pour des « soins médicaux » (39). Rachida est souvent accusée d'avoir choisi ce chemin de prostituée et on l'appelle « pute » et « trainée » à maintes reprises. Ses enfants en souffrent aussi. Quand elle décide de se marier avec Lary, ils « accueillirent la nouvelle avec joie, pressés de montrer aux yeux de tous que je n'étais pas la pute de saoudiens » (302). On a déjà vu que Rachida considère aussi son deuxième mari comme un « paravent » contre les calomnies de sa société. Les femmes qui empruntent véritablement ce chemin souffrent cependant plus, et Rachida utilise plusieurs métaphores enchaînées pour décrire leur sort malheureux : « D'abord souriantes, confiantes, elles n'ont même pas le temps d'éviter le précipice, de crier au secours. Tout en se croyant libres, elles deviennent en réalité des esclaves » (19). Elle parle souvent de ce « précipice » ou d'un « abîme », et elle décrit aussi la tentation de mener cette sorte de vie facile comme un « beau tapis » (19). Elle veut prévenir les femmes des dangers de ce choix. La femme devient « la vraie proie, offerte aux vautours alléchés » (24). Les hommes veulent « attirer le plus de femmes possible dans leur couche, surtout celles qui eurent le malheur de quitter le lit conjugal, certainement par solidarité masculine, pour punir la rebelle » (19).

Le comportement des femmes elles-mêmes est étonnant parce que il n'y a pas de « solidarité féminine ».

« In Muslim society women are trained to obey, and in so doing they perpetuate the male-dominated social structure that curtails their full realization as mature human beings. »¹⁰

Elles ne se montrent guère solidaires avec celle qui choisit de résister à l'oppression des femmes. Tout au contraire, elles sont souvent les premières à condamner Rachida et elles se cachent derrière l'autorité de leur mari comme

excuse pour ne pas l'aider ou la recevoir. « La hippie, comme elles m'appelaient, n'était plus à la hauteur des bonnes manières, comme si en divorçant, je m'étais dé faite de ma peau, de mon honneur et de mes sentiments. » (175). Rachida avoue que « dans mon ouvrage, je critique aussi bien la femme que l'homme », et elle offre comme explication de leur réaction : « Je pense que de toutes façons ces femmes me jalouaient déjà pour la liberté que j'avais acquise par mon divorce. Cette liberté faisait de moi un danger pour les hommes et aussi pour leurs femmes ». ¹¹ Les intérêts matériels déterminent en grande partie le choix des femmes de rester avec leur mari et l'opinion qu'elles forment de Rachida est pourtant nuancée : « Pour elles, je n'étais que l'exemple vivant, l'échantillon de la femme répudiée qui a quitté le foyer conjugal. J'étais l'erreur à ne pas commettre. Je percevais ce mélange de pitié et d'admiration pour ma révolte » (185).

Rachida est condamnée autant par les hommes que par les femmes pour son refus de s'habiller traditionnellement : elle est décoiffée et porte un jean. Elle montre que « L'habit ne fait pas le moine et le *hijab* ne fait pas la *mou-e-mina* » (159). Le foulard et la *djellaba* sont souvent un déguisement, un « cache personne » et « l'air sage » qu'ils donnent est illusoire (261). Les femmes qui les portent ne sont pas nécessairement de bonnes musulmanes. Malgré l'hypocrisie des habits traditionnels, pour les hommes la façon dont Rachida s'habille reste une invitation :

*« To the male mind, a woman who circulates unveiled is undressed, naked. Her blatant renunciation of a protective covering is a sign of her easy availability. »*¹²

Rachida refuse de changer, même si elle est consciente de ce problème : « On ne voyait en moi qu'une femme nue... un corps. J'avais beau m'habiller, me couvrir » (297). Le jean fait partie de son identité, de son authenticité, mais pas de la culture qui l'entoure. « J'agissais en toute bonne conscience et j'étais la mieux placée pour savoir qui j'étais vraiment... il m'aimait, mon Dieu, même en jean ! » (168)

L'attitude de Rachida envers ses fils est intéressante, parce qu'elle, comme les autres femmes qui la maltraitent, aide inconsciemment à renforcer la domination des hommes dans sa société. Tout au long du livre elle se voit surtout dans le rôle traditionnel de mère, par exemple : « J'étais jalouse de mon rôle de mère qui n'avait pas de prix » (42), et « Je n'étais plus qu'une mère, je ne pensais plus à cette femme que Dieu avait créée en moi... Voilà le rôle pour lequel j'ai tout misé » (166). Son deuxième mariage souffre à cause de ce conflit : « Lary était fou de la femme, mais l'adversaire redoutable de la mère » (341). Son acharnement maternel et les sacrifices qu'elle fait pour ses enfants sont à admirer, mais elle parle plus souvent et plus chaleureusement de ses fils que de sa fille. On a même l'impression que quand elle dit « enfants », on pourrait souvent substituer le mot « fils ». Par exemple, quand elle pense à l'avenir, elle dit : « J'avais hâte d'ouvrir les yeux sur mes hommes » (154), et en parlant à Ménager de son premier divorce, elle dit : « je voulais mon indépendance pour faire de mes enfants des hommes de demain ».¹³ Dans cet entretien elle oublie de mentionner Soundouss quand elle parle de la situation actuelle de ses enfants. C'est sûr qu'elle aime sa fille – elle la protège d'un mariage quand celle-ci est trop jeune - mais cette fille n'est pas la préférée de sa mère. « Nous étions presque tous des hommes à la maison. La seule femme, c'était notre Soundouss toujours mise à l'écart des problèmes, la dernière à comprendre et la première servie » (280). Rachida semble être fière de se voir comme homme : « Mon premier et principal rôle était celui du père dans la peau d'une femme » (151). Elle n'est donc pas vraiment la mère traditionnelle et, bien qu'elle s'adapte bien à sa vie indépendante, elle la considère toujours comme privilège masculin : « Ce n'est qu'en prenant ma douche que je me rendais compte que j'appartenais au sexe féminin » (281). Qu'il suffise de dire pour le moment que son attitude envers la liberté des femmes est ambiguë.

Dans son article, « Questionnement du Schema Oedipien dans le Roman Maghrébin »¹⁴, Montserrat-Cals analyse le rapport proche entre mère et fils que

l'on trouve souvent dans la littérature maghrébine. Quelques-uns de ses commentaires peuvent s'appliquer à *Ma Vie, mon Cri*, bien que celui-ci soit un témoignage plutôt qu'un roman. Le couple parental est dissocié et :

*« L'abus sexuel, la trahison, la répudiation, la polygamie et leur cortège de souffrance minent toujours l'entité parentale... nous assistons à la représentation d'une mère malheureuse et frustrée, victime de la tyrannie paternelle... En effet, la vilénie répétée du père indispose le lecteur qui voit avec soulagement l'amour filial prendre la défense maternelle ».*¹⁵

Le fils « entend conserver le seul amour qu'il connaisse, celui de la mère » et la mère « ne consent à céder sa place dans le cœur du fils qu'au terme de la vie ».¹⁶ L'influence de la mère « tresse un réseau de dépendance si dense et si séduisant que loin de le rejeter, le fils le désire ».¹⁷ Il y a des moments où le rapport entre Rachida et ses fils, ses hommes comme elle les appelle, apparaît quasi incestueux, surtout son rapport avec Adil vers la fin du livre. Par exemple, elle lui donne toujours son bain bien qu'il ait treize ans et elle dit qu'elle le lui donnera « À vie », même après son mariage. « Ce n'est pas tout. Une fois par semaine, je te prends à ta femme. Tu dormiras avec moi, dans mon lit, dans mes bras, tu seras à moi tout seule » (279). Adil suggère que sa femme n'accepterait pas, mais Rachida répond : « Eh bien, tant pis pour elle, nous en trouverons une autre qui acceptera nos conditions, n'est-ce pas ? Tu es à moi, tu m'appartiens, et c'est moi ton chef à vie » (279). Il y a des traces de taquinerie ici, mais ce n'est pas toujours le cas. Plus tard, à l'aéroport, elle donne la parole à Adil : « 'Nous sommes inséparables, deux parties qui ne seront jamais l'une sans l'autre,' me disait son regard » et Adil « me serrait dans ses bras, me couvrait de baisers ». Elle parle de « la beauté d'un tableau si émouvant, celui d'une mère et de son enfant enlacés », mais on aurait cru des amoureux (336-7). Quand Ménager lui demande si ses fils auront de la difficulté à trouver une femme « après avoir eu une mère aussi extraordinaire », elle répond : « Avec l'aide de Dieu ils trouveront. Ou alors ils essayeront un peu de les modeler à l'image de leur mère ».¹⁸ Une telle mère risque vraiment de garder ses fils à vie !

Ayant considéré quelques aspects culturels du contexte de *Ma Vie, mon Cri*, passons à l'aspect juridique. Personne ne vient à l'aide d'une femme divorcée : « Quand on divorce, on doit mourir à petit feu pour servir d'exemple aux autres » (152). Chaque fois que Rachida se trouve face à la loi (qu'elle surnomme « le monstre »), elle découvre qu'elle n'a pas de droits : « Mon statut social me catalogua immédiatement... » (196). Selon Everson, la réalité de la divorcée marocaine est « sans doute la conséquence des nombreux archaïsmes de la jurisprudence » et elle suggère que peut-être « la condition de la femme arabe n'est ni un problème culturel ni un problème religieux, mais bel et bien un problème juridique ». ¹⁹ On reviendra au « problème religieux » et l'évolution du statut de la femme, mais c'est sûr que Rachida rencontre ce « problème juridique ». Sa mère lui avait appris « qu'il y avait des hommes instruits, respectueux, qui savent le Coran par coeur, ainsi que les préceptes de l'Islam. Ils sont censés faire respecter les paroles de Dieu et appliquer sa loi sur terre » (117). Plus tard Rachida demande « Que Dieu te pardonne Maman » (140) parce qu' « En effet, il m'a fallu beaucoup de temps et une existence très dure pour réaliser qu'en réalité je ne me trouvais pas dans un palais de justice comme celui dont me parlait ma mère » (118). Bien qu'un mari marocain soit censé entretenir et respecter sa femme (ou ses femmes car il peut en prendre plusieurs), il peut la répudier sans l'en aviser et c'est lui qui gardera la maison familiale.²⁰ Ce ne sont pas vraiment ces privilèges masculins que Rachida remet en cause, mais plutôt le fait que la loi ne lui accorde même pas les quelques droits dont elle devrait bénéficier. Un mari doit verser une pension alimentaire à sa femme après la séparation, mais elle ne la touche jamais. Le procès qu'elle entame traîne pendant des années. Les représentants de la loi s'acharnent plus à punir la femme rebelle que le mari, et surtout après qu'elle résiste à leur harcèlement sexuel. Sans pension, Rachida fait constamment face aux problèmes financiers et par moments sa famille connaît le dénuement. La loi ne tarde jamais à la punir, elle, quand elle écrit des chèques sans provision ou ne paye pas son loyer. Elle ne peut pas quitter le Maroc pour échapper à ces

problèmes et pour se faire une meilleure vie ailleurs - en France, en Allemagne ou en Tunisie, comme on le lui suggère par moments – sans abandonner ses enfants parce que la loi protège les droits du père : la mère ne peut pas le séparer de ses enfants, même s'il ne contribue rien à leur entretien. Ironiquement, après toutes ces années de difficultés, « Le tribunal me somma de payer les frais du jugement pour l'obtention d'une pension dont je n'avais jamais vu la couleur » (344). À la fin du livre, « coupable d'innocence » (355), Rachida est condamnée à la prison par le procureur pour le chèque d'un autre : « C'était le sort qu'il me réservait personnellement et depuis longtemps » (354). Il n'y a pas de quoi s'étonner que Rachida, la femme divorcée, dit : « La justice ! Un mot qui me donne encore la chair de poule » (118).

Lié aux problèmes juridiques est le contexte religieux – celui de l'Islam. La réponse quelquefois ambiguë des femmes, y compris celle de Rachida, vis à vis leur condition est aussi à considérer. Selon Monego :

« While the Koran upholds the equality of men and women in the sight of God, the sharia, the man-made code of Islamic law based on an interpretation of the Prophet's teachings, spells out woman's subordinate nature and inferior status. The notion of 'natural' inferiority has been impressed upon her for centuries so that she has easily come to accept this male conception of her as congenital, eternal, and immutable truth. This has hardly encouraged transformation. »²¹

Même quand les femmes n'acceptent pas cette idée de leur « infériorité innée », on a tendance à remettre en question « toute notion de réforme » du « soupçon d'occidentalisation excessive ». Fadéla Sebti en a parlé à Ménager :

« Il est très difficile de faire évoluer le droit dans un pays musulman parce qu'il suffit d'un faux pas pour qu'on vous taxe de toutes les tares du monde, la première étant, 'Vous n'êtes pas musulmane, vous reniez votre religion' »²²

Rachida est avant tout une musulmane croyante et pratiquante – une *mou-e-mina* en jean. Elle a un rapport très proche, presque familial avec Dieu : « Dieu était en moi, son amour m’habitait et mon âme lui appartenait. C’était mon confident et mon seul compagnon. Je m’adressais directement à lui, sans intermédiaire » (168) . Elle confirme toujours cette foi en parlant à Ménager : « Croyez-moi, c’est vraiment mon grand amour. C’est l’amour de ma vie ». ²³ C’est grâce à Dieu et sa foi en Lui qu’elle survit : « Il n’y a pas plus fort que la force de la conscience et la protection d’une grande puissance » (146). Elle n’est « qu’une simple marionnette entre les mains du destin » (151) et elle prend la décision : « Ne me fier qu’à Dieu, lui qui a tracé ma destinée aussi injuste qu’elle puisse paraître à des yeux humains » (169). Elle ne conteste pas cette destinée difficile : « Je la vivais avec toute la patience d’une *mou-e-mina* » (251), parce qu’elle considère qu’ : « Au fond, peut-être étais-je élue ? Dieu n’a-t-il pas dit que seul le vrai croyant endurait les pires souffrances ? » (73). Rachida dit que : « Je ne me suis jamais vraiment révoltée contre mon destin, assez cruel en somme, mais je priais Dieu d’atténuer mes souffrances » (351). Sa révolte est limitée aux moments difficiles à des monologues intérieurs entre son Invisible (sa conscience) et sa Carcasse (son corps, ses besoins physiques) – « deux voix qui bataillaient en moi depuis toujours » (37). En somme, « Musulmane, je l’étais en dépit de tout » (72) et « Aussi m’est-il impossible de maudire cette vie, ce destin, quand bien même il eût été la source de mon malheur, puisqu’il fut aussi celle de ma sagesse, de ma lucidité » (174).

Rachida utilise cette lucidité pour dévoiler l’hypocrisie de la société soi-disante musulmane au sein de laquelle elle vit. Il y en a plusieurs exemples, entre autres : l’absence générale de la bonté « que l’Islam préconise d’abord » (168) ; le *djellaba* porté comme « cache personne » (261) ; les prisonniers qui participent aux prières seulement « dans le but de s’attirer la sympathie des agents » (266) ; les femmes « indignes » qui disent *Allah yastar* (Que Dieu nous en garde) en condamnant Rachida mais « le répétaient à souhait sans en comprendre le vrai sens » (222) ; l’homme qui est « l’image d’un ange tout de

blanc vêtu » (243) quand il va à la mosquée mais qui propose à Rachida de devenir sa maîtresse parce que « c'est la vie. De nos jours... Toutes les femmes font... Il suffit de ne pas le savoir, c'est tout... » (245). Voilà l'essentiel : tout est permis pourvu que l'on ne le sache pas. Rachida dit que : « Je ne cherchais aucunement à comprendre cette vie où tout était interdit et permis à la fois » (269), mais elle la met en cause : « Hommes, quelle est donc votre loi ? Et la foi, et la piété, et l'entraide mutuelle ? » (152).

Pour se distinguer de cette société hypocrite, Rachida dit : « J'ai été éduquée à être une véritable musulmane ». ²⁴ Quelle est donc l'attitude de Rachida envers la position de la femme ? Comme on a déjà suggéré, elle est quelquefois ambiguë, par exemple dans sa préférence pour ses fils. Elle soutient l'idée citée de Monego au début de cette discussion du contexte religieux, que ce n'est pas l'Islam qui prive la femme de liberté :

« Même dans l'Islam, la femme était libre au moment où vivait le Prophète Mohammed. Khadidja, sa première femme était une femme libre. Elle faisait du commerce, elle était presque chef d'entreprise, elle avait des hommes sous ses ordres. Le Coran ne nous prive pas de liberté, il dit très clairement qu'il faut assumer cette liberté et bien la mener ». ²⁵

Quelle est la forme de cette liberté que la femme doit saisir ? Khadidja serait mariée et libre, mais vu l'état de subjugation générale d'une femme mariée par rapport à son mari d'un point de vue juridique, sinon religieux, il semblerait que la liberté au sein d'un mariage est presque impossible et que le divorce représente le plus souvent la liberté. Rachida se décrit comme « esclave au foyer » (81) dans son premier mariage, mais « il me fallut de longues années avant de prendre cette décision qui devait m'en libérer » (206). Ses sentiments après son divorce ne laissent aucun doute :

« Cela faisait tellement longtemps que je ne m'étais pas sentie aussi libre, aussi légère, aussi confiante. J'étais maîtresse de mon corps et de mon âme... Je goûtais mon indépendance... Rebelle était ma liberté, une

liberté toute spirituelle... J'allais à la rencontre de ce que me réservait mon destin, en portant avec fierté l'étiquette de femme divorcée... J'étais libre... libre, les mains vides et le corps sans abri. » (27-8)

Comme elle le dit, la liberté d'une femme divorcée est surtout spirituelle et elle rencontre beaucoup de contraintes et de difficultés pratiques. Encore une fois, on peut dire que Khadidja aurait de la chance en gagnant bien sa vie. Les femmes qui résolvent leurs problèmes financiers en se vendant aux hommes perdent en fait leur liberté : « Tout en se croyant libres, elles deviennent en réalité des esclaves » (19). Rachida constate que les femmes riches qui évitent le divorce pour garder leur sécurité financière, sacrifient aussi leur liberté : « Elles supportent l'incroyable. Elles cachent leur malaise derrière l'argent. Une femme pauvre ne supporterait même pas le dixième de cette souffrance purement morale. Elle n'hésiterait pas un instant à tout balancer au visage de son mari avant de partir loin et libre » (106-7). Rachida se sent libre au début de son deuxième mariage : « Je restais libre de mes actions » (303), mais la société n'accepte pas un tel mariage, et finalement Lary : « ne supportait plus les insinuations faisant allusion à ma liberté » (311), et pour Rachida seulement le divorce peut : « me libérer de ce terrible carcan » (342) que ce mariage devient. Elle revient donc à l'idée que le divorce représente la liberté, mais « Ce que j'avais omis, c'est que mon attitude pouvait choquer, même si cela me libérait » (343). Au Maroc, alors, une femme qui se libère de son mari se trouve enchaînée par les préjugés de sa société.

Ce n'est pas seulement une question de liberté spirituelle. Quand Rachida est menacée par la prison, elle tient à sauvegarder sa liberté corporelle surtout pour pouvoir travailler afin de soutenir et élever correctement ses enfants : « Je craignais la police. Il fallait fuir pour sauvegarder ma liberté dont dépendait la survie de ma famille » (248). Elle veut donc être libre pour participer à la société au delà du foyer et de faire ses propres choix. Cependant, en parlant à Ménager, elle mentionne en passant qu'elle ne veut pas « tomber dans le piège du féminisme »²⁶ et elle révèle plus clairement l'ambiguïté de ses attitudes

envers l'état de la femme, une ambiguïté que l'on ne voit qu'indirectement dans son livre :

*« Je le dis souvent, je suis contre cette course folle à la liberté que vit en ce moment le Maroc. Parce que nous n'avons pas été éduqués, préparés. Moi j'ai eu la chance d'avoir une mère formidable... [qui] m'a préparée et éduquée à être libre... Ceci a fait que la liberté pour moi, c'était d'abord une responsabilité... et je connaissais les limites de cette liberté. Quand on ne sait pas gérer cette responsabilité, la liberté peut en fait être la source de nombreux problèmes. Ce qui fait que je suis pour l'indépendance de la femme marocaine mais je suis beaucoup plus encore pour la reconnaissance de ses droits. Donner la liberté à une femme qui n'a aucun droit cela ne sert qu'à la perdre encore davantage. Elle ne peut pas apprécier cette liberté qui ne consiste pas à traîner dans les rues ni à rentrer à n'importe quelle heure, à faire des folies. Être libre, c'est participer à l'évolution du pays, donner son avis, travailler, en un mot avoir ses droits. La liberté sans droits, c'est comme un suicide. Voilà pourquoi cette indépendance que je vois aujourd'hui autour de moi – je parle de celle de la jeunesse, de ces jeunes filles... qui sont dans cette course folle – risque de détruire le type de liberté que les femmes plus âgées ont acquis au fil des années. Parce que cela va se retourner contre nous. Je pense que c'est là ce que l'homme reproche actuellement à la femme. Il nous voit libres et il en veut tellement à la femme à cause de cette liberté qu'il fait tout pour lui créer des problèmes. Et tout cela parce que nous n'avons pas préparé nos enfants. Il faut préparer l'homme, le garçon à accepter une femme libre. Je pense qu'il faudrait prendre un nouveau départ pour repartir vers la vraie liberté ».*²⁷

Pour Rachida il n'est donc pas question de tout se permettre quand on est libre, et il faut bien mener la liberté, toujours en respectant des limites – on imagine qu'il s'agit de celles imposées par l'Islam. Alors, d'un point de vue occidental,

elle n'est pas radicale, mais comme Ménager remarque dans son introduction à l'entretien :

« Les femmes marocaines, elles, acceptent une navigation à vue entre des héritages culturels divers et souvent contradictoires. Elles doivent sans cesse slalomer entre des notions qui nous apparaissent tour à tour comme une soumission ou comme une légitime révolte. Leur évolution et l'amélioration de leur condition ne pourront être organisées qu'autour de cette technique de survie et la survie c'est quelque chose que Rachida Yacoubi ne connaît que trop. »²⁸

Nous avons vu que les expériences de Rachida sont typiques de celles des femmes du Maghreb. Même si elle ne se voit pas dans « le piège du féminisme »²⁹, elle veut « provoquer des réflexions, voire des remises en cause » (couverture). Elle veut « transmettre [son] message à toutes les femmes » (55). Il est intéressant de remarquer qu'elle choisit la forme littéraire du témoignage pour s'exprimer parce que celui-ci est un des grands courants dans lesquels les oeuvres maghrébines se situent.³⁰ Son choix est en grande partie déterminé par le fait qu'elle n'est pas écrivain, comme elle l'avoue elle-même,³¹ mais aussi le témoignage se prête bien comme « arme de combat », et cela depuis la période coloniale. En 1950 Mohammed Dib écrit :

« Toutes les forces de création [de nos intellectuels] mises au services de leurs frères opprimés feront de la culture et des oeuvres qu'ils produiront autant d'armes de combat. Armes qui serviront à conquérir la liberté. »³²

Si l'on insère « soeurs opprimées » et « la liberté des femmes », la citation peut s'appliquer à la situation actuelle, où la lutte n'est plus contre le colonialisme, mais plutôt pour les droits des femmes. Pendant la lutte contre le colonialisme, la littérature de témoignage était liée à la nouvelle prise de conscience :

« These works were indicative of the general need to take a stand and affirm one's commitment as a member of the single-minded whole as it asserted its unique and proper identity, and for this reason they are referred to as a 'littérature de l'affirmation de soi'. »³³

L'oppression prive souvent ses victimes de leur identité, et ils ont donc besoin de s'imposer à nouveau.

« C'est ainsi que tout normalement une littérature se développa qu'on pourrait qualifier d'égoцентриque, celle d'individus et de collectivités qui se dressaient, s'expliquaient et s'affirmaient face aux 'autres'... le souci individualiste... de l'auteur d'émerger enfin, de mettre l'accent sur son moi, sans doute non suffisamment reconnu dans la société traditionnelle. »³⁴

Ma Vie, mon Cri est sans aucun doute une affirmation par l'écrivain de l'identité personnelle qu'elle choisit pour elle-même – une *mou-e-mina* en jean. Cette identité est constamment en conflit avec l'identité que la société traditionnelle, et les hommes en particulier, imposent sur elle. En racontant sa vie quotidienne sous forme de témoignage, Rachida cherche à se révéler, à être elle-même, à réaffirmer son moi. Son objectif n'est pas complètement égoцентриque, car son livre sert aussi comme « arme de combat » dans la lutte pour les droits des femmes au Maroc.

Notes

1. Everson, V. 2003. Yacoubi, Sebti et Saqi : séparation religieuse, unité de foi. *French Studies in Southern Africa* Vol. 32 : 2003 : 3. Cette revue ne paraîtra que plus tard cette année, donc toutes les références de page sont celles de la copie inédite de l'article que l'auteur m'a prêtée.
2. Monego, J.P. 1984. *Maghrebien Literature in French*. Boston : Twayne Publishers : 126
3. Ibid. : 127
4. Ibid. : 128
5. Everson : Notes à la fin de l'article.
6. Monego : 128
7. Ibid. : 128
8. Ménager, S. *Femmes du Maroc Années 90*. Inédit : 74
9. Ibid. : 66
10. Monego : 128
11. Ménager : 66
12. Monego : 129
13. Ménager : 65

14. Montserrat-Cals, C. 1991. Questionnement du Schéma Oedipien dans le Roman Maghrébin.
Psychanalyse et Texte Littéraire au Maghreb. Paris : L'Harmattan :49-59
15. Ibid. : 50
16. Ibid. : 53
17. Ibid. : 55
18. Ménager : 79
19. Everson : 13
20. Ibid. : 5
21. Monego : 127
22. Everson : 4
23. Ménager : 76
24. Ibid. : 78
25. Ibid. : 67
26. Ibid. : 65
27. Ibid. : 64-5
28. Ibid. : 58-9
29. Ibid. : 68
30. Déjeux, J. 1980. *Littérature Maghrébine de Langue Française*. Sherbrooke : Éditions Naaman : 39
31. Ménager : 60
32. Déjeux, 1980 : 27
33. Monego : 22
34. Déjeux, 1980 : 61

Public du livre : qui est le « cher lecteur » ?

Le public des oeuvres maghrébines d'expression française est toujours un sujet de débat. La nature autobiographique d'un témoignage assure que Rachida traite des sujets marocains, ce que, selon une enquête menée à Agadir, les lecteurs maghrébins préfèrent : « ceux-ci désirent voir traiter des thèmes spécifiques à la société marocaine et rejettent quasi totalement les oeuvres à ambitions universalistes ».¹ Rachida est fière d'être marocaine. Quelquefois on se trompe sur sa nationalité, mais elle corrige toujours l'erreur, même quand une identité européenne aurait pu lui simplifier la vie. Par exemple, la police veut aider l'étrangère qui circule seule la nuit, mais elle répond : « Je ne suis pas étrangère Monsieur, je suis marocaine » (143), et plus tard elle refuse de suivre le conseil de l'Invisible : « Fais-toi passer pour une étrangère » (235). Lors de son entretien avec Ménager, elle précise le but de son livre :

*« Tout ce que je veux c'est de sauver d'autres personnes, d'autres enfants en particulier, mais aussi notre société, notre Maroc. »*²

Alors, il est évident qu'elle veut atteindre un public marocain, voire maghrébin. Pourtant, le livre est écrit en français, pas en arabe. Son public sera donc restreint parce que la langue française est plutôt « dominée par les élites »³. Rachida sort de la bourgeoisie, mais bien qu'elle inclue des expressions arabes, ses connaissances de l'arabe écrit semblent moins bonnes que son français. Quand un inspecteur lui demande si elle lit l'arabe, elle répond : « Pas beaucoup, mais je me débrouille » (287). En tout cas, selon Déjeux :

*« On a dit et redit que ces écrivains étaient coupés du vrai peuple, qu'ils ne pouvaient rendre en français la sensibilité maghrébine, etc. S'ils avaient écrit en arabe littéraire ils n'auraient pas davantage pu d'ailleurs communiquer avec ce 'peuple'. »*⁴

Ma Vie, mon Cri fait donc partie de ce qu'on peut appeler « une littérature arabe écrite en français »⁵, dont le public inclut certains lecteurs maghrébins.

Même si Rachida écrit mieux en français qu'en arabe, il y a d'autres indices qu'elle vise un public francophone plus élargi que celui du Maroc. Le commentaire de Salah Garmadi, linguiste tunisien, pourrait s'appliquer aussi à Rachida :

« Je l'avoue, c'est par l'intermédiaire de la langue française que je me sens le plus libéré du poids de la tradition. »⁶

Rachida reste fière d'être Marocaine, mais elle critique amèrement sa société arabe et musulmane. Son beau-frère Farid (Hans-Uvers) est Allemand et Musulman converti, mais il incarne mieux les préceptes de l'Islam que la majorité de ceux qui sont nés musulmans. Tous les Européens qu'elle rencontre l'aident, par exemple M. Jean, M. Pierre, et Dedié.

« Que dire de mes compatriotes ? Mon divorce, ma liberté durement acquise n'honoraient guère ma société. Les miens n'ont pas seulement refusé de me tendre la main, non... Ils m'ont rejetée, humiliée et même battue. » (130)

Rachida fait maints sacrifices pour garder ses enfants dans des écoles françaises, et plus tard pour les études d'Adil en France. Tous ces efforts sont sûrement pour mieux réussir dans un monde moderne, mais son jean et son comportement indiquent que certains aspects de la culture occidentale l'attirent. Son choix d'écrire en français rend son histoire accessible à un public plus vaste, mais aussi plus susceptible à la comprendre et à la plaindre. Elle fournit des renseignements dont un Marocain n'aurait certainement pas besoin. Par exemple, elle traduit en français des proverbes marocains : « 'Il m'a frappé, et il a pleuré. Et il est parti le premier se lamenter' dit un proverbe populaire marocain » (137), ou arabes : « Mon foie, comme le dit si bien un proverbe arabe, me montait à la gorge » (238), et elle explique des traditions musulmanes : « ... ce jour de l'Aïd merveilleux, de cette fête du mouton si importante pour les musulmans du monde entier » (348). Les Notes visent aussi un lecteur non-arabe. Alors le « cher lecteur » n'est pas nécessairement maghrébin.

Il faut revenir un moment à l'intention de Rachida dans *Ma Vie, mon Cri*. Comme on a vu en parlant de la littérature de témoignage, Rachida veut se révéler et réaffirmer sa vraie identité personnelle : « Je me sentais cette envie de faire quelque chose, de m'exprimer »⁷. Elle écrit pour elle-même, mais parce que « c'est un livre d'une grande franchise »⁸ dans lequel elle dévoile l'intimité de sa vie privée, elle dit que : « Je savais lorsque j'écrivais que c'était comme un sacrifice »⁹. Pourquoi ce sacrifice ? « Ce serait vraiment vous mentir que de vous dire que j'ai écrit ce premier livre pour autre chose que mes enfants », pour leur montrer « l'autre visage, qu'il ne connaissaient pas, de leur maman »¹⁰. Après elle inclut « tous les enfants du divorce » et suggère que si elle « a apporté quelque chose à d'autres personnes, alors peut-être je me sentirai soulagée »¹¹. Elle nie que le livre est « un règlement de comptes »¹².

Le terme « cher lecteur » est donc à la fois personnel et général. Rachida s'adresse parfois directement aux femmes (230), mais généralement elle ne parle pas seulement à une « chère lectrice », mais aux femmes et aux hommes. À travers son livre, elle tient à contribuer à l'éducation qu'elle considère comme nécessaire pour la vraie liberté des femmes – les hommes doivent apprendre à accepter cette liberté et les femmes doivent apprendre à bien la mener.

*« Il faut enseigner à nos filles à être libres, leur apprendre à fréquenter un homme et à le voir comme un compagnon de vie et apprendre aux garçons à voir la femme comme quelqu'un avec qui ils doivent bâtir leur existence. Quelqu'un qu'ils respectent et qu'ils apprécient. Il faut qu'on apprenne à faire de l'homme un ami et non pas un adversaire... Ce qu'il faut c'est partager les tâches et l'éducation. »*¹³.

Notes

1. Déjeux, J. 1992. *La Littérature Maghrébine d'Expression Française*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France : 92
2. Ménager : 69
3. Déjeux, 1992 : 38

4. Déjeux, J. 1980. *Littérature Maghrébine de Langue Française*. Sherbrooke : Éditions Naaman : 72
5. Déjeux, 1992 : 5
6. Ibid. : 51
7. Ménager : 60
8. Ibid. : 72
9. Ibid. : 68
10. Ibid. : 62
11. Ibid. : 63
12. Ibid. : 72
13. Ibid. : 67

Style de Rachida Yacoubi

Ma Vie, mon Cri est le premier livre de Rachida Yacoubi à être publié. Elle n'est pas écrivain professionnel, mais elle dit : « Je crois que c'est un don que j'avais depuis que j'étais très jeune »¹. Elle ne finit pas l'école, donc : « Mon apprentissage ça a été celui de la vie avec mes expériences », mais à l'école primaire : « j'arrivais déjà à construire quelques métaphores et à faire preuve de beaucoup d'imagination »². Elle avoue que : « Peut-être si j'avais eu plus d'instruction, j'aurais écrit tout cela différemment », mais Ménager lui répond : « Mais peut-être cela aurait-il été moins intéressant, peut-être davantage semblable à tous les autres livres... »³. L'ouvrage a pris trois ans à écrire, suivi de deux ans de mise au point.³ Rachida dit que : « Ça a été un travail très difficile, d'abord parce que je n'arrivais pas à trouver mes mots. Et puis c'était aussi revivre une deuxième fois ce drame ; c'était une expérience douloureuse ».⁴ Plus tard dans l'entretien avec Ménager elle revient à ses difficultés : « J'ai écrit toute seule. J'ai été corrigée parce que je suis incapable d'écrire une phrase sans faire une faute. Je ne cherche pas à me corriger », et Ménager lui répond : « C'est peut-être ce qui garde votre naturel »⁵. Dans son introduction, il fait allusion à « une certaine naïveté » et à « une sentimentalité très proche du mélodrame », en effet un style original mais difficile pour un lecteur occidental d'apprécier sans réserve.⁶ Néanmoins, le style de Rachida fait partie de son message, de son « cri vital... de [sa] vie hurlante » (173), un cri « plus viscéral que littéraire » (couverture). Ménager lui dit : « Ce qui est donc intéressant, c'est qu'on sent que vous n'êtes pas un écrivain traditionnel... mais ce qui finalement est très fort et qui n'existe pas dans les autres romans marocains de femmes que j'ai lus, c'est votre vision critique de la société marocaine »⁷.

Ma Vie, mon Cri consiste surtout d'une longue conversation intime dans laquelle Rachida s'adresse souvent directement au lecteur. On peut vraiment dire que c'est un roman dialogué : premièrement entre Rachida et le lecteur, mais aussi

entre Rachida et Dieu, entre Rachida et les autres personnages, et même entre les deux voix internes de Rachida – son « Invisible » et sa « Carcasse ». Toutes ces différentes conversations n'utilisent pas le même registre de langue. Rachida s'adresse au lecteur d'une manière assez familière : « Aujourd'hui, je te demande, à toi mon cher lecteur, d'être mon confident... » (55). Elle a un rapport intime avec Dieu, mais sa langue est formelle : « Dieu que vous êtes bon et généreux d'avoir épargné aux hommes la prévision du lendemain. Merci, mon Dieu de m'avoir donné tant de courage... » (70). Quelquefois elle parle directement à quelqu'un qui apparaît dans l'histoire. Le registre de ces paroles varie selon la personne. Son amertume peut se montrer en langue très familière : « Nous nous retrouverons sûrement un jour monsieur ! Ce jour là, je serai fière de moi ! Tu baisseras les yeux, incapable de défier les miens, pleins de mépris, qui te crieront : je t'emmerde, toi et ton sale fric ! » (54). Quand elle respecte la personne à qui elle s'adresse, sa langue est plus soutenue : « Existe-t-il une plus grande preuve d'amitié et de respect : aller jusqu'à vouloir intégrer à sa famille une rejetée comme moi... Je ne trouve pas de remerciement digne de vous, mes chers amis. » (187). La langue parlée par d'autres personnes dans les dialogues varie aussi, mais c'est plutôt familière et par moments même très grossière : « Religion de la putain de sa mère, il m'a ignorée comme s'il ne me connaissait pas, ce fils de bâtard d'officier. Attends que je sois libre, j'irai voir la pute de sa copine. Toutes des putes et des filles de putes ! » (217). Les conversations internes entre l'Invisible et Carcasse sont toujours familières, mais jamais grossières : « 'Oh non, du calme ma petite carcasse !' répondait l'Invisible. 'Toi encore ! Ne m'énerve surtout pas avec tes rêves. Il n'y a que moi qui la vis, la réalité !' » (197).

Le registre du récit change autant que celui des dialogues. Rachida avoue qu'elle n'est pas écrivain professionnelle. Une structure manque un peu au livre parce que la division en chapitres n'est pas très claire. Il y a de petites erreurs de langue ou de frappe qui ne sont peut-être pas à Rachida, mais il y a aussi des passages un peu ambiguës. Par exemple : « Je courais sans relâche derrière

mon pain. La survie des miens, face à la rudesse de mon chemin. Quelle arme lever ? Quel ennemi combattre ? » (152) ; « ...je fus incapable, malgré toute la ténacité dont j'ai pu faire preuve, de régler ce qui m'était dû. Les intérêts s'étaient cumulés et tout cela me brisa. » (252) ; « Mais contre la mère, il ne pouvait rien. La force de la mère endurait le pire. Celle-ci était consciente, les yeux ouverts, alors que la douleur lui tailladait les entrailles. Elle persistait, elle poussait, se forçait à donner naissance à ce bout de chair, cette vie qui se détachait d'elle. Une vie qui, jour et nuit, prenait forme en elle. Comment pouvait-on lui en vouloir de lui avoir trop donné ou de l'avoir trop aimé ? C'est cette accusation que je subissais chaque jour. » (341-2). Ce dernier passage est aussi un exemple du style très imagé de Rachida. Elle utilise beaucoup de métaphores, dont certaines sont enchaînées et liées. Par exemple, « le beau tapis » (la vie d'une prostituée), « le précipice » (les conséquences de cette vie), « la course folle » (la vie de Rachida), « le monstre » (la loi qui la poursuit). Quelquefois la langue est assez poétique : « Mes enfants étaient, et sont restés, ma raison d'être, l'unique lien qui me rattache à l'existence. Ils sont la lumière qui éclaire mes nuits, le soleil de mes jours, l'air de ma vie » (46). Ailleurs la langue de Rachida est grossière : « Mon patron était un vieil homme empêtré dans la merde jusqu'au cou. » (67). Le style reste celui de la conversation, même quand il n'y a pas de dialogue : « Cette voie misérable qu'est la vertu était... » (206). Les phrases sont généralement courtes. Souvent il y en a plusieurs sans verbe. Les temps verbaux sont parfois aussi à discuter. Quand elle raconte une conversation qui n'a lieu qu'une seule fois, elle utilise soit le passé simple soit l'imparfait et même les deux ensemble. Par exemple, à la page 33, elle écrit « lançai-je à Nora », puis « me disait Nora », puis « dirent les deux soeurs en se regardant ». Rachida inclut des mots arabes, surtout dans les dialogues, ce qui ajoute à la vivacité et à l'authenticité du texte.

Rachida se sert parfois du sarcasme mordant : « Le papa donneur n'avait jamais le temps, il avait un autre réceptacle entre les mains. » (228). Bien qu'elle ait dit que son livre n'est pas « un règlement de comptes »⁸, ses mots pardonnent mais

pas son ton : « Je pardonnais aussi vite que j'oubliais... Seul celui dont la force dépasse toutes les forces pouvait me venger. Je m'en étais remise à Dieu et j'avais confiance en sa justice. Quelques années plus tard, j'appris le décès de Monsieur Abdou, il s'était pendu. » (77) et « Dieu... Votre châtement n'a pas tardé à se faire sentir. Trois ans après notre divorce, le père de mes enfants se retrouva sans rien, seul dans une maison vide où tout fut saisi, emporté et disséminé. » (230). Rachida dit que son livre « n'est pas que malheur et souffrance, tout au contraire. Mon livre est tout amour. »⁹ C'est vrai qu'elle exprime tout le temps son amour pour Dieu et pour ses enfants, mais le ton général est plutôt amer qu'heureux. Il y a des passages humoristiques, mais l'ironie est toujours présente et l'humour est caustique, par exemple quand elle décrit la visite du propriétaire (290-1) ou « Monsieur l'agent » (233-4). Les conversations entre l'Invisible et Carcasse sont amusantes, par exemple quand il y a un jeu de mots sur « état » (202-3).

Bref, le style de Rachida est sincère, original et variable, même si ce n'est pas littéraire.

Notes

1. Ménager, S. *Femmes du Maroc Années 90*. Inédit : 60
2. Ibid. : 72
3. Ibid. : 62
4. Ibid. : 61
5. Ibid. : 81
6. Ibid. : 57
7. Ibid. : 63-4
8. Ibid. : 72
9. Ibid. : 74

TRANSLATION COMMENTARY

MY PERSONAL APPROACH TO TRANSLATION

My personal approach to translation is the amalgam of my formal studies, my own reading, my practical experience, and my own intuitive feeling for language. I would probably rank these factors as having been mentioned in ascending order of importance. That does not mean that I would dismiss translation theory as unimportant. Apart from its purely intellectual interest, translation theory impacts positively on the practice of translating. Any activity can only benefit from analysis leading to an abstract awareness of why certain practical choices are made. Most practising translators will forget the complex terminology and diagrams, but the theory will survive through the way it has influenced their practice. It is therefore not my intention here to do a survey of translation theory. There are plenty of published books that do this very well already. I do not intend to develop my own abstract theory of translation either. My approach will speak for itself in the translation that I have done of *Ma Vie, mon Cri* and in the explanatory comments specific to this book that follow in this section.

Having eschewed any theorising, I must nevertheless briefly outline my guiding principles. My approach is somewhere between semantic and communicative translation. Since *Ma Vie, mon Cri* is a creative text, my main focus has been on what I perceive Rachida Yacoubi to have intended, not on how I might have expressed the same thoughts or on the impact the text might have on its putative readership. In the case of this translation, my leaning has therefore been towards semantic translation. I have, however, tried to produce a text in English that does not sound like a translation. I hope that it will read easily and well. In this sense I have been communicative. My unit of translation has been each word, but within the ever widening contexts of the sentence, the paragraph, the chapter, the whole book, North African literature, etc.

TITLE

- **“Ma Vie, mon Cri”**: “My Life, my Cry”

The title has been translated literally. The stridency and pithy urgency of the French needs to be retained, as well as its lyrical balance. The most problematic word is “Cry”, however other possibilities like “Lament”, “Wail”, “Protest” or “Shout of protest” all individually express an aspect of “Cri”, but at the expense of the whole meaning. “My Shout” is impossible given its colloquial meaning. There are three indirect references to the title in the book:

“...l’écriture de mon cri vital, à l’écriture de ma vie hurlante” (174): “the writing of my vital cry, to the writing of my heart-rending life”

“Je l’implorais de me donner le courage de retenir mon cri d’horreur” (255) : “I implored Him to give me the courage to suppress my cry of horror” (not used in quite the sense of the title).

“Horrible souvenir, cri douloureux que celui de ma vie!” (355) : “Horrible memory, painful cry that my life is!”

In the unpublished interview with Serge Ménager referred to in the Introduction, Rachida explains her need to write the book after she was released from prison: “Je voyais les miens se détruire. Et il me fallait absolument crier. Pour moi je peux dire qu’il s’agit vraiment d’un cri, comme le dit le titre du livre. Ce cri a duré des années, jour et nuit, je n’ai pas arrêté de crier. C’est une voix qui est sortie du plus profond de moi.”

The English word “Cry” is not as strong as the French, but does retain the combination of emotion and protest which the quotes confirm Rachida to intend.

THEMATICALLY IMPORTANT EXTENDED METAPHORS

- **L'INVISIBLE / LA VISIBLE / CARCASSE**

"l'Invisible" : "the Invisible One" (37, 38, 39, 42, 43, 50, 53, 71, 72, 112, 132, 173, 197, 199, 202, 235, 240, 241, 261, 343)

"la Visible" : "the Visible One" (71)

"Carcasse" : "Bag-of-Bones" (37, 39, 72, 197, 198, 242, 262, 163, 343)

Rachida names the opposing voices of her internal conflicts "l'Invisible" and "Carcasse". She refers specifically to "l'Invisible" as: **"mon âme ou ma spiritualité... Cette chose, pour moi, avait un nom: l'Invisible, celle qui me tenait par la bride, me retenait."** (38). She later refers to it as: **"Cet autre moi était farouche, sauvage, et comme surgi d'une autre époque, lointaine et sans pitié pour les faiblesses humaines."** (71). It is therefore an element of her personality (her conscience) but assumes a definite identity of its own, almost to the extent of being a character in the story, so I have standardised my translation as "the Invisible One", always with capitals even although Rachida is inconsistent. Only once does she refer to her physical nature as **"la Visible... la voix de mon corps, de ma sensualité"** (71), so I used the corresponding "the Visible One" here. Although she does not specifically explain that "Carcasse" is also her physical nature, this is clear through context. "Carcasse" also has a definite identity as a character (standardised as "Bag-of-Bones"), usually as the practical and amoral adversary of the Invisible One in Rachida's internal debates (37, 39, 72, 197, 198, 262, 343). The term needs to be derogatory as Rachida values her spiritual nature much more, but the literal translation of "Carcass" would not tie in with the character's liveliness. "Bag-of-Bones" seemed playful, yet unflattering. Twice it is "sale carcasse", when the Invisible One is being judgemental, which I rendered as "filthy Bag-of-Bones" because "filthy" does have the connotation of amoral (198, 343). Sometimes the "carcasse" does refer to Rachida's actual body, rather than her physical nature, but I consistently retained "Bag-of-Bones" in these instances as the two are almost

inseparable and Rachida does not change her word (152, 197, 242, 263, 317, 343). When she refers to her “grosse carcasse” (317) I use “cumbersome” rather than “fat”, as her body is letting her down because of ill health at the time and a “fat” Bag-of-Bones” seems contradictory.

- **COURIR / CAVALER / UNE COURSE / FUIR / FUGITIVE**

One of the most important extended metaphors is that of running, with life being a race. Linked to this is the idea of fleeing (being on the run) as a fugitive. Most of the time there is no translation problem as the metaphor works equally well in English.

The verb “courir” could usually be translated more or less directly:

“Je me retrouvais dans les rues à toute heure, courant à me couper le souffle et loin d’imaginer que cela pouvait paraître excitant...” (171) : “running till I was out of breath”

“... il n’y a pas plus émoustillant pour un homme qu’une femme qui court” (171) : “a woman who is on the run”. Here “is running” did not seem to convey the implied idea of a woman running because she is busy, but also being “on the run” because she is fleeing various difficulties, hence the less literal translation.

“à courir derrière eux, à pied” (206) : “running behind them”.

“Je cours comme une vraie dingue” (244) : “I’m running around like a real nutcase!” Here “running around” conveys the madness, Rachida’s lack of progress because she is not merely running a straight race.

“Dans la journée, je courais dans tous les sens” (250) : “I ran around all over the place”. This is similar to the previous example.

“Je briserais les chaînes les plus solides pour courir vers vous mes petits” (252) : “to run to you”. This example and the next show Rachida not only “running around” for the sake of her children, but running towards them with contrasting direction and determination.

“...je suis encore assez forte pour courir vers mes petits sans défense”

(253) : “to run back to my defenceless little ones”.

“...à nouveau courir... Il pleut! Oui mais il faut courir!” (317) : “in order to run once again... It’s raining! Yes, but I must run!”

“Ne te réjouis pas Rachida, ta liberté n’est que provisoire! Cours, profite-en, cavale, ma chère, cavale.” (271) : “Run, make the most of it, you’re on the run, my dear, you’re on the run.” The expression “être en cavale” means to be on the run. Since Rachida has just narrowly avoided being imprisoned and fears being caught again, this is the logical interpretation here, even although she uses the imperative of the verb which might have been translated as something like “skedaddle”, which would seem too light-hearted. In the other instances where “cavaler” is used as a verb, I have translated it as “rushing around” as more contextually appropriate.

“Il était temps de reprendre ma cavale habituelle” (313) : “It was time to start rushing around again as usual.”

“ensemble nous cavalions à longueur de journée” (316) : “we rushed around together the whole day long”.

There are several instances where “courir” is linked to “pain”, expressing Rachida’s difficult quest to provide for her children’s daily needs. It seemed clearer to say “running in search of” rather than the more literal “after”.

“Moi je faisais que vivre ma destinée. Celle d’une femme en jean, sur les chemins, courant derrière son pain” (71) : “I was just living out my destiny. That of a woman in jeans, on the road, running in search of her daily bread”. The idea of being “on the road” links to that elsewhere of “walking the streets” - for food, not to pick up men as others imagine.

“Je courais sans relâche derrière mon pain. La survie des miens” (152) : “Without respite, I was running in search of my daily bread, indeed the very survival of my children”.

“Et Maman courait après le pain” (229) : “ And Mummy was running in search of daily bread”.

Rachida not only uses the verb “courir”, but also the noun “course” to describe her life. I have generally translated this as “race” to link with her constant references to running. She is making a “journey” and talking about the “course of her life”, but the constant speed and almost panicky hurry that “race” implies are necessary. Another possibility – “headlong dash”- would not work as consistently well.

“ma course contre mon destin” (105) : “ my race against destiny”.

“J’essayais de ralentir la vitesse de ma course” (169) : “ I tried to slow down the pace of my race”.

“J’avais ralenti ma course rageuse” (173) : “I had slowed down my frenetic race”.

“Il me fallait encore accélérer la vitesse de la course” (319) : “ I had to speed up the pace of my race even more”.

“A pas de tortue, je continuais ma course” (329) : “ At the pace of a tortoise, I continued my race.”

Rachida often describes her “course” as “folle”, and this association remains even when the adjective is omitted. The translation needed to be standardised to make it a recognisable leitmotif. Possibilities included “crazy”, “mad”, or “frantic”, but I chose “frenzied” as best combining the sense of madness and haste.

“ma course folle” (19) : “ My frenzied race”.

“Ma course était folle” (172) : “My race was frenzied”.

“Ma vie ne fut qu’une course folle, celle d’une fugitive dans un cercle vicieux” (220) : “ My life was one long frenzied race, that of a fugitive caught in a vicious circle”.

“...prise par ma course folle” (276) : “ caught up as I was with my frenzied race”.

“Impossible de mettre fin à ma course, de plus en plus folle” (318) : “ It was impossible to put an end to my frenzied race that became crazier and crazier”. Rather than use the comparative “more frenzied” here, I added “frenzied” to race, but used the better sounding comparative “crazier” as well.

In the following example I translated “course” as “running around” instead of “race”. The gossips condemning her would be unaware of her own image of a race, but would rather be seeing a woman “running around” contrary to cultural norms dictating that a woman remain in the home and almost in the colloquial sense of sexually “getting around”.

“Une vision limitée à ma course et à mon jean. Les mauvaises langues s’acharnaient de plus en plus sur moi.” (168) : “ Their vision was strictly limited to my running around and my jeans. The wagging tongues targeted me more and more.”

There are two occasions where “course” is used differently to refer to other people, not to Rachida.

“Il m’emportait dans une espèce de rallye effréné. Rien ne pouvait l’arrêter dans sa course folle...” (151) : “...a sort of frenzied rally.... his crazy course”. The neighbour is literally racing to get Rachida out of his car, so “frenzied” was attached to “rally” and not “course”, which was distinguished from Rachida’s “frenzied race” by using “crazy course”, especially since he is following a course of action, as well as the route of a rally.

Adil **“s’est fondu dans la foule, pris par la course, guidez ses premiers pas dans la vie” (321) :** “caught up in the rush”. Adil is being caught up in the general “rush of life”, rather than any personal “race” against destiny.

Reinforcing the running metaphors are those of a fugitive, which can be translated directly. One from page 220 is quoted above and there are others such as:

“Ma vie de fugitive” (246) : “ My life as a fugitive was terrible.

“Je n’étais moi-même qu’une fugitive” (258) : “ I myself was only a fugitive”. Rachida reinforces this idea of fleeing with her frequent use of the verb “fuir”, sometimes fleeing something abstract like reality and sometimes something concrete like poverty or the police. Since the verb can be translated directly, they are of interest only thematically and will not be quoted in full. (19, 24, 85, 97, 145, 160, 167, 248, 269, 281, 293, 339).

- **DÉLUGE**

Although “déluge” can be translated literally as “flood”, it is an important metaphor and influences how other associated images might be interpreted. Rachida characterises her first marriage and divorce as “le déluge”:

“Je suis partie en me disant: après moi le déluge... Je me trompais. Le déluge se trouvait là, devant moi...” (10). The metaphor seems awkward, but presumably implies an overwhelming flood of problems, a natural disaster destroying everything in its wake. Initially I changed the metaphor into a slightly different one that seemed to read better in English: “I left my husband telling myself: after this, the heavens can fall... I was wrong. The fall was there, right in front of me...” Rachida uses the image of falling over a precipice or into the abyss for other women who succumb to easier but immoral survival tactics, so the idea of this temptation, the possibility of falling, of becoming a ‘fallen woman’ being ahead of her does work. However, she actually means that her troubles were not over and she still had a flood of problems to face. I therefore opted for the literal “...saying: the flood is behind me... I was wrong. The flood was...”. This also makes more sense retrospectively after the reader has read the other two references to “déluge”. The link would not be made if the vivid “flood” metaphor were not retained.

“Je contemplais cette maison où tout avait été emporté par le déluge. Nous étions des rescapés, perdus...” (82) : “I contemplated the house in which everything had been carried away by the flood. We were survivors, lost souls...”.

“Je mis ainsi au monde mon premier roman, qui n’a encore jamais été publié: ‘Le déluge’. Un roman qui retrace des années de contestation, les yeux fermés, tout mon combat contre un homme qui m’a détruite... J’émergeais donc lentement du nauffrage.” (174) : “My first novel - “The flood” - was thus born, but it has not yet been published. It blindly recounts years of conflict, my battle against a man who destroyed me... I was thus slowly extricating myself from the wreck.” The image of a shipwreck only works if the natural disaster is of a watery nature. Since Rachida has even used her “déluge” metaphor for the title of her first book, it needs to be respected and translated literally.

- **TOURBILLON**

In English a “tourbillon” can be either a whirlpool or a whirlwind. Rachida uses the metaphor eight times, with two overlapping but slightly different emphases in meaning. I have used the two English words to distinguish these meanings, which fit in with the slightly different connotations of each word in English.

The “tourbillon” sometimes represents the combined power, beyond Rachida’s control, of all her problems sweeping her helplessly along with them. I have used “whirlpool” in these instances because it fits in with her metaphor of the divorce as a flood and she and her children being shipwreck survivors, as well as the recurring image that she is trying to get to the shore (“rive”), but is being sucked under and sinking (“couler”, “sombrier”).

“ **Mes enfants commençaient à s’égarer, à se perdre dans ce tourbillon de problèmes**” (81) : “My children were starting to lose direction, sucked into this whirlpool of problems.”

“**Prise par le tourbillon de mes ennuis**” (151) : “Caught up as I was in the whirlpool of my troubles”.

“**...ils pouvaient être perdus dans un tourbillon auquel ils n’auraient rien compris.**” (164) : “...they could have become lost in a whirlpool of events beyond their understanding.”

“Engloutie dans un toubillon, nageant dans un océan de problèmes, je mordais à tous les hameçons...” (171) : “Swept up in a whirlpool, swimming in an ocean of problems, I took all the bait I was offered...” In the context of the accompanying metaphors, the whirlwind definitely would not work here.

“...d’atteindre la rive... Prise dans un tourbillon, j’avais pourtant encore la force de lutter pour les miens.” (347) : “...reaching the shore... Although caught up in a whirlpool, I still had the strength to fight for my children.” Again, the accompanying metaphor of the shore makes the whirlpool preferable.

The “tourbillon” in the latter part of the book is not just an external force, but rather Rachida’s very existence because her response to her “whirlpool” of problems is to rush around, always hurrying. The translation of “whirlwind” therefore generally works better here, because it is also a powerful natural phenomenon that sucks in its victims, but in English “whirlwind” is associated with hurrying. I have added “existence” in English to make the meaning clearer.

“Dans mon tourbillon...” (276) : “In my whirlwind existence...”

“Dans ce tourbillon...”(318) : “In the midst of this whirlwind existence...”

“Je replongeais dans mon tourbillon habituel...” (327) : “I plunged back into my usual whirlwind existence”.

- **TEMPÊTE**

There is no translation problem with “tempête” as storm, but it reinforces the ideas conveyed by “tourbillon”.

“Je vivais une période plus ou moins calme de ma vie. Un calme qui m’inquiétait et auquel je n’étais pas habituée. Après la pause, la tempête me guettait toujours...” (297) : “This period of my life was more or less calm. This calm worried me as I was unused to it. After a lull, a storm always lay in wait for me...”.

“Comme par magie, la tempête se calma.” (304) : “As if by magic, the storm subsided.”

- **FOUDRE / FOUROYER**

Expressions using “foudre” and “foudroyer” have been translated differently according to context, not always retaining the weather link.

“Pour éviter de m’attirer les foudres du *Cadi*...” (118) : “To avoid bringing down the Cadi’s wrath on me...”

“Adil, que tu t’abattais sur ces gosses telle une foudre qui ne laissait que des dégâts...” (154) : Adil... you swooped down on those kids like a bolt of lightning leaving devastation in its wake...” The sudden speed and force of lightning worked here, which is often associated with “attack”.

“Courageuse, je supportais leurs ‘Psst... Psst...’ telle une foudre qui s’abattait sur moi.”(251) : “Bravely I endured their ‘Psst... Psst...’ like thunderbolts crashing down around me.” Thunder has sound, which fits in with the verbal assaults.

“Tous les regards présents foudroyaient avec dégoût et mépris celui...” (336) : “All eyes present, disgusted and contemptuous, looked daggers at the man...” A change of metaphor seemed acceptable to express the meaning in context better. The possibility of “flashing looks of contempt...” would not have been as strong.

- **OTHER WEATHER METAPHORS**

The other weather metaphors complement those above, but do not present translation problems.

“Forte était ma carcasse pour avoir lutté contre vents et marées. Je suis peut-être protégée... Sinon, comment aurais-je pu supporter de brûler au soleil ou de geler dans le froid?” (152) : “Strong was my body after fighting against winds and tides.” Perhaps I am protected... Otherwise, how could I have borne the burning sun and the freezing cold?” The style is quite poetic

and since she often mentions inclement weather conditions, she means the sun and cold literally as well as figuratively here.

“Je devais rester droite et tenir contre tous les vents.” (222) : “I had to stand tall, and resist all the winds.”

“...tenir contre vents et marées” (281) : “hold out against winds and tides”.

- **COULER / SOMBRER**

Rachida indirectly reinforces the metaphors of the “déluge”, the “tourbillon” (whirlpool) and the “rive” with the verbs “couler” and “sombrier” which convey the image of her sinking / going under and drowning, or struggling / floundering to avoid this.

“Je coulais tout doucement...” (149) : “I was gradually going under...”

“Je coulais tout doucement.” (168) : “I was gradually going under.” The English expression “going under” also has the appropriate connotation of financial difficulties.

“Ma roue continuait à tourner, mais moi je stagnais et coulais petit à petit.” (242) : “My wheel continued to turn, but I was getting bogged down and sinking little by little.”

I sometimes reinforced the meaning of the metaphor:

“...ont évité que je sombre.” (32) : “kept me from sinking and going under”.

“J’aurais sombré.” (70) : “I would have given up and gone under.”

I used “flounder” when there was a sense of struggling against sinking:

Les femmes vertueuse **“sombraient en silence”** (55) : “floundered in silence”.

“...je sombrais dans le silence” (118) : “...I floundered in silence.”

“Je me débattais dès lors de toutes mes forces pour ne pas sombrier.” (171) : “From then on, I fought with all my strength not to go under.”

“Je voulais tout laisser tomber et sombrier dans le désespoir.” (196) : “I wanted to drop everything and sink into despair.”

The verb “somber” is also used elsewhere in the sense of sinking into thought (205), silence (34, 298) or sleep (340), but these instances are not linked to the extended metaphor, so will not be quoted.

“Elle a certainement **‘sombé’** par inconscience.” (25) : “She certainly “went astray” inadvertently.” Here I translated “sombé” differently as the metaphor of “went under” would not be clear, especially so early in the book:

- **RIVE**

The extended metaphor of “la rive” is closely linked to those already discussed of “le déluge”, “tourbillon”, “tempête” and “couler / somber”. Rachida sees her destination as “la rive” – the objective of saving her children from sinking and drowning after the flood / storm and shipwreck of her divorce. She has to prevent them from being sucked under by her “tourbillon” of problems and get them back onto dry land. The direct translation of “la rive” as “the shore” works consistently well, so it is not worth quoting the passages in full here, but “la rive” can be found on the following pages: 111, 113, 138, 154, 231, 242, 318, 329, 347, 355. The phrase “La rive... la rive...” becomes a sort of mantra for Rachida. The first time (111 and 113) I extended the English slightly to: “Get to the shore... the shore...” to clarify the meaning of the metaphor, but this was no longer necessary by page 318, where I followed the French exactly: “The shore, the shore...”.

- **MA NUIT / TUNNEL / NOIR / SOMBRE / LUMIÈRE**

Rachida uses traditional positive associations with light and negative ones with the dark. These are common to French and English, which make direct translations generally possible. Her period of suffering after her divorce is metaphorically “ma nuit” – “my night”:

“**Ma course était folle et ma nuit très longue**” (172) : “My race was frenzied and my night very long”.

“**Plus je cherchais la lumière et plus ma nuit s’allongeait.**” (201) : “The more I sought the light, the more my night stretched before me.”

“Mais qu’est-ce qu’elle était longue, ma nuit...” (278) : “But how long was my night...”

She also uses the metaphor of travelling through a dark “tunnel” towards a brighter future.

“...je me voyais déjà au bout du tunnel.” (51) : “...I already saw myself at the end of the tunnel.

“...sur cette route que je percevais comme le tunnel de ma vie.” (161) : “on that road which I saw like the tunnel of my life.” Here she travels through both a literal and figurative tunnel on her way home late at night.

“Moi qui n’aimais pas le noir, elle me coûtait très cher cette lumière, un luxe qui dépassait de très loin mes moyens! J’évitais de sombrer dans la réflexion pour pouvoir avancer, aller jusqu’au bout du tunnel sans perdre la raison.”(205) : “I who disliked the dark paid dearly for the light, a luxury that was well beyond my means! I avoided reflecting too much so as to move forwards, to reach the end of the tunnel without losing my sanity.”

“Il fait nuit, c’est dangereux!” (317) : “It’s dark; it’s dangerous!”

The darkness of the night is dangerous to Rachida for different reasons. The option of becoming a prostitute would metaphorically darken her life:

“...l’image d’un lendemain sombre et nuageux” (42) : “...the vision of a dark and cloudy tomorrow.” Ironically, she is assumed to be a prostitute purely on the grounds of being out after dark:

“...je n’étais qu’une femme de nuit, une pute quittant chaque soir un nouvel amant” (272) : “...I was only a lady of the night, a whore leaving a new lover every night.” In English “lady” is understood to be ironical. Rachida is constantly bothered by men assuming that she is a “lady of the night”. She uses the idea of light and dark to set the scene for their verbal abuse on page 161:

“Seuls les phares des voitures m’éclairaient et me donnaient l’impression d’évoluer dans un monde étrange où la lumière était reine,

mais sans éclat. Elle brouillait au contraire la vue. On aurait dit que ce monde si sombre atténuait toute clarté. J'avais l'impression de survoler un univers où j'étais complètement ignorée. (159-60) : "Only car headlights lit my way and I had the impression that I was moving in a strange world in which light reigned, but without brilliance. In fact, it dulled vision. It seemed as though this gloomy world subdued all brightness. I had the impression of flitting through a universe in which I was completely unnoticed." This passage (and the rest of the paragraph not quoted here) presented some translation challenges. For instance, "était reine" seemed better rendered by the verb "reigned", which is what a queen would do. It also gives a good example of the importance of the context – for instance on the next page some of the same words are translated differently because the nuances of the semantic range are different: "tout ce qui brouillait la clarté de mon âme" : "Everything that blurred the clarity of my being". Although not relevant to the light / dark metaphor, a little more of the same paragraph will be quoted for the sake of discussing the translation challenges:

"...Gelée par le froid, je crispais mes mains sur le guidon. Tout en moi était glacé, sauf mon coeur et mon âme qui bouillaient de chaleur. Calme et sereine, je m'y réfugiais pour m'y réchauffer et fuir cette ambiance nocturne." (160) : "Chilled to the bone, I clenched my hands on the handlebars. My whole being was frozen, except for my heart and soul that were ablaze. Feeling calm and serene, I took refuge in that inner fire to warm myself up and flee the atmosphere of the night." Again, there is an example of the same word being translated in two different ways: "âme" has been rendered as "being" and as "soul". "Gelée par le froid" and "Chilled to the bone" are different, but mean the same and the more idiomatic translation reads better. The original image of "bouillaient de chaleur" could have been translated as "bubbled with warmth", but then the French pronoun "y" would need to be translated as something like "within". The different metaphor of Rachida being "ablaze" "with her faith and warming herself with this "inner fire" seemed to work better in English, but retains the sense of the original.

Although officialdom, particularly the justice system, operates during the day, it is also associated with the dark. The summons is:

“ce bout de papier bleu qui allait noircir ma vie” (209) : “that little slip of blue paper which was going to darken my life.”

The buildings and environment are dark :**“couloirs sombres”** (218) : “dark corridors” and **“un couloir un peu sombre”** (260) : “a rather dark corridor”.

“Il n’y avait que de l’insécurité dans ma vie, dans ces coulisses sombres et glaciales.” (255) : “There was only insecurity in my life, in those dark and icy backstage scenes.” The choice of “backstage scenes” rather than “wings” for “coulisses” seemed to convey the idea of dubious things going on “behind the scenes”, out of the public eye, and probably in the dark.

“L’obscurité et la froideur régnaient dans ce monde du sous-sol” (266) : “Darkness and cold reigned in the world of this basement”.

“Il faisait noir lorsque je sortis de ce monde sinistre. J’émergeais du gouffre.” (271) : “It was dark when I left that sinister world. I was emerging from a black hole.” I have chosen to translate “gouffre” as “a black hole” here (but not elsewhere) as it conveys the idea of the dark basement, but also of something powerful and dangerous into which people and things can be sucked and disappear without trace. This fits in well with the impression Rachida gives of the justice system. Rachida goes on to establish the contrast with the outside world where there is light even after dark:

“...cette fontaine lumineuse, ce monde de lumières où je me sentais vraiment étrangère” (271) : “...the luminous fountain, this world of lights in which I felt like an outsider.”

Rachida’s children are a contrasting source of light in all this darkness. The lyricism of these passages needed to be retained in translation.

“Ils sont la lumière qui éclaire mes nuits, le soleil de mes jours, l’air de ma vie.” (46) : “They light up my nights; they are the sunshine of my days, the breath of my life.”

“Mes enfants étaient l'étoile qui brillait dans le ciel de mes nuits sombres. Au fil des jours, elle grandissait et demain, demain sa clarté illuminera le restant de ma vie, me disais-je pour tenir le coup.” (154) : “My children were the star which shone in the sky of my dark nights. With the passing days, it grew bigger, and in order to keep going, I told myself that tomorrow, tomorrow its brightness would illuminate the rest of my life.”

Other good people are also associated with lightening her life:

“Tout n’a pas été si noir puisque j’eus la chance de rencontrer, sur mon rude chemin, un Farid, une Christianne, un Dédé, tous ceux qui m’ont tendu la main dans ma nuit sombre...” (166) : “Things have not been so black since I had the good fortune to meet, along my rough road, a Farid, a Christianne, a Dédé - all those who held out a hand to me in my dark night...” Even in the darkest moments of her “long night”, Rachida does constantly hold onto the hope of light at the end of her “tunnel”:

“En réalité, je venais de voir le jour, je percevais au-delà de ses nuages la clarté d’un doux et brillant soleil. Demain il fera jour, demain il fera beau sûrement.” (110) : “In reality, I had just seen the light; beyond the clouds, I could sense the brightness of a gentle, shining sun. Tomorrow is another day; tomorrow will surely be fine.”

- **MONSTRE / FANTÔME**

Rachida establishes the fixed metaphor of the law being a monster, which she then uses without further explanation on numerous occasions (209, 212, 258, 331, 353). Two of the more interesting passages are given below.

“J’évoluais dans une arène où mon adversaire était un monstre imbattable, sourd et aveugle. Les plus malins lui bourraient le ventre pour l’endormir avant de se frayer un passage pour se faufiler avec souplesse entre ses pattes. Les idiots comme moi, bornés, qui l’affrontent, se font écraser par sa force...” (118) : “I was operating in an arena where my adversary was an unbeatable monster who was both deaf and blind. The shrewdest stuffed his stomach full so that he would sleep and they

could then slip nimbly between his paws. Short-sighted idiots like me, who confronted him, ended up getting crushed by his strength...”

“Du jour au lendemain, je réalisai que la justice n’avait jamais été à mes côtés comme je le pensais. Obstinement, elle était là, face à moi, telle une adversaire, sourde et aveugle. J’étais là, à deux pas du monstre infernal et je n’avais plus qu’une alternative, avancer et faire face à l’horreur avec la protection de Dieu, ou reculer pour me laisser choir dans le piège du diable, sur le beau tapis roulant...” (231) : “Overnight, I realised that justice had never been on my side as I had thought. Stubbornly, it was there, confronting me, like a deaf and blind opponent. I was there, two steps from the infernal monster and I had only one alternative: to go forward and tackle the fiend with God's protection, or retreat and let myself sink into the devil's trap, the magic carpet...” A “fiend” seemed more in keeping with the idea of fighting a creature than the abstract possibility of “horror”. The image of the carpet is discussed elsewhere. Rachida once characterises the law a “fantôme”, but it has similar qualities to the “monstre”.

“La loi fut pour moi ce fantôme aux attaques impétueuses, contre lequel je devais buter durant des années.” (140) : “In my experience, the law was a phantom which attacked impetuously, and I was to stumble against it year after year.” I changed the tense usage slightly as most of her confrontations with the law were yet to come.

- **TAPIS**

A woman’s alternative to confronting the “monstre” of the law is established using the metaphor of a “tapis”. The “tapis” is the apparently attractive life choice of surviving through prostitution, which although it seems easy, turns out to be disastrous in the long run. A carpet does have several associations that fit in with Rachida’s metaphor. A red carpet (tapis rouge) calls for special treatment and facilitates an easy passage. A magic carpet (tapis volant) offers an easy way of travelling (through life). In the Moslem context, Rachida’s carpet could also be an earthly alternative to relying on the power

of prayers made on a prayer rug (tapis de prière). It is therefore appropriate to retain the literal translation of “tapis” as “carpet”. The meaning of the metaphor becomes increasingly clear each time it is used in context.

“L’image de la tendre maman avait disparu pour laisser place à celle d’une professionnelle des grands bordels. J’étais prête pour exercer impeccablement ce métier auquel on me destinait. À chaque pas, l’immense et beau tapis se déroulait devant moi. Si doux, si souple. La tentation était forte, la facilité séduisante...” (42) : . “The image of a loving mother had disappeared to be replaced by a professional from the big brothels. I was ready to carry out faultlessly that career for which I was being destined. At every step, the immense and beautiful carpet was unrolling before me. So soft, so supple. The temptation was strong, the easiness enticing...”

“me laisser choir dans le piège du diable, sur le beau tapis roulant...” (231) : “let myself sink into the devil's trap, the beautiful magic carpet...”

The literal translation of “tapis roulant” would be a “moving walkway”, “travelator” or “carousel”, all of which are unsuitable and jarring in the context, especially as “tapis” with the meaning of “carpet” is an extended metaphor. The “beautiful undulating carpet” might work, but what is the significance of it undulating? Since “roulant” seems to imply movement and a mode of transport, I selected “magic carpet” as the best translation in context. Rachida does often refer to the power of magic, such as in her use of the magic wand metaphor. The verb “choir” could have been translated as “fall”, which would have gone well with “trap”, but “sink” implies relaxing into the plush comfort of the carpet, which is the main metaphor in the sentence.

“J’aurais pu éviter ce problème avec un sourire, installée confortablement sur ce tapis doré que beaucoup de gens sans scrupules déroulaient devant moi.” (240) : “I could have avoided the problem with a smile, comfortably set up on the golden carpet that lots of unscrupulous people rolled out before me.” The verb “set up” is better than “installed” as it conveys the idea of a mistress being provided with all her needs. The carpet in this instance is “golden”, reinforcing the implication of money transactions.

“Certes j’avais tourné le dos au beau tapis de corruption qui se déroulait sans arrêt à mes pieds...” (343) : “Undoubtedly, I had turned my back on the beautiful carpet of corruption that unrolled continually before my feet.”

- **PRÉCIPICE / ABÎME / GOUFFRE**

Rachida describes the sad fate of the women who choose the “tapis” as a solution to their problems through the linked metaphors of “le précipice”, “l’abîme” and “le gouffre”. The danger is not seen ahead and they end up falling over a precipice and into an abyss or chasm. This fate could mean the abstract consequences of existing in a meaningless moral void, but also the concrete possibility of material ruin, prison, or social rejection and isolation. Men can also face this fate. All three words can be translated directly.

“D’abord souriantes, confiantes, elles n’ont même pas le temps d’éviter le précipice, de crier au secours. Tout en se croyant libres, elles deviennent en réalité des esclaves. Celles que j’ai connues croyaient vivre, briller, je les voyais inertes, ternes, sans vie. Elles riaient aux éclats, mais leurs coeurs saignaient...” (19) : “At first smiling and confident, they don’t even have time to avoid the precipice, to cry for help. While believing themselves free, in reality they become slaves. Those whom I have known believed themselves to be alive and sparkling; I saw them as apathetic, dull and lifeless. They laughed loudly, but their hearts were bleeding...”

“C’était le plus facile des choix. Le plus dur était d’être là, debout à la croisée des chemins, d’éviter l’impasse, la voie la plus courte, brillante, pleine de promesses, avec au bout, le précipice... J’ai eu l’immense chance de rencontrer sur ma route des femmes qui avaient emprunté ce chemin. Je les ai vues trembler au bord de l’abîme. Incapable d’assister à leur chute, je me suis sauvée sans avoir le temps ni le courage de regarder derrière moi. L’autre chemin était long et épineux. Très peu de femmes ont eu le courage de supporter ses embûches.” (54) : “It was the easiest of choices. The hardest part was being there,

standing at the crossroads, avoiding the dead end, the shorter path, glittering, full of promise, with at its end, the precipice... Along my way I had the immense good fortune to meet women who had followed this path. I saw them trembling on the brink of the abyss. Unable to look on as they fell, I fled, having neither the time nor the courage to look behind me. The other path was long and thorny. Very few women have had the courage to brave its pitfalls."

"Que de pas vers le précipice!" (230) : "How many steps towards the precipice!"

"Aujourd'hui, je le pleure. En me jetant dans la rue, il s'est jeté dans l'abîme. À présent, je vis ma vie Hamid, mais avec le regret de te voir vivre sans vie..." (230) : "Today, I weep for him. By throwing me into the street, he threw himself into the abyss. Hamid, I am now living my life, but with the grief of seeing you living lifelessly..." This confirms the idea of a moral abyss or void as Rachida's husband has met the same fate.

"Je n'ignorais pas que chaque pas que je faisais pour pousser mes enfants vers la rive et sauvegarder mes principes me menait aveuglément vers l'abîme." (242) : "I was not unaware that every step I took to push my children towards the shore and to safeguard my principles led me blindly towards the abyss." This confirms that the "abîme" could be material disaster too, as Rachida is facing the possibility despite making moral life choices.

"La terre tremblait sous mes pieds. Et du coup, je voyais se creuser sous mes yeux le gouffre effrayant." (346) : "The ground shook beneath my feet. And all of a sudden, before my very eyes, I saw the terrifying chasm yawning wide."

"Mais nul ne m'entendait et je me suis retrouvée debout à deux doigts de l'abîme, du gouffre tant redouté. La terre tremblait sous mes pieds..." (354) : But no one heard me and I found myself standing on the brink of the abyss, of the much-dreaded chasm. The ground shook beneath my feet..."

The "gouffre" seems to be associated with an earthquake, a natural disaster as devastating as the "déluge" which Rachida faced at the beginning, after her

divorce. (As has been mentioned, “gouffre” was translated differently on page 270 as “black hole” because it was not part of the same metaphor.)

- **CHEMIN / VOIE**

The long quote from page 54 above includes the metaphor of choosing the right “chemin” or “voie” in life. The incorrect choices lead to the “précipice”, “abîme” or “gouffre”, but the other more difficult “chemin” is “long et épineux”. Rachida uses “chemin” and “voie” frequently, usually with the same interchangeable meaning of “path” or “track” so they are not worth citing individually.

- **DESTIN / DESTINÉE / SORT / CHANCE / ROUE**

Rachida uses the words “la destinée”, “le destin”, “le sort”, and “la chance” all the time. She generally portrays destiny as an external force over which the individual has no control. Sometimes that force seems to be an entity in itself, but often it is God who is seen to be predetermining people’s fates. Generally, “sort” was translated as “fate”, with the slight connotation of the consequences on people’s lives of what “le destin” or “la destinée”, translated as “destiny”, had decided and imposed. Only a few passages need be quoted.

“Moi, je ne faisais que vivre ma destinée.” (71) : “I was just living out my destiny.” and **“Je vivais ma destinée.”** (260) : “I was living my destiny.”

Rachida does not give up when confronted with her destiny - she actively lives it. Her life is: **“ma course contre mon destin”** (105) : “my race against destiny”. It is, however, definitely beyond her control to change:

“Je n’étais qu’une simple marionnette entre les mains du destin qui, sans pitié, n’avait pas encore décidé de m’octroyer la paix.” : (151): “I was no more than a simple puppet in the hands of destiny that, pitilessly, had not yet granted me peace.” Rachida’s faith makes her accept her fate, although she does continually point out its apparent unfairness:

“Moi, j’avais depuis longtemps pris ma décision. Ne me fier qu’à Dieu, lui qui a tracé ma destinée, aussi injuste qu’elle puisse paraître à des yeux humains.” (169) : “For my part, I had taken my decision long ago: to trust only in God, He who had determined my destiny, however unjust it might seem to human eyes.” The tense change reads better in English as God had presumably determined the destiny before Rachida decided to trust Him.

“Ma destinée était tracée. Je la vivais avec toute la patience d’une *mou-e-mina*...” (251): “My destiny was pre-determined. I lived it with all the patience of a *mou-e-mina*...”

“Je ne me suis jamais vraiment révoltée contre mon destin, assez cruel en somme, mais je priais Dieu d’atténuer mes souffrances.” (351) : “I never really rebelled against my destiny, which was all in all fairly cruel, but I prayed to God to ease my suffering.”

Rachida actually sees that she has benefited:

“Aussi m’est-il impossible de maudire cette vie, ce destin, quand bien même il eût été la source de mon malheur, puisqu’il fut aussi celle de ma sagesse, de ma lucidité.” (174): “So it is impossible for me to curse this life, this destiny, since even though it has been the source of my misfortune, it has also been that of my wisdom and lucidity.” This is one example of many where I have added a conjunction between adjectives listed with commas in French.

“En fait, Lary était pour moi une énigme. Le destin l’avait mis sur mon chemin pour faire de ma vie un paradis et un enfer à la fois.” (313) : “Indeed, Lary was a mystery to me. Destiny had put him on my path to make my life both paradise and purgatory.” The unifying alliteration seemed to justify the substitution of purgatory for “enfer”. Her faith is constantly being tested too.

The following passage is slightly humorous and shows that destiny, or in this case “chance” does seem to exist as a separate entity:

“Mes petits attendaient, un creux à l’estomac... Et la chance qui ne semblait toujours pas me sourire! J’en arrivais, les larmes aux yeux, à

la supplier: 'Je t'en prie chance, un petit coup! Juste avec le pouce. Pitié chance, sois avec moi, ne serait-ce qu'une fois.' Elle restait sourde à mon appel." (96) : "My children were waiting, with hollow stomachs... And good luck still did not seem to smile on me! I reached the point, with tears in my eyes, of begging for it: 'I beseech you, Luck - a little boost! Just a nudge. Have pity, Luck, side with me, even if only once.' Luck remained deaf to my appeal." Since luck was being personified, I capitalised it.

The metaphor of a wheel is linked to inexorable fate:

"La roue de la fortune n'arrête pas de tourner. Et cela n'arrive pas qu'aux autres." (106) : "The wheel of fortune does not stop turning. And it does not happen only to others."

"Ma roue continuait à tourner, mais moi je stagnais..." (242) : "My wheel continued to turn, but I was getting bogged down..." On the same page the metaphor of a wheel is used again, but slightly differently:

"...c'est uniquement pour faire tourner la roue, comme on dit." (242) : "it's just to keep the wheels turning, as they say."

The following extracts use a wheel metaphor but are not directly linked to destiny. The first in particular is interesting because there is such a mixture of metaphors:

"Ce n'était plus que des bâtons dans les roues qu'il voulait me mettre, mais les menottes aux mains. Il a dû râler de ne pouvoir me les passer, il n'en avait pas. Sa vengeance était un menu congelé, servi sur un plateau d'or." (137-8) : "He no longer wanted merely to put a spoke in my wheels, but to handcuff me as well. He must have been fuming, not to be able to slip them on to me: he did not have any. His vengeance was a frozen meal, served on a golden platter." Although the mixture of metaphors does not quite work, they were translated closely as the passage would otherwise change totally and since this is creative writing, Rachida presumably liked the combination. They are as understandable in English as they are in French.

“...moi, j’étais là, à courir derrière eux, à pied... Un fardeau sur le dos et **des bâtons dans les roues...** et sans jamais abandonner.” (206) : “...there I was, running behind them, on foot... a load on my back and spokes in my wheels... yet never giving up.” This passage is also not particularly well written and therefore had to be adjusted slightly to make it read better in English, nevertheless remaining as close to the original as possible.

- **PIÈGE / TRAQUENARD / HAMEÇON / GIBIER / PROIE /TRAQUÉE**

Rachida constantly uses the metaphor of “pièges” (traps), with the occasional variation of “traquenards” (snares). These are linked to other metaphors such as “(mordre) aux hameçons” (taking / swallowing bait), being seen as “proie” (prey), and feeling “traquée” (hounded). Most of the traps are set by lecherous men and the police, but there are some abstract ones like “le beau tapis” (turning to prostitution) or giving way to the “piège de la folie” (madness). A few examples are representative:

“J’avais quitté un homme pour me retrouver face à mille autres. Je n’étais qu’une proie qu’ils dévoraient des yeux.” (10) : “I had left one man only to find myself facing a thousand others. I was nothing but prey to their devouring eyes.”

“Je me sentais traquée, en danger, et menacée de tous les côtés.” (200) : “I felt hounded, threatened from all sides and in danger.”

“...je mordais à tous les hameçons que l’on me tendait pour m’en sortir. J’avais déjà fait du chemin depuis mon petit commerce avec Rajae! Je m’étais dégagée de ce piège sans trop de dégâts. Mais là! J’avais affaire à des professionnels... à pêcheurs au filet...” (171) : “I took all the bait I was offered in order to extricate myself. I had already come a long way since my small dealings with Rajae! I had escaped that trap without too much damage. But now! I was dealing with professionals... fishermen with drag nets...”

“Je cherchais sans arrêt un soutien, et je mordais avec confiance à chaque hameçon. M. X n’avait pas été le seul à me tendre de type

d'hameçons..." (242) : "I trustingly swallowed every piece of bait. Mr X was not the only one to offer me this sort of bait..."

The most interesting sequence using these metaphors is when she is at the police station being questioned. The usual word "proie" has been changed to "gibier", so a different word in English was preferable. It is like a hunt so "catch" worked well in the first instance, but not in the second two, where "quarry" was used instead.

"Une affaire plus importante que la mienne s'annonçait... Un gros gibier sûrement." (253) : "A more important case than mine had come up... Certainly a big catch."

"Les mains jointes sur la nuque, il attendait calmement l'arrivée du gibier." (254) : "With his hands folded behind his head, he calmly awaited the arrival of the quarry."

"C'était curieux. Ils râlaient tellement que j'étais à mon tour impatiente de voir le pauvre gibier. Je le plaignais déjà et j'aurais voulu l'avertir du piège qu'on lui tendait." (255) : "It was strange. They were bickering so much that I too became impatient to see the poor quarry. I was already sorry for him and I would have liked to warn him of the trap being laid for him."

"Malheureusement, je fus aussi incapable d'éviter le traquenard qui attendait l'homme du téléphone." (258) : "Unfortunately, I was also unable to avoid the snare waiting for the man of the telephone conversation."

Here "snare" was used to show the change from the usual for "piège" for "trap". It would have fitted well to say "unable to spring the snare", but you do not "spring" snares, so as is often the case in translation, a choice had to be made.

- **MOINS QUE RIEN**

Rachida uses this expression repeatedly to refer to how society perceives her. I considered using "nonentity", but this would not have expressed just

how low her status is, so I settled for "less-than-nothing", with the punctuation emphasising that it is a name rather than a phrase.

- **PESTE / VERMIN**

Rachida is seen as a contaminating influence in society – a sort of plague others might catch.

“Éloigne-toi de ma femme. Peste! tu risques de la contaminer et de la faire dévier du droit chemin...” (17) : “Keep away from my wife. Pestilence! You might contaminate her and make her stray from the straight and narrow...”

The abbreviation “Pest” would have been too playful and something like “Wicked creature” would have departed too far from the idea of disease.

“Si pour les uns j'avais la peste, pour les autres j'étais un mets délicieux.” (19) : “If for some I was a dread disease, for others I was a tasty morsel.” Rachida’s German friends also see her as suffering from a disease, but ironically inflicted by the very society afraid of Rachida being contagious. **“Ils voyaient en moi leur patiente qu'ils avaient hâte de guérir et de voir courir en pleine santé. Ils passaient des heures à discuter de mes problèmes, à chercher tous les remèdes possibles à ma longue agonie sans oublier les contre-indications.”** (127) : “They saw me as their patient whom they were eager to cure and see running around in good health. They spent hours discussing my condition and searching for possible remedies to my prolonged affliction, without neglecting the side effects.”

The medical metaphor was fully retained.

Linked to the idea of plague is that of vermin:

“Société, pour toi je n'étais qu'une vermine, une criminelle visée par ton épée tranchante. Lâche, tu me poignardais dans le dos.” (153) : “Society, to you I was nothing but vermin, a criminal intended for your sharp sword. You stabbed me in the back like a coward.”

“Je n'étais pas une moins que rien, une vermine qui risquait de contaminer les autres et d'envahir leur espace vital.” (282) : “I was not a

less-than-nothing, a type of vermin likely to contaminate others and invade their living space.”

- **BLESSURE / CICATRISER / PLAIE**

The very first paragraph (quoted on the cover) establishes this metaphor and Rachida refers to it again on the last page, although there the “wounds” are those to be inflicted by prison rather than those from the divorce.

“...de rouvrir ces plaies qui saignent encore et de supporter une deuxième fois leur douleur.” (9) :” to re-open those wounds which are still bleeding and to endure their pain a second time...” Writing about the wounds is in itself a painful process.

“...de raviver une blessure qui n’était pas encore cicatrisée.” (98) :
“reopen a wound that had not yet healed.”

“Je crie pour cicatriser les plaies. Si la blessure physique peut guérir, celle des injures perdure.” (153) : “I cry out to heal the wounds. Although physical injuries can heal, insults endure.” Rachida’s “cri” is a painful but ultimately healing process. Her bitterness on occasion shows that the insults are far from forgotten, particularly when it comes to her first husband.

“Mais il est atroce de rouvrir une blessure qui n’est pas encore cicatrisée. Les plaies sont profondes. Oui, donneur, comment oublier?” (228) : “But it is awful to re-open a wound that has not yet healed. The cuts are deep. Yes, sperm donor, how can I forget?”

“...lorsque cette plaie sera légèrement cicatrisée, je reviendrai vers toi.” (355) : “when this wound is somewhat healed, I will rejoin you.”

OTHER METAPHORICAL WORDS / PHRASES

- **BAGUETTE MAGIQUE**

Rachida often refers to magic, usually metaphorically as an unrealistic or immoral solution to problems.

“La misérable dans les bras de ce sorcier... Avec sa baguette magique...” (52) : “A poor wretch in the arms of this magician... With his magic wand...” Here the magic solution is immoral.

“Certes, l’idée était merveilleuse, mais avec une baguette magique...” (151) : “A fantastic idea, certainly, but with a magic wand...” Rachida has just explained the limitations imposed on a woman’s freedom outside the home, which make success impossible.

“Je les sentais toutes plus intéressées par le secret de ma baguette magique que par ma merchandise.” (174) : “I sensed that they were all more interested in the secret of my magic wand than in my merchandise.” Against the odds, Rachida seems indeed to be succeeding, so everyone assumes she has some sort of “magic wand”.

“C’était cela mon mystère, ma clé magique et ma folie. On me disait folle, oui, mais d’amour pour Dieu, mon seul protecteur.” (225) : “That was my secret, my magic wand and my madness. I was said to be crazy, that’s true, but with love for God, my only protector.” I chose to continue the “magic wand” metaphor which is more understandable than a “magic key” would be here. This passage logically answers the other women’s questions in the previous one. Although separated in the book, all these passages link together. The last brings in Rachida’s other great love and secret of success – her children:

“Le dialogue! La clé magique, je l’avais en main. Je n’ai jamais cessé de communiquer avec mes enfants, de tout partager avec eux.” (280) : “Exchanging ideas! I had the magic key in my hands. I never stopped communicating with my children and sharing everything with them.” I retained the “magic key” because a key opens doors, as does communication. She is talking about opening up to one another.

- **BLINDÉ**

The adjective “blindé” was translated in various different ways according to context. Sometimes it is important to be consistent about the translation of

recurring words, but this is an example where the varying, albeit overlapping, meanings in context are prioritised over consistency. Only when the word is serving as a deliberate leitmotif would the nuanced meaning be secondary.

“J’étais blindée. Aucune envie, aucun désir. Je ne sentais ni froid, ni fatigue, et encore moins la faim.” (71) : “I was immune. No craving, no desire. I felt neither cold, nor fatigue, and hunger even less.”

“Je bougeais sans relâche. Mon vélomoteur tombait en panne, puis me lâcha. Moi par contre, j’étais blindée. Je me retrouvais dans les rues à toute heure, courant à me couper le souffle...”I was always on the move. My moped broke down more and more, then gave up. But I was unstoppable. I found myself on the streets at all hours, running till I was out of breath...”

“J’essayais d’ignorer la situation dans laquelle je me trouvais pour éviter de tomber dans le piège de la folie. Je calmait mes méninges, blindais mes nerfs pour supporter un autre choc, un autre martyr[e].” (253) : “I tried not to think about the situation in which I found myself in order not to fall into the trap of madness. I calmed my mind and steeled my nerves to bear another shock, another ordeal.”

“Les mains sales, pleines de poussière, les yeux rouges, chargée comme une mule, blindée comme un robot, je traînais mes grands sachets.” (317) : “With dirty hands, covered in dust, eyes red, loaded down like a mule, as indestructible as a robot, I dragged around my big bags.”

“‘Psst, Psst, c’est le Koweit ou les Émirates?’ C’étaient les propos de ceux pour qui une femme au téléphone, le soir, ne peut être une mère, ne peut être qu’une amante. Blindée, je continuais...” (328) : “‘Psst, psst, is it Kuwait or the Emirates?’ These were the words of those men for whom a woman on the phone at night couldn’t be a mother, could only be a lover. Immune, I continued...” There are several other aspects of this passage to comment on. The French “ceux” cannot be translated as only “those” as the gender would be lost and it is significant that these are men. The tense of “peut” has been changed to the conditional as this is hypothesis.

- **BOULES DE SOUFFRANCE / BOULE DE FEU**

Rachida twice affectionately refers to her children as “boules de souffrance” (59, 229). The literal rendering “balls of suffering” hardly works, even though the image of curling up is the same. Something like “victims of suffering” has lost the affectionate original tone, so I opted for “bundles of suffering”.

Rachida later uses the phrase “boule de feu”:

“...vu la crise que je traversais. Je n’étais plus qu’une boule de feu dont les flammes consumaient tout ce qu’elles approchaient. Mes nerfs lâchaient et je hurlais pour un oui ou pour un non.” (293) : “...given the crisis I was going through. I was no more than a fireball whose flames consumed everything they approached. I was cracking up and I howled over the slightest thing.” I have retained the metaphor exactly, although it does not fully work as it wrongly makes Rachida sound as though she is on the offensive, whereas her suffering is consuming her. I have respected Rachida’s choice rather than change it completely.

- **BRIN DE VIE / SOUFFLE DE LA VIE**

The relationship between Rachida and her children is very close and there is a mutual dependence – to the extent that they are the “breath of life” for one another. A “brin” is very delicate in all its senses. A “thread of life” might have worked, but in the passage from page 217 Rachida brings together the ideas of a “brin d’air” (more commonly a “brin de vent”), with those of “la souffle de ma vie”. The idea therefore does seem to carry through with these four key words being combined in various ways:

“Younès, malgré ses douze ans, m’était trop attaché. Un corps sans âme dont j’étais le brin de vie.” (13) : “Younès, despite his twelve years, was too attached to me. A body without a soul - I was his breath of life.”

Mes enfants sont “l’air de ma vie.” (46) : “the breath of my life”. In English the “air of my life” does not work, but “the very air I breathe” could, but then “life” is left understood. It seems that the verb “breathe” is needed in English to

associate “air” and “life”, hence the smaller range of translations for the subtle variations in French.

“Je manquais d’air et je faisais des efforts pour ne pas m’évanouir. Dieu, un brin d’air, une petite issue de secours. Dieu, mes enfants, ah mes enfants! Le voilà, le souffle de ma vie, la voilà l’issue de secours dans laquelle je me réfugiais. Je fermais les yeux pour les imaginer...” (217) : “I needed air and was trying not to faint. Dear God, a breath of air, a little escape hatch. Dear God, my children, oh my children! They were the breath of my life; they were the escape hatch in which I took refuge. I closed my eyes to imagine them...” Rachida is dependent on the children as much as they are dependent on her.

“Très pâle, mon chéri se tenait derrière le grillage du portail chaque samedi à midi. Il attendait son brin de vie.” (274) : “Looking very pale, my darling stood behind the entrance gate railings every Saturday at midday, waiting for his breath of life.” This repeats the idea of his dependence on Rachida.

“...priver ma petite Islam du souffle de la vie” (308) : “depriving my little Islam of the breath of life”. This refers literally to the breath of life – Islam might have died if Rachida had had her intended abortion.

“J’étais de retour, ramenant la vie avec moi...” (326) : “I had returned, bringing life back with me...”

- **CASQUETTE**

The “casquette” is part of police uniform, so it seems in these three quotes to represent the forces of law and order. The uniform hence has negative associations. The uniform almost becomes the impersonal identity of those wearing it.

“La pauvre imbécile, c’était bien moi, assise sur un banc, blême, la tête entre les mains, subissant la loi de la casquette... Moi arrêtée! Oh non! Surtout pas ça.” (138) : “I really was the poor fool, sitting on a bench, pale, my head in my hands, subject to the power of the uniform... Me, arrested! Oh no!

Anything but that.” Power and law are closely associated, but since men in uniform enforce rather than make laws, “power of the uniform” seemed better.

“Tu as parfaitement raison, je préfère m’éclipser. Moi et la casquette... Ça ne marche jamais!” (235) : “You’re perfectly right; I prefer to keep a low profile. Me and uniforms... That never works!”

“Les agents de sécurité, impatients de se mettre à l’aise, se débarrassèrent de leurs casquettes qui leur étouffaient la tête ou plutôt la conscience... Fatigués de faire régner la paix, ils se relaxaient.” (264) : “The security guards, eager to have a break, took off their caps, which were smothering their heads or rather their consciences... Tired of enforcing order, they relaxed...” This seems to confirm that men in uniform are no longer individuals guided by their consciences. The uniform suppresses the conscience.

- **DONNEUR**

On pages 227 to 229 Rachida gives vent to a long and bitter tirade directed at her ex-husband Hamid. She uses a lot of metaphor, but the passage is too long to be quoted in full here. Her children are “graines” (seeds) which her husband sewed randomly and thoughtlessly, then left Rachida to cultivate and grow. He is, however, now facing a sterile future. Rachida addresses her husband as “donneur”, which in the context I have translated as “sperm donor”. She is talking about his “seed” (or sperm) and his involvement in the children’s lives was limited to providing the sperm, which is all a sperm donor does. She also refers to his new wife as “un autre receptacle entre les mains” which makes her sound like a test tube!

- **ÉTAT**

Rachida uses “état” often, but on pages 202 to 203 she plays on two meanings of “état” : firstly the “State” as in the government, and secondly “state” as in a person’s condition or situation in life. The second meaning is a

little more obscure, but the English translation maintained this word play as the passage would be meaningless without it.

- **GRANDS / PETITS // DE LA HAUTE / DU GRAND MONDE**

The word “grand” is common but needs to be translated in different ways.

“Mes enfants... étaient déjà dépourvus de leurs droits par une loi faite par les grands.”(153) : “My children... were already deprived of their rights by the laws of the powerful.”

“Les grandes écoles, c’est pour vous, les grands!” (291) : “The universities are for you, the elite!” It seems unavoidable, given the French specificity of “grandes écoles”, that the play on words should be lost here.

“Pourquoi s’embarrasser d’une procédure? Il ordonna, avec toute l’autorité que lui conférait son titre, qu’on me jette en prison. Il représentait l’Ordre et moi les Petits, ceux qui n’ont pas le droit d’arriver et doivent se contenter de rêver.” (355) : “Why bother with a trial? He ordered, with all the authority vested in his title, that I be thrown into prison. He represented Power and I the Meek and Lowly, those who have no right to succeed and must content themselves with dreaming.” Rachida then goes on to explain that someone else guilty of an even bigger offence **“s’en est sorti avec un délai et, en prime, des cornes de gazelle et un verre de thé. La seule différence, c’est qu’il faisait partie des Grands!”** (355) : “got away with a postponement and, what’s more, almond pastries and a glass of tea. The only difference was that he belonged to the Powerful!”

It seemed acceptable to link the “Ordre” and “Grands” rather than make “Petits” and “Grands” echo one another exactly.

In the social context, variations of the translation “high society” were used, especially as “de la haute” is short for “de la haute société”:

“femmes du grand monde” (145) : “high society women”

“des invités de la haute” (184) : “society guests”

“ les gens du grand monde” (186) : “high society people”

“des Messieurs de la haute” (290) : “gentlemen of high society”

“la vie mondaine” (185) : “society life”

Like all colloquial forms of address, “mon grand” can be translated in completely different ways : (258) : “fellow” (policeman addressing a victim ; (273) : “My little man” (Rachida’s son Yamine).

- **MÈRE POULE / NID**

Rachida likens her role as a mother to that of a “mother hen” and their home to a “nest”. During the unpublished interview with Serge Ménager extensively referred to in the Introduction, she admitted over-protecting her children using the same metaphor : “Je préfère les avoir un petit peu trop couvés.”

“Il avait enfin trouvé le nid de Maman, découvert la zone secrète.” (63) : “He had at last found Mummy’s nest, discovered the secret place.”

“De retour au nid, mes enfants m’attendaient bouches ouvertes. Ils le voulaient ce pain, même nu.” (91) : “Back in the nest, my children were always waiting with open mouths. They wanted that bread, even dry bread.”

The image is of little birds with their mouths open.

“Je tenais à entretenir la chaleur et la clarté de leur petit nid, là où ils ont prospéré.” (154) : “I was determined to maintain the warmth and brightness of the little nest where they thrived.”

“C’était là notre petit nid d’amour bien chaud.” (162) : “That was our cosy little love nest.” The children almost are Rachida’s lovers, so this connotation of “love nest” is not problematic.

“Après notre mariage, je suis restée, chose évidente, la mère poule qui couvait ses enfants sans arrêt.” (302) : “After our marriage, I obviously remained the mother hen brooding constantly over her children.”

“Aussi mère poule que moi, elle connaissait mon désarroi.” (320) : “As much of a mother hen as I, she understood my utter despair.”

Another interesting passage relates indirectly to this theme:

“Younès était à bout. L'émotion et la révolte aggravaient ses crises d'asthme. L'oiseau blessé dans son amour propre s'attachait encore plus à moi et prenait ma défense...” (58) : “Younès couldn't take it anymore. Emotion and outrage aggravated his asthma attacks. Wounded in his self-esteem, this fledgling clung to me even more and rose to my defence...” A young person can be a “oiseau”, so by using “fledgling” the image of the bird was retained as well as that of a young person, both of which fit in well with the nest and mother hen metaphors.

- **OR**

There are lots of references to gold. Sometimes the gold is simply material prosperity. The metaphor of a goldmine occurs twice. Rachida's new boss tells her:

“C'est une mine d'or, alors creusez!” (67) : “It's a gold mine, so dig!”

“Cela faisait plus d'un mois que je suis à grosses gouttes, que je prospectais sa mine comme il disait, mais en fin de parcours, la boue était pour moi et l'or pour lui. Et dire qu'il se donnait l'image d'un homme pieux. Il passait ses journées à prier, pendant que moi je creusais... creusais...” (69) : “For more than a month I had been sweating away, prospecting his mine, as he termed it, but in the end, the mud was for me and the gold for him. And to think that he presented himself as a pious man! He spent his days praying, while I was digging...digging...”

“Eh! Oui ma petite, chacun a sa façon de voir les choses: le vieux se fait un plaisir de te voir creuser de l'or pour lui; moi, c'est en toi que je vois de l'or, et c'est moi qui aimerais te creuser...” (69) : “Oh yes, sweetie, each of us sees things in his own way: the old man takes pleasure in seeing you digging for gold for him; as for me, it's in you that I see the gold, and I would like to be the one to dig in you...”

The younger boss's idea that Rachida herself is made of gold is repeated by other suitors: “Toi même tu es tout or et argent.” (240) : “Darling, you yourself are all silver and gold.” Silver can be money, and sounded better.

Rachida later states that Lary had the same ideas:

“Il avait planifié de se servir de moi pour son propre compte, comme une carte de visite, et lui aussi avait vu en moi une mine d’or.” (301) : He had planned to use me in his own interest, like a visiting card, and he also had seen a goldmine in me.”

- **PANIER / COUFFIN**

Among the references to normal baskets (“paniers”) are two of more interest. The first uses a basket metaphor:

“La vie, comme le disaient nos grands-mères, est un panier à deux anses que doivent porter communément les deux époux pour une vie de famille harmonieuse. D’un seul coup, je me suis retrouvée au milieu de la route, seule avec mon cabas plein. Louange à Dieu, j’ai eu le courage de supporter son poids. Il m’arrivait de courber le dos, de trébucher de fatigue, de faire un faux pas. Mais jamais, jamais je n’ai eu l’idée d’abandonner ce panier. Je l’ai porté et je suis fière de le dire aujourd’hui.” (207) : “Life, as our grandmothers said, is a two-handled basket that must be carried by both spouses in order to have a harmonious family life. All of a sudden, I found myself in the middle of the road, alone with my shopping bag full. Praise be to God, I had the courage to bear its weight. From time to time, I bent my back, stumbled with fatigue, took a false step. But never, never did I think of abandoning that basket. I carried it and I am proud to say so today.”

Rachida refers to Islam sleeping in a “couffin” (316) which would be a Moses basket. The other reference to a “couffin” is more vague:

“...si je vais en prison, n’oublie pas de m’apporter mon linge pour me changer, et surtout ma trousse de maquillage, la serviette aussi, et le couffin, le couffin!” (216) : “...if I go to prison, don’t forget to bring me a change of clothing, and especially my make-up purse, a towel as well, and

some food, some food!..." I have interpreted this as a basket of food as *Le Petit Robert* does refer to the "contenu du couffin".

- **PEAU**

The translations of "peau" vary considerably.

"Je me sens bien dans ma peau" (219, 236) : "I feel good about myself."

This is the traditional translation of this set idiomatic expression. In the following two examples, "peau" represents Rachida's "manner" or "image":

"...car malgré ma misère j'étais, sans le vouloir, incapable de me défaire de ma peau de bourgeoise." (141) : "unintentionally and despite my poverty, I was incapable of shedding my middle class image."

"Tout en lui me montrait qu'il n'aimait pas la peau de la petite bourgeoise qui me collait." (201) : "Everything about him told me that he did not like the middle class manner that I could not shake off."

Here "peau" represents the person, not just the characteristics:

"Il fut surpris comme les autres de voir cette peau de bourgeoise assise..." (216) : "Like the others, he was surprised to see a middle class lady sitting there..."

Finally, "peau" here really is "skin", but in a figurative way:

"...j'étais une autre personne avec un autre visage. J'avais quitté la peau très douce d'une mère pour revêtir celle d'un homme insensible, d'un dur." (212) : "I was a different person with a different expression. I had shed the very soft skin of a mother to take on that of an unfeeling, thick-skinned man..." A "hard" man or a thug would be "thick-skinned" which works in well with the metaphor.

- **LA PLUIE ET LE BEAU TEMPS**

This image was translated in three different ways according to context.

"C'est la chance de ta vie. Ce genre d'hommes, ma vieille, sont ceux qui font la pluie et le beau temps." (49) : "It's the opportunity of a lifetime.

My friend, he's the kind of man who can move heaven and earth." Here an expression retaining the natural image was appropriate.

"Eh oui, il avait raison Monsieur l'agent, ses supérieurs c'est une autre chose, grâce à leur grade, ils peuvent faire la pluie et le beau temps."

(234) : "Oh yes, Mister Guard was right; his superiors were in another category; thanks to their rank, they could call the shots." In this context an equivalent but more military expression was used. Although "Monsieur l'agent" might be "Mister Policeman", the man referred to seemed to be doing guard duty and "Mister Guard" sounded suitably more familiar.

"...parla de la pluie et du beau temps" (258) : "speaking of everything under the sun." This was different again, but respected the natural theme.

- **PRÊCHER DANS LE DÉSERT**

"...j'essayais pourtant d'expliquer ma situation. Mais je prêchais dans le désert, car je n'avais guère l'air d'une personne abattue..." (251) : "I tried to explain my situation to them. But I was preaching in the wilderness, because I scarcely had the look of someone down and out..."

"Il ne supportait plus les insinuations faisant allusion à ma liberté, à mes retards et à mes fréquentations masculines. Il prenait ma défense, certes, mais hélas, il prêchait dans le désert. En plus son accent étranger n'arrangeait pas les choses... Il semble dépassé." (311) : "He could no longer bear the insinuations alluding to my freedom, my late homecomings and my associations with men. He admittedly leapt to my defence, but alas, he was beating his head against a brick wall. Furthermore, his foreign accent didn't help matters... He seemed out of his depth". The use of the literal English equivalent worked in the first instance, but in the second the stronger equivalent expressed Lary's growing frustration and more violent reaction to not being "heard" better.

- **PRIX**

In the Dedication at the beginning of the book Rachida mentions something about each child. Initially her second daughter's name "Islam" could be confused with the religion. The most difficult to translate was: "**À Yamine, le prix de ce cri.**" The meaning of "price" is wrong, but I did consider translating "prix" as "treasure", but eventually settled for "prize", as obscure in English as it is in French.

- **PROVERBS**

"L'habit ne fait pas le moine et le *hijab* ne fait pas la *mou-e-mina*" (159)

This was translated literally as the first part is the same in English.

Where French proverbs did not make sense in English but have an English proverb of equivalent meaning, this was substituted. The meaning in context was more important than the French expression itself.

"Il faut bien que le moulin tourne..." (268) : "Life must go on..."

"Ce fut la goutte qui fit déborder le vase" (332) : "That was the straw which broke the camel's back".

Proverbs explicitly referred to as coming directly from another culture were translated literally. Even although the second in particular sounds strange in English, the meaning in context is clear.

"Il m'a frappé, et il a pleuré. Et il est parti le premier se lamenter" (137) : "*He hit me, and he cried. And he was the first to complain,*' says a popular Moroccan proverb".

"Mon foie, comme le dit si bien un proverbe arabe, me montait à la gorge" (238) : "My liver rose to my throat, as an Arab proverb expresses it so well".

FRENCH CULTURAL REFERENCES

Whenever a French cultural reference would not necessarily be understood by an English-speaking person, a more transparent term has been substituted.

- **“lycée”** : “high school”
- **“grandes écoles”** : “universities” (182, 291)
- **“BEP en génie civil”** (319) : The equivalent of a “Brevet d’Études Professionnelles” does not exist everywhere, so to distinguish it from the “Bac”, it was translated as “initial technical school certificate in civil engineering”
- **“un Bac H” / “un Bac”** (319, 320, 328, 346) : “A technical school-leaving certificate” / “ a school-leaving certificate”
- **“grandes vacances”** (81) : “summer holidays”
- **“la mission”** (108) : “the French school”
- **“instituteurs et institutrices”** (110) : “male and female teachers “
Although “primary school teachers” would be more accurate, Rachida is also referring to the high school teachers.
- **“la rentrée”** (190, 320) : “the beginning of the school year”
- **“un intellectuel, un directeur”** (195) : In combination with “intellectual”, it might have been assumed that Ali was a headmaster, but earlier Rachida had mentioned that he was a company director. (14)

- **“Palais de Justice”** (221) : “Law Courts”
- **“main levée”** (269, 270) : “written proof that sufficient funds have been deposited”
- **“procès verbal de la circulation”** (210) : “traffic ticket “
“P.V.” (259, 287) : “statement”

- **“arrondissement”** (118, 120) : “district administration”
- **“(faire) la bise”** (156, 303,337) : “(to give) a kiss”
- **“le goûter”** (222) : “afternoon snack”

- “R4” (316, 317) : “Renault”

ISLAMIC / MOROCCAN CULTURAL REFERENCES

- **cheveux / jean / *djellaba* / foulard / voile**

Since an Islamic woman’s hair should traditionally be covered in public, the many references to Rachida’s hair have cultural significance and implications of immorality which would not be present outside this Islamic context. Wearing jeans would invoke the same reaction. A woman should be wearing a “*djellaba*”, “foulard” or “voile”. Rachida does not conform to this cultural practice and is at pains to reveal the frequent hypocrisy behind it. The many examples need not be quoted as in all contexts “cheveux” and “jean” were translated directly; “*djellaba*” was obviously left as a word foreign in French as well, but it was consistently put in italics; “foulard” was translated as scarf to distinguish it from “voile” as veil. Only a few passages of translation interest follow:

“Mais regarde un peu ce qu’elle est devenue! Un jean, les cheveux en l’air, une folle quoi!” (179) : “But take a look at what she’s become! Jeans, uncovered hair - a crazy woman, I tell you!” The “cheveux en l’air” might also be something like “hair sticking out every which way” because it is uncoiffed, but in the context it is more likely that the implication is that it is exposed to the air, in other words “uncovered”.

“Elle est bonne celle-là! Et les jeans et les cheveux en l’air, qu’est-ce que tu en fais?” (181) : “Oh really! And the jeans and the uncovered hair - what will you do about them?” In this context Naïma is sceptical as to whether Rachida can really be religious dressed the way she is.

“Je n’ose même pas quitter ma *djellaba*, ni lâcher mes cheveux.” (219) : “I dare not even take off my *djellaba*, or leave my hair uncovered.” The woman is quoting this as proof of her piety.

The following passage is interesting for several reasons:

“Fatna! Fatna! Donne-moi mon fils et va en prison! Déplume-moi cette ordure!’ ordonna-t-il en lui arrachant le gosse des mains. Il était rusé mon voisin, pour avoir trouvé la solution, faire d’une pierre deux coups: se débarrasser d’une femme enquiquinante et d’une voisine gênante. Je ne lui ai pas donné ce plaisir. Je me suis enfermée chez moi à double tour en épargnant ainsi mes cheveux qui dérangaient tant ma voisine. Une fois en sécurité et en pensant à la réaction de mon voisin, je donnai libre cours à un fou rire qui me détendit un peu.” (283-4) : ““Fatna! Fatna! Give me my son and go to prison! Pull out this trashy woman’s hair for me!” he ordered her, grabbing the kid from her arms. My neighbour was crafty to have found a way of killing two birds with one stone, getting rid of an irritating wife and an embarrassing neighbour. I did not give him that satisfaction. I locked myself securely in my house, thus sparing my hair that bothered the woman from next door so much. Once safe and on thinking of the man’s reaction, I laughed uncontrollably which helped me unwind.”

Exactly why the neighbour’s wife would go to prison is not initially clear, but I have translated it directly, assuming that she would be punished if she did assault Rachida. The verb “déplumer” can mean to go bald, so in this context I assume that Rachida’s offensively exposed hair is to be pulled out, especially as she afterwards says her hair was “spared”. The insulting reference to Rachida as “ordure” is translated as “trashy woman” because her gender is very relevant and “trashy” retains the association with rubbish, as well as implying someone of low class and low morality. The proverbs in French and English are very close and can therefore be transferred almost directly. The French gender distinction between “voisin” and “voisine” is important so the two could not both be translated as the ambiguous English word “neighbour”.

On page 261 Rachida refers to the *djellaba* being worn piously by a neighbour (who turns out to be involved in child abuse) firstly as hardly a “**cache misère**” : “cover-up for poverty”, then as “**plutôt un cache personne**” : “more likely a cover-up for her character”. When Rachida

wonders if she should also have dressed traditionally, the Invisible One says: **“Dis plutôt, pourquoi tu ne te déguises pas, pourquoi tu ne te caches pas, toi?”** : ““Rather tell me why you don’t dress up, why you don’t cover yourself up?” The play on the word cover-up is reinforced by the idea of dressing up. A little further, on page 262 there could be some ambiguity in English if the gender-specific pronouns in French were not interpreted more fully : **“Quelques unes ont fait d’elle une tenue spéciale pour fréquenter des lieux infâmes. Elles ont fait de cette tenue respectable un chiffon. ‘Hé... hé... arrête! Elle veut me conduire à la corde, celle-là! Oh! tais-toi, je t’en supplie...”** : “**“Some women have made it into a special outfit for frequenting infamous places. They have made that respectable outfit into a rag.’ “Well... well... stop! That outfit will be the death of me! Shut up, I beg you...”**

- **“petites chèvres”** : “lambs” (100,250)
A mother would be unlikely to refer affectionately to her children as “little goats” in English!
- **“cornes de gazelle”** : “almond pastries” (175, 347, 355)
These are obviously some sort of well-known delicacy. Rachida refers to them as “gâteaux aux amandes” (175). A literal translation would not be transparent in English and their symbolism as a luxury is more important.
- **“...son appartement où débuta la surenchère. Je lançai avec mépris: ‘100 000 dirhams pour la dot, ça te va mon chéri? Tu veux m’acheter, alors tu y mettras le prix.’”** (339) : “her flat where the bargaining began. I suggested contemptuously: ‘100 000 dirhams for the bride price - is that to your liking, my darling? You want to buy me, so you pay the price.”
Although “dot” should be translated as “dowry”, I have used “bride price” because in the Moslem context the man pays a sum of money for his wife and this is what is being discussed here, not a “dowry”, which is what a woman brings to the marriage.

- **“Mon horizon de femme s’arrêtait au bout de mes orteils.”** (230) : “My horizon as a woman stopped at the tips of my toes.” The closest expression in English using a part of the body would be “I couldn’t see past the end of my nose”, but this does not work well with “horizon” and has an implication of short-sightedness rather than of limited horizons. I decided to translate literally because Islamic women are allowed to reveal their toes in sandals, but are not supposed to catch men’s eyes so would often have to look down demurely at their own feet, hence not seeing very far ahead. Rachida has specified “mon horizon de femme” and the preceding sentence was “Ayez le courage de regarder de l’avant” – in other words look ahead rather than down at your own feet.
- **“Ça y est! réveille-toi, tu as eu comme tu le voulais ta cinquième lune.”** (309) “It’s over! Wake up; as you desired, you have given birth to your fifth moon.” This is obviously a reference to Rachida’s fifth child. It is sufficiently clear in context not to need to be changed. The other two references to the moon have the same idiomatic meaning as in English:
“...Lary, qu’il fallait aussi faire patienter en lui promettant la lune.” (327)
: “Lary, whom I also had to make wait by promising the moon.”
“J’aurais pu demander la lune, on me l’aurait donnée.” (337) : “I could have asked for the moon; they would have given it to me.”
- **“Maroquia”**
This term is used twice. The first time on page 216 the context would imply that it is an insulting term as Rachida corrects the policeman who calls her a “Maroquia”: **“Une Marocaine, s’il vous plaît, et non une Maroquia’ repliquai-je en colère.”** Since he had first guessed that she was European and been told that she was not, it could have seemed like a term for a person of mixed race. However, on page 235 a Moroccan official also initially mistakes Rachida for a European and is therefore being uncharacteristically polite. Rachida comments with apparent irony: **“Le seul moyen de**

camoufler sa gêne était de continuer à jouer au monsieur poli, tout en me sachant une ‘Maroquia’ comme lui.” It therefore obviously cannot be a mixed-race person. I would guess that it is a more informal, low-class way of referring to a Moroccan, so I have left the term untranslated, but in italics to indicate that it is not English.

- “ferme les yeux, je suis sensible au mauvais oeil” (37) : “Close your eyes; I can sense the Evil Eye.” I have capitalised “Evil Eye” as it is culturally more significant in this context than just any superstitious glance bringing material harm.

“Ne dis pas ça! C’est un signe de mauvais augure...” (179) : “Don’t say that! It’s a bad omen...” This implies the same sort of culturally based belief in the presence of bad luck.

- “repudier”

In all forms of the word, this was translated directly as “repudiate” rather than in other possible ways such as “abandon”, “disown” or “reject” because in English “repudiate” is closely associated with the Moslem cultural practice which allows a man to get rid of his wife.

- “ Et devant Dieu, ces mots: ‘Tu es divorcée, tu es divorcée, tu es divorcée et par trois fois...’ (338) : “And before God, the words: ‘You are divorced, you are divorced, you are divorced’, said three times...”

This Islamic practice is well known in English and easily understandable.

GENERAL ISSUES RELATING TO VOCABULARY / TERMINOLOGY

Recurring words / phrases

Words and phrases that recurred were generally translated in the same way unless the context required otherwise.

- **“articles de sport”** : Both “products” and “items” were used, depending on which sounded better in context.
- **“bercer”** : This was translated variously as “rock”, “soothe”, “lull”
- **“bidonville”** : “shanty town”

It would seem from the story that what Rachida refers to as a “bidonville” was more like a collection of ramshackle outbuildings behind Jilali’s house. It certainly was not a “squatter camp”. The translation is consistent except once when “shacks” seemed better as all the neighbours are at their doors and the individual units seem to be in question:

“...il montra sa demeure, sans oser regarder du côté du bidonville dont le loyer cumulé lui avait permis de payer ses pierres.” (230) : “...he indicated his residence, without daring to look towards the shacks whose accumulated rent had enabled him to pay for his stones.”

- **“bout de papier”**

The English equivalent was varied consistently, depending on what was being referred to.

“little slip of paper” (209, 344, 345) : This seemed appropriate for a summons as it seems insignificant, but ironically has great power.

“pieces of paper” (244) : Rachida’s cheques – fairly neutral.

“scrap of paper” (338, 339, 341) : The word “scrap” seemed to convey Rachida’s contempt for the marriage contract she is forced to enter into.

“bits of paper” (346) : All Rachida’s official papers are dismissively thrown into the air by the prosecutor.

- **“bouleverser”**

The translation varied:

“ma bouleversante vie” (cover, 9) : “my turbulent life”

“...bouleverser mon existence” (296) : “turn my life upside down”

“...rien ne soit bouleversé dans la vie de mes petits” (303) : “nothing in my little ones’ lives was turned upside down.”

“Bouleversée, je ne comprenais plus rien...” (352) : “I was completely bowled over as I understood nothing of the case against me.”

- **“calvaires”** : “bitter trials”
- **“chèque”** : “cheque”
The cheques that Rachida wrote seemed to be more often like credit notes, but “cheque” was nevertheless retained. The expression “sans provision” was translated in several ways depending on the context.
“...il est sans provision.” (242) : “it’ll bounce.”
“... émission de chèques sans provision.” (259) : “writing bad cheques”
“Sans provision?” (267) : “Without sufficient funds?”
“Vous n’avez pas honte? Un chèque sans provision!” (270) : “Aren’t you ashamed? Writing bad cheques!”
- **“enfants” / “petits” / “les miens”** : These were translated inter-changeably as “children” and “little ones” depending on what sounded better in context.
- **“dures épreuves”** : “hard trials”
- **“gérant”** (131, 148, 150) : “estate agent”
Although “gérant” would more usually be a “manager”, the man being referred to is the son of the agent and is fulfilling the specific role of an estate agent.
- **“bodys”** (297, 299) : “leotards” **“guêtres”** (297) : “leg-warmers”
Although “bodys” comes from an English word, it is better translated as “leotards”. The knitted “guêtres” are obviously not the usual gaiter, but given the association with leotards, probably “leg-warmers”.
- **“interlocuteur”** (213, 254) : “interrogator”
- **“linge”** : “clothing” / “linen”
- **“martyre”** : “ordeal” (“martyre” was consistently misspelt “martyr”)
- **“monde” / “univers”** : These words were translated interchangeably as “world” and “universe” depending upon what sounded better in context.
- **“monsieur”**
I retained the French title attached to the two Frenchmen (“Monsieur Pierre” and “Monsieur Jean”). When “monsieur” was used as a general respectful form of address directly to someone else, I translated it as “Sir”, but when “monsieur” was attached to a job designation in the French way, I dropped it (e.g. “Monsieur le Procureur” : “The Prosecutor”). Only in the case of

“Monsieur l’agent” did I retain it as “Mister Guard” to preserve the comic effect. “Le Monsieur” was generally translated as “the gentleman” (e.g. 131). When “Monsieur” was used sarcastically I translated it as “his lordship” (e.g. 138, 205).

- **“pauvre” / “fauchée”** : “pauper” **“misérable”** : “poor wretch”
- **“pension”** : “maintenance allowance”
- **“pute” / “putain” / “trainée” / “ salope”**

These were translated interchangeably as “whore”, “slut”, “tart”

“femme de nuit” : “lady of the night” (“lady” being ironic)

“fille de joie” : “good-time girl”

“(faire) le trottoir” / “ trotteuse” : “(to walk) the streets” / “streetwalker”

“la femme de nuit et de tous les chemins” (172) : “the lady of the night who walked the streets...”

- **“taxi clandestin”** : “pirate taxi”
- **“vélomoteur” / “motocyclette”** : “moped”

This could also have been a scooter, but since it is unclear exactly what sort of “motorised bike” Rachida had, the translation was standardised.

“moto” (210) : motorcycle. This was not Rachida’s bike.

French expressions sometimes used in English

Some were translated, some not, depending on their transparency, register in English and appropriateness in context.

- **“ambiance”** : “atmosphere”

The word “ambiance” in English is not as common as it is of a higher register.

- **“bête noire”** : “pet hate” (121, 191).

The standard English expression works as well.

- **“boulevard”** : “boulevard”

This was left consistently, not only when part of a specific name as there seemed to be little value in changing it to “avenue” and the story is set in a French-speaking context.

- **“bougeoisie”** : This was translated as “middle class”.

- **“espadrilles”** : “canvas shoes” (145, 156, 281, 285). Although used in English, “espadrilles” is not common so an easy understanding of the meaning is more important than the term.
- **“femme fatale”** : “femme fatale” (42)
- **“joie de vivre”** : “joie de vivre” (111).
Expressing this otherwise in English seemed clumsy and comparatively flat.
- **“layette”** : “layette” (308). There is no other single word in English.
- **“milieu”** : “environment” (25), background (260). The register would be wrong.

Officialdom

“agent” : “policeman” (143) / “officer” (202) : threatens Rachida with the police

“agent de police” : “policeman”

“agent de garde” : “police guard”

“agent de sécurité” : “security guard”

“commissaire” : “superintendent”

“flic” : “cop”

“frontières” : “border guards”

“inspecteur” : inspector”

“juge” : “judge

“magistrat” : “magistrate”

“maître” : “counsellor”

“officier” : “officer”

“percepteur” : “tax collector”

“policier” : “policeman”

“procureur” : “public prosecutor”

“M. le Substitut du Roi” : “deputy public prosecutor”

“secrétariat” : “secretariat”

References to body parts

It is interesting that the equivalent of standard expressions including parts of the body in one language often use a different part of the body in the other. For example:

“cette question qui me brûlait les lèvres” (48) : “the question which was on the tip of my tongue”.

“vous n’allez pas me fermer la porte au nez” (133) : “you’re not going to slam the door in my face”.

ISSUES RELATING TO GENERAL LANGUAGE USAGE

Tense and mood usage

Although tenses and moods were generally respected and followed, small changes were made when necessary in English.

“Mes petits ne verront que le visage souriant de Maman.” (215) : “My little ones would see only Mummy’s smiling face.”

“Il fut très long ton somme, et je n’aimerais pas être à ta place à l’heure de ton réveil.” (227) : Your sleep has been very long, and I would not like to be in your place when you wake up.”

Gender specificity of French

There are many examples where the gender is clear in French but would not be in English if the word were translated directly. For example, “voisin / voisine” would both be “neighbour”. When the gender mattered or the lack of it might lead to ambiguity, the translation was adjusted to clarify the matter. On page 266, for example, “prisonniers” was translated as “male prisoners” because Rachida goes on to talk about female prisoners not having an area in which to pray.

DIFFERENT REGISTERS OF LANGUAGE

Changes in register : tu / vous

In French the register of language is immediately obvious through the use of “tu” or “vous”. Most of the minions of the “monster” (law) show no respect towards Rachida and this is immediately obvious from their use of “tu”. Those who treat her better almost invariably use “vous”. This is reflected in the English translation indirectly through the general register of the language chosen to translate, but occasionally “Madam” might be added to show that Rachida is being addressed respectfully. For example, on page 235 the official initially mistook Rachida for a European so he has to maintain his politeness, which is emphasised with the repeated “vous”. In English an extra “madam” was inserted:

“Allez madame, vous montez ces escaliers, vous tournez, vous... vous... vous...” : ““Right, Madam, go up these stairs, turn, then Madam you... you... you...”

Changes in register are also important when men are propositioning Rachida. The change to “tu” immediately indicates sudden familiarity. Sometimes this was conveyed in English by adding a familiar endearment. On page 50 the man has been polite, but when he hears Rachida is divorced he switches to “tu”:

“Mais bien sûr, bien sûr, ne t’inquiète pas, je suis à ton entière disposition. Dorénavant n’hésite surtout pas...” (51) : “But of course, of course, don’t worry, my pet, I’m completely at your service. Particularly from now on, please don’t hesitate...”

In the following example the same verb was translated differently because of a difference in register. Both men are propositioning Rachida, but the first is much cruder so the implication of sexual pleasure was made more direct.

“Tu me plais ma soeur, moi aussi je vais te plaire, je te le jure.” (161) : “You please me, my sister; I’m going to please you too, I swear.”

“Oui, je vous en fais cadeau. Vous me plaisez... Est-ce que je ne vous plais pas?” (245) : “Yes, they’re a gift. I like you... Don’t you like me?”

Dialogues

My translation approach was more communicative in the dialogues. Common conversational words like “allez” or “d’accord” were translated into idiomatic English equivalents and varied depending on context. I tried to make the conversations sound real in English.

Exclamations and strong language

More innocuous exclamations like “Bon sang” were translated in a variety of ways. Rachida uses “merde” in expressions like “(être) en merde jusqu’au cou” quite often outside of dialogues, which I generally translated as “shit” even although this was very familiar as it seemed to be part of her generally conversational style. On page 109 I translated “aller te faire foutre” as “bugger off” as it did not need to be stronger. There were three uses of the following less obvious curse:

“Ils auront de mes nouvelles, religion de leurs mère!” (25) : “They’ll hear from me, I swear it on their mother’s religion!”

“Ah, la pute! La putain de ta mère, tu ne vaux rien, religion de ta mère, dégage, sale chienne!” (161) : ““Oh, you whore! Your mother’s a bloody tart; you’re worthless; f... your mother’s religion, get lost, you dirty bitch!”

The context seemed to justify this stronger version.

“Religion de la putain de sa mère...” (217) : “Curse his whore of a mother’s religion...”

Slang

- When a French slang word was used, an equivalent English slang word was used in the translation to maintain the same register of language. For instance, “gosses” was translated as “kids”, “slaving away” for “bosser”.
- Several slang words are associated with prison. The English slang “clink” and “inside” were used for “**taule**” (53,269, 351) and “**trou**” (261, 264), the choice depending on what sounded better in the context.

- There is no standard pet name for an uncle in English, so “**tonton**” had to be just “uncle”
- Not knowing a slang word can lead to a bad translation. The following passage was a good example:

“Ah, moi, je m’en sors avec une bonne leçon. Il ne faut jamais faire confiance aux flics. Et dire que nous étions amis. Ils venaient manger des glaces; mais dès que... que le robinet a cessé de couler, les poulets se sont fâchés.”(267-8) : “Oh, I’ll escape with a good lesson: never trust the cops. And to think that we were friends. They used to come and eat ice creams; but as soon as... as their supply dried up the pigs got cross.”

Since I did not know the pejorative slang word “poulets” for “cops”, I initially assumed I was dealing with cross chickens pecking around a tap, and did not even think to look up “poulets”. The metaphor “when the goose stopped laying golden eggs” seemed like a more understandable poultry substitute and would have fitted the sense of the text well. It does, however, seem more likely that “poulet” is slang. I have used “pigs” as another animal image and this would be even more rude in a Moslem country.

Terms of endearment

When several different terms of endearment were used in quick succession, as on page 211, I tried to vary the English equivalents too. I also tried to convey the register. On page 52 the important man trying to seduce Rachida says:

“Je te couvrirai d’or, viens dans mes bras ma chatte sauvage, je suis fou de toi.” : “I’ll cover you in gold; come to my arms, my naughty pussy; I’m crazy about you.” A “pussy” has the same sexual connotation as a “chatte” and maintains the feline image. “naughty” sounds both endearing and sexual.

Religious language

- When “Dieu” is used as an identifying name to talk about God, it was translated directly as “God”.

- When “Dieu” is a form of address being directed at God, it was translated as “Dear God”.
- All the statements starting “Que Dieu...” start “May God...”
- The exclamation “Mon Dieu” was translated in a wide variety of ways as it usually has nothing to do with the personage of God, but rather expresses an emotional response to whatever has gone just before. “Mon Dieu” in French is much more common and less potentially offensive than “My God” in English, so it was not translated directly unless the degree of emotion warranted the stronger expression (e.g. 92), or it was a direct appeal to God. Other instances were translated by exclamations such as “Good heavens”, “Good gracious”, “For heaven’s sake”.
- The quotes from the Koran were not translated again, but rather the relevant verses are quoted from the accepted Penguin translation. On page 66 the quoted text is said to be “non littéralement coranique” but the exact English text from the Penguin translation has been used as there was little difference anyway.

GENERAL / PRACTICAL ISSUES

Typographical / language errors

There were some errors in the French text, presumably typographical. They are cited for interest, but the nature of the mistake will be obvious only in context. Differing and inconsistent uses of capital letters and italics are not listed.

je trouvais (12); je serais fort (13); une française (18); vue (59); comment (71); je quittais (73); Boujamaâ (84); buisness (91); espérer (121); qu'elle, que je le pensais (134); martyre (192, 206); mains que me (192); patiente (199); qu'est (206); une moment (220); baraquas (234); peux le lui rendre (240); faites (253); le nouvel arrivant (258); le derrière (266); Adil sur sur (276); heureuse-ment (281)

Punctuation

Since punctuation is only a tool to clarify meaning, it was changed wherever necessary to make the meaning clearer in English.

- The French text often uses commas to join finite sentences. These were generally changed into semi-colons or a conjunction was added or separate sentences were created.
- In direct speech, if the name of the person being addressed was used, it was generally separated by commas.
- Any pronouns referring to God were capitalised.
- All expressions in a language other than English – mainly Arabic – were consistently written in italics, even when the original text was inconsistent.

Proper nouns

The proper nouns were only changed where there is a standard English equivalent like “marocain” : Moroccan. When a reference to “Atlas” was made, “Atlas Mountains” was substituted for clarity (266). The town of Fès was not changed to Fez as it sometimes is in English.

Time / Distances / Currency

- Rachida used the twenty-four hour clock, but since this is less frequently used in English conversation, all times were consistently changed to the twelve hour clock.
e.g. “**treize heures et trente minutes**” (215) : half past one
- When a specific distance was referred to, the numerals and abbreviation were used. e.g. 400 km (225) Only once was a distance written in full – “**trente kilomètres**” (275). This was standardised to “**30 km**”. When distance was being referred to in a general way, “kilometres” was written in full.
- “**dirhams**” : dirhams. It would be artificial to change the currency.

Difficulties requiring a footnote

- “...une miniscule pièce construite avec la tôle de vieux bidons rouillés. C’est à cette époque que je compris l’origine du nom ‘bidonville’.” (89) : “That was when I first understood the origin of the French word for "shanty town". There is no word in English for a “bidonville” which incorporates the materials used for construction, so “the French word” was inserted in the text with an explanatory footnote at the bottom of the page.
- « **La touta** » (280) : This was left in the text as a proper noun, although a similar nickname like “Little Madam” could have been substituted. The explanatory footnote would give the reader a sense of its implied meaning.

A few other translation challenges...

- “**J’étais violée par ces yeux vicieux qui me perçaient le bas-ventre...**” (70) : “I had become icy cold, violated by their lecherous eyes that probed my privates...”
- “**Je les appelais ‘Mme nom’ car elles étaient prêtes à toutes les humiliations pour conserver le patronyme tant convoité.**” (106) : “I called them “Mrs Surname” because they were prepared to accept every form of humiliation to keep their much-coveted husband’s name.”
- On pages 47, 48 and 120 a familiar but not immediately understandable way of being invited to come for a drink had to be found as Rachida is invited for “un pot”, but does not initially understand what this means. I considered using “a round”, but finally settled on “a tipple”. I could not use something too South African like “a doppie”.
- “**Le temps passant, et à force d’encaisser de tous les côtés, je n’étais plus qu’une frêle branche que chacun sciait à sa façon... Et si bien qu’elle devint tranchante...**” (105) : “In time, and as a result of knocks from all sides, I became no more than a flimsy branch that everyone whittled at will... so much so that it became barbed...”

ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF MA VIE, MON CRI

Rachida YACOUBI

My Life, my Cry



EDDIF

Back cover

Rachida YACOUBI

My Life, my Cry

"Lord, help me to relive my turbulent life through my writings; give me the courage to search deep within myself, to re-open those wounds which are still bleeding and to endure their pain a second time..."

Yet Rachida Yacoubi does not lack courage. When, at the age of 43, she took up her pen to write her life story, her children laughed at her. Indeed, who could have foreseen that this housewife, armed with only a school-leaving certificate, would one day become the author of a book as hard-hitting as *My Life, my Cry*?

Rachida does not owe this change of direction to the sudden discovery of her writing talent, but to her destiny. Born of a vital need, this book emerged as a cry from the depths of her soul in distress.

A soul which has made it her duty to testify, to tell how a young woman from a good family found herself, from one day to the next, cast out of the cosy nest of the Casablancon middle class into the squalid world of shanty towns. And yet Rachida's crime can be summarised in a single word: authenticity. For having said no to marital submission, for having refused to betray her identity: that of a "*mou-e-mina* in jeans", she toppled with her children into a hell of exclusion.

From that moment on, Rachida would feel as though she had been born again. It is these first steps, this almost miraculous clarity of vision, albeit the fruit of suffering, which she reveals in her autobiographical novel.

Thus her sometimes violent and disturbing cry, like all things which come from the heart, is much more visceral than literary, but also much better able to stimulate reflection, and indeed, to challenge.

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Page 7 : Dedication

To my mother who, while giving me her breast, passed on her faith in God.

To Younès, son and friend.

To Adil, man of my life.

To Yamine, the prize of this cry.

To Soundouss who has so often dreamed for me.

To Islam who has not yet understood anything of what happened to us.

To Ismaïl, exiled grandson of a fugitive grandmother.

To all the children of divorce.

To others like me...

All my thanks to
Imane Saoud
and Dr Mohammed Chtatou

Page 8

***Praise be to Allah who has guided us hither.
Had he not given us guidance
we should have strayed from the right path. (Al-A'raf, 7:43)*.***
[p. 249, The Koran, Penguin Classics]

* All the quotations from the Koran in English are taken from the translation of the Koran by N.J. Dawood, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1974.

Translator's note

Page numbers from the French edition are given before the first paragraph starting on a new page.

CHAPTER I

Lord, help me to relive my turbulent life through my writings; give me the courage to search deep within myself, to re-open those wounds which are still bleeding and to endure their pain a second time...

Lord Almighty, give me the strength to cry very loudly, loudly enough that I might hear from afar the echo of my cry, in the hope that my voice will pierce the hearts of all those who have loved or hated me. May your peace reign in all hearts!

This peace, how much have I searched for it among men throughout my life, without ever finding it. Each time I turned to You, my Creator, and it came to me through the magic of prayer. It swept through me and I felt strong, protected. Those were the only moments when I was afraid of no one.

I then wished that time would stop so that I could remain in that serene state. Alas, duty - the voices and calls for help from my children whom I was dragging behind me in my fall - would recall me to harsh and bitter reality.

Page 10

I left my husband telling myself: the flood is behind me... I was wrong. The flood was there, right in front of me.

Naïve, confident, and defenceless, I was entering an unknown world, stumbling from fatigue and despair, in search of a haven. Beaten almost to death, I had fled, leaving everything behind me. Penniless, I was taking my first steps in this new world, seeking a safe hideaway. I wished for only one thing: to lie down, to rest, to sleep.

Oh! What a sweet dream...

I had left one man only to find myself facing a thousand others. I was nothing but prey to their devouring eyes. Their stares cut me to the quick and disgusted me. But I could do nothing about it. They thought they could do whatever they liked since I belonged to no one. Divorced, I had become public property. I was rejected by everyone, even my dearest friends, who turned their backs on me. I was in one hell of a mess and everyone shunned me.

It was my great friend Aida who cast the first stone by saying, as she stood up to go and shut herself in her bathroom: "I'm sorry I don't have enough space to put you up."

She left me alone to digest her last words, which still remain engraved in my memory:

"Rachida, now that you're divorced, do you want to sell me your

curtains? You won't be needing them any more now," she said, referring to the net curtains I had bought on the birth of my eldest son and which were with a seamstress for some alterations.

Page 11

"I'm really sorry Aida," I answered, "but I would rather like to keep them as a souvenir of my eighteen years of marriage."

"Well... now you really are going too far. If you think that you're going to be able to live in a house like the one you've just left and hang your beautiful curtains, you're dreaming, my dear! If you find yourself a single room, even with neighbours, you'll be able to count yourself lucky!"

I chose to keep quiet and lift my eyes towards God, praying that he might open another door to me, a door that would not be slammed in my face.

So I left that house never to return. Her husband Karim, a very close friend of my family, followed me sadly.

"Where are you going like that? It's starting to get dark, and with this rain! Stay with us; you'll feel less alone."

I refused this offer. He suggested taking me back by car. Karim had witnessed the icy reception I had faced. He was trying to make amends.

Feeling overwhelmed, I could not stop the tears from flowing down my cheeks.

I was shivering with cold in the little *djellaba* that I had on over my pyjamas. My stomach was hollow and my hands empty.

"Rachida, have you really thought about this? Go back to your husband. Life is hard; think about your children alone with their father," Karim begged me in a trembling voice.

"Never ever... even if I have to beg, to die, or..."

Page 12

"Rachida, I watched you growing up; I was there when your children were born. I don't want to see you on the street, without your family. By the way, do you see them?"

"Yes, when they come out of school... At least, when I can; I don't even have enough to pay for a bus ticket."

"Don't be discouraged. You'll come through. As from tomorrow, every afternoon I'll leave the car at the petrol station for you. You'll find the keys under the mat and you can return it to me at six o'clock, after having seen your children. Leave the hotel room where you've been living for the past three days and move in with one of your friends. I'll settle the bill,

don't worry."

"Thanks Karim, thanks a lot. You're right; I'll go to my friend Laïla's. That way, I'll be able to have the little ones with me, even if only for one night."

The next day, in the car, I found not only the keys but also an envelope with a little money.

I firstly bought some toiletries. Laïla had not hesitated to lend me clean linen and a bed to sleep in with my little ones. Pressed against me, they were purring like comfortably warm kittens. I was able to hide my tears from them. I was missing my two bigger children. They were the price I had had to pay for my freedom and I no longer had any right to them, except that of seeing and hugging them from time to time. That was costing me dearly, but my husband had demanded it in exchange. We had to share our children like one shares a delicacy. I had chosen to leave the two little ones temporarily with their father, while waiting to find a refuge in which to shelter with them, because even renting a tiny room had become impossible for me. Aïda was right...

Page 13

Adil was strong; he was eleven and had chosen, by living with his father, to sacrifice himself for me. Younès, despite his twelve years, was too attached to me. A body without a soul - I was his breath of life.

I used to spend hours waiting for him outside the Subrini High School. I hid in the entrance of the building opposite, because I was shabby looking. I respected the fragile pride of my child, who must already have been suffering from no longer being as well looked after as before.

But each time he saw me, he tried to hide his grief. He acted grown-up: "Don't you need anything Mummy? Don't worry, my darling, soon I'll be big and I'll work for you."

My accomplice, my confidant. His tenderness soothed me; he was my strength. Younès, my little man, was ready to endure anything, anything except see me return to his father.

Hand in hand, we went for long walks while waiting for his lesson time, and he would reassure me: "Don't worry Mummy; I'm big; I take good care of my brothers and little sister. This evening I'll try to get back some clothes from your cupboards and I'll send them with the maid to Laïla's."

It required a whole stratagem to return my own clothing to me.

Laïla was only looking for an excuse to get rid of me. She jumped at the first opportunity: the arrival of my little bundle of belongings. Putting up with me for a week had been too much, and I was nothing more than a weighty burden.

Page 14

"I don't want problems with your ex-husband!" she told me.

She had another version for the neighbours: "My husband doesn't want a divorcee under his roof."

Mixing with me was degrading for a lady of her rank, the wife of a company director. He supervised and chose her social contacts very carefully. For this housewife who did nothing without her husband's permission, my divorce and freedom represented a serious threat.

How I would have liked him to be there to see all the effort I, the divorced woman, was putting into bringing his wife back onto the straight and narrow!

"Laïla, you have all that you could wish for; I can't see what you're seeking elsewhere," I kept saying to her.

"Oh really! Rather you tell me what you've got out of it? Nothing. After eighteen years of devotion and faithfulness, you've been thrown out into the street. Oh, it's a mistake to divorce! You ought to have lived your own life, protected by your status as a married woman!"

Full of self-assurance, she wanted at all costs to show up my inability to adapt to modern life, a life in which Madame made conquests. She was determined to prove it to me by flirting in my company. I begged her to stop, but she did not understand my embarrassment.

"You're stupid... Life is good - you must make the most of it. But what's your case? So, before, you were married, but now you're free. Hey! Look at the beautiful car that just overtook us. That guy's loaded! Do you want me to introduce you to him? He pays a thousand dirhams."

"Oh, good gracious! Keep quiet! You want..."

Page 15

"Idiot... He owns a factory. He can also give you a job."

"No thanks, no thanks, even if I have to die. What a dangerous game you play! Aren't you afraid?"

But she was shaking with laughter as she suggested I go with her to visit her latest lover:

"You'll see his apartment - fantastic! He says he's single, but quite frankly, I don't believe him. Not with the beautiful fully equipped kitchen that he has! He must be married to a poor little woman who works. By the way, you don't know the best of it yet. You're going to love this one, being as old fashioned as you are - I'm pregnant!"

"Now that's good news! A child's really going to calm you down, for quite a while..."

"You're crazy; I'm going to have an abortion."

"That's a sin, and what's more, your husband adores children."

"Yes, but not someone else's. Best of all, it's the boss who's going to pay the expenses... Ah! My poor boss!"

That was how she referred to her husband. To flatter and mollify him, she showered him with "at your service boss", "as you wish boss"...

Proud of this nickname, he gave himself airs and became swollen headed: "You see, my wife doesn't step out of line. I'm the boss and I give the orders!"

In her honeyed voice, Laïla seized the opportunity:

"Tell me, boss, can I go out this afternoon? I have a household errand to run."

"Certainly not! Out of the question... You don't budge from here."

"As you wish, boss. Besides, I'm tired; I need a good nap to be at my best for your return. See you later then, boss, and good luck," she replied, curling up under the bed covers.

Page 16

"I'm already late for the office... I'm taking your car keys."

I was also about to go out. He picked up the keys from the table, looking at me as if to say: "Go on foot, my dear. That will teach you to leave your boss."

But Laïla stopped me:

"Hey, where are you off to like that? Wait for him to go; I'm also going out."

"Your husband's taken the keys - what are you going to do?"

"Don't worry, I had duplicates made!"

"Oh no! I'd rather avoid problems with your husband... I'm going out on foot, and alone."

"It's stupid to walk in this rain. Besides, with or without you, I'm going to go out."

She was already out of bed, slipping on her *djellaba* and combing her hair.

Reluctantly, I allowed myself to be persuaded. Once in her

car, I already regretted my decision. I was afraid that her husband might discover her tricks, and I was convinced that I would be blamed for everything. Was I not a divorcee?

My nervousness amused her. Yet I was far from having a clear conscience. We got home just before the "boss" arrived. I was trembling like a leaf when the front door banged.

"And what if he goes past the car! The engine is still hot; you drove like a maniac; he's going to find out everything, you'll see!"

Page 17

"Well, that's for sure if you don't stop panicking! I know he won't notice anything if you calm down; I'm used to it. Sh! Here he is..."

"Still in bed?" he called out to Laïla.

"I haven't moved; I'm really tired. Does my boss want to have his coffee?"

"Yes, I really need it. Oh, these women! Always tired," he said, slumping into the armchair. Out of the corner of his eye, he was watching me as if to say: "Keep away from my wife. Pestilence! You might contaminate her and make her stray from the straight and narrow..."

He gave a long sigh, took a cigarette, and offered me the packet:

"Would you like one?"

"What? I beg your pardon... You know perfectly well that I don't smoke!"

"Yes, but now that you're divorced, surely you're going to change your way of life, aren't you?"

"Not at all. I have no intention of changing."

"Really! Oh well, that's great... This weekend I'm going to Marrakech - are you interested? Are you coming with me?"

His languorous look told me that it was time for me to leave. Rachida, you must pack up and get going; one week is quite enough.

This time I was carrying a suitcase containing the few belongings I had got back thanks to Younès's ingenuity. But it posed problems for me: arriving at someone's home with empty hands gave the impression of a simple courtesy call that could be extended to the next day. With a suitcase, I was likely to see all doors closing for fear I might stay. It was in my best interest to impose neither my children nor my suitcase on people.

And so my little ones were once again in tears at their father's house, and my belongings were in the care of a French woman, the mother of one of my children's school friends. My friend Laïla did not have enough space in her grand villa.

With empty hands and no roof over my head, I once again set about finding a place to stay.

I headed for the Polo neighbourhood, to the home of Fouzia, the wife of a medical officer and a very kind woman. She welcomed me warmly and even went to the trouble of serving me something to eat. This gesture touched me greatly, and I wanted to gouge out her husband's eyes for the suggestive looks he was giving me behind her back. He disgusted me. I was in a hurry to get out of there. Naïvely, his wife was insisting: "Stay with us and rest; you seem tired."

I politely refused despite my desire to stay. I was hardly out of the door when her cretin of a husband caught up with me in his car: "Climb in, I'll give you a lift."

I didn't have time to react, because in the distance, Fouzia was urging me to accept. He straightaway started to blurt out the same dreaded old story.

"You're beautiful, Rachida. Don't let yourself go. Take care of yourself. I'm prepared to keep you. If you only knew how crazy I am about you! Come on, say yes, I beg you..."

"Stop it, or else I won't hesitate to open the door and jump out."

He was furious, white with anger; I could no longer recognise him.

"I don't want you to visit wife at home any more, or even speak to her. Do you understand?"

Under no circumstances did I want to cause problems for that poor woman, so I refrained from seeing her again.

I did, however, meet her again afterwards. She seemed angry with me, but her cousin later explained that her husband had forbidden her to go near me, saying that I was a "whore".

I don't give a damn, dear fellow; that's what I am in your eyes, but never in your arms! This way you will always say to yourself "Oh! Filthy slut, why the others and not me?" The fact that that enrages you, comforts me...

My frenzied race had barely started and I still had a long way to go. Tired, yes, that I certainly was! But where could I

rest? And how? If for some I was a dread disease, for others I was a tasty morsel. In both cases, I was condemned to disappear; my place was no longer among married couples. I had to run, flee as far as possible from those unscrupulous, lecherous men. They had only one thing in mind: to entice as many women as possible into their beds, especially those who had the misfortune of having left their own marital bed. They were doubtless motivated by male solidarity, to punish the traitor.

Those women who are lured by their seductive glances are often deceived. At first smiling and confident, they don't even have time to avoid the precipice, to cry for help. While believing themselves free, in reality they become slaves. Those whom I have known believed themselves to be alive and sparkling; I saw them as apathetic, dull and lifeless. They laughed loudly, but their hearts were bleeding...

Now, it was these women, whom people call "fallen women", who welcomed me with open arms when all the doors to "respectable family life" had been closed.

Page 20

I was hungry, cold, and exhausted, so I went back...

That Wednesday in February 1980, at about eight in the evening, it was raining heavily and I was shivering when Karim, my friend, my guardian angel, once again helped me to find shelter:

"Take care of her Fati; she is very dear to me."

"Welcome, make yourself at home," said my new hostess, offering me her cheek. "My sister Fatima and my son will keep you company while I'm out; I have to go to work. I come home only at dawn."

We were living under the same roof, but it was two weeks before we saw one another again. When I left the house in the morning she was sleeping; and in the evening when I came home, she had already left. Fati was a divorcee, also the mother of a thirteen year old boy. She was a cashier in a nightclub. I used to hear her in the early morning, swearing vengeance on her "victims", as she called them:

"The bastard, the drunkard, the son-of-a-bitch, he'll pay dearly for this. Fatima! Are you deaf or what? Come and pull off my boots. Oh! My back aches. Ah, ah, a *Mimti*¹, why did you bring me into the world as a woman? My head is going to explode; I drank too much; whisky doesn't agree with me."

She would scream and shout, without worrying about those who were sleeping. Then she would throw herself onto her bed, big and luxurious, but so cold... and burst into tears.

Fati had a small, well-furnished flat, a green Fiat 127 parked outside her home and a full tank of petrol always guaranteed. But this luxury was not enough to reassure her. She was always anxious and worried.

Page 21

"Do you have children Rachida? Are you married?" she asked me during our first meeting.

"I'm divorced and I have four children."

"You poor thing! These men! All bastards ... Me too, the son-of-a-bitch, Khalid's father, repudiated me when I had just given birth, and to marry that whore. Now he tries to pick me up."

That flattered her a bit; her eyes were shining with joy. A smile on her lips, she spoke to her son:

"Tell me Khalid, your dog of a father didn't come prowling around here today, did he?"

"No Mummy, I went to his house."

"He didn't say anything to you about the residence permit that I'd asked him for? Tell him he'd better go to the *Mokkadem*², and quickly, or else I'll cause him and his ass of a wife the scandal of his life. When he needs money, he comes licking my boots, but when he has to do something for me, he drags his feet."

I was dumbfounded. She always shouted:

"You don't know men, Rachida. All bastards! For a dirham, they bow and scrape. It's thanks to me that he hasn't died of hunger along with his brats and his whore. He grovels at my feet! And he comes when Sidou isn't here. He doesn't even dare to come near the house when he sees Sidou's car parked below. In repudiating me, he thought that I would stay down. Ha, ha, now I am *Lallah*³ and I have *Siadous*⁴... By the way Khalid, did *azizek*⁵ come?"

"No Mummy, no one, no one at all."

Page 22

"Not even the monkey?" (This was her second lover's nickname.)

"No Mummy."

Khalid spoke mechanically without taking his thumb out of his mouth, lost in his own little world, that of a thirteen year old baby, as far as possible from the world that his enraged mother was describing to me.

"That bastard of a monkey, that dirty old man, he owns a big

confectioner's, not to mention all the blocks of flats, property everywhere, and he's always complaining, *din emmou*⁶! It's true Rachida, I haven't seen him for a week, *din elkalb*⁷. If he shows up, you tell him that Mummy is sick, and that she has no money to buy medicine, OK! Are you listening to me?"

"Yes Mummy!"

"And as for you Fatima, you must light some candles for him and burn a rag⁸."

"It's already done; I'm going to put more charcoal in the *kanoun*⁹. And the other one?"

"No, that one is behaving well for the moment. I need the monkey."

Calmer, she turned to her son and said in an undertone: "Khalid, if you see the monkey today, you must be nice to him... All right? That way he'll buy you the bicycle you want. Agreed?"

I often noticed this change of tone in Fati's voice when she was speaking to her son. She did everything she could to keep him locked up in his childish world. She was determined that he should stay in it, because a big boy might threaten her good life as a woman.

Page 23

"Oh yes! Mummy! But when's he going to buy it for me? I remind him about it every time, and I haven't got anything yet..."

"OK! That's enough! After all, he's not your dog of a father!"

Without a word, Khalid lowered his eyes and once again became his mother's docile child. His thumb in his mouth, he resumed dreaming with open eyes. Fati, proud of having called his father all the names imaginable, was gloating: "Yes, your bastard of a father who threw us out, look at him today, at my mercy. I entertain him when I want to, and how I want to..."

This father, when heading for the apartment, stopped short on seeing his son standing on the front steps, waving his hands in all directions to say: "Azizi is here... You mustn't disturb." Absolutely nothing else counted then for Mummy. Not even the fate of her little boy standing in the street. Whether he was hungry or cold didn't matter. Her lover monopolised her time and energy; she was attentive only to his pleasure, to his shower, to his relaxation. He paid well...

Still naïve, Khalid was left to fend for himself, poor innocent thing.

I watched him with the eyes of an anxious mother. I could admittedly see him growing up, but with the burden of a fallen

mother and the indifference of an absent father.

It was always to the latter that the little boy went when he was tired of waiting in the street.

"Baba, I have come because "Azizi" is at home."

"Stay, I'll take you back later," he would say, while thinking: "Let's hope he leaves enough; I need a long-term loan from your dear mummy."

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He was too proud to ask for charity from his ex-wife. So he used the pretext of loans that he never repaid. Fati willingly supplied the amounts asked for. She paid to have him constantly at her beck and call. She might need him: he protected her in the event of an argument with the neighbours or of problems with the police. Was he not the father of her child? When there was no cash, payments were made in kind. She was flattered to prove her superiority over her rival, the second wife. He boasted of still having some success with this lady of the night...

Fati was no longer able to adapt to the daytime world. She had even forgotten its colour and warmth. The overly bright light of this crazy world forgave no imperfection.

It's a world in which you have to fight, shout and sweat; you need a strong back and a hard head to survive. It's an unscrupulous, pitiless world in which the powerful crush and dominate, a thoughtless world in which only money determines strength and the law! Money was burning Fati up, torturing her, consuming her. She could feel the dangerous heat of this flame more and more; she had long encouraged it and long used it to light her way, her life.

She was fleeing from a reality that she did not want to recognise. Being assiduous, she was constantly on the look out for a "victim to pluck" as she put it. Now, she was the real prey, left to circling vultures. She was beginning to rot, gnawed at from within. The pleasures of the past were becoming bitter trials and seeds of infection were eating her up.

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She continually avoided the real issue... Rage revived her desire for vengeance. She would scream at her sister: "Fatima! Put more charcoal in the *kanoun*. They'll hear from me, I swear it on their mother's religion!"

The apartment became a real cauldron likely to explode at any moment under the supervision of the *fqih*¹⁰ who momentarily replaced her lover.

This horrible environment was suffocating me, torturing me. I had tried everything to convince Fati that I hated the

beautiful carpet which she was unrolling at my feet in the hope of seeing me sprawl upon it. I had long resisted her, but it was clear that I was speaking a language she couldn't grasp. Another path awaited me.

I could do nothing for her, except wish her lots of courage because it was the only thing she needed to face the break of day...

The day when little Khalid would wake from his long sleep...

This child, to whom I owe much, was the living example for me of what my children might have become. His eyes were filled with hate for all those adults who were unscrupulously crushing him. He assumed a look of blissful happiness, and droned a sort of refrain. He sang to hide his bitterness and seem happy in his mother's eyes. For me, these were only delusions, moaning, suffering.

Thanks to this child, I realised the extent of the danger threatening my little ones.

Fati used to cry every evening over her life and her fate. May God comfort her! She certainly "went astray" inadvertently. Destiny was too strong for her: fatherless, she was married very young to a man who mistreated, humiliated, and crushed her, and then finally repudiated her.

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Were these errors committed through weakness or ignorance? Was she a victim or a culprit? I don't think myself in any way fit to judge. On the other hand, as a mother, I was best placed to lament over Khalid who was the same age as my Younès. I could see him suffering and I felt willing to endure all hard trials to preserve my children's honour.

My pockets were empty, but my heart was overflowing with love for them, and that was my real good fortune. I left that house full of strength and energy, determined to defy the world, to overcome all obstacles. In Khalid's eyes and his mother's bitterness I had seen the disasters littering that path. I turned away from it.

But not for a second did the horror awaiting me even cross my mind...

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CHAPTER II

Bourgogne neighbourhood. That March morning, the weather was fine despite a whole night of rain. The sun was shining, its gentle warmth soaking into my body and soothing me.

From the boulevard where I was, I could catch a glimpse of the

sea. Its blue and the colour of the trees bordering the roadway blended harmoniously.

I scanned the horizon as if discovering this landscape for the first time, and to think I had been living in that neighbourhood for nearly a month!

That day, I was filled with an extraordinary sensation. It was such a long time since I had felt so free, so light and so confident. I was mistress of my body and my soul. It is wonderful, so wonderful, to become aware of oneself, to be able to communicate with the tiny parts of one's being.

My soul was serene and silent, and I was floating in an ocean of happiness. Savouring my independence, I swore to defend my world to the bitter end.

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My liberty was rebellious and entirely spiritual. To be free is to discover oneself before grappling with what surrounds us, to wander the streets, to breathe, to understand, and to get to the bottom of things. Such were my feelings on that magical March morning.

I was on my way to meet whatever my destiny had in store for me, proudly wearing the label of divorced woman... I was free... Free, empty-handed and homeless.

I had entrusted Fati with my little suitcase and the few clothes that she coveted. Indeed, I would have liked to give her more to thank her for having taken me in, but that was my entire fortune.

Once again, wearing my brown striped *djellaba* and my wooden clogs, I walked towards an unknown destination. I had the whole day ahead of me before nightfall.

At midday, Younès was happy to share his sandwich with me. My accomplice and confidant was happy to see me calm and relaxed.

Hand in hand, like real lovers, we followed our usual route. In the afternoon, I visited Adil when school came out, while avoiding Soundouss and Yamine who were always in tears when I left. I wanted to spare them this pain, particularly my daughter who could not understand this separation at all. She begged my friend Bahia whenever she saw her:

"Aunty, please, go and look for Mummy... I didn't do anything to her - why has she left me? Tell her to come back; I'll be very good, I promise, but make her come back!"

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She was too young to understand the reason for the misfortune that had befallen her. Even my friend felt unable to bear this moving scene.

I saw her again two years after my divorce, and she was still lamenting her powerlessness. She trembled when she saw me, had a thousand questions to ask, but dared not speak, still scarred by the image of Soundouss in tears. My little girl never dreamed that I spent hours watching her in her school playground. I saw her playing with Yamine during break. I wept over my troubles all alone and I left there more furious than before.

Alone at night, the darkness jolted me and forced me to seek refuge among my acquaintances. Alas! I was often confronted by a cold look or an indifferent attitude. So much so, that I swore nevermore to knock on those doors.

That wasn't the case with Mina, a young woman whom I knew thanks to Karim. She was about thirty and was the mother of two charming little girls. This family did everything to make my stay with them pleasant. Mina was very reserved and never spoke of her private life. All I can say is that she was full of courage and good will. She was ashamed of her job as a barmaid and spoke of it to no one. She was particularly sweet to her daughters, whose studies she supervised closely and with whom she shared a very modest little bedsitter. During the whole time I spent in her home, about ten days, Mina never mentioned either her past or her job. Out of respect for her, for their privacy, I decided to leave this little family which was anxious not to reveal its secrets.

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Mina was a night owl like Fati, but she was a fantastic mother. I learnt later that, for the happiness of her family, she had reshaped her life by buying a hairdressing salon in order to leave behind forever the world of bars.

The very morning that I had left this warm little home, I bumped into a childhood friend purely by chance and in the same neighbourhood.

I didn't need to give many explanations of my status. Nora knew my husband very well and used to nickname him "Tarzan". She immediately suggested I come to live with her. It was a chance for Nora and her family to repay a debt that they believed they owed me, because some years before, when they had come from Fès to settle in Casablanca, I had put them up.

Nora lived in a luxuriously furnished apartment right in the centre of town, the address and even the existence of which I had been unaware until that day. Since my presence was much more a matter of duty than of pleasure, Nora was determined, and this from the very first evening, to dictate rules for my behaviour under her roof. I would have very little freedom and be allowed only what was strictly necessary: the kitchen for eating, a divan for sleeping, and the bathroom for washing, but without using the bath.

My little ones were given bedcovers to sleep on the ground. I

preferred to swop my divan for their blankets.

Delighted to be near their mother, they didn't complain. They were very good because they knew that their being with me depended on their behaviour. The regular help I was receiving from Karim enabled me to satisfy their hunger before returning to the house where, despite the wealth of my hosts, food was rationed.

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In the morning, my little ones woke up at the first call. They barely moved around so as not to disturb anyone. We left the house on tiptoe to go to school. In the still deserted city streets, they made up for it and let their morning joy burst forth.

At the school gate, it was a battle. I had to spend nearly half an hour convincing them, swearing by the name of all the saints, promising them a thousand times that I would come back to fetch them. Having been forced in the past to lie to them, my little ones had lost confidence in me. They even refused to go and eat at their father's house at midday, although he lived a stone's throw from the school. They were afraid of never seeing me again.

"I don't want to go to Papa's house. Please, Mummy!"

"Me neither," said Soundouss clinging to me. "I don't want to go there; I'm afraid of Papa. If you like, we will stay here at the school gate and wait for you. I'm not hungry; I don't want to eat."

"It's true Mummy, I promise; we're not hungry," begged Yamine in tears.

"Fine, that's fine, calm down. We're going to do something else. Do you want to go to the Ousghirs at midday to eat, and I'll come at about five o'clock to fetch you?"

"Yes, yes Mummy!"

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The Ousghirs were longtime friends. Their children and mine attended the same school. They willingly accepted having my little ones at midday, and for the whole school year. What can I say to them today, to all those who, without perhaps knowing it, kept me from sinking and going under?

Lost as I was, I no longer knew where to turn nor what to do. I spent my days divided between my children: Younès was enrolled at the Subrini High School in the centre of town and he waited for me every day at midday. The others were at the Victor Hugo School in Aïn Sebaâ. I had to take them in the morning and fetch them again in the evening.

The little time left to me was spent running all over the place in search of work. I knocked at all the doors pointed out to me, and in the evening I came home disappointed, bearing on my shoulders another day's failure, and in my heart a bitter and poignant grief.

"Don't even think you can work in an office. Not with your qualifications!" Nora kept telling me all the time. As far as she and her family were concerned, I was an air head and would understand nothing in that domain.

"On the other hand, you could be a housekeeper," Nora told me.

"You're forgetting that she has kids. Who could take her on?" her sister replied.

I felt as though I was at a dead end. Every time I had a glimmer of hope, an invisible hand stealthily snuffed out the flame.

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"She could do dressmaking."

"Dressmaking... Yes, but it's too tiring and really badly paid. She won't have any time left to do anything else."

"Yes she will - she can work in the evenings in a restaurant for example."

"Oh yes!" said their mother in a voice full of enthusiasm. "Do you remember when I had that job? Every evening I came home with my basket full of good things."

"Shut up!" screamed Nora.

"Can't you hold your tongue! Stop reminding us about your famous past as a 'skivvy'," the younger of the two sisters shouted.

At a loss for an answer, their mother lowered her eyes like a child caught doing wrong.

"You're right, it's a good idea to work in the evenings in a restaurant!" I said to Nora. "It would allow me to try to do something else during the day. I could also look after sick people or children..."

"What? Do you think you're in Europe? Who would have you in their home? You have to be ugly or really deformed to work in a Moroccan household. And, since you're not bad looking..." said Nora, holding up her head and looking at herself in a big mirror with a haughty air, as if to impose her own beauty on me.

It was so long since I had last bothered to look at myself in a mirror that I'd forgotten what I looked like! Furthermore, I had lost weight with age.

"Hey, we'd need a housekeeper," the sisters said, looking at each other. "Not yet, but soon. What do you say? We'll give you a good salary and you'll even be able to keep your two children with you."

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"Oh! But that's fantastic! I'd be very grateful to you."

"It's the least we can do for you. We'll need a presentable woman, a maid, and also a cook. At the moment, we're looking for a big plot outside the city on which to build our villa, with a swimming pool and riding paddock."

My daughter Soundouss opened her eyes wide. She saw herself back in the good old days. Horse riding had been her favourite sport and she was sad to have given it up.

All this plunged me into deep thought as to the source of this sudden wealth. I swallowed my curiosity for fear of being shown the door, but despite myself, I tried to find an explanation. Perhaps they had won the lottery? And why not? They were only simple secretaries, and yet, since I had been staying with them, I had never seen them work.

"We're fed up with slaving away for a pittance. That's the truth, Rachida. For 2500 dirhams we prefer not to tire ourselves."

Without saying anything, I allowed myself to dream: if only I could do this work which tired them so much...

So it was that I sank into silence. I was content to live on the surface of things.

Nora was a school friend from a very poor family. From a young age, she had had to take charge of her whole family after their father had left them to marry another woman.

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Responsible from then on for her mother, her two sisters and her brother, and given that her secretarial job did not enable her to pay for the luxuries for which she had acquired a taste, Nora resorted to her magic formula to pull through... She did not hesitate to knock on important doors. She was the mistress of a former minister, whom she gave up for an important businessman I was never able to meet. He always announced his arrival by telephone. On that day everyone had to go to bed early. The doors had to remain closed and the lights switched off, with a formal ban on being seen.

The members of this household almost never went out and no one visited us, not even the brother who lived in the same town, nor the father. No one except the businessman whose visits were becoming more and more rare.

This residence was a female realm, with all the women idle and out of work. But the bank notes rained down as if by magic.

My hostesses spent their time talking about their dream villa. They were drawing up the plans, choosing the colours. Not forgetting the Rolls to be parked in front of the door, a must for social climbing...

My daughter, although small, asked them pointed questions. She was slipping into their world, also speaking about travel and horse riding. And my hostesses were delighted to be admired and envied.

"If you're good my pet, I'll bring you a doll from Paris. And I'll take you with me next time. To tell the truth," added Maria, the youngest, turning towards me, "I get bored during the day shut up in a hotel room all by myself."

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"When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow, tomorrow morning."

"On business?"

"No, no... It's for treatment."

This brought our discussion to an end. Later that night, I overheard a conversation between Maria and her sister. I could only make-out the words "dollars" and "customs".

In the morning, everything was ready when the taxi driver came to fetch us. During the trip to the airport, Maria gave instructions about her return, and the driver joined into the conversation:

"Don't worry, I know everyone at the airport; it'll be quick. I'll also be there when you get back. You'll have no problem with customs. In fact, how long are you thinking of staying over there?"

"No idea - two weeks, a month, it all depends on the treatment that's going to be prescribed for me."

"Have you made an appointment with the doctor?"

"Of course, in Paris. But perhaps I'll go and see others."

The driver was burning with curiosity to know a little more, but kept quiet for fear of seeming too indiscreet and of losing a choice customer.

Poor Maria, I thought, so young, so radiant! But what is this illness which is sapping her strength? I pretended not to care, but my curiosity was too strong for me; a sly little voice was becoming more insistent within me. It was whispering:

"Goodness gracious, where do these millions come from? Silk dress, mink coat, diamond watch, Jourdan bags and shoes."

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"Sh, stop that, nasty Invisible One, or else I'll be shown the door." Fortunately they were busy. I was being ignored, for the moment at least. Only the mother was looking daggers at me and seeming to say: "Close your eyes; I can sense the Evil Eye." To avoid the worst, I played the hypocrite.

"Poor Maria, she mustn't tire herself," I said with a sigh.

But the Invisible One was sniggering inside me: "Oh yes! That mink coat is heavy for her little shoulders; those pointy-heeled shoes are tiring for her little feet! She might fall! Oh, what a pity it would be for the beautiful diamond watch. Oh! No, no, certainly don't lift that overnight case. Your little hands are too soft; you might break your nails!"

"Awili, awili¹¹, shut up! I didn't know you were so jealous! Poor girl, can't you see that she's sick? If she's going all the way to France, it must be serious. She's scarcely to be envied."

"Don't put on an act with me, you old Bag-of-Bones; I know you only too well. And if you carry on, I'm going to gouge out those eyes shining with envy, wanting to wear those clothes and go to France like her. Cut out your coveting, my dear, or else... it's with a rag bag that I'll clothe you and not a mink!"

I have never been able to reconcile these two voices which have always battled within me - let doctors call this phenomenon what they will. Perhaps every individual has experienced this dichotomy, perhaps I'm abnormal - what does it matter! But my Invisible One was never stronger than during that period when, paradoxically, it was a matter of saving my skin. Undoubtedly because as a woman I was no longer worth anything, surely because poverty had weakened my body, my soul or my spirituality (how shall I term it?) had blossomed. This thing, for me, had a name: the Invisible One, who reined me in, held me back. So, I observed my hostesses' behaviour, but without saying a word.

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Nora was always determined that her little sister should make no effort... At table, she cut her meat, peeled her fruit and checked her calories. She was the one to choose the

temperature of her bath. In the evening she was on the look out. She almost guarded her.

Recognised for her expertise in managing the family budget, she controlled the family's financial interests with a masterly hand. Each was allowed a small sum, no doubt payment for a service or the reward for silence.

The only person who wasn't really playing her part in that house was the mother. She seemed lost and ill at ease in the luxurious clothing imposed upon her. I sensed that she was stifled - her gait betrayed her. But duty and social standing required her to be presentable at all times. She studied the way she walked, dressed, ate, and spoke.

Nora and Maria had their hands full! Apparently it wasn't easy to civilise a mother of her age, used to the outdoors, to a rough and spontaneous lifestyle. Entry into the world of refinement must have been a shock. Lost and disoriented, she played many parts and none at the same time. She wasn't always introduced as the mother, but sometimes as a former nanny, or as the maid. Her title varied according to circumstances. If, as ill luck would have it, she was caught in the corridors of the house without make-up, she was forced to remain hidden while waiting to undergo the aesthetic operation to rid her of her shameful identity, of the tattoo of shame. She still personified too strongly their abject past.

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Poor mummy the puppet...

The brother, with his wife and children, lived in the same neighbourhood. We never saw them. He had his pride and self-respect. Yet he didn't spit on his share of bank notes that he was sent monthly. The mother saw to this personally.

While waiting to become official housekeeper, I was passed off as a lady's companion, but my Invisible One tortured me: "Get out, get out, Bag-of-Bones, you've arrived at the airport so watch out! Keep your head on your shoulders."

"Your destination, ladies?" asked the hostess.

"Fr... France!" replied the taxi driver who was going ahead of us with the cases.

Half curious, half jealous, the hostess was checking the ticket.

"Kuwait! Yes! Kuwait, Sir!" she said cuttingly.

The driver stared wide-eyed, but very quickly thought better of it for fear of seeing his tip disappear. The Invisible One was jubilant; my stomach was knotted: "Well then! Kuwait! So it wasn't France?"

"Yes, my beauty! That will take away the envy that has been shining in your eyes since this morning. And if you think I'm willing to let you wallow in that lewdness, you're wrong, Bag-of-Bones."

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CHAPTER III

I was struggling within myself over right and wrong. My head was suddenly flooded with images. Everything came back to me - my childhood, my education and my principles. Everything contrasted with the way I was living. Lost, I stared into space for a long time.

Nora, with great gusto, began to prepare me for my new job as housekeeper, to teach me the rules of the game...

"Ha...ha... Come over here a minute, my poor Rachida."

Like an idiot, I lowered my eyes. What could I do? Nothing! I had neither a roof to hide my suffering, nor a bed in which to rest my tired body.

Nothing, nothing left, except the responsibility for four kids. What could I do other than act stupider than I was to benefit from my hostesses' hospitality?

How then could I stand up to Nora? I had to give in and allow myself to be treated a little like the mother. She corrected firstly my way of dressing, then took an interest in my face: "Come here so that I can put make-up on that face of yours which looks like a man's." Reluctantly, I submitted to the demands of my new boss... I lay down, submissively offering her my face.

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Quarter of an hour later, the simple little Rachida was nowhere to be seen. Dressed and made-up, I no longer recognised myself in the mirror. The image of a loving mother had disappeared to be replaced by a professional from the big brothels. I was ready to carry out faultlessly that career for which I was being destined. At every step, the immense and beautiful carpet was unrolling before me. So soft, so supple. The temptation was strong, the easiness enticing, but that didn't take my tenacity and pride into account. The Invisible One called me to order, and the image of my children was superimposed, gradually wiping out that of the *femme fatale* reflected in the mirror. I was guarding my mother role, which was beyond price. How could I put it up for auction?

Quickly, quickly, to the bathroom! Alone, with my head resting on my arms folded on the basin, I wept... The mirror suddenly reflected the image of another person, a loathsome face! In a flash, I had all the answers to the questions which were

torturing me... the vision of a dark and cloudy tomorrow, an identity lost through the lure of easy gain. I had not only my face to wash, but my whole spirit to cleanse under the basin tap.

"Oh!!! Have you taken a shower? Idiot, all that time making you up for nothing!" Nora fumed.

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Maria's trip had lasted a month during which she telephoned every evening. The calls lasted for hours and revolved only around dollars and jewels. Her return date remained strictly confidential.

That day, on returning from school with my children, I was amazed to see her back.

"Oh! What a nice surprise! I'm very happy to see you back in good health," I said, feigning ignorance. I felt as though I was in the presence of a Hollywood actress with all the beautiful outfits that she was trying on for her big sister.

In her luggage there were also suits for her brother, a dress for my daughter, nothing for her mother, but certainly lots of dollars for Nora.

"How lucky she is," was my first thought.

"Hey, hey! I'm here, stop dreaming," the Invisible One interrupted me.

Silent, I made myself as small as possible in my corner. I listened to them speaking about their plans. They had, it seemed, put up several million for the land, several more for a beautiful car.

Dirty rotten money before which the proudest men bow their heads and close their eyes. Like the man who had offered to be the chauffeur. He was one of their close friends - a handsome man with class and good manners, a man of leisure attracted by the cash.

Aziz was ready to do anything for money and women. His sexual appetite was as voracious as his hunger for wealth. He was particularly partial to "fresh flesh". All he wanted was to satisfy this bulimia by eating his fill of "cakes". That was his nickname for the female sex. He assumed a satisfied look every time he made an appearance at my hostesses' home. He would flop down on the divan, weary as a result of his lecherous pursuits: "I'm sorry if I'm late, a "delicacy" kept me."

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Luckily for me, he ignored me and kept away. He respected me. Thank you, Aziz, and forgive my mean words.

I was intrigued by the strange rituals which all these women followed, like that of lighting candles in the bathrooms. This sorcery was highly valued by my hostesses. "It must certainly be effective," I said to myself, and dreamed of the day when I would also have a bathroom. I could light my own candles to appease the bad spirits that were against me. A house was the most beautiful dream of my life, a dream I cherished every evening. Not for me the desire for a husband, like Nora, who nursed the hope of becoming the legitimate second wife of her lover.

"The *chouafa*¹² told me that, sooner or later, he'd marry you!" her mother told her, feeling proud of having been charged with the secret mission of doing the rounds of the *fqihs* and *chouafas*...

Maria was lighting her own candles for her Kuwaiti lover to buy her the villa, the farm and the Rolls. She didn't want him as a husband. She was in love with a penniless young man...

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I aspired only to stretching out in a modest bed, but not to relax in it. I had to get up early and take my children to school while my hostesses slept in. In the evening, they daydreamed in front of videos. And even though exhausted, I was not allowed to use the divan before they had finished.

With a home of my own, it would have been different. I asked only for a single room with a terrace. A hut, a cave, a tree, even a hole, a place which would shelter me with my children, where we could live with dignity. Unfortunately, I was confronting bitter reality; without a cent, one has to accept what people deign to give - one puts up with it, one accepts it, even if one suffocates.

I was destitute. And nothing is more terrible than to deprive a mother of her children. This was the cruel destiny that I suffered every day when I had to leave my two big ones. The distress was draining me, but the echo of my lament did not succeed in shaking men's indifference.

I could no longer bear to see my two eldest lost, unhappy and wearing stinking underwear. I forced myself to smile, hiding the pain of this separation.

The only time I missed our daily meeting, Younès came to visit me at Nora's house. My little man timidly came through the door. I will never forget that image and my heart still bleeds today. Nora stared at him haughtily, and grimaced when he trod on her beautiful carpet. Younès understood that he was not welcome and was suddenly ashamed of his appearance. He lowered his head and crossed his legs to hide his ragged clothes.

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It is hurtful for me to stir up that heartache again. I was at bay, ready to bare my claws to protect my son. Even more painful was the effort I made not to pounce on Nora. I was biting my tongue at every hurtful word. It took my breath away and I nearly lost control when I heard her say to me: "Why do you make your life difficult? Leave the two big ones at their father's and let him get on with it!"

Yet I have forgiven Nora for all these humiliations. I forgive you because you don't have a mother's heart; you have never experienced the joys and pains of motherhood!

Besides, at times she pined for this very motherhood: "Ah! If only I were a mother, if only I had a child, I would have a purpose in life. I weep for my youth and regret my past..."

I pitied you and I also shed tears, but they were tears of joy, because thanks to you, I appreciated the extent of my good fortune!

My children were my reason for living, my only link to life, and have remained so. They light up my nights; they are the sunshine of my days, the breath of my life.

Nora was rich, but I was even more so through my children and their love that filled my heart. Despite my hostesses' discouraging advice, I had an iron will and I wanted more than anything to pull through.

"Don't kill yourself my dear; you're wasting your time; I'm sure you'll never find any work at the moment - even graduates are unemployed!" they kept repeating to me.

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My energy redoubled, and accepting their words as a challenge spurred me on even more. But what exasperated me most was that every time I applied for a position, I was given practically the same answer, proving Nora right: "Come back in the early evening; we'll discuss it over a tippie in a quiet spot."

Being prudent, I dared not risk it, at least not as long as I had no answer to the question which was preoccupying me: What was this 'tippie' that they all spoke to me of?

I was walking along the F.A.R. Avenue, exactly level with the Monsour Hotel, when a man approached me: "Hello Madam..."

"Madam? Well now! Am I still a lady? It's obviously someone who doesn't know that I'm no longer anything but a piece of rubbish!" I caught myself thinking.

"Hello! Oh! It's you!" I added in a small voice. I was very surprised to find myself face to face again with that illustrious gentleman, one of those personalities that one sees only on television. He had met me only once in the Fès hotel where I had been spending my holidays with my ex-husband and my

children.

I had not forgotten that he had spoilt my stay by forcing me to stay shut up in my room. He had unscrupulously chatted me up, knowing all the while that I was married. I avoided him like the plague, but he tried to make friends with my husband in order to get near me. To avoid any problems for my little family, I pretended to be sick to justify my withdrawal.

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And wham, there he was crossing my path again.

"What a pleasure to see you again. Come, let's not just stand here. Come and have a tippie with me."

"Sorry, I'm in a terrible hurry. Some other time," I replied to avoid that famous 'tippie' that I dreaded.

"Oh, what a pity... I'll give you my contact number and I'll wait for your call! As soon as possible, don't forget now!"

That same evening I was impatient to ask the question which was on the tip of my tongue: "Tell me Nora, what's a tippie?"

The two sisters looked at me, then burst out laughing.

"A 'tippie' is a 'tippie'!"

"If you, for example, were invited for a tippie, what would you reply?"

"Well, I would say OK, and I would have a gin."

"A gin? What's a gin?"

"It's a drink..."

"Oh really, I've never heard of it - what does it taste like?"

"Oh, it's delicious... My poor Rachida, don't worry about it; I'll give you a taste one day!"

That was my first lesson. I learnt the meaning of the word 'tippie', but 'gin' remained to be discovered. Since I was impatient to taste it, I replied:

"Oh yes, I would love to, thanks. In fact, I forgot to tell you who I bumped into this afternoon."

"Who?"

"Mr X..."

Nora opened wide her eyes, and did not hide her astonishment.

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"Really! How did you get to know him?"

"In Fès, two years ago."

"Well then, you should have asked him to find you a job! You know, he need only pick up his telephone and his every whim is granted."

"Well, talking of telephones, I have his number... Wait, here it is..."

"So! What are you waiting for? You're mad if you miss this chance. It's the opportunity of a lifetime. My friend, he's the kind of man who can move heaven and earth."

That was how, the next day, I came to phone "the opportunity of a lifetime". A beautiful voice answered and gave me an appointment for the following day at seven o'clock.

I was greeted by a black servant boy who invited me to go through to the reception room where there were already other female guests. Reassured, I joined them, sitting in a little corner near the door, but I was very uncomfortable. This new world was completely foreign to me.

"What are you having?" a pretty girl asked me, apparently accustomed to offering this sort of service. It was obvious from the way she showed me some different coloured and shaped bottles. I politely refused because, despite my thirst, I didn't know what was in them. Luckily I didn't have a glass in my hand when the illustrious gentleman came in! I surely would have dropped it on the carpet. The soft lighting hid the embarrassment and disgust written on my face. I was perplexed, flabbergasted, and had great difficulty in stifling a cry of horror.

My host was naked. Starkers, my "opportunity of a lifetime" looked like a horrible monkey!

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Before my eyes I had the most vivid example of that glittering world. I was facing the horror of filthy lucre, the world of vice. He walked in a relaxed way. Satan in the body of a man, his flesh rotten, bloated to bursting point. I wanted to puncture his stomach to see it deflate. Fixated on his base desire, he didn't even notice my contemptuous stare, quite different from that of all the other female guests, who were in awe of and submissive to the miraculous power of his bank notes.

Suddenly, the image of my defenceless little ones overcame me and the echo of their voices pierced my ears. In a flash, I ran towards the exit.

The Invisible One inside me was screaming, "I'm rich, you're

mine, my children", but the man's voice stopped me.

"Ah, but what's this? I beg your pardon, Madam, wait... I hadn't seen you... Wait a moment... Ali, pass me my dressing-gown," he said, endeavouring to seem embarrassed! "I'm really sorry - I apologise profusely. I know you're married. Come, come this way; we'll be more comfortable." He led me to another sitting room. There were several rooms furnished differently.

"How is your husband? And the children?"

"We're separated... um, divorced in fact..."

I quickly regretted having confided this to him, and hastily continued...

"Since I have children to feed, I have been looking for work, but without success. I have no qualifications. I would be very grateful to you if you could help me to find a job."

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"But of course, of course, don't worry, my pet, I'm completely at your service. Particularly from now on, please don't hesitate, for anything at all... I'm going to excuse myself from my other guests; we'll be more at ease to discuss things."

"No, no, leave them - I don't want to spoil your evening for you. I must go home. I'm staying with friends and I can't leave the children alone."

"Listen, I'm leaving on a trip for a few days. I'd like you to come along with me. With the difficult time you must have been through, it'll take your mind off things. So what do you say?"

Faced with my silence, he changed his tune.

"That's fine, as you wish. Come and see me tomorrow before ten o'clock. I'll give you a reference for a housekeeper position in a hotel. Would that suit you?"

"Oh yes! Thank you, thank you, Sir."

I left that residence absolutely radiant; I already saw myself at the end of the tunnel. I was thinking about my first pay, of all that I would be able to give my little ones. I even ended up finding this gentleman agreeable, despite the disgusting scene. After all, it was his life and it had nothing to do with me. It was what any man would do with women that easy. The prospect of working took away all my black thoughts.

The next morning, I kept the appointment. This time, the house was silent, the big front door was ajar, and some newspapers, certainly that day's, were lying on the ground.

I rang, but got no answer. I hesitated a moment before gently pushing open the door. The big reception room in which I had been the night before was empty. You would have thought it an abandoned house. On the tables were lying glasses and empty bottles, ashtrays full of butts, some dishes still wrapped in aluminium foil, others hardly touched. Enough to feed my children and me for more than a month! Ah! Rich people...

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It was as if that residence was haunted by its owner's name, guarded by invisible devils. Spotlights and piles of electric cable on the ground indicated that the room had been transformed for the night into a real film studio...

"Is anybody there?" I finally decided to call out.

"Yes, yes, come in. I'm here - take the corridor to the right."

Ah! Must be in his office, busy writing my letter, I thought. I went forward very quietly...

"Come in, come in, I'm alone."

I pushed open the door that was ajar; there he was, my illustrious gentleman, seated in an armchair, clothed this time in a dressing gown. But it wasn't an office! It was the beautiful setting for the dirty life I was being offered. I found myself in front of a vast bed, worthy of the best of the Moroccan middle class.

I must certainly have been dreaming. I had no idea what a success I was! What a rise, from the rubbish bin to a golden platter... Me, the little turd, in this beautiful bed... A poor wretch in the arms of this magician... With his magic wand, he would transform my poverty into riches. He was already promising as much while trying to put his arms around me:

"I'll cover you in gold; come to my arms, my naughty pussy; I'm crazy about you."

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"No, no, I beg you, leave me alone; I don't do this sort of thing. No, let me go..."

My eyes focussed on the children's portraits hanging on the wall opposite me. Certainly his. In my distress, I saw instead the faces of my own children.

"No, no, never ever!" the Invisible One was shouting inside me.

Then he spoke again: "OK, OK, don't get in a state, calm down, I won't touch you. I understand... I understand, it must be that... You don't like men, do you? Well then, be nice, don't

deny me the pleasure of admiring you in the arms of another woman like yourself..."

But I was already at the door, confronted by two bodyguards drawn by my cries. And I thought there was no one in that cursed house!

"Mad, you're mad, have you no shame?" I shrieked.

"Me, mad, you little bitch, rude brat, what a way to behave! What a lack of respect! Tell me, have you forgotten who you're speaking to? Just wait, here's what I'll do with your letter!"

My letter was torn up, shredded, before being thrown with scorn to the floor. I had had a narrow escape but my dreams were going up in smoke.

"And if you don't clear off immediately, I'll have you thrown in the clink. Right, buzz off! What a way to come and disturb people in their own homes..."

"Madam, madam, please leave!" the bodyguards begged me, showing me the way out.

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We will surely meet again one day, Sir! On that day I will be proud of myself! You will lower your eyes, unable to look into mine, which will be full of contempt, as I shout: "To hell with you, you and your dirty boodle!"

Happy to have escaped unscathed, a smile on my lips, feeling positive, I returned home to my hostesses who were impatient to know the details of my meeting.

"So? Did it go well? Tell us!"

"Oh! No! A *khti*¹³, not at all, that lout... he wanted..."

"And so? What's wrong with that? And what did you answer him?"

"That I wasn't like that and that I didn't do that sort of thing."

They burst out laughing, as if I had said something bizarre, and for a long time they nicknamed me 'the one who doesn't do that sort of thing'!

"Damn and blast it, Rachida, accept reality. Don't float in the clouds. You must change if you want to succeed in life," Nora advised me.

"Be more compliant, Rachida; you're not going to make it by acting that way, my dear. If you have the good fortune to find someone who's interested in you..."

It was the easiest of choices. The hardest part was being there, standing at the crossroads, avoiding the dead end, the shorter path, glittering, full of promise, with at its end, the precipice...

Along my way I had the immense good fortune to meet women who had followed this path. I saw them trembling on the brink of the abyss. Unable to look on as they fell, I fled, having neither the time nor the courage to look behind me. The other path was long and thorny. Very few women have had the courage to brave its pitfalls. Those whom I have had the great pleasure of meeting, floundered in silence, without uttering a word. Only their wrinkles reflect their sorrow, the marks of a painful past and its hard trials.

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Now that I have chosen the same path and have been subjected to the same suffering, I would like to pay them homage for their bravery, their temerity and their sacrifices. I bow before them for having, in spite of everything, overcome the obstacles. We have come through... while preserving all that is beautiful within us, the purity of our bodies and of our souls. Today, I ask you, you dear reader, to be my confidant and to kindly pass on my message to all those women whom you know well or distantly, and who like me have experienced the humiliation of divorce, since in many countries, these two words are still linked.

I wish my voice to ring out through you, reader, to reach every one of them. It is for your sake, women, that I unfold my past, that I lay it bare, in the hope of saving our daughters, that part of ourselves, and of protecting them from life's perils.

I needed all my strength to forge a worthy existence for myself and to overcome those obstacles before which the weak admit defeat. I am indebted to Nora and Maria for their invigorating stimulus.

The hour of my departure had struck when the telephone rang. Nora had asked me to answer. Without considering how it might upset me, she passed me off as her maid. Besides, her lover on the other end had thought me too polite to be a domestic. He even asked to meet me, but it was impossible for me to model my lifestyle on theirs, or to change my attitude, and even more so to forget my principles.

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Their mother had no qualms about making me feel unwelcome and that I should pack my bags. Nora herself could no longer bear to have me there.

I left that family with no hard feelings. On the contrary, I owe them all my gratitude. It was by pondering on their

mistakes that I was able to avoid my own. Their home was for me a place of learning.

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CHAPTER IV

New destination: La Corniche neighbourhood.

Karim was beginning to tire of being my guardian angel, but he did not lose patience.

He introduced me to one of his friends, a generous man who let out small, furnished bedsitters reserved for transient artists. Therefore, for the time being and free of charge, I occupied one of these apartments situated in a three storey block evacuated for a short while because of building work. There was only a tiny trickle of water and no electricity at all.

I was the only tenant, but at least I had a refuge in which I could gather my children together. Alas, this fragile happiness was threatened because their father still forbade them from visiting me.

Reluctantly, Adil complied with his father's demands, primarily to protect me from his wrath. My address had to remain secret. As for Younès, it was asking him for the impossible. Nothing could keep him away from me. I had a roof over my head and that was where his heaven was. Being a chronic asthmatic, he remained a delicate child. He needed me and fled from his father, who tortured and threatened him in order to track me down. His father was drinking more and more heavily. Dead drunk, he would sometimes drag the children out at night to force them to reveal my secret shelter to him.

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"Oh! Mummy! If you only knew, very late yesterday we passed by your place. I was praying that Dad wouldn't notice anything. I told Adil to close his eyes to avoid looking towards the block of flats. He could have guessed everything!"

They accurately relayed their father's words to me:

"You go to her place and you can't remember her address? You're idiots!" he shouted, mad with rage.

"Dad, please, I'm tired, tomorrow I have school," Adil begged him on the verge of tears.

"School or no school, that whore of a mother of yours left you to walk the streets. If you're men you must kill her; you'll avenge my honour and yours."

My children heard this speech dozens of times every day. Their father took malicious pleasure in repeatedly trotting it out,

even in front of their friends, with no respect for their youth or their pride.

Younès couldn't take it anymore. Emotion and outrage aggravated his asthma attacks. Wounded in his self-esteem, this fledgling clung to me even more and rose to my defence: "No... No... That's not true - Mummy isn't like that... Don't say that Dad... please... I'm going to die if you carry on..."

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My bundle of suffering and the principal witness to what I was enduring! He knew my feelings perfectly, guessed my thoughts and approved of what I told him. He often contemplated me silently, while I was saying my prayers. He particularly liked that moment. When I knelt and beseeched God, alone at night, he would see my tears flowing the moment I turned my eyes heavenwards. With all the instinct of an anguished mother, I passed on to him my faith in God, taught him courage and patience.

Had he not seen me, many a time, dip stale bread into sugared water to satisfy my hunger? Had he not walked kilometres with me, when we had no money for a bus ticket?

In the evenings, on returning home after a hard day, I would find him in front of the block of flats. He would be waiting for me. He would throw his arms around my neck, hugging me, and we would carefully climb the stairs, a candle in hand, leaning on one another to avoid stumbling over the stones and tools left by the builders on the steps.

Deathly silence and horrifying shadows reigned there. We were alone, not another living soul, no neighbours, only the skeleton frameworks of villas under construction. This isolation would have frightened any child Younès's age.

"Mummy, I'm frightened..." he used to whisper to me, squeezing my hand.

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"No darling, I'm with you and God is with us. Don't even think about it. Say *Bismillah*¹⁴, He will protect you."

I would try to give him courage by speaking out loud, but deep down, I was trembling as much as he was. I would breathe easily only once inside the bedsitter, with the door locked, and even then...

For the end of year holidays, I sent Soundouss and Yamine to my parents in Fès. Adil had stayed with his father and Younès, my inseparable companion, lived with me. More sensitive than ever, he couldn't make the most of his good luck. He could not stop himself from sighing periodically when he thought of his brother, facing his father's mood swings alone. Younès never

neglected his duty; every day he went to visit his brother to see how he was getting on.

In Adil's mind, duty went before feelings. His first concern was to protect me from his father's anger. Being near his father also enabled Adil to keep track of him and, as far as possible, to avoid the worst. He put up with his bad moods while keeping him away from me. He answered "no" to all questions and thus foiled all his attempts to find me. He knew that his father was capable of the worst atrocities. Thus Adil suffered in silence to maintain our fragile happiness. But there were times when he could not take it anymore: a child's courage has its limits! Then he would ask for support from his big brother, who always came to see him in secret for fear of being prevented from seeing me again.

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"Younès, don't leave me alone here; I'm afraid in the evenings. Dad comes home late at night."

"But what's forcing you to stay here? Come with me!"

"No, no ways can Dad be left alone; he'll try to find us again; just think of the scandal he could cause Mummy. Do you know what he's capable of during his fits of rage?"

"Dad is always angry, whether you stay or leave, so come!"

Adil still refused.

"What an ass, then stay - too bad for you - stay and die here!" shouted Younès as he headed for the door with tears in his eyes, but he didn't go through it. Half turning, he tapped his foot, shaking his curly head, unable to turn his back on his brother who needed him.

"Here I am! A *dûbe*¹⁵, little jerk, I'll stay with you... but I swear that this is the last time!"

Relieved, Adil smiled as he wiped away his tears. For one night, he had the joy of not being alone.

For my part, I hardly ever missed my five o'clock meeting after school. With a grave face, Adil would hand over Soundouss and Yamine before turning his back on me and dragging his feet to go to his father's. His sad look tortured me.

"Adil, come my darling, let me hug you. Be brave, my darling..."

I would hold him tightly, stroking his hair for a long time. I was trying to reassure him.

"You know, I've found work. Soon I'm going to be able, *Inchallah*¹⁶, to have you all with me; we're going to be together like before. Come my darling, don't look glum!"

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His eyes shone with joy - a glow that sadly lasted only a few seconds.

"Yes, but Dad won't want that."

"Yes, really my darling; don't worry, I'm going to persuade him. Look, here's a little money to buy yourself some sweets."

As I handed him the money, I detected a sigh of relief: "Money, Mummy has some money! At last she has found work..." Delighted, he held the precious coins as if he were seeing money for the first time. For him, they were worth piles of gold!

Maternal instinct... It must really exist, because what mother does not know her child! I know mine by heart: I understand the message in their eyes, their hearts' desires and their smallest gesture. Everything had meaning for me.

Yes, my Adil's silent lament cut me to the quick. I could hear it all the time, no matter where: "Mummy, help, Mummy, I can't take any more!"

One Wednesday afternoon in May, I was alone at home when I heard knocking at the door:

"Oh! Adil, it's you my darling... Has something happened? How did you get here? You weren't afraid of getting lost?" I asked him, half happy, half anxious.

Without a word, silently, he gently pushed open the door. I read the amazement in his expression. You would have thought him a child who was entering wonderland, his eyes full of the joy of discovery.

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Standing, perplexed, I watched him in silence and without moving for fear of breaking the spell and disturbing his thoughts. I realised that I had not even hugged him.

Slowly, he sat down on the edge of the divan, looking self-conscious, his little hands clasped between his legs. I sensed his heart beating with joy. He had at last found Mummy's nest, discovered the secret place.

Actually, it was the first time since my divorce that my child had turned to me. He was wearing a blue and grey checked shirt and matching pants. His hair was shoulder length and falling into his eyes. How handsome he was, my big twelve-year-old baby! How he had grown! Fondly, I looked him up and down, full of love and tenderness...

"Oh no, Adil! I don't believe it - you came in your slippers!"

"Er...er," he replied, looking sorry and staring at his feet. "I don't have any more shoes, Mummy; they are all worn out."

"And your father?"

His only answer was to shrug his shoulders. I suddenly realised that the fragile balance that I was desperately trying to maintain in my life was threatening to disappear. I was destitute; I wanted my children and had no right to abandon them. Having them all with me was what I wanted more than anything in the world. But how could I feed them?

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Their condition was deteriorating each day. I was at a loss, but I had no right to give up. We were a few days away from the month of Ramadan. Although young, my children fasted and enjoyed doing so. To eat, they had to go to their father's since I could not even provide my own food. Thanks to Younès, I didn't die of hunger. On the sly, he took anything he could find, including shampoo and soap. He thought of everything.

During the month of Ramadan, I would meet him with Adil, accompanied by their faithful Aïcha, waiting near the closest bus stop to their house. Younès would hand me a little bag of provisions under the sad gaze of my former maid. "I'm afraid that's the way it is; life is no joke," she seemed to be telling me with her eyes.

To get to La Corniche, where I was living, I had two buses to catch, but I could not afford them and I did half the journey on foot, despite fasting and fatigue. I always ate an hour after the end of the fast. I walked the length of Anfa Boulevard, my treasure in my hands. I caressed the still warm tin of soup. Often, it was the only thing in my bag, without even a piece of bread. I would thank God gratefully for this food which he sent me.

Since I was tired, I didn't hurry. In this neighbourhood, the poshest of the city, I gazed at the beautiful villas and luxurious cars parked in front of the doors. I imagined the families united around their well-laden tables, the enthusiastic atmosphere of that holy month with its traditions and customs. I fantasised: "Hey, in this villa there must surely be an extra room in the garden. Oh! If only I could have it!"

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Was it too much to ask for, one room? A little junk room then, an old attic? Now that would be marvellous! Of course there would be strict rules to observe: don't make a noise, don't walk on the grass, don't disturb the owners... We would shut ourselves up all the time in our little corner; the main thing would be to be together. As for food, goodness, we would be happy with scraps... And the washing? Where could it be put

out to dry? But of course, I wouldn't do any washing at their place - I would go and do it at the sea front. We could even stay outside the whole day! We would impose ourselves only at night! That way we would stand more chance of being welcome in their home for longer.

The siren signalling the end of the fast woke me from my dreams and summoned me back to reality, whose bitter taste made me feel nauseous.

In that beautiful neighbourhood there was no mosque, but the *muezzin's* familiar voice calling to prayer was always deep within my heart. I was so moved that it seemed as though I was hearing it for the first time.

I lifted my eyes to heaven. My soul was so light that it melted into the blue expanse. An extraordinary sensation, like a magnet, was drawing me towards a miraculous universe. A force overwhelmed me - an emotion without equal. I felt God's presence. In that privileged moment, my prayers grew lengthy.

I appealed for His clemency, His mercy, and I implored Him to inspire me with the strength to bear the blows of destiny.

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**Lord, in You we have put our trust;
to You we turn and to You we shall come at last.
(She who is tested, 60,4)**

[p. 267, *The Koran*, Penguin Classics]

Car hooters broke the magic of that moment. Leisurely motorists were stopping, attracted by the lure that they saw in me. To make me stray from the right path, the devil was making me more beautiful. They could spend the whole night making signs to me, looking at me... I was far away.

"Dear God, how would I dare look elsewhere when You are with me? I feel fulfilled by Your love. I am no longer alone; You are all around me and nothing else matters."

With empty pockets and a hollow stomach, my faith was only made stronger.

Admittedly, my appearance was far from reflecting my frame of mind, and for many, I must have looked rather like a loose-living woman. By way of clothes, I wore only an old pair of jeans and a pullover. That was all I could afford. But it must be understood that in Morocco, at that time, few women dared to dress that way; it was frowned upon and you were immediately labelled. That was why I was badly misjudged by men while waiting for the great day of God's judgement. I was His *mou-e-mina*¹⁷ in jeans. Hot tears flowed down my cheeks, lightening this great burden which was weighing on my heart, and washing away all the dust of sadness from my face. I felt happy, rich and serene. And who would dare to deny it?

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To anyone unfamiliar with my misfortune, I did not seem destitute. Often, people even took me for a well-to-do woman, and to think I was dying of hunger! The height of absurdity, I was living in Anfa Boulevard, Casablanca's most posh neighbourhood.

Appearances! I wonder what mine were? A car? I did not have one. Jewels? None either, not even fakes. Neither beautiful clothes, nor beautiful hairstyles. I wore jeans and I was always broke. I did not hide it. Quite on the contrary, I kept mentioning it. But who was listening? Everything proved the contrary, even my new job in an insurance office, where I was appointed as production manager from the very first day.

I owed this job to Aziz, but not my rank... I owed that purely to my looks. Yet they weren't much help to me at the correspondence school where I was enrolled for two months, without really excelling. My clients were much more interested in me than in my contracts.

My boss was an old man up to his neck in shit. Bearing in mind his advanced age, he wanted to get ahead and make money, at all costs. The offices were in a big apartment, with a waiting room in which there was an imposing table, some chairs, and a typewriter, but not a single file. In appointing me as production manager, he was using my appearance as bait, and did not hide it. He was in a complete mess, and I, like a fool, was being used as a stepping stone...

"Make yourself at home here. It's a gold mine, so dig!" he told me.

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Flattered, like an idiot I devotedly slaved away. I did everything to be of service to that company and to turn it around. I even went as far as finding him a partner, Mr Malak, whom I had met on the way to the Parc de la Ligue Arabe.

It happened one evening, on leaving my office late, as I was hurrying to discourage the driver of a car which was following me. Once I had reached the bus stop, I saw the driver park his car and head towards me. He held out his hand to me with a smile:

"Good evening, Madam. Allow me respectfully to accompany you. It's getting late and the area is rather dangerous for a lady on her own."

I immediately liked this young man. I accepted his offer because I trusted him, and the bus was late...

On the way, I naturally started talking about my life and my problems. Moved, Malak did not miss a word of what I said. Few people have this ability to listen; I felt that a great friendship was going to develop between us.

From the first evening, I introduced him to Younès as my friend.

I saw Malak daily. He made a habit of taking me home each evening. I had just discovered a feeling new for me: tender and sincere friendship between a man and a woman. It was very beautiful.

I often spoke to him of my work, my boss, and his difficulties, which was how he came to suggest becoming a shareholder in the company. And so he became my second boss. We were delighted to work together. Alas, this did not really improve the financial situation of the office and I still had not been paid. I sometimes received a small advance, from a trembling hand, so that I got the impression that my boss was giving me charity. He had great difficulty parting with his bank notes, I'm afraid! Oh yes, and for years he had been twiddling his thumbs, waiting for a miracle: I was the lifeline thrown out into the surf.

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For more than a month I had been sweating away, prospecting his mine, as he termed it, but in the end, the mud was for me and the gold for him. And to think that he presented himself as a pious man! He spent his days praying, while I was digging...digging...

The business was not thriving, despite the arrival of a third partner. This one was quite different from the other two. In buying shares, he had thought that I was included in the deal. He was too gallant, too kind - his stare spoke volumes...

"Oh yes, my sweetie, each of us sees things in his own way: the old man takes pleasure in seeing you digging for gold for him; as for me, it's in you that I see the gold, and I would like to be the one to dig in you..."

My new boss would stop at nothing. He even complimented me on my feet, which he found "pretty". It was the first time that anyone had taken an interest in my feet! These men! It is true that I was wearing my prettiest sandals that Younès had managed to bring me from his father's.

I would so much have liked, even if only once, for a man to take the trouble to look me right in the eye and to see me as I really was. Instead, their stares continually undressed me. Had a divorced woman no right to any dignity? I had lost all sensitivity. I had become icy cold, violated by their lecherous eyes that probed my privates... My body was nothing but a flame of anger. I was not for sale. Obsessed as they were with their desire, they were far from imagining that I was also shaking, but with horror and disgust. I knew them to be deaf, so why cry out? I wrapped myself in silence, which in itself expressed my rancour.

I had a hollow in my stomach... I so longed to be able to eat my fill once more, to have again the security of a roof over my head and a mother's peace of mind: her children's laughter. Deprived of everything, how could I think of anything else, how could I take pleasure in these sexual advances which affected my daily bread and humiliated me? After having lived in opulence throughout my youth, now the thought of being able to buy myself a hot loaf of bread was enough to make me happy. I experienced enormous pleasure in nibbling at it as I walked along.

Walk... I covered kilometres, hundreds of them; I can't even remember how many any more...

I was only at the beginning of my very long journey. And the gossips' tongues were wagging away: I was walking the streets! Little did it matter. I had a very definite goal: I had to get out of that dead end situation.

Dear God, how good and generous You are to have spared men knowledge of tomorrow. Thank You, my God, for having given me so much courage, for having filled my soul with so much serenity. I would never have imagined, despite the poverty in which I was living, the horror that lay ahead of me, and if I had anticipated it, I would certainly have abandoned myself to despair. I would have given up and gone under. Instead, thanks to faith and trust, I was blessed with a marvellous internal peace.

I was immune. No craving, no desire. I felt neither cold, nor fatigue, and hunger even less. This is perhaps what mystics call asceticism. Occasionally I was even happy. I had faith in everything; I was prepared to do anything, as long as it was honest. Even to accept the job as a barmaid that a French friend offered me. My hopeless situation disconcerted him. The job paid well and was not very tiring according to him.

It was what I most hoped for, but my conscience forbade it. How could I go against the prohibitions of my religion? I feared only God and had to answer only to my conscience. As long as my Invisible One was at ease, I didn't give a damn about the rest...

This other me was fierce and wild; it seemed to arise from another, distant era, and was without pity for human weakness. In contrast, the other facet of myself - the Visible One - was ahead of its time. Gentle and understanding to the point of lacking morality and lucidity, it was the voice of my body and my sensuality. What a contradiction! It was a separation, but also a fusion, and I was its only victim. How could I reconcile these two extremes?

I was just living out my destiny. That of a woman in jeans, on

the road, running in search of her daily bread... Always escorted by a line of cars offering their services. The Invisible One, far from this tangible world, prayed to her God and fled from sin. Unstoppable, she persisted in virtue: "Hurry up, Bag-of-Bones; don't turn a deaf ear to the *Muezzin's* voice!"

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My throat knotted with grief and bitterness, I was impatient to be on my knees, in God's hands.

Alas, that silence and peace were too brief. I had to confront hundreds of individuals for whom I was an easy prey, "a streetwalker". I have been badly misjudged, even by women, and it is a miracle that I have kept my sanity in this male society in which everything is both forbidden and sanctioned, as long as one is discreet.

I showed myself as I was, wearing what I had. On foot, in jeans, I was disturbing. Divorced, I was a provocation. There was no way I could be anything but a less-than-nothing, and certainly not a believer, a practising Muslim.

I was a Muslim in spite of everything, with all the courage of a mother in distress. My faith gave me the strength to elude the traps, to deflect the stares of starving wolves who were ready to violate the secret of my intimacy.

The man who was in front of me that day was like all the others... His gaze admired the tips of my toes... His eyes caressed my legs... my backside...

I hastily left his office and went to take refuge with the old boss. He was in his corner, slumped in his armchair. He resembled a crafty monkey who took me for an ass. I still had not been paid.

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Malak, the only man who could have listened to me, was not there. I saw him again three days later. I no longer recognised him. He was angry and accused me of betrayal. He was certain that I had deliberately dragged him into a business that I knew to be bankrupt, and that I was interested only in the commission. I didn't regret leaving the insurance office, but I suffered a lot from losing a friend, who was as much a victim of my stupidity as I myself was.

Weary and muddle-headed, I was leaving the premises, mentally reciting some verses from the Koran, when a voice called me on the stairs: "Hello Madam."

Seeing that I wasn't answering, the voice added: "What's the matter? Are you feeling ill?"

"Er... me? Yes... No! No!"

"Come, come in Madam, come and rest in my office."

It was Mr Abdou, the manager of a building company on the floor below. I had just lost my job as production manager, but one hour later, and several steps lower, I was hired as a draughtswoman.

A fascinating occupation. A new world was opening up before me, that of Rotring pens and drawing boards. It was amazing - I was gifted. "Who knows, perhaps one day I'll become an engineer," I sometimes said to myself. Nothing surprised or astonished me any more. After all, perhaps I was chosen? Did God not say that only the true believer endured the worst suffering?

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My new boss was very generous. The first day, he called me into his office, graciously pulled a hundred-dirham note from his pocket and said:

"Take it, Madam; it's to buy something for the children!"

"Er, no, thank you! I have enough money," I replied proudly.

I did not want charity - I had not quite reached that point!

"I insist, Madam, accept this money and consider it an advance on your wages."

I accepted, proud of having earned that note. I even remember what I bought with it and where... I was in a hurry to get home, on foot as always. I covered those kilometres separating me from home, joyously carrying a box of camembert, my children's favourite cheese, some milk and some hot bread. It was the only luxury that I could give them.

The next day I was happy to get back to work in a pleasant atmosphere. My colleagues, all men, were very likeable. The boss had a personal secretary who was also his mistress, which reassured me. I thought I was safe.

In the evening, as I was leaving, this same secretary held out another fifty-dirham note to me: "Take it, Madam; generosity is one of Mr Abdou's qualities."

Two weeks later, while I was in my boss's office, he asked me:

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"Have you got a driver's licence, Madam?"

"Yes Sir."

"Well then, come with me; I'm going to introduce you to our architect and engineer colleagues. I will sometimes give you

work outside the office."

I wanted to be able to please my boss and earn my bank notes. We made a tour of the building sites. The company's field of activity was very large. There was even work outside Casablanca. We returned only in the late afternoon, to be greeted by the secretary's cold and suspicious expression. I took the fifty-dirham note on the desk and hastily left the premises. The atmosphere was tense; the secretary was giving vent to her pent-up feelings in the boss's office.

I ran down the stairs, with the intention of explaining everything to her the next day.

Unfortunately, she was away all day. But my worst enemy, the male libido, was well and truly present. It had transformed that boss who had been so generous, and he was waiting for me, greedy, drooling at the mouth...a wolf begging for a little caress.

He spoke to me, with a courteous smile, of a flat, keys, money. He did not seem embarrassed, certainly expecting me to agree. He thought he had already reserved me with the few bank notes paid in advance.

I closed my eyes. "It's a sin ...h'ram¹⁸...h'ram..." the Invisible One was shouting, directing my steps towards the exit.

I reached the bottom of the building with a sprained ankle. In my haste, I had fallen, and it was in that state of mixed panic and pain that my former young boss found me. I was really at rock bottom... I can remember nothing except my fine fit of hysterics that I could no longer control. His ironic expression made me want to scratch his face to shreds. Only the gentle voice of Malak, who was also there, calmed me and brought me back to reason.

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I was sore everywhere like after a tough fight. I was limping and crying like a defenceless child. I no longer understood what was happening to me. I felt alone and abandoned in those streets, in that world in which I felt like an outsider. I walked with lowered head, incapable of facing people's looks. I hid my tear-stained face as best I could. Oh! If you had been there, Dad, you would never have allowed that! If you had been there, my brother, you would surely have defended me. If you had been older, my son!

I ran towards my Younès, towards my reason for living. I needed to hold him in my arms, to kiss his little hands, to hear him calling me "Mummy".

That night, on the balcony, kneeling, my forehead on the ground, I prayed for a long time in order to soothe away all the accumulated anguish. Everything was muddled in my head. I

cried for anything and for nothing... But one phrase came to mind, familiar words, the echo of which revived me: "Only the believer is put to the test."

I often had the impression of feeling a benevolent presence with me. I trembled with emotion. God was there... I lifted my eyes full of love for Him. I implored Him to increase twofold my courage and to protect me. Straight away, and as if by a miracle, an extraordinary peace swept through me. Proud of once again having passed a difficult test, I was happy. That was the secret of the smile that lit up my face and made my features glow. Furthermore, this is why the people around me never understood my problems, nor guessed the extent of my suffering.

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I forgave as quickly as I forgot. Also, on this occasion, I had neither the time nor the means to institute proceedings against those men without conscience. Only He whose strength surpasses all other strengths could avenge me. I left it in God's hands and trusted in His justice. A few years later, I learnt of the death of Mr Abdou - he had hanged himself.

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CHAPTER V

I was going round in circles, in search of a way out. I was still alive thanks to Younès's help, but the cupboards were beginning to empty. Lost in an alcoholic daze, his father suspected nothing. He thought that the maids were pilfering. I had to sell everything to stay alive and Younès was worried. One day he confided in me how sick his paternal grandmother was. It did not even cross her son's mind to take her to the doctor, which really upset Younès. Her grandchildren adored her. Family duty called me to her side. I had to get her out of there.

Still with Younès's complicity, I was able to retrieve my last coat, for which I got a modest price. It was nevertheless enough for me to pay the medical costs. My mother-in-law was very moved by this and blessed me, begging me to take her to her granddaughters' home. She could no longer bear to live alone and wished, so she said, to die among her family.

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As promised, a few days later I fetched her to go to Taza where my sisters-in-law lived. She was so weak that she could not even stand to walk. It was impossible to find a taxi in the neighbourhood. Helped by my two elder children, I had to carry her on my back as far as the station, where the two of us took the train.

I stayed at her side only one night and she died a month later.

Her last wishes had been carried out. On the way home, I stopped at my parents' home in Fès, where Soundouss and Yamine were spending their holidays.

A surprise awaited me there. While playing with his cousin, Yamine had fallen from a height of three metres. He had had to be hospitalised because of a fractured left tibia. I ran to his bedside like a woman possessed.

My little darling looked so fragile with his leg in traction. He felt guilty over all the worry he had caused me. His sad expression stopped my tears on the spot and prompted a forgiving smile.

Yamine was eight years old. He was a very brave boy, born under the sign of Aquarius. People of this sign are said to be very perceptive. He had always been good and obedient. He had never caused me any problems, either in his studies or his behaviour. Self-possessed and silent, always the last to serve himself, he would never complain, either of hunger or our extremely difficult living conditions. We considered him rather like a baby who understood nothing. That was our big mistake. This baby was the most mature of all his brothers. He lived out my suffering and felt it; he noticed the least of my sighs and read the expression in my eyes when he saw me sad. Should this last a while, he would discreetly come up to me to show tenderness. Not for anything in the world would he have wanted to be a burden to me.

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That was how Yamine felt in hospital. His beautiful green eyes were telling me: "Stop crying, Mummy; save your tears for the future..."

When, with a heavy heart, I left him a week later, he still had to stay in hospital for another month. I would have liked to stay near him, to pamper and cradle him. Alas, I had to return to Casablanca to face the new school year. We were at the end of the summer holidays.

I was back where I'd started. Although the owner of the bedsitter had been generous, he was becoming impatient and insisted that I vacate his apartment as quickly as possible.

I felt as lost as the first day after my divorce. However, I kept faith in life and in the goodness and loyalty of people. Married at the age of fourteen, I had never been more than a household slave throughout those eighteen years. I knew nothing of life, of life on the street, the street on which I found myself at the age of thirty-two, disarmed and defenceless, yet with the responsibility of four children.

I kept my problems to myself, but the burden was becoming increasingly unbearable for me. I spared my parents as I wanted to keep them out of it all - some suffering spared.

My children were starting to lose direction, sucked into this whirlpool of problems. Younès had to repeat a year because of his frequent absences and failure to pay school fees. After all, he could hardly remain unaffected by our family situation.

Adil also nearly failed at school. He was living with a father who was unconcerned about his future and well-being.

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Yamine had to have his leg in plaster for three months, which coincided with the re-opening of school. He had to be brought back to Casa at all costs so that he could start his studies again.

As soon as I got back from Fès, I went to visit my children at their father's; I had missed them so much. It was lunchtime. My little ones were there, wandering around in the garden under the burning summer sun and in a pitiful state. They flung themselves round my neck and I hugged them tightly. I was laughing and crying at the same time. Flopping down on the lawn, I answered a shower of questions without looking them in the eyes. I did not have the courage to do it and felt unworthy of being a mother. Perhaps I did not deserve their love. I had become accustomed to being called "Mummy" without ever understanding that the term could heal wounds and rekindle a flame of hope. It was soothing music to my ears but did I deserve it? Had I failed in my duty as a mother?

Stretched out on the lawn, I contemplated the house in which everything had been carried away by the flood. We were survivors, lost souls...

"Mummy, when will Yamine come home? My poor little brother!"

"Mummy, is he sore? Does he cry?"

"Mummy, why did you leave him in Fès?"

Mummy, Mummy... These words were like whiplashes ceaselessly beating down on me. I was aching, aching all over. This was no longer the gentle music that had always soothed me, but rather a call to order, to my duty as mother: it was a call for help..

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That day, I made a big decision. Nothing else should matter to me but my children, my flesh and blood scattered far from me. I could see them moving, asking for their share of life which existed only in me, the mother root. I was ashamed of my weakness. I truly regarded myself as worse than an animal. I imagined the fury of an animal when she senses her young in danger. She defends them to the death. Shame on me, a woman with a head on her shoulders, who could not do anything for her own in need. My human-ness disgusted me.

Mortally wounded and cut to the quick, I wailed silently: "Come, you who are of my flesh and blood, return to my roots: live, breathe, suck, suck the last drop of my blood, but live..."

I wanted to be like an animal and have its strength.

Hardened against the blows of cruel fate, I no longer felt any sensation. I racked my brains for just one thing: a shelter, a refuge.

I started by making the rounds of the Ain Sebaâ estate agencies. I was determined to live in this neighbourhood so as to be as close as possible to my two older children, should their father refuse to give me custody. I also wanted Soundouss and Yamine to stay in their school, where their teachers supported them.

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I ended up at Boujemaâ's, a young estate agent who was pleasant and, above all, very patient. Everything he suggested to me was well beyond my limited means. So in the end, he jokingly exclaimed:

"In that case, if you need something less expensive than that, you can have a shack!"

"Yes, why not, if any are available."

"Are you joking?" he asked with a faint smile.

"No, not at all, I'll take your shack."

"But... um... Yes!"

"What's the rent?"

"300 dirhams per month, and... my commission... and a deposit for the owner."

"Put me in touch with him; I'll sort out the rest."

His eyes opened wide as he muttered something, then he stood up to go with me. He was convinced that I was going to waste his time. He did not think me the kind of person who could live in a shanty town.

"We're here; it's this one. Um... Go in, go in... But I'm warning you... close your eyes!"

"Yes, *Bismillah*."

Hundreds of flies welcomed me to my new home. Poor Boujemaâ did not know how to handle the situation. He waited in embarrassment for my reaction. I was too busy shaking off the flies that were swarming around me.

"But... carry on, carry on, where is this shack?"

Eyes riveted on the ground so as to know where to step, he turned round from time to time to make sure I was still following him and would not try to flee from such poverty.

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Oh, certainly not! I was following him. I entered the world of real poverty with firm steps, avoiding only the puddles of urine and turds that decorated the ground.

My new neighbours and a flock of children were gawking at me.

"I couldn't believe my eyes. I thought you were from the health department and so I was very pleased," one of them later admitted to me.

"No, I thought she'd come to buy the land because I saw the estate agent with her; but, as for living here... *Moustahil*¹⁹... *Awili, Allah yastar*²⁰," another added.

The fact that I was in search of shelter had not crossed the dear women's minds for a moment. And yet, I was so happy to have a hovel of my own!

There was only one latrine for several tenants, with a door that didn't close.

My visit was brief, lasting only long enough to find the dwelling. On leaving, we came across Jilali, the house-owner. Once over his amazement and when the introductions were completed as required by Moroccan custom, he invited us to have tea with his two wives and some of his children. After some brief negotiations, he dropped the deposit and asked for only a month's rent. He was delighted to have new people in his home - a subject to animate evening conversation. And then having me in particular as a tenant increased the prestige of his shack settlement.

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With a penniless, rich person like me, he could even consider raising the rent of those poor people deprived of fresh air and sunshine.

Now all I had to do was find the money for the rent. This question was already preoccupying me the moment I left Jilali, promising to return the next day. I did not know how to get hold of the necessary 600 dirhams. I was oblivious of my companion's gossiping but his exclamation woke me from my reverie:

"Look, there's your husband; he's coming towards us."

"Hello young man."

"Hello Si²¹ Hamid. We were in the neighbourhood. Madam is looking for accommodation," stammered Boujemaâ.

"Ah! And has she found something?"

"Yes, and for once in your life, you can help me," I replied angrily.

He was understanding - that man to whom I had given my youth, eighteen years of my life and four children. Yes, he was delighted to help me. Shortly before our divorce, Hamid had ordered a stereo system from a business friend. One day, when I was passing through the shop, I was told that the merchandise had arrived. Younès, who was with me, was already jumping for joy. He dreamed of listening to the John Travolta record I had given him a week before. His father was away on a trip. I could not resist the temptation to do crazy things for my children, so I took the stereo, leaving a piece of jewellery I was wearing, worth twice the stereo, as a guarantee until my husband could come and reclaim it.

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Alas! The divorce was finalised before this matter had been settled. When the shopkeeper learnt of our separation, he insisted that I reclaim my jewellery personally. Hamid, sensing a good deal, offered to give me a thousand dirhams in exchange for the bracelet worth eight times more than that. Take it or leave it.

The jewellery was of little importance to me but Hamid had once again shown himself capable of the worst ignominies.

Before leaving me, he sneered in a sarcastic tone: "Don't tell me you're going to live there? It's a slum!"

I paid the rent and gave the estate agent his commission. I bought disinfectant and a big mosquito net with what was left. With the help of my nearest neighbour, Rkia, we companionably cleaned the shack. I drew on all the resources of my imagination to make it a welcoming little hovel. I stuck pot plants in plastic tubs all over the place. Some of my dresses were transformed into cushions and others into curtains for the door. Windows? There were none.

Two days later, we were reunited around a tablecloth placed on the floor. It served as our table. We were having our first meal together for months. In the joy of reunion, my children were neither amazed nor disappointed by the setting. I had explained the situation to them as something new and not unfortunate.

Going home to our shack had become a sort of game: we had to move faster than the flies to avoid their disagreeable company. I often heard Soundouss and Yamine burst into laughter.

I could not close my eyes the first night because I was afraid that my children would not adapt to the environment, especially since I had hardly anticipated the nocturnal visitors - cockroaches and rather plump rats. The latter ran all over the place. I spent the night lashing out in the darkness to scare them away. I woke up first in the morning and noiselessly swept away the persistent dust that settled on our blankets. I was keen for my children to open their eyes on cleanliness.

Rkia was my closest and kindest neighbour. Our shacks were next to one another. Only a wall separated the one from the other. My door opened onto her only room, measuring about two metres by three. She lived there with her husband, five children and her younger sister. One question tormented me the whole time I was their neighbour: how did they sleep, and on what? Apart from a mat and some blankets, there was no furniture. Due to lack of space, their children were outside in the courtyard all day long and came home only in the evening to gulp down their only meal and sleep.

Despite my poverty, I was the richest person in the neighbourhood. I did not have enough food for my children and me but I could not help assisting that family whose hunger was not always satisfied.

We suffered particularly from the heat during the month of Ramadan. It was practically impossible to keep fresh the little food we put aside. Everything became inedible, which forced me to throw away a lot. Straight away, poor kids would rummage in the makeshift bins and swallow everything in one gulp. From then on, it was impossible for us to eat without thinking of those poor wretches.

Hlima, my neighbour on the left, was the most reserved of all. I knew nothing of her private life, except that she was the mother of six children and that they lived in a tiny room made with sheet metal from rusty drums. That was when I first understood the origin of the French word for "shanty town".

During the day, ours became a "rag town": everywhere there were rows and rows of washing - on the walls, on the roofs and even on the ground. It required real gymnastics to get past all this. You felt as though you were being smothered by a giant spider's web. The piss-like odour of children fed on bread and tea was our daily lot.

There were seven of us tenants, all kind and obliging, plus about thirty children. The neighbouring women used to keep an eye on my children when I was away. They brought in my washing when it rained. Rkia personally took care of Yamine who was immobilised by his leg in plaster. In the morning she took him out into the sunshine while he waited for his brothers to come home and she was always around in case of an emergency.

My children needed many things. But, understanding and obedient as they have always been, they never demanded anything. We lived among people more destitute than we were and I did everything in my power to reassure them.

* Translator's note: The French word for shanty town translates literally as "drum town" (ie a town made from drums).

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In the evening, they sat in a circle around me and I would tell them of God and His power, of Islam and its precepts, of our prophet Mohamed - praise be to him - of his courage and his patience. I told them that he was orphaned and also very poor, but that he never lost faith.

I told them these things with lots of love and tenderness at the most difficult of times and especially when we had very little food to share, as was often the case.

My children were aware of our sudden fall and were affected by its repercussions. From one day to the next, there was no more villa, no more servants, no more car, no more music lessons, no more horse riding, no more, no more, no more... The list of their deprivations was endless. Their comfortable home had been replaced by a dingy rat-infested shack and their beds by blankets thrown on the ground.

My great faith in God, my respect for the principles of Islam, and my strong maternal instinct had returned. Drawing on the religious education that I had taught them from a young age, I soothed their souls with the words of God. The Koran was my bedside reading and cassettes chanting long verses of it lulled us. Thanks to the miraculous power of these words, my children felt less alone and lost.

***Those who ... have faith; Whose hearts
find comfort in the remembrance of Allah.
Surely in the remembrance of Allah
all hearts are comforted.
(Thunder, 13, 28)***

[p. 145, *The Koran*, Penguin Classics]

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I succeeded in engraving the love of God in their hearts and no one could ever turn them away from this. I had confidence in my Creator. How could I fail in His presence? He was the only witness to my tears and my poverty and the only judge of my actions.

In no way was I cast aside, as the society of men would like to have made out.

My main problem was daily bread. A piece of bread? I can imagine your surprise, dear reader. Yes, the bread which is

thrown into the bin in great quantities but which is not given away for nothing... The most charitable people offer you a crust but always expect something in return. The poverty of others is often exploited under the guise of generosity.

Back in the nest, my children were always waiting with open mouths. They wanted that bread, even dry bread. So I had to find it. I had already been walking for a long time one day when I wearily stopped in front of a building where an old friend, Rajae, lived. She was a beautiful, dynamic young woman. Despite the comfortable life that her husband provided for her, Rajae was self-employed with a "suitcase business".

I was pleasantly received because we had lost touch. After the usual small talk, she asked me courteously:

"You couldn't have come at a better time. I was going out - could you drop me on your way?"

"It would have been a pleasure... but I haven't got a car."

"Well then, how did you get here, by taxi?"

"No, by bus."

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Astonished, she waited for me to explain further and before she could say anything, I interjected:

"I am no longer Mrs..."

"What? It can't be true?"

"Yes, yes it is, my dear; I'm divorced."

"Oh! My God, it can't be true; these men are no longer to be trusted. A *khti*, it's impossible!"

"That's life."

"And what are you doing? What are you living on? I hope you're getting decent alimony?"

"No, up to now, I've had nothing."

"And what are you waiting for? Lodge a complaint; show him that a wife and her children can't be abandoned just like that!"

"Yes, but I have no money!"

"Sell your jewellery."

"Sell it! I walked out of my home empty-handed. I left everything behind."

"What? You took nothing?"

Her only response was a long sigh.

"Allah²²... Beautiful villa... beautiful kids. How can he escape God's justice?"

There was a silence, then she went on...

"You know, Rachida, I also experienced the same thing. My mother was repudiated when I was still very small. So I know what it's like, especially coming from a poor family like mine. I'll do everything in my power to help you. But I must warn you straight away: never dare say in front of my husband or his family that you're divorced; they would certainly forbid me from having you visit. You'll always be Mrs X to them, OK? Listen, I have an idea, only come and see me when my husband is out, especially since you've changed - you no longer have the same style. Don't get cross if I say that; it's for your own good. Come to the kitchen with me; we'll have something to drink."

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I followed her in silence, amazed by this turn of events. She continued:

"I'll definitely find something for you... Oh! Yes! I can give you some imported merchandise to sell - what do you think? You could make a fortune. Oh! I forgot; I need guarantees."

"Guarantees? But I have nothing."

"Well then a cheque will do."

"Are you joking? I have no bank account."

"It couldn't be easier! You can open one with five hundred dirhams."

"Yes, that's the problem... Five hundred dirhams. I don't even have twenty in my pocket."

"Goodness me, Rachida, that bad?"

She did not really seem to believe my story but she changed her mind.

"Oh! That son of a bitch! Give me a couple of days... Come and see me in a week. Between now and then, we'll see. I'm busy setting up a little handicraft workshop with a friend. Maybe we'll be able to let you have some *gandouras*²³ to sell. You'll earn your living with me, don't worry. I'm a *Chrifia*²⁴; everyone who works with me gets rich quickly but I need a cheque, my dear."

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She had a mischievous half smile on her lips. She took her wallet, then gave me a few notes to tide me over, not forgetting to specify that she would deduct the amount from our first transaction.

"Here you are, that's all I can give you. You know how it is in business. The merchandise costs us quite a lot. By the way, can you sell me your sewing machine? Oh! How stupid of me! You've already told me that you're *âla el balate*²⁵. Hey, you'll come right, you'll see!"

"*Inchallah*, and thanks for everything."

Once outside, I mentally thanked Rajae for having reminded me about my sewing machine that I had put in for repairs before my divorce.

I ran to get it back. It still was not ready. That was lucky because I still did not have anything to settle the bill. I quickly found a buyer among my friends. She haggled so much over the price that I had to let it go for a price five times less than its value.

I went to Rajae's early the next day to buy some articles from her and set to work immediately. I ran around, climbing up and down stairs the whole day long. I knocked on all the doors, even those of agencies, banks and businesses - everything that lay in my path. After the offices closed, I went door to door.

I was patient. People took their time to choose and try on, and unluckily for me, bargained really hard.

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The customers I visited at home were all acquaintances. They knew I was in need but that did not stop them from quibbling over prices. My self-esteem was flouted. I felt like an insignificant old crone being given charity.

I even resorted to offering my own clothes to close friends. I thought they would recognise their true worth, all the more so because they were aware of my financial position. Well, I was wrong. They argued about the prices more than anyone. Embarrassed, I was reduced to letting everything go for next to nothing to end these humiliating scenes and also to punish my own stupidity. They ripped me off brilliantly, using their husbands' stinginess as an excuse:

"My husband... He certainly won't want me to buy it, you know men!"

"Yes, and how!"

What they did not know, was that I knew them, yes them, even better... I played the game and danced to their tune. I began to get used to their system of payment. I had to visit them at

least ten times before being paid. It was in my interest to be patient, polite and, above all, understanding. My idiocy reassured them. They all behaved in the same way. After the fourth try, I was invited for tea. This became a courtesy call, but cost me dearly, given the cost of transport. We spoke of everything, except my money.

I ended up leaving the premises, swallowing my anger with difficulty. On the doorstep, I turned to the maid: "Listen, tell your madam that I'll come back tomorrow; I don't want to disturb her, especially when her husband is there. Tell her to leave my money with you. OK?"

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On some occasions, we reached the stage where the maid denied that her mistress was even at home: sometimes she was at someone's deathbed, sometimes at a funeral. Without losing hope, I went to knock on another door.

My children were waiting, with hollow stomachs... And good luck still did not seem to smile on me! I reached the point, with tears in my eyes, of begging for it:

"I beseech you, Luck - a little boost! Just a nudge. Have pity, Luck, side with me, even if only once."

Luck remained deaf to my appeal. I persisted, without admitting defeat. When, embarrassed because it was already getting late, I gently tapped on a last door with a hesitant hand, I was almost sure of getting a few pennies. My last customers cut me short for fear of being heard by their husbands. Inviting an unattached woman in, especially at night, could cause problems for them. The image of my starving children haunted me ceaselessly. I was ready to do anything to be paid. Only a miraculous banknote could make me turn back home.

Only then was I happy because I had eked out enough for my family's bread. Once in the street, I faced another problem: there were no more buses at such a late hour. So I dragged myself along. My feet hurt; it was impossible for me to stay upright, much less walk. I looked back from time to time in the hope of seeing a pirate taxi coming.

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I thought back on my day, on this world of business in which the customer reigned supreme and reduced me to a meek, civilised form of slavery.

Weary, I had only one desire - to be alone, breathing in the fresh air of freedom and enjoying peace and quiet after having talked myself to a standstill... With my eyes half shut, I allowed myself to be filled with an exquisite inner silence. And despite my fatigue, I was ready to travel kilometres, as long as I was alone.

But it was not that easy. There were others who wanted to lose themselves in the night and who were fleeing their loneliness. They ended up tearing me from my serenity. In vain I closed my eyes, blocked my ears and feigned indifference - they persisted:

"Psst... Psst.. *Al arzala*²⁶, climb in."

I ignored them, but in vain. They offered me their services, waiting for the smallest sign from me. It was my turn to become queen.

Furthermore, I did not know I had so many brothers: "Come on, sister. I'll take my sister wherever she wants to go..."

Sometimes a cold look sufficed to turn down all propositions, but I nevertheless earned insults from he who had called himself my "brother" a few minutes earlier, before he pulled off in a huff. And it started again: "*Azzine*²⁷... *Al fane*²⁸...! Come on, come on, *azzine, azzine*..."

My admirers had extraordinary eyesight, even in the dark. They managed to recognise beauty with the result that all women are beauties and treasures, except their own.

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I then became more fierce and rebellious. It was my way of taking revenge on everything that was trying to shatter my moral peace and reopen a wound that had not yet healed. I had also been the wife of a man for whom all the others were gorgeous except me, his doormat.

That night, one of them (perhaps unlucky, like me) bore the brunt of my desire for vengeance:

"Are you getting in, sister? Get in!"

"Get out, brother! You should get out," I ordered him.

Blinded by depravity, he parked his car and came running up like a little lamb:

"Good evening..."

"Good evening."

"Pardon me but I saw you alone at this hour and thought I could be of service to you."

"That's very kind - you're a real gentleman."

I was thinking of his poor wife, of everything she must have to do without. In the hope of attracting my attention, he was kerb-crawling, wasting litres of fuel, whilst his wife must have had to battle to get the equivalent of a litre of milk

from him...

"Where are you going? I'll drop you off with pleasure."

"You're kind but I live very far away and I don't want to inconvenience you. I'll wait for a taxi."

"Not at all, not at all; it's quite all right."

"Since you insist, then thank you in advance - I live in Aïn Sebaâ."

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"Oh! That's right on my way."

I knew that was not true. I could see that he was delighted to have won. Thoroughly excited, he was already thinking of the quiet spot where he could devour his prey...

I calmly sat down next to him in his car, determined to give him the lesson of his life.

"Are you married?"

"What, at my age? I have grown-up children."

"But... you're young!"

"Thank you, and you, are you married?"

"...Yes... And I have children," he acknowledged hesitantly.

"May God keep them unto you. May He also protect your wife, because without her you'd be lost... She must play a big role in your life. There are men who don't want to admit it, but in your case, that would really surprise me: you seem like a good husband."

"Hm... hm..."

He did not like that and tried to change the subject. With slightly trembling hands, he took his packet of cigarettes. He was trying to gain time and choose his words.

"Do you smoke?"

"Oh no! Thank you. I'm not rich; I can't afford it. These days, with rising prices... Bread's what I'm after."

"You're joking? Bread?"

"Yes, a good loaf, still hot, but above all, honest and clean... Do you think it's easy to make a living honestly?"

"Um... um... I don't know."

He no longer dared to look me in the eye and he began to get irritated. I attacked all the more.

"At least, that's my opinion. But quite frankly, I think cigarettes are really a luxury. How much does a packet cost again?"

Surprised by my question, he could not help smiling as he looked at me. I continued.

"It's true, hey! Fuel, cigarettes, the children's expenses, and your wife's too, of course... By the way, does she work?"

I had once again broached the subject so dreaded by my driver. I clung to it like a lifebelt and this brought him back to reality.

By the time we arrived at my place, I was sure that the man would go straight home and take the time to look at his wife with new eyes.

But more and more I was becoming a regular user of pirate taxis. I was often the only woman among men reeking of alcohol. I used to stumble out, as though they had generously shared some of their drunken state with me.

I went the rest of the way home on foot, as fast as I could. I would find my little lambs waiting for my return. Before falling asleep, I would watch them heartily eating my hot bread... kneaded with Mummy's sweat - I was proud of myself. But I never thought about the next day.

I had filed a maintenance suit for my children with the courts and I was waiting...

I slowly began to make a living but with five mouths to feed, we barely survived. Without fail, I paid the rent for my rat-hole. But the biggest expenses remained to be met: Younès's doctor, his medicines and school supplies, not to mention the exorbitantly expensive school fees.

My children had nothing left to put on. So I thought it advisable to go and see their father who remained unyielding in the face of my complaints. I asked for a loan from some of my acquaintances but met with only refusals.

I suffered terribly from not being able to meet my children's needs. Like the time when I was woken with a start right in the middle of the night by Younès's laboured breathing. My little one was in the middle of an asthma attack, enduring his pain in silence. He did not want to disturb Mummy. He was concerned, as always, about my rest. When I turned on the lights in the room, my Younès was suffocating. He had to be

treated but I did not have any money. It did not take me long to decide: "Get up, my darling; we're going to fetch your medicine."

It was past midnight. Before leaving the house, I took care to disguise myself. I put on layers of clothing so as to double my size. With scarves on my head, a sheet thrown carelessly over my shoulders and old shoes on my feet, everything made me look like an old woman.

In the middle of the big boulevard, we stopped the first vehicle that passed by, a small pick-up.

"Where are you going, *al walida*²⁹?" called the driver, who had stopped with a screech of brakes just next to me.

I signalled to Younès by pinching him lightly on the arm so that he answered for me: "Please, Sir, to the all-night pharmacy: I'm very sick. This is my grandmother."

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Without paying any attention to me, the driver spoke to the people in the back of the pick-up, who were crammed in, one on top of the other:

"Hey, brothers! Make space for *al walida*."

"Yes, no problem. Come, *al walida*, give me your hand... There we are... gently... A *Mimti*, sit down there!"

"Sh, don't mention it, *al khwadri*³⁰. Hold on tight! We've got mothers and sisters too."

"Excuse us, *al walida*," added the last, a plastic bottle of wine in his hand. "Pray for us, *Allah Ya'fou a'lina*³¹."

I remained silent, replying with barely audible grunts for fear of betraying my age. The passengers were all dead drunk, except the driver, but that did not stop them from being polite. They had given up the best seat for me. They were poor people seeking to lose themselves in alcohol. At least, that is what I started to think at the time. But who knows, after all, what their reaction to me would have been if I had shown my real face, that of a still desirable young woman?

"*Al walida*! I'll drop you last; that way I'll be able to take you home afterwards. Your children are crazy to let you go out at this time of night," the driver shouted to me.

"A *khouya*³², there are people with neither *damir*³³ nor heart. 'Tfou' on them," a passenger added.

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On arrival at the all-night pharmacy, the driver got out to help me.

"Ya Bimillah, a Mimti."

My feet barely on the ground, I ran to the pharmacy with Younès, followed by the driver.

"'Alupent', please."

"Do you have a prescription, Madam?"

"No, but..."

"Oh! I can't give you that medicine; you need a prescription."

Furious, losing all control, I shouted in French:

"In God's name! A prescription! Can't you see that he's in the middle of an attack? By the time you get a prescription, my child might be dead."

Perplexed, the driver was staring at me:

"Awili! Bismillah, who are you?"

Ignoring him, I grabbed the medicine held out to me, opened the box with trembling hands and administered it to Younès. Three little 'puffs' and my son recovered his normal breathing and I my spirits. Now the bill had to be settled.

I took out my identity card and handed it to the pharmacist. He had to accept it as a guarantee until the next day. "Tomorrow is another day." Most importantly, Younès was saved.

On the way back, the driver did not say a word. On arriving at our place, I offered him my driver's licence, saying: "Come back tomorrow; I'll settle your fare."

Early the next day, I visited Rajae. I was hoping to get clothes from her on terms. Once again she demanded a cheque. She lent me five hundred dirhams to open an account and an extra hundred dirhams to pay the pharmacist and driver and get back my papers. I was thus able to hold in my hands my first chequebook as a divorced woman.

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I took my first steps in the ruthless world of business. Rajae proved very generous and entrusted me with a large number of *gandouras* in return for a precious guarantee. I had taken the bait...

She knew I was at her mercy and sold me her merchandise at inflated prices.

Comfortably set up with a cigarette stuck in her mouth and a cup of coffee in her hand, she was making a fortune. She was accumulating millions on the backs of a few poor wretches like

myself.

I ran around in the blazing sun or icy wind to earn my few pennies... Breathless, I ended up at Rajae's, where she sucked the last drop of my blood, and all this in a hurry, because it was absolutely essential that her husband not find me at her place. I was no longer the respectable Mrs X.

The insensitivity of some women is strange. Rajae treated me quite harshly. As a divorcee, I no longer had any status, so it was not worth treating me with consideration. I was received in the kitchen and the niceties were henceforth denied me. She kept up appearances in her way, by saying that she was forced to act that way because of a strict husband. My fate could have been that of any woman, and why not that of Rajae? Therefore why not show solidarity? I was there, an insignificant person, standing in front of a woman just like me - an enlisted volunteer because she had the means! I say "standing" deliberately, because I no longer had the honour of being invited to sit down, as though I might ruin her beautiful armchairs and leave my marks of shame on them...

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Oh, yes - my body was no longer washed by my humble husband's holy water, no longer purified by his gold. I no longer deserved anything other than kicks in the backside. I can still see myself doing the daily accounts, putting the money on the table, signing a new cheque and, without a word, leaving the premises with new goods.

It was only once I was outside, sitting on the pavement with my big bag between my legs, that I caught my breath, before continuing my race against destiny which had mercilessly made me into a woman of the streets.

All the corners, paths and alleys had become my places of business.

Rajae made me believe that she was running a great risk in helping me. She made me feel guilty and, taking advantage of my stupidity, she pocketed good profits.

I learnt later that everything she implied about her husband was a sham.

In time, and as a result of knocks from all sides, I became no more than a flimsy branch that everyone whittled at will... so much so that it became barbed..

Suffering! And yet we owe it everything that is good in us. Ever since then, I have made the same vow: may evil stop and pain disappear forever. Had I not struggled enough on my own behalf, and that of my family and so many others? I see my own children in every sick or starving child and weep for them... I scream until my voice is hoarse in the hope of shaking walls and reaching all compassionate hearts. I shout and beg

sensitive souls to think of those who are deprived. For the love of God, for that of humanity.

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Deign to look at poverty when you pass it by. Deign to confront it. Those are people who hear only the beating of hearts; poverty has made them lose their sharpness of hearing... The wheel of fortune does not stop turning. And it does not happen only to others.

Paradoxically, living through the tragedy of divorce enables one to know others better and with no pretence.

While selling my clothes in grand villas and luxury apartments, I felt my own poverty even more but I felt theirs too - that of the heart. I made my way through the world of gold and diamonds that was henceforth closed to me. I met all sorts of couples. But it was truly rare to come across a couple that was united for better or for worse. Most of the time, they were individuals who were married only to live separately.

I also met women enamoured of their husbands' beautiful cars. They lived in the hope of being able to caress their steering wheels. Others were even unhappier. I called them "Mrs Surname" because they were prepared to accept every form of humiliation to keep their much-coveted husband's name.

Oh! These women, who are so envied, are really to be pitied! They put up with unbelievable things. They hide their uneasiness behind their money. A poor woman would not put up with even a tenth of their purely mental suffering. She would not hesitate a moment to chuck it all in her husband's face before departing - far and free.

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That, I think, is the reason why there are more divorces among the poor classes than elsewhere. Because these are simple and spontaneous people who have nothing to lose. The word "divorce" is generally banned when material comfort is at stake.

People are so anxious to keep what they have, in spite of everything. Every day they feed off each other and sacrifice their happiness. Little does it matter that each lives his own separate life. The pact that society imposes - living under the same roof - must be respected.

Unintentionally, I always emerged with my heart burdened by a family's secret. I used to spend my days in luxurious homes but I regained the serenity of my soul only in the evenings, in my hole.

My shack aroused curiosity. My former friends and customers came, not to see me, but to discover the bizarre place where I lived. For them, I was the living example of a disobedient and

insubordinate woman, chastised and thrown into poverty and oblivion.

"Yes, come... come, you wise women, come and see the fate of she who dared to stand up to her master and benefactor. Admire the fate of she who dared to leave the marital home," said their looks. Their voices enraged me and to this very day kindle my anger.

"Poor Rachida, *mesquina*³⁴... In any case, I'll never cross my husband again," they thought, though they still dared not say it.

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"From now on I'll carry my husband on my back, from his car to the bedroom... He... he... he," sniggered one of them one day, then added:

"Oh! My darling, may God help you raise your children. Where are they?"

"At school," I replied, my teeth clenched with anger.

"Which school? Are they still at the French school?"

"No! You're crazy - that would be the last straw! The French school! Even we can't pay such fees!" replied her best friend on my behalf, before whispering to me that it would be better to place them somewhere as apprentices so that they could learn a trade.

There I was, silent, listening to them deciding on my children's fate. I did not even dare refute their words, knowing that they would have lynched me verbally if they had known that my children were in fact at the French school. Despite my poverty, I wanted at least to maintain my babies' fragile stability. The only vestige of past happiness remaining to them was their school environment, their friends and their teachers. I could not take that away from them too, even if it meant depriving myself of everything else. Another woman thought she had found the answer for me:

"She should give them to their father; he should take responsibility for them. She's young; she should leave Morocco for France or Spain. Over there she could rebuild her life."

"That's true! Have you seen *el hajja*³⁵'s daughter? She's come back from Switzerland, dripping with gold."

"Children, children - what are children going to give you? Nothing... One fine day the boys are going to have it off with a woman and the girl with a man. And you? They're going to tell you to bugger off!"

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"Hey, hey, speak quietly: her kids might be at home and might hear you."

"He... He... You're right; if you fart here, the neighbours hear you."

"Stop your nonsense and get up; we're going. Phew, I'm beginning to suffocate in this heat. There aren't even any windows - it's like a cage!"

"Just a minute, let me speak to her, that's if she wants to listen to my advice."

That was when she turned to me:

"Every day you're losing your youth; go back to your husband and make him shoulder the responsibility of his children. He's laying a chick every night, while you get lumbered with his brats. Idiot, use him as a way out, as protection."

"She's right, you know - children! By the way, where are they at the moment? Still at the French school then?"

Beside myself with anger, I replied "Yes!" to get rid of them, even if it meant incurring their hatred.

"Well then? What do you do for the school fees?"

"She's obviously got a boyfriend, *el af'rita*³⁶!"

"Oh yes, obviously a Saudi Arabian..."

They burst out laughing, nudged each other and exchanged winks. But, on getting to the door, their voices quietened suddenly. They said good-bye hurriedly and I guessed at their whispered prayers: "May God spare us and our children." Convinced of my downfall, they left. There was no doubt: Rachida was well and truly finished, dead and buried.

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In reality, I had just seen the light; beyond the clouds, I could sense the brightness of a gentle, shining sun. Tomorrow is another day; tomorrow will surely be fine.

I was deaf to all the gossiping. I ignored it. Very close to me, another world was being built, another language. That was where my children lived, surrounded by understanding people full of tenderness.

"Keep up your spirits, Ma'am; we're with you wholeheartedly. Don't worry about the little ones. We're monitoring them closely; rather look after your health. It's vital if you want to raise them," Adil's teacher encouraged me, with tears in her eyes.

Yamine's teacher came voluntarily to give him extra lessons

while he was getting better. There she was, sitting in my shack, pretending to be relaxed to put me at ease:

"Don't put yourself out for me, Ma'am; none of this matters - in life there are highs and lows. Your children are more important than anything else. They need lots of love and tenderness so that they aren't traumatised."

My children would have been lost if they had not had these gentle and reassuring voices, the tender and affectionate hands of the male and female teachers of the Victor Hugo School and later the Lyautey IV High School.

I could not accept transferring my children to another school. Despite all the effort it cost me, I wanted to let them continue following this path among young children that they had been mixing with since a very young age and with whom they rediscovered *joie de vivre*.

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Society made me pay dearly for this decision and this choice. Without seeking to understand my reasoning, it never forgave me and harped on about them whenever I had financial problems, however small.

It never sought to understand that to deprive my children of everything in one single blow, would be to destroy them forever. Were they not already needy, without a bed, table and sometimes even without food? Even clean air was missing from their lives: they were poisoned daily by odours of mould and sewers. Were they not already brave enough?

In their school, they felt like the others. They mixed only with friends and each of them tried his utmost to show his affection.

I comforted them with all my strength by calling out:

"Go forward! Run! I'm right behind you; I'm watching over you and guiding your steps. You must get to the other shore and walk on firm ground. Whatever the cost, even if it means my drowning and losing my life! Get to the shore... the shore..."

Adversity had strengthened me. Eyes closed, I fought in silence, until the day when my son said to me:

"Mummy, I've got a hand-ball match against the Descartes High School in Rabat. Are you coming to see me?"

"Adil, my darling, you know I can't."

"Do it for me, please Mummy. Go on, try. All my friends will have their parents there except me."

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"No, my darling, no; don't say that!"

I took him in my arms and hugged him tenderly to stop him from thinking that he was different from the others. I had to fill the void he might feel. I had to be father, mother, friend and confidante all at the same time.

And so I went to the Descartes High School in Rabat, where the Moroccan upper-middle-class had gathered. Tall, handsome, and fit, he ran, jumped, and laughed - my son was alive... That part of me was happy. My little gentleman... whose poor mummy, in the middle of the crowd yelling his name, was watching emotionally with tears in her eyes.

"Go, Yassine... Yes, Yassine... Watch out... Yes, yes... Well done, Yassine."

(Adil was officially enrolled under the name Yassine. Adil was his second name, the one I preferred.)

"Yes Adil...um, Yassine! No! But... gently... Ouch... Ouch," I shouted, but within me, another voice was yelling even louder: "I'm rich, I'm rich! I have treasures..." It was the Invisible One.

The end of the match coincided with the end of lessons. Standing at the school gate, I was dazzled by such luxury. I could not believe my eyes. Me here? I'm still here? Me - the poor wretch, the repudiated woman, the one whom society rejects - I had made all this possible for my children!

Oh dear God! Don't let anyone notice me! What would these rich people say if they realised that I was here - what a cheek to have slipped in among them...

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I passed unnoticed and yet I had only just enough to pay for my return ticket to Casablanca. I watched the beautiful chauffeur-driven cars leaving in a flurry.

Standing at the gate, I waited for my Prince Charming. My man and my son - my little gentleman - was happy among his friends and proud of my being there despite everything. He waved to me from the bus taking him back to Casablanca. His loving look was calling, "I love you Mummy". A quarter of an hour later, it was all over. The square was deserted and silence brought me back to reality, shattering my lost dreams.

On the way home, wedged in my narrow seat, squashed between two old ladies, I let myself be rocked by the jolts of the old bus.

My mind was blank. I closed my eyes, detaching myself from my surroundings... A single idea haunted me: get to the shore... the shore...

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CHAPTER VI

I was starting to get used to my new life.

My little shack was daily becoming more and more liveable. The landlord promised to deduct all the improvement costs from my rent the day I decided to move out, which encouraged me to fix up the crumbling walls. I had cemented the damp floor, thus blocking all my nocturnal visitors' holes, and installed a clean bidet to replace the plastic bucket that we used as a toilet. My children preferred it to the awful rat-infested communal pit that served as a lavatory.

Anyway, my children and I had agreed that they would do their business at school where it was cleaner.

Winter was approaching. We lacked warm blankets - the absolute minimum needed to brave the icy cold of the shacks. I had to save although we were scarcely surviving. Even the merchandise I was reselling did not belong to me. I was hard-up. I would have been prepared to give a kidney, a part of myself, to get back on my feet. How many times did I not think of going to see the surgeons at the hospital to suggest this to them, or else of placing an advert in the newspapers. But I did not even have enough money for that. And should I not recover afterwards, I would not be able to work any more! All sorts of ideas ran through my head.

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I consoled myself as well as I could. I still had a chance with the maintenance allowance case. "My God is so great! Tomorrow I'll be granted my rights," I thought. "The law does after all exist!" The judge would surely rule in my favour and the children's maintenance allowance would save me.

In my impatience, I contacted a lawyer. Since I had no money to pay him up front, I wanted to interest him in my case by offering him twice his fees once the allowance was obtained.

"I'm sorry Madam, but you're asking the impossible," he replied.

"Then I'll pay you in small instalments."

"Instalments? You think I have time to waste on trivialities! Travel is expensive! But if you have 1000 dirhams to pay me, I'll come to the hearing with you right now."

"1000 dirhams? But that's exorbitant!"

"Make me out a cheque! I'll deposit it when you have a credit balance in your account."

"I beg you, Counsellor, for the love of God, help me."

"The love of God! Will that pay my taxes, Madam?"

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I still feel hatred for that lawyer, that man of the law who was supposed to defend my rights. Armed with courage but alone, I went into the law courts, determined to claim my dues. That beautiful edifice filled me with respect. Feeling confident, I headed for the judges on whom my fate depended.

I knocked on all the wide-open doors, but there was no answer! Only a deep silence and empty offices greeted me. On the rare occasions when someone responded, it was to repeat: "Come back again." The date of each hearing was always set for three months hence. And then when I attended, it was just to watch them writing! What I admired most about those people was their extraordinary gift for reading people's minds. I was never allowed to state my case, except to repeat my surname, first name and number of children. As for the rest, these poets of reality dreamed it all up.

As a child I was given a religious education. Faith in God and the principles of Islam were instilled in us. A Moslem was imbued with every good quality: honesty, kindness and bravery. While still very young, I had been taught that there were respectable, educated men who knew the Koran by heart, as well as the precepts of Islam. These people are supposed to ensure respect for the word of God and apply His law on earth. And these were the men in whom I had blind faith, these symbols of integrity, who were playing with my future and that of my children.

My mother used to tell us that if ever one of these men failed in his duty and responsibilities, God would chastise him. She unflinchingly supported her sayings with a story told on every occasion with the same pleasure:

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"Once upon a time there was, in a faraway village, a very rich Cadi³⁷; his egotism made him feel superior to others. He forgot even his role of dispensing justice. One day, in order to affirm his superiority, he wanted to make his ablutions with whey instead of water; this provoked the wrath of God who transformed him into a stork."

Those were Mummy's words. She could not foresee what would happen to me.

To avoid bringing down the Cadi's wrath on me, I floundered in silence. Long years of suffering made me a great observer.

Indeed, it took me a long time and a very hard life to realise that, in reality, I was not in a law court like the one spoken of by my mother. Perhaps the world had changed! I was operating in an arena where my adversary was an unbeatable

monster who was both deaf and blind. The shrewdest stuffed his stomach full so that he would sleep and they could then slip nimbly between his paws. Short-sighted idiots like me, who confronted him, ended up getting crushed by his strength...

Justice - a word that to this day gives me gooseflesh! When, at the age of thirty-two, I took my first steps in this world, I had to start everything afresh: my life, my ideas, and even my papers.

My first contact with the Aïn Sebaâ district administration was far from reassuring. Shunted from office to office, I saw the same amazement in the eyes of every clerk: where does this woman who does not even know her *Mokkadem's* name come from? I finally knocked on the right door, that of the *Chikh*³⁸. The way he was sitting peacefully with a vacant look, you would have thought he was doing a yoga session. He took his time to reply to my greeting with a slight nod of the head. He certainly did not seem to be working, any more than he seemed like a *Chikh*. He was too well dressed for the position he held. To look at him, you would rather have taken him for the *Caïd*³⁹. What is more, everything about him confirmed this: his way of speaking, his mannerisms, his car, and even his decisions...

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In a few words I explained the reason for my visit: my identity documents needed re-issuing.

"Are you married?" he deigned to ask me.

"No, I'm divorced."

He changed position; his elbows on the desk, he interlaced his fingers.

"Do you have the divorce certificate?"

"Yes, Sir, here it is."

Silence reigned in the office: how should I go about this, how best could I defend myself?

"Fine, I'll stop in at your place at mealtime to check that you're really divorced."

"Sir, I haven't come to ask for permission to marry; I'm here for a residence permit."

That did not go down well...

"Do you know to whom you're speaking?" he said, irritated.

"Yes, you're the *Chikh*."

"Well, I'm not giving you any papers!"

"May I know why?"

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"Yes! I quite simply don't want to."

"Leave, leave, Madam. Come back another time," insisted the *Mokkadem*, who had witnessed the *Chikh's* last pronouncements.

Furious at having been treated this way, I went and saw his superior. As gallant as he was handsome, this man of about thirty invited me to sit down and offered me the glass of freshly-made tea that the *Chaouch*⁴⁰ had just poured for him. On being informed of the purpose for my visit, as well of my difficulties with the *Chikh*, he appeared apologetic and promised to sort out my problem without delay.

His "immediately" lasted a week. By dint of seeing me every day in his office and staring at me, he was able to describe me down to the last detail. He finally decided to issue my residence permit. With a smile on his lips, he held out the paper and confidently said to me, somewhat cryptically: "Now that we know each other well, I'm inviting you for a drink on Thursday at 4 pm - we'll get to know each other even better... OK?"

His hand was already resting on my left arm. He withdrew it abruptly, like a child caught doing something wrong. Then he continued: "I hope that you won't deny me this pleasure?"

My cold look was a clear enough answer. Well, that is the story of my first encounter with the district administration in which I had made two enemies who, moreover, never forgave me, particularly since I had gone straight to their superior.

The latter was goodness personified. The papers I had requested were immediately handed over to me, which irritated them even more. They thought I preferred the *Caïd* to them, yet he had no idea what was going on. It was through kindness that he helped me out; he eased my lot that he knew to be hard.

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Unfortunately for me, he was transferred elsewhere. I was nevertheless patient; my silence gave me a haughty air, which only aggravated my situation. The administrative clerks, who had certainly been told to give me nothing without passing through the *Khalifa*⁴¹, remained assiduous spectators. Eventually, their behaviour exasperated me and I became the pet hate of the offices, an angry creature who had to suppress her rebellion.

It was too late when I became aware of how far the dishonesty and corruption went. This was something that I had not even suspected and that I had great difficulty believing. I had vainly hoped that I would open my eyes on a better world but the atrocious reality was well and truly there and could not be

ignored.

May God pardon you, Mummy, for having failed to equip us to fight evil.

Married and mother of a family at a very young age, I had re-enacted my mother's naïveté. I often wondered if I was on the right track. Was I educating my children correctly? To them I was both the father providing for their needs and the mother constantly supporting them. I was at ease only when they were at school. When they had no lessons, I spent the day watching over them, scrutinising every gesture, every word, to the extent that in the evening I was in a hurry to put them to bed so that I could at last breathe easy.

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Today, I am exhausted but happy, because the hardest part of my task is behind me. I have always thought that learning completes upbringing by enabling children to acquire knowledge while developing what is good and true in them and encouraging them to make an effort to succeed.

I may not have been able to avoid poverty or the dust with which it relentlessly covers its victims, but my inner being, my internal world, remained clear and serene. As soon as I felt overwhelmed, I took refuge within myself so that I could be refreshed and erase the bad impressions. That is where I joined my beloved Invisible One and the two of us waited for a miracle, for an extraordinary phenomenon that would lighten the burden of my torments.

My first miracle arrived from Hamburg, in the guise of a German friend: Hans-Uvers, known as Farid to my family and me. He had converted to Islam in Germany before visiting Morocco for the first time.

A few days before leaving for Morocco, Farid had had a strange dream. It was one of those dreams that are insignificant enough to be forgotten until they suddenly materialise in reality and are then termed a premonition. In his dream, he saw himself standing in front of a woman; he could make out only her body. His gaze stopped suddenly on a scar on her foot; it attracted his attention. A mysterious force induced him to retain this image.

So that he would get to know Morocco better, Farid travelled by car, accompanied by his brother. Like all tourists attracted by the sea and sunbathing, they stopped at "Marie-Rose" beach, a few kilometres from Rabat where, as chance would have it, my brother was. As he spoke English fluently, he made friends with them. He invited them to Fès, where our parents and my young sister, then aged sixteen, lived. She was the most pampered child and my father granted her every whim. Despite her youth, she liked to be alone. She spent her days in her room, between her books and high school, and hardly ever went out. She knew nothing of life.

As my parents are understanding and very open, they have always communicated freely with us. They gave us the freedom to make small decisions, but although my sister enjoyed the same privilege, she scarcely used it. Still tied to my mother's apron strings, she was incapable of taking the smallest step alone. And as soon as there was a stranger in the house, she panicked and withdrew into a deep silence.

That was the case the day my family invited my brother's guests round:

"Hello, how are you?" Farid asked in English.

"Hello," Zahira replied in a timid voice, although she spoke English very well. Farid followed my sister's gaze; she was staring at the floor.

"Oh! ... But it's impossible!" he cried, clasping his forehead as though he had seen something extraordinary.

His dream was coming true: the woman with the scar was none other than my sister. As a child, Zahira had been victim of an unfortunate accident and she still bore the mark on her foot.

Once over his surprise, Farid recovered his composure and told my parents about his dream. Two weeks later, he returned to his country to convince his mother of the divine miracle: his dream had come true in the person of my sister. For Farid, it was a sign of destiny that also confirmed his conversion. A few days later, he came back to Morocco with his mother, to introduce her to his future wife, my Zahira.

I can still see that German mother, with tears in her eyes, taking her son's hand and putting it into my mother's, while telling her in a voice trembling with emotion:

"He is your son now - love him."

Two years later, Zahira and Farid celebrated their marriage under the sad gaze of his Catholic parents... They had lost their son. A year later, his father died of sorrow, without ever forgiving him.

That was how Farid became part of our family. He was a brother to me and a son to my parents. Being a good counsellor, he armed me with courage and goodwill. And every time he saw me sad and despairing, he would come over to me with a German translation of the Koran in his hand. Sure that it would comfort me, he would show me the verse he wanted me to read and ask me to recite it in Arabic.

Farid understood me. He saw me suffer at my husband's side,

but because he spoke neither Arabic nor French, he felt incapable of intervening. So he made do with observing me.

He and my sister then settled in Germany since it was vital for his career. Out of love, just like my father, Farid granted Zahira her every whim. As an artist and music teacher, he was, like all people in this field, surrounded by female admirers and often roused my sister's jealousy. She would get all worked up. To save their marriage, Farid sacrificed his career and decided to settle in Morocco, but that changed nothing of Zahira's impetuous nature.

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After three years, she changed her mind and chose to return to Germany. But five years later, and this was her biggest whim, she asked for a divorce.

In no way did this harm my relationship with Farid as he loved my family and especially my father. My parents recognised their daughter's mistake and grieved for him. Much later, he came back to Morocco, but on this occasion it was to my home in Casablanca.

Farid knew nothing of my divorce. Accompanied by a couple of friends, he went straight to my old home and was surprised at the now neglected garden that had formerly been so beautiful. He immediately understood that some misfortune had befallen our family. He thought of going to ask at the children's school that was a stone's throw away. On his way and quite by chance, he bumped into Adil. When I came home that evening, I had the pleasant surprise of finding them relaxed and comfortably ensconced in my hovel. They welcomed me with cries of joy, smiles and lots of encouragement.

Maria, who spoke fluent French, took my hand - there was a spontaneous connection between us. The life I was leading amazed them more each day. They were delighted to share my miserable shack and never mentioned the lack of comfort or hygiene. We were so happy to have friends with us, considering how long we had suffered alone!

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I felt relieved and momentarily secure. I had a true friend at my side and gentle hands to take my place and look after my children should there be problems. It was the eve of the month of Ramadan. Farid explained all the practices associated with this holy month to his friends. I was surprised by their respect for our customs and traditions. Maria was very attentive and questioned me endlessly. They did everything possible not to disturb us during our meditation times when we listened to verses from the Koran. Eyes closed and without understanding the language, Farid let himself be lulled by God's holy words. He was sensitive to the rhythm of the reading. When it was time to break the fast, everyone prayed around the table according to his own customs. There were lots

of us and, since I did not yet have a table, I put a clean cloth over the bench that served as a bed. We all sat on the ground. There was space for everyone. Despite our poverty, we had created a pleasant and cosy atmosphere.

In spite of their youth, the long days and July heat, my children fasted. To encourage them, each evening I lovingly prepared all their favourite things. Yamine also wanted to copy the others, but since I was worried about his health, I forced him to eat. His tears ended up convincing me. I gave in and let him finish his day of fasting with the promise that he would not do it the next day. These scenes were repeated quite often.

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In the evenings, we gathered around our table laden with tea and biscuits and passed the time chatting. My friends were determined to improve my situation. Maria acted as interpreter but I always knew when they were speaking about me - I felt it in their looks. They studied me as if I were some valuable object which they wanted to safeguard from any breakage. Helping me gave them personal satisfaction. They saw me as their patient whom they were eager to cure and see running around in good health. They spent hours discussing my condition and searching for possible remedies to my prolonged affliction, without neglecting the side effects. Sometimes, when we were all in bed, a voice in the darkness would start the discussion again, recalling a detail or making a suggestion. That showed how much my case preyed on their minds. First they suggested I go to Germany. Farid was willing to take responsibility for me and my children. I was overwhelmed by this generous offer, but it was asking the impossible of my children's father. I knew very well that he would never consent to my leaving Morocco with them. As far as I was concerned, there was no question of being separated from them. Having ruled out this possibility, my friends thought it a matter of urgency that they find me a more suitable home. Farid's generosity was unparalleled. He paid for everything the whole time he spent with us. I could therefore stop working for a while and concentrate on searching for accommodation.

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I had the good luck to meet one of my old acquaintances, Rabéa. Although not really a friend, she was the one who helped me most - a simple gesture that changed my life.

Rabéa was one of those women who do not accept defeat. She was very spontaneous and straightforward, saying whatever she thought. She never accepted my living in a shanty town. It was at lunchtime that she visited me for the first time.

We were at table... or rather on the ground, seated around a simple tablecloth on the floor, on which we had put plates and forks.

"Oh! Rachida, you'll never change. Good manners even in a shack!" she remarked ironically.

Standing in the middle of the room with her hands on her hips, she looked around as if searching for something.

"Oh! If I had been with you that day, I wouldn't have let you leave like that, with nothing. You left everything, hey? Tell me, is there no one at your husband's place? ...No? We'll go there one day with a little pick-up to collect everything your kids need. I'll come with you, I swear I will."

Rabéa always surprised me. She had a special way of reasoning. She would certainly have done it without thinking of the consequences.

Later, on passing close by her place, I felt like popping in.

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"Hey, you've come at a really good time; I was just thinking of you a moment ago. Come... come with me. Oh! No! Wait for me to lock my bedroom. I don't trust maids, you know. Damn, where are those keys? Oh! There they are..."

I watched her without understanding a single thing. Once outside, she explained:

"You know my neighbour? The Frenchman?"

"No, I don't know him."

"It doesn't matter. Well, he's going back to France for good. We're going to try to convince him to leave you his house."

"Um... do you think so? That would be great!"

"Don't worry. Oh! While I think of it, not a word of Arabic... understood?"

Without giving me time to react, she dragged me along by the hand. Five minutes later we were already in front of her neighbour's door. Apart from "Hello", Rabéa did not give me a chance to put in a word edgewise. She was all worked up, pleading my case. She explained my situation to the old gentleman, insisting on my poverty and the crisis my children and I were living through. She even went as far as describing my shack.

The poor old man could not believe his ears. He was distressed, and with a trembling voice, he questioned me:

"But... What are you waiting for Madam? Why don't you go back to France?"

"To France? ... Ouch... Well! Yes..."

I understood from Rabéa's kick that she had passed me off as a Frenchwoman divorced from a Moroccan. A wink made me realise that I had to keep quiet.

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I did not have to make any effort at all. The old man had already made up his mind and was even prepared to move elsewhere that very day and let me have the house with all its furniture. The idea of a French citizen living with her children in a shack upset him. What can I say of my compatriots? My divorce and hard won freedom scarcely paid any credit to my society. Not only did my own people refuse to extend me a helping hand, oh no... they also rejected, humiliated and even beat me. As far as they were concerned, I was only a virus that could spread disease among the healthy. Yet the men did not mind. I excited them with my backside defined in an old pair of jeans. I was only a doll that said "no", a "no" which brought misfortune but also pride.

Fortune was smiling on me. The financial help of my very dear friend and brother Farid, the moral support of my dear Rabéa and the compassionate help of Monsieur Pierre were keeping me going. I paid the deposit to the estate agent two months before Monsieur Pierre left. All that still remained was for the lease agreement to be signed; this had to be done when the keys were handed over.

On the eve of his departure, Monsieur Pierre, who was too old to get about, asked a friend to tell me that I had to be at the agency early to collect the keys before the manager changed his mind.

Early the next day, I went to the agency where the estate agent's son greeted me. He was apparently already aware of the arrangements, but absolutely insisted on checking the condition of the premises before handing me the keys.

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A few minutes later we were at the door. I was leading the way since he had never set foot in the house.

"Well... well! It's not bad at all. The area is very quiet."

"Yes, yes... perhaps too much so... That's what gives it its charm, don't you think?" I replied like an idiot.

"For the price... hey! You've got a very good deal here... It's superb."

"Yes, you're right - you can't find little places like this any more."

The young agent did not reply. I was talking to myself. Absorbed by the property's beauty, he forgot I was even there.

The gentleman was so taken with it that he immediately changed his mind.

"To tell the truth... I think, after all, that I'm going to keep this jewel for myself. It really is the place I need... I'll come here to relax from time to time."

"But Sir, I think you already have a home for that."

"Yes... But it's not the same... You know, sometimes one wants to unwind away from the kids and wife... It's quite normal, even if only once a week."

"My kids and I need it every day!"

"Yes, but quite frankly, I didn't think it was so private."

"What do you mean by that?"

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"Listen... I would love... Oh! How about that! The old man left the immersion heater, the table and all these things in the kitchen!"

"Monsieur Pierre promised those things to me before leaving..."

"Oh OK! It's not serious - you can take them and I'll also reimburse you what you've put down."

"Yes, but..."

I did not have time to finish my sentence. I followed him in silence, praying with all my strength to the Good Lord and all the saints. I had eyes only for the keys that he was dangling from the tips of his fingers. Their jangling rang in my ears like a little bell. In time with their rhythm, I felt all the fury of the Invisible One welling up inside me...

"As far as I know you have children," I shouted. "Well, imagine them living in a miserable shack!"

Oh! My comment had hit home! With clenched fists, he turned his head as if to block out what he had just heard. His kids were in the same school as mine, were nearly the same age as Yamine and Soundouss, and had the same friends.

"That's good; carry on; go for it; we've got nothing to lose," the Invisible One whispered to me.

"Listen, Sir, you are presently in a position of strength and I can do nothing about that. But you might regret it because I'm capable of anything."

"Are you threatening me, or what?"

"No, not at all. I would simply like to tell you that you are

not a man of your word."

"Huh, huh..."

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"You can rely on me to mention it everywhere and to everyone, including the teachers and the pupils' parents as well. I'll tell them all about the dirty trick you've just played on me. Believe me, it'll create a big scandal: 'A Frenchman gave it to me and a Moroccan took it away'".

"But... just try and understand and stop talking rubbish!"
"I will not stop: either you give me those keys or you might as well leave the neighbourhood. It's in your own interest, I swear... Do you think your children will be as proud of you as before?"

He was sweating profusely. My arrow had hit its target. I had said all that was necessary: this man was anxious to keep up appearances and safeguard his children's reputation. He continued his inspection, then he confidently declared:

"On careful reflection, this house is too small for me and, what's more, you seem so nice. I know that if one day, I come to your home to relax with a girlfriend, you're not going to slam the door in my face, are you?"

I was perplexed. He waited a moment before continuing, a little hesitantly:

"The lady who lives opposite... over there... the blonde, what's her name again? Do you know her?"

"Yes, why?"

"So that... Well, can you introduce me to her here, in your home? I... I'll be very generous... and..."

I was flabbergasted and did not know what to do. Really, exactly what was I to these men? Not only a slut, but a brothel madam as well...

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I was livid and my eyes, red with wrath, warned of the storm that was already thundering in me. The agent understood very fast that he would do well to clear out.

Shaking like a leaf and not knowing what attitude to adopt, he handed me the keys before disappearing forever. I never saw him again, either to sign the lease or at our children's school gate.

This incident had rather spoiled my joy. I sadly trudged along to the school to tell the children the good news. I was eager to see them living in a house at last.

Their happiness calmed my rebelliousness. I watched them running and shouting joyfully in the garden which we were henceforth going to share with the neighbours. There were four tenants: two young bachelors, a French couple and us.

I was in a hurry to leave the shanty town where we had been living for nine months, but not without regret for my stalwart neighbours, especially Rkia. My good news did not thrill them because they were sad to see me leave. Leaving! It was not as easy as I thought. Once the moment arrived, I found myself facing an entire army poised for attack: the landlord, his wives and his numerous children. All promises are broken and forgotten when material interests are at stake. Yet we had agreed that all the renovation expenses for the hovel would be deducted from my rent, and I had warned him four months before the move, as soon as Monsieur Pierre offered me his house.

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In money matters, principles melt like snow in the sun and I had no proof with which to defend myself. Even Jilali, whose daily smile we had grown accustomed to, looked very serious that day. With shoulders bent and hands clasped behind his back, he was pacing up and down in the courtyard, thus making a spectacle of himself - a spectacle applauded by the hypocritical gaze of his nearest and dearest. They were all there, family duty inciting them to support the head of the family. As if by miracle, this neglected father regained the esteem of his family. His worth was rocketing. His good wives were in battle formation and their glares cut me to the quick. Old before their time, I could feel their desire to shred my body to pieces. This was an opportunity to release their pent up feelings and shout out loud, they who had so long been silenced by their lord and master!

Deep down, they filled me with pity. They were there to silence me. Their husband was determined to make his speech and addressed me, though referring to the neighbours who were standing before their doors, waiting for the usual brainwashing:

"The money I'm asking for, Madam, is my money. I've spent my life building this house, stone by stone. It's the fruit of many years of tiring labour."

With a wave of the hand, he indicated his residence, without daring to look towards the shacks whose accumulated rent had enabled him to pay for his stones.

"This is my home and those who don't like it can move out. The door is wide open. You aren't grateful to God - you have enough space and sunshine in the courtyard, even though you rented only your rooms..."

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He paused a moment. Before long, he was going to charge us for the sunshine. Drawing breath, he continued his tirade:

"Your children destroy everything. As from today, if they want to play, they're going to do it outside... and that's that... Only my own children have permission to play in the courtyard since it's their father's house. I'm the one who buys the bags of flour and cans of oil, and I alone know how to bring them up."

Yes! And how, if this speech was anything to go by!

Jilali was used to such situations. He adopted a strategy that consisted of focussing on the weak point, thus immobilising opposition and winning allies. He knew that the neighbours respected and loved me, and could have gone as far as giving evidence against him if need be, since they knew about the repairs I had carried out. He was therefore eager to warn them of what they could expect if they ever intervened. It was a way of disarming the crowd and having a clear field.

He turned towards me, raising his voice:

"I said to myself: she's a woman on her own with children. We wanted to help you. You've acted as if you owned the place - we told ourselves it didn't matter. And what about the Germans? Do you think they had the right to move in here, among married couples? Certainly not! Once again we closed our eyes. They quite clearly benefited from the accommodation. If they had stayed in a hotel, how much would they have paid? Hey..."

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"So you're asking to be paid for their stay? Shout as much as you want - I won't give you a cent. That was what was agreed, and nothing else."

"Yes, but have you got witnesses?"

"Um... um... but..."

"Money, Madam, dirhams... dirhams."

He turned towards his family to conclude his speech.

"Listen to me everyone, not a rag will be taken out of there, understood? Apart from her handbag, you will not let her take anything!"

"It's barely the 15th of the month. I still have two weeks left. I'm not moving out straight away."

"I'm not asking you to move out. Stay if you want, but you're going to leave empty-handed."

"I'm free to come and go, as and when I please - there are laws

after all, aren't there?"

"The law... I don't know about that! I use a stick! I seize my rights with my own hands; afterwards I consult the law..."

"He hit me, and he cried. And he was the first to complain," says a popular Moroccan proverb, particularly applicable to Jilali's attitude.

In fact, the very next day, I was summoned to appear urgently before the *Caïd*; Jilali had lodged a complaint. Unfortunately, the *Caïd* was away. I was received by my dear friend... the *Khalifa*. The joy of having cornered me was shining in his eyes. He no longer wanted merely to put a spoke in my wheels, but to handcuff me as well. He must have been fuming, not to be able to slip them on to me: he did not have any. His vengeance was a frozen meal, served on a golden platter.

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"The law is the law, Madam: either you immediately pay your rent to this gentleman, or I keep you here until the *Caïd* returns to hand you over to the police."

"But that's not possible! Does that mean I am under arrest?"

I was granted only a shrug of the shoulders in answer. He turned towards Jilali who was jubilant:

"There we go, Sir - you may leave now. Come back this afternoon on the stroke of two. And you, you stay here!"

He called a guard.

"Watch her - she mustn't leave the premises."

When so desired, justice can be delivered efficiently...

I really was the poor fool, sitting on a bench, pale, my head in my hands, subject to the power of the uniform... Me, arrested! Oh no! Anything but that. I was willing to undergo any punishment, any torture, physical or mental. "Hit me, humiliate me, scorn me, but don't arrest me... Not that... My children are going to drown. They must live. Give them time to reach the shore..."

I just had to get out - my children would not know how to cope alone. I headed straight for the *Khalifa*, with my guard following behind. Like a madwoman, I re-entered the office where his lordship was peacefully reading the newspaper. He surely must have been expecting me because he did not seem at all surprised to see me arrive. He was alone as all the staff had already left.

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"I beg you - let me go. My children are alone. There's no one

to look after them. They're small. I beg you... I promise to come back with the money this afternoon."

A gleam of satisfaction flitted across his face. He regained his composure and reassumed a severe expression:

"Oh good, you've at last made up your mind. Since that's the way it is, let's wait for Mr Jilali; he'll be here soon."

I sat down on the bench for a second time under the furious glare of the guard. I had an hour to think about how to get hold of the money without coming up against a blank wall of refusal.

Justice is not to be toyed with. It is swift and efficient, especially when a divorcee is implicated, as though all the rules and laws were made to turn against her.

"Oh!" I thought, "If only I could ask Jilali's advice, if only I could know the secret of his method."

In a single morning, his case had been tried and filed away. He did not need proof, witnesses or a court. His complaint was made verbally, without paperwork. Now there is strength and intelligence for you...

May God pardon you, Mummy - you had taught me something else!

My complaint, the one I had lodged for a maintenance allowance, already dated back nine months and I still had not been summoned... And yet I thought I had done everything according to the rules. My petition was written by a good public scribe and was accompanied by all the necessary documentary evidence. But in just one day, I learnt far more than in a whole lifetime.

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I was now a criminal - for having said no, for not having recourse to Jilali's magical secret.

"You're going to go with her to the bank and she's going to settle what she owes you. If she doesn't, bring her back to me by force!" the *Khalifa* said to Jilali.

Crimson-faced, I walked like a robot next to a Jilali who was glowing with pride for having "seized his rights with his own hands".

May God pardon you, Mummy, and may He, in His mercy, receive the deceased bank manager Mr Bennani, thanks to whom I regained my freedom. I hold no grudge against Jilali: he wanted to prove his superiority to me, the superiority of the truly weak: money. But as for the representatives of the law, what excuses could I make for them? In my experience, the law was a phantom which attacked impetuously, and I was to stumble against it year after year.

CHAPTER VII

For many I was an enigma. I was unfairly denigrated because, unintentionally and despite my poverty, I was incapable of shedding my middle class image. Even in my poor shack, I was surrounded by the luxury items that were my source of income.

Alone at night, I would often tidy my merchandise. The desire to wear beautiful clothes would overcome me. So, in front of my piece of broken old mirror, I would play at being a model. I tried on one dress, then another, until I had tried them all. Momentarily I forgot my poverty. I sat on the floor, sporting a designer dress and holding a crystal glass filled with water. Silently, I contemplated my surroundings; from time to time I looked at my image in the mirror and saw the absurdity of my fate and the contradictions of my life. While watching my children sleeping, a ludicrous idea crossed my mind: I covered them with magnificent embroidered bridal sheets, beautiful silk bedspreads, scarves and up-market dresses. I looked at them contentedly.

The next day, they were surprised to wake up surrounded by such disarray. I used the previous night's cold and our lack of blankets as an excuse. I turned my head away to hide the smile I could not suppress. How could I explain my crazy desire to see them showered in luxury despite our circumstances? How could I make them understand that this was my way of defying poverty, by parodying those fairy stories that change scullery maids into princesses?

For the midday meal we had together on Sundays, I would often ask Younès to unwrap carefully the crockery I sold. Since we did not have a table, we laid out the beautiful porcelain plates and crystal glasses on the concrete floor. This was really enjoyable and we rediscovered our genteel manners of long ago.

I challenged life's two extremities: poverty and wealth. The latter not being within my grasp, it was laid out at my feet and I trampled it underfoot. And the more I rejected it, the more it clung to me, adding to my troubles. Assessed as wealthy, I paid for this affront. It was impossible to protest. It was useless, other than to make me seem like a real skinflint rather than a pauper.

Often I had to travel by taxi because of the weight of my merchandise. With my middle class appearance and an address in a good neighbourhood, the driver demanded double the fare. On the return trip, it was even funnier. I was often accompanied by my customer or by a member of her family. Comfortably ensconced in a beautiful car, I stopped at magnificent shops to

market my articles. I had wads of notes in my bag that anyone would have envied. But how could I explain that I was only the go-between for Rajae and her good fortune?

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More often than not, I did not even have enough for the bus fare. Like the day I decided to go back to the centre of town on foot. The sun was about to slip away. I was walking quite slowly in the posh Anfa neighbourhood.

Feeling very calm, I made the most of a delicious sense of well-being. I was preparing to plunge into the other world, that of poverty and insecurity, existing in the bosom of a divided society, marginalised and ignored by everyone, even the police. The police cars preferred to patrol the middle class neighbourhoods. Life is so unfair and appearances so deceptive... Even the cops were taken in. I fooled them since they kept watch over a poor wretch like me!

As I dawdled along the boulevard, a screech of brakes broke my dream:

"Where are you going, Madam?" the policeman asked.

"To the centre of town, Sir."

"At this hour it's dangerous to wander around alone, especially for a foreigner."

"I'm not a foreigner, Sir; I'm Moroccan."

"Oh, sorry Madam, we thought you were European. But it's risky all the same; take a taxi."

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"I prefer to walk and anyway, I haven't seen a single empty one."

And as if to prove me wrong, a taxi appeared at the corner of the road: "There you go, there's one!"

With a wave, the policeman flagged it down. I had a second or two to get out of this - just enough time to step over to the taxi, open the door, and say quietly:

"I'm going to Aïn Sebaâ."

I was sure he would hesitate.

"Oh... Yes, but that will be sixty dirhams."

"I said Aïn Sebaâ, not the city of Fès."

"I heard you... It's a suburb of Casa."

"Yes, but for 60 dirhams I can get a ticket to Fès. That's very expensive. Don't you have a meter? In any case, you can go. Thank you."

I slammed the door, happy to be rid of him at last. I was relieved to have an excuse to give the policemen, who were still waiting a few steps away.

"What's the matter? Why did he go?"

"He didn't want to take me to Ain Sebaâ, but it doesn't matter. I..."

I did not have time to finish my sentence before the police had set off in pursuit of the taxi. How would I get out of it this time?

At the sight of the taxi reversing to a standstill next to me, I stammered:

"No, no thank you. I won't take this taxi. It's too expensive for me. No, no, you can go."

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"Don't worry - he'll give you a reasonable price."

"Come on, get in, Madam," the driver was almost begging me.

"Listen, I swore by Allah that I wouldn't take this one. I'll wait for another one."

"OK, as you wish. In any case, we're on patrol in the neighbourhood. We'll keep an eye on you."

"Yes, yes, thank you very much, gentlemen. You're really very kind..."

I hurried along praying that no taxi would pass that way. Otherwise what excuse would I give for not taking it? I did not know how to tell them that I was flat broke.

When I got to the roundabout, I changed direction to flee the cops' surveillance since they were convinced that they were dealing with an affluent woman. Yet, I only supplied luxury articles to the residents of posh neighbourhoods. In this way I slaked the thirst of people obsessed with imports and delusions of grandeur...

I dealt with valuable items and dressed high society women, but in reality I felt at ease only in jeans and canvas shoes. Neither my state of mind nor my budget allowed me to dress otherwise. I felt like a stranger on this planet. What is more, I really was, since the most terrible form of loneliness is to live surrounded by a crowd of people who ignore and reject you. It was this indifference, however, which had given me strength. I had to live, and for that I had to face the

world. My goal was to make it, to succeed, so I had to keep going. There is nothing mightier than a clear conscience and protection from a Greater Power. And it is thanks to God and my conscience that I was able to reunite my family without too much harm being done, and little by little give them back the joy of living again after months of unhappiness and deprivation.

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I did not tire of watching them running and living again. My new home was quite cut off at the bottom of a big garden. Monsieur Jean, our nearest neighbour, had two German Shepherds that were undoubtedly vicious, but good guard dogs.

Before letting them loose every evening, Monsieur Jean would ask us to go inside; he was particularly insistent about the children. They did not know us yet. Yamine had protested the first few evenings, but after a while, it was asking too much of him as he adored animals. On the third evening, I was terrified by my neighbour's shouts and his dogs' barking. I ran into the garden and stood dumbfounded by the charming scene. Yamine, in high spirits, was rolling around with the dogs, which were jumping and leaping about. My son had tamed them so well that they were disobeying their master: they no longer wanted to go back to their corner and Yamine had to lead the way to get them to follow. This incident marked the beginning of a great friendship between Yamine and my neighbour, who had been living alone with his second wife since all his children had gone back to France. Monsieur Jean had learnt a lot about our situation through my son Yamine. He was very moved and did his best to help us. As the longest standing tenant in the residence, he knew the whole set-up perfectly, and every time there was a problem, he was the one to deal with it.

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On one occasion it was a power failure. When he came to our place to repair it, all my children were already in bed:

"Good evening, everyone... Oh! You're camping out! That's a pity..." he exclaimed.

He was quiet for a long moment, as though thinking about something in particular, then he turned towards Yamine who was still holding a lighted candle in his hand. He stroked his hair, and said:

"We're going to try to sort this out, between pals - not so, young man? We'll see to it later. But right now, good night to you all."

A few days later, Monsieur Jean woke us up early by knocking very loudly on the door.

"Yamine... Are you coming? I need you. The weather's too

fine to be sleeping, little lazybones."

"Good morning."

"So you're still asleep? Come on; quickly go and drink your milk then come and give me a hand."

"Oh yes! With Windi and Black?"

"No, no, it's for your mummy and the other chums. We're going to clear out the other side of the house. Don't you think there isn't enough space for all of you? Come on, quickly, no time to lose."

"Yes! Yes! That's fantastic. Mummy, Mummy..."

That whole weekend, Monsieur Jean tidied out a big unoccupied room that Monsieur Pierre had abandoned because it held too many bad memories for him after the death of his wife and daughter. He had then allowed his friend to use it as a storeroom. That side of the house had another outside door that went into the garage, but Monsieur Pierre had insisted that exit be blocked. On leaving the house, he had not mentioned it to me since, as far as he was concerned, it had long since belonged to Monsieur Jean. As for me, I was happy with what I was being offered, so I did not ask any questions about that barred door in the middle of my home. Even the estate agent did not know anything about it since he had tried to open it the first time he had come with me to visit the house.

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But Monsieur Jean's conscience would not let him keep something that I really needed. I was both moved and embarrassed by this kindness from a neighbour who, covered in dust and spider webs, was toiling away to give us more space and comfort. His wife was also doing her bit and kept advising her husband to take care of Yamine who was helping him.

When I was away, this couple felt partly responsible for my home and children, especially when I came home late.

We were living in little semi-detached villas built by the French during the colonial period. Their balconies were adjoining to facilitate communication between the residents. The biggest of these villas was at the entrance of the little property, and was occupied by the "Jean couple", as we were in the habit of calling them. The others were built inside and overlooked a very big garden. I had moved into one of these. The other was empty and in the third lived a young Moroccan bachelor. He was often with his parents, who lived in the old *medina*, and he used his house more as a place to relax than anything else. The rest of the time we were alone with the Jean couple.

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Every time he passed my place to park his car, Monsieur Jean would unfailingly remind me of the danger I was courting in leaving one whole side of the garden open.

"Be careful, Madam! You must put up a fence. It's dangerous here for a woman on her own."

But buying it proved to be a real luxury in my situation. I was gradually going under, losing my balance, and this latest folly, the purchase of the fence, had made an enormous hole in the flimsy fabric of my life.

As if that was not enough, once again someone had to come and disrupt my fragile happiness. Everything was too good for me - I who carried on my shoulders the cross of dishonour and sin, the black label of "divorcee".

Oh, how furious my young neighbour's father was when he noticed my little zone of security. He shouted until he was hoarse, as though I had committed some base crime... that of having had the audacity to put up a fence, while in his opinion and that of others, I deserved rather to be thrown out of town. A slut, that's what I was, and I was likely to contaminate the nearby trees since there were no other women at the moment!

In truth, the fence did not affect him at all - not in any respect. It should rather be seen as a pretext for a man's jealousy of a woman much better set up than he was, and what is more, with children. In fury he complained to the estate agent and threatened not to pay rent as long as the fence was there.

The estate agent then came to see me. Luckily the Jean couple was there that day and came to my defence. This did not exactly enchant my young neighbour and the estate agent later told me that he stopped paying his rent for several months. Forever after, I became his most hated neighbour.

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A few years later, when he was married, his wife came to give him a hand in making my life impossible. My misfortunes made them happy. In ten years as neighbours, he was pleasant only once.... It happened one evening when I was waiting for a pirate taxi on the Mohamed V Boulevard, right opposite the central market. I recognised his car. He stopped a few metres from me. Very courteously he opened the car door and invited me to get in. I was surprised by this friendly gesture but climbed in thinking he wanted to make peace.

As soon as I got into the car, his surprise was so great that he lost his voice and began to twitch. Seeing only the good side of things, I ignored his sudden rudeness. He had not replied to my greeting.

"Good evening, Sir, what luck to have met you! I missed my last bus again. You're saving me from making the rest of the journey on foot - it's very kind of you."

He replied with a very vague, "Hm... hm..."

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He seemed reserved, but I thought it very nice of him to help me out. I even caught myself thinking that one should never judge people before getting to know them. Once in the car, feeling worn out, I paid no attention to his strange attitude.

His smile faded only to be replaced by an icy mask. He drove mechanically and very fast. He kept his eyes glued to the road, staring at it nervously. He began to drive faster and faster; he was taking me on a sort of frenzied rally. Nothing could stop him in his crazy course, not even red lights. I was dripping with sweat.

It was only on arriving home that I understood his strange behaviour. My neighbour had picked me up without recognising me. Stupid, as always, I had accepted his gesture as one of kindness.

"Here you are back home, cursèd neighbour. You can go to hell.

I mistook you for a good-time girl..." he must have been saying to himself as he dropped me. He then turned round and took off in a huff towards the centre of town to start his kerb-crawling all over again.

This incident only served to make our relations even more strained. Caught up as I was in the whirlpool of my troubles, I often neglected the little things in daily life. I was no more than a simple puppet in the hands of destiny that, pitilessly, had not yet granted me peace. The heavy responsibilities imposed on me by destiny have, alas, never been accorded their true value by my society...

My first and most important role was that of a father in a woman's body. I was a mother lost in an unjust world that did not forgive mistakes. The impossible was being asked of me: to succeed whilst being pushed aside I was supposed to live shut up inside four walls, withdraw from the outside world and fight my poverty. A fantastic idea, certainly, but with a magic wand...

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In most societies, but especially in Morocco, women have to bear all the burdens, especially when alone. In the same circumstances, a man is pitied, and if he has children, he is assisted at every turn so as to ease his task. He is respected and his courage praised. He is then allowed to do anything, lawful as well as unlawful, as long as he overcomes his hardships.

In contrast, a woman is made to shoulder everything and she must stand tall... She must not bend under the weight, oh no!

All alone and with no support, she must remain perfectly

balanced. When you divorce, you must die little by little to serve as an example to others.

So, men, what of your laws? And what about faith, and piety, and helping one another?

Strong was my body after fighting against winds and tides. Perhaps I am protected... Otherwise, how could I have borne the burning sun and the freezing cold? How many are they - men or women - who have defied this society, withstood the hurtful stares and torrents of loathsome words? Indifference was my motto because I had another formidable enemy to fight - hunger. Without respite, I was running in search of my daily bread, indeed the very survival of my children, and the road was rough. Which weapon should I brandish? Which enemy should I fight?

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Society, to you I was nothing but vermin, a criminal intended for your sharp sword. You stabbed me in the back like a coward. You targeted my children when they were already deprived of their rights by the laws of the powerful. And in addition, their pride was wounded, taunted and battered by your young!

I can still see the terror in their eyes when they had to confront a whole gang of young fiends. I can still hear the echoes that pierce my heart, their cries of pain from kicks and punches. I still weep for them.

I still weep at the memory of Younès having his asthma attack, suffocating under the weight of children piled on top of him. It is a vision that will always haunt me. My blood still boils with anger. I cry out to heal the wounds. Although physical injuries can heal, insults endure.

Forgive me, my children, if I was unintentionally the cause of your torture. You were condemned to pay for my "crimes". Alone, you endured shame in silence to spare me suffering. I am proud of you, of your disregard for danger and of the courage with which you always supported me.

In spite of your little bodies, you fought with all the love you had for Mummy, to defend her against the slander of that entire gang who watched out for you on street corners. You were the only ones who knew me. It was my face that you saw, Younès, when with your little hands you squeezed that throat to silence forever the insults that sullied me. It was with all the love you had for Mummy, Adil, that you swooped down on those kids like a bolt of lightning leaving devastation in its wake...

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Were those children really guilty? No, rather they were the victims of a corrupt up-bringing. My own children honoured me

and I owe them much. They were the only mirror which reflected a beautiful image of me, that of the heart, and I saw myself constantly in them. I did everything to protect their pride - the pride that shone in each one's eyes. I was determined that it should last and grow as they progressed through life. The idea of landing on that shore haunted me... I was impatient to open my eyes on my little men. I already dreamed of the happiness of looking them straight in the eye. I was determined to maintain the warmth and brightness of the little nest where they thrived. I knew that, even as adults, nostalgia would make them come and snuggle up in my arms. I had to remain the symbol of purity for them. A mother is beyond price.

My children were the star which shone in the sky of my dark nights. With the passing days, it grew bigger, and in order to keep going, I told myself that tomorrow, tomorrow its brightness would illuminate the rest of my life. Was their honour not worth all the gold in the world? My maternal duty reminded me of this at every step along the way and before all temptations. This was the mother in distress whom my children defended with all their strength. They knew they had nothing to reproach me for. Alas, the street urchins, for no apparent reason, called my children all sorts of names and often sons of a whore. At the smallest incident of this sort, my children exploded and fought like real demons. They were strengthened by the truth for which they clamoured. They always lied to me about the bruises and scratches that roused my curiosity every time I gave them a bath. It was only years later, when Adil had become a young man and we were walking arm-in-arm, that I found out the truth:

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"Mummy, do you see that young fellow standing over there? Look, at the street corner. Can you see him?"

"Yes, yes, I see him."

"Well, he reminds me of the past! When I was small, I came across him with a whole gang on that same corner. They blocked my path and said 'This way is strictly forbidden to the sons of a Saudi Arabian's whore. And we fought because of that!'"

"But, what do you mean? You never told me about it!"

"I didn't want to upset you."

"Then you should have taken a different route."

"Oh no! No question of that, Mummy, then I would have been agreeing with what they said! No, I confronted them."

"Oh, Adil, my darling, you must have suffered!"

I looked at him with distress, unable to go back in time to defend him.

"Yes, but look at him now. He dare not even look me in the face any more, nor stand in my way."

My eyes were misted with tears. Adil hugged me and I saw in his eyes that glow of pride for which I had worked so hard. It was there - I had succeeded, no matter the price! I was the man of the house, but without a man's rights or physical strength. I quite simply wore his outfit, a pair of jeans, and I was never forgiven even this tiny privilege... Jeans were arousing; I was the forbidden fruit...

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Even the law took no notice of me. The judge worried little about my fate. I had been waiting two long years for my maintenance allowance. My children could quietly die. What did it matter - his were alive!

I had nothing left to wear except the clothing for which I was so condemned - my blue jeans. I shared all the rest with my children. Far from being a provocation, jeans had never been more than the equivalent of overalls for me, a way of being comfortable. And those were the most beautiful years of my life. In the morning, after giving me a kiss and barely touching my arm for fear of waking me too suddenly, Adil's gentle voice whispered in my ear:

"Mummy, I have gym this morning. Can I take the canvas shoes?"

"Yes, my darling, I'll wait for you to come home."

"If you're not going out, can I also take the jacket?"

Every morning, we agreed on what each of us was going to wear for the day and often I found myself stuck at home because of an item of clothing that one of them had put on. Despite everything, it was the happiest time of my life. We were very united, very close, and we shared everything.

Many a time I turned back to change an outfit in which my children did not like to see me. Adil liked me in bermudas. When I was summoned to the school for one reason or another, he came to remind me of the appointment, offering his gentle kiss: "Mummy, wear bermudas to come to school; I like you in them."

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Younès preferred me in a tracksuit, and it was the moped we shared. He needed it to go to school but, while he was in class, I made use of it to do my rounds. I brought it back to him at the end of school. And then began the door-to-door tramp on foot. During the day, I did the banks and businesses, transforming the toilets into display areas. With my middle class manner, I fitted in very easily. All doors were wide open to me. Departmental heads scarcely suspected what was going on. Customers learnt to follow me as soon as they saw me

heading quietly for the toilets.

Each time I went to a bank, the first thing I did was to cash cheques because I sold my goods by instalments. When I happened to arrive after the counters had closed, the bank was transformed into a flea market. There was a bit of everything in my bag. When I did not have stock, I took orders. I forced myself to smile and be patient, so much so that they took me for a happy, rich woman.

It was only much later that the truth about my life came out. My customers' great friendship and mutual respect changed into complicity. From then onwards, I became a confidante, even an advisor on the most intimate of secrets. This certainly did not work both ways because I kept my problems and misfortunes to myself. I did not confide my troubles in them for the simple reason that I did not have the courage to face any more betrayals.

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CHAPTER VIII

The cowl does not make the monk, nor the *hijab*⁴² the *mou-e-mina*.

I was alone, rejected and isolated, but luckily God's presence comforted me constantly. Every time I stayed late at my friend Naïma's, she would always repeat the same words: "One day, you'll be mugged on the road." And I would reply: "Perhaps, if I had faith in the devil, but I believe only in God, and I pray to Him alone. Why should I fear anyone?"

Armed with courage and filled with faith, I took the dangerous road to Aïn Sebaâ on my moped, loaded down with my merchandise.

I often found myself on this deserted road at dead of night and in heavy rain. Only car headlights lit my way and I had the impression that I was moving in a strange world in which light reigned, but without brilliance. In fact, it dulled vision. It seemed as though this gloomy world subdued all brightness. I had the impression of flitting through a universe in which I was completely unnoticed. Cars overtook me at speed without caring about the blasts of air and sheets of water they showered on me and I had difficulty keeping my balance on my moped. Chilled to the bone, I clenched my hands on the handlebars. My whole being was frozen, except for my heart and soul that were ablaze. Feeling calm and serene, I took refuge in that inner fire to warm myself up and flee the atmosphere of the night. Alas, that world spared no one - not even the tiny creature that I was in the middle of my boxes and plastic packets. The shape of my body was hidden by my big anorak that doubled in volume due to the wind. I passed under a big bridge bordered by two huge walls covered in wild grass - an ideal hangout for criminals. Not a single light lit up this underpass and an atmosphere of fear and silence reigned there.

Only the trees moved and each of them seemed to be whispering something in my ear as I approached: courage, courage, go for

it, go for it...

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I thought of my friend who must have been nice and warm under her blanket but shivering with fear at the knowledge that I was on that dangerous road at such a late hour. The vision of my inert body under that bridge haunted her.

How could I make her understand my words and way of reasoning? How could I explain the peace and extraordinary feeling that overwhelmed me? Alas, the assailants of moral peace did not spare me. I felt embarrassed, as if my Creator had caught me in the wrong. I accelerated to intensify the noise of my moped in the hope of drowning out their voices.

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"Hey, my beauty! Stop a minute for a chat."

I pretended not to hear anything.

"You please me, my sister; I'm going to please you too, I swear."

Silence.

"I'll pay you the price you want. *A'fak*⁴³, my sister."

Indifference.

"Hey, hey, *ah'chouma a'lik*⁴⁴, look at me, look."

No response.

"And why not us?"

I bit my lip until it bled; I closed my eyes in disgust.

"Oh, you whore! Your mother's a bloody tart; you're worthless; f... your mother's religion, get lost, you dirty bitch!"

Dear God, I commit myself to You. You were my faithful companion and my only witness on that road which I saw like the tunnel of my life. The faster I tackled it, the faster I would come out the other side. I had difficulty seeing it was raining so hard. In the icy wind my tears mingled with the raindrops streaming down my face. I let my soul purge itself of all that was unhappy and sad - the vestiges of a hard day. Everything that blurred the clarity of my being was cleared away; everything dirty was purged. I did this almost every evening in the presence of my Great Companion, before rejoining those for whom I had to be strong and courageous. Frozen and wet to the bone, I came home to my children who surrounded me with their love:

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"Quickly, go and fetch a towel, Soundouss," Adil shouted.

"I'll run and make you some herbal tea," Younès said.

"Here are your pyjamas," Soundouss offered.

"Rub her feet, Yamine - they're frozen."

"Yes, lie down, Mummy, so that I can cover you."

Often, when it was raining, I would undress on the balcony. I wrapped myself in a big towel before coming back into our single room so that I would not wet it.

Only when I was smiling again could I fall asleep, to the sound of the Koran tape that Younès never failed to slip into the tape recorder. We slept together in the only bed we owned and in the only room that we had. My finances did not yet allow me to refurbish the other rooms, nor to buy other beds.

Our only luxuries were a bed, a divan, a table and some chairs which I had exchanged with my neighbour Rabéa for some light fittings which Younès had brought back from his father's where they had been thrown into the garage. That was our cosy little love nest.

Sunday was always a day of celebration. Soundouss was ten years old. She was the one to prepare my breakfast. My boys took care of the rest to spare me from household chores: Younès was very good at using the floorcloth; Adil saw to the bathroom and dishwashing; Yamine took pleasure in doing the garden. And, of course, from a very young age, Soundouss was the chief cook. The members of my earthly paradise! They never forgot my birthday or Mothers' Day. They looked forward to these occasions to prove their love for me. The smallest gesture from them gave me great joy.

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Very early one Sunday, there was a knock at the door. I got up, still half asleep, fearing bad news, but was surprised to find myself facing my big baby, Adil, who had spent the night at his father's. He proudly offered me a rose decorated with a fifty-centime coin and wished me a happy Mothers' Day. You can imagine the happiness and boost this gave me. Even though I was an adult, I really needed it.

Moreover, I was constantly amazed at my children's courage despite their tender years. They silently protected me, without ever burdening me. Ignorant of what was going on, I made a scene every time Younès wanted to go out with Adil: "But why suddenly this need to drag your brother along with you?"

Little did I suspect that Adil had to go with him to help in case the fighting got too rough. Younès, sick as he was, could not deal with the gang that lay in wait to make him pay for my

faults. His was a silent plea and he voiced only these few words:

"Please, Mummy, I want him to keep me company - that's all."

I watched them leave and said nothing. I could not hold them back, nor stop them from going to their father, even if he did not deserve them. My children were caring and visited him every day as we lived in the same neighbourhood. I had no right to stop them from fulfilling their duty. On religious holidays, he was never the one to come to them; quite the contrary, it was rather they who thought of him:

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"Mummy, can I take a piece of cake for Daddy?" Soundouss asked me.

"Yes, my darling, help yourself."

My children were dutiful towards a father who never helped us. Their duty cost them dearly... as they were the children of a divorcee. They hid this truth from me so as not to hurt me and also to avoid any insult that might wound their pride. Even now, I can still see their little heads bowed, their embarrassment every time I by chance bumped into them in the street. I can still see the mocking looks of those children who, left to their own devices in the street, repeated the nasty comments of their parents who, lacking a life of their own, lived other people's.

Preoccupied as I was with too many worries, I was completely unaware of the abuse that was wearing down my two eldest and completely exhausting their patience. Soundouss and Yamine, on the other hand, had escaped these bitter trials. The support of their little friends and their parents had kept them far from these problems. They comforted them and gave them confidence at a time when they could have become lost in a whirlpool of events beyond their understanding. I am grateful to all those who gave them lifts. I am thinking particularly of Christianne and her daughters who took care of Yamine and Soundouss over weekends and holidays. All the words in the world could not express my gratitude.

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Dédé also comes to mind, a man of sixty whom I met through an employee in my bank. He was my customer before becoming our friend. He helped us a lot in his own way. For two years, he gave Younès his midday meal from the old age home not far from the high school.

"I'm old. Vitamins and calories are no longer any use to me, whereas Younès really needs them - he's a growing boy."

"Yes, Dédé, but what about you?"

"A sandwich will do me. Don't worry about me, my girl. Your son needs a proper meal, especially since he's sick."

"I don't know how to thank you."

"By following my advice: leave Morocco. I'll help you and you can stay with my wife and children in France."

"I can't leave my children."

"Leave them with your parents and you can send them money to live on until they come of age, then they'll come to join you, otherwise you'll die all alone here."

"It's hard, I know, but I can't be apart from them."

"One day I'll go to see their father - has he no shame?"

"It would serve no purpose, Dédé, except to create problems for me, as much from him as from other people. Already, just seeing that we're friends, gossip is flying around."

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"They should be ashamed: a woman who raises her children alone inspires respect. Not helping you is already shameful on their part. Oh... if you were in France!"

"Yes, Dédé, but whatever happens, I am and will remain a Moroccan."

This good man treated me like his own daughter. For my sake, he stood up to all the wagging tongues. I feel very nostalgic when I think of him. He returned to France for good to rejoin his family but I never forgot him.

I was no longer anything more than a mother; I no longer thought about the woman that God had created in me. What my children needed from me had no material equivalent - a mother's presence cannot be bought. That was my only crime: not to have renounced my motherhood. Is that what I'm accused of? That is the role on which I staked everything...

I am not trying to justify myself. I have always responded to abuse with indifference. Judgements cannot affect me: I have already paid for my "crime". But I remain hopeful and await the final verdict of God, the Judge of all judges.

Things have not been so black since I had the good fortune to meet, along my rough road, a Farid, a Christianne, a Dédé - all those who held out a hand to me in my dark night, when I was stumbling on in the hope of finding my way.

With the passing years, my children grew, along with my debts and my burdens, while my judge snored away... From time to time I tried to rouse him to make him aware of my situation. Alas, always nothing. I felt danger coming. It was

approaching in leaps and bounds. To flee from it, I laboured night and day in the hope of getting on top of things. I could no longer obtain imported articles; things were becoming harder and harder; my situation was getting worse; crisis had me by the throat to the point of strangulation, but...

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I am hesitant to say more about the hand that was held out to me. I am even embarrassed about it. But it is the truth!

Geneviève was a French woman married to a Moroccan. This great lady with a kind heart did not hesitate a moment in coming to my assistance when I knocked on the door of the sports shoe company which she ran. I did not have to give her any explanations; she immediately understood my embarrassment.

My previous business had included everything except footwear.

With Geneviève, I did not need money to get goods because she soon trusted me. I simply signed a slip acknowledging receipt of goods, but I needed lots of energy to sell them. It was fairly difficult with the make still being unknown locally. That was how I ventured into the vast wholesale and semi-wholesale sector: a new world, new people and new ways of working.

This time I sought my customers in factories and workshops. My sales extended along the Casablanca-Mohammédia roads. Surrounded by boxes on my moped, I raced in all directions and stopped only when dead tired, late at night. I could no longer feel my body. I had constant throat infections. I had forgotten what I even looked like in a dress or skirt. I nearly ceased to be a woman because I was always surrounded by men.

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I was gradually going under. By dint of shouting and calling for help, I had lost my voice. Without support or help, I struggled on in silence. My society did not want to understand what I was saying. Whilst most certainly deaf, their eyes were wide open - yet their vision was strictly limited to my running around and my jeans. The wagging tongues targeted me more and more. They supposedly spoke in the name of Islam. Their hearts were weighed down with the burden of pitiless principles. Blinded by falsehood, they nastily wanted to destroy an entire innocent family. They blindly sinned against our religion that they pretended to defend.

But God dwelt in me; His love lived in me and my soul belonged to Him. He was my confidant and my only companion. I spoke directly to Him, without any go-between. I had no need for anyone to dictate my behaviour. I was acting with a clear conscience and I was best placed to know who I really was.

God never abandoned me and I was never alone as everyone always

thought. Lots of doors closed in my face, but little did it matter. His was always wide open: My God loved me, even in jeans!

I am a Moslem and Islam advocates goodness first and foremost. The worst is that my society also criticises women who wear the *hijab*. It is thought to be a disguise to mislead others. Really, what is expected of women?

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For my part, I had taken my decision long ago: to trust only in God, He who had determined my destiny, however unjust it might seem to human eyes.

Despite the distance, customs and traditions that separated us, Farid still worried about the fate of my little family. He came back to see us, accompanied once again by a German couple and their child. They were embarrassed on the day they arrived - they did not know where to stay as they could see only one inhabitable room.

But feeling completely at home, Farid took matters in hand. He cleaned and fixed up a room for his friends as best he could. Since they were artists, everything out of the ordinary made them happy. That evening, everyone did his bit. We were not very well set up, but we were happy. The next day, my house was transformed into a conservatory. We lived soothed by music - it was marvellous.

I tried to slow down the pace of my race to enjoy their visit a little more. My friends acted responsibly in my absence, particularly in taking care of my children. When I came home in the evening, I was delighted to be surrounded by such tender warmth. The moped was tiring me more and more. The disadvantages of this luxury were not slow in making themselves felt: I suffered more and more from backache, sinusitis and stiffness.

My friends lavished attention upon me. I communicated easily with them, with the exception of Farid who spoke very little Arabic. This made him observe me even more closely in order to understand me. For the second time he was my harbinger of good luck. Rabéa, who had accustomed me to good news, gave me a wonderful opportunity. She appeared at my home one afternoon, completely charming and radiant: "Rachida, would you be interested in renting a shop?"

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Surprised, I half smiled.

"I'm telling you Rachida, it's just here... behind the house."

Poor Rabéa - how could I explain to her that I was rich in spirit but my pockets were empty!

But she insisted: "Don't be mad; don't miss this opportunity. You must get your hands on it as soon as possible. Come on, come!"

She was pulling me by the hand insistently, as she always did when she had an idea that she wanted to put into practice. Seeing me hesitate, she turned to my friends to explain the issue briefly to them. Only Farid had understood nothing. It was only after a translation that he exclaimed: "Oh! *Meziane*⁴⁵, Rachida."

He leapt up, inviting the others to come on a visit of the premises. Rabéa was delighted to have caused all this upheaval. A miracle! Two days later, I had the keys of a shop in my hand. Together, we threw ourselves wholeheartedly into preparing a work plan. Everything needed to be fixed up, from floor to ceiling.

I was touched by their relentless efforts, but nevertheless reminded Farid that they were in Morocco on holiday and not to wear themselves out working.

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"Contributing to a family's happiness is the best form of leisure."

Such were their words every time I felt guilty about having ruined their four-week holiday.

Three weeks later, the shop "Rachida Sport" was ready. All that was missing was the merchandise. My contacts in the wholesale world made things easier. My shoe customers became my suppliers. They provided me with other things in return for cheques. Swept up in a whirlpool, swimming in an ocean of problems, I took all the bait I was offered in order to extricate myself.

I had already come a long way since my small dealings with Rajae! I had escaped that trap without too much damage. But now! I was dealing with professionals... fishermen with drag nets...

From then on, I fought with all my strength not to go under. My children were growing and their expenses with them. Two were now at high school. I tried not to thinking about school fees in order to remain sane. I was always on the move. My moped broke down more and more, then gave up. But I was unstoppable. I found myself on the streets at all hours, running till I was out of breath and far from imagining that this could seem exciting to other people with nothing better to do than sit and watch others.

After all my experiences, I now think that there is nothing more titillating for a man than a woman who is on the run. All I can say is that wherever I set foot, wherever I held out my hand, even in greeting, there was electricity in the air...

Embarrassed, I immediately kept my distance. Indeed, I could stop them from moving in on me, but I could not stop them from dreaming of me, imagining me - each one embracing me in his way, putting me in his bed as he wished to do. Their dream, an impossible dream, then became an obsession that caused me misery.

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My race was frenzied and my night very long, which only made their sweet dreams last even longer. Your awakening was brutal and bitter and you have never wanted to forgive me for it! But if your dreams were happy because of me, why did you make my life such a misery...

Enough! Enough! Wake up and give me back my self-image! I have had enough of being the whore of your frenzied passion! Today, my children can bear witness to my struggle. They are the mirror of my life, the fruit of my past, present and future.

It was under this burden and weighed down by the pressure of my responsibilities, that I tried to make my way among you. That was I, that "slut" who travelled around on her moped to ensure the survival of her children! That was your criminal, the lady of the night who walked the streets...

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CHAPTER IX

Two years after my divorce, I was settled in a pleasant little house, and fifty metres away my little shop had just got off the ground. Every morning, excited and full of hope, I raised the blind of my little shop and sat down behind the counter to wait for customers. I had finally dealt with all bureaucracy - taxes, business registration and all that went with it. Everything was in order and I was enjoying a moment of respite.

I had slowed down my frenetic race. I was beginning to see things differently, more optimistically. My future was sparkling with bright prospects and I was delighted. What peace! Finally to be able to make a living quietly, and forget the past still burdening my heart and the anguish of all those years of suffering. From time to time I confided in my journal, shutting myself up alone with the Invisible One who helped me to spew all that I had endured onto the white pages. My first novel - "The flood" - was thus born, but it has not yet been published. It blindly recounts years of conflict, my battle against a man who destroyed me. It is a novel that, in its way, was a prelude to the writing of my vital cry, to the writing of my heart-rending life.

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I was thus slowly extricating myself from the wreck. My so-

called friends were returning to me. It was no longer the poverty of my shack that attracted them, but rather the elegance of my shop. One after another they reappeared, false smiles on their lips. The expression in their eyes flashed a challenge: So, are you still alive? Have you risen from your ashes? I sensed that they were all more interested in the secret of my magic wand than in my merchandise.

From the bottom of my heart I thank those rare people who saw me as a friend, a mother, a woman in difficulty; those who empathised with my misfortunes and shared my suffering; those who with much courage and sympathy remained friends with a poor wretch. They were intelligent enough to understand that a woman who earns money the hard way cannot be "easy". And I was surprised by the behaviour of certain women whom I had thought to be my friends. Without my tragedy, I would certainly never have had my eyes opened to the world; I would have remained unaware. So it is impossible for me to curse this life, this destiny, since even though it has been the source of my misfortune, it has also been that of my wisdom and lucidity.

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Among my women friends, I remember Fatima, a mother of six, whom I visited unannounced one afternoon. She was having guests that day, and her table was well-laden. She invited me to sit down and I gladly accepted a glass of tea. So as not to be found wanting in the norms of welcome and hospitality, Fatima felt obliged to offer me a plate of Moroccan cakes. She arranged the plate deliberately so that, when offered to me, I could reach only the less expensive delicacies. Cut to the quick, I stood up and helped myself, saying to her: "As you must know, I eat only almond cakes."

Feeling disgusted, I could not swallow anything and I put the almond pastry down on the side plate in front of me. If my retort had been cutting, it was a way of making her feel the depth my bitterness.

The hippy, as they called me, was no longer worthy of being treated politely, as if in getting divorced, I had shed my skin, my honour and my feelings.

Fatiha was my most precious friend. She and her husband were one of the very rare couples I could still count on. Words fail me, but let my heart speak: "You were a friend and a sister to me. Whether near or far, you lived my sorrows; you shared them with me. You supported, helped and defended me. And when you felt unable to act, I know that you wept for me."

Fatiha has been a friend for ages, since the birth of my daughter Soundouss to be exact. She was married to a very reserved and conservative businessman. I was the only woman who dared knock on their door at any hour of the night or day.

I was always welcome. I was received and served as before, always with courtesy. Her spouse was never put out by my presence. Quite the opposite: as far as he was concerned, I

was a woman worthy of trust and respect, the friend he allowed his wife to go out with at any time.

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"Oh! Here's the hippy," he would say to me, his face radiant, every time I appeared at his home, dressed in my eternal jeans. And very often, he would insist that I share their meal. More often than not, I forgot my problems in that warm family atmosphere. I would enjoy their company until late into the night, then worried, jump up:

"Good heavens, it's late! This only makes matters worse; seeing that the neighbours think I'm a barmaid, tonight I'm once again going to confirm their suspicions!"

"So what! Let them talk," her husband said to me.

"I wonder how those people's minds work. In any case, I won't let anyone say an untrue word in front of me. Gossip makes me beside myself with anger, and even more so when it's about you. *Awili!* You? Oh, no!"

I knew my Fatiha to be capable of anything in my defence. One day I had proof of this when I arrived at her home unexpectedly. I could hear her shouts of rage from outside. I walked quietly, for fear of the catastrophe I might find. Apparently my friend was facing one as, on seeing me, she exclaimed:

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"Oh! There you are! You've come at just the right moment. Listen to this!"

"What's going on? Calm down, for heaven's sake, calm down!"

"How do you expect me to calm down? It's madness!"

"But... What's the matter? Can someone tell me what's going on here?"

I turned towards her faithful servant Messaouda who stammered:

"Oh! *Lallah* Rachida, those women come only to annoy her. It's because of you."

"Me?!"

"You!" shouted Fatiha... "You! My poor darling, as if you didn't have enough problems already! Rachida! Rachida! People have eyes only for her!"

I did not really grasp what was happening. She was out of breath and began to lose her voice. She was perspiring and her hands were trembling.

"Did you see her when you came in? Do you know her - my neighbour from over the way?"

"Yes, I saw her. She seemed strange. She didn't even greet me."

"Greet you? It could have been worse than that, after what I've just told her. I almost pounced on her..."

"You! So out of control - why?"

"Why? Well, can you believe that Madam and her sister-in-law took it upon themselves to come over to advise me not to open my home to you any more. They supposedly respect me and fear for my reputation. As far as they were concerned, you are just a prostitute who entertains Saudis."

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Fatiha thus proved the extent of her affection. She also had lots of admiration for me, and an obsession - which amused me - of wanting to try on all the clothes I was wearing. Every time I was at her home, I submitted at once to these trying-on sessions. She exclaimed:

"Look at this! Come and see the woman who entertains Saudis! See how she's all dolled up, perfumed, and so sexy with her buttons and bows... *Awili, awili*, my poor Rachida, these aren't clothes you have - they're rags!"

"God is great; he will sort out those wagging tongues."

"You're right; after all, God is great. Come on, put your clothes on and come with me. We're going to Khadija's. She has invited the whole gang including my sister Naïma."

This circle of friends got together at each another's homes in turn. After tea, we moved to the table. We were all seated except for Fatiha, who had dawdled in the bathroom. Feeling embarrassed, our hostess was standing with a stool in her hand that she dared not put down because she could not resign herself to seeing Fatiha seated so uncomfortably.

"Give me the stool which you have in your hand. Don't worry about such a trifle - I assure you that it suits me fine, really!" Fatiha assured her.

"*Awili*, no, you're not going to sit on it. You, on this stool! Heaven forbid, my dear. Wait a moment, I'm going to sort this out... Oh! Rachida, give Fatiha your place and take this seat."

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I did not have time to react. Furious, Fatiha abruptly grabbed the stool from her hand. She put it down firmly and her pained

expression spoke volumes. The hostess no longer knew where to put herself.

My poor friend often found herself in embarrassing situations because of me.

"*Iwa, zmar hada*⁴⁶!" she said every time people annoyed her.

"You're absolutely crazy; you're putting yourself out for nothing," her sister Naïma told her. "Leave her to cope on her own. She made her choices. Let her kill herself for her kids! The way she's always backing them, I wonder what she hopes to get from them later."

"Now I understand why you never wanted more than two children!"

"Oh yes, I'm not crazy like you. Tell me, what are you expecting from those kids, hey? One day, you'll get yourself attacked on the road, or you'll surely end up in prison with your debts. Don't expect me to come and get you out of there..."

"Don't say that! It's a bad omen..."

"Oh, my dear, if she wants to take responsibility for her children instead of sending them to their father, it's her own fault! But take a look at what she's become! Jeans, uncovered hair - a crazy woman, I tell you! And to think that their father..."

"It isn't only about the kids; I also work for myself, to survive."

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"On your own, there's no problem. You can come and eat a crust of bread at my place and you'll have a corner to sleep in."

"Yes, and what about my children?"

"You see? Listen to her. You must believe me - she's crazy! Go and kill yourself bringing them up then. When they're older, they'll go to their father's."

"Perhaps you're right, but I can't abandon them."

"They'll become real men only if you let them cope on their own. The girl, if need be, can live with you, but the boys... Are you pretending to be deaf? If you don't want to listen to my advice, then never come back to ask for anything whatsoever."

Fatiha silently listened to the discussion, giving me a knowing smile from time to time.

"Don't worry; let her talk! You know her character - she's scatty, but not nasty."

"Yes, yes, that's it. You two are the crazy ones, not so! By the way, have you at least eaten?" Naïma asked me.

Feeling angry, I remained silent.

"Heat something up for her," she ordered the maid. "It's all I can do for you, grub and a bed. Isn't that enough? Why complicate life with your brats?"

"Never, never will I abandon my children. They'll grow up very quickly, so this situation isn't going to last forever. Soon I'll have a maintenance allowance."

"Yes, that's for sure, but then your ex won't have a cent to give you."

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"Come on, come on, let's change the subject. One day I'll be rich, very rich, and you'll regret everything you've said to me."

I was joking to put an end to the comments that I did not like hearing and also to defuse the atmosphere a bit. I wanted to smile at life, in the hope of seeing it smile back at me. Naïma was already roaring with laughter. She could imagine anything but me rich.

"Did you hear that? She's going to become rich! And exactly how, my dear?"

"God is great, capable of everything."

"Oh! True, but why you and not me?"

"Quite simply because I fear Him and He loves me."

"Oh really! And the jeans and the uncovered hair - what will you do about them?"

"Don't worry, He loves me just as I am. And He protects me."

"Oh really... One fine day you'll get yourself killed on the Aïn Sebaâ road and we'll be saddled with your kids! Don't count on me then! By the way, if you have money on you, you ought to leave it here with the merchandise."

"The bag of merchandise, yes, but as for money... Actually I was going to ask you for ten dirhams to catch the bus."

"That's the real issue, money; I don't have any myself! But I can give you the address of a friend who would be interested in your things. But don't go and give her credit then afterwards come crying to me for bus fare."

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"No... I promise. From now on I'll do exactly as you say. Come on, give me the ten dirhams."

"Fine, then start by putting your children somewhere to learn a trade."

"Never! My children will, *Inchallah*, go to university, even if it costs me my life."

"Okay, I didn't say anything, but then find your own ten dirhams! And besides, I don't have a cent. Here, look in my wallet - it's empty, not so? You'll just have to sleep here... Ten dirhams? A bus ticket costs less than that!"

"Certainly, with the rest I'll buy milk for breakfast."

"Oh yes, and after that?"

"After that, I have the Good Lord. Don't worry, one day I'll be rich."

"Dream on, dream on; it's free... Here, take your ten dirhams, but if you don't pay me back, you'd better watch out."

"Yes, yes, of course!"

"Look how she speaks to me now that she's taken the money! Hey! Seriously, where are you going? Aren't you staying for dinner then?"

"No, no thanks, my children are waiting for me."

"Hang on a minute, hang on... So you're going to wait for your bus on Émile Zola Boulevard? You're still going to do your street walking..."

Naïma loved to tease me.

"What about it? What if you really walked the streets? You could buy yourself a car and stop bugging me for bus tickets. That would be better, wouldn't it? And then, at least, you could repay what you owe me. By the way, has the woman from next door paid you?"

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"No, it's due at the end of the month."

"What a way to behave! Rich people who don't have money to pay. Go and see Fatima then, the one who wears glasses. She's just got her pay, otherwise she'll make you wait even longer!"

She was still shouting advice when I was already far away. I was running because I didn't want to miss the last bus. I was in Belvédère, my headquarters, because that was where my last customers of the day lived. It was my last stop, and every

day, before going home, I called in at Naïma's. Mother of a young girl and boy, she was beautiful and elegant, but tight-fisted... Despite her criticisms, her irony and the pleasure she took in teasing me, Naïma was willing to help as long as it did not involve investing or paying out money. I felt at ease in her home. Naïma was my secretary in a way. She took my phone calls and reminded me of my credits. She did these favours for me without demanding any compensation. I could arrive at her place at any hour and I was always welcomed with her dazzling smile. The only thing I had to avoid was asking for money.

When I was really in need, I had to arm myself with patience and beg her for hours. She gave in finally, but on condition that I sold her an article at half price. She also insisted that I pay for petrol when she took me somewhere by car. Blasted Naïma, she knew jolly well what sort of life I led, my inability to get back on my feet and carve myself a niche in the world to which she belonged. And she made no effort to let me forget this handicap, this flaw. Like the day she had invited friends for Friday lunchtime *couscous*. Fatiha was also there. They had all just got up from table when I arrived:

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"Oh, here's the hippy! I bet she hasn't eaten yet; but I'm not going to put myself out for her. There's still some *couscous* in the kitchen - let her eat it there!"

"No thanks, I've already eaten..."

I felt very ill at ease, and I avoided Fatiha's eye, as she guessed that I had lied. Naïma would never have treated her friends the way she had me. I disliked her behaviour without really being offended. Knowing her character, I found it normal. Since there was nothing to gain from me, I represented nothing to her. She considered me rather like the girls working for her in the kitchen. She set store only by appearances. The fact that she accepted me and did me a few favours relegated me to a lower status, somewhere between her friends and her servants. Thus, without jewellery and appropriate finery, I did not have the honour of being invited to her table when she was receiving high society guests... That was Naïma's false side. Otherwise, I was her confidante, her lady companion, and the only person who allowed her to be natural - far from all the protocol demanded by her lifestyle.

I saw her suffer in order to reach the top... the upper levels which hung by only a thread and which might come tumbling down some day or other. I felt pity for my friend, seeing her grimacing behind the mask which society life imposed upon her. My poor Naïma!

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Thank you all the same, for having received a pauper in your home, you who love money and luxury so much.

That day, as on other occasions, I therefore ignored her comments. I took time out to recover from my long daily haul. What is more, I had enjoyable times with those women who no longer felt anything but pity for me. For them I was only a living example - an illustration - of a repudiated woman who has left the marital home. I was the mistake not to make. I sensed their mixed pity and admiration for my rebellion. Before leaving them, Fatiha came to speak to me: "Rachida, drop by the house this evening before going home. Be sure not to keep me waiting."

I would neglect anything rather than my great friend's request. So at the end of the day, I went to her home.

"Good evening, here I am my dear, at your service..."

Out of breath, I collapsed, exhausted, on the divan opposite my friend, who was watching me and smiling pleasantly and innocently.

"I just wanted you to come and see me."

"Oh really?"

"Why, does that surprise you? You're a friend, aren't you?"

"You're more than a friend; you're a sister that I love and respect greatly."

"The feeling's mutual Rachida. Well Messaouda, are you coming?"

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"Yes, *Lallah* Fatiha, I'm coming..."

"Oh! But what's this?"

"It's for you, *Lallah* Rachida," replied the faithful Messaouda, putting a big dish of *couscous* down on the table.

She did it gracefully, as always. She never failed to serve me decently, as she did high society people. I was very touched by this. Fatiha, as moved as I was, invited me to come to the table.

"Eat, eat while it's hot. I've kept some for your children as well, so don't worry."

My kind Fatiha was the opposite of her sister. She was very well off, but acted with simplicity, doing me many favours without ever making me aware of them. She was very considerate towards me.

Out of pride, I kept my misfortunes to myself. And when I happened to speak of them, it was often after the problem had already been solved, and hence with a smile. The "Story of

Rachida" intrigued a good many people around me, but very few helped me. My reality was so bitter that I did not even dare admit it to myself. It was in my interests to keep my mouth shut, clench my teeth, and bottle up all the bitterness which ate away at my heart.

I saw Fatiha only a year after my divorce, for fear of losing her, like all the others. All the failures suffered with other couples had made me fear the worst. I knew her husband to be very conservative and I wanted to avoid all the problems that the presence of a woman like me could create. I was wrong, because she flung her arms around me, crying with joy, happy to see me again but sad for my little family. From then on, we met very often, but I always refrained from talking about my worries. Both of us did our best to stay in contact. We even thought of matching-making our children later:

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"Rachida... what if we married Nadia to Adil?"

"What a good idea! If I had the means to cover your daughter in gold, I would be the happiest of mothers."

"You're crazy to speak of money! Our friendship is worth all the gold in the world."

But destiny thwarted our plans because Nadia chose the man of her life herself. I was very happy for her, but that did not stop us from making another wish and another promise that I will not reveal.

Is there any greater proof of friendship and respect? To go as far as wanting to make an outcast like me part of her family... I cannot thank you enough, my dear friends.

Other marvellous friends whom I had met after the birth of Younès, the Cherkaouis, lived in Marrakech. I am indebted to el hadj⁴⁷ Mokhtar for having welcomed me warmly into the bosom of his little family. I had much in common with his wife Latifa. I thus was both witness and teacher at this discreet woman's first swimming lesson: her intense excitement was unbounded.

Our mutual trust formed the basis of our lasting relationship. Once, accompanied by my German friends, I rang their doorbell very late at night. They put us up, without asking for any explanations. In the same way, on his trips to Casa, el hadj stayed with me and at night we spent hours in private discussion. He was a friend worthy of respect. I already knew these friends, the Cherkaouis, when I was married, but I won their respect and confidence only after my divorce. It was during this difficult period of my life that they observed and discovered me, analysing at close quarters what I endured. These years of distress revealed to me the true colours of each one of my nearest and dearest.

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CHAPTER X

After I acquired the shop, many of my former friends came back to me, among them Laïla, who would cause my misfortune.

Yet initially she brought me happiness by buying things for her children. When she left, she promised to visit my shop again.

But I had decided to close the doors of my home to her and to maintain my privacy, which only stimulated her curiosity even more and drove her to visit me more and more frequently. She believed she was paying me in kind for past wrongs that she bitterly regretted, because I was keeper of her secrets. She tried once again to make me her confidante and party to her hidden intrigues. She had not the slightest doubt that her husband was spying on her. He followed her everywhere to lift the veil from the mysterious existence she led. He was not unaware that I knew a lot about her and he shrewdly sought to worm information out of me. After my divorce, I saw somewhat less of Laïla, which renewed Ali's hope because he thought I would give in easily and reveal all to him.

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I found him more pleasant, kindly and in particular very generous in his purchases. It was the beginning of the school year. Laïla met all her children's needs in my shop. She bought everything that came to hand. The bill was fairly large, and Ali asked me for credit.

From time to time, he called at the shop to apologise for the delay in settling it and in the hope of loosening my tongue. Since I was too preoccupied with my own problems and remote from the scheming going on around me, I often remained silent.

I found nothing to add to the few pleasantries that I exchanged with him; he was no more than a customer to me.

His rage grew until it became violent hatred, a hatred he himself could not justify, a hatred that was not reciprocated.

Ali abruptly stopped coming to my shop. I patiently waited for what was due to me, without ever seeking to know the reasons for this evasion, until the day I happened by chance to pass through the neighbourhood where his parents-in-law lived.

"Mummy, isn't that Laïla's car there?" Younès asked me.

"Yes, it certainly is; hey, there's her husband's as well. Come, we'll say hello to them, and besides, they still owe me money. It's a chance to get it back."

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I walked into into an atmosphere that was hardly hospitable. Almost the whole family was there, grouped around the couple who were making a spectacle of themselves. They were arguing.

Embarrassed at having arrived at a bad time, I decided to beat

a hasty retreat with Younès.

My greeting remained unanswered. Only the grandmother, with a wave of the hand, invited me to sit down. At my side, Younès was trembling before a scene which no doubt reminded him of my fights with his father.

I did not know the cause of the scandal, but its gravity was plain to see. The husband, in a blind fury, was calling his wife every name imaginable and accusing her of all kinds of infidelity. I wanted to get away for two reasons. Firstly, out of consideration for my son, as I did not want him to hear such language. Furthermore, out of respect for their privacy.

I therefore stood up with the intention of leaving. Too late! This movement drew Ali's attention to me. Still furious, he had seen his pet hate... The opportunity so long awaited presented itself that day. He would also mercilessly attack the woman who had come into the world just to serve as an example to others. He started to preach falsehoods in the hope of extracting the truth from me: "There she is, the one who influences you; she's to blame!"

Then he turned to me:

"I've always told you to keep away from my wife, you slut. You're the one who's leading her astray, making her follow in your footsteps. If I ever get hold of you, I'll wring your neck. Can you deny that you're a whore? How else did you get back on your feet? Where did you get all that money? And your children, whore, how do you manage to pay for their schooling? Whore, whore, I'll kill you."

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The whole family came between us, holding him back. He was struggling wildly.

"Let me kill her; what can happen to me? Nothing, quite the contrary; society will thank me for ridding it of such filth!"

There I was, standing, flabbergasted. I was worried only about Younès who was trembling with fear. I held him so tightly to my pounding heart that I took his breath away. I wanted its beating to calm him. He was crying at his inability to defend Mummy.

Ali's accusations scarcely upset me. Only the truth can hurt and I was making an effort to control myself, not to crack and reveal everything, not to fall into the trap. Instead, I took the opportunity of loudly and forcefully demanding my money. He was intelligent enough to understand the message conveyed in my look: "No, no, old chap, I won't comfort you; burn away slowly; I won't put out the flame which is consuming you. Only silence is great and all the rest is weakness."

I did not grant him the right to wring from me what was mine, just as I claimed no right to interfere in his private life.

But I will never forgive him for having dared to strike me. That image still disgusts me today and I have difficulty in speaking about it. I relive that terrible ordeal. I can still feel those hands pushing me out of the house, those people urging me to leave the premises, indifferent as to what might happen to me, as long as they did not witness it.

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I left with my Younès and we walked along the road, hand in hand, humiliated, incapable of defending ourselves, incapable of any reaction. A screech of brakes made us jump. Ali, in his car, had nearly run us over. Without bothering to park, he left his car in the middle of the road. Without even slamming the door, furious, he pounced on me with all the rage he felt for his wife and which had been lying dormant in him for years. He was ready to kill me so as to bury his past forever, that past which a proud man like him refused to admit. The fear of discovering his own weakness was consuming him, he who boasted of his strength and virility.

Within seconds, I was thrown to the ground. So many punches were raining down from all directions that I had no time to react. I was on the verge of fainting. Everything was becoming muddled in my head, darkening, and I could make out only stars and buzzing. Only Younès's distant voice kept me in touch with reality.

How long did it last? How many blows did I receive? Only the Great Witness could answer. He alone can testify...

My return to reality was slow and gradual, as if I were coming back from faraway. It took me some time to realise that I had been savagely beaten. Beaten like a criminal caught red-handed. An innocent suspect, a woman hit violently by a man in full possession of his moral and physical capacities and, what is more, an intellectual... at least, according to social labels. I was a divorced woman and that was the only crime for which I had been punished. It was a heavy burden for my son's little shoulders as, crying, he tried to lift me up. I was shivering and sore all over. With my hair in a mess and scratched all over, I made my appearance at home before the frightened stares of my children. They cried with anguish for me and ran aimlessly round the house, not knowing what to do, not understanding a word of what Younès, who was starting to have an asthma attack, was mumbling.

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"Ali... It was Ali... He wanted... to kill her... Mummy, my poor Mummy... Why dear God? Why?"

Deathly pale, Adil could not contain his anger.

"Mummy, I swear that I'll avenge you, I'll avenge you, I swear before God," he shouted, leaving the house.

"No, come back. If Mummy feels ill, what am I going to do... Come back!" begged Younès, who was having difficulty speaking.

"I'm frightened," Soundouss snivelled.

Only Yamine, silent in his corner, watched me and understood my incurable loneliness. That night, incapable of anything, I lay next to Younès, who was coughing and vomiting. His breathing was no more than wheezing. Adil had tried everything to soothe him, but in vain. Despite my sorry state and despite the late hour, I went out in search of a taxi to take him urgently to hospital.

I can still see him, frightened in the face of Ali's fury, holding out a hand to help me get up, and with the other holding his throat in which a knot was suffocating him. The emergency department attended to Younès. A few days later, his doctor advised me to get him away from the humid Casablanca climate. In fact, it was not a suggestion, but an order, because his life depended on it. The irregular care of the last few years was compounded by the shocks that he had suffered, and it was necessary at all costs to distance him from these torments. My only solution was to place him as a boarder in a high school in Meknès. Two days after the incident, as I was returning from the doctor's, I bumped into Laïla who was very embarrassed.

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"Please, Rachida, forget what happened. My husband did it on purpose, to provoke you and push you into admitting everything you know."

"There really is a justice system to defend me. Who does he think he is taking the law into his own hands? I will never forgive him. Never, do you understand? Your friend Rachida is dead and buried," I screamed. "There are laws!"

Yes, certainly there were! I was really counting on them. I cried ceaselessly because my spiritual pain was worse than all the bruises on my body. My pride was fatally wounded and I cried so much that I nearly had the doctor who was caring for me in tears. I could not control myself in front of the superintendent with whom I lodged my complaint either. This displeased him. He did not know how to go about summoning an intellectual, a company director, on behalf of a less-than-nothing. As far as he was concerned, it was all only trivial. Society needs a man like Ali more than the lowest of low women...

Page 196

Nevertheless, I persisted. I prayed for the courage not to break down in front of the judge. As I stood there, controlling myself with difficulty, I found new hope in the Koranic verse hung on the wall. It's a pity that it was not clearly visible. It's a pity that he had not read it properly

before pronouncing his decision:

"Are you Rachida... daughter of..." he asked me, without lifting his gaze from my file, which he had in his hands.

"Yes, *Sidi*."

"Married?"

"Um... no *Sidi*, divorced."

And that was it! In his eyes my social status was immediately confirmed. He lifted his hand to silence me. In a flash, my adversary's lawyer put a sheet of paper into the judge's hands, without uttering a single word. A few seconds later, the hearing was terminated. Ali had just been exonerated. Men's justice had once again proved its lack of fairness. I returned home on foot to give me time to digest my rage quietly. I wanted to drop everything and sink into despair. Everything looked black to me. I hardly worked anymore. We were more and more miserable, especially after Younès's departure. I could no longer get rid of the unhappy memory of that terrible evening, when, battered and bruised, I had stumbled through the night in search of help for my son. Adil had accompanied me, holding his brother's arm. Younès was trying to control his attack in order to give me courage and calm my panic:

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"There we go, there we go, Mummy, I feel better... Don't worry about me, I feel better."

Lord Almighty, how could I calm myself, and where could I find the courage? My condition that night only confirmed the opinion my neighbours had of me. A lone woman roaming the streets late into the night could not be honourable. In such situations I argued desperately with myself:

"Certainly, I must be abnormal or else I must be on the wrong track."

"Oh no, calm down my little Bag-of-Bones," the Invisible One replied.

"You again! Don't you dare bother me with your dreams. I'm the one who lives the reality!"

"Yes, I know my dear, it's hard to accept injustices, but you are on the right track."

"You're the one who says so, and you're the only one who thinks so. Don't tell me everyone around me is wrong."

"About you, yes!"

"No, that's not true; leave me alone; can't you see that the more I follow this path, the more bogged down I become? I

have, after all, got a head on my shoulders. I could have a better life."

"What better life? Life is very hard, but don't be discouraged, don't give up; we will surely win through one day. Come on, you Bag-of-Bones, be brave."

"Your Bag-of-Bones... don't be too proud of her! She's worth nothing otherwise she wouldn't be roaming the streets. Look at me! Just look at how covered in bruises I am, look at what I look like! Why me? I must have got it wrong; leave me in peace, I must change."

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"No, no, certainly not, I'll never let you take that step. Come back! Where are you going like that...?"

"Yes, this is the solution... Wait while I get into a beautiful car and let's see if you can get me out of there."

"You filthy Bag-of-Bones, a real whore. Aren't you ashamed? Look behind you a moment - who do you see? Yes, who? Are you brave enough to look - who?"

"Yes, yes, I know; I see them; it's Younès and Adil, and so?"

"Be reasonable, you are the glimmer of hope on their horizon; don't snuff it out. The step you take today will determine their path of tomorrow. Have pity on your children, have pity on them."

"Don't make me cry; I've cried enough for one evening. But my children need many things. Why deprive them when I could offer them everything and spare them the suffering? It's my fault they're unhappy and I am only a woman after all."

"Ah!"

"Wait, wait, I know you're going to throw your religion and Islam at me again!"

"I'm glad you remember them!"

"Yes, but wait... Even in Islam, when a woman is in need, God forgives her sins, especially if she has children to feed."

"What you're saying there is wrong!"

"Oh really! And what's your version of the truth? That I always swim in shit and that others crush me because I'm alone and poor. If I had wads of banknotes, don't worry, I would be protected, respected, a *hajja*, without even having had to go to Mecca..."

Page 199

"Shut up now, and don't contradict me. I know what you're angling at - to find yourself an excuse. No, my beauty, as long as I'm here, you're going to stay on the straight and narrow as I want you to."

"I swear, if you don't leave me alone, I'll commit suicide!"

"Ha, ha, what a flood of ideas. Really, my dear, without me you're nothing; if I leave you for even one moment, you start to rave. And why suicide?"

"I can't take it anymore. That would at least give me a break."

"Certainly, but in hell."

"In hell? Oh no, heaven forbid!"

"There, I like you better like that. Focus your thoughts on God; you will rediscover peace. Why seek it among such selfish men? Life is a series of trials; they must be overcome. Patience is the key to happiness... the true quality of *mou-e-minines*."

And so, miraculously, I plunged back into the world of God, and finally found myself again. My Invisible One was extraordinarily determined and drove me relentlessly.

I felt humiliated, wounded in my self-esteem. I who had struggled so hard, who had even endured hunger to preserve my dignity - I had been scorned, and by the very thing which should have helped and protected me - the law!

This shock had left me completely discouraged. I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I had closed my little shop. My suppliers were becoming impatient. Yet I did not neglect to drop by to reassure them. Some were harsh and I preferred them to the more flexible ones. I shook with anger under their lecherous stares. Enflamed by desire, they wished, in the absence of banknotes, for payment in kind..

Page 200

I felt hounded, threatened from all sides and in danger. I roundly cursed the devil and I even decided to go back to the judge to claim my maintenance allowance. No, I wanted to go higher. I finally decided to knock on the grandest door, that of the Public Prosecutor.

I arrived at the Law Courts, full of hope because my experiences in this domain had not yet extinguished the flame of hope still burning desperately in me. I encountered my first obstacle, the *Chaouch*. It took me half an hour to get his attention, for him finally to deign to look at me with a haughty air: "You aren't mad by any chance?"

He looked at me searchingly, trying to guess who might be

concealed behind this woman asking to see the Public Prosecutor. He went on: "The Public Prosecutor? Go and see the Deputy Public Prosecutor. He's the one who can attend to you at the moment."

The latter saw me without making me wait, despite a very busy schedule. He had just the time to raise his eyes: "Yes?"

Then he buried himself in his papers again. I talked a good while, but certainly aimlessly because I did not succeed in engaging the magistrate's attention. It was only when I had finished my speech, and after a long silence, that he reacted, as if coming back from far away. He once again noticed my presence:

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"Ah, yes, your husband! A maintenance allowance? Yes, that's the *Cadi's* business. I can't do anything for you. Nothing, nothing, I can't do anything about it..."

"Yes *Sidi*... It's just that the *Cadi*... Three years ago... that... I have..."

"No, no, it's the *Cadi's* business, the *Cadi's*, Madam," he added without even giving me time to finish my sentence.

"*Sidi*... I really am in financial difficulties... *Sidi*, I'm in debt... I can no longer cope. I'm afraid, *Sidi*... I might be sent to prison, *Sidi*..."

No answer.

"My children... I'm afraid... The debts..."

The Public Prosecutor was far away...

"*Sidi*... *Sidi*... *Si*..."

"What do you want? That's enough... Nothing... I can't do anything for your children! Go and see the *Cadi*."

Exhausted, I laid down arms. It was hard, very hard, and too much to ask... A miserable maintenance allowance! All I could do was to give up, and too bad for us, so much the better for my children's father, good luck to the *Cadi*, and for me, disaster!

A surprise was waiting for me when I got home, a little summons with the word "urgent" in bold letters, ordering me to present myself at the tax collector's office. The more I sought the light, the more my night stretched before me. The next day, I presented myself at the indicated office. The assistant tax collector's reaction did not inspire me with confidence. Everything about him told me that he did not like the middle class manner that I could not shake off. I had been dropped continuously in the shit in vain - it was impossible to prove

to others that I was far from being filthy rich. The officer immediately displayed extreme antipathy:

Page 202

"Oh! It's you! Your identity document?"

"I have my driver's licence."

"That's fine. Give it to me."

"Hold on, please... there it is."

"Kindly follow me to my car."

"Follow you? May I know why?"

"Oh really, you want to know why? All right, it's simple: I'm going to take you before the *Caïd*. You haven't paid your taxes."

"Yes, but that's no reason for me to follow you to your car. If you say I must present myself before the *Caïd*, fine, I'll go on foot."

"Well, walk in front of me then! Immediately!"

"Stop it - don't lay a hand on me and certainly don't push me. I'm on my way. After all, I haven't committed a crime."

"Oh yes you have... against the State! Come on, get moving or else I'll telephone the police."

"Ah, well, that's lucky; here's a man from the State!" the Invisible One whispered to me.

"Hey, hey, keep quiet; you were all I needed; buzz off; you're going to botch everything even more."

"How do you expect me to hold back? Here, after all, is an opportunity we've been waiting for! He says he represents the State: perhaps his State will be able to do something for yours, for your miserable state! In short, sort things out together, damn it! You ought to understand one another, you lot on earth!"

"Sh... Don't you think I have enough problems the way things are?"

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"Ah well, I just wanted to remind you of your state, of the state you're in."

"Crazy thing that you are, the State is neither a physical nor an ethical state; the State is the nation; it's the government, the law, it's... That's the way it is! It's the law!"

"Then speak to him about your rights!"

"Don't be ridiculous... That has nothing to do with taxes."

"Taxes? Now I don't understand a thing! What's going on then? Why must you pay taxes?"

"Idiot, it's a national duty!"

"Imbecile, and your rights as a citizen? I've always told you: let's stay quietly in the shadow, moonlight quietly, without being registered or recognised!"

"Possible, but get lost!"

I walked slowly towards the *Caïd*, followed by the officer who was grumbling behind me and must have been thinking: "Oh! I'll nail this woman, who's making me walk in the heat."

The *Khalifa*, standing in front of his office door, devoured me with eyes full of rage. He had immediately understood my situation. He bit his lip. He had missed out on this one! The opportunity of a lifetime...

It was a Friday, my lucky day: the *Khalifa* could not pretend to stand in for him. The *Caïd* was there this time.

"You see, Sir, this woman has really put me out. To have to come this far on foot, with all the work I have waiting for me... She refused to get into the car with me!"

"Ah well, it's her right. A simple summons would have sufficed with this lady. She's well known in the neighbourhood."

He turned towards me.

"Are you willing to pay your taxes, Madam?"

Page 204

"Yes Sir... I would need an extension..."

"Yes, no problem. I'll give you until next Friday. Will that do?"

"But... But... Sir, she's going... and if... she... it's just that..." the unhappy deputy replied.

"I think I know my work well enough..."

"Right Madam, see you on Friday."

"Yes, yes Sir, and thank you. May I have my driver's licence back?"

"Your driver's licence?"

"Yes Sir, the officer has it."

"But you shouldn't have taken her licence! Give it back to her. Good bye, Madam, and good luck."

I couldn't believe my eyes. It was wonderful, extraordinary, a man who was defending me! Radiant, I left the premises, but not without flashing a little smile at the *Khalifa*. I knew only too well that rage is not easy to swallow.

I then had to struggle hard to find the necessary sum before the extension date I had been granted. Despite my best efforts, I have never been up to date with my taxes. Every time I stopped by the tax collector's, I signed a little cheque. Moreover, he became increasingly gallant. He even went as far as inviting me to dinner.

"In order to be more discreet, we'll arrange to meet in town. I will be very careful, I promise you. You need not worry. I can't wait to get to know you, so see you on Thursday..."

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His lordship had decided on my behalf, without giving me the choice of accepting or refusing, so sure was he of himself and the effect of his charm.

"It's very kind of you, but I regret that I cannot accept your invitation."

"Why? Don't you like me?"

"No, that's not it, but I can't..."

"Give me a reason."

"Quite simply, I can't - that's the way it is! Well, I'm on my way now. I'll drop by again later when my accounts are up to date."

I avoided his gaze. Still traumatised by my disaster with Ali, I could not meet other eyes or the fury flashing in his. I called at his office a few days later. He was calm, cold and too correct... He had even promised to return a cheque to me to settle my debts. I am still waiting for it... No time, certainly! He passed any matter relating to me on to his deputy, who also initially gave me lots of problems. It was only after many an encounter that he got to know me. I had only to stay true to myself. Since then, he has become a good friend to me, always ready to help, and especially to advise me. I really needed that and he was a great support to me.

I who disliked the dark paid dearly for the light, a luxury that was well beyond my means! I avoided reflecting too much so as to move forwards, to reach the end of the tunnel without losing my sanity. Yes, I risked losing it all the time. I

could not go on anymore. But above all my children must not suffer.

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From their first cry, I had determined everything for them - their names, their religion and their up-bringing. It was my duty to place these innocent souls entrusted to me by God on the right track. And, under no circumstances, would I have failed in this duty. My children were already on this path from the time when we lived under their father's roof, that roof which I was obliged to leave. Under no circumstances were my children to pay for a mistake that they had not made: my marriage with their father. I was the one who had loved and chosen him, and I alone had to accept that responsibility. I had done them enough harm by choosing a bad father! I did not want to deprive my children of everything that a father could offer them. But the divorce was necessary; my life depended on it. Living was an ordeal. Despite being cheated on, beaten, humiliated, it took me many years to come to the decision to free myself.

My little ones fell from a great height; I had to be strong enough to pick them up in my arms. Very gently, and with lots of tenderness, I succeeded in soothing them, putting all the love and all the faith that I had in my soul into wiping away their tears. Little by little, I helped them to re-gain their balance, then put them back on their feet on the path already familiar to them, their schools. That was where their life was... their precious little happiness. The impoverished way of virtue was even more difficult to follow because my fellow travellers were free from financial worries. They all moved forward at the same speed, and there I was, running behind them, on foot... a load on my back and spokes in my wheels... yet never giving up.

Page 207

Today, I can thank him who failed in his duty, for giving me, without meaning to, unimaginable happiness. Surrounded by my little ones, I was the happiest of mothers.

Life, as our grandmothers said, is a two-handled basket that must be carried by both spouses in order to have a harmonious family life. All of a sudden, I found myself in the middle of the road, alone with my shopping bag full. Praise be to God, I had the courage to bear its weight. From time to time, I bent my back, stumbled with fatigue, took a false step. But never, never did I think of abandoning that basket. I carried it and I am proud to say so today. I kept my eyes closed under the weight. I had neither the time nor the means to make the most of life's beauty, deprived as I was of a good companion. But deep down, I was never unhappy, and I regret nothing. I have also known the joy of success and its happiness. This happiness I owe to those who made me cry and who made me laugh, those who gave me back a taste for life, and who drove me to surge ahead without remorse or regret. Today, through saving

them, I have rediscovered myself. Thank you my little ones, a thousand thanks.

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CHAPTER XI

"Mummy" - the mere word redoubled my strength. This magnificent "Mummy" fanned the flames of my desire for freedom when I was put behind bars. I was serene even at the most difficult of times, like that day.

On Friday 1 April 1983, I was again summoned before the terrible monster. The summons made my blood run cold.

My children, standing behind me, were observing my reactions intently. I turned away from them and, motionless, watched the police inspector leaving. I paused momentarily to catch my breath. I had only a few seconds to regain my composure and suppress the fear aroused at the sight of that little slip of blue paper that was going to darken my life. I turned back slowly. Already a smile was playing on my lips, ready to face them and answer questions:

"What is it Mummy?"

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"It's nothing important; it must be a summons for a permit, or a traffic ticket."

"Oh really, can you get a fine even for a motorcycle?" Soundouss asked me.

"Of course, just because it's a motorcycle doesn't mean you don't have to respect the road rules," Adil replied to her. "But in that case, wouldn't he have given you the fine at the time?"

"Yes, yes, you're right, so it must be for a permit that I requested or an official form" I responded to Adil to satisfy his curiosity.

The next day, I was getting ready to go out when Adil approached me.

"Shall I come with you, Mummy?"

"I don't see why and I'd prefer you to stay with Yamine - he's sick."

"I'll go with you as far as the police station and come home."

"As you wish then, if that gives you pleasure."

The weather was very fine that April morning. I walked along

holding my son's hand and listening to his chatter. From time to time I nodded my head to show that I was paying attention. The Victor Hugo School was on our way. It was break time.

"Mummy, look, there's Soundouss. She's playing handball... Can you see her? She's the goalie. Come, come, let's watch her playing for five minutes."

"You know I'm in a hurry, my darling."

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"Quickly, quickly, please Mummy."

"Soundouss!" Adil shouted, perched on the wall and waving to her.

Glad to see us, she waved back. Feeling very proud, she tried harder to show us her skills. My angel was a little over eleven years old...

"My sweetie plays well."

"Yes, but not as well as me."

"Of course not, since you're bigger."

"Oh! Yes! I am tall, almost as tall as you, look..." he said, measuring himself against me. "Soon I'll be a man..."

He put his arms around me, and kissed me tenderly on the cheek. I listened in silence, looking at him lovingly, and my heart cried out to him: "Grow up, my darling; hurry up; I need you so much; I am at the end of my tether. Life is hard; its weight is crushing me."

"What's the matter, Mummy?"

"Nothing, my darling, no... nothing."

Ah, how painful it is to pretend, to hide a terrible truth from sensitive and innocent souls.

"That's it, we're here..."

"Shall I come with you, Mummy?"

"No, you must go back home to look after Yamine. He had a temperature all night. I thought of taking him to the doctor this morning, but I'll do it this afternoon. In the meanwhile, if you see that his temperature is going up, give him aspirin. Right, see you later, my darling; I love you..."

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I kissed him tenderly before he left. I never stopped pampering my Adil. He loved to hear me tell him repeatedly

that I loved him and he would have moved mountains for me if I had asked him. I watched him moving away slowly. I took all my time to admire this very pleasing scene. I was preparing to confront the monster, quite a different scene...

When I turned round to enter the police station, I was a different person with a different expression. I had shed the very soft skin of a mother to take on that of an unfeeling, thick-skinned man...

"Good morning, Sir... I've come about this," I said to the superintendent, handing him my sheet of blue paper. "It's the fourth in twenty days and every time I come, I'm told to come back again without being given any explanation."

"Very well then! I'm going to give you one! You are under arrest," the superintendent replied harshly.

"May I know why?"

"We don't have to justify ourselves to you!"

"But... Sir... it's not a justification I'm asking you for, just information. Why are you arresting me?"

Without taking the trouble to answer, he called an inspector: "Handcuff this woman for me! Issue a warrant, for civil imprisonment. It's for her rent - she hasn't paid!"

The blow was so hard that I was dumbfounded and my head began to spin. I followed the policeman to his office, dragging my feet. We crossed the police station's little garden, as neglected and sad as I was, under the curious and contemptuous stares of all the people gathered there for one reason or another. To them it was clear that I was being carted away for prostitution.

Page 213

Almost angry because I had been the cause of hard work for him, the inspector harshly ordered me to sit down on the chair opposite him, grumbling all the while about his unhappy lot as a badly paid cop. With an abrupt gesture, he pulled over his old typewriter, carelessly slid in a few yellow sheets, then pulled them out and crumpled them up before throwing them in the bin.

"What sort of working conditions are these! You're always turning up to pester us and make us slave away. Not once have you thought of coming to give us a little gift, hey?"

Without allowing me time to reply, he carried on:

"Your surname? Your mother's...? Your father's...? Place of birth? Ah ha, Ifrane? So you were born in Ifrane?"

"That's right! The town of *Nachate*⁴⁸! The Atlas Mountains...

Sidi, the Atlas Mountains! In the Atlas Mountains!" retorted his colleague, who had just entered the office, all the while looking me over from head to foot...

Indifferent to everything going on around me, I begged my interrogator:

"Please Sir, what is the amount owing?"

"Let me get on with my work...!"

Refusing to be discouraged, I insisted, and he ended up answering me:

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"Seven hundred dirhams... Satisfied? Now you know!"

"Could you please grant me a little extension?"

"An extension? You're going to be taken to court this very afternoon, got it?"

"Please, Sir... May God be with you, just a little extension."

"That's not my business. I just carry out the chief's instructions. Speak to him."

This man took pleasure in listening to me then turning a deaf ear to my pleas. I had difficulty persuading the superintendent to allow me to telephone my children at the neighbours' house. Soundouss came on the line first. My voice was trembling with emotion; I was trying not to sob.

"Mummy, where are you? What's the matter? Are you crying?"

"No my darling, it's an allergy; my nose is running."

"That's all right then; when are you coming home? You know Younès hit me and what's more this afternoon I want my twenty dirhams for school..."

"Yes, yes, it's been taken care of; I gave them to Adil earlier. Remind him to give them to you. And how's Yamine?"

"He's feeling better, but he doesn't want to stay in bed."

"Oh no! Tell him I'm going to get cross."

"OK Mummy, but when are you coming?"

"I don't know my darling; I'm going to Rabat and..."

"Oh! Hold on Mummy, Adil is here; I'll hand you to him. Bye now, hugs and kisses Mummy, don't be late."

"Mummy, where are you?" asked Adil.

"I'm in town. I'm not coming home; I'm going to Rabat on business, and if I don't get back this evening, it'll be because I'm going to Fès to see grandpa."

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"OK Mummy, and what about grub?"

"For today, I think you have what you need in the house; I'm counting on you, my darling."

"Yes, but what if you don't come home this evening?"

"You must take the gas bottle from the bathroom and return it to the grocer. With the money from the deposit, buy what you need - just the absolute essentials, hey! Hugs and kisses, my darling."

"Don't worry, Mummy!"

Adil was pleased to take on such responsibilities. He felt like an adult, my little one, and he made me happy. He was far from imagining his Mummy's face, who burst out sobbing the moment the receiver was down. My little ones would see only Mummy's smiling face.

It was exactly half past one when I was loaded into the police van going to court. Purely by chance, it went past my house and, through the window, I was able to see Younès and Soundouss playing in the big garden. My angel was wearing a beige dress, with gold trimmings at the neck and on the sleeves. Younès was in blue shorts and a pink tee shirt! They were clearly laughing heartily, far from imagining my torture. A single question haunted me: to whom could I entrust my little ones?

There were eight of us women in the vehicle - two were under arrested for fighting, and the others for prostitution. The latter were relaxed, all dolled-up as though they were going to attend a ceremony. Six men climbed in afterwards. They were all surprised at the sight of me, almost embarrassed by my presence, as if I were not in the same situation. The doors of the police van closed, and we set off for hell... A policeman, files in hand, got in last and, before sitting down in the front seat next to the driver, glanced into the back of the van to make sure that we were all there. Like the others, he was surprised to see a middle class lady sitting there, looking absentminded and with a notebook and pen in hand, bare essentials which I always kept with me, so as to record everything and forget nothing.

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"Who's that one? A European?" he asked his colleague.

"No," replied the driver.

"Oh! A *Maroquia!*"

"A Moroccan, please, and not a *Maroquia,*" I retorted angrily.

I was submitting to their law, but I did not have to put up with their stupidity. I closed my eyes so as not to throw up...

At about two o'clock, we stopped in front of another police station, that of *Derb Moulay Chérif*, to load other prisoners, six men and three women. A great crowd of their family members surged towards the vehicle. The prisoners were complaining to them in loud voices. Their sickening comments disgusted me. I controlled myself so as not to give in to the urge to strangle those throats and silence forever those howling voices:

"*Ammi...ammi*⁴⁹, if I go to prison, don't forget to bring me a change of clothing, and especially my make-up purse, a towel as well, and some food, some food! Hey, say hi to Aïcha... Ha... ha... ha... *Bikhir*⁵⁰... Yes, as usual. *B'slama*⁵¹ *ammi...*"

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"Some henna! Some henna!" insisted another, worried about her hair.

I trembled on hearing those women speaking. Half an hour later, we stopped to load other people. It was difficult for me to count them as we were so squashed one on top of another. I was suffocating under the weight of two men virtually sitting on my lap. I needed air and was trying not to faint. Dear God, a breath of air, a little escape hatch. Dear God, my children, oh my children! They were the breath of my life; they were the escape hatch in which I took refuge. I closed my eyes to imagine them in their little world, where they must have been smiling, happy, each seated in class, among friends. It was the only image giving me courage.

Without scruple or embarrassment, the women were speaking about their adventures, about the bad luck that had caught them in the police trap:

"Curse his whore of a mother's religion, he ignored me as if he didn't know me, that bastard of an officer. Wait till I'm free; I'll go and see his slut of a girlfriend. All sluts and daughters of sluts!"

I thought harder and harder about my children...

On arrival at the law courts, I was the last to get out. I had just enough time to get the circulation in my feet going again so that they could support me. I followed the inspector, with the voices of a whole crowd curious to observe the misfortunes of others echoing around me as I walked. These people, standing in front of the court doors, enjoyed the suffering of others, and called *Allah yastar* as we passed.

Feeling rebellious, everything in me challenged these spectators, and I thought: "Yes, look at me carefully, take your time, engrave my likeness on your memories, and remember me, this woman who replies amen to your prayers. *Allah yastar*, your wish is not yours alone; it is mine too. May He spare me from your errors and your ignorance because, my dear friends, you are far from the truth."

I followed the inspector along the dark corridors, climbed the steep steps and found myself in front of the office of the Deputy Public Prosecutor, he who could do nothing for me only a few days earlier. What a coincidence! The inspector hesitated, tapped lightly on the door, opened it gently, and briefly glanced inside before rapidly closing it as if he had seen a ghost.

"He's busy," he said to me, with a strange smile to hide his embarrassment. Standing very upright, he rubbed his hand over his stomach and buttoned his jacket:

"Are you hungry, Madam?"

"Oh, certainly not!"

"It's just that you've had nothing to eat. In any case, I'm going to wait for the Deputy Public Prosecutor's decision. Although, it would surprise me if he freed you, because in this case, either you pay, or it's prison."

At this point, I noticed Habiba, the shop owner and complainant. She seemed satisfied. She was profoundly enjoying my misfortune. Her daughter, who was about my age, was with her. She was furious and impatient to spit at me the venom which was so burning the tip of her tongue: "*Allah yastar!* What a woman! No fear of God! I fear him, 'devotion and prayers'..."

She kept trotting out these phrases in the hope of being heard, before continuing: "I say my prayers regularly. I know what lies between God and me. I dare not even take off my *djellaba*, or leave my hair uncovered. Go, go and fight for your rights!" she repeated to her mother.

Habiba, sitting opposite me, was suffocating under her veil. She was bathed in perspiration, but seemed satisfied with what I was being subjected to.

For my part, this old woman inspired me rather with pity. I could not stop myself from addressing her kindly:

"Why put us in a position like this?"

"It's your fault. I, thanks be to God, am just defending my rights."

"You assured me that you hadn't laid a charge when I came to see you to try to find a solution to the problem."

"Why tell you? I wanted to punish you. The way you show off and not a cent in your pocket!"

"Oh yes! You're right there, but the problem is that I feel good about myself, even without a cent. And why does that bother you so much? You forget that all this creates hassles for you as much as for me."

"I'm used to tenants like you. You closed the shop three months ago, so return the keys to me if you're not working in it."

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"Oh no, just because I've closed for a while doesn't mean I have to return the keys to you. I have lots of problems, that's all."

"I know exactly what I'm doing. Just because I don't know how to read doesn't mean I'm going to let myself be taken for a ride. We'll see now who's the more stupid."

Feeling very proud, she looked away and stared at the Deputy Public Prosecutor's door, impatient to hear the terrible verdict. What no one knew - luckily for me - was that I had always lived under a suspended sentence. My life was one long frenzied race, that of a fugitive caught in a vicious circle.

"Ah! There we go, the Deputy Public Prosecutor is free," the inspector said.

He made himself very small before knocking on the door. After solemnly standing to attention, he invited us to enter. He put the file down on the desk, took a step back, and with hands folded, head bowed, remained standing. Silent, unmoving, we all waited.

At last, he deigned to look up! The Deputy Public Prosecutor could not believe his eyes. There I was again, exactly where a few days earlier I had feared to be, when I had come to plead with him and ask for his help! The mess I was in displeased him. He glanced quickly at my file and addressed the landlady severely:

"What's all this? Are you not ashamed to bother me with such trivialities?"

"What! ...*Sidi*..." stammered Habiba.

"No *Sidi*'s! Shame on you."

And without giving her time to say anything whatsoever, he addressed me in a comforting way:

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"Have you enough to settle this case? Seven hundred dirhams?"

"Straight away, no, but... I can manage to find the sum."

"Right, then you will send her money to her by postal order, and afterwards you will bring me the receipt. Fine, you can go; my daughter; may God help you!"

"Thank you, *Sidi*... thank you."

I left the Law Courts almost thanking aloud He who had never abandoned me. Overcome with emotion, I gave free reign to my tears, without worrying about the eyes staring at me. I hurried so that I could take refuge in my prayers, clear the lump in my throat. In the bus on the way home, I had to make a tremendous effort not to collapse. The hollow in my stomach was making me dizzy. To stop thinking about it, I rested my head on the back of the seat in front. I fell asleep, waking up half an hour later, just before my stop.

This little rest had only worsened my condition, and exhaustion was written all over my face. My eyes were red and swollen. Dazed, I mechanically crossed the big garden I shared with my neighbours. I found myself face to face with the two women, both very young wives who, at the sight of me, exchanged knowing looks which said: "Where has that woman come from this time? Look at the state she turns up in, the old hag..." Once I reached them, the nastier of the two commented: "This city is beginning to reek of whores, *Allah yastar*..."

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But why do these women all express the same wish! They repeat it at will without understanding its real meaning. Ah! My poor women, you don't know that every time you pronounce these holy words with your unworthy mouths, it is I who receive God's blessing.

He is Allah, besides whom there is no other god.

He knows the visible and the unseen.

He is the Compassionate, the Merciful.

(Exile, 59, 22)

[p. 270, *The Koran*, Penguin Classics]

I ignored them to run to my children: "Mummy, here's Mummy," Soundouss shouted, joyfully throwing herself into my arms. "Mummy, come and see what I've made for our afternoon snack, a good recipe that you love, and I left you your share."

I had already forgotten the van, the police, and the entire world. I was once again a queen in the bosom of her little kingdom and nothing else mattered.

For years, my life was characterised by fear and insecurity. Dread of separation and the weight of a heavy burden were my daily lot. Duty incited me to protect my little family, to be the pivot maintaining its balance. I had to stand tall, and resist all the winds. I succeeded in doing it and in spite of everything - of your jostling, your obstacles and your malicious gossip.

How should I proceed? Which incidents should I recount, and which leave out? Memories jostle in my mind and all want to be told. It is hard to speak about one's life and it is even harder to choose between all these reminiscences. Dear God! Even memory is selfish. Yes, it is there torturing my spirit. It is well aware that space is limited and that the blank pages require priorities. It is difficult to tell everything. It is even painful.

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How long we have spent together, reader! Even if I can't see you, I can feel you; I even guess the few questions running through your mind. Have I no family? No in-laws? No one to help me out? Yes, and yet...

My mother had spent her life perfecting our up-bringing and that did not stop her from being at my father's side to defend our dear country, as a great many Moroccans did in the past.

Life is not to be trusted... Later, my parents, who had lost almost everything, found themselves in need. From then on, they experienced real poverty and big disappointments. They quite simply retired from society to settle in the country. Still as much in love after fifty years as on the first day of their marriage, they lived with their memories of former times, until the day Daddy breathed his last in my mother's arms. With much love and tenderness, she clasped he who had always lived in luxury and comfort and who died in a remote old village, leaving us only his past as an inheritance.

I did everything to make my father happy. I was obedient and good to the end of his days. I had always hidden my problems and worries from my poor old parents, exactly as I did with my children, in fact even more so since we lived far apart. I felt equally responsible for them.

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My in-laws? If I had the opportunity today, I would really like to put the question to them: why? They are the only ones for whom I find no excuse. Far away? No! They followed my life closely.

Had I not been a worthy wife and mother? I know they often held me up as an example to follow. In my eyes the only reason for their indifference must have been purely materialistic, money which destroys today's world!

Were they ashamed of us, of our new life? Or were they rather afraid of facing their responsibilities towards us? Fear? Shame? Cowardice? We now avoid one another, which really is a pity for our children. The world is small and their paths have nevertheless crossed. Twelve years, for twelve years I struggled along as well as could be expected. Dear God, may this present respite not be merely momentary. My little ones are here, beautiful, healthy and well balanced. I am rich, very rich because of my past, because of my children. The behaviour of one of my in-laws, she who could certainly have helped me, barely affected me. Quite on the contrary, the Invisible One had a good laugh, whispering to me: "That's funny - she who grew up with you didn't even introduce you as a member of the family. Is she ashamed or afraid that it might reduce her social standing?"

Who were you ashamed of? Of me or of him who failed in his duty? Were you much more attached to the honour of your family name? Little did it matter to you so long as it was my name that I flouted in order to save yours. Poverty moulds the great. For you and your family, I was no longer anything but a poor wretch in jeans, that outfit which certainly did you no honour. What does it matter, since another strength was at my side. It more than made up for your absence. That was my secret, my magic wand and my madness. I was said to be crazy, that's true, but with love for God, my only protector.

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You had all abandoned me, but I was always there when duty called. I ran to your dying father's bedside as soon as I heard the bad news from Younès. I arrived a few minutes late, but I was able to kiss him, even though he was dead. I did not hesitate a moment to play my part as a relative, to have the remains transported from the clinic to the family home, 400 km away. As chance would have it, I was the one to do it, given that no one else offered. En route, when we passed through Casablanca, I had begged the ambulance drivers to go past my house so that I could warn my children of my absence. My little ones were the first to gather round his coffin, to bid their final farewells to this uncle who had never come to see them since the divorce. Only Younès was not there. That very evening, seated at his side in the dark, I closed my eyes to relive memories of earlier days. It was in the company of this man over whom I was watching that I had made my first journey as a young wife from Fès to Ifrane. I was fourteen years old. Twenty years later, we were making his last journey together from Rabat to Safi, where his eldest daughter lived, and she received us at three in the morning.

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The day after the death, we were all surprised by the sudden arrival of Younès. Out of breath and in tears, he wanted to kiss his uncle for the last time. I was proud of my son and distressed for him; he had come after the burial, too late.

On the night of that memorable day, I was tired and the first to withdraw to go and sleep in the big lounge. I sank into a deep sleep, but was woken by a cold hand caressing my arm. I groped around in the dark fearfully to reassure myself that I was not dreaming. It was not, however, my deceased brother-in-law insisting that I accompany him all the way to his grave! "Nothing - must have been dreaming," I said to myself.

"Sh, it's me," whispered a voice.

"I curse you, devil," I gasped.

"Sh, it's me..."

Yes, it really was the young *el hadj*, a close relative of my husband! He had scarcely buried his dead, yet he was already thinking of making merry with a woman that he believed to be available to all. What could I do in the midst of a most honourable family, a family above reproach? How could I prove the innocence of an unwanted woman who would be assumed to have come just to cause a scene? Should I spend the rest of the night sitting in a little corner watching for the sunrise and ceaselessly cursing the devil?

What more could I do to prove my love to them? I even pretended to be stupid by holding my tongue to spare another woman from the same fate as mine. My in-laws sought any excuse to keep their distance, even when permanently settled in Casablanca. They then needed all their strength to get used to their new life. Why would they need those who could remind them of their weakness?

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Dear God, my Lord, I will never have enough time to tell them what I think... But I spew up what I feel on the man who was for me nothing but an unworthy sire. You gave me children without considering the real meaning of fatherhood. But I was the one who lived an ordeal for years in order to raise them. Your sleep has been very long, and I would not like to be in your place when you wake up.

Everything has changed since yesterday, sperm donor, everything around you, the entire world, and even your features. Find the courage to face your mirror. It is hard to have to confront old age. Your past, the new companion of your older years, is empty. Your meadow is dried out. Seed cannot be sown at random in the fields. Yours were difficult to grow. I am still bleeding all over, sperm donor. My hands are ruined from working; my back is bent from the weight of my burden; my face is marked by the hard trials of an outcast. My feet are still bleeding and I have not yet been able to remove all the thorns cast in my path. My heart sobs at the mere memory of all that was vomited on the whore I was believed to be... It was in that jungle that, without respite, I raised and refined your seed which, without remorse or regrets, you dumped on me.

Sorry, sperm donor, I am not mincing my words; I am agitating you and I know you hate that. But it is awful to re-open a wound that has not yet healed. The cuts are deep. Yes, sperm donor, how can I forget? I gathered up your seed, with lots of love and tenderness. Alas, they lacked a little warmth from you. They often begged me for some. Without ever hesitating, they rushed to you; nothing discouraged them - neither wind, nor rain, nor burning sun. They needed to see you. Oh! But what a disappointment! The daddy-cum-sperm donor never had time; he was busy with another receptacle. My little ones were adorable, and the desire, probably fleeting, to embrace them sometimes seized you and you said: "How cute you are and how nice you smell! Come to me, little ones, but behave yourselves, and above all, don't ask me for anything. How nice it is to be a father."

A furtive feeling which did not last long. They left in tears, my little ones, to hide in your garden and spy on your movements through the window. From there, they watched you sitting down to eat heartily in an atmosphere enlivened by Bouchra and her brothers. And you seemed delighted to see them taking your children's places, delighted to see them eating with pleasure what your children gazed at enviously. Oh! Daddy-cum-sperm donor, they came back to me with swollen eyes, to snuggle up in my arms:

"Daddy threw us out," Younès said in tears.

"You know, Mummy, Bouchra waited for us to leave before laying the table, so that we wouldn't stay to eat," Adil moaned.

Alas, they were too young to understand and they went back again the next day, only to be chased away once more. Every day, you found an excuse to throw them out:

"You're disturbing me; I come home to relax; go and make your racket at your mother's house."

"But Daddy, it's the others who are making a noise, not us," Younès grumbled.

"Don't start meddling in my private life."

"Daddy, I want to stay and play here."

"You're still here! Go rather and keep an eye on your mother... You're stupid; I don't want kids like you. I want to make a fresh start. Buzz off to your mother's, all of you!"

You were cruel, sperm donor... You must have been made of stone to let them leave with heads bowed and tears in their eyes. Oh! The lump of anguish in their throats was choking

them. It was always to me that they returned to seek refuge in my arms and I waited for them impatiently. Alas, on their way home, my bundles of suffering stumbled into society's other little seeds, who were lying in wait, watching out for them. My little ones turned around in search of help, looking back in the hope of seeing their father come running. What a pity - Daddy was reliving his youth with Bouchra, a girl of fifteen... And Mummy was running in search of daily bread, bitter and hot, burning her hands... My God, how I hated it sometimes, that bread which kept me away from you, my children!

"Is it Daddy again?"

My question remained unanswered; I did not need words to understand.

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What I did not know, was that it was my little ones who, weak as they were, were protecting me. They were defending both parties, themselves and me. I thought I was the only one going through bitter trials; the truth was otherwise. They endured in silence for my sake, to spare me any sorrow.

Dear God, which injustice should be confronted, that of men or of their law? Dear God, I could never have enough faith, nor time, to thank You for Your support. Your punishment was not slow in coming. Three years after our divorce, my children's father found himself with nothing, alone in an empty house from which everything had been seized, carried away and redistributed.

Today, I weep for him. By throwing me into the street, he threw himself into the abyss. Hamid, I am now living my life, but with the grief of seeing you living lifelessly...

I weep and I weep for all the children of divorce. I weep for their misfortunes, for the greatest injustice committed against them, divorce! I weep for the repudiated woman, the mother. How many doors slam in their faces, how many bodies thrown into the street... How many steps towards the precipice!

Mothers, God has entrusted us with the hardest of tasks - to give life. How could one not have the courage to assume this responsibility? People say that behind every great man, there is an extraordinary woman. Why then should that same woman not make her own life an exemplary existence? Have the courage to look ahead.

My horizon as a woman stopped at the tips of my toes. Once the divorce was proclaimed, I sacrificed my life to save those of my children. My self, my own existence, had disappeared; I was preoccupied with theirs. I laboured for their happiness while ensuring that it did not cause the unhappiness of others. And I felt up to this sacrifice. Certainly, I was not accorded my rights as a woman, but no force on earth could deprive me of my rights as a mother.

A single comforting thought, a single prayer motivated me: "Dear God, make the years pass more quickly than time, my children grow up more quickly than their years, so that they can touch ground, reach the shore..."

That promised shore towards which I have never ceased to row. Immense was my joy every time I was able to free a foot stuck in the sinking sands and take a step forwards. I was fighting in a world without pity! I had to straighten my back, be strong when I was being hounded. Overnight, I realised that justice had never been on my side as I had thought. Stubbornly, it was there, confronting me, like a deaf and blind opponent. I was there, two steps from the infernal monster and I had only one alternative: to go forward and tackle the fiend with God's protection, or retreat and let myself sink into the devil's trap, the beautiful magic carpet...

My principles, my up-bringing and my religion - everything within me - shouted: "No, no Rachida, go forwards!" Yes, it was necessary to challenge our terrible justice system. To give my children the time to carve themselves a little niche in this discriminating world.

CHAPTER XII

On the 27 November 1983, Soundouss's voice made me jump:

"Mummy, post for you!"

I immediately recognised the summons forcing me to meet terror. Its sky blue colour gave me goose bumps. I was summoned to appear at the Maârif central police station.

Trembling, I climbed the few steps up to the main door, which was manned by a security guard. He was moving all the time. His facial expression was different every time. Sometimes a friendly smile for his colleagues, followed by a greeting or a joke in poor taste, sometimes the stern demeanour required by the rules.

Hup - attention! Mister Guard started trembling at the sight of his superior's beautiful stars and gold braid. Was it desire, jealousy or fear? He was almost in a sweat by the time he caught his breath, tugging at the bottom of his jacket. "Phew, what a scare!" he must have been saying to himself. "Why am I afraid of him? After all, he's a man like me, and what's more, we work under the same flag. Phew, luckily, no one saw me! Get back to normal and represent the law; it's absolutely essential that others fear me. And so what? After all, I'm the one on guard, ensuring the security of my superiors, who relax while I keep slogging away..."

Oh yes, Mister Guard was right; his superiors were in another category; thanks to their rank, they could call the shots. The beautiful years of youth are short; old age must be taken care of... Something must also be put aside for medical expenses, because nothing can undo the ravages of unhealthy eating habits nor quell the hot flushes of a conscience which keeps you awake at night. How can you go back to sleep?

Impossible, Mister Guard, trips back and forth to Mecca are in vain! The blessing of those holy places is for poor wretches like me, and even at a distance! I really needed it that day!

"Good morning, Sir," I ventured.

"Hm, hm..."

Mister Guard did not know which expression to favour me with. I was finally granted his habitual frown and an inquiring look.

"Hm... go to the other side; it's the other door," he said, handing back the summons to me.

There, I was greeted by the kind smile of a policeman who seemed to want to make things easier for me.

"The section for foreigners is on the other side, Madam, just inside the entrance, on your right."

"Yes thank you, but I've come about this," I replied, showing him my summons.

"Ah!"

He half turned away, slapping his thigh and tapping his foot on the ground. "Drat, I've been caught out!" Too late, he could not change tone. The only way to disguise his embarrassment was to continue playing the polite gentleman, all the while knowing I was a "Maroquia" like him:

"Right, Madam, go up these stairs, turn, then Madam you... you... you..."

I was already far away. Everything was cold in that building, the people as much as the walls and floor. What an atmosphere! The employees ready to pounce and the visitors tense as statues. I dared not ask for directions and timidly searched for office X.

"Pass yourself off as a foreigner," suggested the Invisible One.

"You're crazy; can't you see their reaction? They'll make me

pay for their misplaced smile afterwards. Shut up, won't you!"

"You're perfectly right; I prefer to keep a low profile. Me and uniforms... That never works!"

"How lucky you are! I'd be better off holding my tongue at the moment; that way I can sometimes qualify for a smile overflowing with kindness; but as soon as I open my mouth, I straight away see them backing away. My gob must stink, and from a distance... And yet, I force myself to speak quietly to avoid bad breath... And what's more, my mouth is very small, isn't it?"

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"Oh no, I think it's always wide open, and besides it doesn't stop smiling; but shit, cry a little, look unhappy, play the hypocrite, damn it all!"

"Oh no, I'm rebellious, yes, but not unhappy. I feel good about myself. Admittedly I don't have a cent, but I'm doing fine, don't you think? But where are you? Answer me!"

"Certainly not! I'm getting out of here..."

"Oh yes! I understand; I'm at the right door."

"Good morning, Sir."

Without answering and looking full of contempt, the inspector grabbed the summons from my hand. With a nod of the head, he indicated a long wooden bench in the corner of the office.

On edge, I waited for him to say something. Alas, he ignored me completely. He had eyes only for his typewriter, as though I did not exist. I was freezing as I stared at those sinister premises - an office where everything was grey, right up to the ceiling. Even the inspector, who was about fifty, seemed over time to have taken on the colour of his surroundings.

"Assalam-o-alaikoum⁵²," said two dynamic young men as they came into the office.

"Is the boss not here yet?" the taller one asked.

"No," replied the inspector, nodding towards a closed door.

"Who's that?" whispered the other, referring to me.

"Civil case for debt..."

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Surprised, he addressed me with an air of curiosity.

"Are you married?"

"No, divorced."

"Do you have children?"

"Yes, I have four."

"Do they live with you?"

"Yes."

"Do you work?"

"A bit, I do some trading."

"And don't you have enough to pay?"

"But, I don't know yet... What is it?"

"You don't know. So then why have you come?"

"The summons."

Looking apologetic, he shrugged his shoulders as if to say that I had been wrong to come, then addressed his colleague, who still had his nose glued to his typewriter:

"Have a quick look what it's about."

"Oh! *Sahbi*⁵³, let me get on with my work."

"Come on, look at her file."

"It's on the boss's desk."

"Go and see what it's about, please!"

"Bah! It's a cheque... and for two thousand dirhams. Satisfied? And it's a certain Mr X, from Derb Omar, who laid the charge..."

A cold shiver ran down my spine. Flabbergasted, I said:

"Yes, but I've already paid him half of it, and..."

"Well, all that is not my problem. The superintendent will sort it out. But I'm telling you, if you don't have any money with you, you won't leave here."

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"But, why did you come if you didn't have the amount owing?" the young inspector asked, feeling sorry for me.

"*Mesquina*, she didn't know," replied the tall one.

"You shouldn't have come all alone and empty-handed; what are you thinking of? This isn't the mosque! Good grief!"

I did not have to play the hypocrite - just thinking of my children and their young age brought tears to my eyes. My liver rose to my throat, as an Arab proverb expresses it so well. And here was the same scene being re-enacted. The same anxieties again. How could I return to my family that evening?

I was afraid they would be afraid... I was afraid... I was afraid...

I tried to calm down, to follow the discussion that was becoming more and more heated between the three inspectors. The two young ones continued to defend me, unlike their colleague who was absolutely determined to finish his typing.

"Come on, *Sahbi*, let her go before the superintendent comes. She'll come back with the money to pay."

"No Sir."

"Ah *Sahbi*, she's alone with her kids."

"No, no..."

"If she'd been a tart, she wouldn't have even bothered to come here. Her problem would be settled over the phone."

"Quite so, he doesn't want to understand that if she weren't honest, she wouldn't have arrived here with her debts, while the strumpets on the coast drive around in cars, wads of notes filling their pockets," replied the other.

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"And who's to say the owner of the cheque isn't a bastard and that he wasn't looking for something else? *Mesquina...*"

But the other man categorically refused any concession. Furious, the young inspector leapt off the edge of the desk where he had been sitting trying to persuade his colleague who, for his part, insisted on keeping me prisoner. He did not want to hear a thing. With clenched teeth, one of them gave me a conspiratorial look, indicating that I should remain calm. However, the other, the more impulsive, came and whispered quietly in my ear:

"Don't worry; we'll wait for the boss to come. He's a good-hearted man who fears God. We're going to ask him to free you, or give you an extension at least."

The superintendent arrived in the early afternoon. My defenders had missed their midday meal, and without giving him time to summon me to his office, they went in before me. I never knew what they said because the door was closed, but their faces were radiant with joy when they invited me to go in to see their superior.

Young inspectors, I hope with all my heart that life and the ways of this painful world have not changed you, that you are still loyal and courageous. Thank you, because due to your efforts, I once again recovered my freedom. I was with my little ones that very evening, able to gather them round me and reassure them.

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You were in fact quite right. I could have avoided the problem with a smile, comfortably set up on the golden carpet that lots of unscrupulous people rolled out before me.

I was not for sale. I had repeated it so many times to Mr X, a customer, or rather my supplier's retailer, from whom he had bought my cheque in order to be able to buy me more easily. Because of this man I had very nearly been imprisoned.

I met him in Mr Hassan's manufacturing workshop, where I went for my orders. Later, I was surprised to find him in front of my home, elegant, perfumed, sitting comfortably in his luxurious car, a smile on his lips and his eyes seductive. He demanded that the cheque be paid. He was almost boastful of having it in his hands:

"Mr Hassan paid me with your cheque. He also advised me not to deposit it directly in the bank, but to see you in person about it."

"What? He gave you that cheque when he knows for a fact that I have no money? Give it back to him please, because I'm not prepared to pay it before I've sold his merchandise. It's always been agreed that way!"

"Unfortunately, Madam, I can't give it back to him. It has been entered in my books. But we can sort it out; it's not serious. Darling, you yourself are all silver and gold."

"This is serious," sniggered my Invisible One. "Don't smile my beauty, this one's lecherous; he must like fine flesh, and what's more you haven't stopped putting on weight! If you slimmed down perhaps we'd be left in peace! You're going to need some time to get rid of him; it's the fourth time in two weeks that we've seen him. He has already devoured you with his eyes. The rest won't be long in coming. Listen to him."

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And sure enough he added, as if to prove the Invisible One right: "Two thousand dirhams is no big deal. Why get stressed? We'll settle the debt with a good dinner at the Méridien. Live it up! One must make the most of life, while there's still time!

"Dinner? If I had enough to take you to dinner, I would have paid you back straight away. It's more practical than going all the way to Mohammédia."

"But who said you were paying? You need only say yes and I'll burn your cheque right in front of you - OK?"

"Yes, OK..."

"No," screamed the Invisible One inside me.

"Yes, OK about paying the cheque, but no to the Méridien. Can you see who's behind me, Sir?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who they are?"

"I think they're your boys."

"They are my men, Mr X. But hang on a moment, don't get annoyed; I'll put down what I have on me straight away, 500 dirhams. I'll pay you the rest later, as agreed with my supplier. I'm sorry if I couldn't satisfy you, but that's the way it is."

He took off in a huff, scarcely concealing his displeasure, only to come back a few days later looking even grimmer, to offer me my last chance: either the Méridien or prison... I stammered: "Prison!"

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"Well done, my girl, you've won; but don't cry - one day it will be our turn to be rich..."

Looking back today, I can see myself turning my back on Mr X to re-enter the house. My feelings were so strong that they were written all over my face. I walked past Younès and Adil and our eyes met in silent but solid complicity. My children were conscious of the price I paid to buy them life and self-respect. The more I said no, the more prized my Bag-of-Bones became. It weighed me down and I was being engulfed. I was not unaware that every step I took to push my children towards the shore and to safeguard my principles led me blindly towards the abyss. I knew that it was impossible to extricate myself, but I absolutely had to survive, to gain some time. One person's money served to pay another...

My wheel continued to turn, but I was getting bogged down and sinking little by little.

From then on, I took to trembling before every encounter. I sought support ceaselessly, and I trustingly swallowed every piece of bait. Mr X was not the only one to offer me this sort of bait. It was another cheque story. This time, his name was Khalid and he had assured me:

"It's not serious - a cheque as guarantee will be enough. Don't be afraid of a thing; it's just to keep the wheels

turning, as they say."

"Please be so good as not to give it to anyone else; it'll bounce."

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"Trust me, otherwise we couldn't work together. I'm a man of my word and also a father. I know what it's like to have children."

"May God keep them unto you; how many do you have?"

"Four."

"Oh! Same as me!" I had replied to Mr Khalid, who had received me in his office while he was getting ready to go to the mosque for Friday prayers.

He was very handsome in his traditional white robe, which he wore with elegance. While waiting for the merchandise I had ordered to be packed, I chatted of this and that with my new supplier. I secretly envied his wife for having such a handsome, polite, gallant and pious husband. How deceptive appearances can be!

He was as correct as I was trusting. And how could I not be in the face of this very image of an angel all dressed in white?

I displayed the same trust when I later ran into him in the wholesale neighbourhood. I had to catch a bus; as usual, I was loaded down like a mule, and it had seemed natural for me to accept a lift home from him. On the way, Mr Khalid did not fail to catch up on my news and that of my children, a judicious way of broaching other subjects.

Feeling very chatty, I talked without paying attention to the detour my host had taken. It was only when we were in front of his office that I noticed.

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"Sorry, I'll be five minutes; I have to sort out a little problem and I'll take you home straight after."

"Yes, yes of course."

"Get out; leave your things; the watchman is there; don't worry about them."

I followed him into his office where he invited me to sit down, which I was only too willing to do. Mr Khalid sat down opposite me, opened his desk drawers in search of I don't know what, picked up the telephone receiver, then put it down immediately after, and all this while making conversation with me:

"Not too much work?"

"I'm running around like a real nutcase!"

"Oh no! That's not good; you must think of yourself, of your health. A little for God and a little for the heart, not so? You are young; you must unwind a bit, make the most of life."

He then took out a little box, which he opened carefully before saying to me:

"Here you are, these are your cheques."

"My cheques?"

"Yes, your cheques!"

They were indeed the two pieces of paper I had given him with my own hands. I looked at them before putting them down on the desk, feeling dazed.

"Why? I..."

"You see, they're still there. I haven't given them to the bank."

"Thank you, it's kind of you. Give me a little more time and I'll make a first payment to you."

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"I haven't asked you for anything. You can even take them back."

"Take them back?"

"Yes, they're a gift. I like you... Don't you like me?"

"Yes, but..."

"But what?"

"But, that's all, you have your wife; you're a stranger to me... I don't know..."

"We're going to get to know one another. As for my wife, she's at home with her children; she lacks for nothing."

"But you are her husband! Would you like her to do the same thing to her?"

"And what would I know about that? Hey?"

"Ah! Because you would accept it?"

"What do you want me to say to you? It's her life, or rather, that's life. These days... All women do... As long as one

doesn't know, that's all..."

"But, you already know in advance. It's not true! No Sir, not all women; I won't do it!"

"That's not normal! It's..."

"You mean I'm crazy?"

"Um, no, no, but..."

"Take back your cheques, Mr Khalid, and I'll pay you as we agreed."

He was deathly pale and shaking; feeling embarrassed, he muttered:

"I'm sorry... I don't know what to say to you; please forgive me."

"I already have, because I know you made a mistake about me. I'm used to being judged hastily."

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"Believe me, it's the first time I've been rejected by a woman, and what's more, a divorcee. And to think that married women don't hesitate! Honestly, do you forgive me?"

"Let's forget it!" I replied, getting up to put an end to this embarrassing situation.

What I cannot, on the other hand, understand, is that a man might turn his back on his wife, that he might close his eyes to the wrong she does, to a sin committed deliberately.

I have always tried to turn my problems to good account in order, in the long run, to avoid others. Alas, I have never succeeded in knowing how not to stumble at every step into a so-called benefactor...

My life as a fugitive was terrible. Luckily all those for whom I was a less-than-nothing did not know about it. Otherwise, they would have denounced me, and I would never have been able to escape the police. The latter wanted to be rid of me as quickly as possible, all the more so because they could gain nothing from me. I represented only a lot of work; I was labelled a bad customer...

I preferred to receive my "invitations" personally and protect my children from having any such contact whatsoever with these cold men who terrified them.

A month later, on 6 February 1984, when I came home after a long working day, I was surprised by the atmosphere in the house. I had not been welcomed with the usual shouts of joy. A deathly silence greeted me and no hands came to scratch

around in my packets. Everyone seemed quiet, too quiet. But I guessed from their eyes that they wanted to confess something to me, without daring to.

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This sudden quiet suited me. I really needed a rest. I had hardly started to undo my laces when Soundouss's little voice announced:

"Mum...my..."

"Yes, my darling."

I thought she was apologising forgiveness for some silly prank; this was her way of softening me up. But...

"The police came looking for you..."

"Soundouss! I swear, I'm going to... Can't you let her eat first?" grumbled Younès, he who had come into the world only to suffer with me.

"Leave her alone; it doesn't matter. Well?"

"The policeman looked nasty. He said that if you didn't come tomorrow, he would come and look for you here at the house. I'm scared... And you Yamine?"

My little one did not say a word, but his eyes spoke volumes. They inspired me with all the energy and strength necessary to move mountains and face all the cops in the whole wide world.

I had to smother my fury, and sound reassuring:

"There's nothing for you to worry about. It's not serious. All I ask of you is to be good. And especially, I don't want to see you outside in the street. Younès, I'm counting on you to look after them at home, and you, Adil, at school, without forgetting homework for which you will be responsible."

"And you Mummy?"

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"Me, well, I'm going to have to go away for a while... Besides, I was going to leave on a trip for a delivery."

"And if the police come back?" Soundouss queried.

"Well! You quite simply say that I've left on a trip."

"And if they come into the house?"

"Don't be silly; they can't; it's forbidden by the law," I lied to reassure them.

"Oh good! Then I feel better," admitted my daughter, putting her hand to her chest.

"OK, off to bed and don't forget the Koran!"

The next day, I left home early, once again leaving my children to fend for themselves.

A few metres away, I turned back to look at the house. I had the impression of seeing a wall looming up to separate us. With difficulty I suppressed the desire to run back and snuggle up with my children. But I feared the police. I had to flee to safeguard my freedom on which the survival of my family depended.

Thus, I once again started a fugitive existence, always for the same reason: having bought my children's life on credit.

I wandered around all day and sought refuge in the evening with Naima, who was always willing to accommodate and feed me. I found her smiling:

"So, they didn't catch you?" she said.

"No, as you can see for yourself, I'm still free."

"So much the better for me! I don't feel like running to the prison to bring you a basket of provisions. How would I cope, hey? Look after you or your children? Oh, while I'm thinking about it, tell your two little ones to come here. The two big ones can go to their father's!"

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"And what about school?"

"School, school - they can miss it. I've always told you to take them out of that school. Put them anywhere."

"But I can't; it's too late."

"You can't? So pay."

"That's what I'm busy doing; I haven't asked you for anything."

"And how are you going to pay?"

"God is great, I'll find a way; you, for example, couldn't you advance me the amount?"

"Stop, stop right there; me, lend to you? I have my *takchita*⁵⁴ at the dressmaker's, and I don't even have anything to pay her with."

"And if I asked Fatiha?"

"Oh, certainly not! Her husband has problems with one of his

coaches. He spent a lot fixing it. He's in a terrible state. Certainly don't talk to them about money at the moment."

"You're right."

"Oh yes, they are rich; and to think that my brother-in-law makes a fortune every day! Not like me who married a pauper!" Naïma said, referring to her husband who was in the room.

"You see, Rachida, she's not satisfied, in spite of everything I give her."

"You give me, you give me, what do you give me? You don't see the others - the latest jewellery, diamonds, holiday villas all over the place..."

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And another interminable discussion about money was launched. I lived reality all alone. My language was unintelligible to all the others. To whom could I turn but my Creator, He who followed my steps when I staggered through the night to bring back something to eat for my little lambs, and to give a little money to Younès, who always faithfully waited for me at the door. He watched out for my arrival and I kissed him without thinking, while quickly whispering my instructions.

At night, standing not far from the Beaulieu cinema, I was the target for my neighbours' contemptuous looks. Completely unaware of the catastrophe I was enduring, they judged, condemned and spat out their verdict.

I waited for pirate taxis, and when none came, my followers and brothers of the night willingly offered their services...

During the day, I ran around all over the place trying to get together the money owing. I had to smile constantly while pain tormented my body and spirit... Refuse invitations although the hollow in my stomach was gnawing at me... How could I sit down at the table when my children were perhaps hungry? An attack of conscience brought me back to order. I shut my eyes every time I saw the members of a family united around a table. That image was unbearable to me. I forced myself to smile before politely withdrawing.

I preferred to walk round aimlessly while waiting for my customers and friends to finish their meals. When tired, I often rested on the staircase of a building, since I couldn't in a public park where I was assaulted by stares enflamed with desire. These men were far from imagining that I was starving for bread, thirsty for water, and consumed only with the desire to hold my children in my arms. Bravely I endured their "Psst... Psst..." like thunderbolts crashing down around me.

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I also had to arm myself with patience to bear my customers'

whims, although I tried to explain my situation to them. But I was preaching in the wilderness, because I scarcely had the look of someone down and out; I had neither a scarf over my head nor plastic sandals. How could I prove my state? Certainly not with my windswept hair, my jeans and my smile. In any case, I had to carry on as best I could and I had absolutely no right to let myself go.

My destiny was pre-determined. I lived it with all the patience of a *mou-e-mina*, but that was not the case with the police, who were infuriated at not yet having been able to lay a hand on me. Shrewdly, they knew that a mother never abandons her children, and so they kept them under surveillance. I very quickly understood their ploy, and was able to escape their trap. I turned around and went back. That night I slept very badly at my friend's house. I tossed and turned in my bed, watching for daybreak, waiting for the others to wake up, for the world around me to stir...

There remained another possible way of seeing my children - at school. From afar, I watched out for their arrival. Yamine was walking slowly, dragging the heavy burden of my problems and, in his eyes, a mixture of joy and tears that troubled me. In contrast Soundouss, with the carefree innocence of childhood, was often the last to understand:

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"You know Mummy, yesterday we had nothing to eat; Yamine ate a piece of stale bread that he found at the bottom of the basket. He cried in bed and called out for you. That made me really laugh, hey!"

My heart missed a beat... But the fact that Soundouss had taken things well eased my pain. On the other hand, Yamine's distress pushed me to act.

For that very reason, I had to remain free, and no force would snatch my freedom from me. I would break the strongest chains to run to you, my little ones.

My rebellion was without parallel and my problem without solution. Only divine power, or its earthly representative, could sort out my situation. So I lifted my eyes far, very far into its blue space. And I guided my trembling, but confident hand to the great door.

God the all-powerful would answer my appeals. Amir El Mouminin, our august King Hassan II, would surely not fail to understand me.

On 13 February 1984, with tears in my eyes and feeling lost, I launched an appeal for help to the secretariat of the royal cabinet.

Two days later, unable to go on, I handed myself over to the police. In this way I wanted to submit to my fate as quickly

as possible. A single idea haunted me: to return to my little ones and provide them with what was strictly necessary to enable them to survive.

Everything was crumbling around me and I was incapable, despite all the tenacity I had managed to show, of collecting what was owed to me. The interest on my own debts had accumulated and all this breaking me. I had to get through that cold world in which only typewriters raise their voices, in which the slightest little slip could be fatal for me. A world in which I was only a file number.

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My fate depended on the mood of the man who was going to judge me, and on the man facing me, who was asking questions. Totally worn out, I submitted. Only my heart continued to keep me alive. I tried not to think about the situation in which I found myself in order not to fall into the trap of madness. I calmed my mind and steeled my nerves to bear another shock, another ordeal.

But for pity's sake, hurry up!

Hurry up! My name is still the same, and the reason for my being here as well. So hurry up!

Give me back my freedom; you will see that I am still strong enough to run back to my defenceless little ones, but hurry up!

I beg you, don't stop! Don't talk! Quickly, my children need me. Hurry up, Chief. Oh! No, not that, don't stop, don't answer the telephone, let it ring...

Alas, a knowing look, a smile, a wave of the hand - at that call everything in the office stopped. A more important case than mine had come up... Certainly a big catch.

"Hello... Yes!"

"..."

"Good morn...ing... Oh yes! Good morning, how are you? ... Yes, fine thanks."

He put his hand over the receiver to speak to the inspector who was questioning me, giving him a knowing wink. My interrogator leapt up to go and sit next to his superior and start listening with his ear pressed to the receiver.

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"No... nothing... no, it doesn't matter. But come, drop by, drop by the office; I'm waiting for you... Yes, that's right, see you just now."

He hung up, nodding his head and looking thoughtful.

Delighted, the two policemen looked into one another's eyes to congratulate themselves on what must, without doubt, given their satisfaction, have been an achievement, all the while ignoring me.

"Son of a bitch..." said the chief.

He stretched back in his chair. With his hands folded behind his head, he calmly awaited the arrival of the quarry.

The inspector came back to his seat opposite me in his little office, sighing loudly with satisfaction. Visibly excited, his movements were more energetic. He continued to speak to his superior for a moment before returning mechanically to his typing. The questions were asked automatically, professional second nature. He did not even look at me, nor attempt to understand what I was trying to explain to him. I was dealing rather with a pair of hands that were working like automatons. His head was interested only in what the chief was telling him. With a wave of the hand, he stopped me every time I tried to speak. My "But's", "I's", and "You's" hung unfinished in the air, and I sank into silence without asking my questions.

Suddenly, the inspector stopped typing, forgetting even my presence, so as not to miss a word being said about the person he was waiting for.

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It was strange. They were bickering so much that I too became impatient to see the poor quarry. I was already sorry for him and I would have liked to warn him of the trap being laid for him.

I suffered greatly for all the others. I almost fainted every time I met a person living through the same drama as I. They reflected an image of myself. Through them I relived my reality, my pallor, and my tragedy. I closed my eyes when a police car passed so as not to read the terrible word "Security", a term banished from my existence. I never really experienced it. There was only insecurity in my life, in those dark and icy backstage scenes. The tap... tap... of typewriters still rings in my ears. My name appeared everywhere in the files, the storage rooms and the archives, and I wanted to die so that it would be wiped out and forgotten. I was on file but I was never granted extenuating circumstances. I had to pay, that was all. I will never be able to thank God enough for having guided and saved me from the folly of men.

I implored Him to give me the courage to suppress my cry of horror. I so desperately wanted to slow down the steps of others, to stop them from going down those stairs, from breathing the cold air of those scenes backstage. It is painful to pay with one's freedom and pride, what one cannot pay from one's pocket. My rebellion transported me into another dimension. What I could then have said God alone

knows. I was on a cloud and I fully comprehended things only once I had fallen back to earth. How could I still be strong, when all those who were in that basement seemed defeated?

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In imagining the man, doubtless confident, who was going to fall prey to the trap laid by the policemen, I remembered the elderly man - I can see him again as if it were yesterday - shabby looking, with tired features and a vague look, completely numbed. It was - but I went there so often - another occasion when I had been summoned to the police station. The old man was being subjected to the horror for a trifle, for what another might carelessly squander on his children in an amusement park or on his wife at the hairdresser's. Four hundred dirhams was the amount this unfortunate father of eight children had to pay for I don't know how many months rental. In view of his inability to settle in cash, he had to pay with his freedom, taken from the little time he had left to live: forty-five days of suffering, one and a half months in prison.

"What shall we do with this one here? He says he hasn't the amount owing, not so... hey? Say something... answer."

"No *Sidi*, I'm not working and I have eight children."

"At your age, an old man of seventy... You poor people multiply like flies! OK, wait over there..."

"Next, come in, Madam."

I sat down opposite the old man. We exchanged sympathetic glances. "Don't worry, little old man; I am young, I work, and I have only four children."

"So, chief? Is he spending the night here? Shall I take him down?" suggested an inspector who was in a hurry to finish his day's work.

He stood up to do his job, and it must be said that he excelled in the art of locking people up. His words bombarded my body like bullets. I felt ill. To put an end to this bitter trial, I was ready to pay with my freedom for this trembling old man.

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"Yes, take him down," the chief answered.

"No, wait! I will pay for him," I almost screamed.

Silence reigned in the office. Dumbfounded, they all looked at one another as if I had said something forbidden. Generosity was not really their strong point!

"And your file? Are you paying that too?" the inspector asked, as if to remind me of my situation, because that day I too had

been summonsed for non-payment.

"To tell the truth, no... It's just that I don't have enough money on me. I'll pay first for the gentleman, and tomorrow I'll come back to settle what I owe."

The chief's conscience was roused as if shaken from sleep.

"OK... It's a kind gesture on your part, Madam, and we are also going to do our share; it's fine - you can come back tomorrow, Madam."

"Thank you, Sir... thank you very much."

I put down the few notes on the inspector's desk before leaving. But as I reached the door, the inspector's words held me back.

"As for him, we'll keep him until tomorrow; he'll pay in court."

I was preparing to retrace my steps to once again take up the defence of the old man, when the chief cut in:

"No, no, let him go. You can send the money with the file to court. It's no big deal; we can do that for him!"

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I went running down the steps of that cursed place as fast as I could.

Standing at the bus stop, I noticed from afar the poor old man running towards me. Without thinking, I crossed the boulevard, and changed direction to avoid the unfortunate fellow who doubtless wanted to thank me. I did not have the courage to see again that lifeless face marked by all the woes of the world. I had admittedly helped him to escape prison, but I could do no more for him. I myself was only a fugitive at the mercy of the monster.

Unfortunately, I was also unable to avoid the snare waiting for the man of the telephone conversation. He had already taken the first step.

"Assalam-o-alaïkoum."

"Ahlan⁵⁵," the chief replied, getting up to offer his cheek. A faint smile showed on the new arrival's pale face. He seemed too meek to be confronting these people of indeterminate attitude whose expressions changed with surprising rapidity. An atmosphere drenched in lies, to tell the truth... Forced little courtesies were exchanged... It was awkward...

The new arrival sat down opposite the chief, on the seat reserved for friends. He tried in vain to start a friendly conversation, asking for his news and that of his family and

distant friends, speaking of everything under the sun. With his elbows on the desk, he was tying himself in knots to capture the finely tuned ear of the chief, who was refusing to listen to him.

"Ah ha!" said his indifferent air, "Too late, fellow, you must pay for your negligence... I don't know you, I have never known you and I have no desire to know you..."

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And then coldly:

"That's enough; Abdou-Allah will see to you, over there."

With this, he asked him to change seats, to go and sit on the wooden bench reserved for prisoners.

"No, no, here, opposite me," the inspector said to him, already rubbing his hands with glee, as if to say: "Come, come, my friend, your fate is now in my hands. You see, I am the one who does the report; I am the one who decides on the choice of codes and terms, and not my superior whom you have always favoured and served. Today, it's my turn to give you first class service."

Without even looking at me, he ordered me to give up my seat and change places with the unfortunate former friend.

I did not say a word, but with an attentive ear I followed proceedings closely. With a brusque gesture, the inspector pulled my statement from the machine, evidently in a hurry to deal with the man.

The latter was about thirty, with a dull complexion, small moustache and a stunned expression. He trembled as he held out his identity document and gave the impression of having fallen from the clouds when he was obliged to give even his name to the man whom he had shortly before considered a friend.

An hour later we went down the stairs side by side to go to court. We were on trial for the same thing: writing bad cheques. But our reasons were quite different. This time, I did not come in for the eternal *Allah yastars*, since we had not been transported by police van, but in a car driven by a plain clothes inspector. It must have been a little after eleven o'clock.

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I walked behind them, hurrying on from office to office. We arrived at a rather dark corridor that opened onto some stairs. After a brief greeting, the inspector handed us over to a policeman.

"Shall I take them down?" the latter asked.

"Yes," replied the inspector.

And I went down... into another world. Another policeman, another door, other stairs, other people, of diverse ages, sizes and colours, but all the product of the same background: poverty.

I tried to elbow my way through all those people crammed around the steps. When I got to the bottom, still being gazed at enquiringly, I felt nauseous. There was an unpleasant smell...

A slightly cleaner little room attracted my attention. A sheet of paper on the wall indicated that it was a place for prayer.

The ground was covered with a mat; the room was empty. A single wall separated it from two other rooms that served as cells, one for women, the other for men, all spreading over a large area. Opposite the cells, wooden benches were set apart and occupied by prisoners. At the request of the policeman accompanying me, I sat down on the one in the middle. I was thus in a strategic position from which I could see everything.

A line of women prisoners was standing in a corner, and closer to me, there were two wooden tables on which files were scattered. These were the public prosecutors' offices.

Sitting to one side, my notebook and pen in hand, I was living my destiny. I prayed in silence and God's law reigned in my heart. He was present within me, protecting me and His serenity gave me strength.

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Slowly, I observed the faces surrounding me. I noticed the stares looking me over relentlessly from head to toe. The women were glad to see a little middle class woman in the same boat as them.

Suddenly, I realised that I was not the only prisoner from Aïn Sebaâ. I had noticed a woman whom I knew very well by sight. Without ever having spoken, we eyed each other scornfully in the street. Defiant, as always, I risked a quick acknowledgement, but she remained stony-faced. Making no reaction, she almost turned her back on me, pulling her scarf down over her forehead from time to time and, perhaps to cover her jewellery, hiding her well manicured hands in the sleeves of her green *djellaba*, which did not look like a cover-up for poverty.

"More likely a cover-up for her character," whispered the Invisible One to me.

"Oh for heaven's sake, you were all that was missing here. Are you following me into the clink?"

"But that's where you could need me most, you fool; together we'll try to get out of it. I'm going to whisper to you what to say."

"You? Oh, no, you're going to do whatever comes into your head. Besides, I wonder what was in my head when I came to court in jeans. Why don't I dress like the others? Look at them; they look virtuous, don't they?"

"Rather tell me why you don't dress up, why you don't cover yourself up?"

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"No, it is a sign of virtue; the *djellaba* and the scarf inspire respect."

"In them, perhaps, but not in us, we who have seen so many things going on under the *djellaba*. Some women have made it into a special outfit for frequenting infamous places. They have made that respectable outfit into a rag."

"Well... well... stop! That outfit will be the death of me! Oh! Shut up, I beg you..."

"Oh, most certainly not! You know exactly where I'm going with this. Have the guts to be honest! But why are you blushing?"

"Shut up, damn it!"

"Oh no, I want to refresh your memory. Do you remember? I remember very well. You were walking hurriedly, with your head down. You even hesitated a little, looking left and right, before going through the door. Oh! My Bag-of-Bones, she fell from so high."

"Shut up, you're going to make me ashamed."

"I swore to pursue this to the end and to unveil the truth. So it's you that must shut up and not interrupt me. That day, we set out..."

"Wait, wait, let me close my eyes, so as not to blush with shame."

"To humour you, I'm going to say it very quietly. I'm just going to murmur it."

"No, no, please."

"Not even murmur? Fine, I'm going to whisper it in your ear: We set out... for... the... *Chouafa*... ha, ha, ha."

"Oh, good gracious, I'm perspiring!"

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"That's fine... It'll pass. Remember who we saw there; it'll help you bear your shame. A high class lady, and of exalted social status, an intellectual. Under normal circumstances, to approach her, you have to go through thirty-six thousand doors

and *Chaouchs*. That day, she was very small in her *djellaba* with her scarf over her head.

"Phew, that's enough, that's enough; have you anything else to say?"

"Oh yes, lots of things."

"Really, then go ahead, by yourself, I..."

"No, no, I just wanted to tell you that the clairvoyant was fantastic."

"The poor thing, it must be said that she hadn't understood anything about my future."

"You a future? How could she predict it when you didn't even have a present? Believe me, my dear, even the greatest clairvoyant in the world can't predict yours, or imagine it. And you were delighted to the point of ignoring me. Oh yes! You really had ignored me that day. But it wasn't long before you paid dearly for your stupidity. Oh yes, my Bag-of-Bones in a *djellaba*!"

"That's fine, that's fine, we've heard enough from you, so you can shut up now, and mind your language. The *djellaba* mustn't be criticised."

"Yes, but it's also worn to hide poverty, or else to seem more proper. Like my neighbour's doing today. Look at her! Isn't it true? Tell me, is it really her or am I mistaken?"

"Today she's making herself as small as possible. It's not her usual style, with her grand airs!"

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"But what's wrong with that? It's in her interests to act small. It's necessary to wear a *djellaba* and scarf like everyone else here... I regret not having listened to my friend Naïma's advice. She's never stopped repeating that I need to charm them in court, and especially seem like a poor little woman."

So I was in the clink, wearing jeans and serene despite all the obstacles; divine strength infused me with all the courage I needed. I wore with pride what I had inside me. I was ready to shout it from the rooftops rather than go before the Prosecutor with faltering steps and bowed head, as my neighbour was doing that day.

Her accomplice, the man standing there at her side, was well built - tall and strong, but certainly endowed with a very small brain to embezzle millions from the company's funds for dishonest purposes. He handed the money over to the woman who, in turn, supplied him with poor little creatures to satisfy his sexual vices.

I looked at my jeans, stroking them lovingly. I wanted to kiss my rough and unadorned hands. I was not wearing a watch, but it must have been one o'clock when the audience finished. The Public Prosecutor stood up, starting a general commotion. The entrance doors were closed again and the inside ones opened to allow the prisoners to move around. The security guards, eager to have a break, took off their caps, which were smothering their heads or rather their consciences... Tired of enforcing order, they relaxed...

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"Oh! Allah!" they let slip, collapsing onto the wooden benches. I envied their sense of well-being. One of them opened the women's cell and ordered them to clean the room. The four women prisoners who were inside came out in a flash, smiling. They seemed to know the premises well. Holding buckets of water, they passed in front of me one behind the other, giving me sidelong glances. They must have been wondering why I was being spared the domestic chore. They were all young, of the same age and with the same way of chewing their gum.

The men's cell was also cleared. There were empty milk cartons and yoghurt tubs all over the place, and the few cigarette butts thrown on the ground were fought over by the women craving them. The sweet-talking for cigarettes then started:

"Chief, chief! May God be with your mother, give me your butt when you've finished smoking."

"Wash the floor, you misery."

"OK chief, may God take my mother from me if I don't do it well, but give me the butt, please."

"Shut up. If you had a mother, you wouldn't be doing the floors here instead of at home."

"Oh! Chief, I swear in Allah's name, if you knew the big family I come from, my brothers who... and who... They don't know I'm here, otherwise they would have killed me. As far as they're concerned, I'm working in Agadir."

"Yes, yes, it's clear from your mug that you're from a good family. Come on now, clean the floor and put a sock in it."

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She hitched up her *djellaba*, knotted it around her waist and without any shame, set to work humming a tune from the Atlas Mountains. She seemed to feel at home.

Darkness and cold reigned in the world of this basement, this universe of contrasts. A security guard was acting as *muezzin* in front of the clean little room, and calling the *Dohr*⁵⁶

prayer. A few faithful among the male prisoners ran up, and some others as well, with the intention of obtaining the policemen's sympathy.

I was unhappy not to be able to respond to the call. Neither my clothing nor the place would allow it. There was no room reserved for women, as if the punishment of women was, in the eyes of human justice, automatically sanctioned by God.

My status as a female prisoner denied me this right, this duty to God. My whole body shook and I crossed my arms so tightly across my chest that I stopped my own breath. I was trying to suppress the surge of joy that I felt growing deep within me, but I could not stop my soul from breaking free and rising into the sky where the *mou-e-mina* prayed while the jeans remained imprisoned by men. At this thought, tears welled up in my eyes; they bewailed the limitations of my body, that of a woman criminal.

I was irritated because the woman bent over her floorcloth was humming a *chikhates*⁵⁷ tune. I would have liked to throttle her for having ruined my moments of meditation. As if he had read my mind, the security guard gave her a kick in the backside, which she must have appreciated since she smiled.

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She abandoned her rag to go and squat further away at the base of a metal gate. Without any shame, she pulled out a cigarette butt hidden in her rolled-up trousers and lit it. Then she said in a loud voice:

"Hope is in God; life must be lived! Tomorrow we are all going to die."

I looked at her with pity, and she eyed me scornfully, seeming to say: "Hey, don't be so puffed up! If you were a good person, you wouldn't be here. I'm curious to know what landed you in the soup, and what on earth you're writing in that notebook!"

The arrival of my companion, the man who had been snared by his so-called police friends, put an end to this cold war. He had just finished his prayers and came over to me hesitantly, sat down, and asked me in a hoarse voice:

"You're from Ain Sebaâ, aren't you? I also live in that neighbourhood. I own an ice cream parlour on the edge of Ain Sebaâ. I know you. I often see you in the street. I was surprised to see you earlier at the police station. Why are you here?"

"A cheque."

"A cheque? That you gave or that was given to you?"

"Of course, since I'm here, I was the one who gave it..."

"Without sufficient funds? The devil be cursed," he gasped, rubbing his forehead. "And so?"

"And so, I'm here like you."

"Oh, I'll escape with a good lesson: never trust the cops. And to think that we were friends. They used to come and eat ice creams; but as soon as... as their supply dried up the pigs got cross."

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Our conversation was interrupted and we were ordered to return to our seats for the afternoon session. A heavy silence descended on that gloomy cellar. The Public Prosecutor made his entrance, sat down at the empty wooden desk, and pulled his chair forwards with a jerk. He was already in a hurry to finish when he picked up the first file. He moved from one case to the next with disconcerting speed and stopped only to tell a joke. Perhaps through having rubbed shoulders with the prisoners, he had ended up knowing them. So why drag things out? They were locked up in the evening only to be released the next day. Always on the same grounds: prostitution or drunkenness. Life must go on...

The last women prisoners were jostling each other, also in a hurry to get this round over with, while waiting for the next:

"So, you weren't drunk?"

"No, *Sidi*... It was just... I had only..."

"Only what?"

"Um... um..."

"Speak up. Only what?"

"Um... A few beers."

"Ha... ha... ha... A few beers! And how many?"

"Six..."

"Only six - did you hear that?" he said, turning to the security guards who were standing to one side and who could not help smiling.

"And you didn't cause a scene?"

"No, *Sidi*, by *Allah*, we were a little..."

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"*Nachtène*⁵⁸! Is that it?"

By way of response, she assumed a pathetic, victimised demeanour, tucking her head between her shoulders.

"Right, I don't want to see you here again, otherwise I'll lock you up. OK! *Dahbi*⁵⁹!"

"Yes, *Sidi*," she replied with bowed head.

She immediately raised it again, headed for the door and I was almost sure that she would continue to lead her life as she pleased. Oh yes! The real prisoner, the real criminal was me, the mother fighting for the survival of her children. I closed my eyes and tried to flee that bitter reality. I took my head in my hands and blocked my ears so as not to take leave of my senses. I in no way sought to understand that life in which everything was forbidden and allowed at the same time.

The room was empty. Only my companion and I remained:

"Is it for upstairs?" the Public Prosecutor asked the police guards.

"Yes, *Sidi*, it's for upstairs."

It was nearly six o'clock when we climbed back up the two flights of stairs.

My companion was trembling more and more:

"Where are we going?"

"I haven't a clue," I replied to him.

"They're certainly going to free us."

"You'll first need written proof that sufficient funds have been deposited, otherwise you'll go inside," chipped in the guard accompanying us.

"Inside? But I have the means to pay; I have money in the bank."

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"You're lucky; the worst that can happen is that your family will pay for you. But in my case, if I don't get out of here straight away, my children will die of hunger," I replied.

"Oh no, I have money. I was framed; you know that, don't you?"

"Please, leave me alone. Who will come and get me out of here? And what about my children?" I ended up nearly shouting.

I couldn't take the strain... The more night fell, the more I was gripped with fear for my little ones. I was called first to the office. Seeing him staring at my file chilled me to the bone. My heart was beating fit to burst. The moment seemed

eternal, this moment during which my past, present and future flashed before my eyes. My fate depended on a word. He shot a hard glance at me, like a bullet fired from a silencer, and said in a harsh voice:

"Aren't you ashamed? Writing bad cheques! I'm giving you... twenty-four hours to come back with written proof that you have deposited the necessary funds! Otherwise... Right, go... I don't want to see you here again!"

I opened my mouth to stammer something, but closed it straight away. I was incapable of the slightest movement. I was making an effort to remain standing and leave the office as quickly as possible, afraid of fainting and that the prosecutor might change his mind. Indeed, he had granted me temporary freedom, but not without making me pay with my dignity. Feeling humiliated, I prepared to leave the premises. But I could not turn my back on my companion who really needed me to warn his family should they keep him. His face lit up at the sight of me. I breathed in a whisper to him:

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"I'll wait for you at the end of the corridor."

It was dark when I left that sinister world. I was emerging from a black hole. I tried to recover my spirits. I gently told myself that it really was the air of freedom that I was breathing. I refused to think of the next day.

The big square I was crossing to get to the bus station was empty, silent and far from general noise. A few steps later, I couldn't help stopping for a moment to look at the luminous fountain, this world of lights in which I felt like an outsider. And to think that I often used to come this way! I watched the happy couples with their children. This beautiful tableau touched me. With a shake of the head, I refused a photographer's invitation to take a souvenir picture of the place.

He was far from imagining that the image of this square and this austere monument will always be engraved on my memory. I closed my eyes to avoid reading the word "Court" written in big letters over the door. Everything was becoming confused and a voice pierced my eardrums: "Don't rejoice, Rachida, your freedom is only temporary! Run, make the most of it, you're on the run, my dear, you're on the run."

Feeling weary, I had to turn my back on the good life, on the coloured water, and head for the bus station. Before getting there, I again needed all my courage to ignore the verbal assaults of some men. Once in the bus, I could finally catch my breath, have a few minutes of peace and a brief instant of respite, before confronting the neighbourhood. The contemptuous and hateful stares of the neighbours for whom I was only a lady of the night, a whore leaving a new lover every night.

But I was far away; I quivered with love and respect in the presence of God. I walked protected by my angels, who eased my steps. I trembled, yes, I trembled with gratitude, so much so that I almost lost my balance.

All those people, ready to scandalmonger, never ventured to make the smallest gesture to allay the fears of my little ones. From afar I saw my children, standing in the night, looking out for my arrival. I wiped my eyes and put on a smile. I had to be strong; I was coming back to them, and with me, security.

However, I had a duty to fulfil towards my companion of the basement, who had not enjoyed my luck. I could not inform his wife as she was behind locked doors. Through the wall I could hear his children crying. As I was going down the stairs, I bumped into his mother who had been out shopping. She was initially very suspicious, but quickly changed her attitude once she knew the reason for my visit.

Her indifference to my tale made my blood run cold. No feeling overcame her - neither panic nor surprise. I was the surprised one when she finally deigned to speak:

"I am tired of the problems of this son who leads the good life, leaving his wife and children to me. It's a heavy load for me. Besides, I won't be able to let his brother know straight away. I'll go and see him about it tomorrow. Thank you, my daughter."

It was almost eight o'clock when I got back to my home. I don't remember eating despite a terrible hollow in my stomach. I was so emotionally shaken up by that day that, barely through the door, I collapsed on the couch to give myself over to the care of my little ones who put me to bed like a child. They were well behaved, obedient and ready to do anything to comfort me. Once my head was under the blanket, I let my tears flow. I bit my lip to stop myself from howling over the fear mixed with sadness that shone in my little ones' eyes. They would have given their lives to spare me my troubles, so guilty did they feel over what was happening to me. They even decided never again to ask me for anything, especially Younès, who jumped at every gesture and every time he heard the words, "Mummy... I want...". His eyes opened very wide and his palm was always ready to close that mouth, to stop that voice which could sadden me and blame my powerlessness. With a sigh of relief, my son let his hand drop when the request entailed only a kiss or a favour not requiring any money.

My little man wanted at all costs to safeguard my peace of mind. He went as far as banning from his speech the words "I want" and "need". Although sick, he pretended to forget his doctor's appointments and refused medication. This was the

reasoning of someone who kept in the background for the sake of others, an impressive decision taken by a little mind of fifteen. He sacrificed himself and went as far as refusing his schooling to spare me the heavy costs. Only Mummy's peace of mind mattered.

"I have never seen a kid as attached to his mother as yours," the headmistress of the high school in Meknès had said to me. He had been a boarder there since the doctor had advised that he leave the humid atmosphere of Casablanca.

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Younès looked forward to my visits, and inevitably my departure upset him; it was a real wrench:

"Younès, my darling, you're old enough now, and what's more, you know very well that I never miss a weekend."

"I know Mummy, but it's beyond my control; I can't hold back my tears. I can't live far from you."

This flood of tears streaming down his cheeks intensified my sorrow. He had lost a lot of weight. Looking very pale, my darling stood behind the entrance gate railings every Saturday at midday, waiting for his breath of life. Seeing him thus, all the school employees watched out for my appearance, moved to see us hugging. We looked like two great lovers that destiny had separated. The cruel destiny reserved for a sensitive child, a child of divorce in a pitiless society.

Younès was very bright in his studies. For this reason, the headmistress as well as his teachers took a special interest in him. His schooling lasted two long years that cost me an arm and a leg. Lamely, I hobbled down every road. I did not try to make ends meet. It was impossible. But I tried to keep myself together, because I was being fired at from every side.

What mattered was survival, and my life was very precious to me since my children's lives depended on mine. If the oldest could not bear my absence, what would become of the others if I should disappear?

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After a long and hard day of making deliveries, I was detained in Beni-Mellal to collect a cheque, and I had to spend the night there. More than ever, I felt anxious about being far from my little ones. Early the next day, I hurried to the post office to telephone and get news of the children. A surprise was waiting for me. They announced that Younès was at home. Although reassured about his health, I became worried as I knew it wasn't a holiday period. Like a madwoman, I dropped everything. Carrying my bag of samples, I headed for the outskirts of town in the hope of getting into the first car going to Meknès. A beautiful green car with a military registration number stopped a few metres from me. Without thinking and reassured by the green and yellow plates, I ran up

to the driver.

"Where are you going, Madam?"

"To Meknès, Sir."

"I'm stopping 30 km this side, if that suits you..."

"I don't know if I'll find any way of going further."

"Yes... yes... of course; it's a little village but you can find transport there."

"In that case, I'll come with you."

In his civilian clothing, this decent and very straightforward gentleman inspired my respect. We spoke at length, of children, the problems of raising and schooling them, and even of politics. Thoroughly involved in the discussion, I jumped at the sight of a signpost:

"But... we're in Meknès."

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"Yes, I know; I couldn't drop you before. It doesn't matter; I'll turn around; I have a little farm 30 km from here."

"Thank you, Sir, you're very kind; I don't know how to repay you."

"You already have; the pleasure of meeting a mother like you delighted me."

He paused a moment before continuing:

"Here, I'm leaving you with my contact details. Don't hesitate to get hold of me if you have any problems. I would be happy to see you again and be of service."

He took his pen, wrote down his telephone number and address, then looked up at me, before quickly writing down: "Colonel X". I couldn't believe my eyes. In a flash, many things crossed my mind..

"But that's impossible! Are you a colonel? What a pity I only found out now! Otherwise, believe me, I would have pestered you so much that my son would already be registered in a military high school!"

"Never mind; it'll have to wait until next time. I expect your call if you need anything, Madam...?"

"Madam Rachida."

"Delighted to meet you, Madam, and good luck."

In spite of everything I had to endure, caught up as I was with my frenzied race, I never contacted the colonel. In my whirlwind existence, I lost track of many things.

For me, hitch-hiking was a rapid means of transport which I could not turn down, especially since I was often accompanied by my two older sons.

"How did you learn to hitch-hike?" a woman had asked Adil on picking him up along her way when he was still very young.

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"With Mummy," he had replied spontaneously.

Throughout the period when Younès was at school in Meknès, I was helped out on a number of occasions by a medical consultant who often visited his parents living in Fès.

"Oh! The hitch-hiker... Still no car? Come on, get in then, I'm building up credit so that when you buy a car, you can give me a lift."

I never knew the name of this doctor, and yet our discussions flowed easily. I learnt a great deal about the medical world and he never failed to be respectful towards me.

On that particular day, I arrived at the high school out of breath, and didn't take time to greet all the kind faces smiling at me. I was anxious to know the reasons for Younès's sudden departure. I ran up the stairs leading to the headmistress's office, where I was received straight away:

"I'm sorry to have troubled you, but... I can't keep Younès in my school."

"But... why..."

"Wait, wait, don't worry, Madam, your son hasn't done anything, and it isn't an expulsion at all. Let me explain to you. It's entirely for his psychological stability and also for fear of finding him lifeless in his bed one day. That child can't live away from you."

"I come and see him every weekend."

"I know, I know. In my forty years' of teaching, I have never seen a child as attached to his mother. I'm telling you this and I ask you never to forget it."

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"And what about... his studies?"

"Yes, unfortunately, he's a bright and well brought up child, but particularly highly strung. He never stops pining for you."

"I do my best, Madam."

"Precisely, that's what makes him suffer the most. He is aware of your sacrifice, which makes him sick and worsens his asthma attacks. As you can see it, serves no purpose to keep him away from you."

"In heaven's name, what about his studies?" It's impossible in Casa; all the private French schools have closed down."

"There's more to life than studying. Think about it. Which would you prefer, his life or his studies?"

"His life of course."

"So, Madam, Younès needs you. I am also a mother and I am a psychologist as well. What I am advising you is for the good of this child to whom I am very attached. I am also losing money through his departure, but there are other priorities. Younès needs to feel secure."

Oh Lord, how could I guarantee him this? How could he be secure with his mother constantly being hounded and threatened?

I would have given my life in exchange for that tranquillity.

I was yet willing to do anything to instil peace in the hearts of my children and provide a better tomorrow for them. But how long was my night...

Adil was thirteen years old. His face lit up when I gave him his bath. Those were pleasant moments, moments of great confidences since we were alone together in the bathroom.

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"Ha, ha! Mummy, let me wash myself; I'm big now."

"Oh yes, that's your opinion. But I'll take charge of Sunday's bath, and for life, my darling; understood?"

"Ha, ha, no you won't? When I'm big my wife's going to do it!"

"Oh, OK, the whole week's baths, except the one on Sunday. I'm warning you, when you hear the doorbell of your house ring on Sunday mornings, just know that it's Mummy come to give you your bath. I have bathed you since you were born; how do you expect me to give up my place to another woman? For life, my darling, for life!"

"Oh, oh, I swear you're crazy, ha... ha... ha..."

"Yes, but wait, that's not all. Once a week, I'll take you from your wife. You'll sleep with me, in my bed, in my arms; you'll be mine alone."

"Oh no! Anything but that! You're crazy; my wife won't like it!"

"Well, too bad for her; we'll find another one who'll accept our conditions, not so, my darling? You're mine, you belong to me and I am your boss for life, whether you like it or not. Oh! I remember the first minute you came into the world. You were licking your lips..."

"Stop, stop, don't say that! No, ha... ha... ha..."

"Oh no, I have to remind you from time to time so as to refresh your memory. I am the boss. I'm the one who gives the orders; you carry them out in silence. And for a start, keep quiet, and let me wash you."

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"Ouch, ouch... ha... ha... Gently, you're tickling me."

Around my children my life was joy, happiness, love and harmony:

"Listen Adil, I'm going to ask you a question and you're going to answer without thinking, quick as a flash, OK?"

"Yes, ask away!"

"Are you happy with Mummy?"

"Oh! Yes! Mummy, of course."

He was already in my arms, hugging me happily. What could be more wonderful for a mother?

"Yes, but wait, wait, I haven't finished my sentence yet," he had added. "You must also be happy for me to be really happy, Mummy."

"I am, my darling."

"All the same, you also need someone to love you and protect you and make you happy - a man, Mummy."

"You are my man, my darling, and I am happy with you."

Exchanging ideas! I had the magic key in my hands. I never stopped communicating with my children and sharing everything with them. I asked their opinion about everything. We were nearly all men in the house. The only woman was our Soundouss, always spared the problems, the last to understand and the first served, "La touta"* as we nicknamed her. Even Yamine, the youngest, was more and more coming out of his shell to align himself with us, the men. We accepted him so as not to disappoint him, then gently restored him to his marvellous world of childhood so as not to deprive him of that fleeting happiness.

* *Translator's note: This nickname might be rendered as something like*

"Little Madam" - a female 'number one' around whom the household revolves.

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It was only when I took a shower that I realised I belonged to the female sex. I had completely forgotten that I had breasts, wrapped in ragged bras held together with knots and pins. Luckily my jeans and canvas shoes were holding out. How could I think of these trivialities when problems were springing up from all sides? I was no longer managing to spare my children. It wasn't even worth fleeing from home anymore. Together we managed to shake off the policemen. How else could I resolve my difficulties? I had no choice but to settle one cheque with another, gain a bit of time, and hold out against winds and tides.

I needed all my energy. I hid, I fled, I killed myself in the process. I paid off what I could, including the interest. That was the law. A law, a system of justice that still had not granted me my rights, my maintenance allowance. It was enough to drive one crazy. I was in shit up to the neck. Who could hold out a hand to me? Not even Monsieur Jean anymore. He had returned permanently to France without my having been able to finish necessary renovations in the house. My neighbour repeatedly used to advise me to plaster the bedroom walls where the paint was peeling due to the dampness. But all this was beyond my meagre means. Monsieur Jean did, however, do me a last favour. In order to provide better ventilation, he opened the forbidden door leading into the room where the children slept.

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His villa, situated at the entrance to the complex, remained closed up. There was therefore nobody to reply to the enquiries of the *Chaouch*, who had been instructed to present me with a summons to appear before the Public Prosecutor, who had in turn been instructed by the Minister of Justice to find out about me and report to Rabat as a follow up on my telegram addressed to the Royal Secretariat.

All these summons remained unanswered. They thought I had moved. A few months later, I received a letter from the Ministry of Justice asking me to contact the King's Prosecutor at the Court of Casablanca as quickly as possible.

I was received by his deputy. We had a long interview during which I explained my problems; I mentioned the maintenance allowance, without omitting to make clear that it was probably too late because my children's father had already lost everything. To start another procedure from scratch didn't suit me. At most he would be imprisoned, which would hardly solve my financial difficulties.

At the end of this interview, the deputy prosecutor promised to help me should there be any problems while awaiting a response

from Rabat. This rekindled a glimmer of hope in me. I was not a less-than-nothing, a type of vermin likely to contaminate others and invade their living space. In fact, I was starting to feel at home in the city where I lived and where my dear neighbours were as slanderous as ever. Even more so since I had set up a room at home to do a little sewing. That was too much for them. They did not forgive me for fighting my way back up again when it was my demise they were expecting. I dared to haul myself up to the rank of family head and that outraged them. So they met in a closed committee and decided that my sewing activity at home must at all costs be stopped:

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"Today we are married and without children; but tomorrow we will have some, so how can hers be allowed to mix with ours? And if we let her work at home, tomorrow she'll have a factory set up on top of us."

This was what my dear neighbours were saying. In response, I spoke to them openly of their smear campaign:

"Are you not ashamed to be out plotting and planning in the street late at night, and who are you abusing? A woman who works for her children! At least have the guts to confront me instead of scheming in corners. I'm telling you to your face: go to hell!"

With this, I turned round to go back into my house, leaving them flabbergasted. My appearance took them by surprise as they thought they were alone. Once over his surprise, the most malicious jumped at the opportunity. He called for his wife in a loud voice. She rushed out with her baby in her arms:

"Yes! What's the matter? You gave me a fright!"

"Fatna! Fatna! Give me my son and go to prison! Pull out this trashy woman's hair for me!" he ordered her, grabbing the kid from her arms.

My neighbour was crafty to have found a way of killing two birds with one stone, getting rid of an irritating wife and an embarrassing neighbour. I did not give him that satisfaction. I locked myself securely in my house, thus sparing my hair that bothered the woman from next door so much. Once safe and on thinking of the man's reaction, I laughed uncontrollably which helped me unwind. Two days after this incident, I received the sky blue summons asking me to appear at my second home: the police station.

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Since I was well known there, I didn't need to make myself known or introduce myself. Although new to the area, the superintendent recognised me. And to think that he had never seen me before! One would have thought that he was waiting for me:

"Good mor..."

I didn't have time to finish my sentence.

"Are you going to tell me? Why did you demolish the wall?"

"The wall... What wall?"

"You took advantage of the Frenchman's departure to demolish it and move into the garage!"

"No... It's that... the..."

"You have no explanation to give me; you're going to shut up and you're going to do as I say, OK?"

"Sir, listen..."

"You're going to shut up... Agreed? You're going to go there immediately with the policemen so that they can testify to the situation on the premises, understood?"

"The police inside my house! Dear God, my children are going to be frightened. Oh no! Anything but that! Sir, listen, my children are going..."

"You're going to shut up, OK! And behave yourself! Do you know who you're talking to? Stop waving your hands around in my presence - what bad manners!"

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I submitted to his will. Did I have a choice? I put my hands behind my back and bowed my head, thus showing that I had had enough: at your service, *Sidi*...

"Is that all you have to say, Superintendent? And the search warrant?"

"You're going to shut up! Otherwise I'll lock you up!"

Furious, the superintendent was certainly not used to people standing up to him. He looked me over angrily: "Oh! The canvas shoes... and the jeans... Ah, the hair... uncovered... Really, you would think we were in America..."

I made gigantic efforts to suppress my anger and put myself as always in God's hands. I left the police station accompanied by two inspectors, a policeman and an officer. Despite my irritation, I noticed the knowing look exchanged between them and a man, a gentleman comfortably sitting in his beautiful car. Watched by him, I was loaded into the van.

My children were waiting for me at home since they didn't have school on Wednesdays.

When we arrived, my little ones were seated around the small table; they were doing their school homework. Surprised and with eyes like saucers, they watched us coming in without understanding a thing.

"Come in, come in, gentlemen," I said, forcing myself to smile. I wanted to be strong: "Don't be scared, my darlings, Mummy is here." I preferred to lie to them: "Nothing to worry about, children. It's about the renovations; the neighbours are complaining. Apparently the labourer is making too much noise while he's working."

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"Oh! Good," said their reassured expressions. "Because I don't like the police," Soundouss's was saying, as she came over to hold my hand. With a jump, Yamine took up a position in a corner, ready to pounce, all the while observing the visitors' movements and words. Only my two older boys followed us around and tried to fathom what was eliciting so much interest. Our visitors couldn't understand either since there was neither a door nor a demolished wall. There was only poverty... Bare patches of cement everywhere on the walls and ceiling. The ensuing silence only made the atmosphere heavier. Without saying a word, they headed for the door, just as a figure appeared on the doorstep.

"Ah ha," I thought, "It's the stranger from the beautiful car!"

"I am Mr X, the owner of the house," he said to me, proud of his status.

"Delighted, Sir, and what would you be wanting?"

"I want to come in, to check for myself."

"Not a step further; stay where you are."

"But!" he said, looking at the officer.

"No but's... They are the police... the law... the State... I can do nothing about it... But as for you! No."

With a gesture of his hand, the officer stopped him from entering. Without being invited to go with them, I climbed back into their car to put an end to the afternoon's events.

Despite their reticence, I could understand the silent language of the officer and superintendent. The latter suggested I go away until the next day. So I left.

I was indeed back very early. But in front of another door, that of the Deputy Prosecutor who had promised me his help. He was surprised by my tale and reacted quicker than I had expected. He picked up the telephone:

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"Hello, is that the superintendent? I am.. I'm phoning you about a person from your area; she's in my office; it's Mrs... Listen please, a home is a place of privacy that must not be violated, and the dignity of citizens must not be scorned."

I realised that he was undoubtedly being given a false version of the facts, but his calm features reassured me.

"Listen, Sir, you are to attend to this lady. Take her statement. Make a detailed report for me and send it immediately. Good bye."

He addressed me, the citizen in question, with the air of a man satisfied with having done his duty well:

"There we go, Madam, you can go and make your statement in peace."

"Thank you, Sir, thank you very much."

During the afternoon, I bumped into the Superintendent in front of the police station's main entrance. I greeted him politely as if nothing was wrong. He replied with the same hypocrisy. In the office, I answered all their questions, and I was finally handed the file to sign the statement:

"Sign, here," the inspector ordered me.

"I would first like to read the statement if you don't mind."

"Can you read Arabic?"

"Not well, but I manage."

"Hum, hum, here it is."

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After years of gullibility, my intelligence had finally been roused... I wanted to check the accuracy of the report myself. Luckily for me - I had just escaped the charge for which they wanted me to shoulder the responsibility; I nearly signed a sheet admitting to having demolished the wall.

"Oh really! You didn't demolish it?" he dared to say to me. "I'm sorry; I made a mistake. Come back tomorrow then; we'll write another report. Right now, I don't have time."

My nerves had to be tempered steel to withstand this cold war. The next day, I received another visit, from the property owner accompanied by a distinguished gentleman:

"This is the *Cadi*," asserted the man I was seeing for the second time. And to think that I had been living in his home for years!

"Delighted to meet you, *Cadi*, I'm sure, and now?"

"We want to see the premises..."

"You're going to leave immediately, otherwise this time Rabat will hear about our situation. The Minister of Justice, do you know him?"

At this, the *Cadi* was already beating a hasty retreat. Everything might be taken from me, even my friends, but not my refuge.

He came back in the afternoon, with the chief *Caid* in person. I might have gone off my head if the behaviour of the latter had not been very proper. He tried to persuade me that it would only be a brief inspection. In the face of so much politeness and to put an end to the incessant comings and goings, I gave in:

"Listen, Sir, you can come in to determine for yourself that the neighbours are lying."

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"No, thank you, Madam, I take your word for it. Mr Abdelmajid also says that it's a place of residence that he rented to you, and not a factory."

"If you call a sewing machine and two workers a factory, I again invite you in, to determine for yourself."

"I would prefer you to come to my office tomorrow at whatever time suits you. We will find a solution together."

"That's fine, Sir, with pleasure."

I went there as promised. After a long discussion, I realised that the property owner's intention was to make me leave the premises. I nevertheless succeeded in gaining the upper hand by briefly mentioning all my problems:

"Do you have children?" I had ventured.

"Yes, of course, older children."

Proudly, he told me about the efforts and sacrifices made to raise them. I had adjusted my sights better to hit my target:

"I know something about all that, and especially since I assume the responsibility alone. But before leaving, I would like to ask you a favour. Do you mind?"

"Ask away."

"I don't know who is behind all this business, but I would ask you to pass on to him what I have said. I would be very grateful to you."

When I left the chief, I knew that I had gained his support. But my affair took another turn. I was no longer allowed to do sewing at home without permission. At the end of my tether, and unable to face more unpleasantness, I put away my sewing machine and threads, and gave my workers notice until better days.

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The weather was lovely the day the property owner arrived alone at my home:

"So, Madam, God has not put you back on the right track?"

"I think I should rather be asking you that question. How do you think I could withstand your attacks, yours and those of the gentlemen of high society, if God were not on my side! Let's clear up this matter, once and for all. If I let you come in to determine for yourself that nothing has been changed, will you leave me in peace?"

"Yes!"

"God is your witness?"

"God is my witness."

"Come in, Sir, make yourself at home."

This last sentence didn't please him at all: "Oh! No, my dear lady, may God preserve me from that. I couldn't be at home here. I'm happy in my little paradise," he must have been thinking.

"On the contrary, my fine gentleman, I can clearly see you living here! Sleeping on this mattress on the floor, your children between these damp and crumbling walls. What? You don't like the colour of cement? No really, it's very natural, very original! Look, there's even some paint left dating from twenty years ago... It has historical interest... No? You don't like it? You find it shocking! Ah! You don't understand what you're seeing? That's our clothing. No, we don't have a wardrobe to put it away in. It's easier; everything is within reach; we need only help ourselves. What are you looking for? Oh no, we don't have a television set, or a lounge. We're very comfortable here, happy sitting on chairs round a table, provided you leave us in peace... Where are you going? Don't you want to see the kitchen? So much the better; there's nothing to see but a gas camping stove. No fridge - what would we do with one? We live from day to day. But... speak! Say something! Why don't you say something? You've lost your voice! Look me in the eye; don't tell me I'm stronger than you! Oh, at last! A little smile! What could be making him smile... Ah, the flowers! Yes, my little paradise, my only luxury. Status and class can't be bought; you're born with them and they come from a good upbringing. I am vigilant about

that, Sir! And I'm killing myself for my kids' education. Ah! You don't like that? Does that offend you? The universities are for you, the elite! What difference can it make to me whether you like it or not; I'm the one in shit, not you! Is that it, are you going? Are you satisfied?"

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As though he had read my thoughts, he had only the courage to stammer: "Good bye, Madam."

I never saw him again. I met the Superintendent again later. I was surprised to find him a different person, more understanding than the previous time:

"Listen, Madam, we're well informed about everything here, and we know all about each citizen. I know you're a brave woman who works to raise her children properly."

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Then he added, in a rapid whisper:

"Between you and me, even if you do sell your fanny, you deserve everyone's respect for your courage."

"Oh! No, you're..."

"That's enough, that's enough, you don't have to justify yourself! But from now on, count on me; I will always be there to back you up. Think of me as a brother and my door will always be open to you."

I refrained from answering, shocked by so much vulgarity coming from a man of his rank and age. I seriously doubted the sincerity of those words and the support behind that door. But I was nevertheless called to knock on it time and time again. On each occasion I found support there. My children were no longer scared of the blue invitations. I was sometimes summonsed verbally by the superintendent himself when he bumped into me in the street.

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CHAPTER XIII

It was the period when I most needed that moral support, given the crisis I was going through. I was no more than a fireball whose flames consumed everything they approached. I was cracking up and I howled over the slightest thing. Only in writing did I find peace and flee looming depression. We were at the end of the school year. I sent my children to their grandparents' in Fès, and dropped everything to shut myself up at home and write. This was when Nora, my ex-husband's niece, came to stay with me for a while. She enjoyed correcting my rough drafts whenever I took a break because I stayed buried in

my notebooks almost all day long.

Nora approved of my writing more than anything in the world. She was studying for a degree in literature and helped me with pleasure. For her it was a break from routine. The further we advanced in the work, the more involved in it she became. Through my pages she discovered a woman very different from the one she had known before. I was no longer her uncle's wife, but a real friend. And we were never as close as during that time. The demands of social life separated us once more. Once married to an important French industrialist, Nora forgot me, like all the other women for whom I was, over the years, a sister and a friend.

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In fact, Nora had reappeared in my life only to transform it. She often forced me to leave my room to get some fresh air. This somewhat annoyed me but I went along anyway, as happened late one afternoon, a Friday in August, when she dragged me from my book:

"Hey, come with me please... We'll be an hour at most, just enough time to run a little errand. You're not going to let me go all alone, are you?"

I accepted half-heartedly; but as I knew we were going into town, I wanted to use the opportunity to drop in on one of my clients who owed me some money. He owned a sports club. Nora and I separated in front of the gym entrance, and we agreed that she would meet me there again later. Saïd was in the middle of a discussion with a man:

"Oh! Here's a sportswoman, and a real expert on the subject; her opinion will be very useful to me!" my client exclaimed on seeing me coming down the steps leading into the foyer of the gym.

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"Hello, you've arrived at just the right time. This is Mr Lary. Tell me, what do you think of these products?"

"Let's have a look... You call these sports products! They're real junk."

I gave my opinion spontaneously, without paying attention to Mr Lary's expression.

"Are you saying that because it's competition, or do you not like the item itself?" Saïd asked.

"You are a faithful customer; I don't want to deceive you, and as you must know, quality is what comes first."

"There, she goes again... She wants to make me sign another cheque... I still have lots of stock to sell."

"Don't worry; I have nothing to offer you at the moment; but all the same, you're not going to compare my products with those of this gentleman. My products are unique, Mr Saïd."

"You yourself must also be unique, Madam," chipped in Mr Lary.

This compliment surprised me; luckily the telephone rang, defusing the atmosphere a little. Saïd excused himself to go and answer and Mr Lary turned towards me:

"So, just like that, you don't like my products?"

"Honestly not. It would surprise me if Mr Saïd raved about them."

"And what if I offered to buy your whole stock of merchandise from you?"

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"Slow down, slow down please, you're mistaken. I am not what you think. I myself work for other people."

"But you have only just said that your products are unique."

"Yes, in other words, I create my designs, and the factory undertakes to make them. I am the only one to sell them on the market; I have exclusive rights so to speak..."

"That's a very good arrangement. We could work together if you like?"

"I don't know what to say to you; I am currently busy with a manuscript that I must finish."

"Oh really? What's it about exactly?"

"An autobiography."

"Your own, of course."

"Yes."

"Your life must be interesting. Could I read some extracts from it?"

"I don't know; I can't promise you anything."

"Why? If you have already entrusted it to an editor, you have nothing to fear."

"I must admit that I haven't... I don't even know what to do next."

"I can help you; I also dabble in that field."

"Oh really, I would like that, yes... thank you."

Mr Lary thus promised to contact me after his return from Spain where he had to spend a week. I gave him my contact details, collected my money from Saïd and took leave of them as soon as Nora appeared on the doorstep. I was unaware at the time that that forced outing was going to turn my life upside down.

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This period of my life was more or less calm. This calm worried me as I was unused to it. After a lull, a storm always lay in wait for me. As tumultuous as my destiny might be, it needed this respite to gather new momentum. The hardest trials were still in store for me.

After a gap of nearly a year, I saw Geneviève again. This good mother thought of me every time she had a new product in hand which could be profitable. I took some time before accepting to take on the sale of lycra leotards. Geneviève supplied me with all the garments except the leg-warmers which I made myself. I thus took my first steps in the knitwear industry. That was how I met Touria, my first worker.

I re-contacted my customers with pleasure; they were delighted to see me again and happy to get their hands on original items: "Still fit and smiling, Mrs Sport?"

Yes, but behind that smile and courage were hidden many things - the reality of my life as a woman. Among my bills and my merchandise, I was a businesswoman, held in high esteem by my customers. But outside that context, I continued to live a life of hell. People saw me only as a naked woman... a body. I had dressed and covered myself in vain; everything vanished into thin air as soon as I went beyond the Aïcha roundabout towards Aïn Sebaâ.

At that point, and every day, my life took on a different shape. I led an incredible existence. I travelled the length and breadth of Casablanca and everywhere I was received with respect. But as soon as I entered my residential neighbourhood, I encountered stares that saw me as nothing more than a slut. My slightest gestures, my comings and goings, everything was watched closely. People even had the cheek to ask Younès if we were observing Ramadan.

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In vain had I hardened myself and taken refuge in my prayers; all these underhand attacks undermined me more each day. I sank more and more into silence and took refuge in my prayers.

"God, let this be good news," I said when called to answer the phone. Mr Lary, whom I did not immediately remember, was on the line:

"Mr Lary? That name doesn't ring a bell."

"What... The Tunisian... We met at Mr Saïd's two weeks ago, the sports products."

"Oh! Yes, I'm sorry, I remember now; so you're Tunisian?"

"Yes, Madam, I'm phoning about your manuscript, if you still want to let me have it."

"Yes, of course, so where could I contact you?"

"Um, um, in fact I move around a lot; you set the time."

"Not tomorrow, I have work to do at home; I don't know if... or take down my address then, and drop by tomorrow."

"That will be fine; I'll try to be there at about two o'clock."

That very evening, my friends the Cherkaouis from Marrakech came to visit.

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The idea of entertaining a stranger at home was bothering me. And while I was ironing my leg-warmers, I confided in Latifa:

"You know, I have a strange premonition... And then I hadn't foreseen this meeting with my bank; I absolutely must go there."

"You can go; if he comes we'll keep him here. Come now, don't be superstitious; what's done is done now."

"Yes, you're right. Hey, there's someone at the door! I think it's him."

Indeed it was Mr Lary.

"Hello, I'm sorry, I'm a little late; I had trouble finding your house."

"I was going out to run a little errand, but come in; my friends are here to keep you company while you wait for me to come back. Sit down! Can I get you some coffee?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Here is my manuscript; flick through it; I won't be long."

It wasn't that easy. I had to convince the bank manager to grant me an overdraft even although my account had been frozen for months; however, he agreed. Feeling radiant, I returned to the house and my guest was still there, the manuscript in his hands. He seemed to be absorbed by its contents. I spontaneously started to talk about myself. I suddenly felt as if I was in the presence of someone attentive who would judge me only for what I really was. He took his leave late

afternoon; our friendship had just been born.

I saw him again the next day; he introduced me to his partner, and over a cup of coffee, we discussed business. In this way I subsequently became their third partner. Lary would do the planning for the company, Mustapha would finance it, and I, it was agreed, would market the products.

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As he was a civil servant, Mustapha had to leave the responsibility of the administrative formalities to us. I continued simultaneously to sell my sports products, which interested Mr Lary. I saw him every day and had entrusted him with a few samples.

With the passing days, Lary proved to be more and more kind, gallant and willing to help. Having lived in Paris for ten years, he was very open-minded and had wide experience of women. It was not at all difficult for him to discover my weak points: my faith in God and my love for my children. Shrewdly, he supported all my points of view. Stupidly, I impulsively and unreservedly confided my deepest thoughts in him - about life, which hadn't been good to me; money, which had no value for me; men, whom I avoided.. He knew that for me, only my children mattered.

"You're right; I wonder how a father could abandon his kids. I hardly know them, and yet I adore them."

"What are you waiting for to have some of your own?"

"I haven't had that good fortune. I have not met the woman of my dreams. I married to please my family, and after three years of marriage, we are in the throes of getting a divorce. Those sort of proceedings take a long time in Tunisia, so I'm waiting."

He was often overtaken with the desire to speak about his country and its customs. He enthusiastically described every tourist attraction and his home town "El-Jem" to us. He described his family, and particularly his mother, at length:

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"She's the person I love most in the world," he had said to me one day as he hung up the phone, his eyes misted over with tears.

He thus gave me the impression of being a big child deprived of his mother. That very evening, he was assaulted and transported urgently to hospital. I was his only friend, so Lary gave my contact details so that I could be informed. It was after midnight when the ambulance men rang at my door to pass on the news. Accompanied by my father, who was visiting for a few days, I rushed to his bedside. I would have given my soul to that man who was delirious and calling for his mother.

He thanked God every time he regained consciousness and found me near him. What more could he have said to endear himself to me than the two magic words: "God" and "Mummy"?

My maternal instinct drew me closer to him and I watched over him like a mother. Once recovered, he wouldn't let go of me. I had in some ways become his safety net, which with the passing days, gained in scale and importance in his eyes. He had noticed the great respect accorded me by both my customers and suppliers. He had planned to use me in his own interest, like a visiting card, and he also had seen a goldmine in me. Cunningly, he then thought that the only way not to lose me would be to tie a tighter bond, the most sacred of bonds. He asked me to marry him.

These words of his made my skin crawl. At heart, I was flattered, but not without apprehension. At my age! Divorced! And with four children! I also realised that it was a unique opportunity to prove that I was not a less-than-nothing. I nevertheless informed Lary that my children would have the final say. They welcomed the news with joy, keen to show everyone that I was not the whore of Saudis.

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Even now tears run down my face and blood boiling with revolt surges through my veins at this memory. I accepted this marriage for numerous reasons, and particularly for my children and their peace of mind.

Filled with confidence, I was married in the Moslem tradition before God and in the presence of a few witnesses. We were waiting for Lary to obtain his official divorce before being joined according to Moroccan law, since polygamy was forbidden in Tunisia.

I naively entered into an *Orfi*⁶⁰ marriage with all the faith I had in God. This act in no way committed Lary in terms of the law, and I didn't know that, for him, God was a myth...

What can I tell you, my dear reader, about this man? What I lived through at his side cannot be summarised in a few pages. With him, I knew the two extremes, great happiness and real torture...

After our marriage, I obviously remained the mother hen brooding constantly over her children. My maternal instinct was so strong, so great, that I felt capable of showering affection on all the children of the world. A new life had started for me. I did not have to give in to any particular constraints. I remained free in my actions; nothing changed in my life as a businesswoman, and everything relating to my children remained my problem and mine alone. Thus, my duty towards them took precedence over my marital duty. Besides, this was the only condition I had laid down before pronouncing the fateful "yes". I did everything within my power so that nothing in my little ones' lives was turned upside down. I was

always there for them; they continued to be served first, even at table. As far as money was concerned, my children dug in my bag. Often in their stepfather's pockets as well when I was short of change.

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I sensed a feeling of pride in their knowing looks and they appreciated the trust I had in them. My bedroom door was never closed and they could burst in there at any time. Lary thus also received a morning kiss, and Adil was always the first to wake us. A shared pleasure. If my son sometimes happened not to come, Lary seemed sad:

"You know, darling, I woke up badly this morning."

"You woke up badly?"

"Yes, I'm missing Adil's kiss."

At these words, I threw my arms around his neck, in tears.

"Do you love my children?"

"I adore them.. not like my own children; I don't want to get old, but like brothers," he had retorted, smiling.

"Don't flatter yourself too much; you're no younger than I am, but I didn't waste my time doing nothing like you; I conceived my four children. And you? Not one..."

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"After my divorce, will you make me one?"

"As for that, you can dream on; mine are more than enough for me. Polygamy is allowed in our country; please don't hold back!"

"I want your child; don't be selfish."

Lary knew how to please me. He took particularly good care of my children and he was more than a father to them. He often came home early to be with them when I was working. I still had debts to honour and my load as mother of a family weighed heavily with three children at high school. As if by magic, the storm subsided. We had learnt how to smile again in the arms of a man who seemed to demonstrate great affection for us.

Every day, he discovered a bit more of my little world and became more attached to it. What was initially only a marriage of reason for him changed into a marriage of love. He was in love with a poor mother confronting a difficult destiny.

He was unable to check my pace. We saw each other only late at night, when I came home shattered and half asleep. I needed all my strength, my only capital. Yet it was letting me down that week. I was struggling to get out of bed and my nerves

snapped over trifles. I felt something strange in myself, something new about my body.

My husband, who was observing me closely, was happy:

"Oh! No, that's out of the question!"

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I ran to my doctor for help because my period was late. On the way, I bumped into Naïma and missed my appointment. She stopped me from committing the most odious of crimes on that twenty-sixth day of Ramadan.

It was a slap in the face for me as well as for my doctor, a practising Moslem. An appointment was made for the next week and then once again cancelled and postponed as I was suffering from food poisoning. The third appointment was cancelled due to my doctor unexpectedly being away. I preferred to wait for his return. But he told me:

"No, no I'm sorry, dear Madam. For all the gold in the world, I won't do it. You are now two months pregnant. Impossible!"

"Who can I turn to then?"

"I'm going to speak to a colleague about it."

My curettage was set up for the next day, a Saturday afternoon:

"Have only one or two yoghurts to eat; as a rule I don't work, but the nurse will be there; my colleague will see you here in my surgery at two o'clock."

I was punctual, the nurse too.

"I hope that we're going to put an end to this problem," she said to me with an understanding smile.

After two injections, I was more relaxed in the operating theatre and awaited the appearance of the doctor.

"Come, come now, my darling, get up," the nurse told me, clapping her hands. "There's nothing to be done about it; your baby is determined to come into the world. Follow my advice and keep it. It's a bit much though, isn't it?"

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"Why, what's the matter?"

"The doctor has just phoned; he has been delayed. His father has had a heart attack."

"No, that's not possible! And what about the injections you gave me? And what if I have problems afterwards?"

"Of course you won't; you have nothing to fear; come on, get dressed and run home with your baby. I'm the one losing out here; I wasted an afternoon."

That's the true story of my daughter who came into the world through God's will. A really incredible story that even my husband never believed.

I was in my fourth month of pregnancy when Lary was invited to his young brother's wedding. He went more through a sense of duty than anything else. "I'll make the most of my stay in Tunisia to hurry up my divorce," he told me.

His trip was planned so quickly that he didn't have time to apply for the return visa then required by Morocco. His residence permit had expired and this oversight kept him in Tunisia for a long time.

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CHAPTER XIV

Four months after his departure, I was still without news of my husband and I wasn't expecting any either. I held it against him terribly that he had left me just when I needed him most. After such a long silence, I was visited by one of his cousins, charged personally by him to explain the reasons keeping him there.

It was the second time I had been visited by a member of his family. Firstly, it was his young brother, curious to meet this mother of four children who had dared to work her way into the Chaï family... His intention of declaring war on me was painfully obvious. Instead, a month later, my brother-in-law left us very unwillingly and tried to make amends by hugging me tightly.

Next, it was the turn of Badr, head steward for an airline company. We spent a pleasant week together as a family. He left feeling enchanted and fully resolved to convey my anger to my husband who, for his part, was being reproached by his entire family, but most strongly by my mother-in-law, who already displayed much love for me, and pushed her son continuously to speed up his return to me:

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"I'm doing everything within my power, Mother, but pray that my wife won't have the baby before I get back."

Mamy Mahbouba did more than pray... She bent over backwards to put together a layette and prepared many of good things for me.

Two weeks later, Badr came back from Tunisia with greetings from all my in-laws and told me that Lary would not be long in coming home, he was unhappy far away from us, and begged me to

forgive him for his absence.

It wasn't easy to forget. I was pregnant without a husband at my side. It looked like I had been abandoned. Malicious gossip kept tongues wagging more than ever. The proof of my conduct was there, forming within me.

Yet I nearly broke God's law, depriving my little Islam of the breath of life and me of my present happiness.

My children were as they have always been, very much with me. After sleepless nights, when I suffocated with anxiety, they were more gentle than usual, especially Adil, who spent hours speaking to me about the new arrival. Only Soundouss's spontaneity succeeded in drawing a smile from me, her only concern being the sex and name of the much-anticipated baby. My friend Fatiha thought about the layette, in contrast to Naïma who was tearing her hair out at the idea of a fifth worry. She thought better of it when she remembered that she was to blame for my having missed my curettage appointment. Every day we expected the great birth.

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My husband's return was a surprise and the children's cries of joy drowned out my cries of rage. A few days later, the first contractions started to the great excitement of Soundouss, who couldn't wait to have a much-anticipated little sister. As for Lary, he was hoping for a son. Far from all these concerns, my baby refused to come. What could it not face: the gossip sewn around me or the idea of my cruel destiny?

"You will need a caesarean; the baby is not lying correctly," the doctor informed me.

I gripped my doctor's hand; he was doing his best to calm me.

"Do you trust me?"

"Blindly, doctor."

"Well then the hospital is better equipped for your case. I will recommend you to a teacher friend; don't worry. You will be in good hands; I'll telephone him right now."

An hour after my admission to hospital, my baby was there.

"It's over! Wake up; as you desired, you have given birth to your fifth moon."

I smiled faintly.

"Islam? Do you like it, darling?"

"Yes, yes, it's very beautiful," I replied, still under the effect of the anaesthetic.

"My mother chose the name. I've just told her the news over the phone; she cried with joy. Me a daddy - can you believe it! I'm going to fetch my daughter straight away."

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The whole maternity ward was talking about this father, so ecstatically happy he wanted to share his joy with everyone he bumped into in the hospital corridors, from doctors to nurses, and even visitors. My children were just as bad at visiting time. They bickered around Islam's cot. Surrounded by flowers, those were marvellous days for me. Fulfilled, I shared the happiness I had given my family. I had forgotten my troubles and my worries; I had forgotten that I was surrounded by people who did not understand the term "darling" repeated endlessly by a husband in love with his wife whom he lavished with roses. Curious stares were fixed on each member of my little family and tried to grasp the significance of the name "uncle" that my children used for their stepfather. The question marks multiplied and my husband became *mesquine*⁶¹, a man ensnared by a mother of four children. Poor him, a foreigner... who knew nothing of the Moroccan woman and her wiles.

People's attitudes and their sympathetic looks began to annoy Lary, who was not fooled. Cunningly, he preferred to lie:

"My wife's mother is Tunisian, a cousin of my father's. There's nothing to be so shocked about."

The malicious gossips had been put in their place, my pride as a Moroccan woman was wounded.

"But why did you say that? I hate lies."

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"What do you expect me to do? It's driving me nuts; they even reproach me for loving your children; they think it's 'not natural'. It's crazy the way people believe in the supernatural in your country."

He was madly in love but unable to wrench me from the claws of the petty society surrounding me. Ten days later, I left hospital to enjoy my happiness peacefully at home. But the maid had to put in her two cents' worth:

"Malika, I thought I told you to fetch my jacket from the dry cleaner's," Lary said.

"I didn't have time to go there."

"Listen, my things take priority, understood?"

"I really don't know which way to turn, or which men to serve!"

"Which men? Who are you talking about?"

"The others, your wife's sons; aren't they as big as you?" she retorted, grumbling. "How can you expect to be special.."

Furious, he dismissed her on the spot.

Lary became more and more touchy. He could no longer bear the insinuations alluding to my freedom, my late homecomings and my associations with men. He admittedly leapt to my defence, but alas, he was beating his head against a brick wall. Furthermore, his foreign accent didn't help matters... He seemed out of his depth. He went out, slamming the door and turning a deaf ear to my request. I wanted him to buy some medicine for Younès who was having an asthma attack. It was my second day home from hospital. I had to get out of bed, although my cut was still very painful. I did my best to keep my balance. I supported myself on everything along my way - trees, walls, parked cars. I walked towards the pharmacy with my head spinning more and more. Tears soothed my hardships as a mother and I refused to admit my failing strength. Was I not ferocious enough to defend my children?

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This incident saddened me and permanently confirmed my decision never to rely on anyone whomsoever to stand in for me in my role as mother.

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CHAPTER XV

I was never able to forgive my husband for this insensitivity, despite his apologies. He was giving Islam her bottle, holding her quietly in his arms. Only a few days old, her milk went down the wrong way and, turning very blue, she nearly choked. Lary, panic-stricken, did not know what more to do.

"May God save my child; quickly Rachida, do something."

"Are you shaking with fear for your daughter? Now you know how it feels, the overwhelming love one can have for one's child. Keep it in mind from now on."

Prolonging my maternity leave was out of the question. It was time to start rushing around again as usual. I entrusted my baby to Younès, who pampered her with all his natural tenderness. I was undoubtedly "married", but Lary did not feel responsible for my little family. Without really working for us, he sometimes introduced me to customers interested in my products. Indeed, Lary was a mystery to me. Destiny had put him on my path to make my life both paradise and purgatory. Thanks to him, I was able to widen the scope of my professional activities and move across completely into knitting. That was how, after much effort, "Islam-knitwear" was launched, a label sought after by all the biggest luxury boutiques of Morocco.

It was difficult to find the workforce I needed to set up a competitive workshop. I myself trained my little team of fifteen workers, "my girls" as I called them. They were pleasant and talented. They threw themselves totally into each task and their joy in each new design was unparalleled. I often shut myself away with Touria, who found my ideas rather strange, but dared not go against me. She stammered:

"But... How...?"

"My darling, just do what I say; the rest is my problem."

I joked; I complimented her on well-made items, turning her into the queen of the knitting machine. But, when things didn't go well, I shrieked until she cried. There were mothers, widows and orphans in my team. I was very happy to be able to provide them with a living. On the eve of festivals, I absolutely had to find a way of paying them, even if it meant being left penniless:

"I haven't a single cent; I wonder what I'm going to do about food," I once said in front of my daughter.

"It's simple, Mummy, you put a red, green and white thread in the pot, and there's your meal. I don't understand why you give everything to the girls!"

Adil, on the other hand, continually defended the workers' interests.

"Oh! What's this? You're still working; hey, Mummy, it's after six o'clock."

"Keep quiet, Adil, and let the girls work," I had to reply to him.

"So, are you going to give them overtime?"

"Long live, Adil!" they shouted in unison.

"Yes, that's the way, get lost... Have a good laugh, all of you; the consignment is due tomorrow, I might remind you!"

"But tomorrow is a public holiday!"

"Adil, we're not in a bank; this is a workshop and we have to work to survive."

"Listen, girls, tomorrow is a public holiday; you must get double pay for the day."

"Oh my word, get out of here and right now; scram!"

"Yes, yes, but wait a minute; I forgot to give Touria a cake; the poor thing, she's pregnant; she must have cravings."

"And what about us?" the others shouted.

"Oh well, for that we'll dig around in Mummy's bag," he added, looking at me out of the corner of his eye and smiling knowingly.

"Oh no!"

"Mummy, when I'm big, I'll give you tons of money. I am all yours; you are my soul and my heart... Hey, girls?"

They were all touched and Adil, his eyes misted over with tears, finally decided to leave, saying:

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"I'm something else, aren't I! I make you laugh and cry at the same time."

That was how I made my living with my workers, for whom I was a colleague and a friend more than a boss. They more than repaid me, respected me and didn't understand why people gossiped about me. I hardly resented these slanderers, who were incapable of understanding how hard it was to set up a workshop, thread by thread, needle by needle, starting from nothing, other than very great faith, and a helping hand which never did anything without saying "*Bismillah*". This hand belonged to Touria, the very epitome of goodness, honesty and trustworthiness. Although she had already lived in Casablanca for fourteen years, she came from a conservative family and knew nothing of that city outside her own neighbourhood. Touria was delighted to see me again after several months' absence, a baby in my arms. Younès was sick at that time. I carted Islam everywhere with me. Snugly tucked up in her basket, I put her in the back of my old Renault with her bottles and nappies, and we rushed around together the whole day long.

Thanks to Touria and the old knitting machine she had rented out to me, I was gradually able to acquire my own equipment. We employed her sister as a second worker, which improved Touria's earnings. She had even gone as far as turning down a better job offered by competitors. We made a good team, an inseparable production line of which I was the driving force.

Thinking about the creation of a design, stocking up on raw materials, doing the rounds of suppliers, rummaging through skeins of yarn, choosing colours, matching shades... With dirty hands, covered in dust, eyes red, loaded down like a mule, as indestructible as a robot, I dragged around my big bags. My poor old Renault was always breaking down and I often had to take the bus, which wasn't easy at all. Indeed, which would give out first, my cumbersome Bag-of-Bones or my heavy bags?

Covered in perspiration, I finally arrived at the workshop. My girls were there, having their midday meal, and always happy to share it with me. I quickly swallowed a few mouthfuls with one of them before sitting down to work at a machine, and this every afternoon. My usual round started only at the end of the day; the evenings were taken up by the chore of steam-pressing. Standing in a cloud of steam, I ironed for hours, generally until midnight, when I went home and threw myself onto my bed and slept like a log, to recover, in order to run once again..

It's raining! Yes, but I must run! It's dark; it's dangerous! Too bad, I must be on my way... The brakes are beginning to give in; it's not serious, I must drive on... No windscreen wipers? Not a problem, hands were made for that, I must be on my way... I'll take the highway; I'll drink coffee to hold out. Rabat isn't far. I must hold out... Hold onto the steering wheel; hold onto the washed articles which are still damp and drying in the draft from the open windows; hold onto the driver's door which no longer shuts; hold onto the passenger door which flies open on the slightest bump; hold onto consciousness despite my fatigue. Oh drat! And why be bothered! It's more practical without a car door; my car is more original; it's sporty... In any case, it must keep going, going faster than the wind, faster than time. Alas, it always caught up with me. So let's not worry about appearances, let's not worry about the husband, and let's not worry about life! Let's cling to the raft, to the objective... The shore, the shore...

It was impossible to put an end to my frenzied race that became crazier and crazier. The past haunted me and my debts obsessed me. Lary supported as best he could. With a tray in his hands, he begged me to eat.

"No, no, I want to sleep; let me sleep."

"Think of yourself; think of your health; you're doing far too much."

"I know, but find me a solution!"

"Go away, leave Morocco. We'll settle in Tunisia."

"Never without my children; I'm killing myself for them, so that they need never depend on others. Never, do you hear me, never."

"And to think that their father does nothing."

"He's dead to me; don't mention him again."

"You are my wife, the mother of my daughter."

Perhaps he was sincere, but what could he do for me other than get me orders, in other words work, which I threw myself into wholeheartedly and which depended almost entirely on me. The suppliers and customers wanted to deal only with me. In the workshop my presence was virtually essential because I myself completed the designs, the ironing and the finishing touches.

In the midst of this whirlwind existence, I continually found reasons not to upset my husband. He no longer liked all the hustle and bustle and hoped to see me stop all my activities. Younès's health needed more and more care. He came down with repeated nasal infections and had to have an operation that lasted for four hours:

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"Thanks be to God, Younès is saved. I really feared for his sight," the doctor had informed me two days after the operation.

I nearly went off my head. That was the beginning of a long period of convalescence and fairly expensive treatment, followed by other minor but painful operations. From then on, Younès lived on medicines and slept only with sleeping tablets.

Adil was preparing for his initial technical school certificate in civil engineering. His equipment was costly; he was working hard to get his diploma. And to think that I had also been a draftsman! When I saw him among his sheets of paper and pencils, I was proud of him and thought only of the day when he would be an engineer!

The dream was as beautiful as reality was bitter and hard.. I had to speed up the pace of my race even more. Finally, Adil obtained his diploma.

"Now he can work," my husband had said, reading an invitation to an interview addressed to Adil.

"No, my son will finish his studies."

"How? A technical school-leaving certificate doesn't exist in Morocco."

"He will go to France."

"To France? Do you have any idea what that means?"

"No idea whatsoever; in France, on the other side of the world, Adil will study."

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"And what about you?"

"I'll die afterwards."

"A school-leaving certificate, a school-leaving certificate, what's a school-leaving certificate, it's nothing..."

"A school-leaving certificate is a door and I can't leave my son this side of that door; he must go through it."

It was creaking... creaking! We had to hurry as the number of places in the French school was limited. It was impossible to actually go there, because I had no passport, and neither did Adil.

"Your son's passport depends on yours, Madam," I had been told.

I would rather have died than be an obstacle in my children's lives.

The day schools reopened, my son still wasn't registered and his passport still wasn't ready. I determined to knock on all the doors to wrest this right from the authorities who had denied it to us; I had to submit to inquiries, visits at home, and even cross-examination by a special service. These procedures lasted three months, at the end of which Adil finally had his passport. As for acceptance in a school in France after classes had started, that was another kettle of fish! But miracles happen...

It was Bahia, a great friend, who gave me some tips. As much of a mother hen as I, she understood my utter despair. She was my moral support, and every time things were going badly, it took only a few hours with her to get me fighting fit again. Our children attended the same schools and she defended the rights of both her children and mine by keeping me informed of everything concerning school regulations. Her husband, a senior manager in a large company, had lots of contacts. My friends also put me in touch with the chairlady of the education council in Paris, thanks to whom my son was admitted to the Blaise Pascal High School in Rouen. Everything was arranged over the phone and the bill was astronomical. I was, for that matter, even more attached to the telephone once I had sent Adil off to France, a country I knew only through postcards and newspapers.

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I was proud of having enabled my son to go and, in my heart, I was already looking forward to his return. A sea and international borders separated us. "God, he is out of my sight, but within Yours. Watch over him; he is alone; be with him; he has melted into the crowd, been caught up in the rush; guide his first steps in life," I prayed incessantly.

A few months later, when I was just about at breaking point and more and more depressed, my husband dragged me away from my children and my work for an unforgettable holiday in Tunisia. Lary had a hard time persuading me to go. He was beaming broadly radiant when he came to announce to me:

"Darling, I have good news for you."

"Oh, tell me quickly; is it Adil?"

"Come off it; is Adil all that matters in your life?"

"No, it's just that..."

"My divorce is official; we can be legally married."

"Whew, yes, but whether or not we have a legal contract makes no difference; what matters is that we are married in the eyes of God."

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"Yes, I know, but it's nicer, more permanent..."

"Oh really, and it wasn't before?"

"What are you going on about? You are my wife in the eyes of God and of mankind; but just between us, my darling, I prefer you at home, kind and smiling. Outside... Good heavens, you're another woman, ferocious! I wish to make you into a housewife, in Tunisia, with our daughter..."

"Oh... What a beautiful dream! It would be perfect if I didn't have four children. Islam isn't the only one, my darling; there's Soundouss, Younès..."

"Yes, yes, that's enough, that's enough; we'll discuss it later. Right now, it's the marriage contract that matters."

"You're right, and it would be best to do it in Tunisia since we're going there in a few days' time."

"Oh no! We must do it straight away."

"Why, are you afraid I'll run away?"

And so started the arguments and complaints to my family and friends. I continued to refuse.

A few days later I flew to Tunisia, my second country through my daughter Islam, who was smiling in her father's arms. At passport control, we ran into a few difficulties:

"Is this your daughter, Sir?" the Tunisian customs official asked.

"Yes, she's my daughter and here's her passport."

"What? She doesn't have a Tunisian passport?"

"Why do you ask? Is the one in your hand not valid?" I replied fiercely.

"Yes, but..."

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"No but's; whether she has a Tunisian or Moroccan passport, what matters is that it's valid."

"Please excuse me, Madam, I'm going to consult my superior."

I was beside myself and the idea of being torn between two countries so haunted me that I had only one wish - to go home.

"Give me back my daughter's passport; I'm going home to Morocco on the same plane."

"Calm down, darling; we'll sort this out."

"No, give me my daughter; I'm going home."

"Fine, fine; calm down, Madam. You can give the document back to her the moment the little girl's papers are in order," the superior confirmed, yet seemed to say: "We're entrusting her to you, even if she's ours."

The customs official reluctantly returned Islam's passport me.

I took it back with a sigh and kissed it before putting it back into the bottom of my bag, telling myself, "Bear this in mind, Rachida, it's the only link tying you to your children and it will prevent you from going off your head." This incident started me thinking and from then on reminded me what I should never to forget...

My brother-in-law and a cousin met us at the airport to take us by car to El-Jem, a town situated about 300 km from the capital.

In spite of the dark, my husband described the scenery to me, including the historical monument he had often spoken about, the El-Jem amphitheatre.

We arrived after midnight and my family-in-law welcomed us with festive cries. The ululations echoed from all around and my mother-in-law seemed the most delighted of all. I immediately loved this family who felt the same way about me. I was wild about the beauty of that country where I made lots of friends, people who saw in me a courageous mother. They even suggested I stay permanently in Tunisia. Oh! My husband's beautiful dream!

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"I'll come to live among you with pleasure the day my children no longer need me," I had replied.

"Yes, my daughter," my mother-in-law retorted, "you're right; I'm a mother and I understand how you feel. May God help you to raise them. I was afraid of dying before seeing my

grandchildren."

"Oh well! Here's your granddaughter; she looks like you too..."

"Oh yes, no one can deny that; she's definitely a Chai... If you only knew what I endured to get her father to marry."

"Oh really, that surprises me, he being such a ladies' man."

"That's exactly why he never wanted to marry."

"Even with his first wife?"

"His first wife? But he has never been married; you're the first!"

This blow to my mind paralysed my ability to think for a moment.

"What's the matter, Rachida?"

"Nothing, nothing, just a headache."

"It's probably the change in climate; wait, I'm going to look for a painkiller for you."

My mother-in-law had not understood a thing and her son had disappeared before the end of the conversation to avoid any comment. It was not in the least a shock to me, because I had suspected there was something behind my husband's discomfort and embarrassment. His answers to my questions were scarcely convincing, and I pretended to understand. In actual fact, I was preparing myself mentally to take a knock. I was comforted rather to know the truth, but I couldn't help being disappointed. I had been betrayed.

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In the final analysis, only the fate of my children mattered. I feared that the marriage would separate me from them.

I kept hoping, hoping to trust my husband again, hoping to be able to unite the two poles of my life which were tearing me apart, hoping no longer to have to sacrifice the woman in me for the mother. My life as a woman belonged to me and I was entitled to try another experiment in living as a couple, but sacred, much more sacred, was my life as a mother. My decision was very firm. We must not alter our arrangement; we were fine the way we were. Caught in the wrong, Lary wanted to make up:

"Do you forgive me, darling?"

"But darling, I have nothing to forgive you. You fell into your own trap. You burnt yourself in your own flame. My revenge is never to let it go out. I will do everything so that you will never stop loving me."

He smiled at my words, while taking my daughter in his arms to kiss her.

My products met with great success on the Tunisian market; I managed to sell all the merchandise I had with me and took orders. Caught up in business as I was, my stay lasted two months. I spent a marvellous holiday, dream days, with my husband in the Kerkenna Islands - an ideal spot for reconciliation. We then left Tunisia for Italy; we spent a week in Rome, during which I didn't stop thinking of my children. To buy back credit with them, I went on a shopping spree. I had to seek forgiveness for my delayed return.

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Big mistake - all the gold in the world would not have been enough to replace a mother's tenderness, which they had missed terribly:

"Mummy! Oh Mummy!" Soundouss cried.

Yamine's sad look spoke volumes. Tears filled his beautiful green eyes, from which two big gems flowed to be lost in the ground; mine, tears of blood, pierced my heart so as to stop them from smashing on the earth... I never blamed myself more. Younès smothered me in his arms:

"Mummy, I was afraid that you were forgetting us..."

He had not stopped wondering what he was going to do with his brothers if ever I decided to stay in Tunisia. The idea tortured him. He had lost ten kilos and grown pale, walking around looking lost before this heavy responsibility. I had returned, bringing life back with me and renewing lost smiles.

"I am happy to see you back, Madam; I could no longer bear seeing your children unhappy, looking sad, little orphans who never stepped out the door. May God keep you unto them, Madam!" said a neighbour in a voice filled with emotion. He was a school headmaster and had come over to greet me.

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I had come back at the right time, only just before Younès had a relapse. He had to have another operation. I feared for his life and for his sanity, which I believed lost when I heard him rambling deliriously:

"Sorry, Mummy, I'm making you suffer; I'm causing you trouble," he howled.

"No, my darling, I am happy to be with you; I love you all."

His eyes, unduly wide open, stared at the ceiling. He recited Koranic verses and didn't stop begging my forgiveness. He was still under the effect of the anaesthetic. This scene

affected me greatly and bonded me even closer to my oldest child.

I had once again put everything aside, my husband and my personal life. I plunged back into my usual whirlwind existence, divided between my work, my husband who had stayed in Tunisia to set up a business, and my children. Younès was sick and needed me near him, and Adil could not adapt to being far from us. He constantly required my financial and moral support. I increased the number of letters and phone calls. I spent hours waiting my turn in front of the phone booth, torn between Adil and Lary, whom I also had to make wait by promising the moon.

I slaved away even harder, my head down and often very late into the night. My car had for once and for all given up the ghost. I had my faithful feet, but they held up badly after so many hours of work. I no longer walked; I stumbled towards the phone booth in the middle of the night. My head was spinning, but my maternal love triumphed over fatigue. Adil needed supported and back-up. Alas, I had to put up with mean people's nastiness and their racket often prevented me from hearing my son's voice properly:

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"Yes, yes, I'm listening Adil."

"That's a lucky guy keeping you on the line for such a long time..." suggested a curious man.

"The poor woman; your fellow's forgotten you; he doesn't want to come," replied another.

"Psst, psst, is it Kuwait or the Emirates?"

These were the words of those men for whom a woman on the phone at night couldn't be a mother, could only be a lover. Immune, I continued:

"Listen, you must eat, my darling."

"No Mummy, never!"

"It's an important day for you; you must be fit and well for you exam."

"God will give me the necessary strength if I observe Ramadan."

"And how! You're right, my darling, so I won't call you tomorrow, or the day after. I want you to go to bed early so that you're rested. By the way, when do the results come out?"

"Supposedly on Thursday."

"So, I'll call you again on Thursday evening; OK my darling, good luck, I love you."

I never prayed as much as during those holy days, and I awaited Thursday with a mixture of impatience and apprehension. When Adil announced that he had passed his school-leaving certificate with distinction, I nearly fainted. The less-than-nothing, the slut, had succeeded in getting her son qualified. Thus, one hand had touched the shore; the first survivor had landed... A little effort, Rachida, just another little push and your child will be saved.

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Alas, my strength was beginning to let me down. The doctor's verdict pronounced a disease in my joints. Dear God, help me; come to me my little helping hands; hold me, my little companions of every day...

I was sore all over and I drugged myself with painkillers to get through the day. By evening, I was no more than a tiny baby needing support and care. I couldn't move without crying out in pain. Condemned to an enforced rest, I consulted specialists. Tests were prescribed, which I had done in Morocco and Tunisia, and even sent to France. Impossible to get back my suppleness and energy. At the pace of a tortoise, I continued my race. The slightest effort cost me dearly, and hardest of all was going up and down bus steps.

"Ha... ha... ha... gently Madam," the driver laughed heartily. Good evening! And watch where you put your feet!"

The mockery left me cold. I had to fight the pain that was immobilising me; I challenged my own strength which was abandoning me.

"Oh, the slut is drinking now that she's not worth anything!"

"I'm telling you, old chap, your girlfriend's been throwing it back since you went travelling."

"Firstly, my dear friend, she's my wife and not my girlfriend. And furthermore, she doesn't drink alcohol; she's sick," my husband replied through clenched teeth.

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Deathly pale, he came into the house and sulked all evening. Only late that night did he decide to speak:

"I can't take it any more; I can't carry on like this; we must find a solution; I've never come across such people."

"I know; you must ignore them, that's all."

"Ignore them, you must be joking; they get on my nerves, and I know it's not over."

"I know it's hard for you; I understand how you feel, but what do you expect me to do?"

"My pride as a man is at stake and you can do something. We're going back to Tunisia. There we'll be left in peace. Didn't you see how much you were respected and esteemed? So let's go."

"Again? And what about my children? They need me!"

"Not any more - they're big."

"Who are you talking about? Younès who is sick or Soundouss who is in mid-adolescence?"

"The girl must be married off or sent to her father. Adil must find a job and Younès is old enough to look after Yamine."

"And for us two the good life? Oh! You've really changed!"

"Yes, now I must make something of my life and secure my future, instead of working for someone else's children."

"Firstly, you do nothing for those "others"; I'm the one who slaves away for everyone here, including you and your daughter. What's more, I'm not stopping you from doing what you want with your life and wherever you like; mine is with my children."

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"In that case, you stay in the workshop and I'll look after the customers."

"You know very well that's impossible; the suppliers prefer to deal with me."

"Then I'll do the deliveries."

"If you think that'll solve all the problems, fine!"

This discussion had lasted hours, only to end where it had started. Each contributed to ending a life that had been more or less peaceful. Lary immediately raised the same old story of the marriage contract. I still refused, fearing for my children, and to compensate, I acted more tenderly, more gently. I closed my eyes to many things and in the first instance, to the payments he profited from; he controlled the household budget.

It was one of the weapons he used to fight me. He thought he had found the trick - spend everything, leaving nothing aside, so putting me in impossible situations when it came to paying school fees, without failing to remind me on each occasion the fortune it cost me. He harped on about it when a past problem

resurfaced, when I again had to confront the monster and its agents.

Furious, my husband sought at all costs to get rid of my children. Destiny stepped in to give him a helping hand. My friend Fatiha asked for Soundouss's hand in marriage to her brother. Enchanted, Lary was eager to be rid of a burden. Soundouss was only sixteen years old and I did not want her to suffer the same fate as mine. My friend was very understanding. My husband hid his fury very badly and his resentment of my daughter even less. She henceforth became her stepfather's enemy number one. The most terrible of bitter trials began - my torture, our torture:

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"It's not duty, it's the road to ruin! Yes! You spoil them too much; you refuse them nothing; it's too much; it's just too much."

"I'll do whatever has to be done, even if I have to walk on all fours, even if I have to drag myself on my stomach. These are my kids, my kids; can't you understand that?"

"Getting a driver's licence is a necessity too?"

"Adil will take his driver's licence; it will be easier for him to find a job in France in the event of my one day being unable to continue paying for his studies."

That was the straw which broke the camel's back. Adil was burning with fever that morning when I went to wake him up early so that he could go to report to the Mines service:

"Drop it, my darling; you can't go there in this condition.. You can take your licence during the next holidays."

"No, Mummy, I must get this problem over with once and for all. Don't worry, I can cope."

"Well then take some aspirin to lower your temperature."

"Oh no! Never, I'm fasting."

"OK, as you wish; wait for me, I'm coming with you."

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We left on tiptoe so as not to wake my husband who was still sleeping. During the month of Ramadan, I avoided as much as possible waking Lary too suddenly as he always became irritated. A few hours later, his driver's licence in his pocket, I dropped my radiant son off on the doorstep and went to the workshop, where I found my husband beside himself with rage. I made an effort to keep my cool, while trying to understand his behaviour. I put it all down to his craving for cigarettes. He chose this moment to tell me everything on

his mind. He targeted mainly Adil and his studies. My son was going to leave for France that very evening, on the night flight, and the next day he had his exam. That particular day, if my husband had asked me for my right hand in exchange for peace, so that he would stop doing everything in his power to jeopardise Adil's departure, I would have said yes without a second thought.

Deeply jealous of the love I had for my children, Lary never stopped twisting the knife in the wound. Obsessed as I was with Adil's departure, I held out. My son needed me and it was absolutely essential that I deliver an order on which I had worked very hard to cover his expenses. Alas, Lary was there, declaring war on me. He wanted at all costs to stop that consignment so that Adil would not benefit from it.

I had guessed everything but I played dumb so as not to fall into the trap. Adil's arrival at the workshop put an end to the scene:

"What's the matter, Mummy? You can hear your shouting from the other end of the street."

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"Nothing, my darling. It's Ramadan, the craving..."

"Oh! Yes, uncle and his cigarettes at this time of day!"

Radiant and jovial, Adil was far from imagining everything being plotted. He put his arms round my neck and covered me with kisses:

"Hey, girls? Mummy must celebrate this!" he said, showing his driver's licence. "I'm a champion! First time! May God keep my *h'biba*⁶², the most tender and gentle of mummies. Just wait, my darling, for me to finish my studies; I'm going to slog away, slog away so that you can rest."

I could no longer hold back my tears. He continued:

"Take care of her while I'm away. I'm relying on you. OK, see you just now; I'm running to say good bye to my friends."

How could I lose heart; how could I not stand up to Lary, who said to me:

"You will not go to make that delivery."

"All this so that I don't give my son any money."

"You've done enough for him. I won't let you give him another cent."

"His future is at stake. Do what you like. I'm going home to finish packing."

I left the workshop so as not to poison things. I postponed the delivery until later, after the end of the fast, which would allow me to make some final purchases. I was sure everything would come right once my husband had smoked his cigarette...

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Alas, Lary missed the meal, which worried me. I got up from the table first, followed by Adil, to go back to the workshop. There was no time to waste. A big surprise awaited us. There was no more merchandise. I absorbed the shock, because it was not the moment to lose my mind. Apart from divine will, nothing could prevent the departure of my son, who was standing perplexed and speechless.

So I approached an understanding customer, who withdrew from her boutique the items I had sold her a few days earlier. I offered them to another customer, who bought them from me at a low price. My son was able to get what he needed. Only my husband was furious, knowing us to be on the way to the airport. I had just enough time to throw the suitcases into the car of one of Adil's friends and gather together the necessary papers. We arrived just in time. Adil was the last passenger to check in his luggage. The customs official glanced briefly at the suitcases and, at the very moment my son was going to say good bye to me, my husband, who was hot on our heels and had just arrived at the airport, said to the customs official:

"Please, Sir, stop him, don't let him leave."

"Why?"

"This young man has stolen money and papers from me."

The customs officials looked at each other in confusion:

"How? And where? Have you told the police about it?"

"No, no, I didn't have time."

"Well then, go and speak to the border guards."

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"Yes, straight away. Ah! There they are coming towards us."

"We're going to sort this out here and now, my darling... I'll teach you to disobey me; I'll crush your strength," his nasty expression said.

My head was spinning; I was shaking all over. I was going to faint; it was all too much for one day. I clutched my son's arm so as not to fall. I gripped it for fear of losing him; I felt guilty for all the humiliation he was being put through.

I looked into his face to reassure myself that this cherished

son was still there. Adil understood my distress and with a single gesture pulled me towards him and hugged me tenderly in his arms:

"Don't panic, Mummy; it's not serious. We are the stronger; we have known worse... We are inseparable, two parts of one whole, never one without the other," his look told me.

I pulled myself together as if by a miracle, my courage restored:

"Listen, gentlemen, this is my son; he absolutely must take this flight; he has an exam to write tomorrow; he mustn't miss it. I beg you, let him leave; you have me here."

"Mummy!"

"Calm down, Madam... The poor woman!"

"Please explain! Who is this gentleman?"

"He's my husband, but he's not his father, otherwise he would never have done this to him..."

"Mummy, please, calm down; don't cry."

All eyes present, disgusted and contemptuous, looked daggers at the man who brazenly wanted to spoil the beauty of such a moving scene, that of a mother and son clasped in each other's arms. I could have asked for the moon; they would have given it to me. Passengers and customs officials, all were on my side and each contributed his bit to speed up the procedure. The customs officials searched the luggage once more:

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"It's for his own good, in case your husband lays a charge against him. We will be able to testify that he had nothing on him when he left the country."

Another customs official ran to stamp the passport; the section head, with his radio in his hand, waited for that part of my being to separate from me. My son held me in his arms and covered me with kisses.

"Don't worry, Mummy; I have inherited your strength; bless me, Mummy, bless me!"

"OK, Madam, let him go; now you're the one who's going to make him miss his flight."

"Oh! No! Anything but that! Come on, my darling, off you go, run so that one day you can save us."

"H'biba, h'biba, bless me," he repeated.

With his hands to his lips, he blew me kisses that warmed my

heart and brought me back to life. God of the earth and the skies, thank you for saving him.

This incident destroyed our relationship as a couple once and for all.

Wounded in his male pride, my husband hounded me more and more. A woman who says no to the father of her child, a man who takes legal action against a woman who refuses to marry him - it was the talk of the town.

"No, no, never will I marry him in the eyes of the law; never will I let myself be ensnared in a marriage contract. This man quite simply wants to separate me from my children. Never will I lower my head so that my hangman can put the noose round my neck."

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"The law doesn't recognise an *Orfi* marriage, Madam," I was told in the magistrate's office.

"God recognises it... And what's more, in the name of God, I am already divorced."

"How's that?"

"Two months ago, my husband asked me, in return for divorce, to hand over half of what I owned, including what was in the workshop, and I did it; do you understand?"

"Yes! You're quite right, but we are bound by the provisions of the law; you must marry this man."

"And before God, the words: 'You are divorced, you are divorced, you are divorced', said three times, they mean nothing to you?"

That little sentence cost me dearly.

"Understand the gravity of the situation: either you marry him, or you will be charged with adultery... And you know perfectly well what could happen to you."

Alas, the law is the law! It had pronounced the final word and nobody could save me from that verdict. I had no choice but to comply. I was contemptuous of that scrap of paper, that contract which my husband was in a hurry to conclude before I changed my mind. The *adoul*⁶³ was waiting for us on the street corner, at the exact spot we had arranged with him for the fateful meeting.

"Are you alone?" I had asked.

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"Yes, my colleague has been delayed," he replied.

"You're breaking the law. Does that not matter? Let's go and talk business then!" I said ironically, sliding into the back of the car. A lady friend had lent us her flat where the bargaining began. I suggested contemptuously:

"100 000 dirhams for the bride price - is that to your liking, my darling? You want to buy me, so you pay the price."

The debate started, punctuated with disagreements, shouts, complaints, and tears. I was crying, my friend was laughing, my husband was bewailing his fate as a foreigner, and the *adoul* was yawning. Funny kind of wedding...

"The devil be cursed... I have never attended such a wedding!" the *adoul* beseeched us, tired of waiting.

A losing battle, as always! My husband offered a pittance; it was at least something..

Shaking with rage and shame, I signed the contract before going to look for my guardian. "Witnesses don't matter," the *adoul* had said, in a hurry to finish. There was the law being broken again!

At midnight, I dragged my guardian from his bed. His eyes half shut, he signed the scrap of paper held out through the car window to him by the *adoul*, who then accelerated away into the night, as if fleeing, leaving us alone in the street. My husband had stayed at my friend's house. Finally, the affair had been concluded and my marriage celebrated:

"That's it, it's done! I hope we're going to be able to live in peace! Me your guardian, who would have believed it?" Younès said to me, taking my arm. Funny life..

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"Are you all right? You don't need anything, Mummy?" he asked me once in the bedroom.

"No, my darling, you can switch off the lights; may God bless you, my son."

I crept into my bed, seeking peace and rest there. I pulled baby Islam, who was sound asleep, close to me. Younès was also sleeping in my bed. I stretched out my hand to stroke his head, before sinking into a dreamless sleep. I lived my dreams with my eyes wide open...

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CHAPTER XVI

My husband knew very well what I was made of, that the scrap of paper gave him only legal rights over me and nothing more:

"I am no longer your wife in God's eyes and in accordance with my religion you will not have me. Don't even think about it."

In fact, I was his by right, along with everything I owned and could earn.

And the more I gave him, the more he demanded to satisfy his obsessive fear. I wanted peace and for its sake I avoided standing up to him. He said he loved me. Lary was crazy about the woman, but the formidable adversary of the mother. What could I do as a woman, other than bend to the caprices of that man, with the law behind him?

But against the mother he could do nothing. The mother's strength endured the worst. She was conscious, eyes wide open, while pain slashed open her womb. She persisted; she pushed, forced herself to give birth to that scrap of flesh, that life which was detaching itself from her. A life which, day and night, took shape inside her. How could anyone hold it against her that she had given him too much or loved him too much? I was subjected to that accusation every day.

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God is stronger. He who had done everything to have me according to the laws of men bowed before that of God. As if by magic, the tie that strangled me a little more each day snapped. The rope which each was pulling in his direction broke. Lary assumed all the rights, and society sanctioned each presumption... But my maternal love was so strong that it succeeded in freeing me from this terrible yoke. And as I surged ahead, my husband was left flabbergasted, his little piece of rope dangling in his hand...

It was a Friday afternoon. I was going back along the wide grand boulevard that led to the Habous neighbourhood, known for its big craft market and reasonable prices. Behind this smiling façade particularly attractive to tourists, another market held sway, that of the *adouls*, where poor creatures thrown away after use, paraded, a place where every Moroccan woman lowers her head in indignation.

There I proved all the slanderers right for a second time with the simple words "*INTI-TALEK*"⁶⁴. I had to settle the cost of the divorce myself. The *adoul*, pleased to have a little money, seemed happy to come to the assistance of a man like my husband, to rid him of the burden of a wife who, already, he was devouring with his eyes...

A second divorce! It was no longer a label people had for me, but a black flag floating over my head to signal: "strictly forbidden zone". A woman who had twice messed up her life!

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It was too much to cry over... I had moved far beyond the

threshold of suffering, so I smiled. I tried to control myself so as not to explode with anger at the revolted stares fixed on me, the woman who had dared to opt for authenticity, who had dared to be real. I had not messed up my life; on the contrary I had had the courage to turn back so as not to continue on the same wrong path. I had had the courage to chuck in everything, without regret, for the happiness of my children. I was not weak enough to live to the detriment of their happiness, not cowardly enough to hide my mistakes. I had had the courage to look myself in the face... I am not perfect! What I had forgotten, was that my attitude could shock, even if it freed me.

That was my selfishness; I thought only of myself, forgetting about blindness, cheating and falsehood.

I had made my choice, whatever the price...

I alone am guilty and I beg God's forgiveness.

His bounty is great.

Undoubtedly, I had turned my back on the beautiful carpet of corruption that unrolled continually before my feet. But, unconsciously, I had stretched out my hand to the devil by blindly trusting a clairvoyant. I had forgotten everything, even to the point of ignoring the Invisible One who protested:

"Oh! Yes, filthy Bag-of-Bones, I will never be able to swallow what you did. My word, that's the best yet, going to look in a crystal ball. It still galls me, paying 250 dirhams, enough to live on for a week! Miserable wretch..."

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"Stop fooling around - she predicted accurately, whatever you might say! She just got the wrong person - that's all. She had spoken to me about a Moslem foreigner who would make me happy."

"And you left her house radiant with joy; you really believed your clairvoyant."

"It wasn't her fault if I fell into the arms of the first Moslem foreigner that I met. I could have waited... Let's not go overboard; the clairvoyant was fantastic..."

"In that case then, you deserve your long face and your suffering at the hands of your foreigner."

"Oh yes, I fell like an idiot into Satan's trap and Lary's arms."

No one knows the unseen except God.

My foreigner... He harassed me more and more, swearing to revenge himself on me by forcing me to leave Aïn Sebaâ,

Casablanca, Morocco. He wanted to make me pay dearly for my mother's love. And as troubles never come singly, now after years asleep, the justice system awoke. The court enjoined me to pay the legal fees for a maintenance allowance of which I had never had a sniff. I understood nothing of that little slip of paper bearing my surname, as well as my first name and the amount of 1600 dirhams. I immediately ran to see my lawyer, a noble-hearted man who spent his time pulling me by the hand and guiding me on my way... He was very humane, and knew the minutest details of my life.

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Of course, interest had been added to the sum demanded:

"But, Counsellor, I never received maintenance! Why should I pay anything at all?"

"That's true, but it's the law. All we can do is make them wait long enough for you to find the money. I will give you a note to the person in charge of this section."

I left his office comforted, but morally shattered. I blocked out all emotion to avoid total collapse. I was unable to take on the smallest problem, and even less so the law! A law which had never really been on my side. I periodically looked at my little slip of paper, glad finally to have proof of my much-awaited lawsuit. Small comfort after years of waiting. But, an ironic twist of fate, I was the one driven to the verge of breakdown. I had to find a solution. I knocked on all the doors:

"Go and see about it in Rabat. Here, we can do nothing for you. Either you pay, or property will be attached. Otherwise, contact the assistant public prosecutor; he alone could take a decision."

Why go to Rabat then if Rabat was there? All I needed to do was go up a few stairs. And I had the courage to go up them, in spite of my pain. Feeling nervous, I trembled, perhaps from fear, perhaps from anger...

A strange silence reigned in that office. The public prosecutor was there, hidden behind glasses, and his piercing stare froze my blood. I told him my life story, or rather I tried to:

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"In brief, Madam, in brief!" he interrupted me all the time.

My life in brief! How was that possible? I broached the crucial issue:

"Sidi... I would like... I have come to ask for your... I can't pay these fees... I never received any maintenance..."

He remained made of stone.

"Sidi... I have five children; I am in debt. With daily expenses, medical costs, school expenses, and I have a son studying in France."

"In France!"

That didn't please him at all.

"Why in... France... and not here?"

"He must get his technical school-leaving certificate, and there are no possibilities here."

"Oh! Really!"

"Sidi... I couldn't leave him without work..."

"Like the others, Madam, like the children of the people..."

At this, he threw all my papers into the air. The ground shook beneath my feet. And all of a sudden, before my very eyes, I saw the terrifying chasm yawning wide.

I thought, as I picked up my papers:

"Oh, OK Sidi, we'll all go to the devil! If it's France that bothers you, I'll send my children elsewhere. There's a wide world out there; there's America too... But give me time to pick up my bits of paper which strewn over your so beautiful desk. Oh! I feel so good on all fours on this plush carpet. My knees hurt less. Oh! How shiny your shoes are! They don't know dust, or the poverty that mine have known so as to enable my child to go towards other horizons... Oh! Drat! I nearly knocked over the beautiful silver tray. That tea must taste good! With almond pastries too... Oh! Yes, yes Sidi, you were saying?"

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"I know you have problems at the moment," he continued, "but I'm warning you, if you ever fall into my hands, it will be prison."

The justice system once more had me in its sights. My value, from one day to the next, shot up. I already missed the good old days, the period when I was just a less-than-nothing. I knew I was under threat, but I didn't know when judgement would fall. Waiting is the worst of tortures. I lived permanently with this terror, the clarity of which illuminated my tracks; every step worried me as it could be the fatal one that would stop me from reaching the shore... Although caught up in a whirlpool, I still had the strength to fight for my children.

Over the years, little ones of yesterday became my adults of

today. The sweet music of their voices is still there, with notes of love and tenderness:

"Mummy, I miss you *h'biba!* I miss you all. I can't wait to be among you, to dig around in your bag again. I miss everything terribly, Mummy."

Yes, my darling, they were the best years of my life, and despite all our troubles, I was happy. They were happy memories, memories that the most beautiful lights in the world, even those of Paris, could not dim. Adil was overcome with homesickness and he could not stay away from us any longer. There are always tears in our eyes when we speak about that marvellous day of Aïd, the festival of sheep, which is so important for Moslems throughout the world.

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That evening, I came home later than usual, having knocked on the doors of my friends and customers in the hope of being paid so that I would be able to buy the sacrificial sheep. I had been lucky enough to find nearly all of them at home. I was welcomed very warmly; religious festivals have the power to make people pleasant.

One of my customers even asked for my opinion about her new tapestries. I stood around in the entrance to the lounge, congratulating her on her taste. She was complaining about what they had cost her, but I wasn't really listening; my mind was in the bottom of my empty pockets. Far from imagining my torments, she continued her prattling, finally getting to the excessively high price of sheep that year. As a result, she had nothing left to give me.

Feeling tired, I visited another customer who was slumped in an armchair, surrounded by boxes and packets. Feeling remorseful, she showed me the bill for all she had just bought for her children. She had nothing left to give me for mine.

The third was crying over her recipes for cakes that had flopped, her maids being on leave. She also wanted, at all costs, my opinion about her new traditional outfit made specially for the occasion. I made a huge effort to remain calm and compliment her. I smiled even though my throat was knotted with the desire to sob. She could not understand the sadness of someone who was penniless the night before a festival. Only the poor like me would know the feeling..

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When I got out of the pirate taxi that took me home, I had the grand total of 70 centimes in my pocket. My children were waiting for me, as all Moslem children must do the night before Aïd el Kebir⁶⁵. I did not need to explain the situation. They understood immediately that we were nowhere near having a sheep at our house.

They were still awake when I joined them in their room; Younès, as was his habit, put a tape of the Koran into our tape recorder. We spent hours discussing everything and nothing and I finally had the courage to say:

"Today, God is putting us to the test, my little ones!"

My children were in a particularly good mood and they managed to make me laugh until I cried:

"I would like to have a big sheep... As big as this!" Adil said seriously.

"What?" little Yamine exclaimed. "Mummy, did you hear him? 'One as big as this!' when we can't even have a tiny one like this... He's stupid, eh Mummy?"

The whole evening, Yamine didn't stop asking the question: 'As big as this?' His flabbergasted look really amused us. That evening we were more united than ever.

The next day, we searched in our empty kitchen for something for breakfast:

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"Drat! No more sugar," Soundouss commented.

"No more tea! No more oil!" Adil added.

"Nor bread either," Younès retorted, laughing. "Let's pray the gas bottle doesn't run out! God is great; I'm running to do my prayers first," he said rubbing his hands.

"Wait, wait for me," I shouted, running towards the bathroom to do my ablutions.

I positioned myself behind my son and we prayed together. What could be more beautiful?

We did, however, manage to find some leftover dried-out biscuits in a little box and something to make a little tea. But we were together, and that was the essential thing. To crown our happiness, Yamine came up with an idea:

"Mummy, you know, my friend Abdeljalil could give me a sheep on credit; his father raises them on his farm. He doesn't live far away. Do you want me to go and ask him?"

"Yes, my darling, if that makes you happy."

"OK, I'm going, but not 'one as big as this'!" he teased Adil.

"Wait till I catch you; I'll wring your neck... And since things are working out this way, I'll run to my friend Said to borrow a bit of money. Is a hundred dirhams OK, Mummy?"

Two hours later, everything was ready for the feast. We had a marvellous day, even on credit. It took us three months to reimburse my son's friend. Yamine had to give him his school bag in exchange for the last 100 dirhams. These were memories no force in the world can destroy.

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I never really rebelled against my destiny, which was all in all fairly cruel, but I prayed to God to ease my suffering.

What was happening to me was beyond my control. Justice took a decision, made judgement; the clink lay in wait for me. I drifted aimlessly around the streets to avoid being caught again.

"Hey! Rachida! Are you OK?"

"Sorry, I didn't see you," I replied to my neighbour.

"You're looking a bit down, aren't you?"

"Um... I've got a problem which is bothering me."

"Is it as bad as all that? Tell me anyway; perhaps I can help."

"Oh! It's very tricky."

"Tricky? Don't you trust me then?"

"Not at all, that's not what I meant; I have so many problems that if I start talking about them, I won't ever finish, so I prefer to keep them to myself."

I had started her thinking. She was curious and wanted to know more, and I ended up explaining to her:

"A contested cheque; I don't even know how much it's for, or who the beneficiary is; all I know is that the police are looking for me."

"Is that all? Well, it just shows that you don't know me! I know someone who could fix that... But it will be necessary..."

She squeezed my hand clutched in hers, to signal discretely for fear that the walls had ears, that it was going to be necessary to grease a few palms.

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"Yes, no problem, as long as he gets me out of this..."

"I'm going to speak to him straight away, and I'll give you an answer at home this afternoon."

"No, no, I won't be there; I'm likely to get nabbed by the

police. Are you at home this evening? Then I'll drop in to see you."

I wandered around all day, dragging my tired body and heavy legs. My head with a price on it weighed heavily.

It was in this condition that I made my appearance in the home of the woman who wanted to help me:

"You can go there. For a thousand dirhams, you won't hear of this matter again; but you know, my friend gets nothing out of it himself; he's a *hadji*. He's just acting as go-between as a favour to me."

Indeed, with folded arms and sitting comfortably in a chair, he who should save me listened to my story.. I was completely bowled over as I understood nothing of the case against me.

"Is this cheque not yours?"

"Of course not; my name isn't Mohamed, Sir; there's been a mistake."

"OK, but is this one here definitely yours?"

"Yes, it's mine; it has already been settled, and I have proof. But the big cheque isn't mine; I wonder why it's in my file."

"And why didn't you get your cheque back?"

"My creditor also wanted me to pay the bank fees and his travel costs for returning it to me. But shortly afterwards, I lost contact with him; he had changed address and job. It's so long ago - seven years!"

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"Well it's all fine then; you have nothing to fear; we'll clear it up since Mrs X sent you. My colleague will take care of it."

Before leaving, I put my wad of notes down on the desk anyway. In the final analysis, Jilali's method was perhaps the most efficient!

Mistake - was I not the chosen one, the exception!

A month later, the problem still wasn't resolved. I received another summons and ran to Mrs X.

"Don't worry; it must be a simple formality. Go and see them tomorrow; I'll telephone *el hadj* this afternoon," she told me.

I spent a sleepless night, the eve of that Wednesday in May 1990. The cold hand of my destiny was already clutching me and I had just enough time to kiss my children who were still

sleeping, except for Younès who was following my every move. Dressed in a striped beige suite and with my hair tied up, I naively and confidently delivered myself up to the monster...

"You're being brought before the Public Prosecutor; it's a mere formality. I made sure to mention that the big cheque bears neither your name nor your signature," I had been assured at the police station.

The same corridors, the same doors, but I had nothing to fear; strings had been pulled for me...

Two hours later, when I was as stiff as a board in the gloomy basement, the voice resonated:

"Is it for upstairs?"

"Yes, it's for upstairs."

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How could I get there when my strength was failing me? The pain in my joints tormented me. My tortured mother's soul shouted, "No!" But no one heard me and I found myself standing on the brink of the abyss, of the much-dreaded chasm. The ground shook beneath my feet; my head was spinning: "No, have pity on me, not that door, not that man's..."

It was about half past five and the last rays of sunshine were caressing the senior deputy public prosecutor's secretary's back. She came forward to meet us. She looked me over from head to foot, seeking an explanation, which she found immediately on looking at my file. She looked at her watch before heading for the prosecutor's office door.

She hadn't had time to reach it before it opened and in came the man that one would have thought was waiting for me.

"Ah! It's you! Hm... hm..."

With an automatic gesture, he pulled his beautiful golden pen from the top pocket of his brown jacket so as to condemn me without even taking the trouble to examine my case.

"No, *Sidi*, listen... I paid... I gave... It's not my cheque... *Sidi... Sidi...*"

"Yes, yes, I've heard it all before..."

Standing in his doorway, he announced:

"Prison!"

And he must have rejoiced on thinking: "That'll teach you to send your son to France..."

It was the fate he had personally had in store for me for a

long time. Why bother with a trial? He ordered, with all the authority vested in his title, that I be thrown into prison. He represented Power and I the Meek and Lowly, those who have no right to succeed and must content themselves with dreaming. I was making monstrous efforts not to do what he would certainly have wished all those of my social class to do: jump out of the window to put an end to it all.

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But before, I would have shouted: "What you don't realise, is that I know someone who, faced with the same problem as mine, but for a cheque of several million, and not 3000 dirhams, got away with a postponement and, what's more, almond pastries and a glass of tea. The only difference was that he belonged to the Powerful!"

And there we have it! A son in France, a mother in prison. The price to pay for having reached the shore!

Guilty of innocence, condemned to pay for another who made the most of his freedom, I had taken another step into the criminal world.. Excuse me! Some people really are innocent..

Horrible memory, painful cry that my life is!

Dear reader, I am not saying a final adieu, but rather farewell until we meet again; when this wound is somewhat healed, I will rejoin you.

At present, I cannot do it. Cannot revive those painful memories of prison, cannot for the moment; perhaps one day, in the future..

NOTES

Translator's note

The page numbers in the French edition where the expressions first appear are indicated after each note. Many are used repeatedly, but as in the original text, are not noted again.

1. *A Mimti*: Diminutive of "Mummy".(20)
2. *Mokkadem*: Local authority.(21)
3. *Lallah*: "Madam", with the connotation here of:
"your ladyship".(21)
4. *Siadous*: Men who are superior to him.(21)
5. *Azizek*: Your stepfather (also *Azizi*). (21)
6. *Din emmou*: Religion of his mother.(22)
7. *Din elkalb*: Religion of a dog.(22)
8. Witchcraft practice very widespread in Morocco that involves burning a rag soaked with the victim's sperm in order to cast a love spell.(22)
9. *Kanoun*: Brazier.(22)
10. *Fqih*: Sorcerer.(25)
11. *Awili*: Cry of lamentation: "Woe is me".(37)
12. *Chouafa*: Clairvoyant.(44)
13. *A khti*: My sister.(54)
14. *Bismillah*: In God's name.(60)
15. *A dûbe*: Bear.(61)
16. *Inchallah*: God willing.(61)
17. *Mou-e-mina*: A devout woman.(66)
18. *H'ram*: Sin.(75)
19. *Moustahil*: Impossible.(85)
20. *Allah yastar*: May God preserve us.(85)
21. *Si*: Abbreviation of *Sidi*: "Sir".(86)
22. *Allah*: God.(92)
23. *Gandoura(s)*: A unisex indoor tunic now worn in public, but exclusively by men.(93)
24. *Chrifia*: A female descendant of the Prophet. Meaning here: A woman touched by the grace of God, giving her miraculous powers.(93)
25. *Âla el balate*: Penniless.(94)

26. *Al arzala*: My beauty. (97)
27. *Azzine*: Beauty. (97)
28. *Al fane*: Treasure. (97)
29. *Al walida*: Mother. (101)
30. *Al khwadri*: Brother. (102)
31. *Allah Ya 'fou a 'lina*: May God deliver me. (102)
32. *A khouya*: My brother. (102)
33. *Damir*: Conscience. (102)
34. *Mesquina*: The poor woman. (107)
35. *El hajja*: A woman who has made her pilgrimage to Mecca, which confers on her a title of respect. (108)
36. *El af'rita*: The she-devil. (109)
37. *Cadi*: Judge. (118)
38. *Chikh*: The *Mokkadem*'s superior. (119)
39. *Caïd*: Head of the district. (119)
40. *Chaouch*: Administrative messenger. (120)
41. *Khalifa*: *Caïd*'s deputy. (121)
42. *Hijab*: Islamic veil. (159)
43. *A'fak*: Please (familiar). (161)
44. *Ah'chouma a'lik*: You should be ashamed of yourself. (161)
45. *Meziane*: Great. (170)
46. *Iwa zmar hada*: What a huge mess. (179)
47. *El hadj*: A man who has made his pilgrimage to Mecca. (187)
48. *Nachate*: Fun. (213)
49. *Ammi*: Diminutive of "mother". (216)
50. *Bikhir*: OK. (216)
51. *B'slama*: Goodbye. (216)
52. *Assalam-o-alaïkoum*: Greetings to you. (236)
53. *Sahbi*: My friend. (237)
54. *Takchita*: A traditional female garment worn for festivals. (249)
55. *Ahlan*: Welcome. (258)
56. *Dohr*: Midday prayer. (266)
57. *Chikhates*: Popular female singers. (266)
58. *Nachtène*: Happy. (269)

59. *Dahbi*: Get out of here.(269)
60. *Orfi*: A "customary" marriage, without a legal contract.(302)
61. *Mesquine*: The poor man.(310)
62. *H'biba*: Darling.(334)
63. *Adoul*: A religious lawyer (traditional).(338)
64. *Inti-talek*: You are repudiated.(342)
65. *Aïd el Kebir*: The feast of sheep.(349)

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