



An extract from *Secret Son* by Laila Lalami

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Secret Son

by

Laila Lalami

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THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD

THE RAIN CAME UNEXPECTEDLY, after nearly three years of drought. In those days, Youssef still lived with his mother in a whitewashed house that huddled with others like it along a narrow dirt road. The house had one room with no windows, and a roof made of corrugated tin held down by rocks. The yard, where his mother did the cooking and the washing, was open to the sky. It was in the yard that she cleaned the sheep hides she took in on the day of Eid, and there Youssef received the rare friends who came to visit. The front door was painted blue, but over the years rust had eaten its edges, turning them reddish brown, so that holes had begun to appear at each of the four corners.

They were having lunch when it began to drizzle, the thin raindrops making craters as they landed on the fava bean soup. Youssef's mother looked up at the sky for a few surprised seconds, and then, as though a spark had ignited inside her, she jumped to her feet, grabbed the soup pot by its ears, and took it to the bedroom. Youssef's first thought was of the framed

black-and-white picture of his father, which hung on the yard wall, above the divan. He took it inside, wiping the raindrops off the glass with the hem of his shirt. His father gazed back at him—a young man in his twenties, in a dark suit and gray tie, with his hair combed back neatly, as if he were on his way to an important appointment. His smile was timid, or perhaps reluctant; Youssef had never been able to tell. He left the picture next to his bed and went back outside.

His mother had already picked up the bowls and the loaf of bread, so he grabbed the radio and carried it to the water closet. He lifted the divan on which they had been sitting and positioned it on its side, under the green awning that ran from the kitchen corner to the front door. There was just enough room there for the table as well. His mother finished collecting the laundry—now everything was safe.

They stood together at the door of the bedroom, arms folded, watching the rain. “The year might turn out to be good,” Youssef said. He was thinking of the farm laborers who had been moving into the city, chased by the drought. They came from the Gharb, from the Chaouïa, and even from as far south as Marrakech, here to Casablanca, where their teenage children crowded the markets and drove down wages for every kind of labor. Maybe this year there would not be as many of them.

His mother looked up at him. “We’re already in March,” she said. “It’s too late for the rain to do most crops any good.”

“Your flowers, at least, won’t mind it,” Youssef said, glancing at the row of potted roses, daisies, and gardenias under the laundry lines. One by one, she had rescued the flowers from the trash cans at the hospital where she worked, brought them

home, and nursed them back to health. It was a rare indulgence; she was a woman who valued work over pleasure, utility over beauty. And she was beautiful. The week before, she had turned thirty-nine, and though her hair was streaked with gray and her forehead lined with wrinkles, her green eyes and high cheekbones gave her a distinguished, almost aristocratic look.

At length, they sat down on the straw mat, facing the open door. Youssef's mother dipped her bread in the thick soup and tasted it. "It's all cold now," she said. "I'll reheat it for you."

"Don't trouble yourself, a-mmi," he said. Always, she doted on him like this, as though he were eight instead of eighteen. Even though he discouraged her constant attention, it never occurred to him to resent it. He was her only child.

When they finished eating, he put on his sneakers and checked his watch. He wondered what movie he would see this week at the Star Cinema, but even before he could ask his mother for ticket money, she was already sorting through her purse. She handed him a coin. "Don't forget your jacket," she said. He left the house, hunching his shoulders against the light rain, and headed for the theater.

THE STAR WAS NOT, strictly speaking, a cinema. This would have been obvious to anyone who visited the dilapidated building that stood across from a butcher and a tailor on one of the garbage-strewn alleyways of Hay An Najat. Nevertheless, that was the name that a Casablanca charitable association had given to the place where, every week, a new older movie was projected on a cracked screen, and where patrons competed with rats for space on the gutted seats. For five dirhams, Youssef

could watch Hong Kong action films, Bollywood romances, Egyptian dramas, or American blockbusters. He never missed a show.

All his life, he had dreamed of becoming an actor. He had performed in the only play his high school had ever put on, a reenactment of the Green March, and he had spent long afternoons playing football, hoping to have the athletic chest that was appropriate for the moment when, shirtless, he would raise the Moroccan flag and lead his fellow civilians to reclaim the Spanish border post in the Sahara. He loved inhabiting the life of the hero, loved feeling his triumph, and when the audience applauded, a surge of euphoria, much like the one he had felt when he had tried hashish with Amin and Maati, ran through him. Of course, Youssef knew that his dream was unachievable—no different than wanting to win the lottery when you can't even afford to buy a ticket—but it provided a refuge from the more sobering turns he knew his life would, by necessity, have to take: finish high school, go to university, and, with any luck, find a steady job that would finally get his mother and him out of Hay An Najat.

This week, the Star Cinema was showing *Boyz N the Hood*. Right away Youssef knew that it would not be a big hit with his friends: there were no explosions, no car chases, and, most unforgivable of all, only one naked woman—and she didn't even face the camera. But he stayed glued to his seat because of Laurence Fishburne's fatherly presence, his smooth voice and limitless experience. Youssef had lost his own father at the age of two, so his memories were few, and also faint. He remembered a tall man walking through the doorway, a hand tousling

his hair, the smell of a stuffed pipe at night, but, maddeningly, little else.

Whatever tangible knowledge he had of his father came to him at second hand, from his mother. Nabil El Mekki was a fourth-grade teacher, respected by colleagues and students alike for his dedication. Back then, the family lived in an apartment in the Fès medina, though Nabil often worked odd jobs at night or on weekends to save enough money for a house. Some neighbors who were preparing for a big Eid party asked him to hang lights on their roof. He tripped on a wire and fell down three floors, breaking his neck on a cart filled with roasted sheep heads. He died instantly. It was an accident, the doctors said, though everyone called it fate — mektub — for how else could one accept that such a young man had died so needlessly?

Of course, Youssef and his mother weren't the only people in Hay An Najat without a father or a husband, but they seemed to be the only ones without any family. She was an orphan, raised in the French orphanage at Bab Ziyyat. After her husband's death, she had moved from Fès to Casablanca but refused to stay in touch with Nabil's parents, who had cheated her out of the meager inheritance. This was why, growing up, Youssef had often felt that he and his mother were both unmoored, somehow.

AFTER THE MOVIE, Youssef walked out of the theater into the darkening afternoon, making his way around the puddles of water, heaps of trash, and pieces of metal. It was raining a little more steadily now, and the clouds hung low, shrinking the horizon in all directions. He always found it hard

to go home after a movie. He needed time to adjust to real life, where heroes and villains could not be told apart by their looks or their accents, where women did not give themselves over on the first date, where there were no last-minute reversals of fortune.

He wanted to buy roasted sunflower seeds or chickpeas, but the cart vendors near the theater had all left because of the rain. Amin and Maati, who could usually be found at the street corner, had retreated under the blue awning of a hanout farther down the road. Standing between crates of wrinkled oranges and dark mint, they were arguing about the Widad and the Raja', the odds of either football team at the national championship.

"What's the difference between the Widad goalkeeper and a taxi driver?" Maati asked, flashing a wide, gap-toothed smile. Even though it was cold, he wore a short-sleeved shirt. Youssef suspected it was because Maati liked to show off his biceps.

"What?" Youssef asked with a smile.

"The taxi driver only lets in three at a time."

Amin clicked his tongue. "You won't be joking like that when the Widad defeats the Raja'. And anyway, that's an old joke. Tell us one we haven't heard."

"All right," Maati said. "What's the difference between a girlfriend and a wife?"

"What?"

"Twenty-five kilos."

This time, Amin slapped his thighs and laughed.

"Here's another one," Maati continued. "What's the difference between a bucket of shit and the government?"

“What?”

“There isn’t any.”

Youssef and Amin chuckled. Maati lit a cigarette and passed it around. A girl none of them knew walked up the lane, carrying a bag. They watched her pass them by. Her wet sweater clung to her body, showing the faint lines of her bra and the tips of her nipples. “Come here, kitten,” Amin said.

The kitten didn’t acknowledge him.

“Hshouma,” Youssef said. “You should respect the girl.”

“Come on, my brother,” Amin said. “Let us live a little. Didn’t you see those breasts?”

“Her name’s Soraya,” Maati reported. “Her family just moved in, three streets up that way. Stay away from her, or her brother might come find you.”

“Youssef’s bringing us bad luck,” Amin said. “She’d have talked to me if he wasn’t around, looking so serious, wanting to respect her.”

All three of them laughed. The year before, they had been taken by Amin’s brother Fettah to visit a prostitute, where their Eid money had bought them ten minutes each. Now they dreamed of doing it with a girl their own age, someone who would, unimaginably, let them go all the way.

“She wouldn’t have talked to you,” Youssef said. “She’s not the type.”

“And how do you know this?” Amin asked, narrowing his eyes in a playful way, already sure of the answer.

Youssef shrugged.

“That’s what I thought,” Amin said, laughing. “So let me try my luck.”

The rain grew heavy. Youssef walked hurriedly home and was soaked by the time he arrived. He found his mother struggling to move the divan, carefully covered with a plastic tablecloth, to the bedroom. “It’s just some rain,” he said. “Do we need to move everything inside?”

“It’s going to flood,” she replied. She had a habit of immediately thinking about the worst outcome to any situation, and Youssef had long ago learned not to argue when she got into one of these moods. He took the divan inside. “Can you put some more plastic on the roof?” she asked, and while he did that, she lined his side of the bedroom with pieces of cardboard to keep out the damp.

Inside, he changed out of his wet clothes. When he sat on his bed, his eye fell on his father’s picture, and immediately he noticed that a drop of water had seeped in between the frame and the photograph, darkening the print. He grabbed the picture, running his palm over the spot—his father’s forehead—as though he could dry it. In frustration, he put it back down on the floor and rummaged under his bed for his history textbook. His high school exams were just three months away. Amin and Maati always complained that they were required to learn things by rote, but Youssef told himself he was an actor. An actor could learn lines.



The weather forecast had said that it would clear up late in the evening, but it rained furiously all night long. Youssef could not sleep for the sound of the water drumming the tin roof

and the wind thrashing the bathroom door. Halfway through the night, just as he had begun to drift into slumber, he heard a group of men splashing down the alley, arguing loudly. He pulled his blankets up to his chin and turned to the wall, where the cardboard had begun to smell of ink.

In the morning, he could not go out to meet his friends because it was still pouring. He studied by the yellow light of the lamp, fiddled with the radio for a while, and then grew restless. His mother was knitting a sweater, her eyes fixed on the Mexican *telenovela* showing on television. She was different from the other women in Hay An Najat, he knew. *The widow*, he had heard some of them call her, a scornful look on their faces, as though his mother were a leper, as though widowhood were contagious. The fact that she could speak flawless French somehow exacerbated their resentment; they said she put on airs. And she was not given to large displays of emotion. Aside from a few photographs, she had not saved any of his father's relics—a ring, a watch, a book, some prayer beads.

Youssef, too, was different from the other boys. Until he was twelve or thirteen, he had never been left alone in the house while his mother was at work. Instead, his mother told him to play in the hospital garden or go across the street to the used-book store, whose cashier she knew. He spent all his summer days sitting between stacks of books, reading. He had grown five centimeters in the past year alone and towered over all his friends. And then there were his eyes—sky blue, bright turquoises—nearly out of place on his face, certainly out of place in Hay An Najat. You would expect his eyes on a Fassi, a descendant of the Moors, one of those pedigreed men who had

for generations controlled the destiny of the nation. You might expect them on a tribal chieftain from the Atlas, though even there they might come with the freckled skin of Berber ancestors. You would not expect those eyes in the melting pot of misery and poverty that was Hay An Najat.

YOUSSEF HAD TO WRAP his shoes in plastic before going to school the next day, and in the unheated classrooms he regretted not wearing the additional pair of socks his mother had pressed into his hands that morning. When he came home, he found that water had trickled through an opening in the roof onto his mattress. He climbed back onto the roof to adjust the blocks of concrete, then stripped the sheets and blankets off the bed and set them to dry. But at least the television and the radio seemed to be in working order.

By the time his mother came home, the rain had at last faded to a drizzle. She asked him to go buy some flour, oil, and sugar, so he left the house and headed down the muddy road toward the hanout. At the first intersection, water pooled into a little pond, from which emerged a rusted old signpost, upright and persistent like a warning. In the next row of houses, the water ran into a rivulet. It quickly met with other tributaries to form a river, brown and fast and hungry. Youssef stopped at the bottom of the street. The river before him carried possessions away with it, like offerings to an ancient god—a suitcase, some tires, a broken bicycle, a few cinder blocks. A yelping dog swam helplessly in the middle of the debris.

Holding on to the wall, Youssef craned his neck to see if he could make it to the grocer's, but all along the little street, shops

and houses were flooded. Hammad came out of his store, pushing a wheelbarrow stacked high with bags of flour. A group of boys splashed around in the dirty water. Standing where the water was shallow, the tailor yelled into his mobile phone, asking someone to come help him. Through the broken window of the beauty shop, a blond-wigged mannequin head with painted lips surveyed the scene dispassionately.

Across the street, three red cushions floated aimlessly outside the gaping doors of the Star Cinema. Youssef felt a pinch in his heart at the sight, though he had no time to dwell on the damage to the theater because, just a few feet away, knee-deep in the water, men and women were moving their belongings. A man and his two sons turned the corner toward him, carrying a chipped divan base, a torn mattress, and a table. In places where the mud was too slippery, they held on to house walls or laundry lines. Youssef ran up behind the smaller of the sons to help him with the table. They were moving to an uncle's house, the boy told him. It was the worst thing in the world, Youssef thought, to lose everything and, at the same time, to have everyone see that you did not own anything worth saving.

He continued walking toward the top of the hill, up to where the road was tarred. Rainwater filled potholes, and the bus stop sign was knocked out, but from this vantage point he had a full view of the neighborhood, of the streets that had been flooded and those that had been spared. This was another mektub. It would split someone's life into a Before and After, just as his father's death had done for him. Children born this year would be told that they came into the world during the Year of the Flood.



The news spread quickly through the neighborhood: a city councilman was coming to Hay An Najat to inspect the damage. Because Youssef had never seen a government official except on TV, he went with Amin and Maati to the marketplace, where a small crowd had already gathered. The councilman climbed out of his chauffeur-driven Mercedes, while a dozen staffers carrying file folders and speaking on their mobile phones streamed out of a line of cars behind him. He wore a blue raincoat over a pin-striped suit, and eyeglasses that gave him an attentive air. He lifted his trousers and walked up the street, trailed by his assistants. Some people followed him, but Youssef and his friends stayed back to admire the Mercedes sport-utility vehicle—from a distance, since the driver chased away anyone who came too close.

The councilman was back in front of his car after five minutes, a constipated expression on his face. He spoke in a voice that sounded precious, as if it were reserved for special occasions. “We are monitoring the situation,” he said. “I have given instructions to the emergency management office to send out tents and blankets. They should be here soon.”

“When?” Amin asked.

A benevolent smile appeared on the councilman’s face. “They’re already on their way, my son. Tomorrow. Or the day after.”

“Try spending the night under the rain,” someone yelled. Youssef turned to see who had spoken; it was Bouazza, whose tin roof had collapsed, trapping his children for two hours before he and the neighbors rescued them.

“You have to be patient,” the councilman said, a trace of impatience already apparent on his face. A sudden wind lifted

a section of hair he had carefully combed over his balding head. He patted it back into place. "It takes time to get materials out here. There is flooding in other neighborhoods, and we're trying to help everyone."

"What about our businesses?" Hammad asked.

"You will get assistance, too," the councilman promised.

It started drizzling again. The water was so soft and thin it felt like dew on Youssef's face.

"We have helped you before," the councilman said. He opened his enormous umbrella and held it over his head. "Didn't we get you running water?"

Youssef laughed. "This guy doesn't even know where he is!"

"You're not in Qubbet Jjmel," Maati yelled.

"Qubbet Jjmel is just a few streets away," the councilman said quickly, catching himself. "You'll get running water here as well."

Youssef could hear the councilman's gaffe being repeated. He felt the crowd pressing closer behind him. "Where are the supplies?" he asked. "Tell us where they are and we'll get them ourselves."

The councilman smiled as though at a child. "It doesn't work that way," he replied.

"He's lying," Bouazza said. "There's no help. There's nothing."

Someone threw a tomato; another, a shoe. A rock smashed into the car's front light. The councilman tried to close his umbrella before climbing into the backseat of his car, but under the shower of random projectiles he abandoned it and jumped inside, closing the door behind him. Youssef and his friends joined the protesters, pounding windshields and kicking at

tires as the procession of government cars made its way slowly, painfully, through the crowd. At last it extricated itself from the masses and sped away in a cloud of dark exhaust. Youssef picked up the councilman's umbrella, wanting to break it over his knee, but it would not snap in two. Instead, the braces came loose and cut him. On his left palm, four thick beads of blood appeared. He rubbed them away on his sleeve.

LATER, AS YOUSSEF was walking back home with Amin and Maati, they were nearly run over by a white Volkswagen van on which a loudspeaker had been mounted. At deafening volume, the driver announced that a representative from Al Hizb, the Party, would bring emergency supplies to the marketplace. Youssef had not heard of the Party before, and neither had the others, but the promise was tempting. They retraced their steps.

The white van pulled up in the little square at exactly three o'clock. A stocky man in a skullcap, a black leather jacket, and jeans brought out some wooden crates, which he stacked together. Then he introduced the speaker as Si Hatim, chairman of the Party. Hatim climbed onto the makeshift podium and stared thoughtfully at the crowd, as though he were appraising it. He was dressed in a crisp white jellaba, his head was turbaned, a white cloak floated over his shoulders. He had lively eyes, a neatly trimmed beard from which a few white hairs stood out, and big hands, with long fingers that spread out like the tines of a rake.

"My brothers and sisters in faith," Hatim said, "this flood is a big test of your faith. At a time of such suffering, the faithful

ask themselves why God let such a thing happen. I am here to tell you that He let it happen for a reason. This flood is a warning to those who have cast aside their religion, to the men and women who sin against our Lord, again and again and again.” Here he stared at the young people in the crowd. Two teenage girls, perhaps not so willing to blame themselves for the fate of the neighborhood, walked away, but Hatim went on. “Look at what happened in Asia. For years and years, those people committed the kaba’ir, the sins of fornication and prostitution, so in the end the Lord had enough. He sent them the tsunami to punish them. Now He has sent *you* a warning, and we are here to help you heed it.”

Youssef was about to leave—he was in no mood for a sermon—when Hatim’s speech took a different turn. “My brothers and sisters in faith, I have here in this van some tents and blankets and food. You will get help today, not tomorrow, not next week. Today!” he said triumphantly, his finger spearing the air above him. People cheered, a few of them clapped; everyone looked eagerly at the van.

“The government has abandoned the people,” Hatim said, “and so have all the parties. The socialists spent decades making promises, but in the end they did nothing. The conservatives praise the Makhzen and get rich on our taxes. The so-called Islamic parties don’t want to risk their seats in Parliament or their big salaries on fixing our problems. The people are alone. *We* are alone. But *we* have the power to change things for ourselves. And the only help we need is the Lord’s help, may His name be remembered on earth as it is in heaven. This is what the Party stands for: Power to the people through God, with God, and

by God. *Through God*, because our program is simple: we, the Partisans, follow God's way in the knowledge that it is the best way. *With God*, because we know that the Lord is with us: He will help us and He will smite those who stand in our way. *By God*, because we have made this commitment to you and we will not waiver in our resolve to help you. Remember this: *Through God. With God. By God.*" He raised his finger upward again and looked sternly at the people.

As if a signal had been given, the driver slid open the van's doors and asked people to line up. He began handing out tents, blankets, sacks of flour, tins of sardines, tubes of toothpaste, packets of gum, bottles of cooking oil, rolls of masking tape, boxes of detergent, and canisters of propane gas. It looked like the loot from a corner-store robbery, but people fell on it, pushing and shoving to get their share. Hatim stood aside to watch. The white of his attire stood out against the dark sky above and the muddy ground below. He looked like an angel who had lost his big wings and fallen straight from the sky.



The Star Cinema remained unoccupied until May, when Hatim returned to Hay An Najat with a team of construction workers. There were rumors that he had bought stolen cement from contractors who built homes for Moroccans working abroad. No one was sure. In truth, no one cared—a building being fixed up in Hay An Najat was too satisfying a sight. Hatim also hired some workers to repaint the walls, replace the wood, and retiling the floors. The building was ready in just a few weeks: It

had a real roof, huge double doors, new glass windows. A sign was hoisted over the entrance. In block letters it proclaimed, HEADQUARTERS OF THE PARTY.

Youssef went with Amin and Maati to the grand opening. On the ground floor, there was an infirmary, a meeting room with rows of chairs, and a café named the Oasis (drinks were free on Fridays). The notice board in the hall advertised a cultural program: evenings of Qur'anic study, lectures by visiting Partisans, and, miraculously it seemed, a movie every Thursday night. Standing at the bottom of the stairs, they heard the beat of a hip-hop song drifting down toward them. "That's where Hatim's office is," Maati said, pointing.

"He has good taste in music," Youssef said. He wanted to have a look upstairs, but a sign saying PRIVATE warned him against it.

"I heard he studied in New York," Amin said.

"No, no," Maati countered. "The doorman said Hatim went to school in Cairo."

"New York or Cairo," Youssef said, "what difference does it make? The tea is free today. Let's go to the café." They sat in front of the large TV and played chess until closing time, Amin methodically defeating both Youssef and Maati in turn.

YOUSSEF WAS THE FIRST to arrive at the Party's headquarters for the picture show. He was expecting an action film, but the movie turned out to be *Fatmah*, with Umm Kulthum and Anwar Wajdi in the leading roles. Youssef had already seen this tearjerker several times, but he had no other plans for the evening and he loved the feeling of being in a darkened theater

once again. He watched as the righteous Umm Kulthum was seduced by the debonair Wajdi, who later abandoned her when she became pregnant.

When the lights were turned on, Hatim stood up and asked about the movie's "message." Everyone in the audience gave him a blank look. "This movie was made in 1947, my brothers and sisters, but it could have come out this year, so little seems to have changed. Wajdi's people spend their time drinking, dancing, and carousing, while the people of the Hara can barely find enough to feed themselves. Umm Kulthum's misery is her own fault. This is what happens when Muslim women engage in relations with dissolute men. *That* is the message of this movie. Let it be a warning to the sisters in the audience." And with this, he stared down the single teenage girl who was in attendance.

Youssef went home without getting a snack or lingering at the street corner with his friends. He found his mother bent over her embroidery. She was sometimes able to supplement her income by preparing trousseaux for brides. Without taking a break from the wedding sheet she was adorning in the Fassi style, she looked up and asked him to go buy a quarter kilo of flour.

"I was at the new cinema," he said, sitting down.

"How did you pay?" she asked, needle paused in midair. "You didn't ask me for money."

"It was free."

"Really? That's odd."

He shrugged. "They showed *Fatmah*."

She started again on her embroidery. He told her about the

movie, describing how Umm Kulthum had been deceived, how she had fallen in love with the handsome Anwar Wajdi, how she had had to go to court to prove the baby's paternity, how it had all been the fault of Wajdi's family. His mother remained silent, Youssef noticed. Even though she loved Umm Kulthum, she did not ask which songs had been performed in the film. And the way she kept her neck bent seemed slightly unnatural, as if she were making a special effort not to look at him. He waited.

At length, she set aside the wedding sheet, her eyes meeting his for the first time. "Why are you telling me this?" she asked.

In a way Youssef could not explain to himself, he had always felt that something was amiss in the stories she had told him. "I think you know why," he said softly.

"I don't know what you're talking about. What I do know is that you're going to the movies instead of studying for your final exams. You only have two weeks to go, my son. What are you going to do if you fail? You'd better go get the flour and come back and start studying."

He took the money she handed him and left, kicking at rocks on the road as he walked.



Youssef took his final exams at the end of June, and on the day the results were to be announced, he made his way to school with Amin and Maati. He felt confident about his chances; he knew he was a good student, even if his mother seemed never to believe it. Maati, too, was not worried because, he said, he had

“studied with the best,” by which he meant that he had copied from Youssef. Only Amin was sure he would fail. He had nearly refused to come along.

The lists were posted just outside the gates. Youssef pushed his way through the crowd that circled the notice boards. He scanned the names quickly: Youssef El Mekki, Amin Chebana, but no Maati Aït-Said. “Maybe someone’s taken one of the pages,” Youssef said, turning around to look at Maati behind him. “Some people like to keep them as souvenirs.”

Maati’s jaw tightened. “Nothing’s missing.” He said he was going for a walk.

“Wait, my friend,” Youssef said, but Maati did not look back.

Amin shook his head disbelievingly. He said he would go find his brother Fettah, and together they would ride the bus to the house in Anfa where their father worked as a gardener, to tell him the unexpected good news. Youssef walked back home alone. “I passed,” he announced, as soon as he pushed the door open.

“Praise be to God,” his mother said, rising from her seat and breaking into a series of high-pitched joy cries. She hugged him tightly, her head barely reaching his chest. She told him that she had asked God for good results every day for the past year, and that He had answered her prayers. “Now, everything is going to change.”

Youssef had never seen his mother so happy. She looked years younger now, her eyes sparkling with joy. He smiled as he kissed her hand.

“I’m going to make something special for dinner tonight,” she said. “What would you like?”

His thoughts drifted to his father, as they always did on special occasions. “If only he could have seen me,” he said.

Her face returned to its usual cautious seriousness.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

She looked away. She picked up a shirt from the laundry pile and began to fold it.

“What is it that you’re hiding from me?”

“Nothing.”

Youssef took the shirt from her hand. “Tell me,” he said.

There was no grand soliloquy — the sort of thing he had seen hundreds of times in the movies. His mother spoke very tersely about her life. The Franciscan nuns at the Bab Ziyyat orphanage had sent her to train as a nurse in a hospital. She had been there a few months when a young lawyer by the name of Nabil Amrani came in for a minor checkup. He had been involved in a scuffle with the police at a political rally. They started to see each other, and she quickly became pregnant. They planned to get married. The weekend before their wedding, Nabil went to Casablanca to pick up his brother from the airport, but in the morning fog his car collided with a truck and he died. Madame Amrani, Nabil’s mother, had never approved of the marriage, and when she was told about the pregnancy, she accused Youssef’s mother of sleeping with one of the doctors at work. Youssef’s mother could not complete her training and went to live with a friend from the orphanage until after the birth. Then she left Fès and settled down in Casablanca.

“Amrani? Like the bus company?”

She shrugged. “It’s a common name.”

“What about my last name, El Mekki?”

She looked down. "I bribed an official to put that name on your birth certificate."

Youssef swallowed. Was that all there was to his story? It was a tale of outrageous misfortune, and yet it was utterly ordinary: he had been born an illegitimate child. That was why his mother had never stayed in touch with his father's family and why his father's family never came looking for him. He wanted to take her by the shoulders and shake her. Why had she kept the truth from him? Who was Nabil Amrani? Was there no hope that the Amranis would want to meet him? His head was filled with questions, but he was too angry to formulate them.

He walked out of the house, delivering himself to the scorching afternoon heat. As he made his way to the Oasis café, he realized with a mix of horror and delight that he had not been the only actor in the house. All his life, his mother had played the part of the respectable, grieving widow, talking frequently about the happiness that had been cut short by a terrible accident. She had told him that his father was a good teacher, that he loved to read books, that he always helped her with chores around the house. Those were all lies. And now she had burdened Youssef with her secret, so that he, too, had to play a role.



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