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Mektub

FATMA LIVED IN THE COUNTRYSIDE, in a little house that her parents had built when her oldest brother went to France and started sending back money. Before that, they had lived in a big black tent, made of goats' hair, with flaps that opened up in summer, allowing cooling breezes to circulate. The house, in contrast, just got hot in summer and stayed damp and cold all winter. The house and its sheds were surrounded by huge prickly pear bushes, which formed a compound that hid them from the road and passers-by, and stopped animals and stray dogs from wandering in. The gate to the compound consisted of a car door from a wreck left behind by a neighbour's son who'd gone to Holland and never came home any more. Rumour had it that he had married a Dutch woman, and was afraid to bring her home.

In the rainy season, the compound was awash with mud, and they all wore plastic sandals and boots bought at the souq, which at least gave them a grip. None of the neighbours ever wore footwear, except for one good-looking girl, Meriem, who carried hers over her shoulder until she got near the souq. Looking for a man and trying to make an impression, Fatma's mother said.

Fatma's parents did not believe that looks were important. According to her mother, a man would come for you for what you were and for your housekeeping abilities. Looks were the last thing a marrying man thought of. Yet Fatma longed for a man who would fall in love with her for herself, and die rather than live without her.

Near the house, strategically placed along a straight stretch of the main road to Tangier, was a pottery works and shop, a long low building with a line of pots along the top of the wall and neat arrangements of pots and serving dishes laid out on the sandy stretch in front. Here, tourists would stop and emerge from their

cars, stretching themselves. If they wanted to buy, they would pretend to be shocked at the prices, which they really found very cheap indeed, and they would haggle a bit just for the form, so the potters wouldn't take them for idiots altogether, and punish those tourists who would come later.

When there was no one around, Fatma liked to look at the pots, at the colours and designs, the lozenges, zigzags, leaves and animals. She imagined the dishes on the wall of her dream house, freshly washed and hung up after a meal of tajine which she would cook for her loving husband and her future little ones. She even liked to watch the tourists—although she never mentioned this to anyone—especially the men, whom she tried to picture at home in Europe, being kind and understanding with their wives. Tourist couples sometimes argued over the purchases and the money, but Fatma was sure they must be under pressure to think of all their friends, or tired from travelling. Tourists must suffer so much, what with their fussiness about toilets and food and hotels, they made life difficult for themselves. Different countries, different habits. She'd heard some of it from her sister-in-law, but didn't really swallow too much of her talk, since she was biased against Belgium, where she lived.

There was also a boy at the pottery whom Fatma liked. He had once or twice been bold enough to speak to her. He was about eighteen, dark and handsome, and there was a rumour that he would go to France to help his brother there. Fatma and he had a system which involved improvising songs, so that each knew the other to be not far away, on a donkey, gathering firewood, or going to the well. It had become quite poetic, since it didn't involve any of the awkward shuffling that sometimes happens between people of their age, or the danger that someone might see them. They had not broken any rules, Fatma told herself. And she had not reduced herself to secret meetings in the forest or even expeditions to the Chellah gardens in Rabat, which some of the older girls in the douar had done. That was really for the cheeky or the rich. Fatma's mother said it was the influence of the big city. Besides, Fatma liked the open country and the forest and the dayas that appeared among the trees in spring, with little white flowers floating on their surface, and a loud croaking of frogs in the afternoon warmth.

Fatma was expected to spend a lot of her time helping her mother with the cooking and cleaning and—a job she hated altogether, since in other places it was considered a man's job—washing the clothes near the ford on the river. Some girls loved it for the chatter and gossip. She loved it in winter when the floods came and her father declared washing too dangerous, and they left it for a while until the swell died down. Another thing she loved to do was drink mint tea. She would make an occasion of it, finding a nice, shady corner somewhere—usually under the vine outside the front door—although she liked to change the location as often as possible and to pretend that she was in a different house each time. Then she would install a piece of rush matting to sit on, and invite the others to join her. Her mother would laugh and say, “You're a devil, Fatma!” In winter it was difficult to make things cosy because of the muck outside and the cold inside, but in the evenings she would sometimes organize the kanoun, and when the embers were glowing red she would bring it in and call the others and they would sit around telling stories and laughing. They all loved it when Fatma told stories, although some people didn't like it when she frightened them with stories of djennoun, or Aisha Kandisha. Aisha Kandisha was for frightening men, not women, she would tell them, but they were still frightened. They usually had such evenings when her father was gone to the cigarette shop a couple of miles away, to play cards with his friends, or chat in the mosque beside the souq.

One evening her father arrived home and hunted them all to bed, obviously wanting to talk to her mother in private. Fatma heard the word ‘cousin,’ and felt a moment's anxiety, since she was already fourteen and others of her age were already married, all around her. She had hoped that her mother would stick up for her on account of the mint tea sessions or the storytelling in the evenings. Since they didn't know about the boy, Rachid, and since he showed no signs of getting a job in France, her parents could therefore never be told—unless he made a move himself. She might now find herself in a very awkward position. The camomile flowers she had put in her pillow didn't help her sleep that night, and the alhalfa mattress felt lumpy.

The next day, she was coming back from the forest bent almost double under a load of firewood—a task she preferred to cooking, since it was lentils or chickpeas most days—when a

younger brother came running to tell her she was wanted at the house immediately. How she despised these younger brothers, who were never asked to collect firewood or to carry water or to carry another child, yet who considered themselves strong and capable, and would scoff at her puny strength. She didn't dare wonder what was up at the house.

"You're to be married, my girl," her father said as soon as she arrived, "to your cousin Hussein, who lives in Marrakesh." He was still wearing his rough wool outdoor djellabah and making to leave the house again. "Your mother will tell you the details, and you should discuss clothes and that sort of thing. You'll be going to live in Marrakesh," he added, and left the house.

Her mother could hardly conceal her happiness—their second girl to be asked for so quickly. Fatma felt she could have shown more misgiving, at least as a gesture, for all the good times they'd enjoyed together. "He's a nice, kind man," her mother said, "and he has a good job in Marrakesh. He came all the way back here to get a wife."

Fatma remembered this Hussein vaguely. It made her blood run cold to think of how much older than her he was, and how much younger Rachid. She was disturbed also that Hussein had probably planned this for some time, eyeing her without her realizing it, when he came home on visits, at the souq, maybe, as one would eye a beast.

But she decided to be optimistic, what with the talk of new clothes—they were having some made locally, but a trip to the medina in Rabat was planned—and the fact that everything was happening so quickly. Also, there was the flattering idea that he must have liked the look of her, and the fact that she had never been to Marrakesh in her life, or even far from Rabat except for a moussem in the country the far side of Salé. The fuss was exciting, and there would be a little parade of the wedding presents from the douar to the souq—since it couldn't go all the way to Marrakesh. Then she and Hussein would be going to Marrakesh in a taxi all of their own, with no other passengers.

It would all be grand really, she told herself.

So it happened like that, and the presents were nice, tapestried cushion covers and dishes and blankets and a brass tray. The kinds of things that travel easily. And her husband, Hussein, a man of about forty, was kindness itself. And they went to Marrakesh

and they lived in that part of town where there were tall new apartments but no asphalt roads yet, with sheep grazing nearby amidst the rubbish which people threw out, where birds and children poked for treasure all day long, amidst the smoke and the smell of burning.

She cooked things with chickpeas and lentils in the beginning, moaning about the lack of a garden for herbs and other things, until she found her way around the local market. After a while she realized that Hussein earned enough money for meat on a regular basis, and she began to experiment with other types of tajine.

But that was towards evening. The rest of the time she went out on the street, and found girls of her own age, with whom she played games, whenever they were free—for they were forever being sent on errands for their mothers or married sisters. Some of them still went to school. When they got tired of games, they talked about love and marriage and having children. Sometimes, they looked slyly at her when they talked of children. “Sure there isn’t anything happening?” they would ask, “How many months is it now?” She felt embarrassed at this, wishing she were at home with her sisters and mother, who she was sure would never say anything like that to her. Sometimes she told her new friends about her home near Rabat, about the forest and the dayas and the plants and the animals.

When Hussein found out how much she missed home, he said, “Why didn’t you tell me before?” She had to say that she didn’t really know it herself, but that now she knew how she enjoyed walking in the forest, smelling the countryside, chatting with her neighbours while they minded sheep.

By way of distraction, Hussein took her into town to visit the palace and Jemaa el Fna, and bought her new material for dresses, and for a while she was happy again. But one day, when her new friends in the street all had other things to do, as she was making a pot of mint tea for herself alone, she felt very lonely indeed, and cried her eyes out. When Hussein came home, he insisted that she tell him what was wrong, so she told him about the tea and the get-togethers.

“I’ll change my job,” he said. “We’ll go back. It may be difficult at first, but it’ll be worth it, if you’re happy.”

So they moved back. They took a train this time, and as they got nearer to Rabat, she was very happy to hear the accents and see the faces that she knew.

"It's my country too, you know," Hussein said; "maybe it's a good move for both of us."

But it was difficult. They had to rent a small house in a village already growing into a town, but which had just one main street with a shop for mending the wheels of mule- and donkey-carts, a few cafés, five grocers and a bakery. Behind the village sprawled a huge shantytown.

But Fatma was happy. Her friends, her mother, her sisters came to see her, and she made them mint tea, and even bought some cakes from the bakery, which really impressed them. She didn't tell them that she had forgotten how to make them, indeed had never got into the habit of making them, in all the time she had spent idle in Marrakesh. "A woman of leisure!" they cried, and admired her new dresses. They didn't talk about the house because they knew it was just a temporary thing. One of them whispered to her that Hussein had paid 2,500 dirhams for her. They went to the hammam together, and to the souq, and they gave her tips for better tajines.

Finally one day she knew she was pregnant, and was even happier still. But Hussein wasn't as pleased as she had expected. "I still can't find a job," he said, lighting another cigarette, "and the men in the café tell me there are fewer jobs than ever around here, because of all the new people who are coming to live in the quarters behind the main street. I'm getting old now—they don't want people to whom they'll have to pay a pension." He was smoking too much, she thought, and spending too much time with all those other idlers at the cafés. But she said nothing.

Finally he did get a job in one of the local factories, and came home each evening covered in white dust. The money wasn't as good as in Marrakesh, but it was enough, if they were careful. Fatma knew they would have more children, so she had a plan.

She waited until the baby was born, and then she put her plan into action. She went to work for some of the Nazarenes in the area, and was no sooner employed as a home help when she found herself pregnant again. This time she hoped it was a boy, so he could grow up quickly and look after them. And it did turn out to be a boy, and they called him Mohamed, and she thought he was the most beautiful baby she had ever seen.

Shortly after he was born, her employers left Morocco because their contract was finished and Fatma had to look for work again. Between jobs they had to be careful with the money, because prices had gone up so much in the meantime. And Fatma felt very tired sometimes, and drank a lot of mint tea, which she called her 'fuel,' and which made her feel a lot better. Without it, she said, *ras ouelo*, she had no head at all. While she was looking for a new job, her sisters came to visit, and told her they thought she was mad. They couldn't understand why she and Hussein hadn't stayed in Marrakesh, but they thought she was crazy altogether to go out looking for work, when Hussein had a perfectly good job already.

"It's for the children, really," she said.

Well, it was partly true.

"I'm saving up for their schooling."

The Nazarenes were rumoured to be easier to work for than Moroccans, but Fatma found out that this wasn't always true. Her next employer was a difficult woman, who had two kitchens, one for the hired help (Fatma and a gardener) and one for the family, plus two toilets for the same reason. Her children went horseback riding in the afternoons ("The only horses ever seen around here," grumbled Hussein) along the dusty lanes of the quarter where the Europeans lived in brand new villas. Madame, a Swiss with a Belgian husband, objected to the quantity of spices that Fatma put in the food, the stock cubes and ersatz colouring that Fatma was in the habit of using at home, and which Madame considered poisonous. Nor did she like Fatma's preference for the little boy rather than the little girl. Fatma found the little girl too cute by half, a little vixen, she called her, who sometimes informed her mother if Fatma didn't wash her hands before beginning to prepare the food.

Fatma worked with Mohamed on her back, but usually one of her sisters looked after little Samira. However, one day when the sister had to go to hospital suddenly, Fatma had to take Samira to work with her, as well as Mohamed. She knew Samira could amuse herself quietly—indeed would be delighted with all the toys—while she got on with the housework. But of course her employer's little girl and Samira fought, and when lunch was finished her boss told her to take her daughter home. At the end of the week, she was given her notice.

And so it went on like that, until Fatma was forty, and had seven children. The last little boy was a weakling from the start, shortsighted and even seemed a little deaf, so that he did not talk much, and not until much later than the others. The doctor told her it was because she had not looked after herself during the pregnancy. "You can't live on mint tea and fried bread," he said, when she told him what she ate. She had told him other things she ate too, but he didn't believe her. She knew he was hand-in-glove with the pharmacist across the street, who knew everything. Luckily, her current boss was paying for this visit, because the doctor put her on a course of injections which did her a world of good, but which she could never have afforded herself. She had to pay the pharmacist three dirhams every time to administer the injections, and on the days when she couldn't afford the three dirhams she didn't have any injection at all. She didn't dare tell Hussein much of this, because his brow was now constantly furrowed due to rumours of redundancies at the factory. The older men would be the first to go, he told her, "I'm nearly retiring age anyway."

When her mother died, Fatma cried a bit, because she had died young. But they all took it quite well, until her father announced his intention of marrying again. They didn't have much time to think about it that day, because everything comes at once, and Hussein arrived home very late indeed, and wouldn't eat his dinner. There was a strong smell of stale coffee and cigarettes from him, and she noticed how brown and gapped his teeth had become. He was old now, she realized, and he could no longer be relied upon to fend for them. Nor could Mohamed, who had left school and found nothing else, as if he hadn't the will even to look. She was very happy about the way Ahmed, the second son, had turned out, staying on at school and getting a diploma as a technician. He now worked with the electricity company, but was far from home and had a wife and three children of his own to look after. The rest were girls, an expensive business, who showed no signs of being either good at school or attractive enough to get husbands quickly.

But Hussein was saying something to her.

"I'm finished at the factory," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "it's odd jobs for me from now on."

He would have a small pension, which barely helped when put along with her own wages. One of the girls left school to help

at home, and the next girl attended a typing course in Rabat, which cost money for fees and books and clothes. Everything cost money, and now they couldn't ask Fatma's father for help either, because he was creating another family of his own. And prices went up and there were riots all over the country. The eldest girl, Samira, was doing home help now, like Fatma herself. It was something Fatma didn't like too much, because there were often men visitors where Samira worked, and she was expected to wait late and serve them. Hussein was told nothing of this. "It's like being a waitress," Fatma's sister said, "it's disgusting for an unmarried girl." Country people, Fatma thought, had no idea of town life. She had never told her sisters that in some of the houses where she worked at first, there had been no washing machine and she had washed the underpants of the boss, by hand. They weren't all like that, of course, and some of the younger women wouldn't have allowed her to do that at all. No, she only told her sisters what suited her.

Some years later, the day came when Fatma was too ill to work, and almost too ill to go to the doctor. She lay on the sofa all day, swollen and in pain, hoping it would go away. She watched her youngest boy come and go from school, and she wondered what would happen to him. Not only was he hard of hearing, but extremely shortsighted as well. He never wore the spectacles that had been bought for him by one of her employers, because he was the only one at school with spectacles and the others teased him. His new teacher refused to treat him as a special case, as the previous one had done, and told Fatma that there was no problem: if he couldn't hear very well or see the blackboard, he only had to copy from the pupil beside him. Fatma knew it was either that or a school for the handicapped, and she didn't want that.

This time it was serious, the doctor said. She had high blood pressure, and probably kidney trouble. She would have to go to hospital for tests.

"But my job," she protested, forgetting in her panic that it wasn't his business. "This is the second day I've missed, and if she doesn't get me back, she'll get someone to replace me—she has two young children."

"And how many have you got?" he asked, then more firmly: "It's that or die—you won't last six months at this rate."

So they did their calculations, and with the money they still had they bought sacks of flour and beans and chickpeas, and pasta

and sugar, and some charcoal from the men who burned it out in the hills. And her eldest, Samira, took on the job she had left, because Fatma didn't want to disappoint her boss, or *La Maman de Julian*, as she called her, because she always saw her in relation to her children since she didn't work outside the home. There was a neighbour who was very glad to get the job that Samira left, even though it meant walking four kilometres to work each day. And the daughter who was doing the typing course left it, finally admitting that someone with the Baccalaureate would get the jobs first anyway, and that the best she could do was go working as a home help too, at least it would bring in money quickly, if not much of it.

And the younger girls come and go from school, sitting together in the evenings to watch the television that one of Fatma's bosses left her when departing. And Mohamed, the eldest boy, doesn't do anything much except drink coffee and smoke cigarettes with his father, in the café mostly, just coming home in the evenings for the meal. And the little boy, he gets on at school by sheer determination, although he never talks about it now. He does his homework on the floor, while the others chat and watch TV. Fatma usually sits with her back to it, since she can understand little of what goes on in French, just getting the gist of some of the melodramas in Egyptian Arabic, and laughing with the others from time to time, when she can't resist it, and when the pain's not too bad. She is more swollen now than before, and Hussein says she'll have to go to the doctor again soon. She doesn't really follow the diet he advised, and she often has a glass of mint tea—which is completely forbidden—although she never tells stories anymore. Samira has taken over that role, and makes the others laugh some evenings till they are fit to burst. Fatma hasn't been home to the forest for years now, her father's new wife and family are always busy. But she thinks of it, often, and especially in spring.

Around her the shantytown seethes and boils. Beyond, the towns and cities of Morocco sprawl further and wider. Rabat will meet Casablanca one day, for it is written, it is all written. *Mektub*.