

جوائز ناجي نعمان الأدبيّة

*prix littéraires*  
*premios literarios*  
naji naaman 's  
*literary prizes*

ABDELILAH GRAIN

**BITTER  
HARVEST**

maison naaman pour la culture

## **Abdelilah Grain**

Moroccan writer, living in the United Kingdom. Orphan at five years old, he writes in French and English. After "Quand le jour se lève", it is the turn for "Bitter Harvest". Laureate of Naji Naaman's Literary Prize 2008 (Creativity Prize).

*Écrivain marocain, vivant au Royaume-Uni. Orphelin à l'âge de cinq ans, il écrit en français et en anglais; après "Quand le jour se lève", voici "Bitter Harvest". Lauréat du Prix Littéraire Naji Naaman 2008 (Prix de Créativité).*

## ***DESCRIPTION***

*“Bitter Harvest” written by Abdelilah Grain, is an intriguing work of fiction which focuses on the daily struggles of the poor, young, Muslim boys as they seek a better life as men. The reader is introduced to Hamid and Hisham as they try to salve their wounded minds and calm the tide of hopelessness by smoking hashish. Lacking education or direction, they appear to be drifting listlessly through life. Meeting with friend Rachid, they admire his ability to refrain from falling into the abyss of drug addiction. Believing that his recent visits to a local mosque listening to a charismatic Imam has helped him deliver him from temptation. He urges his friend to follow the same path. As with many young men in similar circumstances, these boys are often drawn into the world of staunchly conservative religious factions as it provides direction and a purpose for those unable to compete in the secular world. Easily convinced that the ways of the world conspire to keep those of lower economic achievement in their present condition, faithful followers of Imam’s are recruited. For those without a proper understanding of the highly competitive and enormously rewarding democratic world, forming a solid allegiance to a religious figure is often the result. As “Bitter Harvest” unfolds an entertaining story along these lines is presented.*

*Composed in captivating narrative and compelling dialogue, the story flows at a brisk tempo. The plot contains more than a few strategically placed, unexpected twists that should maintain the reader’s interest throughout. The characters are developed and presented in a multi-dimensional fashion revealing the intricacies of their unique personalities and individual agendas. In addition, the author effectively manages to avoid artificially padding the work with superfluous material and unnecessary characters thereby keeping the focus directed towards the primary storyline. Navigating the plot to a well conceived and logical conclusion the author could leave the reader with a sense of time well invested in the reading of this story.*

*Abdelilah Grain’s highly descriptive style of writing combined with a keen attention to detail could further enhance the appeal of this work.*

**Author's note**

*This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.*

# Chapter 1

Noon, the sky was golden yellow and the sun shone red boiling the humid air. The air was very still, heavy and oppressive. The inhabitants of this street retreated to their cool houses leaving windows and doors open in a hope of cool breeze. The only people left outdoors were kids playing their frantic games and two teenagers poorly and untidily dressed squatting down on the edge of the pavement. The first with a mousy face covered with pimples and have an air of innocent insolence. He was wearing blue jeans, old shoes big for his feet and the sleeves of his thin coat shone with greasy dirt like a mirror. The other was thin as a skeleton with a bushy head and a terrible sign of illness in his face. The first took a piece of a shady green, coarse, almost like tobacco chip from his pocket and looked at it with admiration.

“ Are you going to roll one, ” asked the bushy-headed young man.

“ Yes, I have been thinking of it all the morning. It keeps me fine till the evening but I smoke a lot at night, as I can’t sleep. I need at least four or five and it costs lot of money. I have to steal to keep the habit. Last time I was nearly caught by two Mokhaznis in Plaza as I stole T-shirts. I didn’t know what happened to me. I heard like voices telling me to do what I want. I couldn’t resist. I grab T-shirts and run. The next thing I knew was two Mokhaznis were running after me. I was nearly hit by a lorry as I crossed the street. I enter the cemetery and run down to the sea. I was high and I wanted to cross the Atlantic Ocean and end up in USA but I hide myself behind rocks. The Mokhaznis couldn’t follow me ”.

He burnt the piece of hashish, spread it on a cigarette and rolled it. He lit the joint, tightened his lips around it and took large big drags and emitted rings of smoke. He passed it to his friend and lied almost flat on his back with one leg on the other. Rachid appeared on the street. He was as usual clad in his faded dungarees, a T-shirt and old adidas trainers. He was a tall slim boy, tall without seeming thin and slim without appearing fragile. He moved with an athletic grace and mastered each movement like a ballet dancer. He hurried his footsteps as he felt the heat of the ground. The sole of his trainers were peeling.

The two young men were staring stupidly at nowhere. They looked lifeless as if they were living in another world. The mousy face young man sat himself unsteady and said:

“ It’s not nice to smoke hashish on a very hot day”.

“ Yes, ” said the bushy-headed after a long pause. He took big large drags again that made the coal glow and sat motionless with half joint still between his forefinger and thumb, feeling breathless but gliding in the sky. He passed the sweet joint to his friend and said:

“ Man, life was unkind to me since my tender age. Man, if you listen to those voices in your head, talking to you day and night; when you look at yourself with no education, no job, no hope, with no respect, believe me, you’ll go crazy .This joint here, is a good medicine for me. It makes me live in another world. I see things that don’t really exist. For instance last time when I smoke this hashish I saw people small like insects. I liked it very much and I laughed great deal. It helps me live the days”.

“ Yes, ” said the mousy face young man“ .We are both in the same boat ”. He pulled in hard on the joint and blinked his smoky eyes. Rachid approached them and said in a very soft voice:

“ Salam Aleikum (*peace be with you*), brothers”.

“ Wa aleikum a salam, ” they replied“ . Do you want to share our joint? It is a good quality hashish”.

“ No, I don’t smoke and you shouldn’t invite anyone to smoke. It’s bad for health and bad for the brain. It drives people crazy”.

“ We know, brother Rachid and forgive us. May Allah keep you away from the evil of this herb or rather from bad influence. Nobody gives a shit about us, and that’s why we are lost. I am not trying to excuse what we are doing but that how it is, ” said the mousy face.

“ Well brother Hamid, the world is like a big jungle, you should look after yourself. And remember this brother Hamid: “ the elephant doesn’t rule the jungle. God forgive you”.

“ I am a failure, brother Rachid. I feel lost since I was kicked out of the school. I wasn’t a brilliant student but I’ve never thought I’ll end up trumping like this. My life is a mess and I don’t know what to do”.

“ And you brother Hisham, do you know what to do? asked Rachid the bushy-headed young man.

“ Yes, brother Rachid, yes ”he nodded for a while and continued: “last time I was passing through Barki neighbourhood and I heard the sound of the mufti. I couldn’t resist the sweet sound, and I went inside the mosque. The Imam talks better than those sons of bitches who are calling themselves civilised and democrats. The man talks about justice, equality, sharing the natural resources of the land, helping one another. I listen to him and I was

moved and cried, literally cried. Yes brother Rachid, one day I'll wake up a changed man, a clean man. One day I'll wake up determined to stop smoking and join the brothers. I'll become a better man. I myself couldn't make it in school and was convinced that the son of the poor stays poor but when I went to the mosque that day and after talking to brothers there, I learnt that the best Muslims intellectuals were from humble background. Why this is not happening anymore?"

"I don't know brother Hisham. I wish I can give you a simple answer, but it becomes complicated by this shit politics".

"Yes, you know brother Rachid, you know".

"I tell you what I am going to do", said Hamid. When you join the brothers I am not staying here on my own. Hell no. I am going to save money and go to Tangier. If I can't save the money I walk to tangier and I am going to swim to Spain. I am not going to pay nobody to cross the sea on his boat. No, I am going to swim. And when I reach Spain, I am going to learn a trade. I am going to learn mechanic or plumbing or anything and I am going to work. I am going to work hard and make my home and look after my kids and I will never come back to this land. I am sick of everybody including my father and my mother. I am sick of everything men, and if I can't reach Spain and I am drowned in the sea, well, it's better for fish to eat my body rather than live in this dirt".

"I can't carry on living like this", said Hisham. "I wish someone can give me direction. I wish someone can tell me what to do and save me but no one care, no one, not even my family. Once you smoke hashish, nobody wants to talk to you. Last time I wanted to take the tape recorder out. I wanted to go to the prairies, sit under a tree and listen to Nass El Ghiwan. Whenever I listen to their songs, I feel as if I am in a trance and I sing and dance and cry. I feel better when I cry. I don't know why but I feel better. But that day my brother was home and the tape recorder is his. He didn't let me. We started an argument and the fight broke up. My father came, he took a good stick and started beating me. I gave him my back and I felt better as he was beating me. I don't know why but I felt better until my mother stopped him. I couldn't sleep on my back for days. It was all black and purple. I can't carry on living like this. I have to join the brothers. They are helpful and very decent people.

Rachid opened his mouth trying to say something; maybe a piece of advice but could not. He looked up and down the street, shook his head as if trying to shake up some nightmare dream and could not, then looked on the high burning sky and wished for god to look down on them. He sponged his face with his handkerchief and quickened his steps leaving the two young men in their indifferently different world.

In the street, kids were innocently playing, half naked and shoeless with old rubber tires they stole whenever they had a chance from a local Texaco petrol station and were dragging clouds of dust behind; while girls sitting quietly in front of a door playing with their dollies. In the middle of the street, a mint seller wearing black torn shoes, blue jeans stiff and shiny with dirt, a brown jumper and a cheap straw sombrero. He was shouting the freshness of his mint which he carried on the back of a small lean donkey and behind him another, selling bleach in dirty plastic bottles. A fat chubby woman opened her door and called the mint seller. He stopped his donkey, uncovered the chouaris, showing her bunches of mint.

“ How much? ”she asked.

“ One dirham, ” he replied.

“ One dirham for this small bunch ”! she said. Her relaxed face tightened, and her eyes sharpened.

“ This decade is a decade of drought and hardship, I heard the wise men of this land saying but nobody listen to them anymore ”.

The bleach seller stopped his dirty trolley, talked to the fat chubby woman but she ignored him. He walked away shouting and looking at the doors hoping someone would come out and buy.

A small girl, maybe at the age of nine opened a door carrying a basket. She went to a corner and threw its content. As she left the door wide opened, three chickens went out and the chase begun. First, the little girl by herself, then a mob of boys arrived. But the chickens were athletes. They could run and fly, and when cornered, they squawked in outrage flapping their wings for speed leaving the boys in a pillar of dust. The boys regrouped and acted like true shepherds directing the chicken to the door and once entered the little girl went in and closed the door behind. The boys screamed victoriously raising their arms. They felt happy and good and went back to their game. Once the street became quiet, a family of cats lean and dirty came to a corner and started feasting on heads of fish the girl had thrown. Two dogs trotted up pleasantly toward them and the cats were mewing in outrage and ready for a fight. The big dog was growling hard and showing his sharp teeth terrorising the little kittens, which hid behind their mother. The smaller dog was not brave enough. He looked for something about to divert honourably his attention and was lucky. He saw a lizard running away and followed her, but the lizard disappeared in a hole. The dog felt proudly of himself as his tale was moving tentatively in the air. Down the road, an old Renault 4, with its mended tyres and a rattling body, was limping, bumping and struggling through the dust like a wounded animal. As the car approached, one of the boys tried to cross the street. The driver put his foot hard on the brakes and the brakes squealed in agony. He left the

car and in anger followed the kid, caught him, shook him, slapped him and mightily cursed him. The kid gathered a couple of stones, and in a state of humiliation and anger; he fired his missiles toward the car, and swearing revenge with any words came to his mouth. The driver picked up speed and disappeared leaving the street blinded with brown dust.

“ Son of bitch, ” said Hisham. He took other big drags and passed the joint to Hamid“ .Why is he taking this road? He doesn't live here”.

“ When they make some money, ” replied Hamid“ they buy old cars and come here to poison us with dust ”. He scratched his smoky eyes, tightened his lips around the joint and took more drags.

The fat chubby woman went back to her house without buying anything and cursing the young and the old for lack of decency and respect. The mint seller covered unhappily his chouris, grumbling and cursing her for wasting his time, and his donkey understood that she was not buying, walked away. The cats and the dog were still facing each other in the corner but another boy threw a stone and hit a cat. The animals ran away mewling and barking in outrage.

Rachid glanced at the boys and did not say anything. He kept walking. When he arrived to a small dull house, which had not had a lick of paint for a number of years and looked derelict, he stopped by the window and shouted: “Jamal, Jamal .” There was silence in the room and no answer came out. He called again without much result. It seemed there was nobody in the room but he knew for sure that Jamal was in deep sleep. He knew that he stayed awake all night revising for the exam. He rattled the wooden interstices, and then clenched his right hand and with his knuckles, he tap-tap-tapped the window very hard. The knocks could have raised and frightened the dead but not Jamal.

“ Shit, shit, ” screamed Rachid angrily in pain.

Little droplets of blood began to ooze. He took his handkerchief, wiped them and bandaged his gashed backhand. He looked in disbelief at the window and one fresh shiny droplet of his blood was hanged on a nail.

“ Nobody fixes any damn thing properly in this land. Other nations are going forward while we are stepping backward, ” he cried out.

Lalla Khadouj opened the front door of the house barefooted and as usual with a big smile on her bony and wan face with dark rings under her eyes. Although she was in her late thirties she looked about fifty, pinched and aged from worries, malnutrition and overwork, but she had a muscular spirit.

She had a number of admirable qualities. She was extremely capable woman with sound judgement and considerable intelligence. Lalla Khadouj enjoyed universal respect and could hold up her head high anywhere.

Lalla Khadouj had been through a great deal. She suffered bravely and without complaint; convinced that Allah wanted her to live that way and the reward is in the other life. She believed in heaven and hell. She had given herself to undertakings all what concern the house or what she herself called her niche and her chicks. In spite of her melancholy air, her face was still expressive and full of character and you could see rightness in her face of all opposing wrongness. Lalla Khadouj hated cigarettes and drugs with an iron zeal and regarded them as a sin against a properly outraged deity.

“ Good morning Lalla Khadouj, ” said Rachid kissing her head and buried his wounded hand in his pocket.

“ God blesse you my son. Jamal is still asleep. Last night, I woke up may be at two o'clock may be at three, I am not sure what time it was exactly, because the alarm clock is not working. I gave him the money to buy the batteries but he spent them. I hope he didn't spend them on cigarettes. Look at those two boys there; they are smoking hashish, I can smell it from here. I know the smell of it because most young men of this neighbourhood are using it. They have nothing to do. They are poisoning our children. It is a calamity sent to us by the Almighty Allah because we have lost faith in the way our grand parents lived. We are no longer following the teaching of the Koran and the guidance of our prophet. Look at that boy holding a Juana in his hand; that's Hisham. I know him like I know my son Jamal. Last time he was with his mother when I met her. His mother told me“ : this is my big boy ”. I told her: “God save his soul .” She told me:“ Do you know? ” I told her: “You can hide nothing in this neighbourhood. We know each other like we know our fingers ”. Lalla Khadouj ceased talking, took a deep breath, adjusted her scarf and called her daughter: “Salma, can you bring me my babouches, please ”. She looked at Rachid and continued: “One day, I was right here in this door and saw him, that boy, coming unsteady; suddenly he lost his balance and fall. Couple of kids were around him, helping him to get to his feet. I asked those kids what wrong with him and was told he stinks of alcohol. That day, when I met his mother he could not look at me; probably he was embarrassed; he left us without saying a word. I asked his mother: “ what is he doing? ” She sighed deeply and said: “Nothing, except having breakfast, lunch and diner and bed where to sleep. He had never done a thing since they had kicked him out of school. His father tried to find him a decent job but the boy had no brain. We learnt later that he smokes hashish and drinks alcohol. Now his father hates him. One day, in angry mood, he told me he could feed a dog but not his son. Last time he stole his brother's radio and a war broke up home .Their father took a big stick as if he was going to kill a snake and punished both boys. The junior was bleeding for no fault of his”. She told me: “ When he smokes hashish

and drinks alcohol, he doesn't talk to the family for three days or more and when he talks he just bursts in trouble like a volcano and doesn't know what he is doing from one minute to the next ". She told me she is drowned in problems till her neck and didn't know what to do. Look at him now with that joint in his hand. When small kids see him, what do you expect them to do? Forgive me my son for telling you all this. I was talking to you about last night. Yes, anyway as I said, I woke up in the middle of the night and Jamal was still reading, thinking and writing. I said to him :“ my son, you are not going to send sputnik to the moon. Go to your bed now; tomorrow you finish what you are doing ”. “Mother, ” he said,“ if I don't pass my baccalaureate this year I will go crazy and I will do something stupid. I failed last year. If I fail this year they will kick me out and there is nothing in this town to occupy even the hands of a devil”.

At this moment, Salma came with a pair of babouches.

“ Mother, ” she said,“ put these on your feet. You are always complaining about cold. Good morning Rachid”.

“ Good morning Salma, ” he replied.

“ Yes my dear, I have water in my knees and we neither have enough money to buy charcoal to warm our bones in winter nor enough doctors in Lalla Meriem hospital. Go and wake up your brother, it is midday now. Tell him that Rachid is here to see him ”.

Rachid shifted his gaze at Salma and there is something he didn't notice before. He felt compelled to have another look at her and saw something specially tender and kind. Although she was only sixteen, her face was full of a living electric beauty. Her big dark bright eyes shone and enlivened her face and her smile curved her juicy rosy lips. Her breast was full and high on good athletic body with smooth thighs belonging to the pedigree of an honoured Berber tribe. Her gaze rested for a moment on his face and he felt some supernatural power attracted him to her. She looked charming in her simple clothes and everything about her was enchanting and his heart thumped wildly. He would like to touch her soft skin, her flower skin and feel its warmth with his own. Salma looked at him in smiling eyes and lowered her gaze, but not in a way that was shy. It was a gesture meant only for him; the need to be had by her admirer, by someone she has strong feeling for. He looked again at her blushed face and her long black hair and above all her shy smile carried him into a fairyland where he felt softened and filled with tenderness and joy, and forgot the pain of his bleeding hand. Lalla Khadouj looked at them, one after the other and put her babouches on. Salma went back to the patio to hang the washed clothes and her mother continued the conversation:

“Eh, my son was a fine man, always smiling like his father. Got along very good with everybody till his father had this accident in the factory and lost his leg. Eh, my son saw how that Satan, I mean the factory owner, that hog, treats his father when he lost his leg. That man has no place in heaven and he will be in hell. He has no respect for life. He trampled on my husband dignity because he himself has no dignity at all. As you know, my husband Si Ahmed is left with one leg and incapable to feed himself. He was our breadwinner. I know my son took it badly but unable to do anything. He could not bear to see his dad with one leg and thrown in a corner with no help. I know my son is suffering in silence but Almighty Allah will punish the wrongful people.” She drew a deep breath as though casting off some heavy weight and went on. “We will never forgive this factory owner. In a day of judgement, before Almighty Allah, he will plead us for forgiveness and I will say to him: “You were so foolish and greedy in material life, now taste hell”. He will taste hell because Almighty Allah said in his book “So whoever does good equal to the weight of an atom shall see it. And whoever does evil equal to the weight of an atom shall see it”.

Lalla Khadouj was fairly shivering with fury. She shouted to her daughter:

“Salma! Put the kettle on and wake up your brother”. She continued her monologue while Rachid was feeling the pain of his wound and listening passively. “And now this baccalaureate exam is driving my son crazy. My son has changed a lot. Last week I was in the corridor and through a curtain I could see him in the kitchen raising his cup of tea, toasting no one at all and talking to himself. I am worried about the books he is reading. They are not written in the language of the Koran. Or may be he is losing himself to those rough, uneducated young men who condemned themselves or have been condemned to a life of hashish and alcohol; but I see him always in his room looking in his books. When he is out, is he always with you Rachid?”

“Yes, always,” he answered.

“And you Rachid, do you read these books?”

“I have to, because we take exam on those subjects”.

“Answer me truthfully; does my son smoke a cigarettes and hashish?”

“No Lalla Khadouj, we never did. We are all worried about the final exams”.

“Allah protect his humble subjects from evil. Come in, I heard the tap running. Jamal is in the bathroom”.

She looked at the far end of the street, looked hard and said :

“Who's that woman coming towards us?”

“It's Lalla Zahra”.

“Let wait for her. I want to know how is getting her man”.

“ I haven’t seen him in Si Hamman store for sometimes; he is still very sick and couldn’t see a doctor because he has no money”.

“ Who has money in this neighbourhood to pay a doctor? It is better to die quick than suffer for a long time but I want Lalla Zahra to know that we care. We poor people care for each other. She always asked me about Si Ahmed”.

Lalla Zahra approached them breathless and said:

“ How is your day, Lalla Khadouj, and how is Si Ahmed?”

“ All praises are to Allah, we never complain. Si Ahmed is as usual. What can we do? I want to ask you about Si Sellam, how is he?”

“ What can I say, ah Sister Lalla Khadouj, he is the same. Si Sellam has gone, only his shadow is still with us, eh sister lalla Khadouj”.

Her face grew with sadness, her dark eyes with pain until they were filled with tears and her lips quivered with pity for the memories of bad luck she thought her family was always having.

“ Did you take him to hospital?”

“ Eh the hospital! It was useless. It was a waste of time. My son woke up one early morning at 3 o’clock so he could be the first in the queue but he couldn’t. People sleep there queuing. At 6.30 I made breakfast and woke up Si Sellam. He couldn’t swallow anything. We walked slowly and we had to rest couple of times. I had little money and didn’t take a taxi. You know, we poor people, we cannot afford money for this luxury and I was thinking about saving some to pay for the prescription. We reached the hospital by 8 o’clock. Our son gave us the ticket and went back home to get some sleep. We were number 20 in the queue. While we were waiting, a young doctor came out cursing his luck. He was followed by a second doctor who was calling after him:

“ Si Sabir, come back; come back please”.

“ I can’t tear myself in pieces, ” said the young doctor“ . More than hundred patients come everyday and it pained me to turn back half of them. When I see them crying I cry myself”.

“ Please Si Sabir, please. You are very understandable man”.

“ You are right but for how long do I have to put up with this and stay late every day. We need more doctors here in this hospital. In fact we need more hospitals in this town. There is one hospital for this town and for the surrounding villages. What kind of logic is this? I become a stranger to my family. Whenever I reached my home I find my daughter asleep. I don’t see her very often. Last time while we were talking she told me“ daddy you don’t care about us, you care about your job ”. I explained to her that sick people need me but she said she herself needs me. I feel tired mentally and

physically. I can pick up my passport and my family and go back to France and live there in peace”.

“ Si Sabir, please look at me. You are very honest man. This country, these people here, who are looking at you now, need you; they desperately need you. Look at them; look at their faces, no doubt they need you. You can go but I don’t think your conscious will let you sleep in peace. Go back to your post Si Sabir, please ”.

Lalla Zahra took a deep breath and continued: “The young doctor sighed and let his arm fall and went back. We waited there till 10 o’clock when he saw us. Eh, he was a young man. He talked very slowly and softly. He must be from a rich background but he was a nice young man, courteous and polite. I wish all doctors were like him. He examined Si Sellam from head to toe and calling him “ father Sellam ” and he said that Si Sellam should take an X-ray. Eh, Lalla Khadouj ”. She sighed deeply again. She looked around with her hand raised to her head then dropped them with hopelessness and continued“ . The young doctor gave us a piece of paper with Si Sellam’s name on and showed us where to go. He told us to wait there for another doctor. We stayed in a beautiful courtyard with flowers and all. Eh, Lalla Khadouj and we did till 2 o’clock when another doctor came from his lunch break. The poor Si Sellam did not put a thing in his stomach all day. I thought we may finish from hospital by 11 o’clock, but we stayed there till 3 o’clock, eh ”.She sighed again in despair and her whole face changed. She turned horribly pale, her lips trembled and her eyes glowed. As she tried to speak, the muscles in her cheeks began to twitch. She felt a choking sensation as if a lump rose to her throat and tears, hot and big like grapes rolled from her eyes. She turned her face away trying to hide it and when she gained possession of herself ‘Lalla Khadouj asked her :

“ What the doctor said?”

“ Let me finish, Lalla Khadouj, let me finish. I have to stop to regain myself. My heart is so full and I don’t know what to do and what to say. Eh, we have waited there. People were coming in, others going out, but there are others, Lalla Khadouj, eh there are others who came and they did not need to queue. They think of themselves very special people ”. She sighed again and her eyes were watered with tears. She raised both hand high to the sky as if talking to god and continued: “ Allah, Allah, your worshippers are all equal. There is no difference between black and white, rich and poor, healthy and sick except their faith on you, but they forget your teaching written in the Koran ”. She turned her face to Lalla Khadouj“ . All they had to do was to whisper in the nurse ear and they were in. But we the poor, we the humble, we who fear god and his wrath, we who respect the law, we

have to wait for hours; we have to beg and shed tears and look very humble and humiliated to get sympathy and if we are lucky we get our right. Yes, we have to cry and beg for our own basic right; but we did not. Si Sellam always kept his head high among people. He never showed his weakness and taught us to behave in the same manner. What is left of a man when you take his dignity, he always says to us? So we did not beg the nurse and Si Sellam did not shed any of his tears before nobody, and when our turn arrived, I gave myself the piece of paper the young doctor gave us. The nurse looked at it unhappily and told us the machine was not working. I told Si Sellam to go back to the young doctor and explain the matter to him. He may help but Si Sellam refused, Eh Lalla Khadouj and we went back home. On the way, crossing Jnan Frances, Si Sellam was unable to accept the reality of the situation, cried with real tears and both were blinded by tears and anger ". She struggled to put a smile on her face but the smile was terrible. Her dry upper lip hung up and her whole face quivered and burst into tears. She shook her head, confused and dejected and bitterer than ever now.

"Don't cry Lalla Zahra; don't cry. We have Allah. He is always with his humble subjects. If not in this life, we will be better in the other. Nothing works properly in the land of Islam these days. We don't think at all . We are busy killing and destroying each other. Our grand parents were united and ruled the world with dignity and justice. Look what happened to us these days! If they come back from the dead, they will feel shame and sad to see what is happening to their children".

" Ah Lalla Khadouj, I'm crying because we are trampling on each other. The Christians and the Jews don't treat each other the way we do. I do not know what happen to the Ouma of Mohamed, Lalla Khadouj, eh. The machine was working; the machine was working ". Her face became red and her rage was rising beyond her control. Her eyes watered and wiped her tears with her hand and continued: " but for people who can afford to bribe the staff who works there. We don't have the money. I wanted to sell the silver bracelets he bought me when he was working and in good health but he refused. Now I have five chickens at home. I'm trying to fatten them, then sell them and take Si Sellam to Mezzoure clinic. People say he is a good man and a good doctor and some people told me if you explain to doctor Mezzoure your situation he won't take money from you but I couldn't Lalla Khadouj, I couldn't. I have to bury my head on the ground to try to say it, and maybe the words wouldn't come out. Well, I have to go Lalla Khadouj. I'm sorry to tell you all this but you are like my sister and never hide anything from you. I know you have your own problems but it's

good to talk. I bought 250 g of chicken meat, half a kilo of tomato, kilo of potatoes and I am going to prepare lunch”.

“ Come and see me Lalla Zahra, I don’t have time to come to your house. Si Ahmed needs me 24 hours a day. I watch him and care for him”.

“ Don’t tell me Lalla Khadouj; don’t tell me. I know everything and I think this seems to be our life. This is how Allah wants us to be. We can endure, we can suffer and no amount of tragedy can break down our endurance and believe in Allah. I am sure of that and proud of it ”.

Her right hand rose again high in the sky and again the muscles in her face began to twitch, her lips swelled, and her eyes were milky with hurt. She wanted to add something but posed in hopeless dejection. She took her shopping resolutely with a sense of obligation, of responsibility toward her family and walked away with her heart dull and heavy in her chest.

## Chapter 2

Rachid followed Lalla khadouj inside the house. The flapping wings followed by the shrill crows of the fighting roosters were coming from the patio. In the entrance, under the stairs that lead to the roof of the house was the privy, from which strong fresh smell of chit and urine was coming. This didn't mean that the toilet was blocked or someone had diarrhoea or constipation or Lalla Khadouj was unhygienic woman but her concern these days was a struggle to buy food and not hygiene materials. After the second door, down there was a sitting room. On the left side were Jamal's room and the kitchen that leads to the patio. On the right side were Salma's room and the parent's room and the bathroom. In spite of the sitting room was looking over the patio, it looked dull and furnished haphazardly. It was the fault of the cheap paint and the furniture that seemed discarded relics of past opulence that Si Ahmed acquired over many years very cheap from Joteya and was barely enough of it to make the room looked liveable. It was furnished by three seddaris and a small black and white " Ferguson " TV which stood on a small wooden table. In the middle, stood a round Formica table covered with plastic sheet and garnished with a vase holding a bouquet of everlasting flowers gathering dust. Opposite the window on the wall a large frame was hanged, which lodged an alarm clock ticktocking and decorated with Surah of the Throne and underneath, black and white enlarged photographs of Lalla Khadouj parents. The mother's face was firm. The lips were parted and teeth showed. The eyes were open and clear and showed comfort and rest. The father's face was rigid and stern with accusing eyes. The floor was covered by straw carpet and sheepskins. There was fluff under Seddaris and a fine dust on everything. On the corners, lines of cobweb run from one side to the other, floating slightly in the stir of the air.

Si Ahmed was lying on the floor looking thin and sickly with that horror of mortality. He was nursing his half leg with his bony fingers and couldn't move without a groan. Wearing as usual his saroual and white shirt buttoned to the top pinching his gullet. His tragic eyes gave a strong awareness of a tragedy that run through his life. They were red, dull and dry.

This didn't mean he was not an emotional man. Many things had moved him and he cried like a child but hidden. He had a religious upbringing and was taught that excessive emotional displays are undignified and unwise. He took everything in moderation but this disaster; this terrible loss of his leg was beyond all his understanding, beyond all his worst expectations. This accident defeated him and beat him utterly and there was nothing he could do and no one could console him and uplift his spirit. He was muttering words to himself as if seeking some explanation to why god had done this to him but not finding any. Salma, his daughter, finished her work in the patio, tiptoed to the kitchen and brought him his usual mug of mint tea and kissed him tenderly on the forehead. She sat on a seddari, took her arrows and started knitting. The needles in her hands were speeding with a continuous noise like a feeding hungry chickens .

"Allah blesse you my daughter," murmured Si Ahmed.

"Good morning father Ahmed," said Rachid.

"Good morning my son. This is what it's left of Si Ahmed. One-legged man, like that American film " Moby dick ." At least the hero of that film was looking for a fortune. I was looking for just a piece of bread to feed my family and to educate my children so they can have a better future than their parents had. And here I am with one leg and no one to look after us ". He sighed in distress and warmed his hands against the rounded side of his mug.

Lalla Khadouj scratched mosquito's bites on her left arm and gulped a great breath.

"Allah never forget his humble subjects," she said.

His eyes were filled with tears but he fought them back so that no one would escape. He paused in tragic wonderment and looked aimlessly to the walls and then to the sky through the open window.

"Ey," he sighed in pain". I am in pain, but the pain is bearable in daytime. At night I feel my half leg huge and heavy and pulses with a throbbing heat and I feel the pain, the pain. It's agony. I feel like an animal about to die. Sometimes I feel as if I have my both legs, something I can't understand. Last time I woke up in the morning and I felt I have my both legs. I forgot I lost one in the factory. As I tried to stand up, I tottered and spun into my fall. Look at this scar in my brow; it was wide open and bleeding like water through a tub".

Jamal was in front of the washstand in the bathroom, splashing cold water on his face and listening. A Gillette razor and a toothbrush were in a plastic cup. He took his toothbrush and scrubbed vigorously his teeth. He looked into the mirror and combed water through his wild and ungovernable long curly hair with his finger. He peered into his own eyes for a moment

trying to read the present and the future and made a wild tormented face at himself and loudly he sighed : “ Allah, Allah, give us one solution, just one solution ”. His father heard him and stopped talking. He came out of the bathroom with his face still wet. His shirt was wrinkled like an old fig. He never ironed his clothes; in fact they didn't have an iron at home. He looked at his father. This father was a strong husky figure with a hide as dark and hard as acajou, abounding in energy and good humour. After the accident, he lost half of his weight and is reduced to this ghostly bony visage coming back from the dead . The distress of his father distressed him and his heart sank rapidly as a stone thrown into a river. He wondered how much longer the ebbing of his life might take.

“ Good morning dad, ” he said to his father who became a mere skeleton covered with skin, and kissed his head .

“ Good morning my son, Allah blesse you all, ” said the father“ .You should put Allah in your heart my son. He never disappoint his faithful subjects”.

They looked at each other and felt talking to one another from the heart. The son would say : “ Dad, you are dying and I am scared, ” and the father would only reply : “ I know. I let you all down. Forgive me, forgive me, and forgive me. I am really sorry ”. But they wouldn't say it in real life and their eyes moist with tears .

Jamal was a handsome young man, gentle and sweet and very courteous. He always hanged on the fringes and gradually he drew away from the world, and the world drew away from him but there was warmth in him. He never spoke unless he was addressed. Even as a little boy he was polite and neat in his behaviour. He was known as Mr “ no trouble .” He loved to read and listen to Nass El Ghiwan and M'shaheb. He liked books and borrowed them from his philosophy' and biology teachers as he couldn't find the subject close to his heart in the school library but he had no desire to talk to anyone about the knowledge he gained through book. His classroom mates found his behaviour strange and called him stuck-up loner. It could be true, because he hated all teamwork, all team sports and disliked any kind of competition when he had to score point against someone else. But after his father had this accident, he became more and more alienated. He didn't like to sit in the sitting room because to look at his father with one leg became torment and particularly distressing and felt in an unsettled and confused state of mind. Angry with himself for this change of behaviour, he looked nervously at his father and smile with his lips while the muscles of his cheeks trembled.

Salma, his sister put her needles down and joined her mother in the kitchen. The kettle was simmering huskily and Lalla Khadouj was engulfed by a vague shame, a weedy sense of something being wrong.

“What happened, mother?” said Salma.

Lalla Khadouj was standstill in the middle of the kitchen looking at the ground in shame. Her face had a thick sadness over it and in her right hand was holding few centimes and tears well coming from her eyes and sliding down her cheeks, tears she didn't even know she was shedding and still didn't move.

“Mother, why are you crying?”

“Am I?”

Lalla Khadouj fumbled in her pocket for a handkerchief and dried her cheeks, but there was no stopping the flow of tears.

“Mother, tell me what's upsetting you?”

“I do not know what's happening in this house, I do not know what's happening to this family and why?”

“Mother, tell me what's wrong?”

“I don't have enough money to buy milk. What your brother and his friend are going to have for breakfast? I don't want to upset your dad because that poor soul had suffered enough”.

“Mother, it's not a problem. I'll bring milk from Si Hamman store on credit. He won't refuse. He always asks me if we need something. He told me many times that he considers my dad like a son to him”.

“No, I can't bring anything on credit”.

For her, credit and debt were an ugly word and concept to live with. It means dishonesty and laziness that she couldn't bear to accept. It soiled the name of the family. She always saved for things she wanted to buy and usually took her over a year to have it.

“I couldn't get a job for two weeks now,” said Lalla Khadouj with flushed face and aggrieved expression and went on “and we don't have any income. Look at your dad; he still needs medicine. We should look after him and I'm not going to spend what little money left till I get work”.

Salma lowered her head looking at the floor, took a deep breath and sighed and said :“ Well muy, make them black coffee”.

Lalla Khadouj put two large spoon of cheap ground coffee in her orphan teapot, added clove, cinnamon and ginger, poured boiling water, shook it with a circular movement, closed her teapot and left it to macerate. Salma put the teapot, two cups and bread and olives on a tray. Lalla Khadouj took the tray and before reaching the sitting room she stopped trying to attract her son's attention. He looked at her. She bit her lower lip trying to tell him to agree to what she was going to say and said :

“I made you your favourite coffee. You know Rachid; my son doesn't like anymore coffee with milk”.

Jamal understood that there was no money in the house to buy milk.

“ Welcome to the table Rachid, ” said Jamal.

“ I myself just got up from breakfast. I slept very late yesterday. I’m preparing for the exam. I don’t want to fail this year. I cannot understand why no more than 15% of the students pass the exam? I can’t swallow another thing, in fact I lost my appetite and mum is saying that I’m losing weight, but I love black coffee to refresh me this morning ”.

He took off his wounded hand from his pocket. Si Ahmed saw the handkerchief soaked with blood.

“ What happened? ” he asked.

“ I hurt my hand when I was knocking on the window ”.

“ Bring paprika, ” he said to Salma. It’s the medicine for poor Moroccans”.

Rachid cleaned his wound, filled it with paprika to stop the bleeding and bandaged it with his handkerchief.

“ Paprika will cure it soon, ” said Si Ahmed. “ I am telling you this from experience. If someone is injured in the factory, we just fill the wound with paprika and after couple of days; you see only black mark in the place of the wound ”.

Jamal smiled remotely to himself and gnawing bread and masticating it in disgust and gasping in black rage; cursing his luck, this neglected land, the failure of his lineage, the weak seed of old generation and the passiveness of his. The question in his mind wasn’t why or how we come to this? No, it was not the true question, he couldn’t figure out the true question, never mind the answer. All he could see that his dad’s generation was a waste; his was flying away like a dark bird crossing a dark distant ocean, and not knowing where to turn, where to run and when and where to land; with no destination. He wanted to howl at the high sky, to swear terrible revenge, to find someone to put a finger on and accused him and cursed him but upon whom? His father interrupted his thinking abruptly.

“ Catching any good fish your dad these days, ” he said to Rachid. Rachid stopped nibbling the poor breakfast, smiled nervously and said :

“ Well, we don’t sleep hungry. All the praises and thanks are to Allah”.

“ Yes, that’s true my son. Last week your daddy came knocking and hollering “ Si Ahmed, Si Ahmed, ” and I shouted back“ do you want Si Ahmed with one leg to stand up and open the door for you, Si El Hachemi? Push the door and come in man. I always leave the door open these days when Lalla Khadouj goes out for shopping .” He came in with a plastic bag in his hand full of fish. I said “ what this, man? ” He said “ this is your dinner given to you by Almighty Allah ”. Si El Hachemi doesn’t give you anything today and not asking for any money and I tell you why? I was in my skiff fishing near Sidi Abderhim. I caught three fish all day, which can make a good tagine. I said to myself “ I’m not going down the market to sell

three fish .” Suddenly you came to my mind. Almighty Allah reminded me of you. I said “ Allah, that poor fellow will be happy with those fish. He got no income and his wife, one day she is working and one week she is not. I’m going to pay him a visit today. Bearing this good intention in my mind, I said to myself let stay bit longer so I can catch another two or three fish but Almighty Allah rewarded me with more than I asked for. All the praises and thanks are to Allah and here the plastic bag full for you. I left some for myself”.

Si Ahmed had to fight tears again and raised his hand almost in prayer. His tragic dark eyes widened with pain. He took as deep a gulp of air as he could and held it, trying to calm down, cleared his throat, took a sip from his cup of mint tea and continued :

“ I don’t understand why poor people are so kind and generous. Too generous to the point some people think they are naïve. It hurts me to the bones and sickens me to death when we poor people give everything and have the impulse to give everything for nothing while the rich, they are fat and they are getting so fat and ugly and couldn’t give a damp thing. They become like fat hogs that don’t know what to do with their money and profits but they still move in every corner they can lay their hands on and suck a last man’s blood in the name of progress and free market. What kind of democracy is this and how can you call this justice? But I learn one thing and I have to tell you this: if you need help, don’t go to the rich; go to the poor; these are the only people who can help.”

He stopped gasping for breath like thirsty dog. His eyes were blazing like live coal and his face was purple to the point of stroke. He felt a tremendous upsurge of feelings through him, painfully, intense and too complex to be expressed in words. Salma put down her needles and her brain raced trying to find words for her feeling but couldn’t find any and wept in silence. Lalla Khadouj pushed the fingers of her right hands between the fingers of her left hand and squeezed them tightly while tears were pouring down from her eyes and flooded her face. She was shedding them silently while Jamal sitting like statue, and if someone asked something, anything, he would brake in tears. He had never seen this dark aggrieved expression and fury in the face of his father. He was astonished by the passion and rage of this man who was always calm, composed and softly spoken. Si Ahmed cleared his throat, had a sip from his mint tea, and looked at his half-leg and continued:

“ Look at this mess. Who’s making money out of this misery?” He raised his arms, shook his head and let his arms fall and he was not expecting an answer and he didn’t get one, he continued :

“ Those fat bosses and theirs lawyers. It’s crying shame. It’s blood money. How can they get some sleep at night? I can’t. I gnawed my pillow all night

and tear the quilt with rage. I toiled all my life like a horse, I laboured like a giant and ran and struggle from morning to night but still poor and hungry like a dog. Last time, Moha who lives in Kalito, came to the factory like some miserable swivelled, whimpering and crying with eyes red like tomatoes. He lost his mother who was in the last stage of consumption and vomiting blood. A week after her death, he came again to work, his face was morose, with a morose look in his eyes and a punished pride. He told us his story, a common one and the news was as bad as usual. His toddler of year and half was sick. I went to his hideous den and he was full of shame. His house was in great disorder and reduced by poverty to the degrading condition when disorder gets the upper hand of every man's effort. We contributed and, o god, forgive me, if I said I gave some money to save that kid. Whose fault is it if that child dies? Whose fault is it that we are living in abject misery while others don't toil, don't labour but they are rich? It' is our fault, ours. Now I am angry and I don't care if I say I don't feel the least pity for these fools and I am among them. I don't. We let all this fall on our heads. And you know what they are saying now; I mean the factory owner and his lawyers? They are trying to blame it on me. I'm the one who throws oneself inside the mill. For what? For the money, they say! What stupid accusation is this? It can be suggested by some damn idiot but not by an educated and decent man. They have nowhere to hide and they are running scared like chickens with their heads cut off. If I have the power, I deal pretty well with all those bosses and their lawyers. I'll cut their ears so it would be a lesson to others or better I'll slit their throat and drink their blood to satisfy my thirst. I can't bear the pain and the humiliation anymore. If we talk about abusing the working class, those bosses and their lawyers and the politicians are the worst abusers in the history of the working class in this country. Don't cry, Salma, don't cry my daughter. You know something, there are no more honest, god-fearing people and that's why god is not helping this country to stand on its feet, but your daddy isn't one of them. Your daddy has always faith in Allah and a law-abiding citizen who knows his duty. I'm going to obey the law of Allah. I will fight them and stand up to their power because the power of Almighty Allah is stronger than any other power, and Almighty Allah is in your daddy' side. They have their lawyers and cronies and all those monkeys but what they are going to say in court is plain lies. And your daddy is going to tell the judge : " look mister, a man went in the factory with both legs, he came out with one. You want to call it an accident, you can call it that, but not in the road or in his home, it happened inside the factory. It happened inside..."

Si Ahmed was defeated this time by his tears and broke. He could not say anymore. His whole body trembled, shaken by spasms and a wave of tears

flooded through him and streamed down his face and made him choke and convulse with wrenching sobs. He folded his bony hands and cried hard like a mourner, outraged by injustice all his life. He could find nothing but torment in all circumstances while seeking light in every direction.

“Father, father,” cried out Salma.

She felt her heart so deep and dark, and her limbs shivered.

“Father,” she repeated aimlessly.

She put her hand on her cheek and lowered her gaze in gloomy resignation and her eyes filled again. She wept in bitterness. Lalla Khadouj tried to reach her hands. She made a fist of them, withdrawing. Lalla Khadouj hugged her, sensing the great grief in her and she said: “Never mind my dearest. Never mind my eyes. We will be all right. Almighty Allah, who created us and created the whole universe, will not forget his faithful subjects.”

But she feared, indeed she had always feared that without a fit father there would be no income. And a handicapped father is a forgotten specimen in this society. How could he live in a society, which doesn't even care about the fit let alone the handicapped? Lalla Khadouj laid her daughter's head on her shoulder, hugging her tightly.

“We are glad he's still with us, my dear. We look after him. He got a big family, we will not disappoint him.”

She sat straight, wiped her tears and took her needles. She bent to her knitting like a good girl whose mission on earth was to do good deed.

“I'll make a good jumper to daddy.” She said.

“Allah bless you my daughter,” said Si Ahmed crying hard.

“Let help your daddy to bed,” said Lalla Khadouj.

“I will not sleep anymore on that bed,” said Si Ahmed in gravel-voice and in his misery. He wanted to hide forever, to burrow himself somewhere where no one could find him and talk to him.

Jamal unfroze from his position and stood up erect and straight like a real soldier. His eyes shone bright with real emotion and unutterable sorrow. He had never seen his father wept before, and the sight frightened and astonished him. It was beyond his understanding. But he could see a man suffering incoherently through each day, helplessly creeping from one room to the other, soundless like death but very much alive. Sometimes muttering to himself, this was unusual of him and withdrawn to a chamber deep inside his head and locked himself alone.

He waved Rachid and went to his room...

## Chapter 3

The room was small, dark and in considerable disorder and in its usual state of chaos. Jamal rarely opened the window. Not because he didn't like an airy and lightened room, but whenever a vehicle passed along this narrow dusty street, a cloud of dust entered his room. But also small boys from the neighbourhood peered occasionally through the window. They came playing their frantic game widely, climbing the window grill and Jamal had to chase them to disappear only to come back hours later. His bed was still unmade, in fact he never liked to make his bed nor make an order in his room. The floor was covered with a thin old rug of Warzazat faded away from use and exposure. It did survive three generations. His grandfather bought it when he was a young man. Given to his father and now came to him. The design was of a shepherd sitting on a hill, playing flute and beside him his faithful companion a dog and when Jamal opened the window the colours shone. The curtain didn't reach the windowsill and might be intended for another room, or may be Lalla Khadouj made them from some left over material or may be they shrank after an unknown number of washes. Under the window, books were piled higgledy-piggledy on a small wooden table, some of them in danger of sliding off onto the floor. Beside the table, a chair was buried under layers of soiled clothes. The room looked dreary and uninviting but they had special love for it. They listened to music there, talked about small event and big.

Rachid sat down on whatever space he could find and this time on the edge of the unmade bed. Jamal pushed down the play button and a grinding sound of Nass El ghiwan came out of the speakers :

*Where are the faithful who used to gather around you?*

*O you Senia*

*Where is my past?*

*Where is my neighbourhood?*

*And my belonging?*

*O you Senia*

*Beware of wickedness*

*People's love doesn't come that easy*

*I cannot forget those days  
Gathering around for tea  
It is a sin to forget you "days"*

The listeners were interrupted by a jubilant gang of children who were chanting and dancing to the glory of Nass El Ghiwan and climbing the grill like a horde of monkeys.

"If you don't disappear I'll come out and cut the bottoms of your mothers, pieces of shit," hollered at them Jamal in a very angry mood.

The jubilant gang run in all directions and laughed head off and Nass El Ghiwan continued their song : *O my regret Why does my cup look so sad amongst cups? Why does my mint lack lushness? Why sugar is incapable of removing this bitterness? Why everything is measured and weighed? Why this body of mine is so damned, deprived and denied? O you Senia.*

"Yes Nass El Ghiwan, stand up for your right and you will see. They don't shoot you in the head and give you an easy death, no. They let you die slowly. That what's great about democracies these days! You can scream. You can holler but when you pass the limit, which they draw, they find ways to break your spirit and you become discarded. They do not need to put your bones in acid and water them. No, time has changed. They break you in a civilised manner and it's a lesson to the other hollers and the screamers," said Jamal. Rachid looked at him and coughed into his fist and said :

"Well at least they are encouraging young like us to express their feeling, not like our parents who couldn't afford breakfast and still say: "All the praises and thanks be to Allah " while others are hogging all what is in the land and starve us in the name of whatever lies they tell us and... of course the so called progress. I haven't seen any damn progress, do you?"

Jamal shook his head and grinned at him. "Is that a fact? " He reached a book of geography, opened it and continued : "M'has-has has been a shantytown, now it is solid houses."

"No thanks to the government. All those houses belong to their owners. To the people, who left their country and worked hard and built their little castles. Workers here can hardly survive let alone thinking about buying a home, because there is no social justice."

"Well, tell me which government in the third world is having housing development in its politics: Algeria, our neighbour? People are still living in tents after the earthquake. Overcrowded street of Cairo in Egypt? Calcutta in India, where people are sleeping in street and in New York in United State of America, the so called the biggest democracy on face of the earth, go there and ask the Black and the Hispanic. Look through this book.

Nobody finds it, the way he or she wants it. The world becomes the big jungle.”

“ I have enough stuff to read.” He laughed and shook his head. “ Well, U.S.A is the biggest abuser of human right as our philosophy and biology teachers explained to us in the classroom once, and that for sure. Si Akram, the biology teacher told me once in a cafe that USA is the mother of imperialism. How can you call it the biggest democracy on earth while still has the death penalty and the most condemned to this massacre are the Blacks and Hispanics?”

“ Well, USA always accuse China of human abuses but as we say “the camel doesn’t see his hump”. Si Akram is a communist, they say.”

“ He never spoke about communism.”

“ No, he never did, but they say he is acting like one.”

“ Come and help us young men,” shouted Lalla Khadouj interrupting them.

“ What do you want?” said Jamal after he opened the door of his room.

“ We are living in dust; we are breathing dust. We are eating dust. We need to clean the house today. We couldn’t wait for a better day than this,” said Lalla Khadouj. “ The house, my house was brushed, my seddaris were pummelled and the covers washed. Look at the house now, I couldn’t do anything since your dad had that accident.”

“ Come on sons; help Lalla Khadouj. Almighty Allah blesse you and make of you good people of this society,” said Si Ahmed. “ Do something about these cockroaches. These days I sleep here on the floor in the sitting room. Every night, as soon as we switch off the light, here they are by hundreds. When I feel them in my bed I kill them with my bare hand. Well, what can I do?”

“ Last night I woke up may be at two o’clock may be at three, I am not sure what time it was exactly, because the alarm clock is not working. I gave your son the money to buy the batteries but he spent them. I hope he didn’t spend them on cigarettes. Everybody in this neighbourhood is a smoker. They poison our...”

“ Mother, I don’t smoke,” interrupted her Jamal angrily. “ Have you ever found a cigarette in my room or my breath smells?”

“ No son, but I am worried. We live in a neighbourhood infested by hashish and drug dealers as young as you.”

“ Well I’m worried about my studies. Don’t give me more trouble.”

“ Tell us what you want to say,” said Si Ahmed impatiently.

“ Ah,” said Lalla Khadouj. “ When I woke up I found in the corridor a line of cockroaches coming from the toilet like a caravan. I started stepping

on them and killing them but some run away, back to the toilet and disappear in the seat.”

“ Why don’t you buy some poison to kill them,” said Si Ahmed.

“ Do you know we are living in dry season or do I have to remind you? You know one day I work and one week I can’t find a job. The money we have, I stretch it like a rubber to make ends meet. I have to save for electricity bill, water bill and taxes. I don’t have a single dirham to pay housing tax.”

“ We are poor people, we don’t have to pay. I can’t find money to buy my medicine. I need help. I don’t have to pay anything to anybody,” said Si Ahmed.

“ Go and tell them,” said Lalla Khadouj. “ Here in this country, only the poor pays the heavy burden. The hammer is always on our heads. The rich never pay. You see, the rich never get old. They still have black hair at the age of fifty, while us, we look as if we are in our fifties while we still in our early thirties.”

“ A man can’t afford a decent breakfast, lunch and dinner and still has to pay! And the rich?”

“ Well let not talk about the rich. Why do you want to talk about the rich? They are in parliament. They make the rule. So why do you want them to pay and this is the reason why the rich grow richer and the poor becomes poorer,” said Jamal.

“ Maybe we should sell the TV. It is rare to watch a good programme these days. Whenever I switch on that box there is someone singing and goes on song after song as if the whole nation is happy and tuned to music but in reality we are singing a different melodrama. That TV is useless and consuming electricity. If I have my other leg, tomorrow I’ll go to the market and sell it,” said Si Ahmed.

“ The money from the sale won’t be enough. I hope I find the job,” said Lalla Khadouj.

“ I think we should have a word with the councillor or even bribe him so we can be exempted from paying taxes, these unjust taxes,” said Jamal. “ Lot of people are doing it. You know we call this, a cup of coffee for the councillor. I think he will be happy to receive some money.”

“ Well, it’s a tax itself,” said Si Ahmed.

“ Better than paying the full tax. I heard he can give us a certificate that proves we are poor,” said Jamal.

“ Does he believe in day of judgement?” said Lalla Khadouj.

“ He goes to the mosque of course, but never thought about the money he is taking unlawfully from poor people. If he thinks about the judgement day, he will stay poor, which means he is a failure in his life. We live in a

different era mother. Before knowledge was wealth but these days, everything has changed. Knowledge doesn't count. What's count is how much money do you have in your bank account," said Jamal.

"Allah Salama, Allah Salama. This is the end of the world; this is the end of the world," said Lalla Khadouj. She lowered her voice, looking over her shoulder and continued blurting : " what can we do? All the thanks and praises be to Allah. He will never forget the poor people. When He close one door He open another." She stood up silently, her red eyes filled again and mopped them with her hand and said : " help your father to go to the room."

Rachid was listening and watching this saga but he had the same saga home with some exception.

Si Ahmed crept, trying to pick up something and said : " I am helping people. Let me do what I can."

" Just relax," said Lalla Khadouj. " Since the accident you always forget what you are doing from one minute to the next. You drop things, even your cup of tea and you become strangely clumsy. Just relax; there are enough bodies here to help. Go and sit in the room."

" You know I was a capable man," he said angrily.

" I didn't say you weren't. Good husband and good father. Every woman wishes to have a man like you and I still respect you and stand by you. There will be one thing which will separate us: it is death. Help your dad go to the room," she said to Jamal.

Jamal helped his dad who rose and straightened slowly.

" Here we are faithful of Allah. I was the head of this family, the breadwinner, now I'm a spectator or rather useless as a rot-hollowed tree."

But he laughed this time trying to steal little victory at the face of defeat.

" Don't worry dad, you've done enough for us. It's my time to take over. I won't disappoint you. You will be proud of me."

" I'm proud of you but how about your studies and future?"

" Don't worry dad. I'll manage."

" That's all young people can say. The elders couldn't manage, how about the young? We all ended up with broken backs and we didn't achieve anything. In our society my son, two-legged, two-armed strong men are able at best to eke out only the necessities of life. Ask anybody who worked as hard as your daddy did, what he achieved in his life? He will tell you nothing much, except back pain. Your daddy used to have two jobs and your mother too: one in fish canning factory and the other in loukous. We used to leave our home very early and still dark and we came back home at midnight, dark as well. Most of the time, we didn't know whether the day was sunny or rainy. However, we were lucky because both factories were

within distance from the port. We did all the jobs. We pull, we shove, we clean, we carry heavy staff, and we did it all. We worked for the Spaniards and we worked for Moroccans and both treated us like cattle. Our life was a failure. There were eleven factories in this small town as far as I can remember. Look today, the fish canning industry is dead since our government authorise others to fish in our waters. Working in loukous becomes seasonal and through a string pulling, unfortunately we have no friends in the right places. Eh, you should ask your daddy about jobs. Before, when the jobs were plentiful, the factories used to send criers to the neighbourhoods asking for workers, eh. Today as you can see, jobs become scarce, like you are looking for a needle in a dark night. Where do you think you can find a job?"

"I'll work weekend in building site."

"Eh, who will employ an inexperience person while thousands with experience can't find anything to do everyday? You can see how many workers are sitting in Cuatro Caminos café waiting for someone to give them a shout to go to work. And not even a dog barks at them. They sit there all day playing cards and sometimes in anger for not finding a job they fight one another."

"Dad, you know what Allah said : " And no living creation is there on earth but its provision is due from Allah. And He knows its dwelling place and its deposit; all is in a clear Book". You never know dad, I may find work in office."

"Allah is always right my son, but working in office is unreachable for poor people like us. You have to buy it my son. Aptitude, competence and qualification are not enough these days. Money buys everything. We are in a world dominated by money. Working in office is the jobs for a rich man, my son. The poor gets the bone." Si Ahmed sighed and continued: "But Almighty Allah said, " It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich to enter heaven." Allah love the poor and hate the rich. Don't worry son, Allah is always in the poor side. Go and help your mother."

The two young men picked up the cushions and the wooden frames and took them to the patio. The two roosters were not fighting but crowing this time. Salma had wrapped a wet rag around the broom and swept down the walls and the corners to take the spiders and their cobwebs. Lalla Khadouj filled up a bucket with soapy water, took piece of rag, and bent herself almost in prayer to the floor and started scrubbing and mopping the fluff of dust. She was a deep corner-cleaner and a good scrubber but she was muttering in fury:

“ Almost every two weeks we have to clean the house from head to toe. We couldn't open the windows because of the dust. Why they don't pave the streets. Why we don't plan like others. Why... Why...”

But Lalla Khadouj forgot she didn't clean the house for more than two months and Si Ahmed was watching her through the door, clasping his hands behind his head. He didn't want to remind her because her feelings were already hurt. But he had to say something.

“ Pave the streets! When did you hear this? We don't need any paved streets. Dust is good for kids. They grow quicker and stronger if they play in dust. Look at the kids of rich people, they look pale and frail and can't run as fast as our kids. When they see the kids of the poor, they run for cover. But what we need in this neighbourhood is a clinic so I don't have to go downtown to have my injections. How many people are living in this neighbourhood? Let say 3000 souls at least are breathing here. Don't they deserve a small clinic?”

“ Dad,” said Jamal, “ are you living in a real world or not? Look around you. Look at our neighbourhood, nothing is built by the state, even the mosque is built with our contribution. Even the fquih is still paid by our contribution. You know the taxes people are paying! They go straight to Rabat as far as everybody knows.”

“ Everything goes to Rabat my son, we all know that. But what can we do? Our hands are tied.”

Salma finished cleaning the walls, went to the kitchen, cleaned the dirty dishes, scooped the garbage up, went out into the patio and threw it into the garbage pail and jammed the cover on. A mass of flies went on complaining, cursing Salma for closing the garbage pail. They turned around and around, trying to find a gap to go to their feast.

“ Close the door my daughter,” said Lalla Khadouj. “ We have no solution for those flies.”

“ We never find a single solution for anything,” said Si Ahmed. “ It is months since I lost my leg and I still waiting for gleam of getting something from those dogs. Well faithful of Allah, I'm still waiting and I have no money to buy medicine or feed my family. O god, why always the poor who has to suffer? I don't understand anything anymore.”

“ We have trust in Allah,” said Lalla Khadouj. “ He compensate the rightful and punish the wrongful. And there is no doubt because everything is written in the Koran.”

They carried on talking back and forth, first Si Ahmed arguing his case, then Lalla Khadouj commenting, like a team of attorneys pleading their case before a stern inscrutable judge.

“ With you in my side,” said Si Ahmed to his wife, “ and Allah in our side, and our belief in justice, we can defeat the company lawyers.”

Lalla Khadouj got some reservation and said :

“ They are educated people and malicious as well. They know every twist and trick to fool poor people like us and rob us with our eyes open. They have the money and people in higher places too. I don’t like those people with fat bellies, soft fingers and suits. There is always something suspicious about them. You know everything can be bought and sold. And what hurt me the most is, this is happening in the land of Islam.”

“ We have Allah in our side and he is the only judge. If we loose here, we are the winners in the other life.”

For an hour long the couple talked, argued, citing precedent cases with failures and successes. And the children were silent but listening with interest over the matter that for good or evil outcome would shape all their life.

Lalla Khadouj gazed at her husband who gazed at her with the same rancorous affection.

Jamal and Rachid left them brooding about the nature of justice and injustice and joined the room....

## Chapter 4

Lalla Khadouj and her daughter were preparing lunch. Si Ahmed was sitting alone in the room with a grim expression ransacking his torn dreams. They started clambering to the surface, illuminated by rough pictures. He looked up gazing in wonder at the pictures hanged on the wall, and the pictures began to move and talked, telling him the stories of the past lives. And thinking his life over, he concluded that life is black and life is white. Life is beautiful and life is terrible and it couldn't be one without the other. The old souvenirs and memories crowded his imagination and fell down upon his head like autumn leaves and a great rage surged through him but he stumbled back and caved into the darkness of the chamber where he stores his memories. He wanted to remain there taking his pain with him to the grave but he scrambled and clawed his way up until the floor beneath his feet levelled up. He remained silent for so many years. He bottled up himself on all matters touching on his life. He felt that he and his son were becoming strangers to each other. They rarely talked about family matters and when they did, it was always very brief. He always felt peculiarly shy about talking of such matters. And now he had decided to tell a little, but it seemed to him that a floodgate had opened to him and a sea of words held back all his life had commenced to pour through. He called his son. Jamal opened the door of his room:

“ Yes, father,” he said standing there.

“ I want to talk to you, my son.”

“ I have no time, father. I am preparing for my exams.”

“ I have things to tell you my son,” he said in a voice stronger than he hadn't heard in many months. “ Listen to your father and come here. Tell your friend to come too.”

The two young men came and sat on sheepskin anticipating in wonder what was about to come.

“ We are not close, my son. We haven't been close at all and you don't know anything about your father except what you think and what you have heard. It was the same with my father. We talked very little. I don't know

how to treat you and I hope you understand.” And he told them briefly the story of his life.

Si Ahmed was an honest and capable man. He was a good Muslim and a conservative in everything. A father, a private man whose most important and satisfying acts were to provide good future for his children and comfort for his family. He had worked hard all his life and raised his family with modest means but with great peace of mind and total clarity of purpose in life.

Si Ahmed left his village as a teenager in the early sixties in search of work. Found a job in farms with the Spaniards. Settled down in the Barrio M’has-has. Si Ahmed was always followed by some bad luck. It seemed that it struck him wherever he went. It wasn’t the work of his enemies because he had none and never made some. Si Ahmed was an upright citizen and certainly a man who could never consciously do anything bad. But there were always some of freak circumstances that he couldn’t avoid. Life had bruised him and wounded him with tragedy and he hated his wounds.

First when Si Ahmed decided to leave his village, he took a bundle in his hand containing all his belonging and on the evening toward the end of January, he took a coach at full speed to Larache. It was so dump and foggy that it was difficult to distinguish anything from the coach window. The coach was crowded chiefly with people of humble rank and some were tired and shivering from cold. Si Ahmed sat next to an old man who looked at him incessantly and showed great desire to enter into conversation. The old man took bread and olives, which were rapped in plastic bag, from the hood of his djellaba and invited Si Ahmed to share his meal. Si Ahmed thanked him but was embarrassed to eat with a man he didn’t know.

“ Eat,” said the old man. “ It’s not in our tradition to refuse sharing a meal with a stranger. In fact it makes people worthy of one another. Don’t be embarrassed.”

But Si Ahmed ate with embarrassment.

“ Where do you live in Larache?” asked the old man.

“ I am not from Larache. I am from Souk Larba. I am going to look for a job,” said Si Ahmed.

“ Do you have a family in Larache?”

“ No, nobody. I have no one,” said Si Ahmed with a sigh.

“ God is helpful my son. God is helpful and merciful. I live in Jnan Bacha, unfortunately I don’t know anybody who wants to rent a room but I know a man who can help you. He is a good friend of mine. We had been in the mountains together.”

“ You mean from the same village.”

“ Oh no,” answered the old man with a big sigh. “ We were fighting for independence. We couldn’t live in shame. I’ll show you where to go when we reach Cuatro Caminos.”

When the coach reached Cuatro Caminos the driver stopped and passengers got off and among them the old man and Si Ahmed.

“ This way is my way to Jnan Bacha,” pointing his fingers. “ That road is your way to M’has-has. Ask for Si Hamman. He is the storeowner. He is very helpful. I can’t ever remember he turned down someone who sought his help. In case if he declined to help you tell him the old Bakali sent me to you but don’t mention my name at the beginning. I am sure he will help you. God bless you, my son.” Si Ahmed courteously shook the old man’s hand and thanked him. The road in was very big and dusty, which also was the road out. He went there and to his horror, he found that rooms were made out of canes tied and bound together by mud. Rooms were made out of corrugated sheet of iron. Shacks were made of anything that could be wedged together. It appeared to him that these narrow streets were according to seasons, dusty in summer, muddy in winter and in this corner and that, there are piles of rubbish, which lied ankle-deep and stench of decomposing dead dog or cat. Si Ahmed covered his nose with his hand because the fresh smell of shit and urine was too strong for his nostrils. It looked to him that only meagre goods were coming in through this big road and nothing coming out except garbage and dead people. It seemed that the rottenness and ugliness of all abomination gathered in the Barrio and the misery of mankind has been distilled here with no relief but the ultimate mercy of annihilation. He walked inside the Barrio and in the heart of the town there was a store. Outside the store customers could find fresh vegetables and inside sugar, flour, oil, candles for the poor and electric bulb for the wealthy and the rich and anything that is not visible, the customer should only ask. The owner of the store was Si Hamman. He was a very hard old, tall broad man but the years had eaten away his flesh. His wizened face was covered with grey beard and pierced with laughing eyes and an attractive air of benevolence and humorous good nature.

Si Ahmed looked around and appeared to him that Barrio Mhas-has was a collection of broken lives wounded with tragedies, harsh unspeakable sad poverty held together by their own set of rules. He walked up the road and two young men were arguing then a fight broke up and started throwing stone at each other. Beside them in a corner, a dog in very peaceful manner was lying down but when the row broke up, it left the scene in hurry. After a while the fight became bigger as the families joined the two belligerents. Si Ahmed cried out to someone to call the police.

“ The police?” said one man. “ They never come at all and when they come in small number they are sent back under showers of stones.”

“ Are you making a fool of me, or considering me an idiot?”

“ Why should I. I’m telling you people here don’t like the force of law. They complicate things. When they come, they take everybody to the police station under a shower of kicks and blows, and you have to look for a lawyer to save your neck. People here are struggling for a piece of bread, they can’t afford lawyers.”

“ Even when there is a big fight, people don’t call them?”

“ Thanks to Allah, there have never been big fights. We are all known to each other, we respect each other. Yes, there are disputes, strayed arguments. People would create racket that could be heard for thousand metres and no matter how lewd or sordid their argument is they don’t call them. Underneath, there is no hard feeling and all become good-natured and friendly. When fighting broke up from time to time, people preferred to settle their differences without calling the force of law. We consider them as outsiders and we don’t want them to put their noses in our daily life.”

“ So who is going to stop this fight?”

“ Don’t worry; we have our judge. He is the best judge in the world without studying any law. He is a good listener and the best diplomat better than the force of law because he has the gift in finding solutions to any dispute. He is Si Hamman, the owner of that store. He lives in this Barrio for a long time and he knows everything about everybody. He develops through time a paternal feeling toward everybody and regards our problems and affairs as his. He gives justice to everyone. He feeds the sick, shelters the strangers and people here are proud to have him. We listen to his advice and try to look after each other. Look there, you see that old man coming toward us running.”

“ Yes,” said Si Ahmed.

“ That’s Si Hamman. He will shout at them and they will respect him like a father and stop the fight. Si Hamman is a complex character. He couldn’t mind his own business. Wherever there is trouble, he is there trying to find solution. Whenever there is pain in any man, he is the one who can help.”

Si Hamman reached the fighters. He went between them shouting and asked them to stop and they did. He talked to each one of them, settled their dispute and the belligerents embraced each other and Si Hamman went back to his store again gasping for air.

“ You look stranger,” said the man to Si Ahmed. “ Strangers never come here or only to track down their lost relatives. Are you looking for someone?”

“ No,” said Si Ahmed looking down and shy and felt irritated by his own shyness; “but I come looking for accommodation and work.”

“ Follow Si Hamman; he helps everybody.”

“ Thank you brother,” said Si Ahmed to the man.

He followed the people who were following Si Hamman and kids trailing behind and talking in loud voices. Others were waiting for him in his shop so he could serve them. He greeted them with polite words and excused his absence. Si Ahmed stopped when the crowd stopped in front of the shop and even in this melee, he noticed a moustachioed man patted one boy’s shoulder and told him:

“ Take this,” he gave the boy a plastic bag full of clothes. “ They don’t fit my son anymore. They will fit your little brother,” the man continued. “Tell you dad I’m busy. I’ll see him another day Incha Allah.” And he left in hurry.

It looked to Si Ahmed that life in the Barrio was very animated. People were all known to each other and respecting one another. They looked poor but very honest and tried to look after one another and whatever was given it was desperately needed by the donor as well as by the receiver.

A customer, a young woman asked for butter, sugar and oil and when Si Hamman handed her the shopping she said:

“ My dad didn’t give me the money.”

Si Hamman laughed, mopping his forehead and still breathing heavily and said:

“ Didn’t he ask you to bring the shopping and some cash?”

She laughed and her face reddened with shyness and said:

“ No he didn’t.”

He looked at her and smiled and there was kindness and almost a fatherly tenderness soothing and pacifying, and with his comfort words he said:

“ Well tell him not to be shy. Tell him not to think about interest.” He took a deep breath and straightened up. He put his palm against the small of his back and massaged his muscles and continued: “ My god, I ran the whole mountains here in the north of Morocco when I was a soldier in the liberation army. I ran like a young lion when we were attacking the Spaniards. I have never felt scared or tired when we were conducting operations. Look at me now, I run only twenty metres and I’m gasping for air like a dying animal.”

“ This is our fate,” said another customer. “ We born babies, we grew up adult then old men and then we die. We can’t argue with what god decide for his creature.”

“ I never did, I never did,” said Si Hamman.

He looked at the kids; most of them were half naked and shoeless. Faces dirty with dust and sadness and over their head hung a slovenly despair. Si Hamman sighed and said:

“ It looks as if there is a wall against learning. As soon as the boy reaches the age of twelve his father takes him with him to the farm. But I don't blame the fathers, they are underpaid and life is very hard.”

“ Last year I took my son to Okba Ibn Nafia School,” said another customer, “ but they told me there is no place for him. Then I took him to Mohamed V School and then to another but nothing. This year I didn't bother myself to go through it again. It's a waste of time and money. My neighbour Si Ibrahim found a place for his son in Okba Ibn Nafia' school. And now he is complaining. Every day his son is coming with a list of things to buy: books, notebooks, and pens: blue, red, green, pencils and all that and Si Ibrahim told me one book cost him one day's work. Eh, imagine if you have three children in school and no help from the government. Eh, I thought about all that and I didn't work that day because I was chasing a place for my son. I could work that day and bring the kids and the wife a piece of bread. Don't understand me wrong Si Hamman; I'm great believer in education. It's the torch of learning and you are right not to blame the fathers, because we want our children to read newspapers and books. To explain to fathers and mothers what's going on in the world, to write letters to relatives, to explain to us our right towards society and the responsibility of the leaders towards us, and to consider themselves better than their fathers. We lived under colonialism and we didn't have a chance to go to school. We were insulted in our dignity. We were exploited and humiliated but we want our children in an independent country to learn accounting and become managers, engineers etc and take the country forward. Unfortunately nowadays learning is for the children of politicians, doctors and lawyers and the rich. This is the unique class, the higher class, a class set off and considered not related to other people. Our class is reduced to produce workers, farmers and labourers working in appalling conditions, living in appalling conditions and earning insulting wages. I haven't seen any improvement in our lives apart there are no guns pointed at our heads, but we are still suffering while others are making fortunes from our misery and may god condemn who condemn us. Nobody likes to go to the slaughterhouse willingly. That's what I can tell you, Si Hamman. I can't read, I can't write but I understand and have a good common sense.”

“ Yes I do agree with you O obedient of Allah and my heart is really bleeding when I think about all this. Sometimes I feel fortunate to work for myself and sometimes I feel as if I betray those hard decent working people for not being with them in a factory or in a farm.”

“ You shouldn’t be, you shouldn’t be Si Hamman. I don’t wish this life to our worst enemies who put their guns on our heads; to the ones who are exploiting us now, but I want them to understand what we are going through and to be human and think like human; that we are poor but still human with brains and muscles and the blood in our veins is the same as in theirs.”

The man took his shopping with his head down and his eyes fixed on his torn shoes. And with an incommensurable sadness and philosophical sorrow, he left.

Si Hamman looked at the man and his eyes moisten with tears. Si Hamman was a very generous man. He was neither rich nor poor. He had no gift for business and never pressed his customers for payment. They took whatever they needed and promised payment at the end of the week or the month, and then next month and after. He never hurried them, nor reminded them until they paid their debt whenever they could. He lent them money with no interest because it is against the Islamic sharia and the teaching of Islam and he stayed poor. Si Ahmed approached him with a bushy face, a shy expression, haggard and shivering with his blanket like a hood around his head and shoulders as if sick of himself and life. Si Hamman frowned down on him in sombre temper and the stranger took a step forward, smiled and stopped.

“ Here another one, what can I do for you?” said Si Hamman.

“ Looking for a job and accommodation,” said Si Ahmed.

“ Jobs are plentiful. I talk to people and you go with them to farms or factories. You can start tomorrow if you are really looking for work. The Spaniards need workers in their farms and factories. They still own whatever they stole from this land and the government still hasn’t done anything about it. For accommodation, buy yourself sheet of iron and make yourself a home. People here are willing to help each other.”

“ I don’t have any money to buy anything for the time being. I just come from the village and I am looking for something to make my hands busy. I can do any job.”

Si Hamman invited him for a cup of mint tea, asking him questions, listening to his answers, nodding and considering him. He saw in him a man who looked brave and demure, a man who was never afraid of sweat and any old job, any rough work would suit him fine and a hard life had turned him hard. He was a countryman who was able to roll up his sleeves and cut trees for firewood, look after cattle alongside the roughest men of his village. Si Hamman accepted to lease him an old cabin in the back garden.

“ Come and see the room. Well, it’s empty and you can use it until you find a suitable accommodation.”

They walked through the patio and Si Hamman lit an oil-lamp. It was by

now dark. In the garden stood a couple of trees and their branches started to sway with the rising wind. They emerged from darkness and took form when Si Hamman walked through. Si Ahmed could identify them: two fig trees, three of orange and behind them was the shack. It stood at crooked angle with its scratched and peeling coats of paint. The shack was exactly what Si Ahmed needed.

“ Well,” he said, “ I have no choice.”

“ I advise you to take it, stay here for couple of months; save some money then Allah will open you all the doors.”

“ Yes, you are right.”

Si Hamman left him and went back to the store. The room was very dark by now. He looked at the small table beside the bed and there was a candle on a saucer. He put his clothes and relaxed on the bed, scratching his stomach and the bed creaked in criticism. Then he reached for his pocket and took a box of matches. His fingers pulled one and struck it on the side of the box and it was lit. He lit the candle and from the pocket of his jacket he took a folded piece of paper. He unfolded it with great care, looking at it as if trying to decipher every single word. He couldn't read but he knew what was written there. Those are addresses of places where he could find work. He folded back the paper until it was small no longer than his thumb and shoved it back in his pocket and tapped the pocket of his jacket and rubbed his arms trying to warm them. It was cold but he welcomed his obscure loneliness and the dead silence and in this cocoon he crept.

At night Si Ahmed smelt and heard the sizzling of the angry olive oil and onion and spices and felt hungry and hoped he would be invited. Si Hamman closed his shop. Si Ahmed heard him talking to Lalla Meriem, his wife:

“ Lalla Meriem,” said Si Hamman, “ there is a young man in the room, back garden. He came this evening looking for work and accommodation. Do we have enough food for dinner? If not can you cook something for him.”

“ Yes, we have plenty. Tell him to come; tell him to wash his hands and feet.”

Si Hamman invited Si Ahmed. Si Ahmed kissed Lalla Meriem's head by respect and called her “mother”. Lalla Meriem was heavy but not fat. Her full face was soft and kind. She was wearing a colourful flowered caftan, but the colour was washed out. The sleeves were rolled to the elbow. She brought a plate of aubergine and the smell excited the hungry stomach of Si Ahmed, and a plate of pepper and tomato salad. Si Ahmed sat down and ate like a man who hadn't had a proper meal for a week, which probably was the case...

## Chapter 5

The following morning at daybreak Lalla Meriem woke up Si Ahmed. She had been up before dawn and she always has been, even when she was feeling unwell. It was a sin for her to lie in bed. She woke up and prepared harira for her customers. This morning she pampered Si Ahmed with a hot bowl of Harira and a piece of brown bread.

“ Here,” she said. “ Drink the Harira. It’s good for you, better than tea and bread and butter. Every morning the workers come here to buy it from Si Hamman and everybody appreciate its quality. It’s the trade I learned from my mother. When my mother was alive, she used to tell me “ you should always put your heart in whatever you are doing, because if you do that, you do a good job”, and that’s why everyone likes my soup. I always prepare it with great care.”

“ Yes that true,” said Si Ahmed and rose to his feet, “ but I don’t think I need breakfast. I need to meet people so I can go with them in a hope to find a job.”

“ Well, let me tell you son. You need nourishment to face the long tough day.”

Si Ahmed sat down on the edge of his bed drinking his bowl of soup. While he was drinking he heard people talking. He hurried drinking his Harira so he could go outside and ask them where he could find a job. Si Hamman store was already opened and seemed to be the centre of activity. Outside, the workers were sitting on their heels or on their knees and their noses on their bowls muttering with joy. Si Ahmed joined them and the atmosphere was full of smell of herbs. He could smell parsley, coriander and sage. He could smell chickpeas and the strong flavour of Mediterranean celery.

A customer squatted on the ground with a bony face, tight of skin, smoothed and unwrinkled, wrapped in a dirty blue overall, pale and polished from years of wearing. His shoes were cracked and swollen, fossilised from years of sun, rain and dust. He took his face from his bowl. His nose was running down hot with spices. He cleaned his nose and laughed and through the laughter he showed his toothless mouth, apart from one rotted tooth and stained maybe with tobacco; his upper-lip was

reddened with harira. He rubbed his hand on his bony chest, looked at the others, winked a red-veined eye and said:

“O obedient of Allah. More than ten years I am drinking this harira every morning. It seemed to me I am drinking something new and delicious every single day. Never Lalla Meriem has cooked bad harira. It’s always cooked properly. I lost all my teeth and I can still eat the chickpeas. It’s cooked like butter. Believe me O obedient of Allah, with those spices; this harira cures rheumatism, kills bacteria and keeps you fit for the rest of you life. Looked at me,” he said and his right hand with veins, stood out heavy and blue, went automatically high in the sky. “I have never been to the doctor, never visited the hospital. I’ll give you free advice: I’ve never touch tobacco, hashish or alcohol.”

Then he put his face on his bowl, wolfing his soup, and with the last piece of bread he cleaned the bowl. Another customer, a large-bellied fellow sitting on a brick spat on the floor, sneezed and wiped his mouth and nose on the back of his hand and said:

“Yes, it’s true. It’s true, because I used to drink harira in that cafe in Cuatro Caminos. It doesn’t taste like this. This harira is very hot and spicy. The hands of an expert made it.” He stirred his bowl with a chunk of bread and his face wrinkled with concentration as he found a bone and continued: “well, I am lucky today; I have a bone in my bowl.” He dipped his two rough strong dirty fingers and took the bone and sucked it. “Emm,” he continued: “I told you it’s my lucky day. I haven’t eaten meat for such a long time.”

“I myself haven’t eaten meat for such a long time,” said the toothless customer. “I could do with a piece of meat or at least suck a bone. I start to forget how meat tastes. It more than a month I’m thinking of buying it, but I just can’t afford it. Last time when I ate it, it was thanks to Si El Hachemi. He hunted rabbits in Shoumis and gave me one. One evening he came knocking at my door, and when I opened the door, he said to me. “Father Ali, I know you want something nice to eat, I caught few rabbits and I thought of giving you one,” and he gave me a big rabbit. I was awful hungry for meat. I stewed that rabbit and I ate it all because I was hungry for meat.” He filled his mouth with Harira and started chewing. “The following day,” he continued, “I was sick. I want to have the same feast before I die.” He screwed up his eyes as if peering at something far off and smiled with his lips.

“Well, it’s not your lucky day today,” said the big fellow and smiled broadly showing his two great horse teeth. “Ask Si Hamman for a nice piece of meat in your harira tomorrow or at least nice rich bone,” and he chewed a thick crust of bread.

“ I will,” said father Ali. “ I will, even if I have to pay for that piece of meat tomorrow, but I know Si Hamman won’t take money from me for a piece of meat or a nice rich bone in my Harira. Last night I woke up and remember I didn’t have any diner. I’m awful hungry now.”

A dog called booby came every morning to the shop with its eyes still closed, its ears drawn down, ribs visible and its tale behind its legs. It always sat beside the customers waiting for Si Hamman to give it yesterday’s harira. This morning Si Hamman was still busy, and when the worker was about to throw the bone, the eyes of the dog became vivacious and its ears stood up.

“ This is for you Booby,” said the fat bellied customer and threw the bone in the air.

Booby jumped high and caught the bone in the air and run to a corner trying to chew it. Then the worker cleared his teeth with his tongue and swallowed and asked Si Hamman for a cup of tea. Si Hamman took a big copper kettle full of mint tea and filled up a cup.

“ I can smell the tea from here,” said the worker. “ Is there any shiba in it?”

“ No, some of the customers complain about its bitterness. When it stays long in the teapot, it gives the tea very strong flavour. But I can give you few leaves.”

“ May god give you and Lalla Mariem a palace in heaven close to his prophets and companions! We don’t know what will happen to us without you. May your Baraka stays with us!”

Si Hamman brought him a shiba.

“ How many sugars do you take,” Si Hamman asked.

“ Put three, sometimes I put four.”

“ Help yourself,” said Si Hamman. “ I don’t know how much sugar you want.”

“ You are always right, Si Hamman. Everyone knows exactly how many sugars his teapot can take. You don’t know how many mine can take and I don’t know how many sugars your teapot needs. It is a question of taste.”

The customer shifted from his position and put three spoonful of sugar. He stirred his tea and watched the sugar whirl and disappear into liquid then he said :

“ Our energy comes mainly from sugar. We don’t have any money to buy meat. So sugar is less expensive and good sources of energy.”

When he finished his tea, he stood up, looked long and hard into the sky as if studying the day and the future, and then from his jacket pocket he took a leather pouch, untied the string and fingers went in and little coins came out. He paid Si Hamman and said :

“ Having this breakfast, I walk proud like a horse and I feel like a bull ready to work all day.”

“ May Allah help you my brother,” said Si Hamman.

Si Ahmed looked at his watch. It was half past five. It was still dark and few stars shone through the black clouds that were scurrying towards the forest, looking for trees on which to rain and the moon lost all its brilliancy and became like a little silver cloud. And more workers still coming; some of them sluggishly with faces still swollen with sleep and yawning and stretching, to have breakfast or meet their colleagues to go to work together, and others to buy their lunches.

Si Hamman was exceptionally kind and big-hearted man in his way; with his door wide open to people in need including strangers. He cheered them all, boosted their moral and glorified their hard work. He loved to tell them stories funny and beautiful carved from the hard truth and cruelty of life, and after a while the sleepy faces become vivacious and the store become full of laughing and joking. Another customer with strong arms and back and anger to spare said:

“ O obedient of Allah, let me tell you something,” He put his bowl on the floor. The others were looking at him waiting for him to crack some joke. He rolled his eyes from one side to the other and back again, scrutinizing every face, one at a time and went on : “ Listen to me carefully and try to understand my meaning; the meaning of my story.”

“ We are listening,” said the others.

“ Well, here is the story, short but meaningful: there was a rich man, very rich in his entire region. Allah gave him the best of land, which gave him the best harvest in the entire region. Unfortunately he forgot Allah and this life and its wealth obsessed him. One day he built himself a big, very big store with no window and strong iron door. He filled his store with his harvest. He refused to give Zakat. He refused to give charity while people in his village were in need. He closed the store and he didn't want anybody to take a single grain from him. He guarded his store himself day and night because he couldn't trust anybody. But one day; it was a very hot day; he was tired and slept. While he was asleep the ants came and invaded the store.”

Suddenly the man ceased speaking, took his bowl of harira and finished it; then he started looking for something in his pocket. It took him a long time but he still looking. He checked every single pocket more than once. But something was still bothering him. The listeners grew impatient as they expected him to go on and draw some conclusion but didn't, and one of them cried out:

“ We are still waiting to hear the end of the story.”

“ O,” he said, “ the end of the story is simple and each one of us knew it already.” He scratched his dirty neck and forced the blood out. Deep crease marks were heavy on his neck and dark with dirt.

“ So what is it?” shouted the same man.

“ The ants took what they want and left the store empty,” he bellowed and took a big chunk of bread.

“ What happened to the rich man? And why did you tell us this story for?”

He swallowed the big chunk of bread and continued: “ That’s only Allah knows. Well I can tell what happened to the rich man. Life is a kind of music, sometimes with good melodies, sometimes with sad melodies. But there is no dissatisfaction compared to the dissatisfaction of the rich. The rich has a full orchestra, unfortunately it plays a single note and that note is with destructive sound and unchanging greed. He was caught in hunger and ambition, in avarice and cruelty to others and to himself and the closest to him. You see a man is living in a good house, with servants; has good clothes, and good saving but a man dies of misery and despair. And the hard and clean questions arise. Was his life good or was it evil? Was his death a loss to his family and neighbours or a kind of joy? And was he loved or hated? It takes me by the throat and shakes me to the bones when I think of it, and I ask almighty Allah to give me good health and clear mind and nothing else. We look very poor and we have nothing and that’s true, but we are rich in our heart and our head. What does a man need? We have shelters, we are eating food and we give the ones who don’t have. We have peace of mind and we live like brothers and almighty Allah is with us; what do we want else?” He stood up and stretched up his body like a tree and continued. “ Well obedient of Allah, there is work waiting for me; I have to go. I’ll tell you another story next time.”

Si Hamman was listening and beside him was Si El Hachemi. Si Hamman laughed a great deal loudly and merrily. He was the one who told the story couple of months ago. He saw Si Ahmed, approached him and tapped his shoulder in a gesture of affection and introduced him to Si El Hachemi who held a cup of tea between his hands. He didn’t drink it but warning his cold fingers. And in formal and dry tone, Si Hamman said:

“ Good morning, my son. This is Si El Hachemi. You go with him today. He works in a farm for a Spaniard. The owner needs someone. Si El Hachemi will be your first friend in this neighbourhood.”

They shook hand. Si El Hachemi was a tall rangy man, strong as a bull, with muscle, blood and brain and strong forehead and dark big eyes sunk back beneath heavy black brows. He worked in a farm for the Spaniard.

“ The Spaniard is always short of workers,” said Si El Hachemi. He drunk his cup of mint tea in one big gulps and said: “It’s time to move on now.”

They went to the mosque for the prayer of the Fajr then took the road to the farms. The land below was green with vegetables and fruits that stretched from one horizon to the other, and the smoke of the early fire from farmhouses drifted upward until the breeze swept it cleanly off. They stopped and both were contemplating the scenery.

“ If I have the money,” said Si El Hachemi, “ it would be nice to buy a little place here. I could keep a cow or two for milk and butter, and a dog to chase any intruders and I could raise enough to eat and sell in the market.”

“ Yes you can,” replied Si Ahmed.

They continued on their way to the farm. The sun started to rise and warmed their heads and the redness grew up on the far horizon. The birds began to chirp louder and louder and more eagerly. An owl hooted nearby and a hawk flew leisurely past and vanished behind trees; and the good morning air brought to their noses sometimes the odour of flowers, and then of grass and rotten roots and damp earth. Far in the prairie the cattle were grazing in the root rich earth and others were butting each other’s knobby heads. Their hide shone with health. Si Ahmed asked:

“ Any good money working in the farm?”

“ Not at all, instead there is lot of hard work and lot of shit from the boss. We work from sunrise to sunset. But if you want good money compare to the work in the farm, go to factories. Loukous factory is open 24 hours a day. In the tomato season, they can tomatoes and when it’s finished, they do Paprika, and then peppers and beetroots and so on. The factory never closes. I know lot of people are working in two factories. Some of them, they start at six o’clock in the morning till two o’clock in the afternoon. And then from four o’clock in another factory till late. Work is plentiful. There is no land fertile as this and there is no city like this. It’s like a paradise. There is a sea with plentiful of fish and if you go to the port you can get it for free. I think one day I’ll buy a boat and become a fisherman myself. I forget to mention a forest where I go with friends to harvest mushrooms and some wild animals. You can live for nothing here, but we, the human being, we are greedy. People, who are upright, live for their souls and remember god, are gone. But people who live for their own needs and who stuff their bellies and pockets are multiplying and this is the downfall of human race. You see the Spaniard pays the Spaniard very well. We Moroccans, we don’t do the same. When we poor Moroccans work for the Spaniard, they pay us like the Moroccan bosses do. So why they bother paying us better. But they are the one who started it.”

“ You mean the Spaniards.”

“ Oh yes. My father told me some terrible and dreadful stories. I am glad he told me. I can see his face right now when he was telling me. It was full of pain and misery and I think I got something burned out of me that night. God forgive them, he is forgiving.”

“ My father never mentioned them,” said Si Ahmed. “ He was a very distant man. I never had the courage to talk to him or ask him. He spoke very little, always looking far and seemed to be absorbed in his thought. I’ve never known what was bothering him. I’ve never understood him.”

“ How about your mother?”

“ I really don’t have any recollection of her. She died when I was a kid. She is in heaven now. She never sin in her life, my uncle told me. She was the daughter of a very religious man. My grandfather was a teacher in Koranic school and a devoted father. My father told me I have her smile and shyness. A beautiful woman, he said once, but I don’t have a picture of her. I wish I had her picture to see if it does match the one in my mind. I asked my uncle but no one kept a photo of her, not even my father. He never got over her death. He felt responsible for not having enough money to take her to a doctor, once my uncle told me. My father was always in pain and one day he decided to destroy her photos so he can start new life but he went nearly crazy. He was hurt so bad that he didn’t even talk to his brother who didn’t have money to lend him and take mum to a doctor. He was not right in his head after the death of my mother and he died miserable. I think he loved her more than anything else in the world. I kept a rug of Warzazat we had in the sitting room as souvenir of both of them.”

“ Whoever is in the face of the earth will perish, Allah said in the Koran. We don’t live long in this land. Most of us die in our forties or fifties. I lost my parents too; my father died long time ago of pneumonia, a Spanish doctor said. His coughing was very loud and disturbing at night. My mother died more than a year ago. It’s very humid and cold in winter in this region and people don’t have enough money to buy charcoal to heat their homes. My father told me they were treated like cattle and lived like cattle. He was full of hatred towards the occupiers. He never said anything good about them. I hate them myself because I saw tears in his eyes when he was telling the stories.”

“ How about this Spaniard?”

“ A Westerner is a Westerner but as far as mistreatment, no, not at all. This guy is a good fellow; never hurt anybody, pay his workers every Saturday and never took a centime from anyone. You think of him as a good Muslim and not a Christian but you have to be very careful while you are working. Don’t blame him if you have an accident in his farm. A boss is

not responsible to anybody in this land. Last time, a young inexperienced man was working with us in the farm. He was tired and sliced his foot with a sickle. I heard him screamed. I went running and found him in a pool of blood. The wound was very deep. The Spaniard tied the wound to stop the bleeding, put him in his car and took him to hospital. I saw tears in the Spaniard face. We stopped working and all of us wept. They sewed his foot in hospital and recovered all right but couldn't come back to work for months. He didn't receive any payment when he was sick but this Christian is very generous man and treated him well. The worker didn't go hungry. The Spaniard visited him once a week, gave him vegetables, fruits and sometimes meat and small money. As for mistreatment, no I should confess. He is a nice fellow. I hate bosses but this guy no. He shouts at me and I shout at him but no hard feeling." ...

## Chapter 6

They reached the farm, a serene beauty floored with green pasture set down in the midst of splendid scenery, well watered and fertile. It has been tendered, loved and laboured with great affection. The vegetables were freshly green in their line- straight rows and the trees were trimmed and groomed on which birds were chirping and trilling as though calling their lovers. It was between Sidi Waddar marabou on top of the hill on one side and the Loukous River on the other from which the mist still rising and bounded by other prosperous farms, that belonged to other Spaniards. It was pleasant to see, like a landscape freshly painted and varnished. The Spaniard as usual was there in the farm's gates. He was a big-bellied friendly fellow, loud and humorous who got on well with his workers. He greeted everyone with polite words and jokes.

“ Good morning Sir,” said Si El Hachemi to the Spaniard.

“ Good morning,” said the Spaniard. “ Is this the worker, a friend of yours?”

“ Yes, a new friend. He worked all his life in farms. He is a country fellow as you can see from his rough look and strong arms. He is like a bull and valuable to this farm.”

“ Yes, I see. Well you can work in the pigsty.”

“ Anywhere Sir. A job is a job,” said Si Ahmed.

“ I like you,” said the Spaniard. “ I like this guy,” he said to Si El Hachemi. “ Show him where to work and what to do” and laughed.

Si Ahmed started his first job in pigsty looking after hogs. As a Muslim, Si Ahmed hated hogs and treated them with kicks and curses everyday, but when the Spaniard showed up, Si Ahmed did a good job. Day after day, working alone in the stable and no one to talk to, only the pigs grunting and squealing, Si Ahmed found himself away from his familiar world of trees and mountains, but the resemblance drifted him into reveries and dreams of his home village, the lost Eden, the landscape where he was born and its softly changes with the seasons. From the pigsty door he could see Sidi Waddar marabou with its sombre graves and it reminded him with pain of his father who stood beside his wife's grave for hours alone; all alone as if

speaking to her, telling her his story and his pain but there were no ears to listen, only him bawling to the empty sky. Then the father leaves the grave wandering aimlessly down the lane that leads to his farmhouse and confused in his manner. He stood thoughtfully in the yard and gazing out upon the valley and beyond and sighed a lot with plaintive exhalations as if waiting for a distant lover who would never come back. One day Si Ahmed summoned up courage and ask his father.

“ Are you going to get married, father?”

He studied the sky and sighed and said :

“ I thought of it now and again but the woman who needs me for a husband is dead, and the world doesn't need more children to fight among themselves.”

“ Forgive me father, I shouldn't have asked you into your personal affairs,” and felt ashamed of his inquiry.

“ I know I'm neglecting you son, but I explain to you later what wrong with me. There are things that happen to people unexpectedly. I don't know what to tell you now.”

Then one of the pigs came and nudged Si Ahmed foot and the reverie dissolved leaving him cold sweat like a dank mist on his skin. He felt mortally wounded and alone, doomed and homesick.

Living alone in that damp and decrepit shack and working alone in the pigsty, and in his wretched need of human warmth and company, he sang in a kind of mourning tone for cries of solitude. He was worried he might go mad or even perished because he started talking to himself and was lucky not to be heard and dismissed as crazy. But to keep his job, Si Ahmed kept the hogs tended with affectionate attention and didn't kick them anymore. He gave them plenty of food and especially plenty of water to help them gobble their food so they could grow quickly. They became his new friends and family, nudging his old shoes in greeting him every morning. When he finished working in the pigsty he went out working so hard on the plantation in a desperate hope he might end tending the hogs and work in the field. He had enough of the smell of pigs, their fart and shit. After all, what good about farming pigs when its meat is categorized as no good for consumption by the Koran. Pigs eat almost anything and its meat is full of bacteria. So he started early in the field and laboured mightily like a giant before he went to the pigsty and rode till late, helping out wherever he could, wherever he could learn something, making sure that the Spaniard understood he wasn't a poor farmer. And one fresh early morning the smells of this plantation had called him unheeded seeking to draw him back into his wish as if touched by a wand. When Si Ahmed and Si El Hachemi arrived in the early morning to the farm, Si El Hachemi went to make hot

mint tea but Si Ahmed as always took a spade and walked as usual barefooted in green row of carrots, moved to aubergines and then to peppers, inspecting them; cutting useless herbs growing around, then moved to the compost depot. He took the spade and started spading the composted earth and filling the barrow. The Spaniard called on him. Si Ahmed, with his shirt wet with perspiration leaned on his spading fork and looked at him and said:

“ I’m trying to finish this before I go to the pigsty.” He shifted one foot and left in the compost a clear imprint of it with its five toes.

“ Not today,” said the Spaniard, “ and not tomorrow. Your job has finished in the pigsty. Let walk, I want to tell you something. Something important and I hope you agree with me.”

Si Ahmed froze in his position. The Spaniard called him again. Si Ahmed threw the spade in disgust and joined the Spaniard. While they walked slowly over the greenly row of vegetables, Si Ahmed picked up small stick from the ground and bent it to a tense bow between his arms. The Spaniard stopped, pulled small leaf and tested it with his fingers. Si Ahmed looked at those fingers crushing the leaf and the stick snapped. He kept the two bits, one in each hand and thought it was his last day in the farm. After all, the boss could hire and fire any worker at any time whether there was a reason or he was in filthy mood. As the Spaniard opened his mouth, Si Ahmed threw the two ends away, thrust his hands in his pockets, wetted his dry lips and swallowed saliva to dampen his dry throat and waited to hear the final judgement.

“ Look at this farm.” said the Spaniard. “ It’s a paradise and I want to keep it this way. I was watching you while you were helping. You are a good farmer and I know you want to work in the field. I studied you for sometime when I see you helping in the field. So I want you to work in the plantation. What do you think?”

Si Ahmed took off his hands from his pockets and filled his lungs with fresh air.

“ Thank you; thank you very much. I really was praying for this day and night. Yes, it is true I work hard because I don’t like to do things badly,” said Si Ahmed trying to emphasise his hard work. “ When I look over the field, it makes my heart rejoice. So I don’t think I could try harder more than that even if I am working for my own father.”

“ Si El Hachemi, Si El Hachemi,” shouted the Spaniard. “ Your friend is working with you in the field.”

“ Well he is for sometimes now,” answered Si El Hachemi. “ He is always helping before he goes to the pigsty. I know he doesn’t like pigs.”

“ I know and this is the reason I want him in the field. He is better than most of you here.”

Si Ahmed jumped upright and joined the workers. He was excited and eager to understand the economy of the farm so later he could run the place as an overseer if the opportunity arises. He worked like a giant, not only with his strong arms and rough fingers, but also with his heart, humour and good spirit. After a while the Spaniard saw his honesty. He saw in him a young hard workingman who earned his money with enough sweat. He could sharpen axles, mend broken ploughs, shod horses and inventing new way of doing thing better and quicker, and the Spaniard wanted him in the farm. He approached him one evening after work was finished.

“Where do you live?” he asked Si Ahmed.

“In M’has-has.”

“Do you pay rent or you have you own shack there?”

“No, I’m renting but very cheap. The owner is a very good man. He helped me since I put foot in this town.”

“But it’s a long way from there to here. What time do you leave home?”

“5 o’clock.”

“Listen, I need someone to guard the farm. I looked at the workers and couldn’t find any honest person like you. You can mend the shack and live there. You can take vegetables and treat the place as yours. You will save the rent money.”

Si Ahmed accepted with great joy and soon after, he moved to the farm. He occupied an old cabin at the end of the farm. It was a rundown, unpainted cabin overgrown with crawling vines and weeds. Inside it was filthy with rats screaming and gnawing as if any minute they would come out and devour anybody alive. The walls were cracked and the paint was peeling. He changed the rotted wooden roof and the tin sheets which gone dark copper red with scaling rust and plastered over the damp black-blotched walls. He bought some furniture from joteya# and his shack looked clean and immaculate. Outside, he built himself a chicken coop, bought some chicken, breed them, fattened them and sold them on Sunday market. And behind his shack, there was some wasteland. He cleared it and grew there all his own food: mint for his tea, potatoes and others vegetables, which were not in the farm for his own consumption and became self-sufficient.

The farm was a thriving operation and prospered well. This was due to the workers hard work and to the Spaniard’s great organizational skills. Si Ahmed accompanied the Spaniard to the market and was learning the subtle connections between the production and the sale, the manipulation of the market price and the exploitation of the producer. He and the Spaniard got on well. The Spaniard always teased him because Si Ahmed never drunk alcohol, never smoke a cigarette, never ate pork.

One sunny day, as usual, the workers were having their lunch under the shadow of trees, talking and laughing and joking and cursing and exchanging food, but Si Ahmed as in most instances remained by himself. The Spaniard approached him as usual. He was on his knees on a sandy soil inspecting the new shoot of vegetables.

“L’Eid El Kebir is soon,” said the Spaniard.

“It’s you again,” said Si Ahmed. “What is your joke today? Yes L’Eid El Kebir is soon,” without looking at the Spaniard. “What have you got in mind?”

“I’m offering you a big hog and a bottle of sangria made of the best Spanish wine and the best Moroccan fruits. What do you think? You still haven’t bought mutton, have you?”

“Yes that true,” said Si Ahmed and stretched his body straight. “I’m going to celebrate it with Si Hamman and his wife. He told me not to buy a sheep. He doesn’t have kids and have no one to eat his lamb.”

“Is he a member of your family?”

“Well no, but we Muslim are all one family. He treats me like his own son. I don’t know how to thank him.”

“I’ll give you a bottle of sangria to thank him,” said the Spaniard laughingly. “He will appreciate the true taste of the forbidden juices.” Si Ahmed shook his head silently and smiled and then said:

“A Westerner is a Westerner as we say; never changed. No I can’t. He is a man who goes to the mosque five times a day. I don’t think he has ever missed one prayer.”

“I’m joking,” said the Spaniard. “Take some vegetables and fruits and don’t forget to bring me some cooked meat. I like the Moroccan cuisine. I love tagine.”

“I’ll bring you some for sure. Lalla Meriem is a great cook. Everybody loves her food. Si Hamman is a generous man. He has a golden heart like yours. I can’t understand why we were killing each other?”

“In the name of empire we do terrible thing. I don’t feel Spanish because I never put foot on Spain. My dad didn’t go back to Spain because he was a republican, so I’m, and I’m not Moroccan because I don’t think I will be accepted. But I admire your way of life and I love your cuisine. I hope Lalla Meriem send me a tagine so I can enjoy it with my bottle of sangria.”

“She will. That woman can give her heart.”

The Spaniard teased him well, especially when he was drunk. Si Ahmed laughed and called him the crazy Christian, the drunkard, the sinner who will be in the bottom of hell if he didn’t stop drinking and repented. The Spaniard never took it seriously and Si Ahmed never really meant it. They were respecting each other despite the painful history that logged them one

another, and their differences, but the Spaniard liked him well enough. Si Ahmed was very tolerant man and believed in the day of judgement. He never judged anybody because he believed that judgement is for Allah and not for human. He always said to the Christian by quoting verses from the Koran “ whoever did good deed will be compensated for it and whoever did bad deed will be punished for it”. The Spaniard admired him for his simplicity of live, for his deep thinking because Si Ahmed never spoke or opened his mouth unless he was right and when he was addressed he listened carefully and respected the views of others. The Spaniard defied his own tradition and one day invited Si Ahmed to his house. When the Spaniard opened the door, everything looked so spotlessly clean that Si Ahmed bent himself to take off his shoes.

“ Enter with your shoes. You are not entering the mosque,” said the Spaniard laughingly.

“ I’m going to soil the floor,” he answered.

“ Don’t worry; enter.”

They sat on a table set for six.

“ I told my wife to cook paella with fish. We know you are a Muslim and you eat only halal meat but we can’t buy it from the market because most of the meat sold in the market is old season. I always take it from the farm.”

Si Ahmed sat down embarrassed without saying a word. After a couple of minutes he met the Spaniard son. He was a young tall handsome and imposing fellow with soft and manicured hands. He was large and thick-bodied, almost like his father but athletic looking. He wore a black suit and white shirt. His hair was plastered to his head after the fashion of the time, giving him the look of a Spanish politician or a scholar, which probably he was, for he had learned accounting, history and philosophy. He greeted Si Ahmed with respect and sat down. Later a tall blonde woman with florid face clad in printed flower dress, came with a plate of paella, followed by an old lady carrying fried fish and chips and kebabs. Then the ladies brought plates of salad, fruits, glasses which Si Ahmed never saw in his life and bottles of lemonade and wine. For a long moment Si Ahmed sat rigid in recurring torture and afraid from the blond woman grinning face. His mind was lost in the depthless morass of race and it was made worse when he was given a folk and knife to eat with. He has never eaten with folk and knife and felt embarrassed. He wanted to say something but he realised he should say what was expected of him. He didn’t know what to say and kept silent. He thought it was a lesson given to him by the Spaniard to humiliate him.

“ My son and I are going to tie you and fill your belly with wine, and then we take you to the centre of the town and leave you there,” said the Spaniard jokingly.

Si Ahmed smiled and looked at the Spaniard son who was looking at him seriously.

“That true,” said the son, “that’s why we invited you.”

“Help yourself,” said the Spaniard to Si Ahmed patting on his shoulder. “You are the best worker we ever had.”

The old lady read a prayer in Spanish and the others said Amen but Si Ahmed didn’t share any of these with them and read his own: Fatiha# first, followed by Bismillah and took the folk and knife clumsily. He took the folk in his right hand. The Spaniard looked at him and understood what Si Ahmed was going through. He put down his folk and knife and said to Si Ahmed:

“Let eat with our hands. I love to touch food.”

Si Ahmed smiled and put his utensils down and proceeded with his five fingers followed by the Spaniard while the others looked at them and smiled. Then the Spaniard passed him the mayonnaise. Si Ahmed looked at it intensely trying to read what it is and couldn’t. He has never seen anything like it. First he thought it was a cheese but as a farmer, he had enough knowledge about cheeses and dismissed it.

“It is animal fat, from my hogs,” said the Spaniard. “If you want to put on weight, become strong so you can work the whole day in the farm without getting tired, this is the right stuff for you to eat.”

“No, thank you,” said Si Ahmed.

The Spaniard explained to him what mayonnaise is. Si Ahmed nodded but didn’t eat it. He liked the food and ate well. After that, they had coffee while talking about the farm and what the Spaniard had for plan. He wanted to buy the farms around his, making his farm the biggest in Larache and plant green beans and strawberries to export to Europe. He wanted Si Ahmed to become an overseer promising him a good pay rise. But the Spaniard didn’t have enough money and the bank couldn’t lend him some for some unknown reason. So the plan of buying the other farms was probably in five-year time. Si Ahmed was overjoyed and accepted the offer once the farm becomes big. He started dreaming of clean big house. Probably, like the Spaniard’s house, immaculate and spotless. He took his cup of coffee and forgot he finished it and was embarrassed. The Spaniard was watching him.

“You like the coffee?” asked him the Spaniard.

“Oh yes, this coffee is delicious,” said Si Ahmed.

“It’s from Spain.”

“I see. I can’t afford good coffee. The one I buy is cheap and they say it’s mixed with roasted chickpeas.”

“I’ll give you some to enjoy in your shack.” and poured him another cup.

Si Ahmed drank his coffee, tasting it, enjoying it with great pleasure and forgot himself. He looked through the window and it was getting dark. He asked the Spaniard and found that eight o'clock found him. He arose and walked out of the Spaniard's house in the darkness and the offer meant a new lease on life to him and an end of a long and bitter search for dignified wages and employment. But five years seemed a long time, an eternity that he couldn't wait and what will happen to him if the Spaniard changed his mind? If he sells his farm and goes back to Spain. What if he dies? He took a deep breath of the pure fresh air, zipped his jacket and turned up the collar against the world and walked Mohamed V Avenue. While he crossed the road, a car swerved, missing him. The driver clanged furiously and frantically on his horn and cursed mightily Si Ahmed; but Si Ahmed was unaware of what was going on around him. He was absorbed in his tangled thought and his legs were carrying him to Si Hamman store. Si Hamman as usual was sitting on his chair and beside him his teapot and a cup of tea.

"We see you like a moon in the sky," said Si Hamman. "How are you my son?"

"I'm sorry Si Hamman. I'm always busy and days are getting shorter now. I'm fine. How is Lalla Meriem?"

"Go to the house, she is inside. Bring a cup with you. She always asks for you. She just brought me some tea. She is preparing crumpets. Go and bring some for yourself."

Si Ahmed knocked on the door and Lalla Meriem's voice told him to come in. She was in the kitchen making crumpets. Si Ahmed kissed her head and asked her forgiveness for not coming so often to visit them. She was very happy to see him and asked him about everything big and small. She gave him a plate full of crumpets and a cup and he returned to the store. He took a red Coca-Cola box and sat on with one leg over the other.

"Where have you been this late?" asked Si Hamman.

"The Spaniard invited me to his house for lunch," he answered and put the crumpets between him and Si Hamman.

"The Spaniard invited you for lunch in his house!" repeated Si Hamman leaning forward and his eyes popping out. "For whom did he mistake you? The mayor of the city!"

"No, for nobody. I met his family and saw his house. Houses of the Christians are very different from ours. They are very clean and the furniture is new."

"You don't have to tell me, I know. Was he out of his mind or drunk to invite a worker in his farm to his house?"

"No, he is perfectly normal. He is not like the other Spaniard."

"Can you tell me what was about this invitation?"

“ He is planning to buy the surrounding farms in five-year time. He asked me to stay working for him. If I do he will put me as an overseer when the farm becomes big. He trusts me.”

“ Well, it sounds good but if he doesn't buy or if he wants to keep you for five years and then sell and go home to Spain. Most of the Spaniards have sold and left.”

“ I don't know Si Hamman,” and shook his head. “ I'm confused and that's why I come to see you. I need advice.”

“ Listen my son; I'm not against anybody but I have to tell the truth. We have been kicked around for half century by the Europeans; have been told so many lies and so often betrayed. Yes son, there is no place like Morocco.” The emotion in his voice was genuine. “This country home to the Berbers, the Arabs, the Moors, the Blacks, the Jews and all. They shared the same hope and lived happily together. They shared also the same desire and the same sadness. These are the principles of democracy. We tolerate each other, but when the colonialism came he wanted to divide us and let us dog one another. The colonialists promulgated the “Dahir berbere” in 1930. They wanted a complete separation between the Arabs and the Berbers. For what? Why they wanted to separate these people who never see themselves different from one another? Those people lived for centuries in harmony. Think about this, he has an agenda.”

Si Ahmed was listening and nodding and felt the compulsion to agree. He filled his mouth with a crumpet and drunk tea.

“ They take us for fools,” Si Hamman continued. “ When a Westerner gives me a promise I just say yes but I have my thought and reservation, because how many promises they gave us and betrayed them, how many lies we heard from them in days of occupation?”

For a long moment Si Hamman didn't speak. His tautly leashed body stayed rigid on a chair and his brain raced through the past. He had dreams when he was young but had been shattered and hopes crumbled into dust. He lived in fear of poverty and abuse.

“ Some more tea Si Hamman,” said Si Ahmed. “ You are not here, only your body.”

His soaring thoughts were brought back and his eyes were murky with hurt.

“ I was thinking it over,” he said and took a deep breath.

“ What are you thinking about, the offer?”

“ No, my wasted life. You need work; you work for the Spaniard. If you are there for the next five years, you take the job as an overseer. If not for some any reason the Spaniard can go to hell. Just tell him yes as long as you need him and he needs you. But don't put your trust on him and his offer. I

know he needs your hard work but doesn't mean he likes you as a person. Try to understand the difference between the two, my son. He is a European; you are an ugly stupid damn Arab. In another word he doesn't consider you in the same level where he is, so you are not his equal. Inviting you to his house proves that he needs your sweat."

Si Ahmed finished his tea and couple of crumpets and without a word he arose leaving Si Hamman alone.

"Where are you going?" said Si Hamman.

"To my castle."

"It's too dark; you stay here tonight. There is plenty of room. I asked Lalla Meriem to prepare dinner."

"I can't swallow anything. My belly is full with crumpets."

"I'm so tired and feel cold. Lalla Meriem didn't bring the Kanoun this evening so I can warm my bones. She was cooking her crumpets and using my Kanoun. Help me close the store. If any of my customers needs to buy something they have to knock..."

## Chapter 7

Si Ahmed settled down well in the farm and resigned himself to the new world. Life went on without too many serious setbacks. He forgot his pain of separation from his home village or it became bearable. And there was plenty of food too. He cleared some ground with rich black soil behind the farm after asking the Spaniard and planted some vegetables and mint for his own consumption. In the evening Si El Hachemi taught him how to hunt and together they hunted wild food, harvested wild duck and black pigeons and collected eggs and fished in Loukous River. Si El Hachemi liked sea and rivers. He liked to fish and talked about the sea like an experience fisherman. Si Ahmed always ate well on the farm, better and more than he had ever eaten before.

Months have gone and Si Ahmed has worked hard and made small saving. He was very happy and life smiled to him. But one day the Spaniard came to the farm drunk; worse than ever before; full of piss and vinegar and in a filthy mood and temper. He was banging and wrenching with careless tool and swearing terrible revenge and howling to the sky. Si Ahmed ignored him for a while, then inspected his state and tried to stop him. He took his bottle of wine, hollered at him in outrage, but there was no stopping the Spaniard. He had enough wine in his car and by nightfall he was still there drinking until he sagged down. Si Ahmed was worried and afraid too. He went to his shack and closed his door leaving the drunken sinner shouting, then reeling across the plantation and wheezing like a bull.

The following day, in a very clear early morning, Si Ahmed woke up and ventured out. He couldn't see the Spaniard but near the river moved a line of gaily workers, merrily chatting in their loud voices and walking towards "Granja". Suddenly one of the men with a gruff voice started a song like a tenor and strong twenty or so voices followed, some gruff, others shrill, interspersed with whistles and screams. Si Ahmed lied flat out watching the stars fading away in the dawn sky and the merry voices vanished and in this great stillness he could hear far away the croaking of frogs and the snorting of horses but was disturbed by the harsh tearing squawk of a crow. It was jeering at him from the tree and crickets were bleeping and chirping. Si

Ahmed loved birds, loved them better than people but a crow is a messenger of bad news. Suddenly the crow flew away leaving the place dead silent. Shortly after dawn Si Ahmed picked himself up. The sky was cloudless and bright blue, which let see sharply all the way to the far horizon. Si Ahmed was looking at the red sun rising from the fiery shimmer of Loukous River to the east, and in this dead silence the screams of Si El Hachemi flew down the length of the plantation, which was a good mile or so to the cabin of Si Ahmed. He ran this way and that in his panic, toward the plantation door then back, heaving and gasping for breath. Si Ahmed frowned with concentration and identified Si El Hachemi by his usual clothes: red trousers turning brown by dirt and black woollen jumper. Si Ahmed ran as fast as he could. He reached Si El Hachemi who cried out hysterically.

“ We are going to prison,” he shouted. “ We are going to prison. Why did I come so early?”

Si Ahmed looked in the direction where Si El Hachemi was pointing his finger and to his horror he saw the Spaniard stretched on the ground with eyes wide open, no longer moist with life, but dry and dull. He knelt by the side of the cadaver and put the finger on his neck. Si Ahmed shook his head and screamed : “ O god no, no, and no” and walked away as if he wanted to preserve the man alive.

“ He is dead; he is dead,” told him Si El Hachemi as if Si Ahmed didn’t know.

Si El Hachemi rubbed his face and stared at the cadaver. His face was swollen and red and his eyes popped out with terrible fear. Si Ahmed stood up for a moment and couldn’t believe the Spaniard was dead. He wanted to preserve the rich lyric voice, the laughter and jokes, the rising and falling tones of the Spanish words he couldn’t understand then he started trembling and mumbled the Fatiha praying for the Spaniard soul but he couldn’t finish it. To pray for a non-Muslim soul by reading the Fatiha seemed to him sickly insincere. Does the soul of the deceased accept it? he asked himself. He walked away and booted a tree like crazy, bruising his foot but he felt very bad about the Spaniard. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down, came back to the cadaver, knelt down, closed the Spaniard eyes, folded his arm across his chest and prayed hard and cried hard. He read the Fatiha and others short Sourats he memorised. Si El Hachemi raised his hand slowly high in the sky and stayed in the air, not knowing where to go and finally that hand patted Si Ahmed on the shoulder.

“ They will put us in prison; they will kill us,” said Si El Hachmi with a plaintive voice, gazing blindly at his torn rubber boots. Finally he sank down to the floor exhausted, cursing mightily his luck and howling his innocence.

Si Ahmed picked himself up, wiped his face, run to his shack and brought a white sheet and covered the body.

“ You stay here,” he said to Si El Hachmi. “ I’m going to inform his family.”

Si Ahmed ran crazy as fast as he could. He ran toward the town at the speed of pain with his heels echoing off like a gunshot and dragging cloud of dust behind him. He didn’t take the main road but to cut the distance short, he took a cart track, thin road and footpaths, crossing the green prairies and through the woodland, all the way to M’has-has. When he reached the neighbourhood, Si Hamman was outside his store looking and shading his eyes like an explorer in Si Ahmed direction who was running and his hands were swinging beside him. Si Ahmed stopped and put his hands on his knees, gasping noisily like a thirsty dog from the run and the perspiration was soaking him, sticking his clothes to his body.

“ What’s wrong?” asked him Si Hamman.

“ I found the Christian dead in the plantation this morning. I’m going to inform his family. Surely I’m going to prison. What a malediction!”

Si Ahmed was agitated in impatience, fidgeting and shivering but fighting his fear.

“ Did you kill him?” asked him Si Hamman.

“ Why should I? I’m earning my piece of bread in that farm.”

He raised his hands high in the sky and shook his head and spat into the dust and the spit rolled over and over picking up dust until it looked round and took an egg shape.

“ God help his faithful.”

Si Hamman entered his store and brought him the expensive drink. Si Ahmed took the bottle of Coca-Cola and drank half of it in one go.

“ I’ll pay you later,” he said to Si Hamman. “I must go to inform the family. I don’t know how they will receive the news”. And he handed him the Coca-Cola bottle.

“ Allah is with you,” he said. He looked at the bottle and in politeness didn’t wipe its neck and drunk from it.

Si Ahmed growled in phlegmy tone and left Si Hamman sitting on the red Coca-Cola box reciting sourates from the Koran. He crossed the neighbourhood, reached the mill factory, took Mohamed V Avenue, turn right, walk down past the court of justice. It was a big fat pink building situated in “Cuatro Caminos”. He looked at it and its windows were dirty and murky like an eye with cataract. He kept walking and close to tears. He reached “plaza España” and turned left to where the Spanish community lives. The sun whipped him and was sweating heavily but sped up his pace to reach the building. He climbed the stairs to the first floor. At his knock, a

reedy voice told him to wait. After a minute, which seemed an eternity to Si Ahmed, the son of the Spaniard opened the door still plastering his hair over his head. He was surprised to see Si Ahmed on his own and very distressed.

“What do you want?” he asked Si Ahmed.

“Your father is dead in the farm,” said Si Ahmed in trembling voice.

They went down running. The son of the Spaniard swung the car door open, got in and started the engine. Si Ahmed sat in the rear seat. The son of the Spaniard rocked the car ahead, down the wrong way, bouncing over the divider in the middle of the road. Two wheels lifted then settled, then steered the car to the right lane. Si Ahmed sat there half-dead listening to the tires biting at the road. They drove in silence down Ibn Tachefine road, past the last petrol station of the town and met by the great expanse spread away to the ancient city of Ixus. In this great distance white like a snow is the production of salt. The son of the Spaniard drove past and before reaching the bridge, which crosses the Loukous River, he took the right turning to the farms and the paved road gave way to a dirt road. It was old and broken with potholes and marl pools. Even though the son of the Spaniard travelled the distance at a very high speed.

In the farm, Si El Hachmi who still trembling and whimpering heard the tires roaring and filling the air with clouds of dust and smoke. He rose up and down on boot toes trying to distinguish who were the invaders.

“Oh shit,” he exclaimed, turning away or rather running away. “He will shoot me dead this Christian,” he screamed.

Si Ahmed hollered at him and Si El Hachmi stopped. His face was a grey colour his eyes full of tears and were almost blind as if a great blackness settled on them that he couldn't name. The son of the Spaniard moved forward woodenly and took off the sheet and there was lying his dear daddy. And how impossible it seemed to him that this active creature was not moving. It was actually not in this world anymore. He looked at it, well it was true. His daddy was no longer alive. He wept in silence and the two Muslims too beside him. The son of the Spaniard put his daddy in his car, covered him with the sheet and before he left he told Si Ahmed and Si El Hachmi to turn the workers back. They did and sat together sipping mint tea in sombre mood.

Days have gone and the son of the Spaniard sacked the staff with the intention to sell the farm and the dream of Si Ahmed to become an overseer went down with it and in this fertile valley he felt fearful of poverty. Disappointment and anger burned a bad hole in his lungs. He hurled his clothes and farm tools in bags, throwing snort and breathing heavily and every breath was anger, every step was anger, every move was anger. He was talking to himself :

“ I’ll go somewhere and make a new start. A new start?” repeated to himself with disgust.

He took his bags, throwing curses and kicked one hog in his way. He left the farm and the future seemed to him too. And here he was on the road with little money and on the move again looking for a place and a job where he could prosper. But Larache is too small, so he went back to Si Hamman. He went back to M’has-has, to the heart of misery. Si Hamman was as usual sitting on red Coca-Cola box outside his store. Slowly he rose shading his eyes with his hand and frowning with concentration. He met him with open arms. He gave him the shack back. He advised him to go to work in canning industry and he did. But the job was seasonal and Si Ahmed, despite his shyness, contacted the son of the Spaniard, asked him if he could find him a permanent job. The son of the Spaniard knew Si Ahmed as a hard worker from his dad and talked to another Spaniard who finally gave Si Ahmed pseudo-permanent job.

Si Ahmed started working ten hours a day commencing at six o’clock in the morning. In the evening, in Si Hamman store the workers gathered there for talk and laugh and in the street dogs barked and chased one another in their usual way, children cried and laughed, shrieked and hollered, and sometimes fought among themselves and stole piece of bread from one another making all the wild noises and the boys roughed each other up or organised teams for football games and old and young women chattered with one another and their small children trailing behind. But the workers’ faces were painful to watch. The ones who just came from work looked tired with drooped shoulders and tortured bones. The ones who worked night-time were with puffed faces and sombre looking. Although they were really tortured and tired, they felt ashamed to complain about physical discomfort and fatigue and to show that things were as bad as they were. So they sat on the floor in a circle as if in an ancient theatre exhausted, slump-shouldered and with their feet swollen resembled to one of the lost tribes but they laughed and joked, drunk mint tea or the expensive American drink Coca-Cola and attributing the poorest life, the meanest existence and every single day they live to Allah’s will. And they talked and talked argue one another on great topics and small, discussing the right and wrong, true and false and the kids around them chased one another, provoking cloud of dust and one of the men hollered at them. So they sat quietly for a while and they started again until the muezzin called for the prayer. Then they all stood up mumbling the Fatiha in silence and the kids imitating them, feeling they are grown men and followed them to the mosque and Si Hamman who always asked his wife to stay in the store. On their way to the mosque, they were concentrated on the coming meeting with Allah, soul to soul with Allah.

Others were indulged on the greatness of Allah ‘whatsoever is on the earth will perish. And the face of your Lord Full of Majesty and Honour will abide forever’. Allah gives me another day to live. All the praises and thanks are to Allah. There is no god but Allah, said one of them.

Si Hamman was himself a strong believer and a devoted Muslim but he never believed in passiveness. He strongly believed that Allah gave him the right to fight any injustice. He always was angry with the workers to allow themselves to be worked like horses and live in absolute misery. He wanted them to stand up for their rights like real men and always tried to make them believe that their struggles against the evil exploitation and daily pain and suffering imposed on them is a just cause. He knew all of them: poor, humble, god-fearing people. Men and women sacrificed and endangered their life every day for a piece of bread. And he knew no matter how hard they had worked it wasn't enough. Their wages were too meagre to get them out of debt and most of them ended the year as they had started it revealing the harshness and growing pain of their life. It was like a rusted razor that threatened the throat.

Si Ahmed understood this after couple of months when he started to buy vegetables, poultry and fish that he used to gather from the Spaniard farm, hunt in the wild and fish in Loukous River. He couldn't save a single Dirham. He shook his head as if he had awakened from a bad dream then he found himself obliged to work from six o'clock in the morning till very late in a hope to save money and make his home he has always longed for....

## Chapter 8

Si Ahmed spent lot of time in the work place and always his eyes were set on one particular young lady. She was small and thin, a fragile innocent body of a child. She seemed almost simple in her shyness but calmly competent young woman. She had tanned skin, small nose and bright smile and her big eyes kohled and her strong black hair was braided and ribboned in one thick pigtail. She was neither beautiful nor pretty but possessed the secret of charm and was extraordinary attractive. They exchanged a significant friendly glances and Si Ahmed was pierced through the heart, love at first sight. And one winter cold rainy day, after work, she was in a corner standing alone as if lost in her thoughts. Si Ahmed noticed the figure and she looked simple, natural but elegant and at the same time merry. He approached her with pounding heart and flush hot with shyness. It was very dark and Si Ahmed was worried about her safety or seemed to be. They looked at each other and their eyes became like four lighted candles in darkness and in them they saw the end of their loneliness. They were in each other's heart and found meaning for the first time to their meaningless world.

“ How do you do miss?” said Si Ahmed. “ May I accompany you? It's very dark and I'm worried about your going alone in those dark streets. Where do you live?”

She woke up abruptly from her reverie and her face shone red. She looked again at him. He was lean and well built, dark of hair and eyes and after a long silence she replied.

“ I live in Kalito. I would appreciate your company and protection.”

“ What's your name?”

“ Khadouj,” she replied shyly.

“ I'm Ahmed.”

He peered down at his torn boots, embarrassed and unsure of what to say next or what to do and the conversation stopped there. They stayed facing each other with one desire but yet separated by no more than a little gesture. For this moment she wanted him more than anything in the world if he would talk to her, even lean on her if he could, drawing the road to

happiness. But he stood nervously in his silence and she couldn't stand it anymore and said:

"Yes I know your name and I admire your hard work." She sighed. "I can't work long hours. Sometimes I do try but I'm not physically strong. If I'm capable, I'll work everyday so I can have a decent home, unfortunately I can't. I think I'll end my life in Barrio Kalito. I feel great weight of guilt but no shame. The simple truth is my life has no meaning."

"Every soul on earth was created for a purpose," said Si Ahmed and this time looking straight in her eyes.

He touched with his trembling hand her glistening cheek and he felt her shiver under his fingers then no one spoke a word. They sank like a stone into the embarrassing pool of silence. But they were both happy to walk alongside each other. They reached Kalito, an encampment made mostly of shanties and poorly maintained. It was exactly like the neighbourhood where he lives, with no solid houses or palisade. It was dark and the place looked abandoned except hungry bony dogs feasting on heaps of garbage and chickens picking at the smelly wet ground. As they approached the camp they could see by the flickering light a stunted little children half naked despite the cold weather with sad faces sitting on doorsteps like grotesque sad clowns that the spectators didn't dare laugh at because the laughter would be self-deprecating and behind them their mothers standing at the doors carrying on their bony hips their crying babies with impassive and expressionless faces. They looked too old and brutalized by poverty to give birth to those babies. Some of the babies were tugging at their mothers' breasts trying to suck the last drop of milk then pulling away and tugging again and when they couldn't find the last drop they gave out their frantic cries. Khadouj stopped, smiled lightly and said to Ahmed:

"You can go back now, I feel safe. I live down this narrow road. You know if people see me with you they would talk about it tomorrow."

"I don't mean to embarrass you. I'm sorry."

"I hope I don't sound so harsh with you."

Si Ahmed walked back to his cage with mix feeling, happy and sad. He looked at the sky and saw black heavy clouds twisting like a ribbon then a dry crack of lightning split the darkness and the rain became heavier with big heavy drops. He passed hospital Lalla Meriem with its high windows and white walls and turned to Jnan Frances, swimming through the air, breathing heavily in the rain and roaming like an animal under dripping trees with his tangled thoughts. The rain was getting lighter when he reached Jnan Bacha. He walked down the pot-holed road and when the occasional cars passed him, they sprayed him with muddy water and a gust of dirty gasoline air. By the time he reached the Mill factory he felt he could

walk for hours. He felt his heart was heavy and great weight settled on his chest. He sheltered under the Mill factory verandah from the bucketing rain. He waited for it to ease but got heavier again. He shook his head to drain it from water, passed his hand through his hair and pulled the collar of his coat around his chin and waited. He looked at the sky and he could see the rain blown with huge drops by the wind over the opposite shops and the red Coca-Cola sign jerked furiously on and off, exploding its motto in the air. The owner of the shops was a Soussi called Si Ibrahim who owned the Mill factory as well. Si Ibrahim went out and pulled down the shutters. After a while the rain suddenly stopped and Si Ibrahim opened his doors again. The street looked like a river and the gutters ran with water. Oily rainbows shone in the flickering light. Si Ahmed looked up and down the street, it was deserted except someone here and there running alongside the walls, chin buried in their chest like a pigeon and the head down or covered by their own jacket pulled up sheltering themselves from the heaving droplets still pouring down and running helplessly toward their destination where they could find warmth and shelter. He shoved his hands in his pockets and took Mohamed V Avenue. He stopped at Cuatro Caminos. A mass of trees hung over the road. The branches were waving back and forth restlessly in the wind like a departed relative in a dream and behind, behind the trees, black clouds upon clouds marching furiously in black emptiness of the sky like furious ancient soldiers in battles. He carried on walking down Mohamed V Avenue and when he reached the liberation Square, the cafes were still open but empty. The centre of the town was deserted and not a single soul to be seen. Under the arcades, a couple of rough sleepers were coughing hard and one of them was cursing the day of his birth and accusing his fate and who ever were involved in his misery. Si Ahmed looked at them then hummed and sighed and considered himself lucky. He walked to "Balcon Atlantico", which looks over the sea. The tide was high and the lighthouse was battered by the waves. The wind was gusting hard from variable directions, whistling and rattling and blowing away spray off the sea. Si Ahmed could smell the harbour salt and fish in the sharp wind. He stayed there looking at this riot in the sea and was lost in his own thought. He felt okay, in fact he felt happy to meet Khadouj. She is ridiculously good-natured girl. He dreamed of her, that life will be fine with her and after all she is a quiet lady. He dreamed of life he didn't have, the life he was missing, the other part of life and he knew that he shouldn't flirt with life but to take it seriously otherwise he would end up in a dark alley and life would rape him without mercy like it did to his parents and grandparents. They did live in abject poverty. He thought of his dad and how much he loved his mother. He understood through the silence and suffering

of his father that a woman can make or destroy a man. But Khadouj was something different and special, somehow like his mother to his father and wanted it to be that way.

Hours had passed and Si Ahmed woke up from his dream and suddenly felt sad and cut off from others as if yearning for something beyond reach. It was cold and his fingers were stiff and numb. He sighed impatiently and began to walk again and this time back to his cage. He reached the Mill factory and turned left to where he lives. It was very dark, darker than ever before. There were no stars, no moon, no light in the street, only a black blanket of cloud. He couldn't see where he was putting his feet, trudging through the muddy water and paddles. He was worried he may trample on a fallen electric cable and get killed. And there was silence except dogs barking and cats mewing. Si Hamman had already closed his store. Si Ahmed unlocked the front door and walked crossing the patio. Lalla Meriem called his name and he greeted her. He opened his cage and heard a family of mice skittered in the darkness. He lit a candle because his room wasn't provided with electricity. There was nothing to warm the room and it was cold as a grave, dunked, and smelt bad. Smell of old carpet, of old socks and of old shoes; smell of old paint and rotten wood. He wiped his forehead with the back of his right hand staring hard at the room and through the poor light he could see his old unmade creaking bed covered with dirty sheet and on the floor his smelly blanket. His washed clothes still hung on a stick strung on two pieces of rope suspended from the ceiling. He looked at the floor; the old dirty carpet was covered with crumbs of bread and food. He couldn't tidy up his room as before since he started working two shifts a day. The first shift was in fish canning factory beside the port and the second shift in loukous factory which is a good half a mile away producing paprika, beetroot and so on according to harvest and seasons. Sometimes he stayed at work till 2 am. He was working twelve shifts a week leaving Sunday to wash his clothes and go to Hamman to clean his body. He rarely did more than sweeping his room and what good to clean the room when there is no one to see it. He took the pillow, fluffed it and tried to make some order but he was stiff all over with an ache of pain in his back. He felt his arms and legs were heavy. He felt he was in no fit state to do anything and his stomach was complaining. He gets used to gorge himself on harira and sandwiches which gave him a chronic indigestion which is universally known among men who live alone and eat in solitude. He felt in need of a woman to share the responsibility of life with him. He sagged down on the edge of his bed and put his elbows on his knees and supported his chin in his hands looking at the riot of his room. He took off his boots. He couldn't wash himself. It was too cold and the water

too. He couldn't afford to heat or warm water. He put on his djellaba, rolled on his bed and covered himself except his head gazing at this chaotic disorder with feelings beyond speech and listening to the wind rattling and hissing through the chinks in the wall. He felt abandoned and offended too. Life was hard and savage, life was salty and unforgiving and he was hurt and angry and full of protest at how big a bully life is. The appalling loneliness felt upon him with its destructive force like a desolate fog and a hot rush of tears came to his eyes. Self-pity or desolation? He didn't know. He stayed there chewing his anger and nothing was moving except the ticktocking of the alarm clock in this great silence. Suddenly he heard footsteps and then knocks on his door.

"You come late again," said Si Hammam pushing the door. "Did you work extra time?"

"No," said Si Ahmed in sombre mood.

Not knowing that his grim expression had nothing to do with him Si Hamman continued :

"Did we upset you in any way?"

"No."

"Well my son, if you feel we are mistreating you or upsetting you, it's better to tell us. May be we are doing it without knowing."

"No, I just met a girl. She is a nice little lady."

Si Hamman laughed raising his hand high and that hand scratched his head and said :

"What do you have in mind?" and preparing himself to sit down on a skin cow.

"I don't know. I'm confused. I want to marry her but I'm scared from responsibility of life. I don't know what to do but she is a good woman. I wanted her from the first day I saw her."

Si Hamman looked straight in Si Ahmed eyes and his face wrinkled up with concentration and said :

"Well my son, marriage in Islam is a binding matter and got lot of benefit. Our prophet said "when a man has married; he has indeed made his religion half perfect. Then let him fear Allah for the rest remaining half." Marriage, my son, is the union of two souls for love, and also two bodies for procreation and legalizing of children. Marriage gives peace of mind. Marriage creates family, a company of kith and kin, which creates society. Marriage keeps a distance between men and sexual crime and gives peace of mind. It contributes to moral welfare of individuals. Our prophet said: "It shuts up eye-sight and guards private parts." I advise you my son to get married. If this girl has sweet tongue and good manners then marry her.

Look at this room; it's not suitable for anyone. I want you to marry her and look for a decent accommodation."

While Si Hamman was talking, Lalla Meriem opened the door carrying a plastic tray.

"Here," she said to Si Ahmed. "I brought you a bowl of Harira and piece of brown bread."

"Thank you Lalla Meriem. May Allah give you and Si Hamman a palace in heaven near his prophets and companions."

"Can you bring the Kanoun? It's freezing here. I can feel the cold coming from earth and going through me," said Si Hamman.

Lalla Meriem brought the Kanoun and skin sheep and went back to her room leaving the men alone because she knew that men business is men business and their business alone. Si Hamman put the skin sheep on top of the one he was already sitting on, picked up his feet and warmed them on the kanoun.

"Eh my son, you should know that the relationship in Islam between husband and wife is based on love and affection and not on subordination and servitude. A wife is the queen and the ruler over the house of her husband unfortunately most of us are not following the saying of our prophet. A wife educates and forms the character of the children and prevents them from falling on slippery ground of immorality. She is a lighthouse of virtue that saves a brute man and transforms him into an angel husband. She is the dearest partner of her husband in his struggles for life. These are the reasons why wives were dearest to our prophet. Look at us: Lalla Meriem and I had only one child. He was a boy. And later Lalla Meriem couldn't have any more children. She became barren and don't ask me why because I myself don't know. One day she had the courage and asked me if I could have a second wife for the procreation of children which in this case is legal by the Chari'a but I did prefer to stay with her. She is my partner in life for consolation and peace. She is my treasure and I'm justly proud of her. I want children but I can't go against the will of Allah." Si Hamman's eyes filled with tears and his voice croaked in the telling.

"And where is your son? I have never seen him and you have never talked of him."

"Very young, he wanted to see the world," said Si Hamman and took a deep breath. "He told me: 'dad, life is very short. I want to go somewhere, find a job, make some money and settle down and have a wife and kids. I was overjoyed when I heard that he wanted a wife and kids and I said to myself: 'well, this is a new generation and it is his life. I have no right to put my nose in his private life and I let him go. I did cry the night of his departure and so did Lalla Meriem. The house seemed empty without him,

with no movement, no sound, and no life. He went to Tangier. It was the city of dreams. I myself have been there once looking for a job after leaving the resistance movement. I wanted to lead a life there but I lived many years in mountains with the moujahidines and felt Tangier wasn't a place for me. I wanted someplace much quieter, so I came to Larache. My son did go to Tangier. After a while he found a job and started sending us letters. They were bleak letters without joy but also without self-pity. One day a letter came from one of his friends saying that my dear son is dead. It was an accident in the building site. He was a builder and a good one too. I went to Tangier and brought his body back home. I didn't receive a centime from his death". Si Hamman sighed deeply and continued. "How can I eat that money? It is a blood money. I couldn't believe his death. It struck me like an earthquake. I believe that death exists but not to take the precious person you have. I thought my son was immortal or at least I should go first. I felt it was my neglect that had done it. I didn't advise him enough. But Lalla Meriem had no hope in this world. She always believed in the other life and always says this is just a resting place on the way to heaven. She took the tragedy with open heart and on the day of his funeral she put up strong face. She cried in silence and prepared the necessary food to feed the Tolbas and the funeral guests. What hurt me the most is I didn't celebrate his wedding and I didn't see his offspring. So I want to advise you like I advise my own son. You met this girl; if she is of goodness, marry her."

Si Ahmed's eyes were filled with tears and he sobbed. He mopped them with the right sleeve of his djellaba. He was silent with the spoon in his hand. He was sick and tired of living like a toad in a barrow. He stayed silent and didn't know what to say; in fact he didn't know what to do and felt swimming in a sea of strangeness. Looking after a family seemed like a heavy burden he couldn't carry. He was scared to fall short in providing the necessary things for the family. But Si Hamman encouraged him because he knew him and his capabilities probably better than Si Ahmed knew himself. Deep down, Si Hamman felt a sense of responsibility towards him. He liked him like his own son and to a great extent understood his fragile personality and his fear for not providing his family with the right piece of bread on a table. His sympathy for Si Ahmed had no bound. Just watching him in this state of confusion and moral torture and hesitation caused Si Hamman great pain and a sense of guilt. Si Ahmed had always been willing to follow in his steps, be behind him and listen to his advice and understood the subtle changes in man's life...

## Chapter 9

Si Ahmed saved money, enough money for the wedding and married his beloved girl. She was a nice girl from a nice family. It was a simple party held in Si Hamman's house with friends and couple of Tolbas reading the Koran and asking Allah to bless the couple. And they went to their room happy with feeling beyond speech. With his wife beside him, Si Ahmed felt a new man as if life breathed into him at last, eager to walk on solid ground. He had known nothing to compare with such an electrical feelings brought by this angelical creature. His face lost its hunted look and became lighted with joy and his body straightened and relaxed.

Si Ahmed kept his job in the factory and took such pride as he could master in his employment and Lalla Khadouj too and worked hard together, determined to make their own home they had always longed for. The work was plentiful in the sixties but with the scrimped wage they could barely survive. So both decided to work long hours or two shifts everyday. In the morning they worked in the "Loukous" nicknamed "the tomato Factory" canning peeled tomato, Paprika, chilli peppers, or beetroot according to harvests and seasons. In the evening at the factory door, there were always Lorries from other factories asking the workers to get in if they wanted extra work. So in the evening they took a lorry to another factory to make extra cash. They stayed late at work and sometimes Si Ahmed went back home till two o'clock in the morning leaving him with couple of hours to sleep. Si Ahmed knew that times might change and it was better to take advantages whenever possible.

When Lalla Khadouj worked one shift, she always did some work at home and kept the room as clean as she could, immaculate and scrubbed too. The little window was washed and the curtain cleaned and Si Ahmed didn't wear any smelly socks and dirty clothes. They saved money too, because they lived on very strict regime. In winter they lived mostly on Harira that Lalla Meriem gave them for free, on porridge, soup, olives, brown bread and tea and in the dull cold misery nights, they couldn't afford to buy charcoal to lit the fire and warm the room. So they huddled together trying to their utmost to stay warm. In summer they could afford some vegetables

and fruits. They never bought anything new. Whenever Si Ahmed needed something he went to Joteya and buys it very cheap. Si Ahmed thought of building his own home. The home he never had. After all, the land was cheap and the materials too. But he couldn't leave Si Hamman, Si El Hachemi and all these poor, humble, god-fearing, trustworthy and decent people behind. He thought of buying a piece of land in the same neighbourhood. On one sunny April day, Si Ahmed as usual was sitting in the garden under the fig tree, where birds were chirping, drinking mint tea and eating some bread. Lalla Khadouj was breaking dried branches and nourishing the fire, which roared up while Lalla Meriem with her flaming red cheeks sitting on red Coca-Cola box looking after Harsha. Si Hamman came from the bathroom where he was washing himself turning down his sleeves. His face and bear still gleamed with water.

“Why are you eating bread while the ladies are cooking fresh Harsha?”

“I can't forgive myself to throw it in the bin, Si Hamman. The bread is becoming hard, and maybe, this evening or tomorrow, it starts to smell. So it is better to eat it than throw it in the bin, as for Harcha, it can stay fresh for another day or two.”

“Yes you are right, Si Ahmed. Did you pay your duty to Allah?”

“No, not yet. I am waiting for you.”

“Stand up.”

“Yes, but give me a minute or two to do my ablution.”

The Harsha rose a little and a good sweet smell of bread filled the garden. Lalla Meriem turned it and the crust was yellow and cheerful brown. She took it from the earth pan, cleaned the pan with a damp cloth, oiled it and put another uncooked bread to repeat the operation. The two men came back from their duty prayer and sat down.

“Is the tea still hot?” asked Lalla Meriem.

“We can do with it,” said Si Hamman, taking his babouche off and preparing himself to sit down.

Lalla Khadouj stood up and brought them a plate of Harsha. Si Hamman poured tea and cut Harsha with his hands.

“Tea is still warm,” he said to his wife and looking at her.

“Harsha is really delicious,” said Si Ahmed.

“Yes, it is,” said Lalla Meriem. “I was talking to Lalla Khadouj. She told me you have some saving.”

“Yes, that's true Lalla Meriem. We have never hidden anything from you. I get used to you and consider you like my mother whom I don't remember much of.”

“I myself consider you like my son and god knows what in people's heart.”

“ I think now it’s time to buy your own home. I don’t like to see you anymore in this room. Both of you are working and I know you have some money to start with,” said Si Hamman.

“ Are you kicking us out, Si Hamman?” said Si Ahmed laughingly.

“ No, and Allah is the best witness. I treated you like my son since the first day when you came to me with that blanket like a hood over you head, and I want the best for both of you. I want to see you living in big house and your children running around. I want to come and visit you and say: yes Si Ahmed made it. He came from his village with nothing except his clothes and a blanket over his head but with his hard work and patience he achieved what he wanted.”

Under the orange tree, two roosters got involved in a clumsy fight. They squared their wings; attacked each other and their feathers ruffed off. Lalla Khadouj threw her rubber sandal towards them and the two roosters run off. Si Ahmed tossed bits of Harsha and the birds on the tree came down and started fighting themselves and stealing from one another then he took a big bite and started to chew it.

“ Wait,” said Lalla Khadouj. “ The food is ready; can’t you smell it? This is the last Harsha I’m cooking.” She rubbed her cheek with her hand and floured her nose with her finger as she touched it. She stood up and uncovered a pot that had been simmering on a kanoun all the morning.

“ What did you cook?” said Si Hamman.

“ Well, here some beef with potatoes and carrot. I also cooked some aubergine and we have watermelon. We thank Allah for his blessing and his food.”

The ladies joined the men as they sat under the tree and the sun filtered through the leaves, dappling their clothes. Lalla Khadouj ladled the aubergine in one plate and the beef with potatoes and carrot into another and put them on the table. Everybody said Bismillah and dug his or her fingers into the food.

“ Yes, I discuss the project with my wife and she is very excited about it,” said Si Ahmed and pulled meat through his teeth. “ We are thinking,” he continued with his mouth full, “ of having kids as well; so we need space.”

“ Pass me the Harcha,” said Si Hamman to his wife who was working her few good teeth vigorously. “ And where do you think to buy?”

“ Here the Harcha,” said Lalla Meriem to her husband. “ I’m going to feel kinder sad to stay alone in this house, but I want you to have yours, and better than mine. I hope you don’t look for something far away from here.”

“ No, don’t worry Lalla Meriem; I myself prefer to stay in the neighbourhood. I don’t think I can find better people than here,” said Si Ahmed and gnawed at the beef bone, tearing the white gristle with his teeth.

“ Well, maybe you are right,” said Si Hamman. “ If you want to stay here, there is a land for sale near the mosque. There is no better place to live in than next to the mosque. When a man grows old, there is no place for him to frequent than the house of Allah, and it is on a hill overlooking the prairies and the Loukous River. Pass me the watermelon”, he said to his wife. “Last time I bought one melon from Jnan Bacha market and it wasn’t sweet. It was a waste of money and we threw it away. I tasted this melon before I bought it, and it’s really sweet.”

“ Yes, you are right Si Hamman. I think I have to buy the land near the mosque. We have worked hard together and we have some little money to spend, as you know. A house surely will make a man and his wife very happy.”

“ Yes indeed, but with few centimes more for pay rise per hour makes a man not only happy but a hard worker and patriotic as well.”

“ That for sure, Si Hamman,” said Si Ahmed and taking a big bite of watermelon, “ that for sure, but I am not expecting these dogs to give me pay rise. All I want is my wage at the end of the week because I don’t want to fall in debt and embarrass myself with people. I know some workers haven’t been paid for a month or so and their bosses are always disappearing on day of payment. I consider myself blessed and fortunate”.

“ Well, buy the land first, and then build your house like I did. I built one room. I refurbished it, and I built the kitchen, the toilet, and the second room and so on until I finished building my house. Everybody does the same, except the rich who have the money to build their houses in one go.”

“ Yes, that true Si Hamman, and it is an excellent idea. I don’t have the money to do it in one go. I want to build my small dynasty. It pleases me when I’ll finish it, and to know that my children and their children will walk on its floor and no one will be able to move away.”

“ I agree with you. A house is the base of the family. It means stability.”

Si Ahmed bought the land and Si Hamman, his good friend and devoted admirer got him started with some cash. He built three small bedrooms, a good kitchen for his standard and a dining room and a patio.

Si El Hachemi himself got married to his beloved girl Lalla Fatima who first met in the Spaniard farm. He built himself a house and bought a schooner and became a fisherman. He was a hard worker but an explosive character who couldn’t stay a month working in one place without starting troubles with the overseers or even the bosses and in most cases he told them to shove their job and collect his pay and leave.

“ I don’t give a damn,” he always said to the boss when he was collecting his last pay. “ You are dead like lambs that haven’t heard the message of the

prophet and waiting for the bosses' boots," he said to his colleagues. "I loathed the shitness of work and living like an animal."

He hated work in factories and disliked bosses and their monkey talk.

"What good to work for such a skunks, who are making millions on other people misery," he always said in an angry voice.

Si El Hachmi considered them lazy and parasites that are sucking the blood of the decent poor. They required from the worker an enormous, sustained effort but giving him a wage that merely house and feed and clothe his family. Si El Hachemi always believed that there are ways to make money fast in Morocco: manufacturing things and avoid paying taxes by corrupting the responsible who are themselves corrupt. Buying things low and selling them high and speculating on the market. But without capital to invest in a large-scale manufacture, it was impossible to make a good margin of profit and become rich in his life. Despite his having been poor and struggling all his life he did managed to save some money and bought himself a schooner and then he paid a visit to Si Hamman store and told the news to everybody and added:

"I feel somehow free from the blind exploitation of this barbaric system called capitalism."

"What is capitalism?" asked Si Ahmed who heard the word for the first time.

"I don't know," said Si El Hachemi. "But the bosses I worked for said they are capitalist and I didn't like anyone. They lie to the poor and exploit the worker to the bones. From my experience, capitalism means enslaving the poor."

"They are not capitalists. What they know about capitalism anyway?" said Si Hamman. "Capitalism is...is...I don't know...is science, yes, how to run the country. I mean the economy. Free market and all that, but we took the word "free" like we are in a jungle."

"So what are capitalism then, and the free market?" asked again Si Ahmed who seemed to be troubled by the words.

"I don't know Si Ahmed, I don't know. We are talking about something beyond us. I'm not an educated man. I couldn't go to school because there was none when I was a kid. The colonisers, the Spaniards and the French didn't want us to learn. They closed our school and steal our wealth. One day I was talking to someone who is an enlightened man and teaches history in university of Fez. His name if I can remember is Hossam. You know people from Fez always look for complicated names. He told me that the colonisers took whatever belongs to Habous, from land to factories and houses... The Habous, this gentleman told me, was a very rich charitable organisation and it was financing education in the Maghreb. This gentleman

may Allah give him a palace in heaven close to the prophets and their companions and may his knowledge enlighten our way and clear our path from every obstacle. He told me that the colonisers said: if they could put their hands on Habous they would switch off the light of knowledge in our land. And they did map our splendid future and I consider myself the success of their plan. I can't read and can't write because of them."

"And why they did that? We never meant to harm them," said Si El Hachemi. "We work like animals in their factories. All these factories here in this town belong to them."

"Don't ask me, O obedient of Allah. Go and ask them why?" said Si Hamman leaning forward and had all his rage by his throat. "They want to keep you like an animal. You answer the question."

"But some of them are good people," said Si Ahmed. "I heard the Spaniard, the owner of the farm, said that in their country they live equal and the rich pay the workers with decent wage and holidays."

"They have Franco in power and he is a bad man," said Si El Hachemi. He killed many Moroccans and many Spaniards. That man is going to hell. He caused so much pain and suffering and hurt too many souls. How many Spaniards are staying here in Morocco? All of them called themselves republicans and hate Franco. He will kill them if they go back."

"That devil will never die. Even if he dies, god will keep torturing his soul till the day of judgement. Franco is a liar and a manipulator," said Si Hamman. "If you want to talk about this, I need more tea. When I drink tea I talk much better."

"That's true," said Si El Hachemi who wanted his usual cup of mint tea prepared by Lalla Meriem. "When I drink tea I understand much better."

Lalla Meriem brought them tea. Si Hamman filled the cups, drunk his in one big gulp, filled up his second and continued:

"I'm telling you this from my heart and it is the truth because my father told me this story and my father is everything but not a liar. He told me that during the Spanish civil war Franco came to this land, told the Moroccans to go to Spain and fight the infidels who hate the Muslims. Some damn cattle Moroccans did go and believed his lies. They called him Haj Franco. He told them that he visited Mecca and converted himself to Muslim faith and they prayed together. Yes Franco prayed with Moroccans, would you believe it? It was all lies and that's why I always tell you, you should never trust those people in politic from the north of the earth because they got two faces. In a single day, they change their mind like their weather. Since when Franco became Muslim let alone went to Mecca? During the Spanish civil war, he promised these dumb cattle a good wage and retirement. He told them he is planting flowers and when they blossom he will give the best to

the Moroccans, which means independence, but the flowers he planted were all spikes. Well, who can believe these lies except the stupid cattle! During that time I was with my dad in the Rif Mountains chasing the Spaniards and the Spaniards chasing us. It was a good occasion for us to unite and liberate the country unfortunately they believed Franco. Franco shipped them to Spain and pushed them to the front line to be killed. As we say, he hit two birds with one stone. Most of the Moroccans were killed in the battlefield and didn't live for their retirement and Franco saved his soldiers and won the civil war."

"Well, the Spaniard I worked for is a very decent man," said Si Ahmed, "and forgive me if I may say better than some Muslims. He said people are well paid in his country. He couldn't do it here because he will stir up trouble with other bosses. I think he was a very honest man."

"He is a republican," said Si El Hachemi. "I worked for him for a long time. He has the heart of gold."

"He couldn't do it here because he is going to stir up trouble with other bosses," repeated Si Hamman with a wild tormented face. "Who's stopping him? Have you ever asked him whether he bought that farm or his family stole it from poor decent people?"

"I never did and couldn't ask him this question."

"Well, they came with nothing to this land except their guns and hunger for theft."

"I don't know Si Hamman. I know they were ruling this land but their reasons, I don't know. But this Spaniard was a good man. He treated his workers with respect, protected the weak and fed the hungry and his son too. He found a job for me. I must say that, that family was doing what the Koran says, except praying five times a day," said Si Ahmed.

"Well, I told you people, I've never been to school but this doesn't mean a man can't understand," said Si Hamman. "Listen to me carefully. I'm going to simplify this story to you as this gentleman Si Hossam simplified it to me. In the 19th century Europe became more industrial but it lacked the raw materials. France invaded Algeria under the excuse to combat the piracy."

"You said the excuse," said Si El Hachemi. "If it was an excuse what was the true reason?"

"Patience my friend, I'm coming to that." He took his cup of tea and had a big sip. Si El Hachemi and Si Ahmed did the same. "Well," said Si Hamman. "I told you they needed the raw materials for their growing industry. They also had a surplus of manpower and when you have many people chasing one job, the boss can pay any wage he likes."

“ That true,” said Si Ahmed. “ I’m still working with the same wage as I was five years ago.”

“ Yes,” said Si Hamman. “ But the Europeans had other plans and their workers became masters who own big farms.”

“ How?” said Si Ahmed.

“ Well, let me tell you how. High unemployment gives dissatisfaction to people, also it is a source of unrest and high level of crime.”

“ We have high level of unemployment,” said Si Ahmed. He nodded in sombre mood. “ How did the Europeans solve their problem?” “ What I’m telling was in the 19th century, not now. So don’t compare the two.”

“ Excuse me Si Hamman,” said Si Ahmed. “ I don’t know in which century we are.”

“ We are in the 20th century, precisely in the second half,” said Si El Hachemi.

“ Let me finish O faithful of Islam,” said Si Hamman. “ The Europeans as Si Hossam, professor of history told me, solved it in very nasty way.” “ Why? Did they kill these innocent decent poor workers?” asked Si Ahmed. “ Why should they? A worker is precious like a stone of diamond to the bourgeois when the worker is working and the bourgeois is profiting”, said Si Hamman. “ But in real life and fundamentally, the bourgeois hates and despises the worker when the latter stands up and asks for his right and directs his anger and hatred upward. To answer your question they didn’t kill the workers but transformed them into soldiers and invaded other countries. According to Si Hossam, the bourgeois needs the worker in his land or factory but also and most importantly when this bourgeois starts looking beyond the boundaries of his country, he transforms the worker into a soldier and a gladiator. When I was fighting for the independence of this land, I wasn’t killing the bourgeois or their offspring, the guilty people but the damned cattle like me. Those damn lawmakers and politicians were far away from the land they set fire to, and I couldn’t lay my anger on them. What hurt me the most till today, till the day when I die, is how those criminals get away with it?”

“ What they did was evil,” said Si Ahmed.

“ When you are a bourgeois and have poverty in the country and workers are striking and your security, your wealth and prestige are in danger you think otherwise.”

“ How? Going to other countries, destroying innocent lives for the sake of money?” said Si Ahmed.

“ Yes,” nodded Si Hamman.

“ How come the French and the Spaniard invaded our country?” asked Si El Hachemi.

“ I put the same question to Si Hossam and he told me that the big countries had a conference in Algesiras, eh all the big and powerful countries like France and Spain and Britain and Germany and so on to divide the cake that is our dear country. Spain was in Ceuta for centuries. So Spain wanted a big slice of the cake. Spain considered itself has the right to invade our dear country since it had a foot in the north. France was in Algeria and considered itself the first country that got the right to go to Morocco. Germany wanted the fruit of the cake too.”

“ Did they fight each other?” asked Si El Hachemi.

“ They did in the first and second world wars, but not over Morocco. The conference over dividing Morocco was before the two world wars. The division went peacefully between them.”

“ How comes you remember all this Si Hamman,” said Si Ahmed, “and you talk like an expert in a matter you have never studied.”

“ I told you I’m not an educated man but a clever man and we the Moroccans are known by telling stories. You see storytellers in the small souk of the old city? None of them is an educated man but they are very clever men. So when I was listening to history told by Si Hossam I was listening to a story. While I was listening I make it sound so beautiful in my head so I can remember it later; and when I’m telling the same story I say it with the same sweet sound.”

“ So Germany went home empty handed,” said Si El Hachemi.

“ Not exactly. It brought its fleet to the shores of Morocco and showed France its muscles but took the slice of cake from another part of the world, I mean Africa,” said Si Hamman.

“ You should write your memoirs, Si Hamman,” said Si El Hachemi.

“ My memoirs!” said Si Hamman with dignity and stealing a glance at both men. “ If I have been to school I would write my memoirs.” emphasising strongly on the word. “ And publish them, not for their literary value, no, but from the importance of the great event of which I have been through and witness and would be translated into foreign languages so the coming generations would understand the tragedies of greed, invasion and wars. We never meant to harm anybody. We just did our duty and drove the occupiers out of our land.” “ I thought they bought these farms here in Larache,” said Si El Hachemi.

“ Most of them didn’t,” said Si Hamman. “ These farms were whether wasteland and become cultivated farm or the Spaniards drove it rightful owners out and if necessary by guns. It was an occupation and under this system the powerful has all the right, every right. He is the judge and the jury. That’s how it was and it is my friends. If you have powerful guns, you are always right and you are the judge and jury. If we are not careful, you

are always wrong even if you are right. We drove them back but as far as I can see we didn't learn a lesson and they will be back. Those people never get tired. They are another breed of human being."

"I can't believe this," said Si Ahmed. "The Spaniards I worked for was very gentle and sweet man. He helped me many times. His son found a job for me in the factory."

"I'm not saying all of them are bad people. You see most of the Spaniards living among us are good people but I'm talking about history, about human greed and what has left behind. Ordinary people are innocent but some politicians and greedy bourgeois are the culprits. When they struck a deal together they become the worst criminals in the history of humanity like the Nazis, the fascists and the like."

The muezzin called for the prayer of Isha bringing to them the sweet smell of the piety for the soul. The two men helped Si El Hamman to close his shop and both went to the mosque to pay their dues to Allah. Si Ahmed and Si El Hachemi found the conversation useful despite customers stopped it from time to time...

## Chapter 10

Lalla Khadouj and Lalla Fatima gave birth in the same year respectively to Jamal and Rachid who became good friends, somehow like brothers. The ladies gave up work and stayed home to bring up the children according to the tradition and the men stayed at work. But when their daughter Salma was five, Si Ahmed couldn't manage to bring enough bread on a table on his own and Lalla Khadouj went back to work as a cleaner in a Spaniard's family house. One day while Si Ahmed was sitting in the cool of the evening on a wooden stool outside his house and his children playing beside, Lalla Khadouj came from work and told her husband:

“Salam Aleikoum,” and hugged and kissed her children.

“Wa Aleikoum Salam,” said Si Ahmed.

“I brought you nice things. The Spaniards gave them to me. I'm going to heat them.”

“We don't need anything,” said Si Ahmed without moving. “We are full. Lalla Meriem came to see the kids and brought couscous with chicken. I kept some for you. It's still on the table.”

“Well, come on in anyhow. I want to show you what the Spaniards gave me.” She took her handkerchief and dried her face from perspiration. “They don't throw things. They keep them in the fridge or they give them to me and the other woman. They are very generous people. The kids will be very happy.”

He rose lazily and followed her into the house.

“You are late today. How was the job?”

“I don't work per hour. I stayed there until they don't need me anymore. But today I'm tired out from washing, rinsing and ironing all the morning. When they give you a centime they know what they get out of you.”

“It's the same everywhere. Tomorrow morning take the kids to Lalla Meriem because I'm working all day. I have to be in the factory at 6 o'clock and I may finish till 10 in the evening. The overseer said they have lot of orders from Europe and we better work overtime if we want to keep the job.”

“ Look here,” she said and showed him couple of steak. “ The Spaniards were having party today and I worked in the kitchen after I’ve finished the ironing. I was cleaning and scraping out the pans and putting them to soak while another Spanish woman was cooking steak. She served it with vegetables and gravy which smelled deliciously onion-flavoured. I was very hungry and hoped they hadn’t eaten it all. It had looked so good on gold-rimmed plates and I felt my mouth watered and my stomach rumbled. When the party has finished the Spanish woman gave me these pieces of steak. They are not bad. The Spaniards eat with forks and knives. They didn’t touch them with their hands. She gave me some pies as well. I’m sure the kids will be overjoyed. Come here kids,” and they came excited jumping up and down like a puppies greeting heir favourite friend. “Eat this; it’s lemon pie. I had one piece and it’s so delicious. I’ve never eaten anything like this before. These Spaniards always have nice things to eat and always have on a table meat or fish, not like us. We can’t afford to buy meat. Have some,” she said to her husband.

“ No, give it to the kids. I feel happy when they eat something nice and see them happy. Did you eat meat in the Spaniards’ house?”

“ No I didn’t. That’s all the meat. I couldn’t swallow it on my own. I had for lunch some vegetables and ate one pie. I kept the meat till I come here and eat it with my kids.”

“ Good,” said Si Ahmed, “ because you don’t know whether the meat is halal or not.”

“ I think they buy meat from Plaza and it is halal as far as I know. I don’t think there is a butcher for the Christians here in this town.”

“ From where do you think they get pork? There is a butcher for the Christians. Well, we are not sure about this meat. It’s better to throw it away than commit a sin. The poor decent people don’t sin. We only have the other life.”

“ I can’t throw all these slices. It’s a sin to throw food and we haven’t had meat for ages. Leave it till tomorrow. I’m going to ask the Spanish woman whether the meat is halal or not.”

“ Better do. Last time I was in Si Hamman store and I heard people talking. One man said his wife brought meat from the Spaniard house and she cooked it. After eating dinner he felt sick and vomited and then his wife and the kids vomited too. They made a joke of it. They said their stomachs didn’t recognised meat because they didn’t eat it for ages, then his wife became suspicious about that meat and told him that the meat is not as red as lamb or beef. They discover that the meat is pork. The poor family, hungry for something nice to eat couldn’t make a difference between pork, beef and lamb.”

“ Well, it is nice meat but we are not going to touch it until I find out. I’ll put it on top of the drawer so the kids won’t reach it.”

Lalla Khadouj was hoping that the slices of steak were Halal meat. She asked the Spaniard and she confirmed it to her. In the evening she went hurriedly back home happy to eat the steak with her kids and husband only to find that the steak smelled badly. She felt disappointed and betrayed by luck. She had been thinking about red meat for weeks. How comes she was not eating the steak that watered her mouth and occupied her head for two day.

“ The Spaniards have a fridge; I saw it and it’s big. They put everything there and the food stays good for days,” she said to her husband.

“ We can’t afford a fridge. We are struggling for food. We are eating the Spaniards leftover. We are eating garbage while we are living in a country like a paradise,” said Si Ahmed angrily.

“ We thank Allah for everything. What can we do?”

Si El Hachemi was doing fine with his schooner. In the evening he has been going with his schooner out to the sea and came back early morning, bringing home plenty of fish and selling it and making good money. He didn’t let his wife going back to work.

“ What good about sending a wife to be exploited in factories or in Spaniards houses while there is enough fish to eat and kids to look after?” he said.

But Si Ahmed carried on running from one factory to another, working hard devoutly as if the awakening duty to the generations which was more or less dormant in him rose to the surface and changed him to a master. He plunged the seeds of his hard work into the fertile land and waited covetously years for the green harvest to appear only to see it pale, dry and yellow as if sick with cancer. Then came the eighties and the deep recession with it, then the drought. The whole Africa was in danger. People were dying by thousands every day in Ethiopia and other African countries. Morocco was flashing between red and green. And Larache, Larache became a small desperate city. The remaining Spaniards started selling whatever they had, leaving for Spain and their factories closed their doors and work became scarce and seasonal. Wages dropped too. Si Ahmed tried to find a permanent job but couldn’t. One day as he was in Si Hamman store as usual, Si Hamman was sitting on his comfortable chair warming his hands in a kanoun between his legs. Si Ahmed was squatting on the ground while Si El Hachemi was sitting on red Coca Cola box and both were from time to time sipping delicately at mint tea. Si El Hachemi said to Si Ahmed:

“ For how long do you think you can carry on working like that, with no prospect of having pension and with no insurance at all?” A buzzing fly stopped on the rim of his cup of tea. He hunted it with his hand but missed. He took his cup and sipped to dampen his dry mouth and continued: “If you have an accident in place of work, don’t expect any compensation. Better if you work for yourself. I’ve been telling you this for so many years, but you are not listening.”

“ I don’t know what to do, Si El Hachemi”, said Si Ahmed.

“ I hate to tell people what to do because it is none of my business, but I know you for years and consider you my best friend. We had good time and we had bad time together. Why don’t you sell fruits and vegetables? Surely you will make good money and you are your own boss.”

“ Buying and selling is an honourable job,” said Si Hamman. “ Our prophet had done this job before. When Morocco took independence in the 50’s, I came to settle down in Larache.” The same fly stopped on Si Hamman nose. He ceased speaking and hunted it and put it under his babouche and crushed it and continued: “ I spent years in the mountains chasing the occupiers and was tired of running. I had very small saving. With this small money I started buying one box of potatoes and selling it in the market. After making some profit I started buying one box of potatoes and another of tomatoes. Look at me now; I have this store. All you need is a gut and patience.”

“ Suppose I want to do this job; where do you think I can sell my fruits and vegetables?”

“ Anywhere you want. Opposite the flourmill factory, it’s not far from here. There are couple of fruits and vegetables sellers there. You can join them, the place doesn’t belong to anybody,” said Si El Hachemi.

“ Yes, I see them. But you don’t know what they suffer, those fruits and vegetables sellers?”

“ No, I don’t know. Can you tell us?” said Si El Hachemi.

“ Well, last time I went there to buy a kilo of apples. I said to myself: it is time to have something nice to eat, have some fruit today. We haven’t had it for sometimes. Lalla Khadouj always buys oranges because they are cheap but very sweet. The seller was very upset and mumbling to himself. I thought may be he lost close relative or a friend or may be he got a problem. I asked what bother him. He told me that, that Satan of a policeman, who supposes to work in Cuarto Caminos as traffic warden always leaves his place and walks to flourmill factory and asks for fruits. He takes a kilo or two of grapes, apples, pears and a melon or two... He does the same to the fish sellers, crumpet sellers and all the sellers there. If anybody is selling something, he took a kilo or two from what he is selling. He told me that

that Satan never bought a thing, never spend a centime from his wage. When he finishes gathering his shopping he stops a car, any car and asks the driver to take the shopping to his house. If a driver doesn't know where he lives he gives him the address and force the poor guy to take the shopping to his house. He even frightens the poor driver of punishment and prison sentence if he doesn't deliver the shopping to his house. I asked him which policeman and he told me that tall skinny devil."

"How about that old fat policeman? I saw him once shopping there," said Si El Hachemi.

"Yes, I asked him the same question and he said the fat policeman never took a thing from anybody. He said he doesn't want to soil his name and buy hell in the day of judgement. When the fat policeman comes to do his shopping he pays and never threaten anybody. He is very honest man. He does his prayers and fear god, but the tall young skinny devil is pestering everybody. The old timers say: if you see a man eating a lot but he is still skinny, be sure that the devil haunt him and eat his food. Eh, this is the lowest thing in the world a young man can do."

"I can tell you," said Si Hamman, "there are enough sick men with bad faith and bad soul who soil their name and shame their family and tear themselves to pieces with ambition and covetousness."

"Well, I can't let anybody," said Si Ahmed leaning forward, "especially these dogs, take from me what doesn't belong to them if I'm a fruits seller." His eyes were bright and beady with blind anger.

"What can we do?" said Si Hamman. "Someone should report him."

"But who has the courage to play games with such a powerful and mad man," said Si Ahmed. "People like him don't believe in Allah and day of judgement. If he knows where to sell teeth he can steal yours with your eyes open. He can insult father and mother that man. When a man loses faith in Allah, he loses the meaning of justice and become a dangerous man in society."

"Power is to Allah. Nobody is powerful and I can tell you there are enough good solid citizens who believe in Allah and are not afraid only from the power of almighty Allah," said Si El Hachemi. "If I am a fruit seller, I'll go to Rabat and knock on the palace door and report that man. Surely his majesty won't tolerate these thieves. He is paying them to do a god job and good deed."

"I do agree with you," said Si Hamman. "I'll do the same thing. I didn't fight the occupiers and chased them only to be replaced by the same police. I want the police to behave like the old fat policeman who does his prayers and fear god. People like him are getting rare." He posed, looking far in the sky in tragic wonderment then said "What angers me, in our Muslim society,

in our days, is our holy book the Koran says : to cherish in men honesty, generosity, kindness, understanding and so on, unfortunately these people become the concomitants of failure in all societies, and the things that honest men detest and the Koran asks us to abstain like greed, egotism and self-interest and so on are becoming things of success.”

“ Who want to be good when a man sees the product of greed, theft and self-interest?” said Si Ahmed leaning forward and his eyes red like a bull. “ Who want to be honest when a man feels cheated in his life and underpaid? Who believes in principles of Islam except the damn fool cattle like us?” He took his position, relaxed himself and continued : “ When our generation dies, this country is going to rot because there will be no more honest people like you and you and me.”

“ If it’s like that,” said Si El Hachemi to Si Ahmed, “ why don’t you sell in the market?” He took off his hat and scratched his tonsure.

“ Well it’s easy to say, Si El Hachemi. I can’t afford to rent a shop let alone buy one.” He shifted forward, took off his babouche and scratched between his toes until it bled.

“ You can buy yourself a cart and go from one street to another,” said Si Hamman. “ Why don’t you do that? If you don’t have the money I lend you some. I helped you when you were building your house, I can do the same right now.”

“ Yes,” said Si El Hachemi. “ I myself have some saving at home. If you need money, come with me right now. I’ve never put a centime in a bank.”

“ I myself have some small saving but I’m too damn tired to go pushing the cart from one street to another,” said Si Ahmed. “ I hope I can find an easy job like a night watchman or security guard and I don’t mind if it’s night-time.” He cracked his fingers to relieve the stiffening from the day’s work.

“ Well, you buy yourself a cart. If you don’t want to rent a shop or buy one,” said Si El Hachemi. “ You could sell behind the Plaza like everybody else. You won’t be harassed by anybody.”

“ Well that’s what you think. In flourmill factory there is this Satan of skinny policeman. In plaza or in small market of the old city, there are Moukhaznis”; said Si Ahmed hot with rage and white saliva dampened the corners of his mouth. “ They are underpaid by the Makhzen and are like hungry dogs. They call what they take from sellers, subsidies to their poor wage.”

“ They make a good man sick, that’s what they do,” said Si Hamman. “ I’m not talking about Moukhaznis.” and shifted from his position. He looked for his cup of tea and drunk the rest in one big gulp.

“ I’m just tormenting myself and I don’t know why?” said Si Ahmed. “ Well, let me tell you there is nothing we can do about this. However, I can tell you one thing: what great burdens of sins men have! They gather them in their arms as though it were something precious.”

“ You can work with me,” said Si El Hachemi. “ I always need someone in my boat to help. I know, you don’t know anything about the sea but I’ll enjoy your company and you will learn with time.” He sipped his tea and self-consciously wiped his moustache.

“ I can’t swim, Si El Hachemi, and I’ve never been to the sea before. In fact I’m scared of the sea. I can’t go with you. I do really appreciate your help but it’s difficult for an old monkey to learn how to dance. It’s too late for me, Si El Hachemi. I’m growing old now and I want a really nice permanent job. You can see these Europeans with their right and pension and all; why we don’t have it? We work hard all our life; we contribute so much; we deserve something aren’t we? Why we are treated like cattle? This is what I can’t understand Si Hamman. For how long we the poor are going to be nice cattle. Are you with me?”

“ I really am,” said Si Hamman. “ But let me tell you one thing from my experience, justice was never given; you have to take it. Under occupation I was bruised and battered and humiliated cruelly with no fault of mine. As a kid I was run over without mercy. I had no childhood. At the age of ten I understood responsibility. At the age of ten I became a breadwinner of the family when my dad joined the Moujahidines. At the age of sixteen my mum died. My uncle took my little brother and I joined my father in the mountains. And since then I never knew the meaning of happiness. I haven’t eaten cooked food prepared by a woman for years. I never had the homely atmosphere. I have never seen my mother, father and brother sitting around the table eating a meal happily. I have never known that atmosphere. I wanted it badly and every night while we are asleep in caves in the mountains I only dreamed of it, of mum and dad and my little brother. I grew angry and hateful with days. I hated everything including myself and was always asking god why I am living. I beg god to release my soul. When I saw the Spanish army I charged like a bull hoping that one bullet hit me in the head or in the heart but always missed. All I wanted is to be a man with his decency intact but I was hurt and when a man is hurt in his feeling he wants to strike at something. I felt living in a jungle and I met good people, bruised and battered like me and we regrouped in mountains and fought the occupation with hands, feet, teeth and arms and head and in the end we won.”

“ I agree with you,” said Si Ahmed “and you are very courageous man and I admire you. In real life, I have a wife and two kids and got duty to put

bread on the table because my kids are waiting for daddy to bring meal, a nice meal to the table. I have a duty to my family. But someone wants to take my hard earn living from me. Speaking fair, what a man got to do? He has a duty to defend his kids and his family. Isn't it natural? He won't be sorry for that greedy fellow, who want to steal his earning and he doesn't care who he is. Are you with me?"

"Yes I'm," said Si El Hachemi. "How many of us, poor people, who don't dream at least once a day to have his boss house? His soft bed and soft bread, his furniture, his fridge, his table and his clothes. How many of us, dream of their kids carrying their books in satchel instead of a plastic bag and wearing new uniform. Everyone of us poor people wants to see his wife and daughter wearing new caftan, new belt and a good quality djellaba but we are underpaid. I don't want you to work in that factory," pointing his finger at Si Ahmed and his face was red with anger. "They push him to work in the mill," he said to Si Hamman. "Nobody wants to face that machine because you see death with your eyes open. There is no safety bar between a worker and that devil machine. If they give me earth on one hand and the moon on the other hand, I won't work there. Listen man," pointing his finger at Si Ahmed, "you have a family to look after, and that machine is on the floor grinding like a demon and if anybody loses balance he will be minced like paprika."

"Where do you want me to work when there is no job?" said Si Ahmed. "I'm myself not happy to face that machine. Spending one night in that factory is worse than a month in hell. Last time we were grinding chilli pepper. We were working like animals and we couldn't see each other because of the dust. We had nothing to cover our noses with. Some people were vomiting, others had their noses bleeding. The poor Si Jelloul, skinny as he is, sagged on his feet, punished by work. I helped him with some fresh water and encouraged him to continue so he wouldn't lose his job. The poor guy tired and carrying a heavy bag on his shoulder lost his balance and was very lucky not to go down that damn machine and be minced. I myself caught him and saved his life. The man became sweat with fear. I've never seen fear in a man's eyes as I did in Si Jelloul's face. He couldn't finish the day's work and he never came back."

"Why don't you do the same?"

"Who's going to feed the family? Do you think the food is going to fall from the sky?"

"Why don't you unite and strike unless they put a safety bar," said Si Hamman. "Is not going to cost them millions."

"We talk about that, but the overseer said they couldn't stop the work. It will cost them millions. Yes, stopping the work for one day will cost them

millions and the Spaniards will not be happy about it.”

“How if it does cost a Moroccan his life?”

“It’s cheaper for them,” said Si El Hachemi. “They don’t give a shit about our lives these people. I’m telling you and this is the reason why I bought a boat and work for myself. Si Ahmed, come and work with me. If you lose your balance and fall into the sea I follow you and if Allah wants it, we die together. If I see a pain in any man’s face I help. But look at these pigs, they are making millions and don’t want to place a safety bar between a machine and the workers.” His whole body was shaking with anger and a cold perspiration dampened his forehead.

“Last time we wanted to strike,” said Si Ahmed. “But the overseer said if we don’t go back to work he will phone the police and will imprison the leaders. We were all scared and nobody has the courage to go on strike. Nobody wants to go to prison and leave his kids hungry and a wife mistreated by everyone.”

“How could he live with himself?” said Si Hamman. “How could he sit on his ass with nothing on his conscious? How could he sleep at night and have sweet dreams? Leadership and responsibility are associated with justice and honesty. But when the overseer is hated and despised by the very people who work under him, he is like someone who takes a knife and stabs his heart, because one day the boss will treat him the way he is treating the people who work under him.” He raised his both hands in the sky and shook his head as if trying to relieve some pain.

“That’s true Si Hamman,” said Si Ahmed. “I hope I stay alive until we the poor workers see him kicked out of that factory and then he will feel our pain, but now he doesn’t.”

“He knows, he knows,” repeated Si El Hachemi shaking his head “and the bosses know but they preferred to keep their eyes closed.” That’s why I don’t like them. What maddens me is, you see a man, a good-looking man but closes his eyes on the truth. I believe clothes don’t make good men. I think they hide their evil intention behind good clothes and nice smile.”

“How many of them?” said Si Hamman. “How many of them are now? They infested the world with their greed and lies. Our old values are dying with us. I don’t know where this new breed is coming from. I would say they are not our children.” He raised his arms high and his hands wide and kept there. “But all we can do,” he continued “is worship Allah and he will hear our prayers.” then he dropped his arms down.

“Well, I have to go,” said Si Ahmed. “Salam Aleikoum.”

He left with his shoulders drooped looking spent and haggard and his gaze aimed at nowhere. The question working his brain was how to find a permanent job as a night watchman or security guard added to his despair.

He lowered his gaze and hurried his steps and each step was a torture, each question was hammering his head. While he was walking he tasted salt in his mouth and he knew he was shedding tears and wiped them with his handkerchief...

## Chapter 11

One early morning, Si Ahmed woke up feeling tired or rather got that kind of creepy feeling he couldn't understand. He went to the bathroom and looked at himself in a mirror and for the first time he noticed his hair was going weak and silver at the temples. He did his ablution and the Fajr prayer.

"Are you going to work?" asked him Lalla Khadouj who was preparing crumpets in the kitchen

"Yes I'm, but I'm not feeling well. I feel like something dreadful is going to happen. I feel like my stomach is turning upside down and have no feeling for appetite."

"You stay home then, have some crumpets. Take this one; it's still hot. Put some butter on it or if you want some honey. It's in the cupboard. Lalla Meriem gave me some honey last time when I went to her house. It's a good honey. Someone brought it from the south of the country. They said it's good for the body. It is a medicine, Lalla Meriem told me. It may cure your illness. Try it."

"No, I can't swallow anything. I have to go to work. We need money. I'm thinking to save some money for the boy. He is going to university next year. He is our only hope to save us from this misery. I am sorry, I worked hard all my life and as you can see, I couldn't afford you a better life. I feel disappointed in my life. I am going to die with a grudge in my chest toward people who exploited me. I am going to work. Salam Aleikoum."

"Peace be with you," she told him and looked at him with affection. "I'll send your lunch with Salma. It's better if she brings it to you than to take something with you now. At least you eat hot food."

"That's true, but everybody comes and tells me : Si Ahmed, let have lunch together. I understand a fellow wants to eat hot food and I share whatever Salma brings me for lunch because I know the fellow wants hot food."

Si Ahmed went to the factory. He started work and as usual he worked in the machine. Hours have passed and Si Ahmed was not feeling well but scared to tell the overseer that he is felling unwell because he was afraid to loose his job. At midday Salma brought him his lunch but Si Ahmed

couldn't eat anything, just staring at his plate. Salma looked at him in wonder as if waving him goodbye.

"Dad, why don't you eat?"

"Later," he said in a miserable voice. "Go home now. God bless you my daughter. I'm going to eat a little. I feel cramp in my stomach."

Si Ahmed couldn't remember what happened next. When he woke up from days of coma he found himself in a hospital surrounded by crying faces. He tried to sit himself up and was hit by a sharp wave of pain and the unexpectedness of it terrified him. He fell back and waited for the wave to pass but the agony intensified and felt his eyes filled with tears. He shut them to calm his confusion, breathed in and out but felt his body falling dizzily away. He opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling trying to remember what happened to him but the minutes went by and nothing came into his head leaving him without a single memory. His leg throbbed and pulsed so extremely and another searing wave of pain attacked him. He screamed in agony and lied rigidly still. He wiped his forehead with the back of his right hand and looked at Lalla Khadouj.

"How bad is it?" he asked with great difficulty.

"Very bad," said Lalla Khadouj.

"What happened?" he asked.

"You lost your leg," she replied. Her heart raced with the impulse to hug him and hold him in her arms but her body was crucified by the fear of rejecting her.

Si Ahmed couldn't believe what his wife told him because he still had feeling his missing leg. He checked and to his horror didn't find it. He covered his face and cry hard.

"Who's going to look after my family? Who's going to look after my family," he repeated. "What happened exactly? I have the right to know". His hand came up in a lost gesture and dropped in defeat.

"Si Ahmed," said one bony old man. "If we know money can bring you back your leg, we all, young and old, men and women and children will contribute. I myself go out in street of Larache and its cafés and beg for money until I get the necessary amount and buy you a new leg but this is your fate and you can't fight the will of Allah. He never forget his humble subjects. As for the factory owners, if they don't pay in this life surely they will pay on the day of judgement. How many men thought of themselves unbeatable, untouchable but Allah is above everybody. He created the whole universe and us. He is Almighty, and sometimes, he punish these devils in their final days and you see them dying in agony that you wouldn't wish to your worse enemy. That what I want to say."

One moustachioed skinny man who looked bowed and beaten with his lips slightly parted as if trying to say something. Inside of him were all these things he wanted to say. The whole abhorrent story of how Si Ahmed ended up with one leg but dammed at the tip of his tongue by the fear that Si Ahmed wouldn't understand. Every fibre of his being has gone defensive and he felt crying over this. He summoned up courage and said with tears coming from his eyes:

“ I was there Si Ahmed when the accident happened.” He closed his eyes and kept them closed as if reading a history of that doomsday into his eyelids. He opened his eyes and emitted a sharp cough of pain and continued : “ I have to tell you this and I hope you forgive me even if I can't forgive myself. I left that factory since that accident happened to you. I have a wife and four children and I don't know how to feed them but I'm not going back there. I saw you that day carrying that damn heavy bag and I did see your eyes crossed and lost your balance. The next thing, your leg was caught in that damn machine. I tried to catch you before falling but as skinny as I am, I was scared we fall together and the two of us be minced. I told you I have a wife and four kids and nobody to look after them if I die. You know how our society is run. My wife and kids will not receive a penny. We are not educated people to understand law, let alone face the company lawyers. You know this breed of people; they have no faith and no law. They can walk over you and crash you like an insect. But believe me Si Ahmed I couldn't sleep since that doomsday. I'm still crying whenever I thought about it and still having nightmare. You were there in that machine and everybody can hear as loud as I did the cracking of your bones. Yes sir, the cracking of bones, of human bones, and anybody said he didn't hear it, he is a damn liar. It's a terrible thing to hear. It is a terrible thing to see: a man not dead but alive in a machine and the machine mincing him like a demon. You see a man dying in front of you and you can do nothing. Your body was distorted and you lost consciousness and we thought Si Ahmed is dead. We were screaming and crying and unable to do anything. I was crying and pulling my hair. Couple of women lost consciousness, others run screaming crazy out of the factory and nobody has seen them since and don't know what happened to them. One of the boys run to the electricity main and cut the power off. When the ambulance came and put you onto a stretcher you were all messed up with blood. Your face was bloodless yellow and the crying ring of people gave way and they took you to hospital. Yes sir, if you are taking the company to court I can say what I told you now before the judges. Yes sir, and if they want to put me in jail for saying the truth I'll go. Yes sir, I go to jail for saying the truth. I am still having nightmare. The overseer asked us to clean the machine but we all refused to

work and frightened him. I want to put my fist in his mouth. We all left the factory and he asked us if we are coming back the following day. We looked at him and one of us said to him to put the damn bar first but I decided I would never go back there. Some people said the place is haunted. The night watchman said he heard voices in some places in the factory. We asked the overseer to phone the Spaniards and he did. We stayed there angry and waited for them but they never showed. Now they put a safety bar but it cost a man his leg.”

He scratched his bony chest and crossed his hands and for a long moment no one spoke. A young male nurse who heard Si Ahmed screamed came and gave him an injection.

“ How bad is it doctor?” asked Si Ahmed.

“ You are recovering well. First when we brought you here, you were loosing lot of blood and we thought we might loose you but everything is in the hands of Allah. This injection is going to relieve your pain. If you need anything give me a shout.”

“ Allah blesse this generation.”

The nurse left and talk burst like a sun through rain and cloud. They started talking about miracle and reminded each other about cases of people who had gotten better when they knew it was hopeless. They tried to force hope and gaiety into this sad place but then they had nothing else to say and silence won over them. They sat with their mournful faces and hopelessness in their eyes waiting for something to happen but the angel Gabriel with his golden wings didn't show up and it was sucked dry. And their heads were down probably thinking about the factory owners who were Europeans. They look civilised but don't treat others with their civility. They brought industry and trade; they brought their charm to this land but greed and poverty and hardship infested this place. Si Ahmed was still sobbing in silence and the men around him ill fed and clad in their ragged clothes still staring hard on the floor, still thinking about the lost generations, their lives and their kids' future, about their hope and better future, about something to happen but found none only bitterness and hurt feeling. Their parents fought the war for independence and they have to fight the losing battle against poverty, against exploitation, against the worsening condition of their lives. Lalla Khadouj took a deep breath, kept the air in her lungs for a moment and hissed as is suffering from intolerable injustice.

“ We have to go,” she said. “ It's getting dark.”

She kissed Si Ahmed forehead, looked at him and rubbed her hand across his hair but he felt too uncomfortable and ill at ease. He started to cry, overwhelmed by fear; a fear he couldn't help and he trembled. He felt robbed of his leg and inside of him was that crazy sense tearing his guts. The

knowledge he was a fool, that he had always been a fool. He was furious and angry with himself at why he had been working in that machine knowing that one-day he would get hurt.

“ I’m sorry,” he said. “I betrayed my kids and my wife.”

“ Don’t worry,” said everybody. “ This is coming from Allah and we can’t do anything against his will.”

They walked away in agony leaving him alone. Si Ahmed couldn’t stop crying because he knew he would live an empty life devoid of meaning. He would suffer such a depressing emotion and a long agony and go through such aimless actions without honour. He felt a sense of loneliness enveloped him and ate him like greedy rodents rooting the rottenness of his life. He sung in plaintive moan :

*My eyes and the eyes of all men  
See the treasures of this land  
We were the finest people I was told  
My ancestors wore silk caftan and all  
But we lost our paved road  
When evil disdains our way  
Now I am the poorest of the poor  
And nobody wants me at his door  
But Allah has directed my way  
So Man’s laws and mine don’t get along.*

A nurse came back and listened to him.

“ You sing pretty well. Where did you hear this song? I have never heard this song before.”

“ I was camping in Sidi Waddar with my family and heard a humble man with his banjo singing this song and crying. I stayed there for a week. In the evening, this man comes and sits in the courtyard. He plays the banjo and sings this song while crying. In most cases everybody cried with him. We wanted to know why he sings and cries but he never answered to any of our questions. He was very unusual person. He leaves the marabou at dawn with a straw hat and disappeared in the forest and nobody knows where he goes. When he comes back at dusk, he goes to the well, washes himself, brings his banjo and sings and cries then goes to sleep. Nobody understands why. I memorized bit of his song. Maybe I feel and understand much better now his pain and suffering.”

“ That true,” said the nurse. “ You are still in pain?”

“ My life is a pain.”

“ I’m talking about your missing leg.”

“ I feel a terrible pain.”

“ I have to give you an injection to help you to sleep easily.”

“ Allah blesse you my son...”

## Chapter 12

There is a big lycée in Larache called lycée Moulay Mohamed Ben Abdellah. It is on Mohamed V Avenue opposite Jnan Bidawa. Jnan Bidawa was a shantytown and considered an insult to the progress of the nation. It was wise from the authority to build a big wall on the façade and hid this structure of shame from public view. It was cheaper to do so than face the problem and build a proper housing state and housed these cattle of human being who deserved anything less than this gutter where they were living

The lycée was a big building of three storeys of classrooms. Two on the same line and the third opposite divided by a courtyard. They looked dreary and drab like a haunted castle as if they received a severe geological punishment or years of neglect which was the case. The windows were broken, the knobs of the doors were missing leaving the classrooms freezing cold in winter. Behind the two storey buildings, there was a boarding school and a restaurant and further there was a laboratory badly equipped with instruments broken or missing. On the façade of the lycée a beautiful sign read “lycée Moulay Mohamed Ben Abdellah”. It should evoke a sort of life that students love. It means knowledge, dream, future, money, happiness and why not “joie de vivre”. In fact it was like a wretched land where nothing seemed to grow or bloom as if a murderous captain had reigned there.

The headmaster was a tall heavysset man, well over six feet but not a fat one. He was almost bald and light complected. His face was clean-shaven with big lips but bore heavy eyebrows thick as wedges and with stiff figure as if immune from natural beauty which gave him the impression that he was much older than his fifty-five years. He liked to wear dark suit and white shirt and stood like a statue in the gate. There was no love lost between him and the students. Most of them disliked him for his coldness and unfriendliness. He frequently lost his temper and treated the students badly, reducing them to the condition of beasts with the brutality and the barbaric despotism of an army officer. He really didn't give a damn what the students thought of him. Any student came ten minutes late will receive his lecture and humiliation. To avoid this insult, the latecomers peered

through the gate and once they saw him still there, they preferred to go back to avoid him and missed the lesson but others preferred to climb the back walls of the yard and sneaked to the classroom. They were called in the school “the alpinists” because they have never bothered to go in by the main entrance.

Lycée Moulay Mohamed Ben Abdellah had never given any great man or if there was one, it was by mistake. It was no thanks to this headmaster and his harsh discipline but to a few good hard working honest teachers who sacrificed their time and efforts for the benefit of their students. Unfortunately most of the students ended up in streets with not even a Baccalaureate. Jobless and no roof over their heads and with no moral support, some of them or good proportion of them ended up in mental hospital or wandering aimlessly on the seaside. Nevertheless, the headmaster was very proud of his record, which was 10 to 15% passes in the baccalaureate exam. “ Only the best pass the exam and go to universities,” he was always saying but he never mentioned what percentage has passed with phone calls and other abject means, leaving some of the best students from poor background cheated and their right stolen and with a big hole in their hearts.

The name of the lycée was in fact a commemoration of the great king Moulay Mohamed Ben Abdellah who ruled Morocco from 1757 to 1790. He was described as a humble man who sought justice for individual as well as a group. When he came to power the education was in very poor state and he understood the danger and its negative consequences on the whole of the country. He intervened personally and brought many changes to the educational sector. He even gave the library of his grand father Moulay Ismael to universities, encouraged teachers financially and morally and built schools. But sometimes he ruled the country with an iron fist if it was needed or was made upset.

The lycée Moulay Mohamed Ben Abdellah didn't reflect the true character of this great man; in fact it did soil his name and undermined his reputation. If he was alive or came back from the dead, surely, he would crash this lycee like he did to Zawiat Sharkiyin in 1788 to the ground and gave this headmaster a good slap or even smashed his head for wasting energy and talent. He would rebuild the lycee again, find a courageous headmaster and renew it, like he did to Zawiyat Sharkiyin.

Jamal and Rachid had no choice but to be in this lycée. It was the only lycée in town. They were preparing for their baccalaureate hoping they could pass the exam this year and their dream was to join the university where they want to study medicine and science and save their parents from

poverty and exploitation. They considered themselves veterans as they failed the year before. Both boys felt unjustly done. They wanted to see their exam paper but it wasn't allowed. This year they wanted to achieve the highest mark and be the best not only in the classroom but in the whole of seven classes of baccalaureate so the headmaster wouldn't have any choice only to back them to go to university. But they faced a mountain to climb as classrooms were overcrowded and lab lacked equipment. Jamal knew this and hated the lycée and the programmes. He felt leaning more toward literature. He loved poetry and philosophy and talked or rather whispered with his friends about their daily life and the struggle of their parents and the corruption of politics whenever they sat in cafés. But whenever they saw a policeman or a detective or unknown person sitting next table they changed the subject fearing for what would happen to them. In science he loved biology despite the lack of equipment. He loved biology because he admired the teacher. The teacher was Si Akram, an exceptional man, respected and loved by everybody. He gave special attention to every student whether he was in his classroom or not. Every Saturday from 3 O'clock on, he volunteered to come to the lycée and helped the students with biology. He gave special courses not only to his students but also to students coming from different classrooms. He welcomed everybody and in most cases he was forced to go to the hall of the lycée to home all the students. He wanted everybody to benefit from his lectures. He never asked his students for money and he knew the administration wouldn't give him a centime for this extra hard work but still comes every Saturday. Why did he do it, nobody knew and it was a mystery that someone leaves his family at the weekend and gives priority to his students. He never asked for the lab to be open on Saturday. Probably he knew the headmaster would object to it or probably he felt that the laboratory was not needed as the equipments were missing or broken. He never asked the headmaster to bring new equipment. Probably he asked before and concluded that he was talking to a wall. He was contented to teach on a blackboard, explained every experiment and drew everything with coloured chalk and sometimes when he could afford money he brought copies and distributed them for free. He always sat in Khozama café and any student needed his help he could go there and have free lesson and free cup of coffee and probably a piece of cake with it. His generosity was without boundaries. The headmaster never liked him and some freak teachers accused him of being a communist, someone who didn't believe in Allah and the teaching of the Koran and the prophet. They accused him of being the admirer of Stalin but he never spoke about Joseph. He never answered back or was bothered by their accusation. Si Akram was in his late thirties, married and had four children and surely not looking for

trouble. He was a tall lean man with pale face and rotten teeth. He smoked heavily cheap cigarette. He couldn't afford to buy Marlboro or probably he disliked America's products but he knew cigarette was harming his health. He explained its danger to his students. One day while he was in Khozama café discussing biology with Jamal and smoking. Jamal couldn't stand the smoke and said:

"If you know the cigarette causes cancer, why are you smoking heavily?"

"Do what I say and don't do what I do," he replied. "I'm very depressed man. I'm not happy when I think a lot," he continued with a look of nervous agitation such as Jamal had never seen on his face. "Yes! Yes! Don't look at me with such a surprise," and every muscle of his thin face was now quivering with nervous excitement.

"How can he talk like that?" thought Jamal. He considered his teacher a model of perfection. His calm manner of dealing with everybody, his extensive reading and knowledge and his extraordinary memory gave him the very qualities that every teacher lacked.

"You are a teacher!" said Jamal. "You have a good job by any standard and good money too. I'm the one who should be depressed. My dad just lost his leg in the factory."

"I'm sorry for your dad," said Si Akram leaning forward and touching Jamal's hand. "Everybody in this town is talking about it. It's really sad when someone has an accident and nobody cares, but this is the fruit of so called capitalism. Capitalism these days transforms itself into a monster. It oppresses the workers. Our workers bear the burden of labour. No matter how hard they work they will not escape their degrading condition because the profit of their labour by which they could buy themselves decent houses, new clothes, go on holidays and educate their children, is taken by the bosses; in other word capitalists. And our society shaped itself that the more the workers work, the richer the capitalists become, while people like your dad remain living like beast for ever. Capitalism, my son has become like a strong brainless horse harness to a heavy cart and running downhill. He thinks he is pulling the cart but in fact he pushes himself at headlong speed and not giving himself time to consider what his movement might lead to until he will find himself in the abyss. Our society needs lot of changes. Going back to our subject I can tell you that teachers in this country are not paid properly. I've been in this job for fifteen years and couldn't afford my own house. I have parents to look after and my wife's parents are old and poor and I love them dearly. I'm looking after three families and my wage is not helping at all". A fly landed on the rim of his cup of coffee and he had to chase it with his hand. He took his cup and had a sip and continued: "I'm still living in a rented accommodation. Can you imagine a teacher

can't afford a roof over his head? Look at my shoes, they are not good quality and I had them for more than a year. What we are getting is an insult to this profession."

"That true Si Akram "said Jamal" .You are wearing old shoes but why some teachers are dressed well? Are they getting paid more than others?"

"Not very much "he said and relaxed in his chair" .I know how they get their money from. You know I teach every Saturday and never asked my students for money. This doesn't mean I want to be special or different or noticed, no I'm very humble person and coming from a humble background. I'm doing this for the love of learning, for the love of this country, for the love of the new generation that will represent this nation, for the love of human kind. I want this country to go forward and be in the position where he deserves to be. When I read history books and find Morocco was "L'empire Chérifien "I say to myself this is the place where Morocco should be now. We have suffered a lot from fighting each other, tearing each other apart, then from colonialism and its abuses and I think this land and its people deserve better, should go forward and you can't go forward if you are not equipped".

"What do you mean by equipped, Si Akram?"

"Well, knowledge is power and you can't get knowledge if you ignore the education sector. It needs lot of investment, diversity of subject like science and technology that we badly need. But also pay teachers decent wage. Now I should answer your question to why some teachers are better off than others. Well, because these teachers teach privately in their homes. They forced their students to take extra hours. Let say I force my students to come to my house for extra hours and I get paid for it and maths teacher do the same and all the others, how much the parents should pay for the education of their children. It's going private and I know that 90% of the parents can't pay or if they can they are being bled dry and denying themselves everything. They have to slave away for their children being taught in state school. To show these students are really benefiting from these extra hours, these teachers give lessons incomplete in classrooms leaving the rest of the students unaware of the missing parts of the lessons. In the exam most students couldn't find answers to the questions, only the one who take extra lessons with the teachers could. So here, the honesty of these teachers becomes questionable and their role as educators becomes suspicious".

"That is true, " said Jamal" .Last time we had math exam, the best marks were for those couple of students who are still taking private lessons with math teacher. The rest of us were average, some of us worse and reduced to tears. I talked to one of the students who is taking private lessons and he

said they worked on the same exercise with the teacher. We, the rest, didn't know anything about it because the teacher never mentioned it in the classroom".

"Exactly, and I'm against this, because they want to show you, you are just bunch of idiots and you need to go private. They want to make you feel guilty for not taking private lessons and I disagree. If my students need help, it is my duty to help and explain to them until they understand. I shouldn't get paid from their parents because I'm already paid by the state. Well, I'm not happy about the wage and I have to fight the state to increase my wage and not looking for the soft target who are my students. I can't bear taking a centime from their parents. Why? " Si Akram relaxed in his chair again, took his cup of coffee and sipped a gulp and lighted another cigarette. He continued : " I tell you why! Because this nation is on its knees. Most of us are poor or reduced to poverty ". Si Akram took his cup of coffee again between his hands and felt it. It was cold. He called the waiter and asked him to warm his coffee and continued : " how about that poor man who goes to factory and works like an animal with no social justice and his only hope is his son or daughter or both in school? He wants them to be educated so they can escape poverty. How about this man? And million like him. Does he have the right to see his children educated? Does he have the right to be happy in his last days of his life and see his children in better position in society? Why shouldn't he? Why are we so cruel to each other? I couldn't understand and life is very simple. After a long reflection I made some comparison between our actual situation and of Europe in its dark ages and I did find some similarities. I concluded that we are living in society where hierarchy is essential, and it wouldn't be natural that the son of the poor should be placed ahead of the wealthy. We are killing talent, wasting energy and slowing the progress of the nation ".

The waiter brought the hot coffee with some extra milk and Si Akram thanked him for it. He stretched himself in his chair but looked uncomfortable. His heart tightened and strong emotions were penetrating his soul and scrambled his ideas painfully. He had strong and warm emotions for all the poor wretches. His father was one of them and he lived among them. He admired and respected them and worked with them in summer holidays and found them very generous and honest. They shared with him their lunch and bread and tea. They were the little people but big in heart, the humble folk, and the nameless but haven't killed and haven't stolen for food instead they worked hard together to achieve tomorrow's hope and helping one another. He felt proud to belong to them, to share their bread and drink their tea. These people who took nothing for free, never asked for something and if they do their faces shoot red with shame.

They rolled their sleeves and soiled their hands and bend their backs and push and pull and pick up heavy loads to get their meagre wage with enough sweat and hard work. He despised the rich for their wicked and barbarous opulence, for their laziness, for their horrible and sad life without happiness and without love. He despised the headmaster for coming to him one day and asked him to give good marks to the son of a noble man and he did because Si Akram didn't want any trouble with this devil. He looked at the headmaster and the noble man and their entourage. They look more desperate people than beggars lost in the gloom and felt proud not to be one of them but among the poor, the dispossessed, the humble and the forgotten. He felt proud to talk about their life, their history and struggle and reap their inheritance. He found great nobility in doing so.

He lit another cigarette and inhaled raggedly and blew it out. The smoke was coming out of his mouth and nose. He smoked and watched the cars creeping slowly up and down Mohamed V Avenue. He saw bitterly that everything was beautiful but everything had changed for worse throughout the years. His eyes lost their sharpness and turn weak and watery and hopeless. He leaned forward as if trying to say something but lost for words. He relaxed in his position, shook his head, and muttered something with sighs. Rachid came and greeted them.

"How is everything," asked him Jamal.

"All the praises are to Allah. Dad told me two fishermen are missing. Nobody thinks they will survive. Probably they are dead by now. The sea was rough last night. I can't understand why some fishermen go to sea without checking the weather".

"How is your dad?" asked Si Akram.

"He didn't go to sea yesterday. May be he won't go fishing for the rest of the week. He got only a small boat. He has to wait until the sea is calm".

"I have to go," said Si Akram and stood up. "I'll pay your coffee," he said to Jamal and left.

Jamal and Rachid walked down Mohamed V Avenue. When they reached Lalla Menana. Two tolbas with ashen-faces clothed in miserable djellabas, were reading the Koran on the main door of the cemetery. They looked brutalised by poverty and sickness. Jamal and Rachid entered. It was a hard, bright spring day. Green leaves burst forth on the trees and the earth were clothed in tender colours. The sun was low sending Jamal and Rachid long shadow sprawling on the graves. The graves stretched away in long rows facing Mecca evoking previous life of the vanished race. Here and there skeletal cows, sheep and goats left only with carcasses wandered grimly between the graves grazing on the grass as if death breathed in the dense air

and breathed out its cosmic dust and marshy emanation of eternal decay on this city .

Jamal and Rachid so often came here. They liked the peacefulness and the quietness of this place. They came with their books. They sat on the foot of a tree or leant against it or a trunk and memorized history and geography; sometimes they talked about the Muslim intellectual movement with the Sheikh of the marabou.

The sun sunk low but still burning. They left the cemetery and took the gate opened to conservatoire and the old city. Opposite the conservatoire there was small museum. Most of the artefacts were from the ruins of Lixus city. Jamal and Rachid sat on the balcony overlooking the port and farther the ruin of the lixus city. The tide was low because they could see the rowing boats stranded on the mud. They stayed there not talking to each other but dreaming, then a sweet sound of music came from the conservatoire and Jamal's dream was intensified and felt his heart swell with some unnameable emotion. He wanted to learn music. He wanted to learn guitar and write his own music and his own word. He sometimes tried to write poems and through which he reached out towards the mysterious life of the Abstract. He wanted to express his own deep feeling in his music. It was a deep and important source of pleasure to him. Whenever he woke up, still half-asleep he pushed the play button and listened to El Ghiwan and the words touched him physically, conquered him spiritually and awakened his soul and often didn't feel any laziness or weakness. He felt free from the odious routine of his daily duties, from the barbarously dishonest headmaster of his school and the depressing look of the classroom and some teachers. He sang and his voice rose in exaltation and sacred grandeur and felt lifted on that great tide of harmony, away from human brutishness and wickedness to where human being are equal, where the weakest were treated humanly and gently until Lalla Khadouj shouted at him and ordered him to stop the music but he opened the door of his room and hugged his mother and sang loudly with El Ghiwan:

*This is a new era*

*This is a new era*

*There is no slave and there is no master*

He hated the headmaster of his school and his mad hurly-burly of duty and honesty because he knew the headmaster wasn't an honest man and he shouted : " long live the anarchists and El Ghiwan " and Lalla Khadouj called him the crazy son and laughed.

One day he begged his father to allow him to take music lesson and asked him for 40 Dirhams. Si Ahmed was disturbed by such a request because he considered music for women only. He wanted him to learn solid subject and

consider music for the hopeless and the trump. He saw the musician in the small souk and how dirty and scruffy and rugged they were and most of the time chased by Moukhaznis. But Jamal insisted and promised his dad that music would be secondary to his studies. Si Ahmed gave him the 40 Dirhams and went to the conservatoire.

“ You said you want to learn music, ” asked him Rachid and woke him up from his dream.

“ Yes, ” said Jamal after a long silence. “ Yes I still want to learn”.

“ Why don't you come to the conservatoire?”

“ I want to. My dad gave me 40 Dirhams for subscription. I came here and they asked me what I want to learn. I said a guitar. I was told there weren't enough instruments to go around. I told them I could buy mine. In this case I was told it is fine, you can join. I was overjoyed, and then I was asked about my age. I said nineteen. I was told sorry we take students under 17. I'm an old monkey who can't learn how to dance”.

“ We have so much energy and we can offer a lot to this land but what stopping this land or rather taking it backward are the injustice, the greed and corruption. The history of this land will judge them severely”.

“ I won't forgive them for their foolish mistake. It's my life. I want to do what good for me, for my family, for my neighbours, my village my town, my country and for the human race. Unfortunately the road is blocked. If a person wants to learn music, languages, art and so on why should somebody else interfere? ”

“ We are treated like cattle and sadly we become like a ticking bomb. With pressure sooner or later this bomb will explode ... ”.

## Chapter 13

The room was quiet. Jamal sat on his desk writing his biology essay and occasionally stopped and listened. The sound of the children playing on the distant and the slap of the feet on the pavement only made his room quieter. The alarm o'clock next to him was tick-tack-ticking and indicating 1 o'clock. He went to the kitchen and the kettle was simmering huskily. Lalla Khadouj was stirring vegetables.

“ Is it ready mother? I have to go to school ”.

“ Not yet, ” said Lalla Khadouj“ . Go and see Lalla Meriem, asked her for some bread. I'm too tired today and couldn't make ours, neither your sister because she was washing clothes. Tell her not to make bread tomorrow; I'll give her bread tomorrow, nice and hot”.

Jamal went to Si Hamman's house, which wasn't far away. He kissed Lalla Meriem's head.

“ Allah blesse you my son. How is your dad?”

“ He is the same, still crawling. Mother asks for some bread. She was tired today and couldn't make any. I want to have my lunch and go to lycée. It's nearly time.”

“ I'm coming to have lunch with you. I prepare some chicken and some Harira. I haven't seen your dad for couple of days. Here the bread, I'm following you. I have to leave some for Si Hamman.”

Lalla Khadouj dished up the vegetables while Salma filled glasses with water. Lalla Meriem entered accompanied with Lalla Zahra and Si Sellam. She put the steaming plate on the table and Jamal mouth watered when he saw a mound of meat squares. He didn't eat meat for months.

“ How are you Si Ahmed,” said Lalla Meriem.

“ What can I say Lalla Meriem. I lost my leg and the company is refusing to compensate me. I have to take the matter to court. How are you, old men? he said to Si Sellam.

“ I am still alive,” said the old man. “ Thanks to Allah, not to these dogs. They refused to see me in hospital but life and death are in the hands of Allah. He decides, not the doctors.” He stretched his bony hand and shook Si Ahmed's hand. “How are you?”

“ As usual, Si Sellam. I fought for my life and I have to fight the company in court now. I still have another battle and I am trying to win it.”

“ This is our life. We the poor, don't die in peace. They don't leave us to savour the last minute of our life,” said the old man.

“ I don't trust those people with suits and clean shaved faces,” said Lalla Meriem. “ They are not honest people like us. Well, but Allah is above everybody. We are just camping in this life. If they don't pay their due here they will regret it in the other life.”

“ That's what I'm saying Lalla Meriem but I never knew that the rich man is stealing from the poor,” said Si Ahmed.

“ Come around the table,” said Lalla Khadouj and she cut the bread.

“ How is Si Hamman?” said Si Ahmed.

“ He is turning into a crabby old man. When people get older, they complain a lot, but Si Hamman has never complained as if he is living in another world or made from another substance. I asked him if he wants to come but he said he wants to keep the shop open. I left some chicken with potatoes and carrots for him. He said he will close early this evening and come to see Si Ahmed. Come next to me, Salma; come, my daughter. You are growing into a beautiful woman. Take this piece of bread. It's still hot. Eat, my daughter.”

Salma blew on a hot potato and mashed it and when she exhaled, a steam came out of her mouth.

“ We are eating today what we usually eat in two or three days,” said Lalla Khadouj. “ If I knew you have chicken I would have asked you to keep it for tomorrow and invite you to have lunch with us today. Tomorrow you cook the chicken and we will have lunch with you.”

“ I didn't know,” said Lalla Meriem. “ I wanted to cook something nice and bring it to Si Ahmed. Keep some for tomorrow if you want. Allah hate wasteful people and our religion insist on moderation. Bring a plate my daughter,” she said to Salma. “ We can keep some for tomorrow.”

“ Don't worry,” said Lalla Khadouj. “ We keep what is left on plate for tomorrow.”

“ Keep some for tomorrow!” said the old man laughing with open mouth and showing his left teeth. “ I don't think this is enough for me. I am awfully hungry for meat.”

At this moment Si El Hachemi, his wife Lalla Fatima and their son Rachid entered. Lalla Fatima was holding a hot steaming plate on her hands.

“ You don't wait for anybody?” said Si El Hachemi with a husky voice.

“ Seems you lost your way home people!” said Si Ahmed.

“ Yes,” said Si El Hachemi, “ but we come to the right place.”

“ We don’t know you are coming,” said Si Ahmed in jolly manner. “This is my happiest day after that doomsday. Sit down man. We have food here for the whole neighbourhood. We have a feast today. You bring couscous, Lalla Meriem brought chicken, and we manage to buy some vegetables. All the nice things come on one day. Sit down people.”

“ At our age, a man gets stiff all over,” grumped Si El Hachemi and sat down.

“ I just talk about Si Hamman,” said Lalla Meriem. “ He is getting all crabby and stiff but I’ve never heard him complaining and he is in your dad’s age.”

“ What this old man is doing here?” said Si El Hachemi.

“ I lost my way too and ended up here like you did. But I didn’t bring any plate in my hands. If I have schooner, surely I’ll bring some fish and not couscous. I am an ornery hungry for something nice to eat.”

“ Are you worried to die before you eat anything nice?”

“ Yes I am and I want to go to my grave with my belly full of good things,” he said laughingly “ so worms could have a good feast of my cadaver.”

“ Don’t worry old man. I’ll bring you some nice fresh fish tomorrow. Where is Si Hamman? Everybody is here except him. Does he still want to make millions in staying in that shop, Lalla Meriem?”

“ I don’t know. He said he is going to close early today.”

“ You see that man!” said Si Ahmed. “ He should be here with us. If I still have my leg we would go to his house with all this nice food and one of the boys looks after the shop while Si Hamman has his lunch in peace with us. We are here eating his chicken and the man is by himself on that shop. I never forget what that man is doing for all of us here in this neighbourhood. You can take whatever you need from his store whether you have money or not. He is a friendly fellow and always has something funny to tell. I never heard a single word against him. I can’t understand why the rich are heartless.”

“ They are another breed of human being; heartless and dry,” said Si El Hachemi. “ When you see them smart with nice suits you think they are the kindest people on the face of the earth but they are not. Last time, I was passing through the school and said to myself let go inside and ask the teacher about my son’s progress. I went in and the receptionist asked me “where are you going”. I told him “ I want to talk to a teacher about my son’s progress”. He said : “ the teachers are in classrooms teaching. You can’t interrupt the lesson”. I said to him “ in this case I want to talk to the headmaster”. He asked for my son’s name and he went in, after not even a minute he came back and told me that the headmaster is busy and can’t see

anybody today. I can see lies in his eyes. On my way out I saw someone stopped his Renault 21 and the receptionist asked him kindly what he wants. The gentleman said he wants to see the headmaster. He said to him: welcome sir, he is in his office. Eh, if I have a car and suit like them rich people, I would be addressed “yes sir” and “welcome” and wouldn’t be treated disgracefully. You can see Si Ahmed; they don’t give a damn about our children. Well, how can this land go forward if only their sons and daughters go to universities, study there and hold the most important jobs? How about us poor folk? Anyhow I don’t want my son to be bad like them devils, hiding himself in a suits and shiny shoes. I want him to be honest like his dad and granddad before him. If he doesn’t make it in school there, the boat is in the port and here is Salma. He can marry her. We don’t find better people and honest like you.”

Salma and Rachid looked at each other and their faces became red and the look said they were already in love. Salma’s eyes grew misty and saw nothing clear. Her pulse beat a hundred and twenty to the minute, her blood throbbed at her heart but tried with all her might to conceal her excitement. But Rachid felt his whole body shivered, his mouth got dry and couldn’t swallow and choked like a mad dog. He left the table, went to the kitchen, drunk water and washed his face and came back.

“ Why not?” said Lalla Meriem. “ They are like my children and Si Hamman and I will contribute toward their wedding. They will make a good couple like their parents and unite the two families.”

“ If they like each other I have no objection,” said Si Ahmed. “ In fact I will be the happiest man in the world because I’m going to eat fish everyday,” he said jokingly. “ Eat, Si El Hachemi, you are talking too much and forgetting the food. We have finished this plate and you haven’t eaten anything.”

“ Don’t worry, Si Ahmed, the food is plentiful today. When I talk too much about our problems I just lose my appetite and sleep. I turn in my head all our miseries and I say to myself look at that man. He is honest, works hard, and gives the factory more than he takes and now he lost his leg in that factory and the same factory doesn’t want to take responsibility. The bosses want to replace him for free. I think about it all night and I say to myself what the hell democracy is this. It’s plain lies and because there is no justice in this land of Allah, so let put some spirit in me and go and burn that damn factory to the ground and see how they feel about it. They want it this way. What the hell they expect from a man who is used and abused to do! Put the chicken plate on the table, Lalla Khadouj. You have finished this plate and I still haven’t put anything in my stomach.”

“ I told you, you are busy talking,” said Si Ahmed.

“ Yes I’m, and I’m in rage like a mad dog. I still have some fish at home. If I don’t fill up my belly here I’ll do it home. I’ll bring you some fish later,” said Si El Hachemi. “Two weeks ago the sky was very strange and murky and a certain storm was coming for sure. I knew it. I took my boat off the water and nobody went fishing that night except three poor lost souls. Why they did go to the sea, nobody knows and don’t ask me. The following day the boat came back with two bodies and one badly bruised soul. The two lost souls had no families to come after them and they buried them in Sidi Larbi cemetery. The victims were lucky because they got into the ground. If they were still in water, their bodies would have been lost and eaten by fish.”

“ Did you finish knitting the jumper for your dad? asked Lalla Meriem Salma.

“ No I don’t have money to buy wool,” she said shyly.

“ Why don’t you say so? Come and see me this evening. We go downtown together. You see Si El Hachemi; she can make jumpers and all those clothes. Last time she knitted a good hat for Si Hamman. When he doesn’t wear his turban he put on his hat. He always talks about that hat and how good it is. He told me when he is wearing the hat he scratches his head because it becomes hot. If she marries your son you will never buy jumpers and hats.”

“ That’s what I really want. I need jumpers made of wool because it is cold on the sea. I’ll contribute myself for this jumper,” said Si El Hachemi. “ How much cost the wool?”

“ I don’t know,” said Salma timidly.

“ Don’t worry,” said Lalla Meriem. “ We are going downtown this evening and we are going to buy wool and I tell you how much. I like this girl and like her to make a good jumper for her dad.”

“ What have you done with the company, did they promise anything?” asked Si El Hachemi.

At this moment Si Hamman entered fuming and puffing.

“ I wonder why this new generation has no respect for crabby old men,” he said waving his bony finger. “ We look so ugly and we talk too much. We old timers consider age as wisdom but this new breed looks at this as a burden. What this old man is doing here?” pointing his bony finger at Si Sellam.

“ What do you think, Si Hamman, you are still young? Death itself is scared to come near this crabby old man. I am stiff and crabbier than you,” said Si Sellam laughing with his mouth open and showing the rest of his teeth.

“ Did you close the shop,” asked his wife Lalla Meriem.

“ Yes I did. I don’t know what I’m doing in that damn store. People in my age should retire and stay in the house of Allah. I don’t have kids to look after. I was in the store and saw this crabby and ugly creature” pointing his bony finger at Si Sellam “ with Lalla Zahra entering here, then Si El Hachemi and the family. I said to myself what am I doing here? I asked two boys to help me close the shop but they refused. Make some space I’m so hungry.” He sat down disgusted with himself.

Jamal and Rachid stood up giving space to Si Hamman.

“ No, no, sit down young people,” said the Si Hamman.

“ We are going to lycée,” said Jamal.

“ I have never seen any country that doesn’t care about its young,” said Si Hamman. “ When I see thousand souls going down Mohamed V Avenue from school. I say to myself, what an opportunity this is; let educate them and equip them and see where the country will go. This country will become an empire like the old time. But we are wasting a generation and irreplaceable opportunity. What did you bring for lunch,” he said to Si El Hachemi.

“ Your favourite dish.”

“ Tell me couscous. What are you talking about?” said Si Hamman shifting the subject.

“ I have to take the company to court.”

“ I can’t understand why people don’t understand,” said the old man. “ That huge black storm that descended and covered the city last time. It was January, I still remember and it was dark as if Almighty Allah had given up on us forever, then came summer and the fire swept the whole of Hawata and was going to engulf the next neighbourhood and went on all night like rain of fire pouring from hell. They called fire fighters from next towns like Azila and Ksar because our fire fighters were overwhelmed by the ferocity and speed of the fire. Then came that doomsday when you lost your leg and the following week, people were jobless and hungry and their kids crying because they don’t have bread on the table. They were still afraid to go back to that devil factory. All these calamities.” The old man stopped to get his breath; “ all these calamities are sign of Allah’s wrath, the last warning from him before he wiped out this stupid race of human being from the face of the earth and still don’t understand their sins and continue abusing their fellow human being. What will make them understand that they are in the wrong path? Take a sword and start persecuting them in his Holy Name? Back in occupation-days, times were hard and we were pretty near starving here but we never went pestering people and lying to them and stealing their possession. No sir, when we can’t find work, we go to the forest and collect eggs and chestnuts and then hunt for birds and rabbits. We

dry chestnuts, crush them and make bread. We survived but never said lies to people like this new breed with suits, and steal them.” He ceased speaking and put a ball of couscous in his mouth he made while speaking and started chewing with joy.

“ Yes sir, that’s right. This new breed with suits and clean shaved faces don’t care at all,” said Si El Hachemi. “ They never think at all, let alone twice. They never waste their time thinking because they know the truth and if they think about it, it will hurt them badly and they won’t have good time anymore, so they don’t want to think at all. We were greedy too in our time but we leave room for other people. With this new breed and their way of thinking this country is going down to hell. They forgot we are made of flesh and blood like them. That’s why god hates them and turns his back on them. He give them this life but will burn them in hell forever and with no forgiveness.”

“ It’s already going down to hell,” said Lalla Meriem. “ You should ask me because I know every story big and small of every soul living in this neighbourhood. I’m helping Si Hamman in the shop and I listened to their suffering and console them if I can. I can tell you the sun’s still rising from east and going down west because of us religious people. We are poor and are helping the poor and giving charity in the name of the lord but them people with suits don’t go to the house of Allah and do devil work by lying to poor folk like us and stealing their sweat. How comes Allah forgive them? They are hated here by the very people and hated by Allah and will be in hell forever and hell is their right place.”

“ That’s right,” said her husband. “ She is with me in the store and she knows everything. Put that couscous on the table,” he said to Salma. “ I’m so hungry and don’t know why I was sitting in that shop while all the nice food is here. Lalla Khadouj, I can see, you are not eating.”

“ I’m full Si Hamman.”

“ In this case, go and make some tea, the way I like it. You look much better now Si Ahmed than after the accident but you should go out for some fresh air.” He filled up his mouth and started chewing. “ I can’t see any flies in this house, what happened?”

“ We don’t open the windows anymore,” said Lalla Khadouj coming from the kitchen with a tray in her hands. “ You see, Si Hamman, the street becomes the dumping ground. Every single house is paying tax for rubbish collection but nobody comes. The rubbish stays there in the street for couple of days and the stink is nauseous but nobody cares. Not only here in this neighbourhood but in the whole town. It becomes like dustbin and all they can do is talk and talk, and talk. I wonder when our men will stop talking, rolled up their sleeves and start doing some real good work.”

“ I see Lalla Khadouj. They treat us worse than animals. Pour some tea. We the Moroccans can't have lunch or dinner without tea and that's why the price of sugar is going up.”

And the men were talking excitedly, and then the roll of voices spread out in the room and grew louder until the air was full of it...

## Chapter 14

For twenty years, they have been married but never quarrelled, never ignored each other, what could it be now? Poverty! They lived it all their life, in fact it shackled them together but now the roots of separation swelled up visibly, split the earth between them. They have lived over so much together, they have loved and cared for each other but what could possibly tear them apart now? Lalla Khadouj became bitter and brutal in her talking. She would talk to Si Ahmed in a blind rage as if it were some devil exorcising in her, as if some horror and sense of evil seemed to have haunted the house. Afterward, in the midst of her cleaning work, regret would punish her heart and hide in the toilet and cry hard. She felt some undefined pain pouring into her heart, filling her breast and become big and heavy and her breathing become tight. Today, while Si Ahmed was sitting as usual in the sitting room on sheepskin and moaning from his pain, Lalla Khadouj struck him with another blow:

“ You get what you deserve. You know in this country everyone is for himself. You know that. Si El Hachemi told you thousand times not to go to that factory. I told you million times to look for something else but you are stubborn. You don't listen to no one. Look what happened to you now! Look at what happened to all of us! Did the company care for your children? Did the company give you any assistance? I have to work and buy your medicine and I'm tired of this life. I am tired of worrying everyday.”

But today Si Ahmed couldn't shut his mouth. He was sombre and short-tempered with the ache of life and a deep weariness. He felt left out and didn't know how to conquer his place back. Bad feeling he got, and dreaded his isolation. He couldn't understand it and perhaps made him dangerous today and he replied:

“ What do you think woman, am I happy facing you everyday? Facing this insult and humiliation? I see everything and I feel more than anybody. I never thought that time would betray me and leave me like this. I never thought I'm going to leave my children hungry but here I'm, not worth anything; even my wife had enough of me and probably my children too. I know I'm not good enough to stay in this house. I'm going to leave and

leave you all in peace. I'm sorry woman, I'm sorry for wasting your money in medicine. I'm sorry for making you suffer with me for no reason. I know how worthless I have become. Oh god, why don't you relieve my soul? Take me, take me even to hell and leave my wife in peace. I don't want anyone to suffer for my mistake. Oooh god."

He slumped his hands on the floor and tears flooded his face and cried like a punished child. Salma put her needles down. Rolled up mentally her sleeves and prepared for action. She felt shame for her mother and tried to restrain her as far as the filial respect permitted and tenderness for her father because of his kindness and suffering.

"Father," said Salma, "we are proud to have you and you should be proud of yourself."

"Proud!" He cut her. "Proud of what? If I have any pride I shouldn't have put myself in such terrible position. If I have any pride I shouldn't have let them push me to work like an animal. I shouldn't have allowed myself to be exploited to the bones. It was my own entire fault. What right have I got now to ask the company for help? Who and what am I? A man who betrayed his own family and left them without bread on the table. A man with no account, wanted by no one and of no use to anyone. Your mother is right."

"Father, we love you," said Salma. "Look, I'm nearly finishing your jumper for next winter. I bought enough wool. Don't worry about anything. I may start making jumpers and selling them or I look for a job in factories. Mother, leave him in peace. He is already in dark pain."

"He misunderstood the point," said Lalla Khadouj angrily. "I'm not talking about money. I wish I could find work day and night to buy your medicine but there is nothing in this town to occupy even the hands of a devil. Nothing to do but I'm talking about you. You trust everybody. You think the owners of the company love you? Well, you understand now how much love they have for you. How they sympathised with you and your family. How they are helping your son to go to university. You trusted everyone and were telling you: Si Ahmed: do this; Si Ahmed : do that; Si Ahmed: carry this; Si Ahmed: work there. And you, with you head down like an animal, you do whatever you were told whether you like the job or you don't and you never questioned anything. What is your compensation? Tell me? I want to hear it from you. Tell me? I am listening. Thrown here on my face with no help. Who comes to see you? Who cares whether you have money for medicine or not? Someone from the company? No, only poor like you and what hurt me is, these poor folk contribute to buy your medicine but not the company, not the guilty. They washed their hands. The

guilty people don't want to hear your pain, don't want to see your face, you are of no use to them."

"All right woman, I'm going. I'm leaving this house. You can have the house and peace of mind too. I'm going. I'm going and you don't have to worry about this one legged man and his medicine anymore," he said crying like a punished child. He stood up on one leg, took his crutches and tears well coming down from his eyes. "Yes, I'm going. I leave you in peace. I'm a damn fool, I discover who I'm but I'm not going away without putting a pain in people who put pain in my heart. I'm going to see those Spaniards. I'm going to the factory and talk to them. If they don't listen and give me my right, I'm not going to ask for anything except my right. If the damn fool Europeans refuse, I'm going to throw myself in that damn machine and they will be responsible in the day of judgement. I have lost faith in justice of this land. I had enough of life."

"Don't go father, don't go, I love you and want you to stay," said Salma crying. "That's what you want!" she said to her mother. "Do you understand he is suffering every second of his life? Do you think he is happy with one leg?"

"I have to go my daughter, I have to. I'm useless now. I have no place in this house. When a man can't bring his meal he should bury himself alive. Si Ahmed is dead months ago and what is left of him is the garbage of Si Ahmed. Now Si Ahmed should throw his garbage away and leave your mum in peace."

"Look what they did to us. Look what the company did to me," said Lalla Khadouj. "They send me my husband back with one leg and crazy."

"I was crazy and stupid before the machine chopped my leg. If I had a brain and a common sense I wouldn't have worked there. I don't know what I was thinking! I put everything in the hands of Allah; I was wrong Lalla Khadouj. I was wrong. If I refused to work there I would still have my leg and you wouldn't dare talk to me in this manner, but the damn fool has to learn with a stick like a donkey and I am that damn donkey."

"Shut up mum," said Salma. "You are dear to me but if you say one more word I'm going to start a fight with you. If you continue we are going to fight like two mad dogs and the neighbours would know how fragmented we are becoming. I myself had enough of your mangling, and if my dad leaves this house I'm leaving too. Life becomes unbearable with your moans. Everyday you start on him."

Lalla Khadouj sagged down crying and beating her chest with despair. She pulled her hair with lamentations : "what did I do to deserve this everyday. What mistakes did I make to be punished in this cruel manner? I do my prayers five times a day and never missed one. I fast Ramadan. I give

Zakat. I fear Allah and believe in the day of judgement. What mistakes have I done to be treated this way?"

"Shut up mum, stop crying. You started all this. He was sitting in his corner listening to his pain. Father, where are you going?"

"I have to go. Your mother is living in hell with me. I have to go so both of us can enjoy some peace."

"Father, back to your place, you are going nowhere. I'll make you a cup of mint tea."

"It's too late daughter. I have no place here. A handicapped in our society has no place, refused by everybody, insulted to his bones."

"Are you happy mum?" said Salma and tears slipped down her dress and made the front of her blurry and even more unreal.

Si Ahmed left the house leaving the two women crying. The sun was high and the hot noon street was empty except couple of dogs. He went to Si Hamman's store. When he reached it, he stopped.

"Allah," he groaned, disgusted with himself. "No wonder people hate one-legged men. I myself can't live with what I turned into. I shouldn't complain when Lalla Khadouj moans."

"This is good news," said Si Hamman. "You should go out from time to time. Come here, have my sit."

"I'm drowned in shit till my neck, Si Hamman."

"In the name of Allah! Why salama?"

"Lalla Khadouj couldn't stand me anymore in the house. We argue every minute. We just had a fight."

Si Hamman studied Si Ahmed like a specimen, nodding his head over and over and said :

"Don't blame her Si Ahmed. It's natural. What do you expect from a woman who loves her husband and children and her house to react in circumstances like these? Whenever she comes to see Lalla Mariem she couldn't stop crying. She worries a lot about you and above all your medicine. You know she doesn't have a stable job and as you can see, you don't bring a centime home. Whenever she has little money she first thinks about your medicine. What is left for food is very little. You should understand her pain too."

"I left her and Salma crying."

"Don't worry. I'll ask Lalla Meriem to go and console them. Tell me, what have you done with the company?"

"Nothing. I have to take them to court. I enquire about a lawyer but it's really expensive and I don't have a penny."

"How much?"

“ Over 10 thousands Dirhams. I heard there are others lawyers who take the case with percentage after winning the case. I think I’ll go for one of those.”

“ Allah is great. He is always with his faithful subjects. Do what you can.”

A Renault 4 stopped in front of the store. The door swung open and a young man appeared.

“ Look who’s here, it’s Hassan!” said Si Hamman. “ Where is your father? I haven’t seen him for sometimes.”

“ He doesn’t like town anymore. He is in the village. He said he wants to milk cows and works in the farm. Unfortunately he is getting old.”

“ Let him do what pleases him. Do you know Si Ahmed?”

“ Of course I do. Forgive me Si Ahmed I couldn’t make time to come to visit you. I’m sorry for what happen to you. Everybody is still talking about that accident.”

“ So what brought you here?” said Si Ahmed.

“ My father is very upset with Si Hamman.”

“ Why?” said Si Hamman. “ I pay him a visit from time to time. I haven’t paid him a visit for a month or so because I am getting cramps and stiff all over.”

“ My father said whenever you pay him a visit you leave without telling him goodbye.”

“ I’m sorry. I always do that, but visiting him shows how much I like that man.”

“ That’s true. But last time he prepared some butter for Lalla Meriem and cut some fresh vegetables, unfortunately you sneaked away leaving everything behind.”

“ Forgive me for doing that. I can’t change myself. I feel so moved when people give me something and that’s why I always sneak without saying goodbye.”

“ But my father insists to bring you the butter for Lalla Meriem and vegetables. It’s in the boot of the car.”

He brought a big heavy basket of vegetables and a large pot of milk and a kilo or so of butter.

“ Do you want me to sell these vegetables in my store?” said Si Hamman.

“ No,” said Hassan. “ It’s for Lalla Meriem and you.”

“ I’ll give half of it to Si Ahmed. We are too old to eat all these. I don’t like to see vegetables rot in my house.”

“ I want to say it, but felt shy about it. Next time I bring you the same, Si Ahmed. I know you are going through a difficult time but we are here to help each other. If we the Muslims from Morocco to Indonesia look after

each other and care for one another we would live differently; surely not despicably like this,” said Hassan to Si Ahmed.

“ Allah blesse you and give Haj Mehdi a palace in heaven close to his prophets and companions. I know your dad for a long time. He is a good Muslim and a devoted father. He is a very generous man and I’ve known him since he was very poor. Even though he still gave things to the poorest than him what he could. We never heard a single bad word from him.”

“ That’s what makes him different from everybody else. Where are you going now?” asked Si Hamman Hassan.

“ To be honest nowhere. I’m just going to make a tour of the town. I haven’t been in town for a while and I missed it very much.”

“ Why don’t you take Si Ahmed with you? He hasn’t left his home since that darn accident.”

“ Why not?” said Hassan. “ Let make your day. Stand up Si Ahmed. I help you.”

“ No, just leave me where I’m.”

“ You go,” said Si Hamman. “ I tell Lalla Meriem to go to your house and tell your wife. Take him to the seaside,” he said to Hassan.

Si Ahmed with the help of his crutches stood up and walked to the car door. Hassan opened the door and Si Ahmed slowly and carefully as a lizard entered without touching anything. Hassan put the crutches in the car boot and drove on. When they arrived to the Liberation square Si Ahmed saw a horse pulling a cart full of carrots.

“ How is the farm?” he asked.

“ Very good. Very good,” Hassan repeated. “ If you have land in “Ouamra” you have gold. That dam near Ksar El Kebir is the greatest achievement in this area. The government really helped us with everything. Water for irrigation is plentiful and if we want, we can work the land throughout the year. We make really good living. Recently Africa experienced drought but thanks to this dam we are fine. In these depression times I must say farming is the best business. A man can go without accessories but cannot let himself go hungry.”

“ What do you plant?”

“ Green beans and strawberries. We sell them to a company, which sell them to Europe. We can plant sugarcane for the factory but we believe there is more money in what we do than the sugarcane. I must confess that there is problem in sugarcane. Cutting cane is mean hard labour as everybody is still using machetes and most workers refuse to work in cutting sugarcane because of the wage we pay. I don’t blame them. We prefer to plant green beans and strawberry because of the money we make. You can easily find pickers and you don’t have to worry about accident in the farm. It’s not like

working with machetes. Some workers get tired and end up chopping their fingers or feet. We also plant vegetables and wheat for our own consumption.”

They arrived to the port. Hassan cut the engine off and helped Si Ahmed to get off.

“ Let go in the port. Sure you like it. I always come here to see boats and buy fresh fish. It’s cheaper here than in the market.”

Si Ahmed followed him fuming and puffing under the hot sun.

“ Eh, this is what is left of Si Ahmed. This is hell. It’s better if I was finished in that darn machine. Have you ever thought about it? I mean death.”

“ No,” replied Hassan.

“ Why should you? You are too young to think about death. But since that accident it doesn’t go away from my mind. I don’t know why I’m still alive after hearing the crack of my bones? Call it fate, I don’t know. But you are looking at someone who should be dead.”

He stopped and sponged his face, which was set without expression. He felt tired of running, tired of working, tired of himself and tired of an unfulfilled existence. He put his handkerchief in his pocket and looked withdrawn like a prisoner resigned to a harsh sentence.

“ I can’t walk anymore. I’m tired.”

Hassan looked around and saw fishing net and said:

“ You can sit on that fishing net. There is a shade there.”

“ You go first,” said Si Ahmed. “ I’ll follow you.”

A man wearing a sombrero was sitting down and a needle net in his hand mending the fishing net. Hassan approached him and said:

“ Can this man,” looking at Si Ahmed, “ sit on your fish net?”

“ Yes, here sit on this box. Put this sheepskin on it. Welcome brother. What happened to you?” he asked Si Ahmed.

“ It’s a long story brother. I don’t know how to start.”

“ Are you the man who lost his leg in the factory?”

“ Well, yes. This is the man.”

“ You can see how we are treated in our own land. Worse than animal.”

“ Allah will punish them.”

The men sat down looking at the boats coming and going out to the sea and boys were running from one boat to another in a hope of stealing couple of fish. Suddenly a fight broke out. Two brown boys like mad dogs shivering with fury with their jaws wide open insulting one another:

“ You son of a bitch, you want to steal my fish! Come and see how much they will cost you.”

“ Do you think you are a man? I’ll spank the bottom of your mother today and I’m going to do just that today.”

And the two belligerents threw themselves on each other with enough anger. Their T-shirts were torn off and faces bled. The man with the sombrero put his needle net, took a stick and separated them with enough blows on their bottoms.

“ Always here giving us enough headaches,” he said in an angry voice. “ They don’t go to school, don’t want to work, and don’t want to learn anything. All they want, is easy money and here they are stealing and making life for us a hell. Last time I came from the sea with enough fish to sell and feed the family. I left the boat for two minutes when I came back I couldn’t find my fish leaving me angry to the point of vomiting my tripe. If I knew who did it I would have chopped his hands like it is stated in our Sharia and the teaching of Islam. No wonder the Europeans are coming back with their American friends who are invading this country bit by bit.”

Far away Si El Hachemi was carrying the engine of his skiff on his shoulder with the propeller behind him. Si Ahmed saw him and called his name. Si El Hachemi put the engine down as he recognised the voice but couldn’t see the face. Si Ahmed waved his bony arm and Si El Hachemi saw him and came to greet him.

“ Are you lost or what? Maybe your eyesight isn’t so good anymore. You tried to go home but ended up here,” he said laughingly.

“ Oh no, my eyesight’s still so good but I lost my leg. Hassan brought me here in his car.”

“ How is your dad El haj,” he asked Hassan.

“ Very well. You know El haj, he couldn’t stop working, and always in the farm doing something. I always tell him to relax and enjoy life but he said working in the farm is an enjoyment for him.”

“ You’re still so strong,” said Si Ahmed to Si El Hachemi.

“ Not as before, no. In my younger years, one day my friends bet me five dirhams if I can carry a donkey in my shoulders for a hundred metres. Five dirhams were lot of money that time. And I did. I surprise myself and everybody else. The engine is not heavy but looks big. Let go and have a picnic in Shoumiss. It’s a good sunny day.”

Hassan picked Si Ahmed and put him in the boat. Si El Hachemi gunned the boat toward the river. On the way down river, Hassan asked Si El Hachemi how fishing is these days. But Si El Hachemi ignored the question for a while and then the head-shake was scarcely more than a twitch as if he was bone tired of the same question from everyone, tired of talking about the port problems but no ears were listening then he said:

“ What can I say? I’m tired of talking, telling people the same things again and again and again but I’ve to take it out of my chest. I don’t give a damn who is listening and who is not. Our people, I mean the ones on top, are good listener. They like to drink tea and listen and talk and talk but it stops there. They don’t like to help us with some cash and let us roll our sleeves and show them what we are made of. No, they just tell us: the port of Larache will change and become like the port of Tangier. We are hearing this for a long time. Now, more than ten years have gone and the port is getting worse. When there is a low tide, big boat can’t come to the port. Worse off, I can’t understand why these Spaniards, Russian, Japanese and God know who else are fishing in our waters. When I go to the sea at night, I see their huge boats like football stadium taking all our fish and scaring the last ones. They leave poor fisherman like me with nothing. Call it competition in a civilised manner if you want! Well yes. My father chased them with anger and threw them back to where they came from. But here they are back with the same intention but with that yellow smile in their faces and calling you, my friend, we want to do business together. I must say these people got the equipment but not the knowledge because they don’t look ahead and never look back, got no respect for the sea and marine life and they use it hard the same way they do to their women. They are putting us out of business. It’s really hard to make a living inside the law. I’m ornery and ignorant but I’ve lot of respect for the sea, because I earn my living from it. Before these huge boats start fishing here, you can see not far away from the shore, fish flipping upward toward the air and light then falling back to the surface with a smack you can hear from far away. Long time ago I saw two big tunas lost their way and came down here to this river. I don’t see tuna anymore. It was fished and taken to Europe and to Japan. Them people come and fish here and wave them damn signed papers that our stupid politicians gave them and have a legal right to fish. They buy us cheap because we are poor and we are getting pushed away right of our sea. It looks we have got to sit and take it. Long before, there were eleven factories here in this small town most of them for canned fish. When them people started coming with their boats, they destroyed the whole industry for their own profit. No wonder our boys got no jobs and most of them want to cross the sea and go to Spain. Most of them end up in the bottom of the sea and eaten by fish leaving their poor family heart broken for the rest of their lives. And some of our boys started this hashish business, and some boys are already talking about Wild West of America. I don’t know what they want to make of this country with their damn politics.”

“ You are right,” said Hassan. “ How long can we go on signing stupid contract, selling our natural resources cheap and wasting it instead of taking

care of it for our children and grandchildren? This sea here is getting bled. We used to buy a kilo of sardine for less than a dirham. Look now, sometimes the price goes up to ten dirhams and you can't find the fish. If my dad didn't buy that farm I don't know what I would be doing now. That dam in Ksar El Kebir is one of the great achievements by the government. We the farmers there are making good living and we don't worry as before when the rain will fall. When it falls, the water is collected in the dam and we use it whenever we need it. I hope the government will improve this port, stop these big boats exploiting our waters and the life of the fishermen become well like ours."

"Well I am hoping and waiting and don't mind if we pay more tax when our income improve. But if nothing changes in five years time I don't think any man with small boat like mine will be making a living in this coast. So I'm thinking about this hashish business too," he said with a stern look at the men who looked at him in surprise. "A man has to support his family even outside the law when he has no choice." He eyed Si Ahmed who was listening intently, winked one eye and asked him: "Do you want to run this dope business with me? Nobody will employ you with that missing leg, Si Ahmed. I'm studying this hashish business for sometimes and thinking hard about it. I heard about a guy in Tangier. He is in this business and he is rich and got private aeroplane. They said he built a house in his native village for every family and they got electricity too. You don't find villages with electricity, do you? Surely, they will put this guy in jail not because he is selling drugs but he is helping the poor. What do you think, Si Ahmed, get involved in this business? The company will not care for you?"

Si Ahmed looked at him intently and laughed. He knew his friend was joking. Si El Hachemi couldn't go to the dope business even if the fishing business collapsed completely. But he answered.

"Yes you are right. I still haven't received a centime from the company and I know the owners never give a damn about their workers. In fact they are exploiting us to the bones. What a man can do with one leg. Everybody rejects him. Even my wife doesn't want to see me anymore at home. Lets do some work. If it happened to be selling dope, be it."

"If it's just food, I'll bring you vegetables every week," said Hassan. "I just give plenty to Si Hamman. Sometimes we just give it to the cows. When we couldn't sell it."

"Listen to the rich man talking. Where are not asking for charity," said Si El Hachemi. "We are talking about work and plenty of money. We are talking about getting rich quickly. How they did it, those people who are living in villas and driving the latest cars? Did they work harder than we do? Or did they suck our sweat and finish by our blood. Think about it son. I'll

never hurt my pride and soil my name by going to the dope business but there are people who can.”

They arrived to Shoumiss. Si El Hachemi slowed the boat to scan the bank for a place to stop. He kicked his old rubber boots off and rolled up his coveralls on his woolly legs.

“Come here. I have to pick you up like a baby. You are the result of this great justice they are talking about.”

“Don’t bother touching me. I’m still capable with my one leg. Back off.”

Si El Hachemi took him with one arm, put him on his shoulder and put him ashore and they sat down.

“Do you know anything about this Shoumiss, boy?” said Si El Hachemi  
“I always come and sit down there. There is a great view from the top.”

“Sure I know.”

“Well, I want to know who built this city here.”

“According to books of history, the Phoenicians were the first people who settled down in this place. They were sailors and traders and their floats cover the whole of the Mediterranean Sea. Look at this city. It’s on a hill between the sea and the agricultural land. It corresponds perfectly to their activities. They were exporting grains and their industry of bronze and glass etc to other nation but were looking also for raw materials. Have you visited the small museum in the comandancia?”

“No,” said Si El Hachemi. “I am always busy looking for a piece of bread. We, the poor, are not educated to go to museums, art galleries and so on. Did you visit the museum?” he asked Si Ahmed.

“Never. I never knew there is one in Larache. In fact I always go past comandancia; I see big building there but never knew what they are. I go there because there is a market. Those sellers from villages Rakada and Sahel sell their fresh vegetables and fruits very cheap.”

“Well,” said Hassan, “if you go there, try to visit the museum. It’s free. You can find their money and artefacts displayed there. After the Phoenicians, the books say, came the Carthaginians and then the Romans. That big amphitheatre in the centre of this town is unique in North Africa. The Romans had built it.”

“And how comes it was destroyed? Was it a war?” asked Si El Hachemi.  
“Whenever I come to this place I asked myself why a beautiful city like this was abandoned.”

“No, there were no wars. The books say, the city was destroyed by fire and people thought it was cursed. So they abandoned it and settled in Larache.”

“It’s good to know a bit of history,” said Si El Hachemi to Si Ahmed....

## Chapter 15

Jamal sat alone in his room which was at that hour nine o'clock in the evening. It was time for most people to go to bed but for Jamal and his friend Rachid the sun still high in the sky. The curtains were drawn and a single candle was burning on a table that made a small pool of light. As he sat there he tried not to think about school. He wanted complete mental relaxation, rest from thought of any kind. He loved this tranquillity, this quiet and intentional isolation from the strenuous rigidity of conduct required in this huge educational community of which he never felt part of. And this was his rest, in his room, with his own books then he indulged himself in a dream of the sweet pleasure of a bath and fresh cool change of clothing. He wanted to ask his mother for money to go to the Hamman# but felt shy to ask her as he knew the money was scarce in the house and father still needed his medicine to be bought. Rachid, as usual, knocked on the window waking Jamal from his sweet dream of Hamman. He made a quick movement and stood up. As he did, faintness closed about him like a vice. He swayed his hand gripping the edge of the table for support. In a moment faintness receded then he walked and opened the door.

“ I have a cooked fish here,” said Rachid. “ Mother gave you this plate. Have some and give the rest to your mum. Dad brought lot of fish today. We gave some to Si Hamman and Si Sellam.”

“ I am very hungry and I love fish like a cat. Oh, this fried fish smell so delicious and still hot.”

“ Mother just cooked it. I was eating while she was cooking. I burnt my tongue. Have you done any work?”

“ No, I haven't. You can't think when your stomach is empty. I am tired and hungry. Mother couldn't find anything to cook. Only Lalla Meriem brought us some Harira. They will be happy with this fish.”

“ I was talking this evening to Si Akram, the biology teacher. He said we need extra hours to finish the program ahead of its time, so we can have time to prepare for the final exams.”

“ Well, I don't have the money to pay him. I can't take extra hours. We hardly afford money for food.”

“ No, he is not asking for money. You know the guy. He pays for our coffee when we meet him in Khozama. He is giving extra hours for free at the weekend. I hope the maths and the physics teachers do the same.”

“ Don’t expect anything from them. In the beginning of the year, they ask us who is able to pay for extra hours. They help if you have the money. I don’t think teachers should be allowed to do that. It creates two-tear system in the same classroom.”

“ Well this is a free country, and capitalism believes in the survival of the richest. Probably Darwin was right.”

“ Probably he needed Stalin to make him change his views by sending him to Siberia.”

“ I borrowed some maths books. We can revise maths tonight.”

“ Ok, but let me have some diner. My stomach is rumbling with hunger. You go to the room.”

The room was as always in its state of chaos but today darkness has intensified and the familiar objects seemed suddenly unhappy and staring in an impish and hateful way. Books and papers scattered on the floor, jeans and T-shirt and jumpers dripping about on chair.

Jamal finished eating. As he came in, he pressed the electric switch flooding suddenly the shadowy room with the yellowish glare of light and switch off the candle.

The boys spent the night studying with high spirit and the following nights were the same. Their preparation kept them at even greater distance from everybody. Their foreheads became furrow, their eyes tired and hollow, their fingers inkier and their backs almost hunchbacked from bending over their books. Jamal grew thinner and frail, carved by poverty. He spent days on bread and tea and harira from Si Hamman but this stimulus of persecution added to his enjoyment. He became indisputably the best student in science making mockery of the students who pay for extra hours. And all this was thanks to Si Akram, the biology teacher, who inspired him. He was full of knowledge, had all the qualities, which made learning a delight, and made all his students cling to learning with great pleasure. He revealed to all his students the beauty of knowledge.

He met them every Saturday evening in school and stayed with them. He gave them something to learn, some homework to write out in which he had to summarise his impressions of everything he had read, explained why a certain things were right while others were wrong. Jamal abandoned himself to these tasks, carried away with zeal that there was not a way out of poverty only by studying. At nights he went to his bed and stayed awake for a long time before sleeping, going over in his mind what he had learned, forcing himself to recreate the triumphant of those men who came from

very humble background and became famous. He admired the life of Ibn Sinaa, Ibn Khaldoun, and Al Hallaj... His imagination, over-stimulated by the racing of his pulse took him towards a distant future where he saw himself as a good judge, punishing the abusers and giving the right back to the poor where his humble father could find justice from his bullied company he had worked for.

Jamal got tired of sleepless night. He found it difficult to wake up in early morning so he could be in school at 8 o'clock. He forced himself every morning to wake up early and be on time. He went to school with his hair not brushed, his clothes not ironed and his face unshaven making him look like a tramp. The headmaster, who every morning stood on the gate was eying him and commenting loudly:

“ I don't want drug dealer in this school.”

But Jamal never answered back or even looked in the direction of the headmaster. But this early morning, he woke up with his eyes red like a slit of a throat. He took his painful head between his hand and stayed there for a while. The sleepless nights had punished him and went back to bed. His mother Lalla Khadouj as usual encouraged him to go to school and shouted at him. And today, without having his breakfast he left. He was in no mood to study and specially seeing his history teacher whose name was Haris. He was a tall ugly fellow, humourless, with a face like dried leather, pierced with restless eyes like a criminal and shaven head like a convict. His big belly was straining almost obscenely and oddly resembling a woman carrying a child. His classes were always half empty because every student hated him. Haris wasn't a creative man. He literally recited like a parrot what was written in a book used by the students. What was the point to write down when you have a book? It was waste of paper and pen and for this he was called the donkey of the school. This drama gave rise to great deal of gossip, that Haris wasn't graduated but bought the job. Jamal rarely attended his classes. He relied heavily on his books but today he didn't know why he was attending this course. He didn't need to come and see this ugly face in this early and beautiful morning. For him seeing Haris in early morning was like seeing a messenger of misfortune. He went in the classroom, sat down and then decided to leave. On his way out the headmaster was still standing at the gate. He was barking like a mad dog at some students who by some accident had been a couple of minutes late and were barred out and turned resignedly away from entering the so-called education and have to wait until the next hour. Stupidity by any common sense. Discipline, the headmaster called it.

“ Why are you going out?” the headmaster asked.

“ I don't feel well. I am going back home.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I didn’t get enough sleep.”

“Where have you been last night? Smoking hashish! Where do you live?”

“In M’has-has. I don’t smoke. I sleep late because I don’t want to fail this year. I am working hard.”

“Look at you. You look like a tramp and a drug dealer. Do you call this the appearance of a student? I know who live in Mhas’has. A neighbourhood of criminals and thieves. Go back to your classroom,” he said in an army officer’s manner. “Who is your teacher for this hour?”

“Haris.”

“You idiot, you should say Professor Si Haris. He is the finest teacher in this school. We are trying to teach you manners here, but all we have is a bunch of idiot specially those who are coming from these poor uneducated neighbourhoods. I don’t know why they send us these cattle. It would be better if the government takes them as “second pigs” to Sahara and keep the Polisarios away. They don’t have brain for learning, these cattle.”

“Professor Si Shit, you bastard,” he said inside him.

Jamal felt confused and tears were well down in his cheeks. At this age, he should be respected and treated with kindness. Like any other student, he never liked the headmaster and so what? But this incident put a bitter poison to their already fragile relationship. His brain felt bruised and heavy, terribly heavy that he couldn’t lift his head and sadness, sadness all the more painful to bear settled on his chest. He was in need of protection, of a voice that would pour the balm of consoling words into his spirit and heart and lift them but found none.

“Why are you late,” a coarse voice asked him, “and why are you crying?”

“I am sick.”

“Same excuses,” said the teacher. “Sit down and I want everyone to write. Don’t sit down like spectators.”

“You don’t change anything from the book. I have the book here. I compare it with what you dictate to us and it’s the same. I can use the paper for something else. I have only my mother who is working hard to feed us. I don’t want to waste money on paper. If at least you give us a resume, it wouldn’t be bad.” said one courageous student.

“Who gives you the right to talk? Who?” he said with his eyes popped out of their orbits. “Do what I say and don’t argue. I said everybody should write means everybody should write. You have the book? I don’t give a damn.”

The classroom fell into silence and with the obedience of a soldier everyone wrote but Jamal who was still confused wasn't following. He asked the teacher:

"Can you repeat please?"

"Who's this donkey asking me to repeat? Are you trying to make a fool of me?"

Jamal searched in vain for what could really upset his teacher and could find anything plausible and rage took him by the throat. He remembered what Si Hamman told him: "You got to fight fire with fire" but he made a big mistake as he tried to defend himself.

"I don't see donkeys in this classroom. I see intelligent students. If you think you are teaching donkeys I'm not one. I'm leaving. This is the reason your classes are always half empty."

The teacher screwed up his eyes, scrutinised his student from head to toe and burst like a bomb:

"Who do you think you are? Che Guevara! You sit down. I'm in command here. Nobody is going out without my permission."

"Yes, you are in command after I leave."

"Nobody is leaving," said the teacher croakingly in his big beast voice. "I have an anarchist in my classroom. I have never wanted you in my classroom."

"What the hell do you know about anarchist anyway? Revolting against your tyrant attitude made me an anarchist in your eyes?"

The teacher went to the door, closed it and came towards Jamal with murderous eyes. Jamal tried to burst past him to the door but he grabbed him by the arm. Teacher and student were tangled in a fight. The teacher's hands came up around the boy's neck and with his murderous eyes blinded by rage which seemed somehow to devour him, he pressed hard on a neck. The operation of his hands was automatic like Frankenstein movies and filled with superhuman strength. The boy choked like a dog swallowing a bone. His neck lengthened under the crush and his eyes bulged and the students horrified by what they saw screamed.

"You are going to kill him; you are going to kill him," cried out one of the girls.

Jamal gave him a good kick to his lap. The teacher released him and rolled like a hedgehog. Jamal reached the door and hurriedly opened it and to his nightmare the headmaster was in the courtyard as if waiting for him to show up. Jamal stood there trembling like a dunked dog and the murderous teacher stood on the door.

"Take him with you to the office and teach him a lesson," he shouted to the headmaster.

“Come here Satan. What did you do?”

“Let go to the classroom and ask the students.” He tried to kill me.

“If there is any mind whose planning murder, it’s the in the head of people who live in Mhas-has. Come with me. This is going to be the darkest day of your life.”

“My days are always dark although I’m living in a sunny country.”

“Well, today will be the worst.”

“I understand. You don’t know how to brighten people’s life. It’s the same everywhere in this land. Shame on everybody who’s taking this attitude.”

“I’ll teach you discipline today.”

“The disciplinarians should be disciplined these days. They betrayed the human race and the common people.”

“You have a big mouth and you are going to pay a heavy price.”

“Yes, always the poor, the humble and the outspoken pay the heavy price. It’s understood.”

As they paced together to the headmaster’s office Jamal didn’t feel any fear. In fact he felt senselessly divided into two people and a strong loud voice was yelling in his ears “fight for your right; fight for your right”. He felt in a virtual trance and the primordial instinct, the primitive vendetta of the wretch of the earth was yelling at him for murder. He looked at the headmaster and at his throat and wanted to drive deep his fingers until he feels the warmth of the blood pouring onto the floor. He felt and for the first time in his life the tremendous strength in his fingers and was trembling uncontrollably. He felt, he would fall intransigently on him and felt helpless to stop himself. He flexed his fingers in excruciating pain.

“Sit down,” a voice told him.

He sagged down with the knowledge of what he had been about to do. For some reason, he wanted to soil his name. “For what reason this was happening,” a voice screamed inside him. And looking at the pale, vile face of the headmaster, he couldn’t tell himself honestly that he belonged to the same society. How could he or anyone else delude himself into thinking this is a modern society when the presence of this guy beside him and the teacher who tried to strangle him believed violently in what they were doing. He looked at the headmaster again and looked to him like a grotesque clown that the whole Moroccan society or even the world did not dare laugh at, because the laughter would be self-deprecating.

“What your name?” asked the headmaster.

“Jamal.”

“It doesn’t suit that face.”

“ Probably, but beauty is relative. Let see your name: Mohamed, the name of the prophet, respected and admired by more than a billion people on the face of the earth. You don’t deserve the name.”

“ Are you lecturing me? Are you? You are dismissed. I don’t want to see your face in this school. Out, you animal, and don’t come back. I’ll send you a letter of dismissal.”

He left the office with tears in his eyes confused and dejected; a painful uncertainty about the future weighed heavily on his heart and felt bitterer than ever. At the gate, Si Akram met him:

“ Where are you going? he asked. Then he noticed Jamal’s reddened eyes.

Jamal wanted to speak but couldn’t articulate a word. He crumpled into the arms of his teacher and begun to sob without restraint like a punished child and tears came in abundance, hot and blinding and run over the brim of his cheeks. He cried hard until his head was throbbing with pressure and his throat felt dry.

“ Come with me to the office and see why this is happening? I can’t understand what wrong with this society. It looks to me that we break the moral of our boys in their tender age.”

“ Why are you bringing this animal back?” asked the headmaster.

“ I don’t see an animal here. This is the best student I have in the classroom, the best in science and our society needs his brain,” shouted Si Akram.

“ I don’t want him in this institution. He just abused his teacher and then abused me.”

“ Did you investigate? He could be innocent.”

“ What are trying to say? His teacher Si Haris is lying? If you don’t mind your business I’ll report you for your views. I don’t like communist in my school. You can go and don’t come back,” he said to Jamal. “Tell your dad to come and see me but I don’t think people coming from your background care much about their children. Allah help you and help everybody else.”

Jamal looked at the headmaster and saw a ruthlessness in the head, harshness in the face like a man without a soul, without senses, without nervous system, and without... and acting as if there is no wrong, no right, no god, no retribution and no... He felt that nothing of him could be hurt because what is left of him that could be hurt was already dead.

What was happening to him? He couldn’t understand. He felt as though the earth had moved and left him standing on the waste of nothing. He looked at the headmaster with reddened eyes, wanting to slap that face, wanting to smash that head, wanting to destroy and crush him like a dog crushed by a lorry. He felt full of hatred and asking for revenge. How could he live with himself? How could he sit comfortable on his ass with a

hypocrite smile on his face and feel good about himself? How could he sleep at night with his conscious not punishing him? How? How would he feel if somebody else mistreat his children with the same abusive manner? How? Jamal shook his head against the pain and couldn't find any answers to his questions. It was all a big joke but a voice inside him was telling him "what about your studies now?" He felt like a man tortured by thirst for knowledge but now wandering and lost in a desert, searching for an oasis or a spring and once noticed one only to find a pig had already drunk and shit in water. Jamal wanted to say something, probably apologise but what could he say to a man sitting there so smug in his power, so bloated in vanity, the final product of the mongrel complexity of this social monstrosity. How could he associate himself with education, leadership, integrity, honesty and discipline? When he glorified punishment and violence. When he was hated and despised by the students. He turned and stumbled out of the office.

"Jamal, Jamal" called him Si Akram.

He couldn't hear, his brain was in fire. He couldn't see, his eyes were hurting, and his rage and horror had burned out his sight and his eyes were full of thick tears. He ran screaming, terrified and terrifying.

Away. Away.

Stumbled and fall. Stood up and again, run blindly through that dense suffocating air.

No stop, no stopping him.

He run, madly screaming and kicking, down Mohamed V Avenue. He reached Ain Chaka and went down near the water. He sat on a rock with a pounding heart. He felt himself as a dissociated entity and his eyes watching him going through the series of action and the horror of today. He came aware of a rot that had existed unnoticed for too long and that putrescence was intransigently coating the whole society. He glanced pointlessly over the immensity of the sea and knew there was nowhere to go from here. He threw his books to the sea and then words came pouring from him, overflowing and overwhelming him, surging from his mouth and cursed mightily everybody including himself.

"Let the society rot, let it rot," he cried loudly. "How can it move forward when a crime, the most abominable crime, the most cowardly and hateful of all crime took place this morning: the murder of the soul of the child? What have I learned? What have I learned? Hatred in my eyes, pain in my heart and deceit everywhere. Deceitful expressions of love and justice and equality. What do I expect now? What do I expect from those loveless, heartless, servile teachers and headmasters corrupted from birth by all the prejudices? I am expecting nothing, nothing from them. To earn their love, to earn their justice and equality you have to be rich and noble, the son of Si

foulane. And how about the little children like me, the poor, the humble wretches, the abandoned, the unfortunate, the anonymous ones with no position in society and no fortune, who have nothing except their hard work and hope in the heart. How about them?"

He looked at the sea. The high tide was coming and the waves growing bigger. He remembered a poem. He didn't know whether he wrote it himself or read it and he recited it.

*I sat here alone, deserted,  
Unwanted and discarded.  
The waves of failure came,  
Engulfed me and flooded me  
And I felt the beating of error  
And then the throb of horror  
And my life span  
And my heart bled  
But by the living god I swear  
I'll try again  
But how can I win.*

When he finished reciting his poem he thought bitterly that it was his admission of failure, the completion of his degradation. He looked at his books and the pages became dissociated, fragmented and every page was taking a different direction. It reminded him of his fragmented, dissociated society. He was judged and other like him dangerous, rebellious mind and nothing positive would come out of them because they lived in those wretched and hateful places where this miserable humanity welded by nearly a century of dire poverty which touched the heart and troubled the imagination. He was judged dangerous because he had the courage to laugh in the face of his teachers and the headmaster when they talked about justice and equality. Their kind of justice and their equality. But when he substituted the subject with the suffering and hunger etched on the faces of the poor. The injustices of their conditions and the inalienable right to revolt, the authoritarian atavism, which was impossible to overcome, they looked at him in horror as a dangerous young man who was trying to bring Marxist ideas to this land.

"Even Karl Max and Lenin didn't believe in your justice," told him one of his teachers. "My god we are a Muslim country, not some damn atheists and communists. You don't find your justice not even in United State of America. Where do you bring your ideas?"

“From the hearts of the dispossessed,” he replied. “Are the poor and the dispossessed, these herds of illiterate, who cannot write their names communists to you? We are Muslims, not some damn atheists and communists. We should value the principles of Islam”.

“The grass serpent is speaking,” said the teacher to the classroom.

“Is it a crime to express your feeling? Is this forbidden?”

“You don’t know where you are putting your neck”.

“In the guillotine,” he replied.

“Well, you know where you are heading.”

Yes, he was a dangerous snake warming in their bosoms and its head should be cut off before it becomes a monster. But how many heads should be cut off? How many hopes should be switched off? How much energy should be wasted?

And as time passed, his whole life appeared to him in a succession of images from the untroubled childhood when his father sent him to school pure and full of naïve faith to this morning when he was expelled and full of troubling doubts. He stood up and went to a paddle and looked at his face and it looked to him so human and so beautiful.

“I see a beautiful face, a human face not an animal, you bastard.”

He started walking home and felt for the first time light and free. Free from the crushing weight of the school, free from its oppressive discipline, and its suffocating walls. Free from that depressing and servile education. He despised them now more than ever and this was why it didn’t occur to him to go back and protest or even to ask for an explanation. He reached his neighbourhood and everything looked to him so ugly. The houses were unpainted and sad and standing like gravestones. The street looked shabby and filthy and stunted children barefooted and half naked like graceful flowers lost in the midst of the harsh barren land were playing football with a dirty plastic ball. Their eyes were joyful, innocent but unforgiving. Old men sitting on the step of their houses looked like withered children as if their growth arrested. Their faces were all hard and bony, and their eyes were bitter, hungry and angry like ghosts. The shadow of decay and disintegration lurked everywhere and he was part of it. Suddenly he stopped. He looked up and watched a large crow that was cowering from the top of some electric post. What was he going to tell his mother? She had been nursing special hopes. She had planned their old age around him, around his future and hope and now they were destroyed. Her son, her only son, the last hope of the family would end up jobless and tramping the roads. He remembered one day he was with a friend who was an artist, and one particular painting drew his attention. It was beautiful flowers but before them were sharp terrifying spikes. He asked his friend:

“ Why did you draw those spikes? It tainted the painting.”

“ No, that how life is. There are things, which you badly want to reach in your life but most of us find those spikes in front. I didn't taint anything. That's the whole picture, a complete one, without dreams.”

And how sad he felt as he drew the comparison. His inner torments increase and a dull chaos reigned in his mind.

“ Why this fate?” he asked. “ How can I face my mother now?” He pushed the door full of shame and entered. Lalla Khadouj looked at him and saw a different boy. His eyes were terrified and terrifying and his facial expression couldn't hide nor betray what was really happening in his heart. She hugged him and said :

“ Rachid told me what happened. I know they are liars, those people with suits. I know they are cowards because they took on the poor so they can feel big and strong. Do not worry my son, the future is in the hands of Allah.”

“ I- I-” and his lower jaw trembled and the words couldn't come out. His face was growing bloodless and became tight and the muscles trembled ravaging the beauty of his features. He took a deep breath and said:

“ I'm innocent mother. I've done nothing wrong.”

And now he was crying, cravenly, despairingly. His whole body shook as if with the ague. He told her everything that had happened to him from the time he had left home: the humiliation he felt in the classroom and then in the headmaster's office, of the chagrin and pain he felt. He told her everything because it was more than he could carry. She approached him and her face grew with indescribable sadness. It was a terrible misfortune, irreparable and incomprehensible. The death of everything around her and he screamed as piercingly as if he wished to drive every human being away by that scream including his own mother. He turned away and tears choked him again and sobbed like a punished child. His mother was dreary pale and said:

“ Don't turn away from your mother, let us weep together.”

“ Scoundrels,” he shrieked turning his face away. “ Destroying the best men.”

His mother sank helplessly and they wept together...

## Chapter 16

Days had passed and Jamal spent them entirely in his room in a dull and wretched mood without saying a word and it was impossible to penetrate his silence. Rachid came to see him but he wasn't in any mood. He stayed there imprisoned in that silence, amid such ugliness counting the pain. He felt not that he had abandoned the lycée but the lycée had abandoned him and it felt like anger and rage. He carried on for days thinking like this, feeling sometimes resigned, sometimes rebellious. One moment he wanted to go to the lycée and demand an explanation from the teacher and the headmaster, the next saying to himself : “ What the point? They have none and the son of the worker should be a worker the same as the son of the minister should be a minister. This is how it is here and everywhere.”

Today the weather was fine. The sun infiltrated through the interstices like an unwanted intruder but brightened the room. Jamal opened the window and sat on a chair and put his feet on a desk. He took a pen thinking about writing something. He gazed listlessly out of the window and his mind was a million miles away. He felt miserably, deflated and utterly lacking the will to do anything.

His mother knocked on his door and entered. She sat down on the floor staring at her hands on her lap and her mind seemed oddly preoccupied until he asked her:

“ What the matter, mother? Is something wrong?”

She took a deep breath, sighed and said:

“ Ah, yes, there is something wrong. Look son, we are very poor and we need you to have a good future. Your father can't work anymore. He needs you. We both need your income as we are growing old and have nobody to look after us except you. You have to think about all this. We have raised you in a traditional manner. You should always have your head down. Let go together to school. I'll beg the headmaster and the teacher to reinstate you. I will cry and beg them if necessary. All you have to do is ask their forgiveness. You know how they are those people with suits, and our hands are tied. We can't do anything. I know they are wrong but what can we do, my son? We are powerless. Stand up son and let go.”

Jamal shuddered. He saw the lycée in his mind: the vile teacher, the hypocrite headmaster, the wretch lessons, and the whole procession of deceit. He looked at his mother and said:

“ I won’t go back. I’ve done nothing wrong and won’t beg anybody.”

“ I know, as does your dad, you have been victimised but you have to think about us. The most importance members of the family are the parents. We have been raised that way. You have to think about them because they think about you. We want only what’s good for you. God blesse you my son; don’t be stubborn. When you reach what you want in the future, you can spit on the faces of your teacher and headmaster. That how it is. You have nobody in higher places to defend you and when you have nobody you have Allah and you brain. So it’s time to use it. Stand up and let go. I’ll do the talking.”

“ Mother! I love you and my dad. I’ll do whatever I can for you and my dad. If I have one piece of bread, you both eat first but I’m not going back to the lycée. I hate everything there. I hate everything that lycée stands for.”

“ And what are you going to do? What! There is nothing in this town. It becomes a ghost town. Look what happened to your dad. He is an example of people who don’t go to school. It’s very hard these days to find a job with qualifications. Without them, there is nothing for you here, or you end up with the same fate like your dad. I hope you think again.”

Lalla Khadouj stood up and immobile looked at her son. She had tears running down her cheeks and left as silent as she came. Jamal went to the bathroom, washed his face and neck, put on his fresh clothes and for the first time decided to go out. His stomach felt genuinely hungry and quickly he made his way to the kitchen. Lalla Khadouj was there peeling potato. He talked to her into giving him something to eat and she brought him olives, piece of bread and a hot mug of black coffee. Sitting himself down and looking at the clear sky through the window, he ate and drunk and felt a new man with excellent spirit eager to walk on solid ground again. His anger had begun to dissipate like yesterday storm clouds in today’s bright sun:

“ You see mother, all these days I was thinking about starting a business.”

“ A Business needs money my son,” she replied without looking at him. “ We don’t have enough money to feed ourselves let alone starting a business. Look at what I’m preparing for lunch! Onion, potatoes and tomatoes. I’m working like a slave every day but couldn’t manage to put good food on the table. We can’t save a centime and our situation is getting worse everyday. What you need to do now is to look for a job and help your dad buy medicine.”

“ Yes, that’s true mother, business needs money but I thought about it. I thought about working in farms for a while. I think it’s easy to get a job in farms. Then I’ll save some money. I thought about going to Ceuta. I’ll bring clothes from there, mostly jeans and T-shirt, the fashion of the time and sell them here. There is money in this business.”

“ Yes there is money in it but it is contraband. It is against the law. If you are caught they throw you in jail, my son. You have to think about the parents you are going to leave behind”.

She stood up, put oil in the pan and cut onion.

“ I’m not stupid mother, money talks,” he replied. “ If you have money you are untouchable. Look at the rich! They are above the law. They do whatever they want and nobody chase them, not only in this country but also in the world. I know people who are in this business. They go twice a week to Ceuta. They bring the goods and they bribe the gendarmes; that’s how it is working and everybody is benefiting. The gendarmes get rich and the smugglers earn their living. The gendarmes and the smugglers houses are furnished like kings’ palaces. Poverty drives a desperate man to desperate measures. I had enough of this life, always thinking about what we are going to have for lunch day after day. I need to work for myself, get a bit rich and look after dad, you and my sister. I’ll sell the goods to the poor cheaply. I’ll help every soul like mine. I had dreams of becoming a scholar, but when they kicked me out of the school, they killed all my dreams. They killed all what I was planning in my life. They don’t know what I am going through. They don’t. Well I am in pain, not a physical pain. No, it’s my head. My head is heavy and I can’t sleep. If I revolt they will call me an agitator and lunatic.”

“ I can’t argue my fate, my son,” she replied. “ That how Allah want us to live And he will punish the wrongdoer”.

The onion, the garlic and the parsley were sizzling and she started cutting potatoes into square cubes.

“ No mother. You don’t know your right in this society. You never asked. They never explained to you. You will never know. That how it is. They want to keep everything for themselves. What kind of justice when a man and woman work all their lives and end up begging in street in their old age? What kind of justice when a man has an accident and nobody comes to help him or comfort him? What justice means when a hopeful young man kicked out of school and his future and dreams are flushed in toilet? When he finds himself in the street with no roof over his head and no hope. What they expect him to do? Be a good citizen! Are they good citizens when they trample on their fellows citizens? And let me question this “a Muslim to his Muslim brother is like a wall made of bricks and each brick supporting the

one another". What happened to the Muslims these days? Why this is not applicable anymore? All they do is write good speeches full of lies and expect us to believe them. I wonder when they stop talking and start doing some honest work. We are all Muslims, we are like brothers, they are telling us. My god, what a lie! Do you want me to call this brotherhood? This injustice, this inequality, this handful of people who have everything and the millions and millions who don't have anything, living like pigs. Dad and you have been working all your life but we don't have any saving. We can't even afford decent food. How many night I went to bed hungry."

"All the praises are to Allah, I can't argue our fate," said Lalla Khadouj. "But there are a handful of people who hold most of everything. The Almighty hates them and despises them. They will never grow in number and he will wipe them from the face of the earth". She stopped talking and added tomatoes, seasoned with salt and pepper and covered the pot.

Salma came in excitedly and holding a plastic bag in her hand.

"You look happy this morning. What's new?"

"I bought some wool to finish my daddy's jumper."

"Where did you get the money from," asked her the mother.

"I was saving. Lalla Meriem gave me some yesterday. I went to her house and I did a deep cleaning there and she gave me some money."

"I told you don't take money from her."

"She insisted. She told me you are like my daughter. She told me to buy wool and finish my daddy's jumper and that's why I took the money. I have enough wool to finish the jumper and my daddy will be very happy with his new jumper. I've never seen my dad wearing something so nice. He is always buying second hand clothes."

Jamal left home and in the street kids with lucent eyes and dusty faces were playing football with a dirty plastic ball while others were chasing a small dog. The big dog was sniffing corners and wetted on all one after another. The girls were playing a skip rope and others talking and arguing like mothers because they felt that made them women. The sun was rising full and cracking the horizon. As he turned to the main street he saw his father sitting on a red Coca-Cola box and Si Hamman on his chair. The men were laughing and cracking some jokes as usual. As he approached them, Si Hamman smiled and said:

"Don't worry my son. Everything is in the hands of Allah. You are going to eat your piece of bread whether they let you finish your studies or not. They are not going to take anything with them to the grave except people's curses. Now you have to think about another decent way to earn your living and there are lot of things to do. You are young and full of energy and educated too."

“ Ah Si Hamman,” said Si Ahmed. “ They already killed his enthusiasm and energy. I’m the one who watch him everyday. He becomes like an autumn leaf and it worries me until I could not get any sleep.”

Jamal squatted down on his heels and found piece of reed to draw with. He dug his stick into the earth and bored a little hole. He nodded and wondered and looked up for a second and the smoulder of pain was in his eyes and said:

“ I’m not sure about the future anymore. Future doesn’t mean anything here. It’s an empty word.”

“ Be positive, my son,” said Si Hamman. “ We old timers say: if you survive a catastrophe it is a new power in your hands. I was thinking the same way when I was in your age. I lived under the occupation, which means depersonalisation. The Europeans my son never thought about our well being. Only theirs. Colonialism, my son creates two worlds: the first is of human, the second of subhuman. I was considered the subhuman but I fought my way because I couldn’t accept that I’m a subhuman. I didn’t achieve what I want because I didn’t know what I want. There were no schools open for Moroccans or very little. So at that time I didn’t know what I want to be in the future but I am satisfied with my life. Now we are living in so called free country. I want you to fight with the same zeal. All you need is perseverance. Think about it son.”

“ We, the poor, got to figure out this and surely there is a way to stop this. It is not like earthquakes or other calamities sent to us by Allah. We’ve got bad things made by bad men and by Allah these things we can change,” said Si Ahmed.

On the far end of the street appeared Lalla Zahra and Si Sellam who were walking slowly toward the store. They were entangled with one another and Si Hamman was confused as who was helping whom. Si Ahmed laughed and said :

“ Eh Si Hamman, if you have home for the old and the sick, surely you make better money than you are making in this store.”

“ No Si Ahmed, you are wrong. Most people in this land have no retirement and end up the rest of their lives in misery. We still far behind, Si Ahmed. When we start thinking about our old age, yes we can have home for the old, but we are still short sighted. Are those Si Sellam and Lalla Zahra coming toward us?”

“ Yes,” said Jamal. “He looks so skinny and very pale. I think he is dying.”

“ We are all dying my son,” said Si Hamman. “ You should never feel scared from death.”

A lean black and white cat came sneaking out of the store and crept through the boxes toward the men. It came under Si Hamman chair and then sat down. It lifted its paw and licked the pads. Si Hamman lowered himself and scratched the cat and the cat stretched out its tail and the last of it flicked and rubbed Si Hamman's leg. Lalla Zahra and Si Sellam reached the store. Si Sellam looked frail and pale.

"Is that you Si Sellam?" said Si Hamman. "I thought you were in hurry and gone already to the other world."

"Don't worry crabby man, I'll go very soon," said the old man breathing heavily and wiping sweat from his forehead. "I am dying slowly and probably this is the last time we sit down together and talked to one another. If you don't find me next time surely you will find my grave."

Jamal kissed Lalla Zahra and Si Sellam's heads.

"God blesse you my son."

"Look after my husband," said Lalla Zahra to Si Hamman.

"He is in safe hands, Lalla Zahra. Sit down here, come here. I always have this mutton skin just for you, old man."

The men exchanged a bony handshake. Si Sellam sat down and scratched his toes luxuriously and said :

"You are not dying as I can see," said the old man to Si Ahmed. "In fact you are getting better."

"Oh yes, I'm and gaining weight thanks to the fish Si El Hachemi is giving me every day."

"I don't know how to thank that fellow. He thinks of his neighbours before he thinks of himself. If I still have appetite I'll be like Spanish torero but I don't have appetite anymore. I'm just waiting for my last hour to come. Every passing day, I thank Allah and said to myself: this is the bonus from the creator. I do my prayers and thank him for everything."

"Are you tired of living Si Sellam," said Si Hamman.

"Why should I? Life is beautiful even in misery and hardship but I outlived everybody in this neighbourhood including you and probably I'm the oldest man in this town. I fought the Spaniards and I fought the French. I lived under occupation and I lived the independence. I managed to have seven kids and my kids have their kids. I've done my duties and fulfilled my life". He looked at Jamal and said: "how are you, my son?"

"All the praises are to Allah."

"Yes," said the old man. "I heard you are out of school."

"Yes," said Si Ahmed. "The only son I have and they kicked him out. He was the best in his classroom. Look at me, O followers of prophet Mohamed, do you call this justice? A father had an accident and hasn't received a single centime and a son thrown to the street. They cut his life

short. It pains me to see him depressed like he is now. Hardly has he eaten something. His mother has to beg him to eat something. I can't understand anymore why all this is happening to us. Probably I sin without knowing and Allah is punishing me."

"There is nothing to understand here," said the old man. "They did the same to my grandson but my grandson was a hell raiser. I gave my children and their children the upbringing of soldiers. I always told them: 'boys don't look for trouble. If you offend someone I'll cut your meat, grill it and feed it to you, but if someone offends you, don't think twice. Whip his ass and if he comes to me complaining I'll give him another whipping. One day his teacher, one of those hotheaded wanted to correct him. For what?' The old man leant forward and his bony arms stretched and his ten fingers wide open and continued. "The boy couldn't memorise his lesson". He took his position, put two fingers on his jaw and in contemplative mood, he said: "If I'm the teacher I would say, the boy needs help. But the teacher doesn't see it the way I do and wanted to beat the kid on soles of his feet. He shoved him and slapped him. I know my grandson, when he is angry he is a dangerous dog. He managed to get free, went out and stoned his teacher. They called me the same day and told me your grandson hit his teacher on a head". The old man leant forward again and with an angry voice said: "I told the headmaster my son didn't finish the job. Show me who's the teacher and I'll soften his head with my bear fist and my anger of a dispossessed man so next time he understands if one of his pupils doesn't understand he would explain and not beat the poor pupil. They don't give a damn about our kids because we are poor, that's what I concluded at the end."

"In this matter I disagree with you," said Si Ahmed. "Some teachers are really good teachers."

"Not all of them," interrupted him the old man.

"Well, that's what I want to tell you," said Si Ahmed. "When Jamal was in primary school he has Madame R'himo as a teacher. She had the habit of repeating thing over and over again with a firm clear voice and followed by a random questioning of the classroom to make sure that what she said was understood. But she had had sticks in her cupboard ready for the lazy. One day, Jamal returned from school trembling and told me 'dad, Madame R'himo beats her own son today'. I asked him why. The boy told me because her son didn't memorise yesterday's lesson and she beat him. I saw my son scared. He opened his books that day and read. I was satisfied and left him in this woman's hands. I know since then that this woman is not producing labourers and farmers but scholars. One day my son returned from school joyful and told me, Madame R'himo gave me a banana for

answering a question that no one in the class understood. I still see the joy in the face of my boy for eating a banana. I couldn't afford to buy bananas. But one day he came crying. As I saw him I knew she beats him and I said to myself, my son is no better than her son. If she can beat her own son for being lazy she has all the right to beat my son for the same reason. My son told me Madame R'himo wants to see you. The following day I put my washed clothes on and tried to look as nice as I could and went to school. She told me I beat your son because he has a brain and if he doesn't use it, he will look old and tired and wrinkled all over in his late twenties like you. I beat him because I don't want him to slave in factories and quarries breaking stones or making bricks like you. I beat him because I want him to wake up and prepare himself for the future, for life brighter and bigger than sitting in streets corners. I beat him because he is my responsibility in the classroom. I beat him because he is sleeping these days. Those are the reasons why I beat him. I said to her, Madame R'himo if those are your reasons, you cut his meat, give it to me and I'll grill it and feed it to him. But this time the teacher and the headmaster got it all wrong. They shouldn't kick him out of school."

Si Ahmed couldn't say more and the silence gained over the men. A lorry passed the men leaving them breathing the brown dust. A stubborn cough took the old man willing to take his life. His face was red as he struggled for breath and spat green. Si Hamman asked his wife to bring water.

"You shouldn't be here," said Lalla Meriem to the old man giving him a glass of water.

"You are right Lalla Meriem. But death itself, which should take me, is scared from this crabby old man. Everybody is scared from old age these days. Last time I asked my grandchild, the little one who is three years and half, to come to me. I wanted just to hug that child and talked to him but as he saw this wrinkled face he started crying. I said to myself : what am I doing in this world?"

"I didn't mean that," said Lalla Meriem.

"I know what you mean," said the old man and drunk his glass of water. "My bones are aching me and I feel stiff all over. It's better if my bones are comfortable in their grave and my soul is in heaven. I think it's better if a man dies a bit young in this land. He saves his family from responsibility. Look at me now. I eat their food, I wear their clothes and I bring them nothing. I worked all my life and I don't get a centime for my retirement. What a world we are living in!"

Jamal stood up leaving the old generation behind and thinking of his. As he walked down the road, Hisham met him. Hisham was a transformed man. He looked clean and neat and his hair was short and his beard was trimmed.

He was wearing a robe and a hat covered his head. He looked cheerful and happy.

“ Salam aleikoum, brother Jamal” and he kissed him and hug him in a very joyful mood.

“ Wa aleikoum Salam, brother Hisham,” said Jamal in sombre mood.

“ I can see what they have done to your father. I can see what they have done to you in school. I can see how unhappy, sad and confused you become. Brother Jamal, I was unhappy and confused as you are now. I was a drug addict. I was thieving innocent people to keep the habit. I have never cared about anything except myself. I was angry about my failure. I was blaming my parents and made their lives a hell. I was angry about anything and everything, but when I joined the Muslim brothers, I understood the reasons of our decline. It is not in us, brother Jamal. It is in the way we live now. We become corrupt, brother Jamal. Look what happened to your father! Did anyone care? Did any of these politicians raise the question of the exploitation of your dad? No, no one came; no one spoke against this blind exploitation of the poor by those Westerners who set up their businesses here. They can't do this in their countries because there is a law there. They transformed our country into a jungle, our brothers and sisters into slaves. They corrupt our corrupt politicians. They exploit our poor. They blundered our natural resources and we have to sit and watch. No brother Jamal. It is time for you to join the brothers. It is a personal matter for you. You have to fight this injustice. The Muslim brothers are growing. Our movement is getting stronger and our idealism that is the teaching of the Koran and the path of the Kholafats is having a big audience. Democracy is a big lie, brother Jamal. What democracy did for your dad? Did he get justice? No. If democracy is vote and shut up; no, we refuse this democracy. If democracy means the rich grows richer at the expense of the poor; no we refuse this democracy. If democracy is to sell us to the West, we have to fight this new slavery. Don't look at me that way, brother Jamal. Yes, now I have a sharp tongue. I learn with brothers what they don't like us to know in school. I read at least two books a week now and fquih, god bless him, is teaching us history of the Muslim world. Join us brother Jamal. I'll come to see you and bring you very interesting books. God bless you brother Jamal. I have to go.”

“ Does brother Hamid join the movement?

“ No, he didn't. He is a lost soul. He said he is going to Spain and Europe, to the civilised nations but they treat animals better than non-white. I pray for him. Nobody knows where he is. I hope he comes back to his senses and join us. We are going to change the world with god's will. I have to leave you, brother for now.

Jamal was left alone. He wanted to go to Khozama café to meet friends but he felt embarrassed to go there and felt confused with Hisham's speech. He stopped near an electric post, looked at the sky, not knowing where to head.

عبد الإله قرين

# أَلْحَصَادُ الْمَرِّ

رواية

دار نعمان للثقافة

عبد الإله قرين

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### BITTER HARVEST

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