





What matters in the end is the truth.

And yet, when I think about the event that marked the end of my youth, I can come to only one conclusion: that there is no truth.

Perhaps there is reason to believe the philosopher who realized, to his dismay, that the truth is precisely that which is transformed the instant it is revealed, becoming thereby only one of many possible opinions, open to debate, disagreement, controversy, but also, inevitably, to mystification.

In other words, there is no truth.

Put differently, truth is that which inevitably contradicts itself. Perhaps that is what is borne out by my story in the end. That

might explain why, instead of the truth, I offer you a greater consolation: a dream.

Msa l'khir. Good evening. Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Hassan. I am a storyteller, monarch of a realm vaster than any you can envisage, that of the imagination. My memory is not what it used to be, but if we can settle on a democratic price, I will tell you a tale the like of which I promise you have never heard before. It is a love story, like all the best stories, but it is also a mystery, for it concerns the disappearance of one of the lovers or the other or perhaps both of them or neither. It happened two years ago, or it might have been five or ten or twenty-five. These details are unimportant. The pink dust hung suspended in the air that evening just as it does tonight, the light from the spice and fruit stalls cast bright plumes like desert wraiths, the restless throbbing of drums rose and fell like bodies in the sand, and, in the end, the events surrounding the lovers brought an entire fabled city to a standstill and transformed forever the character of its renowned meeting place, the Jemaa el Fna, perhaps the most mysterious, most storied city square in the world.

Let me repeat: the truth of my story is immaterial, as is whether or not a woman vanished or a man or both of them or neither. What matters in the end is life, the breathing of air, the breasting of waves, the movement of sand on dunes and surf, each grain of sand a mirror of conflicting perceptions and testimonies.

What language do you speak, stranger? English? All right, I will try my best, though my French is better, and, of course, Arabic would be the easiest. Tell me where you are from. From far away? I see. It doesn't matter. Here in the Jemaa everyone

is an outsider. I don't mean to pry, but these are preliminary introductions, necessary to set the tone. Sit down, please, and join my circle of listeners. The ground may seem hard in the beginning but I will weave a magic carpet of words that will soon take you away from this place. Permit me to pour you some mint tea to accompany my narration. We have our traditions of hospitality. There are ways in which things must be done. If I don't make you comfortable, how can I expect you listen to what I have to say? A story is like a dance. It takes at least two people to make it come to life, the one who does the telling and the one who does the listening. Sometimes the roles are reversed, and the giver becomes the taker. We both do the talking, we both listen, and even the silences become loaded. From a small number of perfectly ordinary words a tapestry takes shape, suggestive of a dream, but close enough to a reality which, more often than not, remains elusive. It is a feat of mutual trust, of mutual imagining. What matters is whether or not we can believe each other's voices, and the test of that will lie in the story we make together. It will lie in the pieces of the past that swim into the present. Maybe it is precisely what we don't remember that will form the kernel of our tale, imparting to it its grain of truth and transforming memories into mythology.

But these are ruminations that travel in circles without beginning or end, like smoke in the air. They are good for passing long, introspective evenings with friends in the green valley of Ourika, in the High Atlas Mountains, where I am from, though I might also be from white-walled Essaouira, on the Atlantic coast, or from sand-coloured Zagora, where the last rock-ribbed mountain roots give way to the Sahara's golden desolation. These are all very beautiful places, and I come from them according to the

needs of the particular tale I am engaged in telling, its flavour, atmosphere, and circumstance. It's the way we set our mark, you see, with one eye on reality and the other firmly fixed in fantasy. It helps to broaden the compass of the narrative, especially since I haven't travelled much, certainly not as much as you, nor, for that matter, my brother, Mustafa. But I have been to Rabat and to Casablanca, and one day I intend to visit more distant places like Meknès and Fès and Tangier. Fabled names, fabled cities: they have long and illustrious histories, and their attractions beckon. Meanwhile, I make this trip to Marrakesh every winter to escape the bitter cold of the highlands, the desert, or the sea—depending on where I might be that year—but also because I am driven to come to terms with what happened that night, here on the Jemaa, when there was a scent of something amiss in the air, and this even before the two strangers made their first and, as it turned out, final appearance.

For I am haunted by them.

## JEMAA

Dusk came early that evening. The sun congealed on the horizon in a thick red clot, and dark, low clouds added to its intensity. Spirals of woodsmoke rose from the clustered roofs of the souks, and the calls of the muezzins rang across the square. It was the hour of prayer, of ablutions, when shopkeepers shutter their stores in the souks and head homeward. So it was on that evening two or perhaps five or ten years ago, just as it is tonight.

I had set up on the southeastern side of the square, near where the Rue Moulay Ismail leads into the Jemaa, past the pink stone steps of the post office, past where the Chleuh boy dancers perform their sexual routines and offer themselves up to clients, their movements leaving nothing to the imagination. I say this neither as a moralist nor as a prude, for I am not easily shocked, but I must admit that sometimes I have to look away, even as I benefit from the crowds that gather around the boys.

Since the events of the night of which I am about to speak, however, I no longer sit in my old location. It may be that I am superstitious, but the memories associated with the place are too painful. So nowadays I lay down my kilim on the other side of the square, next to the brightly lit citrus stalls and adjacent to the police station. It allows me to relate my stories in peace even as I keep a cautious eye on the goings-on around me. There are times when the sight of a young female tourist, often the merest glimpse of a shoulder, or a glint of dark eyes mirroring the sulphur lamps, is enough to bring back that dreadful evening and throw off my concentration. Then I have to scramble to retrieve the threads of my lines and remember what it was that I was engaged in telling. But this happens only rarely. I am well known among the storytellers of the Jemaa for the ease of my narration, the strength of my lines, the versatility of my imagination, and for pausing only for queries from children. Or, at least, that is the way it used to be before those two unfortunates vanished into thin air, irretrievably changing the course of many lives, not least my own, and leading to the disgrace of my headstrong brother Mustafa's arrest and imprisonment. But I'm getting ahead of myself, and perhaps I ought to defer for a moment to the fortuitous appearance of my friend Aziz, who was among

the first to sight the strangers that evening before they ventured into the chaotic darkness of the square.

## RIAD

Aziz had brought a pot of mint tea and a few glasses. As he passed them around, a flock of pigeons swept over our heads to the far end of the square, where a group of brightly clad tourists was emerging from the souks. The birds advanced in a frenzy of wings, and Aziz stood watching them for a moment. The twilight air was rose-tinted and clear, and you could still see through the gathering darkness. The pigeons moved in a funnel across the square and one of the tourists, a young woman with long blonde hair, ran after them, laughing. Aziz followed her with smiling eyes; then he took a seat in the middle of my circle of listeners and I suddenly noticed that he had on the same olive-green jellaba he'd been wearing on the evening of the disappearance. It induced in me an unexpectedly physical sensation of being transported back in time. I recoiled a little, which Aziz must have noticed because an uneasy look crossed his face. He was silent for a moment longer than manners merited, and when he began speaking, it was in an undertone of distress, even regret.

Thank you for inviting me to speak, Hassan, he said, and paused, his dark eyes glittering. What do you want me to tell your listeners? Perhaps I should begin with a word about myself? All right? Very well. My name is Aziz. I come from a small village near Laaoyoune, in the Western Sahara. I am a

waiter in the restaurant of the Riad Dar Timtam, in the heart of the medina, and on the night that Hassan speaks of, I was nearing the end of my workday.

He paused again, searching for words, his gaze remote with the effort of remembering. I did not intervene but let him take his time, recognizing the importance of accuracy. His words softer than before, he went on: It was around seven in the evening. I was nursing a headache occasioned by the strange dream I'd had the previous night, of walls of sand advancing on the Jemaa and swamping everything in their path. It was terrifying, and I recall sharing it with you, Hassan, in an attempt to understand its meaning.

He did not look at me as he spoke, his eyes half closed in concentration. Sipping his tea slowly, he continued: I was still thinking about that dream when they came in from the street—the two outsiders—from the direction of the Souk Zrabia, where, in the old days, the slave auctions were held in the hours before sunset. As they hesitated on the threshold, casting long shadows, I hurried forward to greet them. At once I sensed something different about them. The girl was a gazelle, slender, small-boned, with large, dark eyes, and considerably shorter than her companion. She did all the speaking, accompanying her words with graceful gestures and appearing to perfectly anticipate his wishes. The boy was darker, his skin the colour of shadows cast on sand. He reminded me of an Arab nobleman, tall, with thin limbs and black hair, with something in his erect carriage that suggested otherworldliness. They seldom looked at each other, but when they did, their eyes seemed transfixed by the other's presence.

Aziz took another sip of tea and I glanced at our rapidly growing audience. They sat quiet and attentive, their faces

thoughtful in repose. The moon had just come out, the air was soft and luminescent, and Aziz threw off his blanket and straightened his back, obviously growing in confidence as he recalled concrete details.

They asked for a quiet setting, he continued, and since it was crowded inside the restaurant, I escorted them to the courtyard, where there was a scattering of tables amid citrus trees and flowering shrubs. They chose an especially dark spot in the corner—they seemed to gravitate towards darkness. I brought them water, and when they looked at me, their eyes shone like candles. That disconcerted me, and when the slender youth asked me a question, I couldn't meet his gaze. His companion's eyes had the equally unnerving quality of seeming to rest on me and on something else at the same time. That was when it occurred to me, with a kind of guarded premonition, that Death had entered the Riad in the guise of that beautiful youth and maiden.

Unsettled, I pleaded a sudden bout of fatigue and asked my friend Abdelkrim to attend to them instead. He agreed that there was something exceptional about them. He told me later that even as they ate, he recalled, abruptly and without reason, the flowering trees that had greeted him many years ago when he'd first come to Marrakesh. It was the strangers' gentleness that most moved him, he said, unlike the effect they'd had on me. I found his equanimity reassuring, and when the couple had finished eating, I returned to serving them myself. They asked for mint tea, which the youth drank thirstily, without looking up from his glass, while the maiden gazed at him with a tenderness that set my own heart racing. The winter night fanned a cool breeze. There were

no other guests. I went back to my station and let them be with their thoughts amidst the courtyard's lanterned silence.

Aziz had spoken in a level, restrained tone and now he glanced at me as if to seek my approval before continuing. I nodded, and he resumed speaking, but in a higher voice that betrayed a note of anxiety:

These were my thoughts as I watched them leave that evening. They went out as quietly as they'd come in. She held his hand while he walked erect like a sentinel. The streets breathed darkness; they were swallowed up by it. I recall glancing up at the sky: the clouds had formed a double ring around the moon, which was a peculiar shade of red.

When I returned to the courtyard to clean their table, I saw that their glasses were ice cold, with condensation forming around the rims, even though I had served the tea steaming hot. I brought it to Abdelkrim's attention and his eyes grew wide in disbelief. Then he pointed to the ice inexplicably encrusting the mint leaves at the bottom of the teapot.

Aziz shook his head slowly, his gaze fixed on the ground.

I went out into the street to smoke a cigarette and calm myself. The night had turned hazy and cold. Most of the shops in the souks had shuttered their doors. Only a few shafts of light from lanterns pierced the shadows. I sat on a stoop, nursing my cigarette and attempting to convince myself that there is simply no explaining some things.