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Extract Les Berberes et Moi 0Table of Contents, Part One/Two

### **Introduction**

After my holiday in Morocco in 2012, I felt a terrible need to go back there and for over a year I had been looking for a way to fulfil such desire. It was simply out of my sympathy, admiration and love for those people who have suffered immense poverty and yet who managed to be so generous and hospitable. During my research I stumbled upon a charity called “Hannan” that has been helping the Berber people in the Middle Atlas Mountains. It was established by a couple called Hannah (British) and Hmad (Moroccan); they built a school from scratch in a village called El Borj, where Hmad was born and raised, that now accommodates about 30 children aged 2-5 years old, and currently they are going through tough regulations and money raising (circa £150.000) for the new school for children aged 5-12 years old. They desperately need volunteers to co-ordinate the existing school by helping teachers, managing the paper work, running extra French classes, basically anything that could help children and the organization to progress.

*Magdalena Wasiura*

It's more out of the ordinary than the ordinary. Life as it has been experienced, simply lived. This journal presents a fresh look at life in Morocco, gives you an insight as to how the Berbers live, what problems they face, their attitudes, what they know about us Europeans and what they think about us. This book is written by a young woman, who as a voluntary worker travelled to the Middle Atlas Mountains to help the Association Hannan, a charity that has been helping mainly children, but has also been generous to others in need. “The instant discovery of such a different world, led me to want to prove to myself and perhaps others, who doubted that my mission would be successful, that Muslims can be open-minded, amiable, feel the need of love, and that they want more from us than money or a visa.” My focus was on helping others. However, living with a Muslim family and having Muslim friends turned the whole experience into a simple but also complicated series of events which I had never anticipated to live through. Casualties of this five month ‘experiment’ have vividly been portrayed in the book. “Am I one of them?” This journal aims to be funny, quirky, knowledgeable and authentic. “Reach out for it and it is yours.”

*The Author:* Magdalena Wasiura gained a MA degree in journalism and media studies and then worked as a television presenter and reporter in Poland. Multi-lingual she has worked as a dancer, model and actress in France, Italy and England. Her previous contribution to Cv Publications includes an interview about Andy Warhol's Brigitte Bardot portraits at Gagosian Gallery 2011, and a profile of the artist Daniel Graves published in 2012.

“LES BERBÈRES ET MOI” CONTENTS

## Part One

Part One of “Les Berbères et moi” describes the author’s first step into the life of her Moroccan family hosts, takes you to the souk and hammam, explains the importance of Fridays for Muslim society, sulks itself in whisky and the problems caused by it. In this Part we are introduced to countless opportunists and amiable characters, and we visit a rather lavish circumcision party.

## Part Two

The second part of Magdalena's journal recording her life with the Berber community in Khénifra, in the Middle Atlas of Morocco, their homes, social gatherings and her work with their children in the Association Hannan. Get a good wash in hammam, eat boucheyar, drink shiba, meet her friends Mohamed and Ali and go with them to Arougou, wakha?

## Part Three

Part Three of Magdalena's journal describes broadly 'the forbidden' subjects: intimacy and drinking in the context of Islam that is supported by numerous tales from the Quran, and how young people will turn the prohibited into pleasure. She depicts the growing tension between her and her Muslim family and the cultural clash, something that one will not get in package holidays. “Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate,” it's Dante's invitation to Hell, here however, it invites one to hammam.

## Part Four

What about the fatalism? Should women wear tight jeans? What about swimming? Our God or My God, whose then? Some of those issues are discussed in Part Four of Magdalena Wasiura's account of her stay in Morocco. She also describes a rather stressful Christmas time spent there, the overprotective nature of her Muslim family and her trip to Meknès where she will get arrested.

## Part Five

Love and marriage...does it really go together like a horse and carriage? In Part Five of Magdalena Wasiura's journal one can read about marriage and love, and in the context of a strange encounter in Beni Mellal about hashish and L'eau de Vie. The author travels to the Plateau de Tadla and discovers an amazing Bin El Ouidan barrage, and dances to Berber music at a newborn baby’s party.

## Part Six

The tales in Part Six of “Les Berbères et moi” consist of the author’s attempts to build her life in Morocco by accepting a certain proposal, but meeting obstacles on both the personal and professional level; living thorough a major crisis at home relating to the lack of money, lack of work, and deteriorating health of both grandparents and seemingly everyone else including the author; spending weekends in the mountains and enjoying family outings in the forest of Ajdir.

## Part Seven

New projects, new ideas along with matchmaking in Timdghass are just a small part of Part Seven of “Les Berbères et moi.” What is all the fuss about kissing? The author explains zina and how Sharia punishes you for that. You feel the blisters on the author’s hands when she beats the dirt out of sheep skin as well as the discomfort and cold during her night voyage to Casablanca.

## Part Eight

It’s far from easy to say goodbye but before the author bids them farewell, she goes on a long physically and emotionally draining journey. The countless hours in the buses to Chefchaouen, then Raba, then Marrakesh are a significant component of Part Eight, the last part of “Les Berbères et moi.” The author meets obstacles at Raba airport that make her return to Khénifra, to the police station. And someone dies in this Part.

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## Part One

At Fés airport, around 9.30 pm, I was greeted by two, tall, skinny guys with moustaches who were holding my name written down on a big piece of paper, in capital letters, MAGDALENA WASIURA, and down below, in small writing, Mohamed Naatit. I smiled at them while dragging through the hallway my meticulously packed fifteen kilograms backpack and another nineteen kilograms of hand luggage that had cost me an additional £60. The smile was genuine but contained a tinge of anxiety, a pinch of fear accompanied by a single thought: “What the hell am I doing here?” “Bonsoir. Ça va? Magdalena? Magdalena?” They kept repeating my name while taking my suitcases. When we got out of the airport, the breeze greeted me warmly. Straight away I melted under the five layers of clothing that I had not been able to fit into my suitcase. The heat here, as opposed to the heavy rain and strong wind that bid me farewell in Nantes, had cheered me up at once. We packed everything into a car that was parked just outside the airport and drove through the small part of Fés towards Khénifra - our destination, one hundred and sixty kilometres away. We tried to chat in French but there was obviously some fluency missing in all of that. I knew from that very moment that communication could be our biggest problem. “Tu parle Arabe?” “I wish I could.” I was looking at the world from the back seat while responding to their first questions. “Quel âge, toi? Française? Ah Polonaise, Pologne..... Pologne..... Ou est ça?” Mohamed, to my surprise, was only twenty-eight years old. Despite his beautiful smile which showed a full set of white teeth, he appeared to be much older. His very skinny face and moustache aged him a great deal. Regardless of the linguistic struggle we managed to understand each other. His friend was constantly on the phone while driving usually in the middle of the road or on the wrong side of it. When he wasn't on the phone and still driving like a maniac, he was trying to show me photos of his Italian wife and, I guessed, his children. “Regarde! Regarde! Elle est belle, no?” Had she been a bit slimmer she would indeed have been a good looking girl, but even if she wasn't, I couldn't have said “no.” This is one of the questions which makes me feel uncomfortable and forces me to lie occasionally.

The condition of the road was surprisingly good and the whole journey was going smoothly. We were driving through numerous small villages which carried a strong feeling of abandonment or desolation, with no sign of human inhabitants, only cats and dogs and the policemen. We were stopped twice and checked over quite thoroughly. The policeman stuck his head through the window, nodded, and kept asking questions about me. The checks continued with opening the boot and examining my suitcases. “Shall I get out?” “No, no, reste ici, ça va, c'est normal.” Finally, we were able to get back on the road and stopped at another road blockade.

The same questions, the same control, and back on the road again. Occasionally, we had some radio-signal and music which very much reminded me of my last trip to the Sahara Desert. "Première fois au Maroc? Toi, mariée? Tu veux marier Mohamed?" "Well," I thought, "that was a good start."

Around forty kilometres from Khénifra we stopped to get something to eat. It was one of those places by the road, very strongly lit that displayed massive chunks of meat hanging off the roof with: black and white headed dead goats with tails and bowels still attached to their naked bodies. I asked if this was also going to be on our plate but they did not get my sense of humour. Actually, I considered my question perfectly normal, Italians, for example, pay 1.95 Euro for one hundred grams of pisellino cinghiale - testicles of wild boar. When my question did not evoke any reaction, I shifted my attention onto the butcher who was busy cutting bits and pieces of meat and roasting them on the open-fire. I could only see his bushy dark moustache through those hanging chunks of meat while we were sitting at the table waiting patiently for our feast. As I was observing the numerous cats and dogs running around, as well as plunging my thoughts into the unknown, I had forgotten to wash my hands realising it afterwards. I remembered, it was one of the pieces of advice that a woman who I met at Nantes airport had given me: "Wash your hands before each meal, eat only with your right hand and never with your left - this one is reserved for cleaning yourself only, eat what is in front of you, never reach out for something that is not on your side of the plate." I kept asking questions and she kept responding. "If you ever wanted to come to Rabat and stay with me and my husband, we would be very happy to have you." She talked about her husband Steve, a sweet loving man from Manchester, a lot. After his first unsuccessful marriage followed by divorce, he came to Morocco and found her, his soul mate, in Rabat, in a shop where she was working at that time: "He looked at me, I looked at him and we felt in love. Soon after we got married." "Sounds extremely romantic; how long have you been married for?" "For two years," she responded. They had a farm full of peacocks, with a swimming pool and a constant flow of visitors, mainly foreigners. For some reason, perhaps all those over-exaggerated adjectives of sweet, loving, charming, handsome, brilliant, wonderful, fantastic Steve from Manchester, I suspected the opposite; you don't really praise your husband to a total stranger unless there is something completely wrong with him. I had the pleasure to meet the Steve from Manchester at Fés airport: "Hello," his accent took me straight back to Huddersfield where I spent over three years. "Come and see us. I'll call you." We said goodbye and never saw each other again.

Going back to that meal. We were served one big portion of nicely grilled lamb which was scrumptious, well-flavoured, and *succulent*. We shared the meat served with bread, a glass of water from the outside tap, and mint tea. The butcher with the big moustache was extremely nice to me. He got out of his little place, sat in front of it, and kept glancing and smiling at me saying something in Arabic, which I translated in to my own language: "I hope you like the meal." "It is delicious," I said and put my thumb up. Incidentally, just couple of weeks ago, there was the religious celebration of the sheep slaughter called *Eid al-Adha*, a very important holiday in the Muslim world. Muslim families sacrifice their own sheep in remembrance of Abraham who was to forgo his first newborn son to obey God.

It was after 1.00am when we left the place and we still had one hour's drive ahead of us. Around 2.15am we finally reached our destination driving through narrow streets and pulling up just outside the front door of the house. A young man came to help us and showed me in saying: "Salut, bienvenu." Everybody in the house was fully awake. "I'm sorry for being so late, it was a long drive." They all greeted me warmly and invited me to a small room where most of them were gathered. Immediately, my whole attention was drawn to an old man who was sitting on his single mattress bed in a far corner of that room, wearing a turban wrapped loosely around his head. This was a face of a man who I could only have seen on TV in some exotic tribal programmes or adventures of Bruce Parry. He was a very tall and dry-looking man with conspicuously wrinkled face and hands, massively long eye-catching ears, and rather dissimilar eyes: one looked whiter than the other and the right one seemed to be popping out more than the left one. When I was shaking hand with

him, he glanced at me pronouncing my name few times, whereupon he kissed me on the forehead and welcomed me in his house. "He is almost hundred years old," said the young man. On the opposite side of that room, there was an old woman lying down on the mattress, tiny and fragile looking, with the voice that did not carry well. She grabbed my head, pulled it close to hers and kissed me repeatedly on the forehead.

I was physically and mentally exhausted and felt overwhelmed by the drastic change that occurred. In that moment, I was dreaming of a hot shower and a good night's sleep knowing that the hot shower would not happen soon. Abdellah, the young man, took me to the first floor where my room was. Tiny but sufficient, the only one with a door and a proper king size bed that was covering eighty per cent of that space. The big chest of drawers with a mirror and two small chiffoniers placed on top of each other were facing the bed leaving a small space for my suitcases. There was a big open hole in the wall through which I saw another open space overlooking the rooftop. The very moment that I saw my room I was grateful for this little privacy that no one else seemed to have it.

I was called to come downstairs to eat with everybody else. "But I have just eaten. I'm not hungry, thank you." They weren't interested in my story. I had to eat. Later on I found out it was a sign of hospitality and welcome. It's simple: If you get the food you are welcome, if not, you better look for an alternative shelter. Over a huge plate of tagine, we exchanged some laughter and basic information. "Mangez! Mangez!" they kept repeating. I was warned before that I would be forced to eat.

It was around 3.00am when I had to excuse everyone saying how exhausted I was. Then I took my sleeping bag out and got additional three massive woollen blankets. I even had a bed sheet and a pillow wrapped around in a big piece of a bed cover. Just looking at the bed was making me feel happy.

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I woke up at around 10.00am thinking how late it was and that they might all be waiting for me with breakfast. I was still feeling a little bit drowsy though. On the one hand, the massive breeze coming through that wide gap in the wall was discouraging me from getting up. On the other hand, a bird peeping through that gap, tweeted some encouraging tunes, 'it's a brand new day, get up, get up!' So I did. The family was waiting downstairs with a home-made cake and hot milk. There was a young man looking very much in pain whom, I guessed, was not living here permanently. He was holding a tiny sachet of Nescafe. "Would you like some?" Except for a strong cup of coffee in the morning, I don't think there is anything else that I'm addicted to hence I gladly accepted his offer. "What do I do with this?" I was asking myself looking at the quantity. I didn't want to appear fussy demanding some boiled water, hence I rushed the tiny bit of coffee into the hot milk as everyone else did and drunk it as if it was the same daily intake of a strong Italian coffee from my stainless steel Sardinian coffee-maker. Nevertheless, I was functioning quite well throughout the whole day without fatigue or headache. For a split second, I thought I may be willing to give up coffee, but the first shop that we passed by that day, supplied me with four small jars of Nescafe. It was inevitable; my addiction to coffee was much too strong and pleasurable to give up so easily.

I was looking around my new home. It was very basic here. I shared the three-storey house, including the rooftop, with at least nine people as I counted. The fairly spacious corridor on the ground floor led to three rooms: a kitchen and two living/dining/sleeping rooms and the squat toilet. When it came down to sleeping, one room accommodated at least four people who occupied single mattresses that were laid around each room. Except for my space on the first floor, there was a big area that served as a bedroom or the living room, then a small storage with a gas oven, and a quite spacious bathroom-lavatory. As a breeze would come through every window, every door, all cracks, and the *open-air aperture*, the house felt very cold. "It's better to stay outside," I was told.

After breakfast, I asked for some hot water to wash myself and was nicely surprised with a massive kettle of boiling water. The bathroom-toilet room contained of a normal modern flushing toilet and that nasty squat one. There was a tap with cold water as well as a washing machine which made me feel spoiled already. I mixed up the hot and cold water in a bucket and began my “douche” as they call it here. In case of some peeping Tom, the small window that was overlooking the main street had to be literally stuffed with some fabrics; but no matter how awkward and cold it felt to be standing naked in that icy room at first, it truly was a blessing afterwards. I was clean, content and ready to plunge myself into the unknown. Because I was told we were going out, and I had to take my passport with me, I was rushing to get dressed. “Tiens! It's a present for you,” said Meryam. “What is that beautiful thing?” “Pyjama,” she said. “Shall I wear it now?” “*Bsha!*” It was a black, long, sleeveless, simple design with an orange pattern blazoned around the neck and the chest area. I put it on, covered my head with a scarf and went out.

A young woman called Leila who lived on the same street had joined us. She looked slightly too big for her height which revealed itself through her gait: wobbly, unstable, almost painful as if she was catching up with our steps but it was all too fast for her. She was a very pleasant, chatty and smiling girl. “Comment trouves-tu Maroc? Qu'est-ce que tu va faire ici?” She asked in French and then added in English. “I love English, I like singing in English.” “I could help you with that if you want?” She sounded positive about my offer and happy to share on the spot some English words with me. We carried on walking through some narrow, pretty, colourful streets where all the people, whether they were young or old, women or men, poor or rich, miserable or elated were staring at me. “They might not have many foreigners here,” I said to myself.

It was a jolly hot day and by the time we had reached our destination my cheeks were burning red. “Tu es rouge, le soleil, le soleil,” Leila kept repeating it and laughing. When we finally made to the Registry Office in the fourth district of Amelou, first we had to answer a few questions, then we were asked to make a copy of my passport, and finally, we were asked to wait outside. We sat on the staircase and were observing people passing by. “What is the difference between pyjama and djellaba?” I asked Meryam. Silence. “Is it a hood that makes it djellaba?” She nodded. “Is this a djellaba or pyjama?” I continued pointing out at a woman in front of us. “Djellaba,” she answered. “It doesn't have a hood though,” I expressed my confusion. The explanation did not come. For some reason, and djellaba had nothing to do with it, I sensed that friendship with Meryam, if we would manage to get that close, may be a little bit arduous. It wasn't on the cultural level that I was thinking of but more on a personal one, a character-wise that it seemed judgmental and self-righteous making her harsh and uneasy to get on with. Anyhow, after thirty minutes of waiting, we got back in. I was registered and official here in Khénifra.

When we came back home, there were a couple of new people in the living room downstairs. The two women, beautifully dressed up, greeted me with an overt joy, warmth and kindness. The older one had a very handsome face, strong conspicuous features with full-lips and big smile. Likewise, the young one was equally affable and cordial to me. I was invited for tea and sat around the table with them. “You have a very beautiful face. It would make a great portrait,” my past was haunting me. “You are all beautiful, I mean,” I corrected myself swiftly adding some smile to the perplexed faces of six other women round that table. I tried to apologise for not speaking their language as the gawking part was making me feel awkward. “Mangez! Mangez!” I heard it instead. Grandma beckoned me from her corner to come over, then pulled me hard to her laying down position, kissed me repeatedly in the forehead, and kept pointing at the cake, then at me, and yet again at herself and her moving lips, and said: “*Koul! Koul! Koul!*”

After a little “chat” I was told we were off to the medina. “Go and get changed.” “Can't I go like this?” I was looking at my pyjama. “*La! La! La!*” My confusion with this pyjama continued. We headed off to the centre of Khénifra, a very vibrant and colourful place crammed full of cafés, souks with food, clothes, shoes, carpets, blankets, and people: poor people, beggars, homeless with children on the streets. When we stopped

by an olive stand, a beggar had approached me. I only found one dirham in my pocket, which I gave to him, and came across a rather peculiar reaction: he raised it, looked at it with disbelief and frustration, and then was mumbling something, as if he were expecting more. What a cheek!

After the medina I had a short moment for myself, but soon after I was called to come downstairs to have some soup. Food again. I sat down around the table and tortured Meryam with my phrases in *Darija* while she was watching Arabic soap opera on television. I was also observing *Āami* Lahcen and his enormous ears while he was falling asleep panting, when all of a sudden he woke up. "I want to go to bed," he said it, and I guessed it by watching him moving. I rushed to get on my feet in order to help him stand up, but to my surprise, I got "no-no" for the answer. Instead, he turned himself on both knees and crawled along across the room through the corridor to the other room where his bed was. It was heart-breaking to watch this tall, large, almost hundred year old man on his knees like a baby. Don't we make the full circle? We are born inept and we die inept.

Mohamed, the dad, looked in pain, so dry, so skinny, and so tired. Apparently both, him and the cousin that I met over breakfast, suffered the same stomach problem which was caused by smoking too many cigarettes and hashish. They showed me his medicine: a bottle of liquid with a high-dose of magnesium and written in French "for constipation!" I fetched some painkillers that he claimed later on to have helped him ease the pain. He was asking many questions about Poland, the distance between Poland, France and my home and the hours on the plane. He mentioned how difficult life was here in Morocco, but he did not make a single complaint. Perhaps he was too busy listening to my *Darija* and laughing his head off, "better therapy than painkillers," I thought.

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From the recording: "My second day in Morocco. The poverty is alarming. I don't know if I'll manage to stay here the whole period of five months. I feel emotional. They suffer. I cry. The soil is dry. It seems as if it has not been raining for a long time. *People, donkeys, sheep, goats, "all human life is here."*"

I was woken up by the noise of a hammer banging on continuously from 7.30am until now - 9.00am. They were fixing the roof. As soon as I came downstairs, grandma Halima waved at me and was showing me, in her sign language, tiredness and lack of sleep. She kept making a gesture as if she was crying all night long. I got emotional looking at this tiny, fragile and immobile lady in her, at least, late eighties. Not only did she stay in bed all day long, but also hardly participated in any conversation with the family. She sat, observed, and looked as if she was bothered by something. I was watching her wiping her tears off with a blanket when my own eyes started producing those giant drops. I really didn't know what was happening. I might have been moved by the image that came suddenly to my head of my own grandma who is already ninety-four years old, or simply, I was touched by senility as such. Otherwise, I might have been projecting on myself my own fear of getting old. Apart from the present moment, there would be nothing else left for me as there is nothing else left for them, same room, same routine, same faces, same objects that repeat themselves over and over again, day by day, night by night. "*Nihil novi sub sole,*" or as it was called by Brandon Mull: "*A curse of mortality.*" He writes:

"You spend the first portion of your life learning, growing stronger, more capable. And then, through no fault of your own, your body begins to fail. You regress. Strong limbs become feeble, keen senses grow dull, hardy constitutions deteriorate. Beauty withers. Organs quit. You remember yourself in your prime, and wonder where that person went. As your wisdom and experience are peaking, your traitorous body becomes a prison."

Whatever was the reason for my rather odd behaviour, I knew I had to leave the room to regain my composure. The other room cheered me up as the table was laden with delicious *boucheyar*, exquisite and simple, some jam, coffee and teas. And I must say that *boucheyar* deserves, at least, one separate page.

After a quick wash in cold water, Abdellah agreed to take me to El Borj - the village where I was going to work for the next five months for the Association Hannan. "There are plenty of buses," he assured me. Perhaps there were but today they seemed to be rather ghostly, so in that case, we had to take a taxi. There were two types of taxi: le grand taxi, the one that went outside the city, and le petit yellow licensed only for the city. The grand taxi pulled out in front of us and seated us both at the front leaving four other passengers on the back seat. The distance was short; within ten minutes we were there. "Le centre d'El Borj" said the sign and led me to a minuscule, destitute-looking village, where some shepherds were running after a herd of hungry sheep; men were hanging around the local shop or outside their shelters; women with their babies wrapped around their backs were sitting outside and watching their grown-up children playing. There was so much peace in this place and the surroundings added a great deal to the feeling of tranquillity. The sheer vast Atlas stretches the dirty-orange colour everywhere, continuously and without stopping for about three hundred kilometres. Amazing. The crashing state of ruins of those houses looked as if they'd been bombarded a few weeks ago and was still in a process of rebuilding. Shocking and disconcerting that one could live one's whole life in such conditions. How do they survive winter? It was one of the first questions that came into my head.

It was a week off holiday here, but Mohamed, the caretaker, showed me inside the school. There were two classrooms on the ground floor with a kitchen and the dining room, four rooms on the first floor including Mohamed's sleeping room, the staff room, the playroom with a computer, printer, books and all sorts of toys, and the open rooftop floor with its spectacular view over the mountains and with enough space for children to play. The place was freezing cold and the ground floor wasn't getting much natural light coming in. However, one cannot underestimate the great achievement that this school is. How can I express my first impression of this place? Perhaps admiration would be a good word. I wholeheartedly admire Hannah and Hmad, the founders of this place, for what they have accomplished throughout the twelve years. It's not easy to bring education or hope to a region like this one, but the mission is on and it's working. They have lent a helping hand to many families and many more children will benefit from schooling as they have been raising the funds to build a school on the 1.000sq meters of land that they had bought. "We are making small steps to make a difference and maybe in the future as this grows, we might be able to have a school in the village that takes children right through to Baccalaureate stage, and maybe some hostel accommodation for those that live further away so they can get a decent education," wrote Hannah.

When I walked out of the school, the village people were greeting me with joy, smiles, and curiosity. I was lost for words faced with such hospitality. It moved me and disturbed me at the same time making me feel useless. I felt as if I was capable of nothing. What went wrong that they have so little and we have so much? If there was hope, would it be enough for everybody? How much suffering one could cure if one would find a remedy for it all? What is the solution? Money? More money? Education? Work? How to start? How to give them better lives? I believed that the impotence that I felt, before even commencing my mission, had something to do with a conversation that I had had with Abdellah. "Would you like to learn English?" I asked. "No," he replied without hesitation. "There would be time in the future to do that." The same answer went for the French language. What future is he talking about if he doesn't want to take care of the present moment and grab the opportunity of what is now and here? For me, the fairly well-educated European, statements like this one make me doubt if some people want to change. They do dream and talk about a different world, better, easier, where the struggle is not served on a plate each day. However, the words are empty ones if they lack any follow up action.



Coming back from El Borj, I got plunged straight into the deep waters of *hammam*, the steaming walls and sweating, “sautéed” all body types, colours, ages, characters that were spread all over floors in each room. It was after lunch. Meryam, kindly insisted on paying the entry fee for me – 10 DR each. “I pay the next time.” She nodded. We walked into a “reception room” where everyone stripped off to their underwear and deposited their clothes, including towels, to a lady in charge, and then taking only the essentials: a bucket, a mat, a plastic stool, soap, shampoo, and some scrubbing devices. The heat, when getting inside the *hammam*, struck one immediately even when walking through the first and the second rooms that were supposed to be the most comfortable temperature wise. The third room had the only access to water: the hot water that came directly from the wall to a separate basin was controlled by the lady in charge, I believed. On the contrary, the cold water was coming from the tap and it was used as often as it was needed. The women were observing me, whereas I was observing the whole ritual starting off with: finding a comfortable place, sanitising it by pouring some water over the chosen spot, placing the mat, filling the bucket with water, and putting it in front of us. I could get settled now. The upper body got washed first. “Savon?” Meryam took some brown soft grease and placed on to my sponge. It took me no longer than five minutes when she took over my scrub and started scouring hard my back. That was painful! My back felt red-hot! “Would you like me to do it for you?” I asked and got “no” for answer. At first, I thought that was weird, then I forced myself thinking that perhaps there is some sort of religious issue to it: Muslim, Christian, nudity, and then the cultural one, perhaps Europeans cannot rub Moroccans backs? Hmmm..., it doesn’t add up, does it? I did not insist and I still don't know why she refused it. I was ready to wash my hair. “No, no, no!” She strongly disagreed with my next move. “What do I do now?” I was thinking. She took another sort of scrubbing sponge, and starting from arms and finishing on the back, she was rubbing until the skin came off. I was the appalling copycat. “How do you do that? It does not work on my body.” It really didn't. I tried hard but not a single layer of my skin was willing to shed itself off. “Look!” She took her scrubber and voilà, it was more than the natural peeling, the skin was rolling itself and coming off like crazy! I tried it again and guess what? I failed again. Now it was definitely the time to wash my hair, but as soon as I reached out for some water, it was taken away from me. “Not in this water,” she said. My water was perfectly fine but I tried to respect the full ritual of the bath and did not oppose any suggestions or any change. Within five minutes my hair was shampooed and conditioned and I was ready to get back home. However, Meryam’s still dry, untouched head baffled me slightly. “Don't you wash your hair?” I asked politely. She did. One hour later, after a very deep and long cleanse of her body. I have to admit: I felt overheated, dehydrated, and bored. I wasn't entangled in any social aspect of it and I might have suffered the European “in a hurry” attitude. I wasn't even brave enough to look at those naked bodies that were parading in front of me coming perhaps too close without any shyness whatsoever. It struck me how comfortable they were in that room, how free and relaxed in comparison to the outside world that requests the thorough, from the head to the toe, cover. Once, the underwear got washed, we were done and ready for some fresh air.

At home I was entertaining Papa Mohamed by repeating some newly-learned words: *brit n'koul*, *tcharafna*, *ajbani*, *mezyan*, *zwina*, *khayb*, *tsah-ala-khir*. Papa Mohamed looked in pain, but as soon as I recited them, he cheered up and laughed out loud. He called Hakima, my Moroccan mum, to scratch his back, then he called her again as he was thirsty, and yet again with some other petty things. Here is the rule: men are the breadwinners and hardly do anything in the house, women totally in charge of it: cleaning, cooking, washing, shopping, looking after children and elderly. Hakima was the best example: the mother, wife, and the cook. This beautiful human being of a peaceful nature took care of everybody in this family, and she hardly complained. “Hakima, Hakima....” her name was bouncing off every wall in this house during the day and the night time.

Before each meal, one member of the family went around the room with a kettle of hot water so everybody could wash their hands. Although I was feeling hungry, I couldn't eat a lot. I had this weird, unjustified feeling that if I ate as much as I wanted, I might have deprived someone of his or her portion. For now, I decided to

stick to my Japanese rule: eat till you satisfy your first hunger. Anyhow, the dinner was exquisite: a tasty tender chicken with vegetables sautéed in a pressure cooker, with some finely chopped and well-seasoned tomatoes and bread on the side. Over dinner, I had the pleasure to meet another young man whose name I didn't catch. He appeared unclean and acted as if he was on drugs. He said something about European women, beautiful but wrong for this country as they don't have a heart for it. Owing to the fact that he could only express few words in French, I might have misunderstood his utterance. Then he mentioned Armstrong highlighting strongly his intelligence, and in the same breath - Putin - not a very good man. "What language do you speak?" I asked him. "Berber," he replied. "Arabic?" He strongly opposed. "I'm not Arab. I'm Berber. I hate Arabs." His face looked irate. He really meant it. "*Tsbah-ala-khir*," I said goodnight and left the table around the usual 1.00am.

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From the recording: "There's a saying in Islam that our external form impacts our internal state, just as our internal state has an impact on our external form."

The very early, five o'clock call to prayer, named *al-Fajr*, woke me up every single morning. The *Muadhdhin's* powerful voice carried strong for about two minutes and it was repeated four more times during the day. My Christian response to such an early call was: "Would God like me to get up so early? Wouldn't He rather let me stay in bed and enjoy the deep REM state?" "It's not hard to get up to pray," I hear Muslims saying. "Allah gives you the energy, you feel very connected with Him, especially in the morning." In our house, the young Abdellah prayed out loud five times a day and went to the mosque at least three times a week. Although I had not heard him praying early mornings, I was becoming familiar with his daily routine: he got up, heated up some water, *washed himself*, and prayed out loud while singing and reciting the Quran during his morning *Sobh's* implore.

It was Wednesday, the market day in our district, La Scierie. This massively crowded and boisterous place offered everything: vegetables, fruits, fish, meat, sweets, clothes, shoes, mobiles, toys, and odds and ends for the house. Most of the things were placed on the ground, some had a big plastic platform protecting them from the heat. The Moroccan crowd seemed hectic, and the Moroccan men - desperate. They kept gazing at me, and if lucky enough to catch my eye, they first tried to sell themselves, then their phone numbers, and then whatever was left. One very weird man was following me. I saw him looking. I changed the alley and foresaw his next move. He was a few meters behind me pretending to be interested in potatoes, suddenly. I carried on walking when abruptly, from behind, I felt someone's hand on my leg. The same man passed me, and straight away, like chameleon, mingled with a busy crowd. What a cheek! I couldn't believe he did that!

In the midst of that crowd, I was spotted by another disturbing individual, young with the face of a psychopath, rather creepy looking. He circled around the stands and clearly was spying on me. He saw me buying some grapes, talking to salesmen and other men who were offering their phone numbers, but had no courage to approach me. I then decided to go for a walk, to the garden just outside our district. No surprise that the local psychopath decided to do the same; he had followed me until he stumbled upon his friend on a bicycle. When I stopped by the bridge to take some photographs, they both approached me. The boy on a bike was interested in some private French lessons, and the psychopath, called Mustapha, wanted to "*faire connaissance avec moi*." Although I doubted their intentions, I agreed to help the man on a bike by scheduling the first lesson for the following Monday. He bid me farewell, but his friend insisted on staying. There was something disturbing about him, the way he walked, moved, and talked; it was like seeing the spitting image of the character in the *Taxi Driver* played by Al Pacino, and no, he was not as handsome as Al Pacino. "Either he is mad or on the way to turn into a serial killer," I was disturbed by my own thoughts. He wanted to accompany me to the garden and respond to the standard set of questions, i.e., name, age, profession, country etc. "I thought you were twenty-two years old," he paid me rather a startling complement

and carry on saying, “L’âge, c’est ne pas grave.” “Pardon?” “I’m twenty-four years old and it doesn’t matter if you are older, vraiment.” Has he just proposed something to me, or was I missing the whole point of this conversation? He talked about his diplomas, schools, lack of work, and money. O Goodness me! He was so mind-numbing! I had to find an excuse for to be left alone and lunch was a good one.

For lunch we had chicken tagine and home-made bread. This time I allowed myself to eat a little bit more as my Japanese rule was making my stomach rumble and my energy level - low. After lunch, I spent some time in my room reading. All of a sudden, I heard people screaming, moving about, running up and down the stairs, a real commotion. Meryam and Hakima came upstairs to report what the whole tumult was about. I ran downstairs with them and saw a group of people gathering around Achraf who had cut his foot-open. It was looking dramatic; the gushing blood was creating a little pool around his foot while women holding some sort of infectious-wet-looking fabric were trying to clog the dribbling blood. “No!” I screamed inside, and in terror, ran upstairs to get a proper bandage. They wrapped it around his foot and carried him to the local doctor. The medic stitched the troublesome cut and as soon as he did it, Achraf was back on his feet. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. You better let the wound rest.” He didn’t listen to me, nor to anybody else who gathered around the dinner table that evening. There were: Mustapha, the twenty-nine year old lunatic who seemed to be rather keen on my company, Lahcen another cousin in the family, Mohamed from El Borj, and some friends of Papa Mohamed. I had the feeling that Mustapha may even appreciate my company and his comment regarding heartless women from Europe might be a simple misunderstanding. He kept spending more and more time with me asking all sorts of questions, including my email address, and was keen on learning French. Perhaps, he was not as crazy as I thought. Perhaps his bad temper and low self-esteem had something to do with heavy drinking and cigarettes. Lahcen, on the other hand, the thirty-something mechanic, a specialist in repairing only lorries, divorced with no children, his mother in law hated him apparently, appeared to be stable. He was an entertainer, some even called him a comedian. Talking about a comedy, when we were done with tagine, there was a plate with fresh pomegranates waiting to be consumed. Each of us got a significant portion and enjoyed eating those little healthy bubbles; so *Àami* Lahcen did. However, the bits and pieces of this fruit stuck in his mouth unwillingly, but willingly and with some force, were spat out and landed purely by chance on me. “What the hell? What was that?” At the very moment that I reflected on possibilities, I got attacked by another spit but this time I could clearly see the culprit. “*Baba* spits really well,” I commented and made everyone break into laughter.

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My family. They cared for me. They didn’t make me feel like a stranger. In spite of all the cultural and linguistic obstacles, we had so far managed to create a decent atmosphere. We laughed but sometimes we didn’t even know why we laughed; we hugged each other; we played some sort of silly games, we ate together, and we shared everything. In the mornings, I was always greeted with a cup of Nescafe and a cup of tea at the same time. I believe this needs some explanation. Those two mugs in which coffee and tea were served came from France as one of the presents. The tea I got each morning also came from France as one of the presents. I thought it would make an excellent gift: all sorts of flavoured, fine see-through pyramid tea bags. What an idiot! What was I thinking! I felt exactly like a bunch of people from the “Apprentice” who, in one of those episodes, brought cheese and sausages to France to promote England. Bringing teas to the tea country, what would you call that? A great tea-pas or simply a tea faux-pas?

Unfortunately, the poor little boy was very sick during the night and continued to be sick during breakfast. Not only did he cover the carpet and the mattress with his vomit, meaning a glass of aspirin, vitamin C and ibuprofen that were given to him few minutes before, but he also had a temperature. He was feverish and his wound looked swollen, sore, bloody, and infected. “Why is the blood still coming out? It is not supposed to with the stitches?” “He will be ok. Ça va,” they reassured me. The visit to a pharmacy was apparently

unnecessary. "Are you sure?" I kept insisting while walking to the medina with Meryam and two young men from the same street. She was, and there was no point on insisting. Instead, we got to the centre: idle, unoccupied, quiet. "It is a good time to do some shopping unlike in the evening where one has to squeeze through the busy, narrow streets full of shoppers," I was told. Meryam wanted a pair of pyjama trousers. "How much are they?" "Too expensive," she said. "You don't negotiate?" I took over remembering the golden rule: always negotiate. The trousers cost 35DH. "I give you 25DH," I said. "*La! La!*" the stubborn salesman kept refusing. "What about if we take two pairs of trousers for 55DH?" Another refusal. When we were walking away he shouted, "60 DH for two!" "Forget it, we'll get somewhere else." Shopping generally is not my cup of tea, here was even worse as prices were not set and the salesmen were not open to negotiation. We forgot about the trousers and bought a wristwatch for someone in the family and a gun-toy for Achraf. I thought it would cheer him up a little. And it really did. As soon as he saw it, he jumped on his left leg and absconded the house hobbling supporting himself with the wounded one.

I was craving for some rest and solitude. My room was my solitude. I disappeared for a while. I read, wrote, and talked to my recorder. Half an hour later I had Meryam in my room with a piece of cake and a cup of tea. "Mangez!" she said. I wasn't keen on eating by myself, hence I rushed downstairs. I walked into the room and as soon as I sat down I had to run upstairs to get my camera. I saw something moving. The whole family spread all over the floor, was resting while watching Arabic soap-opera. *Baba*, after his meticulous shave and good body scrub done by Meryam who was leaning against him, was fast asleep. Hakima's mum, Rkia, was also having a little snooze and Hakima was finally dosing on the other side with petit Achraf in the corner of that room. Likewise, grandma Halima was in her bed on the opposite side. This was a moment that I felt a strong unity of the family, love, peace and extraordinary calmness that I don't see much in the Western world as we are far too busy with formulating new goals, creating a new flow of activity so that we forget to get involved with easy details of our lives. In other words, are we as a family linked in any way, or are we "*like string puppets whose wires rest in separate hands?*"

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Allhu Akbar

Ashhadu Ana La ilaha illa-Llah

Ashhadu Ana Muammadan Rasulu-Llah

Hayya Ala Salat

Hayya Ala Falah

Allahu Akbar

La ilaha illa-Llah

It's Friday, the special day for Muslims. It is a day of compulsory gathering praying and it's proceeded by the sermon. "O you who believe! When the call is made for prayer on Friday; then hasten to the remembrance of Allah and leave off trading that is better for you if you know. But when the prayer is ended, then disperse abroad in the land and seek of Allah's grace, and remember Allah much, that you may be successful." It is also a day when Allah's special mercies are granted. Muhammad ibn Isa at-Tirmidhi, a widely recited Islamic scholar said: "The best day the sun rises over is Friday; on it Allaah created Aadam. On it he was made to enter paradise, on it he was expelled from it, and the Last Hour will take place on, no other day then Friday." The prophet al-Bukhaari said the sins are forgiven on Friday: "Any man who performs *Ghusl* on Friday,

perfumes himself if he has perfume, wears the best of his clothes, then goes to the mosque and offers as many prayers as he wishes while not harming anybody, then listens quietly while the *Immam* speaks until he offers the prayer, will have all his sins between that Friday and the next forgiven.” Whoever dies on Friday, said the Prophet al-Tirmithi and Ahmad, will be protected from the trial: “Any Muslim who dies during the day or night of Friday will be protected by Allaah from the trial of the grave.” The Muslims say that it is a good occasion for them to meet together and listen to sermons and feel equality when praying all together in rows without any distinction between the rich and the poor or any other kinds of differences.

The prayer time depends on the sun rise and it changes accordingly. However, the Friday midday prayer, which is called *Zuhr*, gathered them together between 12.00 and 13.00am and was preceded by the usual call to prayer. The mosque was usually overcrowded and the holy gathering extended on to the outside space where they sat, listened, bowed, contemplated, and simply prayed.

When men were back from the mosques, they ate couscous for lunch, the traditional Friday meal. This Friday we were visited by other members of the family. As usual, the number of people outnumbered seats around our little table, but then again nine of us had managed to eat from the same plate. When I say plate, I mean a massive ceramic tagine dish which was as big as a table and as hot as a burning stove, but still the women managed to eat the couscous with their hands; first they grabbed a handful; and then tossing and rolling it quickly they were making perfect little balls ready to eat. Fortunately, this exertion was not obligatory: men, children and foreigners were allowed the spoon. The couscous that was poured over with some tomato sauce or hot milk was usually served with vegetables mainly carrots, pumpkin, chickpeas, potatoes, and meat. The most delicious of all were those tiny “barrels” of sheep meat - tender and mouth-watering. There was a rule which also applied to eating tagine: the meat was consumed last, and usually women in charge were taking it out and sharing it between everybody - in this case each one had a tiny piece. “*Koul! Koul!*” Apparently, I ate too slow and took too little. “You have to eat properly, like us, *chouf!*” Papa Mohamed took a spoonful of couscous and shovelled it down his mouth, and then demonstrated my way of eating. “I suppose I have a little stomach,” I responded. As the couscous did not come with bread, some Moroccans did not like it for that reason. “You satisfy your stomach but soon after you feel hungry again,” said Papa Mohamed.

It was the first time since my arrival that I went out in the evening, with Abdellah, and got connected to the internet in a local café, which was only occupied by men. The pleasure of getting out and seeing people was immense! On the way back home I saw a young crowd coming out of the school dressed up in white pinafores. Perhaps there is some life here? Perhaps I’ll make some friends?

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From the recording: “I have so far enjoyed this journey. I’m overwhelmed by my family’s generosity and warmth towards me.”

After the usual morning coffee, tea, and some bread with olive oil, I was ready to go out. It was the big souk on the suburbs of Khénifra in the fourth district of Amelou today. The day was hot, and Meryam, Leila, and I strode, beaten by the sun, for thirty minutes. First a cloud of dust that was seen from the distance struck me when walking past the Registry Office, and then a vast field of widely spread out tents, people, donkeys, mules, horses and cars that were struggling to get passed it all were emerging slowly exposing more and more of what the dust had covered so scrupulously. Papa Mohamed was supposed to be there. Therefore, we marched towards his lorry not far-off from the souk. Papa, Mustapha and another young man, with a prominent cut on his face, were the guards of sheaves of straw. The lorry which was packed full of straw seemed to have bent under its weight. “How much does one cost?” “25 DR each,” Mustapha explained to me later. He and his friend were happy to pose for the photo when a man on a mule stopped to make a deal. “C’est un vrai, vrai, vrai Berbèr. Je veux un photo,” he insisted. They might have sold or might have not, but

they packed everything back on to the camion and drove off leaving us waiting there for quite a long stretch of time, and what we were waiting for I did not know, I guessed it was money. "I can give you some money or pay for the shopping," I proposed but she refused. Another hour got passed. We went to the souk. Leila was holding my hand like my girlfriend and wasn't willing to let go of it until we went back to our "straw station." After three hours of useless waiting we headed back home with no money, no shopping, and no straw. As soon as we got back Meryam received a phone call from Mohamed the caretaker who was keen on meeting me, but where, how, when and for what reason I had no idea and the answer wasn't clear. Meryam walked me to the main road, sat on its kerb, and waited with me. He arrived twenty minutes later in a taxi with another man. From the correspondence to Hannah:

Dear Hannah,

I met Mustapha, the chairman of our Association today. Fortunately, we had an interpreter. Now I have a clearer view of the whole situation.

Well, I don't think it will be that easy to do things for the school or the children.(...) Mustapha sounds rather sceptical explaining that the children have little time for any other activities (extra French or English) than school; he highlights how tired they are after the school and how difficult it would be to find some extra time. I proposed to do it during weekends, but yet again he told me how worn-out they may be.

In order to do anything, I have to go to Mr. Important and explain everything. If this official agrees on what I want to do, it would be a big step forward. If not, I have to go to someone else (this is where the madness starts).

The other thing is that the teachers in El Borj hardly speak French, and they do not teach children French. They said they have to learn Arabic first because majority of them speak Berber. So for me to sit in a classroom, observe, and then try to explain things in French sound like a "mission impossible" task, and the same would probably go for the teachers.

The chairman sounded very complacent to me, what is the world I'm looking for, hmm "the doesn't really matter" attitude. He sounded like this: this is our reality and you are not Moroccan (he actually said that) so you know hardly anything, which is maybe the truth. However, with such attitude any change would be impossible. From the onset, he puts everyone into the same basket: they are poor, illiterate, they have a little bit of crops that they grow or some chickens. This is what I should write down about the family's background of each child. This really frustrates me.

I had this idea of getting to know the families (maybe it will be impossible), spending some time with them, observing how they live, maybe trying to communicate, but straight away I got the response: you have to go the local authorities to get the permission to do that.

Perhaps I should not have mentioned the idea of writing a book, but as I said, it may bring some sponsors for the school, and as you said, it's better to be honest. In the end, they understood that I'm not going to be a crazy, creepy reporter who runs around with a microphone and takes photos of everything but just a friend who wants to observe the reality and write about it. I will try my best to become their friend and not an intruder.

You see, here in the village I have already met young people who would like to continue learning French and English. Leila, my young neighbour, told me how much she would like to be taught French and English by me. Today we went to the big souk and we practised both languages. Yesterday I met another young man

who'd like to do the same. Therefore, I was thinking perhaps Hmad could write a letter for me in Arabic that I could present to that important official. Perhaps that man could help me to find a venue if Hmad could mention it in his letter (...)

Mustapha also kept saying that the children need to follow their curriculum. I said I don't want to change any of it; this could be additional to what they had learned already.

They will choose two children from the school who are not sponsored yet. Mustapha thinks it's a better idea as it would encourage the rest of the children to attend the school instead of looking for new ones in the village. What do you think? I will take photos and find out a few things about them. Hopefully it will be done the same day with a bit of luck.

My best wishes, M

After that disappointing meeting, which gave me nothing but obstacles to overcome, I happily sat down at the dinner table with my family: a very delicious plate of tagine followed by two litres of Coca-Cola and the same quantity of something tropical - equivalent of Fanta.

The dinner was interrupted by drunken Mustapha, who could hardly stand on his legs but managed to sit at the table mumbling something that irritated *Baba* Lahcen. He was the wise one, and from the tone of his voice, I guessed, he wasn't very impressed by muttering, intoxicated Mustapha. He raised his voice and made him listen, but this young man couldn't keep his mouth shut. "What an idiot!" I thought. "He must have earned some money today by selling the straw and spent it all on alcohol." He then got up, left the room, and one minute later came back to *Baba's* bed, grabbed his head, and kissed it repeatedly. While *Baba* was getting more and more furious with him, Mustapha decided on calming him down by crawling up in front of him pretending to be funny and apologetic. Whatever he had expected from *Baba*, he got rather the opposite. *Áami* Lahcen grabbed his stick and spanked his back, once, twice, three times till he warded him off. In hindsight, it looked quite comical and entertaining but it wasn't funny at all when it was happening. It brought nothing but a great deal of upset. The prayer initiated by *Baba* and joined by Rkia, Halima, and Papa Mohamed came straight after Mustapha's angry disappearance and was followed by a rather intimate barbecue party in our upstairs living room with me, Papa, and Hakima. The small ceramic pot filled with incandescent red-hot charcoal fried tenderly pieces of chicken, and although they seemed to have been rather too tender for consumption, it really did not matter. What did matter in that moment was the company, laughter and the warmth coming from both: my parents and the pot.

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Around midnight, Mustapha came back banging on the door. Someone let him in. He kept talking out loud in a very angry manner and left a few minutes later. The door was locked. Half an hour later he was at the doorstep jolting it as roughly as he could. I heard another man's voice. I believed it was Abdellah. They were both arguing and Hakima was called to come downstairs. It sounded violent. Papa Mohamed did not get up. I imagined he was too sick and too fragile to confront the boozer. The loud voices and Mustapha's fiery words were disappearing in the distance. The metal door was locked again, the lights went out. It became silent once more. Around 1.30am the drunk lunatic appeared in front of the door yelling and roaring trying to get inside. Bang! Bang! No one moves. Bang! Bang! "Hakima! Hakima!" Bang! Bang! No reaction. He moved on to the window. Bang! Bang! Luckily, there was a metal bar that prevented him from breaking in. He had no intention of leaving and Abdellah could no longer stand this spectacle, so both, him and Hakima, went to confront him. There was that silent moment followed by another flood of fury which sounded like total blasphemy. Then the shouting yet again became distant, the door was locked and the lights went out for

the third time. Finally, there was some peace and quiet. The extremely uncomfortable feeling went through my body living me almost paralysed. I knew it very well as my father was an alcoholic. I wanted to react but I had no idea what to anticipate? Would it be appropriate to get involved? If I did, what language would I use to get my message across? All sorts of questions ran through my head, but in the end I said to myself: "If Papa stays in bed so should I."

The next morning my family was very troubled by the whole incident. They were crying and praying looking rather anxious. "He had not come back nor had he been seen today at all," I was told. Papa took me to the district of Amelou in the afternoon and asked around. No one knew where he was. While looking for Mustapha, Papa and I were running some errands, that is, trading some metal wire for money and getting a big fat 500DH. "Good job! Hakima will be very pleased!" I said. "The medina? Coffee?" asked Papa. "Avec plaisir!" Strolling with Papa Mohamed always made me feel safe. In spite of his rather nasty habit of sniffing *nafha* and more appalling way of spitting everywhere, there was something rather compelling about him. Perhaps it was a combination of both: poverty and pride, cordiality and harshness which were adding up to the authenticity. He might have been simple but authentic and good-hearted, and one could never underestimate such attributes. Anyhow, the medina offered us few things including a very, very second hand pair of boots that looked used and abused, worn out from walking, running or even crossing the whole Atlas; then a bag of nuts and sweets worth 75DH, a really giant fish for 30DH and 1kg of apples for another 15DH. Instead of having coffee, we sat down in a scruffy but charming place for *iben*, home-made yoghurt, and a piece of cake. *Hrira* came next; we chose another tatty but likable place where women's curiosity called 'who is she and what is she doing here?' had to be satisfied. "Do you speak Arabic?" The investigation continued and the truth had to be stretched a bit. "*Chweya*," I responded proudly. Our rendez-vous was sadly over and we had to head back home. I felt speechless and moved by Papa's gesture of inviting me out. He knew I had not a single dirham on me that evening and yet again he, the man without a proper job who struggled each day to provide for his wholeheartedly loved family, was more than happy to stand me a meal.

The fish was delivered to Rue 11, No 8, La Scierie, in very skilful hands of Hakima and landed on our dinner table along with tagine, apples, some pomegranate and one kilogram of nuts. I noticed one thing: no matter how much food was on the table, there were hardly ever any leftovers and one was always pushed to eat more. Was it a simple philosophy that said: eat when it's on the table as you don't know if, or when, the next meal will be?

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Men introduced themselves every single day, sometimes they strolled with me, sometimes they sat in the park or in a café telling tales. Today, two young men on bikes accompanied me to the garden. They were charming and positively beaming with pleasure but at the same time, there was so much sorrow in their eyes. I often thought about my life and how lucky I was and still am; I never suffered hunger or poverty, I always had a choice, study or work, stay at home or travel. There was never lack of drinkable water, Coca-Cola or Fanta if I wished to drink it. And what choice did most of them have?

When they had gone, another man who didn't look at all Moroccan, neither his pale skin nor the way he was dressed up, invited me for a quick lunch with mint tea and some *boucheyar*. "The life in Morocco is much more enjoyable, much more tranquil, people here actually smile, whereas in Europe everyone is stressed out and panics rushing around and not having time for a normal human interaction, a smile, a bonjour, a spontaneous laughter," he recalled. The European paranoia of having and not being seemed to have had upset him a great deal. Paris is conceited, and like all Parisians, it raises his nose at him. "I stay in Paris only for work and always anticipate holidays here, with people, and not robots out there." He drove me back home, to the "gates" of La Scierie, left me there with his mobile numbers and follow up question: "Would you like to go to Aglмам to see the big lakes and monkeys?" The temptation to say 'yes' was greater than



common sense, and although I trusted his intentions, I was not able to respond without my family's consent. I believed, the desire to act as I was free was greatly succumbed by the respect I had for my family and cultural rules imposed on me. They neither approved nor disapproved. They looked perplex. "We will have our family outing to Aglmam next Sunday," Meryam convinced me and got me excited. But we never did, and I never saw my "one afternoon friend" again. Instead, Lahcen was becoming friendlier and friendlier and that evening he turned up in my room. Although it was nothing new for me, here, however, it was treated as cultural faux-pas. Never had a man come to a woman's bedroom unless he was married to her. The rule-breaker was very much aware of his cheeky and senseless rather visit in my room and was as confused by his own appearance there as everybody else in the house. "Ça va? Ça va bien, tu marches aujourd'hui?" He was standing in the door not knowing whether he should come or go, but eventually he went away pressed by his own confusion. "Au-revoir," he said and disappeared.

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Going out after 6.00pm required a strategy, a sort of convincing and worry-free plan that was safe for both, my family and me - the truth-stretcher.

I had to allow myself a bit of flexibility. I had to respond to my own desire, to my own unfulfilled curiosity about the nightlife in this city. It's not safe for you; the phrase repeated itself. What is safe for me here? Would it be better to stay in Europe and let all my desires of travels and adventures drown in the deep and rough waters of my imagination? That would be safe, cowardly safe. I prefer risk, happenings, action, the real journey that eventually calms my mind. "I'm sensible and strong," I responded. "I will not be stupid. In any case, I will protect myself by making fair judgement. Don't worry." The understanding of my liberty was non-existent yet, and the given and well-developed sense of freedom and independence had nothing to do with their strict rules. Women here cannot go out after dusk, and if they do, they must be always accompanied by someone, preferably a man, it's for their own safety. I have never underestimated safety as my own heavy baggage of fear and panic attacks keep haunting me, and depending on the environment, might even paralyse me. Nevertheless, locking myself at home would not resolve the problem. On the contrary, it would add more anxiety and distrust towards humans. In spite of my own misfortune that one human being brought upon me, I have the tendency to look positively on the whole spectrum of human existence. In any case, I managed to sneak out after 5.00pm, and I must thank the sun that was still exuding life for giving me an easy explanation. I took a book with me and went off to the garden to read for a while, whereupon the lights of the medina were beckoning me inside. I accepted the invitation and returned it as soon as I entered the gate of busy souks. I was squeezing myself through the crowd and suffocating under heavy looks and shallow talks of curiosity. Bonsoir, Holla... Française... Anglaise... Italiano... que yeux ... salut...donnez moi ton numero, hihhi....bella....I was about to go back home when I heard someone speaking English. "Hi, your eyes are really beautiful. Can I talk to you for a moment, please?" A young man's voice squeezed itself thought that busy crowd first and then his body popped out unexpectedly in front of me. "You must be the only person in Khénifra who speaks English. How do you feel?" "Fine," he responded as if my joke wasn't even taken into consideration. "You are so beautiful. Where do you come from?" This very charming young man was flooding me with compliments and insisted on walking me back home. We were swapping languages like a very used pair of gloves, so that when *Simo's* English was failing him then the French was coming handy. The contact with this young, curious and intelligent human being was almost rejuvenating making me realise how much I missed my real friends. Unfortunately, when he was about to write down his number, we were interrupted by the presence of Mohamed, my neighbour. "Are you ok?" "Fine, don't worry. He was walking me back home." Mohamed took over and delivered me home in one piece just after 7.00pm. Straight away Meryam's eyes were punishing me for coming in late, and demanding explanation. "Where have you been?" "I was just sitting in the garden and reading."

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In order to get from place A to place B outside the city of Khénifra one had to take a grand taxi or patiently wait for buses that never came. Each visit to the Association Hannan started off with a “grand tour” around the centre of Khénifra so that the “grand l’espace” could be filled up with six passengers, at least. One could not swing a *cat* in there, I can assure you of that. I had my preferences: I was going for the front seat. Although I was always crushed by someone, whether it was at the front or at the back seat, I preferred to sit on the gear stick than on my fellow passengers who suffered some sort of chronic staleness which was difficult to breathe in. When I got to El Borj, I started updating files by gathering necessary information regarding the background to the children’s families, identifying the poorest for new sponsors and following up on their progress at school. “I could kiss you and hug you for that,” Hannah was very pleased. Mohamed Ousbigh, one of the trustees and as he called himself - the vice-president of the Association - seemed rough and bullish, but he also gave me the impression of having the welfare of the children on his mind. I was raising my eye-brows when he was reciting, entirely off-the-cuff, information on each single child, whether he has carried his education in the primary school in El Borj, or had left to find his calling through the high school in Khénifra, then their ages, fathers, mothers, siblings, animals ....at a certain point I was doubting the truth behind all of it thinking he could have told me anything and I had no choice but to trust him. However, my stay here would not make sense if from the onset I would distrust or doubt the honesty of a man who practically ran our school. Not only had he provided me with the information needed, but also had not been opposed to running extra French lessons here. “You can start after 1.00pm. We only need the primary school director’s approval. “And we did. I presented myself to the director: a fat, arrogant, unpleasant, full-of-himself man who without Mohamed’s intervention would not have given me his blessing. “O dear child! You don’t understand our reality, do you?” It was written down on his face but pronounced rather unequivocally. “You have to go to Mr. Important to get his permission.” Apparently, the previous director was even worse. He took a computer to his home given to the school as a present from our Association to be used by children saying it was for security reasons, and before he left the school, he had replaced the brand-new computer, which the school never saw, with some crappy old one. Nevertheless, the full of himself director had agreed on extra French lessons offering me children’s schedule and planning the best time for it. As my rumbling stomach reminded me of lunch, I rushed back home to discover a special family’s gathering to which I was also invited. “Put your black pyjama on,” I was told off by Hakima for looking too European. The gathering must be special as Hakima, Fadma - our neighbour and a relative, and another Fadma - Hakima’s best friend, they all were dressed up and had their make-up done in a local beauty salon.

The house where we were going, from outside, looked like nothing but an old scruffy building; the inside told a very different and rich story, a story of splendour, pomp, and extravagance; a story of people who, with no doubt, did better than the rest. A custom tells you to take something with you; it could be chocolate, tea, sugar, yogurts, fruits, something that says how much one appreciates the invitation. Although I appreciated the invitation, I regretted the supply of sugar and milky chocolate to this household; as soon as it was delivered it melted in the splendour of this extravagant event, the party-people, and the silver service that was provided. “The sitters” - women only, were occupying sofas in two large leaving rooms and were spreading on the already existing luxury more luminosity coming from their djellabas, headscarves, and the jewellery. “*Salam ali-koum. La bas? Bikhir? Henya?*” A handshake. Kiss. Hand on the mouth. And again. Round the room. The other one. Sit. Wait. More women. More handshakes. More kisses. More hand on the mouth.

“You can all go upstairs now,” the announcement made us all moved in a pronounced multi-coloured vivid wave. The rooftop, where the whole event was taking place, was as large or even larger than the first floor of our house; layered with red carpets that with contact with heavy plastic rooftop covers, supported by wooden beams, and strong sunbeams were illuminating orange and blue colour all over the space. Comfortably, there were eight tables and more than eighty women, some with children, some with their parents, some singles. I

had this misfortune to be seated by a woman with a baby who kept staring at me, and as soon as I responded to that gaze, the baby was going hysterical making me feel like some kind of monster. Not only was it getting hotter, with more women coming and more breeze escaping, but also the baby was getting on my nerves. "You don't need to look at me baby, yes everyone sees that I'm different here, I really don't need more attention; if you want to carry on looking my question is: what the hell are you crying for?" But the baby did not understand my inner voice. Instead, it was giving me a headache. A kind woman from the family, who I had just met, sat in between me and the baby. "Don't look at her." "I don't. It's her that is looking at me. Tell her that." The baby did not comprehend the whole point of our discussion nor did that woman. After over one hour of waiting and grilling in that space, we heard some particular noise: music, chanting, cheering, and singing. The chanting was distinct; it was produced by a singular sound broken by a vibrating tongue making one hell of a resonance, and whoever felt like joining the orchestra - joined. Soon after, a young woman called Zahra, who I had already met, appeared in our room with her singing entourage, like some kind of diva who everybody awaited in anticipation. She was glowing with joy and the melting make-up while walking around a room shaking hands with everybody. I had no idea what the party was about and I knew nothing about her. When she came up to me I kept asking: "Did you just get engaged or married?" "No, no, baby, baby," she responded. "Ah! You are pregnant!" I congratulated her not even knowing if my guess was right. The party was about to start. It was announced by plates of roasted chicken tagine that laid the tables, followed by another bursting with quantity platters of tiny sweet pasta. What a delight! Wait a minute. It's almost gone. Are we in a hurry? Is this some kind of "who finish first contest?" If it was, the woman next to me would have a surprisingly good timing; she wasn't eating, she was devouring piece by piece nervously, and at the same time, was grabbing and throwing the chicken's parts on to the side of my plate saying: "*Koull! Koull!*" All the leftovers were quickly taken away by the eaters, placed on the bread, wrapped up in the serviettes and hidden away. It is a very normal behaviour here; food is precious and it would be considered a crime throwing it away. I did the same thinking of *Baba* and *Halima* back at home.

Our table looked like a chicken battlefield as everything that was not consumed landed on the tablecloth, which after the meal was quickly removed, easy and simple, not much washing up for them. The feast needed to be digested; another plate full of fruits was served. That was more than enough; I could hardly move when I was rushed to wash my hands and get my shoes ready to walk back home. "*Blatti! Blatti!*" Zahra's mum was trying to sit us down for a cake and some tea. "*Je me suis remplie le bidon,*" I said and they all agreed with me. The cake was packed and the whole trophy, including the chicken and fruits, were given to my grandparents.

Before the food was served, I came downstairs for a little look around. In the kitchen the "You Tube" was on and a few young women, including Meryam, were dancing. "What are you doing here?" Meryam looked bewildered. "Nothing, just looking." The young man came with a very different attitude and dragged me to the kitchen floor: "Dance! Dance!" he said. They were all lined up performing a traditional, well-synchronised Berber dance; the shoulders moved up and down with the legs and hands followed. I had fun but soon was reprimanded by Meryam. "It's not like this, it's like that," she was laughing at my puny effort. "Give me a chance, I have to practise it." Fortunately, the music stopped and my hapless shoulders, not used to such movement, were ready for a little rest.

When I went back upstairs, some women were interested in finding out who I was. As soon as I introduced myself as a voluntary worker, they were giving me their phone numbers for to teach their children and kept saying: "Do you really work for free?"

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That night I had very eerie dreams. I was getting to know someone in a supermarket, someone who claimed to be in love with me but I kept saying, "Listen, we are not compatible." Later I was surrounded by animals, dogs precisely that were having a real human chat with me.

The dreams were in tune with the morning call for prayer: rare, loud, shrill and terribly discordant. The voice wasn't singing but drilling like a pneumatic hammer pressing me to use my ear plugs. The previous week's *Muadhhdhin's* voice was waking me up gently, touching my ears and cradling me back softly into my sleep; his voice was light and graceful; it had carried peace and warmth and through his voice one could have felt the spirit of God. This melody, however, was too rough, too loud and too violent for such early hour. Not only did I badly desire a good-night sleep to feel fully rested the next morning, but also regained the energy consumed by the latest events. I craved for a sleep without any disturbance or any background noise which so far proved to have been impossible.

The next day I was continuing with the files update; lucky day for two children who got a sponsor. The poverty was beyond anyone's recognition and only by living such experience I could comprehend the scale of it. My goal was to find good-hearted souls for eighteen more children who desperately needed financial support. "What about if we make contact with the Moroccan Embassies in Paris, London, etc? These embassies may know friendly businesses through import/export trade?" I was asking Hannah in one of my emails. "Perhaps contacting Moroccan Airlines and asking them if their suppliers would sponsor our children would be a good idea, or directly approaching charities like UNICEF inquiring for a grant or some help with finding sponsors?" The ideas were great but they had already been tested without much of a success, not even extra luggage or free flights were considered by British Airways or Royal Air Morocco - those giant corporations that are making billions each year. "How on earth did it happen that we have so much and they have so little? What went wrong?" I repeated the questions in one of my emails sent to my wonderfully "ancient" and supportive friend Michael Richman. "Who is responsible for such mess? Is it still possible to fix it, and if so, how?"

The whole afternoon I spent in the company of my mum Hakima, Fadma and a family that we paid a visit to that day: Halima, and her mum, whom I met at the party, the one who sat in between me and that screaming baby. By the way, the whole mystery behind that celebration was explained to me by Hannah in one of her emails to me. It turned out it was not pregnancy but a *circumcision* party for her little boy. The house was icy cold and after one hour of not moving and not having a hot drink, I was properly frozen. It was noticed and I was given a blanket. Soon after my poor blood circulation was improved by mint tea and *boucheyar* that were served when Halima came back from the market. I looked at her thinking how attractive she was with her pure healthy skin complexion touched by the sun, finest wrinkles and her upper teeth that were coming out a little bit too far out adding even more charm to her rather shy character. She was forty-two years old and not married yet. There was someone in her life, someone that she loved, but it turned out to be a dodge, disappointment, and a drunken-scam.

The winter finally paid us a visit dropping loads of rain and taking away the sunshine. Our house felt even colder. The temperature dropped down by a few degrees and although the open-air aperture was covered by a blanket, it did not prevent the chill from coming in. Hakima gave me another warm pyjama and a dressing-gown, it was necessary to put more layers on in order to survive winter here. The sudden change of climate made me feel nostalgic, the yearning to be with my own family or friends, sitting in front of a fire, sipping hot chocolate, or having a glass of mulled wine over a film or some chit-chat

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Notes:

1 (p. 8) 'Succulent' - one of my favourite words in English language as reminds me of my best-loved playwright Harold Pinter and his "Birthday Party" (1958).

2 (p. 8) Eid Al Adha - Abraham had a dream in which God told him to sacrifice his first newborn son. When the day came he told his dream to his son who agreed to obey God; when Abraham was about to kill his son, God sent him a sheep to slaughter instead of his son. This is where the commemoration comes from.

- 3 (p. 10) The open-air aperture in typical Moroccan houses or riads is no accident. It serves two purposes. Firstly, the obvious focal point but more importantly, the natural air-conditioning that has been prevalent in Morocco for millennia and is remarkably successful.
- 4 (p. 10) Bsha/bessaha, in Darija, the Moroccan dialect, “in good health.” It’s a very common word and one hears it often.
- 5 (p. 11) Koul! In Darija, Eat!
- 6 (p. 11) La, in Amazigh/Tamazigh, the Berber language means no.
- 7 (p. 12) Darija - Moroccan Arabic dialect. It’s not an official language but it has a strong presence in Morocco. This year it has stirred some linguistic debates whether it should be taught at schools. The proposal has been rejected by Moroccan Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane as “a threat to the very foundations of the Moroccan state.”(Al Jazeera, 27 April 2014).
- 8 (p. 12) Āami, in Darija, my paternal uncle. In this case, when preceded a name, it expresses a great deal of respect for that elderly person.
- 9 (p. 12) “All human life is here” - an advertising slogan for the News of the World in late 1950s. The quotation comes from the book “The Madonna of the future” (1879): “Cats and monkeys – monkeys and cats – all human life is here.”
- 10 (p. 13) “Nihil novi sub sole” - “There is nothing new under the sun,” “Ecclesiastes” (1:9).
- 11 (p. 13) Brandon Mull, “Fablehaven. Teacher’s Guide,” prepared by LuAnn B. Staheli, M.Ed, p.7-8.
- 12 (p. 13) Boucheyar/ Mssemen - Moroccan pancakes.
- 13 (p. 14) Hammam - it derives from Arabic word ‘al hamim’ - ‘the force of the summer heat,’ in Western World it is known as the Turkish bath.
- 14 (p. 15) In Darija: Brit n’koul - I want to eat; tcharafna - nice to meet you; ajbani - I like it; mezyan - good; zwina - pretty, beautiful; khayb - bad; tsbah-ala-khir - good night.
- 15 (p. 16) Al-Fajr - lit. “when the sky begins to whiten/ the first light of dawn,” is the first of the five salat prayers.
- 16 (p. 16) Muadhdhin/Muazzin/Muezzin/Moaadin - a person who is appointed at a mosque to lead and recite the call to prayer (adhan).
- 17 (p. 16) Before each prayer, Muslims perform a ritual ablution called ‘wudu.’ The process involves washing the hands, face, arms and feet in a very particular way. ‘Wudu’ symbolises a state of physical and spiritual purity required to stand before God.
- 18 (p. 16) Sobh - the morning prayer.
- 19 (p. 18) Baba, in Amazigh, grandfather.
- 20 (p. 19) “Letters on life,” Rainer Maria Rilke, The Modern Library, 2006, p. 37.
- 21 (p. 19) Allah, the Almighty; I declare, there is no God but Allah; I declare that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; Come to pray, Come to success (salvation); Allah, the Almighty; There is no God but Allah.
- 22 (p. 19) Quran, chapter 62/verses: 9-10.
- 23 (p. 19) Aisha Stacy, from the article, “The religion Islam. The significance of Friday in the life of a believer,” 2010.
- 24 (p. 19) “Ghusl” - is an Arabic term referring to the full body ritual ablution required, if the adult loses the state of body cleanness; mandatory for any Muslim after having sexual intercourse, orgasmic discharge, completion of menstrual cycle, giving birth, and death by natural causes.
- 25 (p. 19) Immam - a person who learns the Quran by heart and conducts Islamic worship service, and provides religious guidance. It is also a title that is given to every person that leads in Muslim society, e.g. the King of Morocco is called the Immam.
- 26 (p. 19) Aisha Stacy, Op. cit.
- 27 (p. 20) Zuhr or Dhuhur - the midday prayer, the second of the five salat prayers.
- 28 (p. 20) Chouf! In Darija, Look!
- 29 (p. 24) Nafha - black tobacco.
- 30 (p. 24) Iben - white cheese.
- 31 (p. 24) Hrira - the traditional Moroccan soup.
- 32 (p. 24) Chwya/ chwiya, in Darija, a little.
- 33 (p. 26) The name Simo equals Mohamed.
- 34 (p. 26) “Daunbailo” (1986), a fantastic film with Robert Benigni who goes to prison, takes out of his pocket his notes and reads out loud, “Excuse me, excuse me, not enough room to swing a cat.”
- 35 (p. 27) Salam ali-koum, La bas? Bikhir? Henya? The greetings, hello, how is going? How are you? Is it going well? The verbal greeting is usually accompanied by a hand-shake (between men and women and strangers); then the hand is either placed on the mouth (if one greets elderly persons) or on the chest. The close family and friends (only between men) kiss each other three times – one kiss on one side and two kisses on the other side.

36 (p. 28) Blatti! In Darija, Wait!

37 (p. 28) “Se remplir le bidon” - “to be full up,” this French idiom does make French people laugh.

38 (p. 29) Circumcision is practised nearly universally by Muslims in Morocco. It is a tradition established by the Prophet Muhammad and so its practice is considered very important in Islam. There is also a matter of cleanliness and purification. According to a systematic and critical review of the scientific literature, the health benefits of circumcision include lower risks of acquiring HIV, genital herpes, human papilloma virus and syphilis. Circumcision also lowers the risk of penile cancer over a lifetime; reduces the risk of cervical cancer in sexual partners, and lowers the risk of urinary tract infections in the first year of life. (New Evidence Points to Greater Benefits of Infant Circumcision, But Final Say is Still Up to Parents, Says AAP, American Academy of Paediatrics, 2012). Risks associated with male circumcision depend on the type of study (e.g., chart review vs. prospective study), setting (medical vs. nonmedical facility), person operating (traditional vs. medical practitioner), patient age (infant vs. adult), and surgical technique or instrument used. The most commonly reported complications were pain, bleeding, infection, and unsatisfactory appearance. There were no reported deaths or long-term sequelae documented. Well-designed studies of sexual sensation and function in relation to male circumcision are few, and the results present a mixed picture. Taken as a whole, the studies suggest that some decrease in sensitivity of the glans to fine touch can occur following circumcision. However, several studies conducted among men after adult circumcision suggest that few men report their sexual functioning is worse after circumcision; most report either improvement or no change. (Risks associated with male circumcision, Centre for Disease Control and Prevention).

## End of Part One

## Part Two

*“Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I’m not sure about the universe.”*

I left Europe exactly two weeks ago. Although I missed some of the commodities that I was used to, I had not made a single complaint. Amongst the most missed were my shower and bath, and BBC Radio 4 with the stories on Desert Island Discs, and the countryside drama on The Archers. Some form of entertainment, including the cinema and decent meaningful conversations were top of my list. Despite the occasional craving for a glass of Bordeaux or Côte de Lyon, my body felt lighter and my thinking clearer. The popularity that I had been gaining here through all those countless opportunists with such transparent intentions made me ponder writing my own phonebook.

Today I was perturbed by the appearance of two young men who seemed older but acted like teenagers. The one who spoke a little bit of English and French was a twenty-eight-year-old school bodyguard. The second one, called Said, had no particular skills. Wait a minute! I’m missing two things: drinking and smoking. If he wasn’t sipping whisky, hidden in the inside pocket of his jacket, he was smoking either hashish or cigarettes. He was a handsome man but not the brightest crayon in the box. In fact, both of them weren’t playing with the full deck and were full of clear intentions. “What about a walk along the river?” They were asking questions and at the same time praising my curves. “Going where, exactly?” “Mountains,” they said. “They are quite far away,” I was alert. “We could stop at Said’s house if it gets too much,” suggested the bodyguard. I got more alert but there was no reason to panic - it was a bright sunny afternoon in a public garden. Although I knew I was safe, I was troubled by the energy they were sending: clearly abusive, uncanny, and spine-chilling. When I was on the way to the medina, I had this weird feeling that I may see them again. Perhaps it was all a coincidence that a man called Abdellah paid attention to me and offered to walk me home that day, when out of blue, Said and his friend happened to be behind us pretending not to know me at all. “Merde! Now he knows where I live!” I cursed this fortunate encounter. “Please, call me. I’d like to take you out,” said Abdellah, “If you don’t, I’ll come and get you. I know where you live.” That meaningless but creepy remark taught me a lesson today.

Fadma, the very best friend of Hakima, dragged me out of the house over to hers. “*Aji! Aji!*” she shouted adding, “*hrira,... koul!*” The level of my hunger was down below zero but the pleasure of this invitation was greater than the appetite. Despite of all the conservative attributes towards life that Fadma was gradually revealing, there was also another side to her which was illuminated by the beaming warmth towards her family and close friends. It was easy to see how much she was loved by her own children. In fact, the warmth

generated by that family was the only form of heating in the entire house, there was no wood-burning stove or gas heater. It seemed like TV was the biggest modern commodity here as well as each household that I had so far visited displayed one TV screen, at least. Perhaps it was the only way of keeping in touch with reality or entertainment, and certainly football - the national obsession spread out on at least ninety-five per cent of Moroccan men.

I have to own up. *Hrira*, the refined by chickpeas minestrone soup, did not work for me at all. No matter where or by whom it was prepared, there was something tasteless about the whole combination of chickpeas, tiniest pasta, and tomatoes sauce. Nevertheless, I ate it every time out of politeness, respect, and gratitude for the food that was on the table each day. "Fadma...baby," Hakima was pointing at Fadma's belly. "Is she pregnant? Congratulations!" Hold on, there was no trace of the father, where was he? Apparently he was constantly away working and only occasionally was coming back home. Having had two boys she desperately wanted a girl. "She will call the baby after you," I was told by Hakima.

It could have been the *hrira* that gave me a splitting headache which turned into a bad migraine, or it could have been something else. No matter what caused my temporary illness, it certainly required a little snooze. "What's going on?" Incredibly loud yells suddenly woke me from my nap. I rushed downstairs and saw Lahcen's father against Papa Mohamed boozing with disagreement over something. I sat down thinking that perhaps the company of a stranger could prevent further arguments, but as soon as I sat down I had to stand up again as everyone else did. Papa Mohamed was erect in fury and was on the verge of punching Lahcen's father in his face, but here was grandma Halima who raised herself swiftly standing between them two and preventing any violence from erupting. They kept shouting for a while, and the quieter Papa Mohamed was becoming, the louder Lahcen's father behaved. Whatever was said that evening caused a red-hot debate after the furious man was gone. Soon after, his son Lahcen arrived joining in a debate, this time in rather peaceful manner.

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From the correspondence to Hannah:

"Today, Mustapha, Mohamed and Mohamed the caretaker did a great job bringing almost all the children to the school. I think that only sixteen did not turn up. One of our sponsored children, Mohamed Oulabi, came with his mum asking for help. It must have been some time ago since the boy broke his arm, but they had never had money to get it fixed. His arm looks awful and the photos I attached do not even show it. Apparently, they need 10.000DH for the operation and asked if I could help. Perhaps, you could make some sort of appeal? If this would be of any help, I could donate the £100 that John Fairley sent to me through your website."

I had an immediate response from Hannah saying: "This is a bit tricky. Basically we have had to stop helping with medical needs because there are so many; when you do for one you end up with everyone asking for money. We literally had a queue outside Hmad's dad's house, and *Baba* said he was going to put Halima at the door to sell tickets!"

They had paid for an operation to help a boy with club feet, a cataracts removal for a man with Downs Syndrome, and an operation for a three-year-old boy who had a massive lump on his face that looked like a tumour. It took them three years to find a doctor who would perform the operation. It was hugely successful and the boy who is now eight years old, still financially supported by Hannah and Hmad, in a good form. The Association has also been facing a real problem. How to trust all the people who have been approaching them and asking for very large sums of money without any formal medical verification? The people need to

produce a document that could prove the cost of an operation and diagnose the problem which is easy to obtain. Unfortunately they never do.

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The day started off with a drive around Khénifra in a taxi with Halima's mum and a few other curious passengers who talked about me while smiling and praising me by tapping my shoulders.

Then on the way back home from El Borj, I got a lift from a man who drove a brand new-looking 4x4 car. He was dressed up in djellaba and introduced himself as a retired military officer and the mayor of El Bojr, the position that he wanted to resign from this year, 2014. "The bureaucracy is far too annoying," he said. This man, without a doubt, was rich and comfortable and sounded as corrupt as the people he was referring to. He then started bombarding me with questions of diplomas that I did not have, and was crushing my enthusiasm for teaching children French. "Everything has to be authorised," he barked. "What a buffoon!" I thought while explaining, unnecessarily, to him that diplomas have nothing to do with skills. This man was showing off his wealth in front of everybody driving his 4x4 car that, if sold for cash, could feed the whole of El Borj for a minimum of two years. "Has he actually done anything for those people?" I wondered. He dropped me off wishing me good luck.

While I was getting ready to go to the café, a man from the family: smiling, chatty, happy, passed over an invitation to his place for this forthcoming Saturday for me, Hakima, and Fadma. What a charming and friendly man he was!

In spite of the rain, I walked to my favourite "Omega" café where the two waiters were showing off, Simo - with his phone number; Zouhir - with a promise of taking me to the Sahara Desert to introduce me to his family. I obviously nodded and smiled.

"Salut Magdalena, je suis ton voisin," a young man with glasses on, dressed up in a long, dark and quite a fashionable coat performed in front of me. "I'm very pleased," I said, and he disappeared. A few minutes later, he was back again asking to sit with me. As the conversation wasn't flowing, pure fault of a language, he vanished again coming back with another friend who was supposed to be better in French. "Are you both students?" That didn't go well either. He left again and ten minutes later he was standing in front of me with another friend, Mohamed. This time the conversation was on. The full set of standard questions was asked but this time the dialog felt different from any other I had: very European, mature, smooth, easy-going, normal. I was surprised how normal it was. They did not ask me if I was married or whether I would like to get married, nor did they query my age. "What a pleasure to have met someone normal," I said to myself. Ali, my neighbour, was unemployed searching for work for over a year; Mohamed was studying accountancy. While walking me back home, Ali suggested going for tea at his place and meeting his mum. I was more than happy. His mum, Mina, was at home preparing tea and *boucheyar* for us. She struck me as a warm, friendly and easy-going woman, and on top of that, an excellent cook, her *boucheyar* were exquisite! Laughing, chatting, looking at photographs, it was simply an enjoyable time. Mina gave me a present, a pair of earrings with a necklace. She insisted. We scheduled coffee for tomorrow. It was time to go home and share today's excitement with my family. "I have met Ali, his mum, and Mohamed!" I was over the moon behaving like I had never seen a human being before, but they certainly had and weren't as delighted as I was. In fact, they did not show the slightest enthusiasm, and that pressed me to calm down while waiting for dinner.

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There was no specific time for people to go to bed or get up. The talk went on until they got tired of talking. The background noise that seemed to have been hidden in every single nook of the house was as awake as its inhabitants.



Hakima was up and about from 7.00am each morning. The children, Achraf and Moad, needed to be fed and sent off to school. Bread needed to be baked and tea needed to be made. Then everybody else needed to be fed. The two friends, both Fadmas, were visiting her in the mornings while she was making *boucheyar* or already preparing lunch. I might have said that before but it would be worth repeating: she was an extraordinary human being and I loved her wholeheartedly. Never had she complained and worked as hard as a dog. Her life as a married woman, she had tied the knot with Mohamed when she was eighteen years old, looked to me as a mad circle that was spinning around cooking, baking, cleaning, shopping, and looking after everybody. For the past twenty-eight years there was not much entertainment in her life, and I bet that her adolescent life had looked similar. Here was the morning procedure: Hakima made teas, coffee, heated up milk, then served us *boucheyar* or a cake, and if not, some bread with olive oil. No matter how delicious the bread was my stomach couldn't digest more than a few tiny pieces a day, so I was always looking forward to *boucheyar* of *rfissa* both, delicious, buttery, and satisfying. "Demain, Hakima, *Inchallah...*," it sounded like a coded message but it was clear to everybody. It was Papa Mohamed who each night, before the bed time, was saying it out loud to me in front of Hakima. Obviously, it was treated as a joke but the expectations were serious and unambiguous.

This morning I met some children in El Borj who would definitely come to the extra French lessons. I had this cliché in my head that girls were always better-behaved than boys. Wrong. Here they appeared as difficult as boys, cheeky and not terribly clever, curious but not enough to drop the mischievous and resistant attitude. Then, while waiting for a taxi in El Borj, I talked to a man who had this European dream in his head. Europe, for him, was one fat paradise occupied by only rich people. "How much can you earn?" he enquired. "How much does it cost to rent a house in London?" The sudden drop of his mouth showed a real disbelief. "Perhaps it's not such a paradise as you think?" He mentioned Edith Piaff and was familiar with Jack Brell's "Ne me quitte pas" song.

Waiting for a taxi or any form of public transport was time-consuming and the same went for appointments or outings. The daytime did not have a real value for people here and I had to be prepared to wait, for example, the 3.00pm medina outing with Meryam and Fadma happened to be at 5.00pm. Before then, I had stumbled upon Ali who gave me a letter.

Chère Madeleine,

C'était un plaisir pour mon ami et pour moi de faire ta connaissance. Le fait de t'inviter boire un verre de thé chez moi était un geste spontané et ne portait aucune mauvaise intention. Les gens d'ici ne perçoivent pas les choses de la même façon.

Nous sommes à ta disposition pour toute aide. Laisse-toi à nous. Si tu voudrais qu'on prenne un café ensemble ou bien faire un tour à la médina appelle moi sur mon portable ou bien viens pour me chercher chez moi.

Cordialement,

Ali

As I anticipated nothing except for an occasional coffee or chat, I was rather moved by such a cordial message. This letter also made me deliberate a much divided Moroccan society suggested by Ali: "Les gens d'ici ne perçoivent pas les choses de la même façon."

The feeling of vulnerability and powerlessness struck again. While I was standing in front of a shop in the medina awaiting Meryam and Fadma, a clochard walked past me, turned around, and stopped. He picked up a piece of vegetable that was soaked up in a puddle of dirty water on the street, and mumbling something

threw that piece at me saying: “*Koul! Koul!*” I did not move. I just watched him coming closer. The temptation was to say, “I’m not hungry, thank you,” but for a couple of reasons I restrained myself. Firstly, I did not want to get into any trouble with that poor man, and secondly, I felt as if I had no right to engage in any verbal or physical attack against someone more vulnerable than me. However, the clearly diminishing distance between me and him was suggesting some form of intentional aggression. It was lucky that the whole scene was observed by a couple of young men from across the street. They reacted, and their verbal interruptions warded him off. The whole scene appeared funny to them though, they were entertained and had neither any sympathy for this poor homeless man nor for me, his potential victim.

The change of the weather brought a change in our house, a smoky one at first, suffocating, making us all cry, unwillingly. The smoke produced by the malfunctioning *forno* was slowly taking over the whole house looking for escape everywhere but through the chimney. The chimney was made of five long metal pipes that were running through the open-air aperture up to the rooftop. For a couple of hours it was a real palaver, but eventually smoke found its way out through that metal pipe and we all could sit around it enjoying each other’s company. Photo-click. Hakima attacks Papa Mohamed pretending to stab him in his head. Photo-click. *Baba* gets angry, the noise and Mustapha’s laughter, precisely, gets on his nerves. “Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha,” he imitated Mustapha’s cheerfulness. If only I could understand his monolog! Another photo. A good-working stove. Click. Enough. Mustapha was keen on seeing a movie on my computer. “*Wakha.*” When I was going through hundreds of films on my hard-drive, I stumbled upon the documentary on Lucian Freud. “Have a look; this man was a very famous painter.” My intentions were to educate him and never to embarrass, or make him feel uncomfortable, and his reaction wasn’t something that I had anticipated. He looked at the painting, “Benefits Supervisor Sleeping,” and with hinted anger turned his head away. The nudity shown on the painting was for him equal to some other nude acts, which were not to be exposed publicly. *Awrah*, the intimate parts of the body must, according to Islam, be covered from the sight of others with clothing, and exposing any of it is regarded as a sin. “Modesty is part of faith.” Although I did not understand his reaction then, I apologised for making him feel awkward. I do now, with hindsight.

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The midday service seemed louder and longer than usual. The lack of sleep from 5.30am onwards made everything longer and louder, even the Abdellah’s prayer seemed that way.

After Friday’s couscous I was ready to go and meet up with Ali and Mohamed. The same place and same variety of drinks: coffee, tea or hot chocolate. Mohamed, reminded me of one of my best friends Tomasz, intelligent, funny, with great sense of humour. However, my intuition was telling me that he had not yet fully identified his own being, not yet fully recognised himself. His eyes were searching, but what they were searching for I didn’t yet dare to ask. His smile, honest and authentic, kept disappearing under a heavy weight of thoughts and although he beamed with joy, he also kept, consciously, subduing his cheerful attitude. He was fully aware of the whole different world around him, as his intelligence and curiosity were stretching itself out beyond this town or this country. The discussions were stimulating, giving me the whole new spectrum of life here.

Ali, who constantly talked about Islam, seemed to be religious and devoted to his beliefs making me feel like a complete atheist. He looked lost though, and however much he tried to hide it, it flew back on to the surface in a big wave. They both appeared kind and helpful offering their assistance with everything from petty things like finding me a mobile phone, to the more adventurous like taking me places or even organizing the New Year’s Eve celebration.

This time, it was Mohamed’s turn to invite us both to his place: freezing cold and dark. While we were sitting in his room awaiting tea and *boucheyar* that were being prepared by his mum, kind and friendly-looking, I was

inspecting his room when my gaze, all of a sudden, stumbled upon some books. I was nicely surprised. It was the first household that exposed some literacy. His mum joined us for tea. She was clearly expressing her compassion for my situation, which at first I did not understand. I forgot the sentiments and took a very literate meaning of the word “poor” that she articulated. “How does she know that I’m not well-off?” I was thinking. Her comment baffled me but was quickly explained. Ahh, yes! I’m far away from home, the whole family and friends, I don’t have a father, and I don’t have a paid job. Perhaps consolidation was well-deserved, but it has never crossed my mind to see myself that way. Although I was going through some hardship in life, I have never had much compassion for myself. The things I chose were the things that shaped me, and I have been grateful for them. This subject led us to a deeper conversation about freedom, choice, letting go of material things, accumulating less and fully embracing the present moment, the acceptance of what we are and what we want from life. “Are you happy?” asked Mohamed. “I have learned how to be happy. It’s almost like everything else in life, like a song or a poem, if it pleases me I learn it by heart, sometime I forget some lines but quickly enough recall them to sustain the joyful moments. The earlier hardship gave me no choice and the constant travelling has opened my mind making me realise what really matters in life. It’s not what you carry in your luggage, it’s what your heart experiences, what your eyes see, what your mind consumes. You have to feed your happiness as life is hard, and you two know it very well.”

Along with the *boucheyar*, tea, and apples we had some *dactyls*. “Do you know that you can only eat dactyls in odd number?” I had no idea but did exactly what I was told, I eat three. My complaint of a very disturbing morning call for prayer did not come across as blasphemy but it did not evoke any sympathy either. It was considered a blessing for them. “Another day has come, another day given by Allah,” confirmed Ali. They were trying to make me understand the significance of their beliefs and what religion and Allah meant to them picturing it through a marriage. It was a secret act and a strong connection between husband and wife could only be developed with Allah and in the name of Allah. It seemed to me that the whole religious connection had nothing to do with the custom. If a man decides on marrying a girl he must come first to her house and ask her parents for permission. He must bring *a bag of sugar* with him. If he is accepted then the two families get together to negotiate further arrangements. Within a few weeks the marriage is organised. If the marriage for some reason does not work, one looks for the answers in the Quran. The Quran is supposed to bring answers to every single problem in one’s life. Divorce is the last thing that one considers. “Religion is supposed to unite families and make them stronger,” added Ali.

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The typical breakfast:

30g of bread

1 teaspoon of jam

2 spoonful of olive oil

one cup of instant Nescafe

one cup of normal tea

They strongly believed in Allah and were fully aware of the devil. The temptation of stealing was explained to me in a very simple manner by Lahcen. “It is not you who steal.” “How do you explain that to the police when caught red-handed?” “It’s the hand of the devil that pushes you to do so.” “Who would go to prison, you or the devil?” Lahcen and Mustapha strongly opposed. “Tu regardez diable?” Actually, if I were to follow their way of thinking I would say, yes, many times. They also believed that any form of features like tattoos were done by the hand of the devil. “Why is that?” “Because it cannot be washed off.” I doubted that

grandma Halima was aware of the fact that her forehead, chin and hands had been kissed by the devil. She had a tattoo across her face, chin and hands – a strong, symbolic affiliation with Berber culture. I couldn't clearly read the symbol that ran through her forehead, but I believed it was either the symbol of the "*olive tree*" or "*wheat*." Her hands were also revealing another Berber representation which was a simple but meaningful "*tree*."

"Can you have a boyfriend and you don't have to marry him? Can you live with him? Can you also have sex with him?" Lahcen and Mustapha sounded bewildered and anxious placing the devil's horns on my head. "I want to see a film," said Lahcen. "I'm sorry, I don't have any films in Arabic." "It doesn't matter, we can watch some action film." "I don't have any action films." The disappointment struck again. I searched through the collection of my films for something amusing and light that would not require linguistic understanding and would not reveal any nudity, kissing or sex scenes. I let them down. I had neither Charlie Chaplin nor Mr. Bean; there was nothing with Bruce Lee nor with Arnold Schwarzenegger.

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"The rainy season continues making the rough waters of the river look mad, and the ground - orange brown - like never before."

The first day of teaching. Nightmare. Pure and simple nightmare. Between twenty-five to thirty savage, uncontrollable, sweet little monsters aged from ten to thirteen years old turned up that day. There was no choice but to try to accommodate them in the largest classroom which was still not big enough. They had to be seated in five round tables that usually accommodated two children. The possibility of controlling them was slim and I realised that as soon as they had entered the room. The idea of teaching French through funky dancing and singing video lessons was destroyed by talking, shouting, pardoning, hand-pointing, screaming, laughing, fidgeting, kicking, pushing, pulling, simply devouring the small room and leaving me for dessert. I was looking but my eyes were shouting: "Shut up!" Mohamed, the caretaker, calmed them down and I took advantage of the two minute silence explaining the rules on the table. "Respect. Do you know what it means?" I was looking at them and their completely blind faces thinking how pointless the whole explanation was.

I was keen on introducing them to Paris through very basic video conversations, and although they paid some attention at first, the logistics then failed me badly. The screen of my laptop was far too small and the loudspeakers far too weak. As soon as the children opened their mouths, the sound from the videos was impossible to hear. My third attempt that day was to familiarise them with some singing cartoon-characters of a very simple melody and text: "Bonjour, bonjour, comment ça va? Bonjour, bonjour, très bien, merci." Although this part went well, the following change of rhythm and lyrics added more confusion and chaos to the existing one. Whatever they had learned at school it did not manifest itself in practice. At first it sounded comical. "Ça va?" "Oui" "Comment tu t'appelles?" "Oui." "No, I've asked your name." Confusion. "Pourquoi es-tu ici?" "Oui." It was becoming less comical, rather tiring and pointless. Another attempt, this time I wrote the questions down on the blackboard. "Quel âge as-tu?" "No, no," I pointed out at a boy. "Don't repeat the question, just give me the answer." "Alors, quel âge as-tu?" The voices carried the same response: "Quel âge as-tu?" To a certain extent they were amusing and making me laugh by provoking a very human contact giving me no choice but to hug them, dishevel their hair, or shake hands with them. I was far too weak and my formula that "life is hard on them, so why should I be" failed me terribly. That was my weakness and they could sense it, they could sniff it from a distance like well-trained dogs. The challenge wasn't the teaching in itself but bringing the order back to the classroom.

I lasted one hour that day. On the way back home I was pondering two things: a glass of wine and all the devoted teachers. "How admired I them! This is an exhausting job!" I was thinking out loud. "How do they

do that? How do they control those little, hungry for mischief vultures ready to peck you any moment?" That day I discovered in my mail box a message from Somaya, one of our trustees, which perked me up:

"We've not had the chance to meet yet but I just wanted to drop you a line and say, as one of the trustees of Hannan, without volunteers like you we wouldn't be making the progress we are. Thank you so much for all your hard work so far. I hear you're doing a fabulous job and that you've fitted in perfectly with the locals. Do keep us all updated with your progress and if you need anything at all, please just let us know."

Back at home, there was a pleasant family gathering around the wood-burning stove that night with the usual tagine, and popcorn, a massive amount of different flavours: salty, spicy and sweet shared between fifteen people. Mustapha wasn't himself that night. "What is bothering you?" I asked. "You look sad." "Regardez maman et papa," he said. "Is there something wrong with them?" The explanation wasn't easy to understand as every single sentence started off with: "Il y a" and was followed by "regarder" or "pour arriver." When he didn't drink, he appeared intelligent, thoughtful and very sensible, and although he loved *Baba* to bits, he was getting upset with his constant reprimands, "Don't drink, don't smoke, don't laugh, go to the mosque, pray." "Margarena, papa Mohamed and Mustapha called me Margarena, *Baba* est Hitler," he joked meaningfully. Mustapha wholeheartedly hated Arabs and wholeheartedly expressed it while sulking drunk and being impossible to control as either he laughed hysterically or shouted some nonsense. His body did not stay still for a long time and his energy was scattered around places. Eating for him meant: grabbing, chewing, spitting and speaking with a mouthful. The food was never served spicy but a chilli pepper, the ingredient that could only be touched by bread as it was so hot, was always on the side. Mustapha consumed the whole chilli pepper at once. He was a character: difficult and big-hearted at the same time.

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With an occasional wash in cold water, and once per week in hot, my body yearned for a good hebdomadal scrub in the *hammam*. I set off straight after breakfast packing everything but the towel. "Merde!" I spat it out when being stripped off to the underwear. "I'm sorry, I forgot something." I apologised to a couple of women who were sitting next to me. I was trying to recall the word "towel" in Darija while performing charades when, all of a sudden, they both shouted triumphantly "*Fota! Fota!*" One of the women offered me her own towel. My imagination went wild. "*Chokrane,*" I showed number two, walk, and house.

There were no rules in the *hammam*, or maybe there was one: whoever went first to the tap, if there was not much hot water left in the basin, occupied it for as long as all buckets were filled up, sometimes four or less, this time, there were eight lined up. I was standing there waiting my turn and being irritated by their manners, or lack of them. It was definitely their territory marked by "allowing me to use it" gesture when they were done.

They all had the tendency to stare. I understood the street, the outside world where I was and looked like a stranger, here however, there was nothing that made me stand out, I was more equal here than anywhere else and yet again, they gawped; they gawped when I washed, scrubbed, moved, sat or stood up. This time was even worse. While I was washing my hair, a middle-aged woman sat down next to me, in spite of all the space in that room, she chose to sit close to me. With the corner of my eyes I had followed hers, firstly, I saw her gaze right at my face, and then at my breast. She was actually starring at my boobs! I looked straight into her eyes and smiled expecting an embarrassing smile back. Instead, her dead-straight looking face turned away almost angrily, and she was carrying on with scrubbing. A minute later her eyes were on me again. I gave her another look, this time a dead-serious one which was saying "I've got enough of this game!"

Here one could see all body types from corpulent to slim, ugly to beautiful, neglected to healthy-looking. However, today, there was one image that disturbed me and rushed me back home. Here was an elderly

woman sitting on the bare floor brushing her long, thin, damaged, henna-dyed hair. Her minuscule body looked particularly undernourished. Her ribcage was sticking out so much that her stomach was disappearing under the mass of that ribcage. She was tiny, vulnerable and illness-stricken. The image did upset me. It accompanied me home and took a taxi with me to El Borj. But as soon as I left the taxi, that mental picture was chased away by the screaming children who were already waiting for me in the front yard of the school. Yet again, the number of children exceeded the number of places: instead of sixteen we had to accommodate twenty-five. Although they were younger and better behaved, in comparison to the previous group, I was unable to control them without the presence of Mohamed, the vice-president. Apparently, this was how they behaved with foreign teachers: they treated them badly by disrespecting them. "They respond with only the severest discipline as that is all they know," I heard this statement on few occasions. I could actually sense the fear in them when a Moroccan person was walking into a classroom. Today, one sweetly annoying-disturbing individual was sent back home. "Silence! Who's next?" shouted Mohamed. They had to be threatened to become silent. Was this right? The lack of respect was disturbing. "Shouldn't they be taught respect at school?" I was asking myself. And why do they have such attitude towards us? We give them our time and money and in return we get this? "They have to fear you in order to respect you," I was told. Madness. It goes both for the girls and the boys. They were equally vicious and sweet at the same time. "Madam, Madam!" they kept shouting and booing as soon as Mohamed's feet were beyond the classroom's doorsteps. Voilà! Here, I would repeat after Mustapha who kept saying, "Il y a le system de Maroc, le system d'Europe, le system de Pologne, le system de Mustapha et ... le system des enfants!"

Ah,... il y a le system de *forno*. As soon as I walked away from one challenge, I jumped into another, the smoky, uncontrollable and rebellious wood-burning stove in our house. I was not sure when the pleasure of having the wood-burning stove would turn into a nightmare? Perhaps it was already happening? Something was definitely not working and it was bothering me, my lungs, eyes, and all my clothes. No one else seemed to have been bothered though. On the contrary, Papa Mohamed kept everyone in the dark saying that smoke was good for one's eyes.

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A few days ago in the medina, I was noticed by a young man of a sleepy eye and pale skin, tall and handsome. While walking me back home he kept asking questions. "Are you happy? What is important for you in life?" Oh boy! I knew where it was all going. How did it happen? He called it love at first sight. I should have been flattered at least, instead, I was bursting with laughter while he was declaring his perpetual love for me. I suddenly had become the most important person in his life. What a sweet and charming man he was! Cutting the love story short, I promised to see him again. We were supposed to meet in the centre at 11.30am in the same place where he had spotted me the first day. The day was dry and warm. When I arrived Hassan wasn't there, but there were handfuls of opportunists circling around and sending me some sorts of signals by winking, tapping, and tracing down my steps. Bizarre! My friend was running late and I had no intention of waiting for him. I felt more than relieved. The heavy burden of getting to know another "chancer" was buried. Done and dusted. But as soon as I left the medina, I was chased by someone else who shouted, "Bonjour, bonjour, minute, minute." It was a face of that winking man who very much wanted to know where I lived, and kept insisting on coffee with me. As he was as stubborn as donkey and unresponsive to "no," I had to do my usual: I took his number and promised to call him.

Within a minute or two there was another man on the opposite side of the pavement who was trying to make eye contact with me. When this failed, he changed his tactic by overtaking me, crossing the street and waiting for me on the other side of the street. He was beckoning me mumbling "faire connaissance, faire connaissance." "*Wakha*." Beautiful eyes he had; but the very short conversation left him disappointed, he walked off empty-handed with no contact number, no Facebook name or email.

In the meantime, Hassan called me apologising for the delay. He was now in Khénifra and badly wanted to see me. I unburied the burden and met him for coffee later that day. He sounded as desperate to me as was his brother who paid 10.000 Euros for the arranged marriage with a Spanish girl. "It's has been five years since he left Morocco," he recalled. "Is there any love between them?" I asked. "Not at all, they only live together." "What kind of a solution is this?" He said it was better to live unhappy in Europe than happy here. How did he manage to save up so much money? This is the equivalent of 100.000DH. "Our family has some animals and we had managed to save up from selling meat," he added.

He knew how desperate he was but he didn't know how badly his eyes and his body were betraying him: he was tense and nervous. "I can go to Poland with you," he made me laugh again. "When my family and yours meet, I'm sure they would get on very well." When he realised how weak this argument was, he knew he had to play the stronger cards: he hit the triumph one. "My heart belongs to you, I cannot do anything about it, I love you. Do you love me?" "No, sorry, I've known you for two hours, and besides you are far too young for me." His very sweet and handsome face brightened up as the age did not matter to him. He gave me an example of a young Moroccan man who married a very old Swiss woman. "I agree with you but I still don't love you." When he was walking me back home, he identified his last chance. "I'm sick of games that Moroccan women play with me. I will not settle down with a Moroccan woman, I'm tired of looking for one. They are not fun, you are fun and you are in my heart!" "What about friendship?" I suggested. "We don't have to get married straight away but have a romantic relationship, if you agree." I didn't. I turned down his senseless offer which he straight away tried to justify. "I don't want to create a problem for you, I don't like police. I'm just honest and straightforward." He compared Moroccan women to zigzags making me go hysterical with laughter again. "They are like zigzags," he said. "They are not straightforward and you are straightforward." He recognised it straight away, and I had no choice but to take the same straightforward road back home.

The recent tension between me and my family made me go first over to Ali's: "Frappe and monte, any time you want," so I knocked and climbed up the stairs. Mina invited me in for some scrambled chilly eggs served with tea while waiting for Ali who showed his face ten minutes later. There was a difficulty in communicating as the words were turning into a guess and the guess into laughter. There was no substitution for it, and no matter how much I wanted to get to know Mina through the alphabet I had to discover her through her simple acts of kindness, gestures, look or touch. If I looked at Mina through colours and the *Chinese* representation of them, I would use red, yellow and white to describe this superb woman; all her spontaneous acts that were fully grounded and level-headed but still flexible, were making her a very desirable woman, wife, mother, and a friend, a very generous friend. She yet again offered me two pairs of trousers, which I refused saying it would be better to give it to some poor people. She agreed, and instead took out a box full of glittery objects like earrings, bracelets, necklaces and was trying them out on me. The necklace, a pair of earrings and a bracelet were a gift. I liked it and she gave me no choice but to accept them. In exchange I copied some French lessons for Ali and a couple of films, "A Dangerous method" and "Love in the time of Cholera," having had in mind one of his favoured singers, Shakira.

The anxiety of going home was growing fast, forcing me to leave. How did it happen, I was thinking, that the time spent in a company of other people was turning itself into a sheer thought that I may be betraying my own family? Why was I feeling such fretfulness? Perhaps because I anticipated the reaction to my overtly impulsive, exultant way of sharing with my family the new, the exciting, the stimulating, the uplifting that was happening, and observing the previous retorts, I now sensed nothing but resentment and more suspicious questions which only stirred a great deal of misunderstanding. The funny and entertaining Hassan's story, in my opinion, was the very opposite in the eyes of my family. "He has to come here first so we could see his intentions clearly." I laughed not understanding the whole cultural issue behind it. They all, including drunken Mustapha, were convinced that I wanted to marry Hassan. "I have no intention to marry anyone," I

shouted. “But he wants to marry you,” Lahcen was adding more fire to the already burning. “Who is Hassan?” Mustapha joined the surreal discussion. “Toi, mariez Hassan? Hassan, qui est Hassan?” He slumped the door and walked off. I got confused and baffled by the whole blown-up scene which was supposed to be nothing more than a humorous episode in my life. Once again, there was that very worrying and sad fact that was slowly emerging making it all clear that perhaps sharing every detail of my life with my family was not a good idea as instead of releasing some tension, it was only adding more to the existing one.

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This morning I was invited over to Ali’s for breakfast. “Are you going to eat there?” asked Meryam. The truth made her raise her eyebrows, so I quickly changed my attitude by eating as much as possible adding. “It’s just a quick cup of tea.” At Mina’s we had heavenly delicious *boucheyar* with a tiny bit of scrambled eggs. It was 10.00am. As Mohamed overslept, Ali and I decided to walk around the town, take photos, talk and listen to the music while walking and sharing the headphones, moving to the rhythm of the music and singing out loud. It felt normal. I forgot about all the people who were staring, we were simply happy in that particular moment. The change of a café was refreshing and the purchase of “*Liberation*,” stimulating; it provoked discussions that soon became our weekly routine and then a daily addiction. The deliberations about the Quran and the Bible were to be continued tomorrow over a glass of wine and followed by a film, we all decided.

Ali’s dad, Mohamed, was a tailor. He couldn’t hear a thing and talking to him was like having a chat with a person with headphones and loud music on. “Ça va? Toujours ça va?” He was shouting each time he saw me. His small tailor parlour was at the corner of our street where he used to spend most of his time sewing, reading the Quran, and drinking tea. The pyjamas, which he used to make, were traditional, simple and old-fashioned and yet charming, and I wanted to buy one. “It’s old-fashioned,” said Ali. “It doesn’t matter. I like it.” When I shared my excitement of purchasing the pyjama with Meryam and other women who were sitting outside the house that afternoon, I got the “ça m’est égal” look followed by the “really?” guise. We disappeared into the garage and I examined the far too big, the far too old-fashioned and the far too-covered with dust pyjama deciding on purchasing that particular one.

“I don’t understand why you are so angry with me?” I raised the Mina-Ali topic over lunch. “What is the problem?” I asked Meryam. I explained to her the simplicity of our relationship, the friendship and joy that comes with it. “Where I come from, I have male friends, close male friends and this is normal to me.” Apparently, there was no problem; she was fine with it as long as I was safe. We hardly spoke over supper, which consisted of bread, eggs, milk and tea, and some meat that another member of the family had brought in. The room was yet again covered with smoke coming this time from the barbecue which was prepared inside the house. My eyes were watering, the breath was short, but the meat was tasty. I started giving some French lessons to Achraf as Papa Mohamed wanted him to learn and eventually handle a simple conversation. This was his fourth year at school and despite all his efforts, hardy could he differentiate letter “A” from letter “O”. I wondered how on earth he had passed his exams.

I received a distressing email from my mum regarding my grandma’s illness that when the ambulance came, she refused to go to hospital insisting on dying at home. I prayed. I wanted to see her again. Badly.

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”My name is Krystyna Magdalena Margarena Hannah *Zahra* Wasiura.”

At this point, I was desperate to get my message across. Before I put my faith into Hannah, I had used the Google translator creating a little message to which Meryam paid particularly long attention.



I was hoping she would understand my contemplation regarding friendship, freedom, and trust. "Please do trust me, and don't worry about me. I feel safe, you cannot protect me from everything and if I made a mistake you would not be blamed for it." I thought that my discourse would make the next one much smoother. It didn't. Damn Google! "What time will you be coming home tonight?" "Around 10.00 or 11.00pm." Her face was not accepting it, but she nodded.

When the Google translation did not help, the whole cultural misunderstanding was also discussed over a telephone with Hmad who had tried to explain it in their own language. They confirmed that the family was very controlling for a reason. They didn't want me to get exploited as basically no one in Morocco really trusted anyone else. It was hard for the family to understand the freedom that Western women had. "You are doing a great job and you will have these issues come to the surface living and working so closely in such a different culture, but I don't think you will have more problems with the family," Hannah assured me adding, "This is what you do not pick up, when you are on a package holiday!"

Whoever in the house was not involved in my problems was very much occupied by their own little agendas, for example, grandma Halima and her small plastic bottle of water. Let's play the charades. Here is grandma Halima sitting up in her bed and showing me her half-empty bottle pressed hard on to her stomach and making a gesture, with her hands, as if she was putting a spell either on me, her stomach or the bottle. Is she in pain? Is the bottle of any consolation? Why is the bottle half-empty?

Then her little plastic box with the unscrewed top that was by her bed all the time. My simple thinking was leading me to something equally banal: urine. Maybe she does pee in that little box. And when emptying it, I convinced myself to my prior discourse. It was then, when grandma gave me a full pictorial explanation: she unscrewed it and spat into that box. I felt relieved. Sometimes, however, the saliva ended up on her blanket as the top was not properly screwed, making my own stomach turn upside down. Nonetheless, her little habits of spitting, climbing up the stairs and not being able to descend, or arguing with *Baba Lahcen*, all those little elements were adding more charm and charisma to her character. Whatever tiniest favour I did for her, she paid back handsomely through her gratefulness that was bigger, wider and larger than grandma herself. She kissed my hands repeatedly three times and then always went four times for the forehead. Every time I was passing through that room, she called me "Hannah, Hannah" and performed her own ritual with my forehead and hands. Just to clear out the confusion: My name is Krystyna Magdalena Margarena Hannah Zahra Wasiura.

Nevertheless, all the efforts of going out tonight to watch a film over a glass of wine went down the drain. The evening was poisoned by a rather unreasonable amount of L'eau de Vie. All of a sudden Ali called sick. He was well and in good form the night before and in bed looking and feeling jolly miserable the following morning. The story didn't add up, but yet again, my naivety forced me to ask if he was in need of some aspirin or syrup. The explanation soon arrived with Mohamed who was familiar with the consequences of heavy drinking of "the water of life." "What is this?" "It's wine." "Wine? He got poisoned by wine?" I couldn't believe it. He was rushed to the hospital this morning feeling as if he was dying. L'eau de Vie it was not wine, here everything which was alcoholic was called wine for some reason. L'eau de Vie it's a spirit as strong as Italian grappa or Polish home-made vodka called "bimber." It is usually served as a digestive. On the black market, this home-made alcohol goes into hands of young, usually unemployed men seduced by the lower price and the higher content of the spirit, what could it be better? And yet, *dangerous*; if the alcohol is not properly distilled and if the consumption is of a big quantity, it can kill.

The story went that Ali was poisoned by food, some fish, perhaps rotten, difficult to say as he did not pay any attention to what he had eaten that night. We left him in his recovery bed in good hands of Mina and on the telephone with Fatima Zahra, his sister who was to become a doctor.

Mohamed invited me over to his place for tea. With his mum, his sister and him as the interpreter, we touched on the subject of violence and aggression especially towards women. Once again, I was warned not to go out in the evenings as the possibility of getting robbed or even killed was very high. If so, there must always be a man with me. The scale of poverty and unemployment here were greater than anywhere else and the opportunities - minuscule. The theory was that those people would take revenge for their misfortune on anyone who would cross their path.

The sex discrimination that was limiting women's liberty was also evident. Rarely did I see women strolling down the street in the evening; they would not take their chances but would rather call a taxi that would deliver them home safely. The number of "dragueurs" in this part of Morocco was incredible, and if it was converted into kilometres, for sure, it would go beyond the long stretch of the Middle Atlas. There were not only "the singles" who were harassing women, the great number, if not greater, were the married men. Does the polygamy allow men to treat them badly? Does the polygamy allow men to disrespect them? I doubted. The respect, the etiquette, the manners, the whole set of values that allow human beings to grow, to experience, to be fearless, to expand, to let go of prejudices and stereotypes had little in common with the culture and the living traditions. There was a young educated generation of women that were rebelling against such hurtful and unjustified models of living by taking the initiative in their hands because they were fully aware of the transformation that this country must face. Unfortunately, the majority of women were being manipulated and cleverly controlled. The usual form of running was fear, fright, and distress. That group was chained by their own reactions, responses, and their verbal do's: don't go out, don't sit in a café, don't walk, don't wear anything that could make you attractive, otherwise you may become a victim. They all were bombarded by such messages and becoming victims of their own fear that they, and no one else, were passing on to the others in a form of care, percussion, obviously, and yet, they had not realised that their own fear that was passed on to the others in the form of care, could only transformed itself into more fear and panic.

The very stereotypes reigned in Morocco have been pointed out by *Tahar Ben Jelloun*. The very controversial intellectual who became the president of the jury of the cinema festival in Zagora in 2013 has spoken the truth that was not easy to embrace. Not many Moroccans want to face the problem with racism or the lasting stereotypes in Moroccan families: the clearly divided responsibilities for men and women or the very controversial subject of the *offspring*.

As the conversation continued, I was nervously looking at the clock. Having had no intention to turn up at home late, I had bid everyone farewell and was walked home by Mohamed. Always accompanied by a man.

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A woman and two children turned up at my place during breakfast, one was already sponsored by our Association, the second - a girl - wanted to be, or rather her grandma who was trying to convince me that Wishal was chosen for a sponsor. "Where do you get the information from?" "Hmad, Hannah, on the phone," she was making the calling gesture. "Really? I don't know anything about it but will certainly find out." She was kissing and hugging me as if some kind of deal was made. Neither had I trusted her nor her words. I doubted her story and sniffed some kind of trick called, "pushing her own lack." She was indeed lying. In comparison to all the sponsored children they seemed to have been doing well. Although they didn't have mother, they still had one parent who worked and provided for the family, and a big house in Khénifra which they were renting out and getting additional income from it. The greediest always tried their luck; it was the poorest that would never come to me for help.

Another invitation for a Friday couscous. This time from a young retired policeman, who after his five years of service, gave it up all for running his little boutique with organic produce: coffees, teas, nuts, biscuits. "Are

you religious?" I asked when hearing the call for prayer. "I am but I don't practise." "Why not?" "I smoke hashish, so when I smoke my mind is not clear, one can only pray with his pure and clear mind, otherwise it doesn't make sense," he explained. "Why do you smoke then?" "It's a habit, a social thing."

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I don't snack.

The half a litre of coffee consumed every morning has been substituted by a small cup. The same goes for tea. Although the intake of tea is enormous and regular, the cups are tiny.

Having tea with no sugar for over twenty years, I have now been drinking very sweet tea each day. The tea with no sugar is unbearably tasteless here.

I don't drink milk. Milk is always heated up and sweetened by sugar.

I sleep at least eight hours every day.

I don't have to rush to get to work.

I don't have to be anxious when I'm late for work or any other appointment. I don't think the phrase: "I'm sorry for being late" is often used in this country.

I don't feel hungry any more. I'm used to eating bread.

I don't feel cold that much. Although the temperature in my room does not exceed a few degrees, I have learned to put as many layers on as possible to keep me warm.

When Meryam prepares pizza, a Moroccan pizza, I crave for a glass of wine.

I still don't know how to respond to the question: "Do you like to get married here?"

I still don't understand why people think that I may want to stay here.

It didn't even cross my mind to complain about anything that I was used to, like the ambient light in my room, BBC Radio 4, a shower or bath before bed, "calm nuit" tea in bed with a snack over book or film.

I don't complain if I don't wash for three days in a row.

I'm used to the cold water now if I need a wash.

It frustrates me how narrow-minded some people are.

It frustrates me the way they talk to each other and children and how the children talk to adults. It's a vicious circle.

It frustrates me that there is so little freedom for women.

It frustrates me how they are fearful.

It annoys me that despite the immense poverty, they spend so much money on cigarettes.

It frustrates me immensely the lack of ambition in young people. The few things they do are: smoking, drinking, chatting-up, and watching football.

It frustrates me the lack of respect towards foreigners.

It frustrates me how they turn this beautiful country into a rubbish bin.

It frustrates me how lazy some are.

It frustrates me that the ninety-eight per cent of Moroccans see me as a visa.

It frustrates me that most women have little ambition.

It frustrates me how resistant they are to any change.

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Alla, one of Papa Mohamed's brothers warned me today saying: "Lock up your room every time you leave it, and hang the key around your neck with your passport. It's not the family but strangers who you should be aware of." This is the second time that a small amount of money disappeared from my purse. Not a big deal but it made me ponder Alla's warning.

Last night I couldn't sleep. Perhaps it was Alla talking, or it was all happening. I turned the lights off around 00.30am and kept hearing noises coming from the rooftop floor. The open-air aperture that was covered by some thick plastic mat was giving me a massive fright. I was convinced that there was someone on the roof trying to break into the house. I could hear voices whispering and lights moving. I turned the lights on, held my breath, and observed the roof. The noise disappeared. I was getting paranoid thinking that I may be watched. All sorts of bad scenarios went through my head starting off with a simple break-in and ending up with some guys throwing in some sleeping gas. I turned the lights off. The noise started again. This time it was more pronounced as if they were getting under the mat and stepping on to the metal bars. Without turning the lights on, I got up and gently opened the door thinking of catching them red-handed. I went downstairs. Everyone was fast asleep. "Meryam, Meryam," I whispered. No response. "Meryam, Meryam," I repeated and jerked her. She mumbled something. "There is someone on the roof," I said. She didn't understand. "Come with me, I show you." While I was beckoning her to follow me, she got up and turned the light on. "What a mistake!" I thought. They would have disappeared by the time we had got there. Meryam woke Hakima up. We all went upstairs searching for a torch. Hakima was ready to investigate the rooftop while Meryam was trying to prevent her by repeating "*la, la.*" All of a sudden, we heard a knock at the door. It was Abdellah. "What is going on?" he asked. "There is someone up there," I said. He took the torch, unlocked the door and looked around by jumping on both sides of the roof. No one was there. I knew we wouldn't find anyone. If there was someone, they would have gone by now. They said that it was probably a cat but I didn't believe in the cat story, it was far too noisy for a cat. I went off to bed relieved but at the same time disappointed that I had not managed to catch the culprit.

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"Are you coming today?" Mohamed, the vice-president, was on the phone. "In the afternoon, around 2.00pm," I said. His response was incomprehensible but his phone call was apparently urgent, which I found out two hours later when turning up in El Bojr. "Why did it take you so long?" I found Mohamed and Samira, the teacher, standing inside a classroom contemplating. "What happened? What is so urgent?" "Fatima resigned," he responded "And what can I do?" I really did not know what to do. Fatima was our second teacher. She handed in her resignation the day after she had received her monthly salary, which was today. What was the reason for her resignation? No one knew. We only speculated different scenarios over a cup of coffee that we all had together. She was twenty-eight years old and allegedly was looking for a husband, and working here wasn't giving her the right opportunities. Besides, having a job while married

was, for Berber women, something contradictory, something against their beliefs as it could create a conflict between her and her husband who was the only provider and not the woman. There was a possibility that she might have left the village or might have gone abroad. Taking into account an element of superstition, no one would share such news with anybody in case of the evil eye that may curse those plans and they would not come to pass. One of the first teachers in our school didn't turn up one day, just like Fatima. She left for France on her aunt's documents with her uncle, not saying a word to anyone. The speculation went on and on, but the truth was she left us with no teacher, which the children desperately needed.

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"We are not surprised Fatima has put in her resignation; is she going to Canada? We heard a relative, who is now in Canada, was trying to get her there? Who is the new teacher? No one has said anything to us. Have you met her? If you feel able to would you have a short interview with her in French and find out experience and what you think?" wrote Hannah.

The Factor's family. The new teacher was very quickly appointed. Today was her first day. She was a nice girl but unfortunately her father wasn't. In fact, she was one of the first girls who was interviewed by the Association few years back and scored badly; she was painfully shy and did not have much idea on teaching children; so when she was turned down the position her father bullied the organization insisting on employing his daughter. When Samira, the existing teacher, was chosen, he got the parents to boycott the school. His oppression went on for a week and then when it all settled down, he carried on with his daily nastiness, for example as a mail collector for the village, he had stopped distributing the packages. "For this reason we are a bit confused as to how all of a sudden she gets the job so quickly and wonder if some corruption or bullying has gone on?" concluded Hannah.

My task was to monitor her and give my best opinion on whether she should stay or go. In the meantime, I had carried on with the challenging task of trying to teach the children French or rather, trying to control them. After today's lesson I drew a simple conclusion: I was a useless teacher, hopeless and weak. I wanted to terrorise those little monsters, I wanted to spank them, I wanted to be ruthless and give them orders, I wanted to be like any other teacher in this country, but I couldn't. I was weak. Instead, I hugged them, made them laugh, and pulled faces when explaining words, joked or sung songs. And they loved it, but carried on misbehaving and responding to everything with chaos and destruction. What a terrible example of a teacher I was! They disobeyed the kindness because they knew they would not be punished for it. My role here so far was to control the outburst of undesirable chat in the classroom rather than teaching them.

This afternoon, as soon as I got out of the taxi, I was surrounded by children who were giving me flowers. Malak, a beautiful young girl, clever but mischievous brought me a rose. "This was rather cunning element of public relations," I thought, but they didn't know that yet. They all shook hands with me while humming the song that we had played last time: "Bonjour, bonjour, comment ça va...." Perhaps there was some light in that dark tunnel of their disobedience? We started all over again with the alphabet but the letters were slowly being eaten by those little creatures until it all was devoured by the ruling mouth of dismay. I called for help and the terror arrived. Mohamed's presence did calm them down but as soon as he started interrupting and conducting the lesson, the children were turning into little soldiers. "A" "A..." "W" "W..." "W..." "You, letter B," "B..." "G..." "No! Again, what is this litter? "G..." "No! Concentrate." They were shrinking under the tables from protecting their heads.

The stress of this "traditional" method of teaching brought upon me a massive craving for steak, some blood, some flesh. My nervous system could not cope with the dread, the hysteria that was wrapped up tightly in the luxurious Pandora's Box along with the catch 22 situation: without Mohamed I was unable to control them, and with him I was unable to teach. My cravings for steak were replaced by a plate of tagine, *forno* and drunk

Mustapha. Yet again, he could hardly stand on his feet, his T-shirt was burst, his words - insignificant. The spectacle started when he sat down next to a woman who was breastfeeding, pretending to be the “breast-feeder” or rather the “breast-taker. He was crying like a baby demanding some milk. “Mustapha, whisky does not come from the breast,” I said. He laughed. “Regardez photo de Dieu? Margarena, il y a deux photos de Dieu.” ”I don’t know what you mean. I have not seen them, sorry.” His nonsense was getting on my nerves and it was time to seek for some asylum in my room. “Margarena, Margarena,” I heard a knock at my door. “I’m in bed, good night.” “No, no, no,” he forced his way in. “Il y a beaucoup de famille de Margarena ici. Naatit et toi kif-kif.” “*Wakha*.” “Mangez, mangez,” he said. “J’ai déjà mangé.” “*Wakha*, bonne nuit.” Five minutes later he was knocking at my door again. This time he was taking about a “sœur.” “*Wakha*, à demain.” “Margarena, gentille. Bonne nuit.” He came back one more time, sat on my bed and kept grumbling. The rescue finally came from Meryam who managed to fetch him out.

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Ali, Mohamed and I made a solid arrangement. Every Wednesday we would go somewhere to explore more and through that we would get to know each other better. *Arougou* was the first place we visited. That day, Mohamed was remarkably quiet and rather curt towards me. His affection that I had observed growing every day was gone. Is he trying to protect himself? The quick-thinking led me to believe that he was repressing some sort of sentiments that were increasing with every day’s cup of coffee and unsoiled, innocent laughter. “You seem a little bit different.” “I’m just having a quiet day, that’s all.” I was not trusting his answer but happy to be going somewhere. The taxi was a simple van, which was also used for transporting animals. The capacity was quite impressive; it could fit in at least ten people in a standing position. Today we shared the space with two other men who instead of getting inside were clinging on to the van from the outside. Despite the fact that they were young-looking, they seemed old, their faces were fumed up profoundly and their blurred-looking eyes were hardly opened. They were also overwhelmingly generous sharing hashish with my friends. Within fifteen minutes we were dropped off by a café in *Arougou*, a charming place by the road that was made of nothing but a few small plastic chairs, tables and chickens that were running between the tables demanding food by furiously bouncing off the ground and stealing whatever was on it. I forgot to mention the owner, a young single man of smiling eyes and agreeable nature. During the summer time his place offers more than coffee; one can set a tent there, right in the middle of the café, and have a menu with tagines or couscous. The price would vary but would not exceed 100DH for the camping and 30 to 40DH for the menu. It’s a brilliant idea taking into account its location, in the middle of the forest with drinkable water streaming down the grazing land, and possibilities of making a fire. The menu of the day consisted of some bread, eggs, yogurts, tea and a joint - a giant joint stuffed with chemicals. I inhaled it once and had no intention to do it again.

This vast stretch of land, wild and intact, inhabited mostly by olive trees and cactuses invited us for a little exploration. The olive picking season started, picturesque to watch, but we carried on walking till we reached a place that offered a billiard table, a quick couple of rounds and we were off again. We strolled across the fields till we reached a posh place with a swimming pool. Although we stopped for tea there, I felt very much out of place. Places like this one were not attractive to me at all. The charm was disappearing under the intentions that were burdened with heavy consumerism and greed: ‘get more tourists, rip them off!’ For me, the whole experience, no matter where I ended going, was not about the comfort but the authenticity. The feeling of being seen as a tourist had made me choke and gave me no alternative but to camouflage it by settling there for a while. Here, it was a little bit tricky. Although I saw a few people with eyes of a different to brown colour, mine - were cursing me and neither pyjama nor djellaba could conceal it. It was creating a constant problem, for example the prices were always increased, or my friends had suffered a social injustice. Anyhow, when we left that place we got a lift from another fumed up character who offered his mobile number. “If you wanted to go anywhere else, call me.”

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There was an ambiguous fellow in our house a few days ago. As soon as he came and sat down in our living room, Meryam and Hakima went over to the other side. He asked questions about me and my work and was recalling his online dating experience with a foreigner. He also studied psychology and was interested in psychoanalysis, mainly in Freud and Young. Either there was something wrong with him or with Meryam who was sitting all that time in the kitchen with Hakima and was whispering and signalling to me that I should not be talking to him. When the man was gone, the opinions about him were uncovered and summed up by the word “dodgy.” “Be aware,” they warned me. He was also working as a teacher for a charity which was located right in the centre of Khénifra. Although, the very next day, I had intentions to go and see how they functioned, I was kept in bed by Sunday’s heavy rain. A few days later our Association in England received an email from the same man. He was called Said.

“C'est avec un grand plaisir que j'ai découvert votre site sachant que nous avons déjà une petite idée sur vos action sur le village El Borj situé à 10 Km de Khénifra. Ce message est une invitation à la coopération et échange d'expertise dans le domaine de développement local. En attendant de vous lire veuillez agréer nos salutations et respects.”

Apparently, Said had rung up the Association in England a couple of times before sending off emails and using different email addresses, but he had no intention to respond to any of our inquiries. Bizarre. I was told not to be bothered with finding who this chap or that association was. “It seems a strange one,” said Hannah.

Mohamed had continued behaving weirdly convincing me that it was all fault of the lack of dopamine in his body. It may be the case. He had been depriving himself of it through smoking and drinking for quite number of years. “Be careful with those cigarettes, they not only rob you of happiness but eventually they will kill you. What’s the point of smoking?” *Smoking* has been a massive problem in this country. Disregarding the health aspect, one talked mainly about the social one, which seemed to have been domineering. Men appeared to have not had control over it. Smoking became an integral part of their socio-economic status, a very popular aspect of virtually all social gatherings in Morocco. It was like fashion - it was trendy to smoke. Tons of cigarettes were available all over the place, in cafés, on streets, in boutiques, and on a large scale were distributed by individuals who devoted their time to walking across the town and selling them. They tempted everyone with a choice; either you buy the whole pack: Moroccan brand for 20DH, Marlboro for 30DH, or by item: one cigarette cost 1.50DH, Marlboro - 2DH.

Another phone call from Hassan; for the past three days he made fifty-two attempts of which none was answered. Instead he wrote:

“Tu me manques trop, je me demande maintenant si je peux supporter ton absence (...) Je brule de curiosité de connaitre ta réponse et tes sentiment envers moi, c'est nécessaire (..) mon cœur a choisi.”

Despite all the warmth and romanticism behind that message, I would never find out his real intentions. Perhaps it was only me who doubted love from first sight, perhaps it did exist.

In the meantime papa Mohamed was getting more and more ill. His stomach could not bear food and quickly after each meal was disposing it all. He also created his own language in order to communicate with me: “Lo camion la da li? Ce q̄la ce tu El Borj? No, moi je ne travaille pas mais lo....lo...” followed by sign language. Grandma Halima was still spitting into her small plastic box and kept her small plastic bottle of water on her stomach. The palaver with the new teacher Siham was to be continued.

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Fatima, the previous teacher wasn't brilliant. There were complaints of her always being on the phone and treating the children badly. I did see it myself. She smacked them when they misbehaved and raised her voice on a number of occasions. It did not make her stand out though. She was the same as the other teachers. Her approach was rather conventional and predictable. She was not the first one who had left the school without any notice. In the same circumstances the previous teachers had vanished without a single warning, without a hint of complaint. Such practice made the Association think of changing the employment contract. The first salary was now to be paid after the second month of work, this way it would prevent them from leaving without notice.

The main concern of the trustees in England was Siham's father who may be using her position in the school as a form of controlling the organization. I had never met him in person, only heard stories. I knew that the bullying and nastiness in the past made everyone in the Association aware of him. Never to be trusted again "he smiles in your face and stabs you in the back."

Mohamed, the vice-president, called an urgent meeting this afternoon. It was him, Mustapha and Mohamed the caretaker who were waiting for me in a café in Khénifra looking tense and angry when I walked in. "What's wrong?" He was reading the newspaper and not wanting to talk. "Wait a minute, we'll order drinks and we'll talk," Mohamed carried on reading ignoring my presence completely. I was irritated by his odd behaviour so I grabbed the paper and took it away. "Now, we can talk," I said. The problem was the communication between the trustees back in England and the president Mustapha who felt disappointed, deceived, and wanted to resign from his presidential chair. So did Mohamed. "Wait a minute. Firstly we have to clarify few things." There was a huge discrepancy between who made a decision to appoint Siham for the teaching position and how it actually happened. They both, personally, felt accused by the trustees of some corruption that conceivably might have taken place. "Given the history, there was something fishy about how she got this job so suddenly," Hannah raised her suspicions. "The simple people in the village would not comprehend if we fired Siham right now," they were arguing. I was listening and taking into account both, the trustees and their point of view. I did not want to see them go. Despite all the problems that were mainly down to misunderstanding on the telephone line between here and the UK, they were so far pulling their weight. I suggested a solution to this problem and sent over to Hannah with essentially everything discussed. Firstly, a probation period which sounded like a fair option, if she passes, she stays, if not she will have to go, secondly, monitoring her performance for that period of time, and finally, making honest reports back to our trustees in the UK. It all had been accepted with one exception, she would have to sign in confidentiality an agreement which stated that if her father would do anything to harm or jeopardise the charity, she would be dismissed instantly.

I was pleased that we left the café still as a team.

Back at home, I was told that tomorrow Hakima, Fadma, Achraf and I would be going somewhere. It would be a family visit within a walking distance from El Borj that was all I understood. Rkia, Hakima's mum, was also ready to go somewhere. When she was wrapping around her back a small fabric stuffed with some other fabrics, it always signified a change – her moving somewhere else. She was a trooper. I believed she must have been in her late eighties or early nineties, and from what I had seen, she moved around places all the time, from one daughter to another, every few weeks. She was still very strong but often complained about the pain in her shoulders. Although she knew that I could not comprehend a word of what she was saying, she had often talked to me, and I sometime had had a guess making her laugh, and I never knew whether I was guessing it right or wrong.

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Notes:

1 (p. 33) Albert Einstein.

2 (p. 33) Aji! In Darija, come!

3 (p. 36) Rfissa - a very finely torn boucheyar mixed with olive oil and sugar.

4 (p. 36) Inchallah - "if God wills/permits."

5 (p. 37) Dear Magdalena, It was a pleasure for me and my friend to have met you. The fact of inviting you over to my place for a cup of tea was a spontaneous act that has not portrayed any bad intentions. People here don't perceive things in the same way. We are at your service with every help you need. Leave yourself to us. If you want to have coffee or go to the medina, call me on my mobile or come to my place.

6 (p. 38) Forno, in Darija, wood-burning stove.

7 (p. 38) Wakha, in Darija, also in Amazigh, yes, ok.

8 (p. 39) Eating dactyls in odd numbers is connected with Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. It was him who consumed dactyls that way.

9 (p. 39) In traditional Berber society, a man is expected to present the finest white sugar to the father of the girl whose hand he wishes to secure in marriage. The very refined high quality sugar acknowledges the innocence, purity and virginity of the focus of his intentions whilst at the same time evoking pride and power in the father as having a prized daughter who is valued enough to be coveted. To purchase the bag of sugar with its impurities in lumps, uneven grain and colour then present this, however exquisitely wrapped, to a father of a prospective bride would be equivalent to calling his daughter a prostitute. This would be not looked upon at all favourable. ("An overview of sugar culture in Morocco, particularly within a Berber community in Rastabouda," Gorgia-Rose Travis, December 2007).

10 (p. 40) The "olive tree" symbolises strength because of its Berber name "azemmur," diverted from the term "tazmat" which means - strength. "Wheat" is associated with Life (because of its sheath) and Death (because of the seeds being in the ground).

11 (p. 40) "Tree" is related to an easy life, happiness and fertility. It symbolises the centre of the world surrounded by Beings, objects and spirits. It also means Life (because of the roots) and knowledge (because of the leaves).

12 (p. 42) Fota, in Darija, towel.

13 (p. 42) Chokrane, in Darija, thank you.

14 (p. 45) In Chinese philosophy: red represents-fire, yellow-earth, white-metal.

15 (p. 46) Liberation - the daily French newspaper.

16 (p. 47) Zahra: I was given this name, which means flower in Amazigh, during my first trip to the Sahara Desert and it has been used amongst some Moroccans since.

17 (p. 48) In September 2012 two young men, a Czech and a Slovak, killed almost 30 people in Czech Republic leaving more in a critical condition in hospitals. Those two men, having no interest in chemistry but money, had decided to dilute methanol with ethanol and sell on the black market. A deadly mistake!

18 (p. 49) Tahar Ben Jelloun is a contemporary Moroccan writer whose entire collection of books is written in French, although his first language is Arabic.

19 (p. 49) "L'enfant de sable" ("The Sand Child") is a story told by a man who failed to bring a son into the world, hence is determined to raise his eighth, youngest daughter as a boy.

20 (p. 54) Arougou, a place 13 km from Khénifra on a way to Oum Rabia a popular source of drinkable water.

21 (p. 55) Having had a little idea about your work in village of El Borj, situated 10 km from Khénifra, with a great pleasure we have discovered your website. This message is an invitation to a co-operation and exchange of the expertise in the domain of local development. Yours Sincerely.

22 (p. 55) Imperial Tobacco Maroc remains the only significant player operating in smoking tobacco in Morocco and accounted for 98% of total retail volume sales in the category during 2012. The company continues to invest in offering customers a variety of different types of smoking tobacco in various different flavours, which has so far been the key to the company's success in the

category. Following the liberalisation of the Moroccan tobacco industry, no player has entered the smoking tobacco, which remains dominated by the Nakhla brand, imported by Imperial Tobacco.

23 (p. 56) I miss you too much, and now I wonder if I can support your absence. I'm burning with curiosity to know your response and your sentiments towards me, it is necessary (...) my heart has chosen.

End of Part Two