

When I took
that hasty
decision to live
in Morocco I
did not imagine

that, in a country I had toured on several occasions and which had always seemed to be a desert, it could rain so much. And yet that winter I spent in Mimoun it rained for weeks at a time. The wind tore at the branches of the trees, and the branches, as they moved, tormented my imagination. They contrived with their mournful sound to stir up my emotions and carry me away to states of mind more appropriate to an adolescent than to the man I had become.

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I arrived in Mimoun well into autumn, when the days were shorter and fresher, the first rains had fallen and the leaves on the trees were beginning to take on marvellous golden hues. It was a good start to find the earth damp and red, with the sky as clear as enamel. I was excited at the smell of burning wood, the purity of the air and the outline of the minarets sharp against the sky.

I had moved into Francisco's house, which everyone knew as La Creuse du Bon Dieu because it had been built next to a ravine with the aim of serving as a Catholic church and the house of a French missionary. The missionary, in his zeal to convert the Muslims, had chosen to build his mission-house at the edge of the road which led to the Marabout's hermitage situated at the very top of the hill, in which was kept the tomb of a miraculous holy man Sidi Ahmed Al-Qarin, an object of veneration for the Muslim faithful.

The house, though none too comfortable, was a truly beautiful mansion with large domes and windows through whose panes one could view the tree-lined avenue, the small white town crowded beneath the minarets and the blue and mysterious line of the Atlas mountains, floating in the distance, suspended from the sky.

The first days were unforgettable. The leaves turned a deeper gold behind the window panes, and flocks of white birds hurried away to the south, filling the house with their melancholy calls. One morning there was snow on the furthest reaches of the fantastic mass of Bou Iblan and the cold obliged us to light the stoves in our rooms, in an effort to fend off the wind which crept in through the cracked windows. The smell of burning wood invaded the inside of the house, everything seemed to shrink back even more around us, and that day we stayed gazing for hours at the countryside, waiting for the moon to rise on the horizon behind the vague snow-capped cordillera. The moon appeared like some exquisite jewel.

Francisco gave classes at the local institute and did pencil drawings in large yellow sketchpads. He had been living in Mimoun for years, after some modest success in Spain as a sculptor. But shortly after his arrival he had given up sculpture and suffered whenever he happened to recall it. "I came here to work in peace," he said, "and look at me. I know now I'll never go back to sculpting. This country burns you out." He liked well-planned scenes, so this verdict on his life would always coincide with a gesture which took the flame of a match to the tip of his hashish cigarette. "The indolence of the Moroccan," he would say, letting out the first puff of smoke and offering

me the cigarette. "The indolence of the fucking Moroccan. In this country there's a virus no one escapes from. In the end, one becomes a Moor too."

He would get up and stand in front of me with his arms outstretched, as if someone had just crucified him. He was a martyred Christian. His fragile birdlike body was wrapped in a gandora. "Don't you see? I'm more Moor than Spanish by now. There's nothing for me to do back there. I've dug myself a grave I can't escape from." His eyes glistened as if he'd started to cry. He glided over to the record player on his huge yellow slippers, and then went over to the east-facing window, which opened on to the town, the plain and the unsettling outline of the Atlas mountains. In the half light of the early evening, the moon was already sailing above the hills. "Here, at least, I have this!" he said, stretching his hands towards the glass of the window. "This peace. This marvellous moon. Come. Come and see."

He led me over to the window, offered me another drag on the dying cigarette and made me gaze at the moon, which seemed to be pointing at us with its silver horns. The room, with the record player at full blast, was filled with drumming and Berber cries, the fire trembled in the grate and all the wood and copper objects bought in far-off southern souks seemed to grow unaccountably larger. It was dinner time. Opposite the house the lights had come on in a nearby dwelling which in its day had belonged to the missionary's servant and was now occupied by a strange Frenchman who barely moved his head to greet us.

"For a long time I thought Charpent was dumb!" Francisco said. "Later I found out he wasn't. He teaches in a private school in Fez. One day, as he passed me in the street, he let out an alarming sound, as if someone had just kicked him in the stomach. It's the closest he's come to articulate speech."

He scarcely had any visitors. Sometimes he would appear with a couple of men who seemed unpleasant and two girls who looked like prostitutes. He would shut himself away for hours, and the sound of vulgar music would come drifting

across from his house. The visitors would leave in the early morning making a hell of a racket. Then, for weeks at a time, no-one would visit Charpent, who would park his car – almost furtively – near the door and go inside without raising his eyes. Francisco and I were convinced that during these long periods he used to drink alone. His face was covered in red blotches and scales. We both felt sorry for him. Francisco was frightened by him as well. “He’s so mysterious,” he said. “Have you noticed his eyes?” I had not had a chance to see them up to then.

My work turned out to be a doddle. I went down to Fez for my classes twice a week, using the communal taxis. The rest of the time I spent in Mimoun, hardly leaving the house. I read, worked on the final drafts of the novel I’d started in Madrid and filled my head with ideas for a new one. I’d stopped drinking: all I took was the mint tea prepared for us by Rachida, the woman who came each day to do the cleaning.

Everything was in order, Francisco made plans as to how we should see to the garden when spring came, whilst I spent all my time thinking about finding a house of my own. I was longing to start enjoying that independence whose quest had taken me to Mimoun. Besides, I had a feeling that happiness could not last too long. Sometimes we would come across Ahmed wandering by taxi rank in Fez, by Atlas Square. We would sit on one of the benches, beneath the enormous jacarandas, or have something in the Atlas Cafe, which didn’t please Ahmed because he thought it rather inelegant. I found its mirrors beautiful, with their peeling silver and the little black flecks the flies left everywhere. Those mirrors, when spring came, would reflect the blue jacaranda flowers, which seemed to bloom out of the morning mist, hanging from the still bare trees. In Morocco I soon fell in love with that tree whose flowers appear before its leaves.

The unexpected meetings with Ahmed would end up in one of the rooms of the Jeanne d’Arc. Today I have melancholy memories of the tap that filled the strange bathtub with warm water and the steam that rose from the water until it filled the room. Ahmed’s naked body appeared out of the steam just as,

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in spring, in Atlas Square, the blue jacaranda flowers would bloom out of the mist.

Some evenings, back in Mimoun, before beginning the walk up to La Creuse, I would stop in one of the bars for a drink. My presence in that out of the way city caused a mixture of curiosity, sympathy and suspicion. Years before, Mimoun had been an important commercial centre but had fallen into gradual decline. The French had moved out the day after independence, and the last Jews left the city when the Yom Kippur War broke out. There were just a couple of Jews left, owners of liquor stores and much reviled.

When I arrived in Mimoun, the French quarter, with its art deco villas, was almost abandoned. The most elegant houses had been occupied by wealthy Moroccans who ruined the old architecture to adapt it to their own way of life. Other villas grew old and deserted among gardens which had been magnificent in their day but were now overrun by weeds. Among the bushes there still stood magnificent ornamental trees, like remnants of the former splendour.

On the other hand, in the heart of the decaying *medina*, what once had been a flourishing *mellah* had turned into the red light district, drunken soldiers urinated in the alleyways and bedbugs reproduced themselves in silence beneath the covers of straw mattresses. Mimoun was a dead town which only came to life during the Thursday souk, when the Berbers from the local countryside besieged it with their mules, their sheep and goats, and their baskets full of eggs.

I believe the decrepitude of the town was passed on to its inhabitants, and that the peeling walls of the cafés communicated mysteriously with the wrinkles in the clothes of the customers. That decrepitude gradually took hold of my soul, my bouts in the local bars became prolonged, and each day the climb up to the house grew harder.

Without even noticing it, I had gone back to drinking as I did in Madrid, and I stayed for long hours propping up the bars, where I received new offers of friendship each day and had frequently to escape from invitations which did not entice me. Despite myself, I had become the novelty of that autumn

in the dead town, which was enlivened only by the soldiers in the nearby barracks.

Francisco didn't like me drinking with Moroccans. "They don't know how to drink. They just turn nasty," he said, "and you land up getting yourself in one big mess." I think he was afraid I would start taking my new friends back to the house. He was scared of losing his hard won intimate relationships. He preferred to go up at sunset to a café close to the Marabout, where the young locals hung around and sang. Up there, the smoke from the kif brought the adolescents and the soldiers from the barracks into ambiguous proximity.

My drinking companions disapproved of the Marabout café, and always spoke of it with disdainful smiles and giggles in allusion to things no one would explain to me, but which I could imagine. Almost without trying, Francisco and I had contrived not to get in each other's way by inserting ourselves into separate worlds with no contact between them.

Around that time I came to realise that no one in Mimoun would have agreed to live in the house we inhabited. There was a mystery about it and it had been marked by a curse. Apparently – so they told me in the bar – the Muslim faithful had avenged themselves on the missionary who had tried to take them away from their own religion and their veneration for Sidi Ahmed al-Karim and had succeeded, using complicated arts, in driving him mad.

"For months he howled every night like a dog, and his howls reached the very door of the Marabout, terrifying the pilgrims".

He had been abandoned. The servant left the nearby dwelling which Charpent would later occupy, and the faithful who climbed up to visit the holy man preferred to take the long way round rather than approach the accursed house. Only dogs roamed beneath the closed windows, attracted perhaps by the howls of the missionary. Little by little, silence fell and an intolerable stench took hold of the ravine. In the end the dogs could no longer control their anxiety, went crashing in through the windows, and installed themselves in the house. Days later, the gendarmes found the head of the holy man hanging

from a rope in the middle of the living room. The rest of the body, up to the shoulders, had been eaten by the dogs.

When I learned of the former owner's fate, I became afraid of the dogs which roamed around the house. I came across them – threatening or fearful – as I climbed the hill after my habitual tour of the bars. On nights when I had drunk too much I used to bellow to scare them off and then, the next morning, I would be embarrassed at the thought that someone might have been listening to my cries.

The rains had started in Mimoun, and it was good to be indoors listening to the sound of the drops landing on the roof and on the window panes. Francisco had found an old piano and some musical scores, and spent the day playing pieces by Satie, Schubert and Chopin. In addition, we had a good collection of classical records, some books, and the woman who came each morning to cook our meals and keep things tidy.

The earth in Mimoun was red in colour, and although I had bought myself some boots which came halfway up my calves, my trouser legs were always splashed with mud. The road to the house was turned periodically into a mudslide, which the dogs crossed like fugitive shadows. I used to watch them splashing through the puddles beneath the yellow lights and at night they barked endlessly outside the house. The winter cold had worn down the grass on the open space which served as a garden and separated La Creuse from Charpent's place. Whenever it stopped raining for a day or two, I would hear the sound of dogs' paws during the night on the dry grass. Sometimes the noise would keep me awake, other times it got into my nightmares.

I used to dream about dogs invading the garden and I could hear their steps from the bedroom. One of them, particularly large and dirty, scratched around in the grass and ran, with menacing steps, ever closer to the window. Little by little, the walls of the room became transparent and I could see him looking into the room, as if he intended to leap in at any moment. I would shout out to frighten him; I wanted him to know that the house was not empty; that he should not come

in. I shouted with all my might, but no sound came from my lips. The dog finally jumped through the glass and the closed shutters, which gave way without resistance, gently and in silence. He would move then to my side, very close, until I could feel his warm, damp breath on my face. It was useless to go on shouting, because I could not make a single sound, though I could hear him panting in my ear and feel his tongue starting to lick my helpless lips.

Once I woke in time to hear my own shout, the one I could never hear in my dreams. Then I found Francisco, kneeling beside the bed.

"You were snarling, in your sleep, as though you were a dog," he said, "and you were clawing at the straw cover beneath the mattress."

That's how I discovered that I myself was the dog that pursued me in the night. I started to laugh, and got up to have a cigarette with Francisco. Despite my laughter, my breathing was accelerated by my fear.

Francisco had begun to play something by Satie on the piano, as subtle as a solitary whispered monologue which scarcely disturbed the silence of the night. I thought of the former owner of those folders. What kind of life must he have led in Mimoun? And for how long? Francisco had acquired the folders in the local *funduk*: a run-down store which the shepherds and Berber peasants used as a stable when they came down to Mimoun for the Thursday souk. Stored in that place, alongside the mules, sheep and goats, there were broken boxes, old wrought iron stoves of exquisite design, and fine, albeit battered pieces of furniture built in the same style as those adorning the finest houses in Paris or London back in the twenties and thirties.

Amongst the wretched bric-à-brac from the *funduk*, Francisco had acquired his piano, his scores and some of the pieces of furniture scattered about the rooms of the house. There was a gigantic mahogany bookcase, almost empty, which took up the whole of one of the interminable walls, as though it had been made to measure; and the table which Francisco had chosen for the drawing room was also of such a

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size that it could only have found a place in a house like that.

Whilst I smoked my cigarette, sitting beside the piano on the cushions we had scattered around the floor, I was seized with the certainty that most of the second-hand objects Francisco had collected together were made to occupy exactly the place they now occupied, and that even Satie's music had adapted to that space as if it were used to living in it.

Francisco had stopped playing, smoothed out his slender hands, all of whose bones protruded, and smiled.

"How goes it, dog-man? Are you feeling better, or is the music bothering you?"

I told him it wasn't bothering me, and he took the chance to talk, as he had on previous occasions, of the beauty of Satie's music and the charm of those winter nights when wandering clouds cross the sky like ghost ships which sometimes hide the moon and leave the world more silent than before.

"Here, smoke this."

He handed me a hashish cigarette and began to play again. He looked like a bird, bent over the piano, so frail with his sparse tousled hair and his sharp nose. I felt sorry for him then, wrapped in the cellophane of his innocence, caressing, as he turned them, those poisoned pages. I thought that I should never tell him the legend of that missionary who had tried to conquer the soul of Mimoun. I looked at the great table, the mahogany bookcase and the windows which the night had turned opaque.

"I don't know why," I said, "but dogs have always frightened me. And there are so many around here."