

# Behind the reeds, Hab Hab Roummane holds his breath.

He stands still, letting the sun burn on his neck and shoulders. He watches his father, fixed on a rock on the river bank, his head covered with a straw hat, a fishing rod in his hand.

Since the beginning of summer, Brahim has been coming regularly to fish in this deserted spot. He passes hours here, dreaming, and often the fishing rod slips from his hands.

Hab Hab Roummane hears the two peasants calling. He gets up, looks for them. They are on a little hill, farther upstream. They are waving their arms, and their words are distinct: "The water is rising! The wadi is flooding! It's been raining upstream. Watch out! Get out of the way, fisherman!"

The mass of blackening water has already passed the bend in the river and unfurls towards the north with a terrifying roar, swamping the banks over a width of several meters. The child turns and runs, climbs up the slope, doesn't stop until he reaches the road that overlooks the wadi. Then he turns. His father is still sitting at the same spot, deaf to the continuing cries of the two peasants. The child also wants to cry out, to call, only a choking rattle comes out; his mouth hangs open. His

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**Rabah BELAMRI**

*He Rode Away on the Water*

Translated from French by

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father has turned his head imperceptibly in the direction of death, but he hasn't got up to run away. He has simply let his fishing rod fall at his feet. The wave, heavy with trees and bushes, hits him and swallows him up. He appears again immediately, and the child thinks he sees him in the posture of a conquering hero, astride the neck of a monster which he rides where his fancy takes him, master of his destiny. Hab Hab Roummane runs as fast as he can down the road alongside the wadi. He runs until he finally loses sight of his father's form.

When the policemen and the constable get there the two peasants, very upset, say that the fisherman must have been sleeping on the river bank because they had hailed him without success. The child, who knows, shakes his head without saying anything. Coming back to the village with the policemen, Hab Hab Roummane is suddenly overcome by an image whose clarity surprises him, since the event has only been described to him in general terms: his father, in chains, his turban tightly wound, walks between two policemen, followed by Alja, who is moaning, her hair in disorder, a crying baby in her arms. The despair of Alja and the baby's distress, which he feels inside himself, make his chest hurt, tear at him, burn him. He breathes with difficulty. The air seems to be full of shards of light. He is sweating.

"Hey! Come on now, Child of the Night!" says the constable, taking him by the hand. "You're not going to fall down on the way, are you? Your grandmother needs you."

In the house, the neighbors crowd around, ask him questions. He replies in a distant voice, not taking his eyes from his grandmother who is crying, her head nodding.

"The water came, and he left with it."

"You mean that the flood took him by surprise? Maybe he was daydreaming or sleeping? What happened exactly, since you saw it all?"

He says,

"The water came, he got onto it and he went away."

At these words, Alja comes out of her torpor. A gleam comes into her eyes, drowned in tears. She says, turning towards her grandson:

"If he rode away on the water, that means he went to a far away country because the water goes far, far away, but it comes back. We will wait for his return."

The people look back and forth from the child to his grandmother. Sadly, helplessly.

The tears of Alja never stop flowing. In the middle of the afternoon, the neighbors offer to help organize the funeral meal and the customary Koranic vigil. Alja says:

"No! Not tonight. My son might be heading home. I'll wait until tomorrow."

The next day, she does nothing, and the neighbors, in spite of their embarrassment, reiterate their offer, saying they'll arrange everything: they'll buy the meat, take care of the cooking, pay the reciters of the Koran. Alja says:

"Thank you, neighbors. I have everything I need, but I must wait a little longer. My son might be on his way back. You know, the water goes, then one day it comes back."

And Alja, her face bathed in tears, would wait for the return of her son who had ridden away on the water for seven days and seven nights.