

# *“Mama, enough of charlatans!”*

I don't want to hear any more about those thieves. They'll cram my eyes so full of filth I'll end up blind.”

“God bless you, son. Let me have my heart's desire. As long as my legs can hold me, I'll walk, I'll go everywhere. They say people come so far to see him, and that he cures the crazy, the sick who never walked, and women who never conceived. God bless you, don't stand in my way! Let me run till I die. When I see boys your age with their eyes open like windows and I think about you, my soul half melts. All the women are happy except for me...”

Fatim-Zohra began to cry as she did every time she talked about her son's illness, and Hassan, torn to shreds by those tears, said not a word. Fatim-Zohra easily found several women neighbours as desirous as she to consult the new healer who had performed so many miracles that they still did not know about.

They hired a taxi and left early with baskets and scarves filled with gifts.

The healer who simultaneously fulfilled the functions of sage and diviner didn't look anything like his already established colleagues. People said he was the spouse of a female *djinn* he had met in France while working in a hospital where he did the cleaning, took food to the patients, and pushed the patients' carts. The wife had appeared to him at the end of a deserted corridor wearing a white doctor's outfit the night of the Mouloud festival. She had taken him by the arm.

“Fear nothing, brother. I am a Muslim *djinn*. There is no G6d

but Allah, and Mohammed is His Prophet. My name is Fatima. I shall marry you, and we will go home. Algeria will soon be independent. Let us care for the believers."

After listening to the complaints and prayers of the patients, he withdrew behind the woollen blanket to confer with Fatima, visible only to him, about the therapy to propose to the sick.

Voices – now serious, now sharp – stifled laughter, sighs, and the rustling of a dress could be heard.

When Fatim-Zohra's turn came, the sheikh, after having consulted Fatima behind the curtain, declared, "Next Saturday, we will come to examine Monsieur Hassan, son of Fatim-Zohra and of Youssef, age fifteen, who has been struck in the eyes by infidel *djinn*s."

On the expected day, the healer did not appear. He presented himself a week later in the late afternoon.

"Excuse me. If we did not come last Saturday, it is because the dossier of Monsieur Hassan had not arrived at the office. Without files, we can do nothing."

Youssef went off with a nervous cough, and Hassan, who in his mind could envision his files being delivered by angels or demons through the corridors of the sky, almost burst into laughter. Fatim-Zohra devoutly kissed the plump hands of her guest, one of God's blessed. The sheikh asked for a bowl of oil and a spoon, and closed himself in a room with his patient.

"Stand up, and unbutton your shirt. Fatima is going to take an X ray of you."

Hassan, half perplexed, half amused, asked why an X ray of the thorax, then said to himself, "After all, why not?" He had had a lot of X rays at the hospital. That's really how to proceed to find out the cause of an illness. Fatima knows what she must do. He bared his chest and remained standing in the middle of the room, embarrassed by his hands he had decided not to put in his pocket. Maybe he would have to stretch out his arms in front of him, a bit apart, like clasping the X ray machine at the hospital.

The healer, withdrawn into a corner, seemed to have forgotten he was there. Hassan coughed still more loudly, let out a grunt, called himself an imbecile, and went over to sit down on the bed as he straightened out his clothing. The healer stirred the spoon in the bowl of oil for some time before calling Fatim-Zohra.

"The results are there. Fatima has just brought back the X rays. Look carefully."

He showed her the bowl full of oil. Fatim-Zohra attentively leaned over.

"Tell me what you see."

"I don't know, Master," answered Fatim-Zohra timidly.

"Look carefully, here in front of you. You surely see a crescent."

He was silent for a moment.

"It certainly is a crescent. How is it formed?"

Fatim-Zohra, feeling embarrassed and guilty at seeing nothing lowered her head to the floor.

"Tell me, what is its shape? This crescent is open."

"Perhaps, Master."

"What do you mean, perhaps? This crescent is open. There's no doubt about it."

"I can't make it out very clearly, Master."

"Well I can. I see it. It's clearly there in the oil, well outlined, open, but not too much so. The day that the two horns touch, your son will recover his sight. And that day, you can believe me, is not far off."

The young sheikh had Fatim-Zohra sit down in front of him and told her in detail what treatment to follow to hasten Hassan's recovery. First there would be nineteen intramuscular injections administered by Fatima. She would carry out her operations during the night while Hassan was asleep, without pain. This would be followed by taking the oil in the bowl to massage the sick boy's chest nineteen evenings at a stretch. And then there were prescriptions to be observed: eat no salt for nineteen days, not leave the house for nineteen days, and not wash his body for nineteen days.

The healer asked twenty-five thousand – sufficient to maintain a whole family comfortably for a month. Youssef, who was trying to keep himself from throttling the charlatan, did not argue: he handed him five thousand and unceremoniously sent him on his way. He turned his anger against his wife.

"It is a sin to believe what those robbers tell you. How could such scoundrels be part of God's designs?"

"Hold your tongue, man! We are doing this for our son. Don't ruin the effects of the treatment with your complaining. God has

said, "Try, oh my creature! And I shall help you reach your goal."

Fatim-Zohra believed so completely in the word of the young sheikh that night – the first night when the invisible Fatima was to perform her healing – stretched out beside her son to watch over his sleep, she got up with a slight limp. She asked her son if he had felt something in his sleep, something like an injection in the buttock, for example.

"No, I didn't feel anything," replied Hassan, who burst out laughing.

"Well, my son, I did feel something. I've got a pain in the buttock, as though someone had given me an injection during the night. I didn't have any trouble at all yesterday."

"It's clear, Mama, that Fatima mistook her patient. She gave you the shot instead of me."

Fatim-Zohra's buttock hurt her all day long, and she was certain that she had been given a shot by the *djinn*, who, be it said, must not have had a very gentle hand.

If the father refused to listen to talk about spirits and remedies related to magic, he did believe in traditional medicines called Arabic, based on ores, roots, extracts of vegetables, animal fats, and other substances, which could be purchased in the market, the souk, or prepared at home from recipes transmitted by a trustworthy person. One day, one of the customers, certainly well-intentioned, advised Youssef to take a pigeon, cut its throat, clean it well, and then bind it with strips of cloth, opened out, over the eyes of the patient for three days and three nights: it was a remedy that had been tried by hundreds of persons since time immemorial and whose effectiveness was never in doubt. Hassan put up with the nauseating mask of sticky flesh for one day and one night.

One day, advised by a friend no less charitable than the other, Youssef brought home an old countryman who was a past master in the art of bleeding. After the usual preparations – the nape of the neck shaved with scissors and razor – Hassan got down on all fours, his head over an empty basin. He was hardly reassured: the hands of the old man were trembling slightly. Cuppings, propitiatory formulas, incisions with a Gillette blade. The blood spurted out, thick, abundant, hot on the neck, brushing against the corners of the lips, and trickling down the chin. Hassan had a sudden start. Nausea grabbed him in the throat. He thought of

the lamb at the Aid festival, its throat cut so ineptly it was able to get to its feet again, frightened and shaking with spasms. Fatim-Zohra, upset by the sight of the blood, ran out into the courtyard. Youssef watched in silence. The countryman seemed pleased with his operation.

"Just look at that blood as black as soot! The humours of evil are flowing! You're going to have a body cleansed and your eyes washed and as limpid as the spring at Guergour, my child!"

The little vision that was still left to him held out until the October day when his father brought a rod of copper sulphate from the souk. Hassan rebelled, but then he gave in to the entreaties of his mother, who begged him to try to see just one more time, and so he passed the rod between his eyelids for a long time, meticulously, as if to provoke the irreparable, to get out of the fog that he had lived in for nine months, to go fully into darkness since getting well had proved impossible. The effect was overwhelming: Hassan's eyes began to flow like fountains, and, bit by bit, a vast night traversed by a serpent of turquoise that seemed to unite heaven and earth, a serpent that danced, alighted on his eyelids.

As the days went by, blackness absorbed the blue and green serpent and unloosed innumerable elusive points of light.

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*Rabah Belamri was born in the Algerian village of Bougaa. He lost his eyesight in 1962 at the age of fifteen. As an adult he lived in Paris, writing numerous acclaimed novels, short stories, and poetry. He died in 1995, and is deeply regretted. This text is taken from Shattered Vision, New York: Holmes & Meier, 1995, a translation of Regard Blessé, Paris: Gallimard, 1987.*