

There were only a few houses

of Spanish or Italian design left in the neighbourhood. The people who had got rich in the twinkling of an eye had been personally responsible for destroying most of the nice houses, putting up four or five-storey buildings in their place. At the end of the street on the right there was a building near the intersection where five roads met, a beautiful building from whose balconies flowers and women with pretty faces had looked out, and blond children talking French with a strange accent. But the faces had disappeared and all the flowers had withered and the shutters on the windows were closed one after another, and the paint on the walls faded. Sometimes the shutters were pulled off altogether and men and women and children were visible at the windows, looking as if they were from another world, and instead of flowers, ragged clothes began to be hung on the balconies.

The building looked out over two alleyways and a main street, and the part of the building facing the back alley, which led to the post office and the Italian Institute, was occupied by a group of drunks who sat in two of its doorways with bottles of red wine or pure alcohol mixed with lemonade or water in front of them. Here one of them set himself alight, when he was drunk one night and some of the pure alcohol spilt on him as he tried to light a cigarette. He was completely disfigured by the fire at this late hour of the night, and was taken to the casualty department, but they didn't treat him fast enough and he died.

He seemed intelligent, even if he was a villain. He knew how to wash his clothes at night so that he could wear them again the next morning, especially in summertime, but in winter nobody understood how he kept his clothes clean. He mostly wore a shirt and trousers and if there was

anything under them or not, nobody knew. But he caught fire and died. It was said he'd attended Ibn Abbad secondary school in Settatt, and also that his mother had been a well known dancing girl in the town, who'd killed his father with magic and remarried. His mother's new husband was a drunk who used to stub his cigarettes out on the boy's face and also on his mother's legs. She drank and smoked dope constantly, so that when she tried to sing, her voice was hoarse and she coughed violently and her husband beat her up. "Have a drink and shut up. Do you think you're still in your prime? Listen."

Then he would begin to make a braying noise which he believed was singing and talk of strange things, while she drank and raved and wept and laughed. When they both fell asleep on the floor, the child would creep outside and cry himself to sleep. Once his mother said to him: "When you grow up and get your *bac* you'll become a government employee and move to Casablanca. I've got lots of friends there who used to be like me here in Settatt, but they got married in Casablanca. One of them has a son who went to America..."

How often he would think about America after that!

Except that he was set alight by a match and died. But his mother died ten years before him. She wasn't burnt to death, but one of her female neighbours hit her over the head with a bottle and she died. All because of her husband. Apparently he'd robbed the neighbour, or she'd robbed him, or they'd stolen something together and not divided it fairly. In any case, his mother's death was caused by an act of theft. Then he'd died and all those who hung around in the doorways of the building forgot him for sure, and soon another of them would disappear and he too would be forgotten, just as their predecessors who had died or gone to prison or vanished had been forgotten. Once they realised that somebody had been gone for a year, and some of them thought he'd died, but then he came back to them again.

He stopped drinking and smoking hash and decided to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca, but his stepmother went behind his back and called the police because he'd stolen her bangles, and he swore he hadn't stolen anything. He said to them: "It's better if I go back there. Doing good doesn't get you anywhere. What I said to my stepmother was, 'Please give me a little money so I can go on the pilgrimage and when I come back, I'll rent a shop and sell spices like my father used to do,' but she called the police."

Hawla the Cross-Eyed, who was sitting drunk beside her friend Allal, said:

— You don't know anything about women. I've suffered torture at their hands. Give me a drink, Allal.

The man who'd come back to them said:

- But she's my stepmother.
- You don't understand women at all. Pour me a drink, Allal.
- You're drunk already. Go and lie down over there.
- No, I won't. I paid for half of the bottle and we have to drink it together.
- I didn't think my stepmother would do that to me, said the man who'd returned.
- God help your parents, she said. Leave us alone. Go and tell your story to them over there. Give me a drink, Allal.

The man who'd returned was silent, then after a while he slipped out into the main street, perhaps to stop some of the passers by and ask them for cash, or stand in the path of a group of schoolgirls in the hope that one of them might be scared into giving him whatever she had on her. They all did that, dispersing into the main streets and alleyways close to the building, never going very far away from their lair, for Casablanca was a big place, and if one of them was tempted to go to another hideout in another neighbourhood, he'd come back to them with a warning notice scrawled on his face with a razor or knife, or at least with black eyes and a broken nose. Each bird kept to its own nest and if it left for a while, another would come and take its place, as happened in this building which had become home to them. They had arrived at it from all three directions, not interested whether it had water or electricity, the important thing being to find somewhere to sleep. It was their refuge and they didn't care who owned it. It had been empty for years and had rubbish dumped all round it, too much for one man to collect every morning or afternoon, pushing his small cart, completely exhausted from hunger, because it was rare that a girl or boy came out with a glass of tea for him, or a bit of bread. Sometimes he would collect some of the garbage and pile it up in a small clearing behind the post office and burn it. Then one of the postal workers would appear and tell him off: "Take your rubbish away. You're suffocating us."

But the dustman didn't have any alternative. If only the municipality had given him a truck to transport the garbage outside the city, like they did in other places. It was his boss who came by from time to time and ordered him to burn it. Furthermore, since the building's blond inhabitants had abandoned it and these other people had taken up residence in it, the rubbish had multiplied and smelt more strongly and gave off more fumes when it was burnt, almost choking the post office's male and female employees. In that post office there was a female employee who had once been pretty, but she had faded and grown old, perhaps because her bosses had forgotten her for years in her office whose window overlooked the little yard where the rubbish was burnt. Some of the drunks used to sometimes sit by the back wall of the post office drinking,

not bothered by the smell of the smoke, or anything else. Police patrols rarely passed by to pick up people like them, for to tell the truth the police weren't looking for people like them, but for other people in other places which they considered safer. Then there was the fact that these people would cost the state money, as it would be obliged to feed them and give them medical treatment, and these mouths were never full, and how many drugs that were past their expiry date would they need, and how much medical equipment, which would have to be brought from abroad? Be that as it may, they knew what was wrong with them and what the cure was, and even if they hadn't found houses for themselves, they'd managed to occupy a building at the top end of the street where blond people had lived and from whose windows children and flowers and maybe sometimes birdcages had looked out.

The building appeared derelict, but it was full of people. It had been taken over by these people who didn't know one another, but sometimes talked to each other, and others who disliked each other, but avoided quarrelling for fear of creating a problem with the police. None of them knew who owned the building, but an old man said to a friend of his when they were both drunk: "I know the owner of the building. She's called Sonia. Her husband was a colonel in the French army. He died in the forties and was probably one of those who went to invade Syria. She came to Morocco and opened a bar. It's still there in Casablanca. It's called *The Chambourou*. The old woman died, so now we've got a roof over our heads. People like her God protects in the grave, but we want Him to give us some protection while we're alive."

So this old man thought he knew who the owner of the building was, but the others weren't bothered. But there are people who know that a lot of houses were taken over by squatters, when the foreigners fled after Independence. People even squatted in private gardens, which subsequently became wastelands, and yet when others discovered them they took them away by force.

One man said to his friend, a former soldier who'd lost an arm in the Congo:

— We do all right in this building even though we don't know each other, but in the street to the back of here, there's a big building with trees round it, and flowers.

— I know, but it's been taken over by other people.

— When a man from the state discovers it, he'll drive them out. He'll get documents from somewhere, call the police and have the building evacuated. I'll be honest with you, we get along fine here, but some of those men in suits who hover around the building scare me.

One of them could quite easily get hold of a few government officials and then they'll load us onto garbage trucks and dump us somewhere and give us one meal a day—a dish of weevily lentils with a few stones and a lot of water.

— They might. But you don't need to worry. I know a villa where an old European woman lives. Nobody visits her, and I always sleep there. Even the nightwatchman doesn't care. Once the grocer's boy brings him round a few bottles of wine, he drinks until he falls asleep, after he's listened several times to a song that goes *Ma ahlaaha ishi'l-fallah!*
— How beautiful is the peasant's life! He never gets tired of hearing it.

The building seemed isolated at the end of the street, like an island, and people appeared to accept it as part of the scenery, but the police checked on them every now and then, and might happen by chance on a stranger they'd been looking for somewhere else. The police are efficient at finding some people, while it's hard for them to track down others. Let's suppose that a few men in suits with elegant neckties—say five or six, it's not important—turned up, accompanied by armed men from the government, as it happened on a certain day at a certain time.

One of the policemen said to his friend:

— Don't forget that you were brought up in a children's home. We're just doing our duty.

— Where will these people go?

— Where will you go when you get the sack?

— The sergeant was in the home too. I recognise him but he doesn't want to remember me.

— Keep it quiet. Don't say anything.

No one knew what was going on. When a bus arrived it filled up with passengers and drove off. Then more people came and waited for another bus, due to arrive in ten minutes to transport them to other places. They gathered them up and took them away in garbage trucks, and for certain tomorrow or the next day the building would be cordoned off.

— It's a shame, said one policeman to another.

But the other policeman, who didn't know him, tried not to hear him and gave an old woman a sharp kick to hurry her into the truck.

— Get in. You make the place dirty.

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