

Fatima, who was nine, liked to tell

on people. She was a sly, skinny girl with curly hair and sloping shoulders. One day she saw Jamila hiding a hundred-dirham note in her sleeve. The reason was that Auntie Yezza from downstairs wanted to borrow money. "I don't have any, you'll have to wait until my parents get here," Jamila said, showing Auntie Yezza her empty purse. Only the little girl knew about the bill cozily tucked away.

Beside herself, Fatima washed the floor with big, sweeping movements, waiting for the moment when she could go downstairs to reveal what she had seen. Finally Jamila told her to take the garbage out, "and don't just throw it in front of the house, take it down to the river". Bumping into Auntie Yezza in the downstairs corridor Fatima talked quickly, leaning forward and raising her eyebrows to make her point.

It was very exciting. But Jamila found out about it, and she put hot pepper on Fatima's tongue to teach her not to be a tattle-tale. Overcome, Fatima whirled from the room and ran up the stairs to the roof. Clambering up onto one of the sacks of cement stacked there, she leaned over, coughing violently, throwing her head down and wishing she could just pitch down headfirst and die.

"Hey, Fatima, take it easy," said a voice. A figure emerged from behind the strings of hanging laundry that criss-crossed the roof. It was Toufik, Auntie Yezza's son. He sat down next to Fatima on the sack of cement.

Fatima crammed one hand into her aching mouth, claspings her sore tongue. She lay scanning the vacant lot as if she were looking for something down below—something tiny and very particular.

But there was nothing there. The only moving thing was a cow slowly picking its way through the piles of fluttering trash. If only her father would come—come from the farm, come to get her, to take her back.

As she lay bitterly brooding, a question was dawning in another part of her mind: what was Toufik doing on the roof? She had not heard him come up after her. Suddenly docile, she let Toufik lead her back down the stairs.

"The girl's crazy," Jamila said when the two of them came in together, hand in hand. "You take someone out of poverty..."

"She wanted to jump," Toufik said mildly. He was a big, hulking fellow with a mustache and soft lips. With Jamila, who was his age but from a family that was better off, he always spoke in a low, diffident voice.

Jamila snorted. "If she would do that to herself, what wouldn't she do to someone else?" she retorted.

Toufik pushed little Fatima gently towards the kitchen. "Get back to work," he murmured. Fatima ducked her head and darted into the bathroom where she started to wet some rags in a bucket. From there she could see the stairs from the roof.

After a little while, Kawtar came down carrying the laundry tub and looking slightly disheveled. Awed by her own realisation, Fatima wrung out the rags again. Pulling a loose strand of her hair out of her eyes, she bent double and began to wash the bathroom floor.

"*As-salaam aleikum*," said Lalla Khadija. Her entry, already impressive because she was carrying a basket of oranges, was further enhanced by the way she drew out the "s" and the long "a" in "*as-salaam aleikum*". Her husband followed in her wake, a bemused smile on his face.

Lalla Khadija and Si Abdelmalek, Jamila's parents, spent part of their time at their farm near Fez, part of their time at their beach house, and part of their time with their daughter in the rural town of Souk al-Had. Their arrival imposed a more or less tranquil order on the household, and their departure, sometimes leaving the household as small as just Jamila and Fatima, opened up unending possibilities.

Fatima went up to Si Abdelmalek and kissed his hand, saying humbly, "*Aleikum as-salaam, abba*". She called Jamila's parents "*ummui*" and "*abba*," Mom and Dad, because they were raising her, but that didn't mean she ever forgot her real father who worked in their orange grove. She glanced at the oranges, wondering fervently if he had asked about her; but she was too shy to ask.

With a few graceful movements of her feet, Lalla Khadija

removed her shoes and slipped into one of the pairs of slippers by the door, and then came up to her daughter who was rising from the couch to greet her.

"*Aleikum as-salaam, ummwi,*" Jamila said as, all trace of earlier irritation wiped off her face, she kissed her mother's hand. Lalla Khadija's face softened. She had three children, and while she considered her oldest son, Saïd, with a kind of reverent awe, she doted on her pretty and only daughter as if she were a treasured part of herself. (Her third child, Si Mohamed, she took for granted.) Saïd had moved to America where he was either engaged or married to Laura, a *Nasaraniyya*, a Christian girl. Si Mohamed had married his first cousin. Only Jamila was still unmarried.

Si Abdelmalek settled down on the couch and picked up the remote control. Soon Kawtar came out of the kitchen, carefully carrying the silver-plated tea tray, the glasses with their delicate design, and the tea pot full of a grey-green mixture of fresh mint, tea, and sugar. "*As-salaam aleikum, ummwi, abba,*" said Kawtar respectfully.

Lalla Khadija looked at the three girls: her own daughter, a tall, slender young woman with an inscrutable, closed face; her older adopted daughter, Kawtar, usually so expansive and outgoing, but now looking meek, as if she had something to hide; and Fatima, who had backed away furtively towards the kitchen door with her hands knotted together behind her. What a crew, she thought.

"Have you all been good while I've been gone?" Lalla Khadija said ironically, not waiting for a response.

"Please tell my fortune," Kawtar whispered to Jamila. "Do my cards..." Jamila shook her head in annoyance. She was waiting impatiently for Toufik to come back from the video store. The family had already eaten, Si Abdelmalek was playing solitaire on the *banquettes*, with Lalla Khadija dozing next to him. Jamila and Auntie Yezza were huddled on a mat in front of the TV set, the two of them wrapped in one blanket, watching a program of Andalusian music on the national channel. Kawtar and Fatima were sitting demurely behind them on the *banquettes*, straight-backed and ready, not quite relaxing.

Toufik came in with an apologetic expression on his face. "They didn't have Moonraker," he said sadly. Adbullah at the video store always put up signs for hit movies that were then immediately reserved by three or four wealthy, favored clients. All Toufik had been able to get was a video which they had already seen, an American movie about a woman psychiatrist who seduces her patients, then kills them and feeds them to the rats in her laboratory. At the end of the film,

the rats escape from their cage, eat the psychiatrist, then run out into the yard and are presumably still at large.

Jamila, Toufik and Auntie Yezza settled in resignedly to watch "The Cage of Hunger".

— I'll do your cards later, Jamila said to Kawtar over her shoulder. Jamila didn't turn around, and Toufik was slipping the video into the machine, so only little Fatima saw that Kawtar was blushing.

It wasn't hard to convince Jamila to pull out her Tarot deck. The next afternoon, Fatima came in from school and heard them at it.

— Cut three times with your left hand, Jamila was saying.

Then she laid out the cards, snapping them expertly.

— Your fortunes are about to change, she began. Up until now, you have had to be very frugal.

This was certainly true, as Kawtar had no money at all. Little Fatima slipped in the door and came up next to the two of them, in time to see the next card: the Devil.

— You've had a bad man who came into your life, Jamila said, giving Kawtar a meaningful glance. He caused you sorrow. You have had enough of this sorrow... now your fortunes are changing...

Kawtar was looking with excitement at the next card, the Prince of Disks.

— And who is that? Who is that?

Jamila seemed to be purposely drawing out the suspense.

— Hmm... Prince of Disks... a good man... you can trust him, but you must not make him angry. If you are trustworthy, he will be good to you...

As Kawtar was becoming more and more confused and excited, Jamila broke off and asked pointedly:

— Do you have an idea who this card is?

Kawtar placed her index finger on the card, keeping her eyes humbly down.

— It's Toufik, she admitted softly. *Bghani*. He loves me. He wants me. In Moroccan dialect, the two phrases are expressed with the same words.

— And you? Do you love him?

— A lot...

— And does he want to marry you?

— ...yes...

— And what did you say?

Kawtar kept her finger and her gaze on the card, as if watching out for the reaction of the Prince of Disks.

— Does he know...

Suddenly both women became aware of the girl, silently listening.

With a sharp snap Jamila cut off their conversation and turned over another card –Prudence.

— What does it say I should do?

— It says don't do what you did before, Jamila said, gathering the cards together.

When Jamila's parents were around Kawtar and Toufik barely acknowledged each other, nodding and keeping it to "Hi, how're you doing, *la baas, la baas*." Luckily, Lalla Khadija and Si Abdelmalek had to return to the farm for a few days.

Jamila tried to maintain order in her parents' absence, for she knew she was responsible for her adopted sisters; she had to help raise them, to make them mind. Frowning, she handed over carefully-counted coins to Kawtar every morning, along with precise instructions about what to get at the market; and she hit Fatima with a slipper when she caught the girl running about in the vacant lot with a neighbour girl. But she herself felt a lifting in the heart when her parents were gone; and sometimes she was late getting back from work, or stayed too long on the phone, and once she had a fortune teller come over, the *shuwwafa* who burned a little paper on a stone; "Now he is thinking of you," she said, and the little flame burned in the eyes of the three of them, Jamila, Kawtar and Fatima.

Auntie Yezza from downstairs was no help. She had her hands full with her blustering husband, whom Jamila once found drunk, sleeping in the doorway (she stepped over him), and watching out for the interests of her grown-up son.

Toufik was still cautious about visiting, but once little Fatima found him, sprawled lazily on the steps to the roof, gazing up at Kawtar as she washed the clothes.

"Tide," she whispered as she slunk past him and over to the water tap. She filled her own basin and set herself up in a shadowy part of the roof, keeping her eyes on Kawtar.

Kawtar never got compliments on her appearance. She was short, with frizzy hair tightly tied back in a bandana, and although she was good and plump, she was considered to be too dark-skinned for real beauty. But today –Fatima felt a pinch of pleasure and angry admiration– today she looked different. Her bare arms deep in a tub of soapy water, Kawtar was wearing a denim skirt and a low-cut leotard, a violet wrap-around that hugged her tightly. The noon sun was shining straight down on her, illuminating her full body as she leaned over the tub of laundry. And she was transfigured; radiating –something, something Fatima couldn't place, although she knew it was important. Fatima waited hungrily, wondering what would happen next.

— I dreamt about you last night, Kawtar said finally, speaking so softly that Fatima had to strain to hear.

— What did you dream?

— I dreamt that I was at the sea with my father... with Si Abdelmalek... and he left his fishing rod on the shore, and the sea rose and was going to sweep it away, and I was calling for my father but you were the one who came and dove in and got it.

— I saw Toufik, Kawtar said to Jamila that evening, when she thought they were alone.

— And?

— It's love.

This time, instead of saying *bghani*, —he wants me, Kawtar said simply *al-hubb*.

— So you are going to marry him?

— Yes.

— And what about my mother?

— It's okay with Lalla Khadija and Si Abdelmalek, and with my mother in the village, they all say 'Go ahead! Take her!' But please don't tell anyone Toufik has been to see me. If Lalla Khadija finds out she will kick me out of the house '*khri, khri barra*,' she'll say...

Jamila's silence must have meant that she would keep the secret.

— So it's okay with my mother? And Toufik has really asked you to marry him? He wants you? And he knows about...

Little Fatima, perched on the *banquette* in the next room, straining to understand, caught sight of Jamila's gesture; she was waving a hand at a box of old photos.

— He knows, Kawtar murmured.

— And he still wants to...

Kawtar nodded.

— It's his mother, though, she admitted. His mother doesn't want him to...

Under the *banquette* in the side room Fatima found the photos. Trembling, she spread them out on the soft cushions, searching through them as if they could tell her fortune, as if they were Tarot cards that could reveal what was hidden in the heart.

There was Si Mohammed at his wedding; Saïd with Laura, in front of their apartment in America; Jamila as a girl, in a pink bathing suit, pointing at a flurry of pink flamingos; Kawtar standing by the sea, when she was only ten. There she was: barefoot, boyish with her short hair, T-shirt and cut-offs, she held a fishing rod with a kind of jaunty confidence. She had a vivid, cheeky grin on her face.

Although Fatima was being raised by the same family, although she was allowed to go to school, went often to the beach house, and had even gone fishing, she knew she would never look like that, would never stand in that way at the height of childhood mastery.

— That's me —when I was as little as you, Kawtar said.

Fatima turned around with a start, but Kawtar was smiling a trusting, wistful smile. Eagerly, Fatima shifted her gaze back to the photos, trying to seem innocent and curious.

— That was before...

— Before what, *ukhti*?

Fatima tried —although they didn't have the habit of calling each other "sister".

— You see, *ukhti*...

It had worked. Fatima felt a pang.

— You see... This was before I was with my man, my husband... *rajli*...

Fatima's heart thumped with the enormity of it. The word *rajli* was ambiguous —it could mean both man and husband— but Fatima knew Kawtar had never had a wedding.

Kawtar fingered the next picture. Here, she was somewhat older, and the expression on her face was somehow more contained, bottled up. She had her arm around Laura's waist.

— *Shuf, ukhti*... Look... This was the day I was first with my man. He was supposed to meet me again at the beach that afternoon and I went with Laura and he didn't come... I was fifteen, I had no sense at all then, Kawtar said sadly. I met Driss on the beach, he said to me, "I love you. I want you".

— And you married him?

Fatima barely dared to speak; she effaced herself, patient.

— He said... he said to me... he said he loved me, he wanted me. Empty words...

In the next photo Kawtar and Laura were standing with towels draped over their shoulders, leaning against a wall. They were both smiling.

— This was the day I went to his house, Kawtar said. I told Laura, come with me. And I went to him. He shut the door in my face. He said, "What's in your belly is not mine".

Fatima felt herself understanding, getting the point, although the details of the story still escaped her.

— ...and so what did you do?

— I went to the sea. I drank some javel, and then I went into the sea. But there was a couple there, and the man swam out and saved me, and then they took me to the hospital. I went back to my mother...

— To Lalla Khadija?!

— No, no, my mother, my mother in the village. She took me to the doctor and he gave me ten shots on one side, ten on the other, and there was lots of blood... Then Si Abdelmalek and Lalla Khadija didn't want me to come back, so I worked in Rabat for two years for a family.

— And then? Lalla Khadija —you came back —

Kawtar shrugged.

— After a while my mother brought me back here to visit and I just stayed. Now...

Kawtar's eyes were small, suspicious, tight. She was talking quickly.

— Now I've changed. I've got some sense. When a man says to me, "I love you, I want you, never talk to any other man," I just say, "Fine, I don't love you, I don't want you". I'm afraid of men now and I don't want any man to touch me. My heart never gets involved. I just laugh with men, and that's all. And that's what you should do too, Fatima, Kawtar finished, as if she only now remembered to whom she was talking. That's what you should do too.

Lalla Khadija, who had a problem with high blood pressure, came into town unexpectedly to see her doctor. She found the house empty except for Fatima. The little girl, who was doing her homework, started up guiltily when Lalla Khadija came in.

— You're here alone? They leave the house empty except for a little girl like you who has no sense?

She began to mutter irritably; this was just as she had suspected.

"A girl who might let anyone at all into the house...!"

Fatima got up, cowering, but also presenting herself to Lalla Khadija as if she had something to offer. Lalla Khadija suddenly recognised where little Fatima's natural talent lay.

— What's been going on here while I've been gone?

It was Fatima's shining hour. She dared to meet Lalla Khadija's eyes. For a moment, Fatima thought of telling about the *shuwwafa* and the unnamed boy, but the memory of hot pepper on her tongue was too near. Finally she thought of just the right thing to say.

— Toufik and Kawtar were in the house together, and they locked the door.

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