

Monday 24/12

I kicked the huge tomcat.

The women outside the dining hall began to laugh. The nurse arrived. She opened the door and we went in and there was a general commotion. I put my plate on the table and went to fetch a chair from the corner of the room. Halouma elbowed me in the ribs and whispered with a wink that the medical students were coming. I looked towards the iron gate: there was a crowd of them, accompanied by Dr Zuhair. The nurse shouted at us to take our places quickly. The blond student with a thick moustache smiled at me, then rested his hand on my shoulder and asked me in French how I was feeling. I saw the woman from Doukkala at the next table smiling. Dr Zuhair pressed the switch on the X-ray screen, the students clustered around him, and he began explaining the image he'd put up on the screen. I heard one of them asking him if he wasn't worried about the condition of number 42 and remembered Milouda wasn't in the dining hall.

— Where's Milouda? I whispered to Halouma.
— In bed. She couldn't get up for lunch.
— Did they take her some food?
— I don't know.

The nurse Fatima walked by and I beckoned her over and asked if she'd taken some food to patient number 42. She nodded.

The X-ray picture of Milouda's lungs was up on the screen. We were all eating lunch: lentils, tomato and onion salad and a few olives, five per patient. Dr Zuhair ended his discussion of Milouda's condition by saying that it was quite common, adding that there were

no hopeless cases in the wing. They left the dining hall before us. Through the glass door I saw the aged Halima following them out of the wing, pushing the food trolley in front of her.

When we were standing outside the washroom, Amina told me that Milouda had been dreaming the night before. I asked her what she meant, and she said she was shouting and groaning in her sleep. I asked her if she was sure Milouda had been asleep. She shook her head.

I dried my hands on my pyjama trousers and slipped out of the wash room ahead of the others to go and visit Milouda. Her big eyes were half closed and she was moaning faintly. I asked her how she was. She nodded in an attempt to thank me, and smiled. I thought how pretty she was, and noticed her pallor, and the blue of her lips, then got up to go to my ward before one of the nurses caught me out of bed.

The ward was more or less empty of visitors when my grandmother arrived, with her permanent look of ancient fear mixed with childish amazement, and as usual she was carrying the blue plastic basket, and a newspaper under her arm. I took the newspaper from her before I kissed her, then held the basket for her. My grandmother greeted the other women in the ward then, sitting down on the edge of the bed, asked me how I was and when I'd be coming out. It was clear she had begun to tire of visiting me and found the daily bus journey a trial.

She won't stay long. We don't have anything to say to each other and I don't want to repeat myself. What's more, she never gets angry about me taking more of an interest in the paper than in her. She doesn't seem to expect me to behave in any particular way, and I expect nothing more from her than the blue basket and the newspaper, and that affectionate look she gives me. That was my thinking as I studied the headlines in the paper.

She glanced at the man's wrist watch she wore, then pulled the basket towards her and took out a barley loaf, a bottle of mineral water and two packages. She opened one of them and showed me a fried fish, then put it back and closed up the package. On our right the woman from Doukkala folded her long legs and brought them up to her skinny chest. She was smiling and parting her knees. My grandmother put three packages and an envelope on the small metal locker by the bed. She dropped her ancient handbag into the basket (when had I seen that bag for the first time?) and stood up. I understood that I should accompany her to the iron gate which separated us from the men's wing and the hospital garden. She kissed me at the door and went off without looking back. I stood watching one of the elderly male patients shaving himself in a cracked mirror propped between two branches outside the men's wing. He caught me looking and smiled, then seemed to be saying something to me.

I couldn't make it out very well. I smiled and raised my hand to him. From behind the trees the guard saw me and shouted at me to go inside. The old man heard him. He laughed and indicated to me with a movement of his head that I should do as I was told.

I looked at the guard beginning to walk towards me, stuck my middle finger up at him and went inside.

Wednesday 26/12

Milouda's condition is deteriorating.

Halouma is sitting under the old tree trying to read the newspaper. I remember the first time I saw her. She was standing in the queue outside the kitchen, her plate in her hand, and looked the tallest of the women in her high heels. Afterwards I noticed how she joined in a conversation with other patients quite spontaneously. That same night I caught her smoking in the toilet when everyone else was asleep. She laughed silently and looked at her cigarette, then at me, and asked me what time they woke us up in this hospital.

Later on, when we were under the old tree one Sunday, she told me the story of her and her cousin: "It was a relative's wedding and I was with the other girls, fetching water from the well. I was lagging behind a bit. He'd been there watching me since I came out of our tent. He asked me if he could carry the pitcher for me, and there in the trees on the empty road he deflowered me. After that my aunt turned up and the rest of the family, and my mother and sisters were crying. My oldest brother, who's a soldier in the desert, threatened to kill me. I was tired and I wanted to get away from them all. Virginity didn't mean anything to me. Nothing bothered me. I refused to marry him. One thing was certain: I despised him."

Halouma says that was the main turning point in her life. She took a taxi to Rabat.

Halouma laughs. She laughs, full of bitterness, and says, "You know, when I was getting my ID card the official asked me my occupation, and I said, 'Whore'."

I watched her throwing stones at the big cat and missing.

She told me when I was sitting on her bed drinking tea with her that she'd attempted suicide several times. One time she was drunk and in the depths of despair. She put on her djellaba and set out for the area of irrigated gardens with a bottle of flea repellent and was saved by two drunks.

Evening.

"The most genuine and spontaneous women are prostitutes," I wrote on the back of the photo Halouma gave me this morning,

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Evening.

"The most genuine and spontaneous women are prostitutes," I wrote on the back of the photo Halouma gave me this morning,

which shows her in a beautiful Zemmouri dress.

The Doukkali woman was now lying on her front eating a large apple. I enjoyed the sight of her long legs swinging back and forth in the air inside her pyjama trousers. I thought these women would never have worn long pyjama trousers before. They were only doing it now because they had to.

Some women are asleep and the rest are staring into space.

Through the glass of the door I saw the nurse Nawal whose small child-like body explains her arrogance and ridiculous self-confidence. She was scolding Halouma, the woman from the Zemmour region.

On that morning long ago, I discovered she'd pigeonholed me immediately as being on the left. "Patient number 36 is an anarchist." The doctor with long red hair, like she-jinns in frightening fairy stories, stood at the head of my bed, expressing her surprise that I didn't back them up and help them maintain order in the hospital, even though I was "literate and aware".

I looked around me and thought I should stand up and give them a speech about what went on inside this wing: the toilets which were only open at specific times, the dangers of wandering in the hospital garden, the compulsory rags they called pyjamas, and the shower, the shower with which they deliberately scalded our heads. I wanted to call on them to "rebel against the situation". They were silent, staring into space in front of them. The watch on my wrist showed four o'clock. I studied their lifeless faces one after the other, then turned over weakly and withdrew into my thoughts, watching some birds sitting on the old tree outside the window. I began to count them. Four, no five: one flew up and alighted next to the others. At this time in the afternoon, according to hospital time, everyone was vaguely staring into space, even the birds. Now there were only two birds left on the tree, small birds compared to the others circling in the sky, the hospital sky.

Siesta time, when I usually found it hard to sleep.

The woman from Doukkala was counting how many days she'd been in here and how many she had left, using her fingers. Her feet were still beating the air rhythmically, but the sight had ceased to entertain me. The huge tomcat's foot slipped and he fell into the rubbish bin. There were marginal beings who fed off our misery. The cat climbed out with the remains of a pastry in his mouth, his eyes yellow. He noticed some small cats coming from the direction of the kitchen and didn't pay them any attention, and for their part they didn't do anything which could possibly annoy the big tom. One of them tried to climb into the bin while the others stayed at the bottom looking

for leftovers. Why had I never been able to like cats?

In the paper there is a poem in translation by a poet I don't know. He talks about a tree which grows enormous at night, and lights shining among the leaves.

I remembered the light which still annoys me at night, whose source I've never found out. That light assaulting me from behind the giant palm tree which looks huge and black in the night through the square of glass in the door of the ward. I told the Doukkali woman about it and she said the patient who was in the bed before me used to complain about the same thing.

"It's a prison. It's not for making you better at all," she used to repeat, and curse her husband, who'd had her admitted. And I used to think of the world outside.

When night comes the women take out small plastic washbowls from under their beds as tam tams to mark the beginning of the evening's festivities. Sometimes the aged Ghano, the woman who guards us at night, used to come heavily in and tell us off, then switch out the light and close the doors, withdrawing as she had arrived, walking slowly, her leather slippers groaning under the weight of her enormous aged body.

One night after she'd gone and silence had fallen over the whole wing, the light suddenly went on and a hysterical laugh rang out, followed by more laughter and shouting and confused exclamations of modesty and mild shock. The women were laughing and covering their heads and Fatna, the woman from the Zayan region in the desert, was standing in front of them, taking off her trousers, then dancing between the beds.

In the morning I saw her squatting in her bed, putting kohl on her eyes as she normally did when visiting time approached. A woman leant towards me and told me that Fatna used to work as a barmaid in her youth and that she was a retired dancer and that she had also worked in houses and on farms before she ended up here.

"She's a nice woman. And she's vain."

The woman laughed and pointed at Fatna who was combing some of the remaining wisps of hair on the crown of her head. I got to know her when she came to me one evening long ago with a sheet of paper and asked me to write a letter for her. When Dr Zuhair told her she could leave, she put a vase of flowers on my locker which she'd had on hers, and said, "Flowers ease the mind a bit."

When the moment came for her to leave, she cried and kissed us all, having borrowed a thousand francs from me, and the Doukkali woman's djellaba on condition that she returned everything within a day, or two at the most. Then she made swiftly for the iron gate which

had been opened especially for her, unable to conceal her joy. Never had the Zayani been more beautiful and more elegant than at that moment. She looked back at us one last time, laughed, raised her hand, then left and never came back!

— Who did Fatma send that letter to? the Doukkali woman asked me.

— I don't know. To one of her relatives, I think.

My reply didn't appear to satisfy her curiosity. She looked at me crossly, then added that she didn't like that "randy old whore" and didn't like Zayani women or Zemmouri women in general, and called them smelly berbers.

Thursday 27/12

I've been walking bent double for the past two days.

Grandma Tahra, the patient in the bed across from me, massages my chest and back with oil at night and binds strips of cloth round me to make me warm, then makes sure the bedcovers are properly over me before she goes to bed. The Doukkali woman laughs and calls me Mamouna, because Mamouna couldn't stand up straight either.

This morning my father came to visit me. I was fighting a fever and he put his hand on my forehead and looked at me from below. They told him that I'd been feverish since the night before and that the fever had almost finished me off in the middle of the night. I was asleep before the end of his visit. I felt my father looking affectionately over me. I liked the idea of quitting the scene like this, and falling asleep.

Shall I take a tranquilliser?

The Doukkali woman has a towel over her face and is crying silently. I broke off a bit of chocolate and gave it to her and watched her as she put it inside a piece of bread and ate it.

The clock says it's four in the afternoon. The woman doctor with red hair won't let Milouda's father in and sends him off to the administration. The old man walks on. The doctor pushes him and summons the nurse, and asks her to get rid of "this filthy Bedouin". The nurse asks the guard to help her. The guard catches me observing him through the glass and whispers something to the nurse. They both look at me and then drive Milouda's father out of the building.

In the paper there's an advertisement for poetry evenings, one to be held on New Year's Eve. If only I could jump over the wall at night! Laughter exploded in my head. That would be interesting, especially if I landed dead on the other side and they found me in the morning, the first day of the new year.

Friday 28/12

I talked to Amina and Halouma about jumping over the wall. Halouma thought it was an excellent idea and Amina remarked that if she sneaked out one night, it wouldn't be to go to a poetry evening.

"There are more poetic things out there."

Then she got involved in a discussion with the other women.

Halouma said she knew a poet in their area whom the villagers called Hamza the Idiot, because he never stopped singing. She added that she used to feel sorry for him and take him some bread and dates from time to time.

Old Halima's trolley broke the silence. Supper time: five thirty. I saw the Doukkali woman jump off her bed, pick up her plate and go out. The rest of the women followed. If only I could pass miraculously through the iron gate now, at this very moment. But my body is lurking fish-like inside my pyjamas, in a cold bed, in an unheated ward in the second sex's wing which is surrounded by a high wall separating it from the first sex's wing, in a hospital in the suburbs. What's going on in town now?

All the women have gone out. My gaze rests on the shuttered window. Brel says he prefers to think that a shuttered window allows lovers to love each other in a better way. The Doukkali woman said the window overlooked the street and had been shuttered since a certain fateful event.

The Zayani was the only one who knew the story of the window. She said it was a normal occurrence: a man had climbed up to his sick girlfriend to light candles beside her listless body, and since then this window had been shuttered and barred, so that the women could live their solitude in a better way.

Amina confided in me one evening that her friend, the Beast, had asked her to try and open the window.

This enormous friend used to bring her merguez and fruit, and didn't leave until the female who guarded us at night intervened. On one of his visits I saw her putting her hand between his thighs and laughing, then I saw him removing her hand and jumping to his feet, and unlike all the other times he ended his visit early.

When he left she leapt over to my bed and hugged me. "I want him," she whispered, then added, "He's impotent."

One of the times she came to listen to the radio with me she told me he loved her, but he could never make her happy. He swears to her that if it wasn't for him she would have become a prostitute "long ago".

"He's right," says Amina, and laughs.

She told me how she used to take off all her clothes and undo her straight blond hair and let it hang loose over her face and breasts and sit opposite him. He would give her one glass of beer after another, and she would wait, raising her head to look at him, the warmth flowing through her pores. She felt as if she was sitting in front of a barrel of beer which she had to drink to the last drop to discover what was at the bottom. But she would have fallen before she had got to her twentieth beer. In the morning she used to find that once again she hadn't managed to reach the bottom of the barrel.

Amina says he used to always give her presents and promise to marry her and that she liked the beer and nobody but him could quench her thirst. I began to laugh. She was talking in an absurdly serious way.

"I want him."

I burst out laughing again. She laughed at me crossly, then said, "No. It's not what you think. He's not queer. But it's a really common symptom in men of that sort. That's what I've heard people say."

Saturday 29/12

I asked Halouma if she'd kept some clothes for when she went out. She replied that she kept her dress and shoes in a plastic bag under the bed, and I asked her if she was talking about her shoes with heels. She said they weren't very high and she could run in them.

"Halouma, you need shoes without heels. These shoes with heels were designed to make broad hips sway. We're going to jump over the wall."

Sunday 30/12

In the middle of the night Milouda died.

Monday 31/12

It was agreed that we'd slip out of bed once the other women were asleep and we were sure Old Ghano had dropped off. There were a lot of holes in the wall and Halouma was strong, in spite of being ill. She would jump first and give me her hand.

As far as the guards and nightnurses were concerned, it was assumed that none of them would be there, as it was New Year's Eve, and it was unthinkable that a person would donate such a night to the government.

Amina said to Halouma, "You've got the urge to go whoring. That's all there is to it."

My wrist watch says quarter past eight. The poetry evening begins at nine. Grandma Ghano did her rounds then returned heavily

to her own room. The Doukkali woman started to snore. I know Old Yamina in the corner isn't asleep, but she doesn't usually bother about the sleepers.

I took my shoes and trousers carefully from under the pillow, then slipped outside. I saw Halouma's shadowy figure in front of her ward, wearing Amina's shoes. Calmly and cautiously, she approached the wall with the old chair which Grandma Ghano normally sat on. She stood on it, then clambered up the wall. I heard her jump off the top. I stood on the chair, gripped the top of the wall firmly and managed to hoist myself up, taking my weight on my hands. Halouma's down below. She indicates that I should jump quickly. The distance looked unreal, impossible. I closed my eyes. "Here's to the life ahead." And jumped.

There were no guards, exactly as we'd guessed. We climbed over the outside gate. This time I had no difficulty. Halouma jumped down after me and we ran out of the hospital.

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Her first collection of short stories won the Prize of the Union of Moroccan Writers in 1992.

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