

Translated by Fr



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"Abdellah Taïa is :
in France. In this novel, appropriately, he talks
about his first contacts with Europeans. We
learn about the traditional Moroccan family, about
Swiss sex tourists, about the *Salvation Army* in
Geneva, about the first burgeoning of desire in a
young Arab, about family love and carnal love.
Taïa has a captivating way of taking us into his
confidence and telling us essential truths."
— Edmund White

An autobiographical novel by turns naive and cunning, funny and moving, this most recent work by Moroccan expatriate Abdellah Taïa is a major addition to the new French literature emerging from the North African Arabic diaspora. *Salvation Army* is a coming-of-age novel that tells the story of Taïa's life with complete disclosure—from a childhood bound by family order and latent (homo)sexual tensions in the poor city of Salé, through a sexual awakening in Tangier charged by the young writer's attraction to his eldest brother, to a disappointing arrival in the Western world to study in Geneva in adulthood. In so doing, *Salvation Army* manages to burn through the author's first-person singularity to embody the complex mélange of fear and desire projected by Arabs on Western culture.

Recently hailed by his native country's press as "the first Moroccan to have the courage to publicly assert his difference," Taïa, through his calmly transgressive work, has "outed" himself as "the only gay man" in a country whose theocratic law still declares homosexuality a crime. The persistence of prejudices on all sides of the Mediterranean and Atlantic makes the translation of Taïa's work both a literary and political event.

Abdellah Taïa (b. 1973) is the first openly gay autobiographical writer published in Morocco. Though Moroccan, he has lived in Paris for the last eight years. He is the author of *Mon Maroc* and *Le rouge du tarbouche*, both translated into Dutch and Spanish. He also appeared in Rémi Lange's 2004 film *Tarik el Hob* (released in English as *The Road to Love*).

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FAENCH
VOICES



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SALVATION ARMY

Abdellah Taïa

She always slept with us, in the middle, between my little brother Mustapha and my sister Rabiaa.

She would fall asleep very quickly, and night after night, her snoring would punctuate her sleep in a natural, almost harmonious manner. It used to bother us in the beginning, keep us from a peaceful entry into dreams. Over time, her nocturnal music, her noises, became a benevolent breathing that accompanied our nights and even reassured us when we were racked by nightmares that wouldn't let go until we were exhausted, wiped out.

For a long time, Hay Salam our house in Salé, was nothing more than a ground floor dwelling with three rooms, one for my father, one for my older brother Abdelkébir, and the last one for us, the rest of the family: my six sisters, Mustapha, my mother and I. In that room, there were no beds, just three benches that served as our living room couch during the day.

We spent all of our time in that room, where there was also this monstrous, gigantic old cupboard, all packed in

together: we ate there, sometimes made mint tea, went over our lessons, entertained guests, told stories that never ended. And, yes, that's where we'd argue, politely or violently depending on the day, our mental state and, most importantly, our mother's reaction.

For several years, my childhood, my adolescence, the essential part of my life occurred in that room facing the street. Four walls that didn't really protect us from outside noises. A small roof to live under, storing in our memory, beneath our skin, what made up our life, experimenting everything, feeling everything and later, remembering it all.

The other two rooms were almost beyond limits, especially Abdelkébir's. He was the oldest, almost the king of the family. My father's room was at once the reception room, the library where he stored his magnificently-bound Arabic books, and his love nest. That's where my parents made love. And they did it at least once a week. We knew. We knew everything that happened at home.

To communicate his sexual desire to my mother, my father had perfected his own techniques, his own strategies. One of them consisted simply in spending the evening with us, in our room. My father, who was a great talker, who commented on everything, would suddenly fall silent. He would not say anything, no word or sound would cross his lips. He wouldn't even smoke. He'd huddle in a corner of the room, alone with the torments of his desire, in the first stages of the sex act, already in a state of pleasure, his arms around his body. His silence was eloquent, heavy, and nothing could break it.

My mother would get it pretty quickly, and so would we.

When she accepted his silent proposition, she'd enliven the evening with her village tales and outbursts of laughter. Tired, or angry, she would be silent as well. Her refusals were obvious, and my father would not insist. Once, upset, he took his revenge on her, and on us by the same token (although we maintained complete neutrality in terms of their sexual relations, or at least tried to) by cutting off the electricity to the entire house. He thus cruelly kept us from the international variety shows that we followed with great interest every week on television. He made us as frustrated as he was. Nobody complained. We understood perfectly: no pleasure for him, no pleasure for us.

M'Barka would wait until we were asleep before going to his reception room. She'd leave us then, her mind at ease, to carry out her conjugal duties and make her man happy. Several times I tried to stay awake to witness this magic moment: her heading out into the darkness towards love. In vain. Back then I had no trouble sleeping. I'd climb into bed and the darkness inside me would almost immediately become a movie screen. It was a talent I inherited from my mother.

On love-making nights, my mother's snoring was no longer there to accompany us, cradle us. To love us. Getting up the next day was hard, something was missing, but M'Barka would have already returned, in her spot, between Rabiaa and Mustapha.

My dreams at night weren't sexual. On the other hand, on certain days my imagination would easily, and with a certain

and he didn't earn a lot of money. Our sisters were left out of the trip but they weren't jealous: boys hung out with boys and girls hung out with girls. There was a certain justice in that somewhere! The girls would finally be free of us boys, from our watchful gaze which supposedly protected them from the outside world and its dangers. They could do what they wanted, without having to explain themselves or ask permission. It's hard for me to admit it but I was like every young Moroccan guy: I kept an eye on my sisters, considered it my mission. I was the guardian of their honor. I acted like a man, the kind of man people hoped I would become. Fortunately, that didn't last long. I gave up the idea of becoming that sort of man rather quickly after our trip with Abdelkébir.

For the first time in our lives we were going on vacation, together. There would never be a second time.

Tangiers. We would spend a week in this ancient international city.

Why Tangiers?

I didn't ask myself that: we were going on vacation and it didn't matter where. Marrakech, Essaouira, Fez, what was important was that for once summer vacation didn't mean staying home and doing nothing, being home all the time, to the point of insanity. Now that Tangiers holds a special place in my heart, I wonder if my love for that city was born during that first stay, or, later on, when I went back there at age twenty. In any case, as we started this trip, everything I knew about Tangiers, and that amounted to almost nothing, would

soon change. My vision and my idea of that city would be turned upside down forever. In my heart and in my mind, Tangiers will forever be associated with my big brother. Thanks to him, a new and other world opened up for me. I was both happy and afraid.

After the copious breakfast, we went back to the Rabat-Ville station to catch our train. On the way, I bought a small notebook to draw in. Why? I didn't know why. I don't remember. Maybe it was to imitate rich people's children.

In the train, on the spur of the moment, I decided to assign the notebook another role, that of a private diary. Really private.

Tuesday

We got on the train this morning at 9 o'clock. In the beginning, it was almost empty. Then, when it stopped at Salé and Kenitra, it filled up quickly. The compartment where we were didn't have a door and that worked out well because after just an hour into the trip, it got very hot and the whole train heated up like the *hammam* in Hay Salé on Thursday night, the eve of the holy day.

Mustapha, I'm not being fair, I know, but I don't remember what he did anymore, what he was like. When it comes to Mustapha, I often forget everything, rarely pay any attention to him. He's 10 years old, still a little kid. And me ... I'm going through the troubles and storms of adolescence.

Abdelkébir read for the whole trip, this fat novel with a title I couldn't understand, *Christ Recrucified* by Nikos Kazantzakis. Abdelkébir, as usual, didn't speak. There's no conversation with him. He's there. You're there with him. In silence. You don't look at one another. From time to time he'd content himself with asking the question, "You OK?" Mustapha and I would answer together, the same way each time: "Just fine, big brother."

But for me, for a while already, I had made it a habit to secretly observe him. To study him from head to toe, let myself dissolve in him.

I journeyed across his body, seated right in front of me. For the entire trip. He wasn't aware of a thing. I had dissolved inside him and he never realized it.

Abdelkébir is 30 years old. He's a man. M'Barka, more than anyone else in the family, reveres him. For her, he comes before everyone else, and to prove it to him, she always saves him the best of what there is, the best of what she cooks. She loves him more than she loves us. And me, I also love him more than I love the others, more than I love anyone.

His reading absorbed him the entire trip. I tried to read, to guess from his face the story inside this novel with the enigmatic title. Nothing. Nothing was revealed. Is it a love story? A happy story? Sad? Tragic? A spy novel? Nothing. No sign that would let me guess the content of that book or what was going on in Abdelkébir's head.

That irritated me. The impossibility of knowing what was on his mind made me furious. I really felt like asking him to

tell me the story that novel told but that was out of the question. With Abdelkébir this kind of closeness is inconceivable, an overly large barrier keeps us from talking like this, naturally, in a familiar way. With him, all words are reduced to a strict minimum.

But miracles exist.

"I'll pass this book on to you when I'm done with it ... if you want," he said, as he continued on with his reading.

Surprised, disconcerted, I mumbled without thinking about what I was saying:

"It's too thick for me ... lots of pages ..."

Silence again.

He brought it up again a few minutes later.

"You don't have to read the whole thing."

"Then I won't know how it ends ..."

"I'll tell you."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"But there's another problem ... That novel is written in French, right?"

"Yes, so what's the problem?"

"I don't speak that language as well as you do."

"It doesn't matter if you don't understand everything. The important thing is that you keep moving, that you constantly keep reading a little bit more, a little bit more ... And then one day, without even realizing it, you'll end up understanding everything."

"So when are you going to loan it to me?"

"In two or three days, maybe a little longer ... I'm a slow reader."

That's it. A true miracle. A conversation with Abdelkébir. Well, the word "conversation" is a little exaggerated. Short sentences. And a promise.

We arrived in Tangiers around two o'clock. The station is located right next to the port and the beach isn't far away.

Abdelkébir had booked a room with three beds in an old hotel that directly overlooked the beach on the coast road ... The Hotel Tingis. It's a real palace that's falling into ruin. You feel like you're on a movie set that isn't used anymore, scenery without life but full of ghosts.

This hotel frightens me a little. There are too many dark corners and it's almost empty.

After we put our things in our room, a vast, strangely designed room with a ceiling that was too high, we went out to buy sandwiches, then immediately came back to the hotel. We didn't meet anyone, neither coming nor going.

This hotel really scares me. I don't dare tell Abdelkébir. I don't want him to think I'm a wimp but at the same time I'd love him to take me into his arms to reassure me or else, if I admit my fear, to invite me to join him in his little bed, the way he did back in Hay Salam.

We ate our sandwiches (all tuna) in silence, and then Abdelkébir imposed a siesta—like M'Barka, for whom it was a sacrosanct habit. Without believing in it and without complaining either, Mustapha and I tried to do as he did. We are totally dependent upon him and consequently must obey him.

I love obeying Abdelkébir.

I didn't manage to fall asleep. Abdelkébir did, and very fast. He snored for a long time. And since that's what kept me from falling asleep, I watched him, studied his body once again. I had the bed in the middle. I rolled onto my right side, turning my back to Mustapha.

Abdelkébir was in full view.

It had been very hot. All he was wearing were these black underpants. He was sleeping on his back, without a cover. His body is light-skinned, really light. He has some hair on his chest, a lot on his legs and calves, very black and curly.

He's not very strong, even a little thin compared to other men from Hay Salam. But he is, without question, a man. All man: I don't know how else to put it. I know I'll never be a man like him, a man as real as the one he will become, more and more as years go by.

He was sound asleep. His snoring, like M'Barka's, didn't bother me in the end. His stomach, almost flat, rose and fell with a regular rhythm. And I rose and fell with it, hypnotized.

My brother's body was there in front of me all afternoon. I scrutinized it, studied it from head to toe with the great care of a scientist dwelling on every detail. The slender nose. The big eyes. The bushy eyebrows. The thick hair I washed so many times. The lips, full-fleshed and sensual. The thin moustache. The cheeks, not completely round. The neck ... The enormous Adam's apple. The gently falling shoulders. The not-really-muscular chest. The dark nipples. The navel ... The black underpants and what they

concealed. The strong legs. The prominent knees. The calves, muscular, after years of cycling. The feet rather small and beautiful.

All afternoon, I swam inside this unconscious body, that couldn't know how it was entertaining me. This body that is a part of myself and, at the same time, is another self.

Later on, around 5 o'clock, Abdelkébir took us to the beach, which was swarming with people.

Around 8 o'clock we ate in a fancy restaurant on the coast road. I don't remember what we ate (maybe fish). I was tired and only wanted to do one thing: sleep. Abdelkébir understood that. He brought us back to the hotel around 9:30.

He's changing his clothes. He's going out again to walk around.

I'm busy reporting the day's events in my journal and wondering where he's going like that, all dressed up, more elegant than usual, so handsome, more handsome than usual.

All of a sudden, I'm not even sleepy.

Wednesday

I wound up falling asleep pretty fast yesterday, I think. I dreamt about Tangiers all night, Tangiers that I don't really know yet. I was walking alone down streets full of people, not just Moroccans, not really Moroccan streets. Tangiers belongs to another lifetime, one set in the fairly recent past but one in which I played no part.

When I got up, Mustapha was still sleeping. Abdelkébir wasn't in his bed. I immediately thought he had spent the night somewhere else. With whom? Where?

Suddenly he came into the room, a towel around his waist. He had just taken his morning shower and even at a distance smelled good, like his vanilla shower gel. He said "good morning" with a nice smile, forced perhaps, but one that basically translated an inner state of well-being ... and that really intrigued me. Without thinking, I answered with a question: "Did you spend the night here, with us?" My audacity surprised him. As a way of answering, he flashed me this half-smile which showed his amusement and, at the same time, his annoyance, and then he turned his back to me. He let the towel drop from his waist, revealing, almost proudly, his butt.

What a shock!

He had my mother's butt! Yes, I'd seen it before, several times in fact, very long ago, in what seems another century, when, as a child, she would bring me to the ladies' section of the public baths. I never really looked at them. Women would pass by and their butt come into view but it didn't bother me. Their breasts too, I know what they look like.

My father's butt, no. Mustapha's butt, no. Nor my sisters' either, no way.

Abdelkébir's butt was right in front of me, less than seven feet away. I could even (I dreamt about this for a moment) reach my hand out and touch it, feel it, get a better look. His

I'm not going to go into the nature of that love here. It's something beyond me. Something that haunts me.

I'm in love and that's all there is to it.

I feel abandoned. Unloved. Hollow.

Where is Abdelkébir now? What is he doing? Who is he with? What is he thinking?

On the beach, Mustapha caught up with his friends and played soccer with them all afternoon. They invited me to join them. Out of fear of making a fool of myself, getting treated like a girl again, I turned down their invitation and stayed by myself, offering my already darkened body to the sun.

This older man (maybe 35, 40?) came up to me. He gently touched my shoulder and said in French:

"You've got to be careful in the sun. It's dangerous. Do you have any sun screen?"

He didn't give me time to answer and offered me his. I rubbed it all over my body, thanked him, and gave it back.

He started right in again:

"Your back. You forgot to rub some on your back. Turn around, I'll help you ... when it comes to your back ... it's hard to ..."

I did as he asked. He put his left hand on my shoulder and started to rub his sun screen across my back with his right hand. It didn't take long. Maybe a minute at most.

"What's your name?"

"Abdellah."

"I'm Salim."

"Are you Moroccan?"

"Yes!"

"Then how come you speak French?"

"Because I live in Paris. I don't know any Arabic."

"You mean, you don't even know a single word in Arabic?"

"Well, maybe four or five ... tops ..."

"And you don't miss that ... speaking your country's language, your first country's language?"

"No, I really don't! How about you, where did you learn French?"

"My French isn't very good, I know that. I still make a lot of mistakes. I learned it in school, like everybody else."

"What are you doing here, alone in Tangiers?"

"Vacation. I'm on vacation with my little brother who's playing soccer over there and my big brother who's gone to Terouan for the day."

"So you're alone then?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Do you want to go somewhere, just the two of us?"

"Where?"

"Maybe the movies."

"There's a theater at the entrance to the medina. It's called the Mauritanya."

"I know it. Do you want to head there and watch a movie?"

"Yeah, I'd like that. I love movies ... But there's a problem ... my little brother."

"He can stay here and play soccer. We won't be gone very long, two hours at the most."

"We'll take a taxi back to the beach."

"Alright. I'll tell him."

Saturday

I feel sick, sick, sick.

I am a traitor.

I have betrayed Abdelkébir.

At the movies, with Salim.

And the worst is that, I loved it, loved having this 40 year old man who smelled good wrap me in his strong arms and talk French in my ear while he tried to get at my penis, my ass. And I let him. And it didn't hurt. Oh, I loved it. Yes. Oh God! I feel sick. I want to stay in bed all day.

Abdelkébir came up to me this morning. He bent over me, put his hand on my forehead. "Have you got a fever? Yes, you might have one, but it's not very high. You'd better stay in bed and rest. I'll go out and get you some Tylenol and some fruit. You need to drink a lot of water too. I'll leave my bottle of Sidi Ali next to the bed."

When he stood up, I noticed this hickey, this big red hickey where his tee-shirt usually covers his neck.

There it was, the undeniable proof. He had done the unforgivable. Him too. I knew it ... I thought so ... And I was right.

He had betrayed me too.

When all this started, I was a little nuts. Now, I'm completely crazy.

I feel sick ... Alone. Far, far from him who still remains so close.

Something has broken between us. Will it stay like that forever?

I'm going to try to sleep, try to forget if that's possible.

Forget what? Forget who? Can I forget a little, just a little?

Sunday

What happened to me yesterday? How did I get through the day? And the night? What did I do? Sleep? Did I sleep for twenty-four hours?

I don't remember a thing.

Abdelkébir was never far away. It was as if he had slept with me, in the same bed, like in Salé. Did he watch over me?

Today, oddly enough, I feel better. I'm fine, not sick anymore. Was I really that bad yesterday?

I am full of doubts, doubts about everything. I'm obsessed, consumed by questions without answers.

What was going on in my head? In my body?

It's all blacked out.

My first case of lovesickness. Sick because I was deceived,

On the other shore, far, so far away, alone, helpless, panic-stricken, done for, I was already crying: "Help." I called Morocco, called my mother in Morocco.

I had just arrived in Geneva. I was still at the airport.

I told my mother a pack of lies. I had no other choice.

"Everything's fine, mom, just fine. Yes, I finally got here. Don't worry. It's not cold, not yet, anyway ... No, I wasn't afraid in the plane this time. There were a lot of Moroccans on board, I think that calmed me down a little ... Yes, my friend came to get me. He's here with me, we're still at the airport. I'll stay at his house tonight and maybe a few more nights. Yes, he's real nice, a real nice guy ... I promise, yes, of course, I'll tell him you said hello ... You'll say a prayer for him too? Well, of course I'll tell him, I'm sure he'll be glad to know that! Yes, mom, I told you, no, he doesn't take advantage of people ... and he's a really good cook ... He's got three bedrooms and plenty of blankets, so don't worry, I won't catch cold. He told me several times how he'd look after me

like a big brother. I've got to go now, M'Barka, he's waiting, we're heading back to his place ... I'll call you later ... What's that? ... What did you say? He's got a car ... Say a prayer for me ..."

September 30, 1998. Late afternoon.

Nobody was waiting to meet me at the Geneva airport. After two long hours, I had to face the facts: Jean's friend, Charles, wasn't coming to pick me up like he promised. He wasn't just late, like I had been hoping.

I called him at home several times. I got the answering machine every time: "You have reached Charles. You can leave a message, even two if that's what you want. I'll call you back as soon as I can. It's up to you." His voice was invariably the same, warm, too warm for a Swiss person. Charles had a voice like some guy you'd love to gossip with about anything and everything. An obliging guy, he would never let you down, no matter what. A good guy, a really good guy.

First message. "Hi Charles, it's Abdellah! I'm in Geneva ... at the airport. I've been looking for you for fifteen minutes. I don't see you. Are you hiding somewhere? Where? Well, you'll probably turn up as if by magic ... I had no problems at Customs ... I'm here, waiting for you ... I'm sure you're on your way ... I mean, on your way to the airport ... Maybe you're stuck in traffic ... Anyway, I'm here. See you in a bit."

An hour later, the second message. "Hello Charles. It's me

again, Abdellah ... Abdellah Taïa ... the Moroccan ... remember me? I'm still at the airport. There's nobody here now. I don't know where you are ... And I don't know what to do ... Maybe take a bus over to your place? Maybe you're sick, stuck in bed ... so sick you can't even answer the phone. What should I do? What can I do? I don't know the code to get into your building. Okay, I'm going to wait a little while longer ... I've got all the time in the world to wait ... Kiss, kiss. See you in a bit, I hope!"

Another hour. Third and final message. "Good evening, Charles. Obviously you've forgotten me. You know, I sent you a letter a month ago from Salé to confirm the date of my arrival here in Geneva ... Didn't you get it? ... Maybe not ... I probably should have called to tell you exactly when I'd arrive ... You can't always trust the mail, especially Moroccan mail ... Assumptions. That's what I've been under ever since the plane landed ... I've been at the airport for almost three hours ... I've got this really big suitcase. I have a few presents for you. I'm starting to get hungry. And I don't know where to go? Where should I go? You know I can't go to Jean's place. Besides, he's probably not even in Geneva. He's up in Leysin, in his chalet ... I don't know what to do. I've got to figure something out. I was prepared for anything, except being abandoned. Abandoned? I'd better grow up fast, real fast. Thanks anyway ... It's dumb, I know, but I was always taught to say thank you. So, thank you. Well, thank you for what? Adieu! as you say in Switzerland ... Adieu!"

Three phone calls. Three messages. Three monologues. The next call is to M'Barka. She tells me it's already dark in Salé and Mustapha isn't back yet. The television is always broken. She's completely alone in that empty house. We're both alone.

Welcome to Europe!

I took the train to Cornavin Station in downtown Geneva. The ride didn't even take fifteen minutes. My mind was going blank. I couldn't think, didn't know how to link my thoughts, how to decide on anything. I only knew one thing: where to leave my suitcase. I'd leave it at the checkroom that most train stations have for baggage. Luckily I had some money with me, a few Swiss francs.

Geneva, that I really loved when I was with Jean, revealed a whole new side of itself: a cold city, colder than usual. Nevertheless, it was a beautiful city, more beautiful than ever, the leaves on the trees red, yellow, green, black, more full of color ... Geneva experiencing a magnificent autumn. And me, I just had to find myself someplace warm before night finally fell. No need to panic, be afraid, tremble, cry, feel sorry for myself about how things turned out. Now wasn't the time, no, no ... I had to be strong, STRONG. That's when I weighed 121 lbs. I don't know where my strength came from, how I found it in me. Undoubtedly it was the strength you

matter. She was looking out the window, kept turning her back to me and from time to time repeating the words: "of course, yes, of course, that goes without saying."

I told myself it was best to go. So I did. I waited another half hour for her at the reception desk.

When she didn't show up, I asked the secretary if she was still busy talking.

"No, no, she's done. You can go in now, but don't get upset if you notice anything strange. She's a little odd."

Just as I was about to knock, the door flew violently open. A volcano erupted.

"I don't have time to see you now. Come back tomorrow, no, make that the day after tomorrow. I've got to catch the next train for Bern. It's absolutely urgent. Adieu!"

I didn't even have time to come up with some kind of answer. She quickly disappeared, racing down the hallway like a nut in full crisis mode.

August 8th, 1997. The day after my birthday.

I left Morocco for the first time in my life. Jean said he'd come to the airport to meet me. He wasn't there. Instead he sent a friend of his. His name was Charles. Jean would join us as soon as he could, his train was late.

The first person I met in Europe: Charles!

He was kind, sweet, a little refined. He put me at ease right away. "I'm one of Jean's best friends, maybe his best friend ... but you'll have to ask him that." He laughed easily and, always the gentleman, I laughed along with him. Then, as nice as ever, he continued: "Jean asked me to entertain you until he got here. Can I get you something from the cafeteria?"

It was quite a while before Jean showed up. Charles used that time to ask me a lot of questions, first about myself, and then about how I came to know Jean in the first place, something Jean hadn't really talked about. I was delighted to answer his questions, happy to talk, to communicate, for as

long as I could. I wanted to please. I did everything I could to make that happen.

As the minutes passed, this feeling of happiness (or something just like it) started to come over me. I was in Europe! In Switzerland! And just that thought, the realization that here I was on foreign soil, someplace that wasn't Morocco, that alone was enough to sustain my upbeat mood, keep me as happy as a child on a visit to the *hammam* with his mother, as delighted and amazed as some country boy who finds himself in the city for the first time.

"You seem young. How old are you?" Charles didn't believe me when I told him I was 23. He guessed I was five years younger. He went on to say: "That could cause problems for Jean ... When people see you two together, on the street, for example, they might think you're a ..."

He didn't have time to finish his sentence. Jean had shown up, finally! There was something unreal about seeing him again in a place that wasn't Morocco. I didn't know what to say. I found myself speechless. Grateful. Happy. Confused. I was also surprised, surprised to see him again, right there in the flesh, right there in front of me, right there, nowhere near Morocco! And then the big question and all the other questions: Did he really love me? What did he really want from me? What could I really give him?

Yes, Jean had shown up late, but at least he showed up: my Swiss summer was about to begin.

I stayed with him in Geneva for two months, August and September of 1997.

It took us a while to get used to living together, a while for me to feel at home there.

Jean wasn't easy to live with. He was very fussy and had unbelievable mood swings. Almost every day, he'd get really irritated with me. I was terrified. I didn't talk back. I didn't cry. He had something in common with my mother: very strong dictatorial tendencies. As the days went by, I realized he wasn't a bad person but rather the product of a certain kind of upbringing, something and someone it was too late to change. I never felt at home there. No matter what it took, I had to adapt myself to his personality, his tempo.

Sometimes I was afraid: Switzerland struck me as a very strange place, much too quiet. This soundproofed country.

I figured out two other important things during this first trip to Europe. First of all, I realized to what degree my fascination with Western culture was based on reality. And then, once I lived there day in and day out, I got to see just how different the West really was, nothing at all like the place I read about in books or saw in the movies for so many years.

I came from another world and nothing let me forget that. Jean wanted to expand my cultural horizons by taking me to museums and art galleries. No persuasion necessary, I was the one who wanted to, who felt a need to look at everything, discover it all. It was with him that I first saw paintings by Picasso, Goya, Holbein, De Chirico ... art you don't forget. And that's how Jean, day by day, left his mark on me. He exercised considerable influence on my artistic tastes and opinions. All I wanted to do was learn.

And there he was, this college professor, right beside me day by day. He was brilliant. His enormous talent for seeing beyond things fascinated me. He needed to be loved and, at the same time, admired. I greatly admired him and I did love him, in my own way.

One day, in a restaurant, while he was in the bathroom, this elegant, slightly arrogant man in his fifties came up to me and gave me his card. He had written on it: "I pay very well."

So that's what Charles was trying to tell me, that unpleasant truth, and having it handed right to me meant I couldn't ignore it. Charles knew some people might think I was just some trick Jean was treating to a vacation. That's what he wanted to tell me, was all set to tell me when Jean showed up that day at the airport. For a lot of people, and the man who had just handed me his card only went to prove it, I was nothing more than a prostitute, some kind of cheap hooker. Making the rounds with Jean, being part of this "new" scene, meant a lot of people saw me as the object of his desire. What else could I be? After all, he was the one paying.

And anybody could buy me, just like he did.

I didn't cry. Tears wouldn't solve anything. I didn't understand what had happened but became aware of this new aspect of myself, a reality beyond my understanding.

Deep inside me, this irreparable fracture opened.

Several weeks later, the plane that brought me back to Morocco was full of Moroccan women trying to look chic. They were very expensive prostitutes. The high season had

just ended in Switzerland and they were coming back to Morocco in triumph, their pockets full, their liberty, thanks to all those Swiss francs, finally paid for. Over there, just like back home, everything was for sale.

We started walking again, Jean and I, in silence. We started to hear these sounds, sounds that let us discern, there in the distance, the true soul of Morocco: Jamaa al-Fna Square, vibrant, ablaze, overflowing with joyous insanity. But who was being celebrated?

These two cops, just as they were getting back into their patrol car, yelled out from the other side of the street: "Make sure he pays you a lot ... and wash your ass good when he's done, dirty faggot."

Two young lovers, in a state of shock, saw the whole thing happen. They just stood there. For a couple of seconds, the boy stared at me in an odd way. The girl tried to make eye contact and smiled. Then the boy did too.

I didn't sleep that night. I cried my eyes out but found no comfort in tears. I don't know if Jean understood what really happened.

The next day, this brural bell and this voice that sounded like it belonged to some boxer who was traumatized forever by his losses vigorously announced that sleep time, here at The Salvation Army, was over.

It was already seven in the morning. Back to reality.

It was still dark outside.

Michel Foucault had vanished.

A woman, small and somewhat older, served breakfast.

She didn't say "Good morning," that wasn't her style. She passed out little trays and each one came with a big cup of very hot, plain tea, two pieces of buttered bread, some Laughing Cow cheese, some orange marmalade and a chocolate Mars bar.

No one said a word inside the immense room they used as a dining area. There were about fifteen of us, evidently of different nationalities. Since there were only three tables, there was no way to avoid each other but, sooner or later, we'd wind up looking at one another and then we'd look

down, without a smile, without a friendly gesture. We were ashamed to be there. All of us already wanted to forget our past, forget last night, forget the troubles that brought us here and couldn't be shared no matter who asked. Each one of us had his story, his secrets, his tragedies, the parents he left somewhere else, the dreams he hadn't fulfilled yet, the love he could declare or not declare, his still raw wounds. Each of us carried his fate on his shoulders and though it wasn't too pleasant right at the moment, each of us tried to keep that flame inside us from going out, kindle that inner light that gave us the ability to live, to walk, to move forward regardless of setbacks, to earn some money and some of that happiness which we could (or thought we could) buy with a few Swiss francs.

It looked like I was the only Arab. Everyone else seemed to be from Eastern Europe or Asia. No Blacks.

At the most, the breakfast lasted fifteen minutes. You had to be off the premises by 7:45.

That meant a quarter of an hour to fill your stomach. A quarter of an hour to get yourself ready to leave this place, this place that despite everything did offer you some comfort, maybe even some warmth, before you had to face your immediate future: Where would you go? Where to spend the day?

There he was, at the door. Tall, strong, attractive, reassuring. Just the way I pictured a real man to be. Michel Foucault had reappeared. As people were leaving, he'd tell them: "Goodbye! Have a nice day!" Some of them said "thank you," others remained silent, probably because they didn't understand French.

It felt so good to run into him again, see this face I'd known for such a long time, meet this man constructed of words, words I first encountered in books and later in the love story he was reading, this man who stood there, already smiling, even though it was still dark. A man who wasn't dead, even if the real world said he was. I couldn't help admiring him. Loving him.

"Goodbye, young man! Have a nice day!"

"Thanks. You too."

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Uh, I don't think so."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Well ... I think I have ... all ... my ..."

"Think of your mother ... what's the one thing she told you you should never lose?"

"My passport!"

"Right, and here it is!"

"Oh, my God, thank you, thank you! How could I have forgotten that? ... I can't even prove I exist if I don't have my passport."

"Oh, come on now, you certainly do exist. I would be glad to testify to that fact if you wanted me to."

"How's that?"

"How's that!?"

"Yes, how's that?"

"Listen, have you figured out where you're going to sleep tonight?"

"Probably here, if you don't mind?"

“Okay, then. Tonight, after dinner, I’m going to show you how I would testify to the fact that you do exist. Run along now, I’ve got work to do.”

“Good luck!”

“You too! And don’t forget, dinner is served from 7 to 8:30.”

“Thanks. See you tonight.”

Tangiers. January, 1997.

His name was Mohamed. And, like so many others, he dreamt about leaving Morocco some day, for France, Spain, Germany, it didn’t matter where, but his wildest dream was about going to the United States. He knew what he had to do, had even come up with a plan, a simple one, simple but effective: seduce a Western woman, offer himself to her, show her what a Moroccan man was capable of, in other words, fuck her like an animal, make her see stars in broad daylight, screw her nonstop, drive her wild, make her worthy of him, deserving of his cock. He wasn’t afraid to talk like that, that was his big life plan, what he planned to do to make his life a success. Nowadays, he said, the only thing still working in Morocco was sex, sex, sex, and more sex, sex from dawn to dusk and all night too, sex everywhere and sex with everybody, even in mosques. Sex, he used to say, was the country’s number one natural resource, its national treasure, its main tourist attraction.

Maybe the answer is no. But love, once it reaches such a rare and lived-in state, deserves our prayers and our indulgence.

I loved Madrid. I loved being part of Mathias' love. I loved being surrounded by two warm, naked bodies, by four hands caressing me. I let them have me, in the afternoon, at night, in the early hours. I forgot about anyone else, thought only of them, there with me in that city, guiding me, leading me around, smiling at me. I had fathomed the secrets of their relationship, the depths of their hearts. I was them. I lived for them. And all three of us, by sharing this sensual and sexual love, became blood brothers, sperm brothers, far from our own borders.

As soon as I was back with Jean in Geneva, I rushed to tell him all about my beautiful adventure, all of it. I shared everything: how we met en route, my pleasure, my emotion, as well as my comments about their love. My joy at rediscovering with Mathias and Rafaël a kind of sexuality I had experienced in childhood and early adolescence. Group sex.

I must have overflowed with enthusiasm, too much enthusiasm, seemed absolutely delighted by the beautiful gift life had just granted me.

Jean completely changed right after hearing about my trip.

Was it jealousy?

Right there in front of me stood another Jean. All his shortcomings were exacerbated. Now he was foul-tempered.

Possessive. Grumpy. A killjoy. Insulting. Selfish. Noncommunicative. Insulting.

He ignored me. In his eyes I no longer existed, and yet I was more dependant on him than ever. He was the one who payed for everything. And he constantly brought that up.

I was suffocating. Jean had only one response: he withdrew further and further into himself, intensified the sad look on his face and hardly ever opened his mouth, except to say hurtful things.

After a few days, I stopped trying to figure him out, stopped trying to understand his love, his way of showing affection. All I could feel was my own suffering. I was inside a prison, more and more inside a prison.

Freedom in the West? What freedom?

One morning I got up early, well before Jean, and I wrote him a long letter that explained how living with him like that was more than I could stand. I didn't understand any of it. Love was certainly a complex emotion, and I didn't always understand it, especially when it took on these somber tones, this oxygen-robbing silence. I couldn't stay there. I had to leave, go somewhere else, breathe again, make sense of it all, and, especially, think about my future. What we shared together in Morocco and in Switzerland would always remain alive and powerful in my mind. He would always be the first one, the initiator, the master I would have to surpass in time. The very embodiment of love?

Charles, Jean's friend, lent me the money to go back to Morocco.

I knew that two months later I'd be coming back to Geneva to finish my studies, that I'd be away from Morocco for a long time.

Charles promised to pick me up at the Geneva Airport on September 30th.

In Morocco, one month before my new departure date, Marc, a friend of mine who taught at the French School in Rabat, someone Jean hardly knew at all, got this letter from him, warning him how "evil" I was and telling him to be careful because Abdellah was really nothing but a whore, like so many other Moroccans, a cheap hustler who had no scruples, a real lowlife, nothing but ungrateful scum. A terrible person. A heartbreaker. An egotistical loser who wasn't worth your time. A monster.

These were the words I had in my head as I boarded the plane for Geneva, that cold, other world where this huge battle needed me to show up, so it could start. I thought going to live in Europe would mark the end of waiting and waging battles within myself. I was wrong. I would still live for quite some time in obscurity. I would have to make radical and immediate decisions very fast, take my stand, distance myself further and further from people I loved, stop crying once and for all, manage my anxiety and my panic attacks. Forget about taking it easy. Learn how to love again. Let Jean play a new part without letting him take over my life. Reinvent myself despite any misgivings. Get ahead on my

own. Be happy on my own. Frequently vanish. Decide to drink or not to drink wine, to eat or not to eat pork. Little by little, reexamine my views about Arab culture, Moroccan tradition and Islam. Lose myself entirely, the better to find myself. To summon, one gray and very cold morning, an army for my own salvation. It wouldn't happen overnight. When this Great Battle started, the angels and the faithful (the Muslims?) would be there at my side. Then, like cowards, they would abandon me. But in the meantime, I will have become stronger, definitely leaner, and perhaps my dream of being an intellectual in Paris will have become a reality.