

Orange Blossoms

—Top of happiness my dear friend. Your delightful story has been like honey on my heart. It has given me much pleasure to hear it. Please, please. It's true. *Allah-u akbar*, God is Great.

It wasn't often I had the honour of the company of one with a rare provenance such as yours. In fact, you were the most beautiful red chair I had ever seen. I took stock and noted your fine inherited qualities, of which there were many. Without question, the furniture maker must have had a brilliant clientele if you are an indication of his handiwork. I listened with envy how women sat on your lap, flattering and fussing excessively like fawning deer. My word, what astounding things you have witnessed! It was all the more horrid that you were tossed out onto the street, abandoned and made homeless by the ungrateful Louise. It all worked out though. In the end, your wish was granted. You were rescued; and now you are the luckiest of all—loved and cared for by this remarkable woman.

I observed all those days when the household returned from work and passed back and forth through the hall to the bedroom, stopping once in a while to freshen a vase or straighten a picture. But they never touched the travel trunk that had its place beside you. I could tell your sense of curiosity was strong. You were like a child who, forbidden to touch, looks desperately at presents under the Christmas tree. What mysteries lay within the special trunk, locked and latched, you had asked yourself. For over a month you had agonized. In exasperation, your will power overcame you. It was then I revealed myself to you and commanded the trunk to open.

Someone knocked on the front door and asked to be let in. The unknown visitor came and sat on your soft, welcoming cushion. Anyone could see by your blush what you were thinking.

— Don't be seeing lofty ideas. Your blood will be soon boiled, my friend.

When you came here, I saw you as one with great knowledge and history...a mind that has questions...one that wanted to know all about the world, and especially about how it was I came to this house.

—I beg of you. I will be telling you now my accounting of these things. Please to close your eyes. Come with me.

Imagine. I'll take you to a mythic land of orange marmalade, tangerine jam and marigold flowers—of bursting, tantalizing apple reds that turn to hazelnut yellow and apricot orange, colours that flicker like a cozy fireplace fire. These are the colours of the Bedouin, of the dry, sun-ripened desert, the plume of a scirocco sandstorm and Amazigh terracotta tiles, of nomad tents and ripened dates; the ochre of the Kasbahs and orange, like the scorching sands of the *Erg Chebbi* dunes; spices sold in the markets, a golden triumph of saffron, turmeric and cumin; and tastes of freshly squeezed juice and delicious melons. It is the sun about to dip into the sea at the end of the day.

—I apologize. You were going to say something? No? I am possessing much excitement to relate my story. I may continue?

It was a long time ago, in a faraway country. So many years had passed, I could hardly remember. Those were the old days, days when people knew each other by name and stopped to share a story when they met in the market. I was the alpha male in my group, a singularly handsome fellow, if I may say so. There was no mistaking my superiority, and, having cultivated numerous coalitions and friendships, I enjoyed many promiscuous sexual seasons.

—Oh, you smile. Do not be telling me you are plenty of goody-goods with two shoes, walking the straight and skinny. No. No.

But that way of life had all changed. At night, when the stalls shuttered for the day and the vibrant bustle of the *souk* quietened, the people returned to their modern homes on the hillside outside the medina. All the familiar faces vanished from this place of ancient history.

In many ways I was not unlike you. I had, for longer than I cared to remember, lived in a *riad*, the home of one of the wealthiest of Moroccan families, on the second floor, up a narrow twisting staircase. From a wrought iron balcony reminiscent of Andalusia-Moorish architecture, I could look down into an open-air courtyard where lemon and orange trees grew out of huge earthenware pots and bougainvillea plants climbed the wall; and in the center, a blue-tiled bathing pool with water that sparkled. It was a beautiful room surrounded by rich cinnamon painted walls and cushions covered with persimmon velveteen fabric and hundreds of bright, colourful pillows. There was nothing more beautiful in the whole world.

But, I craved life as a mere mortal.

And while I'm thinking of humans...frankly, I'd met many a *Louise* in my day. She's like the ones who told me I'd never have a chance; that I was different from the rest; far too colourful for most. Actually, truth be told, they didn't know anything about me. How could they judge? It was their right to be critical, but having a smiling face while holding a knife was most unkind.

—Owner with two faces!

In the late afternoon, Aicha and Yasmina arrived dressed in casual attire dragging two suitcases, looking bewildered, inhaling the smell of spices and cigarette smoke, and avoiding street vendors who hustled at every step. Everything brimmed with life. An avalanche of ochre-hued bread, freshly baked in the communal oven, rolled out into the alley on a rickety donkey cart while motor scooters wove expertly between throngs of negotiators and hagglers.

Aicha was slender and fit. Her streaked curls blew around her face but as her hand swept them away, I could see her long dark lashes and gentle nose. Her skin had not been coloured by the sun indicating that she belonged to a society of culture and respectability. Anyone could tell this beautiful woman wanted to experience life and absorb all the wonders the world had to offer.

Yasmina was the older one. When she pushed her coloured, bobbed hair back behind her ears, I could see a resemblance—same even eyebrows and high cheek bones. She had careful brown eyes that imperceptibly watched.

Omar had spotted them as they crossed under the ancient archway into the medina. He was a thin man with an enthusiastic eye for the ladies. He had on a yellow and blue tartan, cotton shirt and faded blue jeans; and on his head, a ball cap with a well-worn brim. When he smiled, his mouth revealed a row of crooked and missing teeth. With his left hand he removed his cap, and in a wide swoop made a long theatrical bow, “I am Omar. I am humble guide of medina. I am at your service.”

Aicha and Yasmina understood this was no place to be lost. After giving their consent to be guided to their hotel, their fate was in Omar’s hands. Soon, they were swallowed up into a dizzying labyrinth of ancient alleyways. *In shallah*, God willing, they would find their hotel.

A scruffy donkey, lumbered with a pannier of stuffed produce crates, waited patiently beside a wall. “You know what is?” Omar asked with a broad grin.

Aicha and Yasmina shook their head.

“Moroccan Fed-X...Berber four by four.”

He guided them passed a merchant selling cream and hair products made of argan oil, another offering polished camel carvings and a stall with a thousand colourful *babouches* lining the walls.

Omar stopped in front of a man who operated a primitive lathe. The man pulled a string that spun a piece of wood he carved by using a sharp blade wedged between his toes. The chiseler looked up and his mouth opened into a broad smile that showed an even row of white teeth. “See here. Is orange wood.” His toe switched angles rapidly and wood shavings flew about as he fabricated small irregular spheres into a good luck charm. “Look. Berber machine. Berber Black and Decker!” He put down his string while at the same time his toes dropped the blade. “Come inside. I show you magic box. Come.” He implored them, but Omar rattled off something in Arabic and the man reluctantly sat back down to resume his work.

They had zig-zagged through narrow alleys when Omar halted in front of a modest door and reached up to push a bell, above which was typed the words: *Dar Souran*. Presumably, the bell rang in some little room inside the hotel. After the exchange of a few questions, the door opened. Yasmina quietly slid Omar one hundred dirham for having delivered them safe.

“You rest. I come again at seven o’clock and take you around medina.” Omar tapped his watch and pointed to a small settee. “Here. Seven. I wait. *Bisalama*.”

The two travel-weary figures were invited into a salon discretely located behind high Moorish arches and walls covered with ornamental plasterwork that looked like tatted tablecloths. Gathered were several groups of travelers seated at small tables covered with clay tagine pots, bowls of couscous surrounded by olives, bread and chutney, eagerly devouring the mysteries of this foreign country.

A smiling young man approached Yasmina. “Would you like chicken?”

“Oh, no, thank you.” Yasmina shook her head.

A long pause. He tried again, this time his words came more haltingly. “Ahah, Madame! You like chicken now?”

Yasmina replied politely, “We’re not really hungry, thank you.” She motioned to the couple nearest with a buffet of food on their table. “But, if you must, please bring a much smaller portion than they are having. We’ll share.”

The young man looked puzzled; an expression of consternation filled his eyes. He stared at Yasmina as one might stare if a beetle crawled into your salad. His face wrinkled and he talked rapidly in Arabic. He clapped his hands as a signal and instantly two steaming hot glass cups of fragrant mint tea were placed on the table in front of them—the code of hospitality—the ubiquitous mint tea...like beer to the West.

Aicha came to the rescue. “I think he means *Check-in*...not chicken.”

Yasmina’s incomprehension was visible and a mask of idiocy washed over her. She fanned her face and smiled sweetly. “It’s hot.”

At the first light of dawn, in the sky above the medina, the voices of the *Muezzins* rose progressively and echoed one to another from mosque to mosque across the city. At this very moment, the moment the minaret started calling, Aicha and Yasmina jolted upright in their bed. They threw back the covers, ran up the stairs to the rooftop terrace, and stood, their eyes sealed in a look of fear.

“What’s that siren?”

“Do you think it’s an air raid siren?”

“What if war has broken out? We should hear the hum of heavy aircraft soon.”

“I think we should look for cover.”

“Ya. I’m thinking under a manhole cover.”

“Here in the medina? You must be joking!”

The loud projection appeared to be originating from a tower right next to the terrace. For five excruciating minutes the wailing blared through the skies and into the windows of the sleeping population. Then silence. It was incredible.

Aicha and Yasmina’s eyes locked in a wide, horrified stare. Bewildered, they inched toward the edge of the roof and peered down over the parapet. Why was there no commotion...no outpouring of people shrieking, running frantically to a shelter? When finally they gathered their wits and realized what the calling was, the two ladies erupted in uncontrollable laughter.

“It sounded like they were announcing the heavy-weight champion of the world,” exclaimed Aicha when she caught her breath.

Minutes on end they were laughing.

—I'm telling you, their bodies went up and down, up and down until there was an earthquake-like feeling on the terrace. I thought they would rupture their stomach.

—Bust a gut.

I corrected him.

“What? You say, ‘bust a gut’? Really? I’m begging of your pardon. I am sometimes stumbling on top of these English phrases.”

Aicha had wrapped the scarf around her head...the one she had bought from the merchant in the medina: the vendor of kaftans, carpets, and scarves; the vendor who heated water on a lit Bunsen burner coddled in paperwork.

“Mint tea? Sweet?” He had implored them to sit comfortably on a bench decked out with woven wool cushions. He lifted the tin teapot high above the tray and poured a gentle stream of hot water into the mint-stuffed glass.

Aicha and Yasmina had sat obediently and cooed appropriately as scarf after colourful scarf had been draped over them, each being given gushes of admiration.

“It’s beautiful quality...the best in the whole medina,” the merchant cooed.

Aicha had settled on a brilliant blue while Yasmina chose a cinnamon.

“How much for both?” asked Aicha.

“I make you very good deal. I sell for one hundred and fifty dirhams.”

Aicha had mentally calculated the currency conversion and estimated thirty-five dollars was too much. “I’ll pay twenty dollars, not dirham.”

“Oh, I couldn’t! I lose my shirt if I sell for less than thirty dollars!”

“Twenty, firm,” she had insisted.

“Oh, mademoiselle, you drive a very hard bargain.” He placed his hand over his heart. “I won’t be able to feed my children for a week, but for you, I accept twenty-five.” He bowed slightly but kept his eyes on Aicha.

Aicha had dipped into her travel sleeve and pulled out two crumbled notes and handed them to the shrewd vendor who slipped them instantly into a pocket under his kaftan.

Yasmina fiddled with her scarf. “It baffles me how these people can wrap ten meters of cloth around their head. That’s as much yardage as cloth for a banquet table.”

Aicha shaded her eyes from the early morning sun as she looked up from her breakfast plate at the two men standing in the wooden doorway, one pointing in their direction.

Their guide for their trip to the desert was Youssef, an affable young man who knew the history of the land intimately. Turns out, he had attended the University of Marrakech and studied Biology and History. He looked dapper dressed in his *djellaba* woven of fine, coffee-brown camel hair, with a pointy hood like a wizard. His hair was ink black and neatly trimmed with a hint of a wave. Hassan, their driver, wore a head scarf of brilliant orange like the team jerseys of the Netherland's football team, and a brown *Harley-Davidson* t-shirt.

"Show us on the map where we are," Aicha asked of Youssef.

Youssef took off his aviator sunglasses and shook his head. "Your hotel will not be on the map. It's in an alley. Too small for maps."

"What if we get lost?"

"I am your guide. You will not get lost," replied Youssef.

Soon they were off. Music of the desert blasted on the radio as Hassan careened the vehicle into the street. Moroccan traffic wasn't normal. It was like a war zone in which only the bravest survive. Cars made a left turn from the right lane and the driver cussed you out for honking; tractors, vegetable trucks and camels all shared the same lane. Lane lines? Huh! They were just a suggestion. Pedestrians who wanted to cross threw themselves into the traffic waving their hands excitedly creating even greater chaos. While Hassan waited to wedge into a queue, a youngster pressed a tiny paper origami camel against the vehicle window and pleaded with his soulful eyes, "You buy souvenir? One Dollar. Cheap."

Youssef wanted to be an excellent guide. He chatted about long-ago history of the French and Spanish marauders, how they divided the country, about the Amazigh people. He turned his head to face Aicha and Yasmina who sat comfortably in the back. "Some people call us Berbers. But Berber means *barbarian*. This is not a good word. So we prefer to be called Amazigh. Means free people. We are very welcoming. You will see."

We are travelling the road of the thousand Kasbahs he told them. They passed olive groves with their shimmering leaves, clusters of red adobe huts erupting out of the sand-swept plain, a few palms interrupting the colour; and a shepherd pushing his reluctant sheep, his hands squarely placed across its woolly behind, his knees bent, right foot forward and his left at the rear, as one attempting to push a stalled car.

Youssef gestured out the window. "Over on your left is a reserve for figs... one of the biggest in Morocco," explained Youssef.

"I see." Yasmina furrowed her eyebrows at the astonishing information, "but figs grow everywhere here. Five million trees of them, I read. Why would you need a reserve?"

“Yes. It is true. But here they are protected.”

Yasmina wasn't convinced. “Why would you need to protect them?”

“So the hunters can come to shoot them.”

“Shoot the figs? Off the trees? That's crazy!”

Aicha darted her eyes over to Yasmina and tapped her gently. “I think he means *pigs* not figs.”

Yasmina brushed her hand over her forehead and gazed out the window, “It's hot.”

The music of Tina Turner, *Simply the Best* rang out from the speakers as Aicha and Youssef nodded and tapped their fingers to the rhythm.

“Rockin' with the Moroccans,” said Hassan with a grin looking into the rear-view mirror.

They travelled for miles across a lonely plain that looked like a lunar landscape. Other than a single camel that crossed their path off in the distance, there was nothing in all directions.

“Algeria.” Youssef pointed to a wall of grey hills off on the near horizon.

Yasmina gasped, her stomach lurched. “Isn't there a border conflict between Morocco and Algeria?”

Youssef shrugged. “There is fighting, yes. It is nothing new. It goes on for many years. Some people get killed and all the newspapers scream blame for a few days, but it carries on.”

Hassan veered off to the left leaving the road for rough uncharted terrain. Then, out of this barren land, a gnarled tree materialized standing guard over the lone marker of a hand-painted sign: *Auberge Café Hotel*, a Garden of Eden set in the Kasbah-style fortress architecture, the gateway to the desert.

With the lure of the exotic, the desert brought a tsunami of tourists of all types and sizes to the area looking for adventure. The latest batch that had descended upon the hotel clambered over each other to liberate their luggage from the heap; while Aicha and Yasmina lounged in the lobby on round ottomans draped with colourful blankets and pillows, sipped mint tea, and waited for Youssef to bring them their room key.

Part of the attraction was the elongated swimming pool bordered on one side by keyhole arches through which the golden sand dunes of the Sahara loomed; opposite sat a cluster of small rectangular tables where a few tourists lingered with their orange juice cocktails.

Yasmina appeared in a black swimsuit that stretched over her wide hips covered by a white towel which she lowered to poolside before submerging herself in the water. As she surfaced, wet strands of hair fell over her face, and she shook her head from side to side whipping the hair away. Aicha had piled her long hair up into a pony tail. She took a deep breath and slid her slender body into the pool leaving barely a ripple on the surface of the water.

“It's so refreshing!”

—I am thinking, I'm liking this Aicha chick very well. I am like orange blossom opening for first time. You know meaning of orange blossom? It is meaning good fortune. I am having many good fortunes to be knowing Aicha. It is my heart that is being carried away!

Camelus Dromedarius. This was camel trekking country. Aicha and Yasmina went outside the hotel compound exploring, noting tell-tale clues to the presence of camels. Employing their inquisitive style, they honed in on the dark side of the building where the sun didn't reach. There, they found the mother lode of all camels, the *Camelot* as it were—a parking lot of camels milling about, casually resting in the cool shadow of the mud-brick wall, or nibbling at meagre blades of grass.

Aicha approached one of the beasts and passed her hand over its hair. "It's hard to believe camel hair coats are made from these animals." She came around to face the creature and let it regard her intently and put its nostrils on her chest.

Yasmina wrinkled her nose. She pulled her scarf around her shoulders suggesting it was chillier out on the desert. "Look at her eyelashes!—is it a *she*?—so thick and long. And those huge soft eyes. But her face is rather proud don't you think?" inquired Yasmina.

—I wanted to say to never be minding the stupid camels. It is time you must be couching the sunset! The great sun is lowering itself and you must be looking. It will be giving much satisfaction.

When the sun had gone down behind the plain and the soft breeze began to come in through the windows, Aicha and Yasmina, having changed into their costumes for the evening, wandered into the dining room where servants were preparing tables for dinner.

The waiter came by. "Welcome."

Yasmina perceived the chance to demonstrate her newly acquired language skills and seized on it. "*Bisalama.*"

Aicha corrected her. "Mom, that means, *See you later.*"

The waiter smiled, "How are you tonight?"

"*Marhaba.*" Yasmina smiled sweetly. Her mastery of the language was far from fluency as she had just replied by asking how he was.

"I am very fine," replied the waiter who was now presenting a tower of five dishes concealed in ceramic bowls each with its own handle. "Do you know what is?"

The two aspiring bohemians shook their heads in unison.

"It's surprise!"

"*In Shallah,*" exclaimed Yasmina.

The waiter lifted the bowls one by one to expose the food. The first was some sort of bean concoction; the next dish a meat stew; then a cucumber salad, a chickpea and lentil side dish, and a chutney accompaniment.

“Is good?”

Yasmina spoke up proudly, “*La shukran*,” having radically expanded her vocabulary.

“Mom! That means ‘No, thank you.’”

“Oh, gosh it’s hot here, isn’t it?”

“*Ghabi sayih*.”

“I’ve no idea what that means, but I can guess it’s something like, *stupid tourist*,” a crestfallen Yasmina opined.

—Hah! I swear, for the life of Mohammed, I nearly popped my liver hearing to this chatter. Radio mouth!

I followed Aicha and Yasmina wherever they went...out into the desert...climbing the dunes...glamping. I walked with them at Todra Gorge and sat between them in the vehicle as they drove through *Col du Tichka*, the High Atlas pass. I saw their eyes widen in *Jeema el fna* with its snake charmers, henna artists, *Gnawa* singers and thieves. For centuries the square had been known as the *Assembly of the Dead*. I can testify it has never been anything but full of life.

I waited until evening, when darkness settled in and the muezzin’s call to prayer ended; when the square filled with locals and a hundred and fifty mobile kitchens transformed the tarmac into a gigantic food court that was soon billowing smoke from charred kebobs and hot oil, when the two ladies emerged into the night market.

My princess looked ravishing. But soon, too soon, Aicha would leave.

I’m telling you this all so you will understand—understand who I am. We say *djinn*. You say, genie...a swirl of smoke in a bottle that when released, rises up and becomes a man. I am whatever you want me to be. I am a friend of the universe, older than Methuselah’s goat. I am free, a shadow, a silhouette that moves in the moonlight, across the land, across the sand. In the shroud of the blue *talamust*, I can disappear into the sky. I am white like a dove and can float through the air. I can be found in the pages of a book. I am a chair, like you, or a carpet, or even a teapot. I am the Hand of Fatima, a lucky charm, a love amulet. I’ve wandered the earth for centuries to protect, to clear bad vibrations from the path of life and to prevent danger.

But, I was a naughty *djinn*...a *djinn* with a storied reputation. I confess, I’d had my share of women, of course, worn thread-bare and taken, but when I found Aicha, a new flame burned within me that could not be quenched. I saw her, radiant in the moonlight, her beautiful star-filled eyes. Unobserved,

I watched her move through the narrow alleys of the medina, her heart full of wonder. Ah, her smile could turn all the sand in the Sahara desert to gold; her body as tender as a blooming orange blossom. She was a goddess. I wanted to cry out for her beauty. She'd reached me in a way no one else had.

The situation was electrified. I was like a bee drawn to the flower; like a pot that has found its lid. Why did I come here...to this foreign place in this great land? I came to bring the amulet to Aicha, to reveal myself to her, to confess my love, to beg her, please.

What else could I have done? I told myself I could change. It's true that sometimes a *djinn* converts, giving up his mystical powers, like a Catholic converts to Islam, though I had no respect for such a creature—one who lies on the tomb of a thousand honorable men, rends his garments and sheds his blood while denouncing his powers only to become a puny human, weak and vulnerable. But here I was. Wanting nothing less than what they had done, to throw myself down at her feet. But all along, deep down, I knew.

—It is not a possibility for me. Here, they tell me I am looking for a cow with much cash. How can anyone call Aicha a cow? That is terrible. I am ashamed of the words from your country.

I sobbed bitter tears. Being here, I saw that Aicha had her own wonderful life and all this time I had deluded myself. My love was not strong enough. I had to admit I could not possess her; that I was being selfish. I knew then it was over. I must let go. I had to leave. For a thousand years I've roamed and for a thousand more I'll continue to walk the earth unseen, searching. It is for the best.

—You have a face with much concern. I am mind-blasting you?

I could see, you still did not understand. Let me explain. In my country she was given the name Aicha. Here, she is known as Marissa—such a pretty name. Yasmina is her mother. These are the two that stopped and lifted you up off the street where you were abandoned to an unknown fate. They brought you here and gave you a new home. You are a magnificent red chair, my friend, with much to be grateful for and I envy your life.

The magic flickered for a moment.

—I am ending my story...how you say...to be passing the baton; leaving story-telling for another. Two healths, my friend!

And then he was gone.

The Ruby sat quietly looking at the travel trunk that rested beside him. One thing was sure, if wishes were made of magic, then the wishes of the *djinn* had fallen through his fingers like the sand from the desert.

The lid closed slightly. He could still see the lining that held magazine covers of beautiful women, bikini clad on marvelous beaches; while the faint smell of turmeric, cinnamon and mint lingered in the air.