A Beautiful White Cat Walks with Me

Youssef Fadel

Translated by
Alexander E. Elinson

hoopoe
AN IMPRINT OF AUC PRESS

They say: 'Our Lord! Hasten for us our sentence
even before the Day of Reckoning!'
(Qur'an 38:16)

Foreword

On November 6, 1975, a mass government-orchestrated demonstration saw 350,000 Moroccans cross Morocco's southern border into what was then the Spanish-occupied Sahara. The goal was to pressure Spain to withdraw from the territory it had occupied and administered since 1884. The Green March (so named for the color of Islam symbolizing the Islamic rhetoric with which Morocco's King Hassan II imbued the action) was preceded by a movement of armed Moroccan troops into the territory the week before on October 31, 1975. Facing pressure from the Sahrawi nationalist Polisario Front, as well as from the United Nations and the Moroccan government, Spain finally withdrew on November 14, 1975. Morocco and Mauritania moved in to take control, but under continued pressure from the Polisario, Mauritania withdrew in August 1979. As the sole remaining power in the territory, Morocco became the target of an armed struggle for Sahrawi independence that continued until the UN-brokered a ceasefire in 1991 with the promise of a referendum for or against independence. Neither side has been able to agree on the terms of the referendum, most notably the definition of eligible voters, and the referendum has yet to occur, with Morocco's official stance now a proposal for autonomous Sahrawi governance under Moroccan rule.

The status of the Western Sahara (or Southern Provinces as it is referred to in official Moroccan parlance) remains highly contested, as Morocco has viewed the territory as part of Greater

Morocco since before it gained independence from the French in 1956. Immediately following independence, Istiqlal (Independence) Party leader Allal al-Fassi proclaimed on June 19, 1956: "If Morocco is independent, it is not completely unified. Moroccans will continue the struggle until Tangier, the Sahara from Tindouf to Colomb-Bechar, Touat, Kenadza, Mauritania are liberated and unified. Our independence will only be complete with the Sahara!" This notion was embraced both by King Muhammad V and his son Hassan II, who ascended to the throne in 1961, and in fact, the Sahara issue served him well as a patriotic rallying cry to solidify support for his rule.

Following coup attempts on July 10, 1971 and August 16, 1972, Hassan II purged his military of several high-ranking officers. He faced a general crisis of confidence, and took a series of measures to try to reestablish his authority and popularity among Moroccans. He instituted a land reform program aiming to 'Moroccanize' farms and small businesses still held by non-Moroccans, and in 1973 he sent Moroccan troops to Egypt and Syria to join the fight with Israel in an attempt to shore up his anti-Zionist credentials. Arguably his boldest and most effective move, however, was to ramp up rhetoric in the summer of 1974 in support of Spanish withdrawal from the Western Sahara and its (re-)incorporation into Greater Morocco. These efforts built upon already enthusiastic popular support for the territory's liberation from Spain and (re-)integration into Morocco. Hassan II eventually gained approval for his claim from most Arab countries, as well as from the United States and France.

This enthusiasm, however, was met with opposition from the indigenous Sahrawis. The Polisario Front, established in 1973 as a nationalist resistance movement that aimed to expel the Spanish from the region, refocused its attentions and activities on Morocco and Mauritania until its pullout in 1979. By April 1976, as the conflict escalated, much of the Western Sahara's local population had left the region, with tens of thousands settled in Polisario-administered camps in Tindouf, Algeria. Inside

the Moroccan-controlled territories, Morocco faced increasing guerilla attacks that it countered with troop build-ups and the building of security walls that aimed to stem the outflow of refugees and prevent attacks against Moroccan forces. Although the Moroccan military held a material advantage over the Sahrawi resistance, Moroccan troops—largely peasants from the north and urban conscripts—were at a distinct disadvantage, unaccustomed as they were to the extreme weather conditions and geography of the desert. These conscripts and their commanders were also unable to adapt to the guerilla warfare used by the resistance. Sahrawi fighters were familiar with the terrain and territory, were able to move about largely undetected, and were thus able to keep the Moroccan troops on the defensive, with little to do but wait for the next attack.

This war resulted in a dramatic increase in the size of the Moroccan military, from 56,000 troops in 1974 to 141,000 in 1982. The increase in military expenditures, combined with growing economic troubles that were exacerbated by population growth outpacing agricultural output, crop failures, and drought in the early 1980s, all led to a serious national crisis. The heady days of patriotic fervor that had immediately followed the Green March in 1975 had given way to a precarious economic and social situation that severely tested Moroccans' faith in their country, their political leaders, and their king.

King Hassan II (r. 1961–99) ruled Morocco with an iron fist, responding to challenges to his rule from military leaders and leftist/Marxist activists with mass arbitrary imprisonment, mock trials, torture, and forced disappearances. The Years of Lead in the 1970s and 1980s were a time considerable brutality and fear in Morocco, and it was only in the 1990s that Morocco's human rights record began to improve. Despite considerable progress in terms of human rights and press freedoms, limits remain. Journalists and activists still routinely face fines and jail time for transgressing article 41 of the Moroccan Press Code that prohibits anyone from questioning

the sanctity of "the Islamic religion, the monarchy, or Morocco's territorial unity." Vague as this prohibition is, writers are constantly testing its limits. In the Western Sahara itself, there continue to be reports that torture and forced confessions are still practiced by Moroccan authorities against Sahrawi advocates for independence and human rights.

Hassan, one of two narrators in *A Beautiful White Cat Walks with Me* is a comedy performer with leftist tendencies who finds himself drafted into Moroccan military service and sent off to the desert to fight a war that he and his fellow conscripts do not understand, against an enemy that is elusive and really no different from themselves. His father, Balloute, is a jester in the royal court whose proximity to the king offers a rare glimpse into the monarch's inner circle, his habits, his sense of humor, his flaws, and the rewards and dangers of living so close to power. Their narratives intertwine not only as those of a son and his father, but as complementary views of the kingdom from both inside and outside the palace walls.

This novel depicts Morocco in the 1980s during the war in the Sahara, and is about how the war, and rule of Hassan II, permeated every aspect of Moroccan life. *A Beautiful White Cat Walks with Me* combines comedy and tragedy to examine the role of violence, power, and authoritarian control. One might recognize real historical figures, such as Hassan II, General Ahmed Dlimi (d. 1983) who was the king's right-hand man and commander of forces in the Sahara, the king's real court jester Mohammed Binebine (d. 2008), and others. What is remarkable about this novel is that Youssef Fadel has created a fictional world that evokes these personalities and this time, but is not bound by them. With characters comic and tragic in their humanity and in their attempts to find respect and love in a place where power is concentrated in the hands of the very few, the novel depicts life as so unpredictable, cruel, and ridiculous, it is difficult to know when to laugh, and when to cry.

Alexander E. Elinson

1

Day One

I HAD DREAMED OF THE desert, almost like the one surrounding me now. A desert slapped by blazing whips of sunlight. A fort, a burning tavern, a purple road like a thin strip along the horizon. I saw all of this in the dream, months before actually finding myself here. I hadn't set foot in any desert before that dream. I had never passed by any fort or gone into any tavern. All of this I saw in the dream. It was just like this, in almost the same baffling order. The burning tavern first, then the fort made of clay, then the road, the same purple shade tending toward blue, and the same sun whose heat continued to burn in one's memory long after it was gone. There were soldiers playing cards, unaware of the fire consuming the tavern and of the pillars of smoke rising from holes in the foundation and walls, making it difficult to see. And there I was, calmly searching under tables and between legs for something I was unable to find, not even knowing what I was looking for. Neither the fire's smoke nor the noise of the card players distracted me. I saw all of this in the dream, just like I said. How could I possibly have imagined that a few months later I would find myself sitting in the same tavern I had seen in the dream, a few dozen meters from the fort made of clay, that I had also seen in the dream, watching over the road stretched out like a thin line drawn on the horizon?

I'm now sitting in the same tavern, but without the fire, and without the smoke. I'm watching the same road, but it's

not deserted. There are trucks passing by from time to time. For their part, the soldiers are standing at the counter drinking indifferently rather than playing cards, and I'm not searching for anything, neither under tables nor between legs. Rather, I'm thinking of Zineb.

In the dream I hadn't seen the waterwheel whose water had dried up long ago, nor had I heard the sound of the turning axle moving uselessly, perhaps only because of the small breeze still softly and mercifully blowing. Purple stone everywhere. An expanse of purple stone starts immediately behind the tavern. Purple stone, a purple sky, and an evening not too different in color. The air is heavy. We can barely breathe. A faint breeze blows through the small, narrow window. Stone, a sky, an evening. And this tavern resembling a wooden hut cast out into the empty waste, with a narrow window looking out toward the fort, the six date palms, and the stone road—purple, distant, and aligned with the horizon that separates the purple stone from the purple sky. I don't see the waterwheel because it's on the other side.

Not too far away, a soldier plays his stringed instrument. His name is Haris Sahrawi, and he is the guard. He sits at the fort's door covered with a cloak that has acquired a gray tinge—the color of the desert evening descending upon him. It is his turn to serve sentry duty. Whenever evening falls upon him during guard duty, he thinks about his wife and children back on the islands off the coast, and intense longing overwhelms him. Every once in a while an argument rises up inside the fort between the soldiers playing cards at Sergeant Bouzide's place, followed by the sound of a passing truck in the distance. It's carrying water to a base farther down the road. The truck doesn't turn toward our fort. We get our share of water from the well.

That's it. The fort, the tavern next to it, an argument, the purple hue spreading out in every direction, and the four of us at the counter.

Coincidence and military service have gathered us together here. A conscript named Brahim is blowing cigarette smoke at a small turtle crawling along the bar. He waits for it to walk a little bit before returning it to where it had started, then he blows smoke on it again, laughing. Mohamed Ali doesn't laugh because he doesn't like joking around. He's from Zagoura, in his fifth month here. And there's Naafi. Naafi is a conscript from Marrakech, like me. We arrived on the same day two months ago. His bed is next to mine. He's a student who has finished his first year. He knows the area because during summer vacations he worked as a tourist guide. He loves the desert and he adores Fifi, the tavern's owner. Whenever he's not on guard duty or cleaning the courtyard, he's leaning on the counter suggesting changes he'll make to the bar after he and Fifi get married. She tells him she's going to go back to Tangier and come up with some sort of plan once she gathers enough money here, if the war continues for another few years, but Naafi doesn't pay any attention to what she says. He goes into the kitchen and comes out with his mouth full, jaws working indifferently, as if he was in his own house. Or he wanders around the tables of the dining room, smoking and moving with deliberate steps. It's not the walk of a soldier or of a civilian. Rather, it's the walk of Alain Delon, just as he saw him in one of his films.

Then there's Brigadier Omar, whom no one likes simply because he's a malicious person. He likes to do wicked things for no real reason. Two steps away from me he sways, almost falling over, but is saved by the bar that continues to prop him up as he curses a devil only he can see. And Fifi stands there like a man, cigarette not leaving her lips that are stained blue by cheap wine, disdainfully watching what Brahim is doing with the turtle, yet unable to kick him out because he spends what little money he has there. No one knows her real name. They call her Fifi. She's beautiful, no older than thirty. Her face has light freckles. Her hair is blond and her smile provides

a bit of cheer to this place. She came from Tangier two years ago, and is not allowed to sell the soldiers drinks, cheap or not. Therefore, she serves them "under the table," as they say. Captain Hammouda tolerates her because of her smile and the light freckles on her face. So, there's Fifi, Brigadier Omar, the conscript Brahim, the soldier Mohamed Ali, and Naafi. And then there's me, wondering how I found myself in a place I saw in a dream six or seven months ago.

The picture of Alain Delon never leaves Naafi's pocket. He has a color picture of him and a mirror he uses to comb his hair back when he wakes up, the same way Alain Delon does. When he sleeps, he places his pants under the quilt so that the crease remains visible and straight, just like Alain Delon's pants. And when he sits at the counter to smoke, he waits for Fifi to turn toward him so he can raise his right eyebrow, just as he saw Alain Delon do in one of his first films. Fifi is only interested in him as someone who says funny things. Of greater importance to her is what she nervously follows Brahim doing with the poor turtle. When Brahim is sure she is watching him with those nervous eyes, he places his hand on its back like a civilized person who loves turtles. She approaches him, fills his glass while drawing on her cigarette, and seizes the opportunity to return the turtle to a little plate of palm leaves, placing it on the inside corner of the counter. Brigadier Omar, who is still not sure whether he's going to fall or not, finally falls. He shoots a glance at everyone, wondering which of us made him fall. Then he grabs his glass, holding on to it as if it will help him get up, and there he remains, wondering whether he'll be able to get up or not. Finally, he gets up.

I'm not thinking about life at the base, or the desert I saw in the dream. Rather, I'm thinking about military service. "Eighteen months. Just eighteen months, after which you can return to civilian life and continue performing your sketches in cabarets and private salons as you were doing before. But military service is obligatory!" That's what the commanding

officer made clear when we were in the capital. Everything was going just fine for me at the time, just about. I had left Zineb sick and bedridden, and work wasn't going as I would have liked, but I had high hopes for the future. In the last few months I had been able to put on a few private performances in front of a group of engineers and doctors. In those shows I made fun of the prime minister, who had suggested his government prepare an educational curriculum enumerating the virtues of fasting, which he would then distribute to schools and institutes with the goal of having people forgo the habit of eating, because of the exorbitant cost of wheat to the national treasury. I also had jokes about hard currency and other stories that resonate among the elite. I had been performing this sketch for a while now because the audience I performed for knew it, had memorized it, and came to expect it. Many of my sketches contain the same elements. They always resonated with large numbers of people, and the press wrote about their boldness, considering them politically committed works, just as some considered me a leftist. I'd be a leftist if they insisted, but on my own terms.

As I said, everything was going just fine. It couldn't have been that these sketches, meant to make people laugh, were the reason behind the call to duty. I don't have enemies who would want to send me to the front. Surely my father couldn't be behind it. I was twelve or thirteen years old when he left his wife's bed; when he disappeared from the house for good. I'm twenty-seven now. That year, the year of his disappearance, my mother maintained that he still set up his performance circle in the Djemaa El-Fna square. But after a year, he disappeared from there too. Where did he go? God only knows. Then we heard that he had become a jester in the king's palace. We left him in his palace and no longer thought of him. We forgot him just as he forgot us. I didn't think of him when my sister Fadila had an epileptic seizure in the middle of the alley and fell convulsing into the dirt, the neighbors carrying

her unconscious back to our house. I didn't think about his absence from our table. I didn't think about him when my mother joined the traditional arts collective in order to provide for us. And I didn't think of him when I received that sudden call, at a time when everything was basically going all right, despite Zineb's illness. I had been completely engrossed in preparing a new show about Tariq bin Ziyad, the Berber who, despite not knowing Arabic, wrote his famous speech. In the end, I blamed it on the dream. As long as I dreamed of this place, and as long as this place existed, I would have to see it one way or another. But how would I have seen it without being forced to? Is there a more direct way to get there than through compulsory military service? Compulsory and obligatory, no way around it, just as the officer had said.

2

YES, I'M A JESTER. IT fills me with pride to hear people guffawing, torrents of laughter crashing down everywhere, clusters of joy hanging all around me, happiness swimming in the air, and the wings of intoxication fluttering. A hurricane that fills veins, eyes, and mouths. It squeezes one man's midsection, his cheeks reddening and the blood almost bursting from his pores. He looks as if he's about to explode. It is truly something strange to watch a group of people laugh. Their bodies seem oblivious to anyone watching. When they laugh, people turn into something else entirely. How interesting it is to make people feel happy and unrestrained when they're together—usually with simple words that wouldn't make someone laugh were you to say them to him on his own. But when they're together, their masks fall, to the point that you don't recognize them anymore. This one produces a sound resembling a horse's whinny. That one reminds you of a donkey's bray. Then there's the laugh that resembles a dog's howl or a saw working its way through a piece of wood. A strange carnival of sounds, from the clucking of a chicken to the cackle of a hyena, and every form of laughter strives to outdo the others.

The jester has no family. His family is his occupation. This is what I've come to understand after years of work. The nature of his work has him on call at the palace round the clock, as sometimes late at night sleep eludes His Majesty, or he wants to extend a soiree into the wee hours. Yes, I'm

a jester, and my mission is to make the king laugh. Despite my sixty years, I'm still needed, thank God. Work still has me by the neck. They say that my face is gloomy and that's what causes people to laugh. They say that whoever looks at me thinks I'm crying, so they laugh. But I don't listen to a word they say about me. Why don't I cry when I see my face reflected in the mirror? Why doesn't my face make me laugh whenever I look at it? People say all sorts of nonsense that would never occur to me. Let them talk. I'm only interested in one thing: pleasing His Majesty.

I consider myself lucky, and I'm not just saying this. Is it possible for anyone else to gain such proximity to him? Someone like me, with essentially no trade or craft. No high pedigree or family tree with deep roots. Someone like me, who has memorized only a few lines of poetry and a couple of verses from the Qur'an. I was nothing more than a street performer in Djemaa El-Fna before becoming, all at once, a jester for the king. I eat with him and drink with him, accompany him on his trips and hunting expeditions, entertain him when he wakes up and before he goes to sleep. How many people have been granted the likes of this honor? Not too many, in any case. There are some professional actors and singers, but they only appear during holidays and official functions. They present what they have in terms of new jokes or they sing their enthusiastic songs, then they leave. There are some politicians who might come close, but how quickly they become boring. There's Said Jilali who brings the water for ablutions to His Majesty. This man used to sell donkeys before luck smiled upon him, all because his aunt was employed as a cook in the palace for a little while, and during that time she worked on his behalf to get him this job. His greatest wish when he was hired at the palace was to kiss His Majesty's hand. As time passed, the wish faded away, and in the end it was replaced with the wish to celebrate *me* and kiss *my* hand.

Then there's Zerwal the hunchback, although I don't take him into account. I don't consider him lucky like me because God already provided him with the necessary weapons for permanent and eternal success. His hump and his deformity are the two things that guarantee his livelihood, and this livelihood will never be cut off as long as his hump remains on his back. His head, which resembles a pear, is extra capital that will accompany him to the grave. God created him in this deformed way as if He were handing him a precious gift—a treasure he would benefit from for his entire life, eat from without worry, like a landowner or someone who holds an exclusive license for cutting stone or deep-sea fishing. I don't have any of these special things—neither a license, nor a hump, nor any deformity at all. I'm well formed and can't complain of any deficiency. My professional success relies more on my rhetorical ability, if I say so myself, than on any external appearance. Moreover, Zerwal's constant presence in the palace is more a curiosity than anything else. The king is obsessed with science and scientists, and he is interested in this clown as a specimen with which he and his scientists, on Friday afternoons, can study the natural and unnatural changes that occur in the human body. Zerwal the hunchback is my closest enemy; my only competitor, to be exact. For his part, he considers me an enemy and a competitor too. I know that he spends his time setting traps for me, and even though his ruses haven't succeeded yet, it doesn't mean he has stopped plotting. Even if he gives the impression that he's tending toward rapprochement, that doesn't mean that his intentions are to be believed, that he is not secretly planning something for me, and that he won't succeed tomorrow or the day after if I let my guard down and allow my vigilance to flag.

The sultan's jester *is* the sultan. I know things about him he doesn't know about himself, and he knows things about me that never occurred to me. I say what I'm thinking to him without worry. This is natural as long as we complement one

another. I can say what I wish without fear. Once he told me that his soldiers slave their whole lives away and don't earn a tenth of what I do per minute, to which I immediately responded, "My task isn't easy. There's nothing harder than making a smile bloom on the lips of a tyrant such as yourself." He let out a loud chuckle and walked out. I said this because I knew exactly what his reaction would be because, as I said, I understand him as he understands me.

But what's important is that I must never stop being entertaining and funny, and must always remain open to mockery. I must never forget this. The day His Majesty stops making fun of me and laughing at me and at every word that comes out of my mouth, the day the flame that provides my silliness with the necessary strength dies out, that's when I'll consider myself done. That day has not come yet, thank God, even though I'm constantly thinking about it. I think about what happened to Dr. Rahhali, who was on the verge of being thrown into one of His Majesty's prisons for something or another. They call him doctor, but he didn't work in a clinic. Maybe it's because of the long period of time he spent so close to the king. No one even knows what his job inside the palace was. He was always seen with His Majesty, but can anyone actually remember what exactly he did? Now he's sitting at home waiting for his fate to be decided, perhaps praying day and night that the king has forgotten him, while he waits for a punishment to be meted out for something that no one has any knowledge of. That's what I imagine. I'm not interested in him; not interested in whether he's standing up straight or bent over in prayer. However, I do picture him sitting on his sheepskin rug begging God to lift this misfortune from him. I try hard not to think of him, but he imposes himself on me every time I lie down in bed. Dr. Rahhali, whom everyone revered and respected and whose friendship they bought, look what's happened to him! I do everything I can to stay under His Majesty's protection, sharpening my

wit day and night, firing up my intellect with my whip-smart memory until I find something sufficiently entertaining. When I can't, I go to the house of my old friend Si Hussein the barber. He has enough jokes and stories to keep me fed for days. I don't see any other fate for myself. Sometimes I can't sleep, thinking about the day when . . . I just hope that day never comes. Allegiance to the palace is like walking on shifting sands, and I need to love my shifting sands, to swim in them with the current, as they say. This is how it goes and I need to go along with it, and to thank God for it. Even with all the caution it requires daily, for years on end, diving into these sands is not safe.

All in all, these aren't complaints. When I see the esteem for me in the eyes of my friend Si Hussein the barber's customers, or the jealousy in the looks of people I bump into on the street, I see that I am closer to His Majesty than anyone else in the world; closer than his ministers, his high-ranking officers, his chamberlain, and his private guard. Si Hussein the barber is an old friend from my days of hanging around the Djemaa El-Fna when I was just a street performer. In his store or his house in the Sammarin district I would gather my provision of stories and strange tales for the days that my well ran dry. Si Hussein is a bachelor, like the cobbler he shares a living space with. The cobbler, like Si Hussein, is in his fifties and loves smoking kif, playing the oud, and spending time in the company of young men. When the two of them smoke hashish, Si Hussein grabs his instrument and together they sing the poems of Ben Brahim. Sometimes they sing exceedingly erotic melhoun poems, along with *The Boasting Match between Young Men and Slave Girls*, the book by al-Jahiz that both of them have committed to memory. I have memorized many poems from these two, and from them I learned an essential aspect of my work: to recite love poetry and accompany it with the oud, because many of those I visit in their palaces love this.

The jester's task is not always enjoyable. Besides entertaining his master and his guests and making them laugh by recounting strange tales, he should have committed the Qur'an and hadith to memory, and possess a tremendous number of stories, jokes, and poems. In the moments when he is least expecting it, he has to be able to invent entertaining ruses and games on the spot. Sometimes he has to display great talent and spontaneity by inventing something entertaining, totally unprepared, that is appropriate for a particular moment or that corresponds to some sort of emergency or the arrival of one person or another. I'm like that actor whose worries are hidden when he casts off all his daily cares in order to free himself up for the task of alleviating those of the audience. That's not to mention those times during the day when boredom bears down and they pelt me with fruit peels, or sometimes with empty, or even full, glasses. Once they asked me to throw myself naked into the palace pool at midnight, and as soon as I jumped into the pool they took off with my clothes. I have to accept this with an open mind because all of it is part of my profession. I'm not going to balk at such trifling matters. Nothing in this is what would be called strange. Rather, it's part of my job. Incidents such as these are as much a part of palace life as the walls and the garden and the water cistern. They're always to be found with the king, all around him; with all kings, in fact.

Instead of complaining, I need to hold fast to this opportunity. Every day when the sun rises I say to myself that this is my opportunity and I need to hold on to it. Let them hit me, let them pour water on me or piss on me. This is part of my job and I need to accept it as a gift because tomorrow, and the day after that, and on all the mornings that God creates, I'll sit on the balcony of the Renaissance Café watching Marrakech from above and all around me the customers will turn and point to where I'm sitting. "Who's the man wearing the djellaba and the red tarboosh?" "The one sitting there? Don't you know? Why that's Balloute, the king's private jester!"

In the past few years, with seniority, and because I have become His Majesty's favorite jester, there are no longer that many people bold enough to cross the line with me as they did before when they took off with my clothes or pelted me with fruit peels, even if they are still tempted to do so. They do that with Zerwal now. They hit him on his hump or pull his shirt off in order to use the hump as a dry ablution stone. Despite all of this, I always say that a profession such as this is tempting for important men such as ministers and generals. I've seen some of them clucking like a chicken laying an egg just to get the king to smile. And there are those who will act like a monkey, pretending to pick through the hair on their bellies in a government meeting during which important matters such as the state budget are being discussed. All of this behavior seems strange to me when it comes from important people such as ministers and general secretaries. Making the king laugh has never been a part of their jobs and this makes me hate them even more. I always have to hide my true feelings and accept the mockery and abuse of others good-naturedly. This is all part of my job. I am a jester, true, but behind the mask of the silly jester there lies a deep indignation. My hatred for humanity knows no limit.

Laughter gives life and brings death. He who does not want to die from laughter wants to be made healthy by it. That's because laughter, if it doesn't kill, cures, just as it did with the king whose kingdom was saved by a single fart. This king was bedridden because of an illness that responded to no treatment. None of the doctors of the kingdom were able to prescribe medication that would bring about his recovery. After a few weeks, the illness got worse and he was on the verge of death. All across the land the weepers wept and the mourners mourned. Then it happened one day that his jester was sitting on the edge of his bed crying. The sight of the jester caused the king to let out a resounding laugh, and with it a huge fart that allowed his entire body to breathe easy. Things

didn't happen exactly as described; a few details have escaped me and maybe I'll remember them later. The important thing is that the very next day, the king felt better, as if he had never been at the edge of his grave.

While you might find a person who has never cried in his life, you won't find a person who has never laughed. Animals don't laugh. Laughter is for humans. If someone doesn't laugh out of happiness, he'll laugh out of worry. He'll laugh about sitting and about standing, about silence and speaking. Laughter is in the heart and in the mind. However, even if a person is extremely prone to laughter, he cannot make himself laugh all by himself. He can tickle himself as much as he wants, but he still won't laugh. He might think hard about where laughter comes from and squeeze his heart and tickle himself under his arms and on other parts of the body, but he'll never laugh. He needs someone to stimulate that strange gland—the laughter gland—and as long as things remain thus, we, the jesters, will have a prominent place in people's lives and hearts.

3

Day One (Conclusion)

THREE TRUCKS PASSED BY, THEN two more, all of them carrying water. Where were they heading? Somewhere in the sprawling desert there were soldiers waiting for water. We weren't waiting for water. We were waiting to visit our families. The fort is close to the well that brings us water. Thirty kilometers of sand and stone separate us from it. We were in the tavern celebrating the furlough we'd received. The conscript Brahim, the one who was playing with the turtle—his vacation would be spent on the road. He's from Oujda. Two days to get there and two days to come back, maybe more, depending on the road's mood; if it isn't cut off, or a tire doesn't blow, or the bus isn't late, he'll have just enough time to see his parents and ask them to look for a wife for him for whenever he returns. He thought about all of this while he played with the turtle. He returned it to where it belonged whenever it strayed too far, to remind it, and himself, of their ridiculous journey. The conscript Mohamed Ali wasn't laughing. He's from Zagoura and doesn't like kidding around. He was thinking about his French wife he left behind there. He's got a store where he sells his drawings and this Frenchwoman had passed by the store and liked the paintings. Then she sat down to drink tea with him and stayed in Zagoura. Her name is Françoise and she is the apple of his eye. He was thinking about the days he'll spend with her.

And Naafi? He was leaning on the counter studying Fifi and counting in his head the number of tourists he'd bring

here when the war ended and he married Fifi. So, there was the conscript Brahim, who was playing with the turtle; the conscript Mohamed Ali, who found no reason to laugh and whose heart burned for Françoise; Naafi, who was feeling his way to Fifi's heart; and there was me, thinking about Zineb. Zineb, who I left sick and lying in bed without the smile that was usually on her lips. There wasn't even a phone here I could use to call her to make sure she was okay, to hear her voice and be satisfied that she was in good health. I'd written two letters since arriving. I hadn't received a response and I didn't expect one because she doesn't like writing letters. I requested a special leave in order to see her. The next day I would leave the barracks. That's why we were in the tavern, drinking toasts to the upcoming vacation I'd been anticipating for a while now, and whose time had finally come.

Brigadier Omar rose, holding on to his glass as if it would help him get up. He turned in our direction, firing a look as if he were trying to figure out which one of us had caused him to fall.

Aiming the words at me, he said, "Do you know what's waiting for you, Hassan?"

"I don't know what's waiting for me, and I don't care to know, Brigadier Omar, because I'm traveling tomorrow."

"So you don't know? Better for you."

There was something resembling a smirk on his face, or a muffled laugh that knows there's a hole in front of you, but that doesn't want to point it out before you fall in. Then he told me: My leave had been revoked, and that we would set off, the four of us, at midnight, so as to reach the well in the morning to get water.

"But do you know what sort of weapon the enemy uses?"

No one responded to his question because Brahim was still busy with the turtle, or at least that's the impression he was giving. Mohamed Ali put his head down like someone whose head had started to hurt all of a sudden and Naafi was

counting his tourists. The brigadier leaned on the counter again and lifted his empty glass to his mouth, then slammed it down violently on the wooden counter. Fifi came over and put another bottle in front of him. He filled his glass until the foam spilled over the edge. He lifted it to his mouth and this time the beer spilled all over his uniform.

"They use Kalashnikovs," he said. "New, Russian-made Kalashnikovs. Have you guys ever seen one?"

I hadn't seen one, but I didn't tell that to the brigadier. I had seen the rifle that Naafi used to hunt the gazelles that he'd give to Fifi as a gift. As for the enemy? The enemy's weapon? No. But I didn't say anything. I was waiting for him to finish, as were the others. Or maybe I wasn't waiting for anything anymore after the devastating news I had just heard. As for Brigadier Omar, his unjustified victory made him laugh. It wasn't us who caused him to fall to the ground. That's what I was about to say, but he continued, intoxicated by what he was saying, even more so now that what he was saying was getting through to us.

"And do you know where they are? The enemy? At the well. Guarding the well itself. Tomorrow they'll wait for you so you can see them up close, or maybe they'll wait for you to *not* see him, just like before."

He laughed. He drank from his glass, pushed it toward Fifi, and left before falling over for a third time.

I wasn't thinking about the well or about the thirty kilometers that separated us from it that we would cross at night. I wasn't thinking about the enemy and whether or not they would appear. The time for this had not yet come. My mind was preoccupied with Zineb. We hadn't parted under the best of circumstances. I told myself that this was because of her illness. I had thought that she was pregnant for a second time and, rather than being happy like any other woman would be, the news unraveled her nerves. It wasn't the first time she had gotten pregnant. The first miscarriage had made her permanently apprehensive. But no, she was just tired, I told myself.

What worried me more, though, was that she would be on her own, in bed. I asked her to go to her sister Leila's in Bab Aghmat. Her sister is a housewife. She doesn't go out at all. She'd be able to take care of her more than anyone else would, but Zineb refused, with the excuse that the never-ending noise of her three children would drive her crazy. Or she could go stay with my mother and sister Fadila in Sidi Benslimane. No, she didn't want to put anyone out.

In the end, she said that the doctor would visit her whenever he could. The doctor and his wife are friends whom Zineb had met back in the days of the cinema club, before she met me. Then I met them, through her. They're true friends, as she says, despite the relationship we have with them, which has not always been great. There were some violent rumblings at one point and, another time, a complete breakdown. However, the waters of friendship flowed between us once again, and when she asked them to visit her from time to time, they said they'd come to keep her company every day after work. Zineb opposed this suggestion too. She saw it as too great a commitment on their part, but they insisted on staying late into the night with Zineb since they had no children waiting at home for them, allowing them to spend most of their time after work going from one friend's house to another's. They said that the only time they relaxed was when they were with Zineb, and that Zineb was the only person they knew who deserved this sacrifice of their time.

"Isn't that so, Zineb my dear?"

Collective laughter. Then the doctor said, turning to her, "The soldier will be gone, but the artist will remain here."

I met Zineb four years ago. She was twenty-two and we were getting ready to participate in a television talent show, Zineb as a singer and me as a comedian. I wouldn't have met Zineb were it not for the chance I was given to be in that show, and this is one of the mysteries that continues to perplex me, just like the desert I saw in the dream. I keep saying

Selected Hoopoe Titles

A Rare Blue Bird Flies with Me
by Youssef Fadel, translated by Jonathan Smolin

Whitefly
by Abdelilah Hamdouchi, translated by Jonathan Smolin

No Knives in the Kitchens of this City
by Khaled Khalifa, translated by Leri Price

*

hoopoe is an imprint for engaged, open-minded readers hungry for outstanding fiction that challenges headlines, re-imagines histories, and celebrates original storytelling. Through elegant paperback and digital editions, **hoopoe** champions bold, contemporary writers from across the Middle East alongside some of the finest, groundbreaking authors of earlier generations.

At hoopoefiction.com, curious and adventurous readers from around the world will find new writing, interviews, and criticism from our authors, translators, and editors.