
Women of Algiers in

Their Apartment

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Translated by Marjolijn de Jager

Afterword by Clarisse Zimra

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Women of Algiers in Their Apartment

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Overture

These stories, a few frames of reference on a journey of listening, from 1958 to 1978.

Fragmented, remembered, reconstituted conversations . . . Fictitious accounts, faces and murmurings of a nearby imaginary, of a past-present that rebels against the intrusion of a new abstraction.

I could say: "stories translated from . . .," but from which language? From the Arabic? From colloquial Arabic or from feminine Arabic; one might just as well call it underground Arabic.

I could have listened to these voices in no matter what language, nonwritten, nonrecorded, transmitted only by chains of echoes and sighs.

Arabic sounds—Iranian, Afghan, Berber, or Bengali—and why not, but always in feminine tones, uttered from lips beneath a mask.

An excoriated language, from never having appeared in the sunlight, from having sometimes been intoned, declaimed, howled, dramatized, but always mouth and eyes in the dark.

Today, how do I, as water dowsers, craft words out of so many tones of voice still suspended in the silences of yesterday's seraglio? Words of the veiled body, language that in turn has taken the veil for so long a time.

Here, then, is a listening in, by means of which I try to grasp the traces of some ruptures that have reached their term. Where all that I could come close to were such voices as are groping with the challenge of beginning solitudes.

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* *

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Once I used to think that going from colloquial Arabic to French would bring a loss of all that was truly alive, of the play of colors. All I wanted to remember then was a sweetness, a nostalgia of words. . . .

Do women live despite this padded sound? This constraint of the veil drawn over bodies and sounds rarefies the very oxygen of fictitious characters. They are barely getting close to the light of their truth when they find themselves once again with ankles shackled because of the sexual taboos of reality.

For at least ten years—as a result, no doubt, of my own Arabic woman's silence, by fits and starts—I have been affected by the extent to which speaking on this ground has become, in one way or another, a transgression (except for spokespeople and "specialists").

Don't claim to "speak for" or, worse, to "speak on," barely speaking next to, and if possible very close to: these are the first of the solidarities to be taken on by the few Arabic women who obtain or acquire freedom of movement, of body and of mind. And don't forget that those who are incarcerated, no matter what their age or class, may have imprisoned bodies, but have souls that move more freely than ever before.

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New women of Algiers, who have been allowed to move about in the streets just these last few years, have been momentarily blinded by the sun as they cross the threshold, do they free themselves—do we free ourselves—altogether from the relationship with their own bodies, a relationship lived in the shadows until now, as they have done throughout the centuries?

Are they really speaking in truth as they dance, and not thinking how they'll always have to whisper because of the eye through the peephole?

Assia Djebar, 1979

III

In this working-class district the public baths were open to women every day except Fridays—the day of prayer at the Great Mosque—and Mondays, because the children were not in school and the mothers, saddled with their brood, would really waste too much water. And the owner, a pious and thrifty woman in her sixties, didn't care to raise the prices, so that she wouldn't have to make the necessary renovations. That would be up to her only son when he returned from Europe . . . if he was going to return.

In addition to the problem of the urgent need for repair work, the old lady's obsession was that she might one day find herself with a European daughter-in-law. And so, with a look of suspicious condescension, she scrutinized Anne as she came in with Baya, and preceded by Sonia, who frequented the place.

While she was undressing, Anne decided to go in wearing a two-piece bathing suit. Baya and Sonia were wearing their usual pagnes with the conspicuous stripes, which brightened up the semidarkness of the steam room.

There were few women at this hour: four or five on the other side of the marble slab. One of them, not visible, was humming a sad ballad in a contralto voice.

Very quickly Anne freed from the black jersey fabric her heavy breasts—which sometimes weighed her down. Sonia opened the faucets, rinsed out two small bowls under the streaming water, and took out a set of copper-colored cups in different sizes. Baya, made more beautiful by the luster of her plump, white skin in the translucent steam, began in a motherly fashion to pour tepid water over Anne's hair, which, as it fanned out, covered her entire back.

"Sarah is late," Sonia remarked.

"She rarely comes to the baths," Baya answered, while she smeared Anne's scalp with a greenish paste.

Drowsy from the heat, Anne offered no resistance and looked around. A skylight in the widely vaulted ceiling: an ancient vault that could have been an abbey. Who might hide there at night? Who would mix her sobs of silence with the seeping water? The mystery of a universe of subterranean water.

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The bather who was singing near the marble slab continued her somber threnody.

"What is she singing?" Anne asked under her breath.

"It's just one word she keeps repeating. . . . A lament she's modulating," Sonia said after a minute. "She's improvising."

"It's more that she's consoling herself," Baya added. "Many women can only go out to the baths. . . . We'll see her soon in the cooling room. We can talk to her then."

The unknown woman stopped short, as if she'd guessed they were wondering about her, then in a raucous voice asked the water carrier for a basin.

"Boiling! I want boiling hot water!" Whispering, Baya translated for Anne, while she was rubbing her breasts with her hands; it was then that the Frenchwoman stopped asking questions, looking at the wasted bodies around her in fascination. Arms of a masseuse, standing straight up on the marble slab, then kneeling down, encircling the body of a bather whose face, belly, and breasts were crushed against the stone, her hair a reddish mass, her shoulders dripping with trails of watery henna.

The masseuse opened her lips halfway, showing golden teeth that shimmered; her long, pendulous breasts were crisscrossed with little veins all the way to the tips. Under the light that came down in oblique rays from the skylight, her villager's face, aged before its time, was turning into the mask of an oriental sorceress. The silver pendants she was wearing made a clanging sound every time her shoulders and knotted arms came sliding down on the neck and further down to the breasts of the bather, now falling asleep. Almost black, peaceful, working rhythmically, the masseuse seemed herself to be relaxing. Stopping to catch her breath, then slowly pouring a cup of hot water over the naked bronze back, while hoarse sighs were exhaled below her.

While little by little mothers with sleeping children and whimpering infants began to fill the steam room, the couple formed by the two women on the marble slab high above the other bathers, became entwined again in panting rhythm, taking on a strange shape, that of a slow, well-balanced tree whose roots plunged down into the persistent streaming of the water on the grey stone.

"Allah is great and generous!"

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"There'll be a pilgrimage for you yet this year, mother!"

Blessings were being reeled off in the direction of the masseuse, whose services several groups were now requesting. As she came down from the marble slab, solemn as an old idol, she allowed a wrinkled belly full of spots to show as her pagne slid down.

"Nowadays, pilgrimages to Mecca are for just anyone," she exclaimed haughtily. "May the Prophet forgive me, but even if I were to find myself covered with gold, I've lost the desire to go all the way to his tomb. . . . Unless I could be sure it was to go and die there, to leave this life of hard labor!" she grumbled.

She was addressing Baya and Sonia while she took a good look at Anne, who was huddling bare-breasted, trying to find a stable spot in this place of humidity and hollow sounds. By the manner in which she sat on the stool that was too low for her and the way in which her nudity burdened her, the old woman sensed she was a foreigner, despite her black hair and particularly her somewhat weary smile, her resignation, which made her look like a woman of this city.

Baya asked to be massaged. She was questioning the masseuse, then would relay the answers to Anne, who suddenly was beginning to have trouble breathing. "Too much heat all at once for you," Sonia concluded and pushed her toward the exit into the cold room.

At the other end of the steam room they were leaving, amid thick clouds of steam strongly smelling of sulfur, Anne noticed two or three bathers who were meticulously shaving their pubic areas, having moved their children out of the way first.

Now the coolness of the second room with steps of stone all around on which to sit. Leaning against the cracked wall. . . . In a corner a kind of blackish alcove, where the women, coming out of the steam room one after the other, rinsed themselves at length, each furtively taking off her pagne, each with her own secret sense of modesty. Then sitting down, all of them rosy, looking alike, they were getting ready to be more lighthearted: conversations or monologues unrolled in gentle, trifling, worn-out words that slid off with the water, while the women laid down their everyday burdens, their weariness.

Sarah arrives at last, the pagne, clutched under her armpits,

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comes halfway down her thighs. A comb in her hand, a cup of fresh water to drink, she quietly sits down in the middle of a group. Very close to her, one bather is sprinkling her swollen feet with small splashes of tepid water, her head smeared with henna, her look distant. She immediately picks up the thread of her chronicle.

Sarah doesn't know her. But, while she moves toward Anne and offers to untangle her wet hair for her, she listens to the unknown woman with the absent eyes; in the back, a brouhaha of interwoven voices. The whispering about troubles continues once the pores of the skin are thoroughly open, and open too the shade of the cold stone. Other women, mute, stare at each other across the steam: they are the ones who are locked inside for months or years, except to go to the baths.

At the same time, Sarah remains attentive to the ever-present streaming of the water that here transforms nights into a liquid murmuring. . . . A door opens slightly: enough time for a deep sound to punctuate the air, basins colliding, the ether pierced by a laugh or a moan, constant whining of clean children being diapered and railed at by their mothers, who are tired of having to bring their burdens of flesh along too, of not being able to let themselves be enveloped just by heat, by forgetfulness.

Anne lets herself be combed. Sarah listens to voiceless music and words that seek each other out.

The unknown woman intervenes: "In a socialist village (and she cites her references: a daily paper in the national language that her little boy of ten reads to her every day), peasant women have broken the faucets so they can go to the fountain every day! . . . such ignorance!"

"Freedom!" replies Baya, coming out of the steam room. "How were the new houses built for them? Closed in, every one of them, locked in upon herself. . . . Is that how they live in the douar?"

"What wouldn't I break, inside of me or outside if need be, to get back with the others? To get back to the water that streams, that sings, that gets lost, that sets us all free, if only bit by bit." Sarah has stopped listening.

Anne braided her own hair, smiled with embarrassment when

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a child, perched in the arms of a woman next to her, suddenly began to caress her naked chest.

"How many children has she nursed?" the woman asked, addressing Sarah, who jumped.

"Three," she answered without translating as Anne, now cold, got up to go back to the heat of the steam room.

Baya really wanted to talk, not to Sonia, whom she thought too young, but rather to Sarah, who would reassure her; that way, she might finally manage to strip bare her fears. Since the previous day they hadn't exchanged a single word about Nazim's letter, which Baya had read to her on the phone. Sarah daydreaming. Sarah silent. Whom is she concerned about, Baya thought, about the teenager who has disappeared or about the father? She so much wanted to hear her: the words Sarah would choose would give reality to this flight, would make it a catastrophe or a trivial incident.

"I continue to worry about getting married," Baya finally confided to Sarah, who asked no questions but did bend toward her in anticipation.

Her hands were mashing a paste of crushed herbs and oil. . . . She was listening: some of the virgins of the city would come to you with their emotions and anxieties, one might almost say with their hands outstretched. Their naïveté open as if it were a gift. If Sarah could, she'd weep with defeated tenderness in the semidarkness of the feminine voices. For nothing, for all of them. . . . Evolution, the small steps taken in complete myopia, when an ancient warmth at least kept the revolt from turning on itself in a ludicrous headspin.

"Do you remember the fiancé I told you about last year?"

Sarah hesitated, nodded that she did.

"Give me some water—no—cold!"

Baya, beginning to relax, went on: "In the end, my father in an uproar threw him out of the house. And yet we had set the date for our engagement, but his oldest sister, whom he respects and who lives elsewhere, had been the last to be notified. . . . She was furious and swore she wouldn't be there. So then he wanted to postpone the date, and my father . . . well, you know how men are in the village, they're so short-tempered . . ."

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Sarah let the same child cling to her back. The mother, exasperated, let them be.

"I have no luck."

"Yes you do," Sarah protested, "it seems you've been given a promotion at the lab."

"Sure I have," Baya moaned, her eyes bright, "but you know how I am: I won't be happy if I don't get married."

A newcomer in her middle years, who understood French, commented. With short motions she was soaking an injured arm in a basin of hot water that stood between her feet.

"With your beauty!" she exclaimed, then added in Berber to confirm the girl's regional origin, "Gold coins don't need to go looking for takers. The master destiny has chosen for you will present himself."

Baya smiled flirtatiously. Sarah moved away from the conversation, also wanting to enter the steam room at last, where she couldn't stay more than fifteen minutes at a time because of the strain on her heart.

Sarah joined Anne, who, when Sarah kneeled and let her *pagne* slide off, noticed her friend's wide, blueish scar. "A burn?" she asked, touching it lightly all along her abdomen.

Sarah didn't respond. She ought to say, probably in a melodramatic tone of voice at that, "a war injury." Anne knew nothing about the city during the period of fire and murders just past: women outside under attack by submachine guns, white veils with bloodstained holes. . . . How had Sarah squandered her youth? Somewhere, this way, in these open streets, then in prison crammed together with other adolescent girls. Was she working on this ostensibly artistic project, a documentary of the city, in order to answer the interrogation that had begun to take possession of her these days? The city, its walls, its balconies, the shadow of empty prisons.

The year before, Sarah and Anne had bumped into each other in an airport: the emotion of having been to elementary school together, well before the war. Anne's father, a magistrate, had been transferred later to another colony. A flight of stairs leading down to the square. They used to walk it together, such

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different little girls, but every day they'd be full of laughter as their encounter was repeated. The scent of acacias embalmed the public garden, "you remember?" Anne wanted to know, Anne who'd ended up by dancing, weeping while she danced through the night they'd spent in the orchard. "The same rhythmic movement of shoulders, arms swaying under the heavy lemon tree, childhood laughter among so many women . . . is that what I came back for, too?"

The two women rinsed each other off. The masseuse offered her services with what seemed like banter: she was bringing towels, cold water for their feet in the last of the outer rooms, she had even put down mattresses in the coolness of the vestibule for the languid rest of the indolent, hoping as she always did for a good tip. It was then, after she'd maternally wrapped them both up, "like two young brides" as she put it, happy with the complicity this cliché never failed to provoke, it was then, as she moved with the copper cup in her hand, that she suddenly slid and fell, the back of her right hand hitting the edge of the marble slab.

Besides the two women who were leaving, there was a hefty bather, who abandoned her children to help carry the masseuse, now whimpering.

Outside, Sarah was the first to get dressed. She wrapped a fringed scarf around her hair, went out to phone from the corner grocery. The owner of the baths, usually riveted to the cash register, accompanied her to the vestibule, then began to throw a fit of hysterics as she thought of the disorganization she foresaw for the days to come: Where was she going to find women to carry the water now that the profession was disappearing?

"What she means is," the injured woman added, having come out of her first shock, "where will she, the *Hadja*, find someone like me, both a water carrier (and it's those buckets that have done me in, they're the bane of my existence) and a masseuse at the same time? It's a good thing that I do the massage for my own benefit!"

Anne was observing the hollow face, the eyes burning with helpless hatred. She wiped the woman's perspiring forehead.

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Now fully dressed, she went back into the cold room and brought out a cup of water so that the injured woman could freshen her hands and face.

In the taxi, swaddled in a worn veil of wool, but its whiteness intact, the old woman dozed between Sarah and Anne.

At the hospital, Sarah asked to be taken to the emergency room. A young doctor recognized her. This reassured the masseuse.

"We'll examine your right hand again in an hour. . . . We're going to admit you to the hospital, mother."

The old woman checked the tranquilizers the young intern had given her suspiciously. Anne decided to stay by her bedside in a ward where other women were resting.

She was holding the hand, wrapped in bandages, like a life buoy: the other patients assumed she was an attentive daughter-in-law, and that surely the son would soon make his appearance.

Sarah came back accompanied by Ali, who was coming out of a class with some students.

After a long examination: "It's nothing to worry about, mother," he confirmed. "My colleague, a woman, will take care of you and will certainly be the one to operate on you."

"Operate! . . . I don't want to be put to sleep, it's against my beliefs!"

"What beliefs?" Ali retorted roughly. "So get up then and leave if you want, but you'll not be able to work again with your hand in that shape!"

The old woman didn't say another word, not even when Ali left. Anne, who'd understood, gave her a reassuring smile. "If only I could tell her that I feel a bond with her. . . . I must have had a wet nurse like that. . . . If I . . ."

"Sarah, what's her name?"

"Fatma," the old woman replied brightly. She suddenly showed her toothless mouth (wisely, she'd taken her denture of gold out in the taxi, thinking the hospital would charge her if she didn't). "Explain to her that in our country all *fatmas* are named Fatma!"

An hour later she fell asleep, overcome by fever.

Sarah told Anne she'd come back with the surgeon. The

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only female surgeon in the city had specialized in hand operations as work-related accidents had made that a particularly overcrowded area.

Remaining by the bedside of the water carrier, Anne scrutinized the other patients carefully. With her hand dangling in the space in front of her like the arm of a drowned person going under, the dozing old woman began to moan and seemed still to be struggling under the weight of her basins.

When she was taken by ambulance to the surgical department at the other end of the city, she barely woke up. Her dream, punctuated by the siren of the ambulance trying to get through the traffic, knotted and untied itself in halting words, like a too ancient suffering.

*
* *

For a diwan of the water carrier

"Asleep, I am the one asleep and they are carrying me off, who is carrying me off . . ."

heavy body, horizontal, in the screaming van that marks its trail across the low part of the city. A hiss, breathing that looks as if it comes out of the belly. . . . Navel, a re-opened eye, hands facing heaven, the right one turbanned in white, larger by far than a baker's board, and the other dwarfed by veins, wrinkles colored by old henna, the palm that massages—in second place—the flesh of bathers whimpering underneath the humid vaults . . .

Oozing evaporated words, miasma after miasma under these same stones of shadow, floating in the corridors of water. Liberated words following my old sculptress body, making me a furrow in the ambulance as it tears along. Words in electrified harmony with the ululations of the harem, words transparent with vapors, with echoes. . . .

"Asleep, I am the one asleep and they are carrying my body off . . ."

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. . . Every invocation to the Prophet or even to his widows turns leaden. . . .

Only words, prehistoric words, unformed words of strident white, words that oppress no longer while these hands, one white and the other reddened, slide, beat the rhythm that follows the panting of devout bathers, evanescent words that might illuminate the constant screaming of the ambulance racing along on my behalf—royal camel paying no attention to the roads climbing between cliffs of stairs from which only yesterday I still descended, veiled in worn wool. . . .

From here on in, naked like this, I circulate, I soar, and I will not be a mummy, I am a sovereign, horizontal empress of the gesture that runs the risk of amputation, but for now a gesture of offering. This is my only passage, a triumphant flowing (the ships in the dock down there are my motionless witnesses) for I circulate, I the woman, all the voices of the past are following me in music, uneven song, broken cries, words in any case unfamiliar, multiple words that bore through the city in metamorphosis at noon. . . .

"I am—am I—I am the unveiled one . . ."

From the depths, a geology of wasted words, fetus words, swallowed up forever, will they escape, black wing sheaths, will they awaken to splinter me when I no longer, never again, wear a mask on my face outside, or carry basins on my head inside, it's over, are they drowned, the layered pain, the second voice that has no tone, no vibration:

"I am—am I—I am the Excluded One. . . ."

A swarming of words from the abysses, surging up once more in the horizontal body moving forward, and the ambulance cuts its path: twisting streets that curve and bend between balconies on which the eyes of chiseled children grow wider. . . . Watercolor ships, the sea as an eternal barrier, right now the heights of the city are mauves stretched out in silence: is the hospital still far

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away, is the surgeon getting prepped, alone at last, covering up her mouth with white fabric? . . .

The murmurs come together in a knotted bundle, a sheaf of rumblings shaped above the belly at the bottom of the hollow chest. . . . The frayed stanzas are regrouping, where to determine the language Arabic women utter, long uninterrupted interior sobs that stream forth in sad accompaniment, blood-streaked losses of a rebirth of the menstrual cycle, gaping memories of harems of decapitated subservient janissaries, where white-washed walls rock with new sounds, lacerated words, all around me, the water carrier, creating my new space. . . .

An uncertain voice in pain, out of breath because it has to find itself:

"It is me—me?—It is me they have excluded, me whom they have barred

It is me—me?—me they have humiliated

Me whom they have caged in

Me whom they've sought to subdue, their fists on my head, to make me drown while standing straight, all the way down to the monkey-faced layer of evil, me within the marble halls of mute distress, me inside the rocks of silence of the white veil. . . ."

—and the water, in inexhaustible showers, the water that continued coming down in torrents all that time, a silk of burning shivers, black buckets on shoulders are poured out outside the steaming hole.

"Me, it is me they've been wanting to suffocate, to snatch away from stable ground into the maws of fire, me whom they thought of as having skin branded alive and gaping with open scars, me, is that me? . . ."

The brakes just barely squealing, the driver-nurse slides the ambulance into the hospital building of the upper city, the siren stopped for a moment, begins again in the room, a torture chamber for my sleeping body, which is being fully anesthetized, rustle of glass slides, of scalpels, of knife blades. . . . Minutes before the operation.

The singsong of the interval at last becoming the rhythm

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of preparations under the long lashes and antimony-blackened eyes of the surgeon, the lower part of her face veiled.

"I was the one whom they claimed to marry in the dawn of the world . . ."

My Sahara stretched along the edge, my parents remembered that they'd been nomads and I, little barefoot girl, would run on top of the dune. . . . The rooms smelled of dung, my goat, I had a white goat, would stretch her neck toward the blue. . . . And so it stood, my father's farm that I used to think was opulent.

My father dressed in legionnaire's uniform; I remember that uniform, the red cloth of his coat. I used to rub my cheek against it, closely against it, when he'd hold me hugged closely between his knees. . . .

And I'd tremble. . . . He used to come home only every now and then. . . . My mother had died when I was born, clusters of my aunts would choke with spluttered laughter when I, dressed in the multiple garments of women, was presented to my father when he arrived—and I, I'd lower my eyes, would slide close against his voluminous, scarlet pants. . . .

On one leave, my father arrived with another soldier; my aunts were silent. They were going to take me away, a bride of the beginning of time. . . . For the son of the stranger, they said, the father had decided. The aunts wept, saying that if the grandmother were living, the father would never have dared. . . .

At thirteen years of age, my face was painted, my eyebrows plucked, they waxed the hair off my armpits and pubic area, put spangles on my forehead, on my cheekbones, and bought me embroidered slippers. My heart was beating for this, my first journey, I, the bride of all beginnings. . . .

The carriage went north,

"Asleep, I was the sleeping one and they are taking me away, I who . . ."

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the carriage fled along, unknown women with cumbersome black veils touched me with their henna-reddened fingers, too much henna, palpated my breasts, shoulders, abdomen, then ululated with joy, threw out their rippling cries, while I was going up toward the plateaus of the north. Guttural cry, intermittently let out now by one, then by another (they were four, four sisters), that cry gave me chills, drove my childhood deep inside me, my running through the dune, the cascades of laughter. . . .

"I was, I was the bride of the dawn of the world. . . . Only to end up as a carrier, a water carrier, in holes steaming with vapor. . . ."

Thirteen, tall for my age and of the desired dark hair, hair down to my lower back, eyes blackened, palms made red. At thirteen, I had been full-breasted for a year or two, my heart was beating for this, my first journey, hope, then fear, then. . . . Suddenly it's black, today I am fifty, sixty years old, I don't even know my age, the blackness of time: no doubt it was a basin of water, too hot, sent by fate onto my thirteen-year-old shoulders. Since then I've always been fifty, sixty years old, what's the difference, the bathers still come and go, the children carry on in the steam of the bathhouse, the water never stops flowing down the stone, it weighs in black bronze on my shoulders and finally I massage, and . . .

"Carrier, I want water . . . boiling water! . . . Carrier, water carrier . . ."

Behind, the black and the smoke of the hole. . . . The wretchedness of that farm at the end of my first journey! Children on the floor with bloated bellies, flies in their eyes; not even a lamp in the rooms of dried mud, the jars on the floors taking up every inch of space. . . . The women with aged faces, their breasts out for nursing, their babies pulling at them, empty; a few men, their look feverish, sit around all day long; stretches of stone, further down a green, lush plain that the French had seized earlier, after

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the arrival of the men of law and the police. . . . As I stepped out of the carriage, the master welcomed me; he was wearing the same belt as my father and was eyeing me with interest, as if I were there for him. . . . That night, the husband, an adolescent whose hands groped over my cold body. The next day, the nagging of the women: "Get to work! Show us what you can do, princess!" . . . And a little later: "You, your father gave you up for two bottles of beer in a garrison town!"

Finished, I knew from their insults that it was all over! Two or three more months of misery.

The second voice begins to sing again, jarring, broken, with a little gasp:

"Me—is it really me?—they wanted to break me, they claimed they would plunge me headfirst into the blackish crust of monkey-faced evil . . ."

At last I ran. One night I fled without a veil, in a red gown and with these words inside me: "run straight . . . always straight ahead!" The south no longer existed, the north no longer existed, only space and the night, the long night of my life was beginning.

No more children with bloated bellies, no more sisters-in-law feeling me every morning "When is she planning to get knocked up, this girl?" Me, all alone in the opaque night, only these simple words alive inside me: "leave . . . run now . . . ahead . . . straight ahead!" Words, like fish bones, sometimes stick in your throat, shred your chest . . . words tear you apart, it's true, words tear at you. . . .

Run, I run across the night. Black. Follow the road, hurry, faster, faster still, faster than the antelope of my lost desert!

At dawn, a small town. In a market, some old men gossiping in a corner, steaming tea and its smell of mint. . . . "If only I had a burnoose, looked like a boy! . . . Amble along the streets, be someone else. . . . People, real people . . ."

A woman's whisper, her eyes lonely in the masked face: "What are you doing here, my girl?" An hour later, a

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haven, no, a place to work: two years of weaving carpets by day, of serving a madam by night. . . . In the end, back on the street: a flight this time, not on foot, not at night, another man to whom I am delivered at the end of the road, the capital. I'm a duly registered prostitute, I have a police card. I have clients. Five years, ten years, the years go by. . . . Independence celebrations: houses open, jubilant streets, I go out, I think I'm free. My face in a shop window: "old, I'm old . . . and I'm hungry!"

One or two years earlier, in the Casbah during a riot, a peasant arrives. They hide him. He speaks. He's from my village, he knows such and such a tribe, a certain political group. . . . My heart stops cold: "Do you know Amar, the legionnaire? He used to have a big farm. . . . that's a long time ago. . . . He must have retired since then. . . . I used to work there (and I lied) as a servant."

"He was one of the first collaborators they killed, right at the start of the war. . . . They found him in a ditch with his throat slit. . . . When his farm was sold, his people became beggars and wanderers. . . ."

"Thank you, brother," I said and refused him my bed, another one took my place in the room out of friendship. . . . Then came the proprietress of the hammam. The heat of the steam room, the baths, the basins. . . . One basin, one client . . . Why even count? Once again the same tune, outside the brothel, outside the hammam. . . . Yesterday in the street they were singing of hope, but me, I am invaded only by the lament:

"I am—who am I?—I am the excluded one. . . ."

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In front of Fatma's prostrate body the surgeon is fully focused; Anne sits rooted in the waiting room. At that same moment, Sarah stands in front of Leila's bed; Leila is delirious. The Jewish songstress on the record has stopped her wailing song of the thirties. . .