

TAHAR BEN JELLOUN

ADÉLAÏDE DE CLERMONT-TONNERRE

MARC LAMBRON

LEÏLA SLIMANI

STORIES
of
MARRAKECH



■ CASSI EDITION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE LIGHT <i>Tahar Ben Jelloun</i>	11
MAWAKECH <i>Adélaïde de Clermont-Tonnerre</i>	23
STRANGERS IN THE RIAD <i>Marc Lambron</i>	37
THE BLUE HOUSE <i>Leïla Slimani</i>	51

TAHAR BEN JELLOUN

AN ENCOUNTER
with the
LIGHT



IF ONLY WE KNEW. There are encounters that we could well do without. Not because they come at the wrong moments or are uninteresting, but because they are made of the fabric of nightmares, of depression and also of our pain.

It's best not to dwell on them, not describe them, not give them significance. Other encounters, however, are simple and enlightening, making us happy for a long time. Those encounters are what we seek beginning in childhood, and sometimes they surprise us when we expect them the least. This is what happened with Nabile, on a rainy night in December that was soaked with a feeling of the end of the world, like a great weariness of the universe. Nothing was as it usually was; the sky was filled with black clouds, lightning and thunder. The air was heavy, and birds were lost, looking for places to sleep or to die. There was a first alert. I brought my wife to the hospital, convinced that the baby would be born any second. After a brief examination, the gruff and blasé doctor shook his head that it wasn't going to be that day. "In five days. Not before," he told us. We left a little disappointed but reassured. False alerts are common, especially for a first birth.

At the end of the fifth day, we again went to the hospital. The nurses were frustrated. They were

threatening to strike to get salary raises. We expressed our support for them and hoped that one would admit us. Germaine, the head nurse, did so and explained the reasons for the nurses' unrest, adding, "But don't worry about it; we aren't savages. We're going to take care of you and the baby."

At 3:10 a.m., Nabile was born. I was present for the delivery, firmly yet tenderly holding my wife's hand. I cut the umbilical cord. I was moved to the point of wiping a tear from my eye. The doctor, more gruff than ever, shot me a worried glance. He gestured for me to follow him into his office. Right away I understood that he was going to announce bad news. He put his hand on my shoulder to console me as he said, "There's a problem." He took a piece of paper and drew a stem with branches all over. In red felt pen, he underlined the 21st branch and said, "Trisomy 21."

It was 3:34 a.m., and the word "trisomy" echoed in my head like a final verdict. I didn't fully understand at the time what the scientific term meant, but I knew that it was the name given that night to what the doctor had called "a problem." A condition otherwise known as Down syndrome.

Curiously, he had set aside his blasé attitude and tried to explain to me that my son was born with a "problem," and that there was no remedy for this kind of abnormality, that it was a "genetic aberration." There was nothing to do beyond accepting the reality. When I insisted on having a fuller explanation, he returned to his cold, gruff demeanor and said, "He won't be going to a prestigious university." As I put my head in my hands, I thought to myself: Now this is a talented doctor! He sees right away who will go to a

prestigious school and who will struggle through life. Someone should hire him to save time for families who bend over backwards to give their children the best education possible. *It's not worth pushing him because this kid won't get very far. He won't go to an impressive or even an unimpressive school. That's just how it is.*

I got up wondering how to break the news to my wife. Exhausted, she was now asleep. A nurse's aide who was changing the baby gave me a compassionate look before lowering her voice and saying, "You know, if you want, you can get rid of him. There are associations that for a fee will pick up kids like him, and you'll never see him again. It'll be like he was never born." She seemed proud of her proposition, whereas for the first time in my life I felt awoken in me a desire to react physically. I asked her to put my son down immediately and get out.

The next day, I asked my wife's best friend, a psychologist, to break the news to her.

Since that day, I continue to thank God for sending us Nabile. It has been the greatest encounter of my life. Not only is his physical beauty impressive, but his kindness and generosity are limitless as well. All of his being is filled with goodness; he has no notion of what evil is. His encounters are with light, with innocence, with the sun. My wife and I decided not only to tell the whole family as well as friends and acquaintances about Nabile's arrival, this child born with Down syndrome, but also that we were proud and happy about it. His parents would take care of him until he had complete autonomy.

Loving a child means giving him the best means to be fulfilled and happy in his body and mind. My mother

compared him to an angel sent by God to put us to the test. He is still an angel today. An angel who loves life, music, soccer, action films and a good meal. He is attentive and meticulous about cleanliness and elegance. He is always on time and respects others. He grew up stooped, not because of some kind of deformation, but by his tendency to go toward others, to help people, to be concerned about their well-being, to love them without expecting anything in return. Graciousness is one of his qualities because he is love, all love. He always begins with a smile and reminds us that life is beautiful.

When he was barely six months old, he fell into a hotel swimming pool. Everyone ran to save him. He swam calmly, despite never having had one lesson. "Like a fish in water," said an elderly aunt, who thinks of him as the angel of happiness.

One day he said to us that he'd like to meet the whole family. So for his sixth birthday, we organized a big party. His friends were there, as well as his cousins, aunts and uncles, his speech therapist, his coach and his teacher. Almost the entire family, and he was jubilant. One of his aunts arrived, Khadija, and he looked at her a moment before moving on to greet the person next to her. Everyone asked why he had refused to say hello to her. It was strange. I asked him why, and he responded, "Dija, violent." Indeed, she was the only woman in the family to have reacted poorly when she learned of his birth. He had detected this, or more precisely his intuition had unmasked her. His kindness always enlightens. He recognizes those who love him and those who don't accept his difference.

He's guided by an inner light, and his light makes him a child unlike others – a child who shows the way, who opens a path, who spreads serenity and peace. As soon as he feels tension, he tries to solve the problem. One day, he dressed all in blue, grabbed a handbag and said to us, "Plumber, plumber." In his way, he wanted to intervene to calm others down. The words that he uses most often are "Calm, calm!", "cool," "awesome," "project," "family," "I love you," "my life," "competition", "medal," "champion" and "love."

Despite his speech therapy sessions, Nabile has trouble with complicated words. His handicap is present, but his intelligence and passion allow him to be understood. He speaks with difficulty, and has never really been able to say "spectacle" and "extraordinary," for which he always replaces with his own words, "petacle" and "extra." He still swims perfectly, however.

One day, his grandfather suggested taking him on a pilgrimage to the tomb of one of the seven saints of Marrakech, the most well known and most venerated, Sidi Youssef Ben Ali. This man was an ascetic, living amongst beggars and people forgotten by society. He had an infinite love of God, spent his time doing charity work and celebrating the light of the Spirit. He contracted leprosy but never complained.

In the 12th century, a mosque was built in his honor and called "Ben Youssef." It's the biggest mosque in Marrakech, in the center of the medina of the old city, surrounded by Zawiyat Lahdar, a sanctuary, and the El Baroudine souk. Its minaret is more than 200 feet tall.

Nabile's grandfather, a regular visitor to the area, was sure that the visit would help him speak with less

difficulty. He wanted to try something unconventional. "After all," he said, "it will get Nabile on the road, and maybe he will be touched by the grace of this saint, and his tongue will loosen." The notion of traveling across Morocco with his grandpa filled Nabile with joy. He only asked that each stop on the trip have a pool where he could swim, with an eye on his next competition, and maybe a piano where he could play in the evening to relax. Like all the young people of his generation, he listens to the music of his era, but what he plays on the piano has nothing to do with the songs that he appreciates. He improvises very harmonious melodies. He doesn't claim to be a pianist; he just says, "I'm having fun."

Nabile believes in God. Nobody in the family led him toward this path. Perhaps his grandfather, but Nabile, from the earliest age, raised his finger to the sky whenever something was beyond him. We think that he discovered God on his own and that he prays in his own way.

The entire trip was celebratory. Nabile was happy to take his grandpa's hand, and he gave his grandson whatever he wanted. Nabile is a *gourmand*, who loves to eat. At home we try to reason with him, but when he's with his grandfather he makes the most of it, eating everything that the nutritionist advises against.

In Marrakech, Nabile was moved by the beauty of the light and its many reflections. He followed with attention the way the color of the sky changed as the sun would set, saying, "It's God!" When he saw a host of sparrows performing a ballet in the sky, he began to dance in the street, as if listening to music from somewhere else.

That Friday he went with his grandfather to the hammam where he performed his ablutions before going to noon prayers. Like his grandfather, he dressed in white, and during the prayers, his grandfather asked him to follow his gestures.

In the afternoon, the time when the mosque was less crowded, Nabile and his grandfather went to prayer at the saint's tomb. Prayers were said. Nabile raised his clasped hands and addressed God. He stammered some words and was in perfect harmony with the spirit that reigned in that spot. A brief and beautiful light entered the windows. Nabile shivered. He approached his grandfather, who took him into his arms and reassured him with a kiss on his forehead. For his grandfather, the miracle was going to happen soon. Nabile would speak fluently. He was sure of it.

Leaving the mosque, Nabile wanted to eat some ice cream. He was happy. His time to swim in the pool was coming up. Nabile put on his bathing suit like his hero Florent Manaudou. He had the same brand of goggles and a swim cap with the colors of the French flag. He swam for more than an hour, sometimes doing the breaststroke, sometimes the butterfly. That evening, he got dressed for dinner, and before going to the table, he sat at the piano and played for fifteen minutes or so. Hotel guests stopped to see who was playing so well. He stood up, thanked his audience and joined his grandpa, who had already ordered him a big hamburger with ketchup and fries.

The next day, when they got back on the road to head to Tangier, Nabile thanked his grandfather, speaking to him in Arabic. Not all the words were perfectly pronounced, but one could sense that Nabile

was making an effort to make himself understood. His grandfather smiled. He was certain that their journey had been helpful.



TAHAR BEN JELLOUN was born in 1944 in Fez. A poet, painter and novelist, he won the Goncourt Prize for his book *La Nuit Sacrée* (published in English as *The Sacred Night*). He is a member of the Goncourt Academy.