

TAHAR BEN JELLOUN

ADÉLAÏDE DE CLERMONT-TONNERRE

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STORIES
of
MARRAKECH



■ CASSI EDITION

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ADÉLAÏDE DE CLERMONT-TONNERRE

MAWAKECH



WE WERE ON OUR WAY to Orly Airport, my husband, my children and me. On the phone, I sensed her nostalgia.

“You don’t want to meet us there?” I asked her.

Mom kindly declined. Maxime and Alexis sent virtual kisses. One after the other, they yelled, with the enthusiasm of their two-year-old selves, “Me go to Mawwakesh! Big plane!”

Which, with their analytical minds that called upon their beginner vocabulary, perfectly summarized the spirit of the trip.

This was the first time we were traveling by plane together, and this somewhere was Marrakech, so not just anywhere. My mother and her younger sister grew up in Morocco; my grandmother spent what were undoubtedly the best years of her life there, while my great-grandmother found refuge there with her own mother, the Duchess of Guise, known as “Miou.” Prohibited from being in France by the exile law that applied to the descendants of the royal family – and would be repealed only in 1950 – the Orléans cultivate an absolute passion for the country that took them in.

We are going there today on the invitation of a hotel built by the king to showcase the grandeur of Moroccan history and the excellence of his country’s savoir-faire. Friends had told me of the beauty of the

place, but our arrival is startling. The palace, which is only nine years old, seems to have always been there in the ochre setting of its ramparts and abundant gardens.

Starting with its imposing entrance, over ten meters tall and densely decorated, Maxime and Alexis are fascinated. It's impossible to keep them well behaved, and we let them roam through this dreamy medina, which they explore like Alice discovering Wonderland. They plunge their arms into the fountains and already want to swim in them. They pick up fallen night-blooming jasmine to give to me, and have already spotted the pond filled with carp, to which they give a piece of the cake they were treated to upon arriving. Giddy with joy, discovery and scents, they run through the tiny streets filled with flowers leading to the riads. Their simple facades give no indication at all of the splendors awaiting inside: silks and brocades, crushed velvet and leather rugs, cedarwood embedded with mother-of-pearl and engraved bronze, mashrabiya and furniture inlaid with bone as part of the carved plaster decor, authentic lace with many-sided star patterns, seals of Solomon and honeycomb friezes. Everything handcrafted; thousands of square feet of mosaics, marble, onyx, colorful zellige tilework, *tadelakt* that alternates gleaming textures like marble with the roughness of studded lines. How many hours of work, how many expert, patient, loving hands with great pride in their art were necessary to bring this titanic project to fruition? What might only be a demonstration of strength, of a disturbing opulence in this land of contrasts, actually evokes great emotion. Each detail of the earthenware, each piece of carved wood, carries in it the

artisan's touch, a *maalem* who wanted to honor his or her country and king.

Later that night on the roof terrace, once the kids are asleep, I contemplate the Koutoubia, peeking out from behind the rumped palm leaves. The din of the city rises in the distance. I realize that I know almost nothing about the connection that my ancestors had with this land. Why did they come here? How did they settle in? I have only fragments of answers, little life moments, and nothing that would allow me to follow the full thread of their story. Yet this past was visible on my mother's face as she sprinkled her cooking with *kamoun* (cumin), when she rubbed a lime in her hands, or when she would unexpectedly stop in a street to smell a star jasmine or a blossoming orange tree hidden in the corner of a garden store. I could feel that she was moved by these memories, which she didn't share with me, memories of her childhood to which I never had access. I decided, during this short stay in Marrakech, that I would try to uncover her secrets.

Going back down to the room with the woodwork so finely crafted that it felt like I was sleeping in a luxurious cigar box, I send several bait emails to my aunt, my mother and my great uncle. The next day, one fish had bitten – my grandmother, Micky, who wrote these words: "Morocco was the Paris-Lyon-Marseilles train line. The Saint-Charles Station. The Grand Hotel de Noailles and its magnificent white ocean liners, the *Djenné* and the *Koutoubia*, 'which were waiting for me.' The powerful sirens, the sea for three days, then Tangier. The Hotel de France, also painted white, in the embassy district. The view from it of the old medina, the Grand Socco and the Kasbah.

Morocco is also pine and palm trees, djellabas. Miou's big garden. The sun sparkling on the house's black and white tiles. The blue plumbago shrubs. I must have been three and a half years old. Then I was four, then nine, then older...years that haven't erased these memories, or caused these images to fade."

I think I've made a connection, but her subsequent emails remain elusive. The nostalgia is too immense, and she's built a fortress around her memories. My Aunt Laure's response isn't any more helpful, despite her normally being an enthusiastic storyteller: "Paradise lost isn't Morocco, it's childhood. Of these precious moments that forge who we are, I'm left with sensations of innocent happiness that I will never have again. When writing about these moments, perhaps, don't I risk ruining this wisdom that has always burned bright in my mind, despite all that is accumulated over the course of a lifetime?"

When, where, why and how. My mundane, pragmatic questions clash with their sensitivity, their approximative memories and lyricism. I try calling my mother, without success, and we decide with the kids to venture out from the hotel.

Only a few minutes away, the unimaginable luxury of this place is contrasted with simple dirt floors, colorful piles of foodstuffs and other goods, the roadside shops, the garages filled with spare parts, faded advertisements, families crowded onto rickety mopeds – the man driving, the veiled woman with an infant in her arms. Small yet robust donkeys carry piles of merchandise twice as heavy as they are. Arabian camels – called *dromedaries*, or rather *domadaies*, by enthusiastic kids who drop R's – slowly chew lying down,

hoping that no overweight tourists looking for local color will try to step over them. Mules pull wooden carts, and tired horses carry people like us, because with our ecstatic children we've sacrificed our walk for a horse-drawn carriage ride. It is shimmering, wily and warm. We are in the middle of pomegranate season, and they arrive at the market by the truckload. The olive trees droop with the weight of their fruit, the grapefruit begin to take on their full color. Acres of roses, jasmine and magnolia. At the souk, the meat and fish stalls give way to the scents of spices and dried fruit. The scooters race by, pedal to the metal, having fun with tourists who like us leap out of the way onto the roadside trying to navigate between the cubic feet of local souvenirs sometimes freshly delivered from China. Behind doors without any windows or while moseying down a small, less boisterous street, often are where the true artisans can be found, those who are meticulous about their craft: making embroidered linens, rugs, ironwork, glass and pottery... I try again to reach my mother, but it goes to voicemail.

Awaiting me when I return to the hotel is a pleasant surprise: my Uncle Michel de Grèce, my grandmother's first cousin, who explains that he is ready to help me with my research. He's a historian and a writer, and understands what I'm trying to do, this man who has spent so much time exploring his family's past, which is bound up with European history. It's thanks to this firsthand witness that I finally get a sense of their exile and the fascinating accounts of daily life in another century.

"When my grandparents, the Duke and Duchess of Guise, married in 1899, they were given the

Nouvion-en-Thiérache chateau in northern France as a wedding gift. After four kids were born, and that mission accomplished, my grandmother declared that if she stayed one more day in Nouvion, she would kill herself or someone else. She was wasting away from boredom in that horrible place. And just like that, my grandparents moved to Morocco. They took the boat. My grandfather, who was known as 'Papa Jean,' was a bit reluctant, but my grandmother was delighted by the adventure."

They arrived in Tangier with four young kids. They buy horses and decide – I have no idea how – to go down the coast on horseback. Who knows where they slept. And so they arrived in a little city called Larache, between Tangier and Rabat. They are charmed by it and decide to live there. At that time, the sultan was giving away land to foreigners who were coming to implement modern farming practices. They were given parcels of land in different places in the region, which they began to cultivate under a fake name: Orliac. And so it is to Miou, my colorful, one-of-a-kind great, great grandma that we owe that first big step. A tiny woman whose authority and charisma were inversely proportional to her size, she apparently had a rapier wit and a passionate hatred for dull people.

At the time of their first visit, in 1909, there weren't any settlers, and the French protectorate didn't exist yet. When it was established several years later, the country was cut in half. Larache was in Spanish Morocco, and the land farmed by the "Orliac family" was in French Morocco. They had to constantly cross borders, but it didn't matter. The 1886 exile law didn't apply to protectorates, so the Duke and

Duchess of Guise were able to live a happy life there, far from any protocols; the simple, agricultural life was one of total freedom. "They had crazy fun, but when his brother-in-law died in 1926, my grandfather was suddenly the head of the family. He couldn't take care of family matters while living in Morocco, so to my grandmother's chagrin, they moved to Brussels to live at the Manoir d'Anjou."

Miou decides to keep the home in Larache and goes back there every year. The tribe continues to split its time between the two countries. During World War II, the large, white, two-story villa serves once again as a refuge; all of Miou and Papa Jean's children and grandchildren live there. A fierce community takes shape as nannies of different siblings hate each other but band together to torture one in particular: Marcelle. She has a pet pig that she loves, and the other nannies kidnap it and refuse to give it back. The negotiations over the liberation of the porcine hostage rise to the highest levels of the household, which is furthermore divided by radically opposed political convictions: Miou loves dictatorships, her daughter Françoise is a Gaulliste, her eldest daughter Isabelle is a nationalist who loathes the Germans but doesn't believe in General de Gaulle, and her son Henri is undecided. In the kitchen, the chef is a fervent supporter of Marshal Pétain, in great contrast to the driver Matias, a crafty character who transports contraband cigarette cartons, flasks of whiskey and typewriters hidden under the car seats carrying the grandchildren. At the limits of Tangier, a city in the international zone, customs officials let these fair-haired folks of proper lineage pass without any suspicion of the merchandises beneath their little posteriors.

A community of kind Spaniards, all from the same village near Grenada, adds a little neutrality to the debates at the villa. The whole property is under the control of Balieta and Mercedes. These big, formidable ladies terrorize the children as much as they did the personnel, and they live as a couple. They share, despite their large size, a small iron bed with weakened springs, and relatives wonder how it could contain so much love.

The days pass doing charity work, especially for the *casa de los niños*, and taking rides on horseback or in the car, during which Miou – a hat on her head, a blanket on her lap regardless of the warm temperatures and a fan in hand – admires the magnificent view of the Rif mountains and the Atlantic coast.

The evenings are spent playing interminable card games while downing bottles of Fundador, a Spanish brandy strong enough to make holes in the parquet floor. Miou does not like to lose, and when this misfortune arises, she becomes red-faced and insults the other players using words unbecoming to her social class.

On August 25, 1940, devastated by the French defeat, Papa Jean, Duke of Guise, dies in Larache. Miou takes over a part of his obligations while continuing his good works. In 1948, as a wedding present, my grandparents, Micky and Fred, are given Berma, a farm and land, where they settle to raise zebus and cows from the Limousin region and grow tobacco and eucalyptus, from which they made charcoal.

While I was just beginning to learn about this entire period, my mother finally called me back and, in a torrent of words, quite simply tells me all about her early years there. About her friend Zora who rescued

her from a snake that, while she was napping under the eucalyptus, curled up on her chest. The girl grabbed it with her bare hands and killed it instantly. About the walks through the *douars* where the residents called her by the nickname "Lalla Pussy," about the tagines and the sugar in large bread loaves wrapped in blue kraft paper. About the lagoon, and the marabout, the big cork-oak forest where she would run around until she felt like she was losing her mind, and which, once the harvest was finished, became entirely red. About the shepherds, the trailers of chanterelles, the 30 kilometers of path to reach their home. About the river and the ford where she went fishing with a makeshift rod, and the immense amount of fish. About her friend Apflem who took care of cows, and François de Saint-Seine, a reactionary aristocrat lost in a Moroccan backwater who hosted grand dinners with porcelain dishes and antique silver. About Moulay Bouselham, where the family went for lunches of sea bream, spotted bass and mullet, fresh out of the water. And finally about Rabat, where she was sent to learn to read and write.

After independence in 1956, good relations with His Majesty King Hassan II allowed the family and my grandparents to keep ties with the country. It was in Morocco that my grandmother's brother Bernard died in a horse accident, and it's here that Miou's days came to an end as well. And then there was the inescapable moment of departure, for reasons that are still unclear. Many decades later, all that remains for us are accounts from a sensual, sun-filled, blessed time. The flavors of Barbary figs and dates picked from the garden, the heat of those nights spent outside looking

up at the sky, a few battle horses that became mythic, especially the fierce Garbosso. Only my mother and grandmother knew how to coax this veritable Bucephalus from the Atlas mountains; his legend and the description of his golden coat color made their way to us.

The return to Paris for those who'd tasted this sweet life was brutal, with a persistent sadness – though never really acknowledged – over a lost paradise. There were still several friends: Ahmed, a young shepherd in Larache who, after studying and working hard, became a draftsman in France. His brother Msbah, who sent magnificent letters for months, probably from the flowery pen of a hired writer, to my grandparents once they settled in the Touraine region. My grandfather loved Msbah's beautiful letters, and he went on to spend forty years with the family. He taught me to how to cook vegetables, tagines, couscous, *kesra* and thick Moroccan crepes made only of flour and water, which he would sometimes liven up with chocolate. He showed me how to pick purslane, which grew in the area and which everyone thought was a weed, as well as how to find oregano in the grass. He was a man of whimsy who could be temperamental, but who also lent a kind of poetry to these early years of ours.

Just before leaving, we share one final lemonade at the hotel. Contemplating the Atlas mountains, whose peaks are visible beyond the ramparts, I think about this country that has meant so much to my loved ones. I understand them and dream of another life. Far from Paris, from its beauty and madness. Perhaps this long family passion for Morocco is not yet over.



ADÉLAÏDE DE CLERMONT-TONNERRE was born in 1976 in Neuilly-sur-Seine. A journalist and novelist, she is the author of two novels: *Fourrure*, which garnered many awards, and *Le Dernier des Nôtres*, winner of the Académie Française grand prize for novelists. It will be published in English in June 2018 as *The Last of Our Kind*.