

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

MARC LAMBRON

STRANGERS
in the
RIAD



IT IS ONE of the privileges of existence to find on this planet places that fit so perfectly with the shapes of our dreams. On the second night of my residency here, after a fine dinner, I went back to the riad where I was at work writing my next novel. It was a warm night, and I walked through the gardens, their pungent fragrances refined by the darkness, without a care in the world. Suddenly I heard a voice singing, something like "doo bee doo bee doo."

It was strange. Intrigued, I made my way toward the flowerbed. I saw a man lost in thought, seated in an armchair with colorful cushions. In his early 60s, he was dressed in an austere tuxedo, golden cufflinks and white shirt, with a small bowtie. Very elegant. I wondered if a wedding celebration was taking place at the hotel, but there was nothing scheduled for that evening. And that's when I recognized him. Or if it wasn't him, a perfect lookalike had been brought to the garden. The too-perfectly-combed hair like a hairpiece. The garish ring on his right hand. The look of someone waiting to ambush you, two bodyguards in the bushes. And, of course, those inimitable blue-green eyes of the blackjack player who is going to score with Angie Dickinson.

It was him.

The Voice. The Chairman of the Board. Frankie.
Ol' Blue Eyes.

Frank Sinatra.

He was in front of me, seated in the chair. I wondered what he was doing here, all the more so because officially he was dead. But that's merely a detail that doesn't necessarily put a stop to things. Frank made a gesture with his hand that meant, "C'mere, kid."

Hiding my astonishment, I went over to him.

"Is it...it's you?" I stammered.

"Who else could it be?"

"It's really you?" I repeated, awkwardly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It isn't Jimmy Stewart or the Queen of England. Only I can be me."

A bit reassured by this obvious point, I asked him why he was here. His hand with the ring made a slight, powerless gesture.

"Well, you know, those of us in heaven are allowed back to visit from time to time," Frank explained. "I asked if I could go to the most exquisite place in the world, and to be honest I thought I'd be in Bob Hope's garden in Palm Springs to have a few laughs. But apparently Bob's been outclassed. Walking around this hotel, I understand why. Heaven can wait."

"So you were sent to Marrakech?"

"You can see we aren't in Duluth, Minnesota. We're in Morocco, aren't we? Like Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*? Well, I'll need to adapt."

The Voice glanced over to a nearby bush.

"Are there ghosts here?" he asked, his eyelid raised.

It seemed to be the appropriate question.

"Uh...well, there are these kinds of flying spirits called jinns."

Sinatra stared at me like I was spewing nonsense. Someone might have thought he was going to shoot me between the eyes. Then he seemed to soften.

"People think that Uncle Frankie is as uncultured as a croupier. I love learning things, but you gotta tell me about them with respect. For example, what kinds of animals are there in Morocco?"

Did he think I was a zoologist?

"Let's see," I responded. "There are lots of species. The Fennec fox, the striped hyena. The dromedary. That's an Arabian camel."

"Well, how about that," Sinatra launched back, with a disturbed look. "The only one I've ever seen is on a pack of Camel cigarettes. And the relief?"

"The relief?"

Sinatra looked at me like I was an idiot.

"You know, *mountains*. Is there a Grand Canyon?"

I cleared my throat. "There are sorts of Grand Canyons. The Rif. The Atlas. And really beautiful desert landscapes."

"Ah," said Sinatra, as if he were talking to himself. "The only guy I knew in the desert here was Gary Cooper in Morocco. In any case. There's also Moroccan stuff in Vegas and Hollywood."

"Is that so?" I stammered, still a bit taken aback by the whole thing.

"You think I don't know the desert?" responded Sinatra, with attitude.

"I didn't say that..."

"So, what's Las Vegas?" he barked.

"Uh...it's a city where there's gambling..."

Sinatra sighed, shrugging his shoulders. "It's an oasis. In the desert. I'm not gonna confuse green rugs with flying carpets, but you know what the casinos are called in my neck of the woods?"

I summoned my minimal erudition.

"You sang at the Sands, I think."

Sinatra looked at me with a surprised look of respect.

"Exactly right, pal. And why's that? You don't see sand on Park Avenue, do you? It's in Nevada."

He went on. "And the other Vegas casinos – you know their names?"

"Umm..."

"I'll tell you: the Sahara. The Mirage. The Aladdin."

I nodded.

"That's not Arabia, all that?" he added. "*One Thousand and One Nights*? The Sahara! The Mirage! In the middle of Nevada! And Aladdin? You rub a lamp, and a fucking genie pops out like a damn go-go dancer from a cake."

I had the feeling he wasn't going to stop.

"Okay, now I'm gonna tell you something. You know where I live?"

"Palm Springs, right?"

"Exactly. Palms. Palms from palm trees, you follow? The desert. Coyotes. Skeletons."

"Skeletons?"

He looked at me like I was being silly.

"Nevada. I have several friends who opened cemeteries there without headstones."

He seemed to say it for himself, or maybe for me. It wasn't exactly reassuring.

"By the way, even when I'm shooting my own movies, I'm still in the desert. When we made *4 for Texas*, we did

just fine with belly dancers. Ursula Andress and Anita Ekberg. You know what I said to Aldrich, who bored me like I was the cobra and he was the flute player? I told him, 'I ought to have you decapitated and buried in the fucking desert.' Anyway, I didn't do it."

In the dark I could see the sparkle of his eyes. Ol' Blue Eyes. His calm when he said certain things was chilling. *I ought to have you decapitated and buried in the fucking desert.* He looked at me without any particular expression, like I was irrelevant.

"And of course I went to The Garden of Allah," he said, dreamily.

"Excuse me?"

"The Garden of Allah. A hotel in West Hollywood. You could find people like Betty Bacall and Artie Shaw there. My buddies Harry James and Tommy Dorsey. By the way, I've got a good lady friend who made a film in Morocco. Doris Day. Back in '55, I made *Young at Heart* with her. But the year before, Hitch had her walking around a mall in Marrakech."

"A mall? You mean a souk."

"Right, like you said. A souk."

"The Hitchcock film *The Man Who Knew Too Much*," I said, showing off my knowledge.

"Precisely," Frank confirmed. "Doris had a hell of a temper. Everyone thought she took herself for a holier-than-thou saint, but she'd been around the block."

The subdued beauty of the soft lighting gave the garden's foliage a surreal touch. Suddenly the call to prayer from the muezzin rose in the night, coming from a nearby mosque. Frank Sinatra listened for a moment to the holy chant like a connoisseur, then said appreciatively, "This guy's got a better set of pipes than Dino."

"Dino? Dean Martin?"

"Well yeah, smart guy. You know, Dino can sing lying down. I've never seen a guy sing like him, his head on a pillow."

Frank looked back at me. He then asked me a question that confirmed that he was a ghost.

"You know where I was buried?"

"No," I answered.

A chill went up my spine.

"In the desert, of course," he hammered. "In Desert Memorial Park, to be exact. On my grave, to be like everyone else, they put my dates: 1915-1998. But I had the title to one of my songs added. You know which one?"

"Uh no," I mumbled.

A drop of sweat dripped down my back. Frankie gave me a final look, a contemptuous one.

"The Best Is Yet To Come."

Then, like a jinn, he disappeared before my eyes.

I stood there, alone in the night. Still disconcerted by this ghostly encounter, I walked around the garden, with its lights and its discreet, dark corners. A scent of the Orient filled the night. Suddenly I heard a faint singing. A voice seemed to be chanting behind a bush, in the way that people talk to themselves. As I approached, I could see a silhouette seated in a large armchair, like royalty. It was a woman. An imposing woman in a long, rhinestoned dress, she held a white scarf in her hand. Her hair was pulled back in a bun, and her eyes were covered by tinted glasses. She had the glow of a ruler: she looked like Queen Victoria wearing Ray Charles's sunglasses. I gathered that she

saw me, based on the hand gesture beckoning me over to her. Not being familiar with her majesty, it seemed like she was granting me an audience.

"Come closer, sir," she said to me in French.

I approached, and as she looked me over I could tell that something was bothering her.

"You saw him?" she asked me, urgently.

"Saw who?"

Her hand gripped her scarf, rather theatrically.

"That scoundrel, the imposter. The demon walking in the garden."

I wondered what else was going to happen to me.

"It's him," she said, hissing. "The man with the small hat. Of course it's not Ali Baba, but he does know forty thieves."

She seemed to be outraged by some kind of treasonous crime. Her voice suddenly calmed. "Sir, allow me to introduce myself," she declared with that kind of haughty modesty of queens pretending to be commoners, when they're sure they've already been recognized.

"Perhaps you know my name. I'm Umm Kulthum. My legend has traveled throughout the wadis and the medinas, deserts and cities."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed to myself. "After Sinatra, now Umm Kulthum!"

She seemed to be quite unhappy. The diva didn't give me time to take a breath.

"Even if my modesty must suffer for it, I have to accept the advantages that the universe has given me. Ahmed Rami composed 130 songs for me. Hymns, sir, of grand poetry. Ahmed studied at the Sorbonne. He was a man of letters, not some risotto vendor. I sang his songs in Damascus, Beirut, Tripoli, Tunis, to

standing ovations by immense crowds. They called me 'the Nightingale of the Nile,' 'the People's Singer,' 'the Fourth Pyramid' and 'the Star of the Orient.' So you can understand that I get irritated when I see this spaghetti eater ambling around these exquisite gardens. I did not earn my stripes with the help of the mafia, no sir, but thanks to my vocal chords! Fourteen thousand vibrations per second. Can you even conceive of that? While this *pizzaiolo* isn't even worth the vocal cord he'll be hanged from! And he acts like some Arabian sheik! What's he doing here, at the Royal Mansour, no less! A paradise for high-class folks!"

Her voice seethed with anger.

"Madam," I responded. "It seems he was brought here by a higher power."

Her hand tightened around her scarf.

"Sir, the course of our lives is not supposed to be decided by old criminals in the back rooms of Chicago. Godfathers, like they say. I had a dignified and courageous life, *inch'Allah*. My father was an imam, and he dressed me up as a boy when I was 10 so that I could sing during *Mawlid*. I was a boy, but I called myself Umm, like the third daughter of Muhammad and Khadija. And my husband Hassen was the pillar of my life."

I didn't dream of contesting this last point, but rather her showy indignation. She tossed each surge of ego like a shovelful of dirt onto the coffin of the Palm Springs infidel, the notorious white guy with the mandolin. Umm Kulthum continued, "General de Gaulle called me La Dame, and Callas revered me. I had kings and millionaires at my feet. I walked away from regimes. I sang at the coronation of King Farouk,

you know, but Nasser never held it against me. I was his muse. The Nightingale of the Nile immemorial! I have an Egyptian diplomatic passport, kind sir, like a government minister. And I'm not the kind of person to ask for gaming licenses to open houses of debauchery surrounded by snake pits!"

Her face was reddened with anger, and it made the pearls of her precious necklace tremble. Her hand was regularly gripping and releasing her scarf.

To further her credibility and keep beating up on the little gangster from New Jersey, Umm Kulthum thought it was a good idea to note that she had gone upstairs and not down, upon her death. With a kind of solemnity, she said, "I was given a wonderful welcome into heaven. Perhaps a little less than my arrival in Rabat for my 1968 concert, but still. There are reminders. And when I get tired of paradise, I'm going to be reincarnated at the Royal Mansour. It's a step up in comfort."

"Is that so?" I asked, interested in a comparison between the two.

"Staying here is much more calm. One would think that I'd just be frolicking in heaven with the angels, but you don't know what it's like to hear Farid El Atrache doing vocal repetitions every morning on the next cloud over."

Indeed I was not in a hurry to know. She, however, was squeezing her scarf tighter and tighter, as if strangling the Nightingale of Minestrone, the tuxedoed hit man, the horrible Sinatra. She added, "Sir, have you heard me sing *Al Atlal*? Or *Enta Omri*? *Baid Annak*? Fifty minutes minimum for my hymns. It's not like a jukebox! The Italian pygmy who defames the

mashrabiya, he's an olive oil-soaked wimp! This Pinocchio's concerts are shorter than a single one of my songs. And I'm a woman. He could never be one."

Listening to this final argument, I could only ask a rather banal, silly question: "Uh, which of your concerts had the biggest audience?"

"My funeral," the diva responded without hesitation. "Carried around for three hours in my casket by millions of Cairenes. The ceremony was like the one for Rudolph Valentino, Hollywood's true Arabian sheik, not the tagliatelle imposter who was prowling around this garden. I remember Valentino very well! It's when we're quiet that they want to hear us. In that respect, Valentino had a head start on me."

"Why's that?"

"His films were silent."

On the word "silent," a cloud enveloped her, and just as quickly as Sinatra, she disappeared into the air. Still stunned, in a daze, I mechanically walked back to the riad where I was staying. After several steps, a security guard appeared.

"Can I help you, sir? I thought I heard a noise."

I shrugged. "Oh, it was nothing," I answered. "Just two big cats fighting in the night."

M

MARC LAMBRON was born in Lyon in 1957. A high-ranking civil servant and author of a significant body of work, he was awarded the Femina Prize for L'Œil du Silence. He is a member of the Académie Française.