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HOPE  
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Laila Lalami

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*Laila Lalami*

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## The Trip

FOURTEEN KILOMETERS. Murad has pondered that number hundreds of times in the last year, trying to decide whether the risk was worth it. Some days he told himself that the distance was nothing, a brief inconvenience, that the crossing would take as little as thirty minutes if the weather was good. He spent hours thinking about what he would do once he was on the other side, imagining the job, the car, the house. Other days he could think only about the coast guards, the ice-cold water, the money he'd have to borrow, and he wondered how fourteen kilometers could separate not just two countries but two universes.

Tonight the sea appears calm, with only a slight wind

now and then. The captain has ordered all the lights turned off, but with the moon up and the sky clear, Murad can still see around him. The six-meter Zodiac inflatable is meant to accommodate eight people. Thirty huddle in it now, men, women, and children, all with the anxious look of those whose destinies are in the hands of others—the captain, the coast guards, God.

Murad has three layers on: undershirt, turtleneck, and jacket; below, a pair of thermal underwear, jeans, and sneakers. With only three hours' notice, he didn't have time to get waterproof pants. He touches a button on his watch, a Rolex knockoff he bought from a street vendor in Tangier, and the display lights up: 3:15 A.M. He scratches at the residue the metal bracelet leaves on his wrist, then pulls his sleeve down to cover the timepiece. Looking around him, he can't help but wonder how much Captain Rahal and his gang stand to make. If the other passengers paid as much as Murad did, the take is almost 600,000 dirhams, enough for an apartment or a small house in a Moroccan beach town like Asilah or Cabo Negro.

He looks at the Spanish coastline, closer with every breath. The waves are inky black, except for hints of foam here and there, glistening white under the moon, like tombstones in a dark cemetery. Murad can make out

the town where they're headed. Tarifa. The mainland point of the Moorish invasion in 711. Murad used to regale tourists with anecdotes about how Tariq Ibn Ziyad had led a powerful Moor army across the Straits and, upon landing in Gibraltar, ordered all the boats burned. He'd told his soldiers that they could march forth and defeat the enemy or turn back and die a coward's death. The men had followed their general, toppled the Visigoths, and established an empire that ruled over Spain for more than seven hundred years. Little did they know that we'd be back, Murad thinks. Only instead of a fleet, here we are in an inflatable boat—not just Moors, but a motley mix of people from the ex-colonies, without guns or armor, without a charismatic leader.

It's worth it, though, Murad tells himself. Some time on this flimsy boat and then a job. It will be hard at first. He'll work in the fields like everyone else, but he'll look for something better. He isn't like the others—he has a plan. He doesn't want to break his back for the *spagnol*, spend the rest of his life picking their oranges and tomatoes. He'll find a real job, where he can use his training. He has a degree in English and, in addition, he speaks Spanish fluently, unlike some of the harraga.

His leg goes numb. He moves his ankle around. To his

left, the girl (he thinks her name is Faten) shifts slightly, so that her thigh no longer presses against his. She looks eighteen, nineteen maybe. "My leg was asleep," he whispers. Faten nods to acknowledge him but doesn't look at him. She pulls her black cardigan tight around her chest and stares down at her shoes. He doesn't understand why she's wearing a hijab scarf on her hair for a trip like this. Does she imagine she can walk down the street in Tarifa in a headscarf without attracting attention? She'll get caught, he thinks.

Back on the beach, while they all were waiting for Rahal to get ready, Faten sat alone, away from everyone else, as though she were sulking. She was the last one to climb into the boat, and Murad had to move to make room for her. He couldn't understand her reluctance. It didn't seem possible to him that she would have paid so much money and not been eager to leave when the moment came.

Across from Murad is Aziz. He's tall and lanky and he sits hunched over to fit in the narrow space allotted to him. This is his second attempt at crossing the Strait of Gibraltar. He told Murad that he'd haggled with Rahal over the price of the trip, argued that, as a repeat customer, he should get a deal. Murad tried to bargain, too, but in the end he still had to borrow almost 20,000 dirhams from

one of his uncles, and the loan is on his mind again. He'll pay his uncle back as soon as he can get a job.

Aziz asks for a sip of water. Murad hands over his bottle of Sidi Harazem and watches him take a swig. When he gets the bottle back, he offers the last bit to Faten, but she shakes her head. Murad was told he should keep his body hydrated, so he's been drinking water all day. He feels a sudden urge to urinate and leans forward to contain it.

Next to Aziz is a middle-aged man with greasy hair and a large scar across his cheek, like Al Pacino in *Scarface*. He wears jeans and a short-sleeved shirt. Murad heard him tell someone that he was a tennis instructor. His arms are muscular, his biceps bulging, but the energy he exudes is rough, like that of a man used to trouble with the law. Murad notices that Scarface has been staring at the little girl sitting next to him. She seems to be about ten years old, but the expression on her face is that of an older child. Her eyes, shiny under the moonlight, take up most of her face. Scarface asks her name. "Mouna," she says. He reaches into his pocket and offers her chewing gum, but the girl quickly shakes her head.

Her mother, Halima, asked Murad the time before they got on the boat, as though she had a schedule to keep. She

gives Scarface a dark, forbidding look, wraps one arm around her daughter and the other around her two boys, seated to her right. Halima's gaze is direct, not shifty like Faten's. She has an aura of quiet determination about her, and it stirs feelings of respect in Murad, even though he thinks her irresponsible, or at the very least foolish, for risking her children's lives on a trip like this.

On Aziz's right is a slender African woman, her cornrows tied in a loose ponytail. While they were waiting on the beach to depart, she peeled an orange and offered Murad half. She said she was Guinean. She cradles her body with her arms and rocks gently back and forth. Rahal barks at her to stop. She looks up, tries to stay immobile, and then throws up on Faten's boots. Faten cries out at the sight of her sullied shoes.

"Shut up," Rahal snaps.

The Guinean woman whispers an apology in French. Faten waves her hand, says that it's okay, says she understands. Soon the little boat reeks of vomit. Murad tucks his nose inside his turtleneck. It smells of soap and mint and it keeps out the stench, but within minutes the putrid smell penetrates the shield anyway. Now Halima sits up and exhales loudly, her children still huddling next to her. Rahal glares at her, tells her to hunch down to keep the boat balanced.

"Leave her alone," Murad says.

Halima turns to him and smiles for the first time. He wonders what her plans are, whether she's meeting a husband or a brother there or if she'll end up cleaning houses or working in the fields. He thinks about some of the illegals who, instead of going on a boat, try to sneak in on vegetable trucks headed from Morocco to Spain. Last year the Guardia Civil intercepted a tomato truck in Algeciras and found the bodies of three illegals, dead from asphyxiation, lying on the crates. At least on a boat there is no chance of that happening. He tries to think of something else, something to chase away the memory of the picture he saw in the paper.

The outboard motor idles. In the sudden silence, everyone turns to look at Rahal, collectively holding their breath. "Shit," he says between his teeth. He pulls the starter cable a few times, but nothing happens.

"What's wrong?" Faten asks, her voice laden with anxiety.

Rahal doesn't answer.

"Try again," Halima says.

Rahal yanks at the cable.

"This trip is cursed," Faten whispers. Everyone hears her.

Rahal bangs the motor with his hand. Faten recites a verse from the second sura of the Qur'an: "'God, there is

no God but Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtaketh Him—’ ”

“Quiet,” Scarface yells. “We need some quiet to think.” Looking at the captain, he asks, “Is it the spark plug?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so,” says Rahal.

Faten continues to pray, this time more quietly, her lips moving fast. “‘Unto Him belongeth all that is in the heavens and the earth . . .’ ”

Rahal yanks at the cable again.

Aziz calls out, “Wait, let me see.” He gets on all fours, over the vomit, and moves slowly to keep the boat stable.

Faten starts crying, a long and drawn-out whine. All eyes are on her. Her hysteria is contagious, and Murad can hear someone sniffing at the other end of the boat.

“What are you crying for?” Scarface asks, leaning forward to look at her face.

“I’m afraid,” she whimpers.

“Baraka!” he orders.

“Leave her be,” Halima says, still holding her children close.

“Why did she come if she can’t handle it?” he yells, pointing at Faten.

Murad pulls his shirt down from his face. “Who the hell do you think you are?” He’s the first to be surprised by his anger. He is tense and ready for an argument.

“And who are you?” Scarface says. “Her protector?”

A cargo ship blows its horn, startling everyone. It glides in the distance, lights blinking.

“Stop it,” Rahal yells. “Someone will hear us!”

Aziz examines the motor, pulls at the hose that connects it to the tank. “There’s a gap here,” he tells Rahal, and he points to the connector. “Do you have some tape?” Rahal opens his supplies box and takes out a roll of duct tape. Aziz quickly wraps some around the hose. The captain pulls the cable once, twice. Finally the motor wheezes painfully and the boat starts moving.

“Praise be to God,” Faten says, ignoring Scarface’s glares.

The crying stops and a grim peace falls on the boat.

TARIFA IS ABOUT 250 meters away now. It’ll only take another few minutes. The Guinean woman throws a piece of paper overboard. Murad figures it’s her ID. She’ll probably pretend she’s from Sierra Leone so she can get political asylum. He shakes his head. No such luck for him.

The water is still calm, but Murad knows better than to trust the Mediterranean. He’s known the sea all his life and he knows how hard it can pull. Once, when he was ten years old, he went mussel picking with his father at



the beach in Al Hoceima. As they were working away, Murad saw a dark, beautiful bed of mussels hanging from their beards inside a hollow rock. He lowered himself in and was busy pulling at them when a wave filled the grotto and flushed him out. His father grabbed Murad, still holding the bucket, out of the water. Later, Murad's father would tell his friends at the café an adorned version of this story, which would be added to his repertoire of family tales that he narrated on demand.

"Everyone out of the boat now!" Rahal shouts. "You have to swim the rest of the way."

Aziz immediately rolls out into the water and starts swimming.

Like the other passengers, Murad looks on, stunned. They expected to be taken all the way to the shore, where they could easily disperse and then hide. The idea of having to swim the rest of the way is intolerable, especially for those who are not natives of Tangier and accustomed to its waters.

Halima raises a hand at Rahal. "You thief! We paid you to take us to the coast."

Rahal says, "You want to get us all arrested a harraga? Get out of the boat if you want to get there. It's not that far. I'm turning back."

Someone makes an abrupt movement to reason with Rahal, to force him to go all the way to the shore, but the Zodiac loses balance and then it's too late. Murad is in the water now. His clothes are instantly wet, and the shock of the cold water all over his body makes his heart go still for a moment. He bobs, gasps for air, realizes that there's nothing left to do but swim. So he wills his limbs, heavy with the weight of his clothes, to move.

Around him, people are slowly scattering, led by the crosscurrents. Rahal struggles to right his boat and someone, Murad can't quite tell who, is hanging on to the side. He hears howls and screams, sees a few people swimming in earnest. Aziz, who was first to get out of the boat, is already far ahead of the others, going west. Murad starts swimming toward the coast, afraid he might be pulled away by the water. From behind, he hears someone call out. He turns and holds his hand out to Faten. She grabs it and the next second she is holding both his shoulders. He tries to pull away, but her grip tightens.

"Use one hand to move," he yells.

Her eyes open wider but her hands do not move. He forces one of her hands off him and manages to make a few strokes. Her body is heavy against his. Each time they bob in the water, she holds on tighter. There is water in his

ears now and her cries are not as loud. He tries to loosen her grip but she won't let go. He yells out. Still she holds on. The next time they bob, water enters his nose and it makes him cough. They'll never make it if she doesn't loosen her grip and help him. He pushes her away. Free at last, he moves quickly out of her reach. "Beat the water with your arms," he yells. She thrashes wildly. "Slower," he tells her, but he can see that it is hopeless, she can't swim. A sob forms in his throat. If only he had a stick or a buoy that he could hand her so that he could pull her without risking that they both drown. He's already drifting away from her, but he keeps calling out, telling her to calm down and start swimming. His fingers and toes have gone numb, and he has to start swimming or he'll freeze to death. He faces the coast. He closes his eyes, but the image of Faten is waiting for him behind the lids. Eyes open again, he tries to focus on the motion of his limbs.

There is a strange quietness in the air. He swims until he feels the sand against his feet. He tries to control his breathing, the beating of his heart in his ears. He lies on the beach, the water licking his shoes. The sun is rising, painting the sand and the buildings far ahead a golden shade of orange. With a sigh, Murad relieves his bladder. The sand around him warms up but cools again in sec-

onds. He rests there for a little while, then pushes himself to his knees.

He stands, legs shaking. He turns around and scans the dark waters, looking for Faten. He can see a few forms swimming, struggling, but it's hard to tell who is who. Aziz is nowhere to be seen, but the Guinean woman is getting out of the water a few meters away.

In the distance, a dog barks.

Murad knows he doesn't have much time before the Guardia Civil come after them. He takes a few steps and drops to his knees on the sand, which feels warmer than the water. With a trembling hand, he opens a side pocket of his cargos and extracts a plastic bag. In it is a mobile phone, with a Spanish SIM card. He calls Rubio, the Spaniard who will drive him north to Catalonia.

"Soy Murad. El amigo de Rahal."

"Espéreme por la caña de azúcar."

"Bien."

He takes a few steps forward, but he doesn't see the sugar cane Rubio mentioned. He continues walking anyway. A hotel appears on the horizon. Another dog barks, and the sound soon turns into a howl. He walks toward it and spots the sugar cane. A small path appears on the left side and he sits at its end. He takes his shoes off, curls

his frigid toes in the wet socks and massages them. Replacing his shoes, he lies back and takes a deep breath of relief. He can't believe his luck. He made it.

It will be all right now. He comforts himself with the familiar fantasy that sustained him back home, all those nights when he couldn't fall asleep, worrying about how he would pay rent or feed his mother and brothers. He imagines the office where he'll be working; he can see his fingers moving quickly and precisely over his keyboard; he can hear his phone ringing. He pictures himself going home to a modern, well-furnished apartment, his wife greeting him, the TV in the background.

A light shines on him. Rubio is fast. No wonder it cost so much to hire him. Murad sits up. The light is away from his eyes only a moment, but it is long enough to see the dog, a German shepherd, and the infinitely more menacing form holding the leash.

THE OFFICER FROM the Guardia Civil wears fatigues, and a black beret cocked over his shaved head. His name tag reads Martinez. He sits inside the van with Murad and the other illegals, the dog at his feet. Murad looks at himself: his wet shoes, his dirty pants stuck against his legs, the bluish skin under his nails. He keeps

his teeth clenched to stop himself from shivering beneath the blanket the officer gave him. It's only fourteen kilometers, he thinks. If they hadn't been forced into the water, if he'd swum faster, if he'd gone west instead of east, he would have made it.

When he climbs down from the van, Murad notices a wooded area up the hill just a few meters away, and beyond it, a road. The guards are busy helping a woman who seems to have collapsed from the cold. Murad takes off, running as fast as he can. Behind him, he hears a whistle and the sound of boots, but he continues running, through the trees, his feet barely touching the crackled ground. When he gets closer to the road, he sees it is a four-lane highway, with cars whizzing by. It makes him pause. Martinez grabs him by the shirt.

THE CLOCK ON THE WALL at the Guardia Civil post shows six in the morning. Murad sits on a metal chair, handcuffed. There are men and women, all wrapped in blankets like him, huddled close together to stay warm. He doesn't recognize many of them; most came on other boats. Scarface sits alone, smoking a cigarette, one leg resting on the other, one shoe missing. There is no sign of Aziz. He must have made it. Just to be sure, he asks the

Guinean woman a few seats down from him. "I haven't seen him," she says.

Lucky Aziz. Murad curses his own luck. If he'd landed just a hundred meters west, away from the houses and the hotel, he might have been able to escape. His stomach growls. He swallows hard. How will he be able to show his face again in Tangier? He stands up and hobbles to the dusty window. He sees Faten outside, her head bare, in a line with some of the other boatmates, waiting for the doctors, who wear surgical masks on their faces, to examine them. A wave of relief washes over him, and he gesticulates as best as he can with his handcuffs, calling her name. She can't hear him, but eventually she looks up, sees him, then looks away.

A woman in a dark business suit arrives, her high heels clicking on the tiled floor. "Soy sus abogada," she says, standing before them. She tells them they are here illegally and that they must sign the paper that the Guardia Civil are going to give them. While everyone takes turns at signing, the woman leans against the counter to talk to one of the officers. She raises one of her legs behind her as she talks, like a little girl. The officer says something in a flirtatious tone, and she throws her head back and laughs.

Murad puts in a false name even though it won't matter. He is taken to the holding station, the sand from the

beach still stuck on his pants. On his way there, he sees a body bag on the ground. A sour taste invades his mouth. He swallows but can't contain it. He doubles over and the officer lets go of him. Murad stumbles to the side of the building and vomits. It could have been him in that body bag; it could have been Faten. Maybe it was Aziz or Halima.

The guard takes him to a moldy cell already occupied by two other prisoners, one of whom is asleep on the mattress. Murad sits on the floor and looks up through the window at the patch of blue sky. Seagulls flutter from the side of the building and fly away in formation, and for a moment he envies them their freedom. But tomorrow the police will send him back to Tangier. His future there stands before him, unalterable, despite his efforts, despite the risk he took and the price he paid. He will have to return to the same old apartment, to live off his mother and sister, without any prospects or opportunity. He thinks of Aziz, probably already on a truck headed to Catalonia, and he wonders—if Aziz can make it, why not he? At least now he knows what to expect. It will be hard to convince his mother, but in the end he knows he will prevail on her to sell her gold bracelets. If she sells all seven of them, it will pay for another trip. And next time, he'll make it.