

East Side: North Africa

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THE HIGHEST street in this blue Arab town skirted the edge of a cliff. I walked over to the thick protecting wall and looked down. The tide was out and the flat scummy rocks below were swarming with skinny boys. All of them were wearing pleated bloomer-shaped knickers and little skullcaps as bright as colored candies. An Arab woman came up to the blue wall and stood next to me, grazing my hip with her basket. I pretended not to notice and kept my eyes fixed on a white dog that had just slipped down the side of a rock and was plunged up to his belly in a crater filled with sea water. The sound of his bark reverberating against the high cliff was earsplitting. The woman next to me jabbed the basket firmly into my ribs, and I looked down. It was stuffed full with a big dead porcupine; a pair of new yellow socks were folded on top of its pretty quills.

“That one is a porcupine,” she said, pointing a finger stained with red henna into the basket.

I looked at her. She was dressed in a haik and the white cloth covering the lower half of her face was loose, about to fall down.

“I am Zodelia,” she announced in a high voice, “and you are a friend of Cherifa and Betzoule.” She spoke in Arabic. “You sit in their house and you eat in their house and you sleep in their house.” The loose cloth slipped down below her chin and hung there like a bib. She did not pull it up.

Her information was correct. With the help of frequent gifts and a smattering of Arabic, I had made friends with two unmarried sisters who worked in the market. It was unheard of for any of these women whose lives were led almost entirely within a large circle of female relatives to associate with someone who was not only a stranger but a Nazarene. Nazarene is the popular term in Morocco for all non-Moslems of Western origin (out of Nazareth). Their association with me was a profitable one and so they were actually not deviating too far from the conventional relationship of any Arab market woman to any Nazarene, resident in the town or tourist.

Despite the fact that no other Nazarene woman had ever sat

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about with them before or for that matter with anyone they had ever known, these sisters and the other women in the family very soon took me for granted. They told me over and over again how much I missed my husband and my relatives and how much I enjoyed Moslem food and being with Moslems. They must have considered that this was sufficient reason for my extraordinary behavior, if they considered the situation from my point of view at all, which it is very possible they did not. They were perpetually weaving little plots to outwit me but this never dampened the spontaneity of their moods; they were conniving, generous and hospitable. Sometimes I played the part of a Nazarene fool being outwitted by two shrewd market women and it seemed to me that they were playing the parts of two shrewd market women outwitting a Nazarene fool.

There was considerable speculation about us in the market place and many of the women claimed that when the rest of the family was asleep the three of us sat smoking in the dark. Smoking is strictly forbidden to Moslem women though some of it goes on behind closed doors, even among decent married women and virgins. Cherifa and Betzoule had learned to smoke from a corrupt cousin who was little better than a whore. I did supply them with cigarettes occasionally, but the room which they shared alone (the other sisters who were married slept with their husbands and children) was, more often than not, filled with visiting female relatives and any such scandalous behavior was impossible. These visits often lasted for months.

"You sit in their house and you sleep in their house and you eat in their house," the woman went on, and I nodded in agreement. "Your name is Jeanie and you live in a hotel with other Nazarenes. How much does the hotel cost you?"

Fortunately a round loaf of bread flopped on the ground from inside the folds of her haik and I did not have to answer her question. She picked the bread up and stuffed it between the quills of the porcupine and the basket handle with some difficulty; then she set the basket down on top of the blue wall and turned to me with bright eyes.

"I am the people in the hotel," she said. "Watch me."

I was pleased because I knew she was about to present me with a little sketch. It would be delightful to watch, since almost

every Arab speaks and gestures as if he had studied at a Moslem equivalent of the Comédie Française. At times it would seem to me that they were, all of them, acting in some continuous pageant all about life in a Moslem country.

"The people in the hotel," she announced, formally beginning her sketch. "I am the people in the hotel.

"Good-by, Jeanie, good-by. Where are you going?

"I am going to a Moslem house to visit my Moslem friends, Cherifa and Betzoule. I will sit in a Moslem room and eat Moslem food and sleep on a Moslem bed.

"Jeanie, Jeanie, when will you come back to us in the hotel and sleep in your own room?

"I will come back to you in three days. I will come back and sit in a Nazarene room and eat Nazarene food and sleep on a Nazarene bed. I will spend half the week with Moslem friends and half with—Nazarenes."

Her voice had a triumphant ring as she finished her sentence, dividing my time equally between the Moslems and the Nazarenes; then, without formally announcing the end of the sketch, she walked over to the wall and put one arm around her porcupine basket.

I knew that she did not actually believe that I spent exactly half of my life with Moslem friends and the other half with the Christians in the hotel. A story or a sketch about happiness must not be about what actually happens.

I moved along the wall and stood next to her. Down below, just at the edge of the cliff's shadow, an Arab woman was seated on a rock, washing her legs in one of the craters filled with sea water. The folds of her voluminous white haik were piled in her lap and she was huddled over them.

"She is looking at the ocean," Zodelia said to me.

She was not looking at the ocean. Huddled over the piles of cloth in her lap she could not possibly have seen it without straightening up and turning around.

"She is *not* looking at the ocean," I said.

"She is looking at the ocean," Zodelia repeated, as if I had not spoken. I decided to change the subject.

"Why do you have a porcupine with you?" I asked her, though I knew that some of the Arabs, particularly the country people, enjoyed eating them.

"It is a present for my aunt," she told me. "Do you like it?"

"Yes," I said. "I like porcupines. I like big porcupines and little ones too."

She seemed bewildered and then bored. I had somehow ruined the conversation by mentioning little porcupines. I could tell this by her expression.

"Where is your mother?" she asked me.

"My mother is in my country in her own house," I said automatically; I had answered this question a hundred times.

"Why don't you write her a letter and tell her to come here? You can take her on a promenade and show her the ocean. After that she can go back to her own country and sit in her house." She picked up her basket and adjusted the cloth over her mouth. "Would you like to go to a wedding?" she asked me.

I said that I would love to go to a wedding, and we started off down the wavy blue street, heading into the wind.

When we came to a little store, built like a booth, she stopped.

"Stand here," she said, "I want to buy something."

After studying the counter for a minute or two, she poked me and pointed to some cakes inside a square box with glass sides. "Nice," she asked me, "or not nice?"

These cakes were actually not very nice. They were dusty looking and coated with thin, ugly-colored icing. They were called *galletas Ortiz* and they were made in Spain.

"They are very nice," I said to her and bought her a dozen cakes which I gave her as a gift. She thanked me briefly and we walked on.

After a while we turned off the street into a blind alley and started downhill. When we had nearly reached the end of this alley, she stopped at a heavy studded door on our right and lifted the knocker wrought in the shape of Fatima's hand.

"The wedding is here?" I said to her.

"There is no wedding here," she corrected me, shaking her head and looking grave.

A child opened the door for us and quickly hid behind it, covering her face. I followed Zodelia across the black and white tiles of a closed patio. The walls like those outside were washed in blue and a cold light shone through the broken

glass panes far above our heads. Zodelia stopped at one of three doors giving onto this patio where a row of pointed slippers barred the threshold. She stepped out of her own slippers and set them down near the others. I followed her example, which took me quite a little time because there was a knot in my laces.

When I was ready, Zodelia took my hand and pulled me with her into a dimly lit room, where she led me over to a mattress against the wall.

"Sit," she told me, and I obeyed her; then without further comment she walked off, heading for the far end of the room, which was shaped like a trolley car.

At first, because my eyes were blinded by daylight, it seemed to me that Zodelia was disappearing down a long corridor, but after a minute or two I made out the short end wall and the brass bars of a bed, glowing weakly in the darkness. Satisfied that she would not vanish entirely, I looked around me.

Only a few feet away an old lady was seated in the middle of the carpet directly underneath the only light bulb in the room, which hung on a long wire from the unbelievably high ceiling. She was wearing a sumptuous green and purple dress made of a heavy material suitable for draperies. It was solidly embroidered with dark, glossy flowers. Through the many rents and holes in the material I could see the printed cotton dress and the tan sweater she was wearing underneath.

On the mattress opposite mine several women were seated under a life-size photograph of the sultan, and farther along on this same mattress, which like mine ran almost the full length of the room, three babies were sleeping in a row. Each one of them lay close to the wall with his head resting on a fancy cushion.

"Is it nice here?" It was Zodelia, returning. She had removed her haik, and I was horrified to see that she was wearing a black crepe afternoon dress of modern European design. It hung unbelted all the way down to her ankles, almost grazing her bare feet. The hem was lopsided. More and more Moroccan women (in the larger cities) are beginning to wear European-made dresses or approximations of these. In the street they are fortunately still concealed by Moorish haiks or jellabas.

"Is it nice here?" Zodelia asked again, crouching on her haunches opposite the old lady and pointing at her. "That one is Tetum," she said to me. The old lady plunged both hands into a bowl on her lap that was filled with raw meat and began shaping the meat into little balls.

"Tetum," echoed the ladies on the mattress. Each one of these women seemed to be wearing several dresses at once and all of them had bound their heads in a variety of different-colored materials. Their clothes did not show any Western influence.

"This Nazarene," said Zodelia, gesturing in my direction, "spends half her time in a Moslem house with Moslem friends and the other half in a Nazarene hotel with other Nazarenes."

"That's nice," said the women opposite. "Half with Moslem friends and half with Nazarenes." The old lady looked very stern and I noticed that her bony cheeks were tattooed with tiny blue crosses. "Why?" she asked abruptly in a deep voice. "Why does she spend half her time with Moslem friends and half with Nazarenes?" She fixed her eyes on Zodelia, never ceasing to shape the meat with swift and accurate fingers. Her knuckles, like her cheekbones, were tattooed with blue crosses.

Zodelia stared back at her with a stupid look on her face. "I don't know why," she answered, shrugging one fat shoulder. It was obvious that the picture she had been painting of my life had suddenly lost all its charm for her.

"Is she crazy?" the old lady asked.

"No," Zodelia answered listlessly. "She is not crazy."

There were shrieks of laughter from the mattress.

The old lady fixed her sharp eyes on me. They were heavily outlined in black. "Where is your husband?" she asked.

"He's traveling in the desert."

"Selling things," Zodelia put in.

Among the Arab women this had become the most popular explanation for my husband's trips. I had not tried to contradict it.

"Where is your mother?" the old lady asked.

"My mother is in our country in her own house."

"Why don't you go and sit with your mother in her own house?" she scolded. "The hotel costs lots of money."

I felt a sudden foolish urge, despite my limited vocabulary, to tell these women about New York City; doubly foolish

because, even had I been able to speak fluent Arabic, they might have listened to what I told them with polite smiles but all the while, in their hearts, they would have pictured New York as a walled Moslem town with a predominantly Arab population. Nonetheless I was determined to say something about it and so I decided to tell them about the traffic. This was the simplest subject I could have chosen since even the Arabs use either Spanish or French words for all recent mechanical inventions such as automobiles.

"In the city where I was born," I began, "there are many, many automobiles and many, many trucks."

The women on the mattress were smiling pleasantly. "Is that true?" the center one remarked in a social tone.

"I hate trucks," I told them with feeling.

"She hates trucks," Zodelia explained.

The old lady lifted the bowl of meat off her lap and set it down on the carpet. "Trucks are nice," she said severely.

"That's true . . ." the women agreed, after only a moment's hesitation. "Trucks are very nice."

"Do you like trucks?" I asked Zodelia; I thought that perhaps because of our greater intimacy she might agree with me.

"Yes," she said, "they are nice. Trucks are very nice." She seemed lost in meditation but only for a moment. "Everything is nice," she announced with a look of triumph.

"It's the truth," the women joined in from their mattress. "Everything is nice."

They all looked happy with the exception of the old lady who was still frowning. "Aeshcha!" she hollered, twisting her neck so that her voice could be heard in the patio. "Bring the tea!"

In a minute several little girls came into the room carrying the tea things and a low round table.

"Pass the cakes to the Nazarene," the old lady told the smallest child, who was carrying a cut-glass dish. It was filled with the dry Spanish cakes I had bought for Zodelia. I did not want any of them. I wanted to leave.

"Eat," the women called out from their mattress. "Eat the cakes."

The child pushed the glass dish forward.

I knew that it would be rude of me to leave now without

drinking any tea or eating any of the cakes I had myself bought for Zodelia, but it would be equally rude of me to stay just a little while longer and drink only one glass of tea. I would have to stay at least another hour and drink the minimum three glasses, and even after that the women would protest just as loudly when I finally stood up to leave as I knew they were about to now after this brief visit. Moroccan etiquette demands that a host make every effort to keep his guest from leaving, even when the guest has been sitting around for ten or eleven hours, which is very often the case. One is sometimes detained physically but it is a formality. I searched my mind for some excuse, any excuse, for my abrupt departure; though none would be acceptable to them, I knew that it was expected of me to make one.

“The dinner at the hotel is ready,” I said, standing up. Since these women do not concern themselves with fixed meal hours this was the most ineffectual apology I could have made. They do not expect the truth, of course, but they expect an excuse to sound like one.

“Drink tea,” said the old woman scornfully. “Later you will sit with the other Nazarenes and eat their food.”

“The Nazarenes will be furious if I’m late,” I lied more and more stupidly. “They will hit me.” I tried to look wild and fearful.

“Drink tea. They will not hit you,” the old woman said briefly. “Sit down and drink tea.”

The child offered the glass dish once more, but I backed away toward the door.

At last, after a long and tiresome exchange of apologies on my part and shrieks of protest on theirs, I walked out of the room backward, raving to them about the delights of my visit.

Outside I sat down on the black and white tiles to lace my shoes. Only Zodelia followed me into the patio.

“Come back,” they were calling, “come back into the room.”

I noticed that the porcupine basket was standing only a few feet away from me against a wall. “Is that old lady in the room your aunt—the one you were bringing the porcupine to?” I asked her.

"No," she answered, "she is not my aunt."

"Where is your aunt?"

"My aunt is in her own house."

"When will you take the porcupine to her?" I wanted to keep talking so that she would be distracted and forget to fuss about my departure.

"The porcupine sits here," she said firmly, "in my own house."

There are certain Arab fabrications that seem to be utterly without motive, at least none that any Western mind can possibly fathom. Europeans living in Morocco often speak of something they call the "Oriental wall." I decided not to ask her about the wedding.

When we reached the heavy studded door she opened it just enough to let me through. "Good-by," she said. "I shall see you tomorrow, if Allah wills it."

"When?"

"At four o'clock."

It was obvious that she was choosing this hour at random. There was no way of determining whether or not she would actually turn up and if so at what time. One is not safe in assuming that they will be late.

Before closing the door behind me, she pressed two of the dry Spanish cakes into the palm of my hand.

"Eat them," she urged me graciously. "Eat them at the hotel with the other Nazarenes."

I started up the steep alley, headed once again for the walk along the cliff. The houses on either side of me were so close I could smell the dampness of the walls and feel it on my cheeks like thicker air.

When I reached the place where I had met Zodelia I went over to the wall and leaned on it. Although the sun had sunk behind the houses in back of me, the sky was still luminous and the color of the blue wall had deepened. I rubbed my fingers along it; the wash was fresh and a little of the powdery stuff came off; but no matter how often I walked through these streets reaching out to touch the chalky blue wash on the houses . . . on the walls, I could never satisfy my longing for the town.

I remember that once I reached out to touch the beautiful and powdery face of a clown because his face had awakened some longing; it happened at a little circus but not when I was a child.

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