

# One

## LIGHT FROM THE DISAPPEARING SUN

a novel by

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Baraki, Algeria, 1991

When Farid Belkadi woke up the winter sun sliced through the building's alleyway and lay on the street in diagonal shapes.

A taxi waited for his grandmother and Aunt Leila outside his apartment building. His mother loaded the last suitcase, an oversized blue cardboard case with brass locks, into the trunk.

Farid placed his white skullcap haphazardly over his uncombed hair and pulled a matching robe over his head. The robe was a flowing sea of white over his twelve-year-old frame.

Through the window a newspaper boy shouted the daily headlines, "President Bendjedid Doesn't Recognize Election Results!" Politics bored Farid unlike his mother who fretted that Algeria's imperfect democracy would end. President Bendjedid had been in power since Farid was born and would never give up easily, not to the Islamists radicals or anyone else.

Farid ran down the stairs and onto the street where the taxi waited. Aunt Leila was from Paris and she had come to take his grandmother back to

France where it would be safer to live out her final years. A man with a scruffy beard and unpolished boots paced with his rifle at the corner. He was part of the rival Islamic party that promised to make Algeria a heaven on earth. Farid and his family knew it would be more like fire on their soles than halos on their heads.

Farid peered into the taxi's backseat. His grandmother wore floor-length black garments because she was a widow. If her husband was alive, she would still wear the dark, shabby clothing of a fundamentalist woman. At her age, she had to make it clear she no longer attempted to be attractive. She was occupied with her knitting and didn't notice Farid.

When Farid was a little boy, he remembered how the needles flew so fast he couldn't see them. Everything was a blur until eventually a hat or blanket would appear out of nowhere. At eighty, she still knitted, but much slower. Small blankets formed from the yarn, but with more holes than not. Farid didn't care. He reasoned that it was something to keep her busy and pass the days until Allah changed her address.

"Come here, sweetheart." Aunt Leila motioned for Farid. "One more kiss."

Farid pressed his face into Aunt Leila's cheek. She smelled of spring flowers.

He crawled into the backseat and gave his grandmother a hug. Her eyes were the size of small eggs in a nest of wrinkles. He stared at her for a long time as she cried. Farid tried not to blink. He believed his eyelids were like the shutter on a camera. If they stayed open, he could take a picture of his grandmother and store it in his memory forever.

His grandmother's cry turned into a wail, which reminded Farid more of a funeral than a goodbye. Farid rubbed the soreness on his cheek where his grandmother had pinched him too hard. It was her way of loving him. In the last few days, her upcoming departure had made her soft. Before, his grandmother had been her usual self, always criticizing him when his mother was more lenient. If he took a minute portion of vegetables, she would immediately hold a ladle with steamed peas and carrots over his plate and scold, "That's too little. Vegetables are good for you!"

Farid would put his hand over his plate, "I have enough, Grandma." At that point, she would complain to his mother that he was too spoiled.

Tears were coming faster down her face, which made Farid wonder if she regretted the times she had scolded him. Yesterday, the thought of her leaving would not have made Farid cry. Now that the moment had come, Farid swallowed and tried to keep the tears hidden behind his eyes.

He was also fond of his aunt. She was somewhat older than his mother and had chestnut brown hair that perfectly framed her face. Aunt Leila was a constant worrier along with her husband who insisted that they immigrate to France when Farid was seven. In Paris, Uncle Hakeem had worked in a sausage factory, cutting meat off the bone of pigs' necks. The devout would consider him profane. Farid believed he was intelligent. He was like a fortuneteller, smart enough to read the future and get out.

Farid wiggled away from his grandmother's hold and stood next to his mother on the curb. He came up to her collar. "Why can't we go to Paris?"

His mother gave him a look of exasperation. "Farid, I have told you a thousand times. I can't leave my work. It's too important."

Aunt Leila put her hands on Farid's shoulders. She had no children, but treated him as if he was her own. She said to his mother, "Don't be stupid, Zazi. One day the war is going to come and you won't have any patients."

Farid's grandmother spoke through the open car door. "Let him come with us. We'll take good care of him."

Farid moved closer to his mother's side.

Her features were flawlessly proportioned: a delicate nose, small ears tucked back, the curve of her lips, and the puff of her cheeks. She was a painter's dream. Farid desperately wanted to go to Paris, but there was no way he would leave his mother. His mother looked wispy, but she was immovable. If only Aunt Leila or his grandmother could convince her to leave.

"You're asking me to give up my practice. Abandon the women of Algeria," said his mother.

Farid tightened his jaw and tried to clog his ears. His mother was a gynecologist and he knew her creed by heart as she preached, "The basic right of a woman is to have control over her body and to be the one to plan a family."

Zazi Belkadi kept speaking until the taxi driver honked his horn. He spoke with a cigarette teetering on the edge of his lip. "We go or we miss your flight."

Aunt Leila handed Farid a book wrapped in blue tissue paper. "This gift is for you, Farid."

Farid tore off the paper and studied a tall tower shaped like a capital A on its cover. As Farid flipped through the book, Aunt Leila pointed to famous paintings and sketches of what she said were the Eiffel Tower, Champs-Élysées, and Place de la Concorde.

Aunt Leila hugged Farid's mother. "Follow us as soon as you can. Don't be foolish and stay in this place too long. Sometimes you can be more stubborn than a donkey."

Farid and his mother waved goodbye until the taxi was only a disappearing dot in the road.

"Go, you'll be late for school," said Farid's mother as she hugged him.

Farid passed every cart as he raced through the neighborhood. The younger children chased after him, their feet stomping like a heard of miniature cattle.

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The door to the Baraki Islamic School was still open when Farid arrived. Memorizing his way to heaven, verse by verse, was what Farid did every day from the time the sun peaked above his alleyway until it drifted behind the earth's crust. Inside the main prayer room, Farid crouched on a prayer mat with the other boys to study the Koran. His left arm rested easily on his lap yet crooked at a strange angle, as if he had broken a bone and it had never been set properly. The doctors called Farid a fighter. When he came out of his mother's belly, he not only had mangled his arm, but also fractured his mother's pelvis.

Farid glanced at the dozens of boys in front of him. They were considered the sons of Algeria's soil. Their young voices echoed through the thousand-year-old quarter whose densely packed and labyrinthine alleyways were overhung by balconies that blotted out the sun.

The imam's assistant cracked his reed on Farid's mat. This was a warning to stop mumbling and sing the verses out loud with the other boys.

Farid lifted his head slightly toward the door where he noticed the director of the Islamic School staring at him. He crouched over his Koran again and continued with his task of memorizing six thousand two hundred holy verses. In three years, he would become a hafiz. Farid didn't care much about the honor. His mother only cared because it would keep him safe from the extremists. Unless you were seen to be a devout Muslim, you weren't safe in Algeria.

Life hadn't always been that way. At one time, Farid attended a regular school where he sat at a desk instead of piously crouching on the floor. Then, President Benjedid relaxed restrictions on Islam, hoping the rival Islamic party would build schools and hospitals where his government had failed. For every brick cemented in place, radicalism was preached. For every tenant of Islam ignored, militancy was used. When the first round of elections came this week, everyone feared that if the Islamists couldn't win with the ballot box, they would win with the gun.

Imam Ali tapped his stick against the stone floor where there were no mats. Farid and the other boys stopped their memorization and looked up from the morning lesson. Several times a day, they recited for Imam Ali. First, they repeated the lesson from the previous day, which usually amounted to a page or two from the Koran. Then they rehearsed the previous six or seven lessons combined until they added a new section for the day.

Farid clenched his jaw, trying not to yawn. Along with the other boys, Farid did not understand what he was reciting. Imam Ali told him that the Koran was spoken to the prophet Muhammad by the angel Gabriel in classical Arabic. Because it was seen as the literal word of God, the use of translation was frowned upon. Farid repeated what Imam Ali said with little more enthusiasm than if he was speaking babble.

Farid heard marching. It was one of the Islamic Salvation Front with his heavy black boots kicking up dust in the alleyway. This soldier policed the streets making sure everyone was a believer. The townsfolk gave him respect

despite the soldier's foolishness. The Front believed they were Allah, and to Farid, this was absurd.

A knock at the door interrupted Imam Ali's lesson. Two ragged men appeared dressed in black with axes tucked into their belts. They were the Front's young recruits, peasants before they became thugs. They were hungry and expected the mosques and Islamic schools to feed them.

Imam Ali handed them the students' lunches, sacks of bread and cheese. Before the soldiers left, they walked around the room, studying each boy. Farid buried himself in the Koran and prayed that their axes would not fall into his back.

They stopped at his mat. Farid knew better than to look up. Only the heels of their boots were visible. They smelled of manure. When the soldiers stepped on Farid's fingers, he held in his pain the way he thought a martyr should. Farid did not dare search the room for Imam Ali, but he knew his teacher would approve of his suffering.

Sweat trickled down Farid's spine. He wondered if they knew he was Zazi Belkadi's son. She sent Farid to the Islamic School to protect him, but with her own life, she was bold. Because she was a gynecologist and a provider of birth control, the Islamists tried to wipe women like her off the street. Procreation was Allah's job. To interrupt his work was blasphemous. In the basement of Zazi's clinic where the earth was darkest, she performed an occasional abortion. If the Islamists knew, she could turn into a dangerous woman - a woman who was more sinful than someone who walked the streets without a veil. Yet the neighbors protected Farid's mother, never revealing her scalpel or pills to the armed men. She was the town's necessary evil like the baker who sold an occasional bottle of whiskey.

After what seemed eternity, the soldiers moved away from Farid's mat and left with the students' lunches. Imam Ali's perspiring face glistened with fear and then quickly dried with relief. He asked for a volunteer to run to the dairy for cheese and milk.

Farid jumped up and pointed to himself.

Imam Ali clapped his hands. "Farid, go tell them what happened. Don't be long. Tell them we'll pay next week."

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A wagon rolled along the stony road not far from the Islamic school. Farid watched the two small horses thrust their chests forward to pull the heavy load of furniture and heaps of old trunks. A man and wife, shabbily dressed in coarse clothing rode in the carriage. The man's hands, gripping the reins, were so worn they seemed made of wood. A small child slept on the mother's lap. This could have been her only comfort, but it was hard to tell. Her face was hidden behind her veil. Her husband's eyes had a far away look, somewhere with sweeter distractions. Like many others, they were leaving Baraki.

Each day, more villagers piled their belongings on their horses' backs and moved out. In Baraki, Farid knew that terror was the only thing left to plant or trade and that a bloody harvest was possible. It had already happened in the village next door. Farid heard his mother speak about the hooded attackers who arrived in the middle of the night in trucks. They were armed with shotguns, knives, and axes. "They shot, stabbed and hacked at the village men, women, children and even animals until dawn," his mother whispered into the telephone to her sister in Paris. "They left heads on doorsteps. They raped pregnant women and then cut their babies out of their bellies." Farid nodded while continuing to eavesdrop on his mother's conversation. He knew it was the Islamists who preached that the government soldiers would not help. Farid remembered his mother twisting the telephone cord. "Through their megaphones they screamed, 'We have the whole night to rape your women and children, and drink your blood.' In the morning, the only thing standing was the village mosque."

When Farid's mother hung up the telephone, she put her hands over her eyes and said a prayer for the dead. Farid knew that even before the dust settled, the memory of the village was so strong it was tangible. This was only a few months ago and it was then that Farid's mother enrolled him in the Islamic school. She sent her son to Imam Ali six days a week, knowing he was safe but was being taught that boys were kings and girls were no better than serfs. Farid knew she would never stop her contribution toward a woman's right to choose. She kept her pride hidden and silent like the abortions she performed.

Farid looked past the orange groves in the direction of the dairy. Yet today he took the long way and wandered through the twisted alleyways of the kasbah. The houses appeared gray instead of their original whitewash on the narrow streets. Creeping vines ran around some of the low door frames. Inside most of the homes was the odor of neglect and poverty. Even those with good jobs had little money.

Boys in skullcaps begged Farid for money in the town square. They were enrolled in Islamic schools like him except they had to beg in order to pay for tuition. It was said some of the imams were corrupt and charged exorbitant prices. Many boys chanted Arabic prayers for coins, food, or sugar cubes. Farid reached into his pocket and gave two coins to the boy at his feet. He gave not out of pity or kindness but for better luck in his studies.

Past the kasbah's walls, Farid smelled the manure from the fields. A dirt road ran through the dairy that was surrounded by a few wooden houses. These tiny homes appeared to be made haphazardly from nothing more than sticks.

Flies buzzed over the counter inside the dairy.

"Salaam Aleichem." The owner's smile was one of welcome. His teeth were healthy and white like his milk.

Farid gave him the order written down by Imam Ali.

"How is my little holy man?" The owner wiggled his brow and pointed to Farid.

Farid looked around, unsure the owner was talking to him.

The owner laughed and packed up the cheese and milk in a box. He wiped his hands on his apron. "Are your grandmother and aunt still visiting?"

"They left this morning."

The owner patted down the few strands of hair he had left on his head. "It's nice to have relatives some place else. In shallah you will get to leave this crazy place one day."

"May I go upstairs and visit the chickens?" Farid asked.

"Of course. The mother hen just hatched chicks."

Farid took two steps at a time until he reached the rooftop. It was quiet except for the flapping of an apron drying in the sun. He reached inside the

wooden crate and scooped up a tiny ball of yellow feathers. The chick's lightness made him feel strong despite the occasional weakness of his crooked arm.

Farid walked closer to the edge to peer into the top floor of each apartment building. If a tall man lay down in the street between buildings, he could touch the sides of the other building. Across the street, a window was open in one of the apartments. Farid crouched behind a chicken crate so he would not be seen staring into someone's home. He peered through the wooden slots and noticed the room was a bathroom with a tub in the middle. A woman entered and closed the door. She removed her robe and let it drop to the floor.

Farid dropped the baby chick. He could not close his mouth. He had never before seen a naked woman. Her nipples looked sharp and pointy. She sat down in the tub and rested her head on the side.

Boots scuffed along the stone street below. A man wore the black uniform of the Islamic Salvation Front. Farid froze. The only thing Farid could hear besides his shallow breath was his rapid pulse beating between his ears. He grabbed his crotch. The Islamic fighter would cut it off if he was caught looking.

The fighter looked up at the sky. Farid lay flat, trying to disappear into the roof. He felt the breaking of tiny bones underneath his stomach. For a moment, he panicked. What would the owner do when he found out the baby chick had been crushed? Farid dashed down the stairs when the heavy sound of the soldier's boots disappeared.

He snatched the box off the counter and ran into the street. Farid felt the punishing pain in his muscles until he reached Imam Ali's school. Once safely inside, he didn't dare look up from his Koran for the rest of the afternoon. He recited each verse with fear. Now he had to push himself harder to become a hafiz. Imam Ali told Farid that such an honor guaranteed him entrance into heaven with ten other people of his choosing. For sure, he would have chosen his mother, despite the Islamist's objections.

Farid recited another verse while he thought about his mother who was supposed to protect him. The truth was that he was going to save her, and himself. He doubted he could rescue either of them on this earth, but if she could wait until her death, she might be an angel in heaven with him. In order to do his

best, Farid swept the rugs before Imam Ali could ask him. Afterwards, he ate an early dinner of leftover bread and cheese.

He was the last student left. Imam Ali put his hand on Farid's shoulder. "You worked hard today. Go home and sleep. Rest your brain. There is always more Koran to memorize."

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Farid walked back to his home, a three-story building with creaking stairs that announced everyone's comings and goings. Farid and his mother lived on the second story. They used to live on the third floor when his parents were together, but it was empty now. His mother had been fighting for a divorce ever since Farid began to crawl. Abdelaziz Belkadi refused to disown his wife. She was one of several things in his collection along with his many shoes and rare coins. Last year he took another wife and had a baby with her. With two wives, he liked to flick as many fingers in the air and boast about his manhood. When the new wife complained of Farid's mother, he let Farid and his mother move downstairs. Abdelaziz Belkadi accepted a foreign ministry post in Italy soon afterwards and left with his new wife and baby.

On the first floor was a young couple, the Zeyaris, who were intellectuals like Farid's mother. Mrs. Zeyari was a painter whose work was abstract and had lately become more rebellious in color. Her husband was a writer who published outside Algeria. Inside his apartment, he trapped himself between four walls. His writings were his only means of escape. Once, Farid's mother sent him downstairs to borrow a cup of flour, and he found Mr. Zeyari sitting in the corner staring at a spider. He glared at the insect as if he was a prisoner watching his only companion.

Farid stepped aside on the stairwell for a black cloaked woman. He could not see who she was, but he presumed it was Mrs. Zeyari. Who else would hide her nail polish under black gloves on a warm afternoon? Like her paintings, her mind had to be full of vibrant colors while her body and nails were trapped underneath thick black cloth.

The air smelled of cinnamon tea inside Farid's apartment. The walls were bare except for some landscape paintings of the Sahara Desert and the

snow-capped Atlas Mountains. None of his mother's medical diplomas or the award from the Federation of International Planned Parenthood that recognized her work was on display. In Algeria, it was best to keep your beliefs in your head and not on your walls.

In the living room, the drapes were drawn and a gray light was cast over the furnishings. The clinic was closed, but Farid's mother sat sipping tea with one of her patients.

"When did you last get your period?" She asked.

The young woman lowered her head and stared into her lap. On the back of her chair, she had tossed her chador like an unwanted blanket. "Two months ago."

"A pregnancy test is usually accurate," said Farid's mother. When she saw Farid, she leaned away from her patient and rose to give him a kiss in the middle of the forehead. Farid loved those kisses, but at twelve years old and in front of others, he squirmed away.

"Did you eat?" His mother brushed his cheek with her thumb.

"At school."

She did not bother to introduce her patient to Farid even though the young woman looked into his eyes.

Farid kept his hands buried deep in his pockets until they felt as if they had disappeared. He wasn't sure if this woman expected a handshake. At school he was told never to touch a woman until marriage.

Farid slipped into his mother's bedroom. He had his own room, but ever since the massacre in the village next door, he preferred the comfort and warmth of his mother at night. The day was passing quickly. The tip of the neighborhood minaret flamed with light from the disappearing sun. Farid lay on the extra large bed they shared and watched through an open window the flame lifting from the minaret. Dusk settled over Baraki in a half darkness. Little puffs of wind blew in and comforted Farid.

He listened to the men working between his building and the next. They were keepers of the alleyway. Farid and his mother had a bathroom, but half the neighborhood did not. Inside wooden shacks were toilets, one for the women and one for the men, where the neighbors were supposed to relieve

themselves alongside a ditch. Each night, the men collected the sewage and watered down the stench. Farid was lulled by the scraping sounds of their shovels. He didn't bother to rise and peer out the window like the other idle neighbors. If he did, he wouldn't have been able to see the men anyway. It was a desperate job that no one wanted and in the darkness the men were thankfully hidden.

Farid stayed on his bed and flipped through the book about Paris his aunt had given him. Each glossy page looked like a fancy painting.

He pushed the book aside and thought of all the things that had gone wrong in the last few weeks: A dwindling neighborhood soccer team - Cheikh, Youcef, Abdellhamid, they had all left for safer havens; Drunk men who took up space in the alleyway. They secretly sipped wine with their coffee in small porcelain cups. Jobless, their faces were no longer brown, like the bean, but red like the grapes.

The evening wound down and Farid heard his mother and the young woman slip back into their chadors and veils. Up until a few months ago, Farid's mother never fashioned a chador or a veil, but wore a headscarf. It was an act of her faith. When the Islamists forced women to cover themselves, the headscarf became plain and meaningless for her. Restricted underneath a cloth that swallowed up her body, it was more difficult for her to be bold and free.

Huddled together, Farid, his mother, and her patient made their way through the streets. Night wasn't as safe as day, but it was impossible to get everything done between the time the sun rose and the time it set. The young woman bid them goodnight at the corner. She no longer addressed Farid's mother as 'Doctor', but 'Madame.' A few meters ahead, the young woman passed a man whose complexion was very dark, like old bark. Farid knew him. He was a religious scholar and a friend of Imam Ali. In front of the pious man, the young woman hunched over and hobbled away. It was important to hide her youth. Otherwise she could be taken for a young bride. Each year her belly would be swollen. Each day she would darn mismatched socks and tattered trousers.

Farid and his mother returned to their apartment. His mother opened the drapes, but shut the lights. They drank cinnamon tea in the dark.

“Mama, how come the lights are off?”

“It’s quieter in the dark.”

“Why do we have to be quiet?”

She put another tea bag in the pot. “How was school today?”

“Boring.”

“You should have a better attitude. That one will get you in trouble.”

“I want to go back to my old school. All I do is memorize things I don’t understand.”

Farid’s mother sweetened his tea with rose water, as sugar was scarce.

“Be patient. Allah protects you when you go to the Islamic School.”

“How can I be safe if you’re not safe?”

The telephone rang. His mother answered. It was Yousra, her friend.

Farid did not have to lean closer to hear. Through the receiver, Yousra’s voice was full of terror and screams.

“Through my window, something terrible has come in!”

“What Yousra? Tell me. Was it a bird, a locust?”

“No. It was the imam’s sermon. There’s been a fatwa.”

Farid’s mother played with a few flimsy strands of hair that had fallen into her eye. “Calm down. There are lots of fatwas.”

“But, this one is about you!”

Zazi Belkadi stopped with her hair. She stopped everything and listened to the Islamic law decreed upon her life.

“You have been condemned to death!”

Farid’s mother dropped the phone and buried her face in her hands.

Farid knew that absolute darkness was where his mother wanted to hide.

It started to storm outside. A few moments later, the rain stopped and the sky was quiet. In Algeria, winter showers were as capricious as fighting. One moment you were living and the next moment you were dead.

Farid’s mother closed the drapes and moved through the apartment in the pitch dark. She threw open the closet door in Farid’s bedroom and pulled out underwear, socks, trousers, and shirts. “Put these on, as many as you can underneath your clothes,” she said in a hurried whisper.

Farid wiped his brow with his sleeve. “But, it’s warm out.”

"We're leaving."

"Paris?" Farid's voice was hopeful.

"No, I'm going to the Kaaba's farm. It's at the edge of town, just past the dairy. They have a cellar I can hide in." Farid's mother caressed his face. She paused for a moment to think. "You'll go to Morocco. It's not far, just across the border."

"Morocco!" Farid stomped his feet. "I don't know anyone there. I'm going with you!"

"Farid don't argue. You can't stay here. If the Front finds you with me, they'll kill you."

"Then why don't you come to Morocco with me?"

"I can't go now. With the fatwa, I'll never be able to cross the border. You go first and I'll meet you later when things calm down here."

Farid threw the clothes aside. "I'm not going!"

Farid's mother covered his mouth. She had never used force before, but now she pressed down hard on his lips until he couldn't feel his breath. "Quiet, we don't have time to argue." His mother let go of his mouth and pulled him to her chest. "I'm an idiot to not have let you go with Aunt Leila and Grandma this morning. You can't stay here. Soon every stone in the road will be covered with someone's blood."

Farid flopped down on his bed and refused to move. "Let them take me along with you."

Zazi Belkadi ignored his temper tantrum. She put two pairs of socks on his feet, and pulled three pairs of underwear over his waist. By the time she was done, Farid was wearing three shirts, one sweater, and a pair of trousers underneath his white robe.

Farid looked in the mirror and almost laughed. "I'm a walrus. How will I move with all these clothes on? Why can't I just carry a suitcase?"

"You don't want to attract attention. You'll take the bus to Morocco." Farid's mother wrote down Aunt Leila's address in Paris and stuck it in a leather pouch along with money from her purse. "Wear this around your neck. Once you arrive in Morocco try your best to get to Paris. Aunt Leila and Grandma will take care of you."

“And then you’ll come?”

“God willing, we’ll be together soon.” The tears that swelled along the brim of Zazi Belkadi’s eyes melted her face. She took off the necklace she always wore and put it around Farid’s neck. “Never lose this. Keep it with you at all times. Your grandma gave it to me when I was little. She used to say it had magic inside. It’ll protect you.”

Farid rubbed the necklace for good luck. It was a khamisa, an amulet to protect against the “evil eye.” The silver-shaped hand had a turquoise eye in the middle of its palm. The five spread fingers each represented a pillar of Islam. Farid was indifferent to its religious symbolism, but fascinated by its magical qualities.

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Before the cows were milked in the dairy and the imam called for the first prayer of the day, Farid was on a bus heading toward neighboring Morocco. Moments later, Zazi Belkadi left to hide in the cellar of her friend’s farmhouse.

The desert started to show its desperate face a few hours away from Baraki. Scrub replaced any type of building or life. The sun silhouetted dead acacia trees against a backdrop of sand dunes. In this part of Northern Africa, the dunes rose as high as a hundred meters from the desert floor. Out of nowhere like a mirage, Farid saw a man walking. Soon one man became many. Smaller groups blended into larger ones until their exodus became a moving village. They walked in the same direction as the bus, toward Morocco. The refugees had only their hands to shield their faces from the killing sun. Further along, they simply lay down on the edge of the desert road. No longer moving, they were like clumps of ragweed. Outside the sky burned so hot it rained fire from the sky.

The bus slowed to a stop on the sandy road. Steam bubbled from the engine. Farid’s eyes and throat were full of dust. It was too hot to wear all his clothes. He removed his robe and the clothing underneath until he was left wearing only one shirt, a pair of trousers, and three pieces of underwear.

A truck approached. Its rumbling tires sent huge dust clouds into the air. Armed men poured out and pointed their rifles, shooting at the bus’ stranded wheels. Mothers pressed their babies into their breasts. Their cries were greater

than their children. Farid grabbed his mother's khamsa and rubbed it hard for its protection. He stuffed it in his pocket, hidden safely in his moist trousers. The only thing visible on his chest was the leather pouch with his aunt's address and the money his mother had given him. He crammed a few notes in his pocket.

The men stormed on the bus and ordered the driver to sit in the back. When the driver objected, they stuffed a rag in his mouth until no one could hear his voice or his breath. Then, they shot him. Farid felt the man's death in the pit of his stomach.

One of the gunmen walked down the aisle with a basket. He tapped it with his gun and then pointed the barrel at each passenger. "Money and jewelry, in here."

Farid was in the middle of the bus. He didn't look at the gunman's eyes, but he knew he had to contribute. He dug inside the leather pouch and threw his money on top of the basket.

"Everything!" The gunman yanked the leather pouch off Farid's neck.

Farid repeated his aunt's address in his head. He was almost certain he had memorized it.

The gunman stared at Farid's pockets. "Empty them!"

Farid reached into his pocket. He was careful to pull out the bills and not the khamsa. His voice was a quiver. "Please, this is all I have."

Before the gunman could press for more, another armed man entered the bus. "All women and children off the bus."

No one moved.

"Now!"

There was a confusion of sounds: A pop, a shatter, and then a crashing shower of glass. Farid and the passengers screamed. Shards flew from the windows and stabbed passengers in the face. Their dusted brown skins were no longer gray, but red like bursting veins. A gunman fired at another window. Farid tucked his head in his lap, fearing he would otherwise lose it. Women were pulled from their husbands; children were torn from their fathers.

Farid and a dozen other children and women were forced into the truck. Light burned through the holes in the truck's corrugated roof. On the metal floor, a previous captive had written, "Allah, bless us all." Farid's body

ached. His skin was wet with blood. He felt old and beaten. A gunman slid next to him. Farid wanted to cry out, but he couldn't. To live was to be alive with sound. To die was to be hushed. The motor roared. Along with the swirling sand, Farid and the others were swept away in a fury. Heading toward somewhere, the world seemed broken on the horizon.

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