

MHANI ALAOUI

The Expat

AYA'S SCHOOL WAS up in arms. It was preparing for an important visit. It bustled and buzzed in ways that made even its students eager. The walls and classrooms were washed, the bathrooms, in disrepair, were repainted in bright pink, a color that was cheap for lack of demand, and the broken doorknobs replaced by brand-new ones that got the girls excited and giggling. The courtyard was decked with red and green lights, and colorful flags. Finally, as though worried that the students were not good enough for the whitewashed school, the administration advised them to be immaculately clean and properly dressed the day of the visit: to put their best shoes on, not the dirty slippers they liked to wear on a regular day and splash around in, and tie their hair in a neat ponytail, or, preferably, a well-adjusted veil. An important man was coming to see *their school*. Much-needed funds might be distributed, perhaps even directly into the headmistress's hands.

Aya's school—now a state-owned all-girls school dedicated to the production of fear and obedience—was founded in 1950 by James Stirling, a famous American poet and heir to a considerable fortune, as only Americans knew how to amass.

James Stirling had arrived in Tangiers after having his heart broken by the love of his life. He had met this love in the city of Paris and had quickly fallen under her charm. He wrote poems for her, and about her. Critics said they were some of his worst, and his readers shook their heads at the tragedy of another great voice surrendering to love.

Stirling did not see, at first, that his love was not fully reciprocated. He had opened up his arms, his heart, and his considerable fortune to a woman who had seduced him with her sophistication and charm. Her red mouth smiled, while her restless eyes told stories of other places, other desires.

When Stirling's heart finally broke, he packed his bags and left Paris. The scent of her perfume, which permeated its streets and followed him everywhere he went, had become intolerable. He fled to Tangiers, promising himself he would never fall in love again. But he was wrong, and he did.

Stories have it that he fell in love with Tangiers itself. With its white streets and green tiles, its high hills and vertiginous falls into the blue-white of the sea. With its wild parties and unfettered artists. With its unparalleled feel of a new world in an ancient civilization.

But Stirling, like all true poets, had a tender heart. He began to see past the glitter and glamour into the actual shape of the city and its true inhabitants, those who had been born there and had grown up there. He walked deep into the city, taking in the rare perfume of a medina in the morning. The warm bread, the mint tea, the excited children, sugar from a hurriedly eaten breakfast still on their cheeks, the shrewd carpet seller and the loud-mouthed fish vendor with the gold earrings and imposing behind. Stirling also saw how thin some of these children were, how tired the fish vendor was, how worried the carpet seller. He looked past their persons and saw what expats who refuse to turn native, or even immigrant, refuse to see: the broken-down services, the dilapidated schools, and insufficient hospitals.

Expats do not have a real claim on the city of their choosing, nor do they care to have one. They are the traveling strangers, the privileged elite whose true wealth resides in their detachment, in the ties they are not obliged to honor. They are the fake gold that the powerful shower on their dominion. They are here, for a time only, eager to fulfill a mission, perhaps write a book or close a deal. Their goal, in their short time here, is to be integrated into the expat circles and enjoy their special status as privileged foreigners. But sometimes, they slip.

What was happening to Stirling was the following. He was transforming from an expatriate into an immigrant. And like all immigrants, he needed to place his mark on the city of his choosing. Unlike most immigrants, it would be easier for him to do so.

Because he was a successful, forward-looking American poet who had survived even a failed love affair in the City of Lights, he knew he must contribute to his newfound city's progress.

After many long months and lengthy negotiations, he finally convinced the city to support his project. That was how the poet founded the first all-girls school in Tangiers, the one Aya now studied in. At least, that was the buzz around town.

Stirling never married. He was, however, rumored to have had a son with a Jewish Moroccan woman, who looked after the villa he owned in the Tangiers hills. It was said the three of them led a quiet, happy life for a while in the beautiful villa Stirling owned, far from both his and her

communities. It came as a surprise, then, when Stirling suddenly picked up and left the city to return to the United States, a country he had left over twenty years ago. He left Tangiers the very year it lost its international status and returned to the Moroccan state.

He left the house and a sizable amount of money to his housekeeper and her son. He also recognized the boy as his son. All that he asked in return was for his son, when he reached his twenty-first birthday, to take care of the school he had built.

The child, in the manner of the Spaniards the people of Tangiers feel so close to, decided to carry both his father's and his mother's names. He was Michel Abensour Stirling: Abensour, after his mother, Rachel Abensour, and Stirling, after his father, James Stirling.

James Stirling left and never returned to Tangiers. Nor did he, usually so tenderhearted, ever inquire about the son or the woman he had left behind.

MICHEL ABENSOUR STIRLING was tall and thin like his father. But he had the piercing blue eyes and red-gold hair of his mother—a legacy of the Visigoths, a barbaric northern tribe who had conquered her land many centuries ago. He spoke English, Spanish, some Arabic, Berber, and Hakitiya, the Judeo-Spanish dialect once spoken by the Jews of northern Morocco.

His mother died when Michel was twenty-one, thirteen years after James Stirling's departure. Throughout those years, she had not married, nor had she ever had any other child. She took care of her son and of the house her American lover had left her. She waited for James Stirling to return, or to inquire about her and their son, but he never did. Then she waited for her son to turn twenty-one, to become a man, to finally let death enter the gates.

Upon her deathbed, she took her son's hand and asked for his forgiveness. "When the heart of a true Tangiers woman is broken, she does not survive it."

And so, Michel, who spoke many languages and whose ancestry was glorious and diversified, found himself alone, with no one to converse with or to share his vast knowledge with. When he became an old man, he acquired a German shepherd to chase away indigenous wanderers and dirty children from his high gates, white walls and blue-tiled overhangs.

He was a very different man from the one his father was. He let the city close in on him and very rarely left his villa on the high, quiet hills of Tangiers. He was not a poet nor did he have a tender heart. When he

was a child, he may have had a tender heart. But when his father left him and his mother to their fates in the great old villa, something inside him shattered and he was never whole again.

Michel did not take care of the school nor did he honor his father's will to maintain it. As the city returned to the Moroccan state, so did the school. At least, those were the stories the Tangerine had heard.

This story mattered to the school and its administration—and to Aya—because the visitor they were all waiting for, and getting clean for, was Michel Abensour Stirling.

At first, they didn't know who Michel Abensour Stirling was, nor did the administration remember who James Stirling was. Though his name was placarded in gold letters on the front of the school, no one had ever bothered to read the plaque. A conference call from the U.S. embassy and the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs convinced the administration of the historical, and hopefully present-day, importance of this guest and advised the school to welcome him with open arms and a respectable façade.

This story mattered to Aya, because Abensour Stirling was the cold, aging expat who had chased her away from his property in the high hills of Tangiers with the assistance of his German shepherd.

According to Michel Abensour Stirling himself, when he had chased her away that day and seen the expression in her eyes before she turned and fled, he was seized with an immense anger. Something in Aya's eyes reminded him of himself the day he woke up to find his father had gone. It was an indecipherable mixture of shame, confusion, and fear. It was the child blaming itself for being abandoned, or hit, humiliated, or otherwise hurt. It was the expression of lost innocence.

In time, Abensour Stirling's anger dissipated and made way for a feeling he hadn't allowed himself to feel in a long time, not even after his mother's death: sadness. He couldn't chase from his memory the image of that young girl running away from him and Buck, his half-sane German shepherd. He waited for the memory to dissipate, but it only became more powerful, penetrating his dreams, interrupting his early morning walks by the beach, flashing onto his bathroom mirror as he stood in front of it, shaving his thin face.

After many months had passed, he decided to look for the girl and find a way to eradicate the memory. He asked about her among the men guarding the villas on his street, promising them a fair reward if anyone could tell him who that girl was. Because this was Tangiers, where news

travels fast and secrets are burdens people take turns carrying, he finally found her. One of the guards told him what he knew. “*Sidi*, her name is Aya Dane. She lives with her parents and a brother in the neighborhood behind Petit Socco, in the Rue Cervantes. And, *Sidi*, this is a strange find. She’s a student in the school your father founded, fifty-five years ago. Would you like me to take you to her?”

For many more months, Abensour Stirling did not act on this knowledge. Abensour Stirling was not a man of action, or great resolve. A little girl had disturbed the routine of his old age. She had trespassed into a part of Tangiers that should be beyond the reaches of the indigenes and the poor. She was the reminder of the young world that lay beyond his high gates. And of the disappointment that accompanied it. He had been a fool to believe that looking for the child could bring anything good. There was no magic left in the world; not when your father up and leaves you one morning, when you are eight years old and need him the most.

James Stirling had tried to contact his son once, after the mother’s death. He had sent him a short letter inviting him to come stay with him in Philadelphia, where he was currently based. Michel had never replied nor gone to visit him. It was not clear whether he had ever read the letter, for it had remained, imperfectly sealed, in a box on his desk for all those years.

After many months of inactivity, Michel Abensour Stirling got up, went into his father’s study, which was now his study, and opened a leather-bound address book that had belonged to his father and which his mother, and then he, regularly updated.

He looked for the private number of the American consul to Tangiers and dialed the number. It was not long before he had the consul at the end of the line.

A few days later, Michel got out of bed and rang for service. His room was a chiaroscuro created by the lattices of the wooden windows. He fed his German shepherd, sat at the breakfast table placed in the bedroom veranda, had a meal of black coffee, fresh-squeezed orange juice, and bread with farm-churned butter. He then went into the dressing room and chose white linen pants and a gray shirt that had been left behind by his father. He wore brown moccasins and a white Panama hat that had also belonged to his father, and that were a little big for him. He was—for the first time since his mother had passed—expected somewhere.

The 1970s water-green Mercedes was waiting for him at the door. The driver, Mustapha, was holding the back door open. Michel sat in

the back seat and, for the first time in many years, breathed in the musky scent of the leather seats. The American consul of Tangiers and the highest representative of the Moroccan foreign ministry in the city were waiting for him.

In the meantime, on the other side of town, Aya's school was as decked out and ready as a bride on her wedding day. Aya and her classmates had been asked to form two rows between the school gates and the main school building. They were given Moroccan and American flags to hold and wave when the gates opened and the cars passed through. They were then told to go into their classrooms and wait for the important visitors to come see their classrooms and their work. They were reminded to be on their best behavior and to remember how graced they were by such an important visit.

They, the poor, blessed schoolchildren, watched as the fancy cars entered through their crumbling gates. Most of the students had their eyes wide open, and those who could tried to peer inside the cars, smiling at their distorted faces reflected in the dark windows. Finally, a dilapidated Mercedes, green like the moors in the springtime, rolled sputtering in.

Aya was sitting at her desk when the headmistress came to get her. Word had it that the officials and the quiet gentleman at their side had asked to see their best students. This may or may not have been true. She was not one of those selected. So it came as a great surprise when the headmistress herself, tight-lipped, came back for her.

"They want to see you. Why? Do you know that man from somewhere? Why the sudden interest?"

Aya sensed her anger and remained quiet, waiting for the storm to pass.

"Have you misbehaved, like the others? Whore . . ."

She spat her guile and hatred, but Aya remained quiet and still. That was what hunted animals instinctively know to do.

What Aya did sense was that something was about to happen. Something that seemed to profoundly disturb the headmistress and that caused her to spit more venom than usual. And that could only be a good thing.

Chairs had been brought into the headmistress's office and placed in a circle in the middle of the room. Serious-looking men sat huddled in that circle of chairs, in the way of the elders of the mountains that surrounded Tangiers. Aya was ushered in, and the serious-looking men turned in their seats to look at her. She stopped, frozen in her tracks. She had recognized one of them.

It was *he*—the man who had haunted her nightmares, who had sent his dog at her when she was running away from him. The man whose words had cut through her and whose scorn bit at her beyond the days and the nights. She backed away into the headmistress's white-and-black-garbed body. There was hardness all around her. There was, she sensed, a soft presence in the corner of the large room. But it was too far, too vague, and Aya felt trapped by the tall, hard bodies surrounding her.

Michel Abensour Stirling saw the look in her eyes, the same look that had taken him away from his life of bitterness and anger, from his violent slumber. The look that had haunted him and that he had come to crave secretly, for, he would tell her many years later; it reminded him of another look, another child, whom he thought he had long since buried, alongside his mother and his father.

He rose to greet her. He spoke to her in Arabic, articulating carefully, looking for his words. His accent was not one Aya had heard before. Sing-song and clipped, it was the local Jewish accent he had inherited from his mother and her traditions.

She listened, at first startled and confused, before finally understanding. This was an apology. He asked her about her schoolwork, her interests. He asked if he could take an interest in her, help her in any way, guide her. As he spoke, Aya realized that he wasn't simply apologizing to her. He was apologizing to the city, to the school, to the people surrounding him, to himself, to his mother, in his name and also in his father's name. What a peculiar man, who suddenly opens up to the world and finds that he can offer only his guilt and regret.

To the great disappointment of the school and the officials of the two countries, he did not offer anything else. He did not offer funds for the rehabilitation of the school. He did not offer scholarships or the renovation of the fifty-year-old bathroom stalls. He offered nothing. He had not come to give the school hope or a fresh start; he came, simply, to see Aya Dane. The rest was not his concern. He was not a man of the people, nor a man versed in charitable donations, not a man mindful of the connections between the world and himself.

Michel Abensour Stirling would later tell her that *she* was his hope. She was what was left of the school, of the promise he never believed he needed to honor, and of the child inside him that he wished to lay to rest forever. He had come to be saved, not to save.

That was why, when Aya was dismissed from the headmistress's office, and though he himself didn't understand this, Abensour Stirling did not

feel the contentment he thought he would feel. He felt like an old, a very old, man who had let his life slip away from him without even trying to steer it in the right direction.

He needed to do more.

As he left the school a teacher approached him. She had understood, better and faster than everyone else, that this man was not made of the stuff of saviors, that he was not a generous or giving man. This teacher saw that he barely had the strength to walk into the school. She knew he would not save them and that they would all be left to their fate. But she could do something. She could save one of them. She could save one and watch countless others drown.

She could let the sweet girl whose dream was to save all the stray dogs in the city go down. She could let the rebel, in whose nature it was to question everything, go down. She could let the philosopher, who instinctively knew there was a wrong and a right, go down. She could let all the others, including herself, whose rare dedication and passion as a teacher few had seen or would ever notice, go down in the murky waters of a failed system. But she could save one.

And that was probably as it should be, as the God above, if indeed he was there and indeed watched and cared, may have intended. For the one she would help save was the very one whom she had advised to leave Tangiers and never look back, and the very one Michel Abensour Stirling had asked for in the headmistress's office. She knew this because she, too, had been in the headmistress's office, though none of the gentlemen had noticed her, for the headmistress needed her comforting presence by her side in difficult or trying times.

As Abensour Stirling was about to climb back into his vehicle, she grabbed his arm and, in a low, urgent voice, told him what he needed to know about Aya Dane. He turned slowly to face the small, nondescript woman whom he would never have noticed, but whose determination was a thing of heaven, something akin to the work of angels, and that even he, with his cynicism, could see; and a smile lit his dead eyes.