

NAJAT EL HACHMI

# *from* Mother of Milk and Honey

*Translated from Catalan by Peter Bush*

THEY WERE SEVEN SISTERS, sitting on a patterned raffia rug, around a wooden table. A tray full of narrow glasses in which freshly poured tea bubbled and steamed in front of them. They say: Tell us your story, sister. Tell us everything that happened in all this time you've been so far away. Tell us, dear Fatima, how you managed to reach those foreign parts, how you overcame all the hurdles. Tell us, dear sister, please tell us.

## **A HEAP OF BRIGHTLY COLORED CLOTH ON A DUSTY LANDSCAPE.**

I WILL TELL YOU, sisters, I will tell you what you want to hear. This voice of mine will tell you the facts you don't know about the girl who came out of the same belly as you. Give me tea to warm my tongue, close the door so these words of mine can't leave. They are only for you, who can hear and keep them. And never take them into the outside world, that so likes to judge everything.

I'm sure you remember how my journey began. You all came, you gathered together on the day I departed, the day a dry, sour lump formed in my throat that I couldn't wash down even with cool water from the well. I couldn't swallow a piece of bread, I only wanted water and more water to get rid of the dryness within me. Sisters, how often have we felt that dust in our throats, how often have we pretended it wasn't there.

You all came that day, though it was a real effort. Aisha, your Salim had something wrong with his liver and we thought he wouldn't pull through. We really did. A boy who was the envy of all your neighbors because he was so sturdy and previously had never caught as much as a cold. But people's eyes are horrific. However many lucky charms you'd put on him. He ignored flattery from women for years and then

fell ill, very ill. Poor boy. And look at him now, so tall and strong, may God preserve him.

You Fadma, as you live close to mother's house, you often came to visit, you'd finish your work and be away, headscarf round your head, baby on your back and you'd take the dirt track here, your tightly laced rubber sandals leaving footprints behind you. You never came empty-handed, you always brought a small bundle of food you'd collected from the garden or kitchen. Figs or olives, or bread you'd baked that day. Grandma used to do that too, do you remember? When she came, we all huddled around her and waited impatiently for her to undo the knot to her bundle. Know what, dear Fadma? There's not been a single day when I didn't think of you. The company we gave each other, the things we said on the path to wherever we were going or when we were doing our daily chores. Or even when we were silent, but could hear each other breathing, day and night, when we slept side by side. But all that's now so long ago. When I remembered you in that foreign country, dear sister, I thought perhaps you didn't feel properly loved at times because you only lived around the corner and weren't the one most missed. I can tell you that in these years when I've been so far away you've not been out of my thoughts for a single day. That shouldn't upset the rest of you, but Fadma, mother, Fadira and I were so close.

So you all came and that made it feel like a holiday, one of those amazing days when the seven of us would be back together at home, like when we were small. Well, six really, but Fadira, you've been with us so many years, it's almost as if you were another sister. As I was saying, we felt strange and when you started to arrive, remove your *qubbu* and go and sit in the guests' room, we didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Sometimes we did both at once. We looked at each other, we touched and kissed, tried to put behind us that long stretch of time when we'd not seen one another and recounted the things, big and small, that had happened. You Miluda made a such huge effort to come from Serwan, no easy journey then, you had to rent a car and bring your husband along, who was old. I've always thought of Bel'id as old, with his long, white beard, and wearing a woollen *qubbu* like our father. Miluda, admit he was like that on your wedding day! He was born old. Of course, he wasn't always toothless, was he? I'm joking, love, we all know he treats you like a queen, never raises his voice and always looks you in the face, and that you've never gone without. That's why,

just look at yourself, you're the one who's best preserved her youth and beauty. May God protect you, sister, and your skin that's so white and your face round like a mirror.

You Najima came from Nador with your *abib*, the son of your husband who brought you to our door, you were still on good terms and he looked after you as if you were his mother. Not like now, the ungrateful wretch.

At that time, Malika, you were still unmarried, and were the last of us to find a husband. You were desperate to leave father's house. I'd come back and told you not to be so hasty, that you were lucky not to have married, not to have been forced to live in somebody else's house like us. But you were stubborn, cursing your fate, saying there was no room for you in father's house, that a woman's place is in her husband's house, that we all have to find our own bedrooms. Father never told you to leave. All he wanted was for us to find our place in the world, he didn't throw us out, we'd never been a nuisance. Though he might have been a bit tired of so many women. I'll tell you what your problem was, Malika, you were dying to bed a husband, you cheeky thing. And look at you now, a thoroughly married woman, with your seven bracelets and long earrings. You don't know how sorry I am I wasn't there. I'd so longed for the day when you put henna on.

If my memory serves me, mother got up even earlier on the day of my departure, I found her in the pantry when I went to bake bread. Not today, she said, you don't have to do it today, *I will see to it*. No, mother, I've been kneading bread ever since I was a child, today will be no different, I'll leave the rolls ready for the day's meals. That way you'll think of me, mother, when I'm far away, but that's something I should never have said. Mother, I rued saying that the whole of my journey. I blurted it out, not thinking, I'd wanted to make a joke but when those words echoed around that warm, low ceilinged room you'd made with your own hands, you burst into tears and didn't stop for a long, long time. Forgive me for bringing those tears to your eyes. Your daughters told me you sobbed for weeks until your eyes dried out and a sadness came to your face that has never left you. Poor, poor mother. So here I am, mother, see how I have survived and come back to you all. Do you hear me? Why did I leave? You know all about the ties of the *liver*, love for your children, and must understand only too well what took me from your house and our land. That day I wanted to knead, as if it was an ordinary day, I wanted to celebrate that we were coming together, I wanted to behave as if it were a party.

You arrived early in the morning and there wasn't much room to sit together and we didn't talk as we are talking today, calmly and with plenty of time. It was all hustle and bustle, mother was hard-boiling eggs for the journey, Fadma had brought me freshly cooked *remsem-men* that was still hot, Miluda, little Nurddin on her hip, kept coming in and out of the guests' room trying to keep him amused. It was one big to-and-fro. I was packing my bag, the huge, checkered raffia bag father had brought me from the city, the kind he had used when he worked in the Algarve and Algeria years before.

Before the bread was baked, I had to wrap up the implements, the earthenware kneading bowl, the sieve and iron-plate. They were mine, what I'd salvaged from you know where, the only things I took with me. I put them at the bottom of the bag, under a blanket for protection. Mother, it was you who told me in no uncertain terms that it wasn't a good idea to take all that, it would be very heavy and make the journey difficult. You were quite right, we didn't know if we'd find the right flour there, or if we'd have a big enough fire for the metal tray, we knew nothing about what to expect on the other side. And you all split your sides because I took the yeast with me, a piece of dough to ferment that was wrapped up and had been nurtured over the years. As you'd started using the yeast you bought in the shop the moment they put it on sale, you didn't understand me, though you knew that I didn't like bread baked that way, that I felt it always tasted off. On the other hand, mother's live yeast, what she received from grandmother who had received it from our great-grandmother and countless others before them, left a slightly acidic feel on the tongue, which was the most typical taste of our family I could remember. And I can tell you now, in the midst of that murk, I felt so fortunate to be able to taste bread bonding me to you, to mother, and to grandmother. You said, it will go bad on the journey, or the Customs will take it away. But I ignored you. Something passed down from such ancient times couldn't possibly be ruined simply because we were going abroad.

#### **MOTHER WITH NOTHING.**

FATIMA WAS TERRIFIED when the baby was placed on her front, and her eyes sought out an explanation from the woman who'd helped with the birth. She shouldn't be so tiny, what was wrong, and the woman said she'd been born early, and, not to worry, she'd seen babies

like her before and they'd survived. But she'd need to be looked after carefully. She should put her in a box lined with cotton wool until her body was more like a newly born baby. If she didn't cling to her breast, because she couldn't suck or the nipple was too big, then use a spoon to give her milk. Fatima spent the next few weeks oblivious to herself, completely absorbed by that skinny piece of flesh with its ribs and veins visible under transparent skin that breathed against all the odds. From the start she'd put her to the breast and swaddled her with cloth she tied around her. It was impossible to swaddle her like normal newly born babies so they feel more restful, she would have broken her bones if she'd tried to straighten those arms and legs that were folded over each other. And Fatima was very adept, because she'd had so much practice with her little sisters. First, a rag between the legs, covering up to the navel. Then the first piece of cloth pulled tight around the tiny body, legs straight and arms folded in the form of a cross. Then all the material was wrapped around until the torso was stiff. When she was small, she was very upset by that tightness, the babies couldn't move and she felt they must suffer under so many layers. But Thraithmas told her not to worry, babies felt more at ease that way because when we're born even the air touching our skin is an irritant and, besides, they grew better like that. But not her child who was so small, so obviously fragile, that she kept her on her front while she waited for Mohammed's brother to go and buy the cotton wool and find a box.

Her mother-in-law had wanted to hold the baby but Fatima snapped at her ferociously. She didn't want those fat, witch's hands near her child. Or for her smell to impregnate the baby. Fatima wasn't thinking for herself, it was her body that didn't want to expose the little girl to anything that might harm her. She was reacting exactly like those animals she had watched turn wilder than ever after giving birth to their brood. If she'd been more rational, she'd have let her grandmother hold her own grandchild, but there was no way she was going to do that. Just as she'd not wanted any member of the family to come near; she practically banned them from her bedroom. She said she is so tiny if you give her a cold she'll be gone. Her mother-in-law was really offended and said she didn't see the reason for all those precautions and manias because she was going to die on you any way. Other women give birth to proper babies, while you've produced only a half-made brat. So pray for her, Fatima responded angrily, riling

her even more. Pray for her and don't come out with any more unpleasant remarks. For the moment she is breathing, and that's about all.

Fatima should have felt exhausted after giving birth, after so many hours of labor and bawling, but when the baby girl slipped out from inside her, when she no longer felt such a pain between her legs, she'd felt strangely reinvigorated. She hooked the little one onto her breast and helped the midwife wipe away the messy blood and grunge that had come out of her body, though she didn't know what all that was. She herself had coiled the placenta and wrapped it in a piece of rag. She'd keep it until her mother came; that way she could bury it in a suitable place. She didn't trust her mother- or sisters-in-law to do that. Yamina had said they fed it to the dogs. Fatima had no proof of that, but better not take any chances. If they cursed her through that bit of flesh, she might be left barren forever. When she had the cotton wool and box, she gingerly wrapped the baby's tiny body and placed her inside. She made holes in the lid so she could breathe. From then on all she did was hover by the side of the box. She fed her child with the smallest of spoons, squeezed out her milk and gradually poured it into her mouth, a mouth that was a bluish hole struggling to stay open.

#### **STANDING ON OUR OWN FEET.**

SISTERS, WHAT CAN I SAY, how can I explain things to you? Well, you know, I found jobs right away, especially cleaning the houses of ladies with soft, downy hair whose bedrooms were packed with things and stank of naphthalene. Old people don't smell the same everywhere, I can tell you that there they stink of camphor and the dead skin that falls off their shoulders, those women smell of the products they pour on their heads to make their hair like limp wool. They were sometimes welcoming and pleasant, even affectionate. Others were bad-tempered and shouted at me, but as I didn't understand what they were saying, I wasn't upset, I was just frightened and worried about Sara Sqali who could see how they ordered her mother about, but those old women rescued me from the street and gave me work for short periods, when, and you know how hard I worked, I left their houses cleaned and tidied as they'd never been before. Believe me, they found it hard to trust me, who can ever trust a person they've plucked out of the middle of the street? And dressed so differently to them, skinny and shivering with cold, they must have thought I was a

beggar. And I was a bit of a beggar, but I wasn't asking for charity, I just wanted to show what I could do. You can't imagine how many I went up to on the street, though silently, as I couldn't say what I wanted. In the end, there was one woman, I think the poor dear wasn't quite right in the head, who lived not very far from our basement room, and she was the first to open her door to me. Of course, she opened it so I could do some cleaning, don't think for a minute that she invited me in for a cup of tea. People there aren't accustomed to seeing each other in their homes, they meet in bars or cafés, and have to be very close before they enter each other's houses. You know, we've been there a long time, and I still haven't stepped inside a house if it wasn't to clean. Sara Sqali has, but I never have. I've never been invited in.

But that's neither here nor there, sisters, I can never be grateful enough to those who dared to give me work. I cleaned and cleaned, I tidied like those women had never seen before, they're not as strong as us, sisters, from the expressions on their faces, you could see they'd never seen anything like it. Of course, they know nothing about where we've come from, if they'd seen our lives here, carrying heavy loads, working from very young, mothers who give birth and work, rear and work, get pregnant again and work. Doing chores for those women is a luxury, cleaning is so easy, water streams from the tap, everything is on hand. When I finished, I'd wait all sweaty by the door and they'd totter toward me and hand me a few coins I then took without a word, not knowing if it was a lot or a little. Afterward I discovered it was a pittance, but it was all there was, you see. I couldn't haggle as I didn't have the words and wasn't from there. We foreigners have to conform and everywhere have to accept what no local would ever accept. And those few, short opportunities to clean were the only hope I could cling to. I told myself it made no odds, that I had to put up with that, better times would come, as they got to know me, they'd give me more hours. You bet, that took time, jobs came in dribbles. The old women must have told one another about me and that was how I started to clean more than one house. And it was always with Sara Sqali around my legs, Sara Sqali whose round, wide-open eyes missed nothing.

Our luck changed completely the day a young woman walked into one of those houses. She was on the thin side, a live-wire who never stopped talking at the top of her voice while she moved restlessly. Her spiky blond hair stood out, and her eyes were bluer than I'd ever seen

before, and her tight-fitting jeans clung to her legs as thin as reeds. She started speaking to me the moment she saw me, and to my baby as well, I understood nothing, but she laughed all the time and touched me like none of the old women ever had, a bit like you do, sisters. When I looked into her eyes, I felt distant memories of home. She came back another day and led me by the hand to her car, and made herself understood because, apart from talking nonstop, she made lots of gestures I could understand. I trusted her and she drove me to another street that snaked through the city, across a bridge, and then took me into a big building that stank of skins, a smell even stronger than the river's. I took time to grasp what it was—a tanning factory. There were huge machines making a horrible din where they washed cured skins which a lot of men then moved in small crates they rolled along. The ground was soaked by the liquids leaking from the machines and that was why the men in blue overalls wore knee-length plastic boots and elbow-long gloves. They had to shout over the noise from those big washing machines. We went outside with the blue-eyed woman to a place where piles of skins were drying, some were laid out, with alum, I think, as we do with sheep skins. We climbed metal stairs to the floor above where the people working were women. They were trimming skins and piling them up. A man, who was also blond, with a spiky mustache, came and said hello, laughing a lot, and the blue-eyed woman showed me how to do a job that was clearly less heavy-going than what the men were doing downstairs.

Sisters, that was how I really started to earn my living, because a stranger had taken pity on me and given me a hand. I say this because it's a great truth I've come to understand over all these years: we are nothing without others, nothing without their protection. We are born to be protected, we die to be protected, but we can't survive our entire lives without reaching out to one hand or another. Who'd have thought the hand of a restless, chatty Christian woman would drag me out of poverty. Because I have to say it was one huge change. Though I didn't grasp that until a few days later. At first I went there at the time that woman had pointed to on my watch. Well, that's a manner of speaking, because I didn't own a watch at the start, so I got up very early every morning, you all know I never needed anyone to wake me up, and Sara Sqali and I arrived at the factory gate when it was still pitch black, and they hadn't even opened. I made an early riser of my poor daughter! Later when I had a timepiece and she went to



school, I still took her with me in the early morning, ready for class, hair combed, with her satchel, and me ready for work. All so as not to leave her alone at home.

I couldn't believe it, sisters, when they gave me my first wage packet, so much money in my hands. It wasn't a fortune, I realized soon enough, but after cleaning so many hours for next to nothing, it was a big plus to get a proper week's earnings. I worked that out by the twenty *duros* a baguette cost me then, and I thought that I'd be able to buy a lot of baguettes with my new wage. The first thing I looked for was somewhere to buy flour and a stove to cook on, a stove they used to cook paella in a pan. And a bottle of butane gas. Sisters, you don't know what a difference it made to own those two bits of equipment. When I first lit the stove in the middle of the room with the rusty tap, it suddenly became pleasantly warm around us. We'd been living in the cold so long I couldn't remember when my body didn't feel frozen stiff. Sara Sqali and I wore almost all the clothing we'd brought with us and slept in them, with a blanket wrapped around our bodies that held each other tight. I had collected cardboard from the city's streets, from next to the rubbish containers, and lay it on our floor to keep our bodies off the bitter cold, but even so our hands still shook. We put on two or three scarves so our heads and ears weren't cold, we were like those grubs that turn into a cocoon before changing into butterflies, and every night we went to sleep shivering and thought we might not wake up in the morning, because we'd have been choked by so many layers. But, sisters, when I lit that ring of fire, I sobbed when I felt the heat and felt a bit homely. Mother, it was like feeling you when you hugged me. Of course, I lit it before I started kneading, because if the room wasn't warm, the yeast wouldn't ferment. Besides, my mother of all yeasts, that I'd brought from here had dried out, if it had been you, you'd have thrown it away without a second thought, you'd have said it was useless. It had a hard crust I couldn't crack. But you know me, and how patient I am, and how I struggle like nobody else when I'm convinced I'll get my way. Like when Sara Sqali was so tiny, and everyone took it for granted she wouldn't survive.

I gradually peeled the crust off the ball of yeast, and inside, you won't believe this, was a small lump that was damp and soft. Obviously, it was very little, the smallest lump. But I rescued what I could, mixed it with water and flour and wrapped it in its cloth. I placed it on top of the blanket under which Sara Sqali and I slept. That night, on the ring of

fire in the middle of the room, I baked the sweetest *xarmila* anyone has ever baked. All right, I didn't have any tea, but you can't imagine what it meant to have a room that wasn't just warm but was full of homely smells. Sara Sqali soon fell asleep. I left the burner on and from then on it also became our heater. I wanted to go carefully with the butane, I didn't want to use it up quickly because I didn't know what the future held, whether the factory would keep me on or not, but God took pity on us, and the woman with the spiky blond hair started bringing us bags of things. Especially clothes for Sara, that must have belonged to someone in her own family. She also brought her a pencil case full of colored pencils and marker pens. Sara Sqali still came to work with me because I wouldn't ever leave her alone, and I couldn't have stood being separated from her. But, of course, it wasn't normal for such a tiny tot to be somewhere like that, and afterward I discovered that it was in fact against the country's regulations. You see how well those people treated me. They'd speak to Sara a lot, and, miraculously, she soon began to understand and speak in their language. You could already see she was no ordinary girl but you should have seen how she caught the gist of what they said. I was too old for that and my brain didn't work as quickly as hers, not by a long chalk. One day the blond lady made writing and drawing gestures to her and both of us understood she was saying she must go to school. Sara Sqali looked so enthusiastic but I didn't know what to do. Sisters, I knew nothing about that country, its people or what the schools were like. But I thought that learning business must be the same everywhere, that they couldn't teach anything bad in a school. What's more, sisters, I was beginning to think that our great misfortune as women was our lack of education, that if I'd have known how to read and write, my own position might have been very different. When Sara Sqali grew up, I didn't want her to be at a loss in the world as I was, I wanted her to know about the land she trod, to be able to read a map, and be able to read so nobody could trick her, so she could stand up for herself and not be forced to depend on other people so much, and that was only possible if she went to school. At the time I didn't know it was compulsory to go to school in that country and that you could even go to prison if you didn't enroll your children. What's more, poor Sara Sqali was tired of being around that factory, which wasn't a good place for a little girl to be.

## GLOSSARY

**Abib:** specific name given to the son of a husband or wife.

**Duros, francs, milers:** the people of the Rif normally count in *duros*: a *dirham* is usually two *duros* and coins under a *duro* are *francs*. However, in urban areas the term borrowed from Arab areas is usually used: *milers* (thousands) of *francs* each of which corresponds to ten *dirhams*. People don't tend to count in *dirhams*.

**Henna:** herb that, mixed with water in great quantities, is used to dye hair, hands, and feet on festive days and even to heal injuries or the navels of newly born babies.

**Liver:** in the area where I come from it is the organ where love for children is located.

**Qubbu:** a piece of clothing that is worn over garments when going outside. Men wear the traditional woolen one, as if it were an overcoat, but there are also lighter fabrics that are generally kept for special occasions. Women wear theirs more frequently, as it is what most put on when they go into the street. They come in different materials, colors, and shapes. The word is in Tamazight from the Rif Valley.

**Remsemmem:** dough made with flour, salt, and water glazed with lots of oil or a mixture of oil and butter. It's made by kneading the dough for a long time, which is then flattened out until it is very thin.

**Xarmila:** a dish made by lightly frying onion and tomato; it can also be made with peppers, eggs, and even minced meat. It's a kind of fry-up that is often served, a dish that can be made quickly as it doesn't require so much cooking time as stews, the basic dish cooked in the area.