

# THE INVITATION

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SECOND EDITION

## DISCLAIMER

This novel is a work of fiction. While it draws on dreams, emotions, memories, and inner experiences, the characters, events, and narrative form have been shaped and transformed through the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to real events or places is not intended as direct representation but as part of the universal human experience from which fiction often grows.

## DEDICATION

*To my parents, with all my gratitude and love. To my mother especially, whose life was devoted to her home and her children. She did not continue her studies, yet she carried within her a deep and unwavering hope that all her children would continue theirs and reach what she herself could not. She is a housewife, but that word is too small for all that she has been: the one who cared, who endured, who sacrificed, who kept the home standing, and who gave from herself every day so that we could become more than what life first offered us. Much of what we are is built on her patience, her suffering, and her faith in us. To my father as well, for his hard work, for the burdens he carried, for the ways he tried to keep us safe, and for spending what he had on us so that we could continue our studies and move forward in life.*

*To my brothers, whom I love deeply. As the eldest, I have always felt the responsibility of trying to be an example for them, and I hope that in one way or another I have been able to give them something worthy to follow.*

*To all the people who supported me throughout my education, thank you. Every word of encouragement, every act of help, and every moment of*

*trust became part of the road that led me here.*

*A special thanks to David Nash, my coworker at FCCSC in China, for his kindness, his intelligence, and the inspiration he gave me through his deep relationship with books and knowledge. He is a man of reading, a man whose literary spirit and thoughtful answers left a strong impression on me. Without directly telling me to do so, he inspired me to imagine that one day I too could have a book of my own.*

*A special thanks as well to Abdelhadi Chaouki, a man I met by chance while hitchhiking during my student years, when he kindly picked me up and helped me return home. He was also the person who introduced me to the first book I truly read at a late age, when I was around eighteen years old: *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. That encounter, simple as it may have seemed at the time, opened a door that had long been closed inside me.*

*To my wife, thank you for your support, your patience, and your help in allowing me to express what is often difficult to put into language. Thank you for standing beside me while I searched for words for things that often live only in feeling, memory, and dream.*

*And to my beloved son, Ismael, who is still only one year old. I hope that one day this may become the first novel you read from me. I hope you grow up close to books, close to thought, and close to the world of imagination. I hope reading becomes for you not only a habit but also a source of strength, beauty, and freedom. And above all, I hope you live a life filled with meaning, dignity, and success.*

## PREFACE

*This novel was written in the space where memory, dreams, and inner experience begin to overlap. It does not offer reality in a simple or documentary form. Instead, it moves through the unstable territory where emotional truth sometimes appears more clearly in symbol, reflection, distortion, and dream than in ordinary speech. At its center is not only*

*a sequence of events but also an inward journey. The novel is concerned with what fear does to perception, what shame does to language, and how childhood experience can remain active long after childhood itself has ended. It explores the hidden life of memory: the way certain wounds survive in fragments, in images, in moods, and in recurring forms that the conscious mind cannot always immediately explain. Dreams in this*

*book are not escapes from reality. They are one of the forms through which reality insists on being seen. They conceal, distort, and rearrange, but they also reveal. In that sense, the novel is less interested in the boundary between the real and the unreal than in the pressure they place upon one another. If there is darkness here, it is not for its own sake. It belongs to*

*the effort to approach what is buried, what has been silenced, and what continues to shape a life from underneath. But the novel is not written in devotion to despair. It is written in the belief that what is hidden may still be faced, and that disturbance itself can sometimes be the beginning of recognition.*

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# I

## THE PLACE BEFORE THE DREAM

*The building did not simply stand there; it listened. Old and broad-shouldered, it rose above the street like a tired giant that had spent decades swallowing voices and learning their weight. Its walls were not thin enough to be called weak, yet not thick enough to grant anyone the luxury of privacy. Sound traveled through them in strange fragments, never whole, never clean. A laugh from next door arrived as a short burst, then silence, then another burst. The murmur of a late-night argument came in pulses. The creak of a bed, the slap of a hand against someone's face, a stifled moan, water rushing through a pipe, someone pacing in bare feet across tile, all of it reached the ear as if tapped out through some crude and intimate Morse code that could never truly be translated. The building never gave you the full sentence. It offered pieces, and the mind did the rest. If you were lonely, you heard love behind the walls. If you were bitter, you heard betrayal. If you were restless, you imagined bodies pressed together in the dark, secrets being exchanged, and sudden news arriving that would change a life by morning. And whether deliber-*

*ately or not, the walls made everyone dangerous. You could never be sure what your neighbor knew, because if one day you dared to open a subject, he might answer not with words, but with a detail from your own life, something you thought had remained hidden. He could remind you of what you did yesterday or last week or tell you how loud you were the last time you went to the “Bit er-raha,” literally, in Moroccan usage, the “room of relaxation,” though in plain English it was simply the toilet, and it had never really deserved its gentle name, because there was no true relaxation there, only the worry that someone might hear what should have belonged to silence. In that building, desire, suspicion, and hope did not come from what people knew; they came from what they guessed. And because everyone guessed, everyone also kept quiet.*

*If all this begins to resemble a dream, that is only because some realities arrive already wearing the mask of one. The dream had not yet begun. This was simply where the boy lived.*

*Mornings there did not begin with peace. They began when the vendors finally arrived, not at dawn like honest laborers, but late enough for the sun to already be leaning over the rooftops, around nine or sometimes ten, when the street had begun pretending it was fully awake. You could hear them before you saw them: dragging carts through the road, their voices rough and overworked, calling out prices in tones that sounded less like salesmanship and more like a challenge to the entire neighborhood. “Tomatoes... three dirhams... fresh tomatoes...” Their words did not float upward; they struck the walls and climbed them by force. And there was always something exhausted about them, something swollen and sour about the voice, as if the night had not released them properly. Men who had already spent what they earned, who had left the bars with burning throats and fogged heads, and who now returned to the street because the day demanded money before it offered mercy. Their shouting had the violence of a hangover. It was not just an announcement; it was revenge*

*against sleep, against silence, against anyone still fortunate enough to remain under a blanket.*



*The street was never content to wake slowly. It preferred intrusion. It announced itself by force, as if gentleness were a luxury no one there had ever learned to trust. Even the animals seemed angry to be there. The donkeys and mules hauling the carts moved with the stubborn fury of creatures insulted by the morning itself. Their eyes looked wet with resentment. Their jaws worked slowly, as if chewing on curses they had been carrying since sunrise. Their ears twitched at every shout from*

*the men in front of them, and their steps had the heavy bitterness of old workers dragged back into service before their bodies had forgiven the previous day. Looking at them, you could almost hear their complaint: why wake me for this, why pull me into this noise, why ask me to carry another man's hunger when I have not even been fed my own peace? The street belonged to them as much as it belonged to the vendors, those bitter animals with their patient misery and their faces drawn so tightly with irritation that they seemed on the verge of speaking.*

*At the corner of the street, beneath a small green kiosk faded by heat and dust, sat the guard. He was there so often that he had begun to seem less like a man and more like part of the neighborhood itself, like a post, a shadow, or a fixed point by which the street measured its days. Officially, he was there for safety. In practice, his first duty was simpler and more immediate: the cars. The residence had no real garage, only open spaces between the buildings where residents left their vehicles and then prayed quietly that nothing would happen to them before morning. He watched those cars the way a shepherd watches animals that are not fully his but whose well-being defines his worth. Yet that was only the surface of his work. Unofficially, he was something else, eyes for the authorities, ears for the police, and a memory for the whole block. He knew who had visitors, who fought at night, who was late on rent, who was trying to sell, who was trying to leave, and who had returned quietly after some disaster they did not want named. If the police came asking questions, they came to him first. If someone wanted to buy an apartment, rent a room, or trace the history of a family they did not trust, they ended up at his kiosk too. He was not only a guard; he was the radar of the street, its nervous system, the man through whom information passed before it became rumor and rumor passed before it became truth. Some residents greeted him with warmth, convinced he protected the area through sheer presence. Others lowered their voices when they passed, uncertain whether they were walking by a guardian or a witness they*

*could never fully afford to trust.*

*Nothing in that place was allowed to remain only itself. A guard became a witness. A kiosk became an archive. A passing glance became a form of possession.*

*And above him, behind one of the windows that was always more open than necessary, lived Saida. She had the kind of stillness that did not come from peace but from concentration. She was never loud, never dramatic, never the one calling people over. She did not need to. Her talent was in watching. She leaned into the life of the building without stepping into it, collecting details the way some people collected prayer beads or unpaid debts. She knew who had new furniture before it was fully brought inside, who had a son visiting from abroad, who had started receiving too many phone calls, who had stopped hanging laundry, and who had begun shutting the door too quickly. She knew, too, who had secretly brought a sex worker into the building at night, and she carried that knowledge not like shame but like authority. The next morning, the man who had thought himself unseen would wake to find the building already judging him, the insults and curses reaching him before breakfast, as if the walls themselves had reported his sin. Saida watched with the patience of someone who understood that if you stayed quiet long enough, life would eventually confess itself. Her curiosity was never innocent. It had a fine, quiet hunger to it. Not cruelty exactly, but appetite. She wanted to know not because knowledge helped anyone, but because it made her feel less trapped inside her own walls.*

*Below the buildings there was also what people generously called a garden. In truth, it was mostly soil, that reddish, terracotta color of tired earth that has long since stopped expecting kindness. Grass refused to grow there for two reasons. The first was simple: there was not enough rain, and even less care. The second was more predictable: boys*

were always playing there. To them it was the best place in the residence, the one patch of open ground that could still pretend to belong to movement, shouting, and games. But instead of watering the soil, tending the plants, or accepting that children would remain children no matter what adults built around them, the residents chose another solution. They surrounded the place with a fence so severe it looked less like protection and more like military architecture, as though war were expected and the enemy happened to be boys with footballs. The metal points were sharp enough to tear skin. Many accidents happened there. Children cut themselves, caught their clothes, and bled against those ridiculous defenses. Yet instead of removing the danger, the adults blamed the children for approaching it, as if the wound itself were proof of disobedience.

*The lesson was already there, waiting in metal: what could not be cared for would be fenced, and what was fenced would be defended more fiercely than any child wounded by it.*

There was, however, one place in the residence that resisted the general ugliness, or at least tried to. It stood between the buildings with a quietness that did not belong to the street, a small mosque with two gates, one opening toward the north and the other toward the south, as if it had been placed there not only for prayer but also for passage, for gathering, and for the slow movement of people arriving from different sides of the same tired world. At prayer time, men came toward it from both directions, not in a straight line but like water finding its way after a flood, gathering from corners, alleys, stairways, and shaded entrances, each one carrying something invisible on his shoulders. Some came with worry. Some came with anger. Some came with debts, family noise, jealousy, humiliation, and the private exhaustion of a day that had already defeated them before it was over. Yet the moment they reached the door, something seemed to happen to them. It was not magic exactly, though to the boy it sometimes felt close to it. It was as if an angel stood there, not

visible, not speaking, only filtering people as they entered, removing from them just enough of their burden to allow them to step inside without collapsing under the weight of themselves.

The mosque was the only place where peace seemed to have survived, though even that peace was not clean. It came with consequences. The mind could rest there, yes, but the nose had to pay for it. The carpets, those thick “zerabis” spread across the floor, carried the smell of too many feet, too much dampness, and too little washing. Men came after “wudu” with water still clinging to their skin, their feet wet, their steps leaving behind a humidity that sank slowly into the fabric. Over time the smell became part of the mosque itself, not strong enough to expel anyone but present enough to burn the nose and make the eyes complain. It was a strange arrangement: the soul softened, the body suffered. The boy could sit there and feel his thoughts become quieter, almost slower, while at the same time his face tightened against the smell rising from the floor. It was peace, but peace with a price. A kind of mercy wrapped in old carpet, damp wool, and the stubborn evidence of human bodies.

Still, for him, it remained the softest place in the residence. Not because it was perfect. Nothing there was perfect. Even the mosque had its stories, its small dramas, its tensions between the “imam” and the “muaddin”, its whispers, and its little human storms hidden behind prayer and routine. But those stories did not need to be opened then. What mattered was the atmosphere, that rare suspension of cruelty, that brief agreement among people to lower their voices and stand before something greater than their own misery. Inside, men who outside might curse, bargain, spy, shout, or carry resentment in their faces suddenly became careful with their movements. They removed their shoes. They lowered their eyes. They stood shoulder to shoulder with people they might not greet properly in the street. For a few minutes, at least, the world stopped asking them to defend themselves.

*And then there was the “adhan”. The call to prayer did not sound like the other sounds of the residence. It was not like the vendors shouting with hangovers in their throats, not like the animals dragging carts with insulted eyes, not like the doors being slammed, the arguments leaking through walls, or the cries of children punished behind closed rooms. The “adhan” rose above all that with another intention. It cut through the silence, the sadness, the madness, and the heavy air of the place. It did not erase them, but it interrupted them. It reminded the buildings that sound could still be used for something other than violence. It was a call for peace, a call to return, a call to remember that people were not only bodies moving from hunger to work and from work back to hunger. They were something else too, or at least they had been invited to be. But only a few truly answered. Many heard it and continued as they were. Some delayed. Some ignored it. Some lowered the volume of their lives for a second and then raised it again. The call reached everyone, but not everyone allowed it to enter.*

*After prayer, when the boy stepped back outside, the change could be felt almost physically. Inside, his mind had become slow in a strange and pleasant way, like a person waking from deep sleep without yet remembering the duties waiting for him. It was not exactly happiness. It was closer to that heavy calm that comes after the body has released something it did not know it was holding. His thoughts moved more slowly. The world seemed less sharp. For a short time, even his fear lost its teeth. But the moment he crossed the door and returned to the street, everything came back. It was like being underwater for too long and then suddenly pushing the head above the surface, except in reverse. Inside, he had breathed. Outside, he remembered he was drowning. The problems that had waited politely at the entrance recognized him at once and returned to their places on his shoulders.*

*What confused him most, even as a child, was how much care people*

*gave to the upper parts of mosques. They decorated the ceilings, hung chandeliers, arranged lights, polished what people would see only when they lifted their heads. There was beauty in that, of course, and he understood the intention. When a person raised his eyes in a mosque, perhaps the beauty above was meant to remind him of God, of heaven, of something higher than dust and hunger. But to the boy, another thought always came, quieter and more stubborn. In prayer, the most intimate moment was not when the head rose. It was when it fell. It was when the forehead and the nose touched the ground. That was where the body admitted its smallness. That was where pride broke, if it broke at all. So why did people spend so much effort decorating what was above, while the ground, the very place where the face met worship, carried the smell of damp feet and old fabric? If beauty was needed anywhere, it was there. Not only in the chandeliers. Not only in the lights. Not only in the ceiling that pretended to lift the eyes toward heaven. The ground needed dignity too. The carpet needed cleanliness. The place where a person lowered himself before God should have been the cleanest, softest, most cared-for part of the mosque.*

*Perhaps that was what the mosque taught him without meaning to: even peace, when left in human hands, could become neglected. Even sacred places could carry the smell of carelessness. And yet, despite all of it, despite the burning nose, the tired carpets, the small dramas, and the ordinary weakness of the people who entered and left, that mosque remained the only place in the residence where silence did not feel dangerous. Everywhere else, silence meant someone was listening, hiding, guessing, or waiting. Inside the mosque, silence had another shape. It was not empty. It was held. For a few minutes, the boy could sit inside it and feel that the world had not completely forgotten how to be gentle.*

*That afternoon, the wind was strong enough to unsettle everything. A black plastic bag lifted from the street and took flight, twisting above the*

*buildings in wild, weightless loops. For a few seconds it seemed less like trash and more like a sign, something stubborn, something impossible to pin down. It rose higher, dipped, then surged again, as if mocking the people below. In a place where everyone seemed tied to something, rent, duty, routine, or fear, that cheap black bag was the only thing that looked free. It moved with the recklessness of a creature that had already escaped. Above the narrow streets and tired rooftops, it fluttered like a dark little flag of resistance.*

*From the window, the people below never looked fully alive. They moved, yes, but with the dull, melting slowness of candles nearing the end of their burn. Their faces carried a kind of defeat that could not be explained by one hard day or one hard year. It was older than that. It was something that had settled into their skin over time, softening the edges of ambition, dimming whatever brightness had once lived in their eyes. They walked as though life had taught them to shrink, to take up less space, make less noise, and expect less mercy. Watching them from above felt like watching a city of people who had been slowly dissolving for years and had only just begun to notice.*

*To the boy, this did not yet seem unusual. A child often mistakes atmosphere for nature. He breathes in the sadness of a place for so long that he begins to think it is simply how air is made.*

*And the place from which they were being watched was no less worn than the lives below it. The building was known simply as B100, as if a name made of one letter and three numbers were enough to contain everything it had seen. It stood with the stubborn dignity of something that had survived too much to care about appearances. People said it had once been one of the better buildings in the area. Not luxurious, never that, but respectable. Solid. The kind of place families were proud to move into. And for years the residents tried to preserve that illusion. Every now*

*and then someone would gather support to repaint the walls, repair the entrance, brighten the stairwell, and make it look younger than it truly was. But each attempt seemed to fail in the same way. The fresh paint dulled too quickly. The brightness faded almost immediately, as though the building itself rejected renovation. It was as if B100 had made peace with age and refused every offer of rebirth. It did not want to look new. It wanted to look like what it was: old, watchful, stubborn, and wise in the bitter way only neglected things can become.*

*Reaching apartment 20 was never simple. There was no elevator, no mechanical mercy, only wide, heavy stairs that demanded effort from every leg that climbed them. Around one hundred and twenty of them separated the entrance from the last floor, and because they were broader than normal, each step asked more from the body than it should have. By the time you reached the top, your breathing had changed, and your chest felt as though it had earned the right to exist there. It was the kind of climb that made visitors curse under their breath and made residents carry groceries in silence, pausing halfway without wanting to admit they needed to. Sometimes it felt less like entering an apartment and more like approaching a gate of heaven. The fifth floor was not high in the way towers are high, but in that building, after those stairs, it felt elevated enough to belong to another order of life.*

*He kept climbing anyway. Everyone did. The body learned what the building demanded long before the mind found words for it.*

*The boy had often wondered why his father had chosen the last apartment, the final door at the end of that exhausting climb, B100, apartment 20. Why there? Why the highest point, the farthest corner, the place least forgiving to old knees, tired lungs, or daily routine? As a child, he had thought perhaps his father simply liked punishing himself. Later, he wondered if it had been a kind of ambition, a poor man's version of height,*

*a way of placing the family above something without ever truly escaping it. Maybe his father had believed that by climbing high enough each day, he could leave the weight of the street below, if only for a few hours. Maybe he wanted distance, not from people, but from the life that pressed too closely on them down there. Or perhaps it was something even more private than that: a challenge he had made to himself, a silent refusal to be ordinary, a decision to live where the air was thinner, the noise less direct, and the view wide enough to pretend that suffering belonged mostly to other people.*

*And yet the climb never rewarded effort with peace. The building had its own sarcasm. You gave it your breath, your knees, and your patience, and in return it offered its particular forms of welcome. On one landing, the reward might be the sour smell of stale urine from an apartment where poverty had become too crowded to hide, where a man could not afford clean furniture, fresh clothes, or relief for the children he already had, yet still kept producing more of them because he wanted a son badly enough to gamble with the lives of daughters first. On another landing, the reward might be the heavy air of bad cooking, something burnt, something over-spiced, something that smelled less like nourishment than exhaustion. Or worse, that sharp, choking smoke of things being burned for sorcery, for ritual, for whatever desperate, invisible transaction people believed might tilt fate in their favor. And if smell failed, sound never did. A neighbor cursing his wife. A wife cursing him back. Doors struck harder than necessary. Children crying in the rhythm of houses that had forgotten gentleness. These were the prizes the building gave to those who climbed it faithfully. By the time he reached the apartment door, it often felt as though he had not been lifted above the life below at all, but dragged through its concentrated remains.*

*The question, then, was not only what such a place did to the body. The body learned quickly enough. It learned stairs, smells, noise, heat,*

*humiliation, and the private discipline of passing through other people's lives without appearing to notice too much. But what did such a place do to the mind? What did it arrange there, quietly, day after day, without asking permission? If the walls listened, if neighbors watched, if the guard remembered, if children bled against fences built to protect grass that never truly grew, if peace existed only in a mosque where the soul rested while the nose burned, if every climb demanded breath and returned the concentrated remains of poverty, anger, and neglect, then what kind of inner world could grow inside a child? Perhaps dreams did not come from nowhere. Perhaps they were not merely strange pictures waiting for sleep, but the mind's secret attempt to organize what life had left scattered.*

*And yet even that thought was dangerous, because suffering does not automatically make anyone deep. Misery is not a school that graduates saints. It does not turn every child into a thinker, every wound into wisdom, every poor room into poetry. Some people are broken by it. Some become hard. Some become cruel in exactly the way cruelty was once practiced upon them. Some grow so used to narrowness that they begin to defend it, as if the cage were not a cage but a form of shelter. Others survive by making their desires smaller and smaller until they no longer have to suffer the shame of wanting too much. In places like that, ambition often looked suspicious. Hope looked naïve. To ask for something better could sound almost like an insult to everyone who had already surrendered.*

*Perhaps that was why gratitude there had its own tired sound. People said "Alhamdulillah" often, and there was beauty in that, of course. There was faith in it, patience in it, and sometimes a strength no one could easily measure. To thank God in hardship is not a small thing. It can be one of the highest forms of dignity. But there was another kind of "Alhamdulillah" too, one the boy heard without yet knowing how to*

*name it. It was not always gratitude rising from the sight of goodness. Sometimes it was surrender wearing the clothes of faith. "Alhamdulillah," they said, when the roof did not fall. "Alhamdulillah," when illness was not death. "Alhamdulillah," when the salary was too small but still arrived. "Alhamdulillah," when the beating stopped before something broke. "Alhamdulillah," when life remained difficult but could still be called life. The words were holy, but the habit around them was sometimes wounded. People did not always say them because they had seen mercy clearly. Sometimes they said them because they had forgotten how to ask for anything more.*

*And maybe that was the hidden cruelty of the residence: not only that it made life hard, but that it also taught people to call hardship normal. It trained them to lower their eyes before they had even looked properly at the sky. It taught them to confuse patience with defeat, endurance with silence, and survival with blessing. And still, because human beings are never only what their surroundings make of them, something else could happen there too. A child might take all of it in without understanding it: the building, the vendors, the animals, the kiosk, the guard, Saida at her window, the fenced garden, the mosque, the stairs, the smells, the voices, the watched doors, and the tired faces below. He might carry these things for years before realizing that they had not disappeared. They had only changed form. They had entered the hidden workshop of the mind, where fear becomes image, shame becomes silence, memory becomes symbol, and pain waits for the strange permission of dreams.*

*So perhaps the dream that would come later was not an escape from that world but its consequence. Not a miracle falling from the sky, and not proof that suffering was beautiful, because suffering was not beautiful. It was only suffering. But sometimes, if the heart did not die too early, the mind gathered what the world had broken and began arranging it into a question. Why should children inherit the same fear? Why*

*should another generation learn silence before language, caution before joy, and surrender before hope? Why should a place like this continue producing the same wounded adults, the same tired prayers, the same small lives defended as destiny? Maybe the boy's dream, if it mattered at all, mattered because it refused to let that arrangement remain final. It did not yet know how to save anyone. It did not yet know how to save him. But somewhere inside him, something had begun to resist the idea that this was all life could be.*

*It was from within this world, not from sleep, that the boy's story began.*



## 2

### THE INVITATION ARRIVES

*Inside, the apartment belonged to a different order of life. It was not rich, not luxurious, not free from the pressures that pressed on everything below, but it carried a discipline the building itself did not have. The floors were kept clean enough to catch the light in pale, broken reflections. The tablecloth was straightened. The cushions were returned to their corners. Cups were placed where cups were supposed to be. Curtains were adjusted. Small objects were moved back into position before anyone else had even noticed they had been disturbed. Even the air felt managed, as if the rooms had been persuaded, every morning, to behave better than the world outside them.*

*This was his mother's work. She cleaned with the devotion of someone resisting collapse. With four children, a husband too used to leaving things where they died, and rooms that could fall into disorder in less than an hour, she moved through the apartment like a woman permanently correcting the world. But correction, for her, was not only about*

*cleanliness. It was not simply the fear of dust, or the hatred of disorder, or the need to keep the house respectable in case someone knocked at the door. It was deeper than that. It was almost a philosophy, though she would never have called it one. The world outside could be ugly, careless, loud, and humiliating, but inside these rooms, as much as her hands allowed, things would be placed properly. A cloth would not remain crooked. A stain would not be left to announce defeat. A pillow would not be allowed to collapse in the wrong corner like a tired animal. If life insisted on disorder, she would answer it with arrangement.*

*There was something heroic in that, though the boy did not understand it in those words at the time. To him, she was simply his mother, always awake, always moving, always finding one more thing to fix. But somewhere inside him, long before he could explain it, he felt the force of her refusal. She did not refuse life loudly. She did not stand in the street shouting about injustice. She did not carry a flag or speak like the men whose faces appeared in history books and revolutionary posters. And yet there was resistance in her. A quiet one, domestic and stubborn. If others resisted with slogans, weapons, or speeches, she resisted with water, soap, thread, folded fabric, warm bread, and the repeated act of making a small place beautiful again after it had been ruined by use. She was, in the boy's eyes, not a revolutionary in the way people usually imagined revolutionaries, but she carried something of that same fire. Something like the refusal to surrender. Something like the belief that the world, even if it could not be saved, could at least be corrected in one room, one corner, one table, one morning at a time.*

*She did not only clean. She sewed. She repaired clothes, made curtains, adjusted fabric, measured, cut, folded, and sold small things from home whenever she could. Her hands were never empty for long. They moved between housework and work itself, between cooking and stitching, between washing dishes and preparing pieces of cloth that might*

*bring in a little money. It was not a grand business, not the kind of enterprise people praised in newspapers or spoke about with admiration, but it was real. It belonged to that hidden economy of mothers who turn corners of their homes into workshops, who make money quietly, and who help carry a family without always being named as the ones carrying it. To the boy, this mattered. He saw in her something he rarely saw outside: a person who did not wait for the world to become generous before doing something. She used what she had. A needle. A machine. A piece of fabric. A morning. Her own tired body.*

*And yet the contradiction at the center of her was that she was always tired and still strangely alive inside the work. She complained of exhaustion, of aching legs, of hands that never seemed to rest, and she had the right to complain. Anyone watching her for one full day would have understood that. But there were moments when she seemed almost happy inside the repetition, not because the work was easy and not because life had been kind, but because doing it well gave her back some portion of herself. She wanted things to be beautiful. Not beautiful in the distant, expensive way of houses that never knew dust, but beautiful in the possible way. Clean enough. Warm enough. Straight enough. Prepared enough. A beauty made from effort, not money. A beauty that said, "We are still here, and we have not given up."*

*That was perhaps why disorder angered her so quickly. Her anger did not come from darkness, at least not the kind of darkness the boy felt in others. It came from the pain of seeing something she had protected being touched carelessly. The apartment was not only an apartment. It was a cocoon she kept rebuilding around the family, a soft defense against the building, the stairs, the neighbors, the smells, the shame, and the noise outside. When someone entered that cocoon with dirty shoes, careless hands, a sharp voice, or simple indifference, something in her rose up. She could become sharp then, even difficult, even almost*

*naughty in the child's understanding of her, not cruel, not truly bad, but suddenly burning with the anger of someone whose small protected world had been disturbed. She did not want negativity. That was the strange truth. She hated it so much that sometimes she fought it with a force that looked negative from the outside. She wanted happiness, order, beauty, and peace, and when any of those things were threatened, she defended them as if defending the last clean corner of the earth.*

*The boy did not always understand her. Why not stop? Why not sit down? Why complain about the burden and then reach for it again with your own hands? Why correct a glass that was already almost in place, a chair that was already close enough, or a cloth folded well but not folded her way? But the older he became, the more he understood that she was not correcting objects only. She was correcting the feeling of helplessness itself. She was proving, again and again, that something could still be done. Dirty or not dirty no longer mattered. What mattered was that her eyes had fallen on it, and once they had, she became responsible for it. In that responsibility there was fatigue, yes, but also dignity. Perhaps that was why he resembled her more than he resembled anyone else in the house. Not because he cleaned as she cleaned, or worked as she worked, but because he had inherited the same inability to leave the world alone once he had noticed its disorder.*



*By then, she was already awake, as she always was, moving through the kitchen with the certainty of habit, preparing breakfast while the smell of oil, tea, and warm bread slowly took hold of the apartment. The father had already left for work. He was a teacher, and that fact alone placed the household in a slightly different light from the rest of the building. Not above struggle, never above that, but at least above the raw uncertainty that swallowed so many of the other apartments. The other children were still asleep, folded into beds and blankets with the stubborn devotion of people who trusted sleep more than the day waiting outside them. They were like their father in that way. Sleep received them easily. It took them in, covered them, kept them, and released them only when the morning had already become too loud to ignore.*

*But the boy was not like that. He had inherited something closer to his mother's rhythm, though quieter, stranger, and less obedient. Sleep never held him for long. It was as if a hidden clock had been fixed somewhere inside him, a precise mechanism beyond his control, one that did not care for dreams, tiredness, comfort, or the simple mercy of staying unconscious a little longer. No matter when he slept, it released him after six hours. Midnight, two in the morning, six in the morning, it made no difference.*

*Six hours later, his eyes opened. Not gently, not lazily, not with the softness of someone returning slowly to the world, but with the tired duty of a shopkeeper lifting the metal shutter of his store before the mall itself had opened. It was like one of those small souvenir shops that unlock their doors at seven or eight in the morning, even though everyone knows no customer will come that early to buy a painted plate, a leather wallet, a keychain, or some object pretending to carry the soul of a country. The man opens anyway. He has opened that way for twenty years. Experience has taught him nothing, or perhaps it has taught him exactly this: that the shop must be opened because this is what a shop does. He bends,*

*grips the cold metal shutter, and pulls it upward by hand. At first it rises easily, then it grows heavier, resisting him more with every inch, until his arms begin to burn and, near the end, when effort has almost become refusal, he gives it one final push and lets the whole thing jump into place with a dry metallic crash. That was how the boy's eyes opened. Not because the day had customers waiting. Not because life had come early with promise in its hands. They opened because some inner shopkeeper, obedient to a rule older than desire, had lifted the shutter and declared him available to the world.*

*He did not fight the waking anymore. That part had already defeated him. He simply accepted that his body had its own rules. But what did that mean, for a body to have its own rules? The question had not yet formed in him clearly, not as philosophy, not as something he could explain to another person, but something of it was already moving inside him. Why did his eyes open before he had agreed to open them? Why did his body decide for him? Was this habit, fear, inheritance, discipline, or some strange kind of punishment? Was he awake because he wanted to be awake, or because the body had placed him on a silent autopilot and left the mind to arrive later, confused, late, and already defeated? A child often believes he belongs to himself until the body begins proving otherwise. Hunger comes without permission. Fear rises before thought. The heart runs before danger has been named. Desire appears before the person has decided whether he is allowed to desire. And sleep, which should have been the simplest surrender in the world, became for him one of the first places where he learned that the self was not one thing.*

*For him, sleep was both a blessing and a curse. It was a blessing because the body needed it, because without it the mind began to hallucinate, and he knew that. It began to loosen its grip on reality, to produce shapes, voices, thoughts, and fears that did not fully belong to the room around him. Even the strongest thoughts eventually required darkness,*

*silence, and disappearance. But it was also a curse because he had to fight for it. Sleep did not come to him like something generous. It did not arrive when he closed his eyes and waited politely. It had to be hunted, negotiated with, almost begged. He could lie there for an hour, sometimes two, turning from one side to the other, arranging the blanket, removing it, returning it, listening to the building, listening to his own breathing, entering one thought, escaping into another, imagining futures, repairing old humiliations, inventing conversations that had never happened, answering people who were not there, and returning again and again to the same tired question: why was rest so difficult for a body that clearly needed it?*

*That was the humiliation of it. He did not always want to sleep. Wanting would have made it softer, almost romantic. He needed to sleep. And need has a different taste from desire. Desire can still pretend to be free. Need cannot. Need surrounds a person. It closes the space around him until refusal becomes impossible. When he needed sleep, he felt cornered by his own body, pushed toward a door that would not open quickly enough. He could feel the exhaustion in him, feel the body demanding surrender, and yet the mind remained awake like a guard refusing to leave his post. So he fought for sleep, and the fight itself became another form of wakefulness. The more he wanted to disappear, the more present he became. The more he begged the mind to stop, the more it produced images, voices, memories, and useless questions.*

*And then, after all that struggle, after all that turning, thinking, resisting, pleading, and waiting, sleep would finally come. Not as victory, exactly, but as a sudden disappearance. One moment he was still there, fighting inside himself, and the next he was gone. It should have lasted forever. After such effort, after such hunger for rest, it felt as though the body owed him two days, three days, a long forgiveness in darkness. But no. Six hours. Always six hours. The thing he had fought hardest to*

*reach abandoned him with almost insulting ease. It came late and left early. It made him suffer at the entrance and then expelled him before he had properly rested inside it.*

*Perhaps many things in life were like that. The things a person fights for do not always stay. Sometimes they arrive exhausted, remain briefly, and leave as if they had never understood what it cost to obtain them. And sometimes the things no one fights for remain forever, heavy, stubborn, impossible to remove. Pain can stay. Shame can stay. A careless word can stay. A smell, a room, a slap, a look from someone's eyes can remain for years without being invited. But sleep, peace, joy, tenderness, the things the body and soul need most, can come like visitors with no patience. They enter quietly, sit for a while, and leave before the person has even learned how to thank them.*

*So the boy woke. Always after six hours. The apartment would still be half asleep, the world not yet fully arranged, and his mother already moving through the kitchen as if morning had personally called her by name. He would open his eyes with that strange, mechanical certainty, not rested exactly but released. Or perhaps not released. Perhaps only returned. Returned to the body, returned to the room, returned to the day waiting outside him, returned to the life that had not asked whether he was ready. Somewhere in him lived an old explanation he had once heard in the mosque after "Maghrib" prayer, during one of those small gatherings where a "sheikh" would sit before the people and give a lesson about faith, death, the soul, the unseen, and the things a child could hear without fully understanding but could never completely forget. The "sheikh" had said that when a person slept, his soul went to God, to Allah. It rose from the body, left the heaviness of the room, and traveled toward God, toward Allah, the Lord of all things, perhaps to worship, perhaps to stand where the living could not stand while still awake. As a child, he had not known whether this was metaphor, truth, warning, or comfort.*

*He only kept the image: the body lying still, the soul gone somewhere higher, then returning before morning to enter the body again.*

*But then why did his return always happen so quickly? Why did other souls seem allowed to remain away longer, while his came back after only six hours, as if called down too early, or dismissed, or refused at some invisible gate? The thought was frightening but also strangely logical to him. Maybe his soul went there and was not accepted for long. Maybe it tried to pray and could not complete its prayer. Maybe it arrived too restless, too stained with fear, or too crowded with thoughts, and so it was sent back before it had finished resting in Allah's nearness. Or maybe the soul itself was afraid of staying away from the body, afraid that if it delayed, something would happen below without it. He did not know. He only knew that sleep, which should have felt like being kept by mercy, often felt instead like being returned too soon from a place he had barely entered.*

*He did not yet know that this fight with sleep would follow him for years, changing shape, deepening, becoming part of the hidden war between the life a person wants and the body that carries him through the life he has. At that age, he only knew the fact itself: sleep was necessary, sleep was difficult, and even when he won it, it never stayed long enough.*

*That morning, he sat in front of the computer, and even that object changed the meaning of the room. In that building, a computer did not belong naturally. It looked almost foreign there, like a machine that had crossed borders before it had crossed the doorway of B100, apartment 20. By then, computers were no longer unheard of, but this one carried an older story inside it. It had entered the apartment years earlier, back in the nineties, when owning such a thing in that building was enough to mark a family as different. It was not the result of a local teacher's salary alone, because in Morocco that kind of salary did not stretch far enough to*

*create such luxuries. The computer had come from somewhere else, from another chapter of the father's life, from the years he had spent working in the Middle East, especially in Oman, where money had moved differently and dreams had briefly seemed less impossible. It had survived that journey and settled into the apartment like proof that the family had once stood closer to another world, one wider, brighter, and more forgiving than the one outside their window. That alone had marked the boy differently in the eyes of the neighbors. He had been the first boy in the building to have a computer, and for a place like that, such a thing was enough to create a small mythology around a household. Now the machine was already old, slow, and stubborn, its thick pale body humming softly as though thinking too hard, but to him it was still a privilege, a window, and sometimes a secret country of its own.*

*The room had settled into one of those fragile pockets of stillness that only exist for a few seconds at a time, when the world seems to pause not out of mercy, but out of calculation. The computer screen glowed before him with its pale, stubborn light, and he sat half inside it, half outside himself, his mind caught in the usual unfinished escalators of thought, always lifting him too high or dropping him too low, never leaving him still. Then came the sound. A small notification, almost nothing, and yet sharp enough to divide the moment in two. He looked at the screen. The email was short, almost absurdly simple: "Match today. 4 p.m. Rooftop. Don't be late." At first, he did not feel joy. He felt suspicion. The words remained there, clear and calm, but his mind refused to accept them without resistance. A match? An invitation? Sent to him like something official, almost ceremonial, as if he were someone expected rather than merely tolerated? That was not how these things happened. In the street, football was not organized with messages. Boys drifted down when they heard noise, when they saw movement, or when someone appeared with a ball and enough voice to gather others around him. A game formed itself out of dust, argument, and coincidence. It was never arranged like*

*this. Certainly not for him.*

*And yet the message did not end there. A few moments later, another sound reached him, thinner, harsher, and more metallic. This one came not from the computer but from his phone. It was one of those old phones whose body looked tougher than it really was, a narrow device with the stiff posture of a guard on duty. In his eyes, it always resembled one of those old soldiers standing with a rifle held upright in front of them, not in attack, but in vigilance, the way people in Morocco sometimes described with the name “Hmida Haz Fardi”. It was not elegant, not modern, not fast, but it stood there like a loyal little sentry, receiving whatever the world was willing to send him. He checked it and found the same message again, this time through his number, as if the invitation had decided not merely to reach him but to insist.*

*He leaned closer, reread the words, and felt the old argument begin inside him. He had always believed, in some private and stubborn chamber of himself, that he was better than they thought. Not great, not extraordinary, but better than the laughter that followed him. He had tried every position in those chaotic street matches, each one ending more or less the same way: impatience from the others, muttering, rolled eyes, and that familiar sense that his presence on the field was being endured rather than welcomed. To them he was useful, but not because of talent. He was the owner of the ball. In the unwritten law of the neighborhood, that was enough. If the ball were yours, then your place was guaranteed, no matter how clumsy your feet or how misplaced your confidence. He knew that. They knew that. Everyone knew it. And yet human beings have a strange weakness: when the self is hungry enough, even the smallest temptation can disguise itself as hope. Sometimes it comes like pride. Sometimes like desire. Sometimes like that low whisper inside a person that says, “Maybe this time the rules will bend for you...”*

*He knew that whisper well, though not always under that name. Once, when he had been three or four, he had followed his parents through a supermarket and seen something small and sweet, chocolate, or perhaps some toy-like treat, the kind of object that shines at a child with unnecessary intensity. He had not decided like a thief decides. It was softer than that and therefore more dangerous. A thought had entered him with the innocence of suggestion: take it, put it in your pocket; no one will know. Weakness always arrives that way, not dressed as sin but as possibility. So he had taken it. Then came the cashier, the gate, the crossing into what should have been safety, and then the sudden noise of exposure. A guard stopped him. But instead of speaking plainly to a child, instead of saying, "Give me the chocolate," he chose a crueller method. He said, "Give me that soap in your pocket." The boy had no soap. He looked up, confused, almost offended by the accusation, and for a second the trap became bigger than the act itself. Because to deny having soap was not the same as surrendering stolen sweetness. It was to be pushed into another role entirely: not merely the child who had done wrong but the child who denies, who lies, who stands under suspicion and refuses truth. And the ugliness of it did not end there. The guard was not inventing the accusation at random. He knew very well that if the boy were judged to have stolen from a packaged item, the payment would not be for the single piece hidden in a child's pocket but for the whole pack, four chocolates instead of one. That was how such men made themselves useful: not only by catching but also by enlarging the offense, by turning a child's small act into a fuller transaction, one that could please the management, justify his vigilance, and make him appear as someone doing his job with ruthless precision. Even later, when he thought back on it, what stayed with him was not only the shame of being caught but also the ugliness of the adult's imagination. There are people who do not correct wrongdoing; they deepen it so they can enjoy the shape of guilt more fully. He did not know all that then, of course. He only knew the terror of being looked at as if the thing in his pocket had grown larger*

*than his body could carry.*

*So part of him began immediately searching for another explanation, one kinder, one nobler, one that did not humiliate him. His mind went back to the last time he had played as goalkeeper. He had not wanted the position at first. Standing in goal always felt too exposed, too still, and too blameable. But something had happened that day. A few saves, a few moments where the body reacted faster than thought, and for the first time he had seen in the others' faces not approval exactly but hesitation, a pause, a reconsideration. It had not lasted long, yet it had lasted enough. Maybe that was it. Maybe someone had remembered. Maybe in that narrow, ridiculous opening, a small potential had been seen. The thought embarrassed him even as it tempted him. Hope often does that. It enters wearing a mask of logic, pretending to be reasonable, while underneath it is still the same dangerous hunger: the wish to be chosen.*

*But memory did not come alone. It dragged pain with it. Every time he played, something happened. A twisted ankle. A knee opened on concrete. A foot stamped hard enough to make him limp for days. The last injury had left him unable to walk properly for nearly a week, each step a reminder that joy in places like that was rarely allowed to arrive without punishment. So the argument inside him deepened. Was this an opportunity or another trap? Was he being called because he had improved, or because humiliation had simply found a more elegant method? The conflict was larger than football. It belonged to the old human dilemma itself: how often a person is forced to choose between the safety of what he already knows and the dangerous possibility that, this time, life might be offering something real. Most people do not fail because they never dream. They fail because they have been taught to distrust the hand that reaches toward them, especially when it reaches too late, too suddenly, or too politely.*

*He stayed there for a long moment, staring at the message as if it might confess its true intention if he looked hard enough. Then, little by little, he gave in, not completely, not innocently, but enough. Enough to let desire overtake caution. Enough to decide that even if it ended badly, he would rather be wounded by possibility than protected by refusal. There are moments when a person accepts a challenge not because he believes in success, but because turning away would be a worse kind of defeat. He rose from the chair and went to the kitchen to tell his mother. She turned before he even finished speaking, as though some part of her had already heard trouble approaching. He told her about the match, about the invitation, about four o'clock on the rooftop, and though her face remained mostly still, he recognized immediately the shadow that crossed it. A mother does not need facts to understand danger. She builds her knowledge from patterns, bruises, unfinished stories, and the tone in which a son says he has been chosen. She knew his history with those games. She knew the injuries, the way he returned limping, angry, pretending things had gone better than they had. She knew the softness in him that the street never forgave. And perhaps she knew something even deeper: that the cruelest moments in a life are not always the ones where the world rejects you openly, but the ones where it invites you just enough to make rejection feel like your own mistake. Still, she did not forbid him. That was where the harder battle lived. Nature may warn, but love often betrays nature for the sake of hope. She could have told him no. She could have laughed at the email, dismissed it, protected him with refusal. But mothers, perhaps more than anyone, are made vulnerable by the same contradiction that governs the rest of us: they see the danger clearly, yet some part of them still wants the child to be the exception. Even when experience says otherwise, love whispers that maybe this time it will be different. Maybe this time the world will be less cruel than it has already shown itself to be. So she looked at him with that tired, complicated expression mothers wear when they are arguing against their own instincts, and in the end she gave him the only permission that*

THE INVITATION ARRIVES

*matters in houses like that, not full trust, not full approval, but silence heavy enough to be taken as consent.*



# 3

## THE FIRST FRACTURE

*Long before the match began, he had already started playing it in his mind. Once the invitation had been accepted, it refused to remain a simple message on a screen. It expanded inside him, grew limbs, and filled the empty rooms of expectation until it no longer felt like a neighborhood game waiting on a rooftop but something larger, something with ceremony and consequence. He prepared himself with the seriousness of someone walking toward destiny, as if the afternoon did not lead to a makeshift football match but to the final of a tournament history had been quietly saving for him. In his mind, he was no longer the awkward boy reluctantly tolerated because the ball belonged to him. He was transformed. He saw himself diving with impossible grace, fingertips brushing away shots that should have gone in, rising from the ground while everyone stared in disbelief. He saw himself catching the ball cleanly in midair and heard the collective gasp, then the applause, first hesitant, then unavoidable. He borrowed movements from players he had watched on television so many times they no longer felt borrowed at*

*all. He imagined himself carrying their calm, their timing, their impossible certainty. A goalkeeper's save, a defender's last-minute intervention, a player controlling chaos with one touch, he wore all of it in his thoughts as if skill could be built from repetition of desire. It did not matter that the field was only a rooftop, that the goals would be crooked, that the ground itself would be hard, uneven, and unworthy of fantasy. Imagination has never cared for the size of the stage. It only asks for an opening and then decorates the rest.*

*For a boy like him, imagination was never a luxury. It was rehearsal, refuge, compensation, and, at times, the only place where life arrived in a form generous enough to bear.*

*And the truth was that he had become very good at that kind of decoration. Better at it, perhaps, than at most things that required the body to keep its promises. His mind had long ago learned to continue what life left unfinished. Before sleep, especially, it became its own workshop, its own theater, its own small emergency room for damaged days. There, in the private dark behind his eyes, he could solve what had gone wrong, repair what reality had refused to repair, and return to scenes that had humiliated him just to rewrite them with better timing and sharper words. He could imagine himself speaking properly at last, defending himself at last, stepping closer to a girl he thought he liked without the usual collapse of courage, or living some future life in Europe, in a city wide enough to forgive him, with work, or study, or simply a version of himself that moved through the world without apology.*

*It was one of the quiet talents by which he survived himself: to return inwardly to what had wounded him and make it obey a kinder logic.*

*At other times, his imagination took stranger roads. He could spend half an hour wondering how sleep itself functioned, as though, if he understood the mechanism properly, he might one day invent a button*

*for it and spare himself the nightly struggle. Because sleep never came to him like mercy. For him, it had to be lured, negotiated with, and waited for. Half an hour if he were lucky. An hour, an hour and a half, sometimes two. By the time the rest arrived, his mind had often already lived another life. In that sense, he was dreaming long before he slept. That was both his gift and his ridicule. If he had been harsher with himself, and he often was, he might have said that he was a specialist in useless greatness, a champion of imaginary victories, a boy capable of becoming magnificent in every world except the one that actually demanded proof. Yet even in mocking himself, he could not deny the strange skill involved. Some children simply fell asleep. He rehearsed existence until unconsciousness interrupted him.*

*And perhaps that was why the invitation had seized him so quickly. It had arrived not only as an event but also as an opening between the life he lived and the life he was always secretly preparing to enter.*

*As the hour drew nearer, he became more alert to the sounds above him. Living directly beneath the rooftop meant that the world over his head was never entirely hidden. Every movement there arrived through the ceiling in fragments, muted, indirect, yet strangely intimate, as if the building wanted him to remain aware that life could always be happening just beyond his reach. That afternoon the footsteps were unmistakable. There were bursts of quick movement, then slower drags, then the grinding sound of something being pulled across concrete. It was enough. People were there. The match was becoming real.*

*The imagination that had filled the afternoon now found confirmation in sound. What had lived in expectation began, at last, to knock from above.*

*To reach the rooftop, he had to climb the final short flight of stairs that led to two black metal gates, one to the left and one to the right, both*

*painted in a darkness that had always unsettled him. He had never understood why the doors leading upward, toward open air and sky, should be painted black, as if the person who chose the color had mistaken height for punishment. There was something deeply wrong about it, as though whoever had painted them had looked at the rooftop and seen not a place closer to heaven but an entrance to something heavier and more forbidding. Even the lock on one of them felt wrong, installed upside down for no reason anyone could explain, forcing the key to enter the same way, awkwardly, against instinct, like a bad joke left behind by some worker who had either been drunk or simply careless, or else seized by the ambition to invent a new philosophy of locking doors, as if an ordinary key were too simple and needed to pass through some private maze before earning the right to turn. Many times he had stood there struggling with it, annoyed by the crooked logic of its existence, wondering how a man could complete such a simple task so badly and then walk away satisfied. It reminded him of the kind of bitter saying people invent after too much disappointment: that some men can take simplicity itself and turn it into disability. Earlier that day he had imagined having to fight with it again, turning the key the wrong way before remembering the right way, forcing rusted metal to obey. But then he heard the footsteps and remembered that people were already up there. Today he would not need the key. Today the gate would already be open.*

*The last steps were not many, perhaps twenty at most, but he climbed them with a pleasure far out of proportion to their number. There was something almost ceremonial in those few moments, as if he were ascending toward recognition rather than merely reaching a shared rooftop. Each step felt lighter than it should have, his body moving with the strange joy of someone who believes he is being admitted into a scene from which he has long been excluded. For those few seconds, he was not the boy waiting below things. He was the one emerging into them. When he finally stepped through, the first thing he saw was proof that*

*the place had been prepared. Holes had already been dug into the rooftop surface, rough openings waiting to hold the posts of the goals. The sight gave him both relief and unease. Relief, because the field was clearly being made ready. Unease, because the rooftop did not seem like a place meant to be dug into. He wondered if the neighbors would complain later, if someone downstairs would hear about the damage and turn it into one more argument spreading from door to door. What struck him even more, however, was the silence. Normally, this kind of activity would have drawn people immediately: children leaning in, curious residents stepping out, somebody asking questions, someone shouting a warning, and some old woman appearing from nowhere to demand an explanation. Yet the rooftop felt oddly calm. There were only a few boys gathered at the edges, standing in corners, speaking among themselves in low voices. Not enough for a match, not yet, but enough to convince him that the scene was forming. Enough to reassure him that he had not imagined it.*

*Satisfied, he went back downstairs to tell his mother that the others were already there. He asked for a bottle of water, speaking with the barely controlled urgency of someone afraid that events might move without him. Then he climbed again, not slowly this time but with the speed of excitement, carrying with him the quiet certainty that the next thing he would see would simply be more of the same.*

*But some places do not remain stable once desire has entered them.*

*When he stepped through the gate and emerged onto the rooftop a second time, the world had shifted. The gate was still open. The holes were still there. The sky was still above him. And yet there was no one. No boys in the corners, no low voices, no dragging footsteps, no movement of bodies preparing for play. The emptiness was so complete that for a moment it seemed theatrical, like a stage abandoned too quickly after rehearsal. He*

*stood still, then moved, then stopped again. His eyes ran from one end of the rooftop to the other, searching each corner, each shadow near the low walls, each open stretch of concrete. Nothing. He walked closer to the fence that bordered the edge, then turned back again, trying to make sense of it. How could they vanish so completely in the short time it had taken him to go down, speak to his mother, and return? His mind rejected the emptiness before it accepted it. There must be an explanation. He had missed something. They were hiding, perhaps. They had moved to the other side. They were carrying things. They had gone briefly downstairs. But none of those explanations held long enough to settle him.*

*Then he heard a voice from the eastern side of the rooftop, the side he liked most, the one that opened toward the wider street and gave him a deeper view of the neighborhood below. He moved toward it quickly and leaned over the fence. And there they were. The same people. The same arrangement. The same sense of preparation. The field, the movement, the gathering bodies, and the half-formed promise of the match. Only now it was all on the street below, five floors down, on the main road where it had not been moments before. For a few seconds, he simply stared, unable to understand what he was seeing. The distance between what he had left and what he now saw was too large to be bridged by ordinary thought. He had gone downstairs for water, nothing more. He had not been gone long enough for a group of boys to move an entire game from rooftop to street, let alone recreate the same unfinished scene in another place. The holes on the roof remained behind him like an accusation. The field below glimmered with impossible familiarity.*

*This was the first true fracture: not fear yet, not even belief, but the moment when the world stopped agreeing with itself.*

*Something was wrong. That was the first clear thought. Something had slipped, and whether it was the world or his own mind, he could not*

*tell. The invitation itself began to darken in his memory. Was this how they played with him now? Had the message been a joke after all, a more elaborate cruelty than the usual laughter? Or was he losing his grip on something simple, something ordinary, turning it into confusion because the desire to be included had made him easy to deceive? The questions multiplied too quickly to answer, and beneath them all there remained the one force stronger than doubt: he still wanted to follow.*

*He went back down to his mother with the lie already forming in him, not because he believed it, but because he needed it. By the time his feet found the lower steps, he had already decided that the match had simply changed places, that the boys had moved from the rooftop to the street, that everything still belonged to the ordinary logic of an afternoon game. It was easier to say that than to speak the truth as he had experienced it. He knew his mother too well. Her acceptance had already been fragile, already burdened with suspicion, and he could feel, with the painful precision children sometimes have, that she had only let him go by forcing herself not to think too deeply about what could happen. He did not want to confirm her fears. He did not want to place his confusion into her hands and watch it harden into refusal. So when he reached her, he told her that the boys had changed the place and decided to play downstairs instead.*

*A child's first instinct is not always truth. Sometimes it is preservation: of permission, of hope, of the fragile path between desire and prohibition.*

*Even as he said it, he knew it was a lie. More than that, he knew she might hear the lie inside it. But something in her response disturbed him even more. She did not look surprised. She did not ask why. Her answer came with a strange simplicity, as though she had already settled the matter in her own mind: yes, people were outside. Not above. Outside.*

*And that small difference lodged itself in him like a splinter. Had she heard voices from the street all along? Had he been the only one who heard footsteps above his head, the scraping on the rooftop, the signs of a game forming over him? The thought came and stayed. For the first time, he began to wonder whether the invitation had opened something only he could see, or whether something in him had begun to open on its own.*

*Still, the lie worked well enough to let him move. He grabbed at the decision the way a drowning person grabs at driftwood, not because it is safe, but because it floats. Then he went down again, faster this time, the urgency in him no longer clean excitement but something mixed, unstable, dangerous. He descended with the kind of reckless speed only familiarity allows. Those stairs had trained his body for years. He knew exactly how to throw himself forward without falling, how to skip three, four steps at once, how to let momentum carry him without surrendering to it. Another boy might have broken an ankle trying it; he moved through them almost like water down a cracked wall. Yet even inside that speed, doubt kept pace with him. He told himself he was only late. He told himself the boys were waiting. He told himself that the strange shift from rooftop to street had an explanation he would understand the moment he arrived. But beneath all of that ran a darker question, quieter and harder to silence: was the confusion outside him, or had it already entered his mind?*

*When he reached the street, what he found was not delay, not movement, not even disappointment in the ordinary sense. He found absence. The same kind of disappearance that had swallowed the rooftop had now swallowed the street. What he had seen from above, people gathering, shapes moving, and the field taking form, had vanished so completely that it felt less like a change and more like a blurring, as though the world around the subject had been softened on purpose so the eye could no longer escape what truly mattered. Even the usual life of the road*

*had thinned out into something unnatural. There were no clusters of children, no men pausing to talk, no passing cars cutting through the neighborhood noise, no interruptions by chance or routine. The space looked emptied of intention. It was not the peace of a quiet street; it was the stillness of something withheld. Because he was standing inside it now, he could no longer see it the way he had from above. The outline that had looked so clear from the rooftop would not reveal itself at ground level. The field he thought he had traced with his eyes from the fifth floor was nowhere to be found. The whole place seemed to have withdrawn beyond the limit of ordinary sight. It felt like those dreams where you know a figure is standing before you, know it is a person, know it is looking back, but cannot say what face it wears, what color clothes it has, or even whether it belongs to memory or invention. The street had that same unfinished quality, as though reality itself had been roughly sketched and then abandoned before the details were filled in.*

*For the second time that day, the world seemed to offer him a scene and then remove its meaning.*

*He stood there for a moment, breathing the emptiness. The sky above seemed stripped of character, bare in a way that made even the light look uncertain. There were no clouds with shape, no birds, and no signs. Everything had the washed-out vacancy of a world waiting for something unnamed to begin. Judgment day, he thought suddenly, though not in the dramatic sense people spoke of in stories but in the quieter, more terrible sense of a moment after departure, when everyone else has been called elsewhere and only you remain to notice the silence. Yet even then, standing in that wrong stillness, he did not fully surrender to fear. What held him in place was something more complicated: the last stubborn fragment of hope, still fighting to explain what his eyes could not trust. Maybe they had moved again. Maybe he had come down too fast and chosen the wrong side of the building. Maybe he was exaggerating.*

*Maybe his own hunger to be included had made him see patterns where there were none. But the more he tried to reason with it, the less the world resembled reason.*

*He did not know it then, but perhaps this was not only something that had happened to him. Perhaps it was one of the secret illnesses of that residence, one of those things people lived with every day without ever finding the exact word for it. In that place, good things often appeared before they were possessed. A possibility could show itself from far away, clear enough to make the heart move toward it, then disappear the moment a person came close. People there knew this in their own tired way. They knew it in jobs almost obtained, in papers almost accepted, in apartments almost bought, in journeys almost taken, in sons almost saved from becoming their fathers, in marriages almost peaceful, and in lives that almost changed before returning to the same corridor, the same stairs, the same smell, the same old sentence: "Alhamdulillah," at least it is not worse. Hope did not always arrive there as a road. Sometimes it arrived as a trick of light.*

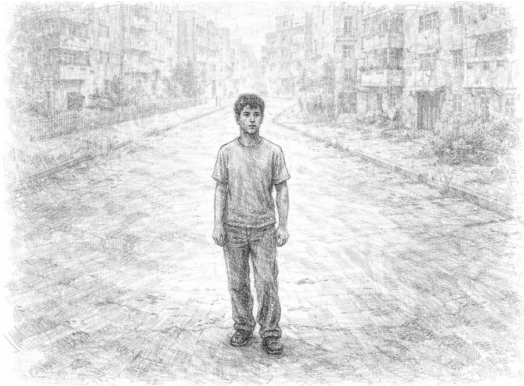
*Maybe that was what lack did to people. Not hunger alone, not the hunger of the stomach, but the longer hunger of the soul. When a person is thirsty enough, even the desert begins to offer water. From far away, the surface shines. The eyes believe first, then the body follows. The feet move faster. The mouth prepares itself for relief. The whole person leans toward the promise. But when he reaches the place where the water should have been, he finds only sand, heat, and the cruelty of his own need reflected back at him. It was not madness exactly. It was the imagination of thirst. And in that residence, thirst had many forms. Some thirsted for money. Some for tenderness. Some for dignity. Some for the warmth of another body. Some for escape. Some for a father who did not frighten them. Some for a mother who could rest. Some only for one day that did not resemble the day before it.*

*For the boy, the match had become that kind of water. From above, it had looked real enough to follow. Boys gathering. A field forming. A game waiting. The possibility of being expected somewhere. The possibility that his name, his body, his awkwardness, his hope, might finally have a place among others. It was not only football anymore. It was recognition wearing the clothes of football. It was belonging disguised as a match. So he had followed it. He had moved toward it with the faith of someone who had seen water in the distance and refused to believe that the world could be cruel enough to invent water only to remove it.*

*Then he came down, and the water withdrew. The street offered him only its emptiness. Nothing remained of the scene except the thirst that had made him believe in it. He was too young to understand this. He did not yet have words like “mirage,” “deprivation,” “longing,” or the hallucination of hope. He only stood there, breathing the wrong silence, trying to understand where the match had gone and why the world had shown it to him if it did not intend to let him enter it. That was perhaps the first cruelty of hope: not that it failed, but that before failing, it allowed itself to be seen.*

*And still, because desire often survives long after logic has failed, he did not stop looking.*

THE FIRST FRACTURE



# 4

## THE FIRST WOUND

*He was still standing there, facing the emptied street as though it might confess something if he stared at it long enough, when movement entered the corner of his vision. It came from the left side, from the direction of the green kiosk and the neighboring entrance beyond it, the one that faced the main street and was usually struck first and hardest by the sun. That side of the building was not meant for darkness. Light lived there almost all day, pressing itself against the walls, flattening every crack, exposing every stain, and making even the ugliest surfaces impossible to hide. And yet, in that moment, something about it still felt dimmer than it should have, as if the brightness had thinned without disappearing, leaving behind a pale, uneasy glare instead of real daylight. At first he thought it was only another trick of the eye, another fragment of this strange afternoon trying to rearrange itself before him. But then the shape became clearer. A child emerged from the entrance, small and completely naked, no more than four or five years old, his thin body dusted with the pale dirt of the street. There was something wrong in*

*the way he moved. One second he seemed to be crying, his face twisted in pain, his chest trembling as though grief were rising through him faster than breath. The next second he was laughing, not with joy but with the loose, cracked laughter of someone too young to understand that terror and amusement were not meant to live inside the same mouth. He walked toward him in short, uncertain steps, neither stumbling nor steady, as if being pulled by something he himself could not see. For a moment the older boy thought he would stop, would ask something, would pass close enough for the whole thing to return to the ordinary language of the street. Instead, the child kept coming until there was no distance left at all, and then, with the smooth impossibility of dream logic, he passed through him. Not into him like a collision, not against him like a body, but through him, as if his chest were no thicker than smoke. The sensation lasted less than a second, yet it carried a cold so private, so interior, that it felt less like contact and more like being entered by memory itself. By the time he turned, the child was already behind him, still half-laughing, half-crying, and moving away as if nothing had happened.*

*That was when the past opened. Not gently, not in the soft shape ordinary memory takes when it returns in pieces, but all at once, with the force of something long locked away deciding it no longer cared about permission. The pale street receded. The kiosk, the empty sky, and the uneasy light around him all withdrew, and in their place came another room, another silence, and another fear. He could not remember what his brother had done. That part had been swallowed by time. Childhood often loses the reason and keeps only the wound. But he remembered the structure of it, the order, the method. Their father taking the children one by one, as though punishment were a task to be completed properly, with sequence and patience. He remembered his own turn being over, his skin still alive with the aftertaste of pain, when his brother was taken into the next room. Their father closed the door behind them, and though the boy*

*outside could see nothing, he understood immediately what was about to happen.*

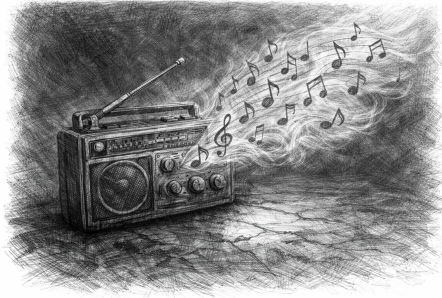
*The first strike announced itself through the cry that followed it. His brother screamed at once, and even then, even as children, they understood things without needing them explained. Pain was one thing. A cry was another. A cry was a strategy. In a place where walls carried fragments of life in all directions, a loud enough cry might save you. It might slip through the cracks, reach a neighbor, stir some woman in her kitchen, pull someone to a door, or bring knuckles against wood. It was possible. Not likely, but possible. So his brother cried as loudly as he could, louder than pain alone required, stretching his voice outward as though it could force itself through concrete and into the ears of people hiding behind their own routines. The father understood that at once. He was not the kind of man who simply punished. He was the kind who calculated. Cruelty, in him, rarely arrived empty-handed. It came with method, with adjustment, with a quick intelligence that understood how suffering must be arranged if it was to remain private. So he brought in the radio, the old machine with its two speakers, harmless in appearance, almost ridiculous in its domestic innocence, and he turned it on loudly enough to cover the child's cries.*

*The song that came through it belonged to a famous singer, one of those women whose voice seemed to arrive already polished, already impossible to resist, carrying brightness and rhythm into whatever room received it. The boy had loved her then in the uncomplicated, distant way boys love women they can never reach. He loved the energy in her voice, the grace of her movements, and the way she seemed to belong to another order of beauty untouched by time or ordinary fatigue. To him she had looked like one of those rare beings who enter the world already complete and somehow remain that way. And yet from that day onward, one of her songs became tied to something it had never*

chosen. Not ruined exactly. Something worse. Bound. Years later, when that rhythm returned from some radio, some passing car, some wedding, something beneath language tightened inside him before thought had time to explain itself. Because how could he account for the precision of that convergence? The singer somewhere far away, the writing of the song, the recording of it, the machinery that carried it from one world into another, the station that played it, the hour in which it was broadcast, the room in which it arrived, the exact moment when his brother's voice needed to be heard, and the world instead received music. It felt too exact to be called an accident. Too cruelly timed. Much later he would encounter words that circled this feeling without fully containing it. Some would say "maktub", as though writing and fate were the same thing. But later still he would understand that in the language already waiting inside him, the deeper word was "qadr", that unbearable arrangement by which separate things, innocent on their own, meet at one exact point in time and become destiny. The singer had not chosen that room, the radio had not chosen that child, and the child had not chosen the belt, yet all of them met there anyway, and once they had met, they could never be untangled.

What remained ugliest in the memory was not only the beating itself but also the unbearable harmony between the music and the violence. The belt fell, the cry rose, the radio covered it, and the rhythm continued. For a few moments the two sounds fit together so perfectly that the world itself seemed complicit. That was the horror of it: not simply that cruelty existed, but that life around it continued without interruption, even in rhythm with it. If the neighbors heard anything at all, they probably heard only a song, maybe children making noise, or maybe another ordinary domestic storm too common to disturb anyone's tea. And even if some guessed the truth, would they have come to help? Perhaps. But perhaps not. In buildings like that, pity and curiosity often dressed themselves in the same clothes. A knock on the door could mean intervention,

*yes, but just as often it meant hunger for a reason, for a story, for the details of another family's pain to be carried home and compared against one's own. That was the genius of the father's act. He did not only silence the child; he gave the building something more acceptable to hear.*



*Another memory rose after that, less dramatic in sound but no less decisive in what it taught. The boy had just finished showering. His hair was still wet, his skin still carrying the heat of water, and like many children who grow up with weak walls, open windows, and constant warnings about catching a cold, he had already linked air with illness. If the window stayed open too long, if the wet hair remained exposed, if the draft crossed the room the wrong way, then sneezing, coughing, fever, and blame would follow. That afternoon his aunt and her children had come to visit, and because the apartment was made of too few rooms for too many people, every space had become occupied at once. The bedrooms were crowded. The corridors were useless. Only the “salon” remained, that sacred room of many Arab homes, the room kept the cleanest, the room where prayers might be said, where guests sat, and where the dignity of the household was supposed to reveal itself most clearly. His mother guarded that room with a special seriousness. It was never just a room. It was the face of the house.*

*His aunt was not there when he first entered. She was somewhere else in the apartment, in the kitchen or moving through one of the other crowded rooms, while he had taken the “salon” for himself for a brief and precious moment. He lay there stretched out, fresh from the shower, letting his body enjoy what little comfort it could find, the warmth of the water still clinging to his skin and the soft heaviness that comes after a cozy wash. The window was open. He closed it. For him the logic was simple: wet hair, evening air, and a draft strong enough to slip through the room meant cold, sneezing, and later blame. He wanted only stillness, a little protection, and a little time for his body to dry in peace. Then the aunt entered. She noticed the closed window almost at once and opened it again. At first it was almost nothing, one of those tiny domestic disagreements that should have died in a sentence. But she had the authority of the guest, and guests in such houses were not merely welcomed; they were protected by custom, raised above ordinary contradiction, and wrapped in a respect that could become almost tyrannical. He respected that too. He had already learned the importance of visitors, of “adab”, of not exposing the house through rude behavior. But even as a child, he felt one limit clearly: hospitality should not cost him his own body. So he closed the window again. She began to cough theatrically, the kind of cough that makes itself larger than the throat that produces it, as if the room without the draft were already becoming unlivable. She opened it once more. He argued. She insisted. The argument, childish at first, hardened into principle. The father, sitting in his room, heard the disturbance and sent the mother to see what was happening. The boy explained himself quickly, even passionately, borrowing a logic he had picked up from the world outside the home. He cited a rule he had once read on a bus: in case of disagreement between passengers, the one who wants the window closed has priority. To him the point was obvious. He was wet. He would get cold. The window could remain open later. His aunt, if she needed air so badly, could have it once he left. But in a place ruled less by logic than by hierarchy, the right argument was never enough.*

*He held his ground anyway. That was the part that would cost him. He did not yet understand that in some homes persistence itself is treated as disobedience. He thought he was defending his health. He thought an explanation might still matter. He thought there remained some small court inside the family where reason could win. But by then the father had heard enough, or perhaps only heard the wrong thing: the continued voice of a child not yet silenced. He called for him. Not with curiosity. Not to ask what had happened. It was the kind of summons reserved for the already condemned, the way a guard might order a prisoner forward not so that truth could be heard, but so punishment could begin in the correct place. The boy came. The father asked, with the impatience of a man for whom obedience matters more than understanding, whether he still intended to continue talking. The boy tried to answer, tried to explain, but the first word had not yet fully left his mouth before the slap arrived. Then another. Then another. It felt less like being hit by one hand than like being struck from several directions at once, as though each slap had its own epicenter and the whole room were trembling around them. After the first few, speech no longer came properly. If anything emerged, it emerged shaking, broken, mixed with pain, shame, mucus, the choking taste of interrupted breathing, and the humiliating sounds of a child trying to remain human while being reduced to the noises of an injured animal. That was when he learned another law: not only that he could be wrong, but that he could lose the right to speak before the world had even decided whether he was right.*

*And yet, even saying “the father” was never simple. What he did had not risen from nowhere. It had roots, and those roots were old enough to carry their own horror. If the boy were to describe that man now, years later, he would struggle to reconcile the memory with the person who remained. Today, that father could seem like the gentlest man in the world, subdued almost to disappearance, a figure so soft in voice and manner that anyone meeting him fresh would find the old stories*

*impossible to believe. There had come a point in his life when he nearly stopped using his voice altogether, speaking so little and so weakly that the family feared he was losing it, feared his vocal cords were failing, and feared disease had taken the place where authority once lived. Only after the children took him to the hospital did they learn there was nothing physically wrong with him. He simply had to speak. The silence had become its own illness. Something in him had folded inward, whether out of shame, age, memory, or the long afterlife of all he had been. And somewhere between the father he had been and the father he became, there had been an accident, a turning so severe it broke the line of his life into before and after. But that was another story, one too large to open fully here. To understand the father completely would require a book of his own, and perhaps one day it would have to be written.*

*What mattered for now was simpler and darker. Monsters are not always born from will. Sometimes they are trained into being. The violence that lived in that father had not been invented by him; it had been handed down, practiced upon him until it settled under his skin like a second nervous system. His own parents had raised him inside brutality. His mother, especially, had not merely beaten him; she had marked him. Fire-heated forks, knives, and whatever metal could be turned into a lesson, these had touched his body for reasons so small that memory itself was ashamed to keep them. If someone were to read his skin closely, they would not see a body but a battlefield after the armies had gone, a land where explosions had already happened, where lines had been traced not with maps but with burns. His experience was not stored in thought; it was written into flesh. Perhaps that is why the boy, even in the worst moments, never remembered hating his father completely. He hated the moment, the hand, the belt, the humiliation, and the fear. But the man himself always remained split in his mind, impossible to judge cleanly. Maybe that was childhood. Maybe that was love. Or maybe children, more than adults, instinctively understand*

*that a person can be both the wound and the wounded thing at once.*

*One memory stayed sharper than most. Back in the Middle East, when the boy was only three, his parents had been invited to someone's home. He had been hungry. So hungry that he had done the most innocent thing a child can do: he had gone to a woman there and asked for a piece of bread. She gave it to him. That should have been the end of it. But somehow the news reached his father in the wrong shape. The father did not hear, "A hungry child asked for bread." What he heard was accusation. Shame. Exposure. He heard that another family might think he had failed to feed his own son and failed to stand properly inside the dignity expected of a man. So he punished the child for an entire day. Not with the belt this time, but with his fingers, taking small pieces of skin and twisting them cruelly, again and again, each twist accompanied by a name he gave it, almost playfully, almost ceremonially, the "pinch of that woman's bread," again and again, as though the child's hunger itself had insulted him and had to be beaten back into obedience. Of all the punishments the boy later suffered, that one remained among the worst, perhaps because it was so absurd, so intimate, so endless. A three-year-old asking for bread. A grown man hearing dishonor in it. That, too, would require more space to understand properly. That, too, belonged to the larger book that had not yet been written.*

*And because everything in that world eventually folded back into place, even the buildings carried the logic of people more than official design. The building where the boy lived might be called B100 on paper, but no one around them truly spoke that way. In Morocco, buildings were often named the way stories were named: after a man, a family, a habit, a scandal, the loudest resident, the worst resident, or the one person who had managed to become inseparable from the place. Names shifted depending on who was speaking. To some, it was the building of the teacher. To others, it would have been another man's building, another*

*family's building, another rumor's building. That was how such places worked. Official names belonged to records; real names belonged to memory. And memory, as he already knew too well, was never neutral.*

*When the memory finally loosened its grip, he was still in the street. The kiosk remained where it had always been. The entrance from which the naked child had emerged now stood empty and ordinary, as though it had never released anything at all. The pale afternoon had not deepened, but something inside him had. He felt the weight of what had returned, felt the old architecture of fear settling itself beneath the strange present moment. The rooftop had filled, then emptied. The street had filled, then emptied. The child had appeared, passed through him, and vanished. And behind it all now stood the father's method like a hidden principle of the day itself: the replacement of one reality with another more acceptable one, the covering of a cry with music, the hiding of violence behind ordinary sound. It came to him with a slow, cold clarity that perhaps what terrified him most was not that the world had begun to behave like a dream, but that dream logic already resembled things he had known all his life. And even then, even with fear pressing harder now against his thoughts, he had not yet given up the one thing still pulling him forward. He was still trying to find the match. Still trying to decide whether the invitation had chosen him, mocked him, or summoned him into something far worse.*

# 5

## THE PROOF THAT VANISHED

*Hope did not return to him with dignity. It came back the way it always had in his life, against his better judgment, dressed in excuses, forcing its way through the cracks left by fear. Standing there in the emptied street, still carrying the cold aftertaste of the child who had passed through him and the memory that had followed, he heard voices again. They came from farther down, from the side where the street dipped and opened into an intersection pressed between several buildings, a place where one road fed into another and the neighborhood briefly widened before closing back in on itself. The sound was unmistakable this time: boys talking, movement, the loose energy of gathering. At once his pulse lifted. He turned toward it so quickly that the street behind him seemed to fall away. For a moment he allowed himself a simple explanation, the kind people invent when they are too desperate to surrender to strangeness. Maybe the first two times had only failed because he had not moved fast enough. Maybe there had been a narrow window in which the scene existed, and by the time he climbed down from the rooftop or crossed back through*

*the building, that window had already closed. Maybe reality itself had not betrayed him; maybe he had simply arrived too late. That thought was ridiculous and yet comforting, and he accepted it at once because the alternative was far worse. This time, he decided, he would not lose them. This time, he would not blink. He would not hesitate. He would run straight toward the voices and force the world to remain where it was long enough for him to step inside it.*

*So he moved. He kept his eyes fixed on the intersection below as though concentration itself might keep it from dissolving. He descended the slope with a speed that was almost panic, feeling that if he slowed even slightly, if he let the scene leave the center of his sight, it would vanish again and leave behind only another empty stretch of street and another question he could not afford to answer. The buildings around that intersection rose close together, their walls facing one another like old enemies forced into permanent proximity. Voices gathered there in a knot, and as he came nearer, he saw shapes resolving into boys, into movement, into a game that seemed on the edge of becoming real. This time, one detail struck him immediately: the ball was not his. They already had one. In fact, for a moment it even seemed as though they had more than one, or as though the same ball kept shifting position too quickly, refusing to settle into a single clear place. That should have unsettled him. Instead, it gave him a sudden, almost shameful relief. If they already had a ball, then they did not need him for the usual reason. They had not gathered around his ownership. They had not called him because he carried the one object that granted him temporary permission to stand among them. Something in him lifted at that thought. It made the invitation feel cleaner, less humiliating. It allowed him, for a few seconds, to imagine that perhaps he had been summoned for himself.*

*And yet the relief was not simple, because nothing else was. As he drew nearer, he realized that the boys were strangers. Not only unfamil-*

iar in the ordinary sense, but strange in a deeper, more disturbing way. Their faces did not settle into details. He could see them well enough to know they were boys, to know where their eyes and mouths should be, and to know the angle of a shoulder and the shape of a stance, but the particulars would not remain. It was the same unfinished quality that had been haunting the day from the beginning, the feeling of a dream that allows you to recognize a figure without giving you the certainty of a face. Still, he knew one thing immediately: these were not the boys from his usual street games. These were not the ones who laughed at him, tolerated him, or turned his possession of the ball into the price of his inclusion. That should have made him feel safer. In one sense it did. There was relief in not seeing the familiar mockery already prepared in their eyes. But relief has a twin, and it arrived beside it. If these were not the boys who knew him, then he was nowhere at all in their world. He had escaped one humiliation only to step into another: the humiliation of being entirely unknown.

Even so, he kept moving until he stood close enough to speak. A kind of order seemed to be passing through them. Each boy showed something, or reached for something, or lifted a hand in that nervous half-gesture people make when they expect verification. He could not tell whether they were checking invitations or merely pretending to, but the sight thrilled him. It made his own invitation feel more plausible, more official, and less absurd. He picked one boy to address, though even later he would never fully understand why that particular one. Perhaps he was simply closest. Perhaps he had turned at the exact right moment. Or perhaps, as he would one day choose to believe, there are meetings that do not belong to ordinary decisions. Sometimes a life selects with its hand what something older has already selected in silence. He approached the boy and spoke with a confidence he did not feel. He said he was there for the match and that he had been invited too. The other boy looked at him not with recognition, not even with hostility at first, but with a cool

*uncertainty that felt somehow worse. Then he asked the obvious question. Show me the invitation.*

*The phone was already in his hand before the sentence had finished landing. He unlocked it too fast. The screen brightened. For one blessed instant, the message seemed to be there, exactly where it should have been, visible enough to reassure him. But when he tried to show it, the surface of the phone began to misbehave. The image shivered as though disturbed by some invisible interference. Words blurred, slipped, and fractured. It looked like an old television when some disruptive current passed too close to it, like the picture had not been destroyed so much as shaken out of agreement with itself. He blinked, adjusted the angle, and tried again. There was the message. No, gone. There again in his own sight, then absent when he turned the screen toward the other boy. For a few seconds, both of them leaned over it together, their heads nearly touching, and this frightened him more than if the other had refused to look at all, because now the text was shared. What he could see alone would either survive another pair of eyes or collapse under them. It collapsed. The message would not hold. The boy beside him straightened first. He said he saw nothing. The invited boy insisted that it was there, that it had just been there, that he himself could still catch pieces of it, but already his own certainty was rotting under the strain of having to prove itself.*

*The refusal that followed was not loud. That, somehow, made it worse. The other boy did not laugh. He did not insult him. He simply began to dismiss him with the tired impatience reserved for people who have mistaken themselves about their place. "Go play with boys your own age," he told him. You are not invited. The sentence entered him like a familiar instrument. At once something older awoke beneath the embarrassment, something planted much earlier and much deeper than football. Fear. Not the noble fear of danger, but the smaller, more corrosive one: the fear of insisting on one's right to occupy space when another person has*

*begun to deny it. That instinct had been trained into him long before he was old enough to name it. He had learned it in rooms where men spoke and children shrank, in punishments stretched so long they entered the body as law, and in those humiliations where even innocence could become cause for pain. The memory of his father did not need to rise fully for its lesson to take effect. It was already there in the tightening of his throat, the hesitation in his tongue, and the way courage faltered just as it approached the threshold of action. His first impulse was not to fight for his place but to retreat from the risk of worsening his own humiliation. He knew that feeling too well: the sense that one more word spoken too strongly might call down a punishment larger than the current one.*

*And yet the boys had begun to move. The group was shifting away from the intersection now, carrying with it the possibility of the match and, with it, his last available explanation for the day. They were going somewhere else, somewhere he did not yet know, the field apparently still ahead, still withheld. He watched them begin to leave and felt the old panic returning, not the panic of danger, but the panic of exclusion. If he let them go now, then everything that had happened would harden into one final answer: the message had not been his, the invitation was never meant for him, and all his efforts had been only another form of self-deception. For a few seconds he faltered. The fear planted by his father told him to stop. The years of mockery told him to stop. The dignity that sometimes survives only by retreating told him to stop. But beneath those voices, something else stirred, older perhaps than courage and less noble than pride. It was the stubborn instinct that had sent him back down from the rooftop, back through the street, and back again toward the voices each time reality withdrew. It was not belief exactly. It was an attachment. He could not bear to let the scene continue without him.*



*So he followed. Not boldly, not with the clean authority of someone certain of his welcome, but with the strained persistence of a person begging reality to keep one small promise. He stayed close to the boy he had first addressed, returning again and again to him as though repetition itself might wear down refusal. He tried to explain, tried to show the phone once more, and tried to force the words into a shape that would sound believable even to another person's ears. But the other boy kept walking, and the group kept moving with him, carrying their silence like a verdict. Still, he did not turn back. Begging has its own humiliation but also its own kind of hope. As long as he was still speaking, still following, still asking, the final exclusion had not yet been pronounced. And in a day where everything kept vanishing the moment he reached it, that small delay was enough to feel, for a few steps more, like survival.*

## 6

### THE SHAPE OF FEAR

*At last, the other boy seemed to soften, not enough to be trusted, but enough to suggest that refusal might not be final. For a brief moment, hope rose again inside Osama. His name was ordinary where he came from, carried by boys who had never harmed anyone, a name meant to belong to families and schoolyards, not headlines. He was sixteen now, stuck in that sharp collision between childhood and manhood, where the body grows faster than the soul can keep up, where a boy is expected to be brave even when he still carries fear like a second skin. His name itself sounded like a promise. It carried the taste of courage and wild energy, a lion's name, strength, presence, and a body that does not apologize for taking space. But the street had never respected that promise. The boys down there had given him a nickname that turned him into a joke, "Osama Vinho," they called him, twisting his name the way Brazilians end their legends with music and style, like "Ronaldinho" or "Robinho," except in his case it was the opposite of glory. It was the name you gave the worst player so everyone could laugh while still letting him stand*

*on the field. And yet here he was, carrying that proud name inside a body trained more in hesitation than in attack, more in swallowing than in answering. Perhaps that was why the small softening in the other boy's face felt so intoxicating. For a second, he thought the invitation might finally be acknowledged, that persistence had begun to work, and that this whole twisted afternoon might still lead him where it had first seemed to promise it would. But the opportunity, when it came, was not the one he wanted. The other boy did not stop to study the phone, did not pause to say yes or no, and did not grant him the simple mercy of confirmation. Instead, he began speaking about himself.*

*At first it sounded like an introduction, the ordinary exchange by which strangers reduce the distance between them. But it was not ordinary. It unfolded more like a life uncoiling beside him, as if the other boy had decided that the fastest way to answer Osama was not to answer him at all, but to force him into comparison. They moved slowly away from the group, curving through the street in a long half-circle that seemed to bend them back toward the place where they had first met. The more the other boy spoke, the stranger the walk became. Everything in his stories felt close to Osama, almost grown from the same emotional soil, and yet each memory turned at the last second toward a different ending, toward a response Osama himself had never managed. It was as if he were listening not to another person, but to a version of himself that had stepped out of the same life and chosen differently at each moment where fear usually took the lead. And that was the unsettling part: the more the boy spoke, the more Osama felt his own life being held up beside it, like a mirror that did not show his face, only his missed chances.*

*The first reflection did not begin with insults or coaches or public embarrassment. It began with something simpler, harder, and more undeniable. A football game in one of those narrow spaces near the building, where children create a field by force of agreement because no*

*real field belongs to them. In the middle of the game, one of the boys had taken a plastic bag weighted with stones, twisted it through the air like a sling, and brought it down against the side of his head. The blow did not reveal its full meaning immediately. Blood, when the body is hot with movement, sometimes delays its own truth. So he kept playing. He touched the place once, knew something had happened, and continued as if the game itself might undo the injury by refusing to acknowledge it. It was only when he returned home and his mother, as she always did, checked him after football that the damage declared itself. The skin had opened. Blood had dried where he had not noticed it. In Osama's real memory, that kind of moment usually led to confusion, concealment, and the old fear of what telling the truth might cost inside the house. But the reflection's version moved another way. The second the blow landed, he said, he turned, grabbed the nearest stone, and smashed it into the face of the boy who had attacked him. Not later. Not after reflection. Immediately. The boy staggered back. The field broke. And later, when the other boy's family came to complain, carrying outrage the way people carry inheritance, the father in that story did not betray his son. He stood outside and answered them with brutal clarity: your son injured mine, mine injured yours, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; now go home and teach your own child not to start what he cannot finish. The reflection told it like a man offering proof. In that version of the world, pain did not remain private, and the child was not left alone to carry it.*

*Osama listened, but the story did not seize him the way the reflection had expected. It unsettled him, yes. It even pleased some hidden part of him, because there was a savage cleanliness in its logic, a satisfaction in the idea that one wound had been answered by another before shame had time to settle. But it did not fully open him. The reflection seemed to notice that. If pain answered by pain did not move him far enough, then perhaps another kind of story would. So he shifted. This second story belonged not to blood, but to speech, to the kind of moment where fists*

*are not the only available answer, and silence becomes the real failure.*

*He told him about a football trial held at night. A coach had gathered boys from the residence and from surrounding neighborhoods, mixing them under the false promise that talent would be enough to save whoever possessed it. The place was a “musalla,” one of those Moroccan spaces forced to become too many things at once, a place for “Eid” prayer, a football field, a basketball court, and a slab of concrete pretending to serve every ambition equally. The ground was hard, indifferent, and faintly humiliating. A friend had invited the reflection there, and he had arrived with the serious foolishness boys reserve for evenings they hope will divide life into before and after. But the coach had no interest in him. He was thrown among the trial boys, the half-seen boys, the ones given a ball more out of convenience than belief. Among them was another newcomer, genuinely skilled, one of those boys whose body already seemed to understand football from the inside. But skill did not make him generous. The coach’s indifference frustrated him too, and frustration in boys like that always looks for the softest available target. So he began insulting the reflection.*

*The insult itself was not obvious at first. It belonged to the street’s own language, one of those dirty phrases that sound almost meaningless until someone older explains where the poison is hidden inside it. He mocked the reflection’s father as a man without enough prostitutes. He said, “Wald klil lkahbat,” a phrase that, in Moroccan slang, does not merely insult a family; it assigns a measure of “manhood” based on vulgar abundance, as if masculine worth were proven by how many sex workers a man could buy, how much dirty access he could afford, and how much street currency he could spend on bodies. In that logic, a father with “not enough” of that is not only poor but also powerless, unworthy, and almost laughable. In Osama’s younger years, such a thing would not even have landed properly. He had known enough of the world to be wounded by it,*

*but not always enough to decode its ugliest parts quickly. He had stood more than once in exactly that type of humiliation, aware that something was being thrown at him and yet unable to catch its full meaning until others around him translated it with the strange pleasure boys often take in another boy's confusion. But here the reflection paused. This, he seemed to say, was the important part. Because this second story was not about hitting back. It was about the possibility of another answer. If you reject the street's logic, he pressed Osama, why did you still hand silence the victory? Why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you tell the coach? Why didn't you answer the insult in your own language, with your own values, instead of standing there and carrying it home? He admitted, almost dismissively, that he himself had answered the insult with a slap because that was his nature, because fire reached him faster than thought. But Osama was not him. Osama always believed he was different, cleaner, and ruled by another code. Fine, the reflection seemed to say. Then where was that code when the moment came?*

*That question struck harder than the slap in the story ever had. Because unlike the first story, which offered the fantasy of righteous retaliation, this one accused Osama from within his own principles. If he rejected violence, then why had he not invented another answer? If he believed himself above the street's filth, then why had he not acted from above rather than merely suffered below? For the first time since they had begun walking together, Osama argued back properly. He said there was nothing shameful in refusing the street's standards. They were Muslims. Their values were supposed to come from somewhere else. What was so dishonorable in not living by the filthy arithmetic of boys who confused vulgarity with power? He knew, even while speaking, how weak it might sound beside the quick certainty of fists. But it was true to him. He was not defending cowardice. He was defending another measure of worth. Yes, he had been weak in moments. Yes, what had happened to him as a child had bent him toward fear and hesitation. Yes, the things done*

to him when he was three had planted something inside him that froze before it fought. But that did not make him stupid. It did not make the street right. It meant only that he had never found the correct form of answer.

The reflection listened, and for the first time something like respect crossed his face. It was not kindness, but it was close enough to matter. He nodded and told Osama that this was exactly what he had wanted from him. Finally, he seemed to say, you react. Finally, you answer. The first story belonged to one law only: violence answered by violence. That was his law, because he was built that way, because fire reached him faster than reflection. But the second story proved something else. If Osama truly believed the street was wrong, then he could not keep using that belief as an excuse for silence. He had to invent a path of his own. Speak to the coach. Reject the insult out loud. Say that your father is not measured that way. Do anything other than stand there and let fear complete the scene for you. The accusation was not cruel. That made it worse. It was disappointment sharpened into truth.

That truth entered Osama quietly and lodged deep. For a second he saw that the reflection was both right and wrong in the same breath. Wrong because fear was not simple in him, and courage had never arrived as a clean instinct. Wrong because a child shaped by punishment does not invent self-defense as easily as healthy boys imagine. But right, too, in the unbearable way truth is right when it arrives too late to save you. There had been other roads. Narrow ones, uncertain ones, perhaps humiliating ones, but roads all the same. And he had not taken them. For a brief moment he felt the temptation to follow that realization deeper, to open the door it was offering and look honestly at what fear had built inside him. But he refused. Not because the thought was false, but because he was not there for that. He was not following this strange reflection through a broken afternoon in order to repair old humiliations.

*He was there for the invitation. The invitation was still in his hand. Hope, wounded and absurd as it was, had not yet released him. So instead of stepping further into that painful honesty, he did what he had always done when memory threatened to become transformation: he shut the door on it. Not completely, not forever, but hard enough to keep moving. And with that small inward act, which almost felt like victory, he raised the phone again and insisted once more that the reflection stop circling his wounds and simply look at the message.*

*The reflection's patience thinned. He stopped walking, turned, and looked at him with something between irritation and disbelief. I am telling you beautiful things, his face seemed to say, and you keep pushing that stupid invitation in my face. What is wrong with you? When he finally shoved him aside, the gesture was not brutal enough to count as assault, but not light enough to dismiss. It carried contempt, and contempt, more than force, was what made it sting. But even that was not enough. The reflection understood that if he let Osama continue like this, still pleading, still holding on to the phone as though it were the last clean object left in the world, then the day would keep folding in on itself and nothing would ever change. So he turned back one final time and chose a crueler method. He began provoking him directly. Not with abstract stories now, but with the exact kinds of things Osama knew people said about him when he was not listening, the quiet humiliations that had followed him for years and made a home inside him. He mocked his fear, mocked his slowness, and mocked the way he clung to proof instead of seizing reality. When that still did not break him fast enough, he tried to slap him, not hard enough to injure, but hard enough to reduce, to degrade, to force him back into the old role of the boy who absorbs and retreats. In that moment, something inside Osama stopped.*

*He froze first. Completely. The world narrowed. The staircase, the reflection, the group somewhere ahead, and the twisted walls of that leaf-*

*like structure, all of it receded behind a sudden gathering of older things. He remembered the previous stories. He remembered his own past. He remembered every small humiliation he had swallowed because fear had arrived before language, every awkward moment where his body had betrayed the name it carried, and every instant in which he had stood there while something inside him begged to move and could not. And suddenly he no longer wanted to be that. He no longer wanted to stand as the reflection seemed to believe he would stand. In the space between one breath and the next, he decided, not clearly, not nobly, but with the brute clarity of a body finally exhausted by its own patterns, that this would be the moment he showed the reflection he was wrong.*

*The phone was still in his hand, the same phone he had carried through the whole day the way a limping person grips his cane: not for comfort but for balance, like a contract, like the final proof that something had called him into motion. It was the only hope he had, the only object that still seemed to contain the possibility of order. And perhaps that was why it became the weapon. He struck with it before thought had time to recover. The first blow landed against the reflection's head with a crack that felt almost unreal. Then another. Then more. He hit him out of anger, yes, but not only anger. Out of revision. Out of accumulated memory. Out of the long backlog of moments that had never found their answer. And here, from my own way of seeing it, the brutality makes a grim kind of sense. Revenge is rarely one clean act. A person who seeks revenge does not fire one bullet and stop; does not strike once with a knife and walk away satisfied. Even when the body is already finished, the hand often continues. Not because rage keeps rising, rage burns fast, but because something emptier has taken over: hunger. The first act is only the appetizer. The rest is the desperate attempt to fill a hollow that cannot be filled, the frantic belief that if you take enough from the other person, you will finally recover what was taken from you. And what is taken is not always a thing. It can be a loved one, a home, dignity, a childhood,*

*a sense of safety, or a future that was supposed to belong to you. So the blows keep coming, not as punishment, but as consumption, as if the violence itself could feed the gap inside. Each strike seemed to release something older than the present. Every time the phone came down, he felt another piece of pressure leave him, another sealed chamber in himself break open. Blood splashed. The reflection staggered backward, then sideways, then slipped toward one of the openings between the twisted layers of the structure. For one instant he hung there, framed by light, and then collapsed through the gap.*

*Osama followed immediately. It was not a decision so much as momentum made absolute. He threw himself after him with the savage certainty of someone who had already crossed too far into violence to stop at injury. He landed badly, barely felt it, and moved toward the fallen body as though the only remaining task in the world was to finish it. He wanted to make sure the reflection was truly dead, truly ended, and truly unable to rise again and return to that mocking half-wisdom with which he had stalked him through the day. But before he could strike again, the reflection spoke. His voice was weaker now, but clearer than it had ever been. He told Osama what he was. Not an enemy, not a stranger, not even merely a guide. He was his courage. He was the part Osama had been searching for all along. And now, he said, his work was done.*

*Then something even stranger happened. The reflection's body, already losing its shape, began to move toward Osama's feet as if drawn there by an invisible current. It did not crawl in the ordinary sense. It seemed to flow, to thin itself into shadow and force, and Osama felt, for a brief instant, a jolt of terror. Somewhere deep in his religious memory there flashed the image of death, the belief that the soul leaves the body beginning from the toes, moving upward toward separation. For a second he thought, "This is the end." But almost at once he understood that what was entering him did not feel like loss. It felt like fullness. The movement*

*climbed through him, and the higher it rose, the more his fear altered. It did not disappear, but it altered. It was joined by something he had never known in such concentration: pleasure, pride, achievement, and an almost sacred intoxication. It filled him all the way to the last hair on his head. For one bright, impossible moment he felt complete.*

*Then, just as suddenly as it came, that completeness began to thin. It did not vanish entirely, but blurred at the edges, the way a background loses focus when the eye is forced to lock onto one harsh subject. It felt better than emptiness, yes, but it did not feel like peace. Already he wanted more. Already the achievement was becoming an appetite. That frightened him more than the violence itself, because he had never known this hunger before. He had never wanted continuation after fulfillment. And yet there it was, opening like another mouth inside him, eager, restless, and dissatisfied with having won only once.*

*And in that thin space where the pleasure weakened, regret finally found its voice. Not guilt, not yet, but regret, the cleaner pain that comes when a person realizes he could have been better than the moment demanded. He saw it clearly now: there had been another road. He could have stayed cold. He could have stayed calm. He could have used the street against itself without becoming it. The proverb rose in him too late, like wisdom arriving after the damage was done: "Lhdra ma tchri khodra." Words do not buy vegetables. He could have said it with a small smile, held out the phone, and refused to enter the performance. He could have called the reflection's bluff without breaking a sweat. He could have protected himself without inheriting his father's method for even a second. But he had not. He had taken the faster road. The brutal road. The road that works immediately and then leaves something dirty behind.*

*He pushed the thought away as quickly as he could, but it did not*

*fully leave. It settled somewhere deeper, not as a punishment but as a warning. Courage earned through violence comes with a shadow. It gives relief too quickly, and then it asks for another dose. It makes a person win and still feel empty. Osama understood then why he did not feel fully repaired. He had gained force, yes, but it was force sharpened by damage, not strength shaped by choice. And the strangest part was that his body had liked it. That was what terrified him most: not that he could hurt, but that hurting had briefly tasted like control.*



# 7

## THE TRAP OF HELP

*When the boy caught up again, the movement of the day had changed. The violence of the first reflection still lived somewhere inside him, still hot in the blood, but it no longer stood at the front of his mind. What stood there now was unease. The next figure did not wait to be chased and did not force the boy into pursuit the way the first one had. He was already there, already facing him, as though the road itself had known where the meeting would happen and had arranged both of them in advance. There was something less aggressive about him at first glance, something quieter and more composed, and for that very reason, more disturbing. He did not come armed with mockery or movement. He came with a question. "How can I help you?" he asked, and the sentence struck Osama with the force of a warning. Help. It was a simple word, ordinary enough in any other mouth, yet in that instant it turned sharp inside him. The question itself felt wrong. It was he who needed something. He who was following. He who carried the invitation like a wound and a proof. So why did the other speak as though assistance itself were a*

*trap? The suspicion rose before thought. Why would someone ask that? What kind of person offers help too quickly? Is he trying to trick me? Is he trying to draw me closer? Is this how people lead you somewhere before taking what you have, before humiliating you, before making you regret that you trusted your own need? In the space of a second, the mind of the child inside him woke up again, and with it came the old habit of reading danger into kindness before kindness had the chance to explain itself.*

*That old habit did not come from nowhere. It had a face, a staircase, a smell, and a woman's voice. The first memory that rose was not dramatic in appearance, but that was precisely why it had lasted so long. It belonged to the father's side of the family, to a time when tension existed between his father and one of his aunts, and to a period when their lives were crowded into another person's walls. He had been young enough then to treat errands as innocence. His father sent him with a message, and because he was a child, he carried the message with the seriousness children give to any task that allows them to feel useful. He was not entering a battlefield in his mind. He was only walking words from one room to another. But the aunt, already angry with his father for reasons he did not understand, chose the weakest available bridge between them and struck there. She told him to go back and inform his father that she cursed the messenger between them. At the time, the sentence did not break open all at once. He understood enough to feel injured, enough to feel that something had turned against him for no reason, but not enough to give the wound a language equal to its depth. It was only later, much later, that he understood what had happened in that moment: trust had been answered with contamination. He had not carried her insult to her. He had carried his father's message. Yet she had placed the filth of her anger on his small body as though the messenger himself deserved the curse. That was one of the beginnings. Not the whole origin of distrust, perhaps, but one of its first clean lessons: even those whose faces are already known can use your innocence as a road toward their*

own resentment.

*Perhaps the figure before him sensed that recoil, because he changed his strategy almost immediately. The first question had failed. Words had opened suspicion instead of comfort. So he reached out with his hand and asked to see the phone. The request was gentler now, almost practical, as if he wanted to avoid frightening him further. That should have calmed Osama. In one sense, it did. The invitation was the reason he was there. The invitation was still the axis of the whole day. Yet even as he lifted the phone, he could feel the old unease moving beneath the action. The courage he had absorbed from the first reflection had not disappeared, but courage is not the same thing as trust. One may help a body strike, endure, and continue. The other must allow that body to open. And opening had always been more difficult. Even so, he showed him the screen while looking at it himself, because by then he already knew the ritual of disappointment: the message would appear to him and vanish for the other, and the proof would tremble into nothing as soon as it entered another gaze. And it happened again. The image wavered. The letters shook themselves loose. The surface of the screen took on that same diseased instability, as if another invisible current had leaned too close to it. He almost pulled the phone back before the other boy could finish looking, not because he wanted to hide it, but because failure had already become familiar enough to anticipate.*

*Yet the response surprised him. The reflection did not dismiss him. He did not grow irritated the way the first one had. Instead, he asked questions, too many questions, and too quickly. When did you receive it? Who sent it? Had you seen the sender before? Were you sure the message had said the rooftop first? Did you hear the boys before you saw them, or see them before you heard them? What exactly happened when the picture changed? On another day, with another person, such questioning might have seemed like care. But Osama's body did not read*

*it that way. It read it the way it had always learned to read interrogation: as danger dressed in curiosity. There are people whose questions seek understanding, and there are people whose questions strip a life for parts. To a child raised among unstable adults, the difference is not always visible soon enough. And so the second flashback came, this one sharper, fuller, and more public than the first. It took him back to the early days after his family had moved into the building, when everything about them was still new to the eyes that watched from windows and doorways, and above all to Saida, who had been living there before them and had already made the neighborhood her private archive.*

*Saida did not simply ask questions. She harvested them. One day, on the stairs, she stopped him, offered him a piece of candy, and began speaking in that falsely warm tone adults use when they want a child to mistake extraction for affection. She asked the things curious women always ask when curiosity has no discipline: where they had come from, what his father did, what his mother cooked, what they had eaten the night before, who visited, how many siblings there were, whether his father was strict, whether he took care of them, and whether they missed the place they had come from. To a boy, questions like that can feel innocent because they are asked with smiles. So he answered. He answered the way children answer when they do not yet know that information, once released, never belongs to them again. Later, when his mother met Saida properly, what should have been an ordinary introduction between neighbors was already poisoned. Saida spoke as though she had been handed a report. She knew too much. She carried details she had not been given by any adult. And the mother, hearing her own life recited back to her by a woman she barely knew, reacted at once with the alarm of someone realizing that the walls she thought she had entered were already full of eyes. The argument broke immediately. Accusation met accusation. And then, in the middle of it, Saida did the cruelest thing possible: she said that the information had come from Osama himself.*

*What happened next remained in him not because it was the worst punishment of his life, but because it taught him one of the clearest lessons. His mother turned toward him with the speed of instinct, grabbed him as though snatching a hundred dirham note from the ground before someone else could take it, and pulled him toward her with the blind urgency of anger. Then came the sandal. In the house he knew, that object was never just footwear when rage entered the room; it was a verdict. She hit him with it first wherever it landed, shoulder, arm, or side, then with more accuracy, until the punishment found the two places that humiliate a child most quickly: the face and the backside. The slaps of rubber against skin came fast and without rhythm, fueled not only by fury but also by the embarrassment of having been exposed through her own son's innocence. She struck his face in the quick, sharp bursts mothers use when they are punishing and shaming at the same time, then drove the blows lower, onto the flesh of his backside, again and again, until the pain changed from sting to heat and from heat to numbness. For a while afterward, sitting ceased to feel natural. It was as though the body had forgotten the existence of comfort and only remembered impact. Yet even inside that punishment there was a terrible hierarchy, and he knew it. Some part of him, even as he was crying, knew that this was still mercy compared with what might happen when his father heard.*

*That was the true terror. The sandal belonged to anger; the father belonged to consequence. And when he came, he did not enter through the memory as a single event but as an atmosphere returning. Osama and his brother were already doing what boys always do after a storm has briefly passed: teasing one another, mocking one another, trying to reclaim normal life in scraps. The mother was still speaking, still carrying the heat of the fight with Saida, and the father was with her, talking, listening, absorbing. For a few seconds everything almost looked ordinary again, almost as though the punishment had already been completed and the day had moved on. Then he felt it before he fully*

*saw it, the shift in the air, the nearness of a larger heat, the sense that something had detached itself from the conversation and turned in his direction. It was the father's presence that changed first, not his words. A hot breath, the animal force of him, something so immediate that in memory it would later resemble a bull turning its full weight toward a smaller thing in the ring. Before Osama could properly blink, the hand had already caught him by the chest of his clothes and lifted him. There was, for an absurd fraction of a second, something almost ceremonial in the motion, something that might in another universe have resembled pride, like a father raising a son before a crowd. But this was the opposite of presentation. Before his feet could find the ground again, the blows had begun. His father's hand was large enough to feel less like flesh than like a brick given movement. The slaps came so fast that shock reached him before pain had time to separate itself into distinct sensations. One, then another, then more, each one so abrupt that they felt almost seasonal, as if every strike replaced the last weather inside his body with another. Summer. Winter. Spring. Then blankness. For the first time in his life, he discovered that too much shock can interrupt pain, can freeze it for a few seconds and leave behind only astonishment.*

*By the time the memory loosened, the reflection was still in front of him, still waiting, still asking nothing more aggressive now than for a little patience. That alone began to matter. He had asked questions, yes, and the questions had frightened him, but they had not ended in accusation. They had not turned into the greedy curiosity of Saida. They had not become a report, a scandal, a reason to strike. He was still there. He was still trying to understand. And for the first time, Osama felt something almost unfamiliar: the beginning of a distinction. Not everyone who asks is hunting. Not every open hand conceals a trap. There are questions that feed on a life, and there are questions that make space for it. The difficulty, he understood dimly, was that a wounded child learns to treat both as the same. Distrust is efficient in that way. It protects by*

*blinding. It says no before the world has had the chance to prove which kind of face it is wearing. The reflection seemed to read this movement inside him without needing it explained. He did not press. He simply held out his hand.*

*The invitation in the phone still trembled at the edge of disappearance, but now the struggle had shifted elsewhere. This was no longer only about proving the message. It was about deciding whether another person could be given even the smallest opening without catastrophe walking through it. Osama looked at the hand, and for a second the whole day seemed to pause there. He had already learned that courage does not automatically produce trust. One may strike and still remain closed. One may shout and still be unable to hand over even a fragment of oneself. But something in him had changed. Perhaps it was the courage of the first reflection still living in his blood. Perhaps it was exhaustion. Perhaps it was only that the day had become too strange for old defenses to keep working in exactly the same form. Whatever the cause, he gave the reflection his hand.*

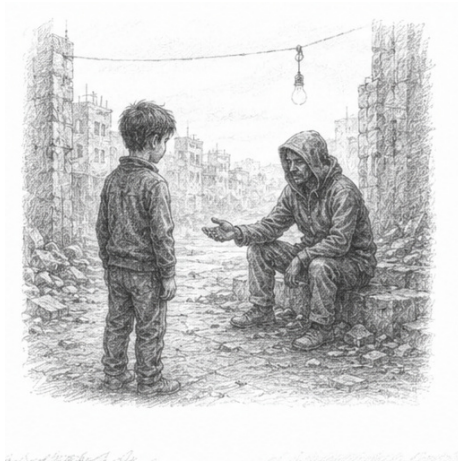
*The world altered at once. The handhold did not feel warm or reassuring in any ordinary way. It felt like permission granted to a mechanism that had been waiting. Around them, space opened, not like a door opening onto another room, but like reality itself folding back and revealing a seam. Darkness gathered in front of them, yet it was not empty darkness. It had depth, movement, a slow pull, like the mouth of some black current widening just enough to let them enter. When they stepped through, the sensation was neither falling nor walking. It was closer to being drawn across a thought too large for the mind to see all at once. Inside that strange space, images began to appear, not in a straight sequence but in waves, each one touching another before dissolving. They were versions of the future, or possible futures, or perhaps only the shape of truths waiting for experience to confirm them. In some of them, Osama*

*turned away from people who would have helped him simply because their kindness frightened him. In others, he mistook suspicion for wisdom and lost opportunities before they had the chance to ripen. He saw teachers he could have trusted and did not. Friends he could have opened himself to and kept at a distance. Older men whose advice might have changed him, but whom he dismissed because he had learned too early that adults ask questions before they punish. He also saw the other side. He saw faces that should not be trusted, hands that would wound if taken, doors that deserved to remain closed. The reflection did not lie to him with sweetness. He did not say trust everyone. He showed him instead that distrust, like all defensive habits, becomes dangerous when it grows too total. To trust wrongly can injure. To trust no one at all can deform a whole life. The real work, he seemed to teach him, was not innocence. It was discernment.*

*When they returned, it was so quiet that for a second Osama did not understand they had returned at all. The street reassembled itself around him. The reflection's hand was still in his. The phone was still there. The shape of the day had not changed outwardly, and yet something inside him had been remeasured. The reflection looked at him with a calm that felt neither proud nor superior. He simply reminded him of what had just happened. You did not know where I was taking you, and yet you came. You trusted me enough to see what you needed to see. That, too, was a kind of truth. Not the blind trust of foolishness, but the chosen trust that makes understanding possible. Without it, there would have been no vision, no door, no glimpse of the roads that wait for those who dare to distinguish danger from guidance. The words did not overwhelm him the way the first reflection's absorption had. They entered more gently. And yet the effect was real. Joy rose in him, not violent joy, not the savage completion that came from absorbing courage, but something lighter, clearer, almost like relief. He felt stronger, yes, but differently. Less sharpened than steadied. Less hungry than widened. For a few*

*seconds he thought that perhaps this, too, might finally be enough.*

*But, as before, enough did not stay long. The feeling settled into him, improved him, clarified something, but did not complete him. He sensed at once that he was better than he had been a few minutes earlier and still not whole. The road in front of him remained unfinished. The boys ahead were still ahead. The invitation still mattered. Yet now, unlike before, he no longer followed in blind agitation. He understood the direction a little better. He understood, too, that some of the figures on this road were not obstacles but necessities. So instead of chasing at once, he waited. He stood where he was, with the strange calm of someone who has just learned that delay is not always abandonment, and he let the path gather itself again. Somewhere ahead, the others would reappear. Somewhere ahead, another reflection waited. And this time, while holding the phone in one hand and the new steadiness in the other, he was ready to let them come.*



## 8

### THE NAMES THAT HELD HIM

*For a while, nothing happened, at least not in any way that could be measured by movement alone. The street remained where it was. The phone remained in Osama's hand. The steadiness he had gained from the second reflection settled inside him, not like peace, but like a new weight learning how to belong in the body. He was calmer than before, yet not calm. He was stronger than before, yet not complete. The invitation still mattered. The boys ahead were still ahead. Whatever waited at the end of this road had not yet released him. So he stayed where he was and waited, no longer with the blind agitation that had sent him running after every vanishing scene, but with the quieter patience of someone beginning to understand that not everything hidden must be chased at once. Some things reveal themselves only when the body stops panicking long enough to let them arrive.*

*As he stood there, the emptiness in front of him began to feel less empty. It was not that the street changed suddenly, or that a door opened,*

or that voices returned all at once. It was subtler than that. A certain part of the space ahead thickened with presence, as if the air itself had remembered that it was meant to hold someone. The world did not split or announce its shift. It simply allowed two figures to appear slowly enough that they seemed less to arrive than to form out of what had already been waiting there. They stood side by side, so alike that at first they looked as though one body had been divided into two and taught to stand separately. Yet the longer he looked, the clearer their differences became. One of them looked sticky, almost damp, as though shame itself had taken on skin. His surface carried the unpleasant shine of something between glue and slime, like the back of a frog or the trail left by a snail on stone. He was not monstrous in the obvious sense, yet there was something about him that made the eye recoil, the way the body recoils from anything that clings too easily and refuses to let go. This was “Hshouma”, shame, but not only shame: the kind of shame that sticks, that crawls from skin to memory and from memory back to skin, the shame of embarrassment, humiliation, exposure, and the eyes of others all fused together into one substance. The other twin was different. Thinner. Cleaner. More restrained. He looked almost delicate, but not peacefully so. His whole body seemed made of hesitation and rule. He stood like someone always half-apologizing for existing, half-afraid of stepping beyond an invisible line. His face carried the tightness of someone trained to remain within boundaries he did not draw. This was “Ayb”, not simply shame, but what is improper, what is “not done,” and what custom, family, and social expectation can mark as unacceptable long before the child understands why. If “Hshouma” clung, then “Ayb” withheld. If “Hshouma” made the skin crawl, “Ayb” made the spine stiffen.

And yet Osama chose them. That was what made this meeting different from the earlier ones. The first reflection had been pursued through confusion and provocation. The second had opened only after distrust

*had begun to crack. But now, carrying courage in one part of himself and a fragile new trust in another, Osama looked at these twins and felt neither pure fear nor pure recoil. The sticky one no longer frightened him in the old helpless way; the restrained one no longer froze him before thought. He knew, even without fully knowing, that the road required them. Shame cannot be escaped merely by becoming brave. Distrust cannot be healed merely by learning to open the hand. There were older laws inside him still, older chains, and these two seemed to wear their shape openly. So instead of waiting to be summoned, he stepped toward them and, almost out of habit, lifted the phone to show them the invitation. The routine had become absurdly familiar by then: his need, the screen, and the proof that dissolved the moment another person looked too closely. But before either twin could respond, before “Hshouma” could let his sticky smile widen or “Ayb” could retreat into that tight inward posture, the whole space around them shifted.*

*The street did not vanish so much as reorganize itself. The walls lengthened. The ground flattened. The light lost its outdoor quality and took on the strange, chalky stillness of a classroom in the late afternoon. Desks appeared first, then a blackboard, then the soft dust of old lessons embedded in wood and air. The twins were no longer standing in the street. They were seated like students. Osama, too, found himself seated. But not alone. At the front of the room stood another Osama, older, unmistakably him and yet shaped by time into a different clarity. He looked less like the boy the street had known and more like someone who had passed through books, through thought, through education, and had come out carrying a different posture toward the world. There was still Morocco in his face, still the same features that proved he was no one else, but something in him had widened. He wore his body less defensively. He looked like a teacher, the kind who had spent enough years around language and human behavior to stop mistaking pain for destiny. The sight of him unsettled the younger Osama more than any of the reflec-*

tions had. He was not a stranger and not exactly a future either. He was more like a possibility given form.

The older Osama did not begin with accusation. He began with a definition. He spoke as a teacher speaks when trying to rescue a word from the prison of habit. He told them that culture is often mistaken for truth simply because it has been repeated long enough. He told them that “Hshouma” and “Ayb” are powerful words in Moroccan life, but power and correctness are not always the same thing. “Hshouma,” he explained, can be the sticky shame people throw on a child until the child begins carrying it as though it were his own skin. “Ayb” can be the colder law of what is considered improper, indecent, not done, not fitting for the family, the neighborhood, or the tradition. But neither word is eternal in itself. What counts as “Ayb” in one home may be ordinary in another. What is called “Hshouma” in one street may not even be noticed somewhere else. These words are not born from heaven complete and fixed; they are shaped by families, by neighborhoods, by fear, by custom, by religion as interpreted through people, and often by ignorance pretending to be virtue. Then he turned toward the younger Osama and, without softening his voice, told him the most difficult part: many people suffer not only because life wounds them, but because they are taught to glue those wounds to themselves using the names “Hshouma” and “Ayb.”

He gave them the first example as if opening an ordinary page from childhood. A family trip. A younger brother too small to manage his body in time. An accident in the car. The smell spreading before the truth is known. The older brother, out of tenderness and quick instinct, trying to cover the younger one, trying to protect him from exposure, trying to absorb the shame before it reaches him. But because he is nearest, because he shields the younger one too well, the accusation lands on him instead. The adults begin speaking in the old language at once: “Hshouma.” “Ayb.” How could you do this? How can someone your age do such a thing? The

*teacher did not rush the scene. He let its cruelty stand in its own ordinary clothes. No one asked first what had happened. No one paused to consider that the boy had never done this before, that perhaps he was not the one responsible, that perhaps this was a mistake, an accident, a child's need, a body's failure, not a moral event. Instead, they reached for shame the way people reach for tools they have inherited without ever questioning whether those tools damage more than they fix. The older Osama looked at "Hshouma" and "Ayb" then and told them plainly that this is one of the first lies children learn: that being blamed feels the same as being guilty. It does not. Sometimes shame is only a misunderstanding dressed as morality. Sometimes a child begins carrying "Hshouma" and "Ayb" not because he has done wrong, but because adults are too impatient, too embarrassed, or too poorly taught to distinguish accident from character.*

*Then he moved to the second example, and the room itself seemed to stiffen. This one took them into school, into a class where ages were not separated cleanly because failure in the system had piled boys together in ways the body understood better than the timetable. A younger boy sitting in front, an older one behind him. A pencil taken. A teacher too strict and too rigid to notice the real danger because she is busy policing posture and attention. The younger boy turns back, asking softly for the pencil he needs in order to write. The teacher cuts him off. Do not look behind. Focus on the class. So the boy does what children always do when authority blocks the straight path: he reaches backward with his hand, trying to find the pencil where the older boy has hidden it, under the place where shoes and books are kept. But the older boy has done something else. Something worse. He has turned the space into a trap. He wants the younger child to touch what should never have been put there. He wants confusion, silence, and the shield that shame provides. The older Osama did not make the moment dramatic in the cheap sense. He made it clear. That was enough. He explained that this is where "Hshouma" and "Ayb" become truly dangerous, when a child is*

*manipulated into silence by the fear of being seen as dirty, improper, or implicated. The child may think: if I speak, they will think I am part of it. If I touched it, even unwillingly, the shame will become mine. And that, the teacher said, is one of the cruelest victories abuse can win. Because the wrongness belongs to the one who planned it, not to the child who was trapped by it. Silence in that moment is not dignity. It is the extension of violence. A child must be taught that not every event involving the body becomes “Hshouma” or “Ayb” simply because the body was forced into it. Sometimes the real shame belongs entirely elsewhere. Sometimes the proper act is not concealment, but exposure.*

*The younger Osama listened with the stillness of someone hearing his own life translated into a language he had needed much earlier. The teacher kept going, because he knew that one good explanation is never enough against years of inherited distortion. He said that children must learn to ask themselves questions before swallowing shame whole. Did I really do wrong? Did I choose this? Did I understand what was happening? Am I being blamed because the truth is ugly for someone else? He told them that “Hshouma” and “Ayb” may sometimes guide behavior, yes, because every society needs forms and limits. But when those words are used to crush a child, to prevent speech, to force silence after confusion, to punish innocence, then they stop being moral language and become instruments of fear. He reminded them that what is considered “not done” in one home can be ordinary elsewhere, and that custom alone does not deserve the authority of truth. Family and environment can define many things, but they do not own the final meaning of a child’s dignity. A child has the right to speak. A child has the right to ask. A child has the right to defend himself against false shame, against misjudgment, against the sticky lies that cling to memory long after the event itself has passed.*

*By the time the lesson ended, the classroom no longer felt entirely like a classroom. It felt more like a chamber of rearrangement, a place where*

*old meanings had been loosened from their hooks and forced to stand under another light. When the older Osama fell silent, the room itself seemed to release its hold. The desks dimmed. The blackboard withdrew. The chalk smell dissolved into air. And when the street returned, the twins had changed. "Hshouma" no longer looked sticky in the same suffocating way. The shine was still there, but it had lost its power to cling. "Ayb" no longer looked crushed by his own restraint. He seemed more open now, less like a rule and more like a question. The two of them stood before Osama not as masters, but as figures that had been properly named and therefore reduced. That was the strange mercy of the lesson: once a thing is understood, it stops ruling entirely from the dark.*

*It was "Ayb" who spoke first this time. His voice had changed too. It was no longer timid, no longer folded inward. He asked Osama what he was really here for. And for the first time, the answer came without confusion. The invitation, Osama said. I am here for the invitation. "Ayb" nodded as though the answer had finally found the shape it needed. Then he did something none of the previous reflections had done. He did not challenge him further. He did not turn inward, vanish, or provoke a fight. He simply pointed him forward. Another reflection waited, he said. Another one you still need. The road had not ended, only narrowed. Osama felt then the same improvement he had felt before: not completion, but strengthening. Not fullness, but another piece returned to him. He was better than he had been. Clearer. Less trapped by names he had carried too long. And yet still not finished. So he turned in the direction "Ayb" had given him and waited, not in panic, not in blind pursuit, but with the growing understanding that each reflection was not merely delaying the invitation. Each one was teaching him the only way he might eventually survive it.*

THE NAMES THAT HELD HIM



## 9

### THE FIRE WITHIN

*The lesson of the twins stayed with Osama longer than the others had. Courage had entered him like fire. Trust had entered him like a careful opening. But “Hshouma” and “Ayb” had done something gentler and, for that very reason, stranger: they had loosened a knot. For the first time since the invitation had begun dragging him through one impossible scene after another, he felt not stronger in the violent sense, not sharper, not hungrier, but lighter. The road no longer seemed to be only a trial. It had become, for a few moments, almost understandable. He enjoyed that feeling more than he had enjoyed any of the others. He lingered inside it. He let it settle through him the way a tired body lets an evening breeze settle after too much heat. And because relief is sometimes the most dangerous feeling of all, precisely because it persuades the mind that it has earned the right to stop watching, he forgot time. Only when the light began to withdraw from the street did he realize how long he had been standing there. Dusk was falling. The world around him was growing dim in that quiet, uncertain way that belongs to the hour between the*

*end of the day and the beginning of worry.*

*That worry came at once, but this time it did not arrive in the old shape. It was not the blind panic that used to seize him whenever something slipped outside his control. It did not feel like the fear that froze the child, nor like the shame that stuck to the skin, nor like the distrust that sharpened every hand into a possible betrayal. It felt different. It felt correct. His mother, he thought suddenly. His parents. He had never been out alone this long. He had never let the day pull him so far from ordinary time that dusk could catch him still following something no one else could see. The concern that rose in him did not humiliate him. It did not weaken him. It belonged to self-protection, to the ordinary wisdom by which a child understands that being late has consequences, even in houses where love and fear live too close together. For once, the voice of caution did not sound like an enemy. It sounded like a part of him that deserved to remain alive. He accepted it without fighting it. But acceptance did not mean retreat. The invitation still existed. The road still held him. He was worried, yes, but he was not broken by the worry. He could carry it and continue.*

*Then he saw the fire. It was not far from him, only a little ahead and down the road, where the darkening street opened into a patch of emptiness and shadow. At first he did not think it strange. Fire in the city was never entirely unusual. People burned trash where they should not. Smoke appeared in corners where no proper fire had been built. Flames rose from what ought to have been collected and removed but instead had been left to be consumed wherever it lay. So when he first noticed the glow, his mind gave it an ordinary explanation. And yet something in the shape of it resisted that simplicity. The fire was too upright, too deliberate, and too gathered. It did not spread the way trash fires spread or spit and collapse the way accidental flames do. It held itself. It resembled itself. And because dusk had already begun to strip*

*the street of its certainty, the sight of that contained brightness called to him with a familiarity he did not expect. Then, from somewhere deep in him, another memory rose, not a family memory this time, but a sacred one. A verse he had heard from his father's recitation during the night prayer, perhaps not once but many times, enough for its music to survive before its meaning fully did. "Musa," Moses, seeing the fire and telling his family that he had noticed one. "Inni anastu naran..." The line returned to him almost as sound before thought. He did not remember all of it exactly, not as a scholar would, but he remembered enough. Moses had seen a fire and gone toward it. Moses, one of the prophets he loved most, precisely because the Qur'an never erased his fear and never pretended that courage meant the absence of trembling. "Musa" had feared, doubted, fled, and returned, and still had been chosen. That mattered to the child in Osama. It mattered deeply. If a prophet could be afraid and still walk forward, perhaps fear itself was not the opposite of being called. Perhaps sometimes the fire is frightening because it is meant to be approached. So Osama moved toward it.*

*The closer he came, the less the fire resembled anything accidental. It was not burning wood. There were no scattered ashes, no pile of street refuse feeding it. The flames rose in the outline of a body, and as he drew nearer, that body sharpened into something impossible and yet immediately familiar. It looked like him. Not exactly him as the street knew him, but enough of him to wound the eye. A reflection, yes, but one made not from mirror light or shadow, but from heat. The face moved within the flame as if fire itself had been taught his features. For a moment Osama stopped, not in fear alone, but in a kind of sacred confusion. The fire was frightening, yes, but it was also charged with the echo of something holy. That was what unsettled him most. He did not believe, not truly, that God was present there in the way of scripture. He was Muslim enough, even as a child, to know that stories from revelation do not simply repeat themselves in alleys because a frightened boy wants them to. And yet the*

*familiarity remained. The shape in the fire felt close to the language of the Qur'an, close to the stories he had heard without fully understanding, and close enough that the border between spiritual memory and dream logic began to dissolve. Then the burning figure spoke, and what it said only deepened the strangeness. Its voice carried the echo of a command he knew not from life but from sacred story, the kind of call that tells the one approaching that he is in a place set apart. Osama should have recoiled. Instead, he felt for a few trembling seconds as though he stood inside something not safe, exactly, but destined.*

*This time it was he who spoke first. He kept a small distance between himself and the flames, enough to respect the danger and enough to preserve the illusion that this was still caution and not reverence, but he asked the question plainly: What is wrong with you? Why are you in the fire? The figure answered without drama, and perhaps that was the most frightening thing of all. It did not howl. It did not accuse. It simply named itself through the things that fed it. "Shame," it said. Silence. Hatred. Revenge. Arguments. The words entered Osama unevenly. Some of them already belonged to him. Shame he knew both as "Hshouma" and as "Ayb," in their sticky and restrictive forms. Silence he knew very well; silence had once been his safest face, the one he wore whenever the world became too large or too violent to answer directly. Hatred was harder. He did not know whether he fully understood the word, but he recognized its shadow. Revenge, too, he only half understood, yet he knew enough of it to recognize its taste in the private fantasies that visited him before sleep, the scenarios where he argued properly, struck back properly, insulted properly, and won properly, all within the sealed theater of his own head. Arguments he knew not as mastery but as warnings. Somewhere in his religious memory, some verse, some teaching, some inherited sentence told him that the believer who turns away from useless quarrels is better than the one who lives to win them. He did not understand the full theology of it, but he trusted the shape of the lesson. And pressure, if that was*

*what burned underneath the other words, he did not know by name, but he knew by feeling. He knew what it was to go to sleep full of unfinished scenes.*

*So, for the first time in these meetings, Osama did not stand waiting to be taught. He tried to help. He spoke as a child speaks when he is building sense from fragments, faith, instinct, and whatever scraps of reflection the day has already placed inside him. He told the figure that shame comes in at least two forms: one is “Hshouma,” the sticky, humiliating shame that clings to the skin, and the other is “Ayb,” the shame of what people say is improper, not done, or unacceptable in family or society. He said that silence is not always a virtue, that sometimes one must speak, because speaking is the only way to keep the wrong thing from settling permanently inside the right person. He admitted that he did not entirely know what hatred meant, but if it meant not liking people, then perhaps the answer was not to let them live in the head like owners. If you do not trust them, then do not give them the whole house of your mind. For arguments, he reached toward what he had heard from religion, toward that half-remembered wisdom that there is no victory in every quarrel, that not every dispute deserves to grow teeth. Then came the memory from television, or perhaps from some Chinese channel half understood, half absorbed, where a sign in a nightclub or bar had given the law of fighting in two brutal lines: if you fight and win, you may go to jail; if you fight and lose, you may die. He did not know if the sign was fully real or if memory had sharpened it after the fact, but the lesson remained perfect in its simplicity. Better to avoid both endings if you can. Finally, he searched for the opposite of pressure, and because he was still a child, he did not answer like a psychologist would answer. He answered from experience. He remembered how he had felt after understanding “Hshouma” and “Ayb” through the previous reflections, how a certain tightness had loosened, how the body had relaxed, and how a burden had fallen without falling completely. So perhaps, he told the burning figure,*

*the opposite of pressure is not heroism or victory but relief. Perhaps it is whatever lets the chest open again.*

*As he spoke, the fire began to change. It did not go out suddenly. It dimmed by degrees, as though each word removed one hidden branch from beneath it. The heat softened. The outline of the figure grew clearer and less terrible. What had first seemed made entirely of flame now looked increasingly like a man standing inside flame, then a man wearing flame, then merely a man still carrying its memory on his skin. The more Osama spoke, the less the fire ruled the shape. And something in that moved him deeply, because it was the first time he had seen one of these reflections respond not to force, not to surrender, not to trust, and not to lesson alone, but to the attempt to name and untangle what was burning it. He did not yet know the right vocabulary for what he was doing. He only knew that speaking to the fire was changing it.*

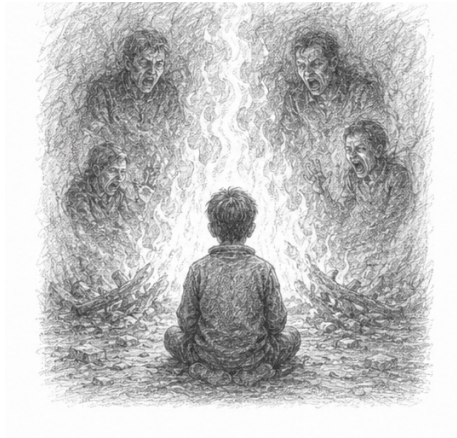
*At last, the final flames fell away. The figure did not remain standing. He loosened, collapsed inward, and became ash almost gently, as though the body had only been a temporary agreement between heat and shape. For a second Osama stared, almost offended by the abruptness of it. The previous reflections had entered him, or steadied him, or widened him. They had been taken inside, absorbed, and made part of him. So when the ashes began to lift under the faint evening air, he instinctively expected the same thing again. But that was not what happened. The ash did not come into him. It moved around him, away from him, like something leaving rather than something arriving. And at the same time, he felt another movement, small at first, then undeniable. It was as if some ash had been living inside him already, hidden in places too fine to notice, and now the wind was pulling that ash outward too. Not chunks, not visible smoke, but a sense of something stale and dark being taken out of him with each soft current of air. He did not feel emptied. He felt less burdened. Lighter. Cleaner. Almost whiter, though not so much in color*

*as in condition. The body became easier to inhabit. The breath moved more freely. Energy returned where pressure had sat. It was not the fullness he had felt when courage entered him. It was the opposite: not a filling, but a freeing.*

*That surprised him. He looked around almost anxiously, as if he might catch sight of whatever was leaving and demand it back on principle alone. Had he solved it? Had he not? Was this not supposed to become part of him if he had understood it correctly? As though in answer, the ash itself seemed to speak, not with a full human voice now, but with the fading insistence of something that had already accepted its own disappearance. No, it told him. This is the one thing you should not keep. This is not a gift to absorb. This is what must be let go. Some things strengthen you by entering. Others save you by leaving. That was the lesson. Anger turned inward, the revenge rehearsed in silence, the pressure of unsaid arguments, the private poison of imagined violence, these were not companions, not qualities, not reflections meant to live inside him as permanent residents. They were smoke. They were ash. They had to be given back to the wind.*

*As the last of the ash lifted into the air, Osama realized that it was not only the remains of the figure being carried away. Something else was going with it. The darkness itself seemed to loosen and follow, as though the ash were dragging the night behind it strand by strand. What had been dusk a moment before began to pale, not suddenly, but in that strange, impossible way dreams sometimes return a morning to the sky without asking permission from time. The street did not become bright all at once; it was gently cleared, as if a dirty veil had been pulled back from the light. The shadows thinned. The air seemed cleaner. Even the color of the world shifted, moving away from the heaviness that had wrapped it. And while the ash was carried off, Osama felt that same movement happening inside him. It was not that something new entered*

*him, as courage and trust had entered him before. It was that something dark was leaving. The anger that had been turned inward, the pressure of unsaid arguments, the private poison of imaginary revenge, the smoke of things never spoken properly, all of it seemed to rise and go with the ash. He did not feel emptied. He felt relieved. Lighter. Cleaner. More awake. It was as if the morning were not only returning to the street but also to him. And in that brief renewal he understood the lesson: some things strengthen you by entering, but some things save you only when they are finally allowed to leave.*



## THE LAST REFLECTION

*When the last of the ash had finished carrying the darkness away, and the street had recovered that impossible morning brightness which did not belong to any ordinary clock, Osama stood still for a few seconds and let his breathing settle. Something inside him had been cleaned. Not completed, not healed all at once, but cleaned. The heaviness that anger turned inward had laid over his mind was gone, and in its place there remained a clear, pale quiet, like a room after smoke has been pushed out through an open window. The road ahead, which until then had always seemed to lead into thicker confusion, now stretched with a rare and frightening simplicity. The light helped. The sky was no longer bruised by dusk. It was as though the world, having been dragged backward into night by ash and memory, had been given another chance to begin. He ought to have turned home then. He knew that. His mother would worry. His father, whether with concern or anger or both, would eventually begin counting his absence. Yet another force, stronger than common sense, kept him there. The invitation was still alive. The boys were still some-*

*where ahead. And because he had come this far through fear, distrust, shame, and the fire of inward anger, the thought of stopping before the end now felt less like prudence and more like betrayal.*

*It was then that he saw the last figure. At first, he was not sure he had seen anything at all. There was only a distortion at the far end of the road, a place where the morning light seemed to hesitate, bend, and then continue. He moved toward it. With each step he believed he was nearing it, and with each step the figure seemed to thin, as though closeness itself were dissolving the thing he approached. He tried to correct his direction. The outline returned faintly. He took a few quicker steps and realized, with a kind of irritation that deepened almost at once into unease, that he had already gone past it. He turned. There it was again, behind him now, transparent enough to disappear against the brightness if he looked too quickly, visible only when the eye softened and stopped demanding certainty. He walked back toward it. Again, he passed through the place where he thought it should be. Again, the body of it slipped away, not by moving but by failing to hold its shape where he expected it to be. For a while, the whole pursuit became absurd. He advanced, retreated, corrected, guessed, doubted, and overpassed it three times, maybe more. Each time, a different frustration rose in him. First came annoyance: why does even the last one refuse to stand where it is? Then came suspicion: is this another trick, another reflection whose lesson begins by humiliating me? Then, more dangerous than both, came the first true touch of the thing itself: the dim, internal voice that whispered that perhaps he would never reach it at all. Perhaps this was the point. Perhaps there are figures in life made only to be glimpsed, never grasped, and promises that retreat because they were never meant for hands like his. That thought did not explode. It spread. It was cold. It entered the knees first, then the chest, then the mind. And that was when the figure came closer by itself.*

*It did not glide. It did not stride. It seemed simply to grow. What*

*had been transparent and difficult to locate drew itself forward out of the light until its outline thickened enough to be unmistakable. It was another reflection of Osama, yes, but one so ravaged from within that, for a moment, he could not even think of it as a person. The skin was almost transparent, stretched over a body that no longer believed in the right to remain whole. Inside him, the organs looked as though they were melting downward in slow surrender. Not torn, not cut, not violently ruined from the outside, but collapsing by the logic of their own exhaustion. The heart had softened into something half-formed, as if courage had lost structure there long ago. The lungs sagged, heavy and translucent, as though hope itself had grown too tired to fill them. The stomach seemed to drip inward, all hunger dissolving into the same pale downward slide. Even the legs had something unfinished about them, as though they had begun many times to hold weight and then changed their minds. He was still standing, but only in the tragic way wax continues to hold the shape of a candle for a few seconds before it bends. Then he laughed.*

*It was not a human laugh. Or rather, it was human only in the way the worst things in human beings remain human long after they stop being merciful. The sound began deep, thick, and satisfied, and the more it continued, the larger he grew. It was the laughter of a tyrant hearing the gates open from the inside. The laughter of a king who has waited a long time for surrender and now recognizes it in the eyes of another before the other has admitted it. With every swell of it, the reflection expanded, and as he expanded, the transparency of his body became more hideous. Osama could see deeper into him. The melting inside was no longer merely weakness; it looked infernal. The organs glowed with the dull color of things too close to lava. Veins shone and sank like threads dragged through heat. The whole interior resembled a punishment carried out slowly enough that the punished becomes his own witness. It was not exactly hell as the child had imagined it from sermons and verses, but it was close enough to make the stomach recoil: the terror of seeing a body*

*become its own furnace while still remaining conscious of the process. The reflection laughed until the sound itself seemed to dry the air, then said what Osama had already begun to fear: yes, you are right. You cannot do it. You cannot reach me. You cannot overcome what you do not have the strength even to hold. The words did not strike him like an insult. They landed like recognition.*

*For a few moments, nothing around them moved except the burning transparency of that body and the slow labor of Osama's breathing. Then, without warning and without any visible hand making it happen, the world changed under them. The street dissolved. The buildings retreated. Light folded inward. And suddenly they were walking through a place that Osama knew and did not know at once. It looked like a landscape made of thought itself. Hills rose and dipped in every direction, not rocky hills, not green hills, but folds, ridges, and soft elevations like the living structure of a brain magnified into geography. Everything was made from curves, channels, pale ridgelines, and deep grooves. It was vast and intimate at once, as if he had somehow been placed inside the topography of his own mind. There were no clear roads. Every rise seemed to lead to another rise. Every slope, once climbed, revealed not resolution but another complication beyond it. Helplessness stood beside him there, no longer laughing now, but no less powerful for his silence. He did not need to explain where they were. Osama knew, in the way one knows dreams from the inside, that this was his own interior world, the place where thoughts lose their words and become terrain.*

*What followed was not a conversation in the ordinary sense. Neither of them seemed to speak with the mouth, and yet meaning moved between them as unmistakably as speech. It came partly through the figure, partly through the air around them, and partly through the place itself, as though the mind had chosen at last to narrate its own shape. Learned helplessness, the place told him, is not laziness. It is not cowardice in*

*the simple sense. It is what remains after too many efforts have died unanswered. It is what a person learns when he has reached for help and met punishment, spoken truth and met disbelief, resisted harm and met greater harm, and tried to move only to discover that movement changed nothing. After enough of that, the body does not merely become afraid. It becomes convinced that trying is a form of self-waste. Why stand if the blow comes anyway? Why speak if no one listens? Why begin if the ending has already been chosen by stronger hands? Helplessness is not the absence of desire. It is desire taught, over and over, that it has no authority over reality. And because the lesson is repeated in moments that matter, it becomes not a thought but a condition. The child does not say, "I choose surrender." The child says, without words, "This is how the world works. My effort has no citizenship here."*

*As they moved across those brain-hills, Osama began to see scenes forming in the folds around them, not as full memories this time, but as examples, almost like parables grown from the soil of his own life. The voice of the place continued. Great things, it said, are often closest at the exact point where the self first becomes convinced they are impossible. This is not because suffering itself is noble, nor because difficulty should be worshipped, but because every ascent has a point where the old strength is no longer enough and new strength has not yet made itself known. The slope grows steeper. The legs shake. The chest burns. The eye begins to measure distance with despair rather than courage. That is the border. Many turn back there, not because the summit rejected them, but because helplessness arrived and disguised itself as realism. It whispered that the mountain had become impossible, when in truth the mountain had simply become itself. A peak is not reached by the comfort of the lower road. It is reached by surviving the place where even hope begins to pant.*

*Then the voice gave him something he understood immediately: football. Not as a game only, but as law. The best goal, it said, is not always*

*the most beautiful in form. Not the early one that comes when bodies are still fresh and confidence still cheap. The unforgettable goal is often the one scored when the match is almost finished, when defeat has already entered the bones of the team, when the legs are heavy, the lungs tired, the crowd half-turned toward disappointment, and the referee has raised the hand that makes everyone understand there is almost no time left. One minute. Two at most. Then, because hopelessness has already spent itself, something cleaner becomes possible. A final organized attack. One accurate pass. Another. A run made on the edge of exhaustion. The strike. The equalizer. Perhaps it does not even win the match. Perhaps it merely prevents the loss. And yet it becomes the greatest goal, not because it was technically perfect, but because it arrived after the whole game had already begun teaching surrender. Its beauty comes from what it had to cross in order to happen. In that sense, helplessness is not always the end of effort. Sometimes it is the last false wall before the effort becomes real.*

*The brain-hills grew steeper as that understanding deepened. Osama felt tired there in a way different from ordinary tiredness. It was not the tiredness of walking or fighting. It was the tiredness of all the times he had stopped inwardly before life required him to stop outwardly. Each ridge they crossed seemed to ask him the same silent question in another form: how many things in your life did you abandon before they truly abandoned you? How many doors did you decide were locked because too many earlier doors had refused? He could not answer. The reflection beside him had lost his monstrous pleasure by then. He was no longer laughing. In that place, he seemed almost honest, which made him harder to hate. He belonged there. This was his kingdom. The folds of the mind had made room for him through years of repetition. Every failed attempt, every punishment that followed truth, every effort answered with futility had built another chamber in which he could live comfortably. Osama saw then that helplessness is seductive precisely because it offers relief from uncertainty. If nothing can change, then one need not*

*keep risking oneself on change. It is a dark peace, but peace nonetheless.*

*And yet the landscape kept clarifying as they walked. What at first had seemed one endless structure of folds and ridges began slowly to reveal a pattern. Certain paths were not random after all. Certain hills were not barriers but curved approaches. The more the reflection explained the nature of helplessness, the more the place itself ceased to be a prison of sameness and became instead a map. Osama understood then that naming a thing changes the mind's relationship to it. What is nameless spreads everywhere. What is named begins to occupy only its proper territory. He grew more tired, yes, but also more directed. And finally, far ahead, there appeared what looked almost absurd in that place: a gate. Not a metal gate, not a grand one, but a threshold shape at the edge of the hills, a place where the patterns of the mind seemed to thin enough to let the outer world back in. As soon as he saw it, his body recognized it with the relief of someone who has been drowning in complexity and suddenly glimpses grammar.*

*They walked toward it together. By then the reflection had changed too. The melting inside him had slowed. He still looked transparent, still mortal in an unfinished way, but not doomed. It was as if the more he was understood, the less infernal he became. When they reached the gate, Osama turned, expecting perhaps the old ritual: absorption, or disappearance, or some final riddle. But this reflection did not dissolve into him and did not ask to be kept. He stood where he was and said, with a calm almost stripped of character, that this was where his nature changed. In the earlier part of the road, he had appeared as helplessness because that was how Osama knew him. But beyond this gate, he said, he would have to live under another name. Not helplessness. Reality. Not because reality is hopeless, but because reality is where limits actually exist and must be met without fantasy. In the world beyond explanation, there would still be tiredness. Still obstacles. Still late hours, closed doors,*

*heavy consequences, and unfinished strength. But reality is not the same as surrender. Reality says, "This is hard." Helplessness says, "Therefore, stop." Reality says, "This is heavy." Helplessness says, "Therefore, it cannot be moved." Reality keeps the mountain standing. Helplessness convinces the climber that no mountain should be attempted.*

*Osama listened, and for the first time in the whole journey, he felt something closer to completion than to improvement. Not perfection, not invulnerability, not the childish fantasy of becoming untouchable, but something more believable than that: readiness. It did not arrive with noise. It did not strike him like a revelation in the theatrical sense. It came quietly, with the calm authority of something that had been assembling itself for years in hidden rooms of the soul and had only now decided to show its face. He stood at the threshold between the folded hills of the mind and the world beyond them, and for one suspended moment he understood that all the reflections had not been delaying him from life. They had been returning him to it.*

*Then he opened his eyes. Not in the street. Not on the road. Not before the waiting boys. He opened them in a room he knew intimately, a room whose familiarity reached him before sight itself became clear. It was not the room of the child who had wandered through fear, shame, distrust, anger, and helplessness. It was the room of a married man, a room with order, with softness, with the quiet dignity of a life built carefully after years spent surviving disorder. There was a beautiful smell in the air, a fragrance he recognized at once, the same scent he always liked to spread before leaving the room. Even that small detail struck him with force, because it belonged not to struggle but to care, not to fear but to habit shaped by peace. This was his house. The real one. The house where he lived with his wife and his beautiful young son. And for a few seconds he remained still, letting the truth arrange itself around him, because he understood before fully understanding that something irreversible had*

happened.

*It had been a dream. Not one of those solemn night dreams that people expect to carry mystery, but a dream born from an ordinary nap, the kind of sleep no one respects because it belongs to the weak middle of the day. Somewhere between lunch and work, between noon and two o'clock, in a small interval that should have been forgettable, his soul had opened a door that years of waking effort had not managed to open by force. That astonished him more than anything else. If it had come at midnight, perhaps he would have accepted it more easily. But this had come in the plain, almost useless hour of a man resting because he was tired, and yet it had done what reading, discipline, patience, advice, and experience had failed to do. It had reached the place that thought alone could not reach. It had taken what was scattered inside him and given it form.*

*For years he had believed, perhaps without admitting it clearly, that the answers would come from outside him. From time. From education. From wisdom. From becoming older. From one more conversation, one more book, one more effort to outgrow what he had once been. But the dream had shown him something far more unsettling and far more merciful: not everything can be solved by training, by reading, by listening, by enduring, or even by understanding in the ordinary sense. Some things yield only when the self becomes quiet enough for them to speak in its own language. And that language, for him, had come in the form of a dream.*

*He lay there thinking of all the questions he had carried for years, questions about pain, about fear, about shame, about the strange way the past can survive inside the body long after life seems to have moved on. He had always believed that experience would eventually answer them, or that maturity would dissolve them, or that perhaps they were*

*simply part of his past that could never be forgiven and therefore could only be endured. But this particular dream, this one unnecessary nap in the middle of an ordinary day, had done something no deliberate effort had managed to do. It had not erased his history. It had not declared him healed in some false and childish way. It had not made suffering beautiful. It had done something more serious than that: it had taken the faceless powers inside him and given them names, shapes, limits, and voices. Fear. Distrust. "Hshouma" and "Ayb." Anger turned inward. Helplessness. They had all stepped forward, spoken, been met, and been seen. And because they had been seen, they were no longer gods.*

*At first, as always, another question rose in him immediately behind the peace. Why now? Why this day? Why this nap? Why this room? Was it rescue, or was it preparation? Was God showing him mercy or readying him for something worse? That too was part of his nature. He had become a man who asked and asked again, not because he distrusted truth, but because questioning had become one of the only honest ways he knew to move through life. All that had happened to him, all those years of confusion, silence, punishment, overthinking, and inward battles, had shaped him into someone who could no longer stand passively before the surface of things. He questioned not because everything needed to be doubted, but because beneath every ordinary thing he sensed another layer, another dimension, another unanswered shape. And for a long time, that habit had exhausted him. But now, lying in that room with the fragrance of his own life around him, he understood that the questions themselves were not always enemies. Sometimes they were doors.*

*Still, one truth became clearer than all the others, and it arrived not with fear, but with relief: perhaps the dream had not come to prepare him for another war at all. Perhaps it had come to end one. Not the wars of the world, not the trials that life would continue to set before him, but the long hidden war within him, the war between the child who had suffered, the*

*man who remembered, and the self who had never fully stopped standing against its own reflection. And that was when he finally understood the meaning of the invitation.*

*It had never really been an invitation to the match. It had never truly been an invitation to follow boys down a street, or climb rooftops, or chase shadows from one corner of the city to another. Those were only the forms the message had borrowed because the soul sometimes has to disguise its truth in the language of the child who first learned to suffer. The invitation had been for something else entirely. It had been an invitation to peace. Peace with himself. Peace with the frightened child who had not known how to answer the world except through silence, fear, or inward fire. Peace with the man he had become, who had carried too many questions not because he was broken, but because questioning had been one of the only ways he knew to keep moving. Peace, even, with the fact that not everything in the past could be repaired, explained, or conquered by effort alone. Some things could only be met, named, understood, and finally set down.*

*That was why the dream felt less like an adventure than like an answer. Not an answer in the narrow sense, not a neat explanation, but an answer in the older, deeper sense, the kind that rearranges your relationship to pain rather than pretending pain never existed. It told him that peace is not forgetting. Peace is not denial. Peace is not the lie that the wound never happened. Peace is recognition without self-hatred. It is the moment when a person stops fighting himself with the same cruelty life once used against him. It is the moment when memory remains but ceases to reign. In that sense, the invitation was not asking him to become someone else. It was asking him, at last, to stop abandoning himself.*

*And perhaps that was the deepest mercy of all. He did not need to*

*erase the old wounds in order to stop living inside them. He did not need to deny the darkness in order to keep it from owning the whole sky. He did not need to become heroic in the way boys dream of heroism. He only needed, finally, to stop making war on his own soul. In the years before this dream, he had believed strength meant learning how to survive what hurt him. Now he saw that true strength also includes knowing when to stop turning the injury into identity. What had not killed him had not automatically made him stronger. Many things that do not kill still damage, still warp, still bury parts of the self alive. Strength comes later, if it comes at all, from what a person chooses to build with what remains.*

*Outside the room, the day would continue in its ordinary rhythm. He would still return to work. Responsibilities would still wait. His wife would still speak in her familiar voice. His son would still exist in the bright, unknowing innocence of childhood. The world would not pause simply because one man had received a private answer in an afternoon nap. Yet something irreversible had happened. He knew it with the strange certainty by which we know some dreams are not dreams in the ordinary sense but messages disguised as symbols because plain speech would have been too weak to carry them. Whether it had come from God, from the soul, from memory, or from some hidden meeting place between all three no longer mattered as much as the fact that it had come. And because it had come, he could no longer honestly pretend not to know.*

*He rose eventually, not as a man whose problems had ended, but as one who had at last been invited into peace with himself. There would be other questions. There would be other fears. Life would continue to test the fragile treaty he had just signed with his own heart. But now he knew something he had not known before: the invitation had already been accepted. It had brought him not to victory over others, not to mastery over the world, but to the rarest place a wounded soul can reach, the place where it no longer needs to run from its own reflection.*

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*And in that sense, the dream was not an interruption of life.*

*It was life, speaking in the only voice deep enough to be obeyed.*



## AUTHOR'S REFLECTION

*I did not write this book simply to tell a story. I wrote it because some things do not leave a person just because time passes. They remain. They change form. They go underground. They become silence, fear, hesitation, shame, strange reactions, or dreams that return without asking permission. But they remain.*

*I believe childhood is one of the deepest architectures of human life. What happens there does not stay there. It enters the voice, the body, the imagination, the ability to trust, the way a person receives love, the way he responds to humiliation, and even the way he dreams. People often think childhood is something small, light, and temporary, as though a person simply passes through it and moves on. I do not believe that. I believe it continues, often quietly, long after the visible years have ended.*

*That is one of the reasons I chose to write this story in the way I did. I did not want a simple, straight narrative where events happen and then end. That is not how memory works. That is not how fear works. That is not how buried pain works. The soul does not always tell the truth in a direct line. Sometimes it speaks in fragments. Sometimes it returns*

*through symbols. Sometimes it takes the form of a street, a rooftop, an invitation, a voice, an empty place, a door, a radio, a child, a figure, or a dream. I wanted the structure of the book itself to reflect that reality.*

*The invitation in this story is not only an invitation to a football match. It is also an invitation into the hidden rooms of the self. At first, it appears small, almost ordinary, something a boy would naturally want. But beneath it there is another movement. It becomes a passage into fear, memory, shame, courage, distrust, helplessness, and finally into the possibility of peace. That mattered to me deeply, because many people live their whole lives responding to invitations they do not fully understand. They think they are moving toward one thing, while in truth they are being led toward something much older inside them.*

*I also wanted to show that a child is shaped not only by what is done to him openly, but also by atmosphere. By tone. By the emotional weather of the house. By whether his words are heard or cut off. By whether fear is normal in the home. By whether shame is used as a method of control. By whether adults know how to guide, or only how to overpower. A child does not need to be destroyed in spectacular ways in order to be wounded deeply. Sometimes what shapes him most is repetition: repeated fear, repeated silencing, repeated humiliation, repeated confusion, and repeated exposure to tension he cannot yet name.*

*In this book, I return again and again to a few forces that I believe decide much of a child's inner life: fear, shame, silence, violence, and the absence of emotional safety. Fear teaches the body to freeze before life has even spoken fully. Shame enters deeper than punishment because it makes the child turn against himself. Silence teaches him that truth can become dangerous. Violence does not end with the blow; it continues as anticipation, as hesitation, and as the expectation of harm. And when emotional safety is missing, even ordinary life becomes unstable. A voice,*

*a room, a laugh, a delay, a question, even an invitation can become charged with danger.*

*That is why the mother, the father, the building, the kiosk, the walls, the rooftop, and even the street all matter in this story. They are not only settings. They are part of the child's formation. The building listens. The walls carry fragments. The street intrudes. The apartment tries to resist collapse through discipline. The father becomes both a source of fear and a product of older fear. The mother becomes love mixed with exhaustion, and care mixed with helplessness. Nothing is neutral, because for a child nothing is ever only itself. A room is never just a room. A closed door is never just a door. A radio is never just a radio. Once memory enters them, they become part of the person.*

*At the same time, I did not want to write a book that only says childhood wounds us and leaves it there. That would be incomplete, and perhaps even dishonest. I wanted to show that the inner life, though wounded, is still active. A child imagines, revises, dreams, compensates, rehearses, and survives. Imagination in this story is not decoration. It is not there to make the book strange for the sake of strangeness. It is there because imagination is one of the ways the self tries to continue living when direct reality becomes too heavy. A child may not have language for what is happening, but he still has images, dreams, rehearsals, fantasies of courage, and strange symbolic paths through which the soul keeps working.*

*That matters because I believe one of the greatest mistakes adults make is underestimating the inward life of children. Children are not empty beings waiting to become human later. They are already interpreting, already storing, already suffering, already hoping, and already making meaning from what surrounds them. They may not explain it well. They may not have the words. But the absence of words does not*

*mean the absence of depth.*

*If there is hope inside this book, it is not the cheap hope of pretending that everything can be undone. I do not believe all wounds disappear. I do not believe memory can always be repaired in some neat way. But I do believe something else: what is hidden can be faced. What is buried can sometimes be named. And once named, it no longer rules entirely from the dark. That is why the story moves, finally, toward reflection and toward peace. Not because peace means forgetting, but because peace can begin when a person stops fighting himself with the same cruelty life once used against him.*

*I think people should care much more seriously about early childhood. Not only about food, school, or discipline, important as those things are, but also about emotional safety, listening, protection from humiliation, and the child's right to speak. A child needs more than care of the body. He also needs care of the invisible world growing inside him. If that world is filled too early with fear, silence, and shame, the consequences do not simply vanish when he grows older. They continue in ways that are sometimes subtle and sometimes devastating.*

*Perhaps that is one of the deepest reasons I wrote this book. Not only to narrate pain, but also to insist that what happens in early life matters. The child is not "too young to remember" in the way adults often comfort themselves into believing. Memory is not only what the mind can retell clearly. Memory also lives in the body, in reaction, in hesitation, in tone, in dreams, in what frightens us without explanation, and in what we keep returning to without fully knowing why.*

*If this book says anything clearly, I hope it says this: children must be taken seriously. Their fear must be taken seriously. Their shame must be taken seriously. Their silences must be taken seriously. And their inner life must be treated not as something small or decorative, but as one of*

*the sacred places where a human being is being formed.*

*I did not write this to provide a final answer. I wrote it because I believe speaking matters. Naming matters. Thinking matters. Dreaming matters. And sometimes the path toward healing does not begin in certainty, but in the courage to look honestly at what has been living inside us for years.*

*If this story leaves behind anything, I hope it leaves behind not only sadness but also attention. Attention to childhood. Attention to memory. Attention to the way a person is shaped long before he learns how to explain himself. And perhaps, above all, attention to the simple truth that care given early is never small. It may decide the whole architecture of a life.*

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