

The Isle of Males

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Any similarity with actual names, events, locations or times is pure coincidence.

Idriss didn't know where things would lead, nor how they would turn out. He could not have anticipated the incidents and events that lay in store for him. His name bore no relation to Moulay Idriss Zerhoun; this Idriss of ours did not have a name studded with precious numbers, he wasn't Idriss the First, nor the Second or the Third. He was one of the darawish – just ordinary blokes –and that was enough for him. He could never have imagined for a single moment the intertwining relationships that were to weave their threads into an intricate piece of fabric, a cloth that would serve to reveal more than it concealed. He didn't know how it happened, and he was not remotely responsible for what he did. As the popular drinking song goes, *it's circumstances that make a person* – and they weave relationships, too.

One day Idriss found himself a stone's throw from a venerable seventy-year-old, the principal of the group of schools in Timghalidti. In Amazigh language the name Timghalidti means 'the great stone', one suitable for use as a lookout point. Timghalidti is located on that great plain known as the Isle of Males.

Intense heat, the place semi-deserted, void of people. Means of transport Idriss was not used to. Jalabas everywhere. Another language, his original language. This Earth a land without maps.

He hadn't known that this piece of ground existed anywhere on Earth. It was not for him to object to her existence, this being-place, nor to his being there himself in her presence. The two of them met. She was empty of people and plant-life. There was very, very little life in her, but she was a space for mysticism, for solitude, for old age or even for death.

He came to her bearing all of his possessions on his sharply stooped back. Some books, some official papers – his national identity card, and his letter of appointment as a philosophy teacher at Dar Al Hatami for Science and Knowledge. He carried with him all the tools required for sleep– a mattress, a blanket and covers – and the foodstuffs his mother had provided him with to live on whilst waiting to come alive. He bore all of this, plus part of the weight of years, and a great burden of sorrow at the eternal shock of separation and encounter.

He did not protest at the way things were for him. He was happy to leave the world of begging and inefficiency behind and head for the workplace, a long-awaited dream as far as he was concerned. Yes, the dream had been late in coming true, but it had risen like the sun, dawning before what remained of the end of his life faded to dusk. After five hard years the homeland had finally opened his arms and embraced Idriss, kissing him on the forehead and bidding him to "Go forth, spread science and knowledge. Let the people become acquainted with each other, and with their own selves. Wage war on ignorance, as did Socrates, Plato, Avicenna and Averroes".

Then the homeland had loosened his embrace, released Idriss from his arms, and retrieved his lips from Idriss's brow. His scent began to fade into the distance, the heat of his chest gradually receding. The homeland grew distant.

Idriss wept copiously at the alienation and homesickness he felt after that. And so he pitched up in the Isle of Males carrying all his possessions, the most important of which was the homeland's kiss on his brow.

When he arrived at the station it was deserted. Extensive featureless flat spaces, low housing density. Distances more plentiful than people. He looked east, then west. East was like west: no coordinates here. He slid his backpack off, to give himself a break from it and it a break from him. He tossed it onto the ground, then set off in search of somewhere he could stay whilst waiting to rent a home for his time here in the Isle of Males – the Isle of his origins, his memory, and so much lifeache.

The Earth was barren save for a few buildings. Hotels, cafés, shops, and many eyes following Idriss, saying, “A new teacher. Yes, this is the season when they either alight here, or migrate North”.

They looked, and he looked. They were amazed, and they wondered. He too was amazed, and he also wondered. *Who are you all? Who am I? What are you doing here, and what will I do? What are you carrying behind those faces on which time has etched such stories, such tales?* He scrutinised the faces as those other eyes scrutinised him. He looked at the colours of the people. Geometric shapes appeared in their faces. He stumbled across round and triangular forms, and others that had not yet been given the chance to fully take shape. From among all those faces a nameless hotel appeared. Idriss would later come to know that it was Hotel Hassan; the hotel was known by its owner's name. It was a strange place. Compelling, grubby. Humble, of course.

The two men went upstairs to the first floor. People ate downstairs here, and slept upstairs. Hassan, accompanying Idriss up the stairs, was one of the people who ran the hotel. They reached the room. It was not up to Idriss to choose. He left it to the room to open her arms and embrace him; but she didn't kiss him on the forehead like the homeland had.

He went back to the station, where he had left his possessions. They were all things he'd wrested from others: shoes from his brother, a blanket and a few locks of hair from his mother. Word was that his pillow had been made out of his father's beard. It was very comfortable to sleep on, since it was not a zealous

beard. He went back to the station and found his backpack right where he'd left it. It hadn't gone anywhere. It was covered in dusty soil; all it needed was a spider's web, some doves and a few strands of faith, and it could have become a shrine, drawn visitors.

How safe this country was! Or maybe Idriss's stuff just wasn't enticing enough to get stolen.

He took his life kit and crammed it and himself into the room, the most beautiful thing about whom was her openness to emptiness. Everything was Amazigh to the very marrow – the people, the places, the clothes. Even the asphalt seemed Amazigh: pale and thin. The corridors and paths were too narrow for two-way traffic, and did not brook with any duality. Either you pass or I pass, we can't pass together. Ennui commenced before work.

The teacher bent the rules of Arabic grammar to reassemble the dismembered body parts of an identity he had reluctantly lost. He was originally Amazigh, but time and place had kept him from learning his language, his identity. He felt cheated. Then he resolved to learn the language of the people from the people. He was ready: his blood was Amazigh, his tongue was Arabic, and his heart not yet full of malice.

He was a homesick stranger in his own homeland now, his alienation ever increasing, fast becoming two parallel estrangements, one from the South and the other from the North. He found himself, a person of Amazigh origins, reduced to begging for the fundamental bases of speech.

He rummaged around in his memory, searching for something of his tongue, but he found nothing except a few words meaning *bread* and *water*, and questions such as *How are you? Who are you? Where are you going?* He stumbled across other words that were supposedly obscene, or that people deemed as such just because they were names for areas of the body present in ghostly form but yet to be acknowledged. He slammed his memory shut and gathered up the rest of his long limbs sprawled across that small place. When he made to leave the room he bumped his head on the lintel of the decayed little brown door. The philosophy teacher wasn't a tall man, and getting through the door hardly required him to crawl on his stomach. There was no public declaration of war.

Usually people bang themselves on things, they bump into them; but on this occasion it was the door who hit Idriss, not the other way around. It was a deliberate blow, a message, delivered specifically to his brow. A bloody wound was caused, on that very same forehead once kissed by the homeland. But it was essential for Idriss not to get upset about the wound, or even appear worried in the slightest, for that would dent his prestige, as well as diminishing his patience and forbearance. In the homeland men don't cry, and they don't feel pain. They bear beatings and hunger and pain, the bitterness of their morsel and the humiliation of being scorned, without once crying out. They are heroes, and heroes don't break down easily in public. Man is invincible. He gets wounded and takes no notice, gets sick and doesn't mind. His teeth fall out? That's for the best – his teeth must be as coarse and weathered as stumps in a forest for him to be considered a man.

Hassan asked Idriss why there was blood on his brow. With a laugh, he answered: "I was getting to know the room, so I caressed her blue walls. I ran my hand over that blueness like it was a sea of young women's breasts. I got so carried away with touching her that the door thought I was seducing his darling room and trying to lure her away from him. After that he returned me my deposit, and I realised that touching females in the Isle of Males is forbidden, even if the couple are a room and a door." Hassan laughed in Amazigh, and Idriss laughed at his laughter, but in Arabic.

The winds here are very close to the people, with their own distinctive scent, colour, speed and direction. Although Idriss had never seen such organised winds before, all of this was normal for an Amazigh wind. Even time itself seemed to be Amazigh: neither late nor early but halted, or at least resting. None of the other times Idriss knew got tired, but Amazigh time did.

When he asked the shopkeeper for two rounds of bread, the man laughed in Amazigh, and said: "Trit madiline?" meaning "Do you want a madeleine?" This name had nothing to do with Albright, as in the Isle of Males a madeleine is a little cake. Idriss thought for a moment. He didn't object. At the end of the day this was still flour, just in another form. He bought a big packet of six madeleines, then he asked the shopkeeper again about the bread. The question

yielded nothing but more foolishness, however, the shopkeeper continuing to ask him, “Trit madiline?” (Do you want a madeleine?). Idriss laughed hard in Arabic. He blamed himself – he was of Amazigh origin, and yet he couldn’t laugh in his people’s tongue. He didn’t buy another packet of madeleines. He left the shopkeeper, whose mouth was still open, the bright white plastic teeth implanted in it ready to devour anything. The teacher yanked his pocket from the man’s mouth, then began searching for his workplace. What was it like? Where was it located?

Despite space being full of gaps, it was hard to reach Dar Al Hatami for Science and Knowledge. There was nothing for it but to ask for help. But in what tongue? He asked directions of some of the passersby, but first he had to answer a number of questions: *Where are you from? What do you do? Do you have a tribe? Are you married?* He felt that they were all informants – the moqadems and choyoukh who were the neighbourhood agents of authority. He answered, and then answered again, until it turned into a cross-examination. He had to repeat the answers to the same questions over and over with each attempt to open up to these folk, the people of the Isle of Males.

He finally reached Dar Al Hatami for Science and Knowledge. He stood in front of it. The door was closed, and the flag of the homeland who had once kissed him on the brow was now flapping with a similarly odd and intense ardor. Idriss had never seen a flag flap with such vehemence before. It was a mercilessly ululating tongue. He left the flag to its trilling, and went back to his room, or their room, in fact, the one they had rented to him so he could seek shelter from the cold. He unpacked some of his clothes, and discovered that they were Arab and the cold was Amazigh.

We have become two, us and them, even though the homeland is one, and the Isle of Males borders the sea. He would have to get to know the other new teachers, so that they could share out the burdens of living.

He managed, together with two Arabic language teachers, to rent a house. It was small, but big enough to await life in.

Philosophy and Arabic language came together in an Amazigh home. The windows of the house looked straight out onto Josef Ibn Saada the Jew’s shop,

where he sold eau de vie to the lifeless. His shop was small and dirty; he subsequently sold it and went on to become a trader in red meats.

Josef Ibn Saada was more Amazigh than Idriss, closer to Idriss's people than he was, just because he possessed both the elixir of life and the tongue of the people.

The teachers shared the house with each other, but in reality they were more tolerant of hosting some other living creatures there than they were of each other. There was room enough for flies, and a few beetles, and also for a large family of mice. The mouse family ate what the teachers ate, hid when they woke up, then got lively when they slept. Only the flies were constantly at work.

Whenever the teachers felt like letting go and having a bit of fun, they would wake up during the mice's shift. They'd besiege the mice, kill some of them and then laugh about it, as proud as cats. After the slaughter they would open the windows looking out onto the sea and sit down to ruminate, all over again, about what they had suckled from the breasts of one of the homeland's wives: literature and art, and many other things yet to be properly digested. One morning they realised that their remaining life-credit was dwindling. They knew that their salaries would not be raining down on them for much longer, especially since the season of droughts was approaching for the darawish, who would surely be obliged to tighten their belts more than others.

A man is someone who can live without money, cross without a bridge, heal without medicine and dream without sleep. O Isle of Males, how difficult masculinity is in you.

Idriss was there now, and Josef's eau de vie was trying hard to save him from the cold, from the risk of being banished, and from shattering into pieces.

Josef's eau de vie has a stinging and lethal flavour – take a sip and you'll feel like you're drinking fire, quenching your thirst with lava. That alcohol scorches, for real. But no matter how much it makes you want to bellow in indignation, wrenching your face off and pulling it into pieces and hurling them around all over the place, you must be a man. Let the fire eat you from the inside and keep smiling. Nothing defeats a man in the Isle of Males, not even drinking Josef's blazing lava. It's a sip of hell that ushers life into the realm of

possibilities. But what life? Word was that Idriss's very lips were infatuated with this Josefian fire kiss, and that he had declared that it was a thing of great beauty for someone to pass through hell's orbit before levelling out in the depths.

When the philosophy teacher was set on fire from the inside, the smoke of that explosive ignition billowed up through him. After this he gradually came to feel how all his limbs were independent of each other. His right hand was there, but the left one couldn't find it. His leg was stretched out in front of the fire, and he couldn't reach it. All his limbs were scattered around, filling the gaps. Idriss was drunk now, alive and life-giving. He was no longer as he had been. He had rearranged the place, and granted himself enough time to delight in his intoxication.

Nothing comes for free. First he had to get burned, so as to be released and rise up out of his own ashes like a phoenix, more splendid and magnificent than he had been before.

The most beautiful thing about the Isle of Males was its nights. At night it was hard to distinguish what was what. A misty world. Ghosts, or shadows of things. Night is a space for scheming, for dreaming, for drifting – so dream howsoever you wish, fill the blackness with sea as you please. You are freer in the night than you are in the day. The pace of Idriss's limbs slowed, some of them became unresponsive. He realised that he had come alive, and he understood the high quality of Josef's wares. Remembering something, he said out loud: "It's my reeling around and staggering that astonishes me in life – the way no part of me is dominating any other part: I've become a kingdom for freedom. My self was liberated from myself, then I vomited up Josef's life, or what was left of it, along with a little of my guts". Idriss was drunk now. He gripped his head with what was left of his hands, and squeezed it. Then he put a little salt in his mouth so that he wouldn't vomit up his dreams, and slept.

Morning came. Idriss had no choice in the matter, he had to get on with it, and start again. But the man was not ready, because the life he'd purchased from Josef for forty dirhams had drained out of him, leaving behind a terrible headache and a bilious heaving hunger. He realised, that morning, that something internal or external was responsible for what had been done to all his limbs, his

head, his stomach, his organs. Something or other was responsible for the bruises on his right side, too. They were obviously the result of a fall, although he had no memory of falling. He sensed that someone was fiddling around with all of his limbs, pulling them this way and that and making them do things they didn't want to do. He found it very strange the way his body had been ecstatic last night but was now quaking.

True, the eau de vie he had bought from Josef Ibn Saada had sparked a brawl between all his limbs and organs, internal and external. But it wasn't long before the teacher grasped what was really going on: the eau de vie was Jewish, the house was Amazigh, and Idriss was from the deep dry riverbed full of walnut and almond trees over yonder. An incoherent superabundance, a profusion of elements as yet out of balance with each other.

The two hands were very tolerant and magnanimous. Despite everything the clumsy head had done with them the previous day, here they were now, full of gracious kindness, forgetting all the affronts, and binding a cloth around that damn stubborn head. All the limbs cooperated so as to stand the body up, but Idriss couldn't really see why he had to stand up at all, after Josef's life had abandoned him, leaving him to wake up clinically dead.

The day passed with great difficulty. He needed to answer a question that struck him as significant: *Why does life begin with the taste of fire and lava, and end in a pounding headache and an all-consuming nausea?*

He knew that in order to come alive he would have to die, first and last. The first steps taken on this earth were like any other action undertaken by a person for the first time – kissing a girl, seeing the sea, travelling by train, riding horses and women...

As far as Idriss was concerned the workplace was a place of worship. So when he entered for the first time he crossed the threshold with his right foot, saying "Bismillah" as he did so – even though he could still pick up a whiff of Josef, even in there.

He would often talk about the principal's face. It was akin to an ancient monument, an evocative ruin that lent itself to being reinvoked. There was something childish about the principal's tone of voice. When addressing the male

and female teachers to advise them on their work, the tips he offered were often softened with a *Petaps*, by which he meant *Perhaps*. The fact that this error – committed by the head of an educational institution, no less – gave Idriss pause, surely demonstrated that he himself was an outstanding maestro. His vocation would turn out to be the correcting of other people’s mistakes, and perhaps not only their linguistic ones, either. But Idriss soon realised that, distracted by the high of linguistic heroism, he too had made a mistake – that of overlooking the actual content of what was being said. He scolded himself a little for this as he picked up his class timetable, along with a box of white chalk and a sponge to wipe the blackness off the blackboard.

The principal asked them to get going, without kissing any of them on the forehead like the homeland once had.

Idriss left, carrying the tools of his trade. He couldn’t recall afterwards whether his right or left foot had led him across the threshold. However, it didn’t really matter on the way out of a place. He took no notice of anything at all until he banged his head on the little door, which had been big on the way in.

The little doors here often hit high heads. Who hit whom? It wasn’t important anymore. Blood was flowing once again, since the first wound had not yet healed up. The box of chalk fell to the ground and smashed into pieces. Idriss was no giant, but when the male and female teachers went into Dar Al Hatami it was a spacious place, longing to welcome them. The big doors opened on the way in, and the little ones on the way out. Idriss learned his lesson. He had been hit twice so far, always on his forehead, where the homeland had kissed him, and always by the many little doors in this place. He’d been blessed once and made bleed a few times. How bloody was the encounter with you, O Isle of Males, city of the South.

Hall number five at Dar Al Hatami for Science and Knowledge had been designated as the philosophy “agora”. There weren’t many pupils in general, and the attendance of female pupils in particular was extremely low. It was unfathomable how an Earth as vast as this, with such a huge number of tribes so deeply rooted in history, had not put forth a more plentiful crop than these meagre spikes of grain, most of them bearing no seed. Idriss was astonished by

this. He knew the task ahead would be both a difficult and a necessary one, on account of how confused and turbulent people's relationship here to knowledge was. They didn't reject it as such, and nor did it reject them; but neither one of them approached the other to plant a kiss on their brow and call for a fresh start.

His head was still hurting. It ached from the blows it had been dealt by the little doors, and also from the poison given him to drink by Josef, seller of eau de vie to the lifeless.

He went home in the evening. Before going up the little stairs he turned towards the life shop. It propositioned him. But his stomach turned and his guts rose up, and he decided to die tonight so as to come alive tomorrow.

He went upstairs. When he reached the door he was on his guard, this time, so that his forehead wouldn't have to bear anymore blows. He went inside to find the place resonating with the moans of Kadim Al Sahir's "I'm yours, so choose..."<sup>1</sup> He passed by the stinking toilet, so low-ceilinged it was impossible to stand upright in there, though crouching was just about feasible. He hurried towards the most beautiful thing in the house, the two windows overlooking the street, the people, and Josef's shop. Idriss looked out of the window and saw Josef among the barrels, that odd hat on his head. Seen from above the shop looked dirty, but the alcohol Josef made sterilised the place and kept Josef, seventy autumns young, rosy-cheeked every morning.

The dirt seemed colourful, to Idriss. Kadim Al Sahir was still invoking images of burning passion, agony and love. Idriss desired life once again, especially since it was only a stone's throw away. He went back downstairs. He asked Josef for some burning fire. His innards contracted and he felt nauseous, but he cursed his organs for not tolerating life and informed them all that tonight he would be mixing Jews with America and drinking them down in one, as that would be the most merciful thing for all concerned.

He took what he took from Josef. He stopped by the storekeeper who had sold him almost a whole box of madeleines the previous day. "Trit madiline?" asked the man. Idriss replied: "Coca Cola".

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgGvlo76Wak>

Although it was in the fridge, it was very warm, since the fridge was not plugged in. There was in fact no electrical supply to the whole shop.

The principal had informed them that work would be commencing the following day. Idriss prepared dinner, taking a sip every so often from the “Jewmerican” drink. He called it this because the eau de vie was from Josef the Jew, and the Coca Cola from America. Life tonight was not like it had been yesterday: after staggering around fondling all the walls in the house, he sat down, separating part of himself from the other part. He brought philosophy out from inside himself, took what was left of the homeland’s kiss from his forehead, and sat between them. With the homeland on his right and philosophy on his left, he asked each of them to spell out what was being demanded of him. “What do you expect of me? What exactly are you anticipating?”

The mice were moving around the place. Idriss realised that he had gone over his allotted time: the mice’s turn had come now. He turned out the light, then slept, leaving philosophy and the homeland to flirt with each other from time to time. The mice’s laughter could be heard, little murmurs and breaths, hurrying, dying down, dying out and then starting up again.

When he awoke in the morning he couldn’t find the rest of the eau de vie he had bought the previous evening. Josef’s bottle was empty, and there was no trace of water on Earth. At that point he felt very embarrassed. He knew that he had pushed the homeland to an act of depravity. But, when he apologetically asked the homeland to excuse him, the homeland laughed and said, “It’s alright”. Idriss knew then that the homeland loved life.

The teacher ate the last two madeleines in the packet, drank a hot cup of tea, and smoked a cigarette (or something like a cigarette) – perhaps that would restore to him some of the life that came to him by night and departed by day. He gathered his tools together, piling them up so they would smash some philosophers’ bones, then set off for the classroom. Idriss was not like the people of the Isle of Males; they were still looking, examining, wondering, but they did not dare let on what they truly wanted. Everything there happened in silence. Jalabas everywhere, faces wearing masks that hid a lot of talk and a lot of pain.

Some of Idriss's pupils were quite old – men with beards, and women ready for life – but they would need a huge amount of support if they were to become as mighty as their ancestors. The teacher was not the first Socrates to come to the Isle of Males. There had been someone before him. Yesterday had left its mark, and it would be up to Idriss to decipher it well.

The pupils knew their new philosophy teacher was freshly graduated. Scared by his inexperience, they were all sizing him up, attempting to ascertain the nature of his relationship with religion, and with Amazigh, and with the Earth. They wanted to find everything out in record time, but their questions actually revealed more about them than they informed them about their teacher. Their questions revealed the way of life led by people in the Isle of Males.

The first meetings with his pupils were harsh and challenging for Idriss. He knew that knowledge began with a person recognising their own ignorance, so he began drawing the pupils' ignorance out, mining it and placing it before them for them to examine and thus realise the extent of the delusions they were labouring under. They were rebellious, enraged, criticising the state of the country, the people, the Earth. Many of them grew beards in declaration of something or other. An unfounded, baseless and irresponsible revolt. They started from the beginning: *Who are you? Who are we? What does it mean to be human?*

How memorable is the mirror's frequent presence in Idriss's philosophy classes. Explaining the concept of consciousness one day, he said:

“When you stand before a mirror and look beyond what you share with others, once you've shed all moral, religious and political masks, and you're standing stripped naked of everything, contemplate yourselves. Meditate on what those selves contain – the lies, the hate, the vanity, the egotism and the many other things seen by no one but God and the owners of those selves, yourselves. When you attain that bare and exposed state, you will ask yourselves: who made us this way, and why? Who carved our personalities out in all their precise detail? How much freedom is allotted to us, within all this structure? Wonder, step back a little, contemplate – then go out to seek the truth of your own selves. No one is deliberately a coward, but he might be raised on cowardice, and on shouting in

silence, loving in silence. You all want to speak, but you don't have tongues. Are you really what you want to be? Let's do an experiment."

Idriss asked them all to close their eyes and try to summon up such events and memories as were unknown to anyone else but them. Then he said: "Now, have a look and see whether it was truly *you* who wanted to do those things that you dare not admit having done? Or are there sometimes circumstances that make a person do things they don't want to do?"

Heat radiated around the classroom. The students' minds were steaming. Idriss opened the windows, then they all took a little break.

*Back we come, but not as we were. We've grown more anxious, and feel more ignorant, weaker and more lost than ever.*

A collective cry went up of "What is to be done?" to which Idriss responded with, "Well, let's turn to philosophy".

Philosophy is like Josef's water: within the classroom it enlivens, and outside the classroom it slays. Because the outside world is chock full of gaps – no room in there for wisdom, or as Averroes called it "the sister of law".

The first lesson was on the subject of the human being, as was the last. But the last lesson went into greater depth. Even though there is in fact no first or last to the human lesson, and no such thing as superficial or deep within a person.

The steps grew bigger and bigger. Idriss got to know the various residential areas, the people, and the names of some of the tribes. He realised that despite being from there, he was also from here, because here was –in essence – there.

Earthen colours prevailed, and spread. Extensive and expansive spaces for the voyager, the meditator, the ascetic mystic, nothing on the face of the Earth except a little bit of life.

The villages, the houses, and the people were all ancient. There was history and memory behind all of those marks drawn on the mountains and the rocks, like tattoos on women's foreheads. Every inch of you, Isle of Males, is a monument standing as proof of an absence that refuses to be forgotten.

The villages seemed like Athenian ships sailing across the brown sandy ground. The Isle of Males mimics everything: it's a semi-desert, it's semi-mountainous, semi-urban, semi-rural – and it's a peninsula. Although Idriss

was utterly astonished by how rich in stories the gaps were, this semi-being held no charm for him. “You either *are*, or you’re *not*,” he said. “This semi-existence befits you, my dear Isle: you are history, a bit of living memory, and a lot of future.”

He knew that in order to teach he would first have to learn. He must get to know the people, their culture, their representation of religion and values and teaching, their games and their way of dressing, their rites of happiness and sorrow. But first of all he needed a tongue, one that would allow him to reach the worlds that still lay beyond seemingly insurmountable barriers.

Dialogue with the people required an Amazigh tongue. So he went forth to converse with the Earth, with the villages scattered around and about, with some of the birds, snakes and scorpions, and with the rivers, dry except for a few tiny pools.

Some of the teachers would go out every Sunday to explore the empty spaces around them. They would pack provisions for the road, many questions, and some sticks to lean on and be led along by until they reached the village of Tisleet (the Bride).

Every tribe has its bride, except for the Asmaan tribe, whose name means “lightning” in Amazigh. Tisleet, this bride-village, had rosy cheeks. Her soil was the colour of roses, her trees like towering adolescent girls. Her massive solid rocks had seen a lot, and wanted to talk about it all, to tell her story. And they did, in fact, but unfortunately it was in Amazigh and the teachers were listening in Arabic.

The men of teaching bid farewell to the men of Tisleet. They picked up the Earth’s colours to carry with them, took pictures of the place, then left. They went on like this, working their way around from one village to another. Whenever they drew near to the centre of the Isle the colour of people’s faces changed notably. The Isle of Males began to resemble Africa. The explorers came home in the evening with much data that needed analysing, and a sufficient quantity of eau de vie from the Arabs’ cousin, Josef.

The place began to offer up meaningful signs and symbols, and philosophy took on a whole other flavour. The night grew a little more bitter. Idriss loved the

place more than the people; even though the beginnings had been bloody, *on this Earth there is what makes life worth living*, as Mahmoud Darwish said just the other day. Like people anywhere, the people there had a memory, and a history packed with incidents and events. There are stories of the Mehdi Ibn Tumart there, and historian Mohammed al-Baydhaq (known as “the pawn”) was also of Senhaja tribal origin. They were captains of ships betrayed by the wind and lost on the high seas. Sons of kings, they were, but wandered off track and never came back.

The Earth talks. It narrates the life-stories of a people, it tells of the tribes’ glory in the fight for the freedom of soil and water and air. They had really and truly passed through here. Their scent still perfumed the place. They were never barbarians or rabble, they were like everyone else. Kohl made by women, perfume made from musk, and cloves, and henna flowers; passion as a system, and beauty as a being. The soil lent its colour to the toys and the tools, to the goat horns and all the other things that sprang from it.

Idriss returned to the classroom. He genuinely loved his pupils. He knew how old they were, how steeped they were in a history that was theirs, even if they did not know it. Their resident mountain, Mount Sirwa, near to the Ait Usmaan tribal lands, stood in witness to all of it.

In the Isle of Males people met up and got to know each other. They realised that although they were all from one homeland, they were different to each other. Idriss’s housemate, the Arabic language teacher, was from the city of Errachidia, or what used to be known as Ksar Es Souk. Their other housemate was from the area around Zagora city. Paths intersected, cultures overlapped, but everyone clung to their own children, and would risk their life to defend them. The homeland was divided and splintered to the point of turning into mini-states carved out by tribes. Estrangement prevailed. Tribe was elevated, and people were known by their geographical affiliation: Rissani and Tangiers folk, Al Hoceima and Marrakech, Rabat and Salé and environs.

Once, on market day, the Arabic language teacher ran into an acquaintance of his who was the schools principal for an area called Timghlidt. The teacher was

unable to shake off the principal, who came home with him, befriended the household, stayed the night, ate up their food and was not in the least bit shy.

Every day Idriss would meet a great number of people, and forget a great number of them. But the principal of Timghlidt, this obligatory new friend, was discordantly unforgettable. He talked about everything except teaching. He informed the teachers of how they could save money at home and abroad, since he used to travel to France in the summer holidays and sell doughnuts and black coffee on the beaches there. He hoped to turn the teachers into a workforce, as he wanted to expand his business. How weird: a teacher, a principal, an educator, selling shit to shit. When he was picked up by the police he would simply tell them he's a teacher, and they would let him off, out of respect for the teaching profession. "If I went to France I wouldn't tell them I was an educator", said Abdellah, the Arabic language teacher. "The principal got to France before us. He's occupied that whole place."

The principal, or the Haji, was a fan of cheap tins of sardines, especially those that he pilfered, or "borrowed", from the school canteen. He also frequently ate the pupils' equipment – jotters, chalk, pencils, some of the wooden classroom doors. He was keen to gobble up pupils and people.

One dry day of the winter term the Haji paid the teachers a visit at home. He ate lunch, and then he slept. The teachers asked him to take off his shoes, so that he could sleep comfortably, but he refused. He slept with his shoes on. He woke up after the aser prayer and went out. He came back in the evening carrying half a kilo of rice, which he handed to the Arabic language teacher, demanding that he make dinner.

It was bitterly cold outside, and the wind was making strange scary sounds, but the Haji principal still didn't set off. He wasn't leaving. The three friends knew then that he would not be travelling that evening: he would spend the night in their company. He could not sleep all night in his shoes, so there was no alternative to him taking them off, but when he did he stank out the whole place and made everyone feel nauseous. The principal's feet were unbearably fetid. Idriss asked him to wash his feet, insisting that he use Tide laundry detergent. The Haji didn't feel at all awkward or embarrassed by this. Off he went to the

toilet, and stayed there a long time. But when he rejoined the group he was as he had left: the teachers still smelled something disgusting, even if it had somehow been disinfected.

Idriss could not accept sharing his room with the Haji. Since it was impossible to make him get out of his bed, or even move over a little, Idriss took his stuff and joined his friends. He slept by the window that looked out over Josef's shop, demanding life. Idriss was a refugee tonight, and he couldn't sleep. When the lights went out, the silence was dreadful. He didn't even hear the mice whispering. No sound, no movement. Nothing disturbed the night air but the Haji's snores. The mice had gone, their little lungs unable to tolerate the rank odour filling the place. In the morning Idriss thanked the principal for exterminating the mice. He resolved to drive him out later on. Right now, though, he was counting on him as a way to befriend the tall man known as Baba Ali, the Amazigh man who was inseparable from the principal, constantly accompanying him around and about.

Idriss had often wondered why despite the stark difference between them in terms of character, colour, identity and various other important things, these two men had such a close relationship. He found out later that the tall man was the head of the parents association in Timghlidt. Thus the teachers realised how the scent of musk and the fragrance of history were connected to eating pens and jotters and the bulk of the three housemates' supplies.

Idriss's love for Ali was as pure as God, memory and the homeland. Once he had established the friendship, he promptly evicted the principal Haji from the house. The philosophy teacher knew that between him and the tall man there were stories to be told and events to occur, as they had now become friends.

There was a hammering on the door that evening. Idriss's heart leapt, as did the mice who had returned to the house. Everyone knew it was the principal Haji. Before the philosophy teacher opened the door he told his two housemates that tonight he would drive the Haji away once and for all, and they did not protest. The mice opened the door, rejoicing at this decision. The principal wanted to come in, but Idriss stood firm before him like a locked and bolted door, and threw him out. He got rid of him, for the time being at least. The Haji

principal knew that he was not wanted, but was unaffected by this, as was his wont. He left, and everyone celebrated. Some of them played love songs, and some got to eliminating the lingering odour of the Haji. Idriss looked out of the window, then said: “A celebration’s no good without Josef’s eau”, greeted him from the window and went downstairs. He came back up with a bottle of fluid that looked just like water, even though it wasn’t.

Time passed quickly. Events accumulated, and Idriss still did not quite believe that he was a teacher. He couldn’t take in that he had finally got out of unemployment, that he’d left the world of begging behind him. Whenever he looked at himself in the mirror and searched for the teacher within, he found nothing but Idriss Ben Idar Al Kadmioui. He rooted around in all his nooks and crannies, scrutinised all the gaps and spaces. He came across many things, some of them significant, or pleasant, and some shameful, but he couldn’t locate the image of a teacher. He left the mirror for fear his self would swallow him up. He applied some perfume, fixed all his body parts in their places, then headed for the classroom, where people were begging for meaning.

He wrote the following question on the chalk board: “Who are we?” Then he went around among the rows of desks, asking this pupil and that pupil, “Who are you, Mohammed?” and “You, Ali?” and “You, your name is Ijja – but who are you?” The teacher discovered that the novices had never asked themselves this question before. Like dew, a little sweat appeared on some of the foreheads. Some other faces turned red with embarrassment, or maybe with vexation at this hellish question, and he knew then that the fire had been ignited.

One of the pupils retorted angrily: “I’m Mohammed Ben Ali, I’m a human being”. To this the teacher said, “But what is a human being, son?” Idriss was still diving, and the pressure down at that depth was on the verge of blowing these little minds. The teacher sensed their collective urge to shout: “What do you want? Spit it out, and then leave us in peace!”

Idriss chalked on the board: *I’m a human, a Muslim, a Moroccan, an Amazigh from the Isle of Males*. He wasn’t aiming at the meaning of Muslim or Moroccan or Amazigh, as today’s lesson was about the human. The teacher rephrased the question: *What does it mean for a person to be a human?* It was

only in moments like these that Idriss knew why the homeland had kissed him on the forehead as he asked him to introduce people to the human in them. He also grasped the reason for the little doors hitting him – they couldn't fathom the sunlight trying to illuminate the place.

He did not surrender. He loved his homeland, so he kissed his generous hands and vowed to continue the journey, even if all the little doors in every corner of the world hit him.

The human being is a brain and an intellect, it is expression and application, and engagement in premeditated action stemming from the ego. What matters about the doer is their action. The human – I'm talking to you, Mohammed, and you, Ali, and you, Ijja – is a doer, a producer and an innovator by necessity. Because the human is free, and has dignity. The human is all of these traits, plus many others still to come. You are a doer, son, so what have you done? This was how Idriss talked to his pupils, moving between the misery of philosophy and the bliss of it, so that the pupils would not get up and leave.

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