

## NISSIM

In the spring of 1942, Massouda AbuHazar took her children on their first trip that year to the beach. When they set out, it was the late afternoon and an unseasonably hot day, the kind that usually came with the full weight of summer, when the souk developed a putrid smell and the thick of the market air settled in every alley. For everyone inside the walls, the knowledge that the Atlantic Ocean sat there, waving just beyond the souk, offering the promise of bathing and feeling the cool wind, was nearly unbearable.

Massouda had tried to wake Rafael to persuade him to spend his day at the beach with the children, but he'd arrived home in the early hours, after another late night. A new world had opened up in Casablanca since 1940, a world underground, and Rafael had seized an opportunity to make secret money. He repeatedly explained to Massouda that the extra income—hidden and tax-free—was necessary to fund their move to Palestine. He reminded her that she'd recently turned twenty, and if she wanted to make it to Palestine before she was an old auntie, he needed the extra work—that without family there to help, everything about setting up a new life would be expensive. Massouda said that she feared he was being tricked by Mama Ghula, who was fattening him up in the night, preparing to feast on his flesh, like in the stories. He brushed aside her concern as the nonsense his mother and aunts used to say.

When Rafael had started working in the dark economy, he first made military boots and bootleg uniforms for militias and resistance fighters, then dabbled in forgeries and the occasional illegal metalwork. Lately, he had also been participating in a card game to increase his fortunes, every-

one being flush with the influx of illicit work. The card game, Massouda knew, was usually what kept him out the latest—and ruined him for most of the next day.

Massouda continued trying to rouse him throughout the morning, because she wanted help taking four children and supplies on the buses to the beach. She told him he could sleep on the sand just as he could sleep at home, that the sun would be good for him. He said he was sick, but since he'd had a good night, they should take a taxi. He then handed her a small wad of bills and a satchel of coins.

Massouda quickly rifled through the coins to see if there were any of her favorites within; there were not. Spying the money, Nissim had asked if they could have *sfenj* at the beach, and Massouda was surprised. A year earlier, when Nissim was only two, the family had been walking in the hills high above the ocean when they'd come across a small *sfenj* bakery and stopped to eat the fried dough sweetened with honey. As the waves of the Atlantic beat against the cliffs, the family sat on the sidewalk in the sun, making themselves simultaneously sticky and oily.

Massouda hadn't imagined the memory would stay with Nissim, or that he'd come to associate the ocean with doughnuts, but it shouldn't have come as a surprise. Nissim created a rich world of associations, categories, and rules that he was forceful in imposing on everyone around him. He referred to himself only in the third person, but since he couldn't pronounce *Nissim*, he renamed himself *Bazja*, emphasizing the soft Moroccan *zzhh*. The street dogs were all girls, and the street cats were all boys. Certain zones in the house and the souk were *safe*, which meant that all game rules were suspended the moment someone entered those areas. Some wall hangings had to be at child eye-level, and some had to be at adult eye-level, according to a mysterious aesthetic principle understood only by him. He told jokes that were one sentence or one word long, with the setup and the punchline merged, and then laughed uncontrollably at his wit. He would point to random people and objects and describe them as *good* or *bad*, without any further explanation. And the ocean meant *sfenj*. Such was Nissim's world.

Though she disliked the port, it was where taxi drivers congregated, so Massouda decided to walk there rather than getting a taxi from the neighborhood. The walk was not too far, even in the late-afternoon heat with four children in tow, and she'd be able to negotiate a lower fare there, leaving enough money for both *sfenj* and the ride home. Though she didn't explain

her rationale to the children, Nissim somehow understood, and he thanked his mother and asked if he could lug the jug of water to help.

When they arrived at the port, Massouda could see the German and French ships lined up, swastika flags flying in the Moroccan wind. The sight made her sick, made her feel unsafe, and she hastened the children into the taxi. The drive mostly hugged the coast, with nineteenth-century mansions rising up on the left and giant waves out of the Atlantic on the right. Along most of the coast, the ocean was too wild to swim in or even get near, but at what they called the beach there was a break that tempered the inherent violence of the water. In the final stretch of the drive, the taxi rose up a hill where white French villas perched on cliffs being whipped and chipped by the white-haired waves. On the edge of this hill was the small sfenj bakery they'd found the previous year, with boulders jutting from the sidewalk where they'd sat to eat while looking down at the sea. As they drove past the bakery, Nissim caught sight of it or smelled it and began crying out for sfenj. He was usually calm in his demands, so when he cried or screamed, everyone took notice. Massouda, sitting in the rear of the taxi with him, explained that they would stop on the way back, after they negotiated a fare with the return driver. Nissim seemed to accept the compromise and went quiet, putting his head out the window to feel the spray from the water colliding with the cliffs.

At the beach, Massouda opened the rug she used to carry the fruit and drink. She weighed down the rug and pointed to a nearby palm tree, telling the children where they would find her, reminding them to stay together and that Simi, the eldest at six years old, was in charge. She also told them if they needed to pee, they could find a spot on the beach away from people, or squat in the shallow waters, but if they had to kaki, they should come back to her, and she would help. They yelled their agreement as they ran off in unison.

Massouda loved watching them run and play together, and she often wondered what she'd done to be blessed with such wonderful and happy children. She knew so many who'd experienced stillbirths or children with mental or physical problems. Watching her young ones now, she smiled at her fortune, before quickly realizing that she was unnecessarily inviting the evil eye.

Sometimes Massouda felt bad that Simi had to take on so much at such a young age, but she seemed suited to it. Simi had not only been an easy

baby and toddler, she'd quickly become second in command, helping with her siblings. Was it the responsibility or Simi's temperament that had made her prematurely serious, Massouda wondered. She asked herself different questions about Nissim, who played as any three-year-old would, but also spent hours each day at Massouda's side, weaving fantastical stories that went nowhere and everywhere. She marveled at how he made sense of nonsense and nonsense of sense, but sometimes he scared her with what he described—images that should have been alien to a child—and by how he lived in a dual world. Depending on the day, she wondered if he had an exceptionally strong imagination, or if something was wrong with him—if something possessed him. Her concern caused her to pay special attention to Nissim, and the other children took notice. When Nissim insisted they all act according to rules he seemed to make up, Simi, in particular, would sometimes become upset. More so when Massouda played along. Nissim was Simi's charge, but when there was disagreement between them, Simi saw that her mother rarely sided with her.

Massouda watched as the children made paths in the sand, creating circles on top of circles, which looked like ancient maps of the heavens the old book vendors were sometimes selling. When they reached the water, they followed its movements. As the tide receded, the children would scream and run after it; and then, as the sea grew into a mound that threatened a wave, they would scream an entirely different scream and race back to the beach—which was, Nissim had announced when they arrived, a safe zone.

Eating grapes on the rug, Massouda trained her eyes on them in the distance, their figures dancing on the beach and singing their screams. The sun reflecting off the water made it difficult to stare at the children for a long stretch, however, so Massouda closed her eyes and focused on the sounds they made. She would watch them by listening. She could picture the movements of the water by the tone of their screams: the waves bringing a shrill chorus, followed by a full-throated ululation at the water's retreat. It sounded so round and perfect, the cycles—with the seabirds barking and the wind whipping it all together.

On the backs of her eyelids, Massouda began to picture Jerusalem—just across the sea, she imagined. She conjured up the walls of the city, so much higher than Casablanca's walls, and the Tower of King David rising up above it all, piercing the heavens. She heard sounds of streets filled with people, rocking in Hebrew prayer in the open air, turning the city into a

giant synagogue. Her mind drifted to the idea of wandering the shuk and tasting grapes from Galilee, Sabra from the Negev, and citrus from Yaffo, speaking in Hebrew that seemed so formal, and looking up at the same sky where Moshe had seen God thousands of years earlier. An endless sky. She opened her eyes and looked up past the fronds of the palm tree; the same sky, but so different.

Massouda realized that she didn't hear the children. Looking out at the beach and water, her eyes were momentarily burned by the radiance. It was all glare—the white sun, the clear water. As her vision returned, she saw Simi running toward her. And then Amram, and then Annet. The sand made them run funny, she thought, laughing at their uncontrollable little bodies and the way they swung their arms wildly, engaging everything in their movement. She squinted to peer beyond Annet, expecting to see Nissim with the others. He wasn't there. She blinked and looked at the children again, but again saw only three. She looked to their sides, to the expanse of beach, but still couldn't find him. As she studied the shore carefully, Simi came within earshot.

“Amu, amu,” Simi yelled, still running. “The water took him away.”

“What?” Massouda asked, exasperated. Simi's words made no sense.

Stopping in front of her mother, Simi repeated, “Amu, the water took Nissim away.”

“What?” Massouda jerked to her feet, alarm snaking through her. “Where?”

Simi pointed her small arm to a spot on the beach, a spot like any other. Massouda could not see Nissim. Running in the direction of Simi's outstretched finger, she pushed her way into the shallows as a wave receded, and then looked frantically to each side. She turned in complete circles to her right and then her left. She could not see Nissim. Simi, Amram, and Annet waited by the line of sand that separated the dry from the wet, looking afraid.

Rushing back to Simi, Massouda asked, “Where is Nissim? What happened to him?”

“The water took him away,” she said simply, and Massouda wanted to shake her for being so composed.

“How?” Massouda demanded. “How?”

“He had to go pee. So he went into shallow water like you said. And he pulled his pants down and sat.”

“Where is he?” Massouda repeated.

“He was peeing, and a wave came. And he tried to pick up his pants. And

he fell. And the water took him away. He was gone so quickly. We ran back right away.”

Massouda once more turned to the water and scanned the entire expanse, the horizon, trying to take in and make sense of every detail. From this angle, the sea looked black, no longer clear and blue with white froth as it appeared from her spot under the palm. Noticing a child playing, about the size of Nissim, she felt a moment of relief. But just as quickly, the moment passed. It wasn't Nissim. She lost her breath. Suddenly everyone around her seemed to be laughing and swimming, as if nothing had happened. She wanted it all to go completely quiet so she could listen for Nissim, scream for Nissim, hear him respond. But most of the noise was from the ocean and the birds, and they could not be silenced.

Putting her hands on her remaining children, Massouda said, “Come, let's go home.”

For once, Simi looked unsettled. Annet began to cry.

Averting her eyes from her children's faces, Massouda tugged them away from the water, away from the sand, toward the taxis.

“Wait!” cried Simi. “What about our stuff? The rug. And food.”

“Yala!” Massouda announced loudly, as if they could not hear her over the din.

Walking away, she felt them twisting in her grip, craning over their shoulders to search the ocean. Massouda could hear the waves moving as they had before, over and back, the sand running after the water, rolling into the sea, only to be redeposited a moment later.

Massouda thought back to a childhood story about a girl who was visited by a maggid in a dream and told that the hakham's newborn son would be her future. Frustrated by having to wait for the baby to grow before she could start a family, the girl placed the infant inside a box, put his amulet around his neck, and threw him into the sea. This sea. Casablanca's sea. In Tangier, a different hakham bought a fish at market and found the boy alive inside. A boy so beautiful, the goats would not graze if they saw him. After being raised to bar mitzvah by the Tangier hakham, the boy found his way home by grasping the amulet and following its fortunes.

“Was he wearing his amulet?” Massouda asked Simi and the other children. She heard no response. She continued pulling them up the hillside, all the while listening carefully, trying to separate the myriad noises—the screaming and shrieking, the tumbling waves—for a sound she knew.