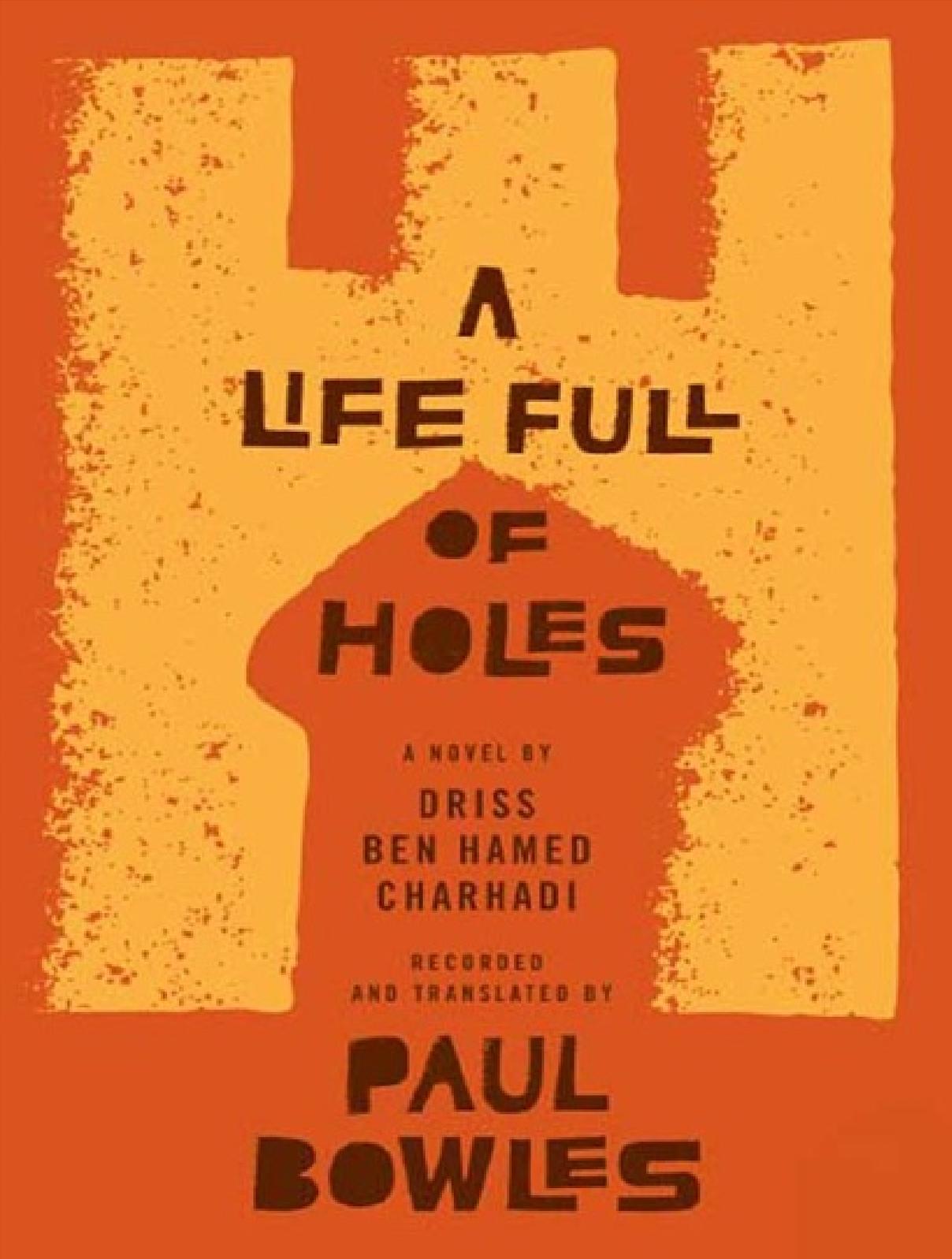


**A
LIFE FULL
OF
HOLES**

A NOVEL BY
**DRISS
BEN HAMED
CHARHADI**

RECORDED
AND TRANSLATED BY

**PAUL
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**Driss ben Hamed Charhadi
(Larbi Layachi)**

A Life Full of Holes

Foreword by Vijay Seshadri

A Novel Recorded and Translated by
Paul Bowles

 HarperCollins e-books

Even a life full of holes, a life of nothing but waiting, is better than no life at all

Charhadi's commentary on a Moghrebi saying

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FOREWORD

Neglected books, if they're good enough or, better yet, if they have the qualities of a classic, often possess an unexpected currency and cultural resiliency. Something keeps them alive and fresh along the margins and in the interstices of collective memory. I've mentioned *A Life Full of Holes* many times to friends and acquaintances of mine who read a lot with the idea of introducing them to a discovery, and am almost always surprised and disappointed to hear them say that they know it and like it as much as I do. The reasons these readers know the book, and the reasons they like it, vary. Some are students of Islamic societies or North African societies or postcolonial societies. Some are particularly sympathetic to the annals—short, simple, or otherwise—of the poor. Others are connoisseurs of the work of Paul Bowles or of memoirs and autobiographies. Still others are knowledgeable consumers of oral history, itself an unjustly neglected genre (the oral historian Gerald Albarelli first told me about *A Life Full of Holes*).

My friends and I don't say much about *A Life Full of Holes* after we uncover our mutual enthusiasm. We usually concur that it is a masterpiece and go on quickly to other subjects. The abruptness is significant, more so than our agreeing that it is a masterpiece. *A Life Full of Holes* is a masterpiece in the sense that it is original, shapely, riveting, illuminating, and not ephemeral. By calling it a masterpiece and moving on, though, we aren't concerned with its literary value but, rather, are tacitly admitting that we're confused about what to make of this peculiar artifact and have been forced to retreat to the safety of an abstract encomium. This confusion extends to a determination of the genre to which *A Life Full of Holes* belongs. At the beginning of his preface, Paul Bowles says the book is "invented," and tells us it is the invention of an illiterate Moroccan acquaintance of his in Tangier, Driss ben Hamed Charhadi (the name is also an invention), who asked his help in making a book, help Bowles gave him by taping his dictation and then translating the tapes literally, without adding, altering, or deleting. Bowles then calls the book, in passing, a novel, before subsiding for the bulk of the preface into neutrality about its ontological status, resorting to words such as "story," "episode," "text."

A Life Full of Holes doesn't read like a novel; it reads like the truth. Bedrock

narrative, laid flush against language, without recourse to devices that create and sustain the illusions of literary perspective—chronological manipulation, character development, *mise-en-scène*, description, geography, research, introspection—seems to be what we have in our hands. The flatness of the storytelling is extreme, but though the narration has a straightforward orality that earlier Western generations would have called primitive, there are paradoxes which suggest that the author is anything but naïve. As Bowles says, Charhadi is a master storyteller who effortlessly “keeps the thread of his narrative almost equally taut at all points.” He possesses, according to Bowles, solid editorial intelligence. He brings his stories out whole, without hesitation; he either has long rehearsed them or, maybe as likely given the dreamlike quality of the transitions and the lack of emphasis and epiphany in the action, has entered into something resembling a visionary trance. And he is blasé, rather than merely oblivious, about internal inconsistencies. The narrator seems to have had at least two childhoods, time frames piggyback on one another, certain recurring characters—the mother, for example, and the egregious stepfather—are so conveniently static that it is easy to suspect that Charhadi has grown indifferent, because of the pleasure he takes in his storytelling and in the sound of his own voice, to the exigencies of documentary fidelity.

These elements, though they might or might not be evidence of a hidden narrative self-consciousness, don’t, at least for this reader, weaken the truth force of *A Life Full of Holes*. Instead, they confirm the well-known proposition that truth really is stranger than fiction and provoke the recognition that memory has its own logic, its own sense of chronological coherence, its own uncanny understanding of the passage of the self through time. Freed of the repressive mechanisms of our supersubtle narrative traditions, how would we tell our stories? In his own writing, Bowles worked with delicate, and often dangerous, material that required infinite circumspection and restraint in its handling. His habits of circumspection and restraint served him well when he found Charhadi. What he has given us, with an interference that is as minimal as possible, seems to be not a story or stories but the narrative plasma from which stories are made.

A Life Full of Holes features jailbreaks, visits to prostitutes, episodes of criminal behavior, moments of startling existential absurdity. It gives us constant glimpses of colonized and decolonizing geographies, which are so much the source of our current crises. It can teach us as well as anything I know about what it actually means to be poor in the Third World. It offers as convincing a representation as I’ve encountered of the stupendous, transcendent fatalism at the heart of Islam. All this relevance is dwarfed, though, by the redemptive act of narration itself, which is the deepest value that *A Life Full of Holes* has to offer. Charhadi seems to have been waiting all his life to put things down, and he recognized his opportunity when it came for the miracle that it was and seized it. The word for book in Arabic is *kitab*, and it has a numinousness and magic that derives in Islamic societies from the presence and power of *the Book*, the Qur’an, which is not an account of God but comprises His actual words, dictated by His emissary to the Prophet. Illiterate and dependent though he was, Charhadi, a writer of a piece with his civilization, knew what a serious thing a

book is. He wanted to make one, and he did.

VIJAY SESHADRI

INTRODUCTION

The man who invented this book, and along with it the name of Driss ben Hamed Charhadi, is a singularly quiet and ungregarious North African Moslem. His forebears are from a remote mountainous region where, however, Moghrebi Arabic rather than a Berber tongue is spoken. He is totally illiterate. His speech in Moghrebi is clear and correct. Like a peasant's, it is studded with rustic locutions and proverbs. The fact that translating and compiling the novel was a comparatively simple process is due mainly to the sureness with which he proceeds in telling a story. He knows beforehand just what he is going to say, and he says it succinctly and eloquently.

The book came to exist in a roundabout fashion. Charhadi used to call by to see me from time to time, usually in the evening on his way home from the cinema. On one of these occasions he had been to see an Egyptian "historical" film. People in this part of the world are prone to confuse the intent of feature films with that of newsreels. Was it possible, Charhadi wanted to know, that the entire city of Cairo had been destroyed without his having heard about it on the radio? When I told him how fictional films are made and what they are meant to be, he was particularly struck by the fact that it is not forbidden to "lie." I said that no one thought of film-making in those terms. "And books, like the books you write," he pursued. "They are all lies, too?"

"They're stories, like the *Thousand and One Nights*. You don't call them lies, do you?"

"No, because they're true. They happened long ago when the world was different from the way it is now, that's all."

I did not argue the point. Instead, I asked him: "And how about the stories the men from the country sometimes tell in the market place? Are they true, too?"

"Ah, but they're only stories. Everybody knows they're just for fun."

"That's like my books. And that's like the films. Everybody knows they're only

stories.”

“And it’s not forbidden,” he said half to himself. “But then anybody would have the right to make a book! I could, or my mother could. Anybody!”

“That’s right. Anybody can, if he has a story to tell and knows how to tell it.”

“And he doesn’t have to send it to the government for permission?”

“Not in my country,” I told him.

A few days later he telephoned me. “May I see you tonight? It’s about something important.”

We set the time, and he arrived. He did not come at once to the point of his visit. Presently he said: “I’ve been thinking. I want to make a book, with the help of Allah. You could put it into your language and give it to the book factory in your country. Would that be allowed?”

“I told you anything’s allowed. But making a book is a lot of work. It would take a long time.”

“I see. And you haven’t enough time.”

“I would have, if it were really good,” I said. “The only way to know is to tell some of the story. Come tomorrow night and we’ll try it.”

The next night when he came, he said: “I thought about it last night before I went to sleep, and I know everything I want to say.”

He sat down on the m’tarrba beside the fireplace. I put the microphone in front of him and started a tape-recorder. After a long time he began to speak.

Immediately I knew that whatever the story might turn out to be, his manner of telling it left nothing to be desired. It was as if he had memorized the entire text and rehearsed the speaking of it for weeks; there was no indication that it was being improvised. About an hour later I had “The Wire” complete on tape.

“That’s not the beginning,” he said. “I thought I’d tell that first, and see if you liked it.”

“What do you think about it?” I countered.

“I think it’s a good story, but maybe no one else will.”

“It sounds very fine in Moghrebi,” I said. “But I can’t tell you anything until I’ve changed it into English.”

When I had the first half-dozen pages translated, I told him that I thought we should do some more.

“Hamdoul’lah,” he said. “Thank God.”

Perhaps two months later I had finished putting “The Wire” into English. At the outset I had seen that the translation should be a literal one, in order to preserve as much as possible of the style. Nothing needed to be added, deleted, or altered.

During this period Charhadi came several times a week, while we went over the spoken text word by word. The apocryphal material disclosed by this examination had its own philological and ethnographical interest, and would have filled a book by itself. One day when we had nearly completed the translation of “The Wire,” he asked me to play the tape back to him from the beginning. Halfway through, he called out: “Please stop the machine! Here I want to tell something more, if it’s all right.” What he inserted was not a supplementary incident; it was a sequence which would give the piece a sense of the passage of time. With the intuitive certainty of the master storyteller, he placed it precisely where it made the desired effect. In the course of dictating the book he made only a half-dozen such additions to his original text.

One of these was the short episode in “The Shepherd,” where the narrator insists on spending the night at the tomb of Sidi Bou Hajja in order to see if the “bull with horns” will appear. When he had appended this bit and listened to the playback, he decided that it was not interesting, and was for leaving it out. This was our only occasion for disagreement. I wanted to include it because, although it was incidental to the story, the passage was a clear illustration of the persistence of pre-Islamic belief: the appearance of the ancient god in a spot whose initial sanctity has been affirmed by the usurping faith. (During rural celebrations the bull is still decorated with flowers and ribbons and medals, and led through the streets to be sacrificed.) I explained to him the reason why I thought the passage ought to be included, knowing in advance that he would disapprove any suggestion to the effect that his ancestors had been something else before embracing Islam. We let the subject drop, he having agreed, if not wholeheartedly, to allow the episode to be incorporated into the text.

The good storyteller keeps the thread of his narrative almost equally taut at all points. This Charhadi accomplished, apparently without effort. He never hesitated; he never varied the intensity of his eloquence. When, now and then, I stubbornly insisted, for the sake of experimentation, that he give me his personal opinion of the behaviour of one of his protagonists, he held back. Probably because he had fashioned them with actual acquaintances in mind, he was loath to pass moral judgment upon his characters. From time to time he would recount a section before we taped it. On such occasions my reactions may have influenced him in his decision to include or excise certain details, but I made no suggestions one way or the other. Apart from the exceptions mentioned and the few passages whose intelligibility depended upon some elaboration, the procedure followed was that once the material was on tape, it was considered to be final and inalterable.

PAUL BOWLES

CHAPTER ONE

THE ORPHAN

When I was eight years old my mother married a soldier. We lived in Tettaouen. One day my mother's husband came home and told her: We've got to go to Tanja. They're moving the barracks there, so we have to move too.

All right, she said. If we have to go to Tanja, let's go.

Get everything ready. When the truck comes to the house, we'll put it all in and go.

Ouakha, she said. She packed everything, clothes and mattresses and cushions, and at noon a truck came. They put the things in. Then we got into the truck too, and they drove us away. We went to Tanja and took a house in Dradeb.

We had been living there three or four months. One day I went out of the house by myself. I did not know the houses or the people in the quarter. I went out and started to walk along, and I kept walking, walking, until I was far away, up on the Boulevard. And night came and I began to cry. A man said to me: What's the matter?

I don't know where my mother is and I don't know where my house is.

He said: Come with me. I'll take you home. He took me to the comisaría. A policeman was sitting in a chair in the doorway. He asked me: Where do you live?

I told him: In Tettaouen.

Poor boy, he said. Come on. He gave me a mat and told me: Sit down there. Are you hungry?

Yes, I said. Then he brought a little food and a piece of bread.

Have you finished? Give me the bowl. I gave it to him and he took it away. Then he said: Come here. Take off those old trousers. Take them off. Don't be afraid. So I took them off. Come here, he told me. Sit down on my lap. He was unfastening his trousers. Don't be afraid, he kept saying. Then I thought I saw a snake in his hand, and I jumped down and ran out of the room. He ran after me, but another man caught me.

What's the matter? Where are your clothes?

In the room, I said. The first policeman came running. Grab him! He's lost. Give him to me.

He put me in another room and brought me my trousers. Get in here. Stop crying. I didn't do anything to you, did I?

No.

And don't say anything to anybody.

I won't.

He shut the door and left me there, and I slept. In the morning a Spanish man came. The policeman told him: Somebody brought the boy here last night. He's from Tettaouen. He's lost.

Where do you live? he asked me.

In Tettaouen, I told him.

Come on, he said. And he took me to Tettaouen.

The police looked everywhere in Tettaouen for my mother, and they could not find her. And they said: This boy has no family. We'll put him into the Fondaq en Nedjar.

They put me into the Fondaq en Nedjar, where they send children and women too, who have no families. In the fondaq they said to me: Boy, where do you live? I told them: Here in Tettaouen. And they too looked and looked for my house, and found nothing, nothing.

And I stayed there. They gave me clothes and shoes and everything I needed. We ate every day and had blankets to sleep under. And I was still small and not yet circumcised. They saw that and said: You'll have to be circumcised. I was afraid, and I said: No! When I find my mother I'll do it.

They called the pacha. He came and said: That boy must be circumcised now. Two men took hold of me and handed me to the women who lived there. They killed two rams and then they circumcised me. I stayed with the women there until I was well. Some of them gave me candy, and some gave me money, but I did not know what money was. When I was well I went back to live with the others. I was learning to

read. From one day to the next I was beginning to know something.

One day the khalifa came to the Fondaq en Nedjar to see the pacha. You must give all the children and women new clothes, he told him, because now I am having my wedding feast. I'm going to take them all to my orchard, so they'll be happy. They have no one to do anything for them.

The pacha called us at noon. Listen, he told us. Go and eat now, and when you've finished come back here. I'm going to give you all new clothes.

Why? we asked him.

Because you're going to the khalifa's orchard. He's going to be married.

We went and ate, and we were talking among ourselves. Allah, my friend, the khalifa's getting married! Now, we're going out to his orchard and everything will be good. A big orchard. We can hide in it and everything. Yes, we told each other.

After lunch we went out to the storeroom and they gave each one of us a shirt, a pair of trousers, a jacket and a pair of sandals. All the children. Then the women came and they gave them clothes too. We went upstairs into the mosque and studied all afternoon. When twilight came they called us. Come down and eat, they told us. When you've finished, you're going in the soldiers' truck to the khalifa's orchard.

We went down and ate. When we all had finished eating they said: Now you will not go up and sleep. Just stay here.

We sat there. Then they said: Go on out. We went into the street and walked through the Medina to the Feddane. In the Feddane under the palm tree we saw the soldiers' truck. We climbed into it. And we went riding, riding, at night, until we got to the khalifa's orchard at the foot of the mountains. We went to sleep as soon as we got there.

The next day we saw that there were trees everywhere. And many of them had fruit in them. Apples, pears, peaches. And when we picked the fruit they let us keep it and eat it. And we stayed there playing all day. It was a day when we were all happy. And I said: Allah, let me live here forever! It's a good place for me.

The next day at noon they gave us a feast. Steamed rice with cinnamon and sugar on it. I had never had such a good meal. Eat, they said, and if you haven't had enough, we'll give you more.

I turned to the boy beside me and said: You see, my friend? It would be better if they'd leave us here always. This is the best place for us. Yes, he said. Al Allah!

So we ate all we wanted, and there was still food left. Everybody had enough. Then they took away the dishes and bowls. There were many musicians there, and

they played Andaluz music for us. That way we lived for a week, and then they took us back to Tettaouen.

One day my mother's husband found out that I was in the Fondaq en Nedjar, and he came to see me. I was sick that day, lying on the floor.

So you are here. Do you want to go home? he asked me.

I want to stay here. It's better here. It's a good place.

No. You should come home. Your mother wants to see you.

But I want to stay here.

Yes. Well. I'll tell her to come and see you.

My mother's husband went back to Tanja. He told my mother: Your son is in Tettaouen at the Fondaq en Nedjar. And he's sick. I asked him if he didn't want to come home, and he said no. He wants to stay there. You'll have to go and get him and bring him back.

Yes, she said. I must. He should be with me.

He gave her some money and told her: Go and get your son. Bring him back here.

When my mother came to see me, I told her: No. I won't go. It's better here. I can study and everything, and on Fridays we go to the mosque with the khalifa and afterward we go to the beach at Rio Martin. I sleep well and I eat well and I like to study. It's the place I like best.

No, aoulidi, she said. You should come with me. I want you with me. You come to Tanja and you can study there.

No, Mother. Leave me here. It's better.

You know best, she said. And she went away by herself. When she got home she told her husband: That boy. We've got to make him come back. You must go to Tettaouen and see the pacha, and tell him the boy's mother wants him with her.

He said: Ouakha. I'll go. So he went back to Tettaouen and told the pacha: His mother can't live without him. He must go home as soon as possible and be with her.

The pacha said: We'll ask the boy. If he wants to leave, we won't stop him.

They came to see me. Which do you want, the pacha asked me. To stay here or to go and live with your mother?

I told him: I'd rather stay here. I know the other boys and everything. It would be

better if I stayed here.

You hear? said the pacha. Listen to what he says.

I want him to come with me and that's that.

There he is, said the pacha. I have nothing more to say.

So I went with him in the bus to Tanja. And there nothing happened. They did not send me to school. Nothing.

And time went by. One day my mother said to her husband: The boy should go to school. He knows a little already and he can learn more. He's still young. He's not doing anything now.

All right, he said. I'll take him down to the school. He took me to the school and I was learning the Qor'an, perhaps for a year. Then my mother gave birth. It was a boy. When her husband saw the baby, he did not like me any more. He began to tell my mother: That boy of yours isn't learning anything. Everything he does is wrong.

After that he could not say anything good about me. I'm not going to give him any more of my food, he told my mother.

You know best, she said. But if you're willing, please let him stay in school. He's nothing but an orphan, I know. But it would be good if you would let him go to school. The boy has no one in the world.

No, he said. I can't let him study any more and I can't give him any more of my food. He can go out and work.

Even if he goes out and looks, said my mother, he's not going to know where to go to get work.

He said: It's not my business what he does. It's between you and him. I don't care what he does, but he can't stay here without working.

I went to work on the beach, helping the fishermen pull in their nets. And at home my mother and the man were always fighting about me.

I would go in the morning and pull on the nets until the end of the afternoon. They gave me two rials. If they caught a lot of fish, they gave me three, but that was not very often. I stayed like that today and tomorrow, today and tomorrow, for a long time. After two years I was earning four rials a day.

When I was about thirteen I was a man, and I began to think. I said to myself: If I had stayed in the Fondaq en Nedjar, I'd have known something when I came out. I thought about it for a long time. One day I decided to go to my mother and talk to her.

Mother.

Yes?

You know, Mother, tomorrow I'm going to Tettaouen.

What are you going to do there, aoulidi?

I want to look for the Fondaq en Nedjar. If I find it and they take me back, I want to stay there.

It's a long time since you were there. You're grown up now. I don't think they'll let you in. You don't know Tettaouen. You won't know where to go. You don't know anybody there, and yet you want to go! But if you do, I can't say no.

I said: Mother, I've got to go, and that's all. Your husband shouts at you all day, and it's about me. I'm going to go and take the life Allah gives me. I'm tired of looking for better work here. But if I can't find the Fondaq en Nedjar I'll come back.

She said: Yes, aoulidi. If you want to go, you must go.

But give me something to eat on the way, I told her.

Ouakha, she said. In the morning.

I went to bed. I got up at seven, and I told my mother: I should go now so I can get there early. Give me the food. She gave me a loaf of bread, and said: Take it, aoulidi, and go. I don't want you to go, but if you want to, I have nothing to say.

I went down the road, through Souani and Beni Makada, and into Mogoga. There I got onto the highway. Walking, walking, until I came to the border where the Spanish customhouse was. I tried to go by behind the buildings, but a soldier saw me and called to me.

Boy, come here! What have you got there?

Nothing.

He said: That blanket. Where did you get it?

I brought it from home, I said, and I'm going to Tettaouen to see my uncle. I said nothing about the Fondaq en Nedjar.

Have you got a passport?

No, I told him. I haven't got one.

How old are you?

Thirteen. But I have no passport.

Let me look in your bundle, he said.

Here. I opened it for him. It's a blanket with bread inside.

He said: Go on your way.

I went on, walking, walking, until I came to a river. The day was hot and the sun was shining, and I said to myself: This river has good clear water. I'm going to sit down here and rest a little and wash my shirt, and then I'll go on.

I sat down and rested and ate a little bread. Then I washed my shirt and spread it from the top of my head to dry, and started out again on the road. Walking, walking, until I came to a place called Fnidaq. By then I was tired and I could not go any farther. I saw a palm-fiber factory not far off, and I thought: I'll go and look at the factory. If there's any work there, I'll stay and work. I went up to the factory, and saw a man standing in the doorway. Mohammed, listen, I said. I want to talk to you. When he came over I said to him: Are you taking on any workers?

I don't know, he said, but ask that Nazarene. That Spaniard over there. Ask him.

I went to speak to the Spaniard. Please, I want to talk to you. If you need anyone to work for you, I'll stay here and work.

Do you know anything? Have you got a trade of some kind? he asked me. I told him: No.

You've never worked with iron?

No.

You see these pieces of iron here? You make a hundred pieces a day. We have to keep putting new teeth into the machine.

I said: All right. I'll try.

He took a hammer. Here, he said. He showed me how to use it on the piece of iron. Then he gave me the hammer. I worked about an hour, and by then I had not made even one piece. The Spaniard said: You won't do. You don't know how to do this work here. The people from the mountains can make ten pieces in an hour. You can't even make one.

You know best, I told him.

No, you can't work with us, he said.

I went out. I walked up to the barracks on the hill where the soldiers live, and an

army truck was coming along the highway. It stopped there and some soldiers got out. And I was very tired and could not walk any farther, so when the truck started out again for Tettaouen I caught onto the back of it and climbed up. I rode in the back of the truck until it had almost arrived in Tettaouen. Then some motorcycle police stopped it. One of them looked over the top into the back and saw me inside.

Where did you come from? he asked me.

I told him I had come from Tanja and got as far as Fnidaq, and couldn't walk any further and had got into the truck.

Come on. Get down, he said.

I was afraid. I thought: This one is going to do something.

Climb down from there and get out of here.

A good man after all, I thought. And I kept walking until I came to the city, and I went into Tettaouen. I went first into the Feddane where the khalifa's palace is, and kept walking around. The blanket was under my arm and I was hungry, but I did not know anyone in the city. Who can I talk to now? I thought. I can't ask anybody for a duro. Nobody's going to give me anything. I don't know anybody. I'm going to sleep here on these steps as Allah wants it and in the morning I'll look for the Fondaq en Nedjar. If I don't find it, I'll look for work. I took the blanket, folded it in the middle, and lay down to sleep with half of it under me and half of it over me. Very early in the morning the street sweepers came down, cleaning the steps. Come on, they said. Get up! Morning is here. And I got out from under the blanket, put it under my arm, and started to walk.

Walking, walking, looking for the Fondaq en Nedjar. And I could not find it. In the middle of the Medina there was a small restaurant that sold white bean pudding. I went in and said to the owner: Can I work with you?

Yes, he told me. Come in. He gave me some pudding and a little bread, and I ate. Then I washed dishes for him all day. Late in the afternoon many men came to eat, and then he gave me more bean pudding and bread. At dark the men stopped coming. The owner said to me: Put all the dishes together and wash them. I'm going to close up now.

I took the dishes and bowls and glasses and washed them. He was counting his money, and he took out a peseta and gave it to me.

Here. Take this, he told me. Go and sleep in the baths and come back in the morning.

Ouakha, I said. I took the peseta, and I thought: I'll go to the hammam and in the morning I'll come back.