SHORT STORY

Wheat Thief

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"cut" by Beaumont Sugar

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I'd been waiting for the guard's vigilance to lapse for more than thirty minutes. I was nervous, but not as nervous as someone who's about to commit a crime.

I was twenty-four or twenty-five. I had only one child at that time, your aunt Zahra. She was a frail girl with bright, curious eyes. She was probably the only girl in Laatamna who could read and write. Your grandfather loved her so much that he made her go to the koutab (the Quranic school) to learn the Quran with the boys of the village. He even sold one of his lands to Votro to buy her a dress when she was four or five. Zahra was ten, almost my age when I was married to your grandfather. If it weren't for the famine, she'd be engaged. My other children, all boys, died at a very young age. Mohammed died of typhoid at two and Lhassan died of pneumonia at the age of four. Tayeb was the youngest. He had been born right there in the house your grandfather had built with his own hands in the spring of 1942, a little boy who took a few halting breaths and died. The house was not big then, but it had been expanded gradually as your father and uncles came along. A small courtyard was surrounded by two rooms, one for sleeping and the other for the meals and the eventual guests. We also had a storage room where food and water supplies were hidden in a deeply dug matmoura (a large hole where provisions were stored). That was the only way to make sure the French soldiers wouldn't take our food resources. The French were fighting against the Germans and were looting the villages to obtain provisions.

Your grandfather had gone to Aïn Temouchent to work in the French vineyards and wasn't heard of in several weeks. It was not the first time he went to Algeria. He'd been there for a year when Zahra was born and had come back with 500 Doros. That sum was a fortune back then. Many other men in Douar Alkhoudrane (Alkhoudrane neighbourhood) at Laatamna also went to Algeria searching for work. It was their last chance to save their families from starvation. Your grandfather promised to come back home with enough money to buy food and clothing. He refused to work for the Nssara (the French). His dislike of them was not random; it was an inherited attitude going back several generations.

I didn't want your grandfather to leave me and Zahra on our own in such hard times. I was upset, angry and frightened. But I knew that it took him a lot of guts to walk across uncounted kilometers of unknown territory in hope of improving his situation and that of his family. He told me that doing anything would be better than staying at home like an idle woman, doing nothing and wishing he was on the other side of the country, where his friends and neighbours lived.

The grass was poor and dry with scant life in it. The fields had fallen barren. The sheep were dying. Buckets dropped in the wells came up with mud, and finally, with nothing. I had to go to Moulouya (a river) which was eight kilometers away from our douar to fetch water. Our

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life depended on crops we planted and on the rain. One after the other, farmers sold their lands for a bag of wheat. Drought was the predominant concern of everyone. However, the Nssara were better equipped. They had tractors and water pumps for irrigation. In fact, they greatly benefitted from our misfortune.

We hadn't eaten in three days. I dug the earth for hours and still, no trace of bgouga (a weedy plant) or any other plant. When a sprig of grass came up, someone was always standing over it waiting to nip it off. Well, I was digging for its roots because the land was so barren that it showed no sign of plants or weeds. Bgouga's roots went deep, where water still hid from the sun, but even those had died. Bgouga was bitter and slippery. You had to swallow it very fast, and it stuck in your throat and made it hard for you to breathe. I was relieved that I didn't have to force Zahra to eat it. I could never forget how she choked the last time she ate bgouga bread and understood that it was dangerous for her. So I had to feed her something else. I needed a miracle for that.

My first thought was to see Votro and ask him for a job. Everyone at Laatamna worked for him. Votro came to Morocco in 1921, the year I was born. He had owned only one hectare of land at the beginning. But little by little, he bought more and more land, most of which he converted into profitable vineyards. He produced red wine which he sold primarily to France.

Of course, I had to disguise myself as a man. I had to wear your grandfather's old jelaba (woolen outfit), had to wrap my black thin hair in his razza (turban) so nobody could tell I was a woman. Working with hungry farmers and impudent Nssara would be risky for the young woman that I was. But this did not make me decide against the idea of finding a job in one of Votro's vineyard farms!

How to look like a man? I thought of smudging ash on my face, but would this be enough? I was not able to sleep through the night. I had to find a way of disfiguring my face. As soon as I heard adan alfajr (the morning call for prayer), I threw the hnbl (blanket) away and went to the kitchen. I took a knife with a sharp edge, the one I used to behead chickens and brutally slashed across my face with it. *Yes, that's how I got my scar*. The pain was unbearable. I stared dizzyingly at the pool of blood that formed on the floor. I finally sneaked into the room where Zahra was still sleeping and fetched my small, silver mirror from the wooden box. I hesitantly examined the ugly wound that was gashing in the middle of my face. I looked like a monster. I remembered that my mother used ash to heal wounds. I spread some over my face, but that did not soothe the pain.

I went out of the house shortly after the first bell of the day was rung. Seasonal farmworkers had half an hour for breakfast before they returned to work again in one of Votro's farms.

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They worked ten hours under the hot sun, and how much were they paid? Almost nothing! It was a warm, sunny, spring day and I felt hot under your grandfather's heavy jelaba. I did not know where Votro's villa was, but I assumed that if I kept walking I'd succeed in finding it.

It was not the first time I went out on my own. I used to go to the forest to get wood for the cooking place. But there wasn't anything to cook anymore except for tea, so I hadn't gone to the forest for a while. I walked for a long time. Still, no sign of the villa and the large vineyards surrounding it. I thought I had gotten lost. It was noon or later before I reached Votro's kingly mansion. As I approached the vineyards, I was stunned. It was as if I was crossing over from night into day. The world became all green grass against the bluest sky. I clenched my teeth together in pointless anger as I stared at the lands that used to be ours. My stomach wove itself into a resentful knot when I remembered how we had lost all our land; the land your grandfather had spent so much time on and worked so hard to prepare for crops. All his life, he worked in the land, shaped it and was shaped by it. He derived a strong sense of pride from having his own land. Your grandfather's dream was to have 100 hectares farmland. He had worked very hard in the last ten years and managed to have a ten-hectare land. That's why he was very sad when he had to sell the last hectare to Votro. For that Nsrani (French man), the land was simply a commodity to be used, traded, or sold.

A guard was there. I was not breathing for a few seconds. That was the first time I had ever been close to a man other than your grandfather. His features were coarse; his face was cold and without cordiality.

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly.

"Talk to Votro." I put on what I thought was a man's voice. I was trying to sound like your grandfather.

"Wldmn?" (whose son are you?)

"Wld (the son of) Lmstfa." That was really my father's name.

"How old are you?"

"I am 20, and I want a job."

"Go away."

"I am robust and sturdy. I can do anything. Look at my hands, they are strong and rough." I persisted, desperately.

"There are already too many workers. We don't need you," he said loudly.

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I was still pleading for a job when a middle-aged Nsrani chewing an unlighted cigar suddenly appeared. That was Votro! I had never seen him before; I had just heard of him from your grandfather. Still, I immediately recognized him. He was dressed in a neatly tailored shirt and tight-legged pants; he wore shiny brown shoes and a lightweight straw hat. My first impression of him was that he wasn't much bigger than Hamdoun, your grandfather. *Ya rabbi (oh my God), if he's so weak and defenseless, how did he cheat us of our lands?* My eyes pleaded but Votro gave me a disdainful glance.

"Dégage!" (Go away)

I did not understand what he said, but his big, flat emotionless voice was enough information for me. A spasm of rage gripped my throat for a moment. I imagined myself knocking Votro to the ground, punching, slapping, biting, pinching, and kicking him. But the fear of not having anything to eat brought me back to the real world. As I was heading back home, I was trying to remember the last real meal I had. Nothing. The bitterness of bgouga erased whatever memory I had of decent human food. I walked for what felt like hours. I was breathless, exhausted, and dizzy with hunger and thirst. I touched my wounded cheek; it was bleeding. All of a sudden, I had a brilliant idea.

I arrived home two or three hours after midday. The time of lunch had long passed, and the hot sun of a warm spring day was sloping down towards the west and still no lunch. Zahra slept crumpled under the hnbl, her mouth slightly open. Her face was unhealthily pale. She was more than merely hungry. By her eyes I knew she was sick. She did not stand the bgouga bread I made a few days back to ease her hunger and mine. I prepared some sugarless tea and woke her up.

"Ma (mother), what happened to you?" She shrieked.

I wrapped my arms around her, and she began sobbing uncontrollably.

I drilled three big holes in a large bag of wheat and put it on. I went out of the house long after the ichae (evening) prayer. The cold wind was drawing a chilling breath through as I held the door open. I firmly shut it, turning the key twice. Now in the middle of spring, the days were warm, but the nights cooled quickly. I had many kilometers to go before I arrived at one of Votro's wheat fields. *Yes, that was where I was heading.* I knew Votro's workers would be harvesting wheat in a week or two.

My blgha (pair of shoes) was worn out; my feet were swelling and my wound was throbbing loudly with terrible pain. But I had my mother's square-headed determination and stubbornness, and I had to remain steadfast and composed for the sake of Zahra. I moved silently across the barren fields, those Votro did not bother buying, with the only sound of

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the wind rustling through the pine trees planted around the field borders. I entered the forest suddenly as though through a gate. I knew I was still one kilometer or more away from my destination.

There were no fences. A foggy darkness cloaked the wheat field; but I saw the silhouette of a man, probably the guard with what must have been a shotgun in his lap. He was leaning against what seemed to be a small bag. I stood waiting for more than thirty minutes. Suddenly, he said something inaudible. I almost fainted with fear. But, then, I realized he was snoring. Still, I couldn't walk into the dark field. Even if my spirit was willing, my feet wouldn't move. I recited Ayat Alkorssi (a verse from the Quran) in an attempt to infuse courage into myself. *Yes, strange to ask God's help when you're about to steal*. Finally, I started across the field. I ducked under ferns and stumbled past climbing wheat strains. I could not stop my hands from trembling. For a fleeting second, I thought I saw someone watching from behind the wheats. When I somehow lost some fear of being watched, I hungrily sniffed at the brownish green wheat plants and put a handful in my mouth to satisfy some awful craving. Then, I took out my sharp sickle, breathed deeply, and began to slit the strains of wheat and put them in my bag.

I stepped warily out of the farm. No one chased me. I ran into the barren fields. Nothing. No shouted insults. No stones. No firing. All I heard was the sound of my own steps. I kept running, breathing heavily. I was burdened by a heavy bag of stolen wheat. The kechaba (dress) I was wearing under the wheat sack spotted with sweat; my face flushed with heat and fear and my wound was hurting. If I were caught I'd be put in jail and Zahra would be all alone.

I had enough wheat for two weeks at least. I was not losing another kid. I thought of sharing some with my neighbour Daouia. No, I could not. Nobody should know about what I had just done. With those thoughts, I continued on my homeward journey in the dark hours after midnight. Suddenly, I heard a rustling sound, then dogs barking. I hid on the edge of the woods off the road. I was tightly clutching the handle of the sickle with both hands, prepared to attack. After a while, the sound of the dogs died out and after a long hesitation, I left my hiding place. An hour of painful limping brought me, at last, to the douar. A happy grin was breaking across my cold, disfigured face despite the migraine and the pain in my body.

As soon as I arrived home, I lit the only kerosene lamp we had and awoke Zahra. Her face brightened when she saw me. She was very pale but she seemed to have recovered her health all of a sudden. Without a word, she helped me carry the bag of wheat to the storage room. We ground the wheat grains in the stone hand mill I brought with me years back when I was a young bride.

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I put the creamy yellowish flour into a big gasaa (clay bowl) and swept across the top with my fingers, enjoying the cool silkiness of the freshly milled flour. After I added some water, I took the lump of dough into my hands, folded it over onto itself, and mashed it into a flattened disc. I laid the smooth and elastic dough to rest for a few minutes. I divided the dough into seven tight, smooth small balls, one for each day of the week. Then, I put the balls in a tajin (a saucer shaped clay).

“Zahra, are the mnasb (three stones arranged as a rough tripod around a flat central hearth) ready?”

“No, I can’t light the fire. I put hay and wooden sticks in the fireplace; yet, no fire,” came the feeble, but cheerful voice of Zahra.

“We still have twigs and branches in the courtyard,” I replied. “Go fetch them.”

We finally built a good fire and put the tajin on the mnasb.

A succulent aroma dispersed through the kitchen. I greedily inhaled the smell of hot matlough (unleavened bread) mingled with the scent of tea. It smelled like childhood days. My mother used to prepare matlough for breakfast while we kids were still sleeping. The smell of bread was the reason why I woke up even before the sun had risen.

“Ma, this is the most delicious bread I have ever eaten,” Zahra said, her sleepy voice cutting through my daydream.

It was. The matlough had a soft, golden brown exterior and tender moist interior. It was luscious and gratifying. It made us human again.

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“So, Sanae, that’s why I love matlough so much; because it brings back a flood of memories.”

The end

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