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Taxi Baby

Judith decided to go to Fes on the spur of the moment. A taxi was loading up in front of the café when she wandered down toward the village center in search of a glass of tea. The season was cold enough that the smoky smell of wormwood still mingled with the scent of mint drifting out of the café. The bright sun lured the tea drinkers out to gossip on the gnarled wooden benches under the trees.

“*Ah Miss! Ah Miss!*” the taxi driver beckoned her over. “Want to go?” he spoke confidentially in Arabic as she drew near the ancient Peugeot station wagon. “We've got room for just one more, *Inshallah*.” God willing. “Come on. You don't go anywhere anymore.”

True, now that she thought about it. It had been four weeks since she had seen Karen, or spoken English with anyone who wasn't a student. It was probably time for a trip. “*Ouakha*,” she shrugged, OK. She had put on clean clothes yesterday at the Public Bath so, really, she was ready to go.

“Good, there's a place for you in front. Front seat, Teacher.” Even better. “Now we just got to wait for Achmed. He's taking a young ram to his family in Sefrou. They're going to fatten it up for the *A'id l'Kbir*. He's picking it up at the *souk*,” the open air Saturday market.

This taxi was roomy, carrying the same six passengers as a Mercedes Benz, but seating

one passenger in the front, three on the bench in the middle, and two in the back seat, instead of cramming four people in the back and two next to the driver. The Peugeot was notorious for diesel exhaust wafting up through the floor. Still, in the front seat she would avoid the fumes and she wouldn't be squashed. The ram would go on the roof, trussed up like an overstuffed suit case.

Judith leaned against the side of the taxi and watched people on their way to the market. A bevy of women passed, three wearing *djellebas* of mature women, plain robes that covered their clothes dusting the ground. One was veiled and two had their faces uncovered but their hoods pinned securely in place. In the center was Malika, her friend and housekeeper, hair covered with a scarf, a bit old to be wearing a girl's hoodless *djelleba*, maroon, embroidered with scrolls of yellow silk, on either side of the zipper. She broke away from the group and came toward Judith. She knew Malika's mom and sister, so the other woman must be the sister-in-law who was rumored to be collecting Malika to take her back to Fes for the first round of wedding celebrations. Judith walked toward the group, ready to be her most polite. The greetings were automatic now, after two years of living in the village. "Hello, Malika. How are you? How's your family? How's your health? What's your news?"

Malika intercepted her and walked back toward the outdoor café. "She wants to know," Malika started quietly with a nod toward the sister-in-law, "are you going somewhere?"

"Yes. I thought I'd see my friend Karen, in Fes. What should I bring you from the city?"

"Nothing, thank you. My new sister-in-law, Llala Fatma, is taking me to Fes and wants to know if you'd like a ride."

Judith studied Malika's face to see if the answer should be yes or no, then glanced at the unveiled sister-in-law. Like Cassius, Judith thought, she had a lean and hungry look, happy to

capture a pet American. But if Malika wanted her support, she would give it. “Are you going soon, or will it be a while?”

“We need to go to the *souk* first. Lalla Fatma thinks a country *souk* like ours has better meat.” Judith thought she could detect a faint shake of Malika’s head. “But we’ll be able to take you straight through to Fes once we are ready to leave. You won’t need to hunt for another taxi to take you from Sefrou to Fes.” Yes, there was definitely a negative eye twitch.

Judith kept her smile large. “We’re just waiting for Si Achmed to bring his sheep and then we’ll be off. I think I’ll go now. It’s a good time of day to get a taxi from Sefrou to Fes.”

“*Inshallah*,” Malika smiled genuinely for the first time.

“*Inshallah*, have a good time at the market.” Judith turned and went back to the taxi to wait for Achmed and his ram.

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Malika, relieved, turned from Judith. It was important for Judith to see her as happy, making her own choices, modern. That would be impossible if Judith came to Fes with them. For Lalla Fatma, Malika needed to appear submissive and tractable, a fitting daughter-in-law for her new husband’s mother; for Mamma she needed to appear supportive, willing to do her duty for the family. The dowry her sister had negotiated on her behalf, would support Mamma and get technical school training for Mohammed, the only boy in the family. So many faces; she longed for a veil to cover them all.

Malika joined Mamma, her sister Aicha, and Lalla Fatma, sister to her newly engaged husband. The women enclosed Malika into their midst and continued on their dusty way up to the Saturday souk. Her thoughts fled to the last sights of girlhood. It was mid-April and the beginning of the harvest season. Olives in the groves they passed were still green and hard. The

wheat fields beyond the *souk* were golden, and the leaves of the lentil plants had started to curl. Yellow and red fruits on prickly pear cactus hedges surrounded clusters of houses. Flocks of goats and scruffy sheep wandered on the rocky hillsides. Wobbly lambs had started to appear among them.

The souk was filled with the early harvest of fava beans, carrots. There were Jerusalem artichokes, and mounds of apricots. Fresh sardines trucked in from the coast sat on ice. Reluctant rams bleated as their backbones were pinched checking for fat. All the vendors, all the buyers, would know that Malika was not long for this village, that she would be moving to Fes, that her mother had made a good deal for her bride price. They would want to congratulate her and wish her good fortune. But Llala Fatma moved her group quickly through the souk, not stopping to chat, not pausing to browse through the fresh produce she would never see in Fes.

“*Ah Khoya*” Brother. Llala Fatma hailed a butcher carrying a whole skinned sheep carcass from the open air abattoir at the far end of the souk. “How much for a rear haunch of that sheep?”

The smell of flowing blood on the chilly cement of the slaughter house made Malika feel woozy. Watching the butcher never had affected her like this before. Her eyes were drawn to the paths under the olive grove to the north of the souk. She would never again walk those flowered paths, hand in hand with her friends, stopping by the spring to brew mint tea as the sun sank in the late afternoon.

She was jealous of Judith who would never have her freedom stolen with a forced marriage. No, it wasn't the marriage. It was the move to Fes. There were plenty of girls who were forced to marry, but stayed right here, still able to walk with their sisters, still able to enjoy the support of friends. It was cruel to be sent so far from home. That was why Llala Fatma had

been sent to the country – to look for a wife for her brother. He had married twice before, both times to city girls, who had ended up fleeing back to their mothers' homes. This was her third trip to visit them. Llala Fatma was convinced that a wife bred in the country was better for people like them. Such a wife would be untainted by knowledge of the city. She would be more timid.

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Judith always thought of Sefrou as an airlock between country and city. Only donkeys could carry goods through the old part of town. Along the streets were clusters of little vinyl covered tables scattered with cheap jewelry, pickled eggs, scarves, piles of dates, good luck pieces hung on silk cords for the mirror of your car. Sounds changed as she moved up the cobble stoned streets, echoing as the street widened, changed again as she approached a tree lined public square. Café tables clustered in one corner. Hawkers shouted about used silver and clothes from China. Someone was selling lumpy couscous drenched in buttermilk under one of the trees, a sure sign that spring was here.

During the walk from the lower taxi stand to the upper parking lot Judith meandered through the walled part of the town, the *medina*, pulling on her city mind, switching from Arabic to English as her primary language. Her posture tightened as she prepared to move among strangers and she looked more covertly at people's faces. She had seen students pull off *djelebbas* to reveal jeans and t-shirts as they left the rural side of Sefrou; she had seen their mothers pull the *djelebbas* on and fasten veils across their faces as they moved into city mode. Judith no longer thought of it as being fake. It was more like playing poker, simply prudent to not reveal too much when you went to certain places, among certain people.

From the square to the upper taxi stand the cobble stones had been covered with tarmac.

Trees lined the road. Mopeds, sometimes attached to delivery carts, came this far. People who owned cars parked in the dusty lot where the taxis gathered passengers. Judith continued the climb uphill, eyes down, looking forward to a *café cassé* once she got to Fes, and maybe a trip to The Oasis, a bookshop owned by an American couple. It didn't pay to actually plan ahead; too much could happen. Anticipating possibilities helped Judith pull on her city self. If it were long enough, chances were that she would get to do one of the things on her list. If she accomplished two of them, well, she was ahead of the game.

“Ah! Miss! Judith!”

She looked up from the road and saw Malika, with Llala Fatma and a man, walking toward her. “Ah, Malika! Still on your way to Fes?”

Malika's smile was tight. “This is my husband’s sister, Llala Fatma, and her husband, Si Yousef.” Judith greeted them. Llala Fatma leaned forward to kiss her cheeks, then nodded to her husband who stuck out his hand. They moved a few steps apart from Judith and Malika, gazing at passers-by but still within earshot. A veiled woman carrying a large silver tray stopped and chatted with them, while Llala Fatma kept her eye on Malika. When the newcomer shifted the tray to her other arm Judith could see that she was so pregnant that the tray was barely visible behind the bulge in her *djelleba*.

“Yes, we are still on our way to my new husband's house so I can get used to his mother and his children. Imagine, he already has four children!” Malika's voice was cheerful and quiet here in the street. “My husband’s sister had some business in Sefrou and thought this would be a good time to meet some of my new relatives before the wedding.”

The husband looked at his watch. When the pregnant woman moved on the sister-in-law drew near. “Are you still going to Fes? We'll give you a ride. You can have tea with us first, at

my cousin's house. They would love to meet the foreign teacher for whom Malika has worked all these years.”

Judith looked at Malika who furrowed her brow and shook her head ever so slightly. “Please do,” said Malika. “We'll be done here in a couple of hours, *Inshallah*. We'll be able to drop you wherever you want to go.”

“Thanks for the offer, but my friend Karen is waiting for me when I get to Fes. I'll trust my luck. If I'm still at the taxi stand by the time you are ready to leave town, then of course I'll accept a ride.” Malika embraced her and whispered “Thank you, *Inshallah*,” in Judith's ear as they hugged.

“That's all right then.” Llala Fatma, kissing the air near Judith's face, didn't seem to be particularly anxious for Judith to be with them.

Now that she had started to think of herself in Fes, Judith was reluctant to spend an afternoon with strangers, sipping tea, and watching Malika getting bullied into plans for a marriage she didn't really want. Had Malika wanted her support, Judith would have been glad to stop for tea whether she was genuinely wanted or not. But after two years, the novelty of being the prize foreigner was just tedious.

At the taxi stand the late morning rush had begun to slow down. Judith got the next to the last seat in a Mercedes Benz, and stood by herself strategically near the front door and waited for a final passenger to appear. Shortly Llala Fatma's friend with the tray trudged up. The driver looked her over. “The taxi is full.”

“No it's not,” said the woman. “I only count five, those four men and that girl.” She pointed at Judith with her chin.

“We agreed to travel light, so it's too late for you.”

“Isn't my money as good as theirs? You don't want to pay extra, do you?” She challenged the men, ignoring Judith.

“We're only thinking of your comfort, *Lalla*.” Ma'am.

The woman set her tray on edge, bracing it on a nearby rock and leaned on it, one of her palms bracing her belly. “I have to get to Fes,” she argued, “Now. *Inshallah*.”

The taxi driver caved. “Take it easy. Of course you do.” He turned to Judith and gestured to the other side of the taxi. “You'll have to sit next to her. It's better that way.”

Better for whom, Judith wondered, but squeezed herself in, next to two men smelling of wood and tobacco smoke, and made space for the pregnant woman next to the door. The woman stashed her tray in the trunk of the Mercedes and climbed in, shifting her belly and hip toward Judith so the driver could slam the door. Her right arm remained draped around Judith's shoulders and the belly shared Judith's lap. Judith had never been so close to a pregnant woman in her life. She was alarmed at the way the belly rolled and bulged as the baby moved. The two men in front made room for the driver and the taxi rolled out of town.

The first sign that there was something seriously wrong was the pain of fingers digging into Judith's shoulder. A soft moan came from the pregnant woman before Judith could even register the fingers. “Are you all right, *Lalla*?” Judith asked. “Do you need help?” The woman gripped again. Sweat beaded on her forehead. This time the moan was too loud for the men in the front seat to ignore. “No!” she whispered and squeezed Judith a third time. That was the last sound Judith heard from her.

“Stop the car!” said the man who had taken Judith's seat next to the front window. “The baby's coming.” The driver pulled to the side of the road and everyone, except the pregnant woman, piled out of the taxi, expelled like magnets. The driver fled farther than the others,

toward a house down the road to borrow a knife, he said, to cut the cord.

The men left behind all looked at Judith. “Go help her.”

Judith felt like Prissy from *Gone With the Wind*. She knew nothing about birthing babies. She knew nothing about how to comfort a woman giving birth. She couldn't even hold her friend's head when she puked into a toilet. She told the men this. Their mouths tightened in disgust.

“How can that be? You're a woman, aren't you?”

“But I was the last in my family. I never even saw anyone have a baby before.” Judith wondered if she were as unnatural as they believed her to be. As much as she preferred the company of women, here, to the groping, ogling society of men, she had never really seen herself as part of women's business. The other woman continued her own silent business alone in the taxi.

A car approached and started to slow down. It was Malika and her new in-laws. The sister-in-law peered into the taxi as they slid past and motioned for her husband to speed up. Judith watched them disappear.

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Malika, in the back seat, felt her hear bump as the road home, and Judith, disappeared behind her. “Isn't she your friend?” she asked her husband's sister.

“An acquaintance. Merely an acquaintance.”

“That was why you wouldn't help her?”

“No.” Llala Fatma snapped her gold capped teeth together and glanced at her husband. He stared at the road. “She is a bad woman, not behaving properly, and you see what has become of her. She is a spectacle. She wanted to run away from her husband before this baby

was born. It will be her sixth child. She was in Sefrou selling her silver to get the money to leave, only the baby came early. The taxi driver will take her to the hospital, and everyone will know of her faithless acts. Now she will have to explain to her husband what she was doing in Sefrou and how his son came to be born in a hospital instead of at home. She will lose the money from what silver she was able to sell. It will go to pay for her unnecessary stay in the hospital. No one can help her now. You see what comes of trying to leave your husband.”

Malika thought of the two women who had already left her husband, abandoning their children to whatever new wife his family would pick for him. This unknown silver seller had tried to keep at least one of her children.

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Judith saw the driver come back with no knife. The people in the house had advised him to drive directly to the hospital. Let them deal with the problem of this woman and her baby. They all, the men in a group and Judith standing alone, continued to shuffle uncomfortably in the dust, watching the dark figure of the mother in the taxi strain at her work. Then the baby cried.

Judith again sat next to the woman as she half lay along the seat, patting her shoulder and arm from time to time. The baby, who no one could see, lay somewhere under its mother's clothes, between her legs, still attached by the cord. Three men crowded in the front with the driver. The fourth huddled near the back door, avoiding the touch of even Judith, as if the soil of birth could somehow be transmitted through her to contaminate him. No one talked, even after they had handed their burden over to the nurses at the hospital.

Silently, they drove to the center of town. Individually they fled the scene, leaving the taxi driver to clean up. Judith told Karen about her trip into town. They wondered what had happened to the woman and her baby, but never imagined the desperation behind the birth. By

the time Malika told them what Llala Fatma had said, it had already become a story.