Motivation in Morocco

His room was dark and damp. A soft breeze tickled the blanket lying on the floor. Azad had woken in a sweat, his heart thumping with a deep ferocity. He remembered his dream suddenly; cold, bare feet against the stone floor, walking towards his parent’s room and a fragile breath upon crisp air, a sound of whimpering, low and quite. He turned into the small room. On the bed was his mother cradling a bundle, crying. He looked around the room and saw his father in the corner, covering his face, his shoulders shaking. Azad slowly walked towards the bed, towards his mother. In the bundle, a small face peeked out. But it seemed wrong. The face was cold and stiff; a light blue tint blanketed the hard features.

His mother looked up, “Your sister…I’m so sorry…”

Azad shook the memory from his head and got up. It was very early, the crickets chirping was a harsh yet familiar sound. He wiped the sweat from his face and slowly made his way to the heavy wood door, taking care to not let it creak. The glow of moonlight reflected on the tiles in the hallway. The breeze had picked up, agitating the leaves of the trees. Azad hurried to the narrow stairs and trotted down them. His parents wouldn’t be up until later, but he knew he would have to hurry. Turning into the kitchen, he grabbed a couple slices of anise bread and slipped out the door. Outside of the house, Azad breathed in the chilly morning air and went on his way.

Weaving through the slender alleyways, Azad finally got to his destination. A large house towered over the street as palm trees arched over the entrance. Azad opened the door and entered.

“Hello, Azad!” a loud voice echoed through the walls. At the far wall stooped a figure, bending over a table.

“Morning there, Abdul.” Azad walked to the figure and put his hand on his friend’s shoulder, “What are you working on?” He looked down. On the table lay a small tile, elaborately carved with patterns of lines and geometric shapes.

“I just finished the last tile from the order; all it needs is paint.” Azad smiled, he had looked forward to this day. Rarely did he get to paint, only about a couple days each month. He picked up the tile and walked over to another table.

“Well I have to get home. Don’t have too much fun without me.” Abdul had grabbed his coat and was near the door.

Azad looked up, “Alright have a good day. See you around.” His friend nodded and shut the door behind him.

He walked over to a small shelf in the corner, grabbed the orange paint and uncorked the lid. It was quite, and the candlelight cast many shadows around the walls as Azad worked. He liked this time of day, when no one knew where he was. He felt like he was the only being on earth, free to do as he pleased. The smell of the paint mixed with the musty scent of plaster and tile. The soft colors of orange enhanced by the flickering of the candle flame calmed Azad. Soon the sun came up, the first of its rays seeping through the cloth hung in the windows. As the room got lighter, Azad realized he had worked through the late morning and needed to get back home. He packed the paints back into their shelves and put the tile on the drying rack.

He had started to turn away, but he noticed a small tile had fallen to the floor off the drying rack. Picking it up, he realized this was an old one from a couple months ago. Though a corner had chipped off, the glaze was unharmed. Azad tucked it into his pocket, a small souvenir for himself.

Azad closed the door and locked it with a key Abdul had left. As he turned down the familiar alleyways, the amount of people increased. Soon, there were street peddlers yelling above the noise, all with their own wares, trying to out-compete their neighbors. The scents of spices, donkeys, and rotting fish snaked up and down the streets. In a short time, the commotion was soon integrated with the morning call to prayer The noise and smells faded as Azad came into his neighborhood. He bit his lip as he came to his house, preparing to face the wrath of his parents. The kitchen door was slightly ajar, and Azad could see his mother bustling around. He entered.

“Hello mother,” he said.

“Oh, you scared me!” She turned to him, almost dropping the bowl in her hands. “Where were you this morning?” But the look in her eye suggested that she already knew.

“Just out taking a morning walk.” Azad looked as sincere as he could.

“Well your father’s still getting ready, so you better wash up quickly. The khobz b’chehma is almost ready.”

Azad turned from the pan on the stove as his stomach grumbled. He went into the wash room and poured some water into a shallow dish. Some orange paint had found its way beneath his fingernails and he scrubbed it off.

Making his way back to the kitchen, he could see that his father was seated at the small table. His suit was pressed and his briefcase sat at his feet, like an obedient dog waiting for a treat. He looked as stern as ever, most likely going over a lesson plan in his head.

Azad entered and sat down at the end of the table, opposite from his father. The man was staring at a spot in the stone wall, where a little soot from the fireplace had smudged. The cold, dark eyes shrunk back into the hardened skull. Wrinkles plagued his face. Azad had noticed in the early days his father was more energetic, playing with him, teaching him the history of Morocco. But time hadn’t been kind to the old man. He had shrunk back into his shell after Azad’s sister passed away. The light in eyes faded to a dull, lifeless color. Azad looked down.

“Breakfast is ready.” His mother brought a plate with the pan-fried bread over to him. The steam off the bread curled as it drifted up. The smell of sautéed onions made his mouth water. The three of them sat together, eating but silent.

After a short time his father looked up. “That was delicious, thank you.” His father stood, briefcase in hand. “I’ll see you in the afternoon.” With that his father walked out the door and headed towards the university.

Azad finished his meal a little less hastily, savoring each bite. His mother sat to the side, already finished with her portion, watching him.

“You’re such a good boy.” she sighed, a hint of sadness in her eyes. “Do you think you could run down to the *souq* and buy some cinnamon?” She slid a couple *rials* over to him; the coins glittering in the sun.

“Sure, is there anything else you need?”

“No, I think that will be all.” His mother took the breakfast dishes to the sink.

Azad got up and tucked the coins into his pocket. The meal had lasted into early noon, the sun resting in the middle of the blue sky. The palm trees swayed leisurely in the breeze, their leaves radiating a dark green color. The streets were bustling with pedestrians, some with large bundles on their backs, draped with colorful clothing. There were many stalls lined in the alleyways, but one caught Azad’s attention. The stall had many paintings hung up, all of them depicting outdoor scenes. A painting leaning at the front of the stall entranced Azad. Beautiful greens and blues bleed through the canvas, as small light pinks created delicate flowers.

“Ah, Monet’s *Water Lilies.* What a genius he is.” A small man with a sharp nose and kind eyes peeped out from under his paintings. He had a heavy French accent under his arabic. “It’s a true work of art, you wouldn’t be interested in it young man, would you?” The man gave Azad a questioning look.

“No, no I’m just looking.” Azad studied the painting some more. Instead of the smooth glazing required on tiles, this painting was full of texture. The water seemed to jump off the canvas, as the soft pink petals almost floated off the water. He could have bought the picture, the money his dad brought in from teaching at the university was steady enough. But he couldn’t imagine hanging the painting on his wall, it was much too grand for that. He felt a figure come up behind him.

“Magnificent isn’t it?” Azad turned to find a man in a fancy suit and bowler hat. A very bushy mustache sat on his upper lip. “You seem very interested in it.”

“I paint, but I’ve never seen anything like this. How did Monet get the texture?” The man’s eyes brightened when Azad asked this.

“It’s a technique used with oil paints, famous for making a scene look more alive.” The mustache bounced wildly as the man gave him a quizzical look. “What do you paint then?”

“Tiles.” Realizing he still had the tile he’d found under the drying rack from the morning, he pulled it out from his pocket. “This is one I painted.”

“Wow, this is amazing. You have a real talent, son,” suddenly Azad felt self-conscious. He never told anyone about his painting, with an exception of Abdul, his closest friend. But he was drawn to the man for some reason. “I am Jean Pascal. I work with painters back in France, and I just began an art school here in Rabat.”

“I’m Azad Murabbi. It’s good to meet you.”

“Well, you seem seem like a natural painter. If you like, I could help you learn more about art.” Jean gave him a card with an address on it as well as his tile. “You can drop by this school any time.”

“Thanks, I’ll check it out.” Azad nodded as the man turned away. He tucked the card and tile into his pocket, took one last look at the water lilies, and made his way to buy some cinnamon.

The afternoon light softened the hard stone walls around the alleyways. Tall beautiful rugs were hung up, like silent guardians keeping the peace. Cats meandered through the stalls, their fur shining in the light. After Azad had bought a small bag of cinnamon from a kind old lady, he headed towards his neighborhood. He soon came to an open square, with a big fountain lightly bubbling in the middle. Near the fountain, a street peddler selling fish had attracted a large crowd.

“The Sultan! Pushed out of his fancy palace full of riches, ha!” he was exclaiming. Those nearest to him warily eyeing the sharp knife in his hand as he swung about. The fish on his cutting board lay cut open, stinking.

“What are you talking about old man? You must be crazy! Go back to your fish!” someone yelled at him.

The peddler insisted. “It’s true! My cousin from Fez came yesterday and told us rebels have targeted the Sultan. The Germans are getting antsy, some say they plan to send a gunboat down here. 1911 will be a big turning point.” The crowd had grown larger, and Azad wondered if what this man was saying was true. But Azad turned from the crowd, he needed to get home before his parents got worried.

He came to his house, entered through the front door, and climbed the stairs to his room. He tucked his old tile under his mattress and went down to the kitchen. Inside his mother hastened around the kitchen, the smell of simmering honey, onion, garlic, ginger, and saffron filled the space.

“Your father is upstairs and dinner is almost ready. Take a seat and rest.” Azad put the bag of cinnamon on the spice shelf and sat down at the table. His mother took the pan out of the oven, which had a large chicken stuffed with couscous on it. Soon his father walked in and sat down. After they had eaten their fill of chicken, his mom spoke.

“The basbousa cake is resting on the windowsill could you go get it, Azad?” Azad nodded and got up, but before he got halfway to the window, he felt something drop out of his pocket. He turned and saw a small piece of paper laying on the floor. But before he had a chance, his father got out of his seat and had picked up the paper.

“What’s this?” Slowly his eyes went dark. “Art school? What are you doing with this? Please tell me you aren’t going here!”Azad was silent.

“I tell you, you’re future is to be a doctor! Not some poor artist who needs to beg for food! You cannot make a living with this dog’s tail of a job! You should not be learning this nonsense!” He threw his plate across the kitchen, the plate shattering on the wall.

Azad’s mother jumped up. “Please, Tasmeem! Calm down!”

But he continued, “You have probably been sneaking about with that friend of yours, making tiles again! You have no respect for your father!”

“No!” Azad had to shout to quiet his father. “Stop! I want to be an artist! Maybe I have been painting tiles, but it makes me happy! I don’t want to turn into a sad old man like you!” With that he turned and ran up the stairs and burst into his bedroom. He threw his clothes into a bag with some of his possessions, the broken tile, the art school card, and his toothbrush. He ran to the front door and started off for the house where he painted the titles. He could hear his father in the distance yelling his name. It slowly got dark outside.

Morning light slipped through the curtains, as the sounds of the call to prayer drifted through the city. Azad woke up curled under the table near the drying rack. Abdul had been here, a low burning candle and a plate with bread was near his head. Azad got up and ate the bread, then took the card Jean had given him out of his pocket. He stood up and took a breath. He knew what he wanted to do. Stepping out of the house he turned towards the east, away from his house.Maybe he would return soon, forgive his father and mother. Maybe not. He walked into the rising sun.