

# The Inheritance

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## I.

¶1 In the spring of 2001, a man sits in a Moroccan teahouse in Amsterdam’s Pijp district and recalls the story of A. M. Almosnino. The events he recounts take place in the years 1973, 1974—though perhaps later still. He pauses.

¶2 “In any case, it was the day after all my money was taken from me at the Algerian border,” he says at last.

¶3 “Ah...” The others reply.

¶4 “I was on my way to Oujda. I had arranged to meet a friend there, Benabou, who was waiting for me in a hotel he had checked into shortly before. He was always in trouble. Only foreigners and the most desperate cases still found their way to him. I had walked all night. Every step was an effort. The blisters on the soles of my feet were bleeding and hurt terribly. When I reached the hotel in Oujda, Benabou was more nervous than I was used to seeing him. I told him that all my money—all our money—had been confiscated by the Algerian police. He shrugged. Benabou said he was waiting for a Jew from Marseille, one who went by the name of Almosnino. He wanted to sell a family inheritance, together with his sister. That’s good news, I said. But something was bothering him. To lift his spirit, I asked what his share would be. That worked. Ten percent, he said, then grinned

¶5 so widely he showed us every tooth he still possessed...”

¶6 The man speaking in the teahouse is accustomed to addressing no one in particular. After a while, he pays and heads home. He walks along Tweede van der Helststraat. When he reaches the bridge, he glances down at the Amstel Canal and sees a pike fish waving at him with its fin.

¶7 Then the pike and the canal vanish, and he is back in the hotel in Oujda. Through the open window of the small room, he looks out at the corrugated zinc roofs of the barracks. By the window is a desk with a stained surface. There, Benabou sits, with his hands solemnly clasped together. Benabou is as thin—if not thinner—than he always was, and his complexion betrays some ailment. He wears a felt coat to impress his clients.

¶8 The man on the bridge opens his eyes. To his right lies Tweede van der Helststraat. To his left, Maasstraat. He pushes himself away from the railing, falling backward as though throwing himself out of the window in Oujda—away from Benabou, away from the hotel. But over and over again he lands in the same room. He pushes himself once more, falling meters into the abyss, and there again: Benabou’s felt coat, a sea of gold plates. He continues on his way. How can it be, he thinks, to remain stuck in a memory, as if trapped in some-

one else's thoughts? That scum in the teahouse must have drugged him. Would explain why they were staring at him like that.

¶<sub>9</sub> He stops when he sees a house with the number 190. He looks at the nameplate: yes, that is unmistakably his name. And this is his house. Yet in his head, behind his trembling eyelids, he is someone else.

¶<sub>10</sub> He opens the door. From the landing, he hears the footsteps of the child who always waits for him at the door, like a housecat. Inside, she continues to wait patiently as he takes off his shoes. Then she climbs onto his lap. She asks if he's thought of a story. He says he doesn't have the energy. She stays seated, resolute.

¶<sub>11</sub> "Shouldn't you be doing something useful?" He asks. She pretends not to hear him.

¶<sub>12</sub> "You promised," she says.

¶<sub>13</sub> "Just let me be," he says.

¶<sub>14</sub> The child jumps off his lap and fetches the recording device. She watches with a satisfied smile as he sets the instrument beside him and clears his throat. Later, lying in bed and listening to the patter and thud of the child moving about the house, he hears the click of the machine and then his own voice:

¶<sub>15</sub> "It was five fifty-five when the peculiar figure..."

## II.

¶<sub>16</sub> It was five fifty-five when the peculiar figure of A. M. appeared on the platform (a man who until then had only existed by virtue of his initials, affixed at the bottom of the missives in which his possessions were listed, like committed sins, and in which his return to Oujda was announced). His eyes were still bloodshot from night-long wakefulness, or from the daylight he rightly shunned, for he too was a stranger as he stood there, a stray fragment of night.

¶<sub>17</sub> Under the inert station clock opposite the platform where A. M. was standing, three young men

sat on a bench, heads rested against one another. They appeared to be asleep. Every now and then, one in particular would straighten himself, with yellow eyes that followed the squeaky rails: with a dazed gleam, his gaze drifted to the bend in the distance where the train could appear at any moment—like the act of a master magician. And then suddenly, as if overcome by a sickness of sleep, he would lose his brief moment of alertness. He moved close to his sleeping brothers and dozed off again.

¶<sub>18</sub> A. M. kept an eye on the three men, as he stayed crouched under the awning of a closed kiosk. Suddenly, he was struck by a paralyzing fear. If he turned even just slightly, the three of them would jump on his back, pull his hair, bite, spit in his ears, grab his eyeballs with their bird claws—oh, his eyes, not his poor eyes! Or so he thought, at least, until the sign of God descended before the men—an emaciated and careless white dove with gray wings. The dove nestled fearlessly at their feet, sinking down on one worn-out leg before tucking its head into its pale feathered collar. Reassured by this miraculous intervention (oh, heavenly bureaucracy! Thank you! Haha! Roo-coo!), A. M. pressed his giant frame more firmly against the station wall and turned to face westwards, where his sister would soon appear.

¶<sub>19</sub> The locomotive rolled into the station slowly. With tentative hisses, the rumor of its arrival spread among the animals in the bushes. The eucalyptus trees bowed backwards one by one, the village once split by the railway (by the French! No, the Spanish! No, the Americans!) in two (the Belgians!), bent its fractured back, revealing a quivering bundle of rails, electric wires, concrete, bursting earth, then, having exhausted its strength, the locomotive heaved itself into the station with a final, heavy moan, stunning all the animals in its wake.

¶20 A. M. warded his burning eyes against the collecting dust. When he opened them, his blood kin was standing over him, grinning. Here I am! His sister cried. She removed her hat to reveal closely cropped hair. She looked like a starving child. She offered him her head, which fit in his outstretched palm. I think it's terrible too, she said, laughing, but you know how it is. No, he said, no, I don't know. Where is your hair, he said, determined not to let himself be driven crazy. But I am not bald! The human cried out. Yes, you are, he said, look, and he showed her the graying chick feathers peeking out from under his cap, which were much longer than the hair on her head. She asked him if she reminded him of someone. He considered this for a moment. Her mother used to hold her in the air and complain about the pigment of her child's skin (why must she be so dark, none of us are that dark!). Even now she was petite, and without her black locks she looked younger and older at the same time. He shook his head. No, she didn't look like anyone he had known. Her face hardened. Then she spat before his feet. A promising start, he thought. They left the station and crossed the road. There, they came to rest near an open crossing gate of a track that had already been out of use for years, and waited.

¶21 A few moments later, a van drew up by the roadside. From within, two passengers watched them with quiet curiosity. Zohra made as if to climb in, but A. M. held her back. He entered first, greeted the other passenger, then pressed Zohra between his body and the door. I have never seen you here before, said the driver. A. M. ignored his curiosity, and feigned sleep. Before long, he slipped away into dreams, and only awoke when they arrived.

¶22 A path wound downward from the place where A. M. and Zohra stepped out. After half an hour they reached the valley, which filled with rainwater in the winter, feeding mudslides that swept away both children and livestock. Thereafter began the

arduous ascent. The sun hung low in the sky, but the heat was already merciless. Sweat ran down their weary bodies. They were almost near the crest when Zohra caught sight of the hamlet upon the nearest hill. She shielded her eyes and counted four houses. They will end us, she said. We have done no wrong, he replied. I have been here for weeks. No one bothered me, let alone spoke to me. Zohra shifted her gaze from the hamlet to him, and back again. Do you not see, she said, breathless. Do you not see that they have cultivated the whole land? It is still ours, he said. We were born here. He pointed to a low building whose façade was streaked with black mold. In that house over there. It was bigger in my memories, she said. A. M. replied that she was smaller back then.

¶23 With A. M. leading the way, they continued, and eventually arrived at the rundown house. Stooping beneath the doorway, A.M followed his sister inside, his eyes half-closed, as she moved about the room. What is that smell? She asked. He lied, saying that he did not know. (When he first arrived, he had found his father's neglected livestock. He had dragged away the now man-shy animals outside, one by one.) Behind the shared space that also served as kitchen, was the bedroom. It had a small window, with hinges that squeaked at night. In the room lay their parents' mattress, worn out and long forgotten, now scattered among A. M.'s belongings.

¶24 Zohra reappeared in the kitchen, pale as a ghost. Her gaze was fixed on a point above her brother's figure. Like a talisman, a rifle rested upon the hooks above the door frame. Did you bring all your things from Marseille? She asked. He did not respond. Why are you here, Momo? He remained silent. At last he said: I have come for the inheritance. Zohra said: I am here for the inheritance as well. But that does not mean I intend to remain here. I do, he admitted. Zohra pointed at the firearm. Is that why you put that up? He

merely shrugged, then went outside and sat down, watching the fields with a straw between his teeth. The wall felt cool against his back. As he listened to the sounds coming from the house, he noticed a dark cloud approaching in the distance, beyond the heat that meandered through the crops. The shadow spread swiftly across the fields. A locust plague, he thought. Then he closed his eyes.

¶25 That night Zohra was awakened by the sound of footsteps. It was A. M., stumbling through the kitchen in his underclothes. She saw at once that he was wildly drunk. Standing still at the front door, he took the rifle from the hooks, opened and closed the magazine with a click, then set the rifle back and returned to the bedroom. Zohra shut her eyes and fell asleep again. When a rooster crowed her awake, A. M. was nowhere to be seen. Drenched in sweat, she walked to the makeshift counter, beneath which stood a row of tin cans filled with drinking water. Just like it used to be. From the kitchen, she could hear the rustling of the animals as they scraped the bare earth with their dry mouths. A bit further away, the scrawny cow grazed. Just outside, one could still hear the gurgling breaths of the blind horse, standing untethered in the darkness. The horse could barely stand; a tumor with a purplish tint protruded from its hind leg, and made its way up his rear.

¶26 She heard A. M.'s footsteps approaching from behind. His sad gaze passed over the horse and halted at the repulsive growth. I do not know what to do with it, he said. Kill him, said Zohra. I cannot do that, he said. She turned, went inside, and returned with the rifle. A shadow crossed her face. Perhaps that's meant for me, thought A. M. A second later, the shot rang out, an ear-shattering bang muffled by its entry to the animal's skull. The horse slammed against the wall. On the other side, dishes fell out of the cabinets. With a sudden jerk, Zohra aimed the barrel at her brother and burst into laughter, as if it were a funny joke.

¶27 So they stood, brother and sister, facing one another in that laughable blood mystery, when a man in a football jersey came running from the house on the opposite hill. It was Hamza, son and heir of their cousin, who had long lived off their land like a parasite. He stood there, waving his arms like a madman. Almosnino! He cried.

¶28 The thirsty crops held their breath at the sound of that almost-forgotten name. Zohra swung the rifle in the air and yelled: the horse is dead! And you will bury it!

¶29 The boy in the football jersey shouted something in return. Then he ran away, out of sight. A moment later, a speeding white Mercedes appeared from behind the houses and sped down the hill in a cloud of dust. The roar of the car grew louder and louder.

¶30 With a sigh, Almosnino snatched the rifle from Zohra's hands. Now you're done for, he grunted.

¶31 When the rumbling Mercedes came to a halt before their house, the two of them were sitting in the shade, a few meters away from the dead horse. Flies circled around the head. The boy stepped out and slammed the door behind him, glowering. His face and hands were covered in scars and scratches. He was not yet born when they left, but he had been told of the abandoned house—of the diseased beasts that lingered there, reaching a mythical old age, and of the man named Almosnino who had once lived within it. Of his children, one a giant, the other a dwarf. They would sooner or later return, it was said, and with them, the end of the land.

¶32 With eyes wide open, he stared at the carcass. Zohra rose and stepped out of the shade. The boy did not make a sound.

¶33 Either you'll bury it, she said, or I shall dump the bitch into the fields and set it on fire.

### III.

¶34 At the coldest hour of the day, Larbi cast a glance through the open window and saw the naked body of his niece curled upon a sheet. Then he asked

his lord for forgiveness and began hobbling, confused and shaken, toward the front door, which he struck three times with the end of his staff. The door swung open by itself.

¶35 Larbi gulped when he saw the enormous shape of A. M. seated at the table; his swollen face hung over an open book, one arm wrapped around a bottle of whisky as though it were a sleeping child. Once more, Larbi asked his lord for forgiveness and then greeted the giant, who slowly raised his head, not recognizing his own nephew.

¶36 After Larbi had introduced himself, A. M. woke his little sister. They prepared tea in silence. How strange, Larbi thought. Their proportions could not be more different. And yet, looking at them together, they could be twins. He allowed himself to be served by the hairless woman, who seemed to have been struck by some grave illness. He then settled onto the small bench at the front of the hut and drank tea in noisy sips. With growing unease, he looked across to his house on the other hill, as though it belonged to a stranger.

¶37 After a long silence, Larbi spoke nervously: my son Hamza returned home yesterday with blood on his clothes. He said that the dying animal, which was already lying in the pit, lifted its blind head at the very last moment, neighed once more, and then collapsed. Larbi looked from A. M. to Zohra, as if seeing the vengeful face of the late Almosmino in that of his descendants. A. M. sat against the wall with folded arms and closed eyes, as if he had fallen asleep. Zohra sat on a stone, legs spread. She began carving symbols into the earth, which made Larbi cast the occasional anxious glance. And then, as if a magical hand had pried loose the knot in his mouth, he confessed.

¶38 On an autumn day in 1952, Larbi began, I took the  
¶39 bus to Melilla to buy a cloak. Back then, I drifted around a great deal, doing odd jobs here and there. All the money that came into my hands was the result of first impressions, which was why I was

searching for something fine to wear. I was drinking coffee on a terrace near the harbor of Melilla when I passed by the statue of General Franco. That was where the boy was leaning. When he saw me, the boy jumped up and ran away. I reached the *mellah* and asked for the leather shop of Rachel Assouline. The shop was located at the bottom of a building whose construction had been abandoned halfway through: it was a cellar room of just a few square meters, with leather and wool cloaks piling up to the ceiling. Among them sat an old Jewish woman. She had a black cloth tied around her head and was singing a song by Zohra el-Fassiya.

¶40 Nestled between her bare legs was a small stove, over which she held a glowing rod. The woman nodded to me in greeting. With a deep sigh, she placed the rod down beside her and shook the ash from her scrunched up skirt. Then she called out: Almosnino, we have a customer! I froze. I looked around the dark room for another living being, but saw nothing. Only when my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness did I perceive a figure. At the back of the small room, under the dull glow of a dusty bulb, a man sat bent over a tray of beads. His face was weathered but aristocratic, his body of superhuman proportions. Without looking up, the man greeted me in turn, telling me that he would be there in a moment, then continued to calmly examine the beads, murmuring over them as though he were giving each a name.

¶41 I do not know how long I stood at the doorway, petrified and trembling with the shame that had suddenly overtaken me. Hidden among the animal hides, I looked at the familiar face of my aunt's husband, who had replaced his pious clothing and white prayer cap with a long black cloak, before covering his head with a kippah. I pretended to inspect the coats while attempting, as discreetly as possible, to cast a glance at my uncle's peculiar disguise. But each time I turned

my face away, I was tormented by the fear of being discovered, and became convinced that I was terribly mistaken. For how could it be that Faqir Abdellah—the street peddler who, with his small trades, had managed to buy a piece of land from our family, the man who had charmed my gullible aunt with his poetic piety—how could it be that he had been pretending to be a Muslim all those years?

¶42 Swinging myself forward, I ran up the small staircase and out of the shop, spraining my ankle as I did so, then stumbled back to the station, while the bewildered cries of the Jewish woman who thought I had stolen something rang in my ears. My heart was pounding. When I arrived late that evening, my father was already waiting for me. He observed my clumsy gait and waited until I stood before him.

¶43 Do you know who I ran into in Melilla? My father looked up. What were you doing in Melilla? I went to buy a new cloak, I said. A cloak? What is that? He asked. It's a kind of djellaba that keeps you warm, father. My father frowned. And who did you run into? I hesitated. Faqir Abdellah, the husband of Aunt Rahma. I said at last. My father's frown deepened. He looked toward the house on the other hill, where a light was burning. The husband of our Rahma? What was he doing there? I said: I was in the *mellah*, and when I entered the clothing shop I saw a Jewish woman. She was sitting on the floor with a small stove between her legs. The hot metal had burned the skin up to her thighs. My father cleared his throat. I continued: And behind her sat Faqir Abdellah with a kippah on his head. The Jewish woman called him Almosnino.

¶44 But Faqir Abdellah converted years ago, my boy, said my father. I remained silent. I was dead tired and my leg throbbed. My father, who was starting to go blind at the time, then said something peculiar, something I would keep thinking about for years. He told me: Whenever I run into Faqir

Abdellah during my strolls, even when it's completely dark, I recognize him from afar, and I say: Pray for us, Faqir Abdellah. He always promises he will, and I sense no dishonesty in his voice. You are all astonished that, despite my cataract, I can still find my way home at night—and I would even dare say that I see more clearly than any of you—so believe me when I tell you that what you saw today is of no consequence.

¶45 My father then made me swear not to tell anyone, and I swore so with my clammy palms pressed to my chest. But a couple days later, Faqir Abdellah, or Faqir Almosnino—the person he had apparently always been—had vanished nonetheless. And Rahma and the children, meaning you two, were also nowhere to be found.

¶46 Here Larbi fell silent.

#### IV.

¶47 The sun rose. The house stood there peacefully.

¶48 Your little brother must never know the truth, said mother. Tell him a sweet bedtime story, she said, one of mountains, of harvest time, of playing in the springs, of overnight stays with the dogs in the yard. Father said: He will never be an heir. As strong as he is physically, he is just too weak in mind. And then came the cries and the accusations, for was it not because of him that we fled? Our Momo did not understand what was happening. In truth, he never did. Father died two years ago, of the heart. On his gravestone was written: Faqir Almosnino. I thought: At last that past is buried. But then Momo pulled himself together, and here we are.

¶49 A. M. looked from his sister to his cousin, dazed. He scoured their faces, but did not know what he sought. Mercy, perhaps. Or the salvation of a final blow.

¶50 He went inside, grabbed a bottle from behind the mattress and brought it to his lips. Something is missing, he thought. He took a sip from the bottle. The ground beneath his feet seemed to slowly tilt,

to the right, then to the left. Standing in the middle of the room with his hand raised, he watched a small bug creep across the table, moving away from him. He waited until the creature was near the edge of the table and then crushed it with a violent blow. And in that moment, he knew.

¶51 He looked up to the door and saw that the rifle was missing.

¶52 Zohra's bursts of laughter immediately clattered through the window. In the distance, dogs bounded over, barking. Larbi's curses and pleas rose into a crescendo of gibberish. The man, flushed and crippled, appeared at the doorway. While A. M. protectively held the shaking Larbi against him, he thought of the coast a few kilometers outside Marseille, of the fish he snatched out of the water, of the way he carved up those mysterious creatures, gouging out their insides, and how, in the dim sheen of their eyes, he had glimpsed his own reflection.

¶53 Outside, Zohra stood by the stone, the rifle clutched against her breast. She studied the facial expressions of the petrified man before her, looking for a sign, and then, to his obvious dismay, she nodded slowly and decisively.

¶54 A. M. laid a hand upon Larbi's shoulders. Do not be afraid, he said. She does not mean you harm. Are you certain? Stammered the lad. As certain as I am that the sun will rise, A. M. reassured him. At those words, a thought occurred to Larbi for the first time. And what if it does not rise tomorrow, he thought, what if it never rises again?

¶55 Zohra loaded the rifle and pressed it to her chest. At the first shot, Larbi leapt against the giant's body and buried his face in the latter's armpit. Farther off, the cow wobbled across the yard. Another shot sounded—this time, weirdly enough, more subdued than the first. The cow's head shot to the left and slowly swung back again. The animal grunted with its last reserves of strength. Shaking on her skinny legs, she sank to the ground.

¶56 It was quiet all around.

¶57 Zohra set the rifle beside her and sat down once more upon the stone, wide-legged. She said: Now nothing remains, little brother, except for you. So either come with me, or I will put a bullet in your head as well.

¶58 (The child grows weary. Her eyes close. She drifts off. A few seconds—or minutes—later, she opens her eyes, and, while wondering what roused her, listens...)

¶59 "...the three of them stood at the lowest point of the valley, where mudslides swept away both children and livestock in the winter. At their quiet parting, something occurred to Larbi. So what's become of you? He asked. A. M. said he was a fisherman. Larbi said it was an honest trade. Then he waved the giant and his sister farewell. And left. His whole weight rested on his cane, and while he walked away, it seemed he would never reach the far hill. That very day, A. M. and Zohra travelled to Oujda, where they entrusted the sale of the inheritance to some broker by the name of Benabou. Not a single dime from the proceeds would ever be seen."