

## GOODBYE MISS MOROCCO

Unlikely as it might seem, I was once engaged to the reigning Miss Morocco. It's a story I like to tell whenever I'm given the opportunity. I usually open by saying — a little ungallantly — that the competition hadn't been staged for several years. Nonetheless, being once engaged to the reigning Miss Morocco isn't something everyone can claim. What's more — most improbably — it has the merit of being true. Or that was what I believed at the time.

There wasn't any doubt that Lucette was the reigning Miss Morocco. She had the proof. Sitting in the candlelight, side by side, on the narrow bed in my barely-furnished room in the *Passage Lacépède*, we leafed through her album of photographs with a certain reverence. Sparkling tiaras, shining smiles, stilettos and swimsuits.

Whether or not we were ever engaged is a little more ambiguous.

My working days in Casablanca were not demanding. An hour or two of light teaching in the morning would be followed by a simple lunch at a food stall in the *medina* and a return to the villa that I shared with two other teachers in Casablanca's Jewish quarter. There, reclining on rush mats in our stone courtyard, we smoked *kif* in almond pipes under the branches of the fig tree and the jacaranda until it was time to return to the language school that employed us to teach English to a mix of native Moroccans and *pieds-noirs*.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays I taught my beginners class. They were a charming group, or so it seemed to me, the afternoon's *kif* having had a mellowing effect on my view of the world and everything in it.

For the first week or two it was a largish class in a smallish classroom, but this, too, might have been the effect of the *kif*. After that, the class grew noticeably smaller although the classroom itself remained the same size. With a reduced number of students, I was able to identify them more easily.

Fatima      Lucette

Fawzi      Latifa

Hasan

Giselle

Abdulaziz

Benoît

For the first hour of every lesson I loved them all unconditionally, and if, during the second hour, I loved them less and my patience became strained, I would only have to remind myself of the hideous linguistic complexities that face the foreign learner of English to regain my composure. By the end of each lesson, I was fairly certain we were friends again.

I was aware of her, of course. How could I not be? Lucette was in her late twenties, a *pied-noir* of Spanish extraction with large dark eyes, a mass of black hair, a wide smile and — during our lessons at least — a charmingly puzzled expression. Yes, I was aware of her, and more aware of her as class numbers dwindled. But nothing more than that.

Fawzi      Lucette

Hasan

Latifa

Abdulaziz

Benoît

One Tuesday, at the end of the lesson, Lucette stayed behind. A tricky point of grammar to be explained? A muddled example to be clarified? I rather doubted if I would be able to provide her with a satisfactory answer but I smiled encouragingly. Would I like her, she asked, standing close in front of me — red lips, perfect teeth, pale apricot skin — to give me a lift home? (Her question was, of course, in French. We wouldn't be attempting anything like this in English until the end of the book ... if we ever reached the end, that is.) I thanked her kindly but declined for no better reason than, in the evening, I enjoyed walking home through the *medina*.

Next Thursday she asked me again. Again I declined. I'm not quite sure why but, at the time, it seemed the right thing to do.

The Tuesday after that Lucette didn't come to the class and neither did Abdulaziz. I didn't expect to see either of them again. It was therefore a surprise to find her sitting in her place the following Thursday. (Abdulaziz never did reappear.) When she approached me at the end of the lesson, I was ready. Her smile was as wide as ever but more determined. Would I, she asked me, refuse her offer again? She wasn't used to being

refused, she said, but she would ask me this one last time. No, I said, I would not refuse her offer. I would be happy to accept and I meekly followed her to a smart yellow car parked illegally on the pavement outside the school.

The fact that she didn't ask me where I lived might have given me a clue that we weren't going there. Instead we headed out of town to the *Corniche* where, on a poor teacher's salary — and, as you may have gathered, I was, in every sense, a very poor teacher — it would never have occurred to me to go. After an astonishingly expensive meal at a very smart restaurant, where I might have felt distinctly uncomfortable if we hadn't had a private room or if I'd thought I might be paying, she put an arm round my neck, kissed me firmly and expertly and drove me home.

I'd expected she might be dismayed to discover where I lived but she seemed delighted to find that the *Passage Lacépède* was in such an unfamiliar quarter of the city. She instructed me to open the gates so that she could park her yellow car in the courtyard. We never normally unlocked the gates and I was worried that our fig tree might be damaged but Lucette didn't understand what I was saying. In any case, she wasn't a woman to be resisted.

The path of true love — if that's what it was — did not, and was never likely to, run smoothly. We spent very little time in each other's company and there was no question of our ever being seen together in public. Her family would not have approved of me. I couldn't blame them. Her brothers in particular would be outraged. Should Francisco and Rodrigo become aware of our affair, said Lucette, they would certainly want to kill me. This seemed to me extreme but I now understood why it was better that she parked her yellow car inside our courtyard and not outside our gate in the *Passage Lacépède*.

Our relationship was marked by squalls of rage and fractious jealousies although these could usually be resolved by candlelight. Our many misunderstandings — missed meetings, changed arrangements — were more tiresome. Some of them at least were caused by language problems. My French had improved but Lucette's English, very noticeably, had not which irritated her considerably. Her solution was to impose a strict regime whereby we were permitted to speak French before we made love, but

afterwards she would only speak to me in English. It may have been this that led me to believe we had become engaged. I'm not sure how it happened but, at the time, I was certain that this is what we'd agreed.

Later that night, watching her car turn the corner out of *Passage Lacépède* into *Rue Lacépède*, closing and locking the gates of the villa, lying in my single bed, blowing out the candle, I suppose I should have wondered how, at the end of the summer term, we were going to cope when I took her back with me to London, which is what, it seemed, we planned to do. She'd said something about living in Kensington and I'd promised her we would be better off in Belsize Park.

I admit I didn't give it as much thought as I might have done but I was young, pleasantly fatigued and confident that everything work out in the end, which meant I slept that night as peacefully as I always did in Casablanca.

Fawzi      Latifa

Hasan      Benoît

On the final Tuesday and Thursday of the summer term Lucette did not appear. This surprised and disappointed me. I wondered if it was the prospect of the end-of-term test that had frightened her. If it was, I felt this showed a lack of faith both in herself and in me. The end-of-term test wasn't something anyone in my class would be allowed to fail. On Tuesday I went through each of the questions several times, writing the answers on the whiteboard and ensuring that they had been copied down correctly. On Thursday Hasan, Fawzi, Latifa and Benoît all performed very commendably.

There was no way I could contact Lucette and it was very aggravating. I couldn't call her home. That would be inviting trouble. In any case, she had never given me her number. Usually I called her office but, each time I did, I was told she wasn't there. What could I do? We would be leaving for London soon. Time was running out and I was almost certain there were arrangements we ought to be making.

The term had finished. The school year was over. My time in Casablanca was coming to an end. We had packed our few belongings, said goodbye to our helpful

neighbours in the brothel across the road and returned the keys of our villa to the landlord. My housemates and I would soon be going our separate ways.

I'd planned to spend my last night at a friend's flat in *Rue Ibn Battuta*. The next day in the morning I would be flying to Algiers on the first stage of my journey home. Did I still believe that, in September, I would be sharing a bed-sit in Belsize Park with the reigning Miss Morocco? I may have done although I'm not entirely sure. I'd been so occupied recently that I hadn't given it much thought. But now the time had come when I needed to know. To be clear what was happening ...

Which is why, on my last evening, I find myself — where I have never been before — concealed in the bougainvillaea on the other side of the road from Lucette's family home in the *Rue Constantine*. I don't have long to wait. A two-seater sports car pulls up outside the front door. The horn is sounded. A moment later Lucette — looking particularly glamorous — is standing there in the street. I step out from behind the bougainvillaea.

—Good evening, I say to her in English.

She looks at me, puzzled. I don't know why this is. We covered 'formal greetings' in one of the first classes of the year.

—I'm going, she says.

This puzzles me until I realise that she wants to say she's going out.

'I'm going, too,' I say.

I mean, of course, I'm going away and should perhaps have made this clearer.

Her expression of alarm is probably because she thinks I'm proposing joining her in the two-seater sports car. I step back and she is visibly relieved.

—I'm going to Algiers tomorrow, I say. Are you coming with me?

—*Comment*?

The driver — understandably — is becoming impatient.

—*Au revoir*, Nicolas, she says.

—Good bye, I say.

It is a sad little moment.

Returning through the wealthier suburbs, I tried to conjure in myself feelings of injury and betrayal but none would come. I kept to well-lit streets on the way to my friend's flat and doubled back several times. I was still mindful of Rodrigo and Francisco, but I knew now that I was no longer — if I had ever been — engaged to the reigning Miss Morocco.