

HOW I BECAME MY MOTHER'S DAUGHTER



LAILA LALAMI

"Hold still," Milouda said. "It'll only make it worse if you move." She squeezed my earlobe between her thumb and forefinger. The needle was new, unused—she'd shown it to my mother when we arrived in her makeshift salon in the old medina of Casablanca. The sound of Arabic music and bicycle bells filtered through the half-open window from the cobblestone street outside. Taking the needle out of a red box with a French brand name, she said, "Only the best for you, lalla Fatima." My mother nodded, unused to the title of respect the clever Milouda had used; she was the kind of woman with whom meat vendors felt comfortable haggling.

A woman sat under a color poster of Olivia Newton-John waiting to get her hair straightened, and Milouda told her this would only take a minute or two. She turned on the stove and held the needle over the flame until it turned charcoal black. "Wiggle your toes," she ordered.

Instead, I put my arms around my mother's waist, looking for the comfort of her soft belly. I felt the pressure of the needle on my right earlobe and the sharp pain when my skin gave. I bit my lips, forcing my cries back in my throat. I felt pearls of blood forming on my skin, one thick drop landing on my shoulder, next to my tank-top strap. I jerked my head to look at the blood. "Stop!" Milouda cried. "Hold still." My mother put her hand on my shoulder, giving me a small squeeze of encouragement.

Milouda pulled the thread through the hole in my earlobe and

I'd always walked to school on my own, but when I sprained my ankle after I fell off my bike, my father started to drop me off at school before going to work. He'd ask Mademoiselle Sauger how I did in class, his hands weighing on my shoulders or stroking my hair, and then he'd kiss me goodbye. After a couple of weeks, my father got better, but he still wanted to drive me to school every day. He started to wear cologne that made me sneeze in the car on the way over. He put on suit jackets over the usual button-down shirts he wore at the office. When we'd arrive on the steps of the school, he'd cheerfully say "Bonjour," and start chatting away with Mademoiselle Sauger. Their conversations started to get longer; they'd talk about books they'd read, movies they'd seen, places they wanted to go, but he always had a kiss for me before he left.



My mother never suspected Mademoiselle Sauger, who was Beatrice Sauger, and she was my French teacher. What I hadn't told my mother was that I already knew my father was having an affair. I knew the other woman. Her name was

affair. I reached for her hand. Normally she'd tell me that, at ten years old, I was too old to be holding hands. "Not a baby anymore." But today she let me.

"Let's go show your father," she said. I knew, though, that the real reason she wanted to drop in on my father was because she wanted to surprise him, to see if he was indeed at work even though it was a Saturday. She had started to suspect that he was having an affair. "Not a baby anymore." But today she let me.

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It was over in a minute, as Milouda had promised. Then I heard the ruffled sound of money changing hands. I admired my reflection in the mirror. My mother stood behind me, her hair in a loose bun, her green jellaba clashing with her yellow neckerchief. We ginned at each other.

My mother had promised me when I agreed to get my ears pierced first earring, this temporary one that would precede the gold studs made a loop, tying it at the base. I reached for it, eager to feel my

always friendly to her and told her that I was good at conjugation. My mother couldn't speak French very well, and she only nodded at my teacher when she picked me up from school, her eyes shifting quickly to avoid having a longer chat. She seemed so out of place, in her jellaba and her leather slippers, and always, always in a hurry to get home. *Je sais, tu sais, il sait, elle sait*, I repeated as I walked through our house, but she never paid any attention to my recitations.

My father never swore me to secrecy. Perhaps he expected my discretion because he always said that the two of us were so alike. My mother often sat in the living room alone, eating sunflower seeds and watching Egyptian movies on television while the two of us read in the dining room, each of us bent over a comic book—*Tarzan* for him, *Tintin* for me. If it was warm, we went to the beach, while my mother stayed home because she didn't want to wear a bathing suit. He taught me how to swim, played soccer with me, and took me mussel picking on the rocks. I remember once, when my mother offered to put ghasul on my hair, I refused. I didn't want my hair to smell of oil and spices for several days, the way hers did. I wanted it to be soft and straight like Mademoiselle's.

"Are you sure?" my mother asked, taking one of my pigtails in her hand and looking closely at my split ends. "It'll make your hair stronger."

"Leave it, Fatima," my father said. "I don't want her looking like a peasant."

I was relieved and thankful and I skipped out of the living room, swinging my pigtails. My mother followed me all the way into the garden. "We can do it on the weekend," she said. "And you can wash your hair on Sunday."

"But I don't want to."

"It won't smell, I promise."

I shook my head no. Her dark, sad features seem to melt on her face. She heaved a sigh. "You're so stubborn, just like your father." She turned around and headed back inside the house.

When my father dropped me off at school the next day, Mademoiselle Sauget smiled at my father and called him by his first name, Hamid, which even my mother never did. I wanted to correct

her, but I didn't. I stood between them, looked up at him as he was explaining something with big, dramatic gestures. I waited for him to put his hand on my shoulder or to stroke my hair. But he never did. He didn't kiss me goodbye. After a few more minutes of hushed conversation, Mademoiselle Sauget came into the classroom, sat on her desk, gave us something to read and looked dreamily out of the window at the florist across the street. Her pearly white skin had turned pink on her cheeks. She dangled her legs under her pleated blue skirt as though she was in a hurry to dance.

At dinner, I sat across from my father and watched quietly as he ate, carefully picking out pieces of the meat tagine with his fork and knife. When he finished, he pushed his plate away and got up without saying anything. I was waiting for him to fetch his pipe and go sit on the veranda. I always sat next to him, enjoying the smell of his tobacco, which lingered on my clothes long after he was gone. But that night he said he was going to get some air. As he put his jacket on, my mother asked what he thought about getting my ears pierced. She said I was getting old enough now. I turned to look at him.

He shrugged. He seemed to be somewhere else already.

I pressed him. "Do you think I should get them pierced?" I asked as I tugged at his sleeve.

"It's up to you," he said, and checked his collar in the hallway mirror before leaving.

"OK," I said to my mother. "I'll go with you."



On the day I became my mother's daughter, we left the hair salon in the medina, and walked hand in hand to the taxi station. I asked for an ice cream. "After we go show your father," my mother said, already waving at a red cab.

"Please, Mama," I said. "Let's go to Les Délices." I dragged her toward the ice cream parlor where I remembered Mademoiselle Sauget said she liked to go. We'd done a class about our favorite foods the week before. Mine, like my father's, was mint tea; hers was

strawberry sorbet from
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My mother smiled, tilted her head. "We can go, if you want," she said, as though she'd given up on the thought of catching my father in the act.