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Mediterranean Wall

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Translated by Tina Kover

The boss

Before they left, Chochana insisted on setting the record straight with the others. It had been her idea, in the first place. And she had looked into the subject at great length; far more than any of them. So, there were no two ways about it: she was the boss. They would do as she told them.

“This isn’t a damn Talmudic study group,” she said, her tongue loosening a bit in her mother’s absence. “Democracy’s all well and good, but if we start arguing over every decision, we’ll never make it. And those people out there aren’t playing around. I’m talking to you especially, Rachel. Is that clear?”

“As Culligan ice cubes, boss.”

“Very clear,” echoed Ezéchiél and Nathan, the two male members of their group.

“Yes, *sir*,” quipped Ariel in English, one-upping the others.

“Cut that crap out right now. I’m not a guy, in case you haven’t noticed. *Boss* is fine with me, but don’t call

me *sir*. Come on,” she added, on a roll now, “we’re out of here.”

The self-proclaimed boss led her troop in the direction of the bus station, where they would get a bush-taxi to Abuja. These twelve-seat minibuses rarely left with fewer than sixteen passengers, one extra in each row. Sometimes one or two others clung to the running board, and one more sat up front, next to the drivers, a spot that cost more. It would have been more comfortable to make the journey by train, of course, but they couldn’t be sure of arriving by Sunday evening. In addition to moving at a crawl, trains tended to stop in the middle of nowhere with no explanation. But on the minibus, with its two drivers relieving each other along the way whenever they stopped for a bathroom break, they’d reach the Abuja bus station by tomorrow morning at around ten-thirty.

People from all over Nigeria milled about beneath the scorching sun, on their way to the farthest ends of the country and the continent. Among them were numerous pickpockets, who had begun their workday very early. There were also crippled men and women who had washed up here, begging bowls held out to passers-by, for want of the slightest scrap of pity anywhere else. Abuja’s central location, in addition to its status as the country’s capital city, made it an unavoidable waypoint, a hubbub of men, women and children colliding with one another, calling out to each other in pidgin English, Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, and other minority dialects. The five travellers, who had set foot once or twice at most in Onitsha, the city closest to their village, seemed lost. Rachel came out soon enough with her usual boast of

“Leave it to me, I’ve got this,” which meant that they ended up having to ask for directions several times. Chochana quickly took advantage of her childhood friend’s failed attempt at leadership to reassert her own authority over the group. She knew that if she let her girlfriend take the reins, it would only go to her head.

“Don’t forget what I said, Rachel. I make the decisions. If I need your opinion, I’ll ask for it—”

“As Culligan ice cubes,” interrupted her friend, before Chochana could ask if that was clear.

Their contact, a man of about thirty with hair like dog turds and a Rasta bracelet on his wrist, was waiting for them at the place they’d agreed upon. He shook everyone’s hand, drawing each one of them into his energy, wrapping his free arm around them in a hug that almost made them forget that this was a business relationship. Then he pressed his right fist to his heart, saying “*Jah Rastafari.*” This ritual completed, he announced without preamble that the departure had been delayed. Two of the 4x4s were being repaired and it was taking longer than expected to get them back from the mechanic.

“You know, they’ve got to be serviced thoroughly before a trip like this. We’ll be on the road for three days if everything goes to plan. It’s better to make sure the cars are in good shape,” he said.

“And you weren’t sure of that before?” retorted Chochana, tit for tat.

“Don’t worry, sister,” the guy said.

“So, when exactly are we leaving?” Chochana wanted to know.

“In three days, *insh’Allah*,” he replied. And then he sang a few lines from Bob Marley, laughing:

Don’t worry about a thing

‘Cause every little thing gonna be all right...

Chochana didn’t have anything to worry about. Everything would be fine, despite the delay. “These things happen.” That said, she and her friends could still back out, said the people-smuggler ironically, looking Chochana straight in the eye. She seemed like the brains of the group. She was the one he needed to convince. He pulled out all the usual tricks. “It’s your choice,” he said, lifting both hands to shoulder height, palms turned toward the five of them. If they were still up for it, they could either go to the hotel or accept his offer of lodging in a “connection house” on the outskirts of the city. The second option had two advantages. “One: it’s cheaper, and two: the convoy will leave from there.” The point of that maneuver, he said, was to avoid prying eyes, and the checkpoints where corrupt uniformed guards—the Babylon, he called them—entertained themselves by harassing passengers and drivers. They might even go so far as to requisition their cars, and then the whole venture would be postponed indefinitely. “Goodbye, Niger; goodbye, Libya. Goodbye, Europe.” Chochana gathered her little group for a quick confab, foreheads pressed together, a few meters away from the smuggler’s amused gaze, and then announced that she’d picked the second option.

The Rasta ushered them to a dilapidated old rust-bucket of a car that resembled many of the others on the street. He spent the whole drive singing “*Everything*

gonna be all right...”. After forty-five minutes of jolting and bumping, of car-horns and sudden braking to escape the dense traffic in the city center, the friends arrived at a house that had been stripped bare of every comfort. It was nothing more than four walls topped by a corrugated metal roof, open to the four winds; the smugglers hadn’t even seen fit to install doors. Some other would-be travellers were already there, chattering away in a dim corner. Others dozed peacefully, despite the damp heat.

The five friends spent three days in the connection house, Chochana having vetoed Rachel’s suggestion that they go sightseeing in Abuja. “That’s not what we’re here for. And what if their damn 4x4s are repaired sooner than expected, and we aren’t back in time; you think those dudes are going to wait for us? They’ll be only too happy to give our places to someone else and keep our cash. So, the answer is *nyet*.” They slept on the ground, using their backpacks as pillows, which also served as a way of guarding their meagre possessions and the second payment the other three had brought with them. This display of initiative earned them a proper telling-off from the boss, who pulled them aside, well away from the others in the hideout. “I mean, do you have shit for brains, or what?” To keep from being robbed, she asked the boys to stand watch discreetly while the others slept.

For their personal needs they were provided with a hole dug in the ground and lined with concrete blocks to prop up the sides. The house was surrounded by two-meter-high walls; this was all the privacy they were afforded at these times. For wiping there was newspaper—or pebbles, in the absence of that. Rachel preferred to hold it when the paper ran out, waiting for a fresh supply.

“Play the coquette all you want,” Chochana told her. “But don’t come crying to me when you’ve got a stomachache. Us, we’ll just make the best of things. Right, guys?”

“Yes, boss, yes,” they chirped in unison.

The three days passed relatively quickly. On Tuesday evening, as the Rasta had promised, the five of them, with Chochana in front, took their places in the back of a pickup truck along with twenty other travellers. Metal rods had been attached to either side of the truck beds for them to hold on to, to keep from being thrown out during the journey as the trucks clattered along on their hubcaps. Once they ran into a patrol, which rose up seemingly out of nowhere. Three police officers were waiting for them with flashlights and guns drawn, as if they’d gotten word of their itinerary in advance. “Routine check,” said the officers, as they spread out among the vehicles. “Don’t talk back,” muttered Chochana to the others through clenched teeth. “We do whatever they say.” The message was received loud and clear. Each of them put their hands in their pockets, and eventually the cops went back the way they’d come and the three pickups started moving again.

The trucks drove all night, arriving in the vicinity of Sokoto at daybreak. Dishevelled from the journey, Chochana, her friends, and the other passengers were left in a new connection house, where the day crawled by with incredible slowness as they waited for nightfall. Once the sun had set the rattling convoy took off again in the direction of Niger, keeping to the same speed as the previous night. Chochana knew they’d crossed the border when the 4x4s paused for a bathroom break. Despite the

darkness of the night she could tell that they were in the Sahel, that wide band of earth marking the transition to desert. When morning came she could see the ochre color of the dirt, as the caravan stopped at a roadblock where the police, under the pretence of conducting a check, robbed them with the same lack of compassion as their colleagues on the other side of the border. One last stop in a ghetto, at the Nigerian equivalent of a connection house, and the following evening the convoy resumed its journey, the trucks swallowing up the miles—and the passengers crammed into the backs of them a lot of dust, unlike the smugglers, who sat comfortably behind rolled-up windows in the air-conditioned cabs.

Chochana had anticipated everything in advance, and her group suffered less. “Who’s the boss, again?” she reminded them, as they slipped on ski masks and sunglasses. The rest of the time the five friends spoke very little, except when eating the food they’d brought, which was visibly running out. When there was no more of it they were forced to make do with the meagre fare doled out in exchange for cold hard cash in the ghettos. Chochana didn’t hesitate to share her portions with Ariel, who had always had a big appetite. “I have reserves,” she rationalized, patting her ample buttocks—but that was really just so her younger sister wouldn’t feel guilty. Chochana had certainly not expected the journey to be so long and exhausting. And this was only the beginning. She dug down deep inside herself for the strength the group would need to keep going the rest of the way, without knowing where it would end. She was sure of only one thing—that she would lead them to the fulfilment of their mutual dream. She was the one who had gotten them into this. It was her duty. The next

morning, at dawn, they reached the outskirts of Agadez,
the gateway to the desert.