

# 32

THE KING IS DEAD. Long live the king.

Long live the multi-ringtone mobile phone. Long live modern technology. Long live blue screens.

When the poor population gets a mobile phone and surfs the kingdoms of electrons, they forget all about their misery. The world becomes as small as a village. It becomes available to people in the cybercafes that have begun to spread like fungus, all at democratic prices. Not too expensive for the poor. Two dirhams for a light, passing visit. Three dirhams for half an hour. Five for a full hour. For the loyal customer, the second hour costs four dirhams, and so on. A few dirhams and a few words of every foreign language is enough for the virtual people of God to surf the multilingual pavilions of blondes. That's for the guys. As for the girls, a bit of Arabic is enough to make flashing red hearts leap from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf.

Long live technology.

As for Rahhal, he was at the heart of it. In the right place at the right time.

He opened a Hotmail account, not to email anyone, but rather, just to have an account with Hotmail. He set another one up on Maktoub, not to use to chat with Arabs online, but rather, because it just made sense for him to have an account on Maktoub. The third one on Yahoo, similarly because it was Yahoo. The fourth? He still hadn't decided.

All of the cybercafe's customers were new to the scene. Most of them were still at the discovery stage, which is why whenever a new person came to the shop, he would stand in front of Rahhal to request a computer and a helping hand. This one wanted to open a Hotmail account, that one a Yahoo account, and Rahhal stayed up

late opening online accounts for them here and there; a new service that seemed magical to those heading to the cybercafe for the first time. Therefore, he set a price for it of thirty dirhams. The account was free, but Rahhal made thirty dirhams for every account he opened and the customers found that to be perfectly reasonable. You couldn't get an online account that did the same thing as a post office box that held letters for the customers in the Massira Post Office for nothing, right? And Rahhal's mailbox was better because you didn't have to pay more than the registration fee on the first day for it to remain open for you forever.

Customers came and went, taking turns at the computers and dragging mice over the desktops. But a small family gradually began to form around Rahhal. Salim was a high school senior dazzled by the new, virtual world. He had two email accounts so far, one with Hotmail and the other with Yahoo. Sometimes he'd come in with his father and sometimes with his sister, Lamia. Always searching for information on the web, and every day needing to print out his search results, which he knew how to flaunt in front of his classmates.

Samira and Fadoua would come in together, sit together, and leave together. Specializing in chat rooms, they became a single online persona. They loved to chat with young guys in Arabic, French, and English. Username: Marrakech Star.

"Two in one. Shampoo and conditioner," Qamar Eddine Assuyuti would tease them whenever he glimpsed them entering the cybercafe. Qamar Eddine was the son of Shihab Eddine Assuyuti, the most notorious Islamic education teacher in Massira High School, and the one whom the students joked about the most.

"Which one of us is shampoo, and which one is conditioner?" Fadoua would ask in a conspiratorial voice.

"To be honest, I'm still working that out. When I decide that you're the shampoo, I'll let you know."

Qamar Eddine knew all about Marrakech Star, especially since Fadoua and Samira ran to him for help with all of their messages that were in English. He'd explain anything that was unclear in the

emails they received from all over, and correct their replies so they could travel across the internet with fewer mistakes.

Qamar Eddine's English was good. So was his French. But he liked to say over and over, whether anyone asked him or not, that, regrettably, his Arabic wasn't so good. There never seemed to be any regret on Qamar Eddine's face when he repeated this confession. In fact, he practically shone with a hidden pride. Did he say it to spite his father, Mr. Shihab Eddine? An Arabic teacher who moved to Islamic education not out of an abundance of religiosity, but rather out of laziness and a desire to wash his hands of grammar lessons. Islamic education wasn't a core subject for science or humanities students. Two hours per week for everyone. A number of students considered that class a break that they'd spend on the sports fields, in front of the school, or at Rahhal's place in the case of those who could pay the price of skating along the screen's ice and surfing the light's waves, especially since Mr. Assuyuti didn't take regular attendance.

Qamar Eddine didn't really hate his father, but he hated talking about him. He preferred hanging out with friends who didn't go to Massira High School, and thus didn't know a thing about Mr. Shihab Eddine and had never heard the jokes or funny stories about him. Fadoua and Samira were an exception. Even though they were in Mr. Assuyuti's class, their relationship to Qamar Eddine was born in the cybercafe, and had nothing at all to do with school. Not to mention the fact that he was a handsome young man who was brilliant with languages. So, his friendship was a real win for both members of Marrakech Star.

Qamar Eddine was always available in the shop to the point where Rahhal came to leave him in charge of the cybercafe whenever he had to step out to deal with some emergency situation or go to the school to take care of one of Hiyam's ever-urgent requests. Qamar Eddine began to enjoy Marrakech Star's electronic adventures and conquests, which stretched from East to West. This one was serious, that one was chaste, and this other one's intentions were noble. This one wanted to visit Marrakech because of her eyes

and asked about the best hotels and airlines. This other one suggested that she come to London, in which case he would take care of the airline ticket, and he would welcome her in his apartment, where she would stay with him as his dear, honored guest for a week or a full month if her precious time allowed it. Yet another one suggested with frightful humility that she do the Umrah pilgrimage to Mecca.

But no sooner did the Nigerian Amelia's sun rise in the cyber-cafe than did Marrakech Star's fade. Fadoua noticed that Qamar Eddine lost his focus whenever the black Nigerian sun appeared. Sometimes Amelia would come alone. Other times she would be accompanied by her friend Flora. Then Yacabou would join later. It might have been a strategy to keep Rahhal from forbidding the three of them to sit at one computer, since the shop's rule was well-known: No more than two people sitting at each computer.

No one knew the nature of Yacabou's relationship with Amelia and Flora. Was he their brother? A relative? Or perhaps he was the lover of one of the young women? With Africanos, it was always hard to tell. At any rate, they were all lucky because apartment and building owners didn't ask them for their documents. Even if they were Muslims from Mali or Senegal, they wouldn't be scrutinized the way Moroccans are. Young locals find it difficult to live with their girlfriends without a marriage certificate, but with the Africanos, no one asks. That's how they live together, five to ten of them in a small, two-bedroom apartment with a kitchen and a bathroom. Generally, Qamar Eddine wasn't too concerned with these details, since he wasn't actually smitten by Amelia. She just made him happy. The way she looked and her smile cheered him up, that's all. That and because he found sitting with her a pleasant opportunity to chat in English, which she was fluent in. But there was a more important reason . . . a tad sensitive. Better not to get too much into it in front of the others, especially Fadoua and Samira.

Qamar Eddine wanted to get out of his country by any means necessary. He was sick of Shihab Eddine and the boring life he lived at home. He was sick of the college that he only went to rarely

now. He was even sick of the damned cybercafe that, it seemed, he had become addicted to. He was sick of Rahhal's snooping—every time he turned around, he found the rat looking at his screen. He was sick of the history teachers who would come en masse to the cybercafe to talk. They didn't have set hours, but when they honored the place with their presence, they came as a group as if going to the mosque. Each one occupied a computer and rather than riding the waves and surfing, they'd chat as if they were in the teachers' lounge. They'd tell stories about how much worse things had been in the Hassan II era and about how much better things had become under the young king; that there were more freedoms, that there was a new vitality and initiatives for change. Qamar Eddine wasn't interested in his father's colleagues' stories. He couldn't see any change at all. And who said he wanted to know how life was under Hassan II? He was young then. And today he felt that he had grown up. He didn't want to go backward. He had no time to waste on this sort of talk. Qamar Eddine wanted another life. The kind of life he saw in the movies. The kind he saw on television. The kind of life that God's chosen people were living up north. Qamar Eddine wanted to escape. Emigration is a sacred right. He didn't understand why he should have to stay in a place that was strangling him, with creatures he didn't like. He didn't understand why he wasn't entitled to cast this whole, irritating world from his days and nights—from his life, his future—and just take off.

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"OF COURSE I'M CHRISTIAN. Why do you ask?" responded Amelia.

"Just a normal question. But could we speak outside?"

She left Flora alone at the computer. She excused herself using a local Nigerian dialect, of which Qamar Eddine could only catch Yacabou's name, which was repeated three times. Once outside, he invited her to Café Milano, across the street from the cybercafe. He discovered that Amelia smoked. As soon as Asmae, the waitress, put the cup of coffee down in front of her, she took out a pack of Marquise. She lit a cigarette and offered the pack to Qamar Eddine.

"Thanks, but I don't smoke . . . I won't take too much of your time, but I want to know about Christianity from you. What I mean is that I want to know more. I've read about the Trinity and holy unity, about Lord Jesus' divine and human natures, about the difference between Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, and between Protestants and Anglicans. I've also read the Sermon of the Mount dozens of times and I've memorized parts of it in Arabic, French, and English. Do you want proof? How about this one? 'Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil, but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man wants . . . if any man wants . . .' Wait, I forgot. But there's another bit that goes: 'Ye have heard that it hath been said: Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you: Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven, for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.' There's also 'seek and ye shall find,' which I've memorized by heart. Listen . . ."



“No, you listen, Qamar . . .”

“Abdelmessih—Servant of the Messiah. My new name is Abdelmessih. You’re the first person I’m telling, so let’s keep it between you and me.”

“Listen, Abdelmessih. There seems to have been some sort of misunderstanding. When I told you I was Christian, I was speaking in general terms about my family’s religion. But believe me, I’m not Christian in the way you think. I don’t go to church, I don’t read the Holy Book, and I haven’t memorized the Sermon of the Mount. In other words, Christian in name only. Take it from me quite simply. Please, let’s go back to the cybercafe. Flora’s waiting for me.”

Qamar Eddine was at a loss for words. His discovery of Christianity had come by accident. It had started by surfing porn sites. But because the rat in the shop was burning a hole in his back with his hungry, probing eyes day and night, he switched over to surfing emigration sites. After that he started to jump around, freestyling all over cyberspace. Then, hop. Another unencumbered jump and he found himself crossing, without prior planning, to the other shore to follow Jesus the Messiah:

“Master, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest.” And Jesus saith unto him, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man hath not where to lay his head.”

What you say is true, Master. “The son of man hath not where to lay his head.”

Qamar Eddine was taken aback as he received Amelia’s cold response. He was in the most pressing need for someone to support him during this critical time of his electronic search for the truth. Amelia was his Black angel, *his father who art in the cyber*. His mother. His sister. No difference. He had discovered the tolerance of saints in her smile. But she had disappointed and hurt him badly. Can you imagine? She doesn’t read the Holy Book and she hasn’t memorized the Sermon of the Mount!

Amelia was dumbfounded. Ever since they had started coming to the cybercafe, Flora and Yacabou had brought it to her attention that Qamar Eddine had attached himself to her, or at least that he

was noticeably interested in her. From that day on, she watched him. She liked how handsome he was. She liked his witticisms, his cheerfulness and cleverness, his good English, and the kind way he spoke to everyone. Why not? A delectable young man deserved her attention. Amelia was prepared for anything with Qamar Eddine, from a torrid love affair to a passing fling. And that afternoon, when he invited her to the café, she went with him happily and enthusiastically. And then the fool forces her into a heavy conversation about the Trinity and the Sermon of the Mount?! Amelia knew about Qamar Eddine's fantasy of emigrating, but she hadn't imagined that his madness would drive him to consider Christianity as a way to leave the country. She was a Christian from a long line of Christians. If priority were given to followers of the Lord Messiah, she would have gone straight to Europe from Lagos, with honor and dignity, without having to take this long detour across the desert only to find herself and her companions stuck in Morocco. They hadn't been lucky enough to slip into Spain, nor could they return to their country and face family and friends with their failure, after having squandered the family's money on such a long, difficult journey.



# 34

QAMAR EDDINE seems to take pleasure in being everyone's friend in the cybercafe. He moves among the computers like an electronic butterfly. Sometimes he's with Salim, helping him do his homework, and other times he's with Fadoua and Samira, explaining a message in English that has just appeared in Marrakech Star's account. Sometimes he takes Rahhal's place when he's out, and sometimes he exchanges whispers with Yacabou after having lately discovered that the Nigerian guy was more religious than his two companions.

Abu Qatada was the complete opposite of Qamar Eddine, aka Abdelmessih.

He didn't talk to anyone. He entered the cybercafe with his right foot forward while reciting the two verses of refuge. While it is true that saying *salaam alaikum*—may peace be upon you—is a duty for all Muslims, Abu Qatada found it difficult to raise his voice in greeting whenever he entered the cybercafe and found the two half-naked girls with that pimp, mistakenly and falsely named Qamar Eddine, "the moon of faith," sitting between them.

"What kind of moon of faith is that? More like moon of shit! Moon of misfortune, not moon of faith. May God curse the day he was born."

As for the African group, Abu Qatada was careful to leave sufficient space between himself and where they sat. Sure, "there's no difference between Arabs and non-Arabs, nor between white people and black, save for in religious devotion," as the prophetic Hadith says, but the black faces of the Africanos don't betray any modesty or radiate devotion. Not because they were Black, God forbid! Our lord, Bilal, the muezzin of our Prophet—upon Him the purest of peace and prayers—was an Ethiopian slave. Islam was so generous with him that the beloved chosen Prophet described him as a

man of paradise, saying, "What an excellent man Bilal is. He is the lord of muezzins. And muezzins will have the longest necks on the Day of Judgment." Abu Qatada noticed that Yacabou's neck *was* as long and thin as a giraffe's. But his dark face could not radiate the light of Islam any less, he and his two ugly slave girls, who practically never left his side. They looked like two ugly black goats. *May evil befall him and them*, Abu Qatada thought, then asked for God's forgiveness.

His name was Mahjoub Didi. He was an employee at the Regional Agency for Water and Electricity. Married with two children. What annoyed him more than anything else was when a dull-witted colleague at work would sing "Didi, didi, didi, didi waah." Because he was so boorish, his colleagues avoided singing the famous Cheb Khaled song in front of him, but they'd wink knowingly about it at one another when he wasn't around. As for "Abu Qatada," it was a nickname chosen for him by one of the brothers—may God bless him for it—at a sweet-smelling *dhikr* session. And from that day on, his name at divine assemblies and on enlightened websites was Abu Qatada, after the glorious companion of the Prophet, Abu Qatada al-Ansari al-Khazraji, may God be pleased with him and give him satisfaction.

"BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU!"

Qamar Eddine would repeat this sentence in English from time to time, mocking Rahhal.

"Sorry, sorry, I meant to say, 'Little Brother is watching you!'"

The cybercafe would shake with laughter.

It had to be admitted that Rahhal's English was just above nil. As for his knowledge of English literature, it wasn't much more than what Amelia knew about the Islamic theological teachings of Imam Malik. In any case, Rahhal was a product of the Department of Arabic Literature with a specialization in ancient poetry: pre-Islamic epic odes, poetry from the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, as well as from al-Andalus and Morocco. He didn't even read novels in Arabic, a language he's very good at, so how could he read them in other languages? And because no one ever explained to him that the reference was to George Orwell's famous novel, *1984*, in which Big Brother watches over everyone, he continued to wonder deep down why Qamar Eddine was boasting about his two brothers—the big one and the little one—in the cybercafe when he only had one sister, who was pursuing her graduate studies in Rabat.

"Little Brother is watching you!"

Qamar Eddine's prodding didn't irritate the Squirrel at all. Qamar Eddine was protesting the way Rahhal treated customers' screens in the shop as private property, fixing his mouse eyes on them as he pleased. That annoyed Qamar Eddine to no end during the first stage of his virtual life, when he was still addicted to porn sites. To this day he hates it when people snoop around his blessed sites. That's why he began to avoid illustrated pages that included pictures of churches, icons, and ecclesiastical drawings. Mostly, he would take texts and paste them onto a blank page and then read

them in Word at his leisure. And when he was done, he'd toss the file into the trash bin and log out.

But in Rahhal Laâouina's kingdom, there was no place for trash bins. As soon as the last customer would leave after midnight, Rahhal would take a few minutes, sometimes more than an hour, to examine the computers. He would inspect each and every one. He would scrape around inside and tear the cover off of the secrets of those who have hidden themselves in the digital shadows. A number of them left their accounts open. Same with members of the online forums. For example, Brother Abu Qatada often minimized the screen and left after hearing the call to the evening prayer, leaving the forum page open with the discussion between brothers continuing along: one time about the need to kill and sacrifice the self should an occupier come to a Muslim land. Another time about using the fraudulent electoral system as a means to gain control and win government posts. This time the discussion was heated, and always about elections. The brothers in God strongly objected to the candidates' heretical self-promotion, and likewise to the notion that all members of society have an equal vote, no matter their degree of learning or religious devotion. As for Abdelmessih's Holy Scriptures, Rahhal would retrieve them from the trash bin and transfer the Arabic ones to his personal computer so he could go over them leisurely the following day.

This amounts to extra work that Rahhal does before closing up, except that he's the one who opened up the accounts for all the club members in the first place. His prodigious squirrel memory stores everyone's login names, real and made-up, and remembers all the passwords. Veils are lifted and the secrets behind them revealed. That's how Rahhal Laâouina knows everything about the flocks of his happy, cybernetic kingdom. Even the Nigerian community in the Atlas Cubs Cybercafe had their secrets revealed to him after they transferred their activities to the electronic realm. Amelia and Flora are gay, but they prostitute themselves to men right now as they wait for the emerging and promising women's market in Marrakech to open up. And Yacabou works for them as an escort, a

personal guard, and an intermediary. As for his relationship with Flora, it's a cover, silly Qamar Eddine. It's just a cover.

Yeah, Rahhal. You see them moving in front of you like puppets. None of them knows that they're in your pocket. Their real and made-up names. Their interior and exterior lives. Their dreams and their delusions. Their ruses and their wild, made-up tales. Their innocent virtual friendships and their illicit electronic adventures. Everything is in your pocket, Rahhal, but you've got to be smart about it. Be extremely careful that these secrets remain hidden. Keep them to yourself, you scrawny squirrel. Otherwise, if, for example, Abu Qatada found out that Qamar Eddine had lost his way so much and deviated enough from his path and his religion for his name to become Abdelmessih, and that the two Nigerian girls were ladies of the night, he'd call for jihad right then and there; a crushing war would erupt in the cybercafe. So Rahhal enjoyed spying on the members of his new family with just enough care to give each one of them a feeling of total safety. Besides, they were at home and in the embrace of their happy family here in the virtual jungles of the Atlas Cubs Cybercafe.

# 36

OVER HERE THERE'S HOT MAROC, and over there is everything else. Hot Maroc. Hot Morocco. That's how the site got its name.

An online news site that provides hourly coverage. You'll find all the country's news there. Fresh ripe news. Politics. Money and business. Sports. Art. Travel. Religion and religious pronouncements. Regional and local news. Protests and demonstrations. General freedoms. Crime. Behind the scenes of politics and society. Opinion articles. Videos. Hot talks. Full scoops. And culture news, too.

Rahhal came to start his day with news from Hot Maroc. The first thing he'd do after opening the shop and turning on the computers was open his amazing online news site that brought him back to the public sphere—he who hadn't purchased a newspaper in his life. Ever since leaving the discussion circles of the National Union of Students in Morocco in college, he had been completely cut off. All he knew now was the Hedgehog and her quills; the Pelican and the Mantis and their lazy, daily routine in his uncle Ayad's house, where the trio from Abda would eat their food and wait for death to come; Hiyam and her ridiculous and urgent errands (once, he was even sent rushing to the women's hammam because she had forgotten her mobile phone there); and this de facto family in the cybercafe that fully embraced him, and that he fully embraced, counting every breath he took as he counted theirs.

Hot Maroc was a free ticket that returned Rahhal to his country. Just like an emigrant who has been abroad for years, completely cut off from what was going on back home, and then here they are, finally coming back—without having to bear the cost of travel—to drown in its affairs and sorrows.

Breaking.

Scoop.

Exclusive.

There's always some breaking news item published on the first page. Breaking news items coming one after another. Hot like fresh bread right out of the oven. Alive like a fish just reeled in. And Rahhal was addicted to the fresh bread and fish of the news site. So addicted that he'd go back at the top of every hour to see if another breaking news item had appeared.

But Hot Maroc was more than just a news site to Rahhal. It was a space for him to express himself and defame others. His new toilet stall. At first, he couldn't believe his eyes when he realized that the comments section was open to all. Underneath each article or news item there was a space for comments. It was amazing! You can write whatever you want, Rahhal, without the smells clogging up your nose. Comment as you please, sitting relaxed at your desk, not crouching with your legs bent under your belly, twisting your guts on the toilet. Now you can interact with what you read from your place here in Massira in the Atlas Cubs Cybercafe. You can freely express your opinion in total secrecy without anyone asking about what your name is or who you are. Check out the list of commenters. There are full names. There are first names: Karim, Khalid, Mouna, Saeed. People sign off according to cities or regions: Samira from Marrakech. Farid from Meknes. The Casaoui. A Guy from Sefrou. The Sahraoui. A Free Amazighi Berber. Girl from the North. Just write your name and email address and comment to your heart's delight.

Rahhal almost went crazy as he read his first comment, which posted just minutes after he had sent it. It was on an opinion piece about elections and democracy in Morocco and the Arab world, written by the well-known Moroccan thinker Issam Louzi. The article attempted to explain how "we can reconcile elections and democracy in the Arab world despite the fact that, in principle, it is not possible to reconcile the part with the whole, or the ends with the means. True, it is not possible for the democratic process to function without free and fair elections," added the article's author, "except that elections and ballot boxes do not necessarily lead to democracy. How is it that . . . ?"



The article was long and the analysis was painful to read. Rahhal wouldn't waste his time reading it in its entirety. But his comment was ready. Where are you, Abu Qatada? Where are you? He recalled the heated discussion that had ignited in Abu Qatada's electronic tent a few days before around the issue of legitimacy in elections. He borrowed Mahjoub Didi's name as a nom de guerre, as well as his email, and opened fire.

"What democracy, what elections, and what nonsense are you talking about, you secular jackass? Elections that give everyone an equal voice? Believer and sinner alike? The chaste veiled woman and the ostentatious whore? The learned and the ignorant? *Say: 'Are they equal—those who know and those who know not?'* And don't elections lead to polytheism next to the Lord of Heaven and Earth? Legitimacy is to God alone. Authority is to God alone. *Or have they associates who have laid down for them as religion that for which God gave not leave? But for the Word of Decision, it had been decided between them. For the evildoers there awaits a painful chastisement.'*"

May your religion be victorious, Abu Qatada.

Rahhal wasn't expecting so many likes. More than fifty likes so far, while the original article hadn't gotten more than seven. Readers liked your comment, Squirrel. True, Rahhal didn't actually agree with Abu Qatada. And he wouldn't go so far as to accuse democracy and elections of blasphemy in such a repugnant manner, but the reading public's embrace of his comment filled him with enthusiasm and pride. He had to look for another topic to dip Abu Qatada's pail into. And God is the one who bestows success.