Our harem in Fez was surrounded by high walls and, with the exception of the little square chunk of sky that you could see from the courtyard below, nature did not exist. Of course, if you rushed like an arrow up to the terrace, you could see that the sky was larger than the house, larger than everything, but from the courtyard, nature seemed irrelevant. It had been replaced by geometric and floral designs reproduced on tiles, woodwork, and stucco. The only strikingly beautiful flowers we had in the house were those of the colorful brocades which covered the sofas and those of the embroidered silk drapes that sheltered the doors and windows. You could not, for example, open a shutter to look outside when you wanted to escape. All the windows opened onto the courtyard. There were none facing the street.

Once a year, during springtime, we went on a nzaha, or picnic, at my uncle's farm in Oued Fez, ten kilometers from the city. The important adults rode in cars, while the children,
divorced aunts, and other relatives were put into two big trucks rented for the occasion. Aunt Habiba and Chama always carried tambourines, and they would make such a hell of a noise along the way that the truck driver would go crazy. “If you ladies don’t stop this,” he would shout, “I’m going to drive off the road and throw everyone into the valley.” But his threats always came to nothing, because his voice would be drowned out by the tambourines and hand clapping.

On picnic day, everyone woke up at dawn and buzzed around the courtyard as if it were a religious festival day with groups of people organizing food here, drinks there, and putting drapes and carpets into bundles everywhere. Chama and Mother took care of the swings. “How can you have a picnic without swings?” they would argue whenever Father suggested they forget about them for once, because it took so much time to hang them from the trees. “Besides,” he would add, just to provoke Mother, “swings are fine for children, but when heavy grownups are involved, the poor trees might suffer.” While Father talked and waited for Mother to get angry, she would just keep on packing up the swings and the ropes to tie them with, without a single glance in his direction. Chama would sing aloud, “If men can’t tie the swings / women will do it / Lallalalla,” imitating the high-pitched melody of our national anthem “Maghribuna watanuna” (Our Morocco, Our Homeland).

Meanwhile, Samir and I would be feverishly looking for our espadrilles, for there was no help to be had from our mothers, so involved were they in their own projects, and Lalla Mani would be counting the number of glasses and plates “just to evaluate the damage, and see how many will be broken by the end of the day.” She could do without the picnic, she often said, especially since as far as tradition was concerned, its origin was dubious. “There’s no record of it in the Hadith,” she said, “It might even be counted as a sin on Judgment Day.”

We would arrive on the farm in mid-morning, equipped with dozens of carpets and light sofas and khanouns. Once the carpets had been unfolded, the light sofas would be spread out, the charcoal fires lit, and the shish kebabs grilled. The teapots would sing along with the birds. Then, after lunch, some of the women would scatter into the woods and fields, searching for flowers, herbs, and other kinds of plants to use in their beauty treatments. Others would take turns on the swings. Only after sunset would we make the journey back to the house, and the gate would be closed behind us. And for days after that, Mother would feel miserable. “When you spend a whole day among trees,” she would say, “waking up with walls as horizons becomes unbearable.”

You could not get into our house, except by passing through the main gate controlled by Ahmed the doorkeeper. But you could get out a second way, by using the roof-level terrace. You could jump from our terrace to the neighbors’ next door, and then go out to the street through their door. Officially, our terrace key was kept in Lalla Mani’s possession, with Ahmed turning off the lights to the stairs after sunset. But because the terrace was constantly being used for all kinds of domestic activities throughout the day, from retrieving olives that were stored in big jars up there, to washing and drying clothes, the key was often left with Aunt Habiba, who lived in the room right next to the terrace.

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1 Maghrib is the Arabic name for Morocco, the land of the setting sun, from gharb (west).

2 The Hadith is a compilation of the Prophet Mohammed’s deeds and sayings. Recorded and written down after his death, the Hadith is considered to be one of the primary sources of Islam, the first being the Koran, the book revealed directly by Allah to his Prophet.

3 Khanouns are portable charcoal fire containers, the Moroccan equivalent of the barbecue grill. They can be made of pottery or metal.
The terrace exit route was seldom watched, for the simple reason that getting from it to the street was a difficult undertaking. You needed to be quite good at three skills: climbing, jumping, and agile landing. Most of the women could climb up and jump fairly well, but not many could land gracefully. So, from time to time, someone would come in with a bandaged ankle, and everyone would know just what she'd been up to. The first time I came down from the terrace with bleeding knees, Mother explained to me that a woman's chief problem in life was figuring out how to land. “Whenever you are about to embark on an adventure,” she said, “you have to think about the landing. Not about the takeoff. So whenever you feel like flying, think about how and where you'll end up.”

But there was also another, more solemn reason why women like Chama and Mother did not consider escaping from the terrace to be a viable alternative to using the front gate. The terrace route had a clandestine, covert dimension to it, which was repulsive to those who were fighting for the principle of a woman's right to free movement. Confronting Ahmed at the gate was a heroic act. Escaping from the terrace was not, and did not carry with it that inspiring, subversive flame of liberation.

None of this intrigue applied, of course, to Yasmina’s farm. The gate had hardly any meaning, because there were no walls. And to be in a harem, I thought, you needed a barrier, a frontier. That summer, when I visited Yasmina, I told her what Chama had said about how harems got started. When I saw that she was listening, I decided to show off all my historical knowledge, and started talking about the Romans and their harems, and how the Arabs became the sultans of the planet thanks to Caliph Harun al-Rashid’s one thousand women, and how the Christians tricked the Arabs by changing the rules on them while they were asleep. Yasmina laughed a lot when she heard the story, and said that she was too illiterate to evaluate the historical facts, but that it all sounded very funny and logical too. I then asked her if what Chama had said was true or false, and Yasmina said that I needed to relax about this right-and-wrong business. She said that there were things which could be both, and things which could be neither. “Words are like onions,” she said. “The more skins you peel off, the more meanings you encounter. And when you start discovering multiplicities of meanings, then right and wrong becomes irrelevant. All these questions about harems that you and Samir have been asking are all fine and good, but there will always be more to be discovered.” And then she added, “I am going to peel one more skin for you now. But remember, it is only one among others.”

The word “harem,” she said, was a slight variation of the word haram, the forbidden, the proscribed. It was the opposite of halal, the permissible. Harem was the place where a man sheltered his family, his wife or wives, and children and relatives. It could be a house or a tent, and it referred both to the space and to the people who lived within it. One said “Sidi So-and-So’s harem,” referring both to his family members and to his physical home. One thing that helped me see this more clearly was when Yasmina explained that Mecca, the holy city, was also called Haram. Mecca was a space where behavior was strictly codified. The moment you stepped inside, you were bound by many laws and regulations. People who entered Mecca had to be pure: they had to perform purification rituals, and refrain from lying, cheating, and doing harmful deeds. The city belonged to Allah and you had to obey his shari’a, or sacred law, if you entered his territory. The same thing applied to a harem when it was a house belonging to a man. No other men could enter it without the owner’s permission, and when they did, they had to obey his rules. A harem was about private space and the rules regulating it. In addition, Yasmina said, it did not need walls. Once you knew what was forbidden, you carried the harem within. You had it in your head, “inscribed under your forehead and under your skin.” That idea of an
invisible harem, a law tattooed in the mind, was frightfully unsettling to me. I did not like it at all, and I wanted her to explain more.

The farm, said Yasmina, was a harem, although it did not have walls. “You only need walls, if you have streets!” But if you decided, like Grandfather, to live in the countryside, then you didn’t need gates, because you were in the middle of the fields and there were no passersby. Women could go freely out into the fields, because there were no strange men hovering around, peeping at them. Women could walk or ride for hours without seeing a soul. But if by chance they did meet a male peasant along the way, and he saw that they were unveiled, he would cover his head with the hood of his own djellaba to show that he was not looking. So in this case, Yasmina said, the harem was in the peasant’s head, inscribed somewhere under his forehead. He knew that the women on the farm belonged to Grandfather Tazi, and that he had no right to look at them.

This business of going around with a frontier inside the head disturbed me, and discreetly I put my hand to my forehead to make sure it was smooth, just to see if by any chance I might be harem-free. But then, Yasmina’s explanation got even more alarming, because the next thing she said was that any space you entered had its own invisible rules, and you needed to figure them out. “And when I say space,” she continued, “it can be any space — a courtyard, a terrace, or a room, or even the street for that matter. Wherever there are human beings, there is a qa’ida, or invisible rule. If you stick to the qa’ida, nothing bad can happen to you.” In Arabic, she reminded me, qa’ida meant many different things, all of which shared the same basic premise. A mathematical law or a legal system was a qa’ida, and so was the foundation of a building. Qa’ida was also a custom, or a behavioral code. Qa’ida was everywhere. Then she added something which really scared me: “Unfortunately, most of the time, the qa’ida is against women.”

“Why?” I asked. “That’s not fair, is it?” And I crept closer so as not to miss a word of her answer. The world, Yasmina said, was not concerned about being fair to women. Rules were made in such a manner as to deprive them in some way or another. For example, she said, both men and women worked from dawn until very late at night. But men made money and women did not. That was one of the invisible rules. And when a woman worked hard, and was not making money, she was stuck in a harem, even though she could not see its walls. “Maybe the rules are ruthless because they are not made by women,” was Yasmina’s final comment. “But why aren’t they made by women?” I asked. “The moment women get smart and start asking that very question,” she replied, “instead of dutifully cooking and washing dishes all the time, they will find a way to change the rules and turn the whole planet upside down.” “How long will that take?” I asked, and Yasmina said, “A long time.”

I asked her next if she could tell me how to figure out the invisible rule or qa’ida, whenever I stepped into a new space. Were there signals, or something tangible that I could look for? No, she said, unfortunately not, there were no clues, except for the violence after the fact. Because the moment I disobeyed an invisible rule, I would get hurt. However, she noted that many of the things people enjoyed doing most in life, like walking around, discovering the world, singing, dancing, and expressing an opinion, often turned up in the strictly forbidden category. In fact, the qa’ida, the invisible rule, often was much worse than walls and gates. With walls and gates, you at least knew what was expected from you.

At those words, I almost wished that all rules would suddenly materialize into frontiers and visible walls right before my very eyes. But then I had another uncomfortable thought. If Yasmina’s farm was a harem, in spite of the fact that there were no walls to be seen, then what did hurriya, or freedom, mean? I shared this thought with her, and she seemed a little
worried, and said that she wished I would play like other kids, and stop worrying about walls, rules, constraints, and the meaning of *hurriya*. “You’ll miss out on happiness if you think too much about walls and rules, my dear child,” she said. “The ultimate goal of a woman’s life is happiness. So don’t spend your time looking for walls to bang your head on.” To make me laugh, Yasmina would spring up, run to the wall, and pretend to pound her head against it, screaming, “*Aie, aie!* The wall hurts! The wall is my enemy!” I exploded with laughter, relieved to learn that bliss was still within reach, in spite of it all. She looked at me and put her finger to her temple, “You understand what I mean?”

Of course I understood what you meant, Yasmina, and happiness did seem absolutely possible, in spite of harems, both visible and invisible. I would run to hug her, and whisper in her ear as she held me and let me play with her pink pearls. “I love you Yasmina. I really do. Do you think I will be a happy woman?”

“Of course you will be happy!” she would exclaim. “You will be a modern, educated lady. You will realize the nationalists’ dream. You will learn foreign languages, have a passport, devour books, and speak like a religious authority. At the very least, you will certainly be better off than your mother. Remember that even I, as illiterate and bound by tradition as I am, have managed to squeeze some happiness out of this damned life. That is why I don’t want you to focus on the frontiers and the barriers all the time. I want you to concentrate on fun and laughter and happiness. That is a good project for an ambitious young lady.”