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Excerpt from the novel Womanland

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Younes and the West: The Sea

The season of the chickens, that's what they called the holiday period. The chickens were the boys and girls who descended upon Morocco in the months of July and August.

They came from all over Europe.

France.

Those were the hard, no-nonsense youth, with the 'va te faire . . . , fils de . . . en crache ton venin, go- . . . -yourself, son-of-a- . . . , spit-your-poison' vocabulary.

Germany.

Lethargic and mostly whiter and fatter than the others. They usually didn't speak a word of Tamazight or Arabic. 'Come on, say "chicken" in Tamazight! Come on, say it!' Amid great hilarity.

The girls from 'Olanda.'

Sharp-tongued and the gift of the gab, verbal karate blows to your groin if you went too far.

The girls and boys from Belgium.

Introvert, a bit naïve, the most Moroccan of all. Every year the girls bought expensive new handmade takchitas to show off at wedding parties in Antwerp or Brussels.

Italy.

Shocked by modernity, these women returned home with short haircuts and sleeveless tops, only to be confused and shocked once again when they discovered that this form of modernity had not travelled with them to their villages.

Those from Spain.

'We're Spaniards.'

And they came too – though in much fewer numbers – from Denmark and Norway, the United Kingdom and even the United States.

There were many of them, more than you could count. The boys had made a sport of assigning them a country.



Cool Adidas training pants, black with white stripes? France!
 Beige shorts and light-blue polo shirts? Germany!
 Masses of curls, on both the boys and girls? Holland!
 Pastel-coloured headscarves, skimpy T-shirts and tight-fitting jeans?
 Belgium!

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Moroccan leather jackets? Spain? Wrong! Beni Nsar!
 Despite their differences they looked like each other, as if they had
 just rolled off the same assembly line.

Assembled in the great multinational known as Europe.

The 'indigenous' young people felt ill at ease for the first few days. Should they be condescending? Indifferent? Fake-friendly? They found it hard to conceal their envy. It was an injustice that they, who had had so much more education, found themselves left behind in the dust again when yet another of those chic automobiles took off with a screech.

But later they had reconciled themselves to the invasion of the *Marocains Résidents à l'Étranger*, the MRE.

They had the time of their lives during those months at the seaside. There was always something happening.

That summer there was Mariam.

He hadn't noticed her at first. He had been more interested in her cousin. And he wasn't alone. Everyone in Saidia wanted to win her favour. Her beautiful slender cousin, with the soft silky hair that gleamed in the sun like in the television ads. But after he had tried to have a normal conversation with her a few times, he had been hugely disappointed to discover she was no more than a giggly bird-brain. A very beautiful bird-brain, mind you. But that would only have charmed him for a day.

Mariam, on the other hand, was interesting. At the time he had even imagined the superwoman that Mariam's intelligence and wit combined with her cousin's beauty would have made.

Mariam's beauty had only barely revealed itself. She was different, had a different kind of beauty.

At the end of the first week of that unforgettable summer he was

so much in love it was embarrassing. He had never been so happy before. After discovering what they had in common during the first week, they spent most of the second learning what the other thought of the crucial questions in life. He discovered she loved Kahlil Gibran.

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When love beckons to you, follow him,
Though his ways are hard and steep.
And when his wings enfold you, yield to him,
Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.
And when he speaks to you, believe in him.

She had recited the verse in French, a language that didn't quite do the poem justice. It was so much more beautiful in Arabic, he had found out much later. But it sounded like music coming from her mouth.

And he believed every word that came from her mouth; she nodded, she whispered, and he was lost. He would have walked into the sea and kept on walking if she had asked him to.

'How many children do you want, Mariam?'

'What do you mean, how many children? Shouldn't you ask me first if I want children at all?'

'Oh, sorry, for a moment I forgot life isn't so self-evident in Europe. Everything is questionable. First, everything is questioned.'

'That has nothing to do with Europe, Younes. It has to do with the free, thinking individual, and that is universal.'

'Why would you question having children?'

'Because there are already so many of them, and because the world isn't a nice place for a child to be in, for example.'

'What's the point of everything then?'

'The point? You, of course. It's you.'

'Me?'

'That's the most important pronoun in Europe, Younes. ME. If you get that, you can fly.'

Younes had thought about this conversation for a long time after.

'ME, ANNA in Arabic, NECH in Tamazight.'

That was the secret of progress, of success. Of freedom, she had told him.



'Nourdin, she's just perfect.'

'She's just a little chicken, man. It won't be long now and she'll fly back to her roost.'

'Oh God, I know you're right!'

'See, I knew you'd come to your senses. By the end of the summer, when all the hormones are gone, you'll see everything in perspective again.'

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'No man, I'd completely forgotten she still has to go back. It's like she's from here. It's like I've always known her. What should I do now?'

'Try and get all you can out of it. Enjoy, man, enjoy the chickens from Europe. They're so much more direct and adventurous than the birds from here, who chew gum and talk in veiled terms. It drives me mad sometimes. They never say whether they love you or not. They think love is full of mysteries. Half-mysteries then, because they never finish their sentences, you have to fill the rest in yourself. Before you've solved the mystery, they're already married and have two kids. Just so much hassle.'

'Should I dare ask it already?'

'Ask what?'

'If she'll marry me, of course.'

Nourdin sat up and arched his brows in amusement. Abdelkader was walking towards him.

'Wow! Younes wants to marry a little chicken and fly on her wings to Europe! Very ambitious, man.'

'Him too?' said Abdelkader disapprovingly, as he stretched out next to Nourdin. 'Is he also prepared to give up his honour and pride for the sake of a residence permit?'

Nourdin lay back in the sand again. With his hands behind his head, he scanned the black sky for the star that shone the brightest, meanwhile continuing: 'You know – at least I hope you do – that these chickens can only fly after you've coughed up a hefty dowry. You know how much Sadiq's little chicken cost him? I hardly dare tell you because it will be such a shock. All I can say is he still sends his mother a huge amount every month to pay off the creditors. And that was three years ago, man.'

'Don't call her a chicken. And I couldn't care less about Europe. I'm graduating soon and I'll create my own Europe. I love her, man, she's the love of my life and I won't let her go. I'm going to ask her to marry me.'

[72] Abdelkader look at him in silence for a moment, then shook his head pityingly. 'What man accepts subservience? I'm serious now! So you're prepared to give up your dignity for the sake of Europe?'

'It's not about Europe, I keep telling you.'

'Oh yeah, that's what they all say. But I don't buy it. There's not a single bastard here who doesn't stare across to the other side drooling. It's not the girl you see, it's a walking European passport. And what do you think you'll find there? Paradise?' Abdelkader dug his heels angrily into the damp sand, and carved deep troughs with them. 'You'll go there and the first thing that girl will say is: 'This is my country, I brought you here, so be quiet and do as you're told, and if you dare protest I'll have your papers taken away and send you straight back where you came from.' You're not going to Belgium or Holland, you're going to Womanland. She's the boss there and you're the *schmet*, the loser.'

'*Wallah al'Adhim*, Allah the Almighty,' echoed Nourdin.

'I despise those guys who come here acting like kings and dressed like goons while they trail along behind their women.'

'It's impossible to talk with any of you.' Younes stood up and brushed the sand off his trousers, then left, waving dismissively. Abdelkader called after him that he had better keep something to hand for the fever. 'Chicken virus can be persistent and vicious!'

Younes heard them laughing.

Translated from the Dutch by Sherry Marx-Macdonald

