

STORY BY TAHAR BEN JELLOUN, trans. by James Gaasch

"COMPATRIOT"

Khadija is beautiful. She has from the Maghreb the color of the earth in summer, and the blue of the clouds. The laughter of her eyes tames the rebel bird. But in her look the prairie of tenderness. A simple movement. Modest.

In Paris for several years, she is finishing her medical studies. The workers from her country, expatriates by circumstances, she knows them well. She demonstrates at their side.

Last Sunday, while descending from the metro, she was approached by an immigrant worker who was trying to assuage his loneliness.

"You are beautiful, my sister..."

Khadija smiled.

"Tell me, my sister, you are Arab, aren't you?"

Khadija nodded with a small laugh.

"Tell me, my sister, gazelle under the moon, you'll have a coffee with your brother from the Maghreb... Sundays are long and sad... And the others don't speak... Come on, we'll talk about our country.

In Khadija's mind, words and images collided: emigration... loneliness...homesickness...guilt...on the make...exile... sadness...violence...constant racism... Talk together, why not?

"OK, thanks for your invitation"

In the café, they exchanged impressions about work, isolation, vacations...then there were long silences and a feeling of awkwardness.

The man took from his pocket a ten franc note and put it between Khadija's breasts. After the surprise there followed an uncontrollable laughter. The man, embarrassed, excused himself. Khadija reassured him, embraced him and left...

Tahar Ben Jelloun,
"Le compatriote", Le premier amour est toujours le dernier, Paris, Seuil, 1995.