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## **A Bus Ride to Ouad Nachef**

Chourouq Nasri

The bus station is almost deserted. You climb onto the only vehicle parked there – a dirty, small overcrowded bus. There's hardly room enough for you. You grab the pole to steady yourself as the bus jerks into the stream of traffic. The fabric on the seats is dark blue. The rain begins to fall in heavy drops against the bus windows. The bus eases into its next stop and a group of four noisy teenagers gets on. Boisterous voices fill the bus. The light scent of cologne and the strong odor of alcohol fill the air. You cannot see their faces. They squeeze past you. The bus suddenly moves again noisily.

Someone squeezes your waist. Rough hands touch your hair, your shoulders, and your arms. Your heart beats very fast. A hand cups your chin. Another grabs your buttocks.

No – this is not happening! You don't believe this is happening to you.

Your heart is bursting in and out. You try to free yourself, but someone drags you by the hair. Your head is throbbing. You want to scream, but you can't. You struggle to wiggle out of their arms.

“Get away from me!”

You say it too loud. Your voice sounds scared. You are shocked by your tone. The boys shriek obscenities. Your legs are hollow. Your arms tremble from the shoulders down. You stare blankly out of the windows at the passing lights and the rain. The bus is still going at a very brisk pace. You feel the rattling and throbbing beneath the soles of your shoes.

Your mother must be waiting for you. She feels lonely since your sister got married. She's always full of words when you enter the house. She looks much older than her real age. Her wrinkled face hides years of grief that sunk into her skin after your father passed away.

Someone is panting and sweating. His lips are pressed against yours. On his breath, you distinguish the sickening smell of alcohol. You want to scream but you are too afraid and too exhausted from the fight. A terrible fear is clouding your brain.

Your mom spent the last two weeks of your dad's life sitting beside his bed, praying. You could not sit. You stood for hours and hours at the threshold of your parents' bedroom door and watched your dad – a diminished pale figure in a bed – breathe.

You take this bus to get back home every day, but never at 8pm. You had an appointment with friends at Opheon. It's your favorite coffee shop – a nice café at a short distance from the university. It was crowded, buzzing with the mixed sound of animated conversations and espresso machines. A strong aroma of black coffee infused the place. You wore your long blue skirt and green shirt for the occasion. You bought them from the new mall with your scholarship. It was the first time you had ever bought anything with your own money.

Someone is bellowing in excitement. You can't stand it.

You had coffee with milk in a short and wide mug made of white porcelain. And, as usual, you had a cheesecake. You ate it savoring each bite.

Facebook status update: "Enjoying coffee and talk with Diae and Ihssan at Opheon."

These are your best days as a university student. You love your English major; you want to become fluent in the language. You love to watch BBC World News; you want to find a job as a journalist there. You know it's an impossible dream, but you indulge in it anyway, thinking you have time for being realistic once you finish your studies.

You talked about teachers and little things at university. You spoke your mind.

Someone shoves his hands up under your shirt. You weep.

Diae and Ihssan were desperately trying to find room 33. So were you. That is where your first class was to be held. It was a literature class; you didn't want to miss it for the world. You were late, but you got acquainted with each other; this is how your friendship began.

"I am fond of Mr Melouki. He's such a good teacher," Diae said.

"Yes, I like his class too," you added. "He has a way of explaining things that makes you want his class to last forever."

"I like the way he listens to us and encourages us to talk," Ihssan agreed.

"I love his accent," you said.

"He has a kind face," Ihssan pointed out.

"And he is so cute! Is he married?" Diae asked, giggling.

"I have a lot of fun in Mr Hllal's class," Ihssan said.

"Oh yeah, especially when he puts on his solemn face and his TV show deep fake voice!" you retorted.

"You mean Big Mustache?" Diae joked.

You laughed a very high-pitched laugh. Everybody in the café turned their eyes on you, but it was impossible to stop. Your laughing got louder and louder.

Someone unbuttons your skirt.

You are sickeningly aware of faces turned towards you from along the bus. Others are looking at their phones, pretending that nothing is happening.

You also talked about love for hours. Ihssan said she did not know what it was; she had never been in love. You know what love is. It's that thing that makes you feel light even when times are tough. You are often in love. Right now your days are too busy for love. Your university classes, your new friends, your daily bus rides to school then back home. You'll probably find time for love during the holiday.

Sweat and hot tears are running down your cheeks.

You sat near the balcony; the view is not particularly stunning, but you like the idea of watching people go to and fro while you are doing nothing.

Someone clamps his hands around your sides and digs his fingers into your ribs.

This is not real.

Someone puts his hand inside your panties.

You stand shivering, your teeth are rattling. You decide to make yourself small like a stone. You curl the edges of your body up and fold them under where no one can see.

A giggle. Another giggle.

Your laughter filled the coffee shop.

You asked your friends to escort you to your bus station. You live at the very end of the bus route. It's a pleasant Friday evening in late October. It's autumn; the days are getting shorter and shorter. The sky is shadowy blue. The moon is hidden by the clouds. The leaves are still clinging to the trees, but they are turning a different color. You love this part of Oujda. You can walk a long distance by yourself without anybody shouting nasty words at you. Things are different in Ouad Nachef.

The bus slows once more, but passes the next stop without pausing when the driver sees no passengers waiting there. You listen to the rain pour down and the thunder clap. You listen to the sound of your father's laughter on that long-ago day. In a short time, you'll be walking in the tortuous streets leading to your house. They will be torn up by rivulets of dirty water. Your mother will be looking out the window, waiting for you.

Ouad Nachef – the dried river.

Maybe a river flew here once. There is no river here now.

Bali, the official *chmkar* (vagrant) of your neighborhood will be wandering and talking to himself in the street.

Loud moaning noises.

Your hands are slippery with sweat. You feel thirsty. You are exhausted and out of breath. Your hands and feet are shaking and you're grinding your teeth.

If you had stayed at home today, this would never have happened.

No – this is not happening.

One of your arms is disconnected and lying across your lap. You are falling apart. A pile of your body parts lies on the bus floor. Four teens are quarreling over it. Your ears, your knees, your fingers, your toes. Two breasts. Pieces of bare skin.

This is not real.

Another bus stop.

Someone gets in the bus. It's your mom. She looks different – she is unspeakably beautiful.

She shoots the boys an angry look and, without a word, snatches you from their hands and gently puts you in the warmth of her soft gray-green *jellaba* pocket. Then, she crushes them with her right hand, throws them out of an open window, and leaves the bus.