

THE FISHERMAN FROM ESSAOUIRA

My sons are thinking the unthinkable. I never thought that one day I would have to tell this story. Yet, here I am.

Fatima warned me. "Keep an eye on Hassan," she said. I did not listen carefully. Now Said wants to follow him too. I cannot look at my father in the eye. Fatima will not look at me in the eye. I have failed.

By the way, my name is Ahmed. Sit down and let me tell you this story. I hope you will also learn from it.

When I was growing up in Essaouira, my father always told me that the sea was our whole life. He was a fisherman, just like his parents and grandparents before him.

He would wake me up before dawn and take me to the port. My hands were small then and the nets felt heavy like iron chains. He would say: "Respect the sea. It feeds us, but it does not belong to us."

I believed him until I heard the call of another city.

It was about thirty years ago. I had plans to go to Casablanca to try my hand at the clothing business. I imagined myself standing in a small shop, selling shirts and jackets, earning money with clean hands instead of smelling like fish and salt.

Of course, those plans never materialised because my father forbade me to leave. He pretended to consider my proposal and said nothing at first. Then he slapped me hard across the face.

"Do not betray your roots," he said.

I remember being angry at my father for killing my dreams, for deciding my future without asking me. I felt trapped. But time passed and slowly I accepted my fate and stayed in Essaouira.

Life continued. I married Fatima. We built a home near the port. Our children grew up between the smell of the sea and the cries of fishermen selling their catch.

Therefore, when Hassan approached me yesterday morning, his eyes quick and his hands restless, I knew he did not want to ask me for advice on how to repair our boat.

Said stood at a distance, as if distance could protect him from my anger and disappointment. Fatima had been working in the kitchen, but she stopped her chores and quietly stepped closer to hear what her middle son wanted to say to his father.

“Baba, I have something to tell you,” Hassan said timidly, his voice trembling, yet it seemed he had already made up his mind.

“Baba, Said and I want to go to Marrakesh.”

The words fell in my ears like a net full of stones. Said shifted from one foot to the other, unable to stand still. Fatima stood quietly, listening, her face unreadable.

“Why?” I asked. “Why do you want to leave your sick grandfather and your eldest brother? Isn’t Essaouira good enough for you?”

Said shouted from where he was: “We want to open a shop, Baba! We ...”

“Come here, Said!” Fatima cut in firmly. “Come and speak to your father like a man.”

“We have a friend in Marrakesh,” he continued once he stepped forward. “He sells leather bags. He says business is good. Tourists love them and he makes more money than we ever could here.”

I could not believe what I was hearing. Neither did Fatima.

I turned my eyes toward the sea through the small window. It had given us fish, protection and identity. It had fed three generations of our family without asking for loyalty in return.

Perhaps even the sea felt the sting of our sons’ betrayal.

“You are fishermen,” I heard myself say, though my voice sounded weak even to my own ears.

“You are the fisherman, Baba. Your father was a fisherman,” he replied. “But we want something different. Baba... we are leaving Essaouira tomorrow.”

In the evening, we ate together as we always did. Hamza, my eldest son, spoke about the rising price of fuel for the boat. Life had become expensive and we were barely able to make ends meet. *The price of diesel had increased again. The nets needed repair. The boat engine made strange sounds.*

"How can we survive like this?" Hamza asked quietly.

Fatima kept bringing more bread to the table, as if she feared it might be the last meal we would share together. She did not speak about Marrakesh or the argument from that morning. She smiled, trying to hide her pain, but her tired eyes revealed everything.

My father sat in silence in the corner of the room. He needed no explanation; he understood. Every so often, his cough broke through the stillness, a sharp reminder of how fragile life had become.

After dinner, I walked outside. The streets of Essaouira were calm, with white walls and blue doors glistening in the night like the sea. Fishermen were repairing their nets under dim yellow lights. The smell of grilled sardines floated through the air.

I remembered my father's reaction when I told him about my plans to go to Casablanca. Even today, I could still feel the burn of his palm across my cheek.

This morning, Hassan showed me the papers. They had rented a small place near Jemaa el-Fnaa, the busy square in Marrakesh. The contract was signed. The decision was final.

I still could not understand why my sons wanted to leave the quiet life of Essaouira and disappear into the noise of that distant city.

They had saved some money, and their uncle Aziz had lent them the rest. That news drove the final nail into my hope.

"You are leaving your brother Hamza alone," I told them. "You are leaving us."

“We are not leaving you, Baba. We are trying to build something new. If we succeed, we can repair the boat, buy fuel, maybe even get a second boat.”

“Baba, we do not want to fight the sea all our lives,” Said said, taking his place beside Hassan. Together they formed a quiet fortress, a fortress I no longer had the strength to breach.

“Life is hard here,” he continued. “Sometimes there is nothing in the nets. In Marrakesh, there are always people. Always customers. You were not able to leave, but we can.”

I tried in vain to tell them that customers were not family. But they replied that customers were opportunity.

It dawned on me that I was fighting a losing battle.

Later that night, Fatima spoke to me and brought me the solace I desperately needed.

“You cannot hold water in your hands,” she said gently. “They must leave to understand what home means.”

I did not answer. Instead, I took her hands in mine.

They left Essaouira this morning.

The bus to Marrakesh was waiting near the main road. The sky was bright, but the strong wind felt cold on my face as I watched them go.

I tried to be strong, and so did Fatima. We held back our tears so our sons would not carry the weight of our grief.

Said avoided my eyes, and I avoided his. As the bus was about to leave, we briefly hugged.

Afterward, Fatima waved frantically at the back of the bus. Hamza tried to comfort us, but his words did little to ease our suffering.

It seemed as if wrinkles had appeared on Hamza's face overnight.

"Are you angry with them?" I asked as we walked back home.

"No," Hamza shook his head. "No, I'm not angry with them. Someone must stay and someone must go."

I looked at the port. Everything looked the same, but nothing felt the same.

My gaze shifted toward Fatima, my bedrock. She walked slowly beside me. I would have given everything I had just to know what she was thinking.

"I could not tie them to the boat," I finally said to my family. "I failed to read the sea. The sea teaches us every day. We throw the net, but we do not choose what it brings."

Hamza and Fatima stopped for a moment and then continued walking slightly behind me. They began talking in low voices, but I could not hear their words. Their whispered conversation followed me like an echo.

I wondered what plans they were forming, or what fears they were hiding.

My only certainty was that my sons were about to learn another sea, a sea of people and voices. I did not know if they would ever return to Essaouira, or if distance would slowly change who they were.

But when the wind blew from the Atlantic and the boats moved gently in the harbour, I felt something remain. The sea was still there. My home was still there.

And so was the hope that one day my sons would follow the wind back.

Home.



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