

the turning tide

By **Laila Lalami**

Rahal lives in the poorer part of Tangier with his demanding mistress Samira. He has a family back in the Rif Mountains that he must support and a wife who's longing to be with him. With a new assignment from drug dealer Pelón comes the hope of bigger work and higher paybacks. But is this really the life he wants?

On those rare occasions when images of his wife crept into Rahal's mind, he quelled them by thinking of the moment and of what he had with Samira. This morning, for example, he focused on Samira's hair, strewn across the pillow. He wrapped his arm around her and took in the scent of it, a fruity fragrance from one of the many bottles she kept in the bathroom. Whenever the merchandise from one of his smuggling trips included toiletries, she took a sample from each box. He drew her closer and tried to go back to sleep, but she rose.

"It's late," she said. She flung open the blue shutters. The cold Tangerine sun flooded the cramped room and with it came the smell of sardines frying at the stand down the street. "It's almost lunchtime." Her figure, silhouetted against the light, brought an urgent feeling to his groin. He pulled at her arm and she fell easily on the bed next to him. He cupped her breasts and kissed her caramel-colored nipples. She giggled, pushed him away and stood up. "When do you have to meet Pelón?"

"Not for a while. Come back to bed."

"You can't be late. Get up, I'll

make some coffee." She put on a nightgown and left the room.

Rahal lingered in bed, hoping she might come back, but gave up waiting once he smelled the coffee. When the door to the armoire was open, as it was now, it touched his side of the bed. He grabbed it and pushed himself up.

Rahal found Samira sitting at the Formica table, reading the paper and smoking a cigarette. "Look," she said. "This one looks promising." She put the folded newspaper in front of him and poured him coffee. The ad was for a used but late-model sport utility vehicle, which the owner said he wanted to liquidate.

"Too expensive," Rahal said, tossing the paper back on the table. He leaned in and slipped his hand between her thighs, caressing that soft spot he liked so much.

She swatted him and grabbed the paper. "You always turn down the ones I find. Sometimes I wonder if you're really serious about buying a car."

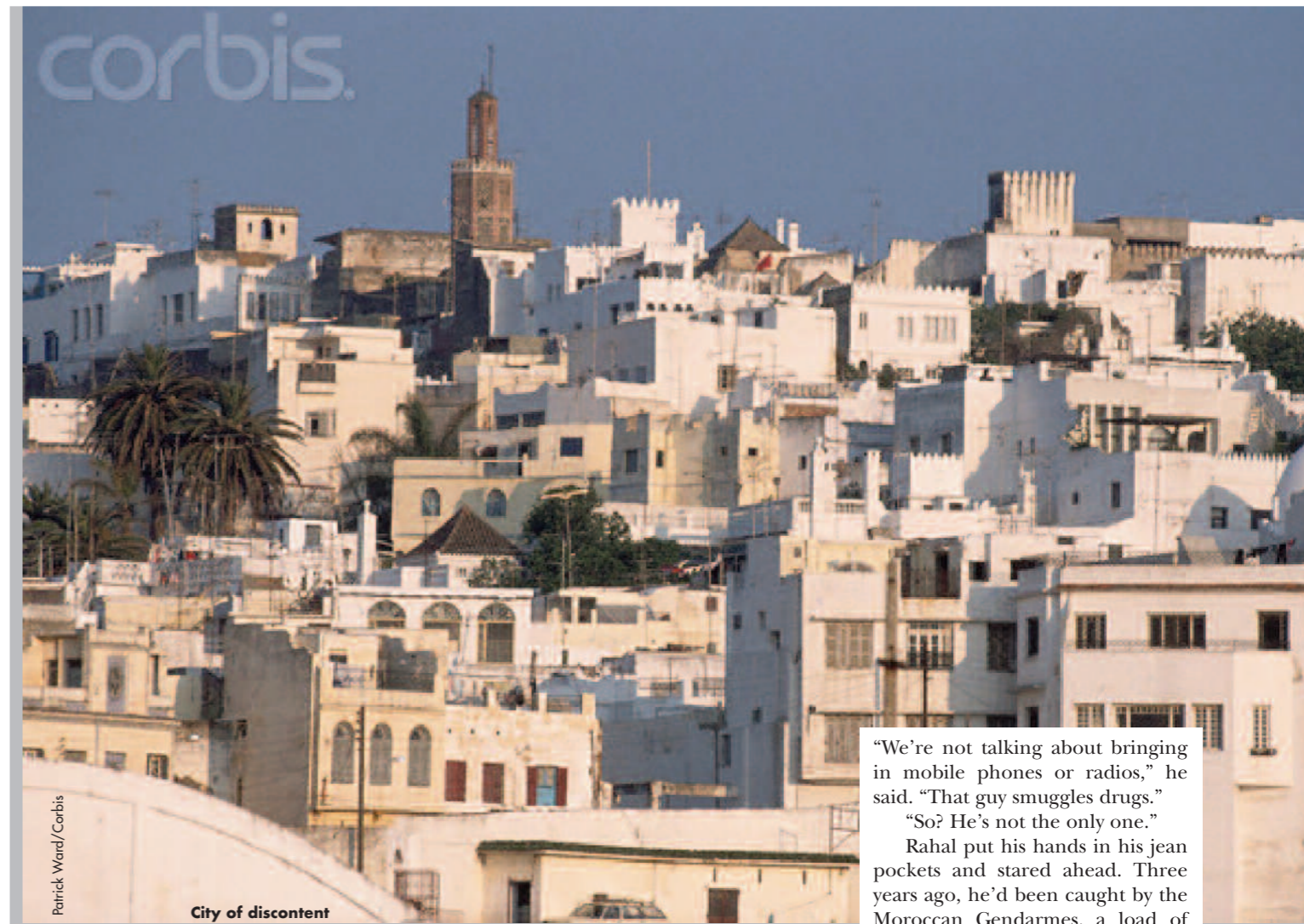
"Of course I am," he said. He could feel the insidious beginnings of a headache on his temples. He didn't want to get into another argument on a big day like this.

"All our friends already have

cars." Her voice turned shrill. "Why can't we be like other people?" She threw the paper across the table and walked back to the bedroom to sulk.

Rahal decided to let her cool off and went into the bathroom to get ready. In the cracked mirror he noticed that his widow's peak was becoming more pronounced. Soon, he worried, he would be bald, and with the deep pockets under his eyes, he would look like a middle-aged man at barely thirty years of age. And what did he have to show for it? He lived in a two-room apartment bordering the medina, in the poorer part of Tangier. He had a motorcycle, but Samira wanted a car. At least he was able to support his family — his wife, his mother, and two younger sisters who still lived in Im Zouren, up in the Rif Mountains. Since he'd left the village five years ago, he'd only visited them sporadically, but now they wanted to come to Tangier to live with him. Women, Rahal considered, always wanted something.

He put on a clean T-shirt and jeans. He wasn't sure he wanted to work for Pelón. He preferred to run his own operation rather than depend on someone else, even if it was someone as big as Pelón. And



City of discontent

why did people call him Pelón anyway? His given name was Ali. Maybe he thought an alias made him sound like a tough guy. At any rate, Pelón was too risky. Rahal liked to stay under the radar, work on small loads, so if he ever had to abandon the merchandise because of the cops, he wouldn't go broke on a single trip. He slipped his keys and wallet in his pocket, the Swiss-army knife in his sock. He was ready to go. It was time to talk some sense into Samira.

When he came into the bedroom again, she was sitting on the bed, having changed into a tight, sleeveless white dress. She had just finished painting her nails a fiery red and held her fingers apart to let them dry. Carefully, she picked up her cigarette from where she had let it rest in the ashtray.

"You're leaving?" she asked.

"I don't have to, just yet."

She stared at him as though his leaving or staying made no

difference in her life. He hated it when she went cold on him like this. What had he done to merit her wrath? Tell her that a car cost money? It did. He was trying his best to make a living and yet she was never content.

"I'm going to Najwa's for the day." She went to the window and waved her free hand out to dry her nails. She pulled at her cigarette with the other.

"You were just there yesterday," he said.

"Do you want me to stay cooped up in the house all the time?" she snapped back. "I'm not your wife." She liked to remind him of that, to remind him that she lived with him but didn't belong to him. And yet it was her defiance, her indifference to what people would think of her, that he found so irresistible.

"Look, let's just see how it goes," he said.

She turned around. "You're not thinking of backing down are you?"

Rahal's head was pounding.

"We're not talking about bringing in mobile phones or radios," he said. "That guy smuggles drugs."

"So? He's not the only one."

Rahal put his hands in his jean pockets and stared ahead. Three years ago, he'd been caught by the Moroccan Gendarmes, a load of watches hidden in the saddlebag of his motorcycle, and he'd had to serve eight months for it. He didn't want to see the inside of El Marchane Jail again.

Samira grabbed her purse and marched past him to the door.

"Wait," he said.

She didn't.

At the Café La Liberté, where Rahal waited for Pelón, the talk among the customers was of the latest group of Moroccans to drown in the Mediterranean in their attempt to cross to Spain. A far-sighted man had taken off his eyeglasses to examine up close the full color pictures of the victims in the newspaper. A teenager walked from table to table hawking portable radios, freshly smuggled in from Ceuta. "Listen to the BBC, France Inter, Médi 1," he said, enumerating the stations the powerful antennas could transmit. Along the street, tourists wandered around, looking for a taste of hashish or an encounter with a

local prostitute. In Tangier, Rahal thought, life and death were like the intertwined threads of a rope, drawn at the whim of Europe.

At 2 o'clock sharp, Pelón stepped into the café and sat down across from Rahal. He took off his sunglasses and let them dangle from their cords. His long, thin fingers and neatly trimmed nails made Rahal wonder if Pelón had ever done any real work. He looked like a graduate student on his way to class and Rahal felt a mean sense of jealousy. He'd barely completed his grade school education and had always worked with his hands. In the village, he'd worked as a shoe repairman and a chicken farm hand before leaving for Tangier. It was clear to Rahal that Pelón had had it easy.

Rahal offered him a cigarette, which he turned down. He lit up anyway while Pelón talked about the job, explaining that he needed someone to do small-scale deliveries, mostly to enterprising tourists who wanted to take some hashish back to Europe with them, hidden in the gas tanks of their cars.

"That's it?" Rahal asked.

Pelón nodded.

"When do you need me?" Rahal asked.

"Not for a week or two," Pelón said. "The cops are breathing down our neck right now."

Rahal blinked. "Maybe we should wait," he said.

"They're in it for the money," Pelón said, shrugging. "But every once in a while, they need to make a few arrests to look good. We just have to wait until it blows over."

"I don't know," Rahal said.

"Don't worry," Pelón said. "I know what I'm doing." He was distracted by someone behind their table and Rahal turned around to look. It was Samira, walking down the street arm in arm with Najwa. She laughed at something Najwa said, then saw him and waved. Rahal wondered why, of all the places to go with her friend, she came here to the Socco Chico. She didn't trust him when he said he'd meet with Pelón and now she was

checking on him. His wife would have trusted him, he thought bitterly. Samira walked away, her hair fluttering in the wind, her hips swaying with each step she took, and Pelón's eyes not far behind. Rahal wanted to tell Pelón to back off, but instead he found himself unable to say anything, allowing this man he already disliked to ogle his girlfriend.

"Why do they call you Pelón anyway?" Rahal asked brusquely.

"When I started working in the business, I was still in college. I would smuggle refrigerator parts by sea, the merchandise strapped to my back. The other divers said I'd never make it, that I didn't know what I was going into. I used to shave my arms and legs so I'd go faster. They called me curly, Pelón." He smiled before delivering what was clearly a punch line he'd used before. "Now they

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all work for me."

Rahal put his cigarette out. Now he felt comfortable enough to sit back in his chair and smile. "What's my cut?" he asked.

"10,000 for this one," Pelón said. "And, depending on how you do," he said, "I could put you on bigger things."

This was already big, Rahal thought. He could scarcely imagine what a bigger cut might be.

"Can I rely on you, then?" Pelón asked.

Rahal nodded.

"I'll call you in a few days. I have to go to Malaga tomorrow."

"New shipment?" Rahal said, trying to sound casual, as if he came to the café to close deals all the time. Instantly, he regretted it. He knew he came across as nosy and perhaps even foolish.

Pelón didn't let on. "No, just going for some business."

The car wasn't the trendy SUV Samira wanted, a fact which she

pointed out immediately upon seeing the red Isuzu truck Rahal had purchased from a local doctor in need of quick cash. Still, she sat down on the passenger's side and asked to go for a ride. She stretched her arm across to his seat and caressed the back of his neck. They drove along the boulevard, passing the Gran Café de Paris, then made their way along the coastal road, as far as the beach in Restinga. On their way back, while they waited for the attendant at the gas station to refill the tank, Samira asked when his next job with Pelón might be. "I don't know yet," Rahal said. She looked out of the window dreamily. At night, they had loud sex and she lay next to him, spent and happy and, for once, content with him.

With the new job came new demands. Samira declared she needed new furniture, new

dishes, a new wardrobe. She even started talking of getting in touch with her family. Neither her mother nor her father had spoken to her since they'd found out she'd slept with the neighbors' son. She'd had to make a living after they threw her out of the house so she danced at nightclubs and hotels, sometimes at weddings. Now that there was more money, she wanted to show them, she said, that she had done well for herself. But first, she needed to get a new haircut or a new dress, so she would look respectable when she'd meet them.

Rahal and Samira had just sat down to eat a lamb roast marinated in cumin and ginger when the postman rang the doorbell to deliver a certified letter from Rahal's wife. She was writing to ask for this month's money and to beg him to join him in Tangier. She pressed him to start a family, said she was the only woman in the village who didn't

have children, and people had started talking. He folded the letter and stuffed it in his pocket. His head started throbbing.

“What does she want?” Samira asked.

“The same as always.”

Samira shrugged. “Have some more lamb,” she said.

Rahal took a bite of meat – overcooked, a bit hard – and chewed it while thinking of his wife. It had been more difficult to keep her out of his mind lately. Even though he earned more money now, he’d been sending her the same as before: enough to pay for the rent and food. And yet she never complained. He could picture her at their home in Im Zouren, sitting cross-legged on the cane mat, patiently spinning sheep wool between her hands. The only thing she always asked for was to come live with him in Tangier. What if he brought her here? Would it work? She was a village girl, could hardly even write her name. All she did was remind him of his duty to his family and then he’d have to bring his mother and his sisters, since they, too, wanted to come. Maybe he ought to divorce her and not carry around this guilt of leaving her behind. But how could he divorce her when she’d been faithful for so long?

Samira cleared the table and set the dishes in the sink. “We should move out,” she said. “This apartment is getting too small.”

A few weeks later, Rahal came home early to find a note saying that Samira was out. He crumpled the piece of paper and threw it out. What was the point of making all this money if all she did was spend it? His mobile phone rang. “Shopping again?” he barked. But it was Pelón, asking him to do a pick up in Ketama, then meet him at the docks by midnight. “Okay,” Rahal said, embarrassed that his boss might suspect his troubles with Samira.

He took his keys and drove the truck to meet Hmida, the supplier, an old carpenter who had

started a wholesale hashish business after his family shop had gone bankrupt. There were a dozen crates to load. Rahal opened one and took a peek at the cookie-like sheets of hash that were stacked neatly inside. The smell reminded him of his grandmother, who liked to slip a bit of hash in the dough of the pastries she served when her girlfriends came to visit her. “So they can relax,” she’d say. There was enough in there to relax the entire village. He closed the crate and started loading the truck.

It took a couple of hours to drive back to Tangier, and he called Samira on his mobile phone. “Where are you?” he demanded. She said she was at Najwa’s and that she might spend the night there. Nothing changed, he thought, even with the new job. Perhaps he should break it off with her and bring his wife here. After all, he was getting older and it would soon be time to start a family. And at least his wife

Nothing changed, he thought, even with the new job. Perhaps he should break it off with her and bring his wife here. After all, he was getting older and it would soon be time to start a family

would be around every day.

He made it to the port on time. The lights on both the Moroccan and Spanish sides cast a glow on the oily water. He didn’t know which boat he was making a delivery to, and he lit a cigarette while waiting for an order from Pelón. At half past midnight, there was still no sign of the boss. Rahal tried calling him but there was no answer. Where was this shipment headed? He wondered what he should do if Pelón didn’t show up. He considered driving up to look for him, but he didn’t want to risk missing him. On the other hand, he couldn’t very well sit in a truck full of drugs; sooner or later a patrol car would spot him and he could get caught. He recalled what Pelón had said about the cops – sometimes, they just needed

someone, anyone to take the fall. He felt a drop of sweat travel down his spine.

He craned his neck to look up the road. What was taking him so long? Finally he saw Pelón walk up the dock toward him. “Where have you been?” Rahal asked, stepping down.

“Cops everywhere,” Pelón said. “Where’s the stuff?”

“Back there,” Rahal said, pointing to the truck bed.

Pelón took the keys and Rahal jumped into the passenger side, and they drove up to a brand-new speedboat. The *Deliverance*, moored on the north side of the pier. Rahal stepped out of the truck and started unloading the boxes while Pelón hopped in the boat and waited at the helm.

“Aren’t you going to help me?” Rahal asked.

“Who’s going to keep a look out?”

Rahal went for the second box. Next time, he promised himself, he’d work for someone

else. He’d only taken the job because of the money. And if it weren’t for Samira, he wouldn’t even need it. He’d have enough to support his wife and family. There was no reason to be taking risks like this.

He was getting the last crate from the truck when he heard the sound of the police sirens, and almost simultaneously, that of the boat’s motor. He dropped the crate and ran up to the boat. “Wait!” he yelled, but Pelón didn’t. Rahal turned around in time to catch the front lights of the patrol car as they swept the road, blinding him. And yet, for the first time in many months, he finally saw things for what they really were. □

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