Essafi Moumen Ali, “Reading the Letter”

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Translators' Preface: Why Wasn't the Letter Written in Tamazight? Translating Linguistic Hegemony in Morocco

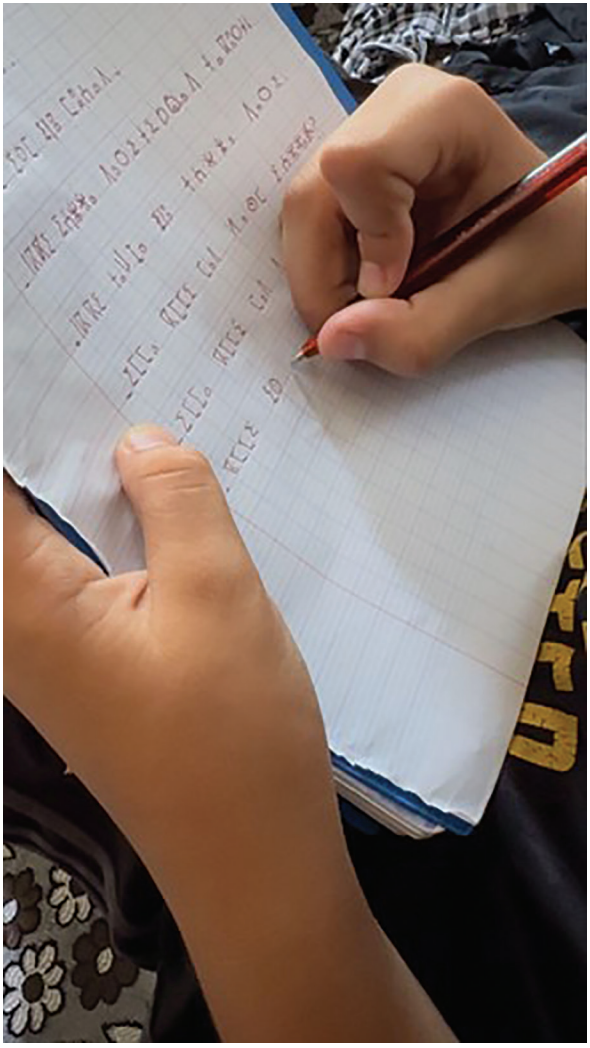
Essafi Moumen Ali's story "Reading the Letter" provides English-speaking readers with a rare glimpse into the complex linguistic landscape of rural Morocco, a setting closely resembling the Amazigh community where Ali, the co-translator, grew up. Tamazight sources, as this novella powerfully illustrates, possess inherent value and deserve wider recognition. As co-translators, we adopted an ethnographically grounded approach, drawing on our extensive experiences in rural Morocco. Linguistically, we utilized our full semiotic repertoires (Standard Tamazight, Tashelhit, Standard Arabic, Moroccan Darija, French, and English) in a translingual manner to render the Tashelhit into English. Because Ali's mother tongue is Tashelhit and Adeli's first language is English, we often used Darija—our most mutually understood language variety, despite it being less dominant for us—to communicate as co-translators in order to bring the English translation as close as we could to the original Tashelhit's meaning. While the meaning of Essafi Moumen Ali's story is deep and profound, the language employed is relatively straightforward and simple. This sometimes presents challenges while trying to adequately convey both the simplicity and depth of the original text while also preserving the intricacies of Amazigh lifeways. Our palimpsestic process mirrors our own personal layered histories, languages, and contexts, which we drew upon to bridge the gap between these disparate Amazigh and American social contexts.

The narrative follows Lalla Fadma, an aging mother waiting for news from her long-absent migrant son. When a letter finally arrives, written in Arabic, it becomes a powerful symbol of exclusion. No one in the village can read it. The unreadable letter highlights a broader sociolinguistic struggle: the hegemony of Arabic (the language of state, religion, and formal education) over Tamazight, the villagers' mother tongue. Thus, this story illuminates the political economy of language, linguistic oppression, and the deliberate erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems.

The story poses a fundamental question through the innocent voice of a child: Why wasn't the letter written in Tamazight? This question underscores the persistent gap between official language policy and lived experiences. Although Tamazight was declared an official language in Morocco's 2011 constitution alongside Arabic, its marginalization continues in many spheres of life. The child, Ali, despite learning Arabic in the mosque, fails to understand the letter, revealing the disjuncture between imposed linguistic systems and everyday linguistic practices.

The story critiques the illusion of individual salvation. The son's return as a circus leader brings joy and spectacle, yet this moment of entertainment may be a distraction from ongoing structural issues. The circus—imported, westernized, and alien—may symbolize how dominant powers exploit folklore and iconography to obscure fundamental struggles around infrastructure and linguistic justice. Rather than labeling villages as "cut off" and "isolated," we must consider how the state has made them so.

The letter remains an unopened text, a metaphor for unresolved tensions between identity and assimilation. "Reading the Letter" ultimately argues that power lies not in possessing the truth, but in narrating it and making it accessible to those silenced by linguistic exclusion. We hope this translation contributes to a broader understanding of Amazigh thought and literature and prompts critical reflection of the following question: Who is teaching you that your language cannot be written, and why?



Mouad's letter in Tamazight script. Credit to Ali Abdeddine.

"Reading the Letter"

Bihi stepped down from a heavily loaded mule and knocked on the decrepit door of a small house, calling out, "Lalla Fadma . . . Oh, Lalla Fadma!"

An elderly woman appeared, and he handed her the few goods he had brought from the market along with a letter.

Bihi was one of the few men who remained in the village of *Tazaoult*, nestled atop the peaks of the Anti-Atlas. Only the elderly men and women, along with a few young children, remained in the village. Many homes stood abandoned, their inhabitants having migrated to the cities to work in trade.

Whenever Bihi went to the market, he shopped not only for his own household but also for some of the village women whose husbands had migrated. It was socially inappropriate for them to go shopping themselves.

Lalla Fadma took the goods and the letter, offering prayers for Bihi. Then she asked, "Is it from Touda or Zayna?"

She asked because she was accustomed to receiving letters from her two daughters. Touda was married and living in Rabat, while Zayna had settled in Casablanca with her husband. They were the ones who sent her the little money that she lived on.

Bihi smiled and replied, "The letter is not from them."

Lalla Fadma was taken aback. "Then from whom? Please tell me!"

Bihi's smile lingered as he said, "You won't believe it, Lalla Fadma. Congratulations! The letter is from your son, Hamo. The Moqaddem[1] gave it to me at the market."

A mixture of astonishment and joy shook Lalla Fadma. Her body trembled. She never expected a letter from Hamo—her son who had left for France over 25 years ago and had since vanished, leaving no trace of whether he was alive or dead.

For years, she had asked anyone returning from France about him, in every village and town nearby, but no one knew anything.

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[1] This refers to the man who acts as the local arm of the state.

Although she could not read, she eagerly tore open the envelope, pulling out the letter and staring at it as if searching for him within its lines. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she sighed deeply.

Bihi, seeing her distress, tried to distract her and forced a smile, "Lalla Fadma, you should neither smile nor cry. Just thank Allah, for He has returned your lost son to you."

Her face brightened at his words, and deep wrinkles appeared as she smiled, chasing away the sorrow in her eyes. "Praise be to Allah! I thank Him that my son is still alive!"

She recalled the words of people who had told her time and again, "Don't hold onto hope, Lalla Fadma. Your son Hamo is probably dead. Maybe someone killed him and hid his body, or maybe he drowned in the river."

She tucked the letter close to her chest and rushed toward the mosque, saying, "I'll go now and ask the Imam to read it for me!"

But Bihi, still smiling, stopped her, "Where are you rushing to? The Imam hasn't returned yet from his hometown. Did you forget? He is from the Sous Valley, not our village. He visits his family once a year and will return tomorrow."

Lalla Fadma stopped in her tracks. She pulled the letter from her chest and stared at it in frustration, mourning her inability to read it.

Bihi reassured her with another smile, "Don't worry, Lalla Fadma. It's not hard to guess what your son wrote. He greets you, tells you he is well, and says he only lacks the joy of seeing you. He hopes you and his wife are well too."

Lalla Fadma sensed that Bihi was merely trying to comfort her, so she replied hesitantly, "I hope that's true . . ."

Bihi, noticing her doubt, insisted, "I promise you, Lalla Fadma, this is what he wrote. In fact, I can swear he even mentioned that he would return to the village in the coming days or next week!"

Ever since Bihi received the letter from the *Moqaddem*, he had been telling everyone at the market, "Hamo Ait Lshkar is alive! He sent a letter! He's coming back to the village soon!"

Not only did the villagers hear his words, but so did the mountains, rivers, and trees along the road to the market. The valleys echoed the news as he spread it on his way back home.

He had repeated the words so much that, to him, they had become an undeniable truth.

Lalla Fadma looked at him and asked, "How do you know my son Hamo is coming in the next few days? Who told you that?"

Bihi confidently replied, "The Moqaddem told me the letter came from Rabat."

"And who told him that?" she interrupted.

Smiling, Bihi pointed at the postal stamp on the envelope and explained, "Look at this postal mark. It's from Rabat's post office. This means Hamo returned from France and is now in Rabat. That's where he sent the letter from."

Left with no choice but to believe him, Lalla Fadma's mouth fell slightly open as she listened.

Bihi continued, "The Moqaddem also told me Hamo sent this letter via express mail."

"What is express mail?" she asked.

"It means the message was sent quickly and should have arrived on the same day."

He added with certainty, "This proves that Hamo is indeed in Rabat and sent this message to let you know to prepare for his arrival."

Hearing this, Lalla Fadma rushed into the house and climbed the poorly lit staircase to the kitchen, where her daughter-in-law, Aicha, was baking bread for dinner.

"Aicha! Hamo is coming home!"

Her worries of 25 years had finally ended. She and Aicha were overcome with joy.

That night felt endlessly long for Aicha. Unable to sleep, she left the room she had shared with Lalla Fadma since her husband left. She went into her own small room, lit a candle, and stared at herself in the mirror, hesitant, almost afraid of what she might see.

Twenty-five years had passed, and she had rarely looked at herself in the mirror. Since her husband left, beauty had meant nothing to her. Instead, she had devoted herself to hard work—plowing, harvesting, gathering herbs for the cow and donkey, watering the garden, grinding grain—just to keep herself and her mother-in-law from going hungry.

Now, as she gazed at her reflection, fear enveloped her. The glow of youth was gone. She touched her face and found her skin no longer soft, no longer radiant. A tear slipped down her cheek.

She dreaded the thought: *Would her husband still care for her when he returned?*

The next evening, the women of the village gathered at Lalla Fadma's house to help prepare for Hamo's return. They roasted almonds and prepared argan oil and *amlou*.

Bihi arrived with two other men, carrying three large sacks of flour ground at the watermill near the river.

Lalla Fadma returned from the mosque for the third time that day, her grandson, Ali, Bihi's son, trailing behind her. She was breathless as she announced, "It's past Asr prayer, and the Imam hasn't arrived yet!"

Everyone fell silent. The anticipation was unbearable. They exchanged glances, unable to say anything.

Bihi broke the silence. "Lalla Fadma, why don't you let my son, Ali, read the letter? He's a student at the mosque and knows how to sound out words."

Ali took the letter, his hands trembling. Under the expectant gazes of everyone in the room, and he slowly sounded out the words. When he finished, he lifted his eyes to his father.

Bihi urged, "Keep reading."

Ali hesitated, "I'm done. I've read it all."

His father frowned, "You're lying. You didn't say 'And peace.' All letters end with 'And peace.'"

Ali swore he had read every word and that there was no "And peace" at the end.

The villagers burst into laughter, assuming he couldn't read.

Bihi wanted the laughter to continue, so he turned to his son and said, "Well then, my son, since you say you've read the whole letter, tell us what it says and explain it to us."

The boy, with a quiet sadness, replied, "I don't know."

The father asked, surprised, "Why not? Didn't you say you read it?"

He answered, "I can't explain it . . . because I don't understand Arabic."

When the people heard this, they burst into laughter once again, mocking him. The boy felt disappointed. He hadn't lied to them, and he couldn't understand why they laughed at him without reason. He began to cry and ran away, overwhelmed.

When night fell that day, everyone regretted what had happened, for little Ali had not returned home, and no one knew where he had gone.

The entire village mobilized to search for him. People carried lanterns and torches, searching through homes, ruins, and even checking the well—without success. Bihi and some of the men went as far as Tamjlousht, his aunt's village at the end of the river, but no one there had seen him. Fear paralyzed them, worried that something terrible might have happened.

Lalla Fadma was the most remorseful, knowing that her letter was the reason for everything that had unfolded.

The villagers' greatest fear was that Ali would encounter wild wolves in the forest—and that was exactly what happened. Had it not been for a passing group of French tourists, the wolves would have devoured him. These French travelers visited the Sous Mountains every year, enjoying the breathtaking landscapes and picturesque villages. That night, they rescued Ali from death, fed him, and sheltered him from the cold in their tent.

The mockery Ali had endured had driven him to leave the village, intending to reach his aunt's house in Tamjlousht. He deliberately chose to walk through the forest rather than take the usual path, fearing his father would find him and bring him back.

The next morning, Ali had breakfast with the caravan. One of the travelers, who was familiar with the area and spoke Tamazight, offered to take him to Tamjlousht, as Ali had told them his destination.

As they walked through the forest, the Frenchman shared stories of the places he had visited in Sous and the adventures he had experienced. Ali, fascinated by his words, asked, "You're French, yet you speak Tamazight! Where did you learn it?"

The man smiled and answered, "In France, my homeland."

Ali's eyes widened in surprise. "France?! Are the French Amazigh people too?"

The Frenchman chuckled. “No, they are not Amazigh.”

Ali pressed further. “Then how did you learn to speak Tamazight?”

“I studied it.”

Ali was even more astonished. “You studied it? Does that mean Tamazight is taught?”

“Yes, there are schools that teach it.”

Ali lowered his head, puzzled. “I never imagined this. . . . I never thought Tamazight could be written!”

He fell silent, lost in thought, before asking, “Can we write Tamazight on a board and read it?”

The Frenchman found Ali’s innocence endearing and smiled. “Of course, anyone can do that.”

“Even me?” Ali asked hesitantly.

“Even you!” the man assured him.

Bending down, the Frenchman picked up a small stick from the ground and handed it to Ali.“Do you know how to write?”

“Yes, I do,” Ali responded.

“Then let’s try something,” the man said. “Write down what I dictate to you on the ground with this stick.”

Ali nodded as the man slowly dictated, “Little . . . white . . . gazelle . . . , do not wander . . . too far into the wilderness. . . . Beware of the wolves.”

When Ali finished writing, the Frenchman urged, “Now, read what you wrote.”

Ali focused, struggling a bit, but eventually read the words aloud.

“Do you understand what you just read?” the Frenchman asked.

“Yes, I do,” Ali replied.

The man smiled warmly. “Well then, you have written and read in Tamazight, little white gazelle!”

Ali blushed and lowered his head, realizing how he had underestimated his own language, likening it to a little white lost gazelle.

They continued walking, Ali deep in thought. He told himself, *If the letter had been written in Tamazight, I would have understood it, and no one would have mocked me.*

Not long after, they encountered Ali’s father and some men searching for him in the forest.

The next day, Lalla Fadma went to the mosque again, but the Imam was still absent. Her worry grew.

She met a villager who had just finished his prayers, and he reassured her: "Tomorrow is market day. By Allah's will, your son Hamo will come, and he will read you the letter himself—no need for the Imam."

Hope flickered in her heart.

The following day, as the men went to the market, Lalla Fadma's house was filled with the voices of village women who had come to help her prepare for Hamo's return. As the day passed and the men returned, her heart pounded with anticipation. But there was no news of Hamo.

When she asked them, they all shook their heads. "We saw no one, and we heard nothing about him."

Pain squeezed her chest. She and Aicha sat in silence, waiting. Dinner time came and went, and still, Hamo did not arrive.

Aicha, unable to sit still, entered her room. The air was thick with the scent of incense and perfume—fragrances she had sprinkled on the bed she had prepared for her husband's return that night.

She glanced at her reflection in the mirror. The radiant glow had returned to her face, but a lump of sorrow dulled the sparkle in her kohl-lined eyes.

She left her room, carrying her sadness into Lalla Fadma's room. Neither woman ate dinner that night. Neither spoke. They simply sat in silence, lost in thought.

Outside, the wind howled, swirling up dust, breaking dry, brittle twigs. Hours passed, and the small oil lamp flickered out, darkness swallowing the room.

Suddenly, Aicha leaped to her feet. "I heard a car!"

Lalla Fadma, startled, replied, "I heard something too . . . but I thought it was just the wind."

Aicha rushed to the rooftop, braving the swirling dust to get a better view of the road leading to the market. Lalla Fadma followed closely behind.

They spotted the distant glow of headlights cutting through the night, inching closer to the village.

Their hearts pounded with joy. It must be Hamo!

But just as quickly as their hope had flared, it was extinguished. The car did not stop. It passed through the village without slowing down.

Disheartened, they climbed down from the rooftop, dragging their disappointment behind them, and returned to their silent, waiting room.

The next morning, the sun rose hidden behind black clouds. The wind kept blowing without pause. The day passed, and the Imam didn't come. Anxiety settled in Lalla Fadma's heart. She could no longer bear the wait for someone to read the letter. She entered the room and found Aicha praying. Without waiting for a reply, she said:

"I will go to the village of Tamjlousht so that their Imam can read me the letter."

She went down the stairs to the barn, placed the saddle on the donkey's back, and struggled to mount it. Then she set out on the road. As soon as Aicha finished her prayer, she hurried after her, catching up with her just outside the village as she braved the dust storms stirred up by the strong winds. She begged her to return and warned her of the wind and the violent gusts. But Lalla Fadma was determined and paid no attention to any of it. She urged the donkey to keep going.

Aicha realized she would not be able to stop her, so she stood watching her with fearful eyes until she disappeared into the whirlwinds of dust.

Moments later, the rain began to fall. Thunder rumbled, followed by flashes of lightning, and the rain plummeted from the sky. The rivers overflowed, but Lalla Fadma paid no attention. She kept urging the donkey forward. Aicha feared something bad might happen to her, so she headed to Bihi's house to inform him. He quickly mounted his mule and went after her to bring her back.

Lalla Fadma reached the river. It was overflowing, so she stood there staring at its waves that were sweeping everything in their path. The river hadn't seen such a flood in years. It hadn't rained like that in a long time.

Tears mixed with rain on Lalla Fadma's face. She was helpless, unable to cross the river to reach Tamjlousht, which lay on the other

side. Bihi found her standing still by the river and eventually managed to convince her to return to the village. She mounted his mule, and he rode the donkey back.

Between Maghrib and Isha prayers, the men gathered around the fire in a room inside the mosque, warming themselves and discussing Lalla Fadma's problem. They were all sympathetic, but none had a solution. A brief silence fell before one of them stood and said: "How can we call ourselves men when we are unable to read a simple letter?"

Another rubbed his head in shame and said, "It's a disgrace . . . truly, every man should know how to read his own letter and not have to let the Imam see its contents, so that only the sender and the receiver know what it says."

Another man added, "Our ancestors were right when they said, 'Whoever doesn't cook his own food, sew his own clothes, and read his own letter—his death is better than his life.'"

A week passed with nonstop rain, day and night. The roof of Lalla Fadma's house started leaking. She and Aicha tried to fix it to no avail. They filled the cracks with mud and used soil to plug the leaks, but it was no use—the house was falling apart. The villagers were trapped. No one could cross the turbulent river to go to the market for essential items.

One night, Lalla Fadma fell into a deep sleep and dreamt that her son, Hamo, had become ill in France. She saw him lying in a hospital bed. Afraid he might die far from his family, he returned to Morocco. When he arrived in Rabat, his condition worsened, and he was taken to a hospital. Upon waking up, he asked a nurse to write a letter to his mother, asking her to come visit him. He had something important to tell her before he died.

Lalla Fadma awoke from the dream in terror. She sat up thinking about her son and told Aicha about it the next morning. They spent the whole day deeply worried, afraid the dream might be reality—that Hamo might die without seeing them or telling them what he needed to say.

That evening, they decided to travel to Rabat in search of the hospital where Hamo was staying.

The rain finally stopped after three days. The river's water level dropped. On the evening of their planned departure to Rabat, Aicha noticed that Lalla Fadma looked pale from sorrow and worry about her son. She sat next to her to console her and then revealed a long-hidden secret—something that had weighed on her heart for a long time.

She told her about her life with her husband, Hamo, and how, despite not being a wealthy trader, they had lived happily.

Hamo had been a performer with the Sidi Hmad Ou Moussa circus troupe. The money he earned from shows in Marrakech's Jemaa El-Fnaa square and elsewhere was enough for them. Aicha was the only woman in the village who spent extended time with her husband. Most other women only saw their husbands once a year since they worked in faraway cities. But Aicha's husband visited her five times a year, often bringing gifts when he had made good money.

This went on for years until, one day, Aicha wore a new dress her husband had gifted her. Some women saw her, and one of them, with a sarcastic smile, hurled a cruel remark, "I didn't know beggars made enough to buy such a dress for their wives."

The words hurt Aicha deeply. It pained her that people saw her husband as a beggar.

From that day on, whenever her husband visited, she tried to convince him to change his work, without telling him why. When all her attempts failed, she finally begged him to stop "begging."

When he heard her words, he defended himself and his profession, trying to convince her that his work was not begging. But she held firm and said sadly, "From now on, don't bring me gifts bought with money from begging."

She left the room, leaving him to ponder. At first, Hamo didn't take her words seriously. But one day, during a performance, it was his turn to collect donations from the audience. Something inside him echoed his wife's words. He felt too ashamed to stretch out his hand. Sweat covered his body. He lowered his eyes and froze in place. His colleagues thought he was sick and ended the show early.

On that day, Hamo quit his job. With the money he had left, he obtained a passport and migrated to France in search of work. Then his news stopped.

When Aicha finished telling the story, she bit her lip in regret, bowed her head, and sobbed, "Forgive me . . . forgive me . . . it's my fault. If I hadn't said anything, Hamo wouldn't have left for France."

Lalla Fadma answered her gently, "Don't burden yourself, my daughter. . . . You haven't done anything wrong. You only did what you thought was best for your husband."

She paused for a moment, then continued, sighing deeply as if speaking to herself, "Perhaps it was my fate not to live my life with my son . . ."

Aicha understood why Lalla Fadma had said those words—because she had spent only a few days with her son. There had always been something keeping her away from him. She said what she said because the very first thing that separated her from her son was the death of her first husband, whom she had loved and who had loved her until he died from the fever that struck the village at that time. He had left her with their son Hamo and two daughters, Touda and Zayna, all still very young.

Later, her father married her off to another man, much older. When her new husband brought her to his village, Tazaoult, Hamo was only three years old. When her son turned five, her new husband woke her up one night and said, "I dreamed that Sidi Hmad Ou Moussa asked me for Hamo."

Her heart trembled at his words because she understood what he meant. He wanted to take her son away and send him to Sidi Hmad Ou Moussa to be handed over to one of the circus trainers to follow the path of the children of Sidi Hmad Ou Moussa.

She refused, which led to several days of conflict between them. Afraid, she fled with her children to her father's house and told him what her husband intended to do. But her father told her that her husband was right and warned her about the curse of Sidi Hamad Ou Moussa if she didn't comply. He returned her to her husband's home.

Days passed without her husband mentioning Hamo again . . . until one morning, she discovered he was gone. She

checked and found the donkey was missing too, and she knew then that her husband had taken her son far away without her permission. She ran like a madwoman through the streets, searching for them in vain. Exhausted, she sat under a large argan tree, sighing in deep sorrow.

Meanwhile, her husband had taken Hamo to Tazerwalt, where he handed him over to a circus trainer and returned to the village. When he got home, he found his wife pale and thin, traumatized by what had happened.

Poor Hamo had fallen into the hands of a cruel trainer. He suffered greatly, enduring abuse, and only learned circus arts after much hardship.

Later, Lalla Fadma's husband regretted what he had done and went to bring Hamo back. But when he arrived in Tazerwalt, the trainer, upon learning he had come, sent his students to tell him, "The trainer and Hamo are not here—they left with a group for Marrakech." He returned home with no success. For over three years, he kept going back to Tazerwalt but never found Hamo or the trainer. Each time, they lied to him. When he died, Lalla Fadma lost all hope of her son's return. She didn't even know the name of the trainer who had taken him.

Fifteen years passed without her seeing or hearing any news of her son, until one day he returned, handsome and strong, and she was overjoyed. He then married Aicha, and they lived happily together. But less than two years later, he immigrated to France to find work, and they were separated once again . . .

All of this played in Lalla Fadma's and Aicha's minds like a film reel that sleepless night. They were waiting for morning to go to Rabat. Outside, heavy rain pounded the earth, and they were worried the road might be blocked off by the flooding river. Each lay curled up with her thoughts, listening to the raindrops falling into buckets and pots from the leaking roof. From time to time, Aicha would get up to empty the containers into the drain so the room wouldn't flood.

As soon as morning came, they began preparing to leave, but suddenly, a deafening sound shook the house. Part of it had collapsed. Fortunately, the section they were in was still standing.

Though Aicha was terrified it might fall too, she composed herself and helped Lalla Fadma down the stairs and past the rubble. Once outside, they stood in the strong wind, watching in disbelief as the rest of the house crumbled before their eyes into a pile of stones.

The villagers comforted them, and Bihi took them to his home where they spent the day and the night. He tried to dissuade them from traveling and asked them to postpone the trip to Rabat, but they insisted. They said their goodbyes to Bihi and his family, then passed by other homes to bid farewell to the villagers. But they found no one, as everyone had gone to watch the circus that had arrived in the area.

Everyone was eager to see the circus, especially the exotic animals—lions, leopards, and elephants—in large cages pulled by trucks. On Aicha's and Lalla Fadma's way through the village, they stopped near the pile of stones that had once been their home and stood there, eyes filled with tears, gazing at the ruins.

Aicha and Lalla Fadma began sifting through the rubble, hoping to find something of their belongings. A man from the circus, wearing western clothing, stood nearby watching the scene with a heavy heart. When they saw him, they covered their faces, as women in the area usually do, and waited for him to leave so they could continue searching in privacy. But he remained standing, watching sadly.

After a moment, he approached and asked, "Excuse me, ladies, when did this house collapse?"

Hearing him speak Tamazight surprised them. They had thought he was a foreigner just passing through.

Lalla Fadma replied, "It collapsed just yesterday."

He gasped in shock and said, "Yesterday?!"

Then he added, "Do you know where the women who lived here went?"

Lalla Fadma answered, "We are the ones who lived here."

She had barely finished her sentence when he exclaimed joyfully, "Mother . . . Mother . . . I'm Hamo!"

As soon as they heard that, they uncovered their faces, staring at him in shock and joy. They couldn't believe they were seeing Hamo, alive and smiling.

The whole village soon knew that Hamo had returned—and that he was now the director of the circus. They welcomed him warmly and were proud of his return. Everyone gathered in Bihi's house, drinking tea while Hamo told them about what had happened during his time abroad.

He said when he first arrived in France, he was unemployed for a long time and was too ashamed to return home. Eventually, he met someone who got him a job with a big circus, and he began traveling with them around the world—to Europe, America, Canada, Japan . . .

He added that he had gained great experience there, performing flips and acrobatics in the tradition of Sidi Hmad Ou Moussa's troupe. He learned to work with wild animals—lions, leopards—and mastered tightrope walking and clown acts. He said, "I made a fortune from this work, and I used it to buy shares in the circus until I became the sole owner."

He didn't mention the hardship, hunger, and illness he had endured before finding that circus job. Back then, he lived off coins tossed to him by drunkards outside cafés, where he performed acrobatics.

Even that desperate work was difficult. He was often chased away and beaten by café owners or their guards, treated like a stray dog.

He lived in a tiny room with an old Algerian man from Kabylia who had spent over 40 years in France, jobless, drinking, gambling, and never once writing to his family or returning home.

One day, Hamo fell seriously ill, bedridden for days without food or care. The Algerian only came back at night. When the illness worsened, the man called a doctor, afraid Hamo would die in the room. The doctor insisted he be taken to a hospital immediately.

But the Algerian was terrified of getting in trouble for housing an undocumented immigrant—Hamo's residency papers had expired. Unsure of what to do, and fearing more trouble if Hamo died there, he consulted friends who advised him to drive Hamo to a hospital at night and leave him at the door.

He borrowed an old car, dropped Hamo off at the hospital, and drove away. A nurse found Hamo, and after consulting doctors, they admitted him and provided him proper care until he recovered.

As soon as he felt better, Hamo fled the hospital, afraid he'd be deported once he fully recovered.

He went back to performing his old acrobatics outside cafés and bars. One day, a circus owner spotted him and, impressed by his talent, offered him a job . . .

Everyone sipped tea and nibbled almonds while listening in awe to Hamo's strange adventures across the world. But when he spoke about the dream that led him to return home, everything else faded. Some villagers' eyes filled with tears as he recounted, "One night, as I slept, I dreamed that I was out in the forest with my mother collecting firewood. I left her behind, gathering what I had chopped. Suddenly, a massive, beautiful bird appeared beside me. Before I could react, it grabbed me with its powerful claws and flew high into the sky . . .

"I wasn't afraid—I actually enjoyed soaring through the vast skies, breathing in fresh air I had never known.

"The bird flew toward a place glowing with colorful sunlight. Just as we approached it, I looked down and saw my mother on the ground, mad with grief, barefoot, wearing tattered clothes, dragging her dirty feet, and calling out, 'Hamo . . . Where are you, my son . . . ?'

"My heart broke. I began shouting for her until I lost my voice, but she couldn't hear me. I looked up and begged the bird to take me back, but it wouldn't. I struggled with all my might to free myself. I took my axe and struck the bird's leg like it was a tree trunk. Blood gushed everywhere, but still, I could not break free . . ."

Just as the bird was about to carry him into that radiant world, Hamo managed to cut its leg with his axe. He plummeted rapidly toward the ground, and there, he woke up from his dream, drenched in sweat.

When he finished telling his story, someone among the listeners turned to him and said, "That dream was a call from Lalla Fadma. The poor woman has suffered so much. You came back just in time. Had you delayed any longer, she might have wandered off aimlessly, lost after her house was destroyed . . ."

Upon hearing this, Ali, the son of Bihi, remembered what had happened to him and turned to Hamo, saying, "Why didn't you write the letter in Tamazight?"

As soon as the others heard that, they all burst into continuous laughter. Then Lalla Fadma stood up, pulled the letter from her clothes, handed it to Ali, and said, "Take the letter, my son . . . read it aloud to everyone once more. Now that Hamo is here, he can confirm that you really can read."

Lalla Fadma insisted on saying that because Ali had once come to her, swearing that he had truly read the letter. She had answered him gently, "I know, my son, that you read it . . ."

He was surprised by her certainty and asked, "How did you know I really read it?"

She told him kindly that she had seen it in his beautiful eyes.

Then Ali stood up and read the letter in front of everyone. When he finished, he turned to Hamo, waiting for his reaction. Hamo smiled, applauded him, and said, "Well done, my boy . . . you read the letter—you CAN read."

The people looked at each other in astonishment, wondering, *Did that really just happen? Did Ali actually read the letter?*

Then Ali turned to Hamo and said, "But even though I read it . . . I didn't understand it."

Hamo smiled and said, "It only said that we're doing well, that I send greetings to my mother, my family, and the people of the village, and that I've arrived in Rabat and will be home soon."

At that point, Ali turned to him with a stern voice, "If you had written all that in Tamazight, everyone in the village would have understood it easily when I read it to them. Without any trouble!"

As soon as the crowd heard that, they burst into laughter once again. Before evening fell that day, on Hamo's orders, the circus workers prepared a large tent and invited all the villagers to dinner.

That night, joy filled the village as the glittering lights of the circus lit everything up. People shared a meal and enjoyed performances they had never seen before. They danced until dawn, as if celebrating a grand wedding.