

THE LIVER OF THE MOUNTAIN

Memories of Tassaouirgane — By Bihi, Dar Tassa Retreat

Part one

The journey always began before dawn, in the quiet, salt-damp air of Casablanca. It was the 1970s, a time when distance felt heavier, more tangible. There were no motorways slicing through the landscape then, shortening the world into hours. To travel to the mountains was to commit to a voyage.

My late father — God bless his soul — would bundle me into a taxi, or sometimes into the sturdy car of his friend M'barek. I was small then, a primary school boy with eyes wide enough to swallow the world whole. These trips were not merely holidays; they were the axis upon which my childhood turned. The road unspooled slowly, mile by mile, taking a full day to shed the city's skin. We always stopped in Marrakech, the red city pulsing in the heat, where Dad would buy gifts — sugar, tea, fabrics — offerings for Grandpa and the family waiting high above.

By the time the road began to climb, the air would change. It grew thinner, sharper, smelling of dust and ancient stone. We were ascending toward Tassaouirgane.

In the Amazigh tongue, Tassa means “liver,” but in our culture the liver is the seat of love, not the heart. So perhaps the name was a promise: The Love of Ouirgane. It was a small village nestled in the High Atlas, a secret garden lush with spring water that sang through the rocks. Fields of corn bowed in the breeze, apple trees stood heavy with fruit, and everywhere — everywhere — was the scent of wild lavender and thyme, rising like incense from the heated earth.

Our arrival was an event. In those days, engines were rare in the mountains. The sound of a car climbing the track was a summons. As we pulled in, the village seemed to hold its breath; the daily rhythm paused. Children would emerge from the mud-brick houses, gathering around the machine with shy curiosity, their eyes bright. And there, amidst the stillness, would be Grandpa.

Grandpa lived there with his wife. My biological grandmother had left this world when I was just a baby, a ghost I never knew. Grandpa's wife was warm, her hands rough but gentle, her welcome sincere. Yet, as a child, I carried a small, quiet knot of worry — a childish concern that she was not “mine.” But the village did not deal in such distinctions; I was simply family.

Grandpa was a man of few words with me, but his joy was loud. He spoke only Amazigh; I, a city boy, did not. We had no language to bridge the gap, yet we needed none. His eyes crinkled when he saw me. He would place a heavy hand on my shoulder, and I would feel the connection hum between us — a tender, wordless

tether.

Life in Tassaouirgane was a kingdom of freedom. With the other children, I would vanish into the fields. We played in the cascades where the mountain water was so cold it made your bones ache, and we ran along the irrigation canals that fed the orchards. We gorged ourselves on wild red berries that grew by the water's edge, staining our fingers and mouths, tasting of summer and wildness.

But the true magic happened in the kitchen. I loved to sit with the women, watching the alchemy of food. Everything was fresh, born from the soil we walked on. The dinners were feasts that defy memory. On warm summer nights, we would climb to the rooftop of the earthen house, under a canopy of stars so thick they looked like spilled milk. We would eat not one, but sometimes four different tagines — one from Grandpa's kitchen, others sent over by neighbours in bowls covered with cloth. We ate with our fingers, scooping up lamb and apricots, the taste of fire and care.

After the meal, when the night grew deep, Grandpa would pick up his heavy baton and his torch. He would walk out into the dark, a lone sentry going to protect his fields from the wild boars that came down from the peaks to forage. I would watch his light bobbing away, fearless.

One memory, however, stands taller than the rest. It is morning. The light is pale and blue. I am sitting at the breakfast table, waiting. Then the door opens, and Grandpa enters.

He is a tall silhouette against the morning sun. He has just returned from his hives, carrying the treasure of the mountain. He wore no mask. He wore no gloves. He used no smoke to subdue the bees. He simply walked among them, a part of their world. In his hands, he holds the honeycomb, dripping and golden.

He walks to the table and squeezes the wax with his bare hands. The honey pools onto the plate, thick and amber, smelling of the thyme and lavender fields. We dip fresh bread into it, paired with butter churned that morning from the milk of the cows his wife tended. We eat eggs that she had pulled from the stable moments before — eggs thrown directly into the hot ash of the Tanort, the wood-fired oven, until they were smoky and perfect.

When it was just my father, M'barek and me, we stayed only for long weekends. But when the whole family came, the days stretched into a week or two of bliss.

Now, decades have passed. Both my father and Grandpa are gone; God bless their souls and grant them peace. After thirty years working abroad, I have returned to live in Tassaouirgane. I came back seeking the village of my memory, but time has rewritten the landscape.

The road from the national highway was finally asphalted in 2019. Cars and engines are no longer a mystery; they are ordinary. The cascade — where we once played in water so cold it ached — vanished one summer in a flash flood. The corn

fields are gone. The wild boars no longer come down from the peaks. The wild red berries by the canals have disappeared. More and more, I see children staring into smartphones instead of running barefoot through the fields. There is little livestock now; industrial cheese, butter and milk have made their way even here. The smiles, the simplicity — those, too, have faded.

And then, on September 8th, 2023, at 23:08, the earth itself turned against us. A devastating earthquake shook the High Atlas and shattered many dreams. Homes crumbled. Lives were lost. The mountains we thought eternal proved fragile.

But we are still here. With resilience and hope, we are rebuilding. We continue to live — not only in the present, with all its trials, but also in those golden memories that no earthquake can touch. In my mind, the corn is still tall, the water still sings, and Grandpa is still walking through the door, untouched by the bees, bringing us the sweetness of the earth.

These memories are my inheritance. They are the honey I return to when the world grows too heavy. And as long as I carry them, Tassaouirgane — the Liver, the Love — will never truly be lost.

Part two — continued

II. The Weight of Freedom

Some children dreamed of summer the way you dream of a gift you know is coming — with a slow, building fever that no school lesson could cool. For me, the dream had a name. It had a smell. It smelled of wood smoke and wild thyme, of mule sweat and mountain air, of something ancient and clean that no city street could offer.

Casablanca was not a bad place to grow up. Let me be honest about that. But it was a place of comparisons, and comparisons are a strange kind of poverty. Our neighbours had flashy cars that winked under the afternoon sun. Other families lived behind white walls in villas with swimming pools — blue rectangles of water that shimmered like promises made to people richer than us. We had none of those things. No pool. No gleaming car. No villa.

What we had, I understood only later, was something far less visible and far more durable. We had Tassaouirgane.

The moment that journey ended and the car door swung open to the mountain air, Casablanca dissolved. The school desk dissolved. The arithmetic, the chalk dust, the uniform — all of it fell away like a coat you no longer need. In its place came something I can only describe as a loosening. A widening. As if the lungs themselves had been holding back and could finally, fully, breathe.

This was wilderness. And wilderness, I discovered young, is the truest form of freedom.

III. The Girl Who Hid Walnuts

The fields of Tassaouirgane were not fields in the way a city child imagines fields — flat, tidy, bounded by clean fences. They were terraced and ancient, carved into the hillside by generations of patient hands. The corn stood tall in summer, and between the rows moved the slow, solemn shapes of cows and sheep, grazing without urgency, as if they too understood that time moved differently up here.

My cousins knew these fields the way I knew the streets of our Casablanca neighbourhood. They moved through them with an ease that made me feel at once envious and delighted. I followed, mostly, wide-eyed and slightly out of breath, a city boy in the mountains — bounader in all but name.

It was my cousin who looked after me in those fields. She was a few years older, with quick eyes and a calm authority that required no raising of voice. She had learned, instinctively, that a city boy brought into the wild needs feeding. Not just with meals at the proper hour, but between things — during the long afternoon stretches when the animals grazed and the grown-ups were elsewhere and hunger came without warning, as hunger always does.

She had a trick. She would tuck walnuts — a small handful, enough — between the fabric of her dress and her skin, warm against her, to keep them safe and close. When the city boy's eyes began to drift in that particular way that meant his stomach was speaking, she would produce them quietly, one by one, without fuss.

Those walnuts. I have eaten in fine restaurants since then. I have tasted dishes that required names I had to ask the waiter to repeat. None of it — none — has ever come close to the flavour of a walnut pulled warm from my cousin's keeping, cracked open between two stones on a mountain terrace, eaten with the sound of cows in the distance and the High Atlas air on my face.

IV. The Hour of the Corn Soup

By afternoon, a rhythm had settled over the house like a quilt. The heat had peaked and was retreating. The animals had returned to shade. And grandpa — reliable as the mountain itself — had taken his place.

There was always corn soup. Thick, slow-cooked, golden in the way that only wood-fired things are golden. And beside it, figs. Fresh ones, still warm from the tree, split open to reveal their pink interior, sweet enough to make you close your eyes.

Grandpa ate with the deliberate, grateful patience of a man who understood that food was not a convenience. It was an arrival. Something earned by the day's work, respected by the eater, prepared with knowledge passed from hand to hand across generations.

I watched him the way children watch things they do not yet have words for — the way he held his bowl, the way he tore his bread, the way he chewed slowly and looked out toward the fields with that expression of quiet satisfaction that only people at peace with their lives can wear. The figs I ate too many of, every time.

Without regret.

Then, as the afternoon cooled, the neighbours came back. From the fields they came — women with bundles, men with tools, the old and the young, all moving homeward through the terraces. And with them came the boys. The mountain boys, barefoot and brown and quick, who gathered the way boys gather everywhere: around the possibility of play.

V. The Ball That Knew a Secret

I will admit, freely and without shame, that I was a scheming child. Not wicked. Not cruel. But the city had given me certain gifts that the mountain had not yet encountered, and I was not above using them.

I had arrived that summer with a ball. Or rather — with something that looked like a ball. I had made it myself, back in Casablanca, with the careful engineering of a boy who has too much time and too much imagination. I had carved and shaped the outer shell from hard plastic, made it round, made it convincing. And inside, I had packed it with stones. Smooth, dense, heavy stones, fitted together until the weight was satisfying in the hand, brutal in the foot.

I set it down in front of two large rocks — one on either side, a hand-width apart. This was the goal. The rules were simple, and I announced them with the gravity of a man who has thought this through: kick the ball between the posts, win one dirham. One dirham. A fortune, at that age, in that place.

The mountain boys looked at the ball. They looked at me — the city boy, soft-handed, still learning how to walk on uneven ground without stumbling. And they saw an opportunity.

The first brave soul stepped forward. He drew back his foot with all the confidence of a boy who has kicked stones his whole life, who was born knowing how the ground behaves, who had no reason to doubt his own strength. He kicked the ball. The ball did not move. It sat there. Patient. Immovable. The way only a ball filled with mountain stones can sit.

The boy's face went through several expressions very quickly. I recognised the sequence: certainty, surprise, confusion, and then — the most beautiful of all — a slow turning toward me with a look of wounded dignity that I will carry with me to my grave.

But here is the stroke of genius I had not planned: he did not leave. He sat down beside me. And then, without any instruction from me, he began to help. To call the next boy over. To assure him, with the authority of experience, that it was possible to kick the ball — one just had to try harder. The conspiracy widened. Each victim became a recruiter. By the end of the afternoon I had collected several dirhams and a circle of boys rubbing their toes, each one somehow persuaded that the next attempt would be different. I had a blast.

VI. The Reckoning

The following morning my father sat beside me. He was a man who shouted a lot. Even when he did not need to. He had a way of delivering a lesson with a weight that was, in its own way, final. Someone had told him. Of course someone had told him — in a mountain village, a city boy's schemes travel faster than the city boy himself.

He spoke. I listened. I do not remember his exact words. But I remember the shape of them — the disappointment, measured and honest, that sits differently from anger. Anger passes. Disappointment lingers in a room.

"These are not strangers," he said, or words that meant the same. "These are your people."

I was small enough to feel the full weight of that. Old enough to understand it. And young enough, still, to tuck the lesson away without fully surrendering the memory of those boys' faces — which I confess I have been laughing about, quietly, for fifty years.

VII. The Thursday Market

But the true jewel of the week — the event around which all other days arranged themselves in respectful waiting — was the Thursday souk. Before the dam was built. Before the valley changed its shape and the water covered what the water covered. The market at Ouirgane centre was a living thing, a creature that came to life once a week and filled the air with noise and colour and the particular smell of a market that sells real things to real people.

Thursday arrived and grandpa prepared. This was a ceremony. He dressed in his jellaba — the good one, the one that fell properly, that made him look as he intended to look. He took his time with it, the way a man takes time with things that matter. He was tall, my grandfather, and the jellaba made him taller still. There was a dignity to him, a self-possession, that I associate now with an older kind of man — a kind that knew who he was and required no confirmation from anyone.

His mule was brought out. A female mule, high and proud, with the particular attitude of a mountain animal that carries people as a favour, not an obligation. Grandpa settled onto her back with a straightness of spine that made the mule seem worthy of him, which she was. And I was lifted up in front.

Eight kilometres lay between us and the souk, through fields and the paths between villages, the path dipping and climbing with the land's own logic. The mule moved at her own pace — unhurried, deliberate — and grandpa held the world steady above me, a tall silhouette against the blue morning. He said little. He rarely did. But his presence was the kind that fills space without requiring words, and I felt, in those mornings, entirely safe. Held between the mountain and my grandfather. No wider container was possible.

VIII. The Kahwajii and the Liver of Thursday Morning

We arrived. The mule was tied with a knot that grandpa made quickly and without looking — the kind of knowledge the hands carry without needing the mind's permission. And then, from across the souk, came the greetings.

Everyone knew him. This I had understood before I had words for it. But in the souk it became visible, undeniable — a procession of handshakes and embraces, of shoulders touched and held, of the soft exchange of Labas? and Labas, *oulidi* in the rolling tongue of Amazigh that I could not follow but somehow always felt, like music one cannot translate but understands anyway. I trotted alongside, small and city-scrubbed, watching grandpa accept his village with the grace of a man who has earned it, year after year, season after season.

Then we went to the Kahwajii. He was, like all Kahwajis, a man of few words and tremendous competence. His domain was a low space with a fire at its centre and the smell of rendered fat and mint hanging in the air like a resident — something that had lived there so long it had become part of the walls. He did not make food so much as receive it. You brought the meat. He cooked the meat. The transaction was ancient and honourable.

We had bought liver. Sheep's liver, or goat's — slaughtered that morning, still close to warm, the colour of dark copper. Grandpa laid it before the Kahwajii the way you set down something valuable. And then we sat. He cooked the liver over the fire with the ease of a man who has done this ten thousand times — turning it at the exact right moment, seasoning it with the instinct of someone who has no need of measurements, because measurement is a substitute for knowledge, and the Kahwajii knew.

The tea came first. Or almost simultaneously — the small glasses filled with deep amber, the pour from a height to make the foam, the smell of fresh mint and the particular sweetness of Moroccan tea that requires, I have learned, no apology to anyone. The sugar was not the loose sugar of cities. It was a cone — two kilograms of compacted white, hammered into pieces, sold by the gram, dropped into the pot with a seriousness that other cultures reserve for wine. There was ritual in it. There was intention. We drank. The liver came.

Around us, the souk moved and murmured. Men argued prices for things I was too young to understand. Women gathered vegetables with the expertise of people who know exactly what they need. Children ran. The mules waited with long-suffering patience. And grandpa — from time to time — would receive another greeting, respond in Amazigh, and then turn to me. I could not follow the words. But I knew — I felt, in the way that children feel what is not said — that each time, his reply contained something proud. Something about Casablanca. Something about his grandson.

The following day, a tajine arrived on the Kahwajii's fire. We had brought the meat ourselves — and with it, fresh vegetables from the souk stalls, oil, spices chosen by

grandpa's hand. The Kahwajii took these things and assembled them into something that deserves a better word than lunch. The pot arrived with steam rising from under its conical lid, and I remember the sound of it being lifted — the breath of the thing — and the smell that came out, like a small season compressed into clay. We ate slowly. There was no reason to hurry.

IX. The Road Home

The bags were loaded on either side of the mule with a careful balance — grandpa was particular about this, about the animal's comfort, about not asking more of her than was fair. Then he swung himself up, tall and easy, and I was placed in front, and we began the eight kilometres home.

The souk fell behind us. The path climbed back into the mountain's keeping. The loaded mule moved steadily, her hooves finding the stones without hesitation. Around us, the afternoon had taken on its golden quality, the light thick and honey-coloured, falling long across the terraces.

And as we passed people — walkers, farmers, women returning from their own errands — the greetings came. Steady as the path itself. “3la slama.” Thank God for your safety. As if we had crossed a sea, or returned from a battle, or survived something the world had thrown at us. Every pair of eyes that met grandpa's offered this — not casually, not as empty greeting, but with a genuine, unhurried acknowledgement that to make a journey and return is something worth naming. Worth giving thanks for.

I did not fully understand it then. I was a city boy, used to the brisk nods of Casablanca streets where safety is assumed and rarely blessed aloud. But riding back to Tassaouirgane on my grandfather's mule, the bags full, the afternoon gold, the mountain patient around us, I felt something settle in me. A rightness. A belonging. 3la slama, they said. And meant it.

And grandpa received each blessing the way he received everything — with quiet dignity, with a slight incline of the head, with the ease of a man who has lived long enough in one place to have earned the love of it.

We arrived back to the smell of the tanort and the corn soup and the figs. The mule was relieved of her load. The bags were unpacked with care. And the afternoon resumed its mountain patience, as if the world had always been exactly this size — a village, a field, a mule, a grandfather, a city boy sitting very still, trying to hold all of it.

To be continued.

These are not just memories. They are the liver of things — the seat where love is kept. Whatever the years have taken, whatever the earth has shaken loose, these moments remain. Intact. Warm. Like walnuts held close against the cold.