



NIGHT WATCH

THE ENORMOUS KOUTOUBIA MOSQUE IN MARRAKESH

Two teenage girls fly through **Morocco**, full of fear and wonder. **Ortensia Visconti** remembers



MOROCCO



MOROCCAN LAMB TAGINE

I remember crossing a river in 2001, on the Tajik-Afghan border, spotting silhouettes of armed men standing against the dramatic sunset and feeling afraid. But I had had that sensation before—before my life as a reporter, covering wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and Algeria. The first time I felt fear like that, I was only 17.

I was on holiday with friends in Essaouira, Morocco. I remember a terracotta castle, crenulated city walls protecting



dusty, colourful souks, turquoise fishing boats and beaches of golden sand, which perforated the skin because of lashing wind. The only pity was not being able to find one woman in all of Essaouira to paint me with henna. It doesn't happen to me often, but when I put something of this sort into my head, especially wishes tied to my vanity, well, I go all the way. So finally, armed with an appointment in Marrakesh, along with my partner in crime Clo, and a driver, I left for the brief trip, electrified by the anticipation of adventure, excited by the boldness of it, waiting to be initiated into the culture with the traditional henna patterns Aisha would tattoo on my hands with a metallic knitting device.

The cous cous had collapsed on the plate. The leftovers of lamb tagine resembled the copper rocks of the Atlas Mountains. Flies droned around it as Zahia waved them away with measured gestures. There was an atmosphere of camaraderie: girlish laughter, whispered secrets, and the curiosity and wonder of exchanging our dissimilar ways of being women.

Was I painting myself for someone? Did I have a promised man? Was I getting married? How to tell her that, yes, I had a boyfriend, but we weren't even thinking of marriage, I was far too young for it? How to explain to her that my father had allowed me to go on holiday alone with him? Clo was more upfront. Had they not heard of women's liberation? Had they not heard of the Italian feminist movement's motto, the one about orgasms guaranteed with the flick of one's own finger? The two girls listened to her in astonishment, shaking their heads and blushing.

They spoke about their husbands, inhabitants of a separate, incomprehensible world, who had the attitudes of overbearing children, which they used to neutralise the fear their women inspired in them. Zahia repeated a phrase of her



POTTERY FOR SALE IN MARRAKESH

mother's: "We're day and night, dear child. Marriage is the illusion of creating both dawn and sunset." Aisha answered with a touch of irony, "First I marry you, then I love you".

Sunset had already splashed the top of the Koutoubia Mosque's minaret. Together Clo and I ran breathlessly, avoiding mountains of rubbish, breathing in putrid air, opaque with smoke, trying to find our way inside the medina's unknowable geography. We reached

the threshold of the city, tense and late, yet somehow sure that our driver would still be waiting for us. He wasn't.

Twilight fell as terror took hold of us. Men stared at us with intense, menacing eyes. I saw that Clo was about to cry. So I made a choice. In that moment, I decided I wasn't going to be afraid anymore. I stopped a car, banging on the trunk with my henna-painted hands. The man at the wheel hit the brakes. I promised him money to take us home. He seemed terrified by my conduct, afraid as he was of women. I too was afraid of him. But right then, I had found the ally that would save me from another man who would attack me a few days later on the beach of Essaouira: an unexpected inner strength that wouldn't tolerate abuse.

The old drunk who thought he could hurt me, if he's alive, will still have a hole in his neck. I saw him hurtle around the beach, his hand upon the wound where, with my henna-painted hand, I planted my long, sharp Balinese hairpin. "Where there is joy, there is henna," the Marrakesh girls had told me. But with the henna, there must also be courage.

Ortensia Visconti is an Italian novelist. Her short story 'Tokyo' will be published in the anthology *Desire: 100 of Literature's Sexiest Stories* (Head of Zeus) in October.



ESSAOUIRA IS A CHARMING PORT TOWN