

Bissat Ahmadi

Hakim Marzougui

(Tunisia)

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# Bissat Ahmadi<sup>1</sup>

Hakim Marzougui

Hakim Marzougui was born in Tunisia in 1966. He is a playwright, director and poet who usually lives in Damascus. In 1996, he founded "Arracif Theatre Group"; his theatre works include: *Aesha*, *Ismail Hamlet*, *Memory of Dust*, *Bla-Bla*, *The Pillow*, *Dream of an Eid Eve*, *Bissat Ahmadi*, *Shahinaz*, *Doga* (Lyric monodrama). He also wrote a collection of children's stories under the title of *Jasmin's Story*. In poetry he created: *The Eighth Neighbour*. Marzouky's works in the field of cinema include: *The Maestro*, *The Gambler* and *The Photograph*. Most of his works have been published and translated to many languages. In addition, many of them have been staged and won various prizes.



Morning. Yaakoub's Persian-rug shop.

Lighting opens onto a cloud of smoke gradually clearing to reveal Mr. Yaakoub incensing the shop, reciting some prayers and charms - inspecting the rugs - patting some gently, amidst morning music.

He is about to pour some black coffee. Meanwhile, Julian suddenly comes in. Yaakoub silently hands him a cup. Julian takes a sip and scowls at the bitterness of the unusual taste. He hands back the cup, Yaakoub pours a second helping - Julian drinks with a more obvious scowl, hands back the cup, and Yaakoub pours a third helping, smiling. The action is repeated several times until Julian is about to vomit in disgust, holding his stomach.

Yaakoub: Here, go wash your face. Black coffee needs a bitter drinker. Not a pansy like you with your croissant and cappuccino and Corn Flakes. Should have kept you drinking till

you drowned 'cause you didn't shake your cup nor said "thank you", as the rules of etiquette dictate.

**Julian:** Thank you.

**Yaakoub:** Get some force into it, or they'll wring your neck. How many times do I have to tell you, tell me that!

**Julian:** Thank you.

**Yaakoub:** You're Welcome - to your eternal miserable existence, God willing. Have been suffering your spattering all morning. Take this client and close shop. Since that piece of rug you brought in for mending, we open and close on that same face that brings us bad luck. Grumbling about my father, may God rest his soul, the client of the morning is like the client in the evening. Why should there be a client other than you anyways? Oh, not that you are a client like the rest of them. Every day we spread out the

rugs for you, you stare at them, you toss them about, you finger them and then carry yourself away and are gone.

**Julian:** Brother Jacob, what do you mean with client?

**Yaakoub:** Definitely not one like you!

**Julian:** (Checking a dictionary) Client ... c-c-c

**Yaakoub:** You'll need endless dictionaries, and probably still won't understand a thing. May the plague get you, what do you want to know everything for? Tell me M. Julian, do you see me in your dreams?

**Julian:** Dreams? I didn't dream.

**Yaakoub:** You walked around the building, and took a walk in Bab Tooma, and had beans at The Goat's Inn, and gave a couple of prayers with Sheikh Mohy el-Din, and prayed the morning prayers at the Omawy Mosque, and had a coffee

at the Nofara, and then found your way here. Has been six months you've been following this route, we know it by heart. Aren't you fed up?

**Julian:** I had a plate of Quishka and a cup of fine-blend tea in Marja.

**Yaakoub:** That's a new one. God willing at Abu El-Abd. Watch out, the governor of Qebala is hot these days on the foreigners to get a visa.

**Julian:** What is the meaning of fine-blend, Jacob?

**Yaakoub:** "Fine-blend" ... How should I know what those foreign words mean? And my name is Yaakoub, with the Arab sound "ein". If you can't pronounce that call me Jacob, can't get it better, can you, M. Julian?

**Julian:** My name is Jallal-Uldin.

**Yaakoub:** Jallal-Uldin! Since when? Only yesterday it was Julian.

**Julian:** Jallal-Uldin is my new name. Julian,

capito, is forgetto, I left it behind, there.

**Yaakoub:** There Julian, and here Jallal-Uldin. What a curse to have two names and two countries.

**Julian:** Take it easy. There is no "there" anymore, nor Julian. There is now only Jallal-Uldin.

**Yaakoub:** Only a few days ago you came in shorts and with a pony-tail and an earring and a tattoo on your forearm.

**Julian:** The world is greater than a piece of paper called ID, or a piece of cloth called flag.

**Yaakoub:** Or a goats-beard like the one you are cultivating. By God! I used to direct and arrange what would become of you when you were Julian. Did someone mess up your brains?

**Julian:** Allah set me right.

**Yaakoub:** Got it.

**Julian:** Thank God that you were born into this part of the world, not there.

**Yaakoub:** Thank God, but not for that. All lands are God's lands.

**Julian:** The sun rises in the East.

**Yaakoub:** And where else would you like it to rise?

**Julian:** If you only knew the blessing and value of being created in the East.

**Yaakoub:** You only see us in museums and the Arab houses on postcards. Wish you had tried mosquito and flea bites in the citron and orange trees, and seen the mice scurrying at the fountain, and bird-droppings in a glass of mulberry-juice.

**Julian:** Sank God.

**Yaakoub:** "Thank" God, not "sank" God.

**Julian:** Why don't you not fulfill your religious duties, Jacob?

**Yaakoub:** Well, actually, it's not that I'm negligent ... maybe a bit negligent. Even my family duties, you know, circumst ... Wait a minute, why am I to justify myself to you! We used to go to you to guide you, now you come to guide us. How nice!

(In the meantime Yaakoub's phone rings. Julian picks up the receiver and answers. He speaks French in a different mood and a relatively low voice. He ends the phone-call and returns to Yaakoub).

**Julian:** Some people from there whom I gave the number here so they can call me from there here.

**Yaakoub:** You're a mixture of the insolence of here and the frivolity of there. Julian, who set you on me?

**Julian:** Destiny.

**Yaakoub:** Why me of all the people on the

market? I don't get you. Neither a tourist nor a client. Neither an orientalist nor an occidentalist. Neither from here nor there. Neither a student nor a suitor. If you want to convert go to the sheikh in the mosque. And if it is the folktales of El-Zeir and Antara go to Abu-Sobhi in Nofara. In simple Arabic, what is it you want with me, Brother?

**Julian:** Brother, brotherhood! This is a word you can only find on a banknote or in official documents. No one calls you a brother, even if they are your brother. You know who just called me here?

**Yaakoub:** How am I supposed to know? Family?

**Julian:** No.

**Yaakoub:** Who then?

**Julian:** My sister.

**Yaakoub:** What? Not a blood-sister?

**Julian:** Not a sister of the same religion.

**Yaakoub:** What did she tell you?

**Julian:** That there is a lot of cold and snow.

**Yaakoub:** May God help you.

**Julian:** And she said my mother had passed away.

**Yaakoub:** Oh dear! What are you talking about? When?

**Julian:** Today. Or maybe yesterday. No idea.

**Yaakoub:** Oh God. That is such bad news.

**Julian:** The will of God.

**Yaakoub:** Oh dear! How tough! How dreadful is the news of death. It isn't easy at all, especially when you are abroad. Give me a glass of water. Don't know what hit me!

**Julian:** Have faith in God, Brother Yaakoub.

**Yaakoub:** Why are you so cold-blooded?

**Julian:** What can I do?

**Yaakoub:** (bursting into tears) Oh my God, oh my God!

**Julian:** Calm down, will you?

**Yaakoub:** You don't know what a mother means, do you?

**Julian:** *Paradise is beneath their feet.*

**Yaakoub:** If it were my mother I would go nuts.

**Julian:** But she died embracing the religion of the non-believers.

**Yaakoub:** For Heaven's sake, what are you rambling about! You're blinded, heartless, merciless. (Phone rings) You take that. I'm in no mood to talk. May God forgive you for bringing such bad news. Such bad timing! You know how weak my heart is, and I suffer genetic hypertension inherited from my father. I can't take it.

**Julian:** Hallo. Who is it? - Says he's calling about some goods.

**Yaakoub:** Hallo. Yes. Hey, Abu El-Yass. Long time no hear. Yes, your order is ready, by the lives of Mohamed and Jesus. Three Tabreezy rugs and two Bukhari rugs. ... Ready for shipment to America God willing. ... Believe you me, the market is at a low. ... Haven't you heard the news? ... Two Afghans, one Turk and three Pakistanis ... Oh no, not rugs ... Terrorist attacks, God forbid! ... How are things with your friend Abu Naeim, the tour-guide ... He promised to bring me a mixed group ... Americans, British, Italians ... A good hand-pick ... A good eye ... There is some Musk for you and a touch for Abu Naeim ... When is the group arriving? ... After tomorrow at 11 ... Good, good ... Will get the shop ready for them ... They can come by and inspect the goods at leisure ... No problem. My friend Mr. Julian is here and I'm sure he can help with the translation.

**Julian:** (correcting) Jallal-Uldin. My name is not Julian.

(Yaakoub seems oblivious to the correction).

**Julian:** Abu Youssef. Since when do you work in rugs?

**Yaakoub:** What do you mean with ...

**Julian:** Your name is Jacob. It should be Abu Youssef. Or according to the name of the father at least. No?

**Yaakoub:** Ever since I was born ... My father found my grandfather in the trade.

**Julian:** I love your talk of rugs.

**Yaakoub:** Don't know if I like those who work, or work those who like ...

**Julian:** What do you like?

**Yaakoub:** Anything that is likable ... starting with rugs and upward.

**Julian:** Upward?

**Yaakoub:** Downward is the same, but ...

**Julian:** What do rugs mean to you?

**Yaakoub:** Three things are inseparable: rugs, cities and women.

**Julian:** How so?

**Yaakoub:** Wherever you find a beautiful rug, you're bound to find a beautiful city beneath, and a beautiful woman above.

**Julian:** And you?

**Yaakoub:** At times I see it as a source of income ... a mere source of income, but ...

**Julian:** But what?

**Yaakoub:** A rug. It's all rugs - mats - carpets. From regular rugs to Persian rugs to Tabreezy rugs to Bukhari rugs to Caucasian rugs to Kharasani rugs to Qairawani. What difference does it make to lay the one you love atop a mat or a luxurious carpet? Will the

kid come more sophisticated or with a brighter face? I'm fed up Julian with the whole thing, a trade full of dust and moths.

**Julian:** What is the difference? Maybe a difference in ...

**Yaakoub:** Maybe there is no difference.

**Julian:** Why do people prefer old rugs?

**Yaakoub:** Everything antique has its flavor. Like a cooking pot.

**Julian:** La vieille marmite fait le bon repas.

**Yaakoub:** Like wine in your country.

**Julian:** God forbid!

**Yaakoub:** Why? By God you have very good red wine. With fish - exquisite.

**Julian:** With fish they drink white wine. My mother died of cirrhosis. I was a therapist at a rehabilitation centre. Don't remind me. We were talking about rugs, no?

**Yaakoub:** A rug is like a woman in everything. Even in dusting off. But whenever you love her, and she gets under your skin, you can't survive without her.

**Julian:** Why do you here always compare everything to women? From the tomato to the car?

**Yaakoub:** But we don't compare women to women. Have you ever seen anything in your life like a man relaxing with a rug on top ... ?

**Julian:** And you?

**Yaakoub:** Delightful! If the rug is soft. Arab, Persian, doesn't make a difference. Spread and occupied, fair and blond, without a blemish. Blue-eyed. Just like your sister whose photo you showed me. Why are you so upset? I know this is no big deal for foreigners, nothing unusual. It doesn't make a difference with them.

**Julian:** Haram. This is adultery Mr. Jacob. And I'm not a foreigner. I consider myself from here.

**Yaakoub:** But why? How? I didn't even touch her!

**Julian:** Even though. It is haram.

**Yaakoub:** How haram? It isn't haram. God willing your whole existence be haram. Why don't we find you a wife from here, one who embraces the religion?

**Julian:** I would like her to be veiled.

**Yaakoub:** What did we say?

**Julian:** Even if she doesn't embrace the religion ... such as Sawsan (whispering)

**Yaakoub:** I don't get you. Veiled but doesn't embrace the religion?

**Julian:** I'm going home.

**Yaakoub:** Oh no, by God. Don't go. Would you really be angry at your brother

Jacob? Your sister is mine, even dearer. Hey, boy, get us some tea.

**Julian:** Fine-blend

**Yaakoub:** As you wish. Fine-blend, Arab-blend, English-blend. What difference does it make? Besides, we're used to your stories. By my honor and by my father's grave, I have never chit-chatted with a foreigner but you. God alone knows why I feel at ease with you. Haven't you noticed how upset I was when your mother died? By God if I only had a visa! Cursed be those who don't go to console you and get to know your family. And your sister, too. Don't forget the day after tomorrow at 11. Need your help in translation. I'm receiving a foreign group, with breath-taking women. Filthy rich foreigners, not like your story of broke and miserly bastards. Why are you so upset? We're joking,

just joking. You're to improve my French and my English, and I'm to improve your Arabic.

**Julian:** Your Arabic is not that as in books. There is a lot of vulgarity. I'll go take lessons with Sheikh Abu-Metaab. More honorable. We'll have the tea some other time. What about the rug? When do I come back for it?

**Yaakoub:** Well, I sent it with the boy for mending. As soon as it is ready, you can come and pick it up.

**Julian:** You never asked me how old the rug is?

**Yaakoub:** I won't ask. Weren't you going home?

**Julian:** It's as old as I am.

**Yaakoub:** Not true. Rugs are always older than their owners, padre.

**Julian:** Do you have one like it?

**Yaakoub:** There are no two rugs alike.

**Julian:** But you haven't seen it.

**Yaakoub:** Original rugs are not seen. I feel them. That's what I learnt from my late father.

(Julian stares at the picture of Yaakoub's father on the wall).

**Yaakoub:** Anything else?

**Julian:** You're not very much like your father. Maybe more like your uncle.

**Yaakoub:** I have no uncles. I look like our neighbor. The one who came up with you. Anything else? Let us earn our living now.

**Julian:** Let's read the *Fatiha* for your father's picture. I mean your father's soul.

**Yaakoub:** Whatever. (They recite the *Fatiha* together. Julian looks at the father's picture, deeply moved. He prolongs the recital, then adds some prayers in correct and eloquent language)

**Yaakoub:** Anything else?

**Julian:** Thank you. I mean, God bless you.

**Yaakoub:** Bravo. Your Arabic is improving. Who enlightens you these days?

**Julian:** Brothers in Islam.

**Yaakoub:** No. Now you sound like people on historical TV series. Do you sleep at their places?

**Julian:** That is personal.

**Yaakoub:** And when you ask me about every little thing, that is not personal?

**Julian:** Ask me about myself, not about others.

**Yaakoub:** Do what you want. None of my concern. You're neither cousin nor brother to me.

**Julian:** I'm your brother. In Islam, of course. Have the same rights and the same duties as you. (He constantly turns to a little notebook for help in

correcting mistakes)

**Yaakoub:** My dear. Now suddenly Abu Qaqa, Abu Meteb and I are brothers? And your siblings over there, born of the same mother? What about them?

**Julian:** I worship not what they worship (continues to recite Quranic and Prophetic Verses relentlessly).

**Yaakoub:** That is what we needed!

**Julian:** We need a lot of reconciliation and union to support the Rightful and fight the infidels and ...

**Yaakoub:** Stop it, stop it. My dear brother, by your honor, I beg you. What is the source of this hostility?

**Julian:** My honor is your honor and that of the Nation.

**Yaakoub:** I beg of you. There are many informers around these days.

**Julian:** Your hand in mine, my brother in

Islam. *And make ready for them whatever force you can and horses tied at the frontier*<sup>2</sup>.

**Yaakoub:** Lower your voice.

**Julian:** Raise your voice as loudly as you can in the face of the despotic and the enemies of the Nation.

**Yaakoub:** Boy, where are you? Forget the tea. Go and leave us in peace, may God keep your women safe.

**Julian:** (Reciting from the notebook in his hands) *He has forbidden you only what dies of itself, and blood, and the flesh of swine.*

**Yaakoub:** Out! May your skin fall off your bones! You had better get out and leave me alone or else! That is just what we needed, foreigners and the likes of you.

(Throws him out, whereas Jallal-Uldin continues to repeat zealous

slogans)

(Yaakoub moves inside, saying in a loud voice trying to make Jallal-Uldin hear)

**Yaakoub:** Brother, if it's the rug, tomorrow I will send it with the boy to leave it at the Mosque gate. And I don't want a single franc from you. Go and leave us in peace, and we won't hurt any of your hairs, you goat. My fault, that I chit-chatted with you. It's true, no wind comes from the west to lighten the heart. God in heaven! (Makes a phone call, and talks, staring at his father's picture).

**Yaakoub:** Hallo. Give me Abu Hamdi the rug-mender ... this is Yaakoub Abu Youssef ... How is the rug Julian the foreigner brought us coming along? Isn't mended? ... How so? ... I know that you are a clever mender, and there is no mender like you in the market ...

What? Chinese and Caucasian? So now what? ... You haven't seen anything like it? ... Whose handiwork? ... From our shop ... What are you talking about? ... During my father's days ... shh ... That is mind-boggling ... Ok, bring it over immediately ... I'm the king of rugs on the market. There is no piece that I don't know, or where it came from ...

**(Curtain)**

(In front of a night-club. Inside dance music and noise can be heard. Suddenly Jallal-Uldin - Julian - is thrown out. He stumbles in his clothes, furious and cursing)

**Julian:** Especes des salops et des saloppes ...  
a l'enfer tous. Lechery. Debauchery.  
Haven't seen the likes of it even in the  
lands of infidels. Women aping men.  
Men aping women. Dancing to tunes  
that are not God's words. Drinking  
what Allah has forbidden. Where  
are their mentors? *Where are those  
who enjoin good and forbid evil?*  
Thus Sheikh Abu Takwa, my Sheikh  
in Paris, has told me. I didn't believe  
him. Thought he was exaggerating,  
until I saw with my own eyes. (Sound  
of a message received on his mobile  
rings. He takes the phone out and  
reads)

**Julian:** Oh martyr of our path,  
absent we are not,

Our path is hard,  
yet we shall fear not.

Hearts upon hearts ...

How right you are my Sheikh!

(He takes out the notebook and starts audibly writing down what seems like memoirs).

Tonight I went to a new night-club. Like always: wanted to find out how many I can win over to the righteous path, take them to take a shower and then accompany me to the morning prayers. However. Don't know what they put in my glass of juice. They stole my shoes and threw me out of the place. Sawsan, the girl I got to know that other time at the Stars Cabaret, whom I had given some money to get veiled, so that she may look prettier. I found her today at this night-club. She can't wear the

veil. I can't forget her.

The boy who works in the toilets to feed his mother and siblings turned out gay.

Abu Samir whom I met at the mosque; I found him dancing. He hid his face from me.

Tonight I met two nice young men. They were drunk and asked me for money to buy themselves two tickets to Europe. I asked them why they drink, one said, that pious people reveal what they hide.

I have not yet given up on Yaakoub Abu Youssef. He is kind despite his tense nature and the weakness of his faith. Weakness of faith! Who am I to judge other people's faith?!

(Closes the notebook absentmindedly)

Those bastards! Every time they take advantage of my inattention

and put a pill in my juice. But why the headache? Maybe this time they did not put anything? Or not as much? Why not as much? Oh God. Am I getting hooked? And have forgotten the message I have come to deliver?

The message! Which message!

True I have learnt how they speak, but not how they think.

I spent six months learning classical Arabic, only to discover that in all the Arab countries no one uses classical Arabic but the radio and the foreigners.

I have a question my Sheikh - please be patient with me - why do people insist on speaking classical Arabic in their prayers and worship? What do those who do not speak classical Arabic do?

Cursed be rugs and carpets. God forbid, not the praying rug of course.

What are you searching for Jallal? Yes, you have left the country of spiritual frost and emotional desertification. You have left a West that builds its fake glory upon the skulls of the oppressed. I have come to search for serenity and the sources of purity in the lands of the East, only to be pelted with trivia and nonsense. I'm bewildered. My soul is diseased and can't resist. My body is winning the battle, so are my desires. I'm worn out, my Sheikh, worn out, Mother. I'm worn out, Sawsan. Don't know which of you is wearing me out, or am I doing it to myself. Calm down, Julian. I mean Jallal. Recite your prayers and charms which your Sheikh has taught you, and your soul will come to rest. And don't forget your message.

Oh God, forgive me and my brothers,  
for they don't know.

Oh God, bring us asunder, for we  
gather only for what is wrong.

Oh God, bring victory to our enemy  
for we fight only what is rightful.

Oh God, terminate our progeny, for we  
raise only lechery and debauchery.

Oh God, spoil our harvest, for we sew  
only injustice and thorns.

Oh God, sterilize our women and  
emasculate our manhood for we are  
wicked.

Amen, God of all Worlds.

**(Curtain)**

(Yaakoub in his shop late at night, subdued light. He stands over Julian's rug distractedly talking to himself, at times in an audible voice, at times whispering.)

**Yaakoub:** It is the self-same. My mother recognized it the minute she saw it when I fetched it from the mender's and spread it out on the floor. She pounced on it and said her nose detected its scent. Though her eye-sight is dimmed. Dimmed with weeping my father's loss. She caught hold of the rug as if she had caught a thief: that's it, the one that broke my heart, and made us drift apart till he died. It was a gift from Hag Amin el-Bahbahany, the Grand-Sharif of Bukhara, to your grand-father Abu-Youssef Al-Arwany when they met in the square to keep each other company in the pilgrimage convoys from the Levant to Hijaz.

This rug had been a token of friendship and loyalty in those days. It passed like a bride into your grandfather's house before I entered it. It would wait for us, your father and me, on the marital platform in the inner patio, when we were newly-weds. We pledged if one of us died, the other would wash them and cover them in their shroud and then lay them on top of this rug ... Go on mother. How come it fell into the hands of a stranger of whose origins we know nothing?

This rug has given me the creeps since your granny told me its story ... And what did she tell you?

- It is said that it went through the hands of more than one maker, and each one of them died or was killed before finishing it. It passed like the magic carpet from Baghdad to Tehran

to Istanbul, till it came to the Levant.

- A pilgrim, mother, isn't it? Are you making this into one of the stories of 1001 Nights?
- Roll this rug up my son, and get going. Why did you have to spread it out and with it reopen all my wounds which never heal or mend?
- Mother, go on.
- You know why the end of the rug can't be mended? Because it is not frayed, nor worn out, nor moth-eaten.
- Why?
- No doubt someone sought to ruin it. For it carries the inscription of a master. His stroke. His secret. Which he does not give to anyone. Which no one knows but he and his master in the vocation. The vocation which you think you have mastered.
- Mother, go on. Or will your story be

incomplete like the rug?

- I will not go on. Shame outlives all lives and you're my son.
- What shame? No matter what shame, you're my mother. By God, go on.

(Suddenly Jallal-Uldin comes into the shop in a weird state, like an apparition in a weird state)

**Julian:** There is no God but Allah, Yaakoub. I will go on.

**Yaakoub:** .....

**Julian:** The rug was here in the shop.

**Yaakoub:** Who stole it?

**Julian:** No one.

**Yaakoub:** Impossible that my father sold it.

**Julian:** It was on display not for sale.

**Yaakoub:** No doubt as a good omen. My father considered it a talisman.

**Julian:** Or else to seduce Western femininity

with Eastern masculinity.

**Yaakoub:** What does that mean?

**Julian:** You shall understand, and then get upset because you understood.

**Yaakoub:** And how did it get into your hands?  
This rug is no magic carpet.

**Julian:** It didn't get into my hands. It got into my mother's hands.

**Yaakoub:** Your mother?

**Julian:** Indeed, my mother. She was fair, blond and blue-eyed like my sister, whose picture you liked. Not like me, I look like my father. (He takes a small photo out of his pocket)

**Yaakoub:** Are you making fun of me??

**Julian:** Look closely at it.

**Yaakoub:** What am I to do with your photo?

**Julian:** It isn't my photo. It's your father's when he was my age when an Orientalist visited him. She was

working on a comparative study of oriental rugs and oriental men.

**Yaakoub:** Don't tell me your mother!

**Julian:** The self-same who passed away. On the phone, and you cried over her.

**Yaakoub:** May God have no merci on any of her bones. Go on.

**Julian:** She remains my mother.

**Yaakoub:** Wait, I just remembered. I was coming straight from school to the shop. She was no mere client. By God, no. She came to the shop daily, scrutinizing the rug. My father would feed her Keshka and offer her fine-blend tea and buy me candy. He would tell me to sit at the shop-door and not to breathe a word to my mother. Often times he would go onto the roof with her and would tell me if anyone comes tell them I went praying.

**Julian:** Oh my God, please forgive our sins.

**Yaakoub:** One day I sneaked up on them.

**Julian:** Enough. Don't go on.

**Yaakoub:** I found them stark-naked. Sprawled out on top of this very rug - if it had a tongue it would tell stories, by God.

**Julian:** Don't tell.

**Yaakoub:** He was on top, she was underneath. A soft white body like Al-Keshka, and my father - your father - a stuffed body the color of pistachios.

**Julian:** Enough Yaakoub.

**Yaakoub:** Like your body now. The moaning and the sighs. Over and over. And my father didn't know her language then, and your mother, I mean auntie, didn't know Arabic either. No idea what they were doing!

**Julian:** Yaakoub, I beg you.

**Yaakoub:** How did they communicate? Then they turned upside-down. She came on top and he was underneath. Imagine!

**Julian:** What of it! (Furious)

**Yaakoub:** My father was sweating and screaming, and your mother was biting him I don't know what, saying things don't know what.

**Julian:** Are you done yet?

**Yaakoub:** And I shouted get off my father, curse your father. You'll devour him you bitch.

**Julian:** So?

**Yaakoub:** My father bought me two kilos of candy and new clothes. Your mother took the rug and I never saw her again.

**Julian:** Nine months later I opened my eyes at the Saint George hospital in Paris. My step-father was thrilled and my granny took me to church for baptism.

I grew up and would fall asleep in her lap while she'd tell me stories and stories of the saints and their miracles and their war against the demons in the lands of the Muslims.

**Yaakoub:** But one can't change their skin, can they, brother Jallal-Uldin?

**Julian:** What skin, what change? I used to hate the children of immigrants living in the suburbs like the plague. Especially when they burnt our car. My mother would hang prayer-beads and a Quran in it, so they would not come near it.

**Yaakoub:** Then how did God soften your heart to Islam? And don't tell me it was a shaft of light that penetrated your chest.

**Julian:** My step-mother belonged to the extreme right.

**Yaakoub:** Aren't those Arab-haters?

**Julian:** But there are Arabs among them. I used to hate them, as I hated my sister's Senegalese husband.

**Yaakoub:** Your sister, the fair blond one? Is married to a Sene- ...

**Julian:** But he is a Muslim.

**Yaakoub:** We're all the same. Go on.

**Julian:** When I was a doctor at the rehabilitation centre, I got to know Rashid, an addict who repented. He introduced me to Abu-Taqwa. A criminal who repented. He told me that Muslim blood ran in my veins.

**Yaakoub:** He gave you a blood-analysis, you mean?

**Julian:** What?

**Yaakoub:** Nothing. Go on.

**Julian:** One day I heard my drunk mother who made her confession to my father, I mean her husband. She told him of

her affair with your father. I took the rug, the photo, the address, and came here, leaving her on her death-bed.

**Yaakoub:** If you don't mind my saying so, may God forgive your mother, but she did not neglect you, did she? She loved rugs.

**Julian:** Our home was jam-packed with rugs. From Tashqand, from Isfahan, to Morocco and Qairawan.

**Yaakoub:** So, you mean to tell me, you are a son of my father's. A bastard, then?

**Julian:** Don't see myself more similar to him than you.

**Yaakoub:** I'm much more similar to him indeed.

**Julian:** Look at the photo.

**Yaakoub:** What are you saying? You mean to dishonor my mother, you mean cur, you son of a cur.

**Julian:** My father is no cur. I don't allow that.

**Yaakoub:** Listen. If you think you can come here, and split with me my income and my money, the stars of heaven will be easier for you to get. Tell whoever sent you to go stitch without this needle. Besides there is nothing to prove any of this. Do you have any proof?

**Julian:** You're my brother whether you like it or not. (He tries to kiss him, but Yaakoub refuses).

**Yaakoub:** Stay away. Don't like the smell of your tooth-cleanser nor the scent of your Sheikh Abu-Meteeb.

**Julian:** Here, Brother. Take this perfume. I brought it with me from Paris, but don't use it anymore.

**Yaakoub:** Still calls me brother. Brother, I'm not your brother. You can't force it

(and sprays the perfume).

**Julian:** I declared our brotherhood. In religion and in front of God, of course.

**Yaakoub:** ...

**Julian:** Yaakoub, my brother. I left behind my job, my money, my property. I dedicated myself to the service of Islam. I came to extend my hand and take yours, and tell you I'm your brother.

**Yaakoub:** You left all your property? May God forgive you. You shake me up, when I suffer from high blood pressure. Hereditary from my father's side.

**Julian:** Me too.

**Yaakoub:** May God forgive you my father. You left us no heritage but blood-pressure. Tomorrow morning I go with you to your embassy, and you write all you have over there in my name. That's better. Or else the

infidels will lay their hands on your riches and then fight us and kill us.

**Julian:** God willing. After I help you out with the translation for the group of foreigners coming at 11.

**Yaakoub:** Done. Over here the young listen to their elders, not like where you come from. Yes. God bless you. Remove this mess and get my shop back into order.

**Julian:** Right away.

**Yaakoub:** Jellallo. Jalloulla (teasing)

**Julian:** Yes, brother. (They embrace)

**Yaakoub:** I thank God who sent you to me. You come sleep at my place, where you can get to know your auntie, Um Yaakoub. Better than sleeping in the mosque. Too many flees.

**Julian:** If you don't mind, allow me to go pick up my things and come sleep here. Here I can breathe father's smell and look at his picture.

**Yaakoub:** Suit yourself. Make yourself at home. Go get your things. I'll wait for your return.

(Jallal-Uldin leaves. Yaakoub remains staring at his father's picture. Then he looks into a small mirror and begins to draw a comparison between the two faces).

**Yaakoub:** The form of the face is almost the same. The color is almost the same. No. He is slightly fairer. What do you mean fairer? Silly you, fairer against black, and white appears fairer. The eyes are darker and wider and more wicked. Like me, why not like me. But the nose is that of my brother Julian's. What brother? He is, God willing, no brother, you're right Yaakoub. But all my life I wished to have a brother. Now I get a brother, a foreigner. And a bastard as well. Oh dear. And I go inviting him to the

house. By God, if my mother were to see him, she'd wring his neck. She can't possibly like him. She'd see him as religious and he does not drink, like me. His lips are Julian's. And the eyebrows, how come? I never noticed. The same brow, and the dimple here. Doesn't look like me at all. You mean this is not my father? This is Julian? Then who do I look like? Who? Is this possible? That I suspect my mother? God forbid and forgive me. I need to sit down and remember all my father's friends. Doesn't necessarily have to be a friend of his. How come, Mother? And I refer to you as a pious Hajja. If he had not hated you he would not have found another woman. No, indeed. This is a tough one. And if I'm really not entitled to anything legitimately, how come he is a legitimate brother in the first place? Maybe he wedded her in secret. Please tell me, Father,

and give me some peace of mind. No, by God, you don't look like my father. Not my father, you dupe, you fool. Why do I keep your picture in the shop anyways? You don't have any chivalry, any sense of honor, I spit on you. (Tears up the picture). Not your mistake. It's my fault, because I allowed you to buy my silence with a bit of candy and new clothes. I spit on you scoundrel and my mean soul. I have to go home and ask my mother. I don't want to see her face. But if she is innocent she will look me in the eye. Why should she see first? My God, why indeed. I have to go to the mosque to pray for God's guidance.

(Curtain)

Yaakoub's same shop in the early morning  
Julian in a new look. His hair tied back in a pony-tail. An earring in his ear. He wears a baggy jacket and jeans-shorts. He kneels on a rug and mumbles some prayers.

**Julian:** Dear God, please forgive my mother, my father, my sister and my brother. Dear God, accept my offerings, and make Paradise my abode with the prophets, the pious believers and the virtuous. (His prayers are interrupted by the sound of a message received on his mobile-phone. He takes out his phone, and reads the message, smiles and replies).

*All praise is due to Allah, Who guided us to this! And we would not have found the way if Allah had not guided us.*

(He hears the sound of Yaakoub coming in)

**Yaakoub:** Got you some Foul and Bread which

you love to eat. We'll breakfast together, and then I will order us a pot of fine-blend tea. We finish our work with the touristic group which is to come at 11, and then we walk to the embassy where you write all your property in my name. Don't leave the sons of bitches a thing. What, do they think you have no family, or what? Jallal, where are you? The Foul is growing cold. Tell me, how did you sleep last night? Jelloula, where are you? (He takes up a censer and starts incensing the shop)

**Julian:** (Appears, surprising Yaakoub with his new look) Good morning.

**Yaakoub:** Jallal. You are again Julian. What happened to you? By God, you were better-dressed and tidier before.

**Julian:** This is for the foreign group and the embassy.

**Yaakoub:** You're right. Yes, this is indeed tidier

and better-dressed. Or else they may, God forbid, think us ...

**Julian:** Yaakoub.

**Yaakoub:** Yes, dear.

**Julian:** What if my step-father's story is true?

**Yaakoub:** And what did that blasted bastard say? Don't remember anymore.

**Julian:** He said my mother adopted me from an orphanage after aborting me, I mean after her abortion of the child she conceived from your father. She was an alcoholic, and the boy suffered a hereditary disease from his father. Your father I mean.

**Yaakoub:** A hereditary disease? Hypertension, you mean?

**Julian:** Syphilis.

**Yaakoub:** How dare he, the damned liar! My father suffered from no Syphilis! You look just like your father, as if

he had sneezed you. Excuse me, you know why I tore up that picture? I felt it was superfluous with you around, his image in flesh and blood.

**Julian:** Anyways. God on Doomsday calls each by their mother's name, not the father's.

**Yaakoub:** Good for us. Imagine they'd call him by his original father's name. What a disaster! You know what I dreamt of last night, after praying to God for guidance? Guess what I saw.

**Julian:** May God make it something good.

**Yaakoub:** Well, my friend. I saw an asp - not a snake - an asp with two heads and one body. The two heads were fighting over food, though they have one stomach. Sheikh Abu-Soad interpreted the dream for me, and told me it was a good omen.

**Julian:** I know of identical twins, with two

heads and one body. The first head was a believer, the second an atheist.

**Yaakoub:** But they were of the same father, no? Praise the Lord.

**Julian:** But in the end the believer conquered the infidel, and cut his head off.

**Yaakoub:** Good heavens! God protect us.

**Julian:** Yaakoub. Don't you think of dying for God?

**Yaakoub:** We live for the sake of God. Is that not good anymore?

**Julian:** It's hopeless, Yaakoub. God has already stamped your heart. Whether I ask His forgiveness for you or not.

**Yaakoub:** Why, Brother Jallal? If we all die for God, who will live?

**Julian:** It's no use talking to you anymore. (Gets up leaving the food)

**Yaakoub:** For God's sake, finish your food. Just let today pass peacefully, and

then we can talk. The group is about to arrive.

**Julian:** I'll handle the group. You go home.

**Yaakoub:** What're you talking about! You have no idea of my work. Your job is to translate, that's it!

**Julian:** I'm telling you. Go and leave me alone for a while.

**Yaakoub:** Come on. Just sit down and finish your food. Ain't I your big brother or what? (**Jokingly**). What's wrong with you today? Why're you so restless? You tremble and look pale.

**Julian:** Don't touch me. I'm washed for prayers.

**Yaakoub:** Don't touch me! What, are you a woman? Come, sit down, let me tell you this joke (**Holding his belt**).

**Julian:** Keep away! Don't you dare.

**Yaakoub:** What's the matter? What's that?

What's that under your jacket?

**Julian:** Don't let go now. Keep your hand on it. If you let go, we are goners.

**Yaakoub:** What is it?

**Julian:** The detonator. Of the belt of explosives.

**Yaakoub:** Belt of explosives? Why?

**Julian:** Don't let go. And don't shout and make a scene. This is a belt to blow up the group of tourists.

**Yaakoub:** Blow up -

**Julian:** Indeed. A suicidal operation against the group of tourists. There is an important person amongst them. Have been planning for this for a long time. With my accomplice and the tour-guide Abu Naeym.

**Yaakoub:** Abu Naeym.

**Julian:** Now don't move. Not a move until we find a solution. Put that stick in the

door so that no one comes in.

(Yaakoub obeys in great fear).

**Yaakoub:** What do we do now, Brother Julian?  
Sorry, Jallal-Uldin.

**Julian:** Wait for the group to come. Then we die martyrs together.

**Yaakoub:** Die martyrs? God protect you, Brother Jallal-Uldin. You're joking, yes?

**Julian:** *No calamity befalls but by Allah's permission. You must now ask God for forgiveness. Repent sincerely before you meet Him.*

**Yaakoub:** There is no God but Allah. But must I meet Him now? Can't you postpone it a bit? Postpone it a few more years. A few months. Ok, a few days. God bless you, I've a heart condition and hypertension. By God, it'll be my end. Why does it have to be in my shop of all shops? The whole town is crowded

with tourists and foreigners.

**Julian:** Your dream of last night comes true. Here we are two heads with one body. One head is a believer, the other a hypocrite. One head believes in martyrdom and Jihad. One head believes in hypocrisy and the joys of the world. Two souls joined by one belt and one detonator.

**Yaakoub:** Brother Jallal-Uldin. Could you please take hold of the de-det-detonator for me, and let my hand go for a bit? I need to go to the bathroom. Want to do my ablutions and pray before the -

**Julian:** You need no ablution. You are now purified, just say Allahu-Akbar when the group of infidels arrives. We press the detonator together, and then we'll find ourselves in Paradise.

**Yaakoub:** Paradise

**Julian:** Oh yes, Paradise. Close your eyes and imagine it. The best of God's creatures are there. It is as vast as Heaven and Earth, with rivers running through it.

**Yaakoub:** My pants are wet. There is something seeping under me. Don't I have to go wash?

**Julian:** Shut up.

**Yaakoub:** Julian. Who messed with your mind?

**Julian:** My name is Jallal-Uldin. And it is a sin that you are born of a Muslim man.

**(The phone rings)**

**Yaakoub:** That must be home. My mother, wife, kids. May I answer?

**Julian:** No.

**Yaakoub:** My last will and testament maybe ...

**Julian:** A martyr needs no will.

**Yaakoub:** I just want to hear their voices. A couple of words.

**Julian:** A couple of words only.

(Julian places the receiver on Yaakoub's ear)

**Yaakoub:** Hello Mother ... Want anything from Father? I mean, ... give me Om Youssef my wife. Yes, be patient with the kids ... Put them on. Yes, love, what did you tell me to get you? Madloufa? ... Yes, (Julian hangs up. Yaakoub is silent for a while, then his mood changes completely).

**Yaakoub:** You coward, did God whom you're about to meet say deprive a little boy of his father? Did you think how many sons, wives, mothers, lovers are waiting for gifts from each member of the group of tourists?

**Julian:** (Interrupting) And did you think how many -

**Yaakoub:** If you kill my boy, I won't go kill yours.

Because I'm better than you are, you believer. Because I'm a sandal-tree that perfumes the axe which cuts it down. Tell me: what is it that you believe in? Murder? I will let you kill me, but me alone, here in the shop. Alone, before the group arrives. So that no one gets hurt. Then we give God our reckoning. He will know how to differentiate the criminal from the non-criminal.

**Julian:** Dear God, I'm innocent of this hypocrite's blood.

**Yaakoub:** Shut up. You don't know God. True, I'm a bit greedy, a bit of a hypocrite, very talkative, but a believer. And now I won't let go of you.

**Julian:** Lachez moi!

**Yaakoub:** There, you fall back into your own language. It is a sin to have you born and raised in a European country. Why did you not come to us a doctor

as you were? You would've been useful to us.

**Julian:** They started with the injustice.

**Yaakoub:** Us and them. Here and there. My dear, I don't accept this. I'm a trader, son of a trader. I ask no one about their religion before I sell and buy.

**Julian:** Pull your hand back bit by bit, so I can replace it with my hand.

**Yaakoub:** What for? Right now I'd like to die a martyr and take you with me.

**Julian:** Yaakoub. We were born of the same father.

**Yaakoub:** Curse upon the rugs.

**Julian:** I have an idea. Come with me to my group. They can defuse the detonator and dismantle the belt.

**Yaakoub:** Haven't you guessed?

**Julian:** What now?

**Yaakoub:** Haven't you heard one say Papa I

caught a thief. So he said drag him here. And he said he doesn't want to. So he said ok then let him run. But he said he doesn't want to let go of me.

**Julian:** As you like. Your loss. In all cases I've cancer and only six more months to live. That's what my doctor told me before I came here.

**Yaakoub: (Smiling broadly)** I'm a trader in this world, but I don't trade with God. You want to come out winner on both sides. Haven't you heard of a cure called Faith? Haven't you heard of a verse that says that our Lives are in the hands of God?

**Julian:** Verily has God Spoken.

**(Julian's mobile phone rings. He pulls it out of his pocket and looks at the caller's name)**

**Yaakoub:** Who is it?

**Julian:** Abu Naeym and Sheikh Abu Taqwa.

**Yaakoub:** Let me speak to them.

**Julian:** ...

**Yaakoub:** I said let me speak to them.

**Yaakoub:** Hello, Abu Naeym. The group has arrived, and is at the door? This time you get no commission. You can't do this. Seems you got quite a lump-sum for this. Hello? The cur knows and hung up on me. My hands are numb and I'm losing my nerves. It's 11. Brother Jallal-Uldin, what are we going to do?

**(Julian coughs and shakes badly)**

**Yaakoub:** Don't you dare die on me now!

**(Julian's panting increases)**

**Yaakoub:** For God's sake. I'm losing my nerves. Put your hand on mine.

**(The mobile rings)**

**Julian:** It's Sawsan. Can't answer her now.

**Yaakoub:** Sawsan! Who's Sawsan?

(The voices of the group members approach. Music is heard. Yaakoub and Julian stand clinging to each other, extremely tense. They pull at each other to and fro. Are they fighting over the detonator in the belt, or have they taken up their positions to tango?)

Lights out

**An End**

## Footnotes

- 1 The title of the play, when translated, means "The Ahmadi Rug". However, with this rendering, the linguistic and idiomatic layers of meaning would be lost. Idiomatically "bissat ahmadi" is an expression which culturally means "keep it simple", hence the pun on "bissat", which means "rug" would be lost.
- 2 Julian's use of Quranic verses is intended to construct a discourse of religiosity. These Verses are italicized and their translation was derived from the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement website, at <http://www.muslim.org/english-quran/search/index.htm>.

