

FROM HUDDERSFIELD TO ESSAOUIRA ...WITH LOVE

"Why on earth did you drag me into this heaving cauldron of humanity," snorted Pete, as he sprang angrily out of the path of an oncoming pushcart, landing awkwardly on the side of his left foot and grimacing weasel-like. "Why can't you just try to enjoy this new experience, for goodness sake? We're not in Huddersfield now, this is Morocco," snapped his wife, Petra. She was rapidly losing her cool with this middle-aged stick in the mud of a husband with his balding pate and overhanging stomach, neither of which had of course been present when they first met. She, on the other hand, with her waif-like figure, had blossomed in self-awareness and in mid-life had developed a penchant for adventures in more exotic locations. Sadly, not shared by Peter! Somewhere along the line they had drifted significantly apart. She clutched tightly to her bosom, as though for comfort, the Moroccan doll they had nervously haggled for yesterday, a special gift for Petrina. The eager, shining 5-year-old's face would light up magically on receiving her requested doll, which sported a rose-petal pink gown, bound around at the waist with a blue satin sash. An even more exquisite feature was the tiny antique locket - actually not a holiday acquisition, but rather one of Petra's own family heirlooms, long coveted by her granddaughter, which she had decided to place around the doll's neck to make the gift extra special.

The thoroughfares of the souk thronged with jostling locals scurrying about their business, whilst tradesmen eagerly called out to passing tourists in whatever language they deemed appropriate, intent on making a sale. "Fraülein, Fraülein, kommen Sie her," shouted the carpet seller to the young, blond-haired passer-by. "You from Ipswich? Manchester? London? You like my pipes? Alright, mate?" shouted the dodgy-looking tout running in pursuit of the portly shaven-headed Man United fan in Bermuda shorts and sandals with the inevitable white socks.

"See you in 20 then!" Peter disdainfully turned up his nose as they approached the aromatic spice stalls. They simply took Petra's breath away. She was entranced by the exotic aromas. The pyramids of rich autumnal colours, ranging from saffron yellow, through tomato-red to burnt paprika suggested that an artist must have painted cardboard cut-outs with vibrant pigment to achieve this effect.

Petra, resigned yet again to solitary exploration, pressed eagerly on into the souk. Exquisite kaftans, shawls, leather moccasins, jewellery and tapestry handbags nestled cheek by jowl with tacky Barbie dolls, Berber Viagra and microwave ovens – a veritable fusion of east-meets-west – displayed in haphazard fashion. Petra's grandfather had been a seafaring man, so for her a visit to the cacophonous fish market, with its smell of brine, so evocative of the sea beyond the medina, was de rigueur. She was greeted with a myriad of familiar and unfamiliar fish, some long, slippery and evil looking, their staring eyes larger than their tailfins – yet others smaller with shell-pink hues and less pungent odour. Almost schoolgirl-like, she reluctantly ventured to touch and was repulsed by their slimy feel. With fascination she observed one middle-aged fishmonger. His feet were clad in sturdy, sensible boots, his torso more than adequately covered in a large apron, splattered with fish guts and mud. As protection from the changing moods of the elements he had donned a woolly jumper and hat, prepared for the hot midday sun or the sporadic downpours which seemed to descend ad lib in this perspicacious country. A garish red rubber glove covered his right hand, ever ready to select some fish for the passing customer,

fillet and slice it deftly, then grin laconically to himself. Another deal done! She discovered in conversation that his name was Rachid, and that he had worked here for many years like his father and grandfather before him. Fish ran in the family, so to speak. His brother was a local fisherman and his wife Rachida ran a fish restaurant. They had a boy and a girl, Zaid and Zaida.

"You ready then? Or are you going to stare at fish all afternoon?" Pete's voice was taunting and impatient as he put in reappearance. "Got the doll safely?" "My god, no, where is it?" Petra became hysterical, her hazel eyes darting hither and thither in search of the lost object. "I had it a moment ago. It must be here." She clutched her head, as though in pain. "Je peux vous aider, madame?" Can I help you? inquired an elegant concerned bystander in her late 30s, dressed immaculately in enviable French chic. "Oh oui, merci!" Petra, was beside herself with anguish. Having explained the predicament to the fishmonger and to France – yes, this was indeed the name of her chic Parisian helper, - they all duly searched the area. Hands darting into crevices between crates, fumbling beneath stall cloths, dropping to their knees and crawling awkwardly under the tressels, searching every last inch of space. But to no avail.

Pete's remarks were contemptuous as usual, chiding her absent-mindedness as they sat in terse silence, sipping mint tea in the courtyard of their riad. Petra preferred not to rise to the bait. Instead, she contemplated the imaginative interior decor around her. Textured wall hangings and soft voile drapes offset the sturdy teak furniture, strategically-placed hammock and wide brass vases filled with Moroccan roses. "Oh, if only I had an eye for this type of composition," she sighed to herself "Let's go eat at the fish restaurant I mentioned," she suggested, in an attempt to diffuse the tense situation by changing tack.

"Ok, lead on." Peter's response was much more amiable than she had earlier dared to hope.

Casa Rachida proved to be a memorable experience in more ways than one, both gastronomically and also in an unexpectedly serendipitous way.

At 6pm sharp, young Zeid and Zeida had gone, as they usually did, to help their father clear away his fish stall. They were both fascinated by his surroundings and already in their young heads they aspired to follow in their parents' footsteps. For Zeid, to become a fishmonger, taking over the family stall, and for Zeida, to run her mother's restaurant. Both children loved and admired their parents but had a healthy respect, particularly for Rachida their mother, who was the disciplinarian in the household; their father, Rachid, being far more indulgent and laid back in his dealings with the pair of them.

It was for this reason that the two young conspirators agreed not to reveal their catch of the day. "Finders keepers!" asserted Zeida confidently. "Don't tell mum or dad, or we'll be forced to hand back the treasure trove."

"But it belongs to someone else! It's not yours and you'll get found out," protested Zeid, seeking to assert his brotherly influence. "Don't care," Zeida remained resolute. "Just wait till I show it off to Francine." She would take great delight in doing so, since her posh little friend, whose mother hailed from Paris and only ever wore expensive designer outfits, always had new, upmarket toys, which meant she could gloat with superiority over her simple Moroccan school friends. Francine was utterly spoiled, and as soon as Zeida arrived with her find, she simply had to acquire it.

"Huh! It's not up to much!" she ventured, with a condescending tone. "But the jewellery's ok. I'll buy that off you."

Casa Rachida was packed, but Pete and Petra managed to secure a corner table. They were now both feeling more relaxed and tucked hungrily into their hearty fish tagine with couscous. Glancing out into the alleyway, they observed a couple of young children noisily playing fighting games. "How peculiar! That's a bit of a coincidence," exclaimed Petra, craning her neck to get a better view. "That little girl has a doll very similar to the one I lost."

"Zeid! Zeida! In here at once," shouted Rachida. "It's getting dark and it's time for bed!"

As the warring children ran in through the restaurant, Zeida tripped and fell, the doll crashing to the floor and rolling over to the corner table. Shaking with disbelief, Petra retrieved it and inspected it minutely. Same pink gown, same blue satin sash. "Where did you get this?" Her voice betrayed both shock and suspicion. Zeida, like most children caught out in a scrape, blushed bright red and hung her little head. Her brother had to speak for her. "She found it in the fish market, and we brought it home for safekeeping!" With emotion clear in her voice, Petra explained her sad loss. "What a piece of luck," she trilled. "I thought it was lost forever."

"Hang on a minute," Pete was suddenly taking an unprecedented interest in the turn of events. "Where's the locket? It's gone!!" Petra's face, which a moment before was etched with joy and relief, changed as quickly as the sky when the fierce sun bobs behind a darkening cloud. The bottom had fallen out of her world. The raised voices brought Rachida out of the kitchen.

"What have you done with the locket?" she demanded to know of her daughter. "You tell me Zeida. No lies now or there'll be trouble!"

"Francine bought it off me," confessed the shamefaced Zeida. Tears were now visible in her eyes, and soon came thick and fast, splashing down onto the white tiled floor - droplets of guilt and shame for all to see.

"I'm busy here in the restaurant, but I'll call Francine's mom and arrange for you to collect the locket at once. Their house is just round the corner," offered Rachida. Pete and Petra were somewhat disconcerted at the thought of accosting a strange woman and extricating the locket from her daughter. Not your usual kind of Saturday night activity for sure, not even in Huddersfield!

On arrival at the house events took an even weirder turn. An elegant lady in a tailored dress opened the door to them. Petra immediately caught her breath in disbelief.

"France! What an incredible coincidence! We met this morning at the fish market." France was also taken aback, but quickly remembered her impeccable manners, and invited the couple inside. Her tinkling laugh and generous smile immediately dissipated Pete and Petra's nervousness.

They were shown into a charming salon, dimly lit with carefully chosen mood lighting. Leather sofas and armchairs were strategically positioned, as if it had all been feng shui-ed for the front cover of a homes and interiors magazine. Peeping round the door in a hesitant fashion was the young daughter of the house, who scampered unbidden across to the couple and thrust the missing locket into Petra's hand, whilst keeping one hand firmly behind her back.

"J'suis désolée." I'm so sorry, she whimpered. Then, rather like an amateur magician, she thrust out her hidden hand, which clutched a small plastic bag. In response to her

excited nods, Petra looked inside. "Une tenue pour la poupée!" An outfit for the doll", Her delight was palpable. "Bless you, merci mille fois". Petra flung her arms around Francine and hugged her affectionately

Mission accomplished, the couple set off back to the riad. It was now dark and the medina buzzed with vibrant nightlife. Stallholders were still haggling, beggars on street corners were still begging, mangy alley cats still foraging, carts still rumbling relentlessly onward, and out of the dark shadows drug sellers now plied their wares. "Hey mon, want some grass? Why not live a little tonight?"

An impatient motorcyclist almost knocked them over as they rounded the last corner, causing Pete to jump and stumble yet again. This time, however, his wife was astounded by the response. For once in his middle-aged life he saw the funny side of the re-run of earlier in the day. "Why on earth didn't we do this Moroccan trip before? It's been quite an adventure and a whole lot livelier than Huddersfield on a Saturday night!!"

"Why not indeed?!" Petra's face surreptitiously broke into a wry smile. They had travelled further today than just the geographical distance of Huddersfield to Essaouira. Pete's acquiescence heralded a new and significant breakthrough in their ailing relationship!

Margaret Royall