

They say that falling stars are nocturnal projectiles that are fired from the heavens upon djinns. If that's true, the heavens can shine with pride tonight. *They* also say that you can make a wish if you see a falling star. If that's true, I wish desperately to find a way out of here. I swear that this really is the last time.

I can't see my face in the mirror of my hotel room. I'm somewhere under the swelling that has deformed the area around my eyes. How will I get rid of it in time? I have to be back in the Tweede Kamer, the Dutch Parliament. How am I going to solve it this time? I think my ribs are bruised.

"You deserve it."

There *they* are. As soon as *it* does something, *they* attack. If it goes wrong, *they* are merciless.

"Your fault."

They are proven right again. Things went badly again. Because of *it*. *It* has been with me for as long as I can remember. *It* accompanies me wherever I go. *It* has no name. If I give *it* a name, *it* becomes tangible, but without one, *it* remains elusive. Nameless or not, *it* cannot be suppressed. However hard I keep praying that *it* will disappear, *it* always finds its way back.

Where *it* is, *they* are. *They* also accompany me everywhere. *It* and *they* have been at war for a long time. *It* is alone. *They* are many. *They* have not one, but many, many names. *They* are the neighbors, the butcher, my cousins, my aunts and uncles. *They* are my fellow

Muslims, colleagues, and classmates. My favorite movies and TV series. Loose acquaintances, and that group of boys on the street corner. *They are the people. And the people fear and hate it.*

It and they both live within me. As long as it lies low, they keep a reasonable distance. But as soon it becomes restless, I hear them march. About six months ago, I became a member of Parliament (MP) for GroenLinks, the Green-Left Party. Immediately, they grew in number: party members, other politicians, journalists, voters, internet trolls, the Moroccan-Dutch community. The army of them is now so big that it is more hopeless than ever before.

Indeed, it seemed that way, but after everything that's happened, I should have known that it wouldn't be that easy. MP or not, *it* lurks from a distance, waiting for a moment of weakness, and strikes. This is one of those moments. It's the May recess, and I'm in New York. I can do that easily now—book a flight to a faraway metropolis. When I got my first paycheck, I took my suitcase to Schiphol Airport on a whim and traveled to Cuba, because once, when I was broke, I had seen on a travel show that you could swim with dolphins there. This coming summer, I want to take my mother and brothers to Morocco, because we haven't been there in so long. Then we can also go to the edge of the Sahara, where my father is buried.

So much has changed now that I'm an MP. I've gone from eviction notices and having the gas and electricity shut off to having a whole lot of money. Everyone in the neighborhood thinks that I've become a millionaire, or a wandering employment agency. My mother keeps asking if I have work for people from my community, and sometimes she brings a CV along herself: "Tofik, if you have time, take a look and see if you can line something up for Issam, Nadya's son. He's graduated and really wants to work."

Now and then I stop by a random ATM, even when I don't need cash, just to press the "check balance" button. Even after all the bills have been paid, there's still at least a thousand euros in the account.

It feels exactly like the first time I got an allowance, of one guilder per week.

New York is the place where *it* had the courage to *do* something for the first time, instead of just thinking about it. That was five years ago, shortly after 9/11. *Here I am again*. It's the May recess, and there's an ocean between *it* and *them*—maybe *it* can even happen again? Come on, who am I kidding . . . I've come back here for only one reason.

The hotel where I'm staying, the Carter, is shabby, and a couple minutes' walk from Times Square. Since it's cheap, people check in and out constantly. Strangers' faces disappear as quickly as they appear. The anonymity fuels *its* courage. There are four computers in the hotel lobby where you can access the internet for a couple bucks. I feel it immediately when I see them: the tingling irresistibility of the Web, where *it* is powerful and *they* are weak. There, I can do everything I want, and feel everything as who I really am. And, here, I don't need to look constantly over my shoulder like I do at my regular spot in Amsterdam. I take my things to my room and immediately take a seat behind a computer. What were the good chat rooms again? I google for a bit, find something on Yahoo! that I had looked at earlier, and go in. It starts right away: "What do you look like?" "What are you looking for?" "What do you like?" "Where are you?" "Do you travel or host?" "Do you have a photo?" All of the standard questions come up. After a few hours, it looks like there's someone with the profile I'm looking for: someone with the same internal war, someone dealing with *it* and *them*. That's what ultimately tips the scales. I need that connection.

I need to get to the Bronx. It's already almost midnight. I take a quick shower, throw on my jeans, sneakers, and black leather jacket, and hop in a cab. It still feels like that first time, grabbing one of these yellow taxis. I read the address that I scribbled on a piece of paper. It's a ways from Manhattan to the Bronx. The driver tries to make small talk, but I ignore him as politely as possible. I'm ashamed that

I've flown thousands of miles, only to fall back into old, unhealthy temptations.

We're here. It's a long, deserted street with fairly large white houses, each with a car parked in front. I get out of the cab, walk to the house, and then it begins. *It* and *they* mentally attack each other. Psychological warfare.

"You'll never break the habit." "You're an MP now. What are you doing?" "What if someone finds out?"

This always happens right in front of the door. *They* know exactly what *they* need to say to sow doubt. *They* flash by in my head: my mother, who is worried about my safety; kids on the block, pointing and cursing; the fathers at the mosque on the August Allebé Square who want to protect me from Satan; my favorite singers, who celebrate love between men and women in their songs; and members of my family in Morocco, who simply don't understand. In the Netherlands, I've often turned around because of this. Now I'm far from home, far from *the people*. I don't know what it is: lust, hunger for affection, distance, something else, but *it* wins this battle. I walk up the steps to the front door. My heart races and bounces in my throat, no matter how often I've done this before. The sexual tension during the chat has turned into short-breathed angst. The door is cracked, and it's dark inside.

"Hello?"

It's quiet for a bit.

"Come on in."

I walk inside, but there's something off. The voice I hear is of an older person. Everything is so dark, and I can only see a silhouette. That's someone different from who I talked to in the chat room. My eyes still haven't adjusted to the dark, so I can't see clearly. But I need to get out of here.

"Sorry, I think I'm gonna go..."

A hand grabs me by the collar. I step back in fear. The back of my head hits something angular by the door and I stumble, but I don't fall all the way to the ground. I try to push myself up and turn to-

ward the door. Two hands grab me—one by the arm, the other on my leg. I still can't see well.

"Please, I need to go," I say weakly. "My friend has this address . . . I always make sure someone knows where I'm going if I do something like this . . ."

I can feel my clothes being pulled. I try to slow things down but get punched in the face. This is serious. My pants get pulled down. I try to stop it, but it doesn't work. I still can't see well in the dark. One shoe comes off, and I pull my other foot away quickly. If I don't struggle, I won't get hit again, he says. I gesture like I'm submitting.

I try to make a fake move and run to the door, but before I take one step, I'm thrown to the ground in a single movement. I feel a punch. Another one. There goes my other shoe, and my pants follow. I hear muffled sounds, but I'm no longer there. I already know what's going to happen. This isn't the first time. I disappear into myself, away from here, to a place where everything makes sense.

I'm with my father, my mother, and my brothers. We're driving toward Morocco in a caravan of fully packed cars and vans, with curtains blocking the sun. Jamal, Abdelaziz, Nourdin, and I sit in the backseat, whining for the windows to be opened farther, and Mom and Dad ignore us in the front. In the cooler, there are boxes of apple juice, peanut butter sandwiches, and, of course, Heinz Ketchup and Remia Mayonnaise to eat with French fries in Morocco, because they don't have those sauces there. The suitcases are packed to the max: they're crazy for Dutch goods in Morocco. Every once in a while, we stop to eat with the other families and to give the fathers a break from driving. The butane stove is used to make tea or coffee. Usually after the first day of the trip, we lose track of the other families and take off on our own, just the six of us. The coolest part is when we get to the winding roads through the forests in France. In the distance, there are isolated, illuminated houses visible through the trees. They make me think of the edible house made of candy, *speculaas*, and pancakes in Hansel and

Gretel. I point to one of the houses and begin to tell my brothers an improvised version of the fairy tale. I have so much fun, because they always get scared when I get to the witch. When it really gets scary, they beg me to stop. As soon as night falls and the cold slowly creeps up from underneath the car, from our feet up to our heads, we fall asleep one by one, like dominoes. I try to stay awake the longest, partly to help Dad stay awake. He might fall asleep at the wheel. Everything is perfect in this moment. Someday I want a family like this, with a mother, father, and children, the way it's supposed to be.

For a moment, I think there are raindrops hitting the windshield, but they are beads of sweat landing on my body. The muffled sounds become clearer, and the stabbing pain in my ribs and face sharper. I don't know if I should try to break free. Maybe I should try to talk instead—convince him, like in a debate. Say that I don't want this and that I won't cause any problems if I can leave. I'm a good talker.

"I won't tell anyone. . . ." Before I can finish the sentence, a white pillow is pushed onto my face. This is to scare me, to subdue me definitively, I'm sure. I put both of my hands in the air as a sign of surrender, but the pillow is pushed even harder onto my face. I can't breathe anymore. I try to free my legs, but it's impossible. I try to give a signal with my hands again, in vain. Is this it? Is it going to happen this time? Is this the end? And just when I finally have something to lose.

At first everything was black, and now everything is turning white. Are the ice crystals coming, the blue after the white?

The pillow comes off. I don't move. I breathe deeply but carefully—anything to prevent another outburst. I lie there and stare at hell; he is leaking sweat as hot as lava.

It's over.

I can see better in the dark now, but I avoid eye contact. Ashamed, I look for my things and walk to the door. I get dressed, half inside and half in front of the door. Then I start to run. The street is still deserted. I grab the first taxi I can. The driver watches me in the rear-view mirror for the entire ride.

“You didn’t really fight back, Tofik . . . he probably thought you wanted it.”

In the hotel lobby, everyone is looking at me. I don’t look back, because otherwise I’ll lose my concentration. I walk with purpose. It’s the only thing keeping me from crying. At the elevator, someone asks me if I’m all right. “I’m okay, thank you,” I reply. I almost lose my concentration but control myself just in time. In my hotel room, after I look at myself in the mirror, I see two big white pillows that make me think of the darkness. I put them away, grab a sweater from my suitcase, and lie down on it. I fall asleep immediately.

In the morning, I recognize my face even less than the night before. I walk straight to the computers in the lobby. Google is my friend, I think to myself. I look up remedies for black eyes and bruised ribs. Around the corner from the hotel, I pick up a bunch of ointments and painkillers at Duane Reade.

By evening, the tiny sliver of peace that my Google crisis plan had brought me is gone. I can’t think of anything else than the computers in the lobby, and the Yahoo! chat room. He’ll lay low for a bit after what he’s done, but you never know. I log in, scan all of the people online, and see his name there.

Yes! Okay, now what?

In a single breath, a feeling of triumph, disbelief, and powerlessness. What should I actually say? Should I curse? Or ask him why he did it? The nerve, sitting here chatting away as if nothing happened. Or is there really an issue? Did I do this to myself? I’m going to scare him—I’ll say that I’m going to report him, that he picked the wrong person to mess with. I’ll let him beg for forgiveness. While I’m thinking about this, I hear *them* whispering in my head: “Can you imagine the headlines in the Netherlands?”

I double-click on his name to open a chat window and say hello. He says “hi” back. I wait for more, but there’s nothing. No “sorry,” nothing.

“Do you think you’re gonna get away with this?”

“What are you talking about?”

I swear, if he were standing in front of me now and I had a knife in my hand, I would cut his throat.

“I will make you pay for what you did.”

Bloop.

He’s logged off.

With sunglasses from Chinatown to camouflage the black eyes, I spend the rest of the recess smearing ointments and downing vitamin C. I maneuver around people to avoid contact with my ribs. Day by day the swelling is going down, and the blue, purple, green, and yellow hues fade away. Only my ribs are still painful, and I have wounds that no one sees.

Sometimes I visit the Hangar on Christopher Street for a couple of fruity cocktails. The Wizard of Oz that I met my first time here doesn’t work here anymore, sadly. Now and then someone asks me what happened to my face. I always come up with a falling-down-the-stairs line, and it’s always followed by the I-don’t-believe-that-at-all-but-I’m-not-going-to-say-anything look.

The flight back to the Netherlands is approaching, and every day there’s less to see on my face. Only my ribs still hurt. I feel proud—proud that I’ve solved this again on my own.

He just logged off.

Disappeared with the click of a button.

Bloop.

Not long after I’ve returned to our faction in the Parliament, Femke, our chairwoman, and Tom, our political adviser, ask to talk to me; by the tone of their voices, I can tell it’s something serious. *De Telegraaf* is working on a story about me. It feels like the whole world is crumbling under my feet.

Could the newspaper know what happened in New York? How is that possible? Or do they know about the previous times? About before?

I really look up to Femke and Tom. They’re the only ones in our party’s faction that I’m really a bit intimidated by. When I look at their combined mental powers, it’s as if I see Professor Xavier, the

telepathic, gifted founder of the X-Men, in front of me. I don't want them to perceive a moment of weakness in me, so I react as nonchalantly as possible. They need to know that I'm strong.

When they reveal what the story is that the newspaper wants to publish, it turns out to be a fabrication from "an anonymous source" that claims I made out with a man in a restroom of the Parliament. I feel relieved and stressed at the same time: relieved because I know it's not true, and stressed, because the truth will always lose out if the lie is more entertaining.

Femke and Tom's advice echoes in my head: "Whatever you do, don't lie." They emphasize that no one can make me talk about personal issues that I don't want to talk about. I have the feeling they don't entirely believe me, that they think it's actually true. Of course, they suspect *it* as much as everyone else.

The gossip from *De Telegraaf* is hanging over me like a black cloud. It's nerve-racking. It comes to a climax when the reporter who is working on the story waits for me at the plenary hall, with the cameras rolling. I try to escape into a debate hall that they're not allowed into without a pass, but they wait. They follow me to my office, with loud accusations that I'm not being honest about who I am. I'm so embarrassed about all of the staff and colleagues overhearing this racket. The newspaper ultimately doesn't publish this story, but it soon becomes clear that this is just the first of countless experiences with journalists from all kinds of media who try to expose *it* through lying or sneaky tricks.

I promise myself to be as good an MP as possible, to master the political handiwork, as Femke keeps telling me to do, in the hope that all of the attention will go toward those skills instead. I suppress what happened during the recess. But every now and then, I see the man's face in front of me.

I am happy—so happy—that he didn't kiss me. Even though no one was watching.