

# THE MAGIC BAG

By Amar Hommany

Everyone woke up on that autumnal frosty morning to a fight between the husband El-Aayachi and his wife Elwadha. The basis of the dispute was the so-called *the boy's case*. And the child Bushtta does not worry about anything as he hears that nominal sentence repeated without knowing its content every morning and every evening. *The boy's case* was nothing but a schism between El-Aayachi and Elwadha where they discuss two completely opposite things. The first thing from the mother's side, who is pressing and struggling to enrol their son in school, and the second is the strong stubbornness shown by El-Aayachi to prevent the mother's wish. He did not accept the idea of Bushtta going to school, as he preferred to keep him without any formal schooling and throw him into the arms of a peasant's farm, believing that the boy would be able to financially support the poor family. Bushtta was told that his age now does not allow him to sit at home with his mother and that he had to go to a place named *school*. Yes, Bushtta bore in mind that he was a candidate to be one of the most desirable guests of the school in the village near his own, and he wished to be successful without even knowing the meaning of success. His little imagination memorised no more than the words *mum* and *dad*, and could not imagine more than one school in his country.

Bushtta did not despair of looking at his father as if he was telling him in an innocent silence, 'Will you leave me deprived of education as you have left me deprived of any clothes?'

El-Aayachi, while touching his moustache angrily, told his wife, 'I am tired of talking about the boy's case if you insist on your son going to school, let him do it, but I will not spend a single Dirham on his education.'

Elwadha complained, 'Oh Allah, by doing this, you are choosing the path of poverty and ignorance for your only son!'

Obviously, she could not convince El-Aayachi to bear the expenses of the child's education. Nevertheless, she said to herself, it's okay, at least he agreed to enrol our child in school.

The rain was a thread from the sky, the Imam knocked on the door and was welcomed by Elwadha while El-Aayachi was lying down near the heating stove while

caressing his long rosary. Elwadha invited the Imam to sit down. After leaning on a worn-out mat, she gave him a cup of tea.

The Imam asked, 'Where is Bushtta?'

El-Aayachi replied, 'He won't go to school as long as I haven't made a decision about it'.

The Imam replied with comfort, 'There is nothing you will have to decide on any more, I enrolled him in school yesterday with all the other seven-year-old kids in the village.'

'Well, if so, you can take him to school today,' El-Aayachi said.

Bushtta almost died of joy when the Imam grabbed his hand, but Elwadha grabbed his hand out of the Imam's hand.

And so, the Imam headed out angrily. 'The problem is you, Elwadha!'

El-Aayachi accompanied him to the door and whispered something in his ear after which the Imam shook his head and left with the other children who were waiting for Bushtta outside. El-Aayachi decided to go to the school with Bushtta herself and explained that the boy's case will inevitably find a way to a solution.

Bushtta had narrowed his hopes after seeing the Imam leaving without understanding the mystery. At that time, Bushtta found no-one looking at him except his mother, who was looking at him with reassuring looks while at same time rebuking her husband El-Aayachi, who was pleased to let his family live in the shame of ignorance, without leaving a trace of science light. El-Aayachi continued to reclaim the warmth of the stove until he fell asleep without going to the market or preparing the firewood as he always does. Bushtta's mother then decided to go with her son to the school and she dressed him a large woollen coat that almost concealed his slim body. The coat belonged to his older brother Jilali who died after he fell into a deep well at one of the farms he worked.

'This coat is bigger than me and doesn't suit me,' Bushtta told her.

She said, 'Wear it only today and tomorrow, I will search for a beautiful coat matching your size later.'

And the boy believed his mother's words because she never lied to him.

Elwadha wore her husband's loose blue burnous<sup>1</sup> and set off with her son, facing the

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<sup>1</sup> A burnous also spelled "burnoose", "bournous" or "barnous", from the Berber abernus is a long cloak of coarse woollen fabric with a hood, usually white in color, worn by the Berbers and other Maghrebis.

strong winds and rain. Bushtta got wet and the clothes didn't really help to face the ferocity of that autumnal day.

They crossed the valleys one by one and the boy was groaning from the severity of cold and fatigue, his mother was hiding her resentment and pain. When Bushtta was unable to walk she carried him on her back and walked along, dragging a burlap bag she was carrying for a reason the boy did not know. She bore the boy's weight with much discomfort because his big coat had become wet and heavy. She picked him up and put him down in severe pain. Bushtta strength was sapped, he completely stopped walking and fell on the ground. The mother thought of leaving the burlap bag and carrying her son instead but remembered that there is no point in taking the boy to school without the bag.

'Well, I have reached a compromise, I will leave neither the boy nor the bag behind!'

Sometimes she would carry the boy and leave the bag and the other times she would carry the bag and leave the boy, until Bushtta regained some of his strength. When they were half way there, Elwadha could no longer bear anything. She was tired of carrying her son and the bag the whole time, especially when some olives hit her face and causes swelling in one of her eyes. Elwadha continued the way dragging her son and the big bag until she arrived at the school, which became a large pool of water in a willow tree forest, whose yellow leaves were flying as a heralding of a day unlike any other. At one side of the school building was standing a huge brown man with a sharp moustache and a wool robe. As he was cutting wood, he noticed their presence near the gate and pointed out, and they understood that he was telling them: 'Come, come on ...' They walked leaning towards this man in an atmosphere full of fear, confusion, hesitation and a little bit of optimism. However, they could not reach the man because of all the mud and ponds.

After a great deal of trouble, they came near the man who accompanied them to a room and said, 'Wait here until the principal comes'.

From outside, the school seemed to be empty and desolate. However, as the rain rose, the voices of children rose from the depths of the classrooms.

Whenever he heard those voices, Bushtta grabbed his mother from her chin and optimistically told her, 'Mum, there are children inside. I'll go play with them, please say yes Mum!'

His mother said, 'Yes.' And his spirit rose even more.

The principal's room was a broken down room. Water dripped... but rather pouring down from the ceiling. Suddenly, the principal entered and sat on his wooden chair, and the water dripping from his Ouazanian cotton Jilbab.

'Where is his father?' He said in a tone free of mercy.

Elwahda told him that Bushtta's father was sick. The principal wrote something on a paper and handed it over. She took that paper even though she didn't not know what was written. This made her terrified, especially since such a paper reminds her of being summoned to the gendarmerie office after being accused of stealing eggs of her neighbour Saadia. The principal ordered her to wait until the rain faded away and then leave, but she decided to go right away and didn't care if the rain had stopped or not.

She said, 'Sir, I want to go now because I want ...'

The principal interrupted her, 'What do you want? I told you to wait and wait only. Otherwise, leave without giving me a headache with your babbling'.

She said, 'Well, may I know what's written on this paper?'

He replied no less harshly than that day, 'Where were you when people were learning to read and write? Go to the market and they will explain to you what's written on the paper, and then you just have to show your money.'

Although she couldn't read or write, she was prudent enough to understand the principal's words and rushed to hold her son's hand.

The principal stopped her for a moment, saying, 'You must leave him here.'

Nevertheless, she refused to leave the boy on the pretext that she would take him home, give him breakfast and change his clothes.

He replied, 'It is okay, give him breakfast and change his clothes, but don't come back without bringing what's on the paper.'

The mother left school with her son taking a road different from where they came from before. She told her son that the road had been changed in order to avoid valleys and deep streams. The rain had cooled for some moments, and parts of the sky began to clear from clouds after it darkened. They had gone a long way.

Bushtta once again asked his mother, 'Is the road longer?'

She said, 'Yes, we just have to avoid rough streams.'

'Okay mum', he replied. 'But I can't walk anymore!'

His mother carried him the way she carried the burlap bag, swaying under the burden of her son and the bag until she approached the village where the weekly

market was held. She started noticing several buildings scattered here and there and people riding animals. Near some houses there were a few dogs, some groaning from the cold and others were unable to even bark.

Suddenly, Bushtta asked his mother, 'Why are you carrying that big bag, Mum, and what's inside?'

The mother was so busy thinking about something that she didn't respond. However, Bushtta insisted on the question.

She reluctantly replied, 'It's your school supplies!'

Although he did not understand her words, he was convinced that he would get something and did not care about the name. Upon arrival at the outskirts of the village, the boy realised that the road he had taken could not have led to their house. He wanted to ask his mother but she interrupted him.

'We have reached the market.'

She took him next to a wall and ordered him to stand and wait there until she finished something and returned to him. She then carried the burlap bag and disappeared, while he remained standing next to the wall looking at passers-by which could hardly help him forget the severity of the freezing cold. After he got tired of standing, he sat down, and as soon as he was seated, Elwadha came back but without the burlap bag. Instead, she came with a smaller bag that had things he had never seen before. She also brought him another bag and took out some bread and a piece of homemade cheese. She handed him the bread and cheese and he went on eating them, while his mother just looked at him sometimes with compassion and sometimes with passion.

When he finished eating, she asked him, 'Are you full?'

He looked at her as if he didn't know the meaning of 'being full'. Meanwhile, he was wondering, how did my mother turn the bag into two bags?!

Then he told his mother, 'I want tea.'

Bushtta was so addicted to tea that Elwadha often prevented him from drinking it, claiming that the drink was the main reason for his urination in bed. The excessive use of tea is shown during meals as it barely leaves the table. At each meal, tea was the master of the table, and the barley bread was the minister, while olive oil and Elharsha (Moroccan pie) was scarcely present on the table. His passion for tea was also seen after he returned from Al-Masid lurking in the kitchen, hoping to catch a jug his mother forget to wash and grab a dose or two of yesterday's tea.

His mother asked him to stand up as they were going back to school and she bought him a woollen dress. She also borrowed a donkey after which they headed back to school. It was midday and the rain had cooled down when they arrived at school.

Elwadha handed the bag to her son and said, 'Go in.'

He went through the water pools and reached the side of the classroom, and there was someone who pointed at him to enter the classroom. He looked at the person's face without showing any sign of cheerfulness or smile. He went to sit on the double wooden bench.

One of the students poked him in the back, and whispered, 'Did you eat lunch?'

Bushtta did not dare to answer or even turn to him fearing that the teacher would see him. Suddenly, the teacher approached him and took the bag that was next to him and opened it and then began to pull out books and pens. Elwadha brought all the things the principal wrote on the back of the paper, the bag included all the necessary school supplies. Nevertheless, the principal seemed bemoaned that Bushtta would go unpunished.

The teacher looked at the rest of the students, saying, 'Do you accept Bushtta bringing the school supplies before you? Listen well, hyenas, if you didn't bring all the school supplies tomorrow you will be punished (pointing to the pomegranate stick), and I will not accept any of your excuses. Do you understand?'

Trembling with the cold and fear, the students answered, 'Yes, we understand.'

The rain started pouring down on the school, and the teacher did not stop looking outside enjoying the sound of the rain falling, and the students savoured the sounds of the rain on the tin roof of the classroom. And everything continued until the darkness began to dim the light in the classroom. Bushtta saw that everyone was pleased with the darkness, but did not know the secret. After a while, he found out that darkness was the only opportunity for students to go home. The teacher asked the students to stand up and sing the farewell song, and so they started singing, *Goodbye my school, goodbye my teacher*. Then he pointed with his pomegranate stick to go out and the students scurried outside...except Bushtta, who secluded himself behind the door thinking of his mother, who did not leave him since his birth, and how he could return to her with that total darkness outside. He walked away

from the door by a step or two while his classmates ran in the middle of the ponds, he did not see anything he only heard the footsteps trampling in mud and water pools. He chose the giant carob tree from all the willow trees and walk towards it. The smell of carob emitted from the tree as much as the smell of fresh rain emitted from the hills of the town. After that, he bowed to the tree's stump, shivering from fear and cold, and he could not take another step towards the unknown. He was just smelling and hearing but he couldn't see anything, so he wondered, where did all my classmates disappear to? And why didn't anyone care about me in this frosty weather? He was smelling carob hoping to relieve the hunger he felt.

When the rain cooled down, he suddenly heard. 'Come on, get on quickly.'

He knew that most of the students would return to their homes on the back of animals, and he couldn't do anything but cry because he could not believe that his mother would be so far away from him; as he was used to her taking him or rather carrying him with her wherever she went. His guess was true, his mother would not leave him.

'Bushtta, Bushtta!' It was his mother's voice. Once he heard the call of his name he did not care about any danger, he set out tracking his mother's voice in the ponds while she didn't stop calling him 'Bushtta, Bushtta'. Her melancholic voice mingled with the roar of thunder and sometimes with the whirring of the wind.

As he ran towards his mother's voice, he fell into a pond and shouted, 'Mama, Mama.'

Suddenly, Elwadha jumped in the pond and grabbed Bushtta with a superman-grip. And raised him on her back and walked a little and then put him on the back of a donkey. Elwadha never left the school when she dropped her son off in class. She took off the blue burnouse and used it as a cover for her son. When they arrived home after that adventure, El-Aayachi, was caressing his long rosary and sipping a cup of coffee. Bushtta walked towards his father at a slow pace, then kissed his hand and began to talk about his day at school, but his father did not care about his words and only shook his head and continued to caress his rosary. Bushtta had not forgotten the big bag his mother was carrying, and he continued to wonder in an innocent surprise, 'Why didn't my mother give up the big bag on the way, even though it was rough and heavy from under the rain. How did my mother turn the big bag into two small bags?' After all, that bag was the only solution to his case.

Whenever she was unable to carry it she would drag it on the ground but never left it behind. It is the magic bag that puzzled the boy, but he did not reveal this confusion to his mother. The naivety of childhood began to overcome the innocence of the boy. He decided to tell his father about the burlap bag and this was the only time El-Aayachi cared about his son's words.

He called his wife, 'Come here, Elwadha, what's up with the bag that the boy talks about?'

'Nothing,' she replied. 'It's a bag where I keep the blue burnouse.'

'Do not lie, Elwadha! You were wearing the burnouse! What about the heavy burlap bag you were carrying with you when you took the kid to school? Oh Allah, if you don't tell me what was in that bag, I'll divorce you right now'.

She look at Bushtta with disappointment as if her tongue said, 'You failed me, Bushtta! And I now understand why some cats eat their young because when they grow up, they rarely recognize the favour!'

Bushtta did not know that he disclosed a serious secret, and did not know the meaning of *divorce*. He scattered his school supplies and played on the mat because they served as toys that he missed throughout his childhood. El-Aayachi's threat to Elwadha was serious. The thing that led her to tell him.

'During the summer season I collected several bags of livestock dry manure and began to sell to the residents of the neighbouring villages to use it for heating and cooking and I am making some money to save it for hard times.'

He replied, 'And did you buy him what he needed?'

'Yes, I bought him everything.' she said. 'Even a wool coat, and we can keep the rest of the money for when we are in serious need,' she added.

Elwadha hadn't finished speaking yet the rosary fell from El- Aayachi hand. Although he seemed to be leaning back, Elwahda soon realised that he had left the world forever. Bushtta was still wondering, 'Why didn't my mother take me with her when she was collecting manure?' While his father asked himself before his death, 'Why didn't she tell me what she was doing?' Elwadha was wondering about one thing only, 'Why do people complain about not telling them about acts that are the simple duty of all human beings? What is most important to me is that I have found a solution to the boy's case.'