Chapter Three
Sources of Authority in Moroccan Culture

Thick and Glass Ceilings…

I will never forget my first day at school. A memorable day it was…The picture of my father, my brother, and me at the entrance of Sidi Ali Tamkart school in the northeastern town of Nador is still vivid in my memory. I remember the little skinny girl I was at six, I remember the awe, the joy-apprehension mix, and the enthusiasm. We were two weeks late because we had to move from another town and I was scared at the thought of losing the opportunity. My father used to speak of school as a life-changing thing. In his military suit on that day, my father looked huge and impressive and my brother was like me: apprehensive and expectant. We were wearing our best clothes. My father went straight to an elderly man as he saw him approaching the school gate. The man (whom I came to call Ami Brahim—Uncle Brahim) was the school keeper and seemed to hold authority in the place. My father informed him that he wanted to register my brother (eighteen months younger than me) in tahdiri (preparatory year) and me in libtidaʔi lʔawwal (the first year of the primary school) because I was older and because he thought I knew the Arabic and French alphabets (which he had taught me at home). Although visibly impressed by my father’s attire Ami Brahim was dead against the idea, he wanted us both in the preparatory level. He could not understand how a pupil—and a girl at that—who had never been to school would go straight to the first year. The two men talked and gesticulated for a while and at one point as if by magic I saw my father put his hand to his pocket and produce two ten dirhams paper notes that he put in the hand of the school keeper whose face immediately beamed. They continued talking for a while and in the end the school keeper suggested to “put me on trial” for a couple of months and see if I could “keep up” with the class. Twenty dirhams (a couple of US dollars) in the 1960s seemed to do the trick: it made my father happy and “triumphant” and earned me one year of schooling!!!
I was taken immediately to the classroom, escorted by my father and Ami Brahim. They both spoke to the teacher: Madame Benzakour who was explaining a text in French. Before leaving me, my father kneeled to look at me in the eye; he wiped my face with a handkerchief, straightened my hair and said: “I know you will make it: remember you learnt the alphabet in a month; it took me one year to do so!” His words were soothing but I was shaking with apprehension of the unknown. All I remember now is that it was important for me to “please” my father. When I entered the classroom, Madame Benzakour, a tall and elegant woman, took me by the hand and seated me at the very back of the room explaining that I was “on trial” and that the best pupils were seated at the front row with the first pupil having scored the highest grade, followed by the second and so on. I sat at the back and made every effort to follow and repeat what she was saying: je (I), tu (you), il (he), elle (she) … I immediately liked the whole exercise. She also taught us Arabic. I started to dream of the first row! I was inhabited by a passion to learn which my father instilled in me. He used to tell me: “I want you to get what I could not have; if only I swept the floor of a school!” He had passed on to me all he knew: the alphabet that some fellow officers taught him in the army, some arithmetic, some geography, how to pray and so on. Oftentimes when he was supervising me and my siblings revise our lessons or doing our homework, he would pick up a book and pretend he was reading but I knew he wasn’t because the book was upside down! The first weeks I spent at school became engraved in my memory: I continued to dream of the front row … One day, my father came home a proud man: Madame Benzakour told him that I was then seated in the middle of the classroom. I was moving towards the front … They decided to let me finish the year. I still remember the loud laughter and happiness of my father … He would tell this story now and again at home or in the village. Toward the end of that year, I finally reached the front row! I was seated in the third position. Only two pupils scored better grades than me … A dream come true! I gained the first row and a huge amount of self-confidence … That first year had a great impact on my schooling years and beyond … Ever since then, I would associate every small “victory” in class with my father … Then every academic victory with him … This has never changed … even when my father became old and incapacitated, even after his death in 2005. His trust in me helped me face the many glass ceilings that were in store … He believed in me and made me believe in myself.