I have met a queen. Her name is Malika, which, fittingly, means just that in Arabic: Queen. She has no throne, no riches, no royal subjects. What she possesses is something far more precious: an indomitable spirit and courage from which we might all draw strength.

Malika’s is a story both miraculous and unfathomable. Miraculous, because somehow she managed to stay alive at all and then bear witness to what happened; unfathomable, because even when you hear her story, you cannot believe such things could still occur in our lifetime.

To have grown up in a palace, the adopted daughter of a king; to have loved this king but then discovered that he killed your natural father; to have been jailed by this same king for 15 years, along with your mother and five brothers and sisters; to have been at the edge of starvation for years and to have then escaped by digging a tunnel with a spoon and a sardine tin; to have been caught and then placed under house arrest for another five years; to have then, at the age of 43, finally found freedom in the West, only to discover that this so-called freedom could never erase the prison in your mind.

No, there are few references for understanding the life of Malika Oufkir, only the leaps of our imagination, which might take us, say, into the realms of the Thousand and One Nights or the Beirut hostage crisis or The Great Escape. Even then, we are left without moorings. Why? Because this is a story of exile and return unlike any other. It is the reason why Malika Oufkir’s book, Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Gaol, has, in the past 18 months, become an international bestseller and been translated into nearly 20 languages. It is also why Miramax is preparing to make a movie based on her life.

Her fame is spreading. In April this year, she was the subject of an American 60 Minutes special. Last month she was named US Cosmopolitan Woman of the Year. In June, Oprah Winfrey, arguably the most popular woman in the US, devoted an entire show to her.

“I wanted you [here] so I could say in front of millions of people, ‘You are my hero,’” Oprah declared, her eyes brimming with tears as the studio audience stood as one to applaud the sad, dark-eyed beauty before them. “We take strength from your strength and we want you to be well,” Oprah said, as the audience wept and cheered.

“I have a good surprise for you,” Malika responded. “I feel happy.” And so it appeared. After two years of contemplating suicide, Malika Oufkir felt, at that moment, strong enough to say she was happy. She was finding a way to live. But it was never going to be that simple. How could it? People don’t just return from the grave.

Malika Oufkir was born on April 2, 1953, in a Moroccan hospital run by nuns. Her father, General Muhammad Oufkir, was aide to the King of Morocco, the second most powerful man in the country. His wife Fatima, Malika’s mother, was a rich and beautiful heiress, as well as friend to the Moroccan King’s two wives.
from her parents and brought to live among the palace concubines of King Muhammad V. The king demanded new titles for his three, or rather four, young daughters: Princess Arina, who was the same age as Malika. His word was final.

Three years later, in 1963, King Muhammad died and his son, Hassan II, ascended the throne. He assumed the role of adoptive father to Malika.

F or more than 11 years, Malika Oufkir lived in the Royal Palace of Rabat. On the gilded surface looked like a childhood fairy tale: the best teachers in the kingdom; receptions for heads of state; holidays in seaside and mountain palaces; private hospitals, golf courses; limousines; access to the secret world of the King and his court harem.

In reality, Malika was riven by competing emotions. She enjoyed the affection of the King and his court harem. She enjoyed the affection of the King and his court harem. She enjoyed the affection of the King and his court harem.

She dreamed of being a movie star, and would seize any opportunity to step into that world. Through her family connections, she met the French actor Alain Delon and, in Hollywood, stars such as Zsa Zsa Gabor and Steve McQueen. The world was at her feet, or so it seemed.

In the summer of 1971, Morocco was racked by the first of two coup attempts against King Hassan II’s increasingly authoritarian and corrupt regime. As the King hid in the toilets during celebrations for his 42nd birthday, disaffected officers massacred more than 200 of his guards. The King responded by executing 10 of the officers and evicting their children from their homes. It was the first indication to the world that the King was in position to execute his family.

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I would restore things with a few phrases. The Story was part of our everyday life, to the point that it caused arguments and passions to flare.

"Truly, humbly believe that The Story saved us all. It helped give a pattern to our lives. The radio permitted us to keep track of the date, but we had no markers, no milestones in our lives... so our characters had them for us: they got engaged, married, had babies, fell ill, died.

"Thanks to The Story, the characters, we didn't succumb to madness."

At least, that is, until a day in late 1986 when "the Apocalypse" engulfed them.

In March of that year, after eight years of being kept apart, the family was finally allowed out of their separate cells. Barely able to walk, having not seen daylight for nearly a decade, they came together in a moment of wild transcendental joy.

"We had all changed so much," said Malika, "and each one of us had grown taller or older.

In March until November 1986 when, suddenly, without any explanation, they were split up

At this point, their mother attempted - unsuccessfully - to kill herself. Fatima Oufkir began a 45-day hunger strike and, at last, on the night of November 26, slit her veins with a pair of small nail scissors.

Pandemonium broke out in the other cells. In Malika's cell, the sisters drew straws to see who would die. Soukaina "won" and Malika, Maria and Soukaina (Myriam, who was too sick to help) smashed concrete, freed an iron bar from one of their beds, they began excavating a tunnel in the small cell adjoining Malika's, where they kept their suitcases and food rations.

Using a spoon, the lid of a sardine can and an iron bar from one of their beds, they began excavating a tunnel in the small cell adjoining Malika's, where they kept their suitcases and food rations.

Working by night when the guards were absent, Malika, Maria and Soukaina (Myriam was too sick to help) smashed concrete, freed stone slabs, dug holes between cells and burrowed a five-metre tunnel and three-metre shaft out of the prison. It took them three months.

Each night they covered their tracks by washing the cell, removing the earth and dust, excavating a tunnel in the small cell adjoining Malika's, where they kept their suitcases and food rations.

At last it appeared they would be given their freedom. They could realise their dream of going to Canada.

However, on the day the family was to board the plane for Montreal, the King announced a change of heart. He had not "completely adjusted" to the family leaving Morocco and wanted them to stay a while longer.

In February 1991, the Oufkirs were finally released, but placed under tight police surveillance and prevented from leaving the country. This situation lasted five more years, until in June 1996, Malika's younger sister, Maria, escaped by boat to Spain and then France.

Under international pressure, the Moroccan government was forced to issue the family with passports and visas. Malika Oufkir arrived in Paris on July 16, 1996, with her brother Raouf and sister Soukaina. She...
was 43 years old. She had spent all but seven of her 43 years either behind palace walls, in prison, under house arrest or under police surveillance.

The woman who stands at the door of her Paris apartment is chic and slender, with mournful, chocolate coloured eyes. She greets me with a smile and a kiss on both cheeks, before leading me into a lofty living room, a vast expanse of cushions, rugs, chests, low tables and paintings from the North African coast. Malika Oufkir is now 48, although she looks much younger – which is a good thing considering how often she feels like a child who has reached old age. She hasn’t started to live yet, though she possesses an ancient kind of wisdom.

Malika was 38 the first time she made love to a man. He was an Italian actor whom she met shortly after her release from house arrest. It was a hopeless liaison. “I couldn’t stand my virginity any longer,” she says now without inhibition, “but at the same time I didn’t realise the extent to which prison had killed my body. Not to have sensations for all those years. And so we tried to make love, but my body refused completely.”

In 1998, Malika married a French architect, Eric Bordreuil, whom she had first encountered at a friend’s wedding in Morocco three years earlier. “When he touched my hand,” she says, “it was the first time in my life that somebody had given me so much love and connection.”

There could never be an easy love. “It is very difficult to live with a woman like me,” she says now, fixing me with a stare of piercing intensity. “I am so complex.”

Fear is her constant companion – fear of going outside, fear of contact with the world. “That’s why I spend nearly all my time here at my home,” she says, “where you see what happens to a family after you have done this sort of thing to them. After 20 years they say: ‘The experiment is finished, the doors are open, now you can live.’”

So you try to live in this sort of society, but the first thing you realise is what individualism means. It means that … after 20 years in bad conditions, after being ignored by the world, you still have nothing. Nobody really wants to help you.”

Who could possibly understand the psychological dynamics of a family such as the Oufkirs, given that each of them has suffered so much and so uniquely? Malika happened to be the storyteller among them; but there were nine stories that could have been told here, each from a vastly different perspective.

To her family, Malika is now an international bestselling author and the most interviewed Moroccan in the world. She is a woman with a partner, prospects, book royalties. They don’t necessarily understand her reasons for writing the book, or what it took to do so. They don’t hear the unanswered questions that assail her every night in bed. Like her friends, her family doesn’t see that not only is Malika not always strong, she is often at the point of breaking.

Until the terror attacks of September 11, she had planned to move to America. Now she’s considering Australia. For 20 years, her survival – and that of her family – had depended upon them staying together. Now it depends upon her going her own way. Away from her parents and sisters, taught them French dictation, English grammar, history, geography, even table manners. She plucked stories from her imagination. She was the mastermind of their escape. She remained strong.

Never did she talk of her years in the prison, under house arrest or under police surveillance. To her family, Malika is now an international bestselling author and the most interviewed Moroccan in the world. She is a woman with a partner, prospects, book royalties. They don’t necessarily understand her reasons for writing the book, or what it took to do so. They don’t hear the unanswered questions that assail her every night in bed. Like her friends, her family doesn’t see that not only is Malika not always strong, she is often at the point of breaking.

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family, she feels she can at least start thinking about the future. She can fulfil her mission by writing the film script of her life story, then she can begin learning to live. “My family has only perceived the success,” she says. “They haven’t understood what it has cost. Maybe it is too early for them to understand ... that the only strength I have is that whatever King Hassan II did to us, however powerful he was, however untouchable he was – thanks to Europe which put him in that position – one woman with no weapons, no power, nothing, succeeded in defeating him.

“And so, when the history of Morocco is written in 40 or 50 years, no historian will forget to associate the history of King Hassan II with the drama and tragedy of the Oufkir family. To me that is the most important thing. That was my way of survival. That was my way of being able to avenge my family.”

The flight from Paris takes just under three hours. For many Moroccans working in France, away from family and homeland, it is a joyous moment, flying over the Pyrenees and the snow-capped Atlas Mountains, before touching down at the delightfully ramshackle Marrakesh airport.

For Malika Oufkir, the emotions are more complex. This is her third time back since she was allowed to leave the country in 1996.

Last year, she joined a symbolic march of activists to Tazmamart, a jail in the Atlas Mountains where 58 political prisoners were shut away in small, lightless cells for 18 years. Half of them died from malnutrition. They were among the thousands of people who disappeared during King Hassan’s 38-year strong-arm reign.

This time, Malika is coming to Morocco to attend a friend’s wedding. She and her husband, Eric, have invited me to join them for the celebrations, and to witness first-hand how she is now treated in the country that once banished her.

Her oppressor, King Hassan II – for whom, amazingly perhaps, she feels no hatred – died two years ago and was succeeded by his son Muhammad VI. The young king has acknowledged the state’s role in the torture and abduction of political opponents and has begun compensating some of the victims of abuse. The Oufkirs are still waiting. “Some people were born to live,” Malika tells me. “Others were born to wait.”

On our arrival in the terracotta-walled desert city of Marrakesh, we walk towards the airport exit and Malika says to the customs officer: “Do I need to declare something?” The officer looks at her and, grinning broadly, says: “You need declare nothing. Welcome home.”

Over the next three days and nights, I watch Malika welcomed “home”. In the square, where the dusk turns pink and smoky with the smell of charcoaled meats and hash joints, and the souks burst with acrobats, hawkers, beggars and cobras, Malika walks among her people with the air of someone just returning from a distant voyage. She is there, but she is not there. “It is like I have made a long journey away from the planet and I am coming back,” she says.

At the wedding the following night, where hundreds of guests have gathered in tents or under a sheltering sky, amidst a cacophony of drum beats, chanting and traditional Moroccan music, she cuts an elegant but remote figure.

“Some people were born to live,” Malika tells me. “Others were born to wait.”