



Survivor and story teller Malika Oufkir, 48, in her Paris apartment. Top right: King Hassan II, Princess Amina and (right) her companion, Malika, at the age of eight in 1961.

It is a story that beggars belief – a whole family is thrown into an isolated Moroccan prison for the sins of the father and left to rot for 20 years. **David Leser interviews Malika Oufkir**, the woman who has retold their story in an amazing book.



From a PALACE to a prison

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.

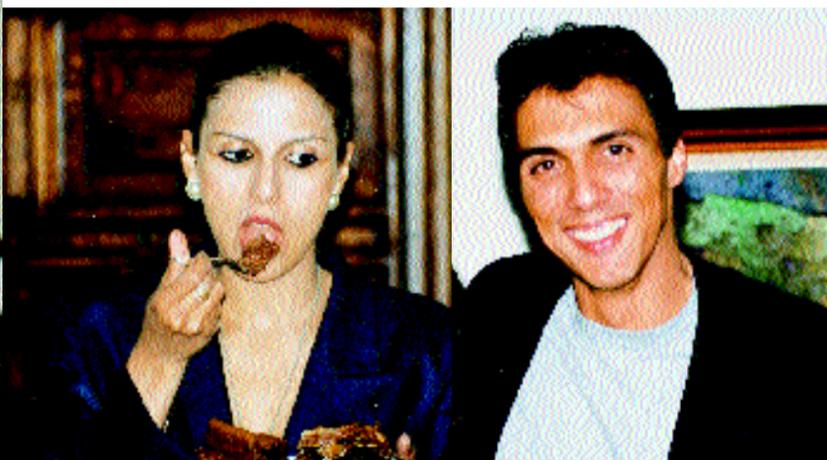
Malika Oufkir was born on April 2, 1953, in a Moroccan hospital run by nuns. Her father, General Muhammad Oufkir, was aide to the King of Morocco, the second most powerful man in the country. His wife Fatima, Malika's mother, was a rich and beautiful heiress, as well as friend to the Moroccan King's two wives.

At the age of five, Malika was taken ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARNAUD FEVRIER/MPA/BIG AUSTRALIA, SVEN ARNSTEIN. FROM *STOLEN LIVES: TWENTY YEARS IN A DESERT JAIL* BY MALIKA OUFKIR.



Malika's mother, Fatima (left), and father General Muhammad Oufkir in the late '60s, whose death led to his family's jailing. Above right: Two of Malika's sisters, Soukaina, 38, now an artist, and (right) Myriam, 47, who is debilitated by epilepsy.



Above left to right: Malika's siblings have struggled to adjust to normal life. Maria, 39, has cancer and lives alone in Paris, Raouf, 46, has few friends and Abdellatif, 33, avoids family gatherings as they remind him of prison.

from her parents and brought to live among the palace concubines of King Muhammad V. The king had decided he wanted a sister, a playmate, for his daughter, Princess Amina, who was the same age as Malika. His word was final.

Three years later, in 1961, King Muhammad died and his son, Hassan II, ascended the throne. He assumed the role of adoptive father to Malika.

For more than 11 years, Malika Oufkir lived in the Royal Palace of Rabat. On the gilded surface it looked like a childhood fairytale: the best teachers in the kingdom; receptions for heads of state; holidays in seaside and mountain palaces; private hospitals, zoos, 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 family, but suffered terribly from the trauma of being separated from her own.

"Tearing me away from my mother meant tearing me away from life," she wrote in *Stolen Lives*. "My parents never spoke to me of this period. If there were explanations, I've forgotten them. Did my mother cry until dawn, as I did?"

She saw her parents rarely. Her father was away constantly because of work. Her mother visited the palace infrequently, and then only briefly.

Malika dreamed of freedom. On two occasions, once at the age of 10, then again at 12, she attempted suicide. They were childish, bungled attempts, but they revealed a desperate loneliness.

"The older I grew, the more I felt like I was a prisoner," she wrote. "I belonged body and soul to the Palace and I was suffocating there."

Finally, in 1969, at the age of 16, she was allowed to return home. Afraid that the King had planned to marry her off to a general's son, she had written to her father threatening to run away unless he brought her home.

She returned to live in the family's sumptuous villa in Rabat, and to a family she barely knew. Her father was by now the country's defence minister, a feared and powerful figure who had been sentenced to life imprisonment in absentia by France for the 1965 abduction and murder of Morocco's Opposition leader, Mehdi Ben Barka.

Her mother was a ravishing bohemian with a love of classical Oriental music, movies and fast cars. Together, she and Malika's father had five other children: Myriam, then 15; Raouf, the eldest son, 14; two younger girls, Maria, seven, and Soukaina, six; and a baby boy, Abdellatif.

For the next two years, Malika lived a life of complete rebellion. She defied her father by wearing miniskirts and going to nightclubs, and she chose extreme left-wing friends. In general, she behaved like a spoiled, rich teenager.

"I dreamed of a normal life, but I had no idea what that meant," she has said. "My world was so easy. I just had to snap my fingers and anything I wanted was mine. Travel? I flew first class the way others took the bus. Clothes? I bought up couturier collections in every major European city.

"My life was an endless round of parties and balls, with guests straight out of the

society gossip columns."

Malika 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 rocked 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 guests. The King responded by executing 10 of the officers and evicting their children from their homes. It was the first indication to Malika that the crimes of the father might be visited on his family.

A little more than a year later, in August 1972, another attempt was made on the King's life, when his Boeing 727 was strafed on its way back from France by three Moroccan Air Force jets. The architect of the coup attempt was believed to be General Oufkir. Relations between the two men had long since broken down over the King's draconian approach to political unrest.

The day after the attempt on the King's life, Malika was staying at the family home in Casablanca when she received a call from her mother.

Fatima Oufkir came straight to the point. "Your father's dead. Pack your things and come back to Rabat."

For the Oufkir family, the descent into hell had begun.

Try and recall 20 years of your life. School finished and you took a job or went to university. You hauled a backpack across Asia and Europe. You heard Pink Floyd for the first time. You fell in love. You started a family. You saw movements sweep the world – flower power, feminism, gay liberation. You discovered colour television and computers. You read the morning papers and barracked for a local football team. You went to parties, took holidays and made plans.

On December 23, 1972, Malika Oufkir, her five brothers and sisters, their mother and two servants were escorted from their home in the most fashionable quarter of Rabat and sent into an exile that was to last nearly two decades.

With 20 designer suitcases filled to bursting, they were taken to an army barracks in the middle of the desert near the Algerian border, to a place called Assa, where, in the summer, the thermometer climbed to 55 degrees Celsius in the shade.

As Malika wrote, "With the dry season came the sandstorms. The gales shattered the window panes. The house [barracks] was full of sand which got everywhere, covering our faces and bodies. It brought with it huge, hairy, highly venomous spiders ... We also tried to avoid the thousands of scorpions that slipped in everywhere, under the beds, on the walls and between our sheets."

After almost a year there, the family was transferred to a ruined fort east of the Atlas Mountains, where they were to languish for four more years.

"They were put on starvation rations and their clothes were reduced to rags."

Raouf, still mourning the loss of his father, went through puberty in this place. Myriam, an epileptic, began suffering from increasingly violent fits. Maria turned increasingly anorexic. Soukaina was seized by moods of manic depression. Abdellatif, the youngest, became the object of the family's love and attention. It was a natural but desperate bid to shield him from what his young life had recently become.

Malika nearly died from peritonitis and for days lay in a virtual coma before her temperature subsided. Her weight plummeted and she lost all her hair.

Occasionally, during these four years, the family received censored letters from the outside, but it was now dicing with death to have anything to do with the Oufkirs. Even the King's brother, Prince Moulay Abdallah, was put under house arrest after daring to ask his brother for clemency for the family.

At the beginning of 1977, the Oufkirs sent King Hassan II a petition signed in their own blood, telling him it was unworthy of him to allow a mother and her children to suffer this way. The King responded by sending them to another prison where the conditions were even more appalling.

Bir-Jdid prison was 45km south of Casablanca, Morocco's largest city. Here the family was placed in separate cells for the next 10 years: Fatima in a cell with her youngest child, Abdellatif; Malika in a cell with her three sisters; the two servants, Achoura and Halima, together in another cell; and Raouf in solitary confinement.

They were put on starvation rations and

their clothes were reduced to rags. Their dark cells were variously infested by mosquitoes, mice, frogs, cockroaches, fleas and, worst of all, huge rats which they would have to beat off. Their only means of washing themselves was with laundry detergent.

All of them succumbed to fevers, infections and diarrhoea. Myriam was so sick with epilepsy she barely left her bed for eight years. Raouf developed painful abscesses in his mouth, which later caused his teeth to fall out. Abdellatif, at the age of eight, tried to commit suicide by swallowing medication.

How they managed to survive – all of them – still defies comprehension.

Malika believes it was partly because they had access to a world beyond their prison. They had managed to keep a radio hidden from the prison guards, from which Raouf had devised an ingenious transmission network running between the cells.

Also, they had *The Story* – a 19th-century Russian fable which Malika had constructed from her own imagination and presented to them every day for 10 years via the same transmission system.

"Altogether, [in *The Story*] there were 150 characters," she says, "all different, all fascinating. Their appearance would reveal itself first, then their personality, their paths and their destinies.

"Then I would invent a past for them, a genealogy and a family, for the children craved to know everything about them ...

"The *Story* was so real to them that I could manipulate and influence them at will. When I sensed they were unhappy, ▶

FAMILY PHOTOS COURTESY OF MALIKA OUFKIR

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.

"I 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.



Malika at home in Paris with her husband, French architect Eric Bordreuil, and Nawal, six, the daughter of Malika's sister, Myriam, whom they have adopted.

"Mother never tired of looking at us, but she cried in secret to see us so ... starved."

Mother didn't recognise her little girls. She had last seen Soukaina and Maria when they were 14 and 15 years old, and now they were young women of 22 and 24. Raouf was a man, resembling my father in build. Abdellatif was now a youth of 17.

"Mother was as beautiful as ever, but the hardship and grief had taken a terrible toll ... We were gaunt and pale, with dark rings round our eyes and bloodless lips, sparse hair and legs that were barely able to carry us. Mother gazed at us for hours. She never tired of looking at us, but she cried in secret to see us so emaciated, so starved."

Their joy at being together would last from March until November 1986 when, suddenly, without any explanation, they were split up again.

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 also die. Soukaina "won" and Malika began helping to slash her veins with a sardine can and knitting needle. Back in solitary, Raouf decided to end his life as well.

"That night, we went crazy," said Malika. "The whole situation became a psychodrama brought to life ... we had completely lost our bearings and all notions of reality.

"That night of the long knives, as we called it, was the worst night of our entire lives.

Anything was possible: murdering a sibling, suicide, or blowing up the prison with our butane cylinders."

In their first prison, nearly 15 years earlier, a friendly guard had allowed a renowned clairvoyant from a nearby village to come and see them.

He told them their ordeal would last a very long time, but that a miracle would eventually intervene.

Perhaps this was the miracle, because not only did none of the family die that night, but it galvanised them into action. In fact, five months later, they executed one of the most audacious escapes imaginable.

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 and replacing the stone slabs with a cement mixture of earth, washing powder and flour that looked exactly like the wall. The guards never noticed.

On the night of April 19, 1987, Malika, Raouf, Maria and Abdellatif escaped.

Wild-eyed, their bodies bloated from the

effects of starvation, wearing shoes cut from their old designer suitcases, they remained at large for five electrifying, sleepless, famished days, managing to elude the Moroccan army and secret police in the process.

During that time, they returned to their old neighbourhood and found, to their horror, the family home razed to the ground. Even more shocking, many of their old friends turned them away, too scared to be seen in their company.

In desperation they contacted French television, which broadcast their plight and amazing escape around the world. So embarrassed was the King by these revelations that he ordered the remaining family members released from prison. 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.

He placed them under house arrest in a luxurious villa in Marrakesh for the next three-and-a-half years.

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 loft filled with 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."

Theirs 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 home, in my bedroom."

Her bedroom is small and dark, just like a cell. At night, when she goes to sleep – if she goes to sleep – it is never before 3am, and only to the noise of the television. It is an antidote against the crushing silence of her desert prisons. And when she dreams, it is always of her escape, down a long, dark tunnel.

She is cold constantly and, on some days, cannot eat. She hoards food and longs for the cravings she had in prison. They rarely come. She cannot stand to see people in restaurants talking as they eat, or leaving food on their plates.

Technology is incomprehensible to her, even though she is never without her mobile phone. Her sense of time is virtually non-existent. An hour is a day is a year. "I ask myself every day: 'Do I have a chance to become normal?' I know that to start living I must forget the past, but I can't. I am always living in the past."

Malika has consulted a number of psychologists, but without success, each of



Miraculous survivors: Malika (left) and her mother, Fatima, 65, on a recent return visit to their homeland.

"I know that to start living I must forget the past, but ... I am always living in the past."

them too overwhelmed by her life story to offer much guidance.

For nearly 20 years, she maintained a mask of extraordinary courage as she attempted to keep her family's spirits alive. In a sense she usurped her mother's role as she educated her 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 palace. Never did she share her grief at being removed from her parents at such a young age. Never did she ask her mother how she and her father could have abandoned her. Never was she able to properly reconcile the excruciating twists of fate that had seen her natural father attempt to kill her adoptive father, before being executed himself by the man who had raised her.

Whom should she love? How should she live? To whom should she turn?

Her sister, Myriam, is now so sick from epilepsy she cannot look after her six-year-old daughter, Nawal. Malika, unable to have children herself, has chosen to adopt her.

Maria, the next sister, has cancer of the bladder and lives alone in Paris.

Raouf, 43, has never been to school. He has no job, few friends and a child whom he rarely sees. Abdellatif lives in a Paris studio

on his own, without friends or prospects. He refuses to spend time with the family as a whole because it reminds him immediately of prison.

"I am sure if you were to meet him," Malika says, "your first reaction would be to cry. Your heart would be broken because, even though he is a man of 32, he really is only a boy of 10. He's been totally destroyed."

Of her siblings, only Soukaina appears as if she might be coping. Two years ago, at the age of 36, she got her high school diploma, with merit. She lives alone in Paris on unemployment benefits.

"It is like a laboratory experiment," Malika reflects, "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 ►

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LESER.



Malika with water sellers in Djemaa el-Fna, the main square of Morocco's capital, Marrakesh. "It is like I have made a long journey and I am coming back," she says.

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

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

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.

All night, people brush by her, greet her, welcome her back, touch her lightly on the shoulder with a confidence or two. Malika smiles at them, nods her head and sways her body to the music. She is there, but she is not there.

Her friend, Sabah, tells me Malika is a destroyed woman and that she will never recover from what has happened. Perhaps she is right. Perhaps you can never return from the grave. W