

FLEYDO ENGLISH SCHOOL

Story Material

The Sunday Table

A warm and powerful story set in Marseille about a teenager who meets her estranged Algerian-French grandmother for the first time and heals a ten-year family rift through food, honesty, and forgiveness.

Level: B1**Skill:** Reading**Duration:** ~45 min**Age:** Teens (11-16)**Topic:** Family**Pages:** 12

The Story

Chapter I— The Woman in— the Photograph

There was a photograph in Yasmine Bouchard's house that nobody talked about. It sat on the bookshelf in the living room, half-hidden behind a row of novels: a woman in her forties with dark eyes, silver-streaked hair, and an expression that managed to be stern and beautiful at the same time. She was standing in a kitchen, a wooden spoon in one hand, the other hand on her hip, looking directly at the camera with a gaze that said: I dare you. Yasmine had asked about the photograph exactly once, when she was nine. Her mother, Leila, had gone very still and said: "That is your grandmother. We do not see her any more." No further explanation. The subject was closed.

Yasmine was fifteen now and lived in Lyon with her mother and her father, Pierre — a quiet, kind French man who taught mathematics at the local lycee and who was, in Yasmine's opinion, the most patient person alive. She knew the basic facts: her mother was Algerian-French, born in Marseille. Her grandmother, Fatima Khelifi, still lived in Marseille, in the same apartment in the old quarter near the Vieux-Port where Leila had grown up. They had been **estranged** since before Yasmine was born — a rift so complete that Yasmine had never met her grandmother, never heard her voice, never tasted her cooking.

The reason, pieced together from overheard conversations and her father's careful explanations, was this: when Leila had married Pierre — a white French man, not Algerian, not Muslim — Fatima had objected. Not quietly. Not diplomatically. Explosively. She had said things that could not be unsaid. Leila had said things back. Doors were slammed. Phone calls ended in silence. Letters were returned unopened. Ten years of nothing. A decade of empty space where a grandmother should have been.

"She is **stubborn**," Leila said on the rare occasions the subject surfaced, always with the same tight jaw and bright eyes. "She made her choice, and I made mine." But Yasmine noticed things her mother thought she hid: the way Leila paused at Algerian food stalls in the market, the way she cooked couscous on Friday evenings with a precision that suggested ritual rather than hunger, the way she sometimes held the phone and stared at the screen as if fighting the impulse to dial a number she knew by heart. The **grudge** was real. But so was the love beneath it. Yasmine could feel both, pressing against each other like tectonic plates, and she knew that one day, something would crack.

Chapter II— Marseille

The idea came from Pierre. It was June, and Yasmine needed somewhere to stay for two weeks while her parents attended a family wedding in Brittany — Pierre's side, a large, cheerful clan of teachers and farmers who gathered every summer in a farmhouse near Saint-Malo. "What if Yasmine went to Marseille?" Pierre suggested one evening after dinner, with the careful casualness of a man who had been thinking about this for months. Leila looked at him as if he had suggested sending their daughter to the moon. "To see your mother," Pierre continued. "Two weeks. Just to meet her. Yasmine has a right to know her

grandmother." Leila was silent for a very long time. Then she said: "She will not agree." "She might," Pierre said. "People change."

Three phone calls and one very tense video conversation later, it was arranged. Grand-mere Fatima had agreed — reluctantly, formally, with conditions about mealtimes and curfews that suggested a military commander rather than a grandmother. Yasmine packed a suitcase, took the TGV from Lyon to Marseille — three hours of French countryside blurring past the window — and arrived at Gare Saint-Charles on a Tuesday afternoon in July. Marseille hit her like a wave: heat, light, noise, colour. The city cascaded down a hill towards the Mediterranean, white buildings stacked against a blue so intense it looked artificial. Palm trees lined the boulevards. The air smelled of salt, grilled fish, and pastis.

Grand-mere Fatima's apartment was on the fourth floor of a building in Le Panier — Marseille's oldest neighbourhood, a maze of narrow streets, painted shutters, and staircases that smelled of cumin and coffee. Yasmine climbed the stairs with her suitcase, her heart hammering, and knocked on a door painted dark blue. The woman who opened it was smaller than the photograph suggested. She was sixty-eight years old, straight-backed, with the same dark eyes and the same expression: stern, beautiful, daring. She looked at Yasmine for a long moment — taking in her face, searching for traces of Leila, perhaps finding them — and then said, in French with a Marseillais accent that was warm despite everything: "You look like your mother." She paused. "Come in. There is food."

The apartment was small, immaculate, and smelled of cinnamon and orange blossom. Every surface held something meaningful: framed photographs, embroidered cushions, a shelf of Arabic books, a collection of brass teapots from Algeria. And in the kitchen — which was clearly the heart of the apartment, the room where everything important happened — a pot of something extraordinary was simmering on the stove. "Sit," Grand-mere said, gesturing to the kitchen table. "Eat first. Talk later." It was, Yasmine would learn, Grand-mere Fatima's **hospitality** philosophy: food solves everything. Or at least, it provides the courage to try.

Chapter III— The Kitchen

The first week was careful. Grand-mere and Yasmine circled each other like cats in a new territory — polite, curious, wary. Fatima cooked constantly, as if feeding Yasmine were a form of communication that did not require the dangerous territory of words. Breakfast was msemen — Algerian flatbread — with honey and mint tea. Lunch was salads, grilled sardines, or tagine. And dinner was always an event: couscous with seven vegetables, lamb mechoui, chicken with preserved lemons and olives, or boureks — crispy pastry parcels filled with meat and herbs. The food was extraordinary — complex, layered, and made with a precision that Yasmine recognised from watching her mother cook. "Your mother learned in this kitchen," Grand-mere said one evening, turning chicken in a pan. "She stood where you are standing. She was your age." It was the first time she had mentioned Leila voluntarily.

Yasmine took the opening. "She still cooks your recipes," she said. "Every Friday. Couscous." Grand-mere's hands paused on the pan. She did not speak for several seconds. Then she turned back to the stove and said: "The couscous is a family **heirloom**. It came

from my mother, who learned it from her mother in Algiers. It is older than this apartment, older than this city, older than France. It is the recipe that holds this family together." She paused. "Even when the family is apart."

On the second Saturday, Grand-mere taught Yasmine to make the couscous from scratch. Not the quick version — the real version, the one that took an entire day. They rolled the semolina by hand, rubbing it between their palms until the grains were perfect. They prepared the broth: onions, tomatoes, chickpeas, turnips, courgettes, carrots, pumpkin. They slow-cooked lamb with ras el hanout — a spice mix that Grand-mere blended herself from twenty-two ingredients. "The secret," Grand-mere said, "is patience. You cannot rush couscous. It tells you when it is ready."

They worked side by side for six hours, and in that time, more was communicated than in any conversation. Yasmine watched her grandmother's hands — strong, precise, beautiful — and saw her mother's hands. She tasted the broth and tasted her childhood Fridays. She understood, in a way that words could never have conveyed, that food was not just nourishment. It was **heritage**. It was memory. It was love stored in a recipe and released every time someone stood in a kitchen and chose to make it again. And she understood something else: this was what her mother had lost when she lost her mother. Not just a relationship. A language.

Chapter IV— The Story

On a warm evening in the second week, sitting on the balcony with mint tea and a plate of makroud — date-filled semolina biscuits — Grand-mere told Yasmine her story. She had come to France from Algiers in 1975, at the age of nineteen, alone. Her family had been part of the great wave of Algerian **immigrants** who settled in Marseille, drawn by work and the proximity of the sea that connected them to home. She had arrived with a suitcase, two hundred francs, and a recipe book that her mother had written out by hand on the night before she left.

"I was terrified," Fatima said. "I spoke French badly. I knew nobody. The city was enormous and cold — not the temperature, the people. They looked at me and saw 'Algerian.' Not a person. A category." She had worked in a garment factory for five years, saved every franc, married a man from her village — Yasmine's grandfather, Hamid, who had died before Yasmine was born — and eventually opened a small catering business from the apartment kitchen. She built a community around her table. Every Sunday, neighbours, friends, and anyone who was hungry or lonely was welcome. The Sunday table became her **legacy** — a place where the food was Algerian but the welcome was universal.

"When Leila married Pierre," Grand-mere said, and her voice changed — harder, defensive, ashamed — "I was afraid. Not because Pierre is a bad man. He is a good man. I knew that even then. I was afraid because I had spent my whole life fighting to keep our **heritage** alive — the language, the food, the faith, the customs. And I saw Leila choosing a different path, and I thought: she is leaving us. She is leaving everything I built." She was quiet for a moment. "I was wrong. She was not leaving. She was growing. But I could not see that. My **prejudice** was louder than my love."

Yasmine did not know what to say. She held her grandmother's hand — small, strong, warm from the tea glass — and felt the weight of ten years of silence between two women who loved each other and did not know how to say so. "Have you ever told Maman this?" she asked. Grand-mere shook her head. "I am too **stubborn**. She is too stubborn. We are the same person, your mother and I. That is the problem." She looked at Yasmine. "But you are here. And you are both of us. Perhaps that is enough."

Chapter V— The Sunday Table

On her last Sunday in Marseille, Yasmine asked Grand-mere if she could invite someone to the Sunday table. Grand-mere raised an eyebrow. "Who?" "Maman," Yasmine said. The kitchen went very still. Grand-mere stood at the stove, her back to Yasmine, not moving. Seconds passed. Then she said, in a voice so quiet Yasmine almost missed it: "She will not come." "She might," Yasmine said. "People change." She was quoting her father. She hoped he was right.

The phone call lasted eleven minutes. Yasmine stood on the balcony, holding her phone, while inside the apartment Grand-mere cooked with the focused intensity of a woman trying to keep her hands busy while her heart rearranged itself. Leila was silent for a long time. Then she said: "Is she well?" "She is well. She misses you. She will not say it, but she misses you." Another silence. "I will take the train tomorrow morning," Leila said. "Tell her..." She paused. "Tell her I am coming for the couscous." Yasmine relayed the message. Grand-mere nodded once, turned back to the stove, and began preparing enough food for twenty people. It was her way of saying everything she could not say in words.

Leila arrived at noon. She stood in the doorway of the apartment, and Grand-mere stood in the kitchen, and for a moment neither moved. Ten years of silence. Ten years of letters returned and calls not made and birthdays missed and words unsaid. Then Grand-mere did something Yasmine had never seen her do. She cried. Not dramatically — two tears, quickly wiped, but real. And she said, in Arabic, the language of the heart: "I am sorry. I was wrong. You are my daughter, and I love you, and I am sorry." Leila crossed the room and held her mother, and Grand-mere held her back, and Yasmine — standing in the kitchen, crying openly, not caring — understood that **forgiveness** was not a single moment. It was a door. And walking through it was the bravest thing either of these women had ever done.

The Sunday lunch that followed was the best meal Yasmine had ever eaten. Not because the food was different — it was the same couscous, the same recipes — but because the table was full. Grand-mere sat at the head. Leila sat beside her. Neighbours arrived and were introduced. Stories were told — about Algeria, about Marseille, about Lyon, about a little girl named Yasmine who had come to a city she did not know and had, by simply being present, reminded two **stubborn** women that love was more important than pride. The food was passed. The tea was poured. And the Sunday table — Grand-mere Fatima's greatest **tradition** — welcomed one more generation home.

Key Vocabulary

Term	Definition
Estranged	No longer close to someone because of a disagreement or conflict
Reconciliation	The restoration of friendly relations after a disagreement
Grudge	A persistent feeling of ill will towards someone who has wronged you
Heritage	Cultural traditions, recipes, or values passed down through generations
Stubborn	Determined not to change your opinion or behaviour
Matriarch	A woman who is head of a family or community
Heirloom	An object that has been passed down through a family for generations
Apology	An expression of regret for having done something wrong
Prejudice	An unfair opinion formed without knowledge or reason
Vulnerability	The quality of being open and honest about your emotions
Dialect	A regional form of a language that differs from the standard version
Grief	Deep sadness, especially caused by loss or death
Tradition	A custom or belief passed down through generations
Hospitality	The friendly and generous treatment of guests and visitors
Forgiveness	The act of pardoning someone for a mistake or wrongdoing
Immigrant	A person who moves to a different country to live permanently
Cuisine	A style of cooking from a particular country or region
Empathy	The ability to understand and share another person's feelings
Resilience	The ability to recover from difficulties and keep going
Legacy	Something meaningful left behind for future generations

Comprehension Quiz

1. Why had Yasmine never met her grandmother?

- A) Her grandmother lived in another country
- B) A family argument ten years ago had caused her mother and grandmother to stop speaking
- C) Her grandmother had died before she was born
- D) Yasmine's family moved away from Marseille

2. What was the original cause of the family rift?

- A) A disagreement about money
- B) Grand-mere Fatima disapproved of Yasmine's mother marrying a non-Algerian man
- C) A business partnership that went wrong
- D) An argument about where to live

3. What brought Yasmine to Marseille?

- A) A school trip
- B) Her father sent her for the summer hoping she could bridge the gap between her mother and grandmother
- C) She ran away from home
- D) She won a cooking competition

4. How did Grand-mere Fatima first react to Yasmine's arrival?

- A) She refused to open the door
- B) She was cautious and formal but could not hide her emotion at meeting her granddaughter
- C) She was angry and sent Yasmine away
- D) She pretended not to know who Yasmine was

5. What role did cooking play in their relationship?

- A) It had no importance at all
- B) Cooking together — especially the family couscous recipe — became the language they used to connect
- C) Grand-mere refused to cook for Yasmine
- D) Yasmine did not like Algerian food

6. What did Yasmine learn about her grandmother's life?

- A) That she had always been wealthy and comfortable
- B) That she had immigrated alone from Algeria at nineteen and built a life from nothing
- C) That she had never worked
- D) That she had always lived in France

7. What was the Sunday table tradition?

- A) A weekly exam at school
- B) A family meal every Sunday where neighbours and friends gathered at Grand-mere's table
- C) A weekly visit to church
- D) A television programme they watched together

8. What finally brought the mother and grandmother together?

- A) A legal requirement
- B) Yasmine arranged a Sunday lunch and both women came, reconnecting through food and honesty
- C) They accidentally met on the street
- D) A third party forced them to talk

9. Why did Grand-mere finally apologise?

- A) Because she was told to by a judge
- B) Because she realised her prejudice had cost her ten years with her daughter and granddaughter
- C) Because she needed money
- D) She never apologised

10. What is the main message of the story?

- A) That family arguments can never be resolved
- B) That food, honesty, and the willingness to forgive can heal even the deepest family wounds
- C) That grandparents should always be obeyed without question
- D) That some relationships are not worth saving

Answer Key

#	Ans	Question
1	B	Why had Yasmine never met her grandmother?
2	B	What was the original cause of the family rift?
3	B	What brought Yasmine to Marseille?
4	B	How did Grand-mere Fatima first react to Yasmine's arrival?
5	B	What role did cooking play in their relationship?
6	B	What did Yasmine learn about her grandmother's life?
7	B	What was the Sunday table tradition?
8	B	What finally brought the mother and grandmother together?
9	B	Why did Grand-mere finally apologise?
10	B	What is the main message of the story?

Thank you for reading! Visit www.fleydo.com for more.