

The Afareet

Mirette Bahgat. Egypt

Racism is man's gravest threat to man
– the maximum of hatred for a minimum of reason.
Abraham J. Heschel

Summer 1934

Siwa Oasis, Western Egypt

I

“Rashid, Rashid, wake up boy!” a faraway voice called but I pretended to be asleep. I can't think of another day of hard work under the burning sun carrying heavy loads and transferring them from one place to another. My only consolation was spending the days with my friend Gaafar. He was the kindest most loyal friend I have ever had. Sometimes I felt ashamed that my only friend was just a donkey, but I've always feared getting close to people, especially strange looking people coming from far away places to live in our oasis. My mother used to tell us stories when we were younger about how those foreigners were bedeviled; she even called them *afareet*.¹ She warned us not to talk to them or even look at them or we'd be cursed; but I couldn't help but sneak a peak whenever a foreigner was passing by. I was always taken by the color of their skin; it was so white compared to my dark skin. Their pale eyes and strange accent frightened me and the way they dressed was so shocking for me. I had a strange feeling towards them; I hated them, yes, but I also envied them. Why do they walk as if they are gods on earth and I have to walk looking down on the ground, as if I'm ashamed of some crime I committed. I know my sister Karima envied their girls because to her eyes they looked so beautiful with their colorful clothes and their carefree behavior while she was only allowed to wear a black veil covering all her body and face when going out. I always wondered if they are the *afareet* or we are.

“Rashid, I know you are awake, get up now!” mama shouted.

It was really hot outside our small hut in the village. I went to untie Gaafar. Poor donkey, he is really getting old for all this hard work. Today we have to go to the police station to carry some belongings of the officer to his house in the city. Officer Ahmed Abdel Hafiz was a hateful figure in Siwa. He was a tough brutal man, married to an English woman who the oasis people thought was the reason for his merciless behavior. I went to the station along with Gaafar and had to pick up three large boxes and load them on the cart. I wondered what was in these boxes as they were really heavy. It was a long way from the station

1. Arabic word meaning devil.

to the city of Agurhmi, six hours under the hot sun just to deliver these three old looking boxes. Again, the curiosity was killing me to find out what was in them, but no, the officer would kill me if he found out that I opened his boxes.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when I decided to stop and feed Gafaar. We stopped under a palm tree and I went down to untie Gaafar from the cart and feed him. I picked some dates from the ground to eat myself. I usually carry some food with me when I'm traveling long distances but today I was so late that I forgot to take the food Mama prepared for me. Is there any possibility that these boxes might have some food; would the officer notice if I opened the boxes and took just a small piece of whatever it was there?

The sound of my growling stomach that can't be silenced by the dates was so high that it covered the sound of my mind. I finally decided to open the boxes.

II

I opened the first box, inside it was a pile of old books. I felt really desperate since I was hoping to find some food; maybe in the second box. I quickly went to the second box, untied the ropes and reached inside; there were old pictures, photo albums and strange looking statues. The desperation filled me as I weakly went to the third box to untie it and there I found a very strange looking box with a screen and handle on its side. I sat beside the boxes exhausted, hot and really hungry. I had no choice but to feed on the dates. I collected the ropes and, as I went to the first box, I was quickly attracted by a colorful book on top of it. I grabbed the book and, as I opened the first page, I laughed out loud. Three cartoon images of two girls and a boy popped out of the page. The two girls and the boy looked completely different from each other; one girl had yellow hair and fair skin; the other girl had black skin and short brown hair. The boy had yellow skin and very narrow eyes. They all held each other's hands and were smiling. As I flipped the pages of the book, several pictures popped out at me and the more pictures popped the louder I laughed. Pictures of the children wandering in beautiful green fields, sun shining above them, a rabbit here and a bird there and flowers of all kinds surrounded them. I felt a strange feeling inside; it was the first time I had seen something like that and I wished so much to go inside the story and be with them. I didn't care how different they looked, I only cared about how happy and peaceful they all looked together and I was not. I closed the book with mixed feelings of happiness and sorrow. I put the book back into the first box and tied it.

As I went to the second box, I looked inside and I grabbed a very old photo album. Inside the photo album there were pictures of the officer's English wife and his daughter and son. At first, I felt afraid to look directly at the pictures. I heard my mum's voice inside me yelling "Don't talk to them or look at them, they are bedeviled" but as I glanced again at the pictures I couldn't help but notice how beautiful the English woman looked. She was dressed in a beautiful dress and holding her two little children. My tears fell as I strongly wished to be held by that woman; how gentle and caring she looked. I can't remember a time when Mama held me that tight or kissed me. I flipped the photo album and saw pictures of the family in strange amazing places I had never seen before; here beside a very high triangular tower and another photo of a very long beautiful river, and there a photo of high green mountains.

Something was changing inside me as I closed the photo album and placed it in the second box. I felt as if the fear and worry inside my heart were fading and instead serenity and calmness were flooding me. I forgot all about the hunger and hot weather as I went to the third one and, without any hesitation, I grabbed the strange looking box.

The small box had a wide screen and a small handle on its side. I wondered what this thing really was. I started rotating the handle and to my amazement a song started to play and images were rapidly moving on the big screen. I was terrified and threw the box away and yelled *A'oz bi Allah*² but as I calmed down I went nearer to the box and held it very carefully and slowly started to rotate the handle again. Slow sad music played as photos of the English woman rotated. She was wearing a white dress with a cap on her hair and standing beside a wounded black child inside what seemed like a hospital. I noticed the differences between the woman and the baby, white and black, rich and poor, healthy and sick, old and young; but in these images nothing mattered, they were together. I put my small hands beside the images and compared my color to the color of both the baby and the woman, and it really looked as if it was in the middle, not too white and not too dark. The rotating images were full of agony, wounded people everywhere and of every color; it looked like a war. It must be war causing all this pain and killing all these people.

In our small oasis, wars have been taking place too. People from different tribes were killing each other for no reason, just because they are different. Nobody was willing to hear the other; fear and worry was inside every one of us and every man asked himself when his turn would come to be killed. It is strange how people from my tribe go to mosques to pray in the morning and then sit together in the night planning a plot to kill.

It was getting late. I started to tie Gaafar back to the cart and drove to the city. It was sunset as I reached the city of Agurhmi; tired and exhausted but happy and peaceful.

III

As I entered the city, I felt something strange in the environment. All the lights of the city were off and nobody was in the streets. I felt fear inside me as I gazed through the streets; Gaafar was acting strangely too. As I drove to the rural part of the city towards the officer's house, I could see faraway lights and hear distant noises; something was not going right. I got down from the cart and tied Gaafar to a palm tree and went to see what was going on. As I went nearer, I could see a large group of men holding torches and heading towards the officer's house. Some of them were holding guns.

I felt terrified when I heard a man saying to the other "we must kill her and her children, she's a curse on the oasis; if her husband had not been Egyptian, we would have killed him also."

I couldn't believe what I heard and saw. I caught a glimpse of Haj Ali and Haj Mahmoud from our tribe between the crowds. I ran towards them and asked them what was

2. Arabic prayer meaning "God save me".

going on. “What brought you here, Rashid?” Haj Ali asked me. “Go back home son, there’s no place for you here.”

I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t leave them to kill that innocent woman and her children; I had to go quickly to the officer’s house before they reached it and help the woman and her kids to hide. I ran as fast as I could; my mind went blank and I didn’t know how to help them but I had only one thing in mind, the woman and her children should not die.

I arrived at the officer’s house and started knocking the door fiercely. “Who is it?” the woman’s voice called from behind the door.

I answered, “Open please, it’s me Rashid. The officer sent me.”

The officer’s wife opened the door and looked at me gently: “Hello young boy, please come in.” I went to the house, and looked at the woman, she had the same beautiful face and caring gentle looks I saw in the photos.

“So did you bring the boxes from the station?” she asked.

“Madam, I left the cart near the city gates. I came quickly to warn you. You have to hide now, you and your children, they are coming to kill you,” I said.

“What? I don’t understand. Who wants to kill me? What is going on?” she asked, shocked.

“Madam, please, we have no time. They should be here anytime now, the men from the village; they want to kill you, please let’s hide.”

The woman rushed to the window and saw the huge crowds of men coming towards the house. “Please good boy, take my children to the back of house. I trust you, but I have to stay here and face them. I did nothing wrong and therefore shall not hide. They legitimized killing me just because I’m of a different color. They have to understand how wrong they are.”

I cried and begged the woman to come with me but she refused. The boy and the girl stood terrified beside me and cried too as she kept telling me to go away and leave her.

“I will be fine kids, don’t worry.” She kissed her children and to my amazement she leaned down and kissed me on my cheek. “Thank you my little boy, God bless you.”

I took the children and went through the back door quickly to hide in the palm tree garden. I saw the woman from afar coming out of the house to face the outraged crowd. I couldn’t stand the image so I held the two children tightly close to me as we all closed our eyes and held each others hands. After a few seconds, I heard shots in the air and screams. I cried loudly *Hasbona Allah wa ne’m elwakeel. Ina li allah wi ena elih li rage’oon.*⁵

5. A prayer from the Koran said when someone dies.