

Abel in the Bar by the Youth Hostel

by Josh Cook

"It felt like the space under my skin had been filled with desert sand. I did not open my eyes for my body was covered with the dust. A camel could have walked over me and not noticed. I needed to wipe my eyes before I could open them and my body was frozen in pain. I could not even bring my hand to my face."

An old Iraqi man talks in a corner booth in a bar near the local hostel. He's there most nights, dressed in the light white linens of the desert, sipping slowly thick ports all night. The skin on his face could repel all liquids hurled at it. He displays the stops and starts of his narrative flow with gentle tugs on his thick black mustache. His eyes are pebble holes in the thick glass windows of anciently abandoned dockside warehouses.

"I thought, 'I must be in hell.' The pain. The heat. The dust. My body unable to move. I thought I had died and had been damned. Even as the pain ebbed away like a receding tide from my fingers and toes I thought it was hell. I reasoned that hell would allow for brief moments of hope only to rush back with fiercer fury. It was logical for hell to induce hope, for the truly hopeless cannot be tortured."

The kids from the hostel usually spent their first night there, just to go out somewhere in an unfamiliar area. The bartender learned sparse phrases in a dozen languages and had the bathrooms marked in five. Most of the kids were Western, Europe and America. They had sturdy backpacks and wallets filled with travelers checks and a patience for the stories of any exotic they meet. They paint their ruddy faces with demands. "Give me a meaningful experience!"

"Expand my horizons!" "Recognize my worldliness!" "I am a suitable sexual encounter partner!" First night kids wear periods at the ends of those phrases, so the bartender points them to the elder exotic with stories to tell and whispers to them about accessible late night underworlds in the town.

The bar is small, with a stage mostly used by bohemians into reading poems with a flip chart of graphs diagramming the images into three possible interpretations and applications to daily life. The poet reads while someone flips the paper; but they're only at the bar on Wednesdays. It's lined on two sides with continuous booths. Two person tables with chairs run along the benches. Abel always sits with his thick port opposite the stage, leaning into the corners so half his left leg hangs off the edge of the bench. The hostellers semi-circle around him.

"But the tide of pain continued to recede, so that I found feeling up to my wrists and ankles and then my knees and elbows. Even so it was like the dust that covered my body also covered my brain. My memories were pieces of furniture covered in sheets while construction is done on the house. I could make out their forms, but what looked like a table could have been a desk and I could not tell what color the chairs and couches were. I endeavored to pull the sheets from them but reasoned the best place to start was with the most recent addition to the house of my brain. I sought to uncover what I had been doing last, what had left me on my back covered in desert dust and for that I needed to see what was around me."

There were six hostellers sitting around Abel; three Germans, traveling together, one American who'd ditched a trust fund, and a Dutch couple who'd been backpacking and selling drugs around Europe. It was their first night in town. They'd met in the lobby all wanting an early night all deciding to just check out the bar for a drink or two and some information about the town. They all wanted to sit and listen a little, clink glasses around a table, smoke exotic

cigarettes and walk home, hands, money and consciousness firmly in their pockets.

“So, I brushed the dust off my eyes and opened them. But I could only see more dust, as if a house with dust walls were built around me while I slept. The air was so thick and dry that I could only keep my eyes open for a second before having to close them again. But I kept looking. There was no wind so it could not be a dust storm, but there the dust was. It must have been driven up by the same force that struck me down. When I could hold my eyes open I was able to make out faint lines and angles in the dust.”

Abel gently tugged on his thick black mustache. Sipped slowly his thick port. A local burst through the door cursing under his breath and waving his arms as if a helicopter sounding black fly circle his head. The bartender had the glass half-filled by the time the local's ass hit the stool and already had the bar-towel thrown over his listening shoulder. The local banged on the bar with his flat palm. The slapping hand scooped the glass and the contents plunged down the local's throat. The bartender didn't cap the liquor bottle so the glass was filled instantly after landing back on the bar. The hostellers turned back to Abel leaving the local to his own pathos.

“Then I saw other human forms rising like I had out of the dust but my legs were too weak to walk. So I stood waiting for the dust to fall, using my logic to reveal what the dust would not. If you throw a stone to the desert floor some of the sand is driven up. From that fact, from the dust, and from the faint lines in the sand I deduced that a great structure had fallen. That was my handhold on the first sheet over my memory. I remembered I had been working on some great structure and it had fallen to the desert.”

Three men walked in dressed in three shades of desperate black. They had the quiet of hunger-strikers. They sat around a table near the door. One of them went to the bar. Even the gestures of ordering

the drinks seemed like a violation. The bartender had seen the miasma of depression the bohemians sometimes brought in with the flip charts on their Wednesday nights, but these men brought something different. They had distraught faces of a disastrous blood soaked misplayed drug deal. They drank their drinks quietly. Mostly looking at the small square windows and out the door. They ordered three more rounds that way, before all sighing in near unison and leaving.

"The dust was settling and it was then that I grasped the grandness of what had to have fallen. I did not know how long I had been unconscious and it had been at least a half an hour, maybe even a little more, since I had woken up. And the dust had been so thick and so long. Then I noticed the mountains in the distance. They were familiar to me. But there was something odd about them. Something that did not fit into what contours of the room of my memory I could distinguish."

The American asked what it was. The others looked at him.

"The mountains were further away, much further away then I had remembered they were. I had somehow traveled. My head hurt so it was hard to concentrate. And the thoughts that were able to form in the dust did not at first make sense. And then I remembered a phrase my friend Habib had said, years ago. He said, 'All of us together could do it.'"

The man from the Dutch couple went to the bar to get a round for the group. Abel held up a quiet lined hand that said he was content to continue slowly sipping his thick port. The others nodding saying yes especially if he was buying with his drug money. Abel held the story and answered questions while the Dutch man was away. He said he was being supported by some Saudi relatives who respected him as an elder of the family. He said he came to the town on a bus tour and finding housing that fit his somewhat eclectic taste decided

to leave the tour and remain. He said he actually acquired the taste for old port in Japan where he had traveled for a few years with a woman he eventually left for her own good. He said they needed to travel several hours for Arab food worth the effort. The Dutch man returned with beers and shots. To new friends he said.

“Habib had said that to me in low tones one night after dinner while we sat in the desert cool looking at the expanse of sky above us. We had been talking about all that was out of reach. We talked of death of the weather of the desert. And of course, we spent most of our time on the ways of women. Still the greatest mystery in this world to me.”

Old world wisdom with new world persistent applicability. From a dark wrinkle skinned man. A hosteler's dream.

“But God must have a seat up there Habib had said. And we talked of this for awhile, what seat God must sit upon and of course the contradictions of a God that needs to sit. He went on to mention a grand idea that was being spoken about in all the caravans he'd come across. 'The people,' he'd said, 'have decided to build a tower to the seat of God.'”

One of the windows let in the sounds of a cat fight from the alley. Such screechings that can be made. Abel sighlaughs as if those noises were part of the story he tells next.

“I was shocked of course. I reasoned it would be impossible. But even so, even if it could not be done, if it brought people together, even as a failure it would be a great monument to our unity. Failing would cost nothing. For every day we strove in vain to connect with God and everyday we went on without that divine connection. So reaching the sky and reaching a point where we could build no more without having reached God would not change our situations for the

worse. And there would be this grand tower. Something all people could look at and say, "That is the power of united people."

Most hostellers stuck with story because they had no plans to go elsewhere or had drinks to finish. They knew they'd have more of an open-minded story to tell their friends if they stuck with the story until the end, if they smiled politely at his harmless insanity, if they shook his hand at the end and thanked him for his insight.

"So we began the tower. All the people came from around the world, in grand caravans with great beams and stones and tools and rope and in our unity the tower grew and grew. We would end each day in the desert dark talking with strangers from far away learning of their lives and sharing our tales from our long day of work. We feasted often. We talked and laughed and shared sagas from our families. It was a great time."

Abel pulled on his mustache, looking down at his thick slowly sipped port, as if he were holding back slight thick tears as he pictured those laughing nights a dozen times a day.

"And so the tower grew. Every day the hand of humanity reached higher into the sky and closer to God. But friends, there were times when the tower did not matter to me. I realized that because of the unity the project brought to my life, that I was truly closer to God, even laying in a valley between dunes as far from the top of the tower as I could be. I understood then, that God was teaching us through this tower that it was not up to the sky that we should reach to find him, but in shared and grand industry, but..."

An old man stumbled out of the bathroom. No one had any idea how long he'd been in there. His clothes were dripping gray, streaked with sweat and street grit. His hair was made of thin dead snakes hanging from his head. His hands hung from him like dried meat from a deli ceiling. He shuffled out and the bartender shook his

head, knowing he'd probably have to clean something up. The American's stomach turned a little bit.

"But then God struck down the tower and scattered us around the world and changed our languages so we could not talk anymore. I woke up on the desert floor shamed. I first concluded that our arrogance was foolish, that it was preposterous to believe we had the right to build a tower to touch God. For days I wandered with shame rushing up to all who I came across to see if they would understand me. Few did."

The hosteler's nodded in open-minded understanding.

"But then I thought more about it. Some small piece of furniture was still covered in the linen. Whenever I felt a pain in my back and I remembered my fall from the tower and I remembered the strangers that had been made from friends. One day it was like a pebble thrown from a distance popped off the back of my head."

Abel made a gesture with his hand of a pebble popping off the left edge of his forehead, with a little sound that bubbled out of his mouth like a smoke ring.

"God would not have had to strike down the tower if it were impossible for us to reach him. He would not have had to turn friends into strangers if the unity of the friends did not threaten his power."

Abel leaned back into his corner and picked his slowly sipped glass of thick port and raised as if to toast the hostelers.

"So learn your languages. Make friends out of strangers. Find a thousand ways to tell God to fuck off for giving us the potential to reach him, but not allowing us to."

Abel slammed the suddenly empty glass on the table and stormed out. The hosteler's tried to have a quick chat about the story but ran into the standard language barrier.

