

ESTABRAQ AHMAD

INFINITY

The arrival

“Run!”

We heard his scream clearly. I turned around and saw his terrified break all over the place, people were trying their best to leave the street by jumping, running, hiding.

As I was racing the frightened people I realized who he was. I was confused but his face chased me and I found that even the people knew him well enough to respond to that call.

I wanted to take a breath as I saw two men entering an abandoned house. I looked behind me and gave up the stupid idea when a shining truth dawned on me: they were so close they could see me entering the house and catch me easily--and specially this house which they knew well, having searched it and having caught Hamid there the last time.

You can hear them yell and threaten but I just keep running, just like the others. **Don't** stop, Sirag, you can still hear the screams of the terror and salvation, I kept telling myself over and over.

The road changed while I was in my confusion; I didn't know where to go, red and blue ghosts had painted the streets, the sidewalks and side roads now crashed against the houses, buildings, doors, windows, hunting and shooting whoever resisted them. I tried to not collapse now as a result of this raid. I needed to think more clearly, yes, I can do it. I realized I should be focusing on the thing that had always made me run, I should focus on that, remember the laugh of your sisters when you race any thing that's on the road, especially Jafar's motorcycle, of course, that was before Jafar got married to your beloved sister Sharifa and traveled alone to Saudi Arabia for two years and came back a crazy man, nobody knew who brought him back to the village but after a week one of his friends came to your family and told the whole story. He said Jafar had left because his mind couldn't stand the desert and the unjustness of his employer. Yes your speed always made you different, that's why I knew I would leave them behind me even though I could hear them. I have to believe in my capacity to race the wind like before, I was wondering how many times I have escaped in this country and every time, in moments of weakness I wondered whether it was worth it.

I have already paid the expenses of my sisters' weddings but my greed still wanted me to keep living out here in order to live my own adventure, to buy the biggest piece of land in my village. Once my father told me that this greed, and the urge to gamble, runs in our family blood, and that he couldn't forget that he himself had tried to make his own destiny by selling his father's house only to gamble. He told me that what we wanted was not always what was best for us. I pictured him standing in front of his grocery store, waving to me, praying that I might come back soon, but both of us realizing that a long time would pass before we could see each other again. Now the years passed by and I'm still far away from my dreams and from my family.

Oh Sirag, try to find a mosque and hide there, you have to take a rest, I kept telling myself, but my legs were hurting too much and my back burned with the fire of some strange stabbing pain. I didn't check what was happening to it because I was afraid it would delay me. I am sure that something is wrong, though. As I passed one of them he jumped in my way and warned me to stop but I ignored him, especially since he seemed so terrified. I pushed him aside and kept running.

Yesssss there is a minaret, yeah I can see it, I can easily hide in a holy place, no one could have the nerve to search there. I took a deeeeeeeep breath, trying to stop shivering from sheer anxiety, fearful that it might prick and destroy my soul, a few seconds separating me from the opened gate and from getting some rest. I reached out, went straight for the huge door and opened it. I felt the pain of my back again, pressing more. It was as if a burning arrow had gone through my body and got stuck there. My steps became heavy. But now I'm in a mosque crowded with silence. I step in and suddenly thousands of whispering voices come to me. I was baffled-- at this time of the night no-one ever comes here to pray except the truly religious ones and even that usually only during Ramadan. It was dark here. Suddenly I notice a weak light coming from some candles, now I want to get out from this strange mosque, I withdraw slowly but the whispering voices kept rising, I retreat and run to the door but feel dizzy, run all over the place but can't find the door.

I was surrounded by pale faces. The unseen one ordered me to close my eyes and I did so without any hesitation.

The woman with the curiously hoarse voice

I obeyed the order, and laid down-- but the moment I did, I felt that everything went wrong. When I opened my eyes a circle of faces had surrounded me, staring silently, absurdly. I ignored them and looked away and up, to the beautifully carved ceiling, wondering if it isn't unusual for a poor mosque to have such rare things. But as I was lying there, trying my best to raise myself up by leaning on my arms, a tall, slim white woman approached and asked, with smile on her face: "how do you feel?"

I tried to talk but my voice wouldn't come out. She noticed what I was going through and looked to the others for help, but not one of them moved or made any sign. She extended her hand very slowly to another man and asked for help; I felt that their movements and behavior were weird--clumsy and slow. Another voice said "give him water, he is thirsty." A dark man came forward, leaned over and lifted me. He got an empty glass, brought it close to my mouth and poured its contents inside me. I didn't see any water but it made me full, and even more afraid of what it was that was going on here.

The woman with the curiously hoarse voice said "let's give him time, he looks so tired," but some of the other voices clamored, insisting that they didn't want to wait for me. The woman looked at me and said, "don't worry." One of the men was upset because of the delays, and began shouting at the woman, asking her again "how long will we stay here?" Again, she answered him quietly: "none of us know." And again he asked: "didn't you tell

us that we will be traveling soon? Why didn't we move then? We have been waiting for hours, and as each new person arrives you say he's the last one." The woman looked confused, and said hesitantly: "It's not my fault that the leader of the last group refused to let me join them. I was begging over and over but he told me that he had to leave me behind, become the leader of the new group, and then wait for the last person to arrive. I already told you that." The man shouted: "but how can we know who the last one is?" The woman answered calmly: "the last one will have a sign. The leader of the previous group told me that. Please be patient." The man looked down on the floor and began crying. Then suddenly his head fell down on the floor. I breathed in and my eyes popped out as I started screaming. He bowed, took his head and put it back on his body. I screamed loudly again, and they looked at me coldly. Some of them even seemed on the verge of laughing but the woman stopped them right away. At the very last moment I wanted to get out but I couldn't move, the dark one was holding me down--and then suddenly a bright line of light moved through the carvings on the ceiling and shone down. The bright light formed a big word. "Infinity" was shining there. And suddenly a weird circus began. One woman was clapping her hands, singing my favorite song, asking me to come down, along with two girls standing behind her. A man was bouncing fast and high to the ceiling, then touching down on the floor in a smooth movement and ordering me to do the same. Yet another man took off his clothes, threw them away and ran up to do the same with mine--but when he reached me he burst out laughing. Yet another one was running all over the place, shouting that no-one will catch him, and we all saw that his back was injured and bleeding. I opened my mouth wide but no scream or even voice came out--until I then saw all of them were crying. Even the dark man was weeping, covering his neck with his red-painted hands. Then I noticed that all wore clothes that were tattered or burnt, and amazingly they were concealing their faces with their hands and, as they slowly took their hands down from their faces they all looked at me at once, and I saw that they all had my face.

The secret

I don't know how long I slept but felt someone woke me up, shaking my shoulder and gently stroking my face. I opened my eyes and saw the hoarse-voiced woman sitting beside me. "You have been crying," she said. I thought I had a nightmare, I answered. She asked: "what about?" I said to her quietly: "this mosque became a circus, there was a woman who wanted me to sing, a man was jumping and bouncing all the way up to the ceiling, another took off his clothes and asked me to strip like him, and another yet was running all over the place, bleeding from his back... it was awful; I didn't know what to do, and do you know how this nightmare ended? All of the people here had my face! I just wanted to wake up but I couldn't!" In a very deep voice she said: "listen to me, Sirag, it wasn't a nightmare." I was shivering: "what do you mean? who are you? what is this place? how did you know my name?" She said: "it's not just me. We all know your name. And let me tell you a secret: here we all know each other's names --in fact, even you do! Just look at any one of us, think, and you will know their name-- all, except mine. Try it, sir." I looked around me and felt that I really did know all their names. I searched out the woman who wanted me to sing and found her name was Jamila; the jumping man was Yihya; the man who took off his clothes was wearing them now and his name was Majeed; the one running around and bleeding was Jawad. I looked at her and she smiled, then said, "well even if you do your best you still won't know mine. I asked her, "where am I?" She said: "we felt the same when we first came

first, and all of us found the answer to this question. Sirag I'll help you out a little. Try to remember your life's mistakes; think about what these people have done. And remember these clues: singing, jumping, stripping, running." Then she got up, walked over slowly and sat down next to another person, leaving me to think about what she had just said.

My life

The singing

_Push more.

_Yeah that's it!

_Oh God! it's a boy.

_Finally!

The village women were so happy that at long last, after four girls, my parents got me. They congratulated my mother after two nights of suffering. But she did not get to keep her happiness for more than a week. After that she came down with fever, struggled for another five days, then passed away. Then my father knew that our life would not be the same. My sisters were still young and he kept doing his best for us, trying to give me in particular a good education. But I kept running away from school, and turned into a poor spoiled boy whose father never punished him. I was always running around on the road, racing other children, and always wining. And I felt I always had to send my beautiful voice upwards, to be carried by the wind, into the fields and into the sky. Many were the times when my proud father called me to sing my mother's favorite song to visitors. My voice became famous, in my own village as well as in the others; they were always asking me to sing at their weddings, festivals and other events. I had a very happy childhood--until life brought my singing to an end. That was when I was 14 years old.

Fareed, one of my best friends, invited me to join his father's band to attend a wealthy wedding. The family's house was near the capital. It was the farthest place that I had ever been to. We were crowded on the bus like animals but I didn't care; it was fun to leave the village and travel to the city. On arrival we were brought to the garden. There was a small stage; we set up our equipment and waited. But even while arranging our things I was astonished by the huge, cleaned, tidy house and the fancy, delicate clothes surrounding us. The garden was filled with many tiny lights; the smell of food was spreading, making me famished. Each minute there I felt more miserable, what with my dirty shoes, ragged pink shirt and black pants. I looked to my friend's father. There was a big smile on his face as he began to sing:

God will guide them
In beginning a new life
God in the sky
Keep away all sadness
From their path
Give them luck

And Handsome children

Sadness captured my soul. I thought that they already have received everything. God in the sky gave them the heavens: why couldn't he look out for us? Fareed said his father wanted me to sing the second song alongside him but I refused. He begged me but I was too stubborn to say yes.

After they brought us something to eat, I asked Fareed if his father had known these people before. With a big smile he told me that his father was the son of their beloved servant and the family called him up all the time because he had such a beautiful voice and they loved him so. I ate the food, went back to my village, swore that I'll make a lot of money in my life, then gave up music and let the grudge birds sing.

The jumping

I hated my poor life and my village; all I wanted was to get out of there. I left my school forever, helped my father in his grocery store and leapt into many opportunities, especially when visiting the capital, I teamed up many projects until I met my cousin Jafar.

It had been a long time since I last saw him he was 8 years older than me, a skinny creature with narrow eyes. His family owned a bit of land but with their many sons, Jafar went instead to the city, worked patiently in a shoe factory,, suffering from his disappointment until he found an opportunity to travel. My father said that Jafar's father had asked him to let Jafar marry my sister Sharifa before traveling to Saudia. I agreed and went to see him before leaving. We talked about the wedding arrangements and his travels;, then we went back together to finish his last paper work at the office. Then we took his papers, and went to buy dinner. When we reached his room I begged Jafar to help me join him going to the gulf but he refused, saying I'm only 16. He also warned me of the risks and expense of forging documents--but this was a risk I insisted on taking. He then promised that he'll check things out and let me know if he could make it happen.

After three weeks he called me, telling me to bring a picture and two thousand. I only had 800, so I tried to borrow more from my friends but all I could get was 150 R; so I went to the loan office and promised them that I'd pay them back with a big interest. Then I called Jafar and told him about the money. The whole idea worried him and he tried to change my mind, but I was too eager to take this chance and warned Jafar against telling my father.

Two months later we celebrated my sister's marriage to Jafar well as my obtaining a forged passport. The day before my trip I told my father about my decision. He was furious and locked me up in the house. Then, in the middle of the night, he came back and opened the door: he looked old and didn't say anything. Earlier that morning he was there, sitting in front of his grocery store. I went to him, seeking his forgiveness. Waiting for my last moments in the village I saw him there, standing in front of the store, waving to me. At that

moment I hesitated and thought of canceling the trip but then looked forward-- toward my jumping forwards into wealth.