

Sailboat



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Written & Designed
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I had never been superstitious, but when I dreamt about the desert, I knew it was a sign.

That night I probably had a vision. Like the Arabs I also came to believe that dreams are one-tenth of the prophecy. There is sometimes much truth in them. Besides, even if dreaming is an event that occurs every time we sleep, nobody can tell what it is exactly, what it does to us. I secretly believe that night events are an extension of our lives, that they complete it. So, that night, I had a vision:

I dreamt of an immense space filled with sand and water intermingling and blurring each other. Strangely the sand dunes were fluid like water. The images in the dream switched from one state to another as rapidly as a foot print on a dune or a handprint in a puddle is swept away. A voice began to resonate in my mind like a litany "the desert is the sea of sands," "the sea of sands."

In minutes all melted inside me and I woke up in need of this sea of sands.

I searched everywhere for a guide fluent in Arabic and native of the Middle East. He had to teach me the basics of the languages as well as some cultural aspects of the Arabian

peninsula. It took us a year and a half to accomplish this first goal, but I did not care how long it took. I had a vocation as an anthropologist, so my life basically consisted of traveling abroad and patiently recording what I found. My second goal was to reach the desert since I had already studied everything I could find about desert life. I felt it natural to get in touch as soon as possible with the Bedouins still living in Saudi Arabia. I would stay for a while in Jidda, then I would migrate further inland when the time would be right.



Photo courtesy of Stéphane Rochon: <http://www.aquanaute.com/subphoto/index.html>

When I felt ready to begin my journey, I rented a sailboat in Yemen. I had always loved the seaside and the Red

Sea is really one of the most beautiful seas on earth with a rich wildlife, ghostly shepherds and itinerant gazelles, its columns of auburn rocks, its banks of salt, its mangroves, and with a lot of coral on its bottom.

The sailboat was steered by a crew of ten; its sail was made out of a brown canvas on which someone had sewn an intricate calligraphy. As we set sail the words seemed to heave along the golden wake:

"He is the One who makes the night go in the day and makes the day go in the night." (The Qur'an)

The sailing ship appeared a little bit unreal with its black canvas and antique white lettering, golden on the edges. As the sail twisted into the sea breeze, it seemed to cast sparkling shades and spots of light over the written words. I was fascinated. The calligraphy had been drawn in the Deewani Jali style. This handwriting was highly ornamental, excessively cursive, however very pleasant. The script was greatly structured and in a shape that reminded me of the sea waves mixed with images of desert dunes. What caught my attention were the spaces between the Arabic letters; these spaces were

spangled with decorative devices that looked like dots so that the writing seemed blurred with the red sand of the desert.



Over the sombre sail, stiff and smooth like an arid landscape, the Deewani also evoked the twinkling shine of a night sky. It gave the illusion that the dark veil of the night was covering and uncovering a bright landscape of dunes shining in the sun. Since the seventh Century, the desert nomads had learned from the Qur'an that ***"[Allah] makes the night go in the day and makes the day go in the night. And He has subjected the sun and the moon. Each running on a fixed course for an appointed term."*** They knew this way that the earth was round, that what we call night was not anything else than the shadow cast by the earth. They knew that the light disappearing in the West drew the curtain of the night; they knew that the night disappearing to the west drew a veil of light coming from the East.



Astrolabes (Left: from the 9th C; right: 15th C) were used for measuring the altitude of heavenly bodies above the horizon, and so determining the time of day or night. Readings are taken by means of rotatable alidade, a diametrical rule with sights.

Simple nomads up to that day know the heavens like their home. Bedouins and sailors are the fathers of great astronomers.

Jidda's harbor was now visible; it was a cluster of buildings that looked like a sand castle. Behind our sailboat, a windjammer flowed swiftly. The vessel was just as large as ours but it had a different ink inscription on its sail; the calligraphy there read: "Allahu-Akbar" -- "Allah is great". Our two vessels were rocking on the waters, making ready to enter first into the harbor. More boats were turning for the haven waiting their turn to come into the port. They were so close to each other that their masts cast a net of shadows over the sea. Furthermore, masts and gears seemed to braid masses of threads

under the white sun so that it was hard to distinguish one vessel from another. The rolling woods melted with the grating pulleys. There was a rumbling of voices all around us in different tones. Now, the sailors and fishermen seemed all eager to enter the port.

I was wondering about all the agitation when a man began climbing along the mast to offer the Adhan, the Muslim call for prayer. Soon, from nowhere the voices of all the muezzins crossed the town; all said the same thing:

"A Ilaahu A kbar" -- "The One God is the most great"
 "A Ilaahu A kbar"
 "A shhadu an la ilaaha illa-L ah" -- "I bear witness that there are not gods but God"
 "A sh Hadu anna Muhamadar rasuulullah" -- I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God"
 "Hayya' alas Salaah" -- "Come to prayer"
 "Hayya' alas Salaah"
 "Hayya' ala Falaah" -- "Come to felicity"
 "Hayya' ala Falaah"
 "A Ilaahu A kbar" -- "God is the most great"
 "L aa ilaaha illa-L ah" -- "There is no deity save God".

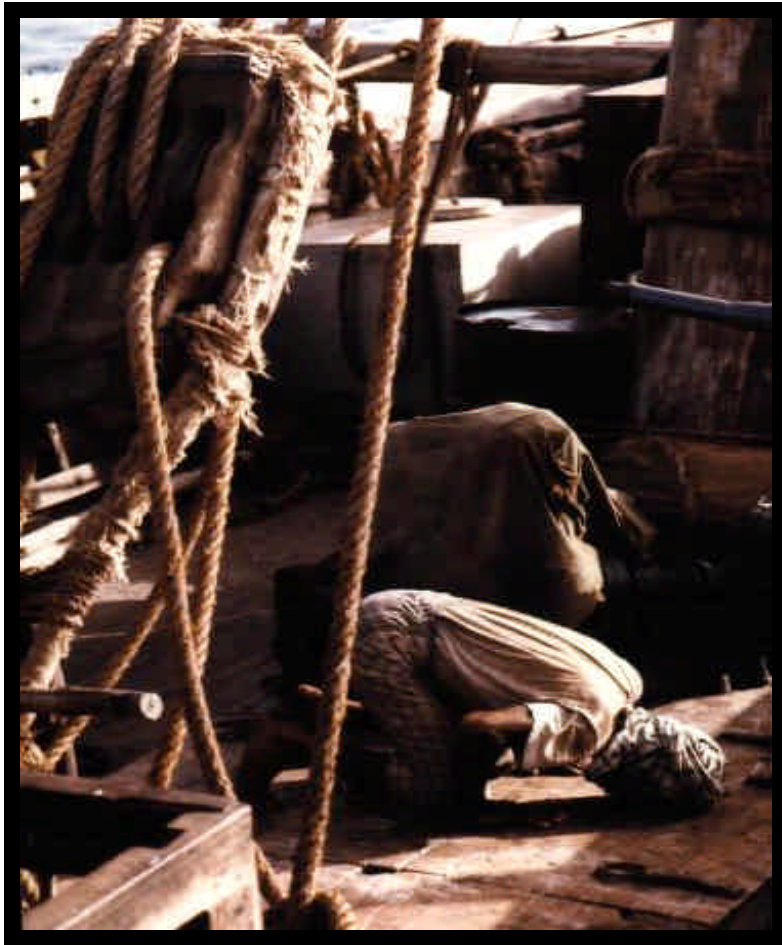


Photo courtesy of Marion Kaplan: www.marionkaplan.com

I felt strange as if surrounded by something uncanny, overwhelming. Each one stood up in his sailboat, raising his hands on each side of his face, reciting Surahs (chapters of the

noble Qur'an); they stayed since they feared to fall because of the pitching, then they bowed. From where I was, I could only watch the backs of the men, rising and kneeling several times like a human tide. They all followed their Imam (literally "the one who has faith"). The imam was not a priest; he was usually the one who had memorized more of the Noble Qur'an.

I suddenly remembered a sentence I had read from traditional Muslim sayings:

"The first thing for which the servant of Allah shall be called to account is the prayer. If it was good, all of his work was good, but if it was bad, then all of his work was bad."

I reassessed these words silently to myself, still amazed by their power. Here, the saying made even more sense because nobody delayed prayers; they were made right on the spot at fixed hours. The saying disturbed me even if I was not willing to admit it. The words seemed to come from a totally unknown dimension. This world was not anything related to me but it already asked for concessions: I was already paying close attention to it. I was entranced by the dance of the little embarkation and the coming and going of my reflections. Meanwhile, the ripples on the sea

seemed to accompany the movement of the bodies as if it itself was praying. I was soon ripped out of it by some noble personage wiping his nose in the tip of his djellaba, tears of delight in his eyes.

As someone who arrived for the first time in the Middle East, I was stunned to see all the activities halted during the time of prayers. From the boat I could see the town. Wherever the believer stood, he laid a clean piece of cloth on the floor. Some still performed the "wudu," the ritual washing, while others continued prostrating. Sailors, merchants, men and children, all were doing the same thing, whether alone or inline with people in the street, in the shops, on the top of a wall or on a roof, on a boat or on a camel's back, all depending upon the circumstances. And that looked amazing!

Those who were weak or ill prayed as well; they mimed the movements following with their eyes or their heads going up and down, up and down several times. Others prayed with or without their shoes on. All that seemed so strange to me; somehow there stood the frightening difference.

I shook a little before focussing on the sand dunes smoothly curving along the horizon. The priors' spines were now like the blade edge of the dunes whirling with the wind against the light. The backs of the dunes curving away from the coastal hills were sparkling with light and seemed, with the silent embarkation, to extend the prostration. One minute of sheer quietness passed as if time had stopped. One minute... two minutes... Five minutes.

The sounds of activity suddenly returned. Our vessel's keel suddenly appeared to plough through the waves, reaching haven. The lights and shades rolling intertwined in the tide soon became a dream. People had stopped praying but I could not shake myself out of my previous state of mind. The Deewani words were sinking into my mind as they spoke to me in between the rower's "Ya Allah!" --"O Allah!"-- and the ocean sound lapping:

"[Allah] makes the night go in the day and makes the day go in the night. And he has subjected the sun and the moon. Each running on a fixed course for an appointed term."(Qur'an)

I was stunned to realize that because of the rotation of the earth, Muslims were constantly praying in succession around the world. Depending on their time zones, they prayed the same *salaat* several hours sooner or later than another group, in a counterclockwise pattern. Yet they all faced the same direction, Mecca, in a perfect unison. All over the world now waves of followers performed *wudu* and laid a clean mat on the ground, praying one of the five obligatory prayers of the day.

I thought about these words over and over again in a new light. These words were calling from fourteen centuries earlier; they taught us that the world turns once bright and dark every twenty four hours like a veil passing around the earth. Muslims knew that the earth was conceived as round since the seventh century although other nations still believed the earth was flat. No wonder they had become great scientists!



Djiddah's silhouetted globe

Suddenly the barge seemed to go up and down. My spirit sailed through the blue and green pitching of its arcs. I hesitated. Should I leave my rocky country behind or should I return? I had one of these irrational moments of hesitation we all feel when we are faced with a situation we lose grip of. Some call it culture shock. With one of my hands I was now touching the wall that separated me from this new country. I let it rest a minute on the shore, strangely surprised by the mysterious difference of the

surrounding world. Suddenly, I realized: it was much too late to go back!

My heart quivered a little anxiously in my chest, but in fact it was out of sheer excitement. I had been raised near the cemetery of the sea where the ships' masts resemble crosses and I would journey where the crescent and the star compete with each other to be placed near the "God of the Worlds." I would know later that I did the right choice. The country was all I had imagined and did not correspond to anything I had ever seen. The open bareness of the land and the people were in fact more than valuable, they were beautiful. In this way and towards the people of Jidda, I would do my pilgrimage...

J stopped short in the middle of my pondering. Now, I was back to reality and I was feeling a little exhausted. I looked around. A boy was crouching on a flight of steps below the bridge the crew used to unload the boat. He was alone, closed up in his own world. He reminded me of myself at that moment. I remember how touched I was to witness this shadow of a boy so grave in his prayers, so lonely. In his fingers, he held beads of black coral particular to this region. His hands manipulated

the rosary with infinite delicacy, indicating that he was taking his time with God; he probably recited many words over each bead. The spot he had chosen for his devotions was concealed from the street. It was a place where anyone could enjoy moments of privacy in the middle of the town, at arm length of the busy people on the quay. Around him, the reflections of the seawater looked like light blue lassos of the purest emerald. I signaled the boat captain that I would stay for a moment on the staircase; I was feeling like talking to that boy. I sat on the lowest step, diving my head into the calm waters of the port. Lord, I felt so hot! It occurred to me that the lowest temperature recorded in Jiddah was fifty-four degrees Fahrenheit. The heat added to my confusion of mind. I had more doubts: could I adapt to this country, to the bareness inland so much in contrast to the green landscapes of the coastline? Could I adapt to the culture as well? This experience was not a dream... it was for real!



Photo courtesy of Marion Kaplan: www.marionkaplan.com

I reconsidered. No, that was ridiculous. I had come to learn, not to judge. I felt this moment of doubt salutary for my inner peace in the semi-isolation of the staircase.

Lord, I needed that! Suddenly, I heard a nice voice, soft and high pitched, warning me behind my back. It was the boy.

"You should not put water on your head, brother. The sun is still too high; you might catch a bad fever."

"Shukran," I said -- "thank you." I turned to look at him, grateful for the moment of respite I gave to my thoughts. "Mâ smuka?"

"Djaliil."

"Assalaam 'alaikum, Djaliil."

To this he raised one hand to his heart, smiling. My Arabic was not too bad after all. I congratulated myself as my teacher would have done back home. He was not really Arab, so it was ok to praise me for doing my job. I asked in Arabic:

"What are you saying to your God?"

"I ask Allah to make me strong in my body and to make my faith stronger." He coughed, turning his back shyly. I added:

"Are you afraid, Djaliil, to lose one of them?"

He looked at me, opening his eyes wide.

"Afraid? Afraid to be losing what, brother? For one of the things you mentioned, I do not possess anymore; for the other, I am not afraid, but it does not hurt to improve it," and he indicated the rosary which he placed in my hands.

I shrugged in denial, startled but still touched.

"No, no," I ejaculated, "I do not use these things, my boy."

"Then you must be coming from far away. Here, even the poorest uses dates stones for the "takbir" (invocations to Allah) because it is known that

***"the one who says Sub'an Allah, Bihamdi,
AllHamdulillah a hundred times a day, Allah erases
his or her sins" (Haadith).***

So, nobody ever refuses the *tasbih*."

My heart leaped at the surprise of his words. I admired his respect for God; I was not so practicing myself. A surge of guilt took over for a few seconds in my chest. I looked straight at him. His eyes appeared covered with water. I noticed a thin line of white kohl on the inner side of his immense eyes, making them shine like hot charcoals. His long eyelashes were profuse and slightly curved upward, giving even more innocence to his stare. He had this straight long nose that gives nobility to most Middle Eastern faces and his sleek hair waved in abundance over his neck. His stature was large and well built. Beauty spots drew the attention to an elongated jaw well set in the visage under a perfectly oval head.

I watched his hands as they stroke the beads. Someone had stained his palms with henna, giving them a dark orange tint almost the color of the skin, a shade brighter.

"Did you just arrive from abroad?" he asked curiously.

"Yes, Djaliil. I am interested in the customs of your country."

"So you would not mind being my *Seeb* today?" he asked without hesitation, even enthusiastically.

I was surprised by his confidence. Why? We had just met a few minutes ago. But then sincerity was an obvious trait in his face.

I pondered upon the proposition. A *Seeb* was a person who helped the diver while hunting oysters. Pearlring had been a source of local wealth in the gulf long before the oil refineries or the metal industry. The coral reef was the people's life.

The youth was still waiting with expectation, his mouth slightly opened. I gazed into his face for a few seconds, trying to decipher his intentions. After all, he was just a boy, what could he do to me? What trick could he do to me? And maybe there was some sharing involved? Besides, I had all the time in the world and Djaliil knew it. I nodded assent, "Na'am."

"I will be diving *Ghais*," he explained emphatically. "It is good for me; it makes my body stronger." He smiled. His teeth were not only white, but also slightly shiny, perfectly clean because of the "siwak," a natural toothbrush, he was continually putting in his mouth. For a minute, I thought about what he had said earlier about losing his health. This was hard to imagine. We stood up and began walking along the beach, making for the shallow banks of the sea. Along the shore, half a dozen horses hauled carts from the customs quay to the various stores. I was surprised, knowing that Arabs were literally in love with their horses and rarely made them work or lay hands on them. Along the haven we also met camel and sheep hordes. I licked my upper lip where salt had deposited a thin layer. I stopped so I could grasp my goatskin bottle I was carrying over my shoulder. After offering some water to my companion, I drank heavily. It was refreshing to walk along the almost sea, pure and natural, like a crystal. And it was relaxing to be here with a stranger who had the gaze of a dove. It felt almost like home. It was like belonging.

"I feel groovy," I thought cutely.



There were lots of activities performed along this coast. Near a sculpture showing the diversity of the thousand of varieties of fish in the Red Sea, men built boats and repaired nets.

Djaliil already greeted friends, introducing me to elders.

Afterwards, he put his hand on my shoulder, instructing:

"Baab will show you how we build ships in Jiddah." He looked triumphant, proud of me somehow. Baab and I shared some greetings and words about the weather. He inquired about my family's health, then he praised Allah profusely. Finally, he signaled me to seat near the framework of a boat in construction. The noble man was easy to understand because he was very expressive. His face quite tanned was welcoming and showed

the marks of many laughs at the corner of his eyes. He wore a white knit cap on the top of his head and skirt typical of the Red Sea.

He explained:

"We have finished with building the skeleton of the ship. See, there is no streaming or artificial bending of the wood. We take the natural curves of the tree trunk, its limbs and crotches, into account to fit it into the frame. The ribs of wood are like a woman's spirit; it is curved, but if you bend it, it breaks. Therefore it is important to treat her kindly." He laughed. I looked at the construction, now not only interested but also amused. The frame really appeared like a rib cage, but there was something comforting in its shape, something round, warm and peaceful. Watching the men working, I felt once more at home, maybe because of the simplicity of the whole situation. The scene I witnessed was as if part of a dream. I mused about how the human contact was easy on this beach. "Nobody takes your hand and walks with you part of the way, but here you are, and this is truly happening to you." I also thought about how real people these carpenters were. And Djaliil was genuine as well.

I was more and more amazed at this country where people actually loved others. The skillful artisan was driving large and flat headed iron spikes into drilled holes, which were then made watertight by twisting collars of raw cotton about them.



The spikes and the cotton looked local, not of industrial manufacture. All looked so true, as if taken from a traveler's book. The picture of the ribs could stay there indefinitely. However, jars of sesame oil waiting about the area gave a tangible touch to the scene. They would stay there, immobile, waiting the finishing of the side planking and the caulking to be mixed with paints. I turned slightly towards the sea, suddenly aware that my host had disappeared. I looked around. There he was, the scum of the sea enlacing his feet like bracelets of soap

foam. He saw that I was free, so he waved, beckoning me to come and eager to share with me his knowledge of the sea. He now wore a simple loin cloth and a leather skin was wrapped around his fingers. I was still astonished at how comfortable the boy felt with me. It was as if he had mistaken me for somebody else.

But, after all, fishermen set nets together. Brass utensils and spikes were made in groups as the blacksmith could not hold the tools and ventilate embers at the same time. And carpenters needed the cooperation of blacksmiths as much as the trust of fishermen. All people were tightly depending on each other, like the night and the day; one was the shadow of the other. So here, there were plenty of occasions to meet new people and entertain the friendship of the others. Why should I find this too incredible to understand?

Djaliil squeezed my hand to make me pay attention.

Next, he gave me a circular net, waded out to his waist to make the cast. I was brought forth with him.

"This is how we fish, " he explained.

Waves of deep feelings washed over me. I was mainly grateful for the boy's friendship, but I was also confused. I did not know what I was supposed to think about being so close with a stranger when I was myself a stranger.

I never made the cast. At that moment, graceful *dhow*s passed by us, deploying their large lateen sails over broad beams like the belly of pregnant living creatures. Inside, fishermen made their daily preparations. I observed closely. They were laying hooks with a handful of minnows between two stones as large as fists. Looping the fish line around the stones, they then lowered the line under the water, stones acting as a sinker. When the load reached the appropriate depth, one muscular man gave a sharp jerk that untied the stones and released the minnows. Djaliil was watching with me, all excited to see how much fish they would catch this time. He soon ejaculated:

"At thirty fathoms, they will get a sultana, a red fish that shines like hot charcoal. At sixty fathoms, they may catch some delicious *faras* that can be sold at a fair price." He tied his net over his outstretched arm, then affirmed:

"This net is not holding fish today. Now, we will dive, Insha Allah (God willing). "

I was yet glancing at the square sterns of the *dhow*s. They looked like medieval vessels emerged from another dimension. But they were also very real, very here and now.

I turned towards the boy, smiling and nodding,

"That's the reason I came here, isn't it?"

"La," he said (no), "you did not come for the diving, you did not come for the occasion; you came for much more than that, otherwise you would not have followed in the first place."

I was a little taken aback by the sincerity of his answer. I challenged him, saying:

"And why do you think I came for?"

"That, I do not know. You understand it yourself. All I know is that what Islam says:

"A believer who removes a worldly grief from another believer, Allah will remove from him one of the grieves of the Day of Judgment."

So maybe I removed a grief from you, maybe you removed a grief from me."

I shook my head, slanting my eyes more against his words than against the sun.



Photo courtesy of Marion Kaplan: www.marionkaplan.com

He smiled again, nodded in answer, and we both burst out laughing. The sea was crackling like fire around us as we joyfully headed towards Djaliil's dugout. We climbed into the embarkation, then pushed it over the shallow waters. One could perceive the seabed as clearly as through a glass of water below. For the beauty of the sea was in contradiction with the difficulty of the living. I had not imagined how

exhausting pearling was until I saw Djaliil stay immersed in the water for what seemed like an eternity. He emerged from the water pale and exhausted because of the intense pressures his body undergone.

He asked: "You see the rocks I band to my ankles?"

I nodded in affirmation.

"When I reach the sea bed, I will release them. You have to haul them to the surface by that rope," and he gestured towards it. Next, he secured a basket at his neck and slung a knife at his wrist. I could not help thinking about the barracuda much dreaded in the gulf.

"I will tug on this rope," he continued, showing me another rope from which a whitewashed cloth was hanging. "This I will do when I have collected as many oysters as I can carry. I will not be able to hold my breath much more, so you will have to pull me to the surface as quickly as possible." He waited a few minutes before adding:

"We will place the oysters in a hap on the deck and it is traditional not to touch it when we sail back. Tomorrow, you

will receive two shares of the proceedings, maybe three if the pearling was good. All right?"

I shook my head, thinking about the bargain.

"Fair and true," I finally said, grinning broadly.

Soon he disappeared under the cutting edge of the canoe. The boy came back several times then dived again, resting a little before falling back in the womb of the Red Sea. Each time he came up very pale and trembling, but the sun did him some good. After a few hours of this wearisome occupation, my body ached from arms to toes. However, the exercise made me feel happier. I liked to be moving around the tiny boat and trying to be of some help to my new friend. Slowly, the sun began to set. I had heard the *adhan* call once more, then silence had taken over so I did not really have any notion of time. Suddenly, as I was contemplating the bottom of the sea, I perceived a shadow coming under the dugout. This time it was not Djaliil. Where was the boy now?

I must have been daydreaming for just a few minutes, rocked by the pitching of the light bluish diamond under me. The shadow

passed again across the beam of the canoe, having the shape of a very large fish.

The sea lames seemed to roll and made the frail vessel move slightly backward. A fan pierced the surface, probably not a dolphin. The second rope tightened, but no one yanked at it. I was short of breath, panting in horror. A shark!

Divers maybe were used to them as well as fishermen, but I had never seen a shark alive. This encounter made my spine ache as I followed the cursive line of the fish's sculling.

Something stirred at the bottom of the Red Sea. A minute after, the predator disappeared and the rope was tugged. I pulled him fast and hard, bending my muscles as never, wishing desperately Djaliil was alive at the end of this rope. After a few moments that seemed ages, I distinguished his slim shape and began lifting him aboard. He was barely breathing. However, he tried to swarm with his feet and hands. In the process, the weight of both our bodies outweighed the balance of the dugout. We both fell in the terrifying water.

I swore as we made it to the shore, holding the boy tightly into my arms. I swore against at the stupidity of such a diving,

against the greedy merchants who exploited cheap labor, against the love for pearls.

I ended by swearing against poverty that forced men to die from attacks of the bends or from fatal encounters. I think I also swore against God himself. Doing this with my mouth, I was still trailing my little load across the sand.

Finally, I let his weary body fall on the beach.

His eyes were opened but thin drops of blood showed at the corner of his mouth. I said, quite alarmed:

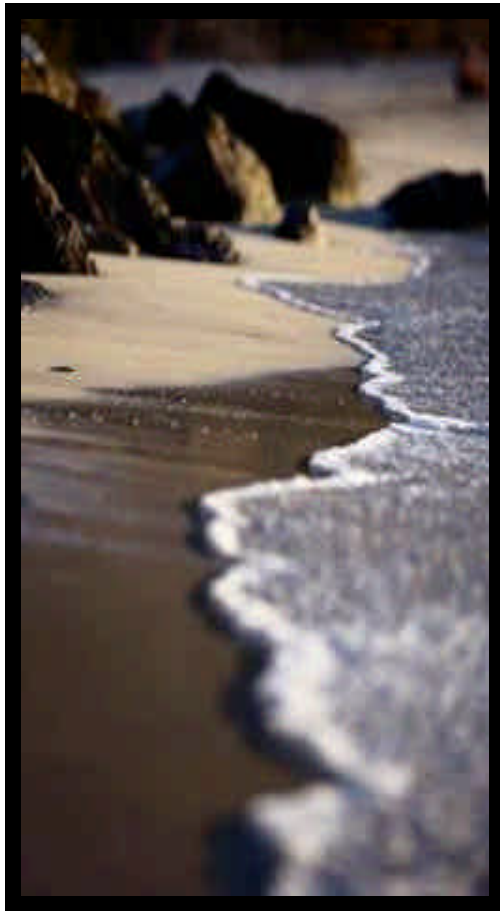
"I will go find a doctor."

Djaliil slowly raised to one elbow, clenched my wrist with very pale fingers, then implored:

"No! Nobody can do anything for me. Let it pass. It always passes. Death is not a terrible thing, actually, I hoped for it sooner. Allah has not made any remedy against it. I am lucky to have lived it all, and I lived so long already. I had time to understand things."

He sighed. His words came up uttered more naturally. Despite the frightening words, he seemed better like he would still live a little longer.

An impression maybe, or an intuition, I really could not tell. He coughed, then wiped the blood from his mouth. It was at that time I noticed the dagger had disappeared from his wrist.



I questioned: "Did you fight the shark?" His chest heaved. His eyelashes fluttered lightly under a drop of water that nestled now in the corner of his eyes.

"No, I hid. When I saw that it was not in the mood to go away, I threw the knife in a hole. The silvery blade attracted its attention. It worked this time."

"So the shark did not hurt you," I said almost relieved. "No, brother. The fish did not; the sea did not either. My body hurts me the most and has for a long time."

"Why do you still dive when your health is in jeopardy?"

"This, brother, is my story. Long ago, I asked Allah if He would restore my health if I could collect enough money to pay for an operation. Sometimes Allah answers, sometimes He is smarter; He lets me decide for myself. So I continued diving for the money. When I became aware that I could never collect enough money, I still continued diving, this time not for money, but for health. If I am careful, I can dive half a day. That's enough to keep me fit. I did it because of faith; I believed Allah would help me as He protected me from the shark. Allah has

granted me more years of life than expected, many more years as a gift of faith."

I looked intensely into his eyes, holding him against my thigh.

The swash of the sea rumbled louder, threatening to suck us back into the water.

I shifted uneasily, half facing the veils of the waves crisscrossing each other. The day was dragging away, pulling the long veil of night with it. Ibis glided around us, then gracefully dived into the sea like a spark of dying life. I never saw it reappear. From where I kneeled, the dunes seemed to sink into the coral reef, the reddish sand highlighting the surface of the lames' crests. ■

"Listen," whispered Djaliil, "somebody is reciting the Qur'an."

"[Allah] sends down water (rain) from the sky, and the valleys flow according to their measure, **but the flood bears away the foam that mounts up to the surface** -- and [also] from that (ore) which they heat in the fire in order to make ornaments or utensils, **rises a foam** like unto it, thus does Allah (by parables) show forth truth and falsehood." (Qur'an 13:17)

The voice echoed from the sea, feeble but clear in the evening breeze, probably a man praying aloud as it was the custom at dusk. Djaliil's breath became deep and regular as if he were asleep. The man progressed in the chanting of the sacred words:

"Then, as for the foam, it passes away as scum upon the banks, while that which is for the good of mankind remains in the earth." (Qur'an 13:17)

I listened, reassured by the shallow breathing of Djaliil. He would maybe live a few more years, I hoped, praying silently with the invisible man. I was sure now that somehow I belonged to this culture. I belonged to the culture where truth was preferred upon falsehood and true hearts were still not rare. Yes, I belonged to the culture of Djaliil, the culture of pious men who want to give and receive equally, fairly. Yes, Djaliil had the sweetness of Faith and he was "the scum" that passed over the earth.

Everybody had to leave someday. I would be leaving too.

Truth remained, invisible to the eyes.

I lifted the boy with fear and hope, but mainly with a new faith.

Under the weight of his body, water and sand intermingling and

burring each other in a puddle. Yes, I thought, *the desert is the sea of sands... the sea of sands...*

I remember having in my mind the image of the sculpture I had seen in a book. The monument was built somewhere in Jiddah, I did not remember where. It showed a rolling wave as a menacing bird ready to attack. The wave stayed there rolled like a snail shell, suspended in the air, darkened because of the erosion against the natural pigments. It looked also like devotion.

I remember thinking *this is life*.



Then I headed to the nearest clinic with Djaliil.