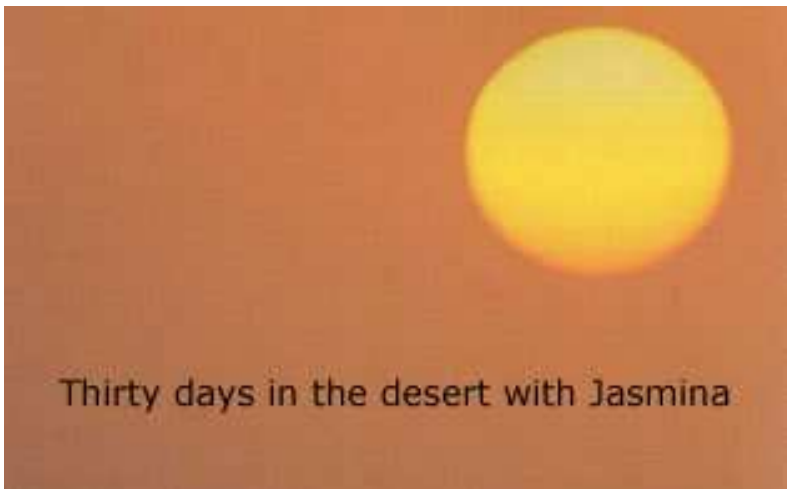


1



Thirty days in the desert with Jasmina

Prologue

In the desert, I want you to call me by my birth name. It was given to me by my grandmother. Karkani was getting serious. Although we weren't Muslims, our ancestors adopted all the local traditions, including naming, religious festivals and culture. It was only after we left Fujairah that my father changed my name and told us some new ways of doing things and how we should live. My grandmother called me Jasmina.

3

A table in the desert at night
Strange but comfortable,
And six high backed chairs
Carved intricately.
We sit, only two of us
Whilst the shadows of servants
And cooks
Lit by their little fires
Prepare delicacies for us.

How many stars
Can you see?
How many grains of sand
In the desert?
A cooling breeze blows
In from the town
Carrying Muslim chants
On the tips of the waves.
Serenity.

Shadow and light
From the fires
Light up your face
And then cast you back into
Mystery.
My Jasmina,
And sometimes my
Karkani.
Food of love.

We laugh as you re-tell
The story of the crazy old man
Who decided to play
With a football
Because he said the war
Was coming
And he wanted to be
A child once more
Before it was too late.

The old man asked;
The Earth is silent,
The heavens are silent,
Then why does my heart beat
So loud?
He said he could hear
The missiles being fired
Long and thin, green
With stars painted on.

They will come so fast,
Faster than a charging camel,
And before anyone can
Gather up their blankets
They will already be dead.
He said; kiss her now,
Make love and become one,
Your last kiss will be
Too late.

He said; draw her name
In the sand
Because then Allah will know.
There will be a
Small sign left of you.
He told Jasmina;
Spill your virginity
In the sand.
A mark you can leave.

The old man collected
Up his old camel
And left, into the desert
With his football
And a bag full of memories.
As he disappeared
We could hear
His chants of
Allah hoo Akbar.

I did as the old man
Had said
And she knelt by my side.
I wrote her name,
Karkani,
And she was happy.
Jasmina, I whispered,
I still prefer to call you
Karkani.

There are no air raid shelters
In the desert she said,
But we will be fine
Because no-one can
Explode a bomb
To destroy love.
I said she was right
And anyway
Why waste so much on us?

In the light of the dawn,
As the heat of the day began
To seep into the sand
We lay there looking,
Waiting for a drone, something
To tell us the game was up.
I don't know if we should
Make love one more time;
The enemy tell us nothing.

Why don't we,
She asked.
After all, love and bombs
Don't mix.
Just ignore them
And they might miss us anyway.
We shared a cup of coffee
A tiny cup that explodes
Taste inside us.

The simple pleasures
Of holding up a thimble sized cup
To her lips
And she sipping so elegantly
From my fingertips.
And her eyes as she
Concentrates on my lips
So as to not let
A single drop fall.

Is the life of a goat
Better than the life of a person?
Deeply philosophical
And ridiculous.
She said yes it was
Because at the end of it all
You can eat the goat.
People just rot and then
You find white skeletons.

And death is the giver of life.
The flash floods that kill
So many camels and people
Seep life into the sand.
The dunes become
Green with life.
Seeds waiting for years
Sighing and drumming fingers
Finally sprout into the world.

Her silk scarf
Thinner than thin,
Blows in the desert breeze
Calling to my resolve
To break, and embrace her.
Like in a Bollywood film.
I can even hear a few
Lines of a song
Carrying to my ears.

The practicality of life
As we flee from danger.
Are we really fleeing?
Can camels flee?
The practicality of life
Step after step,
Mouthful of rice,
Story time,
Time for bed.

We see a caravan of camels
A mirage in the distance.
They are fleeing too,
But in the opposite direction.
It is funny and
We laugh like the crazy old man.
I wonder where he is
And whether he has
Scored a goal yet.

Drinking water in an oasis
Cool and fresh
Dripping drops
Down her face
And shivering down her back.
Drinking water means more
Than thirst.
It is life and more.
And she sparkles.

Tell me a story,
About your ancestors, she says.
They didn't live in this desert,
They lived in another,
Very different.
Where do the words go?
I ask her,
When you have finished
Speaking them?

Tribes that fought for generations
Now sit around a camp fire
And talk of the future.
They are not the monsters
That everyone says they are.
Just people who speak
Their mantras in a different lilt.
Just people who chew
On goat bones differently.

The difference between the enemy
I tell her,
And of us in the desert,
Is that their lines are straight
And measured
Whilst ours
In the desert are soft
And curved
Feminine and full of feeling.

Leaving the familiar dunes
Behind us we enter
A new desert.
Should we cry for those
Ones we have lost?
After all, these dunes
Look exactly like the ones
We have just passed.
Is it relevant?

When you are waiting
For something like a
Bomb that will end your life,
It's like being in limbo,
A timelessness.
We are all waiting for
Reality to catch up
So that the limbo
Can lie down to sleep.

An injured camel shows us
The failure of our negotiations
With life.

It still plods on,
Dedicated to its biology
But falls behind.
You can't put a tow rope
On a camel and pull
It out of its misery.

Where are our fathers?
Where is the simplicity of
Just laughing
Safely in our homes
With our family?
It is not sad but true,
That the comfortable chairs
Left by them
Can be filled by us.

Dreams are like the
Changing of the dunes,
Blown into new shapes
By the artist that
Is the breeze.
We don't have to have dreams anymore
Because the reality is
So good.
So, so, good.

In the dusk, do your
Gold earrings just
Swing randomly,
Or do they pass secret
Messages to me?
My code breaking skills
Are getting much better
And I know what it is
That you seek.

Men who built the sandstone houses
Are all gone now, onto
Another reality.
And soon their houses
Built in sand,
Out of the sand,
Will return to the desert
And there will be
No footprints left behind.

We reach the border
Of a safe country.
Safe for whom? And why?
And there is no big thick line
Drawn across the desert to tell us
That this is a new place.
It looks just like the other
Hundred miles of desert
We have left behind.