

Through the Blue

It was back in the old days, when Grandad was alive and Dubai was just a dusty old desert town, back when I moved like a silverfish, darting under rocks and slipping through the sand.

Grandad would take his pointer roaming through the scrubland that backed on to our house, where rangy, sparsely-feathered chickens squabbled in the dirt that passed for a garden, and one-eyed dogs prowled the streets in packs. They have gold markets for tourists there now, glinting skyscrapers and malls. These were the old days though, with nothing to do but swim in the sea and climb the palms, hiding in their splayed fingers and plucking dates on the fly.

One evening, Grandad came home early from his work at the construction company, his fleshy hands two of the many that were busily building a glimmering new metropolis for the modern age.

“Get your shoes on,” he said.

And so I did.

We stepped out under an electric, deep-blue sky, the sun dying in the distance and bleeding rosy through the honey locust trees. Our pointer cantered ahead, skilfully avoiding the thorns that jutted from the trunks, and I too followed my own scent trail.

“Don’t go too far,” Grandad warned.

“I won’t!”

The trees here were tightly packed and spiked, their slender leaves floating like lily pads in the warm air, and me drifting under the surface. The crease behind my knees wept sweat as I played catch-up with my looming shadow, growing so engrossed in the game I lost track of the time.

“Grandad!”

No reply came. I turned on myself, looking this way and that, but it was no use. Grandad was nowhere to be seen, the thickets were too dense, the spines too clustered, to see very far ahead. I paused then, and a creeping sense of worry tip-toed over my shoulders, uncurling over the base of my neck. If night fell, what then? What crawled out of the dunes once the sun had gone? What lived there?

In the distance, a wailing started. The evening call to prayer unfurled over the desert, a haunting cry that seemed to enchant the very stones beneath my feet. The muezzin unleashed his keening, sending it out and up through the air, summoning the trees and sand to attention. As the call soared higher, I glanced up at the sky, watched it pull down a dusty veil that turned the whole world and everything in it blue, a filter that would soon shift violet and inevitably fall dark. I pressed on through the trees, tentatively now, placing one uncertain foot after another, fighting back worry. And as I moved through the blue, the creature appeared from within it.

It stood under the tree on spindly legs, its thick-lashed eyes deep and dark and gentle in the fading light. Although taller than me, its muzzle was tilted, its head arched back as if in assessment. Wrapping its meaty tongue around the locust leaves, it ate slowly and carefully, eyeing me as a child might a new playmate, but unafraid. I had seen camels before. I had ridden them, even, but always bridled and saddled, moored to their owners who dragged them with one hand and clutched their dish-dashes with the other. Alone in this small break among the thorny trees, the camel towered over me, an earthy smell of musk and sweat rising off its coat. As the call to prayer tailed off, the camel ended its feast. It turned to look at me. It seemed to me in that moment that the desert simply evaporated. As I stared deep into its eyes, I felt a breaking in me, a sadness I didn't understand. And then as unexpectedly as it had appeared, the camel left me, gliding away through the trees, hooves sure on the dirt.

For a few minutes, I waited there alone, before turning back the way I came. It wasn't long before the dog found me.

"Grandad!" I ran towards him, thrusting my hand into his.

"I saw a camel," I said. "A camel!"

"Did you really?" Grandad slipped me a side smile.

"Yes," I frowned. Didn't he believe me? "Really."

"Don't go off on your own like that again."

But I did.

Years later, I left Dubai. The city grew up and I did too. I never went back.

It had existed at the frontier, that camel. The frontier between the old and the new, the wild and the tame. It had not been afraid. It had stood at the gateway to a sacred space, the space in which a child first realises the immensity of the world and her smallness within it, a fleeting glimpse of the end of time, waving me across the border and into the blue.