

MIRALH

AND HIS MEETING WITH THE PAINTER

Jalál 8, 165 B.E.

Ben Caselin

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

He had been running all night, desperate to put as much distance as possible between himself and the village. His father was dead, his home destroyed, his life and future erased. Exhausted, he collapsed onto the cold sand. The flames still burned behind his eyes, evaporating every tear that tried to escape his tormented being. He wanted to cry, but all that came was a scream—a scream at everyone, directed at no one. Explosions and cries of terror echoed endlessly through his mind.

He looked up and saw the moon, the silent witness to it all, now cowardly hiding behind a cloud. Like a bolt of lightning surging from within, he cursed the World Plate and the very day he had been born. Burying his face in the sand, he wished for death to claim him.

The baker. The neighbours. The girls next door. They had all been murdered. He had seen it. Finally, the tears broke free. As he cried, it felt as

though his body were sinking, melting into the sand. This would be the place of his end.

A warm breeze breathed across the back of his neck. When he looked up, the sun had risen. He had no intention of moving. He told himself he would lie there until the sun scorched him to ashes. As the temperature climbed, drops of sweat gathered on his forehead until they grew heavy enough to fall and seek refuge in the sand. His mouth was parched, begging for water, but his mind refused to listen.

Lying on his back, staring into the blue sky, he noticed three black dots circling high above him. He was dizzy. His heart pounded in his forehead. He had stopped sweating. He was convinced he could hear his own skin sizzling.

Suddenly a shadow fell across his face. He opened his eyes and found himself staring at a giant vulture. The moment their eyes met, the vulture hopped backward, as though repulsed by the living. A second vulture landed and hissed

loudly. A third joined them. Their heads bobbed up and down—agitated, uncertain.

“This one is still alive,” one of the vultures said.

“He’s just pretending.”

They’re on to me, the boy realised.

He wanted to leap up and run for his life, but his body refused to obey. A sharp pain stabbed through his chest; he wondered whether he had already been struck. An intensely cold wave of fear crawled from his toes and fingers, spreading through the rest of him. Panic seized him, and with the last of his strength he tried.

“He’s trying to escape!”

He ran, stumbling, glancing back in horror. The soldiers were flapping their wings, hatred blazing in their eyes. The bullets missed him.

INVISIBLE BORDERS

“Hurry up, Anjing! Quickly, Kameel!”

The miserable boy turned around and saw a man approaching with two camels. He was no soldier of Khala—that much was clear from the man’s attire. The man wore blue, while the Khalanese wore only red. As the stranger stopped in front of him, the boy noticed how much the man resembled his own camels: large bushy eyebrows, a long face, and crooked teeth.

“What brings you here, brother?” the man asked.

“I don’t know,” the boy answered.

The man handed him a flask. The boy drank hurriedly.

“Not too fast, my brother. That isn’t healthy.”

Cold liquid flowed into his belly. Dizzy but relieved, he sat down in the shade of the camels.

“You saved me.”

“These are dangerous lands,” the man replied.

“What brings you here?”

“The Khalanese destroyed my father’s village.” His entire being cringed at the memory.

“I’ve heard of it. It’s tragic indeed.”

“Oferi is no more,” he lamented. “It’s gone. All of it.”

“Sadly, that’s how things go.”

The boy hated responses like that, as if people had no control over life whatsoever.

“Everyone is dead, and for what?! A piece of land!”

“Yes,” the man said, “but a valuable piece of land. It’s fertile.”

“It was *our* land!”

“My brother, man has always fought wars, and it will always be this way. Do you have family somewhere?”

“No.”

“Well, further ahead there is a city called Bekim. I’ll take you there, and you can ask for asylum.”

The man ordered one of his camels to kneel. The boy climbed onto its back. “You’ve saved me,” he said again.

The man smiled and handed the boy a loaf of white bread. The scent reminded him of his favorite bakery. He remembered one morning, after a long night of tossing and turning, asking the baker for fresh date bread. The baker had thought him a strange boy, but his kindness was never dimmed by judgment. The boy sighed. He missed his father. However strict and unreasonable his father had sometimes been, he had loved him deeply.

The man placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You will recover. I'm taking you to Bekim."



Softly, the man began to sing. His song told of a lonely lover searching for his beloved. The lover

was so sick with desperation that even the finest doctors declared him incurable. One afternoon, pursued by soldiers ordered to kill this gravely ill—and possibly contagious—man, he had no place to go. He climbed over a fence and fell into a garden. There he met his beloved, who stared at him with her enchanting eyes. The mere glance she granted him was enough to heal him.

“You walk from here, my brother.”

In the distance, the boy beheld the city of Bekim. It was surrounded by a high wall.

As the man and his two camels walked off into the desert, the boy turned his gaze to the city.

“Halt!”

In front of him stood a knight, clad in protective metal and carrying a large sword.

“You cannot walk here.”

Miralh, trying to make sense of what was happening, looked around. He was surrounded by empty desert, and in the distance lay the city of Bekim.

“Where am I not allowed to walk?” he asked.

“Do not ridicule me, boy. Do not go further. You are about to cross the border into my land.”

The angry knight grabbed his sword and drew a line in the sand. “Odiar!” he yelled.

“Noble knight, I am on my way to Bekim. Would you mind if I cross your territory? I will not stay...”

“You will have to pay.”

“I have no possessions except the clothes I wear, noble knight,” the poor boy complained.

“Then you will have to walk around my land! Odiar! If you trespass, I will kill you.”

“Fine,” the boy said grumpily. “But you will have to show me where the border is, because I don’t see it.”

The knight stuck his sword into the sand and began walking. The boy kept to the right of him, sighing and moaning at every turn.

This man is crazy, he thought.

“Who are you?” the boy asked, hoping to elicit some kindness.

“My name is Gurmand, son of Sanntach. I am the last in a long line of lords. Our house is that of Odjar.”

“I have never heard of this house,” the boy confessed.

“You are a dumb boy, did you know that?” The knight cleared his throat and spat in the boy’s direction.

After some time, the knight stopped walking. “Be careful, dumb boy. This city is cursed.” He turned around and walked off, mumbling words in a language the boy could not understand.

On his way to Bekim, the boy reflected on the strange encounter. *What is the difference between an area surrounded by walls and one that is not?*

Behind him, the sun was sinking. He was about to arrive and felt anxious. He was afraid of being rejected and could not bear the thought of spending another night in the desert.

“Greetings, oh strange wanderer with a face that betrays misery. By what name do you travel, and what is your purpose?”

A guard dressed in the whitest garment the boy had ever seen stood by the gate. Only his eyes were visible, revealing his humanity.

“My name is Miralh. I am from the village of Oferi. My village has been destroyed, and I seek asylum.”

“Oh strange one who goes by the name of Miralh, Bekim is known for its hospitality. You are granted three days. If, during these days of bliss, you do not find adequate employment, you must leave. This is a binding condition. Will you abide by it?”

“Yes.”

“Then raise your right hand and repeat these words: I, the stranger Miralh, oh Miralh, abide by the law of refuge laid down by the Seven Wise Women, as it has been written in the Red Book of the Unbreakable Line.”

After carefully repeating the guard’s words, the large city gate opened, and Miralh entered Bekim.

THE STORM OF MERCY AND PUNISHMENT

Bekim was unlike any city Miralh had ever seen. The streets were broad, the houses larger than those in Oferi. The roads were partially paved. It was warmer here than in the desert as the day drew to a close. Merchants were closing their shops, stray cats fought over leftovers, and men smoked apple tobacco in one another's company. The scent of coffee mingled with the sweet fragrance of their hookahs, reminding Miralh of home.

Exhausted, he sat down on the curb. A few women gathered their laundry. He heard laughter and, in the distance, a crying baby. The sand still felt warm beneath him. As darkness fell, he noticed there were no streetlights. With people disappearing into their homes, a wave of loneliness washed over him.

For a second, Miralh felt someone watching him. Across the street, behind a small window, he could have sworn he saw a figure. He looked up

at the sky and glared at the stars. They were the same stars he had watched for years from the safety of his bedroom. The stars and he were the only survivors.

Images of the burning village flooded his mind. He saw his father die right in front of him. Again, he glimpsed movement behind the window. His heart began to race, and a feeling of unease settled over him.



Slowly, the door of the house opened, and a small lady wearing a headscarf stood in the doorway. She approached Miralh with caution.

“You are not from here,” she whispered.

“No, I am not.”

“Come quickly, before the storm begins.”

“Storm?”

“I will explain later. Hurry.”

Having no other sensible option, Miralh followed the lady into her house.

In the living room stood a small table with two chairs. On the table was a pot holding burning incense sticks. The scent reminded him of his grandfather.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Miralh said. “Are you sure a storm is coming?”

“Every night the storm comes. We call it the Storm of Mercy and Punishment. It exists only in Bekim and does not go beyond the walls.”

This sounded strange to Miralh. “How is that possible?”

The woman lit a second lamp. “Usually I prefer sitting in the dark. But for guests like you, I happily provide light. What is your name, son?”

“Miralh.”

“Miralh?” The woman smiled.

He peered through the window. “Why is it called the Storm of Mercy and Punishment?”

“The Seven Wise Women have termed it so. According to them, the storm is a punishment for how we have behaved in the past, and it is a mercy because it prevents us from ever behaving in such a way again.”

“How did people behave?”

“Before, the people in this city were among the most arrogant dwellers of the World Plate. We were short-sighted, and our lives were governed by a corrupt love of gold. We fought wars over it. Justice has come. Now we have nothing to which we can become attached. Everything will perish, except His Countenance.”

The woman closed her eyes, listening intently. “It will not take long. You could have been killed out

there. Every night the storm destroys everything—sometimes rooftops, sometimes entire houses. Every night, the storm reminds us of our dark past.”

“Are you afraid?”

“No. Each morning I thank God for the storm, and I pray for a stronger one, so that it may purify me and my fellow citizens.”

“Why would you pray for that?”

“The storm is a blessing. What God wills is just.”

This God she spoke of was something unfamiliar to Miralh. His father had always told him to reject God.

“You trust this God?”

“Who are we to mistrust the All-Wise? Listen. It has begun.”

Outside, Miralh could hear the wind picking up. He stood and looked out the window. The door began to creak. He couldn’t see much; sand blew violently through the streets. It was as if the storm were kicking at the door, trying to get in. Miralh tasted blood and realized he had bitten his lip. He wanted to ask the woman how long

the storm would last, but when he turned around, he saw she was immersed in prayer.

The next day, Miralh woke up at the table. From behind a curtain, the lady entered the living room carrying a large piece of brown bread and two cups of tea.

“Mint for a fresh spirit and roses for the heart,” she said as she handed Miralh his tea.

“I have to find a job,” Miralh said despondently.

“Otherwise, I have to leave.”

“You don’t want to stay, Miralh. This city is poor and cannot offer you anything.”

“But my village has been destroyed. I have nowhere else to go.”

“Bekim is not for you. Behind the city, to the east, there is a special oasis. Go there.”

“And then what do I do?”

“You will see. The unknown awaits you.”

Miralh envisioned a big black hole where he would not know the way or the language.

“I don’t think the law is fair. I need more time.”

“Fairness is not always convenient. Be grateful. The law protects you from becoming a beggar. The Seven Wise do not wish your humiliation. You can stay here for two more nights. Then be on your way.”

The woman stood up. “I will go to my sister now. You go explore this city and meet people to learn from.” She handed him a small backpack. “There is a flask inside. Be home on time. I will see you later, if God wills it.”

That day Miralh wandered throughout the city. People were kind and greeted him cordially. He wondered why they were so calm and gentle when every night they were tormented by such a horrific storm. He thought about Oferi and realized he had never known anyone as peaceful and wise as this lady, though his grandfather had possessed a similar quality.

Unlike Miralh’s father, his grandfather had never worried about the opinions of others. A quiet man, he spoke only when spoken to. “A wise man

offers water only to those who are thirsty,” his grandfather would say.

After the death of Miralh’s mother, his grandfather had left Oferi. His father had despised him, calling him too liberal. When he left the house, Miralh had asked his grandfather where he would go. In response, he had picked up a handful of sand, opened his hand, and answered that the wind was telling him to head for the Volcanic region in the north.

At the end of the day, as merchants once again closed their shops, Miralh decided to return to the lady’s home. Soon, however, he realized he had lost his way. In his panic he picked up his pace, entering and leaving small alleyways in search of something familiar. The streets were quieting down. After some time, they were completely empty, and darkness had fallen. His fear grew. He wanted to ask for help. He felt the wind picking up, and before he could reach a door to knock on, the wind swept him off his feet.

Miralh fell on his back. He tried to stand, but the wind was too strong. Sand scraped across his face. He could not resist the power of the storm. He yelled, but his voice could not escape the growling wind. As he was violently dragged down the street, his bag caught on something. He tried to pull it free. Suddenly, in a final attempt to free himself, the ground beneath him opened. It was a hatch. The wind turned, pushed Miralh into the opening, growled one last time, and sealed the entrance. Miralh tumbled down a staircase, landing with such force that he lost consciousness.

THE PEOPLE OF DUST

It was dark, eerily dark. Miralh found himself lying face-down on a cold floor. He stood up and looked around. Further up ahead, he could see a faint light coming from behind a door. He pushed it open and discovered a large, spacious cave lit by a thousand torches. In the center stood a gigantic statue of a spider, entirely made of gold, its flickering eyes appearing to be jewels. Along the cave walls, beneath the torches, Miralh could see hundreds of hallways disappearing into darkness.

“You are from the Upper World.”

An old man with a beard reaching to his feet walked toward Miralh.

“Go! This place is not safe. Before you know it, you cannot escape anymore, and you become like us.”

Miralh did not know what to say.

“We are lost. Forever lost, I tell you.”

“Where am I?” Miralh asked, bewildered by the man’s foul appearance.

“Boy, I have been defiled by the shadow. You stay here and you become scared, blind, and inhuman.”

The man came closer. His face was pale, and he stank like a rotting corpse. He coughed, and a long strand of saliva poured from his mouth, only to disappear into his beard.



“You people have forgotten us. We left when the storm came and took everything with us. I am sure the storm is long gone by now, but nobody wants to return.”

“The storm is still active,” Miralh said. “That’s how I got here.”

The old man looked up at the dark ceiling with desperation in his eyes. “Up there the Golden Circle lights the world. It is brighter than fire and hotter than lava. Nobody sees it. Instead we dwell in a place lit by torches and gold.”

“The Golden Circle? Do you mean the sun?”

“I have never seen it. But I know it exists, boy. It is made of real gold and it gives light.”

“You have never seen the sun? Then how do you know of it?”

“I do not need to see in order to believe. I feel warmth coming through the ceiling. I am telling you what I know to be true.”

The old man coughed and spat on the ground.

“If you want to leave this place, why don’t you?” Miralh asked.

“I am too old. My bones are too fragile, my body too tired, and my eyes wouldn’t be able to stand the light of that beautiful sun. It is too late.”

“So you are stuck?”

“I was born here, and this is where I shall die.”

Miralh wanted to comfort the old man but was repelled by his stench.

“Everything is rotten. Further along, you will find the Great Hall, where we dig for diamonds and gold. Here it is quiet. Most people live deeper, at the back of the Hall by the River of Oil. They are digging their way deeper into the shadow,” the old man lamented.

The man walked off and beckoned Miralh to follow. Miralh went after him into one of the narrow hallways. At one point the hallway split into three smaller ones. They took the one on the left. After descending a slippery stairway, they entered a small cave.

“Is this your home?” Miralh asked.

The old man pointed to a large heap of moss.

“I am tired. You sleep there,” the man said. He then wrapped himself in his own beard, lay down, and began snoring loudly.

Miralh lay down on the wet moss. The oil lamp flickered dimly. He heard the rocks above him creak, and he feared he would have to spend the rest of his life in this miserable place.

Upon awakening the next morning, Miralh saw the old man staring at him.

“There you are! Tell me about the Golden Circle.”

“The sun?”

“Yes. Tell me.”

Miralh did not know what to say. He had never had to describe the sun to anyone before. “I guess it’s a large ball of fire, and it is very hot... You cannot look at it for long because it is too bright.”

“Is it truly that bright?” The man seemed to be in awe.

“Yes, but you can look at the moon, if you want.”

“The moon?”

“Yes, it is like a gigantic Silver Circle.”

“Tell me about this Silver Circle!”

“Well, it is a mysterious ball that circles above the center of the World Plate. It shines a faint light when the sun sleeps.”

“Who is he?!” Another man interrupted the conversation. He was much younger than the old man, but just like him, he seemed only partially alive.

“This is Miralh,” the old man answered. “I told you, the Circle is real. Miralh has seen it!”

“Don’t speak about the Circle to me, father. I do not want to hear it.”

The man came closer to Miralh. “So, you are from the Upper World?”

“Yes, sir. I came here by accident.”

“Don’t lie to me, you disgusting little worm. You are here for our gold!”

“Skarabo!” shouted his father. “This is my guest. He is not like you...corrupt and ill-minded!”

“Do not listen to him, worm. He is a crazy fool who believes in some Golden Circle. Look...” He opened his hand and showed Miralh a piece of gold. “This is the real sun and the only sun. It is mine.”

“But sir, the sun is much larger and—”

“Do not speak, you foul insect. I am telling you: gold comes from the earth, not from the Upper World. Oil comes from the earth, not from your poor world. Light comes from fire, and fire comes from down here. Treasures come from down here. I come from this world. Guest or no guest, you leave tonight!”

Angrily, the man left the cave.

“You have to leave tonight, Miralh. My son is ruthless and will feed you to the creatures that feast on death. I am forever thankful that you have confirmed my faith, but you must leave.”

“What would you have said if I told you the sun does not exist?” Miralh asked, intrigued by the old man’s conviction.

“I would not have believed you. Everywhere there are blind people, even in the Upper World.”

Miralh walked up the stairs, feeling anxious. His palms were sweaty. Above him he heard the storm roaring. He knew that during the day it

would be impossible to open the hatch, as it would be buried under the sand. He hoped the storm would be merciful and spare his life. Gathering all his strength and against every instinct that told him not to, he pushed the hatch open. The sound of the wind was deafening. Forcefully he was pulled out through the hatch and swept across the street. He tried to hold on to something to stop himself from moving. Suddenly, he was slammed against a wall. Next to him, roof tiles and other pieces of rubble smashed into bits. With his last reserves of strength, he climbed up a pipe to the top of the wall. A final gust of wind pushed him over the edge and onto the sand a few meters below. The lady had told the truth. The Storm of Mercy and Punishment did not reach beyond the wall. It was quiet.

THE SILENT OASIS

The next morning, Miralh woke to the sun digging its nails deep into his skin. His throat was parched, his eyes irritated by the sand. Further up ahead, he saw the oasis the lady had spoken of. As he walked toward the promise of water, a soft breeze caressed his face. Across the pool, in the shade of a palm tree, sat a man. He wore a dark green turban. When he noticed Miralh, the man smiled and nodded, as though he had been expecting him.

Miralh knelt, filled his hands with water, and brought his tongue back to life. Looking down, he was astonished by the clarity of the water. When he glanced up again, the man was still smiling. His beard and wrinkles adorned his face like quiet decorations of time.

As Miralh approached the mysterious man, it felt like stepping into a bubble of peace. The man's

eyes twinkled. He knew a secret, the knowledge of which had erased all fear from his being.

“Excuse me, do you live here?” Miralh asked.

“Welcome, son. No, I do not live here. Or do I? Where does the sun live?”

Miralh was confused by the response. “The sun?”

“It is always here, yet its home is not on earth.”

“I guess,” Miralh answered.

“You are a strange boy. What is your name?”

“Miralh, sir.”

The man chuckled. “Whoever gave you that name knew the true nature of our being.”



Suddenly, the man stood up and ran off toward the city. He touched the wall and sprinted back to where Miralh stood. Laughing loudly, he sat back down, gasping for air.

“Why? Why did you do that?”

The man filled a bowl with water and drank from it. “I wanted to drink, but I was not thirsty. Now I am,” he answered.

The man looked deep into Miralh’s eyes, as though aware of his sorrow. “This oasis is very special, Miralh.” He pointed to a place behind the trees in the distance.

Miralh could see how the oasis connected to a river that ran deep into the desert.

“Where is all that water coming from?” Miralh asked.

“Where is it going is the question to ask. This oasis is that river’s mother.”

Miralh was surprised; the oasis itself was relatively small.

“This river is deeper than your mind can imagine,” the man continued. “Entire oceans are born from this oasis.”

“Impossible,” Miralh answered with obvious disbelief.

The man remained silent.

“Go and find a nice rock,” he told Miralh.

Curious, Miralh set out to look for one. After a while, instead of a rock, he found a shell.

“Is this acceptable?”

The man took the shell from Miralh. Together they walked to the edge of the oasis. He threw the shell into the water. Miralh followed it with his eyes as it sank deeper and deeper until it disappeared into the darkness below. Then the man opened his hand.

“How? How is that possible?” Miralh was astonished to see the exact same shell resting in the man’s palm.

“How did you do that?”

“It does not matter, Miralh. The shell is back, and oceans have originated from this oasis.”

Unable to respond in any meaningful way, Miralh asked the man’s name.

“My name is Mani. It means moon.”

“Mani...”

“So, where are you headed, Miralh?”

“I am not going anywhere. I am running away.”

“What are you running from?”

“War,” Miralh sighed, “hatred and death.”

“Then you are headed in the right direction. If you are running from war, hatred, and death, then you are heading toward peace, love, and life. You are on your way to God.”

“God...” Miralh was not particularly interested.

“Yes. His names are numerous, and His powers infinite.”

“I don’t believe in God.”

“What do you not believe in?” Mani asked.

“I don’t believe in some old wise man on a cloud who randomly decides what happens on the World Plate.”

Mani laughed. “You have convinced me. I am also a disbeliever.”

Miralh was intrigued by Mani’s response. “What do you think God is, then?”

“Does a stone understand a plant?”

“No...”

“Does a plant understand an animal?”

“Of course not...”

“Does an animal understand a human being?”

“Maybe...”

“Maybe? What would it understand?” Mani asked.

“Well, a camel can be trained to understand a man’s commands...”

“Yes, but does it understand a man’s compassion, his thoughts, his creative powers?”

“No. Of course not.”

“What can I say about God, then? I do not know what God is. He is unknowable and beyond my comprehension.”

Mani bent over and filled his hand with sand. Upon throwing it into the air, a strong breeze carried the grains further, scattering them around.

“The universe is like a painting. God is the Painter. I do not know what God is, but by examining His painting I can get an idea of how He is.”

“What do you see in this painting, then?”

“What do you see, Miralh?”

Miralh looked around. "I see sand, water, and trees."

"Marvelous!" Mani handed Miralh the bowl of water. "Take a sip. Describe it."

"I guess the water is very pure."

"Look at the desert. How would you describe it?"

"It is large..."

"Look at the tree. How does it differ from the sand?"

"It is alive," Miralh answered, wondering where Mani was going with this.

"Amazing!" Mani shouted. "This painting expresses purity, greatness, and life! That tells us something about the Painter!"

"My father always told me to stay away from everything unscientific."

"Miralh, scientists devote their lives to the analysis of God's painting. Every day they are discovering just how brilliant this painting is."

"Are you going somewhere in particular, Mani?"

"I am on my way to the beginning that knows no end." Mani laughed out loud. "Ignore my answers, Miralh. I like you. Tomorrow you will find me a

rowboat, and we will follow the river. Are you happy?"

Miralh, feeling he had made an interesting friend, nodded.

"I would like to come with you."

THE RIVER OF LIGHT

“It is about time!” Mani yelled as Miralh was waking up. “Don’t worry. I already found a boat. You can imagine how confused the guards were when they saw me carrying a boat into the desert!” Mani laughed loudly.

He pushed the boat into the water. “Many people are not even aware of this oasis. Most citizens of Bekim never leave the city.”

Mani jumped into the air, crossed his legs, and landed perfectly in the boat.

“Come on! Jump in!”

Miralh had to take a big leap to get into the boat.

“How did you sleep, Miralh?”

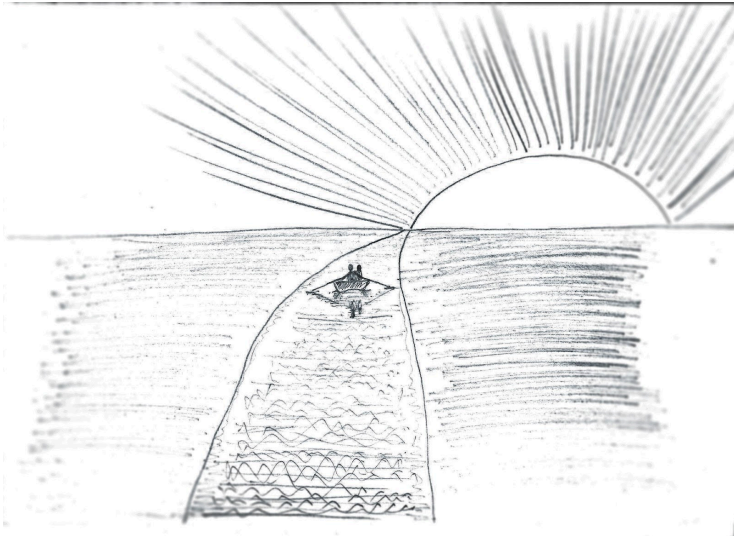
“Not so well. Our conversation got me thinking.”

“So you are a thinker. What did you think about?”

“I thought about an old man I met in a cave. He had never been outside and he had never seen the sun. But he was convinced that the sun existed. All he had felt was some warmth coming

through the walls of the cave, and this was enough for him to know.”

“Knowledge is a light shed into the heart. Sometimes not much is needed,” Mani answered.



“What makes you so sure about this God?”

Mani’s piercing eyes seemed to penetrate Miralh’s soul, as if searching for the right words to answer his question.

“How can you know water exists when you find yourself in a dry desert?”

“I don’t know...”

“Thirst!” Mani’s eyes lit up. “Thirst proves the existence of water. And fire! For everything there is an opposite, so fire tells us of the existence of water! The shadow tells us of light, and weakness is a witness to God’s power!”

“But if God exists, then why are there wars, Mani?”

“Life is a school! God provides us with knowledge, but just like a teacher, He would never intervene during an exam. We are here to learn and prove ourselves, Miralh.”

“What is there to learn?”

“We must learn to take responsibility and use our free will with wisdom.”

“But even those who believe in God fight one another...” Miralh objected.

“All religions are the same religion, but the laws and images change. Again, just like in school. We are given different teachers who explain things in different ways, and as we get older, the rules that guide our conduct change in accordance with our needs and capacities. To hold on

stubbornly to old traditions, this is what creates division.”

Miralh was reminded of his childhood.

“My father was like this. He was against change. I never want to be like him.”

“Do not blame your father. Behold the World Plate with your own eyes and hear its melodies with your own ears. Forget what you have learned. Create space within yourself.”

“How?”

“By being quiet,” Mani answered.

“And then?”

“And then we’ll talk.”

THE SONG OF SORROWFUL DESIRE

“Tonight we stay at this rock. Here the night comes fast. We are in a special area.”

“What makes it special?”

“This is the place locally known as the Mooncircle. It is the only place on the entire World Plate where the Moonbirds dwell. As soon as night falls and the moon appears, they will sing their songs.”

“What are Moonbirds?” Miralh asked curiously.

“They are birds. Many centuries ago they inhabited the moon, but since they came to this world, they have been unable to return. Every night they sing their songs of sorrowful desire. They are homesick.”

“How sad...”

“Do not pity them. They are strong creatures.”

Miralh had lived in Oferi all his life. He never knew the World Plate was such a fascinating place.

“We must sit a little further from the river, Miralh. Now, close your eyes.”

Miralh closed his eyes. Suddenly, after a few minutes, everything turned dark. The wind stopped blowing. Even the river seemed to stop flowing. Then the songs began. Miralh heard beautiful melodies coming from all around him. Although each song followed a different melody, the birds sang in perfect harmony.

“Now, look.”

Upon opening his eyes, Miralh’s heart skipped a beat. The river was bright blue, with a silvery sparkle. Miralh did not understand.

“How is this happening?”

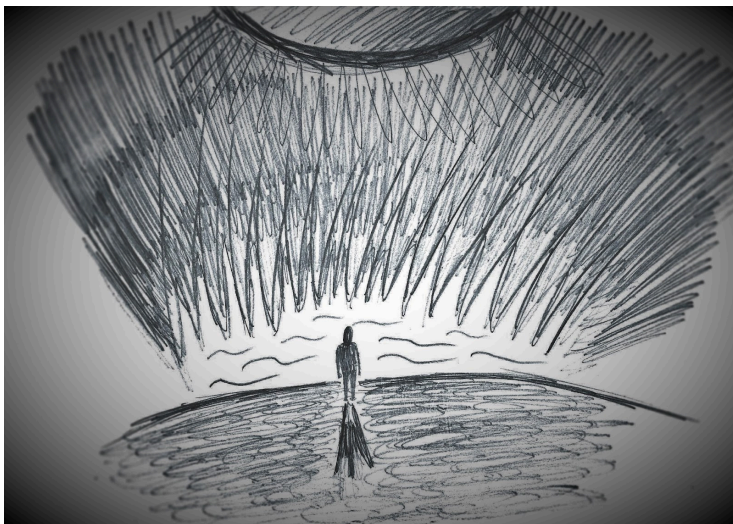
“It is the moonlight being reflected by the millions of jewels scattered over the riverbed.”

“Are there really jewels in this river?” Miralh’s eyes lit up.

“Yes. Human beings are just like this river. But in order for us to bring out the jewels that lie hidden within our being, we must cleanse ourselves. The more purified we become, the

brighter we will shine as we reflect the light of God.”

Miralh stood up and walked to the edge of the water.



“Be careful, Miralh. At night this water is dangerous.”

Miralh felt he could burst into tears. The water was crystal clear, as if it were still daylight in its depths. On the riverbed, he could clearly discern red, green, purple, yellow, and white jewels. He

felt overcome with love. He looked up at the bright moon, so close to the earth. The song of the Moonbirds grew increasingly intense.

Then a deep voice joined their song. Mani had walked further into the desert. Miralh saw him raise his arms to the sky. He sang a beautiful melody, a song of sorrowful desire. Miralh thought about the old man in the cave, and he felt blind.

THE JEWELS WITHIN MAN

“The river has changed its course,” Mani said the next morning.

Again Miralh awoke in a state of confusion.

“We have to carry the boat back to the river.”

Miralh looked around. All he saw was sand. “Do you know where it has gone?”

“Part of it never leaves the Mooncircle, but the Mooncircle is large.”

“So what do we do?” Miralh started panicking.

Mani handed him a banana. “Walk.”

The banana was completely black. Although hungry, Miralh hesitated to eat it. He was in a bad mood. With Mani in front and Miralh behind, they stumbled through the desert carrying the heavy boat.

“Where did all the jewels go?”

“They follow the river.”

“But maybe a few have been left. Maybe we should look for them. Don’t you think?”

“They are unimportant, Miralh.”

“But yesterday you said they were important and that we have to cleanse ourselves.”

“Talents and virtues, Miralh. Not stones.”

Miralh felt intensely agitated. He was tired, hungry, and cursed the fact that he had to carry a boat in the desert. “This is so silly!” he yelled.

“The desert does not hear your complaints, Miralh.”

“But you do! You don’t even know where we are going. What is the point of this?”

Mani stopped walking and let go of the boat.

“What are you doing?”

“I am building a sand castle.”

“What? Why?”

Mani did not answer and started digging into the sand. He was intensely focused and sweating profusely. Miralh did not know how to respond and stood there in silence. After some time, Mani stood back up. It was not a castle. Instead he had simply created three piles of sand.

“Are you finished?” Miralh asked.

“Are you?”

Miralh knew he had been complaining too much and that it was not appropriate. "I am just not happy with how things are going today."

"Miralh, my castle is ugly, bananas turn black, the desert is hot, the boat is heavy, the River of Light is magical, and complaints are useless."

Mani picked the boat back up, and together they proceeded to look for the river.

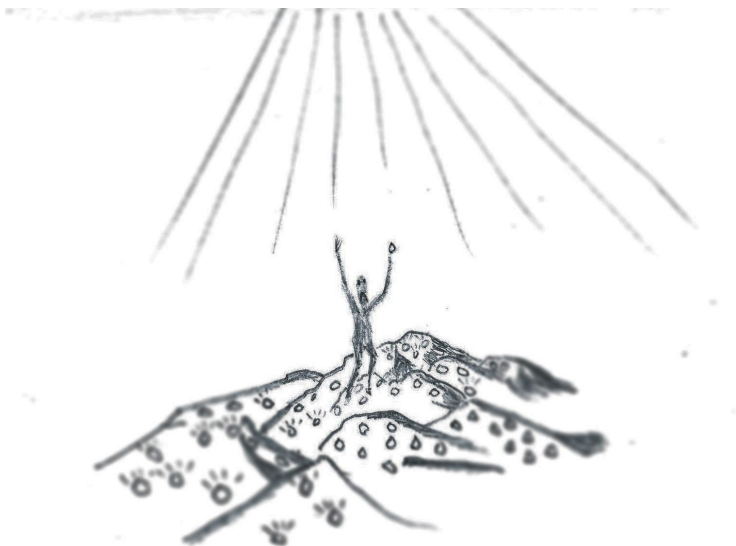
The heat was devastating. Drops of sweat crawled down Miralh's face. He still felt the urge to complain, but his dry tongue refused to move.

"There!" Mani pointed to the river. With intense joy they picked up their pace. Suddenly the boat was not so heavy anymore. Upon arriving, and fully clothed, Mani jumped into the river.

"Join me! The water is marvelous."

Miralh jumped in and drank from the river as he swam to the center. He remembered the jewels lying on the riverbed and dove down. He was amazed. Everywhere he looked he saw jewels of every color imaginable. He picked up as many as he could. He filled his pockets and used his shirt

to hold them together. However, when he ran out of breath and wanted to swim back up, he noticed he was not able to.



He panicked and looked around to see if his clothes had gotten stuck on something. This was not the case. His lungs began to hurt. Letting go of the diamonds did not seem to help. Miralh still felt his pockets weighing him down, so in a hurry he emptied them too. Only when he dropped the

last diamond did he feel a release. He rushed to the surface and took a deep breath.

“Mani!” he yelled.

Mani had already left the water and was drying on the sand.

“Greed is like quicksand and causes man to sink in the shadow. Do not tell me, Miralh.”

“But it was strange. I couldn’t even lift a single stone!”

Mani kept silent. He was clearly disappointed.

Abruptly, Mani jumped to his feet and dove into the river. After a little while he came back up and climbed out of the water with his shirt full of jewels.

“How?” Miralh asked in astonishment. “What power do you possess that I do not?”

“The power to let go at any moment.” Mani turned around and threw all the stones back into the river. He then turned to Miralh. “It is not that we are not allowed to have possessions. We can enrich ourselves as much as we want. The only

condition is that our possessions do not possess us.”

He pushed the boat back into the water. “Let’s go. It’s time.”

Miralh felt a great sadness overcome his soul. He wondered what he had been doing all his life and why. It was difficult for him to deal with the fact that he did not know where they were heading. He had grown up thinking he would have to take over his father’s bookstore, but now there was no future ahead of him.

“I feel life is empty,” Miralh sighed.

Mani kept rowing.

“Maybe there is no point. No plan.”

Mani still did not respond.

“Is there more, Mani?”

“Look around you!”

Despondently, Miralh looked around and saw the vast desert, the sky above it, and the sun looming over it. He shook his head. “No, there is nothing.”

“Exactly. There is nothing.”

“But that’s not what you believe, right?”

“Miralh, I am on my way to the ocean. I have no home. I plan to lie on the beach, surrender myself to the waves, and let them take me to the bottom. Do you know what I will find there?”

“No. What will you find there?” Miralh asked with a feeling of hope.

“Nothing!”

“Why are you saying this?” Miralh said, raising his voice. “Why don’t you tell me there is more than just the sky, the sand, and the sun, and that there is a purpose?”

“Very well,” Mani replied. “There is more, Miralh, and there is a purpose.”

Miralh sighed.

“Look at the water. What do you see?”

“Nothing,” Miralh answered. “Myself.”

“Look deeper. What is behind this reflection of yourself?”

Miralh tried to think of a smart way to answer, but nothing came to mind.

“Everything in the universe is part of the painting and tells us about the Painter,” Mani said.

“Anywhere you look, you will see a sign.”

“What type of sign?”

“Well, look at this beautiful palm tree. Where is it going?”

“It’s not going anywhere.”

“Yes, you are right to claim that the tree is digging its roots deep into the ground so that it can benefit from the world below. However, it is also growing. Where is it growing toward?”

“The sun...”

“Now that is a sign. It is a sign of love and adoration. The tree desires to be near its beloved, the sun. And what does the sun do?”

“It shines.”

“Yes, it provides the world with warmth and light. This is a sign of love too. And when two drops of water meet and merge into one, this is a sign of love. Just like when a mother camel nurtures her young, it tells us about love.”

“So then what is in me?”

“Now you are asking the right question! In you lies everything! Love, compassion, joy, knowledge, and so many more signs of the divine. These are the jewels that lie hidden

within your innermost being, and it is your purpose to bring them to the surface!"

Mani stopped rowing. "We will head into those mountains. Behind them lies a valley where a dear friend of mine lives. We will meet him."

WHISPERS FROM THE SHADOW

Mani pushed the boat into the river to be taken away by the stream.

“We will not return.”

Looking up the steep mountain, Mani grabbed Miralh’s shoulder. “We have to be quick. At night we don’t stand a chance against the Whisperers.”

Miralh had never heard of these Whisperers and did not venture to ask. He trusted Mani and was excited to climb the mountain. When he was young, from the terrace of his home, he used to gaze at the volcanoes in the distance. Although he had wanted to go there, his father would not allow it.

The mountain was treacherous, and the loose sand made it hard to climb. After a while, coming from a dead tree, Miralh heard a bird singing a beautifully enchanting melody.

“Do not be tempted by the song, Miralh. There are no birds here.”

“Who is singing then?”

“That is the sound of a Whisperer. Their only purpose is to lure you into the shadow. Be careful.”



Mani handed Miralh a sweater from his bag. “Take this. The higher we go, the colder it gets.” He proceeded to walk as Miralh struggled to put on the sweater. By accident, his head got stuck in the sleeve, and it took him some time to get it right. By now, Mani had walked quite a distance. Just as Miralh was about to hurry toward him, a little boy appeared from behind a rock.

The boy had a desperate look in his eyes. It seemed as though he was in serious trouble.

“What’s wrong?” Miralh asked. “Where are your parents?”

The boy reached out and opened his hand. He was holding a small, sparkly object. It looked like a coin or an amulet of some sort.

“What is that?” Miralh asked.

The boy did not answer and came a little closer.

Miralh’s stomach became very heavy, and he felt a wave of unease and eeriness come over him. Miralh knew something was wrong, but he could not bring himself to move. He felt cold, and the back of his head began to tingle. He tried to turn away, but then the boy began to cry. He had lost his gold piece and seemed very upset. Feeling pity for the boy, Miralh felt compelled to help him and started looking for it.

Between two small rocks he saw something glistening. He pushed the rocks aside and picked up the gold piece. As he turned to the boy, three other small boys had joined the scene. They looked at him with the eyes of death. He wanted

to get up and run away, but everything around him started to fade. He felt his body weaken, time seemed to stand still, and he did not know whether he was standing on the ground or floating through space. The boys began to scream at a deafening pitch. Suddenly, Miralh felt a hand grab his arm and pull him up. He turned around and looked straight into Mani's eyes.

"What do they want?" Miralh asked after what seemed at least an hour of silence.

"They are creatures of the dark side. They come in many forms and are everywhere, but here there is an abundance of them. They are allies of your lower self, Miralh."

"I couldn't do anything," Miralh sighed. "I could not defend myself at all."

"As long as we are attached to things of this world, we remain unhappy and vulnerable. Let's be quick. Once we reach the other side, we will be safe."

“Mani, if this universe is like a reflection of God, His painting, then how can we understand hatred and evil?”

“Hear no evil and see no evil, because there is none.”

“Of course there is! What about war?”

“War is a sign of evil. But evil is simply the lack of the good, just like darkness is the absence of light and ignorance the absence of knowledge. It is this contrast that teaches us about reality. Without the night, we may not learn about the day.”

“So God is never evil or hateful?”

Mani laughed. “God is complete.”

THE FLIGHT OF THE PROUD RAINDROP

Miralh had never gazed upon the World Plate from so high. The desert seemed endless. He saw the river run its course and, in the distance, the city of Bekim. A fresh breeze ran through his hair, flowed into his lungs, and his body felt alive. On the other side of the mountain lay a valley with a beautiful tapestry of white houses. The scent of lavender and rosemary bushes filled the air.

After collecting some twigs and leaves, Miralh and Mani entered a small cave where they would stay for the night.

“The valley we will go to tomorrow is called Ridvan, but it is generally known as the Valley of the Friends.”

When the sky had turned dark, Mani stood up.

“You stay and enjoy the view for a while.”

He walked off and, a little further ahead, knelt down. He raised his hands and began chanting a prayer. Miralh wondered what he was praying about.

That night, Miralh could not sleep. He was not tired and stared at the starry sky. He thought about how small he was in this immense universe. He felt it was special to be alive. The sky was so clear and reminded him of the River of Light. The stars, he thought, were like the jewels in the river. Without them, space was nothing but blackness without purpose. He understood that everything tells a story, that every stroke reveals something about the Painter. He wondered about the idea of infinity and how everything came into being.



From his father, Miralh had learned much about the physical laws governing nature. Did all these laws suddenly just come into existence? The laws of music, those of gravity, chemistry. And now, after thousands of years, we still do not fully know how these laws operate. These laws have always existed, even before the universe came to be, but they simply had not been expressed yet.

“Mani?”

“Ah, now the whole World Plate is awake!”

Mani handed Miralh a cup of water.

“Have you been awake for long?” Miralh asked.

“I get up with the sun. I want to pray at first sight of light.”

“What’s it like to pray?”

“It’s like conversing with a loved one.”

“But why do you pray?”

“For the same reason you have to eat. You pray to grow. It is food for the soul.”

“Is it necessary to sing?”

“I sing because I enjoy it. But in reality it is the heart that prays. So even silence will do.”

“What do you pray for?”

“Prayer is like entering a meeting place in a higher world. You can ask for healing or peace, but mostly it is to offer praise and remind yourself of your purpose in this world.”

As they walked down the mountain, Mani stopped at a big flat rock and told Miralh to sit down.

“Sit down and close your eyes. Become conscious of yourself.”

Miralh felt uneasy but was interested to try.

“But what am I supposed to do?”

“Do not ask questions, Miralh. You need to be quiet and focus on your breathing.”

After some silence, Miralh felt a warm sensation throughout his entire body. His breathing was calm and steady. Sometimes a thought would enter his mind, but for some reason he felt able to maintain focus. He realized he was alone in the universe and yet safe under the wings of a higher presence. He felt connected to something deeper, a holiness that existed everywhere.

“I feel strange,” he whispered.

“What do you feel?”

“There is more. I only felt it for a moment, but I know there is more.”

“Yes.”

“I just don’t know what to do with it.”

“It is a great realization, Miralh. It means you are ready to be a discoverer, to explore and find out what lies beyond the things we know. It is a blessing! The larger the world becomes, the smaller we can be!”

“Smaller? I thought the whole idea was to grow?”

Mani picked at his beard. “Why are you afraid?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to be insignificant.”

Mani chuckled. “Do you know the story of the proud raindrop?”

Miralh shook his head.

“One day, high in the sky, a raindrop cut himself loose from a cloud. Filled with pride, he headed for the World Plate. He knew he was the most valuable element in the universe, because he was aware that water enabled life. He felt special. All of a sudden, to his great shock, he beheld a huge ocean. He cried and realized he was small and

nothing compared to that great ocean. When the ocean heard the humble cries of the raindrop, it invited him to join its greatness and made him the eternal companion of the pearl.”

Miralh thought about the story. He knew he was like the raindrop, but he wondered how becoming smaller was connected to growth.

“We grow,” Mani said, as if he could read Miralh’s thoughts, “from pride to humility, arrogance to modesty. Not the other way around. Are you hungry?”

Miralh felt his stomach ache from hunger. “Yes, actually.”

“Then eat this.” Mani handed Miralh a tiny raisin.

“It’s tiny...”

“If you don’t want it, you can give it back.”

Miralh quickly put it in his mouth. “No, I’ll eat it.”

The raisin was hard and sour. “Why do you always give me such strange food? First that rotten banana and now this dry raisin.”

Mani got up on his feet. “Maybe I should go back to the desert and build one of my beautiful castles.”

“No, please. The raisin is great!”

“Well, you may dislike the raisin. But it has taught you a lesson.”

Miralh smiled. He was reminded of the lady in Bekim, who was content with whatever came her way.

THE VALLEY OF THE FRIENDS

“The kingdom of Malitoa is not large and does not have a large population,” Mani said, “but its inhabitants can count themselves lucky.”

They had barely entered the city, but they were cordially greeted. Two chubby men and a woman approached them.



“Welcome, wayfarers!” one of the men said.

“What brings you to the valley?”

“We are here to visit a friend,” Mani answered.

“Amazing! This valley is full of friends!”

Miralh was intrigued by the expression on these people’s faces. Their eyes were kind and full of love.

“Peace be upon you! My name is Jamura,” the lady spoke. “May I invite you to join me for a cup of lavender tea?”

All the houses were bright white, and the streets were sandy. The woman lived right at the edge of the city. Her home was remarkably clean. Dark red tiles contrasted beautifully with the white walls, and a constant freshening breeze blew through the living room.

“Please be seated. My daughter will come to greet you,” she said as she disappeared into the kitchen.

After a while, the lady returned with her daughter and some tea. Her daughter was the most exquisite and refined girl Miralh had ever

laid eyes on. Ink-black hair ran down her back. She wore a simple white dress with a rope tied around her waist. Her skin was light brown, and her face beamed with light. However, her enchanting eyes were her most extraordinary feature. Her glance spoke only of love and affection, as if she had never seen anything evil in her life. They were dark brown, and the quick glance she granted Miralh at once catapulted him into a pit of desire and madness. The girl approached Mani and shook his hand.

“Peace be upon you,” she said with a delicate voice. “My name is Maya.”

Her voice betrayed her sincerity, youth, and clarity of mind. Miralh had never dared to dream that such a voice could be expressed on this wretched World Plate. He knew he would never forget the sound she had produced in that brief moment. This one simple sentence she had spoken would forever echo in his mind. He would cherish every syllable she had uttered there and then for the rest of his life. Her name would

forever ring in his ears, making all other names obsolete.

“Peace be upon you as well,” she said as she extended her hand to Miralh.

Bolts of fear tormented his body. He wondered what this girl’s touch would do to him when a mere glance had already destroyed him.

“What is your name?” she asked.

He could not remember his own name.

“His name is Miralh. The boy’s name is Miralh,” said Mani.

Maya laughed. “You can let me go now, if you can.”

Miralh did not know how to let go, but he knew he had to. As he considered the best way to face the solitude of freeing her from his grip, she pulled back with some force.

“Nice to meet you,” she said.

Miralh could still feel the warmth of her hand in his. He decided then and there that he would never wash his hand again and that for the rest of his life he would offer other people only his left hand, as his right hand was eternally wedded

to the memory of hers. He wanted to wrap his hand in silk and secure it for eternity in a secret safe.

The girl left the room, leaving him with a terrifying feeling of emptiness and despair. He missed her, even though he did not know her.

“Your daughter,” he said to the mother.

The lady looked at him and smiled.

“Your daughter...”

He wanted to say that her daughter was the most beautiful being on the entire World Plate and that no one could match her likeness to an angel. He wanted to say that he wanted to be with this girl for the rest of his life, even if he had to serve her as a downtrodden slave.

“She is sweet, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” Miralh answered. “She is.”

His mind had sunk into quietude. All he could think about was Maya.

After finishing their tea, Mani and Miralh set out into the city. Miralh was only able to recover once they had found a place to sit and relax. He

knew he would never meet a girl like her again and was determined to see her later.

“Miralh,” said Mani as he tapped him on the shoulder. “Let us go and find my friend.”

The streets of the Valley were calm, and a beautiful red light filled the air.

Soon they found themselves in front of a large white gate with golden ornaments. Two guards stood in front of the gate. They greeted Mani and opened the gate. The garden was full of red flowers. The front door of the house opened, and out came an old man holding a cane.

“Peace be upon you!” he sang with an energy not befitting his age. “Peace in the Valley!”

The happy old man almost jumped down the stairs and hugged Mani. It was clear that they had been friends for a long time.

“This is Miralh,” Mani told the old man. “He is in search of peace, love, and life.”

“He will find it for sure!” the old man replied approvingly. “I am the Malitoa. I welcome you.”

Miralh’s eyes opened wide. “You are a king?”

“Yes. I rule this Valley.”

Miralh did not know how to act and wanted to bow.

“Boy,” the king quickly spoke, “do not attach to the idea of my kingship. We are all noble creatures of the divine. But in reality I am just an old sock, waiting for mother to take me inside and put me back into the drawer!” The king laughed loudly at his own expression. Mani joined him.

“You remain ever young, Malitoa!” said Mani.

“Yes, and you remain ever old!” the king replied.

Miralh took notice of the fact that the king was not dressed very kingly. He wore a simple dark red robe and no crown or jewelry.

“Please feel at home. I will join you later for supper as we discuss the adventure that is life. Now I must attend to other business. As you know, I am after all a full-time employee of the Valley.”

As he walked off, whistling a familiar melody, Mani and Miralh found a bench to sit on in the garden.

Miralh loved this Valley. He felt he had found his home. Maya could be his wife, he figured. Of course she would say yes, he thought to himself. He was certain she must have felt the same. They would buy a house in the city, and Mani would live next to them. Although, he thought, he would not want her to get too close to Mani. No, perhaps it would be better for them to isolate themselves completely and live somewhere high up on the mountain. Maybe there would have to be guard dogs, protecting them from those who might want to harm them. She would work in the garden, and he would work in the city.

“Mani, do you feel at home here too?”

“My home is everywhere and nowhere, Miralh.”

“Really?”

“Yes. A home has nothing to do with a place. It is a condition of the heart. Let’s go inside.”

THE KING'S ABODE

"I have walked upon this World Plate for over a century," the king spoke, "and still I feel I have not had enough time."

The king sat down at the table, followed by two servants carrying large plates of food.

"Your Majesty," one of the servants said. "Today we offer you grilled chicken with almonds, raisins, and apples from Albir. In addition, we have prepared sweet potatoes covered with saffron and a delicate rice, complemented with an aubergine sauce."

"Amazing!" the king replied. "Outstanding work!" He looked at Miralh as he held a shiny spoon in front of him. "Miralh, right?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. My grandfather gave me that name."

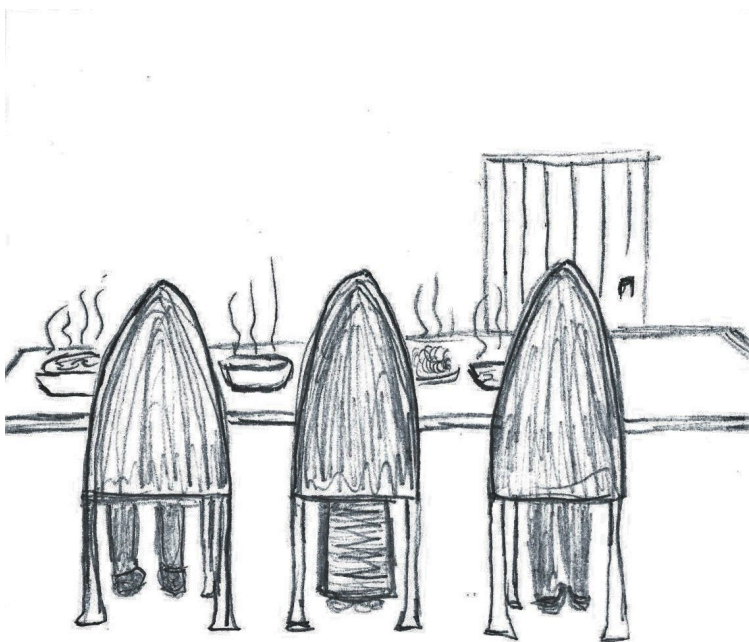
"Your grandfather was a wise man. Are you aware of its meaning?"

Miralh did not know.

"Miralh is a word from an ancient language, and it means mirror! And that is exactly what our reality is. We are mirrors!"

Miralh had never thought about the meaning of his name.

He was reminded of the River of Light and how Mani had told him that we must purify ourselves to bring out the jewels within us and reflect the light of divinity. Just like a mirror, the light may not be within us or come from us, but if we are pure enough, we can reflect it.



“Are you really over a hundred years old?”

The king chuckled. “Well, my body may be old, but my spirit is as young as a newly born camel! The spirit is never affected by time, however sickly or old the body may be.”

“What do you mean by spirit, Your Majesty?” Miralh asked.

“Ah, a thinker. Mani was just like you when he was still young. To question is to live!”

The king quickly grabbed his cane and poked Mani in a teasing manner.

“This is not so easy,” he continued. He took a sip of water, picked at his eyebrow, scratched his chin, blinked his eyes three times, and stuck out his tongue. Again, he laughed loudly.

“If the horse is the body, then the rider is the spirit. When the horse dies, the rider lives on... No, a better one: if this life is an ocean, then our body is a ship. When we reach the coast, the end of our life, we must carry on by foot. We are always on our way, for eternity!”

Eternity sounded pleasing to Miralh. Death had always scared him. He was afraid to be annihilated and disappear into a never-ending sleep from which he could not wake up.

“Man is an everlasting being who lives in the eternal,” Mani added.

The king started laughing. “Do not mind him, Miralh. You may think Mani is wise, mystical, or poetic, but mostly he is just strange.” Again he reached for his cane, but Mani quickly moved away, out of the king’s reach.

“Believe it or not,” the king said, “but I look forward to my dying day. Now our spirit must live with the limitations of our body, but come death it will be unrestrained as the wind.” He raised his fist. “I can rush into space, free of hunger, thirst, exhaustion, time, and space!”

“No time and space?” Miralh asked.

“Of course not! These are all physical limitations.” The king stood up. “Unfortunately, I am still trapped in this prison of flesh. I must sleep, but I suggest you two young cats visit the Friendly Square. You will find your heart’s desire.”

“Mani, are you afraid of death?”

“That’s like asking a bird if she is afraid to fly.”

“So what do you think we will find after death?”

“That’s like asking a baby what lies beyond his mother’s womb. If we knew, then the test of life would be too easy! But just like in the womb, we are preparing for the world that comes next.”

“What about heaven and hell?”

“Well, if we do not prepare and do not develop our spirit and bring to light those jewels hidden within our being, the next life will be as hell. Regret would devour us. We would be as a child born into this world with no arms, legs, eyes, and ears.”

“How do we prepare for the next world?”

“That’s like asking a mountaineer how he prepares for a hike. You train and you train, and you make sure you pack everything you need! You take it one step at a time, and every step is another choice to be made which influences how the hike will go.”

Mani took a sip of tea and sighed.

“We are on a road, and death simply means the road takes on a different form. Perhaps here we

find ourselves on a sandy road, but after the bridge of death, the road may be grassy, with colorful flowers on each side. Who is to say?"

Again Miralh was overtaken by a warm sensation, making his whole body tingle. He thought about Maya and walking down this road in her company.

Mani chuckled. "Let's go to where you really want to be, shall we?"

"Where is that?"

"Under the starry sky, my friend, where the painting is most interesting to you."

Approaching the square, Miralh was delighted to see people dancing. The scent of apple tobacco filled the air, and there was laughter. Above the square, dimly lit lanterns illuminated the scene. Miralh only hoped to behold his beloved Maya once again. Mani walked off to join a group of elderly friends playing a complicated game of cards.

As Miralh looked with interest at the violin player, his eyes fell upon a beautiful girl. It was Maya. His eyes widened, and his heart started

pounding in his throat. She was like a leaf being moved by a gentle summer breeze. Suddenly their eyes met. She smiled and walked up to him.

“Peace be upon you. I am glad you came.”

“Yes, I didn’t want to come, but Mani dragged me along anyway.”

The music stopped. “And now, dear friends,” the violin player announced, “the Sonnet of the Stars.”

“Would you like to dance with me?” Maya asked.

Miralh nodded.

She came closer and put her arms around him. Her skin, touching his neck, felt softer than silk. Carefully, he too locked her in his embrace. Her perfume seemed to carry hints of pepper and jasmine, but Miralh was not quite sure. He wished for this moment never to come to an end. He was ecstatic and wondered if she felt the same.

“Isn’t this nice?” he asked her.

“Yes, every nineteen days we have a feast such as this one.”

“But, I mean, don’t you think that...”

“What do you mean, Miralh?”

Miralh held his tongue.

“Is Mani your father?” she asked him.

“No, we simply travel together.”

She waved at Mani, who upon seeing her approached them.

“Peace be upon you,” she said.

“And may you be ever graceful,” he replied.

While they exchanged pleasantries and engaged in a simple conversation, Miralh felt awfully jealous, wondering why Mani had come to disturb their moment. He wondered if Maya, instead of being interested in him, was really after Mani.

“Thank you for this dance,” she whispered.

“But it’s not finished!”

At that moment, the violinist stopped playing and started a new song.

“Now it is,” she jokingly responded.

“It’s time to go home,” Mani interrupted. He was aware that Miralh’s mood had gone sour.

“I will go home too.” Maya walked off, and again Miralh felt as if his body was devoid of life.

THE ROOTS OF HATRED

The next morning, Miralh woke to the sound of trumpets. He looked through the window and saw the two guards open the gate for a dark figure riding a camel. The man, clearly someone important, was dressed in a black robe. He had a long gray beard and wore a black turban with silver elements. After dismounting his camel, he greeted the king.

“What do you see?” asked Mani.

“There is a visitor for the king.”

Mani peered through the window. “That is Shah Dubhar the Eleventh. He is ruthless and feared by many.”

“Why is he here?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps to make peace, perhaps to declare war.”

After breakfast, Miralh strolled into the garden where he saw the king sitting on a bench. He looked very sad.

“These are dark times, Miralh.”

“What happened?” Miralh asked.

“The situation in the Land of Dubhar is not looking good.”

Miralh had never heard of this land. “What’s wrong?”

“The people of Dubhar face oppression and inequality. They are not allowed to think for themselves.”

“Why not?”

“The Shah rules his land under the guidance of a spiritual leader named Falsk. This cruel man is attached to his position, and anybody who challenges his authority is persecuted. I had invited the Shah to come up with a solution, but he too only believes in violence. He supports Falsk, even though his people suffer.”

“Why? Why is there so much violence and war?”

“It is the consequence of setting the accumulation of wealth and power as our goal in life. With such a corrupt goal, we are bound to sink into the soil of greed, the source of hatred.”

“But you are a king. Don’t you ever fight wars?”

“My only war is the war I fight against myself.”

“But what about if people come to steal your land?”

“My land? Land belongs to nobody. No matter how important you are, in the end your body will be buried in a tiny patch of land in which it eventually disappears.”

“But what if people attack the people you are responsible for?”

“Then I will defend them. I am a king. But there are many kings and shahs, and together we have the responsibility to protect all people from harm, not just our own.”

The king closed his eyes. “I pray that this knowledge soon infiltrates the minds of the ignorant.”

He stood up and walked off.

Miralh wanted to do something, but he did not know what he could do. He knew the king was right. When we only strive for wealth and power, we allow jealousy and greed to enter our hearts. This is what happened in Oferi and with the soldiers of Khala, who hated the Oferians so much.

In all fairness, Miralh knew that even his father harbored hatred in his heart. But now Miralh had seen that this is not necessary. He thought about the woman in Bekim, Mani, and the king. What had liberated them?

The woman was poor, and each night she was haunted by a storm. Yet she was calm and grateful. Mani had no home. He simply wandered the World Plate. However, he was so certain and aware of his purpose. And the king, who ruled over an entire valley and was clearly rich, what kept him from being arrogant and proud?



“Mani, what do you and the king have in common that I clearly don’t have?” Miralh asked after he had joined him on the bench.

“We have nothing,” Mani answered.

“All right, so what do you not have that I do have?”

“We don’t have the illusion that we have something.”

Miralh thought about it for a while.

“How is it an illusion? I can agree that we may not truly possess land, power, or wealth, but what about our bodies? I surely have my body.”

Mani stood up and stretched his arms. “A body? What is a body but a collection of elements? Before you know it, you perish and your body disintegrates completely.”

“I don’t know.”

“Everything in the universe is always moving,” Mani went on to explain. “Things are either growing or falling apart. Every composition is bound to decompose.”

“What does that even mean? What do we do with that?”

“It means that, at most, we can borrow things.”

“But if that is the case, then how can our spirit be immortal?”

“The spirit is not composed. It is not material, but spiritual.”

Miralh understood. The spirit, just like one’s thoughts, is not held together by elements.

“But then, perhaps we can have a spirit,” Miralh said, feeling he had made a valid point.

“If you want to think this way, then you think this way.”

Miralh sighed. “It seems I can never win any argument with you.”

“I don’t agree,” Mani replied, grinning mischievously.

“This evening we leave again,” Mani said.

Miralh was horrified at the thought of leaving.

“No, we cannot leave.”

Mani looked at Miralh, as if reading his inner reasons, and patted him on the back.

“This is your choice. Thank you for your company.”

He stood up and walked back into the house.

Miralh felt sad, confused, and uncertain all at once. He didn’t know if he could even have a

future with Maya. He needed some time by himself and asked the guard to open the gate for him.

THE FINAL STEPS

As could be expected, his walk eventually led him to Maya's home. For what seemed like an hour, he stood motionless in front of her door. When the door was abruptly opened, he almost fell over. He did not know if it was too late to pretend he had just arrived or perhaps whether he could act as if he did not know her.

"Are you exploring the city, Mirat?"

"Yes, just exploring."

"Do you want to join me for a walk?" she said as she closed the door behind her and wrapped a bright blue scarf around her neck.

Miralh did not answer, but joined her nonetheless.

"For how long will you stay?"

Sadness entered Miralh's heart. "My friend is leaving, but I want to stay."

He followed her up the mountain to a large rock. The view was magnificent. Beyond the city, between two other mountains, Miralh could see the desert stretch into the distance.

“Sometimes I sit here,” Maya said, “and I fantasize about what it’s like at the edge of the World Plate.”

“But you don’t want to leave, right?”

“Maybe I do.”

“But there is no place like the Valley, Maya. Believe me.”

She smiled. “You’re a sweet man, Mirat.”

“Actually, my name is Miralh.”

“That’s even better! You’re named after the famous camel washer.”

“Someone became famous because of how he washed camels?” Miralh didn’t know if he should feel amused, proud or offended.

She laughed out loud. “You’re so funny.”

Miralh’s heart was burning. He felt that even if all the water on the entire World Plate were poured onto his heart, this fire he felt would not be quenched.

“Why are you not joining your friend?”

Miralh could no longer lie. “I want to stay with you.”

He was surprised by his own response, and when he saw that she only smiled, without any sign of real joy or mutual desire, he felt the urge to stand up and jump off the mountain.

“No, Miralh. You are traveling, and your journey is not over. You should continue until you have found what you are looking for.”

“But I found you.”

She shook her head.

“You don’t want me to stay?” Miralh felt angry.

“I don’t want you to give up, especially not for a simple girl like me.”

“I think you just don’t like me!” Miralh argued, perhaps louder than intended.

“I do. But it is not right to discontinue your journey halfway.”

“But you are my destination! I have arrived.”

“If that is the truth, then at the end of your travels, when you have all your answers, you will be led back to me. Have your questions been answered yet?”

Peace, love, and life, he thought to himself. He had found love. He was starting to understand life, but he had not found peace.

“No,” he sighed. “But if I go, will I see you again?”

“You will know at the end of your journey.”

Miralh felt a surge of energy. “Wait for me, Maya! I must find Mani!” He kissed her shoulder and ran down the mountain as fast as he could.

When he arrived at the king’s house, he saw Malitoa sitting on a bench.

“Your Majesty, where can I find Mani?”

“He has left, Miralh.”

“What!” Miralh’s heart sank. “Where did he go? I must find him. He was right!”

“East, Miralh.” The king pointed to a steep mountain.

“I can still catch up with him!”

He turned around and started running for the mountains. He felt abandoned. It was crucial, perhaps of life-or-death importance, to catch up with Mani so he could finish his journey and find his answers. When he reached the mountain, he

was already out of breath, but there was no time to waste. Like a savage, he rushed up the mountain, jumping from rock to rock and pulling himself up by grabbing prickly bushes. When he reached a high point from which he could cross to the other side, he yelled in anger. He scanned the desert and saw no sign of Mani.

Possessed by a combination of fear and rage, he proceeded to run down. The sun was already descending and colored the sky red. Without Mani, he felt he was doomed to fail. Why would Mani do this to me, he thought.

He wondered why God was not helping him and whether he had been too naïve believing that there was a purpose laid out for him. Reaching the foot of the mountain, he wanted to run further, but his lungs hurt and his gums burned. Then, further ahead, he saw footsteps tracing around the corner.

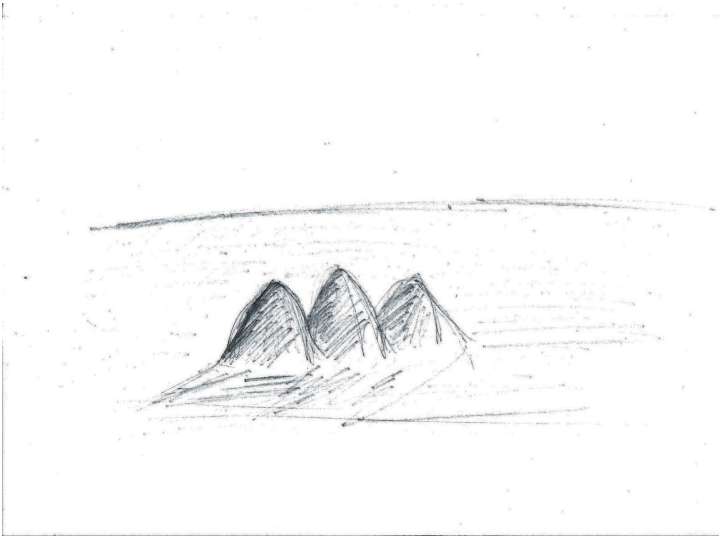
“Mani!” he yelled.

Following Mani's footsteps, he asked himself whether life itself was more than a shallow puddle of water bound to evaporate before he could quench his thirst. Tears flowed down his cheeks.

The trail did not seem to end. He felt as if he was chasing the horizon. No, even worse, he felt as if he was trying to stop the sun from shining by spitting at it. He felt powerless.

When he had almost given up, he saw something. He picked up his pace. Perhaps Mani was wounded. Then he stopped. He dropped to his knees and could not believe what he saw.

The trail had ended, and all he could see were three piles of sand. Mani had left him a sand castle.



Perhaps it meant that Miralh had to be content with whatever life put in front of him. Perhaps it meant that there was more to discover in God's painting. Whatever it meant, Miralh knew he was on his own.

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

Miralh, the boy who had lost everything, had been rescued by a man who looked like a camel. He had argued with a knight who drew borders in the sand. A lady of the most tender nature had taught him about detachment. An old man who had never seen the sun had shown him true conviction.

Miralh had drunk from an oasis from which oceans are born and met a homeless sage who gave him direction. He had seen the River of Light, filled with jewels, which changed its course each night. Birds had filled his heart with a melody of longing. He had likewise heard the whispers of evil coming from the shadows and had felt the power of prayer.

A girl, the like of which was nowhere to be found, had stared into his eyes, touched his hand, and danced with him. And he had dined with a king who taught him about the life of the spirit.

At last he was left with three piles of sand that looked nothing like a sand castle.

Following his awakening, Miralh had journeyed on to walk among elephants, seen a man walk on fire, and had been forced to sleep among snakes. Along the way he found many sand castles, or at least piles of sand, and he had often wondered whether they were merely piles of sand or Mani's hidden guidance. In the end, after exactly nine hundred and ninety-nine days, perhaps preceded by no one before, he found himself standing at the edge of the World Plate, from where he saw other worlds. Worlds that were similar but different from his own. This is where he chose to build his own castle.

Miralh took a deep breath, and as he did, the wind picked up. He witnessed how the wind carried the loose grains of sand and danced with them. If they were not detached from one another, he thought, they would not be able to dance. I must be detached and let myself be carried away by life.

He picked up a single grain of sand and looked closely at it. *Within, I should be able to find all the secrets, he realized. This one grain of sand tells the story of the desert, the World Plate, and the entire universe.* He became aware of infinity and realized that the infinitely small is equal in size to the infinitely large. *The beginning is the end; the first is the last. I existed when I was not alive, and I live forever after.*

He sighed and followed the thought of his sigh into the open sky. *To be free is to hold on, but to be willing to let go at any time. I do not possess; I am.*

He looked at his castle. *This is where my own trail ends. This is from where I take my true steps on the road of life.* He thought about Maya. If he ever saw her again and she asked him where to go from there, he would answer that they were on the way to a place deep within, at the end of the universe, where there is light upon light upon light. He closed his eyes.

Sand is sand and water is water. They are part of the earth. Likewise, my body is made of sand and water. It comes from the earth and returns unto it. But I am not sand, and I am not water. I am light, and I belong to the sky.

He opened his eyes, and it was dark. His sight, however, was clearer than ever. I am a mirror, just as the moon is a mirror. The light is in me, but it comes from the sun, and the sun is my soul. Life, in a similar manner, is in me, but it comes from elsewhere. The spirit is God's breath, blown into my being.

At that moment, an intense heat set his heart aflame, as if a volcano had erupted in his inner reality. In a flash, a devastating feeling captivated his soul. It was more than love, peace, and life combined.

There is no way to explain how it happened, but it was at that very instant that the brush of the Painter touched Miralh's essence and fused him with the whole.