

consternation, 'It is for the death of Ibrahim, the son of our Prophet!' The Prophet, who had gone back into Marya's room to meditate, and to whom these words were reported, replied in vexation (I can still hear his tone of voice), "There is no eclipse of the sun either for the death or for the life of any human being, whoever he may be!"

Sirin falls silent. It has been many a year since she had voiced her memories in the language of her parents . . . Sirin, Oum Abderahmane, and sister of the beautiful Oum Ibrahim.

Later, Sirin was to leave Medina, following her second son Mohammed, and accompanied by her eldest daughter Safya, to settle in Basra, in Iraq, where she died.

Traces of her descendants are to be found in this city. What is more, 'the House of Sirin' was to become a well-known spot in this prosperous city, at least until the year 150 of the Hegira, at the time of her great-grandchildren. 'The House of Sirin' then becomes a haven of peace, a place of protection for enslaved women, for terrified female servants, at a time when the opulence of the new society – composed equally of protected Christians, slaves and freemen of different races – causes inevitable injustices, internal violence.

One small incident – in the life of a pious personality, ibn 'Aun, who was married to one of Sirin's great-granddaughters – gives us a glimpse of some of the affection that Sirin the Copt left behind her: a serving-woman, working for ibn 'Aun, caused him to start up in shock when she presented him with 'a cooking-pot from which rose a strong smell of garlic'. He could barely contain his anger: the terrified girl fled to 'the House of Sirin'. A humble detail in a humble daily life . . .

Sirin lives on; her life, begun in Alexandria, was linked to Medina, as if, in the company of her beautiful, gentle sister Marya, she had travelled that far to witness Mohammed's few years of pure happiness . . . When, as the mother of the poet Abderahmane, the son of Hassan ibn Thabit, she has become a free woman, she finally leaves Medina, not to return to the place of her birth (although Egypt has become a Muslim province), but to travel still further East: to die in Basra, a permanent exile, protector of serving-women, of female slaves, of women with no support.

Translated from the French by Dorothy S. Blair

JAMAL MAHJOUR

Road block

The Storyteller drove a Toyota Hilux, red with a horn that played seven different tunes. Everything that wasn't chrome was painted a gaudy silver. In the back of the pickup he had red lights that spun like catherine wheels, and in the front he had a string of coloured fairy lights that were draped across the acrylic fur of the dashboard. The tailboards were covered in scrawled poems in Arabic lines; passages from the Koran where the word Allah appeared frequently. Though if Allah were in fact to cast his eye this way he might not have been too impressed with this storyteller.

His father of course was the original Storyteller. They still remember him in the small innumerable villages that cling to the sides of the Red Sea Hills and drop away into the Nubian Desert. Famous among the Beja tribes through which he used to travel on foot telling his tales in exchange for a square meal. One of the last greats, they refer to him, though most of those who might remember are either dead or have gone insane with age.

His son was a man who lived by his wits, a smuggler. He ran a ring of sizeable proportion importing whisky and almost anything else that you were willing to pay for. They operated out of the old port at Suakin, a ghost town.

It was after the curfew hour, the early hours of the morning in fact, when he came hurtling out of the darkness on a quiet stretch of road that would take him away from the coast. He was late because he had spent rather longer than he had expected with one of the girls at Mama Samina's. The narrow road stretched out in front of him and, despite

the fact he was a little late, he was singing to himself in the cool dusty air of a December night.

The road block was a square shed of bare brick and a large mimosa tree. There were only two men there at one time. Bona sat with his rifle across his knees and tried to lean his chair back against the wall of the building. His partner had gone to bed complaining that his tapeworms were acting up and giving him pain. Bona hated his partner who was fat and smelled. They were from different ends of the country. Bona was an Azande from the far south, his partner was a northerner. As for any kind of tribal dislike between them, Bona was more bothered by the fact that his partner ate like a pig and smelt like one too. The sooner their spell here was up the better as far as he was concerned.

The lights from the Toyota were getting nearer. The Storyteller had forgotten about the road block as it was quite a recent addition. By the time he realised what it was he knew that he would already have been seen. It was easy enough to pull off the road and make a wide detour of the sentry post and rejoin the road later on. However, he didn't know the ground round here all that well and he didn't want to risk hitting a pothole or even getting hit by a stray bullet. His cargo of Scotch whisky was far too valuable to risk in some mad race in the dark. He slowed down and switched off his lights. With luck they would all be asleep.

Bona saw the lights go off and he stood up slowly. Cocking the old Lee Enfield over his shoulder so that it hung forwards across him, he rested his hand on the gun the way he had seen it in one of those Italian cowboy films. He stepped into the middle of the road and stood, legs akimbo, facing down the dark alleyway of the night.

The Storyteller saw the figure outlined in the darkness as he crawled slowly towards the checkpoint. Cursing under his breath, he switched on the sidelights and saw the tall thin man who was waving him to stop with a laconic flick of the wrist. He stopped when the plastic horns mounted on the radiator were almost touching the statue-like policeman.

Bona stepped aside and crooked the barrel of his gun at the figure in the driving seat. 'Out,' he indicated with his rifle.

As he climbed out, the Storyteller was cursing himself for his

stupidity, thinking about where this man's partner was. He was wondering about what to offer as a bribe.

Bona was thinking about how the sharp leather of his boots cut into his bare feet. He was thinking about the way he looked, trying to remember if the rifle had been cleaned recently.

'Where are you going this time of night?'

'Home. I fell asleep in town but I have been working all day at the port.'

Bona glanced at the tarpaulin-covered shape in the back of the pickup.

'You've been working at the port today?'

The other man nodded. 'I work for the hospital.'

'Which hospital is that?' asked Bona carefully. He moved towards the back of the Toyota. The Storyteller reached for a cigarette, the bolt snapped back as Bona cocked the rifle.

'Just a cigarette,' said the other man, holding up the packet. Bona shook his head at the offer and waited while the Storyteller lit his. Placing the packet back in the pocket of his gjallabia, he rested a hand on his hip, inches away from the pistol that he kept under cover strapped to his waist. He smiled at the policeman.

'Which hospital?'

'The American Hospital, at Quaz Rajab. That's where I live.'

'I didn't know there was an American Hospital here.'

'Really? It's quite new, I suppose.'

Bona licked his gums, at the front where his two front teeth had been removed as a young man. He watched the driver very carefully as he sucked on his cigarette and exhaled, foreign cigarettes.

'And what is there here, things for the hospital?'

'Medicine.' He tapped his chest. 'For the sick, for coughs and chest infections.' Bona nodded understandingly. He stepped over and tugged at the cover, indicating it should be opened up. 'Let me see,' he said.

The Storyteller dropped his cigarette into the dust and moved across to untie the canvas cover, flipping it back so that the sentry could see the boxes. He held a hand out for Bona to inspect the contents. 'There you are.'

Bona stepped back and squinted in the bad light.

'Don't be vague,' he read slowly in English, 'ask for Haig.'

The Storyteller rested his hand back on the Browning automatic. He hadn't expected the man to be able to read English – whoever heard of a stupid policeman being able to read English? He scratched his head.

Bona looked up at the driver. The Storyteller looked back at him.

'What does it mean?' He pointed with his hand. 'Don't be vague,' he read again.

The sentry stood back and waited. The Storyteller scratched his head with his one free hand. He looked at the boxes, then back at the skinny black southerner with the trousers that stopped halfway down his legs on their way to his boots, so that there were about six inches of exposed legs: two skinny bone legs the size of twigs.

The sentry shrugged and shifted the weight of his rifle. He was waiting. The Storyteller rubbed his neck. 'Don't be vague, ask for Haig?' he repeated. He spoke very little English and could hardly read what it said – he repeated the words the sentry had used.

'It means,' he said, 'that you should never let yourself become ill, and you must always drink your medicine.' He nodded enthusiastically, quite pleased at how convincing he sounded. Bona shifted his rifle again and sucked his gums for a moment.

'Let me see this wonderful medicine.'

'You want to see it? It's just cough medicine, brown liquid.'

Bona raised the barrel of his rifle until it was pointing squarely at the other man's chest. There was no way he could pull the pistol out faster than the sentry could shoot him dead; all he had to do was squeeze the trigger.

The Storyteller raised up his hands and showed his palms.

'No problem, officer,' he smiled. 'If you want to see, then you shall see. I shall open these boxes for you myself,' he continued, 'one by one,' he added dramatically, shaking a finger to emphasise his conviction.

Bona smiled and cocked his head to indicate that he could start opening boxes straight away. The Storyteller had no choice. He stepped forward now and pulled the canvas away with a jerk of his hand, his irritation showing for a brief moment. The sentry looked away and smiled inwardly to himself. The cardboard was slit and the box opened. Dozens of tiny miniatures gleamed in the starlight. With one hand on the trigger, Bona leaned over and plucked a bottle from the array. He

held it up so the whisky glowed in the light. He twisted the cap off with his teeth and held the neck up to his nose.

'Cough medicine?' he asked again.

The Storyteller nodded resignedly. Bona tilted his neck back and poured the contents down his throat, draining the bottle in one go. He swallowed and licked his lips. Then he threw the empty bottle over his shoulder into the darkness. He cleared his throat.

'Cough medicine,' he nodded, and stepped back raising the rifle again.

This was the moment that the Storyteller had been trying to prepare himself for. He would have to shoot the man dead. He closed his finger round the butt of the pistol. Bona was talking again.

'All the same, are they? All the same kind of medicine?'

The Storyteller nodded, his finger finding the trigger.

'I'll have that one,' said Bona quickly.

'What?'

'That box there, I'll take that one.' He glanced back at the sentry post just to check if his partner had woken up, though he knew the pig would be asleep until midday tomorrow. 'Just lift it over the side and leave it in the dust.'

The Storyteller hesitated and then moved rapidly, pulling the case forward and over the tailboard. Bona nodded, then he waved a hand down the road and stepped away, lowering the rifle. The two men stood facing each other for a moment, then without saying a word the Storyteller pulled the canvas back in place and tied it down. He climbed into the cab and started the engine, punching it into gear and roaring away down the road into the welcome darkness. Above the racing engine and the howl of the wind past the open window of the car, he thought he could hear the sound of laughter. In the mirror he could just make out the figure of the sentry returning to his post with his prize under one arm.

The man they now called the Storyteller didn't really share the same gift as his father, but then that was what the pistol was for.