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For Isola: A man can love another more than himself



"There are always flowers for those who want to see them"

Henri Matisse

1

Sati lived alone, in a small hut on the edge of the village on the edge of the great desert. Living alone was unheard of for such a young boy, but Sati wanted it that way and no-one, however hard they tried, could persuade him to do otherwise.

His mother had died first. In childbirth, taking the unborn brother he'd longed for with her. He'd lived with his father after that, just the two of them. His father did his best for the seven year old boy, but the simple truth was he hadn't the will to live on without his beloved wife.

One terrible morning, three years to the day after his wife died, in the middle of the marketplace, Sati's father died too. Of a heart attack they said, but even at such a tender age Sati knew his father had died of a broken heart.

After that, many of Sati's relatives and neighbours insisted he come and live with them in their homes. He thanked them all very politely, but he refused to move from the home he'd shared with the mother and father he'd loved so much.

His hut wasn't much to look at, just a one- room dusty shack, but in it was held the tender kiss of his mother and the shy smile of his father. In it was held his childhood.



By the time he was 13 years old Sati was grown up in all but years. Unlike the other children in the village he didn't go to school. Instead he scratched a living looking after two weebegone camels that his neighbour Mushta used for taking tourists out for trips into the desert.

This work did not generate much of an income as the village attracted few tourists, but even so Mushta guarded his business closely and with immense suspicion. He was the only man in the village who took tourists

into the desert and he was fearful of competition – not least from Sati, who he feared would set up on his own when he was a little older.

“You are not to be trusted,” he said one day to Sati with a dismissive flick of his hand. All Sati had done was tie a saddle just a bit too loose. Not enough to be a danger, but it was more than enough to bring on Mushta’s anger.

Sati cried that night. Quietly, alone, in the silent darkness of his home – just as he had when first his mother, and then his father, had died. He knew very well what it was not to trust. His parents taken from him, he did not trust life. Now he was not to be trusted himself.



Sati worked even harder than before, with a desperate intensity, to prove Mushta wrong, to prove himself wrong, to prove the world wrong. He worked even longer hours, tending the camels from the first break of light in the morning until it faded into the soft nothingness of evening. He made no more mistakes and the camels thrived like never before, becoming lustrous and healthy.

Slowly, very slowly, Mushta began to soften. He was not without feeling. He too had once been a child and he too had known the lonely ache of an absent father. His father had left for months on end each year, travelling on his camel to trade in far off lands. Mushta rarely thought of it now, but deep down his body still held a desperate longing.

One evening Mushta came to Sati as he was brushing the camels. “I have been watching you these past months and you have worked well – day in and day out,” he said, his face stern. He paused before breaking into a smile. “When the next tourists come you can help me lead them out into the desert.”

A great joy rose in Sati’s heart and he too had an urge to smile. But he had learned a long time ago that a smile could be dangerous; that a smile

brought loss. “Thank you master,” he replied solemnly, with just the slightest nod of his head.

That night, alone in his home, Sati cried once again. Tears of joy, mixed with tears of sorrow for two people who would never hear of his success.



2

Days slowly drifted into weeks and no tourists came. Sati was disappointed, but not surprised. At most, only two or three tourists came to the village each month. And even when they came they often left quickly again; too quickly at least to take a trip into the desert.

Not everyone fell under the spell of the lonely village, with its one dark shop and its humble huddled huts. Not everyone wanted to go on a camel trip. It was hot and uncomfortable and it meant tumbling from the safe arms of the village into the vast nothingness of the desert.

Eventually though some tourists did come, as Sati knew they would. Two men from a country far away who wanted to spend a night out in the desert. Their eyes were bright with that fire-full excitement that, once ignited, is never extinguished.

Mushta knocked at Sati’s door at five o’clock the next morning: “We are going into the desert – go and get the camels ready,” he said simply and turned on his heel.

Sati was up in less than a minute.



They did not travel very far, only a few miles, but even so the village was completely engulfed within the desert sands. In the darkness of the night they could have been a million miles from anywhere.

Sati had never ventured so far away from his home before. This was unusual in the village. Most boys of thirteen years had travelled into the desert. It was the tradition for fathers to take their sons there on their twelfth birthdays, walking without camels for three days deep into the sands, as an initiation into young adulthood.

Sati had watched so many of the other boys leave the village with their fathers; with a longing he couldn't fully understand as they slowly disappeared into the sand and rock. He knew it was not for him; that it would never be for him.

But now, with Mushta and the tourists, he was leading a camel where he would have walked with his father. He thought of his father's rough chin and his warm eyes, crinkled in the sun. He felt his father's hand on his shoulder and heard, in the dry breeze, his father's blessing. Sati turned his head so no one would see the damp in his eyes.

They walked from dawn to dusk before setting up camp among some low sand dunes. Sati did not speak. He hardly noticed the tourists and he hardly heard a word that Mushta said to them about the desert.

Mushta said very little to him other than to bark an occasional instruction. Sati walked in silence, alone with his thoughts, his hand loose on the tether of the smaller of the two camels. He gazed unseeingly into the heart of the desert, away from where the village lay.



3

Sati now travelled into the desert with Mushta whenever tourists came. And in the long days and weeks between their coming he tended to the camels exactly as he had done before.

Mushta treated him with growing kindness. He no longer barked orders and, when he was given a tip by the tourists, he shared it half and half with him. Sometimes when they were back in the village he would bring food, cooked by his wife, to Sati's hut and eat it with him cross-legged on the rough floor.

Sati rarely visited Mushta's house. He was welcome, but he did not like to go. It reminded him too much of what he did not have; of what had been lost. On the rare occasions he did go he was treated with great kindness by Mushta's wife Meera. She welcomed him like a prince and plied him with soft and sugary sweets from the big glass jar that sat on a rickety shelf above her fireplace.

Sati often spent time with Fellima, the second of Mushta's three daughters, who was three years younger than him. Most days she came to the well and chatted to him when he went to collect water for the camels. Sometimes she would visit him when he was tending to the camels and help him brush their coats. She was the nearest thing he had to a friend.



Sati grew with the years; not tall, but taller. He was a slight figure for a fifteen year old boy, with fine features and his father's kindly eye. He walked with grace and softness. He did not smile.

One baking afternoon, when he and Mushta were taking some tourists, a newly wedded couple, out into the desert, Sati noticed that Mushta was not leading his camel with quite his usual ease. He was stopping more

often than usual to chat to the tourists, taking more rests while he smilingly told them some of the great tales of the desert.

Sati could see his smile hid pain. He said nothing, but as the weeks passed he noticed that Mushta was stopping more and more often to rest on their trips and that he wasn't taking the tourists quite as far into the desert as he had before.

Early one morning, as they were saddling the camels together, Sati saw a quick grimace of pain pass across Mushta's face. He could hold back no longer. "Master, what is wrong?" he asked.

Mushta glared sharply at him with angry eyes. But not for long; soon they filled with a softness of tears that would not be shed. "I do not know," he replied quietly. "But I no longer feel the youth in my body and my heart is heavy." He shook his head. "I do not know," he said again.

Sati heard the distance in his voice and asked nothing more.



4

Sati watched Mushta's decline in silence, in a depth of sadness that had no words. He was all too familiar with death, but he had not witnessed the agony of a slow death before.

For a while Mushta still came out with him and the tourists into the desert. But before long he chose to stay at home. He did not speak about it; he gave no explanations or excuses. He only asked Sati to: "treat the

camels and the tourists well.”

Sati did as he was asked, and when he returned from the desert trips he always brought whatever money he had made and any tip he'd been given to Mushta.

Mushta always gave him half the money back, kissing it in thanks and blessing it as he handed it over. Each time he would smile and say: “thank you, you are a good boy”. At this Sati's eyes crinkled like his father's had before him, but a smile never quite met his lips.

The day of Mushta's death came. He was lying in his bed when Sati arrived, Meera and his three daughters sitting by his side. He raised his head weakly to look at Sati with faraway eyes. “I am leaving you now, my son,” he said, his voice a whisper.

Sati's legs felt weak. He held onto the bed to stop himself falling. He wanted to scream no, to deny the words, but he knew this was a lie. He looked at Mushta, his eyes like thick morning mist.

Mushta looked into a distance that Sati couldn't see. “I am leaving, and soon I will meet our God,” he said. He paused for a long moment with the effort of speaking and looked at Sati. He gazed deep into his eyes.

“I have something to ask of you; that you continue to run our business as before; that you look after our camels and take the tourists into the desert as we have done for so long together – and that you give a little of the money you make to my wife and daughters so that they will not suffer too much with my leaving.”

The words would not come, but Sati did not need to speak. He nodded his head, almost imperceptibly.

“I always knew I could trust you,” said Mushta with just the hint of a smile; his voice so soft it was almost a breath. His eyes closed for the last time.



5

The tourists still did not come all that often to the village, and even fewer wanted to travel out into the desert, but when they did Sati treated them as honoured guests, learning and using words and phrases from many of their languages to put them at their ease.

After each trip he brought all the money that he made and any tips he was given to Meera. And always she would give him half the money back, kissing it in thanks and blessing it as she handed it to him.

Sati enjoyed these visits. Even though he deeply grieved the loss of Mushta, he no longer felt the sadness of coming to his house that he'd felt before. In its place he felt an excitement, an exquisite longing. Fellima was fifteen now. She was no longer the little girl who had come to chat with him by the well and who had sometimes helped him to brush the camels.

Sati felt awkward and nervous when Fellima was around. Although she was three years younger than him he thought of her as older, more knowing. He didn't dare speak to her, he couldn't find any words, but sometimes she would look at him, a quick glance with her dark eyes, and he would shudder inside.



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