

## **The Garden in the Sands**



Waqf Sunni Book

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بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

***Written and Illustrated***

***By***

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***(Sha'ban 1421 - November 2000)***

*"What have I got to do with the material world? The example of the material world and I is that of a traveler. Traveling in the afternoon, he stopped to rest under the shade of a tree for some moments. Then he rose and left it." -- A Haadith*

One day, Djaliil informed me that there was "a garden in the sands." I looked at him intently, alert for any sign of teasing, but the lad looked rather serious. I replied:

"If you tell the truth, my friend, I will agree to visit it."

"O that will be easy, brother. My family lives there."

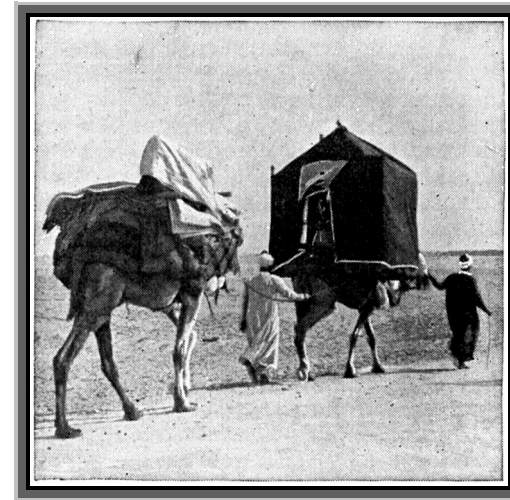
"So you are a Bedouin?" I asked.

"Yes, by Allah, one of the oldest nomad tribes in Arabia. My complete name is Djaliil Abu Thaamy, a descendant of the men who have seen the Prophet (Peace be upon him)."

A few days later, we departed with a caravan.

Some men had prepared a wooden litter draped in gaily-colored pieces of cloth. The structure was called "Hawdaj." I felt immediately curious about it. Why? Because it was imposing, and it looked like the flapping wings of a living creature or one could also think about the sail of a living boat. It twisted in the grains, slinging away handfuls of sand the wind cast at it. It was very well protective against the desert spirits and the scorch, much better than we were.

Djaliil and I had carefully wrapped long, rectangular cloths around our heads, but still the sand entered our mouths and reddened our eyes. The turban I had learned to wear was rolled around the forefront and the neck.



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A loose end hid the lower part of the face from the nose then dropped on the right shoulder. I had adopted long before that the local costume consisting of a floating tunic with a dagger belt, and a heavy cloak. The garment kept my body cool during the day as it let the air and the sand wash over my skin. It was warm during the night as the dark material had absorbed the sun's rays during the warm hours. Standing erect in the sand devils, we looked like sails trying to make an impact in an ocean of dunes. The camel's footprints appeared like large lotus-shaped leaves. They were blown away into our faces as soon as marked upon the earth. For hours,

this is all I could see before me except for the thin legs of the "vessels of the desert" (the camels) which swayed along the path. When I could see better, I noticed that the direction of the prevailing winds showed like freshly ploughed waves in the sand. I thought then that it was worth having endured the tortures of the weather for the sight of this. At one point, nobody could really tell the difference between the snakes' body prints and the sand's natural architecture. In many instances, there were long gradual slopes like swells with ripples, which incidentally were extremely hard. But the dunes were not that many on this part of the desert, nor were they high. As soon as we were back on the flat land, new dunes appeared.

Here and there stunted types of sorghum grew in the sand. They had small heads and a stalk only three feet high. Aside of them, there was not much vegetation, just some bushes carried by the wind. From time to time, I looked around to make sure that Djaliil was following. He often walked near the camels at the rear where the woman's ride followed. The *hawdaj* still jerked to and fro in a slight rolling movement. Its curtains were so thick and numerous, it was impossible to even have a glimpse of what was inside. And when we stopped, the camel was led so far from camp that it was impossible to discern anything of its occupant. Each time I became

conscious again of its existence, I could not help thinking that it looked like a mirage of color in all this dryness and the heat rising from the ground. Nobody had cared to tell me who was the lady in the mysterious palanquin. I guessed it was not the custom for men to talk about women for fear they might feel desire for them. Even Djaliil who was talkative in many subjects scrupulously avoided this one by modesty. He once explained to me, reciting verses from the Noble Book:

" *"Women are the twin-half of men"* (Haadith), *"a garment to them"* (Qur'an 2: 187). Allah has created the wife so that her mate *"might find comfort in her"* (Qur'an 7:189), *"quiet of wind"*. *" And He put between [them] love and affection"* (Qur'an 30:21). So you see, brother, a woman is so precious for a man's peace that he hates to separate from it. A woman is the man's pride and honor. He asks her to hide her beauty behind veils and be pious, so that the gaze of men might not bother her. She usually enjoys this privacy. She is actually often the one who enforces this religious precept."

Djaliil had smiled a little, shyly, then he had abruptly changed the subject. I did not bother him again with my curiosity. Soon, I forgot about women. I did not have to think about them because the opposite sexes did not mix much in Arabia, except in the secrecy of their homes. And I could not inquire about these issues because, for

one thing, I was not part of the family, for another, it was considered improper to talk about the family's privacy. So, I had been basically living in a non-women's land, and had been for many weeks.

Women also had their own world where men were entirely banished. There were rituals like the application of henna tattoos or the beautifying of the hair. Those only men of the family enjoyed. Women actually were little gardens of the desert as I could judge by my readings, but who had the time to think much about gardens grown inside the courtyards of houses?



Photo courtesy of Maha: <http://www.almaha.net>

The Bedouin camp emerged suddenly like a shining object. It struck me as playing the role of a lighthouse among the dunes. Its aura of light came from the green tuft trees growing in alleys next to a cluster of habitations. The Bedouin's camp was not actually what I expected. It was quite big with many olive trees flourishing in the sand dunes. Some guesthouses had even been built for visitors, and paths of stone led to vegetable patches. Some of its inhabitants had decorated the outside walls of the dark tents with tassels. I thought for a few minutes how unusual this sight seemed in the desert. I finally concluded that this had something to do with the growth of foreign tourism in the region. People came here to buy local items, especially exotic outfits entirely handmade. I was glad that I had gained a higher social status by coming with Djaliil. I could be seen as belonging to the tribe and not considered to be one of those tourists. Otherwise, I might have been offered daggers, oil preserved in goatskins or even face veils lined up with coins for my relatives. To my surprise, the oasis looked quite modern, sedentary and cozy considering what I knew about desert life. Men were listening to the Saudi radio and had even bought modern furniture for their tents.

However, as I learned later, modernity did not tremendously changed their ways of life. On the contrary, radio broadcasts had increased their understanding of Islam. They now were more conservative and more knowledgeable.

I was quick to notice that despite the modern appearance of the farm, the Bedouins still reproduced the same old tasks every day. These chores had been performed for generations with little change.



*Photo courtesy of: <http://www.velocity.net/~khamza/index.html>*

And that proved to me how comfortable they felt about the passing of traditions. Watching this tribe, it was not hard to imagine how

oral texts were transmitted through the centuries without many modifications. The Arabs had become masters in the recording of the Prophet's traditions (Peace be upon him). As a result, nowadays Muslims could faithfully transcribe words that had been uttered fourteen centuries ago. Nothing had been altered. Astonishing, I thought!

As we walked our way towards the tent of Djaliil's relatives, I looked at the hills surrounding the place. The green of the olive trees was so unexpected that it looked like fresh growths blooming after a desert flood. *Is this the garden in the sands*, I wondered as I recalled the boy's words? *Or did he mean something else?* I stared at my surroundings, expecting to see somewhere a garden of roses or fragrant flowers. No, nothing of the sort appeared thereof. However, when I looked a little farther, I was amazed to discover palm trees almost completely covered by the sand and struggling for survival. *If there was a garden here one day*, I mused, upset, *it is now on its way to becoming dormant.*

I signaled Djaliil to approach, then I pointed to the abandoned *wadi*.

"Look at the gratitude of the desert! Men strive to create a new environment, and see what happens to them! Their work disappears as if nothing had been done before! Where are now the trees planted

there? All buried in the dunes? What will happen to this farm in a few years from now?"

I was pretty upset, but Djaliil cooled my rising anger with his customary calm.

"Peace, my brother. Our Prophet (Peace be upon him) used to say: *'Be in this life like a stranger or a traveler! If you reach the evening, do not await [to be alive] by dawn, and if you reach dawn, do not await [to be alive] by evening.'* (Haadith) And the Prophet added: *'What have I got to do with the material world? The example of the material world and I is that of a traveler. Traveling in the afternoon, he stopped to rest under the shade of a tree for some moments. Then he rose and left it.'* (Haadith) We are born and we die! The same thing happens to every single thing created on earth. We build, then we destroy! We learn from defeats; we create more because of them. So you see, brother, *'To Allah we belong and to Him we return.'* (Haadith) What is the attachment of the earth?"

I gazed at the boy, yet surprised by his submission to the ways of the destiny, his quiet acceptance of what was univocally condemned to end. *Surely...* I said to myself, *if you believe in God, life on earth is bond to nothing.*

A man in his sixties seemed to appear suddenly from the desert rim. He wore a white beard floating at the brim of his chin and was draped in an even whiter garment. It seemed to me that I saw a mirage, but it did not last. I knew instantly we had reached the place of Djaliil's relatives. *Do they all look the same in this family,* I wondered to myself? Behind the man sprang up a house where a tent stood strewn with brown and red rugs and coarse woolen walls embellished by geometric patterns.

"*Assalam 'alaikum,* brothers. *'Alaan wa Saalan.* Come here in security and in peace where there is food and shelter for you," said the elder.

His straight body betrayed his noble descent; his feet pointing on the desert ground like a chief. Djaliil kissed the man on both cheeks and hugged him several times as it was customary. Then he announced, half in jest:

“O grandfather! I saw a wolf yesterday in my dreams, and it stole a goat from a herd. Furious, I chased it. However the beast stopped and told me,

'Why do you deprive me from my meal? Every living creature must have its due, and you were appointed on earth to be my steward. I eat; you eat. Your family and my family are in peace. There must be enough for both of us, no?'



Photo courtesy of Maha: <http://www.almaha.net>

I exclaimed, in surprise:

'O Wonder! A wolf talking!'

Therefore the wolf said,

'There is something more wonderful than me. There is a man, in the middle of the desert who digs the ground everyday with his hands to irrigate the few trees he has planted. And he gives food and shelter to many animals and insects, communities which sing praises to Allah.' So, grandfather, I thought about you, doing good deeds in the middle of nowhere and all maybe for a limited amount of time."

The Bedouin laughed and confirmed:

"Then, if I am the host of your dream, I must quench the thirstiest of all the men. And who are more in need of fluids than those who cross the desert?"

So he walked towards a she-camel tethered to a thorn-bush and milked it.

A calf jealous of its dietary staple was on the other side of the camel, indeed stimulating the mother's flow. The man squeezed gently the tits of his ride and the milk filled the bowl. Then he patted her flank, thanking her for the liquid and dipping a finger in it to remove a hair. Handing us the bowl, he warned us:

"The gift of milk in the desert is like offering life; it encompasses the gift of water. Milk not only quenches, but it also feeds the body and the mind, and a wise mind needs to be flooded profusely."



Photo courtesy of John and Susy Pint: <http://www.saudicaves.com>

We grinned, satisfied with each other. After that, Djaliil buried his nose in the white foam, drinking deeply to please his host. I thought that if it were not for the water poured in the *wadi*, the animals would certainly not produce milk. What was then the most precious:

the milk that nourished, the water that quenched the earth or the man who planted, harvested and milked?

While I was sipping the unusual beverage, a woman of the family was shaking a heavy goatskin bag full of goat's milk. She was in the process of making a thin, clarified butter for the camp. The churning was difficult, but a good physical exercise. No nomad women looked idle here, nor was any man walking with the herds and working on the grove.

This woman churned and churned for about an hour, until she squeezed her arms out of pain and sat on the floor, tired but content; her task was accomplished.

I had watched step by step her beating from the entrance of the tent where we had moved. Aureoles of perspiration had appeared on her back as well as on the front of her veil that she had used from time to time to dab her eyes and chin. Her outer garment made of wool had swayed with each jerk, making her various adornments tinkled lightly.

I was careful not to appear too interested as the men began stirring the roasting coffee beans on a fire. We had moved in a large tent, a few feet large.

Other men had joined us.

They all looked like noble men dressed in immaculate *dishdasha*. These had been the nomadic people, the people of the trip, always on the road, enjoying their liberty. Now, it was more important to plant and harvest than to move in the spring. They had let the few crippled fruits of the road to the wild beasts; they had made their choice.

A man moved copper and brass pots of coffee near small china goblets. The ceremony of coffee had begun. Like tea, coffee was drunk in three stages: one cup had to be bitter as death, one cup had to be good as life, and the last cup had to be sweet as love. Between each phase of the ceremony, the host roasted, grounded, pulverized the coffee, cast it in the water and finally tapped to signal that the next round was ready.

Then he served everybody, patiently filling the delicate vessels every time the guests gestured by turning them over. I was content in this atmosphere where men recited poetry and talked about the latest news. Even so, my mind was distracted by the mystery beyond the veils of the tents.

In the distance, women were weaving, lying looms in the sun or carefully stretching a thread of wool and spinning it around a wooden shaft.

The entire process intrigued me. Women had no part in the hosting because the family was not receiving other women. Or did they? I suddenly remembered the woman of the *hawdaj*. Where was she?



Photo courtesy of Maha: <http://www.almaha.net>

For a man of the desert, it was easy to recognize the identity of a woman just by looking at her pace or the way she holds her veil. But for me who was a novice in the matters of the land, it was impossible to know who were the inhabitants of the oasis and who was the new comer. I scrutinized but to no avail. As the sun went down, it was more and more difficult to distinguish features among

the women and some had shyly retired to the back of our tent. They had left the flap of the tent's inside door open, so that we knew they were there. It was their way of participating. Children played between the wooden pillars or came to sit on our laps before leaving again for other enjoyments. One little child put his fingers in a man's beard in tender gestures; the man kissed him on the forehead and shoed him towards his mother. Some women were chattering and plaiting the dense hair locks of a little girl in the back of their portion of the tent. They occasionally immersed their fingers in a mixture, apparently of goat's butter before returning to their task. I noticed that small leather bags were used to store grain, sugar and coffee. If I stretched back a little, I could see more of the insides of the tent. Near the women, small bags containing combs and pins had been artistically embroidered with colored silks and encrusted with buttons and small beads. Fringes, tassels and burnt patterns gave to these bags a whole range of colorful effects. I had seen these kinds of artifacts in pictures, but they looked even more beautiful in reality; they usually were finished at the neck with delicate cyclamen-colored nylon.

**D**jaliil came next to me and began talking. Her mother had been once part of this clan. She had been widowed and she could

not remarry inside her tribe because it was regarded more pleasant for a woman to stay faithful to the memory of her husband. So, she had one day packed her things then Djaliil and her had followed a man from Tihaama. Love had grown in the marriage. Djaliil had but a profound respect for the man who had proved to be of the kindest type. He further explained that arranged marriages were not that common in the Bedouins' camps. Most of the time men and women knew already each other. They had met either during the yearly festivals or had talked to each other on their way to pasture or while working at the well. Parents closed their eyes as long as the meetings were done in public and the limits of decency were not overridden. Of course, no extra-marital relationships were tolerated and all respected and feared Allah. As Djaliil was talking, I wondered if the woman who had been in the *hawdaj* earlier could have come just for visiting or for getting married. If I looked closely, the atmosphere of the camp looked very festive, much more actually than I would have imagined. From time to time, men watched the horizon as if waiting for something of somebody. I reckon that I was not disappointed in my guesses.

In the far away, a traveler was slowly making his way towards us. At first, him and his ride had looked like a quivering flame, but, progressively, they had taken a definite shape. I could now clearly

see them ascending and descending slopes of sands even if I lost sight of them at regular intervals. Finally, the man stopped his camel next to the *hawdaj* and checked it carefully. And what is she was here with us, in the same tent, with the other women? The prospect fascinated me. Could she be a member of Djaliil's family? I suddenly remembered how the boy had kept back all along the trail, as if he wanted to keep an eye on the woman. The traveler appeared almost instantly crossing the last few yards that separated him from us. A bird of prey was standing on his wrist, spreading its wings for balance as the man walked. At this sight, our host sprung to his feet joyfully and greeted him, saying, half joking:

“Whoso travels a road in search of religious knowledge will be lead to the Gardens. His superiority over the ordinary man is as that of the full moon over all the stars.”

And would I be that man?” said the newcomer.

"Insha Allah," responded the host, soon followed by a few others.

Djaliil bent towards me and said: "This is my second grandfather, from the side of my mother."

I did not know if this man was an ascetic or a scholar, but truly this new guest was glowing with sparkling lights coming from his white teeth, his white face and his beard. He really inspired a man of faith. The men hugged each other firmly.

After that, women laid the table on the ground and busied themselves with the rest of the evening meal preparations, helped by a few men of the family. The sun had already set and men and women had performed their prayers, but a thin ray of dying sunlight still filtered on the horizon like under the door of the night. The meal consisted of spiced rice and chicken fried with cooked raisins on top. The recipe was traditional and delicious, so delicious that it kept the assembly silent while we were eating.

When our bellies where two thirds full according to the Islamic practice, we stopped, and our host directed our attention towards the falconer. Pride and love were clearly see in his eyes and words. He did not try to conceal them and spoke freely to all men of his tribe, and to us who had arrived earlier.

“This man,” exclaimed our host with a pause, “this man is known as the chief of the trustful. His trust is so complete that he would cross the desert on the scent of an apple.”

Men approved with their heads and laughed agreeably. Djaliil came and sat near the elder and looked at him avidly. The scholar stirred on his cushions and took out from his parcel a needle, a thread, a canvas bag and a pair of scissors.



Photo courtesy of Maha: <http://www.almaha.net>

This scene was probably rehearsed each time newcomers were invited by the family. Everybody here knew what would come next, but they found pleasure in this other ritual.

Djaliil's grandfather explained, teasingly:

"I see that our little Djaliil is back among us once more. May Allah be praised." We all repeated the words of praise after him. "We hope that you have been good all this time to your family, Djaliil. Parents have right over you as you have rights over them." People nodded smiling at him.

"Here is a man whom I consider my brother, an erudite, a scientist. Do you have anything to ask from him, Djaliil? Can he answer your questions?"

The boy grinned, amused, then asked, proud of the attention bestowed upon him:

"I wish to know, noble scholar, why you carry these items in all places and in all parts of the year?"

Saying this, he gestured towards the sewing accessories the last of the guests had brought with him and was using to sew pieces of cloth together, probably a bag.

"Hmm!" answered the man in jest, "So you should condemn me to narrate this story for the rest of my life, little brother?" He paused before adding:

"At least, that much does not impair trust."

"That certainly is true," answered Djaliil. "But again, tell me, my curiosity has grown too big."

So the man began to tell the stories of the marvels he had seen on his journeys, or maybe what he imagined of these travels. I listened avidly, so intent in the process that I completely lost the notion of time and space. Here is what he said:

"I came one day to the abodes of a farm where a celebration was being held. Children were serving their parents around large tables carried on a patio. I called them saying,

"Give me drink of water."

And one of them said to me,

"Do you have a son among us?"

I answered that I did not.

"Then no!" came the reply. "Therein is the advantage of marriage, strangers do not sit with the family."

But soon they told me,

"Look here! There is a place behind those curtains where you can find rest in the open, and I will seek some food and something to drink for you."

To this I agreed and thanked my host as politely as I could. Behind those curtains waited a maiden with her head uncovered.

"Maiden, cover your head," I exclaimed.

"Traveler, close your eyes!" she retorted.

"But my eyes involuntarily fell upon you, and I am in love with you," I said, "and the lover does not cover his eyes."

"I am intoxicated," she answered to make me avert my eyes, but the grace of her neck and of her voice had already struck me.

She continued, "and the drunkard does not cover her head out of shame." Then I added,

"At which tavern did you become intoxicated?"

"Have a care," she cried. "You are bothering me. Is there any in these abodes?"

"No, but maiden, would you have my company?" I asked.

"I am not the sort that is looking for a man!" she answered.

And truly she was afraid that I had to stay with her alone and that is forbidden in our religion.

But she did not have the power to go away. She was the farm servant. She had just tried to conceal it from me to force me to go away, but I knew a servant did not wear a headcover. So I stayed: I had unmasked her.

While she was talking, she was putting her small feet in the waters of a fountain, which ran through the house. Her toes were playing with the little pebbles made of pearls and her skin looked whiter than milk. She looked sweeter than honey. So I pondered a moment, then I asked from her master a needle, a thread, a canvas bag and a pair of scissors. I began to sew a headcover for the woman. When this was done, I counted many gold coins for the value of the thread, the needle and the scissors and I went to see the

master again, and I set her free. I had just remembered how this act was well regarded upon in Islam.

There was much charity in it.

Meanwhile, tears of gratitude streamed from her eyes. She made me wait where I was and went straight to a garden she hid behind a wall of rocks. I followed. Concealed from her view, I saw her walking from plants to plants, flower to flower, and from tree to tree until she reappeared before me holding a big sack of seeds. She said with emotion:

"When you return to your land, grow yourself a garden in the sands, a garden where all living creatures will look for a rest. Then, there will be much charity for you in everything they will eat from it."

"And wouldn't that be stealing from your master?" I asked her doubtful. To this she replied:

"Not at all. This garden is mine alone. There I spent all the wages I could spare. I know that there is a divine reward for being kind to every living creature." She hesitated, then confessed modestly: "Mostly I wanted to be kind to myself."

So I returned the seeds to her and asked if this gift she would accept as a dowry. She nodded assent, casting her eyes downwards, silent, as it was customary. So I married her fast, and she planted her

garden here, in this farm. That's why this place is called "the garden in the sands." I had at the same time found a solution to the dear poverty affecting my tribe and ensured for myself a modest and pious wife."

Everybody smiled at this story, and turned towards Djaliil. His cheeks had become red for the joy the story had procured him. His heart was bursting out of pride. Then his grandfather declared to me, as if confidentially:

"The woman of the story was Djaliil's second grandmother, from his mother's side. She was my wife. She died giving birth to a second daughter. May Allah be pleased with her and her with Him! She made us swear to continue her work, and we have planted trees and plants until now, partly for the sake of her memory. We hope this work will still benefit her, through us, in her grave as it benefits us now on this earth."

Narrow, high teacups of glass were served. Men continued discussing the story long into the night, making gestures of satisfaction. They would never tire of recounting the birth of their oasis because the harvest was good this year, as it had been the years before; the land was blessed.

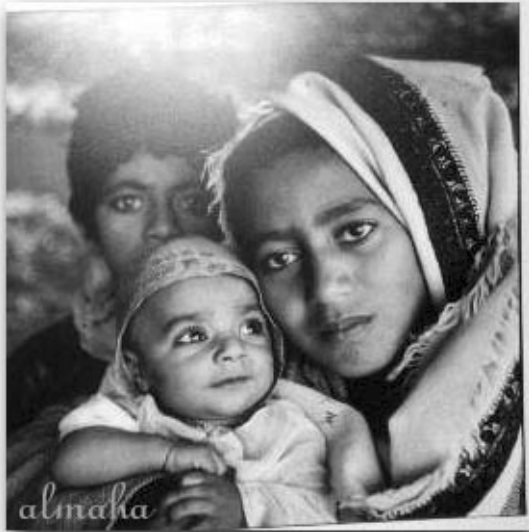


Photo courtesy of Maha: <http://www.almaha.net>

At the end, they unwound their headdresses and allowed the incense from a chiseled studded brass burner to perfume their hair and beards. I was completely enraptured by the story so that I could only see hands and *disdashas* moving around me. Djaliil and his grandfathers had retired in a corner of the tent, holding hands and seeming happy.

In the women's side of the tent, a group of very young girls began singing tales about desert life under the firmament silently twinkling up afar. These song tales told of love, of war, and of landscapes

disappearing under the bright stars. One of them told of death. It said:

*Live in this world as if you were going to live forever,  
Prepare for the next world as if you were going to die  
tomorrow. More than halves of the Arabs are Bedouins  
The one who is rich knows after all the sacred hospitality as  
well as the poorest of the nomads.*

*Everyone is perfected and inspired with conscience of what  
is wrong and what is right.*

*Remind them! O Remind the believers!*

*Live in this world as if you were going to live forever,  
Prepare for the next world as if you were going to die  
tomorrow.”*

In the back of the tent, I suddenly saw the scholar approaching a woman who stood erect in one corner, tending a child. Then he drew a bouquet of flowers he had picked from the *wadi* and placed it on her lap, smiling. The heavy *burqa* glittered and I saw Djaliil smiling back, happy. The magic of this instant was worth waiting. It had been worth not knowing right away the identity of the *hawdaj* lady. I had traveled across dunes and dust without knowing Djaliil's mother had followed in our tracks. I did not know she had come back to her tribe after many years of absence. I did

not know and that was the beauty of it. I suddenly realized how small I was. And I recited:

*"What have I got to do with the material world? The example of the material world is that of a traveler. Traveling in the afternoon, he stopped to rest under the shade of a tree for some moments. Then he rose and left it."*

Alike a traveler, I left and went sleeping on the bare ground.

At that instant, I knew that I really was a voyager.

Never would I feel that concept as strongly ever after. Now, it was in me. And I remembered the trees slowly sliding into the sand dunes, forever forgotten, and I understood. I understood that we all but passed in this life, and that was what was intended.