

In Another World
-By Swetha Amit

A black mass is creeping over the ink blue sky. White dots of light gleam across it. Soon a bright white ball emerges from the clouds. It peeps at first like a shy bride before it makes itself visible to the world. The rest of the stars gather around it in several patterns. For a moment, it appears like a thousand eyes smiling at the sight below them. Beneath the star-studded canvas of black is a sheet of white that stretches across for miles. Chalk like formations rest on it. Shaped sometimes like a woman's head, a rabbit, a giant bird or a mushroom. Peculiar yet fascinating. A gentle breeze stirs and caresses the tufts of brown sand. A fleeting sound echoes in the stillness of the white desert. Almost like a whisper.

Then there is a crackling sound of fire. A man is watching his tourist guide boil eggs, cook chicken and rice. The sudden gust of wind tugs his hair. He turns and sees his blue and white tent just a few yards away. It sports like a little igloo on a sheet of ice. He then looks at the shadowy figure seated on a black mat and looking at the stars. The wind ruffles her hair and caresses her cheek. And then there is silence. All she can hear is just the rhythmic beats of her breathing and her heart pumping. The man walks towards her. The squishy sound of the sand squelching under his big feet makes her turn. In her eyes, he sees a little sparkle. For a moment, he looks hopeful and then slumps his shoulders. All he sees is just the reflection of the stars in her eyes. He sits beside her. Together they watch the gems of the sky, each competing to be the brightest. But it's the moon which dominates and its reflection falls like a floodlight on them. A pair of invisible arms cradles them into a celestial embrace.

The air smells of a queer mixture of smoke and spices. A tiny spark from the fire produces a glow of red and orange. A thin line of grey smoke travels upwards. Soon it will merge with the

sky. Yellow and black mats are arranged around the fire. The sudden brightness makes her squirm. She draws closer to the man. It's for the first time in months she displays such proximity. The man's thoughts flash back to those incidents that led to this restrained communication between them. The little bump, that fall, bleeding, that rush of blood, her cries, her anguish, her dismay, the hospital, solemn expressions on the doctor's face. Fifteen weeks. And the end of a growing life. For nights, they were taunted by images of red clots and little infants. The shade of red began to frighten her. She was dressed in a creamy white gown that fatal day. Similar to the color of chalkstone structures formed as a result of several sandstorms. But nothing like the storm that wrecked their blissful marital life.

He hesitatingly puts an arm around her shoulders. She doesn't shake it off. He looks around the frosty desert. The white ripples of sand remind him of the foamy waves of the sea. The rock formations have come alive. He feels their gaze on him. A strange eeriness lurks. He shivers. The thoughts churn in his head. Those months of dealing with hysterical rants, tears, bawling and then a sudden stony silence. Silence that terrified him. Silence that led to her disengagement from reality. That smell of burnt toast, dirty laundry, split coffee on the upholstery, the leaking pipe, unkempt hair, ghostly face, eyes that lost their sheen, long stares out of the window. Months went by. Seasons changed. And yet in his life, everything had come to a standstill.

He now clears his throat. "Dinner is ready," he says. She looks at him. Her face appears pale. Not very different from the whiteness of their surroundings. He looks at her black hair and visualizes little shiny silver ornaments on it. Like the stars. Her eyes are looking at the dark horizon. Small creases form on her broad forehead. "The fox?" she asks.

It's the third time she asks this. Their tour guide's mention about the appearance of the desert fox, earlier that day, appears to have etched in her mind. "Consider it your good luck if you see one," he'd said.

"Does it come every night?" the woman asked.

"Can't tell," the guide shrugged.

The man stands up and offers his hand. She takes it. They walk towards the fire. Warmth radiates from the orange flames. Another gust of wind blows. The flames are lured in one direction. They watch the reddish orange ball of fire swayed by the force of air. The elements of nature synchronized in a perfect harmony. Like they had once been. It triggers memories of their first date a few years ago. The restaurant by the sea, the musical notes of the violin, wrapped in each other's arms, the rhythmic movement of their feet and swaying to the music. Their eyes would shine like stars. Their faces would emanate a glow, enough to evoke jealousy in the moon.

How he wishes he could turn back the clock. Maybe they wouldn't have run down those stairs. Maybe they wouldn't have been in a rush to watch that latest blockbuster. If only they knew. He sighs again. His eyes feel heavy with the unshed tears. Not a drop of water slid down his cheek since that day. He couldn't. Not when his wife was on the brink of insanity. Nothing would help. Not his parents. Not her parents. Not their friends. Not her colleagues. Calls and mails unanswered, doors closed, her abrupt resignation letter. And just like that she'd retreated into her shell. A change of scene, their doctor had reiterated. A considerable amount of pleading had finally resulted in a mere nod when he mentioned Egypt. For the first time in months, she blinked and looked at him in the eye. A place of her dreams, she'd once said. Ever since she'd read *The Alchemist*. The silence hung around them like a shadow. On the flight from India, the ride to their hotel and their little tours in the land of the Pharaohs. She looked at the pyramids with an expression on her face

he couldn't interpret. Was it disappointment? Misery? Anger? Tombs, their guide explained. Later that evening, her pillow was covered in a pool of tears. "I don't like tombs," she'd said. "They depress me." She couldn't bear it. Seeing those happy faces and hearing little kids chanting Mama. It was the same scene on the cruise on River Nile. They sailed on the calm blue waters, past houses, people and stopped at ancient temples. Even the intriguing historical monuments couldn't wipe out the images of blissful families she'd seen on the boat or near the pyramids. They couldn't understand the viciousness of nature that caused such an upheaval in their otherwise ordinary lives. The man with a reputed position at a bank and the woman who derived joy in educating the young minds. Was it their fault to long for their own saplings? Ones that they could nurture with care and see them bloom? How they wished their life was as smooth sailing as this boat ride. Like the longest river, their life stretched ahead of them. An impromptu suggestion by the guide. And just like that, they'd driven into this surreal space of whiteness. Placid and bare. No sign of a tree or a bush. No scent of a flower. They looked around gasping at the vastness of the space. White, white and white. Shades of brown here and there. Crescent like structures. Almost giving them the feeling of landing on the moon. They reached in time to see the sun sink behind the clouds. Its rays stretched in a manner, like it was bidding goodbye. Darkness prevailed. The man and the guide brought out tents and mats where they now sat for dinner.

The smell of spices waft into their nostrils. The guide serves them chicken and rice. The chicken pieces are swimming in a pool of red gravy, smeared with spices. The man and the woman pause for a second and stare at the red liquid. He looks at her and nods understandingly. "Is it too hot or spicy?" the guide looks concerned. They shake their heads and stare at him with an expression he isn't able to decipher. They take a bite of the white rice and carefully pick the chicken pieces. They push the gravy aside. The guide continues to make small talk. Then he asks a question

that makes the couple cringe. As though a spider is creeping up their shoulders. Of course, the guide doesn't know about his folly of inadvertently touching a raw nerve. No children? he asks in an innocuous manner. He looks at them pleasantly. A chill breeze blows. It tosses his loosely worn hat a few feet away. He moves to get it. Under the watchful eyes of the stars, the couple's eyes glisten with the salty drops of fluid. For a moment, everything appears hazy. Almost like a mirage. An illusion. It is then they hear a light skittering of paws. When they see it at first, they aren't sure if its real or just a figment of their imagination. Their minds are in a space that transcends between reality and delusion. Its only at the tour guide's excited remark that makes them realize that the blurry shape of the bat like ears, the long funnel like fur tail and triangular face is as real as it could get. The desert fox has arrived.

The speck of light gradually begins to become clearer and more visible under the moonlight. They can now see its light fawn color fur that seems to have a special glow. As though its put under a spotlight. It walks in rather shyly; its tail tucked between the legs and presents itself to the couple. It looks up with its black eyes that are shaped like dates. The dot of black on its nose resembles a blackberry fruit. A contrast to its creamy off-white fur. It looks around, at the fire, the food and then back at the couple. The cricket chirrups suddenly and a whistling sound of the wind reverberates through this white arid land. It makes a hushing sound almost sounding like a lullaby. The tour guide places an egg in a jar of water. It looks at it curiously and moves closer.

The woman stares at the fox. An inexplicable calmness takes over her face. Is it relief? Joy? Intrigue? The fox shakes its head slightly. Then it takes a step closer. They notice how tiny it is. That innocent look in its eyes. The inquisitive expression on its face. It almost dispels the notion of any cunningness that is usually associated with a fox. And yet the fox seems to be evaluating the couple. Clearly it does not trust people easily. It continues to look at the woman closely. For

some reason, it does not care much for the man. He steps back and watches them. Perhaps it senses her loss? Is it comforting her? Reassuring her? And then it bends down and nibbles the egg. It bites and chews slowly before it swallows it down its throat. And then the woman does the unthinkable. She stretches her arm and strokes its fur. It stops eating. The woman withdraws her hand. The guide takes a sharp breath. Once again, the fox looks at her. Is it wary? Sensitive to human touch? Fearful? The woman and the fox stare at each other. She instinctively reaches out again. There is tenderness to her touch. The fur feels soft in her hands. Above them, the stars are twinkling. The moon is as radiant as ever. The white translucent light shines upon them. The darkness dissipates for a while. The ghostly expression on the woman's face is gone. After many months, she seems to have come alive. Her eyes seem to be communicating something to the fox. What is she saying? What is she seeing? The man wonders. He yearns to stroke the fox and join this blissful camaraderie. But he stops. He isn't sure why. The tour guide gets up quietly and stands at a distance. The man is lured by this enchanting display of affection between the woman and fox. It finishes eating and curls beside the fire. Time seems to have come to a standstill. For a minute, it feels like they have landed inside a postcard. Everything seems so perfect. Then the fox gets up, scampers for a while and stops. It turns back and looks at the woman for the last time. And gradually it becomes a speck of dust. The flames are dying down. The woman's gaze is fixed towards the direction where the fennec fox disappears. The tour guide breaks the spell with his cheerful small talk. He gathers the vessels and mats, puts it in the vehicle in which they had travelled.

“You are lucky,” he says.

The man looks at him inquiringly.

“Many people have come but go back disappointed. They don't see the fox.”

“Oh,” that’s all the man says. He takes a deep breath. The woman is still in a trance. It suddenly turns cold. He wraps a blanket around her and leads her to the tent. Under the star lit sky, they fall into a deep slumber. They do not notice the tent flapping. They do not hear the winds howl. They are oblivious to the sand flying in the air. The banshee like wails persist.

The woman is the first to wake up. She steps outside the tent. The sun peeps out in the horizon. Streaks of yellow and orange illuminate the sky. Like a golden carpet that is limitless in its reach. The clouds part way to present a cascade of blue. The shades of white and brown are more apparent in the day time. The chalk formations look even more dramatic and deep in the sunlight. She observes the specs of black particles. She blinks and gapes at the structures around her. There is one that catches her fancy. She walks towards it. The wind blows some dust on the white sculpture. She attempts to brush it. But the dust remains. She feels a tap on her shoulder.

“There was a little storm last night,” the man says.

“A storm?” she whispers

“Yes. That explains the black particles.”

“What about the...,” she looks around furtively.

“It will survive. That’s what the guide said.”

“Oh.”

“We survived too.”

The woman looks at him for a long time. She nods. Everything around them appears calm and serene. They walk towards the camp where the guide hands them coffee. They take a sip and see more unique shapes. A sphinx and a camel.

“If we leave now, we can reach the city soon,” the guide tells them. He puts away the things in the vehicle. The woman’s eyes widen. Her face portrays a tinge of sadness as she gives a fleeting look

at the magnificent rock boulders. What is it about this pearl white landscape that fills her with a strange sense of tranquility? Is it her estrangement from people? Reality? Truth? She walks around some more. The man observes her. She appears to be moving away from him. At one point, she resembles a tiny spec of dot. Her silhouette glistens in the sunlight and she almost seems nonexistent. He quickly walks towards her, takes her hand gently and places it on his face.

“It’s time to go,” he says softly.

Reluctantly she trudges behind him. On the sheets of sand, she sees their footprints. They appear like little dots in a pattern. Like the ones she’d seen in the stars. Limitless and infinite. It’ll soon be cascaded by another sheet of sand. The black particles glisten in the sunlight. The guide starts the vehicle. It roars. Clouds of white sand fill the air. The woman turns and cranes her neck. The white desert dissipates behind them. Soon it becomes a speck of white dot.

“The fox?” she asks.

“It’ll come,” says the man.