

SECOND SUNDAY

CHAPTER 18: *THE ARAFAN ASCENT*

"A cloud gathers, the rain falls, men live; the cloud disperses without rain, and men and animals die." (Sir Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, p. 15.)

Following a different—and infinitely easier—route, we returned to our camp above the dry waterfall. We reached it at dusk, prepared our evening meal, and slept.

We awoke the next day at sunrise. The air lay heavy with humidity. It was an uneasy sign. Travel would prove more arduous than before.

After a simple breakfast, we saddled and packed the camels. We moved up the *wadi* at a leisurely pace, heading west—away from the Arava and toward the Negev Plateau. The *wadi* floor sloped and the winter floods ran swiftly. Through the millennia, cavities, hollowed by eddies of grit-laden water, had formed behind the boulders. As erosion altered the *wadi* bed, the eddies dissipated and the cavities filled with silt, inviting plants to take root.

As he had in Wadi Issaron, Shai pointed to each plant, describing how it adapted to the desert and its food or medicinal attributes. As before, I sometimes crushed a leaf or cut a twig to inhale the fragrance of an aromatic tea or taste the essence of an exotic spice. It rekindled memories of my youth and the sharp, sweet smells of honeysuckle nectar, saffron leaves, and spicebush berries.

The layers of dust concealed a variety of species, each remarkable in the way it adapted to the paucity of water.

During the dry season, some become dormant. They look and feel like dead branches, snapping with a crack. Yet, in but a few hours after water comes, they burst into blossom and, in turn, leaf and bear fruit. All of this takes place within a few weeks. With the onset of summer, the sun scorches the silt dry and such plants again fall dormant.

All of the desert species have modified their leaves to save water. In addition to their diminutive size, leaves are often encased with wax. Like skin lotion, it serves as a moisture

barrier, minimizing evaporation. Such leaves remain green even during years of drought.

Palms appear to be an exception. Although found in the desert, they are not plants of the desert. They grow only at a permanent source of water, commonly an oasis. Rarely, as we had seen after our resupply, one or two may be found in a seemingly dry *wadi*. But always, they have taken root in a *thamile*, where water collects just beneath the surface, or in the Arava at a spring.

The roots of desert plants have adapted to suck up the scarce water. Some root systems may run for vast distances just beneath the surface to absorb as much of a transient rain as possible. Some such systems have nodules, which store water for the plant to draw on during the year or more that may pass between rains. Other root systems may tunnel vertically 50 feet or more into the ground or into a rock fissure to reach subsurface water.

Sometimes acacias grow in the *wadis*. They indicate more than the usual soil moisture and suggest enough groundwater to feed a well. They are most common in the Arava. There the floods from the Negev Plateau and the mountains of Edom come to rest.

Their compound leaves are vaguely reminiscent of those of a black locust, but one-tenth or less the size. The diminutive dimensions mask a bulbous shape, which minimizes the surface-to-volume ratio, further reducing evaporation of their water. Every few inches, bleached white thorns the full length of a finger jut vertically from brown, twig-sized branches. Sometimes the thorns are single. Sometimes two erupt from the same point on the branch. Their spiked tips are stained reddish-brown, as if once dipped in blood. They can penetrate the sole of a boot or, as I had experienced, the hand of a careless man.

As I gingerly fingered the thorns, I marveled at the quality of the camels' innards, which enabled them to eat the plant, seemingly without discomfort. At several points, sap had oozed from the branches and hardened into translucent brownish globules. At other points, the sap had run down on itself, forming miniature stalactites. These were more whitish in hue than the globules. I wondered what had caused the differences in color and under what conditions, if any, the hardened sap—eons into the future—might transform into amber. I thought of the permanence of amber—displayed in museums with the preserved remains of insects that were trapped in the then-fresh sap 40 million years or more before. It brought to mind the fragility and brevity of my own mortality.

Shai pointed to a nearby plant. Two pendulous ripening fruits the size of small mangos

hung from succulent stems. The smaller of the two was the pale yellow of a lemon. The slightly larger one had changed to a pale orange-red. It had burst open in full ripeness, exposing the pulp inside.

"That is a caprus. Its leaves are covered with heavy wax and its roots go deep into the ground. That ensures it will have water and green leaves, even in the dry years. There are two kinds. One grows here in the Negev. The other grows in the Golan, above Lake Tiberius—or as Americans know it, the Sea of Galilee. The ruins of an ancient synagogue are there. Carved in the stone are the words, 'This is the synagogue of Rabbi Eleezar, the caprus man.' Perhaps they mean that Rabbi Eleezar pickled the caprus."

Visions of a delicatessen, its aisles crammed with open barrels of pickles and the air pungent with dill and garlic, flooded my mind.

Shai pulled off the ripe fruit and handed it to me.

"The caprus tastes like, how do you call it, dijon mustard? *Bedu* children eat it as a treat. However, they only suck it. The seeds are full of cyanide. If you chew, you will crack the seeds. Likely, it will only give you diarrhea. But, perhaps ..."

Shai's voice trailed off. He had no need to complete the sentence.

Part of me was astounded at how casually Shai treated the ingestion of cyanide. Another part thought of it as a reality of the desert—a reminder of Death and His constant company. I sucked the fruit almost as casually as Shai had warned of its seeds. Here in Wadi Eteq, it seemed a perfectly normal thing to do. And, indeed, the caprus pulp oozed rich like dijon mustard.

We continued for half an hour, following the slowly rising *wadi* westward. Gradually, it narrowed, the converging walls limiting our view to the distance of the next bend. We rounded a curve and the *wadi* opened. Before us towered a precipice, almost a thousand feet high. Talus—the accumulated debris of eroded rock—reached to half its height. Above the talus, a broken cliff rose almost vertically. A barely discernable track snaked over the talus and disappeared on to its face. The formation is unnamed on the map. However, the guides all know it as the Arafan Ascent.

Arafan had been a magnificent camel. He misstepped and careened from the snaking track. Now, like splintered shards, the fragments of his bones lay scattered on the *wadi* floor, bleached by the unrelenting sun. A stub of his broken femur, the knee joint still intact, lodged against a rock. It lay in silent testimony to the unforgiving harshness of the Negev.

Despite the relatively early hour, sweat beaded on the camels' brows, an indisputable sign of the increasingly oppressive heat. Ascending would be more oppressive yet. As we reached the face of the cliff and began to cross it, our torsos would be no more than a few feet from the rock, fully exposed to the radiating heat.

Shai looked toward the precipice and then toward me.

"This is not an easy trail. You can see that it is narrow and steep, especially at the top. But worse than others, it is covered with very loose rocks. That is why Arafan fell."

"As we climb, always hold Samech's guide rope with your outside hand. Whatever you do, don't put your arm through the loop. If Samech slips, pull on the rope. That may steady him." Shai paused. "But if he goes, don't go with him."

He reached up to a water bag hanging from the rear pommel of Louis' saddle. "We must refill our canteens and bottles here. It will be too dangerous to reach the water bags once we begin to climb."

Shai's tone was matter-of-fact. There was little need for him to emphasize. By this, my third summer in the desert, I recognized the constant, indeed casual, presence of Death. I nodded in understanding.

As we began our ascent, I comprehended Shai's words. Most of the trails we had traversed passed over the Negev Plateau. Through the millennia, travelers and their pack animals had kicked away smaller stones and compacted the disintegrating surface, forming a discernible path. In the narrower *wadis*, we had clambered over rocks and boulders. On the *wadi* walls, we had inched along narrow ledges. However, even under the most arduous of such passages, we had found solid footings.

The Arafan Ascent differed. There were no solid footings, only treacherous fragments of slatelike rubble. At some points, even the goats had difficulty, uncharacteristically pausing to pick their way. Later, I would learn that such rubble, called scree, was common to many mountains of the world, and a bane to even the most experienced climbers.

With each step, the fragments slipped, as if lubricated by oil. I thought of a plastic-coated paper plate, pushed by the wind, skidding over the surface of a wet asphalt road. Usually, two or three fragments would slip over one another. The inherent difficulty in traversing them was exacerbated by their uncertain movement—sometimes slight but sometimes substantial. Each footfall was treacherous. Each step forward required exertion to retain balance.

Sometimes four or more fragments would slide together, accelerating the slipping motion. I would jerk back to regain balance, jolting my neck and spine. My lower back began to throb. At each switchback, I followed Shai's direction and shifted Samech's guide rope to my outside hand.

As I struggled up the ever-steeper trail, sweat cascaded from my pores. My back pulsed. My calves ached. My heart raced to pump enough blood to cool my body. I gasped for air, vainly trying to soothe my lungs. Laboriously, I counted every hundred steps, and then allowed myself a pause to ease the pain in my lungs and to sip from my canteen. As we climbed upward, I counted every 50 steps and paused.

The camels, despite their mass, could negotiate the trail more readily than could we. Humans thrust forward with each step. This causes the rubble to slide with the direction of the foot. Camels place their feet straight down. Their pads spread, distributing their weight over the rubble. While the rubble moves, the sliding motion tends downward rather than forward. This enables the camels to maintain their balance. But even with this advantage, they sometimes slipped. Louis set the pace. Each time he slipped, he would hesitate until again coaxed forward by Shai's gentle admonitions.

Early in our ascent, I purposefully lagged 20 to 30 feet behind Louis. If he would plunge from the precipice, I had no desire for his death bellows to startle Samech, sending him over the edge as well. My concern for Samech aside, he and Louis carried our water. If both animals went over, the water bags would be shredded as the beasts plummeted down the talus. We would be left with only the liter bottle that Shai carried and the already partially drained canteens on my hips. At best, they now totaled two-and-a-half liters. They would total less as we climbed higher.

The water hole was hours behind us. Should we lose the camels, we would have but one quarter to one third the water we would both need if we were to reach the water hole safely. I mulled over the mathematics, shuddered, and lagged farther behind to place more distance between Samech and Louis.

Throughout the climb, Samech behaved magnificently. He neither paused nor complained. Exhibiting the primordial instinct of a herd animal, he followed in Louis' tracks. Away from the camel yard, this harshness is the only life the camels know. Having no other expectation, they drive themselves uncomplainingly.

I recall nothing of the remaining ascent, other than to surmise that, akin to Samech, I

plodded ahead stoically, despite my exhaustion. At the crest, my shirt was soaked and my canteens empty. My frame heaved as I gasped to recover my breath. Here, above the confines of the narrow trail, I could refill my canteens and luxuriate in drinking my fill. As I tasted the water, I marveled at the camels. Their brows and bridles were glistening with sweat. They could not drink for at least another two days. Yet, without complaint, they would carry their loads.

Shai suggested that I ride. Ordinarily, I would have chosen to forge ahead, preferring to continue to pit myself against the environment. Having reached the crest, I had tested myself enough and accepted Shai's suggestion.

On the empty expanse of the Negev Plateau, with no *wadi* walls to reflect the sun's heat, the temperature was more bearable. Mounted atop Samech, 10 feet in the air, I was above the inferno-like microclimate formed by the sun's heat radiating from the desert floor. The temperature was yet more bearable. I felt the breeze and was thankful.

We traveled south into the sun, slowly descending into a broad and shallow basin. This was Mishor Se'ifim, the "Fingers Plain," named after the five main tributaries that feed it. At places, it stretched more than a mile wide, a stark contrast to the confined upper reaches of Wadi Eteq. My muscles slowly loosened to the gait of the camel. An hour after the sun reached its zenith, the basin began to narrow. There, we took shelter beneath a solitary acacia.

We left the shelter of the acacia as the afternoon shadows lengthened. The basin began to drop and its walls to converge. Here, the rains, which fell on Mishor Se'ifim, collected and descended toward the multicolored formations that had emerged more than a mile ahead. These marked the transition from the limestone of the Negev Plateau to the sandstone of the Eilat Hills. As the collected runoff rushed through the sandstone, it had cut a gorge 500 feet long, as much as 100 feet deep and, in places, less than 4 feet wide. The lower stratum of sandstone is deep red, and hence the name, the Red Canyon.

We bypassed the Red Canyon and continued south. The rubble underfoot changed from the variegated brown and black, which we had traversed since the start of our journey, to a more uniform reddish purple.

Ahead, what seemed to be a crooked white branch lay incongruously in the otherwise total emptiness through which we were passing. Coming closer, I saw that it was not a branch, but the hooped foreleg of a small ruminant. Above the hoof, a few tatters of white and brown hide told that it had been an ibex. Above that, the forearm and shoulder had been stripped of

flesh. Even the ligaments had been torn away. Except for these bones, nothing else remained. The carnivore—likely a wolf or hyena—had sated its hunger here and dragged the remainder of the carcass to its den.

In the magical moments before dusk, the sandstones captured the light of the sinking sun, transforming their colors to a rich tawny yellow and chocolate brown. Clouds, rarely seen in the summer, scuttled from the Sinai. They accentuated the colors of the sandstone and then dissipated before our eyes. In winter, such dissipation could be fatal, for rain would not fall.

Shai and Louis, silhouetted against the clouds, appeared as a mirage from the past, ghosts of the drivers and camels that had followed these tracks from time immemorial.

Shortly after sunset, we camped in a sparsely vegetated *wadi* below Har Neshef. For supper, we prepared a cabbage salad, roast sweet potatoes, baked apple with raisins, and, as always, unleavened bread. Although the clouds had dissipated, the winds that had carried them continued. Had it been cooler, we would have laid down our sleeping bags with the opening away from the wind to keep the airborne grit out of them. Tonight, as in all nights of our journey, coolness did not come. We slept upon the bags.