

A City to Wake Up In

Yusuf woke to someone arguing with a donkey.

The donkey appeared to be winning. There was a scrape outside, a man's increasingly polite request to move, and then a thump against the courtyard wall.

"Is it ours?" Yusuf asked.

His mother looked up from folding a blanket. "We haven't acquired a donkey in the night. Put your sandals on."

For a moment he had forgotten where they were. No tent cloth moved above him. No camel breathed beside the baggage. He was in a room in Damascus, and the light came through a wooden shutter that would not quite close.



His father, Ali, whom he called Baba, was already downstairs. They had brought two bales of paper from his workshop in Baghdad, and today they would deliver them. Yusuf had helped smooth some of those sheets. He hoped someone would ask which ones.

After washing and prayer, he carried the rolled blanket into the courtyard. Hamza was sitting on a bundle, eating bread. His friend was eleven, like Yusuf; they had met during the long caravan journey, when there had been rather more room around their breakfast.

"You missed it," Hamza said. "The donkey went backwards."

"Through the gate?"

"Into the onions."

Across the yard a man was collecting onions from beneath a bench. Yusuf set down his blanket and fetched one that had rolled towards the stairs. It was cold and gritty in his hand. He returned it and accepted a piece of Hamza's bread.



Harith, Hamza's father, stood beside Baba and the paper bales. He had helped bring the caravan's camels safely to Damascus. This morning he was arranging two porters for the much shorter journey to the customer.

"I remember the entrance," Harith said. "The merchant sent someone round last night. He'll be expecting us."

Layla came down carrying their empty water jug. She asked the woman who managed the lodging where they could refill it and whether food would be available that evening. Yusuf waited with his board under his arm. His mother noticed.

"Take it if you like. But you'll carry it."

He tucked his drawing offcuts beneath its cord and followed her out.

The street was still cool between the walls. Above them, sunlight reached a row of pale roofs. Yusuf tried looking up and ahead at once, nearly stepped into a basket, and decided to do one at a time.

A man was rolling back a cloth awning. Farther along, a woman lifted lengths of blue and brown fabric from a chest. Layla slowed.



“That blue,” she said. “May I see the edge?”

The seller unfolded it across her forearm. There was a narrow border of little squares, some almost hidden inside the fold. Layla turned the cloth to the light while Baba and Harith waited for the porters to pass a laden donkey.

“For a dress?” the woman asked.

“I was thinking of a bag. Though I'd lose half the border when I cut it.”

“Then make a bigger bag.”

Layla laughed. “My husband would object. I'd have to fill it.”

“He could carry it.”

Baba looked round at exactly the wrong moment. Yusuf and Hamza began to laugh too, although Baba had heard only the last part.

His mother asked when the stall closed, thanked the woman and caught up. She had not bought anything. Yusuf was pleased that there would be a reason to come this way again.



The merchant's entrance opened into a courtyard larger than their lodging. Porters crossed between stacked baskets and a shaded store. Beyond the far doorway, Yusuf could see a strip of market, bright awnings and people who seemed to have no intention of standing still.

A man in a moss-green robe came towards them. His beard was streaked with grey, and a loose end of his cream headcloth kept falling over one shoulder.

"Ali! You have brought Baghdad with you."

"Only two bales of it."

The merchant introduced himself to Layla and the boys as Rashid. He asked about the journey, listened while Baba answered, then cleared a low table with the help of a young worker.

The porters lowered the bales onto a dry mat. Yusuf wanted to pull the first knot, but Baba handed him the loosened outer cloth instead.



“Fold this back. Keep the dusty side away from the paper.”

Inside, the sheets lay pale and close together. Yusuf had forgotten how much space they took up when they were not wrapped. Rashid lifted a few from one bundle, then another, feeling their surfaces with his fingertips.

“They have travelled better than my last jar of oil.”

Harith glanced at the wrapping. “They were easier to keep upright.”

Baba and Rashid checked the bundles against their agreement. A worker counted with them. Yusuf held the cloth and watched the paper pass from one pair of hands to another. He could not recognise his own sheets after all.

At last Rashid brought out a purse. Baba counted the payment, and the merchant made a note of the delivery. The paper stayed on Rashid's side of the table. The empty wrapping came back to Baba.



“Finished,” Hamza whispered.

Yusuf felt oddly pleased and disappointed together. The bales had been part of every day for weeks. Now a worker was carrying them into a room where Yusuf would probably never go.

Rashid remained beside the table. “Do you still have samples? The governor's buyer is considering paper for letters and accounts. I could introduce you this afternoon.”

Yusuf looked at Baba so quickly that the folded cloth slipped off his arm.

“For the governor?”

“For the people who do his writing,” Rashid said. “There is plenty of it.”



Baba picked up the cloth. "I have a separate packet. Any order would need to be made and sent from Baghdad."

"Then bring it after the midday prayer. We'll walk over together."

Outside, Baba checked the fastening on his sample bag. Layla asked Rashid how long the visit might take. Hamza nudged Yusuf's board.

"You haven't drawn anything."

"I know."

Yusuf turned an offcut over, looking for a clean side. He had meant to draw the market. Now he was wondering what sort of courtyard a governor needed.

