

The Midnight Fire

In the flames that danced in the pitch black darkness on the other side of my window, I saw fruit: mangos, peaches, oranges, all the wonders of the citrus family, yet the one that was most distinct was the orange. Large flames the color of oranges were menacing against the blanket of peaceful darkness that covered us under the night sky.

The bus was cold. My butt was numbing in a place that was too small for a living person to breathe in. The flames grew with the distance between us, and slowly, the pungent smell of burning garbage left my nasal passages. Despite the fading warm heat of the burning trash, my skin felt icy, decorated in an array of goose bumps.

I turned to the girls that sat surrounding me in the tiny bus. Their joyful conversation was distant to my ears, their smiles fading from my line of vision. All I could see were the flames. Their light shone brightly in my memory. I took another glance through the window, curious to see if the flames truly were still there, or if it was simply just in my mind. I pressed my face against the dirty cold glass and squinted out the window. The streets were lined in sand, mingled with garbage, wary brick houses being the only thing in its path. Stray animals clumsily made their way into the night, desperately in need of shelter.

Was this my home? Could this really be where I was born and raised? I'd seen many parts of Africa, but this was a sight I wasn't ready to fawn over. To live in a land where electricity wasn't always available, families were united by nothing but the blood in their veins and the troubles of life weren't always that big of a deal. Here, plumbing was slowly being discovered, and social networking was not locked behind a plastic screen, but a reality scattered throughout the villages. It made the western world seem like another realm of reality. The people here were simple, hardworking, heading on a one-way track to tomorrow. There were times when I feel too African for America, yet too American for Africa.

"Amina?" A small voiced called to me. I turned to the sound of this curious person and tucked a strand of curly black hair behind my ear before pulling my headscarf tightly over it.

"Yes?" I squinted back into the harsh, glaring lights of our bus. We were headed on a trip to al-bahaar, the beach, for a midnight picnic. The girls in the village were invited by the elders to a gathering along the shores of the sparkling waters of eastern Africa. I was invited,

too, out of respect for my family. Being the only part-American girl in the village made me a bit of a celebrity.

“Can you pass me the water cooler below you?” they asked in quick Arabic. It was Suhayla, a girl around my age. She was small, but strong, a striking sight with her creamy tan skin, silky tar-black hair, and hazel eyes.

“Sure thing,” I answered in English before quickly apologizing and correcting myself in Arabic. After passing the medium-sized cooler to her, I settled back noisily into the chair, allowing my thoughts to roam freely yet again. I closed my eyes and faded into a silent world of one. It was without problems, political issues, the troubles of humanity. The world was silent, peaceful; no tears were shed. I was in dozing off when I saw a flicker in the dim light. It was bright, orangey-red, and it grew rapidly. Suddenly I was caught in a ring of burning fire that carried the heat of a thousand suns and the bitter sweet sting of orange juice on an open wound.

Garbage was scattered around me, falling simultaneously from the open air above, thrown down by unseen hands. I stumbled and ran but got caught in a messy, burning pit of oranges. I fell down to my knees and drew them near me, bracing myself for the pain that was sure to come. It wasn't quite as I'd imagined. I thought that when burned, your skin melted like butter, rapidly and smooth. Instead, I felt myself being jolted away by the quick jerk of the brakes on the bus.

I blinked and rubbed my eyes, dismissing the eyeliner that was sure to be down my cheeks by now. I got up and accidentally banged my head on the compartment above me. Passing my hand over my head and murmuring violent curses, I filed into the line of girls that were ambling out of the bus.

The stars shone brightly, a stark contrast to the fiery visions from what I'd been awakened. I gasped when I saw the massive amount scattered across the sky, like a glass of spilled milk, forming clusters that transformed themselves into infinitesimal glass fixtures.

A few girls caught sight of my perplexed expression and began to laugh.

“Have you never seen stars like these in America?” one of them asked.

“No, I haven't,” I whispered absentmindedly, transfixed by the frozen picture, not bothering to explain the constant competition between the bright glare of the city lights and the natural glow of the sight before me.

Moving forward, I tore my gaze from the sky and was struck by an equally brilliant sight: the ocean. The sea was wrapped in a wide band of rocks, ideal for perching on and allowing your toes to graze the cool ocean water. The moon's reflection was large in the water, its mirror image rippling in time with the calm waves that touched shore.

It seemed like I was the only one caught in its beauty; like a child in a throng of adults, I slipped off my shoes and ran, eager to feel the cool ocean breeze, something I'd never had the opportunity to experience before.

All around I was thrown looks, eyed, and giggled at. They seemed to share the same thought: Who was this unusual girl? I didn't care.

Reaching the railing that opened up into the shore that dipped down into cool water and open rocks, I leaned over and sniffed the air. The cool sea breeze tickled my face and found its way into my lungs. For a moment, I understood the meaning of the term "a breath of fresh air."

I stood, ready to fall over into the alluring deep indigo sea water. I rocked back and forth to the sound of the waves, the soothing crash against the rocks. The fire was distant in my mind, a passing memory that was slowly replaced by the cool image of the water, slowly causing ripples, putting out the pain the fire left inside me.

I felt enlightened as the sea breeze opened my lungs, removing any trace of filth and black-orangey smoke, the stains left behind from the fire. Both the sea and the fire reflected two different sides of this world, causing me to feel like the isthmus between these separate places. From the wrath of the fire, to the calm beauty of the sea, there were parts of this country that no one would be to understand without having experienced it. It was a revelation that both bad and good can co-exist in a single area.

It was ironic that as I was thinking this, I was suddenly jerked back by a hand that grabbed me by the shoulder and propelled me backwards. A uniformed man was yelling at one of the girl's mothers and waving his hands in my direction. I turned around and found myself being pulled back and hidden in the small group of girls that gathered around me. They held me in place and whispered for me not to move or make a sound. From my vantage point, I could see the mother apologizing to the man, but holding her ground.

Moments later, the officer walked off with a warning glance in my direction. Confused, I stood up when I saw her walking towards me.

“What happened? Why was that officer yelling at you?” I asked, a bit bewildered by what I’d witnessed. She gave me a sympathetic look, smiled at me, and reached for my hand, before gently saying, “He was just telling me to be careful and not let my girls run around. It’s fine, go have fun, alright?” She patted my hand and went to tend to the others.

I turned around faced the girls around me. They were looking at each other, clearly hiding something.

“Please? Tell me?” I said in a small voice. Was this my fault? Did I do something wrong?

One of them who was slightly older than me, Safia, stood forward and glanced around. She leaned in and whispered, “He was talking about you, Amina,” she said with a frown before glancing around to see if anyone was looking.

Safia pulled me over and said in a low voice, “He asked if she was your mother and whether or not you were ‘mentally ill’.”

I blinked at her and before saying, “What for?”

She shook her head and gestured towards the sea. I turned and looked at the open water.

“Girls here just don’t do what you were doing, Amina. Here we are expected to be obedient, and quiet. Any female who goes running forward and leaning over the railing would be labeled fairly quickly, and find herself in ample amounts of trouble,” she said sympathetically. Safia shook her head and smiled at me when she saw the sheepish expression on my face.

“You’re just a little too western for us here. But hey, that’s a good thing. Just be a little more careful next time, eh?” I smiled back at her and nodded my head. We turned to stare at the water again, watching it lick the shore lines.

This was a world I had yet to understand, but its warning and blessings were clear. It hit me that though these two different things come from different places, they reside in one place.

I spent the remainder of the evening sitting along the shore, headphones in ear, watching the ocean. Close to the morning, I still sat in the same place I’d been before, awaiting the sunrise. The rest of our little group was lying on the carpets spread out on the shore, talking and eating. I pulled my knees closer to my body, pulling in as much warmth as I could with them.

The previously star condensed sky was lightening to a deep mauve, the sun barely rising over the horizon. Resting my chin on my knees, I smiled to myself as I basked in the irony of it all. Each and every one of us may be different in almost every aspect, living in different countries, and being different people, but in the end of it, all seven billion people in the world are living in nature; we share the same ocean, basking under one ever changing roof: the sky.