



**A collection in progress**

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**Henk was in his late twenties**, slender, mildly handsome, and nearly six-and-a-half-feet tall. His long, wavy, caramel-blond head of hair paired with a thick, darker mustache whose tips turned up or down, depending on the humidity. Even after donning the nondescript, pastel-blue jalabiya he purchased in Alexandria in an attempt to blend in with the masses, he immediately stood out as a European tourist everywhere he went in Egypt—never more so than on a sunny, October afternoon in 1984.

Jeff's own journey to Egypt had begun two and a half weeks earlier when he boarded a bus from Tel Aviv to Gaza, accompanied by an American friend with an impressive, brown beard. On their previous trip, James, a born adventurer, had delighted in getting the two of them lost on the Golan Heights in an area that they later learned held landmines. This time he proposed that they take a series of buses and cheap taxis to Cairo and play three weeks by ear along the Nile River.

On the day after they arrived in the bustling Egyptian capital, James walked briskly down a sidewalk while Jeff strolled behind with a guidebook capturing most of his attention. As an overcrowded city bus was about to pull away from a stop, James hopped onto the back step, turned, and gleefully extended a hand towards the outstretched fingers of his panting friend who was running as fast as he could, weighed down by a large backpack, to catch up to the accelerating vehicle. Afterwards, James made light of Jeff's dicey leap aboard the bus. Adding insult to near injury, James not only refused his annoyed friend's request to revert to travel by taxi, even though it was within their limited means; the following morning, he announced his intention to continue on his own, and so the two went their separate ways.

It was several days later, at a popular tourist spot in Luxor, that Jeff first noticed Henk. Forty-eight hours and a few hundred kilometers later, they walked past each other in Aswan. Now that their itineraries coincidentally jibed again—this time on the sparsely populated beach of far-flung Dahab on the Sinai Peninsula coast—they acquiesced to fate's matchmaking: Around a campfire re-lit by a shivering Brazilian student each time that the sad-eyed, Bedouin proprietor of their palm-frond huts

came by and extinguished the leaping flames for safety reasons, Jeff and Henk struck up a conversation long into the cool night. After spending sixteen days as a lone traveler recording sights with ink drawings in the margins of a dog-eared, paperback copy of *The Bell Jar*, Jeff welcomed the company of a self-effacing Westerner who spoke excellent English and appeared in no rush to put his own life, or anyone else's, in jeopardy. For his part, Henk enjoyed meeting a good-natured American of a similar age who showed as much interest in listening as in talking.

The next morning, Henk readily accepted Jeff's invitation to take an easy hike from their small encampment to see the Blue Hole, at the time a remote site still known today among scuba-diving aficionados for its breathtaking beauty—literally. A gorgeous, circular, coral reef, it was bordered by the tranquil Red Sea on one side and unspoiled, sand-and-mountain terrain on the other. Every year a handful of overconfident divers would drown attempting to pass through the tight spaces of its natural tunnel to the open sea, fifty-five meters below the water's surface. It was nicknamed, aptly, the Diver's Cemetery.

When Jeff had participated in a two-man expedition from Eilat to the Blue Hole three years earlier, his more experienced partner wasn't entirely forthcoming about the risks involved, so Jeff was able to relax and fully enjoy the hazardous dive among spectacular tropical fish and other marine wonders. Craning his neck to look skyward during the slow descent, he marveled at the bubbles rising to great heights from his regulator's mouthpiece as the diaphanous balloons of air danced energetically among the gauzy columns of sunlight that penetrated the crystal-blue water. The journey through the claustrophobic tunnel and the ascent that followed were equally exhilarating but somehow less memorable.

It was now the fourth autumn since Jeff had completed an intensive course in Eilat to earn his diver's license. During that week, he became afflicted with what might be termed FFSD: Fear of Flatulence while Scuba Diving. Jeff had overheard a Belgian instructor tell a pair of Irish tourists that under certain conditions, breaking wind in a wetsuit could

create sufficient force to upset a diver's buoyancy, causing the gassy individual to shoot quickly to the surface. The result was commonly known as the bends, its outcome potentially fatal. New to diving and unsure whether the straight-faced man from Belgium had spoken in jest, Jeff made it a point thereafter not to eat certain foods before heading out to dive. Better safe than mortally sorry. Noah, a former commercial diver who hired Jeff to assist him on small construction projects in Eilat and informally taught him the ins and outs of Red Sea diving that year, enjoyed needling him about it. Just before plunging into the water, he would tease Jeff by commenting on a delicious falafel sandwich or a tasty bean salad that he consumed on his way to the beach. Before jumping together into the Blue Hole, however, Noah had been all business.

On the morning after they met, Jeff and Henk awoke on the sand floors of their huts and stepped out under a cloudless sky. After discussing their day trip over bowls of hummus with ful and glasses of sweetened Turkish coffee at the desolate area's only café, they walked the short distance back to their spartan lodgings, prepared a few provisions for their trek by foot along the beach, and set out for the Blue Hole.

As the sun rose higher, it dawned on Jeff that their destination was further away than it had seemed when he drove there from Eilat with Noah. With the temperature climbing, Henk checked his day bag and discovered that his bottle of sunscreen was missing. Since Jeff had already applied plenty of Coppertone after breakfast and had no protection with him to offer his new friend, he recommended turning back. Henk disagreed, determining that oil from a can of tuna he brought for lunch would provide a protective layer for his fair, Dutch skin. Jeff argued that this might not be a good idea, but his hiking partner lathered his face and neck with the fishy grease and forged ahead.

When they finally reached the Blue Hole, Henk's awed expression was proof that the journey had been worth it, even though they lacked water gear and could only observe the top of the reef from a distance. Inspired by Jeff's animated descriptions of the undersea world, Henk vowed to

return one day to see it for himself. Without another soul in sight, cradled between mountains and sea, they sat and shared a quiet meal in the beautiful isolation, taking their time contemplating the grandeur of their surroundings and their uncertain place in Mother Nature's family. Although neither acknowledged it aloud, each sensed that he would never forget the exquisite setting and the companion with whom he shared it.

While Jeff began to silently rehash his last conversation with James, Henk's thoughts wandered to his girlfriend. A moody fashion designer, Aya had grudgingly supported his decision to travel alone for a fresh perspective on their relationship. The young men's reveries were interrupted when a small bird glided onto the beach and began serenading her audience. She flew away as Henk walked curiously towards her, but in her place he spotted a piece of handsomely embroidered black cloth that appeared to have washed ashore. He waved it for Jeff to see and stuffed it in his bag.

Upon the duo's return to their campsite a few hours later, Jeff removed his sunglasses and was simultaneously taken aback and unsurprised: From the neck up, Henk was the color of a plum tomato not yet ripe but well on its way. Jeff went to his hut and returned with a small travel mirror. On the bright side, Henk gracefully remarked, putting on a brave red face as a stray cat attempted to leap on it, his burning skin would warm him against the chill of the desert night. The American smiled and nodded approvingly at the tall man's sanguine outlook.

Early into their outing that morning, Jeff had nicknamed the Dutchman *Jamal*, Arabic for *camel*. Henk's height, coloring, and long-strided, ambling gait called to mind the thin-legged, mellow mammals that dotted the nearby landscape. Consulting his English-Arabic pocket dictionary again, Jeff rechristened his companion with a lengthier, more fitting moniker for the coming days: *Jamal ahmar min eind thaqb al'araq*.

Overhearing this, the silent Bedouin who tended the huts burst into laughter. Salman's guests had no way of knowing, however, the true

effect of Jeff's novice semitic wordsmithing: For the first time in the months since his granddaughter mysteriously vanished, the heavy-hearted local who spoke no English laughed freely and shamelessly. In one powerful instant, the melding of Jeff's accent and the amusing name he bestowed on Henk—*Red Camel from Blue Hole*—had momentarily lifted the old man's grief like a blast of intestinal gas in a diver's wetsuit.

The next morning, Jeff and Henk shook hands warmly and said goodbye before setting off in opposite directions. Back in Amsterdam a few days later, Henk presented a souvenir to Aya and learned that it was a veil typically worn by unmarried Bedouin females. Jeff returned to Tel Aviv and eventually reconnected with James. They reconciled their differences and for their next trip agreed to travel together in Jeff's old car to the Dead Sea. In its lifeless, salty waters, maintaining equilibrium is effortless, and a person can't help but stay afloat.

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