

A N D R E W M C L E A N

Sinjar

Masun was missing. Distant gunfire rattled us half-awake in the first haze of dawn and Ummi's screaming did the rest. She crouched over Masun's empty mat in the corner of the tent, and became instinctively hysterical. She dug her hands frantically through the starchy blankets and began grabbing each of her children in turn and peeling at their clothes, their hair, their faces, first counting us, then hoping one of us would turn into her darling, and it would only be Mahmet or Misha that were gone. She had no such fortune, and the grief and worry ran down her tired, dirty face towards her heaving chest.

It was not unusual for Masun to run off. He knew the mountaintop better than anyone, and sometimes responded to some inner urging to go find whatever prayerful lonesomeness he could harvest from the crowded camp. But not at night, never at night. No mood, no piety, no insanity could make a person wander off at night. At night the rebels crept higher and the helicopters roared lower and everyone on the mountaintop squeezed tighter together, crying or sleeping.

Rebels had crept into the camp before, but they had always gone for the big silos of supplies. They would never come all this way just to steal a ten year old and leave the rest of the camp in such peace. Many of the other refugees frightened us, and Ummi never let us go near the men. The mountaintop made men crazy, but the mothers together kept them away with screams and rocks sometimes. A man could have come over into our side of the camp and pulled away a boy. Worse things had happened.

A few women had taken boys before, but this was always after they had just lost their own. The camp was too tight for that, though, and the boys had been found

right away, the child-less mothers and their daughters shunned over towards the men, the problem solved. If a woman took Masun, we would find him today, scared and confused and just fine.

No more dangers came to my mind. A scorpion would have left him where he lay. A mortar would have left him all over where we lay. He was taken, either by a crazy man or a crazed woman, or carried up to heaven by Melek Taus.

Ummi was still screaming, but the noise had turned to jolted words. “Stay. Lay,” she ordered Mahmet and Misha, shepherding them into the back of the tent. “Find Masun,” she wailed at me. I would find my brother. He was my responsibility.

I had on my pants, old and sewn and resewn, but switched my shirt to the lucky one. My Real Madrid jersey which I kept rolled in my prayer mat for safety. I crammed my feet into my knotted shoes: new cloth Nikes from the crates with miss-cut patterns and bad letters. They didn’t last more than a month on the shale, but mine barely had any tearing yet. “I’m taking the knife,” I said, but Ummi didn’t really hear me. She kept it under her sleeping mat, and only noticed me once I had lifted it up and sent her blanket into the dust. It hooked onto the cord around my waist, and I pulled the jersey down over it. “Stay!” I said to Misha and Mahmet, giving them my most forceful eyes before squirming around the flap into the morning grey.

Several apprehensive women were already gathering outside our tent. The sturdy two in hijabs clutched staves. Yazid’s Ummu wore only a headscarf with her boy’s clothes, and carried a fixed kitchen knife. They all recognized the call in Ummi’s wailing. I ducked my head as I scurried through. The women outside did not seem to notice me, but covered heads poking from other tents asked me questions, which I ignored as I went by. They would all figure it out together, and I needed to find my baby brother.

Yazid was dressed and ready when I opened his tent. He glanced up with his eyebrows together and looked protectively over his little sister, still curled under her blanket. I pulled my head back out quickly. He followed me outside and gave a dismissive wave of his hand before I could say anything.

“It’s Masun?”

“Yes. Just gone.”

He nodded. “What is your plan?”

“Tell Omar first. Get the rations. Then if Omar has nothing, we’ll go down the road a ways and look around.”

“Do you have your knife? Ummi has ours.”

I lifted my shirt to show him the pocketknife. I knew he would rather carry it. He was much bigger and stronger than me though: let Yazid throw rocks.

“Talib, do you know he hasn’t just wandered away?”

“He wouldn’t go at night. No one is that crazy here. Not even Masun.”

Yazid shrugged in agreement. “Let’s find him.”

“Your sister?”

He looked southeast across the flats. The burning orb of the sun was still below the horizon, but its light spilled up from the wide mouth of the valley. The long shadows of the ruined hovels in the deserted city far below stretched out like the shades of skyscrapers towards the Islamic State trenches and American craters.

“It’s light enough,” he said, “She will be fine, and will probably wake up and join the other girls by your tent. We’ll check on her when we come back with the rations.”

I was still looking down towards the dusted river in the valley. There was a place where it bent, looking like a big nose from up here, and just up the rise from there was a house I could not see.

“Talib,” Yazid said, snapping me from my spell, “We will find him.”

Yazid was a good friend. Big for our age, he often played football with the older boys and men, and felt comfortable down the road. He also never tried to take more than his share, whether food, water, anything. Everyone else on this mountain would scrape for whatever they could, as though decency did not forbid cheating, lying, and stealing during hardship. Yazid and his Ummu were thoroughly honest, never snatching an extra water bottle on a hot day, or shoving through crowds around fallen crates. They were the most under-fed and under-supplied family on the mountain.

I looked at him, expected to say something, and instead ducked my head and started walking towards the silos. He wordlessly fell into step beside me, and we picked our way across the honeycomb of tents.

The silos stood in a rocky outcropping just off the main road, joined by a hovel built out of crates and parachutes and surrounded by a useless fence. The whole camp stretched in one long oval around this: its capital. Here, Taus ran the distribution of the supplies the helicopters brought in. He had the only radio to the helicopters, and the Americans had given him great authority. After some of the big early attacks, when rebels tried to follow the mortars up onto the mountaintop, he called in the medics to evacuate the wounded, and commanded the guards to inspect them to ensure people weren’t coming up to the silos with knife wounds or after bashing their foot with a rock. He ended the long attack in the northern ravines by

speaking into the radio and turning that whole half of the mountain into a fireball. He protected the supplies, and set the ration amounts each week. He resolved major disputes, and directed fighting groups and working groups and living areas. He was also supposed to make sure there was as little violence as possible on top of the mountain. And that little boys were not stolen from their tents.

All of this organization was due to the faceless American. The other Americans came in like smiling babies to throw water down from the helicopters, but the faceless American never smiled: he had no face, just a beard and Oakley visor. The people who once slept beside the outcrop say he came one night on a gust of wind that blew their tents apart. They scurried to re-stake the lines and shake dust off their clothes and he was suddenly among them, talking like a bear and wearing the visor across his eyes even in the dark.

The next morning he had teams of us building the silos on the outcrop, putting up the fence and the building. He called in helicopters to place down barricades on the road and to drop giant boxes all along the outside of our camp. These he had us fill with sand and dirt and string sharp wires between them. The next day, he brought in rifles, and began training our guards to fight off attacks on the camp. During a morning with no mortars he inspected the sick, and brought down red striped helicopters that took away the worst and left the rest with medicine. He picked a few Sunnis, and began to teach them how to use the radio, how to direct the guards, and how to protect and ration the supplies. He also showed them to hold up their fore and pinky fingers and say 'Hookah Horns', which was some sort of American code phrase. Taus was one of the Sunnis, and was put in charge of the guards. Within a week of the faceless American's arrival, our camp became a sort of stretched castle, with 40,000 peasants trapped inside.

One morning, the announcement ran through camp that the faceless American had been bitten in his sleep by a viper. The body lay under his lean-to for three days, and anyone could walk up and see the gaping throat and think clots of brown, but no one cared. Taus kept the helicopters coming in, and his guards kept handing out supplies. Within a week, people stopped saying Hookah Horns and just listened to Taus, who wore the visor sunglasses till someone stole them.

Yazid and I got closer to the silos, and saw no extra guards. That was good. When people noticed extra guards, they would start to crowd around, waiting for the incoming helicopters. Every time the helicopters came, there was a mob, and people died. This morning though, no extra guards meant no mobs meant no helicopters meant no fresh water or food meant no violence. Just then, a mortar exploded down the mountainside below the silos: in the Christian area. Some rebels must

have climbed a ways up one of the ravines in the night. Taus was in front of his shack, talking on the radio to either guards or helicopters.

The Christians had set up in the area of the mountain just below the silos. This gave them the most quick and consistent access to supplies, but also led them to take the most hits from the mortars frequently lobbed up at the silos and command building. The rebels had never hit any of the valuable stuff in the middle yet, only the Christians down below. The living Christians didn't seem to mind, preferring to be the closest to the supplies and at the front of every line.

We found Omar sitting in the shade of the silo outcropping, smoking a pack of the American cowboy cigarettes. Omar was another Sunni, but was too old for the faceless American to have chosen him to lead anything. When Taus took over, he placed Omar in charge of the guards, because he knew the guards didn't really like Omar all that much, but would respect the elder man from obligation. Omar used to be a schoolteacher, and owned the only forty books on this mountain that weren't the Quran or Bible, loaning them out to anyone who asked from an ass-cant he had pulled up the mountain on the first day. I had borrowed from him over eighty times, and he knew me by name.

"Omar, I need your help," I said as soon as we were in earshot.

"You should not be here, Talib. They are shooting at this place." Then, after seeing my face, "What is wrong?"

"Masun went missing in the night."

He looked down, and took a long pull on the cigarette. "Do you know anything?" "No."

"We had only men and old women die this week. It was no Ummu."

"We were worried about a man," I said, waving my arm towards the side of the mountain riddled with the patchwork tents of the unattached Sunnis, Shi'a, and Yazidi; the men who escaped without families, or in spite of them.

"The most I can do is send guards through to see if there is any trouble."

"Please do it Omar."

"Is your Ummu alright?"

I started at the question, and felt Yazid bristling beside me.

The old man backed up immediately. "Excuse me. I only meant that we need to be sure that she is taken care of and will not do anything emotional." That made sense, but there was nothing to do about it. The women were all together, and could hopefully keep one another in line. "You need to go back and take care of your household. I will have my men patrol down the road."

Another mortar landed in the Christian sector. This one was close enough that I could feel the thickness of the explosion roll over me like thunder after a nearby lightning strike. Omar used his stub to light another cigarette. "Get home now boys," he said, "it's not safe up here."

We moved away from the silos. "Is there any chance that the rations will come out soon?" Yazid asked.

"Not with the mortars," I said.

"My family will be ok till later if you want to go look for Masun. We'll get food on the way back."

I looked at Yazid. He was treating me like family. "Are you sure about this?" I asked, looking down the road towards the men's area. He smiled, and slapped me on the back.

"It's fine, Talib. They aren't so terrible. The angry ones will still be asleep from the hashish."

"How do they get it up here?" I asked.

He shrugged. "How do they get it anywhere? Maybe they get it from the helicopters. Maybe they buy it from the rebels between attacks. Maybe they take all our water to grow it."

I sort of laughed before we heard the sudden, low whistle of an incoming mortar. The whistle sound means you dive into the ground, and we did, burrowing our faces into the rock. The mortar hit a good distance off, further than I could kick a football. Sheepishly, we started to get up, rubbing sand from our faces, when a massive eruption flattened us again. One of the ravines was on fire, the white flames melting even the rockface as a hot cloud rolled into the sky. Even from this far away, we could feel the pull of wind being sucked into the fire. A team of rebels were now ash that we would breathe in over the next few days. Yazid and I scurried up a boulder for a closer look.

The rebels had crept up one of the narrowest ravines, and made it only about 400 meters short of the edge of the Christian side of camp. The next night, they easily could have made the barriers. Now they were gone. We scanned the skies for the helicopter or the planes, but could see nothing, not even the little camera ones. The explosion had come from nowhere, and taken the rebels back with it. Taus had been on the radio with the Americans. A few Christians were hopping over the barriers to climb down into the ravine once it cooled. There would be nothing to find.

A couple hours later, I was no longer afraid of the unattached men's area anymore. Or at least not in the morning. The sun was already well overhead, but nearly all the men were still formless lumps of blankets pooled under lazy tents. We had wandered through the areas along the road, but found no trace of Masun.

We talked to a few of Yazid's football buddies. Most were surprisingly cooperative, and promised to ask around. One of the kinder, older men said what I already knew, but couldn't confront. "If he's in this area, he's not with us. He'd be down there, where the trash sleeps. We can go with you." This last offer was more than I could have ever expected; this was the noblest man I had encountered on this mountain. When he asked for more men to go along, there was a notable hesitation. It seemed no one wanted to leave the soccer pitch. He frowned until he got two volunteers, a smaller teenager who sneered up at the world, and a big, gentle looking guy who shrugged and smiled as though he had no better use of his time.

The three men took us down into the nastiest side of camp. No tents were staked down, but blankets and canvas wove together in one formless mass of wasted shelter, as though the plane delivering them had crashed here. A stinking cloud hung over the area, the smell so rotten it hazed the air. I have no idea how these unclean men found two goats, but their bones and hides lay torn in bloody patches across one stretch of sand. We stepped carefully around piles of shit, left to bake and flake in the sun. A large mound of ash and coal lay in the middle of an open area like a black nipple. To the side, an old man lay face up to the open sky. Blood matted his grey beard, but I couldn't tell if he was dead or not. I stepped closer before the biggest man warned me off. "Give everyone space, buddy" he said with a wink.

People were beginning to notice us. The walking men came towards us, kicking blankets awake as they closed in. The football men began asking questions in calm tones. I wasn't able to figure out what words were being said, and Yazid and I moved closer to one another without realizing it. I felt my fingertips on the knife under my shirt and couldn't keep my hand away from it for more than a second at a time. More men came, red eyed and skinny, but several carried knives and clubs. Voices began to grow louder, faster. The three football players sidestepped closer to us, and I felt the kind man's hand tightly grasping my shoulder. Without knowing it immediately, I realized we were backing away. More and more men crowded in towards us. They wore soiled tatters, and yelled through teeth with no gums. Dirty hands jabbed fingers through the air at us, or back up towards the silos. The howling grew and grew as each yell built off the one before. Our big guy was in front, backing away from the crowd with his empty palms up and out. Someone threw a rock that caught him in the temple. He hardly moved, though I could see

blood trickling crimson onto the white cloth of his shirt. Another rock spun over us, and a third caught the noble man in the leg. I wanted to turn and run, but knew I would be chased, and had no idea where to run to.

Suddenly, two of Omar's guards strode into the scene from the side. Glancing around vacantly, one of them yelled out something about staying in our zones today. A skinny man yelled something back, and soon several snarling voices were yelling and screaming from the mob. The guards misread the situation, calling out for order in a tone of haughty authority, then for order in an angry tone, then the rifles came off their shoulders as they called out to the closing masses for order in a tone of desperation.

I bit my tongue when the gunfire began. I felt nothing, but tasted iron and salt. Two dirty men dropped and a third's head popped with a pulpy sound. We still backed away without running, and I watched the writhing, sweaty bodies swallow the two guards. The rifles were raised in the air, followed by a dismembered arm before I could even become sick. Rocks still spun into us, one hitting me in the chest to no great effect, but a rough one smashed the face of the big guy up front. He stopped moving a moment, his hands feeling the wrenched teeth of his ruined mouth. Without thinking, he looked through teary eyes at his stained hands as men came at him as well. He started stumbling back, but as he turned he tripped into the grasp of the bloody-bearded old man and hit the ground in a cloud of dust. Before he could rise they were on him. The last thing I saw was the bloody old man clawing at his eyes and biting into his throat. We turned and ran.

I didn't stop running until I had reached the Christian sector. A crowd was forming by the silos and I could not deal with the chaos of a helicopter right now, so I kept walking on, trying to reign in my sobbing. Yazid was gone. I had no idea when I lost him. I pushed through the gathering crowd, no one giving a second glance to the crying boy vomiting on himself as the distant rumble of the helicopter echoed across the valley.

I reached one of the plastic barriers that made up the perimeter of the controlled camp of Mt. Sinjar. Looking out to the west, the rocky undulations of the mountain crests rolled on into Syria. I could see nothing but dirt and rock and dirty rock; no roads, no buildings, no electrical towers. This world looked exactly as it had to Abram.

I stood at the top of a steep-edged draw and collected myself. Kicking stones out into the great void, I watched them drop down out of sight into a series of clicks and thunks. I kicked a rock, and tried to erase the image of the big man's death, his

heels scraping uselessly in the dust as they ripped into his eyes and stabbed at his stomach. I kicked another and tried to forget the heat of the big fireball rolling out of the ravine a few hours ago. With a few more stones I hoped to erase more of the darker memories; my mother's screaming tears this morning, the desperate people trampling one another for little plastic bottles of water, the castration of a boy for adultery, the gurgling smile of the faceless American, the bodies by the side of the road as we fled up the mountain, the beheaded Christians in the valley, the last memory of Abbi lifting me into the truck before it drove off, leaving him behind in the curling dust.

The stones fell heavy, dropping away into nothing to eventually smash onto the world unseen. Occasionally, one would hit another and another and another, crashing into a sensitive part of the slope, and I'd watch a small rush of stones come pouring out the bottom of the draw, hundreds and hundreds of feet below.

I looked back up the mountain at the helicopter floating amid the surging crowd of people. The baby-faced Americans were throwing out little waters and brown packaged meals. Enough to keep the people going just a little longer. To get us into the next day. Maybe tomorrow we could find a solution. We just needed to live that long first. The helicopter roared louder and the crowd squeezed in. Gloves that tossed waters now shoved clingers off the windows and back from the gun doors. As it lifted into the air, one last wave of the human sea below crested against the bottom of the airframe, leaving a drip of color clinging to the helicopter as it ascended and turned towards me. It came closer, and I could see one young man clinging to the rear tire, wrapped around the wheel in an impossible hug. I waved my arms and screamed, and watched one of the pilots wave back. Just as the helicopter cleared the main bulk of the mountaintop, the man slipped from the wheel, falling with a howling wail down after my rocks. I leaned as far out as I dared, but lost sight of him. I only saw a sprinkling of smaller stones come trickling out down towards the valley floor below.

I walked back towards my tent, but could not bring myself to return. From a distance, I could tell that many of the mothers were still together, their torrid sorrow only growing and spreading. This field was full of fuel for sorrow. Mothers that had watched children starve, seen older daughters carried off, seen their sons beheaded, lost their husbands to the unending violence, now burned together in growing anger. There could be no news of Masun.

I crept around to Yazid's tent. Noiselessly, I crept my head around the corner of its lashed flap. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I saw the loose shape of Yazid's sister,

bundled nervously, staring back at me in absolute silence. We continued to stare at one another. I had never spoken to her before, had only once seen her out of this tent, trailing around after her mother, both of them dressed in boys clothes. She was Masun's age, and I couldn't speak to her. Just as I began to pull backwards, she called out, "Did you get any food?"

I shook my head. Yazid could not have come back through here. I turned my back to the tent, weeping again. Abbi did not weep when he loaded us on the truck. He put me in last, and bent down to my face, kissed me dryly, and grasped my shoulders. "You will take care of the family, Talib. They are safe with you. You are a man. I love you." He said it simply and directly and he had made me believe it then. When the dust kicked up around him he still stood looking at me and smiling with pride. I tried to wipe away my tears now, but was too ashamed of them to stop crying.

I turned back to Yazid's tent, and tore open the flap. His sister sat unmoved, perfectly still, showing no alarm. She looked at me, and her face softened like my own.

"Do you know Masun?" I choked.

She nodded.

"My brother. He's missing."

"He goes off alone sometimes," she said. She did know Masun.

"Not at night. He went missing at night."

"Leyla goes off at night."

"Leyla?" I asked with a cracking twist of my voice.

"My friend. The one that wears the blue jeans. She goes for walks at night. We can't make her stop, but if I tell Ummi, her mom will beat her again."

"Maybe she's seen Masun?" I implored.

"Masun loves her." She said it simply, directly. I was confused, but I trusted her.

"Where is her tent?"

"Down by the sunset. Hung on the wires between the barriers."

I ran off before I could even thank her, or think to tell her that her brother was missing too.

The tent hung grey-green between the two grey-tan barriers, held up by the all-grey rolling wire. On this side of the mountain the ground disappeared in a vertical drop towards the thin part of the river. The sun was setting straight in front of me, and it felt like I was on the edge of the world. Looking back over the camp, I could see smoke rising from the men's section. Fire was spreading over what little

there was to burn. Closer, the mothers were yelling, and the family section had a spiraling sort of stir to it.

The tent was unoccupied. It contained only two mats, the normal blankets and brown packages, and a surprising number of books. I looked around, but could discover no secret as to where Leyla or her mother had gone. I walked out just as the sound of gunshots cracked down from the direction of the silos. I could see nothing, and hear nothing beyond the snapping and popping. I scanned the skies, but saw no helicopters or planes. I couldn't even see what was happening in the nearby area with all the mothers. It was getting dark. Everything was blurry. I realized I was crying again.

I couldn't hold myself together, and turned away from the boiling camp. I ducked under the wires and found myself at the edge of a great precipice. My sorrow pulled me down and I sank to my knees, watching my tears disappear as they fell onto the stony sand.

I gave up. I couldn't do it. I could not keep my family safe, I could not keep my friend safe, I could not keep myself safe. The stony sand waited to suck me up just like my tears.

I stood and walked over to one of the draws. It looked impossibly steep. I let myself step down onto the loose shale, and felt it slide away beneath my feet. I bounced with the slide, feeling the rocks crack into my legs, my elbows, my back and butt. I slid out onto a hidden ledge, not far from the top at all. Looking down, I could see a series of ledges continuing below me, like the stairs of a giant. I let myself fall again with more rocks onto the next one.

When Allah saw how wicked mankind had become, he brought down a great rain to flood the earth, to wash away sin and evil by destroying it all. His heart was softened, however, by Nuh, a good man, and the Lord's own prophet. The people had not listened to him, but Allah could not justly destroy Nuh, so he had Nuh build an Ark, and bring all the animals of the earth onto it. Nuh also brought the 76 righteous believers he could find from all the nations of the earth. After the old world was destroyed, Allah abated the storm, and let the heavy waters drain down the great rivers. Eventually, the Ark settled on Sinjar mountain, and mankind began again from here.

All my life, I have looked up at this mountain, and seen the sun shimmer on her face; a massive altar for the redemption of the world. Now, as I stand on top of it looking down, I see that I had it all backwards. Allah made a mistake. Nuh should have boarded up all the animals and then laid down with his righteous followers

in submission to the will of Allah. Allah's pity was undeserved, and this mountain stands forever as proof of that. From the top of this mountain, Allah can look out and see every sin committed in the world, every evil proof of his great error.

I dropped ledge to ledge. On each drop, I did not know if the earth would stop me as a whole, or dash apart my body and soul. Allah, take me if you will. I submit before you. If you wish it, undo this mistake one boy at a time.

Allah did not take me, and the ground came to a more level place. I found myself near the mouth of a cave. Perhaps here is where Nuh planted his vineyard and became drunk. He likely thanked Allah for saving his family and his righteous companions and woke up the next day to find a girl raped, a boy murdered, his hopes stolen, and his younger brother missing. Allah had made him a prophet, and had trusted him with great responsibility, but he could not protect his family, could not save his people from anything more than the rain. So he came into this cave and became drunk.

I went into the cave and lay down. The dust stuck to the channels of my tears, drawing strange markings across my face. I slept.

I dreamt of my father, before all this. We kicked a football, and walked down to the bend of the river to get washing water. He let me carry a big jug, so that I could be strong beside him. When the Americans rolled through towns in rows of trucks, he brought us up the mountain a little ways and taught us to make a camp. At night, under these same stars, he told me stories from the Quran. I loved stories, and he borrowed books from Omar's school to read to the family under the evening lamps. He read to us the stories of the One Thousand and One Nights, the sadness of Layla and Majnun, the stories of the three kingdoms, and my favorite, the Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn; two boys like me who adventured down a river like ours to explore the world. One day I told him I was going to build a raft and float away forever. He asked if he could come too.

In the dark, I felt something kick my foot, and heard the voices above me. I didn't care if it was rebels or Melek Taus. I woke, but could not see a thing.

"Talib?"

"Abbi?" I asked. Was my father here in this cave?

"Talib, it's Masun. What have you done?"

"Masun?" I grasped for him in the dark.

"It's me Talib. I am here with Leyla." My hands searched the dark for his face.

"Masun, what are you doing here?"

"We left Talib. We are going to find the sea. We waited up the cave for nightfall."

“Masun, I have searched for you.”

“Come with us, Talib.”

My head was spinning, I did not know how to convince my brother to come back with me, but before I could, he gasped, feeling at my body.

“Talib, you’re broken.” He was right. I felt the breaks in my arms and the stickiness of my drying blood as I shifted up towards his small voice. The pain came to me as the taste of water when you are not thirsty. I felt Masun’s teardrops fall onto my forehead. That hurt. I reached out to grab him again, but my hands found nothing in the dark.

“Masun, I am ok.”

“Talib, you cannot come with us yet. I will go back up and find food for you. You wait with Leyla, and I will be back before sunrise. When you are healthy, we will go to the sea.” His voice hardened as if he prepared to begin his plan at once.

“Masun, I love you.”

“I love you, Talib.”

“You cannot go back up there.”

“Yes, there is a way hidden up this cave. It takes you to a hole just below the top.”

“No, I mean, that you should never go up there again. You are an Ark.”

There was a puzzled silence. “Ok Talib, you rest here with Leyla.” There was a light murmur as they conferred in hushes above me.

I did not know how to convince my brother to go, to find the sea. I pulled the knife off my wasteband. “Masun, take this and take Leyla and go find the sea.” I set the knife down beside me in the dark.

“Talib, I cannot leave you.”

I know, Masun, I know. I love you.” I pushed hard with my broken arm and rolled myself down the cave. I picked up speed and tumbled out of the cave mouth onto the steep face of the mountain. I rolled down the side of the altar breaking into pieces as I went. My body stripped apart and my heart poured open and my soul ground out against the razor shale until it all ran in a stream towards the valley floor and dusty river.

I woke up.

My arm was broken, and the pain gnawed at me. I ignored it. I got to my feet, and felt the peeling of my shirt and pants from the dried blood sticking along my backside. I was in the cave, and the hazy light of sunrise was just enough to let me see the valley floor stretching out below me. I belonged at the top.

I began walking up the cave, which rose in a constant slope towards my family. I knew there would be an opening near the top.

Just as the light began to fade into the depths of the cave, I heard a scrunch below my feet. I looked down, and could see the outline of a piece of paper. I picked it up, and carried it.

The hike up the cave took me the better part of the morning, so the sun was high when I finally stepped out onto a boulder just below the plateau of the big mountain. The light was dazzling, and I could hardly see more than the blurry shapes of pure whiteness around me. As my eyes adjusted, I pulled out the scrap of paper. It was a page from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. You lied, Omar. You lied.

It was the notice page from the very beginning of the book. It read:

NOTICE: PERSONS attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.

BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR.

On the back, there was a scratchy note;

Talib-

I know you'll find this. You find everything you look for. Please don't come find us. We will be ok. I love you, I love you all.

--Masun

I looked out over the endless waves of desert mountains and valleys. The sun burned hot across the ancient landscape. Somewhere in the wilderness a very young boy and a very young girl were headed to find the sea. I wept, and my tears ran down over my smile.

ANDREW MCLEAN is an Army MEDEVAC pilot stationed in Colorado. Originally from Seattle, he received his Bachelor's degree from Duke University where he studied really old maps. He remains fascinated by the idea of place as story.