

LLyn De Danaan  
Babur's Fabulous Journey  
About 11,000 words  
ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

# Babur's Fabulous Journey:

## The Enduring Heart

LLyn De Danaan

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## **Preface**

I am Babur. I am a Belgian Malinois dog. We are strong and confident dogs. Belgian like Hercule Poirot, and clever as he. We Malinois become attached to our human companions. I will let a stranger know that the person with whom I walk is mine. Usually a glare will do. Sometimes I must snap or growl. With my own person, I cannot give enough love.

I was born in the Mine Detection and Dog Center in Kabul, Afghanistan. It is a wonderful place for a dog with a mission in life. We are trained to find land mines. My mother and father did this work. My brothers and sisters do this work. You see, Afghanistan is covered with mines. There are over five hundred square kilometers of minefields in the country. There are many kinds of mines including some that look like butterflies or toys so that they are attractive to small children. These horrible things kill people or inflict injury on those who have the misfortune to touch and ignite them.

We mine detection dogs have such a good sense of smell that we can be trained to sniff out the explosives and alert our handlers and the deminers with whom we work. We walk slowly then use our ears, tails, and bark to let the handlers know that we have encountered a mine. Though we have inherited talent for this work, we receive schooling to hone technique.

Mine detection dogs rise early in the morning and practice retrieving balls and pacing, with our handler companions, through grids dotted with fake mines. Commands are memorized and drilled. But it's not all work. After a good workout, we get delicious

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chow to eat and even special treats. And when we are ready to graduate we become part of a mine clearing team. We get to know and depend upon each other in our dangerous work. We also have some fun together playing ball and keep away and other games at the end of a long day.

Sometimes one of our own makes a mistake. And sometimes, someone else does. Once, a bomb was dropped on our kennel and I lost two of my litter mates.

But we persevere. We do the work because the children do not deserve to die and because we are born to it.

My companion is called Ayubi. I love him dearly. One fine morning, not many months after I had completed my training, Ayubi and I and a few other pairs of our team went to out to sweep a new area. We were to walk a grid outside the city in a difficult rocky outcropping. Our team was close to the end of our shift when someone came too near an unexploded mine. I learned about the details later. It seems that in an instant, people were down all around, covering their heads and eyes and ears against the blast. My dog friends snuggled against their handlers.

Ayubi was knocked unconscious but survived. One person died. Others were injured and dazed. I had been hit in the head by a piece of flying rock. With no one to call to me or restrain me, I wandered off alone and confused. This is my story.

## **Chapter I**

### **The Well**

The pads of my feet hurt as I walked through the bazaar. There were cuts, some deep ones, from treading on sharp rocks. I'd come miles over rough terrain in the past few days. In one pad on the left rear paw there seemed to be a scrap of metal. It dug in with every step. I'm sure I was limping slightly, favoring that delicate foot.

The wind whipped the dust around me. I felt it in my ears. I saw small funnels of it rising from the ground. I heard it whistle as it swept through small chinks in the mud bricks of building on either side of my path. It was a gritty, sandy wind. It hurt my eyes. It stung my soft nose.

I felt the dust on my tongue yet I could not help but pant. So my tongue lolled about and caught more dust. I wished to smell water but it was difficult to smell anything through the thick air. How could I find a cool drink if I couldn't smell water? I kept my eyes down, listening and sniffing. I kept my head down, wary of human beings who might wish me harm. Sometimes I heard the Hoopoes. They were perched high above me in old trees and darted down now and then to probe in the leaf litter on the ground. At least they are still here, I thought. What bossy creatures they are. But they are here and are a comfort in my loneliness. So many ducks and cranes seemed to have by-passed us this season. The bombs scared them off. They would scare off any reasonable creature. Hoopoes are not reasonable.

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Sometimes I smelled dried apricots and plums or dried melon strips and sweet green apples. Sometimes I caught the scent of a mutton or melon. A melon would do. There's lots of moisture in melon. But how to grab one without being killed for the act? Sometimes, even keeping my distance, I was struck by a stone tossed by someone offended by my presence. The stones were accompanied by a loud hiss or oath. I kept a great distance between myself and the people. I know, I know. "Dirt under every hair." How often I'd heard that in the past few days. I know I'm unclean. It's not pleasant to be thought of in such a way, but that day in that place it was true. I was filthy. Nevertheless, I'm one of God's creatures, too.

I longed to engage my tormentors in debate. I knew what I would say to them:

*What about the companions in the cave? It is a very famous story in the Koran. Did they not have a dog stretching his forelegs on the threshold, watching for them, protecting them? Did not the dog sleep together with the companions, guarding that cave, for three hundred years! Did not Allah guide them all rightly?*

I would tell them the story told to all pups in order that we may love Mohammed and Allah even though we are challenged by many followers. The story is that a poor dog near death came to a follower of the prophet. The man saw the condition of the despairing animal. In order to nurse it in that desert land where water was so scarce, he ripped a piece of his robe, soaked it in a small pool, lifted the dog to his lap, and used the robe to moisten the muzzle and nose of the sorrowful creature. Though he was criticized by others for touching a dog, Mohammed praised him for his kindness to animals.

You see?

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*Further more, speaking of dirt, were you humans not created out of mud? That's*  
what I imagined saying.

But the Afghan people have suffered centuries of wolves and rabid animals finding their ways to their doorsteps. Many have known only the mad mastiffs guarding their villages and the fierce dogs guarding their sheep. They fear dogs for good reason.

I could not change this. It was easy in those days to lose myself in these invitations to useless ponderings. Some say Satan sends these thoughts. I know now it was just my own confusion. One can calculate one's spiritual strength by the number of times one is disturbed each day. How many times a day was I disturbed? Too often.

*God will show the way.*

*Remember that, I told myself. Remember, I want to live. Leave these big questions to God.*

What had happened? I could hardly remember. My head felt as if it had been struck by a mud brick. My recent memories were in fragments, though some earlier ones seemed clear.

A little girl looked at me from behind a stall of vegetables as I wandered by. She had kind eyes. I stood for a moment and looked back at her. She was lovely but sad. If this were a different land I could approach her, comfort her with big sloppy kisses. I'd put my head in her lap and tell her that I love her. And I might have been scratched behind my ears. I missed being touched. But here it is not the custom.

*Surely it will come to me what I am to do, where I am to go.*

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I called myself Babur. I couldn't remember what happened to my head or why I was roaming about. But I knew I was Babur. And I remembered why I had that name. I had once heard some humans talking about a mighty king called Babur. They said, I thought, that he was descendent from the mongrels and I puffed up with pride. A king descendent from dogs of mixed breeds! But the humans had said Babur was a Moghul king. He had not a drop of dog within him. Still I called myself Babur. The name meant the tiger I thought.

*All right, Babur. You may as well confess all.*

You see, this Babur, this dog that is myself, was a very arrogant animal. I strutted around with my head held high. *Tiger*. Then I discovered that my name is an ancient name for "beaver." Ha. God had shown me up for what I was again. I kept the name. It reminds me every day of my struggle with pride. It keeps me aware of my silly affectations. Beaver, indeed. Oh my. What a fool I am. But I am on the journey.

That day, walking through the market, I was not puffed and strutting. No one knew that I was Babur nor did they care.

"Watch out where you're going you tick ridden, plug ugly mutt. Are you in some entranced communion with the saints to stumble right into my garden of delights?"

A Hoopoe of ample beak and dramatic plumage was looking up into my eyes from an uncomfortable proximity. I'd never had a bird speak to me before. This was further evidence of my affliction I supposed: a talking Hoopoe. He had a fine crest that he spread into a fan for more effect. His wings were banded black and white. I could see this

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as he opened them wide and came even closer. I suppose he wished to intimidate me, crest fanning, wings yawning, and eyes fixed on me. The span was impressive, but when he relaxed his arms, he looked like a feather duster. I began to laugh. This did not go over with Msr. Hoopoe.

“G’wan now. Scat. Move along. But not in this direction.” He hardly needed to add that. Had I moved an inch forward, his beak would have gone right up my left nostril.

I did not intend to move so long as the Hoopoe was speaking even though I thought he was a mere apparition.

“Watch it now. You are in my leaf litter. Sit there by the well,” he brandished a wing in the general direction of a disheveled pile of stones. “If you will stay, I’ll find some remark to make to you from time to time. But get out of my leaf litter. And do not speak to me while I am at work. I’ll tell you when you may converse with me.”

The well! There was water? Apparition or not, I looked to the direction he pointed.

“Water?”

The bird pouted, not easy to do with a beak, and sighed. “I can see that this is going to be a tedious relationship. Yes, dog, there is water. You can have anything you wish for if you will only give up wanting it. You can be anything you wish if only you will be still your mind. There is always food if you are able to digest it.”

Not only were his words imponderable, they seemed outrageously untrue. Was I being teased? Could it be that all I wanted really was there for the taking? Had I been

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blinded when I was hit on the head? I looked around, right to left. I sniffed the ground  
around the rocks where he pointed. I smelled nothing, saw nothing.

Abdul Haq: my Hoopoe friend was a servant of truth. I did not know that then.

## **Chapter II**

### **The Beginning**

First, the well. I imagined that drawing a bucket of water from a well would be no mean feat for a dog and a bird. But that's not what Haq had in mind.

Haq fluttered about my head and screeched orders. I tried to follow him without becoming snappish or sullen. Though I could not smell water, I could see that these rocks marked the opening to a well. The well, Haq told me, connected to deep underground irrigation channels called karez. Water flowed into the channels from the high mountains of the Hindu Kush. There were glaciers there and sometimes heavy rains. The channels filled and water rushed into the channels. Haq said there were hundreds of these channels and that the well was very deep. No one knew how deep. No one knew how old. He instructed me to walk carefully along the stones that formed a rim around. He showed me that there was a steep, spiraling stairway that would take me deep within the shaft.

I began a tentative descent. Some stones were loose. Sometimes one fell and I could not hear it hit bottom. I felt my heart tugging at me to return to the top where the Hoopoe waited. All along the surface of the inside of the well were beautiful paintings of flowers. There were small niches in the walls and in these niches were barely formed lumps of fired clay. It was too dark to make out what these lumps might represent. The bird, above on the rim stones, yelled encouragement.

"Deeper, deeper. You have not even begun," he said. I looked up. The well was dark within but I could see the light above and the bird, smaller and smaller, bobbing

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about muttering, singing, and generally seeming quite insane. Occasionally one of his feathers floated through the air, past my nose, and tickled me in passing. Down and down I went. Once I looked up and saw a shining planet overhead in the sky. I had heard once that one could see planets and stars in the day light from deep within a well. Here was proof it was true for there one was, bright as a lovely beckoning lamp in the dark. The Hoopoe was barely visible now, though occasionally I saw a semblance of his feather mop head nodding over the edge at me outlined by the light from the planet above him. I was frightened and wondered how I could ever return.

“Oh my friend dog,” he yelled as if he heard my thoughts, “You are on the path. Do not allow yourself the luxury of doubt.”

I reached the water. The rock I stood on was sturdy and broad. I felt certain that I could regain purchase on this stair step whenever I wished so I plunged. I swam for a moment. Ah the sweet, clear, cool water. I drank deeply. I splashed, paddled and dove under the surface. It was good.

“Oh, lonely dog. Oh love, follow me. Follow me and you will find yourself.” I heard a voice so sweet so full of breath and honey, I trembled. It was a voice like that of a soft furred animal, nearly whispering but loud enough to shake my soul. I felt myself falling through the water. I was so frightened that I squeezed my eyes shut. Then I heard a new voice calling to me: “Babur, Babur, Babur,” and this new voice I instantly knew was my own.

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When I opened my eyes, I saw a huge array of stars in a dark, moonless sky. I heard a howl, my own howl, a howl of mixed fear and delight, echoing in a vast stillness. And still I fell.

Then, with a great thump, I hit firm ground. I lay dazed for a moment. But just a moment. For even as I lay trembling, wet, and confused, I saw an enraged donkey galloping in my direction.

“A dog a dog a dog” it brayed and ran full tilt toward me. “Kill it kill it a dog.”

I cowered, and then quickly flattened myself out again on the desert floor. I felt that I was doomed. The donkey hated dogs.

Just as he reared back and prepared to strike me with his fore hooves, a large camel came between us.

“Quick,” the camel said, “Quick, dog, jump onto my humps. Quick now. No time to ask questions. Jump.” I accepted the invitation. The camel turned to look at me over her shoulder and fluttered her double lashes .

She was a lovely animal, the color of moonlight and sand. Her humps were two lovely hummocks of flesh and fur. I settled myself between them and hung on as gently as I could. She said, “Do what you must to stay there. You cannot hurt me.”

The donkey fell back. “Very well,” he said. “But keep that dog out of my way.”

The Hoopoe appeared above my head.

“We are ready to proceed.”

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I had found myself, just as Babur, the king, had centuries ago, *part of a wandering band, with mind awander; in the grip of a tribe, a tribe unfamiliar.*

### **Chapter III**

#### **Who has the Map?**

*"The mule I sit on while I recite*

*Starts off in one direction*

*But then gets drunk*

*And lost in*

*Heaven."*

The Gift

Hafiz

"Now my sweet companions, the way is open," the bird said. "We travel by night because it is cool. We travel slowly. We speak softly to one another. We will not fear. We will be brave and loving and we will learn. Come, come. Together we are wanderers, but wanderers with purpose. Follow me oh sorry dog, angry donkey, vain old camel, and I will lead you to the feet of the Hound of Heaven. Together you will see God."

The donkey was somewhat appeased by the bird's words and led off into the desert. Because she was dark in color and the sky was black where there were no stars or where clouds obscured them, she quickly disappeared. The camel, with me on her back, followed the donkey's footprints. The Hoopoe circled slowly in the sky above. Soon the moon rose and came, nearly full, from behind a cloud. Its light caught the gentle movement of the Hoopoes soaring wings and the white flash of his soft underbelly.

The camel was a cheery companion. She wore a band of leather hung with small brass bells around her muzzle and neck. She had two other necklaces worn low on her

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shoulders. These were studded with seed pearls and tied with brass bells. Even the camel's ankles were adorned. Around each of these were golden bands with bells attached. So sweet music accompanied her every movement and a euphonious sound rang out when she walked or trotted. This she did with a gait unfamiliar to me for she walked with her two left legs then her two right legs. The rocking motion put me almost to sleep.

Between her humps, in the place where I rode, she had a many tasseled saddle made of leather and layered with thick Mauri carpets. These were woven of madder red and indigo blue and gold wool and silk. All the tassels with which the carpets were finished were golden. The carpets were lovely with rows of octagons and many eight pointed stars. I had a heavenly place from which to view the earth: stars below, stars above.

She was called Jamilah, a name that means beauty and grace. Her eyes were lined with kohl and her small beard was stained with henna. Even the two toes of each of her feet were painted.

She told me early on, when I wondered where we all might be going, that she loved the journey and cared not a whit for the destination. In fact, she said, she did not believe that one ever reached any particular destination.

She told me that the journey would not be an easy one for me. She could not bear to walk in a straight line for long. So, she said, she would occasionally be compelled to run wildly into hills or mountains just for the fun of it. These giddy fugues had often led her into delightful places she might never otherwise have known. However, when pressed for details, she could scarce remember any particulars of these little excursions.

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

Oh, Jamilah. My friend, my mount, my unfamiliar spirit. Beautiful Jamilah.

Jamilah, you see, dared to be crazy in ways I never could be. I was a serious dog and thought all life must be taken seriously. Jamilah, while certainly responsible in all the important ways, could leave the path and take a joyful chance. As I rode, she took me with her to unusual places I would never dare to go alone. I often wondered if we'd ever find the donkey path again. I imagined frightening consequences. But gradually I learned to let her body lead me. I hung on to the carpets. I held her with all my strength as we galloped through the night into the wild hills where the leopards and the mastiffs roamed. I held and learned to crave the ride. After a few of these mad dashes, I could not imagine life without her. My camel was prone to break out in song and I learned to sing with her. I was becoming a new dog. And this was good for I had such scattered memories of the old dog I must have been.

As Jamilah and I traveled in this zigzag way through the seemingly endless night, I was amazed that the Hoopoe, Haq, did not correct us. He seemed quite content to flutter here and there whilst we took our leave. He seemed always patient and peculiarly serene when we returned. Occasionally he pointed out the donkey path to us.

After many hours and just before dawn, the Hoopoe came to us with a message.

"There is a tavern," he said, "just beyond that hill ahead. We will go there and eat and drink and rest for just a while."

We found the tavern easily enough. There was a small oil lamp tied to a mulberry tree. It was burning in the still dim light of early morning. There were a few tables set for the humans who might come by. But no people were presently about.

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The donkey was already there when we arrived. She had found a bucket full of millet and oats mixed with mutton fat. There was a cool pool of water near the tavern stable and it was not the bitter saline water sometimes found in desert oasis villages. Jamilah went into the stable where there were great bunches of grass to eat. The Hoopoe found a pile of millet next to a large stash of leaves that hid surprises of grubs and worms. Jamilah, noticing my fear of the donkey, said it would be safe to jump down and drink while she and the Hoopoe were close by. I quickly spied a large bone, still bearing considerable hunks of meat and muscle.

We were all in paradise. As we ate and rested together, the donkey began an apology. Her bristled grey muzzle turned a pink with embarrassment as she spoke. She kept her eyes to the ground but I could see that they were filled with agony.

### **The Story of Aminah, the Donkey**

“I am Aminah, called thus because I am a faithful and trustworthy beast. I may not be beautiful, but I am a good creature. As a new born, I was a most adorable donkey. I had a sweet, compassionate face. My legs and ears were long and I was fuzzy all over. In my youth, I was playful. I scampered about near the sheep and goats of my master and they were always comforted by me. I slept among the flock. I was loved by sheep. If some danger came near, I was alert and ready to trample the intruder, even to the death, to save my sheep. But times were hard and my master sold me to another. I worked for a while as a soldier donkey with Ishmael Kahan in the campaign against the Russians. When a fresh donkey was needed to carry supplies, I was ready. I was Aminah. But things were hard again and I was taken to a market in Herat there to be shackled and bid

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

upon like so much horse flesh. In fact, there was horse flesh all around me. Pitiful specimens. All sold by poor masters who could not afford any longer to feed them. And there I was, the proud Aminah among them. My master let me go for so little money. He patted my muzzle, not so grey then as now, and I was led away. My new master was unkind. I was to be used to grind the wheat. I was harnessed to a great millstone and made to go round and round. I was blindfolded, you see, so as not to be distracted. And to keep me moving, a dog was ordered to nip at my heels and bark at me all day long.”

The donkey paused for a long moment here. She briefly glanced at me, then lowered her eyes again and continued.

“That dog was my curse. That dog was the focus of all the hate that grew in me and ate at my heart. Hate has blinded me as much as the cloth that covered my eyes. When I saw you, I remembered the hurt and the rage and I wanted to kill you. I realize that I will be chained and doomed to move around that millstone forever if I keep such anger in my heart. Please forgive me, dog. Give me opportunity to make amends.”

And I did forgive the donkey and told her my name was Babur and that I was a fool on a journey and not so very different from herself.

The Hoopoe, who had overheard it all, told us to stay closer together in the next leg of the journey. “Something may begin to rub off,” he said in his usual cryptic manner.

## **Chapter IV**

### **The Crossing**

*There is no river at all, and no boat, and no boatman.*

*There is no towrope either, and no one to pull it.*

*There is no ground, no sky, no time, no bank, no ford!*

The Kabir Book

Robert Bly

*The only life raft here is love.*

The Gift

Hafiz

We stayed the whole day at the oasis and slept and dreamed and told each other stories. I had my head on the Jamilah's saddle and heard her soft breathing. Sometimes her lips fluttered gently with her breaths.

The Hoopoe told us that we would leave in the evening just as dusk came on. He said that there was a difficult river to cross. He said the moon would guide that crossing, and that until we got to the mountains, we would travel mostly at night. He said we would do this to avoid the heat and to escape detection. Humans, he said, were far more dangerous to us than leopards and mastiffs. The mountains, he said, had many caves. We could hide there if need be. And they would be cool places to rest if the heat was still oppressive.

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It was a robust sunset. The sky was streaked with purple and crimson against a background of lapis lazuli. The colors fell upon us and bathed us with magic. The dusk came rapidly after and the full moon rose in the east. Our shadows would be long tonight.

The sand shimmered on our path as the moon rose higher. We followed a narrow road for a while, though it was rutted and full of potholes and seemed to have been altogether washed away in some places. The donkey was in the lead, easy to follow tonight. I followed on foot and after me was Jamilah.

Venus was low in the west and Jupiter was high overhead, as brilliant as a lantern. "In these skies," the Hoopoe declared, "no one should ever feel lost."

I began to understand that we had direction. The Hoopoe had referred to the mountains and caves. Jamilah bent her head down and whispered to me that because we were going north, north-east we must be traveling to the Hindu Kush. She seemed pleased.

Just as Jamilah raised her head, the wind started to blow in from the north, forcing us all to walk against it. The whirling dust prevented us from talking much because each time we spoke, our mouths filled with the stuff. The wind kicked up a haze of dust so thick that the moon and stars could hardly be seen. Behind the sound of the wind we could hear the sands singing as the tiny grains blew against each other. Yet the Hoopoe drove us on and would not let us consider turning back to the safety of the oasis and the little tavern. Jamilah and I came, suddenly, upon the donkey standing still by the side of a turbulent river.

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We all stared at the rushing water for a moment.

“This river,” the Hoopoe announced, “must be crossed.”

We looked to one another. I had been able to swim in the well. But I didn't know if I could swim in a rapid river. There were no steps, nothing to hold. And the current was strong. There was foam and froth and sticks and limbs floating along the surface.

The camel studied the river. The donkey sat down. Only the Hoopoe seemed optimistic. But of course, he could fly.

“You will find a way,” the Hoopoe said.

Jamilah was solemn, “We must build a raft. I have seen the reeds that grow near these desert rivers. We will collect reeds and with them we will build a raft.”

“Of course,” the donkey said. “I would have said that myself but I thought it obvious.” The donkey instantly looked chagrined. Too long out of the company of kindness, she had now begun to notice her sharp, protective lances. We set out to find the reeds.

Jamilah and I returned with reeds within a short time. Jamilah was tugging a huge pile of reeds she had attached by ropes to her saddle. I had a large bundle in my teeth. But Aminah the donkey was not about. Jamilah and I went off to find more reeds and soon returned with another great load. But still Aminah had not returned.

The camel and I decided to search for her.

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There was no wind now; the last of it had cleared the sky of clouds. We could see clearly in the moonlight. We came around a large boulder by the river and there found the donkey lying on her back staring at the stars. In spite of the bright full moon, the donkey had noticed a shower of meteors. She was in a swoon. Her delight was seductive. The camel kneeled and peered up into the sky. I rolled onto my own back next to the donkey, feeling safe with her since our talk. We all yelped with joy as the bigger meteors streaked across the horizon.

Suddenly a dark form came between us and the brilliant light show. It was the Hoopoe. He hovered above us.

“To the task, to the task, foolish creatures.” the Hoopoe said. “The raft must be made. The journey must not be forestalled.”

We rolled up and onto our feet and went back to the pile of reeds.

We worked methodically and silently throughout the night. We wove the reeds into a stiff, serviceable little raft. It was big enough for a donkey, a camel, and a dog. The bird seemed pleased and added strings of grass and other bits of stick to the project.

While the meteors continued to punctuate the dark and the moon moved past the zenith in its path to the western horizon, we eased the raft to the shallow shore of the river. We stepped carefully, for the rocks under the water were slippery. The camel had found a sturdy pole with which to push us off and steer us. With a giant whoosh and a push from the camel's pole, we were moving in the river, propelled forward in the direction of the other bank, but at the same time we were being carried down river.

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Jamilah put her shoulder into it and we made slowly for the far shore though rushing along with the current at the same time. The donkey and I yelled encouragement. It seemed that we would make it when the raft began to break apart. A large chunk of reeds, the chunk upon which I stood, fell to pieces and I was in the water.

I pumped my legs, paddling as fast as I could. I kept my head up to keep the raft, the donkey, and the camel in sight. I could hear my friends calling to me. I could see the Hoopoe flying high above me. I could see the donkey and the camel, now walking on to the shore. They had made it. Jamilah waded back into the water holding the pole out to me with her teeth. I used all of my remaining strength for a final push. I was gasping. Water was coming in my nose and my mouth. But I kept my goal in site. I snapped at the pole and held it tightly with my teeth. Jamilah trod backwards out of the water, onto the shore, and back up the bank, all the while dragging me along.

Jamilah and Aminah, my dear friends, embraced me and licked me all over with their great tongues and picked the twigs and sticks from my fur. They told me to lie down for a while and rest.

As I rested, the donkey began to gather what was left of the reed raft together and put it on her back.

“I will carry this raft for the rest of the trip,” said the donkey. “We will have no trouble making a crossing again.”

The Hoopoe swooped in and stood on Aminah's head. “What are you doing?” the Hoopoe asked.

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

"I am carrying the raft that will allow us to cross the next river," the donkey said.

"Fool. The raft did not allow you to cross the river. Your brains and dreams and souls eliminated the obstacle to your journey. The raft was just a tool. Leave the raft. It was for this crossing. You will not cross the same river twice. The raft will be a burden to you. Leave the raft for the next one who must make a crossing."

We picked ourselves up and continued our journey, tired but wiser animals.

## **Chapter V**

### **Dawn Comes**

The moon slipped below the western horizon as bright hues of blue and orange made the sky blaze as if there were a fire in the east. There were no words for what we felt then. We had been up all night meeting danger, fording the stream, clinging to life, and saving our souls. And now, at this enchanted moment, we danced. I ran in great circles around the others, yipping and snapping at the earth. Jamilah galloped across the desert floor toward the nearest hillside followed by the donkey, Aminah, braying and kicking her heels. I followed them as quickly as I could. There were, as I have said, no words for what we felt; there was no right or wrong or best or better way to be. Something had happened to us all and we were drunk with love of each other and of the morning. The journey seemed delightful.

We walked on and came suddenly to a valley of lush grass. The fields were irrigated by thin ribbons of water that cascaded down from the high hills that surrounded the valley. We had, during the night, left the desert and begun our ascension.

Some friendly cattle lived there in the valley amidst the grass. They called to us: "May you never be tired. May you always be in harmony." We called back the same to them.

The steep sides of the valley were terraced and planted with walnut and apple trees. As we walked deeper into the valley we came upon a flock of pleasant fat tailed sheep. "May you never be tired," they called to us. "May you always be in harmony." We

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

called back the same to them. We came upon a little settlement where shepherds had pitched their goatskin tents. A stream ran nearby and there were the cold remains of a little dung fire. Near by there were trellises that bore ripe, full bunches of grapes. There were ancient pomegranate trees, their low branches laden with fruit. There were apricot trees There were wild roses in bloom.. We found flat wheat bread to eat, drank deeply from the stream, and settled to rest the day there.

The Hoopoe said he would watch for the humans but believed we would be safe until evening. The humans, the Hoopoe believed, had made butter from the milk of their flocks and were off on a journey to trade the butter for hats and shirts and other things they loved. He had seen a small convoy of shepherders carrying large tubs of butter on one of his fly overs. By their clothing, he imagined that they came from this valley whose customs he knew. He lighted briefly amidst them and listened to them talk as they put down their heavy panniers and rested for a moment. The Hoopoe was convinced that these were their tents. I wandered near the stream with this good news and fell asleep under a willow tree. I had never felt so peaceful, so blessed, and so refreshed.

At dusk, the Hoopoe bid us wake, drink, breakfast, and commence our journey. We were headed toward the mountains now, there was no mistake.

The sun went behind the distant hills and we noticed that the air here was considerably cooler than the desert air. Though we were well rested and amply fed, we all shivered. But it was more than the chill that made us shiver. We could hear wolves in the distance. As we walked we gained elevation and the sound of the wolves seemed closer.

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

Wild pigs roamed this territory, as well. I did not fancy a meeting one of those on a dark night.

I had been trekking along on my own feet since before the river crossing. But now, I jumped upon Jamilah's back and stood there on the saddle so I could watch the path ahead. The donkey, as was her custom, was some distance ahead. She, too, seemed more cautious than usual. Jamilah had an idea. Rather than imagining that we could make ourselves invisible to the wolves, she suggested that we make ourselves seem to be many more than we were.

"Let us sing and talk loudly with different voices as we jog along," she said. "Let us be noisy and obnoxious. Let us exaggerate our presence." No wolf would be so foolish as to strike an entire caravan of fools."

And so we did begin to sing and talk and shout and laugh out loud. Jamilah took up a rapid gait so that her bells chattered ceaselessly. The donkey brayed and bellowed. I snapped, growled, howled, and barked in turn. We created a cacophony of sound that flushed partridges and terrified snow cocks.

Soon we were far out of the valley. The moon was high again in the sky and we could see above and not so far beyond us the ice and snow on the Hindu Kush peaks..

Much to our alarm, the Hoopoe, who had been flying ahead of us, set a course that seemed to take us straight up into the mountains. We began to scramble over the scree on the lower slopes in order to keep the bird in sight. The moonlight, unobscured by clouds tonight, made our long shadows bounce about over the uneven rocks. Sometimes,

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

we could not tell if these were our shadows, or the shadows of some other creatures tracking us.

As the camel, with me on top, stepped gingerly along a narrow path on a ledge, she stopped abruptly. The donkey ahead of us was standing stock-still. Her ears were laid flat back against her head. Her knees trembled. She said nothing. The camel, being taller, and I, being on her humps, could look over the frightened donkey's head. There on the path facing the donkey was a gigantic goat like creature. It surely was a large male goat but its horns, at least a yard in length, were enormous ridged things that curved up and over his back. The hair on his body was patchy, worn to the skin here and there, as if the goat had traveled through thickets of briars and rubbed against rough boulders on his journey. His eyes were tired and sad though he attempted to look fierce and strong. The camel, who was far more traveled and worldly than the rest of us announced, "It is an ibex." She then called out to the ibex in its own language. "May you never be tired," Jamilah bellowed, "May you always be in harmony."

The ibex suddenly jumped up through a rough and narrow break in the higher rock. It balanced beautifully on its small hooves and stopped for a moment to tear off a few leaves from one of the few trees that grew on these slopes. Then it looked down at us and began to speak in a language that we could all understand.

### **The Story of Basil, The Ibex**

"I am Basil, the brave. I come from the north, from the mountains of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. I lived among my friends and kin. There were usually ten or twelve of us

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

traveling together in the high mountains just at the tree line. The peaks and crags were our refuge. Few could reach us there.

On these mountains, we grazed, lazed about in the sunshine, and gamboled over rocks and through the defiles. There was plenty to eat.

Sometimes a hunter would come from the valley. We understood that the people occasionally needed our meat or hides or desired our hair for their weavings. We had lived with this knowledge for centuries. The hunters were few, however, and though we mourned our losses, they were not frequent. And the hunters honored us. We visited their tombs sometimes, stealthily of course. Atop their tombs were mountains of the horns of our own ancestors. Our pilgrimages to the hunters' tombs were to glorify and show respect for our own dead. We sometimes brought branches or spring flowers to lay there by their beautiful, massive horns. We grieved and remembered. And accepted the way of the world.

One day we saw a giant bird flying over our mountain. Inside the bird were humans. They seemed to be looking at us through glass. We feared them. We ran down the mountain to the woods for cover. The bird flew away. But our refuge seemed less safe to us and we were wary.

One day in our wanderings we noticed, just below us, a group of yurts. These did not seem to be the yurts we were accustomed to seeing. There were no flocks of sheep or goats nearby. We could see smoke coming from the stoves within the yurts. There were other tents, too. They were quite fancy colored tents made of a fabric we did not recognize. As we hid behind large boulders and watched, humans came from within these

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

dwelling. Fires were started without and food was prepared. Some of the humans did nothing but eat. They were large, light skinned men, dressed in red shirts and vests with many pockets. They wore caps with bills upon their heads. Other humans seemed to be their servants. They were thin and dark men, sturdy mountain men, the men we were accustomed to seeing. These men cooked food and gave it to the burly pale ones. Then we noticed one of the capped ones looking up the mountain through the glass. We ran quickly to a higher place. But even from this distance, we could hear a voice echoing through the canyons: "There they are. There they are. Let's get going."

The humans were relentless, then. The big bird seemed to find us wherever we were. The humans carried things we had never seen on the old hunters whom we knew. Things they had made of metal and glass. Things they had that buzzed and beeped. They seemed to send messages to one another. They seemed somehow to know where each other were and where we were.

Finally they came from above us on foot. As we struggled to run, we saw one of them to our left flank and two or three to the right. We could only run down, the most awkward running for us because our front legs are shorter than our rear. One of our number, a young fellow, slipped in his fear. A human raised a rifle to his shoulder and shot him. Our friend had fallen, but the human shot again and the others cheered.

Our friend and our companion lay wounded on the rocks. His life was going from him, and he from us. And as we stopped to mourn, more shots came. One by one my friends fell. The heavy men in boots, the men from some strange place, drew their knives and made for my dying companions. I ran from them. I chose to live. I left my friends. I

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

ran and ran and ran. Over passes, beyond reason, beyond knowing. I am Basil but I am not the brave. I was a coward. I left all whom I loved that day.”

Basil was weeping now. All his magnificence was bowed in the telling of his story. We begged him to come near us and be comforted. Oh, Basil, I thought, how like all of us you are. We carry the sorrows of our losses within us, heavy packs of grief and despair. And always the question, could I have done more?

The goat came down from his perch and rubbed against us. He was so lonely for his little flock. Jamilah was particularly gentle with him. “Like the calluses on my knees, we develop thick protective layers. Much is hidden. We don't wish to feel so deeply, perhaps. Basil you are our friend now. You may stay with us so long as you wish. We will journey on together with the Hoopoe as our guide.” The donkey nuzzled my own ears as Jamilah embraced us all.

As if on cue, the Hoopoe dove toward us in great spirals from high in the cloudless sky.

“Do not tarry longer. I have compassed the territory. It is time to move on. You are all ready now. Whoever wishes to explore the Way, let him set out.”

## Chapter VI

### The Final Push

*He knows, he knows the truth we seek,  
That hidden truth of which we cannot speak.”  
To go beyond all knowledge is to find  
That comprehension which eludes the mind  
And you can never gain the longed for goal  
Until you first outsoar both flesh and soul;  
But should one part remain, a single hair  
will drag you back and plunge you in despair  
No creature's Self can be admitted here,  
Where all identity must disappear.*

The Conference of the Birds

Farid ud-Din Attar

*Never let success hide its emptiness from you, achievement its nothingness, toil its desolation. And so keep alive the incentive to push on further, that pain in the soul which drives us beyond ourselves. Whither? That I don't know. That I don't ask to know.*

Dag Hammarskjold quoted in Thomas Hornbein

Everest: The West Ridge

The Hoopoe set a course. It was dawn, but the Hoopoe said it was safe now to travel by day.

The climb would be difficult. We could carry no more burdens with us. We were passing into another world now. The jumble of rocks would be left behind us. Ahead

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

were the serác, towers of ice surrounded by frigid crevasses. We could see them glinting in the morning light. There were huge falls, large glacier like deposits broken from high banks of ice and stone. This frozen landscape would be treacherous and unpredictable. Rocks tumbled around us every time the earth groaned or rumbled high ahead of us.

We walked slowly, in a line, up and up. Here we were, four four-footed fools, animals without ropes or ladders, only our hooves and paws to carry us.

Clouds came in during the early afternoon's climb and these clouds, full of ice particles, made the snow and rock beneath our feet seem to glow a strange pinkish white. As more clouds gathered, it was hard to see far ahead. We were seeing as if through gauze. My whiskers were frozen. Snow clung to my frozen outer coat. But my inner coat was dry and warm. No, our bodies were not so cold. But our eyes stung with the ice and our noses and pads suffered, as much with the sharp granite stones underfoot as with the

We stopped to drink occasionally from snow melts in giant granite basins. We rested now and then on these outcroppings, enjoying the occasional sun breaks. Still the bird bid us upward. Our breathing was difficult now. We drew long, raspy breaths through our moist, warm noses instead of our mouths so that the air did not shock our lungs. Finally, the sun began to set behind a distant western slope and the Hoopoe bid us bed down for the night. We had less than two hours before total darkness, a dark we feared even though we knew the moon was still large moon and it would give us some comfort in the night.

We mounded snow in an area that seemed safe. The mound we made was big enough so that we could tunnel out a cave in which we all could sleep. In the cave, we

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

construct a platform of hard snow on which to sleep. We made the platform inside the cave as long as Jamilah, the biggest of us, and built it higher in the back, away from the entrance, so that our heads would rest in the place with the warmest air. We prevailed upon Jamilah to take off her rugs and place them over the entrance of the cave. We took her bells and hung them across the entrance so that we might be on notice if any other creature tried to seek entry.

As we completed the cave and prepared to crawl through the rug opening, we could just see a few stars above us in the deep velvety sky. The clouds had cleared and the air had a crisp, bright quality. It was mesmerizing for we were all short of oxygen and entranced by our day and the adventure. We were hungry, but, oddly, we did not crave food.

As we settled to sleep, I could hear a soft cry from the camel.

### **Jamilah's Story**

I am Jamilah. My rugs. My bells. Oh my beauty, all gone. I am nothing now but a ragged old camel. The henna on my beard is faded. The kohl on my eyes is washed away. My eyelashes have gone straight. My teeth are yellowed. My pads are cracked. I seem to be in perpetual molt. All I have been has left me. I was a desired camel, a camel to be reckoned with. What am I without my bells and rugs? I thought it was you, dog, and donkey and ibex who had lessons to learn. I was just along for the ride. But now I see

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

what I have to lay aside: youth and vanity. Oh how hard this is. Tomorrow I will stand naked and unadorned. Will you still love me?

Jamilah was a camel who had seen better days and the journey had taken its toll. And what did it matter? Jamilah was not her eyelashes or rugs. Jamilah was a beautiful soul, a generous friend, a camel who would give up her life for any one of us.

And because of her words, we understood the journey. Just as Jamilah must surrender vanity, Basil must give up shame and the need to be brave, Aminah must give up anger and hate, and I must leave behind my pride. All of these burdened us and kept us from knowing truth and our true work.

The next morning we woke rested and exhilarated. It was a beautiful dawn and the sun gave us new energy. In fact Aminah, who feared that we were moving too slowly, charged ahead bellowing and breaking trail. We could not see her or keep pace.

But still we moved steadily. The Hoopoe circled overhead.

## Chapter VII

### The Summit

*You have slept for millions and millions of years.*

*Why not wake up this morning?*

The Kabir Book

Robert Bly

We climbed for another hour or two, but now the way was easy. The world we entered was full of beauty, even more beauty than we had seen before. There were towers of ice and granite all around us. There were waterfalls frozen solid, caught in mid-flow. And now, at this altitude, all was quiet. We were all unble and silent, overcome with the wonder of this place, this sacred place. The donkey walked slowly. The ibex' head was bowed. And I felt nothing but absolute serenity. The camel who had feared giving up the mask she wore, was full of joy and moved with a new strength. What were we doing here? Why had we been lead here? We did not come for gold or gems.<sup>1</sup> We'll find no earthly treasures here. We came, we knew now, to meet ourselves for there as we attained the summit was a giant wall of ice, clear and clean as a mirror. As we came to gaze upon it, we saw reflected images of ourselves. We were ragged and torn, uncombed and unwashed, and bleeding here and there, but free and pure. The journey had brought us to our deepest selves, devoid of all imaginings. The Hoopoe perched atop the wall and called to us.

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<sup>1</sup> After George Mallory responding to the question, "What is the use of climbing Mount Everest?" quoted in Thomas Hornbein Everest: The West Ridge. "

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

“The journey is complete. Well done.” he said and flew away.

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

## **Epilogue**

*...the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do--  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.  
The Journey  
Mary Oliver*

I do my work now with a new passion. Yes, I found my way home again. Sometimes, when Ayubi and I are out looking for mines, I hear a little whistle from a tree branch or from behind a rock. It is the Hoopoe. She reminds me of our journey. She reminds me of all that I have learned. I stand quietly and listen and remember. Ayubi doesn't question me. He scratches my ears and whispers so that no one can hear:

“If only dogs could talk! What a story you must have, my boy.”

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ldedanaan2@hotmail.com

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