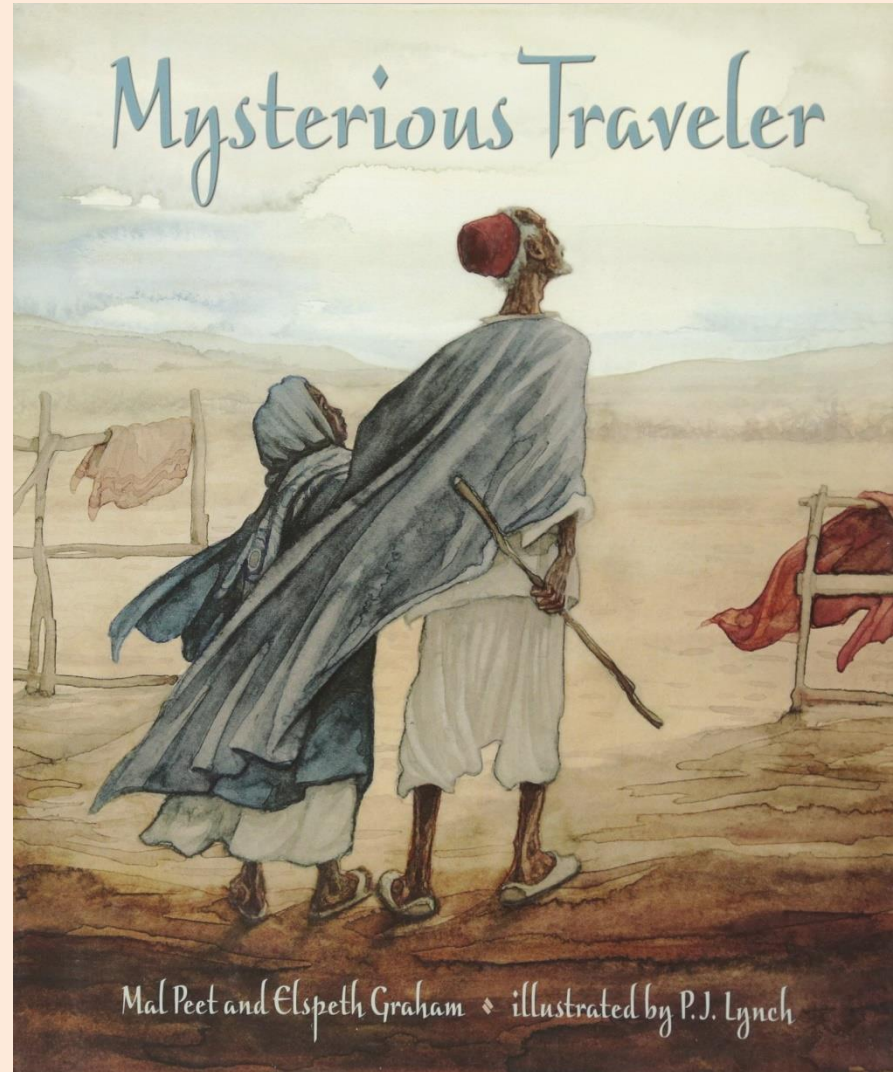


Fiction set extremely faraway



*There were five riders but six camels,
travelling fast. Desperately fast.*

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They were being chased, hunted.

Comprehension Check

R1. To find Issa, what are traders told to look for?

R2. Name one of the two things they bring to trade.

R3. What 3 colours was the ribbon that Issa finds?

I1. What does it mean when the text says “*the Sun was being born again*”?

V1. What is the difference between ‘a guide’ and ‘the guide’?



There were five riders but six camels, travelling fast. Desperately fast. They were being chased, hunted. But because of the fading light and the dust thrown up by the camels' feet they could not tell how close their pursuers were.

The camel without a rider was called Jin-Jin. He was fierce and quick-tempered and very intelligent, which was why he carried the travellers' most precious item of baggage. It was hidden in a woven basket, and Jin-Jin carried it as carefully as he could.

The riders were slithering down into a low and rocky valley when Jin-Jin sensed a new danger. A danger far greater than the men following them. His clever nostrils read it in the air, and he roared a warning, digging his huge feet into the ground.

The rider leading him turned in his saddle and swore angrily. "On, Jin-Jin! On! On!" Then his face changed because he saw what Jin-Jin had read on the wind. Behind them, the evening sky was now a boiling wall of sand and dust like a tidal wave.

A desert storm.

There was no time to find shelter. The storm hurtled into the valley and struck the travellers like an enormous fist, blinding them. The howling, whirling brown air blotted out the sun and the rocks and everything except itself.

The riders and their camels vanished into it.

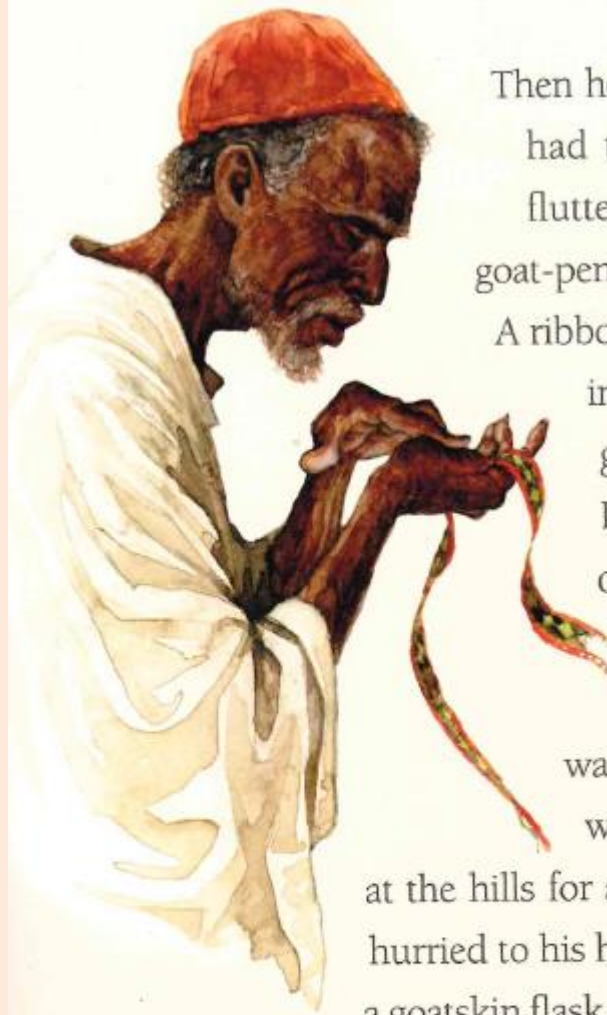


Issa, as usual, left his house before dawn and went to watch the sun being born again. At first it was a tiny red glimpse, as if someone had lit a fire among the distant hills. Slowly at first, then more quickly, it grew and swelled until it floated above the hills like a fat, shivery bubble. The colours of the desert came alive.

Issa's old eyes had watched thousands of dawns, but still it seemed to him that each one was a miracle. Each time, it lifted his heart. On this particular morning, however, the bottom edge of the sun was not as bright as usual. Blurry. Veiled. Issa squinted at it, then took a deep breath of the cold desert wind, testing its smell with his nose.

"Mmm," he murmured to himself. "Yes. Something has changed. There has been a storm in the hills, I think."

He turned to go back to his house. It was time for his prayers.



Then he stopped. A flash of bright colour had tickled his eye. A scrap of cloth fluttering from the thorn fence of his goat-pen. He plucked it free and studied it. A ribbon of some sort, richly embroidered in black and green and red, with two golden threads running through it. Issa knew it had not been made by one of his own people. The pattern told him this. This ribbon had travelled a long way. And it was not the kind of thing that anyone would lose or throw away. Issa gazed at the hills for a long moment, thinking. Then he hurried to his house. He said his prayers. He filled a goatskin flask with water and wrapped a flatbread in a cloth. Then he fetched his donkey from her stable.

“Are you in a good mood today, Donkey? Yes? Good, because we have work to do.”

The old man climbed onto her back and together they headed out towards the sun.

Issa was a guide. No, not *a* guide. *The* guide. He knew the desert better than any other human being. He knew its tracks and its tricks. He knew its moods and its mountains. In daylight, he could read its colours, its breezes, its shadows. His eyes saw signs where other eyes saw only blank emptiness. At night he could read the map of the stars and the scents threaded on the air. And perhaps because he loved the desert he was never lost in it.

When someone died, people would say, “He has gone where even Issa cannot find him.”

Because of his knowledge, because he had magic in his eyes, Issa was an important man. Travellers sought him out. They paid him handsomely to lead them safely through the shifting desert’s dangers. And there were many travellers through Issa’s small town, most of them traders. They came from the north, their caravans – long lines of camels and donkeys – laden with salt. They came from the south, their caravans laden with gold. The dusty roads they all travelled met in Issa’s town.

The traders would ask, “Who can guide us through the maze of hills to the east?” Or, “Who knows where there is water between here and the Great Oasis?”

“Issa,” people would say. “You need Issa. His house is that way. Look for the crooked gate.”

But on the day that changed his life, Issa and his donkey were alone beneath the hot gaze of the sun.

“Stop, Donkey,” Issa said, tapping the animal’s neck. “Let us stop and think.”

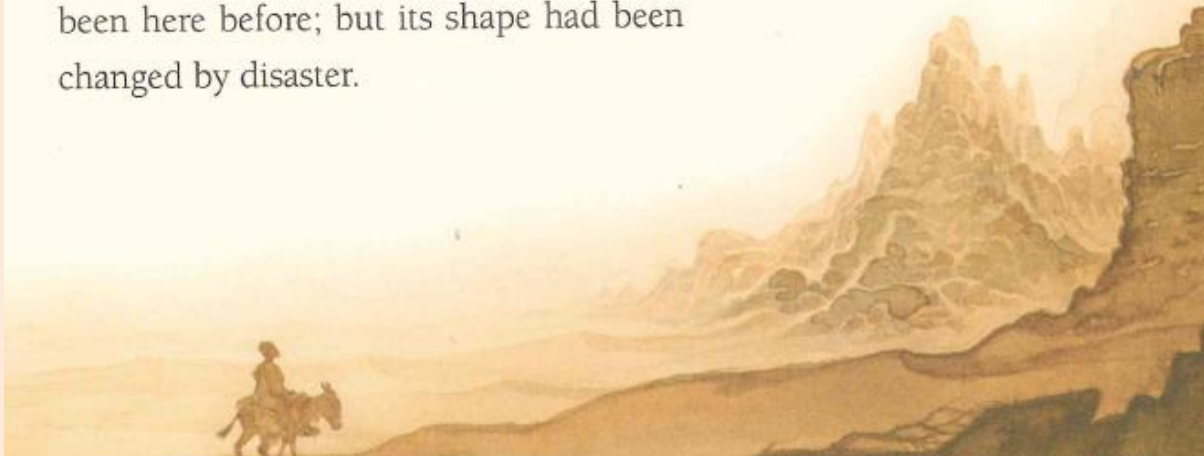
They had been travelling for several hours and had come to the low wall of the hills. The ways in had been hidden by the storm. Issa stared, working out how the world had become different. Then the donkey’s ears twitched.

“What?” Issa said.

The donkey’s ears twitched again, and this time Issa heard something that sounded like a human cough, or groan.

“Good girl,” he said. “Come on. Take me there.”

They struggled into a shallow valley. Issa had been here before; but its shape had been changed by disaster.



Comprehension Check

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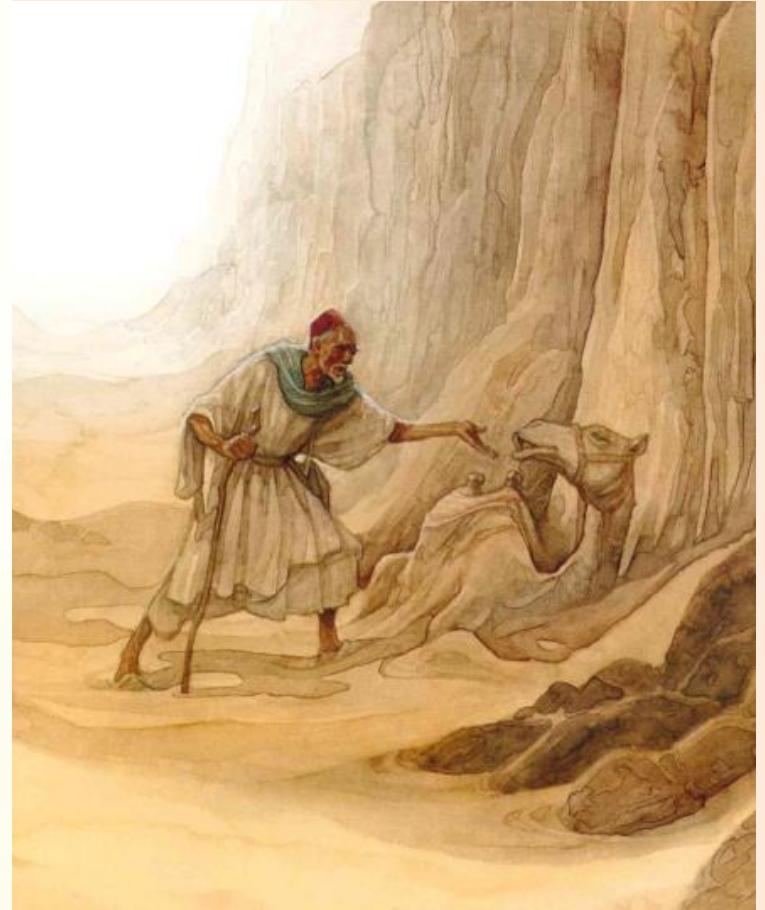
The donkey stopped again. Another harsh cry, louder and closer now. Where the grey rock wall of the valley rose out of the sand, something moved. Squinting, Issa made out the neck and head, the shoulders and hump of a camel. The rest of its body was buried in sand, pressed against the rock. It roared when Issa approached, and showed its big yellowish teeth.

“Salaam,” Issa said quietly. “Peace, Camel. I mean you no harm.”

The animal studied the old man suspiciously. Issa stood, keeping his distance. He was puzzled. Clearly the camel was kneeling. He should have been strong enough to get to his feet, to lift himself free of the sand and dust, but he had chosen not to. Why?

Then a cry, a tiny cry, leaked into the hot air. The camel turned his head and flared his nostrils.

Issa now saw that behind the animal there was a split in the wall of stone, like a very narrow cave. He moved forward, slowly and cautiously, murmuring soft words. “Easy, Camel sir, easy. Here, smell my hand. I would prefer it if you did not bite it. Good. Thank you.”



Now Issa was close enough to see that the camel's bridle was embroidered in the same red, black and green pattern as the ribbon he had found at sunrise. Except that woven into the bridle were letters. A word.

"Jin-Jin? Is that your name? Jin-Jin?"

The camel's ears swivelled forwards. Yes.

"Jin-Jin. Well, Jin-Jin, you must trust me. Please stand up, my friend. Up."

Another thin cry came from within the rock. A human cry.

The camel hesitated, then began to move. Heaving himself free of the sand, unfolding his long legs. Standing. Yet he did not seem to want to leave the wall of rock.

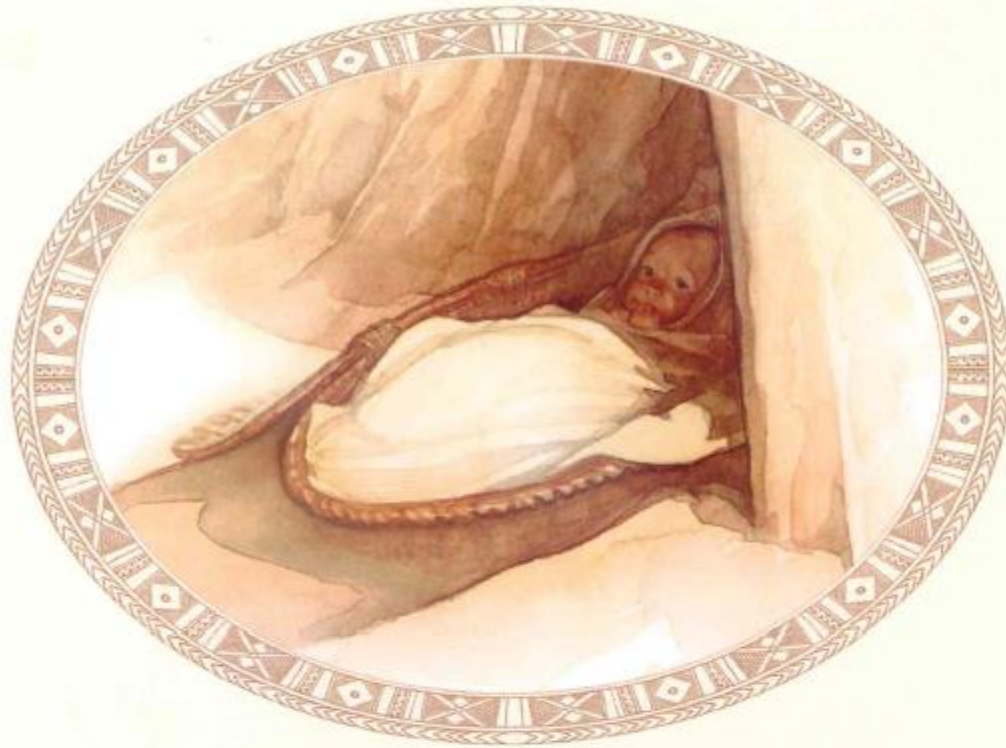
Issa took hold of his bridle and made encouraging noises. "Chuh-chuh-cher. Come, Jin-Jin. Chuh-chuh."

And at last Jin-Jin trusted Issa enough to move. He stepped out into the hot gaze of the sun.

"Good," Issa said, patting the camel's shoulder. "Now let us see what you were so anxious to protect from the storm."

Issa opened the woven basket and his heart stumbled. A child's eyes were looking up at his.

Once, many years earlier, a trader had shown Issa a black



pearl. It had a gleam deep inside it. This child, this baby, had huge black pearls for eyes. Her body was wrapped in finest, softest cotton. Something made of gold hung from a cord around her neck, something the shape of half a star. There were letters hammered into the gold, but Issa could not make sense of them.

The child scrunched her eyes shut and wailed.

Issa stepped back and looked up at the sky. "Why," he asked it, "did you send such a gift to an old man?"

Issa named the child Mariama and brought her up. The townspeople decided that she was his grandchild and he did not deny it. He took her everywhere with him. Before she learned to walk she was familiar with the donkey's jerky trot and Jin-Jin's steady lurch. The travellers and traders who paid



Issa to guide them were puzzled that he had a girl-child with him. Sometimes they teased him.

And Issa would say, "Mariama is a child of the desert. She comes with us to pay her respects to her family. To her uncles, the rocks and hills. To her aunts, the stars. To her four cousins, the winds. How could I leave her at home, when this is her home?"

Perhaps Issa believed this. Or half-believed it. The truth, though, was that love had made them inseparable.

As the years went by, Mariama learned everything that Issa knew: the maps made by the stars, the shimmering paths through the hills, the weather foretold by dawns and sunsets, the messages on the wind, the stories told by stones.

She learned that for a guide everything had a meaning. The shape of a thorn tree, the way sand swirled from the crest of a dune, the length and colour of a shadow, the call of a bird, the height of a cloud.

One evening, Issa was reading aloud from the Qur'an.

He paused in his reading and said, "Please light the lamps, Mariama."

She looked up, puzzled. "The lamps are already lit, Grandfather."

He lifted his head. "Ah, yes," he said. "So they are."

A few mornings later, she watched his hand searching for the bowl of coffee she'd put in front of him. She watched him fumbling to open the gate to the goat-pen.

And she understood. Her blood turned as cold as the water from the well.

She waited for him to tell her, and at last he did.

Comprehension Check 2

P1. What is Issa going to tell Mariama?

R4. What is the camel's name? How did Issa know that was its name?

V2. The text describes Issa and Mariama as '*inseparable*'. What does this mean?

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She waited for him to tell her, and at last he did. "I am going blind, my child," he said simply. "My old eyes are dying faster than the rest of me."

All Mariama could say was, "Yes, Grandfather. I know." ST