

A Story Woven From a Bucket of Milk

A countrywoman's braid swings and leaps. It caresses a stretch of grass and kisses the stems and the blades, vowing to come back, but it never does, for the wind is cruel and the land indifferent. In another universe, she would've been a sculptor. She squeezes the drained yogurt, scoops up the lumps, and closes her fist around it, making sure she leaves dents deep enough for her lover to put his fingers in its place and pretend he's holding her hand. In this universe, she makes *aaruul* and thinks of them as love letters.

Some hundred kilometers away from her, a paper bag is placed in a shopping cart and strapped into the backseat of a car. It's the *aaruul* she made. It watches the traffic and silently listens to the radio, but once it's held flush against someone's humming chest and brought inside, the traffic, the song, and the loneliness of it all will be forgotten. The bag is torn, and a plate is filled to be placed on a table in front of a guest. He takes one and allows it to rest between the prayer wheels of his palms, letting it remember the wind and the sun, the hardening and the baking. Exactly thirty minutes later, he will get up to leave, papers signed and business dealt with, but there will be a weird feeling in his stomach that stays with him until he's in bed. He will sigh in his sleep and dream about the way his old man's hands twirled and whirled when taking the saddle off his horse, and how his eyebrows turned white as snow on an unremarkable summer day.

Some hundred kilometers away from him, two teenagers are studying in a library. One of them has a mathematician mother, a Millennium Prize Problem solver and he wears it like a king's crown. He says his mother came up with a theory on inheritability, a precise equation on knowing what part of a child will be their parents'

and what part their own. *"For example,"* he says, pushing his glasses back, and the girl beside him looks up from her book. *"These eyes are mine. But my resilience is hers, mom says. My brain too. She knew it even before I was born."* She frowns, studying the boy's face, his cheeks bunched up, eyes all sunny. Her grandmother used to be able to transform milk into anything, and whenever asked, she'd reminisce about the time there was nothing to eat but milk and her four children were *very very* hungry. The girl's mother was the youngest of the four and there was never enough yogurt or butter for her. Just *aaaruul*. Just *aaaruul*. *"What if I don't know my parents?"* she asks, blinking, afraid that all she might have gotten from her mother was her hunger. The boy only nods, eyes far away, the words flying past his ears because he's thinking of his mother, his chest swelling with pride and admiration, and how much he hopes her theory is true.

Some hundred kilometers away from them, a little girl tells a tale no one believes in. *"I saw big chunks of aaruul growing on that mountain over there,"* she says, and the neighboring children sitting in a circle around her laugh, clapping their hands. *"I took only one because I was afraid the mountain deity would punish me,"* she continues as the uproar only gets louder. She only lets a few of them see the tiny white thing in her pocket. The rest call her a liar. One of the older kids asks, *"Are you sure you weren't just following a camel's trail? When a mother camel is separated from her baby, her milk will just keep trickling down and it dries up to be aaruul on the ground,"* and she'd bite her tongue to keep a snarky remark from tumbling out. After everyone has gone home and all that was left were their footprints on the sand, and even when those were fading away with the breeze, another girl lingers behind the others. *"I believe you,"* she whispers. *"And I'm glad you took only one."*

Some hundred kilometers away from the girls, a woman stands in front of a framed picture of her older sister. "*I never knew she had a mole there,*" she says, and no one hears her because they're all thinking about how they never knew she had a mole there, on her cheek. She couldn't have known anyways. Her sister always walked on her left when they were walking home from school, shielding her from the incoming traffic, *what traffic*, she wonders now, there were only six cars in their village. That was when they were together the most, her sister on the left, her on the right. The woman excuses herself to the bathroom to draw a little dot on her face with a marker, about where her sister's mole was, just so she doesn't forget again. When she returns, someone has added *aaruul* to the offering plate on the altar. She wants to say, "*I never knew she liked aaruul,*" but remains silent.

Some hundred kilometers away from her, somebody is writing in their journal. "An *aaruul* sitting on a person's hand, alone, is a curious little thing with a peculiar shape; a flower, a handprint, or a tombstone. But two *aaruul* is a different thing; it's a messenger dove, a story, and a childhood," they write.

Some hundred kilometers away from them, a countrywoman's braid swings and leaps. It caresses a stretch of grass and kisses the stems and the blades, vowing to come back, and there never was a promise broken, for the wind is gentle and the land pliable. She holds a bucket of milk in her hand. Soon it will become *aaruul*, and soon it will be placed in front of a guest who will go home to dream about his father.