FLASH NONFICTION

The Malwiya

by Amro Alkado

"Falling Water" by Ian A. Maxfield

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“Wisalna lo ba’ad? Ba’ad ishwiya lil cha’ab!” we chanted in unison. — “Are we there yet or not? Just a little further to go!”

The minibus rattled along the dusty road due north from the capital, and we bounced along with it.

This capital city, like many around the world, pulled at its people, its gravity field resisting all attempts at escape.

Our chanting seemed to push the rickety bus beyond escape velocity. Cousins, aunts, and uncles all providing lyrical combustible energy.

The drive from Baghdad to Samarra was all of two hours, but to my six-year-old mind, it may as well have been two days.

“Does it really spiral up into the sky, Mum?” I asked, full of wonder.

“Yes, you’ll see soon enough.” My mum laughed.

“And you really climbed to the top, Dad?”

“Yes. People on the ground look like little ants when you’re at the top!” My dad maintained.

I couldn’t fathom how that was possible. People were much larger than ants. Though the ants in Baghdad weren’t like the tiny black dots I’d later see in Britain. We called them Persian ants.

They were big, red, and fierce. One had bitten me a few weeks before when I got too close to their nest.

Thoughts of giant ants and spirals that pierced the clouds consumed my mind as we sang our way to Samarra.

Off in the distance, a miniscule spiralling tower emerged. It seemed very easy to climb, like the citrus trees in my grandfather’s garden, which I had scaled many a time before, to spy over the garden walls.

“Wait till we get close to it,” My mum reassured, noticing the disappointment in my eyes.

Sure enough, the tower grew, and before long, it was looming over me as I jumped off the bus. It seemed to touch the scorching sun itself. How did it not melt?

We marched in twos and threes along the edge of the Great Mosque of Samarra, up the slope towards the Malwiya.

The sheer size of the spiralling tower was overwhelming. It was oppressive in scale. The top was barely a speck in the brilliant blue sky, as the clay stones baked in the heat of the sun. I

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clutched my mother's hand with all the force I could muster, as my father forged his way ahead.

There was no rail along the spiral's edge, and I wondered how the mu'adhin had managed to scale it centuries ago to call the faithful to prayer, as my dad had told me. He'd said some believed the tower's slope was built gently enough that the mu'adhin could ride a horse all the way to the top. I imagined him circling upward, fearless and fast, his voice rising with the wind.

Two turns up, the path narrowed. The wind imposed itself, slapping at our clothes, tugging at my mother's scarf, and half the group — elders and children alike — turned back. I felt a mix of sadness and relief, a feeling I hadn't known before. The people were shrinking as we climbed, and I realised father was right. They'd soon be ants if we kept going, and I didn't want to be stung again.

We retreated to the souk for shade, water, and a bite to eat. The air was thick with the smell of dust, sweet perfumes, and cooking. My uncle and I stood beneath a canopy, the patterned fabric trembling in the wind. From where we stood, the Malwiya rose above the rooftops like a sentinel shaped from clay. Across the city, the golden dome of the Imam Al Askari shrine glinted in the sun.

A flock of pigeons burst into the air all at once, wheeling in a perfect circle, before dissolving into the light. For a moment, everything around me fell away. The noise, the heat, even the chatter of my cousins. All that remained was the feeling that I was standing inside history itself. Something that had been here long before me, and would remain long after I was gone.

Soon, day gave way to dusk and the call to prayer ushered us back to the bus. One by one, we climbed aboard, the same, yet somehow also changed. As the adhan, the call to prayer, echoed behind us, I felt the gentle rhythm of the road and knew Baghdad was pulling us home. We chatted contentedly as the road curled like the Malwiya itself, drawing us back into the city's orbit.

As the sun slipped behind the Malwiya, I understood, for the first time, what it meant to be small. The journey was brief, but its awe would last a lifetime.

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