

# A Fire in the Desert

Mr. Brent van Staalduinen (Entry 9-04)

## First Place Winner

I have seen the fire in the desert.

There is a burning, a blazing. *Wahee*, a heat, ever-present, fed by a thousand years of blinding summer sun. There are mirages, waves and shimmers, bending the light across the horizon, fooling wanderers with visions of water, promises of cool relief.

In July, *shames il sahra*, the sun, dominates daylight hours. Nothing stirs at the height of its path across the sky, having been driven into holes and forced into crevices where elusive coolness waits. In the afternoon, Arabia sleeps. After dark, oil-wells dot the horizon with star-points as Arabs come to life, assembling in their homes, the *diwaniyas*, the malls, the restaurants, the streetside shisha-corners.

And the people ignite, bursting into flames, honed by millennia of desert life.

The *giza* begin, the *sowallif*, recited in language forged in the wastelands and *wadis*. The outsiders listen and wonder at the sounds and roughness of the Arabic tongue, and make jokes at the stops, the breaths, the glottals, and the emphatic uvular throws. But Arabic is not a language; it is the song of the heat of the desert, and it is not soft. It burns with the passion of endless wandering and tent-dwellings, of tribal battles and the preservation of family honor. Arabic, the spoken torch, is passed from generation to the next.

And the tribe gathers to laugh, sing, dance traditional dances, and gorge on *tamer* dipped in camel's milk. One cannot be separate from one's tribe, and its members seek comfort around it. At once inviting yet impenetrable, the family is the ultimate source of protection and hospitality. But dare to challenge its borders, and the outsider is scalded by the rebuke of its elders. One cannot truly glimpse Arabia without passing through the rites of the tribal unit: tribe and family are everything from which the desert tradition springs.

Yet tradition's embers can be elusive, difficult to rekindle. The simplicity of eons of nomadic life once bound the Arab to his desert. As the sun sparked on the waves, the dhow plied the waves and brought the catch to the fires lit onshore. The pearl diver disappeared for minutes at a time then surfaced, lungs burning. Today the merchants still lure customers with scalding tea and the promise of elusive bargains. *Souks* bustle, the fiery markets and stalls giving way to computer shops and mobile-phone stores. In the malls, young people gather, preferring the Italian espresso to the bitter, scorched coffee of the *dallah*. A gentle, Gulf wind carries the smell of the refineries into the city, where the new marketplace and the new wealth temper the Arab spirit and remake the tradition, the ritual.

I have felt the new fire burning in the desert.

From the pyres and pillars of ritual, faith's fire leaps heavenward, pointing Arabs to paradise and beyond. Infused and one with its very soul like an Arab home is infused with *bakhour*,

Islam is to surrender everything, and all of life is faith. The passion of Islam cannot be mistaken for mere belief, and those who dare to make assumptions about its place in the Arabian soul are corrected quickly, decisively. Separation is never contemplated, and one can not—should not—imagine today’s Arabia as being distinct from its core. When a faithful land is the custodian of its most holy places, nationhood and political borders are put aside in the common pursuit of truth and surrender: all of Arabia will defend and honor the *kaba’a*, recognizing that pilgrimage and passionate defense are called for, expected. Islam was not born in the desert, yet the desert hones its fervent soul.

This is the fire in the desert. There is *har Arabi*, the dazzling heat of Arabian summer and a way of life crafted around its unforgiving, unblinking fire. The tribes chant to welcome the world-burned wanderer home. To speak to an Arab is to sample the passion of a desert-refined tongue; to listen to an Arab is to listen to a proud, passionate heritage given its life by its very fire. To witness Islam in Arabia is to witness how meaning and faith are branded to the very core of a person.

There is a fire in the desert, and I have bathed in its warmth.