

DRAWN FROM THE WATER

“I have a special job for you today, Miriam,” Amma says. She woke me even earlier than usual today. Everything is black, the walls of our hut, the ceiling, and the sky outside that I can see through the doorway.

It’s hard to get out of bed so early. Usually, Baba is gone by the time Amma rubs my back until I open my eyes. Not today. Baba is standing right behind Amma when she wakes me, which is how I know this is important.

Baba holds up the basket that Amma has been working on for weeks. First, she sent me to the river to gather long reeds for her. She cut those up and wove them together so that I couldn’t see through them at all when I held the basket up to the light. After that, she carried it down to the river to line it with thick mud. That sat in our hut drying for days, but it didn’t bother me.

It was different when she started to rub pitch on the outside. Our hut smelled so bad that I had to hold my nose every time I walked in. She tried scrubbing her hands with sand to get the sticky off. She plunged them into river water. Nothing got it off, which is why she made me hold the baby for hours. “Don’t let him cry,” she told me, so I rocked and made funny faces and dipped my finger into cane water and let him suck on it. Amma fed him a lot, too, but it was getting harder to keep that up.

He’s not a bad baby. He squirms around, and he cries. A lot. That’s not a problem at night. All the Egyptians go home to their real houses and leave us alone, but during the day they’re everywhere, and if they catch anyone hiding a baby boy, they become enraged.

It’s always like this when they pass a new law. Right at the beginning they’re so strict, and anyone caught breaking the rules gets in big trouble. After a while, though, they relax a bit. Baba says they get bored

and look for new ways to torment us, but Amma makes him shush up. She tells him not to talk like that in front of me, because she doesn't want me to repeat those things where an Egyptian can hear me.

Sometimes I talk too much. That's what she says. It makes my Baba laugh, though, when I tell him all the things I see during the day. He doesn't laugh too much, so I've been working really hard to improve my memory so that I can make him happy.

This rule about the babies isn't that old. We all have to be careful. Amma reminds me every day not to say anything if a baby is born in the huts. "I know," I tell her. "I'm already eight years old. I'm not a little girl who doesn't understand anything."

It's pretty bad around here these days. We've all been forced to watch as women who still walk funny from giving birth get pushed to the edge of the river. An overseer pokes her back with the end of his whip and then forces her to throw her own baby into the water. One lady still had blood running all down her legs. That got mixed up with the cuts from the flogging she got right after. The overseers want to make sure that we all know not to try to disobey the Pharaoh's decrees.

I felt really bad for those mothers. They were weeping and shrieking. Baba told me they weren't crying from the beating. The grown-ups all try not to cry when those things happen, even the men, who are pretty used to seeing people get beat up by now.

"You are the fastest runner, Miriam," Amma says as she takes the basket from Baba and puts it in my hands. It's big and round and heavier than it looks, probably from all the mud and leaves she put inside. Pitch always dries heavier than I expect, too. I peek inside and see the baby in there. That surprises me. So it's not the basket that's heavy, but him, who's all dimpled and fat because Amma feeds him so much. "You'll have to run very quickly to keep up with him."

It's true what she says about me. I am a good runner. I'm faster than all the other kids, even the boys. Baba says it's because my legs are so long.

When he wants to tease me, he pinches my calves and says he's helping me develop my muscles. It tickles and hurts at the same time when he does that, which makes me laugh until I can hardly breathe.

"Take him down to the river," she says, "and put him in somewhere safe. Stay with him. The tide may rush in places, and the wind could blow the water even quicker. Run along the bank. Don't let him out of your sight."

I'm not sure how she thinks this baby is going to survive when so many others haven't, but I don't say anything, because Amma and Baba are looking at me with such serious faces. Sometimes I think Amma must be the wisest woman in Goshen and that she can read my mind, because she takes the baby out of the basket and puts her nose right to his little head. Her mouth is smashed up against him, so I can't hear her too well, but she repeats it for me. "This one is special."

Well, yeah, but all the grown-ups are always telling us that every baby is special, no matter what the Egyptians say. If that's true, then why did some others end up drowning in the Nile?

It's a tricky thing to be a slave. The men have it pretty hard. They have to go out to the fields or building sites when the sky is still half-black and half-orange, and they work until their backs are twisted. I help my Amma pack down the dirt of the floor in our hut every day so Baba can lie down with his knees bent up when he gets back.

By the time they come back at night their shadows are really long. That's a lot of hours to pretend nothing hurts, which they have to do. You never know which overseer is going to decide to make someone do extra work or kick a man he sees scrunch his face up or bend over to stretch. They get cut and scraped all the time, too. The women make buckets of salve to coat their skin, and then use it up in a week and have to make more.

But the women have it worse. My chest is flat and my hips are still skinny. "Nonexistent," my Amma calls them. She says, "You're lucky

now, but just you wait.” Even I can see the problems older girls face. Girls my age don’t get bothered by the overseers, but once they start to look like real women, things get really tricky.

It’s like with the babies. If the Pharaoh tells you that you have to drown all your boys as soon as they’re born, it would make sense just to stop having babies for a while, at least until the Egyptians lose interest in this latest rule. But that’s a not a good solution, because any woman who catches the eye of an overseer can’t let him think she’s barren. The overseers want to take girls off behind a pile of bricks, but they don’t want to have any children with slave women. That would lead to a whole host of trouble for them, and if there’s one thing an overseer doesn’t want, it’s trouble.

Here’s how it works. If the baby is a girl, they can pretty much ignore everything and pretend nothing happened. But what if the baby is a boy? That’s when the problems begin for him, no matter how long his whip is. He can either claim the baby and try to take him, but the mother and her family will do just about anything to keep a Hebrew baby out of the hands of the Egyptians. They’ll hide him, pass him from hut to hut, or pretend he’s another woman’s child. That could make the overseer angry, which is dangerous.

Overseers are used to getting their way, mostly because they’re the ones with the whips in their hands. My Amma says the only way they know how to solve problems is by counting out lashes. If he’s admitted that he’s the father of a slave woman’s child, he can’t just walk away and let other people think the Hebrews have tricked him. So he gets angry, which always leads to some of us getting punished. Overseers are really the lowest of the low among the Egyptians, even if they lord it over us. They have bosses, too. If he ruins or even kills any of the slaves he’ll be in really big trouble.

That’s one option. The other thing he could do is deny that the baby is his. Some of them do that, but it hasn’t always worked out so well, because even though the bosses don’t really care what the overseers do

to the women around here, they don't want to see any more Hebrew babies being born. So they make that overseer personally throw his child in the river. You'd think that would be pretty easy for someone who rejects his own baby, but that's not usually what happens. Amma says only the most hard-hearted man could do that without a stain spreading on his soul.

My friends and I saw one of the meanest overseers walk into the very same spot in the river where he had to toss in his own son the day before. He was the kind of man who always laughed when a slave clutched his arm or leg in pain and whipped harder than any of the others just because it seemed like fun to him. He wasn't so tough in the end, though. We watched him walk out pretty far into the water. That's when it began to look like he changed his mind about drowning. He waved his hands until he couldn't do that anymore, but we didn't call anyone to save him. None of the Hebrews could do anything to help anyway, since we aren't allowed to learn how to swim. We all stay close to the sides when we go in, and never let the water rise higher than our waists. Some of the bigger boys walk in all the way up to their chests, but that seems like a really bad idea to me. They wouldn't be able to do anything if they fell down. The water would just carry them away and they'd die.

Not one slave cried when his body washed up on the shore.

That's why the women have to stay pregnant, even if it means they might give birth to boys. It's the only way to keep the overseers from following them around, sometimes pushing them down onto the ground right there in the open, but that leaves them back where they started. So they just have to hope for girl babies, or that they'll miscarry or have stillborns. Amma says, "A live birth is a beautiful thing, but not here. It would be better for them not to have lived at all than to be born a slave."

Being pregnant only keeps the women safe in one way. Other than making the overseers keep their dirty hands to themselves, being with child actually makes things harder. The Egyptians call us animals, so

they expect the women to squat wherever they happen to be when their time comes and push out a newborn like an antelope or cow does, but we're people, and human women can't really do that, at least most of them.

It's the saddest thing to see a woman who can't even stand up anymore on her hands and knees in the fields, screaming and writhing, but none of us can go help her for more than a second or two at a time for fear of being whipped for stepping away from our own work.

We all find ways to help, though. When we see a woman begin to have her birth pains, all of a sudden the work that day somehow has to be done right where she is. Someone brings her a sip of water when no Egyptian is looking, and the little children who are too young to lift or cut put their warm bodies against her back. It doesn't really do anything, so far as I can see. She'll still moan and thrash around, but afterward those mothers always say that having the children up next to them made the whole thing bearable.

The best thing would be to hide those pains altogether. It's better that the Egyptians just not know when a woman goes into labor. If it does turn out to be a boy, everyone can lie and say it was stillborn, or swap in a newborn girl to carry around in case one of the Egyptians notices that some lady who was waddling around isn't pregnant anymore. In the meantime, we all try to hide the boys.

It's all pretty complicated, but not for me. Because I'm a fast runner, I'm sent on errands instead of having to work in the fields and construction sites. I run between them, delivering messages and things like that. I get to see a lot of things that go on. At night, I pull up all the things I saw that day and tell them to my Amma and Baba. Like I said, I have a good memory.

Like the day the decree about the babies was read out. All the men were busy making bricks and hauling them. It was so hot, and I had already been sent all over for hours. The overseers didn't even bother making

sure any women were there. They just walked through the site, stopping little groups of men to read off their papyrus and then told them to get back to work. But they couldn't. Not right away. Each little cluster just stood there, as if someone had grabbed hold of their arms and legs and wouldn't let them move.

I don't understand grown-ups. The overseers started hitting people, which is what got the men back to their tasks, but they didn't say anything. They didn't cry or get angry, or anything. The work site got really quiet. The only sounds were of hammers splitting rock and the wet slap of cement. For the rest of the day, they just kept looking at each other. It was as if they were trying to speak without actually talking. When the men met up with their wives and daughters later that night, it was a totally different story. The women made enough noise to make up for the men's silence. I had to hold my ears closed. It was giving me a headache.

It didn't make any sense. The men didn't say a thing, but then the women shouted or fell down onto the ground. One even screamed at her husband. "It isn't enough that they took our land and our cattle and our dignity. Now they're actually trying to kill us, and you can't even open your mouth."

Her belly was huge, so I guess I can see why she'd be upset, but her husband still didn't say a single word. It was like someone had stolen his tongue. Instead, he rubbed her back, which wasn't going to help anybody once that baby was born.

After that the whispering started. Not right away, but over the next few days. I'd be sent to a field with a message for one of the Egyptians, and a Hebrew woman would call me over, tell me that all the girls and women had come up with an idea, and that I should tell the men to start taking bits of mortar and rock dust home with them at the end of the day.

Then I'd run to the building sites and tell my father or some other man I knew what the women had told me. They'd nod, and tell me to relay the

message that some of the women should start collecting leaves and feathers.

That's how our huts started sprouting hiding places. The men would come home, as tired and broken down as ever, and build little nooks in the corners or off a back wall. And so many women began to look pregnant. Every day, I'd see someone adjusting a lumpy mound as it shifted under her clothes.

The tricks mostly worked. The Egyptians couldn't tell who was really having babies and who wasn't. Even so, they caught a few. Those were really bad days. We all put ashes on our heads. It was the groans that came from the hut where the baby's parents lived that were the worst. I don't know how they did it, because our huts are tiny, but so many women crowded in on those evenings to be with the parents. I couldn't go. Too loud, and anyway, too sad.

And all that time, Amma's belly was getting bigger for real, which made us all very nervous. Even my little brother, who's only five and can be pretty stupid most of the time, started acting even stranger than usual. He wouldn't listen to anyone, and for one whole week pretended he was a crocodile. He wouldn't even eat sitting up, but crawled around sneaking up behind everyone and snapping at their ankles until we'd put his food on the ground. Not in his bowl, but actually pour the food out, even if it was soup.

Of course, Amma and Baba got mad at him, but they also told me that little children act strangely when they can tell something's wrong but don't understand it. I did understand it, because I'm a lot smarter than he is. That's why I got so frightened.

I tried to keep it in, because Amma and Baba were upset enough on their own, but I couldn't do that forever. "What's going to happen?" I finally asked.

Amma looked even more tired than usual. Her skin had gotten kind of grey, like the dust of the rock quarry had been rubbed onto it and stayed

there. By then, she was tottering from side to side when she walked, so I knew that the baby would be born soon.

“We’ll figure something out,” she said.

“But what?”

“I don’t know.” She sounded tired, too, but she must have done that thing where she read my mind, because she said, “If he’s a boy, we’ll hide him, just like all the others. But we’ll hope for a girl.”

But he was a boy. We got lucky, because he was born at night, so the midwives could sneak in and out of the hut without anyone seeing, but Baba told me to go to sleep right after he was born, even though I wasn’t tired at all. Amma was crying as she held the baby. Baba, too. I wanted to do something to help, but I couldn’t, so I cried too, only I turned my face to the wall so they wouldn’t see me.

We did hide him, for a little while, but like I said, he cries a lot, which is bound to call attention to him sooner or later, which is why there’s this basket in my hands now. It’s good that I’m so strong, because it’s a pretty far walk to the river, and Amma sent me out really early this morning so no one would see me. The baby is staying quiet, probably from all the juggling around as I walk.

I didn’t say anything to Amma, but I’m more scared now than ever. What if the basket doesn’t float and I have to watch my baby brother drown. What if the tide turns it over and he slips out, or there’s a crocodile nearby. Even running as fast as I can, I won’t be able to do anything if any of those things happen.

I try to remember what Amma said and repeat it over and over to myself. “We have to have faith. It will turn out okay.” I don’t know if I believe it, but I believe my Amma.

When I get to the river, I look for a spot along the bank where I can walk in. I think that somewhere with reeds to hide us but also a gentle slide where I won't have to climb down a steep ledge would be best.

The basket is getting even heavier. I don't understand why my arms are trembling. I'm not cold at all. Actually, I'm covered in sweat. By the time I find the perfect spot, I almost can't hold it up anymore.

The water feels so good. It's cold, but I was so hot that it feels really nice to walk into it. I wade in a little bit, hugging the basket the whole time. I'm afraid it will float away before I'm ready, so I don't want to go too far away from the bank.

It really is too heavy for me, so I have to put it down. I hold onto it with my hand as I back up until the water only covers my ankles and then my feet. It's pretty uncomfortable to be bent over so far, my feet in the shallow end, my arm stretched all the way out so that the basket doesn't float away.

At the last minute, I pull it back in and unlatch the top to look at my brother. "I may never see you again," I say. He just looks up at me. He has one foot in his mouth, which is what he likes to do when he's lying down. It's pretty funny looking and usually makes me laugh, but not today. Then I get worried that he understood me and will get scared once I let him go, so I say, "Don't worry, I'll be next to you the whole time." I hope that's the truth.

Eventually, I have to let go. At first, the basket doesn't move much. It just bobs up and down on the water and turns around in the reeds. I worry that I chose a bad spot, and that he'll just stay stuck there forever. I don't even know what to do. My chest feels tight and I'm not breathing quite right. But I can't walk into the water to free the basket, because then I'll be stuck in the same situation I was afraid of to begin with.

I can't make up my mind. Now we're both stuck, the baby in the rushes and me just watching the little basket. It bumps into some reeds, which turns it, so that it bumps into some more. Thankfully, the river makes a

decision for me, because I see the basket start to edge out to where the current can take it.

Once it's past the rushes, I start to follow it. The current must be really comfortable, because the baby doesn't cry at all. That makes me mad, because he never stopped crying at home, which was the reason we're here in the first place.

"Were you trying to get put out here?" I say, even though I know he can't hear me, and that even if he could, he wouldn't be able to answer.

The water moves pretty slowly, so I walk along, not even needing to jog to keep up. It starts to get really boring. Nothing is happening. The basket doesn't even get pulled into the middle of the river. It just knocks along the banks. Some mud has started to stick to the bottom and sides, which is hard to see because of all the tar, but I can tell, because it looks bumpier than before. Amma had been really careful with it. She had smoothed the pitch out with a giant leaf over and over. At the time, I didn't understand why, but now I see that she must have thought the basket would float better that way.

It doesn't seem to be making a difference. The basket keeps floating along. I walk beside it. It floats. I walk. The sun is out for real now. The baby is probably nice and cool in the basket, but I'm getting hot. Flies keep buzzing around my ears and hair, so I spend a lot of time swatting them away. Now I'm bored and irritated. I start kicking pebbles as I walk. I even bend down to pick a few bigger rocks up so that I can throw them.

I'm really good at throwing, and these rocks fit perfectly in my palm. I stop, point to where I want the rock to land in the water, pull my arm back, and fling it over my head. It lands far out in the river with a splash and sinks right away.

I'm about to throw another one when I look around and see that the basket has floated up ahead of me. My chest tightens up again. I lost track of why I was here. Amma and Baba would be so mad if they saw

me. I feel terrible and sprint to catch up. The basket hasn't gone very far, but I drop the rest of the rocks out of my fist anyway. I can't throw them while I'm walking, and I'm afraid I'll fall behind again.

It's a good thing I do catch up, because the current starts to speed up a little. I can see bigger ripples on the surface of the water. The color changes, too. It's always brown and muddy, but it's darker now. The basket picks up speed. I'm loping along beside it now, which is better. Not so boring.

That's when the basket moves away from the bank. I have to run to keep up now. The basket tips from side to side more in the water. I get scared that it will tip so far that the baby will fall out, and then all of my Amma's work will be for nothing. Worse than that, I'll have to go back and tell her what happened, and she'll get mad that I didn't save him even though she knows that I can't swim.

All the rocking must be scary for the baby because he starts to cry. I look around, afraid that someone will hear and figure out that this is a Hebrew baby. Then they'd find me and know for sure. I stand on my tiptoes to look around, but there's nothing to see. The river must have carried the basket, and me, along the shore far enough that we've reached a spot that's completely empty. No houses, no roads, no people. It's pretty here, with lots of trees. Their leaves hang over the ground and water, so I can walk in the shade.

This place doesn't look like it does where we live. It's pretty much always noisy there, because the Egyptians make us live so close together. Practically every hut touches another one. And there are lots of kids running around. That's in the morning and at night. I'm not usually there during the day. Since most people are out working in the fields or building sites, I suppose it gets quiet then, but I've never really thought about it too much.

Here it's different. What's that word my Baba uses when he finally gets a chance to lie back and close his eyes? "Peaceful." That's how it feels

here. All I can hear is the water. The birds, too. They talk back and forth to each other from the treetops. Some of them are on branches so skinny I don't understand how they can balance up there.

They start to make a racket soon enough, though. It sounds like clack, clack, clack, and a lot more of them than I thought were around start flying from tree to tree. I'm not sure why they're so nervous and loud, until I hear voices up ahead of me.

Whoever they are, they'll see me really soon. To make matters worse, they're all Egyptians. I don't know what to do. If I keep walking, they'll see me for sure. They could do anything then. I could get a whipping, or be sent far away from my parents if one of them decides to keep me for herself, but the basket is still moving, and Amma told me not to lose sight of it. Even though it's shady, I start to sweat again. I wish my Amma was here with me. She'd know what to do.

I glance over at the basket and see that the current has slowed down again. Thank goodness for that, at least. The water bobs the basket along gently again. It's headed for a marshy bit up ahead, which should slow it down even more.

The only thing I can do now is hide and hope those people don't see me or the basket. I spot a clump of reeds a few steps away and I push right into the center of it and then crouch down as far as I can. From there, I can put my eye right up to a space between two green shafts and see what's happening, but no one will be able to see me.

The only problem is that I've lost sight of the basket. I just hope it's hidden, too. "What do I do now, Amma?" But I whisper so softly that she wouldn't be able to hear me even if she was right there beside me. Anyway, I'm old enough to know that she won't be able to answer. It's just that she'd know what to do, and I don't.

The voices get closer. They're laughing while they walk. Then I see them. Three girls, maybe twelve or thirteen years old. At least I think

that's how old they are, but they look so different from anyone I've ever seen that it's hard to tell.

They're beautiful. One of them is tall, with long arms. I bet she runs fast, because her legs are long, too. Another one has the kind of rosy, round cheeks that I've never seen on a Hebrew child. It's like her face is trying to laugh even when her mouth isn't. The last is small. She's not much taller than I am, but she already has breasts, which is how I know she's older than I am.

All three of them are wearing gold necklaces that reach from their necks down to the tops of their chests and wink back at the water. Their eyes look really long across their faces, almost as if they touch where the tops of their noses should be, but then I realize that they just have very dark paint around them. Their hair is blacker than any I've ever seen and perfectly straight, with beads woven into the ends and some kind of wrap around the tops of their heads. Those hairbands are the most amazing of all. They have beads of all different colors strung together to make patterns of fish and eyes and the symbol of the Pharaoh, which is one that all the Hebrews know well, since we have to carve it into so many of the buildings that get put up.

And their clothes. They wear skirts that open in the front to let them walk and shirts that look like they're attached to their necklaces. I want to go up to them and put my hand on the cloth because it looks so clean. It's all white. Really and truly white and not stained with sweat or ripped and sewn back up in places.

I almost don't believe that these girls are real. I'm so caught up in staring at them that I don't follow their eyes. So I jump in surprise when one of them points and says, "What's that over there?" It looks like she's pointing right at me, and the shivering in my arms starts up again, but then I see them walk down to the edge of the water and peer at another bunch of rushes.

They start to talk to each other, and even though I know Egyptian, their words stumble out on top of each other so quickly that I don't understand what they're saying. What I can see is that they seem nervous. They may even be as scared as I am. It's like they've taken over for the birds and are chattering back and forth to each other in fright.

Someone else must have heard them, too, because I hear her ask, "What now, girls?" Whoever she is she sounds a little frustrated, as if this is how they always act and that it gets tiresome for her to listen to it.

The girls' heads jerk up at the sound of that voice, but they don't say anything. They look at each other, lift their shoulders, and gesture with their hands as if to ask each other what they should do. The voice comes again, "Well, what's there?"

One of the girls finally speaks up. "It's a basket, mistress. Floating in the water. It sounds like it's crying."

"Baskets don't cry," the voice says. I can't see her, and it's probably true that a person doesn't have to grow up a slave to know that this lady is the boss, but I figure all Hebrew children would know for sure. In any case, I know she's the boss, and that the three girls answer to her and are a bit afraid of her, too.

"Yes, Mistress," the tall girl says, but none of them move.

"Well, don't just stand there. Bring it over to me."

I watch the girls as carefully as I have ever looked at anything. I'm wondering what they'll do to my baby brother, when I hear the sound of water moving. The girls have already lifted up the hems of their skirts to wade into the water to get the basket, pushed the reeds aside, and lifted it out. Now I can see the basket again. It looks exactly the same as it did before. I follow the girls' eyes. I see a woman rise out of the river.

The others are beautiful, but this one makes my mind go silent. I didn't know people could look like this. The three holding my baby brother's life in their hands are just copies. It's just obvious, even though this one doesn't even have any clothes on.

As she rises, the water falls away from her. She's like a stalk, long and slender. Her whole body is lit up, like the shiniest bronze. There's no hair on her, except for the long black strands that fall over her shoulders and back. I've seen slave women naked millions of times, and none of them looks like this.

I wonder if all Egyptians are like this, as sleek under their clothes as the statues in their temples. But then I remember the overseers. Some of them have thick, curly hair on their arms and chests. And they all have furry legs. That's what makes me think this woman must be special.

I can't take my eyes off of her. It's like she carries a sun around with her, only this one can be looked at without burning my eyes. My Amma always told me that the Egyptians are no better than us, even if they tell us they are all the time. Amma knows just about everything. I almost can't believe that she's wrong, but I've never seen a Hebrew like this. It's dangerous to be a pretty slave. That's mostly true for the women, but sometimes for boys, too. We've all known someone who takes a knife to her own face so that she can save herself. Afterward, we tell her the scars are more beautiful than the smooth skin that was there before. I think the grown-ups really mean it, but the Egyptians don't agree, which is what Amma calls a blessing.

I'm so caught up in looking at her that I barely hear what they're all talking about.

"Bring it over," the woman in the water says as she walks closer to the other girls.

Unlike before, they don't try to stay dry when they approach her. They don't even take off their clothes or jewelry before stepping into the water.

“Open it,” she says when they’re finally in front of her. It’s the smallest girl who reaches over and pulls the top off the basket. All three girls step back from it, as if it had a poisonous snake in it, but the one they call Mistress reaches in and picks the baby up. She holds him out in front of her and looks at him for a long time. Even her stare must have something special in it, because he stops crying and looks back at her, as if he’s curious to see who this person is. Babies can’t really do that, but that’s what it looks like.

“We’ll take him home with us,” she says at last, and then lays him back down in the basket.

The girls look scared. “But Mistress,” the one with the pink face says, and then stops as if something was shoved into her mouth.

The tall one just stands there looking at everything but her mistress. It’s the small one who finally says, “Surely, Mistress, this must be a—” and then she stops.

“A what?” her Mistress says. My Amma has done that to me, almost like she’s daring and expecting me to answer at the same time. These girls can’t just say “nothing” or “forget it” to her, like I do sometimes when Amma’s voice gets all gravelly like that and I know I’m about to get punished for something.

The small girl looks down and then up at her mistress. She must think she has to be very brave to do it, because she blurts, “Surely this is a Hebrew child.”

Her mistress just looks at her, waiting to hear more.

The tall girl steps in. I think she must be a good friend, even if she is an Egyptian, because it looks like she’s trying to help the other girl. “Won’t your father, the blessed Pharaoh, be very angry if you bring this boy home?”

I jump back. It's lucky I'm in the reeds where they can't see or hear me. The daughter of the Pharaoh, I tell myself. The Egyptians say he's the son of a god. Amma always spits when someone mentions that and says, "Nonsense." None of the Hebrews believe it, but here's this golden lady standing right in front of me, every bit of her body uncovered for me to see, and I wonder if there's more to the story than I know. It seems to me that only a god could make someone like this.

I don't realize it, but I've stood up. I'll be ashamed to tell Amma this later, because it's not on account of the baby. I don't know how I'll tell her that I just about forget about the baby. It's as if that woman, the Pharaoh's daughter, has told me to rise without even looking at me. I'm pretty sure she doesn't know I'm there, and yet it's like she commanded my body anyway.

They're all walking through the water to the bank now. One of the girls is carrying the basket with my baby brother in it. All three girls struggle to get out of the water. They had to walk in a lot further to get to where their mistress was standing than they did to pick up the basket. They're weighed down by their wet clothes and jewelry, but the Pharaoh's daughter keeps rising, all of her shimmering and gold against the green trees and reeds. The tallest girl rushes as fast as she can to bring a cloth to her mistress and wipes down her arms, legs, back, and stomach. She bends down and lifts each her mistress's feet and rubs it gently, then puts the whitest looking dress over her head. I thought the other girls were clean, but this makes me almost want to cry it's so perfectly white, like the wispy clouds that sometimes look like they're dancing across the sky.

One of the other girls brings a golden stool and she sits. Then the tall girl begins to comb her hair out, bit by bit. I've always wanted a comb. I imagine how good that would feel, and how nice my hair would be. Amma tries to run her fingers through my hair to untangle it after I spend all day running. The wind pushes it around, and dust gets all the way into it, but no matter what she does it's always a wild tangle, like a dust cloud that I carry around with me all the time.

This comb is white and pink and blue all at once. Amma and Baba always tell me, “Slaves don’t have the luxury to believe in miracles,” but they’ve never seen anything like this comb. I can’t believe something can shimmer and change color but stay the same all at once.

The Pharaoh’s daughter must have thought about what her girls said, because she says, “He is not a Hebrew,” and I can’t tell if she really believes that or just won’t hear anyone tell her she’s wrong. “He has no mother and no father. He was born of the water. You saw it yourselves.”

The girls are pretty confused about that, but they all nod. It’s stupid. I know he’s a Hebrew. I saw my Amma’s belly get big and heavy with my own eyes and then watched her bring him into life. She’s his mother, not this river.

“All things born of the river are sacred,” she says, and again the girls look like they don’t understand what she’s saying. I don’t either. I’ve heard a lot of crazy Egyptian things, but I never heard anything like this before. I look closely at her, and then I wonder if she’s making that up, even though her face looks exactly like it did before.

Well, not exactly. As they’re talking, the girls pile gold on her. She’s wrapped in it, over her dress and around her waist, her neck, her ankles and wrists, and on every one of her fingers. They paint her eyes black like theirs, and put red onto her lips so that they look like blood. Instead of one of those bands that each of them are wearing, they put a headdress on her. I watch them do it, and it’s just about the most complicated thing I’ve ever seen. First, they take parts of her hair and pin it to the top of her head, crossing the pieces so that it looks like the basket my brother is in, then they weave golden cloth through it and tie that to the headdress, which they lower onto her whole head. It’s covered in jewels that ring around her head like a crown. I think that the gem in the middle of her forehead must be the biggest, greenest one in the entire world.

All the while, she keeps talking, “We will take him home. He will be our son, and a member of the royal house. My father respects all divinity. He will understand the miracle of this boy’s birth.”

When they’re done with her she looks like a goddess for real. I see that my hand has reached out, as if to touch her, to feel all that shining gold and know what it means to hold something precious.

I’m still standing in the reeds. I must look like I grew out of them. There’s dirt on my face. My hair is tangled as always. There are tears in my dress that Amma has sewn back up a hundred times. All that usually makes me invisible. I think there must be something wrong with Egyptians’ eyes, because they usually can’t see me until one of them needs to send me on an errand. But the Pharaoh’s daughter must see more than they do, because she looks over at me as if she knew I was there all along. Her blood-red mouth stretches out into a smile. She moves her hand so little that only I see it. I’m not sure how she tells me, but I know she’s calling me over to her, just like she called the other girls. I know that she will save us all.

The sun she carries around with her shines brighter than ever. It sparkles hot and perfect. It’s mine to lay my hand on. I take my first step toward her.

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