

# SAM

## A STORY OF MUSCAT BY ELINE TERMØHLEN MIKKELSEN

*He had lived to see his land slowly lose its soul, and now he left the world just in time to avoid seeing it fall apart completely.*

He did not know how to pretend anymore. It had been difficult these past weeks – it all seemed so hopeless. Sam sat in class and stared out the thick, UV proof windows. He was thinking about her. She lived out past the mountains, in the tribes. He pondered what his classmates would say if they knew that he was in love with a tribe girl, and giggled at the thought. They would probably think him mad. Sam Ali, the popular guy, the one they all wanted to be like, in love with a girl in the dessert. They had met a few weeks earlier, during an expedition to the tribes. All the history classes had to travel out there to see how the world used to look, before the revolution of 2016. Last time was a community outreach program, they had handed out UV-injections and food for the tribespeople. Thara, that was her name, had helped hand out the supplies because she spoke common speak, a global version of English. Her mother was born in the cities of Jordan, but was expelled to the dessert when she divorced one of the ministers. She had been religious, and one of the few unwilling to let it go when the gulf-state was formed in 2016. Thara was unlike any of the girls in Sam's class. All the others fawned on him – it got old real fast. She was provoking. She still believed in her mother's faith, illegally of course, and she talked back with that wit that made him love her.

The bell rang out, and interrupted his train of thought. He noticed that Kari was smiling at him from the other side of the class. He overlooked it and went out to find his friends in the yard. The school yard, where all the breaks were held, was covered in a dome of the same glass which made up all the windows. It shimmered with the transparent solar cells, which supplied the city with power. Every surface worked all the day to gather power, which in turn was used to cool the enormous indoor areas where they all had to stay. Sam's father was one of the scientist brought in from the west after the regime change, and he had developed the technology for putting the solar cells in all the glass surface and the cover of the houses. He of course, had retired many years ago when Sam was born. They rarely spoke of his mother, and his father got quiet every time Sam would ask about her. He only knew that she had died around the time he was born. All the kids were out in the yard, where the climate was designed to feel like a cool, fresh day, all year round. They even had wind machines, so the conditioning were as authentic as possible. If you didn't think about it, it was easy to forget what the world outside looked like. That's why they had the trips to the tribes; as reminders of how well they had it. Sam couldn't help but to feel grateful for just that – it had brought him Thara.

The bell rang in, and Kari followed him all the way to the door. He could not stand her. They had dated for a while a few years back, and she just couldn't let it go. She was as arrogant and self-absorbed as all the others in the city. Because of his father, Sam was a popular guy, though he actually just preferred to be by himself most of the time. At the end of the day, Sam walked out of the glass exit way, to the huge parking garage, so people could move around without ever stepping foot in the 60 degree Celsius weather. All the students got in their cars and headed home, but Sam had different plans. Since he had met Thara he had been sneaking off once a week, to get injections. It was deemed unworthy of the city people to take these medicinal UV protections, but he needed them now. Thara could not get into the city, and without them he could not visit her in the tribes. It was a colleague of his fathers, one that originally came from the land that once belonged to the United Kingdom. It had long ago been absorbed into the Scandinavian state, but he still spoke with the accent of the old brits. The vaccination helped the cells of the skin repel the UV radiation. Without it, you could not step outside of the glass cover for more than an hour or so. Of course the people of the tribes got it on a weekly basis. Some of the critics of the state had

discovered that the tribespeople started to develop a resilience, but as long as they did not know, the state did nothing to deal with the effects. For now, the darker skin they had developed, and the vaccines, kept them safe. That is one of the reasons that it was frowned upon to mate with the tribespeople. The state was afraid that the gene pool would end up changing to the worse, so no one could work under the sun anymore.

Sam had not told anyone that he had begun to take the vaccinations; people would only start to ask questions. His father probably would not mind, but he did not mind much about anything these days. Most of the elders were starting to die off, because they had lived most of their lives without the technology to deal with the UV; most of them had cancer of some sort. Sam's father was not an exception. He was actually worse off, than most of the others. He was one of the few that had original Arab blood in his veins. Many died in the civil wars of 2015 and 2016, when the Muslim state rose and destroyed the nations. After that everything changed. There was no nationality anymore, and definitely no religion. The countermovement to the Muslim state had gathered all the gulf countries into one state, where religion was frowned upon. But his father had lived in Azaiba when it belonged to Oman, and had only been away during the war. His skin was dark like the tribespeople, but the damage was done.

He had arranged with a nurse, that she could give him the shots behind the hospital. So before long he was on the way home. His car, like all the cars, hovered about 50 cm over the burning hot asphalt. Since the temperature of the roads rose over 50 degrees during most of the year, it was nearly impossible for anything to walk or drive on it. The cars ran on the power that the solar cells in the glass and metal of the car provided. They had discovered the method when the gulf ran dry of the oil that had given them the wealth to become the most technologically advanced state in the world. They then sold all that technology at wildly inflated prices; and regained the wealth that made the gulf rich before the war. It was one of the things that had given his father the status he enjoyed, that and his being an 'original' Arab. Sam got home just as his father was getting out of bed with the help of a nurse. He was afraid to tell him about Thara, he was not sure if he would approve. It was technically legal to be with whomever one wanted to, but those who mixed the races were often shunned. Sam helped his father out into the kitchen, and got some dinner ready for the both of them. All the food in the city came from the desert, and was distributed to the houses.

The dessert plantations and factories were established, when it was discovered how to irrigate the sandy plains. The heat was the same however, and only the tribespeople with their dark skin and the vaccinations, along with the inherited habits of generations in the dessert, could live in those conditions. That is why it was decided that they should stay there. They worked the plantations and factories, all covered and irrigated to provide food for the city. Most of them were descendants of the old migrant workers from the Asian continent, and seen as a lower kind of human. They spoke the old languages. The rest of the world had long since merged the languages into a new speak, common speak, and that had evolved out of English and Spanish. Thara was the only one from the tribes that could speak it, as far as Sam knew. That was one of the reasons she was so alluring, she combined the old world with the new. Sam liked his life, but he missed the culture that the history classes taught. The individuality of the nations that had been removed after the war.

Sam wondered how his father would react to him dating a girl from the tribes. On one hand he knew that he would like her, but on the other hand, he was a big supporter of the divided system. He decided to put it off for now. His father was going on about the new Minister of Technology. Apparently a horrible man, but extremely clever. It was often difficult to read him, he never showed much emotion when he talked, but Sam knew that he was skeptical of the state. In the 30 years before Sam was born, the country had evolved quickly, but now it had stagnated. The state was afraid of a new conflict, so they hesitated to let the technology evolve further. But the old man just

sighed, mumbled something about Sam not listening, and asked to be taken back to bed. Sam could see that he was weaker than usual, but he did not say anything, it would hurt his pride.

After dinner, he could not wait any longer. He ran out of the exit way, to reach the small garage attached to the house and drove off. He aimed for the ominous, red mountains away from the ocean. The air was cloudy with dust, and he knew it would be close to 65 degrees now. The drive to the dessert tribes was about an hour, so he had a while to think. He imagined getting Thara to go with him to the Scandinavian state. The gulf often heard rumors about the northern states, how the weather was better, and the state less controlling. Of course the UV radiation was still harsh, but could be handled with clothing and headwear. Just the thought of breathing fresh air was like a fantasy from an ancient world. It had changed so quickly after the war. When the nations began dropping atomic bombs, the environment finally cracked. They could fly off, take father with them, and head north.

Finally, the tribes began to appear in the sandy surroundings. Her tribe was one of the furthest out; surrounding one of the biggest plantations. Sam arrived at a simple brick house, with a flat roof of the solar cell material that covered every roof in the tribes. Thara came out and greeted him at the door, but Sam could immediately see on her face that something was wrong. She took his hand and walked out onto the burning hot sand, their feet protected by specially made shoes. When they were out of earshot of the house, she told him that her boss had found out that they were seeing each other. She said it in the calm, unemotional manner with which she carried herself. But Sam noticed a single tear starting to peak out of the corner of her eye. He did not say anything; this had been coming for a while. He just pulled her close to him, and prepared to be separated forever. Thara knew, as Sam did, that if her boss did not approve of relationships she could be fired, along with her family. And without a job, no one could survive in the dessert. They had embraced each other for a while, and then she had asked him to leave. He expected no less from his stoic, rational Thara. In a society where people came and went every month for work, he was, in a heartbreaking way, used to saying goodbye to the people he loved. It was a consequence of the new, global world.

Lying in bed later, he stared at the glass ceiling and imagined the world his father grew up in. Nothing had really changed. Not really. The classes were still separated, and love with someone out of one's social class was frowned upon. Money still spoke louder than anything, but now there was an equalizer. Everyone suffered under the climate. At 75, Sam's father was older than most. All the technology in the world could not redo what had been done. The earth had turned on the human race. In a way, it seemed silly for him to worry about Thara. When he was probably part of the last few generations to live on earth. But he loved her, and he wanted to spend his life with her. She was the meaning that he had been looking for. All the girls he had known before had seemed shallow, all his friends were superficial, and his father did not have long to live. She was all he had, and she was all he wanted. He then and there decided that he was going to leave the gulf, and that she was coming with him. The rest of the night he spent in sleepless musings about the life he was planning.

In the morning he went to school as usual, but prepared for it to be the last time he would see it. Later he went to the hospital, where he had arranged to buy a plentiful supply of UV-vaccinations, so they could make it outside if they had to. Of course, he had not been able to talk to Thara yet, but he was carried away. He was sure she would want to leave with him, and start a new life. All he needed to do was get her, and talk to his father. The latter was the most difficult. He was sure the old man would not want to come, but it would be hard to leave him behind. In the afternoon, he went home to face the music. His father sat on the side of the bed, looking out over his old property. When he was a boy it had been a beautiful garden, facing out onto the beach. Now the heat had removed all life from the garden, and the beaches were all covered in decades' worth of garbage and oil spills. The Omanis, who lived in this part of the gulf state before, had taken the nature for granted. Sam's father spent many hours of his illness staring out on the land, with tears in his eyes. It was the only time he showed emotions. Sam

approached him, and put a careful hand on his shoulder. He sat down on the bed next to his father. Slowly, he explained his plan. He told him about Thara, and about going north. His father was quiet for a while, but then he smiled and shook his head. He had been expecting this to happen for years, he had just hoped he was well enough to travel when it did. The gulf state was a good place to live, compared to so many of the areas, but during the war it had changed. There was no soul left in the nation. No culture. Everything that made the place special, had gone with the overthrow of the Muslim state, and later with the counterrevolution. His father explained that he had wanted Sam to make the decision himself, without any influence from him.

Sam left his father's side, and drove out to get Thara. When he reached the tribes he immediately noticed that something had changed. There were no people in the street, and no light in the houses. He drove through a ghost town. Then he saw it. Behind one of the old factory houses was a gathering of people. There must have been hundreds of tribespeople. He got out of the car and moved closer to hear what they were saying. He could not understand, but it was clear that the gathering was agitated. Suddenly he felt a hand in his, and heard a voice in his ear. Thara spoke softly, so none of the surroundings could hear. She explained that the tribes had gotten word of the fading effects of the vaccines, and they were preparing to riot. Sam knew what this would mean for him. If the tribespeople united in a riot against the city, he would not be able to get out of the country. At least not safely. He turned around and faced Thara, and told her about his plan. At first she was quiet. She looked out over the dunes. The place that had been her home forever. The place that had been home too several cultures, nations, families, transformed into an artificial world. And it would only get worse from now on out.

She took a deep breath, turned and faced him, and took his hand. Together they walked to the car. She said that they would have to hurry, and he knew she was right. If the riot got started before they were able to leave the country, they might get stuck here, or worse. They arrived at Sam's house, and planned their way out of the country. In the distance they were beginning to hear masses of people yelling. And out the window, they could see the city lighting up in the night. The riot had begun. The tribespeople had finally had enough of the inequality, and the states indifference towards them. As Sam packed, Thara went to the father's room to tell him about the riots, and their travel plans. Sam looked out over the place where he had never quite felt at home, and hoped with all his heart that they would make it out. Without knowing why, he thought about his mother. He wondered what she would say, if she saw the place she loved go up in flames. Thara came into the room, and walked over to him. She looked into his eyes, and immediately he knew. His father had lived on the land through three changes of regime, and while one could walk on the dunes, and swim in the sea. The proud old man had stood up and looked out over the downfall of his home. Thara said he almost looked peaceful, as if he had been waiting for this for many years. Then he had asked her to help him to the bed, laid down, and passed away quietly.

Sam took a deep breath, and almost felt happy for his father. He had lived to see his land slowly lose its soul, and now he left the world just in time to avoid seeing it fall apart completely. He took Thara's hand in his, and took one final look out the window. Two hours later, he was sitting in an airplane, with Thara by his side, on the way to a better life north of the equator. Beneath them, the dessert stretched out in an endless sea of dunes, while the people of the land fought back against the forces that destroyed the land they love.