

He'd been doing it for days, maybe weeks, and no one knew why. Even those ultimate people watchers- the market traders, were bemused. Other people's business was their business. Instinctively they knew who was in the market place to trade and who was just passing through. It was important to them. All were wooed, but the 'passers by' more out of habit than with conviction.

Yet this old man baffled them. He was a trader- a very good one at that, but recently, bizarrely, he seemed to have lost his appetite for the market. Instead every day without exception, he would walk past, so absorbed and oblivious to all about him that even the most hardened trader had all but given up on him. It was a mystery to them all. And there were deeper questions each asked, even if they didn't articulate them: How could a resident look so perpetually lost? And even more outrageously to those whose whole lives revolved around the acquisition of wealth: how could a rich man look so sad?

Whenever the old man appeared, all were aware of him. Some stared. Others more subtly watched, albeit without apparently looking or seeing. And today all were aware that something was different. There was a purposeful step in the man's stride, and a glint in his eye.

Terah took the same walk he'd taken every day for the last couple of months. But today was different. His mind was made up. And strangely all that had up until then

seemed so gloomy and so alien; no longer seemed quite so bad. Every day he had ventured down the same alley into the same market place, to be confronted by the same sounds and smells, which in themselves were enough to tell him he didn't fit.

Despite living and making a living here, his senses still registered the environment of Ur as "foreign"; which of course it was. Perhaps like nowhere else on earth, the whole world was lured into this tiny compact square of ground. Buying and selling the mundane and essential from nearby, and exotic and extravagant from far away. All with one goal in mind: to become as wealthy as Terah.

Most of these traders were just passing through. A few, like him, had settled. Unlike him however, they had settled emotionally and spiritually as well as physically. He couldn't. Deep down he carried memories of other smells and sounds, probably not so pleasing to the nose and ear of most, but that wasn't the point. The comfort and pleasure lay not in the nature of the senses but in their associations.

He had to admit though it was ridiculous. Here in the city which epitomised success, he had made his fortune. Yet somehow it wasn't enough. Day after day he'd taken this walk for no obvious purpose. In fact, at first it had been in a vain effort to remind himself of all he had achieved and where he'd ended up. Every day he walked through the square where the whole world gathered, and then up past the school and mighty Ziggerat, before turning back down the most lavish of tree lined boulevards where he lived. But it never worked. He might have been in awe of the massive temple tower, which had stood for a hundred years and for all he knew might stand for another

hundred years yet; but as soon as he turned into his street and saw his house, his excitement ebbed away. It was indeed a beautiful house, but it wasn't home.

Most recently his daily circuit had begun to express his inner restlessness, his loss, and crazily enough his homesickness. Round and round he went like a bird flying in circuits back to his perch. Just like a bird, seemingly going nowhere, but in fact plucking up the courage for the marathon migration back home. It seemed irrational. He yearned to turn his back on the sophistication of the world's material and cultural capital, and for what? A rustic backwater, devoid of most of the luxuries he'd gotten used to. But more than that: Home. The place of his birth, and the place for his death.

Now, finally, it made sense. He couldn't think, sitting down. He was the sort of person who needed to be on the move to make sense. And as he walked, he became aware again of who he was, and what he needed to do. He passed the Ziggerat and thought for a moment how some might see this as a spiritual moment. But Terah had never had too much time for spiritual matters. He just didn't think or talk about these sort of things. The stories his mother had taught him, and indeed her grandchildren after him, suggested his family had a few credits to trade with God, whoever or whatever he may be. And so a trader of his skill and experience should be able to do the necessary as and when it might be required. He had for instance bought some favour with the moon god by naming his daughter Sarai after the wife of the god. His first born son had similarly recognised Malkah Sharratu by naming his daughter, Milcah. Not that it had borne any fruit for either of the poor women! And then again

he had taken out some back up with a household god of sorts. Although to be honest, he had left that side of his affairs to his son, Nahor, to supervise for him.

Terah stopped and absorbed the sight and feel of the edifice before him. The sheer grandeur of its size, the extraordinary design, and the fervency of the Sumerian people, who scurried around it, should have stirred him. But as ever, it failed. If anything, he felt somewhat uneasy about it. What was it his mother taught him about a tower in a city of many tongues? Or maybe just the whole religion thing got to him. There was nowhere on earth as ordered, regimented and rational as Ur. It was over one hundred years since Ur-Nammu had taken power in a chaotic coup, and since then, order had reigned. Ur had everything from regulations governing merchants' scales to those which determined the very layout and development of the city itself. A passing trader from Nippur or prospective immigrants from Uruk, both were bound by a legal code of a complexity his family back home would never have believed. Schools taught children about sciences and wonders which would have dumbfounded his forefathers.

Yet amidst this self confidence, the happy people of Ur were still lured to this edifice in search of a god who dwelt in the fires they lit. And why? Curiosity? Fear? Or could it even be an emptiness, similar to his own; albeit one sated in a rather less dramatic way than he intended.

Terah shrugged off the thought, and turned down the grandest of roads. Behind the palms planted to bring shade, colour and even fragrance befitting this end of town, lay houses which outwardly didn't look anything extraordinary. Each unremarkably grey

and adorned only by wooden verandas, they modestly concealed the opulence within. Step over the threshold however, and this old nomad still occasionally stopped to wonder. Today was one of those days. For a moment he stood to take in all that was his. Extending before him was a courtyard resplendent in colour. In the centre was the fountain, so positioned that the sound of its running waters permeated every corner of the mansion. It cooled and refreshed without the need for tasting, and soothed and calmed better than any lyre. Around all four sides of the courtyard ran the colonnaded balcony, supported by huge upright beams which reached from floor to capital, each uniquely and intricately carved.

For the briefest of moments he wavered; somehow entranced by the scene before him, until the spell was broken by the clumsiness of a child. Prompted by an unseen adult, she had raced to the fountain with a bowl and towel. And in her eagerness to reach Terah in order to fulfil her appointed task, she tripped, spilling the water and splashing Terah's robes. Horrified, she froze on the ground where she fell. Then hesitantly she looked up into the face of the patriarch, whose expression slowly evolved from seeming preoccupation through genuine surprise to gentle amusement. The little girl decided to quit while she was ahead, and ran off to her mother's rebuke, leaving Terah to wash his own hands and feet at the ornate basin surrounding the fountain.

No, there was no going back. Ah, but how to tell the family? That was the question. He could of course just order them to come along, and there would be no public arguments. In turn the men would order the women and the women the children, all without registering any dissent, at least not publicly. Of course under cover of

darkness, and in the secrecy of the marriage beds, the wives may protest, in whatever way they might consider most effective. Maybe they would prevail, and their weary or frustrated husbands, somewhat awkwardly, would find occasion to ask to be excused. A request he would grant, partly because he did genuinely love his family, and wouldn't want to force his own sentimental and undeniably selfish schemes on them. But partly because he knew he would leave them soon in any case. No, he would do the unthinkable, and offer a choice to all at the very outset. Once more he smiled- he couldn't recall smiling so much in one day for a very long time. It could be a very lonely journey.

Abram had seen the episode with the child from behind a doorway curtain on the balcony, and couldn't help a smile himself. However he was surprised to see his father smiling as well. It had been a long time. He had watched Terah walk to the fountain and pour water over his hands and feet, and even, extravagantly, his head. Then to his amazement he saw him smile again. At that, Abram knew it was time. He realised he might never again get such an opportunity as this, and almost immediately an excitement and panic caused his adrenalin to pump and his limbs to freeze.

He had tried to rehearse the moment, conversation and arguments many times in his head, but had failed abysmally to come up with a suitable script. It was easier to describe color to the blind than to explain to his father his experiences and their consequences. To be honest he hardly understood them himself: voices, promises, and outrageous commands. He knew instinctively his grandmother would have understood. She and Nahor, her husband, were probably the last of an age when there

was a greater certainty about God. Now as the world merged in metropolises like Ur or Kish, all certainties were blurred. Man may be able to build towers up into the heavens, but somehow the gods seemed even more noticeable by their absence.

Abram's problem was that if he couldn't be certain who he had heard, how could he confidently reveal what he had heard? Especially when it was so outrageous. Leaving father and mother was one thing, but breaking ties with the whole family: that could only ever be interpreted as the ultimate insult. Leaving Ur wouldn't have been seen as too abnormal, but leaving as a nomad, homeless, and apparently directionless, that was another story altogether. The uncertainties which had plagued him these seventy odd years paralysed him once more. Yet this he knew. He had heard the voice, and it had spoken not just to his head but also to his heart, his very soul. It had spoken meaning into futility, and hope into pain. He wanted it to be true. How he wanted it to be true! And if it was, no price was too high to pay, even those moments of humiliation and awkwardness before his father.

For a fleeting second, courage seemed to flow through his whole being. And, from his balcony, as he watched his father seemingly carefree in his exuberance at the fountain, he knew that courage and opportunity might never coincide quite so conveniently again. Abram let the heavy curtain he was holding open, fall back across the arched opening, and headed for the wooden staircase down. But no sooner had he done so, than the courage seemed to drain away, until by the time he was face to face with Terah, he had none left. Now he stood, somewhat awkwardly, before his father, not knowing what to say or do, and in any case totally unprepared for what was about to happen.

It took Terah a while to realise his son stood before him but when he did, he growled happily: “Abram, how opportune. Go gather the men... quickly... before my courage fails me.”

No one needed to be told where to gather. There was one place to which the men of the family retired to drink endless cups of tea or weak wine whilst lounging on ornate cushions spread across the floor. The room itself was on the ground floor but internal balconies extended out below the high ornate ceiling. Beautifully groined arches led off from all four walls to various other parts of the house, but today each were draped with the finest curtains- to limit the eavesdropping to just the most committed!

Having spread the word among his kin, Abram was the first to take his seat, and he did so with an inner uncertainty. As many times before, he felt a sense of destiny, but was genuinely unaware of what this destiny might be, how it would be worked out, and indeed most significantly of all, who was orchestrating it. Not much of this showed of course. Abram may have been the younger son, but he was seventy years old, and every inch a patriarch. “Exalted Father” was his name, a nobleman in a noble lineage, educated, sophisticated, refined. And so he kept up appearances, and gave little, if nothing away. He watched the others as they gathered, and wondered what hopes, fears and dreams they too secretly harbored.

Nahor lowered himself gently on to a cushion opposite him, and as befitted the eldest surviving heir: next to where their father would sit. Abram offered his brother the courtesy of a warm greeting which for his part Nahor returned. But for all the formality there was little depth behind the exchange. It wasn't that the brothers were at loggerheads; it was simply that they lived very different lives. Nahor it seems was predestined to be the loyal family man. Named after his grandfather, custodian of the household gods, and conservative and traditional to the very core of his being. He would never even countenance what was running through Abram's mind right now; let alone comprehend it.

Abram wondered not for the first time whether it could be possible for two brothers to have less in common. There was just one thing they shared, and that was too painful for either to articulate. Consequently each of them dealt with it in their own, alone. Abram by questioning and seeking a greater peace and purpose, Nahor by accepting and by doing and being all else that was expected of him.

As Abram watched Nahor settle his ample frame into the cushions next to where his father would sit, he mused that the seating plan spoke of more than just lineage. He would never be as close to his father as Nahor. The two were one, whereas he thought, and lived on a completely different level to Terah. In no way did he begrudge Nahor any of this. In many ways it was beneficial or at least would be, if Abram could pluck up the courage to do what he had to do. Nahor would always be there, not only hopefully to continue his father's line but to do it in his father's way.

As he settled, Nahor glanced up at balcony above Abram's head, and Abram couldn't conceal the slightest of smiles. He didn't need to follow the glance to know where it was directed, or why, come to that. The lack of secrecy at times like this was the very worst kept secret. Behind most of the curtains someone sat, and behind the curtain at which Nahor glanced, would be Milcah, his young wife. Abram smiled because he knew Nahor loved his youthful wife, who in turn had restored a bit of passion to his otherwise rather predictable brother. He appreciated Nahor's care for one of their dead brother's children, as indeed he had sought in a similar way to care for another. He was also fond of Milcah, because she reminded him of his brother, Haran, and more importantly because she was Lot's sister. And of course in addition to this, there was an even greater unspoken but understood reason for the empathy Abram had for Milcah.

Next, Lot clumsily collapsed into the cushion beside Abram, who feigned an ill tempered glare at his nephew. As ever Lot smiled back, and that was exactly what Abram wanted, although he was once more able to stifle any outward expression of his inner smile. Lot was the anomaly in Abram's life, and everyone knew why. Everyone should be allowed one inconsistency or eccentricity, and Abram had good reason for his. As a serious man of depth who few understood, his indulgence of Lot somehow made Abram human and reachable.

If Lot were a child, he would have been called spoilt. Everyone knew it, and everyone knew why. The older men understood Terah's doting on him, not only because so far he was his only true grandson, but also because Lot reminded him of the son he'd lost. The younger men however appreciated how Abram had fulfilled his duty to his

brother's son in a similar way to how Nahor had to Haran's daughter. But the most understanding and appreciative were the women of the household, who watched Abram enjoy the son he would never have. They understood that in a way Abram's love for Lot was yet another expression of his love for and commitment to Sarai.

Abram thought again of the nagging doubt he had about his nephew, who he, as much as anyone, had spoiled. For all the attraction of Lot's confident, carefree manner, there was a flaw in it, which became all too apparent at times like this. Abram so wanted to share his heart with him, but realised it would be futile. Lot would never grasp the true depth of the thoughts swirling through Abram's mind right now, and Abram felt this deficiency acutely. Of everyone, it was Lot he wanted to take with him on this journey. His fear though was that Lot would go along without asking why. And that could spell danger if not disaster for all concerned.

Finally, with all the dignity befitting a man of age, position and wealth, Terah took his place, and as always, there followed a period of silence. These things were never rushed. The silence in itself didn't indicate any great import or significance to the discussions to follow, but something else in the air did. Nahor and Abram caught each other's eye to try to read the mind of the brother. Abram knew Nahor would probably be more in tune with their father's thinking, and wondered whether his father had shared his mind with his surviving first-born first, as in deed custom would traditionally demand. However the quizzical look back told Abram that Nahor knew as little as he. In fact his brother was obviously trying to discern whether Abram knew more than he had initially let on, when calling all to the assembly, and whether his father had told him the reason for the gathering. For a mischievous second Abram

considered playing with Nahor by pretending to know more than he did, but ultimately he had neither the energy or inclination for such a futile distraction. Instead for a while they held each other's gaze until both realised there was nothing to be read there, and Lot broke the silence.

Silence didn't sit well with Lot. He was younger, and traditionally should therefore have kept quiet. But he had failed to learn either the joy of reflection or the awareness of the moment, which only age and sensitivity taught. He started to talk freely about trivia, and his grandfather not only tolerated and indulged him, but actually positively encouraged him. He would periodically laugh uproariously, if not artificially, at Lot's observations of life in Ur. Until at the end of one period of extended laughter, which even Nahor and Abram rather self consciously tried to join in on, Terah remarked, seemingly incidentally, but evidently as a bridge in conversation, on the craziness of the city. For that moment even Lot seemed to have run out of things to say, and as all reflected upon this summary, Terah took his chance.

"There's word on the street that Ur has peaked." Again the tone was incidental, but both Abram and Nahor knew their father well enough to know that the conversation was now being led, however indirectly, to its main purpose. Lot made to respond in a light hearted fashion but the most surreptitious of movements from Abram was enough to cut him off before a sound left his mouth.

"Word is," continued Terah, obviously more deliberately now, "Canaan is the land of promise for the future."

For a split second Abram lost all feeling in every part of his body: head, heart even limbs. Then as if to make up for lost time, everything raced. His mind swirled, heart pounded, and limbs responded to the excess blood flow by twitching involuntarily. He could scarcely take in what was being said, and consequently couldn't respond. He was aware of responses around him but couldn't focus enough on them to register what was being said. It appeared Lot was laughing, and Nahor questioning, which for him was tantamount to arguing. There was also movement in various curtains.

But in the midst of it all, Abram was transported once again, to a time and place now distant but still ever present in his mind. He stood again on the ravine he'd made his own, and looked out. But for what, or who? As he took in and became one with all he saw, he became aware again of an invisible presence, a Creator, who had to be divine, eternal. That much he knew. He could see it, as clearly as he saw all the creation which lay before him. But he wanted to know more. He wanted to know Him, and worship Him. He was tired of the futility of the conversation, the philosophies, even the lives of those about him. Without a knowledge of the God who made all this, surely the wisdom of Ur was pure folly. One look at the images in and around the ziggerat was enough to prove his point. But the folly permeated deeper than that. It was seen in the sexual appetites, and materialism of his peers. Not that he was immune to these things. He yearned for the ultimate sexual experience: that of procreation. But there had to be more than even that, and this is what he sought.

And then he recalled the voice, the call, the answer. He remembered the flood of emotions which had come over him in waves: the bewilderment, fear, ecstasy, and doubt. And then as suddenly as they came, they left him standing just where he was,

outwardly unchanged, but inwardly never to be the same. He remembered heading back home, knowing that it could never again be home. He remembered the hours upon hours of trying to fathom out what to do with what He had heard, and more significantly trying to understand who it was who had spoken to him.

Unable to talk even to his beloved Sarai about all this, Abram had begun to seek his Creator through the lineage of his ancestry. And what had been vague stories and myths, came alive to reveal a person. But however exciting these discoveries were, the step of allowing the God of history, to become the God of his story was a mammoth one. The demand this God had made of him was just too great: to leave everything, home, livelihood, even family, step out in faith, and go to Canaan. And here was the rub: even if he did know who that faith was in, and to be honest he still didn't, no one else would have a clue. For weeks, no months, he'd sought a way to explain to his family what his God was saying, and now suddenly it appeared he might not need to. But to find that out for sure, he needed to catch up with what was being said around him. So Abram did one of those mental shifts he'd become accustomed to in recent times, and re-engaged with the real world, only to discover all were silent and looking at him.

“Well,” exclaimed Terah, in a way which suggested it wasn't the first time he had said it!

“Well,” Abram repeated, looking round frantically for help in interpreting what question it implied, and therefore what the correct answer was. Ultimately he could only guess:

“Well, yes.”

Terah beamed, Lot laughed, and Nahor shifted awkwardly, as Abram looked on in bemusement. According to custom, for a while longer and before it was acceptable to get up, the conversation turned back to trivia. There was no further reference to the significant matters discussed, and therefore no further clues as to what Abram had just agreed.

Finally, Terah, not without some difficulty, got back to his feet, offered a farewell blessing, and disappeared through a curtain leading to his apartment. The other men stayed seated. It was apparent Nahor still had things to say, but, as Abram expected, it was Lot who broke the silence, as he fell back on his cushion and laughed.

“Who would have thought of it of the old man? Still up for a Canaanite woman.”

Such disrespect wasn't permitted even from Lot, and Nahor was roused from his preoccupation, and spoke loud enough for all to hear, however thick the curtain behind which they were hiding.

“If your grandfather asks us to go to Canaan, it is only because he considers it to be in the best interests of this family.” And with that he staggered to his feet and scurried away. In the process he lost any sense of the dignity he sought to portray, and let slip the ill temper, confusion, even anger he had hoped to conceal.

Lot just laughed again and turned to his uncle to continue the joke, this time at Nahor's expense. But as he had so often experienced recently, he found Abram was somehow remote. So unable and unwilling to understand his uncle's moods, Lot simply slipped away to tell of his excitement and amusement to any member of the household who would listen.

For his part, Abram was reflecting on what Nahor had said. Now he knew that Terah was asking them to go to Canaan, but he still didn't know why? And the why was very important to him. Was it, as Nahor suggested, a rational decision based upon what was best for the family, or was it more profound than either Nahor, or Terah come to that, realised? Was God engineering the circumstances for the call he had placed on Abram's life? On the one hand, it was certainly convenient in that it meant Abram could set out on the course to which he was being called by a strange but increasingly recognisable voice. On the other hand it didn't quite match the original call to leave everything... including family.

Abram lay back and closed his eyes. Convenient or complicated. Not for the first time he was unable to grasp the intricacies of what was going on. If he knew this God better, then maybe he could hear Him clearer, believe Him more easily, and step out more confidently. As it was, he felt clueless, and consequently more than a little angry. It wasn't fair, because it wasn't clear. And would he ever become clear and confident enough to know what the right thing is and then do it?

Then as quickly as the anger came over him, it dissipated, and the reason he knew stood before him. Sarai's mere presence was discernable to him, whether he saw her

coming or not. He had never tried to explain it to anyone so had never tried to put his feelings into words. Anyway he knew that if he had tried, he would have failed.

Now he knew she was there. He could smell her, but more than that, sense her, and she soothed him. As he had done so many times before, he lay there seeing her without opening his eyes. Her extraordinary beauty, which age only dignified, extended far beyond the physical into the emotional. These facets of her beauty then merged in her laughter, and even after all these years, she still took his breath away. How she could laugh: a laughter born of and through pain, which expressed rather than covered up the heartache of her emptiness and barrenness. Somehow the sadness of its foundation made it all the more poignant and her all the more attractive.

Sarai looked down at the man she loved, and watched as the anxiety, which she knew wracked his body, evaporated. She knew and enjoyed the power she had over him in this regard. She was excited by it and proud of it, as she knew of no other woman who had quite the same impact on her husband. And to be honest she needed it. The ache in her empty belly constantly reminded her of her failing, the void in their lives, and the futility of her womb. At least she had something to give to him, and, although she hated to admit it, maybe also something to hold on to him by. She knew she exuded energy, which was attractive to men, although she knew not how. To be honest she didn't care. She was only interested in this one man, and if she couldn't give him what her whole body was purposed to do, she would willingly lay before him all else she was.

She stood waiting for Abram to open his eyes. Up until very recently she wouldn't have needed a conversation with her husband. She merely took in all his eyes said,

and knew him. Now though it was different. There was something about him she couldn't grasp. It was unsettling. Abram couldn't hide anything from her, which could mean only one thing: even he didn't understand it. And sure enough as his eyes flickered and opened, there it was: an uncertainty, a longing, an excitement and a fear. He made to speak, but Sarai merely smiled, shook her head, and said: "I know, I heard."

Abram looked at her and loved her. If only she really knew. If only she had heard. If only he could share this with her at least.