

Kelle Grace Gaddis

An Uncertain Light

Sleep is a type of dying we enter each night. If lucky, we rise from our rest in peace, our pillowed tombs, to see another day, there are miracles all around me, thought Amari the morning of his trial. As yet unable to imagine the jury would convict him.

The prosecutor vigorously shook hands with the grieving families for whom he was a hero.

Amari's attorney smoothed her skirt, picked a piece of lint off its edge and flicked it aside. She regretted taking the case in the first place. In her mind, Amari was probably guilty. Originally, she'd wanted it for its high profile but soon regretted the case as she was portrayed as a villain by the media.

The judge felt he might topple over at any minute. His home AC unit was out, causing heat-induced insomnia, all he wanted was a nap.

The jurors, conversely, were edgy from an excess of coffee and having spent hours under scrutiny from the families that lost people in the explosion. Once dismissed, they bustled into the lobby like hungry chickens into a feeding yard, clucking at one another, the media, and their families. Giddiness aside, some were already feeling uncertain of Amari's guilt. They wanted to know how their decision was playing on TV. Their families assured them that they did the right thing. Everyone wanted justice for the victims - someone had to pay.

The foreman, an angry gray-haired man, had no doubts about Amari's guilt. He knew the evidence was thin but he felt that the mosque Amari attended was evidence enough to link him to the crime. He repeatedly asked his fellow jurors, "What was Amari doing in this country anyway?"

Amari stood quietly, wondering how this could happen. He hadn't reacted to the word "guilty." And, when the bailiff approached him after the trial he'd extended his wrists for cuffing without resistance. Some mistook Amari's resolve as admission of guilt, but that was not the case, Faten Amari was an innocent man.

On the way to his cell, walking past the peach colored walls and steel bars, Amari's mind drifted back to the day his uncle told his eight-year-old self the story of the thief.

"A thief," his uncle said, "ran through the fruit market in Dammam whipping items off carts and tables."

His uncle threw his entire body into the tale, running in place while grabbing imaginary apples, nectarines, and figs from invisible merchants. His arms shot left and right over a dozen times to demonstrate how many vendors the thief had robbed.

Faten laughed, "How could a thief carry so much fruit while running?"

"The thief had a sling fashioned across his white thawb to conceal the stolen fruit," his uncle said impatiently.

"Didn't he look lumpy?" Faten asked.

"Lumpy or not lumpy, doesn't matter Faten, you must listen to understand."

"Sorry Uncle, what happened next?"

"Soon, another man was running along the same path as the first but at a slower pace. The second man's arms were also loaded with fruit, but he had no sling across his thawb to manage the bulk. When a tourist stepped backward into the path, he tripped the second man, sending him to the ground. Nearby vendors, having heard people shouting "Thief!" beyond their view, were on alert and ready to pounce on the man responsible for the robbery.

The tourist, oblivious to any crime, apologized to the downed man scrambling for his goods. The man in the dust looked up and said, "It was an accident" giving the tourist permission to go. The gap the tourist left quickly filled with angry shoppers that had begun to point and murmur "Thief" at the man on his knees gathering fruit.

Just as the discombobulated man reclaimed the last fallen nectarine from the path, and placed it atop all the other precariously arranged fruit between the crook of his arm and his chest, a righteous man stepped forward assessing the man's dirty thawb and array of fruit and snorted, "You're a thief!"

The man carefully stood up so as not to drop anything, "Sir, you're mistaken." The old man ordered his sons to grab the sullied man's arms sending all the fruit back onto the path. While in their grips the robbed vendors caught up and saw a captured thief. One vendor spat at him. Another clucked her tongue in disapproval. The crowd began to chant, "Thief! Thief! Thief!" until the eldest son felt emboldened to act before the authority arrived, dragging the man to a nearby chopping block. He swung the block's ax upward and proclaimed, "You'll not steal again!" before bringing it down and severing the man's hand from its wrist. The crowd, feeling a mix of satisfaction and discomfort quickly dispersed.

The captive screamed in horror and pain, "I'm innocent!"

The old man hissed at the maimed man writhing on the ground, "Justice is served."

The innocent man was left alone to his tragic fate.

Faten wailed, "Uncle, it's so unfair!"

"Good Faten, good," his uncle said, "you understand the story."

Faten Amari didn't want to rot in a cell until his death sentence was carried out. After the lights dimmed, a cue for the prisoners to go to bed, he lay on his bunk wide-awake. When the guard left the corridor to relieve himself, Amari quickly took off his orange jumpsuit and lay it on the floor as if it were a prayer mat.

He prayed with the boldness of an older man, someone showered in the light of hope when all hope is lost, until the guard returned and Amari began to feign illness. The guard unlocked the cell and stepped inside. Amari grabbed the man's legs, screaming, "Justice! Justice! Justice!" And the guard beat him until Amari's head was struck one too many times and his spirit broke free, soaring away in search of miracles in the mystery of a deeper sleep.