

Unexpected Grace

E. V. Sparrow

Grimy salt water sloshed up through the wooden floorboards of the ferry loaded with vehicles and taxis. The ferry dipped and swayed as it cast off from a jetty on the Suez Canal's east bank. Lauren leaned out the taxi's rear side window and gripped the sill as three inches of water rose along the tires. She spun to her friend, Dahlia, wedged tight between their backpacks. "We'll sink!"

"Sink? I can't see a thing."

"I've never seen a ferry like this. It's a raft with an engine...a taxi float."

Dahlia craned her neck for a better view. "It's the only way to cross the Suez Canal."

"I didn't want to go to Egypt." Lauren gazed at the water's surface surrounding them. "The Israelis warned us."

"We discussed this back on the kibbutz. Flying out of Tel Aviv to Munich was three hundred dollars more than airfare from Cairo."

Lauren folded her arms. "It had better be worth the savings."

The women disembarked and stood in a long line of travelers waiting at the Sinai-Egyptian border crossing. Perspiration trickled down Lauren's back in the late afternoon heat. She gulped water from her insulated canteen. "What's happening?" She rose on her tiptoes.

"I'll go look." Dahlia leaned her backpack against Lauren's. She scurried down the line and out of sight. Dahlia returned, "It's not good. The border guard is harassing a Hasidic Jewish family. He won't let them cross."

"Isn't there peace with Israel now? President Reagan said something about that."

“No, silly, you’re thinking of the ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon, three months ago. Egypt’s been okay, but something’s up with the guard.”

Frantic male voices rose, and people in line jostled each other. A lady near Lauren mumbled, “Do what the guard tells you.”

Rejected, the terrified Jewish parents rushed their children back to the border entrance.

*Lord, comfort that family.*

Lauren and Dahlia waited several uncomfortable hours to hand over their passports and plop their backpacks on the counter to be searched. A young guard unzipped the packs. Lauren’s heart pounded. *Lord, help us get through.*

“Your passports have Israeli stamps in them!” The older guard shoved them in the women’s faces. “Why would you go there?” He snarled and spit on the cement.

*Lord, I’m scared.* Lauren glanced at the frightened people in line behind them. *Protect us.*

“We are tourists,” Dahlia smiled at the younger guard.

Lauren glanced at Dahlia. *I hope that’s all he asks.*

The guards seized the women’s cameras from their packs, yanked out the film, and threw it on the concrete. People gasped. The guard sneered, “Too bad, you will not have those photos of Israel.” Lauren stared at her feet. *Lord, deliver us from evil.* The guards grabbed their water canteens and emptied them onto the cement. *Lord, restrain violence.* The crowd murmured.

“What?” The older guard taunted, “Do you care we spilled out Israeli water? Do you wish to fight?” No one spoke. He sniggered and shoved the backpacks at the women. “Here, I feel nice this evening. Go.”

Lauren and Dahlia swung their packs onto their backs. They scuttled away from the guards until the concrete slab ended on the open desert where taxis waited for travelers. The

golden hues of the desert turned blue and purple with the sunset on the vast horizon. Lauren raised her brows. “Dahlia, I prayed so hard.”

“I did, too. If he found out we worked on an Israeli kibbutz, he would have freaked, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, there’s only three taxis, let’s grab one.” Dahlia detained a driver and asked if he had room. The other two taxis left, full of passengers. Dahlia bickered with the driver as he loaded their packs into the trunk that had no lid. “We know the rate is three pounds.”

The driver bellowed. He jerked their backpacks out of the trunk and flung them on the ground. He climbed into his taxi, slammed the door, and drove away in a dust cloud.

Lauren stared. “*Huh?* He left us here?”

“I’m sorry,” Dahlia’s voice trembled.

Lauren turned toward the border entrance. Cyclone fence, razor wire wound on top, and a locked gate. “We’re stuck here!” She panted, “Empty buildings. No lights anywhere. No water.” The first stars twinkled in the nightfall.

“And it’s getting dark.” Dahlia laid her backpack near her feet.

“Don’t scorpions and snakes come out at night?” Lauren scanned the area in the twilight. Insects hummed around them. *Lord, help us.* “What do we do?” From a distance, people were shouting. “Do you hear that?”

“Where’s it coming from?” Dahlia twirled around. “There.” She pointed toward the gloomy horizon.

“I can’t see.” The noise drew closer. “The taxi.” Lauren squealed and hopped with glee, “He came back! The passengers are yelling.” The taxi skidded to the slab. The driver rushed out,

grabbed their packs, and threw them into the open trunk. He snarled something and climbed inside.

“Get in...” Dahlia climbed onto her pack stuffed in the trunk, and Lauren followed. “We’re riding in the open trunk...this would never pass in America.” The taxi sped off. The rear window glass missing above the trunk made it easier to haul passengers like cargo. “It’s a five-hour drive to Cairo. Hang on tight, or we’ll bounce out without our packs.”

Lauren looped her arm around the window frame. “Unbelievable.” She was glad she was short, because the roof of the taxi shielded her from the sand and dust blowing past. “I hope the others don’t mind we’re sitting on their luggage. Thank God the driver came back.”

The young woman sitting in front of Lauren twisted around. An infant slept against her chest. “We told him he could not leave you there, and we would report him if he didn’t return for you. That should not happen, even to people who like Israel.”

“You heard that border guard?”

“We all did. We don’t want our country to treat tourists badly. My name is Safiya. I am a doctor of women’s health.”

The balding man next to Safiya smiled, “I am Ahmed, a professor at university.” The other passengers made their introductions. The women thanked the friendly group, but the taxi driver scowled in his rearview mirror.

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An occasional building, a lone light, and then small villages appeared in the desert night. All the passengers were asleep, except Lauren. *Wish I could sleep. I’m too thirsty.* The taxi bumped along a dirt road, parked in front of a low building, and the driver stepped out. *Maybe he’ll bring us some water.* Lauren kept time on her wristwatch. He returned in about fifteen

minutes and drove on. He stopped at two more villages. Lauren shook Dahlia awake. “He keeps stopping at houses in every village. It’ll take forever to get to Cairo.”

Safiya yawned, “He will stop to visit his relatives. His cousin, then his uncle, now his brother.”

“What did he mumble at the first stop?”

“He warned us he would take his time. He punishes us for our threats, but you are worth it.” The other passengers stirred and agreed.

Seven hours later, at 2:00 am, they arrived in Cairo. Lauren stared at the throng. “Why is it so crowded?”

“The heat of the day is harsh.” Safiya explained, “They do business at night.”

Horns blew, and drivers shouted out their windows. No one used blinkers, stoplights, or crosswalks. Vehicles swirled every direction between pedestrians and Bedouins on camels or donkeys. Lauren squealed and squeezed her eyes shut. Dahlia shrieked, “They honk instead of using blinkers!” The Egyptian passengers laughed. One by one, the driver delivered them to their destinations in Cairo. He parked near a three-story dilapidated building with no windows and jerked his head at Lauren and Dahlia. The driver unloaded their packs and left the women on the sidewalk. “This is a Four-Star Hotel?” Dahlia complained.

Lauren peered through the empty doorjamb. “Maybe back in 1939?”

“It might collapse. Oh, look, a caged-in elevator.”

Lauren inspected the gate, “It’s locked.” They climbed the winding marble stairway to the lobby. Backpackers were strewn asleep across the tiled floor. The women approached the concierge behind a desk.

“English?” His dark eyes twinkled. “Tired?”

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Dahlia sighed, “We’ve had an awful day.”

“The border guards poured out our water,” Lauren whispered. “Now, this...sleeping on the floor?” She gulped back tears. Dahlia squeezed her shoulder.

“Ah, sad day. Drink bottled water—is safe.” He reached under the counter, “Here.”

“Hallelujah!” Lauren snatched the offered bottle and opened it. “Thank you. We haven’t had water in forever...” Both Lauren and Dahlia gulped their entire bottles.

The Concierge grinned, “I know that word—hallelujah. Christians, yes? I too, believe. Take free room.” He slid a key across his desk.

“Why free?” Dahlia frowned.

“Because Scripture says do good to all men, especially to those in the household of God.”

The Concierge pointed, “You are my sisters.”

Writer and illustrator, E.V. Sparrow, served on mission trips, a worship team, and as a prayer ministry leader. She volunteered with Global Media Outreach, at Serna Village, and led small groups in single’s, women’s, and divorce care ministries. Sparrow’s published short stories encounter the unexpected.