BLACK MILK

Nelson Cook, age 43, was a travel journalist and photographer for National Geographic Traveler Magazine. He lived with his wife of ten years, Audrey, in Sedona, Arizona. Audrey had two children from a previous marriage, and worked as an anesthesiologist assistant at Verde Valley Medical Center. She was five years older than Nelson.

Cook had been on assignment in many exotic locations around the world – Mongolia, Iceland, Patagonia, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Uzbekistan, and several others. He adored his job, and realized how lucky he was to have found a position at NGT for the past six years. Now, his editor was sending him on a new assignment to Morocco. It was late March, 2019.

Nelson had been to Morocco once before, as a young bachelor backpacking around Europe one summer during his college days. He had taken the quick, one-hour ferry from southwest Spain at Algeciras to the white-washed city of Tangier for a weekend of wandering and sightseeing. It had been his first taste of Africa, and he found it both alluring and thrilling. Now, he was eager to return and see much more of this unique country.

Cook was dropped off at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix by his wife, then he flew via Frankfort, Germany to Casablanca. This teeming city by the Atlantic Ocean is the largest in Morocco, with some six million inhabitants. On the way to his hotel, Nelson marveled at the immense, gleaming marble Hassan II Mosque, with its 660’ tall minaret, the second largest mosque in the world. He ate dinner at Rick’s Café, an exact duplicate of the ‘gin joint’ restaurant/bar made famous by the classic movie bearing the city’s name, starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. The following day, when his jet lag diminished, Cook rented a dark green Land Rover with four-wheel drive, which he could use on both paved and dirt roads. All of the road signs in Morocco were in Arabic and English, so Nelson would have no problems navigating. He also had a GPS locator on his cell phone, should any unforeseen difficulties arise. The languages spoken in Morocco were Arabic, French, English, and the local Berber dialect (which even had its own alphabet), so Cook was likewise unconcerned. Other than English, he knew a fair amount of French, and a little bit of German and Russian.

Cook’s first destination on his two week-long assignment was Marrakech, an easy three-hour drive from Casablanca. His editor wanted the usual traveler updates (the city was last featured in NGT in 2011) on what to see, where to stay, what to eat, what was new, etc., as well as plenty of accompanying photos. Marrakech, dubbed the Red City, has been a popular and affordable destination for tourists for centuries (especially for hippies in the 1960's, due to its cheap hashish) . It offers a sensual feast of colors, sounds, tastes, smells, and racial mixtures. Writing about and photographing this scene would be a delightful task to anyone fortunate enough to visit here -- let alone being one who is actually getting paid for their efforts! Nelson smiled to himself in realization of this fact as he pulled into the five-star La Mamounia hotel and handed his car keys to the parking valet. His luggage would be automatically and effortlessly placed in his room as he checked in. "Very good, Mr. Cook...welcome!"

As one of the most famous hotels in the world, La Mamounia has hosted royalty and celebrities and Heads of State since it first opened in 1923. Winston Churchill called it “the most lovely spot in the whole world,” and he stayed here for months at a time whenever possible, especially to indulge in his favorite hobby of oil painting – setting up his easel outdoors in various spots in the opulent, eight-acres of private gardens that the hotel features.

Nelson was pleased that NGT had put him up here for two nights, at 6000 dirhams ($600 U.S.) per night, although maybe the hotel was discretely giving him a complimentary stay in hopes of yet another glowing magazine article of exuberant praise, complete with lush, colorful photos. In the business end of the travel industry, one never asked about such things, Cook had learned. Freshening up in his suite, Nelson headed next to one of the dining rooms downstairs and tucked into an early dinner of veal tajine with prunes and couscous, fresh-baked Moroccan bread, and some refreshing traditional mint tea with his dessert.

That evening at dusk, Nelson walked the half-hour north on Avenue Mohammed V from the hotel to the bustling, historic center of Marrakech, the medina of Jemaa El-Fna. Standing like a beacon near the entrance to the vast square was the 253’ high minaret of the Koutoubia Mosque, erected in 1190. The lights of the medina were just turning on when Cook arrived with his professional Canon camera and notepad. The daily sunset call to prayer echoed from nearby mosque loudspeakers. Nelson dodged several fancy, festooned horse-drawn carriages (called ‘caleches’), most of them filled with excited tourists, as he plunged into the throngs of people. Although some guidebooks had warned of random pickpockets in this most popular square, the large presence of both armed military and police here (and throughout all of Morocco for that matter, Cook had noticed) assured protection and safety to all – especially to foreign visitors from Europe and the U.K. (and especially lately from China), who generated much revenue for the country’s growing economy and its corresponding tourist infrastructure.

Jemaa El-Fna was a giddy carnival of snake charmers, acrobats, musicians, jugglers, fortune tellers, henna hand-painters, food vendors (selling grilled meat kebabs, tangy oranges, dates, olives, bread, honey, and fresh-squeezed fruit juices), trainers with their tethered monkeys, dancers, storytellers, magicians, and even fire-eaters. Nelson had brought along a fistful of 10 dirham notes ($1 U.S.) and smaller coins with him to pay for the privilege of taking certain outstanding close-up photographs with his telephoto lens camera. The shops, or 'souks', on the square’s perimeter sold spices, carpets, traditional clothing, leatherwear (especially the colorful ‘babouche’ Moroccan slippers), copper and brass plates, argan oil, carved woodworks, inlaid or painted tiles, glassware, and common souvenirs. Buying anything in Morocco required clever bargaining, so prices were negotiated down to around 40% of the seller’s opening bid. It was a friendly -- almost theatrical -- custom, with both parties acting their roles and usually both satisfied in the end. Even after such crafty negotiations, final prices were still roughly half of what one would pay in Europe for comparable items. Cook, meanwhile, took short, written observations while snapping away with his Canon. Everywhere he turned were colorful, fascinating scenes and interesting people and faces. Most of the older local women were dressed head-to-toe in the traditional dark Moslem ‘abaya’ covering, but only about half of the younger local women wore the simple ‘hijab’ head scarf covering. The other younger women wore totally Western-style clothing, Morocco being one of the least strict Moslem countries.

It was then that Nelson noticed an unusual- looking man missing his left leg, sitting on a worn sofa in a dark corner stall, his crutches propped up nearby. He was wearing the special indigo-dyed robes and turban of the desert Tuareg tribe. The stall smelled of cloves and rosewater. In front of the man, illuminated by an ancient, hissing gas lantern, was a crude sign in several languages, proclaiming: SOOTHSAYER – KNOW THE FUTURE. The poor cripple’s face was arresting, his skin like a wrinkled walnut shell above his beard, but his dark eyes were alert and hawk-like.

“Come, my friend. Relax and be at peace. Salaam Alaikum,” he bid Cook welcome, gesturing grandly.

“Alaikum Salaam, thank you,” Nelson replied, as he entered the stall and sat on a raised cushion opposite his host. “May I kindly take your photograph, sir?”

“Inshallah, as you wish,” the man offered. “My name is Mohammed. I hear the sound of America in your voice. Do you wish to know the future? Only 100 dirhams. Just ten minutes of your life to learn a lifetime of amazing secrets.”

“Well, esteemed sir, my purse can presently afford but 30 dirhams, if you can perhaps provide but three minutes of such secrets?” Nelson played along.

“Ah…Allah will shine on you for but a mere 40 dirhams, my American friend. A full ten minutes as well for that price. And no charge for taking my photograph. Agreed?” The man grinned with distressed teeth.

“Agreed!” Cook smiled as he handed over the dirhams.

“First, take your right hand and place it on my heart. I will do the same to you. Next, I will lean forward and place my forehead on your forehead. Clear your mind of all earthy thoughts if you can. Then I will be silent for a moment before I reveal my important messages,” the soothsayer solemnly advised.

After the ritual exchange, the one-legged man leaned back and spoke, his eyes hypnotic and compelling.

“You have traveled to many distant lands and have seen many wonders. You live in a desert area with many large red and orange rocks. There is much spiritual energy in this place. You are also a very old soul. You have returned to this world again and again in different bodies, and have lived in different places around the world across many, many years. You are a seeker of secret knowledge and wish to learn of ancient mysteries. Your traveling and your work are one. All this I sense, for I too am a very old soul. We may have even met before in a past life. Now, I have an important task for you, should you wish to know the future. I fear the final secret that you seek is not comforting, so stop me now if you don’t wish to know what will happen.”

Nelson felt the small hairs on the back of his neck prickle with nervousness and apprehension. Time froze for the moment. Was this suddenly bizarre event really happening? Was this crippled man genuine, or simply a superb, trained charlatan? How could he have guessed about the red boulders and purported energy vortex of Sedona, Arizona? Either way, Cook felt he had to know. No turning back.

“Proceed, please, Mohammed,” Nelson replied, in all seriousness.

“As Allah wills, then…my friend, you must journey over the mountains east to Ouarzazate, to the Kasbah there, and ask for the old blind woman named Fatima. She will tell you about the Black Milk,” the soothsayer commanded.

“Black Milk? What is that?” Nelson asked.

“Only Fatima can tell you. But the fate of the world will be revealed. It will be a sign from heaven. Be aware and be prepared! That is all I can say. Go now, my friend, and may Allah bless you.” The blue-robed Tuareg shook hands with Cook as Nelson rose to leave the stall. Then the mysterious man placed his right hand on his heart and bowed slightly in respect.

Somewhat emotionally fatigued, Cook took a caliche back to La Mamounia rather than walk through the crowds and traffic again. In his immaculate and quiet suite, using Google Maps, he saw that Ouarzazate was about 200 km away, about four hours driving, on a single, twisting mountain road over the lofty, snow-covered Atlas range. Although he had originally planned to stay on the largely green western side of the mountains on this trip -- and only visit Fes, Meknes, and the Roman ruins at Volubilis -- Nelson realized that he had enough time to both see this Fatima woman and still complete his magazine assignment before his two weeks were up. So it was decided. Cook was intrigued now, rather than suspicious or fearful. Besides, it might make a good story unto itself one day, maybe for sale to another publication? What harm could such a slight diversion be? As he prepared for bed, Nelson replayed the day’s events in his mind. He emailed Audrey and recapped his day for her, but excluded his unusual encounter with the soothsayer. Now was not the time, he reasoned. Later, when all the facts were in, he would tell his wife everything, he decided, as sleep crept in and took him.

The next morning in Marrakech was bright and cool, in the upper 50’s F., the Atlas Mountains clear in the distance, majestic and snow-capped. This awesome range claimed the second highest peak in all of Africa, after Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. After breakfast, Cook visited the pleasant Majorelle Gardens as part of his magazine assignment. Then it was on to the Saadian Tombs, the Bahia Palace, the modern central train station, and the Royal Theater in the afternoon. Nelson took many excellent photos and wrote up his observations of the city after he ate a fine dinner with French wine back at La Mamounia. He emailed both Audrey and his NGT editor, updating them on his progress.

Leaving Marrakech in his rented Land Rover after checking out of his hotel, Nelson drove directly to Ouarzazate over the sole winding mountain road which led into the interior of Morocco. The going was slow, given the multitude of cargo trucks and the increased altitude. But eventually the attractive city -- dotted with its many date palms -- came into view. Cook went directly to the Taourirt Kasbah. The word ‘kasbah’ means castle or fortress, and this impressive bastion was partly restored yet partly in ruins, its brown mud bricks having either defied the elements or succumbed to the ravages of age and time.

Nelson asked a man selling dried apricots and almonds near the Kasbah entrance if he knew where to find an old blind woman named Fatima.

“That is the most common woman’s name in all of Islam because it was the name of The Prophet’s wife,” the man, Ahmed, explained. “And Mohammed is the most common man’s name, for an obvious reason. But I can direct you to the woman you seek, my friend.” Ahmed then gave Cook some simple directions.

When Nelson approached Fatima, she was sitting in a rickety folding chair in the shade beside the door of her living quarters, humming softly to herself, her grandson (Cook presumed) playing nearby in the dusty stone lane, practicing with a well-used soccer ball. Her eyes were indeed sightless, the skin of her eyelids deformed and fused shut. A spotted feral cat lay sleeping peacefully under Fatima's chair.

“Salaam Alaikum, Fatima. My name is Nelson Cook. I was sent to see you by the one-legged soothsayer, Mohammed, whom I met in Marrakech. He told me you could tell me about something called Black Milk,” the photojournalist explained.

“Alaikum Salaam, Mr. Cook.” She yelled to the boy (“Jamal!”) playing soccer to run and fetch some mint tea for her guest. After it arrived mere moments later, Fatima continued. “And how is my old friend, Mohammed, doing lately? He has not visited me for many years, but I understand his difficulty. He lost his leg when he was a young man living in the deserts of Mali. An infected bite from an angry camel, I’m sorry to say. Mohammed’s leg was removed before he could be taken to any hospital. You see, he was forced to cut his own leg off with a knife to save his life before help finally arrived. Months later, he returned and killed the offending camel with that same knife. It was the will of Allah,” Fatima smiled weakly. Nelson noticed the three traditional Berber vertical tattooed lines under her lower lip, the rest of her face framed by a simple purple hijab, her skin worn hard from the years.

“As for myself, I was born blind as you can see. But I have been given the gift of Second Sight, and so I have survived by giving counsel and comfort to others, Inshallah,” she concluded. "Now, you wish to know more about Black Milk? It is a terror, a warning, and you will know it when you see it,” Fatima revealed. “But to finally learn the details and what to do, you must see a man named Abdullah in Ait Ben Haddou. It is a small town not very far from here. Many movies are filmed there, because I’m told that it is unchanged from many centuries ago. Everyone knows Abdullah because he has one brown eye and one blue eye. He is also a seer with The Gift. Go to him without delay. For what he will tell you can change your life.”

Nelson thanked Fatima for her time and the tea, and left her with a 100 dirham note -- pressing it into her gnarled hand -- as a present. ("Allah will bless your kindness," she murmured.) Because it was growing late, Cook left the Kasbah and decided to stay overnight in Ouarzazate and head to Ait Ben Haddou after breakfast the following morning. He lodged at the attractive, four-star Hotel Kenzi Azghor, which was built high on a plateau, its beautiful pool and dining room terrace overlooking the flickering evening lights of the exotic city below. All this for a mere $84 U.S. per night.

Ait Ben Haddou was just 30 km away, a short 30-minute drive for Cook the following morning. The highly photogenic town consisted of two parts: the flat, more modern area on the west side of a small river, and the ancient, large hill area to the east over a single bridge across the water. The dun-colored mud brick buildings of the Old Town resembled a scene out of the Arabian Nights, its main street winding around and around and up and up past shops, living quarters, tea stalls, and intimate restaurants. The layout reminded Nelson somewhat of Mont Saint-Michel in France -- only instead of leading to a Gothic cathedral at its summit, this stony path led to a large, cube-shaped building at the top of a barren, rocky area. The structure had once been used as a fortified stronghold for grain centuries ago. It was at the top of this hill that Cook had been told he would find Abdullah. And sure enough, there he was -- wearing a grey and black-striped hooded Berber robe (a 'djellaba'), posing for tourist pictures for a fee, his striking, dual-colored eyes adding to the captivating photo composition, with the snow-capped Atlas Mountains sharp in the distance. Nelson waited patiently, until a group of French tourists finished clicking their iPads and cell phone cameras and were heading back down the hill, before approaching Abdullah.

"Salaam Alaikum," Cook greeted. "I believe you are the man called Abdullah?"

"Alaikum Salaam, I am he whom you seek," Abdullah replied. "How may I serve you?"

Cook introduced himself, then related in detail his experiences with Mohammed in Marrakech and with Fatima in Ouarzazate. "So you see, wise sir, I wish to know about Black Milk. I was promised that you alone would at last explain what it is to me."

Abdullah went silent, his brown eye and blue eye burning in tandem with grave intensity into Nelson's innocent face. The Berber's expression was dark and serious. Nelson judged the man was probably in his late 40's, though harsh living conditions may have been a factor in aging his features. Perhaps fifteen long seconds passed before Abdullah spoke. He took a deep breath and exhaled with a final flourish.

"Very well, my American friend, I will tell you. I trust the two friends to whom you have spoken with. I can sense your honest heart and the sincerity of your soul. So listen carefully to my testimony. Many years ago as a boy, I had a dream, a terrifying dream. In it, a messenger from Allah appeared to me, unworthy as I am. He wore white robes and his face was glowing with heavenly light. He told me that when I saw white milk turn black, it was a sign of the beginning of the End of the World. All human life would die in the immediate moments afterward. I was specifically instructed to be ever vigilant for this special sign from Allah, and to prepare my spirit for judgment. I was instructed to close my eyes and kneel in prayer when this horror begins. Only a handful of people around the world know of this awful secret. You were deemed worthy, Mr. Cook, of knowing the warning sign of Black Milk by the merits you accrued during your many past lives. It matters not if you are -- or were -- Christian, Hindu, Jew or Moslem. You must humble yourself before your God immediately once you see Black Milk. The messenger ended my vision with blessed optimism, however, by saying that human life would be reborn again in the world after a certain time, such is the love and mercy of our Creator. He provides us with an endless cycle of birth, destruction, and rebirth."

Nelson Cook was stunned. He felt like he was in an unreal dream world, hearing this information. Couldn't this Berber man, as a boy, have simply imagined this whole vision? Yet Cook strangely sensed that what Abdullah was telling him was somehow the truth.

"I see...I see...but why Black Milk? Why not black snow, or black rain, or a black rainbow?" Nelson wondered.

"I know not the ways of the Almighty, my friend. No mortal man can. Perhaps it is because the warning sign of Black Milk can come at any time -- day or night -- in any season, in any climate, in any place. Plus milk can never turn black by any natural means of spoilage or change. Milk is a symbol of life itself, don't you see? So when it goes black, life will end. These are my thoughts, and my two friends that you have met here in Morocco have shared similar conclusions with me," Abdullah offered. "Any more, I cannot say. But please take this special knowledge as a blessing rather than a curse. I pray it will enhance your days and not plague them with worry. Live your life fully and freely, Mr. Cook. But be ever watchful, and be prepared always..."

Nelson thanked Abdullah as they grasped both hands together in farewell, then Cook walked back down the hill alone. He soon crossed the bridge over the small river and went back to his Land Rover. He sat behind the steering wheel for several minutes, thinking, wondering if this trip diversion since Marrakech was a big mistake. Black Milk. A crazy notion? A hallucination? Or something genuine? How could he possibly explain something outlandish like this to his wife?

Cook was perplexed, yet he still had an important magazine assignment to complete, and a two-week deadline looming before flying home to Sedona. He decided to buckle down and focus strictly on his work. He would try to put Black Milk out of his mind, at least until he saw Audrey in person.

During his remaining time in Morocco, Nelson drove to Meknes, Fes, and the impressive Roman ruins at Volubilis as previously arranged, and carefully took his photos and wrote up his detailed travel observations. Doing what he most enjoyed doing helped take his mind off the possibility of seeing any Black Milk. He was particularly fascinated by the ancient Dyer's Quarters in Fes, which had been in use for a thousand years, the leather tanning and coloring processes virtually unchanged. Fes also featured the oldest university in the world, the Al-Karaouine, founded in 839 A.D.

Returning at last to Casablanca, Cook dropped off his rented Land Rover, then flew back to the United States. Audrey picked him up at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix, and they drove back north to Sedona. During the drive home, Nelson told his wife all about the Black Milk prophecy. She listened to her husband respectfully, but then dismissed his recounting as nothing more than a tall tale. "I admit it would make a terrific fiction story, honey, so maybe you can write it up and sell it to some publisher someday," Audrey suggested with a smile. When they got home, however, even before he unpacked, Nelson powered up his laptop in the study and immediately searched the internet for anything related on the topic of Black Milk. There was absolutely nothing. "See, what did I tell you, dear? I'm not surprised...So let's just forget all about it, O.K., sweetheart?" his wife urged when he told her about the empty search results. "You're probably exhausted and just need a good rest now."

The problem, however, was that Cook couldn't forget about it. Whenever he saw a television commercial that featured milk, or whenever they went out to a restaurant and he spied a glass of milk, or whenever they went to the supermarket and walked down the dairy aisle, Nelson was on the alert for any milk that might turn black. He started to have nightmares about milk turning black as it was spilled or being poured. He told Audrey about his milk paranoia and his growing obsession with it. She even suggested that he see a psychiatrist after several continuing months of his aberrant behavior. Nelson angrily refused. He then took the further dramatic step of refusing to drink milk or even having any milk in their house. Audrey was forced to switch to non-dairy creamer for her coffee. Their marriage was starting to suffer.

Fortunately, time itself has a way of lessening most of life's tensions and problems. Nelson grew exhausted with his constant fears about milk, and finally -- one day in 2021 -- he announced to his wife by way of apology, "I'm sorry I have been so hard to live with lately, honey. The Black Milk thing was driving me crazy, but I've come to the rational conclusion that it's likely never going to happen, and even if it does, there's really nothing I can do about it, so why be concerned? I am willing to forget all about it if you are."Audrey cried happily when she heard this confession, and all was right between them again. The contentious issue was put to rest.

Meanwhile, Cook was delighted when he received an exciting new assignment for NGT about reporting on three major world cities that were measured and found to be actually sinking into the ground: Jakarta, Mexico City, and Venice. His editor wanted to know if the Indonesian and Mexican capital cities would really need to be abandoned and relocated within twenty years, as predicted by the experts. And could Venice be saved before it sank beneath the waves, particularly if predicted climate change caused a catastrophic rise in sea levels if polar icecapsmelted? Nelson's later articles on this subject won him a national award, and recognition at a gala dinner in Washington, D.C. It was a new career highlight!

The years went by as Nelson and Audrey led happy and fulfilling lives together. In 2026, National Geographic Traveler asked Cook to return to Morocco to cover the annual Sahara Desert dune buggy Rally Race, which went from the oasis town of Erfoud (in far eastern Morocco, near the border with Algeria), and winding south and west to Dakar, the capital of Senegal. Nelson would be based at the deluxe Xaluca resort in Erfoud, where the other world journalists and television crews were staying. He was actually eager to return to Africa again, and it was seven years since he had last been in Morocco itself. He hadn't thought about the Black Milk prophecy for many years now, the incident since reduced to a repressed, vague memory. He flew again into Casablanca via Frankfurt. The only way to travel by car over the mountains to Erfoud from Casablanca, Nelson discovered, was on the main road passing through Marrakech. So, by chance, Cook wound up returning to the Red City the following afternoon after checking out of the Novotel in Casablanca and renting a four-wheel drive Toyota Land Cruiser.

For curiosity, after checking into his hotel -- Le Meridien N'Fis, near the Menara Mall -- Nelson took a taxi to the Jemaa El-Fna medina to see if Mohammed the soothsayer was still plying his trade there.

The square looked hardly changed from seven years ago -- still noisy and chaotic, yet picturesque and eternally compelling. In no time, Cook found the tiny remote stall of his old crippled acquaintance.

But surprisingly, there was another man working there, selling freshly-squeezed orange juice beside a vast pyramid of the sweet, bright fruit. When Nelson asked about one-legged Mohammed, the juice seller said he had heard that the man had sadly died about three years ago. "I'm sorry, but Allah wills such things," the resigned man explained.

As Nelson Cook turned to leave, however, he noticed out of the corner of his eye, about twenty feet away, a young, light-skinned Berber woman modestly preparing to nurse her month-old baby. She smiled shyly to Cook as their eyes casually met. She gracefully adjusted her robes so as to remove a breast and, in a natural motion unchanged since the days of Eve, offered its nipple to her hungry child. The infant's greedy mouth met its desire and began to suckle.

Suddenly, as if watching a film in slow motion, Nelson was shocked to see the child coughing and choking and spitting up its meal. The expelled milk was black as tar. Clearly alarmed, the young mother removed her breast from her baby's lips. It was dripping with black milk too, from its nipple. The woman began screaming and calling out for help in either Arabic or Berber, Cook could not tell which language. Soon, other people began screaming in pain and horror. Nelson could see people dropping in the vast square, their skin and muscles melting off of their bones like melted wax from huge, once-living candles.

Instinct -- and a distant memory from seven years ago -- reminded Nelson Cook to drop to his knees and beg God for mercy and forgiveness. This he did as he stared helplessly at his own hands clasped in prayer in front of his chest, witnessing his own flesh dissolving rapidly off of his body in searing pain. Meanwhile, all around him, the screams of everyone grew louder and louder. Could it really be...??

Black Milk, Nelson realized. This was it. The beginning of the End of the World. Cook closed his eyes, and thought of his beloved wife, and slipped into darkness as he gradually lost consciousness...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

April 30, 2019