

## AKHENATEN

Alex Irvine

SHE FOUND HIM HALF-SUNKEN in the Nile marshes, tangled in reeds and rushes like a shipwrecked sailor amid the wrack of his raft. Or, she would later think, as if the great river itself had birthed him from its banks, and whenever she had that thought as an old woman she would shiver and glance up expecting to see the hands of the sun reaching out for her. The sun: he claimed the sun for his own, he claimed all Egypt for the sun. When her bearers wiped the black mud from his face, there on the banks of the Nile before the city of Thebes, the sun blazed from his eyes. Blinded, she ordered him taken to the palace, hidden in the harem of her husband Amenhotep Nebmaetre, bathed and fed and hidden from the sun.

When next she saw him, he looked only as a slave might: spindly of arm and leg, shrunken of chest, his belly protuberant like a hungry child's. But he was not a child. Neither, perhaps, was he a man. His face tapered from high cheekbones to a jaw like an arrowhead; no hair grew on his chin, and his skull lay oblong on the silk cushion in her private chamber. His eyes opened, and she caught her breath.

With a gesture, she dismissed her Hebrew chambermaid Miryam, who left breathing prayers to that tribe's pagan gods. "I am Tiye," she said after a moment. "God-wife to the Pharaoh who is the third to bear the name Amenhotep."

He whispered in reply, and she bent close to hear his words. "Again," she commanded, and again he spoke, but she did not understand his words. Only then, with the strange sounds of his language in her ears, feeling as if from a distance her own lips haltingly repeat those opaque syllables, did she ask herself why she had brought him up from the marsh. One deception was rarely enough. How many was she prepared to undertake?

Amenhotep knew nothing of the stranger until his son Thutmose died and the question of succession was thrown open to debate. Viziers and eunuchs furrowed their brows; fishermen and scribes found themselves flinching at the passage of clouds across the face of the sun. Amenhotep himself worried, and spoke long to Tiye. Was the second son, Amenhotep IV, fit to bear the double crown of the Kingdom of the Nile? Tiye had no answer, and then that question too was swept away when Amenhotep the son followed his older brother through the gates of Anubis.

On the night of her second son's death, Tiye stood vigil with her husband. Egypt slept on the banks of the Nile, unaware that its future, docile as a kitten six days before, now crouched to pounce.

She found herself speaking before she had entirely decided what to say. "They must not know," she said. "The succession must not be questioned. How many of your generals, how many priests of Amen, are even now imagining their own accessions.? A second death .... "

Amenhotep nodded, his many chins rippling. He leaned heavily on a staff as he settled his bulk onto a raised platform of cushions. In him Tiye saw the cares of kingship, saw the way he had gorged his body as if the spread of his girth might set an example for the borders of his nation. He wheezed heavily as he sat, and for a moment could not get his breath to speak.

"They must not know," he agreed, "but they will. What are we to tell them?"

Tiye pitied him in that instant. His heir dead, dead too his second son who was not fit to follow him. Aging, obese, without male issue, knowing that the greater part of his days were surely behind him.

And sadder yet, she thought, because he knew that neither of his sons could have borne up under the weight of his legacy.

"There is a man," she said. Silence fell and she became aware again that her second son lay dead in the room with her, near enough to touch. She waited.

Amenhotep gazed long at the body of his second son. In his eyes Tiye saw the sickness of mortality, his and his sons', like a creeping Nile fog -or the crocodile that hid within. After a long silence of moonlight creeping across the stones of the floor, he spoke. "Would you have a co-regent, then? What sort of a man?"

"No," Tiye said in answer to his first question. Then her mind began to stumble over the many things she wanted to say about the stranger sequestered in the harem. The stranger who had learned to speak the language of Egypt, who had become first her confidant, then her lover and now, if she had her last desire ...

Who had spoken to her of Aten, of the sun. Who had spoken of the distance between stars, and the sources of life. Yes, Aten, she had said. Pharaoh worships Aten, and the people worship Aten in him. She had in mind a wall of the palace, carved with rays of the sun that ended in human hands bringing gifts to Pharaoh her husband and to the people of Egypt. The gods created the sun to give us life.

The stranger had shaken his head, his marvelous, elongated, shining head. You misunderstand, he said. Men of Egypt, he said, fed on the grain of the fields, and the grain fed where.? Fish of the river fed on smaller fish, and those smaller fish on smaller still, until the smallest fed on what but the plants of marsh and bank, and those plants fed where? The wind, he said, like the man and woman of Egypt, rises in the morning and falls at evening -- what does it follow.?

She had gone to her brother Aanen, the high priest of Ra, and said to him, There is a man who asks questions I cannot answer. What would you have me say to him.? Aanen asked, and his eyes widened as she whispered in his ear. Aanen left his vestments and put on simple linens, and she smuggled him past the eunuchs into the harem. To his credit, he betrayed no fear at meeting the stranger, did not even wait for introductions, but immediately began. You have spoken of suns and stars, he said, and fish and rivers and men. What of the gods

Tiye had found herself suddenly mindful of the Hebrew maid with her brawling pantheon, and as if reading her mind the stranger had said, From whence comes the light that you may carve these other gods?

Aanen nodded and understood. He turned to her, his eyes bright as if the stranger's gaze had left sunlight there. He spoke, and in his words Tiye could hear the scorching heat of revelation.

She had begun to believe the stranger then, and to carry the priest her brother's words inside her like faith. And she believed him now, in this chamber with her dead son and dying husband, and her belief lent a quiet strength to her voice as she freed her brother's words once more. "He has come from the Sun."

And thus it was that Amenhotep's second son did not die, but came forth from the palace at Thebes the next morning. If the viziers and eunuchs whispered, the keenness of Pharaoh's ears kept them from doing more. Amenhotep IV lived, and would succeed his father.

HE STOOD SOMETIMES, during that last year of his father's life, watching the sun set in the hills west of the great river, and then he stood watching the stars wheel across the sky. Tiye came to him, always, unable to help herself, and always he softly wished for solitude, and always she went away with her heart strangely broken and uplifted by the starlight caught in the depths of his eyes. It seemed to her at these

times that he spoke in his old language, the language of the starving nameless man washed up on the banks of a river that had no beginning. And it seemed as well that she understood, and that in the silhouette of his head blocking the stars was written knowledge of things whose names she lacked the words to ask.

This and more she remembered, when during solitary nights of her own Tiye would chew over the errors of her life.

Amenhotep IV rose to power amid whispers. The sounds of the wind in stone, river in sand, leaf against stem, all began to sound tones of apprehension. The artists came to sculpt him, and showed him their heroic studies. "Destroy those," he said, and rose to his feet. With a flourish he swept his cloak off and unfastened his tunic. Naked he stood on his throne, and even the palace cats stopped in their tracks and averted their eyes. "The sun is as the sun is," he said, "and the body is as the body. The skies are full of suns and the worlds full of bodies." Amenhotep IV flung away his garments and raised his spindly arms to the shaft of sunlight that fell through the topmost window in his chamber. "See me as I am," he commanded. "Carve what you see."

He turned then, and looked out the window into the square. "Bring me the most beautiful woman within sight of this window," he ordered, "except the ones in the shade. The most beautiful woman in sight of this window will be my wife in sight of the sun."

The sculptors ran from him, and the architects of the new monuments at Karnak looked at each other. What madness was this, to marry as monkeys might?

"Aten looks down," Amenhotep breathed as his soldiers spread through the plaza. "Aten sees, Aten gives. From Aten we have come."

Her name, when she came through the door dressed in simple linen, was Nefertiti. She was thin like him, and next to her he looked even more girlish than his advisers had thought. He caught her gaze and held it. "Aten has chosen well," he said, and the soldiers looked elsewhere as the greed in his eyes rose in his body. "Leave us," he said, and Nefertiti became his wife.

This much Tiye saw, but it wasn't until she heard the Hebrew maid gossiping that she heard of Nefertiti's naming. Neferneferuaten, Tiye thought. Is everything to be for Aten now? Shall we no longer remember the gods of our fathers, Isis and Anubis and Osiris and Amen-Ra who...

Who shines in the sun, she had been about to think. What was the truth now? Was Aten something outside the sun, something that used the sun as a means to spread his power to the Earth? This is what Amenhotep IV said, and when she asked him, but what did it mean? Either a god was, or wasn't. What did it mean to say a god used the sun or the river, if it didn't mean that the sun or the river were the god? But Amenhotep IV said this was not so. "Look into the sky," he said, when Tiye found him out on the balcony at night. "How many stars are there?"

The astronomers said there were one hundred thousand, so that was what she said to him.

"Meaningless number," he said. "I have counted them. I have good eyes, and I can only count three thousand."

Tiye tried to imagine counting the stars. No, she tried to imagine not losing count. Counting was easy, if one could begin over and over again. But to move one's eyes across the sky, weaving every star into the fabric of memory and giving each its own number...this was impossible.

"Three thousand?" she said. "Is that all there are?"

"No. There are thousands of thousands of thousands. Some of them I have seen and you never will. Others neither of us will ever know except in the telling." He turned to her, ran a long finger down from the point of her chin to the hollow between her collarbones. "Tiye, you have been all that stood between me and the loneliness of the mad. Now I have taken a wife; will you not reprove me?"

"Pharaoh must take a wife," Tiye said. She was certain that his finger had left a blazing trace down her throat, and wondered before she mastered her silliness why she could not see its glow in the sloping hollows of his face. "A young woman will give you children, and a man with children need never worry about loneliness."

"A man with children," Amenhotep IV whispered. She tried to speak to him again, but he seemed not to hear.

HE MOVED the capital upriver a year later. The priesthood of Ra pressured him not to, and he threw them from his chamber, screaming after them that Pharaoh would move very Egypt if he chose. Did not the Sun move? And was not Pharaoh the Sun of his people?

The next morning he arose and came out of his chamber bearing papyrus scrawled with strange symbols. Nefertiti followed, her eyes strange as the shadow of current cast on the bottom of a pool. Her first daughter squirmed in her arms, a lively child with her father's elongated head and her father's habit of looking at the stars. Thebes was sick with the infestation of Amen and Mut, he declared to the early-morning servants sweeping the throne hall. He had been sickened by proximity. He sent them to gather the important figures attached to the court. When they arrived, heavy-eyed with sleep, Pharaoh gave them these words: "Amenhotep is dead."

They brought Tiye, and he said to her, "I am no longer named for the man who came before me, but for the god who comes before us all. I am the god walking on Earth, I am He Who Is For Aten. I am Akhenaten."

Late that night, Tiye awakened with the aches of age. Stiffly she walked to him, mouth leaping with a question that had plagued her dreams for years before surfacing just this night. The way a dead man returns from the river, bringing with him the tales of his sojourn in the weedy depths of the dead, she brought Akhenaten the question of her dream and put it to him under the moonless sky.

"I found you in the reeds," she said. "Where did you come from?"

"Not so very far away," he answered, and it was no answer.

"Where?"

"When I was a boy," Akhenaten said, "I learned the stories of Egypt. I used to look across the waters of the sea and think, Egypt is there. Someday I will travel there."

Assyria? she wanted to know, and then, Canaan? Persia?

None of those, he said, but nearest Canaan. She thought about travelers' tales of Canaan, of its fine rivers and sweet olives. "Is it not on the ocean?"

"Yes," he said. "When I was a boy, we lived on the ocean, and the world was the blue of water and the white of stone. Now I see the black of night and what color are the stars?"

For a while Tiye had nothing to say. Then she asked him the question behind the question. "When I found you, were you fleeing the place you were born?" "No."

"Why, then, do you wish to move upriver, away from the ocean?"

"Because," he said, "I want to travel through time."

Tiye had words to answer this. "All men and women travel through time," she said. "There is no other road."

"I want to travel back up that road." Akhenaten pointed at a gleaming streak on the river, where the reflection of a single star elongated into a shimmering ribbon on the water. "See; the river flows only one way until it reaches the sea. Time flows only one way as well, and no man knows what sea it fills. But there is a way to go against the current."

"Against the current to what?" she asked. "To yesterday? You are Pharaoh. Egypt cannot look always toward yesterday. I learned this the day you broke the sculptors' studies."

"All men can spend their lives looking toward yesterday," Akhenaten said. They regarded the river in silence. Tiye knew she should withdraw, but she was old enough that Pharaoh's annoyance no longer frightened her, and she was still sleepless with the complaints of her body. "You said once that Aten is the light by which we can know the other gods. I heard you say this, and saw my brother Aamen. Did you look at his face as he began to believe? I think I would not want to see a face like that very often." Aamen had become militant in his priesthood of the new Aten, destroying temples to other gods. Three times he had killed a priest of Amun, and once a priest of Ra. His acolytes had begun hacking images of the other gods out of temples and stelae.

"Aamen believes in belief," Akhenaten said. "I believe in the search for it."

"Which of you believes in the gods?" Tiye said, and he had no answer.

"I have taken my name for Aten."

Tiye nodded. "And yet you spend your nights looking at the sky when he is not present to caress you with his rays. You worship the sun, but all your life you watch the stars."

"Every star is a sun," Akhenaten said.

"Is every star Aten?" she challenged him.

He chuckled then, a sound like the scraping of scarabs on stone. "Must old women blaspheme?" he wondered. "When men no longer come to your bed, must you throw your scorn at the gods?"

"Is every star Aten?" she asked again, with a rushing in her head that battered against her mind like a flood. Beginning to understand. Her eyes came back into focus and she saw him looking at her. Starlight streaked his eyes as it had the eternal surface of the river.

"You see," he said. "I do not know if every star is Aten, but I do know that he comes to me through the sun. If other eyes look up at other suns, Aten looks down at them as well."

Tiye thought of that night many years later, when while looking for her Hebrew maid she turned a corner and ran hard into another Hebrew, a young man. He looked at her and for a moment she felt as if she must be in two places at once, as if she had been overlaid onto herself. The stone corridor fell away and she smelled the salt marshes near the mouth of the Nile, saw the contorted body of the young man who lay in the mud looking up at her. This young Hebrew had the eyes of a fanatic, a gaze touched with knowledge of the infinite. A gaze like the one the man who would become Akhenaten had fixed upon Tiye, so many years ago.

"Who are you?" she asked, at once quavering and imperious.

He held her gaze as he walked around her at a respectful distance, but he did not answer her question, and when he walked away she did not follow.

Tiye found her maid Miryam in the washing room. "Who was that who was here just now?" she demanded.

Miryam ducked her head. "Please," she said. "I cannot tell."

Tiye slapped her hard on the ear. "It is that Moses, is it not? Who stirs up the Hebrews? He believes, does he not?"

"We all believe," Miryam said, crying only a little.

Tiye thought for a moment. A Hebrew named Moses was, incredibly, preaching Aten against the Egyptians. One of the priests said he was Miryam's younger brother; others said he had been born to Levite slaves. Akhenaten paid no attention. As long as Aten's name rang in the streets of his cities, Pharaoh paid little heed to what was said. Tiye softened. She had been harsh out of discomfiture from her encounter in the hall and the memories it provoked.

"You mustn't fear me," Tiye said, although fear was part of what she wanted. "I know how your tribe believes. It isn't so different from how we believed before Akhenaten. When I was a girl, every household had the gods it preferred. But now some of you are uncertain, aren't you? And some of you have become like this man Moses. He has found Aten."

Miryam touched the corner of her eye and flicked the tear away. "He has gone farther than that. He says now that even to name the god is to blaspheme. He says that if Aten is supposed to be a thing beyond the sun, an idea only, then how can it be named? This is foolishness. He says that Egypt is headed for the same doom that awaits all of the other peoples who know not the truth of the invisible god, the He Whose Name Must Not Be Spoken. He says that naming god Aten is like naming a man Worm."

"Where has he gone?"

"I beg you, Mother," Miryam said, tears springing once again from her eyes. "Let him speak his mind. Egypt is huge and Hebrews are so few. He hurts nothing."

"Pharaoh will judge," Tiye said, and Miryam slipped away down the corridor.

Tiye stood in the washing room, thinking. Perhaps she should have all of the Hebrews out of the palace, out of the harem. They were too quick to anger, too eager to seize on new ideas. What Egypt needed now was stability, and nothing could be stable as long as the royal household simmered with dissent and wild heresy.

But the look in the young Hebrew's eyes. She had seen that look in Akhenaten's eyes, so very long ago by the marshy banks of the Nile.

In the next year Akhenaten's daughters began to die. One after the other, as each of them approached the age at which she might have expected them to bleed for the first time, they began to complain of headaches. Strange fits followed, marked by a turning inward of the limbs as if the girls wished to swim back up the river of time until they found their mother's womb again. Then, just like fish that stop gasping bit by bit, they died.

Nefertiti bore sorrow as quietly as she had borne the children. Still her beauty stole the gazes of men, but

it was the beauty now of sunset rather than sunrise. Still her voice charmed Pharaoh, but her spell was a shared dream of the past.

Akhenaten held each of his daughters as she gave up her body, stroking the beautiful long head and crying out in the language he still spoke in his sleep. As his children died, something in him broke. He paid less attention to Egypt, worried less about border incursions and trade difficulties, ignored completely the building program at his city Akhetaten. Even his tomb stood unfinished, its workmen idled to play dice outside the sculptor Thutmose's workshop. Only his nights remained constant. Shunning Nefertiti's bed, he stood watching the stars from sunset until dawn, weeping to himself in his strange cold language that to Tiye seemed like the language a river would speak if it wished to be heard by men. She took it upon herself to approach him one night, walking slowly on knees that ground like mortar and pestle, touching the walls when her failing eyes lost the way. When she took her place next to him and looked up to see what he saw, she realized that all but the brightest stars now hid from her.

"I believed," he said softly, "that I would live in them."

Tiye touched his shoulder. "You yet might in two of them."

"I have no great faith," he said. In the darkness, she thought a corner of his mouth tensed in what might have been a smile. He turned to look at her. "You said once that a man with children would never know loneliness. But here I am. My daughters die, and I am lonely."

"Sorrow and loneliness are not the same things" Tiye said.

"I tell you I am lonely. I knew children might die, but you were right. I believed that seeing myself in them, seeing them in myself, I could forget that once I came alone from the sun." He kept silent for some time then, and when he spoke again his voice was twisted. "Instead I killed them."

"Every father kills his child," Tiye said. "To have a child is to set it on the road of time."

"I killed my daughters," Akhenaten said again. "They were beautiful, and they loved me, and I killed them by giving them life." Something lit up within him then, and he straightened. The old language and the new spilled together from his mouth until with great finality he said, "The next generation. Yes." With that he left the terrace in great purposeful strides.

Tiye followed him, fearing the worst, and by the time he had reached the bedchambers she knew what he intended. "You must not," she begged, holding onto his arm with all of her old woman's strength. "They have not yet bled."

He threw her away as if shrugging off a robe and she fell to the stone floor. Her knees made twin sharp cracks and pain flooded from them. Tiye tried to stand, but her legs would not bear her. "Pharaoh!" she cried.

Strong hands bore her to her feet. "Hush now, mother," Nefertiti said softly into her ear. The quiet strength of the queen's voice checked Tiye's struggles, and seemed even to still her pain. Nefertiti led her to the queen's bed and laid her there until the pain in her knees began to subside.

"How do you bear it?" Tiye said. "Is this not the first time?" She recalled his face, flashing suddenly with revelation, and thought, Surely it is. Surely he has not done this before.

"First time for these girls, yes," Nefertiti said. "Not for the others."

Egypt, Tiye thought. Turning inward, losing interest in the world just as its Pharaoh was turning inward, defiling his own family. Because of me, she thought. I raised him up from the mud and reeds, and now

Egypt will fall with him. A desire to confess surged in her, reached as far as her mouth and stopped there, at her old woman's thin lips that would not pass the truth of her betrayal.

"He believes it will save them," Nefertiti said. "He believes that they were poisoned by his seed when it made them, and that they can only be saved by receiving it again. At other times he says that their children will live, and it is true. Tutankhaten is healthy."

This secret of Pharaoh's only son stopped Tiye's mouth more tightly. Tutankhaten, King's Bodily Son, begotten upon one of his sisters? It was a story one might have told about the old gods. It had no place in the modern Egypt of Aten.

The dam in Tiye's mouth broke. "What is he?"

"A man," came the reply, hushed almost to a whisper. "Only a man. But he says he has gone too far up the river, and looks different than those around him. He never explains." Nefertiti caught Tiye's chin, guided it around until they were facing. "Do you know what this means?"

"He said to me once that rivers only flow one way," Tiye said, and might have said more, but Akhenaten returned then, slick with sweat and his eyes alight. He brushed past Tiye and caught Nefertiti in his arms, burying his face in the swanlike curves of her neck. "I will save them," he said, and said it again, and said it again. Tiye got stiffly to her feet and left without a word.

Akhenaten's daughters, with their strange heads and their strange deaths, hung over Egypt like a plague of the mind. Tiye watched herself grow older, watched Akhenaten too begin to hunch and walk slowly. More and more rarely she met him on the terraces late at night.

The last time, she shuffled slowly along the route she had long since learned by touch of fingertip and echo of breath. She found him leaning against a statue of himself, and she imagined sculpture and subject training their gazes over Egypt and what lay beyond. "Once," she said, "you told me that every star is a sun."

She felt him nod.

"Which one is your home?"

He laughed softly, and his breath wheezed in his throat. "Aten is my home," he said.

Tiye jabbed him with a horny fingernail. "Which?"

"This one," Akhenaten said. "All the stars are the same star, and all the rivers are the same river, and all the directions are the same direction. But none of them lead home."

She was thinking about that the next year, a year in which Moses Miryam's brother killed a man and fled east to Midian, the year in which she died in Akhetaten with her Pharaoh, who had been her lover, who had once staggered her with a gaze that spoke of infinity.

#### ILLUSTRATION (BLACK & WHITE)

Alex Irvine's previous stories for us include the dark fantasy "Rosetti Song" and the near-future s/story "Intimations of Immortality." His latest story is a very different proposition entirely. Mr. Irvine reports that his first novel, *A Scattering of Jades*, is due to be published next year and he is busily working on a variety of projects, both academic and literary.