The Satyr

Jason Wiese*
THE SATYR

by Jason Wiese

No one in the leather souk knows what secrets he conceals under the shabby woolen robe of a holy man, and though they trade hushed stories about monstrous deformities, an extra arm or leg, or the breasts and hips of an old woman, his hood has never been pulled back in their sight to reveal the bony black stubs of horns sprouting high on his forehead, or the pointed tips of his ears peeking out between tufts of wispy gray hair, nor has it ever occurred to them that the filthy rags bound tightly around his oddly proportioned feet do not hide the oozing stumps of a leper as some have supposed over smoky cups of mint tea, but rather the dark and pointed tips of split hooves, scaly with age and in need of trimming, and it would have surprised them all to know that his pained, awkward gait is not merely the result of his poor health and years of hard life, but comes mostly from the inconvenience of having huge lopsided testicles that dangle grotesquely from his hindquarters of an ancient and decrepit ram.

He speaks but rarely, this hooded apparition with his bristling beard and mad, glittering eyes, but they have long known from his accent, his sloppy French and his atrocious Arabic, that he is not a Moroccan. A few men and boys slyly refer to him as “l’Anglais,” unaware of the truth of their instincts though others are equally certain that he is a Portuguese ex-sailor ruined by drink and the wiles of countless whores.

He has been here for years, that much is known, in this forgotten corner of Fez El Bali, the Great Medina of narrow, winding medieval streets, mazes within mazes, a geometry that confounds even the tens of thousands who have spent their entire lives here and prevents the forlorn and restless spirits of the dead from ever leaving this perpetual twilight beneath the woven canopies and smoky oil lamps. Even the foul green waters of the Oued Fez, bubbling up with their bowel stench under the mossy stone ramparts that surround the old city, are quickly confused and lost near the textiles souk, where fresh dye drips off hanging spools of wool yarn, running like butcher’s blood through stone gutters to turn the river crimson as it disappears into the subterranean darkness of tunnels beneath the rue Nekhaline, and it sometimes happens that wayward beams of sunlight become disoriented after penetrating the holes in the sagging canopies and mistakenly illuminate certain streets at all hours of the night as they seek their escape, much to the chagrin of thieves requiring the shelter of darkness for their labors.

But all this suits him well, for he came here to be lost, and now, after a hundred and twenty years of exile, he rarely leaves this part of the Medina and its pungent reek of tanning vats, the swarming flies and impossible shit-stink of rotting discarded hides piled in heaps beneath the
peeling stucco of elegant horseshoe arches. He is a familiar sight to the young boys with skinny arms and legs stained permanently orange from the dye pits and the innumerable toothless old men with their striped robes and festering sores, yet none of them know his name, the name he was born with so many years ago in a distant sunny place, *I can hardly remember it myself now with all this noise, these beetle-like multitudes around me, but if I could, I wouldn’t call myself by that name because it isn’t mine, I’ve lost it, God damn me,* the name of a boy, perhaps, hidden away in his memory like an curling old photograph in a locked drawer, too painful to look at, a small, pale boy with fair hair and frightened blue eyes that couldn’t possibly dwell within this aberrant freak, this grotesque monster with its musky stink of a rutting goat and black halo of flies, surely not this boy, *he was meant to be a hero, do you hear me, not a villain to be jeered at, some wretched old Caliban with no Miranda in sight, just these hideous little Berber women with their veils and henna tattoos, old whores and underfed boys,* and *God nowhere to be seen,* no, they don’t know his name and on the rare occasions when he is spoken to at all he is called, simply, say-yeed, or monsieur.

He is accorded respect here, in part because of his enigma, but more importantly because he is recognized as a craftsman and an artist of rare talent. His nights are his own, and the source of endless speculation, but today, as on countless other days, he is at work in the back room of his shop, which is wedged inconspicuously in a back alley because the better locations in the souk, the ones on the rue Sidi Youssef, have been held by the same families now for ten centuries.

His reputation brings a steady trickle of customers and, as the old artificer could never reconcile his loathing of his fellow men with his need to earn a living from them, these are greeted by Kamal, his obese servant from Meknès who, though he has the slow speech and vacant stare of an idiot, nevertheless routinely out-bargains those who would seek to take advantage of the less fortunate among them. Many come simply to look, to stare in speechless wonder. There are masks fashioned from dyed and stitched goatskin, wizened faces with eyeless sockets that actually change expressions according to the wearer’s mood, from lecherous grins to wounded grimaces, so heavily are they invested with the feeling of their maker, and some of these bark harsh laughter from their pegs on the wall, while others weep real tears night and day, rotting themselves with their inconsolable sorrow.

Here too, are other small marvels, painstakingly carved from perfumed sandalwood and exotic dark woods from the riverbanks of Gabon and Cameroon, curiosities stitched together from delicate reptile skins and embroidered cloth, embellished with colored feathers. He works with these materials in the secretive gloom behind heavy curtains, mumbling a litany of curses as he gives life to snakes with glittering eyes of desert opal, and the tiny camels that cross the expanses of moth-eaten rugs in minute
caravans, the creaking leather bats that flutter in ghostly ellipses around shafts of billowing sunlit dust, and rows of sequined birds that exactly mimic the songs of their live brethren in cacophonous symphonies.

These wonders are not even surpassed in popularity by the enchanted chessmen of Mohamed El Hayzari which daily fight miniature battles to the death before crowds of delighted onlookers, or the green fortune-telling parrot of Ibrahim Abu Ayub, the slug-like Egyptian in the carpet souk, of whom it is often said that he profits more from its matter-of-fact renderings of destiny than from his overpriced and dubiously authentic Berber rugs.

Though he has been surrounded by the fruit of his master's genius for years, Kamal knows little about how these wonders are accomplished and is unable to answer the prying questions about them from the sons and cousins of jealous competitors, for he has never had the opportunity to observe the secrets performed behind the curtains, nor would he want to be burdened with such occult knowledge. He is a simple man, and at any rate, such a breach of his master's privacy would be unthinkable, especially when he recalls that his one unannounced intrusion years ago had cost him the little finger of his left hand, though he afterwards counted himself lucky not to have lost his situation, Allah be praised, the bread and meat for his family, and thinking of these things, he can easily tolerate his master's strange brooding silences, his smell of an unwashed goat and the drunken rages in a strange tongue that sometimes fills the air with feathers and ripped out stuffing, for surely a foreigner and an infidel cannot be expected to behave always as a civilized man should.

The sounds coming from behind the curtain are those of an animal, the grunts and strangled breathing of a suffering beast, for the man within him is little more than a distant memory. He is numb to the small miracles around him, sometimes crushing them underfoot without noticing as he paces his shop in the silence of the early morning. It is for others to delight in what he has made, to laugh and to tell their disbelieving friends. He is simply the architect of these miracles, alone and unknown behind the curtain, and though he can amaze everyone who enters his shop, their warmth and fellowship is forever denied to him, and it is sometimes an agony to remember what it had been like to share in the laughter of friends, allowing himself to be touched by the delicate beauty of a sonnet, to start out a completely normal day by shaving and knotting a tie around a starched collar. There are no mirrors here, nothing to further insist on his otherness. The constant buzzing of flies is a constant reminder of the Divine punishment that had been visited upon him. When he was young he had reveled in his curse, taking his awful delight in the shrieking of women and children, reasoning that if he could not understand his fate, at least he could wholly deserve it. Certainly, once he'd become used to them, his grotesque shape and relentless carnal appetite weren't so terrible, but the horror he hadn't expected and that grew over the years was the realization
that he was absolutely alone of his kind.

Here in the dusty gloom behind the curtain, the lamplight gleams off the polished hooks on his forehead, and off the spines of innumerable books that line the walls, the leaning piles of open tomes on tables next to racks of glass tubes and alembics with long, graceful necks bubbling with vaporous green elixirs, and it flickers on the high ceiling painted with hieroglyphs, cabalistic symbols and the signs of the stars, as well as upon the jeweled sheath of a curved Berber dagger hanging on the wall behind him.

His work in this room has occupied him for years, the sole center of his attention now that he is unable to indulge the eternal tingling of his loins, *the bitter fruit of a past mistake, Marisa, how was I to know*, his mindless maddening urge, devoid of any joy, that now drives him to create until even that isn't enough and there is only one thing in the world left for him to do. He lingers for a moment, scratching himself, pulling silvery lice from his beard as he eyes the form of his most ambitious project yet, lying silent and unmoving beneath its shroud, *materium superabat opus, my sweet salvation, soon to wake*.

He chooses a cedar box and removes with grave care an ancient scroll, long sought for and recently purchased, remembering the search that had lasted for so many hot, empty months, the rumors he had followed with the single-mindedness of a moth seeking the flame of the candle, the countless lies he had endured from gypsies and scholars as he offered them more tea over the ticking of the clock. No one had personally seen the scroll he sought, but of course all knew of it, and too many had an uncle or a cousin or a grandfather that had seen it in Oman, or in Athens, no, it was definitely in the Vatican's library among treatises for summoning demons, or was it in the Alhambra of Granada, the property of a dimwitted Spaniard who used it to scratch his back at night? How their eyes roamed the room as they told their hopeful lies, lingering on the richness of embroidered cloth and dull silver of the teapot, smelling the gold he was so desperate to pay for some forgotten bit of hocus pocus, the knowledge of magicians who had passed into dust centuries ago, now lost beneath the blowing desert sands. At last he'd given up, tempted to just bury a blade in his black heart of a goat, sick of the years, the loneliness and his own stench.

But one afternoon he had found it in a catalogue of antiquities, just a brief description that caused him to stand unsteadily with tears in his eyes. It had been in Alexandria, in a museum, never having left that land of magic and crumbling grandeur, and gold was all it took to have it placed on a freighter to Tangier and brought to him here on the mail train.

Now he carefully spreads it open, both of them cracking with age, and bending, he squints hard at the swirls and scratches of a forgotten language, mumbling to himself as he follows the yellowed point of his fingernail. He sees that there remains one last thing, a detail, really, but important nevertheless, for true magic accumulates within the most minute
ingredients, the most mundane rituals. “Tonight,” he says aloud. “It will be tonight.”

He pulls the hood up and steps through the curtain to the front room, where Kamal fills the doorway with his immense girth as he trades pleasantries with a seller of chickens. The chickens lie in bundles on the cobblestones, trussed up by their feet and blinking with alarm, upset perhaps at the casual way in which their fate is being discussed. “Ici, Kamal,” he says, digging in the pocket of his robe, well here you fool, finding the heavy leather pouch there and bringing it out before Kamal’s questioning eyes. “Yes, say-yeed?”

“This is for you.” He drops it into immense outstretched hands that dip with the sudden weight, and puzzled, Kamal loosens the drawstrings to peer inside, tilting the pouch this way and that, and his mouth falls open to the metallic clicks of the shifting gold inside, my God, what a fortune he has given me, looking up with a glossy sheen of sweat over his round dark face, his eyes comically wide as he struggles to form words.

“But why, say-yeed?”

“I shall be going away.” Away from this prison of solitude.

“Away, say-yeed?” His brows curve up with alarm.

“Yes, Kamal, away. And so it is that I require nothing more of you here,” and he steps forward to where his staff leans waiting with its carved head of a ram.

Kamal backpedals in front of him, moving his bulk with surprising grace. “But say-yeed... what can this mean? What am I to do?” There is no reply. How can he do this, have I not been the best of servants? This is what an astonished Kamal thinks as his master quietly picks up a pair of shears and slips them into a pocket as though nothing were out of the ordinary.

They both step out into the street, and the old man swings the heavy doors closed and locks them with the key he wears around his neck. The doors are enchanted, the bane of every thief in this quarter of the Medina, and they bear the marks of thousands of vain attempts to pry them open. He senses the hugeness of Kamal behind him, the confusion of an oversized child, you sniveling fool, haven’t you worked it out yet that I’ve sacked you, brushing by him now, feeling the tug of time passing too quickly. “Kamal,” he adds, pausing, “adieu.”

He leaves his servant standing in the street behind him, staring dumbly at the heavy bag in his hand, inexplicable wealth and freedom, and he rounds the corner onto the rue Sidi Youssef. Chaos surges all around him as he limps over the cobblestones, the shouts of the nut vendors, the exasperated cries of “Balek! Balek!” as old men in turbans struggle to pull their laden donkeys through the crowds gathered to watch jugglers and fire-eaters, dentists and storytellers perched on stools, and a pair of one-armed boxers, one of them a dark Mauritanian with a glistening bald head and gold teeth, swinging wildly at each other to their lusty roars, and the
beggars and booksellers on the steps of mosques, old bearded men in white skull caps delicately pulling on their embroidered slippers before stepping into the street. He passes them all with the grave care of an invalid, leaning heavily on his staff, ever mindful of the throbbing ache in the heavy pendulum of his scrotum, and of the young boys moving with him through the seething crowd with leashed monkeys riding high on their shoulders snatching at the ears of the unwary, the dervishes with tasseled red tarbooshes and cymbals coaxing coins from passersby, and on through these endless winding alleys thronged wall to wall with sweating humanity, he pauses only to let pack animals pass, lurching wide-eyed camels and melancholy donkeys half dead from exhaustion, sharp cracks of leather thongs raining down on their bleeding haunches as they struggle blindly ahead with immense sagging bundles of spices and carts of live turkeys, 

wretched beasts, I’ve as much in common with you as with your masters, bastards all, and I, too, a tiny dot floating in this sewer, alone and unnoticed in your midst, the Great Unwashed we used to call you and I was born to look down at you all from my pram as nanny wheeled me round St. James Park where the ducks are so fat and happy and I remember the time I was holding her hand in Victoria and I said nanny why has that man got a towel round his head and she said, shhh, it’s because he’s a Mohammedan, what’s a Mohammedan, it’s someone from very far away now you mustn’t stare at him it’s rude and do stop fidgeting where are your manners, and where is nanny now, I wonder, probably laying in some Cornish churchyard, oh these imbeciles, they have no manners at all, this is intolerable, yes, she’s dead now, and Marisa as well, I think they must all be dead, safe beneath the long green grass of England, ah it’s been years since I’ve seen grass, smelt it, and a sudden knock sends him sprawling against the wall, pain erupting in bright flares inside him, teeth clenched against the rising dizziness as a young man helps him up and hands him his staff with a mortified “Esmah lee!” this poor old man, my God what a stink, how can he walk on these feet, and now I’ve touched him, “Ahna ahsif!” and he shrinks quickly away now, swallowed by the crowd before the old man can catch his breath, mutter a “shokran” in gratitude, ah god, poor boy was frightened to death of me, well he ought to be, ah this back of mine, I can hardly walk, his testicles throbbing some urgent new message of pain as he hobbles to his destination, counting his steps, the ringing of his staff on the stones, past hanging bundles of pink, glistening tripe and sticky sweets swarming with wasps, stopping at last at a dingy portico beneath a faded and peeling sign, “Hotel Splendide,” and below this, writhing swirls of hand-painted Arabic script.

Little has changed since his last visit to this place, certainly not the bedding, the blue rooms of broken down beds, blankets crawling with lice and pestilential nightmares, these sour smelling women with the rotting teeth and vacant eyes of kif smokers standing in doorways and
contemplating the dreams they’ve lost through the cracks in the walls, yet the sleepy eyed Asiatic proprietor of years past is gone now, and there is only this tousle-haired young man with a drooping mustache leading him upstairs without speaking after the soft chinking of coins had passed between them, business is business and my time is short, the memories drifting to him through the gloom and the acrid scent of kif and incense, music droning and alien, he again hears the teasing little girls’ voices out of the withered faces of hags, why don’t you take off the robe, old man, show us what you’ve got, well I did just that and they ran screaming from me but not fast enough, down this very corridor with its blue Andaluz tiles and the dust of centuries stirred up by their passing, and he is left standing by an open door, echoing footsteps receding behind him.

A girl is sitting on a bed facing the window, combing her long black hair, and he watches, eyes gleaming in the shadow of his hood. Marisa. He leans on the door frame as the years run through him like water, taking him to another place, the room he has made himself forget, the scent of chalkdust and wax, and the weeping of a girl, her hair cascading over her arms, the edge of the table, his own sick guilt rising within him like bile, but it was love I swear, and she turns to look at him now, a girl of eighteen, his undoing, no, Marisa, please, but then she isn’t Marisa anymore, but a Moroccan girl, getting older as he watches, and he stands there like a frightened child when she beckons him inside.

“Have you any money, old one?”
He hobbles nearer, stops. “Money enough.” Her hair, the smell of it.

“Come, sit with me.”
“I cannot. I have pain... here.”
She nods solemnly, seeming to understand. “Perhaps help may be given,” she says, thinking this poor old man will probably go right to sleep, whew, how he needs a bath.
“Yes,” he says, moving a step closer, “this is the reason for my visit.”
“Many men come here for such a reason.” A look out the window betrays her weariness, and she scratches the flea bites on her ankle.

“Your hair,” he says, thinking Marisa.
“Yes?”
“It is beautiful.”
“Yes, beautiful.” Strange old man. “Do you like it?”
“I want to buy it,” and she laughs at the joke, but I’m quite serious my dear.

“And what price would you give me for this hair, old one” he’s just crazy, I must tell Zoraya of this, that bitch still has my shoes, and what is this?, as he pulls out the shears and drops them on the bed beside her.
“Ten thousand dirhams,” he says.
Her laughter brightens the room. “Where would you find such wealth?” A harmless old fool, surely.
“Here,” and he takes out three handfuls of coins from somewhere in the folds of his robe, spills them on the scorched wooden top of the low table beside the bed. “You need never work again,” he says, watching her eyes flick over the coins, counting them, then widening as she counts them a second time without moving, without even breathing. Now she looks up at him, large eyes beneath her long dark lashes, trying to see him for the first time, hidden away in the shadows of his hood, this strange old man with the stink of an animal and the money of a king. “What are you called,” she asks, her eyes pulled back to the wealth glittering an arm’s length away.

“I have no name.”

“And why must you take this hair? Why not the hair of another?” It isn’t merely the hair I need, but the color and essence of it, just make up your mind, I haven’t time for this. “If I must go elsewhere, I will,” he says.

She looks at him. “But you will find no hair such as this in all the world.” She wraps it around her fingers, caresses her cheek with it, eyeing him coyly, and now he looks at her, sees that she is a creature of beauty and mystery and that these coins are the only advantage she lacks. For an instant he wishes that he could reach out, just once, to touch her cheek tenderly, as a man would, and that she would not pull away in disgust. But it is too far for us to reach, my dear, we walk in altogether different worlds.

A long moment passes as they look at one another without speaking, and he is about to ask her for her name when she gives him a broad smile, showing her bad teeth. “Very well,” she says, “you may have it.” And her eyes gleam fiercely as she adds, “for twenty thousand.”

Later, he crosses the open square of the Place de l’Istiqlal, clutching his precious bundle to him as he walks, while smoke from cooking fires drifts up with the sound of drums and trilling pipes into the rosy light of a dying sun, and higher still, the black specks of vultures glide in their sidereal orbits, almost lost in the coming darkness of night.

He works for hours behind the enchanted doors of his sanctuary, free from the irksome weight of the woolen robe, scarcely noticing the adagios of his birds, or the way his masks wrinkle their noses in distaste as he hobbles by them, scratching at the bristly hair on his legs, and pulling at his beard in deep thought before returning to his labors with the ivory handled awl and needles fashioned from the bones of long extinct fish.

The prayer calls come in the early morning darkness, echoing from the spires of minarets, waivering in the air like cries of joy and pain, “Allaaaaah...ak-baaaaaar!” God is great, a sentiment that inspires a wheezing chuckle deep in his chest as he attaches the last of the hair. A pair of green leather bats fly rings around his head, and he waves them away in irritation as he stands back to look at his handiwork, his magnum
Marisa.

It is the form of a girl. She lies there as if asleep, perfect in every detail. There are no seams on the pale supple leather of her skin, and fine hairs are visible on her arms and legs. Her eyes are closed and her dark hair fans out around her head, and even he is spellbound as he looks upon her, his loins aching. My downfall. Has it been so long?

He feels a sudden coldness in his belly, an animal-like dread of the unknown that is as strange and poisonous to him as mercury, and he wonders, what have I to fear? Something has changed. The effigy, though motionless, has become a presence in the room. He circles the table in a slow, lurching orbit, watching her from every angle, now really seeing her as a whole rather than just an aggregate of parts. For years he has pursued this triumph, this cheating of his lonely fate, yet he had never once stopped to consider exactly what it was his hands were doing, or that he would someday come to this very moment in time.

He runs a trembling finger down the yellowed parchment in front of him, selects a vial of ochre powder and pours this into a small stone bowl marked with runes that seem to shimmer and change shape in the flickering lamplight. He dips a slender glass wand into another bottle and lets a single drop fall into the bowl, and there is a sudden flash of bluish light and acrid smoke drifts up in long tendrils to the stars painted on the ceiling. He sets the bowl carefully on the chest of the effigy, and stands back and waits, thinking, please, please come to me.

There is nothing for a long moment, just the restless flutter of the bats overhead, the inquisitive chirping of his birds, and then she gasps suddenly, draws a breath, her chest faintly creaking like a bellows as it begins to rise and fall. He leans over her, his mouth open, seeing the first restless movement beneath her eyelids.

"Marisa, it is I," he says, startled at the sound of his own voice, and though he can't be certain, he believes he hears a distant wind, as if something is seeking him out through the infinite maze of the Medina.

Her voice beside him whispers, “who are you?” sounding very far away, frightened, the voice of an old woman. Marisa, can it be you? “I...was your teacher,” he says. Your violator. “The school in...in...” He squints, searching for the place he had buried within him. “In Sussex.” He swallows hard.

“Who...?”

“You know my name. I may not speak it aloud.”

“Oh. Oh, yes,” comes the voice. “Yes, I remember you. It was so long ago...” Her eyes flutter, but remain closed. “I tried to forget...”

“Marisa. I am old now. I lost everything, my life, who I was, everything. I was made... into this.” He feels the panic building within him, the walls of the Medina growing around him. Tears well in his eyes, roll down his cheeks into his beard. “I have been utterly alone, Marisa.”
There is no reply.
“Marisa, I beg you, speak to me.”
“Why have you brought me here? What do you want?”
The simplicity of her question stabs at his heart and he finds himself afraid to answer. “I have given you life again,” he says at last, wiping his tears with the back of his shaking hand, “and a body that will stay eternally young, eternally beautiful.”

Her brows crinkle and she turns her head slightly, as if taking notice of herself for the first time. Her hand jerks and moves very slowly over the swelling of her breasts to her neck and face. He watches as she runs her fingers over the smooth curves of her cheeks, the line of her jaw, and her lips part as she takes in a breath. He can see moisture glistening on them.

“It is your face, is it not? And it is free from all signs of age.” At the sound of his voice, her eyelids flutter and open, blinking against the lantern light. Her eyes are blue, as they were so many years ago, and they shine fiercely as they she seeks him out. He backs away into the shadows across the room.

The table creaks as she draws her legs together, struggling to sit upright, and he gapes at her, his eyes devouring her, tensing at the way her muscles move just beneath her skin, holding his breath at the sight of her ribs barely showing beneath the rise and fall of her breasts, crowned with their rosy halos, my God, Marisa, you are beautiful, the fear dropping from him now because there is nothing else in the world except her and the sound of her breathing, the decades vanquished under the arch of her back, swept aside by the curve of her hips. His nostrils quiver with the smell of her and blinking, he looks down, amazed to see the black flag of his lust rising as it had so many times in the past, this is impossible, the waving, pointing finger he’d followed through woods and brothels, naming the objects of his desire, catching them one by one, feeling the savage excitement of their writhing beneath him, their gasps kissing his ears. These memories throb in him, twist a soft groan from his bowels. “Where are you?” she demands, turning toward him.

“I am here,” he says, his voice straining.
Her eyes flick back and forth, squinting, probing the shadows.
“What do you want of me?”
“I want only... your companionship,” he whispers. “Nothing more than that.” Oh, you lying wretched bastard, he thinks, knowing he wants everything about her, I want to bury my nose in your hair, feel your warmth around me forever. He watches as she brings her legs over the edge of the table, first one and then the other, and sighes with pleasure when her feet touch the floor and she is able to stand.

“It really is you, isn’t it, Marisa.”

She freezes at the sound of his voice, then tries to shield her nakedness from him with her arms, looking about her for something to cover
herself, and he briefly considers throwing her the shroud that is wadded up in the corner behind him, but instead he stands where he is, watching, exultant.

"Please show yourself," she says, hearing his breathing.

"Very well, if you wish it." He steps out into the light, smiles ruefully at her gasp of horror. Her eyes linger on the twisted black points of his horns, trace the deep lines etched in his face, now widening as they alight on the prominence of his lust, which bobs as he takes another step toward her.

"What... what are you?" She is horrified, repulsed, and she cannot take her eyes off him.

"I am simply what you made of me."

She shakes her head, "No," and his heart swells in his chest at the way her hair sweeps over her shoulders, shimmering in the lamplight, the hair of a whore transfigured.

"You will grow used to me, Marisa. In time."

"I will not stay. Not with you."

His nostrils flare as he inhales her scent, and the corner of his mouth twitches. "But you will," he says dreamily.

"I beg you, release me," she pleads, hugging herself. "You must."

She is looking around her like a cornered animal, a posture he finds infinitely arousing.

"I cannot," he answers with a curt shake of his head. Nor would I, my dear, it took everything I had to bring you here, I will die before I give you up, return to that wretched solitude, that idiot Kamal. "Speak no more of this, Marisa," he says with the weary indulgence of a father. "You are here. With me." He steps toward her, offering an embrace with his long bony fingers.

She utters a soft cry as the significance of his look comes home, and searching for an escape, she sees the jewelled crescent of the Berber dagger hanging on the wall. He is moving toward her, breathing heavily through his open mouth, his pink tongue visible, now stumbling as the points of a hoof catch in a frayed spot in the rug. Don't run, my dear, I'm too old to chase you. She backs away, holding on to the edge of the table, then lunges for the knife, screaming as his hands fall on her shoulders. It falls out of her grip, clatters on the table behind her.

Then he is upon her, turning her roughly toward him, his clutching bony hands pin her hips to the edge of the table, and she shrieks in his ear, twisting and frantic, now reaching for something behind her, but he closes his eyes without seeing, intent only on this achingly familiar rhythm, the surge of his blood heating his old bones, Oh God, Marisa, I would die a thousand deaths for this, and he does not see the flash of the blade as she brings it up under him. There is only a sudden searing pain in his groin as his eyes open wide, and the odd sensation of something dropping away to the floor.
He looks at her in dumb terror, stumbling backwards as his fingers claw at the pain between his legs, knowing with sick certainty that he will never be able to stop the black warmth spreading there, running in rivulets down his thighs. What have you done to me? Bestial groans escape through his clenched teeth, and he does not hear the strong wind scouring the medina outside, stripping the narrow streets of their accumulated filth and debris, rattling his locked shutters.

She is crouched across the room with the bloody crescent of the blade trembling in her hand, and seeing her through the red mist of his pain he suddenly understands that this moment had been coming all along. He hadn’t been able to escape it even here, the full circle of cause and effect having been preordained in that sunny classroom of long ago where she had wept with horror and humiliation, God’s favorite child defiled, and now it comes like a sibilant whisper, the final sentence having sought him out in the middle of this impossible labyrinth. “Marisa,” he croaks, and a shudder runs through him. “I never meant for this to happen.” She doesn’t move, doesn’t answer. “Please... you must believe me.” Please. But he sees that the magic has failed. The light is leaving her eyes, and soon it is merely a doll that stares at him. The dagger slips and falls to the floor.

No one sees his tremulous smile of longing and regret, and as the lamp burns lower and finally dies, the tears he weeps mingle with the scarlet flow of his life until the birds stop their singing and the bats drop into lifeless toys on the floor and lay there in the gathering silence of a spell broken.