



MARCH/
APRIL

TOR.COM
SHORT
FICTION

Malik
Aguda
Swanwick
Wells
Clark

**TOR.COM SHORT FICTION
MARCH – APRIL 2021**

#Spring Love, #Pichal Pairi

Usman T. Malik

Masquerade Season

'Pemi Aguda

Annie Without Crow

Michael Swanwick

Home: Habitat, Range, Niche, Territory

Martha Wells

The Angel of Khan el-Khalili

P. Djèlí Clark



[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this
Tor.com ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on Usman T. Malik, click [here](#).

For email updates on 'Pemi Aguda, click [here](#).

For email updates on Michael Swanwick, click [here](#).

For email updates on Martha Wells, click [here](#).

For email updates on P. Djèlí Clark, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you without Digital Rights Management software (DRM) applied so that you can enjoy reading it on your personal devices. This e-book is for your personal use only. You may not print or post this e-book, or make this e-book publicly available in any way. You may not copy, reproduce, or upload this e-book, other than to read it on one of your personal devices.

Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: us.macmillanusa.com/piracy.

Contents

Title Page

Copyright Notice

#Spring Love, #Pichal Pairi

Title Page

Begin Reading

Copyright

Masquerade Season

Title Page

Begin Reading

Copyright

Annie Without Crow

Title Page

Begin Reading

Copyright

Home: Habitat, Range, Niche, Territory

Title Page

Begin Reading

Copyright

The Angel of Khan el-Khalili

Title Page

[Begin Reading](#)
[Copyright](#)

[Newsletter Sign-up](#)



#SPRING LOVE,

#PICHAL PAIRI

USMAN T. MALIK.

#Spring Love, #Pichal Pairi

USMAN T. MALIK

illustration by

HAZEM ASIF

T O R
D O T
C O M

I met the pichal pairi by the Ravi's bank at the mouth of a secret tunnel. She was sitting on rocks, massaging her backwards feet on pebbles from the riverbed.

"My mother always said," she sighed, "this is good for plantar fasciitis."

She was smaller than I'd expected, five-three perhaps. Pretty, with green eyes and walnut hair with copper and gold hues, so a red ripple went through it every time she shook her head. She wore ripped jeans, a white T-shirt with WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY? printed on it in electric blue with a middle finger skewering PEOPLE, and an orange dopatta around her neck. No jacket, though the riverbank was chilly from late February winds. Woke, but somehow vintage at the same time.

"I didn't realize witches got plantar fasciitis," I said.

"I didn't realize I'd be stuck with an idiot who wouldn't know the difference between a witch and a churail." She arched her back, stretched, and straightened. She spoke perfect English, slipping in and out of the language like an eel. "So, who're you with again?"

"Dawn Magazines."

"Ah, that bastion of anti-establishment sentiment. Nice." She produced a cigarette from a shoulder bag on the rock beside her and lit up with a Zippo. The smoke drifted across the bank toward a buffalo wallowing in a stream that was once a river.

Everyone knows there are tunnels that go from the Fort to the Ravi and under the river—so the old guide at Lahore Fort told me when I visited years ago. Basements from Emperor Akbar's time—many levels deep to the famous Fairy Palace—toss labyrinthine limbs toward the water. Not only did they give embankment against the mighty Ravi of the sixteenth century, they provided escape from scalding heat and quick access to the ferries should the Mughals face siege from enemy forces.

Now the Mughals were gone, the Ravi a muddy gash in the face of Punjab, its water a urine-colored trickle, and the tunnels—

Everyone knows the tunnels are a myth, they said when I first began asking around. Of course, no prince ever ran blind in that darkness, spilling gold coins and diamonds in his haste to flee the city. No queen, courtier, or guard made use of such secret passageways. And even if such tunnels existed, most certainly no pichal pairi with banshee wails and malformed feet haunted them. Was I ready to buy Badshahi Mosque next too? They'd heard it was up for sale.

Ghostly circles grew like mouths widening around me.

“Raza, right?” the pichal pairi said and blew another smoke ring at me.

“Yeah. I'm sorry about calling you a witch earlier. My bad.”

“Sure. Try not to stick around after dusk.”

Ignoring the alarming quip, I lowered myself next to her, aware of the proximity of her alien limbs curling and pressing against a litter of pebbles, first one mud-streaked foot then the other. Did she walk along the river between scatters of tents and tin-sheds, where hundreds of homeless families lived? After exiting Ring Road I'd noticed sickly-looking panhandlers—adults and children in rags tapping on car windows, slum-dwellers. I had no idea how long they had lived here. Generations? I made a mental note of looking into that for a possible piece.

She was smiling, a hint of teeth between lightly painted lips. I grabbed my recorder, clicked it on.

“Hello! Raza Minhas of Dawn Magazines here,” I began, “and I'm here with Lahore's very own pichal pairi—Ms. Firoza of Old Ravi. Ms. Firoza, I'm very pleased to meet you.”

“Name's Farah. Charmed, I'm sure.”

“Could you tell me a little about yourself?”

“And risk being doxxed? No, thanks.”

“A little about your family then. Are you married?”

“Your questions are boring.” She flicked ash between the pebbles. “Indubitably, delightfully unmarried.”

“Parents?”

“Ailing in a retirement home. No, we won't be discussing details.”

“Any siblings?”

“I have a sister. She is very pretty.”

“What does she do?”

“I’ve changed my mind. Can you turn that thing off?”

“You’re kidding?”

“About not putting my personal info on record? I’m sure as fuck not.”

“Potty-mouth,” I said under my breath.

“Did ... did you just use a kindergarten slur to tone-police me?”

I turned the recorder off. “No, Ms. Firoza, I didn’t.”

“Farah. Yes, you did.”

“So that’s it for the interview?”

“I said I’d meet you, then decide.” She lifted an eyebrow. “So, yes.”

We regarded each other. I looked away, then at her. Green eyes with flecks of hazel.

She licked her lips. “Are you hungry?” she said. “I’m hungry.” I must have looked worried, for she said, “For some chicken, moron.”

Which is how the pichal pairi and I went to eat Shahi Murgh Chanay at Lakshmi.

★ ★ ★

She had lived in Lahore for more than three decades. Her father was Parsi; his ancestors moved from Eastern Iran to Afghanistan a century or so ago. Mother’s family were nomads, descended from a Hindukush tribe called Abarimon.

Mentioned in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, these swift and savage mountain people lived alongside animals amidst tall pines and firs on the highest peaks and couldn’t be captured due to their tremendous speed. When Alexander of Macedon passed through a Scythian valley, his troops spotted an Abarimon male and gave chase. The back-footed man vanished quickly into the rocks and verdure, but later there were screams in the night and steel and animal noises. When dawn came, an entire regiment of soldiers was gone, the snow-whitened ground spotted with blood, littered with chewed up human feet.

Mortified and enraged, Alexander gave orders to track the aggressors with dogs and seasoned foresters. After three days and nights, they captured an Abarimon juvenile. She was hoisted on a pole like a hog, brought to the camp, and presented to the king. Alexander tried to touch her, but the Abarimon bared her teeth. The king laughed and ordered her caged so he could take her with him to the Indian plains. The moment the army left the valley, however, the Abarimon gasped and fell to the ground, dead.

Alexander's land surveyor Baiton would conclude that the Abarimon could only breathe their own valley's air. The outside was poison to them.

"Baiton, of course, was blowing smoke up his own ass," Farah said. "The kid was likely ill and the account exaggerated. It had *nothing* to do with the air. Our ancestors were nomads, for heaven's sake."

She had a point—further demonstrated by her presence in Lahore.

Springtime in the City of Gardens. A cool breeze patting the heads of white roses, honeysuckle, and gardenias set in a neat row by the house opposite the coffee shop. Our second meeting scheduled at Gloria Jean's, and we were getting more comfortable.

Her name was Firoza, but she preferred Farah.

"I was *Ferozeh* at birth, but it was too Parsi a name and my father didn't want anything to do with Iran or Afghanistan anymore." She sipped honeyed green tea. "So my parents changed it when we moved to Pakistan in the seventies. I was ten." She raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"I didn't say anything."

"You gave me a look."

"Well, you don't look fifty."

"Appearances. Deceiving. And all that." She dusted crumbs off her shirt. She had been dipping biscuits in her green tea, which I thought was weird. "Besides, I am half-Afghani, half-Abarimon. Deathless mountains," she pronounced, "are in my bone marrow. Unlike you plain-crawling Lahoris." She laughed not unkindly.

I was tempted to point out her current habitat of choice, but refrained. "So you're a refugee?"

"When the Soviets invaded, my father knew the differently abled would be the first to get targeted. With us there was no question of staying when war

came.”

I decided to move away from the morbid.

“What else do you like besides Peanut Pik, murgh chanay, and green tea?”

“Are we keeping an inventory? Chill the fuck out, bruh.” She wiggled her backwards toes out of her dainty buttercup flip-flops, retrieved Vaseline from her purse, and rubbed it on her heels. “God, that feels good.”

I watched her spread more lubricant over blisters. “Must be tough walking with a shifted center of gravity.”

She made a noncommittal noise.

“Did you go to school in Lahore?”

“LGS, then a few years at NCA and a summer at Boston U. My mother used to say education by dint of broadening your horizons, by showing you the world, can ruin you. Especially a pichal pairi.” The side of her mouth twitched. “I didn’t understand it at the time. I do now.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She called to a waiter who came over, carefully keeping his gaze away from her feet. “Can we get the check please?”

“Jee, madam. Should I pack anything?”

“Just a slice of chocolate cake. The hazelnut, please.”

He moved off.

“Do you need a lift?” I said as we stepped out.

She shook her head. “Careem zindabad. Long live ride-share.” She held my gaze. “As before, I’d appreciate it if the piece you’re working on—”

“Alternate lifestyles and minorities in Lahore.”

“—doesn’t mention my family history or details of my personal life. No identifiers.”

“Nothing specific. No addresses or family names. I’ll keep my word.”

“And if you don’t,” she said, flashing teeth. “I know where to find you.”

“I have your number. Will get in touch if I have more questions.”

“Your questions are getting better and you’re a good listener. Rare, that.” She walked to the curb, where her Careem was waiting, the swing of her body throwing her spine up and back, turning her gait lord-like. She cast a coy glance over her shoulder. “I’m on Tinder too, you know. Just saying.”

I couldn’t help a grin. “Full body pic?”

“Don’t be an asshole.” She got into her car. “See ya, news guy.”
She likes chocolate, I thought. I’ll remember that.

★ ★ ★

We went to see Nighat Chaodhry at The Colony on Queens Road.

I’d like to think it was my irresistible charm that made Farah call me, but I’d be lying. Her Careem app wasn’t working and she needed the ride.

“I’ve only seen her on YouTube. The woman is a fucking genius,” Farah said as we settled on pillows the organizers had arranged on the floor. The hall was filled with college students and student-adjacent adults. They sat cross-legged, cellphones flashing in their hands. Someone opened the balcony door and pot smoke drifted in.

“Didn’t Plaza Cinema use to be here—” I began to say, but Farah put a finger to my lips. The lights were dimming. A yellow square lit up the stage. A wave of shushing went across the room as Shafqat Amanat Ali’s “Ya Ali” began to play. Wearing anklets and a solemn black-red lehnga Nighat Chaodhry appeared on stage from the left. She held red roses in her outstretched hands, an offering to the song’s eponymous patron saint Ali. Facing the audience, head bowed, Nighat placed the roses in the middle of the stage, swayed, and began to whirl. Her dance ebbed and flowed, her arms and legs transforming the music into geometric shapes of grief and hope.

She came empty-handed to Ali, the song told the audience, hoping her barren bowl of desire would be filled by the time she left his holy presence.

Farah watched the kathak performance with a glint in her eyes. Her right foot tapped the hardwood floor in tune with the tinkling of Nighat’s anklets and the subsequent lamentations of tabla, flute, and sitar.

After it was over and another dancer replaced Nighat, Farah rose and went to the balcony. Slipping my jacket on, I followed. Above us a pale February half-moon hung in the sky like a prop.

Farah lit a cigarette. She was wearing an orange kurta and a pleated pink skirt that fell to her calves. In the moonlight her feet gleamed like marble, and I wondered briefly what it would feel like to put my lips around her toes and suck.

I put my hands on the edge of the balcony.

“So, what did you think?” I said.

She inhaled and blew smoke out her nostrils. “Woman’s a genius.” She looked at Queens Road brimming with evening traffic. “When I was young I used to wonder why people danced. What compels our body to harmonize with music? Why waste all that energy?”

“The taal of the tabla, the beat of the drum. The obvious answer is dance is like sex,” I said. “And sex is life.”

“You’re such a guy.”

“What’s *your* hot take?”

“You know all that time she was dancing, I kept thinking of Anarkali.”

“The dancing girl?”

Farah twisted her wrist and pointed her fingers at the sky. Simultaneously she stepped forward with a foot, her body in line with her arm—a classic kathak step; but her balance was off. Even I could see that. “Yes.”

I knew the story, of course. “Why?”

Smoke ribboned to the sky from her airborne hand. She breathed and straightened. “You remember in the story Anarkali and Emperor Akbar’s son Saleem fall in love?”

“Yes?”

“When Akbar finds out, he is livid, right? How can his son, the future emperor of India, fall in love with a dancing girl! In his rage Akbar has the girl entombed alive. Bricked up airtight. Left to starve to death while the prince goes on to wed his queen and retain royal rights to fuck concubines on the side. A tragic ending, eh? Patriarchy wins again.

“Except there are other versions of the story.” She took another drag and offered me the cigarette. I took it. “In my favorite, a mason is bought off by the prince and he lets a brick sit loose so the girl can breathe—while the prince’s men burrow beneath the walls a couple nights later and get her out. Anarkali is taken to the tunnels beneath the Ravi and whisked off to Delhi, where she lives happily ever after.”

I had a vague memory of reading this particular account years ago.

“Escape.” Farah’s eyes shone. “The dancing girl escapes, Raza. They can’t have her, after all. All of dance, for me, is Anarkali’s escape. A flight

of mind, body, and spirit.” She smiled and held out her hand for the cigarette.

The balcony door opened. Music drifted out. A contemporary number. The Dunhill Light was moist from Farah’s lips. I dragged on it, gave it to her, leaned in, and kissed her cheek.

When I pulled back, she was watching me, her green-blue eyes trained on mine.

“What was that?”

I shrugged, but my heartbeat had picked up.

“Next time, ask first.” Farah puffed, then flicked the cigarette stub off the balcony. It spun all the way down, scattering embers into the night. She pulled out a Ferrero Rocher, popped it into her mouth, and munched.

She turned to me. “May I?” she said quietly, caught the V of my shirt, and pulled me toward her. It was a firm, inquisitive kiss. Her breath was hot and tasted like smoke, chocolate, and metal—it made me shiver. I took her face in one hand, ran my fingers through her hair. She smelled like lavender and the barest hint of sandalwood sherbet. She gently bit my upper lip and sucked it, before drawing back to examine me.

“Well,” she said.

“I never said yes,” I told her. A couple stood half a dozen feet away, pretending not to look at us. The girl laughed. I felt tremulous and very aware of our surroundings.

“Fair enough.” Farah slipped her hand into mine. Her fingers were cold and so soft. “You can be mad at me in the cab.”

We went to my place.

* * *

You don’t need to know the details, except this. A pichal pairi’s feet curl with pleasure. When they do they tend to turn forward.

It is fascinating, watching them rearrange. Pleasure, or happiness, it seems, is their true north.

Farah had published poetry under a pseudonym. Quite decent, too. Spring rain drummed on my patio the following Sunday as, bare-chested, I fetched my acoustic and played a few progressions to render her words into song. She lay on her stomach on my Beatles floor rug listening, her legs

penduluming in the air. She was wearing my Freddie Mercury shirt and nothing else.

“Not bad,” she said, eyes closed, “although one can tell the lines weren’t written for music.”

“Neither was Faiz’s work, but look at what folks did with *that*.”

“Eh.” She turned her head the other way, blew a copper-hued hair strand out of her eyes. “I’d like to check out Hast-o-Neest sometime.”

“The traditional arts place?”

“Yes.”

“Sure.” I put away the guitar and dropped to all fours. I began kissing the inside of her thighs. Her limbs had a fine down that was exquisitely erotic. “I was wondering why someone with a degree in the arts doesn’t seem interested in pursuing them as a career.”

Farah made a noise. She rose on her forearms and arched her back, allowing me access. “Who said I’m not interested?”

“Hmm.”

A matter of some urgency then engaged our interest—multiple times—until night came and took Farah with it.

Despite my seductions, despite my pleas, my pichal pairi wouldn’t sleep over.

★ ★ ★

Were you ever bullied as a kid, Farah?

What do you think, genius?

I’m so sorry.

It’s okay.

Was it at school?

Yeah.

Did you get mad?

A little. On the first moonless night of my adolescent cycle I ate him.

★ ★ ★

Her favorite color was orange. Which, in retrospect, explained her choice of clothing.

She loved lychee in the summer, mixed nuts in the winter, and Aamir Khan in *Rang De Basanti*. She hated manspreading, mansplaining, and the Jonas Brothers. Loved the smell of fresh roti, the first bite of mango in season, and Hot Spot, where she once spent hours snapping pictures of the desi posters. She hated dahi bhalla, bananas, and loudspeaker sermons on Friday. She thought Johnny & Jugnu was overrated (*the burger patty is too chewy!*) and, to my horror, couldn't get enough of Salt'n Pepper's club.

"This is why people break up," I told her when she wouldn't stop kissing me with her mouth full of that fucking sandwich.

She had a hell of a time with shoes. Her left foot was her right and her right foot left. Her Achilles tendon twisted like a vine to bring her hind foot to the fore. None of this was conducive to good shoe sizing and heels were out of the question. Ergo, mostly flip-flops.

She loved *Breaking Bad* and the fact that I hated Pakistani serial dramas.

"I can't," I begged. "Please. I just can't."

"But they're so much fun. They're so stupid their stupidity is addictive. Watch one with me, babe." She batted her long witch eyelashes and pressed her boobs against me. "Please?"

I watched an episode of *Mann Mayal* and almost died. Seriously.

* * *

I don't want to sound like a PTV soap opera, I told her, but my parents died when I was nine. I have no siblings. A somewhat negligent aunt raised me. I moved out at seventeen and have cruised along pretty much on my own since. My parents left me some money and a house in Model Town. It was enough to get me through college, enough to get somewhat settled.

No, I don't see my aunt much. A phone call every Eid or so. My relatives on my mother's side aren't any more interesting. Every six months I get the urge to hang out with cousins. Usually takes one cards night to remind me how much they bore me.

Do I feel like I had a lonely childhood? Not at all. I had neighborhood kids to play cricket with and a stray cat named Mankoo, whom I adopted. Oh, I don't know—the chowkidar named him, I think. Yeah, I know it's a dumb name, a monkey's name.

I loved that cat, though. He refused milk from any hand but mine.

* * *

Farah vanished for a week. My phone calls and texts went unanswered. I went to the Ravi. Where the mouth of the tunnel should have been was a boulder. Moss grew on it. I couldn't find a way in. No, I won't describe its whereabouts. She said not to.

I thought about filing a police F.I.R., but changed my mind. I went to all her favorite joints to ask if anyone had seen her. They hadn't. Just when I was frantic enough to reconsider seeking help from the cops, my doorbell rang. There she was, barefoot, in ripped jeans and an orange SAVE OUR PLANET T-shirt. Smiling, a bit pale, but fine.

We clung to each other, kissed, and made love, but I could not get anything out of her. Next time she'd try to let me know, she said, but sometimes she just had to go away.

I had to be content with that.

* * *

How does it feel, Farah?

How does what feel?

To live a life with your feet pointing the wrong way all the time.

Who says my feet point the wrong way? Maybe they're fine and it's my *torso* that never got the message. Maybe it's my *head* that's backward.

Maybe I've just been looking over my shoulders all my life.

What woman, she said, hasn't spent her life compelled to look at the past, the baggage car of trauma that follows her—even as her feet march her forward?

* * *

We went to the Aurat March in Lahore.

I was assigned to cover it for Images. Farah had been planning for months. She wore beads and a hand-painted yellow kurta with the words YOU FEAR LOVEMAKING BUT NOT WAR-MONGERING? in front and

PICHAL PAIRIS ARE WOMEN TOO on the back. In her hands she held a placard: LOOK AT THIS POSTER, NOT AT MY FEET.

Surrounded by hundreds of people, we marched down Egerton Road, chanting *My body! My choice! My body! My Choice!*

An eighty-year-old lady in a wheelchair proclaimed I HAVE WAITED A LIFETIME FOR THIS MARCH. A trans woman in a bright-red dopatta drummed a dholki hung around her neck. The woman next to her hoisted a sign that said STOP TRANSGENDER RAPE. Women of all ages and sizes stormed down the street. Men too. So many “uncles.” Next to a young woman a gent in his sixties held a placard that read MY DAUGHTER, HER CHOICE. A mustached banker-type smiled at Farah as he walked along, holding a ten-year-old’s hand. The kid was hopping along in excitement. Her poster said DISTRIBUTE MITHAI. IT’S A GIRL!

Farah grinned at her and the girl beamed.

A tall sharp-featured girl wearing face paint and a pearl necklace bumped into Farah.

“Excuse me,” she said, then her gaze dropped to Farah’s feet. “Oh.”

“No prob at all.” Farah smiled. “March is packed. Which is great.”

“Uh huh.” The girl inched away and in a low voice spoke to her companion, a heavy-set woman with silver hair. They looked us up and down.

“Everything okay?” Farah said.

The woman pointed at me. “He shouldn’t be here.”

“He’s covering the march for a newspaper. He’s an ally.”

“This is our day,” said the tall girl. “Would be nice to have one fucking day without men.”

“Excuse me?”

“You shouldn’t be here either,” said the girl.

Farah’s smile widened, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “You want to be careful now, sister.”

“Oh, sweetie.” The girl smiled brightly. “I’m *not* your sister.”

“That’s enough, Hira.” The woman nudged the girl. “They’re not worth it.”

They moved away and disappeared in the crowd.

Farah's face was flushed. "Fucking pichal pairi haters."

"I'm sorry." I squeezed her hand. "Every party has a pooper, I guess."

She adjusted her baggy jeans to better cover her feet, but not before I caught a glint of long, sharp claws protruding from her toes. She raised her placard higher. "Let's go."

We finished the march as planned.

That night we heard about the incident at the Islamabad Aurat March. A bunch of mullahs had crashed it, pelted stones at the marchers, given a teenage boy a concussion. The kid needed a CT scan and a couple nights in the hospital.

It left Farah furious. I couldn't reach her for days.

a mile of twisted metal, a scorched train

(she wrote in a poem)

a train aflame

trails my love's wedding dress;

flanked by men

she stumbles down the aisle.

Her favorite place in the whole wide world was not in Lahore.

Not in this urban village foaming with concrete and traffic and smog that made your eyes water. This over-developed parochial town with its incestuous elite who all knew and fucked each other and played golf in private clubs on acres of green, even as the last tracts of nature available to fruit-wallas and chanay-wallas shrank with every passing day.

Of necessity she loved Lahore, its potpourri of culture, cuisine, music, and literature. For remembrance of times past. But her favorite place in the world was not in Lahore.

★ ★ ★

My dear, have you ever beguiled and partaken of a wayfarer?

Huh?

Cannibalism, love. Pichal pairis are notorious for taking on the form of lovely women, luring men off lonely highways, and feasting on them.

You're joking, right?

No, my butterfly. They say you hang upside down from trees—tree-spirits of a sort—and latch onto any unfortunate micturating under said foliage.

Rumors, you moron. Most of us prefer regular food and lodging. At least till someone pisses us off.

Oh.

Oh, indeed.

Do I ... ever piss you off, Farah?

Yes, darling.

Uh. Okay.

But you shouldn't worry. You taste awful.

Is that insult or reassurance—who can say?

I'm kidding. You taste sweet. Okay, sometimes a little salty, a bit gummy maybe, somewhat nasty, but that's usually after you drink that stupid kalonji oil you like so much.

Gee, thanks.

If it's any consolation, you taste sweeter than most men I've swal—

Not helpful, Farah!

*Laughter.

★ ★ ★

I had a work thing in Karachi. I asked Farah if she wanted to come. She surprised me with a yes.

We booked first class tickets in PIA. She paid the fare; I couldn't have afforded it.

“Oh, chill, my dude.” She grinned at my discomfort. “It's all good.”

Two days before the flight she brought a suitcase and emptied it in my living room. Skirts, jeans, shalwar kurtas, baggy pants, T-shirts, lots of undergarments, and flip-flops. I was assigned ironing, while she would make dinner and pack. A chappal whizzing by my head preempted my protests.

Farah flitted from room to room, bouncing with nervous energy. It drove me batty.

“Could you *please* settle down?” I slid the iron over her undies. “I’ll burn it if you keep dancing around me.”

“You’re right.” She dropped the hangers she was holding and threw herself on the couch. “I need a break.”

“Are you okay?”

She drummed her fingers on the armrest.

“What’s up?”

She moved uncomfortably. I turned off the iron and joined her on the couch.

“My sister lives in Karachi,” she said. “That’s one reason I wanted to go.”

“Hey, that’s great.” Farah didn’t talk much about her family. I’d assumed it was a pichal pairi thing. “We should totally meet up with her.”

“She’s very pretty. Runs her own business: a yoga studio and a garments store. She is doing very well.”

“Sounds wonderful.” I squeezed her hand. “But do I sense a ‘but’ coming?”

Farah shot me a glance and sighed. “It’s just ... I live in a goddamn tunnel, Raza. Like a hobbit. She lives in a high rise near French Beach and wears branded clothes and sells branded shit. I haven’t seen her in years. Not since our parents—” Her voice lifted and fell. “I don’t even know how to talk to her anymore, and ... now I’m planning to fly off with you to see her.”

I pressed her thigh. “You don’t have to see her, you know.”

“I guess.”

“Sleep on it. Meanwhile, think of walks on the beach, prawn haandi at Boat Basin, nihari at Burns Road—and let’s pack our shit.” I rose to my feet and kissed the top of her head.

She responded by grabbing my crotch.

“Watch it!”

“Or what?”

Like a bull held by its horn I was led into the bedroom, where she did naughty things to me, wearing only socks.

It was the last time the pichal pairi and I made love before the world was cancelled.

★ ★ ★

We were on our way to Allama Iqbal International when the news broke.

I called the airline but found a busy number. I dialed airport help. An impatient voice told me all PIA flights had been canceled.

“What on earth is happening?”

“It was on one of the flights, sir. A passenger from Tehran.”

“So they cancel other flights as well?”

“Sir, *all* non-emergent flights to Karachi have been canceled.”

For several weeks we’d heard rumors of a disease that had emerged in a neighboring country. The few cases reported in Sind hadn’t really raised eyebrows since they were all returnees from abroad and had been house-locked immediately.

We thought we had plenty of time. Until we didn’t.

I called a well-informed friend at the paper. Reliable reports that the country would go into lockdown in less than forty-eight hours, said my buddy. And a good thing too. This was no ordinary illness.

Whatever it was, it was killing people like flies.

★ ★ ★

I asked Farah to go into house-lock with me. She said no.

“There are hundreds of homeless people who live around Ravi. That’s my neighborhood. They’re going to starve when the rich shut themselves in their mansions. I have resources. I can help them. But I can’t do that *and* return to you. I’ll bring that damn bug with me.”

“I’ll take the chance.”

“I won’t.”

“We don’t even know it will affect you the same way. You’re...”

“What?”

“You’re different.”

She shrugged. “Good. It means I have a better chance of not contracting and dying from the fucker.”

“But what if you’re affected *worse* than regular people? Listen, Farah,” I said, not liking the desperation in my voice. “I’m not letting you go out there alone.”

“That isn’t your decision.” She picked up her suitcase and turned to go.

I resisted the urge to grab her wrist. Instead, I followed her outside. “What if we both stayed here and took occasional trips to wherever you need to go and dropped ration packs there, or something?”

Her hair flew in her face when she shook her head. “I’ll be going out to help every day. It’s simply too much of a risk for you.”

“Holy shit, are you listening to yourself? You’re not a health worker. You’re not Mother Teresa. It’s not your responsibility.”

The murky green-blue of her eyes burned. “Let me be very clear, Raza. I could vanish so quickly you’d never even see me go. But I wanted to talk. I wanted to make sure you understood. Who knows how long this will—”

“That is my point, Farah. We don’t know how long—”

“—last. So”—she took a deep breath and let it go—“I don’t want to see you for a while.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to see you. And I don’t want you to come looking for me. Is that clear?”

I stared at her. “Why does that sound like a break up?”

“Because—” She stood on tiptoe and, placing one hand on my unshaved face, kissed me hard on the lips. Her breath was warm, and her skin cold. “—it is. For now. Take care, Raza.”

With that Farah swiveled on her backwards heels and strode away on a rapidly emptying street.

★ ★ ★

Lahore retreated into house-lock to wait out the mystery illness.

Rangers were stationed at strategic places all over the city. All businesses except food and medical stores were shut down. To get from my place in Model Town to the news office near Pepsi required passage through two checkpoints. If you weren’t wearing a mask, you were berated. If there were children in the car, you were asked to pull over while the army man called in to see what should be done with you.

No children and a press card meant my life was easier than most’s.

I Skyped and physically interviewed doctors and healthcare workers. With a physician friend I co-wrote an article for EOS that got a fair amount of traction and landed my buddy a slot on Indus News.

From backdoor army channels I bought five thousand surgical masks and had them distributed in the kachi abaadi near Kainchi. Donning one myself, I went with a team of rangers to give out food and hand sanitizer to unemployed laborers sitting at roundabouts, waiting for the world to resume its dysfunctional working. These were the invisibles who were everywhere and nowhere. The worker atop the bamboo scaffold at your uncle's plaza. The watchman at the house your father was building. The ditch digger who came once a week with your gardener. Society sweep. Raddi-wala. The woman who rifled through your trash, and her son who swept the steps for a tip. The sun-darkened, cachectic faces of True Lahore.

Victims of the house-lock numbered in the millions. Farah was right.

Three weeks in, and not a single message from her—even as my WhatsApp bulged with misinformation, memes, and magical cures for the illness. My calls went to a recording that apologized and informed me my desired number was currently turned off.

I told myself I never really made a promise. I went to the Ravi and the river was there. Overhead, the sky, an impeccable blue Lahore hadn't seen in decades, simmered with brown cheel kites. They cried and swooped at chunks of sadqah meat commuters bought from roadside vendors and flung in the air to ward off evil from their loved ones. No dogs, though. Usually there were several packs around. Under the bridge homeless men huddled together without masks or shirts. They whispered when they saw me. I tightened the strings on my N95, got out of the car, and handed out money and ration packs. When they tried to swarm me, I shouted at them to back up six feet. They retreated.

I walked along the river till I found the hill and the tunnel mouth still blocked by the boulder. It was impossible to tell there had ever been an opening here.

Two teenage boys in shalwar kameez were tethering a goat in front of a makeshift tent. I beckoned them over. Showing each a thousand, I asked if

they had seen a pichal pairi around. They looked at each other. The lanky one with a farmer turban on his head scratched his chin.

“Don’t know what you mean, sahib,” he said in Punjabi.

It took me a moment to realize they were protecting her. “Listen, I know Farah-bibi very well. I mean her no harm. I haven’t been able to reach her for a while. All I want”—I added another thousand-rupee note to each hand and held the money aloft—“is to make sure she’s okay.”

The boy with the turban elbowed his friend. The latter shrugged and reached for the money. “Farah-bibi’s probably fine, sahib,” he said through buckteeth. “I saw her a couple days ago.”

“Where?”

“All over, sahib. Munir the ferryman has been rowing her up and down the Ravi for weeks. Munir told my chacha that they’ve given out more ration bags than the government.”

I gave him a thousand, held the second note back. “Can you tell me where to find her?”

“Sure.” He gestured at the tunnel mouth behind me. “She lives in the tunnels. Everyone knows that.”

“Everyone?”

They snickered. “We’re river dwellers, sahib,” said the first boy. “We know the water’s secrets.”

“Know a way to get past this?” I nodded at the boulder.

The turbaned boy hesitated, glanced at his friend, and nodded.

I handed them the promised money, took out my wallet, and showed them its contents. “Take me to her and all this is yours.”

The second boy reached out. Firmly, he closed my hand around my wallet.

“Keep your baksheesh, sahib. If you’re her friend and here to help, we’ll show you the way. But we won’t go in.”

“Why not?”

“She may be the nicest pichal pairi that ever lived,” said the boy with buckteeth, “but she’s still a churail. And you enter a churail’s house at your own peril.”

★ ★ ★

I found the pichal pairi at the end of a secret tunnel. How I got there is none of your business.

Blanket pulled up to her neck, she lay on her side in a canopied bed in a room wallpapered with white and blue stripes. At the foot of the bed perched a bench piled high with frilled pillows. *Dirty Dancing* and *Rang De Basanti* posters hung above a couch covered in aqua fabric. A gold-framed Sadequain replica, softly lit by niche lights, swirled across one wall. Three bookcases lined the sidewalls with the collected works of Sylvia Plath and Parveen Shakir poking their heads out like stone animals.

The air was hot and smelled of camphor.

I went to her and whispered, “Farah.” She stirred. I reached out to touch her. “Farah, it’s me.”

She shivered and her head came up. Something was wrong with its shape. “Who’s there?” Then she made a sound, something between a gasp and a keening. “Raza?”

Quickly she thrust a hand to paw at the side table. I saw a flash of pink as of wrinkled pale drapes, and the lights went out. When they flickered on, Farah was sitting up, leaned against the headboard. Sleep hair seethed around her face. Her eyes were red and the eyeliner was a mess.

“You’re *such* a shit,” she whispered and tried a half-smile. “You broke your promise.”

“I made no promises.” I lowered myself next to her. She shifted to make room and the bedroom shifted with her. A sense of unreality came to me like heaviness in the head, and vanished.

“Where the fuck were you, Farah?” I said. “I was worried sick.”

“I was here, trying to—” She broke off with a cough that came from deep in her chest. It shook her entire body. Sweat beaded on her brows. She recovered, took a long breath, winced, and said, “I’ve been trying to help, but I guess I overdid it. I woke up real tired two days ago and”—she waved vaguely at the room—“I haven’t really been able to get out of bed since.”

I placed my hand on her forehead. She was burning up. I could smell her sickness. A humid, sweaty tang in her hair, her pores. The odor of a sick dog.

Her nose was running.

“You’re sick, Farah. This may be pneumonia. Hell, this may be that fucking bug. We need to get you out of here.”

“I’ll be fine, but you need to get away from me.” She wiped her forehead with a hand. “Please just go. I’ll come see you when I’m better.”

“Like fuck I will. You need fluids and medicine. Is there food here somewhere? A kitchen? Maybe some soup.”

“No, babe.” Farah laughed. There wasn’t any laughter in her eyes. “I’m all out.”

“Then let’s go to my place. Come on, I’ll help.”

She shook her head. “Ain’t happening, love. I’m too dizzy.”

“I’ll carry you if I need to.”

“No. It’ll take us a while to get out and I’m ... I’m too weak to create—” She began to cough again.

My legs trembled when I got up. “Wait here. I’m gonna go get some things for you.” I looked around, as a shudder went through the bedroom. The film posters wavered as if the movies were about to play. The niche lights dimmed, then resurged.

“Farah,” I said. “What is this place? How’s there electricity here?”

She tried to get up, but her legs gave out. Like a leaf from a felled tree she sank into the covers. “Please, Raza,” she whispered, closing her eyes. “If you care about me, please go away and don’t come back.”

I was already running.

★ ★ ★

It was after maghrib when I got back. I had taken at least three wrong turns in the dark and two tumbles, resulting in a cut on my palm and a leak in the milk carton. It must have left a sticky trail for a mile.

Just when I feared I was lost I saw a flickering light. I hurried down the tunnel and stopped at the doorless entrance of her bedroom.

In a chamber of granite and limestone she lay on a bed of moss and leaves. Two oil lamps, one in each corner, showed chairs with broken legs, heaps of pink plastic bags (the sort vendors sold sadqah meat in), soda cans, broken pitchers, and clay pots. Gunnysacks filled with refuse. And bones strewn everywhere.

Gleaming vertebrae, dull scapulae, mandibles and maxillae, skulls with deep eyeholes, incisors, and canines. Leg bones. Thigh bones. A veritable kingdom of the picked clean.

Seized with horror, I lurched to her. “Farah.” When she didn’t respond I dropped the supplies and grabbed her shoulder. “Farah, please.”

The netted mass that was my girlfriend’s shape crumpled at my touch. Wet grass rustled, eggshells from river birds cracked, the anthill beneath the fishing net stirred. Its shiny black denizens poured out in waves, swarmed to the walls, and broke against them.

I didn’t scream. Did a part of me expect this?

I settled down: into the bone dust, the odor of incense and rain-washed leaves, the crackling of ant bodies under my boots, the stillness of the air. I steepled my fingers and rested my chin on them. The river whooshed somewhere above me, a distant echo, and an image came to me of a shadow-girl bolting in the dark. The tunnels, they go from Lahore Fort to the Ravi and under it—an old chowkidar told me when I visited Lahore Fort so many months ago. Crisscrossing, apple-saucing, elbowing the river before turning southeast. Nearly five hundred kilometers they ran so the Mughal princes and their courtesans could elope, escape, abscond—all the way to Delhi, where they would live happily ever after. Why shouldn’t the tunnels run thus for a girl in a white T-shirt, an orange scarf, and blue jeans fleeing death, disease, and countless versions of herself?

This cavern should stink, I said to myself as I rocked back and forth on my perfectly formed heels. All that filth and refuse.

But the cavern smelled of cedar and pine.

Seated in the chamber at the end of the tunnel—no, I won’t tell you which one—I tore open the soup packet and ate my fill. I licked my fingers and the hole in the milk carton, and drank the remaining (thimbleful of) milk. I munched all the chocolate, including the Ferrero Rocher.

After, I went home.

THE END

On the last day of April when the first of the heat waves reached Lahore a postcard dropped into my mailbox. This was surprising because our mailman had died two weeks prior from the contagion and the postal service had been temporarily shuttered.

Back inside, I took off my cloth mask and placed the card on the dinner table. Carefully I washed my hands with soap, dried them, returned to the table. Thoroughly, and avoiding the writing, I sanitized the postcard with alcohol. The picture was a seascape with a dancer in the foreground caught by the camera in the most fluid of transformations.

I held the card between my palms. I blinked a few times—my eyes were wet—and read the back. There it was, the stamp of the city it was mailed from.

In the middle of the card were three lines printed in neat handwriting. The ink smelled like mint and roses.

No, I cannot tell you what they said.

The postcard said not to.

THE END



Copyright © 2021 by Usman T. Malik

Art copyright © 2021 by Hazem Asif



MASQUERADE SEASON

'PEMI
AGUDA

Masquerade Station

' P E M I A G U D A

illustration by

A K E M

T O R
D O T
C O M

Pauly should stick to the major roads when walking home from his cousins' house. That's what his mother warns, abstractly, routinely, every morning of this summer holiday when she drops him off. He always nods yes, but in this one thing, he is a disobedient son. He's tried to take the major roads home, but they are so noisy with the grumbling trucks and the plaintive honks from all the cars competing to get ahead. Pauly knows more scenic routes home, less noisy paths that wind between large houses they'll never afford and parks his mother has no time to take him to. And when Pauly doesn't want to take this leisurely walk home, there is a shortcut. If he dips behind the mosque down the street from his cousins' house, scurries across the gutter bridge made of two wooden planks, slashes through some distance of overgrown bush, then hops over the abandoned rusty back gate of Alele Estate, he will burst out two streets away from home. The security guards at Alele's main gate never question his passage; they wave at his sweaty forehead and smile at the grass masquerades are swooshing in the corner stains he's accumulated on the shorts his mother makes for him.

Pauly is trying to get home quickly today. He stayed too long, playing ball with his cousins, Ekene and John, in their huge backyard bordered by coconut trees. Behind the mosque, he startles a man at his prayers. The man stills, following Pauly's path through the backyard as his head hovers inches above the mat. Pauly whispers an apology, not slowing down. He doesn't doubt that the rotting planks will hold his weight, and across the makeshift bridge he goes. But today, a few steps into the bush, he stalls, almost tripping, because here are three masquerades swaying in front of him, blocking his path. Pauly is not aware of any masquerade festivals at this time of the year; he takes a small step back, contemplating the out-of-context figures.

"Excuse me, please," he says, because his mother has taught him to be polite.

The masquerades don't respond. They stand there, moving left to right, then left, like backup singers at church. Pauly has to tilt his head all the way back to see the tops of their heads. The first masquerade is the tallest, even taller than his science teacher, who is a very tall 6'4" — a detail the man crows at his short students. The tall masquerade has a body of long raffia threads layered over each other—like someone has stacked fifty-six brooms and topped them all with a brown cowboy hat, the kind Woody in *Toy Story* wears. It has no face. The second masquerade is just a little taller than Pauly's mother. It is draped in rich aso-oke, the bloodiest of reds. Pauly gawks at the twinkling beads sewn into the cloth, dangling and scattering light, but his attention cannot stay long away from its square silver face with twin black elliptical slits above three gashes of tribal marks on each cheek. Though the head of the third masquerade is a solid dark wood that takes up half its body length (with a chiseled triangle nose, engraved circles for eyes, carved zigzags for teeth), there is an explosion of colorful feathers around it. The feathers are blue and purple and red and yellow and pink and they are long and different, as if all the birds of the world have donated feathers for this purpose. Its skirt is made of several panels of cloth, each with an elaborate embroidered pattern.

When they keep shifting with the wind, not responding, Pauly moves to go around them. They don't stop him. How strange, he thinks, and keeps running; but isn't that a rustling following him? Pauly swings around and the masquerades halt, only a few steps behind.

"Why are you following me?" Pauly asks.

It is the feathered masquerade that speaks; the voice is a whispery, susurrating sound, as if the feathers themselves are speaking. The masquerade says, "Because we are your masquerades."

In the middle of this bush path, a shortcut to Pauly's home, he thinks how he has never owned anything so special and vivid and big. His mother will be proud. His cousins will be impressed.

"Okay," Pauly says, and takes them home, checking over his shoulder at every corner to make sure they are still there, tall and conspicuous and all his.

★ ★ ★

The masquerades are swooshing in the corner of the living room, between the old TV with the crooked antennae and the heat-trapping velvet curtains that Pauly's mother keeps forgetting to replace. The masquerades are so bright, too bright maybe, for the otherwise dim apartment, and Pauly, seated on the edge of the sofa, sometimes has to look away, afraid his eyes will rupture from color.

It wasn't hard getting the masquerades home. They moved through the bush without problems, hopped over the gate gracefully—as if they were featherlight; when the Alele security guards had seen Pauly and the masquerades approaching, they waved and asked: “And what do we have here?” To which Pauly replied, “These are my masquerades,” and the masquerades had swayed and Pauly liked the way the guards nodded, touched their cap visors to show they were impressed.

His mother has warned him not to bring strangers home, yes. So, in this second thing, he is a disobedient son. But Pauly is sure she will understand that masquerades aren't things you pass up, especially when they belong to you. And isn't it his mother who always says never to leave his belongings lying around? Never to lose them?

Pauly doesn't know what appropriate conversation with masquerades sounds like. Should he ask where they have come from? Would that be impolite? Would that be looking a gift horse in the mouth? Or should he ask what they do for fun? They don't look like they'd want to play football, staining their materials, which have somehow stayed clean through that bush passage. But maybe he shouldn't presume. Are they similar to pets he has to feed?

He finally speaks up. “Can I offer you biscuit and water?”

The red aso-oke masquerade bends forward, cloth rippling like a wave, then straightens. This voice is soft too, but more slippery, silkier than the feathered masquerade's. “Palm oil,” the masquerade says from behind its silver mask.

“You want palm oil?”

“Yes,” it says, the *s* slinking out, drawing long. “Only palm oil.”

Pauly's mother arrives from her seamstress job in the middle of this conversation.

“Oh,” she says when she steps into the room, lugging bags of vegetables and fish for dinner in one hand and bolts of fabric in the other. She stands there for a long moment, looking at the masquerades, her body not quite in or out. “Oh,” she repeats. “We have company?”

“These are my masquerades,” Pauly announces. He stands tall, all of his ten-year-old height. He spreads his hands toward them, as if they are an art project of his making. He waits for his mother to be impressed.

But she says nothing, just enters the living room fully, shutting the door with her foot. She walks past them to the kitchen and dumps her purchases on the counter. She is in there for a few minutes while Pauly squints at his masquerades, wondering if their sparkle has somehow muted, wondering how she is not standing beside him, in awe of these shades and textures.

She reappears at the door to the kitchen, holding a knife. “Does this mean I have to make dinner for five?”

“No,” Pauly answers, happy not to add to her troubles. “They only eat palm oil.”

“Good,” his mother says, returning into the relative darkness of the kitchen. “Good,” Pauly’s mother repeats. “Because I’m tired.”

★ ★ ★

Pauly’s cousins want to know what the masquerades can do. They stand really close to the softly moving figures in their backyard, football suspended. The boys reach fingers out to touch Pauly’s masquerades, but withdraw within inches of actual contact.

“I don’t think they need to do anything!” Pauly responds, annoyed that the boys cannot just glory in the glistening of the beads, the luster of the raffia, the vibrancy of the feathers. “They’re masquerades.”

That first night had been weird, having the masquerades in his room, stuck in the corner with all his action figures and Lego. But after he had startled awake several times, the rustling of the first masquerade’s raffia began to soothe him; the moon snuck in through a gap in his curtains and passed through the beads on the aso-oke, and they refracted light, dotting the walls and ceiling of Pauly’s room with stars; the embroidered patterns on the

third masquerade's skirt seemed to him like complete stories in a secret language known only to him, the silver threads glinting alive in the night.

"Jeez, calm down," Ekene says now, walking away from Pauly and his masquerades. "They're cool and all, but if they're just going to stand there —"

"Whatever," Pauly says. He doesn't need to be here with his cousins when he has three masquerades. "I'm going home," he announces. The masquerades glide behind him, as if backing his decision.

On the streets, Pauly kicks pebbles. The masquerades are quiet and now he regrets leaving his cousins.

"But is there anything you *can* do?" he turns to ask.

At first, he is sure they are ignoring him, but then the red aso-oke masquerade does the wavy thing again, silver head bowing down, then lifting up. The raffia masquerade hops and spins around on the spot. The feathers on the third masquerade rise, like a bird getting ready for flight—the feathers stick out in their million directions and Pauly steps back.

The masquerades dance. Out in the street, they twirl and contort and somersault. Pauly feels transformed, transported to another world, a brighter one than his summer holiday has given him so far, more radiant than the heady rush of scoring a goal against Ekene. The masquerades feint left, then jerk right, they jump and fold and twist and spasm and feathers flutter and cloths flap and billow and beads clink and jangle and the plumes blur and raffia palms create a *ssshhhh-shhshshshh* wind that is the background pulse of their dance.

* * *

Pauly's mother leaves her sewing machine for the evening and comes to sit with him. He is watching a movie about a group of teenagers solving crimes with their pet dragon. Static horizontal lines flicker across the screen intermittently, eclipsing their adventures.

Pauly moves to sit on the floor beside his mother's legs, leans his head against them. It is rare that she pauses work to be with him. In this moment, he is happy. The masquerades are next to the TV, swaying as usual. There is an almost-empty bowl of palm oil at their feet. It is Pauly's favorite bowl, the

one with the robots holding hands. Pauly had spent a huge chunk of his afternoon staring at the bowl of palm oil, trying to catch them eating, but whenever he looked away or dozed off, he found the oil depleted. Now, he allows them their privacy and mystery.

He has his masquerades; he has his mother: it is a tranquility Pauly revels in.

His mother runs her hand over his head slowly. “Pauly?”

“Mhmm?” The idyllic moment is lulling him to sleep.

“I’m working on this project now. I’m making a dress for that Nini Edoh actress. You’ve heard of her? It’s for an awards show.”

Pauly shrugs.

“Well, she’s a big deal. And if she likes this dress, I will get plenty of clients and maybe we can move to a bigger house, you know, with a big backyard where you and Ekene and John can play football.”

“That sounds nice,” Pauly drawls, his voice slurring.

“But I need something from you.”

“From me?” Pauly perks up. His mother expects things from him—to be polite, to wash the dishes, to be home before she returns from work—but she has never *needed* anything from him. Pauly sits up, wiping sleep away. “What?”

“I think the raffia on your masquerade would make a wonderful belt. I need just a little bit of it, you know. I’ve never seen raffia like that before. It’s so shiny and smooth! It will really pop against the orange of the dress.” His mother sounds out of breath; it makes Pauly wince.

He turns to look at his mother; the TV lights are traveling over her face and he can see her stare fixed on the masquerades’ corner, and Pauly understands it is them she’s been watching all along. “Oh, I don’t know,” he says. “You’ll have to ask them.”

“But they’re your masquerades,” Pauly’s mother reminds him. “You can do whatever you want.”

Pauly crawls to kneel in front of the masquerade his mother is eyeing. The raffia really is lush and long and lustrous; Pauly has always known this. “Can I talk to them first?” he asks his mother.

“Of course, of course,” his mother says, leaving the room.

Pauly cannot look up at the raffia masquerade's visage. He stares instead at its bottom, where its feet would be, the raffia threads sweeping against the floor in slow motion. "Is it okay if my mum takes some of your threads?" he asks. "I'll make sure it's not too much. She needs it for her job."

The raffia masquerade keeps moving, never still; it says, "We are your masquerades." Its voice is like a drum, deep and reverberating through Pauly's chest.

"Okay," Pauly says, and calls his mother in.

She is already holding a pair of scissors, and she is smiling as she approaches them. She is gentle with the masquerade, smoothing a hand over it the way she had rubbed Pauly's head, weighing the threads, sifting through them, smiling wider. "Yes, this will do very well," she says, and when her scissors snip loudly, Pauly looks away.

★ ★ ★

Pauly isn't sure if he is seeing this right, but the next day, it looks like the raffia masquerade is leaning a little, tilting, no longer as tall as his science teacher. Are the feathers of the third masquerade wilting? Is the aso-oke of the second masquerade duller, less red? When he pours from the keg of palm oil into their bowl, he keeps pouring until it overflows, the red oil running across the illustrated robots' hands.

Pauly's mother comes home around noon, earlier than ever. She says the actress loved the belt and has referred her services to all her friends. Pauly's mother is so happy, grinning so wide that her pink gums are exposed. She wants to take him to Sweet Sensation to celebrate. Pauly is excited. They haven't been out to eat in forever. He wears his favorite sneakers, he brushes his tight coils; then he and the masquerades stand by the door, waiting.

"Oh, Pauly," his mother says when she emerges from her room, applying lipstick, dangling her car keys. "I don't think your masquerades should come. This is mother-son time, and the restaurant might be crowded."

Pauly looks to the masquerades and before he asks, there is that whispery voice saying, "We are your masquerades." And Pauly knows he can tell them to stay. He does. "Stay," he says, and his mother takes his hand.

At the restaurant, when Pauly's mother says yes to him getting both ice cream and an egg roll alongside his yamarita, everything tastes chalky. He swallows hard as his mother calls him her good and perfect and obedient son. He nods at his mother's promises: a new house, a new bicycle, more time together.

★ ★ ★

Pauly guides his masquerades on a tour through one of the neighborhoods where he takes his leisurely strolls. They noiselessly follow him through the cleaner streets with the tall palm trees, and grass that looks too green to be real. The raffia masquerade is still tilting, but not by much. The colors seem to have replenished themselves in the feathers, in the aso-oke. Pauly is glad.

"Look," he says, pointing at the white house with two fat columns holding up a balcony. The wrought iron gate surrounding the compound is painted gold. "We can have a house like that and we can all stand up there and look down at the street and there will be space to dance in the backyard and play football."

The masquerades sway beside him, silent.

★ ★ ★

When Pauly's mother asks for a strip of the red aso-oke, Pauly starts to cry.

"Why are you crying?" she asks, folding herself to sit next to him on the floor. She strokes his head; the smell of her stale sweat mixed with the smell of the lubricant she uses for her sewing machine envelops him.

"It's not fair!" Pauly says.

His mother leans back, away from him. "Not fair?"

"They don't like it," he explains. "They didn't like it when you cut before."

"Did they tell you that?" And when he doesn't respond to this, his mother goes on: "They are yours. You can do what you want. What will a little bit of fabric hurt?" She turns to look at the masquerade beside the TV. "Look at that thing." Her voice sounds breathy again. "It probably has up to forty yards of aso-oke on it. I'm asking for only half a yard, Pauly."

Pauly cries harder. He can still hear the snip of the first cut, can see the way the masquerade tilted afterward. "I don't ... want you ... to do it." Hiccups punctuate his sentence.

"See, it's a big woman who wants this dress that I'm making o. She is Iyaloja of Balogun. Do you know what that means?"

Pauly shakes his head.

"It means that if this goes well, we've made it. I get an in with their market association. Look, Pauly, don't you want me to spend more time at home? Don't you want Ekene and John to come over, instead of you always going there? This single mother life is so hard, Pauly, I just want us to be happy. I want things to be easier for us both."

Pauly cries some more as he nods, and his tears blur so that the scissors going through the red aso-oke look like a knife slicing through blood.

★ ★ ★

On the way to his cousins' house, Pauly begs his masquerades to dance.

The masquerades bend and rise, as if bowing again to Pauly, but they do not jump and twirl and somersault this time. They sway, at first slowly, and then faster. They sway left and right, their heads almost touching the ground before they go in the reverse direction. The feathers do not spread out in glorious performance; they droop behind the wooden head. The cowboy hat has a crooked rim. The silver face doesn't reflect the sun; the slits darken. There is no crackling of raffia, no clinking of beads; there is silence as they move through this muted dance, this slouching, mournful dance that makes Pauly want to cry. "Stop," he whispers, and they do.

When he gets to his cousins' house, they are dressed to follow *him* home. Apparently, his mother has called ahead, mentioning a surprise.

They all walk back to Pauly's house, using the major roads. Pedestrians stop to stare and frown at these wilting masquerades. Pauly wishes his hands were wide enough, that he were big enough to protect them from these looks, to gather them into his arms and console them.

In Pauly's living room is a new TV. It is flat and slick and takes up most of the wall. The masquerades glide to their corner, which is now half of what it used to be. Pauly flinches at how cramped they look, feathers sticking into

aso-oke and aso-oke cloaking raffia and raffia tangling with feathers. But the TV comes on, and for the first time, the hues on the TV are brighter than Pauly's three masquerades.

★ ★ ★

Pauly's mother knocks on his room door and he knows what she wants.

"It's the governor's wife, Pauly!" She sounds excited, her voice pitching higher as it reaches Pauly through the wood.

He doesn't respond. The masquerades are by his toys. They are still swaying, but barely, like they are tired.

"I just need a few feathers, my darling boy. I'm doing a neck detail that will stun everybody! This is it, Pauly! I can feel it. Our lives are about to change!"

Pauly climbs down from his bed, softly, so his mother doesn't hear his movements. He slowly pushes Lego aside so that there is space to sit in front of them. He buries his head in his palms and they all bend, his masquerades, they swoop low and around him. He can feel all their textures tickling his neck, brushing his arms, rubbing his head.

"Are you sleeping, Pauly? I know you're not sleeping. Open this door! You're being disobedient! You're ignoring your mother!"

Pauly stays quiet in the cocoon of his masquerades.

"I just want what's best for us, Pauly." She knocks again. "Okay, I'll make you pancakes for breakfast in the morning and we can talk about it."

His mother shuffles away and Pauly remains in their embrace. He knows now that it will never end. A feather here, two yards of aso-oke there, three more raffia threads—until there will be nothing of them left.

★ ★ ★

Pauly lies awake that night, watching the beads of the aso-oke refract stars across his face. He listens to the *ssshhh-shhshhh* of the rustling raffia masquerade. He traces the stories on the feather masquerade's skirt. Pauly doesn't sleep.

★ ★ ★

At first morning light, Pauly and his masquerades slip out of the house. It is a somber walk to the bush where Pauly first encountered them. The security guards of Alele Estate are asleep on duty. They walk past their snores.

Pauly stands opposite his masquerades in the bush. A bulb behind the mosque shines light through the dim dawn, glinting off the beads, falling on the woven texture of the aso-oke, highlighting the colors of the feathers.

“You have to go,” Pauly says to his masquerades. He has to stay with his mother, be her obedient son, but why should they have to sacrifice themselves for an ideal lifestyle?

The masquerades do not go. They sway in front of him.

“We are your masquerades,” they say together, whispery and silky and reverberating.

Behind Pauly, the muezzin’s call to prayer rings out, a long-held note rising and dipping.

“Then you have to obey,” Pauly says. “You have to go.”

Still, they don’t leave. They shuffle closer to Pauly, sinuous, silent.

“You have to go!”

“We are your masquerades.” Their movement intensifies, becomes faster. They dip left then right. “We are your masquerades.”

“Please, go.” Pauly’s voice breaks into a whisper.

The fluid, drooping dance slows down and they bow, the tops of their heads brushing Pauly’s; they crowd in, textures and patterns and colors surrounding the boy.

The rustling starts when they move away from him. Pauly doesn’t want to watch, but he forces himself to. At first, they just keep swaying, slower, but then the raffia masquerade twirls and the feathers on the third masquerade rise, pointing in all the directions, and there—the beads are clinking again. The masquerades somersault and spin and contort, tones blurring, threads swishing, free and full, dancing into the morning sun.



Copyright © 2021 by Pemi Aguda

Art copyright © 2021 by Akem



MICHAEL SWANWICK

ANNIE
WITHOUT CROW

Annie Without Crow

M I C H A E L S W A N W I C K

illustration by

W Y L I E B E C K E R T

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

Annie and Crow were at odds.

Lord Eros had woven a dozen sets of sheets from sighs and orgasms he had collected in his avatar as Lady Incuba. A thousand times smoother than silk were those sheets and infinitely more sensuous. To touch one, however lightly, was to abandon reason for desire. Lust became one's master, one's purpose, one's all. Questions of gender or rank or appearance no longer mattered. So potent were these shimmering cloths that their effect could be felt through burlap.

Crow stole one of the sheets, wearing gloves made of Lord Eros's own hair, and then, for a prank, held a party for as many of the Peers of Creation as could abide his presence. As they entered, he sent them into an unlighted room to leave their coats upon a bed he had made up with the stolen sheet. Then he watched, laughing, as they rutted themselves to exhaustion.

Annie didn't think it was so funny.

"Look, babe, I played it straight with you. I told you what the sheet was and what would happen if you touched it," Crow said.

"The fuck. You thought you could leave something like that lying around without me trying it out?" She hit him hard in the stomach. Annie packed a lot more muscle than you'd expect in a woman so delicate-featured and slim-waisted. Crow waited until she had turned away in scorn before wincing in pain, then composed himself just before she spun back to confront him again.

"Th'art a vile, whore-mongering rogue!" Annie spat, eyes flashing like summer lightning. "Thou ... thou ... asshole!"

"Hey, hey, hey. You knew I was a trickster when you hooked up with me. This kind of behavior comes with the territory. It's a compulsion. I ain't got no say over it."

"So *you* say!" Annie grabbed her purse and flung it over one leather-clad shoulder. "I'm going to the Rite Aid for some tampons. Don't wait up."

She slammed the door behind her.

A few seconds later, Crow heard the world-shaking roar of his Harley starting up. “My hog!” Outraged, he ran outdoors and was just in time to see Annie’s red hair flying behind her as she hit the road. For an instant the heat shimmering up from the highway mingled with the exhaust to make Annie, her hair, and the motorcycle billow and swell and snap in the air like a banner. Then she was gone, out of this gods-forsaken nation and century entirely.

“Shit,” Crow muttered. This was really going to fuck up the timelines.

★ ★ ★

Annie was almost half a millennium deep into the Mountains of Eternity before she had to stop and take a leak. After she’d taken care of business, she checked the maps and saw that she was close to home. So she unstrapped the saddlebags and unpacked her silks, laces, and whalebone stays. She knew from experience that sixteenth-century England would accept a woman on a motorcycle a thousand times more readily than it would one in skintight jeans.

Men! she thought. With ill grace, Annie changed into clothing more appropriate to her destination,, skimming her leathers onto the verge of the road. Then, perforce riding sidesaddle, she started the Harley again. *Not just Crow—all of them!* They would have to be punished. Only how?

This would require some thought.

Half an hour later she arrived at Maidenshead Manor, in the depths of the Old Forest, and had all her servants and ladies-in-waiting assembled for inspection in the main hall. Everything appeared to be in order when—

“What is *this?*” Annie seized a young male—well-made and even handsome in his way—by the ear and hauled him from among the servants. She glared not at Mistress Zephora, her head-of-household, but at Mistress Pleasance, who was the most likely source of any mischief at Maidenshead. A glimmer of her aspect must have shown in her face, for all her ladies-in-waiting turned pale and a few backed away in fear. “Everyone here knows that my household has one unbreakable rule.” Even before she had abandoned her husband for a gypsy trickster, she had maintained this one mansion free of men, so as to have a periodic refuge from their at times oppressive company. She was not anxious to see it defiled.

“That applies only to males of rutting age,” Zephora said, adding with a dismissive flick of her fingers, “This pillicock is yet a boy.”

“He came wandering out of the forest one day, cold and wet and miserable, and none of us had the heart to turn him away. Who knows where and into what year he would have emerged, had we done so?” Pleasance babbled.

Annie’s nostrils flared. “By the smell of him, he won’t be a youth much longer. A place for him must be found elsewhere. Account for yourself, lad. What skills hast thou? Ostler, footman, page?”

“Lady, I am a poet,” the boy said with a short, stiff bow.

“May the Moon give me patience! Am I supposed to retain thee in order to tell me my eyes are the sun, my lips coral, my breasts as white as a January snowfall, my cheeks like roses, my bearing that of a goddess?”

“Your eyes are nothing like the sun—I can gaze direct at them without pain. Coral is redder than your lips and from what I can see of them your breasts are more dun than white and doubtless nowhere near so chill as snow. I have seen roses both red and white and they are not at all like your cheeks. Granted, I have never beheld a goddess, yet you show no signs of walking in the air rather than on the ground and therefore I doubt you are one.” Thoughtfully, the youth added, “You are, however, far more beautiful than any woman I have erenow seen. That said, I am young and there are many women I have yet to see.”

Zephora raised a hand to cuff the boy for his insolence. But, hiding a smile, Lady Anne forestalled her, saying, “Very well, you are a poet. If I can find you a post elsewhere before you mature, I won’t have to kill you.” Something about the pallor of his face prompted her to examine him more closely. “There is a fey look about thee, lad. Art dying?”

“Aye. Within the year, so the physician says.”

“Best hope, then, that thy mortality wins the race with thy maturity.” Annie turned away from the poet. “Are there any more unpleasant surprises awaiting me? Very well, I shall—” But the faces of her ladies told her that she had moved on too quickly. “What?”

“The child told a strange tale,” Lady Zephora said, “of a man and a woman he encountered in the forest. They were in a carriage made all of

metal and drawn by no animals that he could see. They stopped and asked him the year and when he gave it, one looked to the other and said, ‘Forty-three yet to go, then.’ We grammar’d out the dates and it seems sure they headed for this very year. He said the two were tall beyond normal stature, dressed in black, and wore white masks.”

Lady Anne turned to the boy. “The masks—were they white as chalk? Or white as lilies?”

The boy considered. “No,” he decided. “White as bone.”

“Crap. What’s today’s date?” Then, when Annie was told and had checked her PDA, “The king’s bairn’s christening occurs today at the Church of the Observant Friars. This can be no coincidence. Why are my best clothes not laid out? Why was I not given my invitation immediately upon arrival?”

Yet another uncomfortable silence fell upon the court.

Annie felt her lips go thin and white, and her heart correspondingly ruthless and hard. “Invited or no, we shall make a procession,” she said. “Have the boundaries of the estate moved so that they border Greenwich.”

* * *

The walls of the buildings leading to the church were lined with bright tapestries, and the street itself strewn with rushes, turning it green. A turbulent sea of peasants, priests, merchants, and other nonentities filled every open space and balcony and roof eave, waving scarves and roaring like an ocean squall.

Parked by the church was an ugly metal box of a vehicle, with thick black wheels, irregular sides, and windows of tinted glass. “Does’t look familiar, poet?” Annie asked.

“Aye. ’Tis the conveyance I saw in the forest.”

“That’s an Ural Typhoon. It’s a light troop carrier. Russian Federation, twenty-first century. Composite body armor and a KPV 14.5 millimeter machine gun mounted atop the cab. You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

The boy shook his head.

“All that matters is the knowledge that none but Lord Vacant would have the bad taste to bring such a grotesque thing into Bluff King Hal’s England.”

The unwashed sea of celebrants froze immobile and silent as Annie's procession neared the church. It was the easiest way for her kind to deal with the rabble.

At the procession's approach, the crowds washed away from it like ocean waves parting—save for one, an old man who, unnoticed by the multitude, was pissing upon the church. Some flicker of motion made him look up. When he saw Annie, he blanched. “Lady Anne! You ... You weren't supposed to be here.” At her glare, he tucked himself in and buttoned his trews.

“Obviously not,” Annie said. Laying a hand on his sleeve, she said, “Tell me, Papa Goatfoot—what's going on?”

Because the tale Papa Goatfoot told alarmed Annie greatly and because, technically, she was a party-crasher, she drew shadows around her entourage and slipped them inside the church unnoticed. Though all the pews were filled, enough new ones appeared to seat everyone. Such were the courtesies the universe provided those of her ilk.

“Looks like all the heavy hitters are present,” she muttered to Papa Goatfoot. “I have half a mind to inflict a passionate desire for an unobtainable lover upon each and every one of them.”

The satyr by now was sweating with fear. “Please. I'm supposed to be one of the godfathers—it wasn't my idea! I just agreed because I was in my cups when I was asked.”

“As always. Never fear. You're too old and sozzled for me to bother with.”

Papa Goatfoot breathed a sigh of relief. “I knew you wouldn't do that to a pal,” he said, drawing a flask from an inside jacket pocket.

Taking the flask from him, Annie said, “Don't get cocky. You're not immune. I was the one who introduced Aristotle to Phyllis—and you know how *that* turned out.” She took a swig, returned the flask.

At the front of the church was a baptismal font of silver, carved with symbols that were never Christian. It illuminated those standing by it, for it was filled with *uisce solais*, the water of light. Annie watched as one by one the Lords of Creation stood forward to proffer gifts to the babe.

First and most fearsome came Reverend Wednesday, old man Death himself. “Courage,” said he. And sat down in the front pew, motionless as a stone. Then, solemn and richly dressed, as in a dumb-show, the other Peers advanced, each by turn, up the aisle to loom like storm clouds over the infant and bestow their gifts.

“Insight,” said Lady Dale, sometimes called Lord Dale the evasive.

“Restraint,” one of Lord Silence’s gray ladies said, and he nodded grave approval.

“Loyalty and the charm that inspires it,” said Prince Mundus.

“Strategic brilliance,” said Fata Morgaine.

“Ruthlessness,” growled Lord Vacant, “and the sense to employ it sparingly.”

There was a long pause. Finally, Annie jabbed her elbow in Papa Goatfoot’s side and he popped to his feet. “Sobriety!” he squeaked, eliciting a ripple of laughter. Under his breath, he added, “But in moderation.”

With each blessing, the infant was dipped quickly in and out of the luminous water. It bore the ceremony with surprising self-restraint, looking about alertly and making no complaint about the immersions.

Lady Anne waited until she was most of the way up the aisle before lifting the glamour that hid her and her ladies-in-waiting from the congregation. In her most commanding voice, she cried, “No one has asked *me* what gift I have for the infant.”

Lord Vacant placed himself between her and the baptismal font, saying, “Stand away, upstart! You are but a weak archetype. Only the strong have the right to be here.”

“Yet I have a blessing for the child. If I am as weak as you say, then you have nothing to fear from me, do you?”

For an instant, Lord Vacant hesitated. Then, with a brusqueness that was all but identical to rudeness, he stepped aside.

Lady Anne made her way into the circle of Peers surrounding the baptismal font. Then she dipped her hand into the water and dribbled a few drops on the infant princess. “My gift to thee is that thou shalt neither wed nor bed any man who is your inferior in wit or character.” A pitiless smile rested complacent on her lips for a breath, and then she said, “After the gifts

you have today received, I have good reason to doubt you shall ever find such a paragon. So, really, what I'm bestowing upon you is a lifetime sans husband or offspring."

A gasp rose up from the assembled Lords of Creation. Outraged, Fata Morgaine cried, "You would destroy the king's daughter's value?"

With a cold glee, Lady Anne said, "I would. Moreover, upon the babe's sire—who, I mark, did not bother to attend her christening—I visit the curse that his daughter will be ten times the king that e'er he was."

Elizabeth, princess of the House of Tudor and someday Queen of England, began to wail.

* * *

"There will be many changes made," the Lady Anne announced to the assembled women of her household, once they had returned to Maidenshead. "From this day onward, women shall not take lovers who are their emotional or intellectual inferiors. This will apply not only to the Princess Elizabeth but to every woman everywhere."

In horror, Mistress Pleasance cried, "We'll all die virgins!"

Heads swiveled to look at her and she turned red.

"But, milady, how is this to be done?" asked Mistress Zephora, who was always the most practical one of the household and, consequently, the least popular. "The world needs to be populated—under your terms, it will dwindle to nothing in mere centuries."

"Watch and learn. Oh, and clean the manor house from top to bottom and decorate it to a fare-thee-well. I anticipate guests. Erect tents and pavilions on the lawn and long tables covered by white cloths embroidered in silk with red hearts and yellow roses intertwined. Perfume the air and decorate the nearby woods with fairy lights and tame white harts. Set up targets for archery and prepare a lawn for tennis. Be ready to serve fruits and ices, roasted meats, crisp crudités, breads fresh from the oven with crocks of sweet butter, pâtés and mousses, Viennese pastries, and all manner of good things save only alcohol."

Appearing from nowhere, her new pet poet observed, "'Tis a strange feast that has neither flagons of ale nor goblets of wine. Wouldst have them

drink dew, like mayflies?”

“No, still water, like carp. You wouldn’t want to see this gang plastered,” Lady Anne said. “When they get drunk, they break things.” She clapped her hands and raised her voice. “Everyone! You are to make our visitors welcome. They may go where they please and do as they wish in all regards save one: Allow nobody male inside the manor house. No man may penetrate my chambers, whether from the front entrance or the rear or by any other ingress.” Somebody tittered and she glared. “*What?!?*”

No one dared say a word. “Very well,” Lady Anne said. “You have your duties—see to them.”

The women scattered like so many doves to the six quarters of the estate, and Lady Anne flung herself down on a couch. She caught herself drumming her fingers on its arm and stilled them. All her plans had been made in a trice, but if there was one thing she had learned from years with Crow, it was never to overthink matters. “Plot out your first seven moves,” he had told her. “Then forget the last five.” If things went awry, she could always extemporize.

“Poet,” she said, “I require distraction. Recite for me ‘The Bastard Queen of England.’”

The boy blushed.



The assault began with a flyover of combat jets, meant to intimidate the defensive forces Lady Anne did not have, followed by an all-out invasion of cavalry, infantry, and armored forces. War machines churned up the sod and crushed flowering topiary under their treads. Over the course of four hours, the grounds of the estate were secured, a task that could have been performed in an eighth that time had the invaders been capable of believing there were no defenders. Tanks and mobile guns were parked among the pavilions, latrines and defensive trenches were dug, rolls of barbed wire were unreeled along the perimeter, and guard stations were established by every gracefully winding road.

Servants offered lemonade and petits fours to their bemused conquerors. Lute music and diesel exhaust filled the air.

“Set up a chair in the croquet grounds by the great willow,” Lady Anne told her handmaid Larissa. “Have a pitcher of martinis nearby, in case my guest decides to be reasonable.” She did not think he would, but it was best to be prepared for all possibilities. Seated in what by no coincidence looked like a wicker throne, she waited for the head barbarian to come and announce that Maidenshead was no longer hers.

“If you die,” said her poet, “I will write a ballad in your honor.”

“Remind me again why I haven’t had you strangled?”

“It will make all who hear it weep.”

“Oh, go tell Mistress Zephora to find a hidey-hole for you, lest you be impressed into Lord Vacant’s forces for the rest of your pathetically brief life. Be off. Shoo!”

Shortly thereafter, he whom she awaited arrived. At his approach, she stood gracefully. “Lord Vacant,” she said.

“Slut!” Lord Vacant backhanded her across the face. Fata Morgaine stood by his side, looking amused. “The royal brat was to give birth to a son who would conquer all of Europe and plunge half the world into a war that would last for centuries. You have undone a great deal of patient work today.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Lady Anne said, and Lord Vacant struck her again.

She was dragged to a Sarsen stone at the edge of the Old Forest and there stripped of her ribbons and finery. Barefoot and clad only in her shift, Lady Anne was lashed to the stone. “Do not think to use your witchy wiles upon the guards,” Lord Vacant said. “For they desire only men and are thus immune to you.”

Then he left her.

There were five guards, Greek soldiers by their gear and outfits, and their faces were hard and stony. As an avatar, Annie could not be killed—not permanently, anyway. She could, however, be made to suffer. She was capable of enduring this captivity forever. It was a rare drawback to being what she was.

After a time, she began to hum “Arthur’s Seat Shall Be My Bed” and soon after to sing the words aloud:

It’s not the cold that makes me cry,

*Nor is 't the wet that wearies me:
Nor is 't the frost that freezes fell:
But I love a lad, and I dare not tell.*

She was not surprised to see the soldiers looking wistful and sad with old memories. She had the voice for the song and she knew how to deliver it. Soon, one of the large, stolid men began to weep.

Lady Anne hung down her head so that her long, loose hair hid her smile.

★ ★ ★

Weeks passed. Every now and then, Lady Anne would talk, as if to herself, of her life and sorrows, of the cruel husband Crow had stolen her away from, of how much she had given up and how little she cared. Then she would sing another ballad. By the time her long-awaited supplicant arrived, she and not Lord Vacant owned the hearts of her Greek guardsmen.

At last Fata Morgaine came striding out of the Old Forest. Shoving a guard aside, she removed her mask of bone and said, "I would parley with you."

"Morgi! How delightful to see you again. Timon, be a dear and send for tea."

Twin servitors—Hélène and Héloïse—fetched service, tea table, and a chair, then disappeared. At Lady Anne's nod, so did the guards. Fata Morgaine took a pro forma sip of Lapsang souchong and then said, "One of your whores is sleeping with my husband. This can only be your doing."

"It was my whim," Lady Anne admitted. "I put a geas on my ladies not to sleep with their inferiors. Being as they are, that drastically limited the number of potential bedmates. Who's the lucky lass? Pleasance, I presume?"

"Zephora." Outrage sharpened the Morgaine's tone. "I am an avatar of War, feared and revered in every culture there has ever been. Wherever the bodies are piled high and their stench assails the heavens, there am I. How *dare* Lord Vacant prefer the company of a slattern over mine?"

"The ladies of my court are, when they choose, very close to irresistible. Since your husband insists on staying here, the outcome was inevitable."

"He is waiting for you to undo your curse on the child Elizabeth."

“You and I both know that’s not going to happen. Just as we know that if Zephora keeps her hooks in your husband much longer, you will lose him forever. Now, given that you no longer have enough influence over Lord Vacant to get him to free me ... what else can you offer?”

“Whatever you require. Ask.”

The shift Lady Anne wore was sweat-stained and beginning to fray and her hair hadn’t been washed in all the time she’d been kept prisoner. Yet, lashed to the stone as she was, she was able to look down upon the Morgaine. This psychological advantage was one of the reasons she had ordered a chair for her guest. “Wouldst kneel before me?”

Flustered, the Morgaine said, “I ... yes. Yes, I would.”

“Kiss my foot?”

“Yes, damn you!”

“Pledge your allegiance to me before all the world?”

“Anything! Anything! Anything!”

“None of that is necessary. By your words, you prove yourself my acolyte. All I require is that you borrow one of Lord Vacant’s machines and drive it to the far side of the Mountains of Eternity. Then come back and tell your husband what you have seen. Do this and I promise he will never see Mistress Zephora’s baubles again.”

“That’s it?” Fata Morgaine said in disbelief.

“That’s all. And more than enough.”

★ ★ ★

As soon as the Morgaine was out of sight, Lady Anne’s boy poet appeared out of nowhere and began tugging at the knots of the ropes that bound her to the Sarsen stone.

“What are you doing? Stop that.”

“Lady, we have little time before the Greeks return. I have a set of men’s clothing that should fit you stashed in the woods, along with a knife to hack your hair short, a leathern water flask, a wallet of food, and a bow and quiver of arrows. We can live off of venison and drink from forest pools until you have fled far enough to avoid recapture.”

Lady Anne found herself strangely touched. “’Tis a gallant but fantastical plan. I doubt any girl your age would be fool enough to come up with it. But there is no need. Tell Corydon—that’s the curly-haired brute, the cute one—that the hour has come for my release. Then do thou follow me, a step behind and to the side, to the manor. I must look my best for the coming confrontation.”

Walking point and trailed by her poet, guards, and a growing number of maidens, some of whom sang while others played lutes and pipes, Lady Anne made straight and sure through the enemy encampment for Maidenshead Manor. Soldiers started and stared, but without direct orders dared not interfere with one so obviously in command. She left her Greeks to defend the door, not because it needed defense, but for appearances’ sake.

Indeed, they did look formidable.

A trip across the Mountains of Eternity and back, though objectively grueling, could be made in the subjective flash of an eye. So Lady Anne barely had time for a bath, fresh clothing, a new hairdo, a discreet touch of makeup, and a dab of *Nuit de Titania* behind one ear before Lord Vacant came howling to her door. Standing at the top of the steps (again, looking down), she turned the day in her hand so that the sun sank low and the light turned blue. It was twilight now, when her puissance was greatest. She left just a gleam of sunlight lingering on her face, so that all might admire her complexion.

Had anyone ever seen Lord Vacant as angry as he was now? Lady Anne doubted it. His bone mask crumbled in his clenched hand. “*What have you done?*” he screamed at her.

One by one, the other godparents of the infant Elizabeth faded into existence behind him, for they all had a stake in this wrangling. Lord Silence looked stern and forbidding, Mundus and Dale looked alarmed, and Fata Morgaine was outright frightened. Even Papa Goatfoot, though obviously pixilated, looked as though he would be worried if he could just remember why. Only Reverend Wednesday appeared serene and untroubled.

“You came into my territory unannounced and without my leave, plotted to turn its queen into a broodmare for a would-be world warlord, and failed

to invite me to a christening in which I had an obvious interest. The offense was not slight. I took appropriate action.”

Gathering himself together with an obvious effort, Lord Vacant said, “You have killed off the human race, without whom we none of us have any purpose.”

“I have killed not a single soul—slaughter is your prerogative. I merely assured that the species would quietly and without fuss dwindle over the coming centuries to nothing. As was my right and privilege.”

“You have no privileges,” Lord Vacant said with cold disdain, “and no rights. You are a songbird, whose sole purpose is to lighten the lives of drabs and housewives on their death march to the grave. Stick to your soap operas and confession magazines and leave the running of the universe to your betters.”

So saying, he made a foul gesture.

Lady Anne hissed in outrage. Then she took on her aspect, so that she shone as bright as the moon. She yanked down her bodice. It helped that her seamstresses had access to elastics available to no one else in this century. “I am Romance, proud and fair—look upon my tits, ye Mighty, and despair. Thinkst thou mere brutality can stop me? Entropy? Desolation? I piss on you and all you stand for.”

Lord Vacant sneered. “Such vulgarity, lady, ill suits you.”

“You dare call me out on aesthetics? Fuck you! Do you imagine that Romance is neat and tidy? Meek, mild, and easily defeated? *Polite*? It invades the heart like a conquering army and it takes no prisoners. Whatever stands in its way it lays to waste. Family, friends, duty, love of country, common sense—all fall before it. Decency is set aflame! Morality is tossed aside! Reason is trampled underfoot! Self-preservation? Don’t make me laugh. There has never been a tyrant more ruthless or less prone to mercy than I. And I claim this era—nay, *all* eras!—for my own.”

“I defy,” Lord Vacant cried, “your every claim and throw them back in your teeth. You think to set murmured words and diadems of daisies against napalm and cold steel? Have at me! I am the lash that drives men on to greatness. You are a distraction for adolescent girls. Mine is the power that

creates kings, destroys empires, and writes the lying histories afterward. What have you—”

“Enough.”

It was Reverend Wednesday who had spoken. He raised a hand and Lady Anne found she could not speak. A coldness, like the first frost of autumn, touched her heart. “Your case, dread lady, has been made.” He turned to Lord Vacant. “As has yours.” Then, gesturing, “Come forward, little ones, and kneel before me.”

Side by side, like children before a stern parent, they knelt. For the first time she could remember, Lady Anne felt small and unimportant. She did not much like the sensation. A quick sideways glance at Lord Vacant’s face showed he felt much the same. “Lord of Discord, you have dissed a Peer and she has given you a taste of your own medicine. From this moment onward, you will treat her as your equal.”

A choking noise came from Lord Vacant’s throat and he nodded.

“Lady Anne, your trickster has not been a good influence on you, I fear. In extinguishing the human race, who are under my protection, you overstepped yourself. You will immediately remove the curse from them, so that they may thrive.”

Lady Anne tried to speak and could only croak. So she, too, nodded.

“Nevertheless, you had cause. So I command that young Elizabeth be exempted from your lifting of the curse. Lord Vacant will have to create his world-encompassing war somewhere else, at some other time.” He stroked Lady Anne’s hair, as if she were a cat. “Now stand. This matter is over and done with.”

Reverend Wednesday began to fade away, then became solid again. His eyes twinkled. “Oh, and do try to keep out of trouble.”

Then he was gone.

Next to depart was Lord Vacant, taking his forces with him and leaving behind an estate that would be the despair of the groundskeepers for years to come. Fata Morgaine, hurrying after him, threw Lady Anne a look of what may have been gratitude. The others left in a more leisurely fashion.

Last to depart was Lord Silence. At his nod, one of his courtiers said, “All present capable of doing so will forget this day’s doing and all that led

up to it. The princess was christened like any other princess.” Then Lord Silence flicked his fingers and the man said to Annie, “You have caused a great deal of trouble, lady.”

“All of which could have been spared if you’d only sent me a fucking by-your-leave invitation to the christening. Remember that next time.”

★ ★ ★

When the intruders were gone at last, Lady Anne’s shoulders sagged and with all the sincerity in her body, she said, “Thank Whomever.” Then, all business again, she said, “Pleasance. Take Master Shakespeare and put him back in his proper time and place. Oh, and he has an illness lurking within him. Give him the kiss of life so that he may have his two-score-and-twelve.”

Eyes gleaming, the lady-in-waiting said, “Yes, milady.”

“One kiss, no more, Mistress Pleasance. On the mouth. Nowhere else.”

Eyes dimming, Pleasance curtseyed, saying, “As you will.”

Annie kissed the boy farewell on his forehead. “I really should castrate you,” she whispered in his ear. “Alas, I was always a sucker for a gaudy line of patter.”

★ ★ ★

Because the Harley had disappeared—her ladies being no better than they ought to be, Annie was not surprised that one of them had nicked it in order to keep a tryst beyond her ken and reckoning—she left Maidenshead riding a white palfrey.

Not half a mile into the Old Forest, the path turned, and there was Crow, leaning against a tree. Annie did not ask how he had found her. By their very nature, it was hard for the universe to keep them apart. “Hey, babe,” he said. “I brought you something more comfortable to wear.” Neatly folded on the ground before him were a pair of jeans, a bomber jacket, a tank top, socks, and biker boots. Typical for him, the underwear was lacy and impractical. She was about to say something about that when he dropped a full carton of Kent Menthols atop the pile. For that, much could be forgiven.

Crow watched appreciatively as Annie stripped out of her skirts and furbelows and pulled on the riding gear. The horse she set free, to brighten

the day of whatever rascal found it. Casually, Crow mounted his new Norton Commando and started the engine. "So how was your little vacation?" he asked when she climbed on behind him.

"Dull," Annie said. She wrapped her arms around Crow so tight that it made his ribs creak. "Let's go the fuck somewhere else and stir things up."



Copyright © 2021 by Michael Swanwick

Art copyright © 2021 by Wylie Beckert

MARTHA WELLS

A
MURDERBOT
DIARIES
SHORT
STORY

HUGO AND NEBULA AWARD-WINNING,
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES!

HOME

HABITAT, RANGE, NICHE,
TERRITORY

HOME

HABITAT, RANGE, NICHE, TERRITORY

MARTHA WELLS

T O R
D O T
C O M

“Is this really a good idea?”

There is no way to honestly answer that question without being insulting, so Ayda Mensah opts for, “If I’d known the survey team might almost be murdered in a corporate sabotage attempt, I would have picked another planetary franchise.”

She’s in one of the Planetary Council offices on Preservation Station, talking to Ephraim, a fellow councilor who was planetary leader last term and should know better than to have this conversation. The office is a bland one meant for temporary work, the chairs are comfortable but it’s undecorated, the walls a default cool silver blue. It’s making her uncomfortable in a way it hasn’t any other time she’s been in here. Maybe someone’s adjusted the local environmentals badly; the air feels still and oppressive, though it’s not warm. It makes her skin creep.

It’s the exact same size as the room she was held prisoner in on TranRollinHyfa.

It would be unbearable, if not for the message packet pinging in her feed.

Ephraim sighs. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

She knows it wasn’t what he meant, and her answer is a lie, anyway. Knowing what would happen, she wouldn’t choose a different planet, a different bond company. Because then SecUnit would still be someone’s property, would be waiting for the contract where the negligence or greed or indifference of its clients got it killed.

If not for SecUnit, Ayda Mensah would be dead, her body dumped in a recycler somewhere on TranRollinHyfa or some other supposedly neutral transit station, for the value of neutral that meant “whatever the highest bidder wants.” It’s difficult for Ephraim and the other councilors and her family and almost everyone else she’s spoken to since returning home to understand that. But none of them have any real experience with the Corporation Rim, except as a source of cartoonish villains in media serials.

Ephraim adds, “No one is questioning your response to the original situation.”

Ayda’s lost the thread of the conversation and unlike SecUnit, she can’t run back a recording to see what she missed. She needs to suggest that they leave this room and go up to the council office with the windows looking over the admin foyer but they need privacy for this talk. And even though Ephraim is a friend it would be a sign of weakness she can’t afford. Oh yes, she was unfairly intimating that he had said that her choice of survey world was at fault. It’s not and that’s not what he meant, but she wants to make him say what he does mean. She steepled her fingers. “That was the inciting incident.”

Ephraim is frustrated and he only wants the best for her and for Preservation, which is what makes this so awkward for both of them. It’s hard to make a proper argument when you’re both on the same side. “You’ve brought a corporate...” He hesitates. She wonders if he was going to say *killing machine*. He finishes, “A product of corporate surveillance capitalism and authoritarian enforcement to the seat of our government. I agree your reasons were good, but this is a situation that has to be addressed.”

There we go. That’s something she can work with.

The killing machine in question has just sent her yet another message packet. They’re piling up in her feed and if she would stop encouraging SecUnit by opening them, it would probably stop. They’re all formal requisition forms for Preservation Station Security, requests for increasingly improbable armaments. She responds to the latest with *I don’t even know what that is*. It’s a good thing she understands SecUnit’s sense of humor. To Ephraim, Ayda says, “The situation is a person who saved my life, multiple times, and the lives of the rest of my team.”

SecUnit is also a person who is not supposed to have access to the requisition forms or to Station Security’s systems at all. She knows SecUnit is not so much taunting her with its abilities as refusing to pretend to be anything other than it is. And that’s for the best, because being honest about that is the only way forward.

If she's honest with herself, which she hasn't been, not since arriving back home, she would admit that being in this room has put her in a cold sweat. It helps that Ephraim's here, but she would have to get up and walk out if not for those message packets.

Ephraim is a good person and he won't make the argument that SecUnit is not a person, not qualified as a refugee under Preservation law. Because they are all refugees in the Preservation Alliance, descended from people who were left to die because rescue was deemed not cost-effective. Because they stand on this station built from the ship that saved their grandparents' lives, that helped them for no other reason than because it was there and it could. Instead Ephraim asks her, "Can you separate that person from the purpose they were created for?"

Now that's an argument. SecUnit is a person, a potentially very dangerous person. But right now, Ephraim and the other councilors who agree with him have no evidence to suggest that SecUnit would act on that potential.

The problem is that part of her mind still believes she's on TranRollinHyfa, held prisoner by corporate murderers. Being aware of that should help, but it doesn't. The message packets echo that moment when SecUnit pinged her feed and she knew rescue was possible. The moment she became a herself again and not a bargaining chip. That helps. Ayda spreads her hands, palms up and open. "I couldn't. The person separated itself."

Ephraim's mouth turns down, as if he wishes she had a more definitive answer. She knows he doesn't like this conversation any more than she does. They would both like to pretend that everything is all right.

Ayda wishes she could separate herself from everything that happened. She can't.

They talk for another twenty minutes, back and forth, and reach no conclusion but a wry agreement that the rest of the council will also want to have this conversation, probably several times. As Ephraim gets up and Ayda can finally walk out of this damn room, she replies to SecUnit's latest requisition form. It's for a gunship nearly the size PortFreeCommerce's transit ring: *I think you made this one up.*

★ ★ ★

The Corporation Rim has always been a slave state, though it calls its institutionalized slavery “contract labor.” The production of human/bot constructs is just a more horrific twist, a mental slavery as well as a physical one. At least victims of contract labor are free to think their own thoughts. But we tell ourselves that constructs aren’t aware of their predicament. What SecUnit makes us realize is that this is not true; they are all aware of what they are and what’s been done to them. But the only choice they are ever offered is obedience or pain and death.

Ayda transfers her attention from the feed document to Bharadwaj seated in front of her. They are in her office lounge, on the comfortable chairs near the balcony that overlooks the station admin’s central atrium. The large space is lit by floating overheads that imitate the natural glow of the system primary, and the office lights are tuned down to take advantage of it. It’s quiet out there, except for footsteps or fragments of conversations as people pass by. No music, no babble of advertisements forcing their way into your feed. Ayda tells Bharadwaj, “It’s good work. I think you have a chance to persuade them.”

Bharadwaj smiles a little, looking out toward the atrium. Ayda has a flash of her sprawled on rocky ground bloody and torn, Volescu screaming somewhere off camera, and winces it away. Bharadwaj agrees, “I think I can persuade them to enact more protections in our own territory. But it feels like so little.”

She’s right, of course. “Until bots have full autonomy, this problem is not going away.”

And the other problem is that SecUnits aren’t bots and aren’t human; they fall between the cracks of the existing protections even in the Preservation Alliance. But Bharadwaj’s idea for a documentary series has real potential. It can influence people in every corner of the Alliance and, if they’re lucky, infiltrate the Corporation Rim in a way nothing else can. But in the best case scenario, it will take years. And even then... “It’s going to be difficult. The propaganda has been so effective.”

Bharadwaj’s smile turns wry. “It worked on us.”

“It did.” Ayda had known what constructs were, but the full reality of it hadn’t hit until she had listened to SecUnit coax Volescu out of the pit as the

jerky video had played in their team feed. Along with the horror of what had just happened, there had been the dawning realization that they had fallen into thinking of their SecUnit as a faceless machine, a convenience, an interface with their security system. But it had taken a sentient being who understood fear and pain to talk its way through Volescu's blind terror.

Bharadwaj's expression turns serious. "We can't ignore the fact that SecUnits are capable of being very dangerous. Glossing over that is just going to make our argument look ridiculous." Her mouth twists. "They're every bit as dangerous as humans."

Except humans can't fire energy weapons out of their arms, calculate the exact right moment to jump off a rushing vehicle and survive, or hack the systems of an entire transit station port, Ayda thinks. Then answers her own point: No, humans have to hire someone to do all that for them, or enslave a bot/human construct. She makes a note of that in the open work document in her feed. It's a theme that Bharadwaj might build a persuasive argument around.

Her feed notifies her of a message packet, addressed to her and Bharadwaj. It's a link to some sort of catalog weapons supply service. Ayda sighs, mostly amused. "It's listening to us right now." It must be hard to respect other people's privacy when you've had to fight and scheme for every minute of your own. Hard not to be paranoid when you remember all the times your paranoia was justified.

It's about being treated as a thing, isn't it. Whether that thing is a hostage of conditional value, or a very expensively designed and equipped enslaved machine/organic intelligence. You're a thing, and there is no safety.

And she tells herself: you're being very foolish. Because you were a hostage for a period of days, and it was a minor inconvenience compared to what Murderbot— No, SecUnit; she's never been given permission to use that private name. What SecUnit went through.

And if someone else was in her position, she would tell them how unhelpful comparisons like that are, that fear is fear.

Bhawardwaj squints as she reads the message, and she laughs. "I don't even know what that is."

Ayda looks at the catalog image. It's the thing that fits on a backpack or harness, and has giant extendable spikes. She sends back, *All right, I believe that it's real, but it doesn't look very practical.*

★ ★ ★

Ayda is in the station hotel suite that they took for SecUnit and the members of the survey team while they were all reporting to the council. Pin-Lee, Ratthi, and Gurathin are still staying here with Arada and Overse, who are back now after a quick trip down to the planet to see their family. Bharadwaj, who has her own quarters on the station, has dropped in, and Volescu who is on planet now has been sending them his own work via the station comm.

Now that the furor over corporate murder and abduction is dying down, the survey needs to finish its reports so the council can decide if they want to pursue their claim on the planet. Ayda could work with them on the feed from her office, but she likes being here, sitting on the couches in the common room and talking face to face, the floating display surfaces filled with their data and collated notes. SecUnit is tucked into a chair in the corner, probably watching media in its feed. It's good to have it there, too.

"It's a relief to finally be getting this done." Pin-Lee flicks between different displays. She's working on the contract they would offer to the corporate body who "owns" the planet in question. In the Corporation Rim, everything has to be owned by someone.

Overse, sitting with Arada's bare feet on her lap, gestures in frustration. "It would be closer to being done if Ratthi's tables weren't all over the place and all the links broken. What were you thinking, Ratthi?"

"I was planning to sort it all out the day GrayCris started trying to kill us, it was very distracting," Ratthi protests.

"I'll do it," Ayda finds herself saying. "Can you send me that file?" She shouldn't do it, at least not now, so late in the station's day. She should go back to her family in her quarters soon. But it's easier here, where everyone knows what happened and no one feels the need to ask questions or is trying to get her to tell them everything is fine and she is exactly the same as she was the day she left. Work is a good excuse.

Pin-Lee has already pulled up another file and is frowning slightly. “I need to review our billing, too. Oh, this is ridiculous, we’re not paying for their extra power overrun, there’s no way they can prove that was us...”

SecUnit must be watching Pin-Lee’s feed where the billing documents are, because it says suddenly, “You didn’t get the Retrieved Client Protocol?”

They had offered it to Ayda on the gunship after the attack, standard for clients who survive traumatic incidents like being abducted and held hostage by corporate rivals. “No, no, I didn’t.” She didn’t want a corporation’s excuse for a trauma support specialist poking around in her emotions. She almost adds, *I didn’t need it*, which would be a dead giveaway. And then it occurs to her, *a giveaway of what?* What is she worried about giving away, here among these people she trusts with her life.

SecUnit is looking at the far corner, as it usually does. But they installed cameras for it in these rooms so it probably is watching her expression. It says, “Why not? Is it free here?”

“It’s not free in the Corporation Rim?” Arada, brow furrowed in concentration as she studies the display surface above her head, is still editing her own report.

Pin-Lee flops back in her chair in exasperation. “The stupid bond company lets you get abducted and then wants you to pay for medical assistance afterward?”

Still not meeting anyone’s gaze, SecUnit’s expression flashes through a brief, eloquent ironic twist. Ayda hides a smile. Of course you have to pay for it. She adds, “We don’t have the Retrieved Client Protocol here.”

Overse glances over at her, bemused. “Well, we do, it’s just not called that.”

Bharadwaj looks up from her feed. “Yes, the trauma unit at Makeba Central Medical has a whole section for emotional support. Volescu said he’s been attending regularly. The one at Station Medical isn’t as extensive, but I find it helpful.”

That was taking the conversation to a place Ayda didn’t want to go. “I might have time later,” she tells them easily, and pours herself another cup of tea.

When she glances up, SecUnit is actually looking directly at her. Their gazes lock for what seems a long moment but knowing SecUnit, is probably only a second at most. As its gaze shifts back to the corner, Ayda feels her cheeks flush, as if she's been caught in a lie.

Well, it was a lie.

Gurathin, still wrapped up in his feed and reports, expression distant and internal, gets up to fumble for the carafe on the sideboard. "Is there any more syrup?"

"I'll get it." Ayda takes the chance for a brief escape. "I need to stretch my legs."

She walks out of the suite, down the corridor to the small lobby area. It's empty and quiet, though the doors to the larger public hotel section are open, where there are potted trees and a wood and canvas art installation meant to invoke a traditional Preservation camp house. It's getting on toward station-night, and hotel visitors on local time will be out looking for entertainment and food.

On the far wall there's a pantry, the cases stocked with cold drinks, soup and tea bottles, packaged self-heating meals, seasoning packets, and net bags of fruit and vegetables from the planet, cubed or peeled and ready to eat. Ayda has been in the Corporation Rim long enough to appreciate the fact that it's free not only to the hotel's guests but to anyone who walks in. And what a marvel that is. Just like the station restrooms with showers where the only requirement is that you put your towels in the cleaning unit before you leave. She opens the door of a cold case to look for syrup and nut milk.

When she closes the door, there's a stranger standing there. A stranger not wearing a station uniform or an access badge, his clothes not the colors or cut common to the planet. Even before her brain processes all that, she gasps.

He says, "You are Dr. Mensah, aren't you." It's not a question. He knows exactly who she is.

She takes a step back and bumps into someone's chest. Before she can panic, the words are in her feed: *It's me.*

It's Murderbot — SecUnit — who was monitoring her feed or watching on a surreptitiously installed camera or had simply heard her gasp from down the corridor and through a room full of conversation.

The stranger has had time to process the fact that there is now another person in the room. He raises his hands hurriedly. “I’m a journalist! I didn’t mean to startle—”

“Station Security is forty-seven seconds out.” SecUnit’s voice is even and conversational. And confident. This is a confrontation it knows how to handle. It’s slipped in front of her, reassuring lean bulk between her and the intruder. Its also somehow managed to catch the syrup bottle she had dropped without noticing, and it sets it on the counter. “Forty-six. Forty-five. Forty-four—”

The journalist flails and runs.

The others arrive in a noisy mob, questions, worry, Ratthi exclaiming, “SecUnit jumped over my head!”

“It was nothing,” Ayda assures them. “Just a journalist, he startled me, I was distracted and didn’t hear him— It’s nothing.”

She hands Ratthi the syrup and shoos them back toward the room. “I’ll talk to security. It’s fine, really.”

They go, reluctantly. The fact that she’s a current planetary leader weighs less than that she’s also their survey captain and they’re use to following her orders.

As they move noisily back down the corridor, Station Security is already in her feed, reporting that they caught the journalist leaving the hotel and will verify his identity, and release him if it checks out. They will meet her here in a few minutes to make a formal report. She needs to compose herself before they arrive. SecUnit is still looming over her, radiating warmth. It must be able to do that at will; normally its presence is cool. She’s trembling, which is idiotic. Nothing happened, the journalist meant no harm. It could have been a hotel guest or a hungry visitor or the person who stocks the pantry or—

SecUnit is looking down at her. “You can hug me if you need to.”

“No. No, that’s all right. I know you don’t care for it.” She wipes her face. There are tears in her eyes, because she’s an idiot.

“It’s not terrible.” She can hear the irony under its even tone.

“Nevertheless.” She can’t do this. She can’t lean on a being that doesn’t want to be leaned on. Of all the things SecUnit needs, the only ones she can give it are room and time in a relatively safe space to make decisions for

itself. Becoming a prop for her failing emotional stability won't do either one of them any good.

Or maybe there's something else she can give it. She looks up, keeping her eyes on its left shoulder, leaving it the option of meeting her gaze or not. "In all those requisition forms you've been sending me, is there something you actually want?"

There's a considering pause. "Drones. The small intel ones."

Drones, of course. Like the ones they had on the survey, which had been extremely helpful. They would be eyes for SecUnit, in the many places where Preservation has no cameras. "I'll see what I can do."

It's looking down at her still, and she could meet its gaze to make it look away, but that won't make it retreat. "Is that a bribe?"

She can't help a smile. It does sound like a bribe, just a little. "Depends. Will it work?"

"I don't know. I never had a bribe before." She thinks she's deflected it, but then it comes right back around to its target. "Maybe you should go to the Station Medical like Dr. Bharadwaj."

I can't, I'd have to tell them what was wrong, is her first thought. And yes, she's aware that's the problem. She can't bring herself to lie, so she only says, "I'll try."

There's a quiet, skeptical snort above her head, and she knows SecUnit isn't fooled.

Station Security is in the outer lobby, and SecUnit slips away down the corridor before they reach the doors.

end



Copyright © 2020 by Martha Wells

Art copyright © 2020 by Jaime Jones



The Angel of Khan el-Khalili

P. Djèlí Clark

Reprinted from *Clockwork Cairo: Steampunk
Tales of Egypt*,
ed. by Matthew Bright

T O R
D O T
C O M

If you want to find the Angel of Khan el-Khalili, you have to make your way to the market at night. Not when the sun goes down, and Cairo's masses spill out into the opening shops, where soot-smudged factory workers and well-groomed ministerial clerks mingle at open-air coffeehouses to debate local politics. Not even after the first stars have appeared and, beneath the glare of gaslight, hawkers practice their best chat-up lines to seduce idle wanderers to their stalls—where everything from counterfeit medieval antiques to driveshafts for automated wheel carriages are up for sale. No, to find the Angel of Khan el-Khalili means going to the market late at night, when most of the city have long retired to their beds, leaving the souk to the curious, the adventurous, and the desperate—like you.

For Aisha, you remind yourself. This is for Aisha.

You pass beneath one of the many stone arches that line the night bazaar, and turn down the street of the chai-sellers, where young, strapping men shoulder high-pressure steam urns and pour fragrant tea for their patrons into delicate porcelain cups. You pass through the shop of a gas lamp merchant, whose oval glass lanterns swirl with luminous alchemical vapors that cause them to float about like colorful airborne jellyfish. Exit through the back, and you come out at a rounded yellow door divided into half-moons: the shop of the boiler eunuch mender. He is an unusually tall man, with thickset shoulders that seem unsuited to the gangly body you imagine lies beneath his sky-blue jellabiya. By his dark skin and the carpet of white whiskers creeping along his face, you guess he's Soudanese. Or perhaps simply Nubian. You can't tell.

He ignores your first words of greeting as you stand at the threshold of his shop, watching him use a hammer to beat a dented breastplate into shape. Perhaps it's because of who he thinks you are—a woman out alone at this time of night, unaccompanied by neither a husband or relative. If he could see

behind your headscarf and white cotton veil, to the face of a girl barely fifteen, he would know it is worse than that. So, you stand up straighter, fighting the urge to draw the light black wrap more firmly about you or smooth down your green fringed dress, and speak with the authority you've seen used by some of the other girls at the dress factory. You think of your friend Zehra, the Turkish girl who's always going on about the exploitation of the masses and how we need to turn the tables on "the bosses."

Something in your tone catches his attention. Or maybe he's simply resting his hands. But the boiler eunuch mender finally stops his work long enough to fix you appraisingly with one eye—the other is hidden behind a silver tubular lens.

"Looking for a boilerplate eunuch?" he asks in a deep baritone that rumbles up from his chest. From the south or no, the accent is pure Cairene. "We have many to choose from, each no worse for the wear. In these modern times, every home in Cairo should enjoy the convenience of a boilerplate eunuch." His arms gesture about the room, where faceless metal automatons shaped in the likeness of men stand motionless, reminiscent of soldiers awaiting inspection—or corpses arrayed in their tomb. They are of decent quality, even if refurbished from older models and mismatched parts. But that's not why you've come.

"I'm here to see the Lady of the House, uncle," you say instead.

The boiler eunuch mender continues to stare at you in that appraising way. Sifting and weighing. "What is your name, daughter?" he asks at last.

Beneath your veil, you feel the heat rise in your cheeks. So, you hadn't fooled him, then. You think of lying, but that measuring stare says he will see it right away. Besides, Aisha often warned that lying was one of the greater sins.

"Aliaa," you answer, careful not to give your full name. Cairo is a big city, but a family name could tell him everything he needs to know about you. His white eyebrows furrow at your evasion, but he only says: "The Lady of the House exacts a price. You are prepared to pay it?"

You respond with a stiff nod.

More weighing. More sifting. Finally, he stands up from his stool. Did you think this man was unusually tall? No, he is freakishly so, with arms that dangle to his thighs! He leads you past his silent creations to a door at the back of his shop. It is made of weathered brown wood, like the ones you've seen in photos adorning temples in Luxor. You've dreamt of taking a tram line or airship to visit them one day, and seeing if they whisper with the voices of long-dead infidels, as many say. He produces a golden key from a leather apron at his waist, and fits it into a rectangular slot, pulling the door open. There are a set of stairs that lead downward, illuminated by glowing lamps along the walls.

The boiler eunuch mender does not accompany you, but you offer him a little coin for his troubles; it's only polite. As the door closes behind you, your mind wanders to stories of unfortunate servants, sealed alive in the tombs of ancient despots too selfish to make their own lonely journey into death. You are surprised at how long it takes to reach the bottom, and you wonder how this space came to be. Did the boiler eunuch mender dig it out himself? Perhaps his automatons did: the last slaves of Egypt, destined to toil without respite. Or, more probably, as so much of Cairo, and the Khan in particular, this has always been here: built by some Fatimid caliph or Mamluk overlord for a long-forgotten purpose.

Whatever the case, it now houses a different occupant.

The Angel of Khan el-Khalili is a towering giant. Even bowed as she is, her head near brushes the ceiling. Her body is wrought of iron and brass: a living statue in the form of a lithe woman constructed of clockwork machinery that hums and moves to its own metronomic rhythm. Shimmering silver wings lay folded on her back, a bundle of metallic feathers inscribed with turquoise script that shifts and writhes before your eyes. She sits amid a bed of brocaded cushions on a mammoth moss-green divan, chin propped upon a fist in a thinker's repose. A draping skirt of gold conceals her legs and feet, falling in cascades to flow upon the ground below. You crane your neck to gape up at her, too taken at first to speak and lost in her terrible beauty.

Angels arrived in Cairo some forty years past. Your parents had been children then, but they still tell you stories of al-Jahiz—the disappeared Soudanese mystic, scientist, madman—whose fantastic machines had sent magic pouring into the world with the force of an unstoppered sea. Djinn had been the first to appear, and were in many ways responsible for the great innovations of this age. Their kind you are accustomed to: creatures of flesh and blood, elements of wind and water (or whatever came from smokeless fire) who walk, live, work, and interact among humans. Your family’s apartment sits above the confectionery of an elderly onager-headed Sila. She’s friendly enough, for a djinn, and hands out pink candy dolls to neighborhood children every Moulid for as long as you can remember.

But angels are another matter. They are rarer things, ethereal beings who shroud their bodies behind contraptions of mechanical grandeur and hold themselves apart from mortals and djinn alike. None, not even the religious bodies of Cairo, have been able to discern the reason for their coming. And they have remained equally enigmatic. Some have taken up residence in old palaces and ruins. There are several, you have heard, who now occupy the Citadel outside the mosque of Muhammad Ali. Why this one has decided to shelter in a cellar beneath the Khan would probably befuddle the most learned scholar of the Ulama. All you know is that she calls herself Seeker.

They are not angels. All angels are in Heaven with God.

Aisha’s admonishing voice comes to you even now. She could argue this subject at length, quoting from books you’ve never even heard about. She would explain that angels have no free will and so could not come among mortals of their own choosing. You don’t understand it all yourself. But you try to remember as much and push away the awe that traps your tongue. At least some of it.

“The night’s peace be upon you, Lady of the House,” you call up in greeting.

At your words, the angel’s bowed head lifts up as if from slumber—though you doubt such beings can possibly be bothered with mere mundanities like sleep. You find yourself staring at a midnight-blue mask glittering with flecks of gold. Brilliant light shines from crescent spaces where eyes should be,

above a slight nose and full lips pursed in contemplation. The sound of working cogs accompanies four metal arms that unfold and spread out. Her palms open in greeting as from beneath that fixed countenance comes a melodious and matronly, “Peace be upon you, and welcome, daughter.”

That voice is more than you expect. Not at all like a machine, but decidedly real. More than real even. Aisha once bought you a doll that could say “mama” and “baba,” and whose eyes rocked open and closed. This is like that, only now you imagine the doll as a giant and you as its plaything. Somehow you keep your legs steady, and find the ability to speak again.

“I’ve come before you, Seeker, hoping to gain your wisdom.” You remember to add, “If you’ll grant it to me.”

She studies you for a moment, then replies: “Many claim to seek my wisdom. But in truth, it is my favors they hope to attain.” Her tone is not harsh or even scolding. Still, you feel your face heat up again. It is not a comfortable thing to hear that you are transparent. But you believe that gaze could strip any soul bare. “Forgive me, Seeker,” you try again. “I mean to say, I’ve come to ask a favor.”

The angel tilts her head slightly, reminding you of a contemplative bird. “A favor asked by one so young? Are you certain, daughter, you would not prefer to inquire after a djinn? They deal as well in favors, with their wishes.” That last word is said with a crisp distaste. “Perhaps you hope to catch the eye of a suitor? Or for great beauty? An assurance of a future with a well-to-do husband? Such mortal trivialities are more their domain than mine.”

You cannot help the frown that captures your face. A suitor? Beauty? A husband? Working girls your age dream of enough money to attend a university. Or the skills to pass a civil engineer job that might lift you out of the doldrums of factory work. The year is 1912, not 1812!

“I haven’t come for a wish,” you state adamantly. Wishes are risky business anyway—undependable and unpredictable. You never can tell what end of the bargain you’ll come out on when dealing with djinn. You hesitate, but bring yourself to say it: “I’ve come looking for a miracle.”

At this, Seeker straightens, so that a bit of light glints from her brass breastplate. “A miracle,” she repeats. There is a savoring of the word. “Quite a favor to ask. You understand that such things come with a price.”

You nod. This is Cairo, after all. Everything comes with a price. You reach into the pocket of your dress and draw out a bundle of folded notes. The money is all you’ve been able to save away, at least nine months’ pay. There are dreams you have for this small fortune, all lost now. But you offer it forward, praying it’s enough. Your heart falls as Seeker shakes her head.

“Such things are meaningless to me, child,” the angel chides. “What use have I for your mortal trifles?” You pull your hand back, feeling somewhat foolish. Of course. How could you expect that something as grand as a miracle could be bought with money? “I shall set the price of any favor to be granted,” Seeker pronounces. “You accept this?”

“What will the price be?” you ask warily.

“That is for me to decide. Do you accept?”

“But how will I know that I can pay it?”

“All debts owed shall be paid,” she states assuredly. “I shall not ask thrice.”

Thrice? Who still talks like that? A dozen more pertinent questions sit poised on your tongue. Something about this feels even more precarious than dealing with djinn. But her words ring with a tone of finality. She will dismiss you as easily as a stray thought if you don’t give an answer. Of this you are certain. And you’ve come too far to turn back now.

“I accept,” you say, and wait for something momentous to happen, some feeling seared across your soul of an unbreakable holy compact. But there is nothing of the sort.

Instead, the angel says simply: “Tell me then, daughter, what is this miracle you seek?”

You let out a breath you don't remember holding. "I want you to save my sister Aisha. She's dying."

The words bring a flood of memories.

Aisha had worked at the dress factory, years before you began. She'd hoped to go off to university, to study from all those books she liked quoting. Maybe she would become a historian. Or a barrister. There were women barristers now. There was always alchemy. But your family couldn't afford such things. So, she remained at the factory and tried to hold onto her dreams.

It was Aisha who'd gotten you your job when you came of age. Ever the doting big sister, she'd shown you how to work the loom machines without injuring your fingers. And helped you sew enough dresses to meet the demand of the floor bosses. The work was hard and long, with few breaks, sometimes none for a whole half a day. But Aisha had taught you how to push through it, to hum songs that made the tedious labor pass. How to keep it from your mind so you could sleep and start again the next morning.

She'd been something of a leader at the factory: looking out for those who couldn't work as fast, making certain everyone worked collectively to meet quotas. She'd convince others to cover the work of women who fell ill or who had to nurse sick children. She'd stood up for all of you, demanding things like safer machinery and threatening to stop work if someone was fired unjustly. She'd even begun to talk about forming a union.

Until the fire.

Women would have died if not for Aisha. The fire that tore through the dress factory might have killed everyone in there, if she hadn't gone back into the flames. She'd dragged women out, one at a time, braving the worst of the blaze. You remember her carrying you to safety, your lungs filled with smoke and legs unable to stand. You'd looked up through stinging eyes to see her brown skin blistered and cracked. And her long black hair almost all singed away.

Aisha is a hero, people say. A hero who now lays in a hospice bed dying. In a world of djinn and sorcery, your sister is dying. From something as ordinary and commonplace as a fire. The doctor who tended her claimed her injuries were beyond even what could be healed in this age of wonders. It would take a miracle, he'd said gravely. So, you'd come looking for one.

The angel listens in silence as you relate all this, her radiant eyes unwavering and masked face as set as stone. When you finish, she merely asks, "Why you?" Reading your confusion, she asks again. "Why have *you* come to me? Why has a girl, barely a woman, been set on this task?"

"Because no one else would," you answer plainly. What you do now is considered forbidden by many. Even your parents, who are not overly pious people, would balk. The angel stares down at you for a long moment before speaking.

"Do you know why I am called Seeker?" she asks.

You shake your head. Angels keep their true names secret, offering up only titles.

"I search for truth," she explains. "I seek it out. This is my purpose. The reason of my creation." You have little time to digest that before she continues. "You will be given three chances to give me what I seek. Do so to my satisfaction, and I will grant your miracle. This is the price I set."

You frown at that. Three chances? "You want me to tell you something... true?"

"A truth," she clarifies. "From the depths of your soul. Something hidden."

"You mean a secret?"

"More than that."

You dwell on that momentarily. When is a hidden truth more than a secret?

“A confession,” you realize aloud.

Seeker gives a deep nod. “Those are the truths we hide most deeply,” she states.

A confession? You have heard that Copts do such things, to their priests, you believe. But you’ve never heard of anyone confessing to an angel. It is a strange request.

“How will I know if I’m giving you the right truth?” you ask.

“You will know,” Seeker replies.

Nodding, you turn inward. A truth from the depths of your soul. Could this possibly be as easy as it sounds? Rummaging through your thoughts, you arrive at something. Perhaps it will be enough. At the least, it can be a test. You clear your throat.

“My first truth,” you say. “I lied to my family to come here.” Seeker receives this in silence. You continue. “They’re all at the hospice, with Aisha. I told them I was going to stay with friends tonight. Instead, I came here.” You feel a bit embarrassed at the admission. It is one thing to know it in your head, but another to speak aloud. “I’ll likely have to lie to them again when I—”

Your words are cut short as Seeker rears up abruptly. You watch, startled, as the breastplate covering her chest begins to move—sliding apart like pieces of a puzzle. Beneath it, nestled among a viscera of gears, is a circle of machinery: a spinning vortex of iron with teeth like an ever-moving mouth. From the center of that maw there is light, blinding and roiling like a violent sea. You step back, ready to cry out when something seizes you.

It is as if unseen hands have latched onto every part of you—limbs and bone, flesh and muscle, blood and nerves. Their fingers dig deep, pulling at you, prying loose some inner part of your being and wrenching it free from its mooring. The pain of that sudden severance consumes the whole of you, and it is a while before you realize the shrieks filling your ears are your own. In your mind, you know it lasts only minutes, but it feels much longer. When the

pain finally, mercifully, stops, you fall to the stone floor, panting for breath. You blink up at Seeker, who tilts her head curiously.

“An interesting offering,” she murmurs.

“What?” you manage, trembling. “What did you do to me?”

“You gave me your truth,” she answers in an obvious tone. “I accepted it in my embrace.”

You stare, dumbfounded. Her embrace. Those unseen hands no longer hold you, but a shade of their touch remains. “You didn’t tell me it would be like that!”

“Confession is always painful,” the angel states.

You glare, anger breaking through the hurt as you struggle to sit up. Your gaze goes to the rotating vortex set within the angel’s exposed chest. “What is that thing?”

Seeker looks down, her metal fingers tracing along the rounded edges. “A construct of my own design. A more perfect way for my embrace to extract truth.”

Extract. There is a feeling alongside the lingering pain. A sense of emptiness and loss. You remember something leaving you, and you shudder. “What did...you take from me?” you whisper.

“Only a bit of your soul,” Seeker replies. “Why do you look so? Truth, after all, resides in the soul.”

You clutch at your chest, as if you can retrieve what you’ve lost. What was stolen! Souls are not things that can be bartered. This is theft. “That’s not what we agreed!” you charge.

“It is everything we have agreed,” the angel maintains. Her words have the hardness and care of stone. “And you have not yet met our bargain. That truth

was by no means sufficient. Mortal lies are, after all, common. You have two chances still. Take care not to squander them.”

Your eyes dart to the stairs. You can bolt from here. Flee the Khan and the bizarre bargain you’ve made with this callous creature. But what about Aisha? You owe her this. Squeezing your eyes shut, you whisper a prayer for strength before opening them again. It is an effort to rise to your feet. When you settle your stare on the angel, you find her looking back, those bright eyes expectant.

You search your thoughts a second time for a truth. It will have to be greater than the last. Something more than a lie. Something you wouldn’t want known by anyone. A true confession. “I’ve stolen,” you blurt out. That one truly fills you with shame. “From the factory. Some of the women know a man who trades in the dresses we make. He pays half a week’s salary for every bundle. I stole dresses for over four months and sold them to make money.” You’d only stopped when Aisha grew suspicious. If she’d ever found out, you didn’t think you’d be able to face the disappointment in her eyes. “I know it was wrong—”

The pain that comes is no less, for all that you have braced for it. There is that feeling again of being caught up by invisible hands, and something being torn out of you, stripped clean like meat from the bone. When it passes, you stumble up to your knees, fighting the urge not to empty your stomach. Your eyes wander back to Seeker. You find the angel staring down at you, that set face devoid of pleasure or pity.

“Not enough,” she pronounces. “You have not yet met our bargain.”

Your tortured body sags under the weight of that judgment. “I’ve given you all that I can,” you breathe.

“No,” the angel counters. “You have not. I seek truth, that which is hidden in the deepest recesses of the soul. Yet you have scarcely plumbed those depths. Instead you throw up what dross you skim from the surface. Lies and thievery.” There is derision in her voice. “You think I am impressed with the banalities of mortal existence? You think this is enough to win my favor?”

“What do you want?” It is a question wrapped in frustration.

“More,” the angel demands.

You glare up in exasperation that fast blooms into anger. “I don’t have more! I’ve given you all I can!”

Seeker surges forward then, bending down so low that her head comes only an arm’s span from your own. The dazzling light behind those crescent eyes bathes you in their brilliance. You put a hand to your face, a feeble shield against that glare.

“I am Seeker,” the angel declares, her voice thundering. “I search for truth. I am drawn to it. Do you think your small mortal soul can conceal itself from me? Do you think I cannot see what you keep secreted in its innermost chambers?”

A coldness forms like a dark pit in your stomach. “I don’t know what—”

Seeker lets out a sharp hiss, cutting off your words with the ease of a blade slicing through poorly stitched cloth. “Do not lie to me.” Each word bears a warning edge. “A girl, barely a woman, sets out to find me. To make a bargain for her dying sister. To ask for nothing less than a miracle. Why you?”

“Because no one else would,” you stammer, that cold, dark pit growing ever larger.

“A lie,” Seeker pronounces. “Even if wrapped in the skin of truth, a lie all the same. I ask again, why you?”

Your eyes cast downward, unable to meet the angel’s scouring scrutiny. You fix on your hands and find them clenched so tight the nails bite into your palms. They are shaking. And the cold pit has grown to swallow every part of you, until your entire body trembles. The tip of a metal finger touches beneath your chin, gently tilting your head back up. The surface of Seeker’s

midnight-blue mask is somehow reflective, and there you catch a glimpse of your face—eyes seeping tears that glide down to coat your veil.

“Give me what I seek,” the angel whispers—her voice now turned into a caress and a nudge. “Speak your truth. Allow my embrace.”

The first words are hardest. “I started the fire.” The rest rush out in a torrent.

Work at the factory has never been fair. You labor endlessly, for wages that are a pittance at best. Because you are women, the company pays all of you less. And if you are younger, less still. The machines are dangerous. You’ve seen women scalded by ruptured steam valves or lacerated by weaving looms. The floor bosses don’t care. The company demands they meet quotas, and the lot of them wring every last bit of sweat and blood from each of you.

Aisha had talked of creating a union, and asking for greater rights. But it was Zehra, the Turkish girl, who you thought had the right of it. The company was a machine, she often said, and it would grind all of you to bits if it wasn’t stopped.

The idea to smash some of those machines was as much your idea as it was hers. You’d bring it all to a halt. The company would be forced to come to you, the workers who produced their wealth. And from a place of power, you’d make your bargains. The other women would be sure to rise up if given that spark. You’d been convinced even Aisha would see the sense of it.

Only nothing had gone as planned.

The alchemical solution the two of you had cooked up was meant to melt through the gears of the loom machines. It wasn’t supposed to catch fire, creating bright red flames that only spread the more you threw water on them. As you’d tried to flee, how could you have known the floor bosses had locked the doors in the factory that day? They said later to the papers it was to protect against theft. But it was just another way to keep all of you churning out their damn quotas. That day, their greed and your rashness almost proved deadly. You can still hear the screams of the other women,

banging on bolted doors that wouldn't open. You can still smell the smoke and the fire amid their fear. You can still hear your own screams.

The pain this final time is searing: those invisible fingers white-hot knives reaching into the heart of you, diving deep to draw out what you've tried to hide away. It feels as if you are being stretched within, almost to the point of tearing. You curl around that pain. You cling to it. And for a moment that seems a lifetime, it is your entire world, blotting out your vision and leaving you in darkness. When your eyes flutter open again, your cheek is flush with the floor as you babble the same words in repetition. "I'm sorry, Aisha. I'm sorry. I'll make it right. I'll make it right."

Slowly, you push yourself to a position of half-lying and half-sitting. You look up to find Seeker once more upright. Her breastplate is slowly closing, hiding that frightful machine mouth away. There is nothing to be revealed in the placid countenance of that carved mask. But when she speaks, there is a tremor in her voice that can only be described as—satisfaction.

"You mortals are such frail things. Motes floating among more worlds than you can possibly imagine. Yet your souls hold the weight of stars. If you only knew..." She trails off, as if having spoken too much.

Angels and their secrets, you think scornfully. But you have no care for any of that. With gritted teeth, and more than some effort, you come to be standing. Not steady, but at least standing. "Have I met our bargain?" you ask tightly, wiping your dampness from your face.

Seeker tilts her head in that contemplative way. "You are angered." She says the words with genuine surprise. "Are you not made glad in your confession? Is your soul not unburdened by speaking this truth? Atonement is painful, but are you not rendered the better for it?"

You stare at her in amazement. Does she think she's done you some courtesy?

"Atonement," you answer, "is gained through asking for forgiveness. And I pray for it every day. You can't give me that. Pain isn't absolution. Whatever you think you've taken from me, you haven't unburdened me of anything."

You pause, willing yourself calm before starting again. “What I’ve come here for is restitution. Now, have I met our bargain?”

Seeker is silent for a moment, and you wonder what is going through that indecipherable mind. In your chest, your heart is pounding, but you meet that bright stare with your head held high. And wait.

“Our bargain is met,” she proclaims at last. The breath you release feels as if it comes from every part of you. The angel appears to pluck something from her lips. When her hand lowers to you, it opens in offering. You take what she holds. A stone. Dull-brown and unassuming, it is small enough to fit in your palm. You turn it over, running your fingers along its unevenly smooth surface.

“A bezoar,” Seeker explains. “Grind it to a fine powder for your sister to ingest.”

“This will save Aisha?” you ask uncertainly. “This will heal her?”

“She will make a swift recovery,” the angel replies. “Even her burns. Some might even call it miraculous.”

You glance up from the stone. Had that been a joke? But Seeker is already returning to her earlier repose.

“Farewell then, daughter,” she says in parting. “If ever you find your soul in need of unburdening, I might gladly welcome...savoring...your essence again.” With that, she bows her head, propping her chin upon a closed fist, and is once more still—all to be heard that peculiar metronomic rhythm.

“Not likely,” you whisper. Turning your back on the Angel of Khan el-Khalili (or whatever she is), you make your way up the stairs and back to the boiler eunuch mender’s shop, taking Aisha’s miracle—and your burdens—with you.



Copyright © 2017 by P. Djèli Clark

Reprinted from *Clockwork Cairo: Steampunk Tales of Egypt*, ed. by Matthew Bright

Art copyright © 2021 by Kevin Hong

**Thank you for buying this
Tor.com ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

Sign Up

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on Usman T. Malik, click [here](#).

For email updates on 'Pemi Aguda, click [here](#).

For email updates on Michael Swanwick, click [here](#).

For email updates on Martha Wells, click [here](#).

For email updates on P. Djèlí Clark, click [here](#).



**Science fiction. Fantasy. The universe.
And related subjects.**

★

More than just a publisher's website, Tor.com is a venue for **original fiction, comics,** and **discussion** of the entire field of SF and fantasy, in all media and from all sources. Visit our site today — and join the conversation yourself.