

Part 5- Jasmine

Hashash- Princesses

Picked up my mail in Madrid. Penthly apologized and assured me that he didn't want to discourage the flow of letters. He wants to know everything. Sounds like he'll be going into journalism - says he wants to have some adventure in his life. I wrote but was careful to keep it to the sights and sounds.

I must be lazy. I read my own notes and think that one day I will be disappointed that these words won't allow me to feel the shower of sweat from a hot flamenco or taste the difference between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Was the chef rude or just a man of the earth? Surely I will forget.

I should write endless details about elegant pools at Alhambra, warm night time breezes in Seville, and aromas from kitchens down narrow cobblestone streets in Santiago. The sangria in Portugal is sweet. The garlic in Spain is heavy. The surf in the Algarve is music. The church in Cordoba became a mosque and is warmer than the cathedrals in the north, but gives you goose bumps when you walk through it. Its fountain welcomes virtuoso guitarists and lovely young women that bite accompanied by ugly old ladies.

So many words. Save it for postcards and such.

Then, disappointed I will be. My head claims the most space and the most time. One writer is convincing. Then someone says just the opposite. So it is with newspapers and magazines between countries, artists of different faiths, and finally the thinkers...in different eras.

The books that discover me bring out the adversary. I am a bull with picadores that want my fatigue and my blood. When I am disoriented, their lance brings focus...They work hard to give me a brief reason to feel noble.

Music charms the charge. If there is pain, the muse allows a moment of grace. She pours the wine and we free the powers.

Something electric happens here. In Spain my guitar is played by centuries of ghosts... The Moors brought the oud from Persia and it transformed itself to the lute ...then the

troubadour wrote a melody and a verse that were inextricable like the lips and the kiss of the woman he wrote of...and so the six string plays itself here, and I listen. I'm listening for a song.

Sometimes I play the Key of G. His notes are hard to read...but in this space, I can hear some of his songs...for want of my own.

Even though it has been months since Paris, I hear her...the bitch or the cold princess? I still wonder. I hear her calm words over and over, " Be true ...or be cursed."

" Be true or be cursed."

"Be true or be cursed."

Voodoo. I can't shake it.

N- Weeks go by. The crossing to Tangiers was inspiring. I like the sea...but I don't know her.

Sometimes gray, then blue, but the break at shore is turquoise. She is so inviting and then so dark. I take refuge in my head. She is too sensual. Too final.

And she says, " You pretend."

Thank you sister.

There are things to know. And things to forget.

n- Jasmine -an unusual woman. Casablanca is her home but this month she stays at her fathers hotel here in Marrakech. She writes essays on local folklore and meeting tall, American men who she would like to see wearing boots.

Her lineage is blue blood and her family's wealth is astounding. She studied in Paris and Barcelona, but now lives mostly in Rome where she gives lectures to students and tours them through St. Peters. She is writing her doctoral thesis on the moral code of the hashashin .

Whew! Hit me, babe.

I met her in a room of a cheap hotel by the medina where I crashed. It's halls tiled and rooms expansive with four beds per. There were eight wayfarers toking away the afternoon hiding from the 150 degree heat and the outside smells of donkey urine and other shit...the shutters closed... a candle lit and bongos. The guys repeated a reverberating, sweating, tribal thing.

I sat on the furthest bed and then lay down, soaked and exhausted from the train trip from Tangiers. The joint was the size of a Havana cigar and made its way surprisingly quickly to this late stranger. Who rolled this monster?

Buzzed, I moved myself back to the wall and watched as Swedish hippies danced against their shadows. The heat had claimed everything but their shorts. Nobody wears underwear in this heat. Didn't look like they would stay on for long.

Just as the men stopped dancing she stepped in between the wall and the flame. As she arched her shadow and watched herself, the bongoes landed in front of me. So I played. Slowly at first...palms, then thumbs then fingers...boom kitty kat boom boom kitty kat.

Sweat ran down her long, brown, exposed neck. Her eyes followed her painted fingers as she stretched them overhead. Undulating, the wave travelled down her dripping arms and over her small breasts then under her shirt to her flat belly...a twist, and the curve of her hips mysteriously, carried it the rest of the way, to her bare feet.

I picked up the pace and she spun like a dervish. I slowed down and she became the wave. Boom boom kitty kat.

I was first to claim a shower when they turned on the afternoon water in the room so I passed the bongos along... but Jasmine stepped in with all her clothes on saying she couldn't wait. I was naked she was dressed. The water was freezing which was bad for me but good for her. Her arms were around my neck and she let her head fall forward so the water would cover her back.

After a minute she looked at me flashing the whites of her deep brown eyes, smiled and said, "Shukran...thanks."

She left still wearing her pants and shirt...dripping. I tried to finish washing my hair in the alpine temperature of the shower stall. We have bumped into each other in the casbah a couple of times since. She steals my ears for hours without an apology.

n- Marrakech is the most different of the places I have been. The medina comes to life at night and the snake charmers flute, competes with the storytellers charismatic fire and the craft sellers incessant cries.

They serve bizarre breads and peppermint tea with too much sugar. There are hundreds of stalls that sell sandals, knives, inlaid boxes, and water pipes... the original bong. I stood, ate, watched, and felt strangely calm. The teeming energy of barter and bak-sheesh burned away that foggy place of thought, and with the drums and pipes, brought meaning to the dark desert night.

It had been a few days since I had seen her but Jasmine appeared out of nowhere and stood beside me. Pointing discreetly at this old weathered storyteller, she said, " He is the best of them all. Come, Nexter. Sit...I will translate for you."

" The Princess"

Once there was a swarthy shepherd who was more or less unknown and who tended to rather common sheep. In the day time he sat in the shade of his tent, watching the flock, and by night tended his own fire.

One day a beautiful maiden came to him. With her, she brought some figs and some water. She was a gift from Allah. She and the shepherd lived as one for some time until one day a very wealthy potentate who had heard of the lovers came to see for himself that such a beauty existed.

Unfortunately, for the shepherd, the maiden saw her chance to become princess of the land and enjoy the wealth and prestige of such a marriage, and she departed happily with the potentate.

The swarthy shepherd continued on. To his friends and fellow villagers, he became regarded with some degree of respect...for it was his woman who had been most desired in the land. But the shepherd nursed his broken heart in a personal hell.

One day another maiden appeared. She was far more beautiful than the first and she made a happy home with the shepherd. The potentate hearing of this became perturbed and paid another visit to the shepherd. The potentate had become further annoyed because his first wife had been with child, when he had seduced her away from the shep-

herd. Now he did not want her. So he returned her and the baby, and took the second wife as his princess.

The swarthy shepherd was kind to his first love but let her in his tent only one night a month. Thus did she suffer but for the love of her handsome child. Again, his fame grew but he nursed his broken heart for some time in near solitude with only the company of his sheep and occasionally, the mistress and their child.

Then one day, the most beautiful of all women arrived at the tent of the swarthy shepherd.

She said, "I understand the potentate takes his princess only from your tent."

"So it seems."

"I seek to be a princess and am prepared to be your wife that I might be his."

"So be it," he answered.

So this fairest of the fair stayed with the shepherd and made a happy home for he who tended the flocks. As well, she enjoyed friendly banter and womanly affection with the first mistress of her man. She even enjoyed the baby boy who grew more playful every day.

Over time the potentate again heard of this new bride of the swarthy shepherd.

This time he appeared positively angry because his second princess had been with child as well and he was unsatisfied that he should also not have the most beautiful of women.

So, he arrived he arrived with a battalion of guards who threatened the entire village until they found the shepherd.

He innocently tended his flocks and cared for his women and child but was not surprised to see the potentate.

"I return to you this second princess and your child. I come to take this woman as my final princess... provided she is without child."

Now the shepherd expected her to leave happily for she had been open and honest with him about wishing to be a princess. And this time he was sure she was without child be-

cause she had taught him happiness in the tent such that that no child could be conceived.

Thus he thought she would fair well with the potentate.

" She is without child," answered the shepherd.

" You seem so eager to rid yourself of me swarthy one," she said

" But no. I only wish for your happiness..."

" But I am happy here."

The potentate was now embarrassed. His army sat and waited while the shepherd and his lover fought.

" While I love you dearly, you always said..."

But she interrupted. " Ah. But what a woman says...she says not in words. I have loved you so and such that a child should not come between us."

Finally the potentate could stand it no longer and interrupted the quarrelling duo.

" You will come with me."

" But you smell of the pretense of power and perfume," she complained.

"And he smells of sheep and the earth," said the potentate.

" But it is his scent that I love the most. If you wish me, the fairest of the fair, I should be allowed to sleep in a tent at your palace. And have you smell of sheep... but even so...I fear no...it would not work."

" Why wouldn't it work?" asked the potentate.

" For I also love these other two fine mistresses and their children."

The potentate finally turned and spoke to the shepherd, " You have been my adversary. Yet I see you have a true family...this is the largest responsibility. I shall send you a monthly a stipend that your fine women shall not want."

The three mistresses blinked and looked at each other, and the shepherd, then finally, the potentate.

The swarthy shepherd then spoke softly and respectfully to the women. " The potentate has taught us many important things. It is his nature to bestow and he has been generous. Alas! We each learn our own heart."

Then he turned to the potentate and said, "Enough with words. Safe travels my friend. Many thanks to you."

The potentate disappeared with his guards and never returned. The swarthy shepherd, having found his one true love, together with his mistresses and fine sons, turned away many the ambitious young princess thereafter but rumour has it that the potentate enjoyed the most sublime measure of the harem ever known to man."

" You see? Now we must talk about his story."

" You dance well." I said.

" All women dance well," said Jasmine.

" None of them dance in the story."

" All the women dance. It is assumed."

We did talk about the story...truthfully, I just listened to Jasmine. After three hours I suggested I should leave to check on my guitar.

She got the hint. My ass was sore from sitting on a wooden bench and I was rolling from drinking too much peppermint tea.

" Come."

" Where to?"

" My place."

At the end of the casbah there was a large open area and a luxurious hotel done in a red

stucco. She walked me in and up to her room.

Tourists stay here...the ones with a lot of money. They come over from Casablanca to add a little authenticity to their Moroccan experience.

Jasmine points out the men in the lobby who have asked her out for dinner.

" I thought you liked guys in boots?" I joked.

" Not those kind of boots," she laughed.

" What kind of boots?"

" As long as they aren't shiny!" she squealed.

" Why were you at the Gates?" I queried.

(We call our cheap hotel 'The Gates of Hell')

" ummmm...I like the American." She rolled her eyes with her finger to her lips.

Ah! Someone will be a sacrificial pawn. I own only my own path and my guitar. The American is padded. Travelling cheap for a cocktail story in later years. I see no need to be a sacrifice for my own part. She is queen and sees checkmate.

" Oh so you dance for him." I laughed.

She smiled and said coyly, " Maybe. What a woman says..."

"...she says not with words," I nodded.

Yes it is. But where does the truth lie?

Her room was tiled and cool. Expansive. It looked across the gardens, pools and courtyard to the desert.

She sat down on some cushions by her water pipe and beckoned me over.
We buzzed.

"So tell me your story." I said.

" I am Daddy's girl..." she started in. I was getting sleepy and the glaze over my eyes thickened every time "Daddy" got mentioned. I woke up next morning still on the cushions, to find my guitar and pack leaning against the wall by the door. She was not there.

She is an endless river of talk, but somehow her enthusiasm makes it interesting. I am sure that no one ever listens to her...especially Daddy. I went over to the balcony where a coffee pot waited and looked down to see her with the American from the Gates down in the courtyard. Yep. Boots!

I'm a guest here. But it beats the Gates of Hell.

She was excited when she walked in. She launched into a monologue about how the Persians became the library for the west. While Europe was in the dark ages, Persia developed music and poetry, along with math and astronomy.

What happened?

Politics.

Enter the hashashin. Assassins.

The hired killer of their day. A whole culture once again swallowed up in flames with their library. All the facts...gone forever. Only the myth remains.

They worked alone, travelled disguised as a wayfarer or minstrel, enjoying the proverbial wine women and song...and planned in detail. To the assassin in that day, his life was defined by the last moments of his own life, his victim's status, and the artistry of the assassination itself. They used only the infamous dagger and seldom escaped their own demise at the hands of the vengeful guards.

A ritual sacrifice...makes the bullfight seem tame.

"So were they killers before they smoked the hash or did the hash make them killers?" I joked.

Jasmine tried to see the humour but was unimpressed.

It was a suicide mission most of the time. So, either they believed that a great orgy awaited them in paradise, or they were simply world weary, looking for their version of a dignified death. However it goes...to Jasmine their story is important. The myth lives

on, however feeble and fatigued. Killer instinct and all that.

n- Tonight we will go hear another story...whether I want to or not!

She's playing at something. She said the American offered to bring my stuff over...and she wants my company for as long as I want to stay. But I don't wear boots. I will not play the fool.

It's hot. Time for a shower. Maybe I'll write a letter.

n- Hard to fucking believe this! Almost two years later and who do I meet in Marrakech? The two Germans. They've been living with bedouins or something. Looks like it's been tough.

But what are the odds? All the wayfarers we'll never see again, but...here they are.

We went to the casbah for the storyteller and there they were sitting there.

I said nothing until after the story...then the four of us and the American who had happened upon us went back to the hotel and they told us their story. But first ...the story of Heaven, Hell and Judgement Jack. It sounded so funny coming from Jasmine's lips.

Story goes something like this...

It was that time when legions of pilgrims took to the road and walked weeks and weeks to the holy shrine to pay homage. Amidst the multitudes were three dark wayfarers. They dressed in many layers to protect themselves from the blazing sun.

On one day of the journey the first of the three found himself walking alone. The second, feeling compassionate, caught up to him and said, " You needn't walk alone brother. Let me keep you company."

The first said " Many thanks my friend. It isn't easy sometimes. Everyone sees you the way they want to and wants no part of that which they haven't preconceived."

" Ah, yes. It is terribly difficult sometimes. I know of what you speak."

The first said to the second," and your name?"

"Oh I'm sorry. Forgive my rudeness. I am Hell. And you are?"

The first was taken aback and said, " How can you be Hell? You are joyful and friendly. I feel no heat and see no flames."

" Ah. So you are the same. My myth precedes me everywhere. Nobody will allow me to be the real me."

" And what is the real you?"

" Hard work for most. Confusion, pretense...for many I am vain suffering. Sometimes I am bad luck and at my worst I am boredom. The story of man."

" So you are not part of the hereafter."

" Why no, my friend. I am Hell, here and now. There is no other."

" Well that will be good news for many sinners!"

" Why?"

" They won't have to fear eternal damnation!"

" But of course not. When they are dead, it doesn't matter. They are dead."

" That's what I always say."

"And who might you be?"

" Oh I am sorry good friend. My name is Heaven."

" But you are so sad. You walk alone and you are not clad in white nor do you carry a harp. How can this be?"

" Ah you too have your preconceived ideas. But I know you understand."

" So there are no pearly gates?"

" In your dreams, bud. When you're dead you're dead!"

The two had much in common and walked many days together, finally becoming fast friends.

One day, the third dark wayfarer, out of breath and fat, closed in on them, tripping on his oversized sandals.

" Hey wait for me " he called.

" And who might you be?" asked Heaven.

" Oh...I am Judgement Jack."

" You don't say," said Hell. " I thought you would be a little scarier looking than you are."

" Oh everybody thinks that. You should walk a mile in these shoes," he frowned. "It's trying sometimes living with everyone's preconceived idea about you. You know?"

" We know " they said in unison.

" Tell us about the real Judgement Jack."

" Well I'm very simple. Every step a pilgrim takes, I'm over his shoulder till just past the last fork in the road.

" What fork?" asked Hell, like he didn't know.

"Well...hope or doom."

" So what do you do?"

" There are too many people for me to judge, so I get them to do some of my work for me."

" How do you do that?" asked Heaven.

" Ya know that last fork I was telling you about?"

" Yes," the two responded to Jack.

" Well, I just let them take their first step past that last fork, see which way they go, see

which is their road of choice...Then, my work is done."

" Oh yeah. 'I know I have to' is what I hear," said Heaven knowingly.

"and..."I think I'd like to..." , hope and doom...clever eh?" said Judgement.

" Oh yeah. Now that's a fork," said Hell.

" Tricky Jack. Very tricky," said Heaven.

" You're a clever sod," said Hell. "Ha! "I think I'd like to...!" he laughed.

"And your friend...he's clever too," said Jack.

So are people afraid of you too?" asked Heaven.

" Well they believe I have to do with the hereafter. But when you're dead...you're dead. Right?"

" Right on," said Hell.

" Dead right," said Heaven.

" Say what are your names?"

" Well I am Hell, and this here is my good friend Heaven."

At this, Judgment Jack was taken aback. But over time they all straightened out their preconceived ideas of each other. Soon, Judgement found himself enjoying Heaven's company quite a bit.

Days passed and finally Judgement started spending more time with Hell.

Finally Heaven, who had felt increasingly excluded, asked him," You seem to enjoy Hell much more than me. Why is that Jack?"

"Well Hell... Hell is an everyday sort of guy. You are good company, but the truth is you are fleeting and make me sad."

At this, Hell chimed in," But Jack...you must know one thing. It is Heaven that makes me bearable."

Then Heaven added, " Yeah. And if it weren't for Hell... well then nobody would ever give me any credit... fleeting as I am."

" But, what about me? You two don't need me," said Jack pathetically.

" Nobody needs you," said Hell. " But we enjoy you. So can they."

" Then it is better that they fear me," said Jack angrily.

" Why do they need to fear you?"

"Without fear I am dispensible."

" Ah, true! So you fear a world without Jack!" laughed Hell.

" Methinks you need them more than they need you," said Heaven.

" But still, they think they need you to choose which road they will take, " said Hell kindly.

" Not if they know..."

" Know what?"

" That they judge for themselves and only themselves. And not for a Heaven and not for a Hell."

And is that not enough?" said Heaven

" Easy for you to say. You're fleeting," said Jack.

Then Hell said, "Jack, it's always a temptation to pretend to be something you're not."

Now Jack was turning more and more pale. He pointed at Hell and stammered in frustration, "You, you, you sh-sh-sh-should walk a mile in my sh-sh-sh-shoes! "

" You came to judge me. And now I should feel sorry for you that you see only me in yourself," said Hell ferociously.

Then Hell said to Heaven, " You see my friend? Same old story. A few days with me and..."

" What am I going to do?" cried Jack over and over.

Hell said, "Well now that you know us, live it out...or pretend we never met. It's gonna be hell either way."

Heaven cut in, waving Hell away, " You know what you have to do...stay with me on the bright side of things. Forget about Hell. Sometimes he doesn't know when to..."

" Yes, yes. I will stay with you, Heaven," said Jack carefully eyeing Hell.

After just a few minutes Jack grew sad and started talking to Hell again. Hell was warm and inviting. Then Jack turned pale.

Judgement Jack took a moment to deal with his confusion, then he said," I think what I'd like to do... is get back to the pilgrims."

He turned and started to hurriedly trip his way back to the multitudes when Heaven called after him with exasperation," 'I think I'd like to?' Jack, Jack, Jack... hope or doom...remember?"

Jack never looked back.

Heaven looked at Hell and said, " No saving him."

Hell looked at Heaven and said out of the side of his mouth, " What else is news?"

The fast friends laughed and shrugged.

" Poor Judgement" they said. And so they continued on amidst the pilgrims, on the way to a holy shrine in the middle of nowhere...marking some poor martyr's bones.

So it ended.

To see them again was strange. They were not so jovial but Jasmine has a way of bringing humour into things. They refused the pipe saying they didn't care if they ever smoked hashish again. The American had a lot of questions for them and sat beside Jas-

mine on the pillows.

Apparently my two German friends had become separated in the desert and spent the last year apart, each wondering what had happened to the other, desperately hoping to meet again. They found each other by chance at a feast. Each had lived with different tribes, not realizing how close they were to one another the whole time.

"That is the desert." said one. " One sand dune that blocks your sight and you can wander aimlessly, probably forever, without reward."

" You're glad for the mirage, but the oasis is always further away. Another day breaks... and then, just by chance, the mirage disintegrates... you learn. "

" But how hard we tried, my long lost friend." laughed the first.

I made a mental note...avoid deserts.

When they left, the American stood up to leave. He looked at me and said, "Jasmine likes players."

"I try to play," I responded thinking of G, "...but she likes men in boots too."

He laughed; I laughed. But I felt the sadness and was touched.

He's into her.

" I leave tomorrow." I said.

" Oh, I thought you said you were staying here for the next week," said Jasmine.

" Changed my mind. But I promise to call you in Rome." I looked at him and he looked at me.

"Well goodnight," he said.

Jasmine didn't know what to make of this. I suggested that we could help each other. She would wax eloquent about the woman's 'world without words'.

"Oh. That is so secret. You would have to teach me of the man's world of pleasure...happiness in the tent," she said, her eyes bright and bulging.

Of the secrets we shared there is only one that I can write. And even that has to wait.
I am off to France and out of this heat.

Yes it is.
