

## The Bearer

She came down through the valley in the cool blue dawn with her veil loose at her lips and that gilded jar balanced carelessly on her head. And though the drawing of water was women's work, the men found a reason to be there. The young ones stood tall at the slap of her sandal through the dust, the sincere became earnest and the jesters laughed. Boys jostled for the right to pump the iron handle, to draw her water from the well. But when the jar was filled they fell silent, man and boy alike, and they watched her walk back through the valley as her mother had taught her. Jar balanced, long legs stretching beneath her threadbare cloak, she glided, smooth as the swan through the stream.

Even the old ones pulled in their stomachs and fingered their greying beards, though any could see from the fullness in her cheeks and the nakedness in her eyes, that she was only a girl, and a poor one at that. Her father had been a travelling trader, a seller of herbs who few remembered, and her mother was dead of a fever in the winter gone by. So the girl stayed in her cottage at the valley's end and cared for her young brother, and her dry patch of farm. She troubled no one.

Marriage is a serious business and no father would let his son throw his life away for that little piece of scrub. Yet that did not stop them, running to catch her in the shade of the twisted oak, pledging their love and their possessions, while their friends laughed behind their hands, delighted at the pleader's coming shame, terrified that they might be accepted. Even the hunchback boy, who was no fool and must surely have known the outcome, succumbed in the end.

She turned him away as gently as the rest, telling him she was too young and unworthy, with no dowry to offer. He could not help himself, but begged her as others had done before him. The heat rose in her cheeks. He pressed in close. The oak's coarse bark etched patterns on his palm. Her breath came fast, warm on his neck, and in her naiveté and

her humanity, she touched his shoulder, the tip of one long finger brushing the sharp ridge of his shame. He pulled back so fast that the tree drew blood from his hand, and with the sensitivity of the afflicted he saw a look of revulsion in her wide grey eyes that was not there.

The Elders promised her comfort and security, a place in their household as maid or nurse. The Chief was wise enough to offer a place for her brother too. But the girl was young, with no mother to guide her and little understanding of this strange new power that God had laid in her lap. She laughed in her embarrassment, and clumsily let her veil slip down across her flushing cheeks.

She made enemies of the women too, listening attentively enough to their gossip at the well-side, but her eyes did not smile. She failed to grasp the delectable joy of a rich man betrayed by his wife, a neighbour caught in some petty folly. She had sense enough to laugh, but a moment too late, and the women's eyes too followed her back through the valley. There was little else to do. They knew better than to waste words on their husbands and be answered with a distracted frown.

And so the clay that was moulded in the spring, set hard in the summer heat.

The Council was the business of men, but behind the doors of their houses it was the women who spoke. They told their husbands how the girl's veil hung loose, exposing lips and teeth, and stray locks of hair. And they spoke of the day when she lifted her gilded jar and the flesh winked through her torn cloak, like the evil eye on her belly. They knew the ways of women, they said. Such things did not happen by accident. And their plain daughters drew their own veils tighter. They nodded, sage as old women at their mothers' sides, and called their fathers, Papa, as if they were still little girls.

The Elders were not all fools. They knew their women well enough to understand what was true and what was false, to hear what was left unsaid. Yet, though they wished not to see, each sensed a darker truth. Even those that loved their wives and strove to live with

honour knew in the alertness that held them when she passed, in the thoughts that came unbidden in the dusk and in the dawn, that they had been tempted. They knew, in their secret core, that they were guilty.

So the Elders went to their Council, and they studied their scrolls and stroked their beards. They spoke of pink lips in the spring-time, and a laughing flash of teeth. A moist curl beneath a soft grey eye, so black it shone blue in the sunlight, and they reminded themselves of that wink of flesh on her belly. And when the evidence was heard they quoted their laws and nursed their pride, and fought to slow their beating hearts.

The Chief spoke for all of them when he said that they had no choice. She who draws a man's eye from his wife and his thoughts from his prayers is guilty. The woman was a temptress and a blasphemer, an offender against the sanctity of family and the laws of God. The Council's duty was to declare this truth.

There was one who came late to the Council, a wise man, learned in law whose only son was a hunchback, and who knew what it was to be judged. He talked of forgiveness, and the innocence of the young, but they shouted him down in their passion. He might have fought harder, but he fell silent before the crowd and in time he too was punished.

So came the turn of the young men. Souls and bodies swollen with desire, they were set free by the judgment of the Elders to run through the valley, feet pounding as fast as their thundering hearts. They found her as they expected, flagrant, without cowl or veil. Pale flesh, red lips, that child's face exposed, her woman's body pressed wantonly beneath her shift.

It hardly mattered. Judgment had been rendered. This was only the final proof. Yet still they remembered their duty, and took care to lock the boy-child in the house before they carried her out in the moonlight, and laid her down on the dry earth beneath her olive trees.

She fought them at first. She was young and knew no better. The Chief's sons took their rightful place, beating her only as much as was necessary. And then they came, the next and the next. Her struggles ceased. She made only small sounds, when they hurt her, like a forest creature caught in a trap meant for something larger.

And still we might have been saved. But she stared up at them with the moonlight running in silver streams from her wide, grey eyes.

Could she not have closed them?

Some were too lost in their animal need to notice anything as strangely irrelevant as her face. But there were others whose appetites vanished in sight of the feast. Though her body was slick with blood and seed, they could not enter her, and so they beat her. They had no choice. They were boys who must prove their manhood.

The last was the hunchback. They tore the shirt from his back in their frenzy, mocked him and pushed him down upon her. In love or in lust as he was, night after night of throbbing need wilted before her gaze.

Perhaps that was why, or perhaps it was because when he looked down at that silver patchwork of bloodied flesh, he saw something of himself.

Still, there was one last moment when the horror might have been averted.

A breeze blew through the hot night. The cool hand of God to guide us home, but all the hunchback felt was the clumsy touch of her finger on his back. And again he saw a look in her eyes that was not there.

The hunchback was a wise man's son. He had studied the law and he knew his duty, the punishment for a temptress and a blasphemer.

His knife was short, a child's thing, but sharp enough. Hard in his hand. He held her by that blue-black hair. He stared at the light behind her shining eyes, and he hacked her nose from her face.

She fought then, and screamed to raise the hackles on the wolves in their lairs, but the work was done and the hunchback ran back through the valley to the hell he had made of his life.

She lived.

We knew because she came again to the well. At first, only in darkness, a shadow or a ghost, no longer tripping carelessly, but plodding, heavy and deliberate as the ancients. Yet when she turned with the jar full on her head, she became again, the swan, gliding away through the valley. And in the thin blue light one could almost imagine that it had not happened.

Almost.

The winter was long as any could remember, that time of death before rebirth, but when the mornings finally grew lighter those early at the well might glimpse her face in the dawn. Her veil did not slip now, but was bound tight across the stump that remained to her. Yet she could not hide her bewildered eyes.

Families waited longer to wash and drink in the mornings. Women walked out late beneath the beating sun. Even boys too young to understand ran screaming in delight from the gilded witch.

There was one who earned a few extra coins that spring, fetching water on his hunched back. But he was too slow to earn much, lingering too long, to see her come and see her go. He watched her, close enough to see the flecks of blue in her grey eyes, ready to embrace any curse she might cast, but she gave no sign that she knew him, or any that she saw. And so he watched and he waited, and burned in his exquisite guilt, comforting himself with the promise of the eternal fires that awaited him, and the secret, flickering hope, that now, ruined as she was, he might be worthy of her.

If any man laughed that spring, I did not hear him. In all the places where people met to eat and drink and trade, there was only that. Speech was short, eyes cast down.

There was no relief. The warmth of spring turned early to the heat of summer. Such fire burned from the sky as only the devil himself could have set, driving us early to the well, where even the blind could see that she was swollen with child.

The Elders held their Councils, but they did not meet each other's eyes. They spoke of wilting crops and shrinking stores and waited for the rains, as if they did not know the evil that was sucking the life from the village. It could not go on. The women knew.

We must protect her from the rage of men, they told themselves. They brought her bread and cheese, and olives from their own small stores. They filled her jar with water from the well one last time, and they bid her go. Out. Into the west, lest some mishap befall her, or may God protect them, her young brother, or her unborn child.

And so I watched her go, with the pack on her back and the swelling in her belly, and that gilded jar balanced on her head.

They took her brother to care for, and if they beat him it was only to drive the bad thinking from his head. The boy did not question the little kindness he received. The grey-faced hunchback who brought olives and raisins, piling them up like grains of sand against the desert he had made.

Summer passed once more into winter, and it seemed that the women were right. With the Bearer gone the healing could begin. For many it was too late. There were those who woke screaming in the night, and men, failing in their familial duty who had nothing to offer their wives but their fists. In such small ways was justice done. Though justice is too big a word, a pretension of lawyers and poets that owes nothing to the ways of men.

The young ones grew. They whispered of the harlot and the witch, the Guilty Bearer who consorted with devils and was punished for her sins. None corrected them, and so her

story became a lie. But a lie laced with truth. A poison that infects us in the quiet hours before dawn, when each of us knows that it is we who planted the devil's seed inside her, and one day, as all things do, he will return to his own.