Shalimar the Clown

Salman Rushdie

India

At twenty-four the ambassador's daughter slept badly through the warm, unsurprising nights. She woke up frequently and even when sleep did come her body was rarely at rest, thrashing and flailing as if trying to break free of dreadful invisible manacles. At times she cried out in a language she did not speak. Men had told her this, nervously. Not many men had ever been permitted to be present while she slept. The evidence was therefore limited, lacking consensus; however, a pattern emerged. According to one report she sounded guttural, glottal-stoppy, as if she were speaking Arabic. Night-Arabian, she thought, the dreamtongue of Scheherazade. Another version described her words as science-fictional, like Klingon, like a throat being cleared in a galaxy far, far away. Like Sigourney Weaver channelling a demon in Ghostbusters. One night in a spirit of research the ambassador's daughter left a tape recorder running by her bedside but when she heard the voice on the tape its death's-head ugliness, which was somehow both familiar and alien, scared her badly and she pushed the erase button, which erased nothing important. The truth was still the truth.

These agitated periods of sleep-speech were mercifully brief, and when they ended she would subside for a time, sweating and panting, into a state of dreamless exhaustion. Then abruptly she would awake again, convinced, in her disoriented state, that there was an intruder in her bedroom. There was no intruder. The intruder was an absence, a negative space in the darkness. She had no mother. Her mother had died giving her birth: the ambassador's wife had told her this much, and the ambassador, her father, had confirmed it. Her mother had been Kashmiri, and was lost to her, like paradise, like Kashmir, in a time before memory. (That the terms Kashmir and paradise were synonymous was one of her axioms, which everyone who knew her had to accept.) She trembled before her mother's absence, a void sentinel shape in the dark, and waited for the second calamity, waited without knowing she was waiting. After her father died-her brilliant, cosmopolitan father, Franco-American, "like Liberty", he said, her beloved, resented, wayward, promiscuous, often absent, irresistible father-she began to sleep soundly, as if she had been shriven. Forgiven her sins, or, perhaps, his. The burden of sin had been passed on. She did not believe in sin.

So until her father's death she was not an easy woman to sleep with, though she was a woman with whom men wanted to sleep. The pressure of men's desires was tiresome to her. The pressure of her own desires was for the most part unrelieved. The few lovers she took were variously unsatisfactory and so (as if to declare the subject closed) she soon enough settled on one pretty average fellow, and even gave serious consideration to his proposal of marriage. Then the ambassador was slaughtered on her doorstep like a halal chicken dinner, bleeding to death from a deep neck wound caused by a

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single slash of the assassin's blade. In broad daylight! How the weapon must have glistened in the golden morning sun; which was the city's quotidian blessing, or its curse. The daughter of the murdered man was a woman who hated good weather, but most of the year the city offered little else. Accordingly, she had to put up with long monotonous months of shadowless sunshine and dry, skin-cracking heat. On those rare mornings when she awoke to cloud cover and a hint of moisture in the air she stretched sleepily in bed, arching her back, and was briefly, even hopefully, glad; but the clouds invariably burned off by noon and then there it was again, the dishonest nursery blue of the sky that made the world look childlike and pure, the loud impolite orb blaring at her like a man laughing too loudly in a restaurant.

In such a city there could be no grey areas, or so it seemed. Things were what they were and nothing else, unambiguous, lacking the subtleties of drizzle, shade and chill. Under the scrutiny of such a sun there was no place to hide. People were everywhere on display, their bodies shining in the sunlight, scantily clothed, reminding her of advertisements. No mysteries here or depths; only surfaces and revelations. Yet to learn the city was to discover that this banal clarity was an illusion. The city was all treachery, all deception, a quick-change, quicksand metropolis, hiding its nature, guarded and secret in spite of all its apparent nakedness. In such a place even the forces of destruction no longer needed the shelter of the dark. They burned out of the morning's brightness, dazzling the eye, and stabbed at you with sharp and fatal light.

Her name was India. She did not like this name. People were never called Australia, were they, or Uganda or Ingushetia or Peru. In the mid- 1960s her father,MaxOphuls (MaximilianOphuls, raised in Strasbourg, France, in an earlier age of the world), had been America's best-loved, and then most scandalous, ambassador to India, but so what, children were not saddled with names like Herzegovina or Turkey or Burundi just because their parents had visited those lands and possibly misbehaved in them. She had been conceived in the East-conceived out of wedlock and born in the midst of the firestorm of outrage that twisted and ruined her father's marriage and ended his diplomatic career-but if that were sufficient excuse, if it was okay to hang people's birthplaces round their necks like albatrosses, then the world would be full of men and women called Euphrates or Pisgah or Iztaccíhuatl or Woolloomooloo. In America, damn it, this form of naming was not unknown, which spoiled her argument slightly and annoyed her more than somewhat. Nevada Smith, Indiana Jones, Tennessee Williams, Tennessee Ernie Ford: she directed mental curses and a raised middle finger at them all.

"India" still felt wrong to her, it felt exoticist, colonial, suggesting the appropriation of a reality that was not hers to own, and she insisted to herself that it didn't fit her anyway, she didn't feel like an India, even if her colour was rich and high and her long hair lustrous and black. She didn't want to be vast or subcontinental or excessive or vulgar or explosive or crowded or ancient or noisy or mystical or in any way Third World. Quite the reverse. She presented herself as disciplined, groomed, nuanced, inward, irreligious, understated, calm. She spoke with an English accent. In her

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behaviour she was not heated, but cool. This was the persona she wanted, that she had constructed with great determination. It was the only version of her that anyone in America, apart from her father and the lovers who had been scared off by her nocturnal proclivities, had ever seen. As to her interior life, her violent English history, the buried record of disturbed behaviour, the years of delinquency, the hidden episodes of her short but eventful past, these things were not subjects for discussion, were not (or were no longer) of concern to the general public. These days she had herself firmly in hand. The problem child within her was sublimated into her spare-time pursuits, the weekly boxing sessions at Jimmy Fish's boxing club on Santa Monica and Vine where Tyson and Christy Martin were known to work out and where the cold fury of her hitting made the male boxers pause to watch, the biweekly training sessions with a Clouseau-attacking Burt Kwouk look-alike who was a master of the close-combat martial art of Wing Chun, the sun-bleached blackwalled solitude of Saltzman's Moving Target shooting gallery out in the desert at 29 Palms, and, best of all, the archery sessions in downtown Los Angeles near the city's birthplace in Elysian Park, where her new gifts of rigid selfcontrol, which she had learned in order to survive, to defend herself, could be used to go on the attack. As she drew back her golden Olympicstandard bow, feeling the pressure of the bowstring against her lips, sometimes touching the bottom of the arrow shaft with the tip of her tongue, she felt the arousal in herself, allowed herself to feel the heat rising in her while the seconds allotted to her for the shot ticked down towards zero, until at last she let fly, unleashing the silent venom of the arrow, revelling in the distant thud of her weapon hitting its target. The arrow was her weapon of choice.

She also kept the strangeness of her seeing under control, the sudden otherness of vision that came and went. When her pale eyes changed the things she saw, her tough mind changed them back. She did not care to dwell on her turbulence, never spoke about her childhood, and told people she did not remember her dreams.

On her twenty-fourth birthday the ambassador came to her door. She looked down from her fourth-floor balcony when he buzzed and saw him waiting in the heat of the day wearing his absurd silk suit like a French sugar daddy. Holding flowers, yet. "People will think you're my lover," India shouted down to Max, "my cradle-snatching Valentine." She loved the ambassador when he was embarrassed, the pained furrow of his brow, the right shoulder hunching up against his ear, the hand raised as if to ward off a blow. She saw him fracture into rainbow colours through the prism of her love. She watched him recede into the past as he stood below her on the sidewalk, each successive moment of him passing before her eyes and being lost forever, surviving only in outer space in the form of escaping light-rays. This is what loss was, what death was: an escape into the luminous wave-forms, into the ineffable speed of the light-years and the parsecs, the eternally receding distances of the cosmos. At the rim of the known universe an unimaginable creature would someday put its eye to a telescope and see Max Ophuls approaching, wearing a silk suit and carrying birthday roses, forever borne forward on tidal waves of light. Moment by moment he was leaving her, becoming an ambassador to such unthinkably distant elsewheres. She closed her eyes and opened them again. No, he was not billions of miles

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away amid the wheeling galaxies. He was here, correct and present, on the street where she lived.

He had recovered his poise. A woman in running clothes rounded the corner from Oakwood and cantered towards him, appraising him, making the easy judgements of the times, judgements about sex and money. He was one of the architects of the postwar world, of its international structures, its agreed economic and diplomatic conventions. His tennis game was strong even now, at his advanced age. The inside-out forehand, his surprise weapon. That wiry frame in long white trousers, carrying not much more than five per cent body fat, could still cover the court. He reminded people of the old champion Jean Borotra: those few old-timers who remembered Borotra. He stared with undisguised European pleasure at the jogger's American breasts in their sports bra. As she passed him he offered her a single rose from the enormous birthday bouquet. She took the flower; and then, appalled by his charm, by the erotic proximity of his snappy crackle of power, and by herself, accelerated anxiously away. Fifteen-love.

From the balconies of the apartment building the old Central and East European ladies were also staring at Max, admiringly, with the open lust of toothless age. His arrival was the high point of their month. They were out en masse today. Usually they gathered together in small streetcorner clumps or sat in twos and threes by the courtyard swimming pool chewing the fat, sporting inadvisable beachwear without shame. Usually they slept a lot and when not sleeping complained. They had buried the husbands with whom they had spent forty or even fifty years of unregarded life. Stooped, leaning, expressionless, the old women lamented the mysterious destinies that had stranded them here, halfway across the world from their points of origin. They spoke in strange tongues that might have been Georgian, Croatian, Uzbek. Their husbands had failed them by dying. They were pillars that had fallen, they had asked to be relied upon and had brought their wives away from everything that was familiar into this shadowless lotus-land full of the obscenely young, this California whose body was its temple and whose ignorance was its bliss, and then proved themselves unreliable by keeling over on the golf course or face down in a bowl of noodle soup, thus revealing to their widows at this late stage in their lives the untrustworthiness of existence in general and of husbands in particular. In the evenings the widows sang childhood songs from the Baltic, from the Balkans, from the vastMongolian plains.

The neighbourhood's old men were single, too, some inhabiting sagging sacks of bodies over which gravity had exerted far too much power, others grizzle-chopped and letting themselves go in dirty singlets and trousers with unbuttoned flies, while a third, jauntier contingent dressed sharply, affecting berets and bow ties. These natty gents periodically tried to engage the widows in conversation. Their efforts, with yellow glints of false teeth and melancholy sightings of slicked-down vestiges of hair beneath the doffed berets, were invariably and contemptuously ignored. To these elderly beaux, Max Ophuls was an affront, the ladies' interest in him a humiliation. They would have killed him if they could, if they had not been too busy staving off their own deaths.

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India saw it all, the exhibitionist, desirous old women pirouetting and flirting on the verandahs, the lurking, spiteful old men. The antique Russian super, Olga Simeonovna, a bulbous denim-clad samovar of a woman, was greeting the ambassador as if he were a visiting head of state. If there had been a red carpet on the premises she would have rolled it out for him.

"She keeps you waiting, Mr Ambassador, what you gonna do, the young. I say nothing against. Just, a daughter these days is more difficult, I was a daughter myself who for me my father was like a god, to keep him waiting unthinkable. Alas, daughters today are hard to raise and then they leave you flat. I sir am formerly mother, but now they are dead to me, my girls. I spit on their forgotten names. This is how it is."

All of which was spoken while turning a rooty potato in her hand. She was known to one and all in this her final neighbourhood as Olga Volga, and was by her own account the last surviving descendant of the legendary potato witches of Astrakhan, a fully fledged, honest-togoodness enchantress, able by the subtle use of potato sorcery to induce love, prosperity or boils. In those distant places and long-gone times she had been the object of men's admiration and fear; now, thanks to the love of a sailor, since deceased, she was marooned in West Hollywood wearing outsized denim overalls and on her head a scarlet kerchief with white spots to cover her thinning white hair. In her hip pocket a spanner and a screwdriver with a Phillips head. Back then she could curse your cat, help you conceive or curdle your milk. Now she changed lightbulbs and peered into faulty ovens and collected the monthly rents.

"As to myself, sir," she insisted on informing the ambassador, "I live today neither in this world nor the last, neither in America nor Astrakhan. Also I would add neither in this world nor the next. A woman like me, she lives someplace in between. Between the memories and the daily stuff. Between yesterday and tomorrow, in the country of lost happiness and peace, the place of mislaid calm. This is our fate. Once I felt everything was okay. This I now don't feel. Consequently however I have no fear of death."

"I too am a national of that country, madam," he interrupted her gravely. "I too have lived long enough to acquire citizenship there."

She had been born a few miles east of the Volga River delta, within sight of the Caspian Sea. Then in her telling of it came the history of the twentieth century, shaped by potato magic. "Of course hard times," she said, to the old ladies on their balconies, to the old gentlemen by the pool, to India wherever and whenever she could corner her, right now to Ambassador Max Ophuls on his daughter's twenty-fourth birthday. "Of course poverty; also oppression, dislocation, armies, servitude, today's kids they got it easy, they know nothing, I can see you are a man of sophistication who has gotten around some. Of course dislocation, survival, the necessity to be cunning like a rat. Am I right? Of course somewhere a man, a dream of elsewhere, a marriage, children, they don't stay, their lives are their own, they take them from you and go. Of course war, a husband lost, don't ask me about grief. Of

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course dislocation, hunger, deception, luck, another man, a good man, a man of the sea. Then a journey across water, the lure of the West, a journey across land, a second widowhood, a man will not last, present company not included, a man is not built to endure. In my life men were like shoes. I had two of them and they both wore out. After that I learned you could say to go barefoot. But I did not ask men to make things possible. Never I have asked this. Always it was what I knew that brought me what I wanted. My potato art, yes. Whether food, whether children, whether travel papers or work. Always my enemies failed and I in glory triumphed. The potato is powerful and all things may by it be accomplish. Only now comes the creeping of the years and even the potato it cannot turn back time. We know the world, am I right? We know how it ends."

He sent the driver up with the flowers and waited for India below. The new driver. India noted in her careful dispassionate way that this was a handsome man, even a beautiful one, fortysomething, tall, as graceful in his movement as the incomparable Max. He walked as if across a tightrope. There was pain in his face and he did not smile although the corners of his eyes were creased with laugh lines and he was staring at her with an unlooked-for intensity that felt like an electric shock. The ambassador did not insist on uniforms. The driver wore an open white shirt and chinos, the anti-uniform of the sun-blessed in America. The beautiful came to this city in huge pathetic herds, to suffer, to be humiliated, to see the powerful currency of their beauty devalued like the Russian rouble or Argentine peso; to work as bellhops, as bar hostesses, as garbage collectors, as maids. The city was a cliff and they were its stampeding lemmings. At the foot of the cliff was the valley of the broken dolls.

The driver dragged his gaze away from her, looking down towards the floor. He came, he said in halting reply to her enquiry, from Kashmir. Her heart leapt. A driver from paradise. His hair was a mountain stream. There were narcissi from the banks of rushing rivers and peonies from the high meadows growing on his chest, poking out through his open collar. Around him there raucously echoed the sound of the swarnai. No, that was ridiculous. She was not ridiculous, would never permit herself to sink into fantasy. The world was real. The world was as it was. She closed her eyes and opened them again and there was the proof of it. Normalcy was victorious. The deflowered driver waited patiently by the elevator, holding the door. She inclined her head to thank him. She noticed that his hands were bunched into fists and trembling. The doors closed and they began to descend.

The name he went by, the name he gave her when she asked, was Shalimar. His English was not good, barely functional. He would probably not have understood that phrase, barely functional. His eyes were blue, his skin colour lighter than hers, his hair grey with a memory of fair. She didn't need to know his story. Not today. Another time she might ask him if those were blue contacts, if that was his natural hair colour, if he was making a statement of personal style, or if this was a style imposed on him by her father who had known all his life how to impose, with such charm that you accepted the imposition as your own idea, as authentic. Her dead mother came from Kashmir also. She knew this about the woman about whom she

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knew little else (but surmised much). Her American father had never passed a driving test but loved buying cars. Therefore, drivers. They came and went. They wanted to be famous of course. Once, for a week or two, the ambassador had been driven by a gorgeous young woman who left to work in the daytime soaps. Other drivers had flickered briefly to life as dancers in music videos. At least two, one female, one male, had been successful in the field of pornographic cinema and she had run into their naked images late at night in hotel rooms here and there. She watched pornography in hotel rooms. It helped her sleep when she was away from home. She also watched pornography at home.

Shalimar from Kashmir escorted her downstairs. Was he legal? Did he have his papers? Did he even have a driving licence? Why had he been employed? Did he have a major penis, a penis worthy of late-night hotel viewing? Her father asked her what she wanted for her birthday. She looked at the driver and briefly wanted to be the kind of woman who could have asked him pornographic questions, right there in the elevator, within seconds of their first meeting; who could have talked dirty to this beautiful man, knowing that he would not have understood a word, that he would have smiled an employee's assenting smile without knowing what he was agreeing to. Did he take it in the ass? She wanted to see his smile. She didn't know what she wanted. She wanted to make documentary films. The ambassador should have known, should not have needed to ask. He should have brought her an elephant to ride down Wilshire Boulevard, or taken her skydiving, or to Angkor Wat or Machu Picchu or Kashmir.

She was twenty-four years old. She wanted to inhabit facts, not dreams. True believers, those nightmarish dreamers, grabbed at the corpse of the Ayatollah Khomeini, as once other true believers in another place, in India whose name she bore, had bitten off chunks of the cadaver of St Francis Xavier. One piece ended up in Macao, another in Rome. She wanted shadows, chiaroscuro, nuance. She wanted to see below the surface, the meniscus of the blinding brightness, to push through the hymen of the brightness, into the bloody hidden truth. What was not hidden, what was overt, was not true. She wanted her mother. She wanted her father to tell her about her mother, to show her letters, photographs, to bring messages from the dead. She wanted her lost story to be found. She didn't know what she wanted. She wanted lunch.

The car was a surprise. Max customarily went in for big classic English vehicles but this was something else entirely, a silver luxury speedmobile with batwing doors, the same futuristic machine in which people were time-travelling in the movies that year. To be chauffeur-driven in a sports car was an affectation unworthy of a great man, she thought, disappointed.

"There's no room for three people in this rocket ship," she said aloud. The ambassador dropped the keys into her hand. The car closed round the two of them, ostentatious, potent, wrong. The handsome driver, Shalimar from Kashmir, remained on the sidewalk, diminished into an insect in her wing mirror, his eyes like shining swords.He was a silverfish, a locust. Olga Volga the potato witch stood beside him and their dwindling bodies looked like numerals. Together they made the number 10.

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She had felt the driver wanting to touch her in the elevator, felt his tearful yearning. That was puzzling. No, it was not puzzling. What was puzzling was that the need did not feel sexually charged. She felt herself transformed into an abstraction. As if by wanting to put his hand on her he hoped to reach out to someone else, across unknown dimensions of sad memory and lost event. As if she were just a representative, a sign. She wanted to be the kind of woman who could ask a driver, who do you want to touch when you want to touch me. Who, when you abstain from touching me, is not being touched by you? Touch me, she wanted to say to his uncomprehending smile, I'll be your conduit, your crystal ball. We can have sex in elevators and never mention it. Sex in transit zones, in places like elevators that are between one place and the next. Sex in cars. The transit zones traditionally associated with sex. When you fuck me you'll be fucking her, whoever she is or was, I don't want to know. I won't even be here, I'll be the channel, the medium. And the rest of the time, forget it, you're my father's employee. It'll be a Last Tango kind of thing without obviously butter. She said nothing to the aching man, who would not have understood anyway unless of course he would, she really had no knowledge of the level of his language skills, why was she making assumptions, why was she making this stuff up, she sounded ridiculous. She exited the elevator and let her hair down and went outside.

This was the last day she and her father would ever spend together. The next time she saw him it would be different. This was the last time.

"It's for you," he said, "the car, you can't be such a puritan that you don't want it." Space-time was like butter, she thought, driving fast, and this car the warm knife slicing through it. She didn't want it. She wanted to feel more than she felt. She wanted somebody to shake her, scream in her face, strike her. She was already numb, as if Troy had fallen. Yet things were good. She was twenty-four years old. There was a man who wanted to marry her and other men who did not, who wanted less. She had her first subject for a documentary film and there was money, enough to begin work. And her father was right beside her in the passenger seat as the DeLorean flew up the canyon. It was the first day of something. It was the last day of something else.

They ate hungrily in a high canyon lodge watched over by rows of antlered heads. Father and daughter, alike in their appetites, their high metabolic rates, their love of meat, their slender high-toned bodies. She chose venison to defy the watching heads of dead stags.

"O beast, I eat your ass."

This invocation she offered up aloud, to make him smile. He chose venison also but as an act of respect, he said, to give their absent bodies meaning. "This flesh whereof we eat is not their true flesh but the flesh of others like them, through whom their own lost forms may be conjured up and honoured." More proxies, she thought. My body in the elevator and now this meat on my plate.

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"I'm a little freaked out by your driver," she said. "He looks at me as if I'm someone else. Are you sure about him? He checked out okay? What sort of name is that, Shalimar. Sounds like a club on La Brea with exotic dancers. Sounds like a cheap beach resort, or a trapeze artist in a circus. Oh, please," she raised an impatient hand before he condescendingly attempted to tell her the obvious, "spare me the horticultural explanation." She pictured the other Shalimar, the great Mughal garden of Kashmir, descending in verdant liquid terraces to a shining lake that she had never seen. The name meant "abode of joy". She set her jaw. "It still sounds like a candy bar to me. Also, by the way, speaking of names, I wanted to finally tell you, mine is pretty much a burden. This foreign country you made me carry around on my shoulders. I want to be some other name and smell as sweet. Maybe I'll use yours," she decided before he could reply. "Max, Maxine, Maxie. Perfect. Call me Maxie from now on."

He shook his head dismissively and ate his meat, not understanding that it was her way of begging him to stop mourning the male child he'd never had, to give up that old-fashioned sadness which he carried everywhere he went and which both wounded and offended her, because how could he allow his shoulders to sag beneath the weight of the unborn son sitting up there jeering at his failure, how could he permit himself to be tormented by that malicious incubus when she was standing right in front of him filled with love, and was she not his living image, was she not an altogether finer and worthier creature than any nonexistent boy? Her colouring and her green eyes might be her mother's, and her breasts certainly were, but almost everything else, she told herself, was the ambassador's legacy. When she spoke she failed to hear her other inheritance, the other, unknown cadences, and heard only her father's voice, its rise and fall, its mannerisms and pitch. When she looked in the mirror she blinded herself to the shadow of the unknown and saw only Max's face, his body type, his languid elegance of manner and form. All along one wall of her bedroom were mirrored, sliding closet doors and when she lay on her bed and admired her naked body, turning and turning it, striking attitudes for her own delight, she was frequently aroused, actually turned on, by the notion that this was the body her father would have had if he had been a woman. This firm jawline, this stalk of a neck. She was a tall young woman and her height was his gift, too, given in his own proportions; the relatively short upper body, the long legs. The spinal scoliosis, the slight curvature which hooked her head forward, giving her a hawklike, predatory air: that, too, came from him.

After he died she went on seeing him in her mirror. She was her father's ghost.

She did not mention the matter of the name again. The ambassador by his demeanour gave her to understand that he was doing her a favour by forgetting a piece of embarrassing behaviour, forgiving her by forgetting it, the way one forgives a urinating baby or a teenager who lurches home drunk and vomitous after passing an exam. Such forgiveness was irritating; but she in her turn let it go, making her behaviour the mirror of his. She mentioned nothing that mattered or rankled, not the childhood years in

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England during which thanks to him she had not known her own story, nor the woman who had not been her mother, the buttoned woman who had raised her in the aftermath of scandal, nor the woman who had been her mother, and of whom it was forbidden to speak.

They finished lunch and walked for a spell in the mountains, hiking like gods across the sky. It was not necessary to say anything. The world was speaking. She was the child of his old age. He was almost eighty years old, ten years younger than the wicked century. She admired him for the way he walked, without a hint of frailty in his gait. He could be a bastard, had in fact been a bastard more often than not, but he possessed, was possessed by, the will to transcendence, the interior power that enabled mountaineers to climb eight-thousand-metre peaks without oxygen, or monks to enter suspended animation for implausible numbers of months. He walked like a man in his prime; in, for example, his fifties. If the hornet of death were buzzing nearby right now, this demonstration of clock-stopping physical prowess would surely draw its sting. He had been fifty-seven when she was born. He walked as if he were younger than that now. She loved him for that will, felt it like a sword within herself, sheathed in her body, waiting. He had been a bastard as long as she could remember. He was not built to be a father. He was the high priest of the golden bough. He inhabited his enchanted grove and was adored, until he was assassinated by his successor. To become the priest, however, he also had had to murder his predecessor. Maybe she was a bastard too. Maybe she, too, could kill.

His bedtime stories, told on those unpredictable occasions when he had been at her childhood bedside, were not stories exactly. They were homilies such as Sun Tzu the philosopher of war might have delivered to his offspring. "The palace of power is a labyrinth of interconnecting rooms," Max once said to his sleepy child. She imagined it into being, walked towards it, half-dreaming, half-awake. "It's windowless," Max said, "and there is no visible door. Your first task is to find out how to get in. When you've solved that riddle, when you come as a supplicant into the first anteroom of power, you will find in it a man with the head of a jackal, who will try to chase you out again. If you stay, he will try to gobble you up. If you can trick your way past him, you will enter a second room, guarded this time by a man with the head of a rabid dog, and in the room after that you'll face a man with the head of a hungry bear, and so on. In the last room but one there's a man with the head of a fox. This man will not try to keep you away from the last room, in which the man of true power sits. Rather, he will try to convince you that you are already in that room and that he himself is that man.

"If you succeed in seeing through the fox-man's tricks, and if you get past him, you will find yourself in the room of power. The room of power is unimpressive and in it the man of power faces you across an empty desk. He looks small, insignificant, fearful; for now that you have penetrated his defences he must give you your heart's desire. That's the rule. But on the way out the fox-man, the bear-man, the dog-man and the jackal-man are no longer there. Instead, the rooms are full of halfhuman flying monsters, winged men with the heads of birds, eagle-men and vulture-men, man-gannets and hawk-men. They swoop down and rip at your treasure. Each of them claws back a little piece of it. How much of it will you manage to bring

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out of the house of power? You beat at them, you shield the treasure with your body. They rake at your back with gleaming blue-white claws. And when you've made it and are outside again, squinting painfully in the bright light and clutching your poor, torn remnant, you must persuade the sceptical crowd-the envious, impotent crowd!-that you have returned with everything you wanted. If you don't, you'll be marked as a failure forever.

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