

MEMOIRS OF A BITCH

TWISTED SISTER SUKI

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1

THE ART OF SEDUCTION

LONDON 2013

*

Jon slips up to the bar and smiles at me, looking confident and smooth and cocksure in lime green pants and a Jersey Boy pullover two sizes too small. He's wearing one of those trilby hats made popular by the Kings of Leon.

He imagines he looks eccentric and artistic and slightly mysterious and my gut instinct tells me he wears a variation of the same outfit every night of the week.

And you wonder why you sleep alone.

I never got his name, I never asked and he never offered and so I'll call him Jon because he looks like a younger version of Jon Cryer from CBS' Two and a Half Men. That's not exactly an insult, but it's not exactly a compliment either.

The first words out of Jon's mouth are so mind-numbingly banal I almost groan aloud.

'I lost my phone number,' he says, his watery blue eyes crawling down my cleavage as his smile broadens into a lecherous grin: 'can I borrow yours?'

It's the worst pick-up line I've heard this month, triggering a deeply buried instinct to punish this poser if only for his catastrophic lack of originality.

I laugh politely and hit him with the 'cock shrivelling' response; 'sorry, darling, married.'

I show him my ring just to rub it in. I'd show him the entire finger but I want to keep this civil.

Jon stares down at my counterfeit wedding band and I can see the flicker of uncertainty in his eyes, the sudden stiffening of his shoulders. He probably downed two pints in quick succession just to get this far. I realise his friends are likely watching from across the bar, waiting for Jon to either crash or score.

I'm afraid it's going to have to be the latter, darling.

His response comes too late to sound entirely natural, nodding and clearing his throat, he says, 'yeah, but that doesn't mean you're *happily* married....' He's trying to keep his tone light but I can tell it's an uphill struggle.

'Very happily married, thank you,' I purr, 'would you mind?' I turn my back on him and signal the bartender for a refill and I can almost hear the thin whine of deflating ego behind me.

'Fair play,' my would-be seducer mutters as he slopes off. I'm right about his friends watching from across the bar, their laughter is caustic and cruel as Jon slinks back to their table with his libido tucked firmly between his legs.

I don't blame the poor sap for trying. There's a mirror at the back of the bar and my reflection says it all, five foot nine, Amazonian physique, eyes sea green and skin tanned the colour of wild Spanish summers, I am what they politely refer to as pure MILF from head to foot.

I'm not boasting when I say I could have any man I wanted, and yet I don't want *any* man, by some perverse quirk of character I find I'm only interested in the one kind, the married kind, the kind that take the vows and walk the plank and now imagine themselves happy and settled.

I am a dedicated home wrecker. I want what other women have and yet as soon as I have it I find I don't want it anymore and that's really the most peculiar part of my affliction, I'm not interested in the men themselves, they're discarded as soon as the juice of fidelity has

been extracted, it's the act of betrayal that interests me, the challenge of stealing another woman's possession away from her, if only for a night, and then returning it the next morning, soiled and forever tarnished.

*

It's all about control.

Controlling the image, the effect you have on others, that's the definitive party trick and one I've mastered to a fine degree. Society is ultimately shallow as a child's paddling pool and it doesn't take a mental giant to figure out that celebrity is next to godliness, that looks are more important than content, that a good makeup kit is indistinguishable from alchemy, or as an old and dear friend of mine used to say: "ugly better be rich, hon, because beauty's always a bitch".

My name is Judith Chambers. I am a thirty-four year old lady of leisure by day.

By night I am a predator.

A dedicated bitch.

That's something I'm not going to deny.

*

I've been in the bar just over an hour and already I've been hit upon by four males, one dyke, and one person of indeterminate gender, and my response is the same each time - *not interested, no thank you... enjoy the view, it's all you're leaving with.*

Tonight I'm in the process of catching far larger fish.

I'm waiting for Alan Forrester, an infinitely resourceful Private Investigator of long acquaintance. God alone knows how the man is able to dredge up so much muck on people, he should have worked for the tabloids, he has a knack for finding the most inconsequential detail, "secrets of the trade" he's always telling me, "you pay, I provide."

He used to be a police detective and I believe he still maintains contact with the force. He puts his experience to good use, providing intelligence services for people like me, people with niche interests and money to spend and a pathological need for discretion.

But tonight he's half an hour late and that's just not like Alan. I'm growing impatient and pissed off. I'm about to give him a call and a piece of my mind when my cell phone starts vibrating through the thick padding of my bag.

I extract the phone.

'Where the hell are you, Alan?' I snap.

'Been and gone,' Alan's voice snuffles out of the phone. He sounds like he has a cold.

'What do you mean "been and gone"?' I demand. 'Been where? Gone where?'

Alan sniffs: 'I was in the bar about ten minutes ago....'

Now I'm growing furious. 'So what happened? You didn't see me? I've been waiting over an hour.'

'Oh, I saw you alright,' Alan says, 'you're dressed like a billboard sign, Judith, I said low-key... is that your idea of low key?'

'I am dressed low-key,' I bristle, 'believe me, this is positively demur, you uptight little wretch. I'm really growing tired of all this cloak-and-dagger rubbish, Alan; I've just wasted an hour....'

Alan interrupts me: 'There a coffee shop to your left as you come out of the bar,' he informs me, 'meet me there in ten minutes.'

'Have you got something for me?' I ask.

'Coffee shop, ten minutes, and wear a coat.'

*

Alan Forrester has the eternal look of a paranoid beagle, corrugated skin, sallow and hanging in loose folds, his eyes rheumatic and heavily lidded, his nose beaten into a shapeless pulp by too many youthful brawls. He drinks heavily, smokes almost non-stop, and has suffered three heart attacks in the last five years.

He is not a well man.

'You look like a monkey in a formaldehyde bottle,' I tell him as I join him in the café. 'You ought to give something up for lent.'

I wince at the bronchial sound of his laughter. 'You're a fitness Nazi,' he accuses me, 'sit down, I didn't call you out here to talk about my health....'

I settle opposite him. 'Don't leave me waiting like that again,' I tell him, 'I'm really rather pissed off with you at the moment.'

'That won't last,' he promises me as he lays a plastic office folder flat on the table. 'I've got your little fix right here.'

I stare at him disapprovingly: 'It's not a fix ...' I start to say.

'Whatever,' Alan grunts, 'I just don't understand why you can't visit me at the office like everyone else.'

'You don't have an office, Alan,' I remind him, 'you have a broom cupboard at the back of a crack den and your neighbours are all prostitutes and gangsters, so no thank you, meeting like this suits me fine.'

'You're a snob, Judith.'

'And you're a slob, Alan, so what do you have for me?'

Alan pats the office folder and then almost reluctantly slides it across to me. 'His name is Jared Anderton,' he says as I flick the folder open.

I stare down at a portrait photo of a man in his late thirties, prematurely greying, good looking, good-natured smile, nothing particularly outstanding about him, but then again I'm not after them for their looks.

'And who's Jared Anderton?' I ask.

'Your next challenge,' Alan winks at me, 'Jared Anderton is a confirmed monogamist, just the way you like 'em, married three years, engaged two years prior to that, never had an affair in all that time, never even looked at another woman, the silly sap still buys his missus flowers twice a week, I mean who the fuck buys flowers for their missus every week?'

'Jared Anderton, apparently,'

I flick through the pages of information Alan has collected in his little dossier. 'You've done your homework this time,' I whistle with admiration, 'you could write the man's biography from all this.'

'Yeah well,' Alan shrugs modestly, 'technology's making it easier these days...still, you have to know what to look for.'

'What's *she* like?'

Alan glances at me sharply. 'You mean his wife?'

I nod. 'Mrs Anderton. Tell me about her.'

'She's pretty, she's young, she works in charity, she reads erotica, that 50 Shades crap, and shed loads of romance, bit of a dreamer I guess, and what else can I say, she's in love....'

'How much in love?'

'Let's just say it would kill her if Jared had an affair, I mean it would fuck her right up,' He sniffs, his eyes cold and hard as he studies me. 'But that's what you want, right?'

I nod and smile. ‘Yes,’ I say, ‘I would very much like to knock Mrs Anderton off her little domestic pedestal.’

‘You’re a sick bitch, Judith, allow me the pleasure of telling you that every once in a while.’

I shrug. ‘I need to hear it every once in a while.’ I snap the folder closed. ‘How do I make contact with this Jared Anderton?’

‘You’ll have to join his local gym, that’s the only downtime he gets, three nights a week; the details are in the folder.’

‘You’re worth your weight in gold.’ I pass Alan an envelope under the table and his policeman’s fingers quickly make it disappear.

‘Ta, love,’ he grunts as he gets up from the table. Just before he leaves he bends down and pecks me on the cheek and says, ‘get help, Judith, before it’s too late.’

*

I wander the streets for a while after my meeting with Alan, his dossier tucked firmly under my arm. I could drop the file into a bin and forget the whole thing and Jared Anderton and his wife would carry on window shopping through life, never suspecting how close they’d come to matrimonial Armageddon.

But I do not drop the dossier into a bin. I very much want to ruin the Anderton’s marriage, it’s been over a month since my last kill and the wolf must be fed, it is a pathological hunger with me, a craving that grows more acute with each passing day.

I’m like an addict in need of a fix, I must destroy something sacred; I must desecrate and defile it and leave it in ruins and Alan once famously said of my obsession, “face it, Judith, every now and again you need to take a giant sized dump on someone else’s lawn.”

Perhaps I do.

But I think he understates the case.

What I really want is to destroy every fucking faery tale I ever believed in.

I guess you could say I have daddy issues.

*

It is Thursday night and every Thursday night I attend private one-on-one dance classes with a young Cuban instructor called Angelo Baptiste. I use these classes as a means to distract me from my unnatural cravings, and I will confess that these hour-long dance sessions are the nearest I get to normalcy, a relationship, a sense of spending time with another human being without feeling the need to destroy them.

Angelo has been a dancer all his life, he tells me he first started dancing in his mother’s womb, that he danced his way into the world and that someday he will dance his way out of it, his feet covered in blisters and open sores, but could any man declare himself happier?

He is versed in all the great dance forms, the Cha-cha, the Danzón and Mambo, the Bolero, Rumba and Salsa, and when we dance together it as though, just for a moment, I can leave behind my life of labyrinthine plots and circuitous schemes, and allow myself to be carried along in the bosom of the moment.

Tonight we dance with the studio lights turned down low, and as the music surges our movements become more intimate, my hips grinding back against Angelo’s pelvis, his hands caressing my belly as our feet move in perfect harmony.

Angelo once told me that dance is the mother of all languages and that sex is the oldest dance of all.

‘Lose yourself,’ he whispers in my ear and deliberately lets his hand fall to my mound, I arch my back, my arms rising, my hands circling his neck, and now my buttocks swells against the hard angles of his body, my breasts high and proud. Angelo’s hips undulate as he draws me backwards into his arms, our movements perfectly synchronised, there is no space between us; we have become a single indivisible organism that falls and rises, rises and falls....

He undresses me and yet hardly seems to touch me at all, shedding his own skin at the same time, and naked we coil like serpents around the same invisible limb, his lips burning against my breasts, my throat, my mouth, his hands exploring every inch of my body.

The music ends at the very instant he enters me. I gasp into the sudden silence, my fingers digging into the muscular swell of his buttocks, face buried in the curve of his throat and he continues to make small circular motions with his hips, cock buried to the hilt, and still we dance, micro movements now, soft and unhurried, swaying to the sound of our own heartbeats and I am unprepared for the moment he pulls back, or the savage instant he thrusts home again, a gasp ripped from my throat as Angelo pulls me to the ground and crushes me beneath his weight and every thrust deeper than the one before, my fingers caressing his arms, his tongue flicking serpent-like against my swollen nipples.

I rise towards the alpha moment, kissing his eyelids, his lips, the prominence of his Adam’s apple, and his cock sinks towards the centre of my belly, awakening every nerve ending along the way, triggering the urge to hold on to him, to hold him inside me as I grind my pelvis against his, and my gasps are indistinguishable from sobs, my pleasure inseparable from pain.

As Angelo climaxes I pull back, I must watch his face, I must read his eyes, but they are closed and he looks so peaceful, even in the throes of passion he looks gentle as a saint, and in that moment I want him so desperately and at the same time my heart is twisted by a dark bitterness because I know I can’t have him, that Angelo is the one man I can never tame, he exists beyond my personal time and space, and I hate him for the very same reasons I love him.

I push him away from me. ‘I have to go,’ I say rather more sharply than I intend.

He nods and sighs and prepares to get up.

‘You could always ask me to stay,’ I stare at him defiantly.

He brushes his thick black hair away from his face and smiles sadly: ‘But you know I won’t.’

‘Yes,’ I say bitterly, ‘I know you won’t.’

‘You seem offended.’

‘Do I? Not at all. Why would I be?’

‘Next week then?’

‘Wouldn’t miss it for the world.’

*

That night I sit in my Chelsea flat and make a careful study of the dossier Alan gave me. I listen to Rachmaninov’s piano concerto No 3 and sip a fine Veuve Clicquot, unconsciously tapping my fingers in time to the piano recital as I search for a credible chink in the Anderton’s matrimonial armour.

I am studying my prey.

Dissecting their habits.

Strand by strand I am weaving their fate.

Jared Anderton was born in Wembley, the fourth child of a GP father and a housewife mother. He studied English and Spanish at the University of London, travelled through most of his twenties, trawling the coastlines of the world in search of perfect surfing country. He

met Samantha on a tourist bus in South Africa where she'd been involved with a UNICEF inoculation program, and on and on it goes, pages and pages of personal information that help build a portrait of the man I intend to seduce.

Alan has been deliciously thorough and has included screenshots from the couple's individual Facebook and Twitter accounts. I find these extremely useful, offering as they do an unguarded glimpse into the Andertons' thinking process.

Jared and Samantha Anderton - a match made in heaven, blissfully unaware that a dark wind blows from Chelsea, that wheels are turning in the night, that right now plots are being hatched and schemes unravelled, and you might well ask why I do it, why I invest so much energy in the destruction of someone else's marriage, and the answer will always be the same.

Because I can.

*

ELASTIC BALLROOM CONTORTIONS

ISTANBUL 2011

Two years earlier it is April and I am in Istanbul, standing alone on the banks of the Bosphorus. The evening sunlight glints off the nearby dome of the Ortakoy mosque as a distant muezzin summons the faithful to prayer. I am presently snarling down my cell phone at Greg Noll, the man I've left in temporary charge of my company back in London, cupping my hand to my ear to ward off the sounds of piety and river traffic.

'I don't care if she *is* pregnant,' I tell Greg, 'I want her out before her maternity leave is due, I'm not having her breed at my expense, get her on capability, restructure the department, do what you have to but make sure she's gone by June, is that clear enough for you?'

Greg is used to my impromptu tirades and his tone remains calm and neutral. 'Consider her gone,' he says, 'will there be anything else, Judith?'

'Have you closed the Baxter account yet?'

Greg hesitates. 'They're asking for a reason,' he says, 'Ed claims he's been with us four years, says he's one of our founding clients so he reckons he's entitled to an explanation at the very least.'

'He's become a liability,' I respond as I turn away from a quayside hawker who's attempting to sell me some trinkets, furiously motioning the lad to bugger off. 'The Moriarty account is ten times larger,' I continue '...And they don't want us working with the competition...'

'Yeah, but I can't tell Ed that,' Greg reasons, 'I can't tell him he's being dumped in favour of the competition, that's unethical, Judith...'

I sigh, 'tell him we're downsizing, tell him we can't offer him the service we think he's entitled to, butter him up, make it sound like we're doing *him* a favour, whatever it takes, Greg, but I need him closed down and gone by the end of next week or we can kiss the Moriarty account goodbye.'

'No problem,' Greg says, 'consider it done. How's Istanbul?'

'Never mind Istanbul,' I snap, 'I'm relying on you, Greg, call me if there's a problem.'

I hang up.

As I stand staring past the Bosphorus Bridge at the distant lights of Europe I spark up a cigarette and take a long measured puff.

I feel wretched despite being rich, young, and unattached, I feel I could own the whole world and it still wouldn't be enough, could never be enough. I watch young lovers walking hand in hand along the banks of the river and they are poor people, without merit or consequence, and yet they seem far happier than I'll ever be.

The wind picks up and I try to keep the silk shawl from blowing off my head and my anger grows with each despairing puff on my cigarette.

The poor have no right to be happy.

The rich have no cause to feel wretched.

Something's not right with the world and I can't quite put my finger on it.

*

My father, the architect, built many houses in his time but to the best of my knowledge he never succeeded in building an actual home. He was conspicuously absent

from the house I grew up in, he was “away on business” my mother would tell me in the same manufactured tone she used to describe the weather, it wasn’t until my early teens that I realised that father’s particular brand of “business” involved siring children out of wedlock and leaving them scattered across the country like so many unfinished projects.

He died of heart failure when I was twenty years old and I inherited a vast sum of money when my mother died two years later.

I started my business when I was twenty-three and worked long hours to make it the success it would later become, but nothing, no amount of success, will ever fill the void left by absent fathers, that’s something that never goes away.

*

My life will be changed forever by events that evening two years ago and I mark that point as the beginning of my obsession with married men.

I was visiting Istanbul on the first holiday I’d allowed myself in over a year and I’m afraid the local sights were lost on me, I’d been working too hard for too long, my head swilling with all the things that could possibly go wrong back at the London office, and it was impossible to switch off for any period of time. Greg was competent but that wasn’t the point, I was a control freak and at that precise moment I was experiencing a catastrophic loss of control.

Heroin addicts must experience something similar when they’re forced to go cold turkey.

Whilst staying in Istanbul I lodge at the Grand Hyatt hotel which is quite close to Taksim Square I believe, and I have a patchy recollection of gorgeous fountains that spill water down blue marble terraces, and things floating from high elaborate ceilings, paper dragons and butterfly lanterns and luxurious draperies that extend from floor to ceiling, and of course I’m thinking the ad team really needs to come out and have a look at all this, a little Ottoman decadence might help shift that new line of tampons we’re having problems selling.

I spend the first part of that evening watching a rakkas, a male belly dancer, perform in an exclusive club just off the Nevizade Sokak. The dancer is all sinuous snake hips and lithe muscles and he is quite the most beautiful creature I have beheld in a long while, but the performance is spoilt by the fact I am not alone. A fellow guest at the Hyatt hotel, an American called Chiles, invited me here on the pretext of “grabbing some culture”, but that’s not all he’s interested in grabbing as it turns out.

Chiles informs me he’s here in Istanbul on business. He’s frightfully boring, a serial philanderer with large fleshy hands and a wide insincere smile and he presses far too close when he talks, his breath sodden with alcohol and traces of peppermint, and when he tries to insinuate one of those hands between my legs I snatch a carving knife off the table and press the point against his balls, hard enough to make him wince and recoil in shock. I move after him, keeping the pressure on the knife, my voice low and urgent.

‘Listen to me, you ghastly yank,’ I hiss, ‘you do that again and I can guarantee you’ll lose the masculine inclination to touch another woman as long as you live.’

‘Jesus!’ Chiles holds his hands up in terror, ‘I’m sorry, lady, I thought we were...Christ, I thought we were connecting....’

‘We *are* connecting,’ I probe his testicles with the point of the knife, ‘would you like to feel any more connected?’

He shakes his head, his eyes bulging with fear.

I toss the knife back on the table and retreat to the ladies toilet where I sit in a luxurious cubicle and I’m so angry at that point I actually start shaking. I’m not angry at Chiles who’s merely incidental, but every now and again this rage creeps up on me, this black

hatred for the world and every creature on it and all I can do is squat and shake and wait for the feeling to pass, like an animal nursing some monstrous injury.

As I sit there a woman's voice floats over the toilet divider

'This world is entirely a thing of the senses, don't you agree?'

I'm not certain the voice is addressing me so I remain silent.

The voice continues. '...We see, we taste, we touch, and some say we are here merely to observe, that we cannot ever truly possess, I find that sad because of course I think it is true, don't you think it is true?'

'Are you talking to me?' I ask.

'Yes I am; does that alarm you?'

I'm nonplussed, not used to being addressed over the dividing wall of a public toilet: 'I'm not...' I stammer, '...I don't...Excuse me; I find this exceptionally odd; do you often talk to people in the toilet?'

'It's the most honest place in any establishment, I find.'

'I'd like to be left alone, if that's alright with you?'

'Alone with a rage you can never explain?'

Something in that voice conveys a sense of power, a feeling of divine right, it is heavy, accented, but the words are perfectly formed, almost lyrical, and I'm intrigued despite myself.

'Do I know you?' I ask.

'Would you like to?'

*

The voice in the toilet cubicle belongs to a Turkish woman called Yasmin Kamisli. She introduces herself as she washes her hands in the sink and I think she must be a witch. I've never felt such an instant rapport with another human being, it is as though we are meeting again after a long absence, as though I've known her in prior lives and each time the guise was different but the eyes were always the same.

She wears a silk kaftan that falls around her figure in soft, exotic waves, her eyes darkened with kohl, lending them an almost supernatural vibrancy. She is in her early forties but her skin is flawless, her beauty typical of that region, haughty profile, dark olive complexion, and a bearing that can best be described as regal.

'It is not an accident that we meet like this,' she tells me as she runs her hands under the air dryer, 'we who possess a certain charisma, women like us, we will always contrive such meetings, in toilets and back streets and vegetable gardens, it doesn't matter where, it only matters when, the timing, you see, must be impeccable, the stars must be in agreement, and only then can a particular kind of magic be invoked, and only then can certain forces be set in motion.'

I tell her my name is Judith Chambers, I would have told her more, no doubt, but my tongue feels like cotton wool and my words are clumsy and uncouth.

'Yes, Judith Chambers,' Yasmin smiles as though my name were a forgone conclusion, 'tonight I would like to extend you the hospitality of my home,' she takes my hands in hers' and stares intently into my eyes, 'it would greatly please me if you would accept.'

*

Yasmin lives on the European side of the Bosphorus Straits, in an exclusive suburb reserved for Istanbul's power brokers and wealthy socialites, and that night I find myself

sitting in a small inner courtyard of her mansion, dining on traditional Turkish cuisine with live folk music playing in the background.

For some reason the musicians have been blindfolded. I assume in my ignorance that this is an Islamic practise, that the male musicians are forbidden to look upon the women who attend Yasmin's little get together, but Yasmin will later tell me that the musicians have been blindfolded merely to deprive them of any masculine authority, that this courtyard is the abode of the feminine and although males may visit they must do so only as supplicants.

The courtyard is reminiscent of a secret pleasure garden with arches and miniature pillars and a central pool filled from a lion shaped fountain. Lanterns cast soft arabesque shadows against the marbled floor and the air is filled with the fragrance of wild rose and hyacinth.

A young man and woman entwine limbs as they slip like velvet around our small gathering; they are professional dancers, semi naked; their flesh glistening and writhing in the soft light of the lanterns. It is an erotic vision straight from some hedonistic fairy-tale and their presence embarrasses me at first, and then it intrigues me, and after a while it seems the most natural thing in the world, like a physical extension of the music that haunts the evening.

My fellow guests are all women of indeterminate middle years, a fashion designer called Selma who has fine nervous fingers that are never still, that make continuous weaving motions as she speaks, as though conjuring fabric from the raw material of her words. Beside her sits Mariam, a Greek actress who boasts the powers of a human chameleon, and right in front of my eyes she transforms herself into a succession of vivid characters, a Southern American belle, a Yorkshire woman, a French aristocrat, her accent slipping flawlessly from one persona to the next and it is quite the most extraordinary thing I have witnessed.

The Bulgarian real estate magnate, Ivanka, claims to know the ancient secrets of mammon, the Mumbai hotelier, the Andalusian poet, all women of power, gathered together in Yasmin's wonderful villa where we are served local delicacies on silver plates and it is an enchanting evening that years later I will recall as one might recall the ramblings of a long ago dream.

'We are not religious folk,' Yasmin tells me as she orders my glass filled with a fine red wine.

The Mumbai hotelier has a rich smoker's laugh that makes light of any conversation. 'God Spare us from religion, yah!' She cackles as she slaps a mosquito off her right arm.

'I didn't dare presume you *were* religious,' I respond.

The fashion designer puffs on the corded spout of a hookah as she turns to me. 'Are *you* a religious person, Judith?' She asks.

'I'm not, no...I don't believe in God.'

Yasmin leans sideways and touches my knee, a fleeting contact that nevertheless sends a small thrill of electricity through my flesh. 'But you absolutely must believe in a god,' she insists, 'even if that god is *you*.'

'That's rather narcissistic,' I laugh.

'Here-here!' The Andalusian poet applauds softly, her bangles making a musical sound as they sparkle and twinkle on her slender wrists, 'behind every hard working god there's usually a goddess working twice as hard.'

I frown, 'I'm sorry, I don't understand what you mean...'

'What's to understand?' The Mumbai hotelier demands, 'all men are bastards, it's been scientifically proven.'

Yasmin sighs. 'Men have changed their names many times in order to fool women,' she explains, 'they called themselves priests and scientists and bankers and politicians, but in the end they were still men, and so we women continue to abide by the laws of men, the will

of men, the ideas of men, and every now and again a token woman is thrust upon us to keep the grazing herds happy.'

I smile. 'You make us sound like cows,' I accuse her.

'We must be cows,' the Greek actress growls, 'we spend our lives listening to bull.'

The fashion designer thrusts the spout of the hookah at me. 'Are you a sexual woman, Judith?' She queries.

The question is like a bolt from the blue and I blush furiously as I fumble for the appropriate response. 'Uhm... yes,' I stutter, 'I mean isn't everyone?'

'Not at all,' the Mumbai hotelier gives a throaty chuckle, 'not at all, you see, this is the misconception we live under; most people are merely lusty....'

'Horny....' The fashion designer intercedes.

'Like horny little goats....' The actress adds.

'But this is not the same thing as being sexual,' the Mumbai hotelier continues, 'sex is magic, yah, the ultimate power trip... *see*,' she points at the dancers as they writhe and contort in the shadows of the courtyard, 'look how the man dominates the dance... he is aggressive, yes, demanding, but watch, see how the woman uses that power to misdirect him, to bend him, to shape the dance around him....'

'In order to yield power you must first pretend to relinquish it,' the Greek actress is telling me, but at this point I'm having difficulty following the conversation, my head has started to spin, my flesh crawling with unease, and for a moment I fear I'm going to pass out, but the feeling gradually eases and I nod and smile, labouring to give the impression that all is well.

'Maria has a wonderful expression,' Yasmin tells me, 'what is that phrase you use, Maria?'

'Elastic Ballroom Contortions,' The Andalusian poet replies, 'EBC for short.' She turns to me and winks: 'learn your EBCs, Judith,' she advises me, 'take back your sexuality, it is your mystery, the source of your power, take control of the dance whilst always appearing to submit to it.'

'Elastic Ballroom Contortions,' I echo as I continue to watch the dancers from the corner of my eye, 'I'll try to remember that.'

'Remember it, Judith,' Yasmin touches my knee again and there is something almost proprietorial about the gesture, 'to own a thing is useful,' she says; 'to own a *person*, this is invaluable.'

I am dizzy, overwhelmed by the strangeness of the occasion, only later will I begin to piece the conversation together, but at that moment it all seems dislocated, fragmented, and I'm under the distinct impression that my presence here is not entirely accidental, that these women are trying to tell me something, to draw me into some arcane circle of knowledge. The dancers, the music, the wine, all add to the elusive nature of the evening.

'Elastic Ballroom Contortions,' the Mumbai hotelier raises her glass in a mock toast, 'let them rule their empires,' she proclaims, 'so long as we rule their balls, the world is fixed, yah?'

*

That night Yasmin and I make love, the first woman I have ever been intimate with, and it is a diamond bright moment in my narrative, a departure point from the life that thus far I have been obliged to live.

'You must stay the night,' Yasmin tells me as her guests begin to leave.

'I really should get back to the hotel,' I reply, 'I don't have anything to change into....'

'My wardrobe is yours,' Yasmin smiles, 'whatever you need you have only to ask.'

‘Well, that’s awfully kind of you....’

‘Then it’s settled, I’ll have Bakir prepare a room for you.’

I’m high on something, not just the wine; things appear outlandish and far too fabulous to be the results of mere alcohol. I’m convinced the hookah was spiked, but Yasmin tells me that sometimes stepping out of one’s comfort zone is all the high the human brain requires.

Why don’t I believe her?

Why can’t I trust my own senses?

I can’t stop touching things, as Yasmin leads me through the house my fingers trail over every surface, revelling in the texture, the intimacies of detail - the brass ornaments feel liquid, the stone objet d’art almost organic, the walls are breathing, the flooring composed of one long endless sigh, and I’m melting in and out of coherence, experiencing a kind of low grade delirium that both frightens and exhilarates me.

We enter a large bed chamber, its floor made of lacquered wood, its walls covered in ancient tapestries.

I remember the bed in the middle of the chamber, but I do not remember its exact proportions, sometimes I imagine it was an enormous four poster and sometimes I recall a much more modest affair, but in all memories the bed is black, the sheets inscribed with silvery patterns that resemble magical runes and I remember laughing about this and asking Yasmin if she’s some kind of witch.

‘Yes,’ Yasmin says and the way she says it sends a shiver of disquiet down my spine, ‘every woman is a witch,’ she says as she slips out of her clothes, ‘sex is seduction, magic is life, love is illusion....’ Her voice takes on a peculiar resonance as she speaks, her features blurring, becoming indistinct, at the same time her eyes appear to be growing brighter, a Cheshire cat’s gaze observing me from the shadows, and I realise I am dangerously stoned.

‘What are you doing?’ I demand.

‘Taking you out of your comfort zone,’ Yasmin continues to undress, ‘delivering you into the moment.’

I stumble backwards, ‘I’m not...into that...’ I stammer, ‘sorry, I really think I ought to go....’

‘Of course you ought to, but you won’t, I sensed your hunger the moment I first saw you, your immaculate desire, like a ruby shining in the desert, you and I are very much alike, Judith, we are women who take what we want from the world and let the common man pick up the tab.’

I can’t remember her moving but suddenly she is standing beside me and she is naked, her fingers gently caressing my flesh, and it is a shock to realise that I’m naked as well - events are moving too fast - I try to push her away but somehow my limbs become entwined in hers’.

There is a scratched-record moment, a violent jump-cut, and the next second we are lying on the bed, her lips pressed against mine, her tongue sliding and writhing around in my mouth and there’s a peculiar thrilling motion she makes with her tongue, almost a vibration, that excites and repels me.

‘Don’t....’ I moan, ‘Stop....’

I might as well have been encouraging her for all the difference my protests make, her fingers slip between my legs, elegant fingers, blind fingers, teasing and probing and stroking my vagina in every way it likes to be teased and probed and stroked.

‘We can’t....’ I insist.

‘We can, we must....’ She whispers.

I shudder and reaching down try to stop her but she takes my hand and guides it to her own sex and the heat is indescribable, her clitoris erect and almost indecent in its eagerness to be stroked, and gently I oblige.

I am not myself at that moment, I am wanton and shameless and wonderfully perverse, and all this feels so natural, so effortless; so damned familiar.

She whispers something in Turkish, words that sound like a prayer, or an incantation, at the same time rolling her dancer's hips, grinding her mound against my hand, and I feel her fingers slipping inside me, all resistance melting from their path.

'Fuck....' I hiss.

'Yes,' she moans and bites my tongue, not hard, just enough pain to let me know who is in control and who is being controlled, her fingers working away inside me with increasing ardour, her skin hot, fabulously hot, her eyes burning down into mine, almost mocking in their intensity.

'Cum... like a harlot,' she whispers in my ear.

I cum worse than that, I'm afraid, I explode with such force my stomach muscles cramp, my limbs flopping about in the extremis of my passion, and my mind is engulfed by a white scream that is silent raptures and endless torment and every shade of purple ecstasy between.

*

MACHINE SEX

LONDON 2013

I make first contact with Jared Anderton, my intended victim, in his local gym just north of Holland Park. According to Alan's dossier Jared frequents the gym three evenings a week, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and so I do likewise, taking out a three-month membership under an assumed name and causing an immediate stir the first time I take to the floor.

On that particular occasion I'm wearing a pair of red Nike lycra shorts, a grey streamlined hoodie from Gap, and a pair of red and white suede classic trainers from Puma. I'm not exaggerating when I say that the moment I appear every man redoubles his workout and in the first half an hour alone there are more training mishaps than the entire previous week combined, this according to the rather gawky teenager who takes me through a hurried induction course; he can see I know my ab machines from my abductors and after a while he lets me get on with it.

The floor glistens with exercise equipment designed to trim and pump and sculpt and mould and I can't help wondering to what good use Torquemada might have put these machines if only he'd been given the blueprints, there's a torturous ingenuity about them, a certain devilish cunning in the way they batter farm muscle out of flab and sinew out of cellulite.

I spend ten minutes warming up on the treadmill, using that time to scan the gym, to familiarize myself with its layout.

I quickly spot my target, recognising him from the photo Alan supplied.

It's leg day for Jared Anderton and quite a fetching pair of legs he has too, bulging out of a pair of khaki coloured shorts as he puts them through their paces, hairy and masculine and not too stout, the kind of legs that wouldn't look entirely out of place on the Scottish Highlands with a kilt and a pair of knee length socks to keep them warm.

He squats a hundred and sixty kilos; grunting and snorting through the effort, his training partner too busy staring at me through the mirror to assist him at the required moment.

Not once do I commit the cardinal sin of glancing in Jared's direction, or give him any indication at all that I'm interested in him, and for a while he shows no particular interest in me either.

But I know he *is* interested.

He lets his guard down in subtle ways.

After my warm-up session I use a pair of light dumbbells to work my triceps and rear deltoids and whenever I bend forward to perform my set Jared's eyes flicker - not stray, not quite wander - but *flicker*, as though he's having difficulty keeping them focussed on the task at hand, it is the kind of tell that would have betrayed him in a game of high-stakes poker.

My buttock cheeks are muscular and wickedly proportioned and the exercise I have carefully chosen shows them off to perfection, placing me in the classical receptive position, like a bitch about to be mounted from behind, I couldn't have adopted a more suggestive stance if I'd been posing for Playboy Magazine.

I use the gym mirrors to excellent advantage as I crouch down and brace myself against an exercise bench, raising each dumbbell in a tight rowing motion that isolates the appropriate muscles. All the while I watch Jared without appearing to watch him.

His muscles bulge and flex and tremble and as he performs his squats the sweat soaks liberally through his T-shirt, and every now and again he snatches micro glances in my

direction despite his best efforts not to, and each time he does so he immediately grows flustered and confused.

The exercise I am performing is called “bent-over-rows” and in order to receive the full benefits the upper torso must be held level with the supporting bench, the buttocks thrust backwards and upwards to give maximum stability to the spine. When I adopt this position my buttock cheeks take on a peculiar gravity, every eye in the gym drawn towards their perfect symmetry, the men openly gawping; the woman looking for some sign of imperfection, a dimple, a ripple of cellulite, something to suggest I am human and not some deity come to earth for the express purpose of showing them up.

I remain professional, working hard, barely acknowledging the people around me, I quickly distinguish myself from the social trainers, the ones who hog a particular piece of equipment and chat ceaselessly to friends and acquaintances. I give the impression of someone who knows exactly what she wants out of a workout and has every intention of getting there in the least time possible.

It is a game and one I happen to be particularly good at.

Jared wants me, I can sense it - it only remains for his head to catch up with his body.

ISTANBUL 2011

After Yasmin seduces me I spend the whole of the next day in my hotel suite trying to sort out my emotions, more convinced than ever that I had been drugged, still refusing to admit my complicity in the previous night’s debauchery.

I am not a lesbian, one act of indiscretion doesn’t change the preferences of a lifetime and I am still very much attracted to men, but then it occurs to me that I can’t really recall the last time I had a normal relationship, or even the desire for one, I am still building my career at this point and it seems there aren’t enough hours in the day to accomplish what I have set out to. It’s entirely possible I might be a lesbian and just never realised it until last night.

It is a depressing thought.

But for some reason I am not depressed.

Whatever happened between Yasmin and I was less like sex and more like an initiation into something immeasurably vaster than sex, infinitely more compelling, and I am aroused despite myself, in fact I spend most of that day in a low state of arousal, masturbating once in the shower, and again whilst watching some Turkish soap opera on television.

I am bewitched.

Yasmin has bewitched me; I can’t rid myself of the sensation of her body pressed against mine, her fingers gently violating me, her tongue like a fat eel squirming around in my mouth. I try to preoccupy my mind but my body has a memory of its own, it still carries echoes and traces of last night’s impiety, my quim growing tender and moist of its own volition, my breasts aching with residual desire.

I see her eyes everywhere, staring at me out of the hotel mirror, from behind the courtesy bouquet, peeping at me through the heavy lace curtains, and sometimes I hear her voice whispering faintly in my ears, her fingers crawling over my flesh like the onset of a fever, and the third time I masturbate it is in the heat of a peculiar delirium, my body entwined with the memory of hers’ as I writhe and twist on the hotel bed, my face buried in the pillows to suppress the urgency of my groans.

*

Yasmin didn’t invite me to her house that night but when I show up at the gate she buzzes me in nevertheless, and at the front door she laughs and says, ‘I’ve been expecting you.’

‘What did you do to me last night?’

She steps aside and I slip past her, feigning outrage, indignation, refusing to look her in the eye because I’m convinced that’s how she casts her spells.

‘What do you imagine I did to you last night?’

‘You seduced me....’

‘You allowed yourself to be seduced.’

‘That’s not true, I was inebriated....’

‘On three glasses of wine?’

‘Oh come on, don’t try to tell me you didn’t slip something into the... the shisha... I don’t know, opium or ganja or whatever the hell you use.’

‘If that’s easier to believe.’

‘I didn’t intend for last night to happen.’

‘Then why are you here tonight?’

I frown. ‘To tell you I didn’t intend for last night to happen.’

‘Will you be staying tonight, Judith?’

‘No, I won’t; I should think that’s bloody obvious....’

‘Then at least stay for a drink.’

‘It’s too early in the evening.’

‘That depends on the kind of evening you intend having.’

‘Fine, one drink then... but that’s all....’

*

I climax three times in her arms that night, she cums twice, and afterwards we snuggle together on the bed and she strokes my hair and sings a soft lullaby in her language. Half in and out of sleep I ask, ‘who are you, Yasmin, the others, your friends, who are *they* really?’

‘Women who have learnt to control their feminine instincts,’ she responds.

‘What do you mean?’

‘We dance to our own tune, Judith, and every one of us has attained enormous wealth and status as a consequence, a long time ago they called us witches and because men feared the power we wielded they persecuted us and drove us into the forests... and so there are certain advantages to living in secular times.’

‘Will you teach me what you know?’ I plead with her.

She cups my breasts gently, ‘this is all you need to know,’ she whispers in my ear, and touching my quim adds, ‘this is what you need to forget.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Use your sexuality, Judith, do not let it use *you*.’

‘Is that all there is to it?’

‘You sound disappointed.’

‘I really thought you were a witch.’

She laughs. ‘Shall I summon a spirit?’

‘You’ve summoned enough spirits for one night,’ I sigh.

‘Then one more won’t matter,’ she insists, ‘and his name shall be Yorg.’

She claps her hands.

Yorg appears as if by magic, rising from the tangled bedding like a merman from a mirage of sea foam. I scream when he first appears and tearing myself from Yasmin’s embrace I scramble backwards, staring in horror as the naked man seemingly pulls himself out of the very bed itself. He’s wearing a stocking mask so sheer I think at first he has no face, that he’s some kind of golem summoned by our sinful appetites.

Yasmin laughs. ‘Everything is permitted,’ she tells me ‘nothing can be denied.’

‘What the hell are you up to?’ I demand, my voice harsh with shock.

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