

The Tenth Part of Desire

“For Allah created desire in ten parts – nine parts He gave to woman, and one part to man.”

Islamic saying

*Al-lah-u...Akbar, Al-lah-u...Akbar, Al-lah-u...Akbar – Allah is great, Allah is greater, Allah is greatest.* So the muezzin’s call unfurled from the tall spires of the minarets by the sea, as graceful and unyielding as the curves of the Arabic script in which the words were set down forever. The chant hung in the clear morning air, as it had every morning for a thousand years, a vibrating line dividing the golden pool of the rising sun and the sapphire vault of the sky from the deep blue sea and vast yellow sands that spread beneath them.

The muezzin called the faithful to prayer, and Muhammad was a faithful man. The path down from his home to the mosque by the sea was well-worn, for every day he would heed the call, make his quiet ablutions, roll out the intricately woven prayer mat, and bow to Mecca, as his faith required of him. He did this with a joyful heart, for Allah the merciful had delivered him from his early miseries. And knees unbending from his worship, his step was light and buoyant as he walked back up the hill.

Along his path there lay a stone, resting between sand and sky. It was lustrous and shapely, as though it had been carved, and it was not of the same kind as those around it. As Muhammad mounted the ridge, the city of spires spreading beneath him, he passed the stone without a thought, for there was no room in his heart.

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For this was the day he would take a wife, young and beautiful, and he thanked Allah not only for this, but also for his success as a merchant, which had made him wealth enough for such a fair match. After the labors of this day she would come to him in the train of a great wedding party. Under the brilliant stars of the desert sky, in the courtyard planted with palm trees and flowers from far shores, there was to be a great feast – a goat ritually slaughtered, swiftly and mercifully, so that its blood would not abide in a suffering body. The rich scent of roasting meat mingling with the fragrance of the night-opening flowers.

This was to be so. But what was also to be so, what Muhammad could not guess, was that one year from this day he would take this path again, with a heavy heart and a heavy hand. In his heart would be the weight of a great shame, and in his hand the heavy stone.

And so the stone waited. Hewn centuries ago from the living rock of a distant land, it had come to these shores in the belly of a swift-running galley, sails unfurled. It was laid with skill and care beneath the quiet arches of a Roman bathhouse, built to comfort the new masters of the land. Amid the heat and steam and the vibrant colors of sensuous mosaics the stone witnessed innumerable acts of lasciviousness and debauchery, as well as a few acts of genuine, amorous passion. It heard countless whispers, by turns lewd, plaintive, and true – plots of betrayal, promises of money or of love.

The bathhouse crumbled, forgotten, replaced by one grander still; its successor would crumble in due time, as would the Empire that engendered them both. In the meanwhile the stone lay fallow in a field of rubble. It was during this wait that the stone,

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for the first time, was raised in anger. But a powerful, peaceful voice stayed the wrathful hand, and the stone was set down upon the sand again, unblemished.

When the armies of the Prophet, peace be upon him, swept through the land, the masons who followed them admired the light color and quality of the stone. They gathered it up and laid it with great cunning in the high walls of a towering mosque, its architecture simple and pure. Here the stone abided for centuries, witnessing the ceaseless procession of men who came and bowed and prayed, all in harmonious unison, aspiring to the purity reflected in the mosque, and perhaps also to the stones in their perfect submission to the will of Allah, whose fire is men and stones.

Then the armies of the Cross came; the Templars reduced the mosque and tumbled the walls. Again the stone lay fallow, and when gathered up to be laid in a new mosque, the mosque by the sea, it rolled from the jostling cart as it mounted the ridge and fell by the path, perhaps unwilling to be part of the world of men once more.



Aisha, of almond eyes and honey skin, daughter of a shepherd, first met the elder wife in the courtyard garden. A harmonious rectangle bounded by a marble walking path, the garden lay open to the sky, and this night the stars shone fiercely above, and the crescent moon rose perfectly over the eastern wall. The doors of the inner walls of the great house opened upon the garden, and a spiraling staircase led up to the second story. Here there were colonnaded balconies from which one could look down upon the fountains and hear the waters playing. Where there were no balconies, windows stood upon the courtyard, their pointed arches as graceful as the tapering beaks of nightingales,

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the filigree surrounding them as extravagant as the feathers of a bird of paradise. And the brilliant colors of such birds, their wings clipped, fluttered amid the palms and the vines trailing in the rippling pools.

The wedding feast was over and the men had retired to their sitting room, drinking strong tea and smoking tobacco mixed with rich fruit from ornamented hookahs. The sweetness of ripe dates had begun to replace the savor of roasted meat.

Fatima, once beautiful, a shade of the youth who was the new bride, received Aisha with resolute eyes. The younger wife bowed her head in modesty as Fatima accepted her into the household, speaking gracious words and flashing the gaps in her teeth that were the cost of a child's bones. This made Aisha blush; she glanced at the older face with deference and pity. But Fatima returned this glance with a long look of yet deeper pity.

One of the many doors upon the courtyard opened silently, and from it came a man with vacant eyes and a shambling gait. He shuffled to a certain point behind Fatima's shoulder. "This is Mustapha," Fatima explained, without turning to him. "He does not hear, nor does he speak. Yet he knows the ways of this house as well as any. He has come to show you to our husband's bedchamber. Follow him now."

Fatima watched as the two disappeared silently into the house, the door shutting firm. Alone, she looked at the moon and the stars and the water running from the fountains. She walked along the border until she found the nightflowers that she especially favored. Bowing as she drew one close with a careful hand, she breathed in the scent of another land.



Aisha, blushing, for the first time in her life arrayed in diaphanous undergarments and scented with rosewater, stood dazzled in the sumptuous bedchamber. Hundreds of silken pillows lay in heaps upon the embroidered rugs of deep red, all lit by a hundred candles of fine beeswax and fragrance. Around her neck was a delicate collar of gold, and her wrists were braceleted with fine silver. She found the deepest corner, plush with pillows, behind a veil of pure white silk split down the middle. It rippled with a breeze soft as breath. She lay upon the pillows, supine, as instructed by the mute Mustapha's last gesture before he left. Aisha waited, her heart beating like a bird's.

After some moments the door opened once more, the veil of white silk surging in a heave, and Aisha could see the silhouette of her new husband by the candlelight. She gazed at him with pride and longing. As the master of the house began to remove his robes, he spoke to her without looking. "The Prophet, peace be upon him, has enjoined the good husband to treat all of his wives as equally as possible."

The veil parted. Aisha saw her new husband's hand, strong and rough from long labors, come gently through the veil. The hand held a small disk of brass, much like a large coin. On it was inscribed the name of her husband, and her own name as well. "Take this," he said. "In your years as my wife you may have longing in you heart; if this longing is too much to bear, you may return this disk to me, and it will signify that you have a desire to be fulfilled. I will meet with you and you will speak this desire to me, and I shall tell no one of it. And if it is not against the will of Allah, and it is within my power, you shall have your heart's desire."

But this was to be the only gift the husband would give his bride that evening.



The changing constellations over the garden marked the passing seasons. Aisha fell into the rhythms of the household, helping with the wash, helping with the cooking. The tension between Aisha and Fatima had long passed into friendship, sharing as they did the innumerable intimacies of the home, and now they made their days lighter with each other's company. Of all her tasks, the favorite of Aisha was to help watch over the children of Fatima, who stole their way into her heart. Three spirited boys, none yet twelve, and the little daughter especially, who had only just learned to walk.

Yet this love cast its own deep shadow upon Aisha's heart.

During the lonely nights she would stroll in the moonlight along the marble paths of the garden. She would look upon the trees and the waters of the courtyard and imagine that it was an oasis without walls, that the garden would not end at the marble border, but would go on and on. At the far edge would be the border of a vast, empty desert. She imagined what it would feel like to be alone, to stand at the edge of the desert, the dome of the sky all around her, and yet with no eyes upon her. She tried to imagine how it would feel to let out a cry upon the dry desert wind, with no ears but her own to hear it.

She imagined this only, for she of course had never been alone outside the walls of a household; first her father's, now her husband's. This had not troubled her until these last few months, for she had thought her whole life that at least behind the walls she would one day have a child of her own, a world of her own, to comfort her. But each barren day made more bitter the one that had past.

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On certain nights Aisha would come to the garden and weep by the fountains, under the palm trees. She did this only when she thought herself alone. From time to time, in one of the windows above the courtyard, she would catch what she imagined was the flashing of a white robe, and she would dry her tears.

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“Why do you weep, young one,” came Fatima’s voice, finding Aisha weeping one evening beneath the palm trees.

The almond eyes looked up. “Do you not know?” she cried.

Fatima looked upon her sadly. “Yes,” she said.

The older woman hesitated. “You have had your first blood, then?”

Aisha nodded.

“Forgive me,” Fatima continued. “It is just that you are so very young. I was not certain.” She sat down beside the young girl. She gazed at the moon. “Our husband is not the first old man to hope that a young wife would stir his flagging passion,” she said. “And you may yet.”

The two sat, the vibrant birds of paradise rustling in their nests, their colors muted in the silver light of the moon.

“My advice, young one,” said the older woman, “is that you not hold on to your wedding gift too long. Think about what it is you wish, what it would be that could ease your longing, and ask. For if you hold on to it too long it will be only a thing of brass.”

“You have spent yours already, then,” Aisha said.

Fatima nodded. “Long ago. Nor have I regretted it.”

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The younger wife looked into the dark pools. “What I wish, he has not the power to give me.”

A stern look crossed the face of Fatima. “Think of something else,” she said. Then, softening, “Come, see what my token brought to me.” She took the young woman’s hand and they crossed to the foot of the garden. There, near the deepest of the pools, grew slender shoots just budding.

“I heard stories about such flowers from my father, who was also a merchant. They come from far away, in the distant East. They blossom but once a year, in the dark of night, just as they did on your wedding night. Now that rains have come and gone once more, this year a little early, soon they will bloom again.”

Aisha recalled the memory of a delicate fragrance as the night breeze caressed the tiny white buds dancing on the slender stems. “They are very beautiful,” she said, though their beauty had not made her forget her sadness. She looked up, catching the glimpse of white among the shadows of the colonnaded balcony. She thought it might be a trick of the moonlight, but Fatima was looking up as well.

“Fatima,” she whispered. “Is this a haunted place? Is there some jinn or effrit hiding among the shadows?”

“No,” came Fatima’s soothing voice. “I do not believe so. But I have seen it as well, have seen it in the dark of night from time to time, ever since I became part of this household; ever since I was as young as you.”

The two women stood, hands clasped, underneath the moon.

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In the late morning the household was quiet, the greater part of the servants having departed with Muhammad on a trading voyage. They would be gone for two weeks. Fatima and Aisha also made ready for an expedition, though one more modest. They quietly and carefully prepared a meal, and they arrayed themselves in the long black robes required past the gates of their home. On fine days such as this they would often take their midday meal outside, and close by the house there were the ruins of an old Roman town. The children especially loved to chase and play amid the tumbled columns and crumbled walls, hiding in the many corners and paths that made the place a labyrinth. Sometimes one of the boys would even be able to surprise his brother by reaching up and grabbing his ankle, for over the years curious men had excavated some of the structures that lay beneath the empty town now filling with sand.

When they arrived at the ruins, Mustapha sat down upon a tumbled shelf of stone, staring blankly at the far horizon. The boys had already begun to chase one another, shouting as they disappeared among the old walls and vines. The women spread out a fine cloth and began to set out dishes, talking and laughing quietly to each other, as the young girl pulled at the long grass beside them. Fine dark olives and hummus and oil were set down, along with the crushed eggplant and garlic and the flat bread to go with them. The two forms, veiled in black, animated the stillness of the abandoned town.

The women were busy, and so they did not notice as the young girl caught sight of an iridescent butterfly. Enchanted, she grasped at it, and chased as it fluttered away. Soon she was lost to sight.

Fatima, rising from the spread of food, shrieked when she saw her little daughter missing. Mustapha at last turned his head, and seeing the distress he leapt up from his

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seat and scampered over the stones, following Fatima and Aisha as they rushed into the ruins. The shouts died away and the town, briefly bustling, returned to the stillness of a cemetery.

Inside, the women and Mustapha rushed about, separating to cover more ground. Fatima raced along row after row of empty doorways, rooms without roofs, all alike. She stopped, heart beating loudly. She heard a cry and knew it was Aisha, first a loud cry of surprise and then another, weaker and more distant. Fatima froze, torn. And then she heard the long moan of Mustapha calling over the ruins, and this put half her heart at ease. There was no urgency in his moan; Fatima knew that her daughter had been found.

She ran to where she heard Aisha calling. Turning the corner of an old path, she saw a jagged gash in the ground. She knelt down to it and saw Aisha lying in the dust below.

“Aisha!” she called.

“Yes Fatima,” called the younger wife. “I am all right. I cannot yet stand, but the pain is passing.”

Without hesitation Fatima lowered herself down into the crevasse. The bottom was a little less than ten feet below. She came to Aisha’s side, cradling her. “Did the ground give way beneath your feet?” she asked. “The rains, they...”

“No,” came Aisha’s reply, with a youthful laugh. “In my haste I was not looking where I ran.”

“Mustapha has found her,” Fatima said quietly, her heart deeply touched by the young woman’s concern and spirit.

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They rose slowly; Fatima helped Aisha very gently put weight on her injured leg. “It will be all right,” she said, gaining her feet. “Where is this place?” The two women began to look around, their eyes adjusting to the dim light. Surrounding them were ancient columns, and they found that they stood in a dry, shallow basin, wide and long.

“It must be one of the old bathhouses,” said Fatima. They looked along the walls. Through the deep dust vibrant mosaics still held their color. They depicted scenes of passion, men and women unclothed and embracing, carnal pleasure written upon their ecstatic faces. One of the mosaics showed the image of two women bathing each other, one caressing the breasts of her partner, and she gently touching the other’s hips and between her legs, delight in her eyes.

The two women held each other, a nameless spark arcing between the gulfs inside them. The sky shone brightly in the fissure above, blue and empty and flawless.



It was the next night that they met for the first time as lovers, summoned to the garden in the late hours by the scent of the opening nightflowers, an unspoken signal between them. Their veils fell away in the moonlight, and by the running water glimmering with the stars they made love.

Afterward, the women sat silently beneath the palm trees. Aisha’s lips trembled and she buried her face in her hands and wept. Fatima caressed the hairs of her head, saying, “Young one, why do you weep?” Her voice was strong but full of worry. “Do you not wish it so?”

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The young woman of almond eyes and honey skin shook her head. “It is not that,” she cried, holding the arm of Fatima close to her cheek. “It is only that I am frightened. If we should be discovered...”

“Shush, young one,” said Fatima, relief in her voice. “Muhammad is away. And I know the ways of this house even better than he. Mustafa has slept soundly since he was a child, in all the years I have seen since my own marriage day, many years ago. We are safe here.”

Aisha, wiping her tears, looked away. “And what of the Master above? Does He not see? What have we done, Fatima? There is love in my heart for you, and yet I know that it is a shameful love.”

Fatima looked at her. “There is no shame in love,” she said. “And besides, where is the place of women in Paradise, so that we may deny happiness in this life? I do not know, and these are not matters for us to speak of. Only Allah knows our fate, and He himself has written it and will lay judgment upon it.” She took Aisha’s hand. “As for us, little one, fear not. In the world of men, here at least no eyes will set upon us.”

They drew closer, the crescent moon overhead. The two did not see, but from the shadows of the balcony came a brief flash of white in the moonlight, as of a silken robe upon the wind.

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On the day of Muhammad’s return, Aisha rose early to prepare a special meal for him. She sang in a soft, clear voice, and her heart was joyful and light, for it was filled with love. Not only for Fatima. Aisha’s love for her husband had grown as well, for as

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her passion had spilled out at last, this left room for the tenderness she felt for her husband to unfold from its prison.

The kitchen, cool and bright in the morning, the windows open to the sounds and fragrances of the courtyard garden, bustled with Aisha's carefree labor. While preparing the flatbread she paused, gazing through the window. Mustafa had come down the spiral staircase from the balcony and was shuffling silently across the courtyard. This was not unusual.

But Aisha stared, and a dread filled her heart. She reached for the token her husband had given to her, and found it still in the folds of her dress. Her fear lessened, though her confusion grew. For as Mustafa moved unhurried through the morning light the rays of the sun caught a small object he held in his hand. It shone like a brass coin.

When Muhammad, refreshing himself in his chamber after his long journey, saw the brass coin upon the silken pillow, his own heart filled with dread. He held it in his hand and in it he could feel the weight of doom. But Muhammad was a faithful man, and his word, as his name engraved upon the brass, had been set down forever.

That evening he climbed the marble stairs and entered chambers of his house he had not visited for many years. Without complaint he listened to the entreaty. And without hesitation or question he set its fulfillment into motion, though he knew not the reason for it.

He was asked this: Send for Aisha's five brothers; tell them nothing, and tell Aisha nothing. Before their arrival, depart as though for another trading voyage, but do not leave the city by the sea.

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That was all. His word would then be fulfilled.

And so these things he did.



Muhammad's sojourn at the city by the sea did not last long, and on the third day the muezzin's cry called him not only to prayer, but afterwards also to a council meeting of elders. Muhammad attended dutifully, for he was a faithful man. In council chamber, with the wise old men sitting for judgment, Muhammad saw Aisha's five brothers, anger and anguish in their eyes.

It was from their testimony, as they hid by the windows overlooking the garden, that Muhammad first knew of the betrayal, of Aisha and Fatima's passion.

Muhammad burned with shame, and his heart was heavy. He wondered why Allah would be so cruel – to dangle happiness in front of him, then to humiliate him and make him suffer the loss of two wives all at once, rewarding with one hand and punishing with the other. He wondered what he had done to be so ill-favored in Allah's eyes. But he said nothing, for it is not for men to question will of Allah, only to submit to the will of Allah, whose fuel is men and stones.

And so Muhammad followed in an unhappy train along the path to his home, the same path as his marriage train had come one year before. Aisha's five brothers led the way, knives flashing in the sun. At the ridge, Muhammad stopped. He saw the stone and stooped to take it, and then continued on his way.

By the gates of his home the woman in the white robes waited for him, her son Mustafa by her side. Aisha's brothers continued through the gates. The woman limped

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to her husband and leaned to whisper in his ear. “Many years ago, husband,” she said, “I gave to you your first son. Though he made me barren, and deaf and dumb he is, he has been faithful to you. As I have been to you. With my father’s riches, given to you in dowry, you built for me the splendid garden. It was a comfort in my long years of wretchedness, to look upon its beauty, its purity. Now that purity has been defiled. Your new wives have wronged me, Muhammad, and I call upon you to set things right.”

Muhammad put up his hand. “They have wronged us all,” he said. “And even this is nothing, for they have wronged Allah as well.”

Aisha’s brothers, storming through the house, found the young woman in the kitchen. When she first looked up a smile of delight and wonder caught her lips, for she had not seen her brothers in a very long while. But seeing the fell look in their eyes, Aisha knew that she had been discovered, and an icy fear came upon her. She turned and ran, fleeing to the garden; as she ran the memories of how her brothers would chase her through their home, in their childhood only a few years past, filled her head. She remembered all of them squealing with laughter as they played; but now they called to her in shrill and murderous shouts.

Fatima’s children were playing in the courtyard. Aisha raced past them, raced down the marble path, past the fountains, past the folded flowers, past the date palm trees heavy with fruit. She finally fell, collapsing by the stairs, weeping. She called to her brothers, who were surrounding her. “Please, please,” she cried, lifting her hands in front of her face. “Please, not so that the children will see.”

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Aisha's last sight, as her brothers plunged in their knives, was of the three brothers of the little girl surrounding her as she played, shielding her eyes. Perhaps as a protection, perhaps as a warning.

Under the molten disk of the sun, Muhammad's servants brought Fatima out through the gates, struggling. They dug into the burning yellow sand and buried her to the neck. All the household and all the elders of the city by the sea, joined by many villagers who had come to witness, gathered around her. Fatima's veil was stripped from her head and this was the first, and only, time as a woman that her face was shown in public.

The elders, circling, looked down upon her. "Do you not have anything to say?" they asked.

Fatima held her tongue and set her jaw.

Muhammad her husband came forward, the desert wind catching at his robes. He looked at her, with pity and hate, and the hurt was set genuine and deep in his eyes.

"Why, Fatima, why?" he called to her, one hand upon his head. "Oh, my beloved wife!" he called, his voice cracking. "Why have you brought this calamity upon us? Why have you destroyed our lives?"

Fatima looked up but said nothing. The vault of the sky was deep and blue and flawless, pure but for a distant contrail etching a white line across the emptiness.

The stone, sent arcing through the air, struck the uncovered head and rolled into the dust, wet with first blood. ﷻ