

If God Were a Woman

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*How did you two meet?*—the query every new couple fields at social affairs and family gatherings with a stock anecdote they'll hone to perfection if the relationship holds out. Asal and Nick are different, though. They haven't reduced their introduction to a clever yarn to share at dinner parties and no one has ever posed the question to them. She has no friends and her family turned her out when she was sixteen years old, and his people are ten time zones to the west in northern Virginia.

They met the evening Nick flagged down Asal's illegal cab outside the American Embassy where he works. He tried to negotiate the fare through her open passenger window and she countered by angling the car back toward traffic, leaving him at the curb with his hands in his pockets and a half-assed grin on his face. The following morning and each day for the next six months he would wonder where life might have piloted him if he had let her drive off. Where would he be today if he had stepped back and waved a cordial goodbye before hailing the next car to round the corner? Nick rehashed that question ten or fifteen times a day, but he had no time for contemplation that first night because he was busy moving Asal and the two shopping bags containing everything she owned into his home.

The fact that Nick wasn't much of a talker gave the impression that he was a good listener, and that misconception became the foundation of their relationship. As a third daughter, Asal had spent her life in the shadows, ignored when her family didn't trouble themselves to neglect her outright, so Nick put up with her chatter and quickly won her over. She was mouthy and opinionated, a tandem that would have sent him running for the fire exit back home in Manassas, but Uzbekistan keeps its women in their place and reformists in jail, or worse, so he found her candidness endearing.

He was wrapping up his shopping at the Yunusabad bazaar, a weekly errand he ran alone because Asal was all business here and too impatient to brook his curiosity. The ranging palettes of color and aroma at the spice tables didn't beguile her as they did him, and she found no wonder in the journey a pineapple had undertaken in getting from some distant tropical clime to this double-landlocked desert and into the grubby hand of the child hawking it. Certainly, she didn't share Nick's appreciation of the grandmotherly egg sellers, those cutthroat competitors who spun up the charm in the company of customers only to revert to spirited gossip once the buyer moved on.

He texted Asal to let her know he'd be ready in five minutes and then laid the back of his hand on the smudged glass of a darkened meat case. Warm. "If you don't refrigerate this lamb, it goes bad," he called out to the butcher. He had this conversation with someone every week.

"What can I get for you, Brother?" the vendor asked.

"This refrigerator isn't even plugged in."

The meat cutter stepped forward wiping his palms across his encrusted apron. He spit out the pumpkin seed he had been working on and half of the shell clung to his lip as if indecisive about which was the worse fate, the floor below or this man's mouth. He swiped it aside. "I cut that lamb myself today and I can assure you that it's the freshest on the bazaar. How much do you want, Brother? A kilogram? You'd be wise to take two or three at these prices."

He might have cut the meat that morning, but its blackened edges and the shriveled ridge of fat that rimmed the sinewy leg fixed the time of death somewhere in the previous week. "Why don't you turn this refrigerator on?"

The Uzbek waved his hand, swatting at a fly or perhaps dismissing the superstition of bacteria. He smiled at Nick and pushed the next seed through the space in his mouth where a couple of teeth had gone missing, seemingly for that specific purpose. "That sheep lived a charmed life without electricity. God willing, he won't need it in death."

The trader in the next stall called out to Nick. "I'll give you a good price on horse sausage, Brother." He laid his hand upon his chest and vowed, "I'm losing money, but you'll save me the burden of lugging it home tonight."

Nick declined his generosity and told the first butcher, "I'm looking for a loin."

"This lamb was indeed an extraordinary animal, my friend, yet it was born with the customary two loins and I sold them both this morning while you were still sleeping. I have ribs and one foreleg left."

He went with the ribs and they quibbled over the price until Nick lost interest. Hagglng was the national pastime here and he was out of his league. He paid the man, who then wrapped the meat in newspaper and handed the packet across the dormant display case before picking up his conversation with his associate.

Nick redistributed his bags to balance his load and turned toward the exit. He angled his way through the thinning crowd to the street outside the market and saw Asal a block away, pulling her little white Chevrolet Matiz into the curbside lane and making her approach. The windshield had a crack that meandered from the rearview mirror toward its bottom right corner and the fender on her side was crumpled. The front bumper was altogether gone, lost in an altercation that pre-dated Nick's association with Asal, and about which he had never been able to glean any detail.

He waved her to the curb as though hailing a cab and the conversations surrounding him silenced. Asal had an exotic appeal inclusive of the sundry races that had beset the region over the centuries, but what got her noticed was the fact that she was a woman driving a taxi, albeit an unofficial one—a gypsy cab. Only one other female driver had ever stopped for Nick, a tree trunk of a woman on the downslope of her forties whose grandkids, flitting around in the back of the car like a couple of caged sparrows, functioned as her chaperones.

Male fares either declined to get into Asal's car or they adapted to her straightaway, and she kept a screwdriver in her door pocket to readjust those

who interpreted her offer of transportation too broadly. Women presented a different sort of challenge and Asal held that her independence threatened and even provoked her sisters. Two such conformists were perched at the curbside now, regarding Asal with folded arms and knit brows. Nick chanced a look in their direction and the more hostile of the two fired a wrathful scowl right back at him.

A scar curved with Asal's cheek under her right eye, running about an inch and a half from end to end. The suturing had been clumsy, yet the look somehow deepened her allure. Nick settled his bags into the rear seat and climbed in next to Asal and kissed her on the mouth. He winked at the surly pair out on the roadside and reached back for the seatbelt and buckled himself in. His use of the restraint typically stirred a response of affront or amusement from drivers here, but Asal had grown accustomed to his eccentricities and his obsession with safety no longer fazed her. She pulled into the stream of traffic and cranked up the volume on the CD player, where Freddy Mercury's contribution to the arts looped in perpetuity.

They rode home without speaking and Asal's silence registered out of character, like a bell that should have clanged. The single enduring argument between them was her unexplained refusal to accompany him when he left Uzbekistan for his next assignment, and he assumed that her sharpness now was due to his salting that wound before they left home earlier. They approached the house and she watched through the windshield, still wordless, as the gates rolled open.

“What’s going on?”

She looked at him through squinting eyes as though she hadn’t caught what he had said, then refocused on the gates. She never missed anything he said or even much of what he thought, so her silence could only mean she was ignoring him. The metal doors separated enough for her to scoot between them and she hit the button to close them again just as the car cleared their path. Once secure inside the walls, she killed the engine.

Being ignored wouldn’t cost Nick a minute of sleep, but his silence now would assure that he’d be slumbering solo. “Tell me what’s on your mind,” he said.

Claustrophobia crept up on Asal any time the conversation strayed toward the tight confines of her future or the abyss of her past, but she found her words. “My mother asked to see me.”

“Really?” He heard the skepticism in his own voice. He was curious because Asal never spoke of her family except to claim that she had broken off communication with them a decade earlier. “And how did you learn this?”

She held her telephone up between them. “I don’t want to talk about it,” she said, and she cocked her head toward the yard.

They left the phones in the car, cautious to curb their conversations where uninvited listeners loitered, and crossed the lawn to the bench at the wall farthest from the house. Nick asked again how she had come to know that her mother wanted to see her. She raised her brow and said, “They told me.”

This was new. Her handlers had always expected her to feed them intelligence on Nick and the flow had been one-way until now. “Are they pressuring your mother?”

“They’re using my mother to pressure me.”

“And you’re going to visit her?” he asked, unable to shake the suspicion from his tone. She exhaled audibly, annoyed with him he guessed, so he added, “You need to explain to me what happened between you and your family.”

She looked out over the lawn and indicated the space next to her on the bench with her hand. He settled in and when she began speaking her voice was flat, like she was reading from a transcript. “I came home from school one day when I was sixteen and found my father talking with a stranger. He was twice my age and the two of them were negotiating the terms of my marriage.”

Nick held his response because if he showed anything suggesting sympathy or indignation, she’d walk out on him.

“Two weeks later as I was dressing for the wedding I decided that I would rather be dead than this man’s wife.” She went silent again and Nick allowed her time. When she recovered, she was calm and in control, which was right where she needed to be. “I went to draw my bath and the water heater lit when I turned on the faucet. I didn’t even think about what I was doing when I blew out the flame and let the gas flow. It was peaceful, actually.” She paused and Nick considered that this last comment was a revelation even to her. “I pushed



a towel into the gap beneath the door and then I stretched out in the tub and waited.”

“Your family rescued you?”

Her eyes assumed the gone-astray gaze Nick associated with her dark times. “My family removed me from the bathroom,” she said, skirting the *rescue* word. “I slipped out of the hospital in the night and the following day I went to the house to retrieve my things when the family was out. I took eleven thousand dollars that my father had hidden away and I lived on that until I learned how to get by on my own.”

“You haven’t seen them since then?”

“Not once.”

“Are you ready to face them now?”

Her brows merged closer as she thought this through, but direct questions glanced off her like stones skipped across a lake. “I learned yesterday that my father left for Dubai a year ago and never returned. They gave me no detail, except that he took a lot of money with him that they claim was not clearly his.”

“What about your mother?” He wanted to ask why they had chosen to bring this to Asal’s attention now, and he was more than a little inquisitive about how much money was under consideration and the precise meaning of *not clearly his*, but those curiosities would remain unresolved for now.

“My brothers-in-law are taking care of my mother and sisters. With my father and his influence gone, I doubt they are able to maintain their lifestyle,

which was comfortable.” Her jaw clenched and released before she built up the steam to continue. “They informed me that my father died two months ago and his money is held up in the bank. The government will only release it to my mother if I...”

Nick stood, giving her time to complete the thought and coming to his own conclusion in the absence of hers. “I see,” he said, and he looked out across the yard to take the pressure off her.

When he glanced back she looked muddled, as if climbing up in her mind from the well of an unrelated thought, but her voice was strong and contrary. “That’s right, if I cooperate with them.” She stood, too. “I have to go. I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

She had gone missing a handful of times since moving in with Nick, but never longer than three days. Now that family reunions and offshore bank accounts had entered the discussion, the notion that she may not come back at all was suddenly plausible. They watched each other in what amounted to a standoff and Nick noted a bruise under her jaw. “Where were you this afternoon?” He reached up to the purple mark and she pushed his hand away.

“I was out.”

“Did they hurt you?” He kissed her neck where it met her ear.

“I’m fine.” She hugged him and returned his kiss with a dryer version of her own. “I dropped you at the bazaar and was nearly back home when they pulled a car in front of me at a traffic signal and then two more blocked me

from behind. One of the men got out of the front car and into mine and he told me to follow them.”

There was no point in asking if they had frightened her because she'd only lie, but he reached to her and she hugged him. “Where did they take you?” he asked.

“We drove out of the neighborhood and pulled over in the empty lot behind that shop where you get your hair cut.”

He recalled the spot. “What did they want?”

“What do they ever want?” she asked with her signature impatience. “They repeated the same questions they always ask. *Who does your American talk with? What does he say about his work?* They named two people who they said work undercover for the CIA and they asked if I knew them or if you communicate with them. I said you never talk about your work or socialize with anyone from your office.”

“I’m sure that didn’t help.”

She shrugged her shoulders, apparently sympathetic to the view that Nick could benefit from spending a little more time in the company of other human beings.

“Why did they contact you this way today? What’s different?”

“The money is different.” Meaning she would be more motivated to screw Nick over if they sweetened the pot with her father’s money. “This won’t end well, Nick. They’re pushing hard and they aren’t hiding the fact that they’re tired of dealing with me.”

The bruise under her chin confirmed that assessment. “We’ll be fine,” he said, but the honesty in their relationship had been trouble from the start. “I hope,” he amended, and he interpreted the look she gave him as a blend of pity and tolerance.

She said again that she had to go. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“And then what?”

“I don’t know.” She crossed the yard toward her car and called out for him to get his telephone and the food. Nick gathered up the phone and bags as she took her seat behind the wheel and started the engine. He had barely stepped back before she rolled away and she hadn’t yet reached the intersection half a block up the street when Freddy started wailing through the car’s sound system about fat-bottomed girls.

Four hours later, Nick had tired of his own impatience and he walked to a liquor store for a few beers. He was just getting home when the complaint of the Matiz’s abused engine called out from behind him. Had any sound ever put him at ease quicker than that tortured howl? He stopped in front of his own gates and watched Asal approach.

The streets were narrow in this older neighborhood, an ancient desert layout meant to maximize the utility of shade in the summer months. The downside was that the design pitted inhabitants atop each other, making privacy elusive and justifying the walls surrounding so many of the parcels.

Nick checked across the street and caught the curtain in a second-floor window stirring as if disturbed by a breeze, though the window was closed.

Drinking beer on the street in Tashkent will draw plenty of attention, but Uzbekistan is a former Soviet republic and its business and political engines are still fueled with alcohol. Nick wasn't making any friends by shuffling down the road with an open bottle in hand, but no one would harass him. Asal, conversely, had good reason to hustle into the yard and close the security gates behind her, as local convention was less cordial to an unmarried woman living with a man, particularly when the man she was shackled up with was a beer-guzzling foreigner. "Let's get inside," Nick told her.

"I thought we could go see Laziz."

Nick was always up for a visit to his friend's restaurant, so he tucked his bottles inside the gate while Asal put the car away. They strolled along an abandoned tramline, where weeds had taken over and a couple of goats grazing between the rails regarded them with noisy bleating. They avoided real conversation, talking about the chilling weather and the arrested progress of a home going up along their path. They arrived at the basement establishment and the owner, a bearded man named Laziz, welcomed them.

Laziz, who always struck Nick as being too thin for someone who spent so much time in a kitchen, led them toward their usual booth, sidestepping through an assembly of chairs and tables as mismatched as a crowd boarding a train. Traditional Uzbek music played in the background, its complex rhythm discordant to Nick's ear, and a chubby server taking an order at a table across

the room broke from her customers and waved at them. They had settled in when the slippered server arrived with a decanter of vodka and a vegetable plate to start them off. Asal seized the booze from her and set Nick's glass next to her own to fill them. They drank without toasting, their personal tradition, and Nick followed the shot with a wedge of tomato from the plate, while Asal went with a cucumber spear.

"So, how did it go?" He picked up the decanter to refill the glasses and she held hers out to him.

"Going to my old home reminded me how time runs in reverse here. The Soviet stain is fading and soon this country will look as it did a hundred years ago. A thousand, probably." She jostled her empty glass to hurry him. "Imagine the eleventh century with cell phones."

"It didn't go well, then."

She shook her head. "This society functions on the backs of women and when one of them stands upright and the man saddling her falls on his ass, *she's* the problem." She tapped her filled glass against his and they drank again, chasing the booze this time with flatbread.

"Give me the details," Nick said. She would get there on her own, but the route would be more direct under his shepherding.

She plucked a cherry tomato from the plate and slid it into her mouth. "Over the years, my mother heard rumors about how I was living." She bit into the tomato and had to catch the juice in a paper napkin.

"How did she hear?"

Asal smiled at him with tired charity. "People talk. I once rented a place from someone who had done business with my father in the past and word got to him that I was sleeping with this man in exchange for the room. My mother told me this afternoon that Father might have killed me, but I had already moved on by the time he got there and the landlord had very recently died."

"So she just assumed that the stories were true?"

This earned a shrug from Asal. "A young woman living alone here draws the wrong sort of attention and, yes, people make assumptions. I was rarely able to stay anywhere longer than a month, maybe two. I rented rooms, space, anything I could find."

He knew all this, and he was aware that there were times when she had to live in the car and Laziz offered her the use of the shower and sink behind his kitchen. "What happened at your mother's house today?"

"She wouldn't let me in." Her face reddened from anger, Nick assumed, rather than shame. "She blames me for my father leaving her and for his death, and she told me through the intercom at the street that I have to get the family money back if I expect her forgiveness." Asal noted the approaching server and altered her tone. "Here's the food."

The woman deposited their dinners and Nick wondered first what there was to forgive and then whether Asal needed her mother's clemency.

She turned her attention to the couple at the other side of the restaurant, the only other customers in the place. "I didn't sleep with him," she said. She pinned up a smile, but a tear tracked the slope of her cheek.

He followed her stare across the room. “The landlord?”

“Yes.” She wiped the tear absently. “I’m not proud of everything I’ve had to do to survive. Sometimes the only way to get out of the cold is to lower yourself beneath it, but this landlord? Ravshan?” She shook her head. “It can’t get that cold.”

“You don’t have to explain.”

She raised a palm to quiet him. “After I’d been there a week he started showing up unannounced, and then he started touching.” She plucked up a stem of parsley from her plate and twirled it between her thumb and middle finger. “They all did this eventually, but he was so…” A few more twists of the sprig and she flicked it back to the plate. “It was so hard to find a decent place to stay.”

“I’m sorry—”

She hushed him again. “If I were a widow or even an unwed mother, people might have taken pity on me, but the only sense they could make of my situation was that I was a prostitute, and no one here can imagine that a woman would fall into that profession any way but willingly.”

He said, “You’re lucky someone didn’t rape—” and she fixed her eyes on him, pinning him to the booth. “Oh,” he said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

She held up three fingers. “Once by the police when they caught me sleeping in the car.” Rubbing the scar under her eye, she added, “Ravshan was the last one to try, and he paid for it when I ran the screwdriver into him.”

Nick’s breath caught in his chest and Asal reduced her voice. “He dropped to



his knees and he understood, Nick. He understood before he died that he was a pig.”

“Jesus. What did you do after that?”

She motioned for him to pour more vodka. “I dragged him out to the street like a bag of garbage and left him there with his face in the gutter. I didn’t care about being caught. I just wanted to be free of him.”

“No one suspected you?”

“Everyone suspected me.” Her grin was tight, sardonic. “His wife came around the next day and threw me out, but not before bringing in the police. She told them I was his... Do you know our expression *neighborhood wife*?”

Nick said that he did.

“They harassed me for months,” Asal continued, “but could never prove anything.” She indicated Laziz; the harried restaurateur was pulling tables together to set up for what looked like a party of twelve. “He told the police that I was with him the night it happened.”

“He took quite a risk for you.”

She leaned in close. “You know that Laziz is a homosexual.” Nick nodded. “And that sex between two men is against the law here.” Again, he confirmed. “Some would say it’s a worse crime than murder, depending on who gets killed. Laziz has to be careful about his private affairs and revealing to the police that he enjoys the company of a woman won’t bring him any harm.”

Unless his doing so happened to get in the way of a conviction or some other agenda. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

“Because the Interior Ministry won’t issue me an exit visa as long as I’m a suspect in a murder investigation.”

He leaned back, understanding now her hesitation to go with him when he left the country. “And no one has any reason to close the investigation just yet, but I’m guessing they want to make a deal.”

“They don’t make deals,” she said. “You haven’t given me any useful information to forward to them and they think you know too much, so now I have to come up with something on you, and it has to be big enough to make them look good in the eyes of their superiors.”

“Really? This is about careers?”

“What did you think it was about, national security? Political ideology, maybe?” She laughed a little too freely. “It’s always about careers, Nick, and if I don’t deliver, they’ll charge me with Ravshan’s murder. I can’t say what they’ll do with you, considering that you have diplomatic immunity.”

“So what you’re saying is that I’m screwed. We both are.”

She stared at her plate but tilted her head in allowance of his perspective. “There have been plenty of people in my life deserving of my betrayal, but you’re not one of them. I won’t let them do this to you.”

He slumped and slid back in the booth. “Maybe you should.”

She looked up at him, confusion registered on her face. “What do you mean?”

“My people will recognize what’s happening and they’ll get me out of here. I’ll be fine. The other side wants a scandal they can run in their media, so let them run it. You can catch up with me later.”

“Are you really that naïve after being here so long?”

He drew a long breath, weary. “There has to be some way—”

“They’ll arrest me once they get what they need and my mother will never see any of the money, but you and I can stretch a few weeks out of this before they realize I’m not playing along.”

“What difference will a couple of weeks make?”

She folded her napkin in half and tucked it under her plate. “Enough of a difference for me.”

“Jesus.”

She watched her hands as she spoke. “That’s twice that you’ve called to your Jesus tonight.”

Asal was areligious, so her pointing this out piqued his interest. “Do you even believe in God?”

“Of course I do,” she said. “If we were a simple product of nature we’d be bound by its laws.” She leaned forward, sharp again. “We break them at will only because some god allows us to.”

Nick chuckled, perplexed by her certainty as much as by the fact that he found humor in anything just now. “So, this god steps back and watches as we play out our lives?” She smiled her assent at Nick and he asked, “What does he get out of it?”

“Laughs, I suppose.” Asal shrugged her shoulders as though she hadn’t given this any thought. “He probably finds us entertaining.”

Nick understood just then that he loved her. “You say ‘he’ as if you’re certain that this god is a male.”

She loosed a rowdy outburst of laughter. “If God were a woman, I would have been finished years ago.” She tossed back the last of the vodka and pushed her way out of the booth, still chuckling.

Nick pulled a wad of cash from his front pocket and dropped a subset of the notes to the table. “Why do you say that?”

“Because women have never found me entertaining. Come on, we don’t have a lot of time left and there’s too much to do for us to be sitting around here.” She took his arm and led him to the door, waving goodbye to Laziz on her way out.