

SEPHARAD

It is too late to embark on the sailing ship with other faithful fleeing certain death, for she has missed quite a few chances despite the many warnings from her clan, caught as she is in a web of promises and deceit by those she knows and who have suddenly become strangers in her eyes. But it is also too late to repent for she has openly refused the initial abjuration. No authority will believe her now, a woman accused of heresy but also of sorcery and blasphemy and desecration, just a few of the entries on the long list of charges. Even if the purpose is to save her own life, she is not so sure that she wants to repent, deny and convert, in that order, as the Office so vehemently requires –the *Holy Office* she reminds herself. It appears that she must pick one of two options: living a lifetime of lies and the betrayal of her faith as opposed to upholding a truth that is not her truth. Yet how difficult it is to choose between the two, for life is the only thing we have, she has, she knows. But the dilemma –if it is a dilemma– is somehow resolved, since it is far too late for a solution, with only enough time for sentence to be passed. She expects immediate chastisement, the ultimate and definitive one. Instead, they give her a new set of clothing, coarse but almost clean. All those thick garments bring back hope momentarily. She feels the roughness of the cloth on her fingertips and stretches out the garments in the air as if they could take her far away. But when she inspects them closely, she clearly sees what is depicted on them: on the back and front of her vestment there is drawn a red cross like the letter X as befits those deserving solely of suffering and humility, with representations of convulsing devils and dancing flames; and to wear on her head, a sugarloaf of a hat.

“The key would be too large for a newly built house.”

“I’m sure it’s the key to *my* house, it cannot be any other way.”

“It’s too old and rusty. It must be the key to an ancient door.”

“At least I have the key, and now it’s just a matter of finding the house.”

“Customarily it’s the other way round.”

“In an ideal world, yes. But I’ve lived in a world that’s far from ideal.”

“So where did you get the key?”

“From an antiquarian.”

“How come? Didn't you say it was the key to your house?”

“The key was lost and now it has been found.”

Upside down flames are drawn hastily and with basic lines on vestments. In fact, artists are paid by the dozen garments, and sometimes the colour is richly applied and the figures have an expression of some sort. It is usually an expression of torment and pain of course, but it could also be a mocking smile. In most cases –despite the fast production of the garments, for demand has exceeded expectations as cases have increased hundredfold– we could say they are works of art, perhaps one day they might be recognised as such. But at present they are pronouncements more than clothes: to be handed such a vestment means that the prisoner will not be burnt straightaway. Religious authorities are willing to be generous: prisoners will first be garrotted and die from strangulation, and only then will their bodies be burnt at the stake. But now in the darkness of her cell, she brings the tunic close to her eyes and sees the flames pointing upwards. This is not good news, by any consideration. She knows, for she has been told and warned, that the image of flames bursting forth into the skies means that she will be burnt immediately and without preambles. In fact, she will be literally roasted instead of burnt, treated more like meat than flesh. It can take over two hours to die by burning, especially if it happens to be a windy day, which this day is. The flames will flicker forwards and backwards, not scorching her flesh but meandering steadily, inch by inch, and baking it little by little so that her torment will last so much longer.

“Where does the key come from?”

“An expert said it came from Toledo.”

“We're going back a long time then?”

“Centuries.”

“Would the key open a house now?”

“We'll have to try.”

“Any marks on the key?”

“It’s engraved with a number, although barely visible.”

“The number of which house, and the house in which street?”

“I’m sure I’ll recognise the house when I see it.”

As it is, a captive can be condemned to any amount of suffering for any reason. For not having a husband, for stating that the sun does not revolve around us, for practising beliefs in secret, for dressing in men’s clothing, for reading one of the forbidden or unexpurgated books. You can be accused of proselytising among converts to bring them back to the fold, of possessing an umbilical cord, of hiding linen soiled with menstrual blood, of growing seeds for the purposes of incense. Any object you own, whether organic or not, can and will be considered suitable for casting evil spells, and any words you say will be seen as incantations. And if, in the end, you convert to their faith you will still die. If you renounce your convictions, you will die. If you were to walk sideways or backwards, you will die. And your house will be taken from you, together with all your lands and possessions and belongings however personal, and you shall forever disappear from this Earth, for you are not worthy of leaving behind a single memory. And all this while, she keeps thinking in her delirium that her heirs, and the heirs to those heirs, and all heirs after them, will find the key to her house and they will all return one day.

“You want to find your house, isn’t that so?”

“Yes, that’s my destiny.”

“You’re putting it too dramatically.”

“Destiny’s always dramatic.”

“You know that finding your house will be more difficult than finding the tiniest needle in the largest haystack.”

“Difficult perhaps, but I’m sure it’ll not be impossible.”

“And why go to all this trouble?”

“It’s what I have to do, nothing but this.”

“But how do you know about the key?”

“There was always talk of a key to a house in the homeland, a key that was somehow lost along the many journeys over land and sea to escape persecution.”

“So this key could be...”

“Yes, it’s most probably the key to my house.”

Thus they speak: we know you changed your clothes on the Sabbath, hence you are guilty of not having converted in your heart to the true and only faith. And as you hear such an accusation, this is what you say but only silently: they think of us not as human, they see us as not living, and so the punishment can never be considered too severe. I have been given this tall candle to hold, but it sheds no light on their condemnations or the proceedings, its single flame a foretaste of the fire that will engulf me soon enough. In their eyes I am guilty well before they know about my case, for they see me solely as a corpse already burnt. Yet I must not speak to defend myself but only reflect, now that it is all coming to an end, on what I have lived through. My eyesight is failing, but I can still see the giant crucifix in front of me –its image not facing me, another sign that I shall not be spared.

“The house had been the property of my family for hundreds of years.”

“But that was a long time ago.”

“Just like blood, the idea of home runs through my veins.”

“It’s all long gone.”

“No, nothing ever leaves us. We carry all we do and did. But also, what was done by our ancestors since the beginning of time.”

“Is that how you feel?”

“The tragedies of the past still live in every generation.”

“But the past is gone!”

“The past is always present. Memories are the inheritance of the young as much as a home is their inheritance.”

“That can never be proven.”

“There’s no need to prove the obvious.”

And then you say out loud, as asked to do: I am a heretic contumacious, for I have relapsed and I am impenitent, which is the worst of all crimes. And they speak again: we do not wish to take possession of your house, because the purpose of the Church is not to take but to give, yet as you are condemned we will keep your property and belongings. And on my part, I think this: my heirs shall get to keep the key, they will, they will. And they say: all faiths outside ours are nothing but demonic, and thus we carry out this act of faith so that you may be punished, and we may root out all evil heretics for the sake of our incontrovertible beliefs and in defence of our sacred Church. With your agony and death, we will set an example so that others may refrain from deviation, for in your case the cross of shame would not be enough to destroy the evil of heresy, thus you will receive the full suffering that your refusal to convert demands. And they say many other things such as these, some make no sense and others are just empty words, but you try to forget such accounts for they are long and wearisome and, what is worse, they hurt you more than the physical torments you have endured in the past few days, for they are nothing but hideous lies and defamations about you and your people. And you reach the following conclusion: this is no myth or legend, this is no writing History for posterity, this is no fact that can be proven beyond doubt. This is nothing but an abhorrent show of strength by one group of individuals over another in the most monstrous way and for the most malevolent of purposes. And on my part, I am having to endure the whole process on my own flesh so that one day others may know about it. For these events have to be told and denounced, and no one should ever have to live through such things again.

“And when did you begin your search?”

“I never began my search, nor will I ever end it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll be forever searching.”

“But once you find your house your search will be over.”

“There’re other things to search for. Searching for my house will be but one of many searches.”

“Surely there’ll come a day when your searching will be over?”

“One never stops searching.”

“Nothing but searching for you, then?”

“No, nothing for me but searching, nothing for me but wandering.”

The Church has no thirst for blood, they say, but requires solely that punishments commensurate with the crimes of heresy are administered. Orthodoxy needs to be upheld, beliefs must be preserved, the existing order shall never be defied, the Divine is always on our side and so we cannot but speak the truth. And they continue to talk like this for many hours, during which time I am not allowed to sit or lie on the floor. I am not allowed to move but must hold the tall and heavy candle with both hands, trying to follow the proceedings, because at any time they can ask me about what is being said. The inquisitors notice me trembling, the candle is shaking in my hands. It is not because of fear, but because the candle is too heavy for my weakened arms. And seeing me thus, they raise their voice and ask me if I have any mortal enemies. Do you, now, do you? And I would like to point at them and say only you, your gracious, apostolic and general Inquisitors. But then I also know that at least two of my fellow villagers who, having repented, converted or promised amends for the sin of iniquitous beliefs, are key witnesses in my case. That much I have been told, but not given any names. I keep thinking about who they may be, and at the same time I try to listen to the interminable, convoluted, unfounded details of my crimes and the seeking of reparation through suffering and demise. And when the proceedings are over and I am taken to my death, I know that my two traitorous neighbours will jeer and laugh at me, not because they despise me but because they will have to show that they are menfolk of true faith and they will spurn me as an iconoclast and therefore they will renounce our friendship as something wholly malignant and repugnant. And so, villagers will stand against each other, children against parents, friend against friend, family against family. And surrounded by so many, I will be taken to the stake for all to see me engulfed in flames. Some of them may feed the flames by throwing sticks at the pyre. Some will shout at me and call me names, like apostate and heretic, traitor and Judas, sorceress and whore. And yet all this time I am thinking of the key and how my heirs will look for it relentlessly, even though they may have to travel over centuries, and over sea and land, to get it back. I know the key will be safe and that one day it will be recovered, and my heirs will go back to the house that is home and live there like their ancestors did, like I did. I would like to

tell everyone witnessing my ordeal, at the moment of my death, that there is no stronger passion than home and the search for home and the longing for home. And what was always meant to be yours, you will surely find.

“But the house is bound to have new owners after all this time.”

“No, the house will be empty, waiting for my return.”

“Think again. What if there’s someone living there?”

“I’ll plead with them.”

“They’ll not want to leave just like that.”

“I’ll tell them my story.”

“They’ll not care about your story, for they’ll have their own story to tell.”

“I’ll prove that it’s my house.”

“They might not believe you.”

“I’ll show them the key.”

“But the lock must have been changed many times in all these years.”

“I’m sure the door will still be the same, and so my key will fit into the lock perfectly.”

“You mustn’t get carried away by this dream, for it is a dream.”

“Soon to be fulfilled.”

“A dream greater than you can ever be.”

“Such are dreams.”

“It’s all lost, admit it.”

“I’m sure it’s the key to *my* house, it cannot be any other way.”

“You know that finding your house will be more difficult than...”

“But one never really stops searching.”

“Nothing but searching for you then?”

“No, nothing for me but searching and wandering.”

“But why, why go through all this trouble?”

“Just like blood, the idea of home runs through my veins.”

“So much trouble.”

“It’s what I have to do.”

“How will you know the number of the house and the street where the house is?”

“I’m sure I’ll recognise my house when I see it.”

“How?”

“I just know I will!”

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