

Two stories translated from

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Feridun Zaimoglu
Twelve Grams of Happiness
Stories

Translated by Margot Bettauer Dembo

This World

An Invocation to God - I

[Referring to the pages 84-91 in the German text]

He asked me to meet him at the Kreuzberger Café, promising to tell me a story I could use while still staying within the confines of propriety. His call came at an inconvenient time; it was my day off and I wanted to just sit at home and watch videos. But he refused to be put off. His cousin – that much he was ready to tell me – was “infatuated” with a decent young man, but as a devout Muslim she couldn’t have a normal romantic relationship with him. The Holy Book enjoins abstinence on unmarried men and women. Without mincing words, I told him that I had never heard of male matchmakers. But he was taking the matter quite seriously, so I didn’t want to turn him down. We made a date to meet early in the afternoon at a coffeehouse frequented by young Turks who have “made it.” They take their girlfriends out and behave like recently graduated members of the educated class who have learned that when women are talking to you, you don’t watch their lips but you gaze into their eyes. Some German couples also find their way into this enclave of good manners. Germans manage to relax remarkably fast in strange surroundings, and it will always remain a puzzle to me why the sight of an ordinary cold shepherd’s salad can put them in such good spirits.

I get there early and sit at my usual table, not feeling much of anything. Waitresses in white aprons walk from table to table; they like to get involved in conversations with the customers. An extraordinarily beautiful woman sitting by the window is retouching her eyeliner, our eyes meet, but she laughs and turns to take a sip of tea into which she’s dropped a cube of sugar. Maybe, I think, my mood will improve before the day is over, and just for kicks, I take a coin out of my pocket and balance it on my index finger. When I look up again, Osman is standing before me. He has a talent for

coming up on you soundlessly and disappearing again just as suddenly. We greet each other with the traditional handshake and seal it with a brief embrace. I ask him how's business and has he made peace with the employees at his video store. The receipts have been lousy, he says, nobody is renting Turkish films anymore, and club membership in one of the big video rental stores offers more attractions. In return he asks me how my books are selling, and I promise that I'll talk the publisher into sending him some books. He thinks it would be an inspired business move to place my books next to the cash register in his shop – he's sure they would sell better than in a bookstore. A dog pads over to sniff at his pants leg and he kicks it in the flanks, ignoring the angry look from the woman who owns the café.

They're unclean, these animals, he says. Angels are not allowed to enter places where dogs live.

I don't think angels would let themselves be stopped by mongrels, I say.

Our Prophet, peace be unto him, instructs us to avoid coming in contact with dogs, Osman says. If a cur rubs himself against you, you have to repeat the ritual washing before prayer. A dog is a bag of fleas and can infect you with diseases.

You're living in the wrong country, Osman.

I have that same impression, he says.

The café is gradually filling up with young couples. It's the proverbial hour for exchanging vows of love. The man is supposed to be guided by the color of the shadows at dusk, for the hearts of women are particularly receptive to such appeals when it is difficult to differentiate between a white thread and a black one. Contemplating the faithless "Orientals," I am momentarily overcome by the feeling that we're all headed for a bad end. Maybe I'm just out of sorts because of this stubborn after-hours believer sitting across from me who thinks that dogs should be stoned for hygienic reasons.

Well now, so your cousin is in love; I'm happy for her. But what does she want me to do?

She wants you to ponder the appropriate words and compose a letter to this young man. She would like him to understand the kind of love she feels for him. Of course the letter must not encourage him to take certain liberties. That kind of love would come under an unlucky star.

What's that supposed to mean?

No sex. No physical intimacy. It's important to my cousin that you make one essential rule clear to the guy: She is untouchable until she meets the right man.

So he isn't necessarily her big love.

No, I think not.

Why didn't your cousin come herself, why did she send you?

She is not one of those girls who have no shame!

I didn't say she was, I quickly say, but you must admit that this puts us in a funny situation. Two men putting their heads together to compose a declaration of platonic love on behalf of a woman who will send it to a third man – the lover who isn't allowed to be one. That's what you call "Group Portrait Without Woman".

My cousin happens to be a respectable girl.

Of course, I say. It wouldn't occur to me to doubt it. But your cousin could have asked a girlfriend to act as her messenger of love.

Times are changing, Osman says. Women like to gossip, and rumors fly. She trusts me – and you too, my friend.

I'll observe the seal of the confessional, I say.

What I'd really like to do is to shout at him: I have no wish to intercede in such a matter on behalf of a woman I've seen only once, if I'm not completely mistaken. Osman had invited me to his home for the Feast of Sacrifice; he wanted his parents, both of them illiterate, to meet a real writer and to hear direct from me that you can make good money by being something other than a master automobile mechanic or an assembly line worker.

The apartment was full of relatives from both sides; children were romping around and were only half-heartedly told to behave. I extended my hand to Osman's cousin; she lowered her eyes, and it made me feel like dirt. Among observant Muslims it isn't customary to extend one's hand when greeting women. She explained that the animal nature of a man is easily aroused, and that is why, after a sinful life, she put on a veil and accepted a conditional renunciation of sex. She converted to orthodoxy because she wanted to get away from whorish settings and to decipher the messages of God.

At any rate it all sounded very poetic, back then. What she said left an impression on my mind, and since she could see that she had found a willing listener, she went on to

say that she had even made a pilgrimage to see a holy man and made several knots in a scrap of fabric at his grave. Because the soul of man, enmeshed in sin, stinks like the mouth of a dog, and because she was no different, she made a radical change in her life: away from the flesh and closer to God.

So, will you do us this favor? Osman asked. I really don't want to rush you.

What can you tell me about the young man?

He lives on the same street as my cousin. He wants to make something of himself. He is registered as a college student and taking courses in business management...

An ambitious fellow, I say.

Not necessarily. He just doesn't want to follow in his father's footsteps. Or do you think it's particularly progressive to kill yourself working in a dammed assembly shop?

You have a point there. How did they meet?

They didn't. Perhaps they exchanged meaningful glances. My cousin is sure that he is also burning with love. He blushes whenever women speak to him.

Oh my goodness!

Besides, right now he doesn't have a girlfriend; I looked into that already.

You know, Osman, I think shy college students are square. With all due respect, can't your cousin, let's say, pick a more mature man?

She swears by romance...

Well, after all, we do too, I say.

But she just happened to fall for this novice. She says the man shouldn't lose his virginity with just any old slut. Concubines live in shame, whether they're men or women. It's all the same.

She is very quick to place blame – reproaching this or that person with being dissolute, I say.

The matter seems to be taking an unpleasant turn. What was the sense in all this anyway. I wished Osman's cousin were sitting across from me and I could yell at her that as a bigoted virgin she was more likely to be bathing in demon spit than following the Lord's bidding. That's the sort of language she would understand, and then maybe she could mentally run through her catalog of sins so that she could denounce me for being undecided between good and evil.

How does this sound: Your glances touch me to the quick. I know you love me, and I have similar feelings for you. Let's meet and look at each other, but I can't promise any more than that, not for now or later....

That won't do, Osman says. You have to come up with words that will instantly bewitch him. And besides, the letter has to contain more harmonies.

Harmonies? We're setting a trap for the poor guy! She's asking him to cheerfully resign himself to the fate of a harem eunuch. I think your cousin simply wants to have somebody make goo-goo eyes at her. She's read too many cheap romance novels.

You don't like her very much, do you?

Honestly, Osman. How would you react if you were faced with a hypocritical request like this? Love to be played by the rules, two untouchable bodies who recite poetry to each other, but who speak in code lest sinful thoughts occur to them. What would you do?

I'd have a nervous breakdown. And I told her as much.

And?

She said I wasn't inside her body, and it isn't women but men who have to be restrained. She said, I want to take my revenge on men for having to hide my hair and not being able to wear colorful nail polish.

This guy can't be blamed for that. The way you described him to me, he wouldn't object if she walked around bareheaded.

But that's how it's been decreed. She is afraid that reputable people will no longer respect her if she puts aside her veil. Their disapproval can kill.

I like writing love letters. Or petitions to the German authorities. But to do both with one stroke of the pen, that I cannot do.

Osman folds his hands on top of the table and seems to be pondering what I said. At last he comes to a decision.

I will tell my cousin that you want to get the details first hand. If she continues to insist on writing this strange letter, the three of us will meet. Maybe at my place – that's neutral territory, and her father won't get any mistaken ideas.

All right with me, I say.

I'm sure she'll have fallen out of love by then, Osman says, or realized that she ought to speak to him in person.

And what happens if there's no way out for the fellow?

Tough luck, Osman says. But bad luck makes you grow up, and his next girlfriend will benefit from that. Later he can boast that he was given the brush-off by a woman who had to choose between God and love. That will give him points with women and bring him good luck. He's actually in an enviable position.

The Other World

Skin

[Referring to the pages 105-121 in the German text]

The antique dealer is nothing but skin and bones. He pinches the back of his hand – at a spot that itches, maybe he’s only massaging it. A dog sticks his snout through the plastic strips of the fly curtain hanging in the doorway. Reaching into a pail standing next to his stool, the antique dealer and throws a handful of pebbles at the dog whose hair bristles as he runs off howling. I set a brass candlestick that I picked up back in its place, in the process knocking over a fat-bellied canister. The cover comes off, circles noisily on the floor. A waiter, a mere boy, comes in, balancing two glasses of green tea on a tray; he doesn’t look up until he’s standing in front of the old man. The antique dealer reaches for one of the saucers with both hands, purses his lips and takes a sip from the glass. He nods, and the boy turns to me; he stares at my long hair, then his eyes dart to my unpolished fingernails. The kids from around here are notorious for gathering at the edge of the village to prey on effeminate-looking strangers. A stone from one of their slingshots once cost a long-haired man his life. In their slurred rustic dialect they call all those who don’t live here “stuffed puppets”. The boy picks up the coffee cups from a previous order; then he straightens the pencil stub behind his ear and shuffles off in his floppy bathroom slippers.

We’re waiting for the antique dealer’s wife; she sets the prices, collects the money. It is her husband’s job to sweeten the customer’s waiting time. A talking dummy. He points to some sugared pancakes under a wire mesh hoop. I shake my head and put my tea glass on the side table. I get up, kneel down on the floor and pass my hand over a wedding-night sheet spread out on a carpet. The antique dealer says they have taken it on commission from an elderly farmer’s wife; she in turn had inherited it from her paternal

grandmother. A deal like this involving a third party will be worthwhile for them; I'm sure their share will be two thirds of the price quoted. The wedding-night sheet has a light brown stain on it; the defloration blood is a seal of its authenticity. Along the length and the width of its folded-over edges, fantasy plants twine around Adam and Eve; a deer with a lion's mane lies next to a lion extending two hooved front paws. An old legend embroidered on fabric that has the feel of scar tissue. The dealer is asking a thousand dollars for the sheet; he has already destroyed any hopes I might have had of being able to bargain over the price with his wife, the proprietress. I drop into a basket chair and drink the bitter green tea. I had been warned about that tea: They stuff tea leaves into a fist-sized tea-ball and serve the first four brewings lightly sweetened. The bitter brew upsets my stomach; I drink it in one gulp because I know that people here put outsiders to the test with this strong green tea.

A hand parts the plastic strips of the curtain, and seconds later a massive woman steps into the room. Her dress follows the contours of the bulges and hollows of her flesh, ending at her ankles in an applied fringe. She has thrown a velvet cape over her shoulders, a dirty drapery cord serves as belt. The old man gets up awkwardly; it is time now for the mistress to take over. I stare at the woman; she is used to that and doesn't flinch. Her lower lip is completely tattooed, as if she had dipped it in ink. On her chin there is an upside-down trident with blunt prongs – a symbol of protective magic that is supposed to dispel all evil and cast it to the four corners of the earth. Resplendent on the ball of her left thumb is the same symbol the antique dealer has tattooed on him: a circle pierced by an arrow, its point turned inward. Earlier, the old man showed it to me, watching attentively to see whether I would blush when I heard his explanation. The sign symbolizes a penis which has fully penetrated a vagina and an egg cell sprayed with semen. The arrow tip turned inward conveys the mother's wish for a male heir. Around here, girls are given away, they take on the name of a strange family; a girl is a useless mouth that has to be fed until it is ripe for kissing. One can't expect much good from daughters.

We often have visitors, the woman says. They say that a person who surrounds himself with period documents will become happier. She pronounces the phrase "period documents" as if she were spitting out a wad of old chewing gum. She inserts a hand-

rolled cigarette into a mother-of-pearl holder, strikes a match on a sandpaper strip torn off a matchbook, and holds the flame under the crooked cigarette. She takes a deep drag and sits down on a dowry chest.

In his wife's presence the antique dealer shrinks to a hunchbacked gnome; he kneads and squeezes his hands, and since she gives him no orders, he decides to make sure everything is all right outside the store. The twilight of the dogs has not yet begun, and at this time of day one doesn't have to fear that the hungry beasts have taken up the scent and are charging toward the center of the village. But the sight of the black dog's snout has left a bad taste in the antique dealer's mouth. He grabs a cattle prod that's also for sale. His wife watches him leave.

Did he tell you the price? she asks.

A thousand dollars, I say. I can't afford to pay that much. Ordinarily that would be enough for me to live on for three months.

That's not counting your rent and regular expenses, she says.

Of course, I say. I meant only my household expenses.

Well, what *could* you afford? she asks.

Three hundred fifty tops, I answer. That's my maximum.

Clearly not enough, she says. Look around; find another period document. Your money will make you happy in my store.

She tosses a moth-eaten penitent's hat on the wedding sheet. The hat once belonged to a hermit who lived in the woods, she tells me, and he put it on whenever he came into the village. He wasn't able to expel his self-loathing by renunciation and self-denial, and so he would sit in his hole in the ground and bellow; he bellowed so loud that even the wild dogs scampered to get away from the man's eerie madness. He roared until it was all over for him. And the man who was the village elder back then had them summon her, the proprietress. And so she gathered up her skirt and pinched the bump on her nose, because there, under the third spectral eye the fluids of the head all flow together. She tore herself away from her daughter-in-law's chatter, first pressing the five fingers of her right hand on the girl's face to indicate to her that she had sunk in her mother-in-law's estimation. She climbed up the hillside from which the village took its name, stepping from one rock to the next, avoiding root traps laid by unemployed young

cripples, all the while asking God for His favor, so that she would not be shocked at the sight of the dead man – for she could not get used to that: A dead person was evidence of another world and as long as she had breath in her bosom she didn't want to know about that world. As she was climbing down into the hole in the ground, she ignored the hands stretched out toward her. At that time she was one of the area's most beautiful young women and every man with any sap in his loins wanted to touch her, brush up against her in passing, force her into a kiss, or take her large well-formed breasts into his mouth.

I have not given my heart to anyone, she says, and the fact that I married this guy here doesn't mean a thing, for he carried me off against my will and humped me until I was sore so that my father had no choice but to give me away. I have no brothers and sissies don't take blood revenge. But to get back to the hole in the ground, she says. I climbed down, and because his head was near the opening, there was enough light for me to make out the grimace of death in his distorted features. I fainted on the spot, falling on top of the hermit's body like a sack of sugar beets. When I opened my eyes, I saw that some villagers had dragged me out of the hole. I'm sure they didn't miss the chance of touching all my most precious parts – that's how our people refer to them, not vagina, but precious part, not breasts, but precious parts.

I'm beyond good and evil, she says, that's why I can speak freely to a stranger.

But to get back to the penitent's hat. They hauled out all of the dead man's belongings, and among the gnawed bones and stuff soiled by the dead man's mortal fluids, there was this felt hat. I immediately claimed it as my property. After all, I never got any money for having sent him to the Hereafter with a magic spell. So there it is, and you can have it, a novel trophy that will cost you only one hundred dollars.

Without a doubt, this quack has various ways of calculating. She writes the numbers down in columns, draws a line under them and puts down a figure according to her whim. The hat radiates disaster, and yet she is offering it as merchandise. I believe her story: People around here are forcefully being kept from giving up their villages. It is said they have a bad influence, that they bring down the living.

I say, I have to think it over. I'll take a walk through the village and come back in an hour.

Are you pulling out of the deal? she says. I don't want to wait here for you in

vain. If you're not ready to buy, just tell me. I'll close the store; you go your way, and we'll both be at peace with God.

Hold your tongue, woman, I say, or do you want to pick a fight with me?

No, she says, it shall be as the gentleman wishes.

Just as I part the fly curtain to step outside, the antique dealer comes rushing over and hands me the cattle prod. The dogs, sir, he says. You never know where they're lying in wait for you. Just use this on their hides and they'll get the idea.

I walk out. A fellow in yellow rubber boots is skinning a freshly slaughtered sheep, he stops and looks at me intently. He has nothing to offer a non-believer, neither meat nor a greeting; he is simply waiting for me to get out of his sight. Several billy goats are stumbling along a dry creek bed, past small fields that the peasants have enclosed with dry sticks and poles. Pinecones crack underfoot in the heat; hundreds of granite chunks polished by wind and weather are scattered across land that has been burned and frozen into tones of brown: the fields, the woods, and the gardens of the farm houses. Some time ago prosperity broke out around here and turned the peasants into gentlemen farmers.

I turn into a street paved with cobblestones and come to a garden café. I pass through a turnstile, and an old man wearing a white undershirt leads me to a table under an ancient oak. Where the thickest branch forks there is a wooden sign into which has been burned a prophecy by the village holy man – he is known for his angry view of the future: “We are cleaning up. We will be exposed in the awful mess of the Last Days.” I order some cold water. All the tables are occupied by men who encircle their plates with their arms as if to defend them against attacks by those who are envious of their food. They chew and stare; but there's nothing to see, nothing dramatic happening to keep them from staring and swallowing their food. Paper napkins are tucked into the round collars of their sweaters, a vestige of manners. The same boy waiter who brought the tea to the antique shop brings over a pitcher of water and a glass. Again he stares at my hair, then he makes a circle with his thumb and index finger and pushes his nose through it several times.

Scram, I say, or I'll break your bones, I'll break your fingers one by one; I'll cut off all your fingers and shove them all into your mother's whore hole.

You wouldn't dare, he says. After all, who are you? If you don't watch out, I'll pronounce one of our Holy Man's curses on you, and then you won't be able to get it up anymore; it'll turn to dust. Believe me.

You have a nice scar on your forehead, I say. I'll carve a second one right next to it, and then you can have a career as a dung boy – you can stand in the market square and tell your story to the pita eaters. Anyone who challenges his luck will get smacked.

But not you, he says. Watch out that they don't grab you by your long woman's hair and drag you through the village.

The man in the white undershirt comes over and chews him out, and for a moment he's undecided as to whether, by the prevailing men's code, it would be cowardly to obey his employer. By now, a couple of the farmers have noticed me; they raise their heads, but their arms remain where they were. The boy scurries to another table and removes the tea glasses. I fill my glass with water; the rim of the glass is soiled. I pour some of the water down my back, then put the pitcher to my mouth. I empty it and head toward the turnstile. I walk back the way I came; the butcher is busy and doesn't bother to look at me. I enter the antique shop, and it's as if the proprietress hadn't moved from her spot. I'm in no mood to greet her; the antique dealer sits on his stool in silence. The gentleman has kept his promise, she says. For the second time, welcome. And what is your decision?

I want it, I say, and raise my offer to four hundred.

Just so we understand each other, the antique dealer says, four hundred is less than half what we are asking. At that price we wouldn't make a profit, and the woman who owns the sheet would have no reason to give it to us. After all, we don't run our business merely as a conduit for other people's goods. How are we supposed to make a living?

That isn't of much interest to this gentleman, the proprietress says. He has limited means, and I don't have the authority to drop the price. She is silent. There's no sense in trying to persuade her.

What kind of tattoos are those? I ask.

It's an old custom, she says. I wasn't yet six years old when the village Holy Man started making cuts in my skin, putting a concoction into the cuts with a pointed needle. He prepared the paste himself. When he heard that a woman had given birth to a girl, he

went to see her and demanded she give him some of her milk. He added the milk to ashes from a stone oven and stirred in some animal bile, ground walnut shells and henna, and then he spent a long time in decorating me, for that is an act of grace. Among our people a woman may not let anyone draw anything on her skin after she is married. I have many pierced circles on my body. I think the Holy Man was very preoccupied with my charms but he could not take any more women to wife. The wives he already had would have made his life a living hell.

Is this Holy Man the hermit you mentioned before? I ask.

No, the antique dealer says. The hermit was also a holy man, but he turned away from us, and we know how he ended up.

Don't speak ill of the dead, the woman says. I have every reason in the world to be angry with him, and yet I say nothing. That man, holy? – No way! When he came to town he had us girls sit in his lap and he would rock us and rock us till he was wet between his loins. There you see, I *did* say something bad about him. Young man, if you examine the penitent's hat carefully, you'll find two tiny slits through which the hermit peered. Man remains curious right up to his death. Indeed he seeks death because he is bursting with curiosity and can't wait to cross the border to the other side.

Yes, I say, that's probably the way it is. On the other hand, I limit myself to alleviating people's curiosity and drawing them back into life.

What trade are you in? the antique dealer asks, and when I tell him that I'm a physician, he looks over at the proprietress and starts rubbing the back of his hand like crazy. Suddenly the tension has eased, the fat woman tidies her hair, as if she had to appear before a real gentleman.

You're a good one, she says. You're a good one. Had we known that you were a doctor, you could have counted on a warmer reception, and we would have spoken to you in a way commensurate with your position and profession. Vagabonds come here to bother us and they think they can put one over on us; they think we don't know what our period documents are worth. It's infuriating.

The antique dealer rushes out of the room, says he'll be back soon. Meanwhile, the gentleman should make himself comfortable. I should consider their house my house.

So you're a doctor, the proprietress says. Have you delivered babies?

No, I say, I'm a general practitioner.

I was once present when a woman gave birth, she says. I was standing next to the midwife. When I saw the wet, brutal face of the infant, I was badly frightened. Some babies already have a face when they are born, while with others the face still has to take shape. The midwife explained to me that there isn't much storage space for the little one in the big body of the mother.

Storage space is good, I say. You're real farmers.

The proprietress looks up to make sure I'm not insulting her; she smiles a false smile, showing her gold teeth. The mistress of trinkets and trash. In the open drawers of a built-in cupboard there are prayer beads made of olive and date pits, chipped glass bowls, magnifying glasses, monocles, eyeglass frames, wrist watches with damaged dials, silver cases, even rusty pill boxes. She must have outlived many neighbors, must have bought or appropriated many of their estates

On one shelf I discover an entire collection of Moorish figurines: One has to resist decay somehow, even if only with junk from the households of the dead.

The antique dealer rushes in dragging a girl who looks as though she's been roused out of a deep sleep. She looks about her helplessly, and then at a sign from the proprietress she sits down beside her on the dowry chest. Her long lashes are heavy with mascara. The skirt she is wearing goes all the way down to her naked feet, and round patches are sewn on the gathered crepe of her tunic. The girl tries hard to suppress a yawn; she clenches her teeth and her jaw muscles bulge. Her lower lip is tattooed, and a line and dot pattern starts at her chin and disappears under the stand-up collar of her blouse.

Sir, this is my granddaughter, the proprietress says. She was created beautiful by God. The women of my family are really impressive. I can't blame you for staring at her. The young men in the village become quite agitated when they see her. Once at a party a fellow – without any encouragement from me – started a brawl because of her and came off the worse. Naturally we don't let her out of our sight, but how much longer should she lead the life of a prisoner? And besides, she's in heat. My words embarrass her. But you are a man and a physician and you know what I mean. Next year she'll be fifteen, and then she has to get married, or we will be committing a sin against her.

Stop saying those outrageous things, the girl says. You don't have to go courting for me.

The gentleman doesn't know you yet, the fat proprietress says, perhaps he'd like to coax some secrets from you, and my presence here is keeping him from it. Turning to me she says, You're not married, so far as I can tell. Right?

Right, I say, I haven't had time for that.

Not a good reason, the antique dealer says. Where there's a will, there's a way, and then you move with the times. The fat woman snorts at the foolishness of this remark. She gestures toward the door with her chin; she and the antique dealer get up and just before leaving she says, We'll be back in half an hour. You can talk freely now.

That's all the girl has been waiting for. As soon as she thinks she's out from under the custodial eye, she scratches the instep of her foot. It itches like crazy, she says. I had to control myself, or my grandmother would have slapped me. You don't know her. Later she'll tell me off because I almost yawned. I can't help it, can I? – The old man came rushing into my room and pinched my arm. I was scared to death. He's got this thing for pinching. I'm sure you noticed that too, didn't you?

Yes, I say. Does he have some kind of skin disease?

Where did he pinch himself? the girl asks.

Well, here, I say, pointing to a spot on the back of my hand.

Oh, that has something to do with the two of us, she says. It's friction magic that is supposed to bring us together. He's usually successful, but my grandmother takes all the credit. How old are you?

I'm thirty-eight, I say. There is an age difference of twenty-four years between us.

You look young, she says. It doesn't matter to me.

What doesn't? I ask.

If you take me as your wife, the girl says, I'll be your wife, and then you can beat me with moderation, and you can punish me if I violate your house rules, but first you have to teach them to me, then I will also treat your family name with respect.

I wouldn't beat a woman, I say. I wouldn't dream of it... I catch myself wooing this very young girl; imperceptibly my body has tensed and I've pulled in my stomach. Oddly enough it's suddenly important to me that she doesn't find me totally repulsive.

The girl, still sitting on the dowry chest, turns toward me and unhooks the two top fasteners on her blouse, and I see that the broken line forks at her sternum; she covers her breasts and says, My skin is healthy. Once she thinks her suitor has seen enough, she buttons the blouse, a woman, this woman.

Where is this leading, I say. They've showed you off to me; you really are very pretty. So they want to give you away.

She says, You heard what my grandmother said. I'm at the age where I long for a strong man; but I don't want to exchange one prison for another. When the young guys stare at me, I know what I'm in for: They want to drive me home like a donkey filly and lock me into a better stable.

And am I so completely different? I ask. You don't know me at all.

I have to get out of this village, she says. It wouldn't take me long to fall in love with you, and I would see to it that you would never look around for another woman. Women are as plentiful as grains of sand at the seashore, but you have to make the right choice, or you might as well put a hermit's hat over your head.

I am about to answer her and to express my amazement at her trust in God, to ask her how she can allow them to commit her to a total stranger, when I hear the hoarse voice of the proprietress outside. The sound is like that of a sharp beak hacking away at a worm. The antique dealer keeps butting in with brief admonitions. Looking through the plastic strips billowing outward in the wind, I see him trying to prevent a tall man from entering the shop. The proprietress is holding the man by the arm, but he frees himself with a jerk and a moment later he is inside, followed closely by the boy waiter, the antique dealer and bringing up the rear, the fat woman.

Your crazy drunkenness will get you killed, the girl says to the tall man. You have no business here, you're making me unhappy. Get out. Right now.

The man – I can tell at once – is in a world of his own, unreceptive to any appeals. Years of hard labor in the quarry have marked his body. He could kill someone with one blow of his fist or cause a crowd to become silent by simply threatening them with his big hands. Apparently the boy waiter wrested the cattle prod from the antique dealer, and he keeps slapping it against his side until the proprietress tells him to stop.

I have first claim on you, the quarryman says. Some painted dude can't just come along and carry you off. The girl turns away. No one has the nerve to contradict him. It is so still, I can hear the pine cones cracking. When I open my eyes again I see the boy waiter going up to the quarryman; he opens his mouth, reaches under his tongue with three fingers, and retrieves half a razor blade. Then before anyone has a chance to intervene, he bends down and with a few quick slashes cuts up the wedding sheet. He stands up and throws the razor blade away. The proprietress puts both hands over her face, and an angry cry issues from the depth of her being. The antique dealer goes over to the girl and pats her on the head.

Get out of here, you painted dude, get out right now, the quarryman says. You found your way into our village; now you can find your way out again. Or do you want us to show you the way?

That won't be necessary, I say. I leave the store, relying on my inner compass to guide me out of the village. And knowing my luck on days like this, no stone from a slingshot will hit me, nor will any dog attack me.