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"Noor el Kamar"

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Noor el Kamar

I was discovered on a misty night by a drunken sailor: a bundle glowing by the prow, on top of folded sails. Bewildered, the man stumbled over a thick, glistening rope dangling out of nowhere. As he held the plaited silk, it slipped from his hands and vanished almost instantly, but not before he glimpsed swirls of fire moving up and down a radiant ladder. He looked again at the light and dared not come closer. "It's a piece of the moon," he said, "Noor! Noor!" and retreated to the farthest end of the barge.

For days and nights I glowed in the hazy mists, illuminating the dark crested waves for a great distance. Motionless, the man stared and stared until his barge landed safely upon these shores. It is recounted that he kept repeating: "Noor el Kamar, Noor el Kamar," which in his dialect -that of people from lands where Shams, the sun, begins his daily journey-, means light of the moon. Then, the sailor withdrew into profound silence and disappeared in the Djebel Mountains, or at least that is what I have been told.

Of what became of me at that time, of what my life was like during that remote past I only know from other peoples' accounts. This is how I retrace the first stages of my life in this world. For I only conceived precise memories from the day I used language to communicate. Before, I kept alive a kaleidoscope of images and indefinable sensations.

Some things I recall distinctly. I understood from the very beginning I was expected to close my eyes at night, and play dead at sunset the way others did. Later, I learned this was called sleep, a normal activity necessary for humans, which I feigned in order to withdraw into myself, shielded from my surroundings. It enabled me to retreat and relive the events, images and sounds of previous days. With time, I developed an infallible memory. I'd try to discover the mysterious mechanisms of dreams, which were never allotted to me, meditating on one shape, one thought. I only experienced haunting visions of clinging to a monumental breast, and the pain of letting go. I'd see myself clutching at the gigantic curves enveloping me, my mouth gorged with soft warmth, then ruthlessly hurled into a cold void.

In these early days of my earthly experience, I was entrusted to the care of the highest ranked inhabitant in the region--a privilege inherited by

their descendants. All considered me a daughter of the moon, though the radiance I first so strongly emitted had gradually faded; it nevertheless lasted innumerable years, causing people to believe I possessed supernatural powers. To this day -centuries later-, whenever I remain in absolute darkness, an ethereal aura emanates from me.

Since I reached maidenhood, I have scarcely changed. I was and am still to this day, fair and pale, not ivory pale, for ivory is hard and my skin and flesh give the impression of being hollow and vacuous as if formed by condensed mists. My long hair seems to be made of the same substance; its swaying waves mold themselves to my body as if my skin were a magnet.

They called me Lena, among many other names of lesser importance. One day, tall men from distant lands came in search of Moona, a moon Goddess they identified with me. To this day, the polemic around what should be my official name is still forceful. The High Priests favor Lena though most people call me Noor since it was the first name ever given to me by the common folks and it is my favorite. As many in the village, especially the elders, revered me as a Goddess, I was forbidden to take a husband. My features were carved in wood and magical stones like moonstones. Small effigies were kept on altars in every household, continuously lit by oil lamps. The rivers I bathed in and the fields I walked through were considered miraculous. The inhabitants withdrew religiously when I approached a stream or a riverbank, allowing me a welcomed privacy. I usually sat or walked, awaiting sunset. When the colors faded in the sky, I entered the water, marveling at the language of the ripples bathed in moonlight.

Many pilgrims came to fetch water and grain from our region, which prospered with the visitors' flow. Women, especially brides suffering from infertility, stood in line, begging me to bless scented oil flasks with which they'd faithfully anoint their sterile wombs. Worshipped and looked after with deference, yet suffering from an indescribable anxiety, that of being lonely and different, I doubted my wisdom and holiness, dedicating my solitary nights to study. I have now compiled all existing volumes and treatises about mysticism, astrology, and esoteric religions in order to discover the mystery of my origin and destiny. I often think of the silk ladder the sailor described. Obsessed with recovering my lost innocence, I have chanced upon legends and myths about the Chosen People, those who after proper initiation are allowed, every fifty years, to sail on a given time and at a place indicated by the position of the stars. When they'd reach the secret location of the stellar configuration, the silk ladder descends into their boat and they climb it to milk the moon, bringing back the secret of wisdom and eternal life. But so far I have not encountered any tangible proof of this, my only hope to follow the Chosen People's path.

Indeed, time has no bearing upon me. I have stopped counting years. I do not have the consolation of remembering past lives as a reward for purity and rituals. Therefore, I am confronted with the mystery of my origin, convinced or perhaps wishing I had previous incarnations. Here, I live a paradox between the continuity of my own life and the successive lives of the once-born people. In this eternal present, my implacable memory weighs

heavily on me. Forced to assume the monotony of sameness, I helplessly witness others live and die endlessly. In the chanting and speech of the living I recognize old phrases, inflexions of voices, tonalities of those long gone. Around me, I see fragments, features, eyes, eyebrows, gestures, attitudes, even expressions. Every person I look at is a composite of those I have previously known.

During the long solitary and sleepless nights of my childhood, I studied people's expectations and trained myself to behave accordingly. As no one believed I had emotions, I learned to control them. It took me several lifetimes -of once-born people's lives- to learn not to shed a tear and maintain the monochord tone of voice that now characterizes me. But that training is only a memory. Now, I live alone in the Temple except for the succeeding generations of families in charge of my well being. They reside in a secluded aisle, never disturbing me, never approaching me unless called upon. Aside from maintaining the hearth fire on a stone altar in the winter months, they keep a tray of fresh water and food covered with fine linen.

The Temple, with its high pillars, was erected a hundred years after my arrival at the top of a hill overlooking the village so its inhabitants would feel comforted and protected by my presence. Its location was carefully chosen so that astrologers could observe the waxing moon from all directions. On annual festivities such as the solstice, villagers and pilgrims walk by me in processions, kneeling, touching my bare feet for benediction. I sit, statuesque, on a throne-like chair for long hours, surrounded by the High Priests. These ceremonies tire me because I know the futility behind it all and feel as helpless as the petitioners, if not more. All this time is irremediably lost, spent away from my search for the right time to sail as one of the Chosen People.

Because no one knows I do not sleep, I work and meditate intensely at night. Seated by the circular font that stands in open air in the middle of the Temple, I watch the moon's alabaster face. Night after night I engage in a mute dialogue with its changing phases, dialogue that never leaves me satisfied. Musing under a full moon, I, Noor el Kamar, called daughter of the moon, yearn for a mother, or a sister in that distant, unreachable globe. But faith has never forsaken me and during all stages of the pregnant moon, I run unnoticed towards the secret paths leading to the shore where I keep a boat ready to sail. On nights like these, uncontrollable visions of a silk ladder stretching towards the fountain come to me, and I see myself retracing the movements of the fall, disappearing in the depths of an intangible breast. I hear no voices, recall no faces, yet, I sense the visions are messages of a kind of birthright.

With imaginary fingers, I caress the configurations of the glowing orb, wondering if I had been rejected for having human form. Were there others like me somewhere? Were the swirls of fire envisioned by the sailor trying to rescue me or had they abandoned me to my fate? Legends say that ideal conditions for sailing in search of the ladder happen only once in a human's lifetime. Will I ever accept my condition of eternal longing, or will I attempt to end it out of boredom and despair? I see people die of diseases, wounds, poisoning and old age but I am never ill. Whenever brambles scratch my

skin, my flesh heals immediately, exuding a hazy, albescent fluid instead of a viscous scarlet matter. Was I a human child bathed in moon dust as some legends recall? With time, I trained myself to experience human sensations, imagining pain, cold and heat. As a result, I have lost touch with my inherent nature.

Many generations have seen me as a mature woman and no one alive has any memory of my slow evolution. My childhood belongs to a mythical time when forests covered most of the land and rivers ran different courses. Changes, although slight, give me a tenuous hope that even if I do not reach my goal, there will be an end to my torment. Besides soothing, unifying visions, I also experience terrifying glimpses of myself, old and wrinkled like parchment, unable to climb the long sought for ladder. I see my decrepit self disintegrate, collapse into ashes upon reaching the last rung, in particles of dying light.

A witness for centuries to a life I could not share, I came to believe I would never know what it is like to be with a mortal man. Aside from my serving attendants no one was ever allowed to come near me outside the ritual; no one, except once, so long ago that I do not trust my recollections. As seasons shift irrevocably, in constant renewal, it seems to me as if it were a story I have read or a legend I have interwoven out of fragmented bits and pieces, some of which did not even belong to me. It all began when the High Priests commissioned a local sculptor named Shahir to carve my face on top of the Temple's main stone pillars. They also ordered a monumental marble statue destined to be placed in the foothills by the mosaic baths where many ceremonies were held. He came daily to the Temple, setting scrolls of parchment papers on an easel and spent hours sketching as I sat or stood immobile by the fountain. He did not seem to be aware of my presence. He would barely glance at me, absorbed in his own creations. I recall his hands, incessantly moving and my awe upon seeing his three-dimensional sketches. It was like discovering a twin sister as mute and remote as the one I might have had.

After these sessions, I felt estranged, eager to see the result of his work, eager to exchange a few words with him. I took long walks around the countryside, followed at a distance by my maidservant, until I discovered the quarry where Shahir spent most of his days. His broad shoulders and muscular chest shone in the bright light as he painstakingly fashioned the hard stone. He looked at me then with a certain intensity that unsettled me for everyone else bowed their heads or faced me with an empty look. I grew accustomed to watching him struggle as his tools unveiled shining, unexpected shapes, observing his fingers run along a curve, rub the grain of the stone until it acquired the texture of skin and silk. I waited patiently until he would sit next to me, even for a brief moment. To this day, his green eyes and smile cross my mind, fleeting images, often punctuated by the echoes of his constant hammering on stone. He never allowed me to see all of his sculptures. The marble statue would probably never be completed, he once confided. I did not understand why.

We left together one day, without exchanging a word until we reached the mountain thickets. We came upon a cave in which we rested, how long, it

is impossible to determine for I envision only one long night. I know he would not have survived the cold unless he held me close in the darkness, my long hair enveloping us. Unable to sleep, accustomed to long vigils, I tried to imagine what a mortal woman would feel and sensed that the very absence of images I experienced with Shahir had to be what humans call happiness. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with me, far away from the village and the Temple walls; he would take me across the seas where no one would ever find us. We lived on berries and nuts. He occasionally hunted as we moved constantly, fearful of staying too long in the same place. Careless of leaving tracks, he would carve my face on trees, on the frigid porous cave walls, marking stones, or small branches. It all seemed to me as one extended day and night until we met a small community of people who spoke a language unknown to us. This nomadic tribe led their sheep across different pastures and very seldom settled for long in a given area. They welcomed us, allowing us to share their lives, convinced that I would bring protection upon them.

Deep inside, I feared my presence would harm Shahir in some way and that our closeness might be detrimental to him. He dreamed of reaching a land beyond the sea where he could unearth shapeless forms buried within delicately veined marble, awaiting his stiletto and chisel. In the meantime, he explored the possibilities of the forests, discovering the grain and texture of wood, creating vessels the shepherds could use, bringing life to the porous granite concretions in the numerous caves we encountered in the region. His touch, the pressure of his hands, I still feel on my skin as he, day after day, reshaped the dunes of my nakedness. Eyes closed, I would visualize him at the quarry, endlessly smoothing the fold of an ear lobe, of a pleated veil, until the glistening marble came to life under his fingertips.

I saw Shahir grow tired, his shoulders bend as time left its imprint upon him. He gradually changed, his face losing its former glow, yet his eyes always lighting his entire expression. His body, no longer full nor strong, never ceased to be an extension of my own. We could not stay apart. How long did it last? I cannot say for sure: until we refused to move further with the successive tribes we encountered, until he said he wanted to die in our village. Death was coming to him. He knew it. I could not face losing him. Unable to give him strength, I felt my youth was useless. He insisted we initiate the journey home. He wanted to see his sculptures again, especially the unfinished ones.

When we arrived, we hardly recognized the village. It had spread out, houses were mushrooming everywhere. I went to the Temple where the servants surrounded me, bewildered, as if I were an apparition. All were unknown to me, including the High Priests. They had waited for my return, preserving my cult intact according to the elders' instructions, keeping oil lamps lit in the sacred chamber day and night for generations. Shahir's sculpture was erected by the Temple's front gate. I saw myself trapped in translucent marble, my long hair, my back, hands and feet anchored to the stone, struggling to free myself as one caught in quicksand. I understood Shahir's words. He saw me as I really was, helpless, unable to escape my destiny, forbidden to share his fate. We looked intently into each other's

eyes.

The High Priests seemed relieved at seeing me. Many ailments and plagues had occurred during my long absence. They prayed for my blessing and wisdom, bowing as they joined hands beneath their forehead, hoping I would not abandon them again. No one recognized Shahir in the old man accompanying me. Later, I was told the story of the famous artist who had created this incomparable alabaster-like statue. Madly in love with his model, he disappeared in the mountains. It had happened so long ago, no one remembered the details. Signs of his passage are still found occasionally in caves or tree trunks on which he immortalized the face of Noor, the daughter of the moon. No one knew what became of him. My absence was considered a bad omen followed by a recrudescence of the cult through purification rituals. The people hoped I would return, possibly by sea, as I had once been discovered.

No one questioned the presence of an old, dying man in the sacred Temple. They referred to him as the Wise One. Our intimacy had somewhat extended Shahir's life, although we will never know how long we lived in the distant mountains, nor how long he remained by my side throughout my sleepless nights, both of us unaware of the passing of time. When he died in my arms, I was unable to cry.

I have been entrusted with the sacred book of Vukshsak. It is so old, and dry, no one ever dares touch its leaves -impalpable, as butterfly's wings. The High Priests taught me the secret way of handling the Vukshsak with a special velvet cloth lined with silk similar to the one that sheathes its cover. Whenever a prediction is to be made, I open the book at random while staring at the implorer's eyes because it is believed that a person's energy dictates his own fate. Then, I interpret the signs and symbols according to tradition. After the reading, the sacred book rests in a special niche protected by glass, in the Temple's main altar.

I wish someone would read the Vukshsak for me and disclose the propitious time. Full moon after full moon, my boat is ready to sail. I run barefoot in the sand, heart pounding, confident my calculations are correct this time, running until it is too late: in a fraction of a second the moon's face is upturned, the ladder pulled. Until the next pregnant moon, I confine myself to meditations, torn by recurring visions of birth and death, of a long sleepless night. In my lonely quest, I, Noor el Kamar, light of the moon, seated near the circular fountain, feed upon the sight of the alabaster orb, and await a sign, a change in the eternal dialogue with the multiple-shaped Goddess, hopeful of having the ladder sent forth to me, to the foot of the Temple's fountain.

Nota biográfica:

Poeta y ensayista de origen libanés, Hedy Habra dicta cursos de español en Western Michigan University donde se doctoró en literatura hispanoamericana. Ha publicado artículos sobre numerosos autores españoles e hispanoamericanos, entre ellos, Mario Vargas Llosa, sobre quien escribió su tesis doctoral, *La creación de submundos: lo visual en la narrativa*

de Mario Vargas Llosa. Sus artículos han aparecido en revistas como, *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, *Hispanófila*, *Chasqui*, *Latin American Literary Review* e *Inti* entre otras. Su obra creativa en francés, inglés y español se encuentra en revistas como *Linden Lane Magazine*, *Negative Capability*, *Parting Gifts*, *Explicación de Textos Literarios*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Poet Lore* y *Nimrod*. Sus poemas figuran en *Arab American and Diaspora Literature*, editado por Nathalie Handal e *Inclined to Speak: Contemporary Arab American Poetry*, editado por Hayan Sharara. Su poemario, "Tea in Heliopolis" está bajo consideración editorial y está terminando una colección de cuentos.