



Desdemona Draft

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Desdemona: draft

1.

My name is Desdemona. The word, Desdemona, means misery. It means ill fated. It means doomed. Perhaps my parents believed or imagined or knew my fortune at the moment of my birth. Perhaps being born a girl gave them all they needed to know of what my life would be like. That it would be subject to the whims of my elders and the control of men. Certainly that was the standard, no, the obligation of females in Venice in the fifteenth century. Men made the rules; women followed them. A step away was doom, indeed, and misery without relief. My parents, keenly aware and approving of that system, could anticipate the future of a girl child accurately.

They were wrong. They knew the system, but they did not know me.

I am not the meaning of a name I did not choose.

I exist in between, now: between being killed and being un-dead; between life on earth and life beyond it; between all time, which has no beginning and no end, and all space which is both a bud as well as the sun it yearns for. All that is available to me. I join the underwater women; stroll with them in dark light, listen to their music in the spangled deep. Colors down there are more violent than any produced by the sun. I live in the roots and heads of trees. I rise in art, in masks, in figures, in drum-beat in fire—all deliberate searches for wisdom. I exist in places where I can speak, at last, words that in earth life were sealed or twisted into the language of obedience. Yes, my Lord. By your leave, Sir

Do you imagine me as a wisp of a girl? A coddled doll who fell in love with a handsome warrior who rode off with her under his arm? Is it your final summation of me that I was a foolish naïf who surrendered to her husband's brutality because she had no choice? Nothing could be more untrue. Let me redirect the popular narrative of my life.

It is true my earth life held sorrow. Yet none of it, not one moment was "misery." Difficulty, yes. Confusion, yes. Error in judgment, yes. Mur-

der, yes. But it was my life and, right or wrong, my life was shaped by my own choices and it was mine.

2.

My mother was a lady of virtue whose practice and observation of manners were flawless. She taught me how to handle myself at table, how to be courteous in speech, when and how to drop my eyes, smile, curtsy. As was the custom, she did not tolerate dispute from a child, nor involve herself in what could be called my interior life. There were strict rules of deportment, solutions for every problem a young girl could have. And there was sensible punishment designed for each impropriety. Constraint was the theme of behavior. Duty was its plot.

I remember once splashing barefoot in our pond, pretending I was one of the swans that swam there. My slippers were tossed away; the hem of my dress wet. My unleashed laughter was long and loud. The unseemliness of such behavior in a girl of less than one decade brought my mother's attention. Too old, she scolded, for such carelessness. To em-

phasize the point, my slippers were taken away and I remained barefoot for ten days. It was a small thing, embarrassing, inconvenient, but definitely clarifying. It meant my desires, my imagination must remain hidden. It was as though a dark heavy curtain enclosed me. Yet wrapping that curtain over my willfulness served to strengthen it.

My solace in those early days lay with my nurse, Barbary. She alone encouraged a slit in that curtain. Barbary alone conspired with me to let my imagination run free. She told me stories of other lives, other countries. Places where gods speak in thundering silence and mimic human faces and forms. Where nature is not a crafted, pretty thing, but wild, sacred and instructive. Unlike the staid, unbending women of my country, she moved with the fluid grace I saw only in swans and the fronds of willow trees. To hear Barbary sing was to wonder at the mediocrity of flutes and pipes. She was more alive than anyone I knew and more loving. She tended me as though she were my birth mother: braided my hair, dressed me, comforted me when I was ill and danced with me when

I recovered. I loved her. Her heart, so wide, seemed to hold the entire world in awe and to savor its every delight.

Yet that same heart, wide as it was, proved vulnerable. When I needed her most, she stumbled under the spell of her lover. He forsake her and turned her ecstasy into ash. Eyes pooled with tears, she sang her loss of him of love and life. So with her spacious heart drained and sere, Barbary died. It trembled me. And in grief I questioned: were we women so frail in the wake of men who swore they cherished us? Was a lover's betrayal more lethal than betrayal of oneself? I did not know the answers so I determined to be otherwise. I determined to search most carefully for the truth of a lover before committing my own fidelity. That commitment was a blow to my father, Senator Brabantio. His sole interest in me as I grew into womanhood was making certain I was transferred, profitably and securely, into the hands of another man.

3.

With my father's invitations, and according to his paternal duty, I was courted by many men. They came into my father's house with empty ornate boxes designed to hold coins of dowry gold, or deeds of property. They glanced at me and locked their glistening eyes on my father's. Showing their teeth in doting smiles they slid in soft shoes on our marble floor. One by one they came in velvet and fur-trimmed silk, prettified hats stitched with silver thread. Each one, whether a stuttering boy or an aged widower, was eager for a chatelaine weighted with riches. I was thought beautiful, but if I were not, even if I were a giantess, a miniature or a horse-faced shrew, suitors cruising for a bride would have sought my hand. Those already wealthy ranked me with other virgins on their menu. Those in desperate straights needed no evaluation.

My father instructed me on the virtues of each offer and when I first refused he thought me fastidious. With my next refusal, he chastised me as stubborn; finally, as the refusals continued, as an embarrassment: a sin-

gle female of a certain age, un-nunned, sitting at his sumptuous table instead of fasting in a convent.

I had reached the cusp of un-marriage-ability—that lightless abyss into which a family can fall—burdened by an eating mouth, tied to a poor un-seeded womb, disconnected from the chain that the clan pays out to increase its length and its profit.

Yet my flaw was more serious than pride. It was revolt. I yearned for talk, for meaning, for winds from a wider world. Seas beyond canals, populations living otherwise, speaking languages of music and roar, beast and gods un-imagined within these walls. I longed for adventure out there, yes, but inside as well. Adventure in my mind no less than in my heart.

4.

One evening I veiled my surliness and attended another of my father's endless banquets. Not yet recovered from Barbary's death, I sat mute among the guests. Fully fed, they began to dance—partnered, formal, predictably flirtatious. Hoping to exit the mockery, I stood and moved toward my father to ask to be excused. Among those huddled around his chair was this mass of a man. Tree tall. Glittering in metal and red wool. A commander's helmet under his arm. As I approached, he turned to let me pass. I saw a glint of brass in his eyes identical to the light in Barbary's eyes. I looked away, but not before his smile summoned my own. I don't remember what I murmured to my father to explain my approach. I was introduced to the Commander; he kissed my hand, held it and requested a dance. 'By your leave, Senator Brabantio?' In accented language his voice underscored the kiss.

We danced together, moving in such harmony it was as though we had known each other all our lives.

Emelia. Dear Emelia. Silence seeds our degradation; forbearance waters it. [mtk]

5.

Two women approach each other. One is dressed in simple cloth; the other in a sumptuous gown. They both have white hair and carry a torch.

'Who are you?' asks the woman in the gown.

'My name is Wan, and you?'

'I was Madam Brabantio in life.'

'What brings you to this dark place?'

'I feel comfortable here. It suits me since I lost my daughter. And you?'

'What brings you here?'

'The same. I lost my son.'

'Who was he?'

'A brave Commander named Othello.'

'Oh, no. Not he who murdered my daughter?'

'Desdemona?'

'Yes.'

'We ought to be enemies.'

'Perhaps.'

'Our vengeance more molten than our sorrow.'

'Yet, we have much to share. Clever, violent Othello.'

'Headstrong, passionate Desdemona.'

'Both died in and for love.'

'Miserable. I prayed to Mother Mary for help when your son slaughtered my daughter.'

'A waste. I spoke to my gods for guidance when in remorse, my son responded with suicide.'

'Here are their graves.'

'Let us kneel.'

7.

My husband knew Iago was lying, manipulating, undermining, sabotaging. So why did he not simply listen to, but also act on obvious deceit? Brotherhood. The quiet approval beamed from one male eye to another. Bright, tight comradeship [?] Like-mindedness born of the exchange of musk; the bucks' regard of the doe, the mild contempt following her capture. The wide, wild celebrity they find with each other cannot compete with the narrow comfort of a wife. Romance is always overshadowed by braun. The language of love is trivial compared to the hidden language of men that lies underneath the secret language they speak in public.

Iago. My nemesis, representative of all that women struggle against. Desire bent, made crooked by competition and blood vengeance.

How typical. My husband's best friend competing with me for his love?

Or, perhaps he knew all along. I'm certain of it. Othello refused to promote him, his loyal lieutenant. Why? He understood Iago's nature.

What is this man-love that binds all to its will? What unspeakable deeds do they, as warriors, share? Did they enter the homes of the conquered and rape the cowering women? Were they above torture? What was the ceremony celebrating blood, pain and ravishment?

You, my husband, distrusted the man you were; the man I so accurately perceived you to be. Alone together that Othello shone. That Othello touched me with fingers that held nestlings as well as swords. Fingers that wiped blood from his brow also stroked my breasts. My error was truly believing you were the visage of your mind.

When the man I envisioned was lost to me, I was lost to myself.

Where, to whom could I turn?

My mother gave me sound instruction regarding manners, speech, duty, but the rest she kept closeted. The most valuable gift she passed along to me, the one who gave freely the devotion and nurture of her careless self, was Barbary, my nurse. She understood loss and sang its hurt and its sorrow as she died.

Willow, willow

Sing all a green willow must be my garland.

I called my love false love; but what said he then?

Sing willow, willow, willow:

If I court moe women, you'll couch with moe men.

I mourned her then. And felt confident no such end was in my future.

Who could have thought a military commander, trained to let blood,
would be more, could be more, than a brutal arm educated solely to kill?

I knew. How did I know?

I remember the banquet my father and uncles held. Oh, the music, the
perfumed ladies, the rare, elaborate food and a retinue of the powerful.

And there he stood—splendid within the splendor, but also a bit uneasy
among the simpering and the vanity around him. It was that slight un-
easiness (in a commander?) that aroused my curiosity and caused me to
engage him.

We sat on a stone bench under an arch. I remember the well of softness in his eyes.

And this is what he told:

"As an orphan child I lived with a root woman named Wan who sheltered me from slavers. I trailed her in forests and over sere as she searched for medicinal plants, roots, and flowers. She taught me songs and some of her science. How to breathe when there is no air. Where water hid in cactus and certain vines. Yet soon I was captured by Syrians. I lived with the camels and oxen and was treated the same. I ate what I could find. It was a happy day for me to be sold into an army where food was regular and clothes respectable. There I learned quickly the art of arms and the strength of command. In my first battle, I pointed my childish anger with a daring completely strange to me. I was sad, happy, breathless and hungry for more violent encounters. Only there could I excel and quash the loneliness inside."

And this is what he told:

"Our ship, upon an onslaught from land, sank. I alone was able to swim ashore. As I crawled along the beach I saw no enemy waiting on a ridge above the white sand. But I had heard the people of this place were invisible. Others said they were not invisible—they were chameleons able to assume the shades they inhabited. They could be detected only by their smell which meant in order to encounter their odor, one had to get close enough to be killed. I chose not to discover which was true: invisibility or camouflage. I knew there were tunnels in the sea. If you walk the beach and listen carefully you can hear the wind's music sighing from a certain kind of rock or swirl of sand. They signal an opening. Enter and a corridor of light shines in front of you, a hallway as dry as the Sahara, cool as the Himalayas. I waited in the light of that sea tunnel three days until the enemy believed me dead."

And this is what he told:

"There is an island surrounded by a violet ocean where fish jump into your boat, or you can catch them in your hand; where trees are always bearing fruit; where birds speak as humans; where the islanders have no heads and their faces are settled in their chests. Once, desperate for food and water, I was cast upon their shores. Although they laughed at my deformity, at the hilarity of my own head rising awkwardly and vulnerably above my shoulders, they were generous. They fed me and tended to my needs. All human attributes were theirs except for one: they could not sing for they had no throats. When I sang for them the songs the root woman had taught me, they crowded about. Tears rolled down to their waists as they wept their pleasure. I was difficult to sail away, so awed was I by their civilization."

And this is what he told:

"There are armies of women who kill men in battles so fierce the moon itself hides from the ribbons of shed blood. They cut off their right breasts to ease the arrow shots of their long bows to lethal precision. For this they are called No-Breast or A-Mazon and must remain virgins until after they first kill a man. Whole regiments fall before them. They rule wooded nations and desert kingdoms. I have seen them and marveled at their war skills."

Those are the tales he told. Tales that stopped my heart as much as they fired my mind. Tales of horror and strange. I was captured by love and the prospect of inhabiting a broad original world.

Yet now I know there are other tales. Not of the inchoate, un-healed past, but of a human future.

I know there is space within life or beyond it where human voices exchange rather than confront or dominate.

8.

Barbary! Barbary. Come closer. How I have missed you. Remember the days we spent by the canal? We ate sweets and you saved the honey for me eating none yourself. We shared so much.

We shared nothing.

What do you mean? You were my best friend.

I was your slave.

What does that matter? I have known and loved you all my life.

I am black-skinned. You are white-skinned.

So?

So you don't know me. Have never known me.

Because of your skin? It is you who lack knowing. Think. I wed a Moor. I fled my home to be with him. I defied my father, all my family to wed him. I joined him on the battlefield.

And he slaughtered you.

And your lover slaughtered you as surely as if he had strangled you. Remember the song you sang every day until you wasted away and embraced death without fight or protest?

"Willow...." [mocking]

Don't. Don't.

Listen to me.

No, you listen. I have no rank in your world. I do what I am told. I brought you what you wanted before you knew you wanted it. I kissed your every cut and bruise. I held you when fever made you tremble, and when your parents made you weep. You never had to wash your hands or feet or face. I did that for you.

You blame?

I clarify!

Barbary. We are women. I had no more control over my life than you had. My prison was unlike yours but it was prison still. My good fortune was in rescue, yes, but it was I who had the courage to accept it:

"I tore from a limb fruit that had lost its green

My hands were warmed by the heat of an apple

Fire red and humming.

I bit sweet power to the core.

How can I say what it was like?

The taste! The taste undid my eyes.

And led me far from gardens planted for a child.

To a wilderness deeper than any Master's call."

Was I ever cruel to you? Ever?

No. You never hurt or abused me.

Who did?

You know who did. But I have thought long and hard about my sorrow. No more "willow". Afterlife is time and with time there is change. My song is new:

"Someone leans near

And sees the salt my eyes have shed.

I wait, longing to hear

Words of reason, love or play

To lash or lull me toward the hollow day.

Silence kneads my fear

Of crumbled star-ash sifting down

Clouding the rooms here, here.

I shore up my heart to run. To stay.

But no sign or design marks the narrow way.

Then on my skin a sudden breath caresses

The salt my eyes have shed.

And I hear a call-clear, so clear:

'You will never die again.'

What bliss to know

I will never die again."

9.

Desdemona is alone. Othello appears.

Your cloak is tattered.

So am I.

Why, may I ask?

The endlessness of time and the depth of regret equals hell.

Dear me.

I always wanted to know why you stopped struggling when I encircled your throat and cut off your breath. Why did you let my rage run free?

And pay the price of becoming the real source of your anger rather than its origins?

You were not killing me. You were killing Othello, the man I believed you to be was lost to me. So what was left to struggle for?

Tell me about this Othello you believed me to be.

More than the rapture of his body; more than the sword at his side. My Othello is not the man who chose to believe what you must have known was false.

It's clear now. You never loved me. You fancied the idea of me, the exotic foreigner who kills for the State, who will die for the State. Everyone I slaughtered was someone who wanted your head on a pike. How comforting it must have been—protected by a loyal black warrior. What excited you was my strange story: enslaved youth redeemed by war, fantastic adventures, stories of freaks and miracles. And you thought that was all there was to me—a useful myth, a fairy's tale cut to suit a princess' hunger for real life, not the dull existence of her home.

You are wrong! You believed a lie. You broke my hymen and thought I was unfaithful the next day? Me?

I don't know. I did suspect. Actually I don't care. Listen to me. More than infidelity my rage was toward your delusion. Your requirements for a bleached, ultra-civilized soul framed in blood, for court manners honed by violence. Have you any idea what it took to get to the position I held? Who sabotaged me, delayed promotions, took credit for my victories? Who fed rumors about my intelligence, my virility, my character? Even with the gore of their enemies, the smell of it, the drips of it on my sword, their contempt over-powered what should have been glistening gratitude. Only by perseverance, discipline and a shrewd sense of what truly matters kept me going. While you played with my reality; toyed with it; turned it into—into theater.

Ah, woe is you.

Woe is we. This is the talk we should have had the first evening.

We were hardly alone.

Hardly the reason. My love for you was mind deep. I slayed myself and you to stop the pointless drama. If I could slay myself again, I would. But afterlife forbids a double death.

I am sick of killing as a solution. It solves nothing. Questions nothing, produces

nothing, nothing, but more of itself. You think war is alive, has honor and reason. I tell you it is well beyond all that. War doesn't need to win; it needs simply to be. It has no

beginning, therefore no end. War merely spasms as it occupies all of history. Oh, yes, there are songs, poetry to glorify it and even to weep for its dead—victims and victors. The language, the music is the beauty of massacre, of dogs gnawing the bodies of old men. They hide the carcasses of orphans to persuade us it has all been worth the awfulness. Where is the battle for life? Where are the ramparts to breach for tranquility, for peace? I was the empire you had already conquered. Alone together we could have been invincible.

And now? Together? Alone? Is it too late?

'Late' has no meaning here. Here there is only the possibility of wisdom.

Then that will be my search and my goal.

Oh, think now what our thoughtless deaths have forfeited: arms wrapped around shoulders against gales of mistrust and despair; we two sailing in ships bound for harbors surrounding castles burning white under the blue blaze of the sky.

A fruited vital peace more vivid than war.

A living peace unwilling to court death as its price.

Ask me: is it still out there, available, this human peace? As someone in a privileged position in timelessness, my answer is a roar. Yes! I know it. I see it.

Be assured. We dead are not quiet nor waiting.

