HANNĀN AL-SHAYKH, THE KEEPER OF THE VIRGINS*

One of the women wondered aloud if he was a dwarf in every way. The other women sitting at the intersection burst out laughing. Even though they prayed God to forgive them, their laughter grew louder all the time the dwarf was still in view.

They had grown used to seeing him every morning shortly after they set to work, bending over the hibiscus bushes to gather the wine-coloured blossoms. He would go by with a confident step, heading for the convent where the pure ones lived, books and magazines tucked under his arm, a cloth bundle containing his food for the day held firmly in his hand. He was content to greet the hibiscus-pickers as he passed, although they welcomed him eagerly and offered him a glass of tea or some hot bread. He knew it was because he was a dwarf and they felt sorry for him and he found this disagreeable as he had a great sense of his own importance. Besides keeping up with the politics of his own country and the Arab world in general, he had broadened his interests to take in the whole globe. He studied it thoroughly and remembered everything he learnt, delved into dictionaries, read novels, including some translated from other languages, and underlined passages in pencil when the subject matter appealed to him or he liked the sound of the words. He wrote poetry and prose, and persisted in sending it to newspapers and magazines, even though not a single line of it was published; and he had been going to the convent and waiting by the main gates in its outer wall for a year or more.

He would alternate between sitting on a big stone in the generous shade of the gimayz tree and lying on a blanket he had brought with him beneath its spreading branches. He used to lie with his face turned to the convent wall and knew the shapes of its red clay bricks by heart, their uneven surfaces and geometrical arrangements reminding him of a tray of vermicelli pastries. He spent these long stretches of time either reading, sometimes to himself and sometimes out loud, or building a fire with a few sticks to make tea, or waiting for the hoopoe which appeared out of nowhere from the

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direction of the trees and the water or from the bare, stony desert. Every now and then he would fix his gaze on the iron gates of the convent, hearing some kind of a commotion on the other side, even though he was certain that it was a figment of his imagination because the place was always calm and still again at once, the passing time seemingly uninterrupted.

But as the days went by he discovered from one of the men building the tombs round about, who sat and chatted with him for a while each evening, that the noise he heard was real enough, as the nuns used to sweep the convent yard every now and then. This ruined his concentration for some considerable length of time: he could not read with such enthusiasm, or savour a choice sentence or the hot sweetness of a glass of tea or the food he brought with him. He became entirely focused on the iron gates, as if by staring at them he could melt them and make them collapse before his eyes.

During his first few weeks of frequenting the monastery, he had tried to have a conversation with the nuns to persuade them to open the gate, but each time his request had been refused in dumb silence. He had asked if he could sweep the yard for nothing, worship in the church, confess, but still he met with no response from behind the closed gates. So gradually he became certain that everybody had joined forces to concoct a lie about the existence of this convent, because he was a dwarf, and he knew very well how people thought about dwarves. They were all lying to him: the tomb-builders, the hibiscus women, his family, the wind which must have cooperated with them by making this commotion behind the abandoned gates, Georgette’s mother who had lamented long and loud because her daughter had joined the pure ones and their door had closed behind her, never to open again.

Georgette’s family must be hiding the truth. Georgette must have gone mad and been locked away, for in the period before the rumour went around that she had entered the convent, she would only leave the house to walk over thorns until her feet bled.

The dwarf became convinced that many people profited from his visits to the convent. His mother regularly rose at dawn to get his food ready as if he was going off to a proper job. His younger brother would certainly have heaved a sigh of relief at this new routine of his, for however much he might love him he’d had to be forced to let him participate in his nights out with his friends. They all used to sit in the dwarf’s presence as if they were on eggs, wary of any joke or chance phrase that might offend him or hurt his feelings. Still, he couldn’t remember his brother ever praising him for his determination when he saw him preparing to go to the convent, nor even the hibiscus women, who must have relished the chance to invent hilarious, irreverent stories about him. And what of the building workers? He couldn’t bear to let these thoughts torment him any more, and rushed across to bang