

The Boy God

A story by Mick Stern

I whisper to myself, I howl every night in the wilderness of memory, where jackals and birds eat souls that have lost their way home.

When I was very young my mother took me and my three sisters to an alley every morning and put our infant hunger on display. She squatted in one spot from the first hour of the day to the last, holding her palm out. At night we slept in the dust, huddled together for reassurance. Next morning, we would resume begging; if our misery became overfamiliar in one place, we would go to the next one, slowly making a beggar's tour of town. Sometimes vendors gave us rotten fruits and vegetables at the end of the day.

With every passing season my mother became more silent and impassive. Even when the hot desert wind invaded the city and emptied the streets, she would not quit her spot; at most she pulled a rag around her mouth. She allowed the two youngest ones to cling to her but rarely acknowledged their cries or babblings, or indeed heeded any voice unless it was accompanied by the clink of coins. When we asked who our father or fathers were, she would spit or say nothing.

I grew older, more restless. I passed the time walking in circles or singing out loud until my mother's hand darted out to cuff me in the head. After remaining silent for awhile, I would make faces and provoke laughter from my sisters, then scamper out of reach of my mother's anger. Finally my mother told me that I was too big to remain by her side all day, that I must go forth alone and only return to her at night to sleep.

But how could I survive on my own? Sitting all day with my hand out would get me nothing but a stiff arm, I knew; I was longer a squalling infant and the sight of my ribs didn't arouse much pity. Nor would it have benefited me to undergo some sort of mutilation, unless I sacrificed half my limbs, because the temples were literally crawling with indigent cripples. An easy coin could be made from guiding travelers to the local brothels, but it was dangerous to take business away from other guides.

Once in desperation I snatched some figs from a stall, but the vendor was quick and caught me. As happens in such incidents, passers-by assembled immediately to deal out the kicks and blows of rough justice. Fortunately, it was the hottest hour of the afternoon, and the crowd was too small and apathetic to kill me. But they did teach me that I have no talent for stealing.

I don't know if it was boredom or divine inspiration that moved me to say one day to a poor man who was clutching his ribs:

—It's a pity rubbing your stomach doesn't do for your hunger what rubbing your crotch does for your desire!

A vendor of water who heard me began to laugh and poured a full cup for me as a reward for my quip.

I took this water as an omen; henceforth, I would live on the smiles of others.

And it worked. I made all sorts of jokes with people who passed in the street, to put them in a mood to part with money. I'd tell them I was collecting a dust tax from all those who walked upon it. I'd offer to carry people's donkeys for them. I made up songs. I'd follow someone down the street imitating his walk, waddling or limping or strutting like a cock, as the case might be. When the hubbub of bystanders' laughter gave me away, I'd scurry just out of reach. Sometimes I caught a punch or a slap. But when my victim finally walked away and I held out my hands; people offered me small money or figs or grapes for the entertainment I'd provided. I brought what I could to my mother. She accepted what I gave her with the same silence and resignation that she had accepted everything else: coins, children, curses, and kicks.

One day while I was in the market next to the Western Gate, making jokes and singing songs, keeping one eye out for an odd walk or manner to make fun of, a couple of soldiers stopped to watch me. I knew they would never give me money, because soldiers never had any, but their hard eyes frightened me, so I tried to put on a good show of clowning. They watched me for some time. Just when I started wondering if they would ever leave, they seized my wrists and dragged me through the dust between the rows of stalls. The nearby vendors laughed and their customers looked on with curiosity. I pleaded with the soldiers to let me go, but they slapped the words out of my mouth. Half walking, half stumbling, I was pulled into the very shadow of the palace walls, an area I had always avoided, for it was forbidden to beggars. I began to think that the two soldiers did not want me for themselves, but my forboding was still greater than my relief.

When we entered the palace, astonishment struck all other thoughts away.

The palace was like a city in itself, but more splendid and more orderly. Crowds of men and women and many slaves swarmed between walls carved with the enormous likenesses of beasts with wings and tails. An ox-cart went by, laboring under the weight of a stone figure, followed by a procession of drummers who loudly warned everybody to move back, stand aside, for the divine spirit. The soldiers relaxed their grip on me for a moment, and if we had been anywhere else in the city, I would have squirmed out of their hands and darted away.

The soldiers took me further into the palace, where large buildings and stables gave way to smaller, more ornate pavilions. We no longer walked on dirt paths, but on tiles of

colored stone. Wherever I turned I gazed at some new wonder. At last we came to the smallest and most exquisite pavilion of all. The door opened and the soldiers thrust me inside.

From bright sun I was plunged into night, for there were no windows here. It was a small chamber, flickering with torchlight and reeking of sacred incense. I tried not to cough. As my eyes became used to the darkness, I made out a group of men and women standing around a large bed. There, in a nest of embroidered pillows, lay the strangest boy I have ever seen. His face was pale as maggot flesh, except for two bruise-colored blotches around his gold-lidded eyes. He was dressed in a costume of turquoise and golden beads and wore a golden headdress that was so tall and so heavy with gems that I wondered how his scrawny neck could support this great tower. His pale, delicate hands seemed pinned down by the weight of thick gold bracelets .

A fat-bellied man wearing the sacred bracelet of the priesthood pushed me to the floor by the foot of the bed, beside a ragged girl who crouched in the shadows with large frightened eyes.

—Play, the priest commanded, nudging me with his foot.

—What is that? I whispered to the girl.

—Don't you know? It's the Boy God!

—Play!

I looked up at the grim, expectant faces of those who served the Boy God, and felt my heart turn to stone. Closing my eyes a little, I tried to pretend that I was back in the dusty street, alone and carefree. I rose slowly on one leg, made a little hop, looked at the high priest. He gestured at me to continue. I hopped on the other leg. The girl jumped to her feet next to me. I hopped again, and she did the same. I wanted to sing, but my songs were stuck in my throat.

So I let out a loud whistle.

The whole room shifted uneasily, but nobody spoke. Their eyes remained fixed on me. I whistled once more, and then the ragged girl tried to whistle, but she didn't know how. She puffed with all her strength, but no sound came out but a thin, whispery hiss. So I sang a song and clapped my hands. Excited, the girl clapped her hands along with me. I danced, I twirled at the foot of the Boy God's bed, and the girl twirled around too, awkwardly. As I spun around in place I tried to look at the Boy God from the corner of my eye, out of curiosity, for I had danced for many different people, but never a divine being.

His gold-lidded eyes were open, looking straight at me.

The high priest nodded with satisfaction. Two women laid hands on the girl and me and pushed us out the door, into the glaring sunlight.

—Keep him with you, they told the girl.

—Come on, she said to me.

She flew across the courtyard, and I followed her. We ran until we came to a building with white walls. I helped her push back a large wooden door, and found myself in paradise. Everywhere I looked there was food, sacks and sacks of grain, lentils, and beans, earthen jugs of yogurt, dangling carcasses of slaughtered sheep almost black with buzzing flies. The girl ran to her mother, who was among a group of women shelling nuts. I began to eat fruit from a pile in the middle of the floor until one of the women hit me with a wooden spoon. Still I would have continued if the girl hadn't run to me and breathlessly told me to stop.

—We eat later. Now we have to work.

I was handed a broom and told to sweep up the shells and dump them all into a pit behind the palace kitchen, which was already filled to the brim with rotten offal. Every time I opened the door, the old women inside yelled at me to shut it. Finally it was time to eat. The women and their children gathered in a corner of the kitchen to feast on foods that only the slaves of a great master could ever hope to taste. Afterwards they yawned and curled up on the floor to sleep. I wiggled close to the girl.

—Can I stay here with you forever?

—Maybe. The last boy couldn't play. He was so scared of the Boy God; he just stood there as dumb as a rock.

—What's going on there? cried the girl's mother. She reached over and slapped me on the head and shoulders, calling me trash from the street, gutter rat, billy goat, she'll yank it right off my body herself if I come near her daughter again. I could have said something to her, but I didn't want to be expelled from the kitchen, so I got up and threw myself on some sacks of grain. Another woman screeched at me to get off the sacks, so I finally went to sleep on the stone floor as far from everything and everybody as I could manage.

For the next few days I was completely happy, sweeping the kitchen and helping carry jugs of water back and forth to a nearby well that was used only by palace slaves; they were most haughty chattel I have ever met, but they patted my head and tousled my hair. I ate so much at mealtimes that once or twice I had to go outside and throw up, a sinful waste of food that my mother used to punish me for. And I still found moments to talk to the girl, because her mother was too busy to watch her constantly.

—Where do you come from? she asked me.

—Outside. Have you ever been there?

—No.

—It's better in here. Outside, people are hungry.

—Why don't they eat?

—Stupid girl! You think everybody lives in a kitchen?

She picked up a pebble to throw at me but I leaped away, twisting and turning. She threw pebble after pebble until we were both laughing. An woman wearing silver rings came out and told us to stop making noise. I threw a pebble at her and ran away. The girl followed me, shrieking.

Later, soldiers took the girl and me back to the chamber of the Boy God. Even though I had been there before, it was a shock to pass from clear light into gloom and uncertain torchlight. The Boy God was still lying in bed, white-faced, garbed in gold and turquoise beadwork; his massive headdress propped on a heap of richly decorated pillows. His acolytes stood around his bed with anxious expressions.

—Play, said the priest.

The girl pulled on my arm, as if to tell me to do something. I started singing a song and dancing in place, just as I usually do. The girl began to dance with me, somewhat clumsily, and we twirled around together, first slowly, then faster and faster until the girl screamed for no reason and we fell down together right on the Boy God's bed, laughing for no reason. Horrified, the acolytes dragged us off the bed, but the priest made a sign for them to let us go.

The Boy God was smiling.

The girl and I stood up and bowed. The God lifted one of his arms and pointed to me, barely curling his slender finger. I hesitated for a moment, but the priest nudged me forward. I went right to the side of the bed and knelt down in prayer next to the divinity, while the whole chamber held its breath.

The Boy God turned his head a little bit and stretched his hand across the round copper table by his bedside. It seemed to me that he was trying to reach a wooden box on the table, so I picked it up and put it in his hand. He drew it close to him and opened it. His fingers groped inside the box for a moment and withdrew a small bird, finely wrought in gold. He put it in my hand with his own hand, which was cold and divine. Clutching the golden bird firmly, I bowed my head in prayer and gratitude.

—Thank you, God my God.

The Boy God's gold-lidded eyes closed, and for a moment I wondered if he needed breath as mortals do. But I saw his chest rise and fall. The priest pulled me away.

—Give me that, he said, gripping my wrist tightly.

The idea of parting with the golden bird enraged me.

—No! It's a gift! He gave it to me!

I saw the color of rage pass over the priest's face, like the darkness that announces a storm. But he only laughed.

—This one has a lot of nerve!

One of the acolytes said,

—And he's right, too.

—Get out and take your sister with you.

It was good to be outside again. The sun was setting, the world cooling down.

—Come on, said the girl.

She began to run and I followed her, darting through crowds of people, past lumbering carts, until we came to the outer walls of the palace. In an alley behind one of the palace buildings she showed me a set of steps that took us to the very topmost ledge of the ramparts. The whole city lay spread below us, just as a flying bird sees it. In the distance, above the endless desert horizon, the sky was streaked with the sun's blood.

—Show me where you live, said the girl.

—Over there, I said, gesturing vaguely toward the rooftops.

—There? She pointed at the street directly below us.

—No, not so close.

On the other side of the great expanse, the first stars were glittering like jewels. Maybe they were jewels; very, very small ones.

I was still holding the golden bird. Without knowing why, I put it in the girl's hand. She was surprised.

—Don't you want to keep it? The Boy God gave it to you.

—Don't tell your mother, I said.

—I know a good place to hide it. A mousehole in the kitchen. The mice won't take it, they only want food.

She began singing the song I had been singing in the Boy God's chamber, only she sang it wrong, all wrong, but I didn't tell her, for the sound of voice filled my heart almost to bursting. Shadows engulfed the city as the sun descended behind the hills to the west. She stopped singing and said,

—We better get back or my mother will be mad at us.

We ran back to the kitchen. Though we should not have been gone so long, nobody rebuked us, nobody said anything. They only looked at us with fearful eyes and open mouths; they all knew that we'd been in the Boy God's chamber. Eventually we settled down to sleep.

The next morning, as I was returning from the well with a jug of water, some soldiers stopped me and told me to come along with them.

—I have to deliver this water first.

The soldiers grumbled but allowed me to take the jug to the kitchen. Then they escorted me to the Boy God's chamber. The priest opened the door for me.

The chamber was empty, except for the priest, a male acolyte, and the Boy God himself, who lay on his pillows with his golden eyes closed. The priest seized me by the shoulder.

—This is the child, said the priest.

—Come on, he's almost black! Anyway, there's no resemblance at all.

—What does it matter? His father hasn't seen him since he was born.

—His mother will notice.

—But she won't say anything, because if she does, then she won't be the Boy God's mother anymore, will she?

—Never mind the mother, what about us? What's going to happen to us? said the male acolyte in the high-pitched bleat of a eunuch. He left the chamber. The priest contemplated the Boy God with a grim look on his face. I was restless to get back to the kitchen, but I was afraid to ask to leave. The acolyte returned with two old ladies covered with black shawls. Without uttering a word, they stripped the garments and headdress from the Boy God. He looked even more pale and puny when he was naked. And though gods are supposed to be immortal, he looked dead. The old ladies rolled the white body in the rug and the soldiers took it away.

The priest told me to take off what I was wearing and put the gold-beaded tunic of the Boy God over my shoulders.

—Wait, stop, I'm not a god! Let me go, I'm not a god! I'm a beggar!

The acolyte put a knife to my throat.

—Put that on, or I'll cut your throat open, my little lamb.

I burst into tears for the first time in my life.

—I'll do anything you want!

—You better.

He held the blade up to my eyes and light flashed off it.

Soon I was lying on the embroidered pillows dressed in the bulky garments of the dead god, wearing that great headdress that was so heavy that I could only move my head with effort. The acolytes surrounded me and spoke to me in tones of great reverence. I drifted in and out of sleep, ate a little bit, lost all sense of day and night. Once I heard a noise by the door, a loud voice. I sat up and listened more closely. It was the girl! I shouted, open the door, open the door, and somebody did open the door. It was the girl. She cried out when she saw me.

—They took the bird! I want to keep the bird! You gave me the golden bird!

—Get her out of here! yelled the priest in fury. Don't ever let a filthy slave child near that door again, do you hear me?

I began to weep, but nobody took notice. All the ears around me have turned to stone. They see my headress, not my face. They pray to me, but do not speak to me. Nothing on the earth or in the sky is as lonely as a god.