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Especially Jericho

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Abstract
It is a hot, still afternoon, and God (whatever that linguistic construct might occupy at the moment) is on the side of the Israelites. God is always on the side of the Israelites. He considers it to be his job, getting them together in the first place, sending them out into the desert to suffer and starve, burnt with hunger and devoured with burning heat. Moses is dead (has apparently died undiminished, his eyes still bright and his 'natural force' - does that mean his virility, his ability to get it up? - unabated despite his one hundred and twenty years), and God is doling out territory, Canaan, the land that he promised, first to Abraham, then to Isaac, then to Jacob. The land stretches from Lebanon as far as the great river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the land of the great sea. This land is already occupied, but God has promised it to the Israelites, under the command of Joshua, every place that the sole of his foot will tread.

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It is a hot, still afternoon, and God (whatever that linguistic construct might occupy at the moment) is on the side of the Israelites. God is always on the side of the Israelites. He considers it to be his job, getting them together in the first place, sending them out into the desert to suffer and starve, burnt with hunger and devoured with burning heat. Moses is dead (has apparently died undiminished, his eyes still bright and his 'natural force' – does that mean his virility, his ability to get it up? – unabated, despite his one hundred and twenty years), and God is doling out territory, Canaan, the land that he promised, first to Abraham, then to Isaac, then to Jacob. The land stretches from Lebanon as far as the great river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the land of the great sea. This land is already occupied, but God has promised it to the Israelites, under the command of Joshua, every place that the sole of his foot will tread. All arguments with God are pretty much the same; full of references to inheritance and loaded with bargain. 'If you do what I say, I'll be on your side; if you stick to my rules, you'll have "good success wherever you go" – just like Moses did.' But now Joshua is the recipient of the mantle of power, of the insider intercourse, privileged discourse. Moses has 'laid hands upon him,' and God has fingered him, so Joshua is in command, of commands; he has become the link between knowledge and power. He is directed to cross over Jordan (another one of those tricks of the dry path through the middle of a flooding river) and to 'take possession', the imperative of an already occupied territory. Joshua relays his commands to the people, instructing them to prepare for siege, and reminding them that all dissenters will be put to death. Thus does he utilize his appropriative privilege: 'God has told me that this country will belong to us; I tell you to follow my instructions in order to fulfill these words.' What one says the other will enact. What one enacts, the other will say. Joshua's power is located in this relayed articulation.

But all this anointed stuff is an illusion. Joshua is a favourite of God's because he is a warrior, with a warrior's ways, smart enough to know that the country over Jordan is not likely to fall willingly into his rapacious hands. Secretly – (why? because the people will not think him infallible?) – he sends ahead two spies, saying, 'Go, view the land, especially Jericho.' Bring back information, look for holes in the habits of those about to be conquered and dispossessed.
The nature of a spy is to recognize the gaps in a language, and to enter a world through its absences. The two spies selected by Joshua hie themselves to Jericho and without much fuss, seemingly effortlessly, which points to some prior knowledge and experience, they lodge themselves with a woman who appears to represent a rift in the fabric of Jericho. How they know her or why they choose her is unexplained, or perhaps mere silent acquiescence. For Rahab is described quite simply, as a harlot.

Rahab is lucky: she lives in the wall, or at least the wall has been built as part of her house. The edges of cities are better propositions for commerce than their centres, Rahab has known this for some time. She is able, also, in the early mornings, her favourite hour, to look across the plain at the gathering light over Jordan, and to sing quietly to herself while she combs her long black hair. She is remarkably similar to Rapunzel, but she is unaware of this cross-contamination of mythologies - she does not, at this moment, anyway, feel herself to be locked up in a tower.

And then, on what is an otherwise normal day, these two dudes show up. Strangers, yes. Spies, sure enough: investigative men all look the same, they are indubitably recognizable, but what can you do if a pair of them walk through the door? Blow their cover? Far better to pretend that you are both blind and deaf, far better to speak judiciously. Although their whispered discussion is audible enough - and what they want is clearly different from what she is accustomed to providing. But each feels it necessary to enact the pretence of customary demand.

Well, strangers are visible, and spies are ubiquitous. More than one person on the streets of Jericho sees the two of them in their dark glasses and their slightly shiny suits waving her business card around. And it only requires their Jerichoan counterpart (one investigative agent implies his opposite) to report - quite rightly - their suspicious presence to the king, who has lately heard too many stories about the siege of Troy, which are keeping him awake nights. Although she is a Jericho citizen, that wouldn't have mattered a whit to Rahab, except that the strangers have occupied her patio for some hours by then, after easing their toes out of their too-tight shoes and clicking the ice in a pair of lime rickeys while they survey the view as it slips toward twilight. One FBI man is much like another, and when the Jericho contingent starts pounding on the door down at street level, Rahab wonders if she shouldn't just let them all loose on one another, slip out the back door, and the outcome be damned.

But threateningly muscled FBI or CSIS men pounding on your door - no matter how sturdily thick-planked it is - in the evening are never a civilized matter, and their sheer effrontery makes Rahab wild; they know the necessity of her business, and they really have no right to inflict their cold eyes on her establishment, no matter how they are supposed to represent state security. And the two strangers are such babies, like young
Mormons in their earnestness, desperate to get caught. So she goes down to lift the bar in her flannel nightgown, rubbing her eyes as if she has been aroused from sleep. Every gesture becomes part of a discourse, and she knows that the more she resembles their older sisters, the less likely they will be to harass her.

They are grunting with the effort of their hammering, and their shouts to open seem to prefigure the bellows that will tumble the walls of the city in only a few days, but Rahab has scant patience for déjà vu, and assumes only that here is merely a repeated case of intransigent men.

“Yes?” She manages her question sleepily, but with enough edge so that they should read her annoyance at this interruption.

They have almost fallen into the opening door, and now they are busy smoothing back their hair and straightening their too narrow ties. ‘Give them up,’ they say, marvellously in unison.

‘Who?’

‘Those men who showed up this afternoon. The king wants them. They’re spies.’

‘Those guys?’ She manages this with just enough derision to reveal that she doesn’t think her visitors capable of the intelligence to be intelligent.

And the two intelligence in front of her, sneaking surreptitious looks over her shoulder into the rush-lit hallway, nod vigorously.

She holds the door farther open. ‘I do not know where they came from. They were here all right, but they’ve gone. When the gate was to be closed, at dark, the men went out; I’m not sure which direction they went – if you hurry you can probably catch up with them.’ This is such an old trick that she is sure the two federales in front of her will suspect it, so she fights to keep a straight face – all the while imagining a quick flash of late night Gunsmoke episodes.

They look properly disbelieving, but then, they are trained to disbelieve. So she holds the door farther open, and invites them inside for a quick search. She has taken the precaution of battening her naive visitors down under a great heap of flax stalks, rushes that the roofers just delivered; they will begin thatching tomorrow. She doesn’t like to be caught in an outright lie; but she has to maintain her amoral integrity somehow. They’re trying to count her customers already, trying to tell her that she has to charge G.S.T., which she resents, since she does not consider a service in any way. And mercifully, the visitors do not rustle and sneeze, but manage to pretend quite convincingly to be thatch. Later, she will remember their proficiency at concealment, and will berate herself for not having recognized then that something was dreadfully, dreadfully wrong. They looked as fresh as missionaries, but that too was a disguise. Still, she will answer herself, even if you had noticed, what would you have done? Even if you’d turned them over, would things be different now? Maybe they’d be worse and you’d be dead.
Rahab bargains out this scene with herself again and again; she tries on different courses of action, different words, in this incipient drama that has worn itself into her skin, that she now veritably wears as a costume. But no matter how many variations she introduces, she is still only able to see herself, in one way or another, losing. The only question, the only true variable, is which loss, which untenable resolution is the least acceptable. That she has never resolved. Not yet.

Oh, when the feds have gone, they come out from under her flax stalks and shower her with gratitude and promises. None of which she pays much attention to, listening with one ear to the sound of the noisy pursuit that sets out to the river ford, hearing the gate of the city slam shut with a mighty thump. Here, on the wall, she knows the city’s life so intimately, so particularly, that she could tell the king a thing or two, if he weren’t so eager to hire and to invest his ear in those oblivious and black-suited thugs. Odd, what kind of language a man will trust.

‘You can sleep on the roof for a few hours,’ she says. ‘Then I’ll get you out of here. But do me a favour and stay hidden, all right? I don’t need any more trouble with those goons. I’m the one that will get arrested. You’ll just get a reprimand.’

She descends to her private bedroom, her own room where no one intrudes, and brushing her hair again, thinks of all the rumours she has heard. Strange stories of the Red Sea drying up, of the two kings of the Amorites, so powerful and with such enormous armies, utterly destroyed. Jericho is a lazy city. If there is to be a siege, it will fall, for it relies on the strength of its walls for defence, and has no practice fighting an enemy. Later, she will think that she imagined the horrific scenes she sees enacted in front of her, she will refuse to believe her own déjà vu, that she sees, in the light of her lamp, all the careful structures of her life crumbling beyond any intercourse she has ever undertaken in speech or in knowledge, even in rebellion.

Well, she has taken a risk.

She goes up to the roof, shakes them both awake. In the paler shade of moonlight, she can suddenly see how young they are, barely shaven, these fresh-faced boys. ‘Listen,’ she says. ‘Something’s making me nervous. If you’re planning a massacre, then swear to me, by God, that you’ll remember that I saved you from those gum-shoes. I’ve heard about you guys. I’ve heard you’re pretty good at mass destruction. So, you give me a sign that you’ll exempt me, and my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters, and all their kids. Or I turn you in, right now.’

In the moonlight, she looks ten feet tall, Rahab, even though she is barefoot and bony. They are surprised at her language — they’ve only heard negotiation coming from the mouths of men, and it is disconcerting to hear her bargain as shrewdly as some of their leaders. Besides, they aren’t exactly in a position to argue with her, there under the rushes of the
roof. ‘Okay, okay. Our lives for yours. If you don’t talk about us, then
we’ll save you when we attack the city.’

‘Not just me. My father and my mother and my sisters and my brothers
and their kids. Got it?’

‘Well,’ says one doubtfully, ‘how will we know -?’

‘They’ll be right here in this house with me. No excuses.’

‘Sure,’ says the second one. ‘Just get us out of here in one piece.’

Rahab looks at the sky. Aside from everything else, she is a proficient
astronomer. ‘Two hours,’ she says. ‘The moon will go down. I’ll be back.’

They huddle there on the roof and shiver in the damp of the night.

‘Joshua isn’t going to like this,’ says the first one. ‘He’s going to give us
shit for coming here, when we were supposed to gather our intelligence
on the street.’

‘They’d have noticed us. This city is pretty suspicious. I think she may
have saved our asses.’

They are beginning to feel numb with the cold when she re-appears, a
grey shape in the night that has grown increasingly overcast. Or she seems
to loom out of the dimness behind a huge woven basket, her laundry
basket, to be precise, but as two young men who have never done their
own laundry, they haven’t the means to conceptualize that.

She pulls open the round lid. ‘Get in,’ she says to the first one.

‘What?’

‘Get in. I’m going to let you down over the wall. You’ve got three
hours until daylight. Head for the hills and hide for a few days until they’ve
stopped looking for you. Then you can go your own way.’

‘That thing looks awfully flimsy.’

‘It’s a woman’s strongest vessel. Next to her body. Get in.’

They don’t understand that, having no nose for irony or metaphor. But
her tone is unbrookable, and first one, then the other curls himself into
the strong willow basket and permits her strong arms to lower him down to
the ground outside the city wall. Just before she puts the lid on
the second, she leans over into its open mouth, so that her face looms large
above his.

‘Swear,’ she hisses. ‘My father and my mother and my brothers and my
sisters and their children and me. Swear.’

Her eyes flare in the darkness and her hair around her head, if he had
known any mythology at all, would have reminded him of Medusa. All
he can do is pluck at a thread in his shirt, the fancy embroidery that his
intended has so carefully stitched there, and pull it between his fingers.
He dares not leave her anything more – she might use it against him as
a promise, like the famous Tamar of Genesis who kept Judah’s signet and
his cord and his staff in order to force him to keep his familial promises.
One can never trust a woman dressed as a harlot; she might turn out to
be your sister, or your daughter-in-law, there is no telling.
But her face insists on an oath and its token. Otherwise, he suspects that the rope which is tied to the handles of the basket will simply unknot itself and he will thump to broken bones on the other side of the wall.

‘My oath on it,’ he says hoarsely. ‘When we invade, tie this scarlet cord in your window, but make sure your family is all here in your house. If one of you goes out into the street we’ll have no means of knowing and we’ll spill his blood along with the rest. So long as you keep our business secret, we will respect this promise. But if you tell, all bets are off.’

Later, Rahab will puzzle over this moment, so short and quick, that later elongated itself in a long shadow over the rest of her life. In that moment, the moon lapsed from the sky and her bare feet cold on the rushes of the roof, she knows that her complicity, her self-effacement in this bargain, will be the nexus of her survival. Or at least, her family’s survival. Strange that she bargains so hard for her family. She has little connection with them any more, and their relations are strained by their scorn for her occupation, however much she argues with them that it is hard to make her own way, that she wants to be a woman of independent means and without the stricture of a foul and greasy husband. Far better to service strangers that one can send out the door, dispatch without having to speak to the next morning.

Yes, later, Rahab will struggle to find a rationale for the events of this moment, but at this moment, all she can do is stare down at the boy/man, the potential killer doubled up in her laundry basket, and demand that he swear an oath to her.

And in return, swear herself, snatching the scarlet thread from his fingers. ‘According to your words, so be it.’ Wrapping the rope around a wooden post and slowly edging the basket down the height of wall, she thinks wildly of Cassandra, the Trojan prophetess, imprisoned in just such a basket for the madness (or was it foresight?) that the impregnable fortress of Troy and its incipient fall inspired.

She feels the basket reach the ground with a jar and then the weight within step away, so that if she had not held the scarlet thread in her hand, she could have imagined that she had only imagined those two cowboys, with their Bryllcreamed hair and their high-tone watches and sunglasses. She pulls her basket back up, then awkwardly dances it back to the washing room, and even though she knows the willow wands smell of sun and river, can catch a faint emanation of their malesmell, not sex or sweat but the distinctive spoor of bargaining, the metallic trade-off of escape. And she deliberately binds the thread in her window, visibly, as pretty as any seamstress’s declaration.

She continues to imagine to herself that she has imagined everything, the men and their mission, her naive entrance into the game of hide and seek, her bargain with them – except of course for the gay red bow of the thread. And despite the bureau men who return three days later, hot and sweaty and not a little pissed off, insisting that she has misled them, and
that those men were nowhere to be found, not a track, not even a burnt stick or a tree notched. But while they tear her house apart, systematic in their frustration, she points out that the gate has been kept shut – by royal decree – since they left on their search. The strange men obviously escaped before the posse; perhaps they were unusual enough to fly rather than walk. Which makes the older and larger of the several thick-set thugs crack her loom, eyes narrow on her face to see if she will protest. And she does, sharply and with considerable scorn for his childishness, which matters not a whit to him. He mutters something to the effect that she ought to be grateful that they are not breaking her bones.

Which ache with a kind of arthritic anxiety through the long days that follow, when the sun stands hotly in the centre of the sky and she is certain that she has made a fool of herself, there is no need to worry about the marauding Israelites and their infamous Joshua. Still, rumours fly around the city all that week, of people dancing behind a casket, of the river Jordan altering its flow, of stonehenges rising in the desert, and peculiarly superstitious rituals with men cutting off one another’s foreskins with flint knives. Rahab is never sure if she hears these rumours as whispers on the streets or whether she dreams them, although later she will know them to be the discourse of invasion and attack, these tales incitement for the forty thousand armed warriors who encamp on the plains of Jericho, in visible view of the walls and the apoplexy of the king, now sending out promises of wealth and capitulation with wily ambassadors who never return but are only swallowed by that sprawling camp sweltering in the late summer sun. At last, they recognize that there is no hope of diplomatic resolution, and the city shuts its gates as tightly as a nutcracker’s jaws, pretending invulnerability while it waits to see what kind of siege these strangers will mount.

The rumours on the streets are stories that Rahab can hardly credit; in her economy of listening they are neither received knowledge nor subjective knowledge nor procedural knowledge nor constructed knowledge, they are simply an echo to the great silence that she feels is threatening to engulf her city, her people, her home. She is careful not to dwell on the red cord in her window. It seems now like trumpery, even vanity.

But then, when the invasion comes, she is not surprised, can only watch in amazement as the entire army begins marching around the circumference of the city wall, the ark and the priests in a version of spectacular carnival, and the ram’s horns trumpeting so loudly that you cannot hear yourself think. Well, this won’t get them anywhere, she thinks, looking down at the flashing of helmets below her. They’re going to have to get past the battlements or they’ll be stuck on the plain forever. But every day it seems that the sound of the ram’s horns grows louder until it is a din inside her inner ear and she cannot escape it, cannot find a silent spot anywhere in the house or town, can only hear the blast of
those foul trumpets blaring over the heart of her nervous imagination. Around her, words rattle and the reports of the journalists are blasé and bored – they prefer the clash of weapons to the noise of fanfare. All the while Rahab is locked in a silent argument with herself about reason and rationality and knowledge as closure and even whether what she knows that she knows is negotiable, or whether she should pretend that she does not know what she knows.

So much for rationality, or instinct either. On the sixth day, she runs to her father’s house early in the evening, and insists that they come to stay with her, that it is safer at the edge of the city, that they can escape over the wall if the city falls. Her sisters are nervous enough, by now, to want to stay with her, Rahab has always seemed the practical one, the survivor, and at least they will be able to see what is happening from her house, whereas at home all they can hear is the din. But her parents are adamant that they want to stay in their home, that the walls will never fall. Besides, they do not feel exactly right taking up residence in the house of a woman of ill repute, even if she is their daughter. Rahab has to shout at them, has to persuade them that she knows more than she knows, and her imagination helps, she manages to talk them into coming, for the night at least, with the fiction that they should be together as a family once in a while, they ought to spend a little more social time together.

And it is a curiously quiet night. Once that army stops tromping around the perimeter of the city, they have a quiet meal together, without squabbling, for the first time in years, and so relaxed are they that they manage to sleep late the next morning, hearing the din of the circling Israelites only vaguely. Until of course that final, hugely explosive shout, until the very walls of their impregnable city crumble beside them – with them, for Rahab’s house is built into the wall – and the entire wall shudders and in a slow cinematographic dust, shivers down, only Rahab’s house wall standing in its section, with that red cord suddenly brilliant in the early morning light.

Still, they are a Jericho family, and Rahab has to stand arms outflung in front of the door to keep them inside, to prevent them from running into the street. She does not explain the nature of her bargain, she only holds them there, physically, as if every articulate bone in her body speaks. Although later she will remember their looks, their barely-concealed anger at her, believing that she has betrayed this city, shown the enemy its weak spots, the inevitable decay in the fortress.

But true to the many oaths that were sworn in the laundry basket, they are spared. Joshua himself strides to the door in his sweaty leathers and his metal gauntlets and takes the scarlet thread between his fingers. His eyes gleam with a fanatical pleasure, and he waves a blood-stained sword at her terrified family. ‘Are these all yours?’
‘My family,’ she says evenly, wondering herself at her own pre-
constructed escape, her strange integration of so much knowledge that it
feels as if she will stagger to her knees with the weight of it.

He laughs, hugely, the belly-laugh of a brutal victor. ‘Is this her?’ he
asks of the two spies that she so recently hid under her thatch, panting up
to the step beside their commander. They nod, barely, too afraid of him
to squeak a reply. And after all, they have only just witnessed him
shouting down the walls of this fortified city, they have some reason to
be speechless.

‘Are you sure? All women look the same in the dark.’

She will never forgive him for that. All her life she will hold that remark
against him, in her brooding reversioning of memory; in the tents of these
people who have tumbled down her city, she will remember her cool and
quiet house that somehow remained hers despite the men who came and
went from her door.

‘You beast,’ she thinks, standing there on the doorstep with her family
clustered behind her, while in the street she sees a thigh pumping blood,
an arm sliced off, an eye run through. Her citizens are being slaughtered,
the pavement is running black with their blood.

And they are ushered out, the harlot’s bargain, past the wholesale
deaths of their neighbours, they are helped over the rubble of the city
walls and escorted to the edge of the camp of Israel, urged to sit down
and drink some water while the city is burned with fire, the dead and
maimed within it adding to the smoke, and only the gold and silver, the
pitchers and the vessels of bronze and iron are brought out, tumbled into
a great heap on the sour grass of the plain.

Rahab and her father and her mother and her brothers and her
sisters and all their children now huddle together watching with wide
eyes the final moments of their old and oh so proudly built city as it crumbles into
a great pool of blood and smoke.

And at the end of a long, long day full of hoarse screams and the hiss
of flame, Joshua stands in front of them again, blackened with the ash and
smoke of the burning, legs spread in the balanced thrust of the victor, and
makes his pronouncement. ‘You, woman, hid my messengers. You
and your family may live, but I warn you,’ and he looks now at the
boys, as if the women simply do not hear him, ‘Cursed before the
Lord be the man that rises up and rebuilds this city, Jericho.’

They can only bow their heads before him in the submission of captives.

But they adjust, curiously well, this family, take on the habits and the
rituals of their captors, even intermarry, and slowly forget their initial
shame as the blood kin of a harlot. Only Rahab, sitting leather-faced in the
doors of her tent forty years later, continues to hate Joshua, continues to
ponder that moment of her own tactful suicide, when, faced with a choice,
she had no choice but to die by her own hand, to die or to die or to die in order to survive. In silence, for she has never liked the tongue of these
invaders, she ponders the construction of her bargain then. How did she come to such a pass to seek permission from such monsters, how did she make such a trade-off?

She knew what she knew: she knows it still, nothing can erase the sting of her knowledge. And yet, she subverted herself and her knowledge, as much as declared complicity. And in the choices that were offered that night, in the bargain that she struck on behalf of survival, she knows full well that she self-murder wrote. Rahab does not comfort herself that her choices were no choices. In that moment when she arrived at the nexus between one agent and another, she should have offered them to each other, let them eat each other. She is alive, but still a suicide. She would be more alive if she had died within her city.

And so she sits in the door of her tent, watching the light in the eastern sky, and dreaming of her rooftop and her cool house within the long-since fallen wall of Jericho.