IV

As her thoughts focused on the angel, strange feelings came to her, feelings she had not experienced since childhood. She began to feel a regret, a gnawing guilt, for accepting the angel's pact; childishly, she almost wished she would be punished as if for wrong-doing. And in a way this wish was consummated: it was as if the accumulated years of meaningless activity had finally undermined her vitality and her will. She ceased to care if the books were dusted, the plants watered, the pigeons fed. She no longer studied her Arabic grammar, but tended to read at random, picking up one book, then another, finishing none. She spent many hours simply staring out the window, crying quietly. There was no particular thought behind this expression of grief; it was a purely physical process, as if her body were purging itself of some inner poison. For the first time she also suffered from physical pain, pain in the calves of her legs and her back, pain so intense it seemed to consume her. Her body dried and withered; the veins in her arms and legs showed through the flesh; she felt the cold as if there were no inner energy to warm her. All winter she longed for the spring when the plum tree would bloom again and she would feel the warmth of the sun on her face. Occasionally a vague desire for some other warmth would stir her for a moment. Occasionally the glint of a childhood memory would light her mind. But more often, she thought of the angel, wishing he would return, if only to chide her, to cast her aside, to release her.

One dawn she woke in an uncontrollable rage: she tore down the books from the shelves and flung them on the floor, breaking their brittle binding; she burned years of Arabic translation in the waste basket, almost setting the entire mansion on fire; she shattered the potted plants in the courtyard. In a few minutes she destroyed every vestige of the life that time and fear had created for her, casting the ashes of her papers and journals to the whirling winds in the courtyard. Turning her anger on her own body, she dug her fingernails into her cheeks, she tore out her hair, she pounded her head against the floor. And when she finally yielded to sleep from sheer exhaustion, the angel appeared. He was smaller, balder, and less expressive than she remembered. She begged him to release her from the pact, to grant her one delicious moment of damnation. He looked at her without surprise or anger but with a kind of mild disgust, made one gesture toward the ceiling, and scurried away, metamorphosed into a small rat.

V

Many years have passed. She is old now and has moved into the adjacent room she once dreamed of briefly. It is not in fact so very different from the room where she spent her youth. She is crochety now as befits her age and station in life; she turns her pain outward on the neighbors who sometimes visit from a housing development bordering the land of the mansion. Her visitors accept and honor her ill temper. And she does not allow these intrusions to break the symmetry of her life: she does her bit of studying, dusts her books, waters her plants, and sometimes even returns to the courtyard for a stroll, although the plum tree died long ago. She never dreams of the angel.

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