

"Bible Stories for Adults, No. 17: The Deluge" won the 1989 Nebula Award for Best Short Story. Despite the title's cardinal number, it was the first in Morrow's very infrequent and irregularly sequenced series of Bible Stories for Adults. It's been more than twenty-five years since the last one appeared, but we're happy to rectify that situation now.

Bible Stories for Adults

No. 37: The Jawbone

By James Morrow

I NEVER ASKED TO BE THE Angel of Death. My existence, like yours, O mighty Samson, is an accident — unarranged, unsolicited, perhaps even unfathomable. Which is not to say you and I enjoy the same status in the universe. Whereas the members of your species are transient creatures, their flesh destined to be crushed by time's relentless rotations, my grim dominion extends far beyond all compasses, clocks, and calendars.

Believe it or not, pity and compassion are not alien to me. I wield my scythe promiscuously but always with a twinge of regret. It distresses me to see you lying there amidst the rubble of the Temple of Ossiak, the life slowly dribbling out of your veins, your voice box wrecked, the rest of you smashed like a piñata at the mercy of deranged children. Did your career have to end this way, O mute and reckless Samson? I think not. Listen, and you will learn things about yourself you never knew.

Two thousand and ten years after the creation of the world, I was summoned to the Court of Heaven and deputized to perform an annunciation. "The Angel of Life is indisposed, and so I must turn to thee," Yahweh

proclaimed from His throne as a chorus of sycophantic cherubs cleared their throats in prelude to singing His praises. "Thy mission will take thee to the territory of the Danite tribe. Thou shalt touch down in the town of Gibbethon and appear before the wife of Manoah, whose parents never got around to giving her a name. Once she stops quaking, thou shalt reveal that her heretofore barren womb harbors a future champion of the Hebrew people."

"What manner of champion?" I asked, shivering as if I were Manoah's wife. Even angels are fearful of Infinity. "A king? A prophet? A warrior?"

"A judge."

"Merely a judge?"

"And his name shall be called Samson. Tell the woman she must raise him as a Nazirite, a semi-ascetic who abstains from wine, avoids defilement by corpses, and lets his hair grow. May I count on you?"

"Thou m-mayest."

Naturally, Manoah was delighted when his wife told him he was at long last to become a father. Once your parturition was complete, however, you gave the old man little joy. Despite your Nazirite upbringing, you still managed to raise hell with your vandalism, street fighting, hemp smoking, and petty thefts. I believe you never fully comprehended the degree of grief these antics caused Manoah.

What really broke the old man's heart, of course, was your betrothal to an idolater from the village of Timnah. I've forgotten her name, as will the author of the Book of Judges. Your mother, for whatever reasons, became convinced that this star-crossed romance must figure in Yahweh's plan for protecting His Chosen People from the Philistines, the Israelites' *ennemi du jour*. And, indeed, it can be argued that your bloody but successful forays against Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and other Philistine strongholds traced to events that transpired during, and immediately after, the week-long feast celebrating your marriage to the shiksa.

I must say, O pride of the Danites, your inaugural act of terrorism — killing thirty Ashkelonites for their robes, so you could pay the debt you'd acquired when your wedding guests correctly answered a riddle you'd thought insoluble — was overkill even by my standards. After your erstwhile father-in-law passed your new wife along to a fellow Philistine, you struck again, incinerating the grain fields of the Ashdodites and the

olive groves of the Ekronites. An understandable reaction, but I'm not convinced that fastening torches to the tails of three hundred blameless foxes was the only way to accomplish the deed. Then there was the "great slaughter" you visited upon the Timnites, smiting them "hip and thigh" in revenge after they burned your former bride and her father alive because their behavior had prompted your acts of agricultural arson. I can understand an eye for an eye, but sixty eyes for four eyes? Your grip is strong, O impetuous Danite, but your grasp of arithmetic is weak.

We now come to that ill-considered decision by the Tribe of Judah to turn you over to the Philistines in exchange for a temporary cease-fire. The long, hot journey west from Jarmuth found you tethered to Captain Phicol's chariot while his regiments marched in double file behind you. It was all quite spiritually depleting — was it not? — and physically painful, too — am I right? — for Phicol's adjutant used his lash with a heavy hand.

But then, four hours after the procession had crossed the border into Philistia, you spotted the skull of an ass on the outskirts of Gath, and a great notion caught fire in your soul. You snapped your towrope, broke the cords binding your wrists, wrenched the jawbone free of its hinges — and set to work.

Invisible to all save Yahweh, I arrived promptly on the scene (punctuality being among my many virtues), there to behold the spectacle of ripe human brains decanted from their craniums and strewn about in the dust like so many peeled pomegranates. Did you know that the final tally of the Great Gath Massacre was one thousand, including Captain Phicol and his adjutant? A most impressive showing, though your victory, as you will soon learn, involved supernatural assistance of which you were largely ignorant.

A free man once again, you took to the road, turning your broad back on Israel to consort with painted women in Ashdod and Ekron, until eventually you fell head over heels for a goyische courtesan in the valley of Sorek. You had good taste, I must admit. That well-to-do siren called Delilah was a knockout (and her parents had remembered to name her). Eavesdropping on your liaisons, I found myself utterly charmed by Delilah's desire to make you a better person. As she told her handmaid, "One day my Danite will understand that, of the two great oral traditions practiced in Philistia, fellatio is superior to war stories."

Did you ever apprehend the depth of Delilah's abhorrence of violence and commitment to domesticating you? Did you know that her least favorite female character from Canaanite lore was Jael the Kenite, who gained favor with the Israelites by nailing the head of their enemy, General Sisera, to the ground with a tent peg? Even after Delilah became exasperated with you and cast you out of her bedchambers, she retained a touching faith in your potential to become a man of peace.

While you were off appeasing your libido, the Philistine generals were growing increasingly obsessed with your superpowers. How in the world had Samson the Nazirite slain two infantry regiments in fewer than seven minutes? Through what sorcery had he turned an ordinary donkey mandible into a piece of military hardware?

Eventually, King Garmiskar III, Lord of the Five Cities, an ursine man with eyes so deeply recessed I could imagine them tickling his brain, put his court magicians on the case. By consulting certain ancient prophetic texts, these seven sages deduced that a day was coming when Philistine priests would begin soaking donkey bones in elixirs prepared from the "corporeal fluids" of an Israelite "man of the sun," a "samson" or "shimson" — שִׁמְשׁוֹן in Hebrew — thereby transforming each such mandible, scapula, pelvis, humerus, radius, or femur into a deadly weapon. In other words, O fortunate Danite, you had evidently succeeded in mowing down those enemy regiments because the perspiration from your palms had ensorcelled the jawbone in question!

So now you know why Garmiskar III was so eager to bring you to heel and start plundering your body for its sweat, blood, tears, spittle, urine, and seed. The King meant to equip his army with a mystic and stupefyingly lethal weapon. But there was a problem. Given the sobering fact of the Great Gath Massacre, it seemed probable that further attempts to take you captive would end in a second such disaster. The King resorted to prayer. By what means, O invincible Astarte, through whose treachery, O fertile Dagon, might this latter-day Enkidu be tamed?

His Majesty's frustration was at its peak when his primary counselor, Budodek, told him of recent lascivious events in the valley of Sorek. According to Budodek's network of spies, the odious Samson had become smitten with a fickle minx called Delilah. Although she'd recently spurned him, Budodek believed that, for a small fortune, she would

happily pretend to readmit the shimson to her affections and then set about discovering the wellspring of his strength, straightaway disempowering him if she could possibly manage it.

Delilah assented to the bargain on one condition. The King must promise that, if and when she'd deprived Samson of his prowess, His Majesty would allow him to return to his parents' house in Gibbethon and pursue his proper vocation as a Judge of Israel. A contract was drawn up. Its every clause was dripping with deceit — for Garmiskar III hadn't the slightest intention of letting the shimson slip through his fingers a second time.

And it came to pass, O randy Samson, that once again you visited Delilah's garden of carnal delights. During a particularly meaningful orgasm, you blurred out the vital information. She drugged your wine, took up her handmaid's scissors, and deprived you of your locks. Honesty compels me to report that, when Budodek gave Delilah her thousand pieces of silver, her eyes twinkled like the night sky, and an unseemly smile played about her lips.

But know this, O shorn Samson. She never stopped loving you. When Delilah learned that her fellow Philistines had singed your eyeballs with a white-hot sword (taking care not to compromise your capacity for weeping), her own eyes welled up with tears. When she heard you'd been hauled off to Gaza and locked away in a dungeon, she fell into a pit of despair and remained its prisoner for a year. I can tell by your seraphic expression that, in spite of everything, you continue to love her as well. This greatly pleases me. I am a romantic sort of reaper.

As it happens, I was there when the seven magicians attempted to forge a lethal assbone. No one had asked me to attend the experiment, of course, but it's my wont to show up uninvited, and I knew my services would be needed. Midnight had come to the Levant. The magicians had gathered on a lonely, windswept plateau to the south of Shikkeron. Stars lay scattered across the sky like spindrift on a moonlit sea. In accordance with the ancient texts, Teresh, the chief magician, had filled a bronze cauldron with three gallons of ocean water and suspended it from a tripod over an open fire. Torches encircled the cauldron, their flames casting leaping shadows on the rocks beyond.

"Hear us now, all ye spirits of battle and demons of victory," intoned

Teresh. He was a hulking man with a beard like a fleece throw rug. "The great rite begins. Before me lies the boiling sea, to which I now add a phial of the shimson's salty blood."

The chief magician upended a small bottle over the cauldron, pouring the fluid into the bubbling water.

"Next I add the shoulder blade of an ass."

Mitinti, a gaunt man whose skull-like face reminded me of my own, approached the cauldron bearing a blue linen pillow on which a white bone rested like an ivory knife. Teresh seized the bone — a donkey's scapula, I assumed — and cautiously dipped it into the brew.

"The elixir is now complete," said Teresh.

"And may Dagon strike dead any man among us who dares reveal the formula," said Mitinti.

"Now I shall withdraw the bone," said Teresh, "even as, like hermits walking widdershins, we recite its holy name in reverse."

He lifted the dripping scapula from the brew. The newly forged weapon appeared to be sheathed in serpent's skin, the scales coruscating in the torchlight.

"To the boiling waves, we speak the word! To the seething winds, we speak the word! To the hornèd moon, we speak the word! Praised be Mitinti, who has been appointed the first to fall before this mighty rod!"

"The first to fall?" said Mitinti. "You are grievously mistaken, Teresh."

"Your fate was sealed the day you bedded my wife!" Teresh extended his arm and took careful aim. "Did you imagine I knew nothing of your adultery?" The tip of the scapula was now aligned with Mitinti's neck. "Attend our voices, ye spirits and demons! Hear us as we cry 'Alupacs'!"

"Alupacs!" shouted the other magicians, all save Mitinti, in unison.

Melodious vibrations hummed up and down the length of the scapula. Abruptly it released a sharp, thunderous crack, even as it emitted a blinding shaft of crimson light. Being well acquainted with the Torah, I thought of Moses descending Mount Sinai bearing the Tablets of the Law while exhibiting a face that was "radiant" — רָאשׁ in the primary text — a phenomenon that rabbis, scholars, and artists have invited us to picture as brilliant beams emanating from the prophet's brow.

Under Teresh's guidance, the ray swept across Mitinti's neck. Like a

melon falling out of a fruit wagon, the adulterer's severed head toppled from its customary perch and hit the sand with a squishy thump — at which instant it occurred to me that, before you decerebrated those thousand Philistines, Yahweh must have inspired you to speak an incantation. Your pensive expression tells me you now remember shouting (though at the time you knew not why) the magic word "elbidnam," again and again.

"Thus begins an exhilarating new chapter in the chronicles of Philistine conquest," said Teresh as I set about reassembling Mitinti's body and harvesting his soul.

"This calls for a skin of Phoenician wine," said Ahtur.

"A night in the brothels," said Hanun.

"A fatted calf," said Malek.

"A bonus from the King," said Tubal.

"Many-colored raiment for all," said Achnum.

"You are wrong, my fellow adepts," said Teresh. "This calls for a new Philistine deity — terrible, wondrous, and sublime. Tubal, you are now the chief magician. Tomorrow I shall present myself to His Majesty as the High Priest of the cult of Ossiak, god of military weapons."

"Ossiak, I like the sound of that," said Ahtur.

"Perhaps we should draw lots to determine who will ascend to this great and sacred office," said Hanun.

"I think not," said Teresh, pointing the scapula at Hanun.

And it came to pass that the matter received no further discussion.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, King Garmiskar III, Lord of the Five Cities, became ecstatic upon learning that his magicians had successfully tested the supernatural weapon. He was equally pleased to learn that a new deity had entered the Philistine pantheon. The shimson's breezy annihilation of the regiments had suddenly become a phenomenon that, under the sponsorship of the King and at the behest of the divine Ossiak, could presumably be replicated, over and over — but with a twist. From now on, Philistia's enemies would be on the receiving end of the bone.

Up to a point, His Majesty felt sorry that Mitinti was killed when the enchanted scapula went off accidentally (such was the spin Teresh put on

the adulterer's death). After arranging for the man's widow to receive a pension for life, the King undertook to make the cult of Ossiak the most robust such institution on Earth. Of course, Garmiskar III had his own ideas about who should administer the emergent religion, and he forthwith appointed his brother-in-law, Ziklag, as the High Priest of Ossiak. When Teresh protested that he was more suited to the office than Ziklag, Garmiskar III banished him to the Wilderness of Zin, recently stolen by Philistia from the Israelites.

While the King wanted to go to war immediately, his most trusted general, Yarkon, a man who'd turned atrocity into an art form, took a different view. Eventually Yarkon convinced His Majesty that, before unleashing the power of Ossiak, the nation must first acquire an arsenal of mindboggling redundancy. This strategy was, of course, bad news for the donkeys of the Levant but a splendid development for their breeders. A single ass was suddenly worth ten pieces of silver. Day after day, night after night, the acolytes of Ossiak loaded dead *Equus asinus* bodies into the cast-iron try-pots of Ashkelon and Ekron, diligently stoking the brick furnaces beneath and rendering the donkeys down for their bones.

Meanwhile, the bound and blinded shimson, that mighty man of the sun, was kept under lock and key in the Gaza metropolitan dungeon, watched around the clock by armed guards. At regular intervals, your keepers collected phials of your bodily liquids: the sweat from your weight-lifting regimen, the blood from your pricked palms, the tears you wept when the court poets entertained you with Hebrew psalms, the saliva you drooled on smelling roasted meat, the urine accruing to your fondness for Egyptian beer, the seed retrieved by visiting harlots. Your keepers also gave you a haircut twice a week, just to make sure.

O pampered Samson, you must admit that you were treated extremely well, as befitted the most precious natural resource in Philistia. Is your scowl meant to contradict me? Have you forgotten that the King arranged for you to have the most commodious cell and furthermore instructed your jailers to supply you with the ripest figs, the sweetest grapes, plump quails, rare ointments, and cool air (courtesy of slaves waving fans)? All you lacked were eyes and freedom. Occasionally, I am told, you were permitted to swim laps in the royal pool, groping your way from one end to the other, after which you got to inhale salutary vapors

in the royal salt rooms. But you never understood that His Majesty was keeping you alive and healthy for one reason only: to feed the war machine with your invaluable fluids.

For a full year, the King was content to deploy his unprecedented arsenal against those Hebrew tribes living in proximity to Philistia, periodically ordering General Yarkon to seek out and destroy bands of dissident Danites, Judahites, Simeonites, and Benjaminites. But then, after Ossiak had turned the gutters of Gibbethon, Hebron, Beersheba, and Jerusalem into runnels of blood, His Majesty focused on his uncircumcised foes, systematically making slaves of the Edomites, minions of the Ammonites, taxpayers of the Moabites, and corpses of countless Arameans. Thus dawned the golden age of Philistia. Its population centers ceased to be mere cities and became instead a confederation of city states. Garmiskar III honored the new god by building in his name magnificent temples throughout the land, each such edifice faced in gold, encrusted with jewels, and taller than any structure ever consecrated to Astarte, Dagon, Baal, or the Israelites' incomprehensibly monolithic Yahweh.

Even as the nation's arsenal swelled to epic proportions, a shrewd grain merchant called Arphaxad discerned in assbones a possibility everyone else had missed. These were not just military weapons, he decided. They were potential consumer items. In exchange for a generous slice of the presumed profits, Garmiskar III awarded Arphaxad an exclusive license to sell the new technology to private citizens. The merchant and the High Priest Ziklag in turn signed an agreement giving the Ossiak cult the sole right to manufacture assbones, offer them wholesale to Arphaxad's enterprise, and walk away with fistfuls of silver coins.

With high hopes and avaricious expectations, the merchant consigned his wares to scores of emporiums throughout Philistia. The bones were an instant success. Somehow Arphaxad had intuited that, unlike any known sword or spear, these devices would satisfy obscure aesthetic needs, fulfill rarefied erotic yearnings, and cloak their owners in the glamour of nihilism. By the time the year 1350 B.C.E. rolled around, there were more assbones in Philistia than sheep.

Sobriquets sprang up like weeds. The proud owners of assbones variously called them crimestoppers, security sticks, comfort staffs, carrion crooks (bits of donkey flesh occasionally survived the rendering

process), and horns of Ossiak. Meanwhile, Arphaxad took to marketing particular varieties under brands whose anti-Israelite names I shan't repeat, other than to say you can probably guess what AK-47 stood for. Free enterprise can bring out the worst in people.

Even though business was booming, Arphaxad had the foresight to create an organization, the National Retailers of Assbones, as a bulwark against economic recession, appointing as its leader a charismatic Egyptian named Phut. The association's creed was simple: the purchase, for personal use, of high-powered mandibles, pelvises, scapulae, humeri, radii, and femurs was among the most pious and patriotic acts a Philistine might perform — a message that might very well inspire citizens to keep stockpiling the devices even when they could barely put bread on the table.

While the proliferation of assbones greatly benefited Arphaxad and his priestly confreres, ordinary Philistines began to experience the unintended consequences of easy-do homicide. Domestic quarrels were frequently resolved via decapitation. Chronic depression was typically addressed through self-slaughter. In the taverns and town squares, wine-fueled altercations (some of which, ironically enough, centered on whether concealed carrion or open carrion was the better variety of bravado) routinely ended in eviscerations. At least once a month, some young man with a self-esteem deficit and a grudge against the cosmos would enter a school, temple, marketplace, arena, or playground and, taking out his horn of Ossiak, turn a reading lesson, religious service, shopping expedition, wrestling match, or kickball game into a bloodbath.

I shan't soon forget my encounter with a woman of Ashkelon named Hazelesh. Her lot in life was hard. She had a club foot. Her husband, Targil the tentmaker, had deserted her for a trollop he'd met on his travels. Worst of all, her one and only child, three-year-old Alek, had inadvertently murdered himself when he'd muttered "Rumef" (or something that sounded like that) while playing with one of the comfort staffs his absconded father had left behind. Eventually, Hazelesh decided that Alek had probably said "Rumble," the name of his dog. The femur in question had shot the boy through the heart. I arrived at the house ready to harvest Alek's remains, but I was unprepared for Hazelesh's demeanor.

She trembled as if packed in snow. So loud were her lamentations, I

feared her throat might rip. Peering into her soul, I saw it had been hollowed out as if by a carpenter's adze.

Normally the retailers' association paid no attention to such incidents, but Phut the Egyptian decided that in this case, some token of condolence would be appropriate. He fielded his best man, Javen the Apologist, skilled at shedding crocodile tears on demand. He entered the house wearing an expression of quintessential sympathy.

"You have suffered beyond all endurance, gentle Hazelesh," he said.

"I'm l-losing my m-mind," she rasped, sobbing.

"I pray that you will find inner peace."

"I have found d-darkness and excrement."

"Let me ask a question," said Javen. "To reap the beneficence of invincible Astarte and her brethren — seed-bearing Dagon, grain-giving Baal — do we not offer them oblations?"

"Ob-oblations? What are you t-talking about?"

"Does it not then follow, dear Hazelesh, that to receive the blessings of Ossiak, we must learn to accommodate the odd killing spree by some wayward misanthrope or other?"

"There is n-no Hazelesh. You see b-before you a c-crazed heifer, a mad v-vixen, a r-rabid — "

"Does it not also follow, my good woman, that to walk in perpetual security, we must accept the occasional household misadventure? Surely you understand, O blameless wife of Targil."

There are times when even the Angel of Death is sickened by the meaningless cancellation of a child's life. My rage possessed me like a thousand Beelzebubs. On invisible wings I flew to the cedarwood cabinet holding the remnants of Targil's arsenal, selected a humerus, and aimed the tip at Javen. I rubbed the shaft, death caressing death. A frisson of excitement coursed through me, and suddenly I understood the uncanny allure of this sacred technology.

Javen blinked in bewilderment. How could a horn of Ossiak float in the air and take aim of its own accord?

"Suremuh!" I cried, and the bone discharged a ray, drilling a hole in Javen's stomach.

"Eeeiiiaahhh!" he screamed.

"Suremuh!" I shouted again, perforating his left lung.

"Eeeiiiaahhh!"

"Suremuh!"

An instant later, Javen's amputated lower jaw lay on the floor beside a chew toy belonging to Rumble.

"Eeeiiiaahhh!"

"Life is like that sometimes," I told him, soaring away.

I WAS NOT entirely surprised when a fellow celestial entity, Gabriel, summoned me to the Court of Heaven. Yahweh immediately got to the point. I must never again play the avenging angel, He said. That was not my job. Were I to kill even one more assbone apologist, He would banish me to the underworld with no possibility of parole. Truth to tell, I think Yahweh had a fondness for Arphaxad's wares. He was probably planning to start His own collection.

Not long after my return to the mundane realm, it occurred to me that, while I could not subvert the cult of Ossiak through direct action, I might enlist a mortal as my earthly agent. Of all the humans whose souls I had assessed of late, one nonconformist female stood out. And it came to pass that I visited Delilah of Sorek as she slept and, hovering above her ear, told her the Garmiskar regime's most carefully guarded secret.

"The King imprisoned Samson for his bodily juices," I whispered. "The weapons are made possible through the relentless harvesting of your lover's sweat, blood, tears, spittle, urine, and seed."

Just because Delilah had a pretty head on her shoulders, that didn't mean nothing much was happening inside it. The scheme she concocted for crippling the assbone industry was elegant and brilliant, though it involved a terrible trade-off. Your horrified countenance tells me you know what I'm about to say. Yes, O miserable Danite, Delilah was prepared to kill the man she loved to save a nation she'd come to despise.

"Dead men do not sweat," she told her perplexed handmaid. "Neither do they weep or salivate. Their veins and bladders are dry as arroyos in winter. Their seed secures no future generations."

Delilah proceeded to sinuate herself into the affections of Garmiskar III. Upon becoming his favorite concubine (I take no joy in telling you this), she began badgering him for access to the Gaza metropolitan

dungeon, so she might speak with her former paramour. She no longer cared for him, she insisted. They would exchange no kisses or caresses. She merely wanted to apologize for cutting his hair with malice afore-thought. She did not mention that a sharp dagger or a phial of poison or perhaps an ox-hide garrote would be concealed on her person.

As jealous an autocrat as ever there was, Garmiskar III responded by doubling the guard on the shimson and denying Delilah all visitation rights.

She refused to give up. Eventually she convinced the King and his chief advisor, Budodek, that the tenth anniversary of the assbone revolution should be celebrated with a three-day festival to be held in Gaza's monumental Temple of Ossiak. When not offering sacrifices to the god in question, thousands of citizens would throng the tiers overlooking the courtyard, there to be entertained by jugglers, acrobats, clowns, dancers, and musicians. The crowd would thrill to footraces, sword fights, archery contests, assbone exhibitions, and pageants dramatizing episodes from Philistine history. Complimentary wine would flow in scarlet cataracts. Exotic fruits and rare delicacies from the farthest reaches of the Levant would fill every belly, gratis. The hidden passageways and secret recesses of the temple complex would become venues for private trysts and invitation-only bacchanals.

On the afternoon of the third day, the notorious Samson, scourge of Ashkelon, slayer of a thousand Philistines, would be dragged by main strength into the courtyard — chained, blind, and utterly confused. For a full half-hour, the crowd would subject its Israelite enemy to mocking laughter and cruel taunts. What Delilah forbore to tell the King and his advisor was that, in a gesture she'd reluctantly appropriated from Jael the Kenite, she would then take from her pouch a hammer and a tent peg, rush toward the shimson, and, as if destroying an incubus, drive the stake into his heart.

The guardians of the assbone formula would immediately turn against her, of course. It was one thing to humble the shimson and quite another to deprive the industry of its *sine qua non*. Garmiskar, Arphaxad, and the High Priest Ziklag would surely slay her with their horns of Ossiak. Which is not to say Delilah planned to go on living after sinning so egregiously. Indeed, if for some reason the guardians failed to kill her, Delilah would do the job herself, taking a dagger to her own breast.

"And what will be the price of admission to this grand spectacle?" asked the King.

"Allow me to suggest that each patron need merely flourish an item from his family's arsenal," said Budodek. "'Show us your bone, and we shall grant you entrance.'"

"And if a would-be customer has left his ticket at home...?" asked Delilah.

"This is Philistia," said Budodek. "We forget our manners but never our weapons."

"But how are we to pay for all this?" asked the King. "The royal treasury is fat, but only because we do not squander it on charity."

"Your Majesty's investment will come back to him a hundredfold in adoring subjects and devoted courtiers," said Delilah.

"Your tongue is as golden as your tresses are black," said Garmiskar III.

THE FIRST TWO DAYS of the anniversary celebration came off as planned, the crowd enjoying an unbroken succession of circuses and assignations, even as they consumed enormous quantities of food and drink. On day three, right after lunch, the shackled shimson was duly led into the courtyard and positioned beneath the colossal basalt statue of Ossiak. If you could have seen that idol, O eyeless Samson, you would have found it simultaneously obscene and awesome. Its eyes were like the bejeweled wheels of a ceremonial chariot. Its teeth were sharp as scimitars, its thighs thick as the cedars of Lebanon. Ossiak's holy feet rested on opposite edges of a shallow, rectangular cavity in which a raging fire consumed the remains of recently sacrificed doves, lambs, kids, and calves.

The mob began humiliating you with every means at its disposal: jeers, guffaws, curses, spittle, rotten fruit, the dung dropped by terrified animals as the priests led them to the fiery altar straddled by the idol. As Delilah dashed toward you, murder implements in hand, the mob became transfixed by its own curiosity and the vindictive barrages stopped.

"My love, I ask of you not forgiveness but understanding," she muttered under her breath (you and I alone could hear her). "I can think of no other way to end Ossiak's reign of terror."

And it came to pass that Delilah set the peg against your sternum. She raised the hammer high — but she hesitated to do the deed. Again she raised the hammer, and again she froze.

She hurled the hammer across the courtyard. As it hit the flagstones, a female spectator cried out in a voice like sounding brass, and a famous, fateful word echoed through the temple complex.

"Elbidnam!" the woman yelled, and scores of corresponding mandibles automatically discharged themselves, their reports echoing among the tiers and off the ramparts. "Elbidnam!" The radiant beams flew everywhere, flash after flash, like a storm of horizontal lightning summoned by Baal. Panic seized the screaming, bleeding mob, even as its numbers were reduced by mystic weapons finding arbitrary targets.

The woman shouted "Sivlep!" followed by "Rumef!" and all the pelvises and femurs went off, indiscriminately laying hundreds of victims low.

I scanned the tiers, soon discerning the source of the chaos. What variety of revelation had prompted Hazelesh of Ashkelon to attend the festival? Had her child's restless ghost appeared before her and insisted she go to Gaza, there to avenge his death by slaughtering myriad votaries of Ossia?

"Suremuh!" Hazelesh persisted. Scores of humeri delivered the goods. "Alupacs!" The scapulas fulfilled their purpose in life. "Suidar!" The radii achieved self-actualization.

The uncircumcised and their wives and daughters were now perishing in droves: a woeful calamity, a victory for justice, a cosmic farce — it depends on your perspective. The High Priest Ziklag bled to death when a humerus sliced off both his legs. Phut the Egyptian was disemboweled by a radius. Shot by a pelvis, General Yarkon exited the world with blood fountaining from his throat like lava. King Garmiskar III, Lord of the Five Cities, sought refuge behind Ossia's flaming pedestal, but a femur beam still found him, skewering his brain.

And it came to pass that, before anyone could draw another bead on Hazelesh, I enfolded her in my transparent arms and spirited her away on aquiline wings. A stray discharge had grazed her scalp, occasioning much blood. She appeared to be wearing the sort of skullcap peculiar to Hebrew men at prayer.

In less than a minute, I bore her to the safety of an olive grove outside the city walls.

"Who are you?" she asked her invisible benefactor. "Dagon? Astarte? The God of the Hebrews?"

"I am he who reaps. I am the one who cures the aged and the sore afflicted."

She touched the sticky yarmulke covering her head. "Do you plan to kill *me*, too?"

"Your hour has not yet come."

"It cannot come too soon."

"I believe that in the days that remain to you, some species of happiness will descend upon your house."

"I would not wager on it," she said.

"I have never lost a bet," I said, brushing her cheek with my fingertips.

By the time I returned to the temple complex, a deranged and furious Delilah had taken charge of the assbone apocalypse.

"Elbidnam!" she shouted in the mightiest voice she could summon. "Sivlep! Alupacs!"

With an emotion very much like grief, I saw she would not live to see the dawn, for a dozen random beams had pierced her breast and limbs.

"Suremuh! Suidar! Rume!"

And it came to pass that the vectors struck the great idol's ankles. Like an immense tree succumbing to a hurricane, Ossiak listed toward the plaza. Abruptly, the statue cracked free of the smoldering altar, crashed onto the flagstones, and exploded into myriad shards.

Other rays fractured the foundations of the temple. The severed columns shifted, suddenly unable to bear weight, and the ramparts collapsed as if shattered by Joshua's trumpets, along with the tiers, pavilions, and gates. Thus were innumerable Philistines crushed to death, even as swarms of dust obscured the courtyard like a dense mantle of fog. Despite the gritty haze, I managed to witness Delilah's final moments. With her last breath, she said, "I love you, Samson." As for yourself, O dying Danite, you were brought low by a hail of bricks.

I am not a prophet, it's true, and yet I can see the future as through a glass goblet. The nation of Philistia, I assure you, will soon fall. Historians

will conclude that the destruction of the Temple of Ossiaik marked the beginning of the end for this controversial kingdom, though I myself believe Philistia was doomed from the moment domestic deathware became a twinkle in Arphaxad's eye.

Before the Philistines vanish completely, they will accidentally bequeath their name to the Levantine region in whose embrace their nation once lay. Alas, armed conflict between Israelites and Palestinians will become a recurring motif in centuries not yet born, and this tragic status quo — *plus ça change, plus c'est le même chose* — will likely endure until Yahweh or Allah or whoever sees fit to intervene.

And now, O quixotic Samson, stalwart fighter, passionate lover, injudicious Judge of Israel, I must take leave of you. The city runneth over with stricken men, women, and children, and they must all be escorted into oblivion. Duty calls. I have work to do. Shalom. 

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