

Potiphar's Wife

Brenda Seabrooke

WHEN THE SUN ROSE THAT MORNING, I HAD A NAME but you don't need to know it now. I'm not being coy. It probably exists somewhere if you want to search dusty scrolls for it. If you care to take the trouble. I've been nameless to the world for thousands of years. Those men, the ones who wrote the story and preserved it, translated it, and passed it down, never used my name. They didn't even bother to give me a pseudonym, an alias to protect the innocent. They judged me guilty for the ages, though the record said otherwise. I wasn't important enough to name. Potiphar's wife was sufficient.

Was I not worthy of a name because I am a woman, because my charms were coveted by men? Does that diminish my worth? They do not hesitate to label us. They have a rich nomenclature for characterizing women that I will not repeat but there are no corresponding names for men. We did not choose to be who we are. Women do not have these charms for themselves, the shapely eyes, curved lips, spannable waists, mounded breasts, rhythmic hips. I do not admire another woman for these attributes but for her honesty, her kindness, her generosity, her tenacity under stress. Are we complicit then in the way men regard us when we enhance ourselves with ropes of jewelry looped around our necks, wrists, ankles, baubles tinkling in our ears? Is this not what is expected of us, to adorn ourselves for them with these symbols of slavery? Of their wealth? Their power? All that we have, breasts, lips, jewels, belonged to men then. Possessions. Chattel. That's all we were. Rhymes with cattle. Nothing was mine, not even my name. Guilt was my only allotment.

Why does it matter, you ask. We are all sand in the desert now but it matters. My guilt. My innocence. My name. The anger does not die. It burns as steadily as oil in a freshly-filled lamp. I was not the tempter. Listen to my

story. I only ask that you forget what you've heard from ministers, prelates, elders, and kings. Open your mind and hear my words. Let them fall as sunlight illuminating the depths of a pool. Listen and hear my story.

I noticed his eyes first, not quite cast down properly as a slave's should be but low enough not to be ruled insolent and earn him a beating. A fine line, it must require excellent muscle control to keep his eyes there, vibrating with the effort. He must have practiced over a pool of water or by watching his reflection in a bronze disk, burnishing his image. Opportunist if I ever saw one, he leaves nothing to chance. Smooth as ivory, he is smarter and lighter than the other slaves. He came from the northeast, an augur into our household, a rich man in his other life, slave in this one, a situation that must have corroded inside. Gossip says that his own brothers had sold him into slavery, to men who would take him far away from his homeland and make him a slave in Egypt, as good as dead but without blood on their hands so they could say to their father, no, Sire, we did not kill him.

That should tell you something.

He said they were jealous because he was the youngest, the last child of an aged father who lavished him with gifts. Read spoiled. His mother had been the final wife, plucked young to entice an aged appetite. You know that story. The son learned how to manipulate early from his mother, practised on his father.

He knew how to get what he wanted from Potiphar as well, not coats of many colors or jewels although he was dressed better than the other slaves in fine linen. "As befits his station," Potiphar said, pleased with his selection, "and he can tell the most amazing stories."

Why do you care, you say, you were safe in the end. Your maid corroborated your story.

I care. The anger does not die with the body. I rewarded Amina well. In my womb I carried a child. I was safe then from Potiphar's needs.

Amina said it was a son from the first day. My nipples darkened, a sure sign, she said. I knew it was true. I could feel it in the vigor of his kicks, his churning restlessness. He changed position hourly, seeking the most comfort, warmth, sustenance with the male greediness and aggression that is present from conception.

I lay on my pallet as the moon filled my chamber, my body already adoring this child quickening, but I remembered and my body remembered and curved for him alone in the night when the child was sleeping. And yearned. I'll not deny it, but he planted that yearning in me along with the child. I did not even know such desire existed. He came to my room. I did not invite him. He walked in on his own three legs despite what those old men said. Listen to my tale and judge for yourself.

The sound of wings came to me during the night but through the door of my chamber, not the window. It must have been a servant tending the lamps of the household. Beside me my lord snored, his sleep heavy after the night's exercise. I shifted to relieve the soreness between my legs. Potiphar, his powers diminished this night, could not complete the act, yet would not stop as if his more vigorous seed would leak into me, drain upwards into my womb. I turned away from him, his fetid breath, his skin sere, spotted with moles and age marks, his face a mesh of wrinkles despite the application of creams and potions.

In the morning the new slave brought me figs in camel's milk, sweetened with honey. I was alone, sleeping only after Potiphar had left me. A soft sound woke me. Potiphar's sounds were never soft. I opened my eyes and saw the new slave at his task. This was the first time I had seen him close. He had been with us for some months and Potiphar regarded him highly but he had never been inside my chamber before.

"My lord left at dawn for the hunt, my lady," he said, his voice deferential. His eyes were not. He kept them lowered, but watched me through his lashes. How thick they were. Potiphar's were short and blunt like his fingers. I could not help but compare. I looked down at Joseph's hands, long slender fingers deftly attending to my breakfast. I did not then see the obsidian in his eyes, or the practiced strength of his fingers handling the figs, kneading them into such tenderness that they almost dissolved on the tongue.

"Where is Amina?" She had brought my breakfast since I was a child.

"She has a pain in her stomach, my lady."

Amina never had pains but I did not wonder at that. Not then. I tasted a fig and pondered how he had got past the pair of saluki always guarding the door to my chamber.

That night Potiphar sat late drinking with his men. I listened to bursts of staccato laughter, the retold stories, the relived hunt. The moon rose

golden and so full that I wanted to spread my arms to her. Potiphar drank until the moon spun away into a small silver disk high in the heavens. I relaxed. He would be too drunk this night.

He slept late and did not awaken when Amina came in. Her stomach pain had been cured by a tea, she said. She was Nubian and knew about such things. She brought me figs to make me fertile. I admit I was both relieved and disappointed that Joseph did not bring them again. He was comely to look upon and I had not seen many such men. Amina's fingers were competent as she dressed me quickly before Potiphar could awaken and remember he had skipped a night.

The hour was still early enough to enjoy the garden. Lotus flowers opened their faces in the small pool, the tender pink buds responding to the sun, cupping its light. Bees thrummed and tiny winged things hovered just above the smooth sheet of shining water. The slave that tended the garden was at work pruning. I trod carefully to avoid the thorns of the lemon trees. Heat already radiating upward from the red pebbles on the path scalded my feet through the thin soles of my sandals.

Near a tall jar brimming with flowers the color of molten fire, I stumbled, my sandal slipped to one side, the strap twisted. As I bent to straighten it, the path heaved and undulated before me and as I reached to steady myself, my hand brushed the clay jar. I snatched it back but not before I felt the heat trapped inside, searing my fingertips.

"Allow me, my lady." The gardener knelt before me. He took my foot in his fingers and straightened the twisted strap. He slid his thumb along the soft part of my foot, the tender instep.

I thought I would faint and tried to snatch my foot away but his fingers encircled my ankle and he looked up at me through those lashes, the slave Joseph. His eyes held mine as securely as his hand held my ankle. My heart agitated in my breast like a tethered bird. What if someone saw us behind the tall jar? I was unable to move until a dove called nearby. "I must go," I whispered.

"I will come to you tonight," he said.

"No." I turned and ran down the path more afraid than I had ever been even on that first night with Potiphar. I didn't stop until I had reached the far side of the garden where I found shade under a palm and stood there to calm myself. Amina found me moments later. Her sharp eyes flicked me as

she scolded. “You should not let yourself overheat when you are trying to breed. Come and lie down and I will spread sour milk on your skin to cool it.”

I let her lead me back inside. I had no will and if Joseph had taken me there in the garden I could not have stopped him. Potiphar had married late and wanted heirs in a hurry. In thirteen months I had not failed to deliver my monthly tribute to the moon. I did not want to think about what might happen if I did not breed soon.

I lay down but there was no repose for me. I was in a fever of thoughts cloudy as the mosquito netting. Amina’s ministrations soon soothed me into sleep. She woke me to bathe and dress for the evening meal. Potiphar demanded punctuality. Amina quickly sponged me with rose petal water. She draped a red garment with heavy folds about me and pressed a wide gold collar around my throat.

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if I did not breed soon.

“He did not lie with you last night,” she said.

“You are a nosy old witch,” I said. “I will have you beaten.”

Amina smiled. There was no fear in the darkness of her face. She pulled my hair as she stroked it with pomade until it was soft and shiny. She knew my threat was as substantial as moonlight.

This night as Potiphar entertained his guests, I nibbled grapes and gazed at Potiphar, his head bald like polished leather. A servant paused before me to fill my goblet with wine. I reached for it but as my fingers curved around the bowl, a drop of wine fell on my wrist. I looked up and saw Joseph. His eyes on my feet made them feel naked beneath the narrow bands of my sandals. I twitched a fold of my gown to cover them and the corner of his mouth moved ever so slightly. His lips were full and expressive. I could not look at them. Their smallest movement could create a whirlwind in my mind and body.

“...an excellent fellow,” Potiphar was saying. “I entrust him with everything. He is most knowledgeable and astute. My groves, my fields, my vineyards have prospered. He runs my affairs in my absence.”

Joseph moved on to serve the others. I could not remain in that room. It had become hot, airless, small. I rose and went out to the olive grove. I liked

to walk in the garden at evening when the leaves turned their thirsting silvery undersides to the moon. They trembled as I walked past them shimmering in the moonlight and I thought of Joseph in Potiphar's place. The night air cooled me quickly bringing a sudden shiver.

"Your cloak, my lady." Joseph slipped the soft light wrap around me. His fingers trailed across my bare shoulder, down my left arm.

I couldn't breathe.

"They will drink late into the night," he said, his eyes probing mine, searching for soft spots.

A peacock cried somewhere in the drowning darkness, long and plaintive, nooooo, nooooo. "I must go." I left him in the grove.

I was alone in my chamber when Joseph brought my morning figs. Where was Amina? I sat up and my gown parted. It was not on purpose. I had no need of such ploys. Joseph watched as I covered myself. Then he lifted a fig and put it in my mouth.

"I picked them myself, my lady. They are fragrant with dew."

The fig was sweet even without honey. I did not think I could swallow.

"Your husband and his guests are sleeping at table. They drank until dawn."

And would sleep for half the day.

Joseph fed me another fig. There were sounds outside the door. I could not move. Joseph stood unhurriedly and stepped out the window.

Potiphar stumbled in, red-eyed. A messenger had come from the Pharaoh. I got up quickly from my pallet. Recumbency always aroused him but today there was no time. He stepped close to me. I could smell the wine on his breath, hot, sour. He touched my breast, the same one Joseph had seen. His hand moved down and tightened on my belly. "Do you breed this month?"

His basilisk eyes looked me over. What will happen to me if I do not breed? "I do not know, my lord. It is too soon," I said, but I knew my womb was as empty as the Pharaoh's tomb.

I tried not to think of Joseph as the day passed. I took a long bath in the pool. White flowers floated on the surface surrounding me like tiny fallen stars. Amina wrung the water out of my hair, stroked it dry with soft cloths, and smoothed it with jasmine-scented pomade, then bound it.

"A new gown?" Amina suggested. "Better than an offering to a faraway goddess. It will arouse the master on his return." It could not hurt so I agreed.

“I will call Joseph,” she said.

At my questioning look she added, “He has been left in charge of the household.”

He came quickly and opened the storeroom, then stood outside as I selected a length of green cloth shimmery as water which Amina would have sewn for me with stitches fine as cobwebs but I knew I would feel them as coarse as hempen binding rope.

From the storeroom I sought the garden to cool myself in its shade. Joseph followed, but did not approach me. I thought I was safe then. I ate alone, served by others but Joseph came to pour the wine into my goblet. This time he let two drops fall onto my wrist. He lifted my arm and licked the drops slowly with the tip of his tongue. I tried to rise but he held my wrist. “I will come tonight.”

“No,” I said, my protest as unyielding as a lotus stem. He did not listen.

I retired early. A nightbird sang in the garden. Amina made me a sweet soothing drink. The night was hot and airless. I twisted on my bed, threw off my gown, the thin cotton coverlet. A white moth fluttered in my window. Beyond it I could see a single star. He had not come. Perhaps he was not coming. I was afraid. I dozed and dreamed. Joseph had white wings and a star on his head. The wings disappeared and he stood looking at me. Moonlight fell around him in a luminous pool. With a cry I realized that I was no longer dreaming. Joseph the man stood before me. He touched my lips. “We must be quiet.”

He knelt beside me and I felt the breeze of his movement as caress. He smelled like sunlight and lemon and his skin was young, young and smooth, and he tasted — oh, he tasted like the figs he brought me in the morning. At his touch my nipples were like lotus flowers in a night pool. I locked my hands in his hair, feeling a man’s hair for the first time, springy and alive and pulled him closer, his mouth on mine, his tongue to mine, thrusting against him, my body, my tongue, my life. Again and again until the liquid ran between us, down our thighs, a liquid thick, fertile, sweet.

As Joseph moved away our bodies glistened in the silver light through the window and my belly no longer felt empty.

You know the rest of the story. When they burst into the chamber he told them that I had enticed him there. I covered myself and with Amina’s help no one dared to examine me, to find the liquid rope he had left inside

me. When Potiphar returned to a pregnant wife, he chose to believe me, that Joseph had come into my chamber and that nothing had happened because I had fought him off. Potiphar had his reasons.

He did not have Joseph killed. I was glad not to have his blood on my hands. Instead Joseph was sent to rot in prison which might be the end for some but not him. He went on to great fame as a prognosticator and an interpreter of dreams. Who would know better than I how he cast his enslaving net? He learned from his masters and I learned from him. He rose to become governor of Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh. I continued to deliver yearly issue with Amina's help to ensure Potiphar's fertility and my life.

Those old men, those chroniclers said that I lied, that I was evil, that Joseph was sinned against, that he spurned me and I retaliated. An old triangle: the older man, the young wife, the handsome slave. Whose need was greatest, the wife trying to save herself, the slave lusting for power? You be the judge.



BRENDA SEABROOKE's stories have appeared in *Confrontation*, Texas, Alabama, *Jabberwock* and *Washington Reviews*, *Kestrel*, *Redbook*, *Yemassee*, and *100 Stories for Queensland*. She is the recipient of a grant from the *National Endowment for the Arts* and a fellowship from *Emerson College*. She won the *West Virginia Short Story Collection Competition*, and is the award-winning author of twenty books for young readers.

Eve and Lilith Back at the Garden

Lynn Levin

Eve and Lilith peered through
the padlocked gates of the garden
now a restricted community.

Eve glared at Lilith,
“You told me it was easier to beg
forgiveness than ask permission. Now look.”

“That’s what *I* always do,” Lilith replied,
aware that under the circumstances
she sounded pretty lame.

“Plus,” said Eve, “I think I’m pregnant.”
“I told you to use protection,” said Lilith.
“But Adam promised...” Lilith rolled her eyes.

“Him and his teaspoon of joy,” said Eve.
A fault line threatened her brow.
“Girlfriend,” counseled Lilith,

“either change your life or accept your life
but don’t go around mad.
Let that anger go,” said Lilith. “Just let it go.”

Eve hated it when her friend got preachy.
Anyhow when it came to holding onto anger
Eve was an Olympian, a gold medalist.

She clung to a grudge
like a shipwrecked sailor to a scrap of wood.
It had something to do

with her excellent memory.
As Eve sucked on the red lollipop of her hurt
the two women trudged back to Nod.

All of a sudden something dark
waved in the grass.
“Eek!” shrieked Lilith. “A snake!”

She high-stepped in panic.
Oh, woman-up, thought Eve
as she grabbed a Y-shaped stick,
immobilized the critter’s head,
stared straight into its eyes.
The snake looked back at her with a *who me?* look.

“This one’s harmless.
It’s only a dumb animal,” said Eve.
“Kill it! Kill it!” pleaded Lilith.

“Sorry,” said her friend. “No can do.”
Eve let the snake go.
She just let it go.

LYNN LEVIN is the author of Fair Creatures of an Hour, a Next Generation Indie Book finalist in poetry; Imaginarium, a finalist for ForeWord Magazine’s Book of the Year; and the translator of Birds on the Kiswar Tree, poems by Peruvian poet Odi Gonzales. Lynn Levin’s poems have appeared in Kerem, Lilith, The Torah: A Women’s Commentary, Ploughshares, and Boulevard. She teaches at Drexel University and the University of Pennsylvania.



Mindy Rose Schwartz, *The River* (detail)

MINDY ROSE SCHWARTZ is a sculptor and installation artist living in Chicago. She is interested in the way an individual's experiences with, and memories of objects, can alter their intended meaning or function. She was named in both the Chicago Reader and New City Magazine for the best solo show of 2011. www.mindyroseschwartz.com