

2. SOCRATES

Timaeus knows how to throw a good party. Despite the city's food shortages he manages to produce a spread of various shrimp, pickled fish, olives, grapes and many sheep cheeses. The wine flows as if it will never end. Half drunk, the philosophers sprawl on the couches, more interested in rising athletic stars and small city gossip than in ideal societies. Socrates stands in the kitchen door. While he sips his wine he appears to cogitate whether to stand or sit. He studies his friends with a keen gaze that no detail can escape, but he'd as soon be far away.

I would often see him when I went down to the market place. Always surrounded by fawning disciples he'd argue with food and cloth merchants, ask them heady questions such as, 'are the gods moral?' He pretended to be an ignoramus who only wanted others to instruct him. The merchants soon caught onto his game and were very busy whenever he showed up.

Why should bother I with a pseudo-philosopher who believes that women have inferior souls? What can he tell me that I don't already know? I've spoken with Confucius, Mozi and Pythagoras but learned nothing from them. I've no reason to believe that Socrates is any wiser.

I agreed to provide the day's entertainment because Timaeus offered to pay me generously, but otherwise I didn't expect to talk much with the guests. I combed

my hair, scented my body and put on a pink transparent dress. With my flute in hand, I presented myself at his house.

The disciples all have the wild-eye look of fanatics. It takes a few drinks before they start to behave like men with bodies and feelings; not merely overgrown heads. Socrates is a small rotund man with a balding head, hooked nose, a jutting out lower lip and bushy brows. He walks with a disciplined step as if thinking three times before placing his foot. Each facial expression appears deliberate. Though he says little his massive presence fills the room. I'd like to take him to a private room and seduce him there; watch him lose his intellect for an hour. However it won't happen tonight. Not with so many disciples hanging on his sleeve.

Aristocles offers him a place on his couch and so the master sits down. He announces that his voice is hoarse. 'I've been talking for days. Today someone else must entertain.'

I serve a round of drinks; pick up my flute and play a lively tune to which I dance seductively. Socrates watches my every move with the intensity of a wolf stalking a deer. His stone wall of a face offers no clue as to his thoughts. I suspect he's pondering the purpose of dance, and its role in society. If, as I've heard, he hates poets, he must also hate dancers.

After I put aside the flute he surprises me by standing up and applauding. Affecting a smile, I run over to him with a wine pitcher.

He holds out his goblet. 'Thank you for playing.'

'You liked the music?' I say.

A warm sparkle dances in his eye, as if he decided that I'm not such a bad flute player after all.

'Where did you and Timaeus meet?' he asks.

‘In Taormina.’

‘But you’re not from there. You were born in the East.’ It doesn’t take a philosopher to guess my origin as I have an olive complexion, long black hair and elongated, oriental eyes --- scarcely local features.

‘I’m from the East but for many years I lived in Taormina.’

‘You know the Pythagorean School?’

‘Not only the school, but the master himself.’ I retreat to the kitchen before he can reply.

From his surprised look I know that I’ve aroused his interest. Socrates knows that Pythagoras did not allow women in his inner circle. Also, that he died when Socrates was barely ten. Because I’m apparently only in my thirties I cannot, by Socratic logic, have known Pythagoras.

But I had. For years I served food at his table, and provided love services to his pupils -- one night even to the master himself. After making love, we sat up and discussed the mysteries of numbers until the morning sky grew pale. He told me about his discovery of perfect numbers, whose divisible parts add up to re-create the number itself. Then he turned to what troubled him. One of his disciples discovered entities --- Pythagoras refused to dignify them with the name of ‘number’, that could not be expressed rationally. After prolonged resistance Pythagoras accepted that the ‘irrational entities’ had to exist.

‘How are we to understand them?’ he asked me. ‘How can imperfection exist at the foundation of the universe -- in numbers?’

‘A rational creator could not have made the universe,’ I replied. My comment only made his beard bristle. I’d forced open the door he had tried to keep shut for years. He refused to believe that in his tidy world, the irrational and the passionate

have a right to exist.

I pick up my flute and dance again, close to the guests so they can smell my perfume. Aristocles watches me with lecherous eyes. His parted tunic reveals a muscular chest. He has a large face with small intense eyes and a closely trimmed beard. Last year he was the city's wrestling laureate and took the name of Plato. Disguised as a man I sneaked out to the ring where I watched his beautiful body squash his opponent. Before the end of the contest I was unfortunately unmasked and escorted out.

His eyes caress my body, pausing on my small, round breasts and desirable thighs. After I finish playing, he offers to help me lift wine to the room. We descend to the cellar where, among the wine jars, he pulls me up against his body. For a few minutes I enjoy his powerful caresses. But the wine on his breath sickens me so I push him away. I point to the jars. 'Those three are to come.'

Back at the party we find Critias in the middle of the story of a mythical island called Atlantis, located on an unspecified continent beyond the pillars of Heracles. Long ago its people allegedly conquered the world, except for Athens. Concerned for the beleaguered city, Zeus gave the world a good shake and toppled the Atlantean cities. A huge wave swallowed up the remains of the continent.

'Is this story true or are you making it up?' Socrates asks.

'I heard it from my grandfather,' Critias says as he wipes wine from his beard. 'He swore to me that he heard it from Solon of Sais, an Egyptian priest, but I've no idea whether it's true. Maybe it's no more than a fable.'

Socrates sighs. 'The more miraculous the story the more people want to believe it. Athenians will swallow any story that presents them as greater than other people.'

‘I prophesy that generations will re-tell this one,’ Critias says, and raises his goblet.

‘Only if someone is idiotic enough to write it down,’ Aristocles says.

‘Right,’ Socrates grunts and closes his eyes. I offer to fill his goblet again, but he pulls it away. ‘Not now. Bacchus knows that I’ve drunk more than my measure.’

‘You asked me to provide you with good entertainment,’ Timaeus says. He nods for me to play on.

Socrates holds up his hand. ‘What I have in mind, Timaeus, is that *you* would entertain me today. Yesterday’s discussion on the Ideal State left me hoarse. Let’s hear something new, more cosmic. What can you tell us about stars, spheres and heavenly bodies?’

‘More wine,’ Timaeus says to me. ‘This will take some time.’

They hold out their goblets, except for Socrates who covers his with his hand.

‘We cannot discuss the origin of the universe, without considering the nature of its creator,’ Timaeus says. ‘A world such as ours must have a cause, because everything that belongs in it has a cause. The creator is not necessarily a god, but he is at least a demigod.’

Many heads nod in assent.

I look through a window at the setting sun, watching the golden light burnish the city’s white buildings. Why must I sit here listening to logic and reason when I might be dancing with real people, those who feel passion and divine madness? I want to be like the Delphic Oracle, writhing in her throes of inspiration, instead of sitting here among heady men.

Already Critias and Hermocrates have slid down on their backs, their eyes half-closed. Sitting beside them, Socrates weighs every word.

‘As astronomers, we observe order in the heavenly sphere,’ Timaeus says. ‘Movements of the stars and spheres are all governed by harmonic intervals, defined by simple numerical ratios. Each sphere turns in its proper place. Such an order must have been designed by a great architect. So we of necessity must contemplate the mind of the builder who first perceived those elemental harmonies, and then proceeded to create a living body for them -- the very world where we now live and breathe.’

Bastard. He’s paraphrasing mathematics that I learned sitting at Pythagoras’s table. I then taught it to Timaeus, but he’ll never admit it, because I’m a woman. Not that he disdains women in other contexts. After the party, he’ll expect me to serve up my body like cooked meat. Unless I slip him a strong drink that makes him sleep till dawn.

Aristocles follows the speaker’s monolog. Endowed with a perfect memory he can recall any discussion or conversation verbatim. Frowning, Socrates stares into the distance as if dissatisfied by something in Timaeus’s account.

Timaeus’s words grate like a churning mill stone. To drown them out I play my flute: choosing basic Pythagorean chords that express churning water, untameable winds, mountains that spout volcanic fire. The same forces sleep in the human soul until passion awakens them. Not content with earthly numbers I reach for the higher ones --- those that sing of heavenly spheres, wheels that turn in a sublime world far away from human confusion. I lose myself in the music, allow the chords to repeat as they will, present variations that climax in a passionate burst before they climb down to simple Pythagorean notes. Only Socrates appears to hear the music, for he turns his keen glance at me, and smiles.

Though I want to correct Timaeus’s story, the flute speaks instead and inserts

passion into a sterile story of numbers. I play of sorrow so familiar to me, my wanderings, of a fertile world that held sway long before this dark age, when fields produced their crops, and rains fell when they needed to. Today the barren hills no longer produce any crop. Athens and Sparta are locked in a long senseless bloodletting where men are killed, their children forced into slavery and women are bereaved. All because of some ideal devotion to the City. Meanwhile Timaeus describes a perfect world designed by an imagined creator. He tries to convince us that the world is harmonious, or would be if philosophers were in charge.

After he finishes his lecture, Timaeus asks for wine to slake his thirst. He toasts the gods, but only Socrates rises to participate. Aristocles lies on his back, his mouth open, snoring. Critias and Hermocrates have their eyes closed.

Socrates embraces Timaeus. 'A splendid discourse, 'Your words are truly inspired.' He turns to me. 'I stand enchanted by your music. It seemed to arise like crystal water from a deep well. Where did you find such heavenly notes?'

'Master, the music arose in me from the ether.'

'I was privileged to hear it. I'd like to pay you for your services.'

'No payment is necessary, master. The music was for you.'

Socrates reaches for a pouch dangling from his belt. 'I must insist. Whatever Timaeus offered you, I will match.'

Grasping his wrist I pull his hand away from the pouch. His quickening pulse reveals that he enjoys a woman's touch. I hold his hand; caress it slightly before letting it go. 'Master, the only payment I ask is to dialog with you. Can we discuss the question I put to you?'

Socrates' eyes light up like stars. 'Certainly. What shall it be?'

'What is wisdom?'

‘Is that your question?’

‘Yes.’

Timaeus shrugs. ‘She thinks she’s a philosopher.’

‘Let her speak,’ Socrates says.

‘Master, though my words may anger you, I will not soften them. How is it that so many men in one room can be so deluded? Your thoughts, logic and systems grate on the air within those walls. They contain no more truth than the story of Athena bursting from Zeus' head.’

‘Now, you don't know what you're talking about,’ Timaeus says, drawing himself up so he can look down on me. ‘Spend some time with us and you'll learn something.’

‘You don’t see things as they are. Your thoughts and your logic distort the real world.’

Timaeus waves his hands in exasperation. ‘So, her position is that thinking cannot lead to wisdom.’

‘Men's thinking only sows confusion. It breeds misery,’ I say. ‘It can change nothing. Our citizens kill Spartans and sell them into slavery. Politicians use logic to convince us to slaughter men and women like animals. Such is the fruit of reason: confusion, suffering and death.’

‘I’m no stranger to the war,’ Socrates says. ‘I stood on the battlefield and watched the slaughter. War happens because men don’t think clearly. As Timaeus says, the uncultivated mind came into the world as a formless entity. It needs to be taught to reason morally. As philosophers, we have taken upon ourselves that very task.’

‘But you don’t know what is moral. Only what you all agree is moral: service

to the State, an Ideal State that doesn't exist. Your cultivated mind leaves a person bereft of passion and divine madness, a eunuch who cannot respond to the beauty or touch of a woman.'

I lift my arms and draw close so that he can smell my perfume, feel my raw sensuality.

Cold as a rock, he responds, 'The uneducated mind is disordered.'

'It contains an order that your reason will never know.'

Socrates strokes his beard. He looks to Aristocles for a response, but Aristocles remains fast asleep. Bored by our dialog, Timaeus settles on a couch under the window and closes his eyes.

'Yet by examining our lives, we produce order,' Socrates says

'You send men away to fight wars and to rape and enslave for the glory of Athens. Many of those men are in this room. Your teachings will make them capable of committing every atrocity. The doctor who extracts healing medicines also extracts the juice of the hemlock.'

Socrates grimaces. His eyes flash at me, his jaw stiffens. 'So, ignorance is preferable to learning. Should we elect politicians who are unlearned?'

'Don't be angry with me master. I am only a woman, a failed male cast into female body to pay for the sins of a past life. Can't you see that your philosophy is destroying the world? That it produces chaos?'

'Why should thought produce chaos?' he says as if talking to himself.

'Because it must. Thought is a man who desires a woman, but must resort to masturbation because he is alone. Alone, he conjures up images of attractive women, but none of them are real. And so you and your friends imagine ideal cities or that demi-god of Timaeus. He endows his creator with our human attributes of love, desire

and reason -- perfect indeed. Such a deity is a phantasm of our confused minds. He doesn't exist.'

'No, I didn't like that aspect of the story,' Socrates says with a smile.

'Why are reason and intellect so important to you?' I say.

Socrates clasps his hands as if thinking hard, then he opens them in a gesture of resignation. 'Because reason is all that I know. Over the years I've sharpened it, discovered what it can and cannot do. Like a sword in battle, one day it may break, but you shouldn't throw it away for fear it may break. If reason and dialog are not the way to wisdom, what is a man to do?'

'Go to the land where wisdom is found.'

'Where is that?'

'Don't be angry with me, master.'

'Just tell me where to sail. Also, stop calling me master. I'm too ignorant to merit the title. Socrates will do.'

'Very well, Socrates. I'll tell you where to sail.'

'I'm waiting.'

'Jason had to find the golden fleece in Colchis, beyond the Bosphorus straits. Why should he have searched for the fleece in Crete or in Egypt where the fleece doesn't exist?'

'Why bring in the golden fleece?'

'Using intellect to find wisdom is like sailing west to find the golden fleece.'

'I never liked Jason.'

'I would join you in this journey if you would have me.'

He sighs. 'There's no time now for adventurous sailing. The city is about to indict me. They're determined to take my life. Mostly because I oppose the war. My

presence in the city threatens their quiet sleep. Forgive my angry words. Thanks to you I've glimpsed a vast and unknown land. Unattainable I fear. I'll never know anything about it.'

He stares through the window as if watching his life crumble into dust.

'If you had eyes that show the world as it is, not what you want it to be,' I say, 'Would you use them? Do you have the strength to see a woman as she is and not as you desire her? Can you see a tree not as a collection of numbers or concepts but as a solid fact? Is the world for you a sensual feast?'

He takes a deep breath. 'Your eyes would be a terrible gift for any man. They would reveal him as absolutely nothing. Less than a speck of dirt. I don't have the strength for such eyes.'

'And if you were younger?'

His eyes flash with annoyance. 'Why ply me with hypotheticals? I'm old. I cannot change that. No one can alter their age.'

For a while neither of us speak. The air in the room remains tense. He turns to me, 'Why did you ask me those questions? What do you expect of an old man in the twilight of his life?'

Tears well up inside me. 'For many years I've tried to find out why I'm exiled to this world. I've spoken with those who appeared wise but found only men who worship their thoughts, who call what they know, 'wisdom'. I loved Pythagoras but he could not respond. He'd banished passion along with his irrational numbers. Leaving him, I came to Athena's city. When I saw you tonight, I hoped that that you might know something real; that you could show me the way out of this world. But you're all like your nonsensical creator, with your distorted vision and mental gymnastics.'

Socrates laughs in his beard. 'Perhaps you don't see the obvious because it's

too close to you. Tonight, between your music, dance and our dialog, something happened. We need to find out what. I would ask you now for a favour -- a professional one.'

Earlier I fantasized that I'd make love to him, awaken passion in his body and watch it extinguish his reason, but my anger extinguished any desire for sex. I only want to disappear, leave him and the ridiculous party. Leave Athens and continue my journey.

'Not the service of love,' he says, 'But that we might touch something greater. Walk with me in the garden. We won't speak to each other. It's time to end all arguments and discussions. I would have you with me, in silence.'

'Why?'

'In silence you may discover what you seek, and I my ignorance.'

The stars outside glow bright in a deep blue sky. The garden extends past a large vegetable patch to the feet of shadowy mountains. We walk slowly along a path. My anger melts away. I wanted him to unlock the secret of my life but found a mysterious man willing to listen to me but unable to offer answers. Though I all but demolished his philosophic edifice, he doesn't appear to care. He knows he will die soon, leave the world taking nothing with him.

Could I accompany him on his long, dark journey? My plea rises to the stars, but melts into a silence so deep and immense that I cannot imagine anything disturbing it. In its presence, all the questions and troubles I carried for countless years fade to insignificance. Too trivial for me to bother with. In that instant, all sense of who I am or who I was is erased from my soul. I no longer know where I am; neither do I care. Even as the silence envelops me, I know that it is so far beyond anything I could imagine that I cannot approach it or ask it any questions. I may not

reach it, but perhaps it can touch me. Socrates halts a few feet away, smiles at me.

We don't need to speak to each other to communicate our vision.

Light flashes from the house -- Timaeus staggers into the garden holding aloft a burning taper. I turn away from Socrates. While we both tasted the silence, the stars moved halfway across the sky. The eastern sky has brightened. Together we dwelt with something greater than either of us could conceive, beside which our thoughts were nothing. It felt like a friend I'd known for a long time. Leaving its company was like waking from deep sleep.

I say to him. 'What were we doing?'

He shakes his head. 'We should leave this be, and not inquire too deeply into it. Some things have no names.'