

The Jackals

by

David Zellnik

*Inspired by “Schakale and Araber”
by Franz Kafka, pub. 1917*

*(Author’s note: This is an obscure story by Kafka
which I am not sure has been published in English;
the translation from the German was done by myself.
Portions of Kafka’s text are closely paraphrased in a
few key passages –DZ)*

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Cast - 2 men, 2 women

- Asad - a tall man, a native to Bezzerabistan, any age.
- Katie - a young woman, from here.
- The Oldest Jackal - a women operating a puppet.
- Two Other Jackals - a man, operating 2 smaller puppets.

****** I imagine the Jackals as puppets, however if a director can envision another way of making the jackals come alive I am open to that.***

Time: The Present.

Place: The (fictional) country of Bezzerabistan

Lights up on the deserts of
Bezzerabistan. Dusk.

*In the distance the sound of
jackals. Perhaps we see
shadows of them, far away.*

*KATIE, a tourist, stands,
holding her body tightly
against an increasingly cold
wind. She has a backpack on,
seems ill at ease, shifts her
weight back and forth on one
leg then another.*

*A tall man stands with her:
ASAD, wearing a mixture of
tribal clothes (long flowing
robes) and a t-shirt with a
decal of some 80s pop band.
Los Lobos, perhaps.*

Mid-argument:

You promised-

KATIE

I know.

ASAD

Hotels every night.

KATIE

Things come up, unexpected. The camel-

ASAD

The brochure said-

KATIE

I know. I'm sorry.

ASAD

It's cold here.

KATIE

I'm sorry.

ASAD

Beat. She looks around.

KATIE

It's like, nothing here. Waste. Wasteland.

Silence.

ASAD

(New idea) I have a friend with camels, maybe nearby.
Wait:

*Asad whips out cell phone.
Starts talking in his native
language.*

*After 20 seconds of talking,
he closes phone.*

KATIE

The phones work out here?

ASAD

Good news: my friend is near - new camels will be here soon.

KATIE

(Like she gets the ruse) Oh. Right.

ASAD

What?

KATIE

Your friends with the camels. We'll ride them and all of a sudden we'll have to make a convenient stop by his shop, or his friend's shop - *Abdul* or *Fuad*, *Fuad's woodworking shop* - and I'll feel duty-bound to buy the crap he's selling.

ASAD

No he just has camels, to take us to the hotel -

KATIE

Goddam every day we stop at some quaint trade tent and I'm supposed to smile at the *authentic* and *unique* craftsmanship, which I've invariably seen outside the goddam subway station next to my apartment. It's *tiring*, it's endless-

ASAD

(Gently) Shh.

*The sound of jackals moaning
in the distance.*

KATIE

- What's that?

ASAD

Jackals.

*Asad moves close to Katie,
close enough to have her pull
back.*

*...Which he notices but does
not comment on. Instead, he
points in the distance.*

ASAD

See? From the mountains of Yendekia the jackals come into
our desert.

KATIE

Will they enter the camp?

ASAD

Perhaps.

KATIE

And when they're here-? (*seamless*) You see this is why I
demanded hotels every night!

ASAD

They only eat carrion. They must smell the sick animal.

KATIE

You said the camel would be okay!

ASAD

I thought it would. Yet who am I to argue with the thousands
of years of instinct that tell the jackals to come close and
wait. For the camel to die. You should come inside.

Beat.

KATIE

I'm... gonna make a call. Since the phones work.

Of course. ASAD

May I? KATIE

She wants to be alone. He smiles.

Of course. ASAD

Katie drops her backpack, sits. She opens her cell phone. Dials. The call goes through.

Hi Ma. KATIE
Bezzerabistan.
Yeah the phone works, we're talking. The phone works.
No, everything's fine. Great.
No yesterday was Wazzanistan, tomorrow is the old stone churches- we meet up with the group and spend 2 days in Yendekia-
No it was an extra fee.

MEANWHILE: 3 Jackals move closer. They move low to the ground, in halting steps, fast then slow, closer and closer.

The OLDEST JACKAL, female, is in the lead. Behind her are TWO SMALLER JACKALS, operated by one (male) puppeteer.

Katie doesn't see them.

KATIE
A desert in Bezzerabistan, an oasis. (Lies) It's uh, green and lush and beautiful.
No Ma, I don't know. Maybe longer. I wanted to get lost.
Let me get lost.
No, we're not gonna spend the night in the desert. A hotel every night, that's what the tour office promised-

The Oldest Jackal is suddenly inside the crook of Katie's arm, somehow immediately snuggling into her.

It has happened so quickly Katie doesn't know what to do. She is terrified, but also senses immediately that the Oldest Jackal won't hurt her. They lock eyes.

KATIE

I - I'll call you back.

Katie shuts her cell phone.

OLDEST JACKAL

(With hushed urgency) I am the oldest jackal far and wide. I am so thankful to be able to meet you. I'd almost given up hope. I have been waiting so long for this day. My mother waited, and her mother waited, and her mother waited, all the way back to the Mother of all Jackals. Believe me!

KATIE

I - I -

OLDEST JACKAL

Yes?

KATIE

(Recovering composure) I uh, gotta say: I find it hard to believe you've been waiting for me all this time. I'm here cause one of our camels got sick.

OLDEST JACKAL

That is in line with our prophecies.

KATIE

That someone would come.

OLDEST JACKAL

Yes.

KATIE

Because her tour guide's camel got sick.

OLDEST JACKAL

Yes.

KATIE

Named Katie?

OLDEST JACKAL

Yes!

KATIE

Katie.

OLDEST JACKAL

That is the name of the person we were told to wait for!

Beat.

KATIE

Katie?

OLDEST JACKAL

Please listen-

KATIE

I decided to go on a tour like on the spur of the moment.
I'm from 6000 miles away!

OLDEST JACKAL

Yes I KNOW. It is indeed on that very piece of information
we hang our deepest hopes!

KATIE

Oh.

*Katie looks around to see they
are alone. Her tone changes,
conspiratorial.*

KATIE

Well then. What do you want of me, Jackal?

OLDEST JACKAL

You are from across the ocean. There is much wisdom in
there. Here among the Bezzerabis no spark of understanding
can be kindled. A haughty people. You must already have seen
this. They kill animals, living animals, and feast on them.
On flesh they themselves kill! And yet they spurn meat
already dead! Ridiculous!

KATIE

You're talking very loudly. There are Bezzerabis in that tent.

The Oldest Jackal laughs, as do the do the Two Other Jackals, which Katie for the first time notices are around her.

KATIE

What's so funny?

OLDEST JACKAL

You really are from far away or you'd know that never in the history of the world has a jackal been scared of a Bezzerabi! Why should we be afraid? Even when they whip us we are not afraid!

The Oldest Jackal laughs more.

Is it not misfortune enough that we must live among such people?! Why must we live among them?! Answer!

KATIE

Uhhhh... I try to be un-biased about, um, things I don't know all the information about.

OLDEST JACKAL

So you have heard where you're from of the struggle between Jackals and Bezzerabis?

KATIE

(Lies) Of course. It's in our papers all the time. But.

OLDEST JACKAL

But?

KATIE

The press where I'm from doesn't, you know, report the jackal side very well. And it- to me it seems-

OLDEST JACKAL

Yes?

KATIE

Well, correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems like this is an uh, you know: what you have here is an *ancient grudge*. Like a blood thing and so, um.

OLDEST JACKAL

Yes?

KATIE

It can only end in blood.

Silence. Then:

OLDEST JACKAL

You are right! You're so smart! Oh Katie it is just as we had dreamed you'd be! So clever!

The jackals move in even closer.

Katie hates the smell of the jackals' breath, which she now has no choice but to breathe in.

The Oldest Jackal does not notice this.

OLDEST JACKAL

It is very smart what you have said, and it reflects the teachings of our old jackal masters. We also hold that this is a thing in the blood and only in blood can it end. Do you understand?

KATIE

No.

OLDEST JACKAL

It means...

KATIE

(Understands) Oh.

OLDEST JACKAL

Yes.

KATIE

But they'll fight back.

OLDEST JACKAL

We know.

KATIE

There are 2 more in the tent. They have guns. They'll mow you down in packs.

OLDEST JACKAL

You misunderstand us, in your people-y way, which I see is no different 6000 miles away. We're not going to kill them.

KATIE

Good.

OLDEST JACKAL

There would not be enough water in the great southern ocean to cleanse us of the blood of their living bodies! As it is, we run from the sight and smell of bodies into the clean air, into the desert which is our home for this very reason!

The Oldest Jackal hides her nose. The smell she imagines disgusts her.

KATIE

So what are you going to do? (*Seamless into*) Hey hey, let me go!

The two smaller jackals are now grabbing the back of Katie's shirt, so she cannot move.

OLDEST JACKAL

They're carrying your train. It is their way of honoring you.

KATIE

I don't feel honored! Let me go!

OLDEST JACKAL

Please-

KATIE

Tell them to stop it!

OLDEST JACKAL

Shh shh of course, naturally they will do whatever you wish, but it will take them a little while. All right? They've bitten into your clothes quite deeply, as is our way. OLDEST

JACKAL (cont)

They'll have to unlock their upper and lower jaws slowly, but in the meanwhile... please hear me out.

KATIE

Your behavior doesn't put me in the mood to help you.

OLDEST JACKAL

Oh Katie, please don't hold our clumsy ways against us!

*She howls for the first time
with the voice of a jackal.*

Please Katie! We are poor animals and have nothing but our teeth! For everything we wish to do – everything good and everything bad, everything noble and everything impure, all we have is our teeth! Forgive us! Please say you forgive us!

KATIE

Fine. Fine. What do you want, then?

*Unseen Jackals in the distance
start howling.*

OLDEST JACKAL

Do you hear? It is all the jackals of the world singing our song of hope for you, Katie. Katie: you must end this fight, this conflict that has been setting the entire world at loggerheads, hurtling the entire world towards war. We must have peace from these Bezzerabis, breathable air, a view of the horizon cleansed of them!

KATIE

But other people will just move in, right? Wazzanistanis, Yendeks...

OLDEST JACKAL

We have not been cursed with them but with Bezzerabis! The Bezzerabis who kill sheep, sheep who are forced to die hearing their own deathly bleatings! The Bezzerabis who whip us while we eat dead bodies! They whip us!

*The other two jackals are now
weeping.*

Oh how can you bear this awful world, Katie! You with your noble heart and sweet intestines! Dirt is the Bezzerabi's white! Dirt is the Bezzerabi's black! And their beards are

OLDEST JACKAL (*cont*)

horrible! You want to spit when you see the gunked up corners of their eyes! And their armpits! If they lift their arms, hell itself rises! Purity, we must have purity! Katie! With the help of your hands, your all-capable hands, you can end this struggle once and for all!

*Behind Katie one of the other jackals lifts a pair of **rusty shears.***

KATIE

What do you want me to do?

OLDEST JACKAL

You must kill them. All the Bezzerabis in the camp.

TWO SMALLER JACKALS

(Whisper) Kill them, kill them.

OLDEST JACKAL

You will take these shears, these holy shears that our mothers passed down through the generations. You must take these shears that have been waiting for you.

ALL THREE JACKALS

(A moan) For you! Yoooh!!

She takes the shears and:

Asad suddenly is standing there.

ASAD

What is going on?

KATIE

Nothing.

The jackals become immediately silent. Katie hides the shears behind her back.

ASAD

Were you speaking with the jackals?

KATIE

That's a silly question.

*Asad's face asks "Is it?"
Still he has a task at hand.*

ASAD

But they're in luck – more luck than I: our camel has died.

*Asad gestures to the side of
the stage.*

I have dragged it out for them to feast on. Their instincts were totally correct. Watch this! *(To the jackals)* Come jackals. Come!

*The jackals approach the body,
slowly, almost penitent. (The
body is just where the front
row of the audience is.)*

*They (mime) biting the corpse,
pulling at it... then they
start attacking the dead camel.*

*Asad suddenly takes out a
whip. He steps back and whips
the jackals.*

They moan.

*...But are so consumed with
eating they do not scatter.*

ASAD

They have the blood in their mouths now, they won't run.

KATIE

Why are you-?

ASAD

(Ignoring) Beautiful animals, don't you think?

Asad whips them more.

KATIE

Stop it. *(To the Oldest Jackal)* Tell him to stop whipping you. *(To Asad)* Please stop.

*Suddenly Katie is holding the
shears to Asad's neck.*

KATIE

I said *stop*.

ASAD

You *have* been speaking with them.

KATIE

No, I just. Let them eat in peace.

ASAD

They're our dogs. (*Low, snide*) Prettier than the dogs in your country. Low domesticated breeds.

Asad whips them again.

Katie digs the blade into Asad's neck, not cutting him... yet.

KATIE

Stop whipping them.

ASAD

And I was worried they might not perform their little play for you. I hope you got your money's worth.

KATIE

They didn't speak to me, jackals don't -

ASAD

Then where did you get the shears?

KATIE

(*Beat*) So you know what they want.

ASAD

Of course I know - everyone knows! As long as there are Bezzerabis, those rusty shears will be passed from jackal to jackal through the desert - till the end of time! Every tourist from every land, every visiting man or woman seems to them *exactly* the person their old teachers prophesied would come.

Asad starts to laugh, in spite of himself.

ASAD (Cont)

They have this *crazy hope*, Miss Katie. Some love them for this very reason. And the Jackals hate those who love them most of all.

He laughs more. Katie seems to soften for a moment...

Then grows hard with steely resolve. She keeps the blade on his neck.

KATIE

You think I'm dumb. Dumb rich foreign girl. Pieces of cash floating above my head. Your *customs*, your *traditions*. Your Bezzerabistan is a charnel house!

Asad is frightened.

ASAD

Miss Katie, they are wild animals. Hopelessly lost animals.

She keeps the blade on his neck.

Miss Katie, they will use you and then let you die! You will not know how to live among them. They will hover around your body and strip the bones clean. Look: new camels are coming to take us to a hotel! You will die and their rusty shears will be passed on to their daughters, to their daughters' daughters, to their daughters' daughters' daughters –

*Katie slits his throat.
Blood pours out.*

He falls to his knees.

He tries to crawl away. He collapses. Dead.

Katie cannot believe she has done it.

The Oldest Jackal bows. The Two Other Jackals bow to her as well.

KATIE

What do I do now?

Silence.

OLDEST JACKAL

Thank you, Katie of the Jackals.

KATIE

Do I kill the men inside? Answer!

Silence then:

OLDEST JACKAL

No. *(Corrects herself)* Soon. We walk!

Katie stands open-mouthed.

Then opens her phone.

A light on Katie and she walks. The jackals on either side, in lights of their own.

(Softly, growing through to the end, Bezzerabi music plays)

KATIE

(Into phone) Hi Mom. Listen, listen. I'm not coming home. I'm happy.

She laughs. She also might be crying.

No I can't explain. I'm not coming home.

She and the jackals continue to walk. Into the phone:

I'm walking with the jackals, Ma. No you heard me, they're *jackals*. We're um, searching for Bezzerabis to attack no I'm not *crazy*! It's just – I need to hide from these two chieftains whose brother I killed. Listen: I need you to call the army, we need backup – it's a noble struggle! This is winnable, Ma. We just need the army to come to back us up – Then we're a fat and lazy people and we deserve to be – Carrion. I'm eating carrion. Yes, *dead meat*.

KATIE (cont)

No, I'm growing stronger. I don't have time to explain, the chosen one can eat carrion, their prophesies are very clear. Well I'm sorry I don't sound stronger I feel great.

Ma, Ma-

Listen: this is Katie, I'm Katie. Katie of the Jackals! Ma listen: my arrival was predicted by the Mother of all Jackals. My advent prefigured by several false liberators - I was always waiting for this.

No I don't need hotels! I broke the war wide open!

The jackals start to bellow.

Listen, they're singing.

Katie holds her phone up.

The jackals are bellowing like animals.

(Into phone) Isn't it beautiful?

No, listen harder. It's their song of liberation. Praising - me.

Katie holds her phone up again. The jackals bellow.

Were you listening? Listen to their music!

The jackals bellow louder.

Bezzarabi music grows louder.

End of Play.