

Eternally Artemisia

Some loves, like some women, are timeless.

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*The first time I saw you,
I recognized your smile and I knew.
In your eyes, I saw the stars,
and in your laughter, I heard the rain.
Caressed by the sun, the journey began
to touch the Galilean moons.*

*Time is an illusion
but dreams are real.
In the dark and infinite skies,
never stop searching for me.*

*In every design, every word, every song,
you will find me at your side in another season.
It takes but a single thought to bridge the gap,
to melt the barriers that separate us.
Open your heart and let the river in,
and together we will be again.*

*We are traveling at the speed of light,
looking for the road signs to guide us home.
In the dark and infinite skies,
never stop searching for me.*

Eternally yours, Artemisia

— M. Muldoon



Chapter 1

Slaying the General

She was surprised how effortlessly the sword slid into his neck, slicing his vocal chords and just as astonished by the amount of brute force required to finish beheading him. Days before, the plan to kill the Assyrian general who was about to lay siege to her people seemed simple enough. Using her feminine wiles and beauty to ingratiate herself with the self-infatuated man had been child's play. That had been the painless part. Now, standing in a dark tent, outside of Bethulia surrounded by hundreds of sleeping soldiers, finishing the task of cutting off his head was proving more difficult than she imagined.

Judith peered over at Abra, her friend and confidant, who undeterred by his flailing limbs, was forcefully and determinedly pinning the drunken man's torso to the bed. The young widow hesitated ever so slightly, but when Abra glanced up, and she saw the same look of determination mirrored on the maid's face, despite her aching arms, ravaged body, and bruised thighs, she found the strength to continue.

Raising the blade high over her head, with the moral certitude of a warrior, Judith drove it back into the man's neck until his body went limp and she knew he was finally dead. As Holofernes shuddered and the life left his body, Judith observed in horrified fascination how his thickly muscled arms lay heavily upon the bed like the thick cuts of meat she had seen hanging in the butcher's shop.

She also noted how the general's head lolled back upon the soft cushion in a distorted way, still half attached to his body. With the attentiveness of the village's horse doctor, she watched as blood spurted from the punctured veins and how it ran in rivulets across his upper torso. In another life, if she

had the finesse of an artist, she would have painted this macabre scene. The man's body, half cast in semi-gloom and his distorted face illuminated by candlelight, would have made a magnificent portrait to be captured for eternity; a masterpiece to commemorate this moment—a trophy, almost as precious as his sawed-off head.

“Judith, get on with it!”

Hearing Abra's urgent whisper, she let out a steady stream of air. The monster was finally defeated. The thug who raped her sisters and friends—who threatened to subjugate her entire tribe—was finally dead. Suddenly the thought made her giddy with relief. Her eyes darted back to Abra's face that was now entirely concealed by shadow. Her friend too had suffered terribly at the hands of these cruel and sinful men.

“Yes, you are right. There will be plenty of time in the coming days to mend our hearts, heal wounds, and relish this victory. We have killed the snake, but we need proof he is dead!” With a harsh laugh she added, “Once the Assyrian army sees what remains of their leader's brains on a stick, it will slither back where it came from. Only then will we be free of the tyrants who invaded our land and tried to enslave us.”

Steadying the heavy blade over the man again, Judith sawed into the coarse tendons of his throat and worked relentlessly until she heard the soft neighing of a horse and the idle chatter of two men approaching. On the other side of the flimsy canvas, the women could hear their off-color jokes as they sniggered amongst themselves about the trollop that Holofernes was entertaining that night. They remained quiet, knowing for the moment they were safe. Unless the guards' suspicions were aroused, they would never dare to enter the general's tent while he was entertaining a female guest.

It was precisely this knowledge the widow had used to her advantage. Earlier that evening when she crossed the threshold of Holofernes' field command post, responding to his licentious invitation, Judith knew she was the one in control of the situation. It was she who plied the general with copious amounts of wine and sugared dates and beguiled him with stories designed to flatter his ego. When Holofernes patted the bed, nodding his head suggestively and letting her know he hoped to sully it with the sticky

residue of their lovemaking, she was already one step ahead, intending to soil it with his viscid blood instead.

Distancing herself from the act, Judith had slowly undressed—sacrificing her body—letting him violate and brutalize her. Finally satiated and drunk on the obscene quantities of wine he had consumed, and with the aid of a sleeping potion she slipped into his drink, the general fell into a comatose stupor. Easing from the bed and dressing in the murky light, Judith had called softly to Abra who was patiently keeping watch outside.

Now, as the sweat dripped from her brow, the young widow listened tensely, waiting for the soldiers' voices to trail away into the inky black night. When silence descended on the camp again, Judith resumed carving through the thick sinewy muscles of his esophagus, undeterred by the river of red that splattered her arms and flowed onto the sheets.

Every so often the sword, catching a gleam of candlelight, flashed a silver shard across the canvas walls and over Judith's refined features. In the flickering gloom, as she worked, she scrutinized the silent scream frozen on his face, creating a grotesque death mask. Ready to be done with the grisly task, she bore down and, with one last decisive slice, Holofernes' massive head finally broke free of his torso and slipped from her grasp, falling to the ground with a pathetic thud.

Abra shuddered as if she could barely believe they had succeeded, then quickly sprang into action. Balancing a basket on her hip, she skirted the bed and reached down and collected the gruesome prize by the strands of the general's long black hair. As she worked, Judith rested her trembling arms, observing the dramatic shadow her maidservant cast on the wall of the tent. She inhaled deeply and her nostrils constricted at the smell of sweet wine mixed with the stench of fresh blood.

With one final act of defiance, she wiped the sword clean on the silken sheets of the bed. Then straightening her shoulders, she triumphantly proclaimed, "Abra, as long as I live, I will have control over my being!"