

Madrid

Changes

his mind

George Alec Effinger



Marid Changes His Mind
by George Alec Effinger

Fictionwise

www.fictionwise.com

Copyright ©1989 George Alec Effinger

First published in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction
Magazine, May 1989

NOTICE: This ebook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This book cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This ebook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.



Distributed by Fictionwise.com

Marid Changes His Mind
by George Alec Effinger

We'd ridden for many days out the coast highway toward Mauretania, the part of Algeria where I'd been born. In that time, even at its lethargic pace, the broken-down old bus had carried us from the city to some town forsaken by Allah before it even learned what its name was. Centuries come, centuries go: In the Arab world they arrive and depart loaded on the roofs of shuddering, rattling buses that are more trouble to keep in service than the long parades of camels used to be. I remembered what those bus rides were like from when I was a kid, sitting or standing in the aisle with fifty other boys and men and maybe another two dozen clinging up on the roof. The buses passed by my home then. I saw turbaned heads, heads wearing fezes or knit caps, heads in white or checked *keffiyas*. All men. That was something I planned to ask my father about, if I ever met him. "O my father," I would say, "tell me why everyone on the bus is a man. Where are their women?"

And I always imagined that my father—I pictured him tall and lean with a fierce dark beard, a hawk or an eagle of a man; he was, in my vision, Arab, although I had my mother's word that he had been a French imam—I saw my father gazing thoughtfully into the bright sunlight, framing a careful reply to his young son. "O Marîd, my sweet one," he would say—and his voice would be deep and husky, issuing from the back of his throat as if he never used his lips to speak, although my mother said he wasn't like that at all—"Marîd, the women will come later. The men will send for them later."

Marid Changes His Mind
by George Alec Effinger

"Ah," I would say. My father could pierce *all* riddles. I could not pose a question that he did not have a proper answer for. He was wiser than our village shaykh, more knowledgeable than the man whose face filled the posters pasted on the wall we were pissing on. "Father," I would ask him, "why are we pissing on this man's face?"

"Because it is idolatrous to put his face on such a poster, and it is fit only for a filthy alley like this, and therefore the Prophet, may the blessing of Allah be on him and peace, tells us that what we are doing to these images is just and right."

"And father?" I would always have one more question, and he'd always be blissfully patient. He would smile down at me, put one hand fondly behind my head. "Father? I have always wanted to ask you, what do you do when you are pissing and your bladder is so full it feels like it will explode before you can relieve it and while you are pissing, *just then*, the muezzin—"

Saied hit me hard in the left temple with the palm of his hand. "You sleeping out here?"

I looked up at him. There was glare everywhere. I couldn't remember where the hell we were. "Where the hell are we?" I asked him.

He snorted. "*You're* the one from the Maghreb, the great, wild west. You tell me."

"Have we got to Algeria yet?" I didn't think so.

"No, stupid. I've been sitting in that goddamn little coffeehouse for three hours charming the warts off this fat fool. His name is Hisham."

"Where are we?"

"Just crossed through Carthage. We're on the outskirts of Old Tunis now. So listen to me. What's the old guy's name?"

"Huh? I don't remember."

He hit me hard in the right temple with the palm of his other hand. I hadn't slept in two nights. I was a little confused. Anyway, he got the easy part of the job: Sitting around the bus stops, drinking mint tea with the local ringleaders and gossiping about the marauding Christians and the marauding Jews and the marauding heathen niggers and just in general being goddamn smooth; and I got the piss-soaked alleys and the flies. I couldn't remember why we divided this business up like that. After all, I was supposed to be in charge—it was my idea to find this woman, it was my trip, we were using my money. But Saied took the mint tea and the gossip, and I got—well, I don't have to go into that again.

We waited the appropriate amount of time. The sun was disappearing behind a western wall; it was almost time for the sunset call to prayer. I stared at Saied, who was now dozing. Good, I thought, now I get to hit *him* in the head. I had just gotten up and taken one little step, when he looked up at me. "It's time, I guess," he said, yawning. I nodded, didn't have anything to add. So I sat back down, and Saied the Half-Hajj went into his act.

Saied is a natural-born liar, and it's a pleasure to watch him hustle. He had the personality module he liked best plugged into his brain—his heavy-duty, steel-belted, mean mother of a tough-guy moddy. Nobody messed with the Half-Hajj when he was chipping that one in.

Marid Changes His Mind
by George Alec Effinger

Back home in the city, Saied thought it was beneath him to earn money. He liked to sit in the cafés with me and Mahmoud and Jacques, all day and all evening. His little chicken, the American boy everybody called Abdul-Hassan, went out with older men and brought home the rent money. Saied liked to sneer a lot and wear his *gallebeya* cinched with a wide black leather belt, which was decorated with shiny chrome steel strips and studs. The Half-Hajj was always careful of his appearance.

What he was doing in this vermin-infested roadside slum was what he called fun. I waited a few minutes and followed him around the corner and into the coffeehouse. I shuffled in, unkempt, filthy, and took a chair in a shadowy corner. The proprietor glanced at me, frowned, and turned back to Saied. Nobody ever paid any attention to me. Saied was finishing the tail-end of a joke I'd heard him tell a dozen times since we'd left the city. When he came to the payoff, the shopkeeper and the four other men at the long counter burst into laughter. They liked Saied. He could make people like him whenever he wanted. That talent was programmed into an add-on chip snapped into his bad-ass moddy. With the right moddy and the right daddy chips, it didn't matter where you'd been born or how you'd been raised. You could fit in with any sort of people, you could speak any language, you could handle yourself in any situation. The information was fed directly into your short-term memory. You could literally become another person, Ramses II or Buck Rogers in the 25th Century, until you popped the moddy and daddies out.

Saied was being rough and dangerous, but he was also being charming, if you can imagine that combination. I watched the shopowner reach and grab the teapot. He poured some into the Half-Hajj's glass, slopping some more on the wooden counter. Nobody moved to mop it up. Saied raised the glass to drink, then slammed it down again. "Yaa salaam!" he roared. He leaped up.

"What is it, O my friend?" asked Hisham, the proprietor.

"My ring!" Saied shouted. He was wearing a large gold ring, and he'd been waving it under the old man's nose for two solid hours. It had had a big, round diamond in its center.

"What's the matter with your ring?"

"Look for yourself! The stone—my diamond—it's gone!"

Hisham caught Saied's flapping arm and saw that, indeed, the diamond was now missing. "Must have fallen out," the old man said, with the sort of folk wisdom you find only in these petrified provincial villages.

"Yes, fallen out," said Saied, not calmed in the least. "But where?"

"Do you see it?"

Saied made a great show of searching the floor around his stool. "No, I'm sure it's not here," he said at last.

"Then it must be out in the alley. You must've lost it the last time you went out to piss."

Saied slammed the bar with his heavy fist. "And now it's getting dark, and I must catch the bus."

"You still have time to search," said Hisham. He didn't sound very confident.

The Half-Hajj laughed without humor. "A stone like that, worth four thousand Tunisian dinars, looks like a tiny pebble among a million others. In the twilight I'd never find it. What am I to do?"

The old man chewed his lip and thought for a moment. "You're determined to leave on the bus, when it passes through?" he asked.

"I must, O my brother. I have urgent business."

"I'll help you if I can. Perhaps I can find the stone for you. You must leave your name and address with me; then if I find the diamond, I'll send it to you."

"May the blessings of Allah be on you and on your family!" said Saied. "I have little hope that you'll succeed, but it comforts me to know you will do your best for me. I'm in your debt. We must determine a suitable reward for you."

Hisham looked at Saied with narrowed eyes. "I ask no reward," he said slowly.

"No, of course not, but I insist on offering you one."

"No reward is necessary. I consider it my duty to help you, as a Muslim brother."

"Still," Saied went on, "should you find the wretched stone, I'll give you a thousand Tunisian dinars for the sustenance of your children and the ease of your aged parents."

"Let it be as you wish," said Hisham with a small bow.

"Here," said my friend, "let me write my address for you." While Saied was scribbling his name on a scrap of paper, I heard the rumbling of the bus as it lurched to a stop outside the building.

"May Allah grant you a good journey," said the old man.

"And may He grant you prosperity and peace," said Saied, as he hurried out to the bus.

I waited about three minutes. Now it was my turn. I stood up and staggered a couple of steps. I had a lot of trouble walking in a straight line. I could see the shopkeeper glaring at me in disgust. "The hell do you want, you filthy beggar?" he said.

"Some water," I said.

"Water! Buy something or get out!"

"Once a man asked the Messenger of God, may Allah's blessings be on him, what was the noblest thing a man may do. The reply was 'To give water to he who thirsts.' I ask this of you."

"Ask the Prophet. I'm busy."

I nodded. I didn't expect to get anything free to drink out of this crud. I leaned against his counter and stared at a wall. I couldn't seem to make the place stand still.

"Now what do you want? I told you to go away."

"Trying to remember," I said peevishly. "I had something to tell you. Ah, yes, I know." I reached into a pocket of my jeans and brought out a glittering round stone. "Is this what that man was looking for? I found this out there. Is this—?"

The old man tried to snatch it out of my hand. "Where'd you get that? The alley, right? *My* alley. Then it's mine."

"No, I found it. It's—"

"He said he wanted me to look for it." The shopkeeper was already gazing into the distance, spending the reward money.

"He said he'd pay you money for it."

Marid Changes His Mind
by George Alec Effinger

"That's right. Listen, I've got his address. Stone's no good to you without the address."

I thought about that for a second or two. "Yes, O Shaykh."

"And the address is no good to me without the stone. So here's my offer: I'll give you two hundred dinars for it."

"Two hundred? But he said—"

"He said he'd give me a thousand. Me, you drunken fool. It's worthless to you. Take the two hundred. When was the last time you had two hundred dinars to spend?"

"A long time."

"I'll bet. So?"

"Let me have the money first."

"Let me have the stone."

"The money."

The old man growled something and turned away. He brought a rusty coffee can up from under the counter. There was a thick wad of money in it, and he fished out two hundred dinars in old, worn bills. "Here you are, and damn your mother for a whore."

I took the money and stuffed it into my pocket. Then I gave the stone to Hisham. "If you hurry," I said, slurring my words despite the fact that I hadn't had a drink or any drugs all day, "you'll catch up with him. The bus hasn't left yet."

The man grinned at me. "Let me give you a lesson in shrewd business. The esteemed gentleman offered me a thousand dinars for a four-thousand dinar stone. Should I take the reward, or sell the stone for its full value?"

"Selling the stone will bring trouble," I said.

Marid Changes His Mind
by George Alec Effinger

“Let me worry about that. Now you go to hell. I don't ever want to see you around here again.”

He needn't worry about that. As I left the decrepit coffeehouse, I popped out the moddy I was wearing. I don't know where the Half-Hajj had gotten it; it had a Malaccan label on it, but I didn't think it was an over-the-counter piece of hardware. It was a dumber-than-dumber moddy; when I chipped it in, it ate about half of my intellect and left me shambling, stupid, and just barely able to carry out my half of the plan. With it out, the world suddenly poured back into my consciousness, and it was like waking from a bleary, drugged sleep. I was always angry for half an hour after I popped that moddy. I hated myself for agreeing to wear it, I hated Saied for conning me into doing it. *He* wouldn't wear it, not the Half-Hajj and his precious self-image. So I wore it, even though I'm gifted with twice the intracranial modifications as almost anybody else around, enough daddy capacity to make me the most talented son of a bitch in creation. And still Saied persuaded me to damp myself out to the point of near vegetability.

On the bus, I sat next to him, but I didn't want to talk to him or listen to him gloat.

“What'd we get for that chunk of glass?” he wanted to know. He'd already replaced the real diamond in his ring.

I just handed the money to him. It was his game, it was his score. I couldn't have cared less. I don't even know why I went along with him, except that he'd said he wouldn't come to Algeria with me unless I did.

He counted the bills. "Two hundred? That's all? We got more the last two times. Oh, well, what the hell—that's two hundred dinars more we can blow in Algiers. 'Come with me to the Kasbah.' Little do those gazelle-eyed boys know what's stealing toward them even now, through the lemon-scented night."

"This stinking bus, that's what, Saied."

He looked at me with wide eyes, then laughed. "You got no romance in you, Marîd," he said. "Ever since you had your brain wired, you been no fun at all."

"How about that." I didn't want to talk anymore. I pretended that I was going to sleep. I just closed my eyes and listened to the bus thumping and thudding over the broken pavement, with the unending arguments and laughter of the other passengers all around me. It was crowded and hot on that reeking bus, but it was carrying me hour by hour nearer to the solution of my own mystery. I had come to a point in my life where I needed to find out who I really was.

The bus stopped in the Barbary town of Annaba, and an old man with a grizzled gray beard came aboard selling apricot nectar. I got some for myself and some for the Half-Hajj. Apricots are the pride of Mauretania, and the juice was the first real sign that I was getting close to home. I closed my eyes and inhaled that delicate apricot aroma, then swallowed a mouthful of juice and savored the thick sweetness. Saied just gulped his down with a grunt and gave me a blunt "Thanks." The guy's got all the refinement of a dead bat.

Marid Changes His Mind
by George Alec Effinger

The road angled south, away from the dark, invisible coast toward the city of Constantine. Although it was getting late, almost midnight, I told Saied that I wanted to get off the bus and grab some supper. I hadn't eaten anything since noon. Constantine is built on a high limestone bluff, the only ancient town in eastern Algeria to survive through centuries of foreign invasions. The only thing I cared about, though, was food. There is a local dish in Constantine called *chorba beida bel kefta*, a meatball soup made with onions, pepper, chickpeas, almonds, and cinnamon. I hadn't tasted it in at least fifteen years, and I didn't care if it meant missing the bus and having to wait until tomorrow for another, I was going to have some. Saied thought I was crazy.

I had my soup, and it was wonderful. Saied just watched me wordlessly and sipped a glass of tea. We got back on the bus in time. I felt good now, comfortably full and warmed by a nostalgic glow. I took the window seat, hoping that I'd be able to see some familiar landscape as we passed through Jijel and Mansouria. Of course, it was as black as the inside of my pocket beyond the glass, and I saw nothing but the moon and the fiercely twinkling stars. Still, I pretended to myself that I could make out landmarks that meant I was drawing closer to Algiers, the city where I had spent a lot of my childhood.

When at last we pulled into Algiers sometime after sunrise, the Half-Hajj shook me awake. I didn't remember falling asleep. I felt terrible. My head felt like it had been crammed full of sharp-edged broken glass, and I had a pinched nerve in my neck, too. I took out my pill case and I stared into it for a

while. Did I prefer to make my entrance into Algiers hallucinating, narcotized, or somnambulant? It was a difficult decision. I went for pain-free but conscious, so I fished out eight tabs of Sonneine. The sunnies obliterated my headache—and every other mildly unpleasant sensation—and I more or less floated from the bus station in Mustapha to a cab.

"You're stoned," said Saied when we got to the back of the taxi. I told the driver to take us to a public data library.

"Me? Stoned? When have you ever known me to be stoned so early in the morning?"

"Yesterday. The day before yesterday. The day before that."

"I mean *except* for then. I function better with a ton of opiates in me than most people do straight."

"Sure you do."

I stared out the taxi's window. "Anyway," I said, "I've got a rack of daddies that can compensate."

"Marid Audran, Silicon Superman."

"Look," I said, annoyed by Saied's attitude, "for a long time I was terrified of getting wired, but now I don't know how I ever got along without it."

"Then why the hell are you still decimating your brain cells with drugs?" asked the Half-Hajj.

"Call me old-fashioned. Besides, when I pop the daddies out, I feel terrible. All that suppressed fatigue and pain hit me at once."

"And you don't get paybacks with your sunnies and beauties, right? That what you're saying?"

"Shut up, Saied. Why the hell are you so concerned all of a sudden?"

He looked at me sideways and smiled. "The religion has this ban on liquor and hard drugs, you know." And this coming from the Half-Hajj who, if he'd ever been inside a mosque in his life, was there only to check out the boys' school.

So in ten or fifteen minutes the cab driver let us out at the library. I felt a peculiar nervous excitement, although I didn't understand why. All I was doing was climbing the granite steps of a public building; why should I be so wound up? I tried to occupy my mind with more pleasant thoughts.

Inside, there were a number of terminals vacant. I sat down at the gray screen of a battered Bab el-Marifi. It asked me what sort of search I wanted to conduct. The machine's voice synthesizer had been designed in one of the North American republics, and it was having a lot of trouble pronouncing Arabic. I said, "Name," then "Enter." When the cursor appeared again, I said, "Monroe comma Angel." The data deck thought about that for a while, then white letters began flicking across its bright face:

Angel Monroe
16, Rue du Sahara
(Upper) Kasbah
Algiers
Mauretania
04-B-28

I had the machine print out the address. The Half-Hajj raised his eyebrows at me and I nodded. "Looks like I'm gonna get some answers."

"Inshallah," murmured Saied. If God wills.

We went back out into the hot, steamy morning to find another taxi. It didn't take long to get from the library to the Kasbah. There wasn't as much traffic as I remembered from my childhood—not vehicular traffic, anyway; but there were still the slow, unavoidable battalions of heavily-laden donkeys being cajoled through the narrow streets.

Number 16 was an exhausted, crumbling brick pile with two bulging upper stories that hung out over the cobbled street. The apartment house across the way did the same, and the two buildings almost kissed above my head, like two dowdy old matrons leaning across a back fence. There was a jumble of mailslots, and I found Angel Monroe's name scrawled on a card in fading ink. I jammed my thumb on her buzzer. There was no lock on the front door, so I went in and climbed the first flight of stairs. Saied was right behind me.

Her apartment turned out to be on the third floor, in the rear. The hallway was carpeted, if that's the right word, with a dull, gritty fabric that had at one time been maroon. The traffic of uncountable feet had completely worn through the material in many places, so that the dry gray wood of the floor was visible through the holes. The walls were covered with a filthy tan wallpaper, hanging down here and there in forlorn strips. The air had an odd, sour tang to it, as if the building were occupied by people who had come there to die, or who were certainly sick enough to die but instead hung on

in lonely misery. From behind one door I could hear a family battle, complete with bellowed threats and crashing crockery, while from another apartment came insane, high-pitched laughter and the sound of flesh loudly smacking flesh. I didn't want to know about it.

I stood outside the shabby door to Angel Monroe's flat and took a deep breath. I glanced at the Half-Hajj, but he just gave me a shrug and pointedly looked away. Some friend. I was on my own. I told myself that nothing weird was going to happen—a lie just to get myself to take the next step—and then I knocked on the door. There was no response. I waited a few seconds and knocked again, louder. This time I heard the rattle and squeak of bedsprings and the sound of someone coming slowly to the door. The door swung open. Angel Monroe stared out, trying very hard to focus her eyes.

She was a full head shorter than me, with bleached blonde hair curled tightly into an arrangement I would call “ratty.” Her black roots looked as if no one had given them much attention since the Prophet's birthday. Her eyes were banded with dark blue and black makeup, in a manner that brought to mind the more colorful Mediterranean saltwater fish. The rouge she wore was applied liberally, but not quite in the right places, so she didn't look so much wantonly sexy as she did feverishly ill. Her lipstick, for reasons best known to Allah and Angel Monroe, was a kind of pulpy purple color; her lips looked like she'd bought them first and forgot to put them in the refrigerator while she shopped for the rest of her face.

Her body led me to believe that she was too old to be dressed in anything but the long white Algerian *haik*, with a

veil conservatively and firmly in place. The problem was that this body had never seen the inside of a *haik*. She was clad now in shorts so small that her well-rounded belly was bending the waistband over. Her sagging breasts were not quite clothed in a kind of gauzy vest. I knew for certain that if she sat in a chair, you could safely hide the world's most valuable gem in her navel and it would be completely invisible. Her legs were patterned with broken veins like the dry *chebka* valleys of the Mزاب. On her broad, flat feet she wore tattered slippers with the remains of pink fuzzy bows dangling loose.

To tell the truth, I felt a certain disgust. "Angel Monroe?" I asked. Of course, that wasn't her real name. She was at least half Berber, as I am. Her skin was darker than mine, her eyes as black and dull as eroded asphalt.

"Uh huh," she said. "Kind of early, ain't it?" Her voice was sharp and shrill. She was already very drunk. "Who sent you? Did Khalid send you? I told that goddamn bastard I was sick. I ain't supposed to be working today, I told him last night. He said it was all right. And then he sends you. *Two* of you, yet. Who the hell does he think I am? And it ain't like he don't have no other girls, either. He could have sent you to Efra, that whore, with her plug-in talent. If I ain't feeling good, it don't bother me if he sends you to her. Hell, I don't care. How much you give him, anyway?"

I stood there, looking at her. Saied gave me a jab in the side. "Well, uh, Miss Monroe," I said, but then she started chattering again.

"The hell with it. Come on in. I guess I can use the money. But you tell that son of a bitch Khalid that—" She paused to take a long gulp from the tall glass of whiskey she was holding. "You tell him if he don't care enough about my health, I mean, making me work when I already told him I was sick, then hell, you tell him there are plenty of others I can go work for. Anytime I want to, you can believe that."

I tried twice to interrupt her, but I didn't have any success. I waited until she stopped to take another drink. While she had her mouth full of the cheap liquor, I said, "Mother?"

She just stared at me for a moment, her filmy eyes wide. "No," she said at last, in a small voice. She looked closer. Then she dropped her whiskey glass to the floor.

2.

Later, after the return trip from Algiers and Mauretania, when I got back home to the city, the first place I headed was the Budayeen. I used to live right in the heart of the walled quarter, but events and fate and Friedlander Bey had made that impossible now. I used to have a lot of friends in the Budayeen too, and I was welcome anywhere; but now there were really only two people who were generally glad to see me: Saied the Half-Hajj, and Chiriga, who ran a club on the Street halfway between the big stone arch and the cemetery. Chiri's place had always been my home-away-from-home, where I could sit and have a few drinks in peace, hear the gossip, and not get threatened or hustled by the working girls.

Chiri's a hard-working woman, a tall black African with ritual facial scars and sharply filed cannibal teeth. To be

honest, I don't really know if those canines of hers are mere decoration, like the patterns on her forehead and cheeks, or a sign that dinner at her house was composed of delicacies implicitly and explicitly forbidden by the noble Qur'ân. Chiri's a moddy, but she thinks of herself as a smart moddy. At work, she's always herself. She chips in her fantasies at home, where she won't bother anyone else. I respect that.

When I came through the club's door, I was struck first by a welcome wave of cool air. Her air-conditioning, as undependable as all old Russian-made hardware is, was working for a change. I felt better already. Chiri was deep in conversation with a customer, some bald guy with a bare chest. He was wearing black vinyl pants with the look of real leather, and his left hand was handcuffed behind him to his belt. He had a corymbic implant on the crest of his skull, and a pale green plastic moddy was feeding him somebody else's personality. If Chiri was giving him the time of day, then he couldn't have been dangerous, and probably he wasn't even all that obnoxious.

Chiri didn't have much patience with the crowd she caters to. Her philosophy is that *somebody* has to sell them liquor and drugs, but that doesn't mean she has to socialize with them.

"*Jambo, Bwana Marîd!*" Chiriga called to me when she noticed that I was sitting nearby. She left the handcuffed moddy and drifted slowly down her bar, plopping a cork coaster in front of me. "You come to share your wealth with this poor savage. In my native land, my people have nothing to eat and wander many miles in search of water. Here I have

found peace and plenty. I have learned what friendship is. I have found disgusting men who would touch the hidden parts of my body. You will buy me drinks and leave me a huge tip. You will tell all your new friends about my place, and they will come in and want to touch the hidden parts of my body. I will own many shiny, cheap things. It is all as God wills."

I stared at her for a few seconds. Sometimes it's hard to figure what kind of mood Chiri's in. "Big nigger girl talk dumb," I said at last.

She grinned and dropped her ignorant Dinka act. "Yeah, you right," she said. "What is it today?"

"Gin and bingara," I said. I usually have that over ice with a little Rose's lime juice. The drink is my own invention, but I've never gotten around to naming it. Other times I have vodka gimlets, because that's what Philip Marlowe drinks in *The Long Goodbye*. Then on those occasions when I just really want to get loaded fast, I drink from Chiri's private stock of *tende*, a truly loathsome African liquor from the Sudan or the Congo or someplace, made, I think, from fermented yams and spadefoot toads. If you are ever offered *tende*, DO NOT TASTE IT. You *will* be sorry. Allah knows that I am.

Indihar was dancing on stage. She was a real girl with a real personality, a rarity in that club. Chiri seemed to prefer in her employees the high-velocity prettiness of a sexchange. Chiri told me once that changes take better care of their appearance. Their pre-fab beauty is their whole life. Allah forbid that a single hair of their eyebrows should be out of place.

Marid Changes His Mind
by George Alec Effinger

By her own standards, Indihar was a good Muslim woman. She didn't have the head-wiring that most dancers had. The more conservative imams taught that the implants fell under the same prohibition as intoxicants, because some people got their pleasure centers wired and spent the remainder of their short lives amp-addicted. Even if, as in my case, the pleasure center is left alone, the use of a moddy submerges your own personality, and that is interpreted as insobriety. Needless to say, while I have nothing but the warmest affection for Allah and His Messenger, I stop short of being a fanatic about it. I'm with that twentieth century King Saud who demanded that the Islamic leaders of his country stop dragging their feet when it came to technological progress. I don't see any essential conflict between modern science and a thoughtful approach to religion.

"So," said Chiri, trying to make conversation, "how did your trip turn out? Did you find whatever you were looking for?"

I looked at her, but didn't say anything. I wondered if I *had* found it. When I saw her again in Algiers, my mother's appearance had shocked me. In my imagination, I'd pictured her as a respectable, moderately well-to-do matron living in a comfortable neighborhood. I hadn't seen or spoken to her in years, but I just figured she'd managed to lift herself out of the poverty and degradation. Now I thought maybe she was happy as she was, a haggard, strident old whore. I spent an hour with her, hoping to hear what I'd come to learn, trying to decide how to behave toward her, and being embarrassed by her in front of the Half-Hajj. She didn't want to be troubled

by her past. She didn't like me dropping back into her life after all those years.

"Believe me," I told her, "I didn't like hunting you up, either. I only did it because I have to."

"Why do you have to?" she wanted to know. She reclined on a musty-smelling, torn old sofa that was covered with cat hair. She'd made herself another drink, but had neglected to offer me or Saied anything.

"It's important to me," I said. I told her about my life in the faraway city, how I'd lived as a subsonic hustler until Friedlander Bey had chosen me as the instrument of his will.

"You live in the city now?" She said that with a nostalgic longing. I never knew she'd been to the city.

"I lived in the Budayeen," I said, "but Friedlander Bey moved me into his palace."

"You work for him?"

"I had no choice." I shrugged. She nodded. It surprised me that she knew who Papa was, too.

"So what did you come for?"

That was going to be hard to explain. "I wanted to find out everything I could about my father."

She looked at me over the rim of her whiskey glass. "You already heard everything," she said.

"I don't think so. How sure are you that this French sailor was my dad?"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "His name was Bernard Audran. We met in a coffeeshop. I was living in Sidi Bel Abbès then. He took me to dinner, we liked each other. I moved in with him. We came to live in Algiers after

that, and we were together for a year and a half. Then after you was born, one day he just left. I never heard from him again. I don't know where he went."

"I do. Into the ground, that's where. Took me a long time, but I traced Algerian computer records back far enough. There was a Bernard Audran in the navy of Provence, and he was in Mauretania when the French Confederate Union tried to regain control over us. The problem is that his brains were bashed out by some unidentified *noraf* more than a year before I was born. Maybe you could think back and see if you can get a clearer picture of those events."

That made her furious. She jumped up and flung her half-full glass of liquor at me. It smashed into the already stained and streaked wall to my right. I could smell the pungent, undiluted sharpness of the Irish whiskey. I heard Saied murmuring something beside me, maybe a prayer. My mother took a couple of steps toward me, her face ugly with rage. "You calling me a *liar*?" she shrieked.

Well, I was. "I'm just telling you that the official records say something different."

"Fuck the official records!"

"The records also say that you were married seven times in two years. No mention of any divorces."

My mother's anger faltered a bit. "How did that get in the computers? I never got officially married, not with no license or nothing."

"I think you underestimate the government's talent for keeping track of people. It's all there for anybody to see."

Now she looked frightened. "What else'd you find out?"

I let her off her own hook. "Nothing else. There wasn't anything more. You want something else to stay buried, you don't have to worry." That was a lie; I had learned plenty more about my mom.

"Good," she said, relieved. "I don't like you prying into what I done. It don't show respect."

I had an answer to that, but I didn't use it. "What started all this nostalgic research," I said in a quiet voice, "was some business I was taking care of for Papa." Everybody in the Budayeen calls Friedlander Bey "Papa." It's an affectionate token of terror. "This police lieutenant who handled matters in the Budayeen died, so Papa decided that we needed a kind of public-affairs officer, somebody to keep communications open between him and the police department. He asked me to take the job."

Her mouth twisted. "Oh yeah? You got a gun now? You got a badge?" It was from my mother that I learned my dislike for cops.

"Yeah," I said, "I got a gun *and* a badge."

"Your badge ain't any good in Algiers, *salaud*."

"They give me professional courtesy wherever I go." I didn't even know if that was true here. "The point is, while I was deep in the cop comp, I took the opportunity to read my own file and a few others. The funny thing was, my name and Friedlander Bey's kept popping up together. And not just in the records of the last few years. I counted at least eight entries—hints, you understand, but nothing definite—that suggested the two of us were blood kin." That got a loud

reaction from the Half-Hajj; maybe I should have told him about all this before.

"So?" said my mother.

"The hell kind of answer is that? So what does it mean? You ever jam Friedlander Bey, back in your golden youth?"

She looked raving mad again. "Hell, I jammed *lots* of guys. You expect me to remember all of them? I didn't even remember what they looked like while I was jamming them."

"You didn't want to get involved, right? You just wanted to be good friends. Were you ever friends enough to give credit? Or did you always ask for the cash up front?"

"Maghrebi," cried Saied, "this is your *mother!*" I didn't think it was possible to shock him.

"Yeah, it's my mother. Look at her."

She crossed the room in three steps, reached back, and gave me a hard slap across the face. It made me fall back a step. "Get the fuck *out* of here!" she yelled.

I put my hand to my cheek and glared at her. "You answer one thing first: Could Friedlander Bey be my real father?"

Her hand was poised to deliver another clout. "Yeah, he could be, the way practically *any* man could be. Go back to the city and climb up on his knee, sonny boy. I don't ever want to see you around here again."

She could rest easy on that score. I turned my back on her and left that repulsive hole in the wall. I didn't bother to shut the door on the way out. The Half-Hajj did, and then he hurried to catch up with me. I was storming down the stairs. "Listen, Marîd," he said. Until he spoke, I didn't realize how wild I was. "I guess all this is a big surprise to you—"

"You do? You're very perceptive today, Saied."

"—but you can't act that way toward your mother. Remember what it says—"

"In the Qur'ân? Yeah, I know. Well, what does the Straight Path have to say about prostitution? What does it have to say about the kind of degenerate my holy mother has turned into?"

"You've got a lot of room to talk. If there was a cheaper hustler in the Budayeen, I never met him."

I smiled coldly. "Thanks a lot, Saied, but I don't live in the Budayeen anymore. You forget? And I don't hustle anybody or anything. I got a steady job."

He spat at my feet. "You used to do nearly anything to make a few kiam."

"Anyway, just because I used to be the scum of the earth, it doesn't make it all right for my mother to be scum too."

"Why don't you just shut up about her? I don't want to hear about it."

"Your empathy just grows and grows, Saied," I said. "You don't know everything I know. My alma mater back there was into renting herself to strangers long before she had to support the two of us. She wasn't the forlorn heroine she always said she was. She glossed over a lot of the truth."

The Half-Hajj looked me hard in the eye for a few seconds. "Yeah?" he said. "Half the girls, changes, and debs we know do the same thing, and you don't have any problem treating *them* like human beings."

I was about to say "Sure, but none of them is my mother." I stopped myself. He would have jumped on that sentiment

too, and besides, it was starting to sound foolish even to me. The edge of my anger had vanished. I think I was just greatly annoyed to have to learn these things after so many years. It was hard for me to accept. I mean, now I had to forget almost everything I thought I knew about myself. For one thing, I'd always been proud of the fact that I was half-Berber and half-French. I dressed in European style most of the time—boots and jeans and work shirts. I suppose I'd always felt a little superior to the Arabs I lived among. Now I had to get used to the thought that I could very well be half-Berber and half-Arab.

The raucous, thumping sound of mid-twenty-first century hispo roc from Chiri's jukebox broke into my daydream. Some forgotten band was growling an ugly chant about some damn thing or other. I've never gotten around to learning any Spanish dialects, and I don't own a Spanish-language daddy. If I ever run into any Colombian industrialists, they can just damn well speak Arabic. I have a soft spot in my liver for them because of their production of narcotics, but outside of that I don't see what South America is for. The world doesn't need an overpopulated, starving, Spanish-speaking India in the Western Hemisphere. Spain, their mother country, tried Islam and said a polite no-thank-you, and their national character sublimed right off into nothingness. That's Allah punishing them.

I was bored as hell. I knocked back the rest of my drink. Chiri looked at me and raised her eyebrows. "No, thanks, Chiri," I said. "I got to go."

She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "Well, don't be a stranger now that you're a fascist swine cop."

"Right," I said. I got up from my stool. It was time to go to work. I left the rest of my change for Chiri's hungry register and went back outside.

3.

There was always a crowd of young children outside the station house on Walid al-Akbar Street. I don't know if they were hoping to see some shackled criminal dragged in, or waiting for their own parents to be released from custody, or just loitering in the hopes of begging loose change. I'd been one of them myself not so very long ago in Algiers, and it didn't hurt me any to throw a few kiam into the air and watch them scramble for it. I reached into my pocket and grabbed a clutch of coins. The older, bigger kids caught the easy money, and the smaller ones clung to my legs and wailed, "*Baksheesh!*" Every day it was a challenge to shake my young passengers loose before I got to the revolving door.

I had a desk in a small cubicle on the third floor of the station house. My cubicle was separated from its neighbors by pale green plasterboard walls only a little taller than I was. There was always a sour smell in the air, a mixture of stale sweat, tobacco smoke, and disinfectant. Above my desk was a shelf that held plastic boxes filled with dated files on cobalt-alloy cell-memories. On the floor was a big cardboard box crammed with bound printouts. I had a grimy Annamese data deck on my desk that gave me trouble-free operation on two out of every three jobs. Of course, my work wasn't very important, not according to Lieutenant Hajjar. We both knew

I was there just to keep an eye on things for Friedlander Bey. It amounted to Papa having his own private police precinct devoted to protecting his interests in the Budayeen.

Hajjar came into my cubicle and dropped another heavy box on my desk. He was a Jordanian who'd had a lengthy arrest record of his own before he came to the city. I suppose he'd been an athlete ten years ago, but he hadn't stayed in shape. He had thinning brown hair and lately he'd tried to grow a beard. It looked terrible, like the skin of a kiwi fruit. He looked like a mother's bad dream of a drug dealer, which is what he was when he wasn't administering the affairs of the nearby walled quarter.

"How you doin', Audran?" he said.

"Okay," I said. "What's all this?"

"Found something useful for you to do." Hajjar was about two years younger than me, and it gave him a kick to boss me around.

I looked in the box. There were a couple of hundred blue cobalt-alloy plates. It looked like another really tedious job. "You want me to sort these?"

"I want you to log `em all into the daily record."

I swore under my breath. Every cop carries an electronic log book to make notes on the day's tour: Where he went, what he saw, what he said, what he did. At the end of the day, he turns in the book's cell-memory plate to his sergeant. Now Hajjar wanted me to collate all the plates from the station's roster. "This isn't the kind of work Papa had in mind for me," I said.

"What the hell. You got any complaints, take 'em to Friedlander Bey. In the meantime, do what I tell you."

"Yeah, you right," I said. I glared at Hajjar's back as he walked out.

"By the way," he said, turning toward me again, "I got someone for you to meet later. It may be a nice surprise."

I doubted that. "Uh huh," I said.

"Yeah, well, get movin' on those plates. I want 'em finished by lunchtime."

I turned back to my desk, shaking my head. Hajjar annoyed the hell out of me. What was worse, he knew it. I didn't like giving him the satisfaction of seeing me irked.

I selected a productivity moddy from my rack and chipped it onto my posterior plug. The rear implant functions the same as everybody else's. It lets me chip in a moddy and six daddies. The anterior plug, however, is my own little claim to fame. This is the one that taps into my hypothalamus and lets me chip in my special daddies. As far as I know, no one else has ever been given a second implant. I'm glad I hadn't known that Friedlander Bey told my doctors to try something experimental and insanely dangerous. I guess he didn't want me to worry. Now that the frightening part is over, though, I'm glad I went through it. It's made me a more productive member of society and all that.

When I had boring policework to do, which was almost every day, I chipped in an orange moddy that Hajjar had given me. It had a label that said it was manufactured in Helvetia. The Swiss, I suppose, have a high regard for efficiency. Their moddy could take the most energetic,

inspired person in the world and transform him instantly into a drudge. Not into a stupid drudge, like what the Half-Hajj's dumbing-down hardware did to me, but into a mindless worker who isn't aware enough to be distracted before the whole assignment is in the Out box. It's the greatest gift to the office menial since conjugal coffee breaks.

I sighed and took the moddy, then reached up and chipped it in.

* * * *

The immediate sensation was as if the whole world had lurched and then caught its balance. There was an odd, metallic taste in Audran's mouth and a high-pitched ringing in his ears. He felt a touch of nausea, but he tried to ignore it because it wouldn't go away until he popped the moddy out. The moddy had trimmed down his personality like the wick of a lamp, until there was only a vague and ineffectual vestige of his true self left.

Audran wasn't conscious enough even to be resentful. He remembered only that he had work to do, and he pulled a double handful of cobalt alloy plates out of the box. He slotted six of them into the adit ports beneath the battered data deck's comp screen. Audran touched the control pad and said, "Copy ports one, two, three, four, five, six." Then he stared blankly while the deck recorded the contents of the plates. When the run was finished, he removed the plates, stacked them on one side of the desk, and loaded in six more. He barely noticed the morning pass as he logged in the records.

"Audran." Someone was saying his name.

He stopped what he was doing and glanced over his shoulder. Lieutenant Hajjar and a uniformed patrolman were standing in the entrance to his cubicle. Audran turned slowly back to the data deck. He reached into the box, but it was empty.

"Unplug that goddamn thing."

Audran faced Hajjar again and nodded. It was time to pop the moddy.

* * * *

There was a dizzy swirl of disorientation, and then I was sitting at my desk, staring stupidly at the Helvetian moddy in my hand. "Jeez," I murmured. It was a relief to be fully conscious again.

"Tell you a secret about Audran," Hajjar said to the cop. "We didn't hire him because of his wonderful qualities. He really don't have any. But he makes a great spindle for hardware. Audran's just a moddy's way of gettin' its daily workout." The cop smiled.

"Hey, you gave me this goddamn moddy in the first place," I said.

Hajjar shrugged. "Audran, this is Officer Shaknahyi."

"Where you at?" I said.

"All right," said the cop.

"You got to watch out for Audran," Hajjar said. "He's got one of those addictive personalities. He used to make a big deal out of not havin' his brain wired. Now you never see him without some kind of moddy stuck in his head."

That shocked me. I hadn't realized I'd been using my moddies so much. I was surprised anyone else had noticed.

"Try to overlook his frailties, Jirji, 'cause you and him are gonna be workin' together."

Shaknahyi gave him a sharp look. I did the same. "What do you mean, 'working together'?" said the cop.

"I mean what I said. I got a little assignment for you two. You're gonna be workin' very closely for a while."

"You taking me off the street?" asked Shaknahyi.

Hajjar shook his head. "I never said that. I'm pairin' Audran with you on patrol."

Shaknahyi was so outraged, I thought he was going to split down the middle. "Shaitan take my kids first!" he said. "You think you're teaming me up with a guy with no training and no experience, you're goddamn crazy!"

I didn't like the idea of going out on the street. I didn't want to make myself a target for every loon in the Budayeen who owned a cheap needle gun. "I'm supposed to stay here in the station house," I said. "Friedlander Bey never said anything about real cop work."

"Be good for you, Audran," said Hajjar. "You can ride around and see all your old buddies again. They'll be impressed when you flash your badge at them."

"They'll hate my guts," I said.

"You're both overlooking one small detail," said Shaknahyi. "As my partner, he's supposed to guard my back every time we walk into some dangerous situation. To be honest, I don't have a lick of faith in him. You can't expect me to work with a partner I don't trust."

"I don't blame you," said Hajjar. He looked amused by the cop's opinion of me. My first impression of Shaknahyi wasn't

so good, either. He didn't have his brain wired, and that meant he was one of two kinds of cop: Either he was a strict Muslim, or else he was one of those guys who thought his own naked, unaugmented brain was more than a match for the evildoers. That's the way I used to be, but I learned better. Either way, I wouldn't get along with him.

"And I don't want the responsibility of watching his back," I said. "I don't need that kind of pressure."

Shaknahyi didn't want any part of it. "I wanted to be a cop because I thought I could help people," he said. "I don't make a lot of money, I don't get enough sleep, and every day I mix into one goddamn crisis after another. I never know when somebody's gonna pull a gun on me and use it. I do it because I believe I can make a difference. I didn't sign on to babysit Friedlander Bey's protégé." He glowered at Hajjar until the lieutenant had to look away.

"Listen," I said to Shaknahyi, "what's your problem with me?"

"You're not a cop, for one thing," he said. "You're worse than a rookie. You'll hang back and let some creep nail me, or else you'll get itchy and shoot a little old lady. I don't want to be teamed with somebody unless I think I can count on him."

I nodded. "Yeah, you right, but I can wear a moddy. I've seen plenty of rookies wearing police officer moddies to help them through the routines."

Shaknahyi threw up his hands. "He just makes it worse," he muttered.

"Get used to it," said Hajjar, "'cause you don't have a choice."

Shaknahyi rubbed his forehead and sighed. "All right, all right. I just wanted to have my objection on the record."

"Okay," said Hajjar, "it's been noted."

"Want us to start right away?" I asked.

Hajjar gave me a wry look. "If you can fit it into your busy social calendar."

"Fine," I said.

"Right," said Shaknahyi, walking out of my cubicle.

"You two didn't hit it off real well," said Hajjar.

"We just have to get the job done," I said. "We don't have to go dancing together."

"Yeah, you right." And then he turned and left me alone too.

4.

A few days later, Friedlander Bey sent a message that he'd like to speak with me, and he invited me to have supper with him afterward. I went into my bedroom and undressed. Then I took a quick shower and thought about what I wanted to say to Friedlander Bey. I wanted to let him know that I wasn't happy about being teamed with Officer Shaknahyi.

I got out of the shower and towed myself dry. Then I stared into a closet for a while, deciding what to wear. Papa liked it when I wore Arab dress. I figured what the hell and picked a simple maroon *gallebeya*. I decided that the knitted skullcap of my homeland wasn't appropriate, and I'm not the turban type. I settled on a plain white *keffiya* and fixed it in place with a simple black rope *akal*. I tied a corded belt around my waist, supporting a ceremonial dagger Papa'd given me. Also on the belt, pulled around behind my back,

was a holster with my seizure gun. I hid that by wearing an expensive tan-colored cloak over the *gallebeya*. I felt I was ready for anything: A feast, a debate, or an attempted assassination.

Papa's offices were on the ground floor in the main part of the house connecting the two wings. When I got there, one of the Stones That Speak, Friedlander Bey's twin giants, was in the corridor, guarding the door. He glanced at me and nodded, and bowed his head slightly as I went past him into Papa's waiting room. Then he closed the door behind me. Friedlander Bey was in his inner office. He was sitting behind his gigantic desk. He didn't look well. His elbows were on the desktop, and his head was in his hands. He was massaging his forehead. He stood up when I came in. "I am pleased," he said. He didn't sound pleased. He sounded exhausted.

"It's my honor to wish you good evening, O Shaykh," I said. He was wearing an open-necked white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of baggy gray trousers. He probably wouldn't even notice the trouble I'd taken to dress conservatively. You can't win, right?

"We will dine soon, my son. In the meantime, sit with me. There are matters that need our attention."

I sat in a comfortable chair beside his desk. Papa took his seat again and fiddled with some papers, frowning. It wasn't my place to question him. He'd begin when he was ready.

He shut his eyes for a moment and then opened them, sighing. His sparse white hair was ruffled, and he hadn't shaved that morning. I guessed he had a lot on his mind. I

was a little afraid of what he was going to order me to do this time.

"We must speak," he said. "There is the matter of alms-giving."

Okay, I'll admit it: Of all the possible problems he could have chosen, alms-giving was pretty low on my list of what I expected to hear. How foolish of me to think he wanted to discuss something more to the point. Like murder.

"I'm afraid I've had more important things on my mind, O Shaykh," I said.

Friedlander Bey-nodded wearily. "No doubt, my son, you truly believe these other things are more important, but you are wrong. You and I share an existence of luxury and comfort, and that gives us a responsibility to our brothers."

Jacques, my infidel friend, would've had trouble grasping his precise point. Sure, other religions are all in favor of charity too. It's just good sense to take care of the poor and needy, because you never know when you're going to end up poor and needy yourself. The Muslim attitude goes further, though. Alms-giving is one of the five pillars of the religion, as fundamental an obligation as the profession of faith, the daily prayer, the fast of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

I gave the same attention to alms-giving that I gave the other duties. That is, I had profound respect for them in an intellectual sort of way, and I told myself that I'd begin practicing in earnest real soon now.

"Evidently you've been considering this for some time," I said.

"We have been neglecting our duty to the poor and the wayfarers, and the widows and orphans among our neighbors."

Some of my friends—my old friends, my former friends—think Papa is nothing but a murderous monster, but that's not true. He's a shrewd businessman who also maintains strong ties to the faith that created our culture. I'm sorry if that seems like a contradiction. He could be harsh, even cruel, at times; but I knew no one else as sincere in his beliefs or as glad to meet the many obligations of the noble Qur'ân.

"What do you wish me to do, O my uncle?"

Friedlander Bey shrugged. "Do I not reward you well for your services?"

"You are unfailingly gracious, O Shaykh," I said.

"Then it would not be a hardship for you to set aside a fifth part of your substance, as is suggested in the Straight Path. Indeed, I desire to make a gift to you that will swell your purse and, at the same time, give you a source of income independent of this house."

That caught my attention. Freedom was what I hungered for every night as I drifted off to sleep. It was what I thought of first when I woke in the morning. And the first step toward freedom was financial independence.

"You are the father of generosity, O Shaykh," I said, "but I am unworthy." Believe me, I was panting to hear what he was going to say. Proper form, however, required me to pretend that I couldn't possibly accept his gift.

He raised one thin, trembling hand. "I prefer that my associates have outside sources of income, sources that they

manage themselves and whose profits they need not share with me.”

“That is a wise policy,” I said. I’ve known a lot of Papa’s “associates,” and I know what kind of sources they had. I was sure he was about to cut me into some shady vice deal. Not that I had scruples, you understand. I wouldn’t mind getting my drugs wholesale. I’ve just never had much of a mind for commerce.

“Until recently the Budayeen was your whole world. You know it well, my son, and you understand its people. I have a great deal of influence there, and I thought it best to acquire for you some small commercial concern in that quarter.” He extended to me a document laminated in plastic.

I reached forward and took it from him. “What is this, O Shaykh?” I asked.

“It is a title deed. You are now the owner of the property described upon it. From this day forward it is your business to operate. It is a profitable enterprise, my nephew. Manage it well and it will reward you, *inshallah*.”

I looked at the deed. “You’re—” My voice choked. Papa had bought Chiriga’s club and was giving it to me. I looked up at him. “But—”

He waved his hand at me. “No thanks are necessary,” he said. “You are my dutiful son.”

“But this is Chiri’s place. I can’t take her club. What will she do?”

Friedlander Bey shrugged. “Business is business,” he said simply.

I just stared at him. He had a remarkable habit of giving me things I would have been happier without: My career as a cop, for instance. It wouldn't do any good at all to refuse. "I'm quite unable to express my thanks," I said in a dull voice. I had only two good friends left, Saied the Half-Hajj and Chiri. She was really going to hate this. I was already dreading her reaction.

"Come," said Friedlander Bey, "let us go in to dinner." He stood up behind his desk and held out his hand to me. I followed him, still astonished. It wasn't until later that I realized I hadn't spoken to him about my job with Hajjar.

Chiri's club was crowded that night. The air was still and warm inside, sweet with a dozen different perfumes, sour with sweat and spilled beer. The sexchanges and pre-op debs chatted with the customers with false cheerfulness, and their laughter broke through the shrill music as they called for more champagne cocktails. Bright bolts of red and blue neon slashed down slantwise behind the bar, and brilliant points of light from spinning mirrorballs sparkled on the walls and ceiling. In one corner there was a hologram of Honey Pílar, writhing alone upon a blond mink coat spread on the white sands of some romantic beach. It was an ad for her new sex moddy, *Slow, Slow Burn*. I stared at it for a moment, almost hypnotized.

"Audran," came Chiriga's hoarse voice. She didn't sound happy to see me. "Mr. Boss."

"Listen, Chiri," I said. "Let me—"

"Lily," she called to one of the changes, "get the new owner a drink. Gin and bingara with a hit of Rose's." She

looked at me fiercely. "The *tende* is mine, Audran. Private stock. It doesn't go with the club, and I'm taking it with me."

She was making it hard for me. I could only imagine how she felt. "Wait a minute, Chiri. I had nothing to do with—"

"These are the keys. This one's for the register. The money in there's all yours. The girls are yours, the hassles are yours from now on, too. You got any problems, you can go to Papa with 'em." She snatched her bottle of *tende* from under the bar. "*Kwa heri*, motherfucker," she snarled at me. Then she stormed out of the club.

Everything got real quiet then. Whatever song had been playing came to an end and nobody put on another one. A deb named Kandy was on stage, and she just stood there and stared at me like I might start slavering and shrieking at any moment. People got up from their stools near me and edged away. I looked into their faces and I saw hostility and contempt.

Friedlander Bey wanted to divorce me from all my connections to the Budayeen. Making me a cop had been a great start, but even so I still had a few loyal friends. Forcing Chiri to sell her club had been another brilliant stroke. Soon I'd be just as lonely and friendless as Papa himself, except I wouldn't have the consolation of his wealth and power.

"Look," I said, "this is all a mistake. I got to settle this with Chiri. Indihar, take charge, okay? I'll be right back."

Indihar just gave me a disdainful look. She didn't say anything. I couldn't stand to be in there another minute. I grabbed the keys Chiri'd dropped on the bar and I went outside. She wasn't anywhere in sight on the Street. She

Marid Changes His Mind
by George Alec Effinger

might have gone straight home, but she'd probably gone to another club. In a way, I was relieved that I hadn't found her, but I knew that there were surely more ugly scenes to come.

The next morning, I left my car on the Boulevard and walked from there to Laila's modshop on Fourth Street. Laila's was small, but it had character, crammed between a dark, grim gambling den and a noisy bar that catered to teenage sexchanges. The moddies and daddies in Laila's bins were covered with dust and fine grit, and generations of small insects had met their Maker among her wares. It wasn't pretty, but what you got from her most of the time was good old honest value. The rest of the time you got damaged, worthless, even dangerous merchandise. You always felt a little rush of adrenalin before you chipped one of Laila's ancient and shopworn moddies directly into your brain.

She was always—*a/ways*—chipped in, and she never stopped whining. She whined hello, she whined goodbye, she whined in pleasure and in pain. When she prayed, she whined to Allah. She had dry black skin as wrinkled as a raisin, and straggly white hair. Laila was not someone I liked to spend a lot of time with. She was wearing a moddy this morning, of course, but I couldn't tell yet which one. Sometimes she was a famous Eur-Am film or holo star, or a character from a forgotten novel, or Honey Pílar herself. Whoever she was, she'd yammer. That was all I could count on.

"How you doing, Laila?" I said. There was the acrid bite of ammonia in her shop that morning. She was squirting some ugly pink liquid from a plastic bottle up into the corners of the room. Don't ask me why.

Marid Changes His Mind
by George Alec Effinger

She glanced at me and gave me a slow, rapturous smile. It was the look you get only from complete sexual satisfaction or from a large dose of Sonneine. "Marîd," she said serenely. She still whined, but now it was a serene whine.

"Got to go out on patrol today, and I thought you might have—"

"Marîd, a young girl came to me this morning and said, 'Mother, the eyes of the narcissus are open, and the cheeks of the roses are red with blushing! Why don't you come outside and see how beautifully Nature has adorned the world!'"

"Laila, if you'll just give me a minute—"

"And I said to her, 'Daughter, that which delights you will fade in an hour, and what profit will you then have in it? Instead, come inside and find with me the far greater beauty of Allah, who created the spring.'" Laila finished her little homily and looked at me expectantly, as if she were waiting for me either to applaud or collapse from enlightenment.

I'd forgotten religious ecstasy. Sex, drugs, and religious ecstasy. Those were the big sellers in Laila's shop, and she tested them all out personally. You had her personal Seal of Approval on every moddy.

"Can I talk now? Laila?"

She stared at me, swaying unsteadily. Slowly she reached one scrawny arm up and popped the moddy out. She blinked a couple of times, and her gentle smile disappeared. "Get you something, Marîd?" she said in her shrill voice.

Laila had been around so long, there was a rumor that as a child she'd watched the imams lay the foundation of the Budayeen's walls. But she knew her moddies. She knew more

about old, out-of-print moddies than anyone else I've ever met. I think Laila must have had one of the world's first experimental implants, because her brain had never worked quite right afterward. And the way she still abused the technology, she should have burnt out her last gray cells years ago. She'd withstood cerebral torture that would have turned anyone else into a drooling zombie. Laila probably had a tough protective callus on her brain that prevented anything from penetrating. Anything at all.

I started over from the beginning. "I'm going out on patrol today, and I was wondering if you had a basic cop moddy."

"Sure, I got everything." She hobbled to a bin near the back of the store and dug around in it for a moment. The bin was marked "Prussia/Poland/Breulandy." That didn't have anything to do with which moddies were actually in there; Laila'd bought the battered dividers and scuffed labels from some other kind of shop that was going out of business.

She straightened up after a few seconds, holding a shrinkwrapped moddy in her hand. "This is what you want," she said.

It was the pale blue Complete Guardian moddy I'd seen other rookie cops wearing. It was a good, basic piece of procedure programming that covered almost every conceivable situation. I figured that between the Half-Hajj's mean-mother moddy and the Guardian, I was covered. I wasn't in a position to turn down any kind of help, friend or fantasy. For someone who once hated the idea of having his skull amped, I was sure building up a good collection of other

people's psyches. I paid Laila for Complete Guardian and put it in my pocket.

She gave me that tranquil smile. It was toothless, of course, and it made me shiver. "Go in safety," she said in her nasal wail.

"Peace be upon you." I hurried out of her shop, walked back down the Street, and passed through the gate to where the car was parked. It wasn't far from there to the station house. I worked at my desk for a little while, until Officer Shaknahyi ducked his head into my cubicle. "Time to roll," he said.

It didn't bother me in the least to tell my data deck to quit. I followed Shaknahyi downstairs to the garage. "That's mine," he said, pointing to a patrol car coming in from the previous shift. He greeted the two tired-looking cops who got out, then slid behind the steering wheel. "Well?" he said, looking up at me.

I wasn't in a hurry to start this. In the first place, I'd be stuck in the narrow confines of the copcar with Shaknahyi for the duration of the shift, and that prospect didn't excite me at all. Second, I'd really rather sit upstairs and read boring files in perfect safety than follow this battle-hardened veteran out into the mean streets. Finally, though, I climbed into the front seat. Sometimes there's only so much stalling you can do. He looked straight out the windshield while he drove. We cruised around the streets of the city for about an hour. Then, suddenly, a shrill alarm went off, and the synthesized voice of the patrol car's comp deck crackled. "Badge Number 374,

respond immediately to bomb threat and hostage situation, Café de la Fée Blanche, Ninth Street North."

"Gargotier's place," said Shaknahyi. "We'll take care of it." The comp deck fell silent.

And Hajjar had promised me I wouldn't have to worry about anything like this. "*Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Raheem*," I murmured. In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

5.

There was a crowd gathered outside the low railing of the Café de la Fée Blanche's patio. "Get these people out of here," Shaknahyi growled at me. "I don't know what's happening in there, but we got to treat it like the guy has a real bomb. And when you got everybody moved back, go sit in the car."

"But—"

"I don't want to have to worry about you, too." He ran around the corner of the café to the north, heading for the café's rear entrance. I hesitated. I knew backup units would be getting here soon, and I decided to let them handle the crowd control. At the moment, there were more important things to worry about. I still had Complete Guardian, and I tore open the shrinkwrap with my teeth. Then I chipped the moddy in.

* * * *

Audran was sitting at a table in the dimly-lighted San Saberio salon in Florence, listening to a group of musicians playing a demure Schubert quartet. Across from him sat a beautiful blonde woman named Costanzia. She raised a cup

to her lips, and her china blue eyes looked at him over the rim. She was wearing a subtle, fascinating fragrance that made Audran think of romantic evenings and soft-spoken promises.

"This must be the best coffee in Tuscany," she murmured. Her voice was sweet and gentle. She gave him a warm smile.

"We didn't come here to drink coffee, my darling," he said. "We came here to see the season's new styles."

She waved a hand. "There is time enough for that. For now, let's just relax."

Audran smiled fondly at her and picked up his delicate cup. The coffee was the beautiful color of polished mahogany, and the wisps of steam that rose from it carried a heavenly, enticing aroma. The first taste overwhelmed Audran with its richness. As the coffee, hot and wonderfully delicious, went down his throat, he realized that Costanzia had been perfectly correct. He had never before been so satisfied by a cup of coffee.

"I'll always remember this coffee," he said.

"Let's come back here again next year, darling," said Costanzia.

Audran laughed indulgently. "For San Saberio's new fashions?"

Costanzia lifted her cup and smiled. "For the coffee," she said.

After the advertisement, there was a blackout during which Audran couldn't see a thing. He wondered briefly who Costanzia was, but he put her out of his mind. Just as he began to panic, his vision cleared. He felt a ripple of dizziness,

and then it was as if he'd awakened from a dream. He was rational and cool and he had a job to do. He had become the Complete Guardian.

He couldn't see or hear anything that was happening inside. He assumed. that Shaknahyi was making his way quietly through the café's back room. It was up to Audran to give his partner as much support as possible. He jumped the iron railing into the patio, then walked decisively into the interior of the bar.

The scene inside didn't look very threatening. Monsieur Gargotier was standing behind the bar, beneath the huge, cracked mirror. His daughter, Maddie, was sitting at a table near the back wall. A young man sat at a table against the west wall, under Gargotier's collection of faded prints of the Mars colony. The young man's hands rested on a small box. His head swung to look at Audran. "Get the fuck out," he shouted, "or this whole place goes up in a big bright bang!"

"I'm sure he means it, monsieur," said Gargotier. He sounded terrified.

"Bet your ass I mean it!" said the young man.

Being a police officer meant sizing up dangerous situations and being able to make quick, sure judgments. Complete Guardian suggested that in dealing with a mentally disturbed individual, Audran should try to find out why he was upset and then try to calm him. Complete Guardian recommended that Audran not make fun of the individual, show anger, or dare him to carry out his threat. Audran raised his hands and spoke calmly. "I'm not going to threaten you," Audran said.

The young man just laughed. He had dirty long hair and a patchy growth of beard, and he was wearing a faded pair of blue jeans and a plaid cotton shirt with its sleeves torn off. He looked a little like Audran had, before Friedlander Bey had raised his standard of living.

"Mind if I sit and talk with you?" asked Audran.

"I can set this off any time I want," said the young man. "You got the guts, sit down. But keep your hands flat on the table."

"Sure." Audran pulled out a chair and sat down. He had his back to the barkeeper, but out of the corner of his eye he could see Maddie Gargotier. She was quietly weeping.

"You ain't gonna talk me out of this," said the young man.

Audran shrugged. "I just want to find out what this is all about. What's your name?"

"The hell's that got to do with anything?"

"My name is Marîd. I was born in Mauretania."

"You can call me Al-Muntaqim." The kid with the bomb had appropriated one of the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God. It meant "The Avenger."

"You always lived in the city?" Audran asked him.

"Hell no. Misr."

"That's the local name for Cairo, isn't it?" asked Audran.

Al-Muntaqim jumped to his feet, furious. He jabbed a finger toward Gargotier behind the bar and screamed, "See? See what I mean? That's just what I'm talkin' about! Well, I'm gonna stop it once and for all!" He grabbed the box and ripped open the lid.

Audran felt a horrible pain all through his body. It was as if all his joints had been yanked and twisted until his bones pulled apart. Every muscle in his body felt torn, and the surface of his skin stung as if it had been sandpapered. The agony went on for a few seconds, and then Audran lost consciousness.

* * * *

"You all right?"

No, I didn't feel all right. On the outside I felt red-hot and glowing, as if I'd been staked out under the desert sun for a couple of days. Inside, my muscles felt quivery. I had lots of uncontrollable little spasms in my arms, legs, trunk, and face. I had a splitting headache and there was a horrible, sour taste in my mouth. I was having a lot of trouble focusing my eyes, as if someone had spread a thick translucent gunk over them.

I strained to make out who was talking to me. I could barely make out the voice because my ears were ringing so loud. It turned out to be Shaknahyi, and that indicated that I was still alive. For an awful moment after I came to, I thought I might be in Allah's greenroom or somewhere. Not that being alive was any big thrill just then. "What—" I croaked. My throat was so dry I could barely speak.

"Here." Shaknahyi handed a glass of cold water down to me. I realized that I was lying flat on my back on the floor, and Shaknahyi and M. Gargotier were standing over me, frowning and shaking their heads.

I took the water and drank it gratefully. When I finished, I tried talking again. "What happened?" I said.

"You fucked up," Shaknahyi said.

"Right," I said.

A narrow smile crossed Shaknahyi's face. He reached down and offered me a hand. "Get up off the floor."

I stood up wobbily and made my way to the nearest chair. "Gin and bingara," I said to Gargotier. "Put a hit of Rose's lime in it." The barkeep grimaced, but he turned away to get my drink. I took out my pillcase and dug out maybe eight or nine Sonneine.

"I heard about you and your drugs," said Shaknahyi.

"It's all true," I said.

When Gargotier brought my drink, I swallowed the opiates. I couldn't wait for them to start fixing me up. Everything would be just fine in a couple of minutes.

"You could've gotten everybody killed, trying to talk that guy down," Shaknahyi said. I was feeling bad enough already, I didn't want to listen to his little lecture right then. He went ahead with it anyway. "What the hell were you trying to do? Establish rapport or something? We don't work that way when people's lives are in danger."

"Yeah?" I said. "What *do* you do?"

He spread his hands like the answer should have been perfectly obvious. "You get around where he can't see you, and you ice the motherfucker."

"Did you ice me before or after you iced Al-Muntaqim?"

"That what he was calling himself? Hell, Audran, you got to expect a little beam diffusion with these static pistols. I'm real sorry I had to drop you too, but there's no permanent damage, *inshallah*. He jumped up with that box, and I wasn't

gonna wait around for you to give me a clear shot. I had to take what I could get."

"It's all right," I said. "Where's The Avenger now?"

"The meat wagon came while you were napping. Took him off to the lock ward at the hospital."

That made me a little angry. "The mad bomber gets shipped to a nice bed in the hospital, but I got to lie around on the filthy floor of this goddamn saloon?"

Shaknahyi shrugged. "He's in a lot worse shape than you are. You only got hit by the fuzzy edge of the charge. He took it full."

It sounded like Al-Muntaqim was going to feel pretty rotten for a while. Didn't bother me none.

"No percentage in debating morality with a loon," said Shaknahyi. "You go in looking for the first opportunity to stabilize the sucker." He made a trigger-pulling motion with his right index finger.

"That's not what Complete Guardian was telling me," I said. "By the way, did you pop the moddy for me? What did you do with it?"

"Yeah," said Shaknahyi, "here it is." He took the moddy out of a shirt pocket and tossed it down on the floor beside me. Then he raised his heavy black boot and stamped the plastic module into jagged pieces. Brightly colored fragments of the webwork circuitry skittered across the floor. "Wear another one of those, I do the same to your face and then I kick the remnants out of my patrol car."

So much for Marîd Audran, Ideal Law Enforcement Officer.

I stood up feeling a lot better, and followed Shaknahyi out of the dimly lighted bar. M. Gargotier and his daughter, Maddie, went with us. The bartender tried to thank us, but Shaknahyi just raised a hand and looked modest. "No thanks are necessary for performing a duty," he said.

"Come in for free drinks any time," Gargotier said gratefully.

"Maybe we will." Shaknahyi turned to me. "Let's ride," he said.

We went out through the patio gate. On the way back to the car I said, "It makes me feel kind of good to be welcome somewhere again."

Shaknahyi looked at me. "Accepting free drinks is a major infraction."

"I didn't know they *had* infractions in the Budayeen," I said. Shaknahyi smiled. It seemed that things had thawed a little between us.

Shaknahyi cruised back down the Street and out of the Budayeen. Curiously, I was no longer wary of being spotted in the copcar by any of my old friends. In the first place, the way they'd been treating me, I figured the hell with 'em. In the second place, I felt a little different now that I'd been fried in the line of duty. The experience at the Fée Blanche had changed my thinking. Now I appreciated the risks a cop has to take day after day.

Shaknahyi surprised me. "You want to stop somewhere?" he asked.

"Sounds good." I was still pretty weak and the sunnies had left me a little lightheaded, so I was glad to agree.

I unclipped the phone from my belt and spoke Chiri's commcode into it. I heard it ring eight or nine times before she answered it. "Talk to me," she said. She sounded irked.

"Chiri? It's Marid."

"What do *you* want, motherfucker?"

"Look, you haven't given me any chance to explain. It's not my fault."

"You said that before." She gave a contemptuous laugh. "Famous last words, honey: 'It's not my fault.' That's what my uncle said when he sold my mama to some goddamn Arab slaver."

"I never knew—"

"Forget it, it ain't even true. You wanted a chance to explain, so explain."

Well, it was showtime, but suddenly I didn't have any idea what to say to her. "I'm real sorry, Chiri," I said.

She just laughed again. It wasn't a friendly sound. I plunged ahead. "One morning I woke up and Papa said, 'Here, now you own Chiriga's club, isn't that wonderful?' What did you expect me to say to him?"

"I know you, honey. I don't expect you to say *anything* to Papa. He didn't have to cut off your balls. You sold 'em."

"Chiri, we been friends a long time. Try to understand. Papa got this idea to buy your club and give it to me. I didn't know a thing about it in advance. I didn't want it when he gave it to me. I tried to tell him, but—"

"I'll bet. I'll just bet you told him."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I think she was enjoying this a lot. "I told him about as much as anyone can tell Papa anything."

"Why *my* place, Marîd? The Budayeen's full of crummy bars. Why did he pick mine?"

I knew the answer to that: Because Friedlander Bey was prying me loose from the few remaining connections to my old life. Making me a cop had alienated most of my friends. Forcing Chiriga to sell her club had turned her against me. Next, Papa'd find a way to make Saied the Half-Hajj hate my guts, too. "Just his sense of humor, Chiri," I said hopelessly. "Just Papa proving that he's always around, always watching, ready to hit us with his lightning bolts when we least expect it."

There was a long silence from her. "And you're gutless, too."

My mouth opened and closed. I didn't know what she was talking about. "Huh?"

"I said you're a gutless *panya*."

She's always slinging Swahili at me. "What's a *panya*, Chiri?" I asked.

"It's like a big rat, only stupider and uglier. You didn't dare do this in person, did you, motherfucker? You'd rather whine to me over the phone. Well, you're gonna have to face me. That's all there is to it."

I squeezed my eyes shut and grimaced. "Okay, Chiri, whatever you want. Can you come by the club?"

"*The* club, you say? You mean, *my* club? The club I used to own?"

"Yeah," I said. "Your club."

She grunted. "Not on your life, you diseased jackass. I'm not setting foot in there unless things change the way I want 'em. But I'll meet you somewhere else. I'll be in Courane's place in half an hour. That's not in the Budayeen, honey, but I'm sure you can find it. Show up if you think you can handle it." There was a sharp click, and then I was listening to the burr of the dial tone.

"Dragged you through it, didn't she?" said Shakhahyi. He'd enjoyed every moment of my discomfort. I was starting to like the guy, but he was still a bastard sometimes.

I clipped the phone back on my belt. "Ever hear of a bar called Courane's?"

He snorted. "This Christian chump shows up in the city a few years ago." He was wheeling the patrolcar through Rasmiyya, a neighborhood east of the Budayeen that I'd never been in before. "Guy named Courane. Called himself a poet, but nobody ever saw much proof of that. Somehow he got to be a big hit with the European community. One day he opens what he calls a salon, see. Just a quiet, dark bar where everything's made out of wicker and glass and stainless steel. Lots of potted plastic plants. Nowadays he ain't the darling of the brunch crowd anymore, but he still pulls this melancholy expatriate routine. That where you're gonna meet Chiri?"

I looked at him and shrugged. "It was her choice."

He grinned at me. "Want to attract a lot of attention when you show up?"

I sighed. "Please no," I muttered. That Jirji, he was some kidder.

6.

Twenty minutes later we were in a middle-class district of two and three-story houses. The streets were broader than in the Budayeen, and the whitewashed buildings had strips of open land around them, planted with small bushes and flowering shrubs. Tall date palms leaned drunkenly along the verges of the pavement. The neighborhood seemed deserted, if only because there were no shouting children wrestling on the sidewalks or chasing each other around the corners of the houses. It was a very settled, very sedate part of town. It was so peaceful, it made me uncomfortable.

"Courane's is just up here," said Shaknahyi. He turned into a poorer street that was little more than an alley. One side was hemmed in by the back walls of the same flat-roofed houses. There were small balconies on the second floor, and bright, lamplit windows obscured by lattices made of narrow wooden strips. On the other side of the alley were boarded-up buildings and a few businesses: A leather-worker's shop, a bakery, a restaurant that specialized in bean dishes, a bookstall.

There was also Courane's, out of place in that constricted avenue. The proprietor had set out a few tables, but no one lingered in the white-painted wicker chairs beneath these Cinzano umbrellas. Shaknahyi tapped off the engine, and we got out of the patrol car. I supposed that Chiri hadn't arrived yet, or that she was waiting for me inside. My stomach hurt.

"Officer Shaknahyi!" A middle-aged man came toward us, a welcoming smile on his face. He was about my height, maybe fifteen or twenty pounds heavier, with receding brown

hair brushed straight back. He shook hands with Shaknahyi, then turned to me.

"Sandor," said Shaknahyi, "this is my partner, Marîd Audran."

"Glad to meet you," said Courane.

"May Allah increase your honor," I said.

Courane's look was amused. "Right," he said. "Can I get you boys something to drink?"

I glanced at Shaknahyi. "Are we on duty?" I asked.

"Nah," he said. I asked for my usual, and Shaknahyi got a soft drink. We followed Courane into his establishment. It was just as I'd pictured it: Shiny chrome and glass tables, white wicker chairs, a beautiful antique bar of polished dark wood, chrome ceiling fans, and, as Shaknahyi had mentioned, lots of dusty artificial plants stuck in corners and hanging in baskets from the ceiling.

Chiriga was sitting at a table near the back. "Where you at, Jirji? Marîd?" she said.

"Aw right," I said. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Never in my life turned one down." She held up her glass. "Sandy?" Courane nodded and went to make our drinks.

I sat down beside Chiri. "Anyway," I said uncomfortably, "I want to talk to you about coming to work in the club."

"Kind of a ballsy thing for you to ask, isn't it?" Chiri said.

"Hey, look, I told you what the situation was. How much longer you gonna keep this up?"

Chiri gave me a little smile. "I don't know," she said. "I'm getting a big kick out of it."

I'd reached my limit. I can only feel so guilty. "Fine," I said. "Go get another job someplace else. I'm sure a big, strong *kaffir* like you won't have any trouble at all finding somebody who's interested."

Chiri looked hurt. "Okay, Marîd," she said softly, "let's stop." She opened her bag and took out a long white envelope, and pushed it across the table toward me.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Yesterday's take from your goddamn club. You're supposed to show up around closing time, you know, to count out the register and pay the girls. Or don't you care?"

"I don't really care," I said, peeking at the cash. There was a lot of money in the envelope. "That's why I want to hire you."

"To do what?"

I spread my hands. "I want you to keep the girls in line. And I need you to separate the customers from their money. You're famous for that. Just do exactly what you used to."

Her brow furrowed. "I used to go home every night with all of this." She tapped the envelope. "Now I'm just gonna get a few kiam here and there, whatever you decide to spill. I don't like that."

Courane arrived with our drinks and I paid for them. "I was gonna offer you a lot more than what the debs and changes get," I said to Chiri.

"I should hope so." She nodded her head emphatically. "Bet your ass, honey, you want me to run your club for you, you're gonna have to pay up front. Business is business, and action is action. I want fifty percent."

"Making yourself a partner?" I'd expected something like that. Chiri smiled slowly, showing those long, filed canines. She was worth more than fifty percent to me. "All right," I said.

She looked startled, as if she hadn't expected me to give in so easily. "Should've asked for more," she said bitterly. "And I don't want to dance unless I feel like it."

"Fine."

"And the name of the club stays 'Chiriga's'."

"All right."

"And you let me do my own hiring and firing. I don't want to get stuck with Floor-Show Fanya if she tickles you into giving her a job. Bitch gets so loaded, she throws up on customers."

"You expect a hell of a lot, Chiri."

She gave me a wolfish grin. "Paybacks are a bitch, ain't they?" she said.

Chiri was wringing every last bit of advantage out of this situation. "Okay, you pick your own crew."

She paused to drink again. "By the way," she said, "that's fifty percent of the *gross* I'm getting, isn't it?"

Chiri was terrific. "Uh, yeah," I said, laughing. "Why don't you let me give you a ride back to the Budayeen? You can start working this afternoon."

"I already passed by there. I left Indihar in charge." She noticed that her glass was empty again, and she held it up and waved it at Courane. "Want to play a game, Marîd?" She jerked a thumb toward the back of the bar, where Courane had a Transpex unit.

Marid Changes His Mind
by George Alec Effinger

It's a game that lets two people with corymbic implants sit across from each other and chip into the machine's CPU. The first player imagines a bizarre scenario in detail, and it becomes a wholly realistic environment for the second player, who's scored on how well he adapts—or survives. Then in turn the second player does the same for the first.

It's a great game to bet money on. It scared the hell out of me at first, though, because while you're playing, you forget it's only a game. It seems absolutely real. The players exercise almost godlike power on each other. Courane's model looked old, a version whose safety features could be bypassed by a clever mechanic. There were rumors of people actually having massive strokes and coronaries while they were chipped into a jiggered Transpex.

"Go ahead, Audran," said Shaknahyi, "let's see what you got."

"All right, Chiri," I said, "let's play."

She stood up and walked back to the Transpex booth. I followed her, and both Shaknahyi and Courane came along too. "Want to bet the other fifty percent of my club?" she said. Her eyes glittered over the rim of her cocktail glass.

"Can't do that. Papa wouldn't approve." I felt pretty confident, because I could read the record of the machine's previous high games. A perfect Transpex score was 1,000 points, and I averaged in the upper 800s. The top scores on this machine were in the lower 700s. Maybe the scores were low because Courane's bar didn't attract many borderline nutso types. Like me. "I'll bet what's inside this envelope, though."

That sounded good to her. "I can cover it," she said. I didn't doubt that Chiri could lay her hands on quite a lot of cash when she needed it.

Courane set fresh drinks down for all of us. Shaknahyi dragged a wicker chair near enough to watch the computer-modeled images of the illusions Chiri and I would create. I fed five kiam into the Transpex machine. "You can go first, if you want," I said.

"Yeah," said Chiri. "It's gonna be fun, making you sweat." She took one of the Transpex's moddy links and socketed it on her corymbic plug, then touched Player One on the console. I took the second link, murmured "*Bismillah*," and chipped in Player Two.

* * * *

At first there was only a kind of warm, flickering fog, veined with iridescence like shimmery mother of pearl. Audran was lost in a cloud, but he didn't feel anxious about it. It was absolutely silent and still, not even a whisper of breeze. He was aware of a mild scent surrounding him, the fragrance of fresh sea air. Then things began to change.

Now he was floating in the cloud, no longer sitting or standing, but somehow drifting through space easily and peacefully. Audran still wasn't concerned; it was a perfectly comfortable sensation. Only gradually did the fog begin to dissipate. With a shock Audran realized that he wasn't floating, but swimming in a warm, sun-dappled sea.

Below him waved long tendrils of algae that clung to hillocks of brightly colored coral. Anemones of many hues and

many shapes reached their grasping tentacles toward him, but he cut smartly through the water well out of their reach.

Audran's eyesight was poor, but his other senses let him know what was happening around him. The smell of the salt air had been replaced by many subtle aromas that he couldn't name but were all achingly familiar. Sounds came to him, sibilant, rushing noises that echoed in hollow tones.

He was a fish. He felt free and strong, and he was hungry. Audran dived down close to the rolling sea bottom, near the stinging anemones where tiny fishes schooled for protection. He flashed among them, gobbling down mouthfuls of the scarlet and yellow creatures. His hunger was appeased, at least for now. The scent of others of his species wafted by him on the current, and he turned toward its source.

He swam for a long while until he realized that he'd lost the trace. Audran couldn't tell how much time had passed. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered here in the sparkling, sunny sea. He browsed over a gorgeous reef, worrying the delicate featherdusters, sending the scarlet banded shrimps and the porcelain crabs scuttling.

Above him, the ocean darkened. A shadow passed over him, and Audran felt a ripple of alarm. He could not look up, but compression waves told him that something huge was circling nearby. Audran remembered that he was not alone in this ocean: It was now his turn to flee. He darted down over the reef and cut a zigzag path only a few inches above the sandy floor.

The ravenous shadow trailed close behind. Audran looked for somewhere to hide, but there was nothing, no sunken

wrecks or rocks or hidden caves. He made a sharp evasive turn and raced back the way he'd come. The thing that stalked him followed lazily, easily.

Suddenly it dived on him, a voracious, mad engine of murder, all dead black eyes and gleaming chrome steel teeth. Flushed from the sea bottom, Audran knifed up through the green water toward the surface, though he knew there was no shelter there. The great beast raged close behind him. In a froth of boiling seafoam, Audran broke through the waves, into the fearfully thin air, and—flew. He glided over the whitecapped water until, at last, he fell back into the welcoming element, exhausted.

And the nightmare creature was there, its ghastly mouth yawning wide to rend him. The daggered jaws closed slowly, victoriously, until for Audran there was only blackness and the knowledge of the agony to come.

* * * *

"Jeez," I murmured, when the Transpex returned my consciousness.

"Some game," said Shaknahyi.

"How'd I do?" asked Chiri. She sounded exhilarated.

"Pretty good," said Courane. "623. It was a promising scenario, but you never got him to panic."

"I sure as hell tried," she said. "I want another drink." She gave me a quirky grin.

I took out my pillcase and swallowed eight Paxium with a mouthful of gin. Maybe as a fish I hadn't been paralyzed with fear, but I was feeling a strong nervous reaction now. "I want another drink too," I said. "I'll stand a round for everybody."

"Bigshot," said Shaknahyi.

Both Chiri and I waited until our heartbeats slowed down to normal. Courane brought a tray with the fresh drinks, and I watched Chiri throw hers down in two long gulps. She was fortifying herself for whatever evil things I was going to do to her mind. She was going to need it.

Chiri touched Player Two on the game's console, and I saw her eyes slowly close. She looked as if she were napping placidly. That was going to end in a hell of a hurry. On the holoscreen was the same opalescent haze I'd wandered through until Chiri'd decided it was the ocean. I reached out and touched the Player One panel.

* * * *

Audran gazed down upon the ball of mist, like Allah in the highest of the heavens. He concentrated on building a richly detailed illusion, and he was pleased with his progress. Instead of letting it take on form and reality gradually, Audran loosed an explosion of sensory information. The woman far below was stunned by the purity of color in this world, the clarity of sound, the intensity of the tastes and textures and smells. She cried out and her voice pealed in the cool, clean air like a carillon. She fell to her knees, her eyes shut tightly and her hands over her ears.

Audran was patient. He wanted the woman to explore his creation. He wasn't going to hide behind a tree, jump out and frighten her. There was time enough for terror later.

After a while the woman lowered her hands and stood up. She looked around uncertainly. "Marîd?" she called. Once again the sound of her own voice rang with unnatural

sharpness. She glanced behind her, toward the misty purple mountains in the west. Then she turned back to the east, toward the shore of a marshy lake that reflected the impossible azure of the sky. Audran didn't care which direction she chose; it would all be the same in the end.

The woman decided to follow the swampy shoreline to the southeast. She walked for hours, listening to the liquid trilling of songbirds and inhaling the poignant perfume of unknown blossoms. After a while the sun rested on the shoulders of the purple hills behind her, and then slipped away, leaving Audran's illusion in darkness. He provided a full moon, huge and gleaming silver like a serving platter. The woman grew weary, and at last she decided to lie down in the sweet-smelling grass and sleep.

Audran woke her in the morning with a gentle rain shower. "Marîd?" she cried again. He would not answer her. "How long you gonna leave me here?" She shivered.

The golden sun mounted higher, and while it warmed the morning, the heat never became stifling. Just after noon, when the woman had walked almost halfway around the lake, she came upon a pavilion made all of crimson and sapphire blue silk. "What the hell is all this, Marîd?" the woman shouted. "Just get it over with, all right?"

The woman approached the pavilion anxiously. "Hello?" she called.

A moment later a young woman in a white gown came out of the pavilion. Her feet were bare and her pale blonde hair was thrown carelessly over one shoulder. She was smiling

and carrying a wooden tray. "Hungry?" she asked in a friendly voice.

"Yes," said the woman.

"My name is Maryam. I've been waiting for you. I'm sorry, all I've got is bread and fresh milk." She poured from a silver pitcher into a silver goblet.

"Thanks." The woman ate and drank greedily.

Maryam shaded her eyes with one hand. "Are you going to the fair?"

The woman shook her head. "I don't know about any fair."

Maryam laughed. "Everybody goes to the fair. Come on, I'll take you."

The woman waited while Maryam disappeared into the pavilion again with the breakfast things. She came back out a moment later. "We're all set now," she said gaily. "We can get to know each other while we walk."

They continued around the lake until the woman saw a scattering of large, peaked tents of striped canvas, all with colorful pennants snapping in the breeze. She heard many people laughing and shouting, and the sound of axes biting wood, and metal ringing on metal. She could smell bread baking, and cinnamon buns, and lamb roasting on spits turning slowly over glowing coals. Her mouth began to water and she felt her excitement growing despite herself.

"I don't have any money to spend," she said.

"Money?" Maryam asked, laughing. "What is money?"

The woman spent the afternoon going from tent to tent, seeing the strange exhibits and miraculous entertainments. She sampled exotic foods and drank concoctions of unknown

liquors. Now and then she remembered to be afraid. She looked over her shoulder, wondering when the pleasant face of this fantasy would fall away. "Marîd," she called, "what are you doing?"

"Who are you calling?" asked Maryam.

"I'm not sure," said the woman.

Maryam laughed. "Look over here," she said, pulling on the woman's sleeve, showing her a booth where a heavily-muscled woman was shaping a disturbing collage from the claws, teeth, and eyes of lizards.

They listened to children playing strange music on instruments made from the carcasses of small animals, and then they watched several old women spin their own white hair into thread, and then weave it into napkins and scarves.

One of the toothless hags leered at Maryam and the woman. "Take," she said in a gravelly voice.

"Thank you, grandmother," said Maryam. She selected a pair of human hair handkerchiefs.

The hours wore on, and at last the sun began to set. The moon rose as full as yestereve. "Is this going to go on all night?" the woman asked.

"All night and all day tomorrow," said Maryam. "Forever."
The woman shuddered.

From that moment she couldn't shake a growing dread, a sense that she'd been lured to this place and abandoned. She remembered nothing of who she'd been before she'd awakened beside the lake, but she felt she'd been horribly tricked. She prayed to someone called Marîd. She wondered if that was God.

"Marîd," she murmured fearfully, "I wish you'd just end this already."

But Audran was not ready to end it. He watched as the woman and Maryam grew sleepy and found a large tent filled with comfortable cushions and sheets of satin and fine linen. They laid themselves down and slept.

In the morning the woman arose, dismayed to be still trapped at the eternal fair. Maryam found them a good breakfast of sausage, fried bread, broiled tomatoes, and hot tea. Maryam's enthusiasm was undiminished, and she led the woman toward still more disquieting entertainments. The woman, however, felt only a crazily mounting dread.

"You've had me here for two days, Marîd," she pleaded. "Please kill me and let me go." Audran gave her no sign, no answer.

They passed the third day examining one dismaying thing after another: Teenage girls who seemed to have living roses in place of breasts; a candlemaker whose wares would not provide light in the presence of an infidel; staged combat between a blind man and two maddened dragons; a family hammering together a scale model of the fair out of iron, a project that had occupied them for generations and that might never be completed; a cage of crickets that had been taught to chirp the Shahada, the Islamic testament of faith.

The afternoon passed, and once again night began to fall. All through the fair, men jammed blazing torches into iron sconces on tall poles. Still Maryam led the woman from tent to tent, but the woman no longer enjoyed the spectacles. She was filled with a sense of impending catastrophe. She felt an

urgent need to escape, but she knew she couldn't even find her way out of the infinite fairgrounds.

And then a shrill, buzzing alarm sounded. "What's that?" she asked, startled. All around her, people had begun to flee.

"Yallah!" cried Maryam, her face stricken with horror. "Run! Run and save your life!"

"What is it?" the woman shouted. "Tell me what it is!"

Maryam had collapsed to the ground, weeping and moaning. "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful," she muttered over and over again. The woman could get nothing more sensible from her.

The woman left her there, and she followed the stream of terrified people as they ran among the tents. And then the woman saw them: Two immense giants, impossibly huge, hundreds of feet tall, crushing the landscape as they came nearer. They waded among the distant mountains, and then the shocks from their jolting footsteps began to churn the water in the lake. The ground heaved as they came nearer. The woman raised a hand to her breast, then staggered backward a few steps.

One of the giants turned his head slowly and looked straight at her. He was horribly ugly, with a great scar across one empty eye socket and a mouthful of rotten, snagged fangs. He lifted an arm and pointed to her.

"No," she said, her voice hoarse with fear, "not me!" She wanted to run but she couldn't move. The giant stooped toward her, fierce and glowering. He bent to capture her in his enormous hand.

"Marîd!" the woman screamed. "Please!" Nothing happened. The giant's fist began to close around her.

The woman tried to reach up and unplug the moddy link, but her arms were frozen. She wouldn't escape that easily. The woman shrieked as she realized she couldn't even jack out.

The disfigured giant lifted her off the ground and drew her close to his single eye. His horrid grin spread and he laughed at her terror. His stinking breath sickened the woman. She struggled again to lift her hands, to pull the moddy link free. Her arms were held fast. She screamed and screamed, and then at last she fainted.

* * * *

My eyes were bleary for a moment, and I could hear Chiri panting for breath beside me. I didn't think she'd be so upset. After all, it was only a Transpex game, and it wasn't the first time she'd ever played. She knew what to expect.

"You're a sick motherfucker, Marîd," she said at last.

"Listen, Chiri, I was just—"

She waved a hand at me. "I know, I know. You won the game and the bet. I'm still just a little shook, that's all. I'll have your money for you tonight."

"Forget the money, Chiri, I—"

I shouldn't have said that. "Hey, you son of a bitch, when I lose a bet I pay up. You're gonna take the money or I'm gonna cram it down your throat. But, God, you've got some kind of twisted imagination."

"That last part," said Courane, "where she couldn't raise her hands to pop the moddy link, that was real cold." He said it approvingly.

"Hell of a sadistic thing to do," said Chiri, shivering. "Last time I ever touch a Transpex with you."

"A few extra points, that's all, Chiri. I didn't know what my score was. I might have needed a couple more points."

"You finished with 941," said Shaknahyi. He was looking at me oddly, as if he were impressed by my score and repelled at the same time. "We got to go." He stood up and tossed down the last slug of his soft drink.

I stood up too. "You all right now, Chiri?" I put my hand on her shoulder.

"I'm fine. I'm still shaking off the game. It was like a nightmare." She took a deep breath and let it out. "I got to get back to the club so Indihar can go home."

"Give you a ride?" asked Shaknahyi.

"Thanks," said Chiri, "but I got my own transportation."

"See you later then," I said.

"*Kwa heri*, you bastard." At least she was smiling when she called me that. I thought maybe things were okay between us again. I was real glad about that.

Outside, Shaknahyi shook his head and grinned. "She was right, you know. That was a hell of a sadistic thing. Like unnecessary torture. You *are* a sick son of a bitch."

Maybe, I thought as we headed back to the station house. But if ever I decided that I no longer liked my true personality, there was an almost unlimited supply of artificial ones I could chip in.

Marid Changes His Mind
by George Alec Effinger

I leaned back in my seat and stared out the window. I'd managed to heal the bad feelings between Chiri and me, and I was getting a handle on this cop business. All that remained was Angel Monroe, and a solution to that problem would occur to me soon. I was sure that Laila had a Perfect Mother moddy in her shop. Of course, my mom's skull wasn't amped like mine, but I could take care of that for her, even if I had to wire her brain myself with a jackknife and a coathanger.

See? Life is hard, all right, so you've got to take help wherever you can find it. I thought about that as I scratched my scalp around my corymbic implant. As Shakhahyi swung the patrolcar into the garage, I thought, what's the point of sexy new technology if you can't find some way to pervert it?

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this ebook by going back to your bookshelf: [Click Here](#)