

The
Forty Rules
OF Love

ELIF SHAFAK



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NORTHAMPTON, MAY 17, 2008

Birds were singing outside her kitchen window on that balmy day in spring. Afterward Ella replayed the scene in her mind so many times that, rather than a fragment from the past, it felt like an ongoing moment still happening somewhere out there in the universe.

There they were, sitting around the table, having a late family lunch on a Saturday afternoon. Her husband was filling his plate with fried chicken legs, his favorite food. Avi was playing his knife and fork like drumsticks while his twin, Orly, was trying to calculate how many bites of which food she could eat so as not to ruin her diet of 650 calories a day. Jeannette, who was a freshman at Mount Holyoke College nearby, seemed lost in her thoughts as she spread cream cheese on another slice of bread. Also at the table sat Aunt Esther, who had stopped by to drop off one of her famous marble cakes and then stayed on for lunch. Ella had a lot of work to do afterward, but she was not ready to leave the table just yet. Lately they didn't have too many shared family meals, and she saw this as a golden chance for everyone to reconnect.

"Esther, did Ella give you the good news?" David asked suddenly. "She found a great job."

Though Ella had graduated with a degree in English literature and loved fiction, she hadn't done much in the field after college, other than editing small pieces for women's magazines, attending a few book clubs, and occasionally writing book reviews for some local papers. That was all. There was a time when she'd aspired to become a prominent book critic, but then she simply accepted the fact that life had carried her elsewhere, turning her into an industrious housewife with three kids and endless domestic responsibilities.

Not that she complained. Being the mother, the wife, the dog walker, and the housekeeper kept her busy enough. She didn't have to be a breadwinner on top of all these. Though none of her feminist friends from Smith College approved of her choice, she was satisfied to be a stay-at-home mom and grateful that she and her husband could afford it. Besides, she had never abandoned her passion for books and still considered herself a voracious reader.

A few years ago, things had begun to change. The children were growing up, and they made it clear that they didn't need her as much as they once had. Realizing that she had too much time to spare and no one to spend it with, Ella had considered how it might be to find a job. David had encouraged her, but though they kept talking and talking about it, she rarely pursued the opportunities that came her way, and when she did, potential employers were always looking for someone younger or more experienced. Afraid of being rejected over and over, she had simply let the subject drop.

Nevertheless, in May 2008 whatever obstacle had impeded her from finding a job all these years unexpectedly vanished. Two weeks shy of her fortieth birthday, she found herself working for a literary agency based in Boston. It was her husband who found her the job through one of his clients—or perhaps through one of his mistresses.

"Oh, it's no big deal," Ella rushed to explain now. "I'm only a part-time reader for a literary agent."

But David seemed determined not to let her think too little of her new job. "Come on, tell them it's a well-known agency," he urged, nudging her, and when she refused to comply, he heartily agreed with himself. "It's a prestigious place, Esther. You should see the other assistants! Girls and boys fresh out of the best colleges. Ella is the only one going back to work after being a housewife for years. Now, isn't she something?"

Ella wondered if, deep inside, her husband felt guilty about keeping her away from a career, or else about cheating on her—these being the only two explanations she could think of as to why he was now going overboard in his enthusiasm.

Still smiling, David concluded, “This is what I call chutzpah. We’re all proud of her.”

“She is a prize. Always was,” said Aunt Esther in a voice so sentimental that it sounded as if Ella had left the table and was gone for good.

They all gazed at her lovingly. Even Avi didn’t make a cynical remark, and Orly for once seemed to care about something other than her looks. Ella forced herself to appreciate this moment of kindness, but she felt an overwhelming exhaustion that she had never experienced before. She secretly prayed for someone to change the subject.

Jeannette, her older daughter, must have heard the prayer, for she suddenly chimed in, “I have some good news, too.”

All heads turned toward her, faces beaming with expectation.

“Scott and I have decided to get married,” Jeannette announced. “Oh, I know what you guys are going to say! That we haven’t finished college yet and all that, but you’ve got to understand, we both feel ready for the next big move.”

An awkward silence descended upon the kitchen table as the warmth that had canopied them just a moment ago evaporated. Orly and Avi exchanged blank looks, and Aunt Esther froze with her hand tightened around a glass of apple juice. David put his fork aside as if he had no appetite left and squinted at Jeannette with his light brown eyes that were deeply creased with smile lines at the corners. However, right now he was anything but smiling. His mouth had drawn into a pout as though he had just downed a swig of vinegar.

“Great! I expected you to share my happiness, but here this cold treatment instead,” Jeannette whined.

“You just said you were getting married,” remarked David as if Jeannette didn’t know what she’d said and needed to be informed.

“Dad, I know it seems a bit too soon, but Scott proposed to me the other day and I’ve already said yes.”

“But why?” asked Ella.

From the way Jeannette looked at her, Ella reckoned, that was not the kind of question her daughter had expected. She would rather have been asked “When?” or “How?” In either case it meant that she could start shopping for her wedding dress. The question “Why?” was another matter altogether and had completely caught her off guard.

“Because I love him, I guess.” Jeannette’s tone was slightly condescending.

“Honey, what I meant was, why the rush?” insisted Ella. “Are you pregnant or something?”

Aunt Esther twitched in her chair, her face stern, her anguish visible. She took an antacid tablet from her pocket and started chewing on it.

“I’m going to be an uncle,” Avi said, giggling.

Ella held Jeannette’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “You can always tell us the truth. You know that, right? We’ll stand by you no matter what.”

“Mom, will you please stop that?” Jeannette snapped as she pulled her hand away. “This has nothing to do with pregnancy. You’re embarrassing me.”

“I was just trying to help,” Ella responded calmly, calmness being a state she had been lately finding harder and harder to achieve.

“By insulting me, you mean. Apparently the only way you can see Scott and me getting married is me being knocked up! Does it ever occur to you that I might, just might, want to marry this guy because I *love* him? We *have* been dating for eight months now.”

This elicited a scoff from Ella. “Oh, yeah, as if you could tell a man’s character in eight months! Your father and I have been married for almost twenty years, and even we can’t claim to know everything about

"Oh, it's very ... *mystical*." Ella chuckled, hoping to cover with a joke.

But Michelle was all business. "Right," she said flatly. "Listen, I think you need to get on this. It might take longer than you expect to write a report on a novel like that...."

There was a distant muttering on the phone as Michelle's voice trailed off. Ella imagined her juggling several tasks simultaneously—checking e-mails, reading a review on one of her authors, taking a bite from her tuna-salad sandwich, and polishing her fingernails—all while talking on the phone.

"Are you still there?" Michelle asked a minute later.

"Yes, I am."

"Good. Listen, it's crazy in here. I need to go. Just keep in mind the deadline is in three weeks."

"I know," Ella said abruptly, trying to sound more determined. "I'll make the deadline."

The truth was, Ella wasn't sure she wanted to evaluate this manuscript at all. In the beginning she'd been so eager and confident. It had felt thrilling to be the first one to read an unpublished novel by an unknown author and to play however small a role in his fate. But now she wasn't sure if she could concentrate on a subject as irrelevant to her life as Sufism and a time as distant as the thirteenth century.

Michelle must have detected her hesitation. "Is there a problem?" she asked. When no answer came, she grew insistent. "Listen, you can confide in me."

After a bit of silence, Ella decided to tell her the truth.

"It's just that I'm not sure I'm in the right state of mind these days to concentrate on a historical novel. I mean, I'm interested in Rumi and all that, but still, the subject is alien to me. Perhaps you could give me another novel—you know, something I could more easily relate to."

"That's such a skewed approach," said Michelle. "You think you can work better with books you know something about? Not at all! Just because you live in this state you can't expect to edit only novels that take place in Massachusetts, right?"

"That's not what I meant ..." Ella said, and immediately realized she had uttered the same sentence too many times this afternoon. She glanced at her husband to see if he, too, had noticed this, but David's expression was hard to decipher.

"Most of the time, we have to read books that have nothing to do with our lives. That's part of our job. Just this week I finished working on a book by an Iranian woman who used to operate a brothel in Tehran and had to flee the country. Should I have told her to send the manuscript to an Iranian agency instead?"

"No, of course not," Ella mumbled, feeling silly and guilty.

"Isn't connecting people to distant lands and cultures one of the strengths of good literature?"

"Sure it is. Listen, forget what I said. You'll have a report on your desk before the deadline," Ella conceded, hating Michelle for treating her as if she were the dumbest person alive and hating herself for allowing this to happen.

"Wonderful, that's the spirit," Michelle concluded in her singsong voice. "Don't get me wrong, but I think you should bear in mind that there are dozens of people out there who would love to have your job. And most of them are almost half your age. That'll keep you motivated."

When Ella hung up the phone, she found David watching her, his face solemn and reserved. He seemed to be waiting for them to pick up where they'd left off. But she didn't feel like mulling over their daughter's future anymore, if that was what they'd been worrying about in the first place.



Later in the day, she was alone on the porch sitting in her favorite rocking chair, looking at the orangey-red Northampton sunset. The sky felt so close and open that you could almost touch it. Her brain had gone quiet, as if tired of all the noise swirling inside. This month's credit-card payments, Orly's bad eating habits, Avi's poor grades, Aunt Esther and her sad cakes, her dog Spirit's decaying health, Jeannette's

housewife in Northampton named Ella Rubinstein.”

Her gut instinct told her to put the manuscript aside, go into the house, give Michelle a call, and tell her there was no way she could write a report on this novel. Instead she took a deep breath, turned the page, and started to read.

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Sweet Blasphemy

A Novel

A. Z. ZAHARA

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you wouldn't run into a soul for days on end. From the coasts of the Black Sea to the cities of Persia, from the vast steppes of Central Asia to the sand dunes of Arabia, I have passed through thick forests, flat grasslands, and deserts; sojourned at caravansaries and hostels; consulted with the learned men in age-old libraries; listened to tutors teaching little children in [maktab](#)s; discussed [tafsir](#) and logic with students in madrassas; visited temples, monasteries, and shrines; meditated with hermits in their caves; performed [zikr](#) with dervishes; fasted with sages and dined with heretics; danced with shamans under the full moon; come to know people of all faiths, ages, and professions; and witnessed misfortunes and miracles alike.

I have seen poverty-stricken villages, fields blackened by fire, and plundered towns where the rivers ran red and there were no men left alive above the age of ten. I have seen the worst and the best in humanity. Nothing surprises me anymore.

As I went through all these experiences, I began to compile a list that wasn't written down in any book, only inscribed in my soul. This personal list I called The Basic Principles of the Itinerant Mystics of Islam. To me these were as universal, dependable, and invariable as the laws of nature. Together they constituted The Forty Rules of the Religion of Love, which could be attained through love and love only. And one of those rules said, *The Path to the Truth is a labor of the heart, not of the head. Make your heart your primary guide! Not your mind. Meet, challenge, and ultimately prevail over your nafs with your heart. Knowing your ego will lead you to the knowledge of God.*

It had taken me years to finish working on these rules. All forty of them. And now that I was done, I knew I was nearing the final stage of my time in this world. Lately I had been having many visions in this direction. It wasn't death that worried me, for I didn't see it as an end, but dying without leaving a legacy behind. There were many words piled up inside my chest, stories waiting to be told. I wanted to hand all this knowledge to one other person, neither a master nor a disciple. I sought an equal—a companion.

"God," I whispered into the dark, damp room, "all my life I traveled the world and followed Thy path. I saw every person as an open book, a walking Qur'an. I stayed away from the ivory towers of scholars, preferring to spend time with outcasts, expatriates, and exiles. Now I am bursting. Help me to hand Thy wisdom to the right person. Then Thou can do with me as Thou wish."

Before my eyes the room was showered with a light so bright that the faces of the travelers in their beds turned lurid blue. The air inside smelled fresh and alive, as if all the windows had been pushed open and a gusty wind brought in the scent of lilies and jasmine from faraway gardens.

"Go to Baghdad," fluted my guardian angel in a singsong voice.

"What is awaiting me in Baghdad?" I asked.

"You prayed for a companion, and a companion you will be given. In Baghdad you will find the master who will point you in the right direction."

Tears of gratitude welled up in my eyes. Now I knew that the man in my vision was no other than my spiritual companion. Sooner or later we were destined to meet. And when we did, I would learn why his kind hazel eyes were eternally sad and how I came to be murdered on an early-spring night.

firmly, "I am willing to give my head."

I flinched, feeling a cold shiver travel down my spine. When I put my eye to the crack again, I noticed that the master looked shaken by the answer as well.

"Perhaps we have done enough talking for today." Baba Zaman exhaled a sigh. "You must be tired. Let me call the young novice. He will show you to your bed and provide clean sheets and a glass of milk."

Now Shams of Tabriz turned toward the door, and I felt down to my bones that he was gazing at me again. More than that. It was as if he were looking through and into me, studying the pits and peaks of my soul, inspecting secrets that were hidden even from me. Perhaps he was involved with black magic or had been trained by Harut and Marut, the two angels of Babylon that the Qur'an warned us against. Or else he possessed supernatural talents that helped him to see through doors and walls. Either way he scared me.

"No need to call the novice," he said, his voice attaining a higher pitch. "I've a feeling he is nearby and has already heard us."

I let out a gasp so loud it might have woken the dead in their graves. In utter panic I jumped to my feet and scurried into the garden, seeking refuge in the dark. But an unpleasant surprise was awaiting me there.

"So there you are, you little rascal!" yelled the cook as he ran toward me with a broom in his hand. "You are in big trouble, son, big trouble!"

I jumped aside and managed to duck the broom at the last minute.

"Come here or I'll break your legs!" the cook shouted behind me, puffing.

But I didn't. Instead I dashed out of the garden as fast as an arrow. While the face of Shams of Tabriz shimmered before my eyes, I ran and ran along the winding trail that connected the lodge to the main road, and even after I had gotten far away, I couldn't stop running. My heart pounding, my throat dried up, I ran until my knees gave out and I could run no more.

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Whatever she hadn't been able to find, she picked up from the Whole Foods Market on the way home.

Then, on Saturday evenings, David took Ella out to a restaurant (usually Thai or Japanese), and if they weren't too tired or drunk or simply not in the mood when they came home, they would have sex. Brief kisses and tender moves that exuded less passion than compassion. Once their most reliable connection, sex had lost its allure quite a while ago. Sometimes they went for weeks without making love. Ella found it odd that sex had once been so important in her life, and now when it was gone, she felt relieved, almost liberated. By and large she was fine with the idea of a long-married couple gradually abandoning the plane of physical attraction for a more reliable and stable way of relating.

The only problem was that David hadn't abandoned sex as much as he had abandoned sex with his wife. She had never confronted him openly about his affairs, not even hinting of her suspicions. The fact that none of their close friends knew anything made it easier for her to feign ignorance. There were no scandals, no embarrassing coincidences, nothing to set tongues wagging. She didn't know how he managed it, given the frequency of his couplings with other women, particularly with his young assistants, but her husband handled things deftly and quietly. However, infidelity had a smell. That much Ella knew.

If there was a chain of events, Ella couldn't tell which came first and which followed later. Had her loss of interest in sex been the cause of her husband's cheating? Or was it the other way round? Had David cheated on her first, and then she'd neglected her body and lost her sexual desire?

Either way the outcome remained the same: The glow between them, the light that had helped them to navigate the uncharted waters of marriage, keeping their desire afloat, even after three kids and twenty years, was simply not there anymore.

For the next three hours, her mind was filled with thoughts while her hands were restless. She chopped tomatoes, minced garlic, sautéed onions, simmered sauce, grated orange peels, and kneaded dough for a loaf of whole-wheat bread. That last was based on the golden advice David's mother had given her when they got engaged.

"Nothing reminds a man of home like the smell of freshly baked bread," she had said. "Never buy your bread. Bake it yourself, honey. It will work wonders."

Working the entire afternoon, Ella set an exquisite table with matching napkins, scented candles, and a bouquet of yellow and orange flowers so bright and striking they looked almost artificial. For the final touch, she added sparkly napkin rings. When she was done, the dining table resembled those found in stylish home magazines.

Tired but satisfied, she turned on the kitchen TV to the local news. A young therapist had been stabbed in her apartment, an electrical short had caused a fire in a hospital, and four high-school students had been arrested for vandalism. She watched the news, shaking her head at the endless dangers looming in the world. How could people like Aziz Z. Zahara find the desire and courage to travel the less-developed parts of the globe when even the suburbs in America weren't safe anymore?

Ella found it puzzling that an unpredictable and impenetrable world could drive people like her back into their houses but had almost the opposite effect on someone like Aziz, inspiring him to embark on adventures far off the beaten track.

The Rubinsteins sat at a picture-perfect table at 7:30 P.M., the burning candles giving the dining room a sacred air. An outsider watching them might assume they were a perfect family, as graceful as the wisps of smoke slowly dissolving in the air. Even Jeannette's absence didn't tarnish the picture. They ate while Orly and Avi prattled on about the day's events at school. For once Ella felt grateful to them for being so chatty and noisy and covering up the silence that would otherwise have rested heavily between her and her husband.

BAGHDAD, JANUARY 26, 1243

Being part of a dervish lodge requires far more patience than Shams of Tabriz possesses. Yet nine months have passed, and he is still with us.

In the beginning I expected him to pack up and leave at any moment, so visible was his aversion to a strictly ordered life. I could see that it bored him stiff to have to sleep and wake up at the same hours, eat regular meals, and conform to the same routine as everyone else. He was used to flying as a lonely bird, wild and free. I suspect several times he came close to running away. Nevertheless, great as his need for solitude, even greater was his commitment to finding his companion. Shams firmly believed that one of these days I would come up with the information he needed and tell him where to go, whom to find. With this faith he stayed.

During these nine months, I watched him closely, wondering if time flowed differently for him, more rapidly and intensely. What took other dervishes months, sometimes years, to learn took him only weeks, if not days. He had a remarkable curiosity about everything new and unusual and was a great observer of nature. So many days I found him in the garden admiring the symmetry of a spider web or the dewdrops glistening on a night-blooming flower. Insects, plants, and animals seemed more interesting and inspiring to him than books and manuscripts. But just when I would start thinking he had no interest in reading, I would find him immersed in an age-old book. Then, once again, he could go for weeks on end without reading and studying anything.

When I asked him about this, he said one should keep the intellect satisfied and yet be careful not to spoil it. It was one of his rules. *"Intellect and love are made of different materials,"* he said. *"Intellect ties people in knots and risks nothing, but love dissolves all tangles and risks everything. Intellect is always cautious and advises, 'Beware too much ecstasy,' whereas love says, 'Oh, never mind! Take the plunge!' Intellect does not easily break down, whereas love can effortlessly reduce itself to rubble. But treasures are hidden among ruins. A broken heart hides treasures."*

As I got to know him better, I admired his audacity and acumen. But I also suspected there was a downside to Shams's unrivaled ingenuity and originality. For one thing, he was straightforward to the point of brusqueness. I taught my dervishes never to see the faults of other people and, if they did, to be forgiving and quiet. Shams, however, let no mistake go unnoticed. Whenever he saw anything wrong, he spoke out about it right away, never beating around the bush. His honesty offended others, but he liked to provoke people to see what came out of them in moments of anger.

Forcing him to do ordinary tasks was difficult. He had little patience for such jobs and lost interest in something as soon as he got the hang of it. When it came to a routine, he got desperate, like a tiger trapped in a cage. If a conversation bored him or somebody made a foolish remark, he got up and left, never losing time with pleasantries. Values cherished by most human beings, such as security, comfort, and happiness, had hardly any meaning in his eyes. And his distrust of words was so intense that often he went without speaking for days. That, too, was one of his rules: *Most of the problems of the world stem from linguistic mistakes and simple misunderstandings. Don't ever take words at face value. When you step into the zone of love, language as we know it becomes obsolete. That which cannot be put into words can only be grasped through silence.*

In time I became concerned about his well-being. For deep inside I sensed that one who could burn so fervently might have a tendency to put himself into dangerous situations.

Another rule said, *Patience does not mean to passively endure. It means to be farsighted enough to trust the end result of a process. What does patience mean? It means to look at the thorn and see the rose, to look at the night and see the dawn. Impatience means to be so shortsighted as to not be able to see the outcome. The lovers of God never run out of patience, for they know that time is needed for the crescent moon to become full.*

When in autumn the copper bell rang for the third time, I walked in unhurriedly and confidently, trusting that now things would finally be settled. The master looked paler and weaker than ever, as if he had no more energy left in him. Nevertheless, when he saw me raise my hand again, he neither looked away nor dropped the subject. Instead he gave me a determined nod.

“All right, Shams, there is no question you are the one who should embark on this journey. Tomorrow morning you’ll be on your way, [inshallah](#).”

I kissed the master’s hand. At long last I was going to meet my companion.

Baba Zaman smiled at me warmly and thoughtfully, the way a father smiles at his only son before sending him to the battlefield. He then took out a sealed letter from inside his long khaki robe and, after handing it to me, silently left the room. Everyone else followed suit. Alone in the room, I broke the wax seal. Inside, there were two pieces of information written in graceful handwriting. The name of the city and the scholar. Apparently I was going to Konya to meet a certain Rumi.

My heart skipped a beat. I had never heard his name before. He could be a famous scholar for all I knew, but to me he was a complete mystery. One by one, I said the letters of his name: the powerful, lucid *R*; the velvety *U*; the intrepid and self-confident *M*; and the mysterious *I*, yet to be solved.

Bringing the letters together, I repeated his name over and over again until the word melted on my tongue with the sweetness of candy and became as familiar as “water,” “bread,” or “milk.”

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KONYA, OCTOBER 15, 1244

Bright and plump, the gorgeous full moon resembled a massive pearl hanging in the sky. I got up from the bed and looked out the window into the courtyard, awash in moonlight. Even seeing such beauty, however, did not soothe the pounding of my heart or the trembling of my hands.

“Effendi, you look pale. Did you have the same dream again?” whispered my wife. “Shall I bring you a glass of water?”

I told her not to worry and to go back to sleep. There was nothing she could do. Our dreams were part of our destiny, and they would run their course as God willed it. Besides, there must be a reason, I thought, that every night for the last forty days I had been having the same dream.

The beginning of the dream differed slightly each time. Or perhaps it was always the same but I entered it from a different gate each evening. On this occasion I saw myself reading the Qur'an in a carpeted room that felt familiar but was like no place I had been before. Right across from me sat a dervish, tall, thin, and erect, with a veil on his face. He was holding a candelabrum with five glowing candles providing me with light so that I could read.

After a while I lifted my head to show the dervish the verse I was reading, and only then did I realize, to my awe, that what I thought was a candelabrum was in fact the man's right hand. He had been holding out his hand to me, with each one of his fingers aflame.

In panic I looked around for water, but there was none in sight. I took off my cloak and threw it on the dervish to extinguish the flames. But when I lifted the cloak, he had vanished, leaving only a burning candle behind.

From this point onward, it was always the same dream. I started to look for him in the house, searching every nook and cranny. Next I ran into the courtyard, where the roses had blossomed in a sea of bright yellow. I called out left and right, but the man was nowhere to be seen.

“Come back, beloved. Where are you?”

Finally, as if led by an ominous intuition, I approached the well and peered down at the dark waters churning below. At first I couldn't see anything, but in a little while the moon showered me in its glittering light and the courtyard acquired a rare luminosity. Only then did I notice a pair of black eyes staring up at me with unprecedented sorrow from the bottom of the well.

“They killed him!” somebody shouted. Perhaps it was me. Perhaps this was what my own voice would sound like in a state of infinite agony.

And I screamed and screamed until my wife held me tight, drew me to her bosom, and asked softly, “Effendi, did you have the same dream again?”



After Kerra went back to sleep, I slipped into the courtyard. In that moment I had the impression that the dream was still with me, vivid and frightening. In the stillness of the night, the sight of the well sent a shiver down my spine, but I couldn't help sitting next to it, listening to the night breeze rustle gently through the trees.

At times like these, I feel a sudden wave of sadness take hold of me, though I can never tell why. My life is complete and fulfilled, in that I have been blessed with the three things I hold most dear:

I caught sight of the dervish darting toward the mob, like a flaming arrow shot straight up into the sky. I jumped to my feet and rushed to catch up with him.

When he reached the head of the procession, Shams raised his staff like a flag and yelled at the top of his voice, "Stop it, people! Halt!"

Baffled, and suddenly silent, the men stared at him in wonder.

"You should all be ashamed of yourselves!" Shams of Tabriz shouted as he struck the ground with his staff. "Thirty men against one woman. Is that fair?"

"She doesn't deserve fairness," said a square-faced, burly man with a lazy eye, who seemed to have proclaimed himself the leader of this impromptu group. I recognized him instantly. He was a security guard named Baybars, a man all the beggars in town knew well for his cruelty and rapacity.

"This woman here dressed up as a man and sneaked into the mosque to deceive good Muslims," Baybars said.

"Are you telling me you want to punish a person for going into a mosque? Is that a crime?" Shams of Tabriz asked, his voice dripping with scorn.

The question created a momentary lull. Apparently nobody had thought of it that way.

"She is a whore!" yelled another man, who looked so enraged that his face had turned a dark scarlet color. "She has no place in a holy mosque!"

That seemed enough to inflame the group again. "Whore! Whore!" a few people at the back chanted in unison. "Let's get the whore!"

As if that were an order, a young lad leaped forward and grabbed the woman's turban, yanking it forcefully. The turban came loose, and the woman's long blond hair, bright as sunflowers, fell down in graceful waves. We all held our breath, astonished by her youth and beauty.

Shams must have recognized the mixed feeling in the air, for he reproached them without skipping a beat: "You have to make up your minds, brothers. Do you really despise this woman, or do you in fact desire her?"

With that, the dervish caught the harlot's hand and pulled her toward him, away from the young lad and the mob. She hid behind him, like a little girl hiding behind her mother's skirts.

"You are making a big mistake," the leader of the group said, raising his voice above the murmur of the crowd. "You are a stranger in this town and don't know our ways. Stay out of this matter."

Someone else chimed in. "What kind of a dervish are you anyway? Don't you have anything better to do than to defend the interests of a whore?"

Shams of Tabriz was quiet for a moment, as if considering the questions. He displayed no temper, remaining invariably tranquil. Then he said, "But how did you notice her in the first place? You go to a mosque but pay more attention to the people around you than to God? If you were the good believers you claim to be, you would not have noticed this woman even if she were naked. Now, go back to the sermon and do a better job this time."

An awkward silence descended on the entire street. Leaves skittered along the sidewalk, and for a moment they were the only things that moved.

"Come on, you lot! Off you go, back to the sermon." Shams of Tabriz waved his staff, shooing the men away like flies.

They did not all turn and walk away, but they *did* take a few steps back, swaying unsteadily, puzzled as to what to do next. A few of them were looking in the direction of the mosque as if considering returning. It was exactly then that the harlot mustered the courage to get out from behind the dervish. Fast as a rabbit, she took to her heels, her long hair flying every which way while she scurried into the closest side street.

Only two men attempted to chase her. But Shams of Tabriz blocked their path, swinging his staff under their feet with such suddenness and force that they tumbled over and fell down. A few passersby laughed at the sight, and so did I.

And here was this dervish telling me I was cleaner than fresh springwater. It felt like a tasteless joke, but when I forced myself to laugh, the sound didn't pass through my throat, and I ended up suppressing a sob.

"The past is a whirlpool. If you let it dominate your present moment, it will suck you in," said Shams as if he had read my thoughts. "Time is just an illusion. What you need is to live this very moment. That is all that matters."

Upon saying that, he took out a silk handkerchief from the inside pocket of his robe. "Keep it," he said. "A good man in Baghdad gave it to me, but you need it more than I do. It will remind you that your heart is pure and that you bear God within you."

With that, the dervish grabbed his staff and stood up, ready to go. "Just walk out of that brothel."

"Where? How? I have no place to go."

"That's not a problem," Shams said, his eyes gleaming. *"Fret not where the road will take you. Instead concentrate on the first step. That's the hardest part and that's what you are responsible for. Once you take that step let everything do what it naturally does and the rest will follow. Do not go with the flow. Be the flow."*

I nodded. I didn't need to ask in order to understand that this, too, was one of the rules.

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With love,
Aziz

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KONYA, OCTOBER 19, 1244

Below my open window, dogs were barking and growling. I propped myself up in bed, suspecting they must have noticed a robber trying to break in to a house, or some dirty drunk passing by. Decent people cannot sleep in peace anymore. There is debauchery and lechery everywhere. It wasn't always like this. This town was a safer place until a few years ago. Moral corruption is no different from a ghastly disease that comes without warning and spreads fast, infecting the rich and the poor, the old and the young alike. Such is the state of our town today. If it weren't for my position at the madrassa, I would hardly leave my house.

Thank God there are people who put the interests of the community before their own and work day and night to enforce order. People like my young nephew, Baybars. My wife and I are proud of him. It is comforting to know that at this late hour, when villains, criminals, and drunks go on a rampage, Baybars and his fellow security guards patrol the town to protect us.

Upon my brother's early death, I became the primary guardian for Baybars. Young, adamant, he started working as a security guard six months ago. Gossipmongers claimed that it was thanks to my position as a madrassa teacher that he was able to get the job. Nonsense! Baybars is strong and brave enough to qualify for the job. He would also have made an excellent soldier. He wanted to go to Jerusalem to fight against the Crusaders, but my wife and I thought it was time for him to settle down and start a family.

"We need you here, son," I said. "There is so much to fight against here, too."

Indeed there was. Just this morning I told my wife we were living in difficult times. It is no coincidence that every day we hear of a new tragedy. If the Mongols have been this victorious, if the Christians could succeed in furthering their cause, if town after town, village after village is sacked by the enemies of Islam, it is because of the people who are Muslims in name only. When people lose hold of the rope of God, they are bound to go astray. The Mongols were sent as a punishment for our sins. If not the Mongols, it would have been an earthquake, a famine, or a flood. How many more calamities do we have to experience for the sinners in this town to get the message and repent their ways? Next I fear stones will rain down from above. One day soon we might all be wiped out, walking in the footsteps of the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah.

And these Sufis, they are such a bad influence. How dare they call themselves Muslims when they say things no Muslim should even think of? It boils my blood to hear them utter the name of the Prophet, peace be upon him, to promote their silly views. They claim that following a war campaign, the Prophet Muhammad had announced that his people were henceforth abandoning the small jihad for the greater jihad—the struggle against one's own ego. Sufis argue that ever since then the ego is the only adversary a Muslim should be warring against. Sounds nice, but how is that going to help to fight the enemies of Islam? I wonder.

The Sufis go as far as claiming that the sharia is merely a stage on the way. What stage, I say, what are they speaking of? As if that weren't alarming enough, they argue that an enlightened person cannot be bound by the rules of early stages. And since they like to think of themselves as having already reached a supreme level, they use this as a poor excuse to disregard the rules of the sharia. Drinking, dancing, music, poetry, and painting seem more vital to them than religious duties. They keep preaching that since there is no hierarchy in Islam, everyone is entitled to his own personal quest for God. It all sounds inoffensive and harmless, but after one wades through the boring verbosity, one discovers that there is a

KONYA, OCTOBER 31, 1244

Blessed is this day, for I have met Shams of Tabriz. On this last day of October, the air has a new chill and the winds blow stronger, announcing the departure of autumn.

This afternoon the mosque was packed, as usual. While preaching to large crowds, I always take care to neither forget nor remember my audience. And there is only one way of doing this: to imagine the crowd as one single person. Hundreds of people listen to me every week, but I always talk to one person alone—the one who hears my words echo in his heart and who knows me like no other.

When I walked out of the mosque afterward, I found my horse readied for me. The animal's mane had been braided with strands of gold and tiny silver bells. I enjoyed listening to the tinkling of the bells at every step, but with so many people blocking the way it was impossible to proceed very fast. In a measured pace, we passed by shabby stores and houses with thatched roofs. The calls of the petitioners mingled with the cries of children and the shouts of beggars eager to earn a few coins. Most of these people wanted me to pray for them; some simply wished to walk close to me. But there were others who had come with bigger expectations, asking me to heal them of a terminal illness or an evil spell. These were the ones who worried me. How could they not see that, neither a prophet nor a sage, I was incapable of performing miracles?

As we turned a corner and approached the Inn of Sugar Vendors, I noticed a wandering dervish push his way through the crowd, strutting directly toward me and regarding me with piercing eyes. His movements were deft and focused, and he exuded an aura of self-sufficient competence. He had no hair. No beard. No eyebrows. And though his face was as open as a man's face could ever be, his expression was inscrutable.

But it wasn't his appearance that intrigued me. Over the years I had seen wandering dervishes of all sorts pass through Konya in their quest for God. With striking tattoos, multiple earrings and nose rings, most of these people enjoyed having "unruly" written all over them. They either wore their hair very long or shaved it off completely. Some Qalandaris even had their tongues and nipples pierced. So when I saw the dervish for the first time, it wasn't his outer shell that startled me. It was, I dare to say, his gaze.

His black eyes blazing at me sharper than daggers, he stood in the middle of the street and raised his arms high and wide, as if he wanted to halt not only the procession but also the flow of time. I felt a jolt run through my body, like a sudden intuition. My horse got nervous and started to snort loudly, jerking its head up and down. I tried to calm it, but it got so skittish that I, too, felt nervous.

Before my eyes the dervish approached my horse, which was shying and dancing about, and whispered something inaudible to it. The animal started to breathe heavily, but when the dervish waved his hand in a final gesture, it instantly quieted down. A wave of excitement rippled through the crowd, and I heard someone mutter, "That's black magic!"

Oblivious to his surroundings, the dervish eyed me curiously. "O great scholar of East and West, I have heard so much about you. I came here today to ask you a question, if I may?"

"Go ahead," I said under my breath.

"Well, you need to get down from your horse first and be on the same level with me."

I was so stunned to hear this that I couldn't speak for a moment. The people around me seemed equally taken aback. No one had ever dared to address me like this before.

I felt my face burn and my stomach turn with irritation, but I managed to control my ego and dismounted

a second question hidden within his first question.

“How about you, great preacher?” he was asking me. “Of the seven stages, which stage are you at? And do you think you have the heart to go further, till the very end? Tell me, how big is your cup?”

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KONYA, AUGUST 2, 1245

Bountiful is your life, full and complete. Or so you think, until someone comes along and makes you realize what you have been missing all this time. Like a mirror that reflects what is absent rather than present, he shows you the void in your soul—the void you have resisted seeing. That person can be a lover, a friend, or a spiritual master. Sometimes it can be a child to look after. What matters is to find the soul that will complete yours. All the prophets have given the same advice: Find the one who will be your mirror! For me that mirror is Shams of Tabriz. Until he came and forced me to look deep into the crannies of my soul, I had not faced the fundamental truth about myself: that though successful and prosperous outside, I was lonely and unfulfilled inside.

It's as if for years on end you compile a personal dictionary. In it you give your definition of every concept that matters to you, such as "truth," "happiness," or "beauty." At every major turning point in life, you refer to this dictionary, hardly ever feeling the need to question its premises. Then one day a stranger comes and snatches your precious dictionary and throws it away.

"All your definitions need to be redefined," he says. "It's time for you to unlearn everything you know."

And you, for some reason unbeknownst to your mind but obvious to your heart, instead of raising objections or getting cross with him, gladly comply. This is what Shams has done to me. Our friendship has taught me so much. But more than that, he has taught me to unlearn everything I knew.

When you love someone this much, you expect everyone around you to feel the same way, sharing your joy and euphoria. And when that doesn't happen, you feel surprised, then offended and betrayed.

How could I possibly make my family and friends see what I see? How could I describe the indescribable? Shams is my Sea of Mercy and Grace. He is my Sun of Truth and Faith. I call him the King of Kings of Spirit. He is my fountain of life and my tall cypress tree, majestic and evergreen. His companionship is like the fourth reading of the Qur'an—a journey that can only be experienced from within but never grasped from the outside.

Unfortunately, most people make their evaluations based on images and hearsay. To them Shams is an eccentric dervish. They think he behaves bizarrely and speaks blasphemy, that he is utterly unpredictable and unreliable. To me, however, he is the epitome of Love that moves the whole universe, at times retreating into the background and holding every piece together, at times exploding in bursts. An encounter of this kind happens once in a lifetime. Once in thirty-eight years.

Ever since Shams came into our lives, people have been asking me what it is in him that I find so special. But there is no way I can answer them. At the end of the day, those who ask this question are the ones who won't understand it, and as for those who *do* understand, they don't ask such things.

The quandary I find myself in reminds me of the story of Layla and Harun ar-Rashid, the famous Abbasid emperor. Upon hearing that a Bedouin poet named Qays had fallen hopelessly in love with Layla and lost his mind for her, and was therefore named Majnun—the madman—the emperor became very curious about the woman who had caused such misery.

This Layla must be a very special creature, he thought. *A woman far superior to all other women. Perhaps she is an enchantress unequaled in beauty and charm.*

Excited, intrigued, he played every trick in the book to find a way to see Layla with his own eyes.

Finally one day they brought Layla to the emperor's palace. When she took off her veil, Harun ar-Rashid was disillusioned. Not that Layla was ugly, crippled, or old. But she wasn't extraordinarily

Trembling with anger, choking back sobs, I ran to the kitchen, which has become my sanctuary these days. And there, amid pots and pans, stacks of herbs and spices, I sat down and cried my heart out.

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KONYA, JANUARY 1246

Blushing and sweating slightly, I mustered the courage to talk to Shams of Tabriz. I had been meaning to ask him about the deepest reading of the Qur'an, but for weeks I hadn't had a chance. Though we lived under the same roof, our paths never crossed. But this morning as I was sweeping the courtyard, Shams appeared next to me, alone and in the mood to chat. And this time not only did I manage to talk with him longer, but I also managed to look him in the eye.

"How is it going, dear Kimya?" he asked jovially.

I couldn't help noticing that Shams looked dazed, as if he had just woken up from sleep, or else another vision. I knew he had been having visions, lately more often than ever, and by now I had learned to read the signs. Each time he had a vision, his face became pale and his eyes dreamy.

"A storm is impending," Shams murmured, squinting at the sky, where grayish flakes swirled, heralding the first snow of the year.

This seemed the right time to ask him the question I had been holding inside. "Remember when you told me that we all understood the Qur'an in accordance with the depth of our insight?" said carefully. "Ever since then I have been meaning to ask you about the fourth level."

Now Shams turned toward me, his gaze raking my face. I liked it when he stared at me so attentively. I thought he was his handsomest at times like this. His lips pursed, his forehead slightly creased.

"The fourth level is unspeakable," he said. "There is a stage after which language fails us. When you step into the zone of love, you won't need language."

"I wish I could step into the zone of love someday," I blurted, but then instantly felt embarrassed. "I mean, so that I could read the Qur'an with deeper insight."

An odd little smile etched Shams's mouth. "If you have it in you, I am sure you will. You'll dive into the fourth current, and then you'll be the stream."

I had forgotten this mixed feeling that only Shams was capable of stirring in me. Next to him I felt both like a child learning life anew and like a woman ready to nurture life inside my womb.

"What do you mean, 'if you have it in you'?" I asked. "You mean, like destiny?"

"Yes, that's right." Shams nodded.

"But what does destiny mean?"

"I cannot tell you what destiny is. All I can tell you is what it isn't. In fact, there is another rule regarding this question. *Destiny doesn't mean that your life has been strictly predetermined. Therefore, to leave everything to fate and to not actively contribute to the music of the universe is a sign of sheer ignorance.*

"The music of the universe is all-pervading and it is composed on forty different levels.

"Your destiny is the level where you will play your tune. You might not change your instrument but how well to play is entirely in your hands."

I must have given him a befuddled look, for Shams felt the need to explain. He placed his hand on mine, gently squeezing. With dark, deep eyes glinting he said, "Allow me to tell you a story."

And here is what he told me:

One day a young woman asked a dervish what fate was about. "Come with me," the dervish said. "Let's take a look at the world together." Soon they ran into a procession. A killer was being taken to the plaza to be hanged. The dervish asked, "That man will be executed. But is that because somebody

gave him the money with which he bought his murder weapon? Or is it because nobody stopped him while he was committing the crime? Or is it because someone caught him afterward? Where is the cause and effect in this case?"

I interjected, cutting his story short, and said, "That man is going to be hanged because what he did was awful. He is paying for what he did. There is the cause and there, too, the effect. There are good things and bad things, and a difference between the two."

"Ah, sweet Kimya," Shams replied, in a small voice as if he suddenly felt tired. "You like distinctions because you think they make life easier. What if things are not that clear all the time?"

"But God wants us to be clear. Otherwise there would be no notions of haram or halal. There would be no hell and heaven. Imagine if you could not scare people with hell or encourage them with heaven. The world would be a whole lot worse."

Snowflakes skittered in the wind, and Shams leaned forward to pull my shawl tighter. For a passing moment, I stood frozen, inhaling his smell. It was a mixture of sandalwood and soft amber with a faint, crisp tang underneath, like the smell of earth after the rain. I felt a warm glow in the pit of my stomach and a wave of desire between my legs. How embarrassing it was—and yet, oddly, not embarrassing at all.

"In love, boundaries are blurred," said Shams, staring at me half compassionately, half concernedly.

Was he talking about the Love of God or the love between a woman and a man? Could he be referring to us? Was there such a thing as "us"?

Unaware of my thoughts, Shams continued. "I don't care about haram or halal. I'd rather extinguish the fire in hell and burn heaven, so that people could start loving God for no other reason than love."

"You shouldn't go around saying such things. People are mean. Not everyone would understand," I said, not realizing that I would have to think more about this warning before its full implications could sink in.

Shams smiled a brave, almost valiant smile. I allowed him to hold me captive, his palm feeling hot and heavy against mine.

"Perhaps you are right, but don't you think that gives me all the more reason to speak my mind? Besides, narrow-minded people are deaf anyhow. To their sealed ears, whatever I say is sheer blasphemy."

"Whereas to me everything you say is only sweet!"

Shams looked at me with a disbelief that verged on astonishment. But I was more shocked than he was. How could I have said such a thing? Had I taken leave of my senses? I must have been possessed by a djinn or something.

"I'm sorry, I'd better go now," I said as I jumped to my feet.

My cheeks burning with shame, my heart pounding with all the things we had said and left unsaid, I scampered out of the courtyard back into the house. But even as I ran, I knew that a threshold had been crossed. After this moment I could not ignore the truth that I had known all along: I was in love with Shams of Tabriz.

NORTHAMPTON, JUNE 17, 2008

Beloved Ella,

You were kind enough to ask me to tell you more. Frankly, I do not find it easy to write about this period of my life for it brings back unwanted memories. But here it is:

After Margot's death my life underwent a dramatic change. Losing myself in a circle of addicts, becoming a regular at all-night parties and dance clubs in an Amsterdam I had never known before, I looked for comfort and compassion in all the wrong places. I became a night creature, befriended the wrong people, woke up in strangers' beds, and lost more than twenty-five pounds in just a few months.

The first time I sniffed heroin, I threw up and got so sick I couldn't keep my head up the whole day. My body had rejected the drug. It was a sign but I was in no state to see it. Before I knew it, I had replaced sniffing with injections. Marijuana, hashish, acid, cocaine—I tried whatever I could get my hands on. It didn't take me long to make a mess of myself, mentally and physically. Everything I did, I did to stay high.

And when high I planned spectacular ways to kill myself. I even tried hemlock, in the manner of Socrates, but either its poison didn't have an effect on me or the dark herb I bought at the back door of a Chinese takeout was some ordinary plant. Perhaps they sold me some kind of green tea and had a laugh at my expense. Many mornings I woke up in unfamiliar places with someone new by my side, but with the same emptiness eating me up inside. Women took care of me. Some were younger than me, others much older. I lived in their houses, slept in their beds, stayed in their summer resorts, ate the food they cooked, wore their husbands' clothes, shopped with their credit cards, and refused to give them even a speck of the love they demanded and no doubt deserved.

The life I had chosen quickly took its toll. I lost my job, I lost my friends, and finally I lost the apartment Margot and I had spent many happy days in. When it became apparent that I couldn't bear this lifestyle anymore, I stayed in squat houses where everything was collective. I spent more than fifteen months at one squat house in Rotterdam. There were no doors in the building, neither outside nor inside, not even in the bathroom. We shared everything. Our songs, dreams, pocket money, drugs, food, beds ... Everything but the pain.

Years into a life of drugs and debauchery, I hit rock bottom, a shadow of the man I used to be. As I was washing my face one morning, I stared into the mirror. I had never seen anybody so young who was so drained and sad. I went back to bed and cried like a child. The same day I rummaged through the boxes where I kept Margot's belongings. Her books, clothes, records, hairpins, notes, pictures—one by one, I bade farewell to every keepsake. Then I put them back in boxes and gave them away to the children of the immigrants she cared so deeply about. It was 1977.

With the help of God-sent connections, I found a job at a well-known travel magazine as a photographer. This is how I embarked on a journey to North Africa with a canvas suitcase and a framed picture of Margot, running away from the man I had become.

Then a British anthropologist I met in the Saharan Atlas gave me an idea. He asked me if I had ever considered being the first Western photographer to sneak into the holiest cities of Islam. I didn't know what he was talking about. He said there was a Saudi law that strictly forbade non-Muslims from entering Mecca and Medina. No Christians or Jews were allowed, unless one found a way to break in to the city and take pictures. If caught, you could go to jail, or even worse. I was all ears. The thrill of trespassing into forbidden territory, achieving what no one else had accomplished before, the surge of adrenaline, not to mention the fame and money that would come at the end ... I was attracted to the idea like a bee drawn to a pot of honey.

The anthropologist said I could not do this alone and needed a connection. He suggested checking the Sufi brotherhoods in the area. You never know, they might agree to help, he said.

I didn't know anything about Sufism, and I couldn't have cared less. As long as they offered to help, I was happy to meet the Sufis. To me they were just a means to an end. But then, at the time, so was everyone and everything else.

Life is odd, Ella. In the end I never made it to Mecca or Medina. Not then, not later. Not even after I converted to Islam. Destiny took me on a different route altogether, one of unexpected twists and turns, each of which changed me so profoundly and irrevocably that after a while the original destination lost its significance. Though motivated by purely materialistic reasons at the outset, when the journey came to an end, I was a transformed man.

As for the Sufis, who could have known that what I had initially seen as a means to an end would very soon become an end in itself? This part of my life I call my encounter with the letter *u* in the word "Sufi."

Love,

Aziz

had she heard?

The shame of being humiliated by my father in front of the girl I wanted to marry churned in my stomach, leaving a bad taste in my mouth. It felt like the room was spinning all around me, threatening to collapse.

Unable to stay there a moment longer, I grabbed my coat, pushed Shams aside, and dashed out of the house, away from Kimya, away from all of them.

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KONYA, FEBRUARY 1246

Bottles of wine stood between us, loaded with the smells of hot earth, wild herbs, and dark berries. After Aladdin was gone, Rumi was so sad he couldn't talk for a while. He and I stepped out into the snow-covered courtyard. It was one of those bleak February evenings when the air felt heavy with a peculiar stillness. We stood there watching the clouds move, listening to a world that offered us nothing but silence. The wind brought us a whiff of the forests from afar, fragrant and musky, and for a moment I believe we both wanted to leave this town for good.

Then I took one of the bottles of wine. I knelt beside a climbing rose tree that stood thorny and bare in the snow, and I started to pour the wine on the soil beneath it. Rumi's face brightened as he smiled his half-thoughtful, half-excited smile.

Slowly, stunningly, the bare rose tree came alive, its bark softening like human skin. It produced a single rose in front of our eyes. As I kept pouring the wine under the tree, the rose revealed a lovely warm shade of orange.

Next I took the second bottle and poured it in the same way. The rose's orange color turned into a bright crimson tone, glowing with life. Now there remained only a glassful of wine at the bottom of the bottle. I poured that into a glass, drank half of it, and the remaining half I offered to Rumi.

He took the glass with trembling hands, responding to my gesture with a beaming reciprocity of kindness and equanimity, this man who had never touched alcohol in his life.

"Religious rules and prohibitions are important," he said. "But they should not be turned into unquestionable taboos. It is with such awareness that I drink the wine you offer me today, believing with all my heart that there is a sobriety beyond the drunkenness of love."

Just as Rumi was about to take the glass to his lips, I snatched it back and flung it to the ground. The wine spilled on the snow, like drops of blood.

"Don't drink it," I said, no longer feeling the need to continue with this trial.

"If you weren't going to ask me to drink this wine, why did you send me to the tavern in the first place?" Rumi asked, his tone not so much curious as compassionate.

"You know why," I said, smiling. "Spiritual growth is about the totality of our consciousness, not about obsessing over particular aspects. Rule Number Thirty-two: *Nothing should stand between yourself and God. Not imams, priests, rabbis, or any other custodians of moral or religious leadership. Not spiritual masters, not even your faith. Believe in your values and your rules, but never lord them over others. If you keep breaking other people's hearts, whatever religious duty you perform is no good.*

"Stay away from all sorts of idolatry, for they will blur your vision. Let God and only God be your guide. Learn the Truth, my friend, but be careful not to make a fetish out of your truths."

I had always admired Rumi's personality and known that his compassion, endless and extraordinary, was what I lacked in life. But today my admiration for him had grown by leaps and bounds.

This world was full of people obsessed with wealth, recognition, or power. The more signs of success they earned, the more they seemed to be in need of them. Greedy and covetous, they rendered worldly possessions their *qibla*, always looking in that direction, unaware of becoming the servants of the things they hungered after. That was a common pattern. It happened all the time. But it was rare, as rare as rubies, for a man who had already made his way up, a man who had plenty of gold, fame, and authority, to renounce his position all of a sudden one day and endanger his reputation for an inner journey, one that

nobody could tell where or how it would end. Rumi was that rare ruby.

“God wants us to be modest and unpretentious,” I said.

“And He wants to be *known*,” Rumi added softly. “He wants us to know Him with every fiber of our being. That is why it is better to be watchful and sober than to be drunk and dizzy.”

I agreed. Until it turned dark and cold, we sat in the courtyard with a single red rose between us. There was, beneath the chill of the evening, the scent of something fresh and sweet. The Wine of Love made our heads spin gently, and I realized with glee and gratitude that the wind no longer whispered despair.

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KONYA, FEBRUARY 1246

“Batten down the hatches! Sheikh Yassin! Sheikh Yassin! Did you hear the scandal?” Abdullah, the father of one of my students, exclaimed as he approached me on the street. “Rumi was seen in a tavern in the Jewish quarter yesterday!”

“Yes, I heard about that,” I said, “but I wasn’t surprised. The man has a Christian wife, and his best friend is a heretic. What did you expect?”

Abdullah nodded gravely. “I guess you are right. We should have seen it coming.”

A number of passersby gathered around us, overhearing our conversation. Somebody suggested that Rumi should not be allowed to preach in the Great Mosque anymore. Not until he apologized publicly. I agreed. Being late for my class in the madrassa, I then left them to their talk and hurried off.

I had always suspected that Rumi had a dark side ready to float up to the surface someday. But even I hadn’t expected him to take to the bottle. It was utterly disgusting. People say Shams is the primary reason for the downfall of Rumi, and if he weren’t around, Rumi would go back to normal. But I hold a different view. Not that I doubt that Shams is an evil man—he is—or that he doesn’t have a bad influence on Rumi—he does—but the question is, why can’t Shams lead other scholars astray, such as me? At the end of the day, those two are alike in more ways than people are willing to recognize.

There are people who heard Shams remark, “A scholar lives on the marks of a pen. A Sufi loves and lives on footprints!” Now, what does that mean? Apparently Shams thinks scholars talk the talk and Sufis walk the walk. But Rumi, too, is a scholar, isn’t he? Or does he not consider himself one of us anymore?

Should Shams enter my classroom, I would chase him away like a fly, never giving him the opportunity to sputter gibberish in my presence. Why can’t Rumi do the same? There must be something wrong with him. The man has a Christian wife, for starters. I don’t care if she has converted to Islam. It is in her blood and in the blood of her child. Unfortunately, the townspeople don’t take the threat of Christianity as seriously as they should, and they assume that we can live side by side. To those who are naïve enough to believe that, I always say, “Can water and oil ever mix? That is the extent to which Muslims and Christians can!”

Having a Christian for a wife and being notoriously soft toward minorities, Rumi was already an undependable man in my eyes, but when Shams of Tabriz started living under his roof, he totally deviated from the right path. As I tell my students every day, one needs to be alert against Sheitan. And Shams is the devil incarnate. I am sure it was his idea to send Rumi to the tavern. God knows how he convinced him. But isn’t beguiling righteous people into sacrilege what Sheitan excels at?

I understood Shams’s evil side right from the start. How dare he compare the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, with that irreligious Sufi Bistami? Wasn’t it Bistami who pronounced, “Look at me! How great is my glory!” Wasn’t it he who then said, “I saw the Kaaba walking around *me*”? The man went as far as stating, “I am the smith of my own self.” If this is not blasphemy, then what is? Such is the level of the man Shams quotes with respect. For just like Bistami, he, too, is a heretic.

The only good news is that the townspeople are waking up to the truth. Finally! Shams’s critics increase with each passing day. And the things they say! Even I am appalled sometimes. In the bathhouses and teahouses, in the wheat fields and orchards, people tear him apart.



KONYA, MAY 1246

Baptism of fire. I don't know how to deal with this situation. This morning, out of nowhere, a woman came asking for Shams of Tabriz. I told her to come back later, as he wasn't at home, but she said she had nowhere to go and would rather wait in the courtyard. That was when I got suspicious and started to inquire into who she was and where she came from. She fell to her knees and opened her veil, showing a face scarred and swollen from many beatings. Despite her bruises and cuts, she was very pretty and so lithe. Amid tears and sobs, and in a surprisingly articulate way, she confirmed what I had already suspected. She was a harlot from the brothel.

"But I have abandoned that awful place," she said. "I went to the public bath and washed myself forty times with forty prayers. I took an oath to stay away from men. From now on, my life is dedicated to God."

Not knowing what to say, I stared into her wounded eyes and wondered how she, young and fragile as she was, had found the courage to abandon the only life she knew. I didn't want to see a fallen woman anywhere near my house, but there was something about her that broke my heart—a kind of simplicity, almost innocence, I had never seen in anyone before. Her brown eyes reminded me of Mother Mary's eyes. I couldn't bring myself to shoo her away. I let her wait in the courtyard. That was the most I could do. She sat there by the wall, staring into space as motionless as a marble statue.

An hour later, when Shams and Rumi returned from their walk, I rushed to tell them about the unexpected visitor.

"Did you say there was a harlot in our courtyard?" Rumi asked, sounding puzzled.

"Yes, and she says she has left the brothel to find God."

"Oh, that must be Desert Rose," Shams exclaimed, his tone not so much surprised as pleased. "Why did you keep her outside? Bring her in!"

"But what will our neighbors say if they learn we have a harlot under our roof?" I objected, my voice cracking with the tension.

"Aren't we all living under the same roof anyhow?" Shams said, pointing to the sky above. "Kings and beggars, virgins and harlots, all are under the same sky!"

How could I argue with Shams? He always had a ready answer for everything.

I ushered the harlot into the house, praying that the inquisitive eyes of the neighbors would not fall upon us. No sooner had Desert Rose entered the room than she ran to kiss the hands of Shams, sobbing.

"I am so glad you are here." Shams beamed as if talking to an old friend. "You won't go back to that place ever again. That stage of your life is completely over. May God make your journey toward Truth a fruitful one!"

Desert Rose commenced to cry harder. "But the patron will never leave me in peace. She will send Jackal Head after me. You don't know how—"

"Clear your mind, child," Shams interrupted. "Remember another rule: *While everyone in this world strives to get somewhere and become someone, only to leave it all behind after death, you aim for the supreme stage of nothingness. Live this life as light and empty as the number zero. We are no different from a pot. It is not the decorations outside but the emptiness inside that holds us straight. Just like that, it is not what we aspire to achieve but the consciousness of nothingness that keeps us going.*"

KONYA, JUNE 1246

By Allah, I had never been so embarrassed in my life. As if it weren't shameful enough to see my own father in cahoots with a heretic, I had to suffer the mortification of watching him lead a dance performance. How could he disgrace himself like that in front of the whole town? On top of this, I was utterly appalled when I heard there was among the audience a harlot from the brothel. As I sat there wondering how much more madness and destruction my father's love for Shams could cause us all, for the first time in my life I wished to be the son of another man.

To me the entire performance was sheer sacrilege. But what happened afterward was far beyond the pale. How could that insolent man find the nerve to pour scorn on our ruler? He is very lucky that Kaykhusraw didn't have him arrested on the spot and sent to the gallows.

When I saw Sheikh Yassin walk out after Kaykhusraw, I knew I had to do the same. The last thing I wanted was for the townspeople to think that I was on the side of a heretic. Everyone had to see once and for all that, unlike my brother, I wasn't my father's puppet.

That night I didn't go home. I stayed at Irshad's house with a few friends. Overcome with emotion, we talked about the day's events and discussed at great length what to do.

"That man is a terrible influence on your father," said Irshad tautly. "And now he has brought a prostitute into your house. You need to clean your family's name, Aladdin."

As I stood listening to the things they said, my face burning with a scalding shame, one thing was clear to me: Shams had brought us nothing but misery.

In unison we reached the conclusion that Shams had to leave this town—if not willingly, then by force.



The next day I went back home determined to talk to Shams of Tabriz man to man. I found him alone in the courtyard, playing the *ney*, his head bowed, his eyes closed, his back turned to me. Fully immersed in his music, he hadn't noticed my presence. I approached as quiet as a mouse, taking the opportunity to observe him and get to know my enemy better.

After what seemed like several minutes, the music stopped. Shams raised his head slightly, and without looking in my direction, he mumbled flatly, as if talking to himself, "Hey there, Aladdin, were you looking for me?"

I didn't say a word. Knowing of his ability to see through closed doors, it didn't surprise me that he had eyes in the back of his head.

"So did you enjoy the performance yesterday?" Shams asked, now turning his face toward mine.

"I thought it was disgraceful," I answered at once. "Let's get something straight, shall we? I don't like you. I never have. And I'm not going to let you ruin my father's reputation any more than you have already."

A spark flickered in his eyes as Shams put his *ney* aside and said, "Is that what this is about? If Rumi's reputation is ruined, people won't look up to you as the son of an eminent man anymore. Does that scare you?"

Determined not to let him get under my skin, I ignored his mordant remarks. Still, it was a while before I could say anything.

KONYA, JULY 1246

Breathing with difficulty and barely able to stand straight, my father came to my room, looking like a shadow of the man he used to be. There were bags under his eyes, dark and ominous, as if he had stayed awake all night. But what surprised me most was that his beard had gone white.

“My son, help me,” he said in a voice that didn’t sound like him.

I ran to him and grabbed his arm. “Anything, Father, just ask for it.”

He was silent for a minute, as though crushed under the weight of what he was going to say next. “Shams is gone. He has left me.”

For the briefest of moments, I was awash with confusion and a strange sense of relief, but of that I said nothing. Sad and shocked though I was, it also occurred to me that this could be for the best. Wouldn’t life be easier and more tranquil now? My father had gained many enemies lately, all because of Shams. I wanted things to get back to how they were before he came. Could Aladdin be right? Weren’t we all better off without Shams?

“Don’t forget how much he means to me,” my father said as if he sensed my thoughts. “He and I are one. The same moon has a bright and a dark side. Shams is my unruly side.”

I nodded, feeling ashamed. My heart sank. My father didn’t have to say more. I had never seen so much suffering in a man’s eyes. My tongue felt heavy in my mouth. I couldn’t speak for a while.

“I want you to find Shams—that is, of course, if he wants to be found. Bring him back. Tell him how my heart aches.” My father’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Tell him his absence is killing me.”

I promised him I would bring Shams back. His hand gripped mine and squeezed it with such gratitude that I had to avert my gaze, for I didn’t want him to see the indecision in my eyes.



I spent the whole week roaming the streets of Konya, hoping to trace the footsteps of Shams. By this time everyone in town had heard he had disappeared, and there was much speculation as to his whereabouts. I met a leper who loved Shams immensely. He directed me to many desperate and unfortunate people whom the wandering dervish had helped. I never knew there were so many who loved Shams, since they were the kind of people who had been invisible to me till now.

One evening I came home feeling tired and disoriented. Kerra brought me a bowl of rice pudding, fragrant with the essence of roses. She sat down next to me and watched me eat, her smile framed by crescents of anguish. I couldn’t help noticing how much she had aged this past year.

“I heard you were trying to bring Shams back. Do you know where he has gone?” she asked.

“There are rumors he might have gone to Damascus. But I also heard people say he headed to Isfahan, Cairo, or even Tabriz, the city of his birth. We need to check them all. I’ll go to Damascus. Some of my father’s disciples will go to the other three cities.”

A solemn expression crossed Kerra’s face, and she murmured, as though thinking aloud, “Mawlana is writing verses. They are beautiful. Shams’s absence is turning him into a poet.”

Dropping her gaze to the Persian carpet, her cheeks moist, her round mouth pouting, Kerra sighed, and then she recited the following:

*"I have seen the king with a face of Glory
He who is the eye and the sun of heaven"*

There was something in the air now that wasn't there a moment ago. I could see that Kerra was torn deep inside. One had only to look at her face to understand how it pained her to watch her husband suffer. She was ready to do anything in her power just to see him smile again. And yet she was equally relieved, almost glad, to have finally gotten rid of Shams.

"What if I cannot find him?" I heard myself ask.

"Then there won't be much to do. We will continue with our lives as before," she remarked, a sparkle of hope flickering in her eyes.

At that moment I understood in all clarity and beyond doubt what she insinuated. I didn't have to find Shams of Tabriz. I didn't even have to go to Damascus. I could leave Konya tomorrow, wander for a while, find myself a nice roadside inn to stay at, and come back a few weeks later, pretending to have looked for Shams everywhere. My father would trust my word, and the subject would be dropped forever. Perhaps that would be best, not only for Kerra and Aladdin, who had always been suspicious of Shams, but also for my father's students and disciples, and even for me.

"Kerra," I said, "what shall I do?"

And this woman who had converted to Islam to marry my father, who had been a wonderful mother to me and my brother, and who loved her husband so much she memorized the poems he wrote for someone else, gave me a pained look and said nothing. Suddenly she had no more words inside her.

I had to find the answer for myself.

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talk with dead people. Unlike the living, the dead never judged.

Other than the dead, the only friend I had was Desert Rose.

United in a common need to stay out of society, we had become close friends. She is a Sufi now. She leads a solitary life, having left the brothel behind her. Once I told her I envied her courage and determination to start life anew.

She shook her head and said, "But I have not started life anew. The only thing I did was to die before death."



Today I went to see Desert Rose for an entirely different reason. I had planned to maintain my composure and talk to her calmly, but as soon as I entered, I started choking back sobs.

"Kimya, are you all right?" she asked.

"I am not feeling well," I confessed. "I think I need your help."

"Certainly," she said. "What can I do for you?"

"It is about Shams.... He doesn't come near me ... I mean, not in that way," I stuttered halfway through but managed to finish my sentence. "I want to make myself attractive to him. I want you to teach me how."

Desert Rose exhaled, almost a sigh. "I took an oath, Kimya," she said, a weary note slipping into her voice. "I promised God to stay clean and pure and not even *think* anymore about the ways a woman could give pleasure to a man."

"But you are not going to break your oath. You are just going to help me," I pleaded. "I am the one who needs to learn how to make Shams happy."

"Shams is an enlightened man," Desert Rose said, lowering her voice a notch, as if afraid of being heard. "I don't think this is the right way to approach him."

"But he is a *man*, isn't he?" I reasoned. "Aren't all men the sons of Adam and bound by the flesh? Enlightened or not, we all have been given a body. Even Shams has a body, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but ..." Desert Rose grabbed her [tasbeih](#) and started to finger the beads one at a time, her head tilted in contemplation.

"Oh, please," I begged. "You are the only one I can confide in. It has been seven months. Every morning I wake up with the same heaviness in my chest, every night I go to sleep in tears. It can't go on like this. I need to seduce my husband!"

Desert Rose said nothing. I took off my scarf, grabbed her head, and forced her to look at me. I said, "Tell me the truth. Am I so ugly?"

"Of course not, Kimya. You are a beautiful young woman."

"Then help me. Teach me the way to a man's heart," I insisted.

"The way to a man's heart can sometimes take a woman far away from herself, my dear," Desert Rose said ominously.

"I don't care," I said. "I am ready to go as far as it takes."

I had never felt so humiliated in my life. I bent down to take my robe, but my hands were trembling so hard I couldn't hold the slippery, delicate fabric. Instead I grabbed my shawl and wrapped it around myself. Sobbing, gasping, and still half naked, I ran out of the room and away from him, away from this love that I now understood existed only in my imagination.



I never saw Shams again. After that day I never left my room. I spent all my time lying on my bed, lacking not so much the energy as the will to go out. A week passed, then another, and then I stopped counting the days. All strength was drained from my body, ebbing away bit by bit. Only my palms felt alive. They remembered the feel of Shams's hands and the warmth of his skin.

I never knew that death had a smell. A strong odor, like pickled ginger and broken pine needles, pungent and bitter, but not necessarily bad. I came to know it only when it started to waft around my room, enveloping me like thick, wet fog. I started running a high fever, slipping into delirium. People came to see me. Neighbors and friends. Kerra waited by one side of my bed, her eyes swollen, her face ashen. Gevher stood on the other side, smiling her soft, dimpled smile.

"Goddamn that heretic," said Safiya. "This poor girl has fallen sick of heartbreak. All because of him!"

I tried to force a sound, but it didn't make it past my throat.

"How can you say such things? Is he God?" Kerra said, trying to help. "How can you attribute such powers to a mortal man?"

But they didn't listen to Kerra, and I was in no state to convince anyone of anything. In any case, I soon realized that whatever I said or didn't say, the outcome would be much the same. People who didn't like Shams had found another reason in my illness to hate him, whereas I could not dislike him even if I wanted to.

Before long I drifted into a state of nothingness where all colors melted into white and all sounds dissolved into a perpetual drone. I could not distinguish people's faces anymore and could not hear spoken words beyond a distant hum in the background.

I don't know if Shams of Tabriz ever came to my room to see me. Perhaps he never did. Perhaps he wanted to see me but the women in the room would not let him in. Or perhaps he did come after all, and sat by my bed, played me the *ney* for hours, held my hand, and prayed for my soul. I'd like to believe that.

Nonetheless, one way or the other, it didn't matter anymore. I was neither angry nor cross with him. How could I be, when I was flowing in a stream of pure awareness?

There was so much kindness and compassion in God and an explanation for everything. A perfect system of love behind it all. Ten days after I visited Shams's room clad in silk and perfumed tulles, ten days after I fell ill, I plunged into a river of pure nonexistence. There I swam to my heart's content, finally sensing that this must be what the deepest reading of the Qur'an feels like—a drop in infinity!

And it was flowing waters that carried me from life to death.

BOSTON, JULY 3, 2008

Boston had never been this colorful and vibrant, Ella thought. Had she been blind to the city's beauty all this time? Aziz spent five days in Boston. Every day Ella drove from Northampton to Boston to see him. They had tasty, modest lunches in Little Italy, visited the Museum of Fine Arts, took long walks on Boston Common and the Waterfront, watched the whales in the aquarium, and had coffee after coffee in the busy, small cafés of Harvard Square. They talked endlessly on subjects as diverse as the curiosities of local cuisines, different meditation techniques, aboriginal art, gothic novels, bird-watching, gardening, growing perfect tomatoes, and the interpretation of dreams, constantly interrupting and completing each other's sentences. Ella didn't remember ever talking so much with anyone.

When they were outside on the street, they took care not to touch each other, but that proved to get increasingly difficult. Small peccadilloes became exciting, and Ella started looking forward to a brush of their hands. Goaded by a strange courage she never knew she had in her, in restaurants and on the streets Ella held Aziz's hand, kissed his lips. Not only did she not *mind* being seen, it felt as if a part of her *longed* to be seen. Several times they returned to the hotel together, and on each occasion they came very close to making love, but they never did.

The morning of the day Aziz was going to fly back to Amsterdam, they were in his room, his suitcase standing between them like a nasty reminder of the parting to come.

"There's something I need to tell you," Ella said. "I've been thinking about this for too long."

Aziz raised one eyebrow, acknowledging the sudden shift in Ella's tone. Then he said carefully, "There's something I need to tell you, too."

"Okay, you go first."

"No, you go first."

Still smiling her half smile, Ella lowered her gaze, contemplating what to say and how to say it. Finally she started. "Before you came to Boston, David and I went out one evening and had a long talk. He asked me about you. Apparently he read our e-mails without my knowledge. I was incredibly angry at him for that, but I didn't deny the truth. About us, I mean."

Now Ella raised her eyes with apprehension to see how Aziz would react to what she was about to reveal. "To make a long story short, I told my husband that I loved another man."

Outside on the street, the sirens of several fire trucks broke the usual sounds of the city. Ella was distracted momentarily, but then she was able to finish. "It sounds crazy, I know, but I've been thinking this over very carefully. I want to come with you to Amsterdam."

Aziz walked to the window and looked down at the hurrying and bustle outside. There was smoke coming out of one of the buildings in the distance—a thick black cloud hovering in the air. He silently prayed for the people who lived there. When he started to speak, it sounded as if he were addressing the entire city.

"I would love to take you to Amsterdam with me, but I cannot promise you a future there."

"What do you mean?" Ella asked nervously.

At this, Aziz walked back, sat by her side, put his hand on hers, and as he caressed it absentmindedly, said, "When you first wrote to me, it happened to be a very strange time in my life."

"You mean there is someone else in your life ...?"

"No, sweetheart, no." Aziz smiled a little, and then the smile faded. "It's nothing like that. I once wrote

"Hello, Suleiman. You look preoccupied," Shams said, smiling.

"Oh, my God! You're alive!" I exclaimed, and ran to his arms.

When he managed to pull away from my embrace, Shams stared at me, looking quite amused. "Of course I'm alive! Do I look like a ghost to you?"

I smiled, but not for long. My head ached so much that at any other time I would have downed a few bottles to get drunk as quickly as possible and doze off.

"What is it, my friend? Is everything all right?" Shams asked suspiciously.

I swallowed hard. What if he didn't believe me when I told him about the plot? What if he thought I'd been hallucinating under the influence of wine? And perhaps I was. Even I couldn't be sure.

"They're planning to kill you," I said. "I have no idea who they are. I couldn't see their faces. You see, I was sleeping... But I didn't dream this. I mean, I did have a dream, but it wasn't like this. And I wasn't drunk. Well, I had drunk a few glasses, but I wasn't—"

Shams put his hand on my shoulder. "Calm down, my friend. I understand."

"You do?"

"Yes. Now, go back to the tavern, and don't you worry about me."

"No, no! I'm not going anywhere. And neither are you," I objected. "These people are serious. You need to be careful. You cannot go back to Rumi's house. That is the first place they will look for you."

Oblivious to my panic, Shams stayed silent.

"Listen, dervish, my house is small and a bit stuffy. But if you don't mind that, you can stay with me as long as you want."

"Thank you for your concern," Shams murmured. "But nothing happens outside of God's will. It is one of the rules: *This world is erected upon the principle of reciprocity. Neither a drop of kindness nor a speck of evil will remain unreciprocated. Fear not the plots, deceptions, or tricks of other people. If somebody is setting a trap, remember, so is God. He is the biggest plotter. Not even a leaf stirs outside God's knowledge. Simply and fully believe in that. Whatever God does, He does beautifully.*"

Having said that, Shams gave me a wink and waved good-bye. I watched him thread his way rapidly through the muddy street in the direction of Rumi's house, despite my warnings.

Then another thought occurred to me. How could the lamp in his hand keep burning despite the mighty wind and the heavy rain? And as soon as this question crossed my mind, I felt a shiver down my spine.

I remembered the rumors about Shams. He so excelled in black magic, people said, that he could turn anyone into a braying donkey or a blind bat by simply tying a piece of string from that person's clothes and uttering his evil incantations. Though I had never believed in such nonsense and wasn't going to start doing so now, as I stood watching the flame of Shams's lamp flicker under the heavy rain, I couldn't stay still, I was trembling so.

"Years ago I had a master in Tabriz," Shams said as he put the lamp on the ground, thus taking it out of my eyesight. "He is the one who taught me there was a time for everything. It is one of the last rules."

What rules was he talking about? What cryptic talk was this? I had to decide quickly whether I should come out of the bush now or wait until he turned his back to me—except he never did. If he knew I was here, there was no point in hiding. In case he didn't, though, I had to measure well when to come out.

But then, as if to deepen my confusion, I noticed the silhouettes of the three men waiting under a covering outside the garden wall shift restlessly. They must have been wondering why I hadn't moved to kill the dervish.

"It is Rule Number Thirty-seven," Shams continued. *"God is a meticulous clockmaker. So precise is His order that everything on earth happens in its own time. Neither a minute late nor a minute early. And for everyone without exception, the clock works accurately. For each there is a time to love and a time to die."*

In that moment I understood that he was talking to me. He knew I was here. He had known it even before he stepped out into the courtyard. My heart started to race. I felt as if all around me the air were being sucked away. There was no use in hiding anymore. And just like that, I stood up and walked out from behind the bush. The rain stopped as abruptly as it had started, plunging everything into silence. We stood face-to-face, the killer and the victim, and despite the strangeness of the situation everything seemed natural, almost peaceful.

I pulled out my sword and swung it with all my might. The dervish dodged the blow with a swiftness I did not expect from a man of his size. He was about to swing again when suddenly a rush of movement swirled in the darkness and six men appeared out of nowhere, attacking the dervish with clubs and spears. Apparently the three young men had brought friends. The ensuing battle was so intense that they all toppled to the ground, rolling around, regaining footing, and falling again, breaking spear after spear into splinters.

I stood watching, shocked and furious. Never before had I been reduced to playing witness to a murder I was paid to commit. I was so angry at the three young men for their insolence that I could easily have let the dervish go and fought them instead.

But before long, one of the men started to yell hysterically. "Help! Help us, Jackal Head! He is going to kill us."

Fast as lightning I threw my sword aside, pulled my dagger out of my belt, and dashed forward. The seven of us knocked the dervish to the ground, and in one swift move I stabbed him in the heart. A single hoarse cry came out of his mouth, his voice breaking at its peak. He didn't stir again, nor did he breathe.

Together we lifted his body, which was strangely light, and dumped him into the well. Gasping loudly for air, we each then took a step back and waited to hear the sound of his body hitting the water.

It never came.

"What the hell is going on?" said one of the men. "Didn't he fall in?"

"Of course he did," another said. "How could he not?"

They were panicking. So was I.

"Maybe he got caught on a hook on the wall," the third man suggested.

The suggestion made sense. It took the burden of finding an explanation off our shoulders, and we

“The universe turns differently when fire loves water.”

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