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from *Close to Mecca*

When Rughum was young, young enough to enjoy the great outdoors and play with boys as well as girls, she caught the attention of a visiting sheikh, who had come by her family's quarters whilst on extensive travels from the African ends of the Arabian spread of civilisation. This particular sheikh, who was working on a recipe book for the treatment of sexual ailments of a variety of kinds, including the ailment of Sihaq, wanted to submit Rughum to his treatment to ensure that "her hotness was tempered with coldness, to produce a reduction in her male-like behaviour." The sheikh was soon visiting her family home on a daily basis, building up from once a week, to two then four times and finally becoming a daily resident.

The thing appeared in Rughum at an early age, he said. "If a young girl is born with the thing, it will be harder to cure her. Only when the thing appears as a result of habit will it be easy to repair." She was clearly excellent in athletic ability and did not seem interested in companionship with other girls as was commonly had. But the sheikh was diligent and the more she resisted the more his resolve strengthened. Her spirit was confused, he told the family, it needed to be broken in order to be shaped along the true path intended by the Almighty for the female.

The sheikh first confined Rughum indoors, something reserved to the betrothed only, in order to put an end to her physically intimate relationships with the boys as though she was one of them. Secondly, he asked her family to veil and dress her as though she had come of age. Thirdly, said the Sheikh, if after some time her behaviour is not naturally readjusted to the right path, then her family would have to ensure a speedy marriage for her whereupon it becomes her husband's duty and privilege to correct her. The sheikh was trusted and had prolonged what was to be a short stop on his way to Mecca in order to treat the miscreant. During all this, Rughum was blissfully unaware of how complicated her life was to become; nevertheless, she had overheard the third step. Rather, her mother had deliberately repeated the sheikh's advice to her father while she was in their presence.

Not until the threat of marriage had come along did she realize that the situation was critical. In the time she had been confined at home she had grown to like feminine companionship. She began to develop strong feelings of affection, a partial sensation of romance she could not quite place or articulate for one of her female companions. Fearing that a marriage might end her opportunity to spend time with her young friend, Rughum reformed her ways. She was no longer vocal, no longer the trouble maker. Her severed access to her male friends meant that her physical strength remained uncultivated. Rughum became a woman quite unexpectedly, whilst sleeping. It was the girl with the beautiful hazel eyes, Hind, who awoke her to alert her to the blood that had stained their garments.

Rughum grew and became well-spoken, never looking a man in the eyes if they spoke. The sheikh who had visited their village would have been proud of his achievement. The day Rughum was betrothed to an elderly man, taking on his fourth wife, her mother praised the travelling Sheikh and Allah's bounty for all of them.

"Come Rughum," said the elderly man to his new bride, "do not fear." Rughum approached with care and unveiled herself and sat beside him on one of the many cushions. Rughum was not nervous: as far as she was concerned, this was a non-event. The older women of her family often spoke the kind of talk only married women could have. Married women, or no-good harlots, shameless women without honour or family who make their bodies available for a price. Raised her entire life to see them as harlots, she could not envision the great social freedoms availed to the outcast women who, not having a husband to protect them, learn the ways of protecting themselves. But even those women, those hardened loose criminals she had often been warned against, did not operate without a manager who sometimes took it upon himself to discipline them or to behave as though he owned them. Then there were the female managers of the harlots. These were hardened criminal women who committed the obscenities in broad daylight and no sheikh or authority would have been able to de-seat or de-throne such a woman. Such a woman always knew too much about most of the men in her village or town and her power derived from knowing the intimate secrets of her women-folk just as much as the men-folk.

"I am ready for you," said the old man as he loosened his straps and prepared himself for the encounter. Rughum's stomach turned but she braved her extreme discomfort and nausea. She awaited his instructions. These things did not come naturally to her as she had been told would happen. There was no interest for her in this man and yet at the same time he was her husband and master and he was entitled to what was his, just as she was entitled to her dowry the minute he broke her seal. Besides the fact that he had children to his first wife who were her age and older, there was nothing particularly awful about this man. He was a friend of her family and had known her since she was a young girl. Further, he had even accepted to marry her despite knowing her unusual childhood and the travelling sheikh's treatment of her imbalance of femininity. "Remove your garment," he said softly, shyly.

With some discomfort Rughum removed her garment. It was perhaps the first time in her life that either she or anyone else had had the opportunity to view her naked body for so long. Her breasts, still in their formative years, were tender and subtle, her hair, short, dark, uncouth, unmanageable. She awaited further instructions, but instead of words, tears welled in her elderly husband's eyes. He was obviously moved by his vision of her naked flesh but he was perhaps able to see how little interest she might have felt for him. Whatever the reason, he said to her, "We can wait, you can place your garment back on." And thus it was this way every night for so many nights. Rughum would enter into the chambers, and lie on the cushions, he would lie

opposite her, looking at her and then ask her to come back another night. Rughum seized on his reluctance and began to preoccupy the old man with stories, repeating folktales she had heard from Azzar. Just imagine, the stories of Shaharazad and Shahrayar, those thousand and one nights in local time, in the tongue of their living day! What would you give up to hear that, dear reader, especially if I promised you could understand it, the language would not trouble you, and that you too would be of the times? Such are the spirals of eternity, the spheres of the spirit world. You dream that they might exist after all and that is why we call it eternity, for the infinite wonders we could visit would keep us forever in their thrall.

A pigeon once said to me that we spend more time dead than we do alive. But a man who spent a considerable period of time watching pigeons, determined that pigeon and human behavioural patterns, when it came to mating, were peculiarly similar. This we recognized, early on. This man was Bathal's master for many years. A physician. Married with a litter of progeny, he nevertheless entertained a secret indulgence with one of his slaves, a reciprocal interest there, confined to concealment and the sad burden of shame. Love that is never spoken, lest it speak the languages of forlorn gazes, disappointed hopes and dreamy pleasures.

Just like Azzar, the story teller, and Shaharazad herself, she made sure that her story ended incomplete. And thus, through Allah's merciful bounty Rughum remained a happily married woman. A fourth wife, taking care of her husband's children during the day and entertaining him in their private quarters during the night.

"When I was a young man," said her husband, "we endured a famine the likes of which no other people of the book suffered. I was then just wedded to your sister Fatima, and she was with child: that was to be our first child, an ailing young boy who died in his seventh month. We mourned him and mourned him and we knew that he had had a terrible start to life. While he was in the womb his mother could find nothing to eat for days. I used to take her with me in search of food. I was a young and able man then, and she was a patient wife who accepted that I would not deign to leave her behind while I went, sometimes for weeks, in search of livelihood. She travelled with me as we patiently searched for work, any sort of work would have done for us. Sometimes I worked for a farmer, earning some small portion of the harvest, or sometimes she was asked to help the other women with the preparation of wedding garments for some court official. In fact, the best work we ever obtained was the work we did for the court. The Caliphate back then was a tolerant and generous man, and when one of his blacksmiths fell ill he assigned one of his men for whose wife my wife was working at the time to find a quick replacement. Fortunately for me, I had done some of this work, but I did not have the experience that my wife decorated me with in her descriptions and she so pleaded, that poor woman, with the official's wife, and sure enough her husband recommended me to the court. It was my work at the court that brought me out of the slums of poverty and bondage into this station of privilege. By the time you were born, my sweet, I had collected enough wealth and knowledge of the trade routes

that I had made the transition from serving at court to being a sea merchant. There, Rughum, I saw the world, but upon every return Baghdad stood before us glorious, unparalleled in wealth and refinement. There is nowhere else in the entire world quite like Baghdad in those years of our youth. I came to know the old Caliph personally and was invited to his court and have dined with him and his companions. I have been entertained by his entertainers, dear Rughum, and Allah forgive me, I have tasted the Caliph's wine. And thus it was for the better part of three decades, but al-Mamun took his father's place, wrenched it from his own bother by slaying him...that was a miserable business and as I had lost much of my youth and strength by then, I left the court.

“The young Caliph called me to him as he was dining and said that his beloved father loved and trusted me. The Caliph said that he himself was sad to see the man he had known from his childhood be relieved from his courtly privileges by age. He said he feared age, and he was perhaps intoxicated because the next thing I knew he threw a sizable bag of gold coin in my direction and I laboured to catch it but it fell through my hands. When the bag hit the floor its content exploded in all directions, sending gold coins flying through the air and hitting none other than the Caliph himself on the shin. As the first coin hit him he leaned forward, taking hold of the place of pain, unwittingly positioning his head in such a way as to prove a prime target for the next flying coin. The second coin struck him in the forehead and this shifted him off his balance and he was soon seated by the destabilising force of the two collisions. I was expecting him to rage at me, but instead he found that the place where he fell was near his cup and so he took it up in his hands and began to sing. Shortly afterwards, realizing he had not dismissed me yet, he turned to one of his men and commanded him to take me to the treasury where I could pick out a single item, any single item. The man he commanded tried to resist this request but the Caliph would not hear of it and upon the Caliph's insistence his trusted companion could do nothing but comply. On our walk Qadi al-Muslimeen walked uneasily, after all he was not the treasurer, but he nevertheless took me to where I needed to be and the men guarding the door to a large palace room respectfully bowed out of the Qadi's way and allowed me to enter the chamber. This was nothing very different from what Azar describes when he tells his story about the thieves and the young man, there were riches there beyond your belief, beyond what you can imagine. Halls and halls of riches, golden jewellery, cutlery, swords, fine silks, gold coin as far as the eye could see but I was captivated by a large statue of a small naked slave boy. I picked it up. It was bound to be worth its weight in gold, and it was heavy.

“You don't want that one,” said the Qadi.

“Oh?”

“It is bronze. It is not of as much value as it seems. Here, let me pick something for you,” he suggested and turned around the corner, apparently in search of something suitable. I was quiet

and patient. I did not want to contradict one of the highest court officials. He returned with a studded box made of gold. He told me it was from China and that it might fetch a handsome price if I could find someone able or willing to meet its price. He whispered that I might even be able to persuade the Caliph, some days later, to buy it from me as an artefact from the distant East. He chuckled after saying this and handed me the bejeweled thing. I was too embarrassed to contradict the Qadi and so I took it home but I have not been able to find a buyer for it so I have kept it among my possessions.”

At the close of this lengthy tale, the old man had walked over to the corner of the room and produced the said box, wrapped in an Egyptian headscarf. Rughum marvelled at it, it was so beautiful and pristine, but as she marvelled at it and its emerald gems, it did not occur to her what he was about to say next.

“When I die, my dear Rughum, you will not inherit much from me. My sons and other wives have priority over you as do my daughters. This box, in addition to the dowry you can keep....”

“Why are you speaking about death, Sidi?”

“Listen more carefully, Rughum. Your dowry, you can keep it.” Rughum was unsure what he meant. “What I mean is, keep the dowry and make me a child.” His hand reached for hers and suddenly her friend in these otherwise barren days became a potential predator. She felt awfully guilty for having these feelings against a gentle and kind man, who was offering her a second dowry in place of her seal. “It is true I am old,” he continued, “but I am a capable man. Let it never be said that I was not able to deflower my young wife, or that my seed is weak. This is slander against a man like me and besides what reason could you have, my sweet Rughum, for withholding your love from me? I am old, I know, but I am your master and keeper and I have stayed the nights with you until the cock’s crow sometimes. We are friends, are we not?”

Rughum did not know how to reply. Of course he was right. She knew no other way and his gentle persuasion left her feeling infinitely guilty for her lack of sexual interest in him. He drew near her and began to kiss her. Her body stiffened and the feeling of dread filled her once more. It was not sufficient for him to feel himself against her. He wanted to hear her arousal, to see it... he wanted sexual intimacy, not coerced or forced moments of exclusive enjoyment. As a young man he had not always been that way and in his lifetime he had not shied away from exerting some measure of force, but experience had taught him that a wife made to comply was nowhere nearly as gratifying as a wife yearning for her husband’s kisses. It had taken him a lifetime to learn the art form of pleasing his wives sexually. He had become learned in the ways of bringing pleasure with his hands and tongue as well as his penis but with Rughum nothing seemed to work. The more he tried to pleasure her, to take her own needs into account, the more he realised

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that he was forcing himself on her and this disappointed him greatly. He blamed nothing other than himself, or rather her view of him.

Rughum knew not what to do, and the instinct she had been promised would emerge in times like these, did not in fact emerge. "We must awaken these feelings in you," said the old man patiently. "Don't cry, this is enough for tonight, we can try again another time." But the more Rughum disappointed him, the more impatient and incensed he became and soon afterwards his nightly visits began to dwindle as he preferred the company of one of his other wives. When he felt sufficiently at ease with one of his other wives one night she learned of the difficulties he had been having in consummating his marriage to Rughum. This wife raged and foamed, furious at the new bride's rejection of her fine husband. Who did she think she is? Did not her mother tell her that the first few times were going to be painful? She assured her husband that the problem was not his own but his new wife's and she cursed the day he made a deal with the girl's father.

"This is why she was at her age and still unmarried. The girl has problems. Tell me Sidi, have you examined her?"

"Are you crazy, woman? You want me to ask for a physical examination from the man who leads us into prayer every evening? I took his word and from the appearance of things, she is very likely still a virgin."

"That's not true. What if she is pining for..."

"What are you saying, woman? That I married another man's prize? That she is a harlot?"

"No, Sidi, you would not do such a thing. But just to put your mind at ease, let me take her to Um Saad or one of her daughters. She is a healer, she will hear the girl and offer her a remedy and if you want she can have her examined to see if she is in fact a virgin."

"But, sending my wife to Um Saad, what if someone recognised her?"

"They are not people of the book, Sidi, we should pity them, not hate them. They will suffer in the life beyond this one, why should I make them suffer now?" Um Salma's eyes watered as she remembered the Caliph's men tearing through the town one morning on their horses, dragging some random followers of Mani behind them and setting fire to their houses and destroying their stalls in the market.

"They killed your friend, what was her name? And her infant, I remember... At the time of the old Caliph there was no cruelty to people, we lived such wonderful years, those years of our youth," mused the Hajj, remembering her anguish that day and reminiscing about the times

before. An image of her, standing by the doorway when she returned from the market that day without her companion and her companion's infant but with a wide whiplash of their blood covering part of her hair and face and the top of her feet, welled up. How could he forget how she broke into his arms, this once beautiful woman, convulsing in paroxysms he could not restrain? It was the last of the most violent and public attacks carried out by the Caliph against those not of the book. The people of Mani, with all their peculiar spiritual ways, were strangely both steeped in ritual and mysticism whilst also reducing the value of both by rendering ritual arbitrary and changeable as well. They had not converted to the ways of worship and reverence for the Almighty that the Prophet of the believers displayed and the pagan traces of some of their conduct and beliefs made them particularly suspect to the Caliph who struggled above all else to bring religion under the dominion of political process and power of which he was the ultimate custodian. The Caliph placed himself as a descendant of the prophetic lineage despite the Ulama's disgruntledness at making a human being himself be seen as deity, when the prophet himself did not enjoy this privilege amongst the learned. But, the people of Mani attracted a lot of pious Muslim intellectuals with their alternative worldview and soon many Muslims found themselves incorporating some Mani beliefs and traditions. It was when the court was alerted to this and significantly some time after a decree had been put in place asserting that the followers of Mani, who himself was an unorthodox follower of Christ, were not people of the book. That is, they were not accepted by Christians as Christians and thus Muslims would do well to reject them as well.

It was not entirely necessary for the Caliph to take up arms against the people of Mani but he feared that their beliefs might spread and undermine the theological authority of his Mihna. For, it was not only the people of Mani who found themselves out of favour after reunification. The Caliph began to question the teaching of sheikhs everywhere and to submit them to long and harsh inquisitions. Wherever he found sheikhs preaching against the authorised theology of the Caliph he ensured they were severely punished and sufficiently monitored after their return to their communities; second and sometimes even first offenses were punished by execution. Had Rughum been born in this time, rather than the decade and a half previous, she might have been spared the suggestions and remonstrations of the travelling sheikh from her childhood. Had she not happened by the sheikh, however, she might have found herself in more unpleasant circumstances than these. She always wondered what her life would have been like had she refused to come into the house, had she continued her boyish ways, had she said no to the garment that concealed her. Rughum thought she was fortunate in her life so far. Her husband was understanding, and he was a smart man from whom she began to learn certain verses of the holy text and he was now beginning to teach her how to read. In the Quran Rughum found tremendous solace and consolation for her troubled condition and she prayed that Allah might look kindly on her and endow her with the instincts required for a woman's life. She prayed that Allah might reward her husband's patience not by making her more amenable to sexual contact with him, but by preserving his health and increasing his comfort in his old age.

“The girl, if she is not a virgin, must be returned to her family and the dowry must be revoked, Sidi. What will people say about you when you have no children from her? They will say she is young and they will call you an incapable old man. If you don’t believe me ask Sheikh Husseini, see what he says. He will tell you what I have here told you, that the book of Allah commands that the woman obey her husband, that she has duties to please him just as he has duties to maintain her. The girl might simply need some instruction, Sidi, Allah is great and merciful, Allah is great and merciful.”

The old man thought about it and eventually agreed that his wife should take his younger wife to Um Saad. And thus it was written for Rughum, a young married woman, to meet Najda, the unwed daughter of the witch-woman from the followers of Mani.

Rughum sat down beside her husband’s third wife who led her ferociously through the marketplace moments earlier. A beautiful woman in her thirtieth year, a widow of her current husband’s brother, she had been married to the Hajj for some eight or nine pilgrimages and had borne him two girls. Considerably younger than the Hajj’s older wives, she was always frustrated by the greater authority the others wielded, not simply due to the fact that they had a greater share in terms of decision-making when it came to the running of the home and tending to the children. She was also considered deficient since she was not able yet to produce a son for the Hajj. In part, Um Salma was pleased that a new and more deficient wife had emerged on the scene and that she now could repay her own deficiencies by attending to those of Rughum. Sitting in Um Saad’s stall, Um Salma loosened the garment she wound around her head and face and turned to her fellow wife. “It will be your turn soon.”

As Rughum sat, her hands placed firmly on the top of her knees, she felt the garment of another woman brush past her and looked up to find eyes that instantly captivated her. She also found that the woman by whose eyes she was suddenly bewitched was also gazing back down at her. Rughum could only see the woman’s face partially but her own face was for the moment fully exposed and Rughum observed the large dark eyes as they darted from one point on her face to another. Suddenly aware of this peculiar moment, the likes of which she had never felt, Rughum lowered her gaze but found herself involuntarily seeking the woman’s eyes again but the woman had disappeared in that very moment. Rughum looked around her for the woman and leaned forward from her seat to look beyond the tent’s entrance.

“Um Saad will see you now,” said a soft voice from behind the curtain in the middle of the tent.

“Go,” said Um Salma eagerly, pushing Rughum off her chair.

Rughum stepped through the cloth barrier to find the tent at the other end also open for people to exit more easily and beside the woman who had to be Um Saad stood the owner of the captivating black eyes.

“Sit,” said Um Saad, pointing to a seat opposite where she was seated. “Your fellow wife has mentioned your condition to me. Your husband is a very kind man, a compassionate and pious man.”

“Yes he is, may Allah bless him with all that is good.”

“I have wives who come to me after they have been cast out of their homes, after they have been beaten, after they have been deflowered without their agreeing to it. You are indeed fortunate but not fortunate enough to have never met me.” Um Saad laughed a laugh which was quickly interrupted by a roaring cough.

“Najda, fetch me *fjwofjwof efojeoffjeojf*. See how I will prepare these herbs before you now. Are you paying attention?” she asked Rughum, who was still transfixed by Najda. “Rughum, what a beautiful and unusual name.” Um Saad showed Rughum how to prepare a paste made with herbs and water that would help her increase her sexual urges. “This ointment is known throughout the land for its efficacy and it was brought to Baghdad by a merchant from the middle kingdom. Fortunately, the main ingredient required for this recipe is found abundantly among the local weed.

“This will increase your desire for your Hajj. Only, do tell me, young woman, and don’t make me cast a spell on you to see if you are lying, because I can and I will.... Do you desire someone other than the Hajj? This paste will only make you desire him you love and if you do not love the Hajj and do not want to please him...”

“I want to please my master and husband,” Rughum said dutifully, “and I promise you I have no other person in my heart.”

“But is *he* in your heart?” were the first words spoken by Najda to Rughum and, when she spoke, Rughum could not explain why her face flushed and her heart began to beat faster and her breath became shorter. She could not understand this sudden burst of fear that chilled her.

Um Saad kept staring at Najda, obviously seeing her daughter’s question as important. Rughum looked away.

“So he is not in your heart” announced Um Saad. “But you do not love someone else beside him? This is a most peculiar case. Try the paste, Allah is great and merciful, he will find a way for you to please your husband. In the meantime, I want to show some things you can do for him, to please him.”

Rughum was asked to return after she had finished her quantity of paste that Um Saad made for her. Religiously Rughum ate the paste at regular intervals and reviewed what Um Saad had showed her without shame in her mind. The Hajj did not come to her for many days after her visit to Um Saad and when he did return it was the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan, where as an additional mark of his piety and self-discipline the Hajj abstained from the pleasures of the flesh for an entire month. In this month they spent their evening with the rest of the Hajj’s family, namely his wives and children as well as his grandchildren. When time to retire came the Hajj invariably chose to stay with Rughum who, he was beginning to feel, did not arouse his sexual interest either. Between them was a peculiar friendship, between a pupil and his teacher, a patient swordsman and his student. He found in her mind the kind of solace he could find nowhere else amongst his vast acquaintances of courtiers and poets. She possessed a keenness for understanding, an interest in the holy books as well as the sophistry of the poets and the scientists. Between them grew a strong friendship and he often forgot his troubles with her and what people in the community had been saying of late about the lack of new progeny.

The effect of the paste did not go by unremarked by Rughum who found herself oddly aroused and by the most peculiar triggers at times. At night when she closed her eyes, trying to ignore the ache in her belly and a burning sensation in a part of her body she had never explored, she experienced visions of the beautiful Najda. Visions that were not altogether wholesome but visions which awakened something utterly magnificent within her. She tried to correct these visions and with great determination was able to imagine herself and the Hajj, she pleasing him as Um Saad had instructed and he seeking to pleasure her in return, but the vision could not hold. The moment she began to imagine this she lost the ardour she felt, the ache in her stomach was gone, the fire in her unexplored parts dwindled. She gave up trying to see herself and the Hajj and decided to drift off to sleep, but her body was awake and calling her to it. And soon enough Rughum’s prayers were answered and Allah endowed her with the instinct she needed to know what to do next.

She imagined Najda lying upon a table asking her to remove her garments and this singular image of Najda, on the table, asking for her clothes to be removed, sustained Rughum until her first climax. Rughum was wide awake.

Feeling tremendous guilt, Rughum agonized over the events of the previous night. Her feelings of shame and unwholesomeness were exacerbated by her lack of sleep and the harshness of the fast imposed from sunrise to sunset. This combination of factors made Rughum tearful and she

hated herself ever so much for the feelings she entertained for Najda, feelings she could not help but entertain despite her best efforts against them. When sunset came Rughum did not break her fast; instead she recited from the holy book until she fell asleep and the following day she also did not break her fast. Her fellow wives were concerned for her. She looked pale, sickly and after all she was the tearful new wife of the Hajj who, they each knew, had not yet completed the very first step into her wifhood. Rughum was peculiar in that diverse household, which was divided into separate quarters for each wife and her children. After many months the wives as well as their husband began to see Rughum as a stray Gypsy child left behind long after the roaring carnival had left town.

Um Salma offered her water and said to her, "Rughum, you must return to Um Saad." Rughum tried to resist, trying to say that Um Saad was part of the problem, but she did not succeed in being convincing without revealing the whole truth. And so Rughum acquiesced to return to Um Saad.

When Rughum and her fellow wife returned to Um Saad, the place was busier than usual and they waited for several hours until they were seated in the first half of the stall. Finally it was Rughum's turn and Najda greeted her and added, "Um Saad could not come for four days. I'm sorry if you had to wait for very long."

When Rughum spoke, it was her body that did the talking. Her body that took over her reason for a moment and allowed her to utter, "I would wait a month to see you, sister Najda." She blushed and feared Najda might see how sincerely she meant this. But if she did, Najda did not let on. She continued, "How have my mother's prescriptions worked for you?"

"They did not work, Madam." Rughum said.

"You felt no change at all?"

"I felt some changes but they were not good and I have been going mad about it, I don't know what to do, Allah will curse me and kill me." Rughum burst into tears which took Najda by surprise.

"You don't look to me like a woman who is easily brought to tears, sister. What was your name again?"

"It is Rughum."

"Will you tell me about your changes?"

“I think it was your mother’s paste. It is not sanctioned, it’s witchery.” Rughum raised her voice and rose from her chair. Najda grabbed her and placed her hand firmly across Rughum’s mouth and in an audible whisper she asked pointedly, “Are you mad? Are you trying to get us all killed? Don’t you know why Um Saad is not here today?” She then released Rughum from her grasp, flushed, incensed. “How might you like it if I marched into your home and told you that your beliefs were false, and then how would you feel if I brought the sword to your neck and cut off your head without even a blink of my lashes because you would not believe what I told you to believe? Damn you people of the book, you are all the same! Get out of my shop, go!”

Rughum was genuinely hurt and on hearing this her fellow wife entered and pressed upon Najda that Rughum was a peculiar soul with an unknown ailment and for this reason she was difficult to tolerate sometimes and her behaviour was uncouth. “From what you have seen alone, sister Najda, please, from what you have seen alone, the child needs your help.” Najda hesitated but it was too late, the word “child” had already come out. Yes, indeed, Rughum was still a child.

Najda loosened the garment which covered her head, looked at Rughum for some time and said to her companion, “She needs to break her fast. She needs to be fed.”

“But she refuses to eat, sister Najda.”

“Then,” Najda said coldly, “she will die. And your problem will be solved.”

Najda had challenged her completely and totally by evoking her mortality as a means to the ends of solving her problem. Her problem could only be solved with her death but Allah alone has the right to give and take life. It was a great sin to kill oneself and she would not try to avoid one sin by committing another! In the days of Ramadan that followed Rughum continued her fast and became, as is sometimes known about people who fast longer than the rest of us are required to, somewhat feeble-minded. She spoke to herself often and ignored others and was also introspective and thoughtful. The Hajj, understanding her condition to be a fever from one of his other wives, was advised to remain clear of her until she felt better. He was not made aware that she had not broken her fast for several days, except to accept a drink of water from Um Salma on occasion.

Rughum prayed and devoted herself to her faith in every way. But Najda would appear to her at night when all was still and silent, and Najda would remind her that what she was trying to escape from was life itself, not some minor or incidental appendage, not an additional limb as often happens with Gypsy infants born into the world without a beat in their heart. She was touched also by Najda’s vulnerability and felt particularly awful about her words of condemnation. As if the people of Mani did not hear this too often and for what? They did not do anything particularly evil. They did not behave horribly so much, so why was the Caliph so

much against them? Why was it necessary to stop them from doing what they did? She often saw the number of pleased people leaving Um Saad's tent. She even had a tremendous appreciation for what Um Saad was able to tell her about pleasing her husband. It had never occurred to her, so many of the things Um Saad mentioned and demonstrated on a suitable vegetable. This urge, thought Najda, this itch she had when she was alone at night, and her recurring remembrance of that long moment of pleasure that ended her sense of urgency for more... all of these things, these were the forces of life that take their seat in our bodies and direct our ways. Rughum's abstract thought flowered and at her level of starvation and exhaustion she was able to see the life and death cycle play out as if on a cloth, the very cloth that separates the treatment room from the waiting area at Um Saad's stall.

Her visions were so beautiful that she praised the Almighty for giving her the faculties to perceive these insights. And she praised the prophets for having a stronger faith than hers and for having seen much more of Allah's select revelations.

In this vision, the itch, the urge as she came to understand it, brought believing men and believing women together, in fact, it brought the non-believers together, too. Beyond the call to life that sexual desire explicitly makes, sexual desire also allowed for deeper expressions of affinity. Her thoughts about Najda were no longer evidence of her depravity but evidence of her desire for closeness with God through the love of his creatures, through marveling at his creations. That beautiful earlobe Najda exposed accidentally in her moment of rage, those ripe lips and her cherry nose and those deep luxuriant black eyes... She became aware that her desire for Najda was a desire to love, to honour, to share in the miracle of creation and in the instincts with which she was born.

The sheikh from her childhood was there in the vision which morphed into a dream when Rughum inadvertently fell asleep. She was young again and was throwing rocks with her friends from the top of the hill to its foot, taking joy in the careening missiles that reanimated the landscape, crushing with them sometimes the very same weed she, years later, consumed in an effort to awaken her sleeping instincts.

When Rughum awoke the next morning it was the first day of Eid and she noticed that her garments were soiled with her menstrual blood. She cleaned herself and emerged from her room seeking food. She was utterly famished and when she came by her family's breakfast table she did not speak a word but squeezed herself into the populated fold and made a grab for the boiled chicken and fish. When she looked up after some time she noticed the Hajj was looking at her. He smiled and nodded approvingly. She smiled back and was flooded with feelings of warmth and love for this unusual husband of hers and for once, she did not think about the unresolved situation between them.

Without the instruction of Um Salma but with her praise and self-congratulations, Rughum went to see Um Saad for the third time. She was hoping to see Najda and apologise to her. In her mind and on her way through the marketplace she imagined and recited what she would say to Najda when she saw her. When she arrived at her destination she was surprised to see that another stall had been pitched and that Um Saad and her daughter were nowhere to be seen. Rughum walked to the stall and asked its occupier what had happened to Um Saad. He shrugged his shoulders and walked away but his wife kindly explained that Um Saad had died and she blamed the Caliph's men for it. She explained how a week earlier Um Saad and her daughter were humiliated by a group of passing soldiers. They also managed to hit Um Saad across the head and it was such a hard blow, but no one had expected this hard blow to cost the poor woman her life. Just when she looked like she was recovering, Um Saad was gone.

Rughum turned quickly and set out to find Um Saad's house when she glimpsed a hand whose slant and colour of complexion she felt she knew well. It was Najda. Rughum ran to her and when Najda turned around to face her Rughum saw the marvellous black eyes turn red and soft and tender. For how many tears have they cried for Um Saad?

"Najda. I'm very sorry. I'm very sorry for many things. May Allah recompense you. How can I be of help? How is your father?"

"We are devastated. It's not safe for us here in Baghdad any more. If we cannot trade then how will we live? Why do you not accept us as people of the book? Why do you hate us?"

"We don't hate you. My husband loves your kind. He has told me many stories from his time in court involving his Mani friends, he even said that the old Caliph shared a game with a Mani once. A whole game they shared together...."

Najda looked at her neighbour with some suspicion. Was not this the same woman who some ten days earlier accused her of witchcraft? She was changed though, there was a glow in her face, the look of death had left her somehow. "And how are you fairing, sister Rughum?"

"My name is Rughum."

"So then, Rughum, how are things with your husband?"

"The same."

"And you?"

"Not the same."

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Najda said nothing. She was cautious and she had no place of business any longer. "Can I confess to you? Can I tell you my troubles?"

"I no longer have a place where I can treat you...."

"Then will you just listen to me?"

"Go ahead."

"I have thought a great deal about what you have said to me. I have suffered such sleepless nights, such hunger and thirst and I have been tormented by visions and by my faith. But my faith has brought me back to the very one who caused me all this terrible unrest, my faith has asked me to embrace my life and the lives of those around me."

"Look Rughum, before we go any further. You need to know something. I'm a tharifa, you know?"

"No." Rughum said blankly.

"You need another three years, you are still not wise in the ways. You seriously don't know who tharifas are? Can you pick a tharifa? Come on, see that one there.... tharifa!"

"I can't even tell who she is from this distance.... What is a tharifa?"

"Someone you don't want to be seen around the marketplace with, Rughum. Have a good day." Najda walked away, wrapping herself comfortably in her large garment and bringing it close to herself, Rughum noticed, "just as the holy book instructed." Rughum sighed in admiration and then quickly called after her...

"What is a tharifa, Najda?" Najda turned back around amused and surprised.

"Come," Said Najda grabbing Rughum's hand and taking off with her, ripping through the marketplace, making a nuisance, cutting through the unamused crowd. They kept on in this way until they reached the road to the city limits where their pace slowed to a light walk as they caught their breath.

"Where are we going?"

"To the house of Mani, it's a prayer room near the cemetery, in one of the mausoleums."

Najda lit a candle once they were inside the mausoleum and devoted a self-composed prayer to her mother's memory and wished her a good rest in the soul of her ancestors. She asked the prophet Mani to be with his disciple and to allow her children to continue to honour her memory on earth. Rughum was moved by this exultation, and she was anguishing at the site of her beloved's complete deterioration and sobbing which, loud and sonorous, filled the entire mausoleum with audible grief. The more Najda cried the tighter Rughum tried to hold her and to keep her still. But no force could have kept Najda still in her grief for a mother whom she loved and cared for. Um Saad was not sick, she had been battling her blow to the head, she had been at the very door Rughum was at, except this time it was the Caliph's men who opened the door and it was they who forced her through it. It was not Um Saad's time, Rughum thought, as she held the deceased's daughter in her arms and tried to comfort her.

After Najda's sobbing subsided and Rughum was able to let go of her, Rughum said she had to return to her home well before sunset. "I imagine your husband will want you home with him too by now."

Najda smiled, "How innocent you are, my friend. I am not married." Rughum's eyes expanded in amazement and at seeing that facial expression, Najda continued, "Yes, I am not married and I will not, I don't think. Do you still want to be my friend? Can you risk it if people start to say 'That Rughum lady is a Mani too'? Or, 'She is no real person of the book'? What if they said to you, 'Najda is a witch and you must be a witch,' or 'Najda is a tharifa' or they told your husband you were seen with a tharifa? What then?"

"My husband knows I went to see you. I would not do anything against his will. Is a tharifa a paid woman? Are you such a person?"

"No. A tharifa is a woman whose heart has been melted and beaten and twisted and crushed by the pangs of love. A tharifa yearns for her beloved, sometimes completely and utterly without the beloved's knowledge and without anyone else's knowledge. If she is lucky a tharifa will sometimes find a beloved all of her own and these relationships can last or they can end as soon as they begin."

"I seek forgiveness from the Almighty," said Rughum under her breath and Najda shook her head, she did not know why she was bothering.

"They fornicate? Without marrying their beloveds?"

"They are not permitted to marry their beloveds, my dear Rughum. When have you ever heard of a woman being betrothed to another?"

Slowly but steadily Rughum was beginning to suspect that a tharifa was a woman lover of women, and the concept was beginning to solidify for her as plausible and real. By the time Najda had surrendered her carefully guarded secret, Rughum had already realised that she and Najda were alike. She understood now why it was Najda who had opened the door for her and why it was also Najda who held her back from walking through it. Bringing her back from these thoughts was Najda's soft spoken voice, "I don't know why I told you what I have told you. But I suppose the Caliph doesn't mind us tharifas, not with al-Qadi he has appointed and not with all the loose Manis he still has to capture. You must meet my friend Bathal. She entertains at the Caliph's court. I would be surprised if you haven't heard of her. Her fame is far and wide not only for her voice but for her own songs and poems. Won't you say anything?"

In her dream it was Najda who had opened the door to the other world. It was she who said, "You can go. This is the way out." Now as she stood near her, realising for the first time that Najda was a tharifa, realising too that she was not the only person in the world who felt the way she did, Rughum's belly ached. She so desperately wanted to pluck at Najda's lips with her own lips, she saw herself burying a soft kiss behind Rughum's ear, a kiss placed delicately like a treasure intended for later discovery. Without thinking, Rughum's body began to lean toward Najda, closer, closer still until they were touching.

Najda felt Rughum's awkward closeness and turned her face toward Rughum and in her ear she whispered, "And so this is your real problem?" Rughum took a deep breath, closed her eyes and stepped away from Najda, still inhaling her musky incense that had nested in her hair.

"I must go now," Rughum blurted awkwardly, drawing her garment close to her body and stumbling her way out of the mausoleum. In the meantime, Najda stood surprised for a moment and then regretted not running after Rughum. By the time she walked out of the mausoleum, Rughum was a significant way down the path that took the city dwellers back to the city. Najda watched Rughum for some time as the sun began to set on the horizon and Najda realised that Rughum too was a tharifa. A very young one, maybe some three pilgrimages younger than herself but with no experience in the world whatever. It was not entirely surprising to see Rughum exposed in this way. There was something in her voice, in her repressed mannerisms, a kind of masculinity that made her more easily identifiable than the others. But that masculinity seemed carefully concealed or perhaps unexplored and as such Rughum appeared awkward and uncomfortable.

On her walk home Rughum felt that she had not been forsaken, that she was instead in communion with life itself and that it had taken her much deprivation and self-degradation to reach the clarity she needed to unlock her right to life. The Hajj did not appear in her dream, which puzzled her. How could the heavenly vision that brought her back to life be so careless as

to omit such an important detail? Perhaps she had been careless in not paying attention to her friend and husband, who had waited patiently as well as any man. She had by now heard stories from the older wives, attempting to whet her appetite to the action, telling her that some husbands falter and force their wives if they make them wait unreasonably long and that force has been known to work on young maidens. She was told that the Hajj was a holy man and would do nothing to contradict Allah's law but this did not mean for her to be especially difficult. They entreated Rughum and made many allusions in regard to her situation and responsibilities but they never sought to know her thoughts. As a creature, she had no private quarters especially dedicated to her as the other wives did. She slept in the room belonging to her husband and when she was not submitted to his gaze she was submitted to her fellow wives and their scrutiny. But their scrutiny was well-intentioned and there was in that household for some time genuine harmony that was unlike many of the households in the entire city.

That night, Rughum waited for her husband to come to sleep. As was his habit of late, he had left her to her own affairs and returned at an early hour of the morning seeking refuge in sleep for a brief time before the new dawn. He was surprised to find her awake and waiting for him. He felt his body become more rigid. "Is this it?" he thought expectantly.

"Sidi, I want to talk with you."

"Yes, my apple of my eye?" he said, as he usually did.

"I feel I should be your wife in reality, not only in name."

"O, Rughum... You don't know how long I have waited..."

"Sidi, please, let me..." There was silence for some time before she began again. "You are an honest man and a pious man, Sidi, and I have come to love and admire you and I know I have no right to withhold from you what you have lawfully acquired. But in your generosity, which I hope Allah will reward, you have allowed me to keep what was no longer mine for far too long."

"O, Rughum!" Said the Hajj, evidently ready to throw himself at her, which he soon did.

If only he had waited another sentence. If only he had waited a moment, just long enough for her to say, "Hajj, I ask you to return me to my family. Divorce me and you shall keep the dowry you gave me." But the Hajj mistook her words for ghazal; he thought she was romancing him and he was so lit up with desire for her, as head been for so long. Rughum, although tense and unmoving, did not physically obstruct his path through her garment and felt it was too shameful of her to deny a hungry man at a feast. Tears welled in her eyes as he kissed and pinched her and she accepted wholeheartedly the will of her Creator. Just as Rughum closed her eyes and

resigned herself, the worlds of magnificent events collided to free an old man from the burdens of life and a young woman from the burden of guilt she bore about her life.

He had not ventured very far over the terrain of her body which he believed had been released to him, and he was at the peak of his arousal and attention, in exemplary form, surprising for a man of his age, when he felt such pain that it made him clutch at his chest desperately. It happened so abruptly and incomprehensibly that he did not have time to learn that Rughum did not want him or that she sought a divorce from him. He fell beside her and she was silent for some minutes. She was aware of the possibility that he had just died, as often happened with old people she had seen after the event. Slowly, Rughum pushed her master off her. She sat up and patted his hair and beard and quietly mourned, unlike Najda's's loud mourning in the mausoleum a day earlier. She prayed over him and waited until dawn prayers and when the believing women saw her face, her red eyes and tearful complexion, they knew instantly that it was for him she cried.

The wives mourned the passing of their Hajj and his eldest son soon arrived after being summoned by the news of his father's death. He tore through the gardens and into his father's main home. Tearful, mournful and full of respect. He prayed for his father's soul and for forgiveness from the Almighty for all their souls and he envisioned that his father was enjoying the refinements and pleasures of paradise. He imagined him drinking from the drink that intoxicates without intoxicating.

As often happens throughout the world at many different times and places, the death of the Hajj left a smoldering problem which was the matter of his estate. The oldest of the Hajj's living wives, and the mother of half of his children, raised a concern over Rughum's dowry with the other wives, excepting Rughum from the discussion. "Is she still entitled to the dowry if the marriage was not consummated?"

"Have a heart, Um Khalid! If we dissolve her marriage who will take her? Her family will always treat her poorly and..."

"And, that's how she will always be treated here! The scavenger! She probably poisoned him herself..."

"What are you saying, Um Khalid?" asked Um Isa, the second of the Hajj's living wives. "Are you saying she killed him? Look how she mourns for him. Look how quietly and constantly she has been sobbing since she came to us. Don't be so harsh on the poor girl. Besides, Um Salma knows her best. What do you say, Um Salma, could she have harmed our husband?"

Um Salma was quiet for a moment. She really was not sure. She always felt slightly bitter towards Rughum whose dowry was considerable and who was being allowed to keep it despite a

very short time in their family. She bore him no children, their marriage was still unconsummated, why should she deprive his other wives of their share of his wealth? On what account? “Well,” weighed in Um Salma at last, “I cannot say I know for certain, but Rughum could have poisoned the Hajj. We must seek out a judge and annul her marriage on the grounds of her abstinence.”

As the women went to the Hajj’s eldest son to seek his willingness to represent them to a Judge, Rughum overheard them. She had already collected her belongings and announced, “I relinquish the dowry given to me by Hajj Muizz. He had not made a wife of me yet my sisters. I have earned no place in this household, I have borne no children. I have prepared my things and I am returning to my father’s home. He is expecting me.”

“What has your father said about the dowry?”

“He does not know yet that I have returned it. He does not yet know...” Her gaze fell to the floor. She stepped back into the shadow of the hallway and made a silent and modest exit out of her husband’s home. The wives watched her as she walked down the road and watched her as she entered the marketplace and made her way across it and over the hill. What they did not see was Rughum’s long detour at the bottom of that hill that took her out to the road reaching beyond the city limits. They did not see that while she left them her dowry she had secretly procured for herself an immodest gift given to her by her husband in the early days of their marriage when he sought to woo and please her. Thumbing through her sack she felt the green emerald in the centre of the golden jewelry box and when she detected enough of its ridges to confirm that the box was still in her sack, she threw the sack over her shoulder and continued on toward the Mani Mausoleum.

When she reached the Mausoleum all was quiet and Najda was not anywhere to be seen. Rughum sat on the steps of the mausoleum and took her copy of the holy book which she shortly began to read, slowly, hesitantly, out loud. Her knowledge of the letters of the alphabet and her sense of the Quran’s sophisticated grammar made good tools for her increasing literacy, but she was not yet in a position, this poor Rughum, to write her own tale.

She waited for several days, sleeping in the Mausoleum at night, shivering in the coolness of the desert and with nothing to keep her mind occupied other than the final verses of Surat al-Furqan. It had often been said that soldiers have been known to survive on nothing for days of travel on end other than what they had memorised of the holy book. Now, she thought of the Hajj and his two years of patience with her, along with the verses she had managed to memorise and was repeating when it became too dark to read. She felt she was sure that by giving up his simple earthly desire he was being rewarded for his goodness in paradise. She knew that the Almighty was all-knowing and she knew how much Rughum suffered whenever the Hajj approached her,

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and He knew what a good man the Hajj was to deny what was granted to him by deed and ceremony to take her feelings into account.

“The Almighty does not forget to reward a good deed” she thought.