

no telling without retelling

Even bound in a book, or especially bound in a book, the tales of the *1001 Nights* violate every narrative convention. We know that the stories Sheherazade tells don't have either beginnings or endings: only her first story of the first night has a beginning, but it's a faux-beginning because it's already been rehearsed and set up, so that it is a beginning told and foretold, a recitation rather than a beginning. After the first night, her stories neither begin nor end, they simply continue. Even Sheherazade, the Storyteller, who, seemingly, begins telling stories in Sharyar's bed at the urging of her sister, Dinarzad, does not begin when she first appears. She has been present behind the scenes while the frame that makes possible her appearance is being built by a Storyteller who turns out to be none other than Sheherazade herself, as we discover when on the 456th night she tells the story of the brothers Sharyar and Shahzaman, their betrayal by their wives, their killing of the traitors, their wanderings in the desert, their adventures with the Genius and his wife, their parting of ways, Sharyar's return to Baghdad, Sharyar's vow to take a new bride every night and have her killed in the morning, and his marriage to the Storyteller Sheherazade. If Sheherazade herself is not bound by any narrative convention, we would like to do likewise, but we can't. We are bound to tell her story no matter what our postmodern wishes or rebellious inclinations might tell us: simply pronouncing her name invokes her. When she appears, like the Genie in the bottle of literature that she is, we must obey the order of her stories; this is the exact opposite of the Genii and Genies who are freed or imprisoned in the bottles of her characters, who must obey their liberators. Sheherazade is a peculiar literary Genius who inverts that relationship just as she inverts the conventional order of narrative, the power relations between the sexes, sexuality itself, and memory. Thus:

nostalgia

² There was no beginning, as noted. On orders from Sheherezade, narration is suspended; there is no “before” or “after”: yet all that happens is *not* simultaneous; the activity of a body in time is the exploration of an awareness that there are forces that surround and constitute one’s body in a seemingly chaotic state. The state of suspended “total study” is not narrative, which makes it imperative to note before each story that its roots are in another story; otherwise suspension of disbelief will be impossible. Of course, we take comfort in the fact that one word follows another, one step another step, so simultaneity and chronology contradict each other only apparently.

³ Burton: “a King of Kings of the Banu Sasan in the Islands of India and China, a Lord of armies and guards and servants and dependents.” Note Burton’s blasphemous tinge here: he knows only too well who the “King of Kings” is in English, yet here is another, from a faraway land, who, as becomes amply clear, was not Christ. This King of Kings is the father of the two brothers who divide his kingdom: the elder, who is “a doughtier horseman,” inherits the larger kingdom of India and China, while the younger is ruler of “Samarkand in Barbarian-Land.”

⁴ The bureaucracy of Empire, with the Vizir at its pinnacle, was a calculator whose job was to determine the cost of each royal impulse. The desires, urges, whims, wishes, itches, yens, and fancies of the King produced all the jobs in the kingdom.

⁵ Called by Burton “Wazir,” with the following footnote that takes issue with all previous translators of the *Nights*: “Galland writes ‘Vizier,’ a wretched frenchification of a mincing Turkish mispronunciation; Torrens, ‘Wuzeer’ (Anglo-Indian and Gilchristian); Lane, ‘Wezeer’ (Egyptian or rather Cairene); Payne, ‘Vizier,’ according to his system; Burckhardt (*Proverbs*) ‘Vizir.’ The root is popularly supposed to be a ‘wizir’ (burden) and the meaning ‘Minister’; Wazir al-Wuzara being ‘Premier.’ In the Koran Moses says: ‘Give me a Wazir of my family, Harun (Aaron), my brother.’ Sale, followed by the excellent version of the Rev. J. M. Rodwell, translates a ‘Counsellor,’ and explains by ‘One who has the chief administration of affairs under a prince.’ But both Koranists learnt

In the time before the beginning² King Shahanshah, the King of Kings,³ left his vast kingdom to his eldest son, Sharyar. After the death of the King of Kings, Sharyar, who loved his brother, Shahzaman, made him a gift of the kingdom of Samarkand. Ten years after the death of their father, Sharyar, well established in his authority as ruler of his realms, longed to see his brother, Shahzaman. His immediate impulse⁴ was to mount his mare and to take off at a gallop with a party of attendants and a herd of gift-laden camels to visit his brother, but his Vizir⁵ advised against it, because it was unbecoming of a greater King to visit a smaller one; he proposed sending a delegation to Shahzaman instead,⁶ inviting him to visit Sharyar. Sharyar bowed to protocol, recognizing that it was precisely the observance of every rule, big and small, by his Vizir, that was responsible for the orderliness of his people. Sharyar wrote a letter to his brother (most certainly dictated by the Vizir), beseeching him, in Burton’s translation, to “. . . condescend to bestir himself and turn his face us-wards. Furthermore . . . our one and only desire is to see thee ere we die; but if thou delay or disappoint us we shall not survive the blow. Wherewith peace be upon thee!”

A royal party laden with gifts from Sharyar voyaged a great distance to Shahzaman’s palace in Samarkand, and the Vizir delivered in person his sovereign’s invitation, after making three precise bows to the

ground in the exact middle between King Shahzaman's legs, a space delineated by tradition and known in the Samar language as *teola*.

The splendid gifts were distributed by Shahzaman to his intimates, above all to his beautiful young wife, who received with proper modesty and gracious gratitude the well-proportioned white Mameluke slaves, who were among the many gifts. The horses with gem-encrusted saddles went to his generals, and the high-breasted virgins were distributed among his sons, most of them still under the age of ten, who looked with open mouths on the teen beauties.

Shahzaman had also been missing his brother, so he began immediately to make preparations to journey to his elder sibling's court. The preparations involved finding magnificent gifts for Sharyar and his wives and ministers, which in itself was not a problem for the ruler of Samarkand who possessed rooms full of treasure offered him by traveling merchants in gratitude for free passage along the Silk Route from

their orientalism in London and, like students generally, fail only upon their easiest points, familiar to all old dwellers in the East." Burton sees himself as such an old dweller and a speaker, besides, of the only "pure" Arabic, the Bedouin variety, uncontaminated by Turkish and Egyptian "mincing." It is quite amusing and awesome to see how many shots Burton fires in the preceding paragraph: he demolishes all previous translators in French and English, makes fun of earnest academics, mocks "students" who, obviously, never left the library, and shows off lightly profound erudition in matters of the Koran; one can imagine him atop his purebred Arabian horse with a pistol in

one hand, firing with uncanny accuracy at the translators, while wielding a swift epée to wound a few "orientalists" and "students" in his path. Burton's marvelous swashbuckling is evident throughout his decades-long struggle with the *Nights*. Burton lavishes a great deal of attention on roots and spellings in order to invent his own, which makes for delightful reading after initial difficulty, but the language did not, alas, stay on his side. Despite this betrayal by his beloved language, which he tormented often to poetic heights nearly unreachable by the 21st-century ear, Burton has put a definitive stamp on the *Nights*. Haddawy aspires to a "plain narrative as well as a conversational style" and aims for "neutrality," qualities that, given the extravagance of the *Nights*, have all the appeal of dishwater to a man expecting brandy. Haddawy takes violent exception to Burton's translation, a tradition begun by none other than Burton himself, and reveals in the process something less egregious, but just as unwholesome in its own way, namely, the political "corrections" of the late 20th century. There is no end to the quarrels between the *Arabian Nights*' translators; they don't agree on anything; they copy each other but they claim to work from "original" manuscripts; the number of stories varies as well; bowdlerized and popularized editions make their claims even murkier. It is astounding that the three Fates stayed so civil to one another during Sheherezade's Fating, after all the mud they'd slung at each other across time.

⁶ Sheherezade's father, the Vizir, is the servant of Protocol and Law; commentators have noted his inhuman lack of paternal feeling for his daughter when he allows her to marry Sharyar, despite knowing that he is delivering her to certain death. True, he makes a feeble (fable) attempt to prevent her, but once the deed is done, he waits every morning at the door of the King's bedroom for the emergence of the royal couple. For 1001 mornings, the Vizir waits to kill his daughter. This is an immensity of mornings that will bring him no human closure but will fortify within him the belief in the Law, which is greater than paternity, above the King even, certainly above all human consideration. The Vizir guarantees the legitimacy of the empire on the basis of the Law, which is inscribed in writing in the Law Library. It is a wretched fate indeed that this servant of Writing has given birth to the Spinner of Tales. Writing and Orality confront each other in this Father and Daughter, in the guises of Law and Fancy, Fact and Imagination, Order and Uncertainty. The unyielding Father embodies the inscribed Letter that foreshadows centuries of textual application, while his wild Daughter keeps the blood of her nomad mother burning with the desire to wander.

China to Persia, but which had to be slightly less splendid than those of the greater King. Shahzaman was less protocolar than his brother, but even he knew that he ought not to match him Mameluke for Mameluke, ruby-encrusted blade for ruby-encrusted blade. And by no means should he compete in the area of high-breasted virgins, though his city teemed with them. King Sharyar might recognize some of Shahzaman's gifts as being identical to his own dearly bought treasures, which, as all merchants knew, had once been a pair, the twain of which had been paid in tribute to Shahzaman. Shahzaman thus chose simplicity over opulence, loading his camels with tiger, bear, and lion furs hunted by his own furriers, and a small number of petite Mongol virgins with long braids down their backs that he had personally captured in a border skirmish, whose breasts were neither too high nor too full.

Suitably equipped, Shahzaman's party and Sharyar's envoys left the royal palace at dawn, seen on their way by his wife and his harem's mournful beseeching heavenward to the wailing of stringed instruments. They rode the whole day, then set up camp on a windy plateau under a starry sky. Unable to sleep, Shahzaman looked through the opening at the top of his tent at the sparkling show above, and remembered! He had forgotten the pearls! The string of pearls! How could he have forgotten them, the pearls that had been surrendered by his wife as a special gift from her to his brother's wife! How often he had listened for their sound, clinking softly as she came to him in the night, a panther dressed only in pearls! Thinking of his wife under the sparkling stars that had reminded him of the pearls, Shahzaman sprang up out of his tent, mounted his steed, and took off for his palace, intending to retrieve the pearls, kiss his sleeping wife, and return to the encampment before dawn, no one the wiser. He entered by a secret door and made directly for his wife's chamber, where the clinking of pearls and peals of laughter stopped him dead in his tracks.

Lying on the marital carpet, spread shamelessly beneath a "black cook of loathsome aspect and foul with kitchen grease and grime," was his beautiful young wife, the only visible thing about her a white thigh

arched high over the beastly back, and a strand of the string of pearls snaking away from the sweaty bodies. Before drawing his scimitar, overcome by fury, King Shahzaman had an utterly inappropriate thought: the string of pearls began someplace near the lovers' straining middles and it was being used for pleasure! Without another thought to fuel his already burning fury, Shahzaman struck blindly and killed the lovers, after which he cut each one into four pieces on his own marital carpet-bed. When he pulled the string of pearls from the still-bleeding flesh, he noticed that, indeed, the sinuous ornament had been more than half-buried inside his wife's most cherished place that he'd thought of as his and his only.

King Shahzaman abandoned the dismembered traitors on the marital carpet⁷ and rode dejectedly to the camp,⁸ the string of pearls flying behind him like the milky tail of a burning comet. The journey began at dawn next day and each day increased his torment, weakening him and giving him no rest. He slouched in the saddle, his growing weakness diminishing his once-proud figure. Time passed⁹ and Sharyar's splendid city came into view, its minarets polished and gilded in Shahzaman's honor, its gold cannons firing from freshly tiled towers.

When they embraced, Shahzaman's dejection was immediately apparent to Sharyar, who inquired about the reason. Shahzaman assured him that his condition was due to the rigors of the journey, a halfhearted lie that Sharyar accepted, having no other explanation. He ordered the feast of viands and rare fruits to be brought in by handsome slaves, and bade the musicians and the dancers to begin what he hoped would be a week-long festival of

⁷ The dismay of the women who entered the chamber in the morning to prepare their lieges for their baths and dress must have been great: four large, greasy, and muscled pieces of "loathsome Moor" and four pink-edged jagged petals of fair wife lie on the marital carpet-bed; there is no sign of King Shahzaman, no signs of struggle. The entire palace is alerted to the scene of slaughter, and a great din ensues among the chanting of priests, the babbling of slaves, and the ululating of women. Has the end of the world come? Had the nomads snuck into the palace at night and killed the King's treasure, the love of his life? And where is the King? And what is the cook doing there? Questions to which no witness has the answer, but to which we, future chroniclers, must pay close attention because we are detectives. Surely, all figured it out, eventually, after a party was sent to catch up with Shahzaman on his way to Sharyar's kingdom. They listened humbly as Shahzaman, still livid with fury, recounted the night's events, and they agreed with him that he could not have acted in any other way, given such betrayal. Back at the palace, the slaves also figured it all out, and not a few among them thought secretly that the King was a fool, and that his wife's affair had been the most reasonable thing since she had doubtlessly required the cook who pleased her by his food to please her with his cock. Now the palace was both without mistress and without cook, a truly sad state of affairs; at least the King was out of town, praise Allah.

⁸ It is raining.

⁹ "Time is a man" (Exene Cervenka).

reunion and beatitude. The entire palace had been heated to a pitch of excitement all month as the best of the King's artists had been brought in from all corners of the empire to cook, sing, dance, and otherwise stimulate the nine known senses.¹⁰ Flowers were strewn on every carpet to be crushed by the revelers' bodies, and long pipes of opium and hashish were held to their mouths by muscled youths impressed with jasmine and coconut oil.¹¹

Sharyar enjoyed an organized harem that mirrored the administration of his empire: at the head of it was the Queen, his wife, who was tended by twenty concubines who ruled over hundreds of women of various ages, all of them guarded by Mameluke eunuchs who were themselves guarded (in outside towers) by armed and bearded manly Mamelukes.¹² Sharyar attributed his brother's wan state to the exigent journey, but he was disappointed because he had hoped that they might indulge once more in the roughhousing of their childhood and youth when the cares of government were not yet heavy upon them. He had hoped that Shahzaman's good spirits, as he remembered them, would lift his own, and stop or at least slow the passing of time. Days did pass but Shahzaman still did not touch his food or even smile at the choice amusements provided by his brother. Even worse, it appeared that the young King was wasting away from a dreadful disease the cause of which no physician could ascertain. His color was bad, there was a tinge of yellow to him, he stumbled often, and he fell asleep at inappropriate times.¹³ Hoping to shock him back to life, Sharyar organized a tiger and monkey hunt and invited Shahzaman to come along, recalling Shahzaman's prowess with the bow. He still had a Bengal tiger skin on his wall, the first tiger either one of them had killed. Shahzaman had brought the

¹⁰ Sight, Hearing, Taste, Touch, Smell, Telepathy, Remembrance, Foresight, Proprioception.

¹¹ For details of the party, the reader might look up the garden-feasts in honor of the Ismaili hashisheen (assassins) who embarked on a suicidal journey in order to go to a heaven that partied eternally in the exact same manner. The party protocols of the hashisheen martyrs were inscribed on a scroll that Agha Khan allowed R. Burton to read in Afghanistan, where he was in exile at the time.

¹² Ibn al-Rahat, "Sharyar's Side," *Saudi Literary Studies*, May 2001 (my translation).

beast down with a single arrow in the neck. Shahzaman had shortly thereafter forsaken killing most beasts, especially monkeys because their pitiful cries were much too human, but he was almost willing this one time to overlook his own distaste for Sharyar's sake . . . almost. His dejection held him in check. He told his older brother that now he had many monkeys in his household, dressed in fine cloth, who sat at his table and were served gold plates heaped with fruit by Mamelukes, and he cared for them. Sharyar was surprised by the disappearance of Shahzaman's once-legendary youthful fierceness, but as for himself, he killed and captured more animals than ever. Caged tigers guarded his treasure; elephants worked alongside his purveyors and builders, and he had decreed an annual holiday in their honor, but he took them for ivory whenever he pleased. When he went hunting, he did so in a fashion intended to remind his people that he was agile enough to kill many beasts. The clouds enveloping Shahzaman did not lift at the prospect of the hunt, but his excuse was feeble. "You may have become merciful, Brother," Sharyar said scornfully, "but a good kill is a royal duty." Still he refused to leave, saying that he preferred instead to remain alone in his rooms, to fully savor his sleeplessness, the lack of his appetite, and his near immobility. The manner of his refusal intrigued his brother, who glimpsed a certain voluptuousness in his brother's suffering. He left him to the enjoyment of his sorrows and took his party to the hunt.

Shahzaman lay on his carpet stiff as a corpse for one whole night, but at the break of dawn he betook himself to a window that overlooked an inner courtyard with a splashing fountain and a pool of sparkling blue water. A seemingly solid wooden column in the garden wall across from his window slid open, and out of it came tumbling ten comely maidens led by his brother's breathtakingly beautiful youngest wife.¹⁴ That side

¹³ We assign to Shahzaman more symptoms than Burton does, because our knowledge of the postrevenge effects on a jealous murderer's body are better known now, though they are by no means uniform. Pure psychopaths show no ill effects at all. Sharyar, the elder, is, it will turn out, a much less affected individual, because he is an out-and-out psychopath.

¹⁴ Burton: "A model of beauty and comeliness and symmetry and perfect loveliness and who paced with the grace of a gazelle which panteth for the cooling stream."

was the women's quarters, and Shahzaman felt briefly ashamed to look on his brother's concubines and was about to draw back to lie again on his bed of pain, when a most astonishing sight met his eyes. The ten maidens disrobed and Shahzaman saw that five of them were men. The women dove into the pool and their five lovers dove after them, beginning a gymnastic display of aquatic love-motions that continued on land, as they could not get enough of one another. King Sharyar's young wife called cheerfully to the lush tree in the garden, and a naked Moor of great physical dimensions leapt down from it and embraced her like a tall black exclamation point around which the milky white Queen wrapped herself like parentheses. The orgiastic frolic continued at a greater pace as the sun rose in the sky heating up the sweat-slicked bodies of the lovers, who swam deftly in their own sweat before leaping into the crystal waters of the cool pool, only to continue their games there, and then in the garden again, for what seemed a very long time to the amazed Shahzaman. Hidden behind the fold of the curtain and seeing all without being seen, Shahzaman felt his melancholy vanish, and a wave of well-being washed over him, pushing away all the suffering within. At sunset, when the exhausted lovers vanished behind their secret door, and the Moor climbed back up into the lush tree, Shahzaman left his chamber and ordered food to be brought to him. He ate ravenously large portions and drank thirstily ten jugs of wine. If his brother, Sharyar, the greatest King in the world, could have such dreadful betrayal visited on him, there was little reason for him, a considerably smaller and less powerful King, to mourn any longer. What had happened to him was by no means unique; therefore he need no longer feel inadequate and reduced. After the meal he took three veiled dancers and four musicians to his chamber and toyed with them while smoking hashish, and he could not restrain himself during his rapture from sneaking a look at the window through which he had seen the scene that had restored his health.

When the hunting party returned, carrying a rich bounty of birds and gazelles, Shahzaman was fully restored to his senses and to his prowess. Sharyar noticed right away his little brother's changed disposition. He

marveled at his returning color, his appetite, and his good spirits, and inquired as to their cause. Shahzaman told him that there were two parts to the story of his miraculous recovery, and that he was reluctant to tell either one, for fear of lowering his brother's spirits. Sharyar's curiosity, properly aroused now, drove him to press his brother, until Shahzaman, still gleeful and unable to contain himself, told his brother the reason for his formerly wan state: his wife's betrayal, his rage, his murder of the wife and the slave, and his growing despondency. Upon hearing each detail of Shahzaman's wife's unfaithfulness and his subsequent killing of the lovers, Sharyar clapped his brother on the back and exclaimed in horror and sympathy that, by Allah, if such misfortune were to overtake him, he would kill not only the guilty lovers, but all the women in his kingdom. King Sharyar now insisted, with more curiosity than ever, that his brother tell him the reason for his recovery from his justified melancholy. Shahzaman refused. Sharyar cajoled, then threatened. Pressed in this manner and desiring for reasons beyond his control to tell all, the younger King described in excruciating detail what he had seen from the window overlooking the secret garden.

Astounded, then horrified, Sharyar absorbed each word like a poison and exclaimed that he did not believe him. His wife, he said, had been personally chosen by him from the daughters of all the Kings who paid him tribute; she was the youngest of three of the greatest beauties of the Mongol steppes; if he hadn't married her, she might have succeeded her father, the Mongol Khan, to the throne, and waged war against all, including himself; she was a warrior-princess whom he had patiently taught to love, instructing her in Hindu pleasure arts beyond the reach of most mortals. Such betrayal was inconceivable for one as great as he, who knew the virtue of his young wife to be above that of any other woman, just as her horse-riding and warrior skills made her the equal of any man.

Seeing his brother distraught enough to kill him, a mere messenger, Shahzaman proposed a ruse: let us announce a hunt, he offered, and

leave on the instant; we will set up camp a day's distance from the palace; then we will stake our tents in the desert and steal back unobserved in the middle of the night; we will hide behind the curtain of the window above the garden and watch to see what dawn brings. If I am lying, you must kill me for your honor, but you will be at ease and free to trust your wife again.

No sooner said than done. The Kings called a hunt to celebrate Shahzaman's recovery. They rode to the great forest at the edge of the desert and set up camp a day's distance from the city. They then returned in the middle of the night, making sure that their horses' hooves, wrapped in rabbit skin, made no noise as they passed through the wall. They both hid at the window, using the folds of the curtain to hide them, and waited for dawn. As the sun burst over the horizon and daylight streamed over the garden, Sharyar's ten concubines led by his young wife tumbled merrily out the secret door and began their orgy. Sharyar's wife called to the tree and her lover leapt down from a tall branch, to enfold her. It was as Shahzaman had described it, a feast of flesh heated by sun and cooled by desert springs, a circle-dance of bodies at the center of which his tall Mongol wife, milky white and unburned by the desert, wrapped herself and was folded in turn again and again by a body black as a fire-burnished iron.

Sharyar leapt from his hiding place and killed his wife and her lover himself with swift strokes of his scimitar. He, too, like his brother, cut the bodies into pieces—not just four each, but eight pieces each, because, as he was the greater King, his fury was so much the greater. He then seized the ten white Mamelukes, five of whom were men, and personally tied them to the tails of horses he whipped until they took off in all directions, rending the guilty flesh. He then danced like a madman among the hunks of bleeding meat, slashing at it with dagger and scimitar. He ordered a hundred virgins slaughtered secretly that night. But even these bursts of revenge did not ease his soul, and Sharyar felt, as his brother had, that he must possess some unspeakable flaw to be thus insulted, he the son of the King of Kings, and currently the greatest King on earth, ruler of India, China, Afghanistan, Persia, and Egypt.

Such as had befallen him was unthinkable, and could be avenged only by the destruction of all womankind within his kingdom's confines. His Vizir, the father of two daughters, pointed out that such a course of action was unadvisable. Without women there would be no new people in his lands, and without people he would be the ruler of no one and nothing. King Sharyar knew with his reason that the Vizir was right, but his feelings told him otherwise. He nearly struck down his Chief Minister, but stayed his hand and shouted instead, "Women be cursed! There are wizards who can make people in jars and pots, without the bother of women! I shall find them, Vizir, and show you then!"

The two Kings retreated then to a small council chamber to consider their next action. The revived and energetic Shahzaman, who had witnessed his brother's revenge and his subsequent oath, approved of the idea of finding wizards who make people in jars, without the aid of women,¹⁵ and he said: "Indeed, Brother, let us wander into the world beyond our kingdoms and find the wizards of which you speak, the ones who can make people in jars and pots without the aid of women, and then kill all the women in the kingdom."

"Yes," replied Sharyar warming up to the idea, "but let us discover first if we can find anyone greater than us to whom such wickedness has happened. If we do find someone more powerful and richer than we, whose wife betrayed him in a like manner, we will indeed conclude that all women are wicked, and we can punish them accordingly."

Shahzaman thought about this, and said: "Perhaps we needn't kill them *all*; we can keep some to please us" (he remembered with a shiver of pleasure the night following the recovery of his health), "and some to give birth to people,

¹⁵ He would indeed find these wizards, in the 21st century. I met Shahzaman in 1999 at the penthouse apartment of Carl Djerassi, "the father of the birth-control pill," who had just perfected a means of technological (nonsexual) reproduction and was hosting a party to celebrate his success. There were a lot of people there, most of them friends and colleagues of Carl's, but some of them alchemists and dervishes who had traveled (with difficulty) through time. I met Shahzaman in the anteroom by the elevator, a rotunda with a painted ceiling depicting the Creation, after Michelangelo, in which the hand of God was reaching not to Adam but to a chemical formula. The obviously bewildered one-eyed time-traveler asked me if this was the place of "the wizard who makes people in clay pots," and I said yes. The party-attenders then engaged one another in a conversation I didn't hear, but it involved a Mephistophelian deal that the dervish offered the chemist, a deal that Dr. Djerassi refused. He later told me that the dervish Shahzaman had offered to take him back in time to his brother's carpet-bed where he could watch their sexual anguish and storytelling and conduct scientific researches on the body of the Storyteller. It was tempting, Dr. Djerassi said, but I knew that the exhausting journey into the past would be unnecessary because Sheherezade would always escape from any test tube to renew our appetite for the unpredictable. Reasoned reproduction is neither productive nor beneficial to the universe, which does not like our attempts to imitate its profound generosity. The ersatz economy of reason is deeply displeasing to creation. In endowing Sheherezade with an inventive means of escaping from the prison of King Sharyar's bed, creation issued its first creative license and declared the creative human season to be exactly 1001 nights long. Sheherezade's heirs subdivided and sold her license to all kinds of pretenders to demiurgy, including to us, scientists. Small bits of it, micro-micro-microns of it, are still for sale, but the wonderful truth is that anyone can have her full license for free, provided that they use it without embarrassment for the full 1001 nights. And so I can have my nights right here: why travel with cumbersome machinery to the Middle Ages? I didn't agree, but then I was there only to lend an ear.

since I doubt that we can find enough people-making wizards to populate our large kingdoms.”¹⁶

“You speak wisely, Brother,” the bereft Sharyar moaned. And thus, taking nothing with them, the two Kings, disguised as monks, took to the dusty roads leading beyond the civilized world, in search of greater men betrayed.

search

It was now one year since King Sharyar and his younger brother King Shahzaman had left their kingdoms, their palaces, their slaves, and the hacked-up bodies of their wives behind. Now the former Kings were penniless monks wandering through the desert in search of someone greater than them who had been betrayed by women as they had been.

“What we are searching for is impossible,” said Sharyar, the older brother and the more powerful King, “There is no one greater than me.”

A crow perched on a tree branch over his head would have laughed, had there been a tree in the desert, and a crow. As it is, *something* laughed, but it wasn't a crow in a tree, or anything capable of scorn. The *something* was Shahzaman, his brother.

Shahzaman, who was younger and had ruled only from the splendor of Bukhara in the kingdom of Samarkand that oversaw the Silk Route from China to Europe, agreed that his brother was indeed great, but reminded him of Allah. It was in the name of Allah that he laughed. Allah the All-Knowing, All-Powerful, and Not-Too-Easily-Amused, to

¹⁶ In this he was mistaken, as he found out in the time we met, a time when misogyny was considered wrong, so nobody could kill women with impunity, though such murders were still committed.

whom Shahzaman had pledged his faith just before leaving to visit his brother, laughed through Shahzaman. Sharyar had himself performed ablutions and learned Islamic prayers, but he had paid equal attention to other religions at the court, mindful of the strength of religious sentiments. He knew that Allah was in a hurry, a deity on horse and camel, who had been gathering converts for fewer than one hundred years since the Prophet Mohammed had revealed him, and in those years he had received thousands of worshipful interjections from his devotees, but the world was still too shaky, unformed, quick to switch allegiances. A King had to be careful. Just before he had been stricken by his misfortune, Sharyar's tutor had told him: "This world is yours, but everyone in it is subject to dreams they are apt to mistake for reality. These dreams whisper in the mind with a melodic voice, and all that now seems pleasurable and unchangeable can give way to a desire to be elsewhere. Until you learn how to make your nightly dreams obey, you will be flotsam on the waves of time, just like everyone else, King or slave, and you must not give yourself too rashly to the service of any one god, O young King!" His teacher was evidently Greek, a Platonist.

"Is my job to crush dreams?" Sharyar asked, and his tutor sighed, "I'm afraid so." Sharyar had forgotten all about it, but now, burning and freezing in the desert alongside his brother, he remembered and wasn't sure that he wanted such a job. Dream crushing is for clerks, he thought angrily. Besides, who was to say that what was happening to him and to his brother, Shahzaman, right now was not some kind of bad dream?

At this time spiritual revelations and upheaval were taking place in the deserts of Arabia and the mountains of the East. Between them, the two Kings had ruled over Hindi, Sumerian, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Persian lands, as well as numerous tribes of Mongols, thousands of Chinese clans, and innumerable Turkic, Afghani, and Tajik people. Most of these had been subdued by their father, the King of Kings, Shahanshah. Some of these subjects obeyed deities that could not be described in words or drawn in ink, and some deities forbade such attempts; some gods were

loud, others silent, but all of them demanded sacrifices, and, if they were not properly tended, the people whose gods they were exited the chronicles of Shahanshah's history as mysteriously and as violently as they had entered them. Some of them fell with their cities burning to the ground, but this was no guarantee that they were truly gone, because when it was least expected, wild men appeared in the streets of Baghdad holding the glowing shards of a burned god, the broken statuette of a horned bull, a torn page of goatskin inscribed with letters of blood, or humming a dreamlike song, and these nameless remnants were not harmless. Like his father, Sharyar had issued standing orders to have such prophets killed, but now that he was absent, it was possible that

¹⁷ The King of Kings, Shahanshah, the father of Sharyar and Shahzaman, on the verge of retirement, realized, like most great men on the verge of retirement, that his great power and holdings meant little if he did not take measures to have his deeds recounted in splendid language, and his holdings accounted for and attested to with accuracy, which is why he kept a Ministry of Scribes under the command of a faithful Chief Scribe; the scripting and scrolling of his reign went on day and night, catching up at some point with deeds and words at the very moment that they were committed and spoken, and sometimes *before*. Prophetic scribing, or avant-reporting, was widely practiced in times of peace, though anyone caught describing catastrophic events before they happened was beheaded. Only poets were permitted to write about things that hadn't happened, provided they did this mellifluously and for entertainment only. Oracles and priests were also accorded poetic privileges, but they inhabited special quarters and were consulted only privately during Shahanshah's reign. The King of Kings' administration was more fact-based than any previous empire, and for this reason we have few accounts of it; subsequent rulers eliminated or substituted accounts, corrupted scribes, and elevated oracles, priests, poets, and even handsome eunuchs to positions of "official descriptors." This hasn't changed much down to our day, when everything we call "history" is a revision by those who weren't there and didn't like it. The only relative and approximate accuracy we might trust is the scarce cuneiform clay tablets of Ur because writing was still new and difficult. When scribes became fluent, reality disappeared. Shahzaman was right to suspect the scribes of monkey business.

these grotesque cultists were gathered around the Persian throne using their pitiful magic to influence his Vizir. Sharyar shuddered. Having been taught since early childhood that the only way to shield the throne from the poisons of defeated gods was with rivers of blood, he felt very much out of place wandering through the desert with his brother, like a child who had run away from home.

"How did we come to such a dream?" Sharyar mused out loud, and his brother, the smaller King, said, "We were born to dream it." And after a long pause, he added, "Our cities were built with camels, horses, scimitars, maps, stars, strategy, and engineering by our father, the King of Kings Shahanshah, but I fear the descriptions of his scribes."¹⁷

"Sure, I know all that, but we haven't done much to better our father's work. What are we doing?" Sharyar put his royal head between his hands and pulled his hair.

(Continued)