

INTIZAR HUSAIN

## The Death of Shahrazad\*

SHAHRAZAD TOLD over a thousand stories and gave birth to three sons in a thousand and one nights. The listener prospered and so did the teller. The teller of these stories was Shahrazad who was granted life through her stories and who, in turn, allowed countless virgins to live, virgins who might otherwise have been queen for a night and had their heads lopped off in the morning. The listeners were Dunyazad and the Emperor Shahryar, whose life was changed irrevocably by these stories. The ill will he bore towards all womankind was washed away by Shahrazad's stories. He renounced his practice of marrying a girl for a night and having her head chopped off the morning after.

There was great rejoicing in the kingdom. The capital was bedecked and a grand feast was organized. But Shahrazad was in such a state of befuddlement that she continued to look askance at the change in her situation. How could she forget those thousand and one nights when she had told her stories under the cloud of death? When she did begin to accept that those nights were truly a thing of the past, a great amazement overtook her. She could hardly believe that she had kept such a long vigil and spent so many sleepless nights and spun such yarns that had caught the Emperor's fancy. How did she drum up so many fables? They must have come from above, by God's Grace. Finally, she could contain herself no longer. One night she made Dunyazad sit beside her and said, "Dear sister, now when I think about it, my mind clouds over. I spent a thousand and one nights telling stories! Tell me, how did it happen."

Dunyazad answered, "Sister, I myself am amazed that you had such a treasure trove of stories buried in your memory. Those nights were terri-

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\*"Shahrazād kī Maut," from the author's collection *Shahrazād kē Nām* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2002), pp. 39–45.

fyng. My heart would beat with fear at what the new dawn might bring. I could see Death hovering close, always close by. But those dark, fearful nights were lit up, as if by lamps, through the stories you told. Once you started telling your stories, one was never aware how the time passed and the night slipped away. And the Emperor, he would sit spellbound listening to your tales.”

Shahrazad said, “Sister, I was lost to the world. All I could think of was that I *had* to tell a story and save my life each night. But once I began, I would get so engrossed in it that all thoughts of staying alive would recede. Then, the only thought that spurred me on was that I must bring my story to its conclusion.”

“Your story did reach its conclusion. And what a conclusion! By the end of it, the Emperor was a transformed man. From a woman-hater who had a queen’s head axed every morning, to a husband who is devoted to you—he is a new man!”

And the two sisters relived those nights of terror and uncertainty, and wept at the sadness of those black nights. Then they wiped their tears and offered thanksgiving to the Lord for ending their misfortune. God had granted the strength and wisdom to tell those stories, those stories that had helped save their lives.

Talking to her sister and sharing her sadness and fear made Shahrazad feel better. Soon the festivities wound down. The kingdom slowly returned to normal and things continued as before. The thousand and one nights became a thing of the past. Shahrazad reigned over the harem as the Emperor Shahryar’s favorite wife and the mother of three charming princes. Dunyazad decided to forsake marriage and motherhood and to live in her sister’s shadow.

Shahrazad’s sons grew up. They were married with great pomp and festivity. Maidens as beautiful as the moon entered the palace as their brides. In due course the wombs of the brides were blessed and little flower-like girls were born to them. As the girls grew up, Dunyazad noticed that they were more interested in listening to stories than in frolicking and playing games. She said to them, “Girls, if you’re so interested in stories get your grandmother to tell you some. There’s no one in the whole wide world who can match her when it comes to storytelling.”

Upon hearing this, the three girls went to Shahrazad and insisted that she tell them stories.

Shahrazad was taken aback at the children’s insistence. She had forgotten that once upon a time she had been a great teller of tales. She tried her best to put her granddaughters off but the girls wouldn’t budge.

Dunyazad reproached her sister, “Dear Sister, I know it’s not my place to interfere between a grandmother and her granddaughters, but justice demands that I speak up. These girls are, after all, your granddaughters. They have a grandmother sitting at home who is a storyteller par excellence. Why, then, should these poor little things be deprived of your great gift? Why should they go knocking on other people’s doors to hear stories?”

Shahrazad’s heart melted at her sister’s words. She said to her granddaughters, “My darlings, of course I’ll tell you stories. If not you, who will I tell stories to. But it’s daytime now and stories told in the daytime cause wayfarers to lose their way. Wait for the night, then I’ll tell you stories.”

How they waited for the night! As night fell, the three granddaughters surrounded their grandmother. Dunyazad, too, drew up close beside them. She was anxious to hear one of Shahrazad’s stories after such a long time.

But a strange thing happened. Shahrazad thought hard. She racked her brains and tried desperately to remember a story, but she drew a blank. She couldn’t remember any. Worried, she said to Dunyazad, “My memory has fogged over. I can’t remember a single story!”

“What a thing to say!” Dunyazad exclaimed. “You told so many stories to your husband. Why don’t you tell one of them to these girls?”

“But which one? I can’t seem to remember even one!”

“What about the one you told on the very first night—the one about the Merchant and the Genie.”

“The story of the Merchant and the Genie ...” Shahrazad muttered.

She tried hard to recollect what the story was about. When she couldn’t remember a thing, she grew alarmed and said, “Dunyazad, I can’t recall what happened in the story about the Merchant and the Genie.”

“You mean you’ve forgotten your own stories? Don’t you remember ... the merchant ate the date and spat the stone, and the moment he spat the stone a great cloud of mist arose and a genie appeared. The genie thundered that the merchant’s stone had hit his son in the chest and he had died on the spot. The genie swore, ‘I’ll make you pay. Be prepared to die!’”

Shahrazad listened attentively. She tried hard to remember what happened next, but when nothing emerged from the haze of her mind, she said, “My dear sister, Dunyazad, I seem to have completely forgotten the story but you have it on your fingertips. Why don’t you tell it to the girls?”

Dunyazad thought for a moment, then said, “You are the Nightingale of a Thousand and One Tales. I can’t match the magic you can create in your telling. If you insist, I will tell the story now in my broken-down fashion, but only on the condition that tomorrow you will tell the next story in your own inimitable style.”

Shahrazad agreed to her sister’s condition. And Dunyazad told the story of the Merchant and the Genie to the three little girls with great relish. The girls were delighted. Dunyazad said, “Girls, my tongue does not have the magic of Shahrazad’s. Tomorrow when your grandmother tells you the next story, you will enjoy it much more.”

A great tumult arose in Shahrazad’s mind after listening to Dunyazad’s tale. All the tales she had told in the past rose up in great swarms in the coils of her memory, but not one was complete. Bits and pieces swirled and eddied in the recesses of her mind. Well, never mind, Shahrazad consoled herself. At least my memory has been jogged. Tomorrow when I sit down to tell a story, God willing, all will be well. I’ll remember the whole story. And so, the following night she sat down with her granddaughters with complete confidence. Dunyazad, too, came and sat close beside her. But all that Shahrazad could recall was that the next story she had told had been about the Fisherman and the Genie. Beyond that, she couldn’t remember a thing. Dunyazad prompted, “Sister, once upon a time, a fisherman cast his net into a river. When the net grew heavy, he thought he had caught a big, fat fish. But when he pulled the net out he found a sealed brass pot caught in it. The seal belonged to King Solomon. When he broke the seal and opened the pot, a dense black cloud engulfed the day and turned it into night. From that black cloud, an immensely tall, huge genie came roaring out.”

Shahrazad spoke in a quandary, “It seems to me, Dunyazad, that you will do a better job telling this story since you remember it so well. I can’t recall what happens next so you might as well tell the rest of it!”

With God’s grace, Dunyazad was in full flow and fine fettle. She began the tale of the Fisherman and the Genie with all of Shahrazad’s aplomb and by morning had told the entire story. Shahrazad heard Dunyazad’s story as though it was her sister’s story, and not her own. She was now among the listeners. And the three little girls were absolutely entranced.

The following night Shahrazad was confident that she would remember the next story in the chain. When she couldn’t remember that particular story, she tried to recall some other. She managed to come up with the one about Aladdin and the Magic Lamp, but in that too, she couldn’t

quite get the chain of events right. Again, Duniyazad had to be called to tell the story.

Now, Shahrazad was like a woman possessed. She would try feverishly to recall the stories she had once told with such ease. But nothing appeared out of the fog of oblivion. At her request Duniyazad would tell the stories, until, one by one, they were all told.

Shahrazad heard the stories with great awe. Did I tell all of these stories, she wondered in amazement. Gradually her surprise was replaced with sadness. She had told these stories over a thousand and one nights. And during each of those thousand and one nights she had thought that night would be her last. But now, after all these years, she felt that those nights had been the sum total of her life. Those nights hovered over her being like a magic spell. Only during those nights was I fully alive, she thought ruefully. Once again, forgotten, dormant memories of those nights rose up and swirled around her. As the night progressed, she wandered far and wide—across unknown islands, oceans and deserts—with the characters that had once peopled her stories. She strayed so far in her ramblings that all the fears and apprehensions of life and death were left far, far behind. When day broke and the cock crowed to herald a new dawn, the assurance with which she postponed the story to the following night made Death take a timorous step backwards.

Shahrazad remained lost in the enchantment of those story-filled nights. And when she emerged from that trance into the darkness of her present and its empty nights she thought, “Now my nights are desolate. They’re only long and dark. The magic has quite gone out of them. They’ve become barren,” she sighed, and fell into a deep sadness.

When the Emperor came to the harem he found Shahrazad unnaturally quiet. Despondency dripped from her face. He kept quiet that day, but when he saw that Shahrazad’s state wasn’t getting any better and that she remained steeped in sorrow, he grew anxious. Finally, he could contain himself no longer and asked, “I’ve been noticing for many days now, that you no longer sparkle with happiness. You don’t smile, or talk. Your face looks drawn and pale and sad. What’s the matter with you? What is it that’s eating away at you?”

On hearing these words Shahrazad abandoned all attempts to restrain herself and remain composed. She wept and said, “O dear husband, which Shahrazad are you referring to? The chirping, chattering, storytelling Shahrazad who entered your palace died a long time ago.”

The Emperor was astounded by these words. Perplexed, he said, “What is this I hear? If something is weighing on your heart, there must be some reason for it.”

“O my Emperor and my dear husband,” Shahrazad said in a tearful voice, “You granted me life but you snatched my stories from me. I lived only in my stories. When my stories ended, my own story ended with them.” □

—*Translated by Rakhshanda Jalil*