

The Story of the Porter and the Three Women

The story goes, my happy king, that there lived in Baghdad a man, never married, who worked as a porter, and as he stood in the market one day, propped on his basket, a woman appeared before him wrapped in a cloak of Mosul silk, her head in a cloth the colour of tin and scarlet boots at her feet, rainbow laces up her legs and toes in rainbow trim, and under her veil, when she lifted it, were black eyes hooded and fringed with black, shapes to make a poet sing; and with sweetness in her voice she said Take your basket and come this way,

and the porter, hardly believing his ears, shouldered his basket in haste—O happy day, he thought, O day of grace—and followed her to the door of a house, where she knocked, and to the man who came down, a Christian, she gave a coin in return for an olive jug of wine, which she set in the basket and said This way,

O day of gifts, said the porter, Day of blessings, day of bliss, and he followed her, basket high, until she stopped at the stall of fresh fruit, where she bought pale apples and musk apples, peaches and jasmine, Ottoman quinces and Damascus lilies, cucumbers fine as reeds, lemons from the coast and citrons from the sultan, myrtle and basil and henna blossom, daffodils and camomile, anemones and violets, and pomegranate flowers, laid it all in the porter's basket and said This way,

and he trailed her to the butcher's, where she stopped and said Cut me ten pounds of meat, and paid him its price, and he gave it to her with a little charcoal, and she slipped it into the basket and said This way,

and the porter in a daze followed her on to the grocer's, where she found all she needed to season and sweeten her food: olives pitted and salted, white cheese and Syrian cheese, pickles sour and sweet, and tarragon, arranged it all in the basket and said This way,

and on to the dry grocer's, where she bought shelled pistachios, almonds and walnuts, sugar cane from Iraq, fruit leather from Baalbek, roasted chickpeas and all the seeds, and laid the lot in the basket and said This way,

and he obeyed, until they came to the confectioner's, where she piled a platter high with every sweet in the shop: honey lattices and almond rings, dumplings filled with cream and spiced with musk, soap cakes, anemone floss, pudding and fritters, amber combs and ladyfingers, widows' bread, eat-and-thanks, judge's bites, pipes of plenty, broth of wind, and delicacies of every description, and lowered it all into the basket,

Had you told me, said the porter, I would have brought a mule, but the woman only smiled, then she was at the druggist's, where she bought ten bottles of scented water, lily, rose and others, and two loaves of sugar, a lump of frankincense, aloes wood, ambergris and musk, and candles of Alexandrian wax, and filled the basket with her spoils and said This way,

so the porter followed her, the basket on his shoulder, until she came to a tall house fronted by a wide court, with a double door of ebony inlaid with plates of gold, where the

woman stopped and gave a soft knock,

but morning gained on Shahrazad and cut her speaking short —

The strangest story! said her sister,

If I live another night, she said, I shall tell you stranger,

and when night fell again her sister said If you are not asleep, tell us a tale to break the waking night,

and Shahrazad agreed,

the story goes, she said, that as the porter stood behind the woman at the door, thinking of little but her charm, the polish of her language and the magic in her face, the doors flew open and (he bent to look) there stood a girl, five feet of symmetry and grace, a forehead like the sickle moon's blaze, eyes like the eyes of the doe and gazelle, brows like the crescent of Sha'ban, red anemones for cheeks, a mouth like Solomon's seal, lips red as native gold, teeth like a line of pearls, a neck like something given to a king, a fountain of a chest, pomegranate breasts, and a navel in whose dimple you could sit a drop of balm, and below was the hint of a rabbit without ears,

and at the sight of her the porter nearly lost his mind, his head its haul, and he thought Never in my life was there such a blessed day, and at the keeper's welcome, the porter followed the buyer inside, and into a large hall of elegant design, with carvings and compartments, galleries and balconies, niches and benches, booths and closets with curtains drawn before them, and in the middle was a pool of water from which a fountain rose, and at the far end stood a bed of cypress wood and amber, set with gems and hung with a net of red silk, fixed with pearls the size of hazelnuts and larger,

and behind the net, when it parted, was a woman with glamour about her, the philosopher's grace and the full moon's glow, Babylonian eyes and brows taut as bows, alif's poise and amber scent and sugar lips, a face to shame the sun, a girl like a galaxy, or a dome of golden filigree, or a bride in her finery, or the glitter of tiles on the floor of a pool, or the glisten of tail in a bowl of soup,

and she rose, this third woman, and met her sisters in the middle of the hall, and said Why do you stand there? Lift the load off this poor man's head, and together, the keeper before him and the buyer behind, they took the basket down and emptied it, and when everything was in its place—flowers to one side, fruit to the other—they gave the porter a coin and said Be on your way,

but morning gained on Shahrazad and cut her speaking short —

the story goes, she said, that when the porter considered these women, their beauty and wit, their abundance of wine and meat and fruit and scent and sweets, and no man among them, he was amazed, and as he made no movement to go, one of them said What is it? Have we paid you too little? and to her sister, Give him another coin, but the porter said The wage is more than I deserve, but the way you live concerns me, and how it is that you are here alone without a man: as a table must stand on four legs, so you three need a fourth, and as the pleasure of men falls short without women, so it is for women without men,

and they laughed at him and said Being women, we have secrets: why should we reveal them where they may not be kept?

but the porter said Believe me, I am a man of sense and care, I have read books, listened and learned and cited my sources, show what is good and conceal what is bad, and I am well-behaved,

and they, You know very well what this table has cost us: what have you to offer in return? We cannot let you stay, gaze at our pretty faces and drink our wine for free,

to which the keeper added If you have nothing, leave with nothing,

Sisters, said the buyer, let him be—I swear to God he served me well today, another man would not have been so patient—and let me pay his share,

at which the porter kissed the ground in thanks,

All I have, he said, is this coin, yours, the first I earned today: take it back and take me, not as a companion but a slave,

Sit, said the women, you are welcome,

then the buyer rose and drew a tighter loop around her waist, tidied up the room and laid the table, strained the wine, arranged the cups and bowls and beakers, the spoons of gold and silver, and when the food and drink was spread at the pool's edge, invited her sisters to sit—the porter, among them, believed himself in a dream—and the first cup she filled and drank herself, a second for her sister, and a third for the other, then she poured one for the porter, who sang their praise in verse,

Drink, said the buyer, and be well: the wine will bring you health, banish the pain and quicken the cure,

and they drank, draining and filling and draining their cups, until the porter, full of wine, fell to singing bawdy songs, began to dance, and set upon them with his teeth and fingers, pinching, prodding, and one of them fought back with food, the other with words, the third with flowers, but he was in the fold of pleasure,

and they went on like this until the wine played in their heads, and when drink had outdone them, the keeper rose and stepped out of her clothes, loosed her hair and let it screen her, and threw herself naked into the pool,

but morning gained on Shahrazad and cut her speaking short —

the story goes, she said, that the keeper, surfacing, danced in the spray and dipped her head duckwise, filled her mouth with water and shot it at the porter, and washed her breasts and navel and between her thighs,

then she rushed out of the pool into the porter's lap, pointed to her heat and said My lord, my love, what's this?

Your womb he said,

and she said Whoa! you have no shame, and cuffed him on the neck,

Your mound he said,

and one sister shouted Ugly word! and nipped him,

Your cunt he said,

and the other hammered at his chest to cries of Shame! and knocked him back,

Your sting he said,

and the naked woman smacked him and said No,

Your dip he said, your dingle, your disclosure,

and she said No no no,

and every word he said won him a slap and the same question, What is this? and this girl hammered, that one pinched, the other prodded him until at last he said What is its name?

Basil of bridges, she said,

Basil of bridges! You could have told me sooner—ow!

and the cup was passed around,

then the buyer rose, stripped as her sister had done, and threw herself naked into the pool, dipped her head duckwise, and washed her belly and around her breasts and between the thighs,

then she rushed out of the pool into the porter's lap and said Heart of my heart, what's this?

Your mound he said,

and she gave him a blow to shake the room and said You have no shame,

Your womb he said,

and one sister shouted Ugly! with a slap,

Your sting he said,

and the other sister cuffed him and said Whoa! No shame at all,

and they went on like this: one pricked, another swatted, that one elbowed him as he kept trying—cunt, womb, dip—and they said No no no,

Basil of bridges! he cried at last and all three women laughed until they fell, then came down on his neck with blows harder than ever and said No,

What is its name? he said,

The sesame seed, we call it—

Hallelujah! The sesame seed!

then the girl put on her clothes and they sat back to drink, the porter moaning at the pain in his shoulders and his neck, then the eldest and most beautiful removed her clothes in turn as the porter rubbed his neck and pleaded For the love of God, my neck, my shoulders—

but the woman dived and disappeared into the pool, and the porter's eyes settled on her naked form, which was like a slice of moon, and on her face, which was both full moon and yellow dawn, and took in her full length, her breasts and heavy dancing hips, bare as her Lord had made her, and let out a long Oh and said these lines:

If I compare your figure to the tender

Green bough, the lie oppresses me.

For boughs all robed in leaf are lovelier,

But you unrobed are loveliest to see.

and the girl, at these words, rushed out of the pool into the porter's lap, pointed to her heat and said Light of my eyes, my little liver, what is this?

Basil of bridges he said,

Bah!

Sesame seed he said,

Uff!

Your womb he said,

Yoh! So little shame, she said, and came down on his neck,

and to make the story short, my King, it went like this: the porter said Its name is so-and-so and she said No no no, and when he had his fill of bites and blows, when his neck was bruised and swollen he said Well, what is its name?

Hotel happiness she said,

Hotel happiness!

then she rose and dressed, and they passed the cup between them for a while, and at last the porter stood, took off his clothes—a dangling thing between his thighs—and leapt into the pool,

but morning gained on Shahrazad and cut her speaking short —

the story goes, my King, that when the porter went into the water, he washed himself under the beard and arms, then he rushed out and fell into the eldest's lap, arms in the arms of the keeper and legs in the hands of the buyer, pointed to his penis and said Ladies, what is this?

and the women laughed, happy that his mischief agreed with theirs,
 Your cock said one,
 and he said Ugly! Shame!
 Your penis said another,
 Have some shame!
 Your stick, the other ventured,
 No!
 Your highness,
 No!
 Your thing, your sack, your load,
 and he said No no no,
 What is its name? they said,
 but he came down on one with kisses, one with squeezes, one with nails and one with
 teeth, and the girls fell over laughing and said Brother, what is its name?
 Don't you know? said the porter, It is called the Roving Mule,
 What is the meaning of this name?
 It is the one who grazes on the basil of bridges, eats the sesame seed and runs wild in
 Hotel Happiness!
 and they fell back laughing and carried on drinking until night,
 and when it was dark, the women said to the porter It is time to put your slippers on
 and show us the breadth of your back,
 To part with my soul, he said, would be easier: let us join the night to day and go our
 own way in the morning,
 Sisters, said the buyer, let him stay: we may not live to meet his like again,
 You can stay, they said, on one condition, that you submit to our command and that, no
 matter what you see, you ask no questions,
 and he said Yes yes yes,
 Now get up, they said, and read what it says above the door, so he went to the door and
 found written above it in letters of gold:
 SPEAK OF WHAT CONCERNSTHEE NOT
 AND BURNING EARS SHALL BE THY LOT
 and the porter said I promise,
 then the buyer put the feast together, and when they had eaten they lit the candles, and
 spiked the wax with amber, and burned the aloes wood, and when the fruit and wine were
 served they sat again to drink, and there they stayed for an hour, drinking and talking and lazing
 and laughing, when they heard a knock at the door,
 and the women were not disturbed, but one of them rose to answer and said on her
 return Our pleasure tonight will be complete,

How so?

At the door, she said, are three dervishes, each with a shaven head and face and blind in the right eye — the strangest thing! — and by the look of them, they have travelled far to reach Baghdad: evening gained on them and, being strangers, they have nowhere to sleep, and have come to ask the master of the house if he might give them shelter, and each of them, sisters, has a face to make a mourning mother laugh,

Why don't we let them in, she said, amuse ourselves tonight and see them off tomorrow?

and she talked her sisters into it, on the condition the men ask no questions, and she disappeared, satisfied, and returned with three beardless, half-blind men, who greeted them, bowed low, and stood back, but the women rose to their welcome, gave thanks for their safety and invited them to sit, and the dervishes bowed again and looked around the room at the table laden with food, the burning candles, smoking incense, fruit and wine, and the women without veils, and said By God, this is good,

and when they saw the porter sprawled and spent, sore after the beating he had taken, they said Is he one of us?

Arab? Other?

A wanderer no doubt —

at which the porter, straightening, glared at them and said Mind your own business! Have you not seen the words above the door? 'Speak of what concerns thee not, and burning ears shall be thy lot' — yet no sooner are you welcomed in than wagging tongues,

and they said Mercy: our heads are in your hands,

and the women laughed, made peace between the men, fed the dervishes and sat around to drink, the keeper filling their cups, until the porter said Friends, have you no story to tell us?

but morning gained on Shahrazad and cut her speaking short —

the story goes that the dervishes, warm with wine, called for musical instruments, and the keeper brought them a tambourine, a flute, and a Persian harp, and each man chose an instrument and tuned it, and they began to play, and the women sang with them until they roared, and among their din came a knock at the door, and the keeper went to look,

now the reason for that knock, my King, was this: on that very night the Caliph, Harun al-Rashid, had gone into the city with Jaafar, his vizier, as was their custom, and happened to pass the house, and caught the strains of music and the women's laughter, and the caliph said Jaafar, I want to meet the people in this house,

Commander of believers, said Jaafar, these are people drink has taken over: they don't know who we are and I fear we may find trouble at their hands,