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2000 words

## **Scheherazade's Last Tale**

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*Most of the beautiful stories do not have beautiful endings,  
because destiny is stronger than love*  
Shaharazad al-Khalij

*It is written that Arabian King Shahriyár, having discovered that his wife engaged in adulterous behavior, caused her to be beheaded, and thenceforth made it his regular custom, every time that he took a virgin to his bed, to have her killed at the expiration of the night.*

*The King's Weezer related to his daughter Scheherazade what happened during the King's fatal encounters: upon which she said, "By Allah, O my father, give me in marriage to this King; either I shall die, and provide salvation for one of the daughters of the Muslims, or I shall live, and be the cause of their deliverance from him."*

*Reluctantly, the Weezer allowed Scheherazade to carry out her wish, and she went to King Shahriyár. When the King introduced himself to her, Scheherazade wept; and he said to her, "What aileth thee?" She answered, "O King, I have a young sister, and I wish to take leave of her." So, the King sent for her sister; and the sister came to Scheherazade, and embraced her, and said (as they had previously agreed), "By Allah! O my sister, relate to us a story to beguile the waking hour of our night."*

*“Most willingly, answered Scheherazade, if this virtuous King permit me.” And the King was pleased with the idea of listening to the story; and thus, on the first night of many, Scheherazade commenced her recitations.*

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After that first night, Scheherazade told King Shahriyár many stories of heroes and monsters, of magic, of thieves and hidden treasures, and all sorts of other fantasies. And the King cherished them all, but was especially fond of tales of couples that overcame perils and obstacles to realize their loves, for his romantic dreams had been throttled but not extinguished by his wife's betrayal.

So, nights turned to weeks and then to years. The King's homicidal impulses abated in time, but he did not reveal his change of heart for fear that, if he did so, Scheherazade might stop her nightly storytelling. The bards paint a rosy picture of what ultimately transpired between Shahriyár and Scheherazade, one in which the King begets three male children of Scheherazade and, at the turn of a thousand and one nights, spares her life and weds her. Sadly, the truth is otherwise.

Shahriyár never lifted the threat of execution because he thought that was all that kept Scheherazade from leaving one morning in search for a suitor more in line with her still youthful appearance. And he did not wish her to leave: he had come to desire the maiden, but his attraction had to yield to the excitement that her stories arose on his soul.

His fears of abandonment were never put to the test, for one morning near the end of one thousand nights of storytelling Shahriyár woke up ill, and his condition continued to worsen with each passing day. Scheherazade went on with her nightly recitations, but finally told the King:

“My Lord, I have a very special story for you this evening. But to garner the full benefit of the tale, I must be permitted to hold you hand in mine. May I do so?”

Such an unsought intimacy with the royal person normally would have brought about a severe punishment, if not death. But Shahriyár was too infirm to object and in fact welcomed the touch of this woman he coveted but who never had become his concubine. Without a word, he grasped the maiden's hand and drew a deep breath.

“Now, you must close your eyes for a bit and travel with me. Let my voice guide you in our journey.”

Shahriyár closed his eyes and teetered on the verge of unconsciousness, but Scheherazade's silken words served as a thread that kept him in this world. Soon, it was not only the enchantment of her voice but the strangeness of the story that kept him alert.

“Imagine, my Lord, that we sit on a magic carpet that is flying across the confines of your kingdom. See, right below us is your royal palace, which we just left. On the hills around it are the abodes of the rich merchants and the homes of the soldiers and other people who serve you. Farther out, on the arid plain, are the tents of the poor and the caravanserai where the travelers to all points of your kingdom find their rest. Further beyond, are the sands of the desert and the domains of other kings, friend and foe. Farther away, there is the deep, eternal ocean; and beyond, immeasurably far...” She paused.

“What lies beyond?” asked Shahriyár in a feeble voice.

“The hidden Realm of Barzakh, where the spirits of the dead stay until the Day of Judgment.”

“Is that the hidden realm of what lies beyond the grave?” There was a tinge of disbelief in Shahriyár’s question, for he had been told often about Barzakh by the clerics, but always thought that accounts of the afterlife were only old wives’ tales.

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Are we on our way there?”

“Yes, My Lord. But do not fear. Whether you linger in Barzakh or return to your palace right away is entirely up to you.”

“What happens if I choose to stay in Barzakh?”

“Your body, which is mortal and corruptible, will separate from your spirit and decay to dust. Your spirit will join a multitude of others that are waiting for the final judgment day in which their fate for all eternity will be decided by Allah. On that day, they will either ascend to Jannah, the heavenly garden to enjoy eternal bliss, or be cast to the depths of Jahannam, to suffer eternal punishment.”

Shahriyár shuddered with fearful anticipation. “What do the spirits do while they wait?”

“It depends, My Lord. Many spirits remain awake, and they are rewarded or punished in accordance with the balance of their good or bad deeds. Others sleep; they are rewarded or punished in their dreams. There are also those who have led virtuous lives; their spirits linger in the company of angels and their wait is the same as that of the angels.”

Shahriyár was accustomed to command and having his will obeyed. He declared: “It is my wish that my spirit will mingle with the angels.”

Scheherazade bowed her head in regret. “Alas, if a person, however lofty, has led a life of sin, he cannot expect to escape punishment. Nor can he return to his body and attempt to atone

for his misdeeds. Whatever one does in his lifetime is final and cannot be changed or altered once he reaches Barzakh.”

A long silence followed, as King Shahriyár examined his life, realizing that he had put many to death unjustly, deprived his subjects of wealth and freedom, and made war on other kingdoms causing much death and destruction. And his private affairs had also been bloody: he had sacrificed many innocent women to his thirst for revenge. “Will I have to suffer much if I linger in Barzakh?” was his anguished cry.

“I do not know, My Lord. But the wise men say that the intensity of the punishment hinges on the nature and severity of the person’s sins.”

“In that case, I want to return to my palace. I do not wish to go on and experience Barzakh, even in a tale.”

“As you wish, My Lord. But the physicians who attend to you predict that your remaining days among the living are few, and may be countered with the fingers of one hand.”

“Am I doomed, then?” For once in his imperious life, King Shahriyár felt weak and impotent. On the other hand, the stories about Barzakh might be more than just empty tales.

“My Lord, there is perhaps one way to make your stay in Barzakh somewhat less painful and eventually gain you entrance into Jannah through one of its holy gates.”

“One way? What would that way be?”

“Return to your kingdom and embark on a life, short as it may be, of repentance and reparation. Forgive your enemies, pardon those you have imprisoned, bestow gifts on the poor. You will have to try to accomplish much in the short time that remains to you.”

“But I can’t. I am sick and in great physical pain. I don’t have the strength to do all the things you mention.”

“If you allow me, My Lord, I will continue to hold your hand and lend you my strength, such as it is. May I be permitted to assist you in this manner?”

“Yes, my child” replied the King, shedding a single tear. “Let’s return home. I know this has only been another of your tales, but the trip has nonetheless left me quite weary.”

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It was thus that they found themselves back in the King’s palace, and Scheherazade moved into Shahriyár’s chambers. She rested on cushions next to the King’s bed and held his hand while he issued orders, proclamations and judgments to Scheherazade’s father and the other ministers of his court. He gave away most of his fortune to the poor, emptied the prisons, and released those doing slave labor in the silver mines. He summoned the envoys of other kings and sought, whenever he could, to bring peace to his kingdom by forging harmonious relations with its neighbors.

These efforts took a heavy toll on the King. His voice became feebler with each passing day and soon he was unable to sign his orders, so his index finger was dipped in a coal solution so he could leave his mark without needing to hold a quill. His breathing became so labored that its rasping sound dominated the room. Finally, he was unable to speak and merely nodded in assent or shook his head in denial when a question was asked or a proposed new order was placed before him.

Throughout all of this, Scheherazade whispered words of encouragement to the King, squeezed his trembling hands, and served him the little food and drink he was capable of consuming. She seldom ate and hardly slept, catching a wink or two only when Shahriyár fell into a troubled sleep. She wasted herself away in providing succor to her King, and ignored the

urgent requests from his father and sister that she seek the rest that she desperately needed. For, secretly, she loved the King and was willing to sacrifice all on his behalf.

The King's agony, and that of his faithful caretaker, lasted only two weeks. One night, as the pale sliver of a new moon rose in the sky, Shahriyár opened his eyes widely, squeezed Scheherazade's hand back with unusual strength, and asked one final question to his companion: "Have I done enough?"

"My Lord, I hope so. We will soon find out," was her reply.

The King uttered a loud sigh, his head dropping on the pillow with a thud. On the floor next to his bed, Scheherazade let go of his hand and collapsed to the ground.

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King Shahriyár's washed and shrouded corpse was laid to rest two days after his death in a ceremony attended by hundreds of mourners. He was buried without a coffin, in a deep grave covered with rocks to fend off wild animals; a simple stone tablet with his name and the dates of his birth and death and the duration of his rule marked the spot.

Scheherazade died a few days after the King. She was buried in another cemetery, in a different part of the city. Only members of her immediate family were in attendance.

King Shahriyár and Scheherazade lie in eternal sleep far from each other. They say, however, that on quiet winter nights one can hear barely intelligible whispers near the King's grave. It is rumored that a resonant female voice talks continuously, reciting a mysterious love story that goes on until the new day's sun rises. The King's answers, if any, are too faint to be perceived.

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