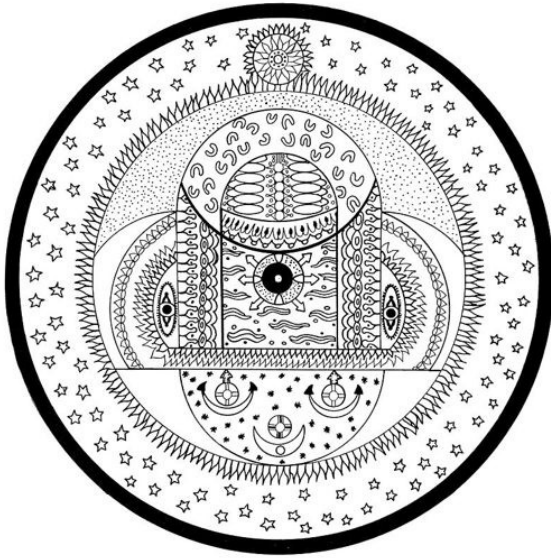


If Not Us



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Contents

The tale of Leila and Majnun
When Leila came
Rosebud
The rapture
Divan
Of all the friends
Faithful
Its sun-like colour
The breath
Hold me softly
Dragonfly
The bones of the air
Dark star
Your delicate sun
I tasted
I bring you flowers
The dome of the sky
Imagine
When you leave me
Peace of Being
Biscuits
Zuleika
The tale of Zuleika and Yusuf

The tale of Leila and Majnun

Leila found Majnun waiting for her at the street corner when she walked her dog to school. He waited every day. Some days they'd hold hands for a while as the dog stood watching. Other days they'd write their names on the wall, letters intertwined like this: mlaejinluan. It was an old custom, and today there were a hundred iterations written on the wall in different coloured chalks and scratches.

They had a game: one of them would write their name somewhere without telling the other one. It meant that wherever they went, each was forced to study every flower, every tree, every cloud, everything, looking for the other's name. It could be anywhere. When they found it, they would interleave their own name. Their names were everywhere.

Sometimes, when Majnun met Leila with her dog, instead of holding hands they'd stand for a minute or two gazing into each other's eyes, silently. They didn't smile – that was part of the game. Then they'd walk to school together, talking of this and that. Where the street was narrow, they'd take turns in walking behind and in front. The one in front generally had to keep an eye on the dog, who liked to play with things it found lying on the ground. Sometimes it ran through an open door into a house, and then one of them would be scolded.

Just before they got to school, they'd stop and call the dog, and both of them would squat to stroke it, one either side. As they stroked it, they'd look into each other's eyes – smiling was allowed this time. Then they'd split up so they didn't arrive at school together, and Leila would tell the dog to go home.

They both worked hard at school, but neither of them could stop themselves being distracted. One or the other would always be staring out of a window or door at the corner where they'd parted that morning.

When there was writing practice, they'd write each other's names instead of the ones they were supposed

to write, and when they were reading, they'd say each other's names instead of the names they were supposed to say. If there was an animal, they'd give it the dog's name, which they'd secretly agreed was mlajjinluan.

Everybody in the school knew about them, and nobody liked it. If the other pupils had known about the wall where they wrote their intertwined names, one of them would have scrawled something nasty on it, or would have scratched out the names, or painted over them. They were just kids. The teacher didn't like it at all, and although their work was as good as the other kids', she started to punish them, calling them lazy and stupid. But they weren't lazy or stupid, and the other kids knew it, so it didn't shame them.

So then the teacher felt stupid, and that was bad news for Leila and Majnun. The teacher started saying that they were crazy and wouldn't listen to her when she told them to stop writing and saying each other's names and gazing out of the windows. But why should they? They were doing fine, and hurting nobody.

It's harder to prove that you're not crazy than to prove you're not stupid, and soon the kids started following them around, shouting 'crazy Leila' and 'crazy Majnun', and throwing stones at them. Sometimes they'd tear up Leila's and Majnun's schoolwork for fun, or pinch and hit them.

Leila's parents got to hear of the bullying, but instead of asking the teacher to intervene and protect them, they believed her when she told them that Majnun had bewitched Leila, and that the kids knew and were trying to warn her. Leila's parents told Majnun to keep away from Leila, and not to write or speak her name any more, and they told Majnun's parents, who were much poorer than Leila's, to punish him and to keep him away from her.

And then they killed Leila's dog. Leila and Majnun refused to speak after that, and they stopped working so hard at school.

Leila and Majnun now only saw each other at school, where the teacher made sure they didn't talk to each other, or sit next to each other. Neither would talk to the other kids, and were silent when the teacher scolded them, which she did often. They both spent a lot of time staring out the window at where they used to stroke the dog. They didn't care about working any more.

Leila's parents were getting worried about her, and they prayed for guidance. The next night they both had the same dream. In it, they saw themselves in another place, fifty miles away, which neither had been to. They were packed for travelling, and Leila was with them, all sitting among a crowd of pilgrims. They decided that this was the answer to their prayer, so they sold their house and moved to the town they'd seen in the dream, and joined the next band of pilgrims that passed through.

Majnun now spent all his time saying and writing Leila's name, and staring out of the window, at home and at school. So his parents sent him to work for a friend, delivering water. He could do that without thinking, so he did, still saying Leila's name and stopping here and there to write his own name, still playing their game.

Leila and her parents made their pilgrimage to a most holy place, and there, her parents asked that she be made to forget Majnun.

She hadn't spoken at all since they moved away from Majnun's town, so they couldn't really tell whether or not the prayer had been answered. Apart from not speaking, she seemed well, and they were not so worried. They let her wander around her new home as she liked. She often went to the ruins of an old mosque just outside the walls where she made a small garden, filling it with jasmine.

Several years passed, and Majnun was still saying and writing Leila's name all over his town as he delivered water to his customers. He made up stories about her, and repeated them loudly when he wasn't just saying her name. He made up songs too, which he sang as he filled the water vessels at the start of the day, and every time

he refilled them. Carrying the water had made him strong, and he had a loud voice, so everyone in the town heard him singing and reciting his stories about Leila.

Leila herself was now of marriageable age, but nobody wanted her. Her parents offered a larger than usual dowry, but still other parents would not consider her because they thought she was bewitched. She hadn't spoken since she had been parted from Majnun.

One day, Majnun was delivering water to the house of a rich merchant in his town, who happened to be away from home. The merchant's wife liked the look of the strong young man Majnun had become, and invited him into the house to sing for her.

When she heard the words of the song, she asked Majnun about Leila, and Majnun told her the story of their separation. The woman was moved, and, going into her garden, picked a sprig of jasmine and pinned it to Majnun's shirt. Then she gave him money and told him to go to the town where Leila now lived, and to find her.

Majnun finished his deliveries that day and told his employer that he was leaving to find Leila. His employer gave him food and wished him success, and gave him directions to Leila's town.

Majnun walked for three days, and when he reached the town he was tired and hungry, so he went to a tavern to find food and somewhere to sleep for the night. The next day he bought new clothes at the market with the rest of the money that the merchant's wife had given him, and visited the bath house. Then he asked where he could find Leila, and they told him. She was well-known in the town as the woman who would not speak.

Majnun went straight to Leila's house. Although he was young and strong and handsome, Leila's parents were shocked and angry when he turned up, and were about to have him beaten by their servants when Leila returned from the ruins of the mosque, where she had been watering her garden.

She smiled as soon as she saw the jasmine pinned to Majnun's shirt, and called out his name. Majnun smiled back and sang one of his songs to her in his strong voice. When he had finished, Majnun asked Leila's parents to give permission for them to be married.

They knew that Majnun was a poor water-carrier, but they saw that he was strong. With her dowry he would be able to provide for her, so they gave their consent. There was one condition: that he should stay away from her for a year to prove he was not crazy. Leila would be confined to the house for that year.

Majnun went to live in the ruined mosque, and found a job as a water-carrier in the town. He kept Leila's garden watered, and every day pinned a fresh sprig of jasmine to his shirt. He started writing a message to Leila on the broken walls of the mosque and soon he had covered every surface. When he was not working, he would sit in Leila's garden and sing his songs about her.

One day, Majnun's employer came to the ruins and, seeing Leila's garden, accused Majnun of stealing water from him. He beat Majnun until Majnun's ears and eyes ran with blood and he collapsed unconscious.

Just then, servants sent by Leila's parents arrived. A year had passed, and they had come to see for themselves that he was not crazy. Majnun awoke, and, not recognising the servants, thought that his employer had sent them to beat him again. He thought that if he acted crazy they would not beat him, so, howling like a dog, he urinated against the wall of the mosque. Then he stood up, and, throwing off his clothes, began reciting the message to Leila he had written on the walls.

The servants returned to Leila's house and told her parents that Majnun was certainly crazy; and so they refused their consent to the marriage.

Majnun continued to live in the ruins of the mosque, reciting Leila's name and singing songs to her. But now he had no work and no money for food, so he lost his strength and became thin and weak.

Leila pretended to her parents that she no longer thought about Majnun, and started speaking again. Her parents were relieved and went to the marriage-broker to look for a husband for her. Meanwhile, she sent a trusted servant to the ruined mosque with food for Majnun, but he was asleep when the servant arrived. A stranger happened to be staying in the mosque with him that day, who pretended to be Majnun, and took the food greedily.

When Leila questioned the servant, she suspected that he had been deceived, so the next day she sent the servant back to the mosque with a knife, telling him to ask Majnun for some blood to prove he was still alive. When the stranger saw the servant approaching, he ran up as before, expecting more food, but when the servant took out the knife the stranger admitted the deception and ran away.

The servant found the real Majnun sleeping in Leila's garden. Majnun was now too weak to fetch water from the town well, and all the flowers had died except for a small piece of jasmine that Majnun had managed to keep alive. The servant woke Majnun and gave him the knife, but Majnun was so thin and weak by now that he could not bleed even when he made deep cuts in his body.

The servant returned to the house and told Leila that he brought no blood, but then he gave her the piece of jasmine that Majnun had saved. That night, Leila crept out of her parent's house and ran to the ruined mosque, where she found Majnun lying in the dead garden. She woke him and gave him food and water. They gazed at each other without smiling.

After a while, Majnun took Leila to see the message he had written to her on the walls of the mosque and they read it together. Then he took her hand and led her to where he slept, and lay her down gently. They made love all night under the light of the moon.

The next morning, Leila woke early and ran back to her house before the servants were awake, promising Majnun she would return the next night. Thus they spent

their nights together, Majnun reciting poetry and singing songs, making love under the light of the moon.

After a month, Leila's parents told her that they had found a husband for her, and that she must prepare herself for marriage. That night, on returning to the ruined mosque, she told Majnun. He was silent for a long time, then he stood and sang Leila the most beautiful song she had ever heard. Then they lay again under the moon, making love and reciting poetry to each other until the dawn rose.

As Leila was leaving to return to her house, Majnun promised that he would wait for her in the ruins until she could return to him. He told her to look for him in the garden. When she left, Majnun went to the garden and dug a deep hole next to a dead fig tree in the corner. Then he carved his name in the bark of the tree, and closing his eyes, sang all the songs he had made up for Leila.

When Leila got back to her house she would not speak, remaining silent as her parents berated and beat her. They knew that the marriage they had arranged would not take place if she became silent again, however large a dowry they might offer.

For punishment, they made Leila be their servant, giving her the hardest and dirtiest tasks, and little to eat. At night they chained her so that she would not escape. But soon she became so thin she was able to slip out of the chains, and she ran to the ruined mosque to find Majnun.

He was in the garden, as he had promised, lying in the hole he had dug beside the dead tree. Leila climbed down beside him and said, 'Majnun, come to your senses! I am Leila. Look at me!' Majnun opened his eyes and said, 'Are you Leila?'

Leila took Majnun's hand and they gazed into each other's eyes, not smiling. Then Majnun said, 'You are Leila, and I am not,' and he died. Leila rose then, and seeing Majnun's name carved in the bark of the tree, interleaved her own name. Then she returned to lay

beside him, saying, 'You are Majnun, and I am not' and she died.

When Leila's parents found Leila had gone, they sent their servants out to find her. They had decided to let Leila marry Majnun, crazy or not. The servants looked everywhere, but could not find her. At last they came to the ruins of the mosque, and they found her garden, full of jasmine, growing in the shade of a beautiful fig tree.

When Leila came

When Leila came to the ruin
I was ready
I had my roots arranged so as not to trip her
and my branches hung to shade her

My trunk was smooth so that she might caress me
and my birds were songful

I raised a hump around me
so she would sit comfortably
and lean against me
so I could feel her hair

I knew she would close her eyes
so I gave her a gentle breeze
to listen to

While she slept
I folded myself around her
When she woke it was with the dew of my kisses
on her lips

Rosebud

The worms in the rosebud know
they are tunneling through a heart

As I knew when you picked me
that I would be consumed

It is the nature of love
that it is fixed in a moment

Whole compendia of stars
are benighted, rivers are stilled

Song ceases, music lulls
trees are silent, crows settle

There is nothing in the world then
and all words lose their significance

There is nothing in the heavens then
and all prayers lose their yearning

We crush the rose between us
flower and thorn equally
worm and sun equally

I knew that when I picked you
we both would be consumed

The rapture

I have tasted a wine that stirs my soul
to rapture and doubles the beat of my heart
after one sip. See how it leaves no part
of me unstruck by longing? Now the whole
universe tastes of its kisses. I feel
as if the moon holds me while the sky's vase
pours sun into my cup. Look how I kneel
in my new dress, dizzy under the stars.

Divan

What now? said my lover
Do you love me?
Then why sit on the divan alone?
Your head is full of thoughts of love
yet you hold your head
as though stricken

Come to me, bring the cup
for I am enamoured of wine
and the red lips that suck its perfume
and its body like greedy birds
Why do you sip like a finicky priest
at a false wedding?

Of all the friends

Of all the friends I have known
You are mine own. When I see the light in the distance
I know you are near. There are always stars.

The delicate gems in my necklace
– you know the one –
are the eyes you use to see mine

The threads of my robe, unwoven,
are the skeins of love that bind us:
among them the one thread, hidden

You are hidden in the great light of the day
– who can see through the sun?
You are hidden in the scorching heat

How can I show my love for you
when all around me the signs burn with such intensity?
Words evade me when I search for the one that
describes you

My course is meandering, yet it brought me here
– having madly thrown away my compass –
and I have arrived at the topmost peak

Not that I shall acknowledge you when we meet
for of all the greetings that we use
all assume we have been apart

We tread the same dust, we break the same bread,
we rise together in the same luminous dawn.
Of all the friends you have known
I am your own

Faithful

Let's be clear: I'm talking to you,
my lover, not God

We are not omniscient, nor are we
all-powerful

But you are with me, always
You are in the words I write
You are in the thoughts I think
You are in the blood
that animates me

Don't worry that sometimes I speak
of drawing an image of you

It's not an idol, there's no
worship involved
I'm only trying to capture one aspect
of your beauty

for my own pleasure,
not capture you

Yet I have the same faith in you
as I have in God. Strange!

It is not hope
for I expect nothing
but to be with you

I do not commit myself to love you
for together
we are love itself

Its sun-like colour

Soft is my sentence of imprisonment,
close is the breath that stirs my captive flame
from spark to fire so brilliant
its sun-like colour has no name.

While moons and tides are idling elsewhere
beyond the confines of my territory
I dream the tangling ribbons of your hair
are winter leaves or waves on wild sea
where blue is green and green is blue;
on all my cliffs are paths that lead to you,
from all your oceans currents run to me,
no clouds float by, no windows spoil my view.

Held in the grace of soft imprisonment
chasing the breath that feeds my captive flame
I willingly endure each endearment
of custody or shelter just the same.

While satellites and stars conspire elsewhere
beyond the outlines of my territory
I dream the ragged fringes of the air
are combed by rhythmmed currents, rushing sea
where blue is green and green is blue,
where walls and joins and edges disappear,
no cliffs, no waterlines, no prisons here
and I am all the roads that travel you
and you are all the tides that fathom me,
no clouds float by, no windows spoil our view.

No word can yet disclose our element,
no sentence can confine our burning flame
of radiant light so brilliant
its sun-like colour has no name.

The breath

I am invisible when the soft rise
of your breath plays through me in the night
as I dream of you, my sensuous eyes
long closed, yet I see light upon light.

Hold me softly

Kiss and hold me softly in your arms
Tenderly, tenderly

The luscious friendly pleasures of the flesh
Skilfully drawn and joyfully given
For themselves are yet not the end, they are

Seeking out the melting fire
Seeking out the constant breath

Oh, we are not insensitive to the humour
Of the senses, to the satisfaction of desire
Even in the intensity of the moment

Or to the faith that sustains the entangling of our hearts
Or to the lure of magical realms

So kiss and hold me softly in your arms
Tenderly, tenderly

But we are wary of those easy common ways and words
That seek to bind: the bliss and grace we give you
The cool surrender. The love we offer you. The stars
portender

For in the deeper landscapes of the worldless whispering
dream
In the tones and beats that cascade and fade and echo
there is

Union of the constant fire
Union with the melting breath
In the forest where no words are
In the water where no waves are
In the we where no we are so

Kiss and hold me softly in your arms

Dragonfly

Why do I sigh like this when all the rest
of me is fit to burst? Give me a clue –
I've never known this beast before; it's new –
a dragon from my belly to my chest

Stealing my breath, squeezing my heart up through
my aching ribs, unearthing from each lung
these sighs, their perfume melting on my tongue
to a mouthful of petals in a glue.

Murmurs unuttered, muted, held in check
rise in my throat; whispers as wild and sweet
as freesias fill me up from womb to neck –
buds over-ripe but blossoms incomplete

Sighing for summer's warmth before they layer
their finest fragile fragrance on the air
all fit to burst, while all the rest of me
keeps rising, falling suddenly, softly.

The bones of the air

The bones of the air
transform themselves as I watch
So far the ribs are winning

Perhaps the humming breath
that motivates this exotic skeleton
tired of its long-winded wait
seeks a revelation

An epiphany of blood and flesh
would do the trick
Bones of air are everyday fantastic

How can the hum, while obviously sincere
synaesthese itself into a delightfully rare
object of graceful form and beauty?

A hum is a hum, no more
It's not a rapturous kiss or candyfloss
at the fair

Let the hum rise as itself, unexclusive
not a subject for the pensive
or a rich reward for the determined
and rigorous

The bones of the air dissipate
and fade, replacing the silence with
a faint whistle in the wind

Dark star

From behind the dark star the moon rose
crystalline and still
in the cold desert air

What, my lover? In your drunken desire
you wish the sun to rise?
Are you through dancing now?

Your delicate sun

Under the trance of night you lift your veil
so we can taste the sweetness of your tune,
drunk on its perfection while we sleep, pale
as white stars in the bosom of the moon,
vanished in her arms, in a reverie
of light breaths and fragrant lips we drink up
your savage perfume scented of wild sea
and rose-petalled wine from the lacquered cup
of our dreams. We take pleasure in the red
of each other's mouths and cheeks, the traces
of your delicate sun, long gone, its thread
trailing and weaving across our faces:
even our flutes fit only for plain song
render up exquisite music when you
play – the sweetening of your lips along
each flaw makes all imperfect notes ring true.

I tasted

I tasted the
sweetest nectar
from an unreachable flower;

at first its distant sway
enchanted me
and danced in me

but when I stooped
to drink its light
only its scent
perfumed my straining cheek

and as I leant
to sip its bud
only its shadow
caressed my trembling lips

so, in defeat and disarray
that it eluded me,
I turned away
from its sweet ecstasy.

Oh how I held
my muted heart,
cradling its beauty,
embracing its silent rapture,

oh how I felt
my beating heart
breathe in,
breathe out again
unfurling its finest petals.

And now I own myself again
my flower abundantly
and sweetly pours its nectar
through me from within;

Only
my most open heart can reach
the unreachable flower.

I bring you flowers

I bring you flowers o my divine love
to freshen your heart, and tears
so they may not fade

As you sit peacefully in the sunlit hills
the breeze blows, ruffling your curls
as your dark eyes gaze thoughtfully far away

Why do you stare so? Isn't it enough that I travel
ten thousand miles to bring you the rose?
You wish for more?

At this the lover rose and held the cup to me
I had always drunk at her bidding
I did so now

I will always do so until it is I that offers the cup
Until the cup offers itself
And we are no longer there to receive it
The wine spilling freely into the endless sand

The dome of the sky

The dome of the sky is split
it breaks and shards
burst out, great gaps
and flooding light
burst in

I saw you last night
at the window
writing, painting, I don't know

The obscuring clouds passed on
the melting light
suffused the pink and broken stonework
warmed the flesh and bonework

Two windows, half-closed, onto your world
of shades and tones and delicate
lines, was all. And music
drifting

The broken sky and world, what? The
flaking sand and melted lights
and breaking sound
and sheltered flight, I offer
a retreat from the juddering
tumult of time and place

A rest, and descent over broken steps
a bridge to the sky-gap
above me, ascending, trailing
laughter

Imagine

Imagine: when you made the last ferry
out of war-torn wherever
I had the ticket waiting

When you smiled at the lies of your
teenage daughter
I made her tell you them for your amusement

When brown water came out of the tap
and the cigarette tasted really good
I sabotaged the water pipes for you

When you were in the shower and your
boiler gave up the ghost
didn't it feel good to be dirty that day?
I did it for you

When your heel came off
and you walked barefoot home that day
didn't you feel free?
I made Friday afternoons

I also made the sun
that illuminated your lover
when your eyes first met

The moon under which you lay with him
when you were both naked
and you kissed softly everywhere

I made you so that you could
smell hyacinths
shiver as your lover passed his
fingertips over your breast
melt into the cool evening breeze after
a hot day

Imagine when you will be me
sitting silently and breathing
light and air, sitting
silently breathing light,
silently light

When you leave me

When you leave me
just tear out my heart
and throw it to the dogs

I'll still have my mind and soul
which is something

I wouldn't care about my mind,
losing that,
and as for my soul, well
it goes without saying

But my heart?
I'm here to spend it
and you've cleaned me out

I suppose I'd better say something
about my soul
you know, that thing we shared?

Shared? Share. There's no getting away from that
and when you leave me
the dogs will still be hungry
and I will be full

Peace of Being

Being
beside you then
in those moments
and now in these moments
the peace of being that you are
that we are

Light
and calm together
lying beside you then
in that moment
in this moment
in which all moments are

Love
in these moments
calmly enfolds, being
in that moment, light
as light, just lying, just loving
every moment

There were no moments then
There are no moments now
Just being and light and love

Biscuits

Today I met another part of the Soul
we baked biscuits

I didn't know if she took sugar in her tea
And guessed wrong. When she spat it out

I felt my heart tear

Zuleika

My friend and I chanced upon a woman
a beautiful woman, fragrant with jasmine
and wearing just enough

My friend said he knew her
and perhaps I did too?
I told him we'd already shared our hearts,
me and her, and my friend laughed
at my sincerity 'Oh, she's a one, Zuleika!'

And we danced together, my friend,
Zuleika and I, till the sun rose
naked and sweet

We danced and danced and danced
naked as the dawn
sweet as the light

The tale of Zuleika and Yusuf

Yusuf was born with two God-given gifts: the gift of prophesy and the gift of beauty. His physical beauty turned heads and took people's breath away and all who saw him loved him. He also possessed an inner beauty and truthfulness which attracted men and women and children alike. His heart was gentle and pure.

His brothers, not blessed with his good, strong heart nor his handsome face, were deeply jealous of him. They accused him of using his gifts to find favour with their father at their expense.

One night they lured him out on the pretext of visiting a local tavern but, halfway there, they grabbed him and threw him into a well and left him there, ignoring his cries for mercy.

Some travelling merchants found Yusuf the next morning, his long black curls all wet and his skin dirtied with sand and mud and, being unimpressed by his bedraggled state, gladly sold him as a slave to the chief of the neighbouring land. The chief saw in an instant that his new slave was young and strong and, after the sand had dried and fallen from his face and body, he marvelled at Yusuf's perfect physique, congratulating himself on a fine choice of servant.

The chief had a beautiful wife named Zuleika. One of her duties was to take food to the slaves every day. The morning she caught sight of Yusuf her heart stopped and, when it started again, it beat more strongly and quickly than before and she found she could hardly catch her breath.

She grew fonder and fonder of the beautiful youth, talking to him when she had no reason to, admiring his strength and diligence as he worked, sometimes playing with him long into the evenings.

Her friends began to laugh at her, pretending to be amused by her ridiculous obsession with Yusuf. But secretly they envied her special bond with the handsome

slave and were affronted by her undying devotion to him since she now ignored them entirely, spending every moment she could in Yusuf's company. They threatened to tell the chief so that he would prevent Zuleika from visiting him.

To quieten their discontent, Zuleika invited all her relatives and friends to a great feast. As they arrived she gave each one a lemon to hold and then passed around a tray of sharp knives for each to take. She told them that she wanted them to cut into the lemons when she gave them the order to do so and then waited for Yusuf to enter the room. When he did so she gave the order to cut but, so distracted were they by Yusuf's incredible beauty, they sliced into their hands, wrists and fingers, some cutting right to the bone, unable to take their eyes off him despite the blood. Just as Zuleika had become, they also had become momentarily unconscious of themselves, and she said to them, 'Reason falls when love rises.'

Her guests did not know what to make of it and bandaged their cuts, all eyes fixed on Yusuf as he withdrew from the great feasting hall.

But for Zuleika, her love was not momentary: Her enchantment with Yusuf blossomed and their intimacy grew. She could not bear the moments she was not with him.

Late one night, when Yusuf lay with Zuleika in her room, gazing out at the stars, he foresaw that if he didn't leave, their passion would soon spill over. He got up.

'I must go, Zuleika – I mustn't stay any longer.'

She pleaded, 'Stay,' and draped her scarf over the statue of her God which she always kept by her bed. 'Now my God cannot see us with his wrathful eyes. Come, lie down again with me.'

'No,' said Yusuf, 'the eyes of your God may be covered with a cloth, but my God sees me wherever I am.'

Zuleika began to cry and shake, blinded by her overwhelming passion for him and would not desist, rising to take hold of his hand.

‘It is wrong in the eyes of God. I must resist.’

She then grew angry and vitriolic.

‘You’re only a slave! Who are you to refuse me? You can’t reject me!’

Yusuf stood firm by his principles and shook his head sorrowfully, advancing towards the door. As he opened it, Zuleika grabbed him around the nape of his neck, tearing his garment, only to see her husband striding towards her room.

‘What are you doing to my wife?’ he thundered, as Zuleika clung to Yusuf’s arm, trembling. He mistook her tears of passion for tears of pain, assuming that the slave had manhandled her, and had Yusuf arrested and thrown into prison. Angry with Yusuf for rejecting her, Zuleika failed to admit her fault to the chief and said nothing in Yusuf’s defence.

All through his wrongful imprisonment Yusuf kept alight the torch of love for Zuleika, despite the darkness of the passion that had suddenly visited and just as suddenly separated them. He continued to walk the path of love, with a graceful heart, while beyond the prison walls, the spell of passion upon Zuleika faded and lifted leaving her in a deep melancholy, anxious and regretful, sorrowful and repentant.

‘Love dies in passion and is again born of passion,’ she told herself.

A year passed and the pain in Zuleika’s heart consumed her flesh and blood. Wasting away, pining and distraught, she cursed herself that her beloved had been imprisoned on her account.

Yusuf had never blamed Zuleika, knowing and understanding that her passion had undone her good heart, but each day he became more deeply immersed in thoughts of her.

Meanwhile, Zuleika's husband had become ill and died. Zuleika left his house and moved away to a village on the outskirts of the desert. She thought only of Yusuf.

The prisoners loved Yusuf, who was happy to interpret their dreams for them. News of his gift for reading dreams reached the Pharaoh who was being greatly troubled by a disturbing dream which he believed to be of desperate importance to himself and his people. Soothsayers and magicians had been unable to fathom it, so finally, he called for Yusuf, the beautiful dream reader, of whom he had heard wonderful things.

Yusuf, whose wise interpretation of his dream quietened the Pharaoh's distress, was rewarded for his gift of prophesy. So grateful was the Pharaoh that he released Yusuf from jail and bestowed both honour and freedom upon him.

Yusuf's brothers came to visit him, delighted to be at last reconciled with him, having regretted their wrongdoing for many years. His father died a happy man, having seen his favoured son after the all the sorrowful years of believing him dead.

One day Yusuf, riding past a village on the outskirts of the desert stopped his horse by the water trough at the foot of a steep garden. On hearing the clatter of hooves, Zuleika rose from her bed, where she lay each day in misery, and looked out into the garden.

'Yusuf?' she cried.

Yusuf peered at the distressed woman whose voice moved him, though he did not recognise her at once.

'Greetings,' he said, kindly, 'what can I do for you? My horses stopped to drink here.'

'Yusuf, don't you know me? I am still as in love with you as I was the moment I first saw you. My love will sustain into the hereafter it is so strong.'

Yusuf stared, unbelieving.

'It is me, Zuleika, who has always desired you, and you alone will I always desire.'

Yusuf was moved to his heart by her constant, deep love for him and he took her in his arms and kissed her, praying to God for mercy.

Their love attracted God's blessing. They were married, living happily for the rest of their lives, and beyond into the eternal hereafter.