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ŠĀHĪN



A story by Angela Carter
Illustrated by Rose Wilkinson



Once there was a king (and there is no kingship except that which belongs to Allah may He be praised and exalted!) and he had an only daughter. He had no other children, and he was proud of her. One day, as she was lounging about, the daughter of the vizier came to visit her. They sat together feeling bored.

‘We’re sitting around here feeling bored,’ said the daughter of the vizier.

‘What do you say to going and having a good time?’

‘Yes,’ said the other.

Sending for the daughters of the ministers and dignitaries of state, the king’s daughter gathered them all together, and they went into her father’s orchard to take the air, each going her own way.

As the vizier’s daughter was sauntering about, she stepped on an iron ring. Taking hold of it, she pulled and behold! It opened the door to an underground hallway, and she descended into it. The other girls meanwhile, were distracted, amusing themselves. Going into the hallway the vizier’s daughter came upon a young man with his sleeves rolled up. And what! There were deer, partridges, and rabbits in front of him, and he was busy plucking and skinning.

Before he was aware of it, she had already saluted him. ‘Peace to you!’

‘And to you, peace!’ he responded, taken aback. ‘What do you

happen to be, sister, human or jinn?’

‘Human,’ she answered, ‘and the choicest of the race. What are you doing here?’

‘By Allah,’ he said, ‘we are forty young men, all brothers. Everyday my brothers go out to hunt in the morning and come home toward evening. I stay home and prepare their food.’

‘That’s fine,’ she chimed in. ‘You’re forty young men, and we’re forty young ladies. I’ll be your wife, the king’s daughter is for your eldest brother, and all the other girls are for all your other brothers.’ She matched the girls with the men.

Oh! How delighted he was to hear this!

‘What’s your name?’

‘Sahin,’ he answered.

‘Welcome, Sahin.’

He went and fetched a chair, and set it in front of her. She sat next to him, and they started chatting. He roasted some meat, gave it to her and she ate. She kept him busy until the food he was cooking was ready.

‘Sahin,’ she said when the food was ready, ‘you don’t happen to have some seeds and nuts in the house, do you?’

‘Yes, by Allah, we do.’

‘Why don’t you get us some. It’ll help pass away the time.’

In their house, the seeds and nuts were stored on a high shelf. He got up, brought a ladder, and climbed up to the shelf.



Having filled his handkerchief with seeds and nuts, he was about to come down when she said, 'Here, let me take it from you. Hand it over!' Taking the handkerchief from him, she pulled the ladder away and threw it to the ground, leaving him stranded on the shelf.

She then brought out large bowls, prepared a huge platter, piled all the food on it, and headed straight out of there, taking the food with her and closing the door of the tunnel behind her. Putting the food under a tree, she called to the girls, 'Come eat, girls!'

'Eh! Where did this come from?' they asked, gathering around.

'Just eat and be quiet,' she replied. 'What more do you want? Just eat!'

The food was prepared for forty lads, and here were forty lasses. They set to and ate it all.

'Go on along now!' commanded the vizier's daughter. 'Each one back where she came from. Disperse!'

She dispersed them, and they went their way. Waiting until they were all busy, she took the platter back, placing it where it was before and coming back out again. In time the girls all went home.

Now we go back. To whom? To Sahin. When his brothers came home in the evening, they could not find him.

'Oh Sahin,' they called. 'Sahin!'

And behold! He answered them from the shelf.

'Hey! What are you doing up there?' asked the eldest brother.

'By Allah, brother,' Sahin answered, 'I set up the ladder after the food was ready and came to get some seeds and nuts for passing away the time. The ladder slipped, and I was stranded up here.'

'Very well,' they said, and set up the ladder for him. When he came down, the eldest brother said 'Now, go bring the food so we can have dinner.' Gathering up the game they had hunted that day they put it all in one place and sat down.

Sahin went to fetch the food from the kitchen, but he could



not find a single bite.

‘Brother,’ he said, coming back ‘cats must have eaten it.’

‘All right,’ said the eldest. ‘Come, prepare us whatever you can.’

Taking the organs of the hunted animals, from this and that he made dinner and they ate. Then they laid their heads down and went to sleep.

The next morning they woke up and set out for the hunt. ‘Now brother,’ they mocked him, ‘be sure to let us go without dinner another evening. Let the cats eat it all!’

‘No brothers,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry.’

No sooner did they leave than he rolled up his sleeves and set to skinning and plucking the gazelles, rabbits and partridges. On time, the vizier’s daughter showed up. Having gone to the king’s daughter and gathered all the other girls, she waited till they were amusing themselves with something and then dropped in on him.

‘Salaam!’

‘And to you, peace!’ he answered. ‘Welcome to the one who took the food and left me stranded on the shelf, making me look ridiculous to my brothers!’

‘What you say is true,’ she responded. ‘And yet I’m likely to do even more than that to the one I love.’

‘And as for me,’ he murmured, ‘your deeds are sweeter than honey.’

Fetching a chair, he set it down for her, and then he brought some seeds and nuts. They sat down to entertain themselves, and she kept him amused until she realised the food was ready.

‘Sahin,’ she said, ‘isn’t there a bathroom in your house?’

‘Yes, there is,’ he replied.

‘I’m pressed, and must go to the bathroom. Where is it?’

‘It’s over there,’ he answered.

‘Well, come and show it to me.’

‘This is it here,’ he said, showing it to her.

She went in and, so the story goes, made as if she did not know how to use it.







'Come and show me how to use this thing,' she called.
I don't know what else she said, but he came to show her, you might say, how to sit on the toilet. Taking hold of him, she pushed him inside like this, and he ended up with his head down and his feet up. She closed the door on him and left. Going into the kitchen, she served up the food on to a platter and headed out of there. She put the food under a tree and called to her friends, 'Come eat!'

'And where did you get all this?'

'All you have to do is eat,' she answered.

They ate and scattered, each going her way. And she stole away and returned the platter.

At the end of the day the brothers came home, and there was no sign of their brother. 'Sahin, Sahin!' they called out. 'O Sahin!' But no answer came. They searched the shelf, they searched here, and they searched there. But it was no use.

'You know,' said the eldest, 'I say there's something odd about Sahin's behaviour. I suspect he has a girlfriend. Anyway, some of you go into the kitchen, find the food, and bring it so we can eat. I'm sure Sahin will show up any moment.'

Going into the kitchen they found nothing. 'There's no food,' they reported. 'It's all gone! We're now sure that Sahin has a

girlfriend, and he gives her all the food. Let's go ahead and fix whatever there is at hand so we can eat.'

Having prepared a quick meal, they ate dinner and were content. They prepared for sleep, but one of the (All respect to the listeners!) was pressed and needed to relieve himself. He went to the bathroom and lo! There was Sahin, upside down.

'Hey, brothers!' he shouted. 'Here's Sahin, and he's fallen into the toilet!'

They rushed over and lifted him out. What a condition he was in! They gave him a bath.

'Tell me,' said the eldest, 'what's going on?'

'By Allah, brother,' replied Sahin, 'after I cooked dinner I went to relieve myself, and I slipped.'

'Very well,' returned the eldest. 'But the food, where is it?'

'By Allah, as far as I know it's in the kitchen, but how should I know if the cats haven't eaten it?'

'Well, all right!' they said, and went back to sleep.

The next morning, as they were setting out, they mocked him again. 'Why don't you leave us without dinner another night?'

'No, brothers!' he said. 'Don't worry.'

Pulling themselves together, they departed. Now, on tie, the daughter of the vizier came to see the kin's daughter, gathered





the others, and they came down to the orchard and spread out. Waiting until they were all caught up with something, she slipped away to him, and listen, brothers! She found him at home.

‘Salaam!’

‘And to you, peace!’ he retorted. ‘Welcome! On the shelf the first day, and you made away with the food; and the second day you threw me into the toilet and stole the food, blackening my face in front of my brothers!’

‘As for me,’ she said, ‘I’ll do even more than that to the one I love.’

‘And to me, it’s sweeter than honey.’ He responded, bringing her a chair. She sat down, he brought seeds and nuts, and they passed away the time entertaining themselves. She kept chatting with him, until she knew the food was ready.

‘Sahin,’ she said.

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t you have some drinks for us to enjoy ourselves? There’s meat here, and seeds and nuts. We could eat and have something to drink.’

‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘we do.’

‘Why don’t you bring some out, then?’ she urged him.

Bringing a bottle, he set it in front of her. She poured drinks and handed them to him. ‘This one’s to my health,’ she egged him on, ‘and this one’s also for my sake,’ until he fell over, as if no one were there. She then went and took some sugar, put it on to boil, and made a preparation for removing body hair. She used it on him to perfection, and, brother, she made him look like the most beautiful of girls. Bringing a woman’s dress, she put it on him. Then, bed. She powdered his face, wrapped the scarf well around his head, put the bed covers over him, and left. Then into the kitchen she went, loaded the food, and departed. The girls ate, and the platter was replaced.

When the brothers returned in the evening, they did not find Sahin at home.

‘O Sahin! Sahin! Sahin!’

No answer. ‘Let’s search the bathroom,’ they said among themselves. But they did not find him there. They searched the shelf, and still no sign of him.

‘Didn’t I tell you Sahin has a girlfriend?’ the eldest declared. ‘I’d say Sahin has a girlfriend and goes out with her. Some of you, go and see if the food’s still there.’ They did, and found nothing.

Again they resorted to a quick meal of organ meat. When it

was time to sleep, each went to his bed. In his bed, the eldest found our well-contented friend stretched out in it. Back to his brothers he ran. 'I told you Sahin has a girlfriend, but you didn't believe me. Come and take a look! Here's Sahin's bride, come and see! Come and see!'

He called his brothers, and they all came, clamouring, 'Sahin's bride! Removing his scarf, they looked at him carefully. Eh! A man's features are hard to miss. They recognised him. 'Eh! This is Sahin!' they shouted. Bringing water, they splashed his face till he woke up. Looking himself over, what did he find? They fetched a mirror. He looked at himself, and what a sight he was—all rouged, powdered and beautified.

'And now,' they asked him, 'what do you have to say for yourself?'

'By Allah, brother,' answered Sahin, 'listen and I'll tell you the truth. Every day, around noon, a girl with such and such features comes to see me. She says, "We're forty young ladies. The king's daughter is for your eldest brother, I am yours, and all the other girls are for all your other brothers." She's the one who's been doing these things to me every day.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes, it is.'

'Fine. All of you go to the hunt tomorrow,' suggested the eldest, and I'll stay behind with Sahin. I'll take care of her!'

Pulling out his sword (so the story goes), he sat waiting in readiness. By Allah, brothers, in due time she came. She had gathered the girls as usual, and they had come down to the orchard. Waiting until their attention was caught, she slipped away to him. Before he was even aware of her, she had already saluted him.

'Salaam!'

'And to you, peace!' he answered. 'The first item on the shelf, and I said all right; the second time in the bathroom, and I said all right; but the third time you put make-up on me and turned into a bride!'

'And yet I'm likely to do even more than that to the one I love.'

No sooner had she said that than up rose the eldest brother and rushed over to her, his sword at the ready.

'Listen,' she reasoned with him. 'You are forty, and we are forty. The king's daughter is to be your wife, and I, Sahin's; and so and so among us is for so and so among you, and so on.' She calmed him down.

'Is it true, what you're saying?' he asked.

'Of course it's true,' she replied.

'And who can speak for these girls?'

'I can.'

'You're the one who can speak for them?'

'Yes.'





(Sahin, meanwhile, was listening, and since he was already experienced, he mused to himself that his brother had been taken in already.)

‘Agreed,’ said the eldest brother. ‘Come over here and let me pay you the bridewealth for the forty girls. Where are we to meet you?’

‘First pay me the bridewealth,’ she answered, ‘and tomorrow, go and reserve certain public bath for us at your expense. Stand guard at the gate, and as we go in you yourself can count us one by one-all forty of us. We’ll go into the baths and bathe, and after we come out each of you will take his bride home by the hand.’

‘Just like that?’ he wondered.

‘Of course,’ she assured him.

He brought out a blanket, she spread it, and- count, count, count – he counted one hundred Ottoman gold coins for each girl. When he had finished counting out the money, she took it and went straight out. Calling her friends over, she said, ‘Sit here! Sit under this tree! Each of you open your hand and receive your bridewealth.’

‘Eh!’ they protested, ‘You so and so! Did you ruin your reputation?’

‘No one’s to say anything.’ She responded. ‘Each of you will take her bridewealth without making a sound.’ Giving each of them her money, she said ‘Come. Let’s go home.’

After she had left their place, Sahin said to his brother ‘Brother, she tricked me and took only the food. But she tricked you and got away with our money.’

‘Who, me?’ the brother declared, ‘Trick me? Tomorrow you’ll see.’

The next day the brothers stayed at home. They went and

reserved the baths at their own expense, and the eldest stood watch at the door, waiting for the girls to arrive. Meanwhile, the vizier’s daughter had got up the next day, gathered all the girls, the king’s daughter among them, and, leading them in front of her, headed for the bath with them. And behold! There was our effendi guarding the door. As they were going in, he counted them one by one. Count, count, he counted them all – exactly forty.

Going into the baths, the girls bathed and enjoyed themselves. But after they had finished bathing and put on their clothes, she, the clever one, gave them this advice; ‘Each of you is to shit in the tub she has bathed in, and let’s line the tubs up all in a row.’ Each of them shat in her tub, and they arranged them neatly in a row, all forty of them. Now, the baths had another door, away from the entrance. ‘Follow me this way,’ urged the vizier’s daughter, and they all hurried out.

The eldest brother waited an hour, two, three, then four, but the girls did not emerge. ‘Eh!’ he said. ‘They’re taking a long time about it.’

‘Brother,’ said Sahin, ‘they’re gone.’

‘But listen!’ he replied, ‘where could she have gone? They all went the bath-house together.’

‘All right,’ said Sahin, ‘let’s go in and see.’

Going into the bath-house, brother, they found the owner inside.

‘Where did the girls who came into the bath-house go?’

‘O uncle!’ replied the owner, ‘they’ve been gone a long time.’

‘And how could they have left?’ asked the eldest brother.

‘They left by that door,’ he replied.

Now, Sahin, who was experienced, looked in the bathing place and saw the tubs all lined up.







‘Brother! he called out.
 ‘Yes. What is it?’
 ‘Come here and take a look,’ he answered. ‘Here are the forty! Take a good look! See how she had them arranged so neatly?’
 Finally the brothers went back home, wondering to themselves. ‘And now, what are we going to do?’
 Leave them to me!, volunteered Sahin. ‘I’ll take care of them.’
 The next day Sahin disguised himself as an old lady. Wearing an old woman’s dress, he put a beaded rosary around his neck and headed for the city. The daughter of the vizier, meanwhile, had gathered the girls, and she was sitting with them in a room above the street. As he was coming from afar, she saw and recognised him. She winked to her friends, saying, ‘I’ll go call him, and you chime in with, “Here’s our aunt! Welcome to our aunt!”’ As soon as she saw him draw near, she opened the door and came out running. ‘welcome, welcome, welcome to our aunty! Welcome aunty! And, taking him by the hand, she pulled him inside to where they were. ‘Welcome to our aunty!’ they clamoured, locking the door. ‘Welcome to our aunty!’
 ‘Now, girls, take off your clothes,’ urged the vizier’s daughter. ‘Take off your clothes. It’s been a long time since we’ve had our clothes washed by our aunty’s own hands.’ Let her wash our clothes!’
 ‘By Allah, I’m tired,’ protested Sahin. ‘By Allah, I can’t do it.’

‘By Allah, you must do it, aunty,’ they insisted. ‘It’s been such a long time since we’ve had our clothes washed by our aunty’s hands.’
 She made all forty girls take off their clothes, each of them leaving on only enough to cover her modesty, and she handed the clothes to him. He washed clothes till noon.
 ‘Come girls,’ said the vizier’s daughter. ‘By Allah, it’s been such a long time since our aunty has bathed us with her own hands. Let her bathe us!’
 Each of them put on a wrap and sat down, and he went around bathing them in turn. By the time he had finished bathing them all, what a condition he was in! He was exhausted.
 When he had finished with one, she would get up and put on her clothes. The vizier’s daughter would then wink at her and whisper that she should take the wrap she was wearing, fold it over, twist it, and tie a knot at one end so that it was like a whip.
 When all forty girls had finished bathing, the leader spoke out. ‘Eh, aunty! Hey girls, she has just bathed us and we must bath her in return.’
 ‘No niece!’ he protested. ‘I don’t need a bath! For the sake of...’
 ‘Impossible, aunty!’ insisted the vizier’s daughter. ‘By Allah, this can’t be. Eh! You bathe and bathe all of us, and we don’t even bathe you in return. Come, girls!’

At a wink from her, they set on him against his will. They were forty. What could he do? They took hold of him and removed his clothes, and lo and behold! He was a man.

‘Eh!’ they exclaimed. ‘This isn’t our aunty. It’s a man! Have at him, girls!’

And with their whips, each of them having braided her robe and tied knots in it they put Sahin in the middle and descended on his naked body. Hit him from here, turn him around there, and beat him again on the other side! All the while he was jumping among them and shouting at the top of his voice. When she thought he had had enough, she winked at them to clear a path. As soon as he saw his way open, he opened the door and dashed out running, wearing only the skin the Lord had given him.

His brothers were at home, and before they were even aware of it, he showed up, naked. And what a condition he was in! Up they sprang, as if possessed. ‘Hey! What happened to you?’ they asked. ‘Come! Come! What hit you?’

‘Wait a minute,’ he answered, ‘Such and such happened to me.’

And now,’ they asked among themselves, ‘what can we do?’

‘Now, by Allah,’ answered Sahin, ‘we have no recourse but for each of us to ask for the hand of his bride from her father. As for me, I’m going to ask for her hand. But as soon as she arrives here I’m going to kill her. No other punishment will do. I’ll show her!’

They all agreed, each going to ask for his bride’s hand from her father, and the fathers gave their consent.

Now, the daughter of the minister was something of a devil. She asked her father if anyone should come asking for her hand, not to give his consent before letting her know. When Sahin came to propose, the father said, ‘Not until I consult with my daughter first.’ The father went to consult with his daughter, and she said, ‘All right, give your consent, but on condition that there be a waiting period of one month so that the bridegroom can have enough time to buy the wedding clothes and take care of all the other details.’

After the asking for her hand was completed, the minister’s daughter waited until her father had left the house. She then went and put on one of his suits, wrapped a scarf around the lower part of her face, and, taking a whip with her, headed for the carpenter’s workshop.

‘Carpenter!’

‘Yes, Your Excellency!’

‘In a while I’ll be sending you a concubine.’ You will observe her height and make a box to fit her. I want it ready by tomorrow. Otherwise, I’ll have your head cut off. And don’t hold her here for two hours!’





‘No, sir. I won’t.’

She lashed him twice and left, going directly -where? To the halva maker’s shop.

‘Halva maker!’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m going to be sending you a concubine momentarily. You will observe her. See her shape and her height. You must make me a halva doll that looks exactly like her. And don’t you keep her here for a couple of hours or I’ll shorten your life!’

‘Your order, O minister,’ said the man, ‘will be obeyed.’

She lashed him twice with the whip and left. She went and changed, putting on her ordinary clothes, then went to the carpenter’s shop and stayed a while. After that she went and stood by the halva maker’s shop for a while. Then she went straight home. Changing back into her father’s suit, she took the whip with her and went to the carpenter.

‘Carpenter!’

‘Yes, my lord minister!’

‘An ostrich shorten your life!’ responded the girl. ‘I send you the concubine, and you hold her here for two hours!’

She descended on him with the whip, beating him all over.

‘Please, sir!’ he pleaded, ‘it was only because I wanted to make sure the box was an exact fit.’

Leaving him alone, she headed for the halva maker’s. Him

too, she whipped several times, and then she returned home.

The next day she sent for her slave and said to him, ‘Go bring the wooden box from the carpenter’s shop to the halva maker’s. Put the halva doll in it lock it, and bring it to me here.’

‘Yes, I’ll do it,’ he answered.

When the box was brought, she took it in and said to her mother. ‘Listen, mother! I’m going to leave this box with you in trust. When the time comes to take me out of the house and to load up and bring along my trousseau, you must have this box brought with the trousseau and placed in the same room where I will be.’

‘But, dear daughter!’ protested the mother, ‘what will people say? The minister’s daughter is bringing a wooden box with her trousseau! You will become a laughing-stock.’ I don’t know what else she said but it was no use.

‘This is not your concern,’ insisted the daughter. ‘That’s how I want it.’

When the bridegroom’s family came to take the bride out of her father’s house, she was made ready, and the wooden box was brought along with her trousseau. They took the wooden box and, as she had told them, placed it in the same room where she was to be. As soon as she came into the room and the box was brought in, she threw out all the women. ‘Go away!’ she said. ‘Each of you must go home now.’

After she had made everyone leave, she locked the door. Then, dear ones, she took the doll out of the box. Taking off her clothes, she put them on the doll, and she placed her gold around its neck. She then set the doll in her own place on the bridal seat, tied a string around its neck, and went and hid under the bed, having first unlocked the door.

Her husband, meanwhile, was taking his time. He stayed away an hour or two before he came in. What kind of mood do you think he was in when he arrived? He was in a foul humour, his sword in hand, ready to kill her, as if he did not want to marry her in the first place. As soon as he passed over the doorstep, he looked in and saw her on the bridal seat.

‘Yes, yes!’ he reproached her. ‘The first time you abandoned me on the shelf and took the food, I said to myself it was all right. The second time you threw me into the toilet and took the food, and I said all right. The third time you removed my body hair and made me look like a bride, taking the food with you, and even then I said to myself it was all right. After all that, you still weren’t satisfied. You tricked us all and took the bridewealth for the forty girls, leaving each of us a turd in the washtub.’

Meanwhile, as he finished each accusation, she would pull the string and nod the doll’s head.

‘As if all that weren’t enough for you,’ he went on, ‘you had to top it all with your aunty act. “Welcome, welcome, aunty! It’s been a long time since we’ve seen our aunty. It’s been such a long time since aunty has washed our clothes!” And you kept me washing clothes all day. And after all that, you insisted, “We must bathe aunty.” By Allah, I’m going to burn the hearts of all your paternal and maternal aunties!’

Seeing her nod her head in agreement, he yelled, ‘You mean you’re not afraid? And you’re not going to apologise?’ Taking hold of his sword, he struck her a blow that made her head roll. A piece of halva (if the teller is not lying!) flew into his mouth. Turning it around in his mouth, he found it sweet.

‘Alas, cousin!’ he cried out. ‘If in death you’re so sweet, what would it have been like if you were still alive?’

As soon as she heard this, she jumped up from under the bed and rushed over to him, hugging him from behind.

‘O cousin! Here I am!’ she exclaimed. ‘I’m alive!’

They consummated their marriage, and lived together happily.



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