

**SOPHIA THROUGH TIME: MEVLANA**

It had to happen.

I knew that one day he would confront me over what I had done. To many, he was known as Jalal-al-Din, poet and saint, but for me always Mevlana, into whose hands I entrusted my soul. After our bitter parting I hoped never to hear his voice again. Suspecting my complicity in the crime, he cut off all ties. With my husband, I live in Damascus, far enough from Konya to feel safe, but I always knew that I would not escape him. He cannot forget someone so close, who wounded him so deeply.

I walk into the living room where I find him seated on the carpet with Taji, smoking. Though I only see the back of his turbaned head, his presence makes the air tingle. His calm, authoritative voice has not changed. Each word he utters thrills with passion. My blood pauses. He has come to our house for no other purpose than to speak to me. He knows I'm standing behind him but gives no sign. My husband asks me to bring refreshment. How I hate his dismissive look. He assumes I'd do anything because he wants it: bring tea and then disappear like a shadow no one will notice. With quick nervous movements I stoke the kitchen fire, fill the kettle and set it on the stove. They will have their tea. As for me, it is as Allah wills. I can no more escape my destiny than a wayside flower caught in a flood.

When I return to the living room, Taji invites me to sit beside him. Mevlana strokes his beard, looks out of the window and pretends not to notice me. Perhaps he

wants to put me at ease. Reverentially, I draw my hijab partway across my face. His clear eyes smile at me. Sensing my confusion he makes a welcoming gesture, lips parted as if to say something pleasant. I remain unresponsive, not in the mood for trivial conversation. Let him ask the questions.

Tajiq clasps and unclasps his hands. He knows that I'm meeting an old lover but he cannot refuse his house and hospitality to one so great.

'Mevlana wishes to speak with us,' Tajiq says in a monotone. 'With you in particular.'

I look away rather than meet his eyes. They always disarmed me, made me spill out the secrets of my heart. 'We haven't seen each other for long,' I say. 'Is there something I can do for you?'

My cold words do not alter his serene expression. 'I come to Damascus to visit old friends. Also, to find news of a beloved one I have not seen for many years.'

'This is where I live.'

He opens his arms in a welcoming gesture. Wrinkles travel like waves over his face. 'Of course finding you after so long a parting is a great joy.'

My jaw tightens. I do not want to answer. I turn to Tajiq, hope he will see my awkward situation and dismiss me, but he doesn't appear to notice.

'You're still looking for him.' The whisper escapes my clenched teeth.

He inclines his head. 'I heard he was in Damascus. Do you have news of him?'

'No one has seen him here the past ten years.'

'I didn't expect that you've seen him. That would be too much. But perhaps you have news of him.'

A chill settles on my heart. The irony in his voice speaks so clearly, that he

knows the truth. Smiling he places a hand on my knee as if to reassure me, but I pull away. Tajiq stirs, scowls darkly. If Mevlana were any other man, he'd reprimand him. I need to send Tajiq away so I can be alone with the sage. Find out what he knows. Will he indict me? Does public humiliation await me? I turn a frosty look at Tajiq, wishing he'd leave. He knows what I want but doesn't respond.

Why did I agree to marry? One day Tajiq appeared in our house in Konya. He spoke to my foster father about marriage. Though I scarcely knew Tajiq, I wanted to leave Konya, become mistress of my own house and run my affairs. Single women have to stay within their family circles, wait on old aunts, run errands or wipe the bums of newborn. They also deal with an endless line of suitors. After Fatima's marriage, I was left alone, the only daughter in the house. I had to leave before boredom ground me into fine meal, too helpless to even take my own life. Also, I needed to forget the past, the turmoil in Konya involving Mevlana. Moving to Damascus, I'd be able to expunge that memory and start afresh as if nothing had really happened.

Tajiq was no different from other men. Some shout more and others less. After a week they all smell the same, produce the same urine, demand to be fed, want their order respected. At night they use the same unimaginative thrusts to satisfy their sex pangs. In the morning they use the same kick to get their wives out of bed to wait on them.

Mevlana studies me. The close look I used to love now confuses me. I can stick to my story, tell him I know nothing, but he knows. It's dangerous to try and deceive him.

He lets out a sigh of disappointment. 'Ten years ago Shams disappeared from Konya. Some say that he died, but each day he feels closer to my heart than when my

we sat next to each other. I must have news of him. Not because it will restore him but because it may bring about the healing of many wounds. That night...' Mevlana pauses, eyes closed. A tremor passes through his large frame as if from sudden pain. He clasps his hands across his large paunch, tenses them. The shadow that creeps over his wrinkled face makes it appear old. He coughs, continues in a strained voice, 'That night we sat in total silence across from each other and savoured a beauty not of this world. There was a knock at the door. He arose, and said. *This is only for me. Stay awhile longer, but do not wait for me.*'

Mevlana's voice falters. He takes several breaths until serenity returns to his creased face. 'He left with some people, and did not return. This much everyone knows. For years I searched for him, heard dark rumours, not knowing if he was alive. Not until recently did I hear from Fatima Khatoun about what happened that night. That a terrible crime was committed. His violent death wounded so many hearts, not the least the man who loved him so greatly. Does not a lover grieve for the loss of his beloved?'

I try to hide the wicked smirk in my face. He has to know that I did not grieve Shams's disappearance. For half a year Mevlana and the dervish remained secluded, praying and dancing. Some said that they lay together as man and woman. I never believed it. Our beloved teacher was lost to us as if he had died.

'You grieved long,' I say.

'From the wound arose a new passion. My love for Shams grew to a fire that burned me from the inside and left no trace of self. Of that we can speak later. I come here to deal with old wounds. Many people were wounded that night, and have not found healing. I ask you to tell me what news *you* have of Shams of Tabriz?'

I'm unable to speak. I refuse to open the door on that dreadful night. What

happened, happened and no one can change it. I want to dwell on happier memories, when Fatima and I attended Mevlana's sermons in private houses. While we sat at his feet he spoke to us of the religious life, a teaching that many called dangerous. He made us all question our reliance on rituals, knowledge and traditions. We questioned everything. Are rituals relevant to a religious life? Isn't a religious life greater than any ritual? What is knowledge? Does it have any place in religious life?

I turn disdainfully to Taji. I must be alone with Mevlana. Though I cannot ask Taji to leave, I can make him feel so uncomfortable that he will get up and leave.

Taji clears his throat. 'So, a meeting between old friends?'

'Fatima and I were very close,' I say. 'Together we studied philosophy.'

'Philosophy?' Taji says. 'I've not much use for it. It muddles simple minds. What will happen when people question even the words of the Prophet? Not a single philosopher has added anything new.'

Mevlana breaks out into noisy laughter. 'We should force them to build prison cells, then lock them up inside. It might stop them from building prisons for others.'

'Indeed,' Taji says, not understanding the jibe.

'Would you put poets and sages in the same prison?' I say.

'Every last one. Imans as well.'

Taji jumps up as if about to draw a knife. He wants to show he's outraged but doesn't know how. His nervous hands can't decide whether to throw me out of the living room, or show Mevlana the door. Realizing he cannot misbehave before such a respected man, he turns on his heel and strides out of the room.

'Those were rich days, long ago when you walked with us,' I say.

'I've forgotten them,' Mevlana says with a shrug. 'I remember some faces but few names. I don't know what I talked about.'

‘But I haven’t forgotten. I can recite every word you spoke. I’ve already assembled your discourses in a book.’

He shrugs. ‘You should burn it. Long ago my master burned all my books. I met him first in a library. He asked me what I was reading. I told him he that he’d never understand the book. So he set fire to the library. When I ask him why he did it, he said that until I burned every book I’d read, I would never understand.’

‘Yes, Shams would say that. But what of us? Your family?’ I don’t care if my voice carries to where Taji is listening. ‘We not only relied on your words. We put our souls into your keeping. Never before was there a teacher whom we trusted as you. You tore away from us the crutches of our rituals and beliefs and left us with nothing. Nothing to lean on except for you. You were the pillar to which we clung, the light that showed us the way through darkness. I put my soul in your hands, for you to keep, cradle and to hold.’

‘Indeed.’ His eyes don’t show that he heard me.

‘Don’t you see that it was so? Do I have to convince you? You came often to our house to teach Fatima and I to write. We were the only women whom you saw unveiled. You loosened our tongues, so that poetry flowed from our lips. Don’t you remember those evenings?’

‘It all happened. Yes, I haven’t forgotten.’ His eyes look past me. ‘Some things become clearer. Now, I know not only that it happened, but why it happened.’

‘That we fell in love?’

He turns to me with a look as hard as steel. All colour has drained from his face. His body tenses about to strike a blow.

‘We were not in love,’ he whispers. ‘I speak about the crime committed because of your devotion to me, your desire for me. Your...’

He cannot get out the word that needs to be spoken. I snap back, 'Say it now. My jealousy. Yes, I was jealous. That wandering dervish had eaten you up; swallowed you whole. You were lost to us. But it was not only jealousy. I had given my soul into your keeping. You opened your hands and let it fall on the rocks to be shattered into a thousand pieces. So it was with me. So it was with hundreds of us. While you danced with Shams, so enraptured that you could see nothing and no one, we were left in the cold without guidance or help. Without your voice. And you had gone mad. I had to listen to scandalous tongues saying that you and Shams lived in an unclean state as man and woman. I defended you every time. Bereft of all moorings, we had nowhere to turn to.'

As I speak, his face remains frozen as a statue, giving no hint of his thoughts. 'Who instigated it?' he says.

'What are you talking about?'

'For ten years you cover the wound that festers inside you. It won't heal on its own. Haven't you borne the pain for long enough?'

'My pain?'

'Your eyes reveal the secrets of your heart. Your frequent nightmares. They will not end until you speak to me of your crime.'

A choking sensation overcomes me as if I'm about to be buried alive. I gasp for breath, my teeth set against each other lest he drag from me the words I'd never have him hear.

'Who instigated the killing?' he says.

More to hurt him than because I have to, I say, 'It was I. Only I.'

He scarcely moves, his statuesque face remote as if seeing another world. I wonder if he heard me. Whether I should repeat what I just told him.

'I'd do it again,' I say.

'Why?' he says, so softly I can barely hear.

'Because I had to. I was determined not to lose you the way I lost another.

Long ago.'

I tell him about Simon, how we travelled together throughout Asia Minor opening people's eyes, so that they could see beyond the trivial world. Mevlana stares bewildered. He must think I am mad, not the least because I claim to have lived for hundreds of years. I don't care what he thinks. I want him to know me, so that he understands why I had to separate him from his insidious companion.

'When I first heard you,' I say, 'I heard Simon's voice. I swore an oath that I would protect you and never leave you. The dervish appeared. You were so taken with him that you forgot us. As if we'd never existed. The family came together. We begged Shams to leave Konya, and he obliged. But after his departure you were lost to us and would no longer speak. For days you danced alone. You begged us to go and find Shams. Fearing you would go mad, I went with your sons to Damascus, found Shams and brought him back to you. The change that overcame you chilled my heart. For half a year you stayed closeted with him and would admit no one. When hunger drove you out, you raved in poetry like a madman. Are you so surprised that those of us who still loved you took action to save you from yourself? That I would not do everything for the man I love?'

The sun now streams through the window opposite us and falls on my face. Closing my eyes I sense how the air in the room tingles as if something dreadful is about to happen.

'What became of his body?'

'I don't know. Fatima said they threw it into a well. Supposedly they buried

him later in a ruined house. I can show you the spot.'

'Did he speak to you before he disappeared?' he says.

'Disappeared? He died.'

'Perhaps. He told me that he would one day disappear so that no one would find him. That seems to have happened.'

He has to be crazy. His love for Shams blinds him to reality. He can't accept that Shams is dead. Not even my confession, spoken to his face can shake his conviction. He still dreams of finding Shams somewhere in Damascus. Yet I saw the dervish, bound to a horse led away to the place of his presumed execution. His dark eyes fixed on me, smiled as if his peril was no more than an elaborate joke. What if Fatima lied to me about the murder? They could have released him, in exchange for his promise to stay out of sight. Might Shams still be alive? It seemed inconceivable.

'What were his last words to you?' Mevlana says.

I can barely utter what haunted me since that night. After a long pause I repeat Shams's accursed words: *So I leave the world. But you will remain in it until I return.*

He sits so still that I can't tell if he is breathing. The silence in his face belies the grief that must wrack his body. I wait, not knowing if tears will burst from him or anger so great that will destroy me. I'm next to a raging fire that cannot be tamed, and whose power is about to overwhelm me.

'Mevlana, I await your punishment,' I say. 'My life is yours to dispense. Choose your vengeance.'

I don't expect to live. I severed him from his greatest love, committed the ultimate crime. I do not fear death. Each day I yearn for release from my wanderings. If only Mevlana can send me off with a quick stab.

He arises, gathers his robe together. 'No vengeful action can return Shams of

Tabriz,' he says. 'His last words were not a curse. He forgave you for betraying him, but only he can release you from your life. You will remain under the circling sun until he comes for you, long after I, my sons and their sons are dead. You will search for one Mevlana after another, but find that their words provide no more nourishment than dust.'

He bows, and leaves the room, not looking back.