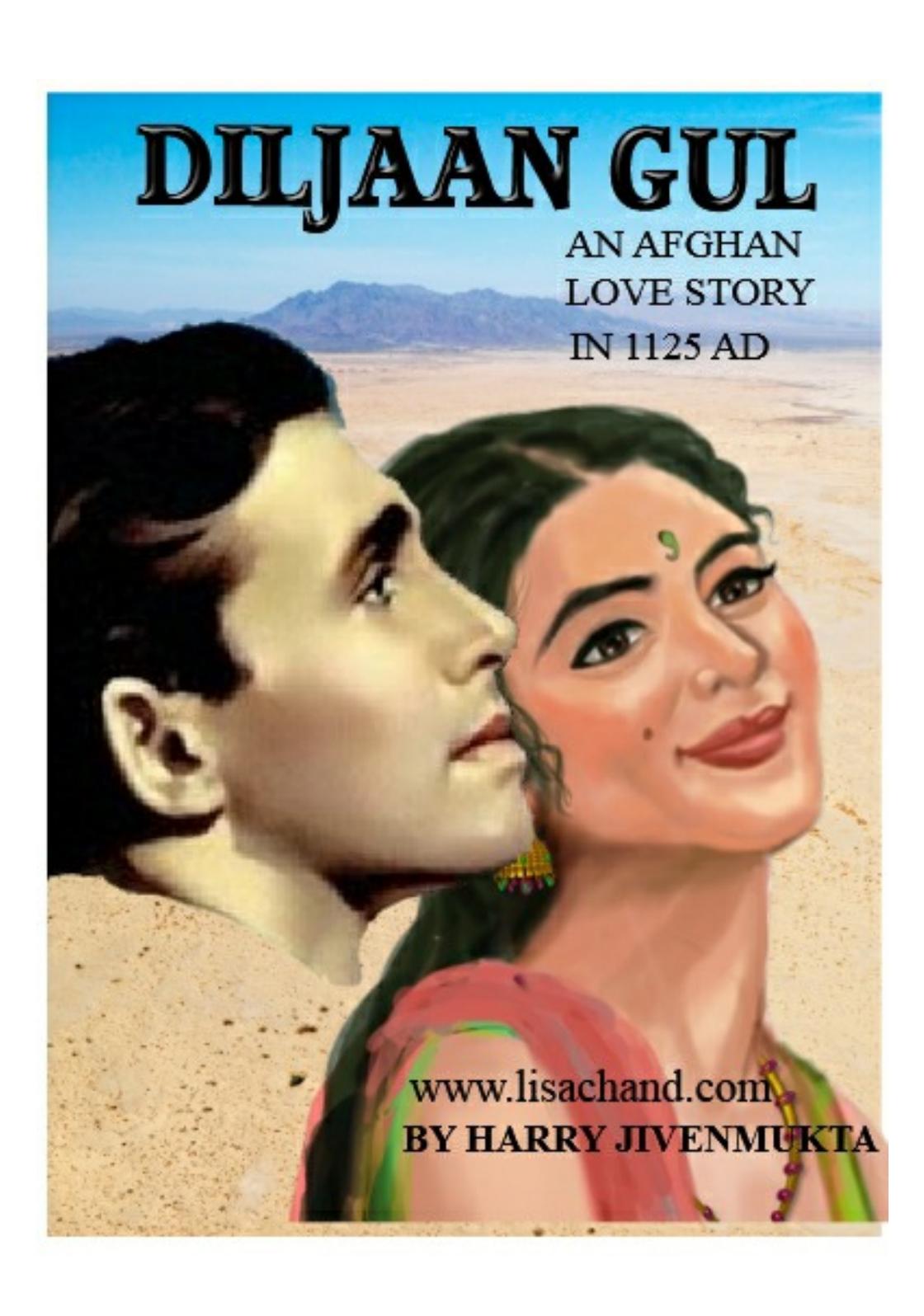


DILJAAN GUL

AN AFGHAN
LOVE STORY
IN 1125 AD

An illustration of a man and a woman in a desert landscape. The man is on the left, shown in profile, looking towards the right. He has dark hair and a serious expression. The woman is on the right, looking slightly upwards and to the right with a gentle smile. She has dark hair, a bindi on her forehead, and is wearing a pink and green garment. The background shows a vast, sandy desert with mountains in the distance under a clear blue sky.

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As I was astral travelling I met an old man . It was about 15 years after the story had happened. He told me the story of Diljaan Gul. I share it here, accurate as far as I can remember his words.

THIS IS THE TEXT VERSION

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Diljaan Gul

1.

Diljaan Gul was about thirty. He was a trader, with two camels. Now, two camels might not sound much, but it is better than one camel, or sharing three camels. His original camel was getting old but he had invested in a younger one. Business was good, and Diljaan Gul set out one bright morning with a spring in his step.

People will have heard about the Silk Road that runs from China to Europe, and this was the route that Diljaan Gul traded on. Not the whole route, you understand, but just about 40 miles of it in Herat province. He bought whatever seemed to be a bargain in one town and traded it along the route to the other town, where he reversed the process and travelled back to the first town. He wasn't too particular in what he bought for trade and sometimes it was seasonal produce.

He never travelled on the main Silk Road routes because there were lots of bandits. Instead, he went along its southern edge, which was lonely but safe. The main problem with being a sole trader was that he had no defences against a gang of bandits. He had been lucky so far, and had never encountered a large group of robbers.

On this fine day, everything was just as it should be. The sun was shining down, there was a little warm breeze blowing off the desert, and Diljaan Gul had just finished a good breakfast. As he set off with his camels, he walked ahead and his older camel led the younger one behind.

After just a few miles of walking, his young camel stumbled and fell down, dead. Diljaan Gul was simply shocked by this. There had been no warning, no signs of ill health, nothing to suggest this was going to happen. And this camel had cost him so much money as well. Looking up and down the trail, he saw no one at all, no living thing except himself and his old camel. There was not even a bird. So, he sat down on a small rock and pondered.

He couldn't bring his camel back to life. He couldn't load his old camel with the supplies that the young camel had carried because it would be an

impossible load for the old camel to carry. He couldn't leave his supplies behind. It would bankrupt him. He was at a loss.

After a long while, when the sun had travelled quite a long way across the sky, Diljaan Gul had narrowed his options down to just one. He would bury the most resilient of his supplies, and then trek away from the Silk Road, travel southwards until he found a settlement or town. He had enough money to buy another camel, just, and then he could return to his buried supplies and continue with his journey.

2.

It was dark when Diljaan Gul saw a little light in the distance. He stopped and sought out the source of the light, whether it might be a risk to him. Then, carefully he urged his old camel on quietly to get closer. The light was from a fire, and when it flickered brightly, he could see a wall of a house. More confident now, he rode into the settlement. It was very quiet, until he heard the rattling of pots as a woman emerged from the house. She froze on seeing him.

Diljaan Gul: Greetings sister, he began.

Faridah: *she lowered her head and looked away from him, sideways,* greetings brother.

Diljaan Gul: I am sorry to disturb you, but I am in need.

Faridah: Wait.

She turned and went back inside. Diljaan Gul could hear voices and then, after a few seconds, three old men emerged and went up to him. Seeing no threat, Diljaan Gul lowered his camel into a sitting position and got off.

Diljaan Gul: Forgive me, but I am in need.

One of the men stepped forward. He was called Aziz.

Aziz: Come inside. Daughter, bring tea.

Inside the house, it was very sparse. They were clearly a poor people, who lived here. Diljaan Gul was introduced to the three men and they were, Aziz, Babrak, and Jabar. They were all old men, and the young woman who Aziz called daughter, was called Faridah, but she wasn't a real daughter of Aziz.

Aziz: Daughter, bring some food for our guest.

Then he said they would talk in the morning. They spread out their blankets and lay down to sleep.

3

When Diljaan Gul woke up, he quietly stepped out of the house into a half-light dawn morning, chilly and a little misty. He looked around and found that there were five houses in all, single storey, mud brick and probably single roomed. Faridah was busy milking goats; there were eight or nine of them. And at the far end of the settlement there were some chickens, although the cockerel hadn't crowed this morning. Perhaps he was mute. Aziz stepped out of the house and stretched his old bones, said a prayer under his breath and called to Faridah for tea.

Diljaan Gul told his story to Aziz and then Aziz told him that there was no one here who had a camel, let alone enough to sell him one. They only had nine goats and some chickens. He did say that there was a trader that passed through here sometimes who had many camels. He also said there was no knowing when he might pass through here next.

One of the houses was empty. Old Mansoor had died only a few weeks ago. Aziz suggested that Diljaan Gul store his goods in there and wait for the camel trader to pass. So that is what Diljaan Gul did. He made a journey out to the place he had buried his stock and returned by the afternoon and stacked all his goods inside the house.

In total there were about ten people who lived in this settlement, all of them waiting to die, except Faridah, who looked about twenty five. In the

afternoon, Aziz realised that Diljaan Gul was wondering about the make-up of the settlement and so he told the story.

Aziz: Well, you can see that there are no young people here. Some went to the war and others went to the town for work. No one has returned. Faridah was married off about ten years ago, and went to live with her husband in the village just over those hills you can see. He was a poor man and uneducated. After a few years, he fell ill, and died. Faridah had nowhere else to go, and so she returned here. I think of her as my daughter now, but I should really call her my granddaughter.

There used to be more houses here. If you look over there, you will see the ruins of them. When there is no one to look after the houses, the walls crack in the heat and then the cold and winter rains and snow eat them away. Today there are just us here, waiting to die. Except Faridah. She has life. I worry about her.

Diljaan Gul told them that he had some money but needed to keep it to buy a camel, but he would be happy to give them some of his goods in exchange for their hospitality. Aziz said that they had no need for money in any case. He spread his arms out and asked where they would be able to spend it. Faridah said that they were short on some spices and Diljaan Gul told her he had spices.

Diljaan Gul: I have cloth that will make good clothes for you all, and for you, sister, I have silks. You can choose any type to make clothes for yourself.

Faridah blushed and turned her head away. No one had ever offered her anything since her husband had died. Aziz asked where she would wear silk, and everyone fell silent.

In the evening, after they had eaten, the three old men settled down in the house, and Faridah sat near the entrance with her face veiled because of Diljaan Gul.

Aziz: So, Diljaan Gul, tell us a story. You know we have just the same stories we tell each other all the time. There are no new ones. You will have lots of them because you are a traveller.

Diljaan Gul: Well, very well then. I do have a few stories.

And from then on, each evening was the same; food and then stories that Diljaan Gul regaled to the old men, and Faridah, sitting away, near the entrance.

Diljaan Gul: The first story is about a donkey.

A man and his son were going to market to sell their donkey. As they led it along the road a man coming the other way commented; "You're foolish. Why make the young lad walk when he could ride on the donkey?"

The father thought this was a good idea so he seated his son on the donkey. As they went further on, another person commented; "Thoughtless young lad, making his father walk whilst he rides."

The Father heard this and sat on the donkey, whilst the son walked by his side. Another person passing by said; "Why make the young lad walk? You could both ride on the donkey."

The father thought that there was a lot of good wisdom about that day, and he sat his son on the donkey with him. A passing stranger was very angry; "You fools, making a poor little donkey carry two people. You should be ashamed of yourselves. You should be carrying the donkey."

The father felt sorry for the donkey. So he and his son got off the donkey and taking one end each, they lifted the donkey up and carried it the rest of the way to the town.

When they got to the town everyone started laughing at the two fools carrying a donkey. The father and son did not understand what all the fuss was about.

The three old men laughed out loud at the story, and even Faridah was shaking underneath her veil.

Aziz: What a stupid man he was.

Jabar: Yes. We had a stupid man like that who used to live here. Remember?

And then he went on to remind his friends who he meant. Meanwhile, Faridah had gone off and returned with glasses of warm milk for them all to enjoy and her eyes sparkled with laughter as she passed a glass to Diljaan Gul. She couldn't remember the last time she had laughed, and it felt so good, but also she felt a bit guilty. She hoped Diljaan Gul hadn't seen her like that. But, of course, he had.

4

The next morning as Diljaan Gul greeted her, Faridah asked him not to address her as sister. She said that she had been widowed but was still young and so he could call her Miss Faridah. Diljaan Gul agreed, but realised at once that she must have designs on him. After all, you cannot be personal with a sister in the same way you can be with a young woman of no relation.

Faridah: I'm sorry, but I still feel I have a life to live. If everyone calls me sister, then I will get old as a spinster, someone not to be approached.

Diljaan Gul: No, not at all. You are right, Miss Faridah. I apologise.

Diljaan Gul needed to break the awkwardness and so invited Miss Faridah to look over his trading goods, and select the spices she needed. They were in large bags, but Miss Faridah brought her spices box to spoon in the spices she wanted. She was reticent at first but Diljaan Gul encouraged her to open each bag and feel free to take what she wanted.

He stood back and watched her. She seemed to be very practical and wore no jewellery, as was expected of a widow. But how long had she been a widow, Diljaan Gul wondered? It was only a set period of time that she needed to mourn. He wanted to ask her, but was too shy.

In one bag that she opened, Miss Faridah brought out some rouge, make-up, not spices. She smelled the powder and then hurriedly tied the bag up again. Diljaan Gul wanted to say 'take some for your pretty face, become a woman once again', but he dared not.

Faridah: You have such beautiful things here, she began.

Aziz came to investigate and saw that they were standing well apart although his keen eye saw desire in Diljaan Gul's eyes. The magic of the moment was broken and Miss Faridah hurried off. Aziz contemplated the piles of trading goods. Diljaan Gul reached for a roll of cotton fabric and asked Aziz to feel the quality.

Diljaan Gul: You can all have shirts made from this cloth.

Aziz: We are old men. What would old men want with such fancy cloth?

Diljaan Gul: But you are wise with your age and should look the part.

Aziz: You always know how to say the right things. Come Diljaan Gul, it is time for breakfast.

Miss Faridah made eggs with some pulses and said that the new spices made the food smell delicious. The old man Babrak who seldom spoke said that Diljaan Gul might have been sent by God to their otherwise godforsaken settlement. The old man laughed at that and Diljaan Gul looked suitably embarrassed.

That evening's story was not as funny as the previous night but everyone enjoyed it nevertheless.

Houn was a Chinaman who had left the small town he had been born in at a very young age. Now he was old and getting frail. He wanted to travel back to his home town before he died. But his memory was very poor so he took some friends with him.

When they had gone some way, the friends decided to play a trick on the old man. "Houn, there is the town in which you were born." They pointed out a different town far down in the valley. Houn rushed along to get there and already felt familiar with the place.

When they got to the town one of the friends pointed to a burial ground and said; "Houn, this is the place where all your ancestors are buried."

Houn walked over and felt the spirits of his ancestors in the air. "Houn, over there, that is your father's grave." The friends pointed to one of the mounds. Houn felt sorrow and sat and cried at the grave side for many minutes.

Suddenly all his friends started laughing out loud. "Why are you laughing, can't you see how distressed I am?" Houn protested. The friends told him that they had played a trick on him, and that his home town was still some way off.

Houn quickly dried his tears and composed himself. "Why did you play a trick on me?"

The friends told him that even though he was an old man, he still lacked wisdom. "You should try to feel the same joy and sorrow for all regardless of whether they are your relatives or someone else's. It does not matter whether this is your father's or someone else's father's grave, does it? The wise person cares for everyone."

Houn understood that it was foolish to cry for relatives he had hardly known or to seek out his own relatives in particular, because everyone is the same, coming from the same source and going from this world the same way.

Diljaan Gul: I feel so close to all of you, although I have only known you for a few days. You are all so kind and welcoming. I wish you were my relatives.

Aziz: We feel the same as you. Perhaps you are a spirit from our family, returned in different guise to be with us.

At that slice of revelation everyone fell silent. Miss Faridah got up and silently slipped out to get the warm milk.

5

Diljaan Gul's favourite time of the day was just after awakening. As he stepped out into the daylight, he would see Miss Faridah milking her goats. It was a perfect time to exchange pleasantries with her because she was busy with her task and had her back to him. He could say more than if she had been facing him, or if she was not busy.

Faridah: Yes, I love my goats. They are my friends. I can tell them anything, all about my hopes and dreams and they never tell anyone else. They are patient and look after us by giving us milk to sustain us. They are simple

Diljaan Gul: What are your dreams?

Faridah: It is more like, what were my dreams. My dreams are lost in the desert sands, my happiness soaked like water disappearing forever into the desert.

Diljaan Gul: No, that is not right. You can have new dreams and they can come true if you remember them enough times. If you repeat them like a mantra.

Faridah: My dreams were just simple ones. To get married, have a family and watch my babies grow as I fed them with my own hands. Now, my goats are my babies....

Diljaan Gul: After breakfast I want to show you something from my supplies. Will you come and look?

Faridah: What do you want to show me?

Diljaan Gul: After breakfast.

They all sat together during breakfast, but Diljaan Gul found Miss Faridah glancing towards him once or twice. Aziz kept the banter going, reflecting with the other old men about the story Diljaan Gul had told last evening.

Aziz: We are like that man, you know, Houn. Who will remember who we were? In only a few weeks the sands will cover our burial mound, and no one will ever know we had even lived.

Jabar: Just as we don't know where the burial mounds of our ancestors are. But, that is the way it is and so, that is the way it should be.

Aziz: Yes. And that is why we should live our lives today, to the full, without regret.

Babrak: I regret that the food was so good.

Aziz: Why is that?

Babrak: Because I want some more. If it had been poor, then it wouldn't matter that it is finished.

Faridah: There is a little more.

Miss Faridah got up and went for the pan, scraping up the bits and offering Babrak the few spoons.

After breakfast, Miss Faridah was busy washing the plates and Diljaan Gul was impatient. It seemed like forever until she finally turned to him and stood, waiting for him to make the next move.

Diljaan Gul: Miss Faridah, will you come with me?

She followed him, a few paces behind.

Diljaan Gul: It isn't anything really, just some cloth I had that made me think of you.

He pulled out the roll and invited Miss Faridah to feel the quality of the cloth. It was very fine and Miss Faridah couldn't think of having felt any better than this.

Faridah: It is beautiful, but why are you showing it to me?

Diljaan Gul: Well I gave you another roll to make shirts for the others, and so I wanted to give you this, to make something for yourself.

Faridah: It is too good. And where would I wear this? It would be spoilt. I can't milk my goats wearing an outfit made of this fine silk.

They were both silent. Diljaan Gul wanted to say that she could wear it when he invited her out for a walk in the evening. He would tell his story to the old men first and then the rest of the evening would be free. Diljaan Gul smiled when he realised he was thinking of the old men and fitting in their story in his imaginary evening.

Faridah: Why are you smiling?

Diljaan Gul: It is nothing. Please take the cloth and make something for yourself. I am sure that when it is made, there will be a reason to wear it.

That evening's story was about Diljaan Gul's favourite animal; frogs. Although to be completely honest, he also liked stories about donkeys.

One day two frogs fell into a bucket of milk. The bucket was made of metal and had very slippery sides. The frogs were in danger of drowning unless they kept paddling around in the milk. If they stopped they would sink. The larger frog swam quite well at first but soon got tired. After a while he said; "I cant go on any longer."

The other frog said; "we must both keep on paddling around or we will die. Keep going and we might be saved."

They both continued paddling round and round in the bucket but there seemed little hope to the larger frog that they would be saved. After a while longer the larger frog said that he couldn't go on. He stopped paddling and sank to the bottom of the bucket and died.

The other frog was now on his own and it seemed even harder to keep on paddling. He kept on and on until he was completely out of energy. "I am going to die like my friend." He thought.

Finally after the last possible stroke he could muster he gave up the struggle. As he began to sink, he felt something hard under his feet. The frog had paddled so much that the milk had turned into butter. Using the hard surface of the butter, the frog mustered the last of his strength and jumped out of the bucket.

Aziz: That was a great story. And it is true. In this life you should never give up hope. Sometimes hope is all there is. But one day, your dreams will come true.

He was looking directly at Miss Faridah. For her part, she was sat facing away from the men, veiled and still like a statue, although inside, her heart was pounding. She was afraid the others might be able to hear it and so got up and went out for the warm milk.

6.

Aziz: Diljaan Gul I am a simple man. I can only ask direct questions, even though sometimes they may not be the right questions or it might not be the right time.

Diljaan Gul: What is it you want to ask? Please don't be shy.

Aziz: Well, you know that Faridah is like a daughter to me. I have seen how you look at her, but don't feel bad, I know you are a young man. It is natural.

Diljaan Gul: I am sorry.

Aziz: No, you don't understand my point. Firstly, are you already married? And secondly, what are your intentions towards Faridah?

Diljaan Gul: No, I am not married.

Aziz: and...?

Diljaan Gul: Well, Miss Faridah is very beautiful.

Diljaan Gul got up and walked away a few paces. Aziz said nothing more and decided to let things come to their own fruition. Babrak was walking towards them and said:

Babrak: People think I am stupid because I don't say much. But, either you have disagreed over money, or it is about a woman.

Then Babrak sat down near Aziz and they both looked into the middle distance towards the mountains. Diljaan Gul walked off in measured paces, trying not to run. He was breathless, and his heart pounded. His head was mixed up like a dust storm, swirling across the desert. He walked for a few minutes until he calmed down. He wondered why he felt like this; guilty, as if he had been caught doing something illegal. Perhaps it was because he thought no one had seen his reactions to Miss Faridah that he felt like this now. He didn't return to the settlement until the sun was beginning to set, and it was time for supper.

Miss Faridah was cooking as she always did, crouched down near the fire, enveloped in the smoke of her own making.

The evening story was about the River God.

The River God called up into the mountains for the little droplets of water to come down to him. He called them to form little rivulets and then join together to form streams. He called them to rush down the hillside and join into rivers. He told the rivers to then join up and become one big thundering river.

When the drops and rivulets and streams and rivers had all joined up they made a huge frightening river of such force that it swept away villages, and cattle and all the people in its path.

"Ha!" The River God was so powerful he felt that there was no-one and nothing bigger or better than he was. "I am the most powerful, the most feared force on Earth."

Eventually the river spread out into the valley floor and became slower and very wide. The River God spread out like a God should, and coasted down the slow currents majestically, posing for the rest of the pitiful world to see.

The river wound around in a huge arc and when the River God next looked into the distance, his face dropped. In front of him was standing the Ocean with its arms wide open, stretching into infinity. The River God was suddenly very small, the proverbial drop in the ocean.

Irresistibly the Ocean drew the river into its mass and the river disappeared into the vastness of the Ocean. At first the River God was devastated by the experience, but then he was overcome with joy as he realised that he was now part of something even bigger.

Aziz was very impressed by the story and said it reflected real life, where everyone thinks he is big until he realises there are things even bigger than him. Even the whole Earth is just like a grain of sand in the galaxy of stars visible at night. Babrak shivered at the thought of being so small, even in this desert, let alone further afield.

They all drank the warm milk in silence and then went to bed.

7.

Faridah: How big is your world Diljaan Gul? She had said his name for the very first time.

Diljaan Gul: Not very big. I travel between two towns, buying and selling whatever people want or whatever is cheap to buy and expensive to sell.

Faridah: But your world is so much bigger than mine. I know this place and for a short time, my husband's village.

Diljaan Gul: Have you never been into a town then?

Faridah: No, never. I have seen traders pass, but they never stayed even for an afternoon. You are the first person apart from this settlement and my husband's family that I have ever spoken to.

Diljaan Gul: And.... I mean.... But...when we....

Faridah: When we? What?

Diljaan Gul: When we... I mean if we.... I don't know what I mean. Can you say it?

Faridah: No, it is you who must say it.

Diljaan Gul: Well... when, I mean if we... I mean if I ask you to marry me....

Faridah: You will have to ask father Aziz. He isn't my real father but he is responsible for me.

Diljaan Gul: And what will he say?

Faridah: He has often spoken to me about what will become of me when he is no more in this world. He worries about me. He will pass all his worries on to the person who will take them.

Diljaan Gul: Shall I speak to him then?

Faridah: It is not for me to say.

Diljaan Gul: (*Suddenly laughing*) Do you know how to milk a camel?

At this point they both snorted in laughter, Faridah, sinking her head almost into her goat milk bucket. Diljaan Gul went off quickly, for a walk.

The evening story was short and really funny.

Uddin was digging a large hole in his garden. His wife asked him; "What are you doing Uddin?"

He ignored her and continued to dig. He was very involved in the digging. Eventually when he had dug the hole very deep he stopped for breath. Again his wife asked him what he was doing. He replied; "You see all that earth at that end of the garden. I am going to get rid of it by putting it all in this hole."

"And what will you do with the earth which you have dug out to make space for the earth at the end of the garden?"

Uddin looked at the pile of earth he had just dug out; "I will come to that later."

Then after a while he said; "I could always dig this hole deeper so that it will take that soil as well."

His wife gravely shook her head.

Everyone laughed at the stupid Uddin, and the old men slapped each other with delight.

Aziz: Really Diljaan Gul, you have some excellent stories. I feel sad for his wife; she must have realised what a donkey she had married.

the drabness of the desert
and the scorching pain of the sun
i thought of what kind of person
might live in this hell
when i saw you that night
i wondered who could
have left you here
in this land
of nothing

i was shocked to see you
like an apparition
a ghost of the sands
but then you spoke
and i knew you were real

your hospitality
a simple good turn
to feed me
and let me drink
your goats milk

you are a man
without rattling teeth
or aged bones
alive amongst these others
i love them but they are
just waiting to die
without much at all

you can conjure up
food and drink
keep bellies filled
without a complaint
without a desire
for things that cannot
be had

like a magician
you produce bags of spices
perfumes and powder
fit for a harem
cloth that sparkles
and is alive
bags of mysterious
magical things

without a sight
of the world outside
you live here
without curiosity
happy that god has
given you even this meagre
share

you tell stories of
people we don't know
of places that don't
exist
at least in my world
you make us laugh
and cry
and dream in our sleep
of places we never
imagined

i found love inside me
that spilled out like
water in an oasis
slaking my thirst
but making me thirstier
as well
you are so simple
in your beauty
blind yourself
to your curves

and points
and perfumed
even without perfume

you showered us all
with gifts
fair to everyone
even handed
without greed
we had nothing to give you
except a blanket
on a floor

i never wanted to call
you sister
you were never my sister
it was just tradition
you are my lover
my sustenance
and you give me a reason
to return to you
with my camels
filled with treasures
for you
you are my treasure

i will miss you when
you go out into the world
to work for us
to make my simple
dreams come true
and i will make
rice pudding
with extra milk
from my goats
when you return

when i return
we will sleep outside
and count the stars
and i will tell you how much
i love you
and how much i miss you
missed you on the camel trail

and you will hold me tight
from the cold winds
at night
and we will melt
into each other
and i will love you
a fresh bowl of water
for your thirst

and we will still revere
the old men
and you will still feed them
and care
until there is only
you and i
we will be enough
for each other

and as the old men
find their burial mounds
we will replace them
with new lives
children of our own
and have more goats
and camels
i will learn how to
milk our camels