

## The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate

by Ted Chiang

*Most of our readers probably know the name Ted Chiang already, but since this story is his first work of fiction to appear here, we should note that Mr. Chiang is the author of such stories as "Division by Zero," "Hell Is the Absence of God," and "Tower of Babylon"; his short fiction has been collected in Stories of Your Life and Others. His new story—which is going to be published shortly by Subterranean Press in a hardcover chapbook—concerns a Baghdad merchant. Mr. Chiang says the story was inspired in part by the work of physicist Kip Thorne.*

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O mighty Caliph and Commander of the Faithful, I am humbled to be in the splendor of your presence; a man can hope for no greater blessing as long as he lives. The story I have to tell is truly a strange one, and were the entirety to be tattooed at the corner of one's eye, the marvel of its presentation would not exceed that of the events recounted, for it is a warning to those who would be warned and a lesson to those who would learn.

My name is Fuwaad ibn Abbas, and I was born here in Baghdad, City of Peace. My father was a grain merchant, but for much of my life I have worked as a purveyor of fine fabrics, trading in silk from Damascus and linen from Egypt and scarves from Morocco that are embroidered with gold. I was prosperous, but my heart was troubled, and neither the purchase of luxuries nor the giving of alms was able to soothe it. Now I stand before you without a single dirham in my purse, but I am at peace.

Allah is the beginning of all things, but with Your Majesty's permission, I begin my story with the day I took a walk through the district of metalsmiths. I needed to purchase a gift for a man I had to do business with, and had been told he might appreciate a tray made of silver. After browsing for half an hour, I noticed that one of the largest shops in the market had been taken over by a new merchant. It was a prized location that must have been expensive to acquire, so I entered to peruse its wares.

Never before had I seen such a marvelous assortment of goods. Near the entrance there was an astrolabe equipped with seven plates inlaid with silver, a water-clock that chimed on the hour, and a nightingale made of brass that sang when the wind blew. Farther inside there were even more ingenious mechanisms, and I stared at them the way a child watches a

juggler, when an old man stepped out from a doorway in the back.

“Welcome to my humble shop, my lord,” he said. “My name is Bashaarat. How may I assist you?”

“These are remarkable items that you have for sale. I deal with traders from every corner of the world, and yet I have never seen their like. From where, may I ask, did you acquire your merchandise?”

“I am grateful to you for your kind words,” he said. “Everything you see here was made in my workshop, by myself or by my assistants under my direction.”

I was impressed that this man could be so well versed in so many arts. I asked him about the various instruments in his shop, and listened to him discourse learnedly about astrology, mathematics, geomancy, and medicine. We spoke for over an hour, and my fascination and respect bloomed like a flower warmed by the dawn, until he mentioned his experiments in alchemy.

“Alchemy?” I said. This surprised me, for he did not seem the type to make such a sharper’s claim. “You mean you can turn base metal into gold?”

“I can, my lord, but that is not in fact what most seek from alchemy.”

“What do most seek, then?”

“They seek a source of gold that is cheaper than mining ore from the ground. Alchemy does describe a means to make gold, but the procedure is so arduous that, by comparison, digging beneath a mountain is as easy as plucking peaches from a tree.”

I smiled. “A clever reply. No one could dispute that you are a learned man, but I know better than to credit alchemy.”

Bashaarat looked at me and considered. “I have recently built something that may change your opinion. You would be the first person I have shown it to. Would you care to see it?”

“It would be a great pleasure.”

“Please follow me.” He led me through the doorway in the rear of his shop. The next room was a workshop, arrayed with devices whose

functions I could not guess—bars of metal wrapped with enough copper thread to reach the horizon, mirrors mounted on a circular slab of granite floating in quicksilver—but Bashaarat walked past these without a glance.

Instead he led me to a sturdy pedestal, chest high, on which a stout metal hoop was mounted upright. The hoop's opening was as wide as two outstretched hands, and its rim so thick that it would tax the strongest man to carry. The metal was black as night, but polished to such smoothness that, had it been a different color, it could have served as a mirror. Bashaarat bade me stand so that I looked upon the hoop edgewise, while he stood next to its opening.

“Please observe,” he said.

Bashaarat thrust his arm through the hoop from the right side, but it did not extend out from the left. Instead, it was as if his arm were severed at the elbow, and he waved the stump up and down, and then pulled his arm out intact.

I had not expected to see such a learned man perform a conjuror's trick, but it was well done, and I applauded politely.

“Now wait a moment,” he said as he took a step back.

I waited, and behold, an arm reached out of the hoop from its left side, without a body to hold it up. The sleeve it wore matched Bashaarat's robe. The arm waved up and down, and then retreated through the hoop until it was gone.

The first trick I had thought a clever mime, but this one seemed far superior, because the pedestal and hoop were clearly too slender to conceal a person. “Very clever!” I exclaimed.

“Thank you, but this is not mere sleight of hand. The right side of the hoop precedes the left by several seconds. To pass through the hoop is to cross that duration instantly.”

“I do not understand,” I said.

“Let me repeat the demonstration.” Again he thrust his arm through the hoop, and his arm disappeared. He smiled, and pulled back and forth as if playing tug-a-rope. Then he pulled his arm out again, and presented his hand to me with the palm open. On it lay a ring I recognized.

“That is my ring!” I checked my hand, and saw that my ring still lay on my finger. “You have conjured up a duplicate.”

“No, this is truly your ring. Wait.”

Again, an arm reached out from the left side. Wishing to discover the mechanism of the trick, I rushed over to grab it by the hand. It was not a false hand, but one fully warm and alive as mine. I pulled on it, and it pulled back. Then, as deft as a pickpocket, the hand slipped the ring from my finger and the arm withdrew into the hoop, vanishing completely.

“My ring is gone!” I exclaimed.

“No, my lord,” he said. “Your ring is here.” And he gave me the ring he held. “Forgive me for my game.”

I replaced it on my finger. “You had the ring before it was taken from me.”

At that moment an arm reached out, this time from the right side of the hoop. “What is this?” I exclaimed. Again I recognized it as his by the sleeve before it withdrew, but I had not seen him reach in.

“Recall,” he said, “the right side of the hoop precedes the left.” And he walked over to the left side of the hoop, and thrust his arm through from that side, and again it disappeared.

Your Majesty has undoubtedly already grasped this, but it was only then that I understood: whatever happened on the right side of the hoop was complemented, a few seconds later, by an event on the left side. “Is this sorcery?” I asked.

“No, my lord, I have never met a djinni, and if I did, I would not trust it to do my bidding. This is a form of alchemy.”

He offered an explanation, speaking of his search for tiny pores in the skin of reality, like the holes that worms bore into wood, and how upon finding one he was able to expand and stretch it the way a glassblower turns a dollop of molten glass into a long-necked pipe, and how he then allowed time to flow like water at one mouth while causing it to thicken like syrup at the other. I confess I did not really understand his words, and cannot testify to their truth. All I could say in response was, “You have created something truly astonishing.”

“Thank you,” he said, “but this is merely a prelude to what I intended to show you.” He bade me follow him into another room, farther in the back. There stood a circular doorway whose massive frame was made of the same polished black metal, mounted in the middle of the room.

“What I showed you before was a Gate of Seconds,” he said. “This is a Gate of Years. The two sides of the doorway are separated by a span of twenty years.”

I confess I did not understand his remark immediately. I imagined him reaching his arm in from the right side and waiting twenty years before it emerged from the left side, and it seemed a very obscure magic trick. I said as much, and he laughed. “That is one use for it,” he said, “but consider what would happen if you were to step through.” Standing on the right side, he gestured for me to come closer, and then pointed through the doorway. “Look.”

I looked, and saw that there appeared to be different rugs and pillows on the other side of the room than I had seen when I had entered. I moved my head from side to side, and realized that when I peered through the doorway, I was looking at a different room from the one I stood in.

“You are seeing the room twenty years from now,” said Bashaarat.

I blinked, as one might at an illusion of water in the desert, but what I saw did not change. “And you say I could step through?” I asked.

“You could. And with that step, you would visit the Baghdad of twenty years hence. You could seek out your older self and have a conversation with him. Afterwards, you could step back through the Gate of Years and return to the present day.”

Hearing Bashaarat’s words, I felt as if I were reeling. “You have done this?” I asked him. “You have stepped through?”

“I have, and so have numerous customers of mine.”

“Earlier you said I was the first to whom you showed this.”

“This Gate, yes. But for many years I owned a shop in Cairo, and it was there that I first built a Gate of Years. There were many to whom I showed that Gate, and who made use of it.”

“What did they learn when talking to their older selves?”

“Each person learns something different. If you wish, I can tell you the story of one such person.” Bashaarat proceeded to tell me such a story, and if it pleases Your Majesty, I will recount it here.

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### The Tale of the Fortunate Rope-Maker

There once was a young man named Hassan who was a maker of rope. He stepped through the Gate of Years to see the Cairo of twenty years later, and upon arriving he marveled at how the city had grown. He felt as if he had stepped into a scene embroidered on a tapestry, and even though the city was no more and no less than Cairo, he looked upon the most common sights as objects of wonder.

He was wandering by the Zuweyla Gate, where the sword dancers and snake charmers perform, when an astrologer called to him. “Young man! Do you wish to know the future?”

Hassan laughed. “I know it already,” he said.

“Surely you want to know if wealth awaits you, do you not?”

“I am a rope-maker. I know that it does not.”

“Can you be so sure? What about the renowned merchant Hassan al-Hubbaul, who began as a rope-maker?”

His curiosity aroused, Hassan asked around the market for others who knew of this wealthy merchant, and found that the name was well known. It was said he lived in the wealthy Habbaniya quarter of the city, so Hassan walked there and asked people to point out his house, which turned out to be the largest one on its street.

He knocked at the door, and a servant led him to a spacious and well-appointed hall with a fountain in the center. Hassan waited while the servant went to fetch his master, but as he looked at the polished ebony and marble around him, he felt that he did not belong in such surroundings, and was about to leave when his older self appeared.

“At last you are here!” the man said. “I have been expecting you!”

“You have?” said Hassan, astounded.

“Of course, because I visited my older self just as you are visiting me. It has been so long that I had forgotten the exact day. Come, dine with me.”

The two went to a dining room, where servants brought chicken stuffed with pistachio nuts, fritters soaked in honey, and roast lamb with spiced pomegranates. The older Hassan gave few details of his life: he mentioned business interests of many varieties, but did not say how he had become a merchant; he mentioned a wife, but said it was not time for the younger man to meet her. Instead, he asked young Hassan to remind him of the pranks he had played as a child, and he laughed to hear stories that had faded from his own memory.

At last the younger Hassan asked the older, “How did you make such great changes in your fortune?”

“All I will tell you right now is this: when you go to buy hemp from the market, and you are walking along the Street of Black Dogs, do not walk along the south side as you usually do. Walk along the north.”

“And that will enable me to raise my station?”

“Just do as I say. Go back home now; you have rope to make. You will know when to visit me again.”

Young Hassan returned to his day and did as he was instructed, keeping to the north side of the street even when there was no shade there. It was a few days later that he witnessed a maddened horse run amok on the south side of the street directly opposite him, kicking several people, injuring another by knocking a heavy jug of palm oil onto him, and even trampling one person under its hooves. After the commotion had subsided, Hassan prayed to Allah for the injured to be healed and the dead to be at peace, and thanked Allah for sparing him.

The next day Hassan stepped through the Gate of Years and sought out his older self. “Were you injured by the horse when you walked by?” he asked him.

“No, because I heeded my older self’s warning. Do not forget, you and I are one; every circumstance that befalls you once befell me.”

And so the elder Hassan gave the younger instructions, and the younger obeyed them. He refrained from buying eggs from his usual grocer, and thus avoided the illness that struck customers who bought eggs

from a spoiled basket. He bought extra hemp, and thus had material to work with when others suffered a shortage due to a delayed caravan. Following his older self's instructions spared Hassan many troubles, but he wondered why his older self would not tell him more. Who would he marry? How would he become wealthy?

Then one day, after having sold all his rope in the market and carrying an unusually full purse, Hassan bumped into a boy while walking on the street. He felt for his purse, discovered it missing, and turned around with a shout to search the crowd for the pickpocket. Hearing Hassan's cry, the boy immediately began running through the crowd. Hassan saw that the boy's tunic was torn at the elbow, but then quickly lost sight of him.

For a moment Hassan was shocked that this could happen with no warning from his older self. But his surprise was soon replaced by anger, and he gave chase. He ran through the crowd, checking the elbows of boys' tunics, until by chance he found the pickpocket crouching beneath a fruit wagon. Hassan grabbed him and began shouting to all that he had caught a thief, asking them to find a guardsman. The boy, afraid of arrest, dropped Hassan's purse and began weeping. Hassan stared at the boy for a long moment, and then his anger faded, and he let him go.

When next he saw his older self, Hassan asked him, "Why did you not warn me about the pickpocket?"

"Did you not enjoy the experience?" asked his older self.

Hassan was about to deny it, but stopped himself. "I did enjoy it," he admitted. In pursuing the boy, with no hint of whether he'd succeed or fail, he had felt his blood surge in a way it had not for many weeks. And seeing the boy's tears had reminded him of the Prophet's teachings on the value of mercy, and Hassan had felt virtuous in choosing to let the boy go.

"Would you rather I had denied you that, then?"

Just as we grow to understand the purpose of customs that seemed pointless to us in our youth, Hassan realized that there was merit in withholding information as well as in disclosing it. "No," he said, "it was good that you did not warn me."

The older Hassan saw that he had understood. "Now I will tell you something very important. Hire a horse. I will give you directions to a spot in the foothills to the west of the city. There you will find within a grove of trees one that was struck by lightning. Around the base of the tree, look for the

heaviest rock you can overturn, and then dig beneath it.”

“What should I look for?”

“You will know when you find it.”

The next day Hassan rode out to the foothills and searched until he found the tree. The ground around it was covered in rocks, so Hassan overturned one to dig beneath it, and then another, and then another. At last his spade struck something besides rock and soil. He cleared aside the soil and discovered a bronze chest, filled with gold dinars and assorted jewelry. Hassan had never seen its like in all his life. He loaded the chest onto the horse, and rode back to Cairo.

The next time he spoke to his older self, he asked, “How did you know where the treasure was?”

“I learned it from myself,” said the older Hassan, “just as you did. As to how we came to know its location, I have no explanation except that it was the will of Allah, and what other explanation is there for anything?”

“I swear I shall make good use of these riches that Allah has blessed me with,” said the younger Hassan.

“And I renew that oath,” said the older. “This is the last time we shall speak. You will find your own way now. Peace be upon you.”

And so Hassan returned home. With the gold he was able to purchase hemp in great quantity, and hire workmen and pay them a fair wage, and sell rope profitably to all who sought it. He married a beautiful and clever woman, at whose advice he began trading in other goods, until he was a wealthy and respected merchant. All the while he gave generously to the poor and lived as an upright man. In this way Hassan lived the happiest of lives until he was overtaken by death, breaker of ties and destroyer of delights.

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“That is a remarkable story,” I said. “For someone who is debating whether to make use of the Gate, there could hardly be a better inducement.”

“You are wise to be skeptical,” said Bashaarat. “Allah rewards those he wishes to reward and chastises those he wishes to chastise. The Gate

does not change how he regards you.”

I nodded, thinking I understood. “So even if you succeed in avoiding the misfortunes that your older self experienced, there is no assurance you will not encounter other misfortunes.”

“No, forgive an old man for being unclear. Using the Gate is not like drawing lots, where the token you select varies with each turn. Rather, using the Gate is like taking a secret passageway in a palace, one that lets you enter a room more quickly than by walking down the hallway. The room remains the same, no matter which door you use to enter.”

This surprised me. “The future is fixed, then? As unchangeable as the past?”

“It is said that repentance and atonement erase the past.”

“I have heard that too, but I have not found it to be true.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” said Bashaarat. “All I can say is that the future is no different.”

I thought on this for a while. “So if you learn that you are dead twenty years from now, there is nothing you can do to avoid your death?” He nodded. This seemed to me very disheartening, but then I wondered if it could not also provide a guarantee. I said, “Suppose you learn that you are alive twenty years from now. Then nothing could kill you in the next twenty years. You could then fight in battles without a care, because your survival is assured.”

“That is possible,” he said. “It is also possible that a man who would make use of such a guarantee would not find his older self alive when he first used the Gate.”

“Ah,” I said. “Is it then the case that only the prudent meet their older selves?”

“Let me tell you the story of another person who used the Gate, and you can decide for yourself if he was prudent or not.” Bashaarat proceeded to tell me the story, and if it pleases Your Majesty, I will recount it here.

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The Tale of the Weaver Who Stole from Himself

There was a young weaver named Ajib who made a modest living as a weaver of rugs, but yearned to taste the luxuries enjoyed by the wealthy. After hearing the story of Hassan, Ajib immediately stepped through the Gate of Years to seek out his older self, who, he was sure, would be as rich and as generous as the older Hassan.

Upon arriving in the Cairo of twenty years later, he proceeded to the wealthy Habbaniya quarter of the city and asked people for the residence of Ajib ibn Taher. He was prepared, if he met someone who knew the man and remarked on the similarity of their features, to identify himself as Ajib's son, newly arrived from Damascus. But he never had the chance to offer this story, because no one he asked recognized the name.

Eventually he decided to return to his old neighborhood, and see if anyone there knew where he had moved to. When he got to his old street, he stopped a boy and asked him if he knew where to find a man named Ajib. The boy directed him to Ajib's old house.

"That is where he used to live," Ajib said. "Where does he live now?"

"If he has moved since yesterday, I do not know where," said the boy.

Ajib was incredulous. Could his older self still live in the same house, twenty years later? That would mean he had never become wealthy, and his older self would have no advice to give him, or at least none Ajib would profit by following. How could his fate differ so much from that of the fortunate rope-maker? In hopes that the boy was mistaken, Ajib waited outside the house, and watched.

Eventually he saw a man leave the house, and with a sinking heart recognized it as his older self. The older Ajib was followed by a woman that he presumed was his wife, but he scarcely noticed her, for all he could see was his own failure to have bettered himself. He stared with dismay at the plain clothes the older couple wore until they walked out of sight.

Driven by the curiosity that impels men to look at the heads of the executed, Ajib went to the door of his house. His own key still fit the lock, so he entered. The furnishings had changed, but were simple and worn, and Ajib was mortified to see them. After twenty years, could he not even afford better pillows?

On an impulse, he went to the wooden chest where he normally kept his savings, and unlocked it. He lifted the lid, and saw the chest was filled

with gold dinars.

Ajib was astonished. His older self had a chest of gold, and yet he wore such plain clothes and lived in the same small house for twenty years! What a stingy, joyless man his older self must be, thought Ajib, to have wealth and not enjoy it. Ajib had long known that one could not take one's possessions to the grave. Could that be something that he would forget as he aged?

Ajib decided that such riches should belong to someone who appreciated them, and that was himself. To take his older self's wealth would not be stealing, he reasoned, because it was he himself who would receive it. He heaved the chest onto his shoulder, and with much effort was able to bring it back through the Gate of Years to the Cairo he knew.

He deposited some of his new found wealth with a banker, but always carried a purse heavy with gold. He dressed in a Damascene robe and Cordovan slippers and a Khurasani turban bearing a jewel. He rented a house in the wealthy quarter, furnished it with the finest rugs and couches, and hired a cook to prepare him sumptuous meals.

He then sought out the brother of a woman he had long desired from afar, a woman named Taahira. Her brother was an apothecary, and Taahira assisted him in his shop. Ajib would occasionally purchase a remedy so that he might speak to her. Once he had seen her veil slip, and her eyes were as dark and beautiful as a gazelle's. Taahira's brother would not have consented to her marrying a weaver, but now Ajib could present himself as a favorable match.

Taahira's brother approved, and Taahira herself readily consented, for she had desired Ajib, too. Ajib spared no expense for their wedding. He hired one of the pleasure barges that floated in the canal south of the city and held a feast with musicians and dancers, at which he presented her with a magnificent pearl necklace. The celebration was the subject of gossip throughout the quarter.

Ajib reveled in the joy that money brought him and Taahira, and for a week the two of them lived the most delightful of lives. Then one day Ajib came home to find the door to his house broken open and the interior ransacked of all silver and gold items. The terrified cook emerged from hiding and told him that robbers had taken Taahira.

Ajib prayed to Allah until, exhausted with worry, he fell asleep. The next morning he was awoken by a knocking at his door. There was a

stranger there. "I have a message for you," the man said.

"What message?" asked Ajib.

"Your wife is safe."

Ajib felt fear and rage churn in his stomach like black bile. "What ransom would you have?" he asked.

"Ten thousand dinars."

"That is more than all I possess!" Ajib exclaimed.

"Do not haggle with me," said the robber. "I have seen you spend money like others pour water."

Ajib dropped to his knees. "I have been wasteful. I swear by the name of the Prophet that I do not have that much," he said.

The robber looked at him closely. "Gather all the money you have," he said, "and have it here tomorrow at this same hour. If I believe you are holding back, your wife will die. If I believe you to be honest, my men will return her to you."

Ajib could see no other choice. "Agreed," he said, and the robber left.

The next day he went to the banker and withdrew all the money that remained. He gave it to the robber, who gauged the desperation in Ajib's eyes and was satisfied. The robber did as he promised, and that evening Taahira was returned.

After they had embraced, Taahira said, "I didn't believe you would pay so much money for me."

"I could not take pleasure in it without you," said Ajib, and he was surprised to realize it was true. "But now I regret that I cannot buy you what you deserve."

"You need never buy me anything again," she said.

Ajib bowed his head. "I feel as if I have been punished for my misdeeds."

"What misdeeds?" asked Taahira, but Ajib said nothing. "I did not ask

you this before,” she said. “But I know you did not inherit all the money you gained. Tell me: did you steal it?”

“No,” said Ajib, unwilling to admit the truth to her or himself. “It was given to me.”

“A loan, then?”

“No, it does not need to be repaid.”

“And you don’t wish to pay it back?” Taahira was shocked. “So you are content that this other man paid for our wedding? That he paid my ransom?” She seemed on the verge of tears. “Am I your wife then, or this other man’s?”

“You are my wife,” he said.

“How can I be, when my very life is owed to another?”

“I would not have you doubt my love,” said Ajib. “I swear to you that I will pay back the money, to the last dirham.”

And so Ajib and Taahira moved back into Ajib’s old house and began saving their money. Both of them went to work for Taahira’s brother the apothecary, and when he eventually became a perfumer to the wealthy, Ajib and Taahira took over the business of selling remedies to the ill. It was a good living, but they spent as little as they could, living modestly and repairing damaged furnishings instead of buying new. For years, Ajib smiled whenever he dropped a coin into the chest, telling Taahira that it was a reminder of how much he valued her. He would say that even after the chest was full, it would be a bargain.

But it is not easy to fill a chest by adding just a few coins at a time, and so what began as thrift gradually turned into miserliness, and prudent decisions were replaced by tight-fisted ones. Worse, Ajib’s and Taahira’s affections for each other faded over time, and each grew to resent the other for the money they could not spend.

In this manner the years passed and Ajib grew older, waiting for the second time that his gold would be taken from him.

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“What a strange and sad story,” I said.

“Indeed,” said Bashaarat. “Would you say that Ajib acted prudently?”

I hesitated before speaking. “It is not my place to judge him,” I said. “He must live with the consequences of his actions, just as I must live with mine.” I was silent for a moment, and then said, “I admire Ajib’s candor, that he told you everything he had done.”

“Ah, but Ajib did not tell me of this as a young man,” said Bashaarat. “After he emerged from the Gate carrying the chest, I did not see him again for another twenty years. Ajib was a much older man when he came to visit me again. He had come home and found his chest gone, and the knowledge that he had paid his debt made him feel he could tell me all that had transpired.”

“Indeed? Did the older Hassan from your first story come to see you as well?”

“No, I heard Hassan’s story from his younger self. The older Hassan never returned to my shop, but in his place I had a different visitor, one who shared a story about Hassan that he himself could never have told me.” Bashaarat proceeded to tell me that visitor’s story, and if it pleases Your Majesty, I will recount it here.

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### The Tale of the Wife and Her Lover

Raniya had been married to Hassan for many years, and they lived the happiest of lives. One day she saw her husband dine with a young man, whom she recognized as the very image of Hassan when she had first married him. So great was her astonishment that she could scarcely keep herself from intruding on their conversation. After the young man left, she demanded that Hassan tell her who he was, and Hassan related to her an incredible tale.

“Have you told him about me?” she asked. “Did you know what lay ahead of us when we first met?”

“I knew I would marry you from the moment I saw you,” Hassan said, smiling, “but not because anyone had told me. Surely, wife, you would not wish to spoil that moment for him?”

So Raniya did not speak to her husband’s younger self, but only

eavesdropped on his conversation, and stole glances at him. Her pulse quickened at the sight of his youthful features; sometimes our memories fool us with their sweetness, but when she beheld the two men seated opposite each other, she could see the fullness of the younger one's beauty without exaggeration. At night, she would lie awake, thinking of it.

Some days after Hassan had bid farewell to his younger self, he left Cairo to conduct business with a merchant in Damascus. In his absence Raniya found the shop that Hassan had described to her, and stepped through the Gate of Years to the Cairo of her youth.

She remembered where he had lived back then, and so was easily able to find the young Hassan and follow him. As she watched him, she felt a desire stronger than she had felt in years for the older Hassan, so vivid were her recollections of their youthful lovemaking. She had always been a loyal and faithful wife, but here was an opportunity that would never be available again. Resolving to act on this desire, Raniya rented a house, and in subsequent days bought furnishings for it.

Once the house was ready, she followed Hassan discreetly while she tried to gather enough boldness to approach him. In the jewelers' market, she watched as he went to a jeweler, showed him a necklace set with ten gemstones, and asked him how much he would pay for it. Raniya recognized it as one Hassan had given to her in the days after their wedding; she had not known he had once tried to sell it. She stood a short distance away and listened, pretending to look at some rings.

"Bring it back tomorrow, and I will pay you a thousand dinars," said the jeweler. Young Hassan agreed to the price, and left.

As she watched him leave, Raniya overheard two men talking nearby:

"Did you see that necklace? It is one of ours."

"Are you certain?" asked the other.

"I am. That is the bastard who dug up our chest."

"Let us tell our captain about him. After this fellow has sold his necklace, we will take his money, and more."

The two men left without noticing Raniya, who stood with her heart racing but her body motionless, like a deer after a tiger has passed. She realized that the treasure Hassan had dug up must have belonged to a

band of thieves, and these men were two of its members. They were now observing the jewelers of Cairo to identify the person who had taken their loot.

Raniya knew that since she possessed the necklace, the young Hassan could not have sold it. She also knew that the thieves could not have killed Hassan. But it could not be Allah's will for her to do nothing. Allah must have brought her here so that he might use her as his instrument.

Raniya returned to the Gate of Years, stepped through to her own day, and at her house found the necklace in her jewelry box. Then she used the Gate of Years again, but instead of entering it from the left side, she entered it from the right, so that she visited the Cairo of twenty years later. There she sought out her older self, now an aged woman. The older Raniya greeted her warmly, and retrieved the necklace from her own jewelry box. The two women then rehearsed how they would assist the young Hassan.

The next day, the two thieves were back with a third man, whom Raniya assumed was their captain. They all watched as Hassan presented the necklace to the jeweler.

As the jeweler examined it, Raniya walked up and said, "What a coincidence! Jeweler, I wish to sell a necklace just like that." She brought out her necklace from a purse she carried.

"This is remarkable," said the jeweler. "I have never seen two necklaces more similar."

Then the aged Raniya walked up. "What do I see? Surely my eyes deceive me!" And with that she brought out a third identical necklace. "The seller sold it to me with the promise that it was unique. This proves him a liar."

"Perhaps you should return it," said Raniya.

"That depends," said the aged Raniya. She asked Hassan, "How much is he paying you for it?"

"A thousand dinars," said Hassan, bewildered.

"Really! Jeweler, would you care to buy this one too?"

"I must reconsider my offer," said the jeweler.

While Hassan and the aged Raniya bargained with the jeweler, Raniya stepped back just far enough to hear the captain berate the other thieves. "You fools," he said. "It is a common necklace. You would have us kill half the jewelers in Cairo and bring the guardsmen down upon our heads." He slapped their heads and led them off.

Raniya returned her attention to the jeweler, who had withdrawn his offer to buy Hassan's necklace. The older Raniya said, "Very well. I will try to return it to the man who sold it to me." As the older woman left, Raniya could tell that she smiled beneath her veil.

Raniya turned to Hassan. "It appears that neither of us will sell a necklace today."

"Another day, perhaps," said Hassan.

"I shall take mine back to my house for safekeeping," said Raniya. "Would you walk with me?"

Hassan agreed, and walked with Raniya to the house she had rented. Then she invited him in, and offered him wine, and after they had both drunk some, she led him to her bedroom. She covered the windows with heavy curtains and extinguished all lamps so that the room was as dark as night. Only then did she remove her veil and take him to bed.

Raniya had been flush with anticipation for this moment, and so was surprised to find that Hassan's movements were clumsy and awkward. She remembered their wedding night very clearly; he had been confident, and his touch had taken her breath away. She knew Hassan's first meeting with the young Raniya was not far away, and for a moment did not understand how this fumbling boy could change so quickly. And then of course the answer was clear.

So every afternoon for many days, Raniya met Hassan at her rented house and instructed him in the art of love, and in doing so she demonstrated that, as is often said, women are Allah's most wondrous creation. She told him, "The pleasure you give is returned in the pleasure you receive," and inwardly she smiled as she thought of how true her words really were. Before long, he gained the expertise she remembered, and she took greater enjoyment in it than she had as a young woman.

All too soon, the day arrived when Raniya told the young Hassan that it was time for her to leave. He knew better than to press her for her

reasons, but asked her if they might ever see each other again. She told him, gently, no. Then she sold the furnishings to the house's owner, and returned through the Gate of Years to the Cairo of her own day.

When the older Hassan returned from his trip to Damascus, Raniya was home waiting for him. She greeted him warmly, but kept her secrets to herself.

\* \* \* \*

I was lost in my own thoughts when Bashaarat finished this story, until he said, "I see that this story has intrigued you in a way the others did not."

"You see clearly," I admitted. "I realize now that, even though the past is unchangeable, one may encounter the unexpected when visiting it."

"Indeed. Do you now understand why I say the future and the past are the same? We cannot change either, but we can know both more fully."

"I do understand; you have opened my eyes, and now I wish to use the Gate of Years. What price do you ask?"

He waved his hand. "I do not sell passage through the Gate," he said. "Allah guides whom he wishes to my shop, and I am content to be an instrument of his will."

Had it been another man, I would have taken his words to be a negotiating ploy, but after all that Bashaarat had told me, I knew that he was sincere. "Your generosity is as boundless as your learning," I said, and bowed. "If there is ever a service that a merchant of fabrics might provide for you, please call upon me."

"Thank you. Let us talk now about your trip. There are some matters we must speak of before you visit the Baghdad of twenty years hence."

"I do not wish to visit the future," I told him. "I would step through in the other direction, to revisit my youth."

"Ah, my deepest apologies. This Gate will not take you there. You see, I built this Gate only a week ago. Twenty years ago, there was no doorway here for you to step out of."

My dismay was so great that I must have sounded like a forlorn child. I said, "But where does the other side of the Gate lead?" and walked

around the circular doorway to face its opposite side.

Bashaarat walked around the doorway to stand beside me. The view through the Gate appeared identical to the view outside it, but when he extended his hand to reach through, it stopped as if it met an invisible wall. I looked more closely, and noticed a brass lamp set on a table. Its flame did not flicker, but was as fixed and unmoving as if the room were trapped in clearest amber.

“What you see here is the room as it appeared last week,” said Bashaarat. “In some twenty years’ time, this left side of the Gate will permit entry, allowing people to enter from this direction and visit their past. Or,” he said, leading me back to the side of the doorway he had first shown me, “we can enter from the right side now, and visit them ourselves. But I’m afraid this Gate will never allow visits to the days of your youth.”

“What about the Gate of Years you had in Cairo?” I asked.

He nodded. “That Gate still stands. My son now runs my shop there.”

“So I could travel to Cairo, and use the Gate to visit the Cairo of twenty years ago. From there I could travel back to Baghdad.”

“Yes, you could make that journey, if you so desire.”

“I do,” I said. “Will you tell me how to find your shop in Cairo?”

“We must speak of some things first,” said Bashaarat. “I will not ask your intentions, being content to wait until you are ready to tell me. But I would remind you that what is made cannot be unmade.”

“I know,” I said.

“And that you cannot avoid the ordeals that are assigned to you. What Allah gives you, you must accept.”

“I remind myself of that every day of my life.”

“Then it is my honor to assist you in whatever way I can,” he said.

He brought out some paper and a pen and inkpot and began writing. “I shall write for you a letter to aid you on your journey.” He folded the letter, dribbled some candle wax over the edge, and pressed his ring against it. “When you reach Cairo, give this to my son, and he will let you enter the

Gate of Years there.”

A merchant such as myself must be well-versed in expressions of gratitude, but I had never before been as effusive in giving thanks as I was to Bashaarat, and every word was heartfelt. He gave me directions to his shop in Cairo, and I assured him I would tell him all upon my return. As I was about to leave his shop, a thought occurred to me. “Because the Gate of Years you have here opens to the future, you are assured that the Gate and this shop will be remain standing for twenty years or more.”

“Yes, that is true,” said Bashaarat.

I began to ask him if he had met his older self, but then I bit back my words. If the answer was no, it was surely because his older self was dead, and I would be asking him if he knew the date of his death. Who was I to make such an inquiry, when this man was granting me a boon without asking my intentions? I saw from his expression that he knew what I had meant to ask, and I bowed my head in humble apology. He indicated his acceptance with a nod, and I returned home to make arrangements.

The caravan took two months to reach Cairo. As for what occupied my mind during the journey, Your Majesty, I now tell you what I had not told Bashaarat. I was married once, twenty years before, to a woman named Najya. Her figure swayed as gracefully as a willow bough and her face was as lovely as the moon, but it was her kind and tender nature that captured my heart. I had just begun my career as a merchant when we married, and we were not wealthy, but did not feel the lack.

We had been married only a year when I was to travel to Basra to meet with a ship’s captain. I had an opportunity to profit by trading in slaves, but Najya did not approve. I reminded her that the Koran does not forbid the owning of slaves as long as one treats them well, and that even the Prophet owned some. But she said there was no way I could know how my buyers would treat their slaves, and that it was better to sell goods than men.

On the morning of my departure, Najya and I argued. I spoke harshly to her, using words that it shames me to recall, and I beg Your Majesty’s forgiveness if I do not repeat them here. I left in anger, and never saw her again. She was badly injured when the wall of a mosque collapsed, some days after I left. She was taken to the bimaristan, but the physicians could not save her, and she died soon after. I did not learn of her death until I returned a week later, and I felt as if I had killed her with my own hand.

Can the torments of Hell be worse than what I endured in the days

that followed? It seemed likely that I would find out, so near to death did my anguish take me. And surely the experience must be similar, for like infernal fire, grief burns but does not consume; instead, it makes the heart vulnerable to further suffering.

Eventually my period of lamentation ended, and I was left a hollow man, a bag of skin with no innards. I freed the slaves I had bought and became a fabric merchant. Over the years I became wealthy, but I never remarried. Some of the men I did business with tried to match me with a sister or a daughter, telling me that the love of a woman can make you forget your pains. Perhaps they are right, but it cannot make you forget the pain you caused another. Whenever I imagined myself marrying another woman, I remembered the look of hurt in Najya's eyes when I last saw her, and my heart was closed to others.

I spoke to a mullah about what I had done, and it was he who told me that repentance and atonement erase the past. I repented and atoned as best I knew how; for twenty years I lived as an upright man, I offered prayers and fasted and gave alms to those less fortunate and made a pilgrimage to Mecca, and yet I was still haunted by guilt. Allah is all-merciful, so I knew the failing to be mine.

Had Bashaarat asked me, I could not have said what I hoped to achieve. It was clear from his stories that I could not change what I knew to have happened. No one had stopped my younger self from arguing with Najya in our final conversation. But the tale of Raniya, which lay hidden within the tale of Hassan's life without his knowing it, gave me a slim hope: perhaps I might be able to play some part in events while my younger self was away on business.

Could it not be that there had been a mistake, and my Najya had survived? Perhaps it was another woman whose body had been wrapped in a shroud and buried while I was gone. Perhaps I could rescue Najya and bring her back with me to the Baghdad of my own day. I knew it was foolhardy; men of experience say, "Four things do not come back: the spoken word, the sped arrow, the past life, and the neglected opportunity," and I understood the truth of those words better than most. And yet I dared to hope that Allah had judged my twenty years of repentance sufficient, and was now granting me a chance to regain what I had lost.

The caravan journey was uneventful, and after sixty sunrises and three hundred prayers, I reached Cairo. There I had to navigate the city's streets, which are a bewildering maze compared to the harmonious design of the City of Peace. I made my way to the Bayn al-Qasrayn, the main street

that runs through the Fatimid quarter of Cairo. From there I found the street on which Bashaarat's shop was located.

I told the shopkeeper that I had spoken to his father in Baghdad, and gave him the letter Bashaarat had given me. After reading it, he led me into a back room, in whose center stood another Gate of Years, and he gestured for me to enter from its left side.

As I stood before the massive circle of metal, I felt a chill, and chided myself for my nervousness. With a deep breath I stepped through, and found myself in the same room with different furnishings. If not for those, I would not have known the Gate to be different from an ordinary doorway. Then I recognized that the chill I had felt was simply the coolness of the air in this room, for the day here was not as hot as the day I had left. I could feel its warm breeze at my back, coming through the Gate like a sigh.

The shopkeeper followed behind me and called out, "Father, you have a visitor."

A man entered the room, and who should it be but Bashaarat, twenty years younger than when I'd seen him in Baghdad. "Welcome, my lord," he said. "I am Bashaarat."

"You do not know me?" I asked.

"No, you must have met my older self. For me, this is our first meeting, but it is my honor to assist you."

Your Majesty, as befits this chronicle of my shortcomings, I must confess that, so immersed was I in my own woes during the journey from Baghdad, I had not previously realized that Bashaarat had likely recognized me the moment I stepped into his shop. Even as I was admiring his water-clock and brass songbird, he had known that I would travel to Cairo, and likely knew whether I had achieved my goal or not.

The Bashaarat I spoke to now knew none of those things. "I am doubly grateful for your kindness, sir," I said. "My name is Fuwaad ibn Abbas, newly arrived from Baghdad."

Bashaarat's son took his leave, and Bashaarat and I conferred; I asked him the day and month, confirming that there was ample time for me to travel back to the City of Peace, and promised him I would tell him everything when I returned. His younger self was as gracious as his older. "I look forward to speaking with you on your return, and to assisting you

again twenty years from now,” he said.

His words gave me pause. “Had you planned to open a shop in Baghdad before today?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I had been marveling at the coincidence that we met in Baghdad just in time for me to make my journey here, use the Gate, and travel back. But now I wonder if it is perhaps not a coincidence at all. Is my arrival here today the reason that you will move to Baghdad twenty years from now?”

Bashaarat smiled. “Coincidence and intention are two sides of a tapestry, my lord. You may find one more agreeable to look at, but you cannot say one is true and the other is false.”

“Now as ever, you have given me much to think about,” I said.

I thanked him and bid farewell. As I was leaving his shop, I passed a woman entering with some haste. I heard Bashaarat greet her as Raniya, and stopped in surprise.

From just outside the door, I could hear the woman say, “I have the necklace. I hope my older self has not lost it.”

“I am sure you will have kept it safe, in anticipation of your visit,” said Bashaarat.

I realized that this was Raniya from the story Bashaarat had told me. She was on her way to collect her older self so that they might return to the days of their youth, confound some thieves with a doubled necklace, and save their husband. For a moment I was unsure if I were dreaming or awake, because I felt as if I had stepped into a tale, and the thought that I might talk to its players and partake of its events was dizzying. I was tempted to speak, and see if I might play a hidden role in that tale, but then I remembered that my goal was to play a hidden role in my own tale. So I left without a word, and went to arrange passage with a caravan.

It is said, Your Majesty, that Fate laughs at men’s schemes. At first it appeared as if I were the most fortunate of men, for a caravan headed for Baghdad was departing within the month, and I was able to join it. In the weeks that followed I began to curse my luck, because the caravan’s journey was plagued by delays. The wells at a town not far from Cairo were dry, and an expedition had to be sent back for water. At another village, the

soldiers protecting the caravan contracted dysentery, and we had to wait for weeks for their recovery. With each delay, I revised my estimate of when we'd reach Baghdad, and grew increasingly anxious.

Then there were the sandstorms, which seemed like a warning from Allah, and truly caused me to doubt the wisdom of my actions. We had the good fortune to be resting at a caravanserai west of Kufa when the sandstorms first struck, but our stay was prolonged from days to weeks as, time and again, the skies became clear, only to darken again as soon as the camels were reloaded. The day of Najya's accident was fast approaching, and I grew desperate.

I solicited each of the camel drivers in turn, trying to hire one to take me ahead alone, but could not persuade any of them. Eventually I found one willing to sell me a camel at what would have been an exorbitant price under ordinary circumstances, but which I was all too willing to pay. I then struck out on my own.

It will come as no surprise that I made little progress in the storm, but when the winds subsided, I immediately adopted a rapid pace. Without the soldiers that accompanied the caravan, however, I was an easy target for bandits, and sure enough, I was stopped after two days' ride. They took my money and the camel I had purchased, but spared my life, whether out of pity or because they could not be bothered to kill me I do not know. I began walking back to rejoin the caravan, but now the skies tormented me with their cloudlessness, and I suffered from the heat. By the time the caravan found me, my tongue was swollen and my lips were as cracked as mud baked by the sun. After that I had no choice but to accompany the caravan at its usual pace.

Like a fading rose that drops its petals one by one, my hopes dwindled with each passing day. By the time the caravan reached the City of Peace, I knew it was too late, but the moment we rode through the city gates, I asked the guardsmen if they had heard of a mosque collapsing. The first guardsman I spoke to had not, and for a heartbeat I dared to hope that I had misremembered the date of the accident, and that I had in fact arrived in time.

Then another guardsman told me that a mosque had indeed collapsed just yesterday in the Karkh quarter. His words struck me with the force of the executioner's axe. I had traveled so far, only to receive the worst news of my life a second time.

I walked to the mosque, and saw the piles of bricks where there had

once been a wall. It was a scene that had haunted my dreams for twenty years, but now the image remained even after I opened my eyes, and with a clarity sharper than I could endure. I turned away and walked without aim, blind to what was around me, until I found myself before my old house, the one where Najya and I had lived. I stood in the street in front of it, filled with memory and anguish.

I do not know how much time had passed when I became aware that a young woman had walked up to me. "My lord," she said, "I'm looking for the house of Fuwaad ibn Abbas."

"You have found it," I said.

"Are you Fuwaad ibn Abbas, my lord?"

"I am, and I ask you, please leave me be."

"My lord, I beg your forgiveness. My name is Maimuna, and I assist the physicians at the bimaristan. I tended to your wife before she died."

I turned to look at her. "You tended to Najya?"

"I did, my lord. I am sworn to deliver a message to you from her."

"What message?"

"She wished me to tell you that her last thoughts were of you. She wished me to tell you that while her life was short, it was made happy by the time she spent with you."

She saw the tears streaming down my cheeks, and said, "Forgive me if my words cause you pain, my lord."

"There is nothing to forgive, child. Would that I had the means to pay you as much as this message is worth to me, because a lifetime of thanks would still leave me in your debt."

"Grief owes no debt," she said. "Peace be upon you, my lord."

"Peace be upon you," I said.

She left, and I wandered the streets for hours, crying tears of release. All the while I thought on the truth of Bashaarat's words: past and future are the same, and we cannot change either, only know them more fully. My

journey to the past had changed nothing, but what I had learned had changed everything, and I understood that it could not have been otherwise. If our lives are tales that Allah tells, then we are the audience as well as the players, and it is by living these tales that we receive their lessons.

Night fell, and it was then that the city's guardsmen found me, wandering the streets after curfew in my dusty clothes, and asked who I was. I told them my name and where I lived, and the guardsmen brought me to my neighbors to see if they knew me, but they did not recognize me, and I was taken to jail.

I told the guard captain my story, and he found it entertaining, but did not credit it, for who would? Then I remembered some news from my time of grief twenty years before, and told him that Your Majesty's grandson would be born an albino. Some days later, word of the infant's condition reached the captain, and he brought me to the governor of the quarter. When the governor heard my story, he brought me here to the palace, and when your lord chamberlain heard my story, he in turn brought me here to the throne room, so that I might have the infinite privilege of recounting it to Your Majesty.

Now my tale has caught up to my life, coiled as they both are, and the direction they take next is for Your Majesty to decide. I know many things that will happen here in Baghdad over the next twenty years, but nothing about what awaits me now. I have no money for the journey back to Cairo and the Gate of Years there, yet I count myself fortunate beyond measure, for I was given the opportunity to revisit my past mistakes, and I have learned what remedies Allah allows. I would be honored to relate everything I know of the future, if Your Majesty sees fit to ask, but for myself, the most precious knowledge I possess is this:

Nothing erases the past. There is repentance, there is atonement, and there is forgiveness. That is all, but that is enough.