

**The Charm**  
**(a short story)**  
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Her neighbor said, trying to be comforting, «What's the matter with you, Um Safi? Why make such a thing of it? You think this is the first time a man has taken a second wife?»

«How can he do this to me?» cried Um Safi, wiping her tears. «If I'd heard this from anyone but you, Khadooj, I wouldn't have believed it. I would have said no, it's gossip... vicious...» She stopped. «Oh», she cried again, «how can he do this to me, Abu Safi, after twenty-five years of marriage!»

Khadooj sniffed sarcastically. «How indeed? Sometimes I wonder about you, Um Safi. You should know by this time that trusting a man is as stupid as trying to carry water in a sieve». Then her manner changed. «But look, my dear, there's no time to waste. I'll take you to Um Zeki. She'll give you a charm to stop everything before it is too late!»

«But how?» Um Safi frowned. «You just said his wedding was set for tonight».

«Yes, yes, but Um Zeki can do wonders».

«In such a short time? In a few hours?»

«That woman can do anything, believe me. She's known for stopping weddings at the last minute, for bringing husbands and wives back together after they've fought for years. She's even managed to separate the closest and most loving of couples».

«But how?»

«Does it matter how? She just does it. But there's no point in even going to see her unless you have a gold lira. No work unless she's paid in advance. And it's a fixed price: one gold lira per job».

Um Safi hesitated. «I have a gold lira», she said.

«All right, let's go».

Um Safi rushed to dress, then she opened her own private chest and took out the gold lira. For a moment she held it tightly in her hand. Years ago she had promised herself never to part with it, this gold lira that was heavy with memories and had become a symbol of her own blessings and good fortune.

She had had many difficult times in her life, bad days, hard days, but she had never considered spending the golden lira. No, it was not a simple matter to use it.

Whenever she rearranged her chest, she would take the gold lira from its box, deep in the folds of garments. Just looking at the piece filled her with happiness, and often she would let her imagination bear her away, into the past.

Twenty-five years ago. The day she had come to this house as a bride. Many times during those years she had sat, the gold lira in her hand, looking first at the winking gold and then at the courtyard where she had worked and lived and raised her children. And she would see the courtyard as it had been on her wedding day, filled with festively dressed guests, the lemon and bitter orange trees decorated with lighted lanterns. When she crossed the threshold for the first time, she had been lucky: the traditional bit of dough on a green fig leaf, handed to her by a cousin, had stuck successfully to the wall of the courtyard. Her family had smiled and congratulated each other on this good omen, an omen that their daughter would settle peacefully in her new home and that her life would be filled with joy.

«The sacred words of Yaseen will protect you», the girls had sung. «O flower of the grove, you are the bloom of rose, of iris, that crowns the head of the sultan». The women of the bridegroom's family had welcomed her into the courtyard with joyous cries of ululation. «No, you're not too tall to be ugly», they sang, «nor short enough to be squat. You're as good as the best halawa, fresh and sweet, sweet». The groom's mother had taken her hand and led her to the place of honor, a platform decked with flowers, made comfortable with carpets and satin cushions. And all the time she had remembered to keep her eyes lowered modestly, so as not to be, as they said, «one of those impertinent brides who gazes into the faces of the guests».

But still she had managed to steal a glance at the courtyard, realized she would live there for the rest of her life, and had loved it then as she loved it now: a spacious courtyard with luxuriant shade trees and high arched doors with a fountain whose jet of sparkling water rose into the air and fell back, splashing, into a small silvery pool. The lilac tree had bloomed for the wedding day, its branches heavy with clusters of pale mauve flowers. When one of the girls' pretty heads touched the branches, blossoms floated gently down to

decorate the courtyard floor with lavender petals. The windows and doors were festooned with jasmine, its scent stronger and sweeter than all of the perfumes worn by the wedding guests.

The twenty young girls had carried decorated candles and had circled the fountain, the flames of the candles leaping as they sang the traditional bridal song:

Blessings on the bride!

God's blessings on the bride!

O beauty,

O beauty,

O rose blossoming in the garden.

Um Safi sighed. She remembered herself then, how proud she had been of her beauty, circling with the girls, proud of her fine blonde hair that fell over her shoulders, almost reaching her knees. The mashita had twined glinting golden threads through her hair and a long transparent veil of white net had been fastened on her head with a wreath of lemon blossoms, the symbol of purity and virginity, of innocence.

Shouts and chants of many people outside had signaled the arrival of the groom.

An old lady had said to her, «They're singing that marriage is a harness for men, a chain, but that real men can handle it. They're singing to your husband because he's leaving the company of bachelors. But they say that if he cares well for his future wife and his home, they will shout congratulations!»

The women's joyous cries of ululation rose higher.

From under her eyelashes Um Safi had looked toward the door and seen her future husband for the first time, coming toward her, surrounded by members of his family. She cast her eyes down. A young relative of hers had whispered, «Don't forget. Don't talk to him till he gives you something for your hair».

He was before her. The mashita put her hands in his. She felt her chest rising and falling alarmingly, her heart pounding. Until this day, twenty-five years later, she could not explain that strange disturbance in her body. Had it been fear, awe, joy? Or all of these?

They had entered the bridal chamber. The door closed behind them. They were alone. She sat beside

her husband. She felt again that strange disturbance in her chest. He was nervous, too, she thought, for he was fingering his worry beads. A moment of thick, embarrassed silence passed. Then he came close, took one of her hands and uttered, in a soft, gentle voice, the traditional first sentence of a husband to his new wife.

«You and I— against the world!» He paused. «Or is it you and the world against me?»

She almost looked up at him, but remembered the words of her young relative and turned her face away coquettishly.

He had smiled. «Oh yes,» he said. «Now I remember». He had lifted a lock of her light hair and kissed it. «Your fair hair is like silk, my love. I shall cherish it with my life. It has no price but gold». He reached into his pocket, took out a gold lira, and put it into her hand.

At that moment she had vowed to herself that she would save the gold piece as a token of blessing, of good fortune, in memory of this wedding day. She had raised her head, meeting his eyes for the first time, and had answered him, speaking clearly and directly from the depths of her heart.

«You and I— against the world!»

She had honored that vow. For twenty-five years she had stood with him against the world, a good wife, faithful, loving, caring. She had borne him nine children, four young men now as straight and tall as palm trees, five young girls, each as beautiful as the moon, she thought. And how could he do this terrible thing to her now? Take another wife? How could he? How could he forget those years?

Maybe KhadooJ was right. Men were faithless, deceitful. She had never believed that, but she realized now that her husband had changed over the years. After his uncle Bakri had died and left him the mill and the orchard, he had never been the same. He became more cross, more irritable, so short-tempered that the smallest matter seemed to annoy him. He had withdrawn more and more from family life, and was always creating excuses to be away from her. How stupid she had been! How foolish not to have noticed that something was going on! She had always had complete faith

in him and had never suspected he might be thinking of someone else.

The gold lira. Yes, she would spend it. She had no doubts now. She went to KhadooJ and said she was ready to see Um Zeki.

Um Zeki took the gold piece.

«After the evening prayer», she said, «go alone to the roof of your house. Circle the roof seven times, repeating this charm each time».

Um Safi nodded. But she felt oddly numb. She had done something she had sworn never to do. She had given up her gold piece, the piece heavy with memory, all for a charm to stop the marriage of her husband.

Her children said, «Mother, what's wrong? Mother, your face is so pale and sad». She did not answer. She was waiting for the call to evening prayer to end. As the muezzin's cry died away, she stole away from the children, up on to the roof, as Um Zeki had instructed her.

Rain poured down. The night was full of darkness and foreboding. Fear filled her suddenly; she had not expected to be afraid. She was trembling, but she straightened up in the rain and began the first round, chanting as she had been told to chant:

«I send you Hani and Mani and the fiercest jinn of all, Khohramani the ruthless,

In his rose tarboosh and his leather slippers  
To bring you back, now, now!  
In any way, in any way,  
From wherever you are,  
Quickly, quickly, quickly!»

As she finished the verse, a bolt of thunder roared above her head. Lightning cracked the black sky, the rain fell in torrents. Um Safi froze with terror, she could not move, she felt she was nailed in place on the dark, wet roof. It seemed as though she saw before her ghosts of those evil jinns, Hani, Mani, Khohramani, in horrid glimmers of horns and tails. She thought she could hear in the distance the howling of rabid dogs and the crying of the owl.

Her heart was pounding so hard she felt it might drop down in her body or stop beating forever. «Oh, what

have I done?» She moaned to herself. «These jinns are dreadful creatures». She cried out, «O Abu Safi, beloved husband, what have I done to you?» He was the father of her nine children after all, and still the most handsome man on the street, despite his age of forty-five. How could she have taken it into her head to condemn him to this horror; he would come to some terrible harm and she would lose him forever.

«No, no,» she cried. «May God forgive me for the evil I have committed. Please, God, let Abu Safi live safe and sound, even if he does marry another. May God forgive me!» And she added, «And please compensate me for the loss of my gold lira».

Um Safi tried to move from the place where she stood, crying in the rain. She pushed along slowly, feeling her way with hesitant steps through the darkness along the edge of the wet roof. Then she stumbled, her foot slipped, and she catapulted down, down into the courtyard below.

But she did not die. Her fall was broken by the full branches of the old lilac tree, the tree she had watered and cared for during the twenty-five years of her marriage.

She had cried out as she fell, and her children rushed to help. Safi, the oldest son, lifted her gently down and carried her to her own bed.

«What in God's name is the matter with you, Mother?» he asked. «What were you wandering around on the roof for on a night like this?»

Um Safi turned away from him and from the other children who had gathered round her bed. She was ashamed to tell them about the charm, but she could not help saying abruptly, «It's because of your father. He's taking another wife. His wedding is tonight».

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A shocked silence. Silence like the dead moment before a storm. Then the storm broke. The children all began to talk at the same time, and the babble of agitated voices grew loud, louder. Safi stood up, screaming and cursing and shouting so his words were incomprehensible. He was running out of the bedroom when

his sister called, «Safi! Where are you going? How can you run off with Mother in such a state?»

«I'm going to him», he shouted, «to bring him here».

Um Safi gathered herself together. «Bring your father here? Why? What for? Where is he?»

«I don't know, Mother, but I'll find him, wherever he is, and I'll bring him back here. Wherever he is», he added, shouting wildly.

Um Safi opened her mouth and shut it again. «So that's the way it is», she said to herself. «That's the spirit, this Khohramani, the fiercest of the jinns». He had always been there, her oldest son, her strongest son. He would have helped her, but she had never asked him. She had not even thought about him. And she had wasted her gold lira and destroyed her memories.

«No, my son», she said finally. «God bless you for thinking of it, but don't confront your father now. You know how stubborn he is. I've asked for God's help. Please, don't make a scene, Safi. Don't give the neighbors something to chew on...»

Safi interrupted. «Don't be silly, Mother. People are already gossiping about us. So what difference does that make? Do you want me to let my father get married again so you can commit suicide and all of us can stand by and watch?»

He slammed the door behind him.

The room grew quiet. Safi had voiced everyone's worst fears, including those of his mother. Um Safi closed her eyes. A strange peace was creeping over her as she realized that her son had grown strong and independent; he was now a man perfectly capable of defending her if she needed him.

In a short time Safi returned with his father.

Um Safi closed her eyes and pretended to be unconscious. Abu Safi stood at his wife's bed. He could not meet the nine pairs of accusing eyes, and so he bowed his head in humiliation and murmured:

«There is no strength but the strength of God.  
There is no power, but from God.

Fate, destiny; what is written on the forehead the eye must see.

We pray to God, we turn always to God, in his mercy».

But even the holy words spoken eloquently could not make those accusing eyes disappear. Abu Safi's sense of humiliation and shame was almost too much to bear.

«I must get the doctor for Um Safi», he said, and ran out of the house. When he came back, the children would have calmed down, he told himself. The doctor's presence would help smooth over the embarrassment of this day.

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By morning, news of the events in Um Safi and Abu Safi's house had spread through the neighborhood. The women came to inquire after Um Safi. She felt poorly from the effects of her fall, but cheered up a bit when Khadooq came and whispered in her ear: «You see, Abu Safi's marriage has been stopped. The stream returns to its bed». She smiled triumphantly. «Didn't I tell you? Um Zeki is a wonder. Her charm never fails».

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