

The flask
or
The Right Side
of Humanity

To my mother.
Jewish by descent;
Protestant by choice;
accepted by marriage into a family
of stubborn Catholic traditions.
From her I learned that pride of belonging
need not ever be exclusive.

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*In the name of God, Most Compassionate
and Merciful.*

*May the peace of our King, the Holy One,
be with you always,
enlightening your mind, guiding your arm.*

My Valiant Friend,

Yesterday your messenger reached me at home. His unexpected appearance stirred me deeply. I'd missed this dear place for so long, and hoped to remain hidden here forever, from everyone and everything, even from my own eyes.

The letter he delivered lay untouched on my desk all night, staring from out of the darkness into the shadows of my conscience.

But now that the first rays of the morning sun are moving across its pages, I too am called to rise and respond. Though tired and deeply sorrowful, I will try to give you what you seek.

I must begin by saying that I cannot satisfy your request. I no longer have with me the object that was put into my safekeeping, and that you ask me now to return to you. Having to confess this gives me great pain, but far greater is the pain of

having to remember the circumstances under which I lost what you most desire; you will soon understand why the retelling of this sorry tale so burdens my soul.

Know that you are the first person to whom, after so long, I am opening myself. Your friendship enables me to do so; that and the thought that I owe this effort to myself as well, however unworthy I may be.

You know that I was in the City when the attack began. The images that still remain alive within me of that disaster are the clouds of written pages rising into the dust and spread by the wind.

Those of us who survived the onslaught wandered aimlessly, driven like lifeless ghosts through the streets. The papers released from the Archives scattered too, becoming hopelessly illegible, together with the lives of the thousands of people whose stories they told, the dust and dampness eradicating even their memory.

But there was more: What I saw scratched out that day was the History of Civilization, or at least a valuable part of it, the part that those writings preserved. Great men who were once alive are now dead forever, for even the means by which we might have been reminded of their deeds are lost.

Shreds of our history ended up in the rivers that surround the City and make it an island. I watched, paralyzed, as they pressed against the bases of the bridges, the tides and wind heaping them up into swollen mounds of tattered rags.

I never thought I would live to see such a thing, that I would witness the collapse of what had once been the Centre of the World and of Trade. On the contrary, I was not only watching the fall, in my mind's eye I was even recording its details. I, a man of Law and Letters, a man who, until that day, had harboured an ambition to write the History of the World (or at least to write "of" that History), felt immensely greater grief for those tattered pages than for the men lying dead all around me.

Oh, how ashamed I am of that!

Well then, you know that I was in Baghdad during the first days of assault. I had arrived from Egypt, leaving behind the palace of Kalil's mother (and the tasks of tutor) to offer the Caliph my services as a magistrate. I carried with me from Alexandria the flask of Fakhr ad-Din.

What fools we were, believing the high white walls of al-Mansur would always defend us! The truth is, the higher the wall, the more it attracts the enemy from afar.

When the attack came, I did not rush to defend

the City, as your army defended Damascus, driving back Kublai Khan- a clear victory, for which I am only now congratulating you!

No, I'm not a man of arms. In those terrible days, my first and only thought was to find a safe shelter outside the residence of the Caliph, and then try to flee across the river.

I had chosen to move to Baghdad in the first place, not because I aspired to something for myself, but for the sake of the flask. I had hoped to find the key to its meaning in the notes of the geographer al-Idrisi, copies of which were stored in the Great Library.

I trusted that, once found, those notes would satisfy my fervent desire to understand entirely the reason for the flask's existence, and the meaning of its message.

But I realize now that I have never before revealed to you the Flask's origins.

So let me start at the beginning.

What you do know is that years ago the Emir Fakhr ad-Din suggested to the King al-Salih Ayyub that he create a gift for his good friend, Frederick, Emperor of the Rumi. King al-Salih assented and the Emir personally supervised the making of the object, going to Damascus to hire the best goldsmiths.

But then that gift, a magnificent flask, was never sent, and at the Emir's death it was entrusted to me.

You write that Manfred, Frederick's son, will be crowned in Palermo's Cathedral at the end of summer. I think your decision to send an embassy and gifts to confirm your friendship with him on that occasion is a wise one. And it is natural you thought of what had already been prepared for his father, an offering worthy of a King! Alas, I regret that you will have to be satisfied with sending a pair of fast cheetahs to gladden the Genoard gardens. For the sad truth is that I exchanged that rare jewel for my very life- a most unworthy trade, I agree! But I now must tell you exactly what happened.

It was the Friday after the entry of the Mongols into the city, just before sunset. I was wandering the alleys of the bazaar behind the Grand Mosque. I had hidden that huge flask in a bag and, to boost my courage, concealed a dagger under my poor caftan.

"...Who keeps me is the Defender, the Guide, the Leader of the Frontier..." The merchant was reading the inscription on the Flask, an inscription I had read over to myself many times before, seeking some clue to its deeper meaning, some hint of its true import. How unbearable to hear those same words flowing now from the mouth of a man who was even more unworthy of proclaiming them than I!

Though I had no doubt that he had already decided on a price, he still insisted on examining the Flask further, drawing it closer to the light. I was sure that he was using this time not to examine the object for sale, but to evaluate the seller standing in front of him. How urgent was my need? How valuable a bargain would be secured that evening?

He tried to engage me in conversation, which I avoided, though not altogether. I succeeded only in offering harmless pleasantries to disguise my distress. For the more time that passed, the more tormented I became, against all my advantage.

So, finally, I stopped him, and demanded three pieces of gold. This was far less than the flask's value, but enough to pay the ferryman for a trip across the Tigris that very night. I knew immediately that telling him my price was a mistake, but I also knew that I couldn't bear more haggling. I was afraid, and incapable of hiding it.

The merchant didn't reply, but immediately began finding fault with the object and its workmanship. He said that if he bought it he would not be able to sell it, because the times were difficult, the workmanship poor, because anything bearing likenesses of the Prophet Jesus (may God bless and glorify him) drew no buyers

outside of Damascus, because, because, because...

Shameless crook!

He was turning over in his hands a piece of art that he would have never been able even to approach in happier times. And yet he would deny me three poor gold pieces, which were my only hope for preserving my life.

In my agitation, and to avoid staring at him, I began to look around.

The four walls of the shop were lined with long shelves rising from ground level to high above the floor, blocking a small window through which daylight might have passed. They were stacked with hundreds of metal objects, all arranged according to color, shape, and size. Opposite the door that opened to the street was a curtained passageway that interrupted the disciplined line of the shelving.

What little light there was in that hovel was focused by the white ceiling onto a bench in the middle of the room, around which we were standing. Heaps of unsorted rags and bags of goods lay sprawled in one corner. The man had been recommended to me as an expert goldsmith and art merchant, but he did not appear to be a craftsman himself: No table for carving was in his shop. This was a person capable only of buying and selling.

Now I saw his fingers exploring one by one the saintly figures on the flask's outer ring. I knew them all by name: Gabriel the Archangel; Myriam, the Virgin Mother; Joseph and John; and then all the others, ending with the twenty-fifth, the mysterious Defender, his hand raised in a sign of peace, the only figure armed with a sword.

I had no idea if he could recognize the names, read the symbols, or understand its numbers: 3, 7, 9, 25...

To cut a circle into sections that were not multiples of the Houses of the Sky; to break it into five equal parts, and divide those again by five, is not something a goldsmith could do, but a task for a mathematician. The Emir, himself, must have designed the flask, not some talented craftsman in Damascus!

What al-Salih Ayyub wished to do was this: Persuade Frederick to return to Jerusalem as a pilgrim, without weapons, before King Louis of France could gather his fleet against us at Aguas Mortas. He intended to offer Frederick the same throne that ten years before his father, al-Kamil, had given to him, to be a Guarantor of Peace.

So it was that the throne of Jerusalem, not a simple gift presented by ambassadors, was the

true and unexpected present planned for the Emperor!

The design of the flask was clear. It showed in detail a fortified route to the Holy City, the same city that King David decided to call in his own language the *Place of Peace*, even though it was so often the object of men's desire for war. It was a complex design, in which I played only the smallest part, for I was never permitted to entirely understand it.

But that the Sicilian in his wisdom would have certainly deciphered it, is sure. He would have been able to compare its eloquent tracks with those that filled the representation of the world in his possession. I mean the Map of the World, the silver "planisphere" produced by al-Idrisi for King Rujari after his many travels. Yes, I saw it once myself, during a visit to Palermo, decorating the Starry Sky Hall, on the top of the Palace of al-Aziz.

So this was my situation: I found myself in the middle of a war but with a secret to decipher, a secret my superiors, with the best of intentions, had not permitted me to know. And now the books that might have enlightened me were burned and reduced to ashes.

What a fool I was! Despite the violence I had witnessed, I still firmly believed that in the History of Humanity one see drawn out the

design of God. Humanity had always appeared to me as divided into two parts. Obviously I thought of myself as dwelling on the Right Side, because of God's blessings towards me.

But as I struggled to determine the nature of the other side, I found myself more and more in agreement with the good Emir who had educated me, and with all the other wise people whom I have had the good fortune to encounter in my life. Their wisdom led me to refrain from representing the World as a place divided between Rumi and True Believers. How foolish to think that we fulfil God's will by removing His other creatures from this Earth.

What blasphemy!

Still, the world I imagined living in could only be defended by a Wall. Beyond it were confined those we used to call "men of the desert", violent and aggressive people, their hearts dry as sand. Ruthless men, primitive, rough, and closed- it didn't matter whether they claimed to be Muslims or Rumi, for in their faith such men seek only one thing, which is their own self-justification.

Those of us on our side of the wall I called "People of the River". This was an ideal community, undivided by language or creed, a vital nation that forged new paths, along which goods and ideas could flow. We preferred the bazaar to the empty rites of mosques

and cathedrals, because the business of the bazaar fosters liberty and compromise.

Fakhr ad-Din and Frederick were both People of the River, open-minded, noble, and clever. Drawn together by their mutual love of astronomy and mathematics, they eventually saw themselves as allies destined to forge a peace between their peoples.

For while the world saw them as enemies because of their faiths, they saw themselves as friends whose love of science and the arts transcended religious differences.

The idea of the Flask was the product of their common vision of Humanity and of God.

But good fortune did not bless their aspirations.

Frederick suffered severe reverses. His Italian allies, the Rumi of the Desert, turned against him in order to earn the goodwill of the Caliph of Rome, enemy of the People of the River. This gave the French King time to take Damietta, before Frederick could get back to Palermo. No embassy was sent to him. And then the brave Emir met his own death in a cowardly ambush at al-Mansurah, before news of our victory at Fariskur could reach him.

So it was that I alone remained to guard a secret that was then only half-known to me, a responsibility I now found myself trying to escape in the most cowardly way.

Turning back to face the merchant, my heart turned from distain to disgust. Every item in the shop, every word he spoke, his every gesture, were all odious to me. I felt I was facing someone from the other side of that great Wall, a rough man of the desert whose life was worth even less than my own.

To my relief, he had stopped running his fingers over the saintly figures. But then he turned to boasting of his purer faith, which refused to honor as gods the Olympian panoply depicted on the flask.

I did not want to argue with him about the primacy of any religion. So I cut him off, saying I knew "how Arabs think". Of course, he understood that I was using the term "Arab" as an insult.

Our voices rose, overlapping. I wanted to hit him.

It was then that I heard a groan, as from a wounded animal. I jumped; a cold sweat broke out on my back.

I turned, but saw nothing.

Then, a tangle of rags spilling over the floor seemed to wriggle.

It was a woman hunched down in a dark corner of the workshop. I hadn't noticed her before, even though I'd scoured the place. Yes, my eyes had been searching, but my mind remained

numb, focused as it was on saving my own neck by means of those three pieces of gold that that Bedouin pig was even now denying me.

The merchant turned to her and spoke. The sun was setting and in minutes prayers would begin. She had to shut up! Better that she go and prepare us something to eat. The skein of rags wound off its spindle, rose, and disappeared silently behind the curtain.

That new presence calmed me at once. Moreover, the merchant himself seemed to be speaking more quietly now. Certainly the affair was more profitable for him than it was for me. In any case, this new calm brought me back to myself. I regained confidence in my belief that the dialogue that business requires can reconcile competing interests. For a moment at least I glimpsed the possibility that we could reach an agreement about those three pieces of gold that I had asked for.

The curtain rose and the woman reappeared from the same dark opening through which she had disappeared minutes before. She carried a small tray with two plates and six dates in all, filled with milk and honey, a ritual food before evening prayer.

It was the precise moment of sunset now, and a blade of light the colour of blood bounced off the

street, hitting the woman in the face.

The black chador she wore was drawn loosely around her perfect figure. Her hand was holding together the edges of the vest and, over that, two deep black eyes were looking at me; innocent eyes that knew both fear and madness.

I was watching her more insistently than was polite, obliging the merchant to introduce her.

He had recently purchased her from the House of the Caliph. She had been a servant there, or so he said, and crazy, too. She'd sung to the powerful, delighting them even though- and this he added with a disgusting wink- no one was allowed to look at her.

I was astonished. Ashamed, I returned the gaze of the poor prey of whom the pig was so proud. I realized that I was looking not at a servant but into the face of the Princess Jasmine. She was a Rumi believer, a spoil of war, of whose beauty the Caliph was so jealous that he forbade anyone to look upon her simple figure. I myself had never seen her before, only heard her voice fill the Palace, accompanied by an orchestra of five blind musicians...

Dog! Dogs! All dogs!

Now I understood why, despite the fact that invaders roamed the city, many shops in the *suq* were open, and full of goods. While half the city was burning, the other half had been looted by

mobs who were now buying and selling the Caliphate's treasures! Hugalai Khan would murder the Caliph three days later on the steps of the Great Mosque; but it was at this moment that I realized that it was the mobs more than the Mongols who were destroying the Libraries and plundering the gardens and palaces of the great City.

And it was a part of the mob, this rogue standing in front of me now, who was boasting about owning a woman of whom he was entirely unworthy.

This was not a man but an animal who was talking to me! My hand reached under my robe, tightening around the hilt of the knife hidden there.

Dog! Dog! I was filled of disgust, but my scream stuck in my throat. The sun disappeared once and for all, and at that moment I heard another scream.

The muezzin had started his chant from the nearby minaret, calling the faithful to prayer.

"God is Great, God is Great, God is Great", he cried three times.

"God is Great" repeated Jasmine with a groan.

She was looking straight into my eyes. The tray she was holding fell from her hands. The black silken kerchief slipped from her tresses which then fell loose over her shoulders, framing a

white shirt opened at the breast and her richly coloured slacks.

She gripped my wrist with both her hands, as if she understood what it was I held in my covered one.

"God is Great", she cried, "but Love is Greater!"

What happened next happened in a moment, a moment over which I had no control.

The shopkeeper threw himself upon the woman, screaming at her to keep quiet. He called her *shameless, crazy, blasphemous*. He shouted, at a volume sure to be heard in the street, that he would not tolerate her blasphemies or the bad fortune they would bring upon him. A rod appeared in his hand, and he began hitting her on the face.

Blood sprouted from the frightened cheek of that heavenly creature who only moments before had been talking of love.

The gentle touch of her hands no longer restraining mine, I raised my weapon and plunged it precisely on its mark.

The pig lay gasping, his throat cut, his eyes bulging. Grasping at the wound in his neck, he could not stop the flow of blood streaming onto the floor of the shop.

Even before the pulsing jets of blood hit my shoes, I was beside the man draped over the bench, looking for the purse under his robe.

I found it and pulled it toward me.

A stream of gold coins scattered onto the floor; some of them were lost in the darkness, others in the blood. I seized three pieces that had landed clear of both. The amount seemed honest and the coins themselves were clean.

I tried to grab the woman's arm, as though it were the most natural thing in the world to try to take her away. But she avoided my grip and went back on the dying man. Weeping, she tried to stop the bleeding.

Of the two of us, only she had the heart to pity him.

I had become an object of horror. I left, abandoning both her and the flask without once looking back.

Outside, everything was quiet, except for the muezzin who was still singing. How fortunate I was that no one had heard our cries!

Women pulled their washing from window sills. The smell of dinner cooking rose from every gate. Men were quickly shuttering their warehouses and shops and moving like a swiftly flowing river towards the great Mosque's green dome. There they would pray after hastily performing their ritual washings.

Of that great river, I was only one undistinguishable drop. And so I succeeded in escaping that night.

Mingling with a travelling caravan, I returned home like a thief.

Since then I have had time to relive, one by one, each feeling I experienced that night, and the terror they produced in me.

On reflection, I have learned many things. Most important, I realize how my actions betrayed Jasmine's words which, deemed blasphemous by some, were probably recalled from the Book itself.

I'm grateful to you that at the dawn of this new day I have had the opportunity to confess all this. But confession does not undo the crimes for which I am unable to forgive myself. I must be content with understanding, only that.

Look at the consequences of my rage and fear! I lost, perhaps forever, a work of genius, created by a true man of peace. And, equally odious, I left behind a dead man, killed by my cowardly act, and a divine woman, resigned to her fate, a woman who I imagined spoke to me of love, asking for my protection, while the truth was that she was trying to defend me from myself.

I think of her often and wonder at her fate

Does she live even now, reduced from servanthood to slavery?.

Or was she instead stoned to death, blamed for my own crime?

Baybars, My Valiant Friend,

You are responsible for many men, and one day you will certainly be King. As for me, I have stopped writing History altogether; I no longer believe in it. For me it is finished, along with the Caliphate.

I have decided instead to write the memoirs of my travels, and to describe the beauty of Creation, bearing witness to the wonderful things that exist by the will of God. I also intend to tell about the places that Man has built. For I am convinced that it is not by repeating tales of the heroic actions of Rulers that we perpetuate their glory, but by verifying the harmony (if any) of the spaces which they designed for us to live in, spaces in which we may find the lasting Effects of their Good Government.

The flask, too, is a Design for how we might live. I hope the few notes and sketches I am sending with this letter give you some idea of the beauty, wisdom, and harmony envisioned by its creators. Finally, I ask you to accept from me a final teaching, one I learned at great cost. It comes from this small man, your old friend Zakariya, hiding for shame in this small Qazwin. The Wall I spoke of before does not divide Humanity, but the heart of us all, and no one is certain that they will never find themselves on the wrong side.

For the real Holy War of Mankind is a war against Hate, not a war against men who hate. For to believe that God prefers one part of his Creation over another is to deeply offend Him. No! Our Holy War is the daily struggle of each of us against the wrong side of our own soul. It is there, in our hearts and minds, where our own divided humanity lives! So, my friend, conducting yourself with the courage you have always shown, you will never have to ask if there is a Right Side of Humanity. If you do doubt, know you are on the wrong side of your *own* humanity.