

Layla and Majnun

Long ago, in the desert of Arabia, lived many great chieftains, and the greatest was the chieftain of the tribe of the Banu Amir. Now this *sayyid*, as he was reverently called, had wealth beyond imagining; his gold and jewels were as countless as the grains of desert sand, and in his tent hung the most precious silks and carpets, and the finest herds grazed upon his land. But rich as he was in worldly goods, he was richer still in the goodness of his heart. He ruled with perfect justice and was generous to all; to those in need he readily opened his purse, and every traveler was welcome in his camp. His tribesmen prospered, and they loved and honored him. The *sayyid* was well content, but for one thing: he had no son and heir.

As the years passed and no son was born, he prayed to God with all his heart and brooded on the fortune that denied to him what he most desired. "What care I for my jewels and gold if I should die without an heir?" he asked. "Indeed, he truly lives who lives in the memory of his son!" And thus he prayed even more fervently, until, at last, his prayers were answered, and God gave to him a son.

There was great celebration in the camp of the Banu Amir, and the *sayyid* opened his treasury so that all might share in his happiness. The desert was filled with shouts of joy, for the child was a boy of unsurpassing handsomeness, even from the very moment of his birth. When he was but two weeks old, his face was as round and as beaming as the moon, and every year his comeliness increased. And the good *sayyid* was known to exclaim, "Of all men on this earth, surely none is more fortunate than I!"

Now when Qays, for so the boy was named, was of school age, he was sent to study under a learned teacher. So quick of mind was he that scarcely did he take a pen in hand than he had mastered script; no sooner did he hold a book than he could read. He was eager for new knowledge, and in all the learned disciplines he excelled, but his greatest skill by far was in the art of discourse. When he spoke, his words were sweeter than the music of a lute; his wit sharper than an arrow; his wisdom more lustrous than a pearl. All his schoolmates gathered round and listened with delight.

سال دوم در شاه طاهر است بیست و پنج و الهادی
بنام شاه بنیامین سالگرد آمد و بنامش کرد که گزشتند در سپاسش انشا الله تعالی

بسم الله الرحمن الرحیم
الحمد لله رب العالمین
والصلاة والسلام علی من لا نبي بعده
وآله الطيبين الطاهرين
الذين اتوا بالهدى والبرهان
والعقل والبيان
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هر که دیکه از یاد دانم
شکر شده بر پس نایم
بمان سیدان خود پرور
میش سسری علم خواندن
مهر لیس شپه نقری حشده
بگفت لیس مهرش نین

Now the pupils in this school were from the noblest families, and so it was that one morning the daughter of a mighty chieftain, second only to the *sayyid* himself, was brought into the classroom. This little girl was very beautiful. She was as slender as a cypress tree and as graceful as a bird; her skin was white as milk, her cheeks and lips were red as roses, and she had the darting black eyes of a gazelle. But even darker than her eyes was her raven hair; her hair was more lustrous than the sky at midnight, and indeed she was called Layla, or Night.

The moment Layla came into the schoolroom love awakened in Qays' heart. All that day he could neither read nor write, but only stare at her and wonder at her beauty and at her long black hair. Enraptured, he whispered "Layla, Layla," softly as if in prayer, and all the next day, and the next, and for many days after, he could say no word but "Layla!" Even at this tender age, Qays claimed her for his own and vowed that he would love her all his life.

And Layla loved Qays in return. Yet they spoke not, for their souls were so perfectly attuned that they had no need of words. Thus Qays would gaze at Layla while the other pupils studied or played in the courtyard. And Layla would blush deeply, lower her lashes, then open her eyes and gaze at him and sweetly smile. And every evening, when the sun set and the heavens darkened and the two were apart, they sighed and wept and eagerly went to their beds, all the sooner to dream of one another. When the sun rose they would hasten joyfully to school. Thus did they love, and every day their love increased.

Now love shines more brightly even than the sun, and Qays loved Layla so intensely that after a while the other children noticed what was plain to see. They were too young to know of love, and so they laughed at Qays and pointed at him, and cried, "Our friend has lost his heart and head! He cares not for his books but thinks only of Layla. See how he stares at her like a love-stricken sheep!"

Then Qays tried to hide his love, but his eyes refused to stray from Layla's face. His schoolmates would follow him taunting, "Have you not heard that Qays loves Layla? Like a madman he stares at her, and chants her name!"

At last Qays could contain himself no longer and surrendered to his passion. In the classroom, as the others recited their lessons, he shouted "Layla! Layla!" And he ran through the streets and the bazaars, calling out her name, praising her black eyes and her raven hair. People looked after him and shook their heads. "Indeed, he is a madman, a *majnun*," they said. And so it was that Qays came to be called Majnun.

Now it was not long before word of Majnun's infatuation reached the ears of Layla's father, and the chieftain was greatly incensed. "Who is this Majnun,

that he should speak Layla's name in the bazaars and thus insult my daughter and my tribe?" And so the chieftain ordered that Layla be taken from the school at once and brought to the desert camp and confined in a tent alone.

Majnun was sick at heart. For several days he sat listlessly before his open books, staring sadly at her empty place. When he could no longer bear Layla's absence, he closed his books and fled to the bazaars. From dawn to dusk he wandered among the stalls, murmuring her name and sobbing with grief. So deeply did he suffer, and so strongly did he love, that his ravings became poems. Walking in the markets, Majnun, the possessed, composed love songs of the most exquisite beauty. And as he sang, the wind lifted his words, like leaves, and carried them into the desert. "Layla, Layla! May my songs fall at your feet!" he cried.

And every night, when darkness fell, Majnun followed his songs into the desert. With two or three faithful companions who were still his friends, he crept into the camp of Layla's tribe. Approaching her tent, he hid behind a tree, hoping for a glimpse of his beloved. One night Layla, restless and sleepless, sat at the door of her tent. Majnun suddenly appeared. In the moonlight they gazed at one another, unbelievably and trembling with love; neither could say a word. It was not until the sky reddened with dawn that Majnun turned and hastened back to his own camp lest he be discovered.

From that day on, his passion burned even more fiercely; like a thorn-bush set afire Majnun was consumed by love. And as he lost his heart, so he lost his reason. Leaving the camp of the Banu Amir, he wandered in the desert and the mountains of Najd. And as he went he tore his robes, shouted Layla's name, and wildly sang his songs. He went alone, for his friends despaired of him and left. From afar people would point to him and say, "There goes Majnun, that madman who was once called Qays. For love of Layla does he wander in the wilderness and bring dishonor on his father and his tribe."

Now when Majnun fled into the wilderness, the good *sayyid* grieved greatly. He called his counselors to him. "Indeed, my son has lost his heart," he said. "His senses are confused, for without Layla does he live in darkness. If he should win her, surely he will find his light." And thus did the *sayyid* resolve to go to Layla's father and ask the chieftain for her hand. The next morning, as the sun rose in the sky, a search party went into the desert to find Majnun. At the same time the *sayyid* set out for Layla's camp. His camels were laden with many precious gifts, and his hopes were brighter even than the rising sun.

But when he went before the chieftain and told why he had come, the chieftain spoke harshly, for he was a proud man. "Who has not heard of Majnun's madness?" he declared. "My daughter will not marry him! See first that your son is

cured, then come to me again. For even if I were to grant your wish, as surely as the sun beats down upon the desert sand, Layla's name will soon again be heard in the bazaars, and every man in all Arabia will laugh at me!"

The *sayyid* sadly shook his head and returned to his own camp. There he found Majnun, and told his son what Layla's father had said. "Why must you worship only Layla?" he asked. "Indeed, among our tribe there are a thousand lovely maidens. Choose one as your wife, and forget Layla. Then you will be happy!"

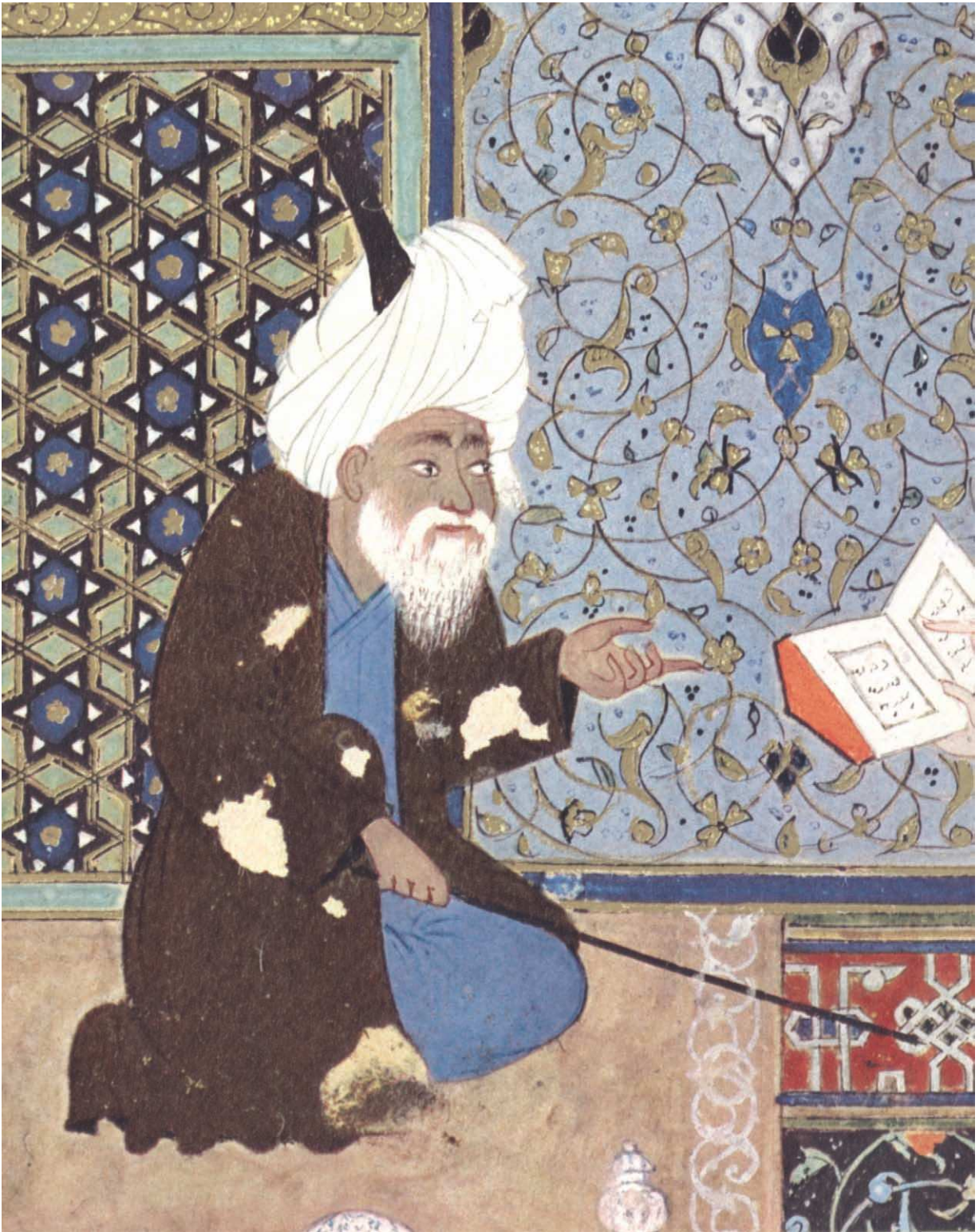
But Majnun only cried out in despair and fled once more into the wilderness. He stumbled across the burning sand, thorns caught at his robes, and still he called "Layla! Layla!" And he tore at his hair and sung his songs until the desert resounded with his words. As he passed through one village and then another, all who heard him marveled at his eloquence; they pitied him and wept. Yet Majnun saw them not, nor did he hear their weeping, or even the sound of his own voice, for he could think only of Layla. At last, like a burnt-out candle, he fell exhausted to his knees and, whispering Layla's name once more, prayed to God for death. "I am an outcast. I bring only shame upon my tribe. Let me die now, for there is no hope for me in life!" Thus he sighed and sank onto the sand.

No sooner had he fainted than a group of shepherds gathered. They prepared a litter for him and carried him gently across the desert to the camp of the Banu Amir. There he lay in his own tent singing his songs and calling Layla's name. And his father's sorrow was no less than Majnun's. "Would that Majnun had never set eyes on Layla, for no longer do I have a son!" he lamented.

With a heavy heart, he called his counselors to him once more. To the eldest he said, "Does not the whole world go to Mecca, to ask God's blessing? Let us, too, make a pilgrimage, and pray to God that Majnun should be cured."

And so it was that in the month of pilgrimage, the last month of the year, the *sayyid* and his closest kinsmen departed from their camp and traveled to Mecca. For this journey the *sayyid* chose his best camels. A litter was devised for Majnun, and as the caravan crossed the desert, Majnun was carried as gently as if he were an infant in his cradle. At last they entered Mecca, and the *sayyid* showered gold coins, as alms, upon the crowds of people in the streets. Then, trembling with hope, he brought Majnun before the shrine, and, taking his hand, said softly, "My son, ask God to save you from your passion; pray to Him to end your madness. Surely you will be cured."

When Majnun heard these words, he wept bitterly. Then he laughed wildly and stretched out his hands toward the shrine, the Kaaba. In supplication, he touched the shrine. "I pray to You, let me not be cured of love, but let my passion grow!" he cried. "Take what is left of my life and give it to Layla's,



yet let me never demand from her so much as a single hair! Let me love for love's sake, and make my love a hundred times as great as it is this very day!"

As Majnun so prayed the *sayyid* listened silently and bowed his head with grief. Then they returned to their camp. When they arrived, the *sayyid* told his kinsmen, "I have tried, but never will Majnun be cured, for before the holy Kaaba he has blessed Layla and cursed himself."

Now everyone in the city of Mecca heard of Majnun's prayer, and there was none in the land of Arabia who did not speak of it. When word reached the camp of Layla's tribe, the chieftain thundered with rage and vowed to kill Majnun. But first he sent two messengers to the court of the sultan to register his complaint. "Magnificence," they said, "this Majnun is a man possessed and does dishonor to our tribe. Order him to be punished at once, so that the name of Layla will be unstained."

Then the sultan's prefect drew his sword. "So be it; let him be punished as you wish."

Now it happened that a kinsman of the Banu Amir was in the sultan's court and heard what had been said. He hastened to the *sayyid* to warn him of the threat to Majnun's life, but Majnun had again fled into the desert. Greatly alarmed, the *sayyid* with his tribesmen searched the wilderness until Majnun was found, in a desolate gorge, writhing like a snake, moaning and sighing, and rising and falling upon the rocks. Tenderly the good *sayyid* gathered his son into his arms, weeping bitterly. So too did Majnun weep. "My father, there is no creature on earth who is not ruled by destiny," he said. "To love Layla is my fate, and never can I throw off my burden. But listen to me, for I have a tale to tell."

Once upon a time, a partridge went hunting in a field and spied an ant, which she seized in her beak by one of its legs. The ant laughed and said, 'You are a skillful hunter, partridge, yet it is a pity that you cannot laugh as I do!' Whereupon the partridge opened her beak to laugh, and the ant escaped. Then the partridge saw how foolish she had been. So it is with man, for he will regret his laughter with bitter tears. Yet I will have nothing to regret, for I have no cause to laugh." And Majnun wept and called out Layla's name.

Then Majnun was carried from the rocky gorge to his own tent, and his kinswomen brought food and water, and his mother whispered many soothing words. But Majnun, staring blankly into the cool darkness of the tent, did not even know her. Several days passed, and when he could rest no longer, he tore open the curtain of his tent and fled again into the desert of the Najd; he roamed under the blistering sun until his face was black and his feet bled from the thorns

and rocks. "Let Layla's father threaten, for I fear him not! What lover fears a sword?" he asked. "He who goes in search of his beloved cares not for his life!"

So Majnun sang his songs, and from villages and towns both near and far the people came to hear him. They copied down the words, even as they were moved to tears, and carried the poems away with them. And when they knew love themselves, it was with Majnun's words that they sang of the stirrings and the passion of their hearts, for Majnun spoke for lovers everywhere.

Meanwhile, Layla grew more and more beautiful. Indeed, she was the most beautiful maiden in all Arabia. But every day she grew more sorrowful, for from that evening when she had seen Majnun in the moonlight, she had never ceased to love him. From sunrise until sunset, she secretly whispered his name, and in the darkness of night, weeping and sighing, she would go to the door of her tent and listen for his step and watch for his shadow. But she heard only the desert wind, stirring the sand and leaves of the distant trees. She did not have to wait long before she heard his love poems, for they were on the lips of every child in the bazaars and every traveler in the desert. By day, she would repeat them to herself; then, in the secrecy of night, she would fashion songs in response. And indeed, her songs were no less eloquent than Majnun's, for as true as Majnun's was her love. She wrote her songs on scraps of paper, and strew them on the sand; the wind carried them into the villages. Thus did people come upon them, as one stumbles on a precious jewel, and sing them. Soon the songs reached Majnun's ears, and he would sing a reply. As their words were carried back and forth across the desert, so did Layla and Majnun promise one another their undying love.

Now there was a palm grove a short distance from Layla's tent, and every day Layla would go there with her companions. One afternoon, while her friends played among the trees and danced on the green grass which spread around them like an emerald carpet, Layla sat apart, thinking of Majnun and weeping with longing. Suddenly she heard a voice singing loudly outside the garden walls. "How can it be," the voice rang out, "that Layla can dance joyfully in her garden, while her beloved wanders in the wilderness alone?"

When Layla heard this reproach, she wept so bitterly and so mournfully spoke Majnun's name, that none who saw her, not even the most obdurate stone, could remain unmoved. Indeed, one of her companions happened to hear the song, and came upon the weeping Layla; tears of pity filled her eyes. She went to Layla's mother and told what she had heard and seen. Thus did the good woman learn of her daughter's suffering, for never had Layla spoken a word to her about it.

That very day, as it happened, a young man of the tribe of Assad was journeying

across the desert and passed by the grove. This Ibn Salam, for such was the young man's name, happened to catch a glimpse of Layla through a chink in the garden wall and immediately fell in love with her. Now Ibn Salam was of a rich and noble family, and he went at once before the chieftain to ask for Layla's hand. The chieftain was well pleased and readily agreed, but asked only that the youth curb his eagerness. "Be patient for a while, my friend," he said. "In but a few months more the bud will blossom into a full-blown rose; then shall the wedding feast be set."

Meanwhile, Majnun still wandered in the desert, dressed in his rags, singing his songs, and crying "Layla! Layla!" He took shelter among some rocks in a gorge where wild animals lived. And one day, a Bedouin prince named Nowfal came upon the gorge and the unhappy Majnun. When he asked his attendants who the mournful creature was, they told of Majnun's suffering. The prince was deeply moved, for while he was brave in battle, he was gentle and kind of heart. Thus he caused a banquet to be set before Majnun. But Majnun would eat no food and drink no wine, and he uttered no word but "Layla!" Then the good prince took his hand and gently said, "My friend, listen to me, for I have heard your story and I wish only to help you. Trust me, and you shall find Layla and shall have her for your own, to love all of your life. Indeed, you shall have Layla, even if I must do battle!"

At these kind words, Majnun arose and embraced Nowfal and went with him to his camp. Under the prince's gracious influence, Majnun became the cheerful youth he had once been. He wore fine robes and a silk turban. Every morning, as the sky brightened with the first rays of the sun, he rode into the wilderness with Nowfal, and they would ride all day. Every evening, when darkness fell, he feasted with the prince and called for wine and listened to the songs of minstrels. Happy were these days, when Majnun's sorrow was allayed. When he looked upon his friend, none was more joyful than Nowfal.

Thus did several months pass, until, one afternoon, the two friends sat together in the shade of a tree, resting from their ride. Majnun sighed bitterly and said, "Good prince, my patience has come to its end. I beg of you, help me find Layla as you promised, for if I must wait even a moment longer, surely I shall die." So mournful did he look that Nowfal leaped to his feet at once, took up his sword, and summoned his men to arms. The next day, at dawn, he rode across the desert with Majnun at his side. When they reached the pasturelands of Layla's tribe and saw the tents on the horizon, they pitched camp. Then Nowfal sent a messenger to Layla's father. "Tell the chieftain that you come to him in Majnun's name and that Majnun must have Layla. Tell him, too, that if he should refuse, in Majnun's name will I attack!"

When the chieftain heard this threat, he was enraged. "Rather than give my daughter to this madman, I will fight like a lion and even die!"

Then Nowfal sent an even stronger threat to the chieftain, and with many curses the chieftain refused. So Nowfal set upon Layla's people, and the desert resounded with the clash of war. In the midst of the fighting, Majnun huddled and wept and prayed for peace. He could not fight, for every injury to Layla's tribesmen was as a wound to him. Indeed, he would have drawn his bow and arrow against his own army had not shame stayed his hand. At last, as the sun descended in all its crimson glory, a truce was called and both armies retreated to their camps. Nowfal again sent a messenger to the chieftain, offering many jewels and precious gifts in return for Layla, the most precious jewel of all. The chieftain scornfully refused. His army greatly outnumbered Nowfal's, for he had summoned many tribesmen from surrounding pastures and hunting grounds. But the next morning Nowfal left his camp and went to amass an even greater force, enlisting tribesmen from Medina all the way to Baghdad, and the fighting began anew. At dawn one day Nowfal attacked; by dusk the chieftain was defeated and knelt at Nowfal's feet. "I am a weak old man," he said. "I have no strength; my men are all dispersed. Do what you will with me, but there is only one thing I ask. Give Layla not to Majnun, for he is a fool and has disgraced his name and hers!"

Now Nowfal, as we have said, was gentle of heart, and when the chieftain spoke, tears of compassion rose to the prince's eyes. Had not Nowfal gone to battle for the sake of Majnun? And had not Majnun kissed the bodies of Layla's kinsmen as they fell dead? Was Majnun not a traitor as well as a madman? Thus, with a heavy sigh, Nowfal agreed to the chieftain's request and bid him farewell. Then he gave the order to break camp. Whereupon Majnun turned to the prince and spoke many bitter words; he then took his few possessions and rode off into the desert. Trembling with rage and weeping with despair, he cried out "Layla! Layla!" And his cries echoed across the dunes. Greatly alarmed, Nowfal went in search of Majnun the next morning, but he was nowhere to be found, and Nowfal saw him not that day, or the day after, or ever again.

For many days Majnun rode deep into the desert; he saw not a living soul, only stones and thorn-bushes and miles of sand. Suddenly he came upon two gazelles caught in a trap. A hunter was standing over them with his dagger raised. When Majnun looked into the gentle eyes of the gazelles he remembered Layla's soft black eyes, and he cried, "I beg of you, good hunter, do not kill!"

"Indeed, I am a poor man with a wife and family to feed," the hunter said. "For two months have I waited for this catch. What will you give me in exchange for the gazelles?"

Whereupon Majnun dismounted from his horse and placed the reins in the hunter's hands. The hunter rode off. Majnun freed the gazelles, and they ran gracefully away. Now Majnun walked in the desert. Thorns tore at his robes and scratched his feet, but he noticed not as he stumbled through the hot sand calling out Layla's name.

The next day Majnun came upon a stag caught in a net and wounded in the neck. Standing over the stag was a hunter with his knife drawn. "I beg of you, good hunter, release this stag at once!" cried Majnun. "Do you not think of the pain of those whose suffering you cause?"

"I do not wish to kill the stag," the hunter said, "but how will I survive? What will you give me if I let the stag go free?" Whereupon Majnun gave to the hunter all that remained of his possessions, and the hunter went off. Then Majnun freed the stag and watched it make its way across the sand. Majnun continued walking in the desert calling out Layla's name.

On the third day, the sun glared down so fiercely that the sand seemed to shimmer, and Majnun sat in the shade of a date-palm tree. Now on a branch of the tree there sat a crow, and Majnun spoke to the bird. "Why are you dressed in black? Do you share my sorrow, that your feathers are as black as Layla's hair? If you do mourn, like me, why don't you leave me." The crow did not answer, but hopped onto another branch, then flew away into the stifling air. And so Majnun sat alone all day, until the sun set and the sky turned red, then blue, till it became blacker even than the feathers of the crow.

Then Majnun slept, and at the dawn, when he awoke, he saw an old woman dragging by a rope an old man whose legs and arms were bound with chains. When the old woman came near, Majnun asked her who she was and why the old man was in chains. She replied that she was a widow and he was a dervish and that they traveled through the desert in this way and begged for food and shared what scraps were thrown to them. Then Majnun fell to his knees. "It is I who should be in chains, not he!" he cried. "Free this man, and put this rope around my neck instead, and you shall have all of our food!"

The woman agreed, and she led Majnun through the wilderness. Whenever they came to a village, or even a shepherd's hut, Majnun would sing his songs and dance and hit his head upon the ground and cry out "Layla! Layla!" and they would be given scraps of food. Thus they wandered through the desert until, one day, they happened upon a camp. Majnun saw Layla's tent. He hit his head against a rock; tears streamed from his eyes, and he cried, "Layla! Layla! I have caused your people to suffer at the hands of Nowfal. As punishment I am in chains. Behold me and my grief!" And, with a howl, he tore his chains apart and flung them from him. Then he cast away the rope and fled into the mountains.

Now it happened that after Nowfal's victory, the chieftain had told Layla of Nowfal's agreement. Layla had listened in silence and then had gone to her tent and wept, for never, not even for a moment, had her love for Majnun faltered. Soon after that, Ibn Salam came back to claim Layla as his bride. He came with many caravans laden with gifts and showered silks and gold upon the chieftain. Carpets were spread, and a wedding feast was set. For seven days and seven nights, and for seven days more, there was great celebration: fires were lit; incense of aloe was burned; silver coins were thrown into the air. Then, the next morning, when barely had the stars yielded to the rising sun, Ibn Salam departed with his bride. When the caravan reached the lands of the tribe of Assad, the joyful bridegroom said to Layla, "Everything you see is yours, my love!"

But that night, when he went to embrace her, Layla withdrew. When he still would take her in his arms, she struck him. "Come not within arm's length of me," she said, "for I have vowed never to give myself to you. Take your sword and kill me if you will, but I will not submit, not even in a hundred years!" So great was Ibn Salam's love for Layla, that he fell to his knees and asked her forgiveness, gently saying, "Rather would I be allowed to look upon your face than lose you forever." And thus did they live and so a year passed.

During that year Majnun wandered in the wilderness. One day, while he was lying in the sand exhausted, a stranger, a black-skinned man, passed by. Now he knew well who Majnun was and said to him, "Have you not heard? Layla is married! Her husband is rich and noble, and even this very moment does he hold her in his arms! Better to turn your back on Layla than to scorn the world, my friend!"

At these words, Majnun moaned with despair and fainted. When he at last opened his eyes, the stranger was overcome with pity. "My friend, forgive me, for I have been wicked and have spoken falsely. Layla is married, yet she loves you still and shares not her husband's bed. She is chaste and longs for you with all her heart and soul!"

Then the stranger departed, and Majnun stumbled through the desert, weeping and shaking to the depths of his being. In one breath, he called out Layla's name and sang his songs; in the next, he reproached her for betraying him; then he wept and cried out his forgiveness.

Now in all this time, the good *sayyid* grew weak with age. He grieved greatly for his son and resolved to go once more into the desert to find him. Taking a walking stick, he set out with two companions. After journeying for many days, he came upon a desolate cave where he found Majnun, wasted and drawn. When Majnun heard his father's voice, he wept. Then the *sayyid* said, "I beg of you, my son, come home, for I am close to death. When I die, I wish to have you at my side."



But Majnun shook his head; he heard his father's words but understood them not, for he knew only that he loved, not who he was or what was his name. And, weeping, he replied, "My father, I am lost to you and can never return. I live like the wild animals that roam around me; I am a stranger to my tribe." With sorrow in his heart, the *sayyid* saw that this was so. He left Majnun in his forsaken cave and returned to the camp of the Banu Amir, and shortly thereafter he died.

One day, while hunting in the desert, a kinsman came upon Majnun and told him of his father's death and spoke many bitter words. "Wicked son of a good father, may you pray for forgiveness for your sins!" At this doleful news Majnun wept; he went at once to his father's grave, and prayed for a day and a night for forgiveness. Then he went back into the wilderness.

When he returned to the cave, the animals of the desert came to his side. First the lion, then the very stag that he had saved, and then the antelope, and the wolf, and the fox; the wild ass joined their company, and the hare, and the timid gazelle. Majnun ruled over them all; a king was he, and his cave was his court. All around were rocks and thorns and burning sand. No place on earth was more desolate than this, yet Majnun called it paradise, for here he lived in peace with all his friends. Among the animals there was perfect harmony; the lion lay with the lamb; the wolf chased not the hare; the gazelle went undisturbed before the fox.

Every day, Majnun and his animals wandered in the wilderness and dug among the stones for roots and herbs. As the sun descended, they would feast together. Majnun would speak of Layla and sing his songs, and the beasts would listen quietly and sadly bow their heads. Then darkness fell. Majnun lay down to sleep; with his great bushy tail the fox swept clean Majnun's resting place. The wild ass was Majnun's pillow; his knees rested on the haunches of the antelope, and the gazelle caressed his feet. Throughout the night, until the break of dawn, the wolf kept watch.

For many hours at a time, Majnun would gaze fondly on his animals, and he was wont to say, "Now that I am among my friends, surely I am the happiest man of all!" And he would think upon a story he had heard, years before, of a young courtier at the palace of the king of Merv. This king kept a pack of ferocious dogs, and it was his wont, whenever anyone displeased him, to throw that person to the dogs to be devoured. When the youth heard the dogs' barking and the victims' cries and moans, he resolved to cultivate the friendship of the keeper of the dogs, and then he won the friendship of the dogs themselves. One day, the courtier aroused the king's anger, and the king ordered him thrown to the dogs. But the dogs would not harm the youth, for he was their friend. When the king saw this, he tamed the beast of his own soul.

So did the wild animals guard Majnun against harm. After some time, two visitors came into the wilderness and approached the cave. The first was an old man; he had flowing white hair and a face so kind and gentle that the lion's growling ceased and the wolf showed not his teeth. They let the old man pass. Majnun greeted him and asked, "My friend, what good news do you bring?"

Whereupon the old man brought forth a letter. Majnun seized it eagerly. "Know that I have seen Layla," the old man said. "One day I came upon her grieving in a garden; so great was her sorrow that I bade her speak. She wept and said, 'A thousand times madder am I than Majnun, for he is free to wander where he pleases, while I am but a prisoner in my camp. A thousand times greater than Majnun's are my torments. Though I cannot be with him, I hunger for news of him. Where does he go? What does he say? Has he companions? I beg of you, search for him until you find him, and tell me how he is!' Indeed, these are her very words. When I promised to search for you, she wrote this letter and gave it to me to give to you."

Then Majnun read Layla's letter; his heart quickened with joy, for all that the old man said was true. At once, he asked the old man for a paper and pen, and he wrote a reply. "I beg of you, take this to Layla, with my love!" he cried. And the old man rode into the desert, to Layla's camp, and brought the letter to her.

Now the second visitor to the cave was Majnun's uncle Salim Amiri. He came into the desert bringing food and clothing. Majnun was glad to see him, for his uncle was a good man and as a boy Majnun had loved him dearly. He put on the robes but gave the food to the wild beasts. When he did this his uncle sighed and said, "Listen to me, for I have a story to tell.

Once upon a time, in this very land of Arabia, a king was riding in this very desert, and he happened to pass a hut. He learned that in this miserable dwelling there lived a dervish who hardly ate and never slept, and he sent an attendant to speak to the dervish. The dervish said that he ate only herbs gathered from the fields. 'Indeed, you should have far better food if you were in the service of the king,' said the attendant, but the dervish shook his head. When the king heard of this, he said, 'The dervish is a wise man, and he is superior even to me. He knows well the worth of what he has and is satisfied.' Then the king went into the hut and kissed the dervish's feet."

When Salim Amiri had finished his tale, he said that he would bring Majnun's mother to the desert, for she had grown old and greatly longed to see her son. When the good woman was brought to the cave, she wept and washed the dust from Majnun's body and plucked the thorns from his feet. All the while she pleaded with him to return to his people, but to no avail. "The Banu Amir are your people; they are mine no longer," Majnun said. "I know only the desert and my

animals." Bent with sorrow, the old woman returned to her tribe. Shortly thereafter, she breathed her last. Then Salim Amiri again visited Majnun, and told him of his mother's death. Majnun went to her tomb and mourned and wept. There he met some of his kinsmen, and they spoke bitterly to him and reproached him angrily. After a day and a night, he again fled to the desert.

All this time Layla waited eagerly for an answer to her letter. Every night she slipped from her tent and stood at the crossroads of her village, watching and listening for the old man. At last, one night, he came and gave her Majnun's letter. When she read it, she rewarded the good man with jewels and a sack of coins and asked him to bring Majnun to a grove nearby. "The trees grow as thickly as a wall, so we shall not be seen. Tell my beloved that Layla longs to hear him sing his songs!"

And so it was that one night the old man led Majnun into the grove. The faithful animals followed and stood patiently outside. The old man brought Layla into the grove. She stayed at a distance from Majnun, for like a moth fatally drawn to a flame, she feared that she would perish. Instead she sat beneath a tree and listened, but heard not a sound, for Majnun had fainted. The old man revived him, and then he sang the most beautiful love poem he had ever composed. Then the lovers gazed upon each other with joy and wonder, as they had when they were children. But all too soon the moment passed; Majnun fled, and Layla went back to her tent.

When Majnun returned to his desolate cave, a young man came to him. Now this youth, whose name was Salam Baghdadi, begged Majnun to teach him his songs and poems. He stayed with Majnun in the desert and learned them all. Then he went to Baghdad and many other villages and cities and sang Majnun's words wherever he went, that all who loved might hear.

Soon after, Ibn Salam was taken ill with a fever as violent as the desert wind, and in a few days he was dead. At last Layla could weep without restraint, for all who looked upon her thought that she wept for her young husband, and they pitied her with all their hearts. Yet for Majnun only did she mourn. Now in Arabia it was the custom for a widow to seclude herself in her tent for two years, speaking to no one. Layla went dutifully to her tent; she welcomed the solitude and vowed that every moment she would think of Majnun.

This ritual she performed until autumn, when the trees blazed with color and the wind rose. During her many months of solitude Layla became so weak that she could no longer rise from her bed. Her weakness turned to fever, and she called her mother to her and told her what the good woman had known for many years. "Grant me one wish, my mother," Layla said. "When I die, for I am like an autumn leaf on the branches of the tree of life, I will be dressed in

bridal robes. Thus shall I wait for my beloved, for surely Majnun will come to my grave. And I would have you comfort him as you would comfort me.”

The next day, as the scarlet leaves fluttered to the ground, Layla died, and her mother did as she had promised. When Majnun heard of Layla’s death, he went at once to her grave and wept from the depths of his soul. Indeed, he wept his heart’s blood, and some say that as he wept, the flowers that grew at Layla’s grave turned red. He sang his songs and again likened Layla to the graceful gazelle. For a month did Majnun stay at Layla’s grave, guarded by his animals. As time passed he grew weaker and weaker. It was in a voice barely a whisper that he prayed to God to release him from his earthly form and bring him to Layla’s side. Soon after his prayers were answered; his animals guarded his body with fierce growls, so that none could touch him. Only when he crumbled into dust did the animals go back to the wilderness. Then Majnun’s tribesmen came forth and gathered his bones and buried them by Layla’s side. All that day, and for many days after, there was mourning in the camp of the Banu Amir and in the camp of Layla’s people.

For many years the story of Layla and Majnun has been told and told again, for never did there live two lovers as true as they.