

Nihad SIREES

A novel chapter and a story

From the novel *A Case Of Passion*

Chapter 1

How did the innocent Widad appear in the photo with the French High Commissioner?

“That was on the 27 of September 1936...”, the old man started. “The train was approaching Al- Cham train station, blowing its whistle.

Widad remained seated and didn't move to look out the window as most passengers did. She tried not to look at the man sitting across from her, by the compartment's door. During the whole trip, he kept looking at her with greedy eyes. She hoped he would leave his place and go out to the narrow corridor of the Orient Express and look through the window just as the other passengers were doing. Her eyelids fluttered as she checked discreetly to see if he was still looking at her. She really hoped he would take his eyes off her so that she could look at the sky, the trees and the buildings which started to appear through the window. She wanted to look at the picture of Eiffel Tower, hung just above her head on the wooden wall of the compartment. But he didn't take his eyes off her. She saw something frightening in his eyes. Her mother had always warned her about men. A slight smile danced on his lips, but she shrank back, and sat very close to the window. She looked down at her hands which were resting in her lap.

She closed her eyes for a while and instead concentrated on listening to keep in touch with the outer world. The train pulled into the station and was still blowing its whistle. She heard cheering outside. She overheard some people say that there were some VIPs on board and a big reception was awaiting them. She wanted to get up and see for herself. But that man was still peering at her. If she got up, she thought to herself, he would have the chance to look at her body.

She decided to remain seated until the train came to a complete halt. Then she would try to escape. But what if all the other passengers got off the train and she was left alone? She shivered at the thought and felt her face grew hot and red. These were really frightening moments to her. She had the same feeling when her mother warned her of what men could do to little girls in darkness of night while lightning and thunder tore the sky apart. That advice her sick mother had given her made her fear men. Her fear grew more now because of that man sitting across from her, who was staring at her all the time, while all the passengers were busy looking through the windows, shouting slogans against France and cheering the delegation. But what was that delegation? And what did the word delegation mean? And why were all these people gathering there to receive the delegation? And where it was coming from?

She had waited for the train coming from Istanbul bound for Aleppo at Midan Ikbis station for more than three hours. Abdo Sinkeh the fool was the only person who accompanied her to the station. It had been said that he once crossed the Turkish border (Midan Ikbis is on the Syrian border with Turkey), and a Turkish soldier stabbed him, and thus he became lame. That's why everybody called him Sinkeh (knife). The big gap in his

upper front teeth, which made him look funnier produced a whistling sound when he spoke. Widad was pleased with his company before her mother died. She laughed heartily when he moved, ran, or spoke. He would be so happy when he saw her laughing he would lie on his back, laugh and lift his hands and legs in the air and move them. Sometimes, when he touched her casually, a strange shudder coursed through his body. After that he would feel relieved and happy for the rest of the day, and didn't know why his energy was gone. Then he would run and sit under a tree. She didn't know why he behaved in that way after his hand touched her, but when Abdel Sabour, the Imam of the local mosque, saw him once, chided him and ran after him holding a stick in his hand. Widad wondered why the Imam got so furious. She hated this Imam that evening, when she saw him sitting by her sick mother's bed, whispering to her and looking at Widad. She thought he was complaining to her mother that she hated him. That evening, her mother re-echoed her warning against men, but Widad didn't consider Abdo a man, and she wasn't afraid of him.

During the three hours they spent waiting for the Orient Express at the station, Abdo didn't stop crying. He was crying because he knew he would not see Widad again. Though he was dim, he knew quite well that her mother wanted to send Widad away to Aleppo after her death. He saw Sheikh Abdul Sabour handing her a letter and some money. He caught a glimpse of the address scribbled on the envelope. The Imam asked Abdo to accompany her to the station, and wait with her till the train arrived.

Widad was afraid because she was travelling by train for the first time in her life. She assured him that she would come back soon. Abdo was sad at her departure and was crying, but when the train drew into the station blowing its whistle, Abdo's mood changed suddenly. He laughed and jumped joyfully when he saw the train whose carriages were decorated with flags and ornaments. Seeing this made him lose the rational part of his mind. Now she burst into tears, while he was laughing. With difficulty she held him still and calmed him down. Then she squeezed his hand, and drew him to an undecorated carriage. There she held him with both her hands to encourage herself to leave the village which she had not left since she was born.

She went and found a seat in one of the compartments. She lifted her bag onto the rack and settled into the seat. Abdo was standing at the platform, still feeling his hand which she held moments ago, and looking at Widad through the window. Her tears were streaming down her cheeks. Before the train started to move again, Abdo had the feeling that he was the happiest person on earth. He jumped and laughed to make his girl laugh, but instead, she burst into tears. When Abdo and the station's building vanished, she wiped her tears. When she turned her face, her eyes came into direct contact with the man sitting across from her, who was looking at her stealthily, so that the other passengers in the compartment wouldn't notice him.

Voices mingled with the faint whistle of the train, and cheers mixed with the rattling sound of the wheels. The sound of music was approaching and growing louder. Widad had a sudden feeling of familiarity about the station into which the train was pulling. Without looking at the man she quickly turned her face to the window. There was a huge crowd of people gathered there to receive the delegation. People were cheering enthusiastically and waving their flags toward the first carriage. A musical band of the gendarmes was playing military marches. She felt relieved.

"These crowds are to receive the delegation..." She turned around, excited. The man was speaking to her, getting closer to the window. At that point, passengers re-entered the compartment to collect their baggage. She wanted to get up, but she knew if she did, the man could touch her. She clutched firmly to her seat. For the first time, she looked at him closely. His bloodshot eyes were still staring at her, penetrating her. He looked at her strangely. At that moment she wanted to escape. It was risky. She moved restlessly in her seat, and looked at him imploringly, willing him to leave her alone. Alone now with her in

the compartment, he reached out his hand and touched her face. She stepped back trembling. The music grew louder. She thought to herself, if she shouted, nobody would hear her. She implored him: "Please", but his hand was touching her cheeks, chin and nose. She pushed him away. He fell on the other seat. She picked up her bag and ran. When she looked back, he was still settled in his seat and smiling at her with rapture. She was afraid he would follow her. She ran into the corridors looking for an exit. It was impossible, the crowds blocked all the doors on both sides. She had to run to another carriage.

The music band was still playing military marches. Some people mounted the train and ran on the roof to the delegation's carriage, so that they could have a close look at its members when they get off the train. When Hashem Attasi, the head of the delegation got off first, there was a loud burst of cheering. The crowd was pushing to break through the cordon made by the French gendarmes. The gendarmes pushed the people back from the train so the High Commissioner Monsieur De Martel could come closer and shake hands with the Nationalists arriving home.

The High Commissioner, in his white uniform decorated with many medals, came close. He embraced Hashem Attasi, looking to smell the scent of Paris autumn on him. Then he shook hands with the rest of the members of the delegation who began to get off the train. They stood for a while on the steps of the carriage waiting to shake hands with the Commissioner. Every time, a new member of the delegation stepped out, he was received with a storm of applause and cheers.

Though their journey took six long days, they didn't look tired. They looked smart and handsome. Before reaching Aleppo they had shaved, washed, and changed their clothes. Some people cried when the delegation members stepped out of the train. The High Commissioner stood in the middle to have a picture taken with the delegation. The photographer took special care to have the train which transported the delegation from Great Paris to Aleppo, the French colony, appear in the picture. When the camera flashed, Widad appeared holding her bag in her hand. Hence she appeared in a commemorative picture which was published by all the newspapers in Aleppo and in the Capital (Widad, with her innocent look, hovering over the head of M. De Martel). Someone affirmed that he saw her on the front page of a well-known Parisian newspaper. The picture was enlarged and hung on the walls of the High Commissioner's office, and the National Bloc's offices as well as in the houses of some of the delegation members.

When the people saw her standing awed and innocent on the steps of the carriage, voices died down and dead silence fell. The only thing heard was the music. Sergeant Samuel, head of the musical band, was moving his hands to orchestrate the band, his face turned towards Widad. The other members of the band were also playing their instruments and looking at the villager who suddenly popped out from the delegation's carriage, holding her old bag, with a scarf to hide her hair from the men's greedy eyes. Even the ministers and the city notables who came to receive the delegation were amazed by the sudden appearance of this beautiful villager. The only person who tried to avert his eyes from her was the mufti, but couldn't. He thought she could be a genie or a guardian angel who descended from the sky to protect the delegation. This sudden silence baffled the High Commissioner. He turned around. It took him some moments to realize what was really going on. He wondered why that girl was there. Widad was confused by his looks and the looks of the members of the delegation. Explaining the reason for her presence there she muttered, "I couldn't find another place to get off the train"

At first, the High Commissioner didn't understand what the girl said. He looked at her confusedly. But when everyone burst into laughter at the situation (Aleppians have a good sense of humour, despite what is said about them). Monsieur Martel was convinced it was a mere coincidence; so he ignored the village girl whose beauty had attracted so much attention, and asked the delegation to proceed. Cheers burst out again and the music

resumed. The French gendarmes pushed the people away to make way for the delegation to leave the station. Everyone wanted to see the head of the National Bloc Hashem Attasi, who led the delegation, or catch a glimpse of Sa'ad Eddin Jabri, the handsome politician of Aleppo. Most people didn't know who to look at since it was very rare to see all those Nationalists and Syrian politicians and the French Generals occupying the country get together in one place and at one time.

The delegation left the station preceded by the High Commissioner, whose white uniform outgrew him. They were followed by the people and the musical band still playing popular melodies. Shortly after that, Widad found herself standing alone on the platform with her bag. She was relieved, but she didn't understand what was going on. She had never dreamt of such a large crowd in a big city like Aleppo receiving her. Had her deceased mother, who was resting now in peace in her grave at Midan Ikbis village, known how warmly she was received by the city men, of whom she always warned her, at the train station, she would have changed her mind. As if she was answering herself, Widad shrugged her shoulder in silence. She then took out the envelope with the address of the house she was going to. She picked up her bag and left the station. As Sheikh Abdel Sabbur had told her to, she waited for a coach. The square was deserted now, and she could see the huge crowd walking behind the coaches and the cars transporting the delegation and the other VIPs who came to receive them. Cheers and shouts mingling with the military marches could still be heard.

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The servant entered holding a kettle of hot tea in his hand. The old man paused and waited until he poured the tea for us. I didn't know whether the old man paused because of his servant, or because he needed a little rest. The servant poured the tea in complete silence, and offered us the tea cups. If the old man had continued his story, I wouldn't have noticed the presence of the servant in the room. This dead silence that ensued made me observe every movement the servant made. I felt uneasy toward him, just as I felt when I saw him at the doorway the first time. I thanked the servant politely, and started to sip the hot tea to warm my cold bones. The moment he left the room and closed the door the old man resumed his story in his soft voice.

Widad left the station and waited outside for a full hour. A coach with a black canopy drawn by a single horse stopped right in front of her. She handed the coachman the envelope with the address, and sat comfortably in the back seat. The coach started to move. She started to look at the buildings on both sides of the street with astonishment. She wondered if the city looked the same when her mother was here eighteen years ago.

Once her mother told her about the day when she left the city. She took the north-bound train from the same station. It was about the end of the First World War, and the Turks were crowded in thousands in the station, each struggling to find a place in one of those trains going to Turkey. Ex-politicians, officers who had concealed their real ranks; old Walis or governors; senior Ottoman officials; men conferred with the title of Pasha by the Sultan as well as governors of towns and districts. The station was also crowded with high-class women and well-fed children, as well as high ranking officers' mistresses who were uncertain about their future.

Nobody cared about their appearance as they used to. They were carrying packages and suitcases containing their savings or loot they had plundered and stole from the towns they ruled. Caravans were pouring into the station. Since the station was filled with people and their luggage, most of them left their stuff in piles outside the station and decided to flee with their souls. When the train pulled in, shouts were heard, and people began to push to secure a place in the train. Some people tried to identify themselves as being such and

such, but who would give a damn a bout ranks or titles anymore? Some of those who secured a place on a carriage were screaming because they had lost a companion, a wife or a son.

With great difficulty, Widad's mother found a place in the cattle carriage. She was in her fifth month of pregnancy. In order to win sympathy she tried to protrude her belly to make her pregnancy more conspicuous. She was an eye-witness to this tragic end of the Ottoman's rule of Syria.

Orders were given for the train to leave late at night. Those who were getting away with their lives begged the station master to order the train to move much earlier. Rumors were spreading at lightning speed that the enemy forces were approaching the city. At first, news had it that the enemy troops had reached the Khan Al-Sabil area, and by the evening, the news confirmed that the British troops occupied the town of Sheikh Said, near Aleppo. Confusion and chaos spread. Women cried. The mother, however, wasn't much concerned, since, she was an Arab, and was only concerned to arrive in Turkey before the closure of the borders, so that she might see the Turkish officer, Uzbashi Jawdat, who had planted his seed in her womb.

The train started to move slowly because it was overloaded, but people on board felt relieved that at last they would be safe. The men in the carriage began to notice Widad's mother. Eyes of both men and women followed her every movement, the men gazing on her with lust and desire and the women with dislike and jealousy. This distracted her from thinking of her beloved officer. She had to push away the men who tried to cling to her in the dark carriage, their hot breath on her face. At the crack of dawn, however, she was saved when the train stopped at Midan Ikbes station for water and wood. Civilians were ordered to leave the train and carry on their journey on foot to leave room for injured soldiers and military equipment. They protested and cried, but they had to leave the train. While the civilians who left the train walked on to Turkey, Widad's mother decided to stay in Midan Ikbis.

All withdrawing troops had to pass through this station on their way to the Turkish territories. So she stayed there waiting for the next train to look for her lover Yuzbashi Jawdat. Days went on, but Yuzbashi Jawdat didn't show up. When she heard that the British troops were chasing the withdrawing Turkish troops, she was certain that she had lost him forever. Since she couldn't go back to Aleppo, she decided to stay in this village until she gave birth to her child.

To be accepted in this village, she had to invent a different story. She created another imaginary life. She couldn't tell them the truth which she had buried in her heart. She told the local people that she was the wife of a Turkish officer, Yuzbashi Jawdat, and that all members of her family died in the war. She also said that she was on her way to Turkey to look for her husband, but the arrival of the British troops, and the battles between the two warring armies along the borders precluded her from crossing the borders. She was a beautiful woman. The villagers had never seen such a beautiful woman, not even among the high-class Turkish women who passed through the village on their way to Istanbul. She had such an innocent and lovely face. With her tears she could convince the stones, so why wouldn't those simple villagers believe her. She gave birth to her lovely baby-girl and named her Widad; she worked hard. She did everything she could to feed and raise her girl. When she grew up, Widad took after her mother in her beauty, gentleness, innocence and charm. Some young villager asked her hand for marriage, but the mother rejected them all. She even didn't permit any man to come near her house, except Abdo the fool, because she was sure he wasn't harmful. She always taught her beautiful daughter for unknown reasons to stay away from men. She grew up filled with a fear of men and avoided them.

When the mother had tuberculosis and felt death approaching, she started to talk to her daughter about life in the city and about some of her friends in Aleppo. She told Widad that she wanted her to go there after her death. She told her that she had a dear friend there named Khoja Bahira, and that she must go and see her. She told her she would give her a letter of recommendation. But she asked her to forget the name of that woman for the time being, and not to mention this name to any of the villagers. She also told her not to ask further questions about her.

The coach driver turned around and looked stealthily at her face. He murmured *ma sha alla*. Widad was looking at the streets with sadness and amazement. Every street, alley, or building reminded her of her dead mother. She imagined her walking arm in arm with her Turkish officer, or crossing the street in front of the coach alone, peering at men's faces, looking for her man who was lost in the war. But why did her mother refuse to go back to Aleppo? Why didn't she take her there and only describe it to her? Everything was shrouded with mystery. Her mother died, and left a thousand questions baffling Widad. Who was Khoja Bahira, and why had she kept her friendship a well-kept secret and why had she wanted her to go to see her after her death? As I said earlier, all these mysteries were roaming in the mind of this beautiful girl.

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The old man went on to say... Baddi'a (the mother's name) was beautiful and brave. She wasn't as shy as her daughter Widad. Maybe because of what she had gone through, she brought up her daughter differently to avoid the hardships she had experienced. All mothers want their daughters to live a different life, especially Baddi'a, who ran away from her parents' house when the war broke out. At that time men were rarely seen on the streets. They were either driven to war or went into hiding. That was men's destiny. The Turkish gendarmes rounded them up and tied them with ropes. They picked them up and they would vanish. Nobody, except God, knew their whereabouts.

That was the fate of her newly-wed brother Mohamed. Her father managed to escape and he used to send them provisions and money. The house was ruled by women. Her mother was very strict and tough, the fact which prompted Baddi'a to run away to Aleppo. To entertain her sisters and her brother's wife, she used to tie a shawl around her waist and dance.

Life in her town wasn't that bad. Women there could make ends meet. In Aleppo however, she saw hunger. Healthy men were not often seen in the streets. Once, she saw an old man's body lying on the side of a street. He had starved to death. Baddi'a was frightened. She didn't know what this city might hide for her, the city of which she had heard a lot and of which she had dreamt for a long time. She thought the course of things would go differently. She fled from her strict mother to a city whose inhabitants were starving. She thought of returning to her town and to her mother. She was sitting curled up in the street, when she asked a passer-by for alms. He gave her a piaster. He asked her if she could do anything other than begging. She said she could wash, clean, cook and dance. Yes, she dared and said she could dance as well, though the only thing she knew was how to move her waist and breasts. It was good that she mentioned dancing, since nobody cared about sweeping and cleaning in those days, since food was scarce. He asked her to accompany him. She followed him while she was biting off a piece of dried bread he had bought for her.

But where did that good man, who arrived at the right time, take her? I was so eager to know what happened to Baddi'a. The old man's interesting story overtook me to the point I forgot to drink my tea. He said if I wanted to hear the story till the end I should be patient. I apologized. When I sipped my tea, I realized it was cold. I want to ask the reader to listen to the mother's story first, and then move to the daughter's. What was interesting in this old man was that he jumped from one story to another. Just when he was about to

finish his first story, he would jump to another. I didn't know why, but still it was interesting. Now let's go back to Baddi'a's story, here I would beg the reader's forgiveness for my interference. But I feel I had to interfere from time to time, since my meeting with the old man and listening to his story, is a story in itself.

The old man went on to say that the man took her to the house of Khoja Bahira, a famous singer in the city at that time. He sold the girl to her for nine gold liras. Baddi'a never saw that man again.

"Did he sell her, that rascal?" I asked him angrily.

"Yes he did", the old man retorted, "But he didn't do that in the real sense of the word. When she told him she could dance, he was certain Khoja Bahira would reward him. That was normal. Bahira was a well-known singer in the town, and liked to take beautiful girls in her group. Furthermore, she needed a dancer in her band, and that's why she rewarded him".

When Khoja Bahira set her eyes on Baddi'a, she was astounded by her beauty. She had dazzling good looks. She was like a diamond that fell in the hands of Khoja Bahira, and of course, she knew her real value. As you know, women in this profession were not usually beautiful; some of them were even ugly. They were usually plump and dark skinned with saggy flesh. Most of them were old, except the Jewish girls. They were attractive, and they were in demand to work in the town theatres. The Jewish girl Jamila, for example, made men sigh heavily for her, not because of her beautiful voice only, but also because of her striking looks, and the suppleness and softness of her body, and her fair complexion. Furthermore, she played the *Qanoun* beautifully.

Khoja Bahira took Baddi'a right away and looked after her. She taught her how to move properly. She also taught her all the arts and skills needed by a dancer, such as how to keep her legs and torso staying straight. She taught her too how to move her waist in harmony with her hands. Her movements were more manly, which women didn't like that, especially Bahira. A belly dancer must be full of femininity. She taught her, and brought her tutors to teach her those skills, till she mastered the art of belly dancing. Bahira was happy with the progress she had made.

However, Bahira's figure was rather odd. Her face, body and movements were more like a man than a woman. She even acted like them. She wore men's clothes. Sometimes she even wore a red fez. She liked others to think of her as a man. She wore men's pants and shirts on stage. She also put a watch with a chain dangling from her small pocket. In weddings, her appearance excited the women. She didn't give a damn about the obscene comments and remarks some women made. She even answered back with more obscene comments. She was more like a man and bad-tongued.

Bahira wasn't her real name. Nobody knew what her real name was. Since she looked masculine, some claimed that her name was Hussein or Abdul or any other man's name. Originally she came from the "Kastal al-Musht" quarter. She was an only child to her parents. Out of fear that she might be molested, her parents claimed, since she was born, that she was a boy. They even had her hair cut like a boy. She used to play with the boys as one of them. (this is true and her name was at that time *Sobhi*). It was also said that she was a leader of a gang of boys, and nobody suspected she was a girl. The gang robbed homes and stole fruit from orchards. One day, the boys broke into a prostitute's house. She wept loudly and told them she had nothing of value and begged them not to steal anything from her. Instead she proposed that they make love to her. The boys liked the idea. But, Sobhi (Bahira) was afraid of being revealed. And desperately tried to dissuade them, but they insisted. They were eager to try to make love to a woman, a thing which they had only heard of, and now the opportunity was in their hands. There was no reason why Sobhi should prevent them from taking this opportunity. They called him names and at last he consented. The boys went into the prostitute's room, one after the other. When they finished, they

were happy and relaxed. At last it was Sobhi's turn, their leader who had chosen to be last. When she went into the room, the woman was lying on the bed with her legs wide open, exhausted. Bahira had an urge to touch the prostitute's body. She started to caress her. The prostitute was surprised by this behavior. Rather than make love to her as the other boys did, she just caressed her, kissed her and stroked her body. It felt good. Bahira was satisfied too. At that moment, Bahira found out that she was attracted to her own sex.

Since then, she no longer cared if the boys found out her real sex. Now she could make love to the prostitute, just as the boys did, and be satisfied. She even suggested that they visit the woman more frequently, and suggested that they pay the prostitute a certain amount of money, because she was so poor. Thus the boys became regular clients of the prostitute, and every time Bahira's love of the woman's body increased. She hated men's bodies.

One day, the prostitute told one of the boys that their leader wasn't a real man and didn't make love to her as the other boys did; that she was satisfied with only caressing her. Soon all the boys knew about that. They kept Sobhi under their watch and soon found out that he didn't urinate standing as the other boys usually do, but they didn't even see him take a piss at all. He claimed that he didn't feel like it when all the other boys stood in line and pissed. They felt it would be really shameful for the whole group if their leader turned out to be an hermaphrodite, neither man nor woman. They hoped that this wasn't true. How could they believe a prostitute and suspect their leader? They had to find out by themselves... but how? Did they dare to ask Sobhi? That was impossible. Nobody could ask him such a question. It would be humiliating. What if that bitch just wanted to make a rift among them to get rid of them?

Once they went for an outing to the Jiser al- Quiri area. They sat by the bank of the Quieck river. They had stolen a chicken from a nearby field, plucked and grilled it. They swam in the river, and dared each other to swim in the whirlpool which had drowned many boys and men. When they were lying down on the grass relaxing, Sobhi, who didn't participate in their fun, was having a little doze on the grass. They made up their minds. They wanted to know the truth. They bared their chests, and with a signal, all the boys jumped on Sobhi. They held him firmly by his hands and legs, and one of them pulled his pants down and removed his shirt. When his private parts were revealed, they were astounded. Sobhi wasn't a boy. How hadn't it occur to them that their leader was a girl? Bahira was ashamed and went back home crying. The boys were astonished. How could Bahira cheat them all that time. But she looked like them in everything. Her face, legs and hands were like those of a boy. She even had muscles, and fought like boys. She resembled them in everything, except that she didn't have that thing between their legs. She could trick them because she never took a piss in front of them. But what about her breasts? They were all 15 years old, and Bahira should have breasts like the girls of her age. Did she tie her breasts? They expelled Bahira from their gang and selected another boy as their leader. The first decision they took was to rape Bahira. But she was careful and escaped them. She too took a serious decision not to marry at all, because men's bodies revolted her.

Her hatred of men encouraged her to sing at weddings among women. When she was eighteen her mother found out that she had a beautiful voice. Bahira came of age and started to have dreams. of making love to women.

Bahira had a good figure. Her body was taut. Her breasts grew bigger and it was impossible for her to hide them by having them strapped. This no longer bothered her since she didn't like to mingle with males. She wanted to associate herself with her own sex, women, who created that atmosphere of friendliness and intimacy. In our country, nobody can enter the realm of women, if one wasn't a woman, even women who resembled men, such as Bahira. When her mother discovered that her voice was sweet, she encouraged her to sing when she had gatherings of women friends and neighbors. But it didn't occur to her

mother that Bahira would become one day a singer at weddings. Bahira became a well-known singer in the town. She was invited to sing at weddings, women's receptions, and baby showers, particularly if the newborn were boys. She was accompanied by her musical band which consisted only of women. She went on stage wearing men's clothes. Sometimes, she wore a red fez, or she drew big moustaches. She always stuck a white flower in her jacket buttonhole. Her masculine manner and gestures attracted women.

She was also known for her tendency towards women. News of her love and her lovers were on every tongue in the salons, receptions and parties held in the *hammam* (the public bath). She wasn't ashamed of these news or rumors. On the contrary, she was proud of them, and would boast about her latest lovers. She fought fiercely to keep them and she stole a girl from other envious and competitive ladies. Once, Khoja Bahira won the heart of a blonde musician, who played the *Qanoun*, and stole her from her competitor Khoja Samah. Bahira convinced her to join her band too.

"So do you know now why Khoja Bahira," the old man asked, his face beaming with a smile, "was happy when she set her eyes on Baddi'a, and why she gave the man the nine gold liras as a reward?"

"Yes I do," I said, "I believe she was strikingly beautiful. A charming girl fell in the hands of an experienced woman who loved women. But, tell me... didn't that arouse the jealousy of the other musicians, especially the blonde *Qanoun* player?"

"She was smitten with jealousy," the old man said, "you don't know those kind of women very well. I am sorry, I didn't mean to underestimate your knowledge and experience in life. But imagine a woman who was the subject of competition between two women, and all of a sudden, she finds herself rejected, and saw all her lover's efforts shift to a newcomer, starting to teach her the art of belly dancing and concentrating all her attention on making her look prettier."

"And what happened to the *Qanoun* player?" I asked.

"She left Khoja Bahira and returned to her ex-lover, Khoja Samah".

I smiled. The story grew more interesting. It seemed that I started to like to hear such stories. To prove to him that I knew something about such women, I said, "I think these women are known locally as "*Banat Ishreb*."

"That's right, *Banat Ishreb*." He confirmed.

"But I don't know what is the origin of this expression. Do you know sir?"

"I think *Banat Ishreb* is used to describe women who make love to women, just as men and women do. It has been said that there were women who live together in the same house, as if they were a normal family. One of the couple assumes the role of a man in the house, and the other takes the role of a woman."

"Is it necessary that the one who takes the role of man must be older than the other woman?"

"Most often yes, that's why the older woman, who assumes the role of man is called "*Abalaya* or *Abla*", which is a distortion of the Turkish word for an elder sister, while the other woman is called "*her girl*."

"And what happened to Baddi'a." My interest in her increased.

"Be patient," he said, "Now I will tell you about Khoja Samah; but I believe it is too late now. I think the servant went to bed. I think we should go to bed now. We will carry on tomorrow."

I was so tired because of what I went through today. I thought to myself, if I wanted to listen to the stories and keep them fresh in my memory, I must be fully awake. I got up and helped the old man go upstairs to his room. He was so weak. He was trembling when he climbed the stairs. With difficulty, he reached his room. I opened the door for him, switched the light on, and helped him lie on his bed. When I was sure everything was well with him, I covered him. He thanked me and I wished him good night. A quick glance

around the room made me stand still. The walls were crowded with framed pictures. Some other pictures were scattered on a small table, and on the two nightstands on both sides of the bed. They were pictures of women and men, children and old men, all of which belonged to wealthy people, who were related to him in some way or another.

The old man was looking at me. I felt he didn't like me to focus on his pictures and on his past (he told me later that he liked my being curious). I bid him good night, switched off the light, and went out.

As soon as I put my head on the pillow, I fell fast asleep. I made sure that the door was firmly locked. I am very careful in my nature.

* * *

When I woke up in the morning my head was heavy. I opened my eyes but stayed in bed. I had that feeling of one who wakes up to find oneself in an unfamiliar bedroom.

It was about eleven o'clock. But the grey daylight outside and the thudding of rain on the windowpanes gave me the feeling that it was earlier. The room looked more intimate than it did last night. When I saw it for the first time, it looked very simple, but neat. The walls were bare, and didn't have any pictures like in the old man's room. There was only a picture of a landscape. The furniture was carved oak wood made in Aleppo. It seemed to me that I have heard something moving in the room, when I was asleep. But being exhausted and cold, I couldn't move from my bed to put on the light and see where the sound came from. I was somewhat afraid. I got up and made sure the door was locked. I inspected the window looking on the backyard, and found it was firmly locked. Most likely I had been dreaming. This made me feel relaxed. I went into the bathroom, took a shower and shaved using a new razor the servant had brought me. Then I got dressed. At that point, I heard a light knocking on the door, followed by the voice of the servant asking me to go downstairs to have breakfast.

The old man was sitting at the table waiting for me. I said good morning and sat in the place assigned to me. The living room was simpler than I thought it was last night, despite the dozens of art masterpieces, wooden cases, paintings and carved ivory horns and rare chinaware, as well as the other items the old man brought from his many travels to various parts of the world. Those masterpieces gave the living room a sophisticated atmosphere. They also showed that he had good taste. We ate our breakfast silently. The servant poured milk in our cups and brought a plate with boiled eggs.

In the silence that filled the room, I looked intently at the old man's face while he was eating. He looked serene and younger than I thought he was last night. He even had a friendly and familiar face. He had sparse shiny hair, with wrinkles extended over his forehead. His eyes were honey-colored with a faint glow in them. While he looked very friendly, his servant looked ambiguous and aggressive. When I remembered last night's sounds, a light shudder went through my body.

We had our coffee in the sitting room by the wood stove. After serving us the coffee, the servant left us alone. The old man resumed his story.

"The picture wouldn't be complete without telling you about Khoja Samah," he said in his deep and weak voice.

I said I would be glad to hear her story.

Khoja Samah was Khoja Bahira's strong competitor. They competed to sing in the high-class houses. Therefore they had women friends from these important families in Aleppo. Each of them conspired against the other, doing everything they could to remove the other from her way. They also competed to sing the most recent and popular songs. They sought to buy the newest discs produced by the Egyptian "Gramophone Limited" company. Once, Khoja Samah got the newest disc of the singer "*Sheikh Sayed Saffi*", even before it reached the company's agent in Damascus. At the party attended by the *Wali* himself, she sang the most recent song of *Sayed Saffi*, which says "*oh my heart, who told you to*

fall in love.” Her fans and admirers talked about the song the following day with great appreciation and admiration. This aroused Khoja Bahira’s anger and jealousy.

Samah was far prettier than Bahira, who looked like a man. Samah was a real woman. She was plump with a fair complexion. She had a round face, unlike Bahira’s oval face. She used to wear a red rose in her hair, which made her look prettier and more feminine. Furthermore she had a lovely mouth with two full luscious lips. Samah also had a tendency towards women and didn’t marry. She did her best to win the hearts of Bahira’s girlfriends, lovers, singers and dancers and make them join her band. Bahira did the same. The last one (as I said) was the *Qanoun* player, whom Samah took as her lover. She was smitten with jealousy when Baddi’a arrived and took her place in Bahira’s heart. Hence she left her and went back to her former *Abbla*, Samah.

Khoja Bahira was very lucky to have Baddi’a. Though Samiha lost her *Qanoun* player, she had other skilled and charming musicians in her band and it didn’t affect her badly. Even though the *Qanoun* player joined Bahira’s band, and she sang the most recent Egyptian songs, specially those songs composed by *Mohamed Afandi* and *Dawoud Hosni*, Bahira’s business wasn’t going well.

“But why was Samah’s business going better than Bahira’s?” I asked the old man, “why did she have in her band all those beautiful girls, while Bahira didn’t have such beautiful girls?”

“Because Bahira was a dominating woman,” he said, “she treated her girls with cruelty. She was harsh and possessive. She loved to possess people, and this made girls slip away from her hands. She counted their breaths.”

“This is a manly behavior, but I believe that such nature fits women just as much, so why not...?”

“As I told you, despite the differences between the two women, and though Samah was *Bint Isbre*, it seemed that her companion women wanted their *abla* to be a real woman.”

“And did Baddi’a accept working with a singer with homosexual tendencies?” I asked. The old man resumed his story.

Bahira trained Baddi’a and made out of her a very good dancer. She began to dance at parties and weddings. She was able to change her from that girl who escaped from her strict mother in a small town to a beautiful professional belly dancer. She chose her clothes for her, looked after her hair and skin. She also taught her how to walk. She used to throw her feet in front of her as most villagers do. Her dance became more balanced. She was taught how to match the movement of her hand with the tune and how she should change her movements incessantly. Bahira told Baddi’a to show that tenderness that distinguished her, and not to be shy. She wanted her to be a real dancer that wins the admiration of both men and women. She also wanted her to be a charming woman that captures the heart and admiration of everyone who sets eyes on her. Bahira knew how Baddi’a was precious, and prepared her to appear in public and introduce her to people. But before she did so, she shared her bed. She caressed her, and for the first time she made her taste true love. That village girl didn’t know much of what a woman can do to her.

Baddi’a was pleased with all that was happening to her. Bahira saved her from an unknown fate. She could have been wandering in the streets begging. The best option she would have had was to go back to her strict mother. Bahira saved her from that gloomy fate, and brought her to live in a luxurious place, nobody had even dreamt of. She promised to shower her with love, silk and gold. She promised to drown her with fame and lights, she promised her to do all that and more, but on condition she must be loyal to her *Abla*, and not cheat on her with any other person, especially Samah. She told her that she would be a famous woman one day, she would hear tender whispers, generous promises, and expressions of admiration. She also cautioned her that many women might fall in love with her, but she shouldn’t believe in any such false feelings, because only Bahira would give her

true love, Bahira who had made her, and who blew life in her, therefore, she must listen to what she tells her, and not heed anybody else.

She told her that men were real monsters; she warned her not to be in touch with them. The only thing men do to women was that they make them heart-broken, impregnate them, and busy them with their children. Men were Bahira's worst enemies. She warned her that other *Banat Isbreh* might snatch her from Bahira, but she can restore her to her bed; but there would be no hope in getting her back if a man married her, deflowered her, and made her pregnant, and made her look after his children. Bahira never stopped talking badly about men, depicting them as ugly and repulsive with their horrible organs. She depicted them to her as monsters carrying hoses between their legs, which they used to tear the insides of women. The alternative, of course, were Bahira's caresses when she slept with her. She would take her into her arms, kiss her, then remove her clothes and caress her till she moaned. Baddi'a liked what Bahira did to her. As a sort of punishment, she wouldn't touch her for a while. Baddi'a grew used to her light touches, and would not go to sleep if she weren't caressed by her. She heard her moan and toss around in bed. Then Bahira was certain that she was ready for her, and was no longer afraid of introducing her to the society.

Khoja Bahira surprised other women in Aleppo society with her newfound dancer. She introduced her for the first time in a party held by the wife of the Turkish Wali, attended by wives of high-ranking men in the city: Turkish, Arabs and Caucasians. Khoja Bahira was invited to sing at the Wali's house, and she was always accompanied a dancer. But none of those people expected to see such an angel in a dancing outfit. While she was singing, Khoja Bahira noticed that more than one hundred pair of eyes were gazing at the astonishing Baddi'a who was dancing in such a way that captured their hearts. Soon, the ladies were fascinated too by this beautiful girl who was moving to the lovely tunes. Some of them sighed loudly, and some in a hushed voice. The following day, this belly dancer was the talk of the town. Requests to dance in the salons of high class houses flowed to Bahira. Visitors rushed to her house to catch a look at the charming Baddi'a. Many tried to win her heart, falling in love with her from the very moment they saw her dancing. Khoja Bahira would make Baddi'a sit very close to her. She would often take her palm between her hands so that everybody would see that she was Bahira's girl. Bahira even told her to kiss her whenever she wanted in front of the visitors, to tell everybody that she was her *Abla*. She even asked the maid to make the visitors wait in the salon, because Bahira and Baddi'a were still in their bedroom. And after a while, they would come out in their nightdresses to welcome them, to look as if they had been having sex.

Men came to Khoja Bahira's house too to see Baddi'a after they heard about her from their women. They were Turkish officers, the *Wali's* retinue and important merchants in town as well as urban counselors... even a German Marshal, and a Turkish Pasha and Arab *Beys* came to visit her. Bahira wasn't concerned at all to let her seen by the ladies but she was worried to have her appear in front of men. She feared men. Khoja Samah was simmering with anger when she heard about it. She had sent her spy women to see Baddi'a and tell her what she looked like.

Samah tried to seduce Baddi'a. She sent her high promises through her women, but Bahira was on watch. They were confronted with a masculine stern face and strong will, she was ready to fight for Baddi'a. For more than two years, Bahira was considered the first lady in the society of women in Aleppo, the lover of the most gentle and beautiful belly dancer in town. Baddi'a had no real competitor.

But however one was careful, fate would strike. Bahira always was afraid that other women would take her Baddi'a away from her. She also feared bad men, therefore she never stopped telling her how in her opinion, men were the cause of all women's disasters and misfortunes. One day, when a few officers and gentlemen were visiting her, Baddi'a fell in love with one of them. He was Yuzbashi Jawdat, the handsome Turkish officer who stole

the heart of Baddi'a from Khoja Bahira. He was strong, with irresistible qualities. He was the bodyguard of a high-ranking Ottoman officer. He sat silently waiting, peering discretely at Baddi'a beauty. He was timid but brave and adventurous. He fell in love with Baddi'a right away. He had delicate and deep eyes, like the eyes of an eagle. Baddi'a felt slight tremors course in her veins, every time his eyes met hers. She too fell in love with him, but didn't dare to let her *Abla* know about her love. He used to come to her neighborhood. He would stand at the corner for long hours. When Baddi'a discovered that, she stood at the window of the wooden kiosk to look at him, and let him see her. He told her that he loved her looks and asked her to meet him outside. She thought of him, and dreamt of him. Her resistance waned. Then she started to make up excuses and went out to meet him. She took the maid with her who could easily be bribed. He made love to her, and made her taste the true taste of love. Baddi'a found that men were not that bad, and that their bodies tasted good.

One day she felt nausea. Her period was interrupted for a while. She was pregnant with Widad. What could she do? Yuzbashi Jawdat married her legally through a clergyman. She wanted to tell *Abla* Bahira, but she was afraid. She waited till the war broke out and rumors spread that Damascus was about to fall into the hands of the Arab and British armies. Then Yuzbashi was transferred to the southern front in the fight to repulse those armies. It was a sad farewell. Baddi'a wept for her lover, and for her uncertain future. Jawdat left her behind, fearing that her pregnancy would appear and Bahira would discover her. Fortunately, the parties stopped because the Ottomans were defeated. Who on earth would care about singing and dancing at that time? When she heard that Damascus had fallen and that the Turkish officers had fled by train to Turkey, she escaped from her *Abla* Bahira. She fled by train, as I said, and lived at Midan Ikbis village to wait for her lover. But the war came to an end, and all members of the Turkish army left Syria, and the British army entered the country. There was no trace of Yuzbashi Jawdat. Badi'a's loss was very hard on Khoja Bahira. She had also to bear the grudge of Khoja Samah.

*

THINKING OF NAIMA

A Story

Late at night, he switched off the light, and groped for the bed which he had bought at the flea market, when he thought of marrying his neighbor Naima, daughter of the shoemaker. He knew that she loved to sleep on a European-style bed. He didn't marry her, and he couldn't figure out why that marriage didn't materialize. He asked himself this question just as he was touching the edge of the bed in the dark.

As soon as he lay down, he decided to think of Naima. And since he didn't fall asleep right away, he had to look for something interesting to think of that made him feel happy. He always wanted to dream of her.

Naima asked him many times: "why haven't you married yet; and how do you manage with your food and laundry?" At last, he decided to ask for her hand in marriage because of her interest in his personal affairs.

He remembered now how he started to think of her. He thought she might accept him, though he was in his sixties, while she was still a young woman at thirty-five years of age. After all, she was not that pretty and surely that squinting in her eyes made her look very plain. He always said she was plain, because he didn't want to admit, even to himself, as he was lying in his European-style bed, that she was ugly, though all the guys in the neighborhood said so.

He thought about this very deeply. He didn't want to ask for her hand in marriage lest he would be rejected. He was sixty years old now and lived most of his life alone after his mother died. He didn't want to be turned down and felt timid at this age. Furthermore, he was sure that Naima didn't want to live at her parents' house after the death of her father when her mother took over controlling and dominating her. Her situation became worse than before, for her mother was sharp-tongued, and was only concerned about what others said about her, beside her elder and younger brothers who loved to flex their balloon muscles in front of her to show her their strength.

Sometimes he heard shouts coming from their apartment which was right above his, while trying to find his way to bed in the dark, stretching his hands in front of him. He often thought of buying a flashlight to put beside his bed. He always worried that he might stumble onto a chair or a shoe and fall down on his way to bed from the door where the electric switch was placed, about a meter and a half away from the bed.

When he heard those shouts, he would know right away that her mother and brothers were beating and rebuking her and wishing fever upon her. He thought of all that and concluded that if he asked for her hand, her family would welcome the idea, at least to get rid of her, and to shift their concerns about her from their shoulders to his, as they say.

He remembered that day when he came back home and saw Naima washing the stairway. He greeted her, and she reciprocated his greeting. Then she asked him what he was carrying in that plastic bag. "Two falafel sandwiches for lunch", he said. "What a poor guy you are," she exclaimed and wondered why he didn't look for a good wife to take care of him in his

old age. He told her he was thinking seriously of getting married, and said he would be grateful if she could help him find a reasonable good-hearted woman who would accept to marry an old man like him. When she heard that, she smiled and reached out and touched his hand, which was holding the rails. Suddenly an electric current shot through his body, and he felt the heat surge to his head. His heart started to beat faster, and his mouth became dry.

He is now hearing footsteps pacing upstairs. He can guess that they are the footsteps of a person treading heavily on the floor to make such heavy pounding sound. Ever since he discovered that this was the way Naima walked, he started to feel something strange inside him the moment he heard her footsteps. Her mother didn't make any sound at all when she walked. He thought that her mother dragged her feet, and she rarely walked barefoot. He also remembered the sound of her brothers' footsteps who used to visit their mother and sister from time to time. The family used to get together at the Lesser and Greater Bairam (the Eid), and on the occasion of middle of the month of Cha'bban, when they return from the cemetery after visiting their poor father's grave, who died before he could see his daughter Naima married and settled down. The sound of their footsteps was strong. They usually walked in their shoes, so that they made a strong thudding sound. And that brother in particular, who used to wear worn-out shoes, with the studs protruding from the heels, would make a loud sound on the bare tile floor.

He turned to his right side to expel all those thoughts of footsteps and shoes. He wanted to concentrate on happy things, the things he always sought before he went to bed, like, for example, when he came back home and saw her washing the stairs, and rushed back to his house and sat in the chair panting, while the memory of Naima's touch of his hand was still fresh in his mind, trying to perpetuate that feeling which overwhelmed him. It had been a long time since he was last touched by a woman. He even forgot completely the touch of his mother's hands, when she used to rub his head to eliminate the headache spells which used to attack him. She used to rub his forehead, eyes and cheeks, murmuring a verse from the holy Quran which starts with "*Say: I take refuge with the Lord of dawn from the mischief of whatever he has created*". Now he was lying on his right side trying to recall Naima's touch. He raised his hand and looked at it, but couldn't see it in the dark. He closed his eyes, pleased with that feeling which made him remember how he had refused to wash his hands for three days, so that the trace of her touch wouldn't be removed. It was a feeling that overwhelmed all his body, so much so that his hair stood on end.

In his heart, he felt the sweet impact of the touch. It was a kind of pleasure that overwhelmed him all of a sudden, that made him sigh with great happiness. At this point, he remembered how he had left his work place earlier and rushed home, hoping to see Naima standing on the stairs, then he would put his hand on the rails, giving her a chance to touch him once again. But he returned to his work place disappointed, feeling depressed. On his way back home, however, carrying his sandwiches in a plastic bag, he felt better again, in the hope of seeing her again or, at least, he would sit in his room and listen to the shuffling of her footsteps; hear her moving from room to room barefooted, then he would remember that unforgettable touch.

In a sharp insight, it dawned on him that she used to wash the stairs on Thursdays only. Now, after he turned to his left side, he remembered how he had met her for the second time, when he stood there holding the rails. He gazed into her face, receiving wireless messages transmitted by her body to his, or by her soul to his, telling him how difficult it was to find a proper woman without roaming from house to house, and knocking on doors.

He found himself asking her to marry him, and telling her that she was the only woman he wanted. Her face turned red, she felt embarrassed. She didn't know what to do or what to say. So he decided to withdraw. But as he was moving away from her, he said to her in a low voice that he would talk to her mother. He knew quite well, however, that talking to her mother was not that easy, for she was, as everybody knew, a bad-tempered and sharp-tongued woman, and would use the same curses and obscene words men used. While lying on his left side, he decided not to think about the mother, since the thought of her made him angry, while he wanted to sleep soundly. Therefore, he didn't try to recall the details of his meeting with her, when he went upstairs and talked to her about this. The only thing he learned in that visit was how Naima liked to sleep. In that visit, he learned that she liked to sleep on a European-style bed with a spring mattress, while he slept on a board covered with a stuffed mattress, following the advice of the doctor of the Department he worked in, when he was diagnosed to have a slipped disc.

Thinking of Naima and of all these things relating to her made him happy, for he discovered that he had now a good reason to roam from one market to another on foot to look for a bed for Naima. Because of his long search, the pain from the slipped disc returned. A colleague of his advised him to look for such a bed at the flea market. Now he found something to keep him busy on Fridays, the weekend when his work place closed and he had to stay home. He found an excuse to leave the house and come back in the hope of having a glimpse of Naima, who hadn't given him an answer yet to his proposal to her. He realized by that time, however, that the noisy sounds made by her brothers' shoes became more frequent and noisier in their house. He felt that those shoes were treading on his head every night. Then this was followed by shouts, curses and threats. Probably he heard one curse directed at him and at his family. At this point he wanted to think only of happy things, he didn't want to recollect all that he had heard, especially that angry shouting describing him as a poor and ailing old man, who didn't own a house. He also didn't want to remember how he heard Naima crying bitterly, and other things, including those sounds and shouting which he believed was one of her brothers beating her violently with the help of her mother. He remembered at that time, that he wept silently for the sake of Naima. He wept once again when he saw her some weeks later, while she was washing the stairs. He came closer to her to tell her that he had, at last, bought for her the bed she wanted to sleep on. But she ran away, leaving the water running on the stairs, pouring like a waterfall. He remembered now that he had wept in his room, though he didn't want to think about such things which made him feel depressed. He felt at that time that he was lonely, and that he would die alone without having a woman touching his hand. Therefore, he started to think of Naima every night, and how she left a nice and happy feeling in him that made him sleep soundly and see happy dreams.

(Translation by Khaled AlJbaili)