

Sadeq Hedayat

Abji Khanom

Translated by Ernest Tucker

Abji Khanom was Mahrokh's older sibling, but people who did not know them and saw them together could not believe it. Abji Khanom was tall, thin and swarthy, with thick lips and musky hair—on the whole, a rather ugly girl. In contrast, Mahrokh was short and fair, with a small nose, auburn hair, and beautiful eyes. Whenever she smiled, dimples would appear. They also behaved very differently. Abji Khanom had a nitpicking, quarrelsome, and unsociable nature, to the point that she would not be on speaking terms with her mother for two to three months at a time. Her sister, on the other hand, was sociable, attractive, good-natured, and always smiling. Their neighbor, Naneh Hasan, called her "the Fair Lady." The sisters' parents liked Mahrokh the best since she was the younger and a dear, sweet child. Ever since Abji Khanom's childhood her mother had hit her and picked on her. She would express concern about her in front of neighbors and strangers. She would slap the back of her hand and exclaim, "O, what shall I do about this misfortune? Who will marry such an ugly daughter? I'll be stuck with

er forever. She's a daughter without wealth, beauty, or goodness. What wretch is going to marry her?" So many harsh words were hurled at Abji Khanom that she had lost all hope and gave up the very idea of marriage. She spent most of her time in prayer and worship. Once, when they wanted to give her to Kalb Hosayn, the carpenter's apprentice, he did not want her. Abji Khanom would tell everyone, "They found a husband for me, but I wouldn't have him. All husbands nowadays are drunkards and whoremongers. They should all be walled up. I'll never get married."

This is what she said in public. But deep in her heart she actually liked Kalb Hosayn and wanted to marry him. However, because it had been said since she was five years old that she was ugly and no one would want to marry her, and because she figured she was not to share in the pleasures of this world, she wanted at least to reap the rewards of the next through prayer and worship. Thus she consoled herself. Indeed, why lament this transient world if one cannot enjoy its pleasures? The eternal and everlasting world would be hers, where all beautiful people, including her sister, would envy her.

During the months of Moharram and Safar, Abji Khanom would make an appearance. There was not a single martyr's commemoration that she did not attend. She would take her place at the *ta'ziyeh* passion plays from eleven o'clock in the morning, and all the *rowzeh-khans* knew her. They all wanted Abji to sit right at their feet, so that the audience would be inspired by her weeping and moaning. She had memorized most of the martyr's stories. Since she had listened to so many sermons and knew religious questions so well, many of her neighbors would consult her about their problems. She rose at the crack of dawn to wake up her household. First, she would go to her sister's bed. She would kick the bed and say, "It's nearly noon, when are you going to get your lazy bones up and go pray?" The poor girl would get up, perform an ablution while half-asleep and stand to pray. The morning call to prayer, the rooster's crow, the morning wind and the humming of prayers put Abji Khanom into a particular mood, a spiritual mood. She was proud in her heart. She would say to herself, "If God does not take me to heaven, then whom will he take?" For

the rest of the day, after attending to household chores and nagging at various people, she would grasp a string of worry beads whose black color had been yellowed with much rubbing and she would send off prayers. Her one great desire was, by whatever means possible, to make a pilgrimage to Karbala and to stay there.

Her sister, though, did not seem to pay any great attention to the spiritual side of life. She was always doing housework. When she turned fifteen, she became a domestic servant. Abji Khanom, at age twenty-two, still remained at home. Deep down, she envied her sister. In the first year and a half after Mahrokh left home to enter domestic service, Abji Khanom did not ask about her or visit her even once. Once every fifteen days when Mahrokh would come home to see the family, Abji Khanom would either get into an argument with someone or go pray for two or three hours. Then, when they were all seated together, she would spout sarcastic remarks about her sister and begin lecturing her on prayer, fasting, ritual purity, and dubious activities. She would say, for instance, "Since these dandy women have appeared, bread has become expensive. Anyone who does not veil her face will be hung in hell by the hairs of her head. The head of the slanderer will grow to the size of a mountain and her neck will shrink to the size of a hair. There are snakes in hell that would drive men to take refuge with a dragon," and on and on in the same vein. Mahrokh felt her sister's envy, but did not show it.

One day toward afternoon, Mahrokh came to the house, spoke with her mother for a while, and then left. Abji Khanom was sitting near the door of the opposite room, smoking a *qalyan*. Because of her envy toward Mahrokh, though, she did not ask her mother what the conversation had been about. Her mother did not say anything to her, either.

At nightfall her father, with his plaster-covered construction worker's cap, came home. He took off his work clothes, picked up his pouch of tobacco and a pipe and went up to the roof. Abji Khanom left off what she had been doing. She and her mother took out the bronze samovar, the small pot of stew, the copper bowl, pickles and onions, and went and sat on the rug. Her mother announced that Abbas, a servant in the same

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house where Mahrokh was working, had decided to marry Mahrokh. That morning, when the house was quiet, the mother of Abbas had come to ask her hand. They wanted to conclude the marriage contract the next week, and to offer a bride price of twenty-five *tomans*, and to set a dowry of thirty *tomans* plus a mirror, a tulip, a Koran, shoes, sweets, a purse of henna, a silk scarf, culottes, and some cloth with gold thread. Her father, while fanning himself, placed a sugar cube in the corner of his mouth and sipped tea through his teeth. With the tip of his tongue, he said, "Very good, with God's blessing, that is all right!" without seeming surprised, or happy, or showing any emotion at all—as though he were afraid of his wife. Abji Khanom was stunned when she realized what was being said, and she could not listen to the rest of the arrangements. On the pretext that she had to pray, she got up and went down to the room of five doors. She caught sight of herself in a small mirror. She looked old and haggard; it was as if she had aged several years in a few minutes. Her forehead had knotted into a frown. One of her hairs had turned white, and she pulled it out with her fingers. She stared at it for a while in front of a lamp, and did not feel the pain of the pulled root.

A few days passed. All of the household was in a flurry of activity, going back and forth to the bazaar. They bought two gold-thread dresses, as well as a decanter, glasses, a piece of embroidery, a rose-water bottle, a drinking vessel, a nightcap, a compact, an indigo-boiler, a bronze samovar, a printed curtain—a little of everything. Her mother, filled with excitement, gathered up small things that were lying around the house, including even the cashmere prayer-carpet that Abji Khanom had several times asked for (and not received). She set all this aside for Mahrokh's trousseau. Abji Khanom silently and fretfully observed all these proceedings. For two days, she pretended she had a headache. Her mother constantly reproached her. "What is a sister for, at this of all times? I know you envy her, but envy doesn't get you anywhere. Besides, beauty and ugliness are none of my doing, they're the work of God. You saw that I wanted to marry you off to Kalb Hosayn, but you weren't acceptable to them. Now you are going to pretend to be sick so that you don't have to do

anything! From morning to evening you carry on with your piety, so I am the helpless one who with these worn-out eyes must thread the needle!"

Abji Khanom, distraught with jealousy, would reply from under the blankets, "Fine, fine, at your age don't try to brand a piece of ice! Men like Abbas are a dime a dozen in this town. Why are you carping at me? It's enough that everyone knows what sort of a person this Abbas fellow is, not to mention that Mahrokh is two months pregnant. I have seen her belly protruding, but I overlooked it. I don't consider her my sister anymore...."

Her mother shot back: "God, may you be struck mute! May the undertaker carry off your body and may I grieve at your death. Shameless girl, get lost! Do you want to stain my daughter's reputation? I know that it's your jealousy. May you die since no one will take you the way you look! Now you slander your sister because of your own grief. Wasn't it you who said that God himself has written in the Koran that he who spreads slander is the worst kind of liar? It is the mercy of God that you are not beautiful, otherwise, since you leave the house so often to hear sermons, many more things would be said about you. Go on, all of your fasting and praying is not worth one devil's curse. It's all for show!"

Such were the words they exchanged for the next few days. Mahrokh was perplexed and did not speak until the night of the betrothal. All of the neighborhood women assembled had indigo eyebrows, veils decorated with coins, made-up faces, hair done in bangs, and cotton culottes. In the midst of all this, Naneh Hasan jumped into the fray and sat with neck bent, playing a drum. Whatever was in her repertoire, she chanted:

Beloved, blessed be your marriage, God willing, blessed be! We come, we come, back we come from the groom's house. All the women are moons, all the men kings, and all eyes almonds.

Beloved, blessed be your marriage, God willing, blessed be! We come, we come, back we come from the bride's house. All are blind, all lame, and all eyes moist.

Beloved, blessed be! We come to carry off the fairy and the houri. God willing, blessed be.

She went on repeating this song. People came and went, in front of the pool they rubbed trays with ashes. The smell of *qormeh-sabzi* filled the air, and someone shooed away a cat from the kitchen. Another was looking for eggs to juggle. Children held hands, alternately sitting down and standing up, chanting, "Ants in the bathtub, sit down, get up!" Copper samovars, rented for the occasion, were lit. It had been announced that Mahrokh's mother and her daughters would be coming to the betrothal. Two tables were arranged with sweets and fruits, and two chairs placed at the side of each. Mahrokh's father was pacing back and forth, thinking that he had spent quite enough money for this, while her mother insisted that they have a puppet show that night. Amid all this commotion, nobody said a word about Abji Khanom. She had left at two o'clock in the afternoon. No one knew where she had gone, but it must have been to a sermon!

When the tulip lamps were lit and the betrothal had been completed and everyone had left except Naneh Hasan, the hands of the bride and groom were joined and they sat next to each other in the room with five doors, and the doors were closed. Abji Khanom arrived home. She went to the five-doored room to take off her veil. When she got there, she saw that the curtain of the five-doored room had been fastened. Out of curiosity, she pulled away the edge of the curtain, and from the window, saw her sister Mahrokh all made up, indigoed, more beautiful than ever in the light of the lamp, sitting next to the groom, a strapping lad of twenty. They were sitting in front of the table full of sweets. The groom had put his hand round Mahrokh's waist and was saying something in her ear, as if they noticed her. Perhaps he noticed her sister, but because they wanted to make her jealous, they laughed together and kissed. The sound of Naneh Hasan's drum wafted in from the end of the courtyard: "Beloved, blessed be!" A mixture of aversion and envy overtook Abji Khanom. She closed the curtain, and went to her bed, which had been put against the wall. Without taking off her black veil, she put her hands under her

chin and stared at the floor. She was dazzled by the flowers and patterns of the carpet. She counted them as if they were something new. She focused on how their colors blended. People came and went, but she didn't raise her head to see who they were. Her mother came to the door of the room and asked, "Why aren't you eating dinner? Why are you so bitter? Why are you sitting here? Take off your black veil, why are you bringing bad luck? Come and kiss your sister, come and watch from behind the window, the bride and groom are like the full moon now. Come and say something. Everyone has been asking where you have been. I don't know what to tell them."

Abji Khanom only raised her head and said, "I already ate dinner."

It was midnight. All had gone to bed remembering their own marital night, and were dreaming pleasantly. Suddenly, the household was rudely awakened by the sound of splashing. At first they thought that a cat or a child had fallen into the pool and, barefoot and half-dressed, they lit the lamp. They looked everywhere, but could see nothing unusual. Just when they were going back to bed, Naneh Hasan noticed Abji Khanom's slippers next to the lid of the water reservoir. They brought the lamp over to it, and saw Abji Khanom's body floating on the water, her black braided hairs twisted around her neck like a snake. Her colorful dress clung to her body. Her face wore an expression of radiance, as if she had gone to a place where there was no ugliness or beauty, no marriage or mourning, no smiling or weeping, no happiness or sorrow. She had gone to paradise.