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Laleh

Brian Spooner

University of Pennsylvania, spooner@sas.upenn.edu

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Laleh

Translated by Brian Spooner

Clouds had been moving across the sky all morning, and an annoying cold wind was blowing. The ground under the trees was full of dead leaves—leaves that from time to time were whipped into the air and fell circling back to earth again. A group of crows flew past, cawing harshly. In the distance, like boxes of matches set out one on top of the other, peasant houses with black windows and no doors seemed frail and temporal.

Khodadad felt as though he had new blood in his old veins. His gait was firm and steady. Despite his gray beard, he was still nimble, and his heart was young. His gaze seemed fixed on the damp road which stretched away through the wide plain in front of him. He could feel the wind on his body. The trees seemed to him to be dancing. The crows' cawing was for him like good news; and the whole of nature seemed lush and beautiful. He had a bundle under his arm wrapped in pretty printed cloth which he hugged against him. His eyes sparkled, and with every step he took the legs of his loose, black trousers rose and fell, exposing the strong, thick calves beneath them. His clothes were blue like the sky, and his hat was buff felt.

Khodadad was a man of about sixty, tall and broad, with sparkling eyes. For the last twenty years or so the people of Demavend had not seen him, for he had chosen to live outside the village on his own. Up above the Ala spring on the road to Mazandaran, Khodadad had built a little room for himself with mud and stones. For twenty years he had lived completely on his own there, like a hermit, working the soil with his coarse, gnarled hands—watering it and sowing, and reaping—the same life his father had led and probably his ancestors for generations before. His father had left him enough land to take nearly five hundred pounds of seed. In a year of drought he had sold half of it, or more. That is, he had exchanged it for flour. Now he passed his life quietly with the scanty produce of the little piece of land that remained.

What surprised everybody was that, in the last two or three years,

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Khodadad had been seen in the villages again, mostly at the *bazar* in Demavend, buying material for women's clothes, sugar and tea, and other odds and ends. Sometimes, in the mountains around Ab Garm, Jabon, and Gilyard, they had seen him with a little gypsy girl.

Four years ago on one of those sharp, frosty nights that seem to scrape the skin off your face with a steel knife, Khodadad had just blown out his lamp and gone to bed when he heard a strange noise: short, sharp cries that could have been an animal or a baby. The noise came nearer and nearer until he heard a knocking on the door of his hut. Khodadad, fearless in the face of wolves or ghosts, sat up and felt a drop of cold sweat trickle down his back. However much he asked "Who is it?" and "What do you want?" no one answered, but every time he lay down, there was a knock on the door again. With an unsteady hand he lit his lamp, picked up the big knife which hung on the wall for carving up wood and sticks, and with a sudden jerk, opened the door. His surprise only grew when he saw a little gypsy girl shivering there in a red dress, with tears frozen on her cheeks. Khodadad threw the knife back into the corner of the room, took the little girl's hand, and brought her in. He warmed her at the fire, and then made a bed for her out of his old bedclothes.

The next morning however much he questioned her, it was to no avail. It was as though the child had sworn not to say a word about herself. And that was why Khodadad called her Lal, or Lalu (meaning "dumb") which, after a time, became Laleh ("tulip"). The strange thing was, this was not the season for gypsies to be moving about, and Khodadad could not think where on earth the girl had come from. He went out and found her tracks, but they soon disappeared on the damp leaves. He asked the man at the mill at the Ala spring, but he knew nothing either. In the end he decided to keep the child until someone came for her.

Laleh was a fair-skinned twelve-year-old. She had a pretty face and bewitching eyes, and blue beauty spots on her hands and forehead. Throughout the four years that she stayed in the hut, however much Khodadad searched for her relatives, none of the gypsies knew her. And anyway, by that time Khodadad did not want to lose her. He had started to look on her as his own child and gradually began to feel a

special attachment towards her. He no longer felt like her father but loved her more as a man does his wife.

As soon as he became conscious of the temptation to make love to her, he put up a curtain across the middle of the room so that they slept separately. The worst thing of all was that Laleh called him "Baba" (father). Every time she said this, his heart turned over. One day when he came home, he saw two brown hens pecking about near the hut. However often he told Laleh that stealing was bad—"You'll burn in the fire of Hell"—a mischievous smile would appear on her lips, and she would brush the rebuke aside with an excuse.

Laleh loved going for walks. If it rained for two or three days at a time so that she was forced to stay in the hut, she would be unhappy and sulk. But when the weather was fine, she would go out, either with Khodadad or on her own. Mostly she went on her own, and in the end this made Khodadad suspicious. Two or three times he had seen Abbas the shepherd with her, and he began to think of him as his rival. One day he saw them together: Abbas was picking wild raspberries and feeding them to her. That night he shouted at Laleh. He told her she must not speak to strange men. Laleh's eyes filled with tears, and he did not have the heart to carry on. Twice Abbas' old mother came to ask for Laleh for her son, but both times Khodadad made the excuse that she was still a child. He reasoned to himself that this lazy Abbas would become his heir and inherit the property that he had worked up over fifty years. What then would his forefathers say to him? Instead of a respectable heir he had chosen a good-for-nothing who could not even till the soil. But apart from that, this child whom he himself had taken in, fed, clothed, worked for, and brought up, was for him like one of his own fruit trees, which he had tended carefully from a sapling to maturity—and then a stranger comes along and picks the fruit. Is a red apple bad for a cripple? Could he not have Laleh for himself? Why not? But he sensed it was not as simple as that. The girl's consent was also a condition. And then there was this bad habit the girl had of calling him "father." This made him despair even more. Often at night, when she went to sleep, he would hold up the lamp and gaze for a long time at her face and breasts and arms. Then like a madman he would rush out into the mountains and hills and only very late at night come home to sleep. His life balanced uneasily between hope and fear, and fear stopped him from giving voice to his love. If Laleh were to say,

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"No, you're old!" there would be nothing left for him but to kill himself.

Near the hut was a big block of stone which Laleh would often sit on, pressing her strong bare legs against its sides for hours without stirring or tiring. Sometimes she would hum to herself. The tunes were always sad. But the moment someone approached, she was suddenly silent. Once, quite by accident, Khodadad had heard her tune, and now he longed to hear it again.

This morning when Khodadad wanted to go to Demavend, Laleh was sitting on this big block of stone. She seemed much happier than usual, but she declined to go into town with Khodadad.

"I'll buy you a red scarf," he told her. He saw her happy, childish smile, which meant the world to him.

When he entered the little *bazar* at Demavend, he went to the draper's and bought a red scarf with green and yellow paisley design. Then he bought tea and sugar, tied them up in his printed handkerchief, and strode off on the return journey to his hut. He was used to walking, and although it was eight miles from the town to his home, it seemed just around the corner. Despite his age and toil-worn limbs, his life had found an aim and a meaning. As he walked along, he thought to himself, "The scarf will look lovely on Laleh, over her shoulders and tied under her breasts." Then, as though he had suddenly felt some kind of shame, he said to himself, "I must be proud of her beauty, for I'm like a father to her, and I must find her a good husband!" But the thought that Abbas the shepherd loved her made all the blood rush to his head.

On he walked, uphill, downhill, along the side of a valley, through mountains and over plains. He saw no one and was aware of nothing. He did not even notice his fatigue. Before, from time to time, something would have taken him through a village; he would have kept looking at the sky to see whether it would rain, or at the land around him to check on other people's crops; he would have asked about the price of barley, wheat, beans, dried fruit, apricots, etc. But now, he thought of nothing but Laleh. His own crop was not good this year, and he was forced to spend some of his savings, but this had no importance

at all for him, compared to Laleh. At this point, he was just passing by the trees where he turned off on another track, opposite which the hill appeared with his own hut perched on top of it like two broken match-boxes placed next to each other. He quickened his pace and pressed the scarf closer to him. He knew this road so well. He passed over another rise, around a corner, and there was the hut in front of him. But Laleh was not there—not on the block of stone, nor in the hut. He came to the door, put his hand to his mouth, and yelled, “Laleh—Laleh!” No one answered. He went out and shouted again with the full force of his lungs, “Laleh . . . Laleh . . . Lalu . . . Lalu . . .” The echo of his own voice answered him, “Laleh . . . Lalu . . .”

Suddenly, a terrible fear came over him. He ran up onto the block of stone in front of the hut and looked around. There was no trace of her red dress. He went back to the hut and searched everywhere. He opened her little case and saw that the new clothes he had bought for her this year were no longer there. He was nearly out of his mind. He could not understand what had happened. He came out of the hut again, and at the Ala spring came across the village mollah, who was sitting under the trees smoking his pipe, in a long, close-fitting coat and blue skullcap. The mollah gave him such a dirty look that he did not dare ask him anything. A little farther on he saw a woman in a long, red veil, black trousers and plaits, with a baby on her back. But she could not tell him anything about Laleh, and there was nothing he could do but turn back.

The sun set and darkness covered everything, but still Laleh did not return. What bad dreams Khodadad had! No! Sleep never came to his eyes. It was a nightmare. He jumped up at the slightest noise, thinking Laleh had returned. At least ten times he got up, pulled the curtain back, and groped, only to feel her cold bed. He trembled and fell back on his own bed. Had someone taken her off by force? Had they seduced her, or had she gone of her own accord?

The next morning the air was clear and sharp. Khodadad picked up the scarf he had bought and went off to look for her. Everyone he saw on the way looked like demons and dragons to him. The blue and gray mountains half-covered with snow seemed to threaten him. The smell of mint at the side of the stream nearly suffocated him. He met a couple of peasants on the road and asked them: “You haven’t seen Laleh?”

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At first they thought he had gone mad and asked each other, "Who?"

"A gypsy girl."

One of them answered, "Two days ago a group of gypsies pitched their tents at Mumej. Perhaps you mean them."

Khodadad took the road to Mumej. This time he walked fast and his legs shook. His route took him from track to track until in the distance he saw a group of black tents. As he came closer, he saw a man asleep at the side of a stream. A little farther on a gypsy woman was sifting groats. The woman greeted him and said, "I tell fortunes. We have charms against snakes; we can sell you sieves, walnuts. . ."

"You haven't seen Lale—er—Laleh?" said Khodadad like a madman. "Don't you know where she is?"

"We'll tell your fortune and then you'll know."

"Tell me. I'll give you money."

"Cross my palm."

Khodadad was tired. He put his hand into his pocket and gave one rial to the gypsy woman. The woman took his hand and looked into his face and said, "Ali is your support and your refuge. You have a sorrow in your heart now. You have lost something which for four years you had worked hard for, no, it was the dearest person in the world for you, and you loved her no less than your own life."

Khodadad with tears in his eyes looked at the woman and said softly, "It's true. It's true."

"But grieve no more, for the girl is near you. She is alive and well. And she loves you as well. But what's the use? Fate has done its work."

"What? What do you mean? By whatever you worship, tell me!"

"Don't let yourself grieve. She's happy. You left the door open. The devil entered and deceived her."

"Is his name not Abbas?"

"No."

"Who are you? How do you know all this? For God's sake, tell me the truth. I'll give you whatever you want."

He put his hand in his pocket, brought out another rial and gave it to her. Just then he saw the door of the next tent pull back, and Laleh came out. She had a red apple in her hand and was polishing it with her sleeve and taking bites out of it. Then she laughed and turned to the fortune-teller and said, "Mother dear, that's Baba Khodadad," and she pointed to him.

Khodadad was so surprised, his mouth opened wide. His eyes kept staring at Laleh and her mother. But he had never seen Laleh so vibrantly happy. He put his hand into the bundle under his arm, brought out the red scarf and dropped it in front of her.

"I bought this for you at the *bazar*," he said.

Laleh laughed aloud, threw the scarf over her shoulders and tied the ends together under her breasts. Then she ran back to the tent, grabbed a young man by the hand and pulled him out, pointed to Khodadad and said something in his ear. Then she started humming that same tune and strolled off with the man; they disappeared under the willows.

Khodadad was crying from grief and happiness. Stumbling and falling, he went back by the same road he had come. He went into his hut and shut the door. No one saw him again.