

Extract from Qismet by Hawra al-Nadawi

Translated by Alice Guthrie

Mullah Ghulam Ali, father to Qismet and grandfather to the two drowned children, was convinced that the catastrophe that had befallen their household was a direct result of the wretched ill omens swept in by the long winter winds. He had always been superstitious about winter: about how long it lasted, about its cold days, about the illnesses it brought on as soon as it set in. Those maladies made themselves a lair of the winter nights, filled them with fever and vomiting, grinding away at bodies that were already scrawny and exhausted. The Mullah had grown accustomed to the idea that when death came to slay whomever of his friends and relations it could, its black advent was abetted by winter. Even when loved ones were snatched away by sudden accidents it was usually linked somehow to the season of cold and dark – like his younger brother, crushed to death under the weight of a cart pulled by an elderly donkey. Mullah Ghulam Ali had originally begun seeing winter as a bad omen on account of what he had heard from his people, who were from an area called Poshte-Kuh (meaning ‘beyond the mountain’ in Feyli Kurdish). These folk told of how hard they worked all summer long, tending their crops and trading, and herding their sheep. Then, when winter drew in, they would go back to their villages tucked away in the bosom of the mountains and seclude themselves there. They would not go near any kind of winter work that necessitated travel, or significant effort, and that might therefore expose them or their mules and cattle to danger. Nothing was

easier than for an animal's hooves to slip when struggling to climb up or down a remote and rocky snow-covered mountain path, as his brother's donkey had. As far as the Feyli Kurds were concerned winter was an uninspiring season, short on blessing, freighted with illness and fatigue. This was not only the case in Poshte-Kuh, but all over Lorestan, which was the original homeland of that group of Kurds. And because the men's strong bodies were bursting with all the energy and force kept tightly shackled by the cursed white winter, they would turn their poison and pent-up feelings on their wives, spewing it all out into their wombs and bringing forth many children. The glowing pride of having a big family brightened up the gloomy winter lethargy that came over them every year.

At other times, some of those who were able to travel had migrated west, towards the warmer regions that bordered the Ottoman state. It was said that some of them chose never to return, preferring to settle instead in a land where the milder climate would shield them from the cold winters and the scarcity of work of the tough mountain life. The scarcer the work became and the harder it got to earn a crust, the further west they migrated – until eventually they reached Baghdad, the big cosmopolitan city. The large population and abundant work opportunities there created a demand for strong bodies like theirs, and for their seemingly insatiable appetite for strenuous work. It was said that Arab men did not have the strength for many jobs that required huge physical exertion, as the torpor of their original desert environment had rarely found them striving to make a living other than shortly before they died of starvation. Hearing such things said of the Arabs did not make the Kurds feel uncomfortable; on the contrary, they believed them easily, and repeated them to each other with pride. Every alleged ethnic

superiority was a helpful bonus they awarded themselves, a buffer against the inevitable disappointments of life as an ethnic minority in Baghdad. Dynamic cities like Baghdad needed the strong men of Poshte-Kuh, with their tall solid build and their huge rough hands – those men who had been working tirelessly, boring into the rocks and mountains since time immemorial, better friends with the mules who carried their loads than they were with each other. This was how the elders would tell it, in any case, adapting the tale to the formula that pleased them best and narrating it with the arrogance of stallions jostling for prime position. They never missed an opportunity to boast of their physical superiority, even claiming their strength and endurance trumped that of their Kurdish peers from western and northern Kurdistan.

[...]

Mullah Ghulam Ali only ever made one visit to Poshte-Kuh, as a youngster, a few years after both his father Rahim and his grandfather Jehangir or Jeni had died. His visit came after Shah Reza Pahlavi ended the self-rule of the Walis in Poshte-Kuh and annexed the entire region of Lorestan to Persia, which had been given the new name of Iran. This was the Mullah's first and last visit. He felt extremely lucky to be one of the Iraqi Feyli Kurds, as they did not fall under the rule of Shah Reza Pahlavi and therefore weren't at his mercy. The Shah used young Kurdish men for forced labour and compulsory military service, as well as prosecuting and imprisoning the elders of the clans if they opposed him. But despite this chaos, which had smashed his Feyli Kurdish community, the Mullah did not give much thought to the policies that had split his people into two halves, one Iraqi and one Iranian. Unlike the

generations that were to come after his, he didn't dream of self-rule or succession putting an end to the despotism of those with whom his people were joined. These oppressors had divided his people into two states, each of which tried to force the nationality they proclaimed for their state onto the Kurds. But the Mullah's thoughts were far from all that, despite the pride and love he felt for his language, his origins, and the children of his sect. His peaceful character and deeply contented nature did not move him to any notable act of rebellion. He was not a religious man: he only performed a very occasional brief and perplexed prayer consisting of the smattering of Arabic words he had memorised here and there. Despite this, however, he was an admirer of imams and was convinced the land of Iraq was a blessing for him and his descendants because the saints of Allah, dear to him, were buried there.¹ So whenever life got him down he would travel to Najaf or Karbala to visit the people he believed had a clearer channel to his god than his mixed-up prayers would ever provide. Although he was always keen to visit the shrine of Musa al-Kadhim whenever he had the chance, he often stopped at the big door without daring to enter the holy space. With tears in his eyes, referring to himself in the third person so as to be as humble as possible, he would murmur: 'O my imam, O Gate of Needs, O Musa Ibn Ja'far, here stands a simple Kurdish man, speaking in a heavy non-Arab tongue, who reads the Quran without understanding it, who doesn't lie and doesn't eat haram food and doesn't reach his hand out for what isn't his. He minds his own business and he will spend what's left of his life asking for your intercession in the mercy and absolution of God'. He would continue this monologue for a long

¹ Six of the twelve imams of the Shi'ite Muslims are buried in Iraq, including two of the most important ones: Ali ibn Abi Talib, and Husayn ibn Ali.

time, until he finally felt at ease and could walk away with the tranquility of the humble obedient subject.

The Mullah neither knew nor wondered why he had been born a Shi'ite, rather than a Sunni like the majority of other Kurds in the world. And he hadn't heard about the historians who questioned how the Shi'ite doctrine had reached his tribe. Some historians noted the fact that his people had embraced Shi'ism even earlier than Persia had. Persia had been a Sunni state for many long centuries, until the Safavids changed the official doctrine and imposed Shi'ism on the general population by force. However, all sorts of stories about how the doctrine had reached the Mullah's people used to circulate round and about. Some of the elders claimed that a passing Shi'ite imam had visited their mountain and set up home among them, and they had then converted to his sect out of love for him. In other accounts it was said that some traders from Poshte-Kuh who used to travel back and forth to Iraq had brought the Twelver doctrine back with them from there. Whatever the truth of these tales may have been, the idea of these people having converted to Shi'ism en masse seemed strange and hard to believe: how could the doctrine have reached them so clearly that they all adopted it, given how cut off they were from other tribes, confined to their remote mountain range? And in the unlikely event that they had indeed had contact with any outsiders, how did they communicate well enough with them to understand the nuances of a new religious doctrine, given the heavy mountain dialect they spoke? Even the Persians, whose language was close to their dialect, found them hard to understand. The rest of the Kurds wondered how these tribes, with their weird pronunciation and difficult words, could be their kith and kin.

Some of the Kurds from Western and Northern Kurdistan even referred to the Feylis as 'Persian bedouins,' in a blatant hint that the Feylis were more Persian than Kurdish. The Feylis strongly objected to this idea, insisting on the authenticity of their Kurdish identity. These were not the only puzzles, as even the etymology of the name by which they were known in Iraq had a number of differing explanations. It was said that the name had come about because of the huge hulking bodies of their menfolk, said to be like elephants – *fiyala*, in Arabic – so they became known as the *feyliien*, or elephantines. This idea had once had much popular currency, but lost its appeal over time, as some of those who studied languages in depth had traced the name back to the root word *Peyli*. The pronunciation of the initial P had apparently evolved into an F once the Feylis were mixing with the Arabs, who do not have a P in their language – in the same way that the word 'Persia' is pronounced with an initial F instead of P in Arabic. The strange thing was that over time both the Persians and the Feylis adopted the Arabic pronunciation of the word, instead of the original one.

And thus the strange stories and mythical tales continued. Despite the fact that the details tended to be contradictory, and to diverge with each telling, they still made Mullah Ghulam Ali feel like boasting, so he would repeat them to anyone who would listen, and be filled with a delicious feeling of pride. Because the stories were orally transmitted, some of them had taken on the patina of a great many embellishments and a great deal of beautification along the way, making them much more thrilling and dazzling than they had been at the outset.

[...]

The Mullah Ghulam Ali took care to pass on what he knew about his culture and his history to his children. But this was not a deliberate attempt to emphasise his distinct identity – his non-Arab roots were obvious from the unselfconscious grammatical errors he made when he spoke Arabic, along with his heavy accent: no one would have been surprised to hear he was Kurdish. No one needed an explanation. The Mullah persistently mixed up the Arabic gendered pronouns, using the female pronoun when addressing men and the male pronoun to women, despite Hajji Aziz al-Saffar's regular attempts to correct him. The Hajji owned a store at the back of the khan. Twisting his moustache, his frayed patience showing in the arch way he enunciated his words, he would say in his elongated Baghdad accent:

– Look, mate, I mean . . . Really, Mullah, how many times have I told you? Say *anta*, not *anti*. my moustache is right here in front of your eyes, and you're still calling me *anti*, *anti*, *anti*!

At this, Mullah Ghulam would throw up his hands in disdain – what was to be done with this complex language full of gendered pronouns? When he compared it with his own, his language won hands down! His simple smooth language, in which the land, the mountains and the rivers, the beloved, the adversary and the enemy could all be gathered together by a single pronoun. So why should he tax his brain? He was perfectly content with his comprehension of Arabic. It was perfectly sufficient to assist him in his normal activities and endeavours. The efforts he had made to become literate in Arabic had allowed him to rise through the ranks of the inn, up from the adolescent porter he had once been to the supervisor he was now; he had not

been so naïve as to allow a language barrier to hold him back or detract from his work. He had earned the nickname of Mullah as a young man, when he joined the *kuttab*, the local class where the children of his sect were taught to read the Quran, and helped to teach in his dodgy non-Arab accent. Despite the difficulty he had in reading and writing, and his broken Arabic, he was considered one of the great language scholars of his tribe. Merely being able to write the Arabic letters in his childish handwriting, and read numbers, and tell the time, meant that he was seen as a bridge between the two sects. And because he carried a watch in his little pocket he always knew the time, and never got lost between the day and the night.

