Faisal Al Suwaidi

The Village Above Which the Angels Roamed

القرية التي حلقت فوقها الملائكة

Translation by Diqqa.net collective (English)

THE VILLAGE ABOVE WHICH THE ANGELS ROAMED

Moza Bent-Mourad

Her real name was "Marteza Maradona," Bolivian by birth, American by citizenship. She arrived to the Gulf in 1975, as part of an oil excavation mission, as her American husband was the senior consultant on the project (or at least, that is what she claimed). Her husband's age was the subject of significant debate; someone claimed that he was 90 at the time, another contended he did not exceed 70, and a third asserted that he was 99 when he drew his final breath in 1977.

Because she arrived from the land of the Andes, the reduced oxygen, and the highest capital in the world, La Paz, she was taken with the elevations, the heights, and the peaks of the peaks, and used her spare time in the Gulf studying the mountains, armed with vintage maps and an old obsession. On one such trip, she lost her way, together with her husband, when they stumbled upon this very village. When they saw—or rather, when she saw—the silhouettes moving behind the mountainous Moringa peregrina, her yearning swelled; she rubbed her eyes and came closer, until she could see humans of flesh and blood. It was as though she had reached the Gardens of Eden!

She was quickly able to form an idea of the society she had joined months earlier, and already felt a type of kinship with. Her joie de vivre and her charisma enabled her to approach the women she crossed paths with—it was as though she felt that members of the feminine species should collude with one another in this nearly forgotten, nearly confined spot. She gave them warm Caribbean hugs, and sensed their heartfelt welcome, their openness, and their happiness, despite the lack of any kind of shared language, besides gestures, smiles, and signs. And so the story began!

She started visiting these women and partaking in their noontime coffee almost daily over a period of six months, during which she learned the basics of communicating in Arabic, or "mountain language" to be exact. She drove the car that had been allocated to her husband, the consultant. The sight of a woman driving a car in these days, and in such a place, was considered mythical—enough

to draw eyes out of their sockets and conjure surprise and incessant questions. Eventually, the scene's novelty waned, and the halo vanished, and the eyes adapted.
She never returned to her husband without a few simple gifts up her sleeve, of Henna, dates, a pot of turkey stew, feminine products, men's fabrics, ground coffee, and more. As for her, every now and then she would bring them scarves, textiles, and handicrafts in bright, pleasing colors, produced in her home country, and which she had brought over her when she moved.

Because her name was hard to pronounce for these tender mountain tongues, they chose the closest, or the most familiar, Arabic name to give her. That's how her name changed from "Marteza" to "Moza," and "Maradona" became "Mourad". Suddenly, and unbeknownst to her family, she became Moza Bent-Mourad!

At first, she acquiesced to the name, then she began to like it, and then she fell in love with the community. She was drawn above all to its magnanimous chastity, or its chaste magnanimity, as she called it. She observed, with her keen eye, that communication between men and women was very limited, due to religious foundations, societal norms, and tribal legacies that demand for relationships between the sexes to be sanctified under the roof of matrimony, hidden from the public eye, and subscribe to the instructions of God and his Prophet. And it was required that a man's gaze be one of chastity and care, and not of exploitation, should he meet a woman on the street or at the door of someone's house, which is what made most men, according to her observation, if not all of them, regard local women as sisters and mothers and daughters who must be protected, and as strange as all this was for "Marteza," or "Moza," as much as it enticed her, and took hold of her beating heart. As for the common thread she found between this village and her hometown in Bolivia, despite the distance that spanned 14,000 km, was the proliferation of legends!

The Legends

In some parts of the gulf, several legends abound—or what are commonly known as "Al-Kharareef"—which revolve around values such as respecting one's parents, honesty, honor, and others. Not even a genius could estimate the ratio of fantasy to reality in these legends. In this village and its neighbors, these stories had spread profusely.

Among the most well-known stories was the one about Ali Ben Rashed, whose head turned into the head of a donkey at lunchtime, after he had screamed at his mother and ridiculed her food at breakfast,

and as for Afra' "Al-Malsoona", she had lied to her sister one afternoon, so worms feasted on her tongue by night until she could no longer speak, and Haroun Bin-Rashed, one of the town elders and the hospital's former guard, swore that he had seen, with his own two eyes, the massive ghost that took El-Mohagam Omran's two sons 60 years ago, right after Omran had falsely sworn by God's name, twice. The old man swears he still cannot forget the heartbreaking sight of the boys' little feet as the ghost lifted them into the sky after sunrise, until they were swollen by the sun disk, and he asserts that they never returned, and that their father died a month later, and as for Hamama, which is not a nickname but the real name of an elderly woman who lived an undetermined number of years past 100, and her memory remained as sharp as a knife, and her eyesight as exacting as a telescope, and her tongue as eloquent as a sickle. Hamama swore that she had spoken, without a translator, to a wolf she saw on her way to the village well 90 years earlier, as she was fetching water for her father, and that the wolf told her that she would be the second longest-living woman in this village, and since that day one question has haunted her: Who would be crowned in first place?!

One of the most bizarre situations that Marteza had witnessed was the case of the Obaidan, the "Insane" or the "Dispossessed" as some called him, and in whose case legends interlaced with reality. When Obaid lost his wife in 2002, he searched for her for several days, in a rage that engulfed the entire village and the authorities. A few days later, a stench wafted out from one of the wells, and the relevant authorities were notified, and within a few hours, the insane, the dispossessed, the miserable Obaidan was informed that the stench was coming from his wife's body, which had been dissolved with enough hydrofluoric acid to dissolve a unicorn and not just a woman as skinny as a matchstick, to the point that she was almost unrecognizable, though they could still make out her clothes and the remains of her hair, and that there was no initial evidence pointing to a killer, and on that day, Obaidan went mad.

He went around telling everyone that he knew who the killer was. After they pressed him, he told them that the killer was the mountain genie, who was known to them as "Khasf al-Sabra"[1], and that he had been threatening to kill his wife for months, after Obaidan had defecated at the genie's residence on the edge of the mountain, without prior knowledge, of course, while herding his goats…And he also told them that he had not taken the threat seriously, despite the fact that the genie would appear in his bedroom in the shape of a dark blue fog, his voice resembling those of strangulated dogs. Then one day, in good faith at most, and with no ill-intent at least, Obaidan

[1] "Al-Khasf" means the ugly, and "al-Sabra" means the cold; the name is based on the village's belief that this genie only appears in winter.

repeated his deed, and on that night, his wife disappeared. The exact time of her disappearance was after sundown on Monday. Obaidan was convinced, by more than 800%, he said, that while he was away at the mosque, “Khasf al-Sabra” strangled his wife in her sleep, flew away with her, and dissolved her in the well, but before he did that, he snatched some of her bones to consume for dinner with his genie brothers, and that the genie himself had told him all this after the body’s remains were discovered; he came to his room, laughed like a pig, told him, and left. The whole village believed the story, except of course if there was anyone out there who concealed his disbelief in these miracles. In the aftermath of this incident, Obaidan fled the village and left his house neglected. He lived in the city and mostly, his news stopped coming. But he would come back every Monday after Maghreb prayers; an Asian driver drops him off to scream his wife’s name into the well as a weekly commemoration, and he does not pray Isha—for inculpable are the insane—and then he departs with the driver (who does not leave the car) just as the believers exit the mosque. And when the police covered the well to protect the villagers, and even the animals, from poisonous residues, he was livid, and he kept screaming at the Emir (who took his madness into account) and he demanded that the lid be removed so as to not disturb his weekly ritual, and he suggested that it would suffice to place a small sign (with the words: Do Not Approach, together with an illustration). What reassured the Emir was the belief that no one would frequent the well after such an incident, since those who never paid much attention to health measures would certainly pay very close attention to superstition!
Marteza was terrified at first, but she adapted when this incident became part and parcel of the village’s weekly folklore; children passed the screaming Obaidan as if they were passing a dying insect or a street sign left derelict on the road. They did not pay him a fourth of attention, or a tenth of a look, and Obaidan’s ritual did not cease for years and years.

Because Marteza has South American roots, the land of beauty and valleys, and because the distance there between reality and imagination, what the eye sees and what the heart sees, and what common people see and what poets describe, might be nonexistent or imperceptible or murky or translucent, Moza bent-Mourad had found in the village’s legends a new nation, and a safe companion, and exhilarating suspense.

Around two years after carrying out brilliant, near-constant relationships with the women of the village, and particularly towards the end of 1977, she disappeared for a month, and because there were no means to stay in touch, they missed her until she returned to them, dressed in black, and said that her husband had died of pneumonia while on his yearly vacation in his American hometown, and that she had only returned to give them the news and say goodbye. They received her with embraces,

tears, sympathy, and its many synonyms, so she accepted the offer the women suggested—an offer that 99.2% of women from the other side of the world would have rejected—for her to settle down with them, especially that she had no children. She would live in Hessa's house, the widow of Maged the tailor, and together, they would fight loneliness and circumvent their miseries. She was one of them, the women said; she agreed without hesitation.

She moved immediately to Hessa's house, who like her, was an obese, childless widow; Moza's arrival stirred in Hessa the happiness of a tireless worker with a warm loaf of bread in his hands after an arduous day.

The houses in the village all look alike; they are considered backward compared to urban houses in the same country, and considered developed compared to mountain houses in other countries, but overall, they are more resilient than houses in the capital…These luxurious, spoilt houses that collapse under a raindrop and quiver in the wind, built by academics, who graduated from universities X and Y, and which grant guarantees and other nonsense. As for Moza bent Mourad's house, and the neighboring houses, they were built by illiterate workers, under the supervision of illiterates who knew nothing about architecture but its name, and despite all this, these houses have held up in the face of erosion, weathering and wind, and they do not budge or soften; houses with a bottomless misery, and hearts of steel, their doors decorated with coffee vessels and the flags of the nation, their courtyards relatively spacious, with a palm tree or a couple of palm trees in every courtyard, but the rooms are limited, and the exteriors' paint lay at the whims of the rain, and the beds, the chairs and the pillows are timeworn but steadfast, and the prevailing smells are of Arab incense.

Marteza wished she had been born in this house she had moved to, which stood right next to the home of Hamama the centenarian, the chief of the village seniors.

She remained a Christian, but she never felt like a weed in this Muslim community, and the women never gave her the impression, even for a fraction of a second, that she was different; she started wearing their clothes and eating their food and drinking only what they drank. She fasted with them during Ramadan, and they came together for the Iftars the women took shifts to host in each of their courtyards. As for the men, they would gather in the heart of the mosque. She slaughtered the sacrificial animals on the morning of Eid Al-Adha, accompanied the women to the Eid prayers, and waited until they were done. She also celebrated their weddings, and cried at every funeral, and spoke

at every engagement, when hordes of high-level women would go to investigate the bride-to-be on behalf of her future husband.

Hessa's turn finally came in the village's death toll; after a long life of harmony and affection with Marteza, she left quietly in 2011. She met her end in her sleep, and Marteza discovered her at noon, and they buried her that afternoon, and after dusk the women's committee decided for the house's ownership to be placed in Marteza's hands, and that no one, above any land or below any sky, would have the right to evict her. Moza Bent Mourad cried after Isha, then she slept a fair amount, and at dawn she looked in the mirror and discovered that she had suddenly aged.

Because the house was the one nearest to the road, since that day she sat on a massive chair a few meters from the front door, and a few meters from the road, in dark, embroidered local clothes, and thick glasses, and a black veil that covered half her hair, or in fact, half her black wig, and revealed half of her wrinkled neck. As for her lower torso, it was kept hidden since that day, covered at all times with thick scarves and a Khaleeji "Banrous," its threads sticking out like small tongues.
She would stare into the ether for hours. She did not read or speak or sing; she only stared blankly. She changed significantly, and she would only speak if someone spoke to her first, such as the embassy employee came to get her signature on certain transactions every now and then, and her visits to the women gradually dwindled. Meanwhile, the men made sure she was alive by checking to see if she was breathing on her throne on their way to and back from the mosque… Until the rocket incident.