



# Abji Khanum

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# Abji Khanum

Abji Khanum was Mahrokh's older sister, but anyone who had no history and saw them could not believe that they are sisters. Abji Khanum was tall, thin, swarthy, with thick lips, black hair and was generally ugly. But Mahrokh was short, white, with a small nose, auburn hair and beautiful eyes, and whenever she laughed, dimples would appear on her lips. Their behavior was so different too. Abji Khanum was fussy, militant and unsociable, she even got angry with her mother for two or three months. But her sister was sociable, lovely, good-tempered and smiling. Their neighbor, Naneh Hasan, called her the fair lady. Their parents also loved Mahrokh more, because she was younger and dear sweet child. Since Abji Khanum's childhood, her mother had hit her and picked on her, but she would express sadness in front of strange people and neighbors. She would slap the back of her hand and said: What can I do about this misfortune? Who will marry such an ugly girl? I'm afraid to be stuck with her forever. She is a girl who has neither wealth, nor beauty, nor perfection. "Which wretch is going to marry her?" saying such words at Abji Khanum caused that she lost all hope and ignored marriage, she spent most of her time in praying and worship. She wasn't supposed to get married at all which means no one wanted to be her husband. Once when they wanted to give her to Kalb Hussein, a carpenter's apprentice, Kalb Hussein did not want her.

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But Abji Khanum used to say: "A husband was found for me, but I did not want him. Nowadays, all husbands are drunkards and whoremongers. I will never get married." She was apparently saying that, but it was clear that she loved Kalb Hussein from the bottom of her heart and she was eager to get married. But since she had heard from the age of five that she was ugly and no one would like to marry her, because she considered herself deprived of the pleasures of this world, she wanted to find at least the property of the other world by praying and worship. So she had found solace in herself. Yes, what a pity for this two-day life if you do not enjoy its pleasures? The eternal world will be hers, all beautiful people and even her sister and everyone would envy her. In the month of Muharram and Safar Abji Khanum made appearance, there was not a single martyrs commemoration that she didn't participate in. She would take her place in the taziye theatre for an hour before noon, all narrators of the tragedies of Karbala knew her and they really wanted Abji Khanum to be at their feet, so the meeting would be filled by her cries and howls. She had memorized all of martyrs stories, since she got religious information so well, most neighbors asked her their religious questions. She woke her family up at the crack of dawn. First she would go to her sister's bed and kick her and say: "It is noon, so when will you get up to say your prayers?"

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The poor girl also got up, performed ablutions in a sleepy manner, and stood up to pray.

From the morning call to prayer, the rooster crowed, the morning wind and the whisper of prayer put Abji Khanum in a special and a spiritual state and she was proud of her conscience. She said 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 different people, she would grasp a string of beads that black color turned to yellow with much rubbing and she would say salavat and salutation. Now all she wished was to go on a trip to Karbala and stay there. But her sister did not pay and she had no special attention in this part and she always did the housework, later, when she turned fifteen, she became a domestic servant. Abji Khanum at age twenty two, still remained at home and was jealous of her sister. During a year and half that Mahrokh left the house, Abji Khanum didn't ask about her or visit her even once. Once every fifteen days, when Mahrokh came home to see her relatives, Abji Khanum would either get into an argument with someone or go to prayer for two or three hours. Then, when they sat together, she would spout sarcastic at his sister and start preaching about praying, fasting, purification and complaints. For example, she said: "Bread has become more expensive since these dandy women appeared.

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Whoever does not fast will be hanged in hell from her hair in the next world. The head of slanderer will turn 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 in dragon." And she said such things like that. Mahrokh had felt this jealousy but she did not show that. One day near afternoon Mahrokh came home and talked with her mother for a while and then left. Abji Khanum was sitting in the doorway opposite the room, smoking hookah, because of jealousy toward Mahrokh, she did not ask her mother what her sister said, and her mother did not say anything. Her father came back with his worker's cap at nightfall, took off his clothes, picked up the bag of tobacco and pipe and then he went to the roof. Abji Khanum left off what she was doing, she and her mother, picked up a tin samovar, a small pot of stew, a copper bowl, some pickles and onions, and sat down on the kilim. Her mother announced that Abbas, a servant in the same house where Mahrokh is a servant, planned to marry her. This morning, when the house was quiet, Nanah Abbas came to suit Mahrokh. They want her to marry next week, they offered twenty-five tomans for bride price and thirty tomans for dowry plus the mirror, tulip, a Quran, a pair of sash, sweets, henna bag, kerchief, taffeta, trousers, gold printed cotton...

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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 well, congratulations, there is nothing wrong with that. Without seeming surprised or happy or showing any emotion at all. It seemed he were afraid of his wife. Abji Khanum went so angry when she knew what is going on, she could no listen to the rest of the argurments. On the pretext to pray, she got up, went down to the five-door room, looked at herself in the small mirror she had, she looked old and broken, it was as if these few minutes had made her old for many years. She looked at the wrinkles between her eyebrows. She found a white hair in her hair and pulled it out with her two fingers. She stared at it for a while in front of the lamp, and didn't feel the pain of the pulled root. A few days passed, everyone in the house was in a scurry of activity, they went to the bazaar and 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 and a little of everything. And because her mother was very sad, she gathered up whatever she could find for Mahrokh's dowry.

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she even gave a cashmere prayer to Mahrokh, which Abji Khanum had asked her mother for several times but her mother did not give her. Abji Khanum observed all these proceedings silently, for two days, she had pretended that she had a headache and slept. 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 out of my control, they are the work of God. You know that I wanted to marry you off to Kalb Hussein, but he didn't accept you. Now you are going to pretend to be ill 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 Khanum distraught with jealousy, would reply from under the blankets, Fine, fine, at your age don't try to brand a piece of ice. There are a lot of men like Abbas 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 pregnant for two months. I have seen her belly protruding, but I ignored it. I don't consider her as my sister anymore... Her mother shouted: God, may you be struck mute! May the undertaker carry off your body and may I grieve at your death.

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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 Quran that he who spreads slander is the worst kind of liar? It is the mercy of God that you aren't beautiful, so then, 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 these words were exchanged between them for next few days. Mahrokh was perplexed and didn't speak until the night of the betrothal. All of the neighborhood women assembled had indigoid eyebrows, veils decorated with coins, made-up faces, hair done in bangs and cotton culottes. In the midst of all this, Naneh Hassan 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 the moons, all the men are 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.



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

Then she repeated this song. People came and went, and in front of the pool they rubbed trays with ashes. The smell of vegetable crumbs 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, stand 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 were placed at the side of each of them. Mahrokh's father was pacing back and thinking that he had spent a lot of 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 Khanum. She had left at two o'clock in the afternoon. No one knew that where she had gone, but it must have been to a sermon. The wedding took place when the tulip lamps were lit. Everyone had left except Naneh Hassan, the bride and groom were shaking their hands and sitting next to each other in a five-door room and the doors were closed. Abji Khanum arrived home. She went to five-door room to take off her veil. When she got there, she saw that the curtain of the five-door room had been fastened.

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Out of curiosity, she pulled away the edge of curtain, and from the window, saw her sister Mahrokh all made up, 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 saying something in her ear, as if they noticed her. It seemed he noticed her sister, but because they wanted to make her jealous, they laughed together and kissed each other. The sound of Naneh Hassan's drum wafted in from the end of courtyard: (beloved, blessed be). Abji khanum had a mixed feeling of hatred and jealousy. 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 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 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 and I don't know what to answer them.

Abji khanum just raised her head and said: I already ate dinner.

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It was midnight, everyone was asleep remembering their wedding night and they had pleasant dreams. Suddenly, the household was awakened in hurry by the sound of splashing. First they thought a cat or a child has fallen into the pool. Barefoot and half-dressed, they lit the lamps. They looked anywhere, but could see nothing unusual. When they returned to sleep, Naneh Hassan saw that Abji khanum's slippers are next to the lid of the water reservoir. They brought the lamp over it, and saw Abji khanum's corpse floating on the water, her black braided hair 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 neither ugliness nor beauty, neither marriage nor funeral, neither smiling nor weeping, neither happiness nor sadness. She had gone to paradise.

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