

## LEYLA

By Feridun Zaimoglu

Excerpt from Chap. 3, pp. 44-51

*[translated by Margot Bettauer Dembo]*

That disgraced sect of troublemakers can't get the better of me in every single competitive business deal, Halid says, They'll come to a bad end.

He loops his wavy-edged reversible silk tie around his neck and bends down to drink some water from the faucet in the kitchen sink. As he straightens up, the tie ends slip back over his chest and he stuffs them into his vest; he looks down at himself and pulls up the elastic waistband of his pajama pants. His family, his children, his daughters, his wife sit at his feet as ordered. Halid is satisfied that no strange habits have wormed their way into his house during his absence. His wife and children did not fall out of step during the two days they were not under his supervision. He touches his freshly ironed hat brim, thoughtfully gazing at Yasmin who is sitting at the farthest end of the half circle, her eyes fixed on the stone floor.

Woman, he says to his wife, aren't you curious to hear about the deals I've made?

You will tell me, master. If you think it is appropriate.

No, Halid says, why should I waste my time? Your tiny woman's brain wouldn't be able to grasp it anyway.... He turns to his sons, And what about you, did you load the sacks?

Yes, father, Jenghis says.

I'll find out soon enough if you missed any of the freight trains because you were asleep.

Yes, father.

Out there, Halid says, and resumes his pacing, people are savages and they try to outsmart strangers. Out of old habit they tried it on me too. Did they succeed?... You, Tolga, answer me!

No, father. They underestimated you.

Exactly, Halid says. I couldn't have said it better. But all of you understand as much about my business as would fit into the groove on a date pit, so I'll finish my deals, and then you'll see me bringing the money home.... Things are tougher with those savages out there than they are here among ourselves. I find their ways very foreign. But business is business... Woman, your daughter Yasmin has brought no blame down on herself, I am not dissatisfied. She is obedient.

Yasmin keeps her head lowered. Instead of being happy with this rare praise from her father's lips, she remains silent, does not thank him, as is customary in this house.

The wise fool from the shadows is waiting outside, Halid says, it is time to feed the poor. Set the table; I'll fetch him.

The women hurry over to the pots, Jenghis and Tolga take their places at the front door so that they can receive the madman properly. He lives and sleeps in the shade cast

by the ruins of the jail. The wind carries the voices from the cemetery to him as well, and when he puts his head into the healing clouds, according to the people who watch him suspiciously from afar, he is considered favored by God: He sings and makes young women blush because they can scarcely bear the fever in their hearts. Behind his back the peasants whisper, it would be best to make the wise idiot flee by pelting him with sharp-edged stones because he has this other-worldly power, and when he sings one has to fear for one's wife. Halid isn't worried about the peasants' hostility. Chechen warrior, Circassian prince, he says, it doesn't matter whether Chechen or Circassian, they all honor their ancestors, the prematurely senile, and the singers.

Halid brings him inside. The crazy man has hooked his arm through his; he is almost blind, his ability to see fluctuates with the time of day. The sons of the house bow as soon as he enters and spray his hands with lavender water from a plastic bottle. Jenghis says he considers himself to be less than a splash of mud on the pants seam of the honored singer. Tolga tries to take the man's lute but draws back when he growls at him. I bless this warming room, the madman says, I bless the children, I bless the woman, your wife, Halid, who has probably made pastries for me. Halid clicks his tongue, he doesn't like it when a stranger, be he a wise man or an idiot, talks about his wife, nor has this woman, his wife, baked pastries. Take a seat at the table, he says, sit down, shall we take your coat?

Only over my dead body, the singer says. You should teach your youngest son some manners. He tried to take my lute.

I only wanted to be helpful, Tolga says.

What am I, a cripple? Do I look as though I have trouble carrying my lute? Let the Overseer of Hell, the base Devil, take me in his arms if I should ever fight for my own advantage.

It is useless to argue with him, at least half of what he says makes no sense. He tries to cross his legs under the low table but unable to do so, he gets up with difficulty and sits down again tailor fashion. Serving from the right, my mother hands him a plate of carrots and green lentils in olive oil. He sniffs at the food. His nose is big enough for two people. He sticks it into the food; this doesn't seem to bother him. And then he says, Where are my noodles? At that my mother hurries into the kitchen; Halid stares at the stranger who in this brief time has twice violated the house rules. Only now does the crazy man part with his lute, placing it on the floor out of Tolga's reach.

It is my duty as a Moslem to stay in the shade, he says. The village girls are dying of boredom and they long to sew for another master, and sooner or later they accept the offers of men passing through. As for the peasants? They smear ammonium nitrate between the buttocks of their donkeys, who race off trying to outrun the pain. What a sick joke! If you don't want crows to squawk, then make sure you're not the peak on the dome of a mosque. And so, one day I went into the shade. And one day they'll carry me out of the shade feet first.

Halid listens to the madman's talk, but even with the best of intentions he can't make sense of it. Since his guest has not yet touched the food, Halid must also refrain from eating. He reaches for his wooden spoon, indicates to the man to stop talking for a while and taste the lentils and potatoes. The crazy one accepts the invitation and also

picks up a spoon. He chews the food with his molars and afterwards wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

Good, yes. May God reward you. The priests have degenerated into recruiters for the Devil. What do you think, Halid Bey?

There are all kinds, Halid says, there are probably more of the good kind than the bad.

I won't let anyone talk me out of my bad opinion of them, the crazy man continues. Once I was the guest of a Hodja. I asked him, Man of God, to whom should I address my prayers for intercession? His answer was, Let's talk instead about more interesting things in life. I let him do as he wished. Then he told me a joke: When concluding a prayer the believer must turn in greeting to his right side as well as to the left. On the right stands the Archangel Gabriel and on the left stands Asrael, the Angel of Death. So far so good. The Hodja confided to me that when he turns to the left he always whispers to the Angel of Death ordering him to leave as quickly as possible, because he intends to live for a long time yet.

Tolga can't suppress his laughter, but an angry look from the madman makes him stop short. The madman urges him to form an idea of good and evil, but he gets no further. My mother puts a bowl of noodles before him. Again he sticks his nose into the food, again he draws the aroma far up into his large nose. Finally he begins to eat, spoonful by spoonful. Halid does the same. And we follow the example of our mother's husband.

I just spent a few days in a strange city, Halid says, I am only glad I don't have to live there.

Did the strangers steal from you? the man asks.

They were about to do so, but I was careful.

So your business takes you to other cities, the crazy man says. His mouth is full of noodles; it's hard to understand what he's saying.

I want to take a look around, Halid says, that is the privilege of any businessman.

But you used to be with the railway; I sometimes greeted you from my shadows.

As a railway worker I wouldn't have gotten this far; the bureaucracy nearly drove me out of my mind.

Oh, so that's what happened, the crazy one says, I thought they had fired you because you burned important files.

Old man, Halid says, you don't know what you're talking about.

There is a stillness in the room like one that precedes a fight. Halid has put his spoon down next to his plate, his fist is clenched. Unruffled, the crazy man calmly chews his noodles and swallows them.

I'm only repeating the rumor making the rounds, he says. Actually I wanted to tell you about something else. Of course I wish you much success in your business. Would you like me to tell you about the Prophet's interrogation of the Devil?

Halid accepts the peace offering and relaxes again; he takes a spoonful of food and lets his eyes wander over his children and his wife. Then he asks the man to go on and tell his story.

The Prophet was traveling with his faithful followers, the crazy man says, and maybe he was thinking of how he should requite the Devil's guile. Just then the Sevenfold Cursed One appears before them in the desert – in all the writings and holy

books the Devil usually appears to the Messenger in the desert. The Prophet's warriors want to destroy him, but the Prophet holds them back and tells them the Devil was sent by God and must now give an account of himself – since God had loosened his tongue, he must now tell the truth when he is questioned. The Prophet asks him: Who is your table companion? The Devil replies: The usurer. He asks him: Who is your guest? The Devil replies: The thief. The Prophet asks: Who is the pupil of your eye? The Devil replies: Men who constantly swear by the honor of their wives. The Prophet asks: What is it that breaks your back? The Devil answers: The snorting of horses going forth to fight in a Holy War.... It goes on like this a while longer, question, answer, question, answer. By now the Devil is sweating even though his scale armor shields him from heat and cold. He is chagrined at having to reveal his secrets. Then comes the question: Where do your sons seek shade in the worst heat of midday when the viciously hot south wind blows? The Devil replies: Under the fingernails of human beings ... The questioning continues, but I've forgotten how the story ends. The Prophet and his warriors probably drive the Sevenfold Cursed One out. But it is the Messenger's last question in particular and the Devil's answer which I just quoted to you that won't leave me in peace.

Is that because you also live in the shade? Halid asks.

Yes, says the madman, and also because – as you know – I beg for my food and drink by playing with these ten fingers.

What exactly is the problem? Jenghis asks. What is it that bothers you?

If, as the Devil said in answer to the Messenger's question, his sons take shelter from the sun and wind under the fingernails of men, I have to be very careful. And I am careful, by God. I have secretly been inspecting your fingernails – don't be angry with

me – and here and there I discovered some dirt; of course, only someone like me, looking very carefully, would have noticed it.

Halid grows tense again. For the third time someone has insulted him and his family in his own house.

He has lost his appetite, and so he pushes the half-full plate away, turns to the half-blind singer who keeps wiping his nose with the back of his hand. My mother has curled up in a near-sitting position; she gnaws on the corner of her headscarf; we are not allowed to move.

If you have something to say to me stop beating around the bush, Halid says. Are you trying to make me believe that the Devil has taken up quarters in my house.

No, not in your house, the man says, but under your fingernails, and under your sons' fingernails. As for your wife and your daughters, there's nothing to find fault with there.

Well, so be it then, Halid says. I am afraid this is your last time as a guest in my house, and now please betake yourself into the shade with your damned lute. Woman, wrap up his food; we don't want to send any guest away hungry.

Halid rushes into the bedroom. The crazy man gets up awkwardly, refusing all help. He is not ruffled by the curses Halid utters under his breath, or if he is he doesn't let on. My mother has wrapped a plate full of noodles in newspaper; she hands it to me, and I give it to the man.

In my shade there is only room for a man who is lost to the world, he whispers to us, otherwise I would gladly invite you to come with me. I try to support his elbow, but he angrily fends me off. Kneeling on our threshold I hold out his right shoe; he slips into

it with his leg slightly bent. He groans and mumbles something about an itch. He wipes his nose with the back of his hand, and I look up. There is a noodle in his nostril. Before he can reach for it, I stick the shoehorn into his nose and pull the noodle out. Then I feel a light slap on my arm. I help him on with his left shoe, stare at the noodle on the shoehorn. He goes through the open door, talking to himself about fathers who raise their children like cattle herders. Again I see him scratch his nose. His lute bobs in time with his steps. It is quiet now; I close the door behind him.

That's the last time I invite a worthless fellow with holes in his socks to my house! Halid says. From now on the poor simply don't concern me anymore.