

Misha

Written by: Vida Mashayekhi

Translated by: Zohreh Valinejad

I saw David in a party at the Vienna City Hall one summer night. I had been invited to attend as a photographic journalist. David was a friend of one of my fellow journalists, and as soon as he found out I am Iranian, he got very excited and came and stood beside me and said:” You know, I lived in Iran for many years during the Shah’s time”.

This was not new for me. I had heard these words from many foreigners before, those who worked in Iran during the Shah’s time. He asked if he could sit beside me, and after a few minutes of silence, as if he had been waiting for this moment for a long time to talk about the past, he continued passionately :” It was about twenty-seven or twenty-eight years after the World War II, and we were living in poverty in Austria. I was a trumpet player, and was very happy when I got hired by the Tehran Symphonic Orchestra. It was the last years of the 1960s and I had a very good and comfortable life in Iran. If the Revolution hadn’t happened, I would never have thought about leaving Iran”.

His words brought back memories of years ago, memories of Roudaki Music Hall. When my childhood friend, Soudabeh Fakhrabady, decided to pursue her dreams of becoming an opera singer. It was then when I became an opera lover and saw almost every opera performed in Tehran. When we were still young, Soudabeh used to put a record on the gramophone and play music for us every time we went to her house. She usually talked about the songs and the composers, and to impress us and make us really listen to the music, she would make up a story about the song she was playing for us. Perhaps some of them were true. She told us about the time when Beethoven, who was almost deaf, sat in the middle of the orchestra to hear his own music even though he couldn’t. In fact, she brought classical music to us by simulating our very deep emotional feelings.

In those years, I knew some foreigners who played wind instruments in the Orchestra. Those days, we didn’t have good musicians of that sort in the Orchestra.

The sound of the Blue Danube waltz filled the hall, and David's request to dance brought me back from my world. I insisted that I didn't know how to dance Viennese waltz, but he didn't take me seriously. "You Iranians always underestimate yourselves," he said. With these words, he put his hand around my waist and with Johan Strauss's music, started to turn me around the floor. After a few turns, he realized that I really didn't know how to dance Viennese waltz and that I could fall down at any minute. He suggested that I just look straight at his shoulder. But I still got dizzy when the music stopped and stuck to him to avoid falling. He guided me back to our table and sat beside me. He suddenly started to talk about a woman named Misha.

"Misha was one of the most beautiful women in Iran. She was a soprano singer in Tehran's operas and I was in the orchestras in all operas she performed." He was talking passionately as I was thinking to myself, he was probably sixty years old, a little bald in the middle of his head with the rest of his hair almost white. His face was a bit red, he had a bumpy stomach, and sometimes, as he talked, he started breathing heavily, as if he were gasping for air. I wanted to tell him that my closest friend was one of the singers of Tehran's Opera, but he didn't give me a chance, and I thought surely I had seen Misha in some operas in Tehran. He poured a glass of red wine for me and a glass for himself, hit my glass with his, took a sip from his glass, and said: "We planned to get married. If the revolution hadn't happened, we probably would have." He moved his head sadly, and continued: "A few days after the revolution, Misha's father was arrested, the Symphonic Orchestra was shut down, my Visa expired, and I thought I better go back to Austria and wait over there for things to change. Misha was very upset, she was so worried for her father. Everyday people were executed. I told her I would go back to Austria and wait and try to prepare everything for her to arrive."

David filled our glasses with red wine again and drank his at once. His face got red. "Did Misha's father get free?" I asked.

"No," he said, "and our misery started right from that point. Her father was in prison for about seven or eight months. She wrote to me about how hard she tried to see her father in prison but never could. She even went and met some very important people in the new government to find a way to reduce her father's sentence or get permission to visit him, but it didn't work out. Her father was

eventually executed. Before her father's execution, she would answer my letters, but after that, she became silent."

I thought to myself, if I knew Misha's surname, I could probably find out who he was talking about, but then I thought,, "What difference would it make?"

"How many years have you been in Austria?" David asked.

"Twenty three years," I said.

"During those years, did you ever go back to Iran?" he inquired.

"The last time I went to Iran was five years ago, and I intended to go this summer too."

David said, "I want to ask you for a favor, I want you to find Misha for me. Will you do that?"

"Do you have her address?" I asked. He nodded and asked me for my telephone number.

I was not enjoying the party any more. David took me back to those years and all the memories, and I wanted to be alone. I said goodbye to him and left the party.

The next day, David called me at my office, and we decided he could come to my office a few days before my flight to Iran. When the day arrived, David showed up and gave me Misha's address and an envelope containing some money.

"Please, if you find Misha, give this to her." It was a bunch of one hundred Euro bills. "Tell her to go to a country that doesn't need a Visa. I will go there, and bring her back with me to Austria. Tell her to go to Turkey."

I asked : "Don't' you want to write to her and explain everything?"

"No. " he said, "it doesn't make sense. All these years I regularly wrote letters and send cards to her, but she never answered. I know that she is alive and received my letters, because none of those letters ever came back to me."

I took the address and the money, and promised David that I would do my best to find Misha.

From the moment I reached Tehran, I was looking to find some time to visit the address David gave me to find Misha, not only because of him, but also for my

own curiosity. One morning, I called for a taxi and gave Misha's address to the driver. The taxi went to a neighborhood east of Tehran. The taxi driver stopped on a street that looked very familiar. There was a school there that I recognized as my high school. The name of the school had changed.

It was almost the end of the school year. The taxi stopped right beside the school. I got out of the taxi and stood there watching. The girls were coming out of the school, some with veils and others with traditional chador. It was the same building with the same dead-end alley behind it. I started thinking about the things that alley had witnessed during my years. Most days, Soudabeh and I went to the alley and pulled up the top part of our socks before entering the school. The assistant principal was a chic woman, with hair that was always done very nicely. She would stand beside the door everyday and check our uniforms, our stocking, and our make-up. Sometimes, the principal herself would join her. The principal was a tall, skinny woman with black hair and shiny black eyes. I was very scared to look into her eyes. She was very serious, and when it came to the matter of the school's reputation, she had no mercy. She wanted to have a respectable school.

I started to walk toward the end of the alley. With every step that took, I recalled a memory. Most of the houses had changed, but altogether, the alley had kept the same shape.

A few boys were playing soccer in the middle of the alley. I went and stood in front of Misha's door and rang her doorbell. For some reason, my heart was beating faster than usual. The boys stopped playing and stared at me. There was no sound from inside the house. A heavy grey iron door and some old brick walls surrounded the door. I pushed the doorbell again. One of the boys, with big black eyes, looked at me and said: "Don't ring the bell. She will not answer."

"How do you know?" I asked.

Another boy said: "We know, she doesn't open the door for anyone."

I glanced toward the end of the alley and asked: "do you know her?"

"Yes, she is crazy:" one of them said. "Once, our ball was accidentally thrown into her yard, however she didn't say or do anything to us and gave the ball back, but we were still scared of her and thought she was crazy."

I rang the doorbell one more time. No response. "Kids, have you ever seen her come out of the house?" One of the boys who was standing in the middle of the small soccer goal said: "Sometimes she comes out at night."

Another boy said: "Yes, our house is right there." He pointed to the house across the alley from Misha's. Some nights I see her from our windows."

The first thought that crossed my mind was to return home and to forget about seeing Misha. I thought that, when I got back to Austria, I would tell David that Misha either went insane, or that she left the house and nobody knew her new address. But know, I myself was very tempted to see her.

At eight o'clock that night, I called for a taxi again. I got out of the taxi on the exact same alley. There were no kids there at the time of the night. I waded beside the school's walls and reached to the door to Misha's house. I thought about ringing the doorbell again, but then I remembered what the boys had said: "she does not open the door for anyone."

I stood there and thought she might come out of the house. I leaned against the wall and waited. From where I was standing, I could see the Balcony of the school where our principal and the vice-principal used to stand everyday. I was thinking that if one of the neighbors saw me standing in the dark corner, they probably would become very suspicious. Right at the moment, the door of Misha's house suddenly opened and she appeared like a ghost. With a calm and familiar voice I unintentionally said: "Misha".

She was skinny and fragile, wearing a long dress with rolled-up sleeves, Her head was shaved and she stood there staring at me. After a few seconds of silence, I said again: "Misha, I am Minoo, David sent me here."

She stood in front of me and for a few seconds, just looked at me. I reached for her hand. Her arms were bony and her skin was wrinkled. I didn't find anything familiar in her face. I thought she looked like she was hundred years old. I said: "I have a message for you from David, can I talk to you for a few minutes?" She turned around, opened the door, and pointed inside without a word.

Behind the door, I saw a vase full of white jasmine flowers, As we continued walking towards the building, we passed a small pond. Next to that, there was a little garden full of geraniums and matthiolas. Before entering the building, we

passed underneath and arch full of small roses. A strong scent of flowers was in the air.

Misha opened the door of the building with her keys and turned on the light of the corridor. We entered the hallway. One could smell the humidity and archaism. The floor had black and white tiles. Misha entered the first room in the hallway. The windows of the room faced the yard, but behind the windows was a solid brick wall.

She pointed to a chair and asked me to sit. I sat on the chair, which was a Polish chair. She sat on another chair just in front of me and asked: "How do you know David? Tell me."

I told her that I lived in Austria and that I happened to meet David at the party. I reached into my purse and put the envelope containing the money David had given to me on the table. "David send these for you so that you can get out of Iran," I said. "He wants to take you to Austria but he thinks you better go to Turkey first."

Misha grinned and said: "Get out of Iran? Now? To do what?"

I didn't know what to say. The first word that came to my mind was "To live" I said.

She shook her head in despair and murmured: "Yes, to live" I was silent. She asked: "What is David doing now for living?"

I replied: "He is playing for Vienna's Philharmonic Orchestra" and suddenly without thinking, I asked her "Do you remember Fakrabad?"

Misha's eyes grew big and excitedly she said: "Are you talking about Soudabeh?" "Yes" I said.

She sighed deeply and said: "Poor thing."

"Soudabeh was my best friend for many years" I explained.

She looked stunned. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?" she asked. "We were classmates in the Vienna Conservatory. We got back to Iran almost at the same time, or I think she might have come back a few months before me. Didn't David tell you anything about that?"

“No” I said. “There was no time that night.” I didn’t want to tell her that David constantly spoke passionately about Misha, and that this was the reason I couldn’t ask him about Soudabeh.

Misha was silent, but I felt something had changed. It felt like she was no longer in the room. She stood up, straightened her dress, and started walking toward the door. “ come with me she said.

We re-entered the hallway and went upstairs. The stairs were covered with red carpet, tightened with golden bars. Upstairs, Misha stopped in front of a white wooden door. She took the key out of the chain hanging on her neck, opened the door, and turned on the light. The room before me was fantastic. All around the room, I could see mannequins with different costumes like the Toska, Carmen, Madam Butterfly, Violetta, Mini, and Aida standing beside each other. I was speechless.

How did all of these get here?” I thought. Pictures of varying sizes of female opera singers hung on the walls. Misha walked around slowly, gently touching the mannequins, dresses as she passed the. I started to look at the pictures on the wall. I walked slowly and stopped in front of every picture, looking very hard to find any familiar faces. All of a sudden, there it was a picture of Soudabeh and a very beautiful woman standing beside her. I turned back and looked into Misha’s eyes. She was the woman in the picture. I felt a choking sensation in my throat and tried to hold back my tears. I thought that I might faint at any minute.

I sat down on the only sofa in the room, a red velvet sofa with gold armrests and gold legs. After a few seconds, I felt better and could see the room clearly. I looked around carefully and saw brick walls behind windows that were covered with red velvet curtains. On the right side of the room, there was a mantle with two bronze candleholders on either side. Each candleholder had five branches. A large mirror with a bronze frame rested in the middle of the mantle. A small table with bronze legs sat next to the sofa, and the floor was covered with red carpet.

Misha came toward me and with a spin, sat on the floor just in front of me. “do you see all these?” she asked. “Soudabeh and I brought them here. Those days that people were opening the military bases and bringing out all the weapons, Soudabeh and I went to the storage of Roudaki Music Hall. I could still drive in those days. I parked my car in a very close spot to make it easier to get back. I

think on the particular day, we were the only people that knew this would be the end of opera in Iran. Some people didn't think this way and were optimistic, but we did not think that way at all and actually were very pessimistic about the outcome of the revolution."

I remembered that Soudabeh was never as excited about the revolution as the rest of us, and in our discussions, she was always against it. She used to say "Revolution means misery and death" but we were an against her. She used to say: "Go and read the history of the revolutions of the world, and then you will realize what I am saying."

I asked Misha: "How did you take all of these things out of Roudaki Hall" Didn't anyone see you?"

She answered: "We both took one bit suitcase. We were not stealing, we just wanted to protect and conserve the. The employees of the music hall knew us and on that particular day, nobody was paying any attention to the hall. It was the least concern of the people. There were no weapons over there, there were only items that could touch your soul. The guard knew us and we told him that we wanted to take our belongings from there. He trusted us. We stuffed the suitcases and returned to my house, and we were so happy that we could save these treasures and that none of the mobs could every lay an hand on them."

Misha stopped talking. She went and stood in front of Toska's mannequin and took its dress of. It was a red velvet dress with golden ribbons sews around the collar and the sleeves. Misha took the black wig off from the mannequin's head and went toward a gramophone in the corner of the room. From a cabinet full of music records, she took out a record and placed it on the gramophone. She then went behind a bamboo divider in the other corner of the room. I was still sitting on the sofa and was thinking about the things that she told me. Misha came out from behind the divider and stood in front of the mirror. She adjusted the wig on her head and placed a golden tiara on her hair. All of a sudden, she looked young and beautiful and her face looked familiar to me.

"I want to sing this for you in the memory of David" Misha said. She turned on the gramophone and the sound of Music (*vissi d'arte*) filled the room. She began to

sing with music, and became completely lost in her role as “Toska, singing for her lover. She could still sing so beautifully. “Tell David that I sang in his memory”.

I was so impressed that I didn't know what to say. I said, prematurely:” I hope one day you will sing this in Vienna for him.” A strange sound came out of Misha's mouth. It was neither a laugh nor a cry, but a mixture of moaning and screaming. I understood why the kids thought she was crazy.

But her voice again drew my attention. “for a long time, perhaps years, all of these were in suitcases. Before Soudabeh left Iran, she told me to go with her. She used to say we could go to one of the European countries. But for me, it was very important to stay in my own country and to sing for my own people, even though it was the same country that took my father from me. Besides, it was very hard for us to find work as opera singers. We both studied in Europe, but finding a job was very hard because of all the competition in the field. I stayed and decided to bring the opera to my house. I wanted to have an old house. I wanted to have a little garden, just like the garden surrounding the entrance of Roudaki Music Hall . I wanted to stay very long until I could sing again. But alas, it never happened.

This is my parents old house. As you can see there are no windows here, I covered all of them and also made the walls soundproof.

I dared to interrupt her and asked:” did anyone come and watch you sing?”

She replied:” My mother was the only person who listened-that is, before she died. “

Misha went again toward the cabinet and pulled out another record. She put it on the gramophone, before starting the music, took off Suzuki's dress and wig from the mannequin, and went back behind the divider.

She came out with a little dagger squeezed in her hand, sat on the floor and sang. “This song was Soudabeh's favorite” she said. “She used to sing it for us”.

Tears were coming down my cheeks and couldn't control them. After finishing her song, Misha came and sat beside me on the sofa and took off her wig.

“You know” she said, “my soul died the day they declared that it is forbidden for a woman to sing. I believe that every person comes into the world for a reason or mission, and I think I was born to sing. When they banned singing for women, I

felt like I didn't have purpose in life. I wish I had Soudabeh's courage to surround my body with the water of the Seine river. Or, like Suzuki, kill myself with that very same dagger I had in my hand. But every time I brought the dagger close to my skin, I threw it away in horror."

I asked: "Why don't you go somewhere else?" maybe you can come to Austira. David is there and it is obvious that he still loves you"

"We wanted to get married and have two children" she exclaimed. Then she stopped talking. A few minutes later, she stood up and just looked at me. I could tell that she wanted me to follow her. We went down the stairs to the first room. She took the money and gave it to me and said : "return it to David. It is too late for everything."

She didn't let me say anything as we walked through the yard toward the door. She opened it. I stood in the middle of the doorway and, despite the darkness, I could see that the wall of the yard was covered with vines and that there were no window.

Before closing the door behind me, she said again: "I wish I had Soudabeh's courage" I stood in the darkness of the alley. Suddenly, I heard the sound of a painful scream. I put my hand on the doorbell, but after a short pause, I turned and ran to the street. I got a taxi and went back home.

The next morning, I woke up with swollen eyes and headache. My head felt it was too heavy for my neck. My bedroom filled with sunlight after I opened the curtains. The window overlooked the courtyard of an all-girls elementary school the girls, with their navy blue uniforms and white veils, looked like wild flowers growing in a sunny field. Some of them were playing tag and some were playing jump rope. Others were sitting in a circle on the ground and one girl, who was about seven or eight year old, was standing in the middle of the circle singing with a very beautiful power voice.

Wien 2013