

**SÉLIM NASSIB**

**from *I Loved You For Your Voice***

**Translated from the French by Alison Anderson**

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PART ONE

1924-1928

1

I recognized the children timidly murmuring their names; I had opened my arms to those who were born while my back was turned. My mother continually put more food on my plate, watching me as if she thought I might swallow up my native country in one meal. She did not take her eyes off me: I was her flesh. The expansive body of my family took me in, pressing round me, squeezing—the same blood, the same organs. In the end it was loathsome. But why am I telling myself stories, I had been missing all that; and I was aware of that—in the midst of manly embraces, of laughter, and in the midst of the Arabic, above all, once again, both near and far, the background music of that magnificent language—my true country.

There was ululating, there were questions. I'd been to Paris, I'd tasted of the fruit: but how was I to tell the story? My mother and my sister Salwa exchanged expectant silences; they alone could measure my three years of absence. My five other brothers and sisters didn't count. I had returned, with my degree from the Sorbonne, and I was head of the family at the age of twenty-three. I would think back on my room in Paris with regret. There, I had been no one.

Muhammad got me out of there, Muhammad Abd al-Wahab, my only friend. With his western-style suit and his tarboosh. He'd abducted me, we were walking down the middle of the street—carefree, adolescent, together. We were almost the same age, and he had everything waiting for him, already. He was a singer, composer, and musician; his talent was dazzling. I could never understand why he chose me for his friend. He'd come to spend a week in Paris; he'd pushed open the door of my room, he'd slept on the floor, we never left one another.

And now he was taking me with him, he wanted to impress me. I'd missed independence day—the crowds in the street, the overwhelming joy. I didn't know what I'd missed; even the air must have had a different smell to it. I was looking, breathing: nothing had changed, fortunately. The shops, the loud nocturnal sounds, the rattle of the trams and their smell of electricity: this was the real Cairo. I was dazed by how different everything was. The warm air surrounded us. Streets disappeared along the tram rails, small shops gleamed in the gaslight, the Orient lay

hiding behind the feminine calligraphy of shop-signs. Displays of spices, fruit, and coffee; men waiting for friends as usual—none of those things had changed. As if the first breath of cooler air was a signal: the nocturnal life was now underway.

We paid and went through the gates into the garden of Ezbekia, and I was suddenly fully immersed in the knowledge that I had arrived. Trees and lanes formed a familiar geography, but it was above all the music and the noise: an oasis of sound that I could have recognized with my eyes closed. I had never left.

A crowd was waiting outside the little theatre. There were, as always, fewer women than men, but there were more tarbooshes than turbans, and more hats than tarbooshes. I was wearing my Basque beret; Muhammad was bare-headed. People recognized him and stood aside to let him pass. With the part in his disheveled hair, he looked a bit like Jean Cocteau. The hall could contain only about one hundred people, and we got the last seats. People spilled into the aisles and sat cross-legged on the floor.

The group was already on the stage, two peasants wearing the long brown jubbah, with turbans on their heads, two sheikhs who had come straight from their village; in front of them, in the middle, a boy sat motionless, terrified, his hands held together over his stomach, severe in the way adolescents can be. Only his hands and face were visible: he had a round, slightly fleshy face, which might have been ugly without his huge black eyes. In spite of the heat and the projectors, a Bedouin cape covered his body and a headpiece was held in place by two rings beneath his chin.

Nothing was happening, people were talking, the young man didn't know how to proceed. He sang out a note above the crowd. It was the *Fatiha*, the first chapter of the Koran. His voice was childish and unsure, but unusual, driven by a rare force, an endless expiration. The boy started the second phrase on a deep note, and his voice rose gradually, holding the note and causing it to vibrate. People responded with a murmur of approval. The holy text unwound on his voice; he was careful to preserve between each phrase an intake of breath that nothing could disturb. The voice rose again in the middle of the pause, to climb into the trebles, then trill for a long time on the highest note. The final call lingered suspended in the air.

Calls of "God is Great!" could be heard. But from the boy, nothing. His eyes still downcast, without the slightest acknowledgment of the audience, until he started up again, and a wave of heat rose to my face, the verses he was uttering were mine, I had written them just before my

departure: “*Passion is betrayed through the eyes,*” my poem, on those Bedouin lips. I turned to Muhammad: so that was it. I smiled, but felt like hiding. There was something disagreeable to me about the adolescent’s singing. The power, timbre and mastery of breath were remarkable, it wasn’t that, but his voice crept into me despite myself, filled me with something so natural it was obscene, unconscious of itself. Sometimes when a note dropped, a slight hoarseness gave off a whiff of sensuality, something unveiled. I was very ill at ease.

He trembled in his devotion and my words were transformed into what they meant to say; even I believed they were real. They were no longer my words but the thing itself, the feeling, my intimate secret laid bare before everyone. The song was not emerging from his throat alone; his entire body seemed to be quivering, almost wringing itself to project the song. A motionless trance. This smooth-cheeked boy was able to incarnate the pain and the sweetness which I heard myself expressing for the first time, through him. It was inside him.

I knew the melody: Sheikh Abu el-Ela had composed it and sung it, he’d had it recorded on a seventy-eight. The young man followed the tune through its tiniest nuances; he was utterly faithful to it. His voice made the difference. I’d shaped the letters, but he breathed life into them, there was no end to it. I recognized the final verse: “*My secret, and yours—who will protect them?*”

I was not returning as a stranger: this was Muhammad’s gift. He had not anticipated this almost painful emotion, and I did not want to reveal it to him, so I stood up for the ovation. The young Bedouin was also on his feet. He was trying to return from the absence which had seized hold of him; no one could understand that as well as I. He waved, his arms flung back. As he moved, the sides of his black cape opened; he closed them again with an abrupt gesture. It didn’t take more than a second, but as the garment yawned open, I had time to glimpse the curve of a breast beneath the rough peasant’s clothing.

It was with an almost immodest gesture that she flung off her headpiece and released her thick black hair. This evening, I sang for you: those were her first words. No pallor lingered on her face, there was no reason for it any more. She was a Bedouin, not even a Bedouin, a simple peasant woman, from a tiny village, Tammay al-Zahayrah, in the delta. The two other people with her were her father, sheikh of the local mosque, and her brother, who was also a sheikh; it was a family business, in a way. There was something indecent about a girl on stage, but she could earn in one evening what her father earned in a month. Hence the disguise.

“I was afraid; it was your poem, and you were there.”

I couldn't fathom it, she was still a boy-girl in my eyes, it was not something you could obliterate just like that: that hint of the hermaphrodite and the beauty of her voice seemed mysteriously linked. It was fascinating and a bit monstrous. I was troubled; in that moment and the one which followed, no words came to me. Muhammad stood next to me, the two sheikhs stood near their protégée, smiling: it was ridiculous. I took her hand and raised it to my lips, a silent homage, that should suffice, but her fingers relaxed at once, her arm opened and followed my movement. I could feel the slight physical urgency, her invisible acceptance. She gave a little laugh of contentment. A spark lit her eyes, the fraction of a second: I could see it distinctly, her sharp gaze, of pure power, pure delight.

“We are very flattered... it's a great honor... a man like yourself...”

Sheikh Ibrahim came to my rescue, that's what social niceties are for, without a certain ritual one is torn apart.

“She sang my poem, the honor was all mine.”

I was saying this to the father, but his daughter's eyes never left mine. There was something Asian about the way she screwed up her eyes, and she was reading my lips, even into my mind—openly, as if she were at home.

“Why don't you write for me?” she asked in a low voice.

“I will write for you.”

“Only...”

“Only what?”

“Write things that I can sing.”

“I'm not sure I understand—”

“How many people understand your words? I mean ordinary people, peasants... To sing *'Passion is betrayed,'* I had to ask for help from Sheikh Abu el-Ela.”

“Poetry is written in classical Arabic.”

“Give it up for me, keep it for others. Why can't there be poetry in a language which everyone understands, why not?”

Muhammad was looking at me, dumbfounded. He sang my texts, he was my friend, he would never have dared to ask me such a thing. This young girl whom I had just met: he heard me, and I heard myself, reply:

“I don’t know if I can manage it... I can try.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow for the seaside with my parents, to Ras-el-Bar, we’ll be spending the summer there. When I get back, come and see me. I live on Kola Street, in Abdine—Sheikh Abu el-Ela will tell you where.”

She gave a slight laugh. She turned to her father, her palms open; she was restoring the power to him.

I pushed open the shutters and the sun offered up a vibrant, spontaneous city, formidably real.

Drawn by the heat and a physical desire to mingle with people, I went downstairs, to rub up against their voices, their smell, their sweat. The newspaper vendor handed me my change without looking at me; I was one of them. I was the only one whose eyes were open, at random, still a stranger, the streets leaping up at me, I was crazy. I couldn't see any English soldiers. Independence was an optical illusion, the soldiers were camped out by the canal, but had disappeared from the streets. I felt like kissing passers-by. Now I could read on people's faces what Muhammad had wanted me to discover yesterday. As if the air were in love. I was laughing to myself, people were staring at me and I didn't care. The town, that girl, music, everything was welcoming me. All I had to do was let myself be borne away on the current and swim with the flow. Everyone needed poets. Theater troupes came together and fell apart, the nights were thick with shooting stars, anyone could set themselves up as a stage director. There was a place for everyone, and if there wasn't, you could make your own. What was important was to launch a maximum number of mad ventures before the wheel turned—and it turned quickly. Cairo was full of allure, and I was lucky to be there.

Sheikh Abu el-Ela. I found him sitting in his garden, at a loose end, looking somewhat melancholy. Old age had grazed his shoulders. His cheeks were sunken, his hair white, and he had the lost gaze of people who think they are alone. I kissed him and gave him the bottle of whisky I'd brought back from Paris; he made an effort and thanked me. He hadn't come to greet me, and he almost never went out anymore. He'd been a friend of my late father's and had helped me to publish my first collection of poetry; I liked him a great deal. We raised our glasses. I told him about my homecoming, the evening with Muhammad, the Ezbekia gardens.

“So you saw her.”

“Yes.”

“And you heard her sing.”

“Yes.”

“What did you think?”

I didn't know what to say.

“Did you notice... she sings... but it's nothing yet. I know what she's capable of. It's still inside her, only a tiny bit has come out... She used to sit by my side here, every evening. Here, in the garden, every evening. If she wanted... But she's only a kid.”

He was full of emotion, burning inside. All signs of age had vanished. We were like two dumbfounded twins. He could not stop drinking, straight from the bottle.

“And naturally, afterwards, you went to see her backstage...”

I didn't reply.

“Did she say anything to you about me?”

“She said you were her master, that she owes you everything. That you taught her to sing my poem, *Passion is Betrayed...*”

“—that I'm her master, and she owes me everything?”

“Yes, that's what she said.”

He wiped his mouth.

“It was a few years ago... I'd sung at a wedding in the delta and was waiting for my train on the platform of the station at al-Sinbillawayn, and someone came up to greet me. It was her father, Sheikh Ibrahim, and I knew him slightly, he sings and chants the Koran. She was there, he'd taken her with him on tour, she wasn't even fifteen years old yet, a little fury, she was kissing my hand and saying, Sheikh Abu el-Ela, it's you, it's you, I thought you were dead! I didn't understand. Sheikh Ibrahim was trying to pull her away from me, but she wouldn't let go. I was the greatest singer in Egypt, the greatest, that's what she was saying. She'd listened to my records on the mayor's daughter's phonograph. She swore she'd kill herself if I didn't go with them right then and there, with her father and her to their house in Tammay al-Zahayrah. There was nothing very exciting waiting for me back in Cairo, and that young girl...she seemed to really want me to come. In the village she brought everyone together. She asked me to sing, and I sang. She began to sing with me. All it took was for her to open her mouth. I missed every single train. I took Sheikh Ibrahim to one side and said, It's a sin, this girl is so gifted, she must come to Cairo. He said no. No is no. I took my leave. It was only last year that the idea came to me: if the head of a great family would vouch for them, perhaps Sheikh Ibrahim could be persuaded. I

spoke to Abdel-Razzak bey, and he agreed. They arrived at the central station, the father, the brother, the maid Saadiya, with supplies of food for six months and there she was disguised as a boy. I found them an apartment and introduced them to people, did the best I could, she has nothing to reproach me with.”

“But what could she reproach you with?”

“Not a thing, as I said. Every evening, at six o’clock sharp, she was there, it’s incredible how she was there. The word work means nothing to her, we went into the music, we went... very deep. I gave her what I had and what I didn’t have. Singing was in her blood, and I taught her to sing with her heart. But nothing could calm her appetite, her lust for singing. Poets, musicians—she wants them all. She is in such a hurry, as if there wasn’t enough time, as if she were going to die, and she’s not even twenty-two yet. Maybe she believes I have nothing more to teach her, I don’t know. I was a student of Hamuli’s, and I’m the one who has carried on his musical revolution. This little peasant girl, you see, will be his daughter, the heir to an entire art form. You’ll see. Mounira al-Mahdia won’t cut it. The only one who is at that level is Muhammad, your friend. Women and the honors of the court fascinate him, he dreams of the West but there’s nothing he can do, he has the gift and he’ll be the heir despite himself. But believe me, she is the legitimate offspring... Our daily sessions are over. She still comes to see me, from time to time... Sometimes she comes to hear me at the al-Riche café, how am I supposed to react...”

I’d gone to France to learn Persian for the purpose of translating one single poem, the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, the Quatrains. There were no existing translations from Persian into Arabic. The only version available had been translated from English. We were condemned to making a detour through the West.

In Paris I had also learned about library organization—I had seven mouths to feed, so I had no choice. I got myself hired at the National Library of Egypt. I worked a great deal, and didn’t go out much. In any case, Cairo slowed down during the summer months; it gave me the impression of a long parenthesis before real life would start up again.

In the autumn, it would be our turn. Taha Hussein was already giving impromptu talks at the al-Fichawi café, demonstrating that Arabs and the West had shared roots and a shared inspiration, and he’d traced them back to the Greeks. The Eastern branch of the trunk had been allowed to

lapse. The revolution that Sheikh Abu el-Ela had been talking about, the famous *Nahda*, had affected not only music but also poetry, novels, philosophy, politics, even Islam. My translation of Omar Khayyam was part of that same inexorable tide. There were those who wanted to forge closer ties with the West, and those who wanted to find the basis for an Eastern modernism within our own culture. We were in the midst of an extraordinary flourishing, or perhaps an extraordinary confusion; how could we know? With the British gone, the country was as young as we were. I was eager to see the end of the summer.

In the evening I would shut myself away in my room to translate Khayyam, to write that other language in my own. It was more than just a poem. In my country fatalism is woven to words, *Inchallah*, God willing, there's nothing we can do, we can find our own warmth within, our destinies are predetermined and unfold beneath our steps, paradise awaits. We are all familiar with this burden, it has been accepted for centuries. As for Khayyam, he stands contemplating the void, the nothingness of the beyond. The certainty of absence is exhaled with every verse; he is a mystic on his lonely path toward God. He wants nothing to do with consolation, community, renunciation. There is only the wine and Sufi intoxication, it is the same. If our destiny is to end up as dust, may that dust become baked earth, an amphora of wine, and lovers will drink from it and lick our skulls with their lips. Nothing will come to appease us, nor should anything, so let us drink, fascinated, until we reach a lucid drunkenness, too lucid, let us drink some more, until we no longer forget.

*“Enjoy, in this world of nothingness  
That part of pleasure which is yours.”*

I could sense that invitation behind every verse and took it personally, as a reproach. Khayyam was driving me into my desire, however vague it might be. I resisted, and found pleasure in resisting. Every night I would slip a bit deeper into the skin of the poet, into his love of sensuality. Arabic and Persian are different, but both are languages of the East, of a same world. This physical proximity plunged me into an exaltation that kept me from sleep. The passage was within reach. And when the meaning was revealed, when the music of the poem found its equivalent in Arabic, I felt the liberation of an emotion that was nine centuries old.

In the darkness I grew drunk on the verses. There were times I came up against a rough passage. I would pull myself up, then get back to work. And in spite of that, I found no peace. Something was still beyond my grasp. I could feel something lacking... not in the flow of the

language, or in the words, or in the rhythm. It was not even something inherent in the text. A resolution was missing, an element which would bring my work to its conclusion and give it all its significance. Suddenly, I knew. It was for her that I was doing this translation. I wanted that girl to sing the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, that was all I wanted. That is what I had to have. The Quatrains, in her throat, would become Arabic, that was it. Everything I had been searching for, for three years in Paris, during my trips to Germany and Great Britain on the trail of the great Persian poet's manuscripts, and not just that, the ferment I could feel in myself, in my country, Muhammad, Sheikh Abu el-Ela and his garden: I had the impression that it could all come together, mysteriously, in her voice. She could be the way; my way.

We'll work together, of course, every day perhaps. And I'll compose verses for her: why not, I had promised to. A poem began to form in my mind, flowing out word after word, a poem in a simple and obvious language, exactly what she had asked of me, like a letter I might be sending to her. I lit my lamp again. And there, in the night, I wrote my first song for her. *"I am afraid that your love..."*

