

# A Saga of Love under the Hail of Fire

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## Abstract:

*This short story is excerpted from a memoir entitled Raha Dar Bad (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp., 2012), written by Soraya Baha. Ms. Baha was the sister-in-law of Mohammad Najibullah (1947–1996) who served as president of Afghanistan from 1986–1992. Najibullah became head of the secret police when the Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan in the December 1979. He was infamous for his brutality and ruthlessness. He became president of the country when the Soviet forces withdrew in 1989, and his widely despised government was considered a puppet regime of the Soviets. Ms. Baha was against the Soviet occupation, as well as the dictatorship of Najibullah. She ran away with her husband and their two children, Khaled, and Roya, and joined the war front in northern Afghanistan (Panjshir), where the famous partisan commander Ahmad-Shah Masoud had stationed his mujahedin forces. Masoud was fighting the Russians and led the largest war front in the mountains and valleys of Panjshir. Soraya Baha stayed there for some time in a small cabin with her two children. She later wrote her memoir and included this experience. The excerpted story below is based on true events that the author personally witnessed while in Panjshir.*

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One night during a cold autumn season, while we all sat under the *sandalie*,<sup>i</sup> twenty-four-year-old Rahim, one of the partisans, rushed into our small cabin and said, ‘Hide me somewhere, Heydar will kill me!’ We hid him behind the mattress and blankets. After a few minutes, Heydar, who was a tall young man, entered our small cabin with a Kalashnikov rifle. He looked everywhere, then asked, ‘Did Rahim come here?’ I said, ‘No, but you can’t come into our cabin without permission.’ He apologized and left distressed. I came out and saw him running quickly toward the top valley in the direction of the Chobak<sup>ii</sup> station.

I went back and took Rahim out of his shelter. He was pale. I asked him, 'What happened?' Rahim said, Heydar and I have been friends since elementary school. Today his sister Marjan showed up at my place, asking me for *shangari!*<sup>iii</sup> I asked, 'How was it that his sister decided to seek *shangari* in the midst of the war?' He said,

His sister is eighteen years old. When Panjshir became the hot bed of war, all the women of Panjshir were evacuated. Marjan and her mother rented out a place from an officer of the Khalqi (communist) faction who lived in Cementkhaneh.<sup>iv</sup> After a while the Khalqi had his eyes on Marjan and asked to marry her. Marjan, whose brother Heydar was in the war front in Panjshir, had no interest in marrying him. But she decided to feign interest. She told the Khalqi that if he wanted to marry her, he should buy her a heavy golden necklace. The Khalqi bought her a set of heavy golden jewelry. Marjan secretly sold the set, and with the money rented two horses. She ran away from home with the aid of an old male acquaintance from Panjshir. After a long ride, they arrived in Khonj last night,<sup>v</sup> and she told me, 'I don't want to marry this filthy Khalqi, I want you to marry me.' Because I love Marjan, I went to her brother Heydar, explained the situation, and said I wanted to marry her. Heydar got upset and said, 'How did Marjan get to Panjshir all by herself, and why didn't she come to me and instead attempted *shangari* in your place?' Heydar felt dishonored by this incident and said, I will show you a *shangari!* He went to the station to bring his Kalashnikov, so I ran away and came to your house. Can you please call Commander Masoud?

One of the partisans went to the station. Once again, my son Khaled and my daughter Roya hid Rahim under the blankets and mattress. After a few minutes, Masoud Shah and Mawlana (the financial officer of the movement) came to our cabin. We pulled Rahim out from under the quilts, and as soon as he saw Commander Masoud, his face turned red, and he

respectfully and calmly sat next to him. Commander Masoud asked, 'What's going on boy?' Rahim said, 'Nothing Commander Masoud. Heydar's sister has come to my place to seek *shangari*, but now Heydar wants to kill me.' Masoud was surprised and asked, 'How did Heydar's sister get to the war front, and seek *shangari* at your place?' Rahim said, 'A godless Khalqi wanted to forcibly marry her, so she ran away here.'

Masoud said, 'Where is she now?' Rahim answered, 'Here in Khonj, by the mountain that is in front of us, on the other side of the river.' Masoud told Mawlana to bring the girl over. Mawlana left, and after an hour, came back with her. The girl, who was wearing a large scarf over her head, respectfully said hello and sat in front of Commander Masoud.

The Commander said, 'You Panjshir girls do not miss out on shangari, right? How did you pass the valley and mountains to get to the Khonj in this cold weather?'

She was embarrassed, and her face turned red. She lowered her gaze, and with her shaky, low voice said, 'Commander Masoud, I had to. If I didn't run away, that unfaithful Khalqi would have forcibly married me.' The Commander said, 'But you can't live with Rahim at the war front.' Rahim said, 'I will take Marjan to the province of Farang to stay with my mom.'

Commander Masoud sent one of the partisans to bring Heydar back. Heydar came in and as soon as he saw Masoud, he put down his Kalashnikov and sat next to the *sandalie*. I don't know if he was trembling from the cold or from anger and stress. Commander Masoud said, 'What's this messy hair and face of yours? And these faded shoes? The Kabul government is right calling you insurgents. Did you want to kill your best friend?' Heydar replied. 'What should I have done?' The Commander said, 'So you wanted your sister to marry a traitor Khalqi?'

Heydar said, 'War has destroyed us and our future. Curse on the war and all Khalqis.' The Commander said, 'Mawlana-Saheb, tomorrow, take these two young people to get married. The girl can stay in Khonj for a week, and

then she must go to the Province of Farang. That's all. Congratulations!' Tears of happiness and joy flowed from the girl's beautiful green eyes, and she said, 'Commander Masoud, May god give you our lives.'

The next day they got married, and everyone congratulated them. Heydar was happy too, and the young couple rushed to stay at a cabin on the other side of the river. Even the roaring river seemed to be singing a wedding song for them.

Surprised by the pleasures of being in love for the first time, their hearts and souls seemed to outlast any danger and fear. In a short time, the love of a girl had transformed everything, interests, needs, and thoughts. They spent their first few days of marriage in a cabin with the bright stars, the valley, and the mountain and roaring river as witnesses.

They were not rushing toward a life of repeating years and monotonous seasonal changes. How soon, though, the lightning that emerges after a thunder rained fire on the green forest of this young love. How soon it became too late. On the early morning of the fourth day of their marriage, thirty minutes after airplanes flew overhead, the sound of the bombers filled Khonj. From a distance, we could hear the explosion of the bombs as they rattled the valley. One of the partisans said, 'They bombed Chobak.'<sup>vi</sup> At sundown my daughter Roya came out of the kitchen and said, 'Mother! Heydar is crying outside.'

I went out and saw Heydar sitting at the edge of the hill, with his head resting on the barrel of his Kalashnikov, crying. Little Khaled was standing next to him and said with a low voice, 'Brother Heydar don't cry, don't cry.'

I asked Heydar, 'What happened, why are you crying?' It seemed as if he neither heard nor saw me. The sound of his sobbing filled the space, like a gong. Khaled said, 'Mother, Rahim got killed.' A vague feeling froze me in place, and after a moment I asked, 'What? Where did he get killed?' Heydar lifted his head. His eyes were red and swollen. His sobbing echoed in the

air., 'Mother, Rahim was killed.' I was stunned and frozen in place. After a few minutes I asked, 'What, where was he killed?'

When Heydar once again lifted his head, it was as if his eyes had been stabbed a hundred times, and no blood was left in his veins. He said, 'When they bombed this morning, Rahim was at Chobak next to the river. A piece of shrapnel from a bomb hit his head, and he was martyred. Commander Masoud, Mahmoud Daghigh, and all the *mujahideen* were there. We washed his body and buried him. I have to go.' He did not give me a moment to ask about his sister and left. After hearing this account, I froze, as if blood had stopped running in my body.

I wanted to go to Marjan, but our cabins were on the two opposite sides of the mountain and a tumultuous river separated us. I did not know where and how to pass the river to get to the cabin of the newlyweds on the other side. The bride's sweet dreams about her future had been destroyed.

I couldn't believe Rahim was dead. Soon I realized how painful it is to experience the sudden death of a young person. I found what love, death, and saga meant under the rain of fire. After an hour of crying, I felt lighter. In the midst of depression, I came to the realization that it was better to truly live deeply and passionately for three days than to live at the surface of life for a hundred days.

I struggled with war nightmares for two days in my cabin. After two days, Mawlana came and said, 'Commander Masoud is deeply saddened by Rahim's death. He hasn't eaten anything nor slept since then.' I said, 'Since there are no other women in the war front, Marjan can stay with me. Where is she now?' Mawlana said, 'Her brother took the poor girl to Farang with him.' On that sad night, the radio station of the puppet government was once again announcing that the country was in peace and safety.

**Soraya Baha** was born in Kabul in an intellectual and progressive family. Her father, Saad al-Din Baha, was a political activist, poet, and writer, and one of the pioneers of the constitutional movement of Afghanistan. Because of his political views, he spent eighteen years in the dreaded prisons of the royal regime. Baha completed her studies at Kabul University in the field of National Economy and was married in 1975. During her student years, according to the custom in the intellectual society of Afghanistan, she gravitated toward leftist tendencies, but soon, based on what she learned about the leaders of the Communist Party of Afghanistan, she left and eventually joined its socialist critics. As a result, when the Communists came to power in 1978, she was forced to seek refuge in France and later in West Germany. She returned to her hometown in 1983 because of family connections and also because of her husband's wishes, who was the brother of soon-to-be President Najibullah (r. 1987–1996). However, she opposed the policies of Najibullah, resisted his threats of arresting her and even assassination attempts on her life, and eventually fled to northern Afghanistan to join the Panjshir Front in 1987. At the time, Panjshir was the most important war front against the Soviet Red Army. Soraya immigrated to the United States in 1988 and today lives in Fremont, California. Soraya divorced her husband in 1996. She is a talented writer and analyst who has written more than a hundred articles about the politics and society of Afghanistan, paying special attention to issues that have oppressed women in that country.

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<sup>i</sup> This is a way of keeping warm in an inexpensive way. A *sandalie* (called *korsi* in Iran) is a low-level table, which is covered by a heavy quilt on top and the sides. A small heated brazier is carefully placed under the table. The family sits around the *sandalie* and pulls the quilt over their body to keep warm often in the bitter cold and in a house or cabin with no other method of heating.

<sup>ii</sup> It is the name of the station.

<sup>iii</sup> *Shangari* (to elope): In the province of Panjshir, young people who fall in love but whose families are enemies or oppose the marriage, sometimes elope. The girl would run away from home before sunrise and go to her lover's house, and the boy would be obligated to marry her. However, once she eloped, a girl's connection to

her family of origin would end, and she would not be accepted back home. The act of going to a boy's house is called *shangari*, which is considered a derogatory and offensive term.

<sup>iv</sup> Khalqi: Member of a branch of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (1967–1979), which had a communist orientation. The Khalqi and the Parcham parties were bitter rival. In contrast to the Khalqis who advocated a rapid transition to socialism, the Parcham followers argued for a slower transition to socialism, given the country's lack of industrialization. The Khalqi's uncompromising position led to massive tribal resentment and eventually the failure of the government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan formed after the 1978 Saur Revolution. The Khalqis pushed for radical reforms and brutally cracked down on dissidents, causing the deaths of thousands. This action, in turn, encouraged the rebellion of the religious segments of Afghan society and culminated in the creation of the *mujahideen*. It also led to Soviet military intervention of Afghanistan in December 1979 in support of the Khalqi communists.

<sup>v</sup> A small village in Afghanistan.

<sup>vi</sup> The name of a station where partisans would take shelter.