

HE WAS DIFFERENT

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✘ Simon Simonian

Translated and abridged by Vahe H. Apelian

The original piece, titled "Ան Ուրիշ Էր" ("He Was Different"), appeared in Simon Simonian's "Լեռնակալաններու Վերջալոյսը" ("The Mountaineers' Twilight").



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After his death, Bédo has continued living in our house and continues to live as a husband, as a father and as a friend, but as a foe of a friend. My father, who had loved him as a brother, is the only one who is discontented with Bédo coming back to life. His animosity started after Bédo's interment.

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I remember well, during my childhood, every time there was bad feeling between my mother and my father, the person responsible for the trouble was Bédo who worked in mysterious ways after his death much like all the great souls, saints and heroes do after their deaths.

Bédo was not a saint or a hero. He was a mere Sassountsi from the Dalvorig village. He was the son of an ironsmith. His father had worked in the Dalvorig mines extracting iron from the rock veins and melting it to make plows, hatchets, shovels, pickaxes and rifles. The guns were muzzle type with which he, his brothers and the villagers had defended themselves against attacks by Kurds and Turks. The leaders of the Armenians were Mourad (Hampartsoum Boyandjian), Mihran Damadian, "Baron" Vahan, Kevork Chavoush and other luminaries of the time. It is in honor of Bédo's father and his comrades that the once popular patriotic song, "I am a Brave Son of Dalvorig", was sung.

At twenty Bédó had left Sassoun and after working in mills, had settled in Aintab much like many Sassountsis. At twenty-five, he had married my mother Ménnoush who was barely eighteen then. Bédó, a handsome, brave young man, had captivated my mother's heart.

"Mother, was Bédó handsome?" I used to ask my mother in my childhood as she recounted stories about him.

"There was no other like him," my mother would say and continue: "He had dark eyebrows and moustache; a handsome posture, a proportioned face. He dressed like a bég. All the girls in our town noted his manly handsomeness. Lucky you, the women would tell me...."

To validate her description, she would open her old chest, the dowry chest, which along with her and much like her, was becoming a worn down witness of old and happy days. From underneath the moth laden, malodorous, dark blue, apricot and pearl-colored worn out clothes, she would pull out her photo bundle, unwrap its silky shroud and hand to me her wedding picture so that I would take a look at Bédó, her Bédó.

My mother's recollection would fill my soul with fascination towards the man who had once been my mother's husband. To further stress so that I would not waver from the impression I harbored of the dead man, my mother would add: "In this picture he does not look as handsome as he was. Hey, bygone days. We took this picture in haste. He had just returned from the mill and was covered with flour all over. The neighbors were having their pictures taken. In our days, women did not go to the photographer's shop. We had this picture taken on the spur of that very moment because he refused to change his clothes"

At times, during these mysterious viewing sessions, my father would happen to suddenly step in the house. My mother, with tears still in her eyes, would wrap the picture and place it back. My father, silent and sad, would sit at a corner and inhale the smoke from his cigarette more deeply than usual. My father's sad silence would last for days, sometimes for even weeks during which time he would not speak with my mother.

That absent person beyond the grave thus caused a lot of heartache between my father and my mother. My father's sadness, my mother's tears and the omnipresence of the departed would fill my childhood soul with an unexplainable mystery.

During winter, whenever my father would be absent for months on end working in the mills, my mother would sit around the oven area during the evenings and tell us about Bédó who had told her father "let your 'yes' not be a 'no'". After long deliberation, her father had consented to give his daughter away in marriage to Bédó. After their engagement, during which they had seen each other

only once, seven years of blissful marriage followed.

"He was an out of the ordinary man", my mother would tell us; "whenever he missed home, whether there was snow or blizzard, he would walk for four hours in the cold of the night just to come home."

Of course my mother was the repository of his joy. They thus lived happily but without a child. My mother had believed that on the seventh year of their marriage, she would conceive and carry his child. The seventh year brought with it the unexpected, Bédó's sudden death in the mill during work. There is no need to visualize my mother's torment and agony. My mother would recount his elaborate funeral procession and the overwhelming sadness among the Sassountsis and would particularly emphasize my father's inconsolable lament over the loss of his bosom friend.

Time did not heal my mother's wounds. There had remained only one thing for my mother, visiting her husband's gravesite even in the dead of the winter.

"I remember well," my mother would say. "It was Vartanants Day and I needed to visit his grave at any cost. Our cemetery did not have walls or guards. There was the fear of wolves. My mother was with me. As I was walking among the graves, suddenly Bédó appeared in front of me in the same dress we had him dressed for his interment. I froze. He looked at me and said, 'return home and do not come here anymore'. My mother arrived and saw me standing still. I told her nothing about the occurrence. I grabbed her arm and we returned home. We had not reached Bédó's grave yet. My mother remained perplexed."

That day became a turning point for my mother. From there on she found refuge in her needlework. From a whole year's labor she raised enough funds to place a tombstone on Bédó's grave, on which she had inscribed:



However, the thick tombstone with all its weight has not been able to contain Bédó's heart that continues to live on this earth, that is to say, in my mother's heart.

A year passed. My father proposed to marry her. They got married. They started having children. My mother devoted herself to raising her children. But she never forgot her Bédó. The passing years and responsibilities crystallized Bédó's love like a diamond that my mother keeps in her heart. In fact, it's the only crystal she carries in her heart. She raised her children in memory of Bédó. My mother is convinced that we are Bédó's children for, as a matter of fact, Bédó had appeared to her the day before her conception. Without the apparition of Bédó, she claimed, she had never conceived. That is to say Bédó had become our Holy Ghost !

My mother had willed that when she died she should be buried next to Bédó. However, her exile put

an end to that vow. But my mother had taken another solemn vow that neither exile nor war or anything earthly would deter her from that solemn vow. In her after life she would be with her Bédó. My father knew about my mother's alarming preference. That is why he remained melancholic the rest of his life. He knew that there was a fateful separation in store for him in afterlife.

My mother's preference had me ponder. I have thought that her first love, Bédó's handsomeness and bravery, the loss of her youthful happiness influenced her decision to make her preference known to us. But there was something different with my mother. Whenever I quizzed her, she would only say: "He was different."

My mother admits that my father, her second husband, has been virtuous, God-fearing, good natured, just and has always treated her kindly. But all my father's virtues have given way to the appeal of the deceased. My mother, in her essence, remains the spouse of the deceased. My father carries a wound that never healed because of my mother's total devotion to Bédó. That is why his once bosom friend Bédó, has become his foe after his death for whom he can do no harm with his living self. The other, on the other hand, from the beyond, continues to aggravate my father on Earth.

We, the children, presented alternating stands towards our two fathers. In our childhood, through my mother's tales, we deeply loved Bédó. When we grew older and realized our father's pain, we sided with him and pounded Bédó, who through his interference from the world beyond, caused so much grief to our father. Our assault for a while bore fruits. Bédó's downfall started. But we could never dethrone him for my mother continued to open her wooden chest, unwrap the bundle and with her fingers caress the pictures while murmuring softly "He was different."

We ended our teens, rounded our twenties and became more mature. We ceased to side with either of my parents. It was the period of our neutrality. We let our mother receive her extraterrestrial visitor in our home and continue her affair with him. But we did not let her verbalize her preference to us.

There remains the last chapter for us that will start in the afterlife. We are sure that a separation will take place, our mother will re-join with her Bédó who is surely waiting impatiently for her. We will remain with our father. Separated from us, our mother will miss us. She will vacillate between her Bédó and us. She will want to join us with Bédó in a threesome arrangement of sorts. My father who despised the francophone triangle and the ghostly presence of Bédó will not want to have his erstwhile friend turn his foe in our midst. We, who were not accustomed to such things on Earth, will reject our mother's proposition. With each passing day, our mother will miss us more and more. She will eventually concede, leave her Bédó behind and join us, and we will have our family anew.

I wrote this piece after a long delay and reader be mindful that my mother is an old woman as I write about her Bédó. She has heard from my brothers that I write about Sassountsis. She confronted me once and said: "Son, let it not be that you write about Bédó. He was not like Mano or Magar. He was different....."

Forgive mother, for I wrote about your Bédó.

