THE SEPARATION

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A segment from **Moushegh Ishkhan**'s (Մուշեղ Իշխան) book titled

"Good Bye Childhood"

Translated and abridged by **Vahe H. Apelian,** 4 May 2013

We will separate.

I do not know how could we possibly separate? I have opened my eyes and seen all of us under the same roof. True, there were two mothers over us - *Mayrig* and *Hadji Mama* -, both, however, were equally endearing not only to me, but also to my sister and brother as well. I understood a bit more than they did, as to what it meant a mother who gave birth and a mother who adopted. My sister and brother did not know as much.

Hadji Mama was the mother who gave birth to me. She was to travel to another country taking her two children. I was not one of them. I belonged to the woman who was the more authoritative whose name was simply *Mayrig* for all of us. I had been gifted to her from the moment I was born. Official registrations had been prepared that way. In front of God, the Church and the Government I was recognized as the son of *Mayrig*.

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"What difference does it make?" Had said my own father, gifting me to his brother. "Aren't we in the same house? Are we not going to live together under the same roof until death does us apart? Let this lad be yours and bear your name. God will grant me more children." He had assured him.

I was his firstborn child.

After me, God gave my own father two other children, my sister and my brother. They were born during our years of exodus.

"Such loving brothers are rarely seen on this world" would say *Mayrig* and would add with a limitless love and reverence, "May God pity his soul, may he rest in His glory; may God reward him at his heart's measure".

What did *Hadji Mayrig* think when she was looking at me? Did she ever have any regret? Did she feel pain or happiness? Not a word was said in that regard. She was a 17 years old new bride in the household when I was gifted to her brother-in-law. She had no say then. Now that we were on the verge of separating for good, she still remained silent and meek.

Had her husband been alive……

How was the poor man to know that the world was going to get up side down a year after my birth; that the established orders would be destroyed and cast them into ruin and that an entire nation would be uprooted caravan after caravan?

During their years of exodus the two brothers had not separated from each other. The elder brother, the one who had adopted me, had taken the brunt of the Turkish brutality to protect and safeguard his younger brother and keep him alive. Alas, what the forces of evil had not been able to accomplish, fate had ordained otherwise. Death had separated the two brothers right at the very time when an armistice was being signed and a glimmer of hope was returning. My own father had passed away due to a crisis of his heart. In due time, the elder brother had resumed his second exodus over again, this time around because of the menace of the Kemalist movement and had left his own widow behind to accompany her widowed sister-in-law.

The two mothers with their combined three children had continued to live together much like bosom sisters. They had bore their ordeal together up to this point. Now they were to go their separate ways.

Hadji Mama was acting like the guilty party. She sought to justify her decision to separate. What could she do otherwise? Her mother, my maternal grandmother whom I did not know and her brother were sending letter after letter from Greece asking her to collect her children and join them there. There were no husband and brother-in-law left. Why would she live by herself in a remote corner of Damascus when she had a mother, a brother and a sister waiting for her return. They would be together and would console each other.

"You are absolutely right" *Mayrig* would say, "do not ever feel chagrined. Collect your family and go and be with your mother. There could not be any person substituting her."

"That is true" would reply *Hadji Mama,* "but you will be left alone, it would be difficult for you".

"What am I to do? It's my fate. Should you sacrifice all your life for that?" *Mayrig* would respond. There were tears in *Hadji Mama's* eyes. My children's instincts told me that her great sorrow was because of me. She would be leaving a part of her heart and would be going away for good, most likely not ever to see me again. However, she did not articulate. Any reference attesting to her maternal love would be regarded tantamount to having sinned without any recourse for penance. It was an issue long resolved. I was *Mayrig's* son.

The days of our separation remain etched in my memory with the following picture. It was dark. The kerosene lantern barely illuminated the faces and the things in the room casting shadows on the walls. At a far corner cross-legged sat a compatriotic elderly woman, *Soghome' Khatoun*. *Hadji Mama* and *Mayring* presented her all they had as household items – spoon, folk, plate, cup, brass utensils for cooking food, etc. *Soghome' Khatoun* acted like an arbiter. We children looked wide eyed as how she divided the goods into two piles, few cups here, few cups there, two small kettles on one side and a large kettle on the other side. She then looked at the two mothers.

Come and make your choice.....

Mayrig differed to *Hadji Mama* to be the first to make the choice. *Hadji Mama* refused to make her choice known and continued to sob instead.

"It was not meant to be this way." Said *Haji Mama*. "Why would they end up separating us from each other? Cursed be to those who brought us to this situation."

The time came to divide the mattresses, the pillows and the few clothing they had. *Soghome Khatoun's* hands shivered over them. They too needed to be divided equally among the inheritors of the inseparable two brothers.

"Come on, make your choices" uttered *Soghome Khatom*.

"Little bride, make the choice and take at your heart's content," said *Mayrig*.

Hadji Mama was indifferent. She was physically present but she was absent in soul and in gaze. Was it the memory of her young husband that troubled her soul? Or was it the call of her mother and brother that had distracted her? *Soghome Khatoun* finished her task and was ready to leave. She stood up with an air of contentment having accomplished a difficult task as best as she could.

"I think it was an equitable division. No one's rights were trampled." She said.

"Oh, *Soghome Khatoum*, who is looking after the few pieces we have. The things we left behind and moved on", said *Mayrig*.

"That is very true, but it is much more difficult to fairly divide the little, than it is to divide the more", said *Soghome Khatoum*.

After *Soghome Khatoum* left, *Mayrig* secured the door of the room, pulled the curtains over the

windows and told us to sleep. My sister and my bother fell asleep soon after. They should have been tired witnessing the unusual happening that may have stirred their childhood imaginations and tired them. I lay on my place, but I did not fall asleep. I sensed that the two mothers had unfinished business to attend in secret from us. Rightfully so, in the middle of the night they silently undid the edge of a mattress and pulled out a small bag. I solved the riddle right away. It was *Myarig's* famed belt purse that she bore wrapped on her body. Through the years it had dwindled to that small bag. My curiosity took better hold of me and I wanted to see the sight of the glittering gold and hear their clicking sound to know how many of them were left. But I pretended to be asleep.

Mayrig looked around her to make sure that there was no one secretly eying her treasure. She emptied the bag and held its content in the palm of her hand. Was it a palm full or not? I was not sure. It was only the clicking of the gold that reached my ears. *Mayrig* sighed and murmured in a low voice.

"Everything has gone, this all that has remained. Half is yours and half is mine. This is all that has remained for us to raise our children"

"This will not take us far. I will spend part of it towards our travel expenses." Said *Hadji Mama* with some desperation.

"What can we do?" Replied *Mayrig.* " Even so we should be thankful that the children would not starve for some time". Then she added "What is to say to those who do not even have this much?"

"As soon as I reach, I will start working," said *Hadji Mama.*

"Your brother will be your keeper" assured *Mayrig*.

"I do not want to be burden on anyone else". Said *Hadji Mama*

"God is great. God will surely open a door". Replied *Mayrig*.

The division is done and finished. I knew that nothing else has remained to divide. The real division however happened the next day at the train station. The division there was not over goods but over souls. Three of us, my niece, the daughter of my father's sister, *Mayrig*, and I were at the train station. Three of them, *Hadji Mama,* my sister and my brother were on the train. We were the ones who were staying put, they were the ones who were leaving.

"Do not let us remain looking forward for your letters, write soon and frequently." Repeatedly said *Myrig* wiping her tears.

"Done" said *Hadji Mama* with course voice. "I will write and you may come as well and we would be together again".

"Why not, little bride, who else do I have besides you?" Said *Mayrig* and added, "If you remain content, I will take my son and join you".

"My son", that is I. The blue eyes of *Hadji Mama* in the wagon remained transfixed on me with an unexplainable sadness. I sense a deep tragedy unfolding as the siren of the steam engine alerted those present of the imminent journey. My sister and my brother did not seem to grasp the situation. They were teary as well and yet they looked happy as well. Had not *Mayrig* bought them candy and chocolate to eat when the train would be on the move?

If Providence would have given me the liberty to make my choice at that very moment and had they asked me then whom would I chose - my own mother or my adopted mother? What would have been my answer? I have not been placed in such a situation before, but had I been placed, I would have chosen without the slightest doubt my adoptive mother.

It may sound strange and incomprehensible to some, but it is what it is. I loved *Hadji Mama* greatly who was infinitely good, meek and beautiful. She was younger and more presentable in society than *Mayrig.* She knew how to read and write and spoke a fluent literary Armenian. Mayrig, on the other hand, had no schooling and spoke in local dialect. She was more authoritative and less compromising. From appearances to manners she was a true representation of a woman from the interior of the country. In spite of these, she was the one who had mothered me. My first smile and utterance of 'mama' were directed to her. She was the one who stood by my cradle in my sick days and I was a sickly child, watching over me with an unconditional love.

It was no secret to me that *Hadji Mama* had given birth to me and had breastfed me for the very first few months. She had continued to live in the same household as the "little bride" and as a grown up sister. *Hadji Mama*, that angelic woman had restrained herself not to call me her child or her kid. She had deprived herself the pleasure of hugging her firstborn son lest she would inflict a wound to her sister-in-law.

Our separation became final. Hardly Hadji Mama arrived to Greece, she repatriated to Armenia with the rest of her family at large. It took 37 long years for the "gates of hope" to open up. In 1962 I became fortunate to visit Yerevan and hug my own mother, my own sister and my own brother. My mother and I had aged. *Hadji Mama* had weathered trying and difficult times to raise her two children and make a person of each. All by herself she had managed to have her two children graduate from college and become respectable individuals.

Mayrig and *Hadji Mama* never got the chance of seeing each other again. Fate had ordained differently for both. A year after our reunion, *Hadji Mama* was planning to visit us in Beirut when she passed away unexpectedly. *Mayrig* passed away as well in the same time frame after a long illness.

This is how the final act of our lives ended. Nowadays my sister and brother have established families of their own in our Mother Fatherland. I remain a child of the Diaspora. Two Mothers as well as two States for those of us from the same blood. This time around it is not only familial but also national……