

## **Fariba Vafi**

Fariba Vafi was born to a middle-class family in Tabriz in northwestern Iran on January 1963, 21. She launched *In the Heart of the Stage*, her first collection of short stories, in the fall of 1996. That was followed, three years later, by *Even When We Were Laughing*, a collection of 22 short stories. Her first novel, *My Bird*, came out in 2002 and won the award for top novel from the Golshiri Foundation and Yalda Literary Award later in the same year. It also picked up accolades from Mehregan Adab Award and Isfahan Literary Award. *My Bird* is already on its 14th reprint.



This novel has been translated into English, Italian, German and Kurdish Sorani. In 2003 her *Tarlan*, a novel, hit the bookstore shelves and secured an accolade from Isfahan Literary Award. Two years later *The Tibet Dream* was launched, for which she won the top prize of the Golshiri Foundation and an accolade from Mehregan Adab. In 2007 she published *A Mystery in Alleys* which has already been translated into French and Norwegian. In the early 2009 her *On the Way to the Villa*, a collection of short stories, was launched; and a year later she released back-to-back novels *All the Horizon* and *The Moon is Getting Full*. In all, her literary career has thus far seen the release of four collections of stories and five novels as well as publication of short stories in various literary journals. Some of her short stories have been translated into Russian, Japanese, Swedish, Turkish, etc. She has won several awards and accolades from different literary events. Fariba Vafi has two children and is a resident of Tehran.

## **In the Heart of the Stage** **By: Fariba Vafi**

### ***Sing for Me***

Why don't you close your eyes? Well, I already know the answer to that question: You don't want to oversleep. You're worried that I may go away, and leave you with these bitches here. Don't worry. I'll take you with me. I'll hide you underneath my shirt and you'll become my baby. The gold-toothed Aghdas says sometimes when you're alone you sing. I don't want to hear a single peep out of you when we get there. They say, um .... There are so many children over there. Many are said to be motherless. I'm gonna shout and scream and stomp my feet.

"I'm not going anywhere. I wanna be with Purya," I complained.

But Mom said, "One day I'll come and take you home."

That's what she said as she trimmed my hair, wrapped it in a piece of cloth and placed it on her chest before starting to cry.

"What about Purya's hair?" I demanded.

She grinned as she gave me a bear hug, "His hair is already cut."

By now his hair has definitely grown. But, what difference does it make? Grandpa doesn't let him move in with Mom. He buys Purya toy cars, trains and squirt guns. Purya has everything he wants. Each day he eats a lot of banana-flavored wafers. If we were together, he'd offer half of his wafers to "Nanaz" [He can't pronounce my name – Sanaz – properly].

In fact though, he'd give me only one third of the wafers. The same brand of wafers Mah Jabin gave me the other day. They were so yummy.

Back then you were not mine; otherwise I'd have given you some. You were sitting in the lap of the gold-toothed Aghdas and she was working on your forelocks. I was staring at you all the time.

Suddenly the gold-toothed Aghdas called out my name, "Sanaz, come here sweetie."

I walked over. Her gold teeth were glistening.

"Do you want this to be yours and sing for you?" she asked.

"Certainly!"

"It's all yours. First, though, you need to tell me something."

I stared at her bulging eyes. She winked at Mah Jabin and Afagh, the opium smoker, who were sitting in a corner.

"Tell me what the guy you call uncle did to your mom."

"I don't know. I believe he pushed her."

Mah Jabin and Afagh, the opium smoker, stepped closer.

"Where were you at that moment?"

"I was hiding behind the blinds."

The gold-toothed Aghdas pinched my cheek. "You're one mischievous girl!"

Mah Jabin called out Khojasteh. "Come and see how this little creature washes her mother's dirty linen in public." And then she offered some banana-flavored wafers to me.

By then the gold-toothed Aghdas had placed you in my lap.

"What about the other uncle of yours?"

I ran my hand over your velvet body.

"Which one?"

Suddenly all three of them burst into laughter and slapped their knees. Khojasteh was laughing her head off.

"You seem to have a multitude of uncles!"

Mom gave my ear a tug. "How many times do I have to tell you not to run your mouth in front of these filthy bitches? I want you to promise me that you won't do that again."

She was practically biting my upper arm. "Tell me it was the last time you talked to them in my absence. Come on."

I was dying. "It definitely was the last time, I promise."

She pulled you out of my grasp and threw you to a corner. Your forelocks were tilted, and you were crying. I cried so much that Mom took pity on me and handed you back to me. She called me names, though.

I envy Purya. He's now lying next to grandpa in his big bed and he's telling great stories. Grandpa loves him very much. I wish I were there with Purya so that we could play hide and seek. But Grandpa doesn't like me. He doesn't pay any attention to me. The only favor he did to me the other day was to give me a couple of candies.

"Where did you and your mom go?" he asked.

"We went to the bazaar."

"What did you buy there?"

"Helicoptel," Purya was quick to say [he could not pronounce the word correctly].

"Did your mom buy that for you?"

"She did," I said.

"Uncle did," Purya contradicted me.

"What was his name?"

Purya stretched out his arms to the sides as if they were the wings of an airplane and began imitating the roar of a plane.

Grandpa pulled me toward himself. "What did he buy for you, Sanaz?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me his name and I'll buy you something."

"Like what?"

"Anything you want; just give me his name."

He was lying. All the time he'd promise to buy me something, but he'd never keep his word.

I didn't say a word about Uncle Morteza to grandpa. I didn't say that Mom threw the bills at him. I didn't say that he picked up the bank notes and looked at her. I thought such revelations might prompt a reaction similar to dad's who would savagely beat her with his belt.

“Don’t touch me, you dishonorable junkie!”

Uncle added one extra bill to the wad.

“Just because of you,” Mom said.

That’s what she tells Uncle Parviz too, but Parviz doesn’t harass her. All he demands is that Mom dance for him. They’ve wrapped a paper packet around the light bulb and everything has turned red. Mom’s face is red, too. You are no longer yellowish. You’ve turned red, too. If you sing now, no one is gonna hear you. Everyone is asleep. I am all alone. Your singing would help me fall asleep. Why don’t you tell a story? Purya says Stoly instead of story. Sometimes he gives my hair a tug and says, “Stoly. Stoly.”

Mah Jabin would tell me a story if she were awake. Look at her. She seems to have been scolded by her mom. She’s taken a fetal position in the corner of the bed. She must be dreaming about her baby. She has a cute little baby. She says he is a bit younger than me, almost the same age as Purya. She says he has curly hair.

“Where is your son now?” I once asked her.

“His dad has taken him to a faraway place.”

“Very far from here?”

“That’s right. Very far.”

“Just like Purya?”

“No, Purya is not that far away from here. My son is too far away.”

Mah Jabin beat herself and hurled curses at herself. She cried and cried until she passed out. That reminded other women of their children and plunged them into sadness. Mom jumped to her feet and handed a plastic bucket to Khojasteh and asked her to play it as a drum so that she could dance. Everyone stepped back and gave her more space so that she could gyrate. Robabeh, a.k.a. trailer truck, stepped closer, snapped her fingers, and began to twirl around Mom. That was how sadness beat a hasty retreat. Everyone was now laughing and clapping. Robabeh kept twirling and shouted, “Encore.”

Mom twirled and her skirt billowed around her. All of a sudden I screamed and Mah Jabin gave me a hug.

“Stop it, Talat. Your daughter is scared.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Keep playing the drum,” Mom said.

In a tone of voice similar to that of a man, Robabeh said, “That’s my girl.”

Maryam knocked on the door and said, “Knock it off. Ms. Ghiyasi is on her way.”

Mom blushed as she tried to catch her breath. I cried and mom pinched me to stop.

Ms. Ghiyasi stood in the doorway like a beast. Everyone was afraid of her. Her voice was coarse. “What’s going on here?”

No one dared answer that question. She stared at everyone and I hid behind my Mom. After Ms. Ghiyasi went away, Khojasteh said, "Right at a time when we want to have fun, the party-poopers shows up."

The gold-toothed Aghdas told Talat to narrate an enthralling story. "I'm dying of living an uneventful life."

The wrinkles on Mom's forehead grew thicker.

Robabeh said, "She's right. Why don't you tell us how you managed to get away from that guy?"

Khojasteh grimaced. "What are you talking about? That was a fabrication. She is a hell of a liar."

Everyone huddled around Mom. Mah Jabin's tingling made Mom laugh. "The hell with him," she then said.

"The hell with who?"

That junkie husband of mine! He quite knowingly consigned me to this miserable life. If my father had let me marry Akbar, I wouldn't have had to put up with this dishonorable junkie.

"Where is your husband?" asked the gold-toothed Aghdas.

"He's in jail and has reportedly kicked the habit."

I was toying with your forelocks and running my hand over your smooth, beautiful body.

"Don't you have shame? Only a short period after your arrival you're provoking others!" Ms. Ghiyasi had snuck in without drawing any attention. All women retreated one by one. Mom's face was pale with fear as she bowed her head. I was embracing her. Ghiyasi jumped forward and snatched me from my Mom.

"Let go of her. You want to turn her into another you? She does not belong here."

That comment made Mom cry. I started to cry, too. Ms. Ghiyasi gently hit me in the head and then walked to Mom and said in a loud tone of voice, "You don't feel pity for her. You are using her as a business facilitator. I know what you are up to."

Everyone fell silent, Mom was weeping.

"I have talked to Child Welfare. They'll take your daughter to a nursery," Ms. Ghiyasi said.

If I see Purya I'll let him play with you too, only for a short period, though. The gold-toothed Aghdas said she'd make another one for me. After all, I'd cried my eyes out. She said instead of a canary she'd make a sparrow next time and send it to me through Mom. She then got a hair band from Robab and tied my hair. Robab was snoring loudly. Some people called her Robab, the pimp. There was a bad smell in the air, Mah Jabin pinched her nose and said, "There she sighed again."

Afagh called out my name. "Come here, Sanaz, and get this." I took the insecticide aerosol and sprayed it in the air.

Mah Jabin took a deep breath. "What a nice smell!"

"What a beautiful canary. Does she sing too?" This is the question the tall woman from Child Welfare posed. I bowed my head and decided not to say anything in response.

"I take you to a nice place. Your friends are waiting for you there. Will you show them your canary?" she demanded.

I hugged you tightly and started to cry. "I wanna be with my Mom"

"Don't cry. Mom will come to visit you there."

Mom took me by my upper arm and screamed. Ms. Ghiyasi hit her in the head and pulled me out of her hands. Mom fell to the ground and kept crying. Mah Jabin followed suit. Everyone gathered around. I ran to my Mom and began to scream. The tall woman kept an eye on my movements and took some notes. Ms. Ghiyasi was foaming at the mouth, literally, and calling names. She forced me out of my Mom's embrace.

"You stay here."

The tall woman told me to stay behind the glass door. She walked to the end of the hall and talked to another woman there. She then wrote down something in a ledger at the far end of the hall. I walked to the stairs and looked out the window. The woman was distracted. I hustled down the stairs, opened the door and snuck out. I wanted to go find Purya.