The Rose of Kandahar

A Novelette

By Maryanne Peters

It would be good to say that grit and determination got me through it all, but that could not be further from the truth. I survived by surrender and submission. Surrender and submission and two Afghan traditions that turned strangely to my advantage – *Bacha bazi* and *Pashtunwali*. Then later another local tradition known as *Shadabi*. This is really a story about traditions.

Afghanistan is a fucked-up country. This is a country where if a girl wants to be educated, she must dress up as a boy, and because girls are “special”, if an old man wants to watch an erotic dancer, that dancer has to be a boy dressed as a girl. That is *bacha bazi*. It literally means playing with children. It is about men getting pleasure from boys dressed as girls. Afghanistan is a fucked-up country.

My problem was that I have always looked much younger than I am. Puberty came and went, maybe a little later than other guys, but even afterward I had little beard to speak of, and poorly developed muscles. I tried to be as manly as I could be. I guess that is why I joined the army. Was that why Bradley Manning joined up? Like him when he was a him, I still looked out of place beside the other guys.

When I arrived on station, at my forward base camp outside Kandahar, and reported in; my new CO said: “We must be getting desperate to be recruiting 12-year-olds”. But he gave me a job keeping his headquarters clean and organized. I guess the little guy sometimes gets the favors, maybe because people don’t feel they can treat me the same as the other guys. I hated being the odd one out. But eventually he relented and allowed me to go out on patrols with the other guys.

I remember the day vividly, a patrol, just like the dozens before it; and that was the problem. Boredom had made us complacent, and when you aren't on your guard, shit goes sideways. The “Bad Guys” must have been watching us for weeks. The spot they chose to ambush us was one where the convoy bunched up a bit. The vehicles got too close together. The flock of sheep that slowed us down even more was probably staged to bring us down to a crawl. Multiple IEDs detonated, obliterating two Humvees, boxing in two others, and flipping the last one onto it's top. My ride.

It was raining meat and blood, human and otherwise, and a hailstorm of bullets riddled the men in the boxed-in Humvees. Even as survivors, including me, were crawling out of our overturned ride, more shots rang out, until only one survivor remained, me; knocked senseless but with no significant injuries.

Later, I learned that I had been declared dead with the rest of my squad, no surprise there. I could imagine after the site of the carnage was surveyed during the post-explosion clean-up , and samples of meat were carried away, that they might well ask: “Where are bits of the little guy, what’s his name?”. Those guys might be able to scoop up a small amount of flesh, bone and uniform fabric and put it in a box and say: “These are the last remains of private Smith”.

But my “little guy” problem probably saved my life. I was not there. I was taken away as a prisoner. I was alive. And that's when the shit *really* went sideways.

The Taliban does not take prisoners. Not anymore. They are too hard to provide for, and they bring on a torrent of shit from those searching for them. Casualties are what count to the Taliban these days. As Haji once told me: “History tells us that if you kill enough of them, they will stop coming”. It was like that for the Greeks, the Persians, and the British, and the Russians, or so he said, so why not us?

I survived because Haji thought I was pretty, or I could be. He saw in me *bacha baz*. Some little man-boy he could play with.

At his direction, two of his fighters dragged me through the dust, and the blood and the gore. And I was in shock. I did my unit no credit, but nobody was there to see me blubbing like a baby. Thank God for that. I was so affected by the disaster that I behaved like a terrified little girl. Haji was the man laughing. He seemed to be the complete monster. Standing in the middle of all that horror, laughing. And maybe thinking about how girlish I looked with the tears streaming down my face.

Before anything else happened, I felt dishonored just by surviving. I should be dead like the rest. But I thought that it would only be a matter of hours. They were saving me for pain. After that, I would be dead, and then I would be with my fellow soldiers – in heaven or in hell, or just dust.

I wish I could say: “join my comrades”, but if I have not made it clear, I was hardly one of them, except for the uniform. And now that was torn from my body. I stood pale, naked and defenseless before him and his men.

What had brought me to this place? “Operation Enduring Freedom”. That is what we called it. I had only about 3 weeks in Afghanistan before this happened – no real operations but just the enduring part. Operations imply that you are doing something. Not just riding in a Humvee. No freedom for me or anyone else either. Just endurance. It is strange just how much torment the mind and body are prepared to take just to cling to life.

Haji could have been forty or he could have been seventy. Who knows? He had a long grey beard and the face behind it was creased leather. He had bushy dark and threatening eyebrows but over eyes that could be disarmingly warm and kind. His turban whether dark or light blue, always seemed clean while the rest of him was covered in dust or blood, or both. He carried an assault rifle everywhere, and an old dagger that he said had belonged to his great grandfather. He was a leader. I have always been a follower. The army likes followers. I followed Haji.

The good thing about the army is that it is designed for followers. That suited me through training and camp life before deployment. The Taliban is the same. Designed for followers. Dedicated cannon fodder who are ready to die. *Sar bazi* they call them. *Sar* means head. Heads for playing with, just as *bacha bazi* are little boys to play with. Not even martyrs like ISIS or the Twin Tower terrorists. Not that religious, or thoughtful at all. Just tribal people who believe that loyalty and the defense of their land and family is something worth dying for.

Not like us. What were we dying for out there? What did everybody in my patrol die for? Political objectives, whatever those might be. Tribesman don’t understand politics. They understand their land, and anyone who enters their land without invitation should die. Only those who are invited should be there.

Which brings me to the second odd tradition of these people – *Pashtunwali*. These people will not just die in defense of their land and family, but also in defense of their guests. That means people that have been invited into their home and their village – even enemies. People like me. So long as I am a guest, my host will put his life before mine.

I saw the movie about it, where a navy seal was protected. It is a real thing. I should know.

Just before you think that this story might be a story like that, or a tale of the nobility of an otherwise primitive people, let me tell you why I was Haji’s guest. Because he wanted to fuck me, that is why. He wanted me to be his very own boy-whore and exotic dancer. That is what I had to become, in order to survive. Because I was invited to be with him, he was my protector.

You may have heard of something called “Stockholm Syndrome”. It is where a captive comes to feel affection for his or her captor. The phrase gets its name from 6-day hostage crisis at a Bank in the city of Stockholm. Well, I was captive to Haji for 2 years, and I do not believe that it was ever affection. But he did earn my respect. He could have been worse. God knows he treated some of his men far worse than he treated me.

For example, the first time was filthy and disgusting, and painful. But he knew that it would be. He was as gentle as a man like him can be, I suppose, especially given what he was doing.

He was religious, I guess. “Haji” was not his name, but it is really a title. It means that he had been on the pilgrimage to Mecca. For small town Afghanistan that is a big deal. It cost money and it costs time. Having been to Mecca and done all the associated shit down there, Haji was seen as being devout. But I am not sure what he really believed in.

The weird thing is that Muslims like Haji are crazy about some things having to be made clean. Ass holes are dirty. Even if you want to fart, you have to go outside. In the army we used to chuckle about it – you know, the first guy to open up a real dead skunk in a closed-up Humvee. If one of their fighters washes his face, hands and feet before prayers and then farts, he has to go back outside and wash again. So, assholes are dirty, but they are happy to stick their dicks in one.

I was told that vaginas are dirty too. In Muslim thinking they are smelly bleeding holes. Before you fuck a woman, you should pray to God. “*Allah akbar*” – “God is great. Please forgive me for entering this woman. Please forgive me for sticking my dick in this guy’s butt”. No real difference. Afghanistan is a fucked-up country. I thought maybe every Muslim country was.

The first time Haji did not bother, but after that he says that I need to wash my asshole before he climbs in. He also gives me a Muslim name – Noora – because he says that infidels are unclean. So, he makes me say a little prayer before he fucks me, because he doesn’t like fucking an unbeliever. But he says I can believe what I like after he is done. Until next time. But just before he climbs in, I close my eyes and say that Allah is the only God and Mohammed is his prophet.

I have to clean his dick too. Not in any disgusting way. I mean I use water. Because semen is unclean too, of course. Then they go outside in the dust and goat shit, because goat shit is OK. Who can believe these mother fuckers?

Anyway, it so happens that I like to be clean. The army does not give a shit unless you are a medic, or you are going on parade or some dress-up crap. Otherwise, just get dirty and stay dirty. But Haji says if I am in his household, I can be clean. Clean of dirt and hair, that is what he likes. When he comes home after a hard day in the dirt killing my countrymen, he likes to curl up with a nice clean *bacha bazi*.

My hair grew and he liked that plenty. My hair was kind of fair, and when I was captured it was only an inch long all over, a buzz cut grown naturally out a bit. But Haji liked the color, and told me that if I cut it, he would have my balls. I never doubted him when he said things like that.

So apart from being an available cock hole for Haji keeping him warm on winter nights, what does a *bacha bazi* do? Well, this is where it gets even more weird. There were women in the camp. I could meet with them without any guy around, because I was sort of not really a guy. Most *bacha bazi* are supposed to be too young to copulate – just children. Children can go among women folk no risk or getting loose in the hen house, so to speak. For some reason everybody assumed that I was not able to copulate even though I was almost 20 years old. As it turns out, they were close enough to right about that, for reasons I can explain later.

Anyway, in the evenings, the women would get me ready, with the clothes and the kohl around the eyes, and they would tell me all the moves, and then they would send me out to dance, in front of the men. They have to stay hidden – maybe sneak a peek through a curtain just to see that I am doing it right. Women can’t dance in Afghanistan. Not in front of men. That is a sin. They just hide up and have babies, or whatever. Boys do the dancing – pretending to be women.

Like I say, Afghanistan, fucked up, remember.

I liked the womenfolk. I thought that it was really my duty to them to do what they could not do. The way I saw it I was dancing for them, not for all the perverts watching me. They could dance among themselves and had some really good moves, but not in front of men. Oh no. Each in front of their husband, if they had one. But not in front of the whole crowd. That has to be a *bacha bazi.*

I think that is what made me good at dancing. I saw other *bacha bazi* dancing nowhere near as well as I could. They would get themselves all in knot about it. Not me. I guess that in the west every guy can dance a bit, but to men in Afghanistan there is no dancing – just maybe jumping around a little in time to some awful music. I could dance, and when I had finished my dance the womenfolk would welcome me back as one of theirs. -It I liked that.

So why was I not sexual with the women? It turns out that somehow, they had drugs just for me. Feminizing drugs. Drugs that sent my dick to sleep.

It always amazes me that in deepest Afghanistan they have daggers made of scissors, and hand-beaten cooking pots, alongside state-pf-the-art electronics. They don’t have good quality antibiotics, the antiseptic smells like gasoline, but they have a stash of female hormones. What the fuck? Where did they come from?

So, for two years I lived like this. Growing my hair and growing my tits. Cooking and cleaning with the ladies during the day, and learning all the skills of the womenfolk, dancing in the evenings and curling up with my old man Haji at night, my ass only for him. Only for him until the day he did not come back.

I would like to say that his death was a victory for our forces, but that is not so. It was a tribal in-fight. That seems to happen all the time. Even in the middle of a war against the infidel invaders, when every man counts. They find time to kill one another.

I told you about *Pashtunwali*. It turns out that Haji died defending me from those who would have me. It was a matter of honor. Although this man was my captor and my rapist, I get choked up thinking about it. He gave his life for me. I am not so sure that anyone in my unit would have done that. We talked about it, but we are not like that. We are not steeped in tradition like the Afghans. The army is full of regular guys who would never dream of running through gunfire to rescue a buddy. The exceptions are true heroes, but there are not many. Sorry to say it, but it’s true.

I wept for Haji. I should not have, but I did.

Haji had a daughter Nasrut, who was married to Majid, a Tadjik from Herat. She was my closest friend. After Haji’s death, Majid felt that all the women might be in danger, so he hurried back from the inter-tribal battle to collect us and flee.

Majid had four guys with him in the twin-cab truck and we had Nasrut and me and Majid’s mother in an old Mercedes, along with rugs and clothes and pots and pans. Women travel separately, all shrouded in black, me included. Majid guessed that I could drive, so he threw me the keys and told me to follow, but stay close. We took off. I suppose that in the cloud of dust I could have taken off, but what where would I go? East to find the base camp at Kandahar? Was it still there? Best to go west with Majid. West to safety.

Majid came from a town West of Herat called Ghourian. This is a town famous for growing roses. When we drove in, we could smell the perfume in the air. The opium poppy was the other flower the town had grown, but farmers were going back to roses. The petals were used to make rosewater for washing and for flavoring food, and oils and extracts for scents. We had just come from a place that smelt only of shit and blood and death, with the sound of gunfire day and night. Compared to South Afghanistan, this place was like heaven.

I was brought down to earth when Majid suggested that I would need to earn my place by doing my thing. I was *bacha bazi*. I could dance and offer sex for money, two things that women could not do. I was no longer available exclusively to one man. My Haji was dead. My asshole now belonged to Majid, or anyone who paid Majid for the use of it.

He loved Nasrut, so he would not touch me himself because she disapproved. And he would pay some heed to the pleas she made on my behalf. I discussed my options with her. The best option was to find me a man who accept me as a woman and care for me, at least until I could get away. And if possible, somebody who could take me out of Afghanistan. Take me further west – it was only 40 miles to the border with Iran.

I suppose that I always thought of Iran as being a worse place than Afghanistan, if that was possible. They hate America there. Haji told me that the Afghans do not hate Americans, they just hate invaders. But Iran is burning our flag, calling us “the Great Satan” and shit like that. But as Nasrut said, women in Iran have rights. She said that the religion there is completely different from Afghanistan. Sure, it is a kind of Islam, but different.

She managed to hold off Majid whoring me out for long enough to find a guy to take me away. And his name was Ismail.

At this point I should explain how I communicated with everybody. There are many languages in Afghanistan. Haji spoke Pashto as his native tongue as did almost everybody in the southern part of the country. Majid was Tadjik and spoke that language. But they both spoke Dari which is sort of a common language in most areas. I preferred the sound of it over Pashto. I used to tell Haji that I like to hear him whisper to me in Dari. Somehow that language seems softer and more poetic. It is basically Farsi, or Persian, the language of the great poet Omar Khayyam. Haji knew some verses from Khayyam. He would whisper and tickle what was left of me. That was how Haji could be.

Farsi is the language of Iran, which is what is left of the last three thousand years of Persian civilization. After all that time, with nobody speaking a word of English, I spoke that language well enough, but with a Dari dialect accent.

Nasrut told me that it was important that I make a good impression upon Ismail. If I did then he would pay money to Majid and get me out of Afghanistan. I have to say that, even if it is not really that rational, getting out of that country was a major priority for me. So, I was determined that Ismail should want me enough to effectively buy me. I bathed in rose water, I washed my long fair hair and brushed it until it shone like gold, and Nasrut gave me a full beauty treatment straight out of a foreign magazine, with eyebrow shaping, and makeup, and everything.

Ismail was not a young man. I guessed that he was in his fifties, no older than Haji, but unlike him he was tall and good looking. He looked sort of like the guy from “Dr. Zhivago” with the big dark moist eyes. I danced for him. I knew that he was impressed. I had been doing this for two years. I knew my stuff. That and the smell of roses heavy in the air. And my honey blond hair and green eyes and darkened eyelashes. It had to work it, and it did.

He had to be gay. He knew what I was. He paid over some money before he even laid a hand on me. Then he wanted to have sex with me, and I knew it was coming. But he wanted to fuck me face to face. Like, I had no pillow to bite on while I had my ass reamed out, I was just looking in his face. Watching him smiling at me and having to smile back.

I won’t say Haji never gave me an orgasm. Sometimes I would get a feeling that was pretty damn good. Sometimes my little limp cock would dribble out some goo. Sometimes I would call out “Allahu Akbar” as if I meant it, not just to show Haji that he was not fucking an infidel.

But somehow when you are looking at the man fucking you, his pleasure becomes your pleasure. As it builds, you start to feel it, stronger and stronger. When he comes inside you and you feel his hot seed, you sort of lose it.

It was as if I was turning gay. I liked it way too much. Two years of being fucked by one guy, and then the second guy inside me is making love to me. That was the difference. Of course, I went with him. Willingly, whether he thought he owned me of not. Worse than that, I was looking forward to the next time we were to have sex. How fucked up is that?

In Iran a woman covers her hair, but not all of it like in other Muslim countries. I had to cover mine because it was fair, and I thought that I would be the only fair-haired woman in the country. A full hijab and darkened eyebrows and dark glasses. Just until we get to Ismail’s home in the capital, Tehran.

It turns out that there are plenty of bottle blondes in Tehran – all kinds of hair colors and even girls with green eyes like mine. It is a big city with so many ethnicities present. And women there dressed in colorful clothing, and heeled shoes, like western women, except that they use the *chador*. But even that head scarf they let slip back so we can see the hairstyle and the makeup. It is almost sexy if it is worn right. It must drive the mullahs crazy.

Of course, at home, you do not need to cover up, and Ismail liked to see me looking good. He bought me some women’s underwear. My first bra to cup my tits with. Panties to tuck away my little bits and pieces. A slip to go over the top and allow me to do a little dance for him every night before bed.

Bed is where I thought I would live, but I could also make myself useful. As long as I was stuck in his big house, right in the middle of the city with a courtyard and small garden in the middle, I had to find things to do. I cleaned and tidied but I could not cook the meals that he liked. He had those delivered.

He had TV but local channels only. State TV. Slanted news bulletins and religious programsprogrammes with the occasional quiz show serving for light entertainment. Ismail bought me foreign women’s magazines which were very popular there. No news except about celebrities, and lots of fashion, hair and makeup advice. Who would not get interested in that stuff if it is all you have?

He was gay, but he liked women to be beautiful. I wanted what he wanted.

But bed was where I wanted to be. In bed with Ismail. Was it love? I really did not know what that was. It was gratitude for saving me from Afghanistan and bringing me to a real home. It was respect for the way he treated me, and everyone he knew. And then there were those orgasms.

I wanted to go out, but he said that would need to wait. He said that we needed to be married first. He explained that he was a traditional kind of man. Regardless of his preference for women like me, and the occasional sinful coupling with men before he found me, he believed in marriage. Marriage between a man and a woman.

That is a tradition that is not strange to me. I just could not see that it had any application to the circumstance that I was in.

I said that I understood and spoke his language, but really not that well. Not when it comes to technical things. I certainly could not read that Persian script, which is similar to Arabic. I could not read the forms that I signed, when I arrived at the clinic. In fact, I did not even know what this building was. There was no cross on the outside to show it was a hospital. Islam hates using the cross.

When I was shown the bed that I would need to lie in I was concerned, but not yet in a panic. I had Ismail beside me, holding my hand, and reassuring me. By the time panic arose I had already been injected with the anesthetic. I would soon be over, my old life.

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It turns out that Iran has a program for dealing with homosexuals in accordance with Islamic teachings. Apparently, in the early days of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the 1970’s, a major supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini was a transsexual woman. The Ayatollah announced that this was a man become woman, and that she could marry and have sexual relations with a man before God and it was no sin.

I was to be cleansed of sin. Ismail would be relieved of the guilt of homosexuality. All that was required was that my genitals be removed, or rather modified.

I was assured that the surgeons attending were highly skilled, but that was after it had been done. They had been kept busy with other surgeries, so they had plenty of practice at getting it right. And the quality of medical care in Iran is generally high – or so I am told. They take pride in their work. It is not just a cut and tuck. They do what they can to keep the feeling. That means extreme pain from the moment I recovered consciousness, but with the prospect of being able to function sexually as if I was a real woman.

Not that I gave that any thought in the horror of the moment. The moment that I discovered that my manhood had been taken away forever.

Ismail gave me space. Then he did a remarkable thing – he sent for Nasrut to come to Tehran from Afghanistan to stay with me. He flew her from Herat to Tehran, her first experience on an airplane.

She tried to tell me that it was a great gift to be a woman and that she was happy for me. But she had not thought this through. For her that gift of womanhood was about giving life – having children and caring for them. I could never do that. In Islam women are good for little else. Except sex.

Nasrut said that even if I cannot bring Ismail children, I can be a wife and make him a better person. She pointed to Majid, the man who sold me, but never laid a hand on me. Then she said to me that because Ismail knew that I could not bear him children, he could only have wanted to marry me for love. Love.

Until that moment I doubted that I could ever forgive Ismail for what he did to my body, but she was right. I knew what love was from the first time that Ismail had laid me on my back and entered me as his big dark eyes looked into mine. It may be hard for people to understand, but I believed that she was speaking the truth. Is still do

As she had done before, Nasrut helped me to get ready. She helped me to prepare my new passage. She had bought more rose oil and we found things to help expand me to take something as big as Ismail had. I was looking forward to it. Sort of. I knew that I could enjoy sex as a receiver, and now I had the proper equipment to do that without the mess. I had a pussy that would always smell of nothing but roses, as it does even today.

Nasrut had been raised in Afghanistan. Not always in a village, but even in a city it was a traditional upbringing. The only thing that she knew about feminine beauty, or what we understand it to be, was out of magazines like the one she had used to pattern my eyebrows back in Ghourian. From her mother she had learned that beauty was cleanliness, and the walk and the movement of the hand, assisted by kohl around the eyes, as these are the only visible things behind a burkha. Now before my husband we needed more, but we had more magazines.

We washed my hair and used rags to make a rough curl. I used blusher and lipstick. Despite the mullahs, all of this is available in Iran. We took time so that I could become truly beautiful. I thought that I was. I felt proud.

Ismail could not wait to take me to bed as a woman. Strangely, I wanted to be in his bed too. I felt desirable and that I was desired by this man. It seemed different from being fucked. As soldiers we would joke that making love is what a woman is doing while you are fucking her, but as I have already said, the word love did not seem out of place with Ismail. We lay together afterwards, and Ismail spoke of a life together in Iran, as man and wife.

This where that third tradition comes in. In Iran they call it *Shadabi*. I suppose the best translation is that it is wifeliness. It is the way a woman should be towards her husband. She should command the house, support her husband but counsel him too, make him proud by her appearance and behaviour, and drive him crazy in bed. I could do that. I had learned to value the traditions which kept me alive.

I started to think that I could live like this for as long as I needed to. Maybe, if Iran was the nice place, it appeared to be when I arrived in his town, I could be a man living as a woman for the rest of my life. I could be Ismail’s wife.

There was a wedding. His family accepted me, even though they knew my past, because they knew Ismail’s past. His mother and his older brother and sister attended, together with some of his friends.

They say little girls dream of their wedding, but I never had such dreams. Still the romance of it was made special by all of the traditions that apply peculiar to Persian culture. The preparation and the day itself are marked by symbolism: The seven pastries, the seven herbs, the gold coins, the silk shawl, the bowl of salt, The candles and the mirror through which the groom should first view his bride, the blessed bread they should break, the heavenly fruits mentioned in the Koran, the book itself, the prayer rug, even the fertility symbols although we all knew there would be no children.

Could I really forget who I was? Somehow it seemed possible because every morning I looked at myself in the mirror and it was not me but somebody else, and somebody who looked good. What man would not desire a wife who looked as good as I did, now with a body unsoiled by male hormones, soft and shapely and feminine. I knew Ismail cared for me, and I cared for him. I seriously thought that I could stay in that place and be his wife.

But as it turns out that is not what Ismail wanted. Or, if it was what he wanted, then it was only because he could not live with me as a *bacha bazi*. That is illegal in Iran, but more importantly it is contrary to the will of God. And, as I have explained, Ismail was a traditional Muslim. Just a gay one.

He is a man who appreciates beauty, so he loved the way I looked. After I was married I was allowed to go out and shop and go to the beauty shop. There are plenty in Tehran. You cover your hair after it has been styled, but share your look with other women, and with your husband.

But I had become too much of a woman for my husband, and as it turned out, that was not what he wanted. He spent more time playing with my dick when I had one, than with my breasts. Even then my breasts had become more sensitive than my dick. Now the object of his true desire was gone.

It just took time before we both understood. It took years in fact.

Ismail said that it was his fault. He wanted a man to marry who would be a wife that he could be proud of without anybody knowing where she came from. He would tell people that he had been to America and had brought back an American bride. They did not need to know that I was a boy underneath. But now, as far as he was concerned, I was not a boy underneath. Not anymore.

It makes you think just how fucked up the whole idea is. Gay is not gay if one guy becomes too female. But gay is always gay. The only thing that I came to understand is that straight is not always straight. Look at me.

This crazy idea about changing sex had seen one person in a gay relationship submit unwillingly to surgical mutilation to meet their crazy laws. The situation of Ismail and me was not unique. We were not alone. Other men who had gay partners who agreed to surgery to stay as a couple found their new wives or girlfriends no longer attractive.

It seemed like Iran was just as fucked up as Afghanistan.

In some respects, it was a very different country. We lived in a cosmopolitan city, Tehran, which could have been any city in the world. It was truly modern and clean compared to Afghanistan.

I had built up a small trade in rose oil coming through from Nasrut. I had become a woman of importance, married to a good man, living in a fine home. Despite what you hear about other Islamic countries, Iran respected people like me. Nobody had to know what I had been. Now I was Ismail’s wife.

People would approach me sometimes asking me where I was from, sometimes even addressing me in English. I would always replay in Farsi. I would say that I am from the Northwest of Iran and my mother was Russian. Iran has many different ethnicities. It seemed to work.

I did not want to disclose to anyone that I was American, even Westerners that I saw. There are undercover police or “Guardians of the Faith” everywhere. Looking 100% female was the best disguise possible. If an official approached me I would simply refer him to Ismail. Being just a woman the only answer I could be compelled to provide was the name of the man in my life – father or husband, or whatever Ismail was.

Ismail was generous too. When we knew that our life together was over, he had money for me – hard currency – euros mainly.

I was sad that it was over. Looking back I suppose it seemed that it had been love that had brought me to Iran, so without that, how could I stay? We made plans for me to leave.

Ismail drove me to Nordooz in the far north of the country. We spent one night in Tabriz and he made love to me for the last time. It was wonderful, but sad for both of us. He gave me the money and I had clothes and some plastic bottles full of rose-extract - the good stuff – as good as cash. Ismail held me one last time. He said that if he could love a woman, he would choose to live his life with me. I never doubted those words. I kissed him. Maybe for a moment I even wished that things could have been the way he wanted.

Then I crossed the bridge into Armenia. He watched me, as I claimed refugee status. He was still there when I was led to the car. I could see that he was weeping. I wept too.

“I am an American,” I said to the Border official in English. “I was kidnapped in Afghanistan almost 4 years ago. Please take me to the US Embassy”. It seemed too hard to explain all my circumstances, so I just told them that my name was Rose.

Armenia is a very different country from Iran. For a start, it is a Christian country, famous for making wine and brandy. Secondly, America is unbelievably popular there. It used to be one of the Soviet Socialist republics, but after all that broke down the huge Armenian community living in America came with money and ideas. Armenian-American celebrities like the Kardashians have become icons. Every Armenian woman wants to look like that.

The first thing I wanted to do was to tear off my chador and get my hair and makeup done.

Believe it or not, beauty is big business in Iran. I had received the works in Tehran from time to time. The “Guardians” may shake their heads, but well turned out women walk the streets in Iran’s capital and that is just the way it is. The poor drove the Islamic Revolution, but it did not dislodge the middle class. They remain too powerful for their women to be attacked. Ismail and I were at the lower end of that middle class, but it was safe for me to put waves in my hair and makeup on my face. In Yerevan, it was expected.

Somehow, now that I was free, I did not want to cut my hair and pull on some pants – quite the opposite. I loved my hair, and now it could flow free. Why wear pants when I had been wearing them (*shalvar*) for the last three years? My lovely long smooth legs had only been for men to stroke in the privacy of the bedroom. Now I could flaunt them.

It might sound irrational, but this is what I had become. I am not saying that I thought this was my future then, but I sure wanted to express my freedom as what I appeared to be – a woman. Somehow being a woman throwing off the yoke of that Islamic shit is so much more liberating. A man crossing the border would hardly notice.

I was supposed to be escorted, but I simply checked into a hotel, made an appointment to visit the embassy in the morning, and went straight to the salon.

I met some local girls who were keen to practice their English. Never for a minute did they not believe I was one of them.

In the morning I had to go into the interview room in the Embassy and tell them who I was. It seemed so unreal. I walked in the room looking wonderful with a new hairdo, a dress and some heels on. I told them that I was an American soldier who had been captured in Afghanistan almost four years earlier. I gave them my name rank and serial number, the name of my unit and the date and place of my abduction.

My name had them scratching their heads. Even then it seemed that I must be a female soldier with a boy’s name. It was not until later in the day when my service record was passed across the table with an incredulous expression. There was a photo of me. Across the file were the large red letters “MIA” with the date of the attack on my team, and under that “Presumed Dead” with another date less than a month later.

The soldier in the image seemed to be only a boy. Far too young to join the army. He seemed like a stranger to me. But I confirmed that it was me, or who I had used to be.

The consular officers seemed shocked, but begging to hear the story I must be able to tell: Was I captured? How had I escaped? Why was I disguised as a woman?

I was offered men’s clothes, but I explained that it was not a disguise, because it was not. I did not have to show them the new panties I had bought the night before. If I had done that, they would have understood.

One of them added that “Transgendered people can no longer serve in the military”. I was not even sure what that meant. But it was a welcome relief. I was not going back to the army. I just wanted to go home.

They said that I would need to go to Germany to be debriefed at Ramstein Air Base. I would need to fly there on a scheduled air service, so they issued me with travel documents. I suggested that the sex should refer to me as female, as that was the status, I had for over a year in Iran. That meant disclosing that I had been operated on, to their horror. But they said that my temporary passport would have to show me as male until I had my status confirmed stateside.

I transited through Turkey, but the border staff there did no more than a double take and then give me a smile. I did not know it then, but I later learned that Turkey is quite accepting of transwomen with at least two transgendered actresses appearing on TV and in films regularly.

At Ramstein I was interviewed by an army intelligence officer – Captain Troy Hayward. I was fresh off the flight but I was able to brush my hair and do my face before we met. I have to say that it was immediately apparent that I had an impact on him. I liked that.

You should understand that I had been four years living not as a man in societies where sexual attraction was repressed. Even in *bachi bazi* those who watched were not supposed to flirt with the dancing boys, and even in relatively relaxed Iran, the sexes were separated to prevent sin. Now I was with a man who made no attempt to hide his interest in me.

He said to me that he had been told to expect a man dressed as a woman – a young soldier castrated and forced to appear female, and now so damaged that he may end up staying that way. He expected a head case and he found a beautiful and relaxed young woman. I had to smile. I found myself thinking how he might look naked. There was confirmation of how much I had changed, and why I was wearing what I was wearing.

He asked whether my parents should be informed. In the normal course they would be, but the army was still unclear of my identity. He took an oral swab for a DNA check. He said that they had tested the site of my last combat for my DNA and had found a small amount. I had bled a little on the battlefield, so that had done well to find any of me. It had been enough to confirm that I was dead. But now I was not dead.

I asked for time. Troy said that he was returning home himself, and we could work on how they could be told, but there was another issue around general publicity. A soldier believed dead now returned to life and returned home would be a good story, but not looking as I was. Once again, he raised the issue of the new policy, impressing upon me that he did not approve of it.

Then there was the question of whether this was a war injury. He said that any injury inflicted upon a prisoner during war was treated as if suffered in battle. My vagina entitled me to a purple heart. It seemed odd as after an initial period of pain, it had given me nothing but pleasure.

He never asked me whether I considered myself a prisoner while I was in Iran. If he had, I might have said no. I was free to move about and I suppose that I could have left anytime I liked and found a way to Turkey, Pakistan or Turkmenistan (avoiding Iraq or Afghanistan). It was just that I had ceased to be the person I was. I was no longer a soldier looking to go home – I was a wife – I was at home there.

It was agreed that we would fly home together, on one of the many transport flights between Ramstein and Andrews.

I got to know Troy as well as I could in the short time we had together. Well enough to check into a hotel in Washington together and have great sex.

He was divorced, with kids. She could not handle life spent from base to base. Plenty of army wives are the same I hear. It is not a traditional marriage. It is not for everyone.

I told him that I believed a traditional wife belongs at her husband’s side through anything. Nasrut was an example of that. I remembered her and the other wives in that old Mercedes following their men in a cloud of their dust. He held me and kissed me, and I knew that was what I needed.

Some people in the Pentagon then assumed that I had been a prisoner of the Iranian state. It could have turned into a major political issue. I had to explain that was not the case. I had been effectively sold and smuggled into Iran. The authorities did not even know I was there.

My reappearance was to be played down, but the army had to notify my parents. So, to head that off, Troy called my parents and told them to expect two shocks: their son was alive, but drastically changed. And we then went together to see them.

I had been discharged from the army, so I was not in uniform as Troy was, but I wore a professional looking skirt and blouse, with a smart jacket. My parents assumed that I must be some kind of support person for the bad news they were awaiting. They were thinking that I was a quadriplegic or in some vegetative state. They were certainly not expecting an attractive young woman to introduce herself as their son.

Honestly, even my father, who had been right behind me joining the army to toughen me up, could not have been happier to have me alive. I later thought how many transwomen might benefit by facing their families having returned from the dead. There were tears and happiness, and Troy could not help but get caught up in it all.

Then it became clear that he was not just an escort. My mother saw it first.

My father should have been disapproving, and perhaps he was, but once he got to know Troy better, and learned that he had children that they could call their grandkids, he happily gave me away.

Ismail confirmed our divorce so we could marry, and we have stayed in touch. I talk to Nasrut too, who keeps me supplied with the scented oils from the East which are the cornerstone of my scent business. I am an independent woman, but I still believe in *Shadabi*. My man comes first.

It was a traditional wedding. I am a sucker for traditions.

The End

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Authors Notes:

1. American forces in Afghanistan were briefed on cultural oddities and were instructed to ignore any incidents of *bacha bazi* that they may have witnessed.
2. Ayatollah Khomeini's edict that love and marriage between two men in Iran is only possible if one of them gets a sex change resulted in many surgeries but is now not an accepted position by the mullahs who determine social mores in that Islamic Republic.