

The Right Step

By Nada Awar

Sulayma was on her way from Beirut to her village, Ain Taeb. Dreams were roaring in her head as the old bus climbed the mountainous road. Suddenly, um-Rachid(1), the old lady sitting next to her, woke from her nap and asked "Where are we?" which triggered a conversation with the young girl.

Sulayma asked um-Rachid about her new-born nephew. "Thank God, it is a boy!" the old woman replied and went on praising the infant, endlessly. "O God almighty! He is as sweet as an angel... beautiful as a full moon on a dark night... His eyes are black and large. They shine like two twinkling stars, an indication of the child's infinite intelligence!... His lips are as red as a ripe cherry... his skin... his tongue... his legs... his ears... the palms of his hands... his behind!..."

Nothing was to stop the women from describing the smallest details of the beauty of the baby-boy. She was so proud. When she finally finished, she took a long breath then looked doubtfully at the girl and asked her: "What are you doing coming all alone to the city? Isn't your mother accompanying you? Who would allow a young girl to go from Ain Taeb to a huge city like Beirut all by herself... How foolish!"

Sulayma smiled and calmly answered: "I was in Beirut, aunti, because I was at the Ministry of Education. Hundreds of students were there waiting for the results of the National High School exam. I did it! I passed the exam!" "Oh!" said um-Rachid. "Congratulations, you are the first girl in the upper district of the village to hold this certificate. In the lower district, there are three girls who are already as educated as you are. Hah, how the days change. When I was your age, we had no schools. We cleaned our houses, took care of our gardens, feared God and waited for a decent

husband to show up. So, Sulayma, the goal of a girl your age should be to get married... Educated or illiterate, a wise girl would definitely aim to get married before she becomes too old for it." "That is not the case for me, I want to get a university education first. After that, I might consider marriage if someone very special comes along." "What are you talking about? You must be out of your mind, Sulayma, you are already eighteen years old! what university nonsense are you talking about?" Sulayma, then, explained the importance of a university education for a person regardless of whether it is a male or female. But um-Rashid, bored with the issue, fell asleep once again before the young girl could finish her explanation...

In Ain Taeb, the entire family was waiting for Sulayma. Her father, her mother and her grandparents were gathered under the old oak tree, watching the road impatiently. Sighting them she shouted, "I passed, I did it!" she shouted. They were overjoyed. Her father rushed to the market to buy the chocolates and baklava, the traditional offering to guests who come to congratulate the family. Her mother rushed to the kitchen to prepare a big pot of Turkish coffee with hal (cardamon seed). Her grandmother went out to tell the good news to the neighbors.

Sulayma sat chatting with her grandfather in the garden. She told him about her long day of waiting in Beirut. When she finished, her grandfather smiled proudly and said "Here we are, you finally finished being a student, you have the highest certificate, which is a good beginning for a joyful summer. You are the best in the village, my child! How lucky he is, he who will make you his bride!" "But..." Sulayma's grandfather interrupted her and went on to say, "Bu-Chaheen and um-Chaheen payed us a visit today. They asked for you hand in marriage for their son and I accepted." Sulayma jumped from her seat desperately fighting for the better future she

(1) In um-Rachid and Bu-Rashid, um stand for the mother and Bu for father, i.e mother or father of Rashid

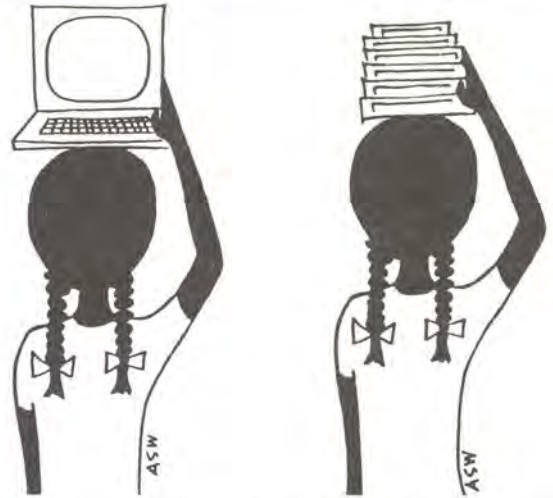
visualized. "How dare you promise these idiots ! I refuse to get married before finishing my university studies.." The old man stood up trembling in rage and anger. "You are the idiot ! you must be out of your mind ! I gave my word to these people ! Do you want me to break my promise to them ?" " I am not responsible for that, grandfather" answered Sulayma.

As they were interrupted by visitors offering their congratulations for Sulayma's graduation, her grandfather masked his anger with a smile and it wasn't until midnight that the family was alone again. Impatiently, The grandfather looked at his son and said "Amin, I want to talk to you in private, come into my room." His son tried to avoid or postpone the conversation until morning; but not succeeding, he suggested discussing it in the presence of the other members of the family. "Is it a financial problem ?", "No, it is your daughter. Lady Sulayma here, wants me to break my promise to . . ." He then told his son the relevant details. Sulayma tried to interfere, but was signaled back by her father. Relieved by his attitude she left the room and went to sleep. She was confident that her father would help her take the right step for a bright future.

Outside, the conversation went on for more than an hour. Amin calmly spoke to his father, "You should have consulted me first. I promised my daughter that she could pursue her studies at the university. She wants to become a social scientist. So why not give her a chance ? . . Why not ? ." The grandfather's anger diminished but turned into sadness as he realized his decision had been overridden. "This must be the end of the world !" he said. "The words of the aged do not count anymore, what a sad end . . I'll give my 'Tarboush'(2) to Sulayma and stay home with a bare head . . "

Time eventually reduced the tension between Sulayma and her grandfather, but he never asked her about the university she was attending, her

(2) Tarboush is the old traditional red head-gear of the Orient symbolizing status, leadership or elderly wisdom in the family and the village.



grades or her field of study. On a bright morning, four years later, she surprised him by inviting him to attend her graduation at the university. He stubbornly refused, but she insisted. She whispered in her grandmother's ear that the president of the republic would attend the ceremony. In no time, this magical news reached the grandfather making him eager to go. It wasn't long before the neighbors and everybody else in the village had heard the good news.

The ceremony was held on the track field of the university at which Sulayma had studies and succeeded. Sulayma's grandparent and parents sat in one of the front rows. Her parents pointed out the important personalities to her grandparents; ministers, judges, MPS... But they were clearly entranced by the person in the front seat; the President of the Republic. If he was there, it must truly be an important event.

Sulayma's name was finally called, and the girl from Ain Taeb proudly walked onto the dois to receive her Bachelor's degree. Her grandfather was stunned to see her in her cap and gown . The only time he had ever seen a costume before was on a judge in court when he had sued his neighbor over a land dispute. And now Sulayma was wearing what his excellency the judge had worn. A tear fell from his eyes. The majestic significance of the event he was witnessing finally hit him. Gripping his 'Tarboush, he said to um-Amin, who was enthusiastically applauding, "How I wish she was a boy ! Then she would really be worth a whole tribe ! Or even yet an entire kingdom !"•