

An Annotated Translation and Introduction to *The Dream of Tibet*

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a translation of *The Dream of Tibet* (Ro'ya-ye Tabbat) by Fariba Vafi (b.1963/ Tabriz, Iran), a post-revolutionary Iranian novelist. Written in forty-five chapters and narrated in the second person, *The Dream of Tibet* is part of Vafi's four-decade writing career and is reflective of the so-called *adabiyat-e apartemani* or apartment literature that arose in the 1990s in Iran. The novel depicts complicated romantic stories and reflects trends among post-revolutionary Iranian women writers, showcasing themes such as infidelity in relationships, the weakening of the institution of marriage, and disenchantment with the traditional roles of women. In this story, the women characters emerge as the survivors in the new social order, seeking independence and expressing their displeasure against society.

**Key Words:** Fariba Vafi, *The Dream of Tibet*, Translation, *adabiyat-e apartemani*

## Introduction

I still maintain that the future of short stories written in Persian lies in the hands of women writers. This development, which emerged in Iranian society after the revolution, is undeniable and magnificent (Mir Sadeqi 1998, 13).

Fariba Vafi was born into a middle-class family in Tabriz, Iran, in 1963. She never attended college but wanted to be a writer from an early age. As a young girl, she traveled hundreds of miles from Tabriz to Tehran every two months, to buy books and to show her writing to a literature teacher (Fathi, 2005). In 1988, at age 25, she published her first short work of fiction, *Rahat Shodi Pedar* (You are at Peace, Father), in *Adineh*, an important independent magazine for art, politics, and culture in the 1980s and 1990s Iran. Her first published book was the short story collection *Dar Omq-e Sahneh* (In-Depth of the Stage, 1996). In 2002, *Parande-ye Man* (My Bird), her first novel, won the Persian literary awards, Golshiri and Yalda and had 35 printings; it has since been translated into several languages including English, Italian, German, Turkish, Kurdish, and Armenian.

Vafi is an extremely prolific writer. Her other published novels include *Tarlan* (Tarlan) in 2004, *Ro'ya-ye Tabbat* (The Dream of Tibet) in 2005, *Razi dar Kucheha* (A Secret in the Alleys) in 2008, *Mah Kamel Mishavad* (The Moon is Getting Full) in 2010, *Ba'd az Payan* (After the End) in 2013, and *Ruz-e Digar-e Shura* (Another Day for Shoura) in 2019. Her story collections include *Hatta Vaqti Mikhandim* (Even When We Are Laughing) in 1999, *Dar Rah-e Vila* (On the Way to the Villa) in 2007, *Hame-ye Ofoq* (All the Horizon) in 2010, and *Bi Bad, Bi Paru* (No Wind, No Oar) in 2016. The work translated here, *Ro'ya-ye Tabbat* (The Dream of Tibet), thus emerges in the middle of an active fiction-writing career spanning four decades.

Vafi can be seen as a post-revolutionary writer. The revolutionary transformation of Iranian society after 1978 stimulated women authors to develop their protagonists as more meaningful and complex. These authors actually followed a trend in women's writing that started several decades before the Revolution. In the late 1950s and 1960s, the first few works of women writers, such as Simin Daneshvar, Goli Taraqqi, and Shahrnush Parsipour, were published. Given the highly patriarchal nature of Iranian society, it was inappropriate for women to etch their true feelings and desires through literature. The feminine perspectives in these works of fiction added a new element to published writing. In the late 1940s, Simin Daneshvar, the first female Iranian fiction writer, emerged with *Suvashun* (1949) and several story collections, such as *Atash-e Khasmush* (1948) and *Shahri Chawn Behesht* (1961). These stories garnered critical acclaim. Daneshvar was the first female author who disrupted the novel's orthodox perception of women. After her, other writers such as Goli Taraqqi established women as the cornerstone in her fiction by publishing her pre-revolutionary works *Man Ham Che Guevara Hastam* and the long story *Winter Sleep* in 1969 and 1973. Later, Shahrnush Parsipour published her second novel *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night* (1988), where she links history and the supernatural in a background of mystical and mythological thoughts and seeks peace in returning to natural sources. *Women Without Men* (1989) is another work by this author that revolves around female identities denied acceptance in society. After the Revolution, these trends of questioning traditional female roles became even more prominent in published writing by women. Iranian women became "adept at maneuvering around the forbidden zones drawn by government and society" (Fathi, 2005).

In popular novels written between 1991-2011, historical and political issues, representation, and discussion of Iranians, especially women and families' status, are the most prevalent topics (Nanquette 2021, 181). A new genre, *adabiyat-e apartemani* or apartment

literature, emerged. The primary settings of such novels are apartments and other confined spaces. Critics credit this genre with detailing the everyday lives of the urban middle class, especially women. Topics such as the infidelity and distraction of husbands, the weakening of marriages, and the idealized rather than realistic attitudes of men toward women are the themes of novels such as Nahid Tabatabai's *Forties* (Chehel Salegi/1999); Fariba Vafi's *We Will Get Used to It* (Adat Mikonim/2004) and *The Dream of Tibet* (2005); and *I Will Turn Off the Lights* (Cheragh-ha ra Man Khamush Mikonam/2014) by Zoya Pirzad.

A decade older than Fariba Vafi, Zoya Pirzad is often seen as typifying apartment literature in her work. Pirzad writes about women's concerns and preoccupations. She pays attention to trivial, unimportant things and deals with the details of these simple matters with such skill that the reader is forced to pay attention as well to apparently inconsequential details that actually make up important strands of everyday life for her characters. Clarice Ayvazian, the protagonist in *I Will Turn Off the Lights*, turns off the lights, cleans the house, and tidies up rooms repeatedly, predictable actions that indicate the monotonousness of her life and those of other women. Pirzad endeavors to reveal the problems encountered by women from different social strata. In addressing these obstacles, she identifies the cause of these problems and provides appropriate solutions. In her novels, she represents women's patience and highlights their endurance in facing adversities with acceptance. She also identifies women who express their rebellion against existing social norms and dogmatic traditions, engendering change in their families.

Vafi's *The Dream of Tibet* fits into this context of post-Revolutionary fiction by Iranian women writers. The text comprises forty-five chapters narrated in the second person by Sholeh, an observant young middle-class woman who is very close to her sister Shiva and Shiva's

husband, Javid. The novel offers a critical look at the life of young, educated characters in Iranian society. The novel depicts complicated romantic stories, allowing readers to imagine the Iranian young generation's relationships and desires. Sholeh and her ex-boyfriend, Mehrdad, experience fleeting emotions; Shiva and Sholeh's feelings towards Sadeq provide an example of a love triangle; and Forough, Javid's stepmother, trapped in a patriarchal society, clinging onto the dream of living happily with Muhammad Ali despite being divorced by him. Apart from Forough, most of the characters are young, and experience desires that differentiate them from the older generation, who tend to portray an idealized life of the past.

The setting is important and meaningful in this novel. The book describes northern Tehran as an affluent modern city section with luxurious homes and southern Tehran as an impoverished city. A significant part of the story occurs in southern Tehran's narrow alleyways. Shiva and Javid seem to be a happy couple, but Shiva's unfulfilled expectations from the relationship convince her to leave her family and pursue happiness in Tibet. *The Dream of Tibet* references Tibet as a symbol for Shiva of escape, of a utopian location far from Iran's oppressive patriarchal society. Moreover, the political situation of Tibet vis-à-vis China is critical to understanding Vafi's themes in this novel. Her first novel, *My Bird*, begins, "This is Communist China. I have never visited China, but I think it must be like our neighborhood" (Vafi 2009, 1). From interviews with Vafi, it can be inferred that China- with its hustle and bustle- represents Tehran (especially Nezam Abad, a neighborhood in Tehran), while Tibet represents a utopian, unattainable, peaceful place (Interview with the author, 2023). Tibet, in Shiva's imagination, offers freedom from the post-Revolutionary regressive laws requiring women to wear a headscarf and long, loose clothing (Hijab) and forcing all Iranians to accept Islam as their faith. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias observe that women, physically and culturally, are symbols

of ethnic and national identity. Thus Shiva's urge to escape to Tibet conveys a larger dissatisfaction on the part of Iran's populace with post-Revolutionary restrictions.

Plain and direct, sometimes repetitive, language and simple syntax are typical of Vafi's work, and they are featured in the novel. Although literary critics have objected to the simplicity and repetitive style in Vafi's work, her intention to convey the external one-dimensionality of women's lives suggests these characteristics are quite deliberate. At the same time, her work captures the secret emotional depths of women's experiences. In her interview with *Zanan-e Emruz* magazine, Vafi says, "Writing about women's world has been one of my concerns. Who is better than a woman to write about herself? I think there is still an unwritten world about this in our literature, a world of hidden feelings and silent female voices that have never been written about" (Daqiqi 2014, 5).

Vafi's writing style also emphasizes the different layers of complexity involved in human relationships and the challenges couples endure in the oppressive atmosphere of post-Revolutionary Iran. Dating and drinking wine are illegal actions in Iran that happen consistently in *The Dream of Tibet*. The experiences of Mehrdad and Sholeh as the modern younger generation, and Forough and Muhammad Ali as an older, more traditional one, typify what Atwood suggests, "Contemporary Iranian novels and films often depict characters who break the law" (Atwood 2015, 129). The shifting codes of censorship are often subject to the political climate of a particular time, which may have restricted the novel's representation of Iranian culture. While Vafi wrote *The Dream of Tibet* during Muhammad Khatami's presidency (1997-2005), she mandated rounds of censorship, though less than other writers. In chapter forty-one, for example, on a rainy afternoon, the Silent Man and Sholeh are in the car while he

tries kissing Sholeh; censored words make it difficult to interpret this scene initially (Interview with the author, 2023).

While no translation can provide direct access to the source text, I have tried to capture the most accurate image of Iran after the Islamic Revolution by literally translating *The Dream of Tibet*. The translation represents Iranian cultural values by mirroring the sentiments of the main characters in the book. Besides the characters' names that are the same as the original Persian script with no diacritics, the book's translation has fundamental irregularities that must be emphasized. All the women characters in *The Dream of Tibet* use short sentences as their mode of communication. These laconic sentences appear to be abrupt thoughts expressing their indecisiveness and emotional changeability. This feature of Vafi's writing style alludes to a more profound topic, women's status in an oppressive country like Iran. Women in Iran are suppressed, which is reflected in their attitude toward life and incoherent communication. The abrupt sentences throughout the translation are a critical feature of the text, possibly symbolizing women's inability to express themselves and their perception of being inferior to men.

Another major feature of the translation is irregularity in the verb tense transition. *The Dream of Tibet* combines different tenses, mostly the present and past, mixing current events with memories. The translation thus often transitions, purposefully, from the present to the past tense and vice versa. The unexpected leaps in these tenses can be confusing for readers. As the translator, I italicized the monologues and put conversations that take place in the present in quotations to mitigate and clarify these verb tense shifts. A further challenge in translating this book is the complex use of pronouns in the Persian language. Unlike English, there is no specific pronoun for the third person. The use of interchangeable gender pronouns is conspicuous throughout the text, so I translated them based on my interpretation.

It is worth mentioning another crucial issue in translating *The Dream of Tibet*, the author's use of some idiomatic expressions reflecting Iranian cultural conceptions, which are difficult to comprehend for non-native readers. Venuti notes the challenge of such material for translators, "domesticating and foreignizing are ethical effects whereby translation establishes a performative relation to both the source text and the receiving situation" (Venuti 2018, xiv). In "domesticating" colloquialisms, the translator renders perhaps overly transparent the significance of idiomatic expressions for foreign readers, while "foreignizing" such material could make them unintelligible. I have implemented a hybrid approach, both domesticating and foreignizing the text, which assists in translating Persian idiomatic expressions that reflect the indigenous traditions of Iran.

For example, in the conversation between Javid and Sholeh about Sadeq, Sholeh says, "Say something that doesn't remind us of the camel" (14). The camel holds symbolic significance in Persian literature, epitomizing strength, and durability. The camel can survive without water for days and withstand extreme desert conditions. This expression highlights the physical strength of Sadeq; Sholeh compares Sadeq's physical disposition to a camel. In the following sentence on the same page, Mom said, "He is very noble." Sholeh sighed and said, "This reminded me of a horse." The horse symbolizes honor, courage, and nobility in Persian literature. Mom praises Sadeq's character, and Sholeh compares Sadeq's nobility to a horse. These are some examples of the "domesticating" of idiomatic expressions. On the other hand, when Javid says, "He is so unlucky that he'll find it dry if he goes to the sea" (68), it is an example of "foreignizing." Javid's apathetic tone in this statement suggests that he feels that luck is never on his side.

Vafi's characters in *The Dream of Tibet*, as in her other works, are endearing and complicated, truly representing real human beings painted in shades of gray; they have apparent shortcomings as well as admirable qualities. Her women are the ultimate survivors, seeking independence and expressing their displeasure against society. They are articulate in communicating the hardships they virtuously endure during their lifetime. Despite her status as a celebrated and highly acclaimed author, only one of her novels, *My Bird*, has been translated into English. After reading *The Dream of Tibet*, I felt sympathetic to the plight of the protagonist in the book. She represents the social status of women in Iran post the Islamic regime. The book chronicles the unique life experiences of the woman characters. The resilience of these women in overcoming their adversities left an indelible impression on me.<sup>1</sup>

According to Emami in *As Past va Buland-e Tarjomah*, a good translator must know the source and target language well, understand the context, and interpret the content correctly (Emami 2006, 47). In this case, most translations are done first from the native origin. I was so inspired by reading *The Dream of Tibet* that it was my pleasure and privilege to translate this book. *The Dream of Tibet* also parallels the current events in Iran after September 2022 and so on, where women were ridiculed in public platforms, denied basic human rights, including the right to formal education, and brainwashed to wear mandatory hijab.

With this background about the role of women authors in contemporary Persian literature, as well as the work of Fariba Vafi, I invite you to read the translation of Vafi's novel, *The Dream of Tibet*, in the next chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> The work culture in Iran was very rigid and antifeminist. My master's proposal at Shiraz University in Iran was rejected on the premise that I endeavored to work on the personality and characterization of two distinguished women authors (Zoya Pirzad and Fariba Vafi). Later, the university discontinued my work permit as a single woman, but now I have the esteemed privilege of translating Vafi's novel.

## The Dream of Tibet

### 1

Shiva! Get up. You messed up! I always ruined everything, but this time it was your turn. Who could have believed that Shiva, sober and wise, would do this? For a moment, we were shocked. It was as if all of us were under the camera's flash. Now I understand that everyone shows their bewilderment differently. Javid scrunched up his face, and nothing was left to lose control of. Mom rolled her wandering eyes and looked at each of us, in turn, to ensure there was nothing wrong.

I was wearing a long traditional dress and standing in the same position, like a doll in a cylindrical glass in the local fairs, with open arms and a dazed look. I don't remember anything about the other people. They were a moving mass that could be felt from a distance. But I still feel that stunned silence. The guests quickly closed their mouths to see better. I wonder how you managed to ignore all those watchful eyes! It must have been compensation for suffering all those eyes that you, who throughout your life had had more eyes watch you than anyone else, suddenly became blind; a kind of triumph appeared on your face, a calm and perfect joy. Your complexion was glowing, and your ears were listening to music no one else could hear. I know this exact situation. It's the feeling of a woman-in-love when she goes to the bedroom, sleeps with the man she loves, a soft and conscious state of numbness in the body. Right there, I thought that all women know this feeling innately, whether they hide it for many years or never have the chance to express it. Some for their whole life, and you for sixteen years.

You and Javid walked to the bedroom like two monks preparing for an ancient ritual. Or perhaps you went to light a candle, but it would be easier to believe that if Yalda and Nima weren't there. During the day, you showed no sign of a romantic relationship or confidential

complicity that would reveal a joyful, intimate, loving emotion between you two. Javid wasn't the kind of man who would grab a woman from behind in the kitchen. Unlike Forugh, who didn't care about her chest, which is like a piece of old leather that a shoemaker might hang on the wall, you weren't the kind of woman who would bend over to pick something up because you wanted your round breasts to be seen from the above.

Mom said, "It was hard to believe that the day Shiva left with Javid, she was going on a honeymoon. We thought she must be going to a volleyball match as always." Your dowry was a flower stem that had dried up multiple times so far, and you liked to say to Javid, "The cost of my dowry is my life: let me be free." And Javid would answer, "Pick a flower from the yard and go." It was one of your habitual jokes that your friends laughed at for many years out of obligation.

On your courtship, Javid read Arash Kamangir's<sup>2</sup> poem. You said how long it was! From the beginning, you were impressed by his strong jaw. I looked at Javid's protruding jaw and realized that people's delusion is more effective than plastic surgery. You said, "His discipline was visible in his appearance." You talked about faith and said, "A man without faith is like a fish without bones; it has no spine." And what Javid didn't have was a single bone. He was tall, skinny, and thin. Sadeq, on the other hand, was known for his wide bones. Javid used to say, "Sadeq is all bones." I replied, "He is all meat and fat." Then I'd act as if I were him, like a fat, un-uniformed general who, with all his weight, sinks into the sofa.

Mom laughed, "At these times, you two sisters become like each other." I said, "How would it be?" Javid peered from behind the newspaper he was reading, "Serious like a judge from the outside, and silly like a clown on the inside." He puffed up his chest, pleased with himself like when he said an alluring expression that he thought was eloquent. You said, "Sadeq

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<sup>2</sup> It is a long poem by Seyavash Kasraei (1926- 1995) based on the legend of Arash-e Kamangir.

was thin, much thinner than Javid.” “He was more patient than others on the mountain,” Javid continued. I laughed mockingly, “Say something that doesn’t remind us of the camel.” Mom shook her head, “He is very noble.” I sighed, and this reminded me of a horse.

Javid put the newspaper aside, “The wisdom of this generation is in their eyes.” I whispered, “Excuse me, by which body part should we see?” He ignored me, and I continued, “What should we see that we don’t?” Javid wanted to explain and needed one hour for this. You replied in a word, “The ghost.” Hearing this word from you was like finding a perfume container among hundred medicine bottles. I was amazed just as much as when I saw a book about dream interpretation under your pillow. I said, “Can’t believe my eyes! Finally, the ghost came to this house too!” Nima looked up from his toy train, “Auntie, are you telling the truth?”

The wandering ghost was always at the house where I stayed with Mom. It moved freely like one of the family members. It came to our dreams and was not scary at all. Mom had seen Aqa Jan’s<sup>3</sup> ghost several times. She used to swear to this or that wandering ghost; it was respectful and had personality. Mom was superstitious because she believed in ghosts, and I was delusional. “But the ghost that I’m talking about is different.” You went to the kitchen. “What’s the difference?” Javid said while he came closer. He must have wanted to explain the origin of the ghost. He loved history and could charm his heart with some historical questions. Like a chef in an asylum, you raised the spatula and announced, “Lunch is ready.”

From a long time ago, you avoided any discussion and stopped obsessing over trying to persuade people of things. You didn’t bicker with Yalda and Nima. A simple but serious explanation was enough from your perspective. Javid raised his voice and shouted, “Education has been suspended in this house.”

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<sup>3</sup> Deceased grandfather.

Making love wasn't an intimate experience but a ritual for you. That's why you panicked when I came to your house that night. Javid used to poke his head out of the room and say, "Our house is like a Swiss embassy; friends take refuge here when they are in trouble." He pointed to the upper level and said, "Hush." I was crying. I was saying that you should do something, and at that moment, I knew nothing could be done. Mehrdad was gone from my life forever. The corridor was dark. I heard the shuffling of Javid's slippers as he approached me. I sat on the steps leading to the landlord's house and thought, this place is worse than Uganda's embassy<sup>4</sup>. I could smell a rotten cucumber from somewhere. Javid pleadingly said, "Lower your voice, please." I told myself, "*He is an ambassador of a fourth-world country.*"

I could hear the door opening from the second floor. You took my arm. We passed the corridor and went inside. I said you must do something and was waiting for you to say something. But instead of you, Javid decided to give me a lecture. He talked about class differences and the impossibility of marriage between people from different sections of society. I turned to you. I wondered how you could love this man, not just for an hour a day, but around the clock, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner; not just for one or two days, but for sixteen years! He was a man who would talk even if you weren't looking at him. He'd probably keep talking even if you had passed out.

I cried again. This time wasn't only for Mehrdad. It was also because of you holding a box of tissue in front of me and pulling out a stuck tissue. For a moment, a feeling of profound failure pierced my heart and turned into a vague sense of liberation. I hadn't lost anything yet, and if Mehrdad left or stayed, it didn't matter much. I could imagine Mehrdad in his baggy pajamas that slipped off his narrow waist and made a faint rustling sound when he walked. For a

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<sup>4</sup> Represent Fourth World Country

moment, I heard a different melody in the middle of my sobbing and found the ability to give up on him forever, but it was only for a moment.

## 2

Tonight, all sense and wisdom vanished into thin air. Tonight, you were crazy. Javid was disappointed that he couldn't call in the same way he called me "crazy" that night in your rented nesting rooms. He didn't say "crazy" as a friend would and immediately laughed. It was a friendly reminder to always be the same. You said, "If he loves you, he'll return." I said, "His love is sincere, but he couldn't." Mehrdad and I used to walk and talk for long hours on the streets. He said his mother had chosen a girl from a more distinguished family for her son and was waiting for his response. Everything was ready. He just had to go. He said he couldn't resist his family anymore.

He insisted on saying this word, resistance, and every time I remembered Sadeq. I don't know which one of you called him the "myth of resistance." "We should do something that he encounters as a faith accomplishment. Something that he doesn't need to resist," I said. At the same time, I remembered Sadeq again. Yalda said, "We'll imprison him and keep him until the wedding ends." Javid just noticed Yalda, who had lifted her head out from below her quilt, resembling a turtle. "Please sleep." He got up and pulled the room's sliding door.

"If they see us together, they'll force us to get married." I thought about it long ago, but it was the first time I said it aloud. Javid sighed, "Insane." Then he turned to you, "She is delirious." You said, "When everything is ready, it means Mehrdad agreed to live with her." Javid started, "Emotional relationships have rules like anything else. That's why you can recognize the fake one."

The light in the room was dim. Javid had to sit on a chair. It was impossible to sit down and talk seriously without leaning. I said, “How do you know?” And I remembered the black market in a movie where the antiquarian is bent over with a cylindrical magnifying glass, distinguishing the original from a fake. Javid put his long legs under the chair, “In the end, everything makes sense.” I mumbled. I came on to Javid myself, so like an interrogator, he discovered my love story. He continued with folded arms, “Of course, if you were aware, you’d have noticed it from the beginning.”

I didn’t know what I should have noticed. I was exhausted. I lowered my head, “But he loves me.” Javid leaned from his chair towards me, “It’s not all about instinct. People will always prioritize themselves. Don’t believe it when they talk about love and emphasize it wholeheartedly. It’s a big lie.” I doubted your love more than before. I thought Javid was like one of those men who hugs his wife while he is thinking about hammering a nail into the wall of his room or a check he must write the next day.

Javid got up and passed by me. He tapped on my shoulder, “Be careful, girl!” He went to bed. I lamented, “Damn your mind! How would your advice help me? How do you use it anyway? It just saved your appearance. It’s like environmental protection law; it has done something to keep you in a secure place.”

You simply and easily have held each other’s hands and decided to live under the same roof without obstacles. I’m sick of this contractual happiness. You gradually became a family commercial during these sixteen years, always satisfied and wise. But tonight, all those protections went away. Honestly, it was a relief. Your appearance never fooled me. You were loyal, honest, respectable, and many other affirmations, but unhappy.

### 3

It's noisy outside. I look out of the window. The sky is clear, and everything can be seen in the moonlight. There is a big table in the courtyard with a big samovar, a hookah, and glasses with some tea. Plates with half-eaten pieces of fruit still there. Forough walks around the chairs but doesn't touch anything. She sits on the stairs with her back facing me. She throws the corner of her chador on her shoulder and puts the ewer beside herself. Maybe she thinks someone must be in the bathroom, or she came out to get some fresh air. After everyone left, Mom gathered plates two by two and took them to the kitchen. Javid approached her and said he'd clean them. He asked Mom for a favor and took Yalda and Nima inside. Mom thought Javid was being courteous. He bent over toward Mom and looked at her face, "Please go." He wasn't drunk. Mom pointed me out, "You stay." She looked for her purse. Javid wasn't satisfied. If it were up to him, he'd be kicked out of Forough. Ever since he had to move into her house, he was always worried. Forough's presence cracked the security protection of the family. "My God! I'm afraid to say a word. What are they doing?" Mom said. I eased her mind, "They don't do anything now, but they haven't forgotten the political confidentiality game."

Mom and I were laughing, and you looked suspiciously at us. Sometimes you were worse than K.G.B spies. It wasn't determined where you were going. You didn't say the friend's name you were talking about. Your friend didn't have a name. If so, they'd probably have several names. Your books still have covers made of newspaper. You warned each other not to talk irreverently on the phone. You quickly became suspicious of everyone. You attended all the meetings on time. You were sensitive to vague hints, self-discipline and self-improvement were considered essential slogans in your life.

It has been a week since you moved to this house. One day, Javid came home at an unexpected time. He walked through the corridor where Forough was sleeping. He went to the kitchen and finally found you in the children's room. "Mistakenly, she is lying down like a bear sleeping in a forest," he [angrily] said. Yalda said, "She could see Grandma Forough from here, rolling in the middle of the room with closed eyes so that the sunlight covered her whole body." You [mockingly] said, "A bear, even thinking about honey, doesn't enjoy it like her."

That night Javid suggested a better nickname. Forough was an Oblomov, the same famous lazy Russian man. But this Oblomov was a woman with long curly hair, and her bracelets jingled with every movement. She applied cream to her hands and tightly tied the small fleshy mole around her sweaty neck with a spool thread. She spread a blanket at the corner of the yard and lay down under the sun. Before you moved to this place, her previous tenant was a student, and her relationship with other neighbors was always good. She said that if she didn't have these friendly neighbors, she'd have had to marry one of her old suitors after Javid's Father died; none had healthy teeth or mouths. They were either irritable and sullen or greedy. She said she liked one of them, "He was a gentleman and communicative. He still had his teeth alternatively. The only problem was that he had shaky hands. I thought my flesh would fall off if he touched me with those trembling fingers."

A few weeks after moving here, the neighbor's daughter asked you for a book about living. She had heard from Forough that you like reading books. A few days later, another neighbor stopped before Javid and asked him confidentially about another side of the world. Javid politely pretended that he couldn't understand him. The man emphasized that everyone knows you're an activist and involved with foreigners. From Javid's perspective, Forough's big mouth could be ignored if it wasn't because of her illiteracy. She puts lipstick on Yalda's face or

lets her try mascara. She answered her questions precisely and clearly, which both of you postponed for the future.

Once, Javid asked about Yalda's lesson at the dinner table. She talked about physics and chemistry and then continued about pregnancy and menopause with a mouth full. I can imagine Javid's face when he heard this. It must be the same as a few years ago. One day, Mom explained to Yalda that a big cow horn shook and trembled under the ground. Javid raised his hairy, bony hand, "Wait, Mom!" The protruding Adam's apple on his throat remained still, and his jaw moved slightly forward, "I won't let my kids' minds get misinformation." He put his plate aside and hurried out of the room to say something like his mother. Javid had to stand before his mother a few weeks later for another reason. You mediated. You couldn't go anywhere else. You were tired of renting.

Javid had a dispute with his partner at work, and he spent all his money to establish an independent workshop. Besides, you loved this house. Although it was an old house and the wooden doors were ugly, it had a yard, pond, and tree instead. Javid used to say he'll give Iran and Forough's share with his first paycheck and rebuild the house. He said he didn't like this pond and tree. But it was different for Forough, "The first night that I came through the door of this house, I forgot all my sorrows. It had a nice big pond and a garden with violets. Iran greeted me, but Javid pulled the quilt over his head and was sleeping in the corner of the room. Iran went to bring me tea. Suddenly a horrible sound came from under the quilt. I collected my chador around my legs. Someone with a creepy voice said, "Get lost out of this house." I was horrified. One day Forough suggested, "I'll take my furniture upstairs and live there." Javid agreed immediately. Mommy heard this story and shook her head with disapproval, "I can't believe that

Javid did this!” And she continued to talk so much until you frowned, “Forough isn’t his mother.”

#### **4**

The moon lights up the room. Your hair falls on your face, and your arm hangs on the carpet. Your white legs are sticking out from your tight black skirt. I put my head on my knee and closed my eyes. I get up and walk. I can’t sleep. I couldn’t sleep. Worse, I couldn’t walk or even sit the other night. The room was tiny, and you were all asleep.

In my mind, I went to Mehrdad’s house several times before morning. I went there with a gasoline can. Imagining this can and a match in my pocket gave me relief. I didn’t know how, but I returned to where I began and walked again. I was going up the hill of their alley this time with an oil gallon. I was wearing my brick-colored coat and covered my face with a shawl. Before reaching the front door, I’d return and start from the beginning with an unknown director saying: “Cut.” When I finally arrived, I poured the oil on his car, parked at the front door that day. The flame was spreading, and I immediately had to decide who should catch the fire first. His mother led the cause, but the bride’s white veil caught fire better. While one of them burns in flames, I’d suddenly get back to their alley. I was tired and wanted to set myself on fire this time. Before I poured the oil on myself, I put my head under the thick quilt you covered me with, which smelled like wool. Mehrdad came to my mind. He stroked my hair, pulled it from my face, and said, “You don’t need fire; you’re all a fireball!” I’d have liked to see his mother, with her trembling hands, disintegrate her proud face like a dry mask and encounter this disaster. My imagination ended with sirens and a cemetery like a documentary film, and I couldn’t make another scene after the fire. I was dying then, and it didn’t matter what happened next. I remembered Forough saying after I die, throw my corpse into the sinkhole.

I wanted to imagine myself in a wedding dress but couldn't. I didn't even want to be approached by the handsome doctor whose shoes were always shiny in the hospital where I worked. A doctor who appeared in my dreams at necessary times, and I could see people's excitement with their jaws dropped. Mehrdad said working at this hospital isn't a big deal. I retorted that I love my job, and with a bit of imitation of Javid's words, I talked about financial independence. He hadn't discussed it; he just looked at me. Damn me; I understand everything's meaning much later. My speech took a long time. I thought my words and definitions weren't enough to express my feelings. Now I know the most precise terms without attention and confirmation are just wandering and meaningless sounds.

I got up in the morning and then sat down again. I looked around. You were on the other side of the sliding door. It took me a while to relate the previous night's events to myself and my body which didn't feel anything. I don't know why I came to your house. I needed to go to a place where my grief was valuable, and with that, I didn't feel this strange distance. I could see, touch, and hug it like a lover that no longer existed. I folded the quilt, grabbed my bag, and silently left the house.

## 5

You moan in your sleep. I get close to you and hold your hand. Your always-cold palm is hot now. You were also so hot the day you squeezed my hand on the bus. We went to the bazaar. It was your suggestion. You were talking all the way. We were in the crowd. You didn't say to come back. You stood in front of every store in which I stood. You didn't say how obsessive you are! You didn't say anything about your children. You didn't suffocate me with your motherhood. Mom used to say, "I was at their home the night that she gave birth. They both quietly dressed and said seriously they were going to the hospital. I was confused. They told me

to go back to sleep. I thought they were going to the hospital for a kidnapping. I've never seen anyone give birth like this!"

You weren't worried about Javid. You weren't concerned about anyone. You touched the clothes I liked and asked about the price of a crystal dish once I saw you. It was joyful going to the bazaar with you. For you, the bazaar wasn't just a few exact stores full of different goods. It was a busy and strange place with new possibilities to discover, and you weren't an ordinary customer. You were a particular detective to find funny, weird, and awkward things; a seller whose pants were unzipped or an unknown person who introduced her to the mercers as an available concubine. You'd see a bath sponge hanging from a shop door or feel sad about a cat that was left emaciated in a place like a bazaar. "I must buy something for Forough; she ordered me. She reminds me every time she sees me," you said. "Why haven't you bought anything yet?" [You remarked,] "I buy these things from the store close to my home, and it doesn't take even two minutes. But this lady says their material isn't good."

The saleswoman had put the bras on the counter. I said, "You're not a woman!" Mommy used to say, "I'm her mother, and haven't seen her body so far. She always wore socks and didn't take off any clothing, even for naps. It was as if she was ready to jump out of bed to the street at midnight in an emergency." Instead, I like to sleep naked. I'd have also removed that feathered underwear if I wasn't scared of an untimely earthquake. I like the softness of my body touching the quilt with every move. "But Forough is a woman; I mean more woman!" I said. You retorted, "Because of her buttermilk-making boobs hanging from her body?" I laughed. Whenever Forough saw me, she said, may God preserve this body. Don't ruin it! Then she'd put her hand on her chest and speak with a mysterious wink that a big bra never goes out of fashion. I said, "She cares about them a lot." "When she sees me, she holds them in her fist like the head of

twins, squeezes them, says she is ready to exchange them with my flat breasts.” “Even when you walk, you bend so much that those flats aren’t visible. Learn a little from your mother-in-law!” “I’ve always wanted to be a role model for others. I’m not that miserable to learn things from a limmer.” “Why limmer?” “Run!” And you ran after the bus.

You bought a ticket from a woman and passed it to the men and the driver. You sat down and took my arm. You were panting. I said, “We could get a taxi.” Your hand was so hot. You weren’t behaving normally. Now I understand that my feeling on the bus that night suggested something to me that I’d understand its meaning years later. I said, “You feel sure! Where is Javid?” “He went to visit Sadeq with the children,” you responded. The middle of the bus was accordion-shaped, twisted, and the man in front of us smiled spontaneously. “Finally, he’s out.” I said, “What a pity his mother isn’t alive.” Javid used to say Sadeq’s Mom was the mother to all of us. She was a brave woman. She became a widow early and raised her five children alone. She really worked hard to send them to the university. Two of them went to prison. One of them never returned. The others immigrated. “When did he get released?” “A few days ago.” I held the corner of my scarf in front of my mouth. The car’s smoke was suffocating me.

“One time, I covered my face and went to meet him with her sister’s ID card. I was throwing up. There is no definition for the prison’s weather; it’s as if hundreds of people yawned simultaneously and closed the door immediately to keep the air. We were both astonished behind the window. He couldn’t believe I was there, and I couldn’t understand why he had to be there among all those walls, bars, and windows. He didn’t deserve this.” “Then what?” “I told him not to worry about his mom. Jāvīd and I visit her regularly. I didn’t say anything after that, but he did. He didn’t waste a second. I was in a good mood when I came out. A week later, his mother passed away. We informed all her children.” “They weren’t there?” “No, I was there by myself.”

## 6

Shiva! Get up, and let me tell you how I felt in that milky-colored car on that cold morning. The cold and insufficient sleep had numbed me, and what I had done a hundred times throughout the night had become difficult and even impossible. I no longer wanted the fire to burn myself or Mehrdad. I needed it to warm up. He said hoarsely, "I'll turn on the heater to warm you up." He parked in an alley while the light of the clinic at the end of it was still on. He said not to be worried about anything; just make up my mind, and he'll drop me wherever I want. He removed his hand from the gear and leaned comfortably on his chair. He was one of those men who could stay in the same position and not get bored.

I looked in my coat pocket. I only had a matchbox from all the flammable materials. I had taken it from Javid's ashtray. I pressed it in my fist and thought something could still be done. But where was Mehrdad? He was always asleep at this time of the morning. When he wakes up in the same lying position, he remembers he has picked up the bride. But the bride was not me. On the previous night, he told me I was his actual bride. He pulled away the plate and brought both hands toward me on the table. I put my hands under the table so he couldn't grab them. The food was untouched. He said he'd be miserable from now on. He said it with the liveliness and energy of a happy person.

I stood up and left the restaurant. He came behind me but first went to the cashier to pay the bill. I stood by the street and waited for a taxi. Several cars stopped before me, but I didn't get on. One of them stopped a few meters ahead. I stared at the open door of the restaurant. I wished he'd come soon, and he did. He put on his jacket at the door. He looked distractedly left and right and looked for something on his coat before walking away, like someone who wanted to ensure a wallet or a key was in his pocket. From now on, he behaved like an old man with an

extended family with more critical concerns. I walked away and heard his footsteps. He was coming fast behind me. He took my arm, and we went to the sidewalk. We walked a few steps. He said his marriage would be a formality, and we could be together again. I yelled at him that I wasn't his lover.

The shopkeeper locked his store's door. He turned around and looked at us. Mehrdad squeezed my arm stronger than usual. I thought he was angry, like when I danced at his friend's engagement and sang along with everyone else in the middle. After months of friendship, it was the first time I saw his face shrink. I slid my finger slowly along his ribs and kept it close to his thigh. He always laughed at it, but this time didn't. I moved my finger a little further. My nail polish was shining.

He stopped the car and said he had to share his opinion about his ideal wife. I said, "Go ahead." "I like a woman who understands situations well," he responded. I said, "I couldn't get him," and withdrew my hands. He said, "For example, in the kitchen, she should be a housewife, and in the living room, like a lady, not a cook. A thoughtful and wise woman in the study room, and in the bedroom like..." I interrupted contemptuously, "A whore!" He wasn't surprised by my words. He hunched over the steering wheel, "A woman who thinks she has to be a scientist or a philosopher in the bedroom is a fool." Now everything in the car seemed like a silly game to me.

I don't know how long I sat in the same position, but the weather was hot. An old man was holding the *sangak* with both hands like a shield, and passed by the car. Then, a limping woman came. She bent and looked into the car with the attitude of someone looking inside a cave, and I remembered I was not alone. I was sitting next to a quiet man. I turned my face and looked at him. He must have seen something in my face. That's why he kindly asked me to calm

down. And it was with these two words that I was relieved. I thought nothing was important anymore, nothing worthwhile. I crushed the matchbox between my fingers and cried loudly.

## 7

My hand hits the door, and it creaks. Forough doesn't hear. She sits facing the darkness. I look at her chubby back. Is she the same beautiful woman who made the grocer restless and other men liked to look at her long shapely legs? The grocer became greedier after he figured out Forough was divorced because of her infertility. He sent suitors one after another with the message that I have two children, and it's more than enough for me. Forough, with her long legs, walked through the alley fast. From the window of the upper room, Javid saw her leaving in a hurry as if she was leaving forever. When she reached the mulberry tree, she bowed her head. Her chador was a little short, and her thigh's skin could be seen from under her thin stocking.

She should have returned home before Javid's Father came. Javid counted the neighbor's porch railing that could be seen from above. He estimated the bird's flocks. He counted the flies that came close to his face. But Forough wasn't home yet. Iran's voice came from downstairs, asking what he was doing there. Then he said he was going to visit the neighbor. Forough and Iran used to get along. Both were outdoorsy and scratched each other's backs.

Javid was afraid that if Forough didn't come on time, his father would kill her with the same machete in the treasury, and he took it out in every Muharram<sup>5</sup>. He said he'd kill her. Javid was afraid of his Father's red eyes. He was scared of his loud voice. Forough had swept the front door that day. She had told him to get up to vacuum there, but he hadn't. Forough threw the broom and said, "To hell!" Then she put on her chador. She didn't say where she was going. His Father's screams sounded like a roar. He was looking for Forough. He was shocked. How didn't he notice his father was coming? He went to the basement.

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<sup>5</sup> The first month of the Islamic calendar and month of mourning for Hossein ibn Ali.

He bent over so as not to hit the arch. He was getting taller. Father was in the yard. He used to take the hose to water the plants and wash his feet after arriving home. Javid climbed the stairs and stared at the street from the window. It was close to dusk. From there, he saw a sparrow sitting on the mulberry tree. A large berry fell between the leaves and then on the street. This time Father would kill Forough. The thought of bloodshedding made him anxious. Suddenly he heard someone's footsteps.

The alley was narrow and twisted. It had an old door which was quiet most of the time. He saw Forough coming out from under the mulberry tree. Forough pointed, "Had Father come?" She was worried, and Javid wanted to make her more nervous. "It's been a long time," he shouted. Her chador was draped over her shoulders, and her sweaty white neck was visible from above. The red light of the sun made her skin crimson. There was the sound of the door opening. His legs were trembling. He thought now the pond was colored with Forough's blood. He imagined the fish. Before reaching the last one, he ran down the stairs and saw stains on the floor. He was astonished. It took a while to clear his eyes from the dust of fear. He realized the drops were just a few crushed cherries.

He went down and saw everything. Contrary to his expectations, the yard didn't look like a slaughterhouse. Forough was sitting on the bed and panting. Father was standing in front of her, very close to her, as he usually stood behind the counter, staring at Forough's large breasts with narrow eyes as if he wanted to weigh them.

## **8**

Tonight was the first time that Javid couldn't say anything. He was amazed and couldn't understand everything at once. He used to talk, analyze, interpret, and prove to himself and others that everything was normal. Javid always takes control of himself by talking, and you with

your silence that you both called “awareness.” I think your shared pride kept you together for all these years. Both of you believed that you could handle everything with intelligence and awareness. But Sadeq wasn’t as sure as you. When he got free, he was doubtful and suspicious about everything. I noticed it at the party you had when he was released.

You decorated that house like a designer. Moving the chairs around, rearranging the cushions, and changing the tablecloths gave a new look to that old house. Javid and Yalda looked for something in the house like detectives and didn’t find it. The house was remodeled without adding anything. Your friends came over with flowers and pastries. They were your old friends. I used to see them sometimes when I came to your house. In your previous places, the landlords grumbled because of the various people who regularly visited you. Nesting rooms were filled with cigarette smoke. I usually sat in the corner and watched. You and your friends were the same types, which reminded me of those communist groups in Italian movies.

You always enjoy discussing things and arguing about them. I didn’t understand anything. Now they were the same people with children who had grown up and usually didn’t come with their parents, and if they did, they went to Yalda’s room and made themselves busy playing with the tape recorder or a computer. One of your friends recited a joke. Everyone snickered. It shuts off like starting a car that hasn’t been turning on in freezing weather. He said another one. The engines were turned on, and this time, everyone laughed. But there was still a problem. There was no sign of smiling on Sadeq’s face.

Javid switched to politics. Sadeq was frowning, and his silence wasn’t affirmative. Javid asked him to speak. Sadeq took a sip from the glass in his hand. He bent a little toward the table so his large stomach pressed against it. He coughed. His voice wasn’t clear. He coughed again and blushed. He started speaking. He spoke quietly. He wanted to say a few words. Some of the

guests gestured like runners at the starting line. He said, “Honestly, I didn’t know what was happening outside at that time.” The runners were waiting for a signal to begin. Sadeq had a referee’s attitude and forgot to whistle as if he had no such intention. Everyone was a little stunned and leaned back in their seats. It was clear from the sudden silence.

A friend who made the guests laugh now remembered another funny joke. He said it with the confidence of an actor who didn’t expect any applause. Yalda’s childish laugh was heard among the indecisiveness of others’ laughter, and a shy feminine smile appeared on Sadeq’s lips. Hands were extended to pick up pieces of fruit and sweets from the table. One said, “Hey, Mr. Engineer, you can’t avoid getting married. It’s the time!” Forough used to say that Iran was trapping Sadeq, but he didn’t fall into her trap. Sadeq sniggered, “Its time has passed!”

Sadeq touched his hair. They were short and sparse. Javid asked about his plans. He said he doesn’t know yet, but won’t pursue his previous job anymore, one year in this city and several years in another. No, he can’t afford it anymore. You were in a deep conversation with one of the ladies. “Sadeq and sedentary! Hear it but don’t believe it. You’ll see him packing and leaving a few months later.” The woman was upset that you had turned your head without knowing. She waited for your head to return to its former position so she could continue. Sadeq didn’t say he won’t go. He said he might do it one day but won’t go to prison this time. He goes to another side of the land of cool water to get some fresh air. You turned your face to Sadeq and turned back quickly to the woman who was talking non-stop and ignored the few moments of your absence. I remember in those few seconds, you could turn your back on all those people with the short words that came out of Sadeq’s mouth, like a coin thrown into the air, and you were sure of owning it.

I don't need to strain my memory. Everything automatically flows to my mind. All those random and meaningless movements have gathered in my mind to show me the real meaning. The word that came out of Sadeq's mouth was "Tibet." Later you said the desire for "Tibet" in those days when everyone dreamed of going to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba was a kind of blasphemy. You said you were only the accomplice of his impiety, and Javid was always upset about it. One day he said thoughtfully, "Shiva! Hanging on the thread of mysticism that Sadeq suggested is not an honor. "Tibet" has no place on the new world map, and bringing it to the map of our life doesn't just upset me, but it makes me suspicious." "About what?" Javid exaggerated, "To my partner's mental and moral health."

"This is a new idea! Fresh air," Javid said and cheerfully toasted the fresh air, "Whenever you get the ticket, I'll celebrate." Sadeq smirked. He seemed upset. He looked at others like a depressed elephant. Javid said half of his lung was destroyed, and his knees were in trouble. In my view, he had some more defects. It was incredibly dull. He didn't laugh and seemed arrogant for not sharing his thoughts with others. I told you all these things while opening the window, "I can't breathe. Cigarette after cigarette."

You said, "Sadeq is one of those men who aren't seen the first time. They're discovered gradually. The first day I saw him, he spoke so simply and concisely that I thought he was stupid. Unlike Javid, he couldn't immediately attract everyone's attention. He used to come to our house with Javid's other friends and sit in the corner. He didn't talk unless needed but was always ready to help. One night, in the middle of an interesting conversation, he helped me to decrease Nimaa's fever. He showed up to help us with our moving time. I was sitting in the middle of the furniture boxes. I was exhausted. I didn't like the house from the beginning. You have seen that it was a basement with no sunlight exposure. Its roof was short, and the model was old. I yelled at

Javid to go out and take the children with him so they weren't cumbersome to me. I was sitting in the middle of the hall and thought I was in a place like Kashan's Fin bathhouse.<sup>6</sup>

It was one of the days of depression when one encountered a philosophical problem. Why should we live or continue life? I came to my senses with the sound of the doorbell. I passed from the mirror. I monologed, "What is Charlie Chaplin doing here?" I had become like him with Kurdish pants, curly hair, and teary eyes. It was Sadeq. When he noticed Javid and the kids weren't home, he hesitated. If Javid weren't home, he wouldn't come in. I invited him, "They'll come back soon." He came in. He didn't realize that he had seen my red eyes. He said he should connect the oven first to make some tea. But before that, he must think about lighting the kitchen.

Javid and the kids returned. Javid insisted, "Mr. Engineer, let it go. It's difficult to do it in a day or two." Sadeq was holding a cupboard from one side and pulling it. Javid had to take the other side of the wardrobe. The wardrobes were moved by night, everything was arranged, and the basement was turned into an apartment where I was supposed to live for three years." You sighed, "Sadeq didn't come even once." I replied, "That time was enough for him!" "Two weeks later, they arrested everyone. I stayed for three months, and Javid six months." I continued, "And Sadeq for six years!" "No, he was released three years later. With the other three years, it would be six. It was a difficult situation. Everyone was busy with their work. He was the only one who was loyal and helped everyone." Javid said he no longer holds the same beliefs. "I'm not talking about his political opinions. He didn't change. He was always himself, simple and reliable. With him, you were always sure about something." Sadeq remained silent until the end of the party.

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<sup>6</sup> It is an old bath that is located in Kashan and the shambles of Amir Kabir, the vice president of Nassir al-Din Shah in the Qajar dynasty.

It was that night, Shiva! I understand you were always afraid of such a night, and I attributed it to your inattention. I always thought you were ready to encounter the future. You said if you ignore it, you have to pay for it. You were talking to me. I couldn't be realistic. I was delusional. I still hoped that what had happened was a lie. Mehrdad could have appeared at any moment and said that everything was a joke, a funny joke. Like the day he called and told me to go to him immediately. He's been poisoned and sick. I hastily reached him. He bent down and clutched his stomach. The laugh was locked in his lips like the wind and came out with pressure. He said, "Like a benevolent nurse, you only respond to requests for help." I said, "How stupid I am!" He replied, "You're not the stupid one here; I am! I've always been the one ready to die for you!"

I came home. There was no telephone. Mom gave it to the repairman to be fixed. She said the sound was too weak. I told her the phone had no problem. She should clean her ears. I went to my room and closed the door. I woke up confused and saw the phone above my head. I was happy to see it like a friend coming home. You said, "I don't understand this much attachment to objects." You didn't just mean the phone. There was also pottery and pendants. My nail polish was all over the dressing table. The big bear on the wall was dusty. The tape recorders were in the middle of the room. I showed you the statue of the African woman, like showing gold to a blind man. You crossed your legs. "First, throw this cat away," Mom said, "She wastes all her money. She must think about her future." The future wasn't an accurate time for me till that day. It was a random time, and Mehrdad and I should go there. Now Mehrdad had gone back on his word. He didn't promise. But bluffs that were much more illusionary than promises, yes!

The day Javid poured out all of his information about the economy, I realized he wasn't only a teacher and an officer. Mom asked him to bring me to my senses. Javid talked about the

first world and reached the third world. It was commuting between the two worlds that he said saving money is useless. It's a trick to turn poverty into a satisfactory condition. It requires critical thought. Finding the primary idea among the hundreds of non-basic words that came out of Javid's mouth, in turn, required patience which I didn't have. It was as if he was looking for the same fundamental thought hidden in his mind, and he couldn't find it, so he searched for it with tweezers in the same place with repeated words. That's why he was struggling so much, as it was almost time for him to come to the table and convince me.

You saved me, "Javid, let's see what Sholeh wants." He just remembered me. He turned toward the direction where your voice came from. "This is a good idea!" He put a cigarette between his lips and looked for a match in his pocket. "Yes! Start until I find the match." I didn't know what to say. Nima came and brought fresh cold air with him. He had a long face with a perfect celestial nose like you. But his small black eyes resembled Javid. The tip of his nose was red. I knew what he was thinking about. I encouraged him from a distance with a smile. He came silently. He stood behind you. Then he stuck his freezing hand under your blouse to your back and placed it on. Only this kid could make you scream inattentively and jump like a firecracker. Javid frowned, "What are you doing?" Javid was a serious man who didn't have patience for others' teasing either. Instead of laughing in jest, he dissected everything and found political motives for it. It would be a statement at the end if he were telling a joke. I've never heard him have a good belly laugh at anything. Sometimes he reminded me of the man in armor from one of the movies. You were also wearing the same armor with the difference that yours had holes in different places, and laughter and sarcasm came out of them. Nima came behind me. He put his arm around my neck. He smelled like a fruit roll, a firecracker, and cold. I thought your whole

organization was on one side, and this kid whose shirt was made of fabric and his soft skin gave on the pleasure of touching a trained animal on the other side.

The phone rang. I was horrified. I reluctantly picked it up, “Hello?” Mehrdad always liked to say I don’t want to talk. The voice was hoarse but audible. He asked about my feelings. He said he wanted to speak with Javid. I asked, “You?” “Has my voice changed this much, Shiva?” “I’m not Shiva!” He became silent as if he didn’t believe it, “But it’s very similar!” He introduced himself. This time I apologized for not knowing him. I gave the phone to Javid, “It’s Sadeq.” And I breathed in relief. Javid forgot to continue his speech.

## **10**

I joined the loop with the guests sitting in a circle. I sat in a corner like a modest marriageable girl. I said to myself, “*Here is the wedding. What else? There is nothing in it.*” My hand was taken by a woman whose eyebrows were closer to her hairline than her eyes. I said I had to go. But the woman pulled my hand to the middle and told someone to raise the volume of the tape recorder. My long hair almost reached my waist. My dress was simple but more stylish than others.

I surrounded myself with the music and started to dance. I saw Mehrdad looking at me with his jaw dropped in surprise. On the other hand, the bride had the eyes of a little girl looking at a cartoon. I spun, let my hair fall to my shoulders, and thought I was more beautiful than the bride. Mehrdad’s look was significant. I pretended that I didn’t see him and completely ignored him. He got up and told the bride, horrified, that he had to get out, the evasive maneuver he used when he wanted to escape from a place or responsibility. But I recognized that movement. Even in my dream, I understood what he meant. He went to call me, not like every day. The phone was ringing above my head. Mom wasn’t there. I picked it up and sleepily looked at the clock. It was

4:30 pm. I remembered everything quickly while feeling a sharp pain in my belly. I thought by now, the mullah must have come, taken the signatures, and left. No one was on the line. I put the phone down. It was a few days later that I doubted. Mehrdad wasn't behind the line. Why did I think it was him? How had I not noticed his silence? How could he stay away from all the noises so that I could even hear his breathing from there?

The following day I went to the hospital as if I were dead. Greeting others was a difficult task, and more difficult was thinking about the afternoon, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow. I was afraid of the evening. I was scared of tomorrow without him. I was walking in the rooms in the hallway and was careful not to make a mistake. I had to take care of injecting the patients on time and controlling their body temperature.

My work shift ended. I left the hospital and stood by the street to get a taxi. It was close to dawn. The markets were still open, and the lights were still on. The road had a wide sidewalk perfect for a promenade couple walk for young men and women. A man with his hair in a ponytail and a massive beard stood next to me. He carelessly mentioned his destination to one of the taxi drivers, then looked at me. He looked curiously and seemed like he was inviting me into the cab. It was as if he was saying that you should do it, but I wasn't interested in discovering the man hidden behind that bushy beard. I wanted a man I knew to experience a new life with. A man with girlish curled eyelashes under his continuous eyebrows and eyes that could be jealous, malicious, crazy, and closed in slow motion as he approached your face.

A car stopped in front of me. I snuck a glance at it. It wasn't navy blue. I continued walking along the street. I could walk on the sidewalk. I foolishly thought I might get lost from his sight if I went to the sidewalk. I said to myself, "*I could be seen better here.*" I raised my head. Involuntarily, my eyes were looking for the dark blue car that Mehrdad always comes with.

But there was no car of this color. There was nothing like that car. I looked at the boutiques. Orange and pink colors were shining in the distance. I went to a public phone booth. I hurriedly dialed a number. My fingers were shaking, and my heart was racing. He picked up the phone. I bit my hand to say nothing, but I was crazy. With the hope of someone who has seen a passer-by from the bottom of the well, I said, "Hello." He paused. There was a lot of noise. He said, "It's the wrong number." He hung up. Now I could walk down the street and not pay attention to the car horns in traffic. I felt the movement of pain in an unknown part of my body. It caught my throat and put pressure on my ears.

A car stopped a few meters ahead. I passed by him and told my eyelashes to keep my tears lest they fall among all these people. They couldn't, and the tears fell down my face. I said out loud, "Damn!"

## **11**

Shiva! Even now, I'm worried about the future. I'm afraid of tomorrow. I know it. None of its moments were made for me. It's like a pond that, after its water is fully drained, the ugly stains on its walls will show. If Sadeq were here, he'd say, "Don't be prejudiced." He said, "There, I had the illusion of showing certainty that tomorrow is the same as today." He said, "It's a good exercise for survival."

But I can't. I have experienced it once. I have lived in that tomorrow once. Strangely, the experience didn't reduce my sensitivity. On the contrary, it increased my fear. It caused my old pain and sorrow to flare up. That next day, Javid advised me, "You should start reading a book. It makes you feel better. Let's go downstairs and get some books." The library was located in the corner of the basement. He had placed a two-meter shelf with some wooden stick boards from work. "Those days, here was my refuge. I used to come here and read books." He turned on the

light. The bulb was attached to the ceiling and had no light. The roof's wire has been corroded. He said, "Being oppressed doesn't suit you." There was a musty smell in my nose. This was a good place to close your eyes and die, not to open them and read. He said, "When we move out of here, I'll build a better library." It has been a long time since he read a book. Whenever I went to their house, a book with a newspaper cover was beside him. A few days later, the book traveled everywhere in the house. The following day it was on the kitchen table and, a few weeks later, next to the bathroom mirror. Javid said, "The mind is in the freest state within the bathroom." Building a luxurious bathroom was one of the projects he remembered every time after coming out from the cold and joyless bathroom of Forough's house.

He sat on the bed and shook it to test its strength. The bed creaked. He stood up. He looked aimlessly at the books. I followed his large hands that paused on the books. His fingers were hairy. He said something about each of the books. He reached for one and spoke more in detail. I panicked. I hope he doesn't want to spoil it all. He pulled a book from the bookcase and handed it to me, "It's amazing!" He gave me another one. I saw *Oblomov*. I reached for the book. "All of us have one of it inside that we must overcome." He was talking about *Oblomov*. He scratched his head, looked at the book like a tired librarian, and walked in front of the door. "Did you use perfume?" I turned toward him. His nose was thin with flared nostrils. He touched his nose with his fingertip. His nostrils were stuck to the wall for a moment. "It smells good."

Javid liked to use perfume. "On a dull day, due to passiveness, I asked the students in the classroom to write an essay titled *Is poverty better or perfume?* Making a rhythm was one of my hobbies. Some of them wrote about poverty. They consistently chose knowledge between wealth and wisdom. They wrote poverty is good because it opens a person's eyes and keeps him sane, but perfume makes a person faint and dizzy. They were used to praising poverty because it was

given to them. Only one of them wrote perfume. I still have the essay. That was interesting. He mentioned scent awakens the feeling in a person that poverty has extinguished.

I pulled the book from the shelf. I said, “Reading a thick book like this requires a lot of patience!” Javid looked at me carefully. He wasn’t curious. He didn’t want to know more than what he knew about me. I was a creature that sometimes surprised him. He had a scientist’s view that a tested animal doesn’t always follow the predicted behavior. He turned off the light and left before me, and waited outside. I went upstairs with the books in my hand. I put them on the table and greeted Sadeq, who had come and sunk into the old sofa. I went toward Nima to sharpen his pencil. I was mad, “Damn it!” With his wandering eyes, he said, “Auntie, are you mad because of the pencil or the sharpener?”

Javid kept turning around himself. He brought an ashtray for Sadeq, told me not to frown so much, and told me why are you always in the kitchen. He put a tape in the recorder. Someone knocked on the door. I tightened my coat and grabbed my purse. I didn’t want to stay even for one more moment. Sadeq was following me with his eyes. He knew what I wanted to do. He pointed to the table, “The books!” I looked at them. They have invalidated spells. I raised my hand carelessly. I quickly passed in front of the kitchen and said, “I’m leaving.” I passed the hallway, then remembered I hadn’t said goodbye to Sadeq. I turned my head into the room. Sadeq was staring at the rug and thinking. He was leaning on one side. It was as if they had assassinated him a few moments ago. The bullet that hit him had done its job, and nothing was left for the general’s heavy and magnificent body to fall to the ground. I thought that no one had seen him like this. I didn’t say anything. Saying goodbye was useless.

## 12

I slowly closed the door of the room. I was cold. I was always cold after Mehrdad's departure. Sometimes I walked halfway home from the hospital. Tiredness helped me to stop my wandering. I gathered all my power to get home. I had no goals and ended up faking one. The house became my goal. Mom said, "It's cold. You'll be freezing." I wanted to freeze. That's why I wasn't happy when I got into the car. I didn't know why he came, but the heat did its job. It melted my ice. I felt a drop of heat in my eye socket. I said, "He lives his life, but I can't." The corner of my eye suddenly emptied. I turned my head down. A teardrop fell on my cold hand. The Silent Man was driving slowly and listening carefully to my words. He said, "You can succeed with your youth, cleverness, and wisdom." "If I was smart, no one could have fooled me." "Do you think so? You're smarter than these words! If it exists, you see everything, even the trap itself."

I admitted that I knew everything long ago but didn't have the will to deal with it in time. "You shouldn't go beyond a certain limit to withdraw on time. Naturally, you can't do it after that." I said, "I always thought people could fall in love in their imagination without touching each other's hand even once. I liked reading such stories. I started dreaming when I watched a movie where a couple didn't get together. I fell in love with this or that person so many times a day, but after Mehrdad, everything changed bit by bit. I was on the other side of the border until I came to my senses. I was distant from all of them. Suddenly, it was as if I matured for the second time. But this time was different. I just realized I'm a woman! Slowly, my senses got involved. I used to see him. I had to feel him next to me. I could hear his voice. I had to ensure he saw and felt me as much as I did every time. He paused for a moment to think about what I was saying. These things came to my mind when I was telling them. "Now I think it's a lie. You can't fall in

love with someone in your mind.” The silent man quietly replied, “It can be!” “It’s a fantasy!” I remembered your words when you called me delusional. I fell in love five out of four seasons in a year! I said, “I wish I could live with someone’s image, but it’s impossible, at least from now on. The emptiness I feel sometimes can’t be filled with anything.” He speeded down. He couldn’t drive fast and talk simultaneously.

“It’s not always a fantasy. I mean, it’s a spiritual experience as real as a physical one.” I looked out of the window. It was raining. Mehrdad didn’t like the rain. I remember on a rainy day, we went to covered places. He said, “I’m a chameleon.” I thought people would leave as they came. I didn’t know they wouldn’t go. They stay. They leave their traces even if they take everything with them. I wasn’t afraid of anything. I was saying if this didn’t happen, the next one would. I thought if I married and didn’t like it, it didn’t matter. I would get divorced. That’s simple!” He said, “But you see how important one’s choices are!” “I thought it was easy to achieve freedom. I didn’t know one day I’ll get tired of myself.” He said, “I know this feeling. I’ve lived with it.” I turned toward him. That fragile feeling didn’t match his powerful awe. I was curious. I couldn’t believe he had experienced such a feeling. “I worked insanely hard. I kept myself busy from dawn to dusk. I didn’t allow myself to think about her.” I said, “Her?” I thought it meant this silent man also has a “Her.” I had never heard him talking about a beloved woman. Once, he spoke of his Mom and several times about the woman in Iran’s constitutional and civil law. “Was it beneficial?” He stopped the car. We arrived. I didn’t get off. I wanted him to continue. His lower lips brought forward the upper one like a lever. A kind of movement that some people give to their lips to avoid speaking clearly.

“More or less. Sometimes you think you’re released. Sometimes similarities find you, and everything falls apart.” Suddenly, something flashed in my memory. I remembered the man

who was admitted to the hospital yesterday. He was in his thirties. His face was regular. I'd go to his room without any particular reason and ask about his feelings. I'd like to stand before him and only look at him. The reason became clear in a moment. Now I understand it was because of his chin. It was like Mehrdad's round chin. I had to leave the car, but I asked cautiously, "Did she love you too?" He remained silent for a century, "I was never sure."

### **13**

I hear Forough's voice. I look at her from the window. She is sitting facing the darkness and muttering something. Javid's Father had seen her from this window many nights. He heard her crying and wanted to go back to her bed. And one day, he goes to Forough's Father for an excuse. After beating around the bush, he said wholeheartedly, "This woman refuses compliance." Her Father growled, "To hell with her." And he forgot that his dentures don't allow him to say strong words, and sometimes they move close to his mouth. Forough's Father slapped her. A few weeks later, Javid's Father built a bathroom in the kitchen corner and got used to washing himself so he didn't smell like cheese and pickles. One night, when he thinks he smells good and has never been so clean, he hears a sound from the yard. He sits quietly behind the window. He sees Forough seated on the stairs and crying. Iran and Javid see their Father coming out of the room wearing a tank top and underpants, beating Forough, "Whore! I've brought a whore to my house." Every day that passes, he becomes more suspicious of Forough. When he comes home from his store, he asks, "Where did she go? Which neighbor came home? And why was she wearing so much makeup? One night Javid hears his Father with reddish eyes threatening Forough that he'll finally kill her. You said, "The past has been like a nightmare for Javid."

One day you said, “The day we were supposed to get married, he paused and finally said, “I’m happy.” I laughed, “He just said that after a long pause?” This time you laughed, “No, he said other things too.” “He said you are the woman I’ve always dreamed of.” I asked him, “What kind of woman am I?” And I thought it would be interesting to know what kind of woman you are from a man’s point of view. Until he says some adjectives, I’ve attributed some to myself, “*I’m a simple, proud, and shy woman.*” I was none of these in his mind. Instead, he said, “You are a woman who can be trusted forever. You’ll never be unfaithful.”

## **14**

Shiva! Thoughts are racing in my mind like a swarm of bees. I need to reexamine all of them. I came home from work that day. The phone was ringing. I picked it up. No one responded. I remembered Mehrdad’s wedding day when the phone rang, but no one was there. I felt the same familiar silence on the line. I held the phone and said, “Why don’t you talk?” I heard the Silent Man apologizing for being unable to talk immediately. He was always worried he’d disturb me, or if he did. I said, “He isn’t.” But it seemed to me he was disturbing. He was quiet. Usually, the silence is bothersome for me. It embarrasses me. I feel responsible for breaking it quickly. I feel ashamed of being talkative at that moment, though. I talked about Mehrdad. Talking about him was the only thing that connected the Silent Man and me. I said, “I don’t want to set Mehrdad’s car on fire anymore.” In my imagination, I’d spin him like a poppet and look at him from all sides. My eyes worked like a precise troubleshooting tool. I breathed a sigh of relief as I found every flaw I hadn’t seen before, and finally, I was the one leaving him. He was not the man I wanted.

I said, “I talked a lot.” And I wondered why he called. He said, “I’d like to listen.” Was he the same man’s voice that I saw driving the milky-colored car? Some people’s images are

created in their minds once and forever. The Silent Man was created in my mind so that he never wanted anything for himself. “To my voice? I’ve said these many times before!” And I thought, no one wants to confide with someone every day. He said, “To your voice!” I laughed. Mehrdad always said there is a tone in your voice. I woke up in the middle of the night with the phone ringing. I picked it up. There was no answer, “Are you speechless?” He replied, “Tell me a few more, then I can hang up.” “Why are you waking me up now, stupid? Does it have a tone?” And at that moment, I regretted my harsh but sarcastic tone. He said, “No! It’s clear, and there is no sadness in it.” I said, “The first time I met you was accidental, but not the second time.” “No, it wasn’t!” said the voice behind the line. “Why?” “It’s a difficult question, but the answer makes everything easy.” I insistently said, “This is important to me.” He didn’t answer. I said, “Is it because of philanthropy?” He laughed, “Why philanthropy?” I again asked, “Do you want to help me?” He paused and then said, “I don’t know exactly!” Anyway, I was thankful for his help and couldn’t have done it without him. “It’s more like a goodbye than a thank you!” He said. Then he said I also helped him. Without asking what kind of help he was referring to, I continued, “Well, we’re even now!”

He became silent as if he forced me to remain silent and not say anything immediately. I couldn’t understand anything very well. I figured out that the silent man loves silence. It was his speaking manner. That’s why he didn’t keep silent so that you remember something. His silence wasn’t an ordinary pause or a pause between two words. It was precisely the word. I got scared. I couldn’t believe he wanted to talk to me in this language. I wanted to say something, letting him know I wasn’t interested in learning his vague and obscure language and reminding him that I’d like another love language full of familiar and meaningful words. My hand was sweaty, and I felt

a dumb person whose face was scrunched up, and it was difficult to get even a word out of her throat.

## **15**

Shiva! Get up. Let's talk. I always wanted to sit together and chat like two sisters. What was wrong with stretching our legs, throwing sunflower seeds to the place, being rude or sloppy, and not blaming ourselves for these? Backbiting people and being vulgar for some moment, as you said. I had come to talk to you that day, but I was jealous of you. You had always taken the referee's role on the football field. I said, "Indeed, you're Mr. Hossein!" You were Mr. Hossein even when you were mopping the kitchen floor, or the day you were tutoring Yalda in math. She asked, "Mr. Hossein?" Sometimes she called you, "Mr. Mom!" This one was new to her. You said, "Aqa Jan named me Hossein since I was in my mom's womb. When he noticed I wasn't Hossein, he still wanted to call me Hossein. I remained Mr. Hossein for him until I was seven or eight years old. My hair was always short, and I always acted like a boy, climbing over the doors and walls." Your body still had a boyish figure. After having two children, you had no fat belly, and if a ball was thrown towards you in the middle of the street, you'd shoot it at the children's playground with a stubborn boy's gesture.

I was sitting on the stairs leading to Forough's room. I usually sat on the third step and leaned on the wooden railings. I liked the fringed crimson carpet attached to the stairs with old clips. The whole house and part of the yard could be seen from there. I was looking from the same stairs that day. Your short hair made your long and delicate neck visible. "He was hoping for me to be born as a boy and helped him. One time he interpreted a bright person who came to his dream and said to name the unborn child Hossein. It was for respect of the holy acquaintances that called me Hossein. Sometimes he called me Mr. Hossein. Mom called me

Shiva and Aqa Jan, Hossein.” You pointed fingers to your chest like someone carelessly crossed, “Before they appear and grow, I was Mr. Hossein. I hated that I had to become Shiva gradually. I hated the changes in my body. The first time I noticed those famous period signs in my underwear, I cried a lot.” I laughed, “Still, you’re Mr. Hossein with the way of describing the famous sign of puberty.”

I told Yalda that Mom couldn’t give birth to Mr. Hossein with the third pregnancy either, and the baby died a few days later. She ignored Aqa Jan, who told her to give birth to another baby, Mr. Hassan too. Because that unknown man had come to his dreams and told him to name the child Hassan, then, some nights, he came home late. Yalda mischievously asked, “Did Grandma know?” You responded, “Those days, everything was clear.” I said, “Whenever Aqa Jan was bad-tempered, he’d say you’re unable to give birth to a boy.” Mom held my hands, and we went to a soothsayer. She said, “Your Father has a concubine, so she can bring him two boys. If she does so, we’ll be miserable.” She’d buy a candle and go to the shrine. “It was fun. I still like to go to a soothsayer.” You suggested, “Don’t go far! Give me the money, and I’ll tell you the future.” The day I showed you Mehrdad’s first gift, you said, “Beware of Greeks bearing gifts, Sholeh!”

You put another music tape in the player. It was a guitar. Yalda liked it, “Let it be.” “You still hesitated! Don’t worry. I give you hope.” I thought you couldn’t. I just realized hope is like an animal’s eyes that shines in the dark, and not every eye has it. Despite your eyes being walleyed, you had the highest vision. You crawled on your knees behind the fence. You passed my hand through it, looked at my palm, and then my eyes. You knew I came to talk. You encouraged me with mockery. I told you about the flaking around my fingers, the size around my waist that had increased these days, and the store that other nurses in the hospital had found that

sold great shoes. In spite of not wanting to say anything about the Silent Man, I came here to backbite and critique him freely.

I came to tell you the Silent Man had returned, and I got in his car again. I came to say that my eye's debugging system needs to be fixed, and I don't know what could be wrong with talking to him. He is reliable. He doesn't have any purpose. But how would I know? Maybe he does! I don't know. It seems he doesn't know either. Sometimes he doesn't have his usual confident and omniscient look. He's kind of wandering. Maybe he is bored of being alone. Sometimes, when I talked, despite being acquainted with me, I realized he was looking at me as though I were a new passenger not knowing how to communicate. I pretended I didn't understand and wanted to get off with an excuse. He stopped the car and responded to me inattentively.

## **16**

I hear Forough's sigh. I look out of the window. She stands up slowly. She takes her ewer and gets up one step. She stands up in front of the room where I am. She is so slow that I can't believe she went to her husband's shop one day and said she wanted a divorce! Thinking that his wife wanted some cleaning powder or a few grams of cheese, her husband asked like a professional shopkeeper what she wanted. Forough said, "Breakaway!" Javid's Father is doubtful, "Break Day?" He says it surprisingly. Forough has to open her throat as if she had gone to the dentist to check her teeth. Javid's Father leaves the shop to his assistant, and they go straight to Forough's Father's house. She doesn't say a word on the way. When they reach her Father's house, Forough loses courage and slowly trembles, but she doesn't regret it. Her Father asks, "I want to hear it from your mouth; what do you want?" And Forough says, "BREAKAWAY!"

The *Tarzan* movie and the *Six Million Dollar Man* series were popular at that time. Forough's sixty-year-old Father wasn't a big fan of the film. But that day, he acts like Tarzan, stands up quickly, puts his hand on the windowsill, and gets ready to jump into the yard. Forough had already gone out; now, she was in her Father's range. Her Father jumps and grabs Forough's chador. The puff of her chador falls on the ground like a parachute's umbrella that has detached.

Forough used to say, "Now she doesn't like to go anywhere else outside." Whenever Javid discussed the home issue, she would say furiously, "Wait until I die, then do whatever you want." Javid said, "This woman has Noah's lifetime!" Mom said, "Because she protects herself a lot. May God preserve her! Her jaw moves constantly." You said, "This home is good for now. Just it needs a little change." Javid replied, "Disaster written all over it, Shiva! Do you understand?" Javid wanted to build multi apartments instead of this house. Then you could sell it and move to a better neighborhood. However, Javid doesn't have enough investment for that. But he had persistence, and everyone knew he'd get it if he wanted something. You lowered your voice, "Your Father transferred some portion of this property under her name. You may be able to convince her with flattery, but not by force!" Mom always said, "God forbid the grocer who became stupid and registered this house to a strange woman. He made Iran a refugee of exile and Javid homeless." Javid replied, "Merrily!"

He puffed on his cigarette. This is one of those things that Nietzsche said, "Don't forget your whip when you go to her." And he repeatedly puffed so that he drowned in smoke. Mom muttered, "Yes, by God!" Nima went to the sofa and said, "What does whipping mean?" You said, "Hush!" You put your finger on your lips and said, "Hiss!" Javid became bloody-minded and said, "Whip means lash!" And his neck turned red. You looked at us with embarrassment

and at him surprisingly, like someone who heard something impolite for the first time. Javid waved his hand and impatiently said, "Leave it!" At that point, your feigned surprise gave way to an old, deep annoyance that couldn't be hidden. Javid said, "Your hissing annoyed others." He slammed the door and went out. It was the first time I saw you two no longer like a single soul in two forms. Something that Javid likes to remind and show off sometimes. Your back was facing us. You were a lonely soul in a lonely form.

## 17

Shiva! I didn't tell you I was going to the Silent Man's milky-colored car the following days. It's not new; it's old, but it's safe, like home, and different from all the cars in the world, even with Mehrdad's car, which was fast, and the sound of the car's recorder shook the windows. I didn't say the Silent Man's car has no recorder, and its small mirror is dark. Inside, it's quiet, like an empty house. The Silent Man neither overtakes nor swerves. He drives slowly. I didn't say I can talk about everything in this car that smells like new shoes. I can speak without concern, without fear of judgment. He put my mind at ease with his behavior, and I'm comfortable. There was no place for anxiety in his car like I experienced in Mehrdad's car, nor the breathtaking violence and reconciliations. His car was quiet, like himself. It was a mobile home where you could take refuge and forget the outside world. Sometimes I even forgot about him. We never get off. We don't eat anything. It's unlike Mehrdad's car, which was always full of junk food, and the music never stopped. I can't stop thinking about Mehrdad in his car. I can't stop comparing. His car comes parallel to the car I'm in, and my mind is like a highway where cars drive side by side in each lane.

Sitting in the Silent Man's car is like a joyless, humble trip devoid of desire. It's like moving austerity. It's not like Mehrdad, who forced me to close my eyes and when I opened

them, we were in front of a luxury restaurant or an unknown cafe or asked me to fasten my seat belt so that he could fly the car, or asked me several stupid questions and made me cry. Windows are always up and dusty. I sit in the deep-set front seat and look ahead. From where I'm sitting, I can see his white, feminine hand on the gear, and when I see him from the side view, I remember the shuttle drivers who don't think about the route or the passenger. They just drive. He doesn't say anything about himself. Sometimes it becomes hard to bear his silence, and sometimes, he falls to thinking about himself so much that he forgets I'm also in the car. I like to snap or smash open the door to take him out of his perpetual mood of contemplation.

Sometimes I think I'm out somewhere, and he is looking for me. Or maybe he is looking for someone else. We pass through the streets. He usually takes less repeated routes. He is like someone who has a mission to identify unknown places in the city. He passes through the old alleys and ends in its crowded squares. He stops next to the newspaper stand. He buys a newspaper, and again, he drives. He doesn't care about the arcades, stores, and shopping centers, but he has sharp eyes to see the spectacular things in nature. He drives in the luxury streets and sometimes parks next to a curb. He lowers the window to the size of his knuckle and listens to the outside. Maybe he remembers a memory. Sometimes we move so slowly that I think we're walking and can see the milky-colored car from the outside crossing with two silent passengers.

I ask myself, "*What am I doing here in this old car next to a man who doesn't even make a promise to himself?*" Nothing brings me great pain or joy. Sometimes his eyes become incredibly young. I'm proud that I brought the light of life to the two dull eyes of this emotionless man. My selfishness gets satisfied. Then I hesitated. How do I know if my presence made him happy? But I'm not the kind of person who can live with doubt for a long time. I say,

“It’s like you haven’t had relationships with women?” He laughs, “Do you mean I’m a eunuch?” I want to say you’re a eunuch but not one of those old ones in the harem. You’re one of those modern ones who don’t know how to love women. I bite my tongue. He says, “There have been few women in his life, but he didn’t have a close relationship with his sister.” Then he asks, “What about you? I respond, “My sister is perfect, but I don’t know what kind of intimacy it is that we can’t tell each other our secrets. I haven’t even told her anything about you.” He says seriously, “Don’t say anything from now on!” I’m surprised by his words. My hand is still on the handle, “But why?” “Understanding this relationship is difficult for them and will be complicated.” That night, I strongly desired to tell her about the Silent Man. Now that I was forbidden to say it, I couldn’t think of it as normal and natural. Hiding this issue changed the situation quickly. It was from that day that our occasional relationship took another meaning, became mysterious, and now I remember thinking about him that night for the first time before going to sleep.

## **18**

I sat on the stairs and looked at Sadeq from the railings that day. He was sitting on the kitchen chairs. You were talking about people you knew. You were like a survivor of an army, and your conversation about the army seemed endless. You poured tea for him into a big glass and put the ashtray next to his hand. He was fat, and his chin was one of those that gave his face peace and personality. He was an engineer but sat and talked like a professor. The thought of living with a man like him made me depressed. I thought at least he could guarantee something that Mehrdad couldn’t provide. You were the one who said later, “There is no guarantee of anything! A Relationship isn’t a refrigerator or washing machine that has a guarantee. One day it’s there, and the next day it’s gone. If someone offers it, he is lying.”

Javid asked you to come to the room. There was the day you bought new sofas and showed them to us enthusiastically. He asked us to touch wood and sit on it. Mom was sitting on one of those and didn't get up for Javid's pleasantness. Sadeq came to the room with the glass of tea and turned to me, "What's up?" He didn't mean to learn about the news. Javid always knew the latest news; he wanted to talk. Javid said, "It's his job. He asks others to talk, and he is the listener. It was also his job as a priest in prison. He listened to bubbles and then would like to sit in a corner like Buddha. I told him that you smell like mysticism, buddy. Maybe if he lived in another country, he'd have become a researcher, or perhaps a social worker."

I talked about the truck parked on the street. On the trunk, someone had written, "Barking up the wrong tree!" "It means opium," Mom said. Javid went to the kitchen, "Justice!" Justice was one of his favorite words. He brought some glasses of water and put them on the table. "No, I don't think so!" Sadeq commented. He coughed, and it took a while to say, "It means love!" He said love as if it was a distant dream and far away from people. I asked, "Do you mean it's not real?" And I gratuitously choked up. Javid wondered, "How?" He turned to Javid. "Mr. Engineer! You were there because of your love for people and a better life!" Love always became universal and masculine, in Javid's words. Sadeq didn't say anything, but his fat stomach shook with a whisper coming from his mouth. Javid filled his glass, "Isn't it?" Sadeq lowered his chin to his chest, "I'm not sure!" Javid raised his glass and waited for Sadeq to do the same, "Are you regretting?" Sadeq remained in the same position as if he didn't have a neck, "I haven't felt regret. But I don't want to live for a particular idea anymore." "Is it possible?" You were confused as if Sadeq was the only doctor for this disease.

"Living like this is being up in the air! It's like being without any shelter in a war, like being homeless!" You always talk like that. You were afraid of making everything personal. Any

problem you had, was related to humanity and people, not you alone. Javid emphasized, “Exactly!” You frowned and raised your hand, “Wait, Javid.” You turned to Sadeq. You wanted him to talk. The answer to your question was in his hand. Javid said, “You wait! You know, Mr. Engineer! He doesn’t talk until he’s lit up!” He raised his glass, “Now see how his behavior changed. Then you can ask him whatever you want.” Sadeq continued, “Give me some yogurt if you don’t mind.” You said, “It’s over.” “Don’t bother me anymore.” Sadeq used to say, “If you don’t stick to something, you can think more freely and even more humanely.” You put your hand on your cheek like you had a severe toothache. Javid went to the children’s room, told Nima to turn down the TV, and asked where Yalda was. I pointed to Forough’s room. Javid grumbled and checked the fridge. A plate fell on the ground. Javid opened and slammed the cabinet doors.

Mom said, “Stop narrating! Shiva, get up and see what Javid wants.” Your elbow was on the sofa arm, and you gazed at Sadeq. It was like you were planning to escape somewhere. But time was short, and you were careful not to miss anything from each other’s words. Another plate fell on the kitchen floor. I said, “We don’t have yogurt.” You didn’t get up, and it wasn’t out of laziness. You weren’t lazy anytime. You were agile and tried to make life easy. You look at everything concisely but masterfully, like a janitor who isn’t very kind but deeply committed. You were attentive everywhere to everyone, especially Javid. But something has changed. You didn’t sit on the new sofa even once that day. You ignored Javid’s frown and didn’t go to clean up around the house. I said, “I’ll buy it.” And I went out before you said anything.

The weather was hot. The local supermarket in your neighborhood had stored yogurt and milk boxes. A few egg trays were outside, and someone was taking them inside. I stayed and gazed at the eggs. I just wanted to think about what I was looking at. I wanted my eyes to hold

the rope of my thoughts. My mind was running. I was walking long distances and didn't know where to go. I got on the elevator and forgot which floor to get off at the hospital. I bought yogurt and walked again. I looked at myself in the shop window and sat on the station bench for no reason. The bus came. Some people entered, and someone looked at me from behind the window. When he left, I looked at the cars. The station was full. All heads turned in the direction where the bus was coming. I stood on the street side with some other people. We waited. The light turned green. I don't remember when I walked or jumped from the gutter. I was shocked by my angry voice, "*Shame on you!*" Worried that someone might hear my voice, I hurried. I cursed myself. I was right. Shame on me that I'm still looking for the dark- blue car on the street.

## **19**

I wrapped a green silk scarf around my hair and shook my head so that my hair fell away from my face. I liked that they kept coming back to my face. The Silent Man turned to me slowly and looked at me admiringly. I opened my bag and took out a stuffed mouse, "I bought it for you, for your car." I grabbed the mouse's neck and thought It was like bringing a naughty boy to a nursing home. He frowned and turned away with the expression of a taxi driver whose passenger had given him a check. I said, "It's a gift!" The mouse was in my hand. He said, "It'll ruin it!" "It ruins what?" "The relationship."

I didn't understand why a patient, considerate man would suddenly become violent. It wasn't the first time he made me upset. If it were Mehrdad, I'd say he is rude and foolish and would throw the mouse in his car. But there, I couldn't do any of these in this car. I put the mouse in my bag and took out a small mirror and lipstick. It was the only reaction I could think of at that moment. I knew he didn't like applying makeup in the car. If it were Javid, he'd say vulgar femininity. The Silent Man didn't give a name to anything. He didn't put on the branding,

but I understood he hates it if I put makeup in the car. He increased the speed. With annoyance, I said, “What kind of relationship is this? What’s its name?” “I don’t know.” I said, “It must have a name.” “Women love to put a name on everything.” I licked my lips, “I get confused.” He slowed down the car and said quietly, “Names only serve to limit life.” I looked at him. I couldn’t recognize him, “They are good for awareness and helping to get out of indecisiveness.” I didn’t know if he was simple or intelligent. Sometimes he was like a simple, innocent boy and occasionally clever and mysterious. I didn’t know what he wanted, and I said it.

He started, “I want to know people. I was always curious about them. It was my dream to travel and meet different people.” It was as if I had given him an essay title, and he was writing for himself. “So, I’m your lab rat.” I thought I should buy him a fat, mustached rat instead of the normal one. He said, “Why are you always looking for another meaning? It’s a simple friendship.” I swallowed, “The relationship between a man and woman is never simple.” I thought his voice was full of sarcasm when he said, “Is it so difficult for you to imagine this relationship?” I said, “*Oh God! Another omniscient one who thinks he knows everything. Mehrdad wasn’t intellectual; he was naive.*” “I don’t like people who make me look stupid.” And I missed Mehrdad so much, who didn’t hide behind politeness and morality. He was always understandable. I said, “I have to get off.” He stopped, and I left.

## **20**

The next room’s door opens. I listen. It’s Javid’s slippers rustling and going to the bathroom. Bladder filling is the last thing he notices. With the prosperity of his workplace, he asked Sadeq to be his partner. After months of unemployment, it was considered a good suggestion. But Sadeq said he is not sure yet. Javid loved helplessness like this to offer a solution. He talked about the role of welfare that shouldn’t be ignored. With relative welfare, personal wishes can be

fulfilled. He said he could understand Sadeq's situation and has been in the same position for some time, but he knows what to do now. He said financial success was one thing they always underestimated. With material and spiritual well-being growth, a person becomes cultural and no longer obeys force. Javid talked about culture, politics, and the existing political parties.

Sadeq interrupted him. He said he doesn't trust any force in or close to power. He said that he spent the most critical years of his life following this or that group and idea, and now he wants to follow himself. Slowly and calmly, he said he was tired of others who assigned him tasks and showed him the way, "There, I thought a lot." You told Nima to go to his room since being awake until this time doesn't make sense. Mom said, "Bring my chador. We also should leave." Our house was very close. If Mom were in the mood, we'd walk. Javid was still talking. Sadeq said, "One day, I woke up and had forgotten why I was there." "You don't seem like you want to go?" Mom asked me. I was standing in the middle of the room, "I also forgot why I'm here," and looked for something. Mom reminded me, "Your chador." Her tone was like the doctor's who reminded me at the hospital, "Urinary catheter." It was as if I had heard this word for the first time. The doctor looked astonishingly at me, "The patient needs a catheter!"

Javid asked Sadeq to think more about the workshop. Sadeq said that he was thinking of leaving, to leave here. You asked, "Where?" And asked Nima to brush his teeth before going to bed. Sadeq repeated in surprise in a way that you don't know where? As if suddenly ordered to stop, you stopped with a tray in hand. You pretended you were dizzy. You blushed. You looked tired. You insisted on doing everything by yourself. I haven't seen you complain about it. I can vividly imagine that night and remember the details I didn't notice. Now I understand it was the thing that made you freeze. It was the thing that brought a mysterious and happy smile to Sadeq's lips at that moment.

Nima asked me to wait until he showed me his essay. He went upstairs and came back with his notebook. I turned some pages. He said, "Grandma Forough spits crookedly." His essay was about aliens that love chocolate. "It's funny," I said. He said quietly, "I don't like to brush." Sadeq turned to you and said, "Don't bother yourself." He took Nima's hand and continued, "This child is brushing his teeth now." I suddenly turned and grabbed Nima's arm, "Wait! What did you say about Forough?" He answered, "When I went upstairs, she said I spit crookedly." I ran there. Forough had a stroke.

## **21**

Do you remember Shiva? You came to take care of Forough. I visited her every hour. The stroke was mild and dismissed. Forough looked at you and asked about Javid. He had come only once. You said, "He's busy." Forough raised her eyebrows and weakly said, "No, it's not true." Her mouth was slightly crooked, and speaking wasn't easy for her. I lifted her pillow. You defended him, "He doesn't have time for us these days. He must run the workshop alone. He always comes home late." Forough responded with difficulty, "Bear a long-lasting grudge!" "Javid?" He never talked about the past. He said the attachment to the past robs a person's ability to harmonize with the modern world. He didn't hang out with his aunts and uncles either. In his opinion, an intellectual relationship was more important than a blood relationship. Forough was the only one who came directly from his past into his life, and Javid didn't intend to hide his displeasure about this. "It was the same from the beginning," Forough whispered. I said she should rest up and then flattened her bed.

Forough faltered, "I only had a perfume and two lipsticks for cosmetics. The perfume smelled good, and when it was finished, Javid's Father bought and hid it. Only a bit from one of the lipsticks has remained. I used a match to take it out. In those days, there weren't many like

now. I applied it to my lips, looked at myself in the pool water, in the mirror, and behind the spoon, and liked it. One day Javid found and smashed it. I sympathized with her, “Don’t be sad dear Forough! I’ll buy it for you.” She slowly raised her finger to her chin, “Now that I don’t have lips?” You were lost in your thoughts, “I wish the problem would end with lipstick.” Forough didn’t hear but said, “I’ve done much for him. I did everything for him, but he couldn’t believe it. He didn’t believe my affection. Iran was different. If she were here now, she wouldn’t leave me alone. But Javid never loved me like his mother. He once called me a whore. He said it like his Father. He was already grown up. I’ll never forget it. His father could say this, but Javid had no right.”

She sighed, “If Muhammad Ali were alive, he’d come.” She showed me his picture. It was an old black-and-white photo. Muhammad Ali’s coat and pants belied his body. He had put one leg forward more than usual as if he was leaning on an imaginary electric light pole. Both were thin. Forough was slightly taller than Muhammad Ali. She was wearing a simple white dress and had a big bag in her hand. She had no shoes. She said, “When they took pictures, I took them quickly because of Muhammad Ali.” It was raining outside. The patient in the next bed was moaning. The room was dark and dimly lit. You stood up, squeezing her hand, “I’ll come tomorrow.” I said, “I’ll stay here tonight.”

Forough was staring out, “He locked the courtyard door. The yard was big and had two gardens. His mother was shouting from the neighbor’s house to close the water. Her voice is still in my ears. Muhammad Ali threw my clothes on the rope and jumped to the pond’s edge.” Tears came down from one of her eyes while the other was dry, “He made rain for me. He asked me to move under the rain and let me watch you.”

It's late at night. I wish I could pass out like you, close my eyes to fall asleep, and forget everything. The Silent Man asked, "Are you running away from yourself or me?" I said, "Both!" I'd come home from work by taxi and pretend I was sleeping. I had no patience to deal with Mom asking me so many questions. She asked about every girl she knew in my hospital. She wanted to know about the patient who was undergoing chemotherapy. Some days when I was in the mood, I told her about everything and everyone, but now, I couldn't even bear myself. I always enjoyed walking on the sidewalks. I liked going to the big shops. I planned to go to the park with other girls in the hospital, but it had been a long time since I hadn't enjoyed these basic things.

Mom said the older woman next door asked me to check her blood pressure. I went to their house and heard our phone ringing from there. I thought maybe it was the Silent Man, and I didn't know whether it was better to be him. I knew it wasn't Mehrdad any longer, and this despair helped me. I didn't want to fill his void with something I didn't wish to do wholeheartedly. I promised the neighbor I'd take her blood pressure the next day and return home. I said to myself, *"From now on, I'll live free and independently without depending on anything or anyone. I'll continue my education, travel, learn English, and exercise regularly. I was reading a new book I had just bought, learning the secrets of self-confidence, and thought I had a home, mom, job, and income. All of these should make me happy and thankful."* I said to myself, *"Don't forget to smile."* One day, when I thought everything was normal, like a relaxed, wise woman, I got into a car driven by a silent man. I masked how much I missed his reticence, quietness, and lonesomeness. He stopped the car and turned back with his whole body. It was my first time sitting in the back seat. "Are you upset with me again?" I didn't say anything.

My hand was still on the door handle. I shouldn't get in. There was a kind of personal kindness in his voice whose effect stays with you for a long time, like the smell of expensive perfume. He said, "You shouldn't bother yourself so much." In these few weeks, my whole life was an exercise not to bother myself but to be free and happy. I should have told him these things. I had to raise my head proudly and say I was not upset about anything, but my head didn't obey; it was down. He laughed and said, "Reconcile?" His hand remained there, between the two seats. I had shaken hands with him before, but it was the first time it had a different meaning. It was the first time that my hand was so aware. It separated from the handle, slowly went to his hand, and stayed there. The same hand that seemed cold and shaky in the past now seemed warm and quickly flowed into my veins.

### **23**

That day, everything was quiet when I came home from the hospital. Mom wasn't watching TV either. Every day when I came home, she'd tell me what the news was saying about the retirees. She followed news of floods and earthquakes, and when she saw the pickpocket's censored faces, she frowned. She was in the kitchen. She bent on her lean back and cleaned the lentils. Her thick black stockings were old and gathered on her ankles. I told myself, "*I must buy a band for her.*" "What are you doing?" Instead of answering, her toes jerked violently. I took my bonus card from my bag and said, "We're going shopping in the afternoon." I said she could spend the bonus on her vow. Gradually, the wrinkles around her mouth disappeared, and she said she came from your house. She said you brought Forough's bed downstairs and cared for her like a nurse. I said, "That's good!"

Forough was always living upstairs before she got sick. When she came down, you entertained yourself with something. You didn't want to get used to your home. You kept your

distance from everyone with your polite behavior. Sometimes I thought even Javid couldn't cross a hundred boundaries you had. But tonight, you passed all of them at once. Mom was upset, "I have no luck! No one would have cared if I had had a stroke instead of Forough. The only thing left was to spoon-feed her. Then when I go to her house, I have to get up with these painful knees and make tea for myself." "So, you are jealous of Forough?" I said. She tilted her mouth, "What?! She can't get a fly off her face!" She put the tray between her hands, "But she had her makeup done. Her jewelry was on, and she leaned on a pillow like a new mother. Shiva was standing next to her like a pale maid. I asked what had happened. She didn't say anything. I told her to pay more attention to Javid since he rarely comes home. Don't you think he's cheating? She scolded me in a way that I was scared of her. She asked if it even fit Javid to do these. He's not one of those philanderers. His mother took him to the public bathroom when he was a child. Javid turned his face to the wall and said, "Take me out from here; women smell sticky." We both laughed. Mom was happy describing these events.

"She was so angry that I didn't understand if she was praising Javid or badmouthing him. I didn't dare to ask anything. I was speechless." "Didn't Forough say anything?" "Not at first, but she laughed meaningfully with her crooked mouth. She is the expert on these things." I again asked, "What did she say next?" "She said Javid is one of those men who play with himself but doesn't belittle himself in front of any woman." I said, "Unless a woman belittles herself!" "I said this too, but Shiva said no! Women like this are disgusting to him. She said Javid wouldn't approach a woman who can't admire him." "Why was she upset then?" "I don't know. She didn't nag either, but she was grumpy.

You always defended Javid. You'd never be a partner of women backbiting their husbands. You weren't compliant with any woman. You had a prejudice against him, which was

prominent in the family. I asked whether Mom was aware of all this. She said, “I didn’t say anything. She suddenly became a genie.” “She suddenly turned erratic,” Mom sighed, “Who isn’t?”

## **24**

I’m cold. I threw a blanket over to you and lay down next to you. There is no pillow. I put my bag under my head. I came to your house. I knew everything was mixed up. You said you beat Nima. I said, “That’s ok!” You responded, “Hitting a defenseless child is easy.” I got gloomy. I came to talk about yourself, but you expressed the Declaration of Children’s Rights to me. I said, “You didn’t get angry so easily. You’re so relaxed that I always think you’ll live two hundred years.” Your calmness was insane. When everyone was down, slapping their hands, and was sorrowful, or even cried, you were as indifferent as the death agent. If they announced someone died, you would say I must remember to buy a black scarf. When Javid excitedly talked about slaughtering people in the corner of the world, you asked him to give you a glass of water. Javid looked around and didn’t know what to give. You reminded him of a glass. He gave the glass and continued talking. Gradually his voice got louder, and his mouth foamed. You asked, “Please give me the saltshaker too.”

I’d dive to Nima if he fell, but you said he’d get up. Mom got worried about the jacket I was buying for her and said if I die and don’t wear it, give it to Azam’s daughters. I said, “God forbid!” But you said, “Azam has six daughters. Which one do you mean?” Mom and I used to go to Aqa Jan’s cemetery, but you didn’t come. You said, “Aqa Jan has now received his Ph.D. in osteology.” I said, “You might be upset from somewhere!” “He was playing. I told him to play quietly and go to his room. He didn’t listen, and I didn’t understand what had happened. I immediately followed him. I was nervous. He cried so much that he finally fell asleep. I sat next

to his bed until morning.” I said, “You shouldn’t read all those child psychology books. Throw them away. Beating isn’t always bad. Children couldn’t grow up with books, but with beating, yes!” “You talked like Mom,”

Your hair fell on both sides of your face, and you put your chin between your knees. “She beats us well!” You raised your head and said, “Mom was illiterate and always busy with the house, but I am not. This is the difference between me and Mom.” The problem was here. You always thought you differed from others, including me, Mom, and Forough. Being different from us was one of your honors. I continued, “Simple women would raise their children better than these obsessed, educated ones.” You said, “It’s not like this at all. Have we grown up well? Full of complex and mental problems.” I was shocked. Your confession was different than usual. It wasn’t like the objections you and Javid always made from society and others, and it wasn’t the same with your initiative. “We haven’t been taught how to live. We can talk about the universe for hours but not deal with the simplest problems. We have grown up but aren’t educated. Last night when I was next to Nima’s bed, I was thinking about where I’d know what to do. I didn’t even know who to talk with.” I muttered, “Javid.” You grinned, “If he knew I beat Nima, he’d buy him expensive toys. When Yalda gets upset, he gives her money. If I frown, he buys me a coffee maker, and when he gets bored, he buys a brand-name jacket for himself. Before, when we didn’t have money, he solved our problems with arguments, slogans, and advice. Now he has money and wants to solve them with money, but the problem remains in its place.”

I said, “Let it go! He’s a child and will forget it soon. See how he plays. He doesn’t care.” “But he always remembers. His appearance doesn’t show anything, but he knows everything.” Then you put your hands under your feet, “Do you remember our old house?” I did. “The kitchen was on the other side of the yard. It didn’t have a door either. It had a floral curtain with six

holes. I was in the bathroom. I called Mom. She didn't come. She was busy as always. She said get up like that. I stayed there. They tied a sack around the tap and hung a lantern from the pipe; my legs were pins and needles. Then Mom came. She forgot I was in the bathroom and went crazy. She lifted me by my shoulders and put me in the snowy yard. She did this so quickly that I didn't have time to pull up my pants. She buried and cursed me. Then she gathered the dirty snow from the corners around me."

You got up. You didn't want to tell a sad story, "I still remember Mom's lips. They were shivering from cold and anger. I sat like that. I only remember my right ear was hot. It must have turned red. I thought it was like a rooster's crown. I stared at the kitchen curtain, which seemed to be frozen. It was straight, and I counted the holes. There were six. I just have to die to forget these tragic events."

## 25

The Silent Man was lost in his thoughts and seemed driving towards the other world. The sun was shining. The highway was empty. I had to remind him that I was sitting there and not losing interest in the world behind us. He returned where he had gone with an apologetic smile. I asked, "You overthink things! Tell me what you have achieved?" He said, "Nowhere!" I again asked, "Have you ever gotten the result?" He rested his arm on the steering wheel, "I know the world is endless. There is no answer for that either." "You talk like old people!" "Well, I am!" I said, "Indeed you are!" I glanced at him. He wasn't upset, "Men at your age are just beginning to understand what life means." Javid used to say, "I just understand how to live. I always said let's eat, get rid of it, and get on to more important things. Now I understand I betrayed this stomach for forty years." He responded, "A person's experiences are more important. You can't think otherwise when your eyes are opened to life and understand it for the first time. If you get hurt

once, life will lose its true flavor forever. Then you can't look at the world as something valuable."

It was hot. I leaned my head on the chair and blinked. It was as if we were driving straight into the sun. I asked, "So the world isn't valuable?" He turned and looked at me with the attention of someone who wanted to remember the sight before him, "Sometimes, yes." He passed the highway exit. My eyes were looking for the next sign. I read the advertisement word above the pedestrian bridge: "Bliss." "If you put aside lies like happiness and bliss and some other words, then you'll be able to recognize life's precious moments." He looked at me again and passed another exit. When we were going out of this highway, I wanted to say that my eyes caught his eyes. He said, "You're a beautiful girl." He said this like a father and seemed sorry that I looked beautiful in his eyes. I tried to answer his compliment with a smile but couldn't. Everything became serious in front of this person. I showed him the exit sign.

## **26**

On your anniversary, you didn't have guests like in previous years. Only Sadeq had gone to the workshop that day, and Javid brought him to the house. Javid was excited that night and said, "We've all been hit, but we survived." Sadeq said, "That is true for some people." Javid continued, "Our generation should strive for this life now." I put the plates on the table and said mindlessly, "To what?" Nima wanted Cheetos and was insisting. Javid said, "As you can see, for the current generation." And he wanted to continue to say, "The young generation sells the planet for chips and Cheetos." Sadeq laughed, "At least they know what they want. It's easy!" Javid wasn't satisfied. He was talking about identity and historical mission. You were moving from the room to the kitchen, "

I don't know about the historical mission, but I understand historical captivity." I laughed at your mischievous attitude.

Javid was impressed. His stare demanded an explanation, but you said he had to bring the cake. You were wearing a crimson coat and skirt. You called the child to take a picture together. Sadeq was the photographer. I was worried. My hair was a mess. Javid said, "If Sadeq has the camera, we must pose until tomorrow." Javid was right. Sadeq seemed to have forgotten that he had to take a picture. I touched my hair. Mom said, "You had to brush it." "This is more natural," Sadeq said. Sadeq liked being natural. Once, Javid insisted Nima recited Hafiz's poetry and looked proud of everyone. Sadeq said, "Let him enjoy his childhood." The other day when Yalda talked about freedom in Javid's style and was applauded, Sadeq nodded.

I got the camera and said, "Let's have Sadeq join you, and I'll take some more pictures." Sadeq disagreed and returned to his usual seat. He sank into the sofa. I turned on the chandeliers. You were now in the light. I didn't have to ask you to smile. You always have one ready. I looked at you from behind the camera. Javid put his hand on Yalda's shoulder. Nima was in the middle. You were standing on the side and weren't smiling. I asked, "Sister, where is your smile?" You were distracted. Sadeq snapped from behind my head. It was loud. We all saw that your soul returned from where it had gone, as a bright smile spread across your face and your natural beauty reappeared as if out of nowhere. Your usual dignity became sweet and feminine with that smile. I went back and tripped over Sadeq's feet which were behind me. I turned and saw him staring at you from where he was sitting. He was in a dimly lit corner of the room. He wasn't paying attention to me and didn't hear my apology when I said it was nearly crushing his leg. It was the second time I surprised him. He put the back of his fingers to his face and looked like

someone who died untimely and unintentionally. He had a stunned and failed look, like a dead man.

## 27

Getting into the Silent Man's car had become a ritual I used to participate in. The Silent Man attended with his unique traditions that were monotonous and made me tired. He was no longer a stone. He wasn't my patient stone. He was a human, a gentleman, and wasn't foolish. It was impossible to get closer to him than the limit he determined. He was startled like a horse, "I don't like to be in someone's possession. I don't expect the same from you. This is a good point in this relationship. There are no expectations." "You mean I shouldn't have any expectations?" "No, you shouldn't!" He slowed down the car as if we were going up a hill. I said, "I know why I'm here." "Where?" "In this moving temple." He laughed loudly like an elephant, "Why?" I ignored him and said, "What about you? Do you know why you are here?" "More or less." "So why?" He looked mysterious and said, "It's a secret." I said, "But the secret is never hidden forever." He said, "Many men and women live and die with secrets in their hearts." I didn't want to be like them and said, "Then what about the news we hear?" He responded, "Those are just one-thousandth of the concealed things. Only one-thousandth of life is revealed. And that's due to carelessness."

I recalled a movie where hundreds of agents with their searchlights went into a basement, and suddenly, everything came out of the darkness. "Why don't you reveal yourself?" I asked abruptly. He became quiet and parked the car on the side. I waited for him to say something, but he didn't. He seemed unlikely to say anything for a few years, so I opened the door and got out.

On our anniversary, Javid wanted to give a speech like every year, but he remembered he had an important call. We memorized all the words he said officially to thank her once a year. Javid returned and forgot what he would say. No one reminded him. He is so unlucky that he'll find it dry if he goes to the sea. He said the price of wood dropped when he wanted to trade a large amount. I took Forough's cake to her room. Her old samovar was boiling, and she was propped up on some pillows. A cold wind was coming from the window. I asked why she didn't come down, and she said, "I won't bother you." "You aren't!" She straightened her skirt. Her hands were covered with brown spots. "I'm a bother. I always was!" I gave her a piece of cake.

"I used to go to Muhammad Ali's house. His mother knew that. Once, she looked around the house, came out, and said get out and leave us alone. I said I'm not a beggar. I'm his wife. She said you were his wife, but not anymore. She grabbed my chador and dragged me into the yard, where I saw his heavily pregnant wife walking. There was a pomegranate bowl next to her samovar. She said, "Look! That is Muhammad Ali's wife, not you!" I said, "Eat your cake." She continued, "I got married. I thought I'd be busy and forget everything. I raised the grocer's child and started a new life, but it didn't work. The grocer smelled like cheese, and I missed the smell of Muhammad Ali's body odor, always clean. He always brushed his teeth and cut his nails as if he were ready to go out to a party. Then he'd come to me."

A piece of cake was stuck to her chin. "He'd touch my belly, and I'd put my head on his chest and cry, Muhammad Ali, this is fruitless, right?" It seemed she choked on the cake and put the plate on the samovar table. Her voice was strained, "But Muhammad Ali used to say you're beautiful. Having a baby would ruin your beauty."

I told the Silent Man, “I want to shout!” “About what?” “My feelings about everything and everyone.” He didn’t say anything. I said again, “My feelings about you.” He said in the kindest tone that could only come from him, “Everything will be ruined. Others will destroy it with their judgments.” He always told me not to care what others think and said, “Live for yourself!” He was teaching me courage while he was afraid of something. Like a trusted shopkeeper, he was always careful and worried about his reputation. I was no longer interested in keeping secrets, so when I got out of the car, questions I didn’t know the answer to rushed into my mind like a mob. I didn’t feel calm and safe like before. I said, “I’ll find a well, put my head in it, and shout.” “There is always someone in the well to listen.” I leaned my head on the chair, “But maybe he’ll not tell anyone.” “It’s impossible. Like you, he likes to tell someone.” “But this matter is important for me, not him,” I said. “That’s why he doesn’t take care of it.” And I no longer knew why I must take care of my secret.

I quietly whispered in the Silent Man’s ear that night I dreamed, “Listen, I’m pregnant. But I don’t have food cravings. I never get sick, and I don’t look pregnant. I don’t crave food, and the baby doesn’t kick. See, look at my face. It doesn’t have any freckles. Damn, this mother!” He chattered, too, “I believe you’re pregnant.” I thought in my sleep, no, he doesn’t believe it. The Silent Man continued with some confusion, “You also have a food craving. You feel sick but know your body, so go to the bathroom before throwing up. Your belly is swollen, but your clothes are well-chosen, so nothing is visible. You want things to eat, but it doesn’t matter to anyone. The baby also kicks inside, and you feel it with all your heart and soul.” “Alone,” I said disparately as if my voice echoed in a cellar, “Alone,” the Silent Man repeated quietly.

## **30**

On our anniversary, Javid told Sadeq he was thinking about a big workshop. He said that Sadeq had wasted time making a decision. Sadeq said he was selling his father's house. Javid advised selling only the car at first. A strange smile appeared on Sadeq's lips, "The car? No!" And the smile spread when he saw Nima approaching him, jumping up and down to the sound of the recordings. Javid invited you to dance, and you said no. He stood up and raised his arms, and struck a pose. He always said, "I'll learn Azeri dance even though it was my last day." I looked at him carefully and realized I hadn't seen him in a long time. He was getting fat, and his taste in clothes changed, so he wore colorful, stylish ones.

I got up without being invited. It was the first time I had danced in a long time. I had makeup and felt young in my tight sportswear. Happiness made me feel light on my feet. I tiptoed from side to side, took Yalda's hand, and danced together. Every time I turned, I saw Mom looking at me with tears. Pointing towards me, Javid said to Mom, "Mom, hope never leaves a person's heart!" And he tried to remember a poem about hope but couldn't think of one. Sadeq got up and came to the middle of the floor, where Yalda took his hand and raised it. Javid took the glass from his other hand, "Mr. Engineer, are you doing a mystical dance<sup>7</sup>?" Sadeq laughed, put his hand behind his neck, and looked at me. His face was red, and he was so excited that he couldn't stand.

Javid came to Yalda and said, "It's a pity not to dance with beautiful girls." You were sitting on the chair and smiling at Nima. Sadeq wasn't shy and displayed more self-control as sweat trickled down his ear. Javid said, "Mr. Engineer is an off-volcano, sleeping and then suddenly becoming active." Javid didn't take his eyes off Yalda as he imitated her movements. I turned around and couldn't make Sadeq join me for dance because he was dancing by himself. He

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<sup>7</sup> Whirling dervish

gave awkward movements to his shoulders and neck and moved back. We all stood on the side and looked at him. Initially, his movements were rough and clumsy but gradually became more meaningful as the song became faster. Sadeq didn't leave. He came forward. Javid encouraged him. Sadeq moved faster and bent his knees right in front of you like a messenger landing before a prince, and we clapped our hands. Mom said, "You gave a hard time to your poor knees!" Sadeq was kneeling there, and his head bent to look down at you. Javid held his shoulders from behind and laughed, "Mr. Engineer, you have confused my wife's skirt with an altar!"

### **31**

But tonight, none of those agents, not even an officer, entered the house, and there was no spotlight. There was no basement, and everything was so clear. Everything was apparent, and we were blind. "I'm used to this car," I said quietly to the Silent Man. He laughed, "So, it's not that bad!" I said immediately, "And to its owner too." The smile disappeared from his face. I've never seen a man get upset by a woman's compliment. He increased the speed and wanted to pass the light. He couldn't. He said, "It's no good." He was obviously worried. I said, "Sometimes I think... ." A beggar woman knocked on the window. The light turned green. "Don't worry! It's nothing." "How do you know?" I glanced at him sideways as I opened the glove compartment.

It was as if he had crushed something hard under his teeth, and I felt his anger. I've never seen the Silent Man restless, not even once. I wouldn't mind seeing him angry. I was measuring his tolerance, and every day that passed, I worried that he would leave. I had asked myself many times, "*Will he leave me?*" And I wanted him to do it now if he wanted. He said, "Because it shouldn't be. I don't like you out of the frying pan and into the fire. None of us." I told myself, "*So it's possible he also falls into a fire, and he isn't as intemperate as he seems.*" I got devilish

pleasure from this sudden discovery, but why did he say frying pan? I turned to him and looked carefully, “Do you still have a frying pan in your life?” He shook his head, “And I want to stay at the same one.”

### **32**

Mom told you I fell in love again, like when Mehrdad was in my life. She said that I’m always talking on the phone. Your steps were fast, as always. Women came out of the stores in groups. I said, “I like this view.” You rolled your eyes, “Which view?” “This one, when women go home with groceries.” You said, “I don’t like it. All these women have arthritis and joint pain. When they get old, they will have bone pain due to carrying all these things.” I remembered what Javid used to say, “Sholeh only sees the forest, but Shiva notices the trees.” I mumbled, “To Hell with the trees!” You started, “Mom asks, why don’t you get married? You’re losing your good opportunities. She is worried about you, and she is afraid that it’ll be late. She says it’s already late.” I said, “What else?” You continued, “She says you waste your time for that boy. Now it’s time. I asked, “Why doesn’t she talk to me then?” “She says you’re lost, but you don’t listen. You nod your head, but you’re not paying attention. She worries if you’re making trouble again.” Then you said, “Does Mom, right?” I didn’t answer. You said, “Again him?” It was a taunt in your question. You faltered, “He belongs to someone else.” Being the elder sister suits you. I said, “He doesn’t belong to anyone!”

You stopped and raised your hand over your eyes to shield them from the sun, looked at me, and said suspiciously, “I’m talking about Mehrdad.” I bit my lip and didn’t say anything, but I wanted to say I was talking about the Silent Man. This was the name I had given him. I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t speak because I couldn’t talk about him in the middle of the street in the same way that I couldn’t sleep anywhere except in my bed. I wasn’t a drifter who could sleep

anywhere you liked and talk to anyone wherever you wanted, and suddenly, you asked someone to talk about her most private feelings. I remembered the day we lagged behind your friends in the national park. You took off your shoes and socks and walked barefoot. Javid would always distance himself from friends and frown when he disagreed with your behavior, “We’re far from civilization. We are still primitive.” You didn’t answer. Javid asked loudly, “Don’t you think so, Shiva?” You said from behind, “No, Javid. We’re not far from civilization, but from nature, yes.”

Someone called me “Sholeh!” I quickly turned around, and the first thing that I noticed was the dark blue car. My heart sank, and I felt dizzy. Then I saw Javid standing beside the new car and how he could barely restrain his pride and joy, like a child waiting for your surprise and admiration. Stunned, I looked at Javid and his car. I thought I had forgotten everything during this time. Javid gratefully responded to my surprise at his decision to buy a car, putting his hand on his chest and politely saying to both of us, “Ladies, I’m at your service.”

### **33**

On that hot day, we divided the work. You were supposed to take care of the plans for the kids, take Nima to his class, and enroll Yalda in English class. I had to take the older people to the park for fresh air. Forough and Mom went for a stroll. Forough because she was overweight, and Mom because of her knee pain. I walked behind them, wondering whether growing old like Forough or Mom would be better. Mom was thin and agile but always struggled with the house door and walls. She is conflicted with everything and is suspicious of the local butcher. Being happy and naked was the same for her; she felt guilty about both. She’d pray with her *tasbeeh* with a frown and show up with the face of one who suffers before God. She loved oppressed people and helped them as long as they remained oppressed.

On the other hand, Forough was less concerned about the existing world. She didn't care if her neighbor suffocated from high blood pressure, and she just focused on herself. Sometimes she looked sad, as if she were in a dream, but her sadness didn't last. She laughed at the world, and her laughter was etched in the lines of her face. Her voice became thinner when talking to men. Whenever she saw me, she said you have become beautiful. Mom used to say she is talkative and flattering. I knew, but I liked it when she flattered me. We sat on the park bench and bought ice cream from the boy selling ice cream. Mom said, "It's not good for my blood sugar." Forough protested, "Eat and enjoy! Life is too short! We won't get any ice cream in the next world." I followed the boy to exchange my ice cream for one in the shape of a funnel and returned soon. Mom said, "Seems he doesn't have any common sense." I asked, "Who?" She responded, "I'm talking about Sadeq, the poor guy." She looked at Forough. She accepted her as a sexual expert, "Is that right?" "He is one of those people who internalizes everything and then explodes. I remembered Iran and I went to Javid's house. Shiva was pregnant with Nima. She said she wanted something sour and juicy to eat, something like grapefruit. But Javid was mad and said do you have any more cravings? Iran said she has a food craving. Javid said these are illusions. He continued that she could eat something else, and her craving will be fixed. He also said something about indoctrination and such things. And you know how he is; when he gets stuck on something, he can go on and on."

Forough asked the boy to skate farther away so he wouldn't fall on their feet. "Sadeq didn't say a word. He had his head down, and he was watching TV. When Sadeq left, Javid was startled. He said a person should be able to control his desires, and he was surprised to hear Shiva say such things. Half an hour later, Sadeq came with a bag of grapefruit and left." Annoyed, I said, "He behaves with Shiva as if he always owes her." Forough raised her eyebrow,

“He has a lot of respect for her.” I said, “Well, Shiva took care of his mom.” “She is the kind of woman who always sacrifices herself for others.” Mom remarked, “My daughter cares about everyone else except me.” Forough hits Mom’s knee and says, “She cares about you too but doesn’t show it.” Mom said something that I didn’t hear. Then she poked me with her elbows, “Your ice cream melted.”

### **34**

I asked the Silent Man to describe what she looked like. “Who?” “She!” He laughed, “You’re an interesting girl.” I smirked, “Are you kidding me?” “No, by God! One can’t predict what’s going on in your mind.” I said, “Did I talk out of turn?” He parked the car, “It’s good! It’s good to talk out of turn.” “If it’s good, answer my question. “What kind of woman was she?” “Was?” “Is?” “What can I say?” I said, “Was she fancy?” The Silent Man asked me to change the subject. I became quiet. I’d been tired since morning and dreamt I was dead. I felt jealous of being still alive. The following morning, Mom interpreted that I’d live a long life, and I thought that, like Mom, I’d one day become an enemy with walls and doors for no reason.

The Silent Man knew the silent language well. He understood that I was looking for an argument and always made me control myself before it happened. Respect was important to him. He began reluctantly, “She had a kind of carelessness in her behavior and clothing. She neglected her appearance so much that sometimes she seemed defiant. But behind her harsh behavior, you could feel the existence of a rebellious nature. She also seemed to know this, as she sometimes became too severe. People like this must domesticate their nature to avoid being domesticated. It was like reciting beautiful analects. I said, “Tell me about her eyes, hair, and nose shape.” And I was careful not to evade. I angrily thought that he had always been evasive. I didn’t doubt his true intentions but couldn’t understand him. It was like acting in an Indian movie, and I was

waiting for the movie's star to reveal his strange and flawed behavior. "Her gaze was dull. It sparked suddenly from the inside. She gestured with a thought, frowning suited her. When she was worried, her mouth became innocent." I asked, "I couldn't understand! What kind of woman was she?" "She was a beautiful woman, but you're more beautiful."

He was sulking at me. He was blackmailing me into giving up. He said, "I'm serious and believe in it." He hadn't lied until that day. He wasn't interested in being courteous. Sometimes, I wished he'd sulk and say nice things to me. His confirmation wasn't enough. I also wanted his admiration. He did none of these. Most of the time, he was serious and sometimes made me upset. He was kind but didn't have any words to express his kindness. He didn't say my darling, sweetheart, or dear like Mehrdad. He doesn't even call me by my name. I insisted on telling me more about her. "She was honest and sincere with everyone and herself." I asked him to tell me about her appearance. "Her shoulders were wide," he said. I said sharply, "Excuse me, was he a man?" I was shocked by my nervous voice.

He stared ahead and smiled, "A world of femininity was hidden in her." He wanted to talk more. He was cheering up. It was as if someone was created in front of his eyes. I didn't want to know anymore. I couldn't bear it. There was praise in his tone that didn't leave any room for a rival. I got a stomach ache. I said, "*It's the price of knowing too much.*" I interrupted him and unexpectedly asked, "Was she like me?" He didn't respond immediately. He just asked whether he made me upset or not. "No!" I said it sharply. He looked at me carefully. He said if she thinks this relationship will make her suffer, we can't continue. Then he apologized and said his loneliness or perhaps his selfishness prevented him from understanding my feelings. That night the Silent Man talked more than usual and said he'd leave tomorrow. He said, "This is better for both of us."

Forough said, “Isn’t it a pity that a beautiful young girl like you is sad?” I said, “I’m not!” And my eyes were tearful. She said, “A mama’s boy is useless.” Mom was an excuse. My men didn’t fall in love. They were accessible, but not mine. When they came, I had this sinking feeling that one day they’d leave me, and when that day came, I’d know that they were like the dead people who don’t think about the ones they leave behind. “Muhammad Ali was also a mama’s boy. When his Mom died, he came to me.” Forough was always behind, but how should she know that Mehrdad had even left my dreams? She touched the geranium leaves by the window and gazed outside. I liked to look at her. My eyes were tearing up, reminding me of the humid weather after the rain. “So, you didn’t go?” I asked her. “I went too. I used to be there all the time. He knew I’d follow him with a hint, but he pretended to ignore it. I knew he wouldn’t be happy with any woman other than me. After several times, he finally came a few steps closer to me and told me not to go there. I cried. I said I couldn’t. He said you shouldn’t have married. Then he said we’d see each other somewhere else, not here. We planned for the garden. It wasn’t out of the city but was remote and empty.”

A new smile rejuvenated her face. “In those days, whatever I did, time didn’t pass. I cared for the yard, swept the rooms, and cleaned the rugs. In the afternoon, everything sparkled. I packed my bundle and said I’m going to the public shower. My legs were shaking. I sat on a rock when I reached the garden and waited for him.” “Did he come?” “Yes, but we didn’t speak, not one word. We both cried. The weather was cloudy. He laughed when he saw my bag. My hands were trembling.” I looked at his hands. From the Silent Man’s perspective, there was no first and last in happiness; it wasn’t monotonous. He said satisfaction is like a seed sprinkled once in the forest of a person’s life and can be found with sharp eyes. “I plucked grass from under my feet

and raised my head. Suddenly, the flash of a machete blade blinded me from a distance. I didn't understand what happened. It was like lightning. I only remember falling to Javid's Father's feet and pleading with him to kill me. "It's my fault; kill me."

### **36**

Javid was busy with the new workshop. He came home late, and you said he always smells of wood. The day I came to your house, your face was pale. You said the smell of wood makes you nauseous. You said everything smells like this these days. I said, "Aren't you?!" You blushed and laughed. I looked at you with surprise. "I laugh at myself." I don't know if a woman is pregnant until her belly is up. I walked in the street with Yalda, and my jaw dropped. She showed me girls; one had nose surgery, and the other had her hair colored. Look at her eyebrow style, or the other is waiting for a car to pick her up. The other one is backtracking. When I'm with her, I feel blind." I asked, "Are you or not?" "Blind?" I said, "No! pregnant." "I went to the lab in the morning." "Why this late?" You shrugged, "Stupidity!"

You seemed so unpretentious and straightforward. I stood up and kissed you for a moment. "What's up? Am I dying?" "That's why you're smarty pants and don't make mistakes. And I like that you don't break your promise when you make it." You asked, "Who said I'm smart?" And you turned off the faucet to hear my voice. "Everyone! Javid always says Shiva doesn't make a mistake!" You opened the tap, "This way, you prevent the opportunity to make mistakes." I said, "You're wise, modest, and clever. In short, you don't mess up! Now I like to see you get pregnant unintentionally since you have everything you wanted. Sometimes flaws make people more beautiful." You said, "It's good that you're talking now; otherwise, no one can understand what strange thoughts are happening in your mind." Forough was coming down the

stairs. You said, “She’ll come down as soon as she knows you’re here.” “She comes to tell me about Muhammad Ali. I like him.”

Your back was facing me. You told me to give you the unwashed dishes. “I don’t like cowards. First, he divorced his wife, then abused her. Where he was expected to stay strong, he became weak. When Forough tells the story about the garden, she never reveals the end as if it never happened at all.” “What happened?” “Muhammad Ali saw Javid’s Father and his robust shop assistant. Javid’s Father had a machete and was coming forward. Muhammad Ali took one step back, hid behind Forough, and wet himself there.” I coughed repeatedly. I want you to stop. Forough was standing at the door, “Did Javid tell you this, Shiva?” Her voice was trembling, and her wrinkled skin hung like a scarf under her neck. You turned off the faucet and said with a bit of shame, “So, he lied?” She leaned her hand on the wall and passed through the hall to go to the yard, “No, why should he lie when he has seen everything?” You came to the middle of the hallway and said, “He didn’t see; the assistant told him. Javid wasn’t there; he was at the store.” Forough leaned her chubby body against the door and closed her eyes. She stayed the same for a while as if she needed time to go to the garden. “Javid started to have peach fuzz over his upper lip. I first saw his spiky hair. He was hiding in the car brought by his father. I still remember his eyes. I understood at that moment; it was his work.”

### **37**

That day, Mom whispered into my ear that everything was messed up. Like a prisoner on strike, you beat the spoon in the pot, and Javid was another prisoner smoking in the yard. He wore an old shirt with striped underpants. His shirt was unbuttoned. I remembered Javid a few years ago. He smokes a lot when frustrated and lies on his stomach like a dead tree cut from its root. He couldn’t do anything. He knew he’d be fired and couldn’t calm down until he related his problem

to the general issues of society, but the problems always made you stronger. You were grading Javid's papers and, in the meantime, looking for a job for him. After several months of unemployment, he started working in the wood-cutting workshop and gradually was able to participate in it.

Everything was on you. You were always writing and calculating. I've never seen you complaining about anything. Javid used to say, "Shiva isn't only my wife; she is my buddy." Now, the friend was severely involved in the kitchen. The sun came near the pond. Nima was clinging to Mom's skirt, and Yalda was pointing to go to her room from behind the window. Everything was disorganized. The sofa was full of unfolded clothes. Javid said, "The lady isn't in the mood to work." Mom had bought lavash and was folding it into pieces at the time. She loved bread and was always in the bakeries. She took fresh bread wherever she went. She'd stand in a long line on Fridays to get *sangak*. If one day, there was no bread at home, she'd be anxious. She put her chador on and hurried to the bakery. "When I arrived, they already fought. Jāvīd said, "Ms. X is smart, this and that, and she ties men's hands behind and does the work of hundreds in a blink of an eye. What about Shiva?" I said, "Didn't Shiva say anything?" "Not at first. She respected my presence, but Javid was insisting. Finally, she started too. She said she likes to lie down, but her problem is that she couldn't. She said she likes to lie in front of the sun like Forough and doesn't care about anything. She said that was unsure where she had signed her permanent work contract. And if she falls asleep for half an hour in the middle of the day, she immediately gets up and cleans the windows." "Did Shiva say these things?" "Yeah, Javid replied; when a person's role model is an ordinary and uneducated woman, what else can be expected? She's like a Mov what?" "Oblomov." "Yes, that's right." Shiva shouted about why she

always has to be responsible. Javid said you regressed. Shiva raised her voice and said, “Your improvement is enough for us.”

Mom went to Javid. “Be patient; I have plans. Since we came here, she has changed. This house is cursed.” Mom said something that I didn’t hear. Javid said, “No, Mom, I don’t mean superstition. Now she can no longer use money as an excuse. She is free to do whatever she likes, exercise, travel, and see how much the world has changed instead of these silly excuses. She complains about my contracts, the office secretary, and everything else. Even on Fridays, she isn’t in the mood to answer my greetings when I’m home.” I leaned against the kitchen wall and said, “How’s Charlie?” Like a warrior, you were trapped between the dishes and kitchen utensils. “I’ve never thought I’d be caught up with these stupid things one day.” I said, “It’s not!”

“When I’m frowning, he doesn’t want to know why I’m upset. He thinks I’m upset because of that selfish secretary. He always has an excuse. The codes are clear. When I don’t talk, he doesn’t ask himself. This poor woman wasn’t mute; what happened to her suddenly? He is more comfortable thinking sometimes women get quiet. He doesn’t bother himself to know what’s going on in my heart.” You bowed your head and looked at yourself. “You should tell him about it!” “He isn’t interested in hearing it. If he pays attention, he might ask some questions. But with questions and answers, you can’t understand anything about a person’s feelings. Mom came to the kitchen with a package of folded bread. “Ms. Shiva, you can’t do it by force and fighting!” You sighted in despair. “Mom, but if it were love, it would be!”

### **38**

I told Forough, “Mehrdad had become a dad.” “That’s why you’re frowning!” She sighed loudly, “When I heard about the birth of Muhammad Ali’s child, I insisted on going to Mashhad. Javid’s Father asked his student to keep an eye on the shop, and we left. I feared I’d break my

repentance and go to their house if we didn't go to Mashhad. I went to the shrine and sat on the corner. I pulled my chador on my head and cried, "O God! Remove his love from my heart." I thought to myself, and I didn't go to a shrine; I got out of one car and into another. Now walking is difficult. She sat by the window. "I couldn't do anything. I don't know my fate. I used to see this window like a mirror in my bag. I look out from here in the afternoons and think I'm not alone. I greet my neighbors from this window. Do you see that tree? It's my companion. Sparrows come, eat their portion, and fly away. The opposite neighbor cleans a blanket daily and greets me by her head. I'm not alone here. I was satisfied so far. The smells of food come from downstairs. Children make noise. People come and go. Shiva is also here. If I lose all this, I'll die."

I told her not to be sad. Javid would figure out something. She said, "He's legitimate; he'll be coming." I got up and looked out of the window, "Where?" She said, "Listen; you can hear his key's sound. He'll come too. It's been a while since he came late." She came in. "He always looks at this window. It's his habit. When coming from this alley, I'd also raise my head and look at the window." "Are you talking about returning home after dating Muhammad Ali?" "Yeah." I said, "Does that mean Javid is also returning home after dating Muhammad Ali?" She put her open fingers on her heart and gestured like she could feel the heartbeat from the bottom of the fleshy mound. She said, "Dear Sholeh, the world is meaningless without Muhammad Ali!"

### **39**

Javid said, "Sadeq is right; occupation begins when women and men become interested in each other. Always they're trying to seize and harm each other's freedom. Ownership begins, and slowly, they become an owner. They're now observers." He was talking to Mom and me, but his attention was on you as you walked through the room without reason. Finally, you went to the

bathroom to help Forough. I put the frog-shaped ashtray on the table next to Javid's hand. Then I went and knocked on the bathroom door. "Don't you need help?" Forough was talking to you. When you came out, you were drenched in sweat. "What was she saying so much?" You dried your face with a towel. "She was saying Muhammad Ali's legs were beautiful and shapely." I laughed. You wanted to hang the towel but couldn't. You hurriedly pressed it on your belly and bent down to prevent spilling something on your skirt with your face contorted in pain. You soon regulated yourself and told me to pour tea for everyone.

Javid was telling Yalda, who had just arrived, about the understanding that is achieved through mutual thinking. You brought sugar and dates. You bent and said, "An understanding that starts from the feet makes more sense." And you pointed to the bathroom door. Javid got angry, "What did you say?" You ignored him. He asked you to repeat it. Yalda said, "I agree!" Obviously, she wanted to be by your side in any case. Javid was furious, "Feet are useful as long as they bear the weight of the body and be used to walk." You stood up and stumbled. Mom asked me, "Is she drunk?" You weren't. You tried it once and said that you're happier without it. "I don't know, even if I have legs," you said listlessly. Javid said, "It's like you're delusional today."

He was evidently angry. You didn't answer his question, which made him more furious, but he stopped himself with what he remembered. He said, "It's not her fault. With what you did today, saying delusional things is normal." Mom asked, "What did she do?" You responded, "Nothing." You went to the bathroom. Suddenly, I got it. I followed Javid, who was pouring tea for himself. "Why didn't you tell me?" Javid turned to the samovar and said, "You should know your sister!" Mom was still looking at Javid and me. Javid lit a cigarette. Understandably, his hands were trembling. He said, "Don't worry! Shiva can handle it." There was a loud sound.

Yalda ran toward the bathroom. Mom and I also followed her. Mom said, “She must have had another stroke.” She was talking about Forough. Yalda screamed, “Mom!”

#### **40**

I sat next to your bed. “You helped a lot.” “I could have helped you from the beginning, and you also wouldn’t disable yourself.” You said, “I didn’t want help. I thought I could handle it.” “I was only busy with myself.” I turned the lever under the bed. The bed rose a little. I made your pillow. I said, “Mom said that’s a pity; we lost the boy.” “How did she know it was a boy?” “If the fetus is lost, it’s a boy; and if it remains, it’s a girl.” A faint smile appeared on your lips and left immediately. I gave you my lipstick and said, “Apply it! Javid paid the expenses. We’re going home.” It was as if you said to yourself impatiently, “What should a person do if she doesn’t want to return home?” I looked out of the window. The sun made everything beautiful. Cars appeared small from there. “One way is to stand on the street side and get into a car that stops for you,” I said this to you because I knew it was wrong to do this from your point of view. It didn’t fit your morals, and I needed your advice. I needed strong willpower to defend myself against a temptation I couldn’t let go of quickly. I wanted to go downstairs, stand on the street, and wait for the milky-colored car. I needed your harsh and unequivocal judgment to calm my inner conflict. “This isn’t what I like to do.” You said it inconsiderately. “So what?”

I looked at you. Your face was pale. “I don’t know either.” You asked me to straighten the bed. You closed your eyes as if you didn’t want to leave. “These days, I do things I never dreamed I’d do. I opened my eyes in the morning and couldn’t believe I was the owner of those dreams.” I remembered the book of dream interpretation I saw under your pillow a few days ago. You put your arm over your eyes, like exhausted labor dozing away from the sun. “I dreamt I was gone.” “Where?” “Somewhere but not here.” I thought where you want to go isn’t a

geographical location. You became silent. Maybe you had fallen asleep or had gone to your usual cautious style. I sat on the bed and asked, “Where?” I was afraid you would say to the other world. Your lips moved slowly, but nothing came out.

#### 41

I got wet in the rain. I gave directions to the taxi driver and ran towards the stopped car. Before I got in, the front door opened. The Silent Man said, “Hello.” I sat in the back seat and closed the door. It was the moment that I imagined and wondered what is in the imagination that makes it different from reality. I said, “I could believe it if you say you passed here accidentally.” He turned to one of the side streets. “It wasn’t accidental!” He parked the car. Several people with umbrellas passed by the car. “I’m used to you, too,” he said hoarsely. His words didn’t make me happy. He was like a late guest, and I was unsatisfied to open the door for him. I said sharply, “That is when I left my habit!” My words seemed not to affect him. He continued, “I didn’t think I’d follow you, but I did!” “It’s not good,” I said in his style. “Yeah, it’s not good,” he said disappointedly.

The rain was faster. I said, “*I’d get out when the rain stops.*” The Silent Man turned off the car. The wipers relaxed like when twins fell asleep. Silence occupied the car like a thick-neck passenger. It was neither possible to talk nor to get out. The rain covered the windshield. I looked outside through the drops that slid down from the window. Everyone was running in a hurry. The street quickly became empty. The branches of the trees swayed. Lightning flashed through the sky. I raised my hand to wipe the steam off the window. He raised his hands close to my hands and quietly said let it be. I lowered my head. The silence took my breath away. I couldn’t do anything in front of him. I felt cold sweat on my back. My mouth was dry. I wanted a drop to wet my lips. I felt the car was cramped. It got smaller and brewed. I wanted air and rain. I was

sweating. I pressed my eyes and heard the sound of rain. Now, it hit the car's roof sharply. I couldn't breathe. I grabbed the door handle with my free hand.

## **42**

The Silent Man isn't there. He never was there. Cars were stopping, honking, and passing me. The drivers would bend down and look at me. Some of them stopped. I didn't tell them my destination. The path also had a password like the name of the owner. It didn't have the owner; it was gone. I came out of the hospital. I walked through the paths I used to visit by car and thought that pedestrians see more things in the world. I stood in front of a photo shop and looked at the photos. It was a cemetery of the beautiful dead. I also passed the supermarket and wheat package sprouts. The Silent Man is hiding somewhere in this crowded world. The Silent Man had disturbed the sameness of the world with his arrival. I didn't enjoy the geraniums on the side of the street, the good smell from the passerby, and the child who looked at me from behind the car window. The milky-colored car was more expensive than these in an anonymous auction.

I was walking but had already lost my balance. Someone should have grabbed my head and pulled my spine up. I came to your house. I wanted a witness to say the value of no car has increased, and I'm just delusional. Someone who told me to go back to my regular days when the sunrise and sunset were on time, someone who removed my watch from my wrist and set it like others. Someone told me I don't need a car. We have a settled house, not mobile. It has a roof, and I can walk, lie, stand, and even dance in it. I roared, "Damn to all these cars and streets."

Before getting into a new car, I looked at the car behind me to ensure it wasn't him. I got off at your alley. My hair was sweaty under the scarf. I was neither clean nor neat. I felt down. I felt rejected. I was thrown into this world for a reason I didn't know, and maybe I had lost my pieces of being somewhere in space. I should have collected them so I wouldn't be incomplete

and confused. I had lost myself and had to find it. But damn me; I didn't want myself. I wanted him. I strolled to the alley. Involuntarily, I raised my head and saw Forough looking regrettably at me from the window frame.

### 43

Mom asked Javid, "What has happened to Shiva?" You were pale and quietly moving things. The recording was loud. Javid held his protruding jaw with both hands. He turned it left and right, and fixed it. He said, "Depression after that story is normal." In Javid's view, nothing is abnormal. I wanted to ask him whether the incident tonight was also expected. Javid announced that you'd leave this house on the same day in a few weeks. Everything was ready; the house deed, municipal document, and the ground panel. Forough didn't talk to anyone. Her friends weren't there. It's been a long time since no one came to your house. Mom said, "Why Sadeq isn't here? He was always helping you." I said out loud, "Maybe they broke up." Javid said he didn't think about him, and now he'll call him. He looked at the phone but didn't stand up. He was tired. I took the phone to him. While dialing, he said, "Who said prosperity is bad?" Then continued, "Hi buddy, where are you?"

You came out from the children's room. You asked who Javid was talking to, and I pointed out, "Sadeq." You stood there, close to the curtain, and listened as if to the chatter of invisible people behind it, not to Javid's voice, who was talking loudly and playing with the sofa handle. He said, "You're delusional!" I told Mom, "Finally, Sadeq was also delusional." Mom bit her lips and pointed to you. In the light shadow where you stood, you looked thinner than ever. You had cut your hair and looked like your younger photos, the one in Yalda's room. Javid talked for a long time. He spoke about his new plans and laughed out loud. "Sure! I promised; at the weekend, here in our house. A good party!" He hung up the phone and said, "Mr. Engineer is

also leaving,” as though the Shah of Iran was leaving. He got up from the sofa. I thought he must be going to the street now, but he stood there and thought. No one asked why and where Sadeq was going. He twisted his back and said, “Mr. Engineer is leaving forever.”

#### 44

I went upstairs, stopped in the stairwell, and hesitantly took a few steps back. I doubted. The Silent Man was right. This wasn't love. When I visited Mehrdad, my nostrils trembled. I remembered being like a dog. I understood all the world's smells and sounds with an animal's instinct. I know love was the spicy aroma, the fire that rose from my fingertips, and my skin's unbearable softness. Love was that, but what was this one? I wasn't a dog anymore. I was more like a cat that came down the stairs and looked at myself like a mute janitor. The staircase was dim, and the walls were scarred from the moving stuff. It was one of those poor stairwells that trap the smell of food, and the loud sound of TV and children can be heard from every apartment. I went up. I felt like a person who climbs higher and higher inside a balloon and may fall from it with a simple slip-up.

I was an uninvited guest. I was wearing tight and beautiful clothing and knew after I left, the pungent smell of my perfume would remain on the staircase. My high-heeled shoes squealed on the stairs. Before knocking, I told myself, “*Be quick and go back.*” My heart was beating so fast. I had to hurry down the stairs. I again took a few steps back. From there, I looked at the bottom of the stairs. It was darker. “*How many floors had I come to? It was disappointing down there. If I were to return, I'd have to lock myself in the house, continue practicing willpower and self-control, and inform Mom about the patient's feelings. I had thought many days and nights about coming to this house. I was struggling with myself. I was disappointed and had become hopeful again.*”

The neighbor's door opened. A woman's curly hair was seen earlier than her face. She stared at me through the half-open door. I became nervous. It wasn't a good situation. I hurried to the closed door and rang the bell. I heard the Silent Man who said, "Why aren't you coming in?" I told myself, "*Go back; return from here. Don't you see how he talks to you? In the tone of an old friend. I hadn't gone to see an old friend.*" His cheeks were hanging, and his plump lips were protruding. I can also remember his drooping shoulders, which were full of dandruff. When I think well, there was sadness under his swollen eyelids, despair in his eyes, and loneliness, but there was also something that wasn't understandable. I can only understand it now. It was indifference in his eyes. That's what blinded me. I couldn't tolerate and understand all that indifference.

He passed me like a fresco, and I got in. He paired my shoes behind the door. He said he'd make tea for me. I said I can do this. I went to the kitchen. I felt the coolness of the ceramics with my soles. He brought me slippers. One of them was torn. He smiled with embarrassment. We returned to the hall and sat by the window until the kettle boiled. It was all buildings, chimneys, and antennas. I asked, "How are you not upset by this view?" "I'm used to it!" I said, "Let's change our place. I'm more comfortable in the chair." He sank into the only sofa in the room. I thought it was his permanent place, but there were six chairs. I put the chair on the other side to avoid facing him. Now I could only see his profile. We were like a couple who had gone to a cheap hotel for their honeymoon. I asked him not to be silent. I was his guest. He took my hand from my knee, crossed it from his armpit, and caressed it. With much effort, I said, "I should come!" And I felt my face messed up all of a sudden. I was happy that he didn't see and came back to look.

He looked at my hand like an exquisite object and said quietly, "It was my fault!" Then he remained silent. Sometimes I thought that his silence wasn't a mood but a place, and like a prisoner, he'd walk to his solitary cell of silence and close the door behind himself. You couldn't get in. As if he said to himself, "When you don't get what you want, you don't go far. You wander around and fight with the most familiar and similar things to you." It was getting dark. He cleared his voice, "I have never lied to you. I don't want to do it even now." I was afraid of all the right words that came to the world with hardship. Tears fell from my left eye. I remembered Forough.

He continued, "You're a beautiful and intelligent girl." I knew this introduction very well. They used to tell you the good things to deny the better ones. "And I have no right to hurt you." I wanted to say no, but a tear fell from my right cheek. "You were right! I know women understand life better than men because of their instincts." "I still don't understand," I said. He said, "I was the one who didn't understand. I was sure of myself. I thought I was stronger than this." I said, "You're afraid!" He said, "Maybe! But I've lived with many beliefs for many years. It's difficult to change. I've thought about it too much. I couldn't." Then I said, "What about me?" And I thought I should constantly remind myself of others. He was thinking deeply. He said, "Everything will be done, and you'll forget." My heart froze. The room was warm and dark, but I felt like I was in the middle of the winter. I slowly pulled my hand out of his hand. I had to leave. I had forgotten what I wanted to say. It was no longer helpful.

My paired shoes were waiting for me. I put my bag on my shoulder. Then put on my shoes. The staircase was dark. I looked at the wall with my hand. I didn't find the switch. I slowly went down in the dark.

Shiva! Get up and talk to me. I wish everything were a dream. The Silent Man was right. One's experiments are important, and you can't escape them. With an operation like an organ transplant, they're stitched to life forever. Tonight, Javid was in a good mood. He even went to the second floor to invite Forough, but she didn't come till the end of the party. The tape recorder was on. You had arranged the bowl of fruit and pastries on the big table. Javid was craving hookah. Mom came to help you earlier. You're wearing a black coat and skirt and have light makeup. Javid filled the small glasses and said everyone should drink tonight. When you took a glass, the guests were happy. It was unprecedented. Mom called me, "Take that venom from her." Javid patted you on the back and said, "Now that's something!" He turned to the guest with a proud face, "This was the renewal of the covenant." He gave you another shot, asked Yalda for a happier song, and told Sadeq he wanted to dance tonight. He went closer to him and asked why and where he had to go. Javid happily hugged Sadeq and said he wanted to go, too; everyone wanted to go.

Javid was drunk and talking incoherently. The words came out of his mouth quickly. He approached Mom. She stepped back with a frown. He came to me and took a piece of apple from my plate. Your cheeks flushed. You said with a smile, "I wish I could go too." Sadeq went to fill his glass. He turned to you, "To where?" You repeated his question, "To where?" And you asked him in a tone of 'don't you know'?! Javid was standing and asking you to tell them where you were going. Then he said *Where You're Going* is the book title he read when he was young. Sadeq sat in the empty seat next to you. Javid said he was ready to take you wherever you wanted and opened his hands to show you the vast world. But you told Javid he couldn't take you. Your witty and sarcastic tone scared Mom. She got up and stood.

Javid went to get the yogurt bowl and said there was no place on the map where he couldn't go. It was clear that he was insisting on his question. Mom came closer and took the glass from your hand. You said the place you want to go to isn't on his map. You were stubborn. You rested your elbow on the chair and then put your arm on it with the lethargy of someone having their blood pressure taken. Sadeq was sitting motionless. His profile was toward you. He didn't turn to look at you, but he was listening to you. His serious attention was evident from a distance. It was as if he was going to stay there forever. He looked like someone whose blood had been dried by a solid electrocution. You said, "I'd like to go to Tibet." As soon as you said "Tibet," tears fell from both your eyes on your face, which still had traces of a smile.

We were all shocked. I've never seen you cry in front of anyone. You didn't cover your face or even try to wipe your tears. You had the comfort of a condemned man who spoke before his death. Javid couldn't say anything. I wore a long traditional dress, standing in the same position, like a doll in a cylindrical glass in the local fairs, with open arms and a dazed look. Sadeq didn't move, but his arm parallel to yours came up and rested his hand gently on yours. The pain of jealousy rose from the bottom of my heart like high-pressure air and heated my face. I was paralyzed. My instant understanding of what I was unaware of before ignited my soul like lightning. I couldn't walk away. I had to confront it. You and the Silent Man were lost in the same dream.

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