My relationship with my past is like, Jean Valjean and Inspector Javert
one fleeing for a lifetime without remembering what his crime was, while the other pursues him

COPPICE BLUE

FAAVIDEL

EPISODE 3
CHAPTER TWO: FRAGMENTATION

Coppice Blue

Faavidel

Literature - Persian Fiction – Novel

Coppice Blue

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Chapter two
Fragmentation

8

The Sea I Drowned In

I arrived at my aunt's house, splashed some water on my face, and revived myself a bit. The pain that was in my soul was intertwined with my physical exhaustion, and it felt as if I had suddenly collapsed, completely drained. That night, my aunt had other guests besides us. Her husband had gone to America for a conference, so we didn't see him. The guests had children the same age as Sophia, who were entertaining them, while the adults were engaged in lively conversations. My aunt's yard was large, and it was easy to find a quiet corner to be alone without any trouble. For a while, Mattia had been walking around the pool and talking on the phone. The expression on his face and the words I occasionally heard indicated that he was speaking to a girl he loved on the other end. I was sitting on a chair by the garden. Dad came over to me with a glass in hand; "Try this, see what a masterpiece it is!" I took the wine glass and turned my head towards him. It seemed like he had just noticed me and asked, "Are you okay, darling?!

"Uh-huh !"

"Why are you so pale ?"

Out of habit, he placed his hand on my forehead and with the other hand, took my wrist; "You have a bit of a fever!"

I said indifferently, "I think I'm catching a cold ".

"Were you in the water a lot today ?"

"Almost ".

" Let me get you some pills !"

Mattia had ended his call and was staring at me intently. When Dad left, he said; "You look terrible! You probably won't make it to tomorrow morning "!

" I hope so" .

"The next doctor has arrived ".

He pointed to Mom, who was coming towards me; “We have plenty of doctors here. You’ll have to explain to each of them separately what’s wrong with you! Hopefully, the guests won’t come looking for you ”!

"Afra! Your dad says you’re sick" ?!

She handed me a glass of water and placed three pills in my other hand. Then she lifted my chin, placed her hand on my pulse at my neck, and said; “What’s wrong? Let me see you! Yeah, you have a fever! Take these before it gets worse! Were you in the water ”?

" Uh-huh "!

This synchronized movement of Mom and Dad wasn’t out of attention or feeling for a specific person but rather appeared mechanically during someone’s illness in the family; perhaps like other family doctors. It seemed that their professional commitment outweighed everything else within the family. When she was staring at my face like that, I had to avoid looking at her so she wouldn’t make some strange guess. If she knew that I was desperately longing for someone's embrace and understood what I had done, the angels in heaven would weep for me. I shifted her focus elsewhere. I showed her my necklace that was hanging around my neck; “Look at this?!”.

She extended her hand again, took it between her fingers, and assessed its weight and size. Her wrist just below my nose had that familiar scent on her skin; the fragrance of all the heartaches in the world.

"How cute! Congratulations! You've never bought yourself some gold"!

"This one was adorable; I couldn't pass it up".

"By the way, where were you today"?

"Mostly at the beach, the usual spot"!

She was getting suspicious; “Your aunt and I went there in the afternoon. It's strange we didn't see you! I actually looked around a lot to find you.”

I was thinking about what to say when Mattia came to my rescue; “You must have come right when we all went to Joan Les Pins.”

Mom, seemingly relieved, continued in English; “Oh, were you all together today?”

Mattia calmly replied; “I was with a few of my friends. We happened to see these cool kids by the beach and went to the other beach together.”

I exchanged a look with him and, amazed by his support, said; “Yeah, we had so much fun!”

Mattia said; “We formed a good group. I think we can hang out together on other days too.”

Mom was at ease. She took the glass of water from my hand and said; “Allright! I'll go help your aunt!”

She left, and a strange silence settled between Mattia and me. I didn't know what to say. I watched him as he relaxed next to me in the chair. I quietly said; “Why did you lie?”

He glanced at me for a moment, turned his face away, and answered softly; “I saw you yesterday!”

I frowned, unable to believe what I had heard; I examined his questioning gaze. A mischievous smile appeared on his lips as he continued; “You and Alborz! At the beach! You were drinking Coca-Cola and kissing each other!” I was astonished; “Coca-Cola??” My body froze! I looked around to make sure no one had heard his words. I leaned forward in my chair, wanting to say something, but he wanted to reassure me; “Don't worry! I won't tell anyone. Honestly, I was really happy when I saw you together!” Even though he was small back then, he knew well about the separation of families. Our pictures were still in the frames on my aunt's wall; they were not something that could be overlooked. I was silent. I had no words. He said again; “He's become so handsome! You two look great together!” I gave a bitter smile. How had he recognized him? The last time we had come here was two years before Aunt Ella's death. At that time, Mattia was only eight or nine years old. He continued; “At first, I was doubtful, but then I recognized him quickly. His face hasn't changed much.” He

paused and asked; “So why are you so upset? Did you have a fight?” With longing, I said; “No.”

"If you want to see him tomorrow and on other days, give it to me! I’ll tell everyone we’re together."

My voice broke; "He left. He returned to London. He couldn't stay longer. I don't know when I'll see him again!"

Mattia immediately hugged me and said nothing for a while. Now he had grown up and was one of us. I never thought this kid would be so understanding. When I separated myself from his embrace, he said thoughtfully and seriously, "You have to tell your Mom and the others! This can't go on. They have no right to separate you! I don't understand why!"

"I don't understand either, but we'll think of something."

"Whenever you need help, count on me! I'm looking out for you!"

I ruffled and stroked his curly hazelnut hair; "Thank you! Thanks for having my back! You saved me!"

"I think you should go get some sleep! You seem drained! You look like you have no energy left!"

"Yeah. I'll do that."

Then I received a message from Alborz that he had boarded the plane. He didn't call because he knew well that neither of us could bear to hear the other's voice. Another message came; "So why did you put the camera in my backpack? It was yours!"

I wrote back; "Put it next to our other souvenirs. That camera won't take any valuable pictures without you!"

That night, I came down with a fever and chills that lasted for three days. Everyone said I had the flu. But I knew well that it was the pain of separation from Alborz that had drained all my strength. When you're in love and your beloved is not by your side, fever, nausea, and loss of appetite become your companions. During that trip, I didn’t go out of the house anymore and didn’t tell Alborz anything about my illness. I didn't want him to feel guilty because of the best two days of our lives.

*

Without saying anything, Aban hugged me. Then she said, "So it was Alborz."

I nodded; I knew what she meant. We had talked many times about our first experience of intimacy. As always, I didn't make a precise reference to my past, but I had told her that that experience was something beyond ordinary experiences and had never happened in the same way, and that person wasn't Sam. It was I who years ago had cleared Aban's conscience about her first experience after her relationship ended—when she was filled with guilt and regret. She struggled with the inconsistency between her worldview and our cultural norms, and by making a general confession about my own experience and the circumstances I had, at least I clarified her situation for herself. At that time too—unlike Aban—I was sure that the feeling of regret was injected into our minds by society's incomplete upbringing, and we should not measure our behavior against it. She continued, "I should have guessed from the very beginning. Poor Sam had such a hard time with this formidable opponent!"

I hit her thigh with my fist. Such comparisons seemed wrong to me. I never allowed thoughts of Alborz to cross my mind when thinking of Sam. Sam also didn't consider premarital relationships impossible for men and women. What was deemed a taboo in Iranian society for me was a natural, personal matter and a fundamental right for him; therefore, he never asked me any questions in this regard. But the nature of my relationship with him—especially in the early years—was from another land and devoid of love for me; although we didn't hold back from each other.

"Afra! How much of a nerve-wrecker was this guy? He must have had at least one bad trait, right? It can't be that he's perfect like a character from a book!"

"Bad traits emerge as a result of our contradictions with others and our environment. Until he was 18, when we were together, and in the space he grew up in, we only had normal teasing and stubbornness. But as he himself said, after immigrating and during those tough years—when the world became full of contradictions for him—

coldness, indifference, and the lack of mutual understanding towards those around him became more pronounced. Maybe my uncle and people who were with him during those frustrating years saw this; but he didn't have that feeling with me. Still, I never figured it out in my life. Maybe I was so in love that I didn't see it."

"Maybe. But how lucky you were that your first date wasn't in Iran! If you were in Iran, it wouldn't have been as enjoyable."

"Uh-huh! Now it feels like a sweet dream, but it was incredible!"

"My dear! What about Mattia? Such a good guy! Who would believe that he's going to be a dad himself now? You said in a few months, right?"

With a smile, I said, "They said two or three months!"

"Let me see! What did you do with your necklace and your photos? Why didn't you show them to me?"

"The necklace is in the safe, next to the other gold pieces; in that red box. I'll show you! It's very delicate and beautiful! The photos too..."

She didn't let me finish my sentence. Suddenly she remembered, "The photos are in that envelope you snatched from me that night! Right?"

"Uh-huh! I wasn't at all ready to see them. I haven't dared to look at them until today."

"You have every right, my dear!"

She kept shaking her head, but there were words on her lips that she didn't express. I said, "What is it?"

"Nothing!"

"Say it!"

With hesitation, she said, "I was thinking how strange it is that people's abilities are so influenced by time and circumstances! I know the details of what I'm saying are nonsense, but it suddenly occurred to me that if you and Sam had married under different conditions and times with other people, maybe you would have kids by now!"

In affirmation, I said, "If you mean me and Alborz, then yes! The probability was very high. Although just imagining it in that relationship is terrifying; I was at the peak of my youth then and my body had more vitality. On the other hand, even until now, there hasn't been any logical or scientific reason found for my issues with Sam. So it was possible that either of us could have had kids with someone else!"

I remembered the day when a few hours after my intersouse with Sam, the doctor had taken a sample from my body and placed it under the microscope[1] as the final practical test to prove our sexual health. He called me over to see with my own eyes; "Do you see, girl? Everything is clear! We just need that great miracle to happen!"

Sam's sperm was joyfully and vigorously bouncing back and forth among the cells and fluids of my body. Our health together was a question; not apart from each other. I told Aban, "By the way, my doctor had mentioned this issue several times!"

"Come on, tell me the rest, Afra! Did he finally come to Iran or not? You're killing me!"

The sky had darkened. I turned my head up and stared again at the horse statue. I didn't know if I had the strength to say what had happened or not!

*

Alborz and I experienced everything that could fit into a long-distance relationship during those days. Sometimes we would email each other music and listen to it; although with my slow internet speed, downloading songs took hours. What I remembered most vividly was the piece "Fields of Gold" by Sting and Eva Cassidy that he sent, and I had just become acquainted with her fate. What happened to her reminded us of Aunt Ella; it was as if she was humming the song for the fate of Alborz and me. I thought Eva's performance was even better than Sting's; with the pain she had in her soul. I listened to it hundreds of times, fell more in love, and later it found a place in my forbidden

1. PCT (Post Coital Test)

list. Until 13 years later when Aban brought it back to life for me, and that day I didn't even remember this part of my memory. Sometimes, as soon as I came online, there would be a message waiting for me;

"I cannot be known
Better than you know me
Your eyes in which we sleep
We together
Have made for my man's gleam
A better fate than for the common nights
Your eyes in which I travel
Have given to signs along the roads
A meaning alien to the earth
In your eyes who reveal to us
Our endless solitude
Are no longer what they thought themselves to be
You cannot be known
Better than I know you."

I wrote, "Wow! Paul Éluard?" [1]

Instantly, he typed back, "My amazing love! My smart and knowledgeable girl!"

He was online again at dawn. I wrote, "Look at you! In love with the lights off!"

He laughed. He didn't need it, but I translated it into Persian for him in a way that I liked;

He wrote, "Oof... When you interpret it, it becomes a whisper of heaven."

1.Paul Éluard, the French poet and one of the leaders of the Surrealist movement, from 1919 to 1938.

"Now I understand why Auntie melted when Uncle read Rumi for her. Isn't it strange? All these years have passed, and you read Goethe and Byron and Rilke and Paul Éluard for me!"

"How interesting! I hadn't remembered that about Mom and Dad!"

"I have a lot of details about their love in my mind."

"So you mean to say that I was influenced without having a precise memory?"

"Yes, no doubt! Just like negative influences are transmitted in the same way. Those images were normal for you; a regular part of life like eating and sleeping. But for me, seeing the empty spaces of our home in yours, I couldn't take my eyes off them. It felt like having something temporarily that I longed for."

"You've always been sharper and more attentive than me! Your intuition has always fascinated me. I admit I tried really hard not to fall behind you since childhood. You were always stronger; wiser, deeper, more attractive, more beautiful, damn it! I'm glad you didn't take after Auntie too much! Although your strong and capable appearance is just that. You separated the good ones! "

He was talking about me! Remembering Alborz's interpretation that day after what had now happened in my eight-year shared life with Sam is very valuable to me; because I know well that femininity in its right state—not as a gender but as a process—has a direct connection to deep intuition, mutual understanding, growth and creation, foresight, insight into the landscape of human relationships, and the management and care of oneself and others. Both genders of the human species have benefited from it in varying degrees. Mom had turned into a hard and incompatible shell by rejecting these qualities. For years, I had unconsciously repeated what I had learned from her. I sent a crooked emoji to Alborz. But to change the subject, I continued, "I finally sent my book to the publisher today. They said they'll announce the review results in 15 days!"

"Wow! Congratulations! I'm sure you won't have to wait long, and your book will be published in no time!"

"You're very optimistic!"

"Optimistic? I have no doubt about it. Afra, don't underestimate yourself! Your work is excellent! I'm sure it'll go to several printings."

I laughed; "Oh Alborz, come on! Unless you buy all the copies yourself!"

"Don't joke! Remember what I told you today?"

I changed the subject again; "I'm reading a new book. I really like it. The Persian version hasn't been published yet. Maybe I'll translate it myself!"

"What's it called? Tell me so I can buy it and read it after the one I have!"

"It's by an Irish author. It's about their summer cottage memories! The story and setting don't really relate to us, but I don't know why it reminds me of our pasts. I'm sure you'll like it too!"

"The Sea? John Banville?"

"That's the one! Have you read it?"

"Oh my God! I started it last night. It's amazing! I read the first 100 pages in one go. I didn't mention it because I wanted to buy one for you and send it today! Couldn't you have read another book? Where did you get it from!? It's just been published here! Don't tell me you came and went back without telling me again?"

"Heh! You didn't recognize me?"

"Bookworm!"

"My friend just got back from a trip to Europe; I gave her a list and she got it for me!"

"I don't think you should read it! It's too early for you, darling! It's not suitable for your age!"

Yes, despite all that geographical distance, we were still book lovers of the special world we shared!

*

Aban interrupted me; "The Sea is great! Did you translate this book too? I remember reading it with another translation back in those days if I'm not mistaken!" I said regretfully, "I translated it halfway, but... I left it unfinished. Not that I didn't have time;

rereading it made me feel bad. After a while, when I got myself together, as you said, a better translation was published."

"That's strange! You're usually not the type to leave something half-done!" She said.

I took a deep breath and continued.

9

The Big Secret; I Never Even Dreamed of It

I knew that coming to Iran was psychologically difficult for him; nevertheless, one day I mustered the courage to ask, "Alborz! Don't you want to come to Iran for a bit?"

"You know that until a few months ago, I had no motivation. I was afraid to come and feel worse about things that are out of place. Friends and family, many of whom have immigrated. I thought I had lost you and couldn't find you. I had nothing there to go back to."

"Now you do!"

"Badly! So much so that it's affecting my mind. Especially after that brief trip to Nice, staying here has become very hard for me, Afra!"

"I've already passed that point. I'm sure my IQ these days is no more than 70."

He sent a laughing emoji with a few parentheses and stars. The confession was difficult. I wanted to freely and comfortably tell him how I felt about him; that he had become my whole world. He didn't wait for me; "And aside from my relationship with you, I need to come and sort out my messed-up relationship with Uncle and Aunt as soon as possible. I'm sure once we see each other, the next steps will become clear."

"Then come!"

"Babe!" After a short pause, he wrote, "I'll come, love! Let me sort out some work, and I'll be there soon!" Then he wrote, "By the way, my dentist sent his regards to you today!"

"Does he know me?"

"He's a friend of Dad's. We met him here. He's a really kind and interesting person! He reminds me of Uncle Amir, Afra! He's a copy of him!"

And he continued, "I've told him so many stories that he knows everything about us. The only downside is that after he's done with me, not only does he not give me a reward, but he also empties my pocket!"

I wrote back with a smiling emoji, "Ah, the good old days of Uncle's rewards! He is still the same, Alborz! Kind and fun!"

"Did you tell him we found each other?"

"Not yet. I'm afraid to say it and have it reach Mom's ears."

...

Three or four days after this conversation, things changed a bit. It was strange that he neither sent messages nor came online! He replied to my messages hurriedly, with short and somewhat cold responses. After two or three days, he wrote: "A problem has come up; I'm really busy. I'll explain it to you! Please give me some time!"

I accepted but wasn't convinced. I didn't feel good. What was his problem? He used to talk to me about everything in his life until morning. Now this problem had become a barrier to his communication with me! For almost a year since we had found each other, our daily lives had been full of each other's footprints again. There was no concern that we didn't share; it couldn't be that he was home and didn't want to talk to me. Was he not home? Was he traveling?

A week after his last message, one day at seven in the morning, my phone rang. An unknown number from a local mobile line.

"Hello?"

"Hi!"

His voice was close and immediately settled into my soul without any delay. I couldn't believe he had arrived so quickly! So he was busy coming. I had made guesses about the possibility of his surprise visit, but I didn't take them seriously. Excited, I jumped up; "Hello to your beautiful Voice! So That's why you didn't keep me updated! When did you come, you crazy?"

"About two or three hours ago."

His tone was tired and devoid of feeling. I had never heard his voice like this before, but I understood him. Maybe seeing this city again and recalling the past was unsettling for him. I asked, "Are you okay? Where are you?"

"I stopped by Mom Ella from the airport. I'm at my hotel now!"

With these few words, he wanted to convey that he wasn't doing well; Antie Ella! I hadn't visited her for a long time; for me, she wasn't there. My aunt was in all the sweet feelings of this world. But a hotel? Undoubtedly, if our circumstances were normal and events hadn't separated us so much, he would have come to our house, but it didn't happen that way. In any case, we had relatives and acquaintances he could go to; his aunt and uncle! I asked, "Why a hotel?"

He paused for a moment. He took a deep breath and exhaled; "No one knows I've come. When's the first chance I can see you?"

"From now on, whenever and wherever you say!"

"Don't you have class?"

"When you're here, what does class matter?"

"Where shall we meet?"

I hesitated and said, "Is the park good?"

Again, I heard deep breaths. He whispered, "The park is good."

We agreed to meet at our usual spot in the park at nine o'clock. I felt an odd sense of unease! It had been years since I had been to the park. This park was a place for me to be with him and his family. Without them, it was nothing but the image of my loneliness.

I arrived a little earlier and decided to walk along the path where we used to skate until he arrived. I had only walked about 30 meters when I saw him in the middle of the path. My body tingled! I had seen this image many times in my childhood and adolescence; there he was,

standing with his skateboard tucked under his arm, gazing at a point in search of a subject for a photo. This time, however, he was very attractive and desirable, transformed into a young man before me; more captivating than ever! Love had done its work on me! Just like that morning when I stood facing the sea and was mesmerized by him, I couldn't take my eyes off him. He had placed his sunglasses on his head, his hand was tangled in his hair, and his eyes—seemingly following a story—were fixed on something to his left. I struggled to pull my gaze away from him and turned my head to where he was looking; it was the statue of a horse! The same one we used to sit next to while having tea and cake. The same one we would circle around on its slope. The one we called a horse while Uncle insisted it was a bird. The sound of rustling brought me back to reality. I turned and saw him approaching, staring at me. He was only three or four steps away. A breeze came from him, carrying a mix of pine and burnt wood scents from a rain-soaked forest. In his gaze was a wave of longing, anger, love, helplessness, and... tranquility; all together. It felt strange and made me a bit anxious! I smiled, but I felt like a dry leaf trembling on a tree. There was no longer any sign of that open embrace and wide smile. Perhaps he was being considerate of me! With a nervous smile, he said, "Damn it! Why do you keep getting more beautiful!?"

I remembered our last meeting in Nice. That day, he had started the conversation in the same way. I fell silent again. I managed to say, "Maybe it's just for you and your eyes that have a technical malfunction!"

He laughed bitterly and nodded his head in agreement with pride. It seemed he took my words seriously; "I haven't malfunctioned. I'm the one who's a technical malfunction for this life!"

How hopeless and helpless he was! This term didn't suit him. His unsuccessful attempts to make me laugh revealed the turmoil within him. Was being in Iran this painful for him? I could no longer bear the distance. Although hugging two friends of the

opposite sex in the urban space of those days in Iran wasn't common and could cause trouble, I walked towards him. For a moment, he held me tightly, kissed the crown of my head, and quickly let me go. Why? He wasn't like this. Was he being cautious? He said, "Shall we go sit somewhere?"

I nodded towards his left; "Is next to the horse good?" He looked at the statue and accepted.

I had heard that long-distance relationships have their issues, and you might talk to someone for a long time and like each other, but when you finally meet, you could be disappointed. If it were the first time we were seeing each other with fresh eyes, if it were the first time I was seeing him in a romantic context, I would undoubtedly have felt doubt creeping in; but I didn't feel that at all. I was also reassured by him. We had already passed our test, and it was clear that his gaze in those moments didn't hide the attraction and pleasant feelings he had for me. With the confession he had made, it didn't seem like he was experiencing any contradiction of that kind, and of course, the roots of our relationship weren't of that nature at all. We knew each other well; but something had changed between us. He had a strange guard up; something was preventing him from getting close. I didn't know what it was! He had always been full of life and affection, but that day he seemed devoid of feeling. There was something I couldn't understand, and I was afraid to ask about it! I didn't want our meeting in Iran to become bitter for him. We sat on the grass a short distance apart. After a few minutes of silence, I said, "Do you remember that time while skateboarding I collided with a kid around this corner?"

He chuckled briefly; "You hit him and didn't stop! The kid got up, brushed himself off, and left. I came after you and found you around the lake. You were curled up on the ground next to the bench."

I laughed; "I thought that with the way he fell to the ground, he must be dead and they'd come looking for me to get my dad involved." He shook his head as if it were a waste of time. At that moment, Alborz was the center of the universe, and I didn't take my eyes off him for even a moment, but he... avoided looking at me. Why? Was seeing me bothering him? Or was he hiding a feeling from me out of habit from

the past? As he continued to stare ahead of him, he said, “It was the effect of the night before. Anyone in your place would have made that interpretation from a simple incident.”

Unlike our meeting in Nice, neither of us insisted on not recalling bad memories anymore. It seemed this was a feature of our meeting in the park, and he remembered it well. He was right. The night before, my mom had chastinated

I had spilled a glass of water on a notebook she was reading and had placed it on the table. In the midst of her curses and beatings, she said I always caused trouble, always messed things up, always made mistakes, and was careless and irresponsible. Even though I knew the answer to my question, I asked, “Did our voices come through that loudly?”

He shook his head bitterly and said at the same time, “In the summers from the window of my bedroom which was above yours, and in the winters from the chimney pipe!”

"How embarrassing!"

"Yeah, but the one who should have been embarrassed was your mom; not you!

I lowered my head. He continued, “Forget it! My situation wasn’t any better than yours under normal circumstances. I was just a bit luckier.”

It seemed today we were only meant to talk about bitterness. With a faint smile, I said, “What do you mean? Your mom and dad were always kind to you! They never even raised their voices at you!”

His brows furrowed. With a bitter smile, he said, “Yeah, sure! They were very kind! But I think it was mostly because they felt pity for me.”

"Why should they feel sorry for you? Alborz! Why have you become so strange?"

Finally, he turned to me; he glanced at me from the corner of his eyes and gave me a mocking smile. My heart sank! I swallowed hard. He was cold, angry, and even wounded; it felt as if he held a

grudge against me. He said calmly, “Don’t pretend anymore! Don’t play games with me! I know everything.”

I was confused. I frowned and said, “What do I know? What are you talking about?”

He seemed more agitated. It was as if he was speaking out of denial, hiding the truth; “Stop it! Don’t you know I wasn’t their child?”

My ears rang! I didn’t understand the meaning of what I had heard! If I didn’t know him, I would have thought he was joking; but he was not only serious but also seemed to despise me. He had never spoken to me like this before. Tears involuntarily filled my eyes, blurring his face in front of me. In a voice that resembled a deep exhale, I said helplessly, “No, Alborz! I don’t know anything.”

He smirked again; “Unbelievable! You remember our childhood memories clearer than anything! You used to overhear many of Mom and Dad’s whispers and come tell me! Should I believe you were unaware of this? Afra! I’m devastated!”

His words were unbearable for me! I could no longer tolerate his rejection. I cried out, “Don’t talk to me like that, this is not fair! I’m unaware! What are you saying?”

I turned my face away from him and wiped my nose with the back of my hand. He too had changed. Although he was angry, he still lost color upon seeing my tears; but there was no longer any trace of kindness. He looked at me in silence for a while. I saw his eyes filled with astonishment and bewilderment in the angle of my gaze. He was searching for something in me; it seemed he wanted to be sure of the sincerity of what I was saying. Then he narrowed his eyes and said slowly, “So you... don’t know about what your uncle did?”

My uncle? My questioning look turned into fear. I shook my head left and right. Eye to eye with him, I pleaded again, “I don’t know anything. Please tell me what the story is, Alborz!”

He looked at my All-Star shoes as if I were wearing them by mistake. It was clear he wanted to talk about something that seemed very difficult for him. After a moment of silence, he said, “Mom and Dad couldn’t have children. According to Dad, they even went to England once and tried artificial insemination, but it didn’t work.”

I stared at him, dumbfounded. He spoke the words as if his throat was being scratched; “They... they adopted me.”

How ridiculous! I laughed briefly; “No way! Who told you that?” He said in shock, “Until ten days ago, I thought like you.”

"But what does that mean?"

"Apparently, after a few years, they had lost hope and were no longer making an effort. Uncle Amir was doing his military service as a doctor in the deprived villages of the north at that time. One of his patients...

He paused. He was struggling to say it. My head was spinning! I was trying to understand his words.

"Whose husband was a construction worker, had six small children, and was pregnant for the seventh time. When she found out she was pregnant, she came to your uncle to somehow help her get rid of the baby. Uncle helped her in a different way. In fact, he took the opportunity and proposed to Elaheh and Farhad that in exchange for their full support of that family, they would adopt the child that would be born.

I said in horror, "I can't believe it! What are you saying?" Alborz paused between sentences to regain his composure. Ignoring my question, he continued, "On the other hand, Uncle reassured that family that they were dealing with good people. The mother of the child was against the abortion and was desperate. When she heard Uncle's proposal, she was happy and accepted it. She said at least this way, I can be sure that this last one will be happy. The child's father, who... was making ends meet as a laborer and was under pressure, wanted the child to be aborted and was afraid Uncle would go back on his word. But when it was decided that all expenses would be covered and financial support would be provided for the family, he became happy and accepted. Mom and Dad took a trip to the north and met the child's family there." Alborz was saying this, and I was suffocating. Each of his sentences hit my heart like a deadly blow.

"It was decided that they would support them until the end of the pregnancy so that they could settle down. During those few

months, Farhad and Elaheh, through Uncle, renewed the household items for that family. They even bought things like a television and a washing machine for them that they didn't have before. They also arranged for the children's food and schooling. Uncle was following up on the mother's check-ups and diet from there. Since he was familiar with the hospital staff, the mother of the child was admitted under Elaheh's name, and naturally, the rest of the documents were registered under Farhad and Elaheh's names. According to what Dad said, after the child was born..."

He paused again, swallowing his sobs several times. He narrated the story in a way that seemed as if he had repeated it to himself many times to digest it more easily.

"For a few seconds, she held the baby and then handed it over to Elaheh, saying, 'Don't let me see him again!' They told the neighbors that the baby was stillborn, and they took the baby and came to Tehran. My Dad, Farhad, had an acquaintance at the civil registry who was able to get my birth certificate from Tehran. Even now, that family is financially supported by Dad through Uncle. My family! My sisters and brothers."

I never imagined that the reason for his distress could be this. My eyes were wide open, staring at him in shock and disbelief. I was feverish; the trail of my hot tears burned my cheeks. The baby he was talking about—was that my childhood friend and playmate? The beloved child of my uncle and aunt? The person sitting before me, whom I loved, with whom I had become one, for whom I would give my life? I wanted to hold him close and have him say his words in my embrace, but he was terribly withdrawn, and his gaze was still averted from me. He continued, "I mean it was a kind of illegal charity! Remember? Uncle used to come to our house, and they wouldn't let us hear their conversations?"

I had my hand over my mouth. I exhaled deeply and confirmed in disbelief. He said, "Dad says..." He choked up again; "Dad says my mom, Mom Ela! She always said that this child's existence has brought so much blessing into our lives that I owe that family for the rest of my life."

We both cried together. I couldn't believe we were sitting next to each other again like teenagers, sobbing! I struggled to ask, "Do you have news of them? From... your family?"

"My dad, the father of that baby, has passed away. Farhad says he fell from a scaffold when he was 12 or 13 years old, and by the time they got him to the hospital, it was too late. Since then, Mom and Dad have been covering all the family's expenses. Even today, they are providing income sources for them. Uncle has invested for them to reduce their dependency, but support continues."

He continued with a smirk, "Now you understand why I was such an expensive child? My biological mom told our uncle, 'I haven't seen this child, but the blessings that came to us after his birth make me indebted to him for life.' Why should they be indebted to me, the wreck that I am?!".

I said, "Lucky you, both sides are satisfied with you!"

He gave a bitter smile. I found it interesting that when he spoke of his true parents, he referred to them as the mother or father of the child. I asked, "How did you find out?"

"My dad said he had made an agreement with Mom Ela that they would tell me everything after my 18th birthday, but then those events happened, and my dad decided to postpone it. At that time, there was already enough shock in our lives. Until about 12 days ago, uncle Amir called my dad and informed him that the my mom was also sick and not doing well. My dad gathered his courage and told me everything before something happened and he regretted it later."

"So that's why there was no news from you?"

"Since I found out, I've been on the brink of madness. All my childhood memories were flashing before my eyes; clues that connected me to the story. It's a terrible feeling! Remember that time you asked my mom why there wasn't a picture of her pregnancy in her album?"

I smiled and remembered that my uncle had answered instead of my aunt; "Uncle said the whole roll of film of your aunt's pregnancy burned."

Alborz continued, "He said it fell into a teacup and burned."

I asked, "Who in the family knows?"

"Our uncle, your mom and dad, and my own aunt!"

"Really? How did they hide it from the rest?"

"Mom told everyone about her pregnancy, and two or three months later, she said they were going to the north to be away from the city. But they were in Tehran and only went north to pick me up from the hospital. They told the family that she had to give birth urgently up there in the north. That was uncle's suggestion. He said that the fewer people who know, the lower the chance that someone will want to tell me prematurely and cause harm."

"How respectable our uncle is, and we didn't know it. So That's why he loves you so much!?"

I looked at him questioningly; "I understand my own mom and dad, but among all those people, why should your aunt know?"

With a smirk, he replied, "Dad says I was on a hunger strike and was barely drinking formula. That's why for a while, part of Sepand's milk share became mine; he was born two or three months before me. My aunt took care of things for a few weeks.

"Now you understand why your mom disliked me and said I wouldn't amount to anything? She always sees me as illegitimate."

Hearing this made me feel bad; "No, she didn't dislike you. Don't say it like that!"

"Why, Afra! Your mom was the only one who opposed this from the very beginning. She said that nothing would come of this child. No matter what you do, its nature and genes..."

I didn't let him finish. I was angry; "That's nonsense! How well did she treat the child who was made of her flesh and blood? How much have I been neglected while you haven't? I'm sick of these thoughts! I wish she didn't know either!"

He said, "Anyway, before I wanted to talk to Aunt and Uncle, I had gotten answers to many of my questions. Dad says one of Mama Ela's biggest fears was that amidst conversations, something suspicious would reach my ears, and I would catch a whiff of the matter and understand the situation at an inopportune time."

"The same thing my mom was a master at."

He ignored that and continued; "Dad said that the closer I got to 18, the worse Mom's condition became; the fear of losing me and my distress after understanding the situation. I don't know, maybe I should say it's just as well that she's not here to see these days!"

If she were here, perhaps she would have managed things differently; in a way that the pain and harm would be less. I summarized and said, "If she were here, things wouldn't have turned out this way."

"It seems she also went to a counselor a few times; one of your mom's friends! And then when her illness happened..."

"My mom's friends?" I exclaimed; "Mom's friend! She wasn't a counselor; she was a psychiatrist. The same one who, after you left, whenever she wanted to exert pressure on me, took me to her! She only knew how to prescribe pills for people and look at them like yogurt while sticking labels on them!" I was still angry; "Now that I'm putting the puzzle pieces together and seeing how much of our joys were destroyed because of Mom's ridiculous thoughts, I want to bring the world down on her!"

Alborz took a deep breath and said softly, "Unfortunately, that same perspective caused our separation. Their years-long friendship and all our joys. Maybe if Mama Ela hadn't been so upset, she would have left later!"

I looked at him. Until that moment, the truth of the matter had remained distorted for me as well. I said, "It's true that Mom wasn't happy with you and me, but it can't be said that their relationship

fell apart because of us. The incident at the party and the stories before it had nothing to do with us."

"What stories?"

It was the first time we were talking about it together, and I didn't know that we were both equally unaware of that misunderstanding. Hesitantly, I said, "My dad and your mom."

He frowned; "What about my mom and your dad?"

Now it was my turn to doubt whether he really didn't know or was pretending not to know. He asked again; "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean!"

"What?"

"Do you mean you are unaware of their relationship?"

"What relationship?"

I said calmly, "I don't know how! But they had a secret relationship."

"Don't talk nonsense!"

"Don't get angry! I thought you knew!"

"There's no way!"

I told him about what I had seen that night at the party, which I thought was true. Alborz had his elbows resting on his knees, his hands buried in his hair, staring at the ground.

"Alborz! Those scenes were very vague and incomprehensible for my childhood world. That's why when Mom spoke up, I was sure she must know more." I paused for a moment and said, "I never thought badly of Aunt and Dad, and my opinion about Aunt never changed. I didn't even want to talk about her because I thought you knew as much as I did, and there was no reason to retell it. I loved Aunt. I never imagined Dad in any other way. I don't know what happened between them, but there was a relationship that Dad was involved in. Even when he found out your mom was hospitalized, he was going crazy. I never dared to talk to anyone about this."

I wished I had known the truth back then and hadn't troubled his mind. Alborz remained still. I felt sorry for him; for his broken heart! I didn't even know what to say that might change his mood. I was still

in shock from hearing the hidden half of his life, suspended between earth and sky. I couldn't believe we were sitting on that grass and talking about these things! I could see Aunt next to me saying, "In the end, play without me! I want to peel fruit for you."

Something came to my mind. Although saying it would make him even sadder, I felt I had to bring it up; "Do you remember the day Uncle Amir came to our house and talked a lot with your Mom and Dad? The same day you played the cartoon song for me!?"

Alborz placed his hand under his chin and turned his head toward me. I just noticed the slight swelling and bruising around his eyes. A mix of sleeplessness and the heavy burden of what he had been through was visible in them. As if recalling that day, he narrowed his eyes; "Did we want to go on a trip? I remember the suitcases in the middle of the living room!"

"Exactly! After Uncle left, your mom and dad were upset. When we asked what happened, Aunt said one of their friends had passed away."

He frowned and said, "I remember that day. After that, you and I came here alone. Mom was sad for a few days. Dad, when he comforted her, would say it was something that happened. 'We'll help in any way we can.'" He paused and pleaded, "Afra! I doubt I know what you're trying to say! Please tell me! My brain can't take it anymore! I've gone crazy solving puzzles and connecting unrelated memories these past few days."

I looked at him in silence, and it seemed as if he could hear my words behind my closed lips; he had buried his hand in his hair and was staring at me in shock—eye to eye—shaking his head in disbelief from side to side. Now we were no longer in doubt that the lost friend from that day was Alborz's father, and Uncle had delivered the bad news to Aunt and Uncle. He took a deep breath and threw himself onto the grass. He placed his palms over his face and cried softly. Ever since the first time I saw him cry years ago on the morning of our moving day, every time he cried, it felt like his tears had connected to something deep within me, making me cry along with him involuntarily. Now my memories of him,

where he would wipe my tears and pull me into a distant dream, seemed far away. Now it was he who was crying, and I had nothing to offer him other than my own sobs beside him. We remained in silence for a long time. This time, another memory from sweet days came back to me. It was as if I wanted to distract a child with something joyful to forget the sadness of bursting his balloon. I sniffed and said, "I remember one day during one of our trips to the North when we were all at the beach; we kids were busy playing in the sand and taking turns burying each other. You were sitting with your back to the sea on the sand, looking at the mountains. I even remember Uncle had put a tape in your Walkman. That George Michael song[1]; as Dad called it, the 'insensitive whisper'! Do you remember?"

He sniffed and without removing his hands from his face said, "Not exactly! Please tell me the rest!"

I didn't look at him; "You suddenly got fixated on why we never go towards the mountains and always come to the beach? Uncle, who always looked at you with admiration, said something along the lines of 'Tha's why his name is Alborz; he's a child of the mountains!' Then Aunt said, 'We're going, my son! We'll go up there once and stay.' Uncle said jokingly, 'Sure! Just make sure to buy a house up there so we can come visit you!' Remember how Uncle was always funny? He said, 'Yeah! Put some money in Uncle's pocket!' I don't remember exactly, but you said something along the lines of 'Uncle! My mom and dad are innocent! After all, I eat all their money.'"

Alborz removed his hand from his face; "I remember now. Everyone laughed! Uncle said, 'Enjoy it, little man! Who better to eat it than you! My God! He meant my family.'"

I said, "Now their words are starting to make sense."

We fell silent again. Everything was falling into place; Uncle Farhad's desire to distance himself from us and everything in Iran, and Mom's desire to keep me away from Alborz and other grievances. Something painful came to my mind but seemed funny at that

1. Careless Whisper, George Michael 1984

moment; our resemblance to each other! Alborz whispered, "What are you laughing at?"

"Oh boy! We are both unwilling participants. At least I'm no longer alone in this thought."

He said softly, "Unwillingly from different worlds! Where am I and where are you?!"

I replied, "Yeah, but it doesn't matter; it's the feeling it conveys. At least after that, they brought you and placed you on their eyes; they completely handed me over to the neighbors. Of course, that was my luck; otherwise, I might have grown up in a gutter. Even now, there's not a day that goes by without them reminding me, under various pretexts, that they didn't want me; as if to say, 'Don't get too happy!'" I laughed. He chuckled just as lightly and then I continued, "At least you grew a lot, and I've just been stuck in place. If we assume that we all chose how to come into this world one day, you chose your parents very wisely!"

He smirked and said, "You? You've been stuck in place?" His mood had shifted slightly.

After a brief pause, I asked, "So what are you going to do now?" He sniffed. In a husky voice, he said quietly, "The first chance I get, I'm going to see our uncle. I'll get an address from him and find answers to some questions that remain. Then I'll go visit..my Mom. Dad said she's not doing well. I don't want to reach a point where it's too late and I lose someone else."

Hesitantly, I asked, "What do you feel for her, Alborz? How did you feel when you found out about aunt and uncle?"

"I don't doubt even one percent that Elaheh and Farhad are my mother and father; they were angels. The best people I've ever known. What would I be without them? Everything I have is from them. They poured all their love and life at my feet. They are the treasure of my life. Better than any parents!" He took a deep breath; "But the one who brought me into this world is also very dear to me. For the suffering she endured because of losing me and perhaps her guilt; for my siblings. It makes me sad when I remember that because of uncle Amir's presence, my life has been

defined in luxury in a different place while they lived in a remote area full of failures and poverty, and now they are losing their mother."

"What's her illness?"

"Colon cancer!"

Silence fell again; cancer again. This time I also rested my head on my knees; I wanted to cry out loud. In that moment, I instinctively reached out to Alborz and gently caressed him. I didn't even know if he was still avoiding me or not! But he didn't pull his hand away. I wished I could take some of the misery and confusion off his shoulders, but there was no way. I myself was one of those who reminded him of his bitter moments and was on his list of disappointments. There was nothing I could do for him. I turned to him and said, "I wish I could help you!"

He wiped his face with the back of his hands. He took my hand that was on his thigh and stood up. I felt the tears on his skin. He placed my hand on his nose and mouth, and while for a moment he inhaled it with his eyes closed, he kissed my fingers. He opened his eyes. He took my hand in his and gently caressed it with the fingers of his other hand. His leather bracelet gift was around his left wrist, and his army-banded Swatch watch was around his right wrist. We locked eyes again. What meaning did these details have for my eyes and soul in those moments, and what did they do to me? With his scattered thoughts, it felt like he had taken all of me in his hands! The warmth flowing from him onto my body seemed to envelop me entirely and caress me. Finally, he broke the silence. With a smile full of longing, he said, "I'm sorry! What a romantic rendezvous this turned out to be!"

I waved my other hand in the air; I understood him. With the state he was in, what else could it be? With a smile, I said, "Today we should have seen each other at the gazebo instead of park!"

A faint spark appeared in the farthest point of his eyes. He mischievously replied, "That spot was under your name!"

I looked at him. I had always heard that people start to resemble each other due to living together, but I never believed it. Now I saw Alborz, and I thought I could still see traces of uncle and aunt in his face. He really did resemble them. My gaze locked onto his fingers,

which, due to years of playing, had the agility and delicacy of a pianist's hands, while at the same time, they seemed to reflect the masculine quality of aunt's hands.

Suddenly, as if a question had cast a shadow in his mind while he searched for words, he lowered his head, opened his mouth to speak several times but fell silent, and finally, with hesitation and a bit of embarrassment, he said, "Now that you know everything about me, I understand if... you don't want to..."

No! I shouldn't allow him to have that thought. He was still searching for the right words when I instinctively grabbed his hand tightly. I interrupted him to express the truth and reassure him; "What are you saying? You are one of the best people I know. Did you think I'm like my mom? Alborz! My feelings for you are only for you! It's what exists within you! The part of myself that I recognized through you! In fact, at this very moment, it's deeper than before. With you, I see things that don't exist anywhere in this world without you!"

He returned to my eyes with a smile and shyness; the anger and suspicion from an hour ago were gone. He was soft and kind again; the same Alborz I knew but wounded and in pain. It seemed he was organizing his thoughts. He pushed his hair back with the palm of his hand and continued with the same tone that had been mine for these years, filled with affection; "You know how I feel about you, Afra! You are my greatest joy! I'm so happy that you exist, and you can't even imagine how much your presence warms my heart. To be honest, when I suspected that you knew all these years and didn't bring it up, I felt sick. I felt disappointed; it was as if I had been betrayed. Forgive me!"

His eyes held me in their embrace, and his words wrapped around me like a warm and soft shawl in the cold. Knowing how to melt the sugar in his heart, I said, "You were right, sweetheart!" He laughed briefly and bitterly. He enjoyed it when I sometimes used his own words that way. His gaze locked onto my lips. With a swift movement, he came closer, placing one hand behind my thigh and the other behind my neck, pulling me toward him. He

paid no attention to his surroundings, but I glanced left and right. It was unlikely that park security or law enforcement would be lurking at this hour in the morning, but still, I was cautious. Moments later, my hand was tangled in his hair, and Alborz's lips seemed to encompass all of my being. For those moments, all anxiety and worry were sent to the farthest point away. The last time I experienced this feeling with him was on the Mediterranean coast, and now here I was, in a scrub and scarf on the grass of the park. Those irregularities and law-breaking moments that Iranian lovers endured in quiet alleys, cinema halls, and personal cars. Ah, those moments! We were young and passionate! Reluctantly, he pulled back slightly and let me go. Our breaths still mingled in front of each other. He said softly, "I missed you so much!"

Unable to resist the distance between us, I took a deep breath in his air with a hint of complaint and surrender. As if intoxicated, with a smile, I said gently, "When did you become so charming and handsome?"

"Are you saying this to me? You, who look like a red apple? You taste like ice cream and smell like paradise?"

As I averted my gaze, I unconsciously noticed our shoes placed side by side. I just realized we were both wearing high-top All-Stars like in our teenage years; he had army green and I had beige. How much I missed those images! He noticed it too and gave my shoe a small tap with the side of his. With a feigned complaint, I said, "Don't think I didn't notice! You were ditching me for more than a week!"

He let out a deep sigh and nodded in agreement, "If you knew how I felt!"

I tried to change the subject, "I wish your dad had come with you!"

"Actually, he insisted on coming; I didn't want him to. I'd rather be alone."

He fell silent for a while and continued, "My mind is full, Afra! All these incidents are too much for me. With what I heard from you today, I feel like I'm drowning. I need time to gather myself. Please give me some time! As soon as I find myself, I'll call you. Maybe the best help you can give me is to take care of yourself! I don't want you

to suffer any more from the past! At least I want to be at ease about you; even though you've always been stronger than me! I'm quite fragile, but don't worry! I'll be fine."

We were still sitting next to each other, and my hand was in his. He raised his other hand to caress my face. Gradually, a spark appeared in his eyes, and the clown within him awakened; "Maybe when I return from the north, we can revive the hotel memory!"

I laughed and kissed his thumb that was brushing against my lips; "I know you want to be alone, but if it takes too long, I won't wait for you anymore; I'll call you myself! Even if it's just a word, don't leave me in the dark about you!"

"It won't take long my dear!"

"Fortunately, this time I know if I lose track of you, I'll know who to ask about you."

He didn't say anything. The sadness in his eyes, his distress, the innocent face that had endured so many incidents, and a body that couldn't bear the consequences brought pain to my soul; it felt as if I had been beaten up badly. That day we said goodbye to each other in shock and silence. Truly, what a meeting it was!

To be continued…

FAAVIDEL, a multidisciplinary artist, has studied graphic design
and has worked in the fields of interior design management, architecture
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Her collection of artworks includes both physical and digital paintings
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These works are showcased in short videos on digital art platforms
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To date, her works have been exhibited and sold in New York
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Previously, her book "The Lake Monster, Chopin, Barbequed Eggplant" was
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