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 9
CHAPTER ONE: OBLIVION

Coppice Blue

Faavidel

Literature - Persian Fiction – Novel

Coppice Blue

By FAAVIDEL
Fall 2024
Editions: 999

All rights reserved; copyright and publication rights are exclusive to the author.
Any adaptation or use of this work is subject to obtaining written permission from the author.

Purchase link:
https://objkt.com/collections/KT1WpQQY6QHeZWzUiPBP23bJX8NqGobHBZR9
Instagram: coppiceblue
Telegram: Coppice Blue Songs

Chapter One
Oblivion

17

Alone Together Under One Roof

Some time passed in silence. Remembering that memory was still painful for me. Aban was in shock from what she had heard; "Was there really something between you two?"

"No! You know that kids our age were not into that at all. Yes, we were growing up, and one of the fundamental issues that had never been important to our parents until now was our hormones. But we were in a daze; in the realm of childhood. Alborz and I had good relationship. We talked a lot about books, music, school, our friends, and all the details of our lives. Now I understand that my aunt and uncle were always paying attention to us; they were looking out for us without us feeling like we were being controlled. Something that maybe my mom wanted to do but was unable to due to her controlling nature and poor management. Even if there was something between us, such entanglements in this regard would have been very unlikely from my mom. Despite all her flaws, she never had unreasonable biases or strictness regarding my relationships with boys."

"So why did she become suspicious?"

I paused and said softly, "In reality, there was nothing between us, but there was between them!" I placed both hands on my face and rubbed my eyes with my fingers; "I'm not ready to talk about it now, but I'll tell you!"

She shook her head and patted my back. We got up from the bench and headed towards the park exit; "You hit me so hard that I forgot how I came to you. If Sam is late, don't stay home alone! Do you want me to come with you?"

"I'm not going home. He said he would work for another hour or two. I want to stop by the restaurant; since I usually don't drop by his workplace, he will definitely be surprised."

"Good job, girl! That's a better idea! That way, my mind won't be stuck on you!"

I said goodbye to her and headed towards the place where the restaurant was supposed to be. On the way, I received a message from Aban. It was a new performance and arrangement of Schubert's serenade along with a red heart and a sentence under that file: "It means a lot to me that you are sharing your most private and perhaps important life matters with me! Rest assured! It will remain with me like a treasure!"

"If I'm going to write them down, soon the whole world will know!"

"Wow! You want to write it down? That's great!"

I sent her a picture of a large, zipped-up mouth and ended the conversation. Fortunately, we both knew well when the conversation would end. The restaurant building was directly opposite one of the newly built luxury shopping centers in Velenjak. You had to pass through a very large wooden door and after going through a ten to twelve-meter corridor, you would reach a spacious hall. I remembered this from the images and Sam's explanations. Sam's Lexus and another car were parked in front of the entrance steps. I pushed the heavy wooden door. Fortunately, it was open, and I didn't have to reveal the

surprise with a message saying, "I'm at the door!" I quietly entered the hallway. Everything was still dusty, and construction tools and materials were scattered here and there. Laughter filled the air. The closer I got to the hall, the more my questions multiplied. It felt as if I were in a mountain; the laughter echoed multiple times in my mind. Before I lost my balance, I leaned against the wall. My stomach twisted, and my hands were cold! My head felt heavy and bobbed like a watermelon in a pool of water! I had to go; before Sam noticed my presence, I needed to leave. Coming here was a mistake altogether. By the time I realized it, I was behind the wheel. I quickly drove away and parked the car in the first alley under a burnt-out streetlight. What I had heard was beyond my expectations; perhaps I was the only one who was surprised there.

Did I hear correctly? At first, I heard the laughter of a man and a woman, which could be normal at that hour and in that place; maybe like two coworkers. But when the sound of laughter and whispers resembled Sam's voice and the verbal caresses at the beginning of our relationship, and the feminine laughter turned into flattery in response to those caresses, I was suddenly rendered speechless and froze right there. No! I must have been hearing things wrong. But the caresses and jokes continued. It seemed that no one was working there; there was no sign of assistants either. The sound was like a romantic scene from a movie where a man and woman were behind a wall, engaged in affectionate conversation so that the viewer could hear and be sure of the nature of their relationship. I wanted to suddenly enter the hall and surprise them unaware, but always in such situations, someone who feels disrespected and cast out appears painful, foolish, and full of inadequacies. I felt deeply humiliated, but I wasn't one for such reactions or sudden emotional movements. I thought, what good would it do besides causing embarrassment for us, relieving those two's minds, opening up to each other, and ultimately, my defeat! After all, I was the loser in that three-person scene; it would have been

better not to confront them that night. At that moment, I was too weak to play an effective role in that scene. I needed to gather myself and choose a better time to reveal the secret of those two, and more importantly, find my share in what I was witnessing.

I couldn't believe it! Sam? He was not at all someone who would betray or hide things. Maybe I had misheard. Perhaps I was hearing part of a retelling or an irrelevant joke. In any case, I needed time for any reaction so that I wouldn't do something I'd regret later. I cried all the way home; there was nothing else I could do. I wasn't innocent or miserable; I was more angry—angry at myself, at Sam, and at the situation that had brought us there. Why was the past repeating itself for me right now? Was it repeating itself to remind me? Why? Why should I experience a feeling that Dad had once given to Mom? Because I left her alone? Because I never understood her? I reached home and threw myself onto the bed. The worst days and memories continued from what I had told Aban, like a monster that had been sleeping for years rising from beneath the earth.

From the day after that night when our parents argued about us in the yard, Mom made a new decision; it seemed she wanted to lessen my dependence on my aunt. She asked Ms. Parvin to come to our house every day of the week except Fridays, instead of three times a week, so that I wouldn't go without lunch and wouldn't have to go upstairs. For Ms. Parvin, the conditions were the same as before. Since almost all of her days of the week were spent at our house, the difference was that her presence in our home became more pronounced. Still, when I returned from school, I would go upstairs several times a day out of Mom's sight; I was used to it and didn't understand the new rules. Ms. Parvin always looked after me. In those early days, she had said that if I wanted, I could go there and study comfortably, and she wouldn't tell Mom. None of the household members understood Mom's strictness, but they all feared her reaction

so much that instead of disobeying or confronting her, they complied with her. Although those visits didn't last long; one day, after Ms. Parvin left, Mom called the house several times, and when I didn't answer, she came to me again that night. From that day on, my trips upstairs were only short ones right after Mom's calls. My aunt was very down during those days; she no longer had the patience to convince Mom. Sometimes she would bring snacks for me with Alborz and we would spend some time together at our house. Sometimes Alborz would bring his homework to our yard or home. The situation was becoming increasingly difficult, and I felt like a prisoner. I didn't know how long this would last! Mom had even become sensitive to the number of phone rings; if I answered after three rings, I had to explain myself. Most of the time, I listened to Alborz's music from downstairs. I was sure this wouldn't last and that this distress would soon come to an end. On weekends, we no longer gathered like before; both families had become distant from each other. Alborz said, "It won't be like before anymore." Maybe he had heard something from my aunt, but I preferred to stay hopeful.

On one of the last nights of autumn, we had guests; as always. Although everyone was distant with each other, family gatherings remained unchanged. We kids were happy; parties became an excuse to improve the situation. That night, nothing and no one mattered to me except for how we six characters interacted with each other. Uncle and Dad were more or less like always; I saw Mom and my aunt in the kitchen engaged in warm conversation a few times; it seemed they were trying to ease the tension in their relationship. Alborz and I would sometimes sneak away from Mom's sight and talk about the joys of that period as we always did. But in between, I caught glimpses of my aunt and Dad sitting together with worried expressions on their faces a few times. In Dad's eyes, there was despair and pleading. I was dying to know what they were talking about, but every time I got close to

them, their conversation would stop. Once, my aunt came from the yard into the house while wiping a tear from her cheek. Dad followed her in and went in another direction. Mom approached Dad, and a brief argument broke out between them, but it didn't take long for everything to return to normal. A few more times, I saw Dad and my aunt stealing glances at each other with heavy eyes in the air. My aunt seemed to avoid looking at him while Dad stared worriedly in her path; but he wasn't looking anywhere in particular. Worry and anxiety gripped my stomach! That night, Alborz spent most of his time chatting with our cousins and other kids, so it was natural that these scenes went unnoticed by him. I thought later I should tell him about what I had seen.

It was past midnight, and the guests had left. Mom and Aunt, along with Mrs. Parvin, were busy tidying up the mess. They always cleaned a bit and left the rest for tomorrow. Sometimes, Mrs. Parvin would stay with us on party nights so she wouldn't have to go home late; but that night, she was sent home by taxi. Then Aunt went upstairs, tired. Alborz and Uncle had also left a while ago to rearrange the chairs. I went to my room. I don't know what happened, but with the sound of my mother's screams, my breath quickened. Dad and Mom were arguing; more seriously than ever. My body trembled! I hadn't done anything wrong! I felt like throwing up. I was waiting for Mom to come to my room at any moment; she didn't come. Whatever the issue was, it was with Dad. I strained my ears. Dad was saying, "My dear! It's not as you think!"

"Have you two fooled me? I've been watching both of you for a long time. I'm not so stupid that I don't understand what's going on around me. And look at her how she plays the victim for me!"

"You're making a fuss!"

"Am I making a fuss or you and her? All these years of friendship, all these years of trust, and it ends like this? Now that she has just snatched you away, she also wants to throw that boy in our way…"

Dad shouted angrily, "Damn it! Lower your voice! What are you saying?"

Mom was crying and wailing, "Damn you both! Damn me for giving my life to her!"

Mom shouted whatever she wanted without holding back, and Dad responded sometimes in silence and sometimes with another shout. They were talking about things that were hard for me to believe. I don't remember every single word they said, but what I heard was enough for me to realize that Mom's new complaints were pregnant with another incident; the smell of betrayal was tormenting her. I couldn't believe it! Aunt and Dad? Could it be? It was impossible! We weren't that kind of people. How could it be? In disbelief, more pieces of that puzzle emerged for me. My memory went back a little further; to a few days before that night's argument in the yard! One of those days when Dad left the house after Mom; before I went to school. He said goodbye to me, but instead of going to the yard, he went upstairs. Uncle had gone to the company. I could hear their vague quiet conversation. To be honest, I was a bit curious; I went towards the door and quietly pressed my ear against it. I heard Dad's voice saying calmly, "Not here. The kids will see and get suspicious. Come to the office in the afternoon! I'll make time for you. We need to talk in detail."

Aunt said, "I can't. What will I do with the kids?"

"They can stay alone for a few hours. At most, tell Parvin to stay longer!"

One of my feet slipped behind the other and hit the door hard; clumsy damn it! Dad cleared his throat and said loudly, "Afra? Dear! Did you have your breakfast?"

I said, "Yes, Dad! I'm getting ready."

That afternoon, Ms. Parvin was cleaning at Uncle's house when Aunt left to visit a sick friend. When Uncle came home a little later, he seemed surprised by her absence. Gradually, Aunt's frequent absences during those days—when Uncle went to Lavasan—increased; it seemed like her visits with Dad had also become more frequent. Another scene stuck in my memory from a few days after the argument in the yard was one morning when Dad was on the phone with someone, saying, “This way won’t work, my dear! We can’t continue like this. If you don’t say it, I will!”

When he hung up the phone, he said he was talking to a friend. But at that time in the morning? A friend? Now I guess that friend was none other than Aunt. As those pieces fell into place in my mind, I found the reason for Aunt's preoccupation, Mom's anger, and those meaningful looks between Dad and Aunt at the party.

Mom was still shouting while Dad tried to calm her down. Suddenly, at that late hour, the phone rang, and no one was there to answer it. I went to it; Aunt was on the line! They must have heard the noise and chaos as well. Her voice sounded as if she were crying. Even in that state, she was kind; “Darling! Can you hand the phone to your mom?”

Wow! What courage she had! She knew the matter had been exposed. What did she want to say? I called out to Mom and told her Aunt was waiting on the line. She came over to the phone and said loudly, “What a nerve she has! She called to play the victim.” She snatched the phone from my hand and said through tears, “What do you want to say?” and silence fell. Aunt was saying something on the other end. Mom was crying and listening. A little later, her hand slipped around the phone, and it fell onto her shoulder. Then she came to herself and placed it back on the receiver.

Dad said angrily, “Did you finaly do this?!”

Mom looked stunned and said, “You all ruined it! You all ruined it! What’s the point now? Now they want to leave so my peace isn’t disturbed any further!”

Where would they go? What was she saying? “Leave? What do you mean leave? Where would they go?” Dad asked.

Mom’s voice rose again; “To my grave. Go ask her yourself! Back when...”

Dad cut her off and wouldn’t let her continue; “If you say one more word, I’ll bring this house down on us.”

I had never seen Dad so full of rage and distress. He was clearly defending Aunt. Mom was alone; as always! Now that I look back on those days more clearly, the word alone fits Mom very well. Mom was always alone; lonelier than even me. She had made herself alone, as well as making both me and Dad feel alone. But Aunt’s reaction still holds significance for me to this day. Regardless of the reasons for her hurt feelings, before Mom could go to her and exchange words that shouldn’t be shared between them—perhaps leading to embarrassment in front of Uncle and Alborz—she bravely called to apologize for the grievances she had caused and to inform her of their departure; hoping for peace to return to both families! I couldn’t imagine Alborz in those moments. What had he been thinking and seeing? I never got the chance to talk to him about those events because afterward, we saw each other very rarely, and our lives were slipping on tumultuous waves amid a storm of ongoing events.

I couldn’t believe it! Everything had fallen apart, yet I still hoped things would get better from somewhere. Could that intimate family connection—something I had never imagined differently since birth—fall apart so easily? What happened at all? Maybe it had become distorted! I wished that at that moment, Mom would only be angry with me; but this time, Dad and Aunt were involved, and things were worse than I had thought.

Two or three days passed in shock and silence. Alborz and I, amidst the tremors of what had happened, spoke only about school subjects. We had many reasons not to discuss those issues; neither of us had the strength to talk about what we had seen. Their departure had become serious. Ms. Parvin spent most of that week sadly and silently wrapping things in newspapers and packing boxes at Uncle's house. Even when I was sure that Mom wouldn't catch me, I didn't dare go upstairs. The moment I saw the boxes, my throat would tighten with tears. Seeing Aunt's sorrowful face, with her tear-filled eyes that looked thinner than ever during those days, was more painful than Mom's beatings! She still kindly embraced me and asked me not to worry. Alborz sat silently behind his piano so he wouldn't see what was before him, and Uncle showed no expression other than deep sighs and exhales. During those days, Alborz's improvisations increased; he lacked the patience for practice. He played sad and strange pieces. He played, and I stored each note within me like the last drops of blood giving life to my heart. I couldn't believe they were gone; I had missed them even before they left. Alborz asked me to take my notebooks and papers from his bookshelf, but I refused; I had no place for them. If Mom found those writings, my life would become darker than it already was. I asked him to take them with him to the new house so that I could retrieve them from him at a suitable time. While he was packing his things, I went to help him; I packed my own belongings into a box as well. He wrote two large letters "A" in black marker on the box and placed it next to the other boxes in the room, all of which had the same letter "A" written on them.

To my utter disbelief, on the following Friday, a week after that terrifying night, a truck arrived in the yard. Dad, ignoring Mom's objections, went to help them. Mom locked herself in her room the whole time, and I spent the entire day crying behind the window. Alborz also didn't come out to the yard until the last moment. When

all the items were gathered, Aunt and Uncle came to say goodbye. Mom still didn't come out of her room. I cried loudly in Aunt's warm embrace for several minutes. Oh! Aunt's embrace! The warmest and safest place in the world! From that moment on, I was restless; like a moth circling a lamp, constantly throwing myself against the light. I couldn't understand even a bit of what was happening among the adults! Aunt was forever my pure and untainted guardian angel; she caressed me, kissed my hands and face, and planted seeds of hope in my heart with her words. Hope that was like igniting a fire in a storm and cold—held by a breath and extinguished the moment it left her mouth. I held her face in my hands and showered her cheeks with kisses.

"Take care of yourself, my daughter! Okay?" Uncle simply said this phrase and gave me a quick kiss on my forehead. Then he went towards the car and busied himself with arranging things in the trunk. I knew he was crying too. I knew Uncle well; he was emotional. He could clearly see the painful blows of this separation for us kids and themselves. Alborz had been standing at a distance the entire time, angrily wiping away his tears with the palms of his hands before they could flow down his cheeks.

What would happen to me after them? They were the Coppice Blues of my little grove in the sunlight shades of summer afternoons. They were the gentle hands of the breeze in the coolness of spring, the softness of rain in autumn, and the warm embrace of winter's cold. How would life be without them? I didn't want that; without them, I wanted nothing in this world. I would have gladly endured Mom's wrath every night if only everything could remain as it was. I went towards Alborz; he was standing under the maple tree, showing off its last red leaves. He was staring at his All-Stars shoes, playing with a dry leaf under them. A tear fell from his eye onto the ground. He had seen me cry many times, but I, except for my childhood, had rarely witnessed him cry. In his life up to that age, there hadn't been many

reasons for tears; but that day, he cried as if it were the easiest thing he could do. Indeed, we were both at the beginning of a path where crying was the easiest way to cope. He wiped his face with his hands, sniffed, and looked at me. His eyes were filled with anger and sorrow; "I'll call you! Whenever you have a question, just let me know! Okay? Our new house isn't very close, but my school is still here. We can meet sometimes in the park."

Whenever I had a question? I was already full of questions at that moment and didn't know who to ask. My tears started flowing again. With sobs, I said, "But how? How will we see each other?"

It was as if I was seeking refuge in his arms; I let myself fall towards him. He wrapped his arms tightly around me and cried along with me. He no longer hid his tears either. Since childhood, we had embraced each other many times; during happy moments, New Year, birthdays, or when we achieved something joyful. But that embrace was the bitterest one we had shared; our first bitter embrace! He whispered in my ear through his tears, "We'll see each other. Things won't stay this way. I promise! We'll endure for a while, then we'll gather again."

He himself didn't believe what he was saying. We stayed like that for a few moments and then I gently pulled away from him; " Dad said you want to rent this place out to a tenant!" I said.

He glanced back at the house behind me. He brushed his short hair off his forehead with his fingers and palm and raised it above his head. This movement was often a nervous and unconscious reaction to find a moment to think amidst words; but he said nothing. He closed his eyes, and a wave of tears flowed down his cheek. He nodded in agreement, and we silently stared at our shoes. How had everything progressed so quickly? Later, I learned that Uncle had reluctantly rented a house so they could take their time deciding about their own home. Dad and Uncle owned other properties besides our house, but they had rented them out, and there wasn't much opportunity for

moving in that short time. I didn't understand what all this haste was about! Aunt had said that their departure would be beneficial for all of us. There was no one to tell me what had happened! Aunt, as if she carried a great pain within her, came towards us and held both of us in her arms with each of her hands. Then she said to Alborz in a choked voice, "Shall we go, my son?"

He nodded. Aunt kissed the crown of my head and squeezed my arm in her hand, and I pressed my face into the scent of her embrace for the last time; a scent I would long for forever from that day on! I separated from her and went home without looking back to see them leave, running towards my room.

18

The Intersection of Roads: Now and Then

In the morning, as I woke up to the sunlight reflecting on my sheets, Sam was lying next to me in bed; I turned my face away from him. After last night's tears, I felt weightless. My head felt as big as an elephant in a birdcage; but so light that it seemed filled with air. I had the sensation of returning from a funeral procession; empty and

lifeless! It took me a while to remember what I had experienced the night before. And then, I realized that what I had been living through until morning was not a nightmare; it was a small part of memories returning to my mind. Now, both my past and present were equally painful, and escaping from either to the other was impossible! I got up and went straight to the shower. When I returned, while drying my hair, I could hear Sam whistling as he wandered in the kitchen. I still didn't know how to face him! I felt like I was with a stranger in the house; I didn't know him. But facing him felt too soon for me as well; I lowered my head and went into the kitchen. After saying "Good morning," he asked, "What do you want for breakfast?"

"A coffee with toast. After that, I want to go for a run."

He came towards me, wrapped his arm around my waist, and pulled me close to him. I averted my gaze from him. The contact of his body with mine made me feel nauseous. This body had rubbed against another body last night and perhaps on nights before that. Now his scent resembled the oily smell of something that had been fried multiple times. He held me in his embrace; it was as if he sensed something was off. He placed his fingers under my chin and lifted my face so we could look into each other's eyes. He frowned. He was carefully searching my face and eyes for something. It seemed he wanted to make sure he hadn't mistaken me for someone else; "Did you hurt yourself again with your past?"

His face was calm and relaxed; as if nothing new or strange had happened. Of course, for him, it was just like that; just as ordinary. If I hadn't heard his voice last night, today would have been just another one of our usual days, and I would have been thinking with guilt that I was the only one in this house whose life had gone off the rails. Did that mean his normal life was much different from what I thought? Did I truly know him? It seemed that just as he knew nothing of my past,

I was equally unaware of his present. I freed myself from his grasp; "It's nothing special. It will be fine."

"If you keep going like this, you'll be done for soon! If those memories are so captivating, tell me about them!"

For you? You have enough excitement in your life! "I'll tell you! Whenever I can, I will."

But for now, it's you who needs to tell me a lot! He went to the refrigerator. There was nothing in his tone; "You have less than a month to be happy again! You can't go on like this! You need to be okay. You know better than I do! Why don't you come meditate with me at night, lighten up a bit!"

Meditate? With you? So this is how you cleanse and soothe your conscience every day? How nice! Now I understand that perhaps it was in clearing his guilt that he found motivation to show more attention to me. I said, "I'm going to the park for that. I'll get myself together quickly," and I left. I wanted to run until my soul escaped. To be so exhausted that I couldn't think of anything. To empty my mind until I reached silence. But I was full; full of questions. Where should I begin? The skin on my face was cooled by the tears that flowed and evaporated while running. It was a strange process that I had recently experienced a lot. Sam's calm face wouldn't leave my eyes. He stood in front of me, talking about our embryo transfer, our last chance. It felt like I could no longer distinguish the right path; I just couldn't. What were we doing? I had a five-day-old being of his in the hospital freezer, and until then, I thought the biggest issue in my life was keeping it alive in my body and giving birth to it after nine months. Until last night, I had no doubt we would become exceptional parents. Sam and I would never neglect our child like my family did or resort to violence in raising him; I had no doubt about that. But now, less than 24 hours later, everything seemed ruined. Sam knew this. But why wasn't he trying to stop me? What did he want from life? Was he

creating a child with me while simultaneously loving another woman? Since when had he not wanted me? How had I been so foolish not to realize? Why didn't he separate from me? It was natural that I didn't want such a life with him either. How far did he want to go? Wasn't it true that secret relationships after marriage lead to gradual death? They wear you down and disintegrate you, leading to ruin? How could he be so calm and composed while hiding things? He didn't seem inexperienced. Maybe he had gotten caught up in a fleeting desire, and if he became a father, he would realize his mistake and abandon everything! What was I saying? I was deceiving myself! I had grown up in a house where suspicion destroyed such behavior. Now that I had become afflicted again, how could I be so optimistic? What was my relationship with Sam like? If I were to draw a chart of habits, affection, and love, where would my relationship with Sam fit on this chart and how important would it be? I didn't know! It was strange, but I didn't know. How long had I been living with my eyes closed? Fear gripped me! I should have understood what drug was strengthening the roots of this old stagnation in my soul and spirit.

It hadn't been a minute since time had intertwined my past and present; what a chaotic world! A wave of memories came and pushed aside the nightmare of that moment, like a thousand-layer dough flavored with bitterness instead of sugar. Once again, the house of my childhood was before my eyes, after they had left.

*

From that day on, my loneliness became more pronounced; living with its bare body terrified me. I had become reclusive and unmotivated. Uncle had given the house key to Dad so that if anyone came to visit the house, he could open the door. The key hung on the key holder by the front door. Sometimes I would go to their empty house and drown in dreams of joyful days, immersed in the smell of cake and colored pencils, the park's picnic basket, Schubert's serenade, books, and the sweet world of childhood and adolescence that had

burst like a bubble. From the photo frames, paintings, Alborz's piano, and the bookshelves, only a black trace remained on the walls, covered by a thin layer of dust on the parquet floor. I had never seen such emptiness in my life. The large living room with its columns, the rooms, and the cold kitchen without their presence resembled scenes from horror movies. I even went to the gazebo once; Alborz's last painting was still there. He had painted the maple tree in front of the gazebo with fiery colors from behind a piece of cut diamond with broken lines of light on glass. I kept it alongside our other paintings in the gazebo. I missed them! I missed those whose daily presence felt like seeing my own reflection in a mirror. Now it felt as if all the mirrors had been taken away. It was as if I were imprisoned; without knowing when I would meet my loved ones again. It seemed that my life was a book suddenly marked over a large section with a black marker.

Two or three days after moving, I spoke on the phone with all three of them. In the first few days, even speaking was difficult for me, and apart from crying and sobbing, no sound came from me. After a while, we gradually got used to it. I could talk normally and only share my longings. Aunt constantly urged me in her comforting words to study my lessons and not to irritate Mom. She was worried and knew that with her departure, there would be no one to support me anymore. She constantly reminded me that if I had any questions, I should ask her or Alborz. In math lessons, sometimes Aunt was even more attentive than Alborz and patiently guided me. Sometimes during the day or in the evening at snack time, the phone would ring, and I would hear piano notes from the other end, which calmed me down. Thus, from that time on, most of my joys were summarized in the phone calls. During those days, Mrs. Parvin was an important communication bridge between us. Sometimes she would bring me gifts from Aunt; as always, they ranged from hairpins and underwear to stationery and my favorite

cake. Occasionally, Alborz and I would exchange books. My share of the bookshelf in his library remained intact. At Alborz's suggestion, I sent my notes and writings there with Mrs. Parvin's help. In this way, I had gotten used to maintaining that kind of connection with my loved ones.

Three months had passed since our separation and a month since the arrival of the new neighbors. The return of old friends to that house seemed impossible. During those three months, I continued to be punished for various reasons; especially after that night, after the situation with Dad and Aunt was revealed and they left, Mom was extremely angry, and I felt that sometimes she took her frustration out on me. But there was no longer an aunt to open her arms for me and comfort me, no uncle to silently turn the wheels of fate in my favor, no one to come to the gazebo to listen to me, make me laugh, and complete my drawings, and no sound of music that would tell me its unsaid stories.

One day while I was talking to Alborz, he suddenly said with sadness, "I need to tell you something." In those last days, our voices were usually filled with sorrow, but that day, the change in his tone was enough to increase my worry; "My mom... she's not well." He said.

I knew my aunt wasn't feeling well; she was no longer like before. She still seemed kind, but she appeared tired; and I attributed it all to our family grievances. I thought she was homesick and hopeless like me; "Let's make a plan and reconcile them!" I answered.

He continued with a weaker voice; "No, not like that. My mom... Afra! Mom Ella is sick."

A stone fell from my heart to my stomach! My heart was full and suddenly empty! I asked, "What do you mean she's sick?" It seemed I didn't want to understand. I continued, "Is she just cold?" There was

silence. I couldn't speak. No sound came from the other end of the line. Fearfully, I asked, "Alborz!" A sniffle came through. The world collapsed around me. I swallowed my sob and managed to say, "Why are you crying?"

He said in a deep, nasal voice, "She's not well. I just found out she has undergone chemotherapy twice. They're going to take her to the hospital tomorrow for a surgery."

In the span of those few sentences, my face had become wet. Chemotherapy? At that age, I had only heard this frightening name in relation to complex illnesses; diseases that were full of pain and suffering. I knew chemotherapy was somehow related to a disease called CA. I often heard its name at home; especially when they talked about some patients I didn't know. But now Aunt? I couldn't believe it! Maybe Alborz was mistaken. I couldn't catch my breath. In a disbelieving exhale, I asked, "Why chemotherapy?"

He remained silent for a while and cried softly, then replied, "She's sleeping now. Dad hasn't gone to work for a few days."

I wanted to say something, but my voice sounded more like a painful moan that only made us both cry loudly.

That night I cried until morning; I cried so silently and pressed my face into the pillow that sometimes I felt short of breath. I resolved to confront Mom and Dad at all costs to inform them. I knew they were unaware; if they knew, they wouldn't have remained so indifferent. In the morning, I got up a little earlier than usual. When I went to the kitchen, Dad was dressed in his suit and sitting at the table, reading the newspaper while sipping his tea. He looked a bit worried when he saw me but didn’t show it; maybe he thought it was due to the effects of loneliness and longing. Mom had been called to the hospital late at night and had just returned home, pouring tea from the kettle. With my puffy face and disturbed state, I stood by the door; "Mom!"

She turned to me; "Hello! Why do you look like this?"

I said nothing. I was crying again.

"What's wrong, girl? Did you mess up your exam again?"

God! The exam! Damn those numbers that defined my identity for Mom! I was furious. "Mom! Did you know Aunt is sick?"

Mom frowned and then smirked as she sat down at the table. Dad's cup paused on its way to his mouth, and he turned to look at me with a frown. Mom said with that same smirk, "You don't know anything, my dear! You better let the grown-ups...".

I didn't let her finish. My voice rose. I cried out, "She's going to have chemotherapy! They're taking her to the hospital today for surgery. What don't I know? Aunt is sick, Mom! Don't you want to do something? You spend all your time for those people out there. Now Auntie Ella is sick, and you're just sitting here?"

As soon as I mentioned surgery, Dad suddenly jumped up from his seat and rushed out of the kitchen, causing his chair to fall to the ground. Mom was stunned and bewildered by my shout, the words she had heard, and Dad's reaction; she just stared at me with wide-open eyes. At that moment, I didn't care if she slapped me; I had said what I needed to say. She didn't even ask how I knew. I ran to my room in tears. On the way, I heard Dad talking on the phone with someone. It was natural that they wouldn't let me go with them to the hospital because that damned school was more important. That day, they both hurriedly left the house. After Ms. Parvin came, I stayed home all day and cried in her embrace for what I couldn't express. She had become my only companion in loneliness. She knew about Aunt's illness and her increased presence at Uncle's house, and in those months after they left, she would come to our house with a backpack full of unspoken words...

19

Dad's Secret Was Revealed

I had listened to the piece that Aban sent me the night before over and over again. I could hardly breathe anymore. Gradually, I slowed down and sat on a bench as my heart rate calmed down. I needed to talk to Dad. I wanted to ask him at least once about his story with Aunt. Now I had the right to know. Now that I was also caught up in a similar story without having a role in what had happened in the past. What a deadly poison the events of my father's house were! How did I become afflicted just by watching those events? I headed towards the parking lot and, after a long time, made my way back to my father's house. When I arrived, Dad had gone to the Enghelab Club with his friends like other Friday mornings and hadn't returned home yet. I collapsed onto the couch. A wave of the bitterest days of my life crashed over me, and I fell asleep.

I jumped up at the sound of the door unlocking; Dad had come in and suddenly saw me standing in the hallway. He took a quick, deep breath; "Girl! Are you trying to give me a heart attack? What are you doing here? Why didn't you let me know?"

Sleepily, I said, "Hi! Sorry! I was just about to let you know that you got here!"

"What's wrong? Are you okay? You've worried me!"

I'm fine! If you knew, you would be fine too! I answered "Yeah, we're fine. I wanted to talk to you."

"What about? Did a medical problem come up for you?"

He was right to think so. We never talked about our present selves, our true selves, or even our memories; “No! It’s not about those things. Just think, I was feeling nostalgic.”

What a statement! Novel and strange! Dad was surprised to hear it, but he didn’t show it. With a face that showed satisfaction, he calmly said, “If you’re not in a hurry, I’ll go take a quick shower and come back.”

I looked at him. He stood before me in a well-tailored windbreaker and sports pants. The hair on his head had become very thin and grayish-brown in the middle. Over the past year, the wrinkles on his face had deepened, and the bulge of his stomach and sides had lessened; it seemed that Mom's absence had also affected his diet. Despite all this, he was still attractive, well-dressed, and standing tall. Although the decrease in testosterone due to aging added softness and patience to him, which I liked very much. With a smile, I said, “Go ahead! I’m not in a hurry. I can wait for you on this couch from now until forever!”

He raised an eyebrow and said with admiration, “Do all writers speak so beautifully?” and headed towards the bathroom.

I said, “So you finally realized what your daughter does?”

From there, he said, “Don’t bring it up! But I’ve read her books too.”

Perfect! So this is how we ended up! I must remember to ask him later in detail when he surrendered! The blinking light of the temporary pause on the music player caught my attention on the TV stand. Maybe Dad had been listening to something before going to the gym and had forgotten to turn it off. I became curious and pressed the button on the remote and... the sound of a piece from among memories filled the house; performed as a duet by Demis Roussos and Petula Clark. It was one of the songs from our weekend home; I couldn’t believe it! Dad too? I closed my eyes and let it flow through me;

“A lonely room and empty chair
Another day so hard to bear
The things around me that I see remind me of
The past and how it all used to be
From souvenirs to more souvenirs I live
With days gone by when our hearts had all to give" [1]

I collapsed back onto the couch and placed my elbow over my eyes; he was singing, and tears flowed down my cheeks. Was this what Dad did in solitude? After all these years, had his morning tea and coffee become this? As the scent of his shampoo and special cologne filled the air, I felt his presence; I removed my hand from my face and saw him. He stood before me, neat and tidy. I looked at him with surprise and questioning, and it seemed he heard my question; he shrugged and, with a smile of surrender and confession, headed toward the kitchen. It was as if he silently said, "Yes, I have feelings too, I am in love too, I miss you too, but I haven't learned how to express it!" Then he returned with two cups of tea and a plate full of cake.

Mrs. Parvin hadn’t worked for seven or eight years. Since then, she had introduced Ms. Sima to Mom; a young woman from her acquaintances. She would come to our houses every other day and knew her job well. Sam always insisted that we should hire a Filipino maid like most residents of the tower, so we wouldn’t have to worry about private conversations being overheard due to language differences and losing our privacy. But I was against it; Ms. Sima’s presence in our home was not just a working relationship but a friendly companionship. I felt the impact of Mrs. Parvin's presence on me since childhood, and now I was experiencing something similar with Ms. Sima. My gaze wandered over the image before me. The homemade

1. The piece "From Souvenirs to Souvenirs," which was first performed by the Greek singer Demis Roussos in 1975, was reinterpreted in a duet with Petula Clark in 1986.

cake and fresh flowers on Dad's table signaled her return, and thus—according to our agreement—she would be my guest the next day; we, the carefree wealthy, we, the disabled who have others do many of our personal household tasks. This is the image that leaks out about us.

Dad was sitting on the couch in front of me, holding his cup. We were both staring at each other, as if he had been waiting for this day and knew my questions would be difficult, and their answers even more so, perhaps painful! Very quietly and a bit sadly, he broke the silence with a voice that resembled a whisper: "What's up?"

It was time; I had to start somewhere. But what was there to say? I looked away from him and said, "I've been struggling in the flood of past events for a while now. I feel like many impactful memories in my personality have slipped my mind. Now, a lot of scenes that I didn't remember at all are coming back in detail. I don't know why or how!... But in the midst of it all, there are many things I don't understand. Sometimes I even doubt whether they are memories or just my imagination!"

Dad continued to look at me. He nodded in agreement; "You're right! We've all been through tough days."

I continued, "Can you...? Can you...?" He narrowed his eyes as if trying to diagnose my condition from what he saw in my face; he didn't take his eyes off me. Due to his profession and expertise, Dad was used to looking deep into people's eyes without actually seeing them, searching for what he wanted to find. But that day, it seemed as if for the first time, his gaze penetrated within me. He was waiting for me to finish my sentence. How should I ask? I had never talked to Dad about private matters. We didn't have heart-to-heart family discussions. I can say that after Mom left, our connection had changed a bit and we had grown closer, but not so much that I could ask him anything. He said, "Go ahead!"

If I spoke, what reaction would he have after all these years? Perhaps it was time to use this opportunity to open the locked doors of

our hearts to each other. I took a deep breath and, without thinking about how to phrase it, blurted out, "Can you tell me what happened between you and Aunt Ella?"

He placed his cup on the table. He hadn't expected such a question. His face became worried and inquisitive. He leaned forward on the edge of the couch, clasped his hands on his knees, and asked, "Me and Ella? What do you mean?"

"That night, after the party, you had an argument with Mom, and then Aunt called and said they wanted to leave us!"

He looked into my eyes as if he could see the scenes of that night within them; it seemed obvious to him. He said, "Well, yes! Your aunt was sick."

"No! Not her illness! I mean your relationship with Aunt. I... well remember that the argument that night was about this issue. Before that, I had seen you and Aunt talking quietly a few times. I didn't understand what it was about until Mom found out and that incident happened. Please tell me, Dad! This issue is gnawing away at my soul like a termite."

He took a deep breath and shook his head left and right. "My dear! That incident was a misunderstanding."

Denial is the refuge of all the traitors in the world! I frowned. "Then what about that secret relationship, Aunt coming to your office without telling Uncle, the phone calls and your pleading looks at the party? What was that story?"

Dad was now upset. He took a sip of his tea and leaned back against the couch. After a moment of silence, he said, "I didn't think you noticed too! I was trying my best for you all not to find out." After a brief pause, he continued, "One or two months before that night, one night—if I'm not mistaken—we were all at your uncle's house.I mean Amir. That night, Ella had cold symptoms; although she knew it wasn't just a simple cold. When it was quiet around me, she came to me. You remember! She wouldn't even take cold medicine from your mom."

I smiled; I remembered. She always told Mom that she had been afraid of the grumpy doctor since childhood. He continued, "She told me she had been experiencing strange pains for a while; a slight fever, pain on the left side of her chest, and most importantly, sudden weight loss and slight swelling under her arm. I didn't want to make any guesses. I told her to come to the office the next day so I could examine her and, if necessary, write some general tests for her. When I examined her, her condition was not good. I didn't say anything to her. I just prayed that I had misdiagnosed it and it wasn't cancer, but well... anyway, that day I wrote the scans and tests to clarify the depth of the disaster. Right there, she swore me to secrecy about her visit to my office."

Dad paused and rubbed his hand over his face; it seemed he was overwhelmed by the memories.

"So you knew!" I said.

"I got the results of the scans, tests, and biopsy myself urgently for her. Poor woman. She couldn't really hide it from you all. In office, right in front of Farhad. And the rest of the day with you kids. The test results turned out terrible. Even though it had only been a month since the initial symptoms appeared, she had secretly been affected from under her arm to her chest. Stage one Hodgkin's lymphoma[1] with grade two, maybe even three! It meant she was in the early stage but with a relatively high growth rate. It was ridiculous and rare; women rarely get this severe type of the disease. Although Ella's father had died from this very illness..."

I interrupted him, "Really? Didn't they say her thyroid was problematic?"

---

1. Hodgkin's lymphoma is a specific type of cancer that occurs in a part of the lymphatic system and, characterized by the loss of white blood cells, causes serious disruption to the body's immune system.

"No, sweetheart! From the symptoms she described, it was clear that he had lymphoma as well. However, at that time, there was no proper treatment or even diagnosis for her. In the end, I referred her to a specialist. We needed to start radiation and chemotherapy as soon as possible, but unfortunately, she was extremely scared. She said she needed time to tell Farhad and Alborz first, and then the rest. She was crying, saying that if the kids and Farhad or Leila found out, they would be so upset. She had given up on herself. She said her condition would disrupt all of your peace. Now imagine, in the middle of all this, your mother's weird behavior had also started. A ridiculous and unnecessary suspicion!"

"So why were you not aware of it and got upset when I told you that Aunt had to undergo surgery that day?"

"I was shocked! There was not supposed to be any surgery in her treatment process. It was about immunotherapy[1], which you kids thought was surgery. A month passed with me bargaining and begging. My optimistic assumption was that if we acted in time, we could somehow control it or delay the worst outcome. But Ella was not ready to bring it up. A few days before the party, I realized one side of her diaphragm and a small part of her spleen were also affected, and in that time, it had progressed to another stage. It was creeping and advancing."

"But how could she hide it from Uncle Farhad? He was so attentive; there was no way he wouldn't notice Aunt's physical changes!"

"Ella was very reserved. During those days, she pretended to be dealing with a chronic flu and told Farhad that her lymph nodes were

1. Immunotherapy or stem cell transplantation is a treatment method for certain diseases, such as cancer, that is performed after several rounds of chemotherapy and the destruction of the initial stem cells. It involves the isolation and protection of healthy cells, which are then injected intravenously into the patient's body.

slightly involved due to her fluctuating hormones. Farhad didn't press her because he thought she had checked the issue of the swelling under her arm and other matters with me and that it wasn't serious. He even asked me about her once, and unfortunately, I made a mistake and lied, saying she was under control; because I had promised Ella. That night at the party, I told her that I would definitely tell Farhad the next day. But with the story your mother concocted, everything took a different turn." He paused here, took a deep breath, and then continued, "After that, they started chemotherapy for her. She still didn't want you kids to know. At that time, Farhad was very angry with me. On top of the resentment from that night in the yard and the argument at the party, hiding Ela's illness added to it; he never treated me like before again. I understood him. However, I kept following up with him over the phone. A couple of times during the week, when Alborz was at school, I went to see Ella. She had become extremely thin and weak. Unfortunately, after two rounds of chemotherapy, they suggested a transplant or Immunotherapy. At that time, I was completely against it; given the progression of the disease and her physical condition, not only would the transplant not work but it would also worsen her situation and cause more suffering for Ella. In any case, that day after the shock you gave us and my call with Farhad, I realized they had reluctantly isolated her for the transplant to take place. That day I managed to convince Farhad not to rush into action and to consult with other doctors as well. Ella was not at all in a condition for a transplant or isolation. We canceled the transplant and still hoped for a miracle with an increased dose of chemotherapy."

With regret, I turned to Dad and said, "Wouldn't it have been better if part of her treatment had been done outside of Iran, considering the facilities at that time?"

"It's hard to say exactly. I don't think it would have made much of a difference. The chances were slim that it would change anything. There wasn't much more that could have been done for her. In any

case, aggressive and strong chemotherapy was the first choice. In fact, from the moment Farhad found out, he did everything he could to travel, but there was no time left. Everything progressed very quickly. One of the reasons for his upset with me is this; that maybe if I had told him sooner, there would have been other options."

My eyes were filling up again; " Probably the fight that night and the bad atmosphere between us also contributed to the worsening of her condition. I'm sure if that hadn't happened and we had been together comfortably like before, her illness would have progressed differently."

I remember that every time I went to visit Aunt, I saw her lying on the bed, suffering from the brutal and relentless effects of chemotherapy, with Mom fluttering around her like a butterfly. She wouldn't let go of Aunt's frail hands and face from her kisses and caresses. Reimagining that scene brought nothing but torment. During those days, I thought it was Mom who had forgiven Aunt, but I realized that it was Aunt who had made Mom feel ashamed; forgiveness was easy for her.

I felt relieved! I always wanted to imagine deep down in my mind that Dad's relationship with Aunt was only related to her illness. If it hadn't been for that night's argument between Mom and Dad and their strange words, perhaps that notion wouldn't have lingered in me at all. My understanding in my teenage world couldn't go beyond what I saw. It was enough for the adults to pull each other out of ambiguity for us to be reminded of this matter as well. Even though Alborz and I were far removed from the adult world, we weren't spared from their harms and perceptions of ourselves. In many instances, we weren't considered important enough to be aware of the reality; after misunderstandings were resolved, we were the children left alone in the vast desert of misconceptions.

"Dad! Why didn't you tell me the story wasn't like that?"

" Darling! I didn't even know you were aware of what your mother said! I never thought that part of the matter would be so important. From the day they took your aunt to the hospital and your mother found out about it, she was restless for her; on one hand, it was the guilt from her foolish thoughts, and on the other hand, it was the situation with Elaheh. She was upset with me too for not telling her. After all, they had been best friends for years; they were closer than sisters. Their sudden departure from that house shattered us all. Essentially, that's how we could no longer stay there.

"Poor me, unaware of everything. You never considered me important! You never realized what kind of torment I was going through. For a lifetime, the nightmare of your relationship with Aunt was a thorn in my soul. I even twisted Alborz's thoughts with my own imaginations. I hope at least Uncle has cleared up this misunderstanding for him.

"I just don’t understand how your mother could have thought that way. We were never in a phase of unhealthy relationships and secrecy. Besides, Elaheh was devoted to Farhad! Those two weren't like you and your mother. Remember? They were in love.

Unhealthy relationships! What a delightful interpretation! And strangely enough, Mom and Dad, in their seemingly loveless relationship, weren't the type to cheat in that way. I said, 'So you were aware that something was off in your relationship!' He gave a sheepish smile mixed with mockery to himself; 'I wasn't blind. They knew how to live well. It's true that your mother always laughed at their chirping, but in reality, she was mostly mocking herself; it was a kind of escape and projection. It was us who didn't know how to maintain respect and a friendly, loving relationship, and that was ridiculous.'"

With this confession from Dad, a memory came to life within me. I was nine years old. Mom and Dad were supposed to go to a seven-

day conference in Paris one or two days later, and I was the happiest because that meant I would be a guest at the neighbor's house for an entire week. That night was my uncle and aunt's wedding anniversary. They always celebrated their anniversary, even if it was just a small gathering. Uncle opened a bottle of wine that he and Dad would bring out every year, usually drinking it on special occasions. He poured some into glasses for all four of them and they toasted to each other's health. Then he gave Aunt a gift and kissed her lips. Mom rolled her eyes as usual and said to Dad, "Oh no! Here they go again. Don't act all mushy in front of the kids; it's embarrassing!"

Uncle laughed and said to Aunt, "Leave them alone! These nerdy kids have studied so much that they've forgotten about love."

To be honest, Mom's opinion was complicated and difficult for me to grasp at that time. I didn't understand how she could criticize conflict and bad behavior in front of the kids but felt that their love and affection, which was full of life, should be hidden from our eyes! How could she not see the negative impact of violence or the positive impact of affection? Watching kisses and hugs transported me to a world of peace and security; just as much as tensions and conflicts left me feeling empty, filled with fear, anxiety, and despair. Mom said, "I'm going to set the dinner table."

She always fled the scene like this. Music could be heard in the living room;

"Which words are you looking for? Your silence says it all!

I recognized you by your heartbeat! In your heart lies the heart of the world's lovers."[1]

A little later, Mom was in the kitchen while Dad was on the phone; from the few words I could catch, it was clear he was talking to the hospital shift nurse about the condition of one of his recently operated patients. A cool breeze wafted through the open window into the living

1 . Poll, by Googoosh

room, making the white curtains flutter gracefully, like the swirling of a bride's dress in the air. Uncle and Aunt were singing together, swaying gently. Alborz was sitting at the piano, harmonizing with notes and chords alongside the music and accompanying the singer. It felt like a kind of practice and trial-and-error that created an interesting blend with the violin and guitar in the background. The atmosphere in the house had become lively but was warm and dreamy. I adjusted my camera and captured images of all three of them singing and playing together. Suddenly, I remembered my our gift for them and called out to Alborz, gesturing to remind him. He ran to his room, brought back the gift, and handed it to Aunt; it was a new cassette tape with a Maxell label. He said, "Afra and I recorded this for you."

Uncle smiled broadly and thanked him warmly. He playfully tousled our hair and then kissed both of our foreheads. He took the cassette from Aunt's hand and went to the sound system to put it in. Aunt hugged us tightly and showered us with kisses; "Oh, how I adore both of you my lovely ones!"

Their kindness, their scent, their calm presence—it was pure paradise. I would have done anything to make them happy. The music started playing. Uncle said, "Wow! It's a live concert performance!" and began to sing along;

"Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin!
Dance me through the panic till I'm gathered safely in
Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove!
Dance me to the end of love!"

Alborz said, "Of course, it has one more difference from those other ones!"

I continued, "The whole sixty minutes is this song!"

Aunt's gaze was moving from me to Alborz, astonished and happy. Alborz said, "It was Afra's suggestion. She said if we record it like this, you would be even happier."

Uncle said, "I mean, it can't get better than this!" Then he went toward Aunt, extended his hand in invitation, and said, "Now we can dance with it for an hour." I remember that Alborz had received the last live performance of that Leonard Cohen song from his piano teacher around those days. Uncle and Aunt were in love with the old version. Every time they listened to it, they would rewind the tape and repeat it so many times that we would get dizzy. Now it seemed they were very pleased with their gift. That night, we had dinner while listening to the endless version of that piece, without worrying about it ending.

To be continued…

FAAVIDEL, a multidisciplinary artist, has studied graphic design
and has worked in the fields of interior design management, architecture
and furniture and accessory design
Her collection of artworks includes both physical and digital paintings
and illustrations, accompanied by music she has composed
These works are showcased in short videos on digital art platforms
.each telling a brief story
To date, her works have been exhibited and sold in New York
Vancouver, Beijing, Istanbul, and Dubai
Previously, her book "The Lake Monster, Chopin, Barbequed Eggplant" was
.published in Iran