

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



CHAPTER ONE: **EPISODE 8**
OBLIVION

Coppice Blue

Faavidel

Chapter One

Oblivion

Literature - Persian Fiction - Novel

Coppice Blue

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Just play Schubert's serenade! Don't play the Toccata anymore!

I still hadn't noticed Sam's arrival. When I was sitting at my work desk among papers, family photos, empty tea and coffee cups, I felt his presence above me. He first saw the empty syringe; I hadn't thrown it away yet, and it was left on the corner of the desk. He picked up the syringe and began to examine it; "Oh! What a thing! It's a cold weapon by itself! Do your people kill with these?" I smiled and didn't answer. He pointed to the photos on the desk; "Who's next on the death list?"

"Probably you! Why did you come so late?"

His mind was preoccupied. He was examining the structure of the empty syringe; "We had made too much color; I thought we should stay and finish it so it wouldn't go to waste. Instead, I'm not going tomorrow."

"Can you tell me what's been worrying you so much these days?"

"It's nothing special. I've had too much work; I'm afraid I won't finish on time."

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"Weren't you the one who always said this is Iran? What is not important is being on time! What happened that you're scared now?"

He gave a slight smile and placed the syringe on the desk; "I still say it! I'm going to take a shower." He left the room, and a few seconds later, his head appeared at the doorframe; "I want to turn on the jacuzzi. If you want, come!"

I nodded in agreement. Although in the past few months our relationship had remained as that of two ordinary friends or two colleagues on a business meeting even in the jacuzzi, it wasn't long before I joined him.

The next day was Friday, and after months I wanted to run a bit; it had been a long time since I had run and cleared my mind. I couldn't believe it! There was a time when I used to run at least six kilometers daily. Now it seemed like years had passed since the last time I had swiftly passed by something. Sam always painted in his studio after studying and practicing yoga. He held his last exhibition last year when galleries reopened after a long closure due to COVID. He took advantage of every opportunity to create new collections. These three activities were food for his soul; he drew energy from them to perform those marketable parts. But with the bodily indecision that had arisen for me, I had somewhat distanced myself from my sources of energy and creativity as well. It was past nine o'clock. I went to the studio to tell him I was going out to run. He was sitting at the desk drawing on paper. I said, "By the way, you didn't show me the photos of that hotel in Shiraz!"

He looked at me in surprise; "You suddenly came to say this?"

I laughed. He was right. My movement was irrelevant and sudden, but it had come to my mind just seconds before reaching the door; "I came to say I want to go run, I don't know why this question came to

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my mind." He picked up his phone from the desk and opened his gallery. After touching several photos, he handed me the phone; "It was good. It had interesting architecture." The photos were taken with the phone's wide lens. It was something between traditional architecture and modern minimalism; a unique and artistic combination. Not of the kind of cliché non-masterful styles but seemed very professional and creative. In some images, there was a woman in the frame; either in profile or with her back to the camera with a familiar face.

"This woman looks so familiar. Who is she?"

"It's Pooneh! Zandieh! Don't you remember?"

I squinted my eyes and zoomed in on one of the profiles; "Public restroom?"

He was leaning back in his chair, resting his chin on his hand, and looking at me. He shook his head with a smile.

"What was she doing there?"

"Come on! She's the architect of the hotel project; she and her business partner are in charge. Pooneh actually suggested the job to me.

I said in surprise, "I didn't think you were that close!" We always shared every detail of our stories; at least that's what I thought. He frowned slightly. He brought his index finger to his lips but before touching them, he hooked his chin as if he were stroking his stubble, moving his hand back and forth;

"I don't know. I thought I mentioned it. She called me for this job. You know she's from Shiraz! She gets good projects in Shiraz."

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"I didn't know she was from Shiraz. Now I remember because you reminded me of her last name!"

"Yeah! ... Here are the photos. Maybe my work there will start in three weeks."

I placed the phone on his desk and headed for the door; "I'll be back in an hour or two."

It was quiet, and I quickly reached the park; to my childhood memories. To the place where every inch was under our control. To the picturesque and familiar sights of greens and blues. Before I knew it, I was running after a long time. Various thoughts—from distant pasts to what had happened just hours ago—flooded my mind. Over the years, I had learned one thing very well; secrecy always came from fear. That which I had experienced many times until then. I had countless examples of fear and secrecy in relation to my parents. Like a filling liquid poured into a mold, fear and secrecy had settled within each and every cell that made me up. Another memory from those days came vividly to my mind. How had I not remembered it until that day?

*

I was 13 years old and in the second year of middle school. It was winter, and in the midst of the second-term exams, I had caught a terrible cold. The next day, I had a math exam, but my mind was not at all helping me study. I envied Alborz. He had taken his term exams two weeks earlier and was now enjoying the comfort of the beginning days of a new term. In high school, his educational system was very different from mine. Although seeing his subjects—especially calculus, algebra, and biology—made my head spin, the 'new system' was better than the limbo I was struggling in.

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Recently, Alborz's piano teacher had given him a sheet music book containing the best arrangements of difficult classical pieces. They were supposed to have a public performance in the summer. Until then, there were occasional school recitals, and we participated in them with Uncle and Aunt, applauding for him. Now he had time until summer to strengthen his hands. Those public performances were just an excuse for his sporadic practice sessions. Sometimes, when his school schedule was lighter, he practiced more; even in the mornings before going to school. On days when Ms. Parvin didn't come, and both my parents were absent, Aunt would invite me upstairs for breakfast, and I would always see him and Uncle with a cup of tea in hand, watching Alborz behind his instrument; as if it were a romantic scene from a play. In those moments, Alborz wasn't engaged in a simple practice; he was living with his instrument. As he had taught me before, he had made it, his love, a part of himself. I loved those days. Our home at the beginning of those mornings felt like a piece of a dream. This was the morning sound of our home; not from anywhere else in the world. But that night...

Alborz had raised several math problems for me while he was busy practicing a new piece at the piano. I could guess he was getting tired; at these times, just before giving up on practicing, he would get stuck and play the same piece in several octaves with different rhythms. A throbbing pain shot around my eyes; it felt as if my head was swelling from the pain, and my mouth was dry due to the blockage of my nose. The house spun around my head, and a mountain of turnips appeared in a plate in front of me. I had to eat all of them! Alborz's piano was near the window, and the dining table was at a 45-degree angle behind the piano; I often sat on one of the chairs overlooking Alborz and the living room. Aunt and Uncle sat facing each other in the far corner of the living room, separated from the dining area by a short step. They had been fighting over something in a somewhat calm voice for about

half an hour. Due to the distance between us and the sound of the piano, I couldn't hear what they were arguing about, but the annoyance towards each other was evident on both their faces.

Alborz suddenly abandoned the new piece and turned to Bach's Toccata¹. Oh! I wished he would play something else! My stomach churned! The argument in front of me, the toccata, and my feelings all reminded me of Mom's agitation. In my heart, I begged him not to play that piece! But when he played with such passion and dedication, I didn't want to interrupt him. He played the arpeggios fiercely; his fingers moved like a faint spirit between the keys, and his mind seemed to wander elsewhere. I understood the language of his instrument well; he had chosen that piece because of the atmosphere in the house. Then, exhausted from struggling, he stopped practicing, and before moving on to the next page, we stayed in silence for a moment. I looked at the scene in front of me. The sound had also diminished somewhat, and their conversation had reached pleasant territories. Uncle and Aunt's arguments were galaxies away from the world wars of our home. Unlike Mom and Dad, these two never fell into a bitter silence after a disagreement or held grudges against each other. Occasionally, they would argue in front of Alborz and me, but they were always engaged in conversation, and a few minutes after their disputes, silence and tranquility would return to the house; a silence not born of fear or oppression, but of empathy and consolation. Now Uncle was trying to win Aunt over, and Aunt, with a wink towards Alborz and me, who were watching them from the corner of our eyes, was trying not to give in to Uncle's charming antics. I was just beginning to understand that those charming antics were his secret

1. Toccata and Fugue in D minor by Bach is one of the most famous pieces by Bach. The toccata is a showy style meant to showcase the virtuosity of the performer or the quality of the instrument, characterized by fast, exciting rhythms, full of rapid melodic movements and intricate passages.

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displays of affection in front of us kids. Uncle also recognized Aunt's glance and he knew well that he was only a few seconds away from aunt's sweet candy. Their changing moods were not without effect on the atmosphere of the house. Alborz began again; a new piece I had never heard before. Ah, this one was good! It calmed me down so much! I dozed off as numbers swirled in front of my face while he played; "Wow, this is so beautiful! What is it?"

Without stopping, he said, "It's Schubert's Serenade. I really love it too."

It was beautiful, and he played it wonderfully. I sniffed to clear my stuffy nose a bit. In a voice that stretched the words too much, I said, "Aaaah-mazing! Just play this one! Don't ever play the toccata again!" He laughed, "Okay, bro. I'll just play this."

Impatiently, I slammed my pencil on the paper; "Ugh, this damn thing never ends! I know I'm going to mess up tomorrow." I rested my head on the table and listened to Schubert's Serenade for the first time and fell asleep. The next day, as I had predicted, I messed up the math exam.

A few days later, fortunately, Mom was not reachable for the results announcement, and Aunt came to school to get my report card. Among all those 19s and 20s, a 16.5 stood out badly. When I saw her during recess bell, she showed me the report card and before I could say anything, she said, "Well done, my daughter! Your grades are very good! Just your math is a bit low. Well, you were sick the night before. Don't worry! Go to your class! For now, I won't tell Mom anything; let's see what we do tonight."

I felt nauseous and desperate; "Mom doesn't care that I was sick. Auntie! I'm not going home tonight; I'm staying with you."

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Her comforting hand was on my head; "Okay, my dear! Come home and we'll talk about it."

I knew Aunt would try again, and the story would repeat itself for me as always.

That day, I ate two spoonfuls of yogurt and rice for lunch at my aunt's insistence; it wasn't long before I threw it all up again. Alborz teased me several times; I got annoyed and pushed him away, but he wouldn't give up. He was doing his best to change my mood. It wasn't his fault. He had grown up this way; alongside Uncle and Aunt, with their comforting gestures towards each other. We had agreed that when Mom came at night, Aunt would go to her and calm her down, and then we would show her the result card. But what then? I knew very well what would come next. I was sitting at the dining table to do my language exercises, but my anxiety wouldn't let me focus. Uncle and Aunt were sitting across from the TV in livingroom, discussing a book that Uncle had recently read and Aunt had just started. I couldn't remember its name; it was about sociology, and my brain was incapable of understanding it. Alborz was sitting in front of me with his notebook and books; he had pursed his lips and was twisting them left and right. At the same time, he was playing with the Swatch watch strap and making sounds with it. His watch was somewhat similar to mine, and both were gifts from Uncle and Aunt for our birthdays. The elastic strap spun loosely around them and made a sound as if winding something up, and during those days, it was our toy during moments of distraction. I wanted to protest that he shouldn't do that, but I realized I was doing the same thing with my watch. It was our new tick. We were both left-handed and wore our watches on our right wrists. Now it felt like we were winding the watches for an important mission. We were sitting across from each other and making a

scratching sound on our right wrists with our left hands. I got frustrated; "Ugh!" I took off my watch and threw it on the table. He had just come to his senses; he did the same. Instead, he held the report card in his hand to review it for the thousandth time. It drove me crazy! What was there to see in that card? It was as if he were waiting for the grades to change shape. Every now and then, he would throw in a funny word and was still looking for a new way to make me laugh. He tapped under his chin; "Compared to a few years ago, you've improved by half a point! You're just a bit away from reaching 17. If you keep this up, by the time you're 20, you'll bring us a 20!"

I said, "Damn it! Alborz, I'm feeling bad; stop teasing me! I wish I could erase that damn 16 and put an 18 in its place." Suddenly we stared at each other. With narrowed eyes, it seemed we were looking at a shared image, and at the same time, a thought sparked in our minds. Calmly and amazed by what I had in mind, I said, "Are you thinking the same thing?"

He bit the corner of his lower lip and nodded in agreement. A new spark shone in his eyes as he whispered, "Get up and come to my room."

We went to his room and took out the sheets of Letrasets¹ from the drawer of his desk. He also placed his correction fluid next to them and pointed at them with a smile; "The necessary materials for the surgery. Aunt thinks she's the only one who can do this!"

I picked up the correction fluid to shake it and start, but he took it from my hand; "You go and keep Mom busy so she doesn't suspect anything. I'll fix this. Go on, hurry!" My mouth was dry. I was chewing

1. Letrasets Letterpress or typesetting was a tool for manual printing. It consists of a set of pre-printed alphabet letters on a plastic sheet that can be easily transferred onto paper or any other smooth surface.

the skin on my lip and looking at my report card on the table. He said, "First, just to be safe, I'll make a copy of the original and set it aside so we can destroy it later. I'll use the correction fluid on the number 16 from that copy and then make another copy of it. After that, I'll stick an 18 over the empty space and make another copy... done!" We stood side by side, looking at him with hesitation. He nudged me with his shoulder; "Come on! I told you to leave it to me!"

I returned to the living room and got busy with my English assignments. During this time, Uncle Farhad went to his office once and came back. I hoped he wouldn't catch Alborz while using the copy machine. After 10 minutes, Aunt lifted her head from her book and asked from across the living room; "Is Alborz still on the phone?"

"Yeah, I think so." I said. Uncle's gaze slowly shifted from the TV to me. As he nodded in agreement, he said with a tone that sounded like sarcasm; "Yeah, he's really into it!"

Why did I feel like he was trying to hide his smile? It was unlikely that he knew about our plan and would stop us. Maybe if he found out, he wouldn't let Alborz help me like that. He was against lying and secrecy in any form. But his hidden smile said something else!

Five more minutes passed, and Alborz finally appeared in the living room with a triumphant expression. As he approached from a distance, he puffed out his chest. He had some papers in his hand, was mumbling a song under his breath, and swaying toward me. He had hidden his broad smile behind his lips. Without saying anything, It was as if he was throwing a sack of freshly stolen banknotes onto the table; he placed both report cards on the pages of the book in front of me, two similar samples. But what screamed in one of them was the math grade; 18! Wow! I couldn't believe it. An ordinary 18 among the other grades. He had neatly turned around the 18 and had also copied the fake report card using Uncle's color printer so that the blue school

stamp would match; completely flawless. I looked at him; I was in shock. Suddenly, we both burst into laughter, and our laughter wouldn't stop. Aunt asked in surprise; "Have you two lost your minds? From noon until now, you've been mourning. And now, you can't stop laughing."

Our laughter grew louder. Alborz went toward the piano; "Mom! These are nervous laughs!"

This time Uncle didn't show any reaction outwardly. He said to the TV; "Laugh! Enjoy it! These days will pass my dear!"

Alborz's gaze floated mischievously between me and his dad, and his mind moved his hands over the instrument; he played a piece from Schubert's *Moments musicaux*.¹ The humor and mischief embedded in this piece reflected our current moment and our childish secrecy and collaboration that I cherished. How beautifully he played! His hands danced lightly over the instrument, bringing my spirit to life!

When Mom came, I was still at Uncle's house. Aunt went downstairs and talked to Mom for a few minutes in front of the door, then called me. Alborz, as if encouraging a parachutist to land at the open door of a helicopter in flight, winked at me, grabbed my arms, turned me toward the door, and pushed me forward; "Go on, hurry up!"

I went, and he followed behind me. I looked at Mom; what a circus she was creating! It seemed she was enjoying the fear she was spreading in me! I greeted her and handed her the result card. She took it and glanced at the grades. Suddenly, with joy, she said; "Are you

1. *Six Moments Musicaux* is a collection of six short pieces by Franz Schubert. The third piece of this collection is written in D minor and has a cheerful and playful rhythm.

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guys pulling my leg, you little rascals? I thought you were going to say you got a 15 in math. Elaheh keeps saying her score has dropped a bit, but don't mind it! Considering my expectations, an 18 is really good.! Well done, Afra!"

Mom gently patted my back. Aunt was stunned watching the scene; she glanced at the report card in Mom's hand with a vague smile and then looked at me and Alborz in turn; she laughed along with Mom. With her laughter, she seemed to be trying to compose herself. It was as if she wanted to hold us accountable while also not being too displeased with what we had done; "Yeah! We said we'd mess with you a little!"

Alborz continued; " But honestly, you were totally shocked, auntie!"

"I was feeling sick, my dear! And something from the shock on the other side!" Mom said.

I went home with Mom. The sound of Schubert's serenade floated in and stirred calmness throughout my being. Later, Alborz told me that when his dad saw him copying the report card in his office, he asked him about it, and he explained. Uncle had asked why, and he honestly said it was because Mom scolds me. That's why Uncle had brushed it off and left the room in silence. It was clear that he had accepted the risk of that support. Later, Aunt came to both of us and deprived us of our post-study fun for a week because of the lie we concocted. Given the calm we had achieved, it wasn't too important for Alborz and me. Now that I look back on those days, I'm sure she did it more for educational reasons; otherwise, she and Uncle were happy with what we had done. They both knew that Mom was being overly strict with me.

Mom's Anniversary

Why hadn't Sam mentioned that he had a joint project with Pooneh? I had never prohibited him from socializing with others. Everything between us was well-defined; we had set the boundaries of our relationship within the framework of mutual commitment and without pressure on each other. No one restricted the other; at least, that's what I thought. Why hadn't he said anything? Was he scared? Scared of what? My reaction? It was all irrelevant; we had had many instances before, but Sam had never reacted this way. Something was off with me or him? I needed to talk to him. Maybe I was being unnecessarily clingy, and he truly thought he had told me. Or maybe he had mentioned it, and I had forgotten amidst the chaos in my mind. I was out of breath and sat on a bench in my path; I opened Aban's message. She had sent it half an hour ago, accompanied by pictures and her explanation: "Somewhere in Filband! It doesn't look bad to me. Worth seeing."

I looked at the photos; a white house with a sloped roof, but not too big. There was another house next to it. I wrote, "If they sell both together, that's good. A small house won't do us any good. Even better if there are three or four small cottages together."

My message was read, and her response came: "Actually, I asked about it. She said they are selling both together!"

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"That's great! So let's set up an appointment. I'm free this week on even days. See which one suits you, please arrange that."

I sent the message with a heart and red lips emoji, and she sent back a thumbs-up with a heart next to it. "I'm going somewhere today to see something in Ab-Sard."

"Why are you going? Tell them to send a picture!"

"They're acquaintances. We're going with Behrad; it's just for fun and sightseeing. It's unlikely to be useful for us."

"Have fun!"

I searched for Dad in my WhatsApp contacts and made a video call. Dad usually went to the Enghelab Club with his friends on Fridays. That day was Mom's anniversary, and I suspected he was reminiscing about his memories instead of going to the club with a heavy heart. He answered my call, and my guess was correct.

"I see you went to the park today instead of me!"

"Yeah, I came to revive old memories."

"You really went there? You haven't been to Mellat Park in a long time! Am I right?"

"That's right. But I've been missing it for a while again. Why didn't you go to the club, Dad?"

"Don't you know it's COVID?"

He was joking; he didn't want me to clearly understand why he hadn't gone. It had been a few months since he had gradually resumed going out after his vaccinations, although he still wore a mask. Maybe Dad had a very strong immune system because during all that time,

despite being in the hospital and high-risk areas, he didn't even show signs of a cold.

"Now that it's COVID and you skipped the club, either come to us or we'll wear our masks and come to you!"

"It's dangerous, dear!"

He said that because he constantly went to the hospital and was a carrier. If he knew I was on the verge of embryo transfer and taking medication, he would undoubtedly have opposed it. I couldn't let him spend that night alone; "Which one is less dangerous?"

"No matter what I say, you won't listen! I'm coming to you! At least this way you won't be breathing in the air of my home. I know I'm talking nonsense. You know, these ridiculous justifications! When should I come?"

And he gave me a sad smile. The fact that he easily accepted to visit us after all this time showed his immense longing. The last time he visited was when Sam and I were sick, along with Mom. After that, I saw him once at Mom's strange funeral and then once at his house. Even before COVID, I didn't see him much, but still, periodic gatherings with relatives sometimes provided an excuse for our visits. We were far apart; and COVID pushed us further away.

"Well done, obedient son! Come whenever you want!"

"After lunch, I have a short meeting at the park near the house with one of my friends. Once I'm done with him, I'll come straight to you!"

"Great! We'll be waiting."

I said goodbye and ended the video call. I had told Sam earlier that Dad might be our guest that day, and he had agreed. To be honest, I felt sorry for Dad; he was really lonely. Although his loneliness wasn't

a new issue, it perhaps became more apparent with Mom's passing. I wished he would find a new motivation for connection after Mom. I wanted him to experience a calm relationship away from chaos, and perhaps even love. What was wrong with that? I didn't think it was fair for him to spend a lifetime alone with Mom and now to spend it alone without her as well. I had long forgiven his behaviors towards me in front of Mom. Now I saw him from a vulnerable perspective. He had worked hard for years, and while he spent his days with many people, every night in his home, he embraced his profound loneliness and fell asleep. He had chosen a peace that neither love nor intimacy was born from, nor freedom; it only kept him in a state of permanence and hanging on.

That night beside my father, we went through the usual reports of the world, the countless unreported deaths from COVID in hospitals, and the news from the past few months with more details. Contrary to my wish, we didn't talk about ourselves or the past. I wanted us to share our hearts' content about those days; but neither that night, after all that distance, was it possible nor in Sam's presence. Sam and Dad played backgammon for a while, and in that way, without mentioning Mom or the past, we stayed together for her anniversary so that maybe we wouldn't feel so alone.

That week, Aban and I hadn't heard much from each other; I knew she was busy buying household items. The proposal from Damavand, as we knew, was irrelevant and remained just another experience. Our trip to Filband also didn't happen; during phone conversations, it was mentioned by the real estate agent that the land didn't have a legal construction permit, and not only could nothing be added to it, but both houses on it also had unclear statuses. I wasn't really bothered by such transactions at all. On Thursday evening, I went to our childhood meeting place to run. A message came from her: "Should I come to you? Where are you?"

"Our park. I came to run; although right now I'm just at the brisk walking stage. If you want, come!"

"Ha, your park! Actually, I'm close to there. But I don't feel like running. When will you be done so I can come then?"

Aban not only had no interest in running, but she believed that it was a great injustice to the knees.

"Just run a couple of steps with me this once! I promise I'll practice Shirshasana¹ with you from morning till night one day."

"Ridiculous! I can't run today; it's the first day of my period. My body can't handle it, and I don't have the nerves for it. I had a fight with Behrad; I don't want to be alone."

"Oh, so now you just want to grab my leg! Alright, come! We can do whatever you want."

1. One of the inverted balance asanas in Iyengar Yoga is the handstand, where the body is upright on the hands perpendicular to the ground. This pose is very beneficial for the internal organs and the mind.

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I sent her my location on WhatsApp so she could find me more easily. Since I was supposed to be out of my routine that day, I only ran for 10 minutes and spent the rest of the time brisk walking until Aban arrived. As soon as I saw her from afar, I went to a tree, laid my head on the ground, lifted my legs, leaned against the tree vertically from behind, and pushed myself up on my hands. I often did this during joint practices with Sam. She approached me gracefully; even in an inverted world, she had an attractive appearance. Aban was unpretentious, beautiful, and flawless; she had a charming and lovable face, a calm and confident heart, and an intelligent and kind personality. She was a clear example of beautiful character and appearance. When I saw a smile on her lips, I felt a little better: "Since you said goodbye, I've just been standing here waiting for you. See? It's not a big deal?"

"You silly clown! Don't do that! Your body hasn't healed yet; it's not good for you! You might hurt yourself!"

I lowered my legs; "Ugh, how hard it is! The ground was sloped; my neck got crushed."

"I love it when you make jokes at every opportunity!"

"As a wise person once said, it's the only thing I can do to lighten difficult moments."

It was interesting for me too. It seemed that Alborz's sense of humor had taken root in me during those strange moments, just as it had for him all those years ago. I hadn't even realized I was like that. Aban looked around and said, "So this is the meeting place of the elegant and the presentable family!"

My gaze was fixed on a point on the hill. With a bittersweet smile, I confirmed, "So what did you hit Behrad with?"

Her smile faded, and she tilted her lip to one side; “We saw a house that I thought was really nice, but we just needed to spruce it up a bit. He’s stuck on the fact that it’s old and thinks it would be better if it were a little newer. Sometimes I think he doesn’t know what he wants. The day before yesterday, we saw a new house, and he was stuck on the fact that the walls are thin! What do you think is wrong with him?”

“Let me see what my processor says,” I replied, pointing to my head. She was looking at me from the corner of her eyes. I felt that if anyone else were in my place, they would be divided into 65 equal pieces; “Oh dear! You weren’t like this before! Is this level of anger normal for a yoga instructor?”

She took a deep breath and slightly closed her eyelids, then turned away; “No! I know myself. I think the mental pressure last month was high; that’s how I became.”

"You know? This is one of those things that no one warns you about so you can be aware beforehand. There are always many issues that need to be resolved between two people at the beginning stages of life; and those two, each on their own, are a complete challenge for each other. That’s why these conflicts arise. Maybe Behrad’s situation isn’t any less than yours. I think he knows what he wants, but among so many issues to resolve, it becomes hard for him to distinguish. Let it go! You know how to handle it!

How easy it is to analyze other people’s problems and see their blind spots in life! Strong and confident, you take an outsider’s look into the ring and without losing your footing, you offer solutions. As if you’ve been a family consultant for years! Strangely enough, your ideas only work for others. When you hear your own voice diagnosing your friends’ and acquaintances’ problems, it’s somewhat hard to imagine, but this is you shouting for help to the world while being full of solutions for others; solutions hidden behind your own lived

experiences and what you've heard for healing but haven't acted upon. You know the way, but not how to do it! You present solutions like many psychologists around the world who have chaotic personal lives and... that's it. I knew a psychiatrist who was an alcoholic and narcissistic, whose mustache had turned yellow from smoking too much and had lived apart from his wife and children for years; but his patients didn't know. We and his acquaintances knew because we saw him at family gatherings. In the outside world, he was a capable doctor who led many lives down paths he deemed right. Perhaps this option is yet another flaw of the human body; humans learn more from their personal experiences to teach others than to teach themselves!

"Are you saying that you and Sam were like this too?"

I was looking into the distance; "I don't know about Sam, but my situation was terrible. Maybe one day I'll tell you about it. But I'm sure of this: there's no way we can learn something until the environment for nurturing it is provided. We have to face it. There's no escape! It seems that each of them is a stage of maturity. Many times in my life, I went through a stage that I thought I would never be able to handle. But I managed to get through it, and it felt like I had grown a year older, starting everything anew."

With a smile, she said, "You're different from me! My life didn't have your ups and downs. Maybe that's why you chose running and I chose yoga!"

"Isn't it enough that you lost your father sooner than you thought and spent years taking care of your sick mother?" I said.

"My parents passed away after years of illness, Afra! It was bitter, but I had the opportunity to accept their departure. They had reached a point where they didn't want anything else. I mean, I didn't face an impossible and strange event. It seemed that both of them were given

some time to come to terms with the outcome more easily. I learned this in those mindfulness courses; stages of maturity. You just mentioned it right now!"

As soon as I uttered the word 'maturity,' a memory thawed in my brain. At Aban's gesture, my heart suddenly twisted. Maturity! Everything that happened afterward sprinkled the dust of oblivion over my entire life. It was strange that I remembered them! Like an animal awakening from a long winter sleep. Sometimes I was terrified of what had happened to me. Aban saw my transformation again and eagerly searched my eyes. She was already used to hearing the memories that returned to my mind at any time. Back then, whatever I remembered, I told her in detail. I didn't know where the words came from; but they came.

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One of the most eventful and worst years of our lives in that house was the same year that shaped the future for both of us. I was in the third grade of middle school, and Alborz was in the third year of high school. That year, for the first time, I experienced my period; during my first cycle, I didn't have heavy bleeding; there were only some spots along with a bit of back pain. I was afraid to share what had happened with Mom. Until that time, she had never talked to me about these matters. My doctor mother didn't find it necessary to discuss this important issue with her child beforehand. All the knowledge she should have given me, I had gathered from the books in the school library. I kept them hidden from Alborz's sharp eyes in my room and read them at night before sleeping. Sometimes I even guided my classmates. My experience was limited according to my age, but my knowledge exceeded that of my peers and sometimes even older ones at that time. When I was experiencing it, due to its nature, I had no fear or ambiguity. But bringing up that topic with Mom was my

greatest fear. I didn't know why I was scared! It felt as if I had committed a mistake; perhaps because Mom's reactions to most of my issues were not calm and relaxed.

We had lunch, and I still had pain. I completely forgot that twenty-some days had passed and it was time for my monthly cycle again. I decided that after lunch, if my aunt allowed, I would go home and rest. She still disagreed with me being alone at home and preferred that I spend most of my alone time in her sight; unlike Mom, who insisted that I could stay home alone now. My aunt had finished her lunch and was on the phone, engaged in conversation with Alborz's aunt. I had also finished my food and was eating my yogurt amidst the forgetfulness of my back pain. Suddenly, I felt a warm liquid flowing in the area where my body connected with the chair. My eyes widened in horror at what awaited me. Alborz was sitting across from me, eating his food and recounting a memory of their antics at school that day. Seeing my eyes widen, he suddenly stopped speaking; "What happened?"

I didn't say anything; I slowly lowered my hand and placed it where my thighs met. When I looked again at my fingers, tears streamed down my face from sheer helplessness. Alborz couldn't see my hand under the table but was following my gaze. He asked again with a firmer voice; "Afra! What's wrong?"

Embarrassed, I rested my elbows on the table and hid my face in my hands. I had no choice anymore. Getting out of that situation was not something I could do alone. Through tears, I said, "Can you tell your mom to come? I don't feel well."

He too was frightened by my sudden change in condition. He ran off and returned with auntie a few seconds later. My aunt came over to me and hugged me; "What happened, darling? What's wrong?"

I was crying. My tongue felt weak and numb. I didn't know what to say! What a terrible situation! Why hadn't anyone told me how to convey this news to the adults? Why hadn't anything about this part of the story been written in any book? I said, "Auntie! I don't feel well."

She tried to lift me from the chair, but I wouldn't let her. She knelt on the floor to be at eye level with me; "Where does it hurt, sweetheart?"

"I need to go home and change my clothes."

She removed my hand from my face. Her expression was serious. Her eyes first scanned my face and then, as if recalling something, suddenly dropped to the crotch of my pants before quickly returning to my eyes. Her action was more instinctive; there was nothing down there that could be seen from that angle. Fortunately, I didn't have to say more, especially since Alborz stood at the door, bewildered and worried. My aunt lifted me from the chair. She pressed me against her body from behind so that there would be no space between us and the back of my dress wouldn't be visible, guiding me toward the front door of the house. All of this happened in a matter of seconds. At that moment, I didn't want to think about the fate of the stain on the chair cover at all. Calmly and coolly, she said, "Alborz darling! Clean up the lunch table please! We're going downstairs and will be back."

He neither asked anything nor responded to his mother. With the commotion I had created and his curiosity and attentiveness at that age, there was no need for further explanation. I changed my clothes. Antie Ella brought me pads from Mom's hygiene cabinet. How different my aunt was from my mom. How much she calmed me! All her efforts were to take away my feeling of embarrassment. She constantly reassured me and caressed me. Even though she didn't have a daughter, she knew very well how I felt in those moments and how

I would feel better. With her delicate hand, she caressed my cheek and simultaneously planted a kiss on my other cheek. Her hands smelled good; of baby powder and orange blossom. "It's okay, my dear. It's completely natural. It happens to all women,"

and she shared with me points that she thought were necessary for me to know; perhaps what Mom should have told me earlier.

"Auntie! Mom will scold me."

"My dear! Why would she scold you? You are growing up; she'll be happy!"

"But it's the second time. I didn't tell her."

We locked eyes. There was reproach in her gaze; but not towards me. It seemed she was aiming it at herself. She gently held my chin between her thumb and forefinger and caressed it; "Why didn't you tell me, my daughter? Why didn't I understand?"

I said with embarrassment, "It wasn't like now... by the time I wanted to say it, it was over."

"It's okay! Tonight we'll tell Mom comfortably."

How warm I felt with my aunt, and how everything became easier with her! Her voice was soothing, and her words were like kisses! Even when I wasn't in her embrace. We returned upstairs; she brought me an ibuprofen pill with a glass of water. Alborz had cleared the lunch table and was improvising various steps on his piano. When he became preoccupied and didn't have the patience to practice, he would do this. Sometimes interesting melodies emerged from these practices. I loved them. It felt as if I heard the sound of his words through his instrument instead of actual words. When he emerged from his world

and saw me with a book in hand on the couch in front of the television, he asked with a smile as always, “Are you okay?”

There was a crease between his brows amidst his smile, and his gaze was filled with concern. I nodded in affirmation. After a little while, he called me; when my head was down on the book. I turned to him just as he pressed the shutter button on his camera. I smiled and returned to my work, and he took a few more candid photos. No one in the house criticized Alborz’s sudden photography anymore. We all knew he captured moments this way, and of course that day had to be recorded too although we didn’t talk about it anymore. After that, everything was normal, and we went about our tasks like any other day. How many questions swirled in my mind! Did he discover such matters in books like I did? Or did Uncle and Aunt tell him? I wanted to ask my aunt but the damned shame wouldn’t let me. Later, when I asked Alborz, he said his father usually discussed sexual matters with him without any embarrassment. He had also asked his mother a few questions about women’s issues, and Aunt had explained them to him; one or two years before I experienced it myself. I could guess how Aunt spoke with him. I realized this when she explained my share to me. In any case, it was true that our generation never received proper sexual education at school or home; it seemed that parents even in our time provided explanations for their children to the best of their ability. Among them were some like me who grew up in silence due to shyness and undue modesty despite having highly educated families.

That night, one or two hours before Mom came, I went to my room. I was afraid she would scold me for having touched the pads without permission. When she entered my room, I realized that my aunt had told her about me. Like a hotel receptionist trying to cheerfully explain the hotel rules to a guest, she coldly handed me points similar to the titles of textbooks; what she should have told me sooner, what I had already read in books more thoroughly, and what my aunt had

explained better. It was strange! With all her skill and competence in her profession, establishing a relationship with her child seemed so difficult for her. Finally, she delivered the final blow: “That’s why I say don’t go upstairs all the time! If you hadn’t been in front of that boy today, you wouldn’t have been so embarrassed!”

My eyes froze on the wall in front of me. Why was I always to blame for everything that happened? Wasn’t this incident a normal part of life? Wasn’t the reason for my embarrassment her failure to explain these matters to me? If I hadn’t been afraid of her, wouldn’t I have told her about it just a month ago? If I had felt comfortable and close to her, would I still have gotten into this trouble? Hadn’t being at my aunt and uncle’s house made that day easier for me? Hadn’t my aunt managed the situation well without making me feel guilty? She hadn’t even tried to brush off or embarrass Alborz and treated both of us with utmost respect. So that after a few minutes, there was nothing in us but a sense of security and calm. Then why did no one feel bad towards my aunt? Hadn’t Mom asked herself what would have happened to me if my aunt hadn’t been there that day? Why did everything get linked to our purposeless communication, as kids? Why did she attribute it that way? Why? They were my everything, and Alborz was my only true friend. All those years, my aunt had wholeheartedly played the role of my absent mother and babysitter. Now that the crisis had passed, she was putting distance between us? Why? Why was everything difficult with Mom, and why did I always become that bad girl in her eyes? From upstairs, the sound of Alborz’s practice came through, playing Schubert’s serenade; the only thing at that moment that drowned out Mom’s words and left me to my own thoughts. I didn’t notice when Mom left my room; I was floating in the sound of the piano. Life for me was those moments with people who, even when I didn’t see them, brought me peace and spread tranquility.

In the days that followed, Mom's strictness increased in every way; she was constantly on my case about my studies so that I could go to high school with excellent grades. My life was truly summarized in my studies. She even preferred that I give up volleyball, swimming, and skating occasionally and study at my desk from morning till night. My only solace remained the presence of my neighbors. Since I had matured, she constantly reminded my aunt not to leave Alborz and me to ourselves. It was easier for her even if we accepted that we wouldn't study together anymore and that I would only go to him occasionally if I had questions. This behavior from Mom was strange to me; because aside from the non-religious atmosphere of our families, she had never had a problem with girls and boys playing together and had always opposed gender segregation. Our relatives had children of all ages, and we all interacted without restrictions. But I didn't understand her sensitivity towards my relationship with Alborz. When I asked her about the reason, she would say, "When you're together, you distract each other! It's better not to ask too many questions."

But it wasn't like that for me. Alborz and I were healthier together, more genuine, more vibrant, dynamic, and full of motivation. In the height of our innocence, the way we looked at each other was not as Mom imagined in her mind. It was true that we loved each other, but in that teenage world, not in the way she saw it; rather, like other family members. We had no concept of living without each other.

I still spent my happy moments at their house. For me, life was only those times when I was with them. Without them, my world would drown in loneliness. Although Mom always loved Alborz in her own way and cared for him, she still stood by her words and said, "He's wasting his time, and at this rate, it's unlikely anything will come of him." Of course, Alborz always got good grades and remained a bright student in mathematics, but it seemed that Mom was determined to prove her futile theory by any means. I was always incredibly upset

by her perspective. Alborz was one of the most sensible teenagers I knew. I always praised his intelligence and abilities. I couldn't accept that just because my aunt and uncle allowed him to engage in sports and arts alongside his studies, he wouldn't become a successful person in the future! He was already more successful than I was at that point.

Gradually, I spent more time at our own house, and in this way, my maturity became a factor for separation from happiness. My aunt filled my loneliness with various excuses. No matter how many strange warnings Mom gave, my aunt was carefree and provided comfort with her presence. However, an event that I believe was one of the reasons for our separation and the subsequent incidents was related to a night in the autumn of that year. Although I still don't know exactly what happened that night. I tried many times to examine it from different angles and reached no conclusion. It was the weekend, and we were guests at my aunt and uncle's house. The night before, Mom and Dad had returned from a several-day conference in Germany. It was clear that I had spent all that time with my uncle, aunt, and Alborz, only coming home to sleep at night.

That night The music in my uncle's house was playing as always. The sound that has remained in my mind from those moments still brings anxiety and unease to my heart when I hear it:

“Waiting eyes on the bend of the road, pure and simple heartaches
Open window and autumn sunset, drizzling rain on the wet street
Your memory every tight sunset...”¹

While eating cake and tea, the adults talked a bit about the political and economic situation of those days. My uncle reported on the construction of the villa in Lavasan and the good news was that if

¹. Ghorroob, by Siavash Ghomayshi

things continued as they were, it would be ready by summer. Dad lamented that if it weren't for the issue of investing in the medical building and clinic, he would have partnered with my uncle there as well. My aunt sincerely said, "It doesn't matter. It's all ours now."

I asked, "Uncle! Does it have a swimming pool?"

"Yes, dear ! How can it be without a pool?"

Dad said, "Remember? We were supposed to build a pool here too. Those fools acted like it's overlooking!"

"Yes. Fortunately, we don't have that story there anymore!"

I didn't listen to their further conversations; Alborz and I were sitting on the carpet in front of the fireplace discussing books. He had taken an old copy of "The Catcher in the Rye"¹ from my uncle's library and had started reading it. I had just finished "Sophie's World."² Mom looked at us as if she had lost something in us. Sometimes she tilted her head so much and scrutinized us with narrowed eyes that it seemed she was using her ears to see us. Alborz noticed the situation. In an attempt to divert Mom's attention from the table, he picked up a chocolate and said, "Aunt! These chocolates are really good. Thank you!"

Whenever Mom and Dad traveled without us, one of our greatest delights was the souvenirs, which were mostly clothes, shoes, and chocolates. Mom coldly smiled and said, "Enjoy!" but the heaviness of her gaze remained bothersome and talkative. I knew our time was

1. The Catcher in the Rye" is a novel by American author Jerome David Salinger.

2. The World of Sophie" or" Sofies verden" is a novel by Norwegian author Jostein Gaarder.

up. I was ready for an incident. She turned to me and said, "Is now the time to read unrelated books? You shouldn't be studying at this time of year to prepare for high school?"

Alborz answered instead of me; "Aunt, we're studying our lessons too!"

My uncle said, "Leila dear! Let them read. You know better that if they were studying in Europe or America, most of these books' summaries would be required in school."

Mom wanted to say something in her defense, but Dad jumped into the conversation and asked my uncle a question aimed at diverting Mom's attention. Mom shot him a glare; and of course, Dad succeeded. Soon, laughter erupted from all four of us, and we were no longer the subject of Mom's attention. I breathed a sigh of relief; once again, we leaped away. Suddenly, I remembered the notes I had placed between the pages of the book, to put them in Alborz's library when we came to Uncle's house. With a gesture to Alborz, I signaled him to take on the mission. If Mom hadn't been there, I would have undoubtedly gone to his room myself and placed them on my shelf, but under Mom's sharp and piercing gaze, risking that move was a big mistake. Although I didn't understand what was going through her mind, she was like an eagle watching two little rabbits over the field, and with every extra movement I made, it felt as if I was putting myself in her line of fire by coming out of hiding; anyway, Alborz picked up the book and went to his room and finished the task.

After a while, we went to the yard. Dad and my uncle were busy preparing the grill for kebabs. My uncle had left the terrace door open, and the sound of the song "Wish You Were Here" by Pink Floyd was playing in the background:

"So you think you can tell

Coppice Blue 35

Heaven from Hell?

Blue skies from pain?

Can you tell a green field

From a cold steel rail?

A smile from a veil?

Do you think you can tell?"

Even the reminder of the lyrics, after all these years, made my mouth bitter. The arrangement of the scene was etched in my mind with such detail because of the importance of that moment; I was sitting with a thin blanket over my shoulders, hugging my knees, while Alborz sat beside me on the metal swing, a short distance away. Occasionally, he would press his foot slightly against the ground to give us a gentle swing. My aunt and mom were sitting a few meters away from us on metal chairs designed for the yard, close to Dad and my uncle, next to the fire. The yard floor was covered with dry, colorful autumn leaves, and the maple tree stood out magnificently in the middle of the yard! Its autumn color was different from the other trees. Among the oranges and yellows, it was only the maple that appeared like a blazing mass with its magenta and red leaves. I remember those moments vividly, with the fragrance woven into the air. I couldn't understand when and how we had transformed from two messy children who always smelled like chicken to clean and tidy teenagers. Back then, he smelled of sour lemon and mint gum, while I smelled of red apples and strawberries; Alborz always teased me by saying I smelled like the fruit compartment of a refrigerator. It was the miracle of deodorant in adolescence! That night, it was our scent mixed with the smell of freshly charred coal in the autumn air; accompanied by a strange feeling of anxiety! We talked a bit about our classmates; Alborz was playing with his leather bracelet and talking

about the fun afternoon he had with his friends at Shahram's Pizza¹. He mentioned the mischief they had with high school girls. I also spoke about the wall newspaper articles and suggestions I had received from the kids! Every time Mom appeared in our line of sight, we would inevitably change the subject so she wouldn't hear anything about the forbidden matters at school. We used my big pimple on my cheek as an excuse and laughed mockingly at it. Alborz had placed the cap of a soda bottle on the swelling on my face and said it would make it look less noticeable. When Mom heard our laughter, she shot a sharp glance in my direction. Alborz leaned forward slightly and quietly said, "Aunt has been more irritable these days. I really don't want to be in front of her."

I didn't want to show it, but I completely agreed with him; "Maybe she's tired or overwhelmed with work. I don't know! You say this, but see what I'm going through!"

"What are you going through? It's obvious, if you don't take your purple pills, you'll probably strap a grenade to yourself and come blow us all up at home!"

I had gotten used to his jokes. Maybe I was laughing again when Mom came towards me... She grabbed my hand tightly and, with a bit of anger, sent me towards the stairs; "Go inside until I finish with you!"

Uncle said, "What are you bothering them for? They're just sitting and chatting. They're not bothering us!"

Mom replied to Aunt and Uncle; " You are the ones to blame for making them so brazen."

1. Shahram's pizza was one of the hangout spots for young people in Vali Asr and Jordan during those years.

I stood on the stairs hoping to fix the situation. I was in shock from something I didn't know what it was. Dad said, "Leila, my dear! Calm down! Nothing has happened!"

Mom was furious; "Don't talk! You have no idea what's going on around you. None of you say anything! You, who are supposed to be her father, have left the girl to God knows who, and both of you with your negligence are ruining this son's future. Even though he has the capacity of... Mistake after mistake! I don't know..."

When Mom spoke like this, Uncle always remained silent, but that night he lost his temper and interrupted her; "The mistake is you, Leila! Stop it! Don't make it worse!"

Aunt seemed to burst like a glass bubble and sobbed as she passed by me and went to her house. Uncle, heartbroken, said to Dad; "Why don't you stop her, Reza? Why do you let it get to this point?"

Mom didn't say anything more. Dad sighed deeply with frustration and shame, sat down on a chair, and covered his face with his hands. It was a bad situation! Mom's words were as nonsensical as always to me, but this time, Aunt's and Uncle's hearts were truly broken. In the meantime, Alborz had gotten off the swing and was standing behind Uncle's shield. With his eyes, he seemed to ask; "What have we done that you talk to us like this?"

Embarrassed by the crowd, I went home crying and waited for Mom for what I didn't know. What a night it was! What a beating I took! Whatever the reason was, only Mom knew. That night, no one had dinner. Dad went and turned off the grill. Maybe the cats had rearranged the meat on the skewers next to the grill. Mom always hurt those around her with her sharp tongue. Aunt and Mom had often hurt each other over the years like two sisters, one calm and the other noisy, and then resumed their relationship. But that night, Mom's anger and

Aunt's hurt were something beyond usual. Mom had gone too far. That night, I cried a lot from pain. Not because of the pinches and blows and insults like "shameless," "wild," and "unrestrained," but solely because of Aunt's sad eyes and my dear friend who was hiding behind her father. Something from within Mom scared him. As always, after I got beaten up a bit, Dad came and pulled me away from Mom. Their actions felt more like a repetitive scene from a play. If Dad didn't agree with Mom's behavior, why did he always arrive last? Why did he never stand up against her inappropriate behavior like Mom herself did?

An hour later, the house fell into the suffocation that I always endured alone after Mom's caresses. But that night, everyone was with me. Finally, the notes of Schubert's serenade floated in the air and calmed me down. He, who 'was supposed to be nothing'. He, who 'didn't understand like me,' was now playing for me. He played for a few rounds, and just before it ended, I fell asleep amidst my tears.

To be continued...

Coppice Blue 39



FAVIDEL, 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.