

Under the Skin of Men

A Novel submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Declaration

I confirm that this is my own work and that the use of all material from other sources in the essay has been properly acknowledged.

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A Synopsis of *Under the Skin of Men*

Two Iranian brothers, after twenty years, meet in London to look for their sibling's assassin, bonded by their differences and secrets that threaten to tear them apart.

Kia Karamian's brother, **Pasha**, is murdered on the way to his father's funeral. Kia finds evidence that connects Pasha's death to London, where he is going to attend a series of Shakespeare conferences. The spirit of *Hamlet* echoes throughout the novel.

In London, his elder brother, **Arash**, a maverick communist, locates him. Arash left Iran to study medicine in the Philippines two decades earlier and has yet to go back. As a child Kia adored Arash, but on their first meeting, he realises that he doesn't have much in common with him. Vegetarian, non-smoker and teetotal, Kia is a considerate man of integrity, while Arash is quirky, charismatic and quick-witted. He has money, madness and comrades who would give up their lives for him. Having his brother as his role model all his life, Kia is unable to refuse his request when Arash asks him to drink with him and join him in unwonted ventures that challenge his principles.

Arash's comrades chaperone Kia wherever he goes. Kia believes that there is no threat and his brother's obsession with security is due to his past political activities. He discovers that Arash, who is reluctant to talk about his private life, is married and has two children, **Cyrus** and **Nina**. The latter is in a wheelchair because of an accident (suicide attempt). Kia finds Cyrus friendly and intelligent, but under his father's spell. Kia makes a surprise visit to Arash's house where his thirteen-year-old niece, Nina, attacks him. Later, Arash explains that when Pasha had lived in London, he had sexually abused Nina, which was the reason she had attempted suicide. Arash confesses that he had had their brother killed.

Cyrus disappears when Kia is trying to get closer to him and his sister. Arash claims that he has been kidnapped by Essy, the ex-ambassador of Iran to the Philippines, who had followed Kia to London. Having been trained to work with explosive devices in his military service, Kia agrees to make a bomb that Arash says he needs to save his son. Essy meets Kia and tells him that Pash's death had been his own fault, trying to assassinate him, using his father's funeral as his alibi. Kia realises that Arash has lied to him about killing their brother to protect him from trying to take revenge and, like Pasha, getting killed. During the changeover of Cyrus with his father, someone shoots Arash, but Kia takes the bullet. Essy is arrested for the possession of a bomb in his car.

During his recovery, Kia gets to know Nina better and establishes a rapport with her. He confesses to her that he had terminated his father's life to relieve him of his suffering, believing that he would have chosen a good death over an undignified life.

Beyond their apparent contrasting principles, Pasha realises that he is uncannily indistinguishable from Arash.

Black Roses

Love killed my father in a hospital in Iran.

He left behind three sons: Arash, who pinned his faith on socialism to change the country, ended up in exile; Pasha, who pursued pleasure like a whirlwind chasing a rainbow; and me, untouched by the ravages of the world, became a university lecturer, teaching dead authors to young souls. We were all ink, fugitive in water.

Dad's death was a huge shock to the Karamian family, but it was just the overture.

Pasha was nowhere to be seen at Dad's funeral. It would be callous of the Karamian family to expect the crowd of grievors to stand there in the cold with frozen toes and wait for my Karamazov brother to arrive. It was the wont of my father to call our trio the Karamazov brothers. Where he had heard about the brothers, I couldn't say, but I was sure he hadn't read the novel. He was only interested in the long epic verses of *Shahnameh* and would recite long chunks of it by heart. *Every young man must read the book if he wants to be a real man*, he would say. He was nothing like Karamazov's sponger father himself. Life to him was his children. He was more of a soul in exile who had dedicated his life to suffusing his little men with what he thought was cosmic. Enchanted by the idea of living with his sons and grandchildren *under one roof*, he built a two-story block of four flats, but we never got together under the new roof. At any given time, one or two of us were missing to make the sky the only roof over our heads. All the same, he lived with hope. He wished his boys would put their shoulders under his coffin, walk ahead of his funeral procession and take him to his grave. Sorry father, only your youngest one here, a little more than a son, and less than a mourner.

Where was Pasha? I scanned the mourners who were insignificant obstacles standing in the snow's path. My mother was sobbing, surrounded by her sisters whom you would see

only in funerals (Pasha and I called them *The Three Witches*). She must be cold in that diaphanous black jacket of hers, standing still, rooted to the ground, where her lifelong husband would dwell. She knew her husband very well, a valiant family man whose sons had climbed on his back numerous times. She had carried his children inside her for twenty-seven months, breast-fed them for six years and released them to the world to perpetuate life. She was only fifteen when she first met my father. At twenty-five Dad was the oldest single man of his village. On his way to meet the girl of a distant relative in an outlying village, he had to pass through the town where he bumped into lieutenant Dara, a kinsman who invited him to his house to have lunch and get some rest before he continued with his journey. Dad saw Mum in Dara's house.

Who is the girl? my father asked.

My niece, said lieutenant Dara. Her parents passed away when she was three. She has lived with us since then.

My father asked for her hand and lieutenant Dara agreed on condition that he moved to the town. Taking his old mother with him, Dad left his village for a new life. Mother saw him a couple of times but did not talk to him until their wedding night. I didn't think they had much to talk about as they were two strangers left in a room to share their bodies. Both virgins, they must have had a lot in their minds for the night. They gradually fell in love and stayed in love for the rest of their lives, thanks to an arranged marriage interposing another one. Mum was not going to marry another man again. She would stay a virtuous mother for her sons.

Her eyes were reddened from the tear-blitz, her fingers, ruddy from the glacial whip. Why hadn't she put her gloves on? I nodded at the cleric, who like a three-toed sloth was wearing an indolent smile, to begin the religious ritual. Facing the coffin in the direction of the Kaaba, the men stood in rows behind *the man of God* and repeated the words he said in

Arabic without knowing their meaning. The women in black veils stood behind, huddled together like Antarctic penguins and watched the men in front repeating the expressions after the cleric. Some were weeping, giving vent to their domestic chagrin.

After the prayer, we lifted the stiffened corpse wrapped in a white shroud from the wooden coffin and handed it down to the men in the grave, who received it gingerly and let it rest on the soil. The safety of his new attire wouldn't offer him warmth or armour him against decay. The gravedigger adjusted the last block on the chamber and glanced at me. Sorrow was melting my body, freeing my soul to ascend with him. I clutched a handful of soil and released it onto the roof of his new abode. Every man used the spade and shovelled some soil into the grave as a sign of respect for the departed. The gravedigger filled up the burial pit after the last man and walked aside for the women to step forward and place their flowers on the mound of the wet soil.

The cleric began regaling his audience with Koranic verses about demise, which made me mindful of the frozen bridge of my glasses fused to my nose, burning my skin. His voice dwindled. Death wasn't the beginning of life and life wasn't the beginning of death. Life had no beginning and end, death had no start. The rest was the story of dust and demons. Where was Pasha?

The snow had paused when a black Rolls-Royce appeared from the corner of the cemetery followed by a white BMW. Two young men in black suits were carrying an enormous wreath of white and black roses, marching ahead of them. A scene straight out of *The Godfather*, I thought. Everyone was watching the newcomers who were certainly not from our town. The cars pulled over and the men walked through the crowd and laid the wreath on top of the other flowers. They strode back, got into the white car and drove off. A middle-aged man in an ivory suit, wearing a black bow tie and a Homburg hat got out of the

Rolls-Royce. He held his ebony stick under his arm to put on his leather gloves before cutting through the throng to stand next to me. When the curiosity of people waned, he thrust an envelope into my pocket.

‘From someone who loved your father,’ he whispered.

I saw the baffled reflection of my face in his sunglasses.

‘For the funeral,’ he added and smiled. His bleached teeth were whiter than the snow.

I didn’t know all my father’s associates, this one must have come from a big city.

The man, who seemed to be suffering from nobility syndrome, doffed his hat to the grave and headed back to the car. Someone opened the door for him from inside. He got into the car and it drove away towards the entrance gate.

I should have asked for his name and his relationship to my father, but it wasn’t polite to interrogate a respect payer with so many bird-bright eyes watching you. I slipped to the back of the crowd and called Pasha on his mobile phone. My careless brother didn’t even pick up. I took the envelope out of my pocket and opened it. There were five wads of fifty pounds notes in it. Unnoticed the drawing that had come with the cash, I closed the envelope. My father’s wealthy friend had come from England.

This is what we did not know: when the reception team was offering tea and dates to the mourners, a few streets away from the cemetery some men were butchering Pasha in his car, sticking their knives into his body.

Shock upon shock.

Hadn’t we already paid a death to God? Why was He chastising us again? Death was feeding on Karamian men. I had to be strong for Mum whose grief had transformed into terrified numbness. She would sit and gaze at a point opposite her without blinking. Shapes, colours, movements or sounds couldn’t infringe her blank canvas of nothingness before her

eyes. She was drifting through the deepest layers of darkness. She had become a nun in permanent meditation, empty of any selves. You couldn't read anything on her face, she was not present.

The police believed the murder had been well planned and done by professionals. If I had shown the envelope to the cops, they might have found something, but I didn't trust them. They were the eyes and the claws of a government that would execute Arash if they could catch him. Under my eyelids, I tried to see the number plates of the two cars that had come to the funeral. The stranger who had shoved the envelope into my pocket appeared and opened his mouth from which a thousand flies flew away. His voice hissed in my ears, *from someone who loved your father.*

Ten days later, there we were in the cemetery again offering a young body to the old soil. No snow this time, only a bitter wind blowing without fear, slapping the faces on its way.

Mum was standing amongst the mourners, staring ahead of her, seeing no one, hearing no voice. I had never seen her so vulnerable, so fragile, she wouldn't survive this. Death was her husband, her son now.

The Karamian family has been cursed, people said.

They couldn't be more wrong. I should have told them that the world had been cursed, to have lost two men of infinite soul, but dense air between us.

No strangers brought any wreath to Pasha's funeral. I walked over to Leila, my fiancé, and asked her to take Mum home and go ahead with the rest of the ritual at home without me. It was customary that relatives would accompany the bereaved family to their home and spend hours and even days with them, but I couldn't bear the well-wishers anymore. When they left, I sat opposite my father and brother's graves and listened to the scream of silence. The world felt empty without them. The Karamian family was a bird that had lost its wings, the rest of journey had to be on foot. My life had changed for ever. The only saving grace was

that my father hadn't been alive to witness the death of his son. Was Pasha's murder in revenge for something Arash had done to his enemies or was it a blinding bolt of fate striking him in the wrong place at the wrong time? If it was vengeance, then why after all these years, why at Dad's funeral? Or his killing may have had something to do with his few years of living abroad.

When you lose your father to stroke, the presence of friends and relatives can help to distract you while your soul is growing a thicker skin. When it is two colossal losses in one week and one of them is a murder case, you need private space to deal with the heap of thoughts perched in your skull. I couldn't find a way of being without them. Staring at the withered wreath resting innocuously on the crest of Dad's grave for an unknowable time, I found myself too angry to offer sorrow a platform on which to perform. I stood up and walked to the giant garland. The dead black and white roses were leering at me. I lifted the wreath, swung it around and smashed it into a lone pine tree.

Going through the different stages of bereavement and coming out restored and ready to go on with my normal life wasn't an option for me. Fury had blocked the way to my internal world. I would have no peace until I found the murderer of my brother.

The next day I went to the university and met Leila at the canteen.

'I thought you'd take advantage of the compassionate leave and stay at home for a week or two,' said Leila. She took her coat off and hung it on the back of her chair and sat opposite me. 'How are you coping?' She put her hand on mine.

I withdrew my hand, took the envelope out of my pocket and put it on the table.

‘Fifty thousand pounds cash and a drawing.’ She

kept gazing at me.

‘I want you to do a DNA test on them.’

She was not even looking at the envelope on the table. She had a way of talking to you without words, by choosing where to set her gaze, how intense and for how long. ‘You’re giving me one of your kind-killing look,’ I said.

‘If they’re going to put your life in danger, you should chuck them in the bin.’

‘Just take them to the lab and see if you can find something.’

Our eyes talked for a decade before she opened her handbag, took out a pair of disposable gloves and put them on.

‘Your fingerprints must be all over them now.’

‘I had my gloves on when I received them.’

She picked up the drawing and had a cursory look. Two matchstick figures were holding hands. The shorter one, a little girl, was holding a flower in her hand.

‘Put the cash back in your pocket,’ said Leila. ‘Students are always looking.’

The simplicity of drawing intrigued her enough to take a magnifying glass out of her bag to examine it.

‘You carry your lab in your bag,’ I said.

She squinted at me above her glasses. ‘You never know when you’ll be asked to look at things.’

She turned the drawing upside down, sidewise, held it opposite her eyes at arm’s length and brought it up to her nose and back again.

‘I need to check for finger prints and run a DNA test.’

I would have laced my fingers with hers to show my love, but we were in a public place in an Islamic country. We had learned to censor ourselves in the open, so she didn't expect an overt romantic gesture. She was competent in reading it in my eyes.

'Where did you get them?' she asked.

Why couldn't she just do what she said she would and leave the rest to me?

'You meet me in the canteen and ask me to do a forensic analysis on a kid's drawing and a substantial amount of foreign cash and expect me not to ask any questions!' She took her gloves off. 'You're talking to your fiancée, for God's sake.' She leaned back in her seat and folded her arms. The clamour of forks, knives and spoons scraping the plates mixed with the hum of students had filled the space between us. There are secrets that you must hide from the world and share only with your family and there are other secrets that you don't need to release to anyone. You hold them tight in your chest, like a pearl in a shell.

'I think there might be a link between these items and the people who killed Pasha.'

'Where did you get them?' She leaned forward, her inner Sherlock Homes roused.

'Remember the men who brought that huge wreath to Dad's funeral?' I said. She nodded. 'The man in the cream suit who was standing next to me shoved them into my pocket.'

'Didn't he say anything?'

'From someone who loved your father.'

'Did you tell the police about it?'

I gazed at her nut-brown pupils with disbelief, a Forensic Science lecturer should know better. They had Pasha's body for a week and all they could come up with was a post mortem report saying that he had been stabbed to death, and the blind could see that.

'What!'

‘Why do you think those people gave it to me? Because whoever is behind this wanted to see me, and I’m not going to disappoint them.’

‘I don’t know, Kia.’ She ran her fingers through her hair. ‘You’re into literature and this is a hands-on effort, a detective job.’

Where does love go when a girl tells her lover that he’s not good enough to do something?

‘Don’t forget that I wasted two years of my life doing my military service.’ How humiliating, trying to tell your partner-for-life who you are. What would father think if he could see me explaining myself to my future wife? ‘I was also a boxer and I have you to help me with this.’ I could see she was not convinced. It may not be dissecting a poem or analysing a story, but the strategies were not poles apart; they both demanded your astute attention to detail to ascertain what was beyond the obvious. ‘Look Leila, I want to find my brother’s murderer and I expect you to help me.’

She was still looking at the drawing, which had become the buffer between our two worlds. ‘Leave these with me for a couple of days.’

‘Can we order something now?’

‘Why did you want to meet me in the canteen?’ she asked. ‘It’s not exactly your haunt, is it?’

In a public place filled with students, she wouldn’t try hard to change my mind or scrutinise my plans. I was too worn out for that.

‘I should’ve tried this place earlier,’ I said. ‘Don’t students pester the lecturers when they come here for lunch?’

I watched her putting the envelope and drawing in her handbag, thinking that we would have been married if Dad hadn’t had a stroke. In the storm of my life she was a rainbow that I

couldn't say exactly where it began or ended.

Two days later I returned to the university and walked into the Forensic Science Laboratory. Immersed in subdued light, Leila was busy examining something under a microscope. I put a raven rose next to it.

'You found the flower shop,' she said without looking up.

'A girl had been there, asking them all sorts of questions about the big wreath with black roses,' I said. 'I asked you to examine the drawing, not launch an investigation.'

I could have been a specimen in a small box in a cupboard for all the interest she showed in my words. She finished with her microscope and picked up the rose. 'So, you finally got me a flower.' She smelt it, no fragrance. 'When you ask me to do something, I do it properly.'

Leila was right. If she was in it with me, she would have the right to do her own investigations. But I recoiled at the thought of her being exposed and vulnerable because of my causes.

'You wouldn't have gone there if you hadn't found something interesting.'

She spun the rose in her hands. 'Interesting enough.'

'It took me two days to find the damn place,' I said. 'How did you find it so quickly?'

'Well, it's not even the difference between a professional and an amateur.' She smiled.

'Gender differences, my dear. Any woman in the town knows where to get those roses.'

'Alright Superwoman, tell me what you found.'

‘The paper of the drawing is not made in Iran. The DNA we found didn’t match our national databank, which supports the idea of it coming from another country. I couldn’t find any fingerprints, which begs the question why they’ve been removed.’

The distant siren of an ambulance pronounced the accent of the city. No rage or retaliation fuelled my investigation. Someone had asked me a question and I had to provide an answer. Someone had killed my brother and the responsibility to find out who, rested with me.

‘You okay?’ Leila asked.

‘I reckon so.’

It is not easy to contain your emotions to present a calm exterior when the subject of the inquiry is so close to you.

‘The florist said the men who had ordered the wreath mentioned London,’ I said. It occurred to me that they might have said it deliberately.

‘You mentioned once that Pasha had lived abroad for a while,’ said Leila and pushed a wandering curl from her face. ‘Did he ever mention London?’

Pasha was reluctant to talk about his time abroad. Wherever he lived, he was deported. I recalled the phone call I received from an immigration officer in the middle of the night, asking me to take his ID to the airport and collect him.

I shook my head.

‘We must find out about his time abroad,’ she said.

I walked to her microscope and had a peek. Exotic shapes invited my eyes to a different world. ‘I’ll find out when I go to the Shakespeare conference in London next month.’

‘Do you know anyone there?’

I knew it would come to this when I involved her in my investigation and she deserved to know about my family.

‘I might find Arash there.’

‘Who is Arash?’

‘My brother.’

She stared at me for a century and shook her head in disbelief. ‘You have another brother and you didn’t tell me?’

‘We don’t usually talk about him.’ She was still shaking her head. ‘He went to the Philippines to study when I was only a kid. People said he became involved in political activities. We haven’t heard from him for twenty years.’

Leila’s pupils were two angry archers throwing poisonous arrows at me. A six months relationship, not even under one roof, wasn’t enough to talk about Arash.

‘What else should I know about your family that you haven’t told me yet?’

‘I told you Leila, we don’t talk about him.’

‘Am I allowed to know why?’

You can love a person without exhibiting all your thoughts, secrets and feelings to them.

‘I don’t know exactly what Arash has done, but after all these years the secret service are still looking for him. He seems to be on the run all the time, which is probably the reason why he’s cut all his ties with us.’

‘That is terrible!’

It was worse than terrible. Dad would have been alive if Arash had lived with us. He loved all of us, but the bond between him and Arash was special. He felt his son’s absence more than everyone.

‘Arash bought me my first bicycle,’ I said.

After so many winters, I could still see the gaping mouths and wide eyes of the boys in our road when I first took my bicycle out. They watched me mount the saddle like a prince and happily became my courtiers, jogging alongside me riding.

‘You think there’s a connection between him and Pasha’s death?’ she asked.

‘Arash was a communist. We’ve always had to watch our backs, but the question is, why now if Pasha’s death was an act of revenge?’

‘Do you know if Arash is still involved in political activities?’

Some years ago, when everyone was an informer and even mothers would betray their young children and hand them over to the authorities, such a question was inappropriate, but things had changed. The post-revolution events, like gravity, had pulled a nation’s dreams back and smashed them onto the ground. We had wished on the stars that we could never have reached.

‘He may have done something to them recently,’ she added.

‘I heard from one of his old friends that he’d stopped his political activities and was into business,’ I lied and I didn’t know the reason. Perhaps safeguarding the family had spread to my genes, but Leila was family. I felt ashamed. ‘Well, you can’t trust such information, can you?’ I added.

She took off her lab coat and hung it on a hanger. ‘Hungry?’ I nodded.

In the canteen, each of us took a tray and stood in a queue.

‘What did he study?’ she asked and put a bowl of salad onto her tray.

‘Medicine, but it seems that saving individuals wasn’t enough for him. He decided to save a nation.’ The notion of a man liberating his folks had sylvan charms to it, but it only held by people with weak personalities who wanted a superman to shoulder their responsibilities. Following their sheep instincts, my people needed a goat in front to take

them to the safety that ignorance promised. ‘Rumour had it that he was the leader of the students who occupied Iran’s embassy in the Philippines after the revolution. Young men and women died on both sides.’

‘You must be very careful if you meet him in London. His enemies will be yours too.’ I nodded to her warning. ‘How are you going to look for him in the big city?’

Arash wasn’t a person to live in the shadow of anonymity for long. ‘I’m sure there must be people who would know him if he’s in London.’

‘Changing my name is the first thing I’d do,’ she said. ‘If he’s using a pseudonym, it’ll be much more difficult to find him.’

‘I can only try.’

The vegetarian meal was edible, but very soon I would be hungry again, I craved red meat. Father never liked my conversion to vegetarianism under Leila’s influence. *What can a piece of cabbage give you that meat can’t?* Dad said once and then revealed his main concern via an analogy: *husband and wife should be like rock and clod, so that when you hit them together no one can hear them. If your wife is a rock like you, everyone will hear when you clash.* All his life Dad had seen clods - his wife the first one - smashed and reduced to powder in silence. He was worried about his son not acting like a proper rock. *Reading a lot of books, son, can make you soft.*

‘You must really want to see him,’ Leila said and put a piece of grilled green pepper into her mouth. Maybe life was that moment, watching her crunching the vegetable in her pearly teeth. The vibration of some inaudible melody hummed inside me.

‘I don’t know, Leila. In a strange way he’s always been there for me. There are a lot of stories about him and I’ve grown up with them. I know people exaggerate when they talk about their heroes, but even if ten percent of what they say about him is true, he must be a hell of a man.’

Yet, there was this fear in me, this gnawing question, *what if the hero I had created in my mind was not real?*

‘I hope you meet him. I’m sure he’d also love to see you.’

The church bell of an imaginary land tolled in the canteen, someone terminated it by answering their phone.

At the police station I signed the paper where it read *next of kin* and received the keys to my brother’s car. I called Leila and told her that she could enter Pasha’s house, which had been roped off for weeks.

The police officer who ushered me to the car was as quiet as the parking lot in the back of the building. He pointed at the black Mercedes in the corner, folded his arms and rested them on his eleven-month-pregnant belly. He stood there like a waxwork and kept watching me with his soulless eyes. The academy training had done its job, draining him of any soul or sensibility. I thought of a fat shrimp whose vein had been pulled out.

Pasha’s dried blood had stained the front seats. They could have used some of my taxes and taken the vehicle to a carwash. In the boot was his suit that he had collected from the dry cleaner’s. I took the plastic cover off and used it to cover the blood-stained seat. Pasha’s smell filled my nostrils. Tears clouded the headquarters. I took a deep breath and drove off to the more affluent part of the city where my brother’s house had become the dwelling place of the forensic team and ghosts.

Leila was already in the house when I parked the car in the garage. I browsed the tools and spare parts with my new eyes, looking for clues in everything.

She was checking Pasha’s laptop when I walked into the sitting room.

‘Could you bypass the password?’ She

nodded.

‘Have you found anything?’

I kissed the nape of her neck, walked round the sofa and sat next to her.

‘Do you know these kids?’ She adjusted the screen for me to see the photo. A girl of seven or eight year old and a boy double her age were in their swimming suits by a sea, smiling at the camera, dimples on their cheeks. The girl had chestnut Persian eyes, different from the boy’s blue, both warm and kind.

I shook my head.

‘Here is another photo of the girl.’

She was in her school uniform happily running towards the cameraman.

‘I believe this one was taken in the UK,’ Leila said. ‘Look at the grim brick walls in the background. See those parked cars? They’re all facing that way, which means they drive on the left side of the road. I think the person who took the photo, perhaps your brother, was collecting the girl from the school.’

I was only able to scratch my chin.

‘Can she be his daughter?’

I shook my head. Pasha hadn’t been out of the country long enough for his child to be that age.

‘Do you know if Pasha had met Arash when he was out of the country?’

‘He never talked about his time abroad. He came back cash rich.’

‘He wasn’t into drugs or smuggling, was he?’

‘I don’t think so. He was an IT wizard. There’s a lot of money in it if you’re very good at IT.’

‘Does Arash have any children?’

‘We don’t know if he’s married or has any kids. I don’t think he’s the family man type.’

‘I sense a connection between the girl and the drawing,’ Leila said. Logical, but what was the connection?

There were hundreds of pictures from buildings, monuments, bridges and parks of different European countries, but no people.

‘Here is another picture that may be of interest to you, the only picture of him.’ She flicked the screen and Pasha appeared in a suit standing next to a stunning tall girl. She looked like an eastern European model. It was night and their flushed cheeks suggested that they were well-oiled. I noticed the reflection of a neon sign on the shop window behind them. Leila zoomed in and read, *The Golden Casino*. We looked at each other. I had the name of a place and three photos to take with me to London. The gods and the ghosts were aligned on my side, my father’s spirit leading them.

Prowling in London

The aeroplane was above London. I looked at the gigantic city through the little window and couldn't imagine how one could find a person he hadn't seen for two decades amongst the jungle of buildings, roads and cars.

Your Iranian passport works against you when you arrive at Heathrow Airport. You are seen as a terrorist until you are cleared. You must fill out some demeaning forms before getting through customs. I had heard that before the revolution, airports gave more credit to an Iranian passport than a British or a German one. With the emblem of the monarchy embellishing its cover, you would hold your head high and pass through any customs with a minimum of formalities. The insignia of a lion holding a sword had been replaced with the Arabic word *Allah*, so I didn't expect the officer to have a cursory look and welcome me to his country, but I never imagined that he would treat me as if I was the official representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran. With a smile on my face answering his patronising questions, I thought that decades of negative publicity against Iran had worked on the low-paid official; the price you must pay when your country stands against the West. I tempted to shout, *Hey! I hate that regime more than you do*, but silence seemed safer. The man was just a sandbag filled by the mass media. Perhaps he needed to feel superior when talking to an Asian man. Only sixty years earlier they had been an empire, *Great Britain*, they still carried the name.

I collected my baggage and strode out of the terminal, towards the taxi rank. A black cab driver slid down his window to crane his neck out and ask if I was going to the city. I had heard that you must wave for them to stop for you. 'I just dropped a fare,' he said, 'and I'm on my way back to the city.' I glanced at the taxi rank, another fifty metres to drag my suitcase and a queue to stand in. 'Hop in,' he said. 'Do you need help with that?' I liked his perseverance and got into the cab. Through the little gap in the glass between the front and

back seats, I gave him the printed copy of the hotel's address the conference organisers had booked for me. He scanned the address, nodded and gave the address back to me. 'I know where it is.'

'Good!'

'The M4 is closed, sir,' he said. 'We need to take alternative routes.'

'It wouldn't cost me an arm and a leg, would it?' His

ear-to-ear grin wasn't assuring.

Before long, we passed through a road where women had their colourful saris wrapped around their brown bodies and bearded men were wearing turbans. The aroma of many spices mixed with sharp incense pervaded the cab. There were no white or black people on the street, all cinnamon-brown. Had I taken the wrong flight and landed in Mumbai? Is this the meaning of multiculturalism, letting people of the same race, language and religion occupy some districts of the city? Looking at the signs of the shops written in Hindi and English, I asked the cab driver if he knew where the Persian communities lived in London.

'Not sure if they have a community,' he said, checking me in the rear-view mirror.

'They're everywhere and nowhere.' He smiled. 'Stay in the shadows to see others in the light.'

Do London cabbies have to pass some philosophy modules to get their licences?

'I'll have to look for them amongst the shadows then.'

'I know a couple of Iranian shops in Kensington High Street. They sell the best pistachios and caviar.'

A country that is not known for giving the greatest poets, philosophers and thinkers to the world, but rather for its carpets, cats, pistachio, caviar and lately the nuclear bomb must be in dire need of resuscitation.

London went on, as cities do, revealing more of its hues.

‘Did you know the word *Church* derives from the Persian language?’ asked the driver.

Philosophy wasn’t enough of a show-off, now linguistics.

‘Are you a philologist?’

‘I could’ve easily been one. It depends who my customers are.’

‘Well, lots of weapons of mass destruction have originated from that country. *Church* is just one of them.’

‘Religion has killed more humans than cancer has,’ he said. ‘I’m not an atheist but I like them.’ He tapped his head. ‘They use the best that God has given them, the brain.’

I leaned back in the seat and closed my eyes, only to see my jet lag waiting for me.

‘Are you in London for business?’

I opened my eyes for natural light to adjust my body clock to the new time zone. Let them watch London and get tired for a good night sleep.

‘I’m attending a conference on Shakespeare.’

‘*To be or not to be*, is the bloody question, isn’t it?’

That seemed like a man who had had a full-night’s slumber. Why do people exert energy to impress others who they may not even meet again?

‘Do you know a place called *The Golden Casino*?’

‘Are you an Arab?’ he asked.

‘Beg your pardon?’

‘Most of the club’s customers are wealthy Arabs.’

‘You know the place?’

‘I’m a cab driver, aren’t I?’

The man was a godsend. ‘Will you take me there after I’ve checked into the hotel?’

‘I didn’t know they held Shakespeare conferences at their tables,’ he said and checked my reaction in his mirror. His eyes twinkled with mischief. I smiled and watched how the weather outside changed from sunny-calm to rainy-stormy so quickly.

The warmth inside the hotel mixed with oak overtones of new furniture welcomed the guests and Verdi’s *Messa da Requiem* playing in the background promised you a good time. I got my key from the reception and rolled my suitcase into a lift. Verdi was transmitted everywhere, the double choir giving me goosebumps. When I put my suitcase into my room and locked the door, I felt like a character in a Hitchcock movie. Maybe one of his films had been shot in that hotel. On my way to the waiting cab I couldn’t remember what my room had looked like.

We set off. The lampposts were like tall desk lamps studying the pedestrians in the rain.

‘I’m involved in a cultural project,’ said the cab driver.

‘Are you?’

‘I’m taking photos of my passengers every day, with their consent of course. After a year, there will be an exhibition of my photos.’

A philosopher, a linguist and a photographer all made in a mobile university called Black Cab.

‘Aren’t CCTV cameras doing enough surveillance in this city? I’ve seen hundreds of them only in two hours.’

‘What I’m doing is art, sir.’

Is taking photos of different passengers and placing them in a gallery art? Since the olden principles of what art ought to be is redundant, anything you put in an exhibition is art these

days. Yet, the essence of creating any artwork remains the same; a revolt against the brevity of life and a wish for the creation to outlive the creator.

When we arrived, he took his camera out and took two shots.

‘I didn’t give you my permission, did I?’

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘Can I take a photo of you, sir?’

‘You already did.’

‘I’ll delete them if you’re not happy.’

‘Please do.’

He clicked several buttons. ‘Deleted,’ he said and asked if I wanted him to wait and take me back to my hotel. ‘No, thanks.’ I paid him and stepped into the rain, uncertain he had really deleted my photos.

The buildings were tall, resembling the black and white detective movies I had seen as a kid. We were not allowed to go to the cinema – *it is haram*, Dad would say - but Arash would take us to see a film whenever he had the money to buy three tickets and two sandwiches, one for himself and one for Pasha and me to share. I loved foreign films and the scenes that were set and shot in big cities like London. The buildings were so different from what we had in our town, much more glamorous.

Two bouncers in black overcoats were standing outside the casino’s entrance, watching how the rain annoyed passers-by. Under the canopy of a designer boutique I took the photo out of my pocket and tried to pinpoint the location where it had been taken. Pasha was smiling at the camera, there were some sparks of that familiar joyful self in his eyes. He never smiled when he came back from Europe, something had died in him. He returned a lonely soul who kept himself to himself. I espied the road and checked it against the photo. Something had been left unresolved. The hail began to drum on the canopy for a minute and then it stopped. I walked to the place the photo had been taken. *The Golden Casino* wasn’t

reflecting on the background window, the cafe was open and lit. I had this feeling that someone was watching me. I scanned around and studied the faces of the passers-by. Life was a ceaseless stream flowing calmly.

I marched to the bouncers and asked them if I could enter the building.

‘Are you a club member?’ asked the taller one.

I shook my head. ‘How can I become a member?’ They

looked at each other and sneered.

‘It ain’t that easy, mate,’ said the sturdy bold bouncer who looked like a bulldog. ‘You need to have,’ he looked at his colleague, ‘what do they call it? Connections.’

‘I’d like to play tonight,’ I said and flashed a wad of notes in my inside pocket. They both shook their heads, which to me was a sign that they were ready for negotiation. Although I hadn’t bribed anyone before, I came from a country that corruption had become its new currency, so I was familiar with this game.

‘Not a place for you, mate,’ said the taller one and put his oversized hand on my shoulder.

‘Do you know this girl?’ I showed the photo to him. His bold colleague joined him to have a look. They glanced at each other and shook their heads.

‘Can I speak to your manager?’

‘You should get going, buddy,’ said the taller bouncer, tapping me on my arm.

I put the photo back into my pocket, strolled across the road and entered the Italian cafe opposite the club. I ordered a cup of tea and took a seat near the window where I could watch the entrance of the casino. A man in a stylish suit and bowtie came out of the casino and talked to the bouncers, who used their hands to add emphasis to their explanations. He must have seen me on their security cameras.

What if I let it go, ordered some food, went back to my hotel, took a shower and went to bed? Maybe Leila was right and I wasn't made for such things. You should hold on to the reins of sanity and quietude. It was hard to sit there and do nothing with my time. I wished I had brought a book with me to read. Why was I sitting there anyway? There must be a better way to look for the girl in the photo, but I couldn't think of any, after a long flight I was tired. I had done enough for my first day, finding the casino. I could resume my investigation the next day after the seminars. Waiting was not easy, especially when your thoughts, like a colony of ants, are marching around in your head. What would Dad say if I quitted before I had even started? *Find your brother's murderer, son.* It was not just my cause, I couldn't quit on behalf of my family. There was no "me" when "I" was "we". On my own, I was small, powerless and vulnerable like a raindrop, but with my family I was an ocean, vast, vigorous and invincible. *You're doing it for our family. I'll be with you all the way, son. Above all, be true to yourself.*

'We're closing in five minutes,' said the waitress.

It was cold outside. My bladder was screaming and the tea I had drunk was already on its way to stretch it further to borders of insanity. The last time I had used the gents was in the aeroplane three thousand feet above sea level. No, I'm lying, I had baptised Heathrow's terminal two on my arrival, but that was six hours earlier. I rationed my steps forward like a penguin, mindful of the smallest undulations of the pavement in order not to disturb the sea of urine inside. I turned into the first restaurant and headed straight for the toilets, the best invention of the human race. A waterfall of elephant pee overrode the pitter-patter of the rain on a pane of glass. While washing my hands, I realised that a woman was watching me in the mirror with a sarcastic look. Yes, I was in the ladies. 'Sorry!' I blabbered and darted out, holding my wet hands in front of me as if I was praying.

Rain again, the weather couldn't make up its mind in this country. I walked past a crowded bar in which a man in white boxers and a navy hat was on a table dancing to crazy music. Where the hell was I? Film studios, media and advertising companies were pushing and shoving sex shops, music clubs, theatres and trendy restaurants over space. I hadn't seen that many different people in one place in my entire life. There was so many colours, music and energy in the air that even the ground was vibrating with it. If I had been a French artist or an Italian architect, I might have discovered some postmodern beauty in the incongruity of the buildings, but I was from a cursed patch of the world where the measure of beauty was ideology and things were either allowed or banned and beauty was just a footnote in small print that would offend the eye. I had grown up in a country about which most westerners knew nothing more than that it was run by a bunch of mullahs who were desperate to get their hands on nuclear bombs to wipe out Israel and the West from the face of the earth.

'Excuse me' I interrupted the conversation of three young men in leather trousers to ask if they knew a vegetarian restaurant nearby.

'Sorry, we don't know this area very well,' one of them said. 'Do you want a fag?' He offered his half-smoked joint with a coquettish grin. I shook my head and speeded up my steps. What the hell was Pasha doing in this part of the city? Had he been a gay? I wished I was more relaxed and confident with people who were different from me. In theory, I welcomed differences and even encouraged my students to celebrate and embraced them, but now, in real life I was a bit tense, feeling nervous. My ethics were far away from me as the stars.

The road smelled of wet people. Further on, two athletic young men in black leather waistcoats were chatting and drinking their beers. Didn't they feel cold? I stopped a black cab and gave the driver the address of my hotel. When the cab was passing *The Golden Casino*, I

saw a girl entering the casino. I didn't see her face properly, but I presumed she was young and tall like the girl in the photo. I took it out of my pocket and had another look at the girl.

Could it be her?

It was too late to have a proper dinner, so I asked the driver to drop me outside a supermarket close to the hotel to get some light food. You learn a lot from the people of a country by walking into their supermarkets. Looking at the amount of unhealthy food on the shelves, which would be consumed eventually, I realised the reason I had seen so many overweight people in London. I left the shop and walked towards my hotel, sensing that someone was following me. I looked back and saw a man in a black overcoat striding towards me. I paused, clutching my shopping bags in my hands, watched him pass. The man entered the hotel. Was I being paranoid?

Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata in the foyer sounded much more majestic than ever.

Shakespeare's Globe Theatre put me on the wings of history and took me back to the author's time. It was surreal to see so many scholars coming from various parts of the world to talk about a man who had died four hundred years earlier. *Hamlet never dies*, I would tell my students, and I could see why. One of the morning speakers was so conversant that made me feel I didn't know anything about Shakespeare. These amazing people were connected to me through stories, characters and words. They were not strangers with different nationalities, we were a family of Shakespeare admirers.

In the lunch break I met a Filipino woman who said she was a professor of English Literature at the University of Santo Tomas in the Philippines. We had lunch together on the banks of the River Thames in a trendy restaurant. Her listening skills turned me into a

chatterbox, talking about *Hamlet* and my approach of teaching it and the effect of Persian culture in understanding the play. She talked about everything but Shakespeare. How could she not to talk about the great man and his work when she was with a colleague who taught the same subject? She even asked some personal questions which I put down to cultural differences. I didn't tell him about my brother who had studied in her country. In the afternoon The Globe staged a production of *King Lear* and the day ended with a panel discussion about the play.

The weather was gloomy when I walked along the riverside. A river bus was resting on the water, waiting for the sightseers to climb aboard. Thames was cradling a couple of moored boats, rocking them to early sleep. Up and down the riverbank, restaurants and pubs were serving customers from all over the planet. London's owl eye was watching them and the queues in and out of the National Theatre. I strolled past a crowd of people who had gathered around five young swarthy men whose acrobatic dance steps and movements to a singer with Jamaican accent had mesmerised them. Further on, I paused to see a man in orange monk dress floating in mid-air, holding the top of a road. A couple of onlookers were bending to see that the levitation was genuine. Those who were convinced that the man had defied the laws of physics were taking photos and videos. To me the secret was hidden under her long sleeves, baggy dress, the rod in his hand and the little carpet on the floor beneath him.

'Kia Karamian?'

I turned to the voice that belonged to a man in black suit with an athletic build.

I realised that he was not alone, I ignored him.

'Someone wants to see you,' he said.

It felt precariously good to be a wanted man in a country in which you knew no one.

Their sudden approach had spiced my veins with fearful excitement. You shouldn't go with

the men, a voice in me advised. *Common sense can take a man only to common places*, Dad's voice echoed in me stronger. Perhaps it wasn't wise to look into the eyes of a dragon in a foreign land, but if those men were the link to find my brother's killer, I would take the risk. I must face the ocean if I was looking for pearls.

'Is that the man who wants to talk to me?' I asked and glanced at his companion.

He shook his head and pointed to a black Bentley waiting and ready to drive over Westminster Bridge. I took the stairs up to the car knowing that it was perhaps the only way to turn my irrationality into wisdom.

No one was in the car but the driver who was as big as a hippopotamus, blocking out the light. It wasn't going to be a quick talk in the back of the vehicle, then. One of the men sat next to me in the back seat, the other one in the front and we set off. No music in the car of the men of few words. I tried to memorise the passing landmarks and the roads the black Bentley was taking so swiftly but after a few twists and turns and crosses I gave up and relaxed my head on the leather seat. I glanced at the man sitting next to me whose athletic body was bursting out of his suit, a pair of large-rim glasses perched on his nose. I could handle him, I thought, as I was younger, faster and had lethal punches. I smiled at the certainty we had as kids that students who wore glasses were not good fighters. The man who was sitting next to the hippo in the front seat looked like a cage fighter. I had always been a fan of silence, but theirs was annoying. What if the three of them attacked me at the same time? What if there were more of them waiting at wherever they were taking me? Could Mum bear another loss? Could Leila move on with her life? God, I was thinking like a doomed man. Where did that conservative caution come from? No more despairing thoughts! I decided. Choppy waters were welcome to test my boat. Why should I expect the worst? The anonymous person who wanted to see me could be someone who wanted to help, perhaps the girl in the photo standing next to Pasha.

The car didn't leave the centre of the city and stopped in a quiet road. The man in the front seat got out of the car and opened the door for me. I stepped out feeling like a celebrity with an efficient bodyguard. He indicated the restaurant opposite with his shaven head. I crossed the road and looked back at the men who were watching me, making sure I entered the restaurant.

Inside, the Italian diner was so dim that it was hard to recognise the face of customers. The bartender was busy cleaning glasses with a white cloth. He didn't acknowledge my arrival, not even with a glance. I looked around the tables and noticed a huge figure sitting at the back. The man's face was in shadow. I walked towards him, dragged out a chair from under the table and sat down opposite him. His Cossack hat had covered his face. The foppish purple of his shirt couldn't hide the enormity of his body. I kept watching the man, thinking that sooner or later he would look up and break the silence as he was the one who had asked for this meeting.

'Bold, but naive,' he said in a deep, gruff voice. 'Exactly the way the old man described you.'

He took his hat off and dropped it on the table between us and looked into my eyes. A roller coaster plummeted in my chest. Twenty years had changed his face, but his arrogant eyes could still create enough heat to start a fire; there was a sun in him. Was I really sitting opposite Arash? Was I finally going to come face to face with my childhood hero? Had he been in touch with father before his passing? My heart, with each beat, was shaking my hands and the empty glass that they were holding for no reason on the table. Yet, the man could be an imposter. It could be a trap.

'You must've mistaken me for someone else, sir.'

'Not as naive as he thought, though,' he said.

The measured cadences that he employed to his voice were Dad's. Its intimate music inspired trust. The ear would like to follow to the end of his words, to his intended goal.

‘You remember this?’ I touched the mark on my forehead, wanting to make sure the man was my real brother. When I was six Arash bought me my first bicycle. I was the most restless boy, every adult whom I had driven mad said. I had been cycling in our yard for hours. I would pedal hard and fast until my thigh muscles would feel as if boiling water had been poured onto them, then I would stop pedalling and close my eyes to experience the ride, passing under the sagging laundry lines running zigzag across the yard. It felt so good to go round the little pond in the middle of the yard again and again until I felt dizzy, weightless. The spout of water shooting out of the little hose pipe in the middle of the pond made the sunny days more bearable. I would close my eyes every time that I passed through the jet of water. I felt my bike hit something and the pain burgeoned before I realised what had happened. I had fallen into the pool with the metal hose pipe stuck into my forehead. It had just missed my right eye. The ache was piercing and the fear of death was frightening. The rim of the hose had gone through my skull. Pasha who had watched the incident, came into the pond and tried to pull my head out of the hose, but it had stuck in my skull. There was no blood coming out of my forehead, the rim had blocked the wounded veins. He fetched Mum, who wailed when she saw me. She took my head in her hands and pulled it out of the hose. Blood gushed out and sprayed Pasha’s face. It felt as if my brain was coming out of my skull. Mum put her palm on my forehead and pushed it. Arash arrived home at that moment. Mum asked him to put me in his car and take me to the hospital. I deserved what had happened to me and I must stay home and deal with consequences. Even Mum’s begging didn’t change his mind.

He touched the dented mark on my forehead.

‘What could a pretty look do for a boy that a face with a scar wouldn’t?’ he said with a touch of a parental tone in his voice. ‘You just missed some stitches, that’s all.’

‘I could’ve died!’

‘You didn’t, and you look more like a man with that mark; a man who has just returned from a bloody battle.’

I would have liked to punch him or stand up and squeeze him in my arms, but he didn’t seem to be a hugger type and I didn’t want him to think that I was an emotional man. Two decades away from his family and country must have abated the eastern heat in his blood.

He pushed the drinks menu towards me and I had a quick look. He snapped his finger to summon the waiter.

‘What are you going to have?’ he asked.

He hadn’t opened his own menu yet.

‘Orange juice.’

‘What is wrong with you?’ He crossed his hands and leaned his elbows on the table. ‘Dad said you didn’t drink, smoke, lie, fight or fuck, but I didn’t believe him. What kind of man are you?’

‘All men don’t do those things.’

‘Neither do the *dead*,’ he said, trying to unveil my soul with his incisive eyes. To him I was so small that he needed a magnifying glass to see his little brother who was as pure and weak as a pint of skimmed milk. ‘I wouldn’t have let you grow into this Kosher Halal thing if I hadn’t lived away from you all of these years.’

His partly opened eyes were mocking a world that had failed to have their full attention. He was not trying to exert his seniority, so I said nothing. The unspoken words had filled the silence between us.

‘Married?’ he asked.

Had he been in contact with dad, he must have known that I was ‘Engaged,’ I said.

‘Tell me about her.’

Would he be able to tell who I was if I told him who I loved?

‘Her name’s Leila.’

‘What does she carry in her bag?’

I laughed. ‘What kind of question is that?’

‘Do you know the things in her bag?’

‘Well, apart from the female stuff, she always carries disposable gloves and a magnifying glass with her.’

‘A detective?’

‘She teaches Forensic Science. We work at the same university.’

‘It would be difficult to cheat on that girl,’ he said. ‘Well, you’re not even a cheater. So many boundaries and restrictions in your life, kid.’

The waitress arrived with two oversized menus, this time for the main course. She took an undersized notebook from her waistcoat pocket, plucked the little pencil from behind her ear and asked for our drinks in a Polish accent.

‘Two double Scotch on the rocks,’ Arash ordered for both of us. I was about to ask for my orange juice, but he thanked her and said that was all for the time being. Like a ballerina the girl did a half pirouette and headed back to the bar.

‘I’ve missed this for twenty years, sitting with my brother, looking into his eyes and drinking to his health,’ he said. ‘You were a kid when I left the country. You can’t imagine how much I loved that the age gap between us wasn’t this big and we could do things together. I had lots of amigos, but a brother is much, much more if he’s also your friend.’ He rose his hands as if he wanted to embrace the pale-yellow orb. ‘Dear God, please forgive my Muslim brother for his sins, drinking the blood of grapes with me and burn me twice in your hell instead of him. Amen, ya rabal alamin.’

How could you reject a drink offered by your childhood hero? I could sense the ocean of love in him, yearning for camaraderie. I would have drunk it even if he had given me poison.

The waitress brought our drinks and put them onto the table. The cubes of ice were losing themselves to the warmth of the spirit. He raised his glass to me and I raised mine to him, chink, his glass stole a kiss from mine. He swigged the sizzling liquor in one go and I poured the volcano of lava into my system. A tide of tears trickled down my cheeks as I tried to suppress a coughing fit. The reward of my guts on fire was his proud eyes. He ordered a second round. Would my body be able to take another blow? I would go to the end with him even if I died in that restaurant in front of him.

‘Is she good in bed?’ he asked.

It was not the booze talking. I could parry the question, but I said I didn’t know yet, and I didn’t feel less of a man saying so.

‘Ah, the old school romantic type!’ he said. ‘I thought your species had become extinct.’

I waved my hand to say that I endured.

‘Love is not a good currency,’ he said. ‘I don’t know a single country where you can spend it.’

‘Here is the country of the currency.’ I tapped on my chest. ‘Love is like your sins,’ I said, ‘they’re in your ribcage and go with you wherever you go.’

‘Your sins, if they exist, are in your head.’

Okay, big brother, your views aren’t encompassed by mine, let us move on and find some common ground.

The second round arrived. He put his fingers around his glass.

‘Is she pretty?’

Well, well, if knowing about Leila was all that he wanted, I would give it to him in style.

‘Her black almond shaped eyes are guarded by hundreds of adroit archers that aim at your heart anytime she casts a glance at you,’ I recited a poem I had memorised when I was a

teenager. ‘Her mouth is the eternal source of life. A pretty mole, like an Indian yogi is sitting next to it, meditating on its exquisiteness. Jasmines have borrowed their fragrances from her. Her soft skin-’

‘-I hope your poetry won’t fly out of the window when you begin your deadening dull daily married life together.’ He trailed his middle finger on the table and then put it in his mouth and sucked it. ‘Shag her and she’ll be reduced to a piece of meat.’

‘Makes no difference if she fumbles or stumbles,’ I continued and closed my eyes as if I was delivering Hamlet’s soliloquy, ‘she is always sashaying in my eyes.’

We were joking about it, but only one generation before us a conversation about love was totally different. Love was in hearts and stayed there. When I was a teenager and in love with the girl next door, I dared to ask Dad why he didn’t tell Mum that he loved her. He glanced at his wife and said she already knew that he loved her. My mother blushed to her ears and took the wet dishes to the sink and washed them again. That was the closest Dad got verbalising his love for Mum.

Arash was shaking his head, sneering. ‘Cloak the lucky girl in your romantic rhetoric and enjoy your oblivious moments,’ he said, using his hands theatrically, ‘for they’re not going to last.’ He spoke like a hurt lover.

The waitress came to take our orders. Her cheap perfume mixed with the smell of food and her sweat tickled my nose.

Having checked all the options and their ingredients, I chose a vegetarian dish.

‘A girl’s choice,’ muttered Arash. ‘I’ll go for the bloodiest steak that you have,’ he told the waitress and gave the unused menus back to her. ‘Make sure the meat belongs to a cow that was raised in a jam-packed stinky barn and was fed crap food. It was beaten and dragged all the way to the slaughterhouse and its throat was slashed with a very dull knife.’

Puzzled, the waitress leaned forward to understand the order, perhaps thinking that her

English wasn't good enough to comprehend him.

Arash turned to me and said, 'No wonder you and your herbivore fiancée haven't fucked yet; you don't have the energy for it.'

The word 'fuck' made the waitress to pull a face and leave our table. Why use insulting words when he could speak like the hero version of him in my mind?

'How can you kill an animal and eat its dead meat?' I asked. 'We're not cave men!'

He shook his head in disbelief, perhaps thinking about our ancestors who had been hunters. 'You don't need to be a cave man to kill an animal and eat it. I've slaughtered people if they count as animals and I'm not a cave man.'

What was Arash trying to prove? He couldn't have possibly murdered people. Did he know that the culture he left behind two decades earlier had changed and wouldn't give him any credit for being an ultra-masculine male? There was a time when people would doff their hats to you if you could beat a couple of opponents simultaneously, but not anymore. These days, young men groomed their eyebrows, applied gel to their hair and cream to their skin.

'I thought the region that you and I come from didn't know how to produce soft men,' said Arash. 'It was toughness to death when I was there. I never saw a single Lor man with a small heart.' He drank his drink at a gulp and put his empty glass onto the table. 'Now, tell me my modern brother, what it is like to hug trees and break vegetarian wind?'

I wasn't a tree hugger. I gave him a smile and he bartered it for a liquid snort.

'How would I know that my romantic, teetotal, vegetarian brother at least has a pair of Lor balls under his trousers?'

Did he really think that my teetotalism made me less masculine? I had experienced a bloody revolution and a bloodier war. He was probably toping with his comrades when we were being bombarded by Saddam. We didn't need a medal for that, but my brother and

people like him who had left the sinking ship and reached the safety of the land shouldn't dare to question the courage of the people who stayed on board and fought to save the ship. Arash's principles of manliness and courage were outdated and unrealistic.

I looked at a black and white framed photo on the wall above his head. A man with a big moustache was feeding the fish while his fishing rod was resting on the ground behind him. It took me back to the time I was a soldier.

The eight-year war with Iraq was over and millions of refugees who had escaped and dispersed all over the country wanted to go back to their homelands and start anew. Men wanted to plough their abandoned long-resting lands. Mothers yearned to give birth to babies who wouldn't hear the dreadful sound of explosions. The half-burnt date palm trees deserved a second chance, shooting green. Someone had to clear up the minefields.

'Yeah, someone,' said Reza Moustache and with his fingers combed his fox-tail moustache.

'You shouldn't worry,' I said. 'Only two months left of your service.' I

kept a diary from those days:

- *Captains and high-rank officers have disappeared. A handful of young officers and lieutenants accompany us to the minefields every day. They sit in their vehicles, drink tea, smoke cigarettes and listen to the radio, watching us defusing the mines under the gaze of the baking sun.*

- *First day: our electronic mine detectors proved obsolete as the minefields are littered with shrapnel which trigger the devices to beep every second. Had to switch to mechanical methods; we take nothing with us but military knives and our courage. - The mines have been buried for a long time. The rain and wind have made a mess out there.*

- Most of the anti-personnel mines are designed not to kill, but to mutilate. In an attack you will leave a dead soldier behind until the mission is over, but you will need three to four personnel to evacuate an injured soldier. It will increase the logistical support burden on the opposing force, cleverly evil.

- Here is our motto: **your first mistake will be your last mistake.**

- We are lucky that there are no anti-handling devices, which will detonate the mines if someone lifts, shifts or disarms them.

- I've found new friends: beautiful, wild and naughty fish. After coming back from the minefields, I take the leftovers with me and lie on my belly on this huge rock next to a stream and watch them eating my food.

- I found 12 grenades in the minefield today. No one should know about them or they'll confiscate my grenades.

- A sad day! Ali lost three fingers and one of his eyes. He was taken to the base by helicopter.

- I'm taking a grenade with me to the minefield. I'll use it to finish myself off if I lose any limbs. Reza Moustache cracks jokes to lift our spirits.

- I hate the countries that make mines, all are made in the West.

- 19th March 2003 the American army attacked Iraq. We saw their fighters dropping bombs on Iraq's army and infrastructure. We've put flags on our vehicles so that they can see we are not Iraqis.

- I talked to my fish today. They know me now, even the naughty eel which waits motionless in the bottom and then darts out for a piece of bread or a small fish.

- An explosion lightened up and then darkened the scene. Reza Moustache's leg flew up to the sky and then crashed landed close to where I was. His hot flesh splashed all over my face and neck.

- *Reza Moustache was killed by a mine which was not designed to kill. The helicopters didn't come to take him to the hospital. We were told they wouldn't take the risk as American aircraft were everywhere bombarding and might mistake them for Iraqi helicopters and shoot them. He lost a lot of blood and died slowly in the ambulance. He was going to shave his two-year-old moustache off after he had finished his service.*

- *I can't sleep, eat or speak. Our commander asked me to stay behind in the camp today. I realised I was under surveillance. They removed all the guns from our trench. Am I suicidal? Ha, they don't know I'm carrying a grenade in my pocket.*

- *I went to the stream, but I couldn't talk to my fish. I lay on the rock and watched them for a while. I had nothing to feed them. I watched the eel catching a small fish. I felt something chafing my chin. A brownish hard thing had stuck to my sleeve. With my nails I scratched it off and examined it. It smelt of nothing, I let it drop into the stream. It was floating on the water. Small fish started nibbling at it. Just then a massive fish from the bottom of the stream darted towards it and swallowed it in a blink. It dawned on me that it was Reza Moustache's dried flesh. A part of my friend was being digested in the fish's stomach. I didn't notice when my hand took the grenade out of my pocket, pulled its pin and dropped it into the stream. The fish swam towards the sound, mistaking it for food. A huge explosion vibrated the world and splashed the water to the heart of the sky. I was soaked. The blanched bellies of small and big fish were floating on the water, even the malicious eel had died. Silence clouded the pond and a man cried rivers.*

Arash turned his head to trace my gaze to the photo behind him. He raised his glass and waited for me to do the same. I lifted mine. His glass pecked mine on the cheek. 'To the fisherman and his moustache,' he said and we poured the burning liquor down to our black

holes.

There was a bottle of whisky on our table now.

He asked me to explain the details of Dad's stroke, death and funeral. Did he understand when you talked to him? Did he recognise the people who visited him? Were you holding his hands when he passed? Arash was like an anteater sucking every word that came out of my mouth. He missed being with Dad on his deathbed.

'Were you in contact with Dad?' I asked.

'The last day of each month he would go to a public phone and give me a miss-call. I'd call him and we would talk for hours.'

'He didn't tell us anything about you?'

'He told Mum everything. He didn't tell you to protect his sons.'

His sons! How could I be the bearer of the terrible news that Pasha was murdered? How could I give him any reason to believe that his brother might have been killed because of him? How could I ruin this evening of reunion?

That night Arash asked about every member of the family, but Pasha. Did he know our brother was murdered? Should I tell him? Pasha was my brother as much as he was Arash's, it was his right to know about his death.

'What do you want from life?' he asked.

You are living your life and then your brother whom you haven't seen for most of your life, comes along and throws a philosophical question at you. What did life want from me was more of an appropriate question. I wanted to find the killer of my brother, but I couldn't tell him. I would only tell him if he asked me about Pasha that night, otherwise I would leave it for later. I wished Dad and Pasha were alive, sitting with us in that restaurant.

'I don't burden my mind with ontological questions,' I said. 'I live my life, that's it.'

‘When you leave your house,’ Arash said. ‘You should know where you’re going or you’ll end up asking others where to go.’ He didn’t seem to be much of a planner himself.

‘I think it’s boring to know how you’re going to live your next day.’

Arash suddenly held my head in his big hands and kissed my cheeks. His horseshoe moustache stuck its daggers into my shaved face. I stopped myself saying, *what the hell was that?*

‘How long are you staying in London?’

‘One week.’

‘Extend it to a month,’ he said. ‘I want you to do something for me.’

Did he know that by drinking alcohol with him, I was compromising with my beliefs, my lifestyle? It already felt that I was doing something for him.

‘What do you want me to do for you?’

‘While you’re here, I’ll take you to different bars and restaurants every night,’ he said.

‘We eat and drink as much as we like, then you go to the manager and say that we won’t pay.’

A midlife crisis that must be.

‘Why should we do that when we can afford to pay?’ I sounded like a priest. ‘Working in a restaurant is a tough job and is low paid. It’s not fair on the staff.’

‘I’ve spent all my life fighting for the working class. I think they owe me something in return,’ Arash said. ‘It’s not about them, it is about you and me and the thrill of it.’

What he was asking me to do was against my ethics. Dad would be disappointed to hear Arash, who was supposed to be a role model for his brothers, asking me to be involved in felonious ventures just for the thrill of it. How could he disrespect my values and ask me to do such a weird thing with him? What would have Dad said? *Never leave your brother alone.*

I could give Arash ample reasons that we shouldn't do it, but I said that I would think about it. He raised his glass to my decision.

When he stood up for us to leave, I realised how tall he was. His figure would give confidence to allies and intimidate any rival. People said that I was tall, but walking next to him, with my head reaching barely up to his shoulder, I was a thirteen-year-old boy walking next to his tall father. He was like a character of a nineteenth century novel: large, full, stable. Not a bourgeois property, but a giant communist in an elusive world.

Outside the restaurant, he took my head in his massive hands - as if holding the most precious gift to the gods - and stooped to put his head onto mine.

'I'll protect you with my life,' he said.

Was I in his eyes still the boy that he had left twenty years earlier? Even then I didn't need his protection. I wished for a brother I could stretch my wings alongside his and fly together rather than him circling his wings around me.

'Don't worry about me, big brother. Nobody is going to harm me, as far as-'

'-Don't say that! The moment you drop your guard, you're vulnerable.'

I understood Arash's defensive approach to life, but I wouldn't let him mould me into a hyper vigilant self.

I opened my arms like an eagle and swivelled round. 'I'm not on guard,' I said, 'I need my wings to fly.'

'You're my brother, you must always watch your back. You understand?'

Now I was whirling like a Dervish who dances around his heart. Arash grabbed the lapels of my jacket and pinned me against a wall. His eyes were frightening, a big patch of his face twitching. Breathing was hard under his crushing grip. He could easily break my ribcage if he wanted. I didn't even use my hands to hold his wrists to ease the pressure, I kept looking at him with reproachful eyes. As if his soul had come back to his body, he realised what he was

doing and released my jacket, raising his hands in surrender. 'I'm sorry,' he said and lurched past his men. 'Take him to his hotel,' he told them and walked away.

Sake on the House

The men offered me a ride to my hotel, but I refused and strode along the road. I wasn't angry with Arash or repining over him, I was worried about him, the things he must have

gone through to be like that. How could I help him? With thoughts churning around in my head, I wouldn't be able to sleep if I went back to the hotel.

I hailed a black cab and asked the driver to take me to Soho. The cab driver said we *were* in Soho. Was it a coincidence that Arash had met me in a restaurant close to the casino? I asked for directions to the casino and marched towards it. I sensed that I had been followed but I couldn't see anybody. Maybe Arash's words were working on me.

The bouncers stopped laughing when a silver Mercedes-Benz pulled up outside the casino. Two men in posh suits emerged from the building and passed the bouncers, who inclined their heads goodbye. They took the steps down and got into the waiting car. As they left, a limousine arrived and waited outside. Six Chinese men came out of the building and got into the car. A Lamborghini replaced the limo and picked up a young man dressed casually. It looked like a parade of expensive cars and men in stylish outfits. At a corner in the dark, my teeth began chattering from the cold as if hundreds of drummers were beating their drums in my mouth and the sleety rain was not making the wait any easier. I didn't know what I was waiting for or what I was expecting to happen, I was following my instincts, which told me there was a link between the casino and Pasha's death. It was a weekday and I hoped they wouldn't stay open until the small hours.

Two girls in Barbour jackets came out of the building and swapped small talk with the bouncers. No car was waiting for them, too young to be patrons. Sharing an umbrella, they walked past me. They were giggling and talking in an eastern European language. The intense smell of cheap perfume suggested an attempt to mask their sweat. They must be a part of a team in the background, running around to provide a relaxing ambiance for the rich to be extravagant. I followed them for a minute or two.

'Excuse me,' I cried. They turned and watched me standing in the rain. Their umbrella was wrestling with the wind. 'I was wondering if you know the girl in this photo.' I stepped

forward. The umbrella went up to accommodate me under it, but the wind twisted its ribs and turned its canopy inside out. We ran and took refuge under the canopy of a boutique where I took the umbrella from the girl and used the wind to fix it. I returned it and showed them the photo. They looked at it and then at each other.

‘What do you want from her?’ one of them asked. ‘Some information about the man standing next to her.’

‘She’s not in any trouble, is she?’ the other girl asked.

‘I just want to ask her some questions.’

They looked at each other again, still perplexed, unsure.

‘The man in the photo is my brother. We haven’t been in contact for years. I don’t live in this country, I’ve come to London for a conference. I thought it was a good opportunity to see him.’

‘Do you have any ID on you?’ one of them asked. ‘To prove you’re his brother.’ I showed the girls my passport.

‘Angelina doesn’t live with your brother anymore,’ said the other girl. ‘She has moved on with her life and doesn’t want any trouble.’

‘Where can I find Angelina? I want to ask her if she knows where he lives.’ They scanned each other’s faces, still doubtful. ‘Please.’

‘How did you know we were her friends?’

‘I didn’t. I saw you leave the casino and I asked you on a hunch.’

‘If you hurry back to the casino, you may catch her.’

I thanked them and ran back towards the gambling house, thinking that I should have asked them for her phone number.

A girl was walking away from the casino. I ran past the bouncers and slowed down to catch my breath. The smoke of her cigarette filled my lungs. Her stature from behind was

similar to the girl I was looking for. I kept my distance and followed her to a bus stop where I stole a look at her. I wasn't sure if she was the same girl in the photo. Her haggard face with no makeup and her casual outfit shouldn't mislead me. I took the photo out and began the comparison. She was listening to some music on her phone, closing her eyes periodically, nodding to the rhythm. The shapes of her nose and cheekbones promised the resemblance.

A night bus arrived and I got onto the bus after her and took a seat next to her.

'Terrible weather,' I said to her ear.

She ignored me.

I watched the night passing by and she listened to her music for a while until I waved my hand in front of her eyes. She took her earphones out to see what I wanted.

'Can I borrow a cigarette, please?'

She smiled and held a pack of Marlborough Lights out to me. I took a cigarette and put it between my lips. She pointed at the *No Smoking* sign and a one-thousand-pound penalty if you smoked in the bus.

'In my country they whip you if you smoke in a bus,' I said.

'You're joking.'

'Yes, I am, but they'll whip you if you drink alcohol.'

'Which country is that?'

'Iran.'

'Yah, your accent is Iranian.'

'How do you know my accent is Iranian?'

'I've worked with them.'

'Did you break his heart?' I asked.

'Beg your pardon?'

'Did you break the Iranian guy you lived with?'

She took the cigarette from my lips and got off at the next stop. I followed her off the bus. She turned to me and asked what I wanted from her.

‘You took my cigarette,’ I said.

‘You’ve never smoked a fag in your life.’

‘I’m Pasha’s brother.’

‘Never heard of him,’ she said and turned into a road and speeded up. I overtook her and showed her the photo.

‘Here are the two of you together.’

She didn’t look at it.

‘That’s not me, you’ve mistaken me for someone else.’

‘Pasha is dead,’ I said.

She stopped and rested her hand against a wall. I waited for her to collect herself. She lit a cigarette and asked for my name.

‘Kia.’

‘Do you have a pen?’

‘Yes.’ I gave it to her. She wrote her mobile number in a chocolate wrap and handed it to me.

‘Call me in a couple of days.’

Someone who had not noticed the *Do Not Disturb* sign banged on my door and woke me up early in the morning. I half opened my eyes, the light coming through the window forced them shut. I put on a shirt and opened the door.

‘Hello,’ said the Filipino woman I had met at the conference the day before.

‘Sorry, what was your name?’ I asked.

‘Dr. Mara Schnittka Cojuangco,’ she said. ‘Please call me Mara. Where were you last night?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I knocked on your door at midnight, but you were not in.’

‘I didn’t know you were staying in this hotel.’

‘You didn’t ask,’ she said. ‘Well, you know now.’

‘What can I do for you?’

‘I saw those men in black suits collecting you yesterday.’

‘Were you following me?’

‘No, the men in suits were following you. Today you didn’t come down for breakfast, so I was worried about you.’

‘They were friends.’

‘You said you didn’t know anyone in London.’

‘Did I?’

‘Aren’t you going to the conference? I thought we could go together.’ What an untimely cockerel.

‘I’m a bit tired. I think I’ll rest this morning and join you in the afternoon. But thanks for the offer.’

She nodded goodbye and let me close the door. I went back to bed, but I could not sleep. I took a shower and headed off to the Globe. Mara ran towards me like someone who had been waiting in an airport for hours to collect a dear friend. Her interrogation about last night was as tough as a suspicious wife’s. In the afternoon, Hamlet went under the knives of literary critique. It was amazing to see the differences between our approaches to Hamlet in

Iran and the way other scholars from different countries saw it. Back home, we would usually use philosophical and psychoanalytical lenses to see the play and apply established critical approaches to discuss and analyse it, but their approaches were more specific: love in Hamlet, food in Hamlet, gaze in Hamlet, disease in Hamlet; all new ammunition to use in my class.

The men in black suits came in their Bentley to collect me from the Globe. Mara was watching me walking towards the car with interest. What was wrong with her? She wasn't trying to seduce me, I could tell; there was nothing in her body language to suggest that she was. Her presence was intense and increasingly annoying.

'Where are we heading to?' I asked.

The gigantic driver glanced at me in the mirror. The cage fighter in the front seat checked his watch. I had better close my mouth and open my eyes. They dropped me opposite a restaurant and drove off. I entered the diner, a smart waiter approached me. I thought he was bending down to pick up something but realised that I was in a Japanese restaurant and that was his welcome to me. Apart from an old Japanese couple who were having an early dinner, there were no customers.

'I'm meeting someone here,' I said.

He inclined his head forward and directed me to a table. I hung my coat on the back of a chair he invited me to sit on and had a look at the drinks menu. I wasn't going to drink any alcoholic beverage that night. I should tell Arash I didn't like alcohol. Couldn't two brothers enjoy each other's company without getting drunk?

Two bodybuilders entered the restaurant and walked towards my table. One of them was looking at me all the way. I checked the street through the window, there was no sign of Arash. Had he sent the Anabolic steroid junkies to test my courage and ability to fight? I turned and noticed that one of them was towering over my table. I glanced at the dragon

tattooed on his big arm thinking that it would turn into a lizard if the man stopped taking his pills and hormones. I was ready to defend myself if he started a fight.

‘My friend, Tony, likes you,’ he said and glanced at him. ‘You see, he’s a bit shy. Here is his phone number.’ He handed me a card. ‘Give him a buzz and go out with him for a drink if you like, he’s a cool guy.’ He smiled, did a U-turn and walked back to shy Tony whose cheeks were lilac now, stealing quick glances at me. I relaxed my clenched fist and asked the waiter for a mango juice. Was I in the right restaurant? The glass of juice arrived, but Arash didn’t. I held it up to the gay men and sipped my juice to the fall of masculinity.

I was about to leave the restaurant when Arash appeared with an English flat cap on his shaved head. His body was as sturdy as a farmer’s when we hugged.

‘A bottle of your best whisky,’ he told the waiter. ‘We’re sitting over there in the back, and please take this away.’ He pointed at my mango juice. I put my palm on the glass and shook my head at the waiter who stooped and left. I took my coat and glass of juice and sat opposite Arash at the far end of the restaurant.

‘Why do you always choose a table with your back to the wall?’

‘It’s always better to see who is going to stab you,’ he said.

‘Do you think someone might stab you?’

He sneered. ‘If you had escaped from several assassinations by the skin of your teeth, you would take all the necessary precautions.’

The waiter brought a bottle of whisky, two glasses and a bucket of ice. He opened the bottle and was about to pour the liquor in our glasses when Arash took it from him. The waiter bowed and left the table.

‘Are you going to be on that the whole night?’

‘I really don’t enjoy drinking alcohol,’ I said. ‘I drank with you last night because it seemed that you really wanted me to accompany you. It was my first alcoholic drink and

hopefully my last one. I couldn't say no to you, because we were meeting up again after so many years.'

'After so many years and one day I still want you to drink with me.' He filled our glasses with whisky, held up his and waited for me. I could say no to him and stick to my values. It would make me a man with principles, but not a brother who cared. I was only in London for two weeks and drinking with him wouldn't kill me. His memory of our meeting after two decades wouldn't go sour if I raised my glass to him.

'To Dad,' he toasted while his glass head-butted mine. Dad's Muslim soul would tremble in his grave watching his sons drinking alcohol. Did souls have religion?

People who knew Arash thought he would be the next president if the regime changed. Even in words, that was a huge achievement for a town boy who had no background, education or connections in politics. I put that to Arash.

'Before the revolution, Iran's ambassador to the Philippines asked me if I was supported by the Americans. I told him we were communists and hated the imperialist country. He asked if I was backed by the Russians, it was before the collapse of the Soviet Union. I said we were a group of young home-grown socialists who fought for social justice and the working class and we were not the agents of the Bolsheviks. He said we had no chance and wouldn't get far because we were not with either side.' He heaved a sigh. 'I laughed at the man at the time, but he was right. We were a bunch of hot-headed revolutionists who loved our people and the thrill that came with the campaign, we never asked what was in it for us.' For a man of few words, Arash was doing fine.

'How did you get into politics?'

'Coming from a working-class family, I had the opportunity to witness all kinds of injustice around me. The country needed a real change and the socialist doctrine fitted the bill, talking about the wealth of the country for all and not just the few. I didn't have the

privilege of reading the Communist Manifesto first and then becoming a communist. I was a street fighter, communism only gave me a pair of gloves and some rules to go with it.'

'But you and your comrades overthrew the Shah.'

'I was in the Philippines studying medicine during the revolution. The party didn't allow the students to go back home and join the people. We were told to finish our studies and then use our expertise to build the country.'

'But you never returned. I don't care about the country, but our family needed you to be there with us and you were not.'

He emptied his glass down his throat and filled it up again.

'It was my dream to come back and be with my family. I had this plan to open a big surgery in our town and help our poor people. But life is not a planner. It disappoints those who have many plans.'

Nothing he could say would justify his abandonment of the family. His absence was felt like a moonless night that never met the light of the dawn.

'What happened?' I asked. 'Why didn't you come back?' He had another drink, I played with mine.

'The new regime sent his ambassador to Manila. The man was a ruffian with a beard. The first thing he did was to stop the scholarship of students who were against the new government. We had to go to the embassy and sign a paper to keep our studentship alive. You would endorse the legitimacy of the regime and promise that you wouldn't do anything against it. Some students signed the paper. There was a lot at stake for many of them. I don't know if you can remember, we had sold our house and moved to a rented flat to support my studies.'

'So, you put your political beliefs ahead of your family.'

'For me it wasn't a choice between the two.'

He put my glass in my hand and lifted his. ‘Cheers.’

‘Those who hadn’t signed the paper were disillusioned. The next thing I knew was that over one thousand students had surrounded me, asking me to lead them to safety.’

There are moments in life when a man must decide, Dad would say, and his decision, in return, will make him a new person. In such moments you need to show what you’re really made of.

‘I couldn’t let those young men down, and so, the gates of heaven and hell opened to me at once.’ He topped up my glass and asked if I had extended my visa. ‘I have a visa, I just needed to change my flight.’

He nodded, thrilled.

‘Still boxing?’ He took my fist in his hands and examined my knuckles. He then touched my arm. ‘Always flex your muscles when someone examines your arm, even if he’s your brother.’

I smiled. He punched my arm gently.

‘You’ve had an easy life, boy.’

I shook my head in disagreement. ‘What makes you say that?’

‘When a man spends his life in schools, universities and libraries, reading books and meeting cultured people all the time, what does he know about the jungle out there?’

‘You should add to your list a bloody revolution and an eight-year war.’ I took a swig of my drink. ‘You’ve forgotten that I’m a Lor and come from the same city and culture that you come from and if there is anything that place can create, it is toughness.’

‘If you thrust thorns in a real man’s bottom, he should say they’re soft cotton,’ Arash said and let out a loud chortle. The staff and some diners looked at our table. ‘Toughness is a labour of love in that bloody culture,’ he said between his laughter.

‘Have you heard of this nine-year old village boy who was serving food to his father’s dignitary guests when he farted?’ he asked, changing the gear to a higher level of excitement. I shook my head. ‘His father told the guests if the boy was his real son, he’d die of shame. The boy heard this and died on the spot.’ He used the wide white napkin on the table to dry his tears of delight and blow his nose.

‘You asked about every member of our family but Pasha.’

‘He’s not living in Iran, is he?’ he said and tried to smooth the contours of his face.

If he had been in contact with Dad before his death, he must know that Pasha returned to Iran years ago.

‘Did he live in England?’ I asked.

‘I met him in Paris a few years ago and tried to persuade him to come and live with me. He had a good job at a prestigious company and didn’t want to leave it. I never contacted him again.’

‘Pasha is dead.’

‘What do you mean he is dead? How can a young healthy man die like that?’ He stood up. ‘When?’

‘Last month. He was killed.’

He sat back down on his chair. Torrents of fat tears streamed down his face. Perhaps I was the first person who had seen Arash crying. You could not call it crying, he sat there with a stern face and looked towards the end of the restaurant and didn’t even blink away the teardrops. If this was the brother I thought I knew, he would not sit there and cry in silence like a weeping camel. He would have banged his fists on the table and roared like a lion in pain. Maybe Pash’s death was payback for what Arash had done to his enemies and he knew it. When I can’t get you, I’ll get your nearest and dearest. It happened to be Pasha, it could have been me. I could be the next victim.

‘Who did it?’ he asked.

‘I think Pasha’s death is connected to England.’

‘How?’

Nobody could sell me that Arash didn’t know Pasha had lived in London, when it had only taken him one day to find me in this gigantic city. Maybe they met once, but their relationship didn’t blossom into friendship.

‘Just a hunch,’ I said.

‘We’ll find his killers.’

My gut feeling told me that I shouldn’t tell him about the people who came to father’s funeral and gave me the drawing and money. I found his silence, after receiving such dreadful news, quite odd and unnatural. He was like a quiet ocean who hid its volcanos, valleys, submerged ships and deep tenebrous places.

‘Do you remember the time they circumcised Pasha and me?’ I tried to fill the silence.

He nodded.

I still believe it was not fair to circumcise Pasha and me together, I was two and half and he was six, almost a man. Mum had tailored the mauve skirts which we had to wear during the post-circumcision care period for at least seven days. She said they were our cloaks and tickets to manhood, but the kids called them the skirts of shame. I didn’t mind mine as all the boys who had worn them in the neighbourhood were older than me, but Pasha loathed his, knowing that the kids would tease us about our conditions and call us the red skirt sisters. In time, the giant man, whom we had heard about plenteous but had not seen, like the Devil’s incarnation, visited our house and opened his little briefcase in which he had all he needed to turn a boy into a man. Before we went under the knife, Arash showed us a maroon penknife and said he would give it to the brother who was the bravest and did not cry. I never

understood how he knew that there would be only one winner. He knew what he was talking about, after all he was a veteran, his penis had lost its foreskin before I was even born.

No local anaesthetic or numbing stuff, none of the pampering treats that medicine offered to those boys on the other side of the Haji bridge whose parents would take them to private clinics for their circumcision. The tall man from every child's nightmare sat crosslegged and put Pasha's bony legs between his calves and thighs. For some moments he gazed at his little penis, like a Buddhist meditating on a dying candle. Mum, who was holding me in her lap, turned away the moment the man drew his knife and didn't let me see how he pressed the clam and severed the foreskin. Pasha made some funny noises, which made me chortle, but they were not substantive enough to fail him as a crying boy. Although his eyes were wet, his valour had triumphed. Every man in the room patted him on the shoulder and welcomed him to the exclusive land of manhood.

I cannot say that I was bubbling over with excitement when it was my turn as I could not even stop my heart beating so fast, but I wouldn't cry, I promised myself, even if I died. I put my tongue between my teeth to prevent me from crying if it was unbearable. When the man hooked my legs under his knees, my right knee twisted and the man sat on it. I screamed and shouted *my knee*, but everyone thought I was scared. I tried to move my leg under the heaviest man in the world, but he kept squeezing my knee further between his Herculean legs. I moved my upper body right and left and my hip up and down to the extent that father had to hold my hands and pin me down on the Lori carpet that smelt of sheep pee. I was about to pass away or pass out from the throbbing in my knee and anguish in my heart for being misunderstood. I was the loneliest child on the planet. My tongue was not even in the way of my waterworks. I burst into tears and stood motionless for the man to do the job as soon as possible. I was so immersed in the discomfort in my knee that I didn't even notice when he

removed the foreskin. It was swift and the ache was like cutting your finger with a razor and putting a pinch of salt on it and then washing it away immediately with cold water.

Proponent or opponent of circumcision, I had lost the foreskin of my penis forever. I would never know what it would feel like to have sex with foreskin on. I could imagine the stray Persian cats in our road rummaging in our rubbish bin, fighting each other over my flesh. I did not get the pen-knife and limped in a red skirt for weeks, life goes on.

‘I was there watching you,’ Arash said.

‘How did you know there was going to be only one winner for your knife?’

‘I thought you’d win the trophy.’

‘But I disappointed you.’

He shook his head. ‘Your brother won the knife and you earned my respect at the age of two and half.’ He leaned back on his seat and stared at me. ‘I heard you when you cried about your knee. I could see you didn’t even feel it when the man cut your foreskin.’

How could he stand there and watch his little brother screaming like a pig in pain and do nothing?

‘And you did nothing to help me out of that situation.’

‘I asked myself why these religious people think they know better than their God. If humanity was made in God’s image, as they say it was, why then we take our swords out, cut half of a boy’s penis and destroy the Almighty’s perfect work? *Sorry God, you made a mistake and I’m going to correct you.* There is nothing written in their holy books saying that God created the heart and the brain and the nervous system, but he couldn’t make a penis with shorter skin, asking us to chop it off for Him?’

‘You knew I was in pain and you were thinking philosophy.’

‘Pain creates memories,’ he said.

‘So does pleasure.’

It's cutting through pleasure and pain, Dad said once, that transforms a boy into a man.

Arash had a point there and civilized countries were right to ban the practice of female genital mutilation, but why was male circumcision still legal? If I had a son, I wouldn't circumcise him. But would he be able to survive in that society?

'How did Mum take the death of her husband and son?' Arash asked.

'She visits their graves every day.'

'She's a strong woman.'

Could a strong woman stomach the double loss? Maybe it was better than losing one at a time. Double mourning shouldn't be as bad as mourning twice over. It reminded my mother of life, asking Leila and I to marry and make some children. Her football team had lost its captain and a player, she would need substitutes. Life reinvents itself.

'What about you,' Arash asked, 'coping well?'

'Dad's death lit a fire inside of me. It's burning, still sizzling, but I've accepted it. Pasha's death was a total shock. I think it made me more furious than anything else. There'll be no peace in here,' I slapped my chest, 'until I find his murderers.'

'We'll find them,' Arash said and put his hand on mine on the table.

I glanced at his hand. When life gets rough and pushes you into a corner, sometimes you need a grain of lenity rather than a mound of toughness. When a crisis hits, you need pleasure, something to hijack the endorphins in your brain and release it into your veins, even if it is a simple touch of hands.

Two waiters arrived with a rolling tray, carrying a wooden ship bedizen with various fish slices and seaweed and placed it onto the table. They pressed a button on the hood above the table from which a spaceship-like pan came down and began to heat up. Arash used the chopsticks to pick up a pink fish slice and put it on the heating pan.

'Clever idea,' I said. 'They charge you to cook the food yourself.'

I speared a fish slice with my chopstick and transported it to the hot pan. Some fish slices were meant to be eaten raw, but I grilled everything I ate. How could Arash eat them raw? He said in the Philippines he had seen people eat dogs, frogs and beetles. He had tried snake and bear meat and found them delicious.

‘Tell me about your hunches,’ said Arash after we had finished a ship of fish. ‘What makes you believe that Pasha’s death is connected to London?’

‘Have you heard of *The Golden Casino*?’

‘It belongs to the Russians.’

‘I think our brother’s death may have something to do with that club.’

‘How?’

I think I was drunk, because my hand missed my inside pocket several times, before I took the photo out and gave it to Arash. He gazed at Pasha’s photo for a while. Tears trickled down his cheeks. I thought there were no tears left in him that night. He dropped the photo onto the table and gulped down his drink, then refilled his glass, guzzled it down and refilling it up again. I put my hand on my glass when I realised he was going to replenish it.

‘Don’t start anything unless you’re prepared to finish it.’

I removed my hand for him to fill up my glass.

‘A brush with death, that is what you need,’ he said. ‘It’ll make you determined to enjoy your life to the full.’

A brush! When he was out of the country drinking with his fidus Achates, we were flirting with death every day during the eight-year war with Iraq. Where were he when I would make love to death every day, defusing all sorts of mines? Perhaps he was right, only *a brush with death* would make you drink like a winebibber but experiencing it in your bones every single day for a long time wouldn’t count. Revolution and war had tamed death into a

circus elephant. If death came to visit me now, I would yank its sleeve and walk ahead of it, *surprise me.*

I picked up the photo and glanced at it before putting it in my pocket. Pasha's eyes were laughing at me. He had experienced death.

'I met the girl in the photo last night,' I said.

Arash's expression was asking for more. 'Her name is Angelina and she works at the Golden Casino.' He kept nodding. 'She's Pasha's ex-girlfriend.' He gestured with his hand, encouraging me to continue. 'Our brother had lived in this country for years.'

Arash poured his drink into his mouth, swirled it around before gulping it down. No booze was potent enough to quieten his heart.

'Did you know he lived in London?' I asked.

'I got his job for him with the Russians.'

It was my turn now to raise my eyebrows for an explanation.

'We met briefly, but I sent him away to save his life,' he said. 'At the time, there were plans to kill me. I didn't want him to be around.'

'Do you think the Russians killed our brother?'

'He was their accountant,' Arash said and played with his moustache, contemplating the possibilities. 'No, they wouldn't dare do that.'

'Why wouldn't they?'

'He was my brother, wasn't he?'

Did Arash have that much power that the Russians wouldn't venture to kill his brother even if he had done something wrong?

'What do you do?'

'Nothing illegal,' he said. 'When you can't do what you've been trained to do, you'll find other ways to survive. I don't stay in one place long enough for my business to put down

roots. Like a nomad, I have to be on the move all of the time.’

For a nomad, he seemed to have done quite well; chauffeurs, bodyguards, enough influence to get Pasha his job.

‘Why do people want to kill you?’ I asked.

A flash of lightning revealed the darkness outside. A thunderclap accentuated his silence. I could say he was reluctant to share his story.

‘Sometimes big causes hurl themselves at you and take you with them to the unknown and you have no choice but to go wherever they take you.’

‘I’m a good listener,’ I said.

Arash tells his fellow students that they are all leaders and don’t need anyone to usher them anywhere, but they insist that he should navigate their broken boat to safety. Unable to send them away, he accepts the responsibility.

‘I wasn’t Jesus to feed chiliads of students with a couple of fish and some loaves,’ said Arash, ‘so I used my connections and bought some guns.’

What he told me was more like a movie than reality, but I believed him.

They hire an indoor volleyball court for their plans. He selects seven team leaders with two assistants apiece and gives each team a bank and one week to do some research and come up with the best way to rob that bank. A team of forty-two students is organised to steal fourteen cars that they need for the job. They call the police one day before the assignment and tell them that there would be a huge demonstration opposite the Iranian embassy the next day. They tip them off that some students are going to use guns and handmade bombs to attack the embassy. That morning Arash sends about one thousand students opposite the embassy to protest against the ambassador’s decision to cut funds for students who don’t approve of the regime. The protesters set fire to a car, shoot at the embassy’s windows and throw some Molotov cocktails at the embassy building. Hundreds of police officers are at the

scene trying to manage the demonstrators while Arash and his trained teams are robbing seven banks in different parts of the city simultaneously.

‘You can only do operations like that on such a scale once,’ said Arash, ‘so it’s better to do it flawlessly.’

They steal enough cash to pay the tuition fees for all the students who haven’t signed the embassy papers. Yet, there are living costs. To cut expenses, students move houses. They give the small flats back to the landlords and use the bigger ones to lodge seven to fifteen students.

They buy a car park in the middle of the city and convert it into a clinic for medical students and nurses to provide affordable health services 24/7. The success of the project encourages Arash to use his connections and get the legal permissions they need to build different buildings for various students to hang out their shingle. For the dental students and nurses, they build a clinic in the shanty town. For the accountancy students they buy a big office in a prestigious part of Manila. They also open a tutorial college for the rest of the students to teach different subjects and languages. Like a big family, everyone does their best to contribute to its success. They begin to prosper, money comes in regularly and the students receive decent salaries. Their success gives them confidence.

‘If a few hundred students could work together so well and become so successful outside of the country,’ Arash said, ‘why couldn’t they use that experience and rebuild their country the same way?’

They have built a utopian society that can be used as a prototype for building a perfect country. They are ready to enter hard-core politics and change the dole of their country.

‘Individuals are underrated treasures whose values will only be recognised in masses,’ said Arash.

‘When a bunch of disobedient intellectuals get together to practise their rights within the limitations of what democracy can offer,’ I said, ‘such as taking part in peaceful nonviolent

demonstrations, I can't stop thinking that their action is nothing but a safety valve for capitalism which guarantees its wellbeing and survival.'

'Maybe that is true in the West,' he said. 'The gathering of determined and fearless individuals under the banner of a unifying ideology is so powerful that it can topple anyone in power who controls the money, law, religion, education and media.'

The students feel they need to connect their little rivulet to the powerful rivers and global seas and oceans. Arash's associates pull some strings for him to become a member of a club owned by Marcos' son, Ferdinand. They rent the best cars to go to the club and Arash's comrades act as his bodyguards. Thus, Arash is introduced to the most powerful figures in the Philippines.

'It is so sad that without siding with a superpower there is no chance for you to change anything in that country,' said Arash.

He raised the empty bottle to the waiter who ran and brought a new one. Drinking only one fifth of what Arash had drunk, deposited me into unknown wonderlands. How could he ask for more booze? I would throw up my guts over the table if I had another glass.

I excused myself to go to the bathroom. We didn't have the stand-to-pee devices in Iran, so I decided to try them. I chose the one in the corner and made sure no one was around to have a peek at my penis. It felt weird to be in an open area doing it. I directed the spout on one side of the alabaster device and gradually let the fountain reach its full speed, having an eye on the strength of the splash. The vapour of hot urine entered my nostrils, it smelt like kidney. While squeezing the last drops of urine out of my meat-pipe, I realised that I had neither access to water nor to toilet paper. What a filthy invention. Like an infant with dung in its trousers, I floundered to the toilet cubicle to get some toilet paper. Some drops had fallen onto my underwear during my journey of disgrace from the stand-to-pee device to the

toilet cubicle. I needed a shower, I would never try stand-to-pee devices again. Civilized men should not use them.

I washed and dried my hands, walked out of the gents and signalled to the waiter. I whispered in his ear to fetch his manager. Soon, a short man in a nice suit appeared followed by the waiter. I opened my wallet and gave the man four brand new £50 notes. He held the notes tentatively, looking at my mouth for an explanation. I briefed him about my plan and his role in it and returned to our table.

‘Do you believe in God?’ Arash hissed in my ear as if he didn’t want God to hear him.

‘Not as a long-bearded old man, sitting up there in the sky with an abacus in his lap, evaluating my deeds.’

‘Do you pray?’ I

nodded.

‘In Arabic?’

I smiled.

‘Is that the only language your God understands?’

‘The language of God is revelation.’

‘So, you do your Arabic yoga five times a day to achieve revelation?’

‘Prayer is a dialogue between you and your body, reminding it who the boss is.’ I was not really enjoying our conversation. ‘What about you? Do you believe in anything?’

I threw the philosophical ball in his court. He stood up and tucked his shirt into his trousers. ‘I believe in friendship,’ he said and picked up his overcoat from the seat and put it on.

‘You didn’t touch your drink?’

‘Lost my appetite,’ he said.

I put on my jacket and followed him to the bar where he asked for the restaurant manager.

‘My brother has something to tell you,’ he told the manager and turned to me. ‘The food was delicious,’ I said, ‘and the service was great, but we don’t want to pay.’

‘Why?’ asked the manager.

‘Because we can,’ I answered.

The manager explained that it was a decent and reputable restaurant and disturbing their customers was the last thing he wanted. ‘Gentlemen, your meal and drinks are on the house this evening,’ he said.

Arash closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He grabbed the manager’s coat and lifted the short man. ‘Give him his money back,’ he said. The man inserted his hand in his coat with difficulty and handed me my notes.

‘Please Arash, let-’ He let the man fall on the ground and slapped me with the back of his hand before I could finish my sentence. I touched my lips, which reddened my fingers and left the restaurant.

Striding along the road, I thought my brother was more of a criminal than an intellectual and freedom fighter. It is not easy to accept that your life-long hero suddenly become a villain, especially when he is your own brother. My legs were taking me away from my childhood idol in frantic long strides as if I was escaping from myself. I could sense how it felt when the soul left the body.

Too wound up to stand the confinement of a bus, I passed a bus stop, needing to walk off my fury in the cold. It was the first time in my life that someone had slapped me and I hadn’t retaliated. The weight on my chest felt hot and heavy as if I had drunk a jug of molten lead. I punched the trunk of a tree. How I managed to control myself and not knock Arash out with a hook was a mystery. Did he want to overpower his own brother? No one can possibly

subjugate a man who has faced death on a regular basis. What were all those gallant stories about him then? Superhuman heroes exist only in the mind, we like avatars more than real persons. We create God on earth in the shape of heroes, hoping that they would protect us from menaces lurking beyond the here and now, to save us from our weaknesses, from ourselves.

On the corner of a road darkness grabbed my neck and swallowed me into a side road.

‘Never ever do anything behind my back,’ said Arash, squeezing my throat against a wall. With my hands free, I could easily have punched him in the jaw, but some chains from the labyrinth within had tied them. The ebb and flow of brotherly affection had flooded my veins. What an unconsummated love, with a man whose hands were on my throat. I sneered in the moonlight, which caused the injection of more power into his fingers. I was choking to death by my brother’s considerate hands, the only brother I had. I grabbed his wrists with all the strength in my hands and released myself with a quick jerk, then turned to him and raised my guard. The all-round boxer-puncher beast in me had been awoken, standing on his quick feet ready to throw punches. My feet seemed to still possess the agility and grace of an outboxer, and my hands the crushing power of a slugger. Arash looked at my guard and the Muhammad-Ali style foot dance and burst into laughter. ‘Praise to my brother’s Lord who has kept the flame in his guts still alive and burning,’ he said. ‘I’m thrilled that the academic life hasn’t turned you into a gutless intellectual prick. Come here.’ He stepped forward to enfold me in his arms. I darted out of his reach and began shadowboxing around him. I didn’t know my brother, I had to dictate the pace of the fight or he would.

‘Why shouldn’t we pay for our meal when we can afford it?’ I asked while moving around him and throwing controlled punches at him.

‘Afford it! It would only take me a phone call to buy the damn restaurant right now.’

‘Make me understand, then. Explain why we should act like hooligans.’

‘Is that what you do at your job, you explain things and your students understand? I’m giving you the real thing to experience and you step back and ask me for explanations.’

He suddenly advanced on me, grabbed my legs with both arms, lifted me up into the air and slammed me to the ground. He stood up and said, ‘Now, you can explain, what happened to you, because, you have experienced it.’ He offered his hand to help me get on my feet. I rose to my feet without taking his hand.

‘When life is so mean that it doesn’t offer its essence and excitement, you must create them or you’ll die of blandness.’

‘What about the manager?’ I asked. ‘Can you imagine how awful he must be feeling right now?’

‘I also offered the experience to the man, didn’t I? But he didn’t take it, maybe because he watches too much TV, telling him how to behave well and be a good citizen.’ He cracked his neck. ‘It won’t be the end of the world if every now and again you take your dick out of the window and piss into the street.’

‘What about the pedestrians walking under your window?’

‘Don’t tell me the staff working in that damn restaurant don’t have a story to tell their families and friends tonight, because they do. I’ve injected spark and passion into their dull lives and created life-long memories for them that they cannot buy anywhere.’ He put his hands on my shoulder. ‘You see kid, there is a big world outside the academic books that you read. It is safety that is dangerous. Madness should be your guide and not common sense.’

‘You’re a communist, right?’ He began shaking his head, knowing where I was going with this. ‘Is that what a person who believes in socialism does to his fellow being, to a worker? How about upholding your principles and caring about the working-class people you just robbed and insulted?’

He cupped my face in his hands and delved into my eyes with affection. ‘Do you know what you’re afraid of? To lose the things you’re attached to, your habits.’ He kissed my head. ‘If you decided to go back to the restaurant, don’t pay for my meal.’ He put his hands in his pockets and walked along the road.

‘Yah, escape from reality,’ I raised my voice for him to hear, ‘but one day you must answer my questions.’

I stood in the drizzle and watched him getting smaller and smaller. I felt so lonely that I wished someone would call my name, even by mistake.

Pasha's Footfalls

Angelina wouldn't answer her phone. I located the bus stop she had alighted at the other night and waited for her in the dark. Many buses dropped passengers and each time I kicked myself for letting her go in exchange for a fake phone number. Friendly-faced punks in leather jackets and trousers arrived in twos, threes and fours and waited at the bus stop. Their heavily tattooed hands passed joints to each other for their young lungs to absorb the dope. It wasn't just the prisoners who got tattoos in this country.

Waiting for Angelina for a long time, warranted thoughts for my company. I indulged in my early years:

Father was the happiest when we moved to the new house at the edge of the city where he would *hopefully* live with his sons and grandchildren *under one roof*. Now that I think about it, Arash must have sent the money for Dad to build the new house. From the adjoining orchard a walnut tree had craned its neck over to the yard like a huge hand shadowing the windows against the summer sun. I would lie on the cement wall and watch the blue filtering through the leaves, imagining that the clouds were different animals chasing each other on the blue.

'No filthy dog in my house.' I heard Dad say.

'He'll keep it in the yard,' said Mum.

'I pray in this house for God's sake!'

I climbed down the wall and hid behind the door to hear them better.

'He was so happy with his old mates,' Mum said. 'We decided to move to a new house not him. Poor thing is talking to the clouds now.' She was talking about me.

‘Why doesn’t he talk to his brother?’ said Dad. ‘You’ve spoiled the child simply because he’s the last one. You’re not doing the boy a favour by overprotecting him. Life is tough out there. Let him grow to be a real man.’

‘Keeping a dog is not going to make him less of a man.’

‘No filthy animal in this house, end of story!’

I made a makeshift shelter for the orphan puppy between the wall and the hedge next to the stream that would creep into the orchard to water the trees. I found my favourite woollen jumper in a suitcase packed with winter vesture and used it to carpet his little refuge. I would secretly put aside some of my dinner and take it to Gigi and watch him eat it under the moonlight.

Gigi’s first chorus of proper roaring barks came one morning when he started barking at the stream. It was as calm and clean as ever, but then lots of floating and half-drowned books arrived at the scene. I jumped into the water and salvaged some of them. Then the second set of books appeared and this time I fished out most of them. I took the books behind the wall and spread them out on cardboard to be resuscitated under the heat of the sun.

I slipped into the house to change my drenched clothes.

‘You must do something for him.’ I overheard Mum telling Dad.

‘Your cousin is a communist,’ father said. ‘That is what happens to people who hold an umbrella over their heads when it’s raining in Moscow.’

‘He’s not a criminal,’ Mum said. ‘He’s just read some books. They’re killing people without any trial, you must help him. Abdi is not just my cousin, we grew up together, he’s closer than a brother to me.’

‘A revolution has taken place, woman,’ Dad said. ‘We don’t know what the man has done. When people are turning their children in for having different ideas, you want me to save someone whose ideas are dangerous and against my religion!’

‘You know Abdi,’ Mum said. ‘He wouldn’t harm a fly, let alone people.’

‘I can’t help him.’

‘You have a lot of friends who can. Tell them he’s your wife’s brother.’

So, the books I had salvaged from the stream were the ones people couldn’t keep. It made me more curious to know what were in those books that forced people to get rid of them. I would read to Gigi every day: from the last letters of political prisoners who would be executed the next day to the story of a black fish that didn’t listen to its mother and left the little mere they were living in to find the ocean. Gradually, the grassroots became my brothers and sisters, the police turned into filthy pigs, religion turned out to be the potent dope for the masses and blood became the colour of freedom.

Autumn opened the schools’ doors and I hated the teachers who were wearing scarves or sporting long beards. I couldn’t stand still in the morning queues when they read the Koran and the headmaster talked about the holy war with Iraq supported by the West. It was difficult to abscond the morning marches of the students who pretended to be soldiers before going into class. I tried to escape the gun training sessions at school, but they caught me. I already knew how to dismantle, clean, assemble and shoot my father’s Colt, I told them.

At school, they wanted to know if I had recently spoken to Arash on the phone and if I knew where he lived. Although father’s influence had crossed off Abdi’s name on the execution lists, it couldn’t stop people in plain clothes with long beards searching our house. They found the Colt, but Dad had papers for it. I was so relieved that my books were on the other side of the wall. The next day I threw them one by one into the stream while Gigi was trying to bark me out of it.

The war had become more than the news on the radio. Iraqi pilots would drop the westerners’ bombs on Iranian civilians indiscriminately. In schools, they began to dig huge tunnels. When the alarm at our school went off and the teachers took the students to the tunnel, we found the tunnel half-filled with rain water. We were lucky the bombs struck other parts of

the city. The government tried to encourage the public to continue sending their kids to schools, but many people who had friends and relatives in villages moved to the countryside. Father thought we were safe as the bombs seemed to be falling in the centre of the city rather than on the outskirts.

Gigi would run to the main road to welcome me from school, but that day there was no trace of him. I had seen some strange boys with airguns the day before, wandering around, shooting at sparrows, frogs, rats and lamp posts. I began to run alongside the stream. Close to home Gigi was barking at something in the water.

His face was imbrued with blood. One of his eyeballs was punctured, but he wouldn't stop barking at a huge doll lying on its back in the bed of the stream.

'Get away from it Gigi, it's a bomb!' I shouted.

I kneeled to examine his eye, but he kept barking at the doll. I had a good look at the sleeping doll under the ripples. 'Oh my God!' I blurted out and jumped into the water with all my clothes on, still carrying my rucksack. I lifted the child out of the water and lay her onto the ground. Gigi stopped barking and began making keening noises. Everything I thought I had forgotten from the first aid courses I had attended at school came back to me. 'Zahra!' I called her name and checked for any response while shaking her shoulders. When I opened her airway, water came out of her nose and mouth. I turned her over and held her little body on my knee for the water to come out, then put her on her back and checked for any signs of breathing:

look, listen, feel, but she was not breathing. 'Help!' I shouted and began performing CPR, giving her mouth to mouth initial breath and compressing her chest. White liquid came out of her mouth and I had to clean it with my shirt before giving her the following mouth to mouth breaths. Soon, my lassitude grew more pronounced, but I wouldn't stop CPR until help arrived.

Zahra's sister came out of their house and began to scream.

‘Go and get some help,’ I said while doing the compressions. Zahra’s father dashed out of the house barefooted, lifted the girl up and ran towards the main road.

Drenched with water and sweat, I sprawled by the stream. Gigi sat next to me and scanned the area for hazard with one eye. I lifted my exhausted hand and examined his bloody eye. The revolution had begotten blood, blindness and death.

Maybe Angelina was not working that night and I was waiting for her return in vain. *Stay longer, son*, Dad would say, *greater effort is required from great men*. I waited a bit longer and the reward was Angelina stepping out of a bus, lighting a cigarette. I followed her into a side road. She walked past a row of canal boats, resting for the night, and overtook a young couple whose chunky platform boots had added at least 30 centimetres to their heights. The cobbles of a pathway by the waterway took her to a house by the water. She was searching her purse for the door key when I called her name. Shocked, she asked if I had stalked her.

‘You didn’t answer your mobile phone,’ I said.

‘I told you to call me in a couple of days, not the next day.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t get the time stipulation, I just heard you saying to call you.’

‘Do you heard me now?’ she asked. ‘Call me in a couple of days.’

I didn’t have much time and needed to speak to her urgently, I explained. She asked me to wait outside for her to clear up her flat. Twenty minutes later, through the intercom, she allowed me into the building.

Behind the latched door, she asked to see my passport. Holding it between my two fingers, I passed it through the opening. She peered through the gap to check my lineaments against my photo.

‘The photo is five years younger than me,’ I said, wondering why everyone I had visited was chary of trusting others.

She unlatched two chains and let me in. She gave me my passport back and said to wait in the sitting room.

While waiting, I inspected her place, not knowing what I was looking for. Perhaps something to suggest that Pasha had lived there. There wasn't any photographs or personal touches to her flat. I was perusing the Russian books on her little bookshelf when she emerged wrapped in a black bathrobe. Had she been taking a shower while I was waiting? What did that tell about her? It could be an innocent act, but when you are still a vestal virgin, what you see first in your brother's ex-girlfriend is her ivory calves. With your always rising seminal fluid behind your dam, you are reduced to a stallion whose reproduction system reacts first when he lays eyes on a brood mare. A marble leg out of a black robe becomes a violent rainstorm that floods your dam, then culture and education come to your rescue tempered with your father's voice reprimanding you for not respecting the woman and the memory of your late brother.

She put the kettle on and went to dry her hair. I volunteered to make tea. I was happy for Pasha who must have had gratification if not love. I brought two teas to the sitting room. She returned from the bedroom and sat on the opposite sofa, sipping from her glass of wine, watching me drinking my herbal tea. Was she trying to read something in my eyes? The footfall of a lustful look in a man's eyes doesn't evaporate straight away. I blinked. Eyes, like silence, are a cryptic language.

'So, you're the brother he admired and envied,' Angelina said.

'Pasha neither envied nor admired me.'

'He did,' she said. 'He admired your selflessness and envied your close relationship with your father.'

She was not telling the truth as I wasn't selfless at all. We knew Arash had a special place in Dad's heart, but I never thought that I was closer to him than Pasha.

'How was he killed?' she asked.

How did she know my brother was killed when I had told her he was dead?

‘Pasha wasn’t a man to die in bed,’ she said. ‘His fingers were in various pies.’

‘Did you live together, in here?’

She shook her head and lit a cigarette. ‘We only fucked each other.’ She puffed it out.

‘Literally and metaphorically.’

‘How long were you together?’

‘Enough.’

‘How long is enough?’ She sneered.

I finished my tea. She was not going to have her tea with wine, so I began drinking it.

‘How did you meet?’

‘How is that going to help with your investigation?’ She sat up straight, one hand holding her glass of wine and the other a cigarette. ‘The bastard, God bless his soul, dumped me. He disappeared from the face of the world, classic, textbook jilt.’

‘Didn’t you look for him?’

‘I tried his flat. His landlord said he had disappeared without giving him any notice.’

‘Didn’t you ask his friends or the police for help?’

‘Pasha was one of those men who had a lot of so-called friends but no real soul-mates.’

She had a slug of wine. ‘I didn’t involve the police because I wasn’t sure his papers were legit.’

‘Pasha didn’t dump you.’

She gave me a how-do-you-know look.

‘A few years ago, I got a phone call from the airport authorities in Iran,’ I said. ‘He had been deported and didn’t have any papers with him.’

She extinguished her cigarette in her glass of wine.

‘You say that, because I told you his papers weren’t legit.’

‘He goes to a hospital for a surgery, but the immigration police arrest him, take him to the airport and send him back to where he has come from. He was still in his hospital gown when I collected him from the airport.’

‘Why didn’t he call me, then?’

‘What was the point? When you’re deported from a country, that’s it, you can’t go back. And you wouldn’t go to Iran to live with him, would you?’

She lit another cigarette and puffed a cloud of smoke towards me. ‘You never know.’

Only a woman in love would do so.

She said I could spend the night on the sofa if I wanted. I got the address of Pasha’s flat and his landlord’s phone number and left Angelina at three in the morning. One hour later I was in my bed. I decided to miss breakfast and the morning speeches in the Globe. I had to have some sleep if I wanted to accompany Arash that night and eat, drink and walk away without paying the bill. What a crazy covenant I had undertaken.

My bladder woke me up at dawn. My thoughts were not good companies to go back to bed with. I went to the hotel’s gym and raced my heart to havoc. I took a shower and had their lousy breakfast before setting off to Golders Green.

The bus did not pass by or through any parks or green patches, which made Golders Grey a much more suitable name for the area, yet the expansive houses suggested prosperity. The word “kosher” on several shops indicated the area’s large Jewish population. Many passers-by were wearing dome-shaped small hats, which confirmed my speculation. It was strange to see the similarity between the traditional Muslims back home and the orthodox Jewish people in that area, both trying to distinguish themselves from the rest of the world by

their appearances and outfits, suggesting how dedicated they were to their religions. If faith was a personal and private relationship between an individual and their God, why did they exhibit it rather than hide and cherish it? It would only create pretence in communities and otherness outside them.

I pressed the buzzer of a half-decent flat in Golders Green Road.

‘Hello Mr Lazarus,’ I said to the intercom. ‘I’m Pasha’s brother. We talked on the phone earlier.’

A big-bellied man opened the door holding a tin box in his hairy hands. I held the box for him to check my passport to prove that I was Pasha’s brother.

‘He lived up there for more than two years,’ he said and pointed to the window perched above a shop. ‘I didn’t have any problems with him. He paid his rent on time every month and never had any parties or visitors. What’s your name again?’

‘You checked my passport.’

‘When you’re asked a question,’ he said, ‘try to answer it.’

‘Kia.’

He nodded.

‘One day I got an overseas phone call from him that he’d had to leave the country due to an emergency. He said he didn’t know when he would be back. He asked me to enter his flat and send him his laptop to an address in Iran, which I did. He said I could keep the deposit as it would take some time to find a tenant for the flat and to donate his furniture to a charity. Why didn’t he call me to say you were coming?’ He had another look at my passport and checked me against my photo. ‘Well, I found some personal stuff in his flat that I thought might be of sentimental value. I’ve put them in this box. How is he, anyway?’ He handed me back my passport.

‘He was killed a couple of months ago.’ Mr Lazarus slapped his hand over his mouth. ‘That is why I’m here. I thought you may have noticed something unusual, especially near the time of his disappearance.’ He kept shaking his head, with his hand still over his mouth, whether in disbelief or as an answer to my question I couldn’t say. He began murmuring indistinguishable words to himself, perhaps praying for Pasha in Hebrew. I waited for his prayers to end, but he continued serving his Eloah with whole heart, perhaps asking Him to have mercy upon my brother, forgive his sins and shelter his soul. Would God consider Jewish invocations for a Muslim soul? Maybe it was his tactic to elude my interrogation. I thanked the man, who was still jabbering to himself, and walked away with a green tin in my hands.

In the bus I opened the box. There were two bunches of keys and a letter from my father. His words made me feel at home in a foreign land. He had asked Pasha to find Arash and stay with him as he was a *lonely mountain* who needed the friendship of a mountaineer. There was a photo of the same little girl whose picture I had seen before. What was the relationship between her and Pasha? I found a key fob on which was written, *The Dreams*.

Mobile phones were not smart in 1999 and internet cafes were like temporary poorhouses for desperate researchers. The place was empty save for a middle-aged man in the corner, who was wearing headphones watching something with concentration. I sat behind a computer and typed *The Dreams* in the search engine. A Danish rock band, a documentary film about the post-war Iraq, a furniture showroom and a chain of hotels and restaurants displayed on the first page. Pasha was neither a musician nor interested in politics. A key fob and a hotel seemed a good match. When I went to collect the address of the hotel from the printer, I discovered that the man was watching porn.

I tried Angelina’s phone, but she didn’t answer. I took a cab to her flat in Camden Town. She wasn’t there or maybe she didn’t want to open the door for me. I headed towards the

market, walking past a young man whose dyed hair resembled a cockerel's comb. Having this strange feeling that a tall man was following me, I entered a supermarket, bought a bottle of water and came out to see if the man was still there. The tallest man in London was waiting on the other side of the road, talking on the phone. I crossed the road and walked towards him. He noticed me and ended his phone call. I walked right past the man whose stature reminded me of Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* and stepped into an internet cafe. I spent half an hour trying to find out information about *The Golden Casino* and the Russians behind it. When I left the café, the man was waiting at a bus stop, watching me from afar. His brazen approach seemed cunningly unprofessional. If he insisted on being seen, I would also make myself noticeable. I strode straight up to him, he turned his back and busied himself with his phone. I raised my hand to tap him on the shoulder.

‘Are you stalking me?’

‘Beg your pardon?’ His azure eyes were a calm sea that wouldn't capsize your ship.

‘You're following me,’ I said. Three girls at the bus stop turned to stare at us. The tall man gestured for them to mind their own business.

‘How about a walk?’ he suggested with a Scandinavian accent.

I trailed him down to the Regent's Canal where he lit a cigarette. I walked on his left side and half a step back, ready to push him into the canal if he tried to do something stupid.

‘Who the hell are you?’ I asked.

‘My name is Lars, I'm protecting you.’

Didn't Arash have a younger and shorter friend to protect his brother? You couldn't miss the man in any crowd. What was it with Arash who attracted oversized men?

‘Protect me from what?’

‘Don't know yet. We think they've followed you to London and have found us.’

‘Who are *they*, and who are *us*?’

‘It’s a long story,’ he said and puffed on his cigarette, which looked as small as a matchstick between his long fingers.

‘I love stories and I have plenty of time to kill,’ I said.

He suggested that we go to a bar, but I insisted we sat on a bench facing the canal, already tired of bars and restaurants.

‘Your brother loves you very much,’ he said. Both of us watched a couple of ducks go past swimming upstream. Love, such a malleable word, opened to rendition. It should make you free and not shackle you with its invisible strings.

‘Who are these people who want to hurt Arash?’

‘I’m not the right person to answer your question.’

‘Are they the Russians?’ I asked. ‘You know, The Golden Casino, gang rivalry, money laundering, revenge.’

His suspicious eyes were confused now. He didn’t know how much I knew about the Russians and how much he should reveal.

‘We’ve settled our problems with them,’ he said.

So, they’ve had problems, maybe over Pasha.

‘Did you know my brother, Pasha?’

His eyes turned into illegible writing.

‘Do you know a Russian girl called Angelina?’ I asked.

The tall man was as impassive as a statue. Now that he was stepping on the denying slope I decided to leave him. ‘I’m going to make a phone call,’ I said and stood up. ‘Can you please stop following me?’ He shook his huge head.

‘I’ll lose you then.’

‘You can’t, I’ll find you.’ his monotonous voice didn’t support his confidence.

‘Watch me.’ I ran towards the canal and jumped onto a passing canal boat.

‘Good afternoon sir,’ I greeted the boatman. ‘Can you take me to the other side please?’

He didn’t say a word and guided the boat to the other side of the canal, where I jumped out onto the opposite bank. I gave a military salute to the boatman, watching the abandoned giant walking in the same direction on the opposite bank.

I took the Dickensian stairs up to the main street and took the first bus towards central London. I got off the bus a few stops later, bought a telephone card and called Iran. As soon as Mum recognised my voice, she put on her happy mask and said she was fine. Out of four men to whom she had dedicated her life, Arash and I were the only ones left for her. As much as I would have liked to tell her that I had met Arash to make her blithe, I didn’t. Even if our telephone was not tapped, what was the point of telling her? Arash couldn’t go back to Iran and Mum wouldn’t leave the country as she needed to visit her husband and son’s graves every other day. Arash, her first taste of pregnancy, must have been special for her but unlike Dad who would show his extraordinary feelings for him, she would never let Pasha and I feel less special. After two decades, what was Arash to her now? Mum was like a calm sapphire ocean under which lay capsized ships, unexploded bombs, undiscovered pearls and hidden treasures.

‘Thanks for staying with Dad to the end,’ I told Mum. There are things you can tell your love ones only from a distance, yet when you put them in words, they become caricatures of themselves and make no sense. On the other end of the line was quietness. Sacrifice was breathing to Mum and I was thanking her for breathing.

‘Take care of yourself,’ she said.

London was difficult to stomach, it was people against the big city. I tried Angelina’s mobile, she didn’t answer. Lars was watching me with his cerulean eyes and a meaningful smile on his face. How on earth had he managed to find me so fast? The blonde giant would have made a brilliant detective if he was half a metre shorter.

Don Quixote

I had three theories for Arash's obsession with protection, sending his men to chaperone me everywhere I went: he was trying to compensate for the problems that he had created for our family; he used fear as a glue to unite his allies against an invented enemy to justify the existence of his clique; he was going mad, like Don Quixote, imagining windmills as giants that would attack him.

Arash collected me from my hotel and took me to a Lebanese restaurant in Edgware Road where all the staff were men in dark blue suits. A golden bucket filled with whole cucumbers, tomatoes, carrots and celery landed on our table.

'I'll have whatever you have tonight,' said Arash.

'Two fresh carrot juices,' I told the waiter who made a mental note and replaced the drinks menus with the meal ones. Arash didn't open his. It was a good opportunity to let Arash know that I wasn't a hard-core vegetarian, so for the main dish I ordered two servings of grilled mixed kebab.

'Look at that creature,' said Arash and turned his head to a woman in a black burqa who was having dinner with a bearded man. She would lift her niqab every time she put food into her mouth. 'See how your religion has reduced her to that.'

Arash had an incredible knack for dragging you to his chosen topic. I didn't want to ruin our evening with words. How could I explain to a wounded atheist that what he was witnessing was a cultural phenomenon which had been practised before Islam by Arab women to protect themselves from the burning sun in the deserts of Saudi Arabia and had nothing to do with religion?

‘She reminds me of Zorro.’ I sided with him to avoid a discussion about religion. You may never get to know God, but you could always make fun of His work, His masterpiece. ‘You may not grow a beard, Kia, but that woman is your sister, because you claim to be a Muslim, so you’re responsible for her retarded life.’

Arash knew Islam was like a rainbow and I didn’t have much in common with the woman, yet he was dragging me into a quagmire.

‘Okay, I’ll spank her when we got home,’ I said and hoped that it was the end of it. ‘Tell me about your childhood.’ I tried to change the subject from philosophy to family, from his belligerent attitude to my congenial approach.

‘You had it quite easy,’ he said. ‘When you were born, the family was already settled. It wasn’t the same for me.’

‘How was it for you?’

‘I was five when the family moved to the city. I was a village boy who didn’t speak like the other kids. I didn’t have a clue how to play their games, we did things differently in the village.’

‘They must’ve bullied you.’

‘Those kids darkened my life for months,’ said Arash. ‘They’d make fun of me nonstop. My accent was laughable, my clothes were out of style, my shoes were piss-poor and my haircut was frumpy, a shepherd boy’s style. *Go back to your goats*, their voices have stayed with me. I stopped talking because I didn’t want the world to hear my accent.’ Our carrot juices arrived.

‘Didn’t you tell Mum or Dad?’

I sipped mine.

‘Those days children never complained, you got on with things. Our parents were deepening their roots in the new soil and they already had enough problems on their plates. I didn’t want to add to their worries. I stayed in and played with grandma.’

‘Little bastards. How could they be so cruel at that age?’

The starters arrived. We began tearing the freshly baked Pitta bread and attacked different mezzes.

‘We’re born cruel,’ he said. ‘Cruelty is what you need to survive in a mean world. Those kids were simply flexing their muscles for a life-long battle in a world full of fuckers.’

I thought we were born innocent and it was parents, cultures and society that sowed the seeds of sin in us.

‘What happened to you?’ I asked. ‘You couldn’t have stayed at home all of the time.’

‘I shaved my head and insisted on choosing my own school clothes, which shocked Dad, but I had to camouflage myself like the other kids. No one in the street would recognise that I was from a village, but when I got to the school everything changed. Ali Scorpion, Rahim Razor and Karim Rhino were my classmates and Hassan Ghoul was in grade two. There were other boys in their gang whose names I can’t remember. They would follow me and imitate my village accent. They would steal my hat and pass it to each other when I tried to take it back. Every day was torture. In the morning they would stand in a line to give me a slap on the back of my shaved head. I didn’t mind if they took my lunch and pocket money every day, what terrified me was that they said one day they were going to fuck me in the toilets. I wouldn’t go to the toilets even if I was bursting for a pee.’

The waiters cleared the table and brought the main course. The Arabic music in the background was weeping for Arash’s childhood.

‘Why didn’t you tell your teacher?’ I asked.

‘I’m talking about four decades ago in Iran when corporal punishment in schools was

practiced. We were scared of our teachers. No one would dare to complain about anything.’

‘Even when I was at primary school, they would still flog you with a stick if you were late or misbehaved,’ I said. ‘It was only when I went to secondary school that they banned physical punishment.’

I called one of the waiters and ordered two grapefruit juices.

‘I wasn’t the only student whose life they were ruining,’ Arash said. ‘They were many of us. I thought if we could get together, they wouldn’t dare bully us, but I was ashamed of my village accent and wouldn’t talk to anyone at school. No teacher or student had ever heard me talking after my first week. I was a silent movie.’

Arash sipped his grapefruit juice and said that he and his companions should have some juice nights rather than ordering alcoholic drinks all the time.

‘One day the Art teacher asked us to make a cage at home, “a circular shape,” he explained. I didn’t know what a cage was, I hadn’t seen a bird in a cage before. I explained the art homework to grandma who helped me to make a nice round sheep pen.’ Arash burst into laughter, so loud that the adjacent tables and the waiters looked at our table. He was drawing a circular shape in the air to show the sheep pen. ‘I took the thing to school. Every student had made a cage, but mine didn’t even have a roof. The gang took my artwork and showed it to every single student in the school. They said it was going to be the shape of future cages invented by a village kid. When I got home that day, I told Mum that I wasn’t going to school anymore. That night Dad came to me and asked the reason I didn’t want to go to school. I told him, “You keep telling me that I should respect other kids and not use bad language. You want me to be a polite boy and not fight with other boys, but it doesn’t work.”’ He asked what had happened, but I told him that the only way I would go to school was to be allowed to defend myself if anyone made fun of me. He gave me his permission. The next day, God I’ll never forget that snowy day. On my way to school I picked up a nice round rock

as big as my cold fist and fastened it in the corner of my shawl. The gang were waiting for me to deliver their slaps on my shaved head. When I got close to them, I lunged forward and hit Hassan Ghoul in the head, then Rahim Razor and another boy. I chased Ali Scorpion who slipped on the snow and delivered a strike on his head and another one on his mouth. The last boys took refuge in the staff room. The snow in the playground had turned red from their blood. I untied my shawl, dropped the rock on the snow, put it back around my neck, sat on a step and watched them crying like babies. I didn't feel the cold anymore.' Both of us had stopped eating.

'The teachers and the headmaster ran out of the staff room, but none of them laid a hand on me. They had to take the boys to the hospital. A few hours later, my father and two police officers entered the headmaster's office. I told them what the boys had done to me and I wasn't ashamed of my accent. When we left the school, my father kissed my cold hands. Two weeks later when I was allowed to return to school, I realised that every student respected me, even the gang members. I learned that in life you can either remain cowed and live a low and miserable life or fight your way up to the top and live a life that you deserve.'

'How was life after that incident?'

'Well, every student wanted to be my friend and my accent suddenly became a *cool* one. Within days I was leading the biggest gang without asking for it. The difference was that we were not bullying others.'

Over the dessert we shared our memories of Dad. Arash talked about the time before I was born and when I was little, and I talked about the period he was out of the country. In my version, he was a trustworthy and friendly father who would protect his family at any cost, in Arash's account Dad was a friend, a brother and a father with whom together they bulldozed the obstacles in the way of the family.

‘I heard that Dad died in your arms,’ said Arash and looked into my eyes with empathy. I nodded. ‘I should’ve been there,’ he said. ‘I would’ve loved to have held him in my arms when he departed.’ He tapped me on the shoulder. ‘I’m glad he spent his last moments in your arms.’ He lifted the Chinese teapot and poured tea into our cups.

There are experiences in life that you keep in your chest and take them with you wherever you go. The last days of my father’s life was one of them:

With the help of two nurses, Pasha and I put Dad on a wheelchair and took him to the bathroom. The whiff of death was in the air.

‘Call us if you need anything,’ said one of the nurses.

Pasha secured the urine tube and the drip while I changed his nappy. There was some dark blood on the cotton. I folded it and shoved it into the bin lest Pasha saw it. He tested the water’s temperature with the back of his hand and wetted Dad’s body. The baby shampoo poured out a stream of snot on his greasy hair and I began to massage his scalp. The pads of my fingertips felt the heat of his head. Why couldn’t they suck up the clotted blood under his skull and fix the damage so close to them?

I covered his body in foam. His penis was still hanging onto his body for no apparent reason. It was difficult to believe that my brothers and I had come out of that confused lifeless thing. It didn’t feel right to touch him down there. ‘Dad, can you wash your private area with your right hand?’ I asked. It was a week before his second stroke and he could still mumble words. He sneered and slurred it didn’t feel anything. ‘You were five when they removed my prostate. Since then I haven’t had any erections.’ Discomfort painted my cheeks Mona Lisa. I never thought father would talk to me about his sexual life in that fashion, so frank, unassuming like a friend. ‘Whatever they were supposed to do to make us, they did it on time,’ I said, trying to sound like a friend. I thought of my mother who had kept it secret

from us for two decades. How noble your heart must be, how selfless to stay with a man who cannot sexually satisfy you and does not even show his love in alternate ways.

The strokes came unbidden when Dad was fighting with a sequence of other health problems. He already had a dead kidney and an infirm heart garnished with high cholesterol and high blood pressure. He said wryly that he was like a wildebeest surrounded by a group of hyenas, biting him from all directions. I knew he would fight to the bitter end, but I didn't think the wildebeest would make it this time. The stroke was a lion and he was already weary and wounded. When washing his body, I felt I was an embalmer, preparing him for his funeral. Death had come with an attitude.

A few days later, he told me that he loved me, a sentence he hadn't said to his wife. It was uncanny to witness how much a man could change when he faced death. I wished my brothers were also there to hear it, *I love you*, such an innocuous vulnerable sentence, hard to say when you are a *real man*. They were his last words before another stroke sent him into a soundless oblivion. It was the only time I heard him express his affection in words, his first and last. If he came out of the coma, doctors said, he wouldn't be able to speak, or he would fumble for words. If a miracle happened and he got his consciousness back, he would speak like Arnold Schwarzenegger talking on a mobile phone with bad reception. Dad wouldn't want that. He thought bodybuilders were not real men. They were a bunch of muscle slaves who shaved their legs. He would use the word *slave* as a suffix to express what he thought and felt about others. A *food-slave* meant an obese person and a *mirror-slave* was a vain soul who took his looks too seriously. Anyone or anything out of moderation was on the path of slavery. He called me a *book-slave*, Pasha was a *money-slave* and Arash was both a *heartslave* and a *friend-slave*. He knew his sons very well. Dad himself was a *child-slave*, but he never acknowledged it. He was a *real man* and tried his best to inject what he knew as machismo into his sons. He always had wise things to say to us, *a man doesn't decide when*

he is angry and he doesn't promise when he is happy. We didn't know whether he created his own aphorisms, all of which started with *a man*, or borrowed them from books, but they made him a credible source of knowledge. There he was, the real man, beyond words and wisdom, facing the only real thing left to him, the end, a *death-slave*.

'I wouldn't have let him suffer for that long, though,' Arash said and scrutinised my eyes.
'That's easier said than done,' I said and let him brows my opaque eyes.

I asked him about Pasha and he briefly said that he had worked as an IT consultant for several corporations, including *The Golden Casino*. His friends had found out that Pasha had had some financial disagreements with the Russians before he had left the country. He said his men were conducting further investigations to see what had gone on between them.

'You're not too full up to fight, are you?' asked Arash.

'Not if I go to the loo first,' I stood up. 'Don't worry I'm not going to pay this time.'

When I came back from the toilet Arash was drinking a glass of whisky.

'A civilized man doesn't fight, unless he is drunk,' said Arash. 'I'll call it a good fight when you already have difficulty standing up on your own two legs.'

I sat and watched him drink.

'There are six waiters, a manager, two barmen and at least seven staff in the kitchen. That makes sixteen,' said Arash. 'Can you manage eight?'

'Do I have a choice?'

He beckoned a waiter to our table. Arash said something in his ear. He left and came back with the bill and his manager.

'What can I do for you sir?' said the manager, a bearded man in a tight suit.

Arash pointed at me and sat back to watch.

I peeked at the bill and said, 'We don't want to pay this bill.'

'Why habibi, was anything wrong?'

‘No.’

‘Is the bill incorrect or has any of our staff been impolite?’ I

shook my head.

‘You don’t have the money to pay?’

‘We don’t want to pay.’

‘I’ll be back.’ The manager left us.

‘Do you think he’s calling the police?’ I asked.

‘Nah. People from the Middle East have learned to fight for their rights. They don’t trust the system to give it to them.’

The manager reappeared and asked us to follow him. We passed the toilets through a long and narrow corridor into a big storage and preparation area where four kitchen staff were waiting for us, holding knives and heavy-duty skewers in their hands. They began talking, perhaps swearing, in Arabic which to me sounded like they were reading from the Koran. A man in an expensive suit, accompanied by a waiter who was panting, entered from the exit door at the back of the storage area. His appearance silenced everyone. He walked up to us and offered his hand for a handshake. Arash shook hand with the man, I didn’t. He had been fetched from a sister restaurant in the neighbourhood, he said.

‘My name is Abdollah, the executive manager of M.R. Restaurants.’ He had a distinctive Arabic accent stressing the /r/ sound to the power of ten. ‘I’ve been informed that you have a problem paying your bill, gentlemen’ I nodded. ‘Your bill is only £120 and your jackets are worth more than a grand, so it can’t be that you cannot afford it. Why are you doing this, habibi? Did you have a bet with someone that you would eat and not pay the bill?’

‘We don’t want to pay,’ I said. ‘We want to see what you will do about it.’

‘What we will do about it?’ He took a kitchen knife from one of the staff and began beating his palm with it. ‘Tell Abou Salim that he and his lawyers cannot trick us.’

‘Who the hell is Abou Salim?’

‘Tell him he’s fighting a losing battle,’ said the man. ‘We’ll fight our corner legally in the courts. We’re not going to fall into his trap.’

‘You’re making a mistake, sir,’ I said. ‘We have nothing to do with anybody else.’

‘Please, gentlemen, we know what is going on.’

‘Let’s go,’ said Arash and threw four fifty-pound notes on a preparation table. ‘Tips for the kitchen staff.’

Outside the restaurant Arash complained about the capitalist systems. ‘Even for a street fight, you need to be a professional fighter with a bloody licence and do it in a cage with cameras all over you.’ He compared Dad’s lifestyle with his father’s and concluded that the variations were minimal, but due to technology, the changes between us and the new generation were unprecedented.

‘Am I boring you?’

I shook my head.

‘I’m boring myself,’ he said.

Back in my hotel I turned on the light only to see a man sitting on a chair in the middle of my room. I was not hallucinating, he was real; one of the men who had collected me from the theatre. He definitely knew how to enter a room in a hotel unnoticed. What did that tell about my brother and his amigos?

Maybe he was sent to take me to Arash’s home. It wasn’t right that my brother lived in London and made me stay in a hotel. Having spent the larger half of his life out of the

country, I thought, Arash must have forgotten our culture. Well, he had sent one of his men to prove me wrong.

‘You need to change your hotel,’ said the man. I suspected he deliberately wanted me to see his pistol. ‘Your belongings are in the car,’ he said and stood up to leave the room, expecting me to follow him.

‘So, who said I was going with you, Sancho Panza?’ My Don Quixote brother had turned his friends into his squires.

‘It is for your own safety.’

He was about to pass me when I struck him on the chest with my elbow. The man hit the floor and I disarmed him before he knew it. I cocked his pistol and pointed it at him while he was still on the floor, examining the back of his head for blood.

‘Sharp and fearless like your brother,’ he mumbled and stood up, rubbing his neck with one hand. ‘You’re coming with us,’ he said and walked past me, ignoring the gun in my hand. I engaged the safety back onto the gun, inserted it into my trousers, pulled my shirt over it and followed the man to the parking lot. I had to talk to Arash and ask him to stop his men chaperoning me.

The man was seated in the front of the waiting Bentley. I opened the back door and sat between the two seats. The driver was as gigantic as a Japanese Sumo wrestler. His seat covered only a tiny part of his back. How the man had got into the car was a mystery, maybe they had assembled it around his body. I pushed the barrel of the pistol to his side, wondering whether the bullet would come out from the other side if shot. The gun and my hand disappeared into the layers of fat. He turned to the man in front and burst into laughter.

‘He’s got your piece,’ he said between bouts of loud guffaws. ‘Arash would love to see this.’

The car screeched out of the parking car onto the street.

‘You know that thing could fire if I hit a speed-bump,’ the enormous man said and flew over one. ‘Whoops!’ He was like a fat boy joyriding on his little sister’s tricycle. In every man there is a naughty boy who keeps quiet at the presence of others but likes to play. I had to put the gun in my pocket to use my hands to protect my head bumping into the windows and the front seats.

‘Slow down,’ I said. The police would stop us if he kept driving like that, and I had a gun in my pocket. The man speeded up, laughing louder and louder. While using my elbows to protect my upper body against the blows of the car, I took the pistol out of my pocket, cocked it with difficulty and pulled the trigger. The bang in the car was deafening, the smoke and the smell of sulphur, suffocating. The hippopotamus pulled over to examine his blubber. The disarmed man in the front seat had crumbled like a foetus, his hands on his ears squeezing his skull. I stepped out of the car and watched the men opening their doors gasping for air. The driver leant his chest, arms and elbows onto the side and roof of the car breathing hard. I put the pistol back into my pocket, its barrel hot.

When the smoke cleared, the driver used his fat finger to examine the hole in the roof of his car. ‘You need a bloody umbrella to sit in the back,’ he said and turned to his friend. ‘Five grand repair job just because you let the kid take your piece.’

The disarmed man walked to me and stretched out his hand. I thought he wanted his pistol back, but he introduced himself, ‘My name is Zabih.’ His hand was still waiting to be shaken by mine. Was he trying to trick me into a physical fight so that he could reclaim his pistol, amounted to his honour? While shaking his hand with my right my left hand was ready poised to strike. The huge man who was watching us gave me a military salute. ‘I’m Tayeb,’ he said and sat back behind the wheel. Zabih and I got back in the car and we drove off.

We turned into a car park underneath a hotel. Zabih and I took the lift to the seventh floor and into a room where my luggage was on the floor. I handed the pistol back to Zabih who said Arash was on his way to see me and left the room.

I was looking at London through the window when Arash entered the room.

‘We had to move you,’ he said.

‘Yah, because the city is pregnant with secrecy?’

‘When I was your age, I was on the move all the time. One night I had to move three times.’

I took my passport out of my pocket and showed it to him. ‘Look, it doesn’t say Arash Karamian, does it? I’m not a big shot like you and no one is interested in hurting me.’

He was a control freak, deciding where and when we should meet, what we should eat and drink and now where I should stay. I knew there was an element of domination and leadership in the firstborns, but his approach was dictatorial, he had even tried to tell me how I should feel and think about various things. I wouldn’t vote for him if that was how he wanted to run a country. Yet, the love for a brother was not for sale. We didn’t have the same worldviews, but couldn’t two people be confidantes despite their differences?

He walked to the window and stood next to me, watching the city shimmering in the dark.

‘Love and hate aren’t out there,’ he said and breathed in the whole city. ‘Everything happens here.’ He tapped his skull. ‘The way we interpret things makes us who we are.’ He took my right hand, as if he wanted to tell my fortune, and put a gun in it.

‘You might need this,’ he said. ‘You’ve put a hole in my car, so you know how to use it.’

I looked at the gun resting in my hand. My weapon was my pen, I had always thought, and my bullet, education. I had come to London to share my views on literature and

Shakespeare and here I was holding a gun in my hand to protect myself from my brother's imaginary enemies. It always began like that, *to defend yourself*, and you ended up killing people, which was the reason that we had the Ministry of Defence and not the Ministry of War. There was a Dun Quixote in my brother and ran with him wherever he ran.

'What makes you think that I might need this?'

'Just watch your back while you're in London.'

'I'll never shoot to kill a man,' I said and rested the gun on a side table.

'Of course, you will,' he said. 'It is circumstances that make a man. Never think you wouldn't do what others can do. If you came from the same background, went through similar experiences and had the same culture and education or the lack of them, you'd do the same thing. Don't judge people for what they do, just hold the ring.'

Arash had claimed, when emotional of course, that he had *slaughtered people*, I wanted to see if he would expand on it, so I said that no one from the Karamian family could shoot a man.

'Did you know Dad shot Mum's brother?' asked Arash.

'What!' He was pulling my leg. 'Dad shot uncle Akbar?'

He nodded. 'You were one or two years old.'

It was impossible, Dad wouldn't hurt an ant, let alone his brother-in-law. Arash was joking, I decided to play his game. 'Did he kill him?'

'No, he died from cancer.'

'Why did Dad shoot him?'

'I don't know if you remember, Uncle Akbar was addicted to opium.' I shook my head. 'One day his wife comes to our house and claims that uncle has hit her in the mouth. She says that she won't go back home unless he ends his addiction and promises not to beat her up again. Mum visits their house, breaks her brother's pipes and dumps his large amount of stash

into the toilet. Uncle goes berserk and gets drunk, he would rarely drink because of his addiction, but he needed it to get some courage. Bang, bang, he knocks at our door with the butt of a combat knife. Dad was a religious person and wouldn't let a drunk man in, let alone someone who was threatening to kill his wife and sister with a knife. Anyway, he asks uncle to go away and come back when he's sober, but uncle Akbar begins swearing and climbs up our wall to enter the house. Remember how much Dad hated vulgarity?'

'Yah, that's the reason we don't swear.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Arash. 'Anyway, Dad takes his shotgun and shoots him in the leg.'

'Didn't they arrest him?'

'They told the police that it was an accident; Dad was cleaning his shotgun when it went off. Uncle also verified the story.'

I sneered.

'Every now and again uncle Akbar would thank Dad for shooting him,' he said.

The whole story was a fairy-tale, but Arash was a hell of a storyteller.

'He was in the hospital for two weeks and stayed home for six months to recover, and that was the end of his addiction.'

'What did Mum say?'

Arash stood up and began dancing like Gene Kelly in *Singing in the Rain*.

'Thanks darling, your accurate shot saved my brother's life,' he said in a woman's voice. 'Let me kiss your virile hand.' He kissed an invisible hand before capering with his imaginary dance partner around the room. He pranced towards me, spun round and asked for my hand. I shook my head. My brother was insane. 'Come on, professor, up the ante,' he said and began improvising dance movements. 'Intelligence is not just in the head. It is diverse and dynamic. Express it with your body. Come on! Stand on your feet and dance with me. If you'd danced

half the amount of time you spent on reading books, you would've been happier, healthier and much more intelligent.'

'I can't dance.' I chuckled at some of his movements.

'We are born dancers, you have been educated out of it. Repent, professor Karamian, repent and have a go. Don't be afraid of making mistakes, it's a part of the process. If you're not prepared to make mistakes, you will never learn new moves.' He made some eccentric and comical moves. 'Express your creativity, professor.'

I had an impulse to join him and get silly, but my inner Victorian dignity pulled my reins. Realising that his fire was not thawing my icicles, he said, 'Take the gun with you and use it if you have to.' He gambolled out of the room and left me alone with a fully loaded pistol and a story about Dad shooting uncle Akbar, which could have been real. With Arash, you never knew where the boundaries between the truth and lies, fact and fiction lay.

Why did they carry guns with them? Was Arash a ringleader involved in unlawful businesses? Perhaps Pasha had been killed by a rival gang in revenge for an illegitimate deal gone wrong. Was that the way he made his money? He must have been supporting us as Dad didn't work for the last two decades of his life, yet he had enough to help the penurious. Did the house we lived in was purchased by illicit money? Was my education paid for by illegally-earned funds? I lay on the bed with a head heavy with indigestible thoughts.

In the morning I called Angelina, but she didn't answer her phone. I left her a voice message to get back to me. Someone knocked at the door. I hid Arash's gun under the pillow before answering the door. A waiter with a trolley walked into the room followed by a man with a big nose and heavy spectacles, who strolled to the curtains and pulled them aside for the sun to bring the day to the room. He glanced at the pillow and walked out of the room without saying a word. A glass of milk, a little jar of honey, an egg, some cheese and Lavash

bread. It seemed incongruous to imagine Dad and Arash talking about what I usually eat for breakfast.

I took the gun and examined it, put it into my pocket and walked across the room, it felt heavy. I sucked my stomach in and inserted it under my trousers between my underwear and belt, it was uncomfortable. I couldn't possibly leave it in the room, the cleaners would find it. I put the gun in the inside pocket of my coat and left the room, heading for the conference, feeling the weight of it in my lopsided jacket.

It felt peculiar to carry a pistol in my pocket and walk amongst ordinary people. What if the police stopped me or I had an accident? I didn't deserve to be put in prison for the possession of a gun that wasn't mine. What would the Security Service think about arresting an Iranian lecturer who was on an educational visit visa, carrying a gun in his pocket? What would Leila think about her fiancé?

However, I couldn't ignore the inexplicable buzz that carrying a gun on London streets gave me. I felt guilty about the excitement. If my weapon was my knowledge, then why did carrying a piece of killing apparatus in my pocket give me such a feeling of elation wrapped in power and security? My education drew a blank to find an explanation for my good feeling. I was tempted to dump the gun into a street bin, but it didn't belong to me.

There was no trace of the Filipino lecturer in the conference that day. I hoped she was off sick and would remain so for the rest of my stay. Cruel, yes, but she was as annoying as sharp stones inside your shoes, difficult to lose. At lunchtime I called Angelina who switched her mobile off after I made several attempts to contact her. Someone must have warned her off. I must pay her a visit.

Indecent Proposal

On my way to *The Dreams*' restaurant, I could feel the attraction of the unknown. Lars, like a bull elephant following his calf, chaperoned me to the place. It was one of those posh restaurants where an overdressed man opened the door for you to make you feel important. There was a door and I had two hands to open it, I didn't need to be treated like I was handicapped in the name of class. I would have loved to walk up to the person who first came up with the idea, thinking that it might inflate the customers' egos, and shoot him between his eyes. Slow down cowboy, I told myself, if you had some servants running about in your house, you would have got used to being waited on hand and foot by others and wouldn't have felt uneasy. Maybe so, but it was good to carry a gun in your pocket and know which brains to empty it into.

'Is your juice fresh?' I asked the waitress.

Having seen many first-timers, she smiled.

'Everything is fresh and organic at *The Dreams*.'

'Good,' I said. 'I'd like to see your manager.'

'Orange juice and the manager, or just the manager?' She smiled and walked to the dim end of the restaurant and came back. 'Follow me, please.'

With the horseshoe moustache and thick framed glasses, the manager reminded me of the black and white photos of the seventies. His collar was two rabbit ears embracing the man's thin neck. Aesthetically, he had been frozen for two decades.

'What can I do for you, sir?' He had a light Iranian accent.

I put the photo of Pasha and Angelina onto his desk.

'Do you know the man in the picture?'

He picked up the photo, had a quick look and dropped it back down onto the table. He shook his head, laced his fingers together and reclined back on his executive armchair. I threw the key fob onto his desk next to the photo. He had a glimpse but didn't pick it up.

'Your restaurant's name is on the fob,' I said.

'Just a name on a piece of plastic,' he said and began pivoting his armchair left and right.

'Who is the owner of *The Dreams*?'

'I wouldn't be able to give you such information, sir.' He stood up, walked to the door, opened it and waited for me to leave his office. 'Please make an appointment if you wish to meet me again.'

I picked up the photo and the key fob and walked to the door.

'It's good you know that I'll be back,' I said and left his office.

Outside the restaurant my *protector* was standing tall. Tayeb and Zabih were also waiting for me. I opened the door and sat in the back of the car. The hole my gun had put in the roof of the car had been repaired to perfection.

'You're in a different car,' said Tayeb, watching me touching the roof in the rear-view mirror. 'This is the twin sister of the car that your bullet sent to the mechanics.' His cauliflower ears and rock-solid neck indicated he was an ex-wrestler, heavyweight division. Zabih was motionless like a crash test dummy, looking ahead of him.

'We're going to a gym,' said Tayeb. 'Your body must be itching for a workout.'

Only an athlete knew what it was like to long for physical activities. He was right I loved to pump my muscles with London-fed blood.

'That's your sport kit.' His thumb indicated a bag sitting next to me.

We drove round a crescent in Hampstead twice before turning into a garage. The door automatically closed after us.

'Welcome to the Singles,' said Tayeb.

Was it the name of a band?

‘Our single comrades live here,’ said Tayeb. ‘Well, it’s equally loved by our married pals who need a bit of space and excitement.’

I followed the men to a gym in the basement where Arash was in a boxing kit, punching a boxing punch bag. He glanced at us but didn’t stop punching. His sweat had watered the floor under and around a huge punch bag. There was a small boxing ring in the middle, a punch ball, a couple of old fashion iron bars, a lot of weights and dumbbells and a press bench. No mirrors, running machines or fancy equipment.

‘When you were two or three,’ said Arash and delivered a combination of double jabs, cross, left hook and right uppercut to the punch bag. ‘I’d use my hands as your punch bag.’ Jab, cross, left hook, right hook. ‘Show him the changing room, Zab.’

Out of the blue I delivered a side kick to the punch bag and disturbed its natural swing. Arash stopped punching. Tayeb and Zabih froze, watching the two brothers.

‘You change my hotel, send your men to follow me around, decide where to meet, what to eat, what to drink and now where and when to exercise.’ My upbringing, culture and respect for Arash prevented me from calling him a control freak. ‘I don’t like to be watched and controlled by anyone.’

Arash took his gloves off of his hands.

‘There is a pistol in your pocket, right?’ said Arash. ‘Do you call that control or freedom?’

‘Control, because you’ve planted electronic chips into it, so that you can trace where I go and where I am at any moment.’

‘Let’s say you’re right and we’ve put a tag on you. Don’t you think there must be a reason for that?’

‘I’m listening.’ I folded my arms, watching him unwrapping his hands from the boxing

bandages.

‘Our sources have informed us that our enemies have come to London for an operation. They may’ve followed you to find us, and if that is the case, there is a chance they may have bugged your room, that’s why we changed your hotel. I meet you in different public places, because we don’t want to give them a pattern to follow.’ He wiped the sweat on his forehead. ‘Believe me, Kia, my mates have better things to do with their time than to chaperone you around London, but they have to protect you and themselves.’

‘Where is the changing room,’ I asked Tayeb.

Tayeb was the strongest, Zabih threw the fastest jabs, Arash was an all-rounder and I was the supplest. I enjoyed the workout as it didn’t turn into a testosterone competition of men doing exercise together for the first time. Arash even followed my lead and copied what I did in terms of movements, weights and sets. We exchanged knowledge on sport and diet. It was the first time that I felt I had something in common with my brother.

Arash and his friends combined were half a century older than me, but they were happier and more energetic than I was. Yet, I felt that anyone around Arash tried to fit into his criteria of gallantry and manhood and was afraid of not living up to his expectations. They were birds that received water, seeds and protection, but in his cage. The fear of not being a part of anything, not being accepted by anyone was there. Something was frightening them back into the comfort of the cage. Someone should have told them that people couldn’t take away their loneliness if they hadn’t made friend with themselves. They were Buddhas who needed Chana, the charioteer, to venture them out of their palaces to meditate on the existential realities of life.

We talked about sports, politics, literature, women and more. I thought it was difficult to live in a body that was in love. Arash said marriage was a choice of who would break your heart. Tayeb said that *unconditional love* was a term coined by pitiful people, Zabih thought

the gents was the most peaceful and decent places on earth left for men. ‘Never offer up your seat to a woman,’ he said. ‘Feminism robbed them of that privilege. Not the *fairer sex* anymore.’ Arash didn’t endorse his view, but they both agreed that a woman was able to bring the best and the worst out of a man. Arash held Capitalism as the worst thing that had ever happened to humanity, even worse than religion. I thought that no man-made system, be it Socialism or Capitalism, could work well inasmuch as the individuals didn’t know themselves. Freedom was not to do whatever you liked, it was rather not to do whatever you didn’t like doing. Zabih believed time didn’t cure your wounds, you simply got accustomed to them. I thought a staff room was a place for mediocre souls who chatted away their lives. Arash saw teamwork as the struggle of people with zero charisma and average egos, trying to act big, but in fact, fighting for domination. Sweat and ideas came out of our systems as random as molten lava from a fuming volcano. Why couldn’t Arash and I continue like this? Were we so different that we needed his friends to grease the friction? Genetically he was the closest person on earth to me. How had we grown apart? Why couldn’t we have a relationship beyond ideology and politics and still talk about them?

When Arash and I were alone in the sauna I asked him why Zabih was such a chauvinist person. He told me this story:

Zabih’s twin brother marries a Filipino girl and has a daughter with her. They move from the Philippines to Sweden. The combination of depression, loneliness and long cold dark days pitches him into a black hole. He is a doctor, but at the time he works as a taxi driver in Stockholm. One night he picks up a passenger, who hands him an address to go to, it is his own address. He parks his car and follows the man to his own house where his wife greets the man with a French kiss. He walks back to his car, takes a gallon of petrol and walks back to the house. He opens the door gently and sees his wife in bed with the man. He pours the petrol on the wooden floor and furniture and sets fire to his own house before locking the

door behind him. It is only when he sits back down behind the wheel of his car to leave the scene that he realises his little daughter is also in the house. He runs back to his house, unlocks the door, runs to his daughter's bedroom, picks her up and tries to escape, but the roof collapses. He finally manages to leave the house with his daughter in his arms, but it is too late, the child is dead. Three days later he dies in the hospital. Since then Zabih has never been with a woman.

'Poor things need therapy,' I said.

He shook his head and said that psychology only worked for people who believed in it.

I could tell that Arash had something important to tell me, but he was not sure how to begin.

'You know you can tell me anything, don't you?' I said.

'Dad said they had trained you in the army to defuse bombs and mines.' I nodded.

'If you know how to defuse bombs, then you must know how to make one.' Beads of sweat were rolling down his forehead. 'I want you to make a bomb for me.'

Now I understood the motive behind his obsession with protection. He wanted me to believe that there was a threat out there and his life was at risk, so that he could convince me to make a bomb.

'What do you want it for?'

'I need it to do away with an old enemy.'

In less than a week he had made me drink alcohol, eat meat and do unethical things and now he was asking me to do the unthinkable.

'I've diffused around 11000 landmines during my military service,' I said, 'and each one of those mines could have killed me. But I did it with honour, because I didn't want to see a child running after his ball get blown up or a mother with her child on her back walking along

a rural road step on a mine and get killed or disabled. Right now, as I'm talking to you, there are 120 million anti-personnel mines still in the ground. 70 people are killed every day and 26000 innocent individuals are disabled every year. I'll never forget or forgive the countries that manufactured those explosive devices and now, my own brother who claims to be a socialist and wants to change our country for the better is asking me to make a bomb to kill people.'

I left the sauna.

You take yourself with you wherever you go. Your fears, anxiety, sorrows, wishes and hopes do not even follow you to be a step behind, they are within you, walk with you, stand with you, sleep with you. They are your world, everywhere you go, you are there with them. Violence was what Arash and his amigos produced well. If the country had been in the power of them, they would have used brutality on a larger scale. When you're a good driver, you will respect the laws of the road, regardless of the make and model of your car. We, Iranians were always in the haunt of shortcuts; such a selfish short-sightedness would uproot any system. If our country was going downhill, it was not all the fault of the rulers. Governments don't make people, it is the other way around. When people, the bricks of a society, are corrupted, the house will fall. Yes, it had always been I against the system, yes, we had suffered a lot, carrying a wounded history on our shoulders, but it was the time I stopped blaming the other and began from myself. Trying to change a government, the other, Arash and his comrades had forgotten about changing themselves.

I shook my head and left the house. Outside the Singles I handed the reins of direction to my legs, letting them take me wherever they wanted to. I needed time to cry in my heart over the pieces of my lifetime idol, who had been smashed on the ground.

I was in another world until the whiff of the City of Westminster rubbish van in reverse gear grabbed my throat and reminded me of the reality of life; it stank. I entered Regent's Park,

gasping for fresh air. The oasis of sanity amid people, cars and gasoline was flirting with London pollution.

Ahead of me walking with difficulty was a man whose legs were like a pair of parentheses. A child could easily amble through the man's legs. His long hair was yellowish white, greasy, filthy. Irate, I couldn't dawdle behind a disfigured drifter. Human stench overpowered human waste in my nostrils when I overtook him. My chest muscles squeezed humanity out of my lungs, I hated the lame man.

I stamped onto the green, strode over a wooden bridge and watched the man from the other side of the pond. It was easy to imagine the flowers dying as he tottered past them. He disappeared behind a row of shrubs and I strode aimlessly. I stood next to a bench, facing the pond, hands in pocket, watching a pair of black swans. They were preening each other's feathers. The young lovers had no cygnets to ride on their backs yet.

So, you two are mate for life? No bonds are for life, birds, trust me. You should believe him when a man talks to a bird. Things change and they change you. Birds and humans are always alone, like God, lonely. Blood is not thicker than any liquid, family means zilch, tribe is a single man. Your only kin are your hands which sift the waters, plough the seas, whip the wind, sit under your chin to brood and clasp tentatively.

I sat on the bench. Furies are so alike when you take them to a park. They play pointless games in your head until they get tired and fall asleep. I shouldn't have been that angry anyway. I felt that the hero of my childhood who was so perfect had cheated on me. I had eluded myself all those years. I should have known that no one was without flaws. Grownups were just older foetus and supermen were only in films. I ought to comfort myself with the fact that at least I had had someone to look up to. Arash had been a fantasy close to me all the time, within me. What noble nescience.

Human stink. The lame man was sitting on my bench. Well, it wasn't exactly my bench, the late Serena Wallace who would go with her dogs for a walk there had donated it to the park.

Between the man's brackets must hang a pair of tough balls, not because he had dared to sit his unwashed bottom next to me, but for the years he had propelled his body here and there in the light and dark, cold and hot, ignoring the sting of people's words, their evil leers. Long live acclimatization.

The man took a bottle out of his overcoat, wrapped in a brown paper bag. He unscrewed the lid, took a swig from the bottle and wiped his mouth with his slimy sleeve. He held it out to me while looking at the swans. The universe was made of silence save the evening birds, beak-wagging beyond London's inane white noise. I took the bottle, palmed his mouth-print and took a swig from it. I gave the bottle back to him, drool upon drool. He took it from me without looking away from the swans. I felt the surge of cheap alcohol coursing through my veins.

A woman holding the leash of her laved and groomed dog walked past us. I was wondering if her death would buy the park a new bench. A bench on which two men who didn't know each other would sit and share a drink.

'My brother asked me to make a bomb for him,' I told the slob.

He nodded as if he had been asked to make bombs many times before. Wherever he was, the hues were paler, the sounds quieter and the words more poetic.

I took the bottle from my smelly friend and drank to his penchant for life and gave it back to him. The sun was climbing up the trees. The man I had hated for no reason and for some reason had chosen me to share his drink with, raised his bottle to the dying sun. Darkness was winging its way towards us.

Lars was sitting on a neighbouring bench watching me and my new friend.

A Room in the Dreams

Someone should invent a pair of special scissors that can snip off your thoughts or give them a trim when needed. Mine felt heavy in my skull, so in the morning I took them on a bus with me to see London. I sat upstairs until the end of its route in south London.

The good news was that Lars was not following me. I crossed the road and got on another bus and let it take me anywhere that its wheels wished. It felt good not to care about the destination and savour the journey, *the wheels on the bus go round and round, all day long*. Trust the bus driver to navigate you through the pollution of London to new pastures. Like life, the bus stopped to let some passengers off and some on, I got off. Each passer-by was carrying a world with them. They were rivulets that brought with them the soil of the lands they had passed through. As the product of the roads that I had taken to reach where I was, I sucked profusely.

I raised my hand for a black cab and asked the driver if she knew where *The Dreams* was.

‘The hotel or the restaurant?’ she asked.

I didn’t know there was also a hotel called *The Dreams*.

‘The hotel, please.’

This must be the place I had been looking for. Pasha’s lacerated body when they unzipped the body bag for me to identify him came to the cab. Mum let out a wail. The police cordoned his house off. The gravedigger dug a hole. A hand threw a wad of notes into the sky and they bestrewed like disoriented birds. An anti-personnel mine exploded.

‘*The Dreams*, sir,’ said the cab driver and turned to me. ‘Thirteen pounds fifty pence.’

I tilted my head to one side to check *The Dreams*. The ghost of Pasha stood between me and the hotel’s sign. I paid the woman and stepped out.

The place had nothing to offer but trouble. *What is the worst thing that can happen to you?* asked Dad's voice. Death was the ultimate destination. *Your brother and I are here for you.* It was only the vagaries of life that offered so many false alleyways to distract us from the end. I couldn't possibly walk away from the mystery lurking behind the bricks of that hotel.

I sucked the London air into my lungs to slow down my heart, it tasted of car fart, rain, asphalt. I had learnt the hard way that when my heart raced that fast I must not respond to the stimulus senselessly. When I walked up to the reception desk, I had this feeling that the day had not yet given birth to its ventures. I put the key fob on the desk. The receptionist picked it up and scanned *The Dreams* written on it with her emerald eyes and asked, in a Polish accent, how she could help me. I was about to tell her that I had found it on the street and strike up a conversation with her, but I asked her if I could have a single room. While she was checking her computer I browsed the foyer and the CCTV cameras installed in various corners.

'I'm sorry, there is no room available.'

Strange to check the computer when she knew there was no room.

'Can I speak to your supervisor, please?'

'What can I do for you?' asked a young man in a smart suit who had overheard our conversation. He too had a Polish accent and seemed to be more of her boyfriend than her manager. He rolled his armchair towards me while sitting on it and repeated what the girl had told me. I demanded to see his boss. The colleagues exchanged looks. I explained that it was not about the vacancy and I needed to talk to their boss about an important issue. 'The manager is not available now,' he said and placed a pen and a piece of paper on the desk.

'Write your contact number here. I'll give it to him.'

'I prefer to talk to him in person,' I said, 'I'll be back tomorrow.'

Outside the building I realised that on the opposite side there was another hotel. If I could get one of those rooms facing *The Dreams*, I would be able to monitor the building.

Something was telling me that the secret behind Pasha's killing was in *The Dreams*. Mystery was about to shed its skin.

A black Mini Convertible parked opposite *The Dreams* and a very young man stepped out of it. He adjusted his sunglasses and gave his car key to a waiting valet in uniform and swaggered towards the entrance. He glanced at me before entering the hotel. Had I seen the young man before? My brain sifted through its visual files, but couldn't find a match to his lineaments. Why did he seem so familiar? I turned and followed him into the foyer. I took a seat in the waiting area, picked up a newspaper, pretending that I was waiting for a hotel guest and watched him talking to the receptionists. They seemed to know the young man very well, chatting and laughing with him in a friendly manner. He waved to the receptionists and walked towards the lifts. I covered the side of my face with the newspaper, strode off down the corridor and jumped into the lift before it closed. Silence accompanied the two of us in the lift until the young man asked if I was following him.

'If you take off your sunglasses,' I said, 'I'll know if I'm following the right person.'

'The person you're looking for must have a name.'

'I'm just acting on a hunch,' I said.

With one hand he took his sunglasses off and with the other put a small gun to my stomach. I examined his countenance meticulously while feeling the coldness of the gun's barrel through my shirt. I had seen that face somewhere before.

'Now that you've put that thing on my belly, I'm interested to know why a fine young man like you carries a gun with him in a country where the possession of a gun is illegal and can put him away in prison for years.'

He glanced at the floor numbers on the lift, took a key from his pocket and handed it to me.

‘You’re coming with me,’ he said before the lift opened. He moved the gun to my side and nudged me out of the lift on the fifteenth floor. At gunpoint, I turned the key and opened room 1513. Almost every item in the room was white. I said that I would have put on a white outfit had I known I was going to step into an ethereal room, hoping that my sense of humour would calm the boy and offer me some control. It didn’t, so I took my gun from my pocket and put it onto the coffee table.

‘It seems that we have a lot in common,’ I said and watched the young man’s reaction.

‘Why are you following me?’

‘I’m not following you.’ I walked to the bookshelves.

He picked up my gun while pointing his at me. I checked the titles of the books.

‘You’re into philosophy, aren’t you?’

‘Your voice reminds me of someone I haven’t seen for years,’ he said.

‘Really! Who?’

‘You haven’t answered my question,’ he said. ‘Why are you following me?’ I put the book back onto the bookshelf.

‘I’m following my instinct, which tells me that you’re not a stranger.’ ‘You say that because I said your voice reminded me of someone I knew.’

‘My name is Kia Karamian.’ I offered my hand for a handshake.

A couple of parallel lines registered on his creaseless forehead. A surge of thoughts was flooding inside his skull.

Reluctantly, he offered his knuckles for a fist-kiss. We touched our fists like two boxers before a fight. The world belonged to the young, we were living in a kidriarchal society.

Children were the new masters, deciding how to greet, talk and behave, smashing the orthodoxy of their forebears to pieces.

‘That is an Iranian surname,’ he said.

I nodded.

An invisible hand began to turn the pages of the chronicle in my mind. My heart caved into a big hollow inside. I took the photo out of my pocket and examined it intensely.

The young man walked to my side to espy the photo that had painted my face with amazement. He took the photo from my hand to have a closer look.

‘Where did you get this?’ he asked.

‘Who is the girl standing next to you?’ I asked.

‘Nina, she’s my sister.’

‘Did Pasha take the picture?’

‘How do you know my uncle?’

‘So, you’re Arash’s son,’ I said and sat down on a white chair.

‘Who are you?’

I was his uncle, I told him. He knew he had another uncle in Iran who was a boxer, but he had never seen a picture of him. His name was Cyrus and he was a student at Cambridge University, studying philosophy.

‘Does Dad know you’re here?’

‘No,’ I lied.

He asked if I had a place to stay, if his uncle Pasha was doing well and if his grandparents, whom he had never met, were well.

‘Everyone is fine,’ I said, knowing that he would never see his uncle or his grandfather.

He said my voice reminded him of his uncle Pasha.

His room in *The Dreams* was a quiet place amid the hustle and bustle of the city, offering him solace. The hotel belonged to his father and his friends.

‘Did Pasha have a room in *The Dreams*?’ I asked.

The room we were in was Pasha’s and that was the reason he had beseeched to keep it. Cyrus was not sure exactly what Pasha was doing when he was in London, but he gathered that it had something to do with IT. He had worked for his Dad and a Russian club.

‘Unfortunately, he had to go back to Iran to take care of granddad, who wasn’t well at the time. How is he now?’

I paused to consider my responses.

‘He passed away a few weeks ago.’

Cyrus stepped forward and wrapped me in his long slim arms. He was my nephew whose mother was American and had never been to Iran, yet he was as hot-blooded as any Iranian young man. He smelt like his grandfather.

‘Dad will be devastated to hear the news,’ he said. ‘He loves granddad very much.’ ‘I know.’

Why didn’t Arash talk to me about his wife and children? Why didn’t he want me to meet his family? Yes, he was responsible for their safety, but surely he could introduce me to them. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust me enough. Why didn’t Pasha tell us that he had met Arash? Why had Arash lied about meeting Pasha only briefly?

‘You should come with me and meet the family at the weekend,’ he said. ‘Dad doesn’t know I’m in London. He and his friends with their families get together in the country every month, that is the day after tomorrow. It’d be a double surprise for him if you could come with me.’

‘I’m delivering a speech at the Shakespeare’s Globe tomorrow.’

‘Call me when you’re finished. I’ll pick you up and leave the city.’
‘I need to see the organisers today.’

‘I’ll give you a lift.’

In Cyrus’s car London felt like home. I kept watching my nephew, a Londoner, all the way to the Globe.

‘I’ll wait in the car,’ he said.

I met the organisers and discussed some details. I asked about Dr Mara Schnittka Cojuangco from the Philippines and if they knew where she was staying. They checked their guest list and said they hadn’t invited such a person.

I got back to the car and Cyrus drove off.

‘You couldn’t have brought that gun all the way from Iran,’ said Cyrus. It was not much stranger than a Philosophy student carrying a gun in his pocket. ‘I’m thinking of the practical aspect of it,’ he said and stopped the car in a quiet road. ‘How could you obtain a gun in this country?’

No plausible explanations came to my mind.

‘I think you’re an imposter with a picture that somehow you’ve got from uncle Pasha.’ He drew his gun and pointed it at me again.

‘I think you and I received our guns from the same person,’ I said. ‘Sorry, I lied to you. I’ve met your father. He gave me the gun to protect myself while I’m in London.’ Mistrust had clouded his eyes.

‘I’ve even met some of his friends. The huge guy, Tayeb and Zabih, the boxer. I even had Lars, the Norwegian giant, as my bodyguard.’ I realised that any imposter could come up with similar information. ‘Here, let me show you my passport.’

‘Don’t fucking move!’

My hand froze in my pocket.

‘Mind your language, young man.’

‘Use two fingers only and fish it out,’ he ordered and I obeyed. ‘Hand it to me nice and slowly. Now, put your hands on the dashboard where I can see them.’

‘I could forge a passport if I was a fraud,’ I said, while he was examining the document.

He put my passport in his pocket and asked me to tell him something about the Karamian family to prove that I was telling the truth.

Arash’s obsession with security had haunted his son, inspiring him to point a gun at his own uncle. I couldn’t possibly tell anything about my family under duress. It was beneath an uncle to be held at gunpoint by his nephew.

I looked at the space behind him pretending that someone was standing on the street watching us. As soon as he turned to check, I disarmed him. I got my passport and gun back from him and returned his.

Silence erected its tent in the car. Outside, a little girl holding a white balloon, was following her Mum towards not the sunset but a traffic light.

I told Cyrus this story about his father:

I was a little boy when I heard that even the police were afraid of Gholam Ghoul. They said he was a huge thug and a real crook with a gang of ruffians around him. He was a usurper and had the whole city in the palm of his hands.

It was an autumn evening and all the neighbours were on the street watching five tattooed gang members, throwing the belongings of a blind man onto the street. They were taking away anything that had any value. I slipped through the dense crowd and got into the front row to watch the drama unfolding. The man’s wife and his six daughters were begging them to stop while crying. The blind man was sitting on a chair solemnly listening to his life collapsing all around him. I thought at that moment he was contemplating suicide. One of the men ordered the blind man to stand up and took his chair. I didn’t know whether he was

sitting on the chair to save the item or his legs were not strong enough to hold the sea of sadness in his system.

Arash, who was still a teenager, arrived with two of his friends and asked the debt collectors to take the items back to the blind man's house. The men surrounded Arash and his mates, sneering, flexing their necks and fingers. It was three inexperienced boys against five older and more muscular brutes. In the hearts of the tongue-tied bystanders Arash and his companions were the heroes, but none of them had the guts to side with them. They were fully aware of the terrible repercussions that their actions would bring to them. Their timid hearts were filled with admiration for Arash and his mates who didn't seem to be bothered about the future.

The thugs had been challenged and had no choice but to kick the boys' asses to set an example to the local people, letting them know that the city belonged to Gholam Ghouh and his gang. Arash threw the first punch and reduced the opposition to four. The man that he punched was on the ground, unconscious throughout the fight. It began with a fist fight and escalated to the use of conventional and unconventional weapons. Then they smashed the loose pavement tiles into pieces and threw them at each other. Arash and his pals chased the men off down the road. When they returned victorious, the mob was murdering the unconscious man. Arash saved the man's life, but he was left permanently disabled.

'Dad won a battle, but I think he started the war,' interrupted Cyrus.

'Well, one has to enjoy the victory of each battle as much as one can, even under the shadow of the war,' I said. 'Arash turned into a hero and I into a proud kid.'

'How did Gholam Ghouh and his gang react to the incident?'

'Oddly, they did nothing. No one knows what happened, but Gholam Ghouh and his gang never bothered anyone in our area again. People said Arash had struck a deal with the thug.'

'Do you play lottery?'

‘Beg your pardon!’

‘Do you gamble?’

Was my nephew suffering from schizophrenia, asking an irrelevant question?

‘Gambling is *Haram* in that country,’ I said. ‘You see, the authorities love people more than they love themselves. They don’t want them to end up in the flames of hell because of betting.’

Everything was a gamble in my country; breathing the air, drinking water, eating meat and of course, speaking your mind. No standards, no supervision, no accountability, no complain, even gambolling about on the streets was a gamble.

‘I’m taking a gamble if I decide to take you with me,’ said Cyrus.

‘Don’t worry; your pets are not going to get chickenpox from me.’

‘I mean it uncle.’

Who was Dr Mara Schnittka Cojuangco? I stopped by her hotel and asked for her. The receptionist checked and said no one was or had been in the hotel of that name. I gave the room number and described the woman. Mara Bahrami was her real name and she had checked out two days earlier. Bahrami was a Persian family name. Everyone who had anything to do with the Philippines was puzzlingly connected to Iran. It felt good to carry a gun in my pocket and be able to defend myself. I was beginning to understand Arash’s obsession with security.

In the Shakespeare Globe I delivered my paper on “The Influence of Eastern Philosophy on Hamlet”. I suppose I was the first lecturer, or perhaps the only one who had read a paper to an academic audience with a gun in his pocket.

I left the Globe and headed to Angelina's flat in Camden. Apparently, no one was following me. I buzzed the intercom and waited. Perhaps she was listening or even watching me through the intercom.

'You didn't answer my phone calls and I was worried about you,' I said.

I could hear her breathing.

'I don't want to cause you any problems, but I have some questions to ask you.' No response.

'I'd like to meet your boss. I need to talk to him.'

The intercom remained silent. She was hiding something. The Russians might have asked her to stop seeing me.

Ten days in London and I hadn't seen any famous sights that tourists frequently visited. Following others on a well-trodden path was the least creative way to see the city, but those sights were parts of London and visiting them once wouldn't hurt. I couldn't be more wrong, because it hurt to see people, who had travelled thousands of miles to be there, taking photos with a soulless waxwork of some celebrity to upload on social media to tell their little world how lucky they were to be next to a nonbeing. Map in hands, I moved to the next sight. How could a big building with little character be attractive only because they said the queen lived in it? What did tourists see in a royal guard wearing a ridiculous hat that I didn't? How could people wait for hours in a queue to get on a Ferris wheel, which looked like a giant bicycle wheel, to see the roofs of the buildings? What a clever way to empty the tourists' pockets. I felt like a fish in a pond whose water level had been reduced to mud.

I dropped into the Singles to see if I could garner some stories about Arash's past life in the Philippines. There I met a man who was checking numbers in a notebook.

'This is Karim,' said Tayeb. 'We call him Karl Marx.'

The man's nose was like a seed-eating bird's beak and the heavy duty spectacles perched on it were the most dominant features of his face. Their fat black rims, like a pair of South American anacondas, had coiled themselves around the thick lenses, the bottom of two Irish beer glasses.

'Interesting name,' I said. 'Karim and Karl share the first three letters, which must mean something.'

The man peered over his glasses and ignored me, taking my irony in his stride. I craned my neck to see his notebook and looked at his accounts. He stopped writing, dropped the pen onto the belly of the book and snapped it shut.

'You're an erudite professor of English and I'm a country bumpkin,' said Karl Marx. 'Can you see any commonality there?' He drilled a hard stare into my eyes through his foggy glasses.

'You work with numbers and I work with words,' I said. 'They're both human inventions, it's what separates us from the animals.'

I stretched out my hand to him and he shook it.

'He knows *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital* by heart,' said Tayeb. 'That's why we call him Karl Marx.'

'I don't think even Marx himself knew his work by heart,' I said. So, the Koran wasn't the only book that people memorised, but didn't practise.

'Your brother has breached most of the rules written in those books,' said Karl Marx and crossed his arms.

'Why are you and others still with him if he's ignored your principles and the words you've loved enough to memorise?' He sipped his coffee.

'Arash and a few men like him broke the rules to make them suitable for our nation in protest against our Toudehi comrades whose reins were in the hands of the Russians,' he said.

I knew that the communist movement in Iran was more than a century old and was popular amongst intellectuals and the working class during the transformation of the country from feudalism into capitalism. I knew that the Toudeh Party was formed during the Second World War and that they played a crucial role in siding with the Prime Minister of the time, Mosaddeq who was campaigning to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. I knew that most of the new generation of communists considered the Toudeh party too conservative and under the direct influence of Moscow, so a splinter group emerged that believed in armed struggle against the monarchy and then the Islamic regime. It seemed to me that a common hatred for their conservative comrades had brought Arash and his comrades together.

‘I don’t know how much Arash has told you about the time we were students in the Philippines, but we did things for each other that you only read about in books or see in movies.’

‘He’s told me a lot,’ I lied.

‘What I like about Arash is,’ said Karl Marx, ‘that he broke most of the rules in socialist literature to respond to the events around us and still remained a damned good socialist. Many comrades didn’t approve of his methods, but they were the type who sat behind their desks and did nothing but criticise us who were in the thick of the events.’

He finished his coffee, walked to a grand piano, sat behind it and began playing a soothing melody.

‘What is your relationship with the Russians?’ I asked.

‘Neighbours, rivals, collaborators,’ answered Tayeb.

His generalisation was a strategy not to divulge information, so I tried a different approach, asking how many of them were married.

‘I am,’ answered Tayeb, ‘but they’re all bachelors. They think you shouldn’t keep a hen for its eggs when you can buy them in the market.’

I was not sure if their chauvinist analogy was about women, sex and marriage, but it didn't worth asking for clarification.

'And how about Arash?' I asked, trying to maintain a natural tone of voice.

An awkward silence altered the atmosphere in the house. What was wrong or difficult about that question? Yes, he was my brother and I should have known about his marital status, but I hadn't seen him for two decades and there had been no news about him during that period.

'I think you should ask him that question,' said Karl Marx while playing.

There must be a psychological explanation why I hadn't asked Arash about his personal life while he had asked me all sorts of private questions. Was it the effect of culture (respecting your older brothers) or my personality? Perhaps we were not as close as I thought we were. I thought my relationship with Arash was beyond our biological similarities and ideological and political differences, but something was obviously missing. One should be able to think aloud in the presence of someone one loves.

My question had thrown everyone into his own sea of thoughts.

'With the amount of time that you guys spend with each other,' I said, 'there is no room for a family.' A lame attempt to lighten the atmosphere. 'I think of your friendship as an unconsummated marriage.'

'I like that,' said Tayeb.

Other's facial expressions were unfathomable. They were willing to talk about everything, but Arash's personal life, so we changed the subject. I asked Karl Marx the reason people from the same countries lived in certain areas in London. He said life in London was like a table with tens of rows and columns. Race, religion, language, for example, were columns and education, financial status and class were rows, which compartmentalised life in the capital. The situation pushed newcomers to find their own kind with whom they felt safe and more comfortable. Therefore, they integrated into their small communities, but not into the society.

London was a gigantic beehive, and people lived in boxes separated from each other. You could see different looks in a London street, but those people never mingled in a meaningful sense.

Multiculturalism was skin deep.

‘Arash wants to see you in a restaurant this evening,’ said Tayeb. ‘It is in a Turkish area. You’ll think that you’re in Istanbul.’

That evening I called Leila who said she had obtained some information about the Iranian embassy in Manila being attacked by the students in 1980. She had seen a picture of Iran’s ambassador hanging by his legs from the window of the third floor of the embassy on the front page of a Philippine newspaper.

‘Did you find out who the ambassador was?’ I asked.

‘He is a real thug,’ she said. ‘Before the revolution, usurers would use him to collect their usurious interest. After the revolution he repented, grew a beard and changed his name to Ismael Ahmadi.’

‘How on earth could such a character become an ambassador? An ambassador must at least be able to speak English.’

‘He speaks English perfectly.’

Leila told me this story:

Essy is five when he and his divorced mother move to this palace-like house for her mother to work as a maid. It belongs to an American man who runs a lucrative business in Iran. Essy grows up with the family’s children and learns English from them. Years later, an expensive necklace disappears from the house and they accuse his mother of stealing it. The family ask her to leave, but later they reemploy her as they find the necklace. Essy never forgets this and at the first opportunity he kills their two dogs, the very reason they call him Essy Sag Kosh (the-dog-killer Essy). This time they kick Essy and his mother out of their house for good. His

hatred for the American family attracts him to the revolution, which is considered antiimperialist. He persuades his fellow-revolutionaries to enter the house of the Americans, take the family hostage and steal their belongings. After the revolution, for his reward, they make him Iran's ambassador to the Philippines. After the students' attack on the embassy in 1980, he resigns and goes back to Iran to fight against the Iraqis who have invaded the country. In the war he proves to be a commendable commander and fights there for seven years. After the war they recruit him into the secret service. He may have been involved in hunting some of the high-profile anti-regime subjects outside the country.

Leila enumerated the problems the thug could cause me while I was out of the country and asked me to be vigilant and cautious.

Turkish Talk

My chaperones dropped me at my moonlight tryst and waited for me to enter the place. My decision to ask Arash the questions that were preying on my mind had already liberated me. The smell of kebabs was in the air. The chef who had told a joke to his laughing fellow workers was adding some commentary in Turkish while skewering lamb chops. What an interesting idea to cook and serve the food in front of your customers.

I sat opposite Arash and asked him who he really was. I had heard stories about him, but they had passed through the collective consciousness of people who loved him, they were bound to have been exaggerated.

He beamed.

‘I like the smell of bread being baked on burning wood,’ he said. ‘I like avocado, cinnamon, strong cheddar cheese, walnuts, olives, wine, fast cars, women, jasmine, boxing, poetry, country life. I don’t like stews, plastic packages, pink, capitalism, birthdays, lawyers, traffic lights, vitamin pills, mobile phones, CCTV cameras, estate agents, chewing gum and the new generation.’

Amused by his lists, I asked him what his job was.

‘If you can’t tell who I am from what I just told you, what I do for a living is not going to help you.’

‘Are you married?’ I asked. ‘Do I have any nephews or nieces?’

A waitress brought us a tray of mixed hot and cold mezze with a basket of warm bread. Another one put a jug of Turkish Ayran on our table. Arash dipped a piece of bread into the smoky aubergine mezze and put it into his mouth.

‘Is my marital status going to help you know me?’

‘I don’t know. It would be nice to meet your wife and children if you have a family.’

Arash stood up as graceful as a peacock and strode towards the toilets at the back of the restaurant. Shortly after, a waiter cleared the middle of the table and put a huge tray of mixed barbecue on it. A hill of half rice, half bulgur covered with lamb chops, ribs, skewers of minced kebab, chicken breast, grilled hot peppers and tomatoes.

It took Arash a while to return to the table. He put his knife and fork aside and used his hands to eat. Something was bothering him beneath his silence. Why was it permissible for him to ask me personal questions, yet it was awkward when I asked him the same questions? He got straight answers from me and I got philosophy, history and commentaries for my questions. Ageism was not just applied to those who were very old, you could be discriminated against for being a bit younger, considered to be unexperienced, naïve and imprudent.

‘Had a good day?’ I asked.

‘What is a good day for you?’

‘Well, every day can be a good day if I don’t sin.’ I wanted to wind him up and lure him into a philosophical conversation that he so loved.

‘Dead people never sin.’

‘What is a good day for you?’ I returned his favour.

‘When I’m not dead.’

I picked up a lamb chop and sank my teeth into it, admiring our ancestors for discovering fire to cook their meat.

‘There are many people who are walking around, but are already dead,’ I said.

‘Well said,’ he said. ‘Many of them are killed by their religions.’

It felt reassuring to see him back to his uncompromising criticising self.

‘And many are playing dead to stay away from the claws and teeth of life,’ I said, ‘because they know that facing the world is more terrifying than awe-inspiring.’

‘I remember this man in our village who played dead for a bear,’ said Arash. ‘His mates witnessed how the bear made sure he was actually dead. They took his half eaten body back to the village. His wife and children were wailing. I was four or five, watching them, thinking if the man had stood tall and fought back, the bear might have retreated and the man returned to his family.’

A waitress came with an aluminium container and asked if we wanted her to put the rest of our food in it to take home. I shook my head and asked for two cups of Turkish tea.

‘Have you made up your mind?’ Arash asked.

Was he asking me to choose between playing dead and fighting back? I didn’t know what decision I was supposed to make. He noticed my dilemma.

‘Are you going to make a bomb for me?’

I knew that the unwanted bill that I had put aside without opening, would knock on my door again. The idea of me making a bomb in London seemed more laughable than ridiculous. I had been trained to dispose of bombs and defuse mines not to make them. I was proud of being someone who had rendered numerous explosive devices safe, which otherwise would have taken lives. Making bombs had never occurred to me. I had considered myself a part of the peace and not the war process. I detested companies that made weapons and explosive devices and I couldn’t and wouldn’t make one.

‘I don’t, I can’t do it.’

‘When people say, *I don’t give a shit*,’ said Arash, ‘mathematically, it means that they want to keep the shit to themselves. That’s why they stink.’

‘I’m sorry, Arash, I can’t be a part of any shit.’

‘You already are a part of it, leading my enemies to me.’

Was he trying to make me feel guilty to improve the effect of his persuasive pitch?

‘Look, I came to London to take part in some academic conferences, deliver some papers and go back home.’

‘You’re carrying a gun in your pocket, aren’t you?’ I shook my head in disbelief. He had forced me into carrying the weapon and he was questioning me why I had it with me.

‘Because you believed me,’ he said. ‘Because the danger that threatens you and me is real.’

The cups of tea on the table were sitting opposite each other losing warmth. An invisible fly was buzzing in the air. I killed a fly when I was a child. The family was camping. Dad and Arash were preparing a fire, Mum was skewering chicken pieces and Pasha and I were playing with a ball. Mum was shooing a fly away, but it was very persistent and would fly back. I walked to the chicken skewers and with my palms opposite each other and above the skewers waited motionless. My sleeves were mirroring the beats of my heart. The fly came and bang, I snapped into action. The insect fell on the ground. Its juice and one of its wings stuck to my palms, red, russet, slate grey. I watched how ants carried the fly’s torso away for it to be stored in one of their labyrinths of burrows. Mother beamed, but I felt evil for becoming an executioner. What was the difference between the life of a fly and the life of an elephant? Which one was more precious? Surely there were more flies than elephants. Supply and demand would always be a part of the appraisals. How many million lives of flies were equal to an elephant’s life? Life was life and taking it was wrong. Mum would say that an egg thief would become a camel thief if he continued stealing. She was right, a fly-killer was being asked to become a human-killer.

‘I can’t kill people or be the tool or the cause of it,’ I said.

He gave me a burning penetrating look, as if I had killed his father and brother. He must know by now that I wasn’t a pushover. Outside was not dark yet. The sky was unvaryingly ashen, uneventful, playing dead.

‘If someone walks into this restaurant with a gun in his hand and tries to kill you and me,’ said Arash, ‘will you use the gun in your pocket to defend us?’

‘I don’t know, I may use it.’

‘You *must* use it or he’ll kill us,’ he said. ‘Religions, laws and morality have approved self-defence. Look at the animal kingdom, they use whatever weaponry they have to defend themselves. You’re not less than a bee, are you?’

Self-defence, what a gullible word, used and abused by all the bullies in the world. Arash was asking a fly-killer to become a human-murderer. A murderer is a murderer whether he takes one life or many. There is no such a thing as a more accomplished murderer. When you are drowned at the deep, it doesn’t matter how far your head is under the water, half a metre or a thousand makes no difference. My childhood hero was asking me to help him defend himself and I was thinking of morality.

‘The taking of how many lives will save yours?’ I asked.

‘How many lives do you think my life is worth?’

When philosophy is in books and it is a means to entertain your intellectual faculties, it is all fun and it makes sense, but when it overshadows your life, you see the lumpen side of it. Morality is a rainbow. Some people voluntarily die for a cause that they think is worth more than their lives. Others destroy the world for a cause that they think is worth more than the lives of others. There must be causes that are worth giving your life for, but no cause is robust enough to take lives. After Pasha and Dad’s death, Arash’s life was more valuable, more meaningful. He was the only sibling I had left, a missing piece that I had discovered and I was not going to lose it again. What if I didn’t do anything and they killed Arash? Would I be able to live with myself, knowing that I could have saved his life, but I didn’t?

‘I’ll think about it,’ I said.

‘This calls for a drink,’ said Arash and waved his hand to a waiter.

‘Not for me, thanks.’

‘An agreement should be endorsed and sealed with a toast.’

‘I haven’t agreed to anything,’ I said and raised my empty cup of tea to him. ‘I’m already drunk.’

He ordered a bottle of wine, which meant he expected me to join him.

‘The way you drink wine mirrors the way you live,’ said Arash. ‘Some flirt with life, these are the ones who smell and sip their wine. Others spill it on the ground, they’re life wasters. With comrades you should drink the whole bottle. With a brother you should drink to death.’

How could I say no to a drink that carried with it a mountain weight? How could I knock brotherhood off its pedestal, sitting opposite my brother? After all it was just a glass of wine. Life had trampled on Arash’s soul, I felt it was my responsibility to remind him that he had one. Drinking with him was a levy on my beliefs, but it made Arash happy; it was my contribution to brotherhood.

We raised our glasses.

‘To life,’ said Arash.

The waiters cleared our table, a hint that we should leave, so that they could use the table to serve new customers.

‘Do we really have to do this?’ I said.

‘You’re a man,’ Arash said. ‘When are you going to stop behaving like a boy?’

I signalled to one of the waiters. I told him to fetch his manager. A medium height man with a seven-month-pregnant belly came to our table. His English was poor and he couldn’t understand me. He thought there was something wrong with the food. He asked one of the Turkish waiters to interpret for him, but he didn’t seem to understand either. It had turned into a comical scene. Arash stood up and walked out of the restaurant, demonstrating our

intentions. The man asked a question in Turkish and the waiter replied, finally the penny dropped. He said something to the waiter who rushed out of the restaurant. Arash lit his pipe outside and smiled at me. We were not in the main road and could fight for quite a while before anyone called the police. The manager was standing between two waiters, cursing and swearing in Turkish. He could see that Arash was enjoying the build-up of the drama, which only ignited his ferocity further.

The waiter arrived followed by six heated Turkish men who talked to each other simultaneously and somehow understood each other, perhaps talking strategies. So it was ten against two. One shouldn't get into wrestling when fighting with more than one person. I had to be quick on my feet. I would have explosive bursts of movement, getting close to them and throw a couple of punches and then quickly get out of range to avoid being caught.

How wrong I was! Arash crossed his arms and told them that I was the one who didn't want to pay. Before I got the chance to say a word the men rushed towards me. I landed a punch on the face of the first man and ducked a hook. Two of them rushed forward at the same time and they received two punches. That made the others look at each other, searching for courage. To prolong the fight and maintain my stamina I had to keep it simple and punch only when I knew I would hit the target. Single punches were enough to keep them at bay, but they wouldn't do serious damage. A street fight is more mental than physical. It wasn't a toe-to-toe fight, I had to box cleverly and wear them down mentally. Three of them rushed forward, trying to grab my legs. I hit one of them with my knee and another one with a punch, but one of them grabbed my legs and pushed me backwards until I landed on my backside. On the ground, the man's head was on my lap, so I landed a right hook into his jaw while sitting. He became unconscious and fell on my legs. While I was trying to move his body away and stand back up onto my feet, I received a kick to my back. Pain thundered through my nervous system. I released my legs and tried to back up onto my knees when I received a

punch from behind. I was almost up onto my feet when another man wrestled me to the ground again. Now I was getting punished by five or six men simultaneously.

I realised that the men were leaving me one by one, which gave me a chance to get back onto my feet. I knocked down the only man left fighting with me and turned to face the others. I saw Arash standing amongst the injured men on the ground. He took some cash from his pocket and threw it onto the ground next to the manager who was holding his bloody nose.

‘Keep the change,’ said Arash.

I couldn’t figure out how he knocked down eight men in less than a minute. So, the stories I had heard about his fighting and bravery were not overstatements. Supermen didn’t just exist in books and movies, they could be your own brother. I was not sure that his quest for going round London and looking for fights was to show me what a great fighter he was. I doubted he wanted to test my ability for fighting. With Arash you were never quite sure about anything, but I felt lighter, exuberant and alive.

Arash dropped me at my new hotel and waited for me to get in. I walked to the hotel’s bar to get some juice. Karl Marx was sitting there, reading a newspaper. I sat on a stool next to him.

‘Are you following me?’

‘Certainly not!’ he said. ‘I live here.’

‘I have an in-house chaperone, then.’

‘I’m too old for those men in the Singles,’ he said. ‘I prefer my own company.’ He closed the newspaper and asked if I was enjoying my trip.

‘Tell me about the Iranian embassy in the Philippines in 1980.’

‘What about it?’ asked Karl Marx.

‘You and your comrades were making headlines.’

‘I have nothing to add to what Arash has told you.’

It felt good that Arash’s friends thought he had told me everything about his time in the Philippines.

‘I’d like to hear your version,’ I said. ‘After the revolution, the new embassy team banned students’ families from sending them money. Hundreds of students didn’t go to the embassy to sign the shameful paper and they had to survive and finish their education.’ I used the technique that I would use in my Creative Writing classes, ushering the students through the threshold of a story, letting them taste the mood and atmosphere of the new world and then hand them the torch to explore the world solo.

‘I’m sure Arash has told you about the sort of things we did to survive,’ Karl Marx took the baton and sped away with his story, ‘but there was this time when the Philippine police raided the flat where we kept some of our stuff and arrested me and six other students. They seized twelve guns and a million US dollars cash. Someone had betrayed us.’

‘Bastards!’ I encouraged him.

‘In the police station, they began beating us up. We knew someone had bribed the police, but we were also confident that Arash would release us very soon and with the connections that he had, the police officer in charge would probably lose his job and get punished. Those days Arash was rubbing shoulders with Marcos’s son and the most influential people in Manila.’

I furrowed my forehead for explanation.

‘Marcos was the president of the Philippines at the time. After hours of torture, they put us in a police van and delivered us to the Iranian Embassy where even the Foreign Secretary himself wouldn’t be able to rescue us. The regime’s ambassador told us that they would send us back to Iran the next day to be executed for the death of students who had been killed in a clash with us in the university campus two weeks earlier. We had heard about the regime’s

arbitrary executions back home and how easy it was to get condemned to death without any trial. We were on our way to the abattoir.'

'I was only a kid, but I know there was a period after the revolution when everyone's nerves were on edge,' I said. 'You could get executed for having read a socialist book.'

'Bloody, beaten, hungry, thirsty and depressed we were handcuffed in a dingy room in the embassy. The youngest student was crying quietly and my broken ribs needed company to hear their pain. I heard the footsteps of people running up and down the corridor calling each other's names. Then came silence. I woke up the others. We put our ears to the door, the walls and the floor to find out what was happening. A few minutes later, the door was opened and Arash appeared holding a pistol to the ambassador's head. Seven guards with their hands on their heads walked into the room at gunpoint. One of them took off our handcuffs, which we then used to handcuff them.'

'How many students did this?'

'Arash had only four people with him, Zabih was one of them. The ambassador was swearing that he would hunt down every one of us and kill us with his own hands when Arash punched him in the face. He fell onto the ground with a splat like a cowpat. Arash and Zabih dragged him to the balcony and tied his legs together with a rope. They secured the other end of the rope to the railings and then lifted the man and let him dangle down over the balcony. We stepped over a dead body, got into three cars and left the embassy behind, with its ambassador hanging upside down from the third floor. It was there that I realised the triviality of words and the value of a gun with a silencer on it.'

Arash and his comrades had killed an embassy guard. How could one kill for peace? The moment you pick up a gun to fight for peace, you have already defeated the cause.

'I thought Arash had left the country to be a doctor and save lives and not to be a gangster and take lives,' I was thinking out loud.

‘Sorry, I thought you knew ... well, I put my foot in it, didn’t I?’ said Karl Marx. ‘I should’ve kept my mouth shut.’ I stood up to go. ‘They would have killed all of us if he hadn’t saved us.’

With that in my head, I wouldn’t be able to sleep. I left the hotel for *The Golden Club* to see Angelina. She had been avoiding me, she was hiding something from me.

Russian Literature

Semi-tipsy, I arrived opposite the club. Formal clothing would have been a good attempt at camouflage to pass through the security, but planning wasn't my forte. I joined a small group of men who were entering the casino, pretending that I was a club member, relying on my confidence to get me past the bouncers.

'Excuse me!' one of the bouncers called from behind me. I quickened my steps.

'Hey!'

I ran through a passage, a door and entered a spacious hall where people were gambling around different tables. Those who were not immersed in their games noticed my intrusion. I smiled at anyone who met my eyes. Two men in black suits who were listening to their earpieces marched towards me from the far end of the hall. I zigzagged between the tables feeling like a boy playing with his street mates.

The bouncers joined them with determination written all over their faces. I darted toward the corridor that would lead me to the kitchen. Rugby style, someone jumped at me from nowhere and both of us hit a table. I collapsed onto the ground with a fat knee on my neck. The crimson carpet smelt of wet sheep. Someone kicked me in the back so hard that I felt my kidneys coming out of my sides. Another blow on my flank caused a burning sensation in my guts. Intense heat washed away the pain, infinite darkness overwhelmed my world, I switched off.

Sounds came first, echoing in my skull, indistinguishable. My eyelids were two heavy shields. A hand wiped my forehead with a wet sponge which smelt of kitchens. Sounds came out of the haze. A woman was swearing. You can tell when people swear even in a language you don't know. She was a blur. My eyes' lenses were deranged, my senses suspended, my

head pounding with pain, throbbing with the drumming of my heart. Why do things go black so quickly yet return so sluggishly?

‘No ambulance,’ said a man. ‘I don’t want any fucking ambulance or police cars outside this building.’

So, my condition was so bad that I needed urgent medical attention. The bastards must have kept hitting me when I was unconscious. The world of fuliginous shades returned.

When I came round, I found myself sitting in an armchair opposite a big desk. A man with his back to me was watching London through a huge window. There were no golden rings on his fingers, he was not smoking a Cuban cigar and when he turned to me, he didn’t have any tattoos or gold teeth. The other three men in the room looked like UFC champions in smart suits.

‘I’m Mr Kozlov,’ said the man. ‘The chief executive of *The Golden Casino*.’

I felt like a blind man who wished to have the gift of sight, and God had granted him a pair of brand-new eyes. Excitement coursed through my guts like chilli sauce. It reminded me of the time when after three months of extensive training they took us to the minefields and I was left alone with my knowledge and heart to defuse my first mine.

‘You’ve been sneaking around one of our branches and bothering a member of my staff,’ he said and picked up my passport and sat on his seat behind the desk. ‘You arrived in this country only last week and yet you’ve managed to get a gun.’ He put my passport back onto the desk. ‘A pro doesn’t take his passport with him when he carries a gun. Or, maybe it’s a fake ID.’ He sipped his drink. ‘Who are you and what has brought you all the way from Iran to London?’

‘Does the name Pasha Karamian ring any bells?’ I asked, feeling the pain all over my body.

‘What’s your relationship with the bastard?’

I would have made a lunge for the gun on the desk and put it to Mr Kozlov’s head if I hadn’t felt so dizzy. I couldn’t see any cartridges, it was empty.

‘I won’t let anyone insult my late brother,’ I said.

Mr Kozlov said that he was sorry to hear the terrible news, pretending that he didn’t know about Pasha’s death, a mobster with sentiment.

‘Did you kill him?’

‘Is he really dead?’ he asked.

‘I understand that he worked for your company.’

‘For three years,’ said Mr Kozlov. ‘He was our financial consultant working closely with our accountants.’ My puzzled eyes encouraged him to explain. ‘He would transfer money between our worldwide accounts for tax purposes. You need to be a few steps ahead of the tax man if you want to survive and grow in a business.’ He opened a small box on the coffee table and took out a Cuban cigar and inhaled its aroma. ‘I must say he was good at his job. You can imagine how much we trusted him.’ He lit the cigar and gave it a couple of ant eater sucks. ‘Well, your brother turned out to be a cheapie and betrayed our trust, but we didn’t kill him. I would’ve killed him years ago, when he disappeared with millions of my money that he had transferred into his own bank account.’

He smoked his cigar.

‘Why didn’t you kill him if he *betrayed* you?’

A man walked into the room, said something into Mr Kozlov’s ear and left.

‘Why didn’t you kill Pasha if he stole your money?’ I drilled into the man’s eyes with a stare. ‘You have enough thugs around you to do the job.’

‘Look Mr Karamian, when you accuse someone of murdering your brother, you’d better have some evidence to back up your claim.’ He puffed on his cigar. ‘My condolences to you and Arash.’

‘What is between you and Arash?’ I asked.

‘Why don’t you ask your brother?’

‘I’m asking you.’

‘I let Pasha go because Arash paid back what he had stolen from us.’ He stood up, put his hands in his pocket and walked towards the window. ‘I’d say that we’ve had an agreeable relationship since then.’

Angelina stepped into the room escorted by a man. She pulled her hand out of the man’s grip and walked to me.

‘I’ll take him to my place,’ she said.

I closed my eyes. In the hands of Pasha’s girl I was safe.

The bouncers put me in a wheelchair and used the back door to take me to a waiting fourwheel drive. Angelina sat next to me in the back seat and cushioned my head on her shoulder. London roads were generous with speed bumps. Every bump and puddle on the road, every break was rendered as different shades of pain in my body. Even pain shortens time; it evicts the tedium from your system. The men unfolded the wheelchair and put me in it. With my eyes shut, I had to trust the Russian men taking me up the stairs. I felt a dull pain everywhere and a sharp one in my sides. When they left and Angelina used a wet towel to moisten my forehead, I opened my eyes. She smiled and promised that I would be fine, I fell asleep.

Dream: Angelina, Pasha and I were in a boat on a sparkling lake surrounded by treecovered mountains. Angelina was wearing a wedding dress. Pasha and I were naked rowing in synchronisation. A genial smile was on his face when he stopped rowing. I slowed

down to see the reason. He winked at me before diving into the lake backwards. I stood up and sat down immediately, realising that I was naked. The lake turned into a rapid river and the boat was speeding towards a huge waterfall. I tried to row against the current, but it was hopeless.

I turned to Angelina to tell her that we had to jump into the river before it reached the waterfall. She too was naked. Her countenance was composed, her eyes mischievous and playful. She didn't seem to understand the severity of the situation. On her hands and knees, she crawled towards me. Any moment the boat would light upon the waterfall. I started and woke up.

'You okay?' asked Angelina and whipped her wet eyes.

I sat up. She smiled. Light was shivering in her eyes. I put my arm around her shoulders and she rested her head on my chest. A couple of teardrops rolled down her cheeks and wetted my shirt, warm. Was it appropriate to stroke her hair to comfort her? How could a twenty-six-year-old virgin, coming from an Islamic country know? The theocratic government separated the two genders as if they were fire and fuel and would burn if they met, both in this world and the next one. When you go to single-sex schools, you don't get to know the other gender, you don't learn where the borders are. Two and a half decades of it erodes your confidence, so you don't know what to do when a woman's head is on your chest. You can't even trust your gut feelings to get it right when your instinct belongs to a body whose testosterone level, like a bull elephant in heat, is high, blurring your vision. Leila was my only experience with girls and we hadn't had sex yet. We had had some skirmishes, but they had never bloomed into a fully-fledged war. You see, this is the miracle of physical asceticism, understanding lovemaking as a war. Warfare or not, Leila and I had decided to save the big experience for our wedding night. I had had numerous chances with women who would put their lives at risk in an Islamic country and come to my friends' houses to have sex

with them in exchange for money or even nothing, but I never capitulated. Sleeping with a woman for me had never been purely physical, two bodies rubbing against each other to gain pleasure. I had a rather idealistic interpretation of sex as the union of the souls of two lovers manifested through their bodies. Perhaps that was the reason why I was still a virgin in an imperfect world. Abstinence is extremism in the name of perfection and perfection is idealism, seeing the world as black and white. In the dark, one cannot see better, now you convince me that light is from within.

Angelina had slept on my chest. I kept watching her muliebrity until I slid into a stupor.

Dream: Leila stepped into the room. Her long hair was a waterfall that had covered her body. She whispered something in my ear in Russian. I wanted to say that I couldn't speak the language when she silenced me with a kiss. Her lips injected poison into my heart. The Russian version of Leila was wilder and freer. My favourite female characters in Russian literature entered the room; Natasha, Anna, Lara, Katerina, Grushenka, Olga, Odintsova and Tatiana. They came with an irresistible lure to seduce me to sin. The primeval man in me had been awoken. One of the girls slid her hand into my shorts. Where was my real Leila to save me? *I'm here*, said Leila in Russian and I understood her. Like a moth, attracted to the light of a candle, I entered her terrain with no map, no plan and no fear, deeper and deeper. She was a burning blacksmith furnace that turned me into a rose, amber, sparkling white glow. She held me with a pair of tongs, put me on an anvil, hit me with a sledgehammer and moulded me into a new being. She immersed me in a water-trough and let me rest next to her, trembling, panting.

My frantic heartbeats startled me awake. Angelina murmured something in Russian but didn't wake up or remove her head from my chest. My underwear was wet and I was trapped under her. I could feel my semen running onto my skin, sliding onto my side and back. I had to get away before she woke up and smelt the male juice. I wish life had a backdoor through

which I could escape. It took ten minutes of intricate manoeuvres to get out from under Angelina and lay her head on the sofa without waking her up.

Under the shower, Dad's image came to reproach me. Why should I be ashamed of an involuntary act? There are nights in a man's life that he doesn't want to reach the cockcrow, but this wasn't one of them. I confess that in some corner of my being I may have fancied her, but I didn't sleep with her and that ought to count for something. Now, if you decide to punish me for my thoughts, like the Almighty, you must first ignore my gallant resistance. Sometimes I wish for the disappearance of humankind, but does that make me guilty of murdering eight billion people? Your actions demonstrate who you are and not your thoughts, thus by the authority vested in me by wisdom, I announce the annulment of abstract and the arbitrariness of my sin. Immoral or not, I had ejaculated due to my proximity to her and it was different from the ones that I had experienced before. I had learnt to speak a new language and no one could make me unlearn it. Like a soldier who was guarding a trench, unaware of the end of the war, something within me was trying to defend my naivety.

I squeezed a bottle of shampoo onto my hair. As a kid I loved it when my father caressed my hair with his long fingers under the shower.

Once a week Dad would take Pasha and me to a public Hamaam close to our home to flay us and wash the dead skin off our fledgling bodies. Every Friday I would be reborn in the communal bath, shedding skin like a reptile and would come out of the ordeal a braver boy. Painful, yes, but belonging to the club of men hadn't come to me that easy.

Only a few months earlier I would have had to go to the Hamaam with my Mum. If there was one thing that got on my five-year-old nerves it was the shame of walking to the public bath with my Mum. I would never forget the day that the receptionist had told my mother that I was almost *a man* and she shouldn't take me with her to the ladies' sessions anymore. It was the best rejection I had received in my short life. It was a Monday and I couldn't wait for the

weekend so that I could go to the male session with Pasha and Dad for the first time. Having had his mates to go with, Arash wouldn't go to the Hamaam with us, which was the privilege of being the firstborn. As a lastborn I was always in a queue.

Pasha gave me a crash course on the horrifying stages of the washing process and during the week tortured me with dreadful stories about Dad's bathing rituals, trying to turn my waiting days into a great misfortune that had befallen me. He warned me that there would be boiling water on my head and father would rub my skin so hard that it would become like my perpetually bruised knees and elbows. If Pasha could come out of the tribulation alive every week, I would be also able to endure it. I couldn't help but tell my friends in the kindergarten that I was going to the men's session. I would love to call them Mummy's boys, but I had to first experience the male session, at least once, and I had to wait for a very long week to pass at a slug's pace. I would call them sweet little girls next week when we would do a wee-wee competition in the toilets to see whose wee would fly higher and travel further than the other boys. Life sometimes kept a bit of enchantment tucked away in case of need, times of tedium.

Friday finally landed in the Hamaam, which unexpectedly had become one of the coolest places a boy could go to. To grapple with pain like a man had become a privilege. Dad was the pilot, Pasha the steward and I the passenger. When Dad was rinsing the shampoo out and combing my hair with his big fingers, through the hot waterfall I saw Pasha who signalled the end of the torment like an aircraft marshaller signalling the pilot to lead the aeroplane to its parking stand. Having prepared myself for more agony, the whole experience felt so straightforward, even pleasurable. Our trio walked into the changing area, the cold blessed my baptism of fire and I felt like Superman himself on our neighbour's black and white television. Dad hadn't bought us a TV, believing that it would ruin our eyes and our minds. The superman had passed the manhood audition successfully and the reward was a cold bottle of CANADA DRY that the caretaker took from a box in the pool, opened and handed to me.

Pasha was not telling lies when he had told me that I would have the whole bottle to myself without sharing it with anyone. I put the golden drink to my mouth and didn't let it go until my heart began racing for oxygen. The acidulous gas came out of my nose and burnt it pleasantly while my eyes were sizzling with eyewater. I looked at Dad and Pasha, each holding in their hands a bottle of the best drink in the world.

Angelina knocked at the bathroom's door. I covered myself with my hands. Her hands put a folded T-shirt, underpants and a bathrobe on top of a washing basket.

'Pasha's clothes,' she said and left me alone with my brother's undergarments, which smelt of mothballs. Why did she still have his belongings? Had they loved each other?

In Pasha's bathrobe, I was in the sitting room drying my hair when the main door slammed open. I switched off the hairdryer and brandished it, ready to use it as a weapon. A badly-roughed-up man was thrown into the flat. He struggled to get onto his feet. On his hands and knees, he glanced at me and wiped the blood on his nose and lips. The man was one of the Golden Club's bouncers who had kicked me in the ribs earlier.

Hands in pockets, Arash walked into the flat. Angelina, in a nightdress, came out of the bedroom, stunned. Arash walked up to me, grabbed my bathrobe with both hands and pressed me against the wall. 'Never get involved in risky activities without me while you're in London.'

He let me go and turned to Zabih and Tayeb and inclined his head to take the bouncer out of the room. They lifted the battered man by his arms and dragged him out of the flat.

'You're my only goddamn brother and I won't let you get yourself killed,' he said and put my gun and my passport onto the dining table before leaving the flat.

Here was Arash barging in again, sorting out problems and disappearing like a sibling in a dream. Obviously, he didn't have time to be a full-time brother, I had only become his evening's entertainment.

I sat on the sofa and held my head in my hands, feeling that I was holding the globe.

You take yourself with you wherever you go. Your fears, anxiety, sorrows, wishes and hopes do not even follow you a step behind, they walk with you, stand with you, sleep with you. They are your world, everywhere you go. Violence was what Arash and his comrades fashioned well; if the country was in their hands, they would do it on a larger scale. When you're a good driver, you will look after your car and respect the laws of the road, regardless of the make and model of your car or the place you are driving. We, Iranians are always on the hunt for shortcuts to bypass the law, because we see it as an obstacle. This selfish shortsightedness will uproot any system. If the country is going downhill, it is not all the fault of the rulers, because governments don't make people, it is the other way around. When the bricks are corrupted, the building will fall, no matter how ingenious the design might be. Yes, it has always been 'I' against the system, yes, as a nation, we have suffered a lot, carrying a wounded history on our shoulders, but we should stop blaming others and start with ourselves. Arash and his amigos had tried to change the government at the expense of forgetting to change themselves.

'How long have you known Arash?' I asked.

'I've known him for years, even before I met Pasha,' said Angelina. 'I used to work for him at one of his hotels.'

'Why did you stop working for him?'

'People change jobs.'

She was not going to divulge anything about Arash. She even upped the ante and asked about my Shakespearean experience.

'I'm enjoying it,' I said.

'How can you learn anything from a dead man?' she asked. 'Leave him alone to rest in his grave.'

I told her that Hamlet never died, but she was trying to derail the conversation.

‘Your devotion to the abstract is almost comical,’ she said.

‘I beg your pardon!’

‘Don’t you think it is weird that you fly thousands of miles to this country to discuss a dead man’s work and his unreal characters?’

‘Most of the books on your bookshelf are written by dead authors.’

‘I don’t worship my books and their authors,’ she said. ‘I’m a street fighter when it comes to books, I only read the essentials.’

When the person you convers with begins to talk about themselves, you should change the subject.

‘Have you met Arash’s wife and children?’ I asked.

‘Which one is more appropriate, *no comment* or *pass*?’

I should meet Arash’s family whom everyone tried to hide from me.

Meeting Nina

Guess who opened the door when Cyrus rang the bell of his father's house? The Filipino lecturer, Dr Mara Schnittka Cojuangco. I looked at her in astonishment. She must be a close family friend to be permitted to answer the door. Cyrus looked from my face to hers several times, realising that it was not the first time that we had met. It seemed too coincidental to think that she was an old friend from university days in the Philippines, and now that she was in London for the Shakespeare event, she had decided to pay a visit to the family, considering how difficult it was to trace down Arash and his family. The professor had a lot of explanations to do.

‘What a pleasant surprise,’ said Mara and embraced my nephew. Who the hell was this woman?

I followed Cyrus' lead and took my jacket off and hung it, with the gun still in it, on the hallstand. The American style oak wood furniture set in the middle of the commodious sitting room seemed abandoned and obsolete. There was a cold sadness saturating the air, even the walls were distant and depressed, yet they had a compensating grandeur to them.

‘Take a seat uncle, I won't be long,’ said Cyrus and disappeared behind a wall.

I folded my arms and looked at Dr Mara Schnittka Cojuangco for an explanation. She forced herself to smile and sat on the sofa, combing her hair with her fingers. She needed a drink, of course, but it would be a long and lonely walk to the kitchen to get one.

‘Your brother and my husband are old friends,’ she said. ‘Arash asked me to guard you at the conference and in your hotel.’

Mara stood up and waved at someone behind me, relieved to be off the hook for any further explanations.

I turned in the direction that she was waving at and saw this attractive woman coming down the stairs that led to the first floor. In contrast to her cream dress, the light tan complexion of her arms appeared darker. Her dress neither concealed her curves nor denied her strong physique.

‘Laura Miller,’ she introduced herself and shook my hand with a firm grip. Her voice belonged to the most confident and independent of women I had ever met. Her eyes were intelligent, attentive and not afraid of being themselves. Her assertive body language reflected a strong character whose natural pulchritude was just a plus. I introduced myself.

She frowned and said, ‘Arash’s brother?’

I nodded, noticing her American accent the way she pronounced /r/.

She ignored my waiting-for-a-handshake hand and hugged me. ‘Arash will be delighted to see you.’ She held me at arm’s length for examination, as if I was a slave and she was a buyer in a slave auction. ‘Look at him Mara, doesn’t he look like Arash when we were in the Philippines?’

‘Yes, he does,’ said Mara. ‘I think I need to get going.’ She darted to the hallstand, grabbed her shoes and put them on. ‘I’ll call you later,’ she told Laura and took her leave of the house, holding her jacket and scarf in her hands. Like a zebra fleeing from the paws of a lion, I watched her getting away, unquestioned.

‘How long are you going to stay in London?’ Laura asked.

‘I’m going back next week.’

‘That’s such a short visit. You and Arash have a lot of catching up to do. I bet he won’t let you go back that soon.’

‘I have to,’ I said. ‘My students haven’t seen enough of me this term.’

‘Please sit down,’ she said and sat on the opposite sofa. ‘How are your parents?’ I told her Dad had passed away.

‘Oh, I’m very sorry!’ she put her hand to her mouth. ‘God, Arash will be devastated.’

‘Dad already knows,’ it was Cyrus’ voice.

She was pushing a wheelchair on which a teenage girl was sitting. She was looking in the direction of her nose. He did a C-turn and parked the wheelchair next to the sofa close to her mother. He put the brakes on and pointed at me, ‘Nina, this is uncle Kia who has just arrived from Iran. Uncle, this is Nina, my lovely sister and best friend.’

Nina was gazing at the corner of the room. I stood up and walked to her. I knelt and took one of her hands in mine, but she didn’t seem to notice that I even existed. I kissed her hand and returned to my seat, thinking that God must have been inebriated to have created such a lovely girl and then put her into a wheelchair.

‘I’ll put the kettle on,’ said Laura and headed to the kitchen. I didn’t expect such an educated American woman to be that humble, hospitable and welcoming.

‘Let me get you something that you’d love to see,’ said Cyrus. ‘I’ll be back in a sec.’ He ran upstairs.

I walked to Nina and knelt beside her wheelchair, she was still looking at the corner of the room.

‘How are you, my dear?’ I asked and put my hand on her knee.

Suddenly, she let out a piercing shriek and attacked my face with her sharp nails. She tore my eyelids and punctured my skin in several places. She screamed at the top of her lungs and pounced again. Blood had obscured my vision and I couldn’t see her hands to restrain them. She raked my head this time and then took hold of my hair. I fell onto my back and pulled Nina down onto the floor with me. She was on top of me now, shouting like a banshee, pouncing like a lioness. My eyes were shut but I managed to hold her wrists when I received the heaviest punches that I had ever encountered in my entire life. Between the onslaught of punches to my face and head, I could hear Laura begging, ‘Stop it! Please Arash Stop it!’

Everything went quiet save for my heartbeats, echoing in my skull. With my sleeves I wiped the blood out of my eyes and saw Cyrus who was struggling to try to hold his father's hands in slow-motion. I wished it was just a bad dream. The noises came back momentarily, but they were muffled by the sound of a commercial hood on maximum mode. The pain was replaced by darkness.

I tried to open my eyes, but I couldn't see through them properly as they were swollen. I was in Cyrus' car. The lights were receding and coming back.

'Where are we going?' I asked. It hurt to talk.

'Hospital.'

'I don't need-' The car went over a bump. 'Oh shit.' I realised that I was slurring my words like a drunkard.

'Don't move your head, uncle. It's not in such good shape.'

I rested my head on the leather seat and tried to hold back my tears. The physical pain was nothing compared to the pain in my heart. Getting beaten by my own brother in his home was totally gut wrenching.

'I've never seen him like this before,' said Cyrus and wiped his tears with his jacket sleeve.

The further we got from the house the less I was disinclined to cry in front of my nephew, but shock had dried my well of tears. I couldn't figure out what had happened. Why did Nina attack me? What had turned Arash into a wild bear? Why didn't they just talk to me if I had done something wrong?

In my first week in London I had been beaten up more than my entire life and it was supposed to be an educational trip. What was the lesson? *Stay away from Arash.*

Cyrus helped me out of the car and to the Accident and Emergency department. We were told that it would take at least three hours to be seen by a doctor. I was surprised that in a

country that had once been an empire not so long ago, that you had to wait that long to be attended by medical staff. If Cyrus hadn't been with me, I wouldn't have bothered to wait. I would have gone to my hotel to collect my belongings and booked into another hotel for the remnant of my ruinous trip. I would also be unable to deliver my next paper because of bashed-up state of my face. We found two empty seats in the corner of the waiting room and began to wait.

I would have liked to have asked about Nina's physical and mental condition and if she had been born disabled, but after what had happened, it didn't feel appropriate. I didn't have the drive.

'Sorry about this,' said Cyrus. 'She's not a violent girl. I don't know why she did this.'

'You don't need to apologise, my dear. She is family.'

'This has never happened before.'

'That's alright, she'll be fine.' I tapped his shoulder.

A beggar entered the waiting area and asked for any spare change. It was the wrong place to beg, he really should rethink his business plan and change his audience. He was fortunate that he hadn't received a punch from someone in pain. He left empty-handed.

'Why is she in a wheelchair?' I had to ask this.

He sighed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs, clasping his hands together.

'She fell down from her bedroom window.'

A nurse came with a clipboard in her hands and called my surname incorrectly. Cyrus and I followed her to a cubicle where she took my blood pressure and asked what had happened to me.

'An accident,' I brainstormed. 'Some people, eh, three men attacked me and ran away.'

The nurse asked if I knew the men who assaulted me and if Cyrus was with me at the time of the misadventure. She was doing the police's job. After quite an intense interrogation, she asked if I smoked, drank or had an allergy to any medicine. She gave me a couple of painkillers and watched me swallow them before asking us to return to the waiting area and wait for my name to be called again. Our seats had been taken. A full house and us, standing by a vending machine.

‘Was it an accident?’ I asked, keeping my voice low.

He shook his head and said that the misfortune took family and friends by surprise, because she had been a content, bubbly and spirited girl before the incident.

‘It was the worse week in my life,’ said Cyrus. ‘A tsunami of unstoppable disasters one after another hit the family. Nina threw herself out of her bedroom window on Sunday, mum broke her hand on Monday, Dad and uncle Pasha had a car accident on Thursday. Dad had some bruises, but uncle Pasha was admitted to the hospital for fractured ribs and a dislocated shoulder and a few days later news came that Granddad had a stroke and uncle Pasha had to go back to Iran to be with him.’

‘Who was driving when your Dad and uncle had the accident?’ I asked.

Cyrus gave me a I-am-not-quite-with-you look. His father was driving when they hit a tree in the countryside. Having heard that Arash was an excellent driver, it seemed strange that he would hit a tree in the middle of nowhere.

‘His brakes had stopped working,’ explained Cyrus. ‘Someone had tampered with them and he had to stop the car by crashing it into a tree. They were lucky that they didn't run into another car.’

Three women left their seats to follow a doctor. We took their seats before the two men waiting next to us got them. One of them had a seat and the other had to stand up.

‘How well do you know Dr. Mara Schnittka Cojuangco, if that is her real name?’

‘She’s a midwife, not a doctor,’ said Cyrus. ‘I’ve known Mara from the moment I was born in a hospital in Manila. She was the midwife who helped to deliver me.’

‘Is she your Mum’s friend?’

‘You have met Tayeb, haven’t you?’

‘Yes, I have,’ I replied, imagining the man’s giant figure and wide smile.

‘Mara is his wife. They’re family friends from the Philippines.’

‘Does she live in the UK?’

He nodded and asked if she had pretended to be someone else. It was not Mara’s first time. ‘When Dad’s enemies get close, everyone protects everyone.’

Shame on Arash who had inculcated his son with the existence of an enemy out there who would harm him if he didn’t protect himself. The ex-ambassador of Iran to the Philippines was real only as a villain in two-decade-old stories told by Arash’s friends. My brother was using the man to get his companions and family together, united against something that existed only in his head. As a middle-aged man it must be difficult for him to accept that his time had passed, when he was the leader of two-thousand students and every moment of his life was full of drama and everyone looked up to him. It had been a great time because of a real enemy, now he wanted to keep some of that greatness by creating an imaginary one. If they had wanted to harm him or his family in Iran, they would have done it by now. The reality was that twenty years had passed and nothing had happened. Arash reminded me of this American man who had spent thirty years of his life in a jungle to construct a bunker that would protect him in a nuclear war.

Two hours later, a doctor called my name and we followed her into the emergency wing and a cubicle.

‘I won’t be long,’ the doctor said.

I had just lain in the bed when I saw, through a gap in the curtains, a police officer talking to the doctor and a nurse. It struck me that I had a gun in my pocket, which I took out, handed to Cyrus and pointed at the bin in the corner. His dazed eyes made my lips mime the word POLICE. He risked a peek before taking my gun and putting it in his pocket, probably next to his own.

‘Slide them under the bin,’ I hissed.

Cyrus smiled. The doctor returned, followed by two police officers.

‘Mr Karamian,’ said the doctor. ‘You told my colleague that you’d been assaulted by some anonymous young men. We must report such cases to the police. These officers are here to ask you some questions. After my examination, of course.’

She instructed me to move my limbs and asked if I was in any pain when I did so. She took my blood pressure and said that some X-rays of my face would have to be taken when I finished with the police officers.

The female police officer led the interrogation. When I told her that I was a visitor, she asked to see my passport and my reason for being in the UK. She asked about my relationship with Cyrus and if he was with me when the assault took place and if there were any other witnesses. When I thought I had answered all her questions, she asked me to tell her exactly what had happened. The male officer was writing everything down. After my improvised anecdote, she said she was very sorry about what had happened to me and promised that they would check the CCTV cameras close to the accident, interview local people and send me a report, which I might need to submit to my insurance company.

The X-rays confirmed that there were no broken or fractured bones. After four hours, we left the hospital with a pack of Paracetamol codeine in my pocket.

‘Hotel?’ asked Cyrus when we sat in his car.

I shook my head and asked him to take me to Camden, hoping that Angelina had come back from work, was not asleep and would let me in.

We arrived in the Camden area in the early hours of the morning. My nephew insisted on waiting until I got into the flat. Cyrus reminded me of Dad, for being such a caring young man, generous with his time for the family. I put my hand on his shoulder and told him that he and his late grandfather would have loved each other if they had met.

‘Here, have it back.’ He handed me my gun. ‘Dad is always right when he senses danger.’

I took the gun and put it into my pocket before I left the car.

‘Shall I pick you up tomorrow?’ he asked. ‘I really like spending time with you.’ I didn’t know what to think. I just needed to get into a bed and see if the pain and my thoughts would allow me to sleep. ‘I’ll call you,’ I said.

‘Don’t think too much about it, uncle,’ Cyrus said and drove off.

Before ringing the bell, I put my head against the wall and closed my eyes and relived the incident under my eyelids. Why did Nina pounce on my face? Her eyes were filled with hatred. Why did Arash attack me so savagely? I was his guest after two decades and he treated me that way. What the hell had happened to him and Nina?

‘Come in!’ It was Angelina’s voice via the intercom. ‘Push the door, it is open.’ She must have been watching me knocking the wall with my fist, talking to myself. I pushed the door open and entered the communal hall, the lights turned on automatically. There was a bundle of letters in a rubber band on the floor. I picked it up to see if Angelina had a letter. There was a letter for flat 2 addressed to a Mr. A. Rostampour. It was an Iranian surname, I tore open the envelope. It was a letter from the sales department of an estate agency to the owner of flat 2, Mr. A. Rostampour, offering to sell the flat for him as they had many potential buyers for it. It was not coincidental that Angelina’s landlord was Iranian. I put the letter in my jacket and ascended the stairs. I thought of placing the gun to Angelina’s head and asking

who her landlord was, but I had been exposed to enough violence for one day.

The door was ajar, I pushed it open and stepped into the flat. A type of soft South American music was in the air, filling the empty sitting room. I sat on the sofa and rested my injured head on the leather. The effect of the painkillers was wearing off, I should take a couple of Paracetamols.

No screaming, crying or asking to explain how it had happened when she saw my battered face, sensing that even ministering to me medically was taking pity on me. She just sat next to me on the sofa and rested my head on her lap and began raking my hair with her fingers. Please no words, just be there with your spirit, and there she was with her nurturing soul and scented body, covered in a crimson silk dress. She was an archetype and the dilemma of a man in search of his soul. She brought rhythms of nature with her; hues and horizons, waves and valleys, hills and lush greens, peace and tranquillity. There must be something wrong when they are all there.

I took my gun out of my pocket and put its cold muzzle on her hot skin.

‘You haven’t been entirely honest with me, have you?’

‘What do you want a woman’s honesty for when you’re here for a week or two?’ She continued stroking my hair, ignoring the gun.

‘Who is Mr. A. Rostampour?’

‘My landlord. He’s from your country.’

‘Give him a ring and ask him to come here now.’

‘It’s one o’clock in the morning.’

‘I know.’ I gave the gun a gentle push.

She took my armed hand in hers as if she wanted to dance with me and guided it to the coffee table on which she slid down my gun.

‘Never use a weapon if you want a woman to do something for you,’ she said and picked up her mobile phone next to my gun and dialled a number.

‘Sorry to call you at this time, but an emergency has come up. No, nothing wrong with the building. A gentleman is here who wants to see you now. He cannot wait until tomorrow. How long? OK, see you then.’

She put her mobile back onto the coffee table and said that it would take him about an hour to get here.

‘So, we have time to eat something.’

‘I might have some leftovers from last night.’ She stood up and headed to the kitchen.

I picked up her mobile phone from the coffee table to check the number she had just called. Amongst the list of callers was Arash’s name. He had talked to her one hour earlier for three minutes and twenty-two seconds. I checked the calls she had made on previous days and saw that they had been in contact every day since my arrival. The goddess of secret and scent had been orientated to the men of my family.

A Black Cab Driver and Norwegian Stories

When the man turned the key in the door and entered the flat, I was ready for him. My heart, which was already beating fast, changed gear to sprint race mode when I realised he was the black cab driver who had collected me from the airport. I directed him with my gun to sit on the sofa. I dragged the armchair from the corner and positioned it opposite the man. Between us was the coffee table and a sea of secrets. I sat on the edge of the armchair with my gun pointing at him.

The silence in the room was dense and impenetrable, enveloping the photographer, philosopher, cab driver and landlord. Angelina appeared from the bedroom. She had changed

her dress, she was now wearing a purple jumper and a pair of jeans. She stood by the door, with arms folded, watching us, adding to the domination of the silence in the room. The more everyone appreciated silence the heavier it felt.

‘Why don’t you sit next to Mr Rostampour?’ I asked her.

She gave me a searching leer and sat on the couch next to her landlord and crossed her legs.

‘How is your photography exhibition doing?’ I asked, gazing into the man’s eyes. ‘My photo must be the only one hanging on its walls.’

He dropped his eyes to the floor.

‘Arash wanted to see a picture of you before meeting you,’ said the man. ‘We also wanted to make sure you’d get to your hotel safely without anyone following you.’ Arash was an octopus whose tentacles were in different pies.

‘I’m wondering how many people work for my brother.’

‘It’s not like that,’ said the man. ‘Friends help each other.’

I turned to Angelina and asked if she was also a *friend* of Arash. She kept looking at me, not even trying to dampen any emotion that might surface and betray her. Perhaps that sarcastic look of hers was also contrived. Had she been following Arash’s script all of this time? Every person seemed to be. Was misdirecting me to the Russians all a part of the scenario?

Angelina stood up and said she was going to her bedroom and asked us to close the door behind us when we left her flat. There was such conviction in her movements that I couldn’t tell her to sit down even though she owed me an explanation.

The man and I kept looking at each other for a while. He asked what had happened to my face.

‘How long have you known Arash?’ I asked.

Long enough to trust him on everything and well enough to put his life on the line for him. People who generalised had something to hide, so I asked Mr Rostampour a yes, no question and enquired if he knew Arash when he was in the Philippines. He asked me to call him by his first name, Amir and confirmed that their acquaintance went back that far. He was a qualified psychologist, but was not employed as one. He was not a cab driver either, although he had done The Taxi Knowledge Licence for London. He helped Arash manage *the business*. What exactly did he and the others see in my brother that made them so fond of him that they preferred to work with him rather than engaging in respectable and lucrative professions?

Arash was one of the few men Amir knew who had not been moulded into a new creature by the system. He still carried in him a fire and a great deal of values that others had lost. People took pleasure in being close to him, because he represented what they would have liked to be, but were not. 'Take me, for example,' said Amir, 'I could work as a consultant in a hospital, buy a nice house in the suburbs, have a circle of agreeable associates, marry a nice pretty girl and have a couple of cute kids. That would be the end of me, murdered by nice things.' He pointed at my gun whose eye was staring at him. I lowered it, but didn't put it back into my pocket. 'Before they put me in a nice coffin, I'd like to suck the marrow of life from the unexpected sources and taste that essence and zest that life has stolen from us.' The man's passion was a clenched fist, ready to punch any life deadener sold to the human race in the name of comfort. 'The farmed salmon that people buy from the supermarkets is not the only fish you can cook,' he said.

I was not sure, I told Amir, that robbing the banks in the Philippines in the name of survival and investing the stolen money in different sectors, employing cheap educated labour to make millions and then transferring the capital to the west and investing it in not very

transparent businesses to make more money was the right way to suck the marrow of life from its desiccated bones.

‘We never took any of that money with us when we left the Philippines,’ he claimed.

‘How come?’

‘We had arranged for the bodies of six students who had been killed in the embassy massacre to be flown back home,’ said Amir. ‘Hundreds of students had come to see off the bodies of their classmates and friends back home when the UN soldiers and the Filipino police surrounded the airport and asked us to surrender. When we did, they handcuffed us and transferred most of the students into waiting vans and drove them off to different detention centres. They divided the last nineteen of us into two groups and sent each group to different terminals. Their secret agents had got it right; almost all of the students they had kept were leaders and had had important positions in the past. They searched us and took our weapons, money, driving licences and bank cards. The officials had liaised with different countries and airlines and our papers were ready.’

Amir asked if I wanted a drink and headed to the kitchen without waiting for me to respond. He could get a knife, but I had a gun. The kettle began boiling. He returned with two cups of tea, sat in his place and resumed his story.

‘Arash asked the officer in charge to fetch his pregnant wife. Without her, he wouldn’t leave the country. The officer told him to fuck off.’ Amir shook his head at the naiveté of the officer. ‘Arash broke the officer’s nose and jaw before seven police officers restrained him. I think he wanted to go to prison rather than be sent out of the country without Laura and his unborn child.’

‘Was Laura a student?’ I asked.

‘She was studying medicine at Manila Central University where Arash met her. She was the daughter of an American High Commissioner who had an important diplomatic rank at

the American Embassy in the Philippines. Laura and Arash were madly in love, they still are.’

He took two bars of chocolate from his pocket, under the gaze of my gun, and dropped one of them next to my tea before unwrapping his and taking a bite of it and sipping his tea. ‘Laura’s father didn’t approve of her choice. I assume he did his best to discourage his daughter from having a relationship with a *communist*, but realised that he would lose his only child if he pushed her too far.’

‘When a girl trusts in her love for a boy, she can even leave her family for him,’ I imparted some of my *vast* knowledge about women.

Here is the rest of Amir’s story:

The High Commissioner agrees to see Arash so that he can try to reason with the young man. He talks to Arash about the couple’s differences such as race, class, ideology, language, culture, nationality and upbringing and gives him ten days to put an end to his relationship with Laura.

Three days after the meeting, when Arash enters his flat and turns the light on, he is met by four armed men led by an American heavyweight boxer who reminds him of his limited time to accomplish what the Commissioner has asked him to do.

Two nights after the incident, Arash and his comrades kidnap the Commissioner despite his bodyguards. It is not all about the kidnapping, but the style of the mission, which is a reaction to the Commissioner’s threatening methods. It takes them two trailer trucks, a bulldozer and two fast cars to carry out the mission. A small accident slows down the traffic. The bulldozers appear behind the bodyguards’ cars and shunts them into the trailer trucks with the bodyguards still in them. It is arranged for the Commissioner to witness the whole operation. Then his car is pushed into another trailer truck and the doors are closed behind.

An hour later the trailer carrying the Commissioner is parked in a private basement garage. The doors are opened and the commissioner and his driver get out of their car and the trailer only to face a dozen armed men. The driver surrenders his gun and they are taken upstairs. They lock the driver in one room and take the Commissioner to another room where they undress him, tie him to a bed and give him a full body wax. Realising who he is dealing with, the commissioner gives his blessing to Laura's choice and they marry two weeks later.

'Let's go back to the airport,' I said. 'Did they deport Arash without Laura?'

'Fifteen police officers accompanied the nine of us into an aeroplane, which was going to take us to Norway,' said Amir. 'I didn't see what happened in the aeroplane, but when I turned to Arash, he was holding a gun on a police officer who was opening his handcuffs. We thought he would open ours and all of us would walk out of the airport, but he left the aeroplane, only taking the police officer with him as his hostage.' Amir shook his head, he still couldn't understand why Arash didn't release him and his friends. 'After Arash left, more than twenty officers entered the plane and double checked our handcuffs. They held us in the aeroplane for about two hours until Laura entered the aeroplane followed by the officer who had been taken hostage and Arash. He then released the police officer and gave him back his gun. The police officer who had been humiliated got his gun back and he immediately pointed it at Arash's head. The officer in chief shouted at the officer and ordered the man not to act on his emotions while approached him cautiously. He finally reached the fuming officer and seized his gun. When they moved the officer out of the aeroplane, Arash gave the officer in charge the bullets that he had taken out of the gun.'

Why didn't Arash unlock his comrades' handcuffs? Why did he go back to the airport to be deported?

After a dramatic start and a very long tiring flight, they finally arrive at the coldest country they have ever known. They have to start from scratch in another part of the world.

‘What happened to your friends who were taken to different terminals?’ I asked.

‘A few months later we found out that they had been sent to Australia.’

‘What about the money and businesses you had in the Philippines?’

‘The government confiscated everything.’

Norway is cold and it feels colder when the day before you were in the Philippines and you have arrived in just a T-shirt. You find the people even colder. You don’t know their language and culture and they haven’t seen enough people with black hair.

From Oslo Airport, in a minibus, they take them to a camp in the middle of nowhere. Snow on the ground, clouds up, pine trees in between and nothing else. They will get three meals a day and weekly pocket money. Twenty refugees in the camp coming from Africa and Asia and no one is allowed to leave the camp until their cases are assessed and full refugee status granted. The notion of seeking asylum is a new concept to the Norwegian government, so they don’t know what immigrants need in order to integrate into their society. They give them pocket money, but not the permission to leave the camp to spend it. Even if they can go out, where to spend it when there are no amenities around for miles.

They give Arash and Laura a room in the family side of the building, next to an Iraqi couple.

They place the rest of the group on the other side of the yard. Amir and Zabih become roommates, Farhad and Nasser share one room and Jalal, his cousin Jamal and the Jalili brothers occupy the other two rooms; they have lived together in the Philippines for three years and are known as the 4 Js.

Amir and others play cards in the morning and play volleyball, weather permitting, or they go to the camp’s small gym for a workout. No one knows that Arash writes 50 common verbs in English and asks one of the officers who speaks good English to scribe their equivalents in the Norwegian language on the first day. The morrow he writes 50 nouns and

asks the officer to do the same. The officer tells him to learn the verbs he has translated for him first and then ask for more words. Arash tells the officer to test him. He does and is surprised that Arash has learnt all of the 50 verbs, so he translates the nouns for him. When others are proud to be able to say, 'Hei', 'Hade' and 'Takk' in Norwegian only one week after their arrival, Arash has learnt about 200 common words and the basic structure of a sentence.

Arash talks to the head of the camp, in Norwegian and English and persuades him to employ a Norwegian teacher to teach the language to the migrants. He asks him to buy some English and Norwegian books and put them in the communal room where everyone can use them.

The second week, Arash convinces the officer in charge to let him leave the camp to meet a bank manager. Accompanied by two police officers, an hour's drive later, Arash meets the head of a DNB ASA branch in Trondheim. After a long meeting with the bank manager, he secures a conditional loan. He needs to pass a language test, find a business which is up and running and come up with a detailed business plan.

While Arash is trying to create jobs and a future for the group, his absence creates uncertainty among his comrades. The 4Js arrange a meeting to discuss Arash's suspicious behaviour, performance and movements. Amir and Zabih believe that Arash must be invited to the gathering to explain things and to shine a light on his secretive absences. He must be given a chance to defend himself against the accusations, but the 4Js insist that the meeting should be held in Arash's absence as some members are scared of him and wouldn't dare criticise him to his face.

The get-together is held one afternoon and Jalal chairs the meeting. He begins with a quotation about the corruptions that excessive power can bring to individuals and expresses the opinion that he has always been worried about Arash's relationship with all kinds of

international politicians and military men in the Philippines. Jamal expresses his concerns about Arash's unlimited and unaccountable access to the *student funds*. Zabih defends Arash, reminding the panel of the extraordinary things Arash did by using the fund and the fact that the fund wouldn't have existed if it hadn't been for Arash's ideas, plans and execution. The Jalili brothers analyse the students' funeral before they were deported and connect it to what happened in the airport and the fact that he did not unlock their handcuffs. They think that the whole scenario has been a secretive plot planned by Arash and the Filipino police. Jalal is of the opinion that the deportation of the students is the work of the CIA, liaising with Arash, perhaps through his father-in-law. What else could it have been? He could have made some phone calls to sort out the situation, instead he came back to the airport with his pregnant wife to be deported. Everything seems fishy about Arash, even his choice of spouse. They think that he has colluded with the head of the police in Manila to sell all the properties and premises belonging to the students after they had left. The price of the properties in Manila has increased thrice over and now would be worth billions of dollars. Although none of the properties are in his name, in the Philippines anything is possible if you have the right connections and Arash can easily sell all of them by pulling some strings. They have heard from one of the immigration officers in the camp that Arash has had meetings with a bank manager several times, which substantiates the theory.

Another speculation is that the CIA has taken Arash out of the Philippines to a safe place to train him in secret so that when the circumstances are ready in Iran, they will send him back to the country to seize power. The Jalili brothers are in favour of this conclusion as Arash is the only one who has left the camp on several occasions. If their supposition is correct, they will have the best chance of getting the highest positions when the government has changed in Iran. They just need to prove to him that they are reliable and responsible comrades.

While Laura Miller's belly is getting bigger, the dreams of Arash's comrades are swelling and gathering momentum behind his back. One evening when everyone is drinking tea, Jalal asks Arash if he will appoint him as the Health Minister when the regime has changed. First a hen should lay an egg, Arash tells him, then they can discuss what to do with it. The reality is that they are in exile and other people are running the country and their priority should be to learn the new language and get jobs and complete their studies. Jalal questions him why he didn't open their handcuffs so that they could leave the airport and continue with their campaign. They were fighting a lost battle, says Arash, and he didn't want more students to be killed for nothing.

'I'm going to stop my political activities,' says Arash. 'There was a time when you could change things if you were brave enough and had better plans for that country, but that opportunity has gone. I'm not a man to sit around a table, smoke cigarettes and talk about revolution. The time of chewing the cud is over.' While believing in socialist ideology, he is not going to spend his time and energy on wistful thinking and empty talk. He will not devote his life writing and scattering pamphlets in a country, which is thousands of miles from his motherland, instead, he is going to make money and complete his education.

Crushed by the news, his comrades try to persuade him to resurrect his leading role, but Arash has made up his mind. The fact that he is going to be a father, the Jalili brothers think, has made him reach such a conservative decision. It is a feeble inference, Amir and Zabih say, to think that anything in the world, even the arrival of his child, can stop Arash doing anything he wants to do. Perhaps he can see things that they cannot see. Delighted by the news, Jalal thinks it is his chance to become the leader of the group. He visits the Jalili brothers clandestinely and gives them some assurances and promises if they elect him as their leader. They vote, and Jalal becomes the new leader of the party by four votes. He spreads the news to other comrades in other countries that Arash has appointed him as his successor.

On a cold crispy afternoon Arash walks to the yard and watches his comrades playing volleyball. He shakes his head at their offer for him to play. An invisible chasm, like a new entrant, now stands between him and his comrades. No one has managed to moor his boat to anything solid in the new anchorage, things are still harnessed to the restless waves and any wind could change susurrations into storm. They have been left with their thoughts for days, which have brought them nothing but despondency and despair. There are no seeds of hope in the future lands.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ Jalal says to Farhad who receives a serve but cannot pass it to the setter to fix Jalal for a spike. Farhad puts his head down and says nothing. Arash lights a cigarette and pulls on it. It was his wont to smoke sociably when they were in the Philippines, but no one has seen him smoke before that day.

‘Are you fucking blind?’ Jalal tells Nasser who hasn’t jumped in time to block the opponent’s hitter. ‘Don’t fucking look at me like that,’ he tells Nasser whose eyes are criticizing Jalal’s bad mouth.

‘Use your fucking brain,’ shouts Jalal at Farhad and flicks his head with his finger.

‘It’s just a game, calm down,’ responds Farhad.

‘It’s just a game for you, because you’re a fucking loser,’ Jalal responds.

Arash drops his cigarette to the ground, steps on it and is about to walk away when Jalal shouts at him, ‘Dra til helvete.’

Arash walks up to him, grabs him by his collar, pushes him against the pole and tells him that it is beneath a communist to treat his comrades like shit. If he has any problem with Arash, he must spit it out. Jalal accuses him of stealing the students’ money and his withdrawal from the party is an excuse to go away and spend the illegal money he has acquired via selling the students’ properties in the Philippines. Jalal calls him a traitor who

works with the CIA. Arash punches Jalal and leaves him behind with a bloody nose on the frozen ground of the court.

That night Jalal, Jamal and the Jalili brothers plan to slay Arash. Farhad overhears them and goes to Arash and tells him about the assassination plot. The same night Laura's contractions begin. In the early hours of the morning, there is a knock on the door. Arash answers the door. The corridor is dark. Suddenly, four men attack him with kitchen knives. Wrestling, shouting and confusion in the dark ensues. When the Iraqi neighbours are woken up and turn on the light, they inform the police, they have seen three men running away from the scene, leaving Arash and Jalal on the ground writhing in blood.

While Laura is taken to the hospital to give birth, Arash is ten miles away, in a detention centre's clinic, watching a doctor stitching his chest and arms. The police tell him the following day that Jalal has died and he has been accused of murdering him. That night Laura gives birth to a baby boy whose father is not there to hold him in his arms.

Arash asks the police to examine Jamal and the Jalili brothers' bodies for wounds and talk to Farhad who had overheard them planning to kill him.

Finally, the Norwegian police 'out of compassion' give Arash fifteen minutes with his family under the vigilant eyes of two policewomen. Arash holds his three-day-old son in his handcuffed hands and kisses him. He asks Laura what she wants to call him and she says Cyrus. Arash asks the police to provide Laura and the child with a safe place to stay while he is in detention.

After one month of investigations, interviews, interrogations and running DNA tests and carrying out autopsies, they sentence Jamal and the Jalili brothers to two years in jail each for attempted murder. They release Arash as he had only been defending himself.

'How about another cup of tea?' I interrupted the story.

‘I’ll make it,’ Amir offered and took the empty cups into the kitchen.

It seemed that everyone felt at home in Angela’s flat.

He came back with two mugs of tea and some biscuits on a tray and put them onto the coffee table.

‘One could write a novel about Arash and his friends,’ I said.

‘Yah, it was like acting in a bloody movie.’

He sipped his tea and continued with his story:

After Jalal’s funeral Zabih, Farhad, Naser and Amir approach Arash and ask him to have a drink with them.

‘Let’s meet tomorrow at Martin’s Restaurant,’ says Arash.

They never knew that amongst the hills of snow and the sylvan surrounding of pine trees such a restaurant existed. Officers in the camp know where the only restaurant of that region is and one of them agrees to give them a ride to the place and collect them five hours later.

When they arrive, Arash is already there, sipping his coffee.

‘The owner of this place says they don’t have enough staff to run the business,’ says Arash. ‘He wants to retire and his business is up for sale.’

The owner, who is in his early fifties, gives them a tour of the restaurant. He explains in broken English that he has earned so much money that he doesn’t need to work anymore. It is time for him to enjoy his early retirement.

‘What do you think?’ asks Arash.

‘We don’t have any money to buy this,’ says Amir.

‘I’ve spoken to a bank,’ says Arash. ‘They’re willing to give us a loan.’

‘None of us can cook,’ Zabih says.

‘The owner will stay with us for one week and show us how to cook.’

‘We don’t know the language,’ Farhad says.

‘We’re not going to write philosophy books,’ says Arash. ‘We only need to learn the menu and basic Norwegian to serve the customers. We can ask the man to write down the sentences we need to serve a customer. We can always use English, they’d understand.’

‘Do you think the Norwegian people will come to the restaurant if they know it’s run by a bunch of black heads?’ asks Naser.

‘We won’t know if we don’t try, will we?’ says Arash. ‘The locals have no choice but to try us. I’ve done a little research, there are no restaurants or bars in a thirty-mile radius. If they want to be served by their own people, they would have to drive for more than an hour and go to Trondheim for a meal.’

‘As much as I enjoy being with you guys,’ says Naser, ‘I can’t live in this region, it’s too quiet for me. Snow, silence, cold and darkness would drive me insane if I don’t move on. I’m a city boy, my lungs are used to be filled with the smoke of gasoline and street noise. I think I’ll go to Oslo and if I still find it too quiet there, then I’ll go to America where my cousins live.’

‘When I left my family,’ says Farhad, ‘I promised them I was going to be a doctor. I’ll go to Oslo and see if I can get into a university and finish my studies.’

Amir and Zabih are not sure what they are going to do, but cannot imagine spending their lives in a cold and remote place in Norway, working in a restaurant.

All of them receive letters from the immigration office, confirming that they can stay in Norway indefinitely and that they are able to apply for Norwegian citizenship. They have one week to leave the camp. They can apply for temporary accommodations while looking for a job. The next day Farhad and Naser leave for Oslo. They heard from one of the officers in the camp that Arash has bought the restaurant.

One day, Zabih and Amir leave the camp for a walk. After a while they think they are not very far from the restaurant, so they decide to pay a visit to Arash. The door is open so they

walk in. A very tall man appears from the back of the restaurant and ducks his neck to pass under the kitchen door. He says something and they try in broken Norwegian to say who they are and who they want to see when Arash appears from the kitchen and rescues them.

‘This is Lars. These are my friends, Amir and Zabih.’ They shake hands.

‘What’s happened to your nose?’ Zabih asks Arash.

‘I had a fight with a motorbike gang last night.’ Here is what happened:

Four leather clad men with shaggy beards appear and ask the giant Lars to fetch his boss. When Arash is approaching the men, one of them takes out a stiletto fighting knife and sticks it on a wooden table and tells Arash that the restaurant has always been the hangout of him and his gang and the new owner is there to serve them any time they want, be it day or night. They will decide when Arash should close the restaurant, especially at the weekends. The new owner should understand that if he is to make a living, he must serve the gang the way they want. Arash waits for the man to finish his little speech and karate kicks him hard in the neck. When the other three men attack him, he picks up a chair and hits them with it. He takes the man’s dagger from the table and puts it to the throat of one of the injured men. The men pick themselves up from the ground and try to organise another attack, when they are told to put their weapons on the table or Arash will slaughter their friend. The man whose throat is in jeopardy, head butts Arash with the back of his head and tries to release himself, but Arash uses the butt of the dagger and hits the man on his face. Blood gushes out of his cheek and reddens his face. Arash holds him again, this time more firmly. They put their daggers onto the table and leave the restaurant, following his instructions. When they mount their bikes, Arash cuts the man’s leather trousers in half and lets him go back to his bike holding his pants. They promise to be back.

‘We couldn’t leave him alone, could we?’ said Amir. ‘Arash had done a lot for his mates and it was our chance to show him that we were there for him when he needed us.’

‘I wish I had been there with him,’ I said.

‘There were always some friends around Arash in good and bad times.’

‘How did he meet Lars?’ I asked.

Here is Amir’s narration with a bit of my imagination:

The ex-owner doesn’t keep his promise to stay with Arash for one week to show him how to cook and run the business. Arash buys the business at one third of the advertised price, but the moment he signs the contract the man and his cook disappear. Arash opens the restaurant and is checking the menu when a tall man with a bag on his shoulder enters the restaurant and orders a meal. Arash tells the man that his cook is off sick and he can cook his own meal if he knows how to do it. The tall man can cook. Lars who has left his wife and doesn’t have any plans, accepts Arash’s offer to work in the restaurant and stays in one of the rooms in the flat above. He becomes interested in Arash after seeing him singlehandedly beating up four men. He believes that the previous owner has sold his business because of the motorbike gang and that is the reason why he has disappeared, knowing that Arash will cancel the deal if he sees the gang members.

Amir and Zabih stay with Arash to defend him against the gang.

A couple who are having their evening meal in the restaurant pause when they hear the roaring of motorbikes. They look through the glass door and see the lights of the motorcycles approaching. Fear is etched on their faces. They leave their half-eaten meal, hurry to the till, pay their bill and flee the restaurant. Nine motorbikes park outside.

Thirteen men and two women all in black leather enter the restaurant and stand in the middle of the serving area in a semi-circle. Arash takes a baseball bat and confronts the men.

‘Speak English?’ asks one of the men who has a husky voice and a long beard.

‘Talk,’ Arash says.

The man points to a symbol on his left shoulder and growls, ‘Do you know what this is?’

Arash keeps looking at him.

‘This is a One-Percenter patch,’ says the orgulous man. ‘Do you know the only kind of men who can put this on?’ Arash rolls the bat in his hands. ‘Those men who have proved to be worthy of it. Even the cops don’t dare to fuck with such men, because they know an outlaw motorcycle gang is behind them.’ He grabs the shoulder of the man on his right and turns him around for Arash to see the insignia on his back which read *The Vikings Now*. ‘Anyone who wears this logo is my brother. You’ve insulted a couple of my brothers. I can only think that you didn’t know who they were, so I’ll give you a chance to apologise to them now. You must also pay damages by serving them and their brothers and sisters tonight, all food and drink on the house.’

‘I’ll give you two minutes to jump on your bikes and leave,’ says Arash, ‘or you’ll have to crawl back to where you’ve come from.’ He raises his hand and one of the motorbikes outside bursts into flames. The gang turn to the flames and see two men pouring petrol on their parked motorbikes.

‘If I raise my hand again,’ says Arash, ‘my buddies will burn your beautiful Henleys to ashes. So, I suggest you get the fuck out of my restaurant, now.’

They look at each other and walk out of the restaurant without another word. Outside, the owner of the burning bike tries to attack Zabih and Amir who are standing next to the row of parked bikes with two lighters in their hands, but the man who has delivered the speech stops him. They watch the bike in flames for a minute as if it is a part of a funeral ritual and then walk to their motorcycles. They wipe the petrol off their bikes before mount them and leave the scene under the glow of the burning bike.

‘They’re going to come back and set this place on fire, with us in it,’ Amir says to his friends who are watching the retreating gang through the flames.

‘Smile and enjoy the moment now,’ says Arash. ‘Play to win again tomorrow.’

Amir, Zabih and Lars sleep in the flat upstairs and Arash spends the night in the restaurant. He makes a bed by pushing seven chairs together in the back of the restaurant facing the entrance. He lies on them with his boots on and covers himself with two blankets under which he cradles his cricket bat. He wishes they had some guns with them that night.

The crockery on the tables begin shaking first, the tables and the walls of the restaurant follow. The earthquake wakes Arash up first. Through the entrance, he sees more than sixty motorbikes, like a string of black dragons, all moving towards them. Amir and Zabih run downstairs in their boxer shorts and through the glass side of the restaurant see the approaching army. They disappear into the kitchen and reappear with four kitchen knives in their hands. The vault is sapphire blue and the wind will slash any uncovered face. The sun is shining, but it is not a match for the frozen snow. The bikers surround the restaurant and begin revving up their engines. Everything in the restaurant is vibrating, the noise is deafening. The whole restaurant turns into a gas chamber as the bikes are sending smoke into the building. The noise stops. Amir and Zabih are coughing in the smoke while Arash is breathing heavily with a napkin over his nose and mouth.

Arash walks out of the restaurant with his cricket bat on his shoulder and faces the battalion of bikers. Three men get off their bikes and march towards Arash. They stand opposite him and look into his eyes, unwavering. Zabih and Amir appear from the back door and stand on both sides of Arash, each holding two kitchen knives in their hands.

‘My name is the Shotgun, and I’m the boss of *The Vikings Now* Chapter,’ says the middle-aged man standing in the middle of two bold potbellied men. His huge size and long beard is reminiscent of the Vikings in the movies. His jacket is embellished with all kinds of

emblems and insignias. Tattoos emerge from his jacket and end in his sturdy neck. ‘You must be the crazy man they spoke about,’ says the man and offers his hand for a handshake. ‘I admire your courage.’

Arash shakes his hand. The man takes a pistol from his jacket with his left hand and points it at Arash’s head. Suddenly, the door of the flat on the side of the restaurant opens and Lars steps out with a shotgun in his hands, pointing it at the bikers’ boss. The clicks of several guns create a symphony and a great number of guns point at Lars. He talks in Norwegian while pointing his shotgun at the three men and walking towards them. When he finishes, an ominous silence follows.

‘How about inviting me in for a drink?’ says the Chapter’s boss and puts his gun back into his pocket. Arash nods and gestures with his hand for the boss to go in first. Amir goes in, but Zabih and Lars stand outside watching the bikers whose guns are visible but not pointing at them.

The two men sit opposite each other. Amir opens a bottle of whisky and puts it onto the table between them with two glasses. He fills their glasses and stands to one side watching the men raising their glasses and drinking in silence.

‘I’m not going to demolish your restaurant,’ says the boss. ‘We need this place. We’ve been coming here for the last fifteen years. No matter who runs the business, you must appreciate that it is where we hang out.’

‘This is my business and I decide who can come into my restaurant.’

‘I can see that you’re not a business man. I’m giving you more than three digits worth of permanent customers who drink like fish and you’re talking about your fucking prestige. You don’t seem to understand the situation man. Open your fucking eyes and look around you to see that more than a hundred hard-core armed gangsters are against four men with a shotgun

and a couple of fucking kitchen knives. You must be either mad or suicidal to go looking for a fight.’ Arash keeps looking at the man, who takes a swig of whisky, straight from the bottle. ‘Look mad man, I can’t walk out of this fucking restaurant without a settlement and I expect you to understand that.’

‘Here is the deal,’ says Arash. ‘They can come to my restaurant, but they have to respect other customers and the opening hours. If anyone gets into a brawl and causes trouble, then I’ll break his fucking neck and throw him out of my restaurant and there must not be any brotherhood crap retaliation.’

‘You must be flexible with your closing times, especially at the weekends.’

‘I don’t mind staying open until late as long as they spend money and the price of booze is doubled after midnight.’

‘The guy whose chopper you burnt expects some sort of compensation.’

‘What’s your recommendation?’

‘A year’s worth of alcohol on the house for him and his girlfriend.’
Arash shakes his head.

‘Nine months free booze,’ says the boss.

‘He’ll only get his first one free for six months.’

‘Deal,’ says the boss and shakes Arash’s hand. ‘You’re a tough negotiator.’ He lowers his head and whispers to Arash, ‘Sometimes you may need to turn a blind eye to certain activities here.’ He takes the bottle of whisky with him and walks out. Outside the restaurant he makes a short speech to his gang in Norwegian and raises his bottle to which his gang shout. He mounts his bike and the others follow him out onto the road.

Amir turns to Lars, ‘You’re a hell of a cool guy. What was that speech about? What did you tell the gang in Norwegian?’

Lars unloads his shotgun and returns to the restaurant.

Later, they find out that Lars has walked out of a seventeen-year marriage, leaving his wife and teenage daughter behind to kill himself in the snowy woods, where hungry carnivores would devour his body. He enters the restaurant to have his last meal when Arash asks him to cook and offers him a job. He postpones his suicide to the following day and when he witnesses how Arash deals with the members of the gang, he wants to know what will happen next. Like Scheherazade who is saved by stories, Lars continues to live by being a part of the story.

Amir and Zabih don't go back to the camp and Lars don't commit suicide. Every weekend there are fights between some members of the gang and Arash's small team. They call them *Black Weekends*, as some men always leave the restaurant with aubergine-black eyes. *The Viking Now* have never had the opportunity to experience the lifestyle of the notorious American biker gangs such as *The Warlocks*, *The Sons of Silence*, *The Outlaw*, *The Pagans* or *The Hell's Angels*. They are law-abiding citizens who have merely been imitating the American gangs in their appearance and presentation, sporting moustaches, shaggy beards, tattoos and leather jackets, riding Harleys and calling each other brother. They carry licensed guns and shoot at empty bottles of whisky and beer cans. They desperately need action and the restaurant's staff give it to them. When Arash and his comrades beat the crap out of one or two of them outside the restaurant and redden the snow with their blood, his gang brothers whistle and clap for them. It seems that they are paying the new owner and his team to beat them up.

Lars loves the fights the most. He is so relentless in beating up the men that Arash has to ask him to slow down in case one of the gang members dies and the police show up and close the business. They are making a lot of money, not only at the weekends but also on weekdays. *The Viking Now* is also thriving and recruiting new members. Some of them will ride hundreds of kilometres to be in the thick of the action. Mass masochism.

To create more space, they join an adjacent stockroom to the serving area. Arash visits the vicinal villages and recruit five girls and three boys to work in the kitchen and serve the customers. He travels to Oslo and comes back with a chef and his assistant and puts him in charge of the kitchen so that Lars can concentrate on the security.

There are also new rules: the price of alcohol will be doubled after ten o'clock and the sale of alcohol is banned after midnight. The results of the new rules are that there is a very long queue for buying booze before ten o'clock and after midnight alcohol is sold under the counter for thrice its normal price. The gang love the illegal purchase of alcohol. They will hide the bottles in their jackets or under the table and when they want to take a swig, they will look to their left and to their right to check no one has noticed their unlawful actions. Drinking alcohol after midnight gives them a huge buzz. Every single person will have a bottle of alcohol in his or her hand and will look forward to buying the next one. Money is pouring in.

One afternoon a police car parks outside the restaurant and two policemen walk into the restaurant and ask to meet the owner. Arash is not a fan of the police anywhere in the world. He sees them as a bunch of low-achievers with weak characters, mostly coming from broken families, who become interested in becoming a member of the police to get some sort of power, which they wouldn't be able to achieve without their uniforms. He would have loved to put up a sign above the entrance which read *No pets and police*, but he already has more than enough headaches with the gang and doesn't need any more. He receives the police officers, who seem to expect to be treated differently, close to the entrance and keeps looking at them. They are there to thank the new owner. They explain that the previous restaurant owner would call the police four to five times a week, sometimes several times a night and they had to send all their police officers to the restaurant to break up the fights. This wasted

their time and cost more than two million kroners a year. They offer help and support if needed. ‘No, thanks,’ Arash says and sees them out.

One day twelve bikers park their motorbikes outside the restaurant. It is about eleven in the morning and Arash and his companions are not expecting any customers. Their leather jackets are black and silver on which are written *The Highwaymen*. Their insignia is a skeleton with wings wearing a cap. On one of the bikes is written, *we fear no evil*. A man with a shaved head and a long beard steps into the restaurant. He takes off his sunglasses and puts them into his vest’s pocket. Arash asks if he can help the man.

Over a drink the head of *The Highwaymen*, the Dice, expresses his interest in wanting a piece of the action going on in the restaurant by using it as their hangout, spending twice the money their rival gang is spending every week. Arash tells the Dice that he will arrange a meeting with the Shotgun to discuss the proposal.

The head of the two chapters meet for the first time in Arash’s presence to discuss business. The Dice who believes that he doesn’t have dreams, but goals and lives in the shadow of death and fears no evil, because he is the biggest mother fucker on the highway makes fun of the Shotgun for allowing females in their gang. The female gangsters, the Shotgun replies, give up their freedom and lives for you if you give them love, support and protection. They’ll go to prison for you and they get less time. The police are less likely to stop and search a woman. Their brothers’ fight is their fight, they are their brothers’ keepers. They can kill and bury their rivals so softly that they won’t even feel it. Arash stops the men and reminds them the reason they are there, but there are various unresolved issues that they must settle first. After two hours of negotiations they agree to use the restaurant as their hangout every other day. Arash suggests they share Saturdays every other week until he comes up with a better solution.

Arash and his team convert a neighbouring barn into a fighting area. They build a big cage in the middle for the fighters and some benches around it for the spectators. The concept of Cage Rage might have just come from that place. When the arena is ready, Arash has a meeting with the head of both chapters and they decide to use it on Saturday nights. Both clubs can use the restaurant on Saturdays and take their fights to the cage. There are seven fights each Saturday and the gangs have to pay a fixed amount to use the fighting area for their fighters. Arash will charge the spectators to watch the fights and will also receive ten percent of the bets. The business couldn't be more lucrative and the customers are experiencing it all. Others pay to go to the cinema to see violence, the gangs are living it.

It is Arash's best invention as the cage fighting redirects the anger, frustration and energy of the men to the cage. Arash and his friends don't have to beat up the gang members anymore as they are beating each other up in the cage. It gives the men a chance to release their pent-up aggression trapped under the comfort of modern life. Lars thinks the root of his failure in his marriage was his lifestyle, spending his time in an office as an insurance officer and going home helping in the kitchen, reducing himself to petty arguments over trivial domestic things. Lars fights in the cage every month; combat makes him feel free and alive, giving him enough pain and pleasure to carry on with his life for another month. Arash is pleased when Lars asks for an evening off to see his new girlfriend, but he frowns when he finds out that she is married. He will go to her house and drink with her husband for hours and then he will go upstairs to their bedroom and sleep with her while her husband is downstairs sleeping on the couch or watching TV. 'It is an agreement between the couple,' Lars explains.

Arash and his Iranian friends' black hair, brown eyes and tanned complexion are considered exotic. Many tall blonde Norwegian girls would love to have a relationship or just have sex with them.

‘We were young and made the most of it,’ Amir said.

‘What about Arash,’ I said. ‘Did he sleep with those girls?’

He shook his head. ‘The girls were after him more than us, but he would break their hearts. He’d prefer to drive to the city and spend Tuesday nights with his wife and son.’

Arash was better as a lover than I was. I had written poems about love, but Arash had experienced love without talking about it.

Money is not just coming from the gangs as they also have their normal customers who will leave the restaurant by nine o’clock to make way for the gangs to arrive. There is this ice hockey team who go to the restaurant after each match and the gang members would chat with them for hours. Often one or two of them turn up in the small hours to ask for alcohol and they don’t mind paying ten times the normal price to get some cases of booze.

One day, Arash gathers his friends and tells them that he wants to sell the business and go to another country for new adventures. His wife and son are in the city and he doesn’t see them often enough. Laura has continued with her studies in Norway and has just graduated and before Cyrus begins school he wants to move to another country and begin a new life. They have made millions over the past years and they can start a new business in any European country. Lately, they have had to turn a blind eye to some members of both gangs selling drugs, which Arash thinks will drag the police into their territory and they must leave before that happens. When his comrades don’t agree with his reasons, he has to tell them the truth that Essy Sag Kosh, his gang and the family of the students who have been killed in the Philippines have found out about their whereabouts and it wouldn’t be wise to stay, they have to move on. Zabih and Amir decide to go with him and Lars says he will happily join them if the new life promises enough challenges and adventures to keep him going. They decide to go to the UK where they don’t need to learn a new language. Seven out of the ten comrades

who had been sent to Australia by the Philippine's government and the UN four years earlier also join them in the UK.

It was early in the morning and Amir was still talking about Arash's past when someone knocked at the door. Who wanted to see Angelina that early in the morning? She was asleep. I took my gun and peered through the peephole. Arash was standing in the doorway, leaning one hand against the wall. I opened the door.

'Come with me,' he said.

Confession to the Dead

Arash had come to apologise to me. Obviously he didn't want to do it in front of Amir. I picked up my jacket from the sofa and followed him out of the flat. He caught his own reflection in a pane of glass, which made him straighten his posture and fill his lungs with air. Inside his black four-wheel drive, no words, no music, no radio and outside the car, the world was talking to itself. I leant my head on the headrest and closed my eyes. The morning sun was caressing my face through the windscreen. Under my eyelids light and shadow were chasing each other. The tall trees by the sides of the road were watching the black car driving into the unknown.

All of a sudden, Arash made a U-turn on the road, my head banged on the window before I opened my eyes. Stunned by his stunt, I rubbed my head, watching him pressing the pedal, demanding wings from the metal. He reduced his speed to join a procession of cars turning into a cemetery. We drove through an arched entrance and followed the cars to the corner of the cemetery. We got out of the car and waited for the pallbearers to take the coffin out of the hearse and followed the box and the mourners to the grave. They set up the coffin at the front of the ditch and made way for the family and close friends to form a semi-circle around the box. A man in a black suit, probably the local vicar, began the ceremony by reading a few

verses from the Bible. He welcomed the people and reminded them that they had come together to celebrate and give thanks for Amanda Smith's life, say goodbye to her and pray for her soul. He then began singing a hymn and others joined him. I studied the mourners' faces to see if I could recognise any of Arash's associates. They all had pinkish-white complexions. What was Arash's connection with Amanda Smith, a mistress, a secret swain? Why had he taken me to her funeral?

After giving a eulogy, the vicar invited the family, friends and relatives to lay their flowers and mementos on the coffin and say their goodbyes before the committal. Arash walked through the mourners like a sleepwalker and knelt to embrace the box with his long arms and lay his face on it. People began whispering to each other. Amanda Smith's family members were watching him with incredulous eyes, almost embarrassed. It seemed to me that none of them knew Arash who was sobbing his heart out like an ancient professional mourner.

A man put his hand on Arash's shoulder, trying to console him by tapping him on the shoulder. He then winked at a tall young man who came to assist him in helping Arash stand on his feet. Magenta orbs and wet face, Arash made his way through the confused bystanders and sat on a grave behind the gathering. With my mouth half-opened, I walked to Arash and sat next to him. He took out a tissue from his pocket and blew his nose. The mourners watched the pallbearers lower the coffin into the ground. The vicar invited them to go to a local pub to have some refreshments.

'You alright, mate?' asked the man who had tried to comfort Arash. There was no response from Arash.

'Look, I don't mind if you were her secret lover,' said the standing man, 'It's good to know that there was someone out there who could make her happy.' There was deep grief in the man's eyes, reflecting the gloomy and joyful moments he had spent with Amanda Smith,

perhaps whispering tender words in her ears, arguing with her over trivial things, the moments that could have been held dearer if the couple had known death was imminent.

‘Come with me to the pub and let’s drink to Amanda, my wife and your lover.’

‘Drink alone bereaved man,’ said Arash looking at the graves in the distance, ‘and drink in peace, for I never met your wife.’

The man looked at me, needing to know the reason we were there and the story behind Arash’s wailing.

‘Wrong funeral,’ I said, shrugging. ‘Sorry!’

The mourning man was not sure if we were telling the truth, standing over Arash with a head full of conflicting thoughts. I knew that if the man lingered there longer, Arash would put a gun to his head and ask him why he had lived with a woman he hadn’t trusted.

‘It must be the next funeral,’ I told the man and sat on a grave opposite Arash. ‘We’ll wait for them to arrive.’

Still deep in thought, the man turned on his heel and marched towards the waiting cars.

After a long silence I asked Arash if he knew the woman and he shook his head.

‘What was all that about?’ I pointed at the woman’s freshly-dug grave.

Dad would say, *a lion never cries in the presence of jackals. It cries alone and in the dark.* Arash cried in daylight in front of strangers.

‘I never mourned Dad’s death,’ said Arash. ‘I didn’t cry for him. I imagined it was his coffin and I was at his funeral with you.’

When in exile, one must experience mourning differently. With the absence of social contexts and rituals, time freezes and it can hit you at any time.

‘Would you kill me if I did something horrible to you?’ asked Arash.

I didn’t think that question was about my likely retaliation for his punches.

‘You can’t do anything that can make me want to kill you.’

‘Don’t think hypothetical. What if I really hurt you, damaged you beyond repair?’

‘I’ll never kill you, regardless of what you do to me,’ I said. Disbelief evaporated from his eyes. ‘Look, you’re my brother and my backbone. Harming you is hurting myself,’ I said. ‘If you break my arm, we’ll have a broken arm. If I break your arm in retaliation, the family will have two broken arms, and that’s spitting into the wind.’

He stared into my eyes for any trace of sincerity and I tried to cover my interior world with layers of earnestness. I felt like a religious speaker who told others what was right and wrong as clear as black and white, but inside them everything was all grey and messy. No one had ever hurt me that badly to make me think of killing them. I cast my eyes to look down at the grave he was sitting on to escape his probing look.

‘I cannot take your life.’ I bolstered up my words by shaking my head. ‘But if someone took your life, I’d definitely kill him.’ A crow cawed several times.

‘If your dead brother was alive and had murdered me,’ said Arash, ‘would you hate him enough to kill him?’

My forehead summoned up all its lines, folds and creases. The imaginary position he had put me in was so ludicrous and at the same time terrifying that I could not think of an apt response.

He was looking at the far end of the cemetery, lost in thoughts, seeing nothing. Eyes, we use the most vulnerable part of the body to express the soul’s pain. What was Arash trying to tell me? Why didn’t he even say his name? *Your dead brother!* He hadn’t called Pasha by his name the whole time we had spent together.

‘I don’t have anything to say to that,’ I managed to say. His words had constricted my throat.

‘Of course you don’t. Murdering your brother is more difficult than killing yourself.’ The crow flew away to another tree.

‘I killed him,’ said Arash.

I turned to him with a smile, hoping he was just pulling my leg. He was still gazing at the abyss at the end of the graveyard. There was a painful tranquillity on his face.

‘I had my brother murdered.’

My guts heard the words first and reverberated them through my chest, arms, throat, temples and then to my balls and thighs. There was a dark conviction in those unpremeditated words that had slain all the doubts that could exonerate him. Ah, graves and tombs open your chests and hide me from the waterfall of vomit that life was expelling all over me.

I had my brother murdered, catalysed the cohort of unanswered questions in my mind and then they began bumping into each other. Had Pasha been a grass, giving information about Arash and his comrades to the Iranian regime? I didn’t think that Arash would have killed him if Pasha had stolen his money. It must have had something to do with betrayal, but I couldn’t imagine how poisonous the knife in Arash’s back must have been that had made him decide to murder his blood brother. I didn’t know what Pasha had done to him, but nothing could ever justify his homicide.

I had finally found the assassin of my brother, my own brother, sitting opposite me with a blood-field gaze watching a haze of nothingness beyond the graves. How could he do that to his brother, to himself, to his family, to me? Nothing can prepare you for that. I wished Arash had not confessed to me. It was a piece of information that wounded deeply and made ignorance appear so noble.

Tears were irrigating his stubble.

‘You reminded Nina of the bastard,’ said Arash. ‘That’s why she attacked you.’ He nodded. ‘She’s a very brave girl, she didn’t want to live with a heavy heart.’

He stood up and roared, ‘Why?’ All the birds in the cemetery stopped chirping. ‘The bastard had sworn her to secrecy through fear, telling her that the family would blame her if she told them. Her parents would punish her and abandon her.’ He closed his eyes and shook his head as if by doing so the thoughts would fall out of his head. ‘She must have been more afraid of us than of him.’ He paced up and down. ‘I arranged for the most attractive girl to be with him, to live with him, but the bastard couldn’t control himself.’ He seemed to be talking to himself. ‘How could he do it to an eight-year old girl, to his own niece, to my daughter? Didn’t he think that I’d kill him?’ He punched a tree several times and each time yelled, ‘Why?’

He sat back on the grave, his hands bleeding.

‘When she jumped out of her window and I took her to the hospital, I knew in my heart that I would kill the bastard. The next day I drove him out of the city to kill him, but Dad’s face was everywhere I looked the whole time, begging me not to kill his son. I smashed the car into a tree, thinking that if he died in an accident, it would be easier for the old man, but he didn’t die. They took him to a hospital. I called the immigration police and told them that he was in the UK illegally. They arrested him and deported him back to the hell he had come from. I promised myself to spare him while Dad was alive. When Dad died, I sent some of my men to finish him.’

That sentence tore my life into shreds. I felt that my interior pipes had burst and sprayed muck all over my internal walls and reduced life to its lowest ebb. How could Pasha be a paedophile and rape his own niece? I couldn’t believe my blood brother was capable of doing that. With the parents that we had, I always thought, nothing but good would come out of the family. What had gone wrong? How selfish and short-sighted one must be to destroy the entire life of a child and her family and perhaps a generation in exchange for a few minutes of corporal joy. We were all *gene-slaves* and parents could only help us grow what was already

in us. I was in such a rage that if Pasha was alive, I would have smashed his face in before asking him *why*. I realised that I wasn't sad that he was dead.

Arash's fist was purple, bleeding. I knelt by his feet, took a bandana from my pocket and wrapped it around his wounded fist.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'Nina's brother and mother don't know about this,' said Arash. I nodded while tying both ends of the bandana together.

He took my face in his other hand and examined the damage he had done to it.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

My face would mend, but my heart never would.

'You look more of a man now.' He smiled, his eyes still crying.

Back in the car, Arash and I were in our own separate worlds. In my sphere a catalogue of unasked questions, the answers to them perhaps in his part of the world, since we didn't talk, there were no answers to any question.

It was difficult to imagine the hell Nina had gone through - alone - betrayed, wounded, scared, ashamed, depressed and suicidal at that age, a victim of misplaced trust. If Pasha was a paedophile, when did he become one? Was it genetic or a learned behaviour? Shouldn't it run in our family if paedophilia was genetic? I wasn't sexually attracted to children, so why would he be? Perhaps the conditions in the womb had influenced him to have abnormal sexual tendencies. Maybe he was just a psychopath who had found his niece an easy target. How and when had he become a psychopath? I had known Pasha all of his life before he had left the country, yes, he was a bit selfish and could be a pain in the bum sometimes, but that was all. He was a predator, but he was also a victim. I couldn't imagine the predicament he must have found himself in - alone - the torture, the shame, the guilt he must have gone through, knowing that he was destroying the lives of people he had loved the most.

It was difficult to envisage the dilemma Arash must have gone through - alone - the torment of being the attorney, the judge and the jury in his inner court, putting the defendant on trial in his absence and reaching a unanimous verdict, the death penalty for his own brother with no right of appeal, without the possibility of parole.

Would it have been less poignant if he had done it to another kid? Arash wouldn't have killed his brother if he had sexually abused other children. He would have definitely murdered anyone who had abused Nina. He wasn't a person to wait for the law to do something for him, he lived by his own rules. Justice was subjective.

Arash pressed an electronic device and the door to his parking place opened. He parked the car next to a white Four-wheel drive. I followed him through a door to the spacious hall that I had visited once before. I felt nervous facing Nina again, so soon.

'Laura!' called Arash, heading off towards the kitchen.

Laura's voice came from upstairs, 'Hello dear.' She appeared in a puce robe towel. Her wet hair was covered in a white towel worn turban style. 'Ah, hello Kia.'

'Good morning,' I greeted her with a smile.

I could tell that she was looking for the right words to ask if I was okay when Arash bounded up the stairs and folded her in his arms, kissing her lips. How different he was from Dad who never showed his feelings for mum in front of others.

'Where is Cyrus?' she asked.

'Who knows where the bugger is now,' said Arash. 'Perhaps crashed on a sofa at a friend's house or asleep in his hotel room.' Laura gave an understanding nod and smiled.

'Is Nina awake?' Arash asked.

'She's in the garden with Helen. You go and see her while I dry my hair and put on some clothes.'

Arash kissed her again and descended the stairs. He tapped my shoulder to follow him out to the back garden.

Beside a pool, on a freshly mowed lawn Nina and her carer were sitting on two adjacent swings moving slightly backwards and forwards. She was reading a book to Nina who was gazing at the pool.

‘Hello Mr Karamian,’ Helen said.

Arash didn’t introduce me to her and asked the woman to take a break and leave us alone with Nina. She put a bookmark between the pages, closed the book, left it on the swing and told Nina that she would be back later to continue with the story. I acknowledged Helen’s curious look with a smile when she walked past us.

Arash strode to Nina, knelt beside her and folded her in his big arms. Nina rested her head on her father’s shoulder and closed her eyes. Her face was so innocent, basking in the caress and kiss of the morning sun. Arash whispered something in her ear that made her smile. He kissed her eyes.

‘Look who is here?’ Arash pointed at me, his face apprehensive.

I waved at her gently, smiling softly. Her face lost her childish features and became stern and mature.

Arash held her hands in his and kissed them. ‘Kia is my good brother,’ he said, struggling for words. ‘You’re safe with him,’ he whispered. I could see from his face that those words were the hardest thing he had ever said to his daughter. ‘I thought you might want to know your uncle better before he leaves us.’ He studied her eyes for an indication of her consent and it seemed that he sensed one. ‘I’m going to the kitchen to make some tea for us.’ He kissed her hands again and left us alone. Nina was looking at the lawn now.

I stepped forward and picked up the book on the swing before sitting on it next to her.

‘I haven’t read this book,’ I said. ‘Is it any good?’

She was gazing at the grass, the geometry of the freshly cut blades.

‘I also write stories,’ I said. ‘For adults, one day you might want to read them.’

I opened the book and began reading from the place that Helen had marked. It was about this white teenage girl who was in Africa with her family, experiencing what it was like to be a white girl and live cheek by jowl alongside the blacks. After reaching the end of the chapter, I put the bookmark in the book and closed it.

The scars of various operations on her ankles and knees were painfully visible, showcasing the ordeal that she had gone through. She would have another operation, Arash had told me, before she became eighteen. How selfish and sick Pasha must have been to abuse this child.

‘Pasha is dead,’ I said, risking everything on the news.

There was no apparent facial reaction from her. I felt I was talking in a language that she didn’t understand. ‘He died in an accident two months ago.’ I said, hoping that like a person in a coma she would understand the words, even though she couldn’t respond.

I didn’t feel depressed talking about my brother’s death. The weight of the guilt that I had carried in my chest for years for breaking Pasha’s teeth and then only intensified after his death, was not there. When I began boxing at the age of thirteen, Pasha would make fun of me and one day he challenged me to a fistfight. I always felt bad for the sadistic pleasure I experienced when my left hook had hit his mouth and broke two of his front teeth. Not anymore.

‘He wasn’t happy when he returned from England,’ I said. ‘He didn’t talk a lot about his life here. He lived alone and didn’t see his friends and family much. After his death I found a notebook in his flat that I haven’t shown to anyone. He wrote how sad and regretful he was because of the terrible mistakes he had made in his life. He considered killing himself several times, but he didn’t want to take the easy way out. He decided to stay alive and let his past

torture him every day. He hated himself for hurting his loved ones, but he didn't know how to fix the problem.'

A lonely cloud blocked the sun momentarily and scudded across the lilac sky towards the east.

'Some people make big mistakes in their lives and are not able to erase them,' I said. 'Some of these mistakes can damage others badly, but there is always a future and hope for change.'

I would have loved to hold Nina tightly in my arms, giving her hope and letting her know that I was there for her, but the right to touch my niece had been denied to me by my late brother.

'I understand your anger against your uncle and against your parents for not protecting you, but Pasha betrayed everyone. I can't ever imagine the pain you must have carried around with you, feeling betrayed, disheartened, empty and isolated, but at the same time feeling responsible for keeping the family together. You're the bravest girl I've ever met.'

Nina had gone through such a dehumanizing and humiliating experience that it had made her feel guilty to be a part of it, guilty enough to attempt suicide. I had read in an article that most sexual abuse victims found it difficult to deal with the fact that their bodies were aroused during the abuse. They struggled to understand the way their bodies responded to the sexual stimulation and experienced some spontaneous surge of corporal joy. They felt ashamed of a body that had betrayed them. They questioned their morality and attitude, simply because their bodies had sent involuntary pleasure signals to their brains.

'When I was a kid, your Dad would pin me down and tickle me against my will. I hated it so much, but I would still laugh, because it was my body's natural reaction to his ruthless tickling. My laughter didn't mean that deep down I wanted to be tickled. I couldn't do anything about it, I was an unwilling participant.'

I crossed my legs so that my right knee could swing freely. With the book in my hand I hit my leg below my kneecap and watched it kick out. I did the knee jerk reflex several times, noticing that she was watching my legs from the corner of her eyes.

‘I want you to know that what happened to you was not your fault at all and you shouldn’t feel ashamed or blame yourself for it.’

I thought that Nina might feel betrayed by her father for telling me a secret that was only supposed to be between themselves.

‘Your Daddy and I are the only people who know about this and it’ll remain a secret between the three of us for ever. He shared your ordeal with me to explain why you attacked me the other day. I want you to know that I would never ever hurt you. I’m very sorry for what Pasha did to you. I’m also sorry that I reminded you of him. I hope you can find something within yourself to help you move on. I don’t know how much it’ll help you to move on, but Pasha had totally changed before he died.’

She was looking at the ripples on the pool, getting tickled by the sunrays. The pool was ocean blue and very clear under the eyes of the sun, briefly challenged only by a passing cloud.

‘You’re a very strong and brave girl and I’m proud of you.’

Suddenly, Nina abandoned the swing and ran towards the pool. The shock of her action propelled me to my feet. She dived into the pool and began swimming under the water.

Arash, on his way to us, was transfixed, holding a china teapot and three cups on a tray in his hands, watching his daughter swimming like a frog under the water.

She didn’t surface until she touched the ladder on the other side of the pool and used it to step out of the pool. Water was dripping from her clothes when she opened the glass door and disappeared into the gloom of the sitting room.

Arash, who was still standing holding the tray, followed her into the room.

By the time I got into the sitting room no one was there but Helen whose hand was over her mouth, standing and watching the bottom of the stairs where everyone had disappeared. ‘She dived into the pool and swam!’ said Helen, clasping her hands under her nose. ‘I saw you talking to her,’ she said. ‘What did you tell her?’

I sat on the sofa and dragged the tray that Arash had left on the coffee table towards me and poured a cup of tea from the teapot.

‘Tea?’ I asked Helen.

‘Do you know how often I have tried to make her swim during the past three years?’ Helen said. ‘I’ve used all sorts of strategies and techniques to get a response from her, all to no avail and you did it in five minutes.’

‘Here, have a cup of tea.’ I placed her cup on the coffee table close to where I thought she would sit. She sat on the sofa while still watching the stairs Nina had used to go upstairs.

‘Please tell me what you told her,’ she insisted. ‘I hope you don’t think I’m prying; I just want to learn the technique so that I can continue using it with her.’

‘Sometimes, it isn’t about what you tell a child or how you say it,’ I said. ‘Who says it also can make the difference.’

Helen and I drank our tea in peace, I, thinking about Arash’s family, she, probably thinking about the technicality of what had just happened.

A while later Arash and Laura came down the stairs holding hands. There was a deep calmness on their faces, pure contentment.

‘She’s asleep,’ Laura whispered as if she would wake her up if she spoke normally. She turned to Helen and said, ‘Why don’t you take the rest of the day off and spend some quality time with your family?’

Helen smiled and headed for the door where she collected her coat and left the house.

Laura let go of Arash's hand, stepped forward and hugged me tightly. 'Thank you,' she said as her tears flowed out of her eyes and onto my shirt. Her freshly washed and dried hair smelt of Jasmine and avocado. I put my hands around her and felt the stretched straps of her brassiere under her shirt. 'Doctors say her legs are mended, but she rarely leaves her wheelchair, and she hardly speaks to anyone.'

Arash was listening to his wife with intense attention, fighting back his tears.

'I still don't understand why she,' said Laura and glanced at Arash, 'and her father attacked you yesterday and no one is willing to explain it to me, but I'd like to apologise and thank you from the bottom of my heart for having such a positive effect on her.'

It was called tough love here, but the culture I came from it was just love, manifesting itself in pouncing and punches.

'Arash had told Nina about this weird game that we brothers play between us. Well, we wrestle and beat each other as a kind of greeting to show our happiness when we meet after a long time,' I said and felt ashamed of my lame improvisation. 'She welcomed me properly and I wouldn't expect less of her.' I persevered, hoping that my smile would put an end to it.

'Let's have dinner together,' suggested Laura, 'the whole family.' She released me to hug her husband. 'What do you say darling? Your brother has been in London for over a week now and we haven't got together as a family yet.' She kissed Arash on the cheek. She was light like a giddy butterfly, flying from one flower to the next. 'Let's go to Nina's favourite restaurant tomorrow night.'

Arash kissed her forehead. 'Jami's it is.' He folded his arms around her and squeezed her before telling her that we had to leave.

He drove to the Globe and parked the car in a quiet street behind it.

'Don't miss what you've come to London for,' said Arash.

Was he the same man who saw my education as useless ornamentation and persuaded me to be streetwise?

‘I’m learning more from you than them,’ I said and pointed at the Globe.

‘You’ve learned enough. More of it is a headache.’

‘Are we still doing it tonight?’

‘Why not? For the last time,’ he said. ‘I’ll pick you up at your hotel.’

Father and Son

‘Where is your Dad?’ I asked.

‘He sent me in his place,’ said Cyrus. ‘You and I will walk into a posh restaurant and order their best food and drink. We’re going to eat, get drunk and then leave the restaurant without paying the bill. If they try to stop us, we’ll fight them.’

I stared into Cyrus’s eyes morosely and saw Arash in action.

‘No, you’re not,’ I said. ‘What your father and I have been doing is wrong and against ethics, humanity and morality. He put me in a situation that I couldn’t say no to him. I’m doing it because it’s just for a short time and it means a lot to my brother. I’ll be leaving the country soon and put all this madness behind me.’

‘I’m doing it.’

‘No, you’re not! You’re a student and you have a future ahead of you. I don’t want you to get involved in illegal and immoral actions.’

‘And you’re a university professor, you could be my teacher.’

‘Look, you belong to a different generation and I don’t expect you to understand why I’m doing it for my brother, but you don’t have to do this.’

‘I understand it, uncle. That’s why I’m here, because I know why you’re doing something that is not really you.’

‘Great! Tell me then why I’m doing it, because I don’t know myself.’

‘When you love someone, you’ll do things that they wish and not what you want.’

Cyrus was like his grandfather, with the difference that his sentence didn’t start with *a man*. He was there because of his love for his father, we both were, doing things that we didn’t approve of.

‘Let’s do it for Dad,’ said Cyrus.

‘You pick the restaurant,’ I said, already feeling responsible for Cyrus’ safety. With Arash I would feel safe walking into a dragon’s den, but with my nephew I was nervy and conscientious.

Cyrus drove to central London and into an underground car park. We got into a noisy lift to get into this quiet alleyway that led us to the main street where a stylish restaurant was displaying its splendour like a peacock. Cyrus whispered something into the manager’s ear and he ushered us to a table for three.

‘Are we expecting anyone?’ I asked, hoping that Arash would join us.

‘Dad would’ve loved to be with us tonight.’

‘Bring us your best wine,’ he told a waitress who was about to hand us the drinks menu. She smiled and left our table to get our drinks.

‘I didn’t know you drank alcohol.’

‘I don’t,’ said Cyrus. ‘This is going to be my second time.’ I arched my eyebrows.

‘When I turned eighteen, I had my first drink with Dad who told me that I should wait and have my second one with someone special that he loved very much.’

The restaurant’s manager turned up with a white-hair man who was pushing an elegant small trolley specially made to hold ten bottles of wine. ‘Hello gentlemen,’ said the manager.

‘Thanks for choosing to try our excellent wines. This is Monsieur Leroy, our wine expert,

who will help you with choosing the best wine for your approval.’ He smiled as widely as a shark. ‘Enjoy your evening,’ he said ‘Gentlemen!’ He left us in the capable hands of Monsieur Leroy only to observe us from a distance. Monsieur Leroy picked up one of the bottles with his gloved hands and began to explain the history of the wine and the way it had been made from handpicked organic grapes grown beside a French river and how mature it was and the names of the celebrities who had ordered it in the past. ‘The Archbishop of Paris described it as “velvet and satin in a bottle” This is for an exquisite male taste.’ I imagined the Archbishop, having drunk his velvet and satin, preaching to people, who had probably drunk their bottles of plonk purchased from a corner shop, spiritual parochialism. ‘The price of each bottle is £3450,’ said monsieur Leroy, ‘but I assure you gentlemen, each drop of it is worth the money.’

‘We’ll take it,’ said Cyrus.

‘Excellent choice,’ said Monsieur Leroy and opened the wine. ‘Divine taste.’ When he was filling up our glasses with the grape blood his concentration was equal to a surgeon performing a heart transplant. ‘Bon appétit,’ he said and left us to it.

‘And that special person to have your second drink with is supposed to be me.’

‘Oui, Monsieur,’ said Cyrus.

I picked up the bottle from the table and examined it, the perfect Burgundy, 1975 Romanee-Conti. If one ml contained about 20 drops, 757 ml made approximately 15000 drops, which meant that each drop of this wine cost in the region of five pounds. It was well worth a fistfight.

‘Dad trusts you very much.’

‘Yeah? How do you know?’

‘For the first time my chaperone is not anywhere to be seen. He disappears only when I’m with Dad.’

‘Was he following us the other night?’ I asked.

‘Of course! He’s the best.’

‘I think your father is exaggerating the threat, there is no one out there who wants to harm you.’

‘No. he’s not. My bodyguard saved me once.’

‘Someone actually attacked you?’

‘They shot at me, but he shot them instead.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘He was about to kill you when you followed me into the lift in the hotel. I waved at him to stop just in time.’

‘I’d like to see this invisible superman,’ I said.

He shook his head.

‘He is like a ghost, he doesn’t socialise. He just follows me wherever I go. He’s not here tonight, which means Dad trusts you a lot.’ I raised my glass and Cyrus followed.

‘To Arash and the ghost,’ I said.

‘Ditto.’

We both ordered seafood dishes. During dinner Cyrus asked me about his grandmother, my fiancé and my job. I asked him about his studies, his mother and sister. I read between the lines that he was still a virgin, apparently I had more in common with him than with his father.

When we were about to finish, Cyrus raised his hand and a waitress appeared. ‘I need to talk to your manager,’ he said.

The waiter fetched her boss who had an ingratiating smile on his face. ‘How can I help you, gentlemen?’

‘What is this?’ asked Cyrus, pointing at the food on his plate.

The manager adjusted his spectacles and bent forward to examine the food. He used his thumb and index fingers to lift a cockroach marinated in sauce, pinching its leg. Cyrus slapped the back of the man's hand and the cockroach fell back onto the plate.

'I didn't ask you to lift it, I asked you to explain what it was.'

'Are you sure it was in the dish, sir?'

'I'm still waiting for an answer.'

'I believe we know what it is, gentlemen, however we have to establish where it has come from.'

'I'm a magician,' said Cyrus. 'I just produced it from my hat.'

'Sorry sir, I'm not trying to be disrespectful, but it has never happened before. I mean, it's impossible to -'

'To serve cockroach with your food,' Cyrus raised his voice.

'Please keep it down sir,' murmured the manager and checked to see if any of the neighbouring customers had noticed the inconvenience. 'I'm sure there are more amicable ways to solve this problem.'

'Your amicability won't help me if I get sick, will it?' said Cyrus. 'I told you that we were going to push the boat out tonight and so far you've given me a stupid drink and a bloody roasted cockroach and you expect me to pay a king's ransom for it.'

'Money is not the issue, sir,' said the manager. 'Why don't you come to my office where we can discuss this more freely?'

'In any case, the Food Standards Agency must be informed as this is unacceptable.'

'We will contact them if that is still your wish after we have talked,' said the manager and forced his face into a wide smile. 'Please follow me.'

We shadowed him along a long and narrow corridor into his office where he sat behind a huge desk and signalled us to take a seat. He lit a pipe. ‘Am I correct in assuming that you don’t want to pay the bill?’

‘You couldn’t have put it any better,’ said Cyrus.

‘I like people who know what they want. It saves time.’ He puffed on his pipe. ‘Well, we might be able to give you a run for your money, then. I’m not going to call the police, let them use their sirens for better causes.’ He pressed a button and four tall athletic men in suits entered the room and stood behind us. ‘Gentlemen, I appreciate that you’re not time wasters. I leave you in the capable hands of experts who know how to deal with deadbeat customers.’ He stood up. ‘If you would excuse me, I have a business to run.’ He left the room while smoking his pipe.

Had Arash been with me, I would have had the wind at my back, but with his son I might have the odds stacked against me. How could I possibly beat four sturdy men who had been trained for this? If I struck first, I might be able to knock one of them out and reduce them to three. If Cyrus could fight with one of them, I would be able to fistfight with the other two and who knows, another knockout punch could turn the tables on the men. The office was too small for a fistfight without resulting into a wrestling match, which I must avoid due to their numbers.

Cyrus took out a handgun from his back and pointed it at the men. They raised their hands in unison. While applying a silencer to the gun he said, ‘I think you’ll agree with me that we shouldn’t disturb your customers with a gunshot.’ He told the men to undo their shoelaces and use them to tie each other’s hands. I tied the last man’s hands behind his back and put their shoes in a recycling bin.

‘Gentlemen, we won’t blindfold you or tape your mouths,’ said Cyrus, ‘I know you’d appreciate the peaceful ambiance of the restaurant.’

I removed the key from the keyhole and when we got out of the office I used it to lock the men in. We walked back to the dining area. Cyrus placed the bin of shoes on a table. ‘Here is the key to your office,’ I handed the manager the key. ‘If I were you,’ I whispered in his ear, ‘I would delete whatever the CCTV cameras have recorded. It’s not good for the restaurant’s reputation.’ We strode out of the restaurant and got into a taxi.

‘Arash would’ve wanted us to have a fistfight,’ I said. ‘What you did was cheating.’

‘Why use your muscles when you can use your brain,’ said Cyrus. ‘That is my motto, it’ll save you a black eye and a broken nose.’

When will the new generation realise that it is not just about winning and the end does not always justify the means?

‘Don’t use your brain then, when you can use your soul,’ I said.

‘You and Dad could have been philosophers.’

‘You should have met your grandfather, he was the father of philosophy.’

Cyrus didn’t want to go home, I didn’t want to go back to my hotel. Karamian nephew and uncle didn’t want the company of their thoughts that night. We walked, laughed and breathed in the London night. The city was vainglorious of its past. We were travellers from different lands. Big Ben, the phallus of the English empire was watching us. The mist was rubbing against it. Politics, far and wide in the world, sucked. Warm from within, we sat on a bench facing the turgid muddy Thames and ate the hotdogs we had bought from a stall. We didn’t need words when silence was eloquent. Cyrus lay on the bench and rested his head on my thigh. I was him, his father was me and we were all my father. I ran my fingers through his hair. A sleepless seagull landed on a post. Arash was not with me, his son was, I had lost a brother and a father, but found a niece and a nephew; the Karamian family was not even close

to extinct. A boat floated upstream. I reclined back on the bench and closed my eyes. After a long time I was no longer miserable.

The whoosh, whoosh of a road sweeper woke me up. I was cold. Whoosh, whoosh. Cyrus opened his eyes and sat up. He said he was thirsty while rubbing his neck. Some birds were warbling. We walked in the fog for a while and found his car.

He dropped me at my hotel.

‘See you at Jamie’s tonight,’ he said and drove off.

A torrent of knocks on the door woke me up. It said 5:58 A.M. on my mobile. A peek at the peephole first, I opened the door.

‘They’ve kidnapped Cyrus,’ said Arash.

‘What?’ My eyes were still fighting with the light.

Karl Marx followed him into the room.

‘Put your clothes on,’ said Arash.

While putting my jeans on, I asked how he knew Cyrus had been abducted.

‘They contacted me half an hour ago,’ he said. ‘I spoke to Cyrus, he was okay.’

‘Who are these people?’

‘The ex-ambassador of Iran to the Philippines and his gang.’

‘What does he want?’

‘He wants me,’ Arash said. ‘Remember I asked you to make a bomb for me a few days ago? I need it now.’

Karl Marx stepped forward with a pen and a notebook in his hands. ‘Tell me what you need and I’ll get them for you as soon as possible.’

‘How long does it take to make one?’ asked Arash. ‘They’ll contact me soon to arrange the exchange, I need to know my options.’

Having assumed that I would make a bomb, they were getting ahead of themselves. I wasn’t even sure they were telling the truth. It seemed a bit contrived and rushed. I could excuse myself to the bathroom and give Cyrus a ring, but what if he was also cooperating with his father? He had told me about the absence of his bodyguard and how much Arash had trusted me to look after him. Was I supposed to feel guilty that Cyrus had given me a ride and I was the last person he had seen? What if Arash was telling the truth?

‘How would making a bomb save Cyrus?’ I asked.

‘We need to hurt his kidnappers.’

I got the pen from Karl Marx and wrote down a list. He scanned it and said that apart from one item, everything was ready. ‘We’ve been preparing ourselves for this,’ he said. ‘Everything will be ready in two hours.’ He left the room.

Arash drove us to an Italian restaurant for breakfast. A waiter said that we should have booked our table in advance. The manager arrived, cuddled Arash and offered us their best table where you could see the chefs at work.

‘How can you eat when your son’s life is in danger?’ I asked.

‘They want me,’ said Arash, ‘and to get what they want they must look after my son.’

‘I hope they do.’

‘Maybe he needed this to appreciate what he has; a kick to toughen him up. The kid is too soft for this jungle.’

Perhaps Buddha was right and suffering was a friend and not a foe. Would loneliness and solitude transform the young soul of my nephew?

‘Cyrus may not have much muscle, but he has brains and a huge heart,’ I said.

‘Having a huge heart makes you vulnerable. You’ll end up using your brain to mend your broken heart.’

‘He takes after his father,’ I said.

‘The offspring of fire is ash, not flame.’

Arash’s eyes were miles beneath darkness.

We walked along the River Thames, listening to the gurgling of the water. On a bench under the moonbeam a man and a woman were canoodling. Have your giddy moments now, couple. Make it public, tell the world you are enjoying life, because it won’t last long. Tell each other any witless thing and it makes sense to you now, until you come to your senses. I was thinking like a man who had divorced seven wives. Silence was pregnant with unvoiced thoughts.

Arash paused and leant on the railings of Westminster Bridge. He watched the water for a while. ‘With this darkness around,’ he said as if talking to the river, ‘how is one able to see?’

He was neither asking the fish in the muddy water how they could see in the murkiness, nor thinking out loud. He didn’t even break the silence; *that* was his silence, lost words, screaming in disguise. If he was a sister, I would hug him. Her finely-tuned antennae would absorb the sympathetic energy from me through touch, but Arash was an isolated island and desired space to figure out what he needed to set the dark on fire.

He sat on a bench facing the river. I leant back and watched the clouds passing by in a hurry, wreathing.

‘How is Mum coping after losing her husband and son?’ Arash asked.

‘Her religious belief is helping her,’ I said. ‘She can’t do anything about God’s will, so she accepts it.’

‘Did you know that I used to pray and fast when I was a teenager?’

‘No way!’

‘Yah, I was a good religious boy. I prayed five times a day and fasted one month a year, an all-round Muslim.’

It was difficult to imagine him stooping to any deity.

‘I liked Ashura the most,’ he said. ‘Everyone would mourn for the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, but I loved the man, admired his courage. He would’ve saved his life and his friend and family’s lives if he had compromised with that bastard, Yazid, but he didn’t. Imagine, there is only a handful of you against an armed force and you don’t bow down to them and you fight until the desert sands run red with the very last drop of your blood. That’s the way a man should stand up for what he believes in. A good death is rare these days.’

‘Religion serves death well,’ I said. ‘It brings the dead back to life. Its rituals are therapeutic.’

‘As long as it helps Mum deal with her losses, I don’t have anything against it.’

‘How come a religious boy became a communist?’ I asked.

‘The freeloaders,’ Arash said. ‘I looked at the lazy fat ass clergymen and asked myself why they didn’t do what they preached to others and instead lived a parasitic life.’

‘They’ve stifled a religion that is supposed to enlighten people,’ I said. ‘Most religious leaders and preachers are an obstacle to the truth and light.’

‘And the scriptures,’ added Arash. ‘I read the top three when I was very young and found them all littered with superstitions, untruths and nonsense.’

‘Let’s assume that the Holy Scriptures are the manifestation of a universal truth,’ I said, ‘it’s impossible to read the words and understand the truth they try to represent in ink.’

‘Hence, the scroungers are born,’ added Arash, ‘to explain things to you.’

I shook my head in disagreement. ‘One needs to discover and experience the message the books try to convey by oneself, through knowing one’s self whose language is revelation.’

‘What are you, a priest, a rabbi a sheikh?’

‘I’m paraphrasing what Molana said in his poems seven centuries earlier.’

‘Well, the man’s dead now.’ Arash lay his hands on the back of the bench and watched the drizzling rain.

‘Some people never die.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ he said, ‘but I know a lot of people who are already dead, just empty shells, roaming around for no apparent reason.’

‘Everything happens within us.’

When I was seventeen, I wrote “Marg” (*death* in Persian) and put up the calligraphy in my room. Dad asked why a fine young man like me should think of death that early in life. Its visible presence in my room reminded me of the moments that I was losing to death ceaselessly. It sharpened my senses to enjoy life more intensely. Confrontation with death, or at least in my case the naming of it in ink, made me think of what mattered most in my life. Dad kept nodding at my philosophical reasoning and asked me to replace it with “death is not the end”. Where was Dad now? Was he watching his sons sitting on the bench?

A couple of seagulls flew over the river. Some boats glided by and the drizzling rain faded out. I simply couldn’t understand it, Cyrus had been kidnapped and we were sitting on a bench wasting our breath on philosophy and doing nothing that could help him. I didn’t know what it was to have a son, but if I had one and he was in trouble, I would rescue him in a heartbeat.

I closed my eyes. The bridges, the roads, the buildings, the faces - an entire world was spinning under my eyelids, giving me a feeling of nausea. When I opened them, Arash was holding his jacket over my head, protecting my dreams from the drizzling rain. Had I slept? I rubbed my eyes with my palms. The Houses of Parliament on the other side of the river were sketchy in the mist.

‘Let’s go,’ I said. ‘We have things to do.’

Dinner at Jami’s

Arash dropped me at the Singles. Karl Marx would stay with me to learn how it was done.

Zabih, the boxer, was reading a book, Amir, the black cab driver, was cleaning a gun, Lars, the giant Norwegian, was making a sketch of the two. Tayeb, the sumo wrestler driver was playing the piano.

‘Ready to learn new skills from you,’ said Karl Marx and asked me to follow him upstairs into a bedroom which had been transformed into a bomb making factory.

Making a bomb is not easy, in terms of techniques and ethics. You think of the humans whose lives your device will take, people who are happy or sad now, looking at death from afar. It helps not to know who your handmade device will kill, it keeps you at a safe distance from the paws and claws of your deeper thoughts. *Help your brother to save his son*, Dad would say. If I called it self-defence, it would be a less difficult task. *It is self-defence, son*.

‘It’s difficult to understand why a person would travel all the way to this part of the world to take revenge on my brother for something that happened in another part of the world almost three decades earlier,’ I said. ‘How deep is this wound that even after so many years it still hasn’t healed?’

The sweetness of revenge had kept the wounds open and festering.

‘How much do you know about what happened in Iran’s embassy in the Philippines?’
asked Karl Marx.

‘I know that there was a clash between the pro-regime and anti-regime students opposite the embassy, things got nasty and some students from both sides got killed.’

‘I’m talking about the time when they took some students hostage and kept them in the embassy.’

‘I know Arash and his team kidnapped the ambassador, took him to the embassy and released the students before they could deport them back to Iran to be executed. I also know that he tied the ambassador up with a rope and hung him upside down out of a third-floor window.’

Karl Marx sneezed twice and they were so powerful that no one within a thirty metres radius of his small frame could ignore him. He wiped his nose with a napkin. ‘I haven’t told a soul about this before,’ he said and stopped. There were some half-digested matters in the past that he was noticeably struggling to talk about. Whatever the issue was, it had managed to survive for twenty years, fermenting in the background, residing in their individual and collective subconscious. Why did Karl Marx want to disclose it to me now? Maybe it was easier to talk about the sensitive issue with someone from far away, someone who hadn’t been there and was leaving them soon. Distance was a shock absorber, a confidant. I respected him for taking the first step, verbalizing what had been suppressed for a long time without the fear of being judged by me.

‘I’m not going to tell you who those students were,’ he said, ‘but we later learned that while they were kept in the embassy they had been sexually abused.’ He lowered his head and busied himself with a piece of C4, drilling a hole in it with a screwdriver. ‘Repeatedly,’ he said, trying to stem his trembling tears, ‘by different men.’ He wiped his wet eyes with his

sleeve. ‘It’s difficult for a man to say that he’s been raped by an enemy. We only found out because all of the men were bleeding and one of them took his life.’

I couldn’t even imagine how traumatic it must have been for the victims. The psychological scars they must have endured. What motivated men to rape their male enemies? I didn’t believe the perpetrators were gay, they must have done it to show their dominance over their foes, to emasculate and demoralise the enemy. The exploitation of the body of a male enemy in a patriarchal and homophobic culture signifies defeat and humiliation for the rival. When a man is raped in such a culture, both the perpetrator and the victim are compelled to enter a contract of silence.

‘The pain was too much for the young man, his name was Asad,’ he said. ‘He walked to the embassy with a gallon of petrol in his hand, sat in front of the entrance, poured the petrol all over his body and struck a match.’ Karl Marx covered his mouth with his hand as if to prevent himself from screaming or vomiting. His eyes were envisaging the image of a man on fire, a vision that he had imagined before. He breathed deeply, needing to refill his tank before he could continue. ‘The bystanders said that he didn’t even move when he was alight. Well, he was already dead from within.’ He paused for a while. ‘Asad was an only child. His body was so badly burnt that we couldn’t send it back to his family. We buried him in Manila.’

I drank a glass of water in one go. ‘The story doesn’t end here, does it?’ I asked.

‘I hope the explosives you’re making will put an end to it,’ he said.

Karl Marx told me this story:

In a drizzling humid evening in 1980 a navy-blue Buick Electra turns into Manila North Cemetery in Santa Cruz. The students who were captured and kept in the Iran embassy have been asked to assemble in the cemetery at Asad’s grave. The car stops, Arash gets out, walks

to the back of the car, opens the boot, lifts a man out and drags him to the grave. The man is blindfolded and his hands and feet are tied with a rope.

‘You know the son of a bitch,’ he says and removes his blindfold.

The ambassador, in his nightwear, looks at the students, his eyes blinking. Arash removes his gag and gives him a bottle of water, which the man immediately grabs, opens and guzzles to the last drop. He replaces the gag over his mouth.

‘This man is the murderer of your comrade, Asad,’ says Arash. ‘He is yours. You can lynch him, but I don’t think a quick death will mollify justice. I leave it to your imagination to come up with the right punishment.’ He sits on a grave and watches his comrades looking at each other and the ambassador indecisively.

The youngest student of the group strides up to Arash, takes the knife from his hand and marches towards the ambassador who braces himself for the knife to slit his throat. The young man cuts the rope that has tied the prisoner’s feet (*to one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also*). He cuts the ambassador’s shirt in half, then cuts his belt and points at the man’s trousers with the knife in his hand. Understanding the cue, the ambassador takes his trousers off and attempts to huddle his drenched body. He follows the young man’s gestures so seamlessly that you will say it is a theatre performance which has been rehearsed numerous times. The young man puts the knife on the ambassador’s neck and points at his boxers. ‘Fuck you!’ is the ambassador’s response. Four students come to help and force him down onto his hands and knees. The young man unzips his fly and inserts his dick into the man’s arsehole, making him suffer the same torment he has gone through. The ambassador breaks down into tears. The young man shouts, ‘Asaaaaad!’ and bursts into tears. He kneels on Asad’s grave, sobbing. Visiting his aggression on the villain purges fury out of his system.

Two students help the young man to stand, pulling up his underwear and trousers. The students force the ambassador to remain on his hands and knees for another student to rape

him, but seeing things in a different light, the new student changes his mind and kicks the man on his butt instead. Nobody knows who is feeling worse, the student who gave the man the taste of his own medicine or the one who just kicked him.

Everyone is sitting on a grave thinking now. Arash stands up, walks to the half-conscious man, lifts his blood-purple muddy body and puts him in the boot of his car. A student picks up the man's trousers and boxers and put them in the car. Arash studies the men's grave faces for a while and then turns on the engine and disappears into the fog.

I excused myself and went to the bathroom; I needed to regroup in silence. I splashed cold water onto my face and looked at myself in the mirror. I felt like an empty stadium, soulless. What if taking revenge failed to deliver the expected sweetness? What if the emotional catharsis of vengeance couldn't dissolve hostility? The very house I was in, the Singles, was full of middle aged men, perhaps the very victims and avengers, who didn't seem to have reached any closure, probably still ruminating on their past deeds. Revenge had made the victims as culpable as the ones who had done the injury and that wasn't a healthy place to be in. The two ends of the chain of revenge were the same, the wounds were still open and suppurating. Their refusal to accept the linear irreversibility of history had not freed them or made them sophisticated people; it had kept them victims.

Arash picked me up from the Singles. We drove towards his house to collect his family to go to Jami's. I asked him if he had any plausible justification for Cyrus's absence for the evening.

'After three years Laura has asked me to take the family out. I cannot cancel it because Cyrus won't be there.'

'Our family was always like this, because you were absent all of the time.'

‘At least you had each other,’ Arash said. ‘I didn’t have any of you.’

‘You had a choice, but we didn’t,’ I said. ‘You decided for us and we suffered because of your decision. Dad took his wish of having us under one roof to his grave.’

‘Thanks for your support when I need my time and energy for the task at hand.’

‘Cyrus is safe, they need you, remember?’ I said. ‘You have all the time in the world to say what you want and when it’s my turn, there is no time. I’ve always been in a queue, a lastborn is, but you’re going to listen to me now.’ Arash pulled up near a park.

‘I’m listening,’ he said.

The colossal significance of him as a role model had now vanished. I was as close to him as a star to the moon.

‘I’ll never forget the night that the Iraqi jets were bombarding the city,’ I said. ‘Dad had gone to another part of the city to fetch Pasha and Mum was shaking in my arms hysterically and I couldn’t calm her. At that hopeless moment I thought of you and hated you for not being there for her. You left us and didn’t even look back. Where were you during the war? People like you owe an explanation to a nation that you left behind to live through a revolution, a war and various sanctions. Now, you locate me in London only to tell me that I’m not macho enough and plan a silly restaurant game to toughen me up. You have been absent for two decades and I shouldn’t have even talked to you and you tell me you’ve missed drinking with your brother. When I look at you, I see a self-centred selfish man who has gathered some losers around him, thinking that he is a charismatic leader who can run his country. People in that country don’t even know you. If the country is much poorer, less cultured and more dangerous, if we are the saddest nation on the planet and the world hates us, it’s because of you who left us in the middle of the ocean for the safety of foreign lands. Don’t you dare tell me that I’m not bold enough because I don’t drink alcohol.’

‘Finished?’ he asked. ‘Shall we go now?’

I threw the wads of fifty pounds notes that he had sent to Iran into his lap.

‘Thanks for your charitable offer, but we have enough to bury our loved ones when they pass.’

‘We!’ said Arash. ‘Who is left from us? You and me, and we’re fighting over nothing.’

I placed the drawing that had been sent with the money on the dashboard.

‘Why did you send this? Is it Nina’s?’

He nodded. ‘She forgave the bastard and I wanted him to know.’

‘But you killed our brother!’

‘Yes, because I’m not Nina.’

‘How could you do this to Mum, to me?’

‘Because I’m a self-centred selfish man who wants to show the losers around him that he won’t spare his own brother when it comes to loyalty and betrayal.’

‘Your confession can shorten an argument, but it doesn’t validate your action.’ He picked the drawing, folded it and put it into his pocket.

‘Let’s imagine that I had gone to the embassy and signed that paper and finished my studies twenty years ago. I would have opened a surgery, made some money, helped some poor people, married and had some kids. I would have experienced the war and sanctions like everyone else and I would have hugged Mum and you when those jets were dropping bombs, and Dad would have seen us under one roof before his death. That sounds good, but that man wouldn’t have been me. A person with no stand in life is a nonbeing. I don’t approve of your ideas, but I respect you for having them, because you are manifesting who you are and what you’re made of.’ He drank some water from a bottle and asked me if Pasha and I were friends. I hadn’t tried to be his friend, not because we didn’t have much in common, but

because he would prefer to be an older brother than a friend, thinking that it would offer him a sufficient height from which he couldn't feel his inferiority complex.

'I thought so,' said Arash. 'I would have been that person and no friendship would have bloomed between us. For the last two weeks I haven't tried to change you, nobody can, I just took you out of your comfort zone for you to see that situations can make you do things that you may not like, but you' do them for others.'

He picked up the wads of notes and placed them between us next to the gear.

'I had promised Dad that I would somehow send something that he would like to see to his funeral.'

'So, Nina's drawing was her holding her granddad's hand?' I asked.

He nodded.

'And you wanted Pasha to see it and think that it's him and Nina who must have therefore forgiven him.'

'Look, I'm very sorry for not being there for you for such a long time,' said Arash, 'but I stretched out my hand to you for friendship. I'd like to believe that you took it when you drank with me against your values.'

'And I made you a fucking bomb.'

'I can see progress in using the language,' said Arash. He placed the wads of notes in my lap. 'There are a lot of poor people in that country who can use these.' He closed his eyes and pressed them with the meat of his fingers. 'I've made a lot of decisions that have hurt others. I don't want to make another one to jeopardise Cyrus' life and I need you for that.'

The quiet light music in Jami's was mollifying, rather soothing. I wished Leila was with me so that it would feel more like a family. When you grow up in a male dominated

household, your experience is like training in a military camp. You are a bindweed curling around cold-rusty railings. Something is missing when children are all boys. Lines are straight, no curves, arches or waves; food is fuel, no salad, sauce or decorations; beds are soldierly berths, no clean Jasmin-scented pillow sheets; conversations are plain and utilitarian, no flavour, soul or colour. Girls are needed in any gathering to create a pleasant, serene ambiance, to gel the members of a household into a family. We had Laura and Nina to address the balance.

Arash told them that Cyrus had left for Cambridge to be with his roommate who was going through a crisis and needed him. He lied so natural that I thought perhaps Cyrus had actually gone to Cambridge to be there for his friend and Arash had lied to me about him being kidnapped to make me assemble that bomb. But Cyrus wouldn't have left without saying goodbye to me.

Arash sat opposite Laura and I sat next to him opposite Nina. I peeked at the menu and put it back onto the table. I asked Nina to order for me whatever she was going to have. She smiled while going through the menu.

After placing our orders, Laura whose eyes were gleaming with glee began a conversation with me about literature. She resembled a TV hostess who knew how to engage her guests on their favourite topics. She had read Mann, Proust, Kafka and Woolf, which was unexpected from an American physician. She had always loved literature and during the last three years that she had had to stay at home four days a week to look after Nina, she had expanded her reading explorations from American borders into Europe and other parts of the world. She crushed my opinions about Americans. The United States to me had been the land of opportunists and founded on occupation, foray and greed. The land of hard-core capitalism resided by large fat consumers whose world began and ended in that usurped terrain. I thought that most American adults were large kids with my-car-is-bigger-than-yours attitude,

whose aspiration was to get a well-paid job to buy a larger house. They drove their FourWheel Drives to the local shopping mall and took advantage of cheap offers of frozen pizzas, burgers, chips, ice-cream and colas to fill up their refrigerators and freezers. They carried their trophies back home and then relaxed on their sofas, watching TV, licking their icecream while waiting for the ding of the oven to announce that the pizza was ready. There goes the waistline. How could Laura come from that land of guns, pretention, inflated egos and Narcissistic nationalism? The Mac Land of division and homogenization produced 1% elites and a mass of undeveloped souls. Laura must have come from the gentry, the minority.

‘Pumpkin Picarones with chocolate fudge,’ Nina read from the dessert menu, ‘for uncle.’

‘Tell uncle what Picarones is,’ said Arash.

‘It’s a traditional Peruvian dessert.’

‘Do you know what it’s made of?’ I asked.

‘Sweet potato, squash and pumpkin,’ she said.

‘Nina ordered it when we came to Jami’s for the first time,’ said Laura.

Arash was smiling, enjoying every moment of being with his family, watching them with fervour as if it was his Last Supper with his disciples.

I had my Picarones with a small teapot of Jasmine tea, feeling guilt for enjoying it, thinking of Cyrus who was alone and perhaps hungry that night.

‘Nina and I went to see a school today,’ said Laura. ‘She is tired of me being her teacher.’

‘I’m not!’ gainsaid Nina.

‘Is Mum a strict teacher?’ I asked.

‘She’s alright.’

‘I loved going to school, not because of the teachers, but to be with my mates,’ I said.

‘It’s a good place to make life-long friends.’

We sat there for a while and chatted about Mum, Leila and Laura's family. Laura told us an anecdote about Arash, carrying his disabled friend, a photographer, on his back and climbing a rock for him to take some pictures from a great height. Arash told us a story about Laura, saving his life when his enemies had trapped him in a shopping centre in the Philippines. They were still in love, marriage had not lost its supernal lustre.

When they got ready to leave the restaurant, I said that I would stay there for a while before leaving for my hotel.

'Don't stay long,' said Arash. 'Try to get some sleep.' I nodded.

'Good night, uncle,' said Nina.

'I enjoyed my meal very much,' I told her and got down on my knees. 'Promise to choose my meal anytime that we go out together.' She promised.

'Thank you and good night my warrior.' I held her head in my hands and kissed her forehead.

I walked back to our table and asked for a cup of camomile tea and the bill.

'The bill has been paid, sir,' said the waiter.

When would Arash learn to let his *little* brother take care of a bill?

'That man sitting over there picked up the tab,' said the waiter while adjusting the chairs round the table. A man in a burgundy suit and Ben Hogan hat was sitting in the corner of the restaurant, sipping a hot drink. His face was obscured with his hat as his head was down, looking at the cup he was not drinking from.

'Cancel the tea please,' I told the waiter and walked to the man's table. I pulled out a chair and sat down opposite him.

'The last time someone picked up my tab, he asked me to make him a bomb. What do *you* want from me?'

‘I owe your brother a dinner,’ said the man, his face was still down and hidden in shadow. He had a peculiar American accent.

‘What do you want from him?’

‘What about his life?’ He raised his head and looked into my eyes. He was in his midforties, wearing an artistic pencil moustache. His grey-green piercing eyes could permeate into your flesh and read your bones. He had the face of a sharp intellectual person.

‘A dinner in return for a life.’ I nodded, trying to stay calm. ‘That’s a bit unfair, don’t you think so?’

‘Your brother killed my brother some years ago.’

‘You’re not the first person who tells me Arash has killed his brother two decades ago, but no one has shown me any evidence to prove it.’

‘His name was Ramak,’ said the man. His eyes were reading images from memory. ‘He admired your brother for his courage and charisma.’

The man and his brother had had dinner with Arash one week before his brother was killed. He belonged to a different political faction, but his late brother was an Arash fan. He got shot in the infamous clash between Arash’s group and the opposition in front of the Iranian Embassy in the Philippines. An anonymous person had called the man, who lived in America now and told him about Arash’s whereabouts, offering him the opportunity to take revenge.

‘Your brother got killed when hundreds of opposing students were shooting at each other,’ I said. ‘Arash didn’t kill your brother.’

‘When things go wrong in any establishment, it’s the head of the organisation that bears the responsibility.’

‘What about the leaders of the other groups?’ I asked. ‘Why don’t you hold them responsible for the death of your brother?’

‘Arash brainwashed and bewitched my brother and many other innocent students like him to die for nothing and he’s going to pay for it.’

‘I know what it’s like to lose a brother,’ I said. ‘I understand if you want to take revenge.’

I took my wallet out of my pocket and put some fifty pound notes onto the man’s table. ‘Thanks for your generous gesture, but no. Not this time.’ I put the wallet back into my pocket and stood up.

‘Go back home, man. Return to your family if you have one.’

The man smirked, took his cup from the table and ensconced himself in his chair, leaning his head on the back of the chair, sipping his drink and gazing in front of him.

I left the restaurant thinking that Cyrus’ disappearance was Arash’s strategy to convince me to make the bomb. He had sent this man now to prove that the threat was real and I had done a good job. A good job, I hadn’t done. The bomb I had made wouldn’t perform without the small piece that I was carrying in my pocket. I couldn’t murder a human being. There was no light to bounce off any atrocity.

The wind hit my face with a rosary of raindrops. My glasses began crying. I zipped up my jacket and retracted my neck into my leather shell. Everyone who needed a closure to two decades of enmity seemed to have gathered in London. Would I ever be able to kill a man to save my brother or my nephew? I wanted an honest answer. Just a few days earlier, like a true gentleman, I had emphatically told Arash that I would never use a gun, but I had already pulled the trigger and put a hole in his car and now I was considering the moral aspects of killing a person. Circumstances had changed Arash, would they be able to change me? Was I becoming my brother? He was a different seed.

When the beeping of road rage shook me out of my thoughts, I found myself in Camden Town. Thinking had stifled my sense of time and place for my legs to take me to Angela's flat. Why was I there? Was there a connection between the overloaded brain of a man and female company? What did my unconscious know that I didn't?

The lucent moon adjusted its tiara in the River Fleet.

I took a black cab and headed to my hotel to get some rest before the big day.

With all the voices rattling around in my head I couldn't sleep. London didn't like to see me asleep. I couldn't stay between the hotel's walls, under its roof. Something was hidden in the trenches of shadows and I couldn't see it. I stepped out.

What did Arash need a bomb for? If he was telling the truth and Essy Sag Kosh had abducted Cyrus, the man's wounds must run deep and incurable, a peaceful settlement was unobtainable. People get hooked to hatred, to the extent that they may not even recall the original reason for it, yet they keep feeding on hate. They require the otherness of the others to make sense of themselves. They need an enemy out there to justify their problems and shortcomings. Essy and his gang must have come to London for blood to wet their dry scabs, craving fresh wounds. Arash didn't deserve to be hurt; he was carrying with him more than sufficient interior wounds from his family and friends. If I hadn't come to London, they wouldn't have discovered his whereabouts.

I sat on a bench in a patch of green, took my glasses off, cleaned them with the corner of my shirt and put them back on. When in the dark you put your glasses on, you only see the darkness better, the indelible night. The sky was more pronounced, the stars were clearer. I thought of the things that happened in the dark, the supernal deeds: lovesick swains whispering to each other, secrets being exchanged, people closing their eyes to pray, revelations being experienced, carnivores hunting in the dark, plots being hatched and

atrocities being committed. I thought of Cyrus and what he was doing or thinking, alone, in the dark.

Mum must be awake now for her morning prayers. Her sons were the reason for the tears upon her cheeks. Would she be able to bear life if she lost another son? She had no idea what was going to happen to her children. Pray Mum, ask your God to look after your sinful sons, make a plea for Arash and his son to stay alive. Pull all the strings you have with the

Almighty to protect your men.

Two Secrets One Reason

No chaperone followed me to the Globe. What did Arash's enemies need his brother for when they had his son? Every couple of minutes I would check my mobile phone for a message or a call. Arash had asked me to go about my normal business and promised to call me if they called or there were any developments. My body was in the building, but I was not in it. The preamble buzz of unknown actions ahead had overlaid the inner miasma with this unsettling sense of anticipation. I was hoping that Arash would contact me before my battery died, when he tapped on my shoulder.

'They made contact,' he said. 'Essy Sag Kosh has asked to see you before the exchange.'

We got into his car and drove off.

'Why do you think he wants to see me?'

'Both of you live in the same country,' Arash said. 'You're his potential enemy. Maybe he wants to negotiate with you about the aftermath of today's exchange.'

'I don't want to meet him.'

'You should, that's one of his conditions.'

'What are his other conditions?'

'Nothing you should worry about.'

'I'll kill the bastard then.'

Arash stopped the car, got out and opened my door. 'Step out.'

I got out. He held my arms in his hands and asked me to listen to him very carefully.

'You and Cyrus are going to walk away unscathed. I want you to do exactly what I tell you, nothing less, nothing more.'

'What about you? I won't let them take you.'

‘The priority is to rescue Cyrus unharmed. I have a plan and you must trust me. The second stage will be my rescue.’

‘There is no plan,’ I said. ‘You just want to save your son. The moment they have you, you’re done.’

‘I have a plan and it needs your trust.’

‘Where are your comrades?’ I asked and spun around. ‘Where is the bomb?’

It occurred to me that his plan might hinge on the explosion that my bomb was supposed to provide.

‘You need to follow my instructions like everyone else,’ he said. ‘The moment they let me know the place and the time of the exchange, my team will begin the operation.’ He held my head in his large hands, kissed me on my forehead and lowered his voice. ‘My team hear everything that we say in the car, so if you want to tell me anything you don’t want them to know, tell me now before we get back into the car.’ I shook my head.

‘Good, let’s go,’ he said and turned to go.

‘Wait,’ I said. ‘I hope it isn’t too late, but the bomb is not finished, it won’t explode.’

‘I know,’ Arash said. ‘Just make sure you drop what you’re carrying in your pocket in his car.’

Back in the car, I felt bad to have disappointed my brother.

Outside the car the ebb and flow of life was normal. Deep in his thoughts, the driver of the neighbouring car was picking his nose behind the traffic light. A cyclist banged on his window. The driver jumped up, wiped his nose with the back of his hand and rolled down his car window.

‘You almost killed me, sir,’ said the cyclist. The inanity on the driver’s face gave the cyclist what he needed to know. ‘You didn’t even see me, did you? Change your bloody glasses.’

The driver rolled up the window. The cyclist banged on the up-going window harder. ‘Don’t shut your window when I’m taking to you.’ The driver’s eyes met mine.

‘Fucking prick,’ said the bearded cyclist who had reduced himself to a class beneath his and gave the car window a final thump.

The driver smiled, expecting me, as a member of the motorist fraternity, to identify with his predicament. Why was this man even alive while Cyrus had been captured?

They called Arash and let him know the place and time they wanted to see me, but they didn’t mention the exchange. They gave us half an hour to get to this Iranian restaurant in North West London.

Arash parked the car in the parking lot of a supermarket close to the restaurant.

‘He may want to work on your emotions,’ Arash said. ‘You must stay cool. Anger will be your number one enemy. Just listen to him and be brief in your answers.’

New instructions arrived. I would meet Essy Sag Kosh in a car behind the restaurant, then I would walk into the restaurant where the exchange would take place.

Arash hugged me and said that he would see me at the restaurant soon. I still was not sure whether I was going to encounter the real ex-ambassador or one of Arash’s pals who would pretend to be him. Even so, I was carrying a leaden weight of fear tinged with responsibility in my gut. When I was walking towards the car, I thought of God. It was pathetic that I only hark back to Him when I was low. Did I think of Him when I came in the lap of the Russian girl? If God was chastising me for that and for having a glass of wine with my brother, then

what was the difference between Him and vindictive Essy Sag Kosh? His heart, if He had one, must be larger than Essy's. He wasn't a bearded man in the firmament who had nothing better to do than to watch me do right or wrong deeds and reward or punish me for them. Perhaps heaven and hell were just a reflection of our psyche, the manifestation of our fears and desires.

I surveyed the area with an air of self-confidence. Two men searched me before they let me into the back of a car. The driver was motionless, like a test crash dummy that companies used to assess the impact of an accident on new cars.

Someone opened the back door and sat next to me.

'What's happened to your face?' asked the man.

'What do you want?' I asked.

He looked like a retired footballer who had gained unhealthy weight. Essy had the girth of the nouveau riche and had a dark grey mark on his forehead, a callus, the sign of a man who had prayed a lot, prostrating on the ground before God for long hours. Pretence was a common virus in the Islamic country, many people would do silly things to grow calluses on their foreheads, pretending to be dedicated religious figures to gain respect or positions. When the currency of a country is ignorance, everything is permissible, even the right way to enter the toilet.

'You must know who I am,' he said and was annoyed to see I wasn't impressed. 'You're going to have a long day ahead of you.'

'Yours is going to be longer.'

'Do you know what's wrong with you Karamian brothers? You underestimate your opponent.' He rolled the window down and lit a cigarette. He had eight rings with huge gemstones on his fingers. 'That faggot brother of yours made the same mistake and paid for it with his fucking life.' He pulled on his cigarette. 'The elder Karamian had sent his little

brother to kill me. Ha, just imagine, *a computer geek murdered Ismael Ahmadi*. Can't fucking believe it.' He used his fingers to create an imaginary newspaper headline. 'If you ask me, I'd say Arash killed your brother. It's like sending a mouse to kill a snake.'

'What are you talking about? Did Pasha try to kill you?'

'Did Arash really think that a good-for-nothing faggot could finish me off?' he said. 'I was really offended by his miscalculation. After all these years, he should've known me better. How stupid of him to underestimate me.'

'Did you kill Pasha?'

'If I wanted to kill that poofter boy, I would've done it years ago.'

'I didn't know Pasha had tried to kill you,' I said, hoping he would tell me what had happened.

'He even had a little fucking plan, to kill me and then go straight to his father's funeral to have an alibi. Well, he didn't make it, did he?'

Here I was, at last, talking to my brother's murderer. Why did Arash lie to me and said it was him who had murdered Pasha? Arash would have never sent Pasha on such a dangerous mission when he could have asked his trained comrades to do the job. Pasha must have tried to salve his conscience by killing Arash's arch enemy, as atonement for the despicable thing he had done to Nina. But what were his comrades doing at Dad's funeral?

'The bastard missed my heart by two centimetres,' said Essy and shrugged his left shoulder out of his shirt. A round scar like a mini sunflower was on his chest, a bullet wound. 'When the faggot shot me, my men rushed to help me, but I said *no, get the bastard*, and they chased him.'

'He was killed by knives,' I said. 'You couldn't have killed him if he had had a gun.'

'He must've thought he'd got away with it,' he said. 'My men followed his car to a launderette. When he parked his car and went into the shop to collect his fucking funeral suit,

one of my men got into his car. They called me when I was in an ambulance going to the hospital. I couldn't miss it, could I? My men forced the driver to do a U-turn and join the action. Imagine, one of my men in the bastard's car and the rest in a car following him.' He nodded, revisiting the images in his third squidgy eye. 'We passed my men's car and there he was, as cool as a cucumber, driving his fucking Mercedes Benz.' He smiled at what he was watching on the screen of his imagination. 'We drove pass him with sirens blaring, then we slowed down. One of my men signalled for him to stop. There were two armed men with me in the back of the ambulance, ready to shoot. I think he realised when we forced him to stop and put the car in reverse, but my men were behind him in another car, boxing him in. He went for his fucking gun, but it was too late, my man in the backseat of his car had already got a firm grip on his neck by using his shoe laces, pulling him back.' Essy gazed into my eyes for a reaction. 'Your darling brother was using his hands to release his fucking neck so that he could breathe, and there I was watching him from the ambulance. He must've thought that he'd killed me, but I was there like an eagle hovering over him, watching him choking to death. My men broke his window, opened the door and stabbed him over and over again. Shit and blood painted his car like a Van fucking Gogh masterpiece.' His words squeezed the life out of my body. I felt like a puppet whose puppeteer had released its strings and let it fall at the mercy of gravity. My lungs were empty yet heavy, my mouth was bitter and dry. He wanted to see me wrathful and hurt, but I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. I was seething inside and would love to punch his hideous face and break his jaw, but I was looking at a dead man.

'If you hadn't murdered Pasha,' I said, 'I would've killed him myself, I hated him.'

'Hah! Did he fuck his little brother when you were kids?'

'Maybe he did. But, we'll never know, will we?'

The past, the present and the future nights together couldn't blindfold the world, the man was a murderer and must die. Would the death of Essy Sag Kosh reduce the amount of evil in

the world or would it add to it? Was he going to cease to exist with his death? Did he have any offspring to perpetuate his immortality? Was he going to have a sempiternal life after death?

‘You’re planning my death in your Karamian head, aren’t you?’ said Essy. ‘I can see it in your fucking eyes.’

He was trying to stir up my emotions.

‘What are you going to do with Arash?’ I asked.

‘He knows what is going to happen to him.’

‘You killed our brother,’ I said. ‘Isn’t that enough revenge? Can’t you just move on with your life and let it go?’

I took the bomb part from my pocket and delicately dropped it onto the floor and pushed it under the front seat with my foot.

‘You don’t seem to understand the situation, little Karamian,’ said Essy. ‘Arash is going to kill me if I don’t finish him first.’ He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and dried the beads of sweat on his face. He pointed to the door. ‘It was him who sent that faggot to kill me. Now that I’ve killed his brother he’s not going to leave me alone, is he?’

‘Arash didn’t send Pasha to kill you,’ I said. ‘He would have sent his buddies to take care of you if he had really wanted to kill you. Pasha did it to show how much he loved Arash.’

He pinched the bridge of his nose. ‘Fuck you Karamian brothers, fuck you and your faggot love affair.’

The callous man would never understand the love between brothers. I smiled to fuel his insanity. I felt I could easily kill the man. My ‘civilized’ lifestyle was a mask that covered my primitive, animalistic instinct. I had been designed to survive in the wild since the dawn of mankind and a couple of centuries changes in thoughts, culture and lifestyle couldn’t alter my

primitive genes. Only a few months earlier I could have written books about inner harmony and tranquillity and how to create peace in the world, but now I had fallen prey to my basic instincts, living the life of an outlaw. As long as people like Essy Sag Kosh existed, we lived in the wilderness and needed our primeval nature. A heartless debauched man with a gun in his hand was far more dangerous than a wild animal and his death was admissible.

‘There are wounds in life that no words or deals can heal,’ said Essy while adjusting a silencer on his handgun. Vengeance was a leech, clinging to his heart for the taste of blood. ‘You’re an educated man and I’m aware you’re doing well at the university. Killing that faggot brother of yours was self-defence. Whatever happens today will stay in this country. I don’t want you as my enemy and you certainly won’t want me as yours. Go back home, marry that beautiful fiancé of yours. What was her name? Oh, yah, Leila Hatami. Have some kids with her and live in peace. I don’t wish to harm you, but if you think of revenge and shit, I’ll fuck up your life and then kill you.’

Our family knew that we were under surveillance, but when Essy mentioned my fiancé’s name, it felt so intrusive and menacing.

‘I’m sure our paths will never cross again,’ I said. ‘I would like to talk to my brother before we do the exchange.’

‘Words and the Karamian brothers.’ He smirked. ‘You’ve got five minutes.’

I left the car and headed towards the restaurant. Two men searched me again before they let me in. I scanned the sitting area and sat on a chair opposite Arash whose eyes were endued with an assuring calmness.

‘Twelve men are sitting at different tables,’ I said. ‘What’s the plan?’

A waiter set two cups of teas on our table.

‘We drink tea and wait for them to deliver Cyrus,’ Arash said. ‘You made me believe that you had killed Pasha.’

‘Only to stop you making the same mistake Pasha made.’ It was the first time he had mentioned Pasha’s name. ‘Did it cloud your vision?’

A thick cloud had been hanging over my psyche since Arash had confessed that he was a fratricide, but clouds came and went and what remained was the deep blue sky.

‘What were your men doing in Iran when Pasha was killed?’

‘We had hacked Pasha’s computer,’ Arash said. ‘We noticed that he was doing research on Essy Sag Kosh and looking for clever ways to kill a person without leaving any trace and how to lose a tail when being followed. When we thought he was close to putting his plans into action, I sent one of my men who could travel to Iran to organise a team to protect Pasha when he tried to kill Essy. My best men were here and couldn’t go back to the country.’ He sighed. ‘They didn’t do their job properly. Dad’s funeral distracted them. When they got to Pasha, it was too late.’

‘Why didn’t you talk him out of it?’ I asked.

‘Pasha felt guilty for what he had done to Nina and to me. We were monitoring him from a distance because he was very depressed and suicidal. Killing my enemy was his atonement, it would’ve helped him save his conscience and get on with his life.’

His mobile phone rang. He answered it and said that Cyrus was with us now.

‘Look after Mum and be there for my kids,’ he said and stood up. ‘Time to go.’

I shook my head.

‘Do what I told you.’

The sound of sirens vibrated in the restaurant. I stood up to hug him when I saw the man I had met in the restaurant walking towards our table. He drew a gun from his coat and pointed it at Arash. *Save your brother’s life*, said Dad. I hugged Arash and turned my back to the man. A bang and I felt a shock to my body, the blazing of burning lead in my chest and a tug of war in my guts, hot and cold pulling against each other tightening thousands of nodes.

Arash lay me onto the floor. The legs of men running in slow motion were everywhere. I didn't hear another shot, Arash must be alive. *Stay alive, son*, said Dad, wearing an oxygen mask. I could kill for a glass of water. I was all out of miracles, watching myself getting evicted from myself. Death, the blackest ink, spilled over the canvas of life and painted it mono-colour-tenebrous.

The indigestible residues of the past emerged from the dark to invade the present:

They hooked Dad up to a life support machine. What life was that? They had inserted a transparent tube through his mouth down into his stomach. Twice a day they would send crushed food down the tube into his alimentary canal and collect the waste at the other side via a urine tube and extra-large diapers if any of it managed to come out. He was a living conduit. I wished, secretly, that the stroke had killed him, or it had at least destroyed his ability to understand his disgraced status, lying there like an oversized vermin with a white nappy between his legs. He was neither alive nor dead, in limbo, in purgatory. His turn had come, it seemed, but he had still not finished with this side. Perhaps he desired to go but the artificial tubes were in the way, providing him with a spurious life. Where was my father in that incongruous arrangement?

The siren of the ambulance taking me to the hospital came first.

Pain confirmed life.

'Stay with me,' a paramedic said.

Breathing was difficult.

Darkness prevailed.

The past rose up from it.

Dad's anatomy was deteriorating with every moment. He was dying in slow-motion before my eyes. Three months had passed in silence from the time he said those unprecedented words, *I love you, son*. His last sentence, like a zip, had closed his suitcase of words. I held his hand and asked him to open his eyes if he could hear me. I moved his eyelids aside and asked him to move his pupils for me, gazing into his vacant eyes for what seemed like an eternity. My teardrops clouded the hospital. I let his eyelids go, they did not completely close, I had to close them for him like in the films, but he was not dead yet. He was sentenced to life imprisonment with no parole, locked in his body, serving his time.

The salient fact of the stroke wouldn't budge, hence he relinquished fighting. He stopped eating even before the second stroke sent him into a coma. I was sure he had gone on a hunger strike to put an end to his undignified situation. Father didn't want to be a piece of meat that smelt the liquidised food the nurses were forcing into the artificial tubes. I changed his nappy. Dark green faeces and red on white. He wouldn't want that life, I knew my father.

Lights came back, I was in the ambulance, the siren vibrating in my skull.

'Can you hear me?'

An oxygen mask was keeping life in my chest.

My eyelids, two leaden curtains, closed themselves.

Mother came to the hospital to stay with Dad in the afternoon so that I could go home and rest until evening. His lugubrious face was with me while walking all the way home. I took a shower to wash away the stench of the hospital. The pallor of his face was under my eyelids when I was washing my hair. He was smiling ingratiatingly without saying a word. I was drying my hair when his bed materialised in my room with all the different tubes going into and out of his body. My finger had switched off the dryer. My eyes were glued to the

opposite wall seeing nothing. Sorrow was fire, steaming my eyes. I felt useless, it hurt. Life was assaying the essence in my bones.

Mum was holding his hand in hers when I returned to the hospital. She noticed me in the doorway watching them. She kissed his hand and left the room without exchanging a word with me. She was a mountain, disintegrating.

The light was poking my eyes.

Surgeons in green, their eyes talking.

Classical music in the background.

Oxygen again.

Inhalation, opiate, anaesthetic.

I wish they knew that I had donated my organs for transplants. Before I became a donor, I thought that only four groups of people would donate their bodies for transplants and medical research: those who knew their families couldn't afford to pay for their funerals, those who didn't have anyone to attend their funerals, those who loved life so much that they wanted to continue living in the bodies of others after their death and people who hadn't done anything worthwhile with their lives and decided to do something decent with their death. I didn't fall into any of the categories. It was better to help some desperate human beings than to rot in the silence of the grave and turn into white worms that would die of hunger and then becoming oil and soil.

Maybe they knew I was a donor. In a few minutes I'll be butchered into pieces. My kidneys, lungs, eyes, liver and heart would enter into different bodies of people who had been waiting for them for ages. There was a shortage of Asian donors in the UK, I had heard it from the radio of a black cab. There was a reason for that, it was only in Asia that when you

died people would say, *thank God he is at peace now*. When life was not worth living what was the point of extending it? What if the doctors finished me to use my body parts? Vultures! Who was going to have my heart? Did those people know whose limbs they were going to have? I wouldn't want any of my organs to help a person to live a worthless ordinary life. I wouldn't want my body parts to serve an individual whose ideology and lifestyle I wouldn't commend. What would it feel like if they implanted my heart in a young woman's body? Would it be able to fall in love again? Wouldn't it change the sexual orientation of the recipient? What would they do with the rest of my body? Dog food? Even as dog food I would be recycled into energy, nothing ever seemed to end in the universe. I wished there was life after death, a transcendental or physical kingdom where I would meet Dad and Pasha again. I wouldn't care if it was in heaven or hell as long as I could see the men of my life again, the three of us.

The hospital was dozing when I took twelve 10 mgs morphine ampoules out of my pocket. I cut off their heads and put them in a line on the side desk. The filter needle of the syringe sucked the dope from the array of decapitated bullets one by one. I wrung my soul and released the opiates into Dad's vein through the catheter. I hoped it was enough to put him to sleep for ever. Before his heart sent the narcotics around his body I whispered something in his ear, I will never say what those words were to anybody.

What I was doing would torment me to the end of my life, but it would put Dad out of his misery, which was beneath his dignity. I would want him to do the same for me if I were in his shoes. I would want him to put an end to my undignified life even if he had to bury the secret in his chest and live with a black hole in his conscience for the rest of his life.

I put the ampoule shells and the syringe in a black plastic bag and hid it in my pocket. I embraced his still warm body in my arms and listened to his heart and followed its beats to

the end, a complete halt. Some puissant energy moved from his guts towards his chest and came out of the area above his nose between his eyes. Miraculously, he half opened and closed his eyes, perhaps to see his murderer, his saviour, his son, his Kia. I toppled onto the floor like a falling elephant whose hind legs collapse beneath him. I had finished his dying. I had chained myself to his soul.

When his heart took its final beat, I lay on the bed next to him. The ceiling tiptoed into my eyes. A spider ran on the white. Dad couldn't see it. He would never see again. I closed my eyes to see like him, the dark. His hand was still warm in mine. Maybe he wasn't dead yet, his soul still lingering around, not knowing what had happened, where to go. Amongst the stench of death, drugs, disinfectant and bladder juice, I smelt my father, the scent of security. Where was he now?

I opened my eyes, the ceiling tiptoed into them. No spider ran on the white.

'Hello, uncle.'

I turned my head to Nina who was sitting on a chair, not in a wheelchair, next to my bed, holding my hand in hers, caressing it like my mother.

'Can you get me some water?'

She pointed at the drip and said she was not sure if I could drink anything.

'Is your father okay?'

'He is fine.'

'And your brother?'

'He went out to get some lunch for us.'

The best news from the best person. I rested my eyes.

'Dad's friends left this morning when we arrived. Lars is still outside. They said you're a hero.'

It is difficult to shake your head when it is resting deep on a pillow.

‘I don’t know about that, my dear.’

‘You saved Dad’s life, so you are a hero.’

‘Your Dad was my hero when I was your age.’

‘Isn’t he a hero anymore?’ I

laced my fingers in hers.

‘A hero is always a hero. And you are the bravest heroine that I know.’

‘A heroine doesn’t make mistakes.’

‘Everyone makes mistakes,’ I said. ‘We learn from our mistakes and call them experience.’

Silence crept into the room. I closed my eyes to feel Nina's love through her fingers holding my hand in hers.

Love killed my father and I didn’t stop it.

When Dad passed, I spent the night with him, holding his hand in mine. I was a hunter who respected his prey. When dawn broke, I kissed his cold forehead and told the night nurse that he had begun his journey. Free at last. *A real man would choose a good death over a degrading life*, he would say. Not a *life-slave* anymore. I wished he was praying in his mind when I injected the potion into his vein, not that he would go to heaven, but his Kia would have the heart to put an end to his suffering.

I left my father behind in a refrigerator in the hospital morgue. He had already begun to decompose, the beginning of turning to dust. Grief, like an ancient shield, felt heavy on my chest, but I didn’t want it less acute. I needed to experience the full-fledged pain, to embrace my mourning and making love to it.

Who could say that from the three hundred million sperm Dad had released once, one of them would beat the others to become his son and twenty-six years later, his murderer. A patricide is an author, a creator, a god and should not be judged by law-abiding citizens who panic when they park on double yellow lines.

I stepped out onto the street and became one of the countless unknown and unknowable passers-by, carrying with me my share of tragedy from the heap of the world's calamities. The wind must have had whispered my secret into the ears of the trees as they were tearing their clothes off so frantically. I couldn't contribute anything to the collective pool of misery, I needed an ocean of it to fill the emptiness within.

I looked at my hands, they didn't belong to me anymore. They wouldn't be able to wash Dad's hair again. From now on, they would be on their own to do whatever they wanted. Let them punch, pray, paint, pick up a fag and pollute the world. I wouldn't mind if they got tired, pulled the trigger and shot the master perched in my head.

I reached home – the rain had helped – I didn't look like a man who had been crying.

If there was a God and he was a writer, father would have been one of his finest lines. When God is possessed by a man in love, everything is permissible, even the erasure of the greatest lines. We may rise from and sink into it, but death is beneath us and cannot touch love.

'What are you thinking about, uncle,' asked Nina.

Let your tongue pronounce your crime, your sin.

'When your grandpa had a second stroke, there was no hope for him to recover and get better,' I said. 'He couldn't talk, he couldn't eat, he couldn't even open his eyes. They fed him through a tube and used nappies, because he couldn't go to the toilet. I thought that living like a vegetable was beneath him and I knew he wouldn't like to live like that.'

She was nodding as if she knew the pain.

‘So,’ I said. ‘I put him to sleep for ever by an injection.’

Nina wasn’t surprised, she didn’t even pause to digest the news, she said I had given Dad something that he had wanted, because I loved him. ‘People usually give you what they want and not what you want,’ she said. ‘Grandpa is happy now and you should be glad for him.’ Glad? Sometimes the marks you make on your soul are indelible, no matter how hard you scratch at them you can’t make them disappear. All you can do is heap the days upon them and hope to muffle their vibrations.

‘Is it ever possible to forgive yourself?’ I asked.

‘One must try, uncle.’

How mature my niece was! A deep well into which you could confess your sins and receive fresh water in return. I felt light, somewhere in my body had been unloaded.

Cyrus entered the room with a box of pizza and a bag in his hands.

‘Uncle Kia is awake,’ Nina told him.

He put the box and the bag on a trolley, sat on the chair that Nina had vacated for him and held my hand in his.

‘You alright?’

He nodded.

‘How many bullets in my body?’

‘Only one,’ he said. ‘Dad kicked the goon before he could shoot again. He disarmed the man and handed him over to the police.’

‘What happened?’

He picked up a newspaper from a side table and handed it to me.

EX-AMBASSADOR CAUGHT WITH BOMB. The picture of Essy Sag Kosh,

handcuffed and sandwiched between two police officers, was underneath the headline. *The ex-ambassador of Iran to the Philippines was arrested charged with possession of explosives and handguns*, read the subheading. A smaller picture of the bomb I had made and two handguns were further down the text. *Acting on a tip-off from a member of the public, the Metropolitan police discovered a bomb and two handguns in a vehicle rented by the ex-ambassador of Iran to the Philippines. The Deputy Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Iran has distanced the Iranian government from the suspect, "Iran is against terrorism, regardless of where in the world it happens. The suspect hasn't had any official post in the government for the past ten years. We don't know what the intentions of him were carrying weapons and explosives in another country. We condemn the suspect's action, yet it is our obligation to make sure that, as an Iranian citizen, the defendant will receive a fair trial."* Chief constable Brian Reed praised the officers involved in the arrest and mentioned that the police will request more time for questioning the suspect.

I gave the newspaper back to Cyrus.

'Glad, they haven't written about the shooting.'

'After all, the cops are not that useless,' said Cyrus. 'They arrested everyone in the restaurant.'

'Yah, only if you chew it for them and ask them to swallow it.'

'Two police officers are outside your room now, protecting you.'

'In other words, I'm under arrest.'

'They're going to ask you some questions. Just tell them the truth.'

'Where is your father?'

'He was taken into custody. For questioning and for protection. He'll be released soon.'

A nurse came in and was pleased to see I had regained consciousness. She asked some questions and left to fetch a doctor. I could hear her in the corridor updating the police

officers about my condition. So, it wasn't just the strong painkillers that told me my condition wasn't that serious, because the police officers entered the room to take my statement. The most salient quality the police officers have, regardless of the country they 'serve', is their persona, which is much more refined than who they really are. The instructions they follow, which seem to have come from the same place, turn them into the best active listeners who seem to find your words more impressive than whatever they have ever listened to, and wow, they are experts in writing things down. Whatever I told the officers about the shooting, I wouldn't tell Mum nor Leila. *A man without big secrets is only an empty shell*, Dad would say.

After the police officers left the room, Nina entered with a thick book in her hands.

'This is the only book amongst a dozen that I thought you might like,' she said and showed me *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. 'Who is your favourite poet?' she asked.

'Molana, but they know him as Rumi in the west. He's not in that collection.'

I chose the Romantic period and she did her best in reading some poems. Cyrus joined us and read some more. A blend of classical music and jazz came from an invisible loudspeaker, the pianist was performing *Autumn Leaves* exquisitely.

'What are your plans after you've finished your studies?' I asked.

'Too early to write philosophical books,' Cyrus said. 'I want to travel for a year and then get into politics.'

'Politics! What's wrong with Philosophy?'

'Philosophy is a privileged game for high society; elites writing for the gentry. Whereas, politics, as dirty as it is, has influences on the grassroots' lives.'

'There's only one destiny for a sweet juicy apple in a box of rotten apples.'

'I agree that politics today is at its worst. So, there's only one path to it and that is to rise,' he said. 'I want to be a part of that transformation.'

I was not much older than Cyrus and I was so pessimistic. Perhaps if he had experienced a revolution and a war, as I had done, he would have had different views. Maybe after one year of travelling around the world and experiencing life, he would change his mind about everything.

After my niece and nephew left in the evening, Arash's amigos arrived one by one - like the head of various tribes meeting a king - and told me their news and expressed how wonderful my action had been. They, who had failed to be there for their comrade when he needed them the most, were trying to find solace in looking after his brother. Did they want me to give them medals for failure? I would close my eyes and let them talk, get bored or tired and leave the room, but two of them were always outside my room. After 24 hours the police officers left, yet Arash's comrades were still there in the hospital, guarding my room like broody hens looking after a clutch of eggs.

The following morning Laura came to visit me. She kissed me on the forehead and whispered a thank you in my ear before taking a seat between Nina and Cyrus.

People may see you as a hero, but there is selfishness at the heart of any sacrificial act as you try to say, *I exist, see me, I'm good and eternal.*

'How are you?' she asked.

'They've patched my lung, so breathing is a bit difficult and shallow.' It was as if a huge rock was on my chest forcing the air out. 'But there is nothing to worry about. Things can only get better.'

Laura's skills in choosing a subject and moving the conversation forward was like a medicine woman and midwife of an Indian tribe, outstanding, yet indiscernible. She was a fire around which we gathered, and she charmed us with her wise warm words.

Nina was holding my hand in hers, listening to her mother, brother and uncle. She was my niece, my friend, my family, my brother, my daughter. With all of us together, silence didn't

have anything to say. We fledged, like butterflies, from one subject to another subject. I felt at home in London now. I could have easily thrown my passport and tickets into the Thames and spent the rest of my life here with Arash's family. I wished Mum was there with us, watching her grandchildren and daughter-in-law.

'How is your mother doing?' Laura asked.

'She's a tough woman,' I said. 'After Dad's death, she's trying to be there for everyone.'

'The kids and I would love to meet her,' she said. 'I wish things were not so complicated and we could buy our tickets and five hours later the kids would meet their grandmother for the first time.'

I nodded at the complication of an American woman and her children travelling to Iran, while on the streets of Tehran certain people still shouted, *down with America*.

'I think you and grandma should move to London and live with us,' said Cyrus.

'Your grandmother cannot leave her husband and son,' I said. 'She'll continue going to their graves until she rests beside them.'

'She can surely come over for a visit, can't she?' asked Laura. 'We would love to meet her and your fiancé.'

On the third day, they gave me a pair of crutches and asked me to walk for ten minutes four to five times a day. Every time I tried to walk, Nina and Cyrus turned the hospital into a horseracing track, encouraging me to go faster as if they had bet their lives on me to win. I was their little brother trying to take my first steps.

They showed me how to play scrabble and I delved into Persian folklore and told them some stories. Cyrus would disappear for half a day to visit his father, who was still in police detention, or to do some shopping, but Nina was there with me from morning until evening when Laura would come to visit me and take her children home. Arash's companions were

there day and night, protecting my room from the possible aftermath of the earthquake.

When the city settled down to rest for the night and everyone left save for one of Arash's friends who sat on a chair outside my room, I thought of my trip to London. A law-abiding citizen broke the law, a lecturer of the Humanities Department carried a gun in his pocket and took a bullet, a disciple of meditation and spirituality became a hoodlum, a promoter of the dialectic method tried to resolve his disagreements by roughing people up. My doctrines had been unfortified, opened to influences. I had picked what I thought were the finest teachings of the greatest philosophies and ideologies, but they had crumbled in action. Perhaps that was why people attached themselves to the solidity of religions, traditions and cultures. It was less complicated to accept a readymade set of beliefs and be a part of a crowd than to create your own principles and stand alone. Night times were all philosophical musings before I slumbered.

The best parts of my hospital days were the mornings when Nina would step into my room with her glowing smile. She would hug me and rest her head on my chest as if she wanted to hear my heartbeats, then she would tell me about the time she had left the hospital the day before until that morning. Her entourage, which consisted of Cyrus and Laura would arrive with flowers, tea and cakes to turn my room into a picnic area. The hospital had become a shrine or a sacred place where Arash's family felt compelled to visit every day. My pilgrims would drink their tea, eat their cakes, say their prayers and leave me with Nina, my mother of mothers, my sister of sisters, my friend of friends. She would say a little when others were present, but she would turn into a nightingale and sing her heart out when there were just the two of us.

'Why do women shave their legs?' she asked.

'I wish I knew. Maybe it makes them more beautiful or confident.'

'What did they do thousands of years ago, when there were no razors and creams?'

'Maybe they didn't shave or used different methods to shave their legs.'

‘Do you think a girl with hairy legs is attractive?’

‘Well, I think the personality of a girl is much more attractive than her legs.’

‘You’re just saying that, because you’re talking to your niece.’ She smiled, I smiled back.

‘I promise that I didn’t fall in love with my fiancé because of her legs. In Iran women are not allowed to expose their legs. They may never shave their legs at all and you wouldn’t know.’

‘That’s good, isn’t it? Here they expect a girl to shave her legs. If she doesn’t, people think she’s unclean and careless and not a proper girl.’

My little niece was talking against millenniums of patriarchy, which like an advanced cancer had swept across all cultures.

‘Never trust a man who is attracted to you because of your looks and beauty only.’

‘Why, uncle?’

‘Beauty is vulnerable. It changes all the time. Age, illnesses and accidents can end your beauty. What do you think will happen to a relationship that relies on beauty when it’s damaged or destroyed?’

‘How do you know if a boy wants you for your looks or for your personality?’

‘Oh, you’ll know, my dear, you’ll know. Only let a man into your life if he loves you and respects you for who you are.’

‘Are you a feminist?’ she asked.

‘Do I look like one?’

‘Helen is a feminist?’

‘Who is Helen?’

‘The young woman who was reading to me when you came to our house the other day.’

‘Did she tell you that?’

‘She says girls must be strong and don’t say mankind when they can say humankind or manpower when they can say crew.’ I nodded. ‘Can a man be a feminist?’ she asked.

‘Just be fair, my dear, that’s all you need to be.’

There was this fire in Nina that would take her far. Full of life, she was one of us, a fighter, a survivor, a Karamian.

Ilia

The days and nights of the opiate brought the worst constipation I had ever experienced. I should have told the doctors and nurses about my suffering, but I couldn't. Imagine, a superman having stool problems! Cut and bruised, every time my bowel moved, the pain in my back was like giving birth to twins. I needed the painkillers for my bottom more than for my gunshot. Without them I wouldn't be able to sleep. And when I slept, I had a dream, which came true the next day. Well, in essence.

Dream: Two crutches under my arms, I am standing outside a cathedral. Wrapped in bandages, my left knee is sore. A nurse is lying on the stairs, encouraging me to ascend, shouting, 'Remember? ABC: able foot first, bad foot next, crutches last.' I follow her instructions and climb up the stairs. The enormous entrance door opens. I enter the olden building with three legs and try to accustom my eyes to the darkness. The chancel and altar have been transformed into a stage on which an actor is holding a skull in his hand, delivering a monologue on mortality. 'Poor Yorick!' The audience sitting on the left nave turn to me concurrently. I wanted to tell them that I wasn't Yorick, but they all knew me: my students, colleagues, old classmates and childhood friends. I smile back at them. 'I knew him,' says the actor. A woman in a black veil is standing in the aisle, close to the stage, watching the play. Her back is to me, but I know she is my mother. Trusting my crutches, I propel myself forward. 'A fellow of infinite jest,' says the actor, stealing a look at me. The audience sitting on the right nave turn to me concurrently. They are strangers, frowning at me. Everyone, save the actor and my mother, is watching me now, wending my way towards the stage. 'and now,' the actor says and stops. Upstaged by the newcomer, he throws the skull at me. I duck back. It hits one of my crutches. Made of plastic, the skull bounces back onto the ground and

rolls towards Mum. The actor leaves the stage irately. Mum bends, picks up the skull and turns to give it to me. Under the veil there is only a skeleton. I shriek and drop my crutches.

Dream ends.

Released from jail, Arash came to the hospital. He entered the room and kissed the imprint of the bullet on my chest. He knelt by my bed and whispered in my ear, 'Whenever you decide to come into my dreams, make sure you wake me up so that I can kiss your eyes.'

'I'll try to remember.'

'You and I are like laughing and weeping,' said Arash. 'They don't meet each other, but when they do, it is pure joy.'

'Who is who?'

'Does it matter?' he asked. 'You see, the world is with those who create reality and do not imitate it.' He sat on a chair and ruffled my hair. 'Dad is proud of you.'

'I know,' I said, not that I had taken a bullet for Arash, but because I had had the heart to end his life.

'They say, you own the life that you save.'

'And the life that you take will own you forever,' I said.

Arash couldn't imagine that I was cable of taking a life. He took a chair and held my hand in his.

‘Remember you told me that I had a big heart,’ he said, ‘because I spared Pasha and when his life was in danger, I sent my men to Iran to save him?’

I couldn’t remember saying those exact words - the effect of the opiate perhaps - but I nodded, believing in them.

‘Well, my heart is not big enough for people who betray me.’

I sensed that he was about to divulge one of his secrets and I didn’t have the stomach for another confession. ‘You don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to.’ ‘I think you need to know this,’ he said. ‘You deserve to know the truth.’ The truth was a lake into which many people didn’t like diving.

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘what is the truth?’

‘Nina wasn’t our brother’s only victim.’

‘Did he do anything to Cyrus?’

Arash shook his head. ‘A friend’s child.’ He breathed in the hospital’s air and said that he couldn’t possibly let a repeat paedophile continue preying on other kids in different parts of the world. ‘I had him castrated,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘By a vet. Like a dog.’

A fresh wound to meet the others. I tried hard to stay a listener.

‘After the car accident,’ he said, ‘on our way to the hospital, we paid a little visit to a friend’s veterinary office.’ He cleaned his nose with the back of his hand. ‘He was the father of the child our brother had sexually abused.’

I managed to ask if Pasha knew about being emasculated.
He shook his head. ‘We told him that his appendix had been taken out to save his life.’

Was it the right punishment for a young man who himself might have been a victim of paedophilia?

‘That is a crime,’ I said.

‘It is.’

Arash had sent his men to rescue Pasha to mollify his own conscience.

‘Why did you tell me that?’ I asked. ‘Knowing what you did to him is not going to help anyone. Our brother is dead.’

‘I’m not dead,’ he said. ‘I want you to know what kind of brother you’ve saved.’

Would I have taken a bullet for Arash if I had known what he had done to Pasha?
Probably.

At that moment, billions of people breathed in and out and their saliva left marks on their pillows. Some sent meat, vegetables and insects into their alimentary canals. Others digested and discharged them into sewers before going to work. Farmers ploughed their lands, fishermen caught crabs, hunters hunted deer, teachers taught the past and writers typed ink on the white. Men cut a half-a-millennia-old tree to get the wild honey up in its top branches while others read the news, watched clips on social media and felt updated with the world and

forgot that ten-year-old piano lesson. A young angry man peed into a communal well and my brother dumped me a secret that I would think about for the rest of my life. Why don't we leave the things be as they are?

Let people pay a mortgage or not, sleep in the street or not, think they have seen a lot or not and go on to live happily ever after or not. Let the rich board their private jets in their flip-flops and get to another continent to wash their bodies under isolated waterfalls. Let people think that life is as vast as their spouses, kids, siblings, the cousins they haven't seen for years and the friend with whom they have shared their failures. Let us believe that human, the perfect beast, is still the perfect image of the Almighty. Just check the expiry date of the milk in your fridge before adding some to your coffee. If Pasha had been a sister, the Karamian pain would have been waived. Don't remove the veil, let things be as they are. My lovely brothers, leave me alone. Don't turn my head into a corpse yard.

One morning a little boy entered my room.

'Hello,' I said, wondering how he had managed to pass my guardians.

'Hi,' he mumbled and clasped his hands, swivelled round, staring at my bed.

'What's your name?'

'Ilia,' he said and rose his head to meet my eyes.

'My name is Kia.' I stretched out my hand for a handshake. He turned his head and stole a glance at the door as if to get permission from an invisible adult, then he stepped forward and shook my hand.

What was the future going to unfold for the kid? Would he look for love, tying padlocks on to anything shrouded in myth? He could try to love. He might try. He will try. He must try love. Imagine, a youngling of this world steps into your world and says his name and shakes your hand and looks into your eyes and points at the bandages on your chest and asks if it hurts? If that is not love, what is?

‘It doesn’t if I take my pills,’ I said.

I took a biscuit from the bedside table and offered it to him. He shook his head.

‘Where is your mum?’

He avoided answering by asking me the same question.

‘She’s probably praying for me.’

‘For you to get better?’ asked Ilia.

‘No, for me not to get hurt.’

‘But you’re hurt.’

‘I am, but she doesn’t know.’

‘You should tell your Mum about it.’

‘Probably I should.’

‘Why do you keep saying *probably*?’

‘I will,’ I said. ‘I’ll tell my Mum.’

Angelina appeared at the door and acknowledged my look with a smile and a nod. She stood by the door, crossed her arms, leant her shoulder and head against the wall and kept watching us with a sense of unworldliness in her face.

Arash entered the room, lifted the boy, kissed his forehead and asked him who his uncles were.

‘Uncle Arash and uncle Kia,’ answered Ilia.

‘This is your uncle Kia.’ Arash pointed at me.

I must bear witness to the seduction of life.

‘Uncle Kia is hurt, but he hasn’t told his Mum,’ Ilia reported to Arash.

‘Sometimes a man has to keep things to himself,’ Arash told the kid and put him back down onto the floor. Dad could have said that sentence to his grandson. The past never dies, it accompanies the here and now, like genes.

I signalled Ilia to get closer. He first took some cautious baby steps, then he ran towards me and threw himself into my lap. Pain moaned in my chest, high on kinship, I ignored it. Pasha’s son was in my arms: my brother, my father, my family. In twenty years, the kid may have tried to love. He will have tried. He might have tried. He must have tried. A Karamian knows how to love.

The End

The Body in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot and Not I through the Lens of Sufism

"First the body. No. First the place. No. First both. Now either. Now the other. Sick of the either try the other. Sick of it back sick of the either. Soon. Somehow on. Till sick of both. Through up and go. Where neither. Till sick of the other. Throw up and back. The body again" (Beckett, 1983, P. 8).

Poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault¹ and Feminists such as Helene Cixous² have had a huge influence on the studies of the body in Samuel Beckett's oeuvre. They have shifted the focus of these studies from the body itself to discourse and representation. This essay prioritises the corporal body and its experience over discourse, yet it does not ignore the latter. It analyses whether Beckett has embraced Sufic doctrine and practices in his treatment of the body, discussing the manipulation of the body through contraction in *Not I* and expansion in *Waiting for Godot*, the use of physical asceticism and the effect of habit and repetition on the body.

Andrew Gibson (2003, PP. 43-54) highlights the importance of Sufism in Samuel Beckett's world view in "*Three Dialogues and Beckett's Tragic Ethics*". In *Three Dialogues* Beckett makes a reference to "the Sufist al-Haqq" (Beckett, 1965, P. 123). "Al-Haqq" (the truth) is a phrase that Sufis express during invocation, ecstasy and rapture. Gibson argues that the allusion is a homage to Alain Badiou whose philosophy is influenced and shaped by Arabic Literature, which is dominated by Sufis. Gibson perceives Louis Massignon, the French Islamic scholar, as the source for the reference, considering his interest in Mansur al-Hallaj, the ninth century Persian Sufi, who said, "ana'l Haqq" (I am the truth) for which he was executed by the orthodox Muslims. Gibson establishes Massignon's influence on spreading a knowledge of Sufism to his literary friends (Gide, Marcel and Claudel) and deduces that in the

¹ They point out the importance of the body in their debate about power, politics and knowledge.

² They emphasise a dialogue beyond the biology of the body seen through the shortcomings of the symbolic and encouraging women to write about their own experience of the body and sexuality.

late 40s Massignion's scholarly and political works were topics for discussion amongst the thinking class. He also demonstrates Duthuit's fascination with the thought and art of the Near and Far East and James Joyce's interest in the world of Muslim philosophical Hellenism and concludes that Beckett knew about Sufism and Sufic literature.

Beckett may have known about Sufism and Sufic practices from his reading of *Curiosité's the'ologiques*, which was one of the books found in his apartment in Paris after his death. *Curiosité's the'ologiques* is a collection of religious peculiarities compiled by Pierre Gustav Brunet. Under the passage called Singularités du mahométismo, Brunet mentions the whirling dervishes who dance to the sound of a flute or Koranic verses. There is a mention of the Kaderi order of Sufis in Turkey and their application of asceticism (Brunet, 1861, P. 260). Mark Nixon and Drik Van Hulle have already found evidence of the influence of Brunet's text on some of Beckett's works (2013, PP. 187-8). Beckett would have read stories such as Ibrahim Ibn Adham, the 8th century Sufi, who renounced his throne, abandoned his kingdom of Balkh (now in Afghanistan) and chose austerity to become a Sufi. To attain righteousness, Adham says, one needs to close the doors of bounty, dignity, comfort, sleep, wealth and worldly expectations and open the doors of hardship, humility, struggle, vigilance, poverty and readiness for death (Attar, 1990, P 221). Losing, suffering and failing, which are the focal points of Beckett's writing, are integral to the Sufis' search for truth. For Beckett and Sufism, the body is the place where such attributes are realised and can enable the individual to break the limitations of the body and enter a more profound level of consciousness from which meaning can emerge amid nothingness. Beckett states that, "the only possible spiritual development is in the sense of depth" (1965, p. 64). Beckett's interest in "depth" puts him on the path of mysticism, which, as Mary Bryden sees it, is a suitable prism through which Beckett's religious consciousness could be revealed and reflected (2004, PP. 166-169). Beckett's letters to his early confidant Thomas MacGreevy also show that he had been drawn to mysticism because he was seeking a "way of living" and a "solution to his woes" (Beckett, 2009, P.257). Beckett's attraction to mysticism is manifested in the corporal suffering of his characters and their perseverance for *going on* in the face of adversities. These attitudes are reflected in Sufism through the elimination of thoughts, the surrender of the body and the endurance of suffering. Interested in entering the mystical world that the body veils, Beckett and Sufism first experience the body itself, of which they are both suspicious to be the source of knowledge.

Beckett uses and abuses the body in his writing to go beyond its physicality. On the one hand, he exploits the body as a device that can experience many selves and find reasons to

go on, on the other hand, he utilizes the body as a proxy to experience pain, boredom, disillusionment and failure. Although the body is more of a limitation than freedom, in both cases, it remains the centre of such experiences. While in Sufism the body is revered as an instrument that can receive epiphany and insight, it is the Sufic abhorrence for the body that makes it pertinent to Beckett. Occupied by wants and desires, the body is a distraction for Sufis, a veil that separates them from the Beloved.³ Hafiz, the 14th century Sufi poet writes, "Between the lover and the Beloved there is no separation, you yourself, O Hafiz, are the veil, get out of the way."⁴ The body causes pain as it separates the seeker from the Beloved and letting go of it also entails suffering. To remove this veil between the individual and the Beloved, Sufism offers physical austerity, which is applied by Beckett to his characters.

From *Waiting for Godot* (1952) to *Not I* (1972) we can see the constant simplification, lessening and elimination of theatrical elements in Beckett's theatre, especially the presence of the body. A typical play needs a story and characters to interpret it, but Beckett strips *Not I* from any story, character, theme, time, place and definitive beginning or ending. Like its character, Mouth, the play itself lacks a structure or a body. The absence of the body directs the audience to focus on the words. Beckett instructs that the beginning of these words expressed by Mouth behind the curtain must be unintelligible, which emphasises the uselessness of language for communication - words do not carry meaning.⁵ This is when Beckett has already minimised the interaction between the actress and the audience by reducing her to her mouth. The pruning of the body to its essentials on the stage is an aesthetic exploitation, which mirrors Beckett's minimalist writing style, "I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more," says Beckett. "I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding" (Knowlson, 1996, P. 352). Beckett iterates Shamse Tabrizi, the 13th Century Sufi, who says, "When everyone is trying to be something, be nothing. Range with lack and emptiness." (Tabrizi, 2008, P. 243). Losing is gaining; the more a seeker loses their egos and attainment, the readier they are to receive revelation. Faghir (the impoverished) is another name for Sufis, meaning that they are empty of any knowledge or selves. The seeker

³ "The Beloved" is an expression that Sufis use for God to suggest that their relationship with Him is based on love. God to them is Existence, therefore everything that exist is the manifestation of God. They see nothing but the manifestation of love and their Beloved.

⁴ Mohamad, Ghazvini and G. Ghani (ed.) *Divane Hafiz* (Tehran Publication. 1995), P. 219 (My own translation from Persian). ⁵ Beckett must have read Foucault, Derrida and Lacan's views on language: For Foucault, language is not about communicating something like the truth; it is about power producing historically contingent truth. For Derrida, language is not about producing truth or meaning in the real sense; it is about the illusion of meaning in the endless deferral of meaning from one signifier to another. For Lacan language is the means via which the complex psychical entity of the individual is brought into a position as a socialised subject.

disappears for the Beloved to shine. Beckett may have not consciously adopted his style from Sufism, but we cannot ignore the fact that they both thrive on their focus on impoverishment, lack and removing rather than in adding.

The main inspiration of *Not I* came from lack. It came to Beckett in Morocco in February 1972 when he saw an Arab Muslim woman shrouded in a *jellaba*, in Beckett's words, "crouched in an attitude of intense waiting" (Bair, 1990, P. 661). It gave Beckett the idea that he could reduce the body to a single visible part in a black background and still have a character.⁵ Beckett's eyes must have seen more than the appearance of that woman: a culture that had reduced her to a pair of eyes and the human rights of which she had been denied. The origin of the play came from repression, concealed and the invisibility of the visible. *Not I* is one of Beckett's leanest plays in which the body has been diminished to its lowest. It subsists on absence, scarcity and lack. The lack of the body leaves the audience with their own imagination to create one. They only have some words and a residue of a consciousness to do so. If a play is written to be seen and heard by an audience, then why *Not I* provides them only partially and fragmentally?⁶ Beckett told Jessica Tandy, who was rehearsing the play for the New York Premiere, that the torrent of words should "work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect" (Knowlson, 1996, P. 195). The lessening of the body in the play increases the involvement of the audience, encouraging them to use their entire bodies to compensate for the corporeal deficiency on the stage.

Not I is a journey from the concrete of the body to the abstract of the spirit (the most delicate and refined aspect of an individual). Mouth tells a story about an old woman who is "wandering in a field ... looking aimlessly for cowslips" (Beckett, 2008, P. 377). Her lack of destination gives the story a philosophical dimension and her search for cowslips confirms that her concerns are not physiological needs such as food or shelter. She finds "herself in the dark" (377) with a buzzing in her head an intermittent light accompanies her, "a ray of light came and went ... came and went" (377). Here, Beckett is moving the focus of the play from the mind to senses, from dark matter to light, from the body to the spirit. The buzzing in her head has some relationship with light and it is accompanied by silence, "all silent but for the

⁵ Tim Lawrence in his PhD thesis argues that "Isolated eyes, objects and veils form persistent tropes throughout Beckett's critical writing" (2015, P. 87).

⁶ Anthony Giddens advocates that the body, in modernity, becomes a "visible carrier of self-identity" (1992, P. 31) implying that identity is formed by physical attributes, responding to the culture of the time. In *Not I* Beckett shows that the shaping force of the culture is not on the physical body, but on an image of it; the shape, size, colour and weight of the body are non-identity. Beckett opens this "visible carrier" to see the contents; identity emerges through the disappearance of the physical body and not the visibility of it. This way, Beckett strips down the culture that has masqueraded the body as identity.

buzzing” (378). Yet when the buzzing comes in the shape of words, it is “a voice she did not recognized” (379) and it is “none other ... than her own” (379). The language of light and revelation, which is within her and is expressed in her own voice, remains incomprehensible to her, “No idea what she was saying” (379) although “the whole being ... hanging on its words” (379). Knowing the voice that comes from within is the ultimate goal of Sufis who know the ineptness of the body to understand it. Mouth tries to use the brain of her invisible body to comprehend the buzzing, “the brain ... raving away on its own ... trying to make sense of it.” (380). Trusting her rational faculty to understand the revelation, she realises that there is “nothing there” (380). The brain is not able to comprehend light.

Beckett does not see the mind as the only source for creativity, inspiration and knowledge. When he worked as a lecturer in French during 1930-31 at Trinity College Dublin, he delivered a lecture called “Gide and the Modern Novel”. According to his student, Rachel Burrows, Beckett made one of Gide’s work of criticism called *Dostoïevsky: articles et causeries* central to his lecture (Burrow, 1930, P. 43). In this work, Gide highlights the gentleness, humility and renunciation of the self in Dostoevsky’s work and argues that such traits enabled him to see the mind and the self as disruptive and unreliable faculties. Gide thinks that it is difficult for the “Western mind” to understand the humility, and abstention in Dostoevsky’s works, yet that is the very reason they need to be read. (Knowlson, 1996, P. 43). The disgrace of the mind to understand the truth and the renunciation of the self, which results in humility, gentleness and peace, are all the hallmarks of Sufism. Mouth’s failure to understand the buzzing, light and revelation, using her intellect, suggests that one needs to go deeper, to another zone where feelings and thoughts cannot intrude. Beckett tears apart the body to reach this region. Gide describes it as a place which:

passion does not reach, and which is at the same time a region so easy and so simple to reach, the very same one, it seems to me, that Schopenhauer spoke of,... the region where the limits of being fade away, where the sense of the individual and the sense of time are lost, the plane where Dostoevsky sought— and found—the secret of happiness.⁷ (Gide, 1923, pp. 21213)

To reach this realm, one must go beyond the dominion of the intellect by mystical means. From the Sufic perspective, reality is inconceivable to the mind and the intellect is nothing but an obstacle on the path of self-realisation and reaching this zone. In prayers, Sufis prostrate to God by touching their heads to the ground, demonstrating the inefficiency of the brain in understanding the infinite. Beckettian ethics comprise the failure of the mind in understanding

⁷ Andre, Gide, *Dostoiïevsky: articles et causeries* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1923), pp. 212–13. Translated by Andy Wimbush. Thanks to him for sharing his work with me before publication. (personal communication).

the inner buzzing and light to challenge and resist the logic of it. Beckett criticises the social background of the play by showing the failure of rationalism in offering any comprehensive principles to the contemporary individual, inviting the audience to ponder what constitutes the attitude of modernity. “on to the next” (380) Mouth moves on. Beckett frees Mouth from the fetters of logic and allows her to use her intuitive knowledge to access the secret abyssality within beyond the ruses of reason.

In *Not I* Mouth does not fail to try and her trying and failing can direct her to new paths to knowledge. Mouth knows that there is a ‘self’ lurking somewhere and she interacts with it, “What? ... the buzzing? ... yes” (381) but the communication is not reciprocal. It interrupts her to ask questions, “words were- ... what? ... who? ... no! ... she?” (381), but it is not a mutual relationship. Mouth does not have a body to contain this self; the very reason she replaces the pronoun *she* for *I*. By refusing to use ‘I’, Derval Tubridy argues that Mouth “both denies her position as a speaking subject within language and denies the possibility of language,” (Tubridy, 1998, P. 115). By rejecting her subjectivity, she is able to go beyond the restrictions of symbolic order and dive in and out of her consciousness. Here Beckett sides with Sartre who believes that the self is egoless and outside consciousness (Sartre, 1959, P. 38). The self is invisible, yet the audience realise the existence of it operating outside Mouth. In other words, a self emerges when subjectivity disappears. According to Rumi (2008, P. 44), real Sufis are as empty as a reed flute and submitted to the flute player, the Beloved. The world within must be cleansed and empty of voices, thoughts and false identities for the real self to emerge. When Hallaj says “ana’l Haqq,” (I am the truth) he is not driven by delusions of deity; he means that he is empty of subjectivity and his body is a shrine for the breath of God, so whatever he utters is not his own words. Corresponding to Mouth, there is no ‘I’ in Hallaj’s body to take the responsibility of what he says. Mouth’s voice and identity are in the hands of a ‘self’ outside her body, dictating to her what to say. The audience neither can see, using Rumi’s phrases, the flute nor the flute player, they only hear her voice, Beckett calls it, “outburst” (Courtney and Herbert, 1993, P. 87). Since it comes from a self that is outside Mouth’s body, the outburst is uncontrollable and unintelligible.

In *Not I* Beckett confiscates the ultimate possession that a character can have on the stage, the body. He embarks on a journey from the apparent to the hidden, from the present to the absent, from the outer world to the inner world, where Mouth can experience awe, delight and wonder. With *Not I* Beckett’s art of subtraction ends in a cul-de-sac. He must return. This is the moment that the arrival of a truth becomes feasible. Lesserness and deficiency begin to yield. The example of the phoenix and its emergence from ashes is a wellknown anecdote

amongst Sufis, which emphasises the importance of losing everything and reducing to nothing. After losing all, there is an opportunity to recognise what is beyond.

While the broken body in *Not I* represents a fragmented self and characterizes a broken world, Beckett does not end the play in pessimism. Although there is “nothing there” (382), Mouth must “tackle the “long hours of darkness” (382). While in the dark, she has no choice but to “keep on” and try “somewhere else” (382), even if she does not know “what to try” (383). In the darkness of Beckett’s theatre there is always a chance to “hit on it in the end” (383).

When darkness invades the stage and begins to consume the audience, glimpses of light emerge. If Mouth knows darkness, she must also know light. The play ends in the light of an April morning, “God is love ... tender mercies ... new every morning” (383). From darkness and suffering, Beckett extracts hope and motivations for going on. In Sufic literature darkness is positive, “Darkness is your candle” says Rumi (Rumi, 2015, P. 50). In the dark, a seeker can see the need and value of light and search for it. The breakdown of Mouth in the dark is her breakthrough and a catalyst for mystical experience. Beckett is the master of keeping his characters in inner and outer darkness, yet darkness is not totally negative, it works as an impetus for going on.

Going on is accompanied by suffering. Whether it is Estragon’s foot, Vladimir’s bladder, Pozzo’s heart and eyes, Lucky’s legs and head or Mouth’s lack of limbs, the Beckettian world is filled with physical pain. As Christine Jones sees it, “being in physical pain is perhaps the surest certainty of an individual’s existence” (1998, P. 195). Whether it is pain that affirms existence, or it is existence that endures pain, suffering is in action. So are the Christian ethics. The speaker in *Not I* was brought up to believe “with the other waifs” (377) in God. The word God brings with it the thought that “she was being punished ... for her sins” (377). This is opposite to the Sufic tendency of neglecting the formal duping of religion and trusting the internal compass. Then, Mouth realises the falseness of the belief when she turns within and examines her feelings, “she was not suffering ... imagine!.. not suffering!” (377). If she is not meant to suffer, she must be “intended to be having pleasure” (377) but “she was in fact ... having none ... not the slightest” (377). She thinks that the notion of punishment “first occurred to her ... then dismissed ... as foolish ... was perhaps not so foolish” (377). Pleasure is not potent enough to confirm her existence, pain is. While life is punishment, Beckett suggests, it is worth living it, because it comes with mysteries and the seduction of discovering them.

Beckett agrees with Sufism that the inner world is where mysteries reside. They both apply ascetic renunciations to establish the right of entry into the interior realm. They welcome

suffering to get access to this world. To form crude iron into a shape, one needs fire and suffering is that furnace. Ibrahim Adham who left his kingdom to become a Sufi was asked if he had ever experienced happiness and he replied, once he was in a boat with ragged clothes and dishevelled hair. A man tugged at his hair, pulled him around and beat him repeatedly while people were laughing at him. He felt delighted to see his nafs (self/ego) being so disgraced. (Attar, 1990, P.325). Beckett also discredits 'self' through suffering and the disgrace of the body. In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon has spent the night in a ditch and already been beaten up by strangers before the play even begins. All the characters are sick and have physical peculiarities. Estragon's feet hurt and prevent him from sleeping. He is always tired and lives in dreams. Vladimir has trouble with his prostate and wants to pee all the time and cannot stand still. Pozzo is fat, breathless with a swollen heart and in the second act he is blind. Lucky is either trembling or going to sleep now and again. What they have in common is that suffering is working on their bodies. Rumi echoes the message, "The grapes of my body can only become wine after the winemaker tramples me" (Rumi, 2015, P. 49). However, suffering is not the goal; it can help to eliminate the false selves, so it is a stepping-stone to spiritual growth. The reduction of eating, sleeping and talking is essential for Sufis. Yet, many of them go through forty days of pure asceticism periodically to sanitise their inner world. Beckett himself periodically lived like a Sufi.⁸ In a letter to Thomas McGreevy, he wrote:

I can't seriously suppose that there's anything I want to rid myself of or acquire, no growth of freedom or property that can't be shed or assumed with a absurd a coefficient of plausibility in the miasma as anywhere else. Nothing is so attractive anyhow as abstention. (Beckett, 2011, P. 88)

Beckett understood the power of renunciation to gain access to the inner world, where he needed to be to express his creative skills and imagination. *Zuhd* (abstention) is another form of ascetic renunciation that Sufis practise to keep their attention on the world within. Some early Sufis exceeded the practice of asceticism to attain "*ikhlas*" or absolute purity of intention and act. Christopher Melchert in "Origins and Early Sufism" provides substantial examples of early Sufis' extreme austere practices⁹, which are not that different from the lifestyles of Beckett's characters: suffering from poverty, hunger, sleep deprivation, withdrawal from

⁸ Ulrika Maude believes that Beckett was attracted to asceticism and told Ann Cremin, "My ideal is to live in a totally bare room, with no books, no pictures, just four empty walls" (Maude, 2001, P. 57).

⁹ Sufism updates its teaching, methods and practices to suit the time of the Sufi. For example, most contemporary Sufis do not see any virtue in excessive self-discipline exercises practiced by early Sufis. They rather frown at such customs as unbalancing acts which disturb harmony. They recommend that Sufis should provide the body with its needs in moderation, so that it is not in the way of the lover and the Beloved.

society, silence, abstinence from sex, living in ruined houses and wearing scratchy ragged clothes. In addition, Beckett demands physical and mental exactitude from his characters and the actors who play them. The actress in *Not I* needs to restrain her body to have that focus she needs to express the words. She cannot see, move or hear. She must get out of the way for her nervous system to speak. Although the body is the source of suffering and life is absurd, Beckett wants it to exist and go on in the face of adversities. No matter how bad things are, he encourages his characters to take another step to experience their tragic dignity. Sufism does it in the promise of a mystical truth that appears rarely and fleetingly through revelation. The ninth century Sufi, Bayazid Bastami, states, "Accepting human condition of un-satisfactoriness is the antidote to suffering" (Al-Mogaddisi, 1980, P. 213). This could be a paraphrase for the Beckettian *going on* with the difference that the goal of a Sufi is idealistic (a journey from an imperfect world to a perfect one) while Beckett's fidelity is not to truth, but to bodily asceticism through which the possibility of a secularized truth or aesthetic can be glimpsed.

Beckett is known for his reduction of the body, but he also expands the body to examine its precarious identity. Beckett does not look at the body as a single entity, limited to what the eye can see. The French actor and Beckett specialist, Pierre Chabert explains how Beckett manipulates the body:

The body undergoes metamorphoses. It is *worked*, violated even, much like the raw materials of the painter or sculptor, in the service of a systematic exploration of all possible relationships between the body and movement, the body and space, the body and light and the body and words. (Chabert, 1982)

Beckett's approach to the body as a raw material offers him tremendous freedom to mould it into different forms. He edits the body like a text and experiments on the nebulous nature of it. He assays how far the body can be reduced or expanded and still remain a person. Beckett's trialling of the dimensions of the body overlaps Sufic understanding of the body. In Sufic literature, the body is seen as distinguishable forms inside other forms, which are finer and more delicate and in direct and close contact with each other. The Sufi master, Shahmaghsoud (2012, PP. 174-188) divides the body into four forms: *Nasut* (the corporeal and etheric body), *Malakut* (the astral and celestial body), *Jabarut* (the casual or divine body) and *Lahut* (the luminous body). He explains that these bodies are composed of substances that gradually become finer and finer and mutually interpenetrate one another. The beginning and the end of the body is not limited to its physical feature, so the body is not 'I'; Beckett shows this, in different ways, in *Waiting for Godot* and *Not I*.

Cartesian dualism of the body and mind has been used by humanist critics such as Hugh Kenner to show that a typical Beckettian character is able to use their minds and move beyond the restrictions of the body (Kenner, 1962, PP. 117-132). Ulrika Maude argues that this approach has ignored the eminence of the body and its infirmity as well as “the unsustainable nature of transcendental thought” (2001, P.5). This article argues that it is not the mind, but the finest aspects of the body, the spirit, that can rise above the body. Mind, as a person’s memory, intellect, mental process or the faculty of consciousness and thoughts, is dependent on the body without which it wouldn’t exist in the first place. While in need of the body for its existence, the mind cannot transcend the body.

Beckett endorses the refined aspects of human beings when he reduces the world into two substances: matter or “dark matter” and spirit or “light”. In fact, the relationship between matter and spirit is one of Beckett’s main concerns, especially in plays such as *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot* in which matter and spirit are represented by Beckettian duos. Steven Connor notices the recurrent opposition between the two in Beckett’s theatre manifested in, “opposition between the living, the embodied, the concrete on the one hand, and the abstract, the symbolic and intangible on the other” (1988, P. 140). It is this relationship between the concrete and the abstract, between the body and the spirit that Beckett explores in *Waiting for Godot* to expand the body. Peter Woodthorpe, who played Estragon in the first British production of *Waiting for Godot* in 1955, asked Beckett about the purpose of the play and Beckett replied, “it’s all symbiosis” (Knowlson, 1996, P. 417). The symbiotic relationship between matter and spirit is quite apparent between the duos. Estragon represents the body and Vladimir the spirit. In a letter to Alan Schneider, who was directing *Waiting for Godot* in New York, Beckett wrote, “Very pleased by your remarks on your Vladimir, he is the spirit of the play” (Beckett, 2011, P.586). The word “spirit” in this context may not exactly mean the non-physical part of a person or a supernatural being, yet it shows Beckett’s interest in more refined and delicate aspects of the human being. In the same letter to Alan Schneider, Beckett writes, “Estragon is inert and Vladimir restless. The latter should be always on the fidget, the former tending back to his state of rest.” In other words, Estragon is “dark matter” and Vladimir “light”; the body and the spirit of the world. Vladimir is active on the stage all the time and never eats or sleeps while Estragon finds things to eat and from time to time enjoys a nap. Vladimir talks about repentance, the Bible and salvation. He is the one who reminds Estragon that they cannot go because they are waiting for Godot and wakes him up when he sleeps.

“Why will you never let me sleep?” asks Estragon, and Vladimir responds, “I felt lonely” (p. 17). Sleeping, which is one of the “great needs”¹⁰, serves the dark matter, but the spirit is awake and wants company. The duo complement each other, yet there is a tension between them. There are times when Estragon wonders if it would be better for them to part and Vladimir replies, “You wouldn’t go far” (p. 17). The body cannot live without the spirit; their lives are entangled. “I’ll carry you if necessary” (p. 17) Vladimir tells Estragon who laments that he will never walk again. The duo provide each other with the conditions to endure life and the motivation to wait longer.

The dichotomy of Beckettian matter and spirit reverberates the Islamic theory of the creation of the world. Pozzo tells Estragon, “You’re human beings none the less. [...] of the same species as myself [...] made in God’s image” (p. 24), referring to the model that the human beings are made of dust and when God breathes into them they become living souls. The French philosopher, Henry Corbin, refers to the dual dimensionality of beings as “the union of two terms of each pair constitutes a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a simultaneity not of contradictions but of complementary opposites” (Corbin, 1969, P. 209). Referring to Ibn Arabi’s use of *Rabb* and *Abd* (Lord and vassal), he suggests that the total being is the union of the Lord and of His vassal. Each being has two dimensions that cannot negate one another or be confused with or substituted for the other. The Lord is the archetypal essence, the world of mystery and the Divine while the vassal is the body or the birthplace of the essence. The body is not separated from the essence; it is the manifestation of it. The apparent duality between Estragon and Vladimir is the manifestation of a united whole in different forms.

Within the duo’s symbiotic relationship dwells an exploitative correlation. Beckett expert, Linda Ben Zvi (1982) believes that in pairing characters together Beckett is validating the presence of the self, arguing that a Beckettian couple is an “external testimony”, confirming the existence of the ‘other’. The duos of *Waiting for Godot* experience their existence by interacting with each other. Their identities feed on each other, “It is too much for one man,” says Vladimir (P. 11), highlighting the authentication of the self through the other. The idea of experiencing or presenting the self implies the existence of a stable and fixed self, operating behind the appearance. However, what Vladimir and Estragon understand as ‘I’ is because of, in relation to and from the other, which is not an independent ‘I’. The subjects are vulnerable and trapped in the existence of the other. This deprives them of having an authentic presence

¹⁰ In *How It Is*, the narrator lists his great needs, all of which belong to the physical body and will eventually fail him, “the need to move on the need to shit and vomit and the other great needs all my great categories of being” (P. 15)

or personality. The flaw of such enslavement is shown through the master-slave relationship between Pozzo and Lucky who mirror Estragon and Vladimir and share an identical symbiotic relationship. There is a miscommunication between the duos, which makes the interaction between them both sad and amusing. Beckett's couples may complement each other, but most of the time they oppose one another. The symbiotic relationship between them does not work well, "We weren't made for the same road" (p. 52) says Estragon, which advocates the dysfunctional relationship between the two and signifies a blending of antitheses that only maintains their differences. The master-slave association between the body and the spirit is not in the right order.

The master-slave relationship between the Beckettian duos corresponds to the bodyspirit relationship in Sufism. The body is a colony of cells, filled with desires, instincts and thoughts, designed for *living*, while the spirit, the more delicate body, is intended for *life*. Unless the body is surrendered to the spirit, there will always be a master-slave relationship between the two. The analogy of a horse as the body and its rider as the spirit is used in Sufic teachings to simplify the bond between the two. The horse needs to trust the rider that they know the destination and obey them to reach there. The interaction between Pozzo and Lucky demonstrates a dialogue between the body and the spirit. In the first act, Pozzo (the body) drives Lucky (the spirit) by means of a rope passed around his neck and cracks his whip every now and then. As a servant, Lucky is useless and Pozzo says so, but he faces Vladimir's criticism, "After having sucked all the good out of him you chuck him away like a ... like a banana skin ... Really ..." (p. 33). Having neglected the subtler dimensions of the humankind, Beckett criticises the experience of human beings under the influence of modernity that has prioritised the materialistic aspects of the body over its more delicate ones and the solidity of living over the essence of life. Interested only in progress and usefulness, modernity has ignored how that use affects human beings and their experience of being in the world. Relying on rationality, modernity has got it wrong.

The ascetic trainings and practices in Sufism are designed to amend the relationship between the body and the spirit and put the horse before the cart. Sufism recognises the duality between the body and the spirit and suggests that the former must submit to the latter. The horse must be tamed by the rider. Beckett makes an attempt at this in the second act. The ramification of the disharmony between the duos becomes more pronounced when Pozzo and Lucky reappear in act two. This time the horse is before the cart, but it is too little too late. Pozzo is blind now and cannot lead the way, "Sometimes I wonder if I'm not still asleep," says Pozzo (p. 80). The word "asleep" suggests closing your eyes to what is being normalised and

the inability of people to see their losses. Beckett uses shock as a means of waking them up to the shocking nature of their blindness. The tragedy does not stop there and extends to Lucky, “one day like any other day,” Pozzo says, “one day he went dumb” (P. 83). Beckett is pointing at the lack again. According to the Koran those who take the wrong path and exchange light for darkness are ‘deaf, dumb and blind’ (2:18). Beckett may not be a hard-core antimodernist, but he can see that modernity has gone astray. The blindness and dumbness of Pozzo and Lucky involve a wish for a pre-enlightenment world-view. Lucky is the creature of the inner world, but “He thinks he’s entangled in a net” (P. 39) Pozzo says. Lucky has been stymied for a long time and when they let him talk, he speaks two pages of nonsensical gibberish, which insinuates that we have forgotten the language of the spirit. Lucky takes his contemplative life to extremes and his speech is an incomprehensible revelation to suggest that we have forgotten the language of the inner world. Following the body’s desires is relinquishing the reins to the horse and letting it take the rider for a ride. Pozzo, blind and tied to a rope trying to lead the way, is a demonstration of that scenario. Losing the way is inevitable and that is what Beckett is showing us, we are lost in a wasteland.

Beckett’s asceticism for Vladimir and Estragon is adapted from Early Sufis who would abandon their families, jobs, possessions and travel from place to place, mainly on foot, in search of a master whom they may not even find. The lesson from embarking on such journeys was that security was not in having power or possessions, but in losing them to see beyond the boundaries of the matter. Vladimir and Estragon are abandoned onto a wasteland in the middle of nowhere, waiting for someone whom they haven’t seen and will never show up.¹¹ They have nothing with them, no food, water or even a rope to commit suicide. Stripped of power and possessions, they are released into the wilderness with the promise of some vague hope, the arrival of Godot. This is total punishment, both, physical and mental. Boredom, which is the fruit of waiting, is another ascetic renunciation that Beckett offers to his characters, “we are bored to death, there’s no denying it” (P. 75) says Vladimir. The lack of ego to confront the world and deal with the ups and downs of life brings with it a lot of time, which needs to be filled. To overcome boredom, Vladimir and Estragon engage in trivialities, which indicates the silliness of all human activities between birth and death. In a letter to Carlheinz Caspari, who was directing *Waiting for Godot* in Germany, Beckett emphasises the importance of routines,

¹¹ Beckett likes to see the body constrained. In *Happy Days*, Winnie is buried in the ground up to her neck. In *Play*, the characters are held throughout up to their necks in three ‘identical grey urns’. In *Endgame*, Hamm is confined to a wheelchair and his parents are imprisoned in two rubbish bins. In *Waiting for Gogot*, the wasteland (the world) is the container that imprisons the characters.

“it is this dailiness and this materiality, in my view, that need to be brought out” (Beckett, 2009, P. 391). Meaningless routines show the misery of the characters. “Here unhappiness is the highest of the grotesque and every act is a piece of clowning,” says Beckett in the same letter and suggests, “Laugh at them then and get them laughed at, at unhappiness and at the act” (P, 392). Beckett implies that a shallow and mundane life is beneath the dignity of human beings, it is a clown act and deserves to be ridiculed.¹² The play starts with Vladimir saying, “Nothing to be done” (P. 11) and the phrase is repeated several times throughout the play. “Do nothing” is the first lesson that a Sufi master gives a seeker. While the seeker is in the grasp of their whims, thoughts and wishes, whatever they do will be pernicious to the process of knowing the self. Before self-recognition, all actions are seen as engaging in trivialities. So, Sufis try to take the worldly life easy, yet they take their responsibilities seriously. This resonates with existentialist philosophy, which most critics believe Beckett’s works reflect.¹³ The emblematic formulation of existentialism is Jean-Paul Sartre’s statement that *existence precedes essence*, meaning that one exists first and then one decides what they want to be afterwards. Since “man is condemned to be free” (Sartre, 1958, P. 34) one is responsible to take advantage of his freedom and make his essence. We are thrown into the world to create our own meaning. Since we exist, we are responsible for making something of ourselves, “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (P. 111). In other words, Sartre asks, ‘what have Vladimir and Estragon made of themselves?’ and Beckett replies, ‘Clowns!’ and they represent humankind, “at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not” Vladimir tells Estragon (p. 74). To pass the time they also make comic choices. Their lives are the repetition of silly actions. They are even prepared to hang themselves to avoid tedium, “habit is a great deadener” (P. 84) says Vladimir. This implies that the cultural, political, philosophical and social backgrounds of Enlightenment modernity have failed to offer a meaningful life to the humankind. Beckett’s characters in *Waiting for Godot* are the debris of a collapsing civilization whose rational culture has brought them to nonbeing. “I’m in hell!” (P. 69) says Estragon. “I can’t go on like this” (P. 87). Vladimir reminds him that there is a chance that Godot may come and “We’ll be saved” (P. 88). Godot is a hope that offers a reason to the characters to wait longer.

Beckett sees reasons for the absurdity of waiting. He furnishes the wait with repetition to keep the end at bay and make room for the possibility of *going on*, “We always find something,

¹² The Koran reiterates Beckett’s view, “Know that the life of this world is but amusement and sport” (57:20).

¹³ Steven Connor argues that for decades it was impossible to talk about Beckett outside the paradigm of existentialist phenomenology, “‘Beckett and Sartre’ was at one time as reliable a double-act as Marks and Spencer or Abbot and Costello.” (Beckett and Sartre: the Nauseous Character of All Flesh, 2014, pp. 27-47).

eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" (P. 64) says Estragon. From repetition Beckett extracts therapeutic effect. This is more pronounced in *Molloy* whose speaker thinks of Sisyphus (In Greek mythology, Sisyphus is condemned to push a rock up a mountain and then to let it roll down and repeat the task again.) and writes, "perhaps he thinks each journey is the first. This would keep hope alive, would it not, hellish hope. Whereas to see yourself doing the same thing endlessly over and over again fills you with satisfaction" (Beckett, 2006, P. 128). Beckett considers repetition as a punishment from which one cannot escape, but it also comes with hope. Albert Camus in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" discusses the fruitless search of humans for meaning in a meaningless world devoid of eternal truth. He stresses that the absurdity of a search in an ephemeral and ethical-free world should not create despair and put the individual in a situation to contemplate suicide but to "revolt". He uses Sisyphus as a metaphor for the modern man whose life is repetitive and fruitless, "The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks and his fate is no less absurd" (Camus, 1991). Nevertheless, Camus realises a point in Sisyphus' repetitive task and thinks that "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart". This is a triumph of hope over despondency and life over death. Life needs to be filled with actions, even if what we do seems meaningless and ends in failure. Happiness, Camus thinks, can spring from the absurd, "One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness". To start anew is the miracle of failure, Beckett calls it *going on*. This is the moment of consciousness at which Sisyphus, "is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock." Camus leaves his hero at the foot of the mountain and concludes that. "One must imagine

Sisyphus happy." Vladimir and Estragon take their absurd actions very seriously by repeating the absurdity. In *Waiting for Godot* repetition can conjure up traumatic experiences from the past to the present, which is hard for the characters, but is eventually healing. Sisyphus is a very wise person, because he has turned a punishment into a source of contentment.

Beckett uses repetition of trivial tasks to offer his characters the present. By concentrating on the task of rolling the rock up the mountain Sisyphus enrolls himself in a meditation class, which allows him to experience the here and now. Vladimir and Estragon **are** and that is what matters. To 'be' is the best practice a Sufi can experience. Repetition is one of the methods that Sufis practice to be in the present and experience it. *Zeker* (remembrance) is a type of incantation that the seekers chant to remind themselves of God. Short phrases such as *La ilaha ilalah* (there is no gods but Allah), *Tasbih* (glorifying God) and the 99 names of God are repeatedly recited with concentration in the heart. Repetition can turn to habit and Beckett views habit as "the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit" (1965, P.

19). However, he realises that “Breathing is habit. Life is habit” (P.19) and one must go on. It is not a surprise that *Waiting for Godot* is identical to a prayer book, full of repetitions and short sentences that the characters keep chanting. It keeps their bodies and minds busy and occupies their time while waiting.

This essay highlighted the importance of Sufism in Samuel Beckett’s world view by discussing Andrew Gibson’s “*Three Dialogues and Beckett’s Tragic Ethics*” and Pierre Gustav Brunet’s *Curiosite’s the´ologiques*, concluding that Beckett knew about Sufism and emulated some of its practices, especially the way Sufis treat the corporal body. It discussed Beckett’s approach to the body as a raw material, which offered him freedom to reduce it in *Not I* and expand it in *Waiting for Godot* to have a peek beyond its physicality. It explained how in *Not I* the deduction of the body reached its optimum and deficiency and lack began to yield. It showed how Beckett expanded the body in *Waiting for Godot*, in search of a self that remained elusive. It discussed the symbiotic relationship between the Beckettian duos and linked it to the body-spirit bond in Sufism and showed how it could turn into a master-slave relationship. The ascetic trainings and practices in Sufism were used not only to amend the master-slave relationship between the body and the spirit, but also to help the individual enter deeper terrains to turn the darkness into impetus for “going on”. It revealed the suffering that accompanied the Beckettian “going on” and the possibility of mystical experiences that came with it. It discussed Beckett’s use of Sufic chanting and bodily repetition to offer his character the here and now, making their experience of “going on” less poignant.

“I say to the body, Up with you now, and I can feel it struggling.” (Beckett, 1995, P. 100).

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