

Contrary to Democracy

Farkhondeh Hajizadeh

Yesterday, in the cab, you were sitting in the face of a man. I stared at your eyes. You looked at me. I laughed. You left. He winked. [No, this is not right. Do you understand? You must be honest.] I moved away. I grimaced. He shrugged his shoulders: "There is an abundance of women. Especially after the war." The driver removed his foot from the accelerator. Four girls passed by. He said: "God bless them. Look over there Mr. Driver. After war, men are really lucky." My mouth dried up. I said: "If God willed it, your species become extinct." He said: "Dream on."

The man was not like you. Let me tell you how he was. See! How should I say it, you know, he wasn't like you at all.

I turn the key in the lock. Your eyes laugh. You become pale. "Click", the lock turns open. You turn red, gray, blue, khaki, purple. I laugh: "Hi".

"Hi".

I lie back to the wall. I look at your shoulders. My head turns on the wall. You stand right in front of me, bosom to bosom: "What is it? What is the matter?" My right cheek gets wet. You shake your head: "No". You take a few steps. You return: "Your eyes are red again!"

"I didn't sleep."

"You didn't sleep! Why?"

" Well, it is obvious. He is sick, he is crazy. He is not a human being. He has driven me crazy. Do you understand?"

You shrug your shoulders: "What do you want me to do? You women always act as if we owe you something. You asked for it."

"Yes, I asked for it, myself. But you are not on trial here that you are trying to be acquitted. I wanted that myself, yes."

" Well, who is sick?"

"That damn image of yours which comes to me any time it cannot go to sleep and begins its night walk. It shakes me, the bastard doesn't even think that I am dreaming about you. It wakes me up. I sit in bed. As soon as I turn on the light it leaves. What would you do if you were in my place? Ha? What?"

The softness of your hand touches my cheek: "What do you do?"

What do I do! I take my head in my hands, I clutch at my hair, I curse myself, I hit the pillow, I curse you. Do you understand? Leave me alone. I want to be myself, myself. I want to live."

"Well, live."

"Without you!"

Zhaleh said: "Say 'In the name of God,' Parvaneh, 'In the name of God;' force the earth to make a pledge. Then you won't have bad dreams." She is right, I shouldn't place myself into the hands of... I can. Any time I want. He should understand that I too am a human being. Whatever the case may be, one from a creature... What did she say, I should force the earth to pledge? But then I wasn't having

a bad dream. Oh, yes, I was. A dream that takes one's peace of mind is a bad dream, no matter what dream and whose dream it is.

One sheep, two sheep, fifty-nine sheep, two hundred and eighteen sheep, six hundred and eighty-six sheep, twenty-two sheep,...

"What is the matter? Is it something wrong, mother?"

"No, straighten your neck, you are snoring."

"You've got a screw loose again? Don't you want to go to sleep?"

"I cannot sleep, what do you want me to do?"

"Take a pill, it cannot be like this every night...?"

"That's all I need, getting addicted to pills."

I put the pillow in its original place. Who said that when you dream about someone, if you move pillow around he will dream about you." I don't want you to have a dream about me at all. You can't force me. I have to sleep. I know that tomorrow I'll be dozing off at the office."

Your fingers twist in my hair: "So, you want to live, is that so?"

I quiet down. I stare at your eyes. Your eyes do not speak. My legs are trembling. The side of my dress is crumpled in my hand. You laugh: "What is it? What is the matter?"

"I am afraid."

"Of hell?"

"No, of being finished. Do I exist at all? Did I ever exist?"

Your lips close my eyelids: "You are pessimistic again! Why are you crying now?"

"For the times that you were not, I was not."

"But now you are."

I laugh. Your look warms up. Your lips move. My veins are beating. Your name sits on my tongue. My hands fall down.

I see you. Your hand goes towards the receiver, you dial a number. My ears grow hot. My heart sinks. I have goose bumps all over my body. I pick up the receiver: "He...hello."

"Pushinehbaf?"

I throw the receiver away. I hit my head to the back of the chair. I am depressed. The numbers are turning under my fingers: hey, whom is he talking to, so early in the morning?

Then, why didn't you call me? You devil, you knew that I am at home, damn it.

The numbers are trembling under my finger. I slam the receiver down on the cradle.

I am not going to call, I don't care, why should I call? If he can resist why can't I. No, I won't call. Zhaleh is right, men are like shadows. I won't call, I'll resist. Mother is not home so I'd better at least make lunch.

One cup, two cups, is it four? No, five.

The hell with it. I better go to Zhaleh's. Should I go? If I go and then he calls, like that day... Oh, no. he won't call. That was a long time ago. All this time I sat at home, why didn't he call? In fact, let him call when I am not home. Let him wonder where I could have gone, let him wait.

I pass the stairs. Oh, phone!"

"Ye...yes."

"Hello, what a surprise, for once you are out of breath!"

It was stupid of me to think it was he.

"My breath, yes; I ran."

"Did you guess it was I?"

"Ah, no, I was waiting for a phone call."

"I want to see you."

"There is nothing to be seen about me."

"You mean you have no feelings."

"Feelings? How do you write that word?"

"No matter how you write it, you have none. Have you?"

"I had heard that if you water even a dried branch regularly, eventually it will grow."

"How do you know this branch has not blossomed somewhere else?"

"Stone doesn't blossom. Wood maybe. You are stone."

Zhaleh said: "Is he beautiful?" I said: "Beauty is the moment of love's birth."

Yesterday his eyes were wet; his eyelashes were stuck together, had he cried? I couldn't ask, would he answer if I asked? No, I don't think so. When I got close, he went away. Why doesn't he speak? When I looked at him, a hand took hold of my heart. I wish I would understand why he has cried. Maybe he misses his mother; if I were his mother, I would miss him as well for sure. Oh, if I were his mother, when he fell in love at the age of eighteen, maybe even younger, I would put his head on my shoulder and I would say, cry as much as you want. Then, we would draw her picture, together, and hang it on the wall. So that he could look at her whenever he misses her. Or if one day he brought her home he could tell her: "Look, you have always been here!"

Where did I put it? Eh, this damn memory! It was in this book. No, I had put it in my notebook.

"What do you want, dear? Why are you making noise?"

"A picture, mother. Where did I put it? Did you see it?"

"What kind of picture was it?"

"Just a picture! I should take it to the office tomorrow."

"Make a knot at the feet of the devil and you will find it."

Maybe he really has fallen in love and that is why he cried? Who could she be? Their neighbor's daughter? Yes, that is her, she is very beautiful, but beauty is not everything. How about his cousin?

What were they whispering about, that day at the party? I wish I knew who she is! Whoever she is, if he loves her I can love her too.

Maybe you were tired. Here your eyes are laughing. Were you depressed? Do you want me to be your mother? If I were your mother would you speak? No, you can't, you are shy. Do you want me to be your sister? Your little sister to whom you can give your letters; at noon when mother is asleep, she can go and put her hand in front of her mouth, and call the neighbor's daughter, and put the letter in her hand and say, my brother sent this. Don't make a face. You don't like it. Ha? OK, do you want me to be your friend? Anyone; I can be anyone you want, just tell your eyelashes not to stick to each other. OK? Tell them to always laugh like they are in here.

"God help me, the girl has completely gone crazy, she is eating paper."

I say, it is good that you are here, otherwise I wouldn't dare go home this time of night; it is good like this, isn't it? I don't have to get stuck in traffic, or be careful and make sure that nobody would see me, and at the party keep an eye on everyone so that I can look at you, just a little bit.

"Taxi, stop right here."

"Do you see what you did? Are you happy now? What should we do now?"

"You are right, what should we do now? Don't leave, don't leave me alone with these, oh, God, wait a minute."

"No, I can't. You know that I have problems."

"Oh, don't worry."

"What you mean, don't worry? The problem is that . . ."

"I understand. I'll hide you."

"Where?"

"In my bosom."

"In your bosom! How?"

"I'll make you small. Very small. And then I'll put you in my bosom."

"Stop! How many passengers do you have?"

"Three in the back one in front."

"There was another one in the back; what did you do with him?"

"Where could he be, brother!? When did he get in? There should be a mistake. Where is he then?"

"You mean we couldn't see!? She was sitting on his lap."

"You are imagining things. God knows there wasn't anyone."

"Come down."

I get off. I pull my scarf down over my forehead.

"What happened to that man?"

"Which man!?"

"Shut up, you dirt! Who? Ha! The same one on whose shoulder you had rested your head. Where are you going this time of night?"

"I am coming back from class, I am going to night school."

"What did you put in your bosom, was it a flyer? Bring it out, let me see."

"That was nothing."

"Search her."

"I didn't see anything."

"Open your purse. . . So, you smoke, too!?"

"I bought it for my husband."

"So, you have a husband, too."

"Yes. I have."

"Your ring?"

"I have a husband, not a ring."

"You will sign this and will get out of here."

"Why should I sign? I haven't done anything."

"To begin with, your socks are thin, you have make-up on, too, you lie, too, you don't have a ring, you are addicted to cigarettes, too, and you are on the street at nine P.M. To tell you the truth, we are still suspicious."

"Mother, what happened to this bathroom?"

"They'll come and fix it tomorrow. Wait another day."

"I can't. I stink. Since last night, the smell is in my nose."

"Go to the public bath. It is down the street."

"Go and take a walk round here. I'll be back soon."

"What do you mean? I am not a bum."

"I can't take you there, in the middle of all those women."

" "

" "

" "

"I say, how about putting a blindfold on you."

"NO. Not at all, no way. A blindfold is contrary to democracy."

"Get out of here; for a long time democracy acted contrary to us, now for once we will act contrary to democracy."

"In general, I am against any kind of blindfolding."¹

"So, what do you say we should do?"

"What should we do? Well, this is one way we could . . ."

"I know. There is a library right here. How about going there and waiting for me there."

"No, not at all; waiting causes anxiety, and anxiety makes you upset. I disagree. You know what? The public bath reminds me of my childhood and my mom. You know what is my last memory of the public bath? My mother and I had gone there . . .

"OK, don't be emotional. Come. But promise . . ."

"OK, I give you a manly promise that I will not look at anyone but you."

"It is not right to look at me there, either."

"So, you want me to go blind?"

"No, why blind, there are a bunch of things over there that you
can watch."

"For example?"

"For example, the water, a mirror, . . ."

"Why don't you say pumice, facial scrub . . ."

"I say come, come and sit behind this column. Here is water
and soap."

"I don't like it. It is dark in here."

"Wasn't it our deal that you wouldn't bother me?"

"Come on, now, you have brought me to the bath for once, and you keep nagging. Look at this girl who is sitting behind you, how old do you think she is?"

"I don't know, seventeen, eighteen years."

"No, her body is bigger, the tip of . . ."

"Stop it! Didn't you promise?"

"Come on, didn't you say that you won't be jealous?"

"Well, . . ."

"Don't make a face. OK, I won't look. Smile, smile a bit. Now close your eyes, close them, you'll have shampoo in your eyes."

"You want me to close my eyes so that you can keep looking people over?"

"Again this feminine jealousy! Don't close them. Look at that woman, her legs are more . . ."

"Remember. You gave me a manly promise that . . ."

"Well, I am acting manly now. I just wanted to show them to you. Otherwise, I wouldn't want you to think I want to look."

"Go to the locker room. OK?"

"Yes, it is hot in here."

"No, I don't want you to go. There, women,. . . Why don't you go out for a walk?"

"What do you mean? I want to stay here. Is this any of your business?"

"No, but now that you are being stubborn I know what to do with you. I am going to make you small and put you in my bosom."

As soon as I step out of the bath you stick your hand out of my bosom. You slap me on the face. You laugh: "Did you see that

woman? The one whose layers of belly were twisting and falling on each other?"

"You know what? We cannot reach a mutual feeling. I give up."

"It is not possible. Until yesterday there was no visiting. And today is only for members of the immediate family."

"Five minutes, only five minutes, I will run in and come back fast."

"Only members of immediate family; are you his wife?"

"His wife! No."

"Then what is your relationship with him?"

"I am his mother."

"What? His mother!"

"No, I mean his daughter, his sister."

"Go on my sister, don't bother me, there is no way."

"Sir, could I wait here, behind this wall, until his sentence is finished?"

"She has gone crazy, poor thing. Hey, soldier, take her right there and hand her over to the madhouse."

Zhaleh said: - I am worried about you, Parvaneh. Don't be stubborn. I am your friend, after all. It is not a question of one or two days. In

the middle of this nowhere, behind this wall, how can you . . . all these years. . .? You know that waiting . . .

Waiting causes anxiety, and anxiety upsets people.

"Oh, my baby, what a terrible insomnia my baby went through. Are you her friend, sir?"

"Yes, her body is cold. It is freezing. Her pulse does not beat. What does the doctor say?"

When you put your hand on my forehead my veins start beating. I see the tip of my nose getting red; my cheeks fire up; my body warms up. As soon as I open my eyes you say: "What is it? What has happened? I told you that waiting causes . . .

I laugh: "Waiting . . . there is hope in waiting."

"Where?"

"Emergency."

I run up the stairs. In front of the emergency room door: "It is not possible madam."

"Why not?"

"We set the hospital regulations, not you. This patient is in quarantine."

"Well, I have the same sickness."

"This should be diagnosed by the doctor and the lab, not you."

"At least the cause of his sickness."

"Pollution madam; polluted air has contaminated his breath."

"Doctor, can one change one's breath, like blood? I can . . ."

"Don't make so much noise my girl. Be sure that my goal and that of all employees of this hospital is the health of the patients. This patient needs a long rest, healthy air, and fresh milk. Go on, my dear; I promise that as soon as possible I will let you visit him for a few minutes."

I am in front of the hospital's door: "Hello."

"Where are you going, madam? So early in the morning."

"I have come to see him."

"It is not possible."

"Why not?"

"Well, it is not possible."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you are late."

"Please sir, I beg you, five minutes."

"We have responsibility my sister, responsibility. Go and come back later, visiting hours begin at eight o'clock."

"I will come out right away, before eight."

"No, my sister, it is not possible, you came late."

"You told me to come at this time. Yesterday, because we are from the same city."

"I am sorry, sister, I can't. Go and come back later, with one of your relatives."

"That's him, let me go and see him, just for a second."

"It is finished. He is gone."

The hospital bells are ringing. My head is turning on my body. My hair is suddenly long and has come out from underneath my scarf. The smell of cedar disseminates in the air. The guard throws his big body on my eyeballs. Blood boils under my skin and becomes round as a bullet in my veins. A voice is heard: "Blood, blood, hey, come here nurses, run, someone's veins have exploded, hurry up, blood!" People come and step on my head and pass. The veins in my breasts are swollen. I hear the sound of milk pouring. Milk leaves a white dry spot on my long dress. Mosaics become white. Someone says: "Stop her, she has a lot of milk, like a cow. All this milk in such small breasts!?! Just like a cow!" My head does not turn anymore. It goes in a dark well, my breath is drowning. Your name sits on my tongue. I want to call you, your name is broken in pieces. My voice is not there; it has drowned. Like the day that word broke in pieces on my lips. You laughed. You said: "You'd better say nothing, you can't talk. But the color of your face, the tics in your cheeks."

"It is five over eight."

"Hurry up. Sugar IV. Hurry up, Don't let her go into a coma."

Once the softness of your hand rests on my forehead I open my eyes. The doctor says: "That is not right dear girl. Are you feeling better?" A voice says: "They have taken him to Behesht Zahra."² I pull the IV out of my hand; I jump down from the bed. A few black drops of blood drip on the nurse's clothes.

In Behesht Zahra someone says: "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, wearing red clothing with your white hair! And here, in Behesht Zahra." I roll up my sleeve and show him, I say: "See, I have black clothes on." He says: "what is his relationship to you?" I say: "He is my child, I won't let him die. I will give birth to him again. On the highest peak of the mountain, in healthy air, my blood will become red again; then I'll give him to young mothers to pour their first milk in his throat; he will grow up, gradually, gradually, his eyelashes will not stick together; young girls with scented hair, daughters of the fairy king come and fall in love with him and take him to the sea. I will not be there, but from far away, very far, I will see his eyes laughing; his eyelashes are not stuck.

1 In this text the Persian word has a double meaning. The original meaning of cheshmbandi (which we have translated as blindfold) is the creating of illusion.

2 The name of the most famous cemetery in Tehran.