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When the newspapers reported the increase in the number of Afghans leaving Iranian soil due to the flight of Mullah Omar and the establishment of the Karzai government, her heart began to pound. The figure of Atef in his light blue shirt and black pants, with his straight hair, slender form, black eyes; and his mouth... the mouth that if it hadn't opened to say, "If you need help, give me a yell," she would not have known he was Afghan, appeared before her. Even if the Afghan nationals had not been leaving Iran she didn't have much hope of seeing Atef, unless she was able to check every queue of day laborers, or go search city by city and ask, "Have you any word of an Afghan named Atef?" All this in addition to her troubles and for no reason other than the fact that a few years ago, every morning at 7:45 AM, Atef, with his slim hands and a piece of beige-colored cloth and Right glass cleaner, gave the glass on her desk such a sparkle that she could see the reflection of her bright eyes in the glass; after which he would clean the legs of her desk and the bookshelves around her. And whenever the library supervisor with his thinning hair, elegant outfit, and straight teeth would call him, Atef would answer nonchalantly, "Sir, let me clean Ms. Sabahi's desk first." The supervisor would say, "Atef, be careful; Ms Sabahi's desk is very important." Then he would turn to Ms. Sabahi and give her a sweet, meaningful smile, which meant, People get what they deserve.

Paying no attention to the supervisor's meaningful smile, Ms. Sabahi would listen to Atef's sad humming; he would gradually move away from her, and she knew that once he got to the last bookshelf he would turn and take the tray and the cup of tea from her desk and she would give him the cheese and walnut sandwich wrapped in a napkin so that when Zahra

Khanom was serving the tea at her desk she would tell her, "Of course your tea is special." And Farideh from the other end of the hall with her Yazdi¹ accent would say, "Well, well, Parvaneh, do tell your Alain Delon to help me clean up around my area one of these days."

The first day Atef had arrived at the library with a few Afghanis to move the bookshelves, Farideh said, "Parvaneh, check out the Alain Delon!"

Parvaneh's look turned on the Afghanis, but she didn't see any Alain Delon. Atef's clean outfit and appearance caught her attention. He was wearing a beige shirt with black pants that day.

Parvaneh suggested to the supervisor that he keep Atef on as the cleaner in the library.

The supervisor thanked her for her attention, and Atef stayed.

Those first days, she didn't know anything about Atef's life other than that he owned a blue shirt, a pair of black pants, and a beige shirt. She didn't even know that Atef straightened them on the cord when he washed his clothes or that he ironed them so much with an old iron to take out the wrinkles.

When the decision was made to transfer the storehouse for the books from the first floor of the library to the second floor, the employees were forbidden to take any leave. A few people from the service staff of the university, all Afghanis, were dispatched to the library. The tasks were divided according to a very efficient plan. Some were packing the books downstairs and writing the call numbers with a thick marker on the boxes; another group upstairs was shelving the books.

She was assigned to work on the *PIR* series; as always, no one was willing to take on the task of shelving these series, both because of the heavy volume and the complicated numbers; but she, who had not yet learned the ins and outs of the office, accepted the job. Colleagues were also obliging her by saying,

“Parvaneh, you like literature, you can have the *PIR*.”

The silence of the library had been disrupted; once in a while someone from upstairs would yell, “Either write on the cardboard boxes or tell them the serial numbers!” The banging of the boxes could be heard on the ceiling of the first floor, and at times an accented voice would call out *QA* or *DS*. Holding her nose, Farideh would say, “Pew, I can smell the Afghans. Do you smell that, Parvaneh? Is it the smell of their feet or their bodies?” and she would gag.

Atef came up; he checked through the shelves and when he saw Parvaneh he looked up the shelf and said, *PIR*, and after a few minutes he tossed the first *PIR* box onto the floor next to Parvaneh. Bending, he quickly opened the box; he picked up the books in batches, set them on the shelf vertically and said, “It’s easier this way.” And he went to take care of the other box. Farideh said with laughter, “Good to be lucky.”

“What do you mean?”

“At least he doesn’t smell.”

As soon as Atef tossed the box on the floor, he said, “Done,” and noticed Parvaneh’s bare feet; she had taken her socks and shoes off and rolled up the legs of her Lee pants. He blushed, “If you teach me I will help you finish quickly.”

When Atef looked at the top of the shelf he said “*PIR*,” and Parvaneh realized that he could read; she asked, “Atef, how many years of schooling have you had?”

“I have studied.”

“I know; how many years? What was your profession in Afghanistan?”

“I was a high school teacher.”

“A high school teacher! What subject?”

“Literature.”

In the midst of work on the *PIR* series Parvaneh and Atef carried on their conversation. Parvaneh found out that Atef worked as the concierge of a private apartment complex at

night and worked at houses on Fridays and sent his income to Afghanistan. She felt embarrassed to discover that Atef worked so hard. So much so that she couldn't say, Why don't you come to our house some Friday?



The retired General Shaham, who had become the head of Human Services at the university, in accordance with the law that called for the prohibition of all Afghan labor from working in public institutions, ordered all the Afghans to leave the different departments in the university. The efforts of the library supervisor, Parvaneh, and Zahra Khanom to keep Atef on got nowhere. Atef left without saying goodbye; Shaham had forbidden them to be in the university for even a few minutes.

Parvaneh was hopeful that in her country the laws and orders had no permanence. Then the ban on Afghans working in public institutions could be lifted, and Atef could come back.



With the kind, motherly sparkle she always had in her eye, Zahra Khanom, who always held her hand in front of her mouth whenever she laughed to hide her broken front tooth, pointed to the back door of the library with her left hand. When Parvaneh got closer, she whispered in her ear, "Be careful no one finds out; Atef has come to the back door; he says he wants to see you for a moment."

As the key in Zahra Khanom's hand was turning in the lock of the glass door, Parvaneh stared at Atef's eyes through the glass. In Atef's eyes she wanted to find the reasons for his affection. Was Atef, who was only a few years older than her sons, thinking of her as his mother? Did Parvaneh resemble his sister, fiancée, cousin, the girl in the neighborhood...

whomever Atef was attached to for no reason, or did he just like her without any reason? Zahra Khanom put the keys in her pocket and pointed to Atef, saying she would be back soon; she turned to Parvaneh and said, "I got so panicky, the rascal, how did he dare."

There was no traces of hatred in Zahra Khanom's saying rascal, nor in the pupils of Atef's eyes could she find anything but a simple friendship, the kind of friendship that has no particular color and is everlasting.

Zahra Khanom was coming back with another set of keys, Parvaneh was remembering Atef's voice when he was putting the Divan of Hafez² in its place on the shelf—*I am liberated from any confining colors*. Atef would take a step, and as he was putting Hafez, Moulavi,³ Ferdowsi,⁴ Attar⁵... on the shelf, he would recite a line of their poems and Parvaneh would follow with the other lines. The day after Parvaneh had finished in one day the *PIR* series that had the most number of books and was the most difficult job, as a bonus the supervisor gave her a three-day leave. Farideh in a naughty yet friendly way said to her, "Good to be lucky." And it was agreed that Atef would help Farideh the next day. After that day Parvaneh would see Atef once in a while in the storehouse of books sitting in a torn leather armchair with his back to the library facing the university under the sunlight reading a book.



Atef disappeared with a piece of paper in his hand. They had agreed that he would work at Parvaneh's house next Friday. Parvaneh was embarrassed; it was Zahra Khanom's suggestion; with a blush on her face Parvaneh asked Atef and he accepted very comfortably.



By that Friday evening Atef had cleaned and polished all over the house; he had even cleaned the keyholes in the cabinets with a pin around which he had wrapped a scrap of cloth. Parvaneh was embarrassed to put money in Atef's hand, so she asked her husband to take care of it. Her husband, who would never involve himself in these matters, told her, "You pay him yourself."

When her son saw Atef, he asked her, "Mom, do you think Atef was in the cleaning profession in Afghanistan?" Parvaneh discreetly told him of Atef's profession and his level of knowledge. Her son's eyes filled with tears, "Then why did you ask him to come and work at our house?" And he went to his room and closed the door behind him. And at lunchtime he said, "I am not hungry." Why had she asked Atef?



She held her wallet in front of Atef. Atef blushed again. He kept his head down and said, "I didn't come for money."

"This way I would feel very bad; I won't be able to ask you next time I need your help."

Atef stretched his hand toward the wallet and picked a thousand-toman bill as if he were holding a mouse by its tail. Parvaneh added another four thousand to the one thousand-toman bill in Atef's hand, and after that Atef would come once in a while on Fridays and would polish Parvaneh's house by the evening, until the day he disappeared.

Parvaneh had no address for Atef; from time to time he would call and they would arrange for a Friday that Parvaneh needed him, or even for some times when she didn't have much work to be done at home.



Zahra Khanom said, "Don't be sad, he has probably gone to his country to visit his family; or maybe he got married; he will turn up."

Whenever there was news on TV about the events in Afghanistan and a report on the casualties among the Afghans, Atef's blushing face and the sparkle in his eyes would appear before Parvaneh's eyes, until the time that, in the midst of her troubles and illness, the memory of Atef got lost.



It was the last session of her chemotherapy; she was coming back home from the hospital; in the hallway Mr. Suleymani, her first-floor neighbor, told her laughing, "Ms. Sabahi, congratulations! I got rid of a pest for you. I thought to myself, poor Parvaneh Khanom has enough burdens on her shoulders to be disturbed with visitors from the provinces and Tehran who drop in on her every hour. Considering the condition you are in. The fellow didn't look like an Afghan; he wasn't dressed like them either; he said, 'I have heard the lady is not well, I have come to visit her.' I said to myself, What does Ms. Sabahi have to do with Afghans? At least if he had said he was American, that would be something else. That's why I told him you left Tehran a while ago."

In front of Ms. Sabahi, her son said, "You don't know, Mr. Suleymani; my mother has a lot of these friends like that; bus drivers, Afghan workers..."

Ms. Sabahi, who was taking the steps up the stairs leaning on the railings on the way, asked, "Didn't he say what his name was?"

Just as her son was saying, "Mom maybe it was..." Mr. Suleimani said, "Atef." Parvaneh's eyes filled with tears. When she blinked, the tears rolled down. She decided to travel back in history, to the time when Afghanistan was part of Iranian soil, and then she could imagine herself breathing under the same sky as Atef.