

## The obstacle

(To my dearest Pejman and Peyman)

Translated By: Dr. Ali Hodavand

By: Farkhondeh Hajizadeh

First she heard the sound of the skate wheels and then the boy's hands struck her on the chest and knocked her against the wall. She held his hands to stop him falling. The yellow folder fell and the papers scattered on the ground. In tears and laughter a sentence sprang from her mouth "Excuse me," he said. Then he bent down and gathered the papers and gave them to her.

The woman leaned against the wall. Her cold hand went through her veil, jacket and manteau in search of the golden key and touched it. Her heart sank like the time when the boy's hands struck her on the chest and she was afraid that the boy might fall on his head, and she couldn't help the papers falling. Her right knee bent. She drew herself back against the wall and stared at the boy.

The squeaking of skate wheels was heard every time the boy passed her by and smiled every time. Her hand hooked into the chain round her neck. She felt so hot that when she waved goodbye to the boy, there was no shawl round her neck. She said, "Go home. It's cold."

When Sewana went away, she marched home, imagining her mother in her dark woolen coat, with cream slippers and no stockings, sitting on a step in front of the house with her hands round her knees, crouching on the front door stoop with no plastic stool under her. She always grumbled at her mother, "The tiles are cold, you will freeze. Why did I buy you that stool?" and her mother laughed, "the snow is behind the mountains." She knew her mother could bear the cold weather. In fact she had bought the stool to perfect her mother's pose, but she sat as she pleased.

She saw Sewana talking softly with his mother in Armenian by their house. When she was near the house she slowed down as usual to surprise her mother with a hello, and to listen to her mother's reply: "Why did you come from this side? I expected you to come from that side!"

"Sometimes the bus service stops just here. Get up. It's cold."

Their house was a three- floor apartment. The third floor was uninhabited. There, the owner kept a chest, a wardrobe and a small wooden box which contained her mother's mementoes.

On the second floor she lived with her husband and her mother. Her mother lived with them only in winter. She would return to their village in the southeast of the country in spring. Her younger boy lived on the first floor with his wife.

She was looking at people and cars and pushing a pebble by her foot. She reached the house, a house with a closed door, with the absence of mother. She searched her purse for the key. The sound of a singer was played in the first floor. The song passed through the opening of the doors and reached the alley: "It's morning again, oh me and my heart. The mystery is still unsolved, oh me and my heart."

As she put the key in the lock, she turned her face back to the street. Sewana's hand was in her mother's, and she longed for a baby.

She slowed down in front of the first floor door. She reached out her hand to knock at the door. But her feet took off the ground and she rushed up the stairs. She closed the door, then she took off her shawl, jacket, manteau, headscarf, and socks. She laid them on the nearest armchair in the hall. She tossed her glasses and her watch on the table and lay on the sofa in the thin blouse and trousers she wore under her manteau. She closed her eyes. She knew her mother, who spent all day watching television, would keep talking continuously, if she didn't close her eyes. She was bored. She had neither read nor written anything since the beginning of the day at the office, when the boss had shouted at her. She didn't do any work for the office either. She felt that she was slowly wasting away. She was tired; she was impatient with herself, too. She used to ask about her mother's health every day by telephone, many times, but mother had a lot to say; more than seventy years worth of words. The woman, herself was full of unspoken words, too.

"Any problem?" asked her mother worriedly after a while.

- No, my head hurts.

"Thank God! You have no fever," said her mother, laying her hand on her forehead, "Shall I put a blanket over you?"

The woman raised her eyebrows, but mother stood up slowly, brought a blanket from the next room and put it over her. She straightened the sides of the blanket and then she went away on tiptoe. She sat on her bed by the window.

The woman knew her mother's habits by heart. She even knew the words that mother wanted to say but was waiting for the right time, as well as the ones she never wanted to say.

She couldn't sleep. She felt pity for her mother. She turned on her side. *Shall I take her for a walk?* But as it was cold and she was tired and has to make dinner, she changed her mind. She

decided to go to the kitchen, call her mother and break the silence. She got up. She felt giddy. Mother had collected her dresses off the armchair; the woman tossed the unfolded blanket on the bed.

“Is something wrong with you?” Her mother called.

“No. what is wrong with me?”

“But there is something wrong. Is it my fault?”

“No, mother! Why your fault?!”

“Then for whom are you doing a favor?”

“I’m not doing anybody a favor.”

“I’m not a jackass and I didn’t fall off a jackass’s thing.”

The woman’s voice rose: “What do you mean, mother?”

“It’s not your fault; I promise myself a hundred times not to come here anymore but I yearn for you and your children every year.”

Mother kept on talking and talking. The woman was so angry that she struck her head with her fist, shouting, “I’m dying. Leave me alone!”

Mother came over and took the woman’s hands angrily: “Why are you hitting yourself? The quarrel is over me? May I be disgraced if I...”

The woman didn’t hear the mother’s voice. She kept on striking herself madly and shouted: “Leave me alone. I’m dying. Everybody’s making me miserable; it’s enough. Let me die. Leave me alone. Do you understand? Let me die.”

Mother came towards the woman and took her hands firmly. The woman breathed hard. Her chest moved up and down. Mother brought her head forward. She kissed the woman’s forehead, “Oh, my poor girl! Why don’t you have any mercy on yourself?”

The woman cried loudly. It was for the first time her mother had heard her loud crying since her childhood. At her father’s funeral she was crouching in a corner, weeping soundlessly and lamenting every so often: “Oh, father, father.”

Mother ran and got the tissue box on the table and held it in front of the woman, saying, “Excuse me for disturbing you. What else can I do? I’ve lost my mother. Then to whom should I pour out my heart?” and she burst out crying without finishing what she was saying.

A smile appeared on the woman's lips. "She wants to have a mother at the age of eighty", the woman thought.

A lump in her throat replaced her smile. She wanted to take her mother in her arms and kiss her wrinkled cheeks and put her mother's head on her chest, talk and cry with her. But she couldn't: there was an obstacle.

She got up, took a tissue out of the tissue box and put it in her mother's hand. Then she brought her a glass of musk-willow water from the kitchen, wishing for someone to come or for the telephone to ring.

It was cold. The woman's hand came out from under her blouse looking for the blanket. There was no blanket over her. She jumped out of bed. The room was dark. She turned the light on and looked at the clock. She thought of her husband's coming and dinner. Then she went toward the bedroom paying no attention to the untidy heap of clothes on the armchair. She stood in front of the dressing table and stared at her mother's portrait in its frame. Mother sitting on a wooden bench with a green and cream cover, a small Turkmen rug hanging on the wall. She wore a green knitted blouse with tiny half moons, a black chador with little flowers, and a cream scarf with the same flowers as her chador. Her brown hair could be seen under her scarf. The woman held the portrait close to her lips, kissed it, put it on her breast, went to the window and looked at the rain which had just started and listened to the song from downstairs. It's morning again, oh me and my heart. The mystery is still unsolved, oh me and my heart.

In her mind, the woman took a journey to the past, to twenty-eight years ago. On the evening of a rainy day in a village in Azerbaijan Province, at the foot of the main alley, when she turned to the blind alley, she saw two young boys. One of them was three years, four months and twelve days older, and each held one side of a blue-white checked blanket and walked with difficulty. The older boy, who was about six years and a few months old, put on a pair of orange Otafuku sandals; the younger boy, whose face was unusually gloomy, was in his pajamas, with two pieces of cotton wool in his ears, and a pair of slippers with no socks. The woman moved the basket to the other hand and ran toward the boys. She could hear the splash of the water in the elder boy's sandals; "What are you doing? Where are you taking the blanket?" she shouted. Coming nearer, she saw the younger boy was trembling under the blanket. She seized the blanket in his arms. "Who told you to come out of bed?" she said patting the boy's hand. "We were coming to wrap you in the blanket and bring you back home. Because of the rain." said the older boy, bursting into tears. "You might die in the rain", said the younger boy. The woman smiled. She wiped her hand on his wet face and pushed the boys toward the house.

After changing their clothes, she pulled the cotton wool out of the younger boy's ears. There was no infection in his ears. She felt relaxed. Without making the soup she went to the dressing

table. The golden key could be seen through her open collar, just over the brown mole between her breasts. A smile appeared on her lips, thinking about so many explanations she had to give to everybody about this little golden key, but she was always evasive, in her usual style. Each time they tried to find out about her life she did the same thing. The last time was a few years ago. When she bent to offer tea to the guests, the key moved on her bosom. It moved from side to side and then stopped on her bosom, over the brown mole. "We couldn't find the mystery of this key, which is as dear to you as your life," said her friend in so all of them could hear her. "She's right," they said, "You'll reveal the mystery of the key today or we'll force ourselves on you for dinner."

The woman offered them the tea and bore all their glancing at the key and the brown mole on her bosom. She set the tray on the table, wound the chain around her finger and laid it under her lower lip. Now the key was on her chin. "No dinner!" she told them smiling. "This is the key to the garden of Eden."

The woman's lips came together slowly. Her forehead creased, and the two vertical lines in the middle of her forehead came nearer. She began to count the days on which she had passed the chain through the golden key and put it round her neck. She could not think. She used to use her mind for drafts when she was a child, to save paper. Now, she couldn't, so she sat at the desk and after practicing a lot, and including the leap years, she got 8497. For 8497 days, the key had been a part of her body. She set the key aside a few hours or days every year for certain occasions. Although she was told repeatedly that she should not have any metal things, necklace, earrings or hairpin during X-rays, scans or operations, she would forget to take it off and her hand would search for the lock of the chain at the last moment of the technician's notice.

She hated all jewels and anything with a golden color. When her mother looked at her earlobes regretfully, saying, "What an effort I had to pierce them!" the woman would say: "Ears are more beautiful without earrings," and she would give her mother no opportunity to say, "Get a pair of imitation ones, at least," As if the mother remembered her ears with no earrings when she was young, she sighed and said: "You may know better."

It was only the golden key and a watch that she had to wear to be on time for the office, and she had never got used to its presence. It was the reason why she lost it every now and then, and she would have to do without a watch until she could save enough money to buy a new one. She had to wear the watch since she had to coordinate her travel with the time of going to and from the office. Before starting her job in the office, she used to shut her watch and put it in her purse, and she took it out every now and then to look at it and set her time for her appointments. But the office made her wear it. To escape from common custom, she wore it on her right hand. So she used to take it off while working and writing to be quicker. She had lost

many watches; a watch with a silver chain and a cover with red, blue and azure stones on it—she opened it when she wanted to know the time—and a watch with a white face and band which she had bought from a paddler in Arg Square for a hundred tomans.

The watch with a black face and band with red and white lines and blue hands lying on the table was bought by her sons and her daughters-in-law for her birthday two years ago. She was careful not to lose it. They have chosen the colored lines and the big face of the watch to help her to distinguish the lines better. But she still liked to sit by the old heater in her childhood house and stare at the clock with the red head of a rooster on its face which moved up and down while ticking. Or during the nights of Ramadan, she liked to hear in her mind the ringing of Mashdi Soghra's grey clock which stood on the shelf with its two round domes and its narrow handles. The sound of the clock echoed in the silence of the night, then Mashdi Soqra would call the mother, and the mother would say: "Oh, thank you neighbor. May God always bless you with greatness." And in going to and coming back from school she used to ask Mashdi Soqra the time, until one day she said "Twelve. Exactly" and she smiled and thought what "Twelve, exactly" meant. And since that day, when asking the time she used to stare at the bricks of the hall floor to find out where on the floor the light of the sun must have fallen so that the neighbor would say "Twelve. Exactly". Not knowing for a long time why Mashdi Soqra used the word "Equal" only for 12, one day she asked the time from Mashdi Qoli, the second person who had a watch in the village, and he held his hairy hand in front of her and said: "Please read it yourself," and she held Mashdi Qoli's hand in her little hands and looked at the watch with the brand of "West End Watch" on it so that she could find out why Mashdi Soqra used the word "equal" for 12. Then she let go of Mashdi Qorban's hairy, perspiring hand and ran over to Ali- Shir's store to buy "Halva -Keshoo" for 1 rial and offer it to the children before the school bell rang. So that the boys would grab the Halva and while trying to get it back, it would be mixed with the dirt of their hands and she couldn't eat it so she would say, "I don't want it. You have it."

The woman hooked her finger in the gold chain of the key and her eyes rolled. Her hooked finger went round her neck with the chain. She pulled her finger suddenly and felt the pressure of the chain on her neck, and her eyes were full of tears. She looked at the wrinkles round her eyes. Her elder son used to count the wrinkles before they were fourteen. Tears filled his green eyes and he asked her to do something and remove them. So he did with her few white hairs which were a mass, now. She wanted to count the wrinkles. When she counted to seven, she saw how much she looked like her mother. The boys had told her, and they laughed. Her younger son had told the elder one: "Look! How much mummy looks like granny! Just like her." Her elder son had laughed: "He's right mummy. You look exactly like her. Do you know it yourself?" the woman had recently noticed how much she looked like her mother when she was 80. She touched the golden key with her fingers and put it between her lips. She wished to

have a mother. She took her mother's portrait, sat on the bed cross-legged, put the portrait on her knees and put her finger on her mother's mole, saying loudly: "Once upon a time, 8497 days ago in a room with five doors, at the foot of an alley, a woman was sitting with no wrinkles on her face, dreaming. The leaves of the double door in the middle of the room has been closed, and a little olive-skinned boy with moss-green eyes, soft hair and his usually frowning face, who wore short red pants ran up to her. He threw the small box to the woman and a crumpled 20-toman bill fell on the carpet near the box. "Take it. To hell with it! Are you happy now?" he said. "He had sold the tea-pot." He turned his face away and ran off. The woman knew that he wanted to hide his tears. She took the box, bewildered. The small gold key was shining inside it.

The woman was afraid. The boy had pestered her to have 20 tomans since the week past. The woman hadn't given him the money until the night before when his big eyes were full of tears. "I wouldn't have asked you for the money if Daddy weren't in prison," he had said, and he had put his head under the blanket. The woman had gone to the kitchen and wiped her tears, drank some water and called her elder son. "Ask him what he wants the money for, all right?" and the boy had told her: "Do give him the money, you miser!" and left. The woman had returned to the room, removed the blanket, kissed his eye lides and fondled his hair, saying: "Okay, we'll go together tomorrow, and you can buy whatever you want." The boy had pushed her hand away and slept with his back to her, saying: "Don't sit beside me. Get up. I don't want anything." Now the 20-toman bill was crumpled and the golden key was in front of her. She ran to the next room and saw the boy sitting in the corner. She held his shoulders. "This! Where have you got this?" she shook the key in front of his face.

- I've bought it from Dadbakhsh. Go ask yourself.

The woman put on her slippers, hung her purse on her shoulder, took the boy's hand and went out. Dadbakhsh's jewelry store was on the corner of the alley. She had never gone into the store, but she would greet Mr. Dadbakhsh as a neighbor each time she passed it by. She herself didn't know why she was ashamed of going into the store. If a relative saw her there, she would feel ashamed. But that day she hurried over there. As she entered the store, Mr. Dadbakhsh came to her with a dish full of chocolates: "Happy birthday. God knows I would get it back if I know her. But she wasn't a customer. She was a stranger. I don't know her. This little child has been coming to the window and staring at it for a long time. He had asked its price many times. It was sold just ten minutes before he came. I can't tell you how many times he pounded the table glass."

The woman looked at the glass. There was a pile of 5, 10, 20 and 50-rial coins on the table. She felt giddy. She could hardly hear Mr. Dadbakhsh's voice: "I offered him all these tiny things and I told him that you like this key and you've ordered me not to sell it and wait till you have your

salary in the end of the month.” The woman raised her head. She saw Mr. Dadbakhsh’s pupils moving in his tears. She took the little boy in her arms: “I liked the key. So I didn’t give you the 20-toman bill.”

“You are a liar! Uncle gave me the money. Now are you happy?” said the boy.

The woman laughed. Her tears flowed into her mouth: “God knows I like the key.” And she took the boy in her arms, as today she holds the portrait in her arms.

It was dark. The woman got up and put the portrait on her dressing table. She opened the freezer and took out two packages of chicken. She should cook the food so that she could keep some for lunch. They should go to the Behesht Zahra Cemetery the next day, and there as usual, after sending her husband, her brother and others to the car, she would tell them: “I’ll come after you.” Then she would stay there to take a pebble and knock it on the grave so that the sound would pass through the marble stone and mud of the tomb and reach her mother in the grave and make her talk about things she had to say but hadn’t; then she would sit silently and listen to her mother’s voice.

Farkhondeh Hajizadeh

Nov. 2001