

Circles (Novel)



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Hamid Nourshamsi (Tehran-1982)



Hamid Nourshamsi (*1982, Tehran*), *Ph.D. student of Communication Sciences*, has been working as a journalist and literary critic in Iran for the past twelve years. He is about to release another novel entitled *Returnee*. He is also the author of the book *Kimiaye Pars* including a brief introduction and looks to selected works of the Iranian National Literary Awards. Nourshamsi has been ranked first to third in some journalistic awards in the field of books in Iran and is recognized as a well-known literary journalist in Iran. *Returnee* is about to publish in Shahrestan-e Adab Institute and *Kimiaye Pars* was published in Taka Publishing Institute.

About the book:

"Circles" is a long social story. The story is about a small part of a society whose frustration and disappointment have become a permanent part of their story. The story of young people who, in the moments when they feel they are coming to their desires, have found it more distant and unattainable than ever. Hamid Nourshamsi's first long story tells about the life story of four persons who have intertwined with small reasons. At a time when these little excuses are becoming the most important and beautiful reason for them in life, destiny and time and perhaps the essence of these persons who were trained and bred in a society that nurtures them, fade them and take them away.

The "Circles" has tried to tell a story from the perspective of five persons with four narratives in its text. Therefore, the narrators of these stories are a daughter, two sons, and two fathers. The life of each of them runs like a circle in its orbit. These circles have nothing like a common point with each other except when their orbits cross each other somewhere. The crossing will not necessarily mean that their paths will change from there. In its narrative style, the "Circles" has attempted to utilize as a simple and poetic narrative style as possible. The sense of narrators at any moment during the happening of special events for them has been described and conveyed without exaggeration or overstatement and merely by helping the simplicity of words and phrases. The work has a linear narrative with four narrators each narrating the story somehow. The first chapter of the story opens a knot that the other chapters are trying to explain how this knot created and what its outcome was. The Circles book is a social novel and is compiled according to the author's specific view, as a cultural journalist in Iran with 12 years' experience in Iranian newspapers and news agencies. Shortly after its publication, this book has received a great deal of attention from literary writers and critics in Iran, and a number of them have also attended its signing ceremony.

Expert of the Book:

Mehri

I had been thinking about this split second many times. This question had always been there how it is going to come about. Does it mean its time has not come yet, and I can expedite or postpone it? I had never thought that at times when I am not thinking about it at all, it comes to me, stares into my eyes and let me know that I should go, then what should I do? On the whole, could anything be done at all? When it is time, it can no longer be delayed. I am not a philosopher and I never wanted to be one, but life has taught me that whatever it takes to do something, the action have got to be worth doing it. Just like this cigarette that is now half-burned in my hand and its ash has fallen on my pants and pierced it to the size of a pencil butt, though it is the first cigarette that has glued to my lips, and although it has been two years that its pack along with a junk lighter have been crumpled at the corner of the dashboard, I have never desired to smoke it. Since it was not appeal it to make me high and then continually nag me to take it yet again. No, I did not feel like it until it was worth it. But now it is worth it because I am doing something that you know will hurt me. I make out and I yearn for. You know what? It is now time to twist the earlobe of this life a little bit. My life lies like a bloodless corpse before me, it has paled out and lacks luster, perhaps it is worth smoking to speed up the ending of this picture for a second.

Life has taught me I ought not to want no matter which for myself. It always whispered in my ear that when you asked for something and you owned it, you wounded it with the first scar to its pristine nature, the first step to destroying it. Just like a flower that is now and then so gorgeous that you want to pick it and bring it into the pot so that it is there just for you and you enjoy it more; but you do not

know or maybe you know and pretend otherwise, that when you wounded its body by the injury of separating it from the stem, you have condemned it to certain death with every passing moment.

Like a cigarette pack that looks like it is a appealing thing as long as its plastic film wrapping is intact, but once you tear down the wrapping and take possession of its insides, you have made the first wound to that manifestation of prettiness and the day will come that you crush it yourself and throw it into the water ditch. Which means, ‘Go away, I no longer need you’.

It is time. Whether I like it or not, it is time. I admit I did not think of it, not that I did not want to, but I did not today. Nor yesterday. I had been considering about it three or four hours ago. Right here. On this same bridge. There was a huge crowd on New Year’s Eve in the evening . . . in that traffic jam. The police, the ambulance, the people . . . I did not know what attracted their attention that they wanted to see it. I did not know that if a thirty-year-old young man threw himself down the ninety to hundred feet height of a bridge onto the highway pavement and then a Nissan finished off his incomplete attempt by crashing him to the pavement, why it was so interesting for them to watch. Does that mean reminding people of death is *that* appealing to them?

Right here, I hit the brake too. No lie, I did the same thing without knowing it. I had left the car with a running engine in the traffic jam and rushed to the edge of the bridge. I wondered at the red stain around the ambulance’s tarpaulin cloth that had covered the body. It was soaked in blood.

Everyone was standing, watching the scene curiously. That night when I went again to the car, my hand inadvertently slipped into the dashboard. I picked up the cigarette pack and put one on my lip. I even stroke the lighter. I stared at its yellow flame, but instead of the cigarette, I held my finger near it. It burned and the burning dragged itself to the soles of my feet and I unconsciously released the lighter knob and killed its flame? Why? It certainly was not worth it. But now smoking was

worth it. I should have celebrated attending a deadly symphony. I had to do something to make me realize what I saw.

Death was waltzing in front of my eyes over . . . like a young adult ballerina girl who woos her audience and shows off her elegance; the elegance of her being and her destruction. It was going up and down meticulously in front of my eyes. It rotated and went up and down so frequently that it seemed it knew I had noticed it. It just wanted to persuade and make a point of saying that it was, and it was not supposed to never be. To say that by being there and proving its existence, it calms many and scares many. A dubious but fair contradiction. It is there and takes possession of you whenever it wants and you can accept it if you are very brave. However, even if you do not accept it, there is no way out anyways.

There was a drizzle. The rush of the New Year's Eve had magnified the bittersweet sensation of the rain. I was a little frustrated, I could not decide to stay in the car or else. I had nothing to do at home. I could work in that hustle and bustle till morning, like the time my father used to work with this car till dawn, but the commotion could not improve my boredom. The feeling of rain and driving in it did not allow me to redirect my way home. Understandably, the hubbub was luring me into heading toward an empty road and escapes the bustle of the city.

It was deep in those thoughts when he came to me, as I reached the beginning of Valia'sr Square at the passenger liners car queue that had lined up for Vanak. I had rolled the window down. I had rolled up the sleeve of my robe and had stretched my hand out of the window. I liked the cold raindrops that abruptly hit my hands and surprised all of me. Raindrops were surprising me. Every instant they possessed me in a way sweeter than ahead of, without me even asking them. What a love it would be in which a lover would sacrifice herself for the beloved without asking for anything. There would be no surrender and no takeover. The rain always fell in love with the ground as such.

He pounded his fist on the rear window a few times. My half-open eyes saw his dark complexion. It was an old man, maybe seventy. With a bent shoulder and a

gray and worn out overcoat. He could barely stand on his knees. It was as if his knees were collapsing. Raindrops drove him to the ground like a hammer. The lenses of his spectacles were more or less covered with raindrops. I wondered whether he could see anything through them.

- "Do you do charter, my daughter?"

I opened my eyes wide. I brought in my hand and asked as I rolled my sleeve down, "Where?"

- "Imam Airport. No matter how much it costs, I will pay. No problem."

It was about 1:00 AM. I glanced at the street. It was not going to get empty. I nodded at him to get on.

The old man sat at the left corner of the seat and leaned his head against the glass. I was peeping him in the mirror. His eyes were gazing at the rain-covered glass from behind those wet lenses.

I did not have a habit of talking to passengers and digging them too much. But the old man looked strange. I was constantly scrutinizing him in the mirror. He did not lift his head from the glass. He neither looked like an airport passenger nor had the characteristics of a person who was going to welcome somebody. As the Imam Ali Highway was ending, the old man suddenly burst into tears. Loudly at first and then less noisily.

I slowed down and pulled over to the highway curb. I turned on the flasher. I looked back at the old man. He had rested his head on the back of the seat and was weeping with a chocked sound. His face was lost in the darkness of the car and the highway. I reached for the car's ceiling light and turned it on. When the light poured itself on his face, I saw the tracks of tears on his face. He held up his hand to make a barrier between the light and his face.

I muttered an 'are you ok', but he gestured me to turn away and continue my way. Halfway through the Azadegan, the rain had already become something more than a drizzle that could be called rain proper. I turned the knob on the taxi's radio. From the show host's words, I just heard something about a piece named Cavatina by

Stanley Myers. I recognized the musical piece once it was aired. Not itself. Its movie, *The Deer Hunter*. The story of four friends who head to Vietnam to fight for the cause of their country and one of them stayed back there. I remembered that extraordinary scene. That brilliant Russian Roulette table scene and the two friends at the table facing each other. The two soldiers had to shoot a pistol with only one bullet at their head. Around the table, many people had made bets on their lives. Their guns were facing them like rabid dogs, waiting for a command to break free of their collars and tear them apart. And now, the two soldiers had to test their chance of life under the wild gaze of the pistol by discharging a pistol at their brains. Unaware of how the rabid guns that surrounded them would treat them, even if they won the gamble. A weird feeling was in this life! It was as if death was ballet dancing for them to the tune of Cavatina like that adult girl.

The music was soothing, no matter how terrifying the performance was in the film, but the music seemed to convey the inherent tranquility of death to its audience.

The musical piece was halfway through when the old man raised his voice, “It was my fault. I was greedy. I lost all that I had. My son, my life . . .”

I looked at him in the mirror and said nothing. I lowered the window on his side so the cool breeze of the rain would calm him down.

I asked as I entered the highway from the road’s exit, “Where should I go?”

He bent forward with difficulty and handed me a piece of paper: ‘Imam Airport, Delivery of Special Cargo Dept., The Deceased Affairs, and Mr. Askari’.

The entrance of the special section was crowded. It was hard to find a parking place. But the orange-colored taxi could prove itself in such places. I threw myself at the end of the passenger liner cars and asked them to look after the car and do not keep a turn for me. I knew any time they meet a female driver; they would break the rules. I grabbed the old man’s hand and slowly got him out of the car. There was a folder in his hand. He was not quite out of the car when something slipped through the folder and sat on the ground. I picked it up to give it to him. Perhaps a photo. As my eyes fell on the photo, it slipped out of my hand and clung to the wetness of the

ground once more. The rain was kissing its face drop by drop as I picked it up again. I wiped off where the rain had kissed with my hand and stared at it. That was it.

I went back to the old man who was dragging his feet to the gate.

- "Is this . . . yours?"

He turned and looked at me and gazed at the picture, tired and calm. And his shoulders shook again. The hands whose fingers with coarse calluses were now visible went under his magnifying spectacles went under the magnifying spectacles and caught the wetness of tears. Slowly, he raised his hand and grabbed it and changed direction toward the special section.

Something in my head started to prickle. A tingling sensation behind my eyes. I followed the old man.

I asked loudly, "Sir . . . whose photo . . . is this?"

He did not say anything. He glanced at me. Again, he went his own way. I did not give up. I followed him into the Askari's room. He was a relatively young man. In a simple room. With a regular metal table and chair. The old man sat down and I stood by the door. The young man looked at me and said nothing. He only asked under his lips, "Are you together?"

The old man did not say anything and I just nodded.

Askari asked the old man for the documents and the old man gave him the folder. He opened it unhappily and grumbled that he must have separated them, and pulled out a piece of paper from among them and based on that, entered something into his computer and said, "Your cadaver has arrived. It arrived with the 7:00 PM flight. It is in the morgue. Go there for delivery formalities. Minus-two floor. The elevator is outside, at the end of the lobby, on the left."

He picked up a piece of paper from his printer, sealed it, gave it to me and asked, "Do you have a car?"

The old man looked at me and I was pinned down to Askari's mouth.

Without waiting for my reply, he said, "Well, now it is midnight. You should get an ambulance, anyways. They will arrange for that right there in the delivery section."

When I came to myself, the old man was trying to get up from the chair. I went ahead and grabbed him by the armpit and we got out of the room.

The minus-two floor was quiet. A narrow corridor with fluorescent lights that flickered alternately. We stopped in front of a door with a small sign at the upper right corner that said it was a morgue. The door was closed. We had to ring the bell. The old man was staring at me. Even his eyes had nothing to say anymore. I gazed into his eyes hoping something might pop up in my mind, but his eyes were more hapless than having anything to spare.

A square-shouldered and chubby guy came and opened the door halfway through.

- "One person may come in, a close relative!"

The old man looked at me. He leaned against the wall and relaxed. He slipped like a melting candle on the wall and spread out on the floor. The sound of his crying echoed in the hall. The man was looking at him unpassionately.

I said, "I come!"

The fat man asked, "What relative are you?"

I said, "He was going to be my man!"

The man stared at me and then went inside and I followed him. The whole room was covered with turquoise tiles and the floor also was covered with dirty ceramic tiles. We passed through several rooms to reach the morgue. A large stainless steel metal pile was visible at the far end of the hall. Like hospital cold storage. The man took the piece of paper that Askari had given me, glanced at it, and opened one of the shelves of the morgue. He pulled a large tray out of it. Inside its enclosure, a mass wrapped in black tarpaulin revealed itself. He opened the zipper and pushed aside the plastic film inside it. He nodded to me to get closer. I do not remember how long it took for me to get there. I looked in hesitantly, it was him. Babak. Around one of his eyes was blue and black right down to his cheek. There were many small scars on his face.

- "Is it him?!"

I lowered my head to confirm it.

- "God bless him. Please go to the next room for the rest of the formalities. However, his father must come to sign and settle the account . . ."

The old man was sitting on the hall's floor and was crying. I changed my direction toward the exit. Something was pressing on my throat.

I looked at him. He looked back. I nodded as a sign of confirmation and went to the exit. I do not remember how long it took, but I did not stop until I reached the same bridge. I got back to the same helter-skelter of two or three hours ago. It was now quiet. Silent and void.

Did it mean it was time? There on that bed and inside that bag? So simple and unceremoniously? I had been thinking a lot about meeting Babak again, but not with this waltz that death was pushing me toward his direction. It was as if I was seeing the same adult dancer girl again. But this time, instead of dancing, she was bowing half-raised to me. It seemed she was waiting for my order to start her solo waltz, but she lacked something, to begin with.

My hand went to the dashboard and opened it. Among the junk, I found that untouched pack of cigarettes and picked it up. I put one of the cigarettes between my lips and lit it. It was worth it. I sent the smoke to the bottom of my heart and spat it out to the girl's face with a cough. Once. Twice . . . The third time the girl seemed to be moving. She got up and stared at me and started dancing. I hit the accelerator hard a few times and she made some moves. It was as if she was just warming up and ready to dance. I got out of the car. Along with the girl, I walked to the middle of the bridge. I leaned against the side railing. The girl opened her arms and stood on the edge of the bridge's iron railing. She gestured me to go closer to her. She wanted to dance with me. We spread our arms wide. Like the statue of the crucifixion of Christ. The girl was laughing and inviting me to her side. However, my legs were incapable of dancing with her. I felt the weight of my body pressing on the ground. The soles of my feet were hot. I wish I was a little lighter . . . but the

ballerina girl was dancing to the same Cavatina tune. She was dancing and laughing.

Babak

I had down pat a few things from my earlier years. Like a speck of pale dust settling on the home appliances. Sometimes it can be removed and obliterated with a blow. I have no shortage of these old specks of dust in my life so that I sit here every night on the platforms of Taksim Square, at the beginning of Istighlal Street, and blow them away. During those five-minute intervals that I sneak out to smoke a cigarette to get enlivened and get lost again in that stinking and greasy and dirty basement and wash glittery plates for the luxurious lounge upstairs.

Turkey is a city for lonely people as far as I could figure it out within a year. People who are themselves the center of their world. All of them are minding their own business. Their most important honors are themselves. Nothing is more important to them than lingering in their status quo. They are happy with things they can touch; music, food, freedom . . . freedom . . . what a frozen thing this freedom was! Having it was like holding an ice slab in hand. It was cool at first, and then it burned your hand and rendered it numb and of course, it would stick badly to your hand.

It took me a year to find myself here. Before that, like all other immigrants, until I could raise my head, the order of daily life had crushed me. Here, the life for me meant voyeurism in stylish coffee shops and luxurious shopping centers, roaming around the shops full of colorful dishes, or eyeing high-end cars and villas of their owners. What's more, all of that rushed to me after I spent two-thirds of my day in that stinking two-story Greek restaurant basement in Taksim. The rest continued in the morning while I was sleeping intoxicated in a room with three Turkish, Slovak and Hungarian roommates and doing with a piece of bread and a cup of tea. Occasionally, if there was any leisure time, strolling in the street with a junkyard motorbike to move tourists around would be added to it, which would also end up

either with an accident or confiscation of the motorbike for driving without license, or hanging around an intersection to pick the brains of female tourists.

This free life that I had suddenly fallen into its lap had no clear beginning or end. The only specific part of it was twelve hours of washing and cleaning in this basement and sneaking out three, four or five minutes a day to smoke a cigarette. It has been a couple of days that I have realized they have planned even for this life that I have. It is screaming in their whispering and their eyes. I am not *that* concerned anyway. When you are scared once you are scared to the end. I was scared once. I was so scared that even if I would have never been scared of anything again, the memory of that single time would make me shudder.

Today's fourth cigarette had reached its middle. I looked at it. Its ashes are clinging to the cigarette tip and swell. Waiting for a slight jolt to fall and disappear. Like half the passengers on a boat that takes us from Turkey to Europe, they knew their life is hanging on the rope, the same jolt that they did away with them in the middle of the sea for not having five hundred dollars more. Just because of not paying or having five hundred dollars more per person, their lives were scattered in the air, in the cold waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Regardless of the fact that they had gone to the sea looking for a new home, and the sea, of course, acknowledged it. It had granted them a new life.

I was not even scared there. When I gave the 500 and begged them to return me. The fear was only when my eyes fell on the eyes that I thought I loved them, and at that moment I might abandon them for the fear of my life right at that moment and flee. Oblivious to the fact that the fear must be reserved for a time that you just want to reveal yourself and invite someone on a journey you do not dare to go by yourself. I was scared once for my part and had to make up for it till the end of my life.

I remember when I was a kid. When the roofs of the houses had not yet risen so high that you could still see as far as ten houses on every side, on the eastern horizon of our house, right in the middle of a vast land which I only knew was a

military garrison, there was a massive mast. The mast had a strange shape. It was wide at the bottom and tapered off from the middle to the top. Half red and half white. At the top, several antenna dishes were mounted and a red light that always flashed. One of my hobbies was going to the rooftop and watching the mast. Since the outcome of my sneaking out of the house was an accident and that, put my leg in plaster for a month, watching it had become more serious for me. It was a fascinating entertainment. At any cost, I went to the rooftop with a crutch using a loose wooden ladder in the yard. All my concern was peeping the houses from the roof of the house. Counting the number of times that Red-Breasted Asqhar, our left side neighbor, went to his pigeon cage and released them in the air. Or the arrival and departure hours of Lady Pari, the female neighbor on the right. Sometimes I checked out the young girls in the house on the back. They were two, one skinny and the other plump. I could not see them except through the second floor's window frame. They stopped in front of the mirror of their room several times in the morning and in the afternoon and fashioned up. But I never dared to peer into their yard for a long time. They had a strong and tough father and brother.

One morning on a late winter day, as my leg was in the plaster and the weather was moderately cold so one could get on the roof, something caught my eye on the mast. A black spot had emerged on its highest part. As if they were going to construct something there. Something like a bird's nest. I had been watching that spot for a few days, which were getting bigger every day, and of course, its owner was unknown; until I finally saw it. It was a big bird. Bigger than any bird I had ever seen. It went around the nest. It pushed something into it with its beak and then flew away. That was what it did for a few hours. It was coming and going incessantly.

When spring arrived and the weather got warmer and my leg was out of the plaster cast, I saw it hanging around the nest. Now, she went into the nest and sat down. It sat for hours and possibly stared at somewhere. All my concern was to check the mast in the mornings before school and at noon thereafter, and look for the bird. For

two or three years the bird was a guest at the mast. Early in the fall, it left home and showed up again at the end of winter.

That was the story until one year it did not show up in late winter. Then, it was summer and again autumn and winter. It did not come at all. However, its nest was still there. I never figured out why it went away and why it just left the nest it had been building for several years like that and fled.

The nest was there until it was my turn to do my compulsory military service. And in the same barracks, as a matter of fact. There, I found out that the mast was used for wireless communication with the garrison and that its antennas were repaired once a year. The repairman arrived from outside and, escorted by one or two soldiers climbed the mast with the help of a crane and checked the antennas.

It was a winter morning when he showed up for the repairs. Along with two soldiers. From their looks, it was clear that they did not like to climb. It was not my work shift, but I managed to pick the brains of one of them and convinced him to let me climb in his stead. I climbed. The crane went up to two-thirds of the mast, and the repairmen climbed the rest of the way with their tools that were a handful of ropes and fittings. I had to stay in the cabin to help them, alongside a feeble soldier who trembled like a willow tree. The repairmen were doing their job without realizing that I had started climbing on the other side of the mast without any ropes or safety gear. My companion soldier was watching me with awe and the repairmen were oblivious to it. I desperately wanted to get to that nest. I reached it. But as my hand touched the nest, a large section of it turned to powder-like ash and poured down. I raised my head to see the inside. Nothing was there except for three or four pieces of eggshell. I reached for them and upon first contact; they turned to powder too and poured onto the nest. The shouting of repairmen brought me back to reality. I was paralyzed. One was cursing and the other was coming after me. By breaking that empty nest, it was as if something was broken inside of me. The repairman got to me and grabbed my wrist and then around my waist as if he had caught a thief, he tied a rope around me and while he was constantly cursing, directed me downwards.

I did not resist. My head was up and I was watching the house. As we reached the crane, their eyes looked like bowls of blood. They were waiting for me to say something. I told them. I told them the story of the nest that had been empty for years.

One of them just said, "That nest is like that because a crazy freakish bird like you had built it at the wrong place! For your information, sergeant Ghandali! The chicks that are born on the mast get mad by the intensity of waves and throw themselves out of the nest and that makes their mother go crazy too because she always sees her chicks dead."

Three days in solitary confinement was a good time to think about his words. The last flight of a bird, that I knew then the death of its chicks had driven it mad but I did not know where it was going and how it dealt with that death.

I came to the conclusion that when you build a house at the wrong place, you will either perish or you will ruin someone forever for being in that house.

Later, I was determined to dig more into my own life and my father's life, and after a few days following him to see where he was going and what he was doing to put a piece of bread on the table, for the first time I realized that my life had been pulverized in itself for years and scattered in the air like that worn-out nest.

I realized that when one's life becomes like a leaf out of thousands of sycamore tree leaves, it is not interesting to anyone. No shine, no gloss, no special size, and in a nutshell, nothing to offer, that for example, someone would check it out to steal it. That is why it occurred to me that I had to escape being in that life. All the two years after military service that I had been hitting the clutch and brake on the motorbike and snatched cargo and passengers off the street, I was thinking about the same colorfulness and colorlessness and escape. About to own a house that if someone sticks his neck inside it, there is something in it to make him long for it. I wanted to be seen at that perspective, acquire a glaze and a smell from it. It was a weird feeling and maybe that feeling sent me to that little café & bar. On the fourth floor of the Milad Hall, the exhibitions' center. Where there was always a concert

and conference full of various people who bought something before going to the hall; a can of soda or fruit juice or a piece of cake. There, I had the opportunity to gaze at the face of a lot of young and old men and women every night, smile and give them something to eat. My feeling was that if they were satisfied with it, I would have fulfilled an important task and got one step closer to being different. I wanted to peer into their moments so that they never forget its aftertaste. I thought it meant having some fresh shine and gloss, and that was when Mehri came into my empty life.

Ayyoub

It is written: ‘Story without ahead’. I scan the empty cells of the crossword puzzle. It was hard to read at the dawn’s twilight with these half-open eyes. But I find its place and jump with “R” and “Y” and finish it. Yeah . . . this crossword was finished with “TORY”. Like my life that has always been without ahead. Its name was both life and not life. That is, it has been there and progressed, but not to that extent that one could say it *was* there. These years, it was mostly like trying not to die than enjoying life. Let alone that these days it is “die” more than ever. Die until one of those youngsters arriving from a foreign country rush in and take your place in an instant. Does it make any difference for anyone?

I put the crossword puzzle aside and thought again about this morning. My eyes did not see clearly, but in the dawn’s twilight, I looked around several times to make sure no one saw me and then gripped tight the relatively heavy leather bag’s handle. Before that, I lowered my head several times and looked at the bag. Two thin, short leather straps and a lock that did not look too robust, which was encrypted with three numbers. I weighed the bag up a bit with my hand. Something told me that an important item must be inside it and now, its owner must have a miserable time upon losing it.

I prompted myself, ‘Miserable or not. Which one of those who carry such bags must run a rat race like you every day from midnight to the twilight in the morning and

their only joy is smoking *Oshno*¹ next to a ditch full of dirt. Which one of them dips his hand up to his eyeballs in this sludge to open the waterway so that their debauchery is not disturbed?

For thirty bloody years, my eye was the people's eyes. My hands, their hands. I cleaned under their feet so that in the autumn morning, the wind would not shove dust and debris into their children's throat and irritate their eyes. I cleaned it so, in the early dark winter morning, the ditch's water and mud would not run down the street and muddy their clothes. With nothing at the end of the day. They would bring a young gigolo country boy to take my place. By the way, does a municipal street-sweeper have any place that they want to occupy it at all? Is he a big deal? After all these years, no matter what is inside it, do not deserve it?

My mind was racing and I got more nervous. At the upper alley, I reached a row of tall box trees. Where I used to take off my clothes every night and wear orange. Like every day, I put the broom on the wall, in a dried jasmine shrub of a magnificent house in front of which the box trees were planted. I had marked that spot for years to keep the broom. I took a bag of clothes out of the box tree bushes and reached for the small bag of "Nas" (dried tobacco leaves) inside it. I put a piece in my mouth between my lips and let it soak and then pressed it on my teeth. I tasted it for a few minutes and spat out the rest at the edge of the ditch. I had to take off my clothes. I pulled the shirt, pants, and the jacket that I had for two or three years, over the bones under my skin, which were the only thing my body had. I put my work clothes in the bag. I pulled the string of my magnifying spectacles from the back of my head and took out the spectacles. In the dim light of the light bulb of the light pole, I checked its lenses and blew them clean. Separately for each lens. I put it on my eyes again. I tucked the bag under my armpit and with the bag in my hand, looked back and forth again and walked away.

¹ . Oshno is the name of an old brand of non-filter cigarette made tobacco by Iran Tobacco Company.

For twenty-three years I was a street-sweeper. Always five or six streets. From 4:30 AM to 6:30 AM. 11:00 PM to 3:00 AM. Eight hours a day and the salary was always the rock bottom without insurance. I had frequently thought about going to the contractor companies for cleaning. I did not. I could not go any further. I could not stand the nagging of housewives and the men with submissive house cleaning wives and an acquaintance whose meeting might have blushed my face.

In the municipality, they no longer insisted on staying, but they could not boldly say go either. I was minding my own business. I would not spare anyone an excuse. I was always a perfectly ordinary person. I did not have the looks, not even healthy eyes. Years of the day's work in the stone cutting workshops of southern Tehran and its dust had ruined my eyes. I was forced to wear glasses, or due to a habit, and of course the salary, I had become a night worker and swept the streets.

I held the bag tightly in my hand and thought about my past. Like I always expected to find the bag like in the movies or stories and get rewarded by the owner or pick it up. Did I really have to pick it up? Fat chance. They would have surely found me. I pressed the bag in my hand and thought of the days whose place in my life was very empty. The days I got married after getting employed at the municipality and poverty pressed on my shoulders more than before. The days that I had a son, many years after my marriage, but poverty killed my wife in a state-owned hospital while giving birth. All of my possession in the world was a single-story 58m² dilapidated house at Gh'alemorghi district where I had brought up Babak. The house was my father's only inheritance for his family of three. And my only inheritance for Babak, who was twenty-one or -two years old. He was eighteen when he went to military service leaving his studies incomplete, and then all his concern was a motorbike, purchased by installments with which he worked and made a living.

I am still unaware of his situation. I know my being is shameful to him. Having a street-sweeper father, especially for Babak, could not be digested, but I could not help it. I tried a lot to find a place for him in the municipality to no avail. For the starters, he had to produce a high school diploma which he did not have.

When he did not turn out to be what that I thought if he could be what would come by, he went looking for a job - from carrying passengers with motorbike to a be courier, sandwich shop, car wash, and finally, thanks to an old friend, besides carrying passengers with motorbike he found a job at a coffee shop in The Permanent Location of the Exhibitions, i.e. a waiter. We were the same. In the day, he swept under the feet of the people and in the night, I did. Overall, we had become the people's garbage men.

I walked faster. For the first time, in that morning, I did not go to Hassan Ghergheri's coffee house. Every day after the night work I went to his coffee house. I drank two cups of tea on the two-person table outside the shop and some bread and butter. I slept there until 9:00 AM and then I had to arrive at Tajrish by eleven o'clock. In front of the marketplace. *Moheban Yas* restaurant. Then I put on the uniform and yelled at the customer to come inside. About four o'clock I returned home from the restaurant. Again, I drank a cup of tea at Hassan's place and listened to the six o'clock news on the radio and stayed home until ten o'clock to get ready for the night work.

This morning, I directly went home to find the bag. I was very careful not to attract attention. I felt strange at home. I thought a lot of eyes were staring at me. It was as if they were watching me. I threw myself into the house. Babak was not home. Usually, he did not go out early morning, unless he had not been at home for the night. Perhaps, he did not return last night.

I looked out of the window at the tiny yard and around the house. The morning silence and everything were normal.

I put the bag in front of me and wiped it clean. I tried to figure out what was inside. It did not work. I messed with the lock. I punched it a few times. It opened. My heart was pounding. I opened it. Inside it was full of Iranian and foreign banknotes. I was sweating. My hand was shaking. My throat was dry like wood. I thought I had to hide it to make a decision about it. But what decision? I did not know.

The only place that came to my mind was behind the rows of blankets of mattresses in the room where no one would ever check. I had nowhere else. I pushed the bag between them.

I changed my clothes and threw a pillow at the corner of the wall of the entrance room. The same old spot. I spread myself on the worn-out carpet on the floor. The sun was slowly casting its light from the window on the carpet, but it was never capable of tickling my eyes. That day, however, seemingly its power had increased. By the way, I could not fall asleep either. I went to the crossword puzzle. All that was left of my literacy could only do that; filling in the useless cells of the puzzle. I filled in two or three until I reached a three-letter ending in R and Y. I looked at it. It was as if the empty house was staring at me. I threw the crossword puzzle to the wall. I lay on the floor and stared at the ceiling. The ceiling of the house was like a movie theater's screen in front of my blood ridden and sleepless eyes.

I saw my father on it. As always, he was stroking the grapes and checked out the robustness of their boxes.

I remembered the days when my father came from Qazvin to Tehran with his grape boxes and he had to stay a week to sell them. He always came alone and hired a daily-paid worker in Tehran. It was his habit. He managed the orchard like that as well. He had not made anyone dependent on him except for the mother, though in the latter times he had not said anything to reveal that he wanted the mother to stay, he did not expel her either.

He had bought the house just like that. Alone. Without asking anyone's opinion. To stay single in Tehran. No one knew about his purchase until my father's occasional visits to Tehran increased based on various pretexts. There was a rumor that he had a wife in Tehran. My mother heard all that but did not say anything. The middle daughter of a Reza Shah's army captain, who had married to a villager because her father only wanted sons, and a small vineyard was her marriage portion.

It had just turned into an adolescent and it was time for being zealous. I dug my father more than before. I monitored his trips, and the touches of sarcasm like the

one that One-Eyed Akbar had once thrown at me at the coffee house, “Say hello to Haji and tell him if the house is empty, give the key so we will screw Tehran too.” And the entire coffee house exploded in laughter. I followed the father unbeknownst to him. I was confused. I had to find it out. As the father arrived in Tehran, he went straight home and changed his rural clothes with a relatively new urban outfit. He then changed his direction toward Imamzadeh Ma'soom and in its labyrinth of alleys, knocked on the door of a relatively large house. He went inside for an hour, and then with an almost young woman got out of the house. They changed their direction toward the Imamzadeh. It was noon when after they prayed at the shrine in Imamzadeh, they met a Sheikh and followed him into a booth. They stayed there for half an hour and got out. The father seated the woman on a platform and performed his ablution for prayer and went inside the mosque’s section designed for nocturnal prayer. Then they set off again and returned home by bus. Before arriving home, the father purchased a box of sweets and some table vegetables and they went inside.

For one or two hours I walked around the house so the sun would set. There was no news from the inside of the house. At sunset, the father got out of the house. I followed him. He changed his direction toward the mosque and after prayer went to the coffee house. It took him one to two hours to return home.

I could not tolerate to continue that hide and seek game. I had to figure out what the story was. I ran around the house like a headless chicken, until the sound of a few pigeons flapping their wings caught my attention. It was night, but I followed the sound and reached a ruined house in the alley behind the house that one could climb over its wall. I climbed up and from the roof reached the roof of the father’s house and saw the father.

He was sitting on a rug in the yard next to the young woman. He had worn underwear and the woman had its counterpart as well. It was as if they were having dinner. An hour passed and then, they went inside and the lights went off.

I stayed the night on the roof until morning and the next day followed the father again. For three full days, the father went to the farm products' marketplace from morning to noon and at noon, prayed and went home and in the evening hit the streets with that woman.

Every day, I felt more and more excited than the day before. Something like a flame was burning more and more inside me. The fire that I fueled myself, one day finally its flame burst out such that I dared to tell him face-to-face what I had to say.

I returned to Qazvin earlier than the father. On the evening of the day, the father arrived and before going home, he went to the coffee house like he did every day and excluded outsiders from his two-person table at its corner. Before he took a few puffs of hookah and sip the tea from the cup, I glued myself to the chair facing him. The father looked at me when he realized I had been staring at him for a while. I felt my eyes, shamelessly with my mouth, were telling what I had seen. When I stopped talking and said that I had seen him with that bitch and I knew about his affair, the father just looked at me. Each word that had come out of my mouth had turned him redder and at that time he was ready to roast whatever was at hand. He deeply puffed at his hookah and as he had thrown his head down, gazing at the dirty tiles on the coffee house floor, said, "So what?!"

I blurted, "You must give it to me!"

The father took another puff at his hookah and suddenly slapped me under my ear. My ear burned awfully. For a moment, its sound silenced the whole coffee house.

I said with a certain naughtiness, "That slut is yours. I want a house."

He did not say anything more until the next day he sent me someone with the message that the house is mine. I went to Tehran that very night and began to sell the vineyards' products. But the crop became less and less from the following year. The father no longer attended the orchard. As if he had no more love for his vineyard to bear fruit, and the vineyard that had lost its beloved, reduced its crop until it dried up and eventually burned out in a drought two or three years later. It did not take two months that with the death of the vineyard, the father passed away

forever and a few months later, the mother. I and the rest of the heirs chewed on the vineyard's land until one day there was nothing to eat. If it was not for my wife, I would probably have eaten this house as well. I did not eat and began to work and in the end came to street sweeping.

This entire story was running on the ceiling and I was watching it until the picture turned white. Totally white . . . My eyes were tired. My eyelids blanketed them for a moment of comfort.

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