

SOFIA

Masoumeh Kazemi



Title: Sophia

Author: Masoumeh Kazemi

Publisher: Gardoon Pubs. / Germany

Subject: Fiction literature (novel)

Year of publication: 2020

Number of pages: 188

Size: 14×21

ISBN: 9783864330643

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Masoumeh Kazemi (1990 - Mashhad / Iran)

Masoumeh Kazemi is a writer of Afghan ethnicity living in Germany. She was born and raised in Iran. I have been interested in writing since my teenage years. Despite my many homework assignments, I kept trying to pen something down on the paper and write on any occasion. I was fed up. I wrote more than I spoke.

My young father was ill and my mother strived to be his nurse rather than his wife. My brother was about to go to primary school and I would read stories to him at night while putting him to sleep. Some of the same stories I wrote myself. Afterward, I would go to my father's bed. I read poems by Sohrab, Fereydun Moshiri, and Simin Behbahani. Dad would choose and I would read.

After my father died, my desire to write multiplied. I wrote many short stories and poems that except for Sophia's novel are not published yet. I am currently writing a new novel in the socio-political genre. I believe that one has to read a lot to be able to write a little. I am very interested in the socio-political genre and have studied a lot in this field.

My goal in writing is to cry out for justice and fairness, while in my country, some people may still cutthroats and try to silence the outcry. I am the generation of war and displacement. So, everything I write is fused with my flesh and blood.

ABOUT THE BOOK:

After the end of the celebration, the dinner tablecloth is spread out. Pamir is unwilling to eat as usual. He eats a few reluctant bites, leaves the table sooner than others, and goes to the room. He lights up his cigarette and sits on a chair by the window. He fixes his eyes on a faint star flickering in the corner of the sky. The nostalgic grief that the star shoulders is felt and heard as much as its remoteness. It leaves a bitter aftertaste in his mouth, bitterer than the thick cigarette smoke circling his head, bringing his loneliness's in Kabul's *Darulamann* in a straitjacket right before his eyes, in a dilapidated house with most of its rooms in a state of severe disrepair and uninhabited. He lit up his first cigarette right at the time the pain of love was running to his bones. Moreover, for fear of losing, being forgotten, and cheated, he counted stars all his nights. "I don't understand why I have this feeling for you . . ."

Sophia is the name of one of the three main characters in the story. The sad story of Sophia and why she and her husband resorted to illegal immigration is the reality of the lives of thousands of Afghan men and women who have been grappling with countless accidents and disturbances for the past forty years. The story is written in the romantic-social genre, narrated through two (dramatic and fictional) timelines. The Baran character in the story's dramatic timeline is the same young Sophia of the novel's fictional timeline. After living in Germany for 20 years, Baran (Sophia) spends the last days of her life in a nursing home. She is forty-eight and suffers from brain cancer. Her adopted son, Ahura, is her only delight that had survived the ravages of time. He is a physician doctor and works in a hospital where Baran would eventually land. Ahura addresses Baran as a *mom*. Ahura's childhood is included in detail in the novel's fictional timeline. He is the son of Mahrokh (one of the three main characters in the story). There is a great secret in Ahura's life that he himself is not

aware. According to Mahrokh's will, Baran took custody of Ahura after her death and invited him to Germany. Ahura's mistress is a girl named Mandegar who works as a nurse in a hospital. The madness that brought Ahura to his knees out of this gray love often evokes the past in Baran's mind. Years ago, not too long after Baran arrived in Germany and right after he was released from the lunatic asylum, he began writing his memoirs. His memoirs narrate the fictional timeline of the novel.

Afghanistan's civil war between the country's ethnic and political sects hit the nail of the Taliban terrorist regime in 1996 on the head of an unfortunate population. This marked another beginning for people to flee over the borders. The escape of Pamir and Sophia from Kabul with two toddlers and the events that befell them is the pain and suffering of the majority of the Afghan people. The novel *Sophia* narrates a great tragedy that has happened, it is neither fantasy nor fable.

The failed and frustrated love that pervades the depths of Mahrokh's soul has not only added to the story's attractiveness but also depicts the loud cries of thousands of poor girls who have fallen victim to some of the wrong traditions in families. Mahrokh's biography is narrated in detail in the fictional timeline of the novel. When the Taliban regime was in power, Sophia and Pamir fled Afghanistan and sneaked into Iran. They had no one in Iran. Before they could secure any refuge for themselves, one night they stumbled upon a swindler who took away all their possessions. Despite his will, Pamir is forced to take refuge in Mahrokh's house. Mahrokh's love for his cousin Pamir still makes her heart beat violently in her chest. Sattar, Mahrokh's husband, does not understand the 27-year-old Mahrokh due to their big age difference and is immersed in his world. Pamir is fed up by confronting Mahrokh and the past that haunts him from time to time and inadvertently gets nervous and aggressive, which sometimes surprises Sophia, "But why?!"

Pamir has a degree in mathematics. However, like many educated young displaced people living in Iran, he is forced to work as a laborer and enters the building construction business along with Sattar, Mahrokh's husband. At the workplace, he meets an old man named Yaqub. The grief that wells up in Yaqub's eyes and the tears that constantly filled his eyes hurt Pamir's heart. The suffering inflicted on Yaqub, his two young daughters, his toddler grandchildren, and his bereaved wife, who has been living in silence for years, narrates the crimes of the Taliban regime.

Pamir's new job as a laborer induces a sense of guilt in Sophia because Pamir gave up everything and go to displacement due to Sophia's severe depression, caused by shutting down the universities by the Taliban. This fact annoys Sophia until Malekpour, the construction project contractor, offers Pamir the basement of his mother's house in exchange for not being alone at home overnight. Unlike Pamir, Sophia accepts it wholeheartedly. In addition, Mahrokh implodes into herself again.

The contractor's mother (Ms. Homa) dismisses the man and woman who served her before Sophia came into the picture and as of that day, she hires Sophia. Sophia hides the matter from Pamir for fear of his objection. She spends her days and nights with patience and apprehension, that constantly shakes the bottom of her heart until the troubled lives of illegal immigrants living in Iran force Pamir to take another trip. Although his father has given up on him for years and has nothing to do with Pamir, he exacts his travel expenses from him. Before the trip, he goes to Mahrokh to ask for her forgiveness. Mahrokh cries and opens her heart by complaining about Pamir. Meanwhile, Sophia overhears everything as she unties her shoelaces at the back of Mahrokh's house; including Pamir's unspoken words and why his father has abandoned him.

Pamir and his son, Raham, are shot dead in a forest in a smugglers' route near the Soviet border, Sophia gets severely wounded and her four-year-old daughter, Hasti, disappears. Hasti is Baran's missing loved one who is briefly mentioned at the beginning of the story. In the last days that Baran is in a state of death-struggle in the hospital, a nurse named Maria, who is Dr. Afzoneh's stepdaughter, takes care of her. In addition to other circumstantial evidence, she has an identification keepsake on her that proves she is Hasti. On the last day of her life, before her dust-ridden eyelids close, Baran tells Ahura the truth; that he is Pamir's son. This pushes Ahura to the corner of the hospital yard and he sobs violently there. Maria goes to Ahura to console her, and out of empathy, tells the memory of losing her father, brother, and mother as she could still remember that day vaguely. She hangs the identification keepsake, a delicate necklace, around her neck and says, "This is a gift from my father. He hung it around my neck before the trip, kissed my face, and said, 'This is a gift to you by an angel on the occasion of winter'." Ahura stares at Maria's necklace. He remembers the day when Pamir came to Mahrokh to ask for her forgiveness. Mahrokh pulled the necklace - which Ahura had not seen on her neck until then - out from under her collar and gave it to Pamir at the moment of saying goodbye and added, "It has been a burden on my neck for a long time. Give it to Hasti!" Ahura hurries to Baran's room, pushes aside the physician doctors who have circled around her bed, puts Maria's hand in Baran's lifeless hands, "Mom, look, I fulfilled my promise," and shouts the name Hasti. Suddenly, the electrocardiographic heart monitor emits a constant beep, and Baran's heart goes silent.

The present book has three chapters. Different perspectives have been worked out. Various characters tell the story from their perspectives. The work has become comprehensible using techniques such as association, dialogue, marking, and so on. It has two main timelines (dramatic timeline and fictional timeline). In the fictional timeline, there are also brief flashbacks to the more distant past.

EXPERT OF THE BOOK:

Chapter One, Feeble Steps . . .

Everywhere is covered with a thick fog. With the usual angst welled up in her eyes, she stares at the road whose end is out of sight. A gentle wind caresses her disheveled hair on her shoulders and face and her long silk dress dances in the wind. Someone passes by her like a breeze, "Stop!"

The shadow fades into darkness, and she runs after it in that ambiguity. It is as if she wants to get rid of what drags her behind, "Please stop! I want to tell you everything, let me die in peace. Where are you, Ahura¹?"

The sound of a cell phone ringing takes her out of the nightmare that has been tightened around her last days of life like a noose, and she says breathlessly, "Yes!"

- "It's Ahura! Mom, are you okay?"

"I have a headache, little nausea, and dizziness too," replies Baran² with a calm and tired voice as she stares at an unknown point.

- "I'm going to get the tests to result in tomorrow; I'll come over to see you."

"Okay, I'll be waiting! Until tomorrow," says Baran after a short pause.

The sound of thunder resonates in the room. With a tremor that she constantly feels in her legs, she gets off the bed, "Answer to what? To my death?" She goes to her clothes closet, "This weather is working against me and won't stop pouring." She has not quite taken off her

¹ Mythical Persian name for boys - Tr.

² Rain in Persian - Tr.

leather overcoat from the hanger yet when she feels dizzy and her vision is blurred. She sits quietly at the same spot and shortly after, totters to her room, opens the door, and calls the nurse loudly, “Ms. Catherine! Ms. Catherine!”

Her voice echoes up to the end of the long and wide hall, the lights come on; she darts nervous glances around in search of someone. However, no one hears her voice. She closes the door and goes to her cell phone, “Hello! Do you hear me, Ahura?”

- “Yes Mom! What’s up?”

- “What’s this hellhole that you got me in the last days of my life?”

- “God forbid, mom! Don’t say that!”

- “Long time, no see. Looks like you’re busy somewhere else, aren’t you?” She turns off her cell phone and throws it across the room, “Damn!” She pulls out a notebook from under her bed - which she has not separated from herself even for a moment throughout the years - and flips through it. The dust that rises from the notebook pages casts her hapless gaze on the lifeless body of the road that extends over the shoulder of spoiled moments. Sophia wipes the glass, which her warm breaths have made slightly foggy, and leans her head against the cold window sill again. She stares at the road, scattered phrases swirl in her mind, “Stick to Roham and Hasti at all times!....Don’t even think about me and your father! The very fact that you get rid of this buried-alive situation, relieves us of the grief of not seeing you . . . Be sure to call after you crossed the border so that we slaughter a calf as an offering for your health . . .” Unknowingly, her lips open to a smile. “Poor calf!” she says to herself as she runs her fingers through her daughter’s jet black hair, “To how many people was it slaughtered as an offering from last year to this year? Finally, it got into trouble after we crossed the border in one piece.”

The trembling voice of an old woman who repeatedly says Salawat³ is heard from the back seat. Sophia slowly turns her eyes to the purple rosary beads, which pass through the old woman's thin, withered fingers, every time she says Salawat. The old woman kisses the rosary and puts it in her bag. She brings her head close to Sophia's, "Where do you live? Mashhad?"

Without answering the old woman, Sophia puts her hand on her forehead and asks in confusion, "Excuse me, do you have a pill?"

"What happened suddenly, sweetie?" asks the old woman. "Did your pressure drop?"

"I don't know, maybe," replies Sophia, and stops talking.

Pamir glances at Sophia's pale face and asks her, "Have we stolen something or killed someone that you've freaked out like that?"

Sophia, "We've sneaked in, haven't we? Do you know what'll happen if we get caught?"

Pamir, "No! *You* tell me what happens because part of my brain is missing! Well, suppose they find out, they will not execute us! They'll deport us to our homeland again."

Sophia, "Just like that? They deport us to our homeland?"

Pamir, "Well, darling, do you expect them to greet us and say they had been waiting for us for quite a while?"

Sophia shakes her head with a smirk on her face, "What homeland? A homeland where peace and quiet had become a dream and memories of good ol' days for us?"

³ Allah! Send blessings on Mohammad and on the children of Muhammad - Tr.

Pamir, “Nevertheless, I’m glad that there’ll be peace from now on, and . . . calmness and . . .” He left the sentence unfinished and fixes his eyes on the other side of the bus window.

Sophia replies as she braids Hasti’s hair, “It’s a long march to peace. Have you ever thought about what would happen from now on? Right after we arrive at the terminal?”

The driver slows down the bus. Pamir has not taken his gaze away from the window yet, when Sophia glances at him, “Did you hear what I said?”

Pamir’s confused eyes fixed on the bus window relaxes her fingers and Hasti’s braided hair lock falls off her hand, the sound of her heart pounding resonates in her ears. She wipes off the sweat on her forehead with the corner of her veil. She gently follows the direction of Pamir’s gaze and pinches her cheek with all her might, “Damn it! We’re doomed!”

Pamir, “Keep cool! Just make sure the kids don’t say anything.”

Shortly afterward, the officers at the Baghcheh Checkpoint stop the bus. The driver gets off the bus and opens the bus trunk. One by one, the checkpoint officers rummage through the suitcases, finding objects and clothes inside one that looks a little suspicious to them. They report to their superior, who is standing a little further away. After their superior checks the suitcase, he asks the driver, “Did you take Afghan passengers from Zabul?”

The driver glances at the stuff inside the suitcase, “No, captain! Everyone’s documents were checked before boarding.”

Grimacing slightly, the captain frowns again and says, “You all say the same thing at first, but I’ll pull out the owner of this suitcase even if he’s hidden in the cracks of this bus, you’ll see!” Then orders the officers to inspect the passengers.

Sophia, “We’re screwed, Pamir!”

Pamir smooths out his beard and the collar of his shirt, “Well, at least I trimmed my beard in the Zabul dormitory, right?”

“What does it matter?” Sophia glances at the passengers. “Look, most of the young men have beards like you.”

Pamir, “Well, that’s what I mean. I look like most of them! Listen carefully, they are approaching. If they catch us, don’t open your mouth! For now, get busy braiding Hasti’s hair!”

Sophia’s ears are filled with the sound of the officer’s boots approaching. She repeatedly runs her cold, tired fingers through Hasti’s hair and says the Amman *Yojib*⁴ prayer under her lips. Meanwhile, the voice of a crying boy is heard from the end of the bus, “Dad, let me get out of the car! I am afraid of the police.” All eyes turn in his direction. His mother covers the boy’s mouth tightly and hides his head under her veil, “Be quiet!”

The captain glances at the driver who has lowered his head and then makes a gesture to the officers, “Here they are! Get them off the bus!”

Fear grips the faces of a man and a woman sitting at the end of the bus with four kids of different ages. More helpless than a pigeon whose claw is stuck in a trap, they surrender to fate.

The man glances at his wife and children, and stands up as prompted by the officer; his depressed shoulders break his stature. It is as if the weight of the whole world is on his shoulder at the moment, there is an entreaty welling up in the depth of his eyes that uttering it could not change any verdict. As he quickly swallows his saliva, he rubs his hands together and with a stutter, that shakes his words, replies to the officer, “By God, we are helpless and wretched. We were forced

⁴ The Quran, Al-Naml, verse 62; a prayer usually used in times of trouble -Tr.

to go wandering. Have mercy! It will come back to you; we are human too.”

Officer, “Move, get off the bus! Don’t waste time, sir! We already have a lot of trouble. Damn it, what a mess!”

The woman points to her kids squatting behind the seats, “Look, bro! By God, we fought tooth and nail to save these kids from the Talib’s⁵ sword. Maybe you have children too, you know what I mean?”

Ignoring the woman’s cries, the officer brings them to their feet, “Come on kids!”

The woman gets off the bus following her husband and children. “We were displaced after we left Bamyan province,” she begs other officers standing around the bus, “where the streets are red with the blood of a thousand people, believe me, its water, bread, and air taste like blood.”

It is as if no one hears, or if someone does, what does it matter? Well, they escaped from Bamyan, so what? In any case, a criminal is a criminal! It is not only about drug smuggling or manslaughter; they should have died but should not have broken the law! Why did they cross the border? They have set foot in a land that has nothing to do with them. Maybe the smell of their skin, flesh, and blood feel alien to the soil.

Sophia rests her head on the headrest of the seat. Unbearable grief involuntarily runs on her cheeks. She looks at Pamir out of the corner of her eye.

Pamir, “Are you alright?”

Sophia, “Alright? I’ve never felt so bad.”

⁵ Taliban - Tr.

The old woman's voice interrupts Sophia and Pamiir's small talk, "Do you feel better?"

"Yes, I just have a headache," Sophia hurriedly touches her own face.

Baran's eyes are fixed on a line in the notebook and she repeats to herself, "I just have a headache." And adds, "Wow!" Amid that sadness, everything seemed puny, even the pain that had broken my heart so badly, and I took refuge in the pain that was not in my head." Moreover, she listens to the booming sound of thunder and raindrops pounding on the sloped roof of the room, and the curtain on the window dancing in the wind, the wind that shakes the petals of the geranium on the ledge. They were shaking restlessly and confusedly like the branches of the trees around the terminal after the sudden storm and heavy rain on that day. The sidewalks were carpeted with white and pink blossoms.

Sophia picks up a few white blossoms that the wind has thrown to the ground and places them between Hasti's double braided ponytails. She takes shelter behind a bus where there is less likely that the wind and the rain blow at her.

One by one, the bus driver hands over the passengers' luggage, "Good luck!"

Taxicab intermediaries lurking in all corners of the terminal to find passengers, skillfully compete to be the first to be lucky enough to take the passengers to their destination, "Sir, don't get wet in the rain!"

One of them comes to Pamiir, "Destination, sir?"

Pamiir, "I've no specific destination. I'm going to the city center."

- "I'll take my bro to the best place, where all hotels and inns are." He takes the suitcases from Pamiir, "Take the hands of your wife and children and follow me!"

The driver dropped them off near the Imam Reza shrine on a crowded street. In every dozen feet, there are luxurious inns and hotels, most of which are high-rise buildings.

Sophia, “Do you think they would let us stay in the hotel without identification certificates?”

Pamir, “Well, who’s going to go to a hotel? We might rent a room in a typical inn if we pay a bit more.”

Finally, they choose an inn that seems most typical among a large number of inns. It has a calm and pleasant atmosphere. A young boy is sitting at a desk, typing on the computer, “Can I help you?”

Pamir, “I want a room. Just for a few days.”

Young boy, “Gone praying, wait for about ten minutes.”

Pamir takes a deep breath and sits on the couch next to Sophia. Sophia is looking at the glass bowl on the table wherein a pair of goldfish are swimming. Although a few days have passed since Sizdahbedar⁶, Haftsin⁷ tablecloth has been removed and there is no sign of samanoo⁸, sumac, garlic, vinegar, and coin; but the crystal bowl is still filled with water and the fish are happy.

The squeaking sound of the inn’s door makes her look away from the crystal fishbowl.

A white-bearded man enters through the door while moving through the circle of large ruby beads of a rosary. He must be the innkeeper. Pamir gets up, “Hello, Haji⁹!”

⁶ April 1- Tr.

⁷ Seven Sins Tablecloth, decorated for New Year (like Christmas tree) - Tr.

⁸ A kind of pasta - Tr.

⁹ A Muslim who has been to Mecca as a pilgrim - Tr.

The man greets him softly. He removes the green skullcap from his head and points to Pamir to approach the reception desk, "Please, I'm at your service!"

- "I want a room, for an indefinite period, though."

- "no problem. Please sit down!"

He puts on his glasses and pulls a large guestbook out of his desk drawer. Pamir's eyes meet Sophia's worried eyes, he raises his eyebrows toward her, "What's it?"

The old innkeeper diverts his attention to himself with a cough, "How many people are you?"

- "I, my wife and kids. Just us four people."

- "I.D. please!"

Pamir's face turns red; he pulls the skin of his dry lips under his teeth and says, "Goodness, what can be done!"

The old innkeeper, who is busy flipping through the guestbook, notices Pamir's hesitation, "What's the problem? What's the dilly-dally for, son?"

- "Well, I don't know what to say."

- "Your accent shows that you're not Iranian. Well, that's not a big deal!"

Sophia partly raises herself, "God bless you, Haji!"

The old innkeeper, "When I said I.D., it meant a residence permit or a passport, if you have one."

"Passport?!" Pamir and Sophia repeat in unison. Again, excitement and slackness seal Pamir's lips.

Innkeeper, "Okay, what should I do now?"

Sophia takes the children by the hand and walks towards the inn's door. Pamir also picks up the suitcase without saying a word and near the exit, turns back to look at the innkeeper. He touches his head to say goodbye and leaves the inn. Streets with no beginning and no end that are embedded into one another, tall buildings, luxurious and crowded shops, and the people who seem to have rushed out of their homes all at once; each person moves in a random direction. The atmosphere is filled with the smell of rain. A few steps away from the inn, Pamir and Sophia sit on a piece of rock under the umbrella of a large tree.

Sophia says, "This rain won't stop," and tries to tell Pamir something. After swallowing her saliva a few times, she takes a deep breath, puts her hand on Pamir's knee, and asks softly, "Would you be upset if I make a suggestion?"

- "No honey, fire away!"

- "Try to control yourself, don't get angry all of a sudden and shout and make everyone . . ."

- "Well, if you think your suggestion is irrational, don't say it!"

- "Not at all! But you're a bit too jumpy . . ."

Pamir interrupts her, "Is it . . .? I got it. Look here, how many times must I repeat it, ma'am! We'll not go to Mahrokh's¹⁰ house!"

- "Come on, she's your cousin, what's the deal? It's better than the side of the street."

- "Who said we're going to stay on the streets? What's more, I didn't come with the hope of staying at Mahrokh's house, did I? Well, I'm thinking about what we should do."

¹⁰ Persian name meaning moon faced.

Meanwhile, a boy with shabby looks and a bag of potato chips and puffed corn snacks on his shoulder passes by. Roham asks Pamir mischievously, “Father, is it harmful to eat chips and puffed corn?”

- “Naughty kid . . . what does that mean?”

“It’s exactly what you think,” Roham laughs childishly.

Pamir calls the boy. He looks at his wretched appearance and asks Sophia, “What if the children get sick? I think these puffed corn snacks . . .”

The boy raises an eyebrow and stands facing Pamir self-righteously, “Your head’s in the clouds, sir! You’re looking at me in such a way as if you want to buy *me*. This puffed corn snack that I sell with these dirty, worn-out clothes is no different from the puffed corn snack that the shopkeeper sells.”

Pamir strokes his head, “No offense, boy. I was afraid they might have been exposed to direct sunlight for a period of time.”

The boy puts the bag on the ground, “What the heck!” He pulls a white embroidered handkerchief out of his pants pocket, wipes the sweat off his forehead, kisses it, and puts it back in his pocket. He gives the puffed corn snack packs to the kids, “Wonder why I kissed the handkerchief? Well, you are right! Do you know? My mother embroidered this. After my father, she used to keep our bellies full in this way. That is, with so many children of different ages and a lot of problems . . .”

Sophia, “After your father? You mean he died, God forbid?”

Boy, “God knows, fellow citizen, this war caused a lot of people to go missing, didn’t it? Count my father as one!”

Pamir, “You said, fellow citizen?! Hey kid, where are you from?”

The boy looks around and says quietly, “From the land of the weary, from where you came, traveler.”

The voice of a man saying, “Attention, the municipality is coming . . .” ends the conversation between them. The boy immediately picks up the bag and runs away.

Pamir, “Wait a minute, boy! Take your money!”

The boy waves as he runs straightforward and says “Go have fun, be my guest!”

The stature of the peddler boy, bending under the weight of the bag of puffed corn snacks, still brings tears to Baran’s eyes after years. He waved and the sky wept hard for his generosity. He was gradually moving away from the sympathetic looks of the crowd who watched him flee. The sound of his pride shattering resonated in the ears of the world. Baran still remembers that day very well, the weather was neither like springtime nor like any other season. It was the season of loneliness.

Baran closes the half-open windows one by one and smooths out the folds of the curtain that the wind had disheveled. Before going back to bed, she brings out the electric coffee maker she had hidden in her clothes closet. The doctor had banned drinking coffee due to her illness, but she drinks a cup every day before breakfast away from the nurse is prying eyes and says that the bitterness of coffee relieves the heaviness of eyelids. She drinks the rest of the coffee at the bottom of the cup, washes the cup in the sink at the corner of the room, and hides it again in her clothes closet along with the coffee maker. She removes a picture frame from the wall and takes it to the bed, lies down, and holds the frame in front of her. The flight of pigeons, which has been captured in the image for years, takes her to a steel window in the cozy corner of a rectangular portico.

One of the servants stroke Pamir’s face with a duster wakes him up and says, “Dear sir, the shrine is a resting place. I know you’re a traveler, you’d better go to the hotel and sleep! I came to you several times but you were totally unmindful!”

Pamir, “Yes, I barely noticed you, but what can I say . . . I’m sorry anyway!”

Sophia pulls aside the corner of her veil and looks around with half-closed eyes. Upon seeing the servants, she sits up, hastily tidied herself up, and adjusts her veil, “You’re right, sorry!” She stares at the sky, “What a frustrating evening! Oh, Pamir, how sad I feel all of a sudden!”

Pamir, “Why are you so upset? Do you have a claim against the heavens?”

Sophia replies, “Why should I demand anything from it? I love the sky, it is a nice place! Look at the stars! The darker the sky gets, the brighter they shine, but the Earth . . .” She leaves her sentence unfinished.

Pamir, “But the Earth what?”

Sophia, “It’s not a nice place at all.”

Pamir, “What’re you thinking about again? Perhaps that peddler boy?”

Sophia, “I can’t help it. You know, that boy still has a long time to grow up, the worry of putting bread on the table is too big for him, too much!”

Pamir, “That’s right! However, worrying has become a part of the life of the people in our country, no matter how young or old you are. Everything goes along with it.”

Sophia, “I’m sure when he grows up, he’ll only feel regret for his childhood, and an unaccomplished period. Just like that!”

Pamir, “As for you and I, our eyes should have already gotten used to such kids. It was not rare to see children in Afghanistan who put bread on their table by shoe polishing, selling dry bread, and carwash jobs, right?”

Sophia, "This is not Afghanistan."

Pamir, "That boy was an Afghan anyways."

Sophia's eyes are fixed on the thorns and thistles stuck to the bottom of her veil. She says, "So are we! So, why did we come?"

Pamir, "Because I didn't want to live life the hard way. Sometimes you have to consider luck."

Sophia smiles and asks, "Do you think you can really fool yourself?"

Pamir, "Yeah, sometimes. It's very difficult though!"

A woman knocks on the door and says, "Ms. Baran!" Her voice resonates in the room.

Baran looks away from the picture and stares at the room door worriedly. She is slightly sensitive to noise and anything that might suddenly disturb her privacy. Her heart beats faster and she feels a bit exhausted. She hides the notebook and the picture frame under her pillow and says, "Come in!"

Catherine enters, holding a rectangular tray, "Good morning! I've brought you breakfast." She places the tray on the ledge next to the geraniums.

"Good morning," replies Baran, "Well, in my view, morning means dawn, when the darkness has not yet completely faded out of brightness," and then she goes to the chair by the window and sits there. Reluctantly, she pulls the breakfast tray towards herself. She stares at the geraniums and, like bratty kids who push away their

food, fiddling with the square pieces of cheese and salami, saying, "I've had enough of eating this junk food." After all these years, she is still accustomed to greasy and salty foods. She remembers the taste and aroma of Persian dishes and luxurious restaurants, and the cry of a starving boy who is constantly stomping his foot does not leave her mind.

Sophia gives Roham and Hasti the remaining pieces of greasy bread that her mother had put in her suitcase at the time of their departure. Roham forces down some bites and stares at the restaurants, nagging again, "The greasy bread's dried up. I want fresh food."

Pamir, "Like what?"

A smile appears on Roham's lips and he points a finger toward the restaurant, "Like the food over there."

Pamir looks at Sophia out of the corner of his eye and says, "You're right, son! I'm very hungry too."

Sophia, "Stop acting like a child, Pamir!"

Pamir puts his hand on his belly and says, "Believe me; I'm not saying it because of my own stomach."

Sophia, "It's as if I don't know what a glutton you are!"

Pamir, "Now that you know it, I have no choice, I must confess that yes, my dear, all this food can't be ignored."

Sophia, "Don't overspend right from the start, for heaven's sake!"

Pamir, "Yes ma'am! *You* order. Now, are you ready to go in?"

A muscular medium-height dark-faced man with a mustache follows them into the restaurant, orders his food, and sits near them. Sophia raises her eyebrow at Pamir to attract his attention to the man. Pamir begins to think and whispers to himself, "Where have I seen this dickhead before?"

Sophia, "Nothing big, I thought he's a little weird and wanted to point it out to you that is it!"

The man keeps eating and glances at them from time to time. Pamir notices his mysterious glances but does not mention them.

Sophia, "What's the problem?"

Pamir, “Nothing, eat your food!”

The man finishes his meal, gets up while chatting on his cell phone. Pamir is all ears but does not overhear anything. The man chuckles stops talking, and leaves the restaurant.

Sophia, “We’ve finished eating, so why are we still sitting here?”

Pamir, “Let’s see! Are the gold and money still in the suitcase?”

Sophia replies, “Why do you ask that? As a matter of fact, we put them in the suitcase and gave it to the shrine’s safekeeping department.” She asks after a short pause, “Are you suspicious of this guy?”

Pamir, “I’m not suspicious, I’m certain!”

Sophia, “Are you scaring me?”

“Today, as I was hiding the money in the false bottom of the suitcase near the safekeeping department, this dude glanced at me and passed by,” Pamir said, staring at an unknown point.

Sophia, “You know what, you shouldn’t have taken them out of the first hidden partition at all.”

Pamir, “No way, it was pissing me off. How long do you think one can keep money and gold in one’s underwear?”

Sophia, “Call the cops if you like!”

Pamir, “Are you out of your mind? *We’re* the ones who the cops will bust first! For now, it’s better to return to the shrine.”

Ahura is sitting at Baran’s bedside and constantly calls her, “Mom, open your eyes!” and with his hand, wipes the sweat off Baran’s forehead. “What’re you good for?” he asks Catherine, “If I hadn’t come . . .”

The nurse attaches the intravenous infusion setup to Baran’s arm, “Her veins have become too thin.”

Catherine, “Ms. Baran not only doesn’t go jogging but contrary to your advice, spends time with her picture frames.” Then, she points a finger at the breakfast tray that she has left untouched on the ledge and says to Ahura, “And she doesn’t care about her diet at all, no wonder she’s so weak.”

The sound of drums and musical instruments from the Kettledrum House¹¹ and the crowd going to the ablution cubicle evokes the sound of white-winged pigeons flying over the golden dome in Baran’s ears. She abruptly opens her eyes and while her cheeks are moistened with tears, she takes a deep breath and stares at Ahura’s face, “It’s nothing, I’m just a little weak.” She closes her eyelids again and let herself go, to get away from the newness since which years have passed. She returns to Pamir, to him, who in those days, manhood weighed heavily on his shoulders.

Pamir runs his hands through his tangled hair locks, exclaiming to himself, “That guy . . .”

Sophia asks abruptly, “Why don’t you go to Mahrokh’s house? Knock it off, for heaven’s sake.”

Pamir stares at her, “You’re driving me crazy! Why do you insist so much to go to Mahrokh’s house? By the way, have you ever seen her before, huh?”

Sophia, “Take it easy; I haven’t sinned, have I?”

Pamir, “Should we always be guilty of committing a sin so that we don’t get on each other’s nerves?”

Sophia, “You’ve become so grouchy, goddamn it!”

Pamir, “Goddamn what?”

¹¹ A place where the drums are beaten at fixed intervals - Tr.

The sympathetic glances of two old women sitting nearby fuel Sophia's weeping. The sound of her crying attracts the attention of the kids who are playing a short distance away.

Roham, "What happened, mommy?" Also, Hasti tries to remove Sophia's hand from her face. Pamir sits them both on his knees, "It's nothing, she's a little sad."

Roham, "Do *you* cry if you feel sad too?"

Pamir, "Men don't cry!" And gently touches his cheeks, it was as if he could still feel the tracks of tears that were washed away in the rain on that day. There was the sound of thunder, and the rain that had flooded the streets forced the towns' shopkeepers to close their stores before sunset. Pamir was holding Sophia's hand, waiting for her father at the beginning of one of the covered corridors of the coppersmith bazaar. His gaze constantly moved between his watch and Sophia. He would carefully scrutinize her and ask her to pull her veil tighter to cover her eyebrows completely. Although Sophia would succumb to his request, he would not let go of the temptation and murmured under his breath, "I wish I had bought her a burqa."

At that moment, a middle-aged and charismatic man caught his attention. He slowly let go of Sophia's hand and before his father had a chance to approach them, he hurried to him and threw himself on his feet, then got up and kissed his hand, "Hello, dear father!"

His father glanced at Sophia and said, "Father my ass! You'd better say, Mr. Ebrahimi!"

"Excuse me? Well, okay . . .," said Pamir.

His father said, "Well, you do the right thing not to mention it, you are a human being anyways, and feel a little shame."

Pamir said, "Please, father!" and pointed to Sophia, who was standing a few steps away from them, "She's the girl I told you about, in fact, your bride!"

Sophia's body was frozen like a corpse. She pulled her veil over her eyebrows again while her legs were shaking, and stepped closer, "Hello, dear father!"

Pamir's father couldn't help but to express his anger in a grimace and a loud voice, and said, "Look, sweetie! At the moment, I'm not even my son's father, let alone . . .," he interrupted himself, but added, "There's no¹² . . .," and asked Pamir to get out of sight, "Thank God you didn't come to the shop, you ungrateful son. Go away! I don't have a son named Pamir."

Pamir, "Go where? I have just arrived from Kabul an hour ago. What's more, I must go see my mother."

"Your mother?" said the father, "I'll divorce her if she ever claims she has a son your name."

Tears welled up in Pamir's eyes, staring at his father walking along the corridor and disappearing into the darkness. Hasti strokes Pamir's face with her tiny hands. Pamir looks away from the floral design of the carpet on the shrine floor, seeking an excuse to appease Sophia. "Sophia! Sophia!" he inadvertently repeats several times.

Sophia, with her hand on her forehead, responds calmly in a choked voice, "Tell me! What do you want?"

Pamir calls her again, and Sophia looks at him worriedly this time, "You sure you're okay?"

"Now that I see you're concerned, I'm fine," says Pamir with a smile.

Sophia, "You're really mad!"

Pamir, "Well, I like it when you worry about me. If it is madness, I'm fine with this madness."

¹² The full phrase is "There's no God except for Allah", in this case used as an expression of disbelief - Tr.

He reaches for Sophia's cold hands and stares into her eyes, "Don't mess with me these days! Please don't mention Mahrokh's house! I promise to rent a house tomorrow."

Sophia smiles and says, "Okay, whatever you say, but don't lose your temper so fast!" then she gently pulls her hand out of Pamir's, "I'm so scared of that dude. Maybe he has a plan for us."

Although Pamir is suspicious of the man, he tries to deny it, "I don't think it's serious, maybe I didn't get it right."

Sophia, "I hope so!" She interrupts herself, and asks in horror, "Where are the kids, Pamir?"

Pamir partly raises himself, his darts nervous glances around, and then shows to Sophia the kids chasing one another around the pillars. Suddenly, Sophia calls out to Roham and Hasti.

Pamir, "What happened all of a sudden? Maybe you're too paranoid?"

Sophia presses the children to her chest, "God knows I'm not paranoid. I'm fine. Believe me!"

Pamir, "So, what's the problem?"

Sophia, "I think I saw that guy for a moment. I thought maybe he was going to hurt our children."

Pamir, "Sophia, please snap out of it! This is *Iran*; it's safe and secure everywhere. This is not a place where kids simply vanish."

Sophia, "Believe me, I saw him! He wore the same black leather coat."

Sophia's words make him nervous. He thinks to himself, 'Maybe he knows what's going on? What if he turns us in?'

They do not waste time and hurry to the shrine's safekeeping department. Before Pamir takes back the suitcases, he stops for a moment and checks his surroundings avoiding attracting any attention. He does not notice anything suspicious.

He grabs the suitcases and they hurriedly go to the large, crowded bazaar nearby. Of all the crowds walking around, Sophia sees only herself and Pamir. Her frightened eyes and the words she utters subconsciously, sometimes draw the attention of the passers-by. Pamir hides his anxiety behind forced laughter and responds to Sophia's whispers, "I had no idea you chicken out so badly! You women are only courageous at home and bully your poor husbands."

"Oh, my God," says Sophia as she thinks Pamir had not taken the matter seriously, "how can you be so careless?"

Shortly afterward, the noise of the children excitedly running towards the grassy knoll brings Sophia to herself, "Pamir, this place is so secluded. Why didn't we stay in the bazaar?"

Pamir looks around for a moment; there is nothing but a few open shops and occasional passers-by. The burbling of colorful fountains in the square breaks the midnight street silence. The children insist on sitting on one of the benches installed around the grass landscaping. Pamir has a sense of premonition as if that man is standing a dozen steps away from them. Sophia notices his discomfort, and pulls her shoulders together pretending that she's cold, "Isn't it better to go?"

Catherine picks up a knitted cape from the hanger at the corner of the room and throws it on Baran's shoulders standing by the window, "Don't catch a cold!" Baran looks at the baby squirrels hopping on the grass, "Are you here to take me?"

Catherine, "Yes! I hope you'll be back soon."

Baran, "Do you know what I had as a shoulder to cry on inside these four walls since Ahura took away my picture frame and notebook yesterday?"

Catherine glances at the geraniums on the ledge. Baran smirks and says, "They have their place too. I meant the baby squirrels. Look how do they jump up and down carelessly."

Catherine, "They're so cute!"

Rain, "Please don't take me away, will you?"

Catherine, "It's out of my hand; I'm just helping you get dressed."

Baran, "I know! I just wanted to say something, an attempt to . . ."

Catherine, "I'm sure you'll get well!"

Bara says with a bitter smile, "Are you cheering me up?" and pats her hair, "look how this pain has ruined my appearance."

Catherine, "But you're beautiful the way you are."

Before leaving, Bran gently caresses the geranium petals, "I'll miss you! I'm sure it's a pipe dream hoping to see you again. He's coming for me one of these days; the sound of his footsteps fills my ears very vividly."

In addition, she feels sad by the sound of footsteps of a person who would haunt her forever. He appeared that fateful night from the heart of the darkness and the mass of silence and shook the four pillars of the Pamir's body. Pamir grabs the suitcase tighter and hurries back. A man holding a large piece of cardboard comes to them, "Wait a minute, bro!"

Pamir stares at him. His face is very different from the one he expected. He is thin, his bony cheeks are covered with stubble, and he has eyes filled with honesty and sincerity. He gets closer by the moment. Pamir glances at him and Sophia, and then, with his sharp eyes, reads the writing on the cardboard, "Sophia, we're so lucky! Can you read it?" The man still has to walk a few steps more to reach them when Pamir walks towards him, "Hello."

Man, "Hi, bro, welcome to our town!" He turns to Sophia, "You too, sis!" Sophia reads the text on the cardboard and gets excited, *Room for Rent, Reasonable Price.*

The man asks Pamir, “Excuse me for being nosy; I think you’ve not found a suitable and affordable place on the eve of the new year? Can I help you?”

Pamir glances at the cardboard, “Yes, that’s right! I don’t know what to do?”

The man puts his hand on Pamir’s shoulder, “As a bit of advice to you, my dear brother, don’t travel with your wife and children and if you do, spend money! It’s a bad time, with plenty of villains around.”

The man’s words frighten Pamir even more, “That’s right. It’s nothing but the truth, dude. Now, let’s get to the point! Do you have a room for rent? I mean, is it your job to rent rooms?”

Man, “Don’t rub salt into my wound, bro! My job is carrying passengers on a motorcycle, I have a family. The income is not enough. Sometimes you have to, what can be done? You made my day.”

Sophia prompts Pamir to ask the price of the room. But before Pamir begins to talk, the man says, “Come on, let’s go, bro! We aren’t that greedy . . . whatever you think it’s worth, it does not matter.”

In that eerie midnight silence, they follow the stranger through the old back alleys around the shrine. Occasionally, the noise and cries of the hungry and tired children break the silence and the man calms them down skillfully with the help of Pamir and Sophia. Finally, after a lot of twists and turns, they enter a dead-end alley with old houses on either side. The walls of the houses are cracked, and plaster debris and dust are piled up on the back of most houses. There is a dim light in the window of one of the houses. The man points to the window, “It’s that house!”

Pamir carefully looks around, “What kind of a place is this!” then adds with a smirk, “However, God bless you! It’s better than wandering in the street.”

The man rings the doorbell a few times. No one opens the door. He reaches for his pocket to get the key, but does not find it despite a lot of fumbling, "This is my grandmother's house. Maybe she's not home. She's probably forgotten to turn off the light. You stay here; I go for the key and come back quickly."

Pamir and Sophia sit on the concrete stair step in front of the yard door and wait. All of a sudden, the sound of a giant motorcycle resonates in the alley. The children wake up and scream. Pamir jumps to his feet. The motorcycle's headlight dazzles Pamir's stunning eyes and he cannot see anymore. Sophia is speechless and presses the kids to herself so hard that her arms feel numb as if the blood has frozen in her body.

A motorcycle rider is a muscular man with a black helmet that covers his head and neck. After revving the engine a few times, he gets off the bike, walks toward Pamir with a puffed chest, and says in a muffled voice, "Give me the suitcase quietly, if you want to live!"

Pamir stands in front of him panting heavily, and says, "Couldn't you find someone more helpless and miserable than us? Don't you really feel ashamed?"

The man grins, "Helpless and miserable? No, you don't look like that, but if you want to be miserable, okay, mess with me!"

Sophia screams, "For heaven's sake, please leave us alone, I beg you!"

The man pulls a knife out of his back pocket and shows it to Sophia, "Look! This has cut off the voices of many so far. Don't try to add yourself to their crowd!"

It is as if boiling water is poured on Pamir's head, he feels hot and hears the sound of the volume of blood rushing in his veins. He punches the bike rider's hand hard, which throws the knife away. The other one quickly gets off the motorcycle and picks up the knife, "Damn!"

The man rubs his hand, this time threatening to get rid of him in front of his wife and children if he does not hand over the suitcase. But Pamir, whose all his possession is inside the suitcase, does not give up easily. He fixes his eyes on the man's eyes and tries to show off his courage. Sophia falls at Pamir's feet and begs him to hand over the suitcase. Pamir glances at her and the kids. Roham and Hasti have stuck their faces to a wall and hardly breathe in fear. He closes his eyes for a moment and listens to Sophia's numbered breaths, "Here, damn you!" He throws the suitcase across the alley. The man glances at him and the suitcase, laughs aloud, and kicks him gently in the abdomen. Pamir's gaze sees the suitcase off, as he is lying spread-eagled on the ground.

Baran opens her eyelids and returns from the alley where she was suddenly ruined that night. It constantly haunts her mind remembers her from afar under any pretext, and it is as if it is hanging her from a noose time and time again in that narrow pathway that has no beginning and no end. Ahura approaches her slowly. He sits seize-style in front of Baran's chair. He caresses Baran's yellow and wrinkled hands, "Mom, are you okay?"

Baran stares at Ahura's white robe and the badge on it, her frown disappears slowly, "I don't know why I can't believe you're a doctor now."

Ahura kisses Baran's hands, "I owe this to the kind hands that God placed in my hands," and shortly rests his head on Baran's hands. Delicate hands and finely sculpted fingers that were constantly moving over the computer keyboard at the clothing shop's cash register,

- "You don't have to work so hard with this headache! Do you understand how much pressure it puts on you? I'm really worried about you."

And you looked at me, and replied scared and confused, “Oh, why do *you* worry about me?”

- “Because you’re important to me!”

And you looked at me again more confused than before. It was as if you realized that I believed that you were the last prescription that the world had provided for my life. And instead of any other person, I had only you. You tried to calm me down with a smile, “Ahura, would you please go over there and choose a nice T-shirt for me?” I got my mind set on you, I went away a few steps but tip-toed back and stood behind a mannequin.

- “By the way, any news of my missing loved one, Mr. Christine?”

- “The police have searched most of the orphanages in the neighboring countries. Well, nothing can be done when there is no clue. She was not lost at a certain spot; how do you know that . . .”

- “Please don’t continue!”

- “Sorry!”

- “Thank you for all of your efforts during this time! By the way, about that matter, I told you before that it’s not possible!”

- “How can you be so cruel? You’d better kill me rather than reject me.”

- “Mr. Christine, please understand my situation! Ahura is eleven years old. How can I convince him?”

- “Does he have a problem with me being at your side? Well, everything will be alright if he endures for a while, he will reach the legal age and can comfortably live in an independent house.”

- “I’ll never create such conditions for him. Ahura deserves peace! I promised.”

Dr. Michael's voice kicks Ahura back to reality, "Mr. Doctor, you went to sleep over your mother's hands?"

Ahura replied, "Oh, sorry doctor! I was distracted for a moment," and helps to place Baran on the M.R.I. bed. A device that was built with the same length of a narrow dead-end alley. An unnamed alley whose silence is broken only by the debris that occasionally falls from the walls of ruined yards to the ground.

Pamir is startled awake by the sound of the door opening slowly. He hurriedly gets up, shakes out his clothes, and calls out to Sophia, as he stares at the old woman in surprise. Sophia wakes up and she too confusedly looks at the old woman standing in the doorway of the yard's entrance without saying a word. She totters toward the old woman, "You . . . , were you in this house last night? The light that was on?"

The old woman strokes Sophia's dusty face and tries to speak to her, but her jaw shakes so much that makes it impossible for Sophia to understand anything. Pamir rings the doorbell, but the deaf and dumb old woman figures out what has happened to them by examining their distraught faces. It seems that such an incident has occurred frequently.

They start with a heart full of fear and despair, a mind that has forgotten life, and the steps that are no longer steadfast. Disencumbered and free from the sudden trauma, they move toward life, to reach which, they walked for several days and nights through rocky hills, scary valleys, and towering mountains of Zabul and made their way through the thorn bushes and the roads that stunk of death and the scorpions in between the boulders that had tilted their tails to their direction.

Sophia sits on a wooden bench at a bus station in Tabrasi Street. The thorns and thistles of the desert, which they had walked for hours, are still sticking to the bottom of her veil, stockings, and soles of her shoes.

She cautiously takes off her stockings that have stuck to her toes due to bursting blisters, and pain shoots up to her bones. She almost faints. She cries involuntarily and looks at the iron roof above her, "Thank God! At least after all of the rat race, there is a roof over our heads." Confused and terrified, she looks around, and occasionally her sobs worry Pamir. He hugs her, "Calm down, darling! Don't worry about anything. I am at your side." And he closes his eyes for a moment. He imagines a woman with long hands and long fingers and lacquered nails play tambourine and sing *Shakokojan*. The sound suddenly bring him to his senses, he immediately says, "Let's go!"

"We'd better stay here," says Sophia, staring straight ahead. "Where can we go? That's enough. We're tired of wandering the streets!" She glances at the children, "Look how nice and comfortable they're sitting on the bench. They've Just slept. It isn't right to wake them up."

Pamir runs his hand in his hair, squeezes the back of his head hard, and says, "Look! It's deserted everywhere at dawn. Streets, sidewalks, shops, buses. This very bus stop where we're sitting now will be crowded in an hour . . . what's more, the cops may spot us."

Sophia, "So, where should we go? We've nowhere to go, have we?"

Pamir takes a piece of paper out of his pants pocket with the address of Mahrokh's house written on it, "We go there!"

"Are you kidding me?" Sophia says with a laugh while crying, "What does it matter now? You can still be so bloody-minded."

Contact Person: Asma

polliteraryagency@gmail.com

-Unit.8, No.80, Inghlab Squ., Tehran-Iran, [Tel:+98 21 66480369](tel:+982166480369)-[66478558](tel:+982166478558)-[66907693](tel:+982166907693), Fax: +98 21 66480369

Unit.1, No.17,Cemal Sururi Str., Golbahar,Sisli, Istanbul-Turkey,Tel: +90 5448039558

www.pol-ir.ir

