

My relationship with my past is like, Jean Valjean and Inspector Javert
one fleeing for a lifetime without remembering what his crime was, while the other pursues him

COPPICE BLUE

FAAVIDEL



CHAPTER ONE: **EPISODE 5**
OBLIVION

Coppice Blue

Faavidel

Chapter One

Oblivion

Literature - Persian Fiction - Novel

Coppice Blue

By FAAVIDEL

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The Infertile Species of Humanity

Dr. Kayhan's office was as crowded as ever, even during the pandemic, that there was no place to sit in the waiting room at the beginning of the day. Due to COVID-19, only pregnant women were allowed to sit in the office, while other patients remained outside in the waiting area, which was surrounded by chairs; some even stood. Most of the time, I would go to a corner of the waiting room where no one passed by, making it suitable for standing; I would hold a book and immerse myself in it until someone called me. Even though we had an appointment—unless we were in an emergency—we would wait at least an hour for our turn. Depending on the mental alphabet of individuals, this place could feel like a purgatory where some unfortunate souls wandered, or a changing room for professional players who would soon head to the stadium .

I was standing with my book held in front of me. Memories gradually leaped off the page; I saw the words like the bodies of my youth in movement, fluctuation, and fear, sitting cross-legged at various places on the pages of the book. I looked up and saw a crowd of desperate and sorrowful people around me, sending waves of

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frustration and surrender my way; faces mostly weary, having come from near and far cities, some of whom had experienced my situation more than ten times. Sometimes I would see two seemingly unrelated individuals sitting next to each other; I understood that a rented womb was involved. On one side of the story, someone sacrifices their life force for the prosperity of another's life. They choose a day, get acquainted with a law, and the story begins. Occasionally, I would inadvertently hear snippets of conversations from those sitting nearby who shared stories about their lives; a single girl wanting to freeze her eggs because of her advancing age so that if she married late, pregnancy wouldn't become impossible for her. Or a woman facing divorce threats from her husband if this round of IVF failed... subjects like these. The sound of an argument between a couple caught my attention. The man was saying things with aggression and contempt, and the woman was throwing back something similar to what she received. It's strange, this process of parenthood; we get so immersed in it that the essence of the matter becomes overshadowed by forgetfulness. I have often seen couples along this path who have fundamental issues with each other but deny them and only think about having children. Now this couple before my eyes—how could they think about having a child with this level of tension and lack of understanding? Wasn't resolving their issues more important? Or perhaps they were among those who believed that with the arrival of a child, everything would automatically be resolved? Just like how teeth and bread come together! Whenever I have faced a problem in life and confronted it, I have encountered people who have experienced that same problem on a much larger scale; it's as if they gaze into my eyes and remind me that your share isn't so bitter after all. Look at me; how much more troubled am I than you?! How many more failures do I have that are constant?! Now I was there again, surrendering myself to a new chapter amidst failures. I closed my book so that I wouldn't let the pages overwhelm my troubled mind any

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further. On the other side, a woman's voice rose as she angrily addressed a man sitting next to her: "Sir, what is this situation? You didn't keep your distance and are sitting right in front of us! You took off your mask and are coughing?" The man sheepishly adjusted his mask but simultaneously said in a way that seemed to imply that nothing had happened and why was she making a fuss: "Sorry! I was suffocating".

"Are we not human beings sitting here for two hours with masks on? Is it only you who feels pressure?"

And there was silence. Each of us returned to our mobile phones. It's strange! I rarely saw anyone reading in these waiting rooms. Everyone either waited with a sorrowful expression or was engrossed in their phones—playing games, chatting, using Telegram and Instagram and other social medias. This was one of the few places where people had undoubtedly come to add another version of themselves to the world; a decent copy (though not an original). An updated version! What makes us want to scatter our genes, however unremarkable they may be, across the world? Perhaps it's the feeling of creation and leaving a footprint on the world after ourselves! After all, childbirth is the easiest method of content production by humans. It requires neither art nor science nor insight! Just as the images before me indicated. Among them, no one thought of passing the time through anything other than their phones, and this was a small but complete example of the future parents' situation. Truly, how many of them add something to their awareness each day? I doubt anyone is as aware of the future generation's situation as Dr. Kayhan. Someone who gets many pregnant every day and creates even more than that. Now, what was wrong with me? Perhaps I was exploring others in search of justification for my superiority over them! Undoubtedly, I still couldn't see my own blind spots, and perhaps my weaknesses were also evident to others...

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My name was called, and I went into the room; "Dear, sit here! When that lady comes out, you go!" The receptionist pointed to the woman next to me, whose self-conflicted voice could be easily heard even with social distancing; "How many places do we have to wait? An hour there, half an hour here." She looked at me for confirmation; I ignored her. I suppose it's not any doctor's fault that people don't know how to spend their time properly. He sits in a small room and focuses entirely on examining and understanding various types of human bodily defects. I had understood this with all my being throughout my life up to that day, and because of my way of living, I knew waiting well. Waiting was the most ordinary thing I had always done. Living with those parents and their long absences had made me so creative in entertaining myself that until that day, I had never experienced a moment of boredom.

Finally, I passed through the last door and entered Dr. Kayhan's office; he was a man in his late sixties who was still agile and lively, as always well-dressed and pleasant. You could easily see the smile behind his mask from the corners of his eyes. He got up from his seat; he was a doctor who stood in respect for a writer who might be around the age of his grandchild! He had said that the first time I came to his office, he had been curious about my attire upon arrival to know what my profession was; he glanced at my file and, upon seeing "writer" next to my name and "university professor" and "artist" next to my spouse's name, he became even more curious. He had mentioned that most writers don't dress like artists. In response, I said perhaps it was because I was caught somewhere on the border between both. It wasn't long before I realized that he had read one of my books as well. I couldn't believe there was a doctor interested in art and literature. The doctors I knew—like many educated people—had no reading material other than specialized discussions. They considered novels as empty stories, reading them a waste of time, and deemed art unnecessary. I

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was so excited that I brought him all my published books during our next meeting. From that day on, whenever I visited Dr. Kayhan, he tried to exchange ideas with me during his limited time. I was fortunate that due to our similar last names, I hadn't reached out to him as a relative of my father. Later, I found out they knew each other from afar. Many old and new generation doctors accepted my father's subtle diagnoses and referred patients to him. But in Dr. Kayhan's mind, it didn't fit that Dr. Padidar could have a daughter as crazy as me. Dr. Padidar's child undoubtedly should have been a skilled and respectable doctor like himself. I placed my hand on my face in embarrassment for him to sit; "Doctor, please sit down!" He gestured to the chair opposite him and sat down; "Welcome, my dear! My heart lifted when I saw you! Today has been very exhausting."

"Well, now that I'm here, it's going to get worse!"

He waved his hand in the air; "Did you get your card?" I handed him my card. He looked at it; "Don't worry! If your body is ready, this one opportunity will get us the answer." I didn't say anything and nodded in agreement. He continued; "How about you? Tell me what's new?"

"I'm fine. I've become a pro. This time I quickly got myself together. Can you tell me when I can start running and exercising?"

"Two to three weeks from now, my dear!"

I rolled my eyes toward the ceiling; "Ugh!" I shared some details with him, and we agreed that I would start taking medications in the next cycle. In about 20 days, I had a hormonal injection around my navel, and a month later was the final competition. He immediately began writing the prescription and handed the notebook back to me; "Now tell me! On the day of the surgery, we didn't have time to see each other properly. What are you writing these days?"

"I'm in the middle of a new project, but I've slowed down because of my situation."

He told me a bit about the book he was reading, glancing at his watch occasionally to keep track of time. To be honest, that day, I wasn't paying much attention to what he was saying. I didn't even realize how I said goodbye to the doctor! By the time I came to my senses, I was in the pharmacy downstairs in the medical building. I handed my prescription to the receptionist. I overheard a conversation between a woman and the pharmacy employee; they were one of the couples I had seen in the waiting room upstairs. They were among those who had chosen this path for parenthood despite the high treatment costs. Apparently, according to new regulations, IVF costs would also be covered by insurance, but that law hadn't been approved yet at that time.

"It's not up to us, ma'am! If you want it to be covered by insurance, you need to get a letter from your insurance office; otherwise, it will be charged. And that's only for some of the Iranian medications. The foreign ones aren't covered. Most of Dr. Kayhan's medications are foreign."

"But I have to go back to my city tonight. They don't have these medications there. If I go to the insurance office here until tomorrow, it will be too late. Didn't they write it in the notebook? Just accept it already, please!"

Another round of bargaining; a struggle with conditions, rules, and laws that only ensnare ordinary people and make them vulnerable. The pharmacy employee repeated the same explanation regarding my prescription as well. I calmly said, "I understand! It's no problem. Please charge it as private!" I glanced at the man and woman. They were a bit farther away, looking distressed as they thought of a solution. I felt bad seeing them like that in that place. Quietly, I asked

the employee, "How much are her medications?" He replied just as quietly; "Most of them are like yours. Two or three are different. With their vitamins, it comes to about six million seven hundred tomans."¹

"Could you please give me their invoice so I can pay for it along with my medications?"

His tone became respectful; "Yes, ma'am! Why not! Please! Believe me, it's not in our hands. There's nothing we can do... Excuse me, sir! Please wait!" I turned my head and saw the two of them; they stood hopelessly facing the reception as they were about to leave the pharmacy. The employee wrote the amounts of the two invoices on a piece of paper and placed it on the counter. I walked towards the cash register; the man was calmly explaining the situation to them. When I returned to get my medication, the young woman spoke in a shy and grateful tone, saying a few short sentences. My mind was so preoccupied, and I felt embarrassed by her kindness and prayers that I couldn't even look her in the eyes. I thanked her, took my bag of medications, and stepped out of the pharmacy. I was deeply frustrated with the unwritten rules of the world. What had always been easily available to me since childhood was unattainable for others forever. What was available to others was not available to me. What one could easily obtain, another couldn't despite years of effort. In any case, that woman and I shared a significant point of intersection in our respective failures that had remained unresolved for both of us until that moment.

I was wandering again on Vali-Asr Street. The doctor's office was just three alleys up from my childhood home. Every time I went there, I felt like a racehorse wearing blinders as I entered the office and returned home with my eyes closed. That street was no longer a place

1. About three hundred dollars at that time.

for walking! Why did I keep finding my way there no matter which direction I came from? Couldn't the office be somewhere else? Since the volcano of my life was on the verge of eruption, that day felt as if I had just stumbled upon that place for the first time in years. My legs carried me towards our old house. There was nothing left of what I remembered; in its place stood an eight-story building, devoid of any sign of its yard and trees. I was fifteen when Dad sold that place; his excuse was the insecurity of courtyard houses, relocating his and Mom's offices to Niavaran, the distance from there, and the difficulties of commuting during rush hours. Although deeper issues lay behind it. Dad sold the house with all its memories, and we moved to a modern five-story house near the office that was bigger than that house—the same house where he still lives. That place never had a soul; without a yard, without uncle and aunt... without Alborz. Now, too, without Mom.

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Tintin and Milo, the day before your arrival

I sat on the curb in front of where our house used to be. I could still see our house behind the wall; on that Thursday morning when we had our birthday party that night. It was a house with green trees, a stone-paved yard, and spring flowers blooming in its garden. The cars were

parked on the other side of the yard. There was a round pool in the middle of the stone pavements; except for me at that height, everyone else considered it a shallow pond with a fountain in its center. Our wooden gazebo was aligned with the pond and under the persimmon tree. A large cedar and a seven-year-old maple surrounded it. Dad planted a one-year-old maple tree there on my birthday; my name "Afra" in persian means maple tree and that tree was supposed to symbolize seeing myself as I grew up.

In my vivid imagination, I climbed up the entrance steps of the house where Alborz and I used to sit on its wooden railing. After that, the wide staircase between the two floors came to mind with its wooden railings before me. Most of the time, the front door was open, and this frame stood out prominently. The images were very clear. I had washed my hands and face and wandered sleepily from the living room towards the kitchen. I passed the half-steps that separated the hallway from the living room. Mom was at the end of the hall, busy arranging dry snacks and other treats on our big dining table. I passed by the second column; I saw Ms. Parvin and another person whom I didn't recognize. They were mixing salad Olivier and preparing food on the kitchen counter. In parties where there were mutual friends, Uncle's house was always for dinner while ours hosted gatherings, dancing, and receptions. As soon as Mom's eyes fell on me from across the hall, she gave me a nervous smile and gestured towards the kitchen with her eyes; "Good morning! Breakfast is on the table! Go eat quickly before Parvin collects everything. We have a lot of work to do."

"Mom! Why does it smell like stew?"

She didn't hear me. Ms. Parvin replied with a smile instead of Mom, "It's not stew, dear! It's meat with rice! I put it on the stove, upstairs." I sat at the kitchen table. She ran her hand over my head,

cooled my tea with a bit of cold water, and placed it in front of me. As she stirred the sugar into it, Alborz entered with puffy eyes, a wet face, and hair that was somewhat damp from playing in the water. Alborz greeted us all loudly. Ms. Parvin warmly and kindly responded. I waved at him too. Mom, as always, said, "Hello, dear! How are you?" Her voice resembled that of radio announcers; the same ones who shout "Good morning" every day. Alborz waved back in the air to me and told Mom, "I'm good, Auntie! Can I have breakfast here? Uncle Amir came to visit us; my mom had some work with him. She said I should come here."

"Wow, he came so quietly! Yes, of course you can. Come sit down! Afras just started too."

Uncle Amir was actually my uncle and a dentist. He had a good and close relationship with Aunt Ella and Uncle Farhad. Every time he came to our house, they would chat and laugh together quietly. Usually, they didn't let us kids join them. Sometimes even when Mom wasn't around, he would come to see Aunt and Uncle. Now, for instance, he had come to help, but even before reaching us, he had gone up and kicked poor Alborz out. I was happy. I loved the busy days at home because they kept me out of Mom's critical gaze. When Alborz pulled his chair back to sit next to me, I sleepily asked, "Mom! Why didn't Uncle come to see us?" Mom was talking to Ms. Parvin. In the middle of her words, she said, "He'll come. You eat; he'll arrive."

"Why does Alborz call my uncle 'Uncle' but I call Alborz's uncle by his name?"

Alborz laughed; "Well, you can call my uncle 'Uncle' too! What difference does it make?"

"No. You call my uncle by his name!"

Mom smiled; "He's right. What difference does it make?" she said and left. Alborz was stirring his tea. He glanced at me from the corner of his eye, chuckled softly, and gently tapped the side of my head with the piece of bread he was holding, silently saying "Fool" with his lips; I replied with a gesture saying "Dolt." To annoy me further, he said, "Well done! You've made progress, Little one!" He placed a piece of bread filled with something in front of me and pointed at it; "Happy fake birthday!" He knew I loved the butter and sour cherry jam sandwich they used to make in a small piece of bread. I took it and swallowed it. Instead, I found a half-burnt piece of bread from the basket and stuck it like a candle into a cheese mold and held it towards him; "Happy fake birthday to you!" He loved crunchy and burnt bread with Tabriz cheese; he was always forbidden from eating it. The adults said carbon is not good for our bodies. So happily, he snatched his gift out of the air! Aunt's voice came from the upstairs hallway; "Parvin dear! Did you intentionally not turn on the stove under the chickens, or did you just forget? Ms. Parvin replied from the doorframe, "No, Dear ma'am! I didn't forget. I thought it was too early."

"So whenever it's time, remind me! Do we have room in the fridge downstairs? Can I bring one of the jellies down?"

Alborz said childishly, "Oh, jelly!"

Jelly! It was a luxury treat of that time that I hated, and he loved. Mom was chatting with Auntie in the hallway. Ms. Parvin was at the refrigerator when she turned to Mom and said, " Dr. Leila! Please tell her we have space for the jellies." Mom's voice rose, "Elaheh! There's space here. I'll come upstairs and get it from you. I want to see Amir."

"Come on, dear! Come!"

Alborz and I ate breakfast in silence. I was still sleepy; "Mom said we shouldn't be underfoot until evening."

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He shrugged; "Well, let's go to the yard. Your dad is doing some work there. Let's go to the gazebo."

Something had gotten into my eyes, and no matter how much I rubbed them, it didn't change. "Don't do that! You're going to poke your eyes out, kid!" Alborz said.

I replied irritably, "Ugh, it's driving me crazy! I think an eyelash got in there."

"Let me see!" He placed his finger under my eye and held it open, then suddenly blew hard into my eye. It wasn't a blow; it was like a bucket of water that splashed into my eye; "Ouch! You poured all your spit into my eye!" He burst out laughing; "Sorry, sorry! I swear it wasn't intentional!"

I laughed; "My eye smells like cheese!"

"It'll make your spit medicine. It's better now, right?!"

"Should I bring my colored pencils or the Legos?"

"Neither. We have chalk and charcoal in the yard; just bring paper!"

"I don't know how to draw with charcoal like you."

He got up and headed for the door; "I'll teach you. It's easy. I'll go get my stuff."

Just like that? The way he said he would teach me made it sound like we were going to make paper boats. I went to my room, grabbed my papers, and headed towards the door; "Mom! Can I take some ice cream for myself?"

Mom was talking to Dad out the window, who was in the yard; "Tell Parvin to give you some!" I went to the kitchen. Ms. Parvin was

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washing her hands; she dried them and before I could say anything, she opened the freezer. She handed me two vanilla ice cream cones from the ice cream drawer; "Here you go, dear! Enjoy! Be careful not to drop them!"

With papers under my arm and ice creams in hand, I went to the yard. Dad was holding a string of multicolored lights and untangling the wires. The birthday decoration items were scattered in a bag at his feet; these came out of storage once a year for our celebration. He glanced at me from the corner of his eye; "Happy birthday, little one!" He said.

"Today isn't my birthday!"

"That's right! But we congratulate you twice. Once on the day we celebrate, and once on the day you were born!"

Alborz arrived; "My dad just told me the same thing! It's so much fun! Hello, Uncle!"

"Hey Champ..."

I handed him the ice cream. From there, he called out to Mom, who was still visible in the window frame, "Thank you, Auntie."

"Enjoy!" Mom answered.

I picked up some charcoal pieces from the grill and went to the gazebo. The string lights were hanging there too. While I was busy laying out the papers on the wooden floor of the gazebo, Alborz arrived. I looked up; my long, straight hair was covering my face. My hair always got passed around between Ms. Parvin, Auntie Ella, and sometimes Mom. Mom tied it harshly and painfully, thinking it would never come undone! Ms. Parvin only knew one way but was still a good option; Auntie Ella did it patiently and gently, sometimes

braiding it for me and placing cherries and flower buds in my hair during spring and summer. Sometimes she would tie it in a bunny style, sometimes in a ponytail, and sometimes like a tomato. That day, no one had time to fix my hair. Alborz spread his things on the floor of the gazebo and sat next to me, laughing as he said, "Why do you look like a mop? Which way is your face?"

I didn't want him to know that I couldn't gather my hair; "I couldn't find my hairpin."

He paused for a moment and without saying anything, got up and went towards the garden. He picked a few Spider plant stems and returned. In silence, he bent down as if he wanted to tie his shoelaces. He gathered my hair behind my head and tied it with the stems he had picked. It hurt a little, and some of my hair didn't get gathered either, but it was better than when it was scattered around my face. He went back to the garden again and this time picked a leaf from the maple tree and brought it back; "Here, practice drawing this with charcoal! Then I'll tell you what to do for coloring it!"

" And what do you want to draw?"

He casually replied, "Something like your painting."

It was really hard. Until then, I hadn't drawn a leaf; especially not with charcoal. I tried several times, but it kept turning out crooked. The maple leaf was full of tiny serrations, and no matter what I did, it wouldn't be symmetrical. He was busy scribbling on his paper. Finally, after several attempts, I picked up another sheet of paper. I placed the leaf on it and tried to trace around it with the charcoal. When I reached the serrated edges, I used the sharper edge of the charcoal to make the fine lines more precise. It was clear he was watching me closely. I heard him laugh, "Cheater!"

"Well, it was really hard!"

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"This time it's okay. But try to practice this! Now that you've drawn the serrations accurately, see? It wasn't that hard after all! Do you want to learn shading? It's a kind of coloring!"

"Yeah. What did you draw?"

He held his drawing towards me; it was a shadow-light sketch made of quick, broken lines; "Imagine it's us!"

"But that's a mountain and trees!"

"Well, genius! The mountain is me and down It's a forest full of maple trees."

"But your name isn't Mountain."

"Alborz is the name of a mountain; it's a mountain range in northern Iran!"

"Is that where we went when I was little?"

He laughed again; "Yeah. Not that you've grown up a lot now?"

"But I will be in first grade soon!"

Just then, Uncle Amir ran into the gazebo. He knelt behind us and quickly kissed Alborz on the head and my cheek and squeezed us both tightly; "I'm going to take the car for repairs and I'll be back by evening." He said. After he left, music started playing from Uncle Farhad's house. You couldn't spend weekends at home without music; especially since it was our birthday night. The sound system in each of our houses was connected to the speakers throughout the entire building; that's why during parties, the sound from both houses was the same. That day, "Life Goes On" by Shirley Bassey filled the yard and house with the gentle breeze of the last breaths of spring, overflowing with calmness and joy in those moments. Alborz taught

me how to shade on the leaf I had drawn. My first shading experience turned out really well; different from what I had drawn until then. I became enchanted by this work. I was absorbed in practicing while he read "Children's Universe"magazin to me. It had become his habit. Most of the time we were together, he would do just that. Sometimes he would read from my own books for me. Or we would go through Tintin together. He would read the texts while I stared at the pictures. A lot of times, he would silently flip through his own books too.

As Dad was heading towards the parking door, he said to us, " Kids, don't be around here for a few minutes! They're bringing in the delivery." He stood with his back to the gazebo to wait for the truck to come into the yard. There was something like a large box on its back. Alborz quietly said with excitement in his voice, "I know what it is. It's my birthday gift."

"You're lying! Is your gift that big?"

"You'll see!"

"Then why don't you go get it?"

"Dad said I have to wait until evening."

It was close to noon when the truck left the yard, and before Dad could close the door, Mr. Ali appeared at the entrance with a taxi and the cakes on the back seat. We excitedly ran to see the result of the work. Two separate cakes on a large platter; Tintin with golden hair, wearing a blue shirt and brown pants for Alborz, and Milo, his fluffy white dog, for me! Alborz had drawn them on paper, and Uncle had taken them to the bakery. They turned out really cute. Dad's eyes fell on us; "Oh no! What have you done to yourselves? You've turned into

Haji Firouz!¹ If you don't want your moms to kick you out, wash your hands and faces first, then go inside!"

Mr. Ali was a kind middle-aged man who came to our house during the week to do shopping and take care of the yard and garden. That day, he had polished the fountain and just poured clean water into it. Thanks to his presence at this time of year, the yard was filled with jasmine, violets, geraniums, and rose buds, and the air was fragrant with the sweet smell of flowers and the moisture of the water-soaked geranium leaves. Alborz and I went to the faucet with our charcoal-stained hands and faces to tidy ourselves up a bit before entering the house. I vividly remember that at that moment, our favorite song was playing in the house; "The Day Before You Came " by the group Aba. We swayed joyfully and childishly to the music; shortly after, we were chasing each other around the yard like drowned rats with the hose, and it wasn't long before we both found ourselves sitting in the pond. In fact, Alborz pushed me, and I pulled him along with me. Mr. Ali called out to Dad with a smile; "Doctor! Come take these kids inside! They've soaked each other! Come on!" I could see Dad busy fiddling with something on Uncle's terrace. When had he gone up there? He called Uncle; "Farhad, my hands are tied, go see what these kids are up to!" We were lost in joy but shivering from the cold water. We spent a lot of time in the pond during summers. That day, the weather was sunny and nice but not warm enough for playing in the water in summer clothes. Uncle Farhad arrived from the stairs. Alborz laughed; "Oh no! Instead of a doctor, an engineer came!" We splashed water on

1. Hajji Firuz is a traditional and symbolic character in Iranian culture, especially recognized during the Nowruz celebrations. He entertains people with colorful clothing, a painted blackened face, musical instruments, and singing, bringing joy to homes. This character represents happiness and hope at the beginning of the new year and is considered a part of Iran's cultural heritage.

him and wouldn't let him get close, but eventually, he picked us up under his arms and took us to the house; there they wrapped towels around us so we wouldn't drip on the floor. The waxed parquet floor shone from cleanliness, and the drops of water dripping from us were the last thing our mothers needed at that moment. Auntie took Alborz upstairs and forcibly sent him to the bathroom. Mom took me with her to the bathroom and scolded me thoroughly, warning me about what I had done in that weather; "You'll catch a cold, I know it! If you get sick, who will stay home to take care of you, kid?"

"I'm not going to get sick. Besides, auntie will take care of me?"

She shot me a glare; "You're being cheeky again!" I didn't say anything more, but I was sure Auntie hadn't scolded Alborz for playing in the water.

That night, I fell asleep very quickly; apart from the commotion in the house, I didn't remember much of our birthday celebration. The next morning, I woke up shivering and drenched in sweat, with a severe sore throat. In the midst of fever and delirium, my only concern was Mom. If she came and saw that I was sick, I would be in trouble. Before I could get up, I saw Mom and Dad's shadows above me. Oh no! They knew I was sick. Mom was upset and kept saying, "She doesn't listen anymore. With all this chaos, this is just what we needed. Tomorrow by noon, I have three surgeries. You were supposed to keep an eye on these kids in the yard! Now you stay home!"

Dad said, "It's nothing! She's just a kid; She caught a cold. You see far worse than this every day. Why are you getting all worked up? Besides, Elaheh can take care of her?"

"Poor woman has to take care of that boy. She can't manage two sick kids until the evening."

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Oh? So Alborz was also suffering from the same thing. I felt a bit happy that the mark of foolishness didn't fall solely on my forehead. We both ended up with two hefty injections. As always, I insisted that Dad give me the shot; getting an injection from Mom was just as painful as her slaps, pinches, and the soles of her slippers. But Dad had such cool hands that it made me drowsy. I knew Auntie Ella would also be giving Alborz his shot. She had learned how to do it back in her student days. Fortunately, the other medications were oral.

That summer, with the new colored pencils that were my birthday gift, I began a different kind of painting. Painting with them was enjoyable. When the layers of color glided easily over each other, they became exactly what I wanted. My first shaded drawings were two pictures of my family of three and Alborz's family; I thought they turned out very beautiful. Just like a tree that blooms its first blossoms in spring, I took pride in my paintings. When I showed them to Auntie, she showered me with affection, hugged me tightly, planted a firm kiss on my cheek, and stuck our family drawing on the fridge door with a magnet, right next to the drawing Alborz had made a few years ago. I also gave our family drawing to Mom. She raised her eyebrows; "It's very good! I hope your studying goes as well as your painting!"

Then she handed it back to me. I was so excited. Alborz said I had become more professional than him. Painting made me happy. During the days when I painted and Alborz read books for me, I would immerse myself in our world. Most of the time, the subjects of my paintings were the stories from our books. Sometimes while reading, Alborz would take the pencil from my hand and correct a corner for me.

That summer, during the hours when he practiced piano, I always painted something new to surprise him after class. The picture of a mountain and tree that he had drawn that day in the gazebo with

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charcoal had been practiced many times, and I had drawn it in four seasons with my colored pencils. Gradually, I added ourselves into the pictures as well. Sometimes I drew the mountain from the perspective of the forest and sometimes the forest from the perspective of the mountain. I saw and narrated the painting with our presence and the stories behind it. Auntie said, "It's really interesting that you either create stories from your drawings or draw from your stories!"

I had even learned the blending of colors and their coexistence from Alborz, using it like a new magic. Gradually, I began to notice that in the shadows of white snow and the orange of sunset, purple and green spots would settle. The yellow petals of sunflowers would turn red and jade in their dark corners, and the greens of the meadow would shift to blue in the afternoon's light shadows. I watched Alborz as he always painted the dense forest and lush groves and coppices in a way that made them look blue. He would fill the background with a vibrant green velvet and overlay it with a layer of blue, yellow, and gray shades. I asked, "So why do you paint the trees and grass blue?"

He laughed and said, "That's not blue. It's a kind of green!"

"But to me, it looks blue! Anyway, I like it."

"I like it too. I think trees are less green when there's less sunlight!"

I drew upon my learnings: "So when the yellow of the sun is wiped away from them, their blueness comes out?"

"Something like that!"

deciduous teeth; Empty Space

It was evening, and I was still sitting on the curb. I received a message from Sam that he had a work meeting and would be coming home late. I got up and started walking towards the park. I missed it; the last time I had been there was over 12 years ago. I had always kept my distance from it, but that night, I wanted to fill my lungs with the scent of its pine and plane trees. Before that, I headed towards the zoo; the place where there used to be a zoo, and for a long time, two golden lion statues remained on the sidewalk. Memories flooded back again; from the last year the zoo was there. I couldn't believe it! Where were those memories coming from? With all that attention to detail! How had they been forgotten until that day?

*

It was the first summer that on the mornings of even days, I went to english language class with Alborz. Our class hours had been synchronized so that they wouldn't have trouble with my commute. Our companionship also meant more freedom for him since he no longer went to the institute with his mother. Our institutes were opposite each other, three alleys up from home. He would first drop

me off and then go to his own class. On the way, he would buy us Kim¹ ice cream or two-colored cones, and we would walk back home along Valiasr Street, which at that time had a wide stream filled with clear water. In the evenings, sometimes we would jump up and down in the yard and sometimes sit on the swing. He would read to me from our books; from Tintin, Around the World in Eighty Days, The Little Black Fish, The Wizard of Oz, and The Prince and the Pauper. Aunt would join us in the gazebo with cake, chocolate milk, and juice, and sometimes she would explain difficult words from the books to us. Near sunset, we often went to the park with Uncle and Aunt or sometimes went shopping. When Alborz's piano teacher arrived, I would keep myself busy drawing and enjoy the sound of their practice. His piano class, swimming pool, and language classes for both of us became our fixed schedules that summer and continued forever.

That summer everything was fine; except for the last days of September. Although I don't remember much from it, I think it became one of the elements that shaped my character during those days. Later, I never spoke to Mom about it.

Mom hadn't talked to me much for a few days. In the evenings, she would come, silently serve my dinner, and send me to my room. I didn't know what I had done wrong. I was even afraid to ask her. Sometimes, when I misbehaved in front of guests or strangers, Mom would give me a warning glare, and I understood that things would get more serious when we were alone. But during those days, I hadn't done anything wrong. As always, I had been at my aunt and uncle's house from morning till night. Alborz and I would go to english language class, and in the evenings we would head to the park. I thought to myself, could I have done something foolish that my aunt told Mom? But my aunt never got that upset with us. Sometimes we

1. A kind of icecream bar in Iran.

would annoy her and make her angry, but she always told Mom that I was a good girl. Late that night, when I woke up to go to the bathroom, I heard Mom and Dad talking in their bedroom. They were awake and speaking. It wasn't really a conversation; it was more of an argument. I was playing with my first loose tooth and quietly stood behind their door, tilting my head towards it to hear better. Mom said angrily, "Why can't you understand? I can't stand it hanging around me. It's affecting my work and life. Do you know what these six years have done to me? I don't want it. Get it? I didn't want her from the start. Back then, you tricked me!"

Dad replied calmly, "Is that it? You don't want it? Does my opinion not matter to you?"

"When you can't help, no, it doesn't matter. Remember? At first, we were supposed to have a babysitter. What happened? As soon as you saw she was untrustworthy, you got scared and said you wouldn't let a stranger take care of my child. I suffered a lot. It was a miracle that I could specialize. If it weren't for my mom, if it weren't for Elaheh right now, what would we have done?"

"The situation has changed now. A few years have passed and we can..."

"What can we do? You're only thinking about yourself! What about me? Just the thought of it makes me sick. You expect..."

And then Mom's voice broke into tears! I ran silently to my room and buried my head in my pillow. My tooth made a sound and became a bit looser. Tears flowed uncontrollably onto the pillow. What inconvenience did I cause them? What time did I take from them? They were never with me! So why was I too much for them? I didn't even know what my mistake was that Mom didn't want me and Dad had no time for me. That night, I cried so much that I fell asleep. I

woke up very early in the morning; Mom was still home. It felt like when she returned from night shifts, her presence was noticeable. But it was clear that day was not normal. I sensed another presence in the house as well. Ms. Parvin wasn't there; she couldn't have arrived that early. It was my aunt! They were sitting in the kitchen and talking quietly. I was dying to know what they were saying. Were they talking about me again? I tiptoed closer to the kitchen and stood by the entrance. Oh, woe to me if Mom noticed me eavesdropping; then even a slipper would be too little for me. My aunt said, "Well dear, he has a right too!"

"Why are you saying that? Didn't you see what happened to me? Have you forgotten those days? It was a nightmare. If it weren't for you all, what would I have done? "

"We are here now. You shouldn't do that! Someone would kill themselves if they were in your situation, and yet you are being so ungrateful like this."

"Elaheh! I can't be like you, who abandoned your job and stood by your child. It's so scary for me! I won't forget how kind you were to us all these years and the effort you put into Afra. But look at yourself! You spent all that time going to university and studying. You had such a good job! And in the end, what?

" In the end, this is what you see! I continue my work at home with less volume. At least until the child is out of the woods, I've chosen this path and I'm satisfied.

"You're fooling yourself! Part-time work is the same as being in a company? Even if the salary doesn't matter!"

" Yes, Leyla! I'm not like you. I would have been willing to pay a hundred times more to see Alborz grow up. What could be better than that? "

" You're crazy! You don't have any sense! You're the one who raised Reza's expectations too high."

She was talking about my father and continued, "Once I made a mistake, I won't be fooled again. This is already too much!" She lowered her voice and continued speaking softly. I couldn't hear anything else. Tears were streaming down my cheeks again. I went to the bathroom and splashed some water on my face amidst my sobs so that no one would know what I had been through. They were talking about me again. Why was I too much? I wish I could die now that they didn't love me! Lucky Alborz! Aunt dedicated all her time to him, and everyone loved him. I was so alone, and in the end, I had become too much! Angry and sad, I looked at my tooth in the mirror; it was hanging just like me. I closed my eyes and suddenly pulled it, and... that was it. A few seconds later, a little blood had dripped onto my gum, and the tooth was between my fingers. I rinsed it carefully and placed it beside the sink, looking at my fresh face in the mirror. My puffy eyes were not enough; the empty space where my tooth used to be stood out on my face. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all. At least I was growing up; Alborz wouldn't keep calling me "little kid" anymore!

I came out of the bathroom and went to the kitchen. Mom and Aunt were waiting for me with a cup in hand, without saying anything. It was rare to see Mom without makeup and with her hair unkempt. That day, she looked pale and sad, sitting next to Aunt; she was wearing a purple satin sleepdress, and her messy hair fell over her shoulders. Aunt, neatly dressed in a white top and jeans with her dark hair in a ponytail, sat beside her. There was no breakfast; Mom impatiently said, "I don't feel well! I need to rest. Go upstairs with Aunt and have your breakfast! Take your things with you so you can head to your language class from there."

I was afraid to say anything. I asked, "Aren't you going to work?"

" No! I'm home today."

Aunt gently said, "Sweetheart, go get your things so we can go upstairs!" Then she turned to Mom, "Leila, dear! If you need help, let me know! I'll come check on you. I'll bring you lunch from our food!"

" Don't bother! Isn't Parvin coming?"

Aunt smiled her usual smile and said, "Well, at least one day you can all enjoy my cooking!"

Mom's gaze was on the table; she shook her head. I dashed to my room. Maybe she wanted to stay home to think about my situation. Did they want to hand me over to someone? An orphanage? Or somewhere that kept unwanted children? Fear gripped me! I felt like throwing up. I wished Aunt and Uncle could convince her to always keep me with them. I promised I wouldn't come downstairs anymore and wouldn't disturb Mom. I wanted to tell her this before leaving; but I didn't have the courage. I gathered my things, and we went to Aunt's house. Alborz was sitting at the breakfast table, spreading cheese on bread with a steel knife. As soon as he saw me, instead of saying hello, he asked, "Are you sick?"

My head was down. In a voice I could barely hear myself, I said, "No! What's wrong?"

He turned to his mother and said, "Mom, she doesn't look well." Aunt leaned down and turned me towards her. She gently tucked my hair behind my ear and caressed my face; "Oh, look at your beautiful eyes! Come on darling, eat your breakfast before you faint! You look pale from hunger! You didn't have a proper dinner last night! You can't go to class like this! Sit down; I'll get you a bite, dear!"

Aunt's kind tone always calmed me. She poured tea into my cup and made it lukewarm with cold water; "Should I put sugar in for you, dear?" I shook my head no. The doorbell rang.

"It's Mr. Ali! Alborz, dear ! Please check what Afra is eating; get her a bite! Well done, my son! I'll go tell Ali about the shopping list."

Lucky Alborz! Mom never called me "my daughter!" or even "Afra, dear !" Today I understood why; because I was too much. Because she didn't want me. Alborz didn't ask me what I was eating; he knew. He handed me a piece of bread with butter and honey and started eating himself. With his mouth full, he asked, "Why were you crying?"

I hadn't eaten anything yet, but the lump in my throat felt like a big bite blocking my airway. Fortunately, my hair covered my face, so I could hide my eyes behind it. I managed to say, "I wasn't crying."

He gave a mischievous smile; "You cried! Your face looks like those times when you hide in the yard!"

How embarrassing! I had been found out. Maybe soon he would also be disgusted by me and I would become even more alone than I already was. I didn't know what to say; "I don't know."

He didn't continue. He pointed to the bites he had arranged for me on the table; "Eat these so we can go do our homework. Mine is almost done; but you haven't done anything yet!"

"It's not much; we'll finish it quickly."

"Haven't you found your hair clip again?"

Now that I was caught, I didn't feel like boasting anymore. I was ashamed and kept my head down; "I didn't lose them; I brought them. But I don't know how to tie my hair."

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He laughed; "I know, silly! It's okay. Keep them; my mom will be here soon." Then I did my English homework with his help. Alborz practiced the piano a little and got busy playing Atari. The airplane was refueling. The airplane was shooting. The airplane was passing through tanks. The airplane was getting shot and exploding. I pretended to be drawing, but I was just scribbling.

"Aren't you coming to play? Cops and robbers, just the two of us!"

"No! I don't feel like it!"

I couldn't concentrate. That damn lump was sitting in my throat like a stone. I loved the days when Mom stayed home, but why was she keeping her distance from me? What had I done? I wished I could go somewhere no one could find me so I wouldn't disturb anyone. Before they took me somewhere and left me there, I needed to disappear so they couldn't reach me. Aunt came and reminded me it was time to go. Reluctantly, I got up and put on my clothes. Aunt arranged them on me and entrusted Alborz to me. She always advised us to take care of each other; I loved that advice. It felt like we were both supporting each other, regardless of our ages. But that day, I was so sad that I didn't pay attention to her. When we reached the yard, Alborz slapped his forehead with his palm; "Oh man! I think I left one of my books behind. Wait a minute, I'll go grab it." He said that and ran towards the stairs. I could no longer stand there silently; I dashed toward the door with the biggest and fastest steps I could muster, feeling wild and aggressive. I crossed the alley without looking back. Tears streamed down my face, heading toward my ears. I wished I were nowhere to be found! By the time I reached the end of the alley, I heard Alborz's voice behind me. I didn't stop; I didn't want him to see me looking so miserable! He called my name several times. I just kept running. I couldn't cross the street and hide in the park. So, I went down the street instead. I reached the zoo gate; I didn't look back

anymore. I ran past the guard. No one stopped me; I kept running. I was going through empty paths ahead like a maze. I had nowhere to go; I just wanted to disappear. I ran so much that I could no longer feel my legs. My breaths scratched my lungs like knives and turned into relentless coughing fits. I was still crying. I sat down next to a bench on the ground. No one paid attention to me. Maybe they thought my parents were around there somewhere. I had my head on my knees, sobbing. I was also a bit scared because I didn't know how to find the exit. It didn't matter anymore; I didn't want to go home. I don't know how many minutes passed when a familiar voice came. He was panting; "What happened to you? Why did you run away? Why didn't you stop when I called you?"

My voice wouldn't come out. With a sob, I said, "Why did you come? I wanted to disappear!"

He came toward me and sat down on the ground in front of me. There was a slight smile on his face; "But here? In this stinky zoo where everything is obvious?"

I wished I weren't so much smaller than him! He was ahead of me in everything and knew more than I did. My head was on my knees and hands; "I don't want to go to class. I'm staying right here."

"Why not? What's wrong? Why are you crying? You learned your lessons well; you solved your exercises too!"

I didn't say anything and turned my face away. He pouted his lips and twisted them left and right, searching for words to get me to talk. He pointed toward the door with his head; "Because of you, I had to buy a ticket!"

"Did you know my mom and dad don't want me? They want to put me somewhere so I'm not around anymore?"

He burst out laughing; "Who told you that?"

"I heard it myself. Your mom knows too! She's very upset!"

"I'm sure you're mistaken! Parents don't leave their child anywhere. Our place is at home! My mom always says we older ones would give our lives for our kids!"

"What does that mean?"

"It means they love us a lot.

"Your mom and dad are kind, but my mom and dad... they don't want me. I heard it myself; she told your mom that I'm too much." I cried again.

"If that's the case, I'm not going to class today. Wherever you are, I'll stay right there." He said.

"What if they tell your mom?"

"Maybe they won't! And if they do, they'll treat me the same way they treat you!"

"Your mom would never hit you. You lied to me! Aunt is very kind!"

Alborz said nothing; it seemed he was embarrassed that I knew he wasn't like me and didn't get hit. He stood up, took my hand, lifted me up, and brushed off the dirt on my clothes; "I say let's go to the park. We'll stay there until class is over, and then we'll go back home."

"We can't cross the street. And after that, I won't come home."

"I know how; we'll cross together. Don't be mad! Come tell me what you heard! Maybe then I'll run away with you."

That day, our mischief reached new heights. We bought ice cream from the shop across from the park. Alborz got a Coke and two Hobby chocolates; we poured the Coke into my water bottle to get rid of the glass. He put the Hobbies in his bag so we could eat them in the park. Coke was forbidden for us; Uncle said having it occasionally was fine, but Mom and Dad disagreed. We spent a few more minutes in the park, on the grass of that hill where the iron horse was. As if he had just discovered something new, he excitedly asked, "When did your tooth fall out?"

"This morning."

"What did you do with it?"

...

We returned home, and no one ever noticed that we hadn't gone to class that day. The incident remained hidden like our other secrets forever. That night, Dad was at work and didn't come home. The next day, Aunt sat me on her lap and told me that my parents loved me and would never trade me for anything in the world. I knew Alborz had told her about my worries. I felt a bit relieved; although I never heard those words from Mom. Dad and Mom hadn't spoken to each other for a long time; maybe two or three weeks. Later, I realized that Mom had chosen to have an abortion that day, contrary to Dad's wishes and Aunt's insistence; a decision that, given my current situation and my fruitless attempts at motherhood, I could never fathom. I would never judge her on this matter, but I also didn't forget that both during those days and in the days that followed, I constantly heard from her that I was too much. She even told others in my presence, "This one is too much as well." I was always too much.

To be continued...

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FAVIDEL, a multidisciplinary artist, has studied graphic design and has worked in the fields of interior design management, architecture and furniture and accessory design

Her collection of artworks includes both physical and digital paintings and illustrations, accompanied by music she has composed. These works are showcased in short videos on digital art platforms, each telling a brief story.

To date, her works have been exhibited and sold in New York, Vancouver, Beijing, Istanbul, and Dubai. Previously, her book "The Lake Monster, Chopin, Barbequed Eggplant" was published in Iran.