

Everybody Dies Thirsty

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The sight of Nazie entering the Café brings back all the old feelings; not that they'd ever really left him. As he gets to his feet, he almost knocks the table over.

'How have you been?' he asks and hugs her, long enough for her body to grow tense.

'I'm alright. You?'

'Good. Thanks.'

'I have to be at work by nine. Tell me, what's so urgent?'

'That's why I've already ordered your latte. The way you like it, double shot, extra hot, with oat milk.'

'Thanks, but I already had one. What's so *urgent* that couldn't wait?'

'It doesn't matter anymore.'

'What do you mean?'

'Now that I've seen you it doesn't matter anymore.'

'Was this another *lame* excuse to see me? Swear to God if you are trying—'

'I wanted to see you of course. But I didn't lie when I said it was important.'

'Then tell me!'

'I'm just not sure that you'll understand.'

'Why did you want to see me if you were not sure that I'd—'

'Okay, I'll tell you. I... I think that I'm going to die.'

'What?'

'I think that I'm going to die,' he says again in a lower tone.

'My God! Are you sick?'

'No. I just *think* that I'm going to die.'

'What do you mean? Are you *dying* or not?'

'Would you prefer it if I did?'

'Of course not! What are you talking about?'

'Because you sound as if I've wasted you time if I'm not.'

'Oh my God! Are you going to tell me what's going on or not?'

‘We are all dying, some slower than others but—’

‘My *bloody* God! Just tell me what’s going on!’

‘Okay, I have a feeling that I’m going to die,’ he says.

Last night he had dreamt that Azrael was standing next to his bed. When he opened his eyes Azrael *was* next to his bed: an old man with a long white beard and bright eyes who wore something like a long black *kurta*. He smelt of eucalyptus, the same as his childhood house during winters—heavy snows, the unexpected school cancellations, playing with other kids on the white bright streets...

He will not tell her anything about his peculiar experience though; he knows how that conversation unravels:

No one was standing next to your bed! You hadn’t even opened your eyes yet, she’d say.

I was awake! We even talked. I mean, we communicated through our minds. He told me that I have only until tonight to live, he’d say.

For God’s sake! You were still dreaming. How irrational you can be sometimes! she’d say...

‘Have you stopped taking your pills?’ she asks after a pause. ‘Do you remember what happened the last time you did? You were anxious all the time and had a sense of foreboding that wouldn’t leave you alone.’

‘No. I haven’t stopped.’

‘You promised me you’d always take your pills,’ she says. ‘Do you remember? The day I moved out.’

‘I’m taking my pills. Anyway, I thought I should see you again, just in case,’ he says, as he grabs her hands.

‘I can’t take this anymore! Why are you doing this to me?’ she says, pulling her hands back and hiding them in her lap.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Are you sure you’re taking your pills regularly?’

‘Swear to God! Do you think I’m going to take the Lord’s name in vain considering I may meet him soon?’ he smiles.

‘It’s not funny, just ridiculous!’ she says, and stares at him in silence, her eyes filled with pity and hopelessness. In the past, a look like that would have made him infuriated, but not anymore.

How low has he sunk? Anything is better than nothing, as long as she is offering it. ‘Why didn’t you let me set you up with my colleague, huh? She’s such a kind and beautiful girl—’

‘She’s too short for me.’

‘She’s taller than me!’

‘Yeah,’ he murmurs, ‘but she’s not you.’

‘My God! Stop it! I’m not the only girl on this fucking planet, do you understand? I’m a shitty, shitty person. You told me so, yourself. And we’ve—’

‘But you were *my* shitty person.’

‘I’m not yours or anyone’s, I’m *my own* shitty person!’

‘But—’

‘God, will you ever grow up?’

‘Even if I wanted to, I don’t have enough time anymore.’

‘Stop laughing! It’s not funny.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘And stop saying you’re sorry.’

‘Okay.’

‘Are you still working part-time?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You should get a full-time job. It’s not healthy to have too much time on your hands. Plus you need to think of your retirement too.’ She gets to her feet. ‘I have to go.’

‘Can I have a hug?’

She hesitates before she lets him embrace her. ‘Promise me that you’ll take your pills on time.’

‘I promise.’

His eyes follow her as she leaves the café and disappears among the crowd. He feels guilty thinking about the pile of untouched pills on his bedside table. The only reason he had continued taking his medication for as long as he had was the promise he had made to her. Otherwise, he had started feeling weary of everyone and everything long before that. From the cereal he had for breakfast to his colleagues’ irritating laughter, from people queuing for the latest model of some gadget to his own body odour on the pillow at night.

And the feeling that he doesn't belong here. After separating from Nazie he had moved back home, but it had only taken him three months to realise that he didn't belong there either. He wasn't in the land that he had left seventeen years ago. It had changed beyond recognition. Or maybe he had changed irreversibly. Or maybe a bit of both. He had been a stranger who laughed at jokes he hadn't found funny; listened awkwardly to racist comments; nodded knowingly at slang that made no sense to him; passed by hideous "modern" buildings that had grown monstrous, swallowing the cheerful moments of his childhood... He had been a ghost walking through old memories and nostalgia.

It is taxing now to be constantly restless, to crave to see Nazie again. Taxing to consider everything that society expects of him. Taxing... to think. Something like a bubble rolls up and down his chest and throat and makes his breathing heavy. He takes a deep breath, and closes his eyes till his heart sucks in the tears, bloating a bit more.

He walks to his car and drives to the nearest op shop. 'Do you take in books?' he asks the middle-aged woman in a red apron.

'Sure. We sell everything.'

He unloads eight boxes of books under the shade of a tree in front, and drives away to his sister's house. At the front door he hesitates for a second and listens to the crying of a baby—his newborn niece. He knocks.

'Just a moment!' his sister shouts. He waits for a minute or two. 'Hey!' Mehri says, as she opens the door. 'What are you doing here? Didn't you have to go to work?'

'I took a day off.'

'Sorry you had to wait, I was changing Goli. Is everything alright?'

'Yeah. Let me hold her.'

Mehri passes him the baby and goes to the kitchen. 'I need to make her a bottle. Do you want tea?'

'Nah, I just had a coffee,' he says, rocking his niece softly.

'Why did you take a day off?'

'I wanted a break from work,' he says. He quit his job four months ago.

She comes back with a bottle. 'Let me feed her,' he says. 'You take a rest.'

Mehri is five years younger than he is, but today she looks older. Her pale cheeks seem saggy, and her red puffy eyes, looking at him through a fog of fatigue, sit above two dark patches. She walks to the kitchen, comes back with a cup of tea, and sits on the sofa.

‘How many more months of maternity leaves do you have?’

‘Two. Is everything alright?’

‘I told you everything’s fine. I just needed a break.’

‘Last night I was talking to mum, and I know you may not like it, but she said that our neighbour’s cousin—’

‘I don’t want you to set me up and I don’t want to get married.’

‘How long has it been? Fourteen, fifteen months? How much longer do you plan to live alone?’

‘I don’t know. But hopefully not too long.’

‘What do you mean? Have you met someone?’

‘Nah.’

‘A man shouldn’t live alone.’

‘Why shouldn’t he?’

‘It’s bad, it’s... It’s unnatural, and—’

‘Unnatural?’

‘Yes. Staying alone for too long is unhealthy. Nothing good comes out of it. And especially for men. Women are more self-contained.’

‘I’m surprised that you still have energy to argue.’

‘You’re my brother and I want you to be happy.’

‘I know. Thank you and—’ he hesitates and looks right into her eyes ‘— and I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry? About what?’

‘About everything.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘When you moved here, I didn’t really support you. I was busy with my work and “writing” and the fact that you and Nazie didn’t get along didn’t help the situation either. I have no excuse though. As your brother—’

‘Hey, listen! I never expected you to put your life aside and take care of me. I’m a big girl and I can—’

‘I know that you married him because you were lonely. If I supported you emotionally then maybe—’

‘Don’t we all find a partner because we feel lonely?’

‘I know what you said to mum, I’ve known it for years, and I think you’re right and I’m sorry. I should’ve said this years ago but I was too much of a self-righteous prick to accept that I’ve been an ignorant wanker.’

‘Hey, I’m alright, okay? I’m as happy as one can be. More importantly, I’m content.’

He nods. ‘That’s good. Anyway, tell that idiot husband of yours to spend more time with you and Goli rather than working 80 hours per week.’

‘Don’t talk about him like that. Who’d pay the mortgage if he didn’t work?’

‘Who indeed?’ her husband would mock him if he was around. ‘You? The Great Writer!’

‘Anyway, what’s in the box?’ she says, referring to the box he has left at the door.

‘Some of my rare books. I want you to have them.’

‘Why? You love your books! Are you alright?’

‘I’m fine. I’m just sick of books.’

‘Never thought I’d hear you say that. Are you sure everything’s fine?’ she asks, and when he doesn’t respond, she continues, ‘Any luck with your novel?’

‘Not really.’

‘I know nothing about publishing, but based on what I’ve heard rejection is part of the game. You should keep trying.’

Okay,’ he says. He has stopped trying long ago.

‘If you’re tired I can take her now.’

‘I’m fine,’ he says. He stares at the baby in his arms. She is as light as a feather, but holding her like this for a couple of minutes, he already feels a minor discomfort in his arms. The same goes for sorrows in life, no matter how small they may seem, when you carry them around, when you don’t know how to put them down. He looks back at his sister. She has already fallen asleep on the sofa. He holds the baby until she is sound asleep and then puts her back in her stroller.

He goes to the kitchen and starts cooking *qormeh sabzi*, Mehri’s favourite dish. While the stew is simmering, he washes the dishes piled up in the sink, mops the floor, and tidies up the living room. No matter how much noise he makes, Mehri goes on sleeping undisturbed. *It must*

be 8:00 am back home, he thinks. He video calls his mother, and shows her his snoring sister and her sleeping baby. ‘My poor girl is too tired!’ his mother says. ‘Put a pillow under her neck.’

He does. ‘Mum, do you remember that one time when you bought me a Sherlock Holmes’ book?’

‘Not really. I bought you a lot of things, young man.’

‘But this was different. It wasn’t my birthday or anything, and you still got it for me, even though after the war books were so *fucking* expensive!’

‘Watch you language young man,’ she smiles. ‘Not in front of the baby!’

He smiles back. ‘I’ve got to check the rice now. Bye mum. Love you.’

‘Love you too, my son.’

He sits on the sofa doing nothing, hoping his sister will wake up so they can have lunch together, but she is fast asleep. He cannot bring himself to wake her up; Goli will do it later when it’s time. He makes sure the oven is off, leaves his car key on the coffee table, and leaves.

He walks to the Central Market, buys a bottle of his favourite gin and a small serve of his favourite dolma, then ambles to the Botanic Gardens. He sits next to a small pond that, with its muddy shallow water covered in dead vegetation, seems like a scene out of a post-apocalyptic film. He takes out his mobile, transfers all of his money to his sister, and then tosses it into the pond. After taking two sips from his drink, he takes his laptop out of his backpack, and looks through his old writings. Some of the stories are twenty years old. He chooses one he cannot even remember writing, and starts reading. Two pages into the story he is bored. *God, this is shit, such a waste of time, such a waste of life*, he snaps his laptop shut, throws it into the pond, and gets back to drinking and his dolma. When the bottle is half-empty he takes off his T-shirt and pants, lies down on his stomach, and lets his body go lax under the sun. He remembers one of his ex-girlfriends asking, ‘Which one would you choose? A life without women or a life without sun?’ ‘A life without women,’ he had answered, without hesitation.

When he wakes up the sun has turned pale and long shadows have taken over the park. He puts his clothes back on, leaves the half-empty bottle of gin on a nearby bench, and leaves the park. He is still drunk—too drunk—and desperately needs to urinate but decides not to. He hails a cab, gives the driver his address, and sits in the back. ‘Last time back home, I had a friend who was a drug addict,’ he says to the driver ten minutes into the silent ride, and follows his surprised eyes in the rear-view mirror. ‘He was shooting heroin, and had relapsed a few times. Once I

asked him, why couldn't he let go? Was it that good? He said, "You know how pleasurable it is when you finally pee after holding it for a long time? This is like that times a thousand!" If he was right he must've died happy!

He opens his eyes, gives the driver thirty dollars, and asks him to keep the change.

'You're three dollars short!' the driver says.

'Sorry! That's all I have.'

'You can pay with your card.'

'That's all I have, literally!' He takes a silver ring off his finger and throws it at the back seat. 'It's not worth much but it's worth more than three dollars, for sure.'

'I don't need your ring, sir—' the driver is saying, but he has already walked away. He enters his unit on the third floor, goes to the fridge and gulps down a small bottle of water. Then he sits on the sofa for a few minutes staring at the blank TV screen. He gets to his feet, takes a step towards the balcony, then returns, picks up a sturdy bottle, and strikes the TV screen with it. 'Fucking TV!' he says, and stands there staring at his own shattered reflection before he moves to the balcony.

He climbs up on the edge of the balcony, opens his zipper, and urinates onto the street with a sigh of relief. *I should've done this more often*, he thinks as he pulls his zipper up. A gust of wind hits him. The curtains flap behind him like two giant wings. The smell of eucalyptus engulfs him. He closes his eyes, inhales the warm scent. For the next one point four seconds, he is hunger, he is thirst, he is tears, he is joy, he is anger, he is peace, he is hatred, he is love, he is jealousy, he is pain...then for a fraction of a second, he is everything and nothing.

Hossein Asgari has recently completed a PhD in Creative Writing with the JM Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice at the University of Adelaide, during which he explored the life and poetry of the contemporary Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad. He is currently working on his fourth (unpublished) novel, *Decadence*.