

A New Home

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Mr. Qaemi was lean and fell on the short side of the spectrum. However, he seemed taller than he was, perhaps because of his broad shoulders, his near perfect posture, and the confidence with which he carried himself.

My cousin and I had a weekly private English class with him. At the end of every session, we chatted in English about a topic of his choice. He kept quiet and only interfered to keep the conversation going or to correct us. During these talks, he was not a speaker but a facilitator, as he liked to remind us. He broke that rule only once. That day, my uncle had a few guests over, so we moved the class to my cousin's room. Throughout the session, Mr. Qaemi could not help but to take an occasional peek at my cousin's collection of Tintin books. When it was time for our discussion, he walked to the library and picked up one of the Tintins. For a minute, skimming through the book, he was not in the room anymore and when he returned, he told us a story that he had never shared with anyone else except his wife.

When only twelve, he had the chance to browse an English version of *Tintin on the Moon*. In his small town of seven thousand people, that book with its glossy cover and colourful images was a splendid and unique possession. So it pained him that it did not belong to him but to Mehdi, his classmate. Mehdi had got it as a souvenir from his uncle who had left the town, then only a village, thirty years ago for Mashhad, and now lived in — as Mr. Qaemi pronounced it with a smirk — Vashington.

Every day, when Mehdi took the book out of his bag, Mr. Qaemi was one of the kids who offered Mehdi something — a candy, a small coin, a banana flavoured chewing gum — waiting patiently for his turn to browse the book for a few magical seconds. In a week, everyone else had lost interest, but he still did not leave the house without a token for Mehdi. Finally, he offered Mehdi all his savings for the book, but he, Mehdi, did not want to part with his precious possession, at least not for that price. He did not have any more money, Mr. Qaemi objected. He must wait until he did then, was Mehdi's answer. But he did not want to wait. One day in school, during the break, Mr. Qaemi stole the book. His bag was the first place Mehdi looked, but

knowing he would be the main suspect Mr. Qaemi had hidden the book in his teacher's desk, in a drawer that was never used.

Such a joy to touch that sleek cover and to go on an adventure with Tintin through the pictures, if not the alien words. However, the guilt was too much, and Mr. Qaemi left the book at Mehdi's door one night. Half way home, it started to rain. He ran back to save the book, but it was not there anymore. The next day at school, he heard that the book was ruined. Having destroyed such a fine book, he had no choice but to confess and take his beatings like a man — which he did. He returned home with a bloody nose, knowing that one day he would leave that tiny town on an adventure. He also knew that he would learn English and buy all the Tintin books out there. All twenty-four of them, advertised at the back of the book.

English became his life and livelihood. He studied a Bachelor's and then a Master's at the University of Tehran, and was now teaching in the best English institute in Mashhad.

'If I didn't get married, I'd probably have done my PhD too,' he said. 'Not that I regret anything. My family is the best thing that has ever happened to me.' Moreover, he was only thirty-one and could do a PhD when he was financially secure.

One day after class, Mr. Qaemi asked if he could talk to my uncle. Later I learnt that a loan had been discussed. He had found a small piece of land, not more than 150 square meters, and wanted to build a house. He had his savings and his share of his father's inheritance, but it was still not nearly enough.

My uncle had agreed to the loan on the spot. He, a dermatologist and a university professor, always had a soft spot for hardworking self-made men like Mr. Qaemi. Maybe because he himself could not have survived in the real world if not for another self-made man — my grandfather. As stingy as he was, he had supported my uncle throughout the medical school, bought him a car, and let him stay rent-free at one of his houses. Among all of his nine children, my grandfather, an orphan who had grown into a wealthy man, had a soft spot for the son who was capable of nothing but studying.

From that day onwards, Mr. Qaemi did not miss any chance to talk about his new house and its progress. Even when he complained about the financial and bureaucratic difficulties of building, he did it with a smile. It had been his dream to have his own house, and with the inflation, he could never have afforded one if not for my uncle's loan.

‘Maybe I could have bought a sixty-square-meter apartment in some shitty suburb, but never a house in a decent neighbourhood,’ he never failed to highlight. He was not charging my cousin for the classes anymore. ‘This way we’ll be even in a hundred years,’ he always said with a laugh. Obviously, he was going to start paying my uncle back as soon as he moved into the new house and did not have to pay rent anymore. One day, early winter, he informed us that the house was almost finished. ‘We’re planning to move in next Wednesday. Do you want to see the house?’ he asked, with so much enthusiasm that it was impossible to decline. ‘What about tomorrow? Bring a pen and a piece of paper too. Why not take the fun out of it by making it educational?’ he laughed.

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Friday afternoon Mr. Qaemi took us on a tour of the house. He had managed to keep it within budget because some of the labour had been done with the help of friends and acquaintances. The father of one of his students had painted the house for a very reasonable price; his cousin had installed the gas heaters; an old friend had taken care of the electrical wiring and accessories. After visiting the small backyard, where he was planning to plant an apple tree similar to the one in his father’s house, he asked us to write a two-hundred-word piece describing the house for the next week’s session. ‘Try to use some of the new words you learnt today,’ he said.

His family was also there. His wife walked around and took notes of minor issues that needed mending. I was only sixteen, too young to even think of marriage, but I already knew I wanted a wife like her — a lively woman who never missed a chance to laugh, even at work poorly done, even if it meant more trouble for her. His son seemed too serious and somber for an eight-year old, but maybe he was just in a bad mood that day. His five-year-old daughter compensated for her missing front teeth with a big personality. She wore a purple lace dress and blue shoes, with a transparent plastic tiara. When I asked what her name was, she said, ‘Princess Liala,’ and stayed in character.

‘I don’t know where she got that name, Liala, from,’ her mother said. ‘Every night, we have to go through so much drama to take that dress off her. I have to come up with a convincing story every time, and never the same one, before she even considers changing into her sleeping clothes.’

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Next Thursday after school, I had my lunch and sat at my table, staring at the paper with all the new words, which had been sitting there the whole week. I had two hours and no idea where to start. I did not want to write something boring and predictable and I could not tell the truth. If I wanted to be truthful, I would have to write, ‘It is a small house, with an ugly brown door, a sink way too small, and a toilet poorly tiled, but it has everything and everyone to be a beautiful home.’

God! I wish I didn't have to write this! I thought. The phone rang and I ran for it, happy to take a break from my damn paper. My cousin said hi in a hoarse voice. ‘Have you caught a cold?’ I was about to ask, hoping that the class was cancelled and I would have another week to work on the paper, when he said, ‘Mr. Qaemi is dead!’

‘What!’ I almost shouted. It took me a minute or so before I could say, ‘What?’ again, this time in a whisper.

‘And his wife, and his son, and his daughter too,’ he sobbed.

‘What?’

Last night. The first night at the new house. A faulty gas pipe. Carbon monoxide poisoning.

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My mother entered my room. I wiped my tears and continued staring at the Tintin book in front of me. She hesitated before embracing me, the side of my face pressed against her chest.

‘It’s okay to cry my son,’ she said.

‘But why?’ I wept.

‘I don’t know my dear, but I’m sure they are in a better place.’

A new home, I thought.