

In A Chord

Written by Hasan Abir

I

Sometime in a lap, the coming of a cold winter midnight brought about an impulse to unravel within a scrupulous heart. That of which belonged to Mazhar Haque, a man, brown-tanned, coarse-haired, slightly stout-cheeked, plump-mouthed, wide-nosed, eyes seldom closed, who believed his ears were in salvation by the power of music. A cobalt blue bike that he rode came with a broken bell, a yellow basket stuffed with music sheets, a down tube spray-painted with the word *ZERO*, a neon green flashlight attached to it as headlights, bearings freshly greased, and seats for two. He pedaled into the fog of the weather stirred in with the gas of the manholes, condensing on his skin as he left the haze. A tune that amazed him, a long-time favorite of his, went by the name *Where or When* by *Johnny Smith*. And uncalled, it played in his head. There wasn't a reason to not be swaying. His rhythmically precise swinging of the bike to the instrumental kept him amused and distracted. In his city, New York, he was content. A crowd walked in, and a crowd faded out, but never in one color. On wheels or on feet, a crumbling move was never made in a land that equated the need for climbing higher stories with the need for writing higher stories. Both men, one from the street and one sipping coffee from the 20th floor, knew what it took to swap their positions. At every junction, there was always a way forward. With the mind of the breathing city wrapped in the present, time ceased to matter for the past. Just the right place, for him, at last. Across the grid, he and his bike journeyed through streets that were dark, abandoned, and lifeless, turning at every crossroad and running on loops every now and then. Several beliefs were lost with time, along with the belief that he too was lost. Locked and empty were the offices, shops, and

restaurants, and so were the apartments, although not as dead. Some on their beds and couches, and others on their floors, sprawled drunk out of their minds with their TV sets still running as the night ticked away. From a good distance, as he approached the end of a street, he noticed a light, warm in hue, that shone brightly from a basement window, illuminating only a small sphere around itself. With lifted eyebrows, all kinds of questions arose, such as: What follows next? And the only way to know was to be drawn into it. Mumbled and faint, but clear enough to tell, drumming of a spontaneous tribal nature was heard from the basement, overlaid with an alto sax that blew like a stirred-up hornet's nest. And the cello freely bounced sideways when the sax refused to phrase any longer, working in dispute with the drums. He took it all as an invitation, a call, but every other note played broke and made him think otherwise. As he pedaled closer and as the music grew louder, he began to feel his blood rushing, and his head felt to be in a shape to break out and split open. His volatile, anxious mind played tricks on him, such as one that made him imagine a crude figure bursting out of the basement door with vengeance, repeatedly. As he slowly rode, almost touching the emitted light, his ears began to take in the additional layer of piano keys that had been smothered before underneath the anarchic piece. Then, all of a sudden, the window slid open with a terribly loud click, sending him quivering, but only for a short instance. The following event had him in serenity: A big, beautiful, multifariously printed, crimson-violet-orange butterfly flew out of the opening. Its gleaming wings, gently fluttering away from the light, took his tranquil gaze along with them. Although pleasant to trail, its rapid, sporadic flying did make him dizzy. Smoothly, one flutter at a time, it lost its shimmer as it slowly flew towards the darkness. And in the next moment, nimbly, it sprang into the colorless void with no sign of a return. A curse was left behind for him after: Instantly, he lost all control of his bike, and as soon as the front wheel touched the curb, he tumbled down, hitting his head first.

[Absently, MAZHAR carried his fumbling legs from the bed to the bathroom. Upon entering, on the floor, a few loose strands of long, wavy hair came to his attention, floating on puddles of water, slowly being drained out.]

MAZHAR *[to himself]*: Odd. She never wakes up this early on a weekend, let alone take a shower. Well, whatever. Try not to bother her with that.

[Carrying on, he brushed his teeth. But the brush in his mouth stayed still in one place indefinitely as a series of circling thoughts clouded his mind. Falling back to a previously proven practice, he adjusted the circulation in his head to bring in a tune, freshly heard, that would help drown out those thoughts. And the magic worked once again; the song then refused to leave. Then, the faucet caught the drips of his wet, heavy head as he lifted his face towards the mirror. A long stare, eye to eye, shifted the world around him, which was brought to place quick and jarringly as soon as his under-eye depressions came to view, faltering his self-perception. Also in the mirror, with the bathroom door open, his wife appeared, TISHA ONWAYEE, dressed in an archaic, adventurous black tunic. A sturdy leather belt with a symbol of a tree embedded in the center girdled her small waist. To fit with the rest, olive gray leggings are what she made to be the best. She entered the room with an evident rush and flew across the frame of MAZHAR's mirror to stand in front of her own one. The fluorescent light above brightened her light-honey-toned face, shadowing her jaws under her cheekbones while she put on her mascara. Not long after, their eyes exchanged looks through the mirrors, sprouting gleeful smiles on each of their faces. First, he grabbed a towel and dried himself. Second, he threw it on the bed. Third, moving closer to her and wrapping his arms around her waist from the back, he brought his mouth close to her ears.]

MAZHAR *[in the poorest accent, whispering]*: Buongiorno principessa! *[He finished with a peck on one of her cheeks.]*

[And she returned double the kisses.]

TISHA: Tell me, how do I look? Do you—you think this outfit fits me naturally?

MAZHAR: You look like—what is it?—right, like a dashing, swordless warrior onboarding a journey through the hills and the rivers, just to brandish a kitchen knife at a snotty king sitting on his inherited wealth.

TISHA: Thank you for the big words, kind sir, but I'm naturally overwhelmed. [*She chuckled.*] Now let me finish this mascara quickly. [*Tenderly, she freed herself from his embrace.*]

MAZHAR [*with askew brows*]: But the mistress isn't dressed up for me, is she?

TISHA [*tilting her head sideways*]: I would love to dress up for you, but you don't ask me to. Anyway, I made a new friend just the other day. A very young girl. You know, around 20 to 23. God, I'm getting old.

MAZHAR: Come on! We're only 28.

TISHA [*steering her thoughts back*]: As I was saying, that day, after work, I really craved some hot chocolate. And on my way back home, I visited this new cafe that just opened. There, I noticed her sitting all by herself while I was having my drink. I thought to approach her as a friendly gesture. She looked very pretty, dressed in all black and such. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

MAZHAR: You see, this is the thing I don't get when you say that. What kind of pretty? Those who are pretty aren't bound by shape, size, or color. I'm not sure which you speak of.

TISHA: Oh, she looked like—let me think—Anna Karina.

MAZHAR: I see. You have yet to see a movie with her in it.

TISHA: Put one of her movies on one of these days. I'll check her out. So, yeah, she was very '60s-fashioned with a cigarette between her fingers. I loved that about her. Today, I'm visiting her. We're going to try out outfits together at her house.

[*He moved away to grab a drink.*]

MAZHAR [*about to take a sip*]: That's great! I hope you have fun doing that. [*He cleared his throat.*] Regardless of what you keep hearing from your co-workers, friends, and families, I always believe that you should do as you please. This is the only life we get a shot at anyway, apart from those who get in our way. Apparently, some Nirvana expects their holier-than-thou souls. You and I are destined to turn to dust.

TISHA [*gushing*]: Exactly! I don't know what bothers them so much about what I do with my life. Oh, that's right, I have one, and they don't. [*But immediately, she wrinkled her forehead, lowered her eyeliner, and gazed directly into the eyes of her reflection.*] But I could never manage without your well-thought-out advice.

MAZHAR: Don't be ridiculous. I don't give you any advice. Everything I say is for me personally. You only happen to overhear me when I do. [*Finally, he took the time to finish his drink.*]

TISHA [*facing him with her hands on her waist*]: Tell me, mister. What shall thy do with thy time while thou mistress is gone?

MAZHAR: Oh, uh, maybe I will watch that movie by Kurosawa. There's no time in the workday to watch something of that length anyway.

TISHA [*loosening her arms*]: That's good. Nice. I'm still sorry to leave you alone on a weekend. It's just this week.

MAZHAR: Don't mention it.

[*It was time to leave. TISHA led the way in a haste, and MAZHAR trailed behind. A straight walk through their long, wide hallway would end with them facing their front door. But she halted before departing. Indecisively, she bent over to their plenary rack, placed perpendicular to the door, of shoes, slippers, and heels, and cherry-picked her favorite leather boots. Then, gracefully, she sat on a stool, facing the rack, with the boots at her feet, and looked up to MAZHAR*]

with her pleading eyes and, with her pointing fingers, gestured for him to tie them.]

MAZHAR [*cleverly*]: Is that why you wear slippers on days we struggle to keep peace between us?

[They laughed together hysterically while, admittedly, she nodded her head and, with great struggle, squeezed her feet into the boots. In the transition from roaring laughs to complete silence, MAZHAR knelt down before her knees and began assembling her bootstrings. While doing so, he felt the need to utter his thoughts.]

MAZHAR [*tying the knots*]: You know, I have this song constantly playing in my head—Manhattan Cry by Don Cherry. I heard it for the first time last night when I came home before you, and since then, I can't get over it. It has a very Hellenic tone throughout, sprinkled with fragments of outbursts. It would get to a point where the screams of the saxophones would become indistinguishable compared to a real cry of terror. It all sounds too filthy, too skin-scratching, but somehow it ends up fitting the overall improvisation.

TISHA: That sounds much too exciting! But help me imagine better. Is it like Ornette Coleman?

MAZHAR [*brightly*]: Yes! Or at least, in the same vein of attitudes. And as a matter of fact, he used to play in a band with Coleman.

TISHA: Very interesting. I'm going to have to check him out later.

[However, from the corner of his eyes, he discerned a brown paper bag leaned against the door, and he guessed it, from its spilling of pink and black laces, to hold the outfits she spoke of. With her boots then tied within her grip, he stood up, and as he unbent himself, on a better look, he distinguished a lingerie and a fur cuff hanging out of the bag. The very next moment, obscuring his look, she hurried to tidy up her belongings. Then, she flung both of her arms around his shoulders, gave him a long, passionate kiss on his lips, and waved him goodbye with a swirl of her fingers on her way out. He shut the door with a bang, and over the fading of its echoes, he became

petrified. His weak, shaking feet could no longer hold him upright. And an eventual plummet to the floor left marks of scratches on the door as he fell down with his nails pressed on it. A vignette had begun shadowing his peripheral view. But despite that, he hung his head on a shoulder and peered down the hallway that, blindingly, burned bright because of the regularly-cleaned, glossy, plain, white floor tiles shimmering under the daylight that came from a window at the very end. Then, through it, a white dove flew in, and on the sills it rested, cooing.]

II

A circuit, indeed. Here, I conclude I've ridden a round, circling. Another one: a number must be affixed. No, too numerous to number. Someone else can do it. Rather like a slice of pie, it was. I'm afraid that might be too big of a cut. The last piece of it looms, impending, around some corner. And before I left, the clock ticked and had a talk with me: Starting anew is way past due. If true, too blue of a thing it all is. But why stop without a try? A droplet hit my head. No. Rather, the sky seems to break into a nasty cry without an end in sight, *pro tem*. From the looks of it, tonight the rain must soak some into it, if not all. Curiously foreign, this bike always seems to me. Almost nothing can deter it, whether it be the heavy rain or the burning heat. It passed the test of time alright with not too many hiccups, yes, but I wonder how, even after several years of physical growth slipping by, it could fit me comfortably. Please, some mercy would be kind. That cough tore out of the throat. Remain calm. Imposing, this motion felt on the curvatures of these stone-street hillocks. Anticipate the top with a crawling pace and joyously let loose on the way down, like a child on a slide. Oh, a relief at last; I'd welcome more sneezes wholeheartedly. Words regularly trap themselves in the windpipe, and now, even more. However, this coarse, nasal tone and this winter's shivering and stumbling shan't splinter me; they shan't break any flow; they shan't be withstood. Here I sing: *Sans Toi* from the film *Cléo from 5 to 7*. To go along, some rows of gloomy notes stepping down would certainly lift the spirit. But memory serves me just as well, it seems.

*Et si tu veins trop tard
On m'aura mise en terre
Seule, laide et livide
Sans toi, sans toi*

...

Sans toi

Paris, Pahree—oh, the dreams it holds. Kiss her, him, them, and it. Hold hands to never split. Under the skewed, bulbous tower, all did. Well, love is always fruity and burns with a pleasant smell. And the more one resists, the more it swells. But beside that sky-high structure, we appear as jots, loving and wrangling to one day rot. Laughable: putting on paper the thought. That's about right. Paper, canvas, lined sheet: where the real, honest romance is instated, although infrequent, to last forevermore. Or rather, as long as it's delicately carried through the passage of time by the passing aloof generations. To be transparent, I'm part of one too, and I think of them, wiped from every memory. But optimistically, here in Paris, love, be it yours or anyone else's, is here to stay and bloom, well pollinated. I could be confused with a total loyalist, but a little faith doesn't hurt, I believe. *Je suis un mouill chat sur une mouille nuit.* Ah, they rhyme: *mouille nuit*. Slowly and steadily, letting each vowel drone, does me fine, but I can't expect the world to wait. Tired eyes of them, fellow tenants, pains me to take my time. I sense that that middle-aged couple has seen plenty of fools like me come and go, secretly wishing to be rid of them. Their usual, long-lasting, spiteful mumblings under their slow breaths itch me in various places; I can't make a word of them. Now, only if I could do the same in anglais. They pack a hefty number of languages into their narrow heads, which they twist and spit out of their mouths. Remember, English is one of them. Won't work. Wave the white flag for now. Let's admire the surroundings for a moment. 54 Place Street, this must be, loosely placing in my head. How could I forget the last time I was here? Barely, I could make my way through that rally swarming by. Knees and thighs (exposed or not) are all I remember of this place. But now that I lay my eyes on these buildings, poorly and inconsistently lit under these rows of streetlights, I can appreciate the care that went into the architecture. Despite their antiquated nature, they fit just about any era. The front doors engraved into the intricately lined and shaped walls, and them hiding beneath shadows, shy of lights, make for a deadly picture.

Save that image in your head for later. When you eventually put these on paint and paper, they seem to hold many untold-at-first-glance revelations, even when you thought there was nothing to see. But my habits reveal that I'll probably forget it and later not forgive myself for forgetting it. So, forget that. Anyway, all the pedestrians on the street seem to have tucked themselves in their homes, confined and warm. Also shut down: cafés, restaurants, shops, stalls, and offices. That is to be expected at this hour, but will I, if kismet allows, ever get to see them under the sun? Next morning, I am promised, but I have my faith elsewhere. Something as seamless as sleep could only pass time, but to move me, I would have to give myself up. What is the sky feeling now? Same thing, but it's starting to calm down. And there seems to be something to discern on those terraces. Oh, such lively figures! Moving about, chattering (gibbering, jabbering), hugging, kissing, and raising their diluted drinks up to the sky, all in the dark for the arrival of—what is it?—new year's eve, that's right. Good grief; what a day to forget. I can feel it. Something must be on the other side of the curvature. Either I'm riding into it, or it's riding into me. But, oh, not a *it*, it is. Rather, a *she*. There is quite a distance between us. Still, I can tell: Her drenched, darkened-in-the-dark skin is of olive tone, and its smooth texture—she must be in her youth. And oh, her lithe figure, so luxuriously cloaked under a long, sleeveless, jade green satin dress, so tall that it reaches her toes while also revealing a leg. What should that mean? That bold look she's throwing at me, with her gray eyes on a face mostly hidden behind her straight hair, couldn't be for nothing. Oh my, she whistles too.

— Emmène-moi quelque part!

Oh, sir, clench the brakes tightly; you don't want to run her over! Definitely not where I wanted to stop, but I'm glad I did come to a halt. However, that's too near her to have been parked, awkwardly facing her. Is my front tire resting between her feet? That'd be too embarrassing to check now. She had to be walking right in the middle of the street, too. I complain, but so was I, pedaling. A word

hasn't come out of her, has it? All this empty space of silence left for us to think. Ah, it slipped off my mind; she just ordered me to take her somewhere. Tonight, kismet brings me an assertive character. Well, nice to meet you too. It doesn't look like she's carrying any tools to mug me. There's nothing to worry about. It's safe to heave a sigh of relief in spite of her refusing to elaborate. Yes, that's fine. You're free to rest your drippy arms like that on the handles as long as there isn't a sudden awakening of some kind in you to assault me. I think I've got a clue: Quell this riddle of my face and my stare, and your quest shall be given to you. Pardon me, but in between these shushing raindrops, to disappoint you, I can't decipher a meaning. There must be something silly slapped on my face to make her break out that lovely smile. Oh, her teeth—so white, so even. Just about enough to please a dentist. I can't help but liven up my face along with hers. What a wonderful, wordless exchange between two strangers! Wait, she seems to have grown tired of it. Watch out. Take it easy. Sharp vampire nails of that length do hurt. Why struggle so much just to have a seat upfront, face-to-face, when this bike can quite comfortably carry you on the back of it? Alright, have it your way. I don't mind much your slovenly grace. Here's something to consider: With your arms flung around my back and your legs clenched to my whole body, we might as well stay idle for the rest of the night. Great, the second hint to a play, a joke, a mockery, or whatever this could be: You can't escape my sight when I'm this close and uptight. Right. Now, how much can you resist me?

—C'est impossible!

—Qu'est-ce que c'est?

—Ce.

—Ce quoi?

—Tu parles anglaise, madame?

—Oui. I'd like to think so.

—It's impossible to go anywhere with you clinging to me like that.

The message seems to have passed on to her. There. Look at how mobile we are now, with your legs wrapped around my waist. She reminds me of a picture of a baby monkey hanging off the shoulders of its mother's. Meanwhile, the truth lingers and pokes: We've just met.

—Tourne e le! The other way!

The few choices that I've got left can fade away for her, for the sake of these vacant streets, for the wetness of this night. Unexplainably insistent is all she comes across as, but I sense, albeit ambiguous, a soft, amiable person hidden under the edge of her words, someone I must know. However, no more moving forward for me, for she must pull me back the other way for now, for me to reminisce on all the things I've put behind me. Ah, how unnatural it is to turn around my ride with a companion. She looks very thinly shaped, but that doesn't necessarily make this bike any lighter. One good thing to come out of this is this downward slope, so consistently even that I could start swinging to my heart's content. Leave out pedaling entirely except your hands; keep them halfway pressed on the brakes just in case.

—Modern men. I love them. Not always, not when basked in an already-coming-off façade, not when they eventually lecture me on the *flu*, not when they show me what I should be. Only sometimes, only when they're free of all mirage, only when they sell themselves to be true, only when they let me walk free. It's hard to find a man with all these conditions, but I happen to know one. He never gets in my way, and neither do I get in his. Secluded, we make love like lemonade, quick and easy, and when we come—oh my—the harmony between us! That makes life worth lusting for. But my mother, back at home in Pakistan, lives a life in stark contrast to mine. While I button my shirt after all the fun, I get tremendously overwhelmed by guilt. No, not of my life here, but of her life there. Confined within the limits of the kitchen apart from nights, shackled, is how her will to live fades, one day at a time. And that's

forced on her by this wicked, controlling, insincere animal of a man, her husband-by-law, who never lets a word come out of her pretty mouth. Sometimes, I wish I were dead in her belly so that they could have their first child, a son like they prayed for, instead, and so I didn't have to witness her swallow everything.

—Ah, that's absolutely misery for just about any being, let alone for an aging woman like her! From the very gut of my spirit, I feel sorry for her. As shocking and horrific as it is, I'm not completely removed from stories like your mother's. Believe me, I understand how that must be. I come from a land no different than yours. They all see things of that sort happen daily and think there's nothing to question because nobody ever does. Obviously, I don't know her at all, but I can tell she doesn't either. She's grown accustomed to a life of that kind, which is no kind at all. Not because she believes it's all fair to her, but rather because she is conditioned to choose from the living she has to a living down on the streets. Nothing in-between. My apologies; I didn't mean to be too analytical. Putting aside my meandering speech, I guess you couldn't bring her over here. Could you?

—Non.

Her recurring stillness revisits her face, and for me to precisely judge my own lack of sincerity, isn't that just wonderful? I can feel her limbs letting go of my back slightly. What is it that I said to bite her? Oh, there must be a word—unguessable to me but rather crude and left open to her—to make those reddened, swollen eyes shed heaps of tears like that. At this stage, I might as well forget the rest of the world behind her and before us, for her tears with her mascara paint unpleasantly on her cheeks now. Go on. You have something else to say. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. A few false starts, a few stumbles—happens to the most well put together, go on.

—Despite everything, there's a part of me I can't stand. Life and death—I have figured it all out for myself. Just stop thinking; none of it needs to be understood. What's the point to it all anyway? Do what you feel like doing, and you'll sleep well. But there seems to be something that stems from me naturally that I can't resist. Oddly and unreasonably, I wish for someone—only one—to intrude into my life. I want them to get in my way and let me get in theirs. These I meet: fools. And that's me being kindled with kindness. They don't ever fear losing me. How is my heart expected to contain that? I'm tired of being a plaything at all times. A woman needs to be yearned for. She is not just the goods. Anyone who knows me knows I love poetry and painting and would fully dedicate my whole life to them if I were more disciplined. Not one of these *Tom*, *Dick*, and *Harry* care to know me deeply; they don't listen. *Personne*, non.

—This too, like everything else, is between black and white, I don't doubt. And surely, I have turned out to be no different thus far. But I can be *Mark*—the exception. But not to woo you or get you to take a bait, but rather to brighten your night, acknowledging your presence. So, to begin, what's your name?

As if it were snow that has been pouring, her frozen posture that my torso bears cools me too. That momentary exchange of words cleared much of the noise that the drops make, but they're here again to fill in this silence. Gently, they fall on our heads, very unlike in the beginning. A drop, and then the next, oh, a miss, a drop again. I'd very much like an answer from you instead of this riddle that you present with your stare every time. Again, these nails do pierce the skin, and even more so when you grab my face with that much hostility. Her inching closer—I take it she has been wooed. Not what I meant, but I suppose there's no other meaning she could make out of my words. Things often begin for her this way; yes, I understand, but just how often? A number must be affixed. No, too numerous to number. Someone else can do it. Her lush, tender, soft lips do warm mine well. Much of her aforementioned passion shows itself more clearly now. But she is

right. There's no fun in thinking. To be fair, taking her into my arms as well would be a heartening gesture. And these handles—I could let them loose. I shouldn't, but her pull grows as our kiss flattens our faces. Eyes needn't be closed. But it's too late. A sideways peer tells us that we're unstoppably headed straight into a café.

[Above MAZHAR, his finely-combed, patchy-wet, fresh head of hair played around his long-bearing bugbear, a bumblebee. It bumped noisily along with the jingling and jangling of his house keys that he jumbled in his fist after being through with locking the front door in three different spots. With his house satisfyingly secure behind his back, he set about to not only bathe in the sun but also with the motive for an experiment to see where and just how far his legs alone, without the obsessive mind guiding them, could take him up the city while embracing every moment as they came to him. So he began, stepping down to the street to greet a quiet neighborhood with nobody around. The wind blew low, and when high, it whistled in prolonged waves like a flute, along with the hissing leaves on the ground. It was pleasant to the ears, but not elsewhere; it only brought irritating heat with its sways that his clothes were much too warm for.]

MAZHAR *[to himself]*: In the blink of an eye, it's over. The colder days this year could be counted on only six fully-fingered hands. I can remember no more than ten winters in my life up to this point that stayed for almost two months. I should be excused for the weather alone. Anyway, raise your shirt sleeves, will you?

[Waddling with him side by side on a wall fence, on its little paws, squeaked now and then a young tabby cat. It grabbed his attention immediately. And so did a curled-up dog down the road.]

MAZHAR *[quietly singing]*:

*Come, jump down, you pussycat
Run into my pleading arms*

*With them wrapped around your fat
This dog can do you no harm.
He's sensible, although stray
And us; we are the same way
He's nowhere near, so why fear?
For he's snoring a heap, far away*

[The cat jumped down the fence before MAZHAR could elegantly end the song, but its instincts took it rather inside the property. Somewhere distant in the sky, a voice broke sternly the call to prayer from a mosque, echoed by a few other voices from elsewhere. It rose eloquently with every phrase. Which all sounded too near to have been from very far. While the call still kept going, on his back, he felt the bump of an arm. A bushy-faced man in a long, shiny, blue velvet robe with a white skullcap on his head revealed himself from MAZHAR's left with an evident rush in his grace. That man walked, flailing his arms, as if nobody really mattered much in his way. Then, carelessly, he took a step much too close to the dog's mouth, springing it up on its feet. It stood upright for a moment, facing the man as he went by, and it would have barked at him if only its drowsiness hadn't put it back to sleep.]

MAZHAR: Good afternoon. Sleep and bloom.

[From a nearby grocery store, the smell of intense turmeric with rice lured MAZHAR's nose and his sight towards itself. The storekeepers were having their lunch in a hurry, breaking out drops of sweat on their foreheads as they did.]

MAZHAR *[mumbling under his breath]*: You all could choke yourself with that speed, and for nothing too. Take a look. There's almost nobody around.

[One of the men, to his surprise, did end up raising his head off his meal, chewing with a mouth half full still, and gazed around just as MAZHAR suggested, swinging his knees back and forth, sitting on

his stool. Over the counter, he caught MAZHAR staring into the store before he could turn away and walk past.]

THE KEEPER [*inching up off the stool with the remainder of the rice in his mouth*]: Can I get you anything, brother? Tell me what you need. The store is still open for business.

[MAZHAR responded with his usual lazy gesture: Shake your head, adding in your hands if necessary. And the next moment, he was completely caught off guard. A shrieking voice blew into his ears from right next to him.]

UNKNOWN: Boo!

[Then, facing to his right, he found out it was no one other than his lovely, dear wife, TISHA with all of her fingers spread wide open at him and her face cheerily lifted. But she wasn't alone. Behind her stood two unrecognizable figures.]

TISHA [*folding a hand of his between her palms, fondly*]: Alright, mystery man, tell me. Where in the hell were you headed at this hour?

[*She brought about the worst phase of stumbling in his mouth.*]

MAZHAR: Here. There. Just this. No. Around the bend, I mean. For a walk.

TISHA [*taken aback*]: A what? Walk? [*She shook away the shock from her head.*] It was just the last year we installed those old-fashioned wall clocks in all our rooms because you wanted them. Because you can't keep track of time otherwise. Then how do you still manage to ignore them all?

MAZHAR [*calmly*]: Now you're being ridiculous. I didn't set the house on fire. Relax.

TISHA [*finally ignited, letting go of his hand*]: Me, ridiculous? I'm terrified of you leaving me alone with the house at any time to wander off to God knows where. You know how happy it would make me to think that you're off to see a lover with whom you truly share things in common? But I would know if you did. You've got to be unapologetically honest, too. God, I'm just glad I caught you along the way.

MAZHAR [*hugging her one-handed*]: That was only one time, and even so, I'm sorry. I would have come back today if you had called.

TISHA [*gently pushing him back*]: Sure, you would. Hear our tummies grumbling? Anyway, let me introduce you to my friends. [*She turned around to them, still within his hold.*] Babe, remember earlier this morning I was telling you about that girl I befriended lately? [*She laid a palm across towards her ANNA KARINA-like friend, like a goddess, directing MAZHAR's eyes swiftly to this stranger, who confidently stood with gray eyes, an even bob haircut, an open poppy red trench coat around her shoulders, and a tight white turtleneck covering her slim neck.*] Well, I brought her with me. Say hello to Afri. [*She continued with chuckles.*] My inner poetess is making a comeback, I tell you.

AFRI [*curiously*]: Wait, you didn't tell me you wrote poetry. Since when?

TISHA: Like I said, I don't anymore. Who has the time to write or to read? The world has long moved on from all that.

AFRI: That too.

TISHA [*shifting her palm then towards her other company, which, unlike AFRI, stood timid with his hair all long and messy and his clothing all black*]: And this is her older brother, Faisal. [*She put her hand down at last.*]

[The siblings smiled and nodded as their eyes contacted MAZHAR's, but he responded to that with words instead.]

MAZHAR: Well, it's nice to meet you two. And this is our house. You both are very welcome.

FAISAL *[with eyes squinted, pointing up left to a tall white apartment]*: Oh, is it that one?

AFRI: That's such a nice, open balcony.

MAZHAR: It is, but no. *[He emphasized, laying down his arms out in the air.]* It's right here, where we stand, in front of a grocery store. It's really as convenient as it gets.

[They each returned a stunned look, nearly at the same time, almost expecting an explanation. But TISHA instead, finding it funny, faked an annoyance on her face with a light slap on one of MAZHAR's shoulder bones.]

TISHA: Are we done? I have a delicious lunch planned for all of us. Now, let's all go inside. Our house is just a couple of corners away.

[They took a fairly quiet, short walk together, stopping at the entrance of the house. TISHA, with no patience to stand outside, kept pulling on the handles of their door recklessly, ready to barge in.]

MAZHAR *[to the siblings]*: I don't know where they come from, but watch out for that bee buzzing around. It's hard to tell; it could be a wasp too. Even worse.

[AFRI let out a small shriek and stepped back, catching it in her sight. And TISHA gave up trying, having the locked door realized.]

TISHA [*raising the corner of an eyebrow with two of her fingers embarrassingly*]: Right, I'm an idiot. [*She turned to face MAZHAR.*] Sir, please open the door for us.

[*The keys in his fist all this while now freely jingle again. As he bent on his back to unlock the door, TISHA spun around to show her smirky, tiresome face to her comparably less tired friends.*]

TISHA: You two must be incredibly hungry. If not, I sure am.

[*They both blushed and nodded like brides. To the sound of a click from the door, she turned back.*]

TISHA: You're still at it? Hey, let me tell you what. [*She leaned down to MAZHAR's ears.*] How about you fix a second door on top of this that comes with ten different locks? [*A few quiet laughs broke from her back.*] I've really got to pee! Hurry up!

MAZHAR [*struggling to place the keys*]: Almost done.

[*Again, she turned around, but with a hand on her stomach.*]

TISHA: Now tell me something, one of you. I don't remember much, but whose idea was to add in the grass?

[*The door clicked for a second time, but TISHA ignored it.*]

AFRI: I had nothing to do with anything today. [*She rolled her eyes, like she had enough.*] It must be Faisal's, I can tell.

FAISAL [*casually*]: Hey, I don't remember either. But I was wondering, does Mazhar smoke?

TISHA: Nope. Not even a cigarette.

[*At long last, the door clicked open.*]

MAZHAR [*in a grand tone*]: A sweet home is sweet. Come in all; I greet you not sourly either. [TISHA dashed in fast without stopping to hear him finish.]

[*It was the lunch hour. Within a very short amount of time, TISHA had taken her shower, cooked all the meals, and served them on their six-chaired, wood-grain table with MAZHAR's help. And the other two only waited on the sofa with their heads down on their phones. Despite the teasing aroma that the dishes left, they weren't allured to the table right away. TISHA clapped a few times to get their attention while fixing the chairs.*]

TISHA [*through the noise of the chairs rubbing*]: Over here! Look what I've cooked for all of us today! My favorite meal to make and eat—mostly to eat. Honey, can you get the big bottle of Coke from the refrigerator? [MAZHAR went and came back, flying.] Thank you. [*The bottle let a sizzling sound out, and the guests took their seats.*] On the menu: a moderately spicy tandoori chicken to go with not-too-hard-to-chew, fluffy, thinly sliced naans. That is important, as we both have weak sets of teeth. Alongside, I've served two different types of sauce—both custom-made—with complementary onions and lemons if any of you need them. I've made this recipe plenty of times before, so it really wasn't that much work.

FAISAL: It still looks like a lot of work. Why don't we all eat together? Get off the phone, Afri.

AFRI [*opening her camera*]: Yes, yes. But a picture first is a must.

[*Staggering, the guzzling mouths wiped clean their dishes in an instant, except MAZHAR. While he ate, with hands surrendered from the table and relaxed backs, they waited patiently for him to finish his meal. The setting sun, still far from the horizon, penetrated the room from the window behind MAZHAR, beaming. And it took away all the fine details of his face in the meantime.*]

AFRI [*spent, heavily breathing, and struggling to word her thoughts*]: Good God, Tisha! You could be a profes— [*She tried shushing her incoming belches.*] —sional chef. The way you cook is a gift. A gift, I'm telling you. God, I should've slowed down a little. Terrible choices—that's me.

TISHA [*holding her glass of coke*]: That makes two of us. Except for the "chef" part. [*Taking a sip, she gave her a smug smile.*]

MAZHAR: I'm almost done eating. How about you all hang out in the bedroom while I sort the dishes?

[*As MAZHAR readily dipped his hands into the lather with the tap water running, almost all nearby ambient sounds escaped his ears. Nonetheless, he could tell with utter confidence that not a single word had come out of the bedroom. Amidst the confusing absence of their chattering and the circular rubbing of his sponge on the plates, the foam began to disappear. Leaving only half of the dishes to dry on the rack, he walked to the bedroom to ask TISHA to help him find the spare soap.*]

MAZHAR: Tish, honey, you know where—

[*He stopped dead on his tracks, right beneath the door frame of the room. With shivering lips and a bulky, stagnant heart, he stood to watch the following unfold: TISHA sat on the bed in between her two friends with a worried look down to the floor as she, with a sense seemingly of guilt, hastened to bring her now ungirdled, torso-unveiling, and raised-to-the-neck black tunic down to her waist. Her glued partners then removed themselves, each inching closer to the far ends of the bed with a similar shame on their faces.*]

TISHA [*straightening her dress*]: Yes, babe. You were saying? [*She then fixated on her hair instead.*]

MAZHAR: Do you—soap—dishes... Yes. As I was saying, do you remember where you put the spare dish soap?

TISHA: It's in the top-left cabinet, behind some jars. And also, please come join us and chat. It feels empty without you here.

[A while later, after having done the rest of the dishes squeaky clean and taking his time doing so as if avoiding any interaction, he finally decided to sit together with them. On one end of the bed, he was by himself, and on the other, the rest of them sat distantly like an audience. Without saying much, TISHA reached for the guitar by the bed and handed it over to MAZHAR, placing it on his lap.]

TISHA: You look incomplete without it. You two are like Siamese twins, meant for and living for each other. You know something; it's a sinister thought, and God forbid me from witnessing it, but not even in my wildest imaginations can I imagine you on your deathbed without your guitar lying beside you. *[She had FAISAL and AFRI in awe.]* That's true, you two. And let me tell you both more. Mazhar loves his music—his art—much more than he loves me, and not for a moment do I feel wronged. Those are the integral parts of his life, and mine too, now that I've been with him for so long. And with me, he really compromises. A passionate artist-wife would rather suit him.

AFRI *[poking around TISHA's waist]*: Aren't you that?

TISHA: Not even close. I have a regular head for a regular 8-5 job.

MAZHAR: And so do I.

TISHA *[eyeing MAZHAR]*: You treat that full-time job very much like part-time. Baby, I know where your heart's at.

MAZHAR: Of course, you know me well. But tell me, why must this silly string tool bring such a profound meaning to my existence, as you put it?

TISHA [*sighing*]: Again? You keep calling it a tool. Why? Look at it this way: The guitar acts like a spiritual hand that guides you through all the dark corners of life. It's keeping you safe, you know?

FAISAL [*astounded*]: That's deep. Carry on.

AFRI [*resting her chin on a palm*]: It really is. I'm sorry to interrupt.

TISHA: And furthermore, it looks great on you.

MAZHAR: And so it does on you, or anyone for that matter. You speak of it like it's a dress. The guitar just has that reputation now. But I find that deceiving when, all in all, it's something you use to unleash your ideas and perhaps even explore them. [*Mind-numbed, the siblings put their heads down on their phones.*] This guitar is completely useless when you don't make something out of it. Capiche? I'd rather have a picture taken with a saxophone anyway.

TISHA [*in a bold tone*]: No! [*She paused her expression for a moment.*] I won't let you sell this guitar.

[*Simultaneous chuckles broke out from the audience.*]

MAZHAR: That's childish. [*He gave up to lighten up.*]

FAISAL [*patting on one of MAZHAR's shoulder arms*]: Cheer up, man! That was only the sense of humor we share, although dark.

AFRI [*to MAZHAR, dreamily*]: I think you would really dig Lana Del Rey. She has an artist's personality. Well, of course, because she is one of them. I don't know what I was saying. But I worship her—she is perfect. Her makeup, her hairdo, her vintage fashion—just

everything about her is seductive and sexy. Sometimes I really envy her and wish for some of those perks in me, but oh well.

FAISAL: And I love, personally speaking, Robert Smith. He is an idol of mine. It's just recently that I've been thinking of straightening my hair and making it all spikey with hair gel. [*He ended with a stroke of his fingers through his hair.*]

TISHA [*to FAISAL*]: Same here. But, hey, don't mess with your curls. They look really good on you. [*She touched hers as well. Then she faced MAZHAR, with her fingers still in her hair.*] Honey! Won't you play something? How about that tune you came up with just the other day?

MAZHAR: I can do that.

[*The room darkened without warning, for the sun had almost been touching the horizon as it sank rapidly. Its dim rays only accented MAZHAR's side profile as they, once again, invited themselves through a window of the house, and in the meantime, his wife and the guests were left in the dark, to furl in the shadows. And the strings chimed: tung, tong, toong, ting, teng, tang, as MAZHAR tuned them right. Then, unannounced, a fluorescent light switched on, blinding every eye in the room.*]

TISHA: It completely slipped off my mind, but didn't we plan to go shopping, Afri? We did, yes. I need more black dresses, and she needs a pair of leather boots. We better hurry, then. First, let me put on some lipstick quickly. And, babe, would you be at all interested in going with us? I ask that knowing how much you hate mall music.

MAZHAR [*waving his response*]: No, I'm good. In fact, let me tell you what. [*He got up, walked to his desk, rummaged it for a pair of earbuds, and swung them in the air as he found them.*] Take these with you.

III

In the mane of a, you, our protagonist, groan. Her neck heeds the nomad's heart. For she's wild, she understands. But soon, she'll leave to turn into a. Has she not already? Slowly, awake! Slowly, the clicking heels even up, shaping, rounding, then spinning and spinning. Krrrrring! The bells have called. What's with the slumping? Pump some air into your tobacco-untouched, for the sake of those unfinished works. The consequences. The forthcoming end you wished for, feared, and evaluated the meaning of bears all the consequences too. For the better? You can think so to calm down. But that is only true in the eyes of the beholder. Leave all those miseries for the moment, yes? Memories? Oh, miseries, I'm attuned now. Yes. Three-quarters of the way, you are. Don't you see? You broke a line away from the coil that pained you to near death. Don't you hear? Oh, those peace-bringing brutish roars of waves, for the sea beats against the shoreline again and again, splashing on the road even. I do feel the. On my arms, I feel them. And this wind—the way it blows! Some it pulls me back, and other it pushes me forward. Times. I don't understand. Where does it want me to go? Think not much of it; it's the mood, the way of nature. Any meaning is only your meaning. It's of significance if, and only if, you can get a crowd to interpret. I think the wind wants me to go back to. It's coming. I can sense it coming from the deep insides of my mind to the eardrums: A samba beat, sweetened, mellowed, and oiled by the chings of the chords, washes me back to the past, distant and smudgy. And those pipe-like whistles—I could roll my eyes and get lost. Has the world, or have I, disappeared?

Poppo

Poppopporrro rrorro ro rri ro

You try, you whistle. But it's just a swoosh.

Rolled all the Rs like a true native, good. But was that life-resolving? If you can't, what's the moral, at the very least? All these questions—am I to be taken for the Creator? Certainly not, but there are some who can answer questions like these. Yes, self-made answers by self-proclaimed gods, shy of acknowledging their mortality—the world's full of them. Understood: There are only questions in this prosaic world. But seldom are dreams in accord with. In a chord, I am. Spain; the wind insists on taking me back to Spain. Console me with this desert, this sea, and this lane—those that I could view from a distance through a back window. From afar, I judged all these together as a poignant painting, not a picture to be sweating in. You can rest your mind. This scorching evening is to blame. A one-way highway, yes, but admirable, if only for its many turns. The jinkiness of it, at the minimum, keeps pedaling from feeling like a rut. Carry on like you are. Hold on. There was a rustle of leaves around the bend that you just left behind. Unnatural. There, again. Louder, it grows and grows, so clear, so near now. What have I got to lose? And what have you got to win? Find that out for yourself. Now, frightened, you feel an added weight on your bike. There's no harm in glancing back, for in the evening light, all you can make out is a pale, feminine, short-even-haired, darkly dressed figure gazing up to the motionless, starry sky with their dreamy blue eyes, lost and taking absolutely no notice of the pedaller. And they speak softly:

Yo lo haría si pudiera. Pinta como Van Gogh. Pinta lo que veo. No sé qué hay dentro de mí, pero me siento fantástico.

They seem like an adventurer gone far off wandering in its mind, untying it nerve by nerve. Orororo, como Van Gogh. You think, but then you say:

Hallo! ¿Eres una fantasma?

Answer:

Si soy una fantasma. Y tú... un extranjero?

You sink into their words as though they were the sea. Stop drowning; you can swim. Besides, they're as calm as a poppy, although blue. I forgot I could. Coming back, they reason:

Tu color... unfamiliar.

Admire them rubbing their entire face with both of their warm palms in an attempt at erecting their consciousness. Now, they add code-switching:

I'm sorry. I'm all but well. It was not important to mention that. Beat me, por favor, wherever you want.

So aggrieved. Lightly, going ballistic even. Hold back no compassion. I shan't. I say, reassuringly:

Your words were only descriptive, not demeaning. There's no need to regret them.

Ah, a big reassurer. What is the helpless world to do without you? Take a guess at how much they absorbed your words, then flip it once upside-down and once inside-out. Is that much? Well, they're telling you nothing. So, you steer the words, introducing a new subject that is closer to their state than their shell, and ask:

I imagine you're seeing this mundane sky with the smokey clouds twisting, shrinking, growing, and turning right before your clear eyes through the fog of your half-conscious mind. Very well, an experience to be experienced certainly. But what then, when the world reverts back to its original shape? Do you let go of these images as just a pleasant dream?

Gently, like a newborn, they rest their head on your shoulder, and you feel the immense warmth of it rising. Soon, the destination

might be a lousy, crying, nowhere-land hospital, with me as the paramedic. Relax; that happens; you should know. Besides, you haven't agreed to help yet. Charitable, I am, and a casualty, they are, but I'm still thinking. Unanticipated, these words flow out of them:

I will drug me then, more and more.

The dilemma begins:

Surely not everything's a bore. Aren't you a little dissatisfied with the false narratives that these drugs tell you?

Yes, true, but the real thing leaves me empty just as much; it's not the truth I identify with. Everything comes to an end—we expire like jokes, quick.

The dilemma ends with shutting your mouth, for there's not much to be argued there. A pang here, a pang there, everywhere—they bank up, down to your toes, they flow. I can't stow my tears in my eyes any longer, so I don't. Oh, hello, moon, illuminate all the gloom, I plea. They lighten both of your weights with:

You're a singer? I heard you sing. Or hum. What was it?

João Gilberto. Aos Pés da Cruz.

Ah! The Gilbertos'! When she passes, I smile, but she doesn't see. What a sweet sound too! You know Janis Joplin, right? I'm practically raised on her songs.

Joplin, bueno.

Your back begins to cool a bit. A relief to you, yes, but their head isn't heat-ridden yet. And on a tangent, they pour:

But, with the whole of my heart, I hate them. Who? Those that I'm tied to. My parents. Hippies. I can't bear the gap. What will heal this hole in my heart? They stole my heart—not romantically but criminally; I don't have it anymore. But, oh, listen to them talking on their high horse. Love is all; love is free. We accept anyone without exception. What about me? If I don't fit into their small world, I must not be real. A defect, as they put me. I couldn't care less if this junk takes their lives. Or mine. Por favor. Take mine.

I gather the strength to. Sigh. Gather the love to. They're high—oh, so high. But regardless, seldom are people in accord with each. In a chord, lovers entwine. The end isn't nigh, no. Tell them. Speak. You say:

Take a look at the sea. Moving and flowing, it cares about no boats rowing. All those lives, all those swimmers—they don't put a dent. It's too big for that to make a difference. Peaceful, isn't it?

Like that—ssshhh—ssshhh—wails the cunning sea, infinitely. And the unoiled, unkept wheels begin squeaking as you travel farther and farther away from the painting. But, no, nothing. Silence is all. Death like. I weigh less and less; am I forgetting? But I sense something around. On your back, you feel a bulge rubbing against the lip of your pants. Not deliberately, I don't think. They treat your neck as a hanger for all of their clothes, having stripped. Commonly done under influence, yes. And what's with the temperature rising? Perhaps it's just the brittle climate shifting. You tell yourself, fooling, but the gust of fright has already touched you dearly. The steeping flames from their body take absolutely no time to spread onto yours. In your ears, close, they scream, and on top of yours, from the bottom of their gut. If I just bump the wheels into the guardrail, it will. Flinging the fiery two of you in the air, the bike stands balanced, eventually collapsing as you hit the surface of the water below. By the mossy sea rocks, along with the fish, you swim, fearing the slow throttling of the water. Swimming because you can.

[The doorbell buzzed later than expected, but MAZHAR ran to the door at once nonetheless.]

MAZHAR: Come in, sweet one. Why the dull face?

[TISHA entered, paying no mind to his words.]

MAZHAR: Upset? *[Softly, he shut the door.]*

TISHA *[walking in a direction with her back to him]*: Tired.

MAZHAR: Not upset?

TISHA: And drunk. A little. *[Pausing on her steps, she stood with a stoop. And then, clumsily, she raised one of her arms halfway.]* Take me to bed. *[Letting her arm fall, she carried on.]* Never mind, I'll go on my own. You do too much for me already. Oh God, I—I need to throw up.

[He handled her from behind, taking her to the bathroom, where she emptied her whole stomach swiftly. A few feet away from the toilet, standing at the door, he watched her throw up the remainder. And while she cleaned herself, he thought of a question.]

MAZHAR: What was that anyway?

TISHA: Oh, yeah, that was the lunch I made today.

MAZHAR: No. You were talking in a grateful tone. Do I make you feel like a burden?

TISHA: Will you shut up? Let's go to bed. *[Pushing him aside, she got out of the bathroom.]*

[Getting hold of an arm of hers, he stopped her from walking away.]

MAZHAR: In these clothes?

TISHA: Now what? You're insecure about what you wear to bed? Oh, you mean mine. Help me change, will you?

MAZHAR [*quietly*]: Of course, sweetheart.

[*Returning to her unassembled bed, she collapsed on it right away, staring up at the ceiling and gently beating the side of the bed with her ankles. Meanwhile, he began looking on the desk chair, in a big pile of clothes, for her sleepwear that she had left there that morning. He found them just as she closed her eyes.*]

MAZHAR [*waving her clothes in her direction*]: These ones?

TISHA [*with her eyes still shut*]: Yes.

MAZHAR [*standing before her knees*]: Lift your legs, hon. Let me change you into your sleeping pants. [*She did as he told her, but dropped them too soon.*] Yes, and keep them lifted.

[*Amid the undressing and dressing, she resisted him as she realized a sharp pain below.*]

TISHA [*pressing her eyes*]: Ouch! That hurts too much. Pull the pants up softly around the buttocks.

[*He gave up altogether and sat beside her, an arm away.*]

MAZHAR: Hurts? Why does it?

[*Like waking up from death, she sprang up with open, wide eyes and a hold of her own pants.*]

TISHA: I'll do it myself.

MAZHAR [*stroking his chin while losing track of time in the patterns of the rug below*]: I really wonder why. [*He changed his tone to sarcastic.*] He has to wonder why. That aligns well with what I heard about him from his parents: slow and unrefined.

TISHA [*sternly*]: Say what you mean.

[*With her head turned, she peered at him, hanging on to his words. And her eyes reflected her corroding comfort.*]

MAZHAR [*bluntly putting*]: I know why.

[*A deep sigh moved through and out of her windpipes as she slapped both her thighs, checking the same patterns as him.*]

TISHA: What is it that you want to hear?

MAZHAR: Whatever you have, say.

TISHA [*begrudgingly*]: Really? You don't seem to care at all, as usual. Why should I bother explaining anything? [*Edging nearer to him, she made up her mind to explain.*] Okay, look. You don't ever believe it, but I want you to take my words for once when I say how much you really mean to me. You're my world—my everything. You—you're the reason that today I walk, not only freely but fearlessly. I feel sheltered and lucky when I'm around you. And I'm terrified when I'm not. Have some faith in me. This is all nothing for you to worry about. [*She held his hands with the utmost affection.*] I'm here with you now, feel? Nothing, I repeat. No, I reassure. How about you see this in a different way? How? Well, to tell you the truth, I'm only exploring my inner fantasies, wishes, desires, or whatever you want to call them, so that I can live a life without regrets. Not everything is possible with just you, and that's okay. You don't have to mold yourself for me. That would be selfish to ask for.

[She failed to bring a clear, emotional response to his still, cold face. A few noisy breaths later, he made his feelings evident by the tears that flowed across his face and up to his chin. And while at it, refusing an eye-to-eye, he shook his head, sending her a hazy notion.]

TISHA [*with great concern*]: I hate seeing you like this. Please tell me. Is there anything wrong with what I said?

MAZHAR [*at once*]: Not at all. Not at all. It's just that I can't bring myself to imagine you with somebody else. If only it were easy to be ignorant.

TISHA [*lifting her voice*]: Babe, they are no threats to you.

MAZHAR [*with a growing temper*]: What are they, then?

TISHA: Temporaries.

MAZHAR: You take me for a fool, don't you? Temporaries. I've seen, with others, how this usually goes. First comes one, then the other; temporaries after temporaries with no end in sight.

TISHA: Yes, you're right, but mostly because they forget to come to their senses. Can't you trust me? Why should I care at all if you struggle to see me as an exception? I really don't think you love me.

MAZHAR [*in a deeper tone*]: You seem to see through everything. What is it that I feel?

TISHA: What you feel is very upfront. First and foremost, you think that I'm never good enough for you. I lack a good sense of art, as you always put it. Despite me trying out so many things, like learning an instrument or how to paint well, you somehow always manage to pick out a flaw from the core. Not even the poems I used

to write changed much. Corny, that's all they are to you. There's one thing you need to get used to, and that is that not everyone's born a genius like you. I could never be compared. [*As her speech gradually deteriorated, chokingly, she sobbed.*] I'm so incredibly sorry, but I was destined to be born into this withering, old, dumb woman that you have beside you. I really wish I weren't those. Didn't I tell you how I did in school? Terrible grades. Fs all over.

[*They continued with their roles reversed.*]

MAZHAR [*flinging an arm around her*]: Oh, you didn't need to go that far! I never meant to hint at any of that. Not only are my beliefs the total opposite, but I also propagate against those petty thoughts. Grades, certificates, and all—they speak for trained thinkers. Self-thinkers are the ones that move with time. You should know better, after all these years, what I stand for. Now hear from me, alright? I think you're intelligent, humble, a great listener, cool-tempered, cheery, and everything I wish to see in more people, including myself. I can talk about anything with you, whether that be literature, films, music, politics, or just life. You're a great conversationalist with a great sense of humor. We've had too many funny moments to count. Remember that one time when you accidentally tripped on a sidewalk? It would be too cruel of me to not pick you up and brush the dust off you, but I remember saying afterwards: Stop kissing the ground! [*He made her laugh quietly amidst the tears.*] And just like that, it numbed the pain in your bruises. You don't take everything seriously, and not everything, as I believe, needs to be. There aren't many like you. I meet new people now and then, but you always stand out to me. And no, I can't and won't try to evade my own words. During heated arguments, I may have said things to hurt you, but you know I don't mean anything terrible. Words are like swords in a staged fight; you drop them as soon as you call a truce.

TISHA [*raising her brows, avoiding eyeing him*]: What about that female friend of yours? Oh, the ways she practically throws herself at you.

MAZHAR: She is married, for heaven's sake!

TISHA: Those ancient days are gone, sweet thing. God, I don't know. You confuse me a lot. [*She took a short break to remember her complaints.*] And—and there's the fact that you never call me hot or sexy. If you did find me those, why would you hold yourself back from saying them? I'm awfully tired of your ping-pong ways.

MAZHAR: Yes, and glance over the many times I call you adorable.

TISHA [*with much anger*]: They're not the same thing!

MAZHAR: They are the same to me. Is it a crime now to think of you as more than just flesh and bones?

TISHA [*squinting her eyes*]: What?

MAZHAR: Forget it. My point is that if I didn't find you sensually attractive, my body wouldn't respond to you. And it does, much.

TISHA [*with a hopeful look*]: Do you really mean that?

[*He resolved her doubt with a peck on her cheek.*]

MAZHAR: Truly, I do.

[*In an attempt to treasure a moment this mushy, she embraced him with much-needed warmth.*]

TISHA: We love each other, baby. Let's not fight.

MAZHAR: I don't want to, either.

[These kind, feathery words brought down the height of their prickly sentiments, reducing them to a brief, quiet moment.]

TISHA *[beginning with a sniff]*: I promise to you, I won't bring them home again.

MAZHAR: But do you still plan to see them? I don't mean casually—you know what I mean.

TISHA: Like I said, this really doesn't mean anything other than listening to my body. You're still mine, and I'm yours. That's all that matters at the end of the day.

[Reading the response on his face, his cold and impassive look perplexed her to the degree of being mildly annoyed.]

TISHA: Wasn't that good enough?

[First, he whistled through his nose. And then he rested his forehead on a thumb.]

MAZHAR: We can't work this out. The truth is that either this goes away, like a passing cloud, or we end things between us.

[Her tears came back, erupting thickly out of her eyes as she folded them, unresisting.]

TISHA: Again, once again, you threaten me with that. That's your only conclusion. What am I to do without you? *[Her reddened eyes came to light, looking around aimlessly in hopes of finding something.]* You know me better than I do. You know this will all go away soon, and I'll come back running to you. *[Pausing her search, she turned to face him with an earnest but fragile look.]* There is only one favor I ask from you. Without being cruel, answer. Is it too much for you to keep me as a friend?

MAZHAR [*without a second thought*]: I'd rather be a stranger than a friend of yours. And I'm not saying that to spite you, but any kind of closeness to you will always remind me of your love. I can't bear that.

TISHA: Where has my love for you gone? Nowhere. And neither will it go anywhere. It's still where it was. But I understand what you're saying. I can't be so immature here. Though there's one thing for certain: I'll be missing you too much. Please keep that in mind. Ah, my heart can't contain all this! [*She forcedly gave him a smooch despite him not moving an inch.*] It is so late right now. I can't keep my head up anymore. Let me give Faisal a call. [*That time, with a purpose, she looked around and pulled everything out of her purse hanging from her shoulder, expecting to see her phone.*]

MAZHAR: How does he fit now?

TISHA: He'll come pick me up. I'll stay with them for some time until I find a place for myself.

MAZHAR [*raising his head at last, startled*]: Isn't that taking it a bit too far? Hold your horse and calm down. We can sort all that out later. Sleep here; I'm going to the couch.

[*Finally finding her phone, she showed it to him with an awkward smile on her face. And then, ringing, she waited for FAISAL to pick up her call.*]

TISHA [*to the beep of the phone*]: Yes, Faisal? I'm sorry to bother you so late at night, but can you come pick me up? I'll tell you everything later. Alright? I'll be waiting.

[*FAISAL arrived much sooner than MAZHAR expected. While MAZHAR speechlessly stared into a wall, sitting on his bed, she kept whizzing by his face back and forth, packing her clothes. As soon as*

she was done, she quickly ran to the front door, halting right before leaving. And he followed her as clumsily as he could. The wide-open door let some light into the abyss past it. Then, turning around and not even looking at him in his eyes, with a terribly wet face, she hugged him one last time before disappearing into the darkness ahead. His delayed tears began pouring as he stood at the door and stared into the void, unmoving. And just at that moment, all the lights shut off, leaving him in complete darkness.]

IV

A favor of a mighty blue night:
Ever-drizzling, flavorless crystals
Twinning with whistling wind
Now half strong in the dawn
On the ground, all around
Mazhar, collect into and erect
A snow layer, slowly growing.

O, he lays all blue and gray, but
Luckily, impacted and acting quick
A few black men from a basement
Timely climb up the stairs to find
Questions with no suggestions
On his face of his race left like
Waste at such a time and place.

Such fine men in their formalwear:
Real hoot, clean, white suits
That fittingly go with velvet bows,
And to count, three heads feel bound
To hunker down to lift Mazhar up
The ice before his death applies.

Carrying the man in their hands
They take his half-awake body back
To the basement, entering through
A long, crude, repeating hallway, all
Full of hopes, jokes, and dreams
Ending by broadening their views
To a large, happy crowd clapping
In streams within a big rim.

Awaits him, a round, plate-like

Stage with all eyes engaged at an
Empty, wooden chair with a nifty
Little, shy trumpet by its side
And as the cheers come nearly
To a stop, his strong carriers drop
Slovenly, his flailing body on
The seat, tucking his feet neatly
And holding dearly the trumpet near
His loose, clumsy, stout mouth.

Now, the crowd anticipates and waits
For words or grunts out of this world
But after all, taking all the nearby air
In his chest, Mazhar let his best
Note out to ring, and ring unendingly
Until all his air inside ended in nil.

With the end marked, the act sparks
Them, taking its toll on their souls
And knowing that, they show their
Repulsion-less appreciation
Plainly with more raining claps.

Up their seats with beating hearts
The admirers leave, heaving each other
And amid that, a middle-aged man
Questions at leisure, a stranger
A young woman as a friend would.

Q: Which part took your heart the most?

A: The beginning, of course!

Q: Peculiar. Why is that?

A: That's when love was new and at its most!

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