

In a Chord

Written by Hasan Abir

I

Sometime in a lap, the coming of a cold winter midnight brought about an impulse within a scrupulous heart to unravel. And that heart belonged to Mazhar Haque, a brown-tanned, coarse-haired, slightly stout-cheeked, plump-mouthed, wide-nosed, and seldom-closed-eyed man, who believed his ears were in salvation under the power of music. The cobalt blue bike that he rode came with a broken bell, a yellow basket that he stuffed with music sheets, a downtube with the spray paint of the word ZERO, a neon green flashlight that he attached to it as headlights, bearings that he freshly greased, and seats for two. He pedaled again and again into the cold, stirred-in-with-manhole-gas fog, and each time he left the haze, it condensed on his skin. A tune that amazed him, a long-time favorite of his, went by the name *Where or When* by *Johnny Smith*. And uncalled for, it began playing in his head. There wasn't a reason to not be swaying. His and his bike's rhythmically precise swinging 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, one could hardly ever make a crumbling move in a land that equated both the need for climbing higher stories and the need for writing even higher stories. Both men, one from the street and one sipping coffee and looking down from the 20th floor, knew what it took to swap their positions. And 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, as he turned at every crossroad, running into loops every now and then. With time passing by, he kept losing one thought after another; most

importantly, he was losing himself. 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 distance, as he approached the end of a street, he noticed a light, warm in hue, that shone brightly from a basement window, though it illuminated only a small sphere around itself. With lifted eyebrows, he raised all kinds of questions, such as: What follows next? And the only way to know “what” was if he drew himself towards it. A mumbled and faint, but clear enough to tell, spontaneous tribalistic drumming resounded 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 broke him to think otherwise. As he pedaled closer to the music and as it grew louder, he began feeling his blood rushing to his head, shaping it to break out and split open, or so it seemed. His volatile, anxious mind repeatedly played this one trick: as he imagined, a crude figure, with vengeance, burst out of that basement door. And when he was 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 to quiver, but only for a short instance. The following event abruptly 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. Meanwhile, slowly flying towards the darkness, the butterfly smoothly began losing its shimmer, a flutter at a time. And in the very next moment, nimbly, it sprang into the colorless void with no sign of a return, leaving a curse: he instantly 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, floating on a puddle of water slowly going to the drain, came to his attention.]

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

[Carrying on, he brushed his teeth. But the brush in his mouth indefinitely stayed still in one place as a series of circling thoughts clouded his mind. Falling back to a previously proven practice, he adjusted the circulation of his head to bring in a tune that he had freshly heard—that would help drown out those thoughts. And the magic worked once again; the song refused to leave once it came. The faucet caught the drops of his wet, heavy face as he lifted his chin to the mirror. A long stare, eye to eye, shifted the world around him, but, quickly and jarringly, was brought to place as soon as he lowered his gaze to his under-eye depression, muddying his self-perception. Also in the mirror, with the bathroom door open, his wife, TISHA ONWAYEE, appeared, dressed in an archaic, adventurous black tunic. A sturdy leather belt, its center embedded with a symbol of a tree, girded her small waist, and to match the rest, she thought of olive gray leggings as the best. She entered the room with an evident rush, flying across the frame of MAZHAR's mirror to stand in front of her own. While she put on her mascara, the fluorescent light above brightened her light honey-toned face, her cheekbones shadowing over her jaws. Soon, their eyes exchanged looks through the mirrors, sprouting gleeful smiles on both their faces. Joyfully, first, he grabbed a towel and dried himself. Second, he threw it on the bed. Third, wrapping his arms around her waist from behind, he brought his mouth to her ear.]

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

[And she returned double the kisses.]

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

MAZHAR: You look like—what is it? Right. Like a dashing, swordless warrior, ready to board a journey across many hills and rivers just to brandish a kitchen knife at a snotty king sitting on his inherited wealth.

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

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

TISHA [*tilting her head sideways*]: I would love to dress up for you, but you never 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, when I was having my drink, I noticed her sitting all by herself. I thought of being friendly and approached her. She looked very pretty, dressed in all black and such. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

MAZHAR: You see, I never understand what you mean by that. What kind of pretty was she? Pretty isn't exactly a shape, a size, or a color. You have to be more specific.

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: Yes, yes, that filmmaker. I'll check out their movies later. 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 some 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 family, I will always believe that you should do as you please. This is the only life we will ever get a shot at anyway, although, apparently, for those who get in our way, a nirvana somewhere is expecting their holier-than-thou souls. But I assure you, we're 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 after, she wrinkled her forehead, lowered her eyeliner, and gazed directly into her reflecting eyes.*] 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 thou time while thou mistress is gone?

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

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 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 down to their plenary footwear rack, placed perpendicular to the door, cherry-picking her favorite leather boots. Then, facing the rack, she gracefully sat on a stool with the boots at her feet, after which she looked up at 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?

[They both laughed hysterically together 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, and while doing so, he felt the need to utter his thoughts.]

MAZHAR [*tying the left knot*]: 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 strong Hellenic tone throughout, sprinkled with fragments of outbursts. It would get to a point where the screams of the saxophones would become hard to tell from a real cry of terror. The song sounds all 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 [*now tying the right knot, brightly*]: Yes! Or at least, they share the same vein of attitude. 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 eye, he discerned a brown paper bag leaning against the door, which he guessed, noticing the pink and black laces spilling out of it, held the outfits she spoke of. With her boots then tied within her grip, he began unbending himself, and while doing so, he figured, with a better look at the laces, that they were a black lingerie and a pink fur cuff. The very next moment, obscuring his look, she hurried to tidy up her belongings. Then, flinging her arms around his shoulders, she gave him a long, passionate kiss on his lips, and on her way out, she waved him goodbye with a swirl of her fingers. He shut the door with a bang, and with the fading of its echoes, he became more and more petrified. His weak, shaky feet could no longer hold him upright. And when he eventually plummeted to the floor, his nails left marks of scratches on the door.]

A vignette began shadowing his peripheral view. With that, he hung his head on a shoulder and peered down the hallway, through the shimmering of the glossy white floor tiles, to the window at the hallway's end. Then, flew in through the window a white dove, and on the sills it rested, cooing.]

II

A circuit, indeed. Here, I conclude I've ridden a round, circling around. 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 the pie must be looming, 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. By 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 so comfortably. Please, some mercy would be kind. That cough tore out of the throat. Remain calm. Imposing, this motion feels on the curvatures of these stone-street hillocks. Anticipate the top in a crawling pace and then joyously let loose on the way down, like a child on a slide. Oh, a relief at last; I welcome more sneezes wholeheartedly. Words regularly trap themselves in the windpipe, and now, even more. However coarse or nasally my tone may be, 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* by *Michel Legrand*. To go along, some rows of gloomy up-stepping notes would certainly lift the spirit. But memory serves me just as well.

Hm... hm... hmm hm
Hm hm hm hmm... hm
Hmm... hmm... hmm hm hm
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, metal 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, music sheet: where we instate the real, honest, infrequent love to last forevermore, or rather, as long as the passing generations will delicately carry it through the passage of time. To be transparent, I'm part of one too, and I think of those 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 droning each vowel does me fine, but I can't expect the world to wait. Tired eyes of them, fellow tenants, pain 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 each time. 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 must pack a hefty number of languages in 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 placed 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 (some exposed) are all I remember of this place. But now that I lay my eyes on these buildings, poorly and unevenly lit under the 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 in the intricately lined and shaped walls, hidden 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 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? The next morning promises me that, 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 as before, 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 dilute 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. Oh, not a "it," is it? Rather, a she. There is still quite a distance between us, yet I can tell: Her drenched, darkened-in-the-dark skin is of olive tone, and its smooth texture—she must be young. 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 early. However, I parked the bike a little too close, 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. Hear me complain, but so was I, pedaling. A word hasn't come out of her, has it? All this silence left for us to think. Ah, it slipped my mind: she just ordered me to take her somewhere. Kismet brings me an assertive character tonight. 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 you don't get the sudden awakening to assault me. I think I've got a clue: "Quell this riddle of my face and my stare, and I shall give you your quest." Pardon me, but in between these shushing raindrops, to disappoint you, I can't decipher a meaning. There must be something silly sitting 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 complete 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 your slovenly grace. Here's something to consider: With your arms flung around my back and your legs clenched to my hips, we won't go anywhere but idle here 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?

—Ce.

—Ce quoi?

—Tu parles anglaise, madame?

—Oui. I like to think so.

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

The message seems to have gone through 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 of its mother's shoulders. Meanwhile, the truth lingers and pokes: We've just met.

—Tourne e le! The other way!

Any other choice left might as well 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 ambiguously, a soft, amiable person hidden under the edge of her words, someone I must know. The price: no more moving forward, for she must turn me around the other way—to make me reminisce about all the things I've put past me. Ah, how unnatural it feels to steer this ride with a companion! She might look thinly shaped, but that doesn't necessarily make this bike any lighter. Now this downward slope I climbed for so long, so consistently even; I could swing to my heart's content. Leave out pedaling too, but keep the hands; keep them halfway pressed on the brakes just in case.

—Modern men. I love them. Not always, not when basking 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 nor do I get in his. When we make love, it's like lemonade, quick and easy, and then when we finish—oh my—the harmony between us! Only that makes life worth lust for. But my mother, back at home in Pakistan, lives a life in stark contrast to mine. When I button my shirt after all the fun, I get tremendously overwhelmed with guilt. No, not because of my life here, but of her life there. Confined in her kitchen all day, shackled, is how her will to live fades, one day at a time. And forces her to stay there: 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, like they prayed for, a son instead, and so I didn't have to witness her swallow down everything.

—Ah, that's absolute 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. Daily, they all see things of that sort happen and think there's nothing to question because nobody ever does. Obviously, I don't know your mother at all, but I can tell she doesn't question it either. She's grown accustomed to a life of that kind, which is really no kind at all. Not because she believes it's all fair to her, but rather because she financially only has two conditions to choose from: the life she has now and the life down on the street; nothing in-between. Forgive me, I didn't mean to be so analytical. Putting aside my meandering speech, I guess you couldn't bring her over here, could you?

—Non.

This 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 point, I might as well forget about both the worlds behind and before us, for her tears, along with her mascara, now paint unpleasantly on her cheeks. 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.

—In spite of everything, there's a part of me I can't stand. Life and death: I have figured them all out for myself. Just stop thinking; you need to understand none of that. What's the point 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 kindling them with kindness. They don't ever fear losing me. How can I expect my heart

to contain that? And 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, 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 pouring rather than rain, her frozen posture cools me too. That momentary exchange of words might have cleared much of the noise the drops made, but they're here again to fill in this silence. Gently, they fall on our heads, very unlike in the beginning. A drop, 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, those nails do pierce the skin, and even more so when you grab my face so angrily. She's inching closer—I take it she has been wooed. I didn't mean that, but I suppose there's no other meaning she could make out of my words. As I understand, things often begin for her this way, but how often do they? A number must be affixed. No, too numerous to number. Someone else can do it. Her lush, tender, soft lips warm mine so well. Much of her aforementioned passion shows itself more clearly now. And 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—let's let loose of them. I shouldn't, but her pull is growing stronger as our kiss flattens our faces. Also, I don't need to keep my eyes—oh, it's too late. A sideways peer tells us the news: we're unstoppably heading straight into a café.

[Above MAZHAR's finely combed, patchy, wet, fresh head of hair played his long-bearing bugbear, a bumblebee. It bumbled 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 not just with the motive of bathing in the sun but also an experiment: seeing 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 it 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 felt pleasant to his ears, but not elsewhere, for it irritatingly brought, with its sways, heat, which his clothes were much too warm for.]

MAZHAR [*to himself*]: In the blink of an eye, winter's over. The colder days this year—I could count them with only six hands. I can remember, up to this point, no more than ten winters in my life 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 fence wall and on their little paws, squeaked now and then a young tabby cat. They 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 their instincts took them rather inside the property. Somewhere distant in the sky, a voice broke sternly the call to prayer from a mosque, echoing with few other voices from elsewhere. And it rose eloquently with every phrase, sounding like it came from

somewhere nearby rather than distant. With the call still going, he felt on his back the bump of an arm. A bushy-faced man in a long, shiny, blue velvet robe, wearing 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 stepped much too close to the dog's mouth, springing them up on their paws. The dog stood upright for a moment, facing the man as he went by, and would have barked at him if only their drowsiness hadn't put them back to sleep.]

MAZHAR: Good afternoon. Sleep and bloom.

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

MAZHAR *[mumbling under his breath]*: You will all choke yourselves if you eat at such speed, and that would be for nothing, too. Take a look. There's almost nobody around.

[To his surprise, one of the men on the stools did end up raising his head off his meal, chewing with a mouth half full still, and then, as MAZHAR suggested, looked around, swinging his knees back and forth. Before MAZHAR could walk away, the keeper, from over the counter, caught him staring into the store.]

THE KEEPER *[inching up off his 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 the head, along with the hands if necessary. And in the next moment, a voice, shrieking into his ears from right next to him, completely caught him off guard.]

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 his hand between her palms, fondly*]: Alright, mystery man, tell me. Where in the hell were you heading at this hour?

[*She brought about the worst phase of stumbling on his lips.*]

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 last year we installed those old-fashioned wall clocks in all our rooms, all 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 always terrified of you leaving me alone with the house 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, someone you truly have things in common with? But there's no way I wouldn't know that; you always have to be so faithfully honest, after all. God, I'm just glad I caught you along the way.

MAZHAR [*bugging her with one hand*]: 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? [*Like a goddess, she laid a palm towards her ANNA KARINA-like friend, 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 did 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, who, unlike AFRI, stood timidly 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 them with words instead.*]

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

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

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

MAZHAR: It is, but no. [*Emphasizing, he laid 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, expecting an explanation. But instead, TISHA, 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 to stop at the entrance of the house. TISHA, with no patience to stand outside, began 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 once she caught it in her sight. And having the locked door realized, TISHA gave up trying.*]

TISHA [*raising 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. And then, to a click of the door, TISHA 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, and that comes with ten different locks? [*Two 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 this time.*]

TISHA: Now tell me something, one of you. I don't remember much, but whose idea was it to smoke 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 idea; it always is.

FAISAL [*half-yawning*]: Hey, I don't remember either. 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 inside without stopping to hear him finish.*]

[It was then 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, it didn't lure them to the table right away. To get their attention, TISHA had to clap a few times 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 out a sizzling sound, 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.

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

AFRI *[spent, heavily breathing, 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 part about the chef. *[Taking a sip, she gave AFRI 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, with the tap water running, into the lather, almost all nearby ambient sounds escaped his ears. Regardless, he could tell with utter confidence that not a single word came 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 headed to the bedroom to ask TISHA to help him find the spare soap.]

MAZHAR: Tish, honey, you know where—

[He stopped dead in 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: with a worried look at the floor, TISHA was sitting on the bed between her friends as she, with a sense seemingly of guilt, hastened to bring down her ungirdled, torso-unveiling, and raised-to-the-neck black tunic back to her waist. Her sticky partners then immediately removed themselves from the situation, scooting to either end 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 for a chat. It feels empty without you here.

[Sometime 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 the three 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 this guitar by your side. [*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 in 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 as if it's 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 moreover, it looks great on you.

MAZHAR: And so it does on you, or on anyone for that matter. You speak of it like it's a dress! The guitar just has that reputation now, I suppose. 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 if we 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.

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

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

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

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 extravagant. Sometimes I really envy her and wish for some of those perks in me, but oh well.

FAISAL: And I love someone slightly darker, Robert Smith. He is an idol of mine. It's just recently that I've been thinking about straightening my hair, spiking it with hair spray. [*He ended by stroking 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 was then almost 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 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 you that because I know 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 in it for a pair of earbuds, and swung them in the air when he found them.*] Take these with you.

III

Between 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, shaping, rounding, then spinning and spinning. Krrrrring! The bells have rung a call. What's with this slump? 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 if you'd like 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 in tune 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 roars of waves, so brutish. 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 in them. Has the world, or have I, disappeared?

Poppo

Poppopporrroorro 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. Consoles me: this desert, this sea, and this lane—those that I could always 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 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-haired, darkly dressed figure gazing up at the motionless, starry sky with their dreamy blue eyes, lost and taking absolutely no notice of this 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 wandering in their mind, untying it nerve by nerve. Orororo, como Van Gogh. So you think, but then you say:

Hallo! ¿Eres una fantasma?

The 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 as they rub their face with both of their warm palms, in an attempt at erecting their consciousness. Now, they add, switching code:

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 this 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 it 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, through the fog of your half-conscious mind, this mundane sky with its smokey clouds twisting, shrinking, growing, and turning right before your clear eyes. Very well, an experience to have 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 shift to a lousy, crying, nowhere-land hospital, with me as the sole 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, an answer, flow from 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?

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

The dilemma ends, shutting your mouth, for there's not much to argue there. A pang here, a pang there, everywhere—they bank up; down to your toes, they flow. I can no longer stow these tears in my eyes, so I won't. Oh, hello, moon. Illuminate all the gloom; hear my plea. They lighten both of your weights with:

You, 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? My parents raised me on her songs.

Joplin, bueno.

Your back begins to cool a bit. A relief to you, yes, but their head is yet to be heat-ridden. 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 on their high horse: Love is all; love is free. We accept anyone without an exception. What about me? If I don't fit into their small world, I must not be real. A defect, as they put it. 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 un-oiled, unkept wheels begin squeaking as you travel farther and farther away from the painting. But, no, nothing. Silence is all. Deathlike. 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 yourself, but the gust of fright has already touched you dearly. The steep flames from their body take absolutely no time to spread onto yours. Now, in your ears, closely, they scream from the bottom of their gut, and on top of yours. If I just bump the wheels into the guardrail, it will. Flinging the fiery two of you in the air, the bike stands balanced, but eventually it collapses 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 MAZHAR expected, but he 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 so 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. Standing at the door a few feet away from the toilet, 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: Not that. 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 stepped out of the bathroom.]*

[With a hold of her arm, 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.

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

MAZHAR *[waving her clothes at her]*: 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 then 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 so much. Pull the pants up softly from the butt.

[*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. [*With a sarcastic tone, he resumed.*] 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 you. How about you try to

see this in a different way? How? Well, to tell you the truth, I'm only exploring my deep fantasies, wishes, desires, or whatever you like to call them, all so that I live a life rid of 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 of me to ask for.

[She failed to bring a clear, emotional response to his still, cold face. A few noisy breaths later, his feelings became more evident as his tears flowed across his face and down 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 ignore.

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 that usually goes. First comes one, then the other; temporaries after temporaries with no end in sight.

TISHA: Yes, you're right, but mostly because those "others" often 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 a born 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 things. Didn't I tell you how I did in school? Terrible grades. Fs all over the sheet.

[*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—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 wonderful 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 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 eye contact*]: 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 feel like calling 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 numerous times I called 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 own body. You're still mine, and I'm yours. That's all that matters at the end of the day.

[Reading his response, his cold and impassive look perplexed her to even be mildly annoyed by him.]

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 then 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. But 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 forcefully 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 [*startled, raising his head at last*]: Isn't that taking things a bit too far? Hold your horse; 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. And then, with the call ringing, she waited for FAISAL to pick it up.*]

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. Meanwhile, as MAZHAR sat on his bed and speechlessly stared into a wall, TISHA kept whizzing by his face back and forth, packing her clothes. As soon as she had her bag ready, she hastily ran to the front door, although, just like in the morning, she halted right before leaving. And he followed her as clumsily as he could. The wide-open door shed some light onto the abyss ahead. Then, turning around to him, not even looking in his eyes, she hugged him, with a terribly wet face, one last time before disappearing into the shadows. As he stood at the door, unmoving, staring into the void, his delayed tears began pouring down his face. And just at that moment, all the lights in the house 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
From the ice before his death applies.

Carrying the man on 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
That ended 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.

Then, 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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