

The Future Is All We Fear

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The Future Is All We Fear

We were poets and had no memories. Every afternoon, perhaps from four o'clock, we stood there in front of that bookstore and talked. We read poetry and carried on discussions. It was like that everyday. Words were not real anymore. Just like a swarm of flies, they followed our trail and flew over our heads buzzing until we reached the bookstore. And then if we got tired, we would go to the teahouse next door and drink some tea. The sound of flies buzzing would fill the teahouse until we could no longer move our jaws. Then we would leave.

Opposite the bookstore, on the other side of the street, there was a row of stores. Above the stores were apartments that we had never seen until that day.

Perhaps it was a Saturday, and I say *perhaps* because at that time we all suddenly became confused—and to this day we don't know what day it was. But we all knew that she was not there before. She was neither in that little apartment above the row of stores which had a little door opening to the street, a door we had just noticed, nor anywhere else in the city. In such a small city, if there was such a woman, particularly one like her, we certainly would have noticed.

We were poets searching for memories. And the memory of a woman who wore black and did not tie a knot on her black scarf so that the white of her neck was at times, though not always, visible, was not in our minds yet. This we gleaned from the sparkle in each other's glances; our eyes started to glitter on that day, and on all those days thereafter.

The first time, she came out of her place at four o'clock. She had an oval face, thin and compact lips, and long black hair that would have reached her waist, had she let it hang. There was the dust of sorrow on her face, or perhaps she was sad merely because she wore black. And it saddened us that she was sad.

When she crossed the street, watching the passing cars with pleasant movements of her head and neck, and went inside the bookstore, we were reminded that perhaps some new books had arrived, though we hadn't been reading for a long time and hadn't even gone inside the bookstore. It was there that we thought she wanted to see a volume on the works of Van Gogh. Her voice with her pure and radiant words dazzled us, and we could no longer listen—it wasn't clear whether we had listened at all—words, translucent and brilliant, were flying in the air. We concluded that she was a painter wanting to buy an easel or a painter's palette.

When she left, the bookstore felt empty. We didn't have anything else to do there, so we left. It seemed as if we didn't know each other, nor why we had stood there or what we rambled on about.

It may have been on that day when we saw the little door open. A moment later, we noticed the discolored curtain and thought that the room must have been very big, since big rooms generally have large glass doors, and that she must have turned that place into her painting studio. A room facing the street would fill with light once the sun rose, and light was certainly necessary for painting.

The next day we returned and saw a new curtain hanging, a curtain full of seagulls. Seagulls that had lost their way and had strayed from the sea, not knowing which direction to take. With the movement of their heads and necks, they seemed to ask us to show them the way to the sea. That's why we talked about seagulls and then the talk of seagulls caused us to rush into the bookstore and find a book on the sea and seagulls. We wanted to find out how the seagulls could find their way, we wanted to know and be able to rest secure in our knowledge.

It took us a week to stop talking about the seagulls. Afterwards we did other things. Perhaps if the curtain were a little longer, so we wouldn't have seen her shins and thus realized that she was seated facing the street, we would have continued talking about the seagulls. But on the eighth day when we arrived, we saw her sitting there and knew that she was facing the street, because we could see the hem of her black skirt, which reached her shins, and the hand that occasionally reached down and picked up something from the floor. And we knew that her paintbrush must have fallen, or a slab of paint, or a drawing pencil.

On that day, we left after it grew dark. Our shins hurt all night. The next day, we returned earlier than usual and noticed she was not there. It was a quarter to three when we saw her legs. She came, sat down, adjusted the chair a bit and went to work. Her brush and pencil fell two or three times, and we saw her nice, white hand.

For ten days we stood there and watched. Nobody knew what she was drawing, but we all watched for the curtain to move. And it did. We arrived at a quarter to three from that day on. We stood by the bookstore and waited, sometimes arriving a few minutes earlier to have tea at the teahouse. The tea had a different taste. And from then on none of us drank tea at our own homes. We always left the teahouse at exactly sixteen minutes to three and stood at our positions across the street.

On the eleventh day she opened the curtain. We saw her take her painting off the easel and put another canvas on it. Without closing the curtains, she sat on the chair. We looked at each other in disbelief, our eyes glittering as if we had been relieved of an enormous burden. We breathed heavily and watched her from the corners of our eyes, pretending we were not paying attention. But we could see her go back and forth looking at the canvas, and we knew she was looking outside and were sure she was drawing one of us.

That is how our movements began to mimic those of the previous days. That is, we thought if on the day before she had drawn up, say to the point where one of us had waved a hand in the air, we thought we had to repeat the same gesture in order for her to finish her painting.

And not knowing anything about painting, and how long it would take to draw up a sketch, or how to give life to a painting, we went to the bookstore and bought all the books we could get on drawing, painting, and the biographies of great painters. We read them all. That satisfied us except for one thing—our hair and beards kept on growing, and we couldn't do anything about it. We were so distracted by the growth of our hair and beards that we feared she might suddenly draw the curtain and abandon us forever.

After two months of standing there and repeating the same movements we had become bored. One day, apparently realizing the toil we were going through, she suddenly stood up, took the canvas off the easel and put another in its place. We stood on the other side of the bookstore and made her draw us from another point of view. Once again, we mimicked our previous gestures to help her do her job quickly and flawlessly.

Our days passed in this fashion, and at night, when the bookstore closed, she got up and drew the curtain. Then we all set off together. We could not let go of each other. We were seemingly unable to be alone. Or we were afraid that something might suddenly happen if one of us was left out. That's why we took turns (and nobody knew how we came up with this) staying at one another's homes emptying bottles. First we drank slowly; none of us wanted to drink more than the others. Everybody wanted to keep their senses to hear what the others had to say and not miss anything that was said. But nobody said much, aside from canvases, paintings, Cezanne and Van Gogh.

Pausing on Van Gogh's slashed ear, we were certain as to the beauty of his earlobe prior to the incident. That's why we at times were brought to tears.

Late at night, everybody would sit alone in a corner of the room, listening to each other's long and loud sighs. Asleep, awake, or in this drunkenness we reviewed the day's movements and activities so that we could stand in the same position the next day and not hinder her work.

After a while, we realized that sometimes she came to the bookstore between the hours of two and a quarter to three, and from then on we were there usually at one. She would arrive, scan the books, nod her head in our direction, and then leave without buying anything. We would see her eyeing us, as if she wanted to see if we were all there. That's why without even talking about it, we all arrived by one. A week later we saw her smile as if she was pleased. We, too, exchanged smiles among ourselves, and looked to make sure she could see all of us. The more one could be seen the better.

We saw her get out of a taxi a few times. It was either a cab or a pick-up truck. We can't remember exactly which. But she had things that needed to be carried with her, an easel, a bed or some such thing. When she got out of the pick-up truck, she carried her things with difficulty. And we stood there watching the driver help her. And before we could make a move, we saw her open the little door to let the driver in. We looked at each other in disbelief. And we watched the driver, a swarthy young man with a thick mustache, come out of the little door, put his money in his pocket, and close the door. Before we could go over and talk to him, he was gone. He sat in his car and pushed his foot on the gas pedal. That day we realized that none of us knew how to drive. And later, no matter how hard we looked for the swarthy driver in the city, we couldn't find him.

Once we even threw ourselves through the door that he opened. We came across some small and lead-colored stairs. We thought that the light bulb in the staircase had burned out, and none of us knew anything about electrical work. On that day we looked at the light bulbs on the street lamps and wondered about the guys who climb those poles to fix the wires.

We remember the date of her departure well. The day when all of us suddenly grew old. None of us saw her leave. But she had, doubtless under the cover of darkness. Though not on a Friday, because on Fridays we used to pass that street, sometimes on foot and sometimes in a taxi. There was nobody there at her place. The curtain was closed. And no legs or feet could be seen. Nevertheless, we came.

When she left, our common need, the necessity to forget her or to see her again, brought us closer together. We talked to each other, this time about her and in loud voices. It is not clear how, but somehow we realized

that at sometime she must have been in love with somebody. Or perhaps two men had loved her at the same time. Perhaps in a fight over her, they had both died. Or maybe one of them had killed the other. So the one who stayed alive was sentenced to death in a court of law. And she whose window faced the square of execution would wake up at dawn everyday hoping the sun wouldn't rise. And she would see the sleepy soldiers take the second man through the ceremony, and the second man, walking at the head of the column of soldiers would take deep breaths, perhaps thinking of her scent which was in the air or maybe he knew that she would wake up every day at dawn hoping the sun wouldn't rise. Perhaps he had even stayed awake under her window many times.

It was then that we realized that she had devoted herself, black and mournful, to painting. She intended to have exhibitions of her works in different cities, and that's why we listened to all the news on art—to find out if a woman in black was going to have an exhibit in some city.

For the first few months, we all went to the bus terminal every day to find out if a woman painter in black was among the passengers. But now we feel we should take turns in going to the terminal to see for ourselves whether she's come or not. It's not a difficult thing to do; no more difficult than how we feel while sleeping, or while conscious. Sometimes without telling each other, we all wish we could go to sleep so we could quit thinking about her. But we are always awake in sleep. And consciousness dictates that if we go to sleep we'll dream that we're awake. That is how it becomes very difficult, and more so every day. And had she gone upstairs and had that curtain covered all the window, then we wouldn't be in this state. We would know if it were to be erased from our minds. She would come one day, again, put up her short curtain and we would see the two shins. And then a hand, occasionally, would reach down to pick up a pencil or a brush. And then our legs and shins would start to radiate with pain again.

Every passing day, even this very moment, becomes the past. And nobody can change the past. That is, nobody can change this moment—today, tomorrow, and other future days. And we know that fear, the fear that we carry within ourselves, is always present. It won't let go of us. It's become used to us and is afraid to leave. As though it won't have another place to live and breathe, if it leaves us. That is why we are afraid all the time. We fear the future which is the past, and that she might return and think that we have forgotten her.

Translated from the Persian by Steve MacDowell and Afshin Nassiri