

## **Fariba Vafi**

Fariba Vafi was born to a middle-class family in Tabriz in northwestern Iran on January 1963, 21. She launched *In the Heart of the Stage*, her first collection of short stories, in the fall of 1996. That was followed, three years later, by *Even When We Were Laughing*, a collection of 22 short stories. Her first novel, *My Bird*, came out in 2002 and won the award for top novel from the Golshiri Foundation and Yalda Literary Award later in the same year. It also picked up accolades from Mehregan Adab Award and Isfahan Literary Award. *My Bird* is already on its 14th reprint.



This novel has been translated into English, Italian, German and Kurdish Sorani. In 2003 her *Tarlan*, a novel, hit the bookstore shelves and secured an accolade from Isfahan Literary Award. Two years later *The Tibet Dream* was launched, for which she won the top prize of the Golshiri Foundation and an accolade from Mehregan Adab. In 2007 she published *A Mystery in Alleys* which has already been translated into French and Norwegian. In the early 2009 her *On the Way to the Villa*, a collection of short stories, was launched; and a year later she released back-to-back novels *All the Horizon* and *The Moon is Getting Full*. In all, her literary career has thus far seen the release of four collections of stories and five novels as well as publication of short stories in various literary journals. Some of her short stories have been translated into Russian, Japanese, Swedish, Turkish, etc. She has won several awards and accolades from different literary events. Fariba Vafi has two children and is a resident of Tehran.

## **On the Way to the Villa**

**By: Fariba Vafi**

### **Coffee Shop**

I sat down on a park bench and touched up my lipstick. “To hell with Houshang and Mom,” I told myself.

On a nearby playground, a number of children were playing on a faded slide. To my surprise they’d sit tight each time they landed on sand at the foot of the slide, waiting for their moms to come and lift them up. Their mothers had huddled in a corner, like a murder of crows, making small talk.

In the past when my Mom took me to a park, she would sit on a bench and relax. I was extremely playful and could handle anything. Those frail kids who didn’t feel like getting up on their own were no match for me.

I’d spend one week with Dad and the next with Mom. The handover would take place at a park on Friday nights. Crying was a fixture of any such meeting. After a while Dad’s interest in having me over faded and the handover time was pushed back. Eventually there came a point when he was decidedly reluctant to spend time with me because he’d remarried.

It took Mom five years to come up with an idea about our future. We moved in with Houshang. When I first heard his name, I thought he was a lanky guy. So when I first laid eyes on him I was taken aback. He was a depressed giant with shoulder-length hair.

At some points Mom wouldn't want me to grow up. At others, though, she wanted me to grow up as soon as possible so that she could marry me off. Frankly, I wouldn't care. But living under the same roof with Houshang had its own problems. Sometimes he was nice and willing to pay for my birthday cake. He even kept calling me sweetie. And sometimes he was an awful nag, targeting not me but my Mom all the time.

"You've spoiled this kid. She's as lazy as her father. Don't dance to her every tune. Such an attitude is bound to further spoil her."

Almost anytime I came home after hanging out with my friends, I would find Mom waiting outside the front door. "Come on, wipe off your makeup."

I'd run my hand over my face. "There is nothing. What would you do if you were Azita's mother?"

That answer would prompt Mom to hurl curses at Azita and other friends of mine as she wiped my face with coarse tissue. That was enough for me not to talk to her for at least two days. The problem was that I needed her assistance quite often.

"I want a pair of tight-fitting pants. All my friends have already bought such pants."

"I don't have any money," Mon would say with a frown on her face.

I would keep at it until she relented and gave me money to buy what I wanted. We'd tell Houshang that the new item was a gift from grandma. Of course Houshang was too clever to buy what we told him. "Since when does your grandma opt for the latest fads?"

Sometimes when he was jolly, he'd ask me about my coursework and I'd launch into a lengthy lecture. "Who cares about coursework?"

"Are you implying that you don't like academics?"

I would talk about my classmates and the cool things we'd do together at which point Mom would start a frenzy of eyebrow cocking to signal her disapproval of what I was saying and tell me to stop. That she always signaled her feelings through facial gestures rather than through words had turned blinking and lip-pursing into her identifying features. After we moved in with Houshang, those habits got worse. She wanted to tell me something through those gestures all the time. Frankly I wouldn't care. Her fear was quite groundless.

I still believe that in the absence of Mom, Houshang would die of hunger. He is such a lazy person. That my Mom is at his beck and call makes me real mad. What adds insult to injury is that she keeps reminding me that she's doing what she's doing just because of me. But I won't buy those silly comments. I know that she's madly in love with Houshang. On a few occasions I have heard Houshang tell her, "Keep an eye on her. Don't you ever tell me that I didn't warn you in advance." Sometimes the brainwashing is so effective that Mom does not even let me go out for a walk with Azita. Earlier today, however, I dug in my heels. "I want to go to a coffee shop."

Houshang was having a nap. I was mindless of the fact that he had more than a pair of ears. He slightly opened one eye and sarcastically said, "That's great! That's what we've been waiting to hear for such a long time. Why don't you go out and ask someone on the street to take you to a coffee shop?"

Mom bit her lower lip and signaled to me not to answer back. I kept my nose in my books and fumed over what I was told. I was too upset to stay home, so I told Mom that I wanted to go to grandma's place. She first wore a frown, but eventually relented and gave grandma a call and advised me to get back home soon. So I came to this park. Who in their right mind would want to spend time in grandma's ghost house? I thought.

I wish I could go to a coffee shop with someone, sit at a table by the window, look at the street through tinted glass and let every problem weighing on me drift into oblivion. Azita and I once went to a coffee shop and had a blast. We ordered sundaes which featured a couple of fresh sour cherries, ice cream, whipped cream and a lovely strawberry that sat atop everything else in the tall glass. It smelled like heaven.

I walked to the telephone booth and gave Azita a call. She was not at home. I then called Afsaneh, but she said she had guests and couldn't come out. Then I called a random number which gave me the busy signal. I returned to my bench. A classy man had parked himself on the bench with one leg crossed over the other. His head was bowed. He seemed to be talking to the button of his jacket. I sat beside him and said hi out of habit.

That I had greeted a complete stranger made me giggle. The bald man lifted his head and warmly acknowledged me. He seemed to have thought I was someone he knew and was a bit embarrassed for the initial snub. When he found out I was a total stranger, he smiled and said hi again.

The greeting he offered was a sweet one that entailed interest, attention and a smile, all at the same time.

"You are bored, aren't you?"

"How do you know that?" I asked.

He pivoted toward me and said, "Because I'm bored too."

Both of us burst into laughter.

"The weather is lovely."

I approved of what he said, but I was lying. It was awfully overcast.

"It's great to take a stroll." He paused a few seconds, apparently for effect, and then said, "Youngsters like you must like to go for a stroll. For people my age, though, sitting somewhere is preferable."

He stared at some point right ahead of him. It was quite clear he was looking at nothing in particular.

"What's the use of strolling? I want to be seated in a café, listening to relaxing music. I want the one who is sitting across the table from me to train his eyes on me for all eternity," I almost said. I had been to a café only once before. But Azita was a regular visitor. Her friend would pick her up and they'd go to different cafés together. And after each outing she had a lot of interesting things to share with us, so interesting that I'd shout as she recalled the things that had happened in the café.

The bald man glanced at me. It was unclear what was going on in his hairless head. I thought I'd tell my friends the story of that encounter the next day. "I won't tell them that

he was bald or at an advanced age," I told myself. He was older than my father or Houshang for that matter. When he inquired about my family, I said my father was an architect. Of all jobs, I don't know why I went for architect. I was afraid he wouldn't believe what I had said. He looked sideways at me. He was a cool, polite guy. If I were to decide, I would have swapped him with my two useless fathers.

"What grade are you in?" he demanded.

I didn't want to be treated like a schoolchild. So I picked my handbag, reapplied my lipstick and then licked my lips. I knew the lipstick would give my lips fresh luster. He was now looking at me with interest. I thought I was as unlucky as my Mom. Instead of a movie star or a handsome young man who drove one of those luxury cars, I had come across a bald man. But he had a nice and gentle manner of speaking, and a sweet smile to boot. He kept plunging into deep thought, though. When I closely scanned him, I found out that his baldness was not all that bad. He was not like skinheads. He had very thin hair on the sides. His hands looked nice too. He had no beard or mustache, and his moves were elegant. I wished Houshang, who kept scratching himself and removing hair from his ears, would borrow a leaf out of his book.

A single raindrop fell on his head and he wrinkled up his nose in disgust. I laughed quietly.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing," I replied.

He looked skyward. "Clouds are passing through, just as humans do," he told himself.

I was getting bored. I kicked a ball which was rolling toward us. A small child grabbed it and ran back to his friends.

"Do you have children?" I demanded.

"A daughter and two very playful grandkids," he responded.

He later told me that his wife had got a divorce and now lived in the United States. As I listened to him, I was involved in a hypothetical conversation with my Mom too. I was telling her that I bumped into this guy near grandma's place. But as she began to grill me over the encounter, I decided against telling Mom anything about him.

- "Have you ever been to the US?"

- "I lived there for 13 years."

By force of habit, I almost called him crazy.

- "I got too lonely there all of a sudden."

- "Aren't you lonely here?"

- "Well, the loneliness there is different. There you feel like a fish out of water."

- "You mean like dead fish?"

- "No, not exactly. They let you swim in beautiful manmade lakes. Aquariums, if you will. You swim in water, but at the same time you crave water."

He then gave me another smile. "Here, though, I can come to a park like this and chat with a beautiful girl like yourself."

He fell silent and was lost in deep thought again. Probably he was revisiting his past.

“Was she beautiful? I asked.

“Yes, she was very beautiful.”

“You liked her?”

“I loved her.”

He placed his hands on his kneecaps and straightened the lapel of his coat. There was a sad look on his old face.

“It was a strange love. I still have maximum respect for my relationship with her. I always thought I might get killed in a car accident. So I was always in a hurry to get home. She would open the door for me before I rang the doorbell. She couldn’t wait for me to arrive home. After her, I was never happy with any other woman.”

What he said was like a love story.

“What happened then?”

He clapped his hands. “Things went south. Just like the sky which clouds over in an instant.”

Raindrops were now falling faster and faster. Everyone was running for a roof to take shelter under. He said we could have a coffee together if I wanted to. At first, I didn’t ask where; later when I wanted to, it was too late to inquire. He opened the car door and I hopped in. He turned on the engine and wipers began to sweep aside the raindrops on the windshield. I placed my handbag in my lap.

“I don’t even know your name.”

His profile was that of a much younger man.

“Do I know yours?”

I kept a straight face. In fact, my stomach was in knots. My heart began to race when he pulled to the curb in front of a house. He pushed a small button and the big door to the front yard slid open. The car eased into the yard where a few other vehicles were parked already. It seemed like a movie script, as if an actress was playing my role. Before we climbed the stairs I told Azita and other friends of mine, again in another hypothetical conversation, that I got a ride in a luxury car. The whole thing seemed to go against the grain, so the idea of returning home crossed my mind. The key would not turn in the keyhole. He tried another one only to learn that the first one was the right key. He opened the door wide enough for me to see the inside of his apartment. I stood in the doorway and did not walk in. Instead, I turned and cast a look at what was behind me. There was another door by the elevator. He didn’t care about my anxiety.

“Come in. You don’t need to take off your shoes.”

It was a vast sitting room full of large, expensive furniture. That a neatly-dressed man with good manners and a squeaky-clean car had a messy apartment like that struck me as very surprising. The apartment was dark; there were no chandeliers. Instead there were only a few desk lamps on. “What is it?” he asked. “You’ve missed your Mom. You look too brave to get cold feet.”

He hustled around, changed the places of a few items and apologized for the messy condition of his apartment.

“We’ll have coffee and then leave. It won’t take long.”

I stayed put. He approached me and wanted to grab me, but I withdrew my hand.

“Feel at home. I promise you’re gonna have fun.”

His voice was now cracking with excitement. As he kept talking I spotted a pair of socks under one of the armchairs in the room. It reminded me of our own house where socks were always at the center of disputes. I walked toward a rectangular desk. There was a full ashtray on the desk. He placed a few photo albums by the ashtray.

“Take a look at these photos, and I’ll make coffee.”

He almost scampered to the kitchen. I could still hear his voice.

“Can you guess which one of those women is my wife?”

He returned with two cups.

“Sorry I forgot to bring over sugar.”

He went back to the kitchen and returned with sugar.

“I’m sorry. This time I forgot spoons.”

I was looking at the photos. I thought it was impossible to tell Mom that I went to the apartment of a total stranger. “What am I doing there? Looking at these old photos?” I told myself. He bent forward and showed me the photo of his wife. Before scanning the photo, I saw his index finger shaking. The woman was not beautiful at all. In one of the photos she was actually glaring at her husband who was smiling at someone out of the frame. The kind of smile you put on to take some years off your appearance. Of course in that photo he was young, much younger than his current age.

“Have your coffee.”

He sat down a couple of armchairs away from mine and sized me up.

“Tell me what you are up to these days.”

I decided not to respond to that question. Instead I made a lot of noise stirring my coffee. His place was a real ghost house, much worse than my grandma’s. You could hear no noise whatsoever there. I could die of fear if I stayed here any longer. If I hadn’t seen the other door, I would have imagined it was the only apartment in this building, I thought.

“You tell me what you’re up to.”

“I have nothing to say. I feel too lonely. Every two weeks or so, my daughter comes here along with her husband and two kids. During weekdays when I get home from work, I watch TV, read something and sometimes go out for a stroll through the park.

I don’t know why but I recalled the depressed mammoth character of an animated movie. He crossed one leg over the other and kicked back.

“There is always something that makes me mad. People litter in parks; they are dishonest and tell lies all the time. Nothing is like before. I used to enjoy everything across this land.

Ever since I've returned from the US, I find things disappointing. Nothing is like before. A few months ago, the idea of returning to the US crossed my mind. Over there humans are respected; there is law and order in place. There are many other things over there that are non-existent here."

He was now staring at me.

"If you were there, you could attend university and have a decent life."

He turned to the large flower pot that stood guard like a real soldier in a dark corner of the room and interlocked his fingers. "Things are boring here. I hate everything."

Then he bowed his head and began to fidget with his button once again.

"Things are not promising. Corruption is deep-seated here."

He lifted his head. Our gaze locked again, and that reminded him that he was not alone.

"Sorry I'm boring you with such stupid remarks. Instead of being happy for having a beautiful guest like you, I'm talking like a grouchy old man," he said before putting the cups in the tray.

"Am I talking too much?"

"No. I enjoy listening to you."

In fact, he *was* talking too much.

"When someone talks too much, they say 'Gimme a break.'"

I thought his daughter was right not to visit him more often.

"You speak nicely!"

He gawked at me. "Seriously?"

I nodded in approval, and got ready to leave.

"That a young lady thinks highly of me means I'm not that old."

His gestures made me laugh.

"Let's go to the kitchen. If you don't want to help me, that's ok. You can at least watch me wash the dishes."

I leaned against the frame of the kitchen door like when I talked to my Mom as she did the dishes.

"Say something as I wash these cups."

"Like what?"

"Anything you wish to talk about. Tell me about your friends, your father, or your mother. I want to listen to your voice."

I began to feel right at home. The water was running, but he was not washing the cups. He was staring at a certain point near the kitchen sink. "He must be crazy. He plunges into deep thought whenever he says or does something," I told myself.

"Don't you want to wash the dishes?" I asked.

He turned off the faucet and looked angry now. "Later."

Unwittingly he ran his wet hand on his head and turned around. His gaze was now serious. I tossed my hair out of my face and strapped my handbag over my shoulder. His small eyes were penetrative. He seemed to have transformed in a second. He was pale, no longer the nice man I had met in the park. He picked a towel and wiped his hands dry. He put on a sheepish smile, revealing his yellow teeth; rolled his sleeves, showing his hairy arms and approached me. His breathing was labored. He was hyperventilating like people who suffer from asthma.

"Do you need money?"

With my voice breaking, I told him that my Mom had already given me my weekly allowance. I looked at the closed door of the room as I held on to the strap of my handbag and pressed it against my shoulder. He was not acting normal. His bald head was now red with blood flowing in subcutaneous tissue. I was scared. He quickly unbuttoned his shirt.

"I feel hot."

I could now see his hairy chest and freckled neck. I stepped back and pressed against the wall as he accosted me.

"What do you think is the ideal thing to do now?"

His voice had changed. I recalled my grandma who sounded like fish one day when she could not swallow her saliva. He was a shadowy figure like those in movies. He acted as if he wanted me to tell him where I had hidden my money or jewelry. His hand was only a few inches away from my belly. It was as if he wanted to stab me. I wanted to say something, but my vocal cords failed me. He raised his finger and placed it under my chin. His finger was shaking. I could feel that. He dropped the towel. I bent over, picked the towel and handed it over to him. "I wanted to go to a coffee shop," I quickly said.

All of a sudden he looked petrified and took a few steps back. "Where are you headed?" he asked just like hearing-impaired people.

It was my turn to entrap a lot of energy in my throat and suddenly release it like a shrill cry.

"I was heading home."

In a second he seemed to be burdened with a ton of sadness just like someone who had just been informed of the death of a loved one. He then burst into laughter, not like a human, but like a giant, a real giant. He laughed until he squatted in the middle of the kitchen and put his head on his knees. It scared the living daylights out of me so much so that I was unable to turn around and look at the door. Like a paraplegic, I had frozen in my tracks. The black plastic bag in the garbage bin drew my attention.

He raised his head. He was no longer laughing. He seemed to be in pain and had a troubled look on his face. His mouth was wide open and he was pressing his eyes shut. I thought he was either on the brink of dying or getting blind. He pressed the towel against his face as he ordered me to go out and get in the car.

Along the way, he did not utter a single word. I asked him to drop me off near the park, but he said he would give me a ride home. When I was in the alley a few yards away from my home, I turned around, but he was gone.