

On the way to the villa

Translated by Yassaman Assa

I was young and it was not fair to feel so mirthless. I wished I could get out for some days, have fun and hang loose. For a couple of days be far away from mother's naggings and be absolved of the burden of taking care of the kids. That was the reason that I took Mitra's simple invitation more seriously than she herself and announced loudly:

"We are going to auntie Mitra's villa."

Pooya jumped up and sounded gladden. Mom reactivated her preparatory part that has been disfunctional since a long time ago.

"We should take warm clothes. Nights are cold there."

Mitra had not mentioned anything about mom, only had asked me to take my children and visit her for a couple of days.

"I will send Abbas to pick you up."

We had talked about the details of the trip over the next calls but Mitra never did mention mom. I even thought that it was kind of a bribe she was paying me in return of living with mom that was something she could not bear more than a week. Travels to abroad and being busy were her excuses for sending her to me.

"Your husband is out of town and you won't be alone."

And now, with that wealth and comfort, it was not surprising if every once in a while she would feel a twinge of conscience and asks me to rest in her villa for some days. She knew that I was depressed and on medication. Mom had tipped her that sometimes I would not reply to her and at most would move my heavy head instead of my light tongue. Mitra knew that these days I was in no mood to do anything.

Sometimes I even forgot my connection with the kids. When and why had they arrived. I only knew that I was responsible for them. I took good care of their nurture and sleep. I might have even played with them but none of these were joyous. I wished, if possible, I could take some days off and forget that I was a mother. Forget that I was daughter to a mother who needed my companionship. I even thought that my absence would be a good opportunity for mom. The house would be free from my heavy presence and mom would not see my sullen face for some days. She could invite over the neighbors she liked and away from the cries and noises of the kids, rest peacefully for a couple of days.

"Your feet are sore."

"We won't be going on foot. Besides, Mitra would send Abbas after us."

I was tongue - tied. How could I tell mom not to go, and that I didn't want her companion and wished to be alone? I wished she was one of those mothers that I could leave the kids with for some days and get lost myself.

"I have raised my children and now it is your turn."

I reminded her that she was not this way with Mitra's children.

"I was younger then. I had the patience."

Once that I took Pooya to her she frowned.

"Get back soon. I don't know what to do if he gets hungry."

"Just feed him milk."

"How many teaspoons? I do not know anything about these things. I might give him something mistakenly. There was no dry milk powder in our time."

Mitra called. She said when to buy tickets and on which day and time to go. She loves formalities. It was as if we were traveling to Texas instead of a village in Amol. She told us where to wait in the terminal so that Abbas would not miss us. We all knew that Abbas agha would not take the trouble of searching, would just look around and quickly return home and simply, say that we were not there.

Mom got up and came to the phone.

“Tell her that we will wait in front of the terminal’s restaurant. This way he won’t miss us.”

I twisted the phone wire around my finger.

“We haven’t decided to take the trip yet.”

I said it out of spite. In fact I was telling it to mom. She knew what I meant; She knew how I felt but was not willing to give up the trip. She had never done so. Wherever there was pleasure and fun, she would suddenly turn young and zippy and start before anyone else. She had a bon vivant nature which I had inherited none. Even sometimes I doubted to be her daughter.

“Why bothering Abbas agha ? I will get there myself. I am not alone you know. Mom’s coming too.”

Mom had reached out her hand to take the receiver. Mitra hesitated a while.

“I will send Abbas after you anyway.”

I gave the receiver to mom. As usual quite quickly they reached an understanding. Mitra did not mention that she had not invited mom and mom pretended as if Mitra had invited her before anyone else.

“Mitra, honey, we will come on our own.”

And then it seemed that Mitra said something funny that my seventy years old mother started to laugh like a young girl; a loud, young and carefree laughter. Maybe it was wanderlust and its sweet promises that made her laugh that way. I was breast feeding Sepehr and looking at my picture in the glass of the TV table. It was I who was seventy while being twenty nine and couldn’t laugh like her. Sepehr was drowsy. Slowly I took my breast away from him and lied on my back. Then I waited till he was sound asleep.

Mom got up from the sofa. Her bangles jingled. Then came her smell. She smelled like wet wool. Limping she headed towards the bathroom. I was still sitting in the same place when she returned.

“Get up and take the kid to his bed.”

She was talking about Pooya who had fallen asleep on the couch. I stood up, picked him up and put him in bed.

“Give me a glass of water to take my pill.”

She took the glass and then asked me to look and check whether she was taking the right pill or not.

“I might die and don’t wake up tomorrow morning.”

She was always saying that; a Kind of paying compliment to death, or perhaps a way to make me be kinder to her. I brushed my teeth and turned off the light.

“push aside the curtains.”

I did so. The yellow and shabby light beaming through the window shattered the room’s darkness.

“Don’t forget the night lamp. It’s like a grave in here.”

I plugged the lamp in. It was a butterfly with illuminated wings.

Mom stayed awake. She, who would fall asleep like a log the moment her head touched the pillow, couldn’t sleep.

I knew she was awake because of the trip’s zest. She was lying on one side with her arm under her head and rubbing her legs together softly and quietly.

The movement of her legs showed that she was thinking about a sweet dream. Years ago, when I defined this movement for myself, I detested it. On those days I assumed that the movements of the legs were the lusty dance of a forbidden joy which reminded me of vague and incomprehensible happenings in our house a long time ago, that nobody helped me to understand clearly and their memories remained in my mind crippled and exaggerated forever. Now the legs were old and the sound was like the sound of sanding an uneven board with sandpaper made me angry. In fact, her strong and ravenous desire for life provoked me this much; the life I had no desire for, and the excitement of its mysteries didn’t

warm up my heart; the life which was emptier than ever.

“One night sleeping in its pleasant veranda will cheer you up. What a nice weather.”

I pretended to be asleep. I didn't want to receive her message of friendship which she was sending to me in the dark. I couldn't believe that she was thinking of me. I was almost sure that she was tickling with the thought of the days to come; the big veranda is carpeted with rug and sheep skin; The sky is clear and full of stars and the weather lucid and fragrant.

Abbas agha is preparing his hookah. Mom is leaning on Mitra's big cushions and dreaming about Paradise. A cool breeze is blowing and the trees' branches are moving in the darkness, their rustles mixes with the sound of the river and everything turns mystical.

Perhaps it is the dreamy jag of that scenery that makes her voice sound so young. Mitra is like her too, as much in love with life, in love with nature and having good times in the heart of the nature and life.

What was wrong with it? This was the question I asked myself several times that night and each time replied that there was nothing wrong with the fact that she wanted to enjoy the remaining days of her life. But this answer made me more furious than convinced.

Mom was old but old age did not rule over her. Old age was her servant like a pesky man whom she knew how to fool, sometimes with charm and sometimes by menace. She had experienced a lot of ill fortune but had fought back, and had not forgotten herself. She didn't turn into an underdog. Even had struck a pose and got used to it so much that taking care of it has become her nature.

She had thick hair and her remaining teeth were strong. She had a heart operation years ago. Her facial crème and a bottle of perfume that was better to be handy so that she won't smell like the hospital, were the only things she asked for before the surgery.

Mom was seventy. One of those pretty seventy years old with a formed and round body, who puts on sheer pretty chadors in the parties and knows how to act in order to look elegant and neat. That is why Mitra likes to introduce mom to her friends. She takes her to parties with herself and calls her my mother coyly. She turns into a daughter in love with her mother and mom turns into a wonderful woman whose simple breath is a blessing. Mom loves this role so much that even after the party is over she doesn't like to change her mood.

But Mitra starts to complain when they are left alone. Mom is forgetful, her lips become twisted while sleeping; most of the time she appears sluggish and should gather herself up, and Mitra hates anything that reminds her of the downfall of human's mind and character.

The following days I was still hoping that mom would change her mind. One day I said that there was no bus ticket and another day informed her that there has been heavy raining that might cause a flood. Nonchalantly, she tolerated all that. Only one day was left. We had to make a decision.

“I won't go, if it makes you uncomfortable.”

She had chosen a perfect day. She knew that my trip would become embittered, if she would stay home after all that drama.

I kept quite. She said that one should be very unlucky to impose oneself on her ungrateful children. She had two daughters in the world which none could bear her. Her older daughter takes trips to abroad all the time and she should get lost when her younger's husband returns from his business trips. She would leave for Germany to live with her son, if only she was healthy and had some money. He even would be grateful for.

I gave in. I thought that I have been too hard. I was pissed off somewhere else and making mom pay for it. I was tired of babysitting, tired of my husband's long and far business trips. Mom was not to blame for my being so bitter.

I started to think about the advantages of her companion the moment I agreed to her going with us. She was the only one who could talk a little to Abbas agha. Abbas agha was always after making money so that he never had the time to enjoy the benefits of his efforts. Mom was even a good companion for Mitra. Mitra would chit-chat while removing mom's facial

hairs with a piece of string. She would dye her hair. In return, mom would sew the ripped corners of the quilts or the lining of some mattress. Maybe she would agree to take care of the kids, then I could go by the waterfall and make peace with nature and life once more. Mom started to talk again. She was still awake.

“When I was your age I took care of the children and the house work. I did a hundred tasks in a blink of an eye and didn’t make a fuss over it. I was a fire-ball. But you seem to be lifeless. You are always tired. But it doesn’t matter. We will eat cheese and fresh walnuts for breakfast and fresh fish for lunch; make some jam from the garden fruits. Your kids will be revived. You will see the difference in your skin when you are back.”

We got to the terminal after a six hour trip by bus. We saw Abbas agha at a distance. He was twirling the car keys in his hand and running around in circles. He resembled a mouse wondering around a hundred paths in a second to find a hole. He approached us. As always he was in a hurry, as if he had to get to an appointment to sign an important contract.

“I have parked the car far away.”

It would take a couple of hours to get to Amol and then another half an hour to the villa. Mom was walking with difficulty. Pooya was crying and wanted me to carry him.

Sepehr was sleeping on my shoulder. Abbas agha weighted my bag, then picked it up and started quick as a flash. Only once he turned and looked at us who were shuffling behind him.

“Get a move on. I have parked the car in a no-parking spot.”

I took Pooya’s hand and dragged him behind me. Mom picked up her bag and mumbled something that I assumed must have been cursing Abbas agha for being in such a rush. It was dark. Outside of the terminal was covered with girders, cement bags and mold. I remembered that Mitra had said a new building for terminal was under construction. A whistling man passed me by. Now we could barely see in front of our feet. We were afar from all the world’s lights on every side. It was raining and not. A wandering droplet dripped on my nose from somewhere in the sky. Pooya had stopped crying. He had hold my hand firmly and walking.

Mom was moving with trouble. Her chador had slipped down her head and she had taken hold of its corner with her teeth. I stood to take a breath. I had sweated and my arm was feeling numb under Sepehr’s weight. Mom was way back behind me. She couldn’t move forward her fat body. She was stumbling to left and right. Perhaps after all that time sitting in the bus her legs were swollen. I wished I could tell her: “Wasn’t it better if you had stayed home?”

I realized that I felt no sympathy towards her. This old woman was moving limpingly to reach the villa and lie on its pleasant veranda, rub her legs together and daydream. This was the thing that made me angry. A blind fury which I didn’t know where and how it came. Whatever it was, it sucked all my senses and blood into it like a sponge.

I told Pooya to advance ahead faster. Abbas agha was vanishing in the dark. He was tiny and nifty and in a hurry to get my valueless bag to the car like a precious cargo.

I looked back. Mom was saying something out loud. I turned a deaf ear. It was the price she should pay. I even didn’t slow down for her to catch up. I had one eye on my way and another on Abbas agha. Pooya didn’t go ahead. He had become frightened of the silence and darkness surrounding us and was clinging to me firmly. From a distance Abbas agha signaled to hurry up.

I felt tired. Desperately I thought where was I heading to with two kids and an old woman and all these stuff. I was heading towards Mitra’s damned villa. Mitra, who had never experienced any of the vicious moments of my life and didn’t help us to solve our problems. And now that she had offered some kindness, we had to suffer a lot. I was getting mad at her. At least she could buy an airplane ticket for mom, if not for me.

But she only answers to requests and not the needs, and we had not made that request.

She would have acted pronto, if she was informed of my illness. She would have come to my aid with a few phone calls and therapeutic advice and consulting and making an appointment with a doctor and paying for my cab, but she would never ask me what the hell was wrong with me. I might explain in detail and she didn't have the patience to listen. For an instant I felt that I've packed all the weariness of my entire life with me and was carrying it to another place like a porter. I turned back as I heard a falling sound with a shriek. Mom had fallen down on her face. Her bag had fallen a little bit further on the armatures by the road. Her chador was twisted around her waist. I didn't know whether it was wrath, cruelty or fear that I stood frozen. I didn't move a bit. I wished instead of being in this situation, I had fallen myself. Something was stopping me from going to her. Something nameless that was piercing my heart.

I turned and walked away. I dragged my foot forward. The sweat ran down from the back of my neck under my dress. Then I heard something. It was a muffled, unfamiliar sound like an animal's trapped in a trap. It was coming from my throat. I couldn't turn back. I guess it was this disability in being kind or something like it that left me unable to even cry like a human. I opened my mouth, felt the flow of air in my dried mouth. Then came the tear. Pooya clang to me.

"A wolf will come and eat us now."

I could get back, take mom's arm and help her up, but I moved forward instead. I couldn't see a thing. I just walked. I heard mom's voice from behind.

"Has he to go to pee that he is running like this?"

It was late when we arrived at the villa. Mitra came to welcome us with so much fuss. She brought the woolen mat from a corner, laid it under mom and put a big cushion behind her; put the kids on a soft mattress and brought us tea and a bowl of fruits. The veranda was luminous and bright and the sound of crickets and the river was heard. The smell of the rain was in the air. Mosquitoes had made a net around the lamp. Abbas agha was busy with his hookah's tobacco. Mitra went to warm up some food for us. I stretched my legs, closed my eyes and felt that in this fine weather I was not weary any more. I thought I had left everything behind. My head was empty.

I opened my eyes and it was then that I saw mom. She had dragged her fat body beside the fence. She had turned her face towards the garden, staring into the darkness. Her tea had turned cold and she had not touched the fruits Mitra had put on her plate. One of her hands was around the fence and the other, the one that seemed to be older and trembled a bit, rested on her lap.

I approached her, pretending I wanted to take the salt shaker.

"Let me see your knee."

Her double chin trembled unnoticeably as if she swallowed something. Slowly she lifted her hand to the corner of her eye and then lowered it down. She didn't turn her face back. I wanted to hold her but instead looked for the pomade in my handbag. I couldn't find it amongst all that clutter. Mom's voice was weak and ireful.

"I don't want it."

I found the pomade and opened it. The white lotion stuck out.

"This pomade will heal your leg ache."

I didn't like my trembling voice. I became silent and hold up my hand with the pomade and remained that way. The pomade was an excuse that she could forgive me with. We both knew this. She moved her leg forward a bit. I lowered down her thick stockings. There was a harsh bruise under her knee. She didn't look at me.

"Is it any good?"

I bent my head over her knee.

"Yes it is."