

Stray Dandelions

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NIMA'S VIDEO CALLS WITH HIS FAMILY TAKE FOREVER, ENDING ONLY BY network glitches or some previously announced arrangement. I sit with him for the first few minutes, in an appropriate outfit and with faint traces of makeup. I wave at my parents-in-law and grin at Niloo, Nima's sister—or *baby* sister as he still calls her. At some point, the conversation about weather and whatnot veers into something specific. A hint that I should excuse myself. I shuffle out of frame, but still hear fragments while busying myself with chores.

I don't mind if my Saturday mornings pass like this. In fact, I secretly admire my husband's bond with his family, his patient ear for their updates on a distant aunt's knee surgery or a neighbour's daughter procuring her dowry.

Recently, Niloo's imminent graduation from the University of Tehran with a degree in chemistry has taken centre stage. Her stellar GPA has brought about her family's adoration and pride, but this milestone has also unleashed a breadth of hot debates. Everyone comments on what should be next for her, my husband being the most vocal.

It's been three years since I joined Nima in Canada, himself having just celebrated his first anniversary living abroad. It feels like Niloo has been with us since day one, even though she's never crossed Iran's borders. The first time I sipped the watery coffee in Tim Horton's, Nima said, "Niloo will love the warm colors here" or when I bought my Canada Goose's lightweight down parka, he chortled, "She'll wait out winters at home."

During my third year in Toronto, when I landed an accounting job with a decent salary bump, we moved to a two-bedroom apartment. Our friends joked that the second room was to become a nursery. However, it turned into our office and later a temporary habitat for Nima's parents during their recent visit. But in his jargon, it's always Niloo's room.

Nima allocates a good chunk of his Skype ration to introducing North American universities, their pros and cons, and technical matters of applying for each. He talks

about it as if that's the only way. His optimism instills grateful praises from his parents and ambivalent nods from Niloo whose enthusiasm rarely surpasses monosyllables like "wow" or "nice."

I can see why Nima is so adamant. My two brothers settled in the U.S. even before my move. And everyone around me—those who could afford it financially or academically—have done the same or are in the midst of doing so. It's a mass migration and whoever isn't on board needs to have a real reason. Nima has done his part in facilitating the process for many friends and relatives—me included—and he would do the same for his sister.

His motto: Stay and perish; leave and flourish.



One Monday morning, I receive a call from Niloo, something that happens only on occasions like birthdays or Norouz, or when Nima goes AWOL. Today is no one's birthday with no new year around the corner, so I expect queries about Nima's whereabouts.

"No, actually...I was hoping I could talk to you."

I put her on hold and roam around the office to find an empty room. I realize it must be serious and the thought makes me upset. Not only the nature of the call, but also the prospects of talking to Niloo. It's as if being around her without Nima's supervision is a skill I'm yet to learn.

Finally I squeeze into a meeting room. "I'm ready."

"How much leverage do you have on my brother?"

I'm surprised, though not greatly. I've witnessed Niloo's bluntness, but only indirectly, when it's been pitted against her own kin. With me, she's been discreet, and I've always returned the same level of formality and respect. After all, I'm still addressing her as Niloo, her official name.

"What? Why?"

"Can you somehow persuade him I don't need his constant coaching in life?"

"Is it about him trying to bring you over?"

"It's about him thinking everyone should adhere to his way of life."

The Niloo I've come to know was a frivolous teenager in high school. My husband is partially to be blamed for this rebellion. He's treated his sister like a kid. When we were in Iran, he refrained from bringing Niloo to our gatherings or parties. He believed she was too young to be exposed to vices—arak, cigarettes and exposed cleavage.

"Nima cares about you very much." I know a bit about the art of mediation, the need to subtly justify the absent party, and yet criticize them enough to gain the trust of the other side—to find a middle ground. "And...I do agree that sometimes he gets carried away."

"Nima doesn't know everything. He presumes I have no attachments here. No house, no job, no..." She pauses, weighing her next word. "According to him I'm a stray dandelion who can float around and land in Canada."

It's not too hard to read between the lines, to guess at the word she swallowed. "Niloo, is there a guy?"

On the other end of the line, Niloo exhales loudly. "Yes."

"If there wasn't, how would you feel about coming here?"

She sighs. "Now you sound like him. Too rational. Dissecting one's psyche. I don't know. Really. This is my state of mind—solidified mineral, sodium and chlorine mixed together. That's all I know."

She's a chemist, even in love. "It's probably not my place to ask. Keep the answer to yourself. Is your relationship strong enough to change major life plans?"

She retorts as if she has the answer ready. "What if he *is* my major life plan, Athena?" She gives me a

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moment to digest her question. “The feeling I have for him is pretty much like what you had for my brother back then.”

And how can I possibly argue with that?



I was indeed in love. Head over heels. I would go to Mars to be with Nima. Even then, I knew he didn't fully reciprocate, but he liked me enough.

My friends didn't understand. To them he was a computer geek interested only in solving a problem in linear time—not exploring the infinite realm of love. And strange as it sounds, I found his ambition sexy. The dedication he had to his research field—network security. The passionate manner with which he waxed about digital certificates, cyber attacks, salting and hashing, turned me on, even though I didn't fully understand any of it. When he kissed me, I was proud to have stolen him from his algorithms.

A year after our wedding, Nima moved to Canada for his PhD. Once again, my friends criticized him for being selfish. Couldn't he wait it out until I graduated? No, he left a year early to get us settled. Besides, had he stayed, he'd have to complete his military service.

The day I reunited with him, the plane landed in Toronto at dusk. Snowy and cold. At least Nima's embrace was warm, familiar. He had a week off to show me around, as much as ice and sleet would allow. Then, reality asserted itself. I would stay in our musty rental, except for English classes in which I had to sit next to a Filipino lady thrice my age, whose accent I struggled to understand. During those early days of immigration everything was so interconnected I had a hard time blaming my sporadic tears on anything in particular. Was it simply the throes of separation or a change in my feelings toward Nima?

A solidified mineral.

Through referrals, I finally found a job as a secretary for an Iranian lawyer. I oversaw the comings and goings of clients who had land for sale in Iran and a number of happy couples who wanted to register their marriage under Iranian laws. Also, the sad ones willing to undo unions they came to hate. I was amused by observing men and women at either the zeniths or rock-bottom of their relationships. The stability in my own marriage was reassuring, though I rarely had time to evaluate it too closely. Weekends arrived only to blend into the next Monday. I'd made a few friends and grown more comfortable with Nima's social circle. Life had gained momentum and I'd become numb to its rapid pace. That's why when Niloo brought up “back then” I took it less as an analogy between our shared feelings than between my own feelings then and now.



The same day as Niloo's call, I emerge from the subway and my phone vibrates with a message from Nima, “At U of T. Will be home after.”

Nima has frequented the University of Toronto in the past, attending talks and events. He usually lets me know in advance, often invites me to tag along if he finds the topic might engage me. Never like this, unannounced.

I'm stirring barley soup when he barges in. His face shines with glee. Whatever his agenda, it must've been fruitful.

“Niloo can start her master's degree next September,” he declares.

“What?”

“Well, it'll be up to her if she wants to do a PhD or a master's,” he says as if that's what's left to decide.

Nima delves into the technicalities while locking the door, unlacing his shoes, removing his scarf and jacket, rubbing his hands together: a professor he's

met a few times was impressed by Niloo's academic performance, promises to fish out her application once she sends it.

As I observe him, my mind drifts toward Niloo with more urgency. It explains why she contacted me. Today of all days. She must've been tipped off.

"How did that professor get hold of her grades?"

"I made Niloo translate her report card and mail it to me," Nima says.

I hover the ladle in the air. "Isn't it up to your sister to decide if she wants to come here in the first place?"

"Who doesn't want such an opportunity?" He snorts. "Oh, what're you cooking?"

Nima has a naïve way of changing subjects. He advances toward the kitchen, opens the lid and immerses his nose in the escaping steam. I note the stains of sweat on his shirt. He curls his arms around my waist. His lips find my neck. I'm in a faded blouse and pajamas. Hair unmade; lips bare. Definitely not at my most desirable. But it's not about me. It's him yearning to cap his success with a display of virility. I yield, barely managing to turn the stove knob off while he pulls me to the bedroom.

On the bed, I'm collaborative, follow the routine by number, moan to his groans. His climax is sudden, followed by a smirk.

He rolls over to his side, panting. "Did you like it?"

He might have sensed something. It's not a question he asks often. And not a question whose answer I readily know. I need to force myself to remember as if I was asked about a long-ago vacation. The true answer is that it wasn't worse than other times. No better either.

"Nilooofar doesn't want to immigrate," I say to the ceiling.

"Huh?" Nima turns toward me and rests his head on his palm. "How do you know that?"

"She called me today. At work."

He falls on his back, laughing dramatically, like this is a trick his sister pulls frequently.

"Nima, she said outright she wants to stay with your parents. Despite what you think, Iran is not a living hell."

"Coming from you who along with your brothers live in North America." He raises a finger, suddenly excited. "Let me guess. She told you she has a boyfriend."

I debated how much information I should spill. But, the casual manner with which he drops the bomb disarms me.

He reads the answer from my silence. "See? She can so easily manipulate people. There are many things you don't know about Niloo."

"If I don't know, that's because my husband has been reluctant to share."

"Well, it wouldn't have boded well if I told you she'd had suicidal impulses."

I emit an *oh*, audible and elongated. I picture Niloo's lifeless body in a crimson bathtub, her belly brimming with pills. That lithe, cheerful creature who took the stage at our wedding, who in every cellphone clip was dancing the night away in a lacy purple dress!

"Has she ever acted on those impulses?"

It's too dark to discern any change in Nima's expression. I know he's regretting what he blurted, what he's kept a secret for years and would've continued to do so.

"Forget it," he groans.

It means the end of discussion, the expiration of my access to the dark corners of his family. I'm suddenly reminded of my nakedness and pull the quilt over my body.

Later, we have soup in silence, a mushy sticky soup.



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Niloo and I exchange texts, jokes and emojis, and occasional voice messages. I discover more about her boyfriend: his name is Hadi, same age, same university, already employed in a medium-sized firm. She even sends me a picture, their hands around each other's shoulders, smiling. Young love. She makes me promise to delete it—which I do. I don't reveal that Nima knows about a boyfriend. Strangely and ironically, Nima is absent in our correspondences.

I find Niloo quite tasteful, fashionable. When I'm torn between dresses or vases, I shoot her a picture. She never gets it wrong. She has an eye for what matches what, already knows I'm into blues. Within two months, Niloo turns into the sister I've never had. Yet the family Skype calls continue like before, as if nothing has changed. What's left out is the elephant in the room. No one brings up Niloo's future plans—her desires. Incidental mentions of university, of immigration, slip into conversation, but those hardly evoke discomfort. I suspect I'm deliberately kept in the dark. There must be some threads of conversation I'm not part of. I wonder how much longer they can keep up the pretense. With university deadlines approaching, this is the calm before the storm.

The calm continues until my phone comes to life with an unknown number. The number starts with +98, Iran's area code. Calls from +98 numbers are not to be taken lightly, even if it's from an unrecognizable number. After all, my parents are past sixty, perfect candidates for a slew of sudden diseases. I excuse myself from the meeting I'm in.

The voice on the other side belongs to a man. He sounds calm but the way he draws out his words bespeaks some artifice. He introduces himself as Hadi.

"Niloo has hurt herself." Then he immediately adds, "She's stable now. They said she'll be released soon."

I cup my hand around the phone, even though none of my colleagues understand Persian. My head fills

with questions and worry, but I don't know how much I can handle knowing. I'm now deeply embroiled in a drama to which I've been consistently denied access.

After a few seconds in silence, he continues. "She told me she's been in touch with you. So...I thought..."

"That's okay. What happened?"

"She was with me. Nothing unusual. She said she was going to take a shower. Then I heard her scream from the bathroom." He breathes. "There was blood everywhere."

"Her wrist?"

"Yes. And now she's not talking to me." There's a hint of frailty in his tone, at odds with the macho character Niloo has described to me. "Should I tell her parents? They don't know anything about me."

I slap my palm on my forehead. Too much to take, to be complicit in an affair like this. I don't even know if this has to do with Nima's stubborn invitations or is it the outcome of some lovers' quarrel? And there's no point asking. I'm being offered random glimpses into the untrodden recesses of this family; I'm expected to act with incomplete information. I don't have the heart to tell Nima.

"Are you sure she's safe now? Any sign that she might do it again?"

"She's hard to crack, you know." And then he bursts into tears, seeking some catharsis. "Sorry," he mutters and hangs up, unresponsive to my subsequent calls.



Dear Niloofar, or maybe I should say Niloo, I'm recording a voice message since you don't seem to be able or are willing to answer my calls. I hope you'll get better soon. I wish you luck in making up your mind about your future. It's not an easy call, I know. There is no right or wrong answer and there's no decision that can't be reverted. Listen to your

gut feeling. Nima is your brother and my husband, dear to us both. But what he thinks of your best interests, or mine, comes from his own subjective truth. Personally, I'm not even convinced I made the right decision to come here with him. It was definitely the wrong thing not to question his choice at the time. You once compared your feelings for Hadi to mine for Nima. That affection brought me here, which, in retrospect, is not the best thing that has happened to me. Make sure whatever you're going to do isn't determined by your affection only. Anyway, that was my two cents. I know this all sounds like motherly advice. Please remove this message once you heard it. But think it over. Remember. The gut feeling.



Nima has a funny way of showing his discontent. He slumps into our couch, laces his hands behind his head and gazes into random corners of the ceiling. Periodically, he narrows his eyes in the air, as if he's following a fly, only to return his gaze back to the ceiling. This will go on until I ask him what's wrong, or until he gets tired.

Meanwhile, I'm scrubbing the kitchen floor. This is what I tend to do when I'm anxious. It's been about ten hours since I heard about Niloo's suicide attempt. Now I wonder if Nima's behavior has to do with that. We're well acquainted with the eccentricities of our moods. The problem is, at times like this, it takes courage to venture and ask.

In the end, I decide to be the reckless one. I claim a rag and stride to the living room. Nima stops chasing his imaginary fly and turns towards me.

I remove small plates from the coffee table and dust its spotless surface. "How was work?"

Nima's hostile glare confirms that I have a role in whatever he's brooding over.

"Okay, tell me." I'm still holding the rag. His gaze

only intensifies, so I add, "Niloo?"

At the mention of his sister's name, he jerks forward. "I don't know. You tell me."

I step back and sit on a stool. "Oh God! Nima, I don't understand the dynamics in your family. Why's everything a secret? Okay, Niloo is fine now. I'm sure you already know that. And she's mature enough to know what to do with her life."

"Sure." He chuckles. "Thanks to your motherly advice."

He steals a glance at my expression, picks up the remote and switches on the TV. He must have seen the bewilderment in my eyes.

"What did you just say?"

CNN is talking about the prospects of impeaching Trump.

"Well, I'm sure you give her advice, don't you?"

Nima asks, eyes on TV, feigning interest.

"Turn that off," I scream, and he obliges. "You listened to my message?" I remove the questioning tone and repeat, deflated. "You listened to my message."

Nima is silent, looking at me as if savouring this revelation, with the same curiosity he adopts while scrutinizing cracks in our ceiling.

Since I got home, my phone has been with me consistently. Only one logical explanation remains, which I'm working hard to dismiss, to refute. The roil in my stomach is an indication that my body is ahead of me in accepting the truth.

"You hacked her phone. That's how you knew she had a boyfriend. Oh my God, Nima. Fuck! You've been spying on your own sister." Certainty rises with each word.

"I care for her and that's why I'm doing everything in my power to bring her over. She's not in a position to decide. She hasn't seen the life we lead here. I'm the one who has experienced it and I'm the one able to compare because I've seen her life over there."

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"And very closely. The details of her most private moments."

"You think it was easy for me to read those things? It was agony." Then he adds, "But...but at least I know what's going on, and have some sense of control of the situation."

His self-righteousness is unbelievable. He's condemned himself to torment, with the promise of possible future good.

"What if one day you decide to control *me*? What if you *are* already controlling me?"

"Do not turn this into something that it isn't. You don't understand. It's different with her. She's my baby sister. She's..."

And he stops talking, starts to cry. He's the second man in my presence today. And it's contagious this time. I rub the dirty rag against my eyes, then throw it away. "This is sick, Nima. Pathetic. I'll never feel safe with you."

"Your voice message...you recorded it before you found out." He adopts an epiphanic look, a bit sinister maybe. "It didn't sound like someone feeling *safe* in a relationship."

"Yeah," I sniffle. "Because I listened to my gut feeling."

Later, Nima sleeps in Niloo's room. I hug his pillow.



In the morning, we have breakfast at different times. I

boil my eggs, then he does his. No *hellos*, no acknowledgment of the other person, no eye contact. I creep back into the bedroom. It's Saturday. I wonder if the weekly Skype call will happen, despite everything. It's the only way to find out about Niloo's health.

At quarter to ten, Nima tiptoes in to find me sitting on the bed, my head in my Kindle.

"They'll be on in fifteen," he says.

No hint of invitation in his voice. One should know him intimately to recognize his need for me to be at his side, to seal a truce and smile at his parents.

I keep my mask of inscrutability on until he leaves. Then I dredge myself out of bed, yank a dress out of the closet and change into it. I sneak into the bathroom, add some color to my pale lips and cheeks.

In the living room, Nima perches on the edge of the sofa, staring at his laptop. I slide next to him, neither too close nor too far to draw suspicion. I count down the seconds, for a temporary end to this lingering awkwardness.

When the call arrives, Nima is quick to accept. Niloo is wearing a long-sleeve shirt, tugging at the hem every few seconds, sitting between her mother and father, as is their custom. Everyone smiles at everyone in the vague, delayed way of video calls. Nima takes my hand, ensuring it's captured by the webcam. His mom squints at a corner on their laptop that I suspect is the gap between us. I inch closer. His dad starts by asking about the weather. I volunteer to respond, all the time alert for the cue that tells me I should leave the scene.