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From the collection *The Probability of Merriment and Mooning*

The Generals and the Kiosk

Across from the base, next to a small kiosk, Sergeant Alireza Mazaheri, dressed in civilian clothes, put his large tarpaulin bag on the ground so he could at last wipe the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand, and fixed his eyes on a twelve- or thirteen year old standing in the kiosk and staring at him. He did not have the energy to breathe, opened his hands without thinking, wishing he could go for a swim or take a shower. The heat rash in his armpit and groin was bothering him. "Are you new?" the kid said.

The sergeant did not know why he shook his head instead of talking; maybe it was the fatigue from the ten, twelve hour trip, or maybe it was this half hour, pacing up and down in the minibus and in this burning sun. The kid looked at the rivulet of sweat ruining the light blue of the shirt and leaving stains around his armpits.

"If you want to change your clothes, go to the kiosk. " The boy came out of the kiosk, pointed to the military police station on the other side of the road. "They'll pick on you if you are a newcomer. You've got anything illegal in your bag?"

The sergeant dragged himself into the very small shadow of the kiosk, grabbed the shirt that sticking to his body with two fingers and shook it. With pleasure and hesitation he felt a little bit of air reaching his armpit, then picked up his bag and turned to go into the kiosk. The kid was standing next to it, looking at him from head to toe. The inside of the kiosk wasn't cool, but the heat was less intense. He glanced at the packs of fruit juice and boxes of drinks, put down his bag, looked up at the base's watchtower. The kid was standing outside the kiosk, still watching him sharply. The Sergeant said: "what's your name?"

The kid smiled: "Jabbar."

"Is it always so empty here ?"

"Not always, officer. By the way, are you a lieutenant or a sergeant?"

Despite his impatience, the sergeant smiled: "I might be a general!"

Jabbar put his hands under his chin, leaning at the small counter. "New recruits arrive all together, wearing their uniforms. But some of these sergeants and lieutenants come in civilian clothes, and some are more polite than some others. They are embarrassed to be changing their clothes outside, in front of the tower guards because they will be outranking them soon, so they have to put a hundred tumans¹ in Mr. Jabbar's hand to get to change their clothes in the kiosk!"

"A hundred tumans?"

At this moment, everything he owned was two hundred and fifty tumans, left after he paid the minibus fare. He buttoned up his shirt, picked up the bag, stepped out of the kiosk, and looked at the entrance of the base, inhospitable like the gate of a dead city.

"Do I have to pay even for a worthless clothes change?"

Jabbar stretched his arm, took a pack of grape juice from the fridge and put it in the hand of Sergeant. "Have a drink, General! You cool down! Today, you're gonna be messing around in the base."

The sergeant hesitated: "You are a glib talker. How old are you?"

"Fifteen.... Don't you drink?" Jabbar was smiling.

The sergeant unwillingly put the grape juice on the counter: "How much?"

"Be my guest."

"Whose guest ? Yours?"

"Would you be my guest if I were your age?"

The sergeant looked at him for a moment. Jabbar didn't blink. "Where do you come from, Borujerd?" he said.

"You know where Borujerd is?"

"They say that's where the landmine diffusers are trained, Code One Hundred and Twenty One.

Many of them come here. What's yours, hundred twenty one?"

"Where do you know this stuff from?"

Jabbar pointed to the base: "All of them are my dad's customers."

"Where is your father?"

"He's gone to Ghasr-e-Shirin² to buy stuff." Again, he slid a pack of fruit juices towards the sergeant: "Drink, General. You are our customer too."

"I won't be staying for long."

Jabbar pointed behind the sergeant's head: "Sohrab said the same thing."

The sergeant looked at the military police station. Someone was coming on crutches. He was wearing civilian clothes. His right foot had been amputated from the knee down.

"A sergeant. He came last year. He changed his clothes here. He had no money but it was obvious that he's a loyal person. I gave him a fruit juice, wrote it down to his account; he became our customer. He was coming here once or twice a day until three or four months ago when he stepped on the mine. Now he has come to finish the paperwork and pay out. He is exempt now, going home."

Jabbar went towards Sohrab and took his bag. "Didn't your father come?" Sohrab asked.

"Do you want to run away this quick, General? We were just getting used to you." Jabbar took out a fruit juice from the fridge. "Here you are, be our guest."

Sohrab took out his wallet. Jabbar took his wrist like an adult, trying to be serious: "I swear I get upset if you pay. If my dad finds out about that, he'd pull my ears again."

Sohrab laughed: "Give me one cigari³ then--you've got one prepared?"

Jabbar became happier again, laughed out loud: "Do you remember?"

He went to the kiosk, bent under the counter and faked a voice: "It is none of your freaking business, you itsy-bitsy!" In his hand was a single Winston with its top crumpled and twisted. "I don't want it if you don't let me pay you," said Sohrab.

Jabbar stroke a match: "Don't ruin the moment now that you are leaving, General."

He came out of the kiosk, inhaled the cigari twice, with satisfaction, then handed it to Sohrab.

Then, he pushed his head forward: "You can come and pull my ears yourself so I'll behave."

Sohrab took the cigari, looked at the sergeant and said: "Here you are, buddy."

"Dear General, watch the kiosk while I go to the washroom in the base. I'll be back soon." said Jabbar to Sohrab, and he went towards the base.

"How come they let this kid enter the base?" asked sergeant.

"Here, everyone is Jabbar's customers" said Sohrab. He sat down on the empty beverage box, and dropped the crutches on the bag beside his hand: "He is a lovely kid. Our delight here was this kiosk and Jabbar, oh..." he huffed a breath into the air.

"Why does he speak like an adult?"

"He's been here four, five years dealing with adults."

"Where was he before that?"

"His entire family died in the bombardment during the early years of war⁴. His father was a vendor. When the war finished, he came and built a kiosk in front of this base."

"Why here?"

"He himself is from this region. He says there isn't any job in the town."

"Is it worth it for him?"

"Most probably, otherwise he wouldn't have survived four, five years. He is a strange man. He does everything, even he mediates for some of the farmers of this area whom their land clean-up

turn is late, and he gives some money to lieutenants in order to advance their clean-up turn. He then takes several times that money from farmers. This brings him good money, why not, it's bound to be profitable".

The sergeant looked at Sohrab's amputated foot and said: "Did you finish the paper work and the pay-out?"

Sohrab put his hand in his pocket and showed his military service Exemption⁵ Card: "All it was this piece of paper. They brought us here from that side of Iran to go to the zero-point border by truck, then put down sounds into the soil to search for scrap irons, man. Maybe this has been our destiny, what do I know."

"Can't we get away from this job? Is there any way to get a desk job in the army units?"

"You should either kiss the colonel's ass or do like some of these newly-arrived second lieutenants, who'll wash dishes to be in the service of the permanent sergeant, or to be lucky; if you had been lucky, you would not have been sent here in the first place."

"It's good that the military service with the border units is a couple of months shorter."

"Fuck them all" he scratched his amputated foot: "What's the difference anyway? In the morning when you get out of the base, you pray that at least the scrap iron works properly so you can diffuse them step by step, just how you have been taught in the training. Some of these scrap irons have been planted some ten, eleven years ago; they are corroded now, diffusing them is haphazard. See-- depends on luck, too... shit!"

The sergeant felt his groin and armpit beginning to burn. He spread his feet wider, moved his hands and rubbed his armpits. Sohrab puffed on the cigari again, held in the smoke and looked at the sergeant: "As if a piece of my brain has been taken out". He raised his finger: "Do you know what this does with the man?" he offered: "try it"

The sergeant said: "I'm not a smoker. I haven't smoked more than two, three cigarettes in my life."

"This one is different. This is of some use here." said Sohrab.

The roaring minibus emerged from the distance. Sohrab stood up, puffed for the last time, turned to sergeant: "Watch the kiosk, I don't want to see Jabbar again. Tell him General said I'll miss you."

While the sergeant was going to the kiosk to change his clothes, he picked up the grape juice on the counter. It was cool; he got undressed, stuck the fruit juice to his armpit and tasted its coolness. His look was on the Sohrab whom someone was helping to get on the minibus.

[...]

An excerpt from the novel *The World*

Right in the middle of the circle the village crowd made, a heap of white cloth had emerged from the ground; if it hadn't moved and wailed in desperation, it couldn't be apparent that it was a girl whose hands have been tied and who was buried up to her chest. According to the law, if the girl could pull herself out of the soil during the execution of the [sentence](#), she would be forgiven and released.

The crowd was also quite like the white heap of cloth. Some were Talibs with weapons in their hands, each of them standing facing the crowd one or two meters away so nobody would approach the cloth. A six- or seven-year old boy was peeping through the gaps between the adults' legs to better see the cloth. Farther away some people were collecting stones and putting them in a wheelbarrow. Mullah Hagh, the elder commander of the Talibs, with a longer beard and a larger turban and a weapon in hand, stood in the middle of the circle, near the cloth heap, facing the crowd: "Allah's order according to Quran, Allah's word about anyone who commits

adultery is stoning to death. We do nothing unless it is in accord with Allah's order. You are Muslim, faithful. If we don't take action against corruptors, our faith will be swept away by the wind."

One of the Talibs was pounding the soil around the pile of cloth with the back of the shovel to make it tighter. The little boy who was wriggling among the adults, having failed to get closer to the cloth pile, went instead to the stone collectors.

Mullah Hagh came and stood in front of an old man and woman. The old man was looking down, the woman seated on the ground was weeping, and no one could tell whether between her wails she was praying or cursing. Standing eye to eye with the older man, Mullah Hagh looked sharply at the man: "Yes, Anvar? Say it was your negligence that your daughter committed sin... isn't that right?"

The Mullah was waiting. The people who were looking at the cloth turned their eyes to Anvar and the Mullah. A young Talib with a wispy beard leaned towards Anvar. "Mullah you're right. Anvar, wipe this disgrace off yourself and our village."

Anvar was still looking downward, and Mullah Hagh was still waiting. The little boy, who had been mooning around the wheelbarrows, poured the handful of stones which he had collected back into the wheelbarrow and together with the young Talib went toward the crowd. The Talib unloaded the stones beside the other heaps in front of the crowd. The little boy sat cdown happily among the stones and began to arrange them in rows.

Mullah Hagh shouted at the crowd: "Anvar is ashamed of raising his head, folks." Then he turned his eyes toward everybody. "And he's right. He is ashamed in front of Allah and the Prophet because of not looking after his daughter."

He walked to the young, masculine Talib who, unlike the others, was not facing the people, no weapon in his hand. Mullah Hagh bent over, picked up a stone the size of his palm and stood in front of the young Talib: "Take it."

For a moment the harshness of the Mullah's voice distracted the little boy, who was laying out the stones next to each other to make something like a wall of a house. He looked at the big stone in the hand of the Mullah, who was holding it towards the young Talib.

"Take it."

Mullah Hagh turned to the crowd: "I have faith in the purity of this young man. I have known him ever since he was a little child. From me he learned the teachings of Quran and Maktab in the Koveiteh School... Hear me, people ... who is clean now and would throw the first stone? I, Mullah Hagh, having studied the teachings of Quran and Islam in my entire life, testify to the cleanliness of this young man. The border of right..." he touched the young man's shoulder." ... and wrong..." he pointed to the cloth. "...is blind to sisterhood and brotherhood, folks. Right is right, and wrong is wrong... Take it Zamir. You throw the first stone, as I haven't seen anything in you but cleanliness, truthfulness, and good faith."

The crowd was gazing at Zamir's stone. The little boy didn't place the stone that was in his hand next to the stones of the house he was building, holding it in his hand.

Then he took the stone, with the weapon hanging in his other hand. Mullah Hagh shouted, facing Zamir, the crowd, and Anvar: "Act in a way that your father and mother lift their heads and don't feel ashamed. Execute Allah's order."

Zamir looked at his father who was not raising his head. His mother was on the ground, bending over, mourning, intoning something unintelligible, as if she was not conscious of where she was and what she was doing. Some people in the crowd came one step forward and picked up a stone. They were looking at Zamir and at Mullah Hagh. The little boy dropped his stone, picked up a bigger one, stood up and raised the stone up to the chest like Zamir. "Throw it."

The bundle of cloth was looking to where Zamir was standing: "Throw it, Zamir." she wailed. "Throw it and finish me off."

Some people moved their heads and clattered. The Talibs came again with a wheelbarrow and unloaded more stones where there wasn't enough in front of the crowd. Mullah Hagh shouted a reprimand: "Zamir..."

Gazing dazedly at the weeping cloth he said "Throw it, Zamir. Throw it, my brother; throw it so that I can be rid of disgrace and shame." The echo of the scream the cloth mad was reaching the mountain and coming back, reverberating in the head of Zamir who had a stone in his hand, and a weapon in the other: the stone raised and the weapon dropped.

"Throw it Talib, throw it so that your mother, and the villagers know the truth—the Qu'ran and Allah are with us and you are on the side of truth. Throw it so that the believers don't hesitate and their hands don't shake. The person there is not your sister, it's a corruptor who'd corrupt the believers in the village... throw it!"

The voices were bouncing in Zamir's head, the stone shaking in his hand. Zamir took one step forward. The crowd, having waited, was now gazing at the stone in Zamir's hand. The little boy took one step forward, too, raised the stone and held it toward the cloth. His look was on Zamir's hand. The little boy didn't see the tear flowing down Zamir's cheek while he was about to take another step forward. As the stone was falling from Zamir's hand and the tears were flowing down his cheek, he was mumbling: "Which one of us is clean ... Which one of us," shaking his head and weeping and mumbling something in a way no one could hear. All the people saw was Zamir taking out the weapon and shooting a bullet through the cloth and throwing the weapon in a corner.

The little boy didn't know what to do with the stone in his hand. The white pile of cloth was now red, and swelling. In the hubbub and uproar, the little boy was merely watching out that no one would destroy the house he was building. He put the stone that was in his hand on top of the other stones of the house in order to make its wall larger.

At Mullah Hagh's order, two Talibs tied Zamir's hands behind his back and dragged him to the village.

Translated from the Persian by Roya KABIRI

¹ The equivalent of about 10 cent

² A city on the border of Iran and Iraq

³ A blend of marijuana and tobacco

⁴ The war between Iran and Iraq (1981-88)

⁵ Military service is obligatory for all men in Iran; after two years, they will receive a "card of exemption".

Excerpt from *The Rituals of Restlessness*---

Kamran is planning to fake his death in a car crash and is in the car with his driver on their way to the spot where he intends the accident to happen. This piece opens with a question from his driver, Golshah.

[...]

"Where are we going, sir?"

"To work."

"What's our business?"

Kamran felt less anxious when he talked. He didn't want to remain silent, even for a second. He just wanted to talk, about anything. It didn't matter about what.

"Were you content with yesterday's pay?"

"God bless you."

There was a flask of tea on the rear seat, and the gasoline container in the trunk. It wasn't going to be more than half an hour to the gorge. Then it would be half past four. Kamran had figured that it would at most take him an hour to finish the job. That meant it would be half past five in the morning and still dark.

"You're silent, Golshah."

"What should I say sir?"

"Your wife and children are in Afghanistan?"

"They're here."

"How many are you?"

"I have six children, a wife and her mother... we are nine."

"You've been quite busy. God bless your potency. How old are you?"

"About forty, forty five."

"Don't you have an ID?"

"I had one. Our house was ruined in the bombing, nothing but debris. However hard I searched I couldn't find it."

"Weren't you at home at the time? Where were your children?"

"I wasn't at home. Three of my children were killed, and my wife."

"So this is your second wife? The six children are hers?"

"It's not good for a man to remain single, I was alone. I came to Mashhad. I saw this woman with her two children and mother. They were from Herat, compatriots. I said God would be glad and she would not be without a man..."

Kamran laughed out loud... Golshah turned and stared at him. For a few seconds, he forgot everything. As if he had gained courage, Golshah laughed too: "What's our job sir?"
