

Mahsa MOHEBALI

Two stories

The Vampire Bat

In this story a murder is committed. Not that you think it is an account of a murder. No, right in this story, between these very lines which are to come, a murder is committed.

Be prepared for a murder committed in front of you. I want to see you suffering from the maximum fear and anxiety. I will now create a murderer, a victim, and a detective. All are part of my existence. Let me tell you now not to hope to discover the murder, because I am the murderer. Also, don't expect to face two layers of time, as in other detective stories. You have always read: "a woman was murdered at midnight on the fifth street of Yousef Abaad!."

You always start to read stories when the most interesting part has already finished. The murder has been committed and you, like a mole, have to chase the detective to chain the events together.

No, relax, this is not going to happen here. In this story a murder will be committed in front of your eyes. I promise you will not be able to take your eyes off these lines until the end of this story. You may even hiccup from the intense anxiety. And promise me too, promise to lose me between the lines.

Tomorrow, around six o'clock in the afternoon near Narmak Street a dark blue Peugeot will stop next to the feet of a man who is walking slowly. The driver of the Peugeot is a woman wearing heavy make-up and big sunglasses, which hide her face as much as possible. It's me. The woman will ask the man, who is walking, for an address. The man will bend down next to the car's window and begin to give her directions. At this moment, a flare of fire will glitter from behind the woman's sunglasses and a sense of insatiable desire will flow in the man's veins like a narcotic drug.

The woman will dumbly pretend not to understand the directions. The man will get into the car to give the woman directions. He, the victim, is any man who will be walking near Narmak Street at around six o'clock in the afternoon.

Half an hour later the victim and I will be moving towards the suburbs on Abali Road. My victim is wearing jeans and a cotton checkered shirt. A nebulous smile is stamped on my lips and a dizzy one on his. My victim is talking continually: about his work, his home, his favorite sport, his favorite music . . . and will be asking me stupid questions. Rather than answer, I will only smile, and his smile will get dizzier. At that moment, I will put my hand slowly behind the seat and give him an injection in his neck, like a female bat. Half an hour later, the dark blue Peugeot will still be moving along the road. Conversing with the victim is certainly enjoyable. The syringe contains substance that will have turned the man to stone. He will be staring forward with the same mild smile and satisfied eyes, and I will confide in him. The victim will listen to me quite calmly. He is the best listener in the world. The sun must be setting now when I begin a very picturesque detour. There must be a detour near Abali Road that might lead to a deserted canning factory, a detour which is wooded with poplar trees. I will say, "What a beautiful place!" and will inhale the fragrant summer evening air into my lungs. How sensuous it is when I come to know that this air is mine. The man sitting next to me will never take any air into his lungs. How marvelous it is to joyride with a corpse on the outskirts of the city. To each sentence I utter he will offer the same smile, his lips indicating his satisfaction, as if the smile on his lips is only the result of my last sentence. There is no listener better than a dead one, especially when he has such a smile on his lips.

I pull over and stop in the shade of a poplar tree. I get out of the car. What nice weather! I will wave at him: "why don't you get out?"

¹ A district in Tehran.

I will open the car's door for him. He will fall out of the car like a stone statue, seated and bent towards one side. If the victim is not too heavy, I can use a little force to persuade him to lean against the door of the car. Then I can sit on a rock in front of him. If I remember to take a flask of tea with me, we can also drink tea. Then I start to talk again. Men can never listen to all my words, unless they are dead-like this one. When I talk to a person, I always want them to keep looking me straight in the eye, without any distraction. Women usually do this quite calmly, but men often steal their look. In the middle of a very important sentence, their look is diverted towards something else, or they start to look for their pack of cigarettes. In this condition it is almost impossible for me to continue talking. But this one is staring straight into my eyes and there is a beautiful nebulous smile on his lips. I am sure that he is listening to my words with all his heart. He is the best listener in the world. On this summer afternoon how sensuous it is to confide in my petrified victim with that unique smile on his lips.

Tomorrow I will tell my victim not to worry, because I am a murderer-author and will fade away a few seconds later. The detective, no matter how intelligent he is, cannot guess who I am because I have impunity. In this story nothing will ever happen to the murderer, nor to the victim. Don't worry, (you,) my poor randomly chosen victim, you can sit here in complete serenity and listen to my words. The detective, with that paunch, raincoat and trilby can search for the murderer-author's randomly chosen victim forever.

I would like to sit there forever and talk to the statue man. Tomorrow I will tell him how much I like the way he walked near the square, in that free and comfortable state, a kind of thoughtless state which tempted me to give him a ride. And how enjoyable it is for me to turn a beautiful man with such freedom to behave as he wishes into stone. I should also talk to him about how to bury him. He may prefer to be cremated. This is easier for me too. I can finish him off with a four-liter jerry-can of petrol.

I would like to chat with him once more, forever. He is the best listener in the world because tomorrow I will tell him that the murder was not committed today in the afternoon at six o'clock but rather last night around eleven o'clock, while you were reading the story of my randomly chosen victim's murder, and as your attention was completely drawn to finding out the secret of the murder between the lines, I, the murderer-author, committed the real murder while writing the story of my randomly chosen victim's murder, a real murder for reasons that are entirely personal. My poor randomly chosen victim of tomorrow was just a mask for the main and personal murder that I committed while writing about tomorrow's murder.

The personal Midnight murder of yesterday was committed exactly at the moment when I was writing the story of tomorrow's six o'clock murder. At my desk in my room, busy writing, the real victim sipped his poisoned tea.

It was a sensuous murder, very sensuous because it was committed for entirely personal reasons. It was a personal settlement. He was a man whose death I had desired for a long time. I wanted him to die in an ugly and nauseating way. My dream has almost come true. My real victim, having drunk his poisoned tea exactly at the moment when I was writing the last words of this story, fell down on the floor in the next room. His face had turned dark violet, almost the color of his dark blue shirt, and his tongue had jutted through his locked teeth for nearly five centimeters, and he had, wow, two beautiful, stricken, glassy, eyes.

What a sensuous murder it was, no doubt about it; a murder whose reasons are all hidden under the lines of that other murder and nobody will ever find out its secret, neither the detective nor you who lost me in the middle of the story.

From Love-making in Footnotes

In this story love-making happens. Love-making as an ivy that, like mandrake, tangles my lover and me between the lines. My lover, a few movies and stories and I will be interwoven so that we will not be distinguishable.

I have short auburn hair stuck on my forehead and temples. I weigh forty five kilograms and am five feet four in high heels. I graduated in literature from Azad University. I stayed home for the next few years until I met my lover at a 'Sizdahbedar'² holiday party in the garden of one of my relatives. My lover has drunken eyes and works at the Central Bank. He is tall and very affable. He has no other distinctive characteristics except that he constantly fiddles with his moustache. In one corner of the garden my lover with his charming drunken eyes is staring at me. Coquettishly abashed, I throw my head down and go away. My lover follows me and holds out a glass towards me. When I take the glass from my lover, our glances cross momentarily. My lover gently pulls my hand towards him and fills my glass with something like wine.

To better comprehend this part of the story, refer to Mohammad Tajvidi's miniature on page 23 in Hafez's complete work emended by Dr. Ghasem Ghani and Allameh Ghazvini, 23rd edition, when the man in the miniature, solicitation waving in his eyes, grabs the skirt of the woman in the miniature and holds a wineglass towards her. Meanwhile, the woman has turned back in the opposite direction and is looking into the farthest possible distance. Despite all this, it is clear that there is a hidden desire erupting under her skin. This hidden desire is also distinguishable in the way she is glancing from the corner of her eyes. The woman seems to have been looking forward to this moment for years and now that she has found an opportunity for coquetry; despite her blushing cheeks, she is trying to pretend to be cool and dispassionate. However, the man does not care and is staring at her, his hair falling on his forehead. He is only thinking about joining his beloved and does not care if his image is recorded in history as that of a fool.

My lover and I are sitting in front of the TV in a forty-five square meter apartment we have rented on Hafez Street, watching the Helicopter Rescue series. I get up in the most sensational scene, go to my bedroom, put on a red robe, stand in front of the TV brushing my hair and in reply to my lover's complaints give him a seductive look. He smiles but still tries to follow the story. I unplug the TV.

To better comprehend this part of the story, refer to The Quiet American, by Graham Greene, translated by Ezatollah Fouladvand, Kharazmi Publication, first edition, page 143, when Pyle asks Fowler, that experienced English journalist: "If somebody asked you what your deepest sexual experience had been, what would you say?"

And Fowler replies to the young quiet American: "I was lying in bed early one morning and watching a woman in a red robe brushing her hair."

At that moment, all the erotic sense of the wise Englishman was focused on this scene. A scene that he had very likely never experienced with any other woman before; but at that moment in the tower with the two Vietnamese soldiers and that quiet American, passing the night into the morning in dread of a Viet Cong attack, it was the only image in his weary, disturbed mind. It was very likely that at that moment Fowler was not thinking about any of his lovers, neither Phuong, that beautiful Vietnamese phoenix, nor his English beloved. That image was the sum total of all the moments of love that the Englishman had ever experienced.

² The thirteenth day of the first month in Persian calendar, part of Nowruz (New Year) festivities, when people celebrate and spend the day in the nature.

My lover and I are sitting in a beach café sipping our cappuccinos. My lover is wearing a white T-shirt that is clinging to his body because of the sultry weather. I have a light green manteau on and a big white magnolia between the buttons. The fragrance of the magnolia on my chest, the smell of cappuccino and the sultry odor from the sea mingle together and make me dizzy. I put my fingers to my temples and take a deep breath. My lover looks at me worriedly. I ask my lover to re-tell the story of that young boy and girl who drowned. He replies that he has recounted the incident five times since yesterday, and has had enough.

To better comprehend this part of the story, refer to Moderato Cantabile by Marguerite Duras, translated by Reza Seyed-Hosseini, first edition, 1973, page 89, when Anne Desbaresdes with that décolleté dress and a magnolia on her chest leaves the dinner table in the party nervously in order to go to the harbor café and drink another glass of wine with Chauvin and ask him for the last time to recount the story of that young man and woman. At that moment it was the first time that Anne Desbaresdes realized the magical power of wine and magnolias and, at the same time, the incredible undeniable similarity between the two. Anne Desbaresdes realizes that the odor of magnolia appears quite innocent at first, as drinking a little wine does, but after a while the flower's fragrance surrounds the mind so that there will remain no place for any other thought or sense, and this is exactly what Anne Desbaresdes is feeling at that moment: intoxicated by the fragrance of magnolia and wine and a mind that thinks about nothing but love. At that moment, love, like the fragrance of magnolia, has filled all her mind, and of course untimely boredom, which has conquered her mind just as much.

My lover and I are in our forty-five square meter apartment. My lover is lying on the couch with a glass full of ice on his chest and a cigarette up to his lips. He is staring at the ceiling and gives short meaningless answers to my questions. I am sitting on the armchair dangling my feet over one side, angrily leafing through 'Art and Decoration'. I ask my lover not to flick his cigarette on the floor. He does not answer and, still staring at the ceiling, flicks his cigarette again on the floor. I go and stand over him with my arms folded and look at him furiously. My lover sneers while staring at the ceiling. I shout at him that I am sick and tired of his behavior and the glass he always has in his hand. Muttering something under his breath, my lover puts on his pants and tightens the belt. Standing by the door and blocking his way, I ask him to put an end to it and not to do American movie heroes when they are tired of their beloved. He pushes me away, slams the door and leaves.

To better comprehend this part of the story do not ever refer to American movies with happy endings. Because unlike Jane Fonda or Julia Roberts, I am not going to go after my lover and find him in a park or a nearby café and ask him to come back home with me. When my lover leaves, I play the CD of Richard Strauss' opera Salome, lie on the couch and skim through Oscar Wilde's Salome and when Herod asks Salome to dance on the occasion of that special night, I start dancing the 'Dance of the Seven Veils.' And in the end, when Salome embraces John's decapitated head and kisses the lips she was unable to touch when he was alive, I too take the picture of my lover that sits on top of the TV and kiss his lips. My vengeful and sadistic feeling at that moment is no less than that of Salome towards John.

My lover and I are lying in the bathtub, surrendering our bodies to the gentle warmth and slowly smoking. My lover is talking on and on, and I reply with an inexpressive smile and a more inexpressive voice. I have closed my eyes and am thinking about hours ago, thinking to myself what would happen if my lover knew what I was thinking about at this moment. The mere thought fills me with terror. My lover says I'd better get out of the bathtub as I might catch a cold.

To better comprehend this part of the story, refer to *Unfaithful*, directed by Adrian Lynn, the scene when the woman is lying in the bathtub and suddenly sees something drawn on her belly. The very drawing that the lecher had done on her belly when she was sleeping. This is the most important moment in the process of forming her relationship with her husband. Up until then, everything has been only mischief or even a joke; but when she picks up the sponge and cleans that pierced heart, she realizes the magical power of secrecy. Since then she has entered a new phase of this game. Before that, she might have confessed everything to her husband at a moment of ecstasy or trance. But since then she understands the joy of the excitement of betrayal, which constantly encourages her to make the game more dangerous.

My lover and I are returning from a party arm in arm. I am wearing an open-collared blouse and my lover is wearing jeans and a t-shirt as usual. We sing 'Tonight is the Moonlight' out loud. Sometimes we stagger and grab each other's arms and sometimes we giggle. Any time my lover reaches the words 'my beloved' in the song, he frowns and points his finger towards me with a serious face, addressing me. I sing along with him in one octave higher.

To better comprehend this part of the story, refer to 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' where Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton try to hide their real emotions from each other by joking, which may easily lead to swearing if they are not careful enough, and of course oblivion comes to help. Oblivion helps past memories change and sometimes aids the wounded feeling or mind. A feeling coming from the loss of a child or an abortion or a betrayal which has never been truly unfolded nor denied.

My lover and I are sitting in our apartment smoking cigarettes depressedly. More weariedly, I lie down on the sofa and more depressedly he lies beside the fireplace smoking a cigarette. Depression tangles our hands and feet like ivy. I suggest one of us leave the other because in such cases it is usual for one lover to leave the other. My lover rolls over and says he is in no mood for wandering in the streets and suggests that if I am the tired one, I may leave him. I remind my lover that it usually is the man who leaves. But he does not accept this and, in the face of my persistence, just looks on with his drunken eyes. I tell my lover that I cannot keep on smoking depressedly, and am tired of his depressed way of smoking. My lover puffs on his cigarette again and says that in his view nothing but smoking can express depression so beautifully. I go to my bedroom as my upper lip throbs in anger, play the CD of Chopin's sonata in B-flat minor, lie down on the bed and think about some unimportant matters.

If Wim Wenders had started *Paris, Texas* some sequences earlier, where the couple in the story are bored, you might have referred to this movie. But at the moment you had better refer to this very sonata of Chopin in B-flat minor, where the harp notes bring to mind the monotonous sound of rain and Chopin's boredom on Majorca. When Chopin, sitting at the piano and composing the boring, destructive notes of this sonata in that 16th century villa located on the rocks, was thinking about one thing only: boredom. Boredom of love. An unavoidable boredom which encumbers man after a long period of lovemaking; after betrayals, carelessness, oblivions, quarrels, intoxications and trances, and leaves him no choice but, like Chopin, to listen to the monotonous sound of the rain and the waves hitting the rocks, and to put into writing the boring notes which bear the ecstasy of a storm regardless of George Sand's peevishness. Although George Sand was also probably writing a story in which a beloved kills her lover out of boredom in the next room. However, I believe if Chopin and George Sand, before their relationship ended in that intolerable boredom, had gone to Arles instead of Majorca, where Van Gogh painted his beautiful Sunflowers, they would have become so frenzied that one would definitely have killed the other or at least, like Van Gogh who cut his own ear, one of the two would have maimed or cut themselves.

Translated from the Persian by Arya Aryan
