

WHILE TEHRAN WAS SILENT

MEHDI M. KASHANI

The living room looks untouched since last night: glasses of wine and tea, empty or almost, scattered across the tabletops; small plates stacked on top of one another with discarded fruit and crackers; the flimsy coffee table still pushed into a corner meant to make room for dancing. Ava studies the disarray, triaging cleaning measures. They had a girls' night out yesterday and the whole gang ended up here. In her hungover mind, last night was fun, a rare success. She knows that her parents' imminent trip to Vancouver will alter her social life. Apart from an uncle in Maple Ridge (too far; distant wife), they'll only have her to depend on, will accompany her wherever she goes. She won't be herself, or at least the self she's carved out over the past six years. For fifty-six days, she won't have access to uninhibited, effortless heart-to-hearts like the night before.

Last night, they talked about everything from Iran's politics to their profs to guys. Especially guys. Those with a man and those without, all complaining. The spotlight was on Ava's roommate Parissa, who had agreed to live with her boyfriend, Amir, while Ava's parents are in town. A convenient setup that allows Parissa to test out living with her boyfriend, dodging the pressures or risks of moving in. Also, she would save her share of the rent with which she's planning a romantic weekend on Vancouver Island.

The door to Parissa's bedroom is closed. She must be still asleep.

Parissa is not asleep. She is, in fact, on the phone with Tehran, being briefed about the sudden demise of Ava's mother. Ava's brother Ahmad is describing how the accident happened: crazy truck driver, bad road, the same drill. There are understandable pauses and occasional bursts of sniffing in his story, during which Parissa makes monosyllabic responses meant to be comforting. "She didn't suffer," is the mantra Ahmad keeps repeating, more to himself. Parissa listens, patient, all the while trying to conjure up the image she has of him, one only known from his sister's words and Instagram. She twists the grinning face in those pictures into what he must be like now. Once she captures that mental image, she starts sobbing. It's her own mother she imagines dead, a dread she's been living with since she moved to Canada. Every sneeze, every cough on the phone could mean a symptom of a terminal illness.

"Does Ava have a strong support system out there?"

It's the first time Ahmad addresses Parissa, and it catches her off guard. She remembers last night. How many of those girls will be ready to put their lives on hold for their friend?

“Sure.”

“Does she have a boyfriend?”

The question is direct, indelicately put. Back in Iran, Ava used to hide her tame romances from her brother. Parissa isn't sure if that dynamic has shifted. Ava's private life is irrelevant at a time like this, but in any case, no one is in her life.

“Don't think so.”

There is a pause.

“Okay. Got to go. Things aren't good here. I should take care of my dad.”

Ava's dad, Parissa remembers, is old. In his late seventies even. He probably never foresaw the day when his young wife would go before him.

“When are you going to tell Ava?” Parissa asks in a whisper.

“Can't right now. I called Uncle Vahid a few times. Will try him again. He'll handle it.”

Ava has dubbed him the once-a-year uncle. Only on Persian New Year does he make himself available. Parissa doubts if such an elusive man could be relied on. “What if you can't find him?”

“I will. In the meantime, can you keep an eye on Ava?”

Parissa offers a hesitant sure, as Ava's shadow shuffles about from under the slit of the door.

Sprawled on a deckchair, a plastic cup of piña colada in hand. From Vahid's vantage point the whole stretch of beach is visible. He can see his boys in the distance with their mom. Under normal circumstances it'd be a blissful image, but an unnecessarily long look at another bather's ass had caused a serious fight between him and Farida.

They're now under a truce but Farida is far from him and apparently no longer cares what's parading in front of his eyes—"apparently" because with Farida you never know.

He slowly turns his head, catching a sorry glance at his own beer belly as he's slumped in the chair. On his left, a group of young bikini-clad women are chatting and occasionally laughing. He doesn't understand what they're saying, can't even locate their language. They might be talking about him for all he knows, ridiculing his disproportionate body. But no, they don't even deign him a glance. He's invisible to them, just as he is to his wife, who only takes interest in him when he looks away from her.

His phone starts to ring. The same unknown number he'd missed an hour ago while he and Farida were arguing.

Aware of the roaming charge, he answers.

"Hi," his nephew, Ahmad, said. "Uncle?"

The dishwasher is whirring, and the garbage bag is brimming. Ava is completing her final touches when Parissa's door creaks open.

"All done, roomie," Ava chants without raising her head.

Parissa sprints toward the restroom behind the kitchen. "You're the best, roomie."

Her voice, traveling around Ava, sounds off.

"Hey, what's up?" Ava says. "Look at me."

Parissa obliges. Her eyes are red and watery.

Ava ventures a guess. "Amir?"

Parissa's silence compels her to continue. "Look. I don't want my parents' visit to put a dent in your relationship. Like I said, we can

switch rooms. I'll stay in the big room with my mom. My dad can sleep in the hall."

At this, Parissa's shoulders heave.

Ava passes her a tissue. Parissa's erratic relationship with Amir is what makes Ava skeptical toward men, though recently she's been trying to emerge from her shell.

"Come on. I have a date tonight. Don't make me have second thoughts."

Parissa widens her eyes, the liquid in them lending some glint. "You do?"

Ava laughs at the way Parissa is distracted like a three-year-old with a new toy. "It's just Nader! Don't make a big deal out of it."

"Last night I spilled out my whole private life and you kept this to yourself?"

"Some of our friends are pretty mouthy. I don't want Hooman to find out. Not now, at least."

Let's say you like a girl, then win her heart for a while, only to suddenly lose her with no closure. You're entitled to a moment of speculation and thrill when, after a year, her uncle calls you out of the blue, from another country. That's what Hooman feels at the beginning, even after he realizes Uncle Vahid has no idea about their breakup. The flutter in his heart goes on until the ominous news is delivered. As far as Uncle Vahid is concerned, the fact that Hooman is out of Ava's life gets him off the hook.

"Then maybe it's best if you stay out of it," Ava's uncle says before ending his long-distance call.

Hooman doesn't care much about Uncle Vahid's advice. Once they hang up, he calls Ava's roommate, Parissa. She gives him a somber hello. During a few occasions in the past, he'd asked her to act as a mediator between him and Ava, a role she hated to play. So, it's understandable if she's not ecstatic to hear from him.

"Parissa, I have terrible news." He hears her cough. Waits for it to subside. "Is Ava near you?"

"Not right now. And I already know. I need your help with that," Parissa says.

They exchange what they know, that Ava is on campus right now, in a weekly meeting with her supervisor. They agree that they can't depend on any help from Ava's uncle.

"I'm on my way. Stay put."

He can feel Parissa hesitate.

"You'll be good, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"No drama?"

It was true, not long ago, when the chances for rapprochement had been depleted, he started to fantasize about hypothetical alternatives to win Ava back. What if she was inflicted with an incurable disease? A malady to make her realize she'd be alone for the rest of her life, only to see Hooman next to her, supportive and still in love. Or, what if her kidneys failed and, in a display of selfless gallantry, he volunteered one of his?

But exploiting her vulnerability in the wake of her mother's death?

"Give me a little credit."

“I appreciate your coming. I know that she still counts on you.” Parissa pauses. “But, please please please, don’t look at this as an opportunity.”

Her repetition of please hints at a repetition of such a practice, is an accusation perhaps. And maybe he had been guilty of this in the past. Every time Ava asked, are we good, wanting him as a friend—and no more than a friend—wouldn’t he concur, hoping to stay close to his flame? Or, for any birthday party, wouldn’t he offer to buy a gift together, so that people would think there was still something going on between them, to dispel and confuse other male suitors?

He straightens his back and furrows his brows as if Parissa could see him. “I’ll be there for her and let’s not discuss it further.”

Securing a date with Ava didn’t come easy for Nader. Twice before, she’d cancelled with vague excuses. She’d say, *Not sure I’m ready*, as if having a coffee or grabbing a bite required preparation. But Nader is persistent and, so far, this characteristic of his has paid off. It brought him to Canada, helped him finish his PhD in five years and build a start-up company he could sell handsomely to invest in his new venture. If his round-the-clock perseverance convinces skeptical investors, why wouldn’t it have the same impact on a girl?

Last week, she finally said yes to dinner and he immediately made a reservation at Cincin on Robson. Less than six hours remain before the rendezvous and Nader is reviewing the material he’s going to talk to Ava about. He’ll make sure he provides enough room for Ava to discuss her favourite topics, but he’ll distill his achievements in life to insert into their conversation.

When his phone rings, he half expects it to be Ava, playing the I'm-not-ready card after all.

It's her roommate. Ava's rejection game is hitting new levels.

"Hi, Nader. How are you?"

Keen to cut to the chase, he asks, "Is it about tonight?"

"Related."

"Spit it out."

Parissa tells him about Ava's mother, and that it might not be a good idea to go on a date right now. "And one more thing," she adds. "No condolences. She doesn't know yet."

"What? Somebody should tell her."

"If you want to volunteer, be my guest," Parissa says bitterly, sitting in an empty classroom on the top floor of the Academic Quadrangle building with Amir and Hooman at her side. She rolls her eyes at both of them as she hangs up on Nader.

"How did he take it?" Amir asks. His head is in his laptop, searching for flights online.

"Does it matter?" Hooman intervenes. "He lost a date. Ava lost a mother."

Parissa rubs the palms of her hand on her eyes, like a kid. Then she blinks a few times and leans toward Amir. "I'm exhausted. I lost count of the number of times I've relayed the news to people. Every time, I feel like I'm betraying her."

She's entitled to a degree of frustration, Amir thinks. Before Nader, Parissa had enlightened Ava's supervisor. It was Amir's idea to give this sweet old Canadian a heads-up that he'd be losing his grad

student for at least a few weeks. The man asked the same question, *When is she supposed to find out?*

Meanwhile, Amir tried to follow up with Tehran. He made calls to the only number they had (Ava's brother) to no avail. Neither were his messages on Facebook and Instagram responded to, or even seen. When he reported it all back, he asked Parissa, "Are you sure this thing even happened?"

A group of Asian students barge in which means a class will start soon. Hooman climbs toward the whiteboard as if he wants to teach something, but he only plops onto the leather chair to face everyone else. "We should tell her now. It's getting ridiculous."

"It's not that we're scared," Parissa says, a bit deflated. "We want her to find out under the right circumstances. With enough emotional support. Preferably from family. Physical or virtual, I don't know."

Amir raises a hand. "These moments are very crucial. They'll be formative. She'll relive every second throughout her life. We're trying to cut the losses. To do what's less harmful. You don't want her to associate you with the most horrible loss in her life, do you? I'm speaking out of experience."

He looks at Parissa, inviting her to fill Hooman in. "Amir lost his father in high school. He received a text message of condolence without knowing what it was about."

Hooman shoots a glance at Amir, but it's unclear if it's sympathetic, or defiant. Whatever Amir knows about him is through Parissa which, considering the circumstances, he's willing to take with a grain of salt. But, within the few minutes they've been under the same roof, Amir can identify certain impulsive emotionality in the spurned Romeo

that makes it hard to fully trust him. At least for now, Hooman seems convinced to remain tight-lipped.

Amir's attention returns to his laptop screen, the results of his flight search. "I just found her a ticket for late tonight. Through Amsterdam. Should I take it?"

Parissa exchanges glances with Hooman. "What's the cancellation policy?"

"Why would she want to cancel?"

"What if this thing drags on? We can't board her on a plane without telling her why."

Amir looks at his watch. "We still have seven hours. I'm gonna buy it for her. We keep her busy until we can't." Then, he starts filling out the ticket purchase form.

Parissa jumps out of her chair, driven by an idea. "Hooman, do you have Uncle Vahid's number? If he wouldn't mind being interrupted in Los Cabos."

Hooman takes out his phone. "I have the number he called me with."

"Wait. I need her passport number," Amir says.

"I know where she keeps her documents," Parissa says.

"Me too," Hooman cries like he's announcing bingo.

More undergrads trickle in. It's not as easy to talk over the din. Parissa and Hooman look at each other, then they both turn to Amir, the reluctant tiebreaker. "I think Hooman should go. Parissa is more useful here, around Ava."

Hooman turns to Parissa. "You can trust me."

She passes him the key, and he writes down Uncle Vahid's number on scrap paper. Like a business transaction. He sprints out, bumping into a group of incoming students on the way.

Amir folds his laptop and takes Parissa's hand affectionately. "Let's go. It's almost three."

She's staring at the phone number, like she's decoding it. "Did I do the right thing?"

"We did."

Outside, Parissa calls Uncle Vahid several times. "Goes directly to his answering machine."

"Maybe he's flying back."

"Yeah, sure," Parissa snorts.

Vahid wonders if he's risking his marriage by stepping out of their suite with his luggage. And yet he does it, trying to tune out his younger son's crying, a sound he has so far sacrificed a lot to avoid.

Vahid has been an astute believer in signs, though preoccupation with day-to-day life has recently made him turn a blind eye. But today, hundreds of kilometers away from his natural habitat, he can see this sad news as an opportunity, the tipping point he's been waiting for. The idea to unshackle himself and leave his family comes with an innocent veneer of redemption, of obligation—his niece needs him. A legitimate situation of some sort.

As he wheels his carry-on into the hall, his wife hurls a volley of questions at him in a single breath, ramping up to a harsher pitch: "You're walking out on your own kids and wife for the death of your sister-in-law? And what? You go to Vancouver, not Tehran? To console your niece? How convenient a setup to ditch your own family!"

His cab is waiting downstairs.

“Please understand.”

He deserts the standoff knowing his wife won’t understand. She never did, never liked his family. And he didn’t try hard enough to change things. Once in the car, he calls his widowed brother time and again until he picks up. Vahid adopts a sincere tone for his condolences and when his brother shows concern about Ava, he responds:

“Leave Ava to me. I’ll get to her in a few hours.”

At the airport, Vahid hops kiosk by kiosk, asking ticket agents if any flights to Vancouver are about to depart. He’s an anomaly among laid-back tourists with all the time in the world. But he’s enjoying this, the injection of an adventure into his monotonous life, the introduction of purpose, of a sense of being useful. He can’t remember the last time he acted spontaneously. The last time he had it his way.

There’s a WestJet flight leaving in forty minutes. He buys the ticket and zigzags through passengers, negotiating with the people in the security line to take their turn. *My niece has lost her mother. She needs me.* Lots of *aws* and *ohs* as he inches forward.

On the plane he’s surrounded by beautiful tanned travellers, some with braided hair and fake tattoos. After takeoff he shuts his eyes for a nap, though fails at shutting down his brain. His heart thumps in his chest, both from what he is leaving behind and what will be expected of him in Vancouver. By the time he arrives home, Ava might or might not have heard the news. Regardless, she’ll have her uncle’s shoulder to cry on.

About eight months into their relationship, Hooman was throwing ideas at Ava about what to do for her birthday, due in two weeks. He wanted it to be perfect, something to remember for years to come, not knowing it would be her first and last birthday with him, that next year at the same time he'd be debating with himself whether he should even make an appearance at her event.

It was in the middle of that conversation, as their limbs tangled over and under the formless duvet, when she interrupted him. Whatever you do, don't make it a surprise party. She explained she hated surprises, the fact that everyone conspires behind your back. She said that *Rosemary's Baby* gave her the creeps not because Mia Farrow's character was carrying the devil's baby, but because everyone knew about it except her.

Hooman didn't take her words seriously. In fact, he leveraged his promise as a way of making the surprise more effective. On the night of her birthday, Ava entered her home to see balloons hanging from the ceiling and a horde of people blowing into horns and shouting Happy Birthday. She acted civilized, hugged everyone including Hooman. But this subject was brought up a few times during their break-up fights. And now, sitting on the floor in Ava's bedroom (perching on her bed would be a violation, of what he's not sure), Hooman is drawing the similarities, imagining her prancing around campus smiling at people who smile back concealing their sigh and sorrow. This time, the surprise is not a birthday. It's a death, and she'll be unforgiving when she finds out.

Framed pictures hang from the wall or lean on Ava's desk. Her mother stars in many of them. Hooman considers laying those pictures face down. But then he cringes at the thought, at the gross

trespass into Ava's life. They're all to be blamed, himself, Parissa, Amir, even Nader—this newcomer to Ava's life who agreed to cooperate. In an alternate reality, where Hooman was still Ava's partner, he'd have been the undisputed candidate to break the news and look after her. There wouldn't have been a nosy roommate with an all-knowing boyfriend calling the shots. But, in the reality he lives in, he's hugging his knees while deferring the retrieval of Ava's passport, to spend more time in her room. The last time he was there, he had to hear Ava's heartbreaking remark: *We're just two atom radicals, thrown far away from our families, who happened to attract each other for a while.*

The vibration of his phone snaps Hooman back to present. Parissa's messages appear in quick succession:

Change of plan.

The date is back on.

She's coming home.

Found her passport yet?

Hurry. Leave.

As much as Ava anticipates the arrival of her parents, she's been constantly bothered by a hollow in her heart. She knows that she wants to spend as much time with her parents as possible. She'll be too busy to care about romance. But she needs some assurances, even if veiled, that she's coveted, desired. Maybe one text a day, or two. She knows enough not to expect anything solid to develop in the ten days before her parents' arrival. Still, when they confront her with the inevitable question—the presence of a guy in her life—regardless of her answer, deep inside she'll be pleased that she's working on it, that she's secured an anchor at least.

That's why she's sitting at a table with Nader, piercing her fork into bocconcini cheese while trying to freeze her face into a smile. Nader isn't her type, not really. But he's been persistent. And sweet in his own way. He's a bit socially awkward which is common among the nerds she's met in her life. And now, she finds it hard to focus on his face, and not be distracted by the damp underarms of his checkered shirt, as he's talking about his new start-up company. His speech is, in a roundabout way, full of hiccups, and then there's his craning head, monitoring people coming and going around them. Ava wonders if that's how he pitches his ideas to strangers. She also begins to doubt if he has any genuine interest in her as a person, as if *girlfriend* or *wife* is only a check mark on his to-do list.

"Are you having another date here concurrently?" she interrupts.

"No, why?" he asks, taken aback.

"You look distracted."

"Sorry. I'm not much used to the dating scene."

Ava regards his apologetic face and raises her wine glass, tips it forward. "It might help?"

He clinks his glass to hers and sips from it. "Enough about me ... or my work. How about you? What's the most exciting thing in your life?"

"Well ... my parents are coming for a visit, which I guess you already know." She pauses. He doesn't respond, an indication that he wants to hear more perhaps. She wonders how much she should share. "The part that you don't know is I have mixed feelings about their visit. I'm ecstatic of course. But it comes with trepidation. I haven't lived with them for years. I'm worried about how things will turn out with all of us in that matchbox apartment. I've changed a lot.

They probably haven't. I'm sure my mom will have lots of opinions about my life here."

She should stop, even though he's listening attentively, hovering his lettuce-filled fork in the air. She must leave it on a happy note. Again, her wine glass comes to her rescue. She holds it aloft. "To our lovely parents, who are the dearest, in spite of everything."

To her surprise, Nader doesn't return her smile. He touches the stem of his glass as if he's forgotten how to raise it. It occurs to Ava that she doesn't know anything about his parents. What if he's lost one of them, or both? Does she have to offer an apology, or will it only make things more awkward?

Nader stands up. "Sorry, I have to go to the restroom."

He hates being used, bait in the bigger scheme of things. But, sometimes in life, you have to go through things against your will, for the better good. That's what Nader told himself when Parissa pleaded with him on the phone.

"I'm so sorry Nader. We thought it might be best to keep her busy. I know I said you should cancel tonight's date, but I expected someone from Iran would contact her, someone who can take the responsibility."

"You just want me to entertain her."

Silence, then a male voice. "Hi Nader, I'm Parissa's boyfriend. I understand how you feel. A far from ideal situation. I'm sure Ava will appreciate it later once the dust settles."

So, three hours ago, Nader agreed to help one more time, only to find himself in front of the gilded mirror in the Cincin restroom, re-evaluating his decision to become a part of this deception. *Ava will*

appreciate it, they'd said. Yes, so appreciative maybe she'll marry him and later they'll tell their children how their relationship kicked off: Kids, your grandma died, and I was putting up a façade so that your mom wouldn't find out. Then we fell in love.

If no one else has the guts, if Tehran has forgotten her, maybe Nader should be the one to tell Ava, between the bocconcini salad and the grilled salmon, to put an end to this limbo, to let her grief begin. After all, there's no right way to hear about a death in the family.

He wipes his face, steps out to discover that the restaurant floor has changed into a theatrical stage. It feels like he's been in the restroom for an eternity, making it back just in time to see the last act of a play unfold.

Ava's unhinged sobs reach his ears before his eyes find her, a few meters away from their table and in the arms of a stocky, rather aged man Nader doesn't know. Ava retains an awkward posture, her right hand draped on the man's shoulder, the rest of her body dangling from it, as if she's undecided between standing or collapsing. Closest to her is Parissa, whose heaving shoulders are gripped by a man standing behind her. Next to them is Hooman who, according to Nader's prior research, used to date Ava. No one notices Nader standing at the restroom entryway. The patrons from the neighbouring tables are staring at the spectacle, dividing their time between chewing food and looking bewildered. Nader takes one step forward, then backward, then turns to the hostess behind the podium. He asks for the bill, pays the whole amount with a twenty percent tip, scrambles into his jacket and climbs down the stairs to join the crowd on Robson Street.