

The Story of the Stone

If on a January day you should get in your car and start driving on the steep Chalus road toward the sea, you will at last come upon a place near the dome formations where you'll see a stone, a smallish slab of rock with the flat, written part facing you: "Mani, Taraneh, may your union be blessed," and neither do you know who Mani and Taraneh are nor if this union of theirs ever turned out. Mani and Taraneh could have authored the words as a prank, or else friends of theirs driving ahead wrote it just to see the surprise and laughter on the couple's faces as they finally pulled into that precise spot.

These two could have simply set out for Chalus on their own without telling anyone, indifferent to how they'd get there – either driving a car or else on foot carrying just their backpacks and the most basic essentials, devoted solely to each other and not concerned with a final destination, wanting only to experience this road and all the roads of the world and hoping that it would never come to a final end

They may have taken a motorbike instead, Mani's, or else it was borrowed from a friend who knew about the young couple's love for each other and lent them the bike so they could at last experience the voyage they had always desired to make together.

"Mani, Taraneh"

Maybe these names are not even real and were invented to throw off their friends who may or may not have been trailing them on that road. The young man suggesting 'Nasser' for example, the young woman raising an eyebrow and saying, "I like 'Mani' better." Which in turn inspires him to call her 'Taraneh'. Pleased, she smiles at that name.

What if there was no couple at all; rather, just one of the locals, or a random traveler making a stop at a restaurant called Blue and deciding to log something outside, for amusement's sake, before moving on.

If the young woman and man are real – real like us – they will pull over on hitting the thousandth turn in the road, the young man planting both feet firmly on the ground while the young woman gets off the motorbike. He loops his helmet on the right handlebar of the bike resting at a slight up angle. Next he firmly grabs both handlebars, pushes the jack down with the tip of his toe and slides off too.

The young woman squats on a wedge of rock, and pressing her knees together while opening her backpack she takes out a bite she has prepared.

The young man makes for frozen water and scoops a handful of snow. Cold. The young woman calls and he turns to see her reaching a hand toward him smiling. He squeezes the snow in his fist and through his fingers, then saunters her way to take the offered food and sit on the incline next to her. This is not unlike the image of themselves they've often dreamed of and longed for.

After eating their fill, the young man says, "Let's get going before the others catch up to us."

But what if their friends are driving ahead of them? Say one of them notices the smoothly surfaced stone and comes up with a plan. He tells the others what trick he has in mind; laughing, they're game. The car stops, they get out and make a run for the slab. Someone is looking for something to write with. What can one possibly find here except more stone and snow and dead winter brush? Until the driver recalls there is a can of spray paint in the back of the car. Everybody cheers. Finally: "Mani, Taraneh, may your union be blessed."

It had to have been spray paint. Black. We can easily see how the last letter of the last word of the sentence appears to be dripping down.

Soon after, the couple are driving past the site and the young woman says, "Did you see that stone?" "Which one?" the young man asks and on her insistence, they turn the car around

“Mani, Taraneh, may your union be blessed.”

Maybe it was a half burnt piece of stick they used to write on the stone. If that’s the case, the writing would have been erased by now. Rain and snow would have washed it off, with only smudges of black remaining here and there.

Or else in their hurry to speed ahead, the young man’s eyes catch the level rock face and he says, “That was beautiful.” The young woman has seen nothing. The young man adds, “Shall we leave a memento?” The young woman smiles and asks, “Where? And with what?” “I’m not sure,” he answers, “but I wish we could leave something here.”

Another possibility is the young woman produces her lipstick, “How about with this?”

“Pink?” the young man asks narrowing his eyes.

The young woman has darker lipstick too. But whoever wrote the words, the handwriting wasn’t very good. The dots on the letters are uneven; the speck over the letter *NUN* sits far too wide over the semi-circle.

If on the other hand the writer happens to be a traveler or one of the regular vacationers who make their annual trek this way, maybe he spends an hour at Blue, perched at his regular table near the window, his back to the road and his eyes intent on the snow-clad precipice where it is snowing, or not snowing.

The waiter at Blue who knows the traveler steps forth wearing his entirely white uniform and quietly sets down a cup of hot tea before returning to the counter to eyeball the man and recall there had been a time when he’d bring tea for two of them. An old, nostalgic song fills the space when the waiter turns on the sound system and now the traveler who has been staring at the snowy beyond sinks further into his chair

Yes, there had to have been a woman in his life at some point, and now she's gone. And the traveler who passes this way every year has to contend with the interminable road and its twists and bends Right up to the thousandth turn!

When did our traveler come this way with her? What year? Did they come by car or a motorbike, by bus or on foot Does it matter?

Perhaps they were traveling in a group after all, and that first time around the young man did not have the courage to say what was on his mind, and so he uses metaphor to convey himself. He makes up an excuse to go outside and when he comes back the young woman sees that his palms are black. When they exit together the young woman hands him a lump of snow. And as he stretches a hand he notices the color of his palms. If you rub snow on your hands the blackness will go away. But snow is also cold. You will feel the cold.

Still, someone traveling alone may have wanted to simply give the impression there were two people, a young woman and a young man. We will never know why the traveler would do such a thing. We cannot possibly know.

It is possible, though, that Taraneh and Mani were really, truly in the car. They sat next to each other, both content in their thoughts, or feeling discontent and staring outside. They passed by the slab of rock without ever noticing it.

And what if the young woman and man were actually married to each other? Newlyweds. Or no, two runaways who leave everything and everyone behind. They have raced to get here, on their motorcycle. Writing what they need to write and speeding ahead, one turn following the next. Up ahead at a blindspot in the road a truck happens to be coming from the opposite direction. The young woman holds tight to the young man, pressing her face against his back, her eyes closed. The young man, sunk in his own thoughts, does not see

Each is thrown a separate direction, falling to the bottom of the crag where a withered trunk stops the body of the young man while the girl disappears into the whiteness of the snow.

"Mani, Taraneh, may your union be blessed."

But let us put dark thoughts aside and imagine this was indeed a happy union, free of misfortune and tragedy. There was dance and cheerfulness, candy and confetti and white satin. They are traveling to Chalus to the family villa for their honeymoon. No mishap. It's better this way and the story is not burdened with sorrow that always shadows all that is ever written, whether on a piece of paper or on a stone – no matter.

Maybe you think there was never a stone to begin with. But I have seen that stone. I've seen it at the dome formations just before the thousandth bend in the road.