

NOT EVERY BULLET IS MEANT FOR A KING

by Hossein Abkenar

Shapur str.

Scene 1

The one holding the gun shouted, “All you motherfuckers lie on the floor right now!”

The bank’s customers began screaming and drawing close together before they all threw themselves to the floor. There was a chubby young soldier working security holding a cup of hot tea in one hand and an old G3 rifle on his shoulder. As soon as he tried to move, the lead robber smacked him in the face with the butt of his handgun. The soldier went down with his tea, the strap of the G3 still in his hand. He received a kick to the ribs and quickly let go of the weapon.

There were two of them. They both had black stockings drawn over their faces so that their eyes were hidden. One of them was slim and had long hair bunched up underneath the stocking. Robber #1, who was doing the shouting and the gun-waving, cursed some more, picked up the soldier’s gun, and gave it to Robber #2. Meanwhile the soldier, bleeding from the nose, slowly dragged himself to where the others were sprawled. Robber #2 appeared to have a bad leg and didn’t know how to hold the rifle properly. Nevertheless, he or she managed to smash the bank’s video camera with the rifle stock; the thing made a cracking sound and hung limp off of its hinges. In addition to the woman farther back at the safe-deposit desk, three other employees were still frozen behind the teller windows. Robber #1 now motioned them to join the others, which they did.

Since the bank manager was on vacation, his deputy sat in his chair to the

side of the teller windows. The guy's knees were shaking violently and he was desperately trying to find the alarm button beneath the table. He pressed on something with his foot but nothing happened. Now, with the eyes of Robber #1 on him, he slowly stood up like a kid who had been found out and tiptoed over to where the other captives were. Sitting next to him there had also been a bearded man, maybe around sixty, who had a set of red prayer beads in his hand. The man kept squeezing the side of his coat as he got up to follow the vice-manager. The two of them now stood together over another guy who sat on the floor as if he was about to eat his lunch there. This other man, looking bewildered and lost, had a newly shaven head that he kept scratching hard at with the edge of his mortgage booklet.

The safe-deposit woman was the only staff still left on the other side of the glass divider. Mechanically, she began pushing stacks of money that had been sitting on her table into the drawer. It was as if she were in a trance. The vice-manager noticed her doing this and his eyebrows went up in surprise; it was a good thing the bank robbers were not looking her way just then.

Scene 2

Zahra said, "Push the damn button!" Then she struck at the elevator button herself. You could still hear music from inside the apartment. Two young guys came out of there and ran toward the elevator. When its door closed, they about-faced and went for the stairway.

Inside the elevator, the other girl, Samira, could barely keep her eyes open. She pressed herself against Zahra. "You danced like a queen tonight." She brought her face closer to kiss Zahra on the lips but Zahra pushed her away.

"How much did you drink? Your mouth smells like a toilet. Damn you, Samira!"

Samira continued laughing and trying to kiss Zahra with her eyes closed. When the elevator door opened, Zahra pulled her out of there while yanking her *chador* out of her bag. The sound of the guys' footsteps was getting closer. She let go of Samira and threw the *chador* on.

One of the guys protested, “Zahra, you just got here. It’s not even nine thirty.”

“It’s late for me. I gotta go, Ali *jaan*.”

Arash whispered, “Did Milad say something to make you mad?”

Zahra glanced away. “Thanks for everything. Say goodbye to Rasul too. The cab’s waiting outside.”

“Do you want me to tell the driver to leave?” Arash volunteered. “One of us can drive you home later.”

Samira giggled and hung onto Zahra’s arm. “Come on! We were just starting to have fun. Let’s stay.”

Zahra’s voice was full of irritation: “It’s my mother. I’ve had a dozen missed calls from her already.”

“Oooh, Mrs. Mayor’s office!” Samira chuckled again.

“Shut up, Samira.”

“Do you need some gum at least?” Ali asked.

“But Zahra didn’t drink anything,” Samira said, giggling. The phone in Zahra’s bag began to vibrate. “Goodbye, guys.”

Scene 3

The flimsy shopping bag’s handle tore out of Puri’s hand and several of the oranges went rolling down the street. Before she could get to them, a passing motorcycle crushed one of them and raced on.

Puri sighed, then laughed in resignation when she saw Milad had caught up to her and was already salvaging the oranges that hadn’t been damaged.

“Let me take the bags for you,” he said.

“It’s like you descended from the sky, Milad *jaan*.” She gave him the bags but held onto the two big round flatbreads. “Thank you.”

They walked past the local barbershop. Milad slowed down and got the guy's attention and pointed to his own head. *I'll be back*, he pantomimed.

The barber nodded and went about his work.

Puri said, "Why do you want to cut it? You look great with a ponytail."

"I'm tired of it, to be honest."

They walked several more blocks in easy silence until Puri stopped in front of an alms box and dropped a small bill in there. "I can take it from here."

"No, let me help you. I don't live too far."

"Don't you and your brother live back the other way?"

"We did. But I moved down here recently, to Vazir Daftar

Street. It's that big old building over there. I'm renting just a small studio."

"What about your brother?"

"Well, he's got his family."

"Hmm. Does he want to cut his hair too? You guys look so similar."

"Actually, he does. Or maybe he has by now. Says it itches too much." He laughed. "Maybe I'll keep mine so we won't look so much alike." His attention now went to the other side of the street where several black-clad men stood in front of a mosque. You could hear the sounds of a *noha*, lamentation, coming from inside the place.

Puri nudged him with the bread. "Take a piece. It's fresh."

Milad tore off some bread and put it in his mouth. They started walking again. In front of her building, she paused for a second and gave a kick to one of the front wheels of her car.

"That tire needs some serious air in it," Milad remarked. "I know," she said.

"It's dangerous like that—is it yours?"

"More of a gas-guzzler than a car, to be honest. It used to belong to Shahin's father. I don't think you ever met my kid, Shahin."

Milad shook his head.

Puri was about to ring the buzzer but then remembered that Goljaan, her Afghan helper, must be gone by now. It took her awhile to find her keys.

They climbed side by side up a dark and dank stairway. “Come in for a minute,” she offered.

He glanced down at his muddy boots. “I won’t bother you.” “You’re not a bother, come in.”

As he went to set the shopping bags inside the door their

hands brushed one other ever so slightly. Their eyes met.

“Only if you’d like to come in,” she added.

There was noise from inside and they both peered in. A boy of

about ten or eleven, drool hanging from his mouth, was staring at them with glazed eyes. Puri suddenly became nervous.

“I’m sorry, I . . . I know you’re waiting for a loan from the bank. But my boss there still hasn’t gotten around to any of the recent loan requests. He’s on vacation.”

Milad was back to gazing at his own boots. “Right. Sure thing.”

“That last loan you took, how many more payments do you have on it?”

“Two.”

“Pay those off first. I think it’s better that way. Then I can speak to the bank manager.”

“Of course. Whatever you say.” He slowly retreated from the door and turned at the stairway.

Scene 4

“You think you’re smart, don’t you? I knew it. I fucking knew it. You’ve been acting strange for a while. Always nagging me about something. Making me look bad. I spit on myself. Yeah, on myself, for having a wife who sends me a

court order after six years of being at her every beck and call every moment of every day. Shut up!

Shut your trap up and stop crying. What did you tell them? That your husband is an addict? That I'm crazy? That I beat you up? That I don't give you enough pocket money? What did you say, bitch? Talk to me! So fucking what if I take a couple of tokes at the end of the day? I do it so I can keep working. Do you know how the pain in my back feels? Like pins and needles. I work so I can put food on the table. It takes a man, a real man, to sit sixteen hours a day behind the wheel of those buses. You think anyone can do it? You think these motherfuckers sitting in those real estate offices moving millions around and getting fatter every day—you think those pieces of shit could do what I do even for one day? Look at me. Look at this bank book I carry around and not a penny to my name. I tell you what I'll do: I'll shave my head. That's what I've decided. My scalp is itchy from my nerves, and this stupid bank book is only good for one thing: it's a head-scratcher. Excuse me, what? Stop that mumbling. You think your own husband can't ask where you go off to when I'm working? Always leaving your one-year-old baby with the neighbors and going off God knows where. You think I don't know? And I'm not supposed to ask? I spit on this fucking life I got! Not worth a shit. Work two shifts a day and what do I have to show for it? Nothing. Zilch. Zero. Just drive that fucking route up and down this nasty motherfucker of a city with no time off, no weekend, not an hour to call my own. And suddenly I'm the bad guy? The court wants *me* to explain myself? Fuck you all. And fuck those passengers who always give me shit. One guy says he doesn't have exact change. Another wants to get off before the next station. Another refuses to pay. Another curses me out and says I passed her stop and wishes hellfire on me and mine for seven generations. This is my lot in this miserable country. I spit on every Iranian that ever walked the earth. You want a divorce, do you? You want your freedom? Be my guest. Go! Go and see what's waiting for you out there. Plenty of streetwalkers where you're headed. And guess what? They're even glad to take a nobody like me for a ride. I know, because I see it every night on my way to the terminal. Sixteen-year-olds, forty-year-olds, doesn't matter. They got no place to stay. They won't get off the bus. I tell them, *Sister, it's time to get off. Go home.* But they got no home. They got nowhere. You crying now? Today you cry, tomorrow

you'll have the cops on me. I know your kind. Just because I'm not rich, just because I don't own my own home, I don't have the latest-model car, I don't have a country house, I don't have . . . don't have a pot to piss in. What do you want me to do? Go rob a bank? Will you shut that baby up, for God's sake! Or are you above taking care of your own child now too? When you first came to Tehran you were a simple girl. None of this lipstick this, lipstick that. I should have known better, but I waited. Told myself you'd come around. It was just a new stage with all the makeup, I told myself. You'd settle down, I told myself. But it got worse. First you nagged my poor little brother so much that he ran off. The kid's just a college student. But do you care? Of course not. You don't care that he has to pay three hundred a month for a hole-in-the-wall two streets down from here. And you're still not satisfied, are you? Stop that crying. I swear I'll hit you. Ouch! What happened? I didn't mean it. Let me see. You happy now? Now you'll have more evidence for the judge, won't you? You can tell them your husband hit you in the face with his key ring. Who'll believe I didn't mean it? No one. But you know what? I don't give a damn anymore either way. You go your way, I'll go mine. What's a pauper like yours truly supposed to worry about—that they'll take my bread? I got news for you: they already took my bread; they took it from me a long, long time ago.”

Scene 5

The man was in the middle of his evening prayer when his cell phone rang. He kept an eye on the screen even as he continued. As the sound became louder, his wife came and stood over him. He kept praying but signaled with his hand for her to not worry about it and get on with her own work. She complied.

After that he only went through the motions of the prayer and finished up as fast as he could.

He checked the phone while his wife asked from the kitchen if she should start serving dinner.

“I'm going to Kamali's house tonight,” he answered.

She walked back out into the living room. “But . . . I put on a whole lot of rice for us. Why didn’t you mention it earlier?”

The man didn’t bother answering. He seemed annoyed about something and asked, “Where’s that daughter of yours? Is she up- stairs in her room? Tell her if she steals my car keys and goes out like that again I’ll break both her legs. I’m not joking.”

The woman nervously played with the button on her skirt. “*Haji*, please! She’s a big girl. She didn’t mean anything by it. She’s sorry.”

The man’s voice grew louder. “She didn’t mean anything by it? Where was she Friday night? Why did she come home so late?” “She was at her friend’s house. They were studying together.” “Studying, was she? Mark my words, if I catch her one more time . . .”

His phone began to beep again. He paused for a second before

answering in an even tone, “*Salam alaykum, haj agha.*” He laughed. “No, certainly, yes. I’ll be there. I just have to stop on the way at the office and get some documents. You honor us, *haj agha*. We’d be happy if you came here and we could host you for a change.” As he spoke into the phone, he slowly folded his prayer rug and put it away in front of the hall mirror. “Certainly. But tomorrow the mayor’s office is closed. Yes, because of Commander Jafari’s fortieth day of mourning. I know, it’s hard to believe. Forty days since his passing already. May he rest in peace. Yes, yes, absolutely.”

Call over, he went to the coatrack next to the entrance and put on his overcoat.

His wife stood at the threshold of the kitchen watching his every move. She said, “I have the help coming in the morning to clean the house. Can I give him that other black coat you don’t want anymore?”

“Give him the sneakers too. The ones Yasir sent from London.

I don’t wear those things.” She nodded.

He kept his eyes on her for a few seconds. “What’s this thing you’re wearing? Have you seen yourself in the mirror lately? You look like a maid.”

The woman immediately became anxious and withdrew a little into the kitchen. “I . . . I don’t know. It’s just that I’ve put on a bit of weight. This skirt is just a lot more comfortable.”

“I brought a whole suitcase full of new clothes for you from Turkey. They’re all too tight already?”

A text message distracted him and she stood watching his back while he fiddled awkwardly with his phone. He put on his shoes and without turning to her again or saying goodbye, he muttered a *Bismillah* and exited the house.

The woman did not move for another minute. Then she went to the kitchen cabinet and took out a bottle of prescription medicine. Valium. Her hands were shaking. She filled a glass of water and took two pills out.

“Is his majesty finally gone?”

The woman jumped. “Zahra! You scared me. I guess you already heard how angry your father was with you.”

“Don’t worry about that man.”

“One doesn’t talk about one’s father like that.” She examined her daughter. “Why are you dressed up?”

Zahra was holding up a small mirror and putting on some gloss. “He thinks he has the right to tell you anything he wants. And you never say anything back. What are you scared of?”

“I asked why you’re dressed for outside.”

“Because that’s what I’m doing—going out.”

“Zahra, please! Don’t you have an exam? You should learn a

little bit from your brother Yasir.”

Zahra sneered, “Yasir? That guy could barely get his high school diploma here. Now all of a sudden we hear he’s getting a PhD in London. Who did my father pay off this time? And how much?”

“Your father spent thirty-one months at war in the front lines.” She stormed past the girl into the living room and started searching frantically for the TV remote. Zahra followed her. “Thirty-one months,” she repeated. “Don’t you ever forget that!”

“Well, your *haj agha* is certainly getting mileage out of those thirty-one months now. And all he has to do in return is sport a stupid prayer bead and let his beard grow a little. Everyone knows he’s turned the city’s Twelfth District into a thieves’ den.”

“Bite your tongue, girl!”

“Why do you let him push you around like that?”

“He’s my husband. He’s the man of the house.”

“Don’t play dumb. You know he’s been having an affair with a married woman. Don’t pretend you don’t know.” “Zahra!”

“You were crying on the phone when you were talking to Aziz about it.”

“I was talking to Aziz about someone else.”

“Sure you were. You haven’t slept together in over a year.” “That is none of your business.”

“It *is* my business. You have to stop being such a weakling in

front of him. I know what it is: you’re afraid he’ll divorce you and you’ll have to go back to the provinces. Who’d want to give up all this luxury, right? The money and the fancy car and the country house and the fashionable address in the most expensive part of Tehran. You’re afraid you’ll be average again. So you take those stupid pills and keep putting on weight. Instead of taking all those meds, you should take a shot of whiskey every night. Works a lot better.”

“Stop this talk, Zahra. Sacrilege! I don’t know what kind of people you’ve been hanging around with. Your father is right: when a girl doesn’t marry young, this is the result.” TV remote in hand, she sighed and sat down on the sofa and began surfing the channels.

Zahra scoffed, “And tell him to stop bringing me suitors. If he still insists, tell him to at least let them know beforehand I lost my virginity a long time ago.”

Her mother put a hand over her face. “God forgive us for her profanities.”

“Don’t worry. Our times are different than yours. Nowadays you won’t find any girl my age in Tehran who hasn’t known love and then some. Virginity is for fools.” She went toward the door.

Her mother jumped from the sofa. “I swear I’ll call him right now if you go out.”

“So call. You think I’m scared? When you call him, tell him his daughter went to buy cigarettes. I’ll be right back.”

Scene 6

He tapped the motorcycle cabbie’s shoulder and said, “This is a one-way lane for buses. What are you doing?” He was holding on for dear life and was glad that the guy had at least lent him his helmet.

The rider half turned to him in the wind. “No worries, I know the cop handling the lane today. He won’t bother us.”

A bus came straight at them. The rider angled his bike sharply onto the sidewalk where several cursing pedestrians had to jump out of the way.

On Manuchehri Street he gratefully got off the bike and breathed a sigh of relief. The area was filled with currency exchange shops and antique and black-market dealers. He handed the biker his fare and headed into the crowd of people.

“You selling dollars?” someone shouted.

“No.”

“You buying them?”

No again. A little farther into the street there were less people.

Several secondhand traders had laid out their goods on the sidewalk—watches, prayer beads, rings, old coins.

He stopped in front of one of them. The guy was selling nineteenth-century teapots, ancient-looking locks and bolts, an old Zenith camera, a pair of brass trays, and a boxful of LPs from the 1970s.

Someone passed by whispering that he had “king-killers,” *shah-kosh*, for sale.

What if the guy was undercover? He had to be careful before he asked around. He walked a bit farther on and squatted by another street dealer. Picking up a steel knuckle buster, he asked how much it was.

The seller didn’t even bother looking at him.

He tried again, “How much is that knife?”

“Eighty,” the man said, still not turning to him.

He took the knife and tried opening it but couldn’t. The man

grabbed the knife from him and flicked it open. “Switchblade.” He laughed nervously. “All right, how much for the knuckle buster?”

The man gave him a dead expression. “Don’t beat around the bush. Tell me what it is you’re after.”

“A gun.”

The guy kept a steady eye on him, measuring him. Now he slowly turned and gestured at a heavysset man with a thick mustache who slowly ambled over to them.

“He’s looking for a king-killer.”

The big guy ran a hand over his mustache and stared hard at the potential customer. “Come!”

He fell behind the big man.

On a smaller street they stopped in front of a ruin of a house and the man spoke: “You want American Colt or a Russian automatic?” He had a Kurdish accent.

“A king-killer. That’s what I came for, a *shah-kosh*.”

“Can be arranged. It’s secondhand, though. Forty-five caliber.” He wasn’t sure what to do. He kept his hands in his pockets, feeling naked there.

The man said, “I have a secondhand Beretta too.”

“The king-killer. How much?”

“Three-fifty. Fifty rounds thrown in.”

“It works fine?”

“Fit for a king.” The man rubbed his fingers together to indicate it was time to show him the money. There was no choice. He had to trust the guy. He brought a bundle of bills from his jacket pocket and counted before handing it to the Kurd. The guy counted again and then touched the bills to his forehead in a gesture of appreciation. “Wait right here.”

After a while he began to feel stupid. Why had he trusted the guy like that? He lit a cigarette and smoked nervously, not sure what to do. The air felt dirty. He threw the half-finished cigarette away and slammed a fist against the wall in frustration.

Another five minutes and the man finally showed up.

First thing he did was give him the ammunition. Then the king-killer itself, wrapped in an old red rag.

He felt the thing in his hand, the rag still covering it. It was heavier than he’d expected.

Scene 7

“May your hearts be of gold and your eyes sparkle and your mouths show laughter and may today’s autumn afternoon be filled with joy for you and your . . .”

“Turn that stupid bitch off, please,” Puri said.

Goljaan, her Afghan helper, smiled and turned the radio off. “Shall I iron these ones also, *khanum jaan*?”

“No. Go on home. I’ll do the rest myself. I left your money next to the radiator. Don’t forget to take it.”

“May God always protect you. Thank you. A friend is headed for Kabul tonight; I can give them this money to take for my family.”

“Good.”

The boy was standing there, his eyes vacant as always and the ever-present drool hanging from his mouth. Puri pulled the sweater over his head. The kid stood motionless while she struggled with the sleeves. Impatiently, she said, “Shahin *jaan*, help me out here a bit. I can’t wear your clothes for you.”

The boy stood still and more drool came out of his mouth.

Goljaan picked up her envelope of cash. “What is this, *khanum*?” She pointed to a blue dress on the sofa.

Before Puri could answer, her phone rang. She answered it. “I’ll call you back, *Maman jaan*. No, I can’t come to your place. I know schools are closed, but the banks aren’t. Yes, I do have to go to work. All right. No.” She threw the mobile on the sofa and turned to Goljaan. “The dress is for you. Almost new. I only wore it one time at a wedding.”

“You are an angel, *khanum jaan*.” Goljaan went to the door to put on her shoes.

Puri was distracted. She began ironing a scarf, half talking to herself and half to Goljaan who was almost out the door. “Two of the employees have gone on vacation and they force me to do all their work. People tell me how lucky I am to work in a bank. Mrs. In-Charge-of-Safe-Deposit-Box. As if the money in there belongs to me. As if I won a prize or something. What do they know! Between last week and this week the price of milk tripled and I have an eleven-year-old child who hasn’t spoken two words his entire life. Sure, I’m really lucky to work in a bank.” She peered over at the boy who stood there gawking at her. “And guess what else? Now everything in the world is suddenly carcinogenic. Those new Chinese lamps: cancer. The plastic spatula I just bought and threw away: cancer.”

The phone rang again. She stood the iron up and checked the number calling her. Taking a deep breath, she answered, “*Salam*. I’m home. I’ve just washed him. I’ll give him the phone.” She called the boy over. “Shahin, your father wants to talk to you.”

The boy’s mouth hung open from joy. He hurried to his mother who lifted the phone to his ear. Some nondescript sounds came out of his mouth and he listened. She sat him down on the sofa, caressed his head, and took the device away after a few moments and began talking into it. “It’s me. Well, it’s nice of you to remember him. No, I’m not being sarcastic. I’m almost out of his medicines. No pharmacy has them in the city. They say it’s the American sanctions. Nothing’s coming into the country. I asked one of the bank’s customers. He has a son studying in London. Deputy mayor. Twelfth District. Travels a lot. I gave him the names of the medicines. He said he’d bring a couple of packages. What? No, I didn’t flirt with him, for God’s sake. Besides, you can tell from his face the guy has something to do with Etelaa’at. I don’t even like him. But what can I do?”

She listened for a while longer, becoming increasingly agitated. The boy remained on the sofa swinging himself left and right. Finally she shouted into the phone, “What’s it to you if I’m seeing anyone or not? Do I ever ask *you* these questions?” She hung up and turned the phone off completely and threw it next to the boy. The boy stared at her with wide eyes and she kissed him on the forehead before going over to the window and lighting a cigarette.

Scene 8

Arash sat in a corner of Milad’s room, unseen, while Milad stood in the doorway listening to his doddering landlord ramble on in chopped sentences.

“Young man, I told you from day one . . . families live here . . . That friend you have, he doesn’t look right . . . and girls, too many girls coming and going . . . I mean, I’m not traditional . . . but the other tenants . . . if you ask me, they’re all thieves . . . but still my tenants . . . You should be careful of that Internet . . . I like the satellite TV myself . . . those Turkish soaps are nice . . . not all of them though . . . And you’re telling me you don’t have the rent

and it's five days past the beginning of the month . . . and with my two daughters in college . . . Do you know how much college costs nowadays? . . . And then I have to climb up these stairs with my bad knees and bad back and bad everything . . . not right for an old man like me . . . And here, here is a lightbulb for your hallway . . . Screw it . . . screw it in yourself."

Milad nodded respectfully. "You are absolutely right. Give me one second." He set the lightbulb on his study desk, took some money from the drawer, and handed it over.

The old man counted with shaking hands. "But this is only half of it."

"Sure, I'll have the rest soon."

Slowly but firmly he closed the door in the old man's face and came back inside, looking both relieved and exhausted.

Arash was rolling a hashish joint on a small tray full of loose tobacco. "That old man should have his mouth sewn up. What a windbag! The bastard already owns six buildings in the neighborhood and he still has to come up here and knock on your door. You should tell him to go to hell."

"Don't be stupid," Milad snapped. "I'm lucky the guy rented me this place at all." He sat in front of his computer.

"There he goes again, Mr. Facebook. *Oh look, friends, my thousands and thousands of bullshit Internet friends—here's my pic drinking strong black coffee, here's me in my green outfit from last year, here's my cat and isn't she a jewel? And isn't meditating and thinking Zen thoughts so damn cool, guys? Let's everybody meditate together and jerk off.* God! People got nothing better to do in this town."

"Shut up, Arash! This computer's got a bug. Half my files are fucked. I'm frustrated as hell."

"You say it like the damn machine has the flu. What, you want to French kiss the computer screen? Fuck that thing and its files. Where do all these files and the papers you turn in for your engineering courses get us, college boy?"

Nowhere. We're still poor as shit." Arash lit the joint, took a couple of hits, and offered it to Milad. "Inhale, brother, it'll lighten you up."

Milad put the joint in his mouth and took a long, hard drag, gazing vacantly at the ceiling. He blew the smoke out toward Arash. "So what happened with your plan to leave this shithole country?"

"My old man says not to count on him for help. Motherfucker! He says he doesn't have the dough. And even if he did, he wouldn't give it to me. The asshole!"

"That kind of money is no joke."

"The man I talked to said he didn't need all the money at once. I can pay him off in three installments. The last one when the visa comes through."

"If you have to pay, you have to pay. Three installments or ten installment makes no difference when you don't have the bread."

"I know. My ass is fucked."

"Besides," Milad took another hit, "what if the guy takes your money and runs?"

"Nah. He's trustworthy. He does this kind of thing for a living. It's his livelihood. He'll lose customers if he fucks me. I asked around about him. Did my research. You remember that guy who was in love with himself?"

"I know a lot of assholes like that. Who?"

"You know, the guy who was in the gym like fifteen hours a day. Had muscles the size of Hercules's dick. Used to roll up his sleeves in the dead of winter and strut around like a pumped-up whore. My contact got him as far as Malaysia. Now he's waiting to get to Australia." Arash took the joint out of Milad's hand. "But forget that for a minute. Let's talk about this: I got a fail-safe plan. Something deep, something serious." He took a toke. "We'll be millionaires if we do it right. A one-shot deal."

Milad turned away. "Not another one of your get-rich-quick schemes."

“I swear, if you say no, I’ll have to ask that dumbfuck Rasul the Limp, Samira’s one-legged dick.”

“You’re high. Relax and shut up.”

“This is real. And even if Rasul says no, I’ll ask the bitch herself, Samira. That girl’s willing to do anything. Remember the time she came to the stadium with us?”

Milad’s phone started buzzing.

Arash persisted, “I swear, you’re less than a cunt if you say no to my plan. It’s foolproof.” The phone continued vibrating on the sofa. Arash finally picked it up and checked the number. “You’re going to answer your phone or not? It’s your woman, Zahra.”

“Don’t answer it.”

“You’re wasting your time with that piece of ass. Better off jerking off.”

“Shut up.” Milad was clicking fast on the computer keyboard and didn’t even bother to turn around when Arash slid the phone across the floor to him.

“She goes around acting like Ms. Innocent. I hear her big-shot father has picked the Twelfth District clean these past four years. Everyone and their mother in the Twelfth is on the take. I wish the bastard would at least give me a job there.”

Without turning around, Milad stretched his hand out and took the joint from Arash.

“Let me guess,” Arash went on, “you probably do her from the back, right? But why her? I mean, this town’s filled with bitches — tall ones, short ones, ones with asses the size of a donut, others like a watermelon. We got the pick of the litter, and they’re all looking for husbands. The stupid cunts.”

The phone buzzed again.

Milad finally picked it up off the floor, silenced it, and shoved it in his pocket.

“Come on!” Arash whined. “Let me tell you my plan. We can go out and eat something and talk.”

“I can make you an omelet right here.”

“You’re gonna turn into a fucking poached egg yourself if you keep eating so much of that shit. That’s all you ever eat. Come, let’s go out and get some fucking dog burger at least.”

“All right, let me just change this lamp and we can go.”

A minute later Arash heard a thud in the hallway and then Milad’s voice groaning about his twisted ankle.

“Great,” he muttered to himself, “now we got Rasul the Limp #2, and there goes my foolproof plan.”

Scene 9

It was dark out and wet. The man drove into the main street. An Allah gold chain hanging off the rearview mirror quivered back and forth every time the car made a turn.

“I’m sorry if it scared you. I always carry one with me.”

“It’s all right,” the woman answered quietly. “I’d never seen one up close.”

“Don’t be afraid. What’s important is that the wrong kind of man doesn’t carry one of these. It’s just for protection.” Saying this, he reached instinctively for the side of his coat and felt the weapon’s hardness. Then he ran the same hand over the woman’s thigh. She froze.

“Once the work on my country house up in Lavasan is finished, it’ll be a lot better for us. It’s a bit far, but safer.”

The woman said nothing.

There was a long line in front of the New Moon ice-cream shop. He drove past it.

Now the woman said, "I can get off here."

"Too many people. I'll go around. You didn't tell me what happened to your forehead."

"It's nothing."

"How old's your child?"

"Almost one."

"May God preserve him. You are still going ahead with your

divorce with that bus driver?" Instead of waiting for her to answer, he reached for a small leather Koran sitting on the dashboard. Inside it was a folded-up piece of paper. He handed it to the woman. "This will help you. It's a little note to the family court judge in the district you need to go to. Give it to him, and tell him I send my regards. He'll know what to do."

"You are very kind to me."

"But don't call my cell phone anymore. Just send me an empty

text message. I'll know it's you. I'll call you back." "I will."

He pulled out an envelope from his inner coat pocket. "Take this too."

The woman felt the money in the envelope and put the whole thing in her bag. "Thank you very much."

He rubbed her thigh one more time and she froze again. "Can you get out here?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"I don't want to see you with a mark on your face again.

Doesn't look good."

She nodded and hurriedly stepped out of the car. "Thank you, *haj agha*. Thank you."

Scene 10

From the back of the bus a woman shouted, “Driver, open the back door!”

There was hardly room to breathe in that bus. Everyone hung on to some sliver of metal railing and tried not to squeeze too hard against the next person. Even on the bus’s steps people were sardined shoulder to shoulder and could barely move. The last guy in through the middle door had his briefcase half stuck outside and was desperately pulling on it with both hands.

The light turned green and the bus started to move again. The woman shouted, “I said I’m getting off! Stop the bus!”

A chorus rose, “Bus driver, stop! She needs to get off!”

The driver paid them no mind and kept driving. Somebody in the front noted that there was no bus stop here.

It was a gray morning. Early. The bus moved fast through the express lane. A man pushed his way with difficulty to the front. “Driver, please open the door when you can. I got on the wrong bus.”

The driver didn’t acknowledge him. Someone nearby said,

“There’s no more stops until Vanak Circle.”

Someone else observed, “The poor guy got on by mistake.

Why can’t he just stop for him?”

From the opposite direction a motorbike came zooming illegally toward them. The driver didn’t slow down at all. At the last moment the biker was forced to turn sharply onto the sidewalk and almost slammed against several pedestrians, who scattered like bowling pins.

The bus moved on.

At Vanak Circle the doors to the bus finally opened. Several men got on from the front and ran their metro cards through the machine. One guy had to buy his ticket first and stretched a bill toward the driver.

“Here you go.”

The driver just sat there staring directly ahead of him. He saw no one and answered no one.

Now a large woman came barreling up front. “I hope you rot in hell!” she yelled. “Now I have to go all this way back because you wouldn’t stop!” She threw her coins on the floor of the bus and stormed out.

The driver checked his watch. Almost ten o’clock. He pressed a button next to the steering wheel and slowly got up.

One of the passengers said, “Where’s this guy going?”

“He’s leaving. Hey, where are you going? This isn’t the end of the line.”

The passengers stuck their faces to the foggy windows of the bus and watched the driver as he walked toward the family court building in Vanak and eventually disappeared in the crowd.

Scene 11

As she rode him she pressed her palms into his chest, moving her head back and forth to caress his face with her long hair. He lifted his head and bit on her nipples one at a time and then sank back down and grabbed the back of her ass cheeks and pressed her deeper. She moaned. In one quick movement he turned her so that she hit the mattress on her back while he stayed inside her pumping harder.

She moaned again and so did he and they managed to come together.

He rolled off and lay on his back. She put her head on his sweaty chest.

His phone buzzed. He jumped up but didn’t check it. As he was taking a piss the phone buzzed again. He went and stood by the window and listened to his messages.

It was Zahra: “Milad, I know Samira is there. It’s not my business . . .” Her voice cracked as she spoke but she went on with the message. “If I made a mistake and slept with others, I was thinking what difference does it make? What’s important is the heart. You know? Milad, listen to me—I’m failing all my college classes because of you. I can’t concentrate. I swear to God, if you don’t talk to me I’ll kill myself.”

He deleted the message and turned to see Samira stepping out of the bathroom. She sat naked in front of the computer and lit a cigarette.

“It was Zahra,” she said. “Right? Poor thing. You should treat her better.” She clicked on something and piano sounds came from the computer.

“Turn off that music.”

She did so, then picked up an enormous textbook and asked, “What does this title mean? *Fluid Mechanics*. Is it a novel?”

Milad didn’t answer.

“So what happened to your leg? Now you’re walking like that dumb fiancé of mine, Rasul the Limp. He says he wants to wait until we have more money before we get married. *More money from where?* I asked him. He’s so dumb.” She laughed. “Have you seen how long he’s grown his hair? He’s looking more and more like you these days. Maybe he wants to be you. Everybody does. By the way, I saw Arash the other day. He’s got some crazy idea in his head.”

Milad was staring out the window. He spoke her name: “Sami- ra.”

She didn’t hear him and continued to talk. “He said he’d told you all about it. I mean, I’m sitting there listening to him, thinking this guy is out of his mind. You should have seen Rasul’s face. I thought he’d have a heart attack just listening to the plan. But then I thought—why not? I mean, his plan isn’t all bad. So I say to Arash, *Do you want me to come instead of Rasul? I can even play like I got a limp like my fiancé. It’ll throw off the police afterward. They’ll be looking for a limping thief.*”

“Shut up, Samira,” he said quietly.

“Milad, come to think of it, now that you’re limping too, why don’t all three of us—me, you, and Rasul—all go together with Arash?” She laughed louder this time. “Think about it: Arash and the limping bank robbers.”

“Be quiet.”

“Has a ring to it, no? I mean—”

“Samira!”

“Huh? What, love?”

He threw Samira’s bra and panties at her. “Get lost!”

Scene 12

The hallway was pitch-black. Zahra peeked inside her mother’s room. Her bed was next to the window. A shaft of light illuminated her glass of water and her bottle of pills on the nightstand. Her mother was fast asleep. Now she tiptoed to her father’s room. The door was shut. She drew a deep breath, held it, and turned the doorknob. She stood there for a second. No sound except his heavy breathing. She brushed a hand against the clothes hanging near the door. Pants pocket. The car keys rattled when she reached for them. She fisted them with a sweaty hand and tiptoed back out without shutting the door all the way.

Downstairs, she put on her orange scarf and *manteau*. She took another deep breath and stepped out of the house.

Scene 13

It was past two in the morning. Except for a few neon signs here and there, everything appeared closed. Puri didn’t remember which pharmacy was open this time of night. She passed several sanitation workers in their orange overalls. A man stood holding a backpack and as she passed him he tried to flag her down. She pressed on the gas and moved on.

Her phone rang. She didn’t answer. In the distance she spotted a cigarette man. He sat next to a beat-up metal container and had himself a fire going

with empty cigarette cartons. She pulled the window down a couple of inches.

“You got Marlboro Lights?”

The man nodded and she pushed some money out the window. He gave her the cigarette pack.

“Is there a twenty-four-hour pharmacy around here?”

He stared at her. “What are you looking for?” When she said nothing, he asked, “Meth? Crack? Pills—”

She didn’t wait for him to finish. Several lights down she slowed the car and took out a smoke. Her hands were shaking. This time of night, most of the lights stayed yellow and just blinked nonstop. Her phone rang again. This time she answered.

“What do you want from me? I told you I’m not home.” She listened for a minute and then snapped back, “The boy is running a fever! I’ve come looking for a pharmacy. No, you let *me* talk! If you’re so worried about him, be my guest, come and take him. Take him and see if you can look after him for one day.” She listened again, and now answered with a dull, tired voice, “We’ve been divorced four years and you still won’t leave me alone. To hell with you. What makes you think you can call me at two in the morning anyway?” She sped up and shouted into the phone, “That’s right! Actually, I’m planning to fuck some college kid twenty years my junior. He lives in my neighborhood. You happy now?”

She threw the phone on the passenger seat and drove faster and faster. The low pressure in the front left tire made the car hard to control. Still, she passed through several more yellow lights without slowing down. And though her cigarette wasn’t finished

she was already reaching for another one.

She did see it coming. The white Toyota approaching from

the cross street at normal speed at first. Puri thought she’d pass it before they both got to the intersection. But then the Toyota seemed to be trying to do

what Puri was doing, speeding up, and in an instant she was ramming right into that white car, lifting the thing and sending it spinning in the same direction it had come from. Puri's face banged against the side window upon impact but she didn't lose control of the wheel. She applied the brakes and simultaneously heard the sound of metal on asphalt and shattering glass as the other car careened and slid, upside down, before finally coming to a stop on the opposite side of the intersection.

When she finally turned, she saw what looked like an orange headscarf next to the car among all that shattered glass. It was not unlike the color of the overalls of those sanitation workers she'd driven past earlier. She felt like vomiting. The cigarette had fallen to the floor by her feet and was still burning. She lit the other one that was between her fingers and took a long drag. She didn't even glance back at the upended Toyota again. There were no cars any- where. No one had seen this. Her engine was still idling. She put the car into gear and slowly inched away.

Final Scene

Bank Robber #1 kept pacing back and forth, nervously waving his gun in the air. He screamed, "Hurry up, all of you! You see what I'm holding in my hand? They don't call it a *shah-kosh* for nothing. And if it can kill a king, it can definitely kill you pieces of shit. Now out with everything you got in your pockets."

He turned to the woman in charge of the safe-deposit. "I want all the money you keep on this table, bitch." He slammed his hand on her table and returned to the customers. "Hurry!"

People were nervously emptying pockets and opening hand- bags and overturning briefcases.

Robber #1's attention went to the bald man who was still scratching his head with his mortgage booklet. He lingered for a second on the man before deciding to address the vice-manager instead. "Take this." He threw a black

bag at him. “I want every- thing that’s on the floor in that bag. Cash, phones, rings, every- thing.”

Robber #2 was standing watch by the exit, one eye on the bank and the other on the street. There was a moment when everything seemed to come to a standstill, and then Robber #1 ran back to the safe-deposit woman.

“Didn’t I tell you to put all the money on this table?”

The woman was watching him with a bewildered expression. There was a bruise on the side of her face the size of a ping-pong ball. This fact seemed to make Robber #1 more angry. He yanked her hair and pulled her out of her seat. The woman started screaming so loudly that Robber #2 had to run over and wrench Robber #1 off of her.

The two bank robbers whispered something amongst themselves while the woman, crying, shuffled to where the others were still busy getting rid of their valuables.

Just then a cell phone went off. The sound of a *noha* lamentation was coming out of it. The phone belonged to the man with the red prayer beads who had been standing with the vice-manager.

Robber #1 stormed up to him. “You old fart, didn’t I tell you to cough up everything?” He smacked the man in the forehead with the gun. The phone fell out of the guy’s hand, but the infernal dirge coming out of it continued.

“Shut it up!” Robber #1 screamed. “What kind of stupid ring- tone is that? Kill it.” He pointed his king-killer to the ceiling and pulled the trigger. There was an awkward click but nothing happened. The barrel had jammed. “Shit!” He tried again. Nothing. The man he’d just hit, his face bleeding, seemed to come alive all of a sudden. He fingered the side of his coat, took a glance at the broken camera, pulled out his own gun, and released the safety. Robber #2, who was still standing by the safe-deposit table, now came running, rifle in hand, and immediately received a bullet to the throat.

“My daughter . . . hospital . . .” The prayer-bead man who’d

just shot his gun off murmured these words to himself. No one heard him, of course. It was pandemonium in there. For a second the man even seemed to want to bend down and reach for the phone that had momentarily stopped ringing. People were screaming. A woman had passed out.

“Mercy!” Robber #1, standing there shaking, now croaked.

The phone started back up. The same song of lamentation. Robber #1’s legs went limp and he fell to his knees next to Robber #2’s body.

“Mercy,” he repeated, this time barely managing a whisper.

The man fingered his red prayer bead and his face went dark. He put the gun to the masked man’s forehead. “Mercy? Mercy, you say? Don’t you know a king-killer that actually works knows nothing about that word?”