

## ***Farhad Hasanzadeh***

Farhad Hasanzadeh born in 1962. Because of Iraq, Iran war and being born in the border city of Abadan he could not attend in university. But after 25 years of successful, remarkable literary activities he earned the artistic emblem of literature in Iran.

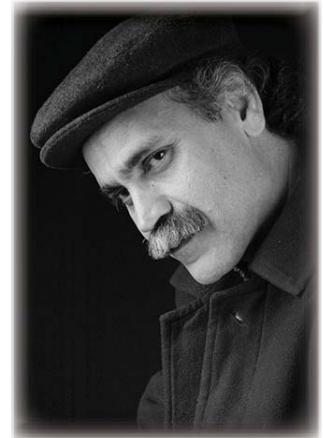
He has written 70 different types of books for young adults and is one of the founders of the “young adults authors Assembly” which is the most Pervasive writers community in the country.

He has been writing for children in the most widely circulated newspaper in the country (hamshahri) and for his contributions in the Iranian press he has earned tree awards.

He has been the judge for several literary, cinematic and theatrical festivals in Iran and has been holding one of the most prominent “creative writing for children” workshop trough out the country.

He has earned 30 different national prizes for his major works such as “Hasti”, “Bambak’s Scorpions”, “back yard” and “flying turtle” so far.

Several TV series and movies Based on his books are producing at the moment.



## **The Backyard Translated By: Homa Lezgee**

### **Chapter One**

Ashoor was asleep when Sharifeh came in. He lay supine in the middle of the metal bed, snoring from the gap between his half-open lips. A piece of string stuck to his scraggly beard and moustache, shuddered and shivered with every hot puff of breath. Sharifeh bent down and pulled the string away from Ashoor’s face. She stepped back and looked at him. He’d obviously had a bad dream. She could tell from the way the blanket coiled like a snake around his waist and shoulders and arms and legs or the large drops of sweat that had grown out of his forehead and the dark curve of his cheeks. She turned off the ceiling fan: “Hope he doesn’t catch a cold!”

She pulled her scarf off and brushed the tips of her elongated fingers through her hair: “Puff! I’m boiling hot!” Her hair was long, down to her waist: “Got to cut ‘em else the summer heat’ll kill me.” She held her hair back facing the mirror and restrained it with a tie so her neck could get some air.

The fan’s wings were losing steam as they grumbled jerkily. She took off her manteau, walked to the adjoining room, put on her flowery Indian skirt and walked back. Her eyes stumbled upon the metal bed and its occupant again. Ashoor had rolled towards the wall, still in

the snake coil. The fan's wings slackened and came to a halt. She pulled a newspaper out of her olive-colored handbag and turned the pages with a subtle and feminine haste. She looked for the crime page just as she'd done at the newsstand. There'd been no chance of finding it in the minibus from work with the wind and the rustling straw leaves on the one hand and the jabbering of Mrs Garmsiri on the other. Now, she was afraid Ashoor would suddenly wake up. She was too tired to go to the other room or the yard. She turned the pages and there it was. Ashoor's picture was fine and clear. The bold black "LOST" printed under it begged attention. She read quietly: *"The man in this picture, Asher Mash'ali..."*

For a second time she felt a pang of disappointment over the writer or typesetter's ignorance and rebuked herself for not insisting on the correct spelling of Ashoor, for not mentioning that his name is written with a double "o" not an "e". She kept on reading: *"suffers from amnesia..."*

The bed's stiff springs gave a jerk and then Ashoor's voice pulled her out of the ad in the paper. "When did you come in?" He was still facing the wall.

She folded the paper and stuffed it into her olive-colored bag: "Just a few minutes ago."

As soon as their eyes met, they exchanged hellos. Ashoor crouched over his right arm and dried his sweaty face and neck with the chafiye on his head. "To hell with the power company, the heat's killin' me" he said.

"Oh, there's power all right" Sharifeh said. "You were sweating like a heifer so I turned off the fan."

"What about yourself? Aren't you hot?" Ashoor sounded like congealed liquid was stuck to the end of his throat.

"Why don't you take a shower and cool down a bit?" Sharifeh said.

Ashoor stayed as he was, leaning on his arm. "Well, get up then" Sharifeh said. "The water might stop."

She knew too well that the water, shower, and heat were all excuses. She couldn't bear his eyes. Here he was while his lost ad was all over the place. She had to stay collected. She popped the bag by the wall. The room was a mess with the remainder of breakfast still on the floor. She placed the stained tea glasses on the platter and collected the little bits of dried bread before wiping the nylon spread clean with a sponge. A few quick moves were enough to gather the clothes and other odds and ends on the floor. From the corner of her eyes, she saw Ashoor's silhouette glued to the metal bed, staring at her: "Don't look at his eyes! He'll read everything from the heat in your eyes like a psychic." She busied herself with Shahed's books. Her eyes caught a page in his copybook. He'd drawn a dove, a white dove in the midst of a blood-red sky. "Look what he's drawn! It's pretty, isn't it?"

Ashoor didn't look. Maybe he'd already seen it. Maybe Sharifeh was more important because she wasn't herself.

"What is it sis? You look jittery!"

Sharifeh looked at him from the full-length mirror on the wardrobe. This was better, indirect. "I'm fine. Just tired. Had a really busy day."

"That's nothing new."

"Well, that's it. It all piles up and then gets to you without warning."

"You're more tired than usual. Have you had a fight?"

"No Ashoor. I'm just tired, honestly! I want to take a week off."

"A week? To do what?"

"To rest, to breath some air that doesn't smell of alcohol and medicine and disinfected blankets."

And she changed the subject.

"You want lunch, don't you?"

"Still haven't swallowed down breakfast. I'm thirsty."

"Do you want some water?"

"Had enough to burst. Make some tea sis!" □ Sharifeh plugged in the samovar. She lifted the lid and looked into the scabby body. It was half-full. She wished Ashoor would go away so she could read the ad properly and hide the paper. She knew if he weren't pulled off of that black metal bed, he'd sit there for hours, regurgitating the same old dreary and stinging words. She wasn't in the mood to listen to all that. "By the time you're done showering, I'll have lunch and tea ready," she said, unclasping the pearl necklace on her bare and bony neck and placing it in the buffet.

"I don't have an appetite Sharifeh. You go ahead and eat. What's happening outside?"

"Appetite comes with eating. We've got lentil soup. I'll heat it up and you can have a few spoonfuls."

"Come off it."

"How careless can you get? The patients in our hospital are sturdier than you are. This is no way to eat. You want to add ulcer to your collection of pains, do you?"

She stood up and held the metal cane ready in front of him: "Get up! Come on now!"

Ashoor stared at her, head held high: "Since when have you been ordering me around?"

Sharifeh's face lit up with a soft smile: "It's not an order sir! It's a command, binding and obligatory. Now! Or you'll be disciplined. Sixty bunny squats!"

"It's frog squats you dope! Not bunny squats" Ashoor said.

"What's the difference?" said Sharifeh. "Bunny squats are so much better. Come on now!"

And she extended an arm. Ashoor took her hand and slid forwards: "You've turned really cheeky, you know that? Why don't you just deliver the deathblow and be done with it!" and he took the cane.

The smell of Ashoor's body permeated Sharifeh's breath. "A deadman doesn't need a deathblow, does he? You're as good as dead when you're slumped on this bed." And she held him by the arm: "Quickly now, I'm starving."

She liked Ashoor's smile. He didn't take offense. He took the cane and started walking: "Did you buy the paper?"

Sharifeh stood up, holding the platter. Her legs were slightly shaky and the glasses jittered daintily. She headed to the adjoining room, which served as the closet as well as kitchen. "No. You wanted me to?"

"Why didn't you?"

"I'll get one this evening, or I can send Shahed to get one. Now, go shower before the water pressure drops!"

"All right! Hold your horses! You'd think it's hospital number two here!"

Sharifeh let her breath escape and turned back into the room as soon as she heard the cane hit the yard's asphalt. She turned on the fan, pulled the paper out of the bag and tore the crime page right off with shaking hands. She stuffed the rest of the paper into the bag and pushed the bag under the metal bed. Then, holding the page, she walked to the adjoining room and read on her way, feeling disappointed again at the writer or typesetter's ignorance. She doted on the Ashoor in the picture: "You're so angelic!" Her large eyes warmed: "And the look in your eyes, I'm not sure if they're smiling, or crying, or if they're silent or talking."

She raised the corner of the bedclothes. "You stay here for now and we'll see what tomorrow brings." She put the page under a bedding wrapper adorned with petunias and chrysanthemums. Arms folded, Sharifeh clutched the bare and sticky skin of her upper arms. She walked towards the window and looked through the blue curtain at the schoolyard. Her ears were wet with the sound of rain. But there was no sign of rain outside. It was dry; no rain, not even a speck of cloud; just the sky, the sun and a soft wind from the north that made the flag atop the long pole dance. At the foot of the pole, Ashoor was standing on one leg, his lips moving softly. The sparrows that had fled from his foot sat in front of the window beside Sharifeh's eyes. As she dropped the curtain, they flew from the window to the refuge of the weeping willow.

## Chapter Two

Fereydoon was asleep when the secretary came in. He wasn't in a deep sleep, just on the verge of wakefulness. The soft music of the secretary's shoes sounded like a bouncing Ping-Pong ball and roused him. He felt cold; cold and numb. Drawing away from the leather cushion of the rotating chair, he put on his semi-dark glasses. The sound of steps and the bouncing Ping-Pong ball was cut short. The secretary was standing dubiously in the middle of the room, her shadow breaking on the redbrick parquet like a black wave. "Excuse me, Mr Alamzadeh. I think it's a bad time," she said.

Fereydoon's sleepy eyes were gently clearing behind the dark glasses. "Not at all. What is it?"

The secretary took a few more musical steps to the edge of the table and placed a leather-bound folder on it. "Here are today's letters. And here's yesterday's paper." She laid the paper on her reflection on the dark glass. "How's Mahboubeh?" she added with a smile.

“Good, she sends her regards” Fereydoon said with a drawn breath, beating rhythmically on the table with his numb fingers.

The secretary uttered her catchphrase: “Why don’t you bring her along one day so we can meet her in person?”

Fereydoon’s fingers stopped moving. “All in good time.” “God save us from the incurable disease of nosiness” he thought.

He got off his chair and feeling slightly colder, pulled his white coat off the thin hanger in the rack and put it on. He looked at his white-clad image in the mirror attached to the pillar in the centre of the room. “Going somewhere?” the secretary asked.

“Not now, but I want the car ready for three-fifteen.”

“Excuse me sir, where are you going?”

“The Five-hundred Project.”

“But it’s the managing board’s meeting at three-thirty. Mr Afsharian insisted you start it on time.”

“No!” Fereydoon smacked his forehead. “What day is it today?” he asked, waving his straight and bright black hair to one side.

The secretary pointed at the desk calendar: “It’s the 25th.”

Fereydoon frowned. “So that’s why I’m woozy!” he said bitterly. “Allergic to meetings and managing board members constipating and things you can’t say or digest.”

“Shall I ask Jamal to bring you some coffee?” the secretary asked.

Fereydoon dropped himself on the chair and made a half-circle towards the window. The stained glass robbed the light of its radiance. A few doves flew by. He wanted to say “no” for no apparent reason even to something he wanted terribly: “Coffee?” He wanted something to kill the pain. He opened the desk drawer and took out a pack of pills: “I’ll take a pill. Tell Jamal to bring me some water.” His mind was fixed on coffee, the intoxicating smell: “And ask him to buy me a pack of tobacco afterwards. Captain Black.”

He’d promised Mahboubeh *and* his mother not to smoke. “Women! They want to control you,” he thought. He felt that at that particular hour there was only one thing that could give him peace and it wasn’t talking to Mahboubeh, or gazing at the turquoise dome of the mosque from his elevated position by the window or listening to classical music. It was sucking the flat stem of a pipe. “Don’t forget to tell him that! Tell him I want a golden.”

The secretary stepped back: “Anything else...?”

Fereydoon remembered something: “Wait a minute!”

Bashing time! He picked a sheet of paper from the letter tray and threw it on the table like a trump card. “W..what’s wrong?” the secretary stuttered.

Fereydoon’s chair turned gently towards her. “It’s got three spelling mistakes. You know, it’s very embarrassing to have three spelling mistakes in a letter that’s just five to six lines long. And do you know what the most embarrassing mistake is? It’s Mr Abedini’s name. They way you’ve spelled it he sounds like a dean in an abbey.”

The secretary took the letter and held it in front of her chest. She watched Fereydoon's steps from the corner of her eye. He was beside the window now. Outside were the unbothered doves, the turquoise dome of the mosque and the high and low roofs. He tapped the table on which the light from the window fell crookedly. A model of the Five-Hundred Unit Apartment Project lay on the desk like a white cream cake. For the thousandth time he saw his name on the model's brass nameplate titled project manager. There was no sign of the usual sense of pleasure in him though, just bitterness and disgust. He wanted to get rid of the bitter feeling by striking someone else with his venom. It made no difference who that person might be. It could be the executive manager or for that matter, his ignorant niece who didn't have as much as half a diploma and served as the office scarecrow with the added advantage of having very strong antennas.

He started striking as soon as he was back at his desk: "Competency! That's what we get paid for but lack. People are always making mistakes everywhere and nothing happens. And, you know what? They're the same people who want to build the world. A bad beginning leads to mistakes, followed by disgrace and finally a bad ending. But, Miss Barazandeh, in the world of civil engineers mistakes mean playing with peoples' lives. You merely need to replace a curvy seven with a twisty eight in your calculations and that little mistake will spread like wildfire and you'll get a building that's not worth a curse. In fact, everything stems from here." He pointed to his head: "Here!" And added distinctly and emphatically: "Please-pay-more-attention." He started playing with the pills' blister pack: "If I were you, I would practice spelling two-hours a day."

Then a memory popped up in his head, one that had become an inseparable part of his memory-bank and which he would retell for people at various occasions, without warning: "I had a schoolmate who was terrible at spelling; quite absent-minded. He just didn't feel responsible for the poor words. He wrote them down any way he could think of. No amount of private training helped. He wouldn't learn. One day the headmaster asked us to make small flag-shaped badges and pin them on our uniforms. He asked us to write three words on those flags: 'Khoda, Shah, Mihan'.<sup>1</sup> And that's what we did, but do you know what my friend had written on his flag?"

"What had he written?" asked the secretary with a smile.

"He'd written: 'Khoda, Shah, Mahin'.<sup>2</sup> The schoolchildren started teasing him: 'Who's Mahin, you cheek? He's in love'. And that's how he became a laughing stock."

The secretary hid her smile with her hands. "Who knows?" she said. "Maybe he did it on purpose to immortalize his love."

"You mean there actually was a Mahin?"

"Yes."

"No, Ashoor wasn't the romantic type. I mean we were only in fifth grade, not as grown up as all that. It is true that southern boys mature a bit earlier than other children. But anyway, this friend of mine, unlike us, was religious. He prayed and fasted."

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1. Persian for "God, King, Motherland"

2. While Mihan is the Persian word for motherland, its variant form Mahin is a feminine name.

"You mean you weren't?"

"No, not purely and strongly. Everything has its own place and time. And then there was the revolution..."

He ended abruptly and became serious, thinking he'd gone too far in associating with this inquisitive girl, a mere instrument for the executive manager. He'd let her venture too much into his private life, what all the world's secretaries delight in.

"Well! Are there a lot of letters?" he asked, pointing to the folder.

The secretary stood on her toes and folded her arms: "The letters! Not much; the most important one is from the Ministry of Housing and Urbanization, about the company's loan request."

"Really? They've responded?"

"Yes. They haven't received the necessary credits from the Central Bank yet. It's only been a month since new year's day."

"Ridiculous. We lose time by months in this country. In fact, time's the only thing that lacks any value or meaning."

He touched his aching temples and relaxed. He had to relax. That was the only way to stop the pain that had poured into his head that morning as soon as the clock started to ring. Now, it was banging itself all over the interior of his skull like a sack of sand. Everything had to stop, even thinking. Wouldn't it be wonderful if he just rose from his chair and left the office without warning or without saying goodbye? He'd get in his Nissan Patrol and drive from Khaju Bridge to Chaharbagh Abbasi, take a turn from Neshat to Bozorgmehr Street and leave the city behind. He'd head for Ziyar where the cow farm owned by Mahboubeh's father awaited him under the May sunshine. Then, far from the gaze of that husky man with the handlebar moustache, the white-clad workers and big-uddered milch cows, he'd throw himself on the dry and sweet-smelling hay, stare at the many-shaped clouds and think of nothing, not even the stains on his white suite, or the loneliness and warm heart of his old mother, or even Mahboubeh's exceptionally beautiful eyes, warm breath and lips.

Like cold water, the secretary's voice washed away the flames of that desired and unattainable peace: "I scanned the papers. There were a few auction notices, which I've circled."

The wave of pain was gone. The thought of peace had brought peace. "That's it? What else? What's the news?"

"The news is that the government's stopped giving out chicken coupons. They say they'll hand out cash instead of subsidies," the secretary said.

Fereydoon's lips formed a slight sneer. People give themselves away with the type of news they talk about. For this fat salaried woman, chicken coupons and the taste of subsidies was the most important news. He dismissed her.

"You can leave now."

"Nothing else I can do for you?"

"No. Just a glass of water, some Captain Black tobacco and a corrected letter to Mr Abedini on purchasing ten tons of Portland cement."

“Certainly.”

“Hopefully.”

He looked at the aquarium. The sound of the secretary's shoes resonated in his ears. The aquarium was silent and dark, like the depths of the ocean. Its glass walls were opaque and thick with grime. It emitted an aura of monotony and dreariness, resembling the slow and monotonous movements of its fish. He pulled the paper to his face and ran his faded and bewildered eyes over the front-page headlines. The top news was vote counting underway following parliamentary elections. He turned the page. The headlines and advertisements, he thought, had nothing to say, like always. News reports promised a bright future; *“will be built”*, they said; *“to be established”*, *“will come on stream”*, *“will be produced”*. The only page that mentioned the recent past was the crime page, the fourth. He put one leg on top of the other and adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose. He could see better now. He started going through the dull headlines. A meat-grinder had devoured the hand of a four-year-old. A well had swallowed a 50-year-old woman. A murderer had been hanged. A heist had exposed a sinister murder. A woman had been stoned. As he sneered, his straight black hair flowed on his forehead and screened his eyes. It seemed as if all the news from yesterday and the days before had been copied on today's paper! He sighed. So much repetition and so much indifference! Why isn't anyone concerned about the gaping mouths of meat-grinders or thirsty wells or the motives of murderers and thieves or deceived women? Deceived women! But what about their next-door neighbor, Faribah? Her husband would turn the bend and she'd show up with a different excuse each time. “Fereydoon! There's something wrong with the light bulb in our bedroom. I won't dare touch it. And Nasser won't be back until Thursday night.” As soon as the bedroom's light bulb was fixed, there'd be something wrong with the water tap in the bathroom. His mother who'd read the woman's intentions sold the house within a month and bought another one near Darvazeh Shiraz, but she wouldn't give up. As soon as Mahboubeh came in the picture though, everything was all right. It would have been very difficult for his mother to bear the scandal, prison, shame and stoning.

He'd bent down on the paper, his head on his hands, worn out. The tang of sumac and the fatty kebab he'd had for lunch were tautening his mouth and throat. He raised his head, distancing his eyes from the paper and its muddled words. A pair of innocent-looking eyes was staring at him, familiar despite the passage of years, clear and lucid, within a frame that sat at the bottom of page four. He knew the person in that photo, the person to whom those innocent eyes belonged. In fact, he had the same picture in his own photo album. This is our Ashoor! The same one who showed up in his dreams and whose memory broke into his wakefulness! The same person he was talking about with the secretary just two minutes ago. “Khoda, Shah, Mahin”. Was he awake and conscious or had he sent his memories flying again like a kite in the fluid sky of his mind? He thought of the words he'd written on the white surface of his cigarette packet one cheerless evening. He liked those words so much: “There were six of us, and we ruled the world. We were the kings of the little islands of childhood. One day, there was a storm. The kings lost their crowns and the islands their land!”

The person in the photo was Ashoor, who'd been so far away from him for such a long time; one of the six kings from childhood. He fixed his eyes on the picture again. It was him but from years before, when the six of them had cycled to the Eiffel photography shop to take



pictures for school. The six of them had wanted to wear the same shirt, the same brown silk coat and the same striped tie. They'd turned the Eiffel shop on its head that day, enraging the photographer who kept drawing on his cigarette, with all that chatting and joking and clowning around and finally, when they were getting their receipts, they'd muddled up their names and had had a great laugh about it. A week later, Homayoon was given Fereydoon's picture. Homayoon's picture was found in Yadollah's envelope. Morteza had Ashoor's picture and Noori was given Morteza's and thus, they'd completely confused the longhaired photographer with the cigarette on the corner of his lips and had managed to flee just before he lost his temper. They'd walked along the tinplate and milled walls of the refinery to the Bahmanshir summer cinema where they'd watched *The Fiddler on the Roof*, eating half kielbasa sandwiches. Afterwards, they'd written messages behind the pictures and offered them to each other under the fading light bulbs of the company apartments.

The blood in his veins was flowing fast. He hadn't heard Jamal knock and enter the room with a hello, walk forward, pick a glass of water from the steel platter and place it on the desk. Jamal was at the centre of the room, heading to the kitchen. Fereydoon spoke in a voice that didn't sound like his: "Ashoor!"

Jamal's head turned. "Do you want anything sir?" he asked.

Fereydoon's smooth and egg-shaped chin was shaking: "This is my friend."

Jamal walked back to the desk, the platter held under his arm: "Who sir?"

Fereydoon's finger lay under the too familiar picture of the king from the good old times: "He's here. Look! We were together from the first year of school till graduation, in Abadan."

Jamal shook his head: "It's a rotten world sir. Always unexpected."

Fereydoon was restless: "His name is Ashoor. Ashoor Mash'ali. The stupid idiots have misspelled it. Seems it's becoming a trend. What can I expect from Miss Barazandeh when the paper's worse than her! This is Ashoor." And his voice broke as he said: "I can't believe it." He emptied the glass of cold water on his flaming heart with two big gulps.

Jamal bent on the paper, hands and platter behind his back: "Ahh! What a pleasant young man! God rest his soul sir! He's in peace now!"

Fereydoon banged on the desk: "What are you saying? He's not dead. He's lost..."

He felt doubtful and read the muddled words again: "*The man in this picture...Asher Mash'ali...suffers from amnesia...*"

He stopped, nonplussed, baffled. He couldn't tell the time. The kite's string had tied itself in a knot. The picture was old, at least fourteen or fifteen years old. Ashoor didn't have amnesia then, did he? He was a dear and like all the other kids, he was into school and play and books. Maybe he's amnesic now. But now! Where's his *new* picture? You can't use someone's childhood picture to find them now, unless time's stood still. But time hasn't stood still, has it? No, it hasn't. Is that to say he hasn't changed at all? Or maybe he hasn't taken any new photos or they don't have any new photos. He felt unsure about the dates, about the date that Ashoor had gone missing. He looked at the date printed at the top of the page, April 24th. He glanced at the desk calendar: April 25th. Everything was new, it was now. He hadn't gone missing ten or fifteen years ago. He'd gone missing at the age of thirty. Then why this picture?

"Really strange!" he said and jotted down the telephone number on the ad. It was a Tehran line. He picked up the handset, gave the number to the secretary and asked her to call it immediately. He didn't have any news of Ashoor but he could ask for it. He leant back on his chair and felt Jamal's presence beside him, as if he hadn't seen him there before. He remembered that Jamal was supposed to bring him a glass of water. He took a pill from the desk drawer and popped it in his mouth. Then he picked up the glass to swallow it down with water. It was empty and light. "Where's the water?" he asked.

"You drank it up, sir."

"Me? When?"

"Just now, when you were all worked up sir."

"Nonsense. Bring me a glass of water now!"

Jamal shuffled out of the room, leaving Fereydoon with the bitter taste of the pill wandering in his mouth like a piece of chalk. He'd never swallowed a pill without water before. His father had managed to swallow pills, thirty-three genuine German aspirins in fact and he'd closed his eyes to all of life's shit. That's what he'd written in his will. Closing his eyes to all of life's shit. He'd sat in a crane's basket and closed his eyes to everything twenty meters above the ground, quite unperturbed. He spitted the pill inside the dustbin and pressed his fingers softly upon his temples. He stared once more at the picture in the paper. He had the same picture in his photo album, next to the pictures of the other four: Homayoon, Morteza, Nooreddin, Yadollah. Except for Nooreddin, he had no idea where the rest of them were. The tide had carried them all away. Over the years, he'd rarely spotted an old friend in the street or any other public place from whom he could ask about old schoolmates. He had asked on the rare occasions, but nothing had come of it. He just knew about Nooreddin, that he'd faced the gallows one autumn day at dawn.

The glass hit the desk with a thud and brought him back to his senses. The phone started ringing at the same time. Fereydoon's hand remained suspended for a moment between the phone and the glass. He chose the phone and gave a start.

"It's you Mahboub!"

"Hi. Who else would it be? Were you expecting a call?"

"What can I say?"

"What is it? You sound so skittery jittery! Is this about the Afsharian gang again?"

He signaled Jamal to leave, thinking whether he was still standing there to get a receipt for his glass of water. Jamal shuffled out of the room.

"Come on! What's wrong?"

"Remember what I told you about Ashoor?" □

"Ashoor? The one whose father was a cinema operator?"

"No dear, that's Homayoon. Ashoor's father was a high school caretaker."

"Right, the one whose religious beliefs were thicker than the others. Brother Ashoor."

"Yes, that's him. I just read in the paper that he's lost."

“Lost? What is he? A two-year-old?”

He suddenly remembered the painkiller and holding the handset under his chin, he opened the drawer, took a pill and gulped it down with water.

“That’s the thing. It says he’s lost because he suffers from amnesia. But it looks like the person who got the ad printed suffers from something worse because the photo belongs to his school years, it’s the same one I have in my album.”

The deep raspy sound of Fereydoon’s breathing resounded in the mouthpiece. He felt a shot of pain in the rims and tip of his nose, which turned scarlet. The light’s reflection on the desk’s dark glass became blurred and disappeared, as if he was driving in a rainy night. Mahboubeh’s voice sounded thin and drawly: “Are you crying, you big man?”

Fereydoon’s breaths were knotty, shaky and involuntarily noisy: “What do you mean crying, Mahboub? I wish I could wail. You just don’t know what a dear Ashoor was.”

“So what if he was. I really don’t get this. What’s gotten into you all of a sudden? Your friends left your life a long time ago and now you’re suddenly crying for them?” □

“What are you saying Mahboub?”

“It’s true! If you’re so in love with your friends you want to wail for them, why didn’t you ever try and find them? I guess you’ll say you had your own troubles to worry about. Well, everyone’s like that these days so there’s no point really. Anyway, you’ve got a lot of friends now, haven’t you?”

“Don’t make lousy comparisons Mahboub! The people you call friends don’t know their boundaries. They live in empty shells! The friendship I shared with my schoolmates was something special.”

“I know. You went to school together for twelve years. But it didn’t last, did it? There was a vacuum in the middle. Like you say, islands with crown-less kings and not a speck of land left.”

He put the handset on the desk. Mahboubeh’s voice was loud and clear: “Don’t beat yourself up! You belonged together for some time. Everyone’s had that sort of thing. I used to have a group of friends in Hakim Nezami High School and we’d kill for each other. We’d even sworn oaths of loyalty and all that. But marriage and then children turned them all into different people. I guess I’m the only unlucky one since fate threw you at my door... Hello! Are you listening to me?”

He picked up the handset, disgruntled. “Stop it Mahboub! I’m not in the mood. I was wheezy this morning. I thought I’d visit your dad’s farm and roll on the hay.”

“Suits you perfectly. Why didn’t you?”

“I’m not in the mood for jokes. Anything else you want to say?”

She did. She’d called to arrange for a movie outing that evening. She wanted to see *Bashu, the Little Stranger*.

Fereydoon apologized. “Not tonight.”

He hung up and called the secretary.

“Well?”

“He’s gone to buy it sir.”

“What? A phone?”

“No sir! Tobacco.”

“I asked you to dial a number, who wants tobacco?”

“Right sir! I called. It was on answering mode. Should I call again?”

“No. I’ll do it myself.”

He was about to hang up when the secretary’s voice rose. He could hear it from behind the door as well as from the earpiece.

“By the way Mr Alamzadeh!”

“Yes!” □

“It’s three o’clock. The managing board meeting...”

“I’m unwell. I can’t make it.”

“But Mr Afsharian insisted...”

“To hell with Afsharian. Can’t stand him or any of his clan.”

He hung up and took a hot and chocked-up breath. In the sudden gloomy silence of the room his eyes ran across the black-framed pictures, the maps, models and books, the aquarium, the dead computer and the window with the curtain trembling in the wind. Was it 1979 or 1980? He couldn’t remember. He’d moved so far away from the past he couldn’t tell where the border between the years lay. Amiri Street, opposite Niagara Cinema, Siyahkal Bookshop. He was absorbed in *Dialectic Principles* when he heard the sound of a motorbike and a moment later Ashoor was standing within the door’s frame. It had been some time since they’d last met. He closed *Dialectic Principles*, stepped away from behind the counter and extended his hand. Ashoor didn’t take it, as if he hadn’t noticed. But Fereydoon felt unclean. He’d refrained on purpose. Ashoor’s inquisitive eyes were scanning the books and revolutionary titles. His eyes ran along the images of bloodstains, stars, hammers and sickles that seemed to be struggling to pop out of posters. “Congrats!” he said instead of a hello.

Fereydoon put his rejected hand to his waist. “Not mine. Belongs to the guys.”

Ashoor hadn’t even looked at him. Within his eyeshot was a poster of Carl Marx with a straggly beard. “So he’s your prophet, is he?” and went on without waiting for an answer: “They guys told me you’d set up a bookshop. I said I’d never believe it unless I see it with my own eyes. When did you start putting us after the leftists?”

Two girls walked in. They said hello and started looking at the books. Fereydoon lowered his voice: “I don’t care about left or right. I’m looking for the truth.”

Ashoor glared right into his eyes. “Really? Then you must have Islamic books as well. Do you have anything by Shariati?”

Fereydoon shrugged. “Not yet. But we’ll bring some if they’re in demand.”

Ashoor glanced at the girls: “Guess only the communist books are in demand then!”