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**T**he man who late in the evening got on the passenger car that was taking us to our destination, had carefully wrapped himself in his dark-blue raincoat and had drawn down to the line of his eyebrows the visor of his hat, as if wishing to separate himself from the outside world.

His destination was 'khonsar', which was on our way.

He had a parcel with him which he

carefully held under his arm.

During some half an hour that he was with us, he neither said a word, nor heeded the now and then talkings of the passengers and the driver. This had created a stuffy aura of strangeness and aloofness around him.

Each time the headlights of cars or some light from outside lit the cabin,

I would steal a glance at his face: white skin, pale, a small slender nose and half-closed tired eyelids. The circular wrinkle around his mouth showed that he was a man of firm determination and strong willpower. His head and neck gave the impression of a stone-bust. Occasionally he would wet his

lips with the tip of his tongue and would again become absorbed in deep thought.

The car stopped in front of 'Madani' public garage in 'Khonsar'. We were supposed to drive through the whole night, but the driver and the passengers got down.

I went to have a look around. The building of the garage and the teahouse did not merit my interest as a convenient place to pass the night in.

To settle the matter with the driver, I went to him and said: "As it seems, we have to pass the night here..?"

- "Yes. If possible, we'll stay here tonight and by the early beams tomorrow we'll start for our destination."

I noticed at this time the man in dark-blue raincoat coming towards me.

He said in a calm, choked voice: "You hardly may find a good place here sir. If you do not have a relative or acquaintance in the city, you are welcome to my place for the night."

- "Thank you very much, but I don't want to cause any trouble for you."

- "I hate to stand on ceremonial and pretentious offers and stuff like that! I neither know you, nor want to. I do not intend to oblige you with the invitation either! Since I've built a special new room for myself that matches my own taste, my former room is empty and just idle there. I think it's better than a tea-house room anyway! It's up to you."

His sincere, informal and frank tone impressed me. I quickly understood I was not making the acquaintance of an ordinary man. I said:

"O.K. I'm at your disposal." – and without any hesitation started to go to his place in his company. He took out from his pocket a battery-torch and lit it.

A column of a bit too strong light lit the path before us. We passed through some uphill and downhill alleys with mud walls. The tranquil silence that hovered the night, permeated the soul, benumbing it with calm and peace.

We heard the melody of the running water in the brooks and a cool breeze passing

# The Darkroom



through the trees caressed our face. In the distance we could see the flickering lights of some houses. Some more time passed and we were still walking keeping silent. To make my not yet known friend talk, I said: "It must be a beautiful city!" As if frightened in surprise by my voice, he paused for some moments and then in a very low voice said: "Among the cities that I've visited in Iran, I've come to develop a special liking for 'Khonsar'. Not just because of its farms, many fruit trees and abundant water, but more because it has preserved its old ambience and atmosphere.

You can vividly feel this and even smell it in every of its meandering alleys, in the piers of its mud-brick houses, and in every branch and leaf of all its tall silent trees. Everywhere you can breathe the noble air of the good old days and its essence of sincerity and hospitality. It's a small city situated in a remote and outlying place. This very fact has imbued it with a poetic ambience. Things like newspapers, automobiles, airplanes, railroad and the like, are all, in my opinion, the blights of our age, specially the automobiles!

They intrude the peace and calm and purity of pastoral environment and countryside life by the noise of their engine and raucous honkins and by the dust they raise in the air driving on rural tracks. By such intrusion, they take to the remotest virgin areas and to their inhabitants the often harsh manners of desert drivers and driver-mates, the cheap mentality of the parvenu and their stupidly imitative habits and tastes!"

He threw the light of his battery-torch on the windows of the houses and said: "Look, each house is an independent construction with windows of inlaid work. One can feel the smell of earth, the smell of reaped lucerne, the real smell of organic life, hear the humming of the crickets and the singing of birds, see the people of the old culture around – whether simple or sly – and feel detached from the bustle of the modern world and the 'nouveau riche'!"

Then, as if suddenly remembering that he had invited me, asked: "Have you had your supper?.."

- "Yes. I had it on our way in 'Golpayegan'"

We passed by some streams and brooks and finally, very near to the mountainside, he opened the gate of a garden and we both entered. Going farther ahead, we arrived at a newly constructed building. He ushered me into a small room furnished with a table, two armchairs and a traveling bedstead in a corner. He lit the kerosene-lamp and excused himself for a minute. He returned in light-red pyjamas, the colour of human body, having in one hand a new lamp and in the other a parcel. He opened the parcel and took out a red cone-shaped lamp-shade which he put on the new lamp. After a while of keeping silent and thinking, as if hesitant to say something or not, he finally said: "May I invite you to come with me and see my private room?.." And he took the new lamp leading the way and I followed him.

We passed through a dark narrow corridor with a barrel-arch ceiling. It was constructed in the shape of a cylinder. The walls and the ceiling were painted dark-red colour of ochre and the floor was covered with red shortnapped coarse carpet. He then opened a door and we entered an oval room which had no windows and no outlet except the door to the corridor. It was a full ellipse with no angles or geometrical lines. All over inside, that is: the wall, the ceiling, the floor, were covered with jujube-colour velvet. The heavy scent of perfume in the air made me almost lose my breath. He put the lamp on the table, sat on the bedstead which was in the middle of the room, and offered me the chair beside the table. There were on the table a crystalline jug of milk and two glasses. Surprised and almost worried, I was looking around, thinking that I had been trapped by a psycho in his torture room that was intentionally covered with dark-red velvet to hide the stains of blood and had been constructed with no outlets or windows to prevent the escape of the victim or his shouting for help! I anticipated a blow of a club on my head or a sudden slam of the only door of the room and the stranger's attacking me with an axe or a knife

at any moment! But I heard him saying in a gentle voice: "How do you like my room?.."

- "Room?!.. But I think we are in a rubber bag!"

Without heeding my comment, he said: "My only food is milk. Do you like to have a glass too?.."

- "No. Thank you. I've had my supper."

- "A glass of milk will do you no harm."

He put the jug and a glass before me on the table. I didn't feel like drinking milk, but willy nilly I filled my glass and drank it. He then began to gradually drink the rest. He would fill his glass and very slowly sip the content allowing himself to feel the taste of every drop, turning his tongue over his shiny lips in relish. His lowered eyelids and grimace of pain showed that he was deeply in thought reviewing perhaps some unhappy memories. His young pale face, small slender nose and fleshy lips, under the red light of the lamp, inspired a feeling of sensuality. On his broad forehead, a blue vein was beating and his long reddish-brown hair were scattered on his shoulders. As if talking to himself, he said: "I have never shared the pleasures of other people. Always a bitter feeling, a feeling of misfortune, has prevented me – the feeling of the pains and problems of life! Most important of these pains and problems for me has been cohabitation with people. It has always been a bitter frustration. I've come to believe that the demands of the rotten human society added to our physical needs to food, clothing, etc., are barriers to our spiritual growth, perpetually preventing our soul to open up. I once tried to mingle with others, abide by their rules, imitate them and be one of them, but very soon I realized I was just making a fool of myself. I tried all what others regarded as pleasure and I came to the conclusion that none were pleasures to me. I always felt I was an alien wherever I went. I had no relations with others for the very reason that I couldn't cope with them, bringing myself to adapt to their expectations. I told myself: "I will one day run away from this society and take refuge in a distant village or somewhere." But I didn't want to do this to seek fame

and worldly gains. I only wanted to avoid submission to others. I didn't want to be an imitator. In the end, I decided to construct a private room which would meet my needs, a place where I could be quite by myself and nothing would disarray my thoughts. I'm a "born lazy" man. I don't believe in struggle and endeavour. I think such things belong to empty people and serve as excuses for them to assert themselves and fill in their inner gaps; they belong to the mean nonentities of no noble roots, to the ever-beggar and ever-hungry! My forefathers had already filled their inner gaps and they passed their time in laziness and bequeathed me this laziness in full. I don't take pride in my ancestors. Besides the fact that we do not have social classes in this country in the sense there exist in some other countries, if we meticulously search for the roots and origins of many of our "Dowlehs and Saltanehs" \* we will find their forefathers having lived the life of a thief, a highway robber, a clown in the royal court, a profiteer and the like.

Moreover, if we further dig in for our ancestors, we'll no doubt come upon gorillas and chimpanzees. At any rate, I'm not born for working. In the social environment we now have, only the parvenu can, in their own words: "assert" themselves. It is the society they have developed in conformity \* Aristocratic title in Iran of older times. "Translator" with their own lusts, whims and greeds. Others have to swallow down the pills that they prescribe for even the most trivial quotidian duties of life!

They have put the name of "working" on this captivity! Everybody has to beg them for his natural rights in life. In such an environment, only the shameless, the senseless, the unintelligent and the brazen-faced thieves enjoy the full rights of living and if somebody is not dishonest and a mean flatterer like themselves, they tag him as "unfit for living"! I deeply realized that these people would never understand me and the heavy hereditary burden under which my back was bent. I felt the residues of the fatigue of my forefathers throughout my whole being

and at the same time I felt nostalgic about that remote past. I felt like hiding myself in a safe hole and hibernate in my own darkness and gradually grow to fullness from within. As a photo may be developed on the glass only in a darkroom, the subtleties and delicacies hidden in our being are revealed in full manifestation only in utter darkness and silence. Otherwise, they die away in the daily life endeavors, the light and the hue and cry in the environment. I felt that needed darkness within myself and my attempts to remove it from my being were in fact futile. I feel a great pity now why for some time I tried to be like others. I now realize that the most precious thing in my being is this very need to darkness and silence. Actually, it exists in everybody, but is revealed to us only when we distance ourselves from the worldly and the secular life and live in seclusion. Always people run away from such darkness and seclusion; they turn deaf ears to the call of Death; they let their personality give way and die away in the tumult and hub-bub of life. Don't be mistaken: I'm not a "sufi"\*. I do not preach seclusion so that, as they say: "the light of TRUTH would be revealed to me", No! On the contrary, I may well expect \* ("Sufi": Mystical person. "Translator") the dagger of the Devil! I only want to

be myself and wake up from within the real whatever that I am. I hate the rosy but empty sentences the so-called 'intellectuals' use to make their way through. I don't want to lose my reality to meet the base needs of this life which is made to conform with the ideals of a bunch of thieves, smugglers, idiots and mammonists. It is only in this room that I feel I can live within myself without wasting my energy. I need darkness and this dim red light. I can not tolerate sitting in a room with a window – even if my back to it. It disturbs my thoughts. I'm averse to light. Under sunshine everything looks cheap and silly. I believe the source of beauty should be sought in darkness and fear. A cat is just an ordinary animal during the day, but when in darkness, its eyes shine, its hairs shimmer and its movements convey an air of mysteriousness. When you look at a shrub of flowers during the day and the thin spider webs here and there around it, you may even feel it is a bit sickly, but the same shrub looks specially meaningful during evening and you feel as if it emits a mysterious radiance around it. Light makes every living thing conscious and watchful of its movements. It is only in darkness that the ordinary becomes mysterious, all the hidden and dormant fears wake up. It is in darkness that we hear



even if we are asleep. Our inner self is awake. It is only then that we live in the true sense of the word. It is only then that we are free from our base and mean needs and we freely float in spiritual worlds... and things that we have never come to understand come fore to our mind as an insight.

After this fervent speech, he suddenly fell silent.

It seemed as if what he said was a speech of apology to justify himself.

Was this man from a rich and aristocrat family who was tired of life and had lost all his interest in living, or he was simply a sick man? In any case, he evidently didn't think like ordinary people. I didn't know what to say as an answer to him. There was now a very peculiar expression on his face. The line around his lips seemed to have become deeper and more rigid. The blue vein on his forehead looked more swollen. When he talked his nostrils trembled. Under the dim red light, his paleness gave the impression of a sad and tired man. His head looked like the head of a bust made of wax! My impression of him was now different and even contradictory to the impression I had of him when I watched him in the car. When he looked down, I noticed a vague and passing smile on his lips, but he soon, as if noticing my observation, changed that to an unexpected steely, yet ridiculing, stare and said: "I'm sorry. I talked about myself all the time.

You're traveling and you must be tired!"

- "Whatever we say, in fact we only talk about ourselves. The only reality for everybody is his or her own being. Unconsciously, we're all talking only about ourselves all the time - even when we're talking about somebody other than ourselves, we're in fact expressing ourselves by expressing our own thoughts, feelings and impressions from the mouth of somebody else! The most difficult thing is to tell the reality and the truth about ourselves!"

I regretted the answer I'd given him. I thought it was meaningless and not apropos at all. I didn't know it myself what was that I wanted to convey.

Wasn't it that I was indirectly flattering my host and his thoughts?!

He didn't heed what I said. He turned his painful stare at me for some seconds and then his lids lowered again. He licked his lips with his tongue.

It seemed to me he was living in another world at those moments. He seemed to be talking to himself and quite unaware of my presence. He said:

"It was always a wish for me to make a special living place for myself that would be in conformity with my taste and preference. I finally came to the conclusion that what others had made for me was not what I really wanted. I wanted to live for myself and within my own inner world. To realize my wish, I sold whatever I had, came to this place with all my cash and built this special room for myself. I've personally supervised over every detail. I brought along with me the velvet curtains. The only thing that had skipped my mind was the red light-shade. Some days ago I ordered it in Tehran giving them the exact size and other specifications. They delivered it to me today. That was the only reason I had gone to Tehran. Otherwise, I hate to leave my place or associate with people. As for food and drink, I've accustomed myself to suffice to milk. It meets my nutrition needs. Besides, I can have it in any position: sitting or sleeping. I've made a vow with myself that the day I finish my cash and become needy to others, I would commit suicide. Tonight is the first night that I sleep in my ideal room. I'm a happy man as I've realized my wish. A happy man! It's very difficult to imagine who is a happy man. I could never imagine it myself, but I feel I'm a happy man now!"

He fell silent again. To break the irksome silence, I said: "The ideal state you're seeking is the state of an embryo in the mother's womb. Lying safely between the soft and warm layers of flesh, the embryo feeds itself on the mother's blood, without needing to struggle or fight or flatter the mother for it. All its needs are automatically met! What urges you to seek this state is the nostalgia

for the lost paradise that exists in the inner depths of every human-being. The wish to live within one's self and in seclusion is perhaps a tendency for a self-determined death."

Apparently he didn't expect anybody interfere his talking to himself.

He turned a glance of ridicule at me and said: "You are a traveler and must be tired. You better go to your room now and rest!"

Saying this, he took the lamp and ushered me to the end of the corridor to the room we had first arrived in.

It was past midnight. I inhaled some fresh air as if I had left a sickly cellar. Stars were twinkling in the sky. The question hovered my mind:

Whether I had met a mentally sick obsessive man or an extra-ordinary person?!

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I woke up at about ten in the morning.

To say goodbye to my host, I decided to go to his room. I cautiously walked along the dark and silent corridor like a stranger who wants to enter a sacred temple. I tiptoed towards his special private room, knocked at the door and entered the room. The lamp on the table was till on. I saw my host lying motionless on the bed in his light-red pyjamas, covering his face with both hands, having his knees bent and pressed against his abdomen exactly like an embryo! I went nearer and shook his shoulder, but to my horror I found him stiff dead!

I rushed to the garage not to miss the car waiting for me.

Had he run out of his cash and had therefore put an end to his life as he had told me he would do the night before? Did he in reality fear the loneliness he so much sought and praised, and had therefore invited me to have someone near him during the last night of his life?...

Maybe, after all, he was a really happy man who wanted to preserve his happiness by passing his final hours in his ideal room!