

Compilation 11

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Account 1 - Abbas

Mehdi Navid

November 8th, 2017

My acquaintance with Abbas goes back to our commander's tea to which we decided to add a new color with our piss. He was recently settled in the kitchenette and was a new recruit. He was not satisfied and impertinent to anyone who wanted to bother him, so he was punished more than the rest of us, either by the veterans or by the cadre forces and commanders. The kitchenette was exactly in front of the secretariat in which I was working, so we communicated a lot, but we were not buddies.

Military base had a cold atmosphere and you couldn't trust everyone, no matter about what. The important thing was to mind your own business and not meddle. It was enough to make a mistake to lose your daily leave to someone else. Since he was a new recruit and didn't know about the strict and unwritten rules of the military base, Abbas was punished repeatedly. It took him a long time to adapt.

The craziest image I have of him is of a war game for which a couple of other military bases had come to fight in our base. The war game was about urban riots. A group of soldiers was given the role of demonstrators and another group was supposed to oppress the demonstration under the commandship of the cadre forces. We were the spectators of the war game. Near its end, the demonstrators were besieged by the Special Forces in a pincer movement. A tear gas was shot toward the demonstrators, but before finding time to act, one of the demonstrating soldiers kicked it toward the shooter and his commander. The Special Forces didn't have gas masks. They were all trapped in the smoke. At this time Abbas held a wet cloth over his mouth and ran from the spectators' seating area toward the smoke which was escalating each second. He stole the pistol of the Special Forces' commander, who was caught amid the gas, from his belt and went straight to the military base's major general who was watching

like us. Impertinently he said: "This doesn't work sir" and gave the pistol to the general. Abbas was detained for one week and had to carry out one more extra month for his military service.

The night before that morning in which we mixed our piss with the commander's tea, Abbas poured Aragh Sagi¹ from a freezer paper in our cups. He had hid the freezer paper under the car seat of our unit so that no one would find out. We never understood how he did it and what secret deal he had with our driver. At midnight we went to one of our unit rooms which was dark and cold and drank a couple of cups without making any noise. The silence and blackness together with the fear which had got hold of me added an excitement to this event. In the morning he suggested to pour this excitement, which was now in our bladders, into the commander's tea so that he would also take part in our drinking. Our eyes twinkled and we did it.

He called me a year after military service and said he missed me and liked to gather the gang somewhere to meet. I dodged the request at first, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. A couple of the boys came and we gathered in a park. Abbas said he had got married and worked in a taxi firm. He was airing his grievances, just like the military service days. I was listening to his words until I realized the point of all these words and complaints was just one thing: asking me to participate in a work with which we could go from rags to riches just with a little capital. It was one of those pyramid schemes in which you just recruit members and make your own hand and then swindle the money of the people under your hand. Little by little as I understood the story, my hand and foot got numb. His voice was not planning to stop and it went on and on and on to reach that moment when your eyes would twinkle from the paradise he was portraying for you. Inevitably I said something so that I could escape from that dilemma.

Now a few years have passed from than night and I have neither seen Abbas nor heard his voice. But I have kept his number, before for if he called I wouldn't answer, and later because he was a comrade from

the passed times and memories.

1

Aragh Sagi literally means “Dog alcohol”; it is a type of distilled alcoholic beverage in Iran which contains usually at least 65% pure ethanol. The closest equivalent to Aragh Sagi in English is hooch.

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Account 2- Adel

Mehdi Navid

November 11th, 2017

Curly black hair. Black eyes. Kind of swarthy. About the same height as me, but skinnier. He had three interests: Gregory Corso's poetry, Gilles Deleuze's philosophy and weed. Those days he used to pass his life with them. He worked at a bank and had a rental not fancy apartment. We talked when we were smoking weed and it was most about his translation of Corso and the things he wrote about Iranian literature in newspapers. I was supposed to find him a publisher for his translations. They never got published.

Adel married a university student who had come from the province to Tehran. He distanced himself from everyone, even from the newspapers. I heard he left Tehran and is working at a private bank in Shiraz. This phone number belongs to one of his bachelor day's apartments in Tehran.

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Account 3- Akbar

Mehdi Navid

November 19th, 2017

Akbar's life was caught in the wind which began blowing with the Revolution. His father, a general in Shah's army, fled the country and Akbar was labeled an opposition and spent two years in prison. He was nineteen when he was released. He was drafted into military service to serve his duty in Iran-Iraq war. A couple of months later, he was suspended from serving his country due to his prison sentence. He returned from the frontline to Tehran. He mastered his broken French in university, which he had learned from a cellmate, and at the same time started working at a small lathe workshop as a turner. He fell in love in one of the classes and immediately got married, but didn't produce any offspring. He was given a column in a newspaper and started translating the economic news of the world. After a while, a publisher suggested a book in the field of economics to him for translation. He quit translating for newspapers and set his foot in the book industry. When his first translation got published, he was diagnosed with MS. Everything was white in his eyes. His feet and hands became numb and motionless. He was hospitalized for one month. He used medical herbs and was recovered again.

I met Akbar at this point; in the lunchroom of the National Library. He sat in front of me and put his vegetarian food on the table. I don't recall what book I was holding, but it caught his attention and we started chatting. After that day we ate lunch together every day and talked about everything. After one year, my second book was finished. It was a novel based on the love affair between Rabe'e and Baktash in Jami's account. I had done my best to extract the story of these two characters from Jami's poetry and to introduce it into the modern life. I gave the manuscript to Akbar and asked for his opinion. He read it. He said it was patchy and the characters were flat and ... I couldn't stand it. It was at that point that I realized I can't bear to witness my one-year work be destroyed in front of my eyes. I

grabbed the manuscript to leave. He got mad. I got mad too. After that incident, upon an unwritten rule, we adjusted our times in the Library so that we wouldn't run into each other. And we didn't run into each other, though now I agree with his comments on my book.

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Account 4- Ali

Mehdi Navid

December 6th, 2017

My maternal grandfather finally gave in to my grandmother's request and they both went on a Haj pilgrimage. He had benefited from a huge heritage before. He was the son of a petty landowner and had estates of his own. He loved driving but he never got his driver's license out of snobbery; he used to bribe the cops on a monthly basis so that they wouldn't pull him over. In the prime of his life, he started working in the personal status registration office of the city just to pass the time. He had a neat handwriting and became a birth certificate writer; he traveled from city to city and from village to village to play his role in registering the early surnames of the inhabitants there. He was facetious and together with his colleagues he chose odd surnames for the illiterates due to ethnocentrism and the frictions between the dwellers of the city and of the village. The illiterates, not knowing anything, accepted the surnames. There are still many people around the city living with those surnames. Later he kind of knew everyone and because of this knowledge, whenever a close or distant relative came to him to ask for information about the girl or boy his son or daughter was going to marry, he used to puff up and ramble. The close or distant relative listened very carefully to his words and set the marriage in his mind since my grandfather always uttered favorable stuff and was pro-marriage. But once, his speech was stopped in the very first sentence. He said: "The great grandfather of that family had a tail". That was all.

In his middle age he realized that his wealth had been spent on parties and drinking and only a little saving was left. He opened a store and became a businessman. However, he was not successful in it, so he decided to move his family to Tehran and start a new life. He invested what was left of his money in a factory, bought a house and abstained from partying and splurging.

It was exactly one year later that he accepted my grandmother's request and they went on a Haj pilgrimage. In Mecca, many of the tents were burnt and a great number of Hajis were burnt and died.

My grandparents survived this incident and it became a turning point in my grandfather's life. He started throwing parties again, but this time in a religious form.

A couple of months ago, despite his weak heart and the strong advice of his doctor and children that he should avoid heavy sports, he picked up his Zurkhaneh¹ meels out of childish pig-headedness to show that there's life in the old dog yet. The next morning while he was sitting on the sofa and was holding his little grandchild, he had a peaceful heart attack and dropped dead.

1

Traditional Iranian system of athletics, a combination of martial arts, calisthenics, strength training and music.

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Account 5- Amin

Mehdi Navid

January 18th, 2018

I'm not sure if it's him or not. I don't recall vividly, but if this is the same Amin that I have in mind I don't know what to say. I've met him just once. It was at a friend's birthday party. I was weary and the party's bustle was suffocating me. The only escape was a balcony accessible from the kitchen. I had to set my mind to it, and pass through this dark passageway abuzz with dancing, smoking and sweat. Within this commotion, someone took my hand and motioned me to dance. Still boredom eventually reached my veins again, and I drove myself further to the balcony.

From the balcony's edge, I lit cigarette, and the height of the building and the image of the night seemed far away. I looked at Keivan who was playing with his cigarette and seemed pensive. I was going to ask him something when a boy in a stiff collar and a white starched shirt entered the balcony. He was formal and it seemed that he had tried to create a neck that he didn't possess with that collar.

He greeted us and introduced himself very formally. He said to Keivan: "Your face is very familiar to me. Have I not met you in L.A.?"

Keivan was startled, "No, why there?"

"I feel that I have seen you in one of the bars there", Amin answered. "The parties there are exactly like the parties here, very friendly and warm, the Iranians are great too."

Keivan answered with a fake formal tone, "I have not had the honor to visit there. But it's quite some time that I'm in St. Louis for work. Maybe we met there."

Amin said, “No, I’ve not visited there yet. I’ve been in America for ten years, but I’ve not set my feet outside of L.A. It’s great there, it smells like Iran. By the way, pardon me for asking, what is your job?”

Keivan replied, “I’m a documentary director. I’m currently working on a series of documentaries about immigrant Iranian artists working abroad.”

Amin was delighted, “Wow. So you’re a filmmaker and I’m very pleased to meet you. If that’s the case, you must visit L.A. The real artists are there. Behrouz Vosoughi is a friend of a friend of mine. I can introduce you to him so he can play for you.”

Keivan explained patiently that a documentary differs from a fiction film, and that his work is something else, but he was still grateful for the suggestion.

Amin said, “So I have to connect you to the Iranian satellite networks, like Hamid Shabkhiz. He is similar kind of artist and adores artists like you. I’m sure you know him. He hosts important concerts in L.A. His satellite network is awesome. He can certainly help you in broadcasting or other stuff.”

A light was twinkling in the Keivan’s eyes, and we tried to hide our laughter. Without waiting for Keivan’s answer, Amin said, “Write down my Tehran phone number. I’ll be in Iran in a month. We can arrange a meeting and discuss it further.”

Keivan replied playfully, “Unfortunately I have left my cellphone at home.”

Amin was going to say something but I abruptly cut him off, “I’m Keivan’s colleague. I can save your number in my cellphone.”

He was glad, gave me the phone number and left the balcony.

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Account 6- Alireza

Mehdi Navid

February 25th, 2018

Their house was in the provinces. He was ten years older than me and the other cousins and because of his age, his sovereignty over us was legitimate. Under his family's pressure and thanks to private lessons, he entered university. After three reports about him smoking opium at the university dorm, he was expelled from university together with a couple of his classmates and got drafted into the military service.

During the last months of his military service, we went to the province and he was also on leave. He had fallen in love and it was arranged that after receiving his military service completion card the wedding would be held. Three of my cousins and I followed Alireza and one of his childhood friends in the streets and alleys; we, being in our teens, lighted our cigarettes secretly and felt like adults by being close to Alireza. We entered an old bazaar, and then reached the row of tailors and drapers. It was a holiday and all the stores were closed.

Alireza's friend opened a store and we all went in. Through the store's old stone staircase, we reached the second floor and my three cousins and I were engrossed in the colorful cloths in there. Alireza brought an ashtray for us and warned us to be careful with the cloths.

Alireza's friend appeared with a picnic gas stove in his hand. We exchanged suspicious glances and blew our cigarettes. They brought a metal stick, a safety pin and a bottle which was apparently perforated with a Bic pen. We got a bit afraid and Alireza realized it. He said they would take some puff and then we would go. He told his friend to warm up the metal stick and then offered us. He inhaled deeply and held his breath.

A couple of years after his marriage, the news broke out in the family that Alireza and his wife were addicted to crystal meth. They had sold their house and all their stuff and became tenants. Alireza was a

flunky in a car showroom and his wife had outdone him in doing meth. Their neighbors called my aunt constantly and complained about the wife. At last, they lost their patience and called the cops for help. In the absence of Alireza, the cops burst in the house and arrested the wife. The house was ransacked and a great amount of meth was found, stashed behind the outlets and sockets. In order to escape the trap, Alireza got divorced and because of his parents' insistence, he was hospitalized in a clinic to come off drugs.

A couple of months ago, I saw him at a family gathering. He was buoyant and perky. He had fallen in love and had plans to marry. Now he is an intercity bus driver and supposedly has become meek and is working really hard.

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Account 7- Alma

Mehdi Navid

April 23rd, 2018

Alma is no longer here. She took her own life. It was just three years ago when I saw in Facebook that someone wrote Alma ended it all.

Did she really end it? I don't know. Hour later contradictory news spread and my head was spinning. I recalled ten or twelve years ago and Reza's death, an Afghan poet who fled from his country during the civil war, made it from Mashhad to Tehran and met Houshang

Golshiri¹. Golshiri offered him a job in his monthly magazine.

However, one year later near the evening, Barbad called me and said Reza suffocated in his sleep from the gas leak in his home. He died in his sleep. My feet shivered.

But Alma didn't suffocate; she took many pills at once and lied on her bed waiting. Apparently she had even closed her eyes. Except that one time that we met, I never saw her again. She had told a friend that she wanted to see me to talk about the book she was translating. I was sitting in a café when she showed up. Her eyes, like her voice, were sad, and even the way she shook my hand. Her teeth were trying to hide the bitterness in her face, but they were caught in an unintentional lethargy. I was dead sure at that time that she was just playacting. She said she was twenty two and moved from Sareyn² to Tehran to pursue her studies at the age of eighteen. But she didn't say her father was an army officer and how much she was plagued by him. She didn't say that she was thrown out of home as she had become a disgrace to her family and as she was thinking differently. She didn't say how her mother got old after this incident and this separation. She didn't see how her father hid her "suicide" from others in her funeral to save his honor and left her mother alone beside the grave. She showed me her translation, we talked about it and she asked me for advice to find a publisher for it. An hour later we left the café and took our own separate paths. Except exchanging

emails, we neither saw each other anymore nor talked on the phone.

1

Houshang Golshiri (1938-2000) was an Iranian novelist and literary critic and one of the most influential writers of Persian literature in the 20th century.

2

A northwestern city in Ardebil province

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Account 8-Arash

Mehdi Navid

August 9th, 2018

He used to have a stationery shop in a mall on Enghelab Street. He was seven or eight years older. His shop was next to my friend's bookshop to which I paid a visit once a week. Arash was a football enthusiast and this was the only reason for our companionship. I used to meet him for two years and talk about football matches and players.

In one of these meetings, among the jokes and laughter someone talked about the gays which led to a lengthy discussion. One was of the opinion that they were sick. Another claimed it was more about pretense and show. Arash evaded to express his opinion on the issue and took everything as a joke and made fun of it. Somewhere in the discussion I got tired too and followed Arash's jokes.

I told Arash, "In fact we two click. We can be together and be a great couple", and I laughed.

Arash replied, "As a matter of fact you got a great ass", and laughed his head off.

From this point on, the others forgot about their own serious discussion and got engaged in our talks.

I said, "As a matter of fact you've got such full beautiful lips that deserve kissing". We couldn't stop laughing and tears were running on our faces.

A couple of weeks later, I went to the bookshop to see my friend. It was closed. I went to Arash's store. "He's gone out", he said, "He'll probably be back in half an hour. If you want you can stay here till he

comes. By the way, those fountain pens that you called and ordered will arrive today”.

“That’s great”, I said, “They’re so good that I want to give them as gifts to others. When will they arrive?”

He answered that they would arrive soon.

I started looking at the pens, notebooks and the fountain pens which were arranged in a neat order. I felt that he locked the store. My back was to him.

I said, “You must have a blast around this stuff. I adore stationery. I’ve got a strange fascination for them”.

As his voice got closer he said, “So you love to kiss my lips”, and put his arms around me from behind. A cold sweat ran through my body. I gave his hand which was coming to my face a brush-off.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I yelled at him.

He said, “I thought you like it”.

He opened the door and I ran off. My whole body was shivering.

Last year after eleven or twelve years I suddenly bumped into him on the street. He was with his wife and two kids. We both pretended not to know each other and passed by.

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Account 9- Arghavan

Mehdi Navid

January 2nd, 2019

Arghavan is my colleague. As she says, from the moment she opened her eyes and wanted to know the world, she found herself working in a publishing house. In the early 90s she went to university and studied philosophy. Before enrolling at university, she was waiting for the neighbor's boy to return from the war and to get married.

The boy was reported missing in action. Arghavan waited for a couple of years for some news. There was none. She got herself together and enrolled at university. There she met a boy who approached her occasionally with the excuse of borrowing notes. Apparently they used to secretly go behind the faculty's building and exchange their notes, and in that brief time there were short yet pleasant conversations between them. The boy also accompanied her several times on the bus, though not being able to talk to her. Every time Arghavan got off the bus in the station near her house, she just waved at him and the boy responded with a secret wink. On one of these occasions, the boy plucked up the courage to get off the bus with Arghavan and to walk her home. Her soul was filled with fear and joy. With a specific distance and as if far away, they began walking in the alleys. They didn't exchange any words and just walked in silence. A couple of people in the neighborhood noticed them and stopped the boy. Arghavan quickened her steps and held tight on her chador. The boy was beaten severely.

A couple of months later, the boy gave a letter to Arghavan on the university campus and walked away nervously and clumsily. In the letter he had written that he intended to leave Iran to continue his studies abroad. This letter became the boy's goodbye and a lump in Arghavan's throat.

After graduating from university, she started working in a publishing house. She worked so well that after a couple of years she became the

manager of one of the sections there. She saved up and rented a flat, and despite her parents' objections, moved out of their home. As she says, since she spends day and night either at the publishing house or at home, she has run out of marriage luck and no longer has any interest in getting married.

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Account 10-Amir

Mehdi Navid

March 23rd, 2019

He works on Vesal-Hejab¹ taxi line. He is the only taxi driver whom I guess is my friend now. You must surely know him; he was the instructor at the Faculty of Literature of Tehran University at the beginning of 1990s, the faculty dean who laid the ground for losing his own job for the sake of teaching the works of contemporary poets and writers in his classes and encouraging his students to read more in this area. However, he was not fired; after being summoned and interrogated for a couple of times, he refrained from teaching. As he said, one day he gathered his students around and explained to them that he can no longer bear it, that there is no use in continuing in such a way, then he left the university.

The first time I got in his cab I was astonished at seeing the photo of James Joyce pasted to the front window. I couldn't believe my eyes. I thought to myself maybe he was just interested in the photo of Joyce covering one of his eyes like a pirate and in fact he doesn't know him at all.

The next time *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* resting on the dashboard caught my eyes. It was obvious that he had devoured it many times. His taxi was clean and well-ordered and unlike other taxis there were no stickers or anything dangling from the dashboard, except for the photo of Joyce which was a copy apparently cut from a newspaper or a book. He had silver-grey hair and his hands were dancing on the wheel and gear. He was dancing to Chopin. Chopin was behind the piano and Amir was behind the car wheel, Chopanizing. Instantly I recalled that on the previous ride he was listening to Beethoven and I had guessed that it was coming from the radio.

The ride was always short and there was no chance to talk. I decided to bring one of my translations of Samuel Beckett to him. He was pleased. He said, “excellent, the master’s pupil”.

I said, “The degenerate pupil of the master of course.”

He laughed. I had to get off. Our interactions were always like this; every time a couple of sentences and then finished.

One day he said he was writing a book on Ebrahim Golestan² and was looking for a publisher. We exchanged phone numbers and I said I’d be glad to help. The book is not finished yet; the work is in progress.

1

Name of two streets in Tehran

2

born in 1922, he is an influential Iranian literary figure and filmmaker.

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