

## Symphony of the Dead

A thin plume of smoke floated beneath the barrel arches and domed vaults of the nut-sellers' souk and forced its way out through the front gate. At the other end of the souk, a number of porters burnt wood in a brazier. A blanket covered their hands and occasionally, whenever they dared bring them out, they cracked watermelon seeds. Behind them, in a place looking somewhat like a crypt, three men were roasting the seeds in cauldrons. A mixture of smoke and steam rose into the air.

All the oil lamps, even the stronger *zanbouri* lamps, had been lit. From a distance, the souk resembled a village enveloped in mist. On the right hand side of the hall, in the trading chamber named "High Quality Nuts and Dried Fruits", two men were content with the heat emanating from the oil lamp on the table. Urhan Urkhani was sitting behind the table. Ayaz the policeman was sitting beside him.

Ayaz the policeman came to the shop every Thursday, sat on a big chair and placed his feet on a small stool. Whether it was winter or summer, he had the habit of frequently wiping sweat from his brow. If there were no big chair nearby, he would sit on a sack of watermelon seeds. He said: "How can I sit on a small chair with this huge body? Tell me."

If he wanted to, he could even lift Father, awe-inspiring as he was, with two fingers and hang him from one of the hooks suspended from the ceiling. Ayaz had a plump, fleshy face, a small head and a skin abrasion, wrinkled like the rest of his face, on his left cheek. He had the habit of buying a single seer measure of pistachio nuts and actually paying for it, although the nut sellers insisted that he should help himself. He shelled the pistachio nuts and placed them on the table in a row. He then ate them in one go. It was at this stage that Urhan had to bring him a glass of cool water.

Father was very fond of him because he was the veteran policeman in town and also because he knew a lot. He had a wealth of information about every per-

son and place, and could tackle any sort of problem. Father said: "This man is not an ordinary person." Father paid him his due every week and, every New Year's Eve, sent about a dozen kilograms of nuts to his house. Even now, several years after Father's death, Urhan kept paying the policeman his weekly dues.

On the other side of the chamber, behind the counter, there were two young workers with their hands in their pockets. They were wearing their *papakha* sheepskin hats. They had covered their ears with the raised collars of their overcoats. They were whispering, exactly as Urhan and Ayaz were doing: calmly, and with their mouths close to each other's ears.

Ayaz said: "I am standing behind you like a lion; have no fear."

Urhan was hesitant. He did not know what to do. He said: "Are you sure this won't be an own goal?"

"Finish the job and get rid of the whole problem."

"But what am I to do if some piece of evidence betrays me?"

"You've got to be clever. You should avoid leaving any clues."

Urhan pondered for a moment. Then he turned his eyes away from Ayaz and said: "Like Yusef?"

"Has anybody suspected anything? After the passage of several years, no problem has arisen."

"They refer to the case as fratricide. I have heard it with my own ears."

Ayaz shouted: "Let them fuck off." He then lowered his voice and said: "People talk, even behind God's back."

"But my dear Ayaz, are you sure that this one won't be a bottomless pit? Are you sure that I won't fall into it, head first?"

"Just tell me, was I not a friend of your father's?"

"This is all true, but ..."

Ayaz said: "You remind me of your father. He was a coward."

Urhan passed his hand over his bald head, brought his face nearer to the lamp and said: "I am not a coward. On the contrary, I have the courage to do anything."

"You asked me to tell you what to do with that whore, didn't you? I told you to divorce her. Did you not benefit from the advice? You are now asking me to tell you what to do with this son-of-a-bitch. I am telling you to finish him off. One of these days, when his daughter is seen in this vicinity, you will no longer be able to carry on your business. You might suddenly see some blonde asking whether this is her father's shop."

Urhan was silent.

Ayaz said: "Now that the matter has come to a head, don't wait any longer. Act right now. Get going."

Urhan said: "In this snow? Where do you want me to go?" He looked outside.

Such heavy snow had fallen that for years to come people would refer to this winter as the terrible one. Half the people had crept into their shelters and the other half had no choice but to struggle in the cold and snow to make ends meet. The snow had let everybody down. A curious silence reigned over the streets and alleys, pipes had frozen, cars could not move, the snow was piled high in the streets, shopkeepers had swept the pavements but the previous night's snowfall, to a height of about half a yard, was still there.

In the narrow alleys, doors to homes had disappeared behind snowdrifts. People had dug out interconnecting paths along which they moved confidently. Had a disaster struck? Perhaps. Many winters had come and gone and there had been numerous snowfalls, but no-one could remember one such as this. The ravens had taken over the town and several of them could be seen on every tree. They were to be found indoors as well. They landed comfortably on balustrades and veranda railings and flew off again. The house with high walls, cornices and double windows had been buried under the snow. It was forgotten, cold and lifeless. The ceilings of the rooms on the upper floors were sagging. The stench had reigned for many years on the lower floors. No-one lived in it, no lights were lit, nobody swept the snow from the roof. The lantern at the entrance was broken.

In the good old days, mother brought flour from the pantry, made dough and baked bread in the oven at the centre of the kitchen. The pleasant scent of baked bread and burning wood rose from the oven. When the bread was ready, Mother wrapped six loaves in a piece of cloth in order to send them to Uncle Saber. Ideen and Urhan rode in the five-horse carriage and sped towards Uncle Saber's. Before their return journey, Uncle Saber's wife filled their pockets with delicious things to eat.

There was also a time when Father, ascending the staircase, held the rounded railings and counted. When he reached 21, he doffed his *papakha* and hung it on the coat stand. He also took off his overcoat, shook it and hung it up. He wiped his trousers down with a handkerchief but did not hang them. Instead, he placed his trousers under his mattress so that they would be "ironed" while he was asleep and would acquire neat, sharp creases.

There was also a sister called Ida. She roamed about in the kitchen, in the cellar, other places in the house, enduring the severity of the rheumatic pains which were burning her. Eventually, she did burn up.

And now, in the stale silence and cold of the rooms, there was no Urhan to sleep under his worn-out, dirty quilt and think that he could sleep comfortably. No. Everyone was dead. And this last one?

He said: "He should be got rid of by whatever means necessary."

Ayaz said: "What are you waiting for then?"

"Where is he?"

"As always, at Shoorabi' lake, at the teahouse."

"In this snow?"

"You weren't born in Arabia were you. Whoever has been brought up in Ardabil<sup>2</sup> lives with snow. Besides, he might be dead."

"No. I know that he is alive."

"How do you know? After ten days, how can he be alive?"

Urhan said firmly and with confidence: "Ideen is alive. I can't believe he could be dead. Just yesterday, I found out that he had a 15-year-old daughter. I also found out that they were holding her birth certificate. If he lives, we will soon have hundreds of claimants and litigants on our hands. Do you understand, Ayaz?"

"Go then. Go. I will be standing right behind you like a lion. Nothing will happen to you. Pay no attention to my age. I am still Ayaz the policeman".

Urhan listened to the hissing of the *zanbouri* and thought of a 15-year-old blonde who would one day appear on his doorstep.

Ayaz bent his head, gazed at Urhan's face and said, in Azeri Turkish: "Hurry up brother."

Urhan was silent. Ayaz said: "If I had been in your father's position, God bless his soul, during the years when Ideen was too proud and tried to be a poet, I would have taken him to the frontier and let him go."

Urhan said: "My Father? My Father was afraid of him."

"You are afraid of him too."

"No. I am not afraid. I just can't be cruel".

"If you had done it last week, you would be happy right now. A man must say 'water' and drink it, must say 'air' and breathe it. Otherwise, he'll be dead".

Ayaz donned his *papakha* and stood up, fastened the buttons on his overcoat one by one, from the bottom upwards and checked that his appearance was completely neat and tidy. Then, as if talking to his subordinate, he barked: "What are you going to do?"

Urhan pulled himself together, raised his head and said: "I will go."

Ayaz stamped his foot on the ground: "Yes, like me. Get up and go." And he left.

He forgot to collect his weekly due. Or may be he didn't want it. Urhan was left feeling deeply troubled. One feels so lonely at times like this, as if a spell has been cast on one. He was sitting there, dumbstruck, motionless as a mountain. But was it possible to remain there?

A few moments later, at exactly at two o'clock in the afternoon, Urhan, contrary to his usual practice, was not able to transfer the daily accounts into the overall ledger, although he wanted to tidy up and close the weekly account. Anxiously, he counted the banknotes earned and pushed them into his trouser pockets. He placed the account books in the framework of the abacus but forgot to put the abacus in the drawer and lock it up. But he would not forget his *papakha*. He would keep it on his head whether it was summer or winter. While working, he would keep the hat on the desk and, on leaving, he would put it on his head again.

He donned his *papakha* and fastened the buttons on his overcoat. He looked around the shop and, without giving them any work, told the employees they were free to go.

He stood there until the employees had picked up their empty lunch plates and left the place. For a moment he felt that he should pick up something or perform some particular task. But the more he thought and the more he looked around, the less he remembered what he was supposed to do. He let out the compressed air of the *zanbouri* and left the office. He secured the top and bottom locks of the door and looked around him with great care. He went to entrance of the souk and gave a five-*tooman* note to Martha, the beggar sitting on the steps at the corner of the hall. He said to her: "Martha, you're shivering like a dog, aren't you?"

The old woman said: "It has turned very cold" and quickly hid her hand, holding the banknote, under her chador. She continued: "May Allah bring you abundance and prosperity."

Urhan turned back. He saw the porters at the end of the souk, burning wood in braziers. Smoke had spread everywhere. He pointed at the large sacks of pistachio nuts and watermelon seeds under the arches and said to Esmayol: "You fire-worshipping fools will one day set this souk on fire". He didn't wait for an answer. He went through a row of arches under which sacks of roasted and salted watermelon seeds had been placed and, without addressing Esmayol directly, said: "Keep an eye on the shop too." He then walked towards large sacks of pistachio nuts that had been stacked on the left hand side and filled the space under the arches. Within the next day or two, the sacks had to be taken to the retailers. The money earned would no doubt arrive by the New Year. He touched the bulging sacks of pistachio nuts and, once again, looked towards the other extremity of the souk. The porters, who had turned down the flaps of their hats, lowered their heads as a sign of greeting to Urhan. Their eyes looked tired and sleep had accumulated at the corners. He passed slowly through the hall of the souk. He heard someone say-

ing: "Hello Urhan." He didn't want to look. He just said: "Hello." Whoever it was did not matter.

He neither knew them nor needed to. They passed him quickly, like wind.

Father used to tell him: "When wind pushes upwards against the rim of your *papakha* it will lift it. Be very careful."

Times were more peaceful in those days. When Father was around, sleeping on the terrace was more pleasant than one could imagine. Even the night sky was blue. One was able to dream in colour. Until quite late at night, one could hear Mother and Ida washing up in the kitchen. Ideen, tucked up in his bed, turned from side to side until everyone was asleep and he was able to open his book and keep reading. Sometimes I thought that he was eating the pages. And, eventually it was reading that finished him. One could imagine that it was possible to hear the movements of his eyelids and the sound of his thinking from his room at the end of the corridor while the cats were meowing loudly on the high wall of the courtyard.

Father used to ask: "What is it you are reading Ideen?" And Ideen used to reply: "I am studying. I am learning my lessons Father." I suppose he was telling the truth.

"Carry on reading. We will see what achievements you will make and what regions you will conquer by doing so".

He had reached the street. He pounded his feet harder so that no snow would settle on his boots. Rotten oranges floated on the water's surface and then submerged, the water flowed fast and the cloudy sky looked like dark velvet, in a single piece, without a break. Urhan stopped and looked towards the end of the nut-sellers' souk. He was hesitating. He didn't know what to do. Apart from the problems of business at the shop and afternoon customers and scores of such headaches, the ten-day absence of 'Sooji' was irritating him.

Since that morning, even since the night before, he had struggled with himself about whether or not to go. Could he refrain from going? Every night, when he entered that big, cold house, the distant hubbub of bygone years suddenly became as silent as a wall; it turned into a pine tree and stood motionless in the middle of the garden; it turned into a door and remained closed. The distant hubbub of the past acquired the shape of Yusef who gazed, with eyes wide open, and stood like a huge chunk of meat. If Ideen could overcome his restlessness and stay in the house, all I had to do was to say: "Where are you Sooji?" Immediately, a man wearing a long overcoat, a scarf and a worn out *papakha*, all having belonged to father, would creep out of the hole upstairs like a wild bear and declare his presence without making the slightest noise. He said: "Don't chain me Urhan".

I said: "Don't say Urhan. Say brother," and slapped him across the face. The *papakha* fell off his head. Father's old hat brings back memories and restrains me. Sometimes I want to slap him in the face or chain him to the railings of the balcony. But his smiling face, topped by the old, discoloured hat, softens me. What can be done? Mother said: "You have no feelings or affection." I replied: "I do." And I really do. Oh, mother, you, too, would be fed up if you were in my place. You would not set foot in a house with a pond containing water green with dirt and moss, with pine needles covering the courtyard, with cold air trapped behind dusty windows and with open wood-burning ovens, in the kitchen hidden under loads of useless objects. The dead kitten embedded in the ice in the gutter at the end of courtyard is still there. It has been frozen in the gutter for two months. There is no life in it and no-one cares to push it so that it falls down. No-one is in a mood to light the fireplaces. The bricks at the top of the walls fall down one by one, as if the building has caught a cold. No-one sweeps the rooms. No guest arrives. The glass that held the lightbulb at the front door is broken. The rooms, devoid of furniture, look overly large and, when one walks on their floors, reverberations of one's footsteps hit one's head like a hammer. The sound of one's breathing floats about. You wouldn't dare even sneeze, as the sound would turn around in your own head. From all the hubbub of the past, only the harsh sound of the ravens has remained. They move about on top of the pine trees.

Their ear-splitting noise sounds like the shouting of "snaw, snaw", as if acknowledging the white surroundings.

He gazed at the leafless trees along the pavement. The snow had bent their branches. They would no doubt break with the next snowfall. The people, too, resembled the trees. A heavy load of snow was constantly on their shoulders and its weight would be felt until the beginning of spring. What was bad about it was that the people, unlike the trees, died only once. And this unique occurrence was a painful catastrophe.

He pushed his hand into his overcoat pocket and felt the ball of rope that he had picked up that morning. He felt at ease and buried himself in the crowd. When he reached Qanat Crossroads, he pulled out his silver pocketwatch, looked at it only by way of habit, without noticing the time, closed it and put it back in his pocket. Mother used to say: "Ideen is fading away. We must do something." She even used to ask me where the Armenian girl was and suggested that it could be because of her. And I used to reply: "No Mother. It is tiredness. I will take him to Villa Darreh. The fresh air will invigorate both of us".

When he was passing Dorostkar's, the watchmaker, he felt like stopping for

a moment and looking through the window. He must have passed that shop a thousand times but now he looked closely at Mr Dorostkar's big, circular clock. The frame was made of oak and the hands of high-quality Persian iron-wood. The round, convex face had artistic illustrations. The glass in front of the face was also convex. So was the shop window. Between the window and the big clock, there were about a dozen mantelpiece clocks. The big clock was a truly beautiful one. Mr Dorostkar himself had made it ages ago, but it had been out of order for the past 30 years. It had stopped when Mr Dorostkar's heart had stopped beating for just a moment. Or perhaps it was the other way round and the heart had stopped beating when the big clock stopped working. In either event, the two failures had been more or less simultaneous. The only difference was that Mr Dorostkar's heart had started beating again, albeit with some difficulty, whereas the clock's stoppage had been so serious that Mr Dorostkar, despite his great skill, had not been able to reverse it. It had stopped exactly at half-past five. To be more exact, it had stopped at half-past five in the afternoon, on a hot summer's day, in the year 1325, or 1946 if one went by the Christian calendar. And, now, alas, after so many years the big clock was still dormant. Mr Dorostkar was manipulating the gears of a wristwatch and, no doubt, dreaming of the day when he would revive the big clock and, with the sounding of its beautiful cuckoo chimes, would prove to everyone that anybody can do what they desire, provided that nature is not against them. Father had told these things to Urhan and Urhan used to tell them to other people. "And when the big clock is revived, Mr Dorostkar, with no further wishes, would lie down on his shop floor and surrender to death." This, too, had been related by him to everybody in the town over the past 30 years.

Father used to say: "This, too, is a big misery." Mother used to reply: "Don't talk about that madman any more."

Now that I am no longer young and vigorous, there are many things I can't stand. As soon as I reach the house and open the door, all those living people, with their hubbub and noises, run away. At the doorstep, a dreadful silence embraces me, lifts me up, takes me upstairs, and makes me lie down on the ramshackle wooden bed, under the old quilt, pale with its years of dirt. Before I feel warm, midnight arrives and submerges me in further fatigue and worry.

I used to enter Mother's room in the afternoon, when I returned from the shop. She must have been breathing her last. She was all skin and bone. It would be enough for somebody to squeeze her nose; and that would be the end of her. Her room was the same room of the past with its three doors, on the lower floor. It smelt of garlic and staleness. It smelt of the breath of someone suffering from tuberculosis. The teacups and the saucers were saturated with

these smells and the taste would go down one's throat with the tea. I sat at mother's bedside. I avoided eye-to-eye contact. I said: "Hello Mother." I touched her hand and caressed it without any feeling.

From the depth of their sinking, mother's eyes were gazing at the ceiling. They resembled a swallow's nest on an old tree trunk. She said: "Ideen ... where is my Ideen?"

I reacted with rapid blinking. I just kept gazing at the floral patterns on the carpet, or perhaps at nothing. I, too, was her Urhan, or maybe I was not. And nothing could be done about it. I had accepted the possibility that I might not be her dear Urhan. I said: "He must be around here Mother."

Mother turned her head for a moment and released my hand. Her white, long fingers were hanging from the edge of the bed. She said: "Go and get him here straight away. Do you understand? If you can't take care of him, chain him here, right in front of my eyes."

I said: "How can I find him?"

Mother sat on her bed. Every now and then she displayed some strength and this was peculiar. It was as if she had a hidden reservoir of strength. She shouted: "You are unfair." Tears rolled down her pale face. She said: "Who have you inherited your habits from? Where is my Ideen?" Her voice sounded like a piece of cloth being torn.

I said: "Don't worry yourself, Mother. It'll damage your health. I'll find him this very evening. I promise".

She said: "Do you understand? Where is Ideen right now?"

He was behind the Anooshirvan the Just School. A child of 12 or 13 was playing some sort of a makeshift mouth organ and he was looking at him. Saliva was running down his face. I said: "What the hell are you doing here, you big good-for-nothing?"

He replied: "I was just wandering around and I ended up here."

I said: "You should be ashamed of yourself, you silly ass. I warned you not to do this sort of thing again. Get moving".

Mother was nervous and worried. She was bony. She was shaking. She pulled on my jacket sleeve and said: "Where is he? Can't you hear me? Are you deaf?"

I said: "He must be wandering around and will end up somewhere. In Akhavan Garden."

After crying for some time, she had regained some of her calm but she had a trembling voice: "He is no kid, is he? He's 29-years old."

I said: "Do you think that I don't want my brother to be wise and well-behaved? Why do you hold me responsible for everything?"

She lay on her bed and drew the white sheet up to her chin. She was clutching the sheet so fiercely. It was as if she was crushing me. She said: "I don't know what you have done to him. Anyway, I order you to take good care of him. He doesn't expect anything from you. He just has some food and lies down."

I said: "Mother, please don't talk like that." And I wept.

She said: "In that case, sell some property and spend his share on him. Take him somewhere."

I wish I could take Father's will out of my pocket and read it aloud. I said: "Mother, I promise to take him to Tehran or abroad. I will also spend money on him. Show some patience and let me get things done. I promise."

In his will, Father had formally stipulated that none of the beneficiaries was to transfer their inheritance, in part or in whole, to anyone else during the lifetime of that beneficiary. On the other hand, what was Father's estate after all? It was the entirety of the nut shop in the hall at the souk, a house covering 480 square metres, at Sheikh Safi-od-din e Ardabili Street and a garden, with trees and a total area of 1,240 square metres, to the north of Sardab. Father had transferred the ownership of his apricot orchard to mother at the time of their marriage so that he would not be indebted to her in any way.

Mother put her handkerchief to her eyes, wiped her wet cheeks and said: "I just don't want him to die like a stranger in the middle of mountains or deserts. That is all I want."

"Please don't say that sort of thing Mother."

"What's going to happen to him after my death?"

She was sobbing. I got up and fetched her a glass of water. She sat up with my help, took a sip of the water and leant against the headboard. Her silence was killing me. She just looked and blinked. I wondered whether to stay or to go. But during those last days, she was no longer restless. Now, after nearly a year, she had forgotten the disaster. She was getting used to it. She had neither the breath to shout nor the strength to stand up in front of me and yell: "What have you done to him, you scoundrel?"

I said: "I didn't have anything against him, Mother. Did I?"

She wailed, she pounded her chest with her clenched fists, and her tears were always rolling down her cheeks or, at least, could be seen in her eyes. She kept saying: "May God make you fall to the depths of misery and degradation."

"Don't curse me mother."

"How can I help cursing you, you infidel, you heathen? Do you think that you'll come to a good end, you ..."

Gradually, her mournful temper subsided. One day, when Ideen and I had returned from the souk, she had cooked us a delicious meal of stuffed vine leaves. We ate and I talked about my trip to Astara on the Caspian coast. I said it would be a good idea if Ideen and I went there together to see the dense forests. I kept tempting: raspberry bushes are everywhere along the road, one can see the sea-bed, and there is a 19-year-old girl who would agree to marry Ideen if he promises to behave. Afterwards, Ideen, giddy and sleepy, stretched out. With Mother's help, we took him to the basement room. She said: "Ideen, would you like to go back to your previous room and stay with Urhan?"

He said: "What are you up to this time?"

We helped him on to the bed. On the stairs, Mother said: "I hope he doesn't wake up again. I can't bear seeing him like this any longer. What happened to all that dignity, all that strong personality, all that compassion?"

She wept again and progressed up the stairs by holding on to the railings.

I said: "Why do you exhaust yourself, Mother? Do you think he's really suffering? Rest assured that he is the most comfortable person on earth. He has no sorrow, no worries, no cheque to get cleared, no bills to pay. He enjoys absolute comfort and bliss."

He was going up the stairs, two steps ahead of me. I laughed. And as soon as he heard my laughter, he slapped my face so hard that I felt dizzy. He said: "Who are you laughing at, you scoundrel?"

His voice was cold and devoid of feeling, exactly like Father's commanding voice. For me, it was as if the walls were cracking and the cracks extended to the ceiling. The seed had been sown very early in childhood. After Ida's death, our lives resembled a great avalanche plunging into the depths of the valley of death, with no-one able, or willing, to stop it. It was as if destiny had decided that from childhood I should carry this incorrigible brother of mine on my shoulders and carry him up through a mountain pass. Despite all this, he pretended to be so self-sufficient that he made not only me desperate, but Father as well.

He meddled with my toy car and took it to pieces, climbed walls, and mocked everybody. I could not convince my parents that they should try to stop him.

Helplessly, all I could do was to hit my head against the wall and shout until someone paid attention to me. One day, he got hold of my bicycle which I had left against the wall. He cycled around the pond with such speed that it must have made him dizzy, exactly like a wasp sprayed with insecticide. Was it my fault if Father had not bought him a bicycle? I shouted from the veranda: "Get off my bike." But he kept pedalling around the pond, faster. And he guffawed.

I sat in corner of the courtyard and kept banging my head against the ground until I fell, exhausted and motionless.

Father was having some watermelon on the veranda. He did not budge when I banged my head on the ground. But when he saw my face covered in blood, he came down and started slapping Ideen on the back of his neck. He hit him so hard that Ideen could not move his head for three days. Mother cursed both Father and I. The kind mother, who had devoted all her affection to Ideen, did not utter the phrase “my Urhan” even once.

During the day, she used to send us off to the area around Lord’s Electric Fan Factory to loiter about. We used to go to the end of the alley where the factory was situated in a kind of huge quarry, surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. The two flaps of its gate kept moving to and fro with the wind. A steep dirt road led to the area in front of the factory buildings.

We stood there as a matter of habit and, from the alley, looked down. The factory kept purring, making electric fans at an astonishing rate. We looked at broken blades piled up in a corner of the area in front of the building.

I said: “Let’s go.”

He replied: “Let’s see who gets back faster.”

We ran down the steep road. Our satchels were heavy and tended to pull us sideways. The noise of the factory was so loud that one preferred to shout rather than talk. We could not hear each other. I ran fast and felt hot, but I could not catch up with Ideen. His satchel was swinging in front of me. Although I knew that I was losing control of my feet, I let myself go. I rolled over, head first, and I fell flat. The operator came out of his little glass compartment and helped me stand up. My face was awash with blood and tears and my legs ached. A sleepy weakness ran through my body. I had difficulty in seeing Ideen who, happy and excited, picked up red, pretty fan blades.

Father kept hitting him with his belt while mother dressed my facial injuries. Father said: “For how much longer do you want to be naughty? Why are you so vicious?” And he kept beating him.

That night, mother could not stop my bleeding. Father twisted Ideen’s ears and said: “You have broken his nose. Do you understand?”

Ideen said: “I haven’t broken his nose. Don’t blame me for things I didn’t do...”

Father did not let him finish and boxed his ear hard. Ideen said: “I am sorry for him and his broken nose. But it isn’t my fault.”

Next day, father brought a doctor home, but to no avail. Even now that I am 40 years old, one side of my nose is still twice as large as the other.

He took out his pocketwatch, glanced at it and put it back. He was still in

two minds about going or not going. He was afraid that it would be night before long. As was his habit, he brought the two sides of his overcoat together and then left them without doing up the buttons. He put his hand into the pocket of his overcoat and felt the ball of thick rope. A warm excitement covered his face and a sort of confidence flowed calmly through his veins. No. He had to finish the job without hesitation. Then he would be called a murderer. Who was it that uttered the word ‘fratricide’? Mother, where are you now, to level false accusations, to share my guilt, to lighten my burden? But I swear to God that it will be good for him. He has been dead for years. Wherever he might be, in the Shoorabi teahouse or on the edge of the Salt Marsh, he smells of death. He is like a dry statue abandoned in his own past.

He looked at the people. Everybody was busy with their own problem. A gaunt old woman wanted to cross the street but was fixed there, motionless. A youngster was busy pushing two pieces of charcoal into the face of a big snowman in order to endow it with eyes. Some people were wearing nylon headscarves to protect themselves against snow. A woman wearing a black chador had so much snow on her head that she looked like Mount Damavand<sup>3</sup>. No doubt she was from a nearby village. Urhan walked on. A peculiar force dragged him towards the suburbs; more exactly, towards the Shoorabi teahouse. He walked so slowly and he was so absorbed in himself that he looked like someone who had nothing better to do, walking in the snow just for the sake of exercising.

I could not control myself. Besides, I didn’t want to suffer silently as had always been my nature. I shouted: “You big lout. I have toiled for 12 years in this bloody place. What do you understand?”

He retorted: “Do you think I have nothing better to do? You expect me to be your apprentice?”

I said: “Even those bigger and more important than you should obey me, you, apprentice carpenter.”

He waved his index finger as usual and said: “Some people are like you, some people are like me. It is a pity that I can’t leave all this misery and go back to my carpentry. My conscience ...”

I interrupted him: “Don’t talk about what you don’t have.”

He felt disarmed. He closed his eyes and sat down. I knew where best to hit in order to hurt him most. I said: “Father knew what kind of animal you were. It wasn’t for nothing that he called you a coward.”

He replied: “If you think you can make me quit by insulting me, you are very wrong. Because of what is in Father’s will, I have a right to be here. I will not sell my share. Nor do I have enough money to buy the place.”

I said: “You challenge me? I’ll teach you a lesson.” And I got up. I wanted to hit him hard and break one of his bones, but right at that moment, Esmayol came in. He closed the door and said: “You two are quarrelling again. What’s the matter with both of you?”

I sat behind the desk. Esmayol said to me: “After all, he is older than you, isn’t he?”

I banged on the desk with my fist and said: “An ass might be older than I am. Am I supposed to respect any such ass?”

Esmayol said: “After all, you are brothers.”

I said: “I’ll piss on such brotherhood.” And then I saw Ideen leaving. I was feeling sorry for him but I could not make him understand that he should not have made any purchase without my permission. He had purchased four sacks of pistachio nuts. If he had waited a bit, I could have bought them five or even ten *toomans* cheaper per kilogram. Around mid-summer, it would be the time for purchases. But he did not understand these things.

In the evening we had another commotion in front of Mother. Mother said: “Alright, alright. See to your shares of the property and halve whatever you have: Two sets of scales, two of everything; it will be like having two separate shops, each of you to himself.”

I kept quiet. That night I stayed awake, thinking about how best to deal with the matter. Mother had made every path of action impossible. She had said half and half, two sets of scales, two of everything.

But after such an outcome, would anyone pay any attention to me? Although our customers knew that I had 12 years of experience behind me, it was my brother they addressed straightaway. They thought I was the assistant. Worst of all were those disgusting women who had a crush on him as soon as they saw his nasty face. They entered the shop in their chadors and modestly veiled, but forgot about their modesty and their God as soon as they saw him: “What a pity that you haven’t got married yet.” They knew nothing of his sweetheart.

I said: “Is there anything proper about you associating with Armenian girls?”

He replied: “That’s none of your business.”

It was a depressing afternoon. I went to the cemetery, I sat at Father’s grave and I wept. I said: “O, Father! What did you make me out of? And what did you use to create him? Why don’t women look at me? Why do they scowl when they see me? Why is it that the most beautiful girl on earth has fallen in love with my brother? We have the same genes, don’t we?” Father remained silent and motionless. He could no longer even cough. The ravens were sitting in a tree and a fierce wind lashed the dust into my eyes.