

DETENTION

NIUSHA SHODJA

I strove to keep my balance as I was hurriedly forced down the stairs, pushed by the girls behind me. My legs sped up and I shifted my weight, trying to avoid shoving against the girls in front of me, stepping with my body turned to the side. I felt my pants get trapped underneath my heels and I stumbled, barely catching myself with three heavy stomps down five steps of stairs before regaining stability, and almost taking down two others with me.

We were herded underground through a narrow hallway, poorly lit, smelling of the shelved cabinets outside of a mosque housing pairs of shoes that had been drenched with sweat from the feet of those inside performing their noon prayers. I was caught in the middle of the flock, my steps fast and close together as we were pushed past a woman collecting our belongings: purses and mobiles, our headscarves and any fabric ties or cords connected to our *manteaux*. We were driven into a small room. I kept my *manteaux* on, given no choice but to allow the woman to scissor off the two black straps sewn at its sides that used to tie into a bow in the front, cinching my waist.

The room was windowless, except for what was the door, which was jailed with metal bars. We spent the night awake, sitting up on the floor, our knees forced to be folded up into our bodies, our backs leaning either against the white painted brick walls or each other.

The cold basement air numbed my toes, exposed in my strappy heels, wearing nothing but fuchsia polish. My eyes scanned the room. *There must be at least thirty of us.* I barely fidgeted, trying to make myself comfortable enough to close my eyes. *If I can sleep for even an hour, this will be over sooner.* I felt my pants wedged between my buttocks; my body trembled as I lifted my bottom off the floor and tried to pull out the seam. I gave up, unsuccessful. I looked at the girl next to me, coiled up, stretching her *manteaux* beyond its threshold to cover her bare knees. *At least I wore pants. I shut my eyes.*

I wondered where Pezhman was being held. It seemed as though

the guys were being kept somewhere upstairs. We had been dating for less than a month, and going to tonight's party had been a last minute decision.

"A friend of my friend Bahman is having a party tonight. That's also an option," Pezhman said over the phone. "Would you like to go?"

"*Khoobe?* Is it any good?"

"I think it's a big party. How about we go, if its good, we'll stay, if not, we'll get up after only an hour or two then go out somewhere? For either dinner or *ghelyoon?*"

I didn't smoke, even if it was just the hookah. I stood in front of my closet, with its doors wide open. *Then I should wear pants, long pants.* To roam the public spots of Tehran, females are forced to wear a headscarf veiling their hair, a long sleeved *manteaux* gowning to the knees at the least to conceal their shape, and long pants down to the ankles, minimizing the visibility of any bare skin. Normally, I reached for a dress getting ready for a party, which I would temporarily cover with a *manteaux* and scarf before leaving the house, my bare shins hidden in the privacy of my car.

The party was in a building of seventeen stories. The windows were mirrored and double paned, blocking the penetration of the beating of the subwoofer or the dancing laser lights - I still wonder what gave it away to the police. Someone must have ratted us out. Maybe the neighbors. I wish we had never gone. Our first party. We had only been dating for a month- maybe not even.

We were seated when the police arrived. The song sounded like techno and the dance floor was packed and humid with sweat. They were in plain clothes: collared shirts and belted pants. One had a handy cam, following the room on film. Pezhman and I were sitting on the series of chairs that were placed against the living room walls, opening more than enough space required for dancing.

"Look," Pezhman referenced the man with the camera with an outward motion of his chin. He put his hand on my knee. His hands were strong and large, harmonizing his 184 centimeters of height, and they cupped my knee perfectly, before sliding off my thin legs that brought me up to his square shoulders, and back onto the chair handle between us.

"*Vaa,*" I said, puzzled. "It's not like it's a birthday party. What is he filming?"

Pezhman went quiet. Distracted in thought, the skin between his

black eyebrows wrinkled. His brows sat closely to his eyes, almost as black as his hair, gifting his face with a mysterious appeal. He had a dark wash of jeans on and a navy Ralph Lauren shirt, with a diagonal green lined golden stripe across the front, an enlarged polo playing logo on its chest, its collar erect, and the only three buttons left open.

“Where’s your *manteaux*?” He elbowed me suddenly. “*Bepoosh, bepoosh*. Put it on, put it on.”

“*Wha-*,” I reached for my purse and took out my *manteaux* and scarf, which I had kept beside me, avoiding having taken them off in one of the bedrooms intended for the girls to strip down to proper party attire, since we had planned to stay for no more than an hour. I hurriedly pulled my arms through the pale blue sleeves, concealing my exposed skin from the sleeveless modestly low cut top I had on.

“The alcohol! Get rid of the *alkol*.” I heard someone whisper loudly.

“Pour it down the sink.”

Girls panicked to get to their hijabs waiting for them in the room. I don’t remember how it happened, or when exactly it started happening; the next thing I knew we were all told not to move. My hands shivered as I waited, but I waited. *Someone will pay them off and they would leave. Where was the host? He’ll pay them off, and they’ll let us all go.*

“*Natars*,” Pezhman whispered. “Don’t be afraid.” His hand didn’t touch mine, and his body shifted away from me to avoid the slightest physical contact. I had met Pezhman behind a traffic light driving home from dinner with university girlfriends. A couple of months had passed since graduation and we caught up over pizza at a small Italian place called *Pastoo*. It seemed like we hadn’t seen each other in forever- the last few months had been busy with building final *maquettes*, scale models, and getting ready for our thesis defenses, too engaged to hang out like previous terms. We had dinner, chatted, and possibly gossiped a bit. I was giving one of my friends a ride home, and a Kia Sorento on the left lane tried to keep up, aligning themselves parallel to us. I glanced over from the wheel; they were waving their hands, signaling for us to roll down the window. We ignored them, my girlfriend and I secretly exchanging smiles between the two of us, with our faces pointing towards each other, away from the passenger window. This was typical; a car of girls approached by a car of

guys, asking to roll down their window, at least one of them trying to exchange numbers with one of the girls, beseeching for her to punch his number into her *mobile*. It was when we were side by side behind the traffic light that we finally caved and let the window down.

“I don’t want to be pesky. I know you,” said the passenger leaning forward into the dash. “I know you *be khoda*, to God. Aren’t you Atoosa?”

“And you?” I asked, my teeth exposed, the corners of my lips turned upward.

“*Pezhmanam*.” He said. “I’m Pezhman. You don’t remember me? We met last spring, *eid norouz*, new year break, in *Shomal*.”

Everyone went to *Shomal* by the Caspian Sea for the New Year holiday.

“No, listen. Don’t you have a villa in *Darya-Kenar*? You’re Arshia’s sister.”

Ahh. I was starting to remember.

We were escorted into vans, white Toyota HiAces with the words “guidance patrol” written in white inside a thick stripe of green, lined up outside the building. They separated the girls and guys upon boarding the vehicles. I called home, knowing my phone would be confiscated soon after. My dad answered.

“*Baba*,” I whispered. “They got us. We’re in the *mashin* now. I don’t know where they’re taking us. I think *Vozara*.” *Vozara* is the detention of detentions, where you’re not just filed as a record, but jailed, known for un-Islamic arrests, reasons being attendance at a “mixed” party, alcohol consumption, “bad” hijab- which can mean anything from a good deal of makeup, a too short *manteaux*, too many strands of hair showing from under your scarf, or just plain bad luck and an unforgiving officer. My words must have been shaking. My father consoled me not to worry, that they might keep us over night since it was late; he would send my brother with some comfortable clothes and shoes. The guards and officers never gave me the sweatpants or flats, even when I asked for them. I sat on the cold floor with my feet at a forty five degree angle tiptoe in my heels and my knees tucked beneath my chin in the windowless room, painted white over brick, the closest link to the outside the barred door.

I went through episodes of sleep, nothing deep or lengthy. My stage one of quiet sleep was interrupted with a startle.

“I’m telling you to open this damn door *jendeh*. Open it whore!”

“Speak right miss.” A voice on the outside answered.

“Shut up and open the door. I’m telling you I need to go to the bathroom.” The girl gave the bars a strong shake. No one responded.

“Open! Open it!” She started to scream even louder. “I need to piss.” She kept her grip wrapped around the bars. “Filthy whores. I’m talking to you. Are you deaf? I’m telling you I need to piss.” She paused for an answer. “*Khaar kosse*, open it cunt.”

“E e *khanoom!* Miss! Speak right.”

“I’ll piss right here. I’m not joking. I’ll piss right here for you.”

I had never heard a girl be so vulgar, and furthermore, to government officials. She really had to go. Two insults later, directed towards their mother and sister, her panties came off, and she relieved herself, her knees bent and spread apart, holding the bars like a caged orangutan at the zoo, splattering the hallway floor, managing to target just outside the cell. “She thinks I’m joking. She thinks I don’t have the balls. *Kos nane.*”

I closed my eyes and rested my forehead on my knees, blocking out the commotion that had stirred in the hall. I had been pulled over before, I had been warned for being bad-hijabed, but never had I been arrested. It was cold. They could give us blankets, or at least newspapers to spread underneath us. I didn’t even know anyone. Why did they have to put us in a cell? And pile us all into one? My stomach growled. Some of these girls had done this before. I didn’t belong.

“We’re wretched.” Someone whimpered. “What are we going to do?”

My ears listened but I refused to lift my head, feeding the urge to continue breathing the warmer air trapped between my chest and knees.

“Nothing. We’re wretched, that’s all.”

“*Vaay!*”

“The filths!”

“What are we going to do if they take us?”

“If? Didn’t you hear them? They’re taking us. They said seven. It’s seven.”

“They said it’s just *test e alkol*, no?”

“We don’t know. What if they test that too? Anything can come of these filths.”

We had been there since three. I never thought four hours could go by so slow.

An hour later than scheduled, we were lined up, paired, and handcuffed, left hand to a fellow inmate's right, and directed into the vans. Our families stood outside, mothers in tears, fathers comforting, begging to let their child go, as we were vanned and driven off to the forensic clinic for breath tests. Alcohol consumption is a crime, but what the girls truly feared was whether or not they would be examined, not for showing abstinence from alcohol, but from sex.

I had nothing to fear- a twenty four year old virgin who barely drank, not because of Islam but because I detested the taste. I didn't have a sip of alcohol that night- we were only planning to stay for an hour or two.

Alcohol consumption can land you seventy lashes, but nowadays it has fortunately been replaced with a monetary fine. Gradually falling out of fashion in the past eight or so years and being informally replaced with monetary fines and permanently documented criminal record files, rarely are the whips taken out anymore.

I was hand in hand with a girl called Sara. She was almost a head shorter than me, wearing black head to toe with the exception of a thick lock of platinum dyed hair-although black at the roots- and burgundy painted nails. Her dark shadow was in time with her pupils, but now spoiled with the ashes of heavy layers of mascara freckling down to her cheekbones. Her eyes were red - probably from keeping in the jade green contacts for so long. "Did you have *mashroob*?" She whispered barely moving her lips, asking if I had had any alcoholic beverages. Her lips were stained from the lipstick she had wiped off at some point in the night. I raised my eyebrows and gave my chin a lift, signaling my negative reply. Her nose was an exaggerated example of the widespread rhinoplasty, looking like a slide at the Wild Wadi water park in Dubai, the bone shaven to a strong curve, its tip high and up almost forming an obtuse angle with her lip. I felt a pull, my arm slightly thrusting away from my body as Sara wiped her palm on the side of her thigh.

I opened my mouth as the breath analyzer came down the line and it was my turn to blow. We were charged eight thousand tomans each for the imposed test; those of us who had money with us paid up front, those with their pockets drained of any notes depicting the turbaned head of

Khomenei had their names put down as *bedehkaar*, owing money.

I blew on command. The man looked at what seemed to be a small screen and squinted. “*Dobare*,” he said. “Again.” I blew again, still confident. He looked at the screen. My eyes sought to meet his for confirmation. He denied me eye contact and moved on to Sara. “Blow,” he ordered. My stomach growled.

It wasn’t until four o’clock that afternoon that they overwhelmed us with food. The cell door opened to two large aluminum rectangular dishes, two bowls of yogurt, a bag of bread, and one plastic spoon per person. There were around twenty of us now, the other half moved to the neighboring room to allow more space. I took my spoon and dipped into what waited. It was *zerehshk polo*, barberry rice, with chicken. The rice was warm but only at room temperature. The small tart berries were scarce, and the white grains lacked any trace of saffron. I chased it with a spoon of yogurt.

“They’re keeping us tonight too,” one of my cellmates said quietly.

“Probably, Or else they wouldn’t be giving us food.” She tore off a piece of the *lavaash* bread and dipped it in the bowl of shared yogurt.

“And still, thank God,” another said. Her eyebrows were shaven replaced by brown ink tattooed with its tail higher than natural, giving her a devilish look. “I heard all they gave the boys was stale bread.”

“They beat them too.”

I cut into the chicken using the side of my spoon, managing to separate strings of the meat, pursued by rice, joining them together as they entered my mouth.

I heard yelling, “Aren’t you going to give us soda?” It came from the next cell. I scooped some yogurt. “A Coca, a *doogh*, something,” she nagged, her tone offended. A *doogh* would be nice, I thought, the carbonated yogurt drink seasoned with mint. Then again, a soda might be better.

“She’s so cheeky,” a girl smiled.

“I think it’s the same girl who peed.”

I kept quiet, my spoon rummaging any remaining grains of rice, making a scratching hum as it hit the foil bottom.

“So they’re keeping us tonight.”

“But tomorrow they’re letting us go. I heard them when we were

coming back from the forensic clinic.”

I let my spoon fall with the others into the aluminum, splattered with sparses of white. My knees folded into my chest and I rested my back against the white painted brick wall. I pulled the foot of my trousers over my bare toes folded inward at the knuckles, locking the ends of my pants underneath them. Tonight was still cold.

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