Iran Banu

نویسنده: هدیه رحمت‌نژاد

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For three nights, the rain refused to lift from the rooftops of Tehran. The alleyways smelled of smoke, blood, and wet earth. The walls were scarred with slogans, hastily thrown up at midnight only to be blotted out with black paint the very next night. The city was no longer a city; it was an abyss, slowly devouring its own children. Iran sat by the window of her room, staring into the jaundiced glow of the streetlamp. Her fingers trembled at the memory of a sound that still echoed in her mind. The heavy click of an iron lock. The laughter of nameless men. Men in black boots and hooded faces, men who had stolen the nights from the people. Every evening, Aras would cross the city to stand outside Iran’s house. He would position himself beneath the same withered mulberry tree and gaze up at her window. In the past, Iran would part the curtain, smile, and tap twice against the glass, a secret code shared only between them. Now, however, the window remained dark. He had no inkling of what Iran had endured over the past month. Or why a girl who had once spoken of the future with such fierce passion had suddenly vanished. Months slipped by until, one day, the light in Iran’s room finally flickered back to life. But... Since her return, Iran was no longer herself. She did not answer the phone, she opened the door to no one, and she could not even bear to speak Aras’s name. One day at the door, without meeting his eyes, Iran’s mother told him: "Don't come here anymore, my boy... Everything inside her heart

must have died, otherwise she would answer you." Aras had lingered on the street that night until dawn. The rain lashed against his shoulders, and he could not comprehend what exactly had crumbled into ruin. The only explanation his mind could grasp was betrayal. He believed Iran had given her heart to someone else, or had cast him away out of fear or despair. No one had told him the truth. Because the truth was unspeakable, at least, from Iran’s lips. Iran had been arrested during one of those nights of upheaval; a night when the streets were thick with smoke and screams, and people were running for their lives. She had merely been holding a green headscarf in her hand, chanting: "Woman, Life, Freedom." Then the black van had pulled up. And then… They took her to a place without windows. The damp walls smelled of pus and blood. A blinding white light burned above her head, day and night. Men came and went. Sometimes they laughed. Sometimes they hurled insults. Sometimes they demanded Iran surrender the names of her comrades and friends, and when she remained silent, they turned her body into a battlefield. On the first night, she still wept. By the fifth night, she had no voice left to scream. By the tenth night, she could barely recall her own name. And after several months, all that remained of her was a mute shell with eyes that flinched at every sound. It was morning when they finally released her. They discarded her on the side of the road like an old rag. A female passerby had draped her own chador over the girl’s trembling body, and when her mother finally found her, she could not even gather her into her arms; it seemed Iran was terrified even of an embrace. Since that day, all the mirrors in the house had been draped. Iran would sit for hours under scalding showers, remaining until her skin turned blistering red. It was as if she were trying to wash something away from her body that could no longer be washed away. At night, she heard the stomping of boots. She would startle awake from her sleep, her hands clutching at her own throat. And whenever her mother mentioned Aras’s name, her face turned chalk-white. She still loved Aras. That was precisely what made the agony so unbearable. She was utterly convinced that if Aras knew the truth, he would no longer want her. The man who had once kissed her hair might now be unable to even hold her hand. Iran could not bear the thought of love mutating into pity. That is why she remained silent. And the silence killed everything. Months drifted by. Aras stopped coming. Eventually, news trickled down that he had married Aida, Iran’s closest friend. Aida had been in love with Aras for years, and Aras, exhausted and wounded by Iran’s rejection, had surrendered to a new life. A marriage devoid of love and passion, forged only to forget, or perhaps unfolding exactly the way so many other lives do. But there was no forgetting. On a winter's night, Aida visited Iran’s mother’s house. Iran stayed in her room, sitting in the dark as always, her body shivering. Her breathing was a rattling wheeze. As her mother poured out her grief, she suddenly began to weep. "They killed my daughter… The night they took her, they murdered her… They only gave me her body back." Aida froze. And then, slowly, through the

mother’s words, she understood everything. When she told Aras the truth, he did not speak a word for hours. He merely stared at the wall. Then, as if he had aged years in an instant, he sank to the floor and buried his face in his hands. The next day, Aras went to Iran’s house. The same withered tree still stood there. The same window. He knocked. Iran stood behind the door, struggling to breathe. Aras’s voice trembled: "Iran... just let me see you once." The girl did not open the door. She slid quietly down the doorframe to the floor. Tears streamed silently down her face. On the other side of the wood, Aras leaned his forehead against the doorframe. He said, "This is not your fault... Do you understand? None of it." Iran covered her mouth to keep her sobs from escaping. The alley was silent. Only the wind blew, driving torn posters across the asphalt. A city that had once been filled with songs had now become a graveyard of women, women whose bodies had been stolen by night, and their souls plundered by day.