Where is My Home?

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hadn't been in a good mood for a few days. The incidents that were happening to me one after another ruthlessly faded my hope. I no longer had the strength to respond to what was erupting .inside me

Meanwhile, receiving an email from the online magazine "Ham-Dastan" cheered me up. They had asked me to interview Generation Z youth. This offer had thrilled me; but in their next email, they changed their mind and withdrew the offer. This incident frustrated and disappointed me .once again

I don't know why Generation Z was so interesting to me. I had a lot of curiosity and thought that conversing with this generation could give me a deeper understanding of their lives and their .world. But this opportunity was taken from me, for reasons that were still not clear to me

I became a bit depressed and for a few days was preoccupied with thoughts that relentlessly .occupied my mind

Until one night, I came to my senses and cast aside the veil of depression and isolation. I reviewed the "Ham-Dastan" email and the questions they had sent me once more, and decided .to take action myself

I connected with fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds in various ways. First, I started with people close to my sister and her friends, and then, with the help of three of my colleagues, I met other young people. My questions were mostly friendly. Over about two weeks, I conversed with nearly .twenty-seven people

I asked about their family, social, and cultural lives; the challenges they faced, as well as their personal thoughts and views. Many of the answers were similar, but some similarities made me .wonder

From the faces of those I interviewed, I could easily tell if they were Iranian or Afghan. However, "?to break the ice, I would ask them: "Where are you from

Of course, before that, I would briefly introduce myself. I'd state my name, age, profession, and where I was from. Then it was their turn. They too would state their first and last names, talk .about their birthplace, and say what grade they were in

.During these conversations, I noticed something that heavily occupied my mind

Iranian youth, in response to the question "Where are you from?", would immediately and with a .special gleam in their eyes proudly utter the name of their city or province

.But among the Afghan youth, the story was a bit different

Some of them would pause briefly before answering. Some would say they were born right here and hadn't seen Afghanistan. Some didn't even know the Afghan province their parents were .from

What occupied my mind more than anything else was these pauses. I remember three or four of .them who, when saying the name Afghanistan, unconsciously fixed their eyes on the ground

In the eyes of many of them, when they said they were Afghan, I saw a sorrow and longing .whose meaning I couldn't grasp

This question kept repeating in my mind. In the following days, I turned to various books about migration, society, and human relations, but none could answer the curiosity that was eating .away at my soul like a termite

The weekend ended, Saturday arrived and passed, but this thought still wouldn't let me go. I felt like a small wooden boat with a hole in it that was getting bigger every moment; a boat taking on .water while I thrashed about inside it

A few days later, on a Friday, I went to a book café in the Pasdaran neighborhood of Tehran. I

sat at a table and started reading a book. A young boy approached and asked: "Miss, would you "?like to order

I looked up. The young boy was Afghan; tall, with a newly sprouting mustache and a kind, polite .smile

He repeated his question. I tried to pull myself out of my thoughts and, after a short pause, said: "."A cold drink, please. Whatever you recommend

He left, but it was as if a feeling inside me said: Here is another youth I can talk to. Perhaps a conversation with him could provide an answer to the question that had been occupying my mind .these days

When the boy brought me a lemon drink and placed it on the table, I said: "Young man, may I "?speak with you for a moment

He seemed shy about my offer. He looked around and said: "Miss, I'm a worker here and ".customers might come, but please, go ahead. I am at your service for two minutes right now

".I asked: "What is your name?" He said: "Abolfazl

At that very moment, someone called him from a corner: "Boy, can you come over?" Abolfazl left, .and I started drinking

A few moments later, I saw him with his friend; a boy of the same height, but a bit plumper. The two were talking and pointing at my table. From his friend's face, I guessed he was Iranian. Both came toward my table. Abolfazl said: "Miss, my friend Saman is going to cover for me. You ".wanted to talk to me? I am at your service

Abolfazl pulled a chair forward a bit and sat right across from me. I said to him: "Mr. Abolfazl, I am an undergraduate student, and for a project, I want to talk with youth around fourteen to seventeen years old about their family and social lives, as well as new challenges like social networks and artificial intelligence. If you are also willing to talk with me, please introduce ".yourself

I looked at his face carefully. I was waiting to see if, when it came to stating his birthplace and ?nationality, he would pause. Or lower his head

Abolfazl stated his first and last name. When it came to his nationality, he paused briefly and ".cleared his throat, which seemed a bit hoarse. He said: "I am Afghan

I looked at him closely. As he said this word, I saw sorrow in his face; a feeling of confusion, or

perhaps the feeling of not belonging anywhere. I said: "Abolfazl, I'd like to know more about you, your family, and your life. How many years have you been living in Iran? How much do you know about Afghanistan?"

Abolfazl spoke quietly about his family. His father had been disabled and had passed away about two years ago. He, his mother, and his sister lived in one house. Abolfazl had dropped out of school at sixteen and didn't know much about Afghanistan, except for the news he had seen and heard on TV and Instagram.

While he continued chatting, a spark went off in my mind. I took a deep breath and said: "To be honest, I have a question that has been bothering me for a few weeks. I have had friendly conversations with about twenty-seven young people your age. What I noticed among some Afghan youth was that before saying where they were from, they would pause or lower their heads. I want to know the reason. Why do they feel ashamed when they say they are Afghan? Why did your voice catch when you wanted to say you were Afghan?"

Abolfazl gave a bitter smile, raised his head a little, and asked: "Did you grow up here since childhood yourself?" I said: "No, I've been living in Iran for about four years." He said: "Well then, let me tell you a story from my childhood."

He continued that when he was a child, he didn't yet know what being Afghan or Iranian meant. He would play with other kids in the alley. Older boys would call him "Afghani" or tell kids his age not to play with him because he was an Afghani and didn't belong here.

When he grew a bit older, at age six, he went to preschool with his mother. The school principal told his mother: "Ma'am, you need to bring the necessary documents. You are Afghan."

Abolfazl said that gradually, following a series of such incidents, he had come to the conclusion that he didn't belong here; as if his place was somewhere else. These behaviors had slowly created the feeling in him that he was in the wrong place.

Then he arrived at a memory from his second year of high school. He said Saman had been his friend since childhood and they were still friends. That day, he was sitting next to Saman, in a row near the back of the class. Their teacher hadn't arrived yet. One of their classmates named Amir, who was bigger than the rest and always bullied others, sat in the chair next to him.

Abolfazl was busy drawing a flower when Amir took his colored pencils without permission and said: "Afghani, what are you doing? Why did you take my pencils?" Abolfazl said that since childhood, hearing the word "Afghani" would destroy his self-confidence. He told Amir: "The pencils are mine. Give them back." He stood up to take the pencils back, but Amir pushed him,

.and Abolfazl fell to the floor

The sound of the kids laughing rose up. According to Abolfazl, Saman was the only one who didn't laugh. The rest were laughing; some were cheering Amir on, and a few were saying, "Beat the Afghani!" Abolfazl got up and dusted off his clothes. He told Amir again: "The pencils are mine. Give them back, or else I'll tell the teacher." Amir got angry and punched him hard. Abolfazl .started crying

At that very moment, the teacher entered the classroom and asked everyone to be quiet. When the teacher asked what had happened, Amir said: "Miss, the Afghani stole from me. My colored pencils that were missing, I found them in his bag." Abolfazl said the teacher was a kind woman. "?She turned to Abolfazl and asked: "Is it true? Did you take Amir's pencils

Abolfazl said at that moment, a lump sat in his throat. He felt his pride was broken. He gave no answer. He just stayed silent, and warm tears flowed down his cheeks. Saman, despite his fear of Amir, said: "Miss, the pencils belong to Abolfazl." But according to Abolfazl, no one else dared .to tell the truth

He said that even now, when he recalls that memory, one word hurts him more than anything else: "Afghani." Right then, Saman brought two coffees with dark chocolate for me and Abolfazl. I had turned on my phone's voice recorder and was looking closely at Abolfazl's face. Tears had .involuntarily welled up in my eyes

Abolfazl glanced at me and said: "Well, young lady, do you understand now?" I was still confused. I asked: "What happened after that? Didn't he give your pencils back?" Abolfazl gave a bitter "?laugh and said: "No. Do you even know what happened after that

He said he had loved drawing since childhood and was better at it than many of his classmates. But after that incident, all his drawings turned black. He only drew with a black pencil. His father, who was a construction worker, had injured his back while working and become paralyzed. His mother worked from morning till night to provide for their living expenses. Their family couldn't afford to buy new colored pencils. Abolfazl understood this very well. From then on, all his .drawings became black

Abolfazl said: "When Amir took my colored pencils, not only did all my drawings turn black, but the colors of my life also faded into darkness." When he said this sentence, tears flowed from his .eyes and his voice broke. I couldn't hold back my tears either

Abolfazl, noticing my state, asked softly: "Young lady, why are you crying?" With a lump tightening my throat, I said: "Abolfazl, I know this question is a bit cruel; did your teacher never

notice that your drawings were all one color?" He said: "She did, she mentioned it a few times. ".But I gave up drawing altogether

He had gradually lost his interest in school and studying, as well as his sweet childhood dream; the dream of one day becoming a famous painter. Then he continued: "Amir didn't just take the pencils from me. He blackened the various colors of my life. He left me alone with a sense of identitylessness and an unknown world. I couldn't even figure out if I belonged here or if I had to consider myself separate from them. From childhood until now, I don't know where I belong. I am lost. Miss, do you understand now how painful the answer to the question 'Where are you from?' "?is

I wiped my wet cheeks with a tissue, and the only broken word that came out of my throat was: "I'm sorry." Besides that word, I had no answer to give the young man. I felt that before Abolfazl's eyes, I too had become exposed and defenseless. When he looked at me with his almond-shaped eyes, in that moment, no law, no religion, and no border came to my mind. All of them .had become empty, idiotic, and meaningless to me

We were silent for a few moments. Abolfazl broke the silence and said: "Miss Aagheleh, now you "?tell me; where do I belong? Where is my home