Ladder

نویسنده: سیمین مرتاضی

تاریخ انتشار: 12 Aban 2585 باستانی برابر با November 3, 2026 میلادی



I had known Kamran for years; since a time when no one thought he would ever amount to anything. He was short. He barely had any facial hair. His shoes were always a size or two too big. This clumsy, oversized nature of his shoes was very noticeable. He was quiet and polite; mostly, of course, with officials and women. His tone of voice was somewhat whiny and drawn-out, lacking much decisiveness.

From those early years, traces of that unpleasant person could be seen in him. It was enough for a female colleague to enter the room for that crooked smile to settle on his face and his sarcastic jokes to begin. Once, he came to our office and said something that shocked us; an inappropriate sexual joke, accompanied by his usual dirty laugh. It was as if he was somehow starved for attention.

Despite having less administrative seniority than me, Kamran knew one thing very well: the rules of the game. I once saw from my office window that he opened the car door for the General

Manager and bowed so low it made me sick. He would stand by the elevator door waiting for the GM or the deputy to arrive, performing whatever sycophancy was required; from grocery .shopping for their homes to carrying their bags and offering senseless flattery

He knew the managers' arrival and departure times. He was aware of the comings and goings and office gossip, delivering reports and news to the managers right on time. He knew exactly what news to deliver, when, and to whom. These connections quickly brought him close to those in power. He became the group head earlier than all his peers and then secured the deputy .position

That was when I gradually realized the issue wasn't just Kamran. The system that promotes .people like him must surely like something about them

After many years, by management's decision, I too was transferred to Kamran's group. Three years later, with the retirement of a few colleagues and Kamran's appointment as deputy, I finally became the group head. I held that position for over a year; exactly one year, five months, and !ten days

Before my appointment, he treated me well. I even thought to myself that I might have been .wrong about him. But after the appointment, everything changed

One night on the phone, he spoke to me harshly and mid-conversation said: "You're the group head; you need to handle it." Slowly, he began questioning my abilities. He was chipping away at .my self-confidence

I later understood what he meant by "handle it." For him, being a group head meant knowing how to put people under pressure. He would say: "Drill a hole in so-and-so." Or: "Brown them." ".(humiliate them) Sometimes he'd say: "Hose them down

This vocabulary was alien to me. I had never defined myself by my position or title. That's why, .when I became group head, I treated my staff the way I expected to be treated

A few days later, after a completely illogical work argument, he barged into my office and said .loudly: "If you want to work here, whatever I say goes." I was frozen

I had always thought that if I did my job well and maintained my own boundaries, no one could break me. But that day, I felt I was sinking; like sinking into a swamp. A swamp doesn't swallow .you all at once; it drags you down little by little

I loved my job. I had a good relationship with my staff and put time and energy into my work. But ".I kept hearing one phrase: "She is a good expert, but doesn't know management

First, I doubted myself. Maybe I really don't know how. Maybe I'm being too strict. Maybe I should compromise. Even though I was serious about my work, had studied, and knew the principles of management, these sentences slowly ate away at my self-trust like a termite.

I later realized that in this system, if you do as they say, you're great; but the moment you act against their wishes, they deliberately destroy you. Your performance doesn't matter.

I brought the issue up with the General Manager. I expected him to at least understand what had happened. He said: "When you take a position, you have to be able to manage your manager." Manage your manager...

This phrase echoed in my head like a ringing bell. Everything had been turned upside down. If your manager crossed his boundaries, you were the one who had to find a way to get along with him; not him.

I gradually realized the problem wasn't just Kamran's behavior; the environment around me was teaching me the exact same rules: "You must obey management." I would tell myself: God, what are they saying? Where am I trapped? Did I come here for anything other than to work? Sometimes I thought all the rights here had become wrongs.

I loved my position too. I wanted to work well, be seen, and advance. But not at any price. The more I resisted, the greater the pressure became.

Kamran not only offered no support, but he demanded things that had absolutely nothing to do with my group. He would constantly call after working hours. I tried very hard to satisfy him, but it was like pounding water in a mortar. Because he was never going to be satisfied!

Gossip had also increased. I heard from many that in meetings he would say: "She can't handle the work."

At the same time, his treatment of Morvarid was completely different. I knew Morvarid from a distance. I didn't know much about her. She was from the provinces. She was petite, had curly hair, and her style of dressing didn't match my taste. She was quiet and didn't mingle much; at least not with the women.

After the restructuring, she fell under Kamran's division. There were many rumors about her, but I wasn't one to judge based on rumors. However, what was seen could no longer be denied.

A few times, I saw Kamran and Morvarid leave the office a few minutes apart. Colleagues had also seen Kamran picking Morvarid up in his car. Their outings outside the office were no longer hidden from anyone. Kamran had even been spotted near Morvarid's house a few times. It

seemed Kamran didn't mind these rumors; as if he didn't mind others having such an impression .of him

Amidst my conflict with Kamran, Morvarid was also catching her own fish. My overtime was reduced for no reason, and Morvarid's overtime was arbitrarily increased! I still haven't figured out why, but from the moment I got the position, Kamran wanted to pull the rug out from under me. Or perhaps I just don't want to realize that Kamran wanted a relationship with me similar to the .one he had with Morvarid; a relationship I neither wanted nor could accept

Kamran thought that by putting me under pressure, he could force me to surrender. And the ".system had given him the license to do so. I was the one who had to "manage my manager

He finally found the excuse he was looking for. Seek and ye shall find! And he made a huge deal out of it. Over a trivial report that I hadn't even prepared, he dragged me into his office and acted .so insolently that I couldn't tolerate it anymore

He was shaking his legs frantically and shouting. He did this whenever he got angry. Patience !was no longer justified. I shouldn't let him insult me any further. Come what may

I didn't let him finish his sentence. I walked out of the room. He had gone mad. He shouted after me: "Come back... I'm not done talking." Then he added: "I'll affect your overtime." I said: "You've ".always done that anyway

I couldn't stand the disrespect. Even so, I still hoped the new General Manager, who had recently replaced the previous one, would at least understand what had happened. The GM wasn't in his office. At the first opportunity, I went to report Kamran's behavior; but as soon as I entered the !room, I saw Kamran was already there. What management! God bless the previous one

Kamran was sitting next to the GM with a biased posture and started to tear me down. "Mr. Manager, as you are aware, the report that was supposed to be sent to the auditing organization was prepared with this lady's negligence. When I called her in and asked for an explanation, instead of admitting her mistake and trying to make amends, she left the room and brought up ".the issue of overtime

The GM tried to look impartial, but he wasn't. He confirmed Kamran's words and nodded. The more I explained, the more I felt I was talking to a brick wall. They were a team, and I was alone. This very backing made Kamran even more brazen. Nobody was going to listen; the answers .were prepared in advance

I said my piece, and that day passed somehow. The rumors had grown stronger. I was never one

for drama, but at that time, I was unintentionally the drama itself. Nevertheless, I myself thought .that maybe I had made mistakes

My friends would say: "Fix your relationship. All bosses get demonic on certain days." I accepted their advice and made my last effort. When Kamran's father-in-law passed away, I went with a .few colleagues to offer our condolences

Kamran deliberately dragged out his phone call and kept us standing. When the call ended, we offered our condolences. He didn't even look at me. On the way back, I cursed myself with every ?swear word I knew, and only one question remained in my mind: Why did I go

Rumor had it they wanted to replace me with Azam. Azam and I were hired at the same time; a petite, energetic, olive-skinned girl with a gaunt face and a self-confidence that was apparent from the very beginning. The first time I saw her, we had come for the hiring interview. She was wearing an Arabic chador, and her tangled hair spilled out from underneath it. We had the same .major. She came from a religious family, but she wasn't religious herself

Our friendship wasn't very deep, but it continued more or less for years; we went to the gym together and sometimes confided in each other. Because we weren't direct colleagues, we had no conflicting interests. Sometimes her behavior annoyed me, but I saw her so sporadically that I let it slide. Even some colleagues would ask how I could be friends with her. But I never thought .she would one day cause me harm

The previous manager, due to an ethical issue between Azam and one of the deputies, had sent her to another department. Her transfer was done in a humiliating way; they didn't even let her pack her own things, and the colleagues sent her belongings to her. I was upset about this too; about why women always have to pay the price for these behaviors. I thought to myself: Was this ?connection one-sided? Why did only Azam have to pay the price

Despite our relationship not being what it used to be, I called her and asked how she was doing without mentioning that issue. I didn't want her to suffer any more and hoped that incident would be a lesson to her. The last time I spoke with Azam, she said Kamran had offered her my .position, but she refused, saying she didn't have the experience for the job

I later found out she had conditioned her return on getting a position higher than her previous one. The manager had said he didn't have a vacant Group Head slot. When she learned about my conflict with Kamran, she—with the support of Kamran and that same deputy whose affair .with her had been exposed—pressured the manager to give my position to her

It was February when the manager summoned me. He said Kamran was dissatisfied with my

work and they had decided to remove me from the position and give it to Azam, who had no experience in this field. The previous manager had punished her, and the current manager was rewarding her!

I didn't cry this time. I rarely cry anyway, especially at work. I knew they had made their decision; there was no reason to trouble myself with explanations. They were all a team; from management to security. I was tired of fighting single-handedly.

I said: "The appointment is your right; but as I've said before, the issue isn't the work. The issue is personal." I walked out of the room. I felt a burden had been lifted from my shoulders. For the first time, leaving that position didn't feel like a defeat. I felt light.

I came out of the manager's office when the secretary said: "Kamran wants to see you." I thought to myself: He's done what he wanted, why won't he leave me alone? I went to his office.

Kamran tried to look calm and confident, but as usual, he was playing with his pen. He brought his head too close to the planner in front of him and bounced his legs incessantly. His shoes, as usual, were loose on his feet. I felt his tics had gotten worse! Azam was sitting very intimately next to him. She knew the rules of the game; she wasn't like me.

At that moment, I remembered years ago. The day she told me about Kamran proposing to her. Knowing the pressure and harassment from her family, and considering Kamran's situation, I thought he was suitable for Azam and had said: "He's not a bad guy, maybe it wouldn't be bad to give him a chance." Azam had replied: "His looks don't appeal to me, and he's such an old gossip!" How times had changed.

Kamran, with a kind tone I hadn't heard from him in a while, said: This appointment was management's decision, and he still wanted me to remain in his division. I wanted to laugh. The manager had said something else; he said Kamran didn't want to work with you. Did he really expect me not to see all his efforts to push me aside?

Anyway, I refused. Azam kept interrupting; as if nothing had happened and she wasn't to blame. But I no longer had the patience for charades and masks. I didn't even look at her. It was as if she were a wall.

Azam raised her voice: "Are you giving me the silent treatment?" In my heart, I said: That's right, I'm not like you, and I gave you a lot of chances, but don't treat me like an idiot anymore. I didn't say anything. I had no patience for it. I gestured to Kamran and said: "I'll come back later." And I walked out of the room. Enduring Kamran was easier for me than Azam.

Azam's voice still followed me: "What's it to me?... I wasn't even here..." I was sick of hearing this. People who do wrong and don't even have the courage to say they did wrong. I indifferently left the management area and went to pack my things.

A few months have passed since that February. I'm still in the same organization, but in a different department. Sometimes I see Kamran, Morvarid, and Azam. But they no longer matter. I don't hate Kamran, nor do I have anything to prove.

I still remember what one of the deputies told me over the phone the day after it happened: "Unfortunately, you adhere to a certain set of values." That sentence stuck in my mind. Perhaps he himself didn't know what he had told me. But that very sentence pulled me out of my final doubts. I hadn't made a mistake. For years I thought if I wasn't a good manager, it must be my own fault. Now I understand that perhaps our definitions of a "good manager" weren't the same.

I pour myself some tea. I take Sadegh Hedayat's "The Blind Owl" from the bookshelf. I turn the pages until I reach this sentence; a sentence I've underlined in pencil: "I felt that this world was not for me, it was for a bunch of shameless, impudent, beggarly, pedantic, coarse, and insatiably greedy people. For those who were created to fit the world, who begged and fawned before the mighty of the earth and sky like a hungry dog in front of a butcher shop wagging its tail for a scrap of gristle..."

I stare at the sentence for a few moments. Nearly a century has passed, but it seems the world still belongs to them. I close the book. I too once thought the higher I climbed, the more successful I was. But now I know that climbing up doesn't always mean moving forward. I had lost my position. But not myself.