

Done with Love

A Short Story

Fifteen hours before two coffee mugs fell to earth with a cry of shattering ceramic, Bahram and Firouz Bagheri didn't know what to wear for tomorrow. All of February had been freezing, but, suddenly, the weatherman reported that this Saturday was going to be in the sixties with gale-force winds coming from the southwest. None of Bahram's summer shirts had been carried down from the attic and washed, and Firouz only had winter sweaters to wear. Both of their spring jackets were missing too, but neither owner looked too hard for them Friday night, after hearing the weather report, or Saturday morning, after breakfast. Both search-and-rescue operations were done half-heartedly as well: Bahram rummaged around a bit as he shuffled from one end of the house to the other; then, when he reported to Firouz that nothing could be done, she retraced his snail's trail through all the closets and came to the exact same conclusion.

Both shrugged and settled on black: black tops and pants, plus a black headscarf for Firouz. It had been forty-three days since the funeral, and neither of them had moved away from the color of coal, or even announced any intention to transition from outfits dyed so strongly they felt like plate armor.

In fact, one waited for the other to broach the topic, or, better yet, to appear wielding the smallest thing with the slightest speck of color. Bahram craved emeralds gleaming around his wife's neck while Firouz pined for paisley ties heralding her husband's presence. But both had grown mute and cowardly, not to mention exhausted, in those forty-six monochromatic days since the phone call from the hospital. Solitary as mollusks, boneless and nerveless, they huddled inside their blackened shells. They went to work and ran errands with the same slow, mute rippling of muscle as when they sat on the couch together every evening and soaked in the nightly news. They went to bed the exact same way too: lying side-by-side like two skeletons

unearthed from the same gravesite, both assigned to the front lines in the fiery afterlife whilst their bones and chainmail melted into the pale sand surrounding them.

Black wasn't a bad choice, all things considered. It was sturdy. Whether there was a little or a lot of it, black grabbed people's attention. And, in some strange way, Bahram and Firouz wanted to be seen that Saturday: roughly two hours before they were witnessed by a barista that stunned them both, neither one admitted this craving to the other as they dressed and turned and discovered that the other had chosen black as well.

And neither one confessed that going out was going to be terrible: this was fully understood by their sighs and sidelong glances after the phone rang Friday night, and before Bahram folded up the framer's receipt and stuffed it into his pocket the following morning. Frankly, Firouz expressed her foreboding much earlier than her husband by crossing out "food shopping" on Saturday's to-do list and moving it to Sunday. They just needed to accomplish *one* task that day: no need to make things harder than they already were.

Difficulty manifested, as it always does. It wasn't even ten o'clock, and the temperature outside was already above fifty degrees. Too much dead grass and salty mud covered the earth while all the branches in the trees stood naked against the blue, cloudless sky. The wind whipped them into a frenzy as it struck Bahram and Firouz full in the face; it yanked the air from their mouths and slammed their cheeks against slabs of sun-warmed granite the moment they stepped outside. And as they drove into the center of town, to the framer's, there were too many joggers and dog walkers and people not even bothering with jackets today. Bahram and Firouz both felt like priests having to leave their temples and journey amongst the unrepentant masses.

Twenty minutes passed before Firouz placed her parcel in the backseat of their car and asked Bahram if there was anything else he wanted to do that day. And before answering, he

stared through the windshield at all the movement *and* the stifling brightness, refusing to look in the rearview mirror at the wrapped frame staring daggers at him. He didn't sigh or glance at Firouz when he asked:

“Do *you* want to do anything else?”

And ten minutes earlier, they pulled up to the curb in front of the framer after five minutes of circling the neighborhood in search of parking. There was some righteous indignation from them both, hating how everybody flocked everywhere once temperatures rose above freezing, even if it were just for one day.

Bahram turned off the car, then got out to open Firouz's door. It was a usual habit of his, but, today, Firouz would have appreciated exiting the vehicle on her own schedule. Then, fifteen minutes later, Bahram ordered coffee for himself and glanced at Firouz for her to give her order, not even asking if she was ready to talk to the barista. And eight minutes after *that*, white ceramic fell onto a black tabletop like hailstones upon the crops of the wicked.

Regardless, both begrudgingly agreed that this parking spot was extremely fortunate. Bahram opened the shop door too. Everything inside was made of right angles. Hundreds of corners of frames, fashioned from polished wood and gold trim, clung to the walls and created a forest of columns pointing straight to the heavens. Several empty frames leaned up against the counter, containing themselves and bits of others. Somewhere in the back, somebody was using an air hose.

Bahram pulled the receipt from his pocket and slowly unfolded it. A bead of sweat blossomed on his left temple, despite it being cooler in here. Meanwhile, Firouz stared down at a mahogany frame lying close by. She made no indication of ringing the bell on the counter

herself, so Bahram sighed and tapped it once. It clanged, and a brassy ringing hovered in the air for at least five seconds; the whooshing in the back stopped, then resumed.

“*Hello!* How’s it going?”

The voice came first, then the speaker. An older woman dressed in a khaki jumpsuit appeared from a doorway hidden amongst the corners. Her hair, slowly weathering from white-blond to grey, was gathered into a tight bun.

“How can I help you two?” She asked.

She rested both hands on the counter and leaned forward, like a pro, as Bahram glanced at Firouz. She had nodded at the owner but didn’t step away from the mahogany frame beside her. Thus, shouldered with everything, Bahram cleared his throat, shuffled up to the counter, and handed the proprietor-inquisitor his receipt.

“We’re here to pick up,” he murmured.

The framer gently pried the paper from his hand, then studied it closely. Eventually, she recognized her own handwriting, nodded, and disappeared into the back.

“Sorry it took so long!” She said, memory jogged after fifty-five days of silence.

“It’s alright,” Bahram answered.

“We tend to get backed up sometimes.”

“It’s alright,” Bahram repeated.

The owner reemerged, carrying a wide black frame ahead of herself with both hands. She gently laid it atop the counter and gestured for Bahram and Firouz to step closer.

“What do you think?” She asked.

Bahram, so bold, so lonely, looked first. Then, he turned and gestured for Firouz to look too. The porcelain doll obeyed the tin soldier’s request, seeing the edge of all things resting on

the counter and accepting that something lying in the same room as her *must* be real and, consequently, unavoidable. She had already learned this lesson forty-three days ago anyway.

Letting Bahram's shoulder barricade her from the worst, Firouz approached the counter and stared down at what had been brought in fifty-five days ago and forgotten until eight last night. It was a rectangular frame, roughly two feet wide and eighteen inches tall, made of wood painted black; the bright overhead lighting made the grain bleed through as silver. Firouz started at the right edge and methodically glanced to the left. A grey matte encircled two smaller rectangles. The one on the right was a glossy photograph; its colors were potent, like puddles of syrups and powders: pomegranate for the plush carpet beneath three pairs of dress shoes, myrtle and almond for the suits and gowns, pistachio for the headscarf, and saffron to fill in the blank wall in the far back. Hues materialized first, then the faces. Firouz stood to the left, smiling. Bahram stood to the right, smiling even wider. Mahmud stood in between them, his face the brightest of the three. His teeth, his curls, his glasses, and the belabored sheen across his forehead all caught the camera's flash and multiplied it.

All three were joyous. Not *joyful*: bodies filled with feeling like bells are full of sound when they are struck. But *joyous*: the windstorm endlessly encircling and replenishing itself.

The rectangle further to the left was slightly taller than the photograph, its paper the desolate color of frost; the text in the center read, "Dmitri Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Minor." Underneath was a scrawled sequence of thin black loops: "To Mom and Dad. Done with love. Mahmud."

Ten minutes later, Bahram ordered black coffee; then, extemporaneously, Firouz ordered hot jasmine tea. They were staying in, so both drifted towards a small table pushed up against one of the picture windows facing the opposite side of the intersection.

Bahram and Firouz each pulled out their own chairs and took a seat. They stared outside rather than at each other. Two men wearing reflective road crew uniforms were sweeping debris away from the curb and into a large dustpan. Powdered glass sparkled in the sunlight amidst large chunks of black plastic and several bent sprigs of chromium.

Both mourners watched intently. Forty-five days had passed since Bahram signed off on Mahmud's crumpled Corolla and watched it disappear back inside the municipal tow lot. Forty-four days had passed since Firouz opened the plastic envelope stamped "Property of Mahmud Bagheri" and discovered a pair of eyeglasses inside with both lenses missing.

"What do you think?"

The framer smiled at them firmly, used to certain answers and expecting the same from these customers as well. Neither Bahram nor Firouz moved, petrified by what laid on the counter. Eventually, one of them gurgled:

"It looks *wonderful*."

"I'm glad you like it."

The framer pulled out a calculator and started punching in numbers.

"Where are you going to hang this one?" She asked, making the usual small talk.

Bahram focused on pulling out his wallet, so Firouz was left to make conversation.

"I think in the upstairs hallway," she said.

"Mm-hmm," Bahram added.

"That's nice. And who's the young man?"

Bahram dropped his debit card. And thirteen minutes after plastic struck carpet, two sets of ceramic mugs in saucers clattered together as the barista placed Bahram's coffee and Firouz's

tea on their table. She hoped they would enjoy, but both were too startled to thank her as she disappeared back inside the darkened coffee shop.

Their eyes, used to sunlight and shrapnel, slowly adjusted to a dimmer reality on this side of the glass. They saw white ceramic against black wood; they also saw the barista walking away and thought, with a secret, sluggish acknowledgement that didn't even feel like thinking, that the barista was probably a delight to cuddle in bed with. Bahram wished he had given her a tip instead of instinctively tapping "None" on the keypad. And Firouz wished she had smiled at her when she was done mumbling her order.

"He's our middle son," Firouz said softly. "Mahmud."

"He plays the piano?" The framer asked, prying the card from Bahram's sweaty fingers.

"Yes. Very well, actually," Firouz smiled. "This was his last concert before graduating."

"That's wonderful," the framer said. "It's an excellent piece. I was listening to it as you walked in."

She stepped away from the counter, brandishing the card.

"I'll be right back."

"Actually," Bahram croaked. "Could you wrap this up before we leave?"

And now, both stared down at their drinks. Outside, bits of glass and metal were being swept off the curb, but specks stubbornly glimmered in the cracks between the grey paving stones. Five minutes away on foot (without holding hands), a black frame wrapped in brown paper laid in the backseat of the Bagheri's car.

Bahram wondered when this collision had occurred; thinking back, he didn't notice any glitter on the ground when he saw Mahmud's Corolla bent into the shape of a horseshoe. Firouz examined her tea and wondered at the possibility of someone breaking into their car and making



off with the frame wrapped in brown paper. However, if that were to happen on this side of town, Mahmud's glasses still sat inside her bedside table at home, going nowhere. She couldn't call anybody about *that* problem, not even her two other sons.

And nobody else could be bothered either: they had already given the mandatory three days of food after the funeral, and the standard mourning period ended three days ago too. Besides, the February chill had departed for a single day: everybody would be out walking and breathing in the sunny air. And neither of her two sons wore glasses. They wouldn't understand.

Besides, what could anybody do for Bahram and Firouz in this cavernous coffee shop full of black dyes, dark polishes, shadows, and silhouettes? Bahram looked up from the bottom of the well shimmering beneath the rim of his coffee cup; Firouz finished staring at the amber mirror cupped inside her hands and matched his gaze.

Then, both raised their cups to their lips, blew lightly, and took long, patient, suffering sips. Focusing on the bubbles and specks floating beneath their noses, they briefly forgot about the other. And once their cups were set back down in their respective saucers and pushed towards the center of the table, they got to work on the autopsy.

Firouz cut around and through her husband and kept Bahram's nose and the hairs at the ends of his eyebrows that poked up higher than all the rest. Bahram focused on the rectangles of skin separating the corners of Firouz's eyes from the locks of hair that trailed in front of her ears; these two gems were a shade lighter than the rest of her face. Firouz moved on to her husband's chin while Bahram studied the peak of Firouz's scalp. Both scanned the other's hands, knowing them so well but not recognizing any carryovers in Mahmud: Bahram had no musical abilities, much to Firouz's chagrin, and Firouz's family had little patience for singing or dancing. Again, much to her chagrin.

They kept up this silent game of pasting together body parts, drawing from parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, neighbors, coworkers, celebrities, and even their own sons. It was a bit like graverobbing, but neither one felt ashamed about it: they were at the coffee shop on a warm February morning, putting a puzzle together.

And once the visual elements were put in order, other senses followed. There was not much in terms of taste: Mahmud had dedicated himself to the piano from an early age, not the oven. Meanwhile, touch lingered on his handshakes and hugs. Bahram and Firouz both hated themselves for focusing straight away on something as immaterial as appearance and wanted to correct this error right away. Then, even more touch followed after this burst of criticism: Mahmud's curly hair refusing to move through combs, first Firouz's, then his own; his shirts and pants stiffly ironed by Firouz, before she insisted that he do it himself.

Soon after, Firouz felt her own hands clasping one another inside the mosque, pinching her wrists hard enough to draw blood. Meanwhile, Bahram felt crumbs of soil running out of his palm inside the cemetery on a January morning so cold that it burned his cheeks. He found yellowish crud buried under his fingernails that night and refused to put that hand under the warm tap running in the bathroom. Yet, when he awoke the next morning, his hand was spotless.

There wasn't much smell though, and sound inexplicably eluded them. There was too much coffee and tea in the air, besides the roaring of the espresso machines and the chattering of people on the other side of the shop. Firouz knew that every child had a particular fragrance, and she hated herself for not being able to recall Mahmud's. Bahram tried to play the opening notes to Shostakovich's "Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Minor" in his head and boiled against himself when he couldn't do even that. He had spent so long rehearsing the pronunciation of

“Shostakovich” in order to not sound like a fool in front of his coworkers and Mahmud’s professors.

And rather than staring up at their partner, so perfectly miserable in their recollections, and glimpsing the cobbled-together thing that *wasn’t* Mahmud looming over their shoulders, Bahram and Firouz stared at the center of the table pushed up against the window. It was bright blue outside while, on this side of the glass, they both wore black, hands tucked away. Two mugs resting on white saucers sat between them.

Then, they both tried again, even angrier at themselves for messing up, and at each other for not stepping in when desperation was so obviously painted on their partner’s face: how can you go on like this, and how can you go on letting *me* go on like this?

Yet, both tried again. There were bins of rubber toys, and tiny sweaters packed away for summer with sachets of rosemary and lavender. The tightly-knotted funk of an “accident” buried beneath liberal use of baby powder and a fresh diaper. Three young faces, stretched downward by hunger, resurrecting once the fast was broken and food appeared under candlelight, every mouthful a miracle. The body of a man rocking back and forth atop a cushioned stool as his hands darted across the keys, every note a miracle. Two tiny hands sweating inside two larger hands as all three of them walked to school under elm trees rustling in an early September breeze, every step a miracle.

Bahram and Firouz refocused and saw each other. Both of their mugs hovered high over their heads. Then, they fell back onto their saucers in blurs of white and shattered with a crack that made the entire shop fall silent. Black and beige liquids flew in arcing waves and splashed steaming hot upon the table and floorboards. Heads snapped towards Bahram and Firouz, who slowly turned to study the audience they had suddenly acquired.

Eventually, heads swiveled back to their original positions, and the bustling resumed. A minute later, after much dripping, the barista that both Bahram and Firouz thought was cute walked over with a wet rag and a trash can and sorted out the mess. She didn't apologize or make small talk; she wiped down the table, then carefully gathered the broken thirds of the saucers and mugs and dropped them into the bin.

Bahram thanked her and watched her walk away; then, he looked down and saw a miniscule stain spreading along his right pant leg: blacker resting in black. Firouz stared at a single teardrop of coffee that the barista had missed while mopping up: it sat beautifully cloaked in the table's dark wood grain.

The wind outside roared as the cleaning crew departed with a dustbin full of what used to be a motor vehicle. And inside, the barista wrung her rag out in the sink, sending eight dollars and ninety-two cents gliding down the drain. Meanwhile, Bahram and Firouz Bagheri smiled at their own incomplete portraits and the unframed traces, the *gifts*, that had been left behind for just the two of them to contemplate.