

SISTER
SEEN,
SISTER
HEARD

KIMIA ESLAH



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To my sister

Excerpt

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1

Friday, May 7, 1993

Late Friday morning, Maiheen Ghasemi woke to her husband belting out an Iranian love song in the shower of their Toronto apartment. Mustafa had left the door to the ensuite bathroom ajar, most likely to coax her out of sleep and woo her into joining him. The ballad he sang dated to the sixties and the final stages of their courtship. Soon, they would celebrate their twenty-sixth wedding anniversary, and it pleased her that he lusted for her as much as he had back then.

Maiheen stretched in all directions before she turned onto Mustafa's side of the bed, taking in his lingering scent on the pillow and tucking in the blankets around her, reluctant to rise on her day off from serving and cleaning at the coffee shop. In the vanity mirror, she saw her puffy face and grayed roots. She chastised herself for not keeping up her appearance, and she thought about Mustafa and the importance he placed on his looks. Back in Iran, when they both worked in the same branch of Sepah Bank, Mustafa had always been the best dressed of the managers.

Through the sole window of their bedroom, Maiheen noticed that the sky was a brilliant blue and she smiled with gratitude. She didn't expect it to be a warm day, not in Canada in the month of May, but she was glad it was cloudless. *Maybe I can go for a walk. Really, I should be more like Mustafa. He's so much better at taking it easy.*

Maiheen hoped her two twentysomething daughters would meet men as balanced as their father, though it seemed like an impossible future to ensure. She considered herself friendly and open-minded, and she felt unfairly excluded from their love lives. She scowled at the thought. *They never bring home any of the young men they're dating, as if I don't know!*

She heard Mustafa turn off the shower, and she quickly rose from bed, brushed her hair, and wiped the sleep from her eyes. Spritzing herself with flowery perfume and chewing on a breath mint, she examined her body from various angles. The wrinkles and spots that had appeared in late middle age could be masked with the right makeup and hairdo, but she was daunted by her widening waist and rear end.

Her former coworkers in Esfahan would have teased her about the pear shape she had acquired since moving to Toronto fourteen years earlier. The physical labour involved in working at factories, cleaning offices, and serving in coffee shops depleted her desire to do anything but slump on the couch once she got home. Of course, even those moments were brief and crammed between her own housework and cooking duties. Eating, whether it was donuts at work or candy on her bus ride home, soothed her weariness. Feeling despondent, Maiheen wrapped her silk robe tighter and decided to meet Mustafa at the breakfast table rather than wait for his return to the bedroom.

As soon as Maiheen opened her bedroom door, she heard Farah rush down the hall. Her twenty-year-old daughter, looking like a transient with cropped hair and oversized men's clothes, often behaved like an impatient child, making demands and responding ungratefully. Maiheen was not impressed by Farah's displays of immaturity, and she often wondered why the girl could not model herself after her older sister. Maiheen conceded that Farzana was not perfect, especially with her inclination for secrecy, but at the

very least, she was composed. If Farzana was still water, Farah was a whirlpool.

“Mama, do you have the deposit cheque?” Farah asked before her mother stepped out of her bedroom.

“Good morning, Mama! Good morning, Farah-*jaan*, dear! How was your sleep? Good, thank you. How was yours? Good, thank you for asking.” Following her performance, Maiheen pursed her lips and walked past Farah to the kitchen.

“Oh, sorry.” Farah followed behind closely and spoke without pause. “Good morning, Mama-*jaan*. How was your sleep? I slept well. Thanks.”

“Farah, can I get ready for my day first?” Maiheen asked rhetorically as she grabbed instant coffee and a mug from the cupboard. She had prepared the cheque the day before and placed it in the top drawer of her dresser. It was tempting and easy enough to direct Farah to its location, but Maiheen refused to reward her daughter’s bad behaviour, especially since soon she would have fewer opportunities to instill the right values in her daughter. Maiheen’s own mother would have been horrified by Farah’s direct and demanding disposition, having taught Maiheen to use diplomacy, compassion, and flattery to achieve her goals.

Farah tried to sound unhurried, “Yeah, of course. I’m just making sure that ...”

“*Medoonam*, I know, Farah,” Maiheen interrupted without looking up from the cup of coffee she was preparing. “You’re excited. I understand. I just need ...”

“I’m being organized. See, just like you said,” Farah whined. “I’m making sure that everything is ready and I’ve covered all the bases. Like you told me to.”

“I also asked you to calm down and take things one at a time,” Maiheen added, looking desperately at the timer on the microwave, willing it to go faster.

“That’s not fair,” Farah complained. “I’m supposed to be, like, responsible but when I try to get stuff done you tell me to, like, calm down.”

The microwave beeped, and Maiheen took her cup to the counter to stir in cream and sugar. She tried to remain composed in spite of her desire to throw a nearby banana at her daughter’s head. She inhaled and exhaled deeply before she replied. “I’m happy to see you being responsible, but I wish you would take into account everyone else’s experience.”

“What does this have to do with other people?” Farah continued, flustered, pacing in the tight space and gesturing wildly with her hands. “Why is this, like, such a big deal? I just need a deposit cheque. You already said you’d give it to me. This conversation totally doesn’t make any sense.”

“None of this makes any sense to me,” Mustafa complained as he entered the kitchen from the other end. He kissed Maiheen on the lips and discretely patted her rear with a conspiring grin.

“No, no, no!” Farah stomped her feet. “Baba, we’ve already agreed. There’s nothing to explain. We’ve agreed!”

“I didn’t agree to anything,” Mustafa said with a shrug. He took a sip of Maiheen’s coffee and grimaced. “Too sweet,” he declared and returned the mug to Maiheen.

“Mama! This is not fair,” Farah pleaded with her mother. “Baba, stop it! This is not funny.”

Maiheen sighed, “Mustafa, you’re making it worse. Can you please leave it to me, my love?”

She encouraged him towards the dining table, and Mustafa complied. Maiheen rewarded him with her smile of appreciation, and then she continued her lesson with Farah about the merits of delicacy and diplomacy.



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From the dining room, Mustafa heard his wife extolling Farzana's interpersonal skills and then his younger daughter giving a frustrated moan. This was a lecture Maiheen had delivered many times before, and he wondered why she bothered to repeat herself. Teaching Farah etiquette wasn't a lost cause, but she needed to learn her lessons the hard way, through consequences. She had been obstinate since early childhood, always speaking out of turn and saying too much, and Mustafa blamed the examples set by Canadian children, whose culture lacked subtlety and refinedness. Whereas Farzana spent her preadolescent years in Iran learning decorum from relations and teachers, Farah grew up in Canada and adopted mannerisms that would be considered uncouth by even the lowliest of Iranian society. Like her tendency to inject herself into conversations without an invitation and her inability to stand down or allow others to save face. *Maiheen's just wasting her time. The girl is too stubborn to listen to anyone.*

To distract himself, Mustafa turned his attention to the best part of the newspaper, the sports section. Athletics was the realm of gods and miracles, and he had felt destined to be in that sphere since he was a boy. He wasn't fast enough for football, strong enough for weight lifting, or agile enough for wrestling, so he pursued a business degree in hopes of opening a training gym that rivalled the world-class gyms of Moscow and Brussels. The managerial position he accepted at Sepah Bank, at age twenty-five, was intended to provide the funds to purchase and renovate a facility.

These days, his life bore little resemblance to the past. The tailored suit and corner office had been replaced by coveralls and long days cleaning cars. What remained, day-in and day-out, was sports. He had installed a satellite dish on the balcony so he could watch football matches from around the world, but he was also dedicated to hockey and baseball, having declared his allegiance to the Toronto home teams almost on arrival in the city.

Hearing Farah interrupt Maiheen repeatedly irked him, and Mustafa cast aside the newspaper and injected himself in their conversation without waiting for a pause. "I just don't understand why you need to pay someone else when you have a room here," he challenged Farah from one end of the kitchen, looking past Maiheen who stood in the middle.

"Baba, we've already talked about this," Farah whined from the other end of the kitchen.

Her crossed arms and pouting lip reaffirmed Mustafa's opinion that Farah couldn't think clearly, unemotionally.

"So, you know the reasons. Tell me again," he responded coolly, trying to set an example.

"Mustafa, my love," Maiheen pleaded, handing him a cup and saucer of hot fragrant tea.

She looked tired but not angry. His wife rarely became angry. He placed the cup and saucer back on the counter, kissed Maiheen's hands in show of appreciation, and prepared for a routine faceoff with Farah.

"I mean, really. What's the point of wasting money? I'm not a bank manager anymore. I clean cars, and it takes a lot more time and effort to earn money. So, why am I paying for three places? I mean mathematically, this is nonsense." He ended with his arms crossed and his head cocked to receive her attack.

"You don't," she snapped back. "You *and* Mama pay for my stuff. Farzana pays for her own place."

Farah held his gaze in a show of defiance. Her mother had taken her coffee into the dining room, making space that Farah filled by widening her stance and placing her hands on her hips, elbows wide.

"Is that what you think?" Mustafa asked with a smirk. "We pay for a lot more than you know, and I'm tired of it."

With unmatched daintiness, he picked up the cup and saucer and joined Maiheen in the dining room. When Farah followed, he knew

he had weakened her defences.

“Baba!” Farah started with a drawn-out whine. “We’ve already talked about this. I need to be closer to school, downtown.”

Feeling in the lead, Mustafa retorted, “Why?”

He wasn’t sure about his endgame, but if it was possible to discourage another one of his daughters from moving downtown, he would continue trying. Farah had yet to place a deposit on the one-room rental.

“You’ve been bussing downtown all this year, and it’s been fine.”

“Not fine,” Farah rejoined, sounding less angry than fraught. “I had to take the bus and the subway for an hour, five days a week. Twice a day. You don’t know what it’s like. You drive everywhere.”

She was nearly in tears now. To sustain his resolve, he diverted his gaze to the newspaper and spoke from behind its pages.

“I drive to work, to earn money, to pay rent. Three times, if you had your way.”

When Farah didn’t respond, Mustafa snuck a peek from around the paper. She was sitting on the couch, adjacent the dining table. From her rigid posture and clenched fists, Mustafa knew Farah was fuming.

Apprehensively, he glanced to catch Maiheen’s reaction. Since the girls were young, it had been Maiheen who signalled the right approach and led him to victory. But she wasn’t in sight and Mustafa felt out of his league.



On the couch, Farah stared at the oversized aquarium that occupied one wall of their living room. She sat with her arms crossed and her lips firmly set. The one remaining bubble-eye fish swam slowly about the tank, mouthing any small floating debris that crossed its path. Farah silently cursed its mediocre existence.

Years earlier, her father had spontaneously bought the fifty-gallon tank and three dozen assorted fish. As he assembled the aquarium,

he had described the goldfish in the pond at his childhood home. Farah, who had longed for a pet she could cuddle, had accepted the fish in lieu. She and her father weren't fluent in the same language, embedded in the same culture, or of one mind about any matters close to the heart, but they could care for the fish together.

Pathetic. Absolutely pathetic. She fumed as she observed the lone surviving fish. The others had died in a slow massacre that could have been avoided if her father had researched beforehand. The betta fish and cichlids dominated the tank, eating all food flakes before the goldfish could swim to the surface. The discus fish died within days because the temperature didn't suit them. The barbs nipped at the angelfish and the angelfish bullied the guppies.

Farah was past caring about the fish. Their demise was a testament to her father's disregard in the one bond they could have shared. She resented the last fish, and she wished it would die and bring the whole affair to an end. *He doesn't care about me or what's important to me. He's power-tripping like the macho Neanderthal he is.*

Farah glanced his way to examine her father's expression, but the newspaper hid his face. It didn't matter. This situation was all too familiar, and Farah knew her parents' expectations. It was the same old bullshit about attracting flies with honey, not vinegar. *Fuck that. Flies are attracted to shit, not honey.*

She refused to be manipulated into behaving like someone she wasn't, specifically her older sister, the good daughter. She loved Farzana, whom she considered to be her best friend, but Farah had long ago tired of being measured by the standard her sister set.

"You let Farzana move downtown for school," Farah started.

With dramatic flair, her father lowered the paper and replied knowingly, "And how did that go? Four years renting a room and now she lives with some fast friend. They should both be living with their families and saving for the future, not throwing away their money on rent."

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Farah squeezed shut her eyes and emitted a guttural sound. *There is no way to reason with this man.*

“Mustafa, my love,” Farah heard her mother entreat. “Let’s leave Farzana out of this. She’s doing just fine.”

Farah opened her eyes to see her mother stroking the nape of her father’s neck. She planted a kiss on his forehead, and his grimace transformed into an adoring gaze, one that followed her mother even as she returned to the kitchen.

Her father’s softened expression relieved Farah. Typically, it meant an end to their argument, with all likelihood that the deposit cheque would be in her hands soon. Subduing others with entreaties as a way of handling conflict was her mother’s specialty. Farah intuited that her mother had used this particular conflict to reinforce her lesson about influencing others with charm.

Deflated, Farah leaned back and unclenched her fists. Her gaze fell again upon the lone fish, which gobbled a piece of floating debris and spit it out again, recognizing it as inedible. Next, she admired the expanse of clear sky and the view from their eighteenth-floor apartment. In the far distance, she could see the top half of the needle-like CN Tower, demarcating downtown Toronto and signifying her new life as an independent woman. *Partially independent, I guess. I still have to rely on them for rent.*

From the kitchen, her mother returned with a platter of fried eggs, enough for four people, and another platter of warmed pita bread, all of which she set on the dining table. Once she had transferred buttery eggs onto a plate for her father, her mother took a seat on the couch next to Farah. From the pocket of her robe, she retrieved a folded cheque and silently placed it on Farah’s lap.

“*Merci*, thank you, Mama,” Farah said quietly, tucking the cheque into the back pocket of her jeans. She was grateful for the money, but she refused to ingratiate herself to her mother, especially with her father covertly observing their exchange. *Why can’t this be*

a cut-and-dried exchange? Why do we need to make everything about pleasing each other?

Before she rushed out of the room, Farah kissed her mother once on the cheek to avoid seeming ungrateful. Over her shoulder, she informed her parents, “Oh, and I’m staying at Farzana’s tonight.”

“What’s this?” Her mother asked as she rushed to the hallway, where Farah slipped on her army boots and prepared to leave.

“After school, I’m meeting Farzana at the subway station. Then we go to the landlord and do all the lease stuff, you know, ’cause Farzana is my co-signer. After that, she’s letting me stay over, finally.”

In a half-whisper, to avoid attracting her father’s attention, her mother narrowed her eyes and leaned in to ask, “And when I call Farzana’s tonight, you’ll be there?”

“Of course,” Farah replied resolutely.

“And your exams next week?”

“They’re fine,” Farah perked up, glad to move on to another topic. She counted off her exams on one hand. “I have four. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Then the semester’s done. And the exams are all based on assignments, so I can do them in my sleep.” She offered another pleasing smile and added, “Okay, I’ve got to go now. The bus.”

Before Farah could unlock the front door, her mother asked, “I thought there weren’t any more classes. Why are you going to school?”

Farah sighed and dropped her shoulders. She was still facing the door, and she made sure to plaster a smile on her face before she turned to her mother and answered. “There’s a meeting for one of the clubs.”

“What club is it?” Her father asked as he stepped into the hall and took his place behind her mother.

To sustain her momentum and avoid further delays, Farah kissed each parent farewell as she answered. “It’s a women’s club. The

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meeting's at twelve and I've got to catch the bus ...”

“Oh,” her father interrupted, “I thought you said it takes an hour to get downtown. It's already nearly eleven. How're you going to make it to this meeting?”

Before he finished asking his question, Farah had walked out and the door had closed behind her. She was halfway down the hall, towards the elevator, when she heard her father call for her.

“I have to go, Baba,” she pleaded.

“I know, I know. You're a very busy person,” her father teased her.

He ambled down the hall, and when he reached Farah, he pressed a twenty-dollar bill in her hand. “This should cover your expenses tonight.” He winked knowingly.

Farah realized that her father had overheard her plans to spend the night at Farzana's. Mildly vexed by his covert games, she offered a small smile and thanked him for the money.

“I really have to go now.”

“Go, go!” He urged her jovially. Then, he turned back toward his apartment, where his wife stood in the open doorway.

From the landing in front of the elevators, Farah heard her father say, “Maiheen, none of this makes sense. You understand, yes?”

“Yes, my love. I do,” her mother answered before she shut the door.

Farah had the elevator to herself during the ride down to the lobby. That wasn't a surprise since it was late morning on a weekday, and everyone who had to be at school or work would have departed hours ago. She crammed the twenty dollars into her back pocket, along with the cheque, and prepared her portable cassette player for the hour-long commute downtown.

As she stepped off the elevator, Farah heard a commotion in the concrete room at the rear of the lobby, near the double doors she used to access a shortcut to the bus stop. Except for moving days,

when tenants used the rear entrance for loading and unloading furniture and boxes, the room was a quiet space.

One corner of the room was sectioned off by a floor-to-ceiling chain-link fence. Inside the fence, two dozen bicycles were locked to a set of heavy-duty bike racks. Farah's bike was among them, stripped of its front and back wheels and long forgotten. The bicycle locker offered little protection against theft since the four-digit code of the combination lock was common knowledge.

As Farah neared the concrete room, she heard the static of handheld radios that signalled the presence of police. At the doorway between the lobby and the concrete room, she paused to inspect the scene. The double doors that led to the loading area and visitors' parking lot were propped open, and Farah spotted three police cruisers parked at odd angles, several officers jotting notes, and police tape cordoning off an area of asphalt half the size of a basketball court.

Farah was accustomed to police activity in her neighbourhood. In a crammed corner of her dilapidated high school, there existed an office for the resident police constable. At the start of every school year, the principal reminded students that the officer served in the capacity of a guide and advocate, not a monitor or mole, but the kids didn't trust the principal or the officer, neither of whom lived in their neighbourhood. She knew police officers to be short-tempered bullies who targeted Black boys at her school and protected only their own reputations.

From experience, Farah knew that the police didn't concern themselves with her. Often, they didn't acknowledge her existence. Somehow, being young, brown, and female was disarming, and her features made her invisible to police officers.

Fine with me, she thought every time a constable looked through her as if she didn't exist.

She was about to change her plans and leave by the front doors when she spotted Michael Selkirk in the bike locker. Dressed in black

from head to toe in his customary outfit of oversized trench coat, loose shirt and jeans, scuffed sneakers, and tattered cap, Michael knelt in front of a bicycle that Farah knew wasn't his. Michael lived with his parents and younger brother in the apartment building identical and adjacent to hers, which is where he also stored his beat-up bike.

What is he doing? Farah could have stood there watching Michael for a long time. With his too-pale skin and prematurely thinning hair, Michael wasn't anyone else's idea of a dream boy. To others, Michael appeared malnourished, if not jaundiced, and his lanky posture under the threadbare trench coat gave him the air of a delinquent, but Farah felt that she knew him better than anyone else, and she knew that Michael was harmless.

His pale skin, which barely concealed the network of blue-green veins, was the result of his sleeping all day, working in the back room of a shoe store until closing time, and staying up late into the morning to smoke cigarettes and play cards with his friends at an all-night coffee shop.

When a flurry of activity started among the officers, Michael leaned far to the right to inspect the commotion. Absentmindedly, he placed his hand on a bike seat to lean farther and his weight caused a series of bikes to topple over. The officers stopped talking and turned in his direction with concerned expressions. One of the officers approached the bike locker.

"Is everything okay?" The constable asked with a grimace. "What are you doing in there?"

Farah took the opportunity to ingratiate herself to Michael. She rushed into the concrete room and called out to him. "See, they took both my wheels."

Pretending that she just noticed the constable, Farah acted surprised and asked him, "Did you come about my bike? Someone stole both my wheels. See." Farah pointed to her bike, one of the many that Michael had knocked over.

The constable said sternly, “This area is part of a crime scene. I need both of you to leave, immediately.”

“Okay,” said Farah, as she stepped back from the bike locker. She looked at Michael and suggested, “Maybe you can help me later?”

Michael nodded silently. He slung his black knapsack over one shoulder and exited the bike locker, making sure to shut the chain-link door behind him. The two walked through the double doors and into the lobby without looking back at the constable.

Farah felt the rush of adrenaline that surged through her body when she was in close proximity to Michael. She smelled his menthol aftershave and nearly swooned. Once, after having sex in his bedroom, she had concocted an excuse to borrow his shirt. She slept with that shirt for several nights, burrowing her face into its thin fabric until his scent had been replaced by her own.

She wanted more of Michael, more than casual sex and a borrowed shirt, but he was content with the arrangement they’d maintained for two years. Sex, no strings attached, and the occasional hour spent smoking cigarettes and watching music videos. Farah had convinced herself that this arrangement would eventually lead to a romantic relationship since neither of them was dating anyone else, but time was running out, especially with her imminent move downtown, an hour away from him and out of range for last-minute calls to drop by his place.

“What were you doing?” Farah asked in a teasing tone.

“Trying to find out what happened,” Michael replied coolly.

“What did happen?” Farah asked as she recalled the section of the parking lot that was cordoned off by police tape. Her memory of the crime scene had been compartmentalized at the sight of Michael in the bike locker.

“Are you serious? You didn’t hear the sirens?” Michael scoffed as he walked to the front doors and lit a cigarette as he exited the building.

Trying to remain unperturbed by his frosty demeanour, Farah followed slowly, not submitting to her desire to rush Michael and kiss him deeply until he declared his affection for her.

Outside, the weather was a mixture of spring sunshine and chilly winter air. Farah zipped up her hooded sweatshirt and stuffed her hands in its pockets. Michael had readjusted his black cap to cover his eyes and raised the collar of his trench coat to shield his neck. Slightly hunched over to block the wind, he shuffled along the paved path leading from her apartment building to his own. Farah stepped in stride next to him though the path led her away from the bus stop.

“I’m on the eighteenth floor. I don’t hear much up there,” she explained plainly.

Michael had never seen her apartment since her parents would have embarrassed her with their formality. Farah cringed at the thought of Michael sitting on their overstuffed couches, her mother offering fruit with delicate plates and knives and her father reciting the previous day’s sports scores.

Michael did not use delicate plates or watch sports. His apartment and his family could be described as informal in every respect. No one cooked, and with the intrusion of cockroaches that scattered every time Farah opened a cupboard, it made sense. Meals came out of cans or the freezer, and their family ate with plates on their laps in front of the television.

The apartment was cluttered with piles of knitting and scrapbooking projects and stacks of electronics waiting to be repaired. The smell was most disturbing of all, a mixture of cat urine and spoiled milk. Farah could just imagine what Michael would think of her and her family if he ever stepped foot inside her parents’ pristine apartment. *Uppity, vain, self-obsessed.*

She didn’t want him to judge her or to assume that she judged him.

“Oh, yeah. I forgot. You live in the penthouse,” Michael teased and poked her side.

She interpreted his teasing as a friendly gesture, so she stepped closer and decried, “Uh, Michael, the penthouse of a rat’s nest is still the penthouse of a *rat’s nest*.”

“Yeah, but it’s still the *penthouse*,” Michael joked.

They both chuckled and Farah felt confident about their bond. She didn’t understand why Michael opposed their dating, and she wondered whether he was embarrassed by her, or possibly he was interested in someone else and Farah was keeping his bed warm until he convinced the other woman to go out with him.

Farah noticed that they had reached the end of the path, at the front door of his apartment building. She wanted to kiss him but she knew that he didn’t display affection publicly. Instead, she stalled for more time to look into his eyes.

“So, what happened? The police and all?” she asked.

Michael took a drag from his cigarette before he answered. “Remember Sheena, with the long hair, the really long hair? And, the chunky heels ...”

“Shireen,” Farah interrupted. “Sheena is Ali J.’s ten-year-old sister.”

“So you know her? Shireen?” Michael asked, lifting his cap to reveal his hazel eyes.

“No,” Farah answered distractedly, preoccupied by Michael’s nearness. “I never talked to her. She’s, like, five years older than us. Her dad worked at the same place my dad works, like, a long time ago.”

“Yeah, well, Shireen jumped.” Michael informed her, following a long deliberate drag from his cigarette.

“Shit! How do you know it was her? Is she going to be okay?”

She crossed her arms to feel safe and warm, but the chill that overcame her refused to relent.

Nonchalantly, Michael exhaled a plume of smoke over his shoulder before he answered, “She’s dead, Farah.”

“Shit. That’s crazy,” Farah whispered, shocked by the news. “Did you see anything?”

“No. They’d already taken her away when I got there. I think it happened really early.”

Michael took a final pull of his cigarette before dropping it to the ground and crushing it with his sneaker. His tone had grown solemn, possibly influenced by Farah’s severe reaction to the news. He wasn’t a sentimental person, and Farah knew that he distrusted emotionality. Jokingly, Michael’s mother likened him to a zombie because of his dispassionate reactions, and Michael suggested that the cold-blooded nature of a vampire was more fitting to his character.

With his hands tucked into the pockets of his thin trench coat, Michael turned toward the front doors of his apartment building and gestured with a nod that invited Farah to follow.

I’ll catch the next bus, she assured herself as she trailed behind Michael.

In the empty lobby, Michael leaned on one shoulder near the elevator doors but he didn’t press the button. Farah stood steps away, biting her lip and wondering where this was leading.

“I heard from the super that they took her dad away too and that her apartment’s got tape across the door,” Michael added while he toyed with his plastic lighter.

“Shit. That’s crazy,” Farah replied, shaking her head in disbelief.

She had known of other kids who died, like Thomas Frey’s older brother who was killed in a drunk-driving accident and the sixth grader who got sick with meningitis and died overnight, but she had never heard of a kid committing suicide. *So why was her dad taken away?*

She didn’t pose the question to Michael because she feared that he might reply cynically or make a sarcastic joke, and Farah wasn’t interested in humour just then. Shireen was only an acquaintance to Farah; still, it seemed unfeeling and callous to judge or mock a dead girl.

“Yeah, crazy,” Michael said, still playing with the lighter but eyeing Farah. “Sorry about your friend,” he added when Farah remained quiet.

“Oh, I didn’t know her,” Farah explained, concerned that she seemed overly affected by Shireen’s death. “A lot of people worked at the same place as my dad.” *Did that sound bad, snobbish? Did I just snub a dead girl?*

“That’s cool,” Michael shrugged. He pressed the button for the elevator and casually asked, “Do you wanna hang out? No one’s home at my place.”

Michael didn’t attempt to seduce Farah with a look of longing or persuade her with charisma. He remained his usual aloof self, shielding his desires and discouraging intimacy. His gaze rested on the dial overhead, which indicated that the elevator was descending from the fourteenth floor.

Within the next minute, Farah needed to decide whether she would join Michael for their routine of sex, junk food, and TV, all of which would consume at least a couple of hours. Or whether she would head downtown to campus, where she was expected at a meeting. The elevator had descended to the fifth floor, and for the first time since they began sleeping with each other, Farah considered declining his offer. *Taari is expecting me.*

During her first year of university, Farah had connected with only one person, Taari Hadva. When Taari suggested that Farah join her at the women’s studies’ meeting, she agreed readily, if only for the opportunity to chat with Taari outside of class. Farah desperately wanted a friend at school, someone to hang out with during breaks, maybe have a beer together at the on-campus pub that she had been too intimidated to enter alone. It had been easier for Farah to make the honour roll than to make friends.

Unsettled, or possibly surprised by her delayed response, Michael responded, “It’s cool.”

SISTER SEEN, SISTER HEARD

Just then, the elevator door chimed open and an elderly woman walked out pulling a collapsible shopping cart that had been lined with cardboard. Michael stepped aside to let her pass and Farah smiled briefly at her, out of respect. Then, Michael stepped into the elevator, pressed the button for his floor, and leaned against the back wall, facing Farah.

He offered a tightlipped smile and said, “Catch ya later.”

As the elevator door closed, Farah replied, “Bye.”

She watched the dial as the elevator ascended to the tenth floor, Michael’s floor. She sighed, bit her lower lip, doubting herself, then put on her headphones, turned on her music, and started for her original destination.

Farah walked the sloping sidewalk that led from the cluster of deteriorating high-rise buildings on the hill to Don Mills Road, the thoroughway that carried cars, trucks, and buses north to the suburbs and south to downtown Toronto. The road was three lanes wide in each direction, and walking across its intersections was a fatal act for a handful of people each year. Left-turning cars preoccupied with oncoming traffic and right-turning cars inattentive to pedestrians regularly threatened Farah.

To top it off, weather made the commute just as difficult. In turns, the blustery winds of winter and the scorching heat of summer depleted her energy. On wet and slushy days, she feared being soaked by a passing vehicle as its tires drove through a pool of dirty water in the ubiquitous potholes. If Farah never took the No. 25 bus again, she wouldn’t miss it at all.

At the traffic lights, Farah crossed the road to wait at the deserted southbound stop. The three inner corners of the narrow plexiglass shelter were littered with used coffee cups, cigarette butts, and potato chip bags. Farah gingerly stepped through the small opening to avoid contact with the grimy walls that were marked with graffiti and streaked with spit.

After examining the two-person bench for wetness, Farah sat and held her knapsack on her lap. The music from her headphones drowned out the racket of traffic, and Farah assumed the universal mindless stare of commuters waiting for the next bus.

Presently, a thirtysomething white woman dressed in office attire entered the shelter, stepped past Farah and stood to her left, facing the direction of the impending bus. Farah studied her covertly and imagined what it would be like to dress in a skirt and blazer. Soon after, two East Asian women arrived. The younger of the two was middle-aged and dressed like Farah's mother, in floral print blouse, chunky cardigan, pressed black slacks, and sensible walking shoes. Her companion was a much older woman, hunched over and dressed in a long gray wool coat, knit hat, and tightly wound scarf. They moved slowly towards the grassy strip behind the shelter and away from the traffic.

Farah considered offering her seat to the two women but she couldn't bring herself to start a conversation. She continued to stare ahead, into the middle distance, and concentrate on her music.

Moments later, she spotted two young Black women crossing the street and approaching the bus stop, one of whom she recognized as an acquaintance from high school, Terry Henderson. Farah assumed the younger woman, possibly fourteen or fifteen years old, was Terry's sister. They shared a resemblance but they had also donned similar stylish track suits and wore their hair tied back in small high buns. Farah smiled to herself when she noticed that the sisters even walked with the same confident gait, and she wondered if she and her sister walked alike.

Farah remembered how much Terry had been liked in high school by teachers and students. Terry was friendly, athletic, and smart, someone Farah admired for her ability to fit into any crowd. She knew that Terry lived in one of the high-rise buildings in their neighbourhood, but their paths hadn't crossed since high school.

She probably doesn't even remember me.

Hoping to avoid an awkward situation, Farah decided to keep her eyes cast leftwards, in the same direction as the office worker. Shortly, Terry and her sister entered the shelter. The younger sister sat to the right of Farah, and Terry stood facing her sister. Farah's music blocked out their conversation but she could see they were talking excitedly.

Tired of staring at the oncoming traffic, Farah squinted to see the front page of the newspaper in the box chained to the nearby lamp post. It was the picture of a white man, dressed in a suit and tie and sitting in the back of a police cruiser. From the nightly news coverage, she recognized him as Paul Bernardo, a serial rapist and murderer, a predator who had been attacking women in East End Toronto for six years before he was caught.

In a pamphlet on campus, she had read that one in four women is sexually assaulted in their lifetime. This information staggered her. Farah considered the five women waiting for the bus at that moment, and she wondered if any of them were already a statistic. One disturbing question led to another, and she pondered what percentage of men were rapists and sex offenders.

Presently, a black pickup truck pulled up alongside the bus stop even as traffic continued to speed through the intersection. Farah couldn't hear the two young men who had crammed their torsos out of the passenger-side window but she could tell that they were yelling.

A quick glance at the frightened expressions on the faces of the women on each side of her informed Farah that these men were strangers hurling insults and threats. She made to remove her headphones to hear the men with their bulging eyes and flashing teeth, men young enough to be teenaged, but what happened next shocked her into paralysis.

One minute she was removing her headphones and the next she

was shielding her head and face from speeding projectiles lobbed from the truck. A series of loud thuds reverberated inside the plexi-glass walls of the bus shelter, followed by yelps from each side of her, and then Farah heard the squealing of tires as the truck peeled away.

She opened her eyes, and after confirming that the truck was out of sight, she exhaled the breath she had been holding. *What the fuck was that about? Who were those guys? Why would anyone do that?*

A dark gelatinous substance covered the outer pane of the glass wall directly in front of her, and from its viscous motion as it travelled down the glass Farah guessed that it was pudding. *Was that supposed to be a joke, hurling pudding at strangers? They have a truck, so they can get away with it?*

To her left, the office worker looked startled, her knuckles white as they clutched her leather handbag to her chest. On Farah's right, Terry rose from having draped herself like a human shield over her sister and knelt to the side of the girl to whisper reassurances.

Adrenaline pumped through Farah, and she noticed that her hands were quivering. She wanted to say something, anything, but no one was looking her way. Instead, she scanned the grassy area behind the bus shelter for the middle-aged woman and her elderly companion.

The two women were slowly approaching the red and white bus-stop pole, avoiding the thick globs of brown that had splattered the pavement. A moment later, the office worker stepped past the bench and joined the two women at the pole. Farah could see that the bus was two blocks away but she didn't want to leave Terry and her sister, who were still in their protective huddle.

"Is she okay?" Farah asked softly.

Terry looked up and nodded. Then she whispered something to her sister and rose from kneeling. The young girl's lower lip was trembling, and she wiped her face repeatedly with the sleeve of her track suit.