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The Whirlpool

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The Whirlpool

Translated by Brian Spooner

“Is it really true?” Hodayun said to himself. “Is it possible? So young—yet he lies out there in the cemetery among thousands of other corpses in the cold, damp earth, a shroud clinging to his body. He’ll never see the first days of spring again . . . or the last days of autumn . . . nor such gray mournful days as today. Is that light in his eye completely out? And that lilt in his voice—he who was always so ready with a smile and a joke . . .”

Outside the sky was overcast. The windows were slightly steamed over, but through them the gabled roof of the house next door was visible with its covering of snow. Flakes of snow were wheeling about slowly and regularly and coming to rest on the eaves. Wisps of black smoke rose from the chimney above the gabled roof, dipped and swirled against the gray background of the sky, and thinned slowly into the distance.

Hodayun, with his young wife and little daughter Homa, was sitting in front of the living room stove. Usually on Fridays this was a room of laughter and happiness, but today they were all depressed and silent. Even their little daughter, usually so lively, was looking gloomily out of the window, her plaster doll with its broken face lying at her side. Even she seemed to have realized that something was wrong, and that it was because of her uncle Bahram who had not come as usual, and she sensed that her mother and father’s dejection was because of him. The black clothes, the red sleepless eyes, and the cigarette smoke wreathing the air confirmed her impression.

Hodayun was staring at the fire in the stove, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Helplessly, he was remembering the winter schooldays when like today a layer of snow covered the ground. As soon as the bell went for morning break, he and Bahram didn’t give the others a chance. Their game was always the same when the weather was like this: they would roll a ball of snow along the ground until it became a large mass. Then the children divided into two teams, and using the

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snow as a stronghold, began the snowball fight. Without feeling the cold, though their red hands burned from its intensity, they pelted each other with snowballs. One day when they were playing like this, Homayun pressed a handful of melting snow together and threw it at Bahram. It hit him on the forehead, and hurt him. The teacher came and caned his hand. Perhaps the beginnings of friendship between him and Bahram had begun there. Thereafter whenever he saw the scar on Bahram's forehead, he remembered the cane on his own hand. During the eighteen years which had passed since then, their thoughts, their souls had become so close that they could not only confide in each other their most secret thoughts and feelings, but each understood many of the other's unspoken thoughts.

Their thoughts, tastes, and temper had become practically identical. Up until now there had never been the least difference of opinion or resentment between them. Until yesterday morning. The phone had rung in Homayun's office to tell him Bahram Mirza had committed suicide. Immediately Homayun took a droshky and rushed to his bedside. Slowly he turned back the white cloth which had been thrown over his face, barely hiding the blood. The blood-stained eyelashes, the brain spewed over the pillow, the stains on the rug, the helpless wailing of the relatives, it all hit him like a thunderbolt. Towards dusk he followed the coffin to the cemetery. They brought a bunch of flowers he had sent and laid them on the grave. After a last farewell he went home with a heavy heart. From that day to this he had not had a minute's rest. Sleep had been impossible, and the hair on his temples had grayed. A box of cigarettes lay open on the table before him, and one after the other he smoked through them.

It was the first time Homayun had thought at all seriously about death, but he got nowhere. No theory or idea satisfied him.

He was completely at a loss, and had no idea what to do. Every now and then a sort of madness came over him. However hard he tried he could not forget. Their friendship had started at school and their lives had become almost blended together. They shared each other's joys and sorrows, and every time he turned around and looked at Bahram's picture all his memories came to life before him, and he saw him: his fair moustache and blue eyes set wide apart, the small mouth and pointed chin. He had a loud laugh and was always clearing his throat

with a noisy cough. Hodayun could see it all clearly. He could not believe he was dead—and so suddenly. There was nothing Bahram wouldn't have done for him. In the three years he had been posted away Bahram had looked after his home and family for him. In the words of Badri, his wife, "Before anyone else knew there was something to be done, he had done it."

Now Hodayun felt the burden of life; and longed for the past when they all used to spend time together so easily in that room. They used to play backgammon. The hours would pass unnoticed. But the one thing that tortured him more than anything else was while they were so close and had no secrets from each other, how was it Bahram never said anything to him of his decision to commit suicide? What reason could he have had? Had he gone mad, or was there some domestic secret involved? He turned this question over and over in his mind. Then, as though he had suddenly thought of something, he looked to his wife for help and asked: "Well, what do you think? Have you any idea why Bahram did this?"

Badri, who was apparently intent on her embroidery, looked up, and as though she had not expected the question, said indifferently: "How should I know? Didn't he tell you?"

"No, he didn't. That's why I can't understand. When I got back from my trip I sensed a change in him, but he said nothing to me. I thought perhaps his work was worrying him. I knew the office used to get on top of him. He often told me so. In fact, he never used to keep anything from me."

"God have mercy on him! He seemed to enjoy life so much. This was the last thing you'd have thought he'd do!"

"No, he seemed like that on the surface. Sometimes he was quite different . . . quite different . . . when he was alone. One day when I went into his room I did not recognize him. He was sitting at his desk with his head in his hands, deep in thought. When he saw my reaction, he tried to cover up by laughing and making one of his jokes. He was a good actor!"

"Perhaps there was something that he didn't want to tell you in case

it upset you. He was thinking of you. After all, you have a wife and family. You always have them to think of, whereas he . . .”

She shook her head meaningfully. It was as though his suicide had no importance. Again silence drew them into thought. But Homayun felt that somehow his wife was not sincere but only saying what she felt she ought to say. This same wife who eight years ago worshipped the ground he walked on! All those sweet fancies she had about love. Now, it was as though a veil had fallen away from his eyes. Compared to his memories of Bahram, the consolation his wife offered disgusted him. He began to hate his wife who seemed now so materially minded, settled and middle-aged, thinking only of money and the pleasures of the world. She was not willing to give way to sorrow or grief, and the excuse she gave was that Bahram did not have a wife and children. How mean could she get! Because he had deprived himself of this common pleasure, his death did not matter! Was his own child worth more in this world than his friend? Never! Wasn't Bahram worth mourning? Would he ever find another friend like him in the world?

He had to die, while that decrepit hag who came tapping her stick along the road this morning, smelling out the house of the dead man for the sweets they give to beggars—she had to live! Why? The will of God! But Badri, his wife, thinks it quite natural, and one day she herself will be just like that old beggar-woman. Already, without makeup, her appearance had undergone quite a change. Her eyes were different and her voice too. In the early morning when he went to the office, she was still asleep. There were wrinkles under her eyes, and lately she had really let herself go. She probably felt the same about him. Who knows? Hadn't he changed as well? Was he still the same kind, obedient, handsome Homayun he used to be? Hadn't he deceived his wife? But what was making him think like this? Was it the sleepless nights, or was it the painful memory of his friend?

At that moment the door opened and a servant entered with a letter for Homayun. Holding her long veil across her face with her teeth, she gave the letter to Homayun, and went.

Homayun recognized the small, jerky handwriting on the envelope. It was Bahram's. Hurriedly he opened it and read the letter:

“Now, one and a half hours after sunset on the 13th day of the

month of Mehr 1311 A.H., I, Bahram Mirza Arzhanpur, of my own free will and consent leave all my property to Miss Homa Mah-Afrid. Bahram Arzhanpur."

Homayun read it a second time and, dazed, let it drop from his hands. Badri, who had been watching him, asked: "Who was it from?"

"Bahram."

"What did he say?"

"You know what? He's left everything to Homa . . ."

"How nice of him!"

This expression of pleasant surprise made Homayun even more disgusted with his wife. But he found himself looking at Bahram's picture again. Then he turned and looked at Homa. Suddenly something came to his mind which made him tremble. It was as though another veil had fallen away from his eyes. His daughter Homa was without a shadow of doubt the image of Bahram. She didn't take after her father or her mother. Neither of them had blue eyes, a small mouth, or a pointed chin—each feature of her face resembled Bahram. Now Homayun realized why Bahram was so fond of her and had now after his death left everything to her. Was this child he loved so much the result of clandestine relations between Bahram and his wife? The man who had been his bosom friend—with whom he had shared such trust and confidence—it was as though both their souls had come out of the same mold! For years his wife had had the chance without him knowing, and all this time she had deceived him, made a laughingstock of him, and now this will, this insult, sent to him after his death. No, this was something he would never be able to get over.

These thoughts flashed like lightning before his eyes. His head started to ache and his cheeks flushed. He threw a glance full of hate and fury at his wife and said: "Well, what do you say? Why did Bahram do this? Didn't he have a brother and sister?"

"You can't imagine how fond he used to be of this child! When you were at Bandar Gaz, Homa caught the measles. Ten days and nights

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that man was at the side of her bed nursing her, God rest him!”

This made Homayun more angry: “Oh no! It’s not as simple as that.”

“What do you mean ‘It’s not as simple as that.’ Not everybody cares as little as you, leaving your wife and child and going off for three years at a time. When you finally come back, empty-handed, you don’t even bring me a pair of stockings! You could have brought something for me, if you’d really wanted to. It was for your sake that Bahram loved Homa. If it wasn’t you, he would not have fallen in love with her. Couldn’t you see he loved her more than his own life.

“You’re not telling me the truth.”

“What do you want me to say then? What are you getting at?”

“You know damn well!”

“What do you mean by that? *I* didn’t commit suicide. *I* didn’t make out the will. Do I have to answer for it?”

“I just happen to be absolutely certain that you know.”

“You know what? I don’t understand hints. Go and see a doctor—you’ve gone mad! What do you want from me?”

“You think I don’t know?”

“If you know, why do you ask me?”

Homayun lost his patience and shouted: “That’s enough. That’s enough. You’ve made a fool of me.”

He screwed up Bahram’s will and threw it into the fire; it flared up instantly and quickly turned to ashes.

Badri threw down the material she had in her hand and got up. “All right, so you want to have a row with me: Don’t you want your child to have the money?”

Now Homayun got up as well, leaned on the table, and with a mock-

ing tone in his voice said, "My child? My child! Then why is she the image of Bahram?"

He knocked over the enamel framed photograph of Bahram with his elbow and it fell to the floor.

The child, who had been silently watching, now started to cry. Badri's face went pale; a threatening tone entered her voice. "What do you mean? What are you trying to say?"

"I'm trying to say that for these last eight years you've been deceiving me, making a fool of me. For eight years you've been a liability, not a wife, both for me and for my daughter."

Homayun laughed angrily. He was breathing fast. He pointed at the photograph. "Yes, *your* daughter—*your* daughter. Pick it up and look at it! I'm trying to say I've woken up at last. I realize why he was so generous. He was acting like a kind father. But you—for eight years you've—"

"Been in your house and put up with everything, including you, and looked after your home for three years when you were away. Then they came and told me you'd fallen in love with some Russian harlot in Bandar Gaz. Now this is how I'm repaid. You can't find anything else to pick on, so you say my daughter looks like Bahram. But I'm not putting up with it any longer. I'm not staying another minute in this house. Come on, darling. We're going."

Homa couldn't make it out. She was pale and trembling. She had never seen a quarrel like this between her mother and father before, and she just stood and looked. Then she cried and grabbed her mother's skirt, and they both went towards the door. At the door Badri took a bunch of keys from her pocket and threw them roughly at Homayun's feet.

The sound of footsteps and Homa's crying died away down the hall. Ten minutes later the wheels of a droschky could be heard carrying them away through the cold and snow. Homayun had not moved. He was still standing dazed, afraid to raise his head. He did not want to believe that all this was true. He asked himself whether he had gone

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crazy—or was this just a terrible dream? But one thing was clear: from now on this home, and this life were unbearable, and Homa, the daughter he loved so much, he could never see again. He could not kiss her and hold her. The memory of his friend was sullied. Worst of all, for eight years his wife had had access to his dearest friend and had polluted his home. And all behind his back—without his knowing! They had all been very skillful actors. He alone had been deceived and made a fool of. Now his whole life disgusted him. He had had enough of everything and everybody. He felt himself infinitely alone and a stranger. The only thing to do was to take a post in a town a long way away—one of the ports on the Gulf—and live out the rest of his life there, or else commit suicide. He must go somewhere where he would see no one, hear no one, where he could go to sleep in a hole and never wake up again. For now for the first time he felt as if between him and all the people around him there was a fearful whirlpool which he had never noticed before.

He lit a cigarette, walked up and down the room a couple of times, and leaned against the table again. Outside the window the snowflakes, regularly, slowly, indifferently, as though they were dancing in the air to some mysterious music, came down and settled on the edge of the gabled roof. Involuntarily, he started thinking again of the good old days, when he used to go with his mother and father to their village in Arak. During the day he would sleep alone under a shady tree in the deep grass, the same place where Shir Ali used to fill his pipe and sit on the threshing sledge. And his daughter with her long red veil would wait for hours there for her father. The thresher with its plaintive moaning would crush the golden sheaves of corn. The oxen, their backs sore from the load, with their long horns and broad foreheads, went round and round until sunset. Now he was just like those oxen. Now he knew what these animals felt. He too had spent all his life with his eyes shut, walking around in circles, like a donkey in a mill, like those oxen who pulled the threshing sledge around over the wheat. For long monotonous hours he had sat behind his desk in the customs building day after day, turning the same white papers black. All this he remembered. Now and then his colleague looked at the clock and yawned, picked up his pen and wrote down the figures again and again in their columns, made them tally, added them up, went through the pile of books on his desk—but then he had something to keep him going. He knew that although his eyes, his mind, his youth, and his strength were

disappearing bit by bit, nevertheless, in the evening he would see Bahram and his daughter and his wife and they would all be happy, and his tiredness would leave him. But now he could not stand the thought of any of them. All three had had a part in bringing him to this.

Suddenly he seemed to make up his mind. He went and sat at his writing table, opened the drawer and took out the small automatic which he always took with him on journeys. He tested it. It was loaded. He looked into the cold, dark barrel and slowly raised it and placed it against his temple, but the sight of Bahram's bloody face came to his mind. In the end he put it in his trouser pocket.

He got up again. In the hall he put on his coat and galoshes, he picked up his umbrella and went out. The street was quiet. The snow swirled slowly in the air. He set off at once, although he did not know where he was going. He just wanted to get away from this house, from all these terrible things that had happened.

He came out on to a main street. Everything was cold and white and sad. The wheels of droshkies had formed furrows in the snow. He walked slowly, lifting his feet high with every step. A car passed close beside him and splashed his head and face with slush and mud. He stopped to look at his clothes. He was smothered in mud. It seemed to console him. He saw a boy selling matches. He called to him and bought a box, but when he looked at the boy, he noticed he had blue eyes, a small mouth, and brown hair. He started thinking of Bahram. His body trembled, and he set off again. Suddenly he stopped in front of a shop window. He went up to it and pushed his forehead against the cold glass. His hat nearly fell off. In the window toys were laid out. He rubbed the window with his sleeve to wipe off the mist, but it was no use. In front of him was a big doll with a red face and blue eyes. It was smiling. For a while he stared at it vacantly. The thought came to him that if this doll were Homa's, how happy it would make her! The shopkeeper opened the door, and he walked on again. He passed through two back streets, one after the other. A man selling chickens appeared in front of him sitting beside his basket full of birds. Three chickens and a cockerel, their legs tied together, had been put on top of the basket. Their red feet shivered with the cold. On the snow beside the man were drops of red blood. A little further on a boy with no hair

was sitting in front of the porch of a house. His elbows poked out of his torn shirt.

He noticed all these things unconscious of where he was or where he was going. He did not feel the snow, and the umbrella he had brought with him had remained closed in his hand. He went into another quiet back street and sat on a doorstep. The snow was heavier. He opened the umbrella. Tiredness began to overcome him; his head felt heavy, and his eyes slowly closed.

The sound of someone talking brought him to himself. He got up. It was dark. He thought back over what had happened that day, even about the bald boy he had seen sitting on the porch with his elbows sticking out of his shirt, and the wet red feet of the hens shivering with cold on the basket, and the blood which had dripped on the snow. Twinges of hunger led him to a confectioners where he bought some buns and ate them as he walked along, drifting like a shadow without interest through the back streets.

When he got home, it was two o'clock in the morning. He dropped into a comfortable armchair. An hour later the intensity of the cold woke him up. He went and lay on his bed fully clothed and pulled the bedclothes over him. He dreamed he was in a room and that same boy he had seen selling matches was wearing black and sitting behind a desk on which there was a big doll which had blue eyes and smiled. In front of him three men stood with folded arms. His daughter Homa came in with a candle in her hand. Behind her a man with a white blood-stained scar on his face came in and took the hands of Homa and the boy with his tray of matches. When he tried to go out, two hands appeared from behind the curtain pointing a small automatic at him. Hodayun woke up frightened with a headache.

For two weeks he lived like that. During the day he went to the office, returning home only late at night to sleep. Sometimes, in the afternoons, he found himself passing near Homa's school without realizing how. When it was time for the children to come out, he hid around the corner. He was afraid that Mashhadi Ali, the servant from his father-in-law's house, would see him. One by one he looked the children up and down, but he could not find Homa among them. Then his application for transfer was accepted, and it was proposed he should go to Kermanshah.

The day before he was to go Hodayun got everything ready. He even went to the garage, saw the coach and bought his ticket. In spite of the insistence of the garage manager, since he had not yet shut his cases, instead of going at dusk that day he arranged to set off for Kermanshah the following morning.

When he got home, he went straight to his own room where his writing table was. The room was in chaos. Cold ashes were strewn all over the floor in front of the stove. The violet-colored material his wife was embroidering and the envelope which had contained Bahram's will were still lying on the table. He picked up the envelope and tore it down the middle, but he saw a piece of writing which before, in his extreme haste, he had not noticed. He fitted the pieces together on the table and read:

"You will no doubt receive this letter after my death. I realize that this sudden decision of mine will surprise you, since I never used to do anything without confiding in you. But in order that there should be no secret between us, I confess I loved your wife Badri. For four years I struggled with myself. In the end I won, and the demon which had awoken inside me I killed to stop myself from betraying you. I offer an unworthy gift to Miss Homa which I hope will be accepted.

Yours ever,
Bahram."

For a while Hodayun looked around the room stunned. Now he had no doubt that Homa was his own child. Could he now go away without seeing Homa? He read the letter again and again, put it in his pocket and went out. On his way he went into a toy shop and without hesitation bought the large doll with the red face and blue eyes, and went off towards his father-in-law's house. When he got there he knocked on the door. Mashhadi Ali, their servant, when he saw Hodayun, spoke with tears in his eyes. "Sir, what did I do to deserve this? Miss Homa . . ."

"What's the matter?"

"Sir, you can't imagine how unhappy Miss Homa was without you. Every day I used to take her to school, but Sunday—five days ago—she ran away from school in the afternoon. She had said she was going to

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see her 'Daddy.' We got so worried. Didn't Mohammad tell you? We phoned the police station. Twice I came to your house."

"What—what's happened?"

"Nothing, sir. It was dark when they brought her home. She had lost her way. It was so cold she caught pneumonia. Till the moment she died she kept calling for you. Yesterday we took her to Shah Abdu'l Azim. We buried her right next to Bahram's grave."

Homayun stared at Mashhadi Ali. At this point the box with the doll in it under his arm fell to the ground. Then like a madman he turned up his overcoat collar and walked off towards the garage with long high strides. He no longer needed to close his cases. He could go with this evening's coach. The sooner the better.