

Aan, maan, nabaraan...;
Too, too, escachee...

OR Black Fish

Pouya Pirhosseinloo

Characters:

MIGRANT – A young woman, 27, with black hair and a Middle Eastern face.

OFFICER – A man in late middle age, 57, with salt-and-pepper hair.

Imagine a small glass box. A table and two chairs barely fit inside it. No one can fully stand upright in it, or move with ease. The stage is at once an interrogation room, a bedroom, a living room, and the private library of an immigration officer.

It does not matter whether this box is real or merely traced by light onstage. What matters is this: no one inside it can leave. A small black-and-white television, countless liquor bottles, and dozens of books piled on top of one another are visible across the stage.

The smaller, barer, and more cluttered the stage is performed, the truer it is performed.

The Embassy Officer, formal in both dress and manner, sits across from the Migrant. Among the papers and files beside him rests a bottle of liquor. He drinks continuously as he speaks.

OFFICER

Passport, please.

Silence.

OFFICER

Pass... passport.

MIGRANT

Yes.

OFFICER

Your passport.

MIGRANT

Yes. Here.

The Officer pauses. He stares at the woman in astonishment. A long, unnatural silence.

OFFICER

Name? Your name?

MIGRANT

Scheherazade.

OFFICER

Scheherazade... Sharghi.

MIGRANT

Sharghi.

OFFICER

Scheherazade Sharghi.

MIGRANT

Yes.

A long silence. Suddenly the Officer lunges toward the Migrant, stretching himself across the table. He begins caressing her face. Slowly, his hand passes over her cheeks and beneath her eyes.

Then he pulls himself back and settles once more into his chair.

OFFICER

Scheherazade.

MIGRANT

Yes.

OFFICER

What is the purpose of your travel?

MIGRANT

Study.

OFFICER

Study?

MIGRANT

I have a university admission. Full scholarship.

OFFICER

Full scholarship?

MIGRANT

Literature... Comparative Literature.

OFFICER

Where are you staying?

MIGRANT

Yes.

OFFICER

Where? Your accommodation.

MIGRANT

The City I...

OFFICER

Not the city. The place. Your residence.

MIGRANT

Yes.

OFFICER

Your English isn't good?

MIGRANT

It's good.

OFFICER

Are you scared?

MIGRANT

I have an IELTS score of 7.5. I have the documents with me.

OFFICER

Where are you staying?

MIGRANT

At a friend's house.

OFFICER

Mm-hm...

MIGRANT

Just until the university residence is ready.

A long silence. The Officer stares at her with strange bewilderment.

OFFICER

Private residence of immediate family.

MIGRANT

Yes. A private residence.

OFFICER

Private residence of immediate family.

MIGRANT

They're friends of mine. Until the university dorm is ready.

OFFICER

Friends?

MIGRANT

Yes. An old friend.

OFFICER

Your accommodation needs further review.

MIGRANT

Why?

OFFICER

Your accommodation...

MIGRANT

What's the problem?

OFFICER

The residence! Suspicious address. One person. No clear relationship.

MIGRANT

I read the embassy guidelines about accommodation very carefully.

OFFICER

Here, the border officer decides. Not the embassy.

MIGRANT

If it seems suspicious, then investigate it.

OFFICER

Most of these addresses and letters are fake. We can't let someone into the country when we don't even know where they'll be sleeping tonight.

MIGRANT

My documents are complete. I have money with me. I have my university acceptance.

OFFICER

It doesn't make sense to stay at a stranger's house.

MIGRANT

They're not strangers. They're my friends.

OFFICER

Why?

MIGRANT

Why?!

OFFICER

Why?

MIGRANT

It's a chain. Someone once did the same for them. And when I get permanent residency, I'll do the same for many others.

OFFICER

But your visa is a student visa. You don't have permanent residency.

MIGRANT

I mean years from now. I wasn't talking about my current visa. I mean if the legal process gets approved.

(Silence.)

Legally.

OFFICER

So you're not planning to go back?

MIGRANT

I don't understand.

OFFICER

You mean you don't intend to return? After your visa ends, you're planning to claim asylum so you can get permanent residency.

MIGRANT

Asylum?

OFFICER

Yes. Refugee status.

MIGRANT

I never said such a thing.

OFFICER

You said permanent residency. Yet your visa is temporary. A student visa.

MIGRANT

I was saying... Look, what I was saying is that this kind of support among our people is something completely normal... that people would want to...

OFFICER

You said your English was good.

MIGRANT

My English is good. I took the IELTS just last month—

OFFICER

Go wait over there.

The Migrant struggles, unwilling to accept this new situation.

MIGRANT

My documents are complete, sir.

OFFICER

Further review is required.

MIGRANT

Why?

OFFICER

Wait over there.

MIGRANT

Please. Look at this. The address confirmation...

OFFICER

Wait over there. This is the last warning I'm giving you.

MIGRANT

Okay. Alright.

Angry and exhausted, the Migrant walks to the middle of the stage with her small backpack-suitcase.

The Officer tidies his belongings, picks up his bottle, and, after a delay, turns back toward the Migrant.

OFFICER

What do you have with you?

MIGRANT

My suitcase is on the other side of the gate.

OFFICER

What's inside it?

MIGRANT

What's inside it?

OFFICER

Yes. What belongings do you have?

MIGRANT

Mostly clothes. Some food. A few books.

OFFICER

Why books?

MIGRANT

Well... books. Some of them are old. There aren't PDFs of them... I still prefer paper-

OFFICER

What's in your backpack?

MIGRANT

My laptop, perfume, a power bank, and a book. Do you want to see?

OFFICER

Of course, I want to see.

MIGRANT

That's all. Charger, a notebook...

OFFICER

A diary?

MIGRANT

No. Just a regular notebook. I write down my tasks.

OFFICER

And a little bit about your mother too, hm?

MIGRANT

What?

OFFICER

A little... about your mother.

MIGRANT

It's just an ordinary notebook. A daily to-do list...

He mocks her.

OFFICER

And a little of the city you used to live in. The park you loved. Some memories of your father. That café whose coffee you liked. Probably a few friends too. And of course... the poems you loved.

MIGRANT

I left all of them behind. Deliberately.
I only brought a little of their shadow with me.
Ghosts of the things I'm supposed to forget...

OFFICER

And your dreams...

MIGRANT

Dreams?

OFFICER

Yes. Those beautiful dreams you once had for your country.

MIGRANT

I buried all of them before I left.

OFFICER

Good...

MIGRANT

Shouldn't everyone be like that?

OFFICER

They should be.

MIGRANT

Isn't everyone like that?

OFFICER

No... they're not. Most people who pass through this gate – the ones who are never going back... you know...

They know they're leaving forever, and still they're full of all this sentimental bullshit.

You know, even the way people die is dramatic. So imagine immigration. Right?

MIGRANT

What do I have to swear on?

OFFICER

The King! The monarchy – though it itself belongs somewhere else now... The Constitution...

MIGRANT

That's not what I mean.

OFFICER

You swear loyalty. You swear to sever your previous ties..."

MIGRANT

Not a citizenship oath. I mean a promise right now, so that you believe me... In our language it's slang, an expression... I only came here to study. I'm not looking for any-

OFFICER

That's exactly what someone who is looking for something would say

MIGRANT

Yes, yes.

The Migrant tries to remain calm.

MIGRANT

I... I'll wait for the review process, and then hopefully I'll be allowed in. I don't want to say anything that...

OFFICER

You don't want to say anything?

MIGRANT

Anything that could cause trouble.

OFFICER

The fact that you're not saying anything – that itself is trouble.

MIGRANT

I mean... yes. Right.

The Officer speaks with anger and contempt.

OFFICER

You see them?

See how they stand in line in front of immigration officers like polite little mice? Trying so hard to prove what nice people they are, just so the officer doesn't feel uncomfortable?

They've always dreamed of coming to the West. Becoming Western. Thinking like Westerners. Talking like them. Look at them – doing everything they can to hide their accents. They want to become the closest imitation possible

And then four days later, half of them turn anti-Western. Anti-war.

"Oh no, what if our taxes turn into missiles falling on our parents' heads?"

Then go back to the shithole you came from.

MIGRANT

But I'm not like the people you're describing.

OFFICER

Wait here. Immigration police will call you in.

MIGRANT

When?

OFFICER

Morning.

MIGRANT

Morning?

OFFICER

We need to run a verification.

MIGRANT

Verification?

OFFICER

Verify your letter. Through local police.

MIGRANT

How am I supposed to stay here until morning?

The Officer rises from his seat. He pushes things aside so he can sleep on the table. The bottle is empty. He finds another bottle, drinks deeply from it, and pulls a blanket over himself.

MIGRANT

Why aren't you sleeping, then?

OFFICER

I can't sleep.

MIGRANT

Since when?

OFFICER

Ever since I can remember. Since the war.

MIGRANT

Which war?

OFFICER

What difference does it make? There's always a war. Imagine whichever one you remember. Since then, sleep has never come to me again.

MIGRANT

So that's why you drink so much? You want it to make you sleep?

Police:

It's *Sab'eh Nā'emeh*... Do you know what that means? Seven cups of wine that the ancients, the sages, used to drink at the end of the day so they could fall asleep. They drank seven drinks and dreamed of seven kings who *slept in the 7th heaven*.

MIGRANT

Do you want me to tell you a story? Maybe that'll help you fall asleep.

Police:

A story about what?

MIGRANT

Anything, That was my thesis project. I used to travel to distant villages, collecting forgotten stories. My mind is still full of them.

OFFICER

Go on, Tell me a story, fascinating one, to help me pass these sleepless hours of night.

MIGRANT

There was once a merchant from Rey who had a wife like a jewel. One day, while the merchant was away on a long voyage to India, an old friend of his – a Tylor – came to his house in search of him.

He greeted the lady and asked after the merchant. She said he had gone to India for trade; one year had passed, and another would pass before his return.

The Tylor said: *What kind of trader leaves behind such a jewel, for distant lands? The treasure is here – what greater treasure does he seek abroad?*

The lady replied:

You see gold. He saw only dust.

The Tylor entered the house. He tore open the lady's silk dress and saw her body like pure gold, and two jewels upon her, shining like suns. He took her into his arms, and for an entire day and night denied himself all earthly food, feeding only upon gold and jewels.

OFFICER

That gold – was it the reward of the Tylor, or the torment of the traveling merchant?

MIGRANT

The merchant no longer had any gold... He had left his gold behind, chasing the spices of India

OFFICER

Ridiculous...

All these old tales and fables are ridiculous. A pile of sexist stories soaked in racism. Their time has expired.

MIGRANT

The fact that it angers you means that you–

OFFICER

It means nothing.

MIGRANT

It means you're seeing yourself reflected in the story's mirror.

OFFICER

Am I the merchant? In search of what gold did *I* come to this land of spices?

MIGRANT

The Lion said the same thing to Demne¹.

He asked: *Do you mean me? Why do you speak in parables? Are these stories directed at me?*

And Demne. replied:

Your Majesty resembles that king who married a beautiful maiden, yet soon after, the girl's face turned pale and withered, and all the physicians of the world failed to cure her...

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kal%C4%ABla_wa-Dimna

And the Lion said:

Tell it, for I greatly desire to hear it...

OFFICER

Tell it...

(Silence.)

For I... greatly desire to hear it...

MIGRANT

The king was out hunting when he saw a beautiful girl. He fell in love with her and took her as his wife. But after he possessed her, fate decreed that the girl fell ill².

The king summoned the greatest physicians in the land. Each prescribed remedies and ointments, yet nothing helped.. Her face turned yellow, her body thin, her spirit sorrowful – like a flower withering away.

Until at last a divine physician appeared. He said:
I shall uncover the secret behind the girl's pale face.

So he took her pulse and began naming cities, professions, signs ... until the moment the girl's pulse quickened, and her her pulse quickened, and she grew more restless than before.

(A long silence.)

MIGRANT

"And when the tale turned to this point, the dawn came and Shahrzad sealed her lips against the rest of the story."³

*The Migrant rises. The Officer
tries to follow her.*

OFFICER

No, no... continue it. I want to know what happened.

² <http://www.masnavi.net/2/50/eng/1/204/>
https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.151299/2015.151299.The-Mathnawi-Of-Jalaluddin-Rumi_djvu.txt

³ "–And Shahrazad perceived the dawn of day and ceased saying her permitted say." <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3435/3435-h/3435-h.htm>

He grabs the liquor bottle and drinks again.

MIGRANT

What are you doing? Don't do this to yourself.

OFFICER

Vin Bahs ba Salase Gasale Miravad. And with the three washers cups of wine this dispute goeth⁴

The hangover-breakers. A set of three cups you drink to wash away last night's seven... cleanse them... erase them...

MIGRANT

You're becoming a drunk. You need to pull yourself together.

OFFICER

Tell me the rest of the story...

What was wrong with the girl?

MIGRANT

You have work to go to...

When night comes, I'll tell you the rest.

Once more they sit across from one another like an official interview in the immigration room. The Officer becomes serious again, trying to compose himself. Several times he exhales loudly through his nose, trying to steady himself.

OFFICER

Is this your first time here?

MIGRANT

Yes.

OFFICER

Your documents.

⁴ <https://ugarit.ialigner.com/text.php?id=1589>

"And with the three washers cups of wine this dispute goeth"

MIGRANT

Passport.

OFFICER

What is your purpose of travel?

MIGRANT

I have a student visa.

OFFICER

Student?

MIGRANT

Student.

OFFICER

For a doctorate?

MIGRANT

I've been accepted. Full scholarship.

OFFICER

Scholarship?

MIGRANT

Full funding. Twenty-five thousand a year.

OFFICER

Why? Didn't they have universities there?

MIGRANT

Wasn't God's earth vast enough⁵?

OFFICER

No. It wasn't. It isn't.

It's neither vast, nor can you truly travel from one place to another.

There is only this place...

The whole world is right here... this small...

A prison you can never escape.

⁵

https://wiki.ahlolbait.com/%D8%A2%DB%8C%D9%87_97_%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%87_%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A1

'Was not Allah's earth vast enough so that you might migrate in it?'

MIGRANT

You're the one who trapped yourself here. Not me...
I... there's a vast world ahead of me. I'm arriving in a new
country. A new life.

OFFICER

An illusion.

MIGRANT

There are millions of happy immigrants in the world...
You don't get to decide for everyone else.

OFFICER

They pay me here precisely so I *can* decide.

MIGRANT

According to the law.

OFFICER

Here, *I* am the law.

MIGRANT

No, you're not. No one stands above the law.

OFFICER

Oh yes they do. The people who write the laws.

MIGRANT

Did *you* write them?

OFFICER

They were written with my vote.

MIGRANT

You're a foreigner too. Just like me.
Your feet reached this place a few years earlier, that's all.

OFFICER

Documents for the place you'll be staying.

MIGRANT

It's a friend's house. Just for a few days. I'll stay there
until the university housing is sorted out.

OFFICER

University?

MIGRANT

The dormitory.

OFFICER

And then what?

MIGRANT

It's a chain. Everyone helps their own people somehow. You give students a place to stay for a few days, help them with applications, share job offers...

OFFICER

No. No, no...

MIGRANT

I—

OFFICER

You no longer have the right to remain connected to anyone from there.

MIGRANT

Why? That's every person's right—

OFFICER

You have to erase it. Whatever it was — it no longer exists. Do you understand?

What's your mother tongue? You must forget it quickly. Where do you get your news? You abandon every news agency you once knew. You read no text, hear no news, no books — unless they're in English. You watch no films except mainstream films.

YouTube, Spotify, Google... you create new accounts. No recommendation from your old world should ever reach you again.

Listen, you must forget that the damned Middle East ever existed.

You must believe it was never there.

Believe your mother's name was Jennifer. Your father's name was John.

Believe your eyes are blue. Your hair is blonde.

And that damned backpack and suitcase of yours – stuffed with useless junk – you throw them away too.

Everything you need, you buy again from the beginning.

In fury, he empties the backpack and throws it aside. Silence falls everywhere.

MIGRANT

"A stranger arrived one day, looking dusty, tired, sad, and frightened. He was pulling a big suitcase.

The Bird asked: 'Hey! Hi there! What's in your suitcase?'

'My suitcase? Well,... there's a teacup.'

'That's a big suitcase for a little teacup?'

*'But there is a table for my teacup and a wooden chair for me to sit on, too. ... And there's a little kitchen in a wooden cabin where I make my tea. **That is my home.** It's on a hillside surrounded by trees, and on a clear day you can see the sea. It's all there, in my suitcase.'*

The stranger said these things and, exhausted from his long way, fell asleep.

The Fox said, 'I do not trust him. How do we know he's telling the truth? Someone pass me a big rock, we're going to break open the suitcase and see what's inside.'

*It broke the lock. The suitcase opened.*⁶

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COLOpT1YMcs>
<https://freelibrary.overdrive.com/media/5116259>

The Migrant falls silent and walks away.

OFFICER

What was inside the suitcase?

MIGRANT

Inside the suitcase?

OFFICER

Yes. What was inside it?

MIGRANT

Anything.

OFFICER

What do you mean, "anything"?

MIGRANT

Anything that exists in your mind. Anything you wish to imagine.

OFFICER

I'm not supposed to guess, or imagine things—

MIGRANT

Why not?

OFFICER

No. It's ridiculous.

MIGRANT

There are many stories with open endings...

OFFICER

Useless intellectual stories...

The ending of a story is its most important part. The whole meaning of a story lies in its ending.

MIGRANT

Not all stories are supposed to have meaning.

OFFICER

Is this your way of escaping? Because you're inventing these stories yourself, and none of them have endings... hm?

MIGRANT

A broken teacup. And an old photograph.

A long silence.

OFFICER

So he was telling the truth...

MIGRANT

Mm-hm.

OFFICER

Was he carrying his loneliness with him?"

MIGRANT

Even without an ending, that much was obvious...

The Officer finds his small black-and-white television and switches it on. The television shows nothing but static.

The Officer has grown visibly ill and worn down. Sitting before the television, he changes channels repeatedly, but every channel is snow and static. He strikes the television a few times, then finally sits and watches the static in silence.

The Migrant rummages through the room. She flips through the books.

MIGRANT

Have you read all these books?

OFFICER

No.

MIGRANT

Then why collect them?

Silence. The Migrant opens a play script.

MIGRANT

"Suddenly..."

OFFICER

"And suddenly. *Va Nagahan, Hādhā Habībullāh. Māta fī hubbillāh. Hādhā qatīlullāh. Māta bi-sayfillāh.*"

He opens the book.

MIGRANT

It's my favorite play, too.

They say Americans don't like long titles. If they staged it here, they'd probably shorten the title to simply: And Suddenly.

OFFICER

Father! Father! From where does your voice call me?

I have forgotten your face. Forgotten it completely.

Last night I wept before Fatemeh. She looked at me and said nothing, Father! She looked at me and said nothing.

I wept and tangled my hands in her long braided hair, pressing her face against my wet cheeks.

I am a stranger. To whom shall I speak of my pain?

I clutched at her hair and wrapped my hands around her neck. She said nothing...

MIGRANT

One of our professors used to say the main character of the drama drinks constantly and keeps reading books, and that's why he's become like this – this performance, this confusion, these fractured lines.

It all comes from his point of view. It's his own voice echoing inside his head, mixed together with the voices and texts of every book he has ever read.

OFFICER

Where is your smile, the smile that calls me toward death?

Your glances are nameless beasts that spread poisoned wings toward me with their enormous eyes.

Your lips, darker than all existence itself, pour wave after wave of burning fire onto my decaying body.

And the furious serpents that are your hands come twisting,

trembling, to envelop me and caress me with terrifying pressure.
Your love. Your love. Your love is enough.

MIGRANT

Morning's come. Aren't you going to work?

OFFICER

No.

MIGRANT

Why? Did something happen?

OFFICER

N...

MIGRANT

You don't want to tell me?

OFFICER

There's a war...

MIGRANT

Here?

...

Speak clearly. What happened? Is there really a war?

OFFICER

Mm-hm.

MIGRANT

Is this war all about the 51st state?

OFFICER

Not here. Home.

MIGRANT

Didn't you say to forget it? Didn't you say to throw it all
away?

That you should forget where the Middle East even is?

OFFICER

"In the beginning, when the 'Giver of Forms' wanted to bring me into actuality, he created me in the form of a falcon. In the realm where I was were other falcons, and we spoke together and understood each other's words."

Silence.

One day the hunters laid a trap, filled it with grain, and, in this manner, caught me. They took me from the land where my home belonged. Then they stitched my eyes shut, put four different bonds on me and appointed ten men to watch over me. Five of them faced me, while the other five kept their backs to me.

MIGRANT

Then tear those damned bonds open.
 Either go back to the land where your home was, or forget it.
 What kind of limbo have you built for yourself?
 What do I care anyway? Why are you telling me all this? You seriously freaked me out – I thought there was an actual war...

OFFICER

When the war ends...

Yeah... when this war ends... when this war ends, I'll delete every app on my phone.
 My Google account... YouTube, Spotify... all of it.
 I'll erase all my social media.
 I'll forget the language I used to speak.
 All these books... every one of them, I'll burn them.
 I'll forget where that damned Middle East even is...
 Even the poems I know...

MIGRANT

Stamp my passport. Let me go.
 I've been here for more than thirty hours. "I'm going crazy from exhaustion." All my friends, all my family are worried about me...

Please... get up...

With exhaustion, the Officer rises. He drinks several times in succession.

OFFICER *(under his breath)*

"Vin Bahs... ba Salase Gasale Miravad... Vin Bahs ba salase ghasale miravad... Vin bags...And this discussion... is washed away by the Three Cleansers... this discussion is washed away by the Three Cleansers..."

Over his sleepwear he puts on his formal jacket again and sits behind the interrogation desk, more exhausted and disheveled than ever before.

OFFICER

Passport, please.

MIGRANT

Here.

OFFICER

Your name? Scheherazade...

MIGRANT

Scheherazade Sharghi.

OFFICER

Sharghi.

Again, almost tenderly, the Officer strokes the Migrant's face with the back of his hand.

MIGRANT

Yes.

OFFICER

What is the purpose of your travel?

MIGRANT

Study.

OFFICER

University.

MIGRANT

A doctoral program.

OFFICER

Place of residence?

MIGRANT

I'll get a dorm room. University housing.

OFFICER

Until you get the dormitory?

MIGRANT

I'll stay at someone's house...

OFFICER

What relation are they to you?

MIGRANT

One... one of my friends.

OFFICER

Why would someone do such a thing?

MIGRANT

Please.

(pleading)

OFFICER

Is your English good?

MIGRANT

I'm begging you...

OFFICER

Is there a problem?

MIGRANT

I'm tired. I've been here for thirty-four hours. I haven't even managed a few hours of proper sleep.

OFFICER

You'll stay here as long as necessary. Until I'm certain everything is in order.

MIGRANT

Everything *is* in order.

OFFICER

Nothing is in order.

MIGRANT

Please.

OFFICER

You can sign here and return to your country on the first available flight.

MIGRANT

Please. Please. Just tell me what I have to do.

OFFICER

Whatever I say.

MIGRANT

I'm already doing everything you say.

OFFICER

Whatever I say.

MIGRANT

My documents are complete.

A long silence.

OFFICER

I want to see you.

MIGRANT

I don't understand.

OFFICER

You do understand.

MIGRANT

I don't understand what you mean...

OFFICER

Your English isn't very good.

MIGRANT

It is. I understand!

OFFICER

Then you should understand...

This is the only way left for you now.

MIGRANT

Why don't you just say clearly what you want?

OFFICER

I did say it clearly.

MIGRANT

Then say it.

OFFICER

I did say it. I did.

I want to see you. One night. We'll just have dinner together.

That's all.

MIGRANT

I...

OFFICER

Not you, me

The immigrant tries to keep
herself under control.

MIGRANT

You... so many people pass through here, through you... every day.

OFFICER

Yeah. They pass through. Thousands of people.

MIGRANT

Do you do this to all of them?

OFFICER

No... no.

MIGRANT

How have you never been caught?

OFFICER

Never...

MIGRANT

Never what?

OFFICER

I've never said such a thing to anyone before.

And suddenly she explodes.

MIGRANT

You asshole.

OFFICER

Sit down.

MIGRANT

How is this even possible?

OFFICER

Listen.

MIGRANT

There are cameras everywhere here.

OFFICER

Sit down...

MIGRANT

I'll make your life such hell you'll regret ever being born.
I'll report you.

OFFICER

Calm down.

MIGRANT

Shut up! Shut the fuck up, you piece of shit-

OFFICER

Don't make this worse. Let's talk.

MIGRANT

Worse than what? Worse than what, you bastard?

OFFICER

The cameras here don't record sound. I've been here thirty years.

MIGRANT

Don't touch me.

OFFICER

No one will believe you.

MIGRANT

Let go of my hand.

OFFICER

Let's talk.

With all her strength, the Migrant screams and lunges at the Officer. He grabs her wrists, trying to restrain her.

OFFICER

Calm down... calm down...

MIGRANT *(crying)*

You bastard—!

Broken and desperate, the Migrant buries her face in her hands, collapses over the table, and begins to sob.

The Officer rises. He begins filling large one-and-a-half-liter bottles with water and arranging them around the stage. Five or six bottles stand beside one another.

OFFICER

I charged the flashlight. Bought some dry bread too. A few cans of food. Power banks. Matches. Iodine tablets.

MIGRANT

There's no war here. That's the whole reason I came here – so there wouldn't be any war.

OFFICER

There is war. There's been war for years. The fire just isn't here. They keep it burning far away on purpose, so no one here has to see it.

MIGRANT

Then, why are you stockpiling dry bread and water?

OFFICER

"That is my home. It's on a hillside surrounded by trees, and on a clear day you can see the sea. It's all there, in my suitcase."

MIGRANT

It is written in the story that 'The stranger said these things and, exhausted from his long journey, fell asleep.' So you should sleep too..

OFFICER

My eyes won't close.

MIGRANT

Then go back. Let this hell end.

OFFICER

They stitched my eyes shut, put four different bonds on me and appointed ten men to watch over me. Five of them faced me, while the other five kept their backs to me.

MIGRANT

Please. Stamp my passport. Let me go.

Suddenly the sound of a fighter jet is heard. The Officer turns toward the sound.

OFFICER

Do you hear that? A fighter jet.

He turns back toward the Migrant.

Don't be afraid. After a few days, the fear lessens. You know, it's mostly probabilities... once you start calculating the odds, you become less afraid.

MIGRANT

I came here so I wouldn't be afraid anymore.

OFFICER

How many people live in your city?

MIGRANT

My city is the place you refuse to let me enter.

OFFICER

The city you came from. The place where the war happened.

MIGRANT

Ten, Twelve million people.

OFFICER

Every fighter jet strikes an average of three places. Each strike kills or wounds twenty, thirty people. That makes ninety.

Divide twelve million by ninety. That's your probability. Don't be afraid.

MIGRANT

The jets are gone now. Try to sleep a little.

OFFICER

They come back.

And every time they return, there are more of them. More missiles.

But dying and surviving are only probabilities.

The fewer people you love, the less afraid you become.

It's proportional to the number of people you love – that's how many times you die and come back to life.

Let's calculate it. How many people did you say you love? We put that number above the fraction line, then multiply it by–

MIGRANT

I love no one.

I forgot everyone before I came here.

OFFICER

Mm-hm. Good... good...

Throw away your suitcase too. Forget everything else as well.

Forget what language you used to speak. Forget your memories.

Your mother's memories, your father's memories...

"Father! Father! From where does your voice call me?... How beautifully you recited the Qur'an..."

Speak English. Make English memories for yourself. Dream in English.

MIGRANT

A few days before my IELTS exam, the war started.

I was studying English under the sound of fighter jets and bombings.

Whenever the jets came, I thought: *this is the last time I'll ever be here.*

I stopped translating words and sentences inside my head.

I told myself I had to forget that language.

That was the only way I could endure it. Until finally it ended.

OFFICER

It never ends.

MIGRANT

Yes it does. Every nightmare ends eventually.

What do you know about being a woman in the Middle East?

What do you know about being arrested over a piece of cloth?

Humiliated? Photographed like a criminal?

What do you know about spending your whole life fighting even for your most basic rights?

These few hours will end too.

Whether you sleep or not, you'll come back here, stamp that damned passport, and I'll enter.

It ends. Everything ends like this.

OFFICER

Look. See the black spots on my skin? On my clothes?

MIGRANT

I don't want to see them. There are millions of happy immigrants in the world.

I want to be like *them*.

I want to see *them*, not you.

OFFICER

When you heard the fighter jets... didn't part of you hope they'd strike sooner?

Strike before reaching you, empty themselves elsewhere?

MIGRANT

Everyone feels that way.

A missile is only bearable as long as it lands on your neighbor's house.

OFFICER

But I saw it.

I saw it – and heard it – coming closer and closer and closer... until it exploded.

Everything shook. My vision went black.
Then I opened my eyes. Everything was bright.
The earth and the sky were orange. It was daytime.

MIGRANT

You weren't there

OFFICER

I stayed there until the next day.
I walked through the streets crying.

Behind me there was still a mountain of smoke joining the earth
to the sky.

Then rain slowly filled the heavens. Fine, black rain.
And beneath that black rain, I cried black tears for my city,
blackened.

MIGRANT

What you're talking about happened just a few weeks ago. I saw
the videos when they hit the oil depot.

But you've been here for more than thirty years.

OFFICER

And yet I was there, walking and weeping beneath that poisonous
black rain. I called myself. The internet was cut. The lines
were cut.

Between whom are we trapped, Scheherazade?

MIGRANT

Maybe you dreamed it.

OFFICER

I haven't slept in a very long time...

MIGRANT

Nightmares while awake.
You read about it in the news, imagined it... I don't know.

OFFICER

Why won't you believe me? Look.

My whole skin is blistered.
Look at the black spots on my skin, on my clothes.

MIGRANT

You need sleep. You're not well.

OFFICER

Sleep won't come.
Can you tell me a story?

MIGRANT

No. Every time I began telling a story, you refused to close your eyes.

OFFICER

Tell one, Scheherazade. This time I'll sleep. I promise.

MIGRANT

Sleep.

OFFICER

Tell me – that physician who took the pulse of the king's lady... what did he discover?

A long silence.

MIGRANT

The physician sat alone with the lady.
Softly, gently, he asked:
"What city are you from? For the cure of each city's people is different..."

He placed his hand upon her pulse and continued questioning her...

Until he reached the name *Samarkand*.

Then that moon-faced girl let out a cold sigh...
And tears streamed from her eyes like a river...

(Silence.)

The lady was in love with a goldsmith from Samarkand...

OFFICER

Mm-hm...

(Silence.)

I loved her...

Her name was Scheherazade...

MIGRANT

Did she look like me?

OFFICER

Like you...

MIGRANT

With eyes as dark as mine?

OFFICER

Did the physician find the cure?

MIGRANT

The king said:

"Now tell me – what remedy is there? In such sorrow, why delay?"

The physician had to make the lady forget her love for the goldsmith.

So he gave the goldsmith gold and jewels and promises, and brought him into the palace. For a while they lived happily. But after the reunion, the physician poisoned the goldsmith, and before the lady's eyes he slowly began to burn away and dissolve.

"Since he became ugly and ill-favoured and sallow, little by little he became cold in her heart."

The Officer rises, a liquor bottle in his hand. Drunk, he struggles toward the interrogation desk.

OFFICER

Passport... please.

MIGRANT

Passport...

OFFICER

Y-your... your name...

MIGRANT

Your name?

OFFICER

My name?

MIGRANT

Yeah... what's your name?

OFFICER

Me?... I... I don't remember my name.

MIGRANT

How can someone forget their own name?

OFFICER

Only I ask questions here...

No one's asked my name in years...

MIGRANT

But you must have a name. Think about it.

OFFICER

If I think... maybe I drank too much... maybe it'll come back to me.

MIGRANT

Give me your passport.

OFFICER

Pass...?

MIGRANT

Yeah. Your passport.

*He rises, looks around aimlessly,
then sits again.*

OFFICER

Passport?

MIGRANT

Your name's inside it.

OFFICER

As long as I can remember, I've been here. Here, you can't leave
and you can't go back. You don't need a passport for this place.

What about you? Do you have a passport?

MIGRANT

Uhum ...

*She hands him her passport once
more.*

OFFICER

Name. What is your name?

MIGRANT

Scheherazade.

OFFICER

Purpose of your travel?

A long silence.

MIGRANT

I've thought about it.

(Silence.)

Fine... I'll come see you one night. Just one night. Just
dinner.

We'll talk. I'll see your library... your plays...

That book, *And Suddenly*, the one you said you loved.

OFFICER

Good.

MIGRANT

I just want to know why?

OFFICER

When my visa came through... only mine came through.

We waited a month. Hers never arrived.

But it wasn't rejected either.

MIGRANT

You had to leave.

Your university deadline was approaching. Your visa would've expired. Right?

OFFICER

Uhum.

MIGRANT

And then?

OFFICER

And then...

(Silence.)

That was it.

A few weeks. A few months. Then it ended.

Little by little you realize you were mistaken.

That person was never who you imagined they were.

How much time and life is a person supposed to spend enduring someone else's complaints and excuses?

How long are you supposed to cling to a past that's slowly dying?

MIGRANT

What was her name?

OFFICER

I don't really remember...

Silence.

What was your name again?

MIGRANT

Scheherazade.

OFFICER

Ohhh... Scheherazade.

MIGRANT

Scheherazade.

OFFICER

Yeah... that was her name too.

Like you.

(Silence.)

She looked at people the way you do.

(Silence.)

And her voice... her voice sounded like yours.

(Silence.)

She smiled kindly. Looked kindly. Spoke kindly.

(Silence.)

Like you.

(Silence.)

And when I was at my loneliest...

(Silence.)

...she would gently squeeze my hands...

I just wanted to see her one more time.

Talk. Sit in silence. Look at each other. That's all.

The Officer stamps the Migrant's passport and hands it back to her.

OFFICER

Stamped. You can go now.
Welcome to your new country.

MIGRANT

What if I'm lying?
What if I say yes now, but the moment I step outside this place,
I never see you again?

OFFICER

Mm-hm.

MIGRANT

Don't you want to keep my passport with you?

OFFICER

Scheherazade never lied. Even when she had to.

MIGRANT

But I'm a different Shahrzad. We only resemble each other—that's all. Actually, I doubt we even resemble each other. It's just a feeling, a faint similarity that somehow reminds you of her.

You've only known me for fifty hours. And even then, only through a few interrogations

OFFICER

Questions and answers.

MIGRANT

Questions and answers.

OFFICER

A legal procedure.

MIGRANT

Yeah. Yeah. That's the word. Legal.
My English still isn't very good.

OFFICER

You should...

(A long silence.)

You should forget your mother tongue...
Think in English... dream in English...

The Migrant rises.

MIGRANT

Can I go now?

*The Officer stands and walks
toward his bed. He drinks a few
more mouthfuls, throws the empty
bottle aside, and curls himself
beneath the blanket.*

OFFICER *(still beneath the blanket)*

I didn't think you'd come.

MIGRANT

I didn't come. I just haven't left yet.

OFFICER

At university, I became friends with a few people.
Most foreigners become friends with other foreigners. They even
build Chinatowns, Little Indias, Iranian neighborhoods...
Foreigners always try to find people who are similar to them.

But not you. You mustn't stay inside your safe zone.

Alright, Scheherazade?

MIGRANT

new people... new colors... A new life...

OFFICER

There was a Ukrainian girl...
Her eyes, her hair, her skin, the way she spoke...
She was the strangest thing compared to the world I had grown up
in – and that alone was enough.

I had to leave my safe zone.

The Little Black Fish. You leave your pond and swim into the ocean. You have to become friends with the strangest fish imaginable. New adventures. A new life...

Isn't it ridiculous to be born in one pond and die in the same pond? That's it?

MIGRANT

What was her name?

OFFICER

Scheherazade asked: "*What was her name?*"

I said, "It's nothing."

She said, "That *nothing* seems to be a very important thing in what you tell me."

I said, "she's just an ordinary friend. Someone from university. Just one of the students. One of those people I hang out with and go places with. Relationships like that are completely normal here, Just like...?"

she said. "Yeah, I could tell."

MIGRANT

I could tell.

OFFICER

I asked, "What will you do if your visa doesn't come by the end of the month?"

She said, "Nothing."

She said, "For years, I've been slowly burning down my entire life... I sold everything I had spent years collecting."

"Now all that's left of me is a backpack and a suitcase weighing 22 kilos and 900 grams. I left 100 grams for the possible difference between the airport scale and the one at home."

I said: "Well?"

She said: "That's it. I'm tired. I want to stay here and apply to study for a master's instead."

I said: "You never truly wanted to leave in the first place."

She said: "The embassy doesn't look into my heart."

I said: "Actually, Olena used to say—"

She said: "So her name is Olena?"

I said yes.

And then... she said nothing...Nothing at all...She disappeared into silence.

MIGRANT

Olena...

OFFICER

Yeah... her name was Olena.

It lasted a few months. Then it ended.

MIGRANT

That's how it is. Every love dies one day.

OFFICER

Where are you going?

MIGRANT

I'm leaving... I'll stay with a friend for a while and then I'll move to the university residence.

OFFICER

But you promised you'd come see me.

MIGRANT

I had to. I had to find some way to escape this damned airport and these filthy immigration rooms after fifty hours.

OFFICER

Impossible. You... you... you're part of my imagination.

You do what *I* want you to do...

MIGRANT

No. I do whatever hurts you more.

OFFICER

But Scheherazade stayed.

She told the king stories for a thousand and one nights...

MIGRANT

Old fables full of lies. Full of comforting endings.

Real life is nothing like them.

Why should Scheherazade stay beside that filthy King Shahryar?

That monstrous king who slept beside a virgin every night and

cut off her head before dawn?

OFFICER

Scheherazade pitied the king. She loved him.

She stayed to heal his wounds.

MIGRANT

No.

Everything she did was out of fear for her own life.

The real world isn't like fables. It ends more bitterly.

People die alone inside their own loneliness.

*Scheherazade moves to leave, but
the Officer desperately tries to
keep her there.*

OFFICER

Did I tell you the tale of the king and the lady? The one who
loved the goldsmith of Samarkand?

*Scheherazade turns back toward
him.*

MIGRANT

The physician lured the goldsmith into the palace with promises
of money and gold... then poisoned him.

OFFICER

*"As the goldsmith grew ugly and ill-favoured and sallow, little
by little he became cold in her heart.*

MIGRANT

Surely that was the only way the lady could forget her love for the goldsmith.

OFFICER

After she found out she was sick, every day she went live on her page and read one of her poems.

The cancer had spread through her whole body...

Like the goldsmith, Scheherazade's physician poisoned her a little more every day... and day by day her face grew paler...

She refused to shave her head. Within weeks all her hair thinned and turned white. Then it began falling out in handfuls.

The shadows beneath her eyes darkened. Her gaze...

(Silence.)

...deeper than ever. Full of astonishment. Full of grief...

MIGRANT

Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part.

Nay, I have done, you get no more of me;

And I am glad, yea glad with all my heart,

That thus so cleanly I myself can free.

OFFICER

"As he grew ugly, and ill-favoured and sallow, little by little..."

No... you lied, Scheherazade... The physician lied...

No fire dies this way.

Until every piece of wood is burned, no fire goes out.

She was burning... And I too must burn until I'm finished...

What am I saying?

I need to gather more water... buy more dry bread...

They've started striking the power plants one by one...

He threatened us. Said: "I will turn the world into hell for you." Said—

No... no... I need iodine tablets. They say if you don't leave quickly enough, they'll use atomic bombs.

Don't go... wait. Wait. Let's flip a coin".. Let's see who has to close their eyes... who has to go...

You stay. If you stay, maybe I can leave...

The Officer has become childlike now. Exhausted, he moves from side to side with childish gestures.

MIGRANT

Why don't you delete your accounts? Why don't you turn off that damned television?

You promised... stop reading the news... you promised you'd forget it...

OFFICER

You promised if she became ugly and withered and pale... slowly everything would grow cold...

Didn't you go live so I could watch you turn yellow and lose feeling for you?

Wait... wait... now I'll count ten-twenty-thirty-forty...

MIGRANT

I have to go.

OFFICER

I know this one... I know it...

Wait...

Ān... mān... navārā...

To... to... eskāchi...

Āni... māni... kalāchi...

OFFICER

Wait... wait...

I'll close my eyes, you go hide...

Now it is the Officer's turn. He covers his eyes and repeats the rhyme. The Migrant exits the stage.

OFFICER

Ān... mān... navārā...

To... to... eskāchi...

Āni... māni... kalāchi...

Ready or not, here I come...

I'm coming...

The Officer opens his eyes. He is alone. Suddenly he brightens with excitement.

Did you see that school?

You know they strike it before the game even begins...

A colorful missile... we built it ourselves, us immigrants...

They hit it with that...

Some of the children are torn to pieces...

Doesn't matter... It's war, right? Doesn't matter... we'll build better ones... tomorrow will come... we'll make better children...

The rest of the children run away... run into the prayer room... screaming... crying...

That's the best moment. The perfect moment for another—

The second missile arrives.

He lights up with manic excitement. He bursts into hysterical laughter.

Don't be afraid... it's nothing, sweetheart...

They brought excavators to bury them...

Doesn't matter... later we'll make better ones... prettier children...

Suddenly his mood shifts. He begins to sing.

"Degh ke nadaani ke chist gereftam,
degh ke nadaani...

Haal-e tamaam az aan-e to baada,
Gar che nadaaram khaaneh dar in jaa,
khaaneh dar aan jaa...

Sar ke nadaaram ke tasht biaari
ke sar dahamat sar,

Bi to gadaayam bebin,
gadaay-e koocheh-ye donyaa...⁷

Again his mood changes.

They brought excavators...

It's not hard... the girls are tiny... little boys too...
Just dig a little space for each one... it'll be fine...

A hundred of them... no, two hundred... not more than that...
We'll do it quickly for them...

The physician said: "*Since she became ugly...*"

Isn't it all earth anyway? Isn't it all dust?

He said: "*Since she became ill-favoured...*"

⁷ The poem should be sung in Persian.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67j_ANnmnRw

<https://soundcloud.com/mahmood-moghadam/iraneh-khanoom-mohsen-namjoo>

He said: "Since she became sallow-cheeked..."

Isn't it sallow already?

Dust... all of it sallow-colored dust...

They're pouring earth over them now...

My burning is finally ending...

Now I can grow cold... now I can sleep...

He slowly calms.

Children die every day, everywhere... So what?

What are all these sentimental games? These cheap lamentations?

Didn't Scheherazade die too?...

Did Scheherazade die?

Did Scheherazade slowly grow pale? Did she die?

My homeland is no bundle of tales

Not a memory...

My homeland is the stranger's anger against sorrow...

Why won't it turn yellow?

Why won't this damned earth wither?

So I can grow cold... so I can end...

"An old man weeping for his sons and his field

This land is my bone's skin

And my heart...

Over its grasses, flies like a palm

Hang me from the branches of a palm tree

Hang me—" ⁸

They buried them... I'm finally growing cold now...

⁸ English:

<https://ae.ok.com/content/en/blog/poems-by-mahmoud-darwish-on-homeland-362896776585445376/>

Arabic:

<https://www.poemist.com/mhmod-droysh/otn>

"where they stitched my eyes shut, put four different bonds on me and appointed ten men to watch over me. Five of them faced me, while the other five kept their backs to me. "

The Officer falls asleep.