

## Red Shawl Series – Third Story

### *Damn the war!*

It was 2:15 and the school bell rang. I walked the school route to the bus station. It took just under five minutes, like it did every day. It was raining and I walked without an umbrella. It wasn't raining hard and I wasn't used to carrying an umbrella anyway. Besides, the rain falling on my head and shoulders felt nice. Although I tried to ignore it, during all of this brief walk, I could feel the heavy weight of someone watching me.

As I approached the bus stop, I noticed the old woman who could regularly be found in that exact spot two or three times a week. She had a red umbrella opened over her head as she waited for the bus.

She caught my eye and smiled, saying "Come underneath the umbrella. You seem to have forgotten yours gain!"

I thanked her and sat down on the half-soaked chair at that roofless station, close to her under the wide umbrella.

A few seconds later, a boy sat down several seats away. There was some silent camaraderie between us. We were waiting for the bus. We had that in common.

The boy looked over at me and after a moment asked, "Excuse me. What time is it?"

I answered, "It is 2:22"

He smiled, though I wasn't sure why. "What time does the bus arrive normally?"

"Depends on the day. We just have to wait," I answered.

It was 2:35 pm, when the bus finally arrived. We gave our tickets to the driver and the old lady and I squeezed by the other passengers to the women's section at the end of the bus.

We bumped over the road in silence. I didn't have to disembark until the final station at which point I would have to change to another bus.

The old woman stood to leave the bus at the stop before mine, but stopped suddenly and turned to whisper to me, "He keeps looking at you, I think he loves you so much!"

I stared at her, dumbfounded. "Who?"

She cast her eyes to the front of the bus and answered, "The same boy. The one we were at the bus stop with.

"I think, you made a mistake," I stammered, taken utterly aback.

She shook her head knowingly and replied, "I was a young girl once too. There is no problem yet, but be careful and don't fall crazy in love too fast."

She smiled again and said, "Goodbye now."

I murmured a similar “goodbye” and between the two last stations couldn’t help peeking toward the boy’s seat. He’d been reading his book for a long time, but occasionally sometimes paused to lift his head and look around. When I was afraid we might make eye contact, I looked away, but I could feel his eyes on me.

When we reached the last station I hastened off the bus and pretended I couldn’t feel his eyes on my back.

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It was Saturday and we had a math exam. I had stayed awake all night to review the previous exams I hadn’t done so well on. Unsurprisingly, I was exhausted. I managed to answer all the practice questions though and thought I should get the complete mark with any luck. When I finally dragged myself back to the bus stop, I saw the boy sitting at the bus stop again.

I slowed my already molasses-like steps but he still looked up.

“What time is it?” he asked.

“I don’t have a clock, but it should be between 2:20 and 2:25.”

“Excuse me,” he burst suddenly. “Can I talk to you?”

I tried not to look as surprised as I felt and fought to ignore the uncomfortable feeling in my stomach.

“Um, sorry. If my father or cousins saw me with you, it could be big trouble for me and dangerous for you”

He looked at me for one more long moment before taking a deep breath. “I love you. I love you so much and I want to marry you.”

For a moment my mind struggled to comprehend the meaning of the sounds coming from his chapped lips. When I was finally able to force words out, the things I wanted to ask remained lodged in my throat.

“What is your name and what are you doing?” I heard myself asking. “Why don’t you go to school?”

“My name is Sohrab,” he replied, still somewhat breathless. “And since I am the only man in my home and my mother and two sisters can’t work, I work and pay my family expenses.”

“You work?” I echoed, not because it was surprising but because I was struggling to keep up.

He nodded and replied slowly. Perhaps he could see how flustered I was and didn’t want to frighten me anymore.

“I’m working in a forging workshop,” he said, putting his hands in his pockets. “It’s good wages.”

I nodded and slowly remembered myself. I shook my head and took a half step back.

“My name is Shaghayegh,” I said, offering a hand.

He smiled cheekily. "I know."

At that point I couldn't find it in myself to be surprised. "I can't talk here."

"Can we go to the cinema and talk more?" he asked eagerly, stepping forward.

"I'll have to see," I said evasively, not willing to make any kind of commitment in this moment of surprise.

I hesitated, then turned to walk away, but found myself hesitating again.

"By the way, you're not going to school, but you always read that book. I mean I've never seen you without it."

"I work during the day and study in nightly high school."

I nodded and considered him briefly, considered what his days must look like.

I turned to go but he called after me, as if he couldn't bear to let me go yet.

"You have a beautiful Red Shawl!"

I stopped again and looked back. "Thanks. My mother knit it."

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He bought us two tickets for the cinema.

We talked together. We both feared the war. I asked what he would do if the war started.

"I will join the army and will fight for my country and people," he replied immediately.

We were still talking in hushed voices when a siren blared loudly outside.

The screaming began instantly. People scrambled to their feet and rushed for the narrow corridor to escape to the outside, even though there was no guarantee it was safer there. There were ten or twelve of us stepping on each other and elbowing each other to find our way out of the dim building.

"Faster!" He shouted. "Faster, Shaghayegh! Hurry!"

We ran together.

We had not yet reached the exit, when the ceiling of the cinema suddenly collapsed in, raining rubble and cement down on us. Despite the bright daylight now streaming through where the roof had once been, my whole world turned dark.

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The television was loud. It was the first thing I heard that made sense.

"A deadly hit by several rockets during yesterday's air strikes on a military building, a cinema, and two schools in Shourbakht city left 35 dead and 23 wounded."

I woke with great pain spearing through my head and body.

I struggled to open my eyes and turn my head.

A hospital. I was in the hospital. Someone stood over me.

The nurse was saying, “Well done, Doctor! She’s opened her eyes. She might yet recover.”

A doctor approached and the nurse stepped back. He checked my eyes with a small light.

My mouth felt dry but I had to ask, “Where is he?”

The doctor raised an eyebrow at the clipboard the nurse handed him.

“Everyone in the cinema died,” he said in an empty voice without looking at me.

I wished he would look at me so I could find a lie in his eyes.

“When the firefighters found you, there were several corpses underneath you. One whose hand was clasping yours and had to be pried off.”

I wasn’t sure how to breathe. I seemed to have forgotten. I turned my head and saw my shawl, the red looking a gaudy, bloody color against the hospital chair it was tossed across.

The doctor followed my gaze and said, “They thought that shawl might be yours. It was around your neck when they found you.”

I don’t know when I started screaming. I didn’t know when I started crying, sobbing. I couldn’t look at the red shawl. The tears blurring my eyes mercifully hid it from me until it was just a faint, red stain in my vision.

“Damn the war!” I screamed, reaching to throw whatever my fingers could find. “Damn this war!”

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