

You, Me, Him and the Telephone

A Short Story by Anar

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Telephone numbers aren't all alike.
But there are human voices at the end of all of them...
Bad days aren't all alike,
Sometimes it is you who remains silent;
Sometimes, the telephone.

—Vagif Samadoghlu

Your telephone died yesterday. Not only do people die...telephone numbers die, too.

During your lifetime you will forget a lot of numbers: your passport number, the amount of salary at your last job, the license number of your friend's car, the distance between the earth and the moon, the population of your city as well as many other numbers—you will forget all of them except for these five numbers. Those five numbers in that particular sequence were the dearest gift for you. Those five numbers, her voice and the smell of violets.

Sometimes I have picked up the phone so delicately and gently as if I were raising the lid of a grand piano. Sometimes I have hung it up as if I were lowering the lid of a coffin.

Now that number is gone. Well, it exists, but it's gone for me. That number is a restricted area for me. Those five numbers that are so easy to dial, they are prohibited now, they are like a restricted territory that I can't cross—kilometers, meters, miles. I can pass four-fifths of that territory. I can dial four numbers, but I can't dial the fifth one—the last number. Your number is like a locked door and I have lost the key for it.

I could do without seeing you. I could call you up, hear your voice and say to you: "Why is your hand so cold, my dear one?" I could do without seeing you because I could feel you even from a distance, just the way people who live near the sea can feel its presence even if they do not see it. Now the sea has disappeared for me. It is gone.

The story repeats itself hundreds of times: you, me and him, of course. And yes, the telephone. Everything started at Rasim's wedding. Firuz continued his toast:

"We were five friends. Like in a movie, you remember that one: there were five of them. Me, Kamal, Murad, Rasim and Seymur. We had been conquered one by one and tied with collars. They did it—our wives. Besides, we all have a bunch of kids at home. Yes, household problems have made us grow old." (Everybody laughed.) "Today we are losing Rasim. It's a pity...Of course, I'm joking. I wish you happiness—Farida and Rasim. I wish all the happiness, health and a long life to you. May God bless you with lots of children.

"However, we have already raised our glasses to you and we'll be doing it many more times tonight. For that reason I want to raise this glass for the last young man here—for our dearest Seymur, he is the only single man here. Be good, be healthy, be a nightingale, but not in a cage."

Everybody was looking at me. I could see their familiar faces—the faces of my friends, among laughter and raised glasses. There was joy and a bit of surprise expressed on their faces.

After the guests had left, we all went out together at the same time—Firuz, Kamal and Murad with their wives and me by myself. We were walking down the streets of the sleeping city when suddenly Firuz's wife put her arm in mine: "OK, Seymur, when do we celebrate your wedding?"

"In the far future."

"Why? You don't believe the words of this fool, do you?" She leaned on her husband's arm with a devilish smile. "You think that family life is like hell."

"He can't find a good girl for himself," Firuz said.

"Really? Hey guys, did you hear that? Let's find a girl for Seymur. Will you marry if we find the most beautiful girl in Baku for you?"

"Of course," I said, "but only under one condition. You must find the girl right now, at this moment. If not, I can change my mind."

Kamal said, "How can we find a girl for you at night? We can't look for her here in the street. Besides, you probably wouldn't marry a girl who walks the streets at night."

"Yes," I said, "you are completely right. That's why we should change the subject."

"I have an idea. Let's find a girl for Seymur by telephone. There's a telephone booth over there."

"That's a good idea," I said, "but I don't have any change."

They all handed coins to me. I went into the telephone booth.

"Tell me the number."

"Dial the first number that comes into your mind," Firuz said. "For example..." Suddenly he stopped. "No, brother, I can't insist on this. What if you don't get along with your mother-in-law? I'll be the one to blame."

"Coward," said I, "that's exactly the point. Marriage is not a joke. Nobody wants to be held responsible. Kamal, why don't you say something?"

"I have a suggestion," said Firuz's wife. She was always making recommendations. "If nobody wants to be responsible, then let's share the responsibility. Let everyone suggest a single number."

"Fine," Firuz said. He always liked the proposals his wife made. "Two."

I repeated the number two.

Firuz's wife said, "Nine."

"Zero," Kamal said and looked at his wife, "Your turn."

"Me? I don't know what to say. OK—four."

Murad said, "Five."

Only Murad's wife didn't have a chance to suggest a number because the telephone was already ringing.

"My fiancé is sleeping," I quipped. Everybody laughed. I hung up the phone.

We continued on our way and parted one by one. Everybody went to their homes and for some reason, I felt very lonely. I went down to the park by the sea. I was walking along the lonely boulevard, looking at the dark sea and the waves of different colors. For some reason I kept remembering the telephone number that I had dialed. It was two o'clock at night. I went to the nearest telephone booth, deposited a coin and dialed the number.

A woman picked up the phone. Her voice didn't sound very tired, just a bit tired and a little surprised.

"Yes."

"Hello."

"Hello. Who's calling?"

"It's me. Let's get acquainted."

I was expecting a rude answer like a slap in the face. Or I expected her to hang up the phone on me, like a door slammed in my face. But she neither cursed me, nor did she hang up the phone. Her voice remained calm.

"Don't you think it's a little late for making acquaintances?"

"Late? No, I don't think so. It's the right time for it. I'm coming from the wedding of my best friend. He was the last single person among my friends. It seems to me like it was his funeral today, not his wedding."

"Why do you say that? Aren't you married yourself?"

"No. Are you?"

She laughed. "You want to know everything from the first day of acquaintance?"

"I'm sorry. I hope you don't think that I'm an obscene caller. I'm not. It's just that my heart is tearing apart from loneliness. So I thought I'd call and speak to someone."

"How did you get my number?"

"Lucky guess. I just dialed the first numbers that popped into my head, that's all."

"That's interesting."

"You know, I'm a little drunk, so I feel lonely."

"That's all right. It can happen to anyone."

"Is there any way that I can see you?"

"No. Listen, this is not going to work. Let's do it this way. It's late now. Go home and get some sleep. When you get up in the morning, all your sadness will be gone. You'll see."

"But I want to see you. Let's talk at least."

"You know my telephone number. If you feel like you want to talk to me tomorrow morning, you can call back."

"Really?"

“Really. Good night!”

“Good night. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

It’s funny, but as soon as I hung up the phone, I didn’t feel lonely anymore. Now I had someone, too.

Naturally, I didn’t call in the morning. I had a thousand things to do and I forgot about it. After a few days, I had a fight with our lab director while discussing some work project. He was also my research work supervisor.

Firuz took me to his house after the discussion. (He worked at the same institute that I did.) On our way home he was telling me to be wiser and not to explode at every little thing. “Even if you’re sure that you’re right, there are smarter ways to defend your opinion, with the help of facts and arguments. Otherwise, you’ll only gain enemies and you still won’t be able to convince anyone. Be outgoing. If you see that someone is wrong, tell him, ‘It seems like you haven’t considered the problem from all viewpoints, I think that if you look at the problem again, you’ll agree with me.’ It’s just not right to handle problems like you do: you don’t understand anything, you’re so ignorant... And that’s why...”

“That’s why,” I said, “I’m sick and tired of your cautiousness.”

“All right. I can see that there is no way to speak to you like to a human being. Let’s go to my house and have a cup of tea...”

“You know,” Firuz’s wife was saying, “we never taught him, I don’t know where he picked up these words. He makes them up himself. He says: ‘m-mother,’ ‘f-father.’”

She was talking about their one-year-old baby boy. Firuz was in the other room changing into comfortable clothes and slippers.

“That’s true,” he said. “Strange, but I have invented a new theory. I think babies are the ones who invented words, not adults. We adults only use the words that they made up. Have you ever seen a baby sweeter than my son, ha?”

I couldn’t remember the number, no matter how hard I tried. I remembered the second part of it. I could also recall the first two numbers, the third number was zero, but what about the second one? I couldn’t remember it.

“Look, Samaya, what was the number you suggested the other evening?”

“What evening? What number?”

I had to explain everything to her. I also became the butt of jokes, laughter and advice. They made fun of me, and then they told me to be wiser. “Well, that’s not important,” Samaya said as I was leaving.

Finally, I remembered: the number was nine. It’s the number of the trolleybus that I take every day.

“Hello. It’s me.”

“Hello. Who are you?”

“You have a short memory. Remember, I called you three days ago. It was at about this time.”

“Your voice was different then,” she said and added with irony, “or maybe, it’s a different person this time. Last time it was a lonely man whose friend had just got married. You have found a good hobby for yourself—telephone adventures.”

She spoke sharply, in an ironic tone of voice.

"I swear, it's me. You probably heard my drunk voice last time, and maybe that's why you don't recognize it. Do you recognize my voice now?"

"Yes, I recognize it. I'm sorry, I thought it was someone else," she laughed lightheartedly. "So, you are not drunk today."

"Absolutely not. I called when I wasn't drunk so that you wouldn't have a bad impression of me. I don't want you to think that I'm a drunkard. I rarely drink."

"It's good that you called tonight because I was bored. My radio is broken."

"Do you always go to bed this late?"

"Yes, I listen to the radio till midnight. However, my radio is broken today, so I'm going crazy without it."

He could hear someone playing the piano, but the sounds appeared to be originating from far in the distance.

"I know you don't like answering questions, but could you tell me, who is playing the piano this late?"

"Oh," she laughed. "That's not in my house, it's the neighbor. I'm sick and tired of that girl. She plays her piano all day long. The walls are thin, and her sonatas are getting on my nerves. When my radio was working, I could drown out her playing."

"What do you listen to on the radio?"

"My radio gets very good reception. Look—here they are always broadcasting concerts." I envisioned her fingers turning the dial and checking out the various stations.

"Here there are some melodies from some place far away, from overseas. Here it always sounds like a storm, here they speak in a foreign language. Here it's always noisy. The host of the program makes jokes, people laugh, they clap and although I don't understand the words, I enjoy it because everybody is laughing, clapping and having fun. Here there is some kind of program about intimate things. A man and a woman speak in very low voices, almost in a whisper, and I can hear their sighs. Radio is a very strange thing. It seems like the entire world is in my room, kind of the world's night: the sky, melodies, dramas, airplanes..."

"Why airplanes?"

"Listen," she said. I realized that she was listening to something. I started listening too, and could hear the sound of an airplane. I wondered if this plane were flying over my house as well. I wondered where her house was situated, in what part of the city.

"Are airplanes and radios relatives of each other?" she suddenly asked.

"Are they?"

"Yes, the sky connects them," she said and became silent again. Now there were sounds of the same piano playing, not the airplane.

"I speak all the time and you listen silently. Why don't you speak a bit, too? Tell me something."

It was amazing. I don't know why, but I started telling things to this stranger that I had never told anybody. Like about the difficulties that I had at work. About how me and my old friend Firuz were

avoiding each other lately. About the reasons why I didn't like my research work supervisor. About how I fought with him at the meeting and about other things. About things that didn't have anything to do with her. Why was it to her, not to anyone else, that I was telling all these things? I didn't know. But I couldn't help it, I had to tell her everything.

Suddenly I realized what I was doing, told her goodbye and hung up the phone.

I was thinking about it all the way home. I was thinking that nobody would believe me if I told them about it. I was telling things that lay deep inside my heart to someone I didn't know, someone I had never seen. What did I know about her? Nothing. I only knew that she liked listening to the radio at night and that her neighbor played the piano.

One of the characters in this story is the telephone. That's why I want to say a few words about it. Lately, I've been thinking a lot about telephones: each of them unique and different in its own way.

There's a black telephone on the table of our laboratory director. Every time I look at that telephone, its wires remind me of a grenade. When I look at the eyes of my director, they are always troubled, full of worry and fear. It seems to me that there's a long-term explosive bomb in his room, not a telephone. He shudders with each phone call. Probably, it seems to him that this bomb—the telephone—can explode any minute, bringing him bad news. Like someone might call and tell him that he has been fired, or that his wife has run away from him.

There was a telephone in our chancellery. But its dialing apparatus was a black closed circle, without any numbers on it, as if it were locked. It seems to me that this telephone was as helpless as a car without tires, a letter without an address on it. It was a symbol of submissiveness, dependence, passiveness and lack of initiative. Someone could call you, but you could call no one. From this point of view, telephone booths are just the opposite of such telephones. You can call anyone you want, but no one calls you. You can call someone and say whatever you want, you can even swear at them and there is no way they can trace you down and find you.

That makes telephone booths the symbols of impunity, irresponsibility and lack of restraint. Their power is like the power of an airplane carrying bombs over a unarmed ship sailing in the open sea.

You can't imagine how much I regretted not having a telephone myself. I collected coins and never spent them, like a greedy man. I would ask everyone—my friends, people I knew—for coins. Also, every time I had a chance, I would change some bills into coins.

I called her every evening. And I always called late at night. It had become a habit. I was used to these everyday conversations and to her somewhat tired, somewhat ironic, sad voice, to the sounds of the piano of her neighbor, to the sounds of the radio that I could faintly hear and to the silences caused by planes flying overhead.

I already knew a few things about her, but very little. I knew that her name was Madina. That she lived alone. I knew that she had brown eyes, that her shoe size was 35.

Once I asked her: "How old are you?"

"Oh, I'm very old, I have grandchildren and great-grandchildren," she said. I realized that she was teasing me, because her voice was very young. And I also realized that she didn't want to speak about her age, her job or her marital status. And I didn't insist.

Of course, she didn't ask herself anything like that, however, she knew that I was 29 years old, that I was single and that I worked at a scientific center. She didn't know my name. For some reason I didn't tell her my real name; I told her that my name was Rustam. Why? I don't know. Maybe her name was different as well, not Madina.

"When will I see you?"

“Why do you want to see me?” she said. “Don’t you like it the way it is? I don’t know how it is for you, but I like these phone conversations. They bring something new into my life. I like that I have to wait for a phone call during a certain time of the day. I don’t know the person who is calling at all. I have never seen him—that’s why I can talk frankly to him, and he can tell me everything on his mind as well.

“He’s never seen me and he can’t even imagine how I look. Is that so bad? What if, when we see each other we don’t like each other? Everything will be spoiled then. Even if we like each other, it still will be different, it will be usual, ordinary, everyday. Let’s leave it the way it is. I can assure you that it’s better this way. Tell me about your job. What happened after that fight with your director? Did you get away with it?”

“I’m going to leave and quit that job. I’m going to work some other place.”

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know yet. What do you advise?”

She didn’t answer. I heard the sound of a plane.

We were celebrating the New Year at Firuz’s place. The newlyweds—Rasim and Farida—were also there. It was 20 minutes to midnight when we took our seats at the table. The table was very nice, Firuz’s wife and the other ladies had done a very good job. I was the last one to arrive. It was cold outside and after the snowy, windy streets, the light and warmth of the house seemed to be more pleasant than ever.

The clock struck midnight. Everybody hugged and kissed and wished each other happiness. Firuz announced that the coming year was going to be historical because Seymour would be getting married. We drank another glass of vodka and Firuz took me aside. He had been drinking all evening so he was very drunk and making toasts that were dedicated only to me. He looked only at me while saying them.

“I’m drinking to your health. Always be yourself. So courageous, principled, but I wish you were a little friendlier, a bit more tolerant and patient with others. I wish you could see the world with open eyes. I know you’re laughing at me inside your heart, or maybe you even hate me. You think that I have exchanged my dignity and honor for all this,” he pointed to his new furniture, “or for Samaya’s fur coat.

“No. I will never do anything that counters my conscience. I never even say something that is opposite to my principles. You can be sure about that. But...” he paused, “but one must always be wise and calm in every situation. You must not burst out in fury over every little thing. There are times when you must take a step back and compromise. And there are times when you can scream, fight and stand for what you believe is right. You must be able to make compromises in small cases, in order to stand firm when it comes to larger matters.”

“Maybe you’re right. But this theory is too complicated for me: take a step back here, here go ahead—I’m not good at such kind of sports.”

He gestured with his hand. “OK. Let’s drink. Where are you going to work this coming year?”

“At a publishing house,” I said. “I got hired yesterday.”

“Of course, it’s your business, but if you ask me, I’d say that you shouldn’t have left your old place.”

He went over to the piano and started playing and his wife started singing. It was one of the latest hits on the radio. Suddenly I recalled the sound of the piano playing, and then the radio.

“I want to propose a toast,” I said.

Everybody looked at me with surprise. I never liked making toasts.

“Look, we are all here, together, and we are having a wonderful celebration. But there are people today who are alone. What are they doing? For example, people with professions such as men on duty, road watchmen, railroad controllers.”

“Who? Who?” they all asked.

“Railroad controllers,” I said. Yes, those railroad controllers who know the train schedule by heart, those people who stay alone in their old houses at night and those who do their jobs, meeting and seeing off the trains, even in cold weather and strong winds and storms.”

Rasim said, “Hold on, I think our friend is drunk already.” Everybody laughed.

Firuz looked at me and stood up. “Wait, hold on,” he said. “I think he was insulted. Please do not laugh—the question is very serious. OK, Seymour, so let’s drink to the health of railroad controllers?”

Everybody raised their glasses.

“No,” I said. “I didn’t mean to say that I wanted to drink to railroad controllers. You didn’t let me finish. I wanted to drink to the health of someone else. If you tease me, blame yourself.”

“OK. Say it...”

“I wanted to drink to the health of one person who is alone, all by herself. Now she’s sitting in front of her radio. She knows the schedule and all the programs on the radio by heart. She greets and sends off all the radio programs just like railroad controllers do for trains. The entire world is in her room. She is all alone, by herself, with the world so large and wide...”

I downed the whole shot in one gulp.

Everybody emptied their glasses as well, without saying a word. They all looked at each other with surprise, but no one spoke a word. After drinking, they started talking about various subjects.

I went to the corridor and picked up the phone, dialed her number and waited. Nobody picked up. “Here is your railroad controller,” I thought. “You shouldn’t have felt so much pity for her. She’s probably celebrating the New Year somewhere, too. And why shouldn’t she?”

I dialed again. I thought I could say “Happy New Year” to her according to Moscow time. There was no answer. I called an hour later, wanting to wish her “Happy New Year” according to Prague time. No answer again. Another hour passed and I made one more call. Which area was celebrating the New Year at that time, maybe Greenwich?

Finally, at 5:30 a.m., when I called from a telephone booth, she answered.

“Happy New Year according to Atlantic Coast time,” I said. She probably didn’t understand what I meant. I didn’t explain.

“Is that you? I just came in.”

“I know. I’ve been calling you all night long.”

“I was at a friend’s house.”

“That doesn’t matter,” I said, “I want to start the New Year by telling you something important. I love you. I’m crazy about you.”

“Really?” She laughed. “What good news! The New Year hasn’t started out so bad.”

“You are my darling, my dear one, you are the light of my eyes. I don’t know what I’m supposed to say, but I have never loved anyone like this. I know it sounds funny, we’ve never seen each other. But the fact is that I can’t live without you.”

“To be more exact—without my telephone,” she said. “I know these words are pointless, but it’s still pleasant to hear them.”

It was the first time that our conversation was not accompanied by piano sounds. The morning came. I used to go to music school and therefore, a comparison came to mind—the chromatic scale of life—the succession of white and black keys—of days and nights, of good, light days with bad and dark ones...

“When will I see you? No, you’re right, let’s not see each other. This is the finest way of loving, we are connected to each other by telephone lines. It’s a good connection.”

“It’s a one-sided connection,” she said, “meaning that you can call me and I can’t call you.”

“Yes, that’s why I need to see you. Tell me your address and I’ll be right there.”

“Please, I beg you,” she said. I felt pain in her voice. “Please, do not take this joy away from me. A lot of people make me these kinds of offers. If you say that too, I’ll cut off my relations with you as well.” Then she became silent and added, “But I’ve become very used to you. You’re the first person that I’ve felt so close and dear to after my husband’s death.”

I went to my new workplace the following day—January 2nd. All day long, I edited material and gave it to the typist at the end of the day. I told her to finish it by morning. There was a long list in front of the chancellery room with the names and telephone numbers of all the workers. I glanced at the list and I was shocked. It was as if I saw someone familiar among people I didn’t know.

“Who is Valizade?” I asked.

“She’s our typist. You just gave your material to her. Why do you ask?”

I looked through the window. A typist with brown eyes was going down the stairs. Her high-heeled shoes were making sounds, click-click-click. I knew those shoes going down the stairs were size 35.

It was exactly like a fairy tale. Fortune decided to have us meet in an office, but she didn’t know anything about it yet. She was sitting there and typing the stack of material that I had given her and couldn’t even imagine that it was me who had given it to her. Well, of course, she knows that I gave it to her, but she doesn’t realize who I am. Well, I don’t know how to say—she doesn’t know that I am me.

I couldn’t wait, I wanted to tell her this news as soon as possible, so I called her from the telephone booth. It was the first time that I had called her so early. No one answered. “That’s all right, I’ll call her at the usual time so that it’ll be a surprise for her.”

I called at night.

“Hello. I phoned you two hours ago.”

“Why so early? I was at my friend’s house. I had some work to type and I was doing it at her place.”

It was hard for me to keep from laughing.

“What work?” I asked.

"I took some work home. It's an assignment from my new boss."

"New boss?"

"Yes, today we got a new department director in our office."

"Really?" I desperately wanted to laugh, "Well, how did you like your new boss?"

"I don't know what to say. My first impression was that I didn't really like him at all. He's very arrogant. Of course, it's hard to say anything from the first time, but in any case..."

I was shocked. I hadn't imagined such an outcome.

"Why didn't you like him?"

"Well, nothing really, first impressions usually prove to be wrong. Maybe he's a good man. In any case, he looks like a very self-important man. He's tall and handsome. He's a young, good-looking man, but a bit boastful...he seems to look down on everybody. He speaks in such a demanding tone: 'It must be done by tomorrow!'"

It was the first time that she had spoken about her profession. I didn't have to ask her what her profession was since she had started talking about it. Besides, I knew it anyway.

"What about you?" she asked. "Did you get your new job?"

Back then, I couldn't have realized that I had started playing a very strange game, but some internal force made me stop for a moment. Then I said: "No, you know, I changed my mind and decided to stay at my old job."

In the morning I saw Madina, my Madina. Of course, I had seen her the day before, too. However, yesterday her face was one among the many faces I had seen. Yes, it was a nice, good-looking face, but it didn't distinguish itself from others. It was an ordinary face. Maybe it was even possible to say that it was beautiful, but it was a pale, gloomy beauty. But that's what I thought yesterday.

Today, everything was completely different. I secretly watched her while paging through the papers that she had typed. I was trying to find a relationship between her face, so unfamiliar to me, and her voice, which was so close and dear. I sought a relationship between her real essence and her telephone voice, that is, the depth that I had perceived about her from my telephone conversations with her.

My attitude toward her changed. I was sensitive and kind to her. I wondered if she could tell the difference.

In order to find out, I waited for evening to come—for the telephone-call time.

"I told you, first impressions usually turn out to be false. He is such a kind and sensitive man..."

"Don't trust second impressions either. They can be deceiving as well."

"No. Before I didn't have a chance to look into his eyes. I did today."

"When did that happen? I missed it," I thought.

"You know, his eyes are so honest and clever."

"I'm starting to be jealous of him," I said.

The game had started like this. I already knew the rules of this game. But she was unaware of it all.

It was already too late to change anything. The events were out of my control, like a letter that you post in a mailbox.

But there were specific difficulties in this game. I had to have control over all my words, expressions and even thoughts. I had to be one person at home and a different one at work. Each place had its own world, its own attitude and psychology.

I was a totally different person at work. I had to be open-hearted, but had to keep a separation between me and her and control myself.

She was telling me about myself, about my every move, my every step, and all the expressions of my face. Most of the time, I started the conversation about myself, but lately I noticed that it wasn't necessary to do so. She spoke with such excitement about Seymour Muallim herself. She spoke to Rustam about Seymour during all these long conversations, but she never spoke to Seymour about Rustam. No one knew anything about her telephone life. I didn't know how to react, to be glad or sad about it. Sometimes, it seemed that the fact that she didn't tell anyone proved her complete indifference. And sometimes, I thought exactly the opposite. I thought that she kept it secret from everyone as her dearest, deepest feelings. Strange, but it seemed to me that my feelings were mixed. Imagine, when I was Seymour I was jealous of her telephone life. And at night during our telephone conversations, me—Rustam, I was irritated when she spoke so much about Seymour.

I told her one time: "Let's stop speaking formally with each other [addressing with the polite form of "you"]. We've known each other for such a long time."

"OK," I heard her say.

"Good night. Bye." I was full of joy, like a little child, because Madina would now start speaking informally with me and officially with him.

And I suddenly realized that it was the first time I had ever thought of a third person as my second "ego."

"It seems to me that you expect something more from him?"

"How do you know?" she said in a furious voice, "Maybe he's the one who expects something more."

I hung the phone up angrily. I didn't call her for three days.

At work we were having fun that day. One of the experienced workers of the office came up to me: "Don't waste your time," he said and smiled. "Nobody can conquer the heart of our little lady."

We all laughed, and after Madina left, he added: "She's like a nun. Nobody can find a way to her heart. She proved to be a loyal wife to her husband even after his death. He died such a long time ago."

I found out that her husband had been a pilot and had died in the sky.

I got off work late the next day. When I was leaving, I heard Madina typing something. She had long, tiny fingers, and when she was typing, it seemed like she was playing the piano.

I called her that night.

"Hello."

"Hello. So, you have a temper. Why did you hang up the phone on me the other day? Seymour accompanied me home today."

"What?" I asked, surprised, and believe me, I was sincere.

"You heard me right. I had a lot of work, so I stayed late and he accompanied me home because he's such a well-mannered man."

"To be more exact, a bad-mannered, ill-bred man. He's a fool," I thought. "I should have known better. She stayed at the office so late and I left her there, having said goodbye to her. I didn't even think of accompanying her home."

But I also realized something else. I understood that if I would express the desire to see her home, she wouldn't say "no" and maybe she would even like it. Maybe she was taking revenge because I had hung up the phone on her the other day. Maybe, she was saying it just to make Rustam angry. It means that she is not indifferent to me, her telephone friend. But how could I know? Would she ever find out about it? I was confused and lost among all the "perhaps" and "maybes" that came to mind. But I made one thing clear for myself. I knew what to do the next time she stayed late at work.

We were going down a lonely street and I asked her: "What do you do in your leisure time in the evenings?"

"I stay at home," she said.

"You stay at home? All by yourself, alone?"

"Yes, why? I read, listen to the radio."

I wondered if she would speak about the radio as she had before? But she changed the topic and I was grateful.

"There's my window," she said pointing to one of the flats on the second floor.

"Perhaps your corridors are dark. Let me escort you directly to your door."

"No," she said.

But I didn't want to give up. "You could invite me inside."

"With great pleasure. But it's very late now," she looked at her watch, and I could tell that she was getting mad.

"Late? Do you go to bed this early?"

"No, but..." She was uncomfortable and she didn't know what to say.

"OK, if you don't even want to offer me a cup of tea, let's walk a little more in the fresh air."

She didn't say anything. We walked around her house several times. I wanted to go inside very much. I was eager to see the house, the radio and the sofa that were so close and dear to me from our telephone conversations. Maybe if she had invited me inside that night, I would have told her everything.

But when we said goodbye to each other, she rushed to give me her hand.

"All right, goodbye, Seymour Muallim. Thank you and good night."

She smiled and ran away.

I was listening to the sound of her steps and I suddenly realized everything. I understood why she was rushing home, why she was nervous and why she was looking at her watch all the time. She didn't want to miss the telephone call. My telephone call.

A few days after our director gave a stupid report at the office production results meeting, I stood up and said everything that was wrong about it. He didn't say anything to me, but I suddenly felt sorry for the man. He had been working at the newspaper for many years, and probably nobody had talked to him in this manner and tone before, especially in the presence of so many of his colleagues.

I felt uneasy after the meeting, first of all because I had been totally wrong, secondly because I recalled Firuz's advice and, thirdly, because I didn't want to get fired from this job. Madina worked here. Anyway, I went to the director's office and apologized.

When I called Madina that night, I knew what she was going to talk about.

"You know, Rustam," there was so much excitement in her voice, "our Seymour is such a brave man. I didn't participate in the meeting, but everybody is talking about how Seymour stood up against the director. He said everything he thought about him. You know, everybody is talking about it. You know, nobody has ever said anything to him. And to say all that in front of so many people."

"I know," I said, "I know these kinds of men very well. They give bright speeches at meetings when everybody is looking, and then they go and apologize when nobody is around. Your Seymour probably went up to the man's office and begged for apologies when nobody could hear their conversation."

She said in a sad voice: "Why are you talking like that? Why don't you like him?"

"Because you like him and I love you."

"Great. Let everybody love each other."

"Of course, you can joke. The trouble is that you see him, you speak to him face to face and you go to the movies with him."

"To the movies? How do you know that I'm going to the movies with him?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

She laughed. Obviously, she liked the idea.

"And with me, you communicate only through the phone."

"I thought you agreed with me on this matter."

"Have you said anything to him about me?"

"No, of course not. I will never say anything to anyone about it. For me this is, well," she kept silent for a moment, "something sacred."

The next day we went to the movies together. The movie was about test pilots and Madina was sad. Maybe that's why she felt the necessity to say everything that was inside her heart. When we were walking on the Boulevard, she told me about her husband who had died. She said that their entire lives had been spent in the air: "We met each other in the air. He was a pilot and I, a passenger. Then I started working as a stewardess, so that I could be always with him. We got married. We were flying back and forth between Baku and Moscow. We kissed whenever we found a private place. Then I got pregnant and I took maternity leave from work. That was the last time I accompanied him on his plane."

There was no distance between their lips, but they didn't know that it was the distance between life and death. The distance between the eternal sky, the sky from where he'll never come back and the earth where Madina will be waiting for him forever.

When the plane was about to leave, Madina threw some water after it, as is the custom when someone is going on a long journey. It was probably the first time in the history of aviation that someone tossed water after a modern airplane, as it was done according to a rite that dates back thousand of years. The plane rose in the air. And then it started raining.

Madina stopped and started listening to something. Then in a while I heard the sound, too, and I realized that she heard the sound before anyone else. We looked at the sky where the plane was moving and emitting different colors, and Madina said: "His grave is up there. Normally, wives go to the cemetery to visit the graves of their husbands, but I look at the sky every time I think about him."

Then Madina told me that she sometimes goes to the airport. She stands there and watches airplanes take off and land. She also said that her baby had been born dead, that she wasn't even able to save this gift from her husband.

I reached for her face and wiped tears from her cheeks, then I started kissing her like a madman.

She said: "No, no, no, please don't," but I could feel that it was more and more difficult for her to say these words.

I dropped her off at her home and called as soon as I returned home myself.

Her voice was a little excited and even a bit happy, and I felt sorry for all romantic people—for all who have died in the air, on the earth and at sea.

"You know," I said. "Now we've started to address each other in an informal way. I called you yesterday, as soon as we separated, but your phone was busy. Who were you talking to so late?"

I would never have expected something like this. She became very uncomfortable. But she pulled herself together quickly and said: "You probably dialed the wrong number. I went to bed as soon as I came home."

"Yesterday I had a dream about you."

"That's strange, how could you see someone in your dream if you have never seen them in real life?"

"I saw your voice. And the radio program 'Neringa'."

"I can understand about 'Neringa' but how could you see my voice? I can't imagine that. What do you think I look like? Can you imagine my appearance?"

"Of course. You're tall, you have long legs and long hair." I was saying things that didn't match her real appearance.

"Quite nice," she said. "You've formed a very good picture of me. Now you're going to have dreams about me every night."

"I'm probably not the only one who dreams about you."

"There you go again."

"No. You know, they say Mahin Banu' used to appear in the dreams of hundreds of men. How about you?"

"I exist only in one version and only in your dreams. You are the light of my eyes."

"I am forever grateful to you."

"Listen, you light of my eyes, I want your advice on one matter. But please, control yourself, don't make a big fuss about it and don't hang up."

I had been waiting for this conversation for almost three days. I was surprised she hadn't brought it up earlier.

"Listen, but first take a tranquilizer."

"OK. Hurry, say it."

"All right. Three days ago Seymour asked me to marry him...are you all right?"

"No," I said. "What did you tell him?"

"I haven't answered yet. I want your advice. Because you are my best and dearest friend."

"The psychology of women is really strange. When they fall in love with someone else, you become the best friend and the dearest person. Say 'no'." The strange thing is that I was sincere. "Marry me or don't get married at all. I love you." Oh God, I wish it were possible to marry by telephone.

She laughed very loudly. But her laughter was a little nervous and a bit artificial.

"Be a good boy. You're still a little kid to me."

"Me? How do you know? You haven't seen me."

"I can feel it. I can tell from your voice, your temperament, your devotion to me and, well, from many other things. I beg you, please, always try to be like this, don't rush to become older."

"How do you know, maybe I'm older than your Seymour."

"No, my dear. Women intuit things like this very well."

It seemed like a joke, but I had no desire to laugh. For some reason I felt pain, sorrow and anxiety.

"Don't marry him, Madina," I was saying. "What am I supposed to do? Your husband won't allow me to call you."

"We'll find a way out. Telephone communication is not a betrayal, it's not a sin. By that time you will have your own telephone and I'll be calling you myself."

How could I explain to her that that was impossible?

"Try to understand me," she was serious and her voice sounded a bit sad. "Look, you men sometimes complain about loneliness. It makes me laugh when I hear something like that, because you'll never know what real loneliness is—the kind of loneliness that only women understand. If I wake up at night, it seems like the walls are coming down on me... Whatever. Let's not speak about sad things. I'll do whatever you say. I'll say 'no' to him if you want."

What could I tell her? She kept silent for a while, then I heard the sound of an airplane and I realized that that was the answer. Neither me—Rustam, nor me—Seymour, would ever be able to replace her dead husband.

In the evening after work, she invited me to her house for the first time. I knew the number of entrance and of the floor, but not the flat number. I knocked on the wrong door in the darkness. Nobody opened. I lit a match and saw a note on the door saying "The key is at the neighbors." I recalled the piano sounds as soon as I saw the note and I understood that it was the wrong door. I turned and knocked on the other door.

A "Neringa" radio, a soft padded chair and an ordinary lamp—everything was exactly the way that I had imagined it would be.

"Hold on, Seymour, I'll tune in to some good music," she said. "You listen and I'll go and prepare some tea."

Then I started kissing, hugging and caressing her. I could feel that it was both pleasant and difficult for her to feel herself a woman. Then someone started playing the piano behind the wall and suddenly she freed herself from my embrace and started listening for something. I was listening, too. I knew that I would hear the sound of an airplane in a few seconds. But I couldn't hear anything. And I suddenly realized what Madina was expecting to hear. She was expecting a phone call, because it was that time.

He—that was Me.

I knew that he would never call again, but there was a moment of hesitation. I waited for the call as well. I was expecting a miracle to happen—wishing that the telephone would ring.

But it never did again.

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