The Merchant’s House: the Private and the Public in the Writing of Home

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Dedication

To Mehrdad and Arash

And to the memory of my parents: Fatemeh and Madjid
Acknowledgements

I would never have been able to finish my Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA) without the guidance of my committee members, help from friends, and support of my family.

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Because English is not my first language, it was necessary to have my thesis copy-edited, the exegesis by John Revington and the novel by Christopher Cyrill, and in both cases editorial intervention was restricted to standards D and E of the Australian Standards for Editing Practice.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

(Signature)
Abstract

This thesis has its origin in the 2009 presidential election in Iran, and the dispute that arose over the election results between the ruling party and the ordinary citizens of Iran. This agitation compelled me to revisit in my narratives the country that I had left twenty-seven years before in a similar setting of social unrest.

My Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA) consists of the novel ‘The Merchant’s House’ and the cluster of socio-political essays which make up the exegesis, ‘Beginning Again’. The novel and the essays explore the journey, which began with my life before and immediately after the 1979 Revolution and continued up until my exile in Australia. In my political and social commentary on Iran I focus on the reasons why intellectuals of my generation who were involved in politics faced imprisonment and finally exile. The novel and the four essays which make up the exegesis are interconnected through the themes of memory, private and public life in contemporary Iran, and the search for the idea of home by which they are mutually informed.

In the first essay of the exegesis, through the lens of a migrant vision, I review my definition of ‘the idea of home’, discussing my life as a political activist in Iran, and then my gradual shift from political activity towards science and literature after coming to Australia in 1988 as a refugee. In the second essay, I examine the significance of memory and its interplay with notions of the self, creativity and engagement with the form of the novel. The third essay involves a discussion on how and why the public and private lives of ordinary Iranians have changed since the 1979 Revolution. And finally in the last essay, I look at the difficulties and possibilities of formulating a position as someone who attempts to write in English as a second language.

The novel, ‘The Merchant’s House’, is the story of the migration of two Azerbaijani sisters to Tehran for arranged marriages. The house referred to in the title is in Yousef Abad,
the area where I grew up. The time span is from two years before the 1979 Revolution until 2009. During these years Iran’s monarchist regime was overthrown and the Islamic Republic of Iran came into being. The life of the main characters is altered by the revolution and the subsequent eight years of war between Iran and Iraq. The public and private lives of Iranians provide the fabric for the novel; the main theme of the novel is how the life of ordinary Iranians changed within this time span. The novel ends in 2009, the time of a disputed presidential election result. At the conclusion of the novel, two young characters, the son and daughter of the two sisters, are prevented from migrating to Australia; hence Australia remains for them as a utopian ideal.
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**The Merchant’s House: A Novel** 138
Beginning Again: an exegesis
Introduction

The embryo of my novel germinated in a big plastic box which I carried with me through my years of living in Sydney. The plastic box contained notebooks, my mother’s prayer chador, my father’s rosary, and the photo of our home in the suburb of Yousef Abad in Tehran, taken before it was demolished to build office buildings. I had this novel with me for many years, but putting pen on paper to record what was inside me as a story was a creative struggle. I had to overcome certain fears about how to start, how to break the silence, how to look back on my last twenty-seven years of life in exile, to find a writing voice, to define a writing style.

Iran’s 1979 Revolution started with promises of respect for human rights and democracy, but then fell into the hands of an authoritarian, clerical regime. The horror of eight years of war between Iran and Iraq (1980 to 1988) left writers and intellectuals, as well as many other Iranian citizens, no choice but to leave their homeland. This began the biggest mass displacement of people in Iran’s modern history.

Since then, the concept of where home is has been subjected to question and examination first by convention, then revolution and finally by exile. Some writers, such as Zohreh T. Sullivan, has examined the concept of exile through narrative and memory, which is collected as a book in Exiled Memories: Stories of Iranian Diaspora (2001), Azar Nafisi, in her memoir Reading Lolita in Tehran (2003), maintained her involvement with the home of literature by privately teaching students about Nabokov’s novel Lolita, after having been dismissed from her university position. Marjane Satari’s graphic novels, Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood (2003), and Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return (2004) are about the history of Iran and the 1979 Revolution through eyes of a girl between the ages of 10
and 14. These narratives share the concerns of memory, exile, oppression and the role of the citizen in a society that is full of contradictions in the public and private domains.

In this exegesis I explain my childhood memories of home and the contradictions I had to endure when I was in Iran. I then explore my reasons for leaving Iran and coming to Australia as a political refugee. From this perspective, this exegesis, and indeed the creative component of the thesis itself, should be read as writing in exile.

There is a wide variety of theoretical, social and political discourse that could traverse the domain of writing in exile, but I have narrowed my focus to issues such as home, memory and fragmentation. I have chosen these subtexts to provide and insight to my own socio-political background as a writer. Like many others in exile, when I gave up hope of a return I started to revisit the value, meaning and idea of home. As I discuss in this exegesis, exile starts at home, when a person’s own country becomes hostile to her citizens.

The first two essays, ‘The Idea of Home’, and ‘Memories: Remembering and Forgetting’ deal with ideas and expressions of home and memory. The central theme here is how migrants see and define themselves in their new countries and their new homes. How we keep memories alive and how, through objects and surroundings, we carry the past into the present. In these narratives I discuss the dualistic metaphor of the blindfold – how blindness forces us to look deeply inward for our vision/s. The third essay, ‘Public and Private’, explores how Iran’s internal affairs have been misunderstood by Western society, largely because of its foreign policies. Iran’s last president, Mr Mahmood Ahmadinejad’s hostile rhetoric against Western societies, especially the United States, has made so many headlines in the Western media that
it is easy to ignore the fact that the ordinary life of Iranians often has little or no connection with the president’s point of view. The public and private aspects of Iranian citizens’ lives, especially those of women, have been overlooked. The appearance of Iranian women in Western media is often concerned with issues around the wearing of the headscarf. My novel, on the other hand, deals largely with the private and public lives of women who live in Iran.

The title of my fourth essay is ‘Fragmentation: Beginning Again’. It reflects on how I stopped writing because I lost my connection with Farsi, my native language, and how it took me years to gain the skills I needed to write fluently in my second language, English. This essay is about how I overcame the obstacles of being in a new culture, of having to learn to read in a new language and finally of having to identify the linguistic and syntactic position/s needed to begin the novel.

The Idea of Home

I started writing this thesis when Iran’s 2009 election was daily news. Uprisings, street demonstrations, arrests and interrogations, family news – all were destructive to my afflatus.. During this time, my yearning for home became more pronounced than ever; the memory/memories of home became intimate and overpowering and fuelled my creativity. The lives of my characters in the house in Yousef Abad started to take shape in more detail; the prose was driven by anger, despair and longing. ‘Bad times, after all, traditionally produce good books.’ (Rushdie 3). That was my hope anyway. This longing for home, whether it be idealised or not, inspired creativity.

This was also the time I was planning to go back to Iran. Tormented by the news I was watching on the internet, I thought that the topic of return should be
included in my discussion. I was particularly interested in elaborating on this triangle of hostility in relation to one’s own country, the strangeness of the new home and the strangeness of return. As Nikos Papastergiadis reminds us: ‘Mapping the world starts with the primary marker of the home,’ (Papastergiadis 5). I was thinking about Iran’s position in the world, about its government’s global responsibility and the vehemence the new generation was facing just because they were demanding a socio-politically safe and stable home within their own country. These three things seemed to me to be like a triangle of hostility.

The relevance of this essay to my novel relies upon the imagery of Yousef Abad, an area in Tehran in which I spent most of my childhood. By describing this area, my time at university, and finally, my departure from Iran to Australia, I have addressed the meaning of home and its relationship to defining the self. This theme is central in my novel. After marrying, two Azerbaijani sisters leave their homes in Tabriz and come to live in Tehran. Sorraya, the older sister, has her divorce request rejected and is left with no choice but to return to her husband’s home again and face the hostility of her mother-in-law. When her husband dies in a car accident she wants to return to Azerbaijan but she has financial problems. On the other hand, her younger sister Ayda is opposed to the idea of returning home to Azerbaijan because of the poverty she had experienced there as a child and she prefers to live in her husband’s house despite their cold marriage. The third character, their elderly mother-in-law, sees through her blind eyes how her life in Yousef Abad has changed over the years since she married and came to live there. In her old age she constantly reviews what home meant when she was a young girl. The contrast between home and exile is encapsulated within the relationships between these family members.
The novel also reflects on the triangle of hostility, strangeness and return by describing these three women’s lives together.

**Memory**

In this exegesis, by mapping my personal experiences of living in Australia over the last twenty-seven years, I discuss my struggle with remembering and forgetting. I have also elaborated on how memories have shaped me and my stories.

I have structured this essay into four sections, each of which explores one of the following aspects of memory: dialogues of remembering and forgetting, cultural versus personal memory, the sensory relationship with memory, and memory and photography. Following Roland Barthes’s definition of the photographic **Punctum**, I examine the unseen and ignored details of a family photo.

By using some examples from workshops I ran in Sydney with different communities, such as a Cambodian community group and women’s group with members from Iran, Iraq, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, I elaborate on how different practices of daily life, such as cooking, can be ways of commemorating the past. In this section I discuss how diverse institutionalised collective memories play a crucial part in the formation of our social identity.

Memory plays a crucial role in my novel as central characters reflect on their lives by remembering how they were shaped in Yousef Abad. The remembrance comes to them through photos, food smells, sounds and daily rituals.

Memory, however, is not always about remembering; sometimes it is more related to the desire to forget. In the process of my discussion about remembering and recording my daily life here in Sydney, I have also referred to discussions I’ve had at writing workshops with traumatised women and refugees,
invoking/remembering my own experience in Iran. This directly relates to the psychology of my three main female characters, who process their own current personal traumas through the kaleidoscope of their past.

Public and Private

Iranians say that after the 1979 Revolution, they live two different, parallel lives: one that is public and outside their homes, and the other that is inside their homes. This is a country which in general has been presented as a part of the ‘axis of evil’ in the Western mainstream media or has been misunderstood because of the complexity of the social and political lives of its citizens. My literature review shows that although a great deal has been written about Iran after the 1979 Revolution, the main focus has been on the country’s political system. This focus has been criticised by some writers and researchers. For example, Elham Ghaytanchi has criticised Iranian historians who have focused mainly on the importance of the 1979 Revolution and neglected investigating the public and private lives of its citizens. The fact that not much information has been available about how the 1979 Revolution changed the lives of Iranians makes me believe this essay is both necessary and important for providing background information about the social and political life I have explored in the novel.

The main component of this essay is my personal experience of life in Iran, from the 1979 Revolution until I left the country in 1988, when a severe conservatism took over the country. However, because the creative component of my thesis continues till 2009, I have also covered issues in Iran that I have learnt about either through research or through personal contact with the new generation of migrants. Of all the texts I have read for this essay, I found Kaveh Basmenji’s
Tehran Blues: Youth Culture in Iran the most comprehensive; hence I have used that text as my main source, especially to detail what has happened in Iran during my time in exile. Apart from Basmenjii’s book, the only other resource I have found on this topic was a conference paper called Private Lives in Public Spaces in Modern Iran (2005).

**Fragmentation: Beginning Again**

I need to explain the contradiction of making ‘Fragmentation: Beginning Again’ as the last essay in my thesis.

After giving a detailed account of my literary background in the Farsi language, I give an overview of my daily life from the time I arrived in Sydney until the time that I started this exegesis and the novel. This is a language journey through lost and found realities, of finding a new voice and new ways of storytelling as a result of displacement and exile. It is about how, step by step, I found my way back to reading and writing – this time in the English language. Therefore, this is a new beginning for me, a time of beginning to read and write in the language of my exile. I owe part of the title for this essay to Edward Said. For almost a year, I searched for something to start with, to begin with. One day, I found Said’s book, Beginnings: Intention and Methods in a bookshop. I spent months with this book, contemplating the implications of such passages as: ‘I said parenthetically above that the novel is a literary form of secondariness; here we can refine this generality to say that the novel makes, procreates, a certain secondary and alternative life possible for heroes who are otherwise lost in society’ (Said 93).

Said led me to contemplate what was I really looking for in these passages? Was I looking for an alternative life? Or a hero? Was I looking to save someone from
being lost in society? I couldn’t really clarify it but I used Said’s book, especially the chapter ‘The Novel as Beginning Intention’ as my prime text. Said’s text made me self-question my writerly motivations: was this novel I wanted to write somehow a closure to my enduring, futile hope for a return home? Or a need to assimilate? Or was I trying to make a new home by writing this book? I still don’t know. However, there is always a certain time for a story to become a novel. And I knew this time had arrived.

I have identified issues such as problems with language and the necessity to establish a life in exile, which delayed the writing process. My fragmented experiences in a new country were glued together in the form of the novel as, step by step, my language improved and I established a home in exile. I have also described the strangeness I felt with this new language of English and how, through reading Australian writers, I tried to find something familiar, to make a connection, to make my life in Australia more coherent. This section of the essay is also about the peculiarities and strangeness a writer feels when she writes in a second language, and the enduring foreignness and estrangement of a borrowed language.

My life in Australia after migrating from Iran is crucial to my exegesis. But I should also mention the relevance of Australia to the creative component of my exegesis.

Iranian migration to Australia increased abruptly after the 2004 presidential election in which Ahmadinejad took presidential office and also after the 2009 uprising and unrest when there were public protests over the rigged election result that saw him returned to office. There were two reasons for the Iranian interest in migration to Australia, and one is that Australia is considered a friendly English-speaking country with universities of a high standard and a good economy – it is still
considered a land of opportunity. This image doesn’t include Australia’s treatment of refugees and that is not a major concern, for the generally middle class, skilled young professionals who seek a better life in Australia. The second attraction is that Australia has an embassy in Iran, which shows that there is a good relationship between the two countries.

In my novel, two young cousins, Mahtab and Maziar, are trying to obtain visas to go to Australia. Mahtab’s mother, Sorraya, spends time in front of the Australian Embassy and becomes more and more disappointed on hearing how other people in the queue talk about the difficulties of obtaining visas. Mahtab and Maziar fail to get their visas and the 2009 uprising destroys their mothers’ hopes for their children to have a better future in Australia. In the novel Australia represents a utopia, a promise of opportunity that cannot be delivered.
Chapter One

The Idea of Home: to go home or to be on the way home

In *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*, Rosemary Marangoly George writes, ‘The word “home” immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection’ (George 1). George, the editor of *Burning Down the House*, elaborates on the broader meaning of home as a space, ‘...the “private” space from which the individual travels into the larger arenas of life and to which he or she returns at the end of the day’ (George 11).

For most of us, the very first sense of self starts at home. Where we eat, where we sit, how we sleep night after night, the food we eat and the rituals of preparation, religious and family events all go to make the first map of our self. It is at home that we acquire our first skills of life. Whatever adventure our lives become, big or small, we walk most often in the tracks created by the simple steps we took under the roof of our first home.

For me, who had to leave her childhood home and become a political refugee, and who has lived the last twenty-five years away from that place where I felt I belonged, the concept of home is more about how I have obtained my sense of self by examining my experiences and writing about them. So in this essay I discuss stories related to my sense of self and home and home-country. George explains the ‘home-country’ as:

What the hyphen in “home-country” makes explicit are the ideological linkages deemed necessary for subjects who are at home in a social and political space and even more acutely for those who are, because of
geographic distance or political disenfranchisement, *outside* their “legitimate” space. Home-country and home resonate differently from different locations for different subjects and often even for the same subject at different location (George 17).

My first home in Iran was in a suburb of Tehran called Yousef Abad. Our house was too small for a family of five children so I didn’t have my own room. Instead, I had a small cabinet of my own that my parents bought for me when I became an outstanding student in my second year of primary school. I used this wooden wardrobe as my spaceship. Anytime I needed to be alone, away from my noisy brothers and sister, I would sit on my pile of clothes and travel around the world and the universe in my mind. In my wooden spaceship, I travelled to faraway lands, passed over oceans, and across mountains. I took risks and indulged my sense of adventure by imagining what I could do from my castle of power.

As a child, I had read stories about the dangers of the outside world and the security of home. After all, stories such as *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Hansel and Gretel* were universal stories.. I had read *Alice in Wonderland* and, like nine-year old Pippi in *Pippi Long Stocking*, I imagined having superhuman strength. It was in the security of my home that I learnt that whenever I was in danger, safety was just a wooden door away.

When I started high school I was given my own room. This was when my older sister, who had been my roommate, married and left home. Since I was now the only girl at home, I was given the room. This gave me my first experience of privacy. In my own room I had permission to be myself; I started to get interested in books. I became a voracious reader and also started writing in my diary. I still had my
favourite wardrobe but instead of clothes, I stored my diaries and journals in it. Gradually, from reading, I graduated to trying my hand at writing. My ideas, and also my interest in writing, developed in this room.

My childhood and teenage years were full of security and happiness; I was sheltered due to the efforts of two wonderful parents. At that time, I really didn’t know what was going on outside of my home. The self I knew was defined by others; by my parents, who first considered me as an enthusiastic and intelligent daughter but with too much imagination, perhaps too much of a daydreamer, to the point that she lost touch with the ground underneath her feet. Or by my brothers and sisters, who considered me too loud and demanding. My neighbourhood friends found me creative, someone who brought a new game to play every day. Now, the wooden spaceship was not enough to feed my growing enthusiasm for learning. So my first experience away from the shelter of home started when I left home and went to university, far from Yousef Abad.

University life expanded my horizons and my understanding of the outside world, as it was my first experience of being a long way from home. I learnt to do things on my own, buy the food I wanted and wear the clothes I chose. My sense of self was growing at a personal level, and gradually as my world grew, so did my decisions, my ideas, and my involvement with my surroundings and society. My classmates were not just our next-door neighbours’ children, as they had been when I was in high school.

One day after our class finished a group of girls and I decided to go to a local café for ice-cream. Two girls from small provincial cities said that they were not allowed to go anywhere after class. In his introduction to "Dialogues in the
In folklore the significance of the home is defined by its relation to the outside. The home may be a clearing within a forest, a camp in the middle of a desert, an island surrounded by sea. The outside space is usually perceived as dark, hostile and capricious. Beyond the clearing lies the devil (Papastergiadis 3).

Coming out of the safety net of my home, I learnt that those small, friendly and innocent gatherings after our classes were seen by some families as a danger zone where their girls would get corrupted morally. The fact that those gatherings had happened outside their homes made it dangerous for girls and had to be banned.

One of the girls in my class quit her studies and got married. When I asked her why she didn’t wait till she finished her degree, she replied that her parents wouldn’t allow it. It was an arranged marriage she did not want, something my parents wouldn’t force on me. I told some of my classmates that I had cousins who had a German mother and one of the girls commented that her family had never allowed mixed marriages. She said her older brother had lived in the UK for the last three years and when he decided to get married, he came home. I had grown up in cosmopolitan Yousef Abad. I had friends from Christian and Jewish backgrounds but my other classmates, living in other parts of town, had never met a Christian or a Jew. It was eye-opening for me to see that although we came from the same religion, we all had different ways of practising it. My understanding and awareness about class issues started at university too.

Papastergiadis reminds us, ‘Home is not only the place which is marked out as your own, but also the specific place in which you will be recognised by others and, most importantly, by God. To leave home is always risky’ (3). As art students,
we travelled all around Iran to view the artefacts of our country’s ancient history. We travelled to Isfahan, Shiraz, Yazd and Kerman. On the way we crossed through small towns and villages, observing people who were taking muddy water from their wells, living in the dusty roads – no electricity, no medical centres or any other basic facilities. For me, another kind of realisation was emerging from these travels. I discovered the broader meaning of home, my home-country, my people, and my nation. George wrote, ‘The term “home-country” suggests the particular intersection of private and public and of individual and communal that is manifest in imagining a space as home’ (11). We, students of the university and people of these villagers were from the same country but we were seeing these village people as outsiders. They were outsiders to our space, and they were seeing us as outsiders, because their private and public space, within the same country, was different to ours. Two divisions within home- country; where the I/eye sees more difference than similarity within the one nationality. Here, the hyphen of home-country wasn’t a linkage as was suggested at George’s description, but a division. We all were once Persian, now Iranian, but we occupied different geographical and socio-economical spaces, we were in ‘hyphenated’ locations.

My generation was enjoying prosperity, which oil money had been bringing to the country since the early 1970s, and the department of tertiary education funded the excursions. It was during those excursions that I learnt about how Tehran, the capital city and a few big historical cities were saturated with the glitter of modern life at the cost of the poverty in all the other parts of Iran. My knowledge about state-enforced security measures was enhanced during this period too. Each time we students wanted to be in close contact with the locals, we knew that we had to be careful about what we talked about and how we talked. We knew SAVAK, the secret
police, were everywhere.¹ I was warned about SAVAK even in first grade when my sister took me to school. She told me during the national anthem, which was sung every morning in the school assembly, that I had to stand politely and never say a bad word about the monarch or his family. Those days, every Iranian knew about the danger of the notorious secret agents. I experienced their presence first hand when two of our classmates disappeared and never attended classes again. After the revolution, I saw their names, along with those of hundreds of other political prisoners who had been tortured and killed by SAVAK.

As my understanding increased my conscience became shaky. I believed that I had to do something but I didn’t know what or how. I decided to join the department of education and work as a teacher in an underprivileged area. I told my parents I would be a teacher in one of Tehran’s richest areas, otherwise they wouldn’t allow me to take this job as they knew working as a teacher in a poor area meant that I would be under SAVAK’s surveillance all the time. They also disagreed with my working because they thought I should just go to university and finish my degree. In their view, only girls from disadvantaged families went to work.

The school was in one of the many shanty towns on the outskirts of southern Tehran. The classrooms were freezing cold during Tehran’s snowy days and extremely hot from the first month of spring onwards because of their tin roofs. Looking at those hungry faces with frozen skins, every morning, the first question in my mind was always: How, in a rich oil country, can schools have no budget for heating or cooling the classrooms? In the summer of 1977, I and two other teachers kept the school open during the summer break and helped the students to catch up with their studies. We also organised recreational events. One day, when we were on the way to the school to pick up students to take them to the park, we heard noises
and then guns being fired into the air, and immediately the whole area was in chaos. In the streets people were running and shouting, and cursing the council workers who were there with trucks and bulldozers. People had been told by the government that they had to move from their homes. In the days and weeks that followed, the council tried to move the thousands of people living in the shanty towns and force them from their homes. They wanted to clean up the area without providing any alternative accommodation. People retaliated by causing disturbances for months. Police relentlessly attacked them, killing forty and arresting many more.

The council cut off the water and electricity supplies. People tried to find resources for themselves within their community and, in a short period of time, learnt how to work together and oppose the cruelty they faced. The force of their resistance made the council finally back down at the end of the summer and cancel the decree on the shantytown. This encouraged people to arrange strikes in their workplaces. Teachers participated in the resistance from the beginning to the end. When in the early autumn school started, the area was transformed completely; a new energy and courage were in the air. Changes like these were occurring all around the country.

It was in this climate that I developed an interest in politics. What started with compassion and caring for people gradually developed into a more complex and more intellectual aspiration. My university days were filled with political discussions about our country – we had never discussed politics at home. The only time that I had previously been involved with politics was in 1975, when the late Shah introduced his one-party system to have a monopoly over the politics of the country and gained a stranglehold on power. He made it compulsory for everyone over sixteen to enrol in this party. My older brother and my sister refused to enrol when the government officials came to school to register our names. Now I did the same.
In those days in the 1970s, in some ways we were like any other university students in the world; we partied together till late, drank alcohol, smoked cigarettes and listened to Western music. We also educated ourselves about what was happening in the world, in North and South America, in the Soviet Union and the Communist Bloc. Discussions about capitalism and imperialism were part of our everyday activities.

We also had lecturers who had been educated abroad. They came back equipped with new ideas about democracy, social and political science, history and cultural studies, and feminism and gender issues. They knew that they couldn’t teach us what they had learnt in the university curriculum. They used to organise group gatherings or give us their books, which we couldn’t buy in the bookshops, or told us the names of important authors. Our art lecturer introduced us to modern cinema. Gradually, we organised our own reading and discussion groups. We discussed how the Shah’s one-party monopoly was at odds with all the propaganda he was producing in the media, about how he wanted to have a modern Iran. Although the Shah defined himself as a secular Muslim, he constantly referred to himself as a divine figure. He didn’t want to reign but to rule. As a result he never talked about democracy, the basic element of modern politics.

From 1963 to 1977, a series of events made Iran ripe for revolution. The Shah’s White Revolution took place in 1963. It called for land reform, literacy and human rights. It was called the White Revolution because it didn’t involve any bloodshed, but the outcome wasn’t revolutionary.² Zohreh T. Sullivan, an Iranian writer who teaches and works in the U.S.A, has written a book titled Exiled Memories: Stories of Iranian Diaspora. For this book, Sullivan interviewed exiled
Iranians who lived in America. She not only expressed her own ideas about being in exile and her memories about home, but she also creatively integrated a chorus of narratives from Iranians of different genders and cultural and religious backgrounds. In her introduction to the book, Sullivan refers to how the Western media misread the White Revolution as a positive move toward the modernisation in Iran:

Western writers on Iran frequently misread the signs of prosperity: the White Revolution much publicised as the Shah’s effort to end the power of landowners, in fact resulted in increased rural poverty, displacement, and unemployment of peasants who fled the countryside and created massive slums around urban areas (Sullivan 131).

In 1971 the 2500-year anniversary celebration of the Iranian monarchy, organised by the late Shah’s administration, was praised by monarchists but condemned by Iranians and most of the media in the West, mainly because of the huge financial expenditure on the parade that was held to mark the occasion. In his book *The Life and Times of the Shah*, Gholam Reza Afkhami referred to Manuchehr Hezarkhani, the leader of the student confederation, saying that ‘in most countries, the confederation set out to bring to the attention of the leaders and the people, the Shah’s crimes, Iran’s poverty, the wide chasm separating economic classes and the regime’s militarism’ (Afkhami 413). Like the leader of the student confederation, we, the political activists, didn’t see the glory of Persia which the late Shah was trying to portray in the media; instead we saw a contemporary Iran with its wide chasm separating classes and the regime’s militarism. The term “home-country” in itself expresses a complex yoking of ideological apparatuses considered necessary for the existence of subjects: the notion of belonging, of having a home, and a place of one’s own, (George 2). Our ideology from the left party was different from the king’s monarchist ideas. The king justified his position by invoking the glory of
Persia and our egalitarian doctrine was necessary to continue to protest against the regime. On personal level, my notion of belonging was changing too. Those days, I reflect now, was my coming of age, leaving my protected life and exploring a new self, a new woman, who refused to accept the boundaries of a traditional home. The country as a whole, with its past and present problems, was going to be my new home-country. My consciousness had been awakened. I was not prepared to go back home, to the protected shelter I had before. Although both my parents were liberal they were aware of SAVAK and the dangers of political involvement, especially my mother who was trying to prevent me from getting involved with any kind of politics. No doubt my mother, like many women of her generation wished me the best in life and that usually meant going to university, which increased the prospect of a better marriage and perhaps a more educated and affluent husband.

About the position of men and women in the location of home, George writes:

While the issue of “homelands” or “home-countries” is raised primarily in the discourse on nationalism and other so-called masculine, public arenas, the issue of “home” and the private sphere is usually embedded in discourses on women. In literature and literary theory, until quite recently, most considerations of the home have occasioned examination of the status of women (17).

My mother’s stand on protecting her family from the danger of outside wasn’t unusual for her generation; but women of my generation already started to question the masculine domain of house and we were not convinced that our parent’s or our husband’s home were enough for a meaningful life.

In 1978, one of the cinemas in Iran, Cinema Rex in the city of Abadan in the south of Iran, was set ablaze and more than 400 people were killed. SAVAK claimed
that one of Iran’s fundamentalist Muslim groups were responsible for starting the fire. However, the general population of Iran blamed SAVAK. This became a turning point for a society which had already had enough of its regime, and sparked demonstrations and strikes against the Shah and his brutal secret police. The unrest continued until the revolution in 1978.

It was one of the most exhilarating times in my country’s history and I was excited to be part of it. A revolution was on the way and, as the youth of that time, we were filled with hope and ambitions. We were young and we were looking for something new. We were ready to leave aside our old way of life, which we had learnt at our parents’ homes, and search for a new way of life by re-defining what a new home would be. We were learning to re-define what home-country meant to us. We were learning to look upon the ancient Empire of Persia as in exile itself; the king justified using the country’s resources by claiming he was trying to resurrect the culture of Persia and leaving villagers without any basic contemporary necessities. I felt blindfolded by the our traditions and our present. In those excursions through the country, we students were travelling to sites of archaeological interest that described the culture which once was Persia, but we encountered villagers who saw these same lands as their ‘home’.

George writes, ‘I would like to suggest that the basic organizing principle around which the notion of the “home” is built is a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions. Home is a way of establishing difference. Homes and home-countries are exclusive,’ (2). What my political activity did for me, was put me in a certain socio-political space that’s to differentiate my private life from my public life. As my home of my childhood receded a home-country expanded before me.
People called those days 'the spring of freedom'. I felt like that was what it was. It was exciting to walk on the streets, especially around the major universities, seeing people, standing around in groups discussing all sorts of topics, from politics to literature and art, topics which they were not allowed to discuss during the Shah’s time. Permissible conversations during the Shah’s time were limited to what the state security allowed.

The university was our new home, our new destination, where we had a goal. The goal was to bring freedom and democracy to the country, and to have a prosperous and egalitarian society. New ideas need new habits, and new systems needed new regulations and rules. We wanted to have a new life based on this fresh, fertile socio-economic soil and we, the university students from all around Iran, joined millions of other Iranians to ask the Shah to leave.

One of the Iranians in exile whom Sullivan interviewed for her book was Afsaneh Najmabadi, who explained her experiences during the revolution in the following terms:

When I went back in 1979, the Shah had just left. And I went there to make my revolution. [She laughs.] What else can I say? There were thousands and tens of thousands of us who came back. It was wonderful, remarkable – an illusion of total freedom. You could say anything. You could write anything (Najmabadi qtd. in Sullivan 149).

In a matter of a few months, the country underwent its biggest political transformation ever. After 2500 years, the monarchical system in Iran changed and the referendum showed that Iran was ready to have a republican system. But why and how that dream of a republic became one of the first totalitarian Islamic systems in recent history still remains a puzzle to many Iranian scholars. Some blame the shortcomings of the Left, which was blind to Ayatollah Khomeini’s charismatic
character. Some believe that the undercurrent in Iran was more religious than secular. But there is no clear political answer. Ayatollah Khomeini proposed that Iran’s new republic should be named the Islamic Republic of Iran. He faced a backlash from most of those who had participated in the revolution and brought him back from his long-term exile. He promised that most of the political parties would be free to practise their political rights. He said that under this regime there wouldn’t be political prisons, there wouldn’t be torture or execution of the opposition. He promised the rights of minorities would be respected. He also said that his aim was to bring prosperity to everyone and not just to one per cent of the society, as was the case with the Shah’s regime.

Unfortunately, that spring of freedom was short-lived. The first attacks from the newly established Islamic Republic targeted minorities and ethnic groups. A Baha’i woman, Lily explained:

In 1980, the real persecution of all groups against the regime started. They arrested people; they tortured leftists; they tortured and killed others and the Baha’iis specifically. Certainly, they never said that they were arresting Baha’iis because of their religious beliefs. But entire assemblies – many professors of the university, the most educated of our people, many artists – were executed. The only woman meteorologist of Iran was executed (Lily qtd. in Sullivan 143).

Like millions of Iranians, I was disappointed to see how the promises of the revolution changed so easily. Sullivan explains that:

The women who marched for the revolution were a heterogeneous group who represented social and political organisations as different as the conservative Women’s Society of Islamic Revolution, and as radical as the Revolutionary Union of Militant Women whose parent organisation was the Maoist Communist Party of Workers and Peasants. Gradually, as evidenced by the writings of Khomeini and Motahari and the restriction of Shariati’s Fatima Is Fatima, all differences withered into a single truth: the only acceptable woman in the Islamic state was the Muslim
woman who was the ‘pillar of the family,’ and who abided by all the laws laid down in the Shari’a (Sullivan 129).

If it was the late Shah who talked about modernity but never mentioned democracy, Ayatollah Khomeini’s regime talked about rights but never mentioned civil rights, human rights, women’s rights or children’s rights. What he meant by rights was Sharia Law. Soon, many Iranians found out that this regime, if it was not worse than the previous one, was in many ways very similar. The Shah had dreamed of ruling like a king of 2500 years ago; Khomeini dreamed of ruling the country as it was 1,400 years ago, the period of time which, in his mind, was the glory of Islam.

Soon the backlash started from every direction, left, right and centre. Many, who participated in the revolution now organised and participated in demonstrations against the regime because they felt that their revolution had been hijacked by Islamists. For example, in March 1979, on International Women’s Day, women marched against the new Islamic rules and codes to protest against Khomeini’s comments about veiling the day before. Najmabadi writes:

On the seventh of March, Khomeini held an audience with some groups of women, in the course of which he had uttered one of his famous one-liners. He said, ‘Women can go to offices, but they must go veiled.’ This was on the day before International Women’s Day. So for the next few days there was this spontaneous outpouring of women on the streets demonstrating against Khomeini’s statement, going to the Minister of Justice, to Iranian television, to Tehran University (Najmabadi qtd. in Sullivan 151).

Najmabadi explains how on 8 March, women carried the slogan Azadi bayad nabayad nadare, which translates to 'freedom has no must' in response to Khomeini’s decree. Unfortunately, the Left didn’t see Khomeini’s decree as a precursor for upcoming human rights abuses in Iran. The Left accused women who participated in this demonstration of falling into the trap of taking a petty issue such
as veiling too seriously and ignoring major issues such as the treat of an imperialist invasion or even a *coup d’état*. I was, at that time, a member of the Communist Party, which didn’t see feminism as a legitimate cause, so I didn’t participate in this demonstration. Later I regretted my decision because I didn’t realise at that time how important basic civil rights are, and that if a new government is not willing to provide those, it will not be possible to demand greater political rights from it.

The Islamic Republic of Iran started a new operation to destroy the ‘insurrections’ in Kurdistan. Rebwar Kurdi, a Kurdish Iranian interviewed by Sullivan explained his experience:

> The Islamic Air Force dispatched its Phantoms and helicopters, bombing the people of Sanandaj, killing and wounding many hundreds, on the first New Year [21 March] after the fall of the Shah. This was a major turning point. Now people argued that there was no difference between the two regimes, and many said the Islamic regime was worse (Kurdi qtd. in Sullivan 172).

Najmabadi continued her interview with Sullivan recalling that, ‘Suddenly there were all sorts of exclusions and new legal restrictions on women. Women who had graduated and finished their courses in legal studies were told they were excluded from *tahleef* – the oath required for becoming a judge. There are no women judges now in Iran’ (Najmabadi qtd. in Sullivan 151).

In September 1980, Iraq attacked Iranian military bases and the war between Iran and Iraq started. It lasted until 1988. During this time, Khomeini’s regime used the war as an excuse to silence any voice that spoke against the regime or criticised it. Every day Iranians faced kidnapping, torture and persecution, as well as the daily difficulties of living in a country torn apart by war. By the end of the war thousands of political prisoners had been executed in Evin prison. Those of us who were still active in the movement faced the danger of being arrested or killed every day.
As a result of my political involvement with one of the Left parties called Cherikhayeh-fadaieyan khalgh, ‘Organisation of the Iranian People’s Devotee Guerrillas’ I went to jail for two years. This time made me think about my affiliation with the Left and to reflect on my political activities. It brought me a vision of myself. My strengths and weaknesses were being challenged all the time. Sometimes at night, we inmates used to sit in a circle and talk about our homes. Under the constant surveillance of security guards, what we talked about felt strange; those sweet and safe moments of playing, those soft touches of life our parents had provided us, each of us in our own way. Almost every night we talked about home, each night each of us was a new Shahrzad. Like this mesmerising storyteller, each of us took the role of a seductive narrator to tell our stories of childhood to distract ourselves from the horrible conditions in the prison. Those stories were our way of returning home. Sometimes, through those discussions in which we created ourselves, it was as if we sat in the spaceship of our memories. Those home stories healed our tortured souls and bodies.

After being released from jail, I realised the extent to which all my civil liberties had been taken from me. I couldn’t continue with my university education, I could no longer be a political activist, I was not allowed to work in the public sector. I was not even allowed to get married unless I introduced the man I wanted to marry to the judiciary. And my fiancé didn’t want to be introduced to the judiciary because he refused to join the army and go to the war. So as a result of all these hurdles, none of us had proper documents to apply for a passport to leave the country legally. Finally we found a minister who agreed to marry us. After my son was born, we reviewed our options and decided that there was no prospect of a decent life in Iran. The only option left was to leave Iran illegally.
As soon as I had the chance, I escaped the country with my husband and our one-year-old son across the border to Pakistan. Years later, looking back, I feel that my displacement started in my birthplace, in my homeland. Anytime I call home now, I remember my first call home from prison (in the first month I didn’t have permission to have family visits). My grandmother answered the phone. Being an Azerbaijani woman, she didn’t speak or understand Farsi; I talked in Azeri Turkish to her. Blindfolded, looking down, I could only see my interrogator’s shoes. As soon as I talked in Azeri, I saw the pair of shoes coming closer; the interrogator hung up the phone and warned me if I spoke Azeri again he wouldn't let me call home. Whenever I smell detergent in the evening, I remember how I used dish-washing liquid to wash the wounds of a fifteen-year-old Kurdish girl in prison. I used detergent to wash our clothes, our hair and her wounded back. She was arrested because her brother was a member of one of the left wing political groups. Thomas Mann wrote: ‘What an abnormal, morbid condition, abnormal and morbid for anyone, but especially for the writer, the bearer of spiritual tradition, when his own country becomes the most hostile and the most sinister foreign land’ (Mann 101).

I think many people who live in a diaspora as a result of the brutality they have faced in their homeland can identify with Mann’s comment. Iran’s biggest outward migration started as soon as the Islamic Republic of Iran established itself as a system of power in the early 1980s, as many people, especially those from diverse religious and cultural groups and political opponents, faced the danger every day of being arrested or killed. For the first time in Iran’s history, not only did people move out of the country en masse, but women moved out in larger numbers than men. Gholam Hosain Saedi, an Iranian writer who left Iran soon after the 1979 Revolution and lived and died in exile (1985) in Paris wrote:
Exiles must tell the world, in every known language, what has happened to their country. They must tell everyone about the black cloth that a handful of executioners have draped over an entire, breathing people. Locks must be removed from lips. The season for screaming has arrived. If you don’t scream, if you don’t shake the world it will not even glance at you. Gradual death, chronic death, will eat you slowly like gangrene (Saedi 24).

Memoir writing became a major genre between Iranians in exile, especially among women writers to explain what had happened in their country. Leili Golafshani, an Iranian postdoctoral research fellow at university of Queensland has written about memoir writing by Iranians in exile:

Generally speaking, in the past decade or so, there has been an unprecedented rise in autobiographical writing by Middle Easterners, particularly by Iranians with outstanding women’s memoirs. Exilic memoirs—more often than not published only outside Iranian territory—emerged in the 1980s and surged after September 11, 2001 (Golafshani 1).

In this essay, I will focus on one of those memoirs, *Journey from the Land of No* by Roya Hakakian, a Jewish-American writer to discuss Saedi’s point. My reason to choose this memoir is mainly Hakakian’s subject, which is inclusive about what has happened in Iran before and after revolution and includes the modern history of her community.

In, *Journey from the Land of No*. Hakakian describes her father as a calm and loving father who takes care of his house and family. He is a trustworthy Jewish man who had the respect of his neighbours:

> When Father sauntered down the street, his hands clasped behind him, chest forward, always in a suit and tie even if he was only going to the corner grocery, perfect strangers felt compelled to acknowledge him with the only term of reverence they could bestow on a regal passerby: “Mr. Haji, good
day!” Haji: a fellow Muslim fortunate enough to have been to Mecca. And my obliging father, in turn, said as he passed them, “May Allah keep you safe!” Not Khoda, Persian for God. No. Father invoked the Koranic equivalent to express his appreciation for living at a time and in a city where a Jew could mingle with others so freely that he was mistaken for a Muslim (Hakakian 28).

Roya’s father always felt at home in his home-country and when, after the 1979 Islamic Revolution six members of the Jewish community went to visit Imam Khomaini, the Imam said, ‘We recognize our Jews as separate from those godless Zionists!’ (Hakakian 157); Mr Hakakian still felt at home in his beloved Iran. He felt no danger. But one day when he saw the sign of Najes, the Persian word for dirty on the walls of the buildings, a word which hadn’t been used before since the Pahlavi dynasty was in power. He knew that his home-country was not a safe place for him and his family; therefore his private home wasn’t safe anymore. So he thought he had to clean his home of anything dangerous. He saw danger in his daughter’s books if the government members raided his home:

Father held a long wooden stick charred at one end and among the ashes, in the bonfire, my world was burning: my newspapers and magazines, my fifth grade appreciation certificate from the shah’s minister of education. Underneath them, my weightier loves had settled: Albert’s copy of ‘The Little Black Fish’, my records and tapes, signed copies of my favourite poetry books, my Jane Austen Reader, my hardcover Mikail Sholohov’s ‘And Quiet Flows the Don’, my leather bound Dostoyevskys—all burning to punish me for what should have never been a crime (Hakakian 226).

In this episode, Roya’s mother was pleading to her daughter to understand. “He had to,” Mother said, “for your own safety.” (225). Her job as the woman of the house was to keep everyone safe and comfortable and happy. Roya continues her story, “‘Mother implored again: ‘Don’t be upset, please. They were unsafe to keep at
home” (226). When I read this passage, it reminded me of my own experience with my mother. I have referred to George’s comment on the position of men and women in the location of home in a previous section. The mother’s reaction resonates with many female Iranian livefe in the early days of the revolution.

The protective home which Roya had grown up in was demolished in front of her eyes. For a while she was hysterical, shouting and screaming, demanding a response. The boundaries were violated by national politics; the meaning of home is thus re-defined, the once safe walls become a porous network of outside/inside. The other boundary which is broken is self/other, which in the house was established as father/daughter or mother/daughter relationship. When the home of the self is violated then there can not be any other home. So Roya express this as ‘Among the ashes, in the bonfire, my world was burning: my newspaper and magazines, my fifth-grade appreciation certificate from the shah’s minister of education’ (Hakakian 226).

Roya witnessed how the sanctity of her home, her room within the home, vanished. The scream Saedi asks for, has been captured in the voice of adolescent Roya perfectly. And her story ends at, ‘Father walked onto the balcony. He stood behind me, lay both hands on my shoulders, cleared his throat, and said faintly, “It’s time we leave for America”’ (Hakakian227). Her voice also encapsulated the comment George gives us about the women’s position at home.

The association of home and the female has served to present them as mutual handicaps, mutually disempowering. Hence, the woman is incapacitated because she is “tied” to the home, and the home is shelter for the incapacitated. For men, both women and the home provide momentary escape and respite, but to linger too long at these comforts is to be lost (George 17).
Although her mother is not a career woman and her position in her home is limiting but her understanding that at that particular moment the outside is a dangerous space for her family makes her to follow her husband to protect her family; her mother would rather her husband burning their daughter’s books rather than the government’s police raid to her home. In a way, Roya’s mother played a traditional ‘incapacitated role’, as she stood there watching her husband burn her daughter’s books for the sake of their safety. But Roya herself, as a young woman refused this disempowered position; she screamed, she shouted against the situation in her home.

A memoir such as Hakakian’s book complies exactly with Saedi’s requests from exile. But that scream to tell the world what has happened to their country took another turn too. Some Iranian women writers wrote about what happened in their country, as it was suggested by Saedi, but at the same time they were also forced to defend their country’s dignity and culture.

For example, in her essay, *How to be Persian abroad? An old question in the Postmodern Age*, an Iranian literary critic, Nasrin Rahimieh compares Rica, a fictional Persian character in Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes* (*Persian Letters*) with her own situation. At the time of writing this essay for the First Biennial Conference of the Society for Iranian Studies, Rahimieh was also teaching Montesquieu’s text in a graduate seminar on the eighteenth century:

This irony of a Persian teaching *Lettres Persanes* to students from a Western cultural and literary tradition was only brought home to me during one of the classes in which I read aloud the famous phrase “How can one be Persian?” Looking up from the text, at the smiling faces of my students, I realized that I was being seen by my students as embodying both the question and the answer. In their eyes, there I was, Rica’s twentieth-century
counterpart, having to confront the West with yet another partial understanding of what constitutes Persian identity (Rahimieh 165).

Montesquieu’s fictional Rica is not a strange persona in our modern time and definitely it is not only Persian identity which has been questioned in the era of refugee and mass migration. Persian as an identity has also been used as a kind of brand name for a home-country by other writers to relate to a peculiar, problematic identity. For example, Azadeh Moaveni, an Iranian-American writer of the memoir, *Lipstick Jihad* writes:

Growing up, I had no doubt that I was Persian. Persian like a fluffy cat, a silky carpet- a vaguely Oriental notion belonging to history, untraceable on a map. It was the term we insisted on using at the time, embarrassed by any association with Iran, the modern country, the hostage-taking Death Star. Living a myth, a fantasy, made it easier to be Iranian in America (Moaveni vii).

In the USA, some Iranians may have felt an obligation to prove that they belonged to a greater history, to a bigger power. Is this a result of too much focus on the greatness of Persian culture from the time of its empirical glory, or too much defensiveness? Sometimes, these writers’ defensive strategies manifests as nationalism. Perhaps this is as a result of being culturally or politically bullied by the authority of other culture or politics. Persis M, Karim and Nasrin Rahimieh write, ‘in the wake of the September 11, 2001 tragedies, Iranians in the US found themselves once again viewed with suspicion. Seen as part of a monolithic community of Muslims presumed to be hostile to the US, Iranians were at pains to conceal their identity’ (Karim et al. 204).

Although the tragedies of September 11, 2001 greatly affected how Australia’s general public viewed Australian Muslims, those views were not directly
targeted at Iranians, so Iranian-Australians unlike Iranian-Americans didn’t feel that they had to protect their identity through Persian-ness. Iran and Australia, unlike Iran and America didn’t have a long term hostile political relationship and there was not a long history of immigration from Iran to Australia to create both connections through politics and education nor hostility through foreign affairs and policies. Karim and Rahimieh remind us that:

Being bombarded with unfavourable and repetitious images of and headlines about Iran and Iranians has reinforced the Iranian American community’s anxieties about their national affiliation. The Iranian diaspora’s simultaneous embracing and disavowal of its origins is inextricably linked to the political realities of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and is equally inflected by the community’s desire to maintain a double allegiance to both its point of origin and its new home (Karim et al. 205).

In her introduction to *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi writes about how since the Islamic Revolution her country, a great, ancient civilisation, has been defined by fundamentalism, fanaticism and terrorism. ‘This is why writing *Persepolis* was so important to me. I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrong doings of a few extremists (Satrapi). Satrapi is concerned by how her country has been misunderstood by the west.

It seems that this ‘scream’ has two echoes. On the one hand, writers wrote about their generation’s traumatic experiences - revolution, the long, bloody war with Iraq, political disappointment, imprisonment, torture, economic hardship, religious repression and censorship. On the other hand, they wanted to defend their country’s dignity and pride. Sometimes it felt as if they had drifted to nationalistic line.

We come to nationalism and its essential association with exile. Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms
the home created by a community of language, culture and customs; and, by so doing, it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages (Said 51).

There is always a sense of betrayal by the old country which in conflict with the sense of duty to defend it. It is like being in an abusive marriage.

In 1994, Sydney faced one of its most devastating bushfire seasons. It was my first experience of this catastrophic phenomenon. At that time, my home was in the south of Sydney, in the St George area. Standing on the third floor of my apartment building, I could see flames appearing and disappearing in thick clouds of gray and black ash. The sound of fire engines was reverberating from every corner and fire fighters were asking residents to evacuate. People in the area were packing, running around with small suitcases, babies in one arm and cats or dogs in the other. The fire was following us and I was thinking that at home in Iran I had seen war, revolution and prison; I had walked for ten days in the mountains between Iran and Pakistan with a one-year-old child without food and water. After I reached safety here in Australia, the fire was still following me.

In exile, many things which were once familiar to me lost the sense of familiarity and became distant. My familiar home with all its memories was lost and this new home was the presence of total absence. Said wrote:

And just beyond the frontier between “us” and the “outsiders” is the perilous territory of not-belonging: this is to where in a primitive time peoples were banished, and where in the modern era immense aggregates of humanity loiter as refugees and displaced persons (Said 51).

I felt that I had lost all that had once connected me to my life. Outside, an unfamiliar landscape was burning in front of me, a strange feeling was rising inside of me; I am so familiar with fire, with burning, with the destruction which follows after that. All
of a sudden I realised I was in danger again; my home was a dangerous place again. I picked up my son and ran outside.

A few days later we returned home. Some came back to half burnt buildings, some to a home with a black door, some lost rooms with half burnt stuff in them. Many people checked to make sure their photo albums and their documents were safe. Some homes remained intact. That evening, everyone gathered in the street saying they were happy to see that nothing serious had happened. But the smell of burning lingered for almost a month, reminding us that the danger was not over yet. I remember that in those days I used to write a lot, letters and my journals basically. I still have most of the letters; I never sent them. In those writings I was just jotting down my frustration; they were an attempt to comfort myself in my new home, in this new environment. And in those days, I truly believed I had lost myself, the person I knew. Looking back after eighteen years, reading my writing from that time, it seems like I'm reading someone else’s travel journal.

Sullivan suggests that ‘the process of telling who we are, however, changes when people are suddenly removed from the group. When the received story of relation between self and the collective breaks down, the process of telling who we are continues in a new circumstance’ (Sullivan 20).

The concept of home is the twin sister of the concept of exile. Thousands of pages have been written about home and equally about exile. If one of them is the body, the other one is the soul; if one of them is the original, the other one is the shadow of it but still equally powerful and real. As soon as we arrive on safe shores, the very first question is, ‘Where is home? Where am I standing now in comparison to my other home?’
When we are in a diaspora and we lose the basis for our sense of belonging, the first loss becomes ‘the self’, the person we know, and the things we recognise ourselves by. For most of us, the first steps in exile are an experience of freedom and safety, which most of the time comes in parallel with isolation and solitude. Home is where our activities are, our connectivity to our day-to-day life creates our home. In Australia, I lost my tangible connection with the politics of home; it was a big loss as my political activism was an essential part of my life. As soon as we feel we are safe we try to re-make ourselves, to rebuild from bits and pieces. But Said, by referring to the fate of historical refugees - Jews, Palestinians and Armenians, for example, reminds us that:

Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. The crucial thing is that a state of exile free from this triumphant ideology – designed to reassemble an exile’s broken history into a new whole—is virtually unbearable and virtually impossible in today’s world (Said 53).

I lost touch with Iranian politics for a variety of reasons; one was that I wanted to take advantage of going to university in Australia and obtaining my qualification as a scientist. Then, as soon as the opportunity arose, I wanted to go back home and serve my country as a responsible citizen does. I naively believed that I would be in exile for not more than four years, which was the duration of my degree. I thought that by then the regime would have changed and all the exiled would return.

I have briefly referred to nationalism. I would like here to refer to the ‘refugee’, the stateless being. As a political refugee I feel I have a close intellectual, moral and cultural understanding of this word. I will refer to Said here as part of his discussion on exile and nationalism. He writes:
Although it is true that anyone prevented from returning home is an exile, some distinctions can be made between exiles, refugees, expatriates and émigré. Exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider. Refugees, on the other hand, are a creation of the twentieth-century state. The word “refugee” has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas “exile” carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality (Said 53-54).

I felt both a political being, without any desire for politics, and total solitude. Like many Iranians, including Saedi himself, I left Iran with a hope that one day I would return again. Pakravan has translated Saedi’s article as the “Avatars of Exile”. In the original article in Farsi, Saedi had used Farsi word avareh which translates in English as vagrant, homeless, tramp and refugee. In fact, the word refugee is the last option because the exact word for refugee is panahadeh which in contemporary Iran history is politicised word, whereas avareh connotes both homeless and wandering. But the word tabeid, ‘exile’, is not used. He was a refugee but he wasn’t feeling solitude. Saedi was very eager to tell the world what the homeless feels and lives.

Karim writes:

Another interesting by-product of the conversation that emerged around A World Between is that some people of Iranian descent in the United States (both first and second generation) have suggested a level of ill-ease with this term. For those who came as adults from Iran (even if they have lived here for more years than in Iran), the term suggests a level of assimilation that they don’t feel they have experienced. For many Iranians, the experience of immigration was involuntary. They left as exiles and refugees, expecting to return after a period of stabilization (Karim xxiii).

In those early years I kept my dream of return alive by writing home, mainly letters to my family and records of my daily activities. I used to write in Farsi regularly. I
fulfilled the unspoken political and moral responsibility I felt deep inside me by writing back home. It seems to me that in those days I wasn’t looking back to the past or forward to the future. Instead, I was looking at a side-by-side life, a parallel life. One of my lives was in Iran and the other one was in Australia. I was trying to settle down and make Australia home but the unsettling feelings always prevailed.

One of the women who were interviewed by Sullivan describes her feeling in exile as:

I feel I am the wandering Jew who has no place to which she belongs. I thought I could settle down, but can't imagine staying. Whenever I bought a bar of soap and two came in the package, I thought there would be no need to buy a package of two because I would never last through the second. Why? Because I knew I was returning to Iran – tomorrow. So too, I would buy the smallest size toothpastes and jars of oil. Putting down roots here is impossibility (Pari qtd. in Sullivan xiii).

As time passed I gradually realised that returning to Iran was a faraway dream. Nikos Papastergiadis suggests that ‘There are only three options for an exile: to defer the homecoming to an idealised time in the future, to find a substitute home in the here and now, or madness’ (Papastergiadis 5).

To avoid madness I continued writing. Writing is often acknowledged to be a process of self-discovery; it is the process of inventing the self in the form of text, memoir, journal and short fiction. Returning to Iran as the home I had grown up in remains unachievable to me, but the fascination of homeland will continue in, and emerge through, my writings. Homeland, as the idea of home, has a history as old as human beings' first memories of existence. We carry that with us and within us.

I live almost on the other side of the world to the place in which I was born. My birthplace is a hostile land at the moment but the dream of a free Iran is part of a self I know and I will follow that dream forever. The self I knew in Iran will remain with me as part of my memory-self. This is not an issue of patriotism for me as I
have come to the conclusion that I prefer to consider myself a citizen of the earth. My birthplace wasn’t kind to a woman like me so I don’t have any illusions about my birthplace: I believe home is where our safety is and our activities are, but of course, the reality is more complex than this.

A friend of mine once told me that she says ‘I am going home’ but never says ‘I am on the way home’. When I asked her why, she explained that to her, going home means there is a building that she lives in; she knows how to get there and she does so every day after work. But being on the way home means that she stops at her uncle’s shoe shop to have a chat with one of her cousins and a cup of tea with her uncle’s wife, perhaps takes a parcel or a pair of socks or even homemade sweets for her mother. Then she walks those streets where, as a little girl she used to play, looking at the ever-changing buildings. Then, when she reaches the corner bakery, she buys fresh Turkish bread and after she rings the bell, she listens to her little nieces and nephews behind the door calling for her to wait till they bring the key to open the door. ‘This is the way you go home,’ my friend said, drinking her tea and looking at me from the window of her bright eyes, which are hidden now behind wrinkles.

What my friend was talking about was community as home, our small society, we as a group, something to add to our sense of self, something to identify with or even against, but still something. I believe we all have a group, a community to feel close to. And for those of us who don’t have it, I mean mainly those who deal with creativity, if we don’t have it we try to create it. We try to gather groups of writers or readers, or a small salon or something similar. Because we need to be part of something here, have some sort of community. Because we need to feel that what we write, what we say, what we create is somehow meaningful; we want to play a
role in it. We want to feel that security and warmth we once had as a child at home. When our society doesn’t provide that home for us, we do it ourselves. When we lose that small community we become disconnected, and then day and night we struggle to define ourselves. We strive to remain connected to the self we once knew, because our surroundings, our known surroundings are important for our coherent existence. Of course, losing a sense of self is not something that only exiles experience. But rightly or not, the exile usually feels they have much reason to feel that loss. The exile feels that because of the absence of home, community, group and much more, they are more prone than others to a lost sense of self.

The poet Czeslaw Milosz writes:

New eyes, new thoughts, new distance: that a writer in exile needs all this is obvious, but whether he overcomes his old self depends upon resources which he only dimly perceived before. One possibility offered him is to change his language, either literally by writing in the tongue of the country of his residence, or to use his native tongue in such a manner that what he writes will be understandable and acceptable to a new audience (Milosz qtd. in Robinson 37).

The strangeness of one’s new surroundings creates a powerful force that directs the writer’s eyes to look at the past, not behind her back but rather in front of her eyes. Sometimes the smallest stimulus, such as the smell of food, can create a flashback to childhood for days or weeks or even years. The experience of strangeness and unknowingness puts the writer in exile in a melancholic state where she sits in front of paper or keyboard in the present and feels the passage of time. So in a stateless existence, creating a story creates a sense of connection again. I tried to write in both English and Farsi to be connected again. I felt that I needed to take the offer Milosz talks about; I wasn’t ready to give up my first language but I was ready to adopt a new one. I was ready to learn and write in English.
To me, as a bilingual writer, home still is language. My mother tongue, to me, is my wooden wardrobe where I hid all my secrets. When I am so far away from the physicality of the home I once knew, when I am so isolated from what was once so familiar to my eyes, my language is a relationship which connects me to home. Life in exile has most often been seen as a between-ness; the between-ness of two languages, two cultures and two worlds. In contemporary literature, recognisable and tangible homes are often not available; instead, literature provides a space in which to wander around that lack of presence. Paolo Bartoloni suggests that modern and contemporary literature is the world in-between. That in-between-ness provides a place which is absent, a situation for which there is no definable condition. One moves around and navigates the home which is deleted or absent. Bartoloni suggests that this kind of navigation of home is done as if ‘looking into its own eyes’ (Bartoloni 35). In the process of navigating for the meaning of home, a writer can invent herself. However, all of these possibilities become limited when the writer tries to write from that unknown shore called a 'second language'. For me that second language is English.

Although nostalgia might linger in the situation where one leaves a familiar home, being able to express one’s feelings through writing might help one to resist being its victim. Writing brings balance; inspired by the new home, new democracy and freedom, the writer writes about the values of being on the way home. She gradually learns to be at home in the world instead of in one country, in one city, in one suburb. Papastergiadis writes: ‘The question ‘Who am I?’ can no longer be answered by identifying our place of origin and the time of living there. Even the most local identities are now influenced by global processes’ (Papastergiadis 10). Someone like me who came from the other side of the world is now part and parcel
of the Australian landscape. Living in Australia now brings for me the question, who am I?, no longer to be answered from my past but my present life here in this new country.

Writing also provides an opportunity to return home, although it is only on the page. By writing, I keep my experiences of home printed on paper; reading my writings about home helps me to remember the home I left behind and this new home I have built in Australia.

My first return home was in 1984 when I was released after spending two years in prison. The jubilation in the family was overwhelming. For weeks, family members and friends gathered in my parents’ living room, talking loudly about almost any topic, trying to avoid asking me about my time in jail because they were worried that those memories might be too painful for me to handle. I constantly had to assure them that I was fine and happy being at home. However, I had difficulties being in crowds for long periods so I preferred to remain in my room. It was heartbreaking to see that there weren’t any books to read. One of my friends and a family member had dumped all my books on the southern outskirts of Tehran after I was arrested. They knew Hezbollah might come and find them, and I would be in more trouble because of those books, which I had bought on the black market on topics that were banned by the government. My library now was behind a secret wooden wall built into the wardrobe where I hid my books behind my clothes.

Twenty-one years later, during the uprising in 2009, I returned to Evin prison through images taken by mobile phone cameras and posted on various websites. There were boys and girls blindfolded and sitting in the long corridor of the prison. I recognised the iron door which we inmates passed through to go to the reception
rooms to see our families on visiting days. Looking at the images, I couldn’t help thinking how many of those young people would attempt to run away from their country when they were released, how many of them would end up being refugees. I remembered an article I had read recently about the rights of refugees. Elazar Barkan refers to the ‘The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)’ and reminds us that ‘Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country’ (Barkan qtd. in Hirsch and Miller 228). I know from personal experience that there are governments in the world that, regardless of being members of the UN, don’t honour their human rights obligations.

As a political refugee I have decided not to go back to Iran, fearing for the safety of my family and myself. I have reunited with my family twice and I call those two reunions my partial return home. Neither of them was an actual return to Iran. Five years after we arrived in Australia, our family suggested a family reunion. After six months of negotiations about where and when to meet, we finally decided to meet in Malaysia for ten days. That was the last time I saw my father; he passed away six months later. Our second reunion was in 2010 in Istanbul, Turkey. It was in Istanbul that I was reunited with my younger brother after twenty-three years.

In Australia I lost all hope of returning, but my claim to my right to return has remained with me.

My most recent form of return is through the internet. Every Thursday afternoon around four pm, which is nine am in Tehran, I see my mother’s living room through the small window of my laptop. It is as if I am that little girl again who sits in her imaginary spaceship but this time, instead of a small wooden commode, I get into my small wireless box on the internet. What I see in her living room is a combination of new and old things. Her sofa and side chairs are new to me, but I
have known her glass cabinet since I was a little girl. I can even identify her china collections, which she has taken care of through the years. They are the dowry she brought to her home from Azerbaijan. I also know those photos she has hung on both sides of the cabinet. One of them is of my son, taken when we were still in Iran. He is one year old, sitting on my mother’s kitchen bench and biting on a big green strainer. The other photo is of my father, a photo taken during his trip to Paris by my brother who lives there. With his sand-gray hair and moustache, this is how he looked the last time I saw him in Kuala Lumpur.

My mother is familiar with my room too. If I change the place where I usually sit, the first thing I do is try to show her my surroundings through my computer camera. I talk with my mother for hours while looking at her wrinkled and arthritic, deformed fingers. She still wears her wedding ring, although my father passed away twenty years ago. Sometimes, I think my mum actually forgets that I am on the other side of the world. She gets off her chair, moves around. Sometimes I see her take off her scarf, brush her curly white hair with the small comb she has used since I was a child to tame her wild curls and then, as if she remembers me again, she comes back and sits in front of the computer. In those moments I don’t call her or rush her, or remind her that I am on the other side of the world. I just sit there and watch her movements, listen to the quietness of the day in her room. Sometimes I can even hear sparrows outside her window. Then she sits in front of the computer, leaning on her hand, looking in a direction that I can’t see.
Notes

1SAVAK was formed and trained by British, U.S. and Israeli intelligence (Sullivan 2001: XXIII)

2 The Shah’s White Revolution that called for land reform, literacy and human rights. Peasants lost their function in a known system; their new money took them toward cities that became progressively more overcrowded; the number of villages declined from forty thousand in 1963 to ten thousand in 1978. American companies such as Dow Chemical, Bank of America, John Deere, and Royal Dutch Shell entered Iran at this time (Sullivan 2001: XXIII).
Chapter Two

Memories: Remembering and Forgetting

My first home in Sydney, when I arrived in 1988 with my husband and my two-year-old son, was Villawood hostel.¹ These days, the notorious Villawood Detention Centre is part of this hostel; the area is part of the Greater Western Sydney region.²

Most of the population of this region consists of migrants and refugees who were either born somewhere else or are second or third generation migrants. An immigration centre bus drove us from the airport along a highway to what was then a remote area in Western Sydney. For us, the most surprising thing was to see strange houses in the area. The single storey weatherboard houses looked more like seaside holiday homes, something temporary and unstable. The buildings in the hostel all looked the same; all were made from pre-fabricated building material as if at a beachside settlement. This sense of a holiday mood increased each time a train stopped or started at the nearby Villawood train station. In Iran we didn’t have city train lines; trains were for travelling between states. The sound of trains arriving and departing reminded us that this new life too was a stopover, a station between our past and our future.

In this new home at Villawood hostel, our life was a mixture of feeling safe, away from war and persecution, and also feeling alienated, isolated and like a stranger. Although the sense of safety gave us hope for the future, the hostel’s setting made the sense of strangeness and alienation intense and all-encompassing. It increased when we found out that in this new home we had to eat our meals in a communal kitchen. All the residents were newly arrived refugees from around the world. Looking back to those days, I recall that they served mainly cold food, on the
same-sized, all-white plates. I hadn’t seen such a white kitchen even in hospitals. The walls, tables, benches; all were white. It felt like you were in an army camp, or in jail. Every day, three times a day, at exactly the same time, there was a bell to call all the residents to the kitchen for a meal. We sat next to those who came from our own countries, probably due to a fear of being misunderstood because of our in ability to speak English, or due to the fear of doing something that might be offensive, something like asking for a second serve, or rejecting the food because we didn’t like it.

When we left Iran, we had gone to Karachi because the Pakistan border was a safe one to cross. We lived for a year in Karachi while waiting for the UN’s decision about which country we would be sent to. Food in Karachi was hot and colourful, and although Persian spices were different to Pakistani spices, the smell of food connected us to the lives we were now leading. In the Villawood kitchen with its odourless foods, nothing smelled of home. At home we had revolution and war, political persecution and a blurred future, but we also had our family and friends. Every special moment on our calendar was marked by a ritual, such as the Persian New Year on 21 March, or the fire festival a week before New Year. These included the dates on our religious calendar, such as the month of fasting, and the festival of sacrifice. Our individual ceremonies such as weddings, birthdays, naming a child, university acceptance and the final year of high school were also celebrated. All those rituals were associated with special times and the special times were associated with special food. Different foods were associated with the familiar ways of celebrating different occasions. So, sharing food with big groups of people, or even strangers, wasn’t a new experience for us. But here in this kitchen, everything felt and tasted strange, isolating and uninviting; all those familiar things which were once
associated with everyday life evaporated. We didn’t talk, not even with those who were sitting next to us. Staring at each other, we ate our cold and odourless food. We were not connected to one another as a group, or community, or even a family; we were there just eating (or not) to survive.

There was also the constant April rain. It was as if it was washing away our past, breaking the bridges behind us. We knew then that we had been washed onto faraway shores. Vladimir Nabokov wrote a memoir which in its English version is called Speak, Memory; it is interesting that the Russian title is Drugie berega, which translates to Other Shores in English. Memory is a backward journey. It is like walking on the shore while a constant current washes away our footsteps.

Now, after twenty-five years, whenever I feel I am a stranger or a foreigner, or have a moment of depression, which comes from an unknown origin, I drive past the gate of the Villawood hostel. It is as if I go back to the reference point in time and place when I started feeling that I was divided between two times, two calendars, two systems of life. The hostel was my departure and starting point; it was the bridge between my two lives. It was as if I was chasing my tail. I had lost my home, and I did not know where to and how to start again. It was a limbo. I wanted to go back but there wasn’t anything behind to look at, to go to. It was as if I could see a new perspective across the border of time. Everything had become visually heterogeneous. There wasn’t any sense of homogeneity in me and this made me feel more split inside. I felt I was a foreigner. But yet, strangely, looking at this gate to the hostel which was once a strange place to me brings my split self together again. I feel that going to the gate helps me to remember how I felt at that time, how I lost part of my identity there, part of my culture, my language, myself.
I have a notebook from those days, with the names of the streets surrounding the hostel, the shops. I have a hand-drawn map in this notebook showing how to go to the city and how to come back without getting lost. In those days we didn’t have a car or a street directory. This hand-drawn map helped me to return to where I had started, to the origin. Julia Kristeva, in *Strangers to Ourselves*, has written on the aloofness of being a foreigner: ‘Not belonging to any place, any time, any love. A lost origin, the impossibility to take root, a rummaging memory, the present in abeyance. The space of the foreigner is a moving train, a plane in flight, the very transition that precludes stopping’ (Kristeva 7–8). When I read *Strangers to Ourselves*, I felt as if it was written about me, about my experience in Sydney, the train I caught from Villawood, about the new life that at that newly arrived time which felt like it didn’t belong to me. In this book, Kristeva identified almost all the characteristics of what it feels to be a permanent foreigner, for example questions such as ‘Are there any happy foreigners?’ (3); or statements such as ‘A secret wound, often unknown to himself, drives the foreigner to wandering’ (5). I felt claustrophobic reading it; its inclusiveness made my mind spin under the pressure of its truthfulness.

I became interested in how memory has been studied in both science and literature. When I was practising as a scientist, I regularly read scientific periodicals about the effect of memory on our brains. Dr George Christos’s research on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) has been considered both controversial and fascinating in scientific circles. He suggests that the reason healthy infants die suddenly while they are asleep, is because of their brain functions, because of their dreams. According to Christos, the answer to this frustrating medical mystery can be found in our first journey through memory. Christos writes, ‘The process of
dreaming and memory may offer a clue to the cause of this mysterious and fatal disease. Basically, I am suggesting that an infant dreams it is back in the womb and stops breathing because it did not have to while it was in the womb’ (Christos 156). It is fascinating to speculate that the human journey through memory might start at such an early stage of our life. It is also interesting to remember that the basic reservoir of our memory is located in the womb. We return to the womb as a first home, we see it as the destination we started from, the reference point we return to. I remember I had dreams during my pregnancy. The war between Iran and Iraq was being waged in 1985 and I constantly dreamt that I was hiding my one-month-old son inside my womb, to protect him from bombardment.

*Remembering versus Forgetting*

In 2005, seventeen years after I had arrived in Australia, I was invited by the Cambodian community to facilitate a writing class at the Cabramatta Community Centre, in the Greater Western Sydney region. The aim of the workshop was to encourage participants to remember their stories and through their memories record their past. Among the participants was an eighty-three year-old man. Since most of the participants were from younger generations, second- and even third-generation descendants of migrants, I asked him what his motivation was for participating. His interpreter explained, ‘For more than thirty years I have tried to forget about those horrible times I had in my country. It was too painful to remember. But today I look at these younger ones who live here in Australia and they don’t know what kind of genocide the Khmer Rouge committed in my country. They just read books which are published by the government. I am here because I am getting old and I am so scared that those times will be forgotten. Earlier I tried to forget because of the pain I
felt by remembering and now I am trying to remember, to remember everything and write about it. We need writing. We don’t want to forget.’

For the younger second- and third-generation participants, the motive was to explore a family connection. They wanted to be connected to their family history, or to an origin or home, which came to them more through their experiences at home here in Australia. To these generations, the idea of homeland was an abstract concept rather than a first-hand brutality or a sweet memory of childhood, which their grandparents have shared with them. Daniel Mendelsohn’s memoir, *The Lost: A Search for Six Million*, is an inspiring book on the topic of memory and remembrance. In his interview with Nancy K. Miller in *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, he refers to his own experience on the issue of memory and return to the origin:

> When you grow up in an immigrant family, you’re always hearing about the country of origin. So it does feel like going back. I make no apologies for using this term, which everybody tends to use. Certainly if you’re a certain generation of American Jews, people always talk about ‘going back’, even though it’s not a place you’ve been – it’s a locution that, if anything, goes to the heart of the strong sentimental role that the country of origin plays in the lives of even distant descendants of immigrants (Mendelsohn qtd. in Hirsch and Miller 112).

The younger Cambodians brought with them what their idea of the origin was; one young man described how to him the memory of his home in Cambodia was his mother’s voice. He felt there was a home far away, which came to him whenever his mother sang Cambodian songs.

In her essay, *Off-Modern Homecoming in Art and Theory*, Svetlana Boym writes:

> Some of the best critical theory on memory was written by immigrants of the second generation. Immigrants of the second generation (who either came to the new country as young children or are children of immigrants) share the frames of reference, styles of writing, and syntax of longing with native populations, which
makes their stories of quests for roots or longing for the recovery of personal history more understandable, explicit, and acceptable than the tongue-tied and accented tales of first-generation immigrants (Boym qtd. in Hirsch and Miller 152).

I disagree with this statement. The freshness of memory is like a first touch. The second generation may bring polish to the narratives but the first generation brings an immediacy that is important to capture. As a first generation migrant, I feel the need to pass on something to the second generations and to the new country, like the old Cambodian man. I believe that even accented and ‘tongue-tied’ language has its own kind of power. Although I acknowledge that there are difficulties imposed on the first generation as a result of language, accented language is still a means of communication and a powerful tool too.

Our memory is a great reservoir. Many narratives have been written by tapping into memories. Complex interactions between personal memories and cultural memories have created texts in all sorts of genres. Our past is also important for the cohesion of our everyday life. The dilemma of whether to remember or forget is an existentialist question in human life. This dilemma has an additional dimension when it comes to the life of a migrant. Because a migrant is a displaced person, the lack of familiar things can reduce the intensity of memories and hence make it easier to forget. It can also have the opposite effect. A mind can resist forgetting by constantly remembering and imagining the past. This paradoxical condition is an important part of migrant life.

For some of us who have been forced to leave our country because of difficult political situations, we might prefer to forget the past, the painful tortured past. For others, such as Sally Morgan, recording the past is both a personal journey and a task of filial responsibility. In her book My Place, Morgan, through a narrative about her search for her roots, tries to describe her efforts to recover her Aboriginal
heritage. Her mother had denied her Aboriginality for fear that her children might be taken by authorities during the period of the Stolen Generations (Morgan 1987).

The past, the main realm of memory, can be a dangerous territory if the émigré succumbs to it completely and becomes obsessive about it. Edward Said reminds us: ‘If the past is idealized or sentimentalized to such an extent that everything the new country has to offer seems inadequate, the émigré is unable to integrate into the new society, is un-accepting of its differences’ (Said 54). He warns against this extreme, for one can make ‘a fetish of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments’ (Said 54).

For some writers such as Mendelsohn, who writes about his family’s past, there is nothing to forget or to remember:

I didn’t have anything to remember; its reality for me had to be constituted by the journey. Quite often the survivors never go back. They remember enough. They don’t need to know what it looks like or sounds like or feels like or smells like or whatever. I think it’s very important to remember that memory is individual, you know, you can’t remember things that didn’t happen to you (Mendelsohn qtd. in Hirsch and Miller 115).

In 2004, I received an Australia Council grant from the Arts, Community Development Fund to facilitate writing workshops for women from non-English speaking background (NESB) communities. This project was supported by the Liverpool Migrant Resource Centre (LMRC). It had a twofold aim: firstly, it had to be an outreach project to break the isolation for women who were in Australia as refugees. Secondly, it aimed to use storytelling and memory-writing as a tool for healing, given that most of these women came from troubled backgrounds. Most of the women in the group were from Iran or Iraq, with a few members from Thailand, Bangladesh and Malaysia. The group was diverse in ethnic and religious orientation. For example, women from Iraq were mostly from Sunni Muslim backgrounds with a
few Shi’a Muslims; some of the Iraqi women were Christian or from the Mandaean faith; some Iranian women were from the Baha’i faith. There were a few Kurdish women too. The Malaysian women were Christian, and the Bangladeshi and Thai women were Muslims. Some of them had lost close family members during wars in their countries; some had experienced domestic violence and some had been in a refugee camp or detention centre. These women lived in isolation because of a fear of speaking about their experiences, or a fear of being labelled as liars, or they didn’t speak because of their difficulties with the English language. As the facilitator of the project, I had to find a way to break that isolation. I started with my own experience of torture and trauma. I told them about my experience of being in prison. I told them about how memories come to me as flashbacks. I explained the alienation I felt within myself. I knew from my research that this was a common feeling among trauma survivors.

In the essay, ‘Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self’, Susan J. Brison suggests that: ‘Survivors of trauma frequently remark that they are not the same people they were before they were traumatized’ (Brison qtd. in Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 39). I knew, again through my own experience that as soon as these women felt that it was safe to talk; their stories would be about traumatic memories and lost selves. I had personal experiences with those flashbacks before I began narrating them and writing them down; they were intrusive and impacted on my life; those memories of a traumatic time were traumatic in themselves. For example, it took me years to be able to use bleach products at home in the evenings. The smell of bleach was, and still is, associated with prison evenings for me. In the prison, bleach was the only product we had for cleaning the bathrooms. I began to be able to control my fear about the smell of bleach when I started to talk and write about it. Brison talks about
‘speech acts of memory’, in remaking the self. She argues that: ‘Working through, or remastering, traumatic memory (in the case of human-inflicted trauma) involves a shift from being the object or medium of someone else’s (the perpetrator’s) speech (or other expressive behaviour) to being the subject of one’s own’ (Brison 39).

The writing in these workshops was based on our personal experiences as women, and it helped us to share our stories of very difficult and even dangerous pasts. But what connected us more to one another were our cultural memories, such as childhood relationships with mothers, women’s spaces in the society, being scrutinised by police and the moral codes that brought our stories under one umbrella. In the project, all the women used the opportunity to get together to feel safe and to talk about their past. Most of the women had come to Australia with their husbands and children. They had to put their family responsibilities ahead of their own problems. As a result of their duties, they had become isolated inside their homes and communities. Some of the women had good English because they had received a university education in their own countries and some had participated in English classes in Australia. A few of them didn’t have much English at all. They felt isolated because they were new to Australia and the fear of not knowing the culture or the language made them stay at home, and they felt alone and disconnected. To break the isolation they talked about their past, the past that, although it was problematic and even dangerous for some, was still familiar territory.

Joseph Brodsky, the Russian poet wrote:

> Whether pleasant or dismal, the past is always safe territory, if only because it is already experienced; and the species’ capacity to revert, to run backward especially in its thoughts or dreams, since there we are generally safe as well, is extremely strong in all of us, quite irrespective of the reality we are facing (Brodsky qtd. in Robinson 8).
In one way I agree with Brodsky’s statement. For all of us women who participated in the project, our difficult pasts in our own countries were still safer than our new haven in Australia, just because we had lived that past and we knew what it was all about, whereas the new life in Australia was still unknown to us. We had all been through the devastation of war and political persecution; some had experienced domestic violence. I had been in prison. All those memories of our countries helped us to come out of our isolation. In the project evaluation, all the women commented that the project had helped them to be connected to the self they felt they had lost for a long time. Nevertheless, in another way I disagree with Brodsky’s statement, because the durability of memories also means they are traumas that torment our lives. Coming together and talking about these memories somehow helped us to face our fears of the past. Brison writes: ‘Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self’ (Brison 40). She reminds us that this does not mean that narrating one’s traumatic memory is always a therapeutic process, or that it is sufficient to bring about recovery from the trauma. But it is a contribution to the process of recovery, and it has become accepted practice in the field of trauma psychology.

However, despite the powerful lure of turning to the past, an activity which can be pursued to the point that it diminishes the possibility of having a meaningful existence in the present, ironically the opposite phenomenon can apply too. The lure of forgetting the past for the sake of living in the present can also jeopardise our personal history. Our experiences of the past or our memories can give us skills and resources which we can use to bridge the divide between past and present for the
sake of creating a sustainable existence. For instance, for myself, a return to Iran at
the present moment is impossible, and so the urge to forget is a powerful pull.
Because I may never get a chance to go back to Iran, either for a short visit or for
good, the urge to forget my past is strong. To prevent my memory loss, I constantly
look through our photo albums, or try to follow my mother’s hand-written recipes
while I am cooking traditional Iranian food to keep my sense of the smell of home
fresh and crisp. But something I can’t control is the loss of my memories of Iran’s
landscapes, of Tehran’s surrounding mountains, the snow covered peak of Mount
Damavand, the tall cherry and apricot trees in the north of Iran, around the Caspian
Sea. Those times of my life, on the old familiar shores of the past, are a part of my
memory which I want desperately to save.

Cultural and Personal Memories: Personal Memories and Cultural Issues
Whenever I see chocolate egg boxes at Easter time, I remember my first experience
with Easter. My son was three years old and he was happy to go to his day-care
centre at Granville TAFE, where my husband and I were taking our first steps at
learning English in order to sit for university entrance exams. On the Easter holiday,
he came home with a big box of chocolate eggs and gave it to me, and said a few
words, which at that time were a mixture of English, Farsi and self-made childish
words. I took the box and that night, when I tucked him into bed, I put the chocolate
box at his bedside, thinking I was being a good mother and that I would reward him
for being a good child. In the morning I heard him crying: ‘You had to hide them. I
had to go find them. You are a bad mum. You didn’t hide them, I see them and this is
bad.’ It was difficult to explain to those crying eyes that I came from a Muslim
country and had no idea there was a custom of hiding chocolate eggs all around the house.

During the Iranian New Year, my family and I traditionally coloured baskets of eggs. The process involved boiling the eggs with coloured fabric. My son’s Easter egg was covered with gaudy tinsel. As a writer of Azerbaijani Iranian heritage, to me the egg had come to symbolise the embryo of memory, started in the womb. The last thing I would want to do is hide that ‘egg’ from my son. That would be akin to hiding my traditions. When we are in exile, our traditions are exiled within exile: the next generation, as a model of adaptation, is encouraged, perhaps forced, to forget the previous culture. The old culture is replaced in the adopted country by the local, the national, the new. As a result of this model of adaptation, I believe cultural memory is always in the process of translation.

I was attracted to those stories of real life which had similarities with mine; those stories helped me to think about my personal memories as a source of creativity and helped me to nurture my imagination. I wanted to make my memories work for me, to help me move towards my future life. I am always searching for those writers and intellectuals who had similar experiences to mine. Writers such as Kundera and Nabokov became part of my routine reading. Although I knew these writers when I was in Iran, it was in Australia that I found them more interesting and more relevant to me. When I read Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* in Farsi, I didn’t connect to the book. His statement that the human struggle against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting didn’t mean much to someone like me who had no substantial experience with that struggle. It took me a long time, after I had experienced turbulent times in Iran and had lived
long enough in Australia far away from my previous life, for me to have changed my mind about memory and its potential for enriching living and creativity. I started realising the importance of Kundera’s statement. It is interesting that as human beings, any time we try to remember something we close our eyes. It is as if we are blindfolding ourselves to see, to remember. And as soon as we open our eyes, the scenery in front of us gives us another vision, the present vision and hence we forget the previous vision. I relate this to remembering and forgetting. Blindfolding is equal to remembering and taking off the blindfold is equal to forgetting. This simple act of closing eyes and opening became part of my every day practice.

Sensual Memory

In my first published short story in English, The Big Iron Door Banging, I described my first experiences in prison in terms of descriptions of smell: ‘The air of this bathroom is saturated with the smell of soap, shampoo and female bodies, clashing with the old smell of army blankets, which prisoners use as bedding; with great difficulty, I managed to pass through the bathroom’ (Mahoutchi 116).

The sense of smell remains as a major part of my life today. My personal and cultural memories of smells from the past follow me like a bodiless stalker. I think my sense of smell increased during my time in prison because whenever I wasn’t in my cell, when I was in the interrogation room, or when on family meeting days I was taken to the meeting room, I was always blindfolded. When my eyes were closed, naturally I was trying to see through my other senses and hearing and smell became strong tools. Also, when I was in my single cell the only thing I could measure the time with was meal times, three times a day, so I could break the day in three parts through the smell of food.
In 2008, I participated in an art project called ‘Invisible Map’. This project was funded by the Casula Art Gallery, located in the Liverpool Council area in the Greater Western Sydney region. One of the aims of this project was to collect household items such as old furniture people leave outside, or packaging materials from foods which had been imported to Australia and whose names and labels were therefore not in English. Our aim was to use these collected items to create an interpretation of the immigrant and multicultural life of the area. I had noticed multicultural food stores and restaurants were abundant in the area; because of that, there were lots of food smells. It was common for people to start cooking as early as six in the morning. I wanted to give a sense of something which was in the area but wasn’t collectable. The smell of food was something everyone related to but they could not take it home. So, for the opening night, I chose to start with the most difficult thing to collect: smells. To replicate the smell of food in Liverpool, for the opening night of the exhibition I cooked rice and shared it with those who came to the opening. The smell of rice disappeared but the effect remained with the audience. They said the smell of food was something that reminded them of home. They felt they were at home.

The simple act of life, cooking, makes life complex too, but can also be used metaphorically to create a bridge between past and present, old and new life. My practice of cooking and trying to capture the sense of such a volatile memory through the smell of food is one example of the discontinuous nature of memory; it comes and goes but it is difficult to gain a concrete sense of it. The smell of food has great cultural significance in Iran. When I was a child, food was still a seasonal issue; not every ingredient was available all year round, so the smell of food was very special to us. For example, in the spring and summer when fresh produce was available,
from early morning we could smell fried onion, fried garlic, cooking lamb or frying chopped green herbs. At midday it was the smell of rice, turmeric and saffron which enveloped the streets of Yousef Abad when we were on our way back home from school. In the winter, we used to eat hot beetroot cooked in thick syrup, or buy broad beans from street vendors. These foods remind me of home and at the same time homelessness. When I was a child, it was common that at lunch or dinner time a beggar would ring the bell and ask for food. One of the memories I have from my first days in my first home in Australia is our kitchen in the Villawood hostel and that cold, odourless food they served us. It was a reminder of being in exile. Nikos Papastergiadis wrote: ‘Exiles always complain about the food and weather’ (Papastergiadis 4).

The smell of certain foods also traumatises me because they remind me of my time in prison. In my women’s project, some women also described how certain smells brought them painful memories. To me, this part of memory is the most complex one. We don’t see it in our dreams. Most of the time our memories are triggered by smells when we are awake – in the kitchen perhaps, or when we walk in the streets or in the supermarket. One of the Iraqi women in the project described how one of her favourite traditional Iraqi foods traumatises her whenever she makes it. She explained that in 2003, when she and her family were in Jordan waiting to receive their visas to migrate to Australia, they watched on television how Baghdad was invaded by US soldiers. Her family was celebrating their son’s birthday while eating traditional lamb and rice. All the other women in the group could relate to this description, because of the occurrence of similar events in their lives. This situation reminded me of Jonathan Shay comments. Shay is a therapist who worked with Vietnam veterans, referred to the effects of traumatic memory: ‘Traumatic memory
is not narrative. Rather, it is experience that reoccurs, either as full sensory replay of traumatic events in dreams or flashbacks, with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments’ (Shay qtd. in Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 172).

**Memory and Photography**

The recollection of memory through photos or photo albums has often featured in migrant writing and also in film scripts. The storage and retrieval of events through the mind’s eye is a domain for writing and creativity. Most often, personal stories start from here. To remember the past through the image, we withdraw ourselves from the present time; we leave our actions aside by tapping into the power of dreaming.

Reaching into the past through the eyes of camera lenses gives us the opportunity to imagine ourselves in a different time and place, feeling expansive and free from the limitations of the present. In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes writes: ‘what the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially’ (Barthes 4). Through gazing at photographs, one can create an imaginary time tunnel looking to the past. Barthes associates photography with time:

> For me the noise of Time is not sad: I love bells, clocks, watches—and I recall that at first photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinetmaking and the machinery of precision: cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing, and perhaps in me someone very old still hears in the photographic mechanism the living sound of the wood (Barthes 15).

For Barthes, a photograph is not memory because of the aoristic nature of photography. He argues that ‘Not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory (whose grammatical expression would be the perfect tense, whereas the tense of the
photograph is the aorist), but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory’ (Barthes 91). However, in her book, *Family Frames*, Hirsch has quoted Patricia Holland and Jo Spence, to offer other opinions about photography and memory:

> Family photography can operate at this junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal unconscious. Our memory is never fully ‘ours’, nor are the pictures ever unmediated representations of our past. Looking at them we both construct a fantastic past and set out on a detective trail to find other versions of a ‘real’ one (Hirsch 13-14).

The process of recalling memories works as a bridge to the new present; the focus of a camera can bring balance to those minds that fear losing that connection. This is particularly important when the present time is difficult to deal with or doesn’t feel right. It doesn’t feel right simply because it is a strange land, a strange language and a strange existence. I have seen so many migrants, when they talk about the difficulties of their time in their new country and new home, bring a photo album to show to you how it was back home.

> My home in Sydney is a gleaner’s heaven. Objects and photos which my family members bring for me whenever they came to visit are all around the house. One of the photos in my photo albums shows my parents in their wedding clothes, but the photo was taken three years after their wedding day. There was also another wedding photo, taken on the same day. In this particular photo, my older sister, who was almost two years old and my older brother, who was almost one year old, are in the photo too. For years I used to tease my mother by questioning her about how a Muslim woman could have two children on her wedding day. My mother was always upset by my teasing and wouldn’t allow us to reprint the photo.
The story is that on their wedding day, a cameraman, who was the son of one of my father’s business partners, took a few wedding photos with those big tripods and a camera with a thick red curtain. The film didn’t work and because in those days there was no way of knowing what was captured or not in the negatives. My father was more upset than my mother and the next time he found a chance to bring a photographer home was almost three years after their wedding. By then my mother had two children and her wedding dress no longer fitted her, but that is not what we see in the photo. With the help of her sister, the front part of the wedding dress looks perfect although at the back it is held together with big nappy pins. My baby brother is crying and my mother’s arm is stretched out to make sure he doesn’t fall down in his brand new shoes. My father looks formal gazing at the camera, his black hair oiled backwards as was the fashion then. Although my father’s gaze at the camera is engaging, it is my mother who remains as the central character in the photo, due to her vulnerability about her children, her posture which is slightly turned towards the baby, her maternal affection. This is how I always remember my mother, her arms stretched out to hold something, protect a child, help my grandparents, her posture always extended to support others. At the back of the photo my mother has written the date and the colour of my sister’s pleated dress, light pink.

While rearranging my photo albums I came across a bundle of photos, both black and white, and coloured. Am I creating this memory or was the colour of the houses in the streets of Tehran really a mix of grey-red bricks? When I called my sister to confirm this memory, her response was interesting. ‘What? Grey-red. No. No. You are wrong. Don’t you remember? They are grey-yellow bricks.’ My sister has lived in California for as long as I have lived in Sydney. We both have the same cultural memory, we both engage our mind with visual memories of Iran but we each
have different personal memories. The same happened when I asked about the colour of our father’s eyes. When we had a disagreement again, we called our mother and she had a totally different description of the colour. Our father passed away almost twenty years ago. To verify the facts, we looked at many photos of him. The camera lenses had their own visual memory, totally different to ours. My father’s eye colour was different in each photo.

Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller write about the return to family history through memory:

The return to family through acts of memory is a journey in place and time. In the most common form of the genre, the returning son or daughter seeks connection to a parent or more distant ancestor and thereby to a culture and a physical site that has been transformed by the effects of distance and the ravages of political violence (Hirsch and Miller 10).

After the 1979 Revolution, the Shah’s photo was replaced with Ayatollah Khomeini’s photo. The Ayatollah’s photo was framed and hung from the walls of all government buildings, offices, hospitals, hotel lobbies and any other places which were considered public areas. When the war between Iran and Iraq started, the same photo was stencilled on street walls all around the country. One of those stencil was on our neighbour’s wall, where there was a sand-bag trench made by the boys from the local mosque. As the war continued and more lives were lost, people used the walls of the streets to post photos of their loved ones and to call friends and families to participate in the funerals. Usually the martyr’s photo was posted next to the Ayatollah Khomeini’s stencilled photo. The reason, perhaps, was to show the devotion the family of the martyr, or the devotion the martyr himself had for the leader’s call to participate in this war. Soon, the streets of Yousef Abad became a museum of war. On every street one could see the face of the leader, frowning at an
unknown destination, and next to it a young face, staring into the camera. They were like footprints of dead youths, haunting the streets of the city. These photographs were reminders of the front line, coming from the south of Iran to the capital, wounded and bloody, breathless and dead.

One of the many faces posted on the walls of Yousef Abad was of a martyr named Faramarz, one of our neighbour’s sons. I remember him vividly, and his image on the photo stood out in my mind like a child’s face remembered by its mother. He was fourteen or fifteen and he was one of the boys who loved to play street soccer. His funeral photo wasn’t a portrait photo, as was common with other martyrs. In his photo we see him standing next to a pear tree (the photo was taken in the backyard of his family home), looking at the camera. He is wearing a T-shirt with the face of Maradona, the Argentinian soccer player. In one hand he has a plastic ball and in the other hand he is holding a thin slice of watermelon. At first glance there is nothing evocative about the photo, nothing related to the aesthetic or artistic skills of the photographer. It is an ordinary snapshot of a young boy, such as those usually piled up in the home of any Iranian middle-class family who could afford to have a Polaroid camera. But there are two points, which if Ronald Barthes analysed the photo, could be seen as the photograph’s punctum. ‘A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)’ (Barthes 27).

The first point in this photo is the way Faramarz holds his lips. It is obvious that he has something in his mouth. The second point is his slice of watermelon; a bite is missing. These two points suggest that the photograph was shot immediately after he had taken his bite of watermelon. He bit a piece off but didn’t have a chance to eat it. He has a mouthful of watermelon and at the same time he is smiling with closed lips. This photo definitely pricks the observer. Its memory stays with you
forever. This is a photo of a young martyr, with funeral dates printed underneath but all you see is a happy, smiling boy who is ready to go play street soccer while enjoying a sweet summery watermelon, it feels so refreshing you can almost smell the fruit in his mouth. This is the effect of \textit{punctum}, which Barthes described as follows:

However lightning-like it may be, the \textit{punctum} has, more or less potentially, a power of expansion. This power is often metonymic. There is a photograph by Kertesz (1921), which shows a blind gypsy violinist being led by a boy; now what I see, by means of this ‘thinking eye’ which makes me add something to the photograph, is the dirt road; its texture gives me the certainty of being in Central Europe; I perceive the referent (here, the photograph really transcends itself: is this not the soul proof of its art? To annihilate itself as medium, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself?). I recognize, with my whole body, the straggling villages I passed through on my long ago travels in Hungary and Rumania (Barthes 45).

As you look at Faramarz’s photo, you feel with your whole body the taste of life and joy he carried with him, as if the photo tells you that the image doesn’t belong to the \textit{studium}. The realisation takes the photo out of the ordinary and brings the second image into the foreground through which we understand him as that young boy. Barthes writes that ‘The \textit{studium} is a kind of education (knowledge and activity, ‘politeness’), which allows me to discover the \textit{Operator}, to experience the intentions which establish and animate his practice, but to experience them ‘in reverse’, according to my will as a \textit{Spectator}’ (Barthes 28).

At the centre of the photo is the notion of the martyr, a devoted Muslim is the \textit{studium}, a historical war memory. But away from the central focus stands the \textit{punctum}, a testimony to life. If someone looks at it, it will be to remember joy, vitality, and the energy of street games. No matter what the intention of the
juxtaposition of Faramarz’s photo with the photo of the leader, the eye reads it differently.

I have often questioned myself about the motivation of Faramarz’s family in choosing this photo for their beloved son’s funeral. During the war, it was common to see portraits of young men on walls and immediately you would know ‘another martyr’, but with Faramarz’s photo the reading is different. At the *studium* level it is a war memory, belonging to the devastation of the lost; but at the *punctum* level it resists death, it speaks as a live persona. It says yes, I am a martyr but I will remain alive, at least in your memory.

**How Time Flies**

In my research on memory, I came across Eva Hoffman’s book *Lost in Translation*, which mainly covers the issue of displacement, of being out of a culture based on her own personal experience coming from Poland to Canada. In her interview with Nancy K. Miller in the book *Rites of Return: Diaspora Politics and the Politics of Memory*, she commented that she believed that memory works from the present:

> I think that memory works from the present, often. So, the narrative, which, in a sense, I was working with then, started with that present, with the present of my actual emigration and the identity which was fore-grounded for me then, was the identity of an immigrant, because identity is also not written in stone for any of us, and it can change with different preoccupations, different stages of our lives (Miller qtd. in Hirsch and Miller 107).

As I went through the stages of settling in Australia, I started having an interest in this new present life. Gradually, as the space cleared in my head from the past, I started collecting memories of Australia through other people’s eyes because I didn’t have my own personal memories about Australia. I used cultural memory to inform myself, particularly the cultural memories of Indigenous Australians as well as
migrants. I tried to educate myself about a culture that I had no memories about. I tried to read what Aboriginal writers had written or recorded about their past. In her essay, ‘Indigenous Australian Arts of Return: Mediating Preserve Archives’, Rosanne Kennedy wrote:

Developing a nuanced cultural memory of indigenous child removal, compulsory assimilation, and return – especially in a global context in which ‘genocide’ conjure images of mass killing – presents several challenges. The first is to articulate the particular methods of disposition of land, family, and identity to which Indigenous people were and still are subjected (Kennedy qtd. in Hirsch and Miller 89).

I want to go back to the difference between first and second generation issues here. The first generation offers a cultural memory and the second generation uses that cultural memory to create personal memory. The memory is something that perhaps never happened to them, but as Mendelsohn notes, it is part of their family love, which the migrant children relate to. In similar fashion, through my writings I want to transmit my cultural memories to a second generation which perhaps has no personal experience of its Iranian culture.

It took me years to distance myself from the past to be able to write about my prison experience, or even about less intense and traumatic experiences of my life. For an émigré, the landscape of the new home brushes away the previous landscape. This can sometimes create a great sense of self-loss. I realised that this change of physical setting was quite significant in my mind. It affected my memories of the past. It made me realise how valuable the past can be. Then I started collecting every single letter I had received from Iran and read through them a few times, especially those with descriptions of our home, or our neighbourhood, or any other visual descriptions of my home and life in Iran. I started collecting mail obsessively. It may not be a common practice for everyone; however this practice became urgent for me.
No matter what our motives are, our past remains a strong part of the life we have lived and the urge to share it with others is so strong that many a genre has sprouted out of this need. After all, it is our past that creates part of our self today. We have to hold our breath for a moment to feel what it was like when we dreamed about the womb, that dark home where our first origin, first memory started.

Notes

1 Villawood Immigration Detention Centre (IDC) is an Australian immigration detention facility located in the suburb of Villawood, Western Sydney. It caters for people who have overstayed their visa permits or those who have had their visas cancelled because they have failed to comply with their visa conditions, and some adult male Irregular Maritime Arrivals. People refused entry into the country at international airports and seaports may also be detained there. This centre was originally a migrant hostel, which was opened in 1949. Its main function was to assist in the transition of, and provide a temporary housing for migrants whose application for immigration to Australia was approved. Villawood detention centre has been the focus of much controversy, with accusations of human rights abuses since 2001 when 40 asylum seekers escaped. And then the plight of a six-year-old Iranian refugee, Shayan Bedraie, was revealed in the Four Corners documentary a month later as ‘The Inside Story’. At the moment the centre accommodates 551 people. This number comprises 405 adult men, 105 adult women and 41 children.


2 Greater Western Sydney (GWS) is the western region of the metropolitan area of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. The University of Western Sydney (UWS) defines Greater Western Sydney as comprising 14 local government areas (LGA). These are Auburn Council, Camden Council, City of Campbelltown, City of Bankstown, City of Blacktown, City of Blue Mountains, City of Fairfield, City of Hawkesbury, City of Holroyd, City of Liverpool, City of Parramatta, City of Penrith, The Hills Shire, and the Wollondilly Shire.

Chapter Three

Public and Private

When I was a child, the streets of Yousef Abad were our playground. All three months of the summer school holidays, street soccer, bicycle games, hopping games, even chess and backgammon were played on every corner of the neighbourhood. Boys and girls played together. Evenings were for hide and seek and when there weren’t enough places in the streets to hide, we would run inside the houses, not just our own, and hide in the corners of the neighbours’ kitchens, under benches or, best of all, under the chadors of the grandmothers.

My grandmother was a big Azerbaijani woman who couldn’t speak a word of Farsi. She always wore brightly coloured floral dresses and matching chadors all year round, whether it was winter or summer. She had grown up in Azerbaijan’s snowy winters and Tehran’s winters didn’t seem too cold to her.1 She would keep herself busy with household chores, mainly chopping herbs and preparing the ingredients for the daily cooking. This task could last almost half a day as cooking an Iranian casserole with herbs and spices for eight people required a lot of preparation. Because my father didn’t come home for lunch, she started her dicing in the afternoon and worked till early evening to have them ready for dinner. She used to sit in our living room, spread a bed-sheet on the carpet, line up her knives beside her, which every now and then she sharpened by rubbing them on the back of her tea saucer. All the while she smoked endlessly. Her chador was particularly attractive for us because it spread so widely that during hide and seek games, two or three of us could easily hide under it. The elderly were part of the game too. Sometimes we could hear the seeker ask my grandmother in a low voice if she had seen any of us
and she would answer that she was too busy to notice silly children running around all the time.

I used to hide regularly in my Jewish neighbour’s kitchen because I knew the other kids were afraid of her big noisy bird, which could talk and had a cage as big as her fridge. Pari Khanoom lived alone. I used to go there every Saturday morning and light the stove for her. Whenever kids came to check if we had hidden in her kitchen, she would feed the parrot to keep the big bird’s mouth shut. It was always in my Armenian neighbour’s home that I lost the game. My friend’s grandmother used to make biscuits for the corner confectionary shop. Their house always smelled of vanilla and each time I entered their home this smell lured me. We used to go to her kitchen to get the biscuits which came out from the oven in imperfect shapes. Sometimes, five or six of us stood side by side at her long wooden table and ate whatever was left in the silver tray. There, I always forgot that I had to hide. The seeker would find me and then shout my name to let the others know that there was a loser.

In my generation, most girls from middle-class families didn’t wear the chador. In my neighbourhood, my mother, her sisters and a few family members wore the chador but we were never encouraged or obliged to wear it. I wore a black chador only once, when I went to the mosque for my grandfather’s funeral. Before the 1979 Revolution, wearing a floral chador was common for women. Black chadors were for funerals or other official ceremonies. Of course, women from more conservative families wore chador all the time when they entered the public sphere.

In the summer time, we asked our grandmothers to make floral chadors for us. The girls from other religious backgrounds would bring their fabrics to my grandmother to measure and make a chador for them with her beloved Singer sewing
machine. Then all the girls, Muslim and non-Muslim, would wear them, pretending to be adults. Or we wore them during our games when we played at being mothers. On special religious days, such as Ashura and Tasua, we wore our chadors to enter the mosques and watch the ceremonies.

All afternoon, we would go from mosque to mosque, watching different groups of men, all in black, self-flagellating, beating their chests, carrying massive decorated flags, entering their nominated mosques. Then, in the evening, people gathered in the mosques where the men and women would be separated into two halves of a room that was divided down the middle by a knee-level curtain. We made sure that all of us young people were seated somewhere where we could communicate easily, talk to each other and exchange telephone numbers without our parents, or guardians, (usually a grandmother or auntie) being able to see what we were doing. After sorrow and mourning definitely came happiness. Always after Moharram the wedding season would start. By the time I entered university; a few friends of mine from the neighbourhood were already married as a result of these liaisons. But I was following a different path and acquiring a different, but equally colourful, political and social interest.

In 1979, we all stood shoulder to shoulder, men and women, veiled or not, to support the Revolution. Even though I had communist ideas at this time, I began supporting the Ayatollah Khomeini because I had heard him say in an interview at his residence while he was in exile in Paris, that in the future, under the new system, every Iranian would be free to express their opinions, even Communists. This was appealing to most Iranians, whether they were intellectuals or not, because we all wanted to be united under one umbrella and get rid of the Shah. As a leader, at that time, Khomeini was very charismatic and as a result of his openness to individual
freedom (at least verbally), he very quickly became accepted by the public. It was a time of great excitement as the streets were full of people discussing everything with great hope and idealism. But it was a very short-lived happiness. Within a mere six months the Ayatollah Khomeini was in power and our lives changed.

One of the biggest changes to public spaces after the Ayatollah Khomeini took political control was the sudden closing down of liquor shops, cinemas, theatres, cabarets, performance venues, cafés and restaurants that played live music and served alcohol. Even video shops were shut as they were seen to be a symbol of Western corruption. Public spaces, such as universities and hospitals, began to have two entrances, one for males and the other for females. Soon classrooms, buses and other public transport vehicles too had been divided into two sections. Before the Revolution, only mosques were divided into male and female sections but now every public space was divided. What was even more horrifying was that even in our political space, where we didn’t believe in such segregation, we had to be vigilant. For example, at our party meetings we had to be careful to observe the segregation because the government agencies, especially Hezbollah members, used to spread propaganda about the lack of morality among the communists. One of their urban legends was that communists were called communists because they shared their beds with other women. In the years to come this would become a matter of public derision against us.

In the winter of 1980 I was at a family birthday party. It was the usual family gathering with many children present as the party was for a five-year-old girl. The guests were enjoying themselves with food and drink, and the occasional dance was something every family was familiar with. All of a sudden, a group of four armed
men stormed into the living room, pushing and shouting. In the first few seconds it wasn’t clear who they were and what they wanted. Then we realised that these were four Hezbollah members who had come to arrest us because they had heard the music. Someone, a neighbour perhaps, must have reported us. The home-owner tried to calm them down by explaining and apologising. The men at the party immediately stood in the far corner of the room and created a segregated section. The females of the party reached out for anything on hand to cover themselves, although they were all decently dressed. Recognising the fact that the gunmen were Hezbollah, the women felt obliged to cover their heads, and the children started crying and looking for their parents. After they had made sure that they had created enough fear amongst the guests, one of the Hezbollah members took the host aside and gave him a lecture about his Islamic duties. He was then asked to sign a document of repentance and promise that he would never disobey the Islamic code of conduct again. I had heard from my political activist friends that the Hezbollah had entered their homes in the middle of the night for searches but, till that day, I had never witnessed how they could break into people’s homes, intrude into a private party, even a children’s party, and create such fear. It was obvious that this was the new state of fear the promised system was creating. The Sazeman-e Ettela’at va Amniyat-e Keshvar (SAVAK) of the Shah’s regime had entered people’s homes in the middle of the night to arrest political activists; now the servants of this new system entered people’s private parties to create horror amongst the entire nation, old and young equally. For a decade they succeeded in generating fear in every sphere of life.

During the 1980s we became used to seeing the Hezbollah storming into parties or wedding ceremonies, children’s birthday parties and even the funerals of political activists who had been executed. The government would not even allow
private mourning for grieving family members. Not only did the Hezbollah stop people in the streets and enter people’s homes unannounced to search for political opponents, they also came to private parties with the excuse that music was being played or that alcohol had been served, or that the sexes were mixing in the same room. They saw all these as symbols of a Westernised lifestyle, which had to be stopped.

We are a nation used to limitations in public life. Our political systems have always incorporated complex mechanisms of surveillance to dictate to citizens the boundaries of social behaviour. Perhaps it was as a result of that experience that Iranians became so protective of their personal lives. The tall walls of our traditional houses suggest that privacy is important to Iranians. Politically, we had the experience of our public life being restricted, but during the Shah’s regime we had a certain level of civil rights, which allowed us to enjoy ourselves at least in the privacy of our homes. The Islamic Republic failed to understand the social fabric of the very society that it was trying to govern. As a result, it faced on a daily basis public opposition to its invasion of private lives.

The feeling of being invaded inside our home hurt us more than the interferences in the public arena. At this time, most of the entertainment centres were closed, drinking outside wasn’t allowed, listening to music or hanging out with the opposite sex could incur a punishment or even the prospect of being arrested, and most of my family members, as was the case with the rest of the citizens, tried to keep their doors closed and enjoy life, and share it only with those whom they trusted.

One of the major social features of the 1980s was that people learnt to be two-faced and live double lives. I remember that my younger cousins, who were still
in high school, learnt that if they superficially followed the dictated norms of the theocracy, they could easily build a shadow-society in the privacy of their homes. This was even more evident to me because I was in prison for two years, and when I was released I noticed how the lives of these teenagers had changed. On the one hand, they marched to the rhythm of revolutionary hymns and chanted death to the opponents of ‘Velayat-e-Faqih’, and on the other, at home, they did break dancing and performed the ‘egg roll’, which they had picked up from contraband Michael Jackson videotapes. Since then, it has become a common saying that Iranians have parallel lives, do-zindegi-eh-movazi; one is in the public realm, dictated and controlled by the Islamic Republic’s moral police, and one takes place at home, a private life of satellite dishes and social media. Those hide and seek games that we used to play as children we soon learnt to play with the new government.

In *Teheran Blues: Youth Culture in Iran*, Keveh Basmenji writes:

A favourite slogan of the conservatives, written in beautiful *nasta’liq* script on many walls throughout Iran, reads; ‘A woman is like a pearl, and the *hijab* is like the protecting shell.’ In 2004, boutiques were banned from putting lingerie, as well as ‘short and indecent’ clothes, in their windows, or using mannequins inside the shops. The true reason for the conservative-mindedness behind the ban – never expressed openly – is that such items provoke men’s sexual desire (Basmenji 303).

It was after I was arrested that I really grasped the true meaning of the divide between the public and the private. The day I was arrested, I had on a khaki skirt with a grey pullover; my long hair was pulled back and tied in a ponytail. I didn’t have makeup on because a serious communist girl wasn’t supposed to be attracted to those imperialist consumerist habits, and I had no scarf. As soon as my initial interrogation was over, I was given a black chador and then handcuffed. I was already blindfolded. That day, my interrogator took me to another room for
questioning. He ordered me to cover myself with my chador. He ordered me to hold the corner of a pen, which he poked me with to make me understand where he was. His religion told him that he was not allowed to touch a strange woman so he was using this pen because he didn’t want to touch my hand. With one corner of the pen in his hand and the other in mine, he would pull me behind him whenever I had to be taken to another room.

Evin prison in wintertime was covered with snow. Like the other inmates, I didn’t have shoes; we used to wear plastic slippers. But not only was I almost barefoot, blindfolded and handcuffed, I also had to hold the corner of my chador with my teeth; otherwise the guard would punish me with a fist to my head. I was clumsy and every now and then I fell. He'd let go of his pen, punch me with his fist, and then give me the corner of the pen to hold, shouting in my ear, calling me names for not being able to wear my chador properly, then pulling me roughly again. The humiliation of my situation was worse than the pain of a punch in my face. In the interrogation room, every now and then, he would tell me that I had to cover myself because he could see my clothes, or my feet, or my hair. Instinctively I knew that he was lying. This was his way of showing that he was watching me all the time. That realisation sent a shiver down my body; the thought of him watching me while I was blindfolded and handcuffed, sitting in front of him with a black chador, was more than I could bear. He repeatedly said that I was a dirty communist who didn’t know how to wear a chador. Sometimes when he was taking me to my cell, instead of using a pen, he pulled the corner of my chador. This humiliation became even more unbearable in my mind; much more than his brutal interrogations.

For the first few weeks in Evin, after I was transferred from another jail, my interrogator kept me in solitary confinement, a single cell as small as a cage. He
never locked the door behind me. Sitting behind the door, day and night, sweating a chill on the coldest days of winter in the north of Tehran, I would pull my chador around my body to protect myself, just in case he came in and attacked me physically. I slept wearing my chador, believing that if he saw me with a chador he wouldn’t dare to act indecently. It was at that moment that the hijab became symbolic of the division between the public and private for me. On the one hand I hated wearing it because of the conditions under which I was forced to do so; I associated it with brutality and humiliation. But on the other hand I was relieved to wear it, to be able to cover myself with it, especially when I was blindfolded and helpless, and had to sit in front of my interrogator’s gaze. Till that moment, I had not thought about what it would do to you if someone forced you to wear the hijab, not due to religious beliefs, but due to political compulsions. Just as my interrogator was using the hijab to humiliate and control me, I too learnt to use the hijab as a shield to protect myself. It was a defence born out of desperation and not conviction.

In prison, there is no private life; the lights are on even during the day, doors are open till the guards close them. You are even exposed during your ten minute shower as you have to share the shower with five or six inmates. We had a dress code; our family could bring clothes for us but the colours couldn’t be bright, dresses couldn’t be short or short-sleeved or open-necked and floral fabrics were not allowed. The Islamic Republic’s early days of hostility against colour is another well-known memory for Iranians. Dictating the colour code wasn’t limited to what people had to wear. The monochromatic life was something that the Islamic government wished to impose on the society but people showed their desire for a colourful life in any way they could. Basmenji wrote how the prohibition against colour extended to print culture too:
The most popular periodical was *Danestaniha*, a sort of large-size *Reader’s Digest* that appealed to hundreds of thousands of readers. Its popularity rested to a great extent on its being the only full-colour publication in an otherwise grey world. Also, it published stories on science, technology, nature and culture: a pleasant break from the war propaganda (Basmehji 194-195).

In order to rebel against this monochromatic regime, when we received clothes from our family during our monthly prison visits, in order to give some flavour to our dressing, we would cut pieces of fabric from each other’s clothes and stitch them into our clothes. They were the only flashes of colour in these dark moments of our history.

The day I was released, the only face I saw was that of an elderly woman who wore a black chador. When I returned the prison chador to her, she gave it back to me and said, ‘You take this home with you; it will teach you how to be a decent woman, *enshaallah.*’ The authorities didn’t let families see that we were handcuffed and blindfolded, so she opened my handcuffs and took off my blindfold. My family members, who were waiting for me outside, brought me my *hijab*; I had to wear a long black *manteau* coat and a long black head scarf. On the drive home from Evin prison, I could see that the public sphere had changed. All the women I could see outside on the streets were wearing either black chadors or large, dark-coloured headscarves.

A few weeks later it was *Chaharshanbeh Suri*, the Fire Festival, and my family lit a fire in our backyard. The big customary fire wasn’t allowed anymore but I wasn’t in the mood for any celebrations anyway. To cheer me up, one of my cousins suggested that I should bring out the bag from prison and burn it. I watched how the black fabric disappeared in the hot body of the dazzling fire. I stared at the fire, imagining that it was the warder’s fingers that were burning, or his tongue or his
gaze. This tenebrous image remains with me even today. My grandmother, who was standing beside me watching the fire, cursed the man that she had never met but knew was my reason for hating that black fabric.

Every year the government holds celebrations in February called Daheye Fajr, Ten Days of Dawn, to mark the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. State television shows programs and footage of the Revolution, especially the day the Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran. But this footage of the Revolution showed only women in Islamic dress. The first thing the regime did was to censor the history of recent times and eliminate the presence of women from the public space. In this footage, the government only showed women who wore the hijab. The message was loud and clear; this was a conservative Revolution and belonged to those who believed and adhered to the government’s version of Islam. About this elimination of the presence of women from the public realm, the Iranian feminist, Haideh Moghissi writes:

True, mandatory hijab has made secular women virtually indistinguishable. The Islamic regime would love, if it could, to make them invisible and it has done its best to turn the female population into undifferentiated and undifferentiable creatures, stripped of their sexuality, humanity, and voice. But, in this, the regime fails. Iranian women of diverse social and class backgrounds and ideological beliefs continue to resist the Islamic state (Moghissi 197).

When I came out of prison wearing the hijab, I felt that not only had my private life been invaded, but my public space had also become narrower. A few weeks later I went to Madjidieh, a suburb close to Yousef Abad, to have coffee with an Armenian friend of mine. This area was known as the Armenian mahaleh (suburb). Seeing all those Armenian women who are from the Christian faith in full Islamic dress was strange. The government’s aim was to make the entire country look Islamic according to their definitions of Islam; even religious minorities who didn’t have any
religious obligation to wear the *hijab* had to wear it. While we were drinking coffee, my friend’s grandmother came home, shaking. She had been sent home by a young *basiji* because her headscarf was green and she was supposed to wear dark coloured headscarves only.

I have been arrested twice. The first time was on the day of *Chaharshanbeh Suri*. It was the year before the 1979 Revolution. I was kept in custody for two days. The second arrest was on the day of *Ashura*, the tenth day of *Moharram*, the mourning month in the Shi’a calendar. This was in 1981 and I was imprisoned for two years.

There are three major public celebrations in the Persian calendar. Every year on the night of the last Tuesday before 21 March, Iranians celebrate *Chaharshanbeh Suri*, the Fire Festival. This celebration dates back to when Zoroastrianism was the predominant religion, before the invasion of the Arab Muslims. It was this invasion which converted Iranians to Islam around fourteen centuries ago. The day after this evening, 21 March, is the Iranian New Year according to the Persian calendar, which started 2500 years ago. Another big public event is *Sizdeh bedar*, a big picnic on the 13th day of the Persian calendar. On the 13th day of the first month of spring, Iranians prepare special food and gather in the green corners of the cities and spend all day outside, drinking, eating, listening to music and dancing.

Then there are the days of *Ashura* and *Tasua* in the sacred month of *Moharram* in the Shi’ite lunar calendar. These two days mark the time when Imam Hussein, the Prophet Mohammad’s grandson and third imam in the Shia faith, was killed with his seventy-two followers on the orders of the Caliph Yazid in 680 AD. The days of *Ashura* and *Tasua*, on the 10th and 11th days of the month, are marked
with anguished, almost hysterical wailing, when men parade through the streets while flagellating themselves with chains and metal scourges as women look on.

The 1979 Revolution in Iran not only brought an end to 2500 years of monarchy, but it also introduced one of the first theological regimes in the twentieth century and brought a new social life to Iran. As soon as the Islamic government came to power, the authorities tried to ban the Persian calendar ceremonies such as Chaharshanbeh Suri and Norooz (the Persian New Year) celebrations, saying that since they came from the ancient Persian calendar they were pagan. This is another paradox of the Islamic Republic; they didn’t say they banned those ceremonies because they came from the Zoroastrian religion. The Islamic Republic always claims that they respect all religions which have a holy book and consider them legitimate faiths.

The ceremonies of Ashura and Tasua are an interesting example of solemn ancient religious ceremonies being followed by festivities. Many Iranian writers talk about the paradox of this juxtaposition.

Many of the contradictions (or what we think of as contradictions) of Iran play out during the holy month of Moharram. A nation is in mourning, yes; but the Iranian penchant for turning every solemn occasion into a festivity is also on display. Ancient ritual and pageantry, reviled by orthodox Sunnis as paganism and idolatry, are set against a backdrop of modernity and a quest for technology. Public displays of grief, apparently sincere, are quickly followed by sumptuous feasts in the privacy that exists behind Persian walls. Weeks of practicing carefully choreographed mass self-flagellation culminate in an ecstatic, and even at times erotic, display of male machismo. Laughter follows tears, happiness comes from sorrow. And the people often described as the most Western in the Muslim Middle East continue to live their Western-influenced lives, going to restaurants and cafes, taking the kids to amusement parks, watching movies and listening to music, and surfing the Internet, all the while surrounding themselves with symbolic solemnity (Majd 136–37).
The Islamic government also expanded the lists of mourning to include even minor descendants of imams so that in one way or another, their names became part of a newly constructed Shia Islam. So the days of mourning increased. Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini once proclaimed ‘There is no fun in Islam’ (Basmenji 20). In the Shia Islamic calendar there are more funerals than celebrations. And this has become a topic for citizens with which to ridicule the government. There is a joke among Iranians who say that we have 365 days in our calendar and 366 days of public holidays to mourn our imams. Such criticisms were not anti-religious but anti-government because of the restrictions placed on every aspect of private life. For example, my parents reminded us constantly that the government’s actions were not within the purview of the Islam they believed in.

A common image in the streets of Iran was of a four-wheel drive with four Hezbollah members sitting inside, two men with guns and two women with black hijabs. They drove around the city, especially in those areas that were gathering points for young people, such as cafés or shopping areas, checking on their behaviour. We were also stopped by these moral police to be notified about the permissible colour of headscarves or the colour of shoes, even shoelaces. Anything with bright colours, or even a hint of colour, was not allowed. We were so fed up with them that whenever we saw one of those four wheel-drives, we would call them chahar welgarde dayoos, ‘four cuckold vagrants’. I have recently heard from my younger friends and family members that since mobile phones came to Iran, any time people see the four-wheel drives around they call each other to warn their friends. In this way, they prevent themselves from being arrested or harassed by these morality police.
The other things the Hezbollah checked for during their daily surveillances in the streets were whether anyone was carrying illegal pamphlets, journals or books. If someone carried newspapers or pamphlets printed by any of the leftist parties, or other parties such as the monarchists, or the national liberal party, they would face prison. So whenever they went onto the streets people were always careful to ensure that their handbags and their pockets did not contain such things. In the eyes of this new system, the citizens were always already guilty of some minor or major wrongdoing and constantly had to prove their innocence in street searches.

One of the focuses of the moral police was young boys and girls. They considered that the morality of those youngsters was low and that they were corrupted with Westernised youth culture, and hence they had to be controlled. The solution was to enforce the government’s version of Islamic culture on the lives of the younger generation to make sure that society was pure and free of Western vice. If women had to cover themselves with the hijab (because they were considered as the major source of the corruption of men’s morals), men had to be controlled to make sure their minds were not deviating from their major devotion (religion), so they were forbidden to drink alcohol, or listen to music, or read books which might corrupt their minds. And to prevent such corruption, they had to be controlled all the time.

Even children were not immune. Soon the streets of Tehran, which once used to be common ground for children, boys and girls equally, to play and enjoy their summer holidays, became silent. The girls had to wear hijabs from the age of seven; they were not allowed to ride bikes or play soccer in the streets anymore. Boys, especially those who were teenagers, had to be careful because they might be chased and arrested and sent to the front line in the war.
One of the things the authorities checked in the streets were handbags and pockets. If they found makeup items in women’s handbags, they often confiscated them. Hezbollah women always carried nail polish remover or creams with them in order to ‘clean up’ the errant women. They never hesitated to humiliate a woman, usually a young one, by wiping off her lipstick, or other makeup, while loudly lecturing her on how a Muslim woman should walk in the street. Usually, the problem of makeup could be solved on the street, but if they found other items the women would face prison. Two female inmates in Evin were arrested because the Hezbollah women had stopped them in the streets and found contraceptive pills in their handbags. Although the two inmates were married, the Hezbollah women considered having contraceptive pills as indicative of their lack of morality.

Our country was a patriarchal society even before the 1979 Revolution. However, the misogyny that came in the 1980s with the Islamic Republic went so far that it covered all aspects of life – so much so that even literature wasn’t immune: misogyny became a tool of censorship for the authorities. Nahid Mozaffari and Ahmad Karimi Hakkak have recorded some examples of such moral policies in their recent book, *Strange Times in Persia*. They mention the experience of a writer who applied to the Ministry of Islamic Guidance to obtain his publication permit. This is the response he got:

Unfortunately, your book has some small problems which cannot be corrected. I am certain you will agree with me. Take these first few sentences ... Nowhere in our noble culture will you find any woman who would allow herself to stand waiting for her husband to bring her a cup of tea. OK? Well, the next problem is the image of the wind sliding over the naked arms, which is provocative and has sexual overtones. Finally, nowhere, in any noble culture will you find a sunrise that is like a sunset. Maybe it is a misprint. Here you are then. Here is your book. I hope you will write another book soon (Hakak and Mozaffari xxv).
So not only were we checked publicly on the corners of streets, but we women had been reduced to being seen as corrupting influences that couldn’t even ask their husbands for a cup of tea. Now, with this new noble culture, we had to make sure we learned how to watch the sunset and sunrise too. On the one hand, Iran was bombarded day and night with the message that Islam respects women, but on the other hand, there was a complete erasure of the very real lives and daily existence of women.

From 1997–2005, during the two terms of the Ayatollah Khatami, things changed. He won the presidency on the women’s and youth votes. He advocated freedom of expression, tolerance and a civil society. The restrictions on public and private life were relaxed. Laws were passed that stopped people’s private lives from being invaded, the arts started to be funded, literature flourished and cultural activities got a boost. Right from the beginning of his presidency, it was clear that not only did this president respect and believe in the civil rights of citizens and was willing to work towards it, he was also interested in working towards recovering Iran’s damaged global relationships, which had deteriorated since the 1979 Revolution, first with the United States and then with practically the whole of the rest of the world. He realised that for Iran to remain in international isolation would be a disaster economically, politically, and also culturally. So he travelled abroad to Europe, the Middle East and the United States to establish dialogue about his country’s interest in developing peaceful global relationships. In *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change*, Ali Ansari wrote:

Khatami’s agenda at home and his ability to communicate his ideas effectively abroad made him a figure of international stature in a very short space of time. This was undoubtedly in part a reflection of foreign curiosity and fascination with an articulate and apparently rational president representing a country and government few accepted as ‘normal’. But it also indicated the genuine interest in his
significance as a reformer and his cultural sensitivity, as well as his ability to communicate with those groups who could best mediate his message: intellectuals and the media (Ansari 138–9).

Referring to the President’s discussion with Western journalists in New York in September 1998, Ansari also emphasised President Khatami’s intentions for reconciliation with minorities inside the country.

At one stage, when asked a question by an eminent Zoroastrian scholar, Khatami went so far as to interrupt the questioner, first to praise him, then to note that they came from the same city and then to point out that, as Iranians, ‘we all have Zoroastrian roots’. This was a remarkable statement for a Muslim cleric to make, and its impact on his audience should not be underestimated (Ansari 138).

In the eyes of Iranian Islam, Zoroastrianism is pagan, so acknowledgement of such a non-Islamic past from an Islamic cleric of his status was of major significance.

The rule of Ayatollah Khatami was an important time in Iran. The fact that there was a cleric president who dared to acknowledge Iranian’s pre-Islamic past made a bridge for reconciliation between citizens and the government. It was in the time of Khatami’s presidency that Iran’s two different cultures and calendars were again reconsidered as two intertwined heritages and not rivals. Khatami’s policy also opened the door for cultural exchange, both between Iran and the West, and within Iran itself. Iranian filmmakers started making dramas and documentaries about private life and social issues, and showed them mainly at international festivals. Iranian cinema flourished and Iranian theatres too started showing more diverse foreign movies.

Through Iran’s newly discovered cinema on the world stage, the West became familiar with some of the complexities of day-to-day life in Iran. Some aspects of private life such as marriage, children’s custody and teenage pregnancy,
even drugs and prostitution, have been among the many topics covered in this cinema. Documentaries especially, began to show public life in the streets of Iran. Although music wasn’t allowed to be played in public, people felt free to listen to any sort of music they wanted. The internet had made such private access possible, and it was through the internet that Iranians also became part of a larger global public.

Once the internet became common, my broken relationship with Iran re-established itself, albeit in virtual space. I should say that my connection to the socio-politics of today’s Iran is more in terms of personal inquiry than political activity in exile. Earlier, my politics were a public act, whereas now I can partake of or participate in the new socio-cultural life of Iran in the privacy of my room in front of the computer screen.

I remember the joy I felt the first time I read Khatami’s interview in the *Persian Herald*. For the first time since being in exile, I felt that there was a possibility that I could go back and live in Iran as a free citizen with civil rights. In fact, many exiled Iranians returned during this period, some just for a visit and some to stay for good. I delayed returning because of personal issues and then when I was ready to go, all these changes suffered a setback. In 2005, Khatami lost the election to the new president Ahmadinejad, mainly because of Iran’s crippled economy. Iran’s short-lived period of democracy was gone, and things returned to how they had been prior to Khatami’s presidency. Media censorship returned to the level of the early days of the Revolution; the universities’ intellectual activities were cut back due to a lack of funding, and the dialogues on human rights and civil rights faded away, having lost the strength they had started to enjoy during the Khatami’s presidency. Having said that, some winds of change had swept Iran too; technology
had opened up a means of connection between Iran and the rest of the world. The public and private lives of Iranians have changed since the internet started to be part of everyday life. From the private spaces of their own living rooms, Iranians reach out to the world through cyberspace and share their lives in this new public space.

I have tried to take part in these volatile freedoms through my friendship with youngsters who call themselves the third generation, either online or having met them here in Australia. Those who had not seen a woman in the streets without a hijab, those who had to say their prayers before entering their first year of primary school, those who had had to wear a big dark headscarf since they started school at the age seven, those who had been encouraged to go to war since the early years of high school. Every day I watch them on YouTube, or Facebook and other internet outlets, with astonishment and disbelief. I have young Iranian friends who identify themselves as Muslims but every now and then they drink alcohol socially, and they listen to music constantly, all sorts of music. Some of them have their own bands and their music is very Western. There are many hip hop artists and rappers among young Iranian musicians, in Iran and abroad. Looking at the photos of young women in the streets wearing their fashionable sunglasses, heavy makeup and colourful headscarves and clothes as a statement of their basic civil rights, I am again reminded of everything my generation didn’t have.

One of the paradoxes of our times is how capitalism has smashed borders and opened up the world. As an ex-communist, I sometimes wonder about what it was that went wrong. In Australia, during my research on emigrant writing, I came across Brian Castro, whom I found had written an essay on the topic of the ‘public and private’. In this essay, Castro refers to the sexual practices of ancient China to show how the recent government of China uses sexuality to control the lives of its citizens:
Up until recently, the Chinese government held to a law which refused contraceptives to unmarried couples. One would wonder why, since population growth is one of the huge problems China has yet to solve. And this problem is the direct result, since Confucianism, of a cultural practice which ascribed shame to a household without at least one male issue. The reason is simple. Contraception, like drugs, is the promotion of Western decadence. If allowed, the country would go wild (Castro 88).

The religious rulers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, like their ideological counterparts in the Chinese government, think contraception is a Western decadence, and so they have banned it. This ban was loosened when Iran’s population almost tripled in the first few years of the Revolution. It is amazing to see how a communist authority and a religious authority use the same logic to control the lives of their citizens. No wonder Akbar Rafsanjani, Iran’s third president, has been called by some journalists ‘the Ayatollah Deng Xiao Ping’ because of the flamboyance and extravagance he introduced during his presidency and the similarities of his policies to China’s. Castro also discusses in his essay how the Chinese government in fact controls the political life of Chinese people.

So population control is really secondary to political control ... and political control is far easier if you make the culture work for you. Consequently, Chinese cities yielded the visitor incessant images of frustrated lovers doing the best they could without crossing the lines of public propriety; in parks, on street corners after dark, in trolley-cars. Privacy, if they could get it, provided its own dangers. Conception without marriage, and worse still, female illegitimate offspring would have meant social and material disaster. In this way the government was able to get into the bedroom (Castro 88–89).

By the time the Iran–Iraq war finished in 1988, Iran’s baby boomers were adolescents, and they brought with them a big appetite for exploring life and all its pleasures. Now the government had a complex issue on its hands. On the one hand, sex and drug use among the young generation became a priority in every parliament
member’s discussion list. On the other, the government had to come up with a way to encourage family planning. Soon we witnessed war slogans and slogans about the hijab being replaced with religious advice on family planning, explicitly recommending legal methods to prevent pregnancy.

In 2005, the Iran Heritage Foundation organised a conference called *Private Lives and Public Spaces in Modern Iran.* Referring to the importance of studying the new direction in the writing of Iranian history, the organiser’s introduction says:

Due to the overwhelming significance of the Islamic Revolution and the political questions that it posed, historians of modern Iran have focused primarily on political history and have rarely explored the (trans) formations of private and public spheres, the changing spaces that have directly shaped the experience of everyday life. Intimacy, sexuality, and sociability, burgeoning fields of historical studies – have similarly remained unexplored by Iranian historians. Despite considerable feminist interest in Modern Iranian history, many studies have largely abstained from exploring domestic and private life in Iran. Fetishizing the veil, they have rarely inquired about the subjectivity, agency, and personal lives of women (The Iran Heritage Foundation 6).

In Sydney, every year, three ceremonies are performed by Iranians in exile and by Shia Muslims. The ceremonies of *Ashura* and *Tasua* is performed in the Western Sydney suburb of Auburn and *Chaharshanbeh Suri* and *Sisdeh bedar* is performed in one of the other suburbs in Western Sydney, usually Parramatta, one of the main homes to newly arrived refugees and migrants from Iran. I have known a few Iranians who participate in the *Ashura* and *Tasua* ceremonies, but thousands of Iranians in exile participate in the *Chaharshanbeh Suri* and *Sisdeh bedar* ceremonies, usually bringing along their non-Iranian friends, proudly describing to them how the ceremony was and is celebrated in Iran. I have participated in the Fire Festival, taking my Australian friends who showed an interest in Persian culture. The numbers
at both ceremonies indicate to me that when Iranians live under other calendars, in this case a Western and Christian calendar, they are interested in celebrating their pre-Islamic culture much more than their Islamic culture. Even devoted Muslim Iranians show more interest in *Chaharshanbeh Suri* and *Sisdeh bedar* than in religious ceremonies. Perhaps there is another layer of cultural identity that plays a role in this participation: Old Persian culture versus old Western culture rather than Old Christian culture versus old Islamic culture.

**Notes**

1 Azerbaijan is a province of Iran which shares a border with the Republic of Azerbaycan. Iranian Azerbayjani people live mainly in West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaycan, Ardabil and Zanjan.

2 The Iran Heritage Foundation describes its activities in the following way: ‘Since 1995, the Iran Heritage Foundation has nurtured, cultivated and developed Iran’s cultural heritage. With a broad focus extending from ancient to contemporary subjects, we have forged strong relationships with major international institutions of learning and culture in the UK and US. The Foundation provides support to academic and cultural posts and funds a range of digitisations projects. It has organised numerous major exhibitions, created a vast array of public programmes and provided grants for research, travel and study.

Chapter Four

Fragmentation: Beginning Again

Beginning 1

In the mountains between Iran and Pakistan, my calendar started to be mixed up. My Persian documents showed it was 1364, yet in the UN office, when we received refugee status; all our documents were written and dated using the Western calendar. We had to begin a new life with this new calendar, a new time. Since then I have developed a compulsive habit of comparing the dates on the two calendars, juxtaposing the past and present, and opening a gulf of centuries. This new time told me that only two decades were left before the twentieth century came to an end in Australia, when it had not yet remotely begun in Iran. I had to jump over a gap of centuries to begin my new enterprise. So there had to be a new start. In his book, Beginnings, Edward Said describes how making a ‘new start’ usually involves some kind of disruption:

What are the conditions that allow us to call something a beginning? First of all, there must be the desire, the will, and the true freedom to reverse oneself, to accept thereby the risks of rupture and discontinuity; for whether one looks to see where and when he began, or whether he looks in order to begin now, he cannot continue as he is. It is, however, very difficult to begin with a wholly new start. Too many old habits, loyalties, and pressures inhibit the substitution of a novel enterprise for an established one (Said 34).

For me, a new beginning started with the English language when I arrived in Australia in 1989; all of a sudden I had lost all the skills of communication one takes for granted with one’s own language. I came to a country which I didn’t know anything about. In English, the cliché of trying something new is ‘to go into it blind’. That was my condition: to enter into a new country is to enter blind. In my mind I
was between the Persian year of 1366 and the Western year of 1988. In exile, I would argue the gap between those years never closes. In exile, time starts from zero; the new calendar starts from zero. This year became my year zero in the Western calendar and in my personal calendar as I started a new life. Soon after that I felt a wall had been raised in front of me, a wall that prevented me from being able to communicate in my usual way and in a language I was used to. In Australia, this wall became even taller and thicker because everything, every utterance, every sign, and every written paper, was in English. Unable to communicate, I felt I was mute; silence was the only option. I felt a prisoner again, blindfolded again. Tall walls of new language made me a prisoner again. While the journey from Tehran to Karachi was a displacement, the cultural resemblances or closeness of Farsi and Urdu mediated the sense of total muteness. In Sydney, I felt all my abilities to communicate evaporate and I became a displaced person, a fragmented being.

I felt there was a vacuum in my mind. What Farsi gave me was a known skill and a familiar way of thinking, which was also a crucial tool for communication. Now that I was in Australia my Farsi language was unusable, and had to be replaced completely with a new skill and way of thinking, one that came from English. I was lost; that’s how I felt at the beginning. It was frustrating. I wanted the intimate relationship I had with Farsi to be replicated in English. But all the poetic tools which a native language provides were now taken away from me. This created a real sense of disorder in my mind. In front of me was a horizon of silence. The silence had a force: there was a pressure both to adapt and to resist that adaptation.

This silence also brought isolation, and as a result my cultural life became smaller and smaller. This decline of an active cultural life made me feel disconnected both from society and from myself. I felt lost because my cultural cohesion was lost.
and I felt there was nothing for me to be a part of; Australian culture was unknown to me, alienating and somehow uninviting, although at that time I really wasn’t able to put my finger on it. I could not say that was the reason why I felt alienation within the Australian culture. I felt I was rootless and alienated as a so-called Iranian-in-exile. I felt like a total outsider. It was as if I was blindfolded again; this time it was here, in this new country, new culture and new language. But at the same time, I believe that this new blindfold allowed me to discover my deeper sense of memory. That perhaps was a first embryo of my writings in English. To be blind to my surroundings allowed me to see the past and to revisit my childhood. Like an infant I held my breath to dream my first location, the womb.

Brian Castro writes about his own experience of feeling like an outsider within both Australian culture and his Chinese culture:

To become an outsider in this kind of society is not easy. It is like biting the hand that feeds you. Yet at one stage in my youth I remember making the conscious decision to unshackle myself from this culture as well as from the predominant Australian one. I became a minority within a minority (Castro 52).

As a young man, Castro’s reasons for abandoning both cultures were that he felt Australian culture excluded people from other cultures and Chinese culture was too restrictive. In my own case, I found that hanging out with Iranian expatriates, political or otherwise, was restrictive and limiting. As for Australian culture, I wasn’t familiar enough with it to feel excluded; I just found the atmosphere uninviting and unwelcoming. But, as time passed, my sense of being a newly arrived refugee started to settle and gradually I felt ready for the best or worst possibilities of life ahead of me. At that stage I finally accepted that there was no return, but there were ways in which another kind of return became possible.
Beginning 2

My first degree was in science. The universality of scientific language opened a door for me to be able to communicate on a certain level. Rules of gravity, mathematical facts, chemical bindings required its own language and I was equipped with this language. So, doing a science degree after my arrival helped me to start communicating in the new language of English and in those days, between 1989 till 1992, the books I read in English were science books not literary books. I felt I understood the meanings of the words, their secrets and their wisdom in science, but I didn’t have that relationship with English and Australian literature, and I was missing the deep connection one might obtain through this literature.

Later on, when I started to read and write in English more regularly, I noticed that single images had two perspectives in my mind. One visual image could immediately create two meanings, two different emotions and two wisdoms in me. I think it was in those days that I was beginning to have the feeling that I was becoming a bilingual being. I started spending more time in bookshops and libraries. I started reading books I’d first read in Farsi in Iran. I reread Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Albert Camus, Borges and Kafka translated into English. It felt as if I had found pieces of myself again; memories came to me from those days when I used to read them in Farsi. The most impressive thing I felt at that moment was the realisation that I could read books, which I had read before, but that this time I was able to read them in English.

During the Sydney Film Festival in 1992, an Iranian film was screened in the Valhalla Cinema in the inner city suburb of Glebe; my husband and I, the only two Iranians in the cinema, listened to the dialogues in Farsi while the English speaking audience read the subtitles. The movie was Bashu, the Little Stranger, by one of
Iran’s most celebrated directors, Bahram Beizai. It is about a young boy, Bashu, whose parents are killed in a bombardment by the Iraqi army in the south of Iran. He escapes on a cargo truck to the north where he finds a farm woman named Na’ei who cannot understand the language he speaks. He speaks Arabic and she speaks Gilaki, a Farsi dialect from the Northern Province of Gilan. My journal of that night reads: ‘I felt every move this boy made, his body language, his frustration and his inability to like this woman’s kindness because of language barriers.’ That was what I felt in the cinema too. Until then, although I had been in Australia for three years, I had never felt the intensity of my strangeness, perhaps because as a newly arrived refugee, my immediate and urgent agenda was how to survive here. But now, sitting next to Australians listening to the story of this little stranger, it was as if it was my story that was projected in front of me. I watched him running from a war which was appearing in his disturbed nightmares, his memories of his home in the south coming to him through flashbacks, but still he was running to an unknown safety.

One day, I found a second-hand book, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (this book had four previous owners’ names on the first page) in the box in front of a second-hand bookshop. Looking at its first few pages, I found I was somehow able to read it all. I could read it fast and understand it perfectly, and that surprised me. It also pleased me to be able to read a book in English. Later on I realised I could read this book so easily because I knew the story inside out and upside down. Reflecting back to the time that I had read the Farsi translation refreshed my mind about my first experience with that style of magical realism. With these readings a new door was opened to me. The wall was crashing down or, rather, I was learning to walk through it.
I could now read James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad and Ernest Hemingway in their original English for the first time. I also read Karl Marx, Georg Lukacs and Maxim Gorky again, to assess the feelings I once had about them. Strangely, this time I didn’t feel that they were dull or boring. It felt nostalgic. I had to begin with a new language in which I didn’t know myself. In Iran I had read all these writers from around the world in Farsi, and they all felt culturally homogenous to me. But now, reading them in English, I felt they were somehow different. I could feel that I was reading a variety of writings; this also felt like a form of doubleness – double meanings and double feelings.

Gradually I became interested in literature written by Australian writers and I still have my first book by an Australian writer, *Inland* by Gerald Murnane. He writes:

I am writing in the library of a manor-house, in a village I prefer not to name, near the town of Kunmadaras, in Szolnok County. These words trailing away behind the point of my pen are words from my native language. Heavy-hearted Magyar, my editor calls it. She may well be right. These words rest lightly on my page, but this heaviness pressing on me is perhaps the weight of all the words I have still not written. And the heaviness pressing on me is what first urged me to write (Murnane 1).

At that time, my English wasn’t good enough to read whole books like the novels I used to read in Farsi as if I was cruising with the narrator through the pages. I made it my job to read every evening and translate for myself, but only for my own use. I still have my handwritten translation of *Inland*, by Murnane, which became my starting point to reading Australian literature. Stories and literature are not created in a void. Working on the translation helped me to find a new language and new insight, as if I was being connected again. It helped me to know myself better, as any new work, or a new translation, or a new practice does to a person. Australian
literature gave me a new means for reading about people and experiences I had never known before.

Also I had a fascination with following non Anglo-Saxon names on the creative map of Australia, although I found this map very limited and short-circuited. Somehow, in those names, I thought I would find stories similar to mine. I came to know the name of David Malouf through Hossain Valamanesh, a contemporary Australian visual artist originally from Iran. Nikos Papastergiadis writes about Malouf’s use of language to describe landscape in *Johnno*, his first novel:

In one passage, the protagonist *Johnno*, tells the narrator Dante, a fellow writer, that if after every six years the body replaces all the tissue, then he has expelled Australia from his own body, he has excreted every archipelago and every little island. The body seemingly has been shed by exile (Papastergiadis 77).

The second book I read by David Malouf was *Remembering Babylon*. The story of the main character, Jimmy or Gemmy, reminded me of Bashu, the character in the Iranian movie that I watched in Valhalla cinema. The similarities of their experiences of being away from their home and their parents, being strangers in their new environments and languages, surviving with the help of people other than their own, made this historical story interesting to me. Like the movie Bashu, the character in the book reminded me of my own strangeness in the new environment and new language. This book also was my first exposure to writing about Australia, about colonialism and white settlement and Aboriginals in Australia. All my previous readings about colonialism were in one way or another abstract, something like history, nothing personally related to me. I read them to inform myself as an intellectual responsibility. But this book was about a country in which I had chosen to live my life; its history now was related to me. This was a new approach in my life.
My first book by Aboriginal writers was *Paperbark: a collection of Black Australian Writings*. A friend of mine gave me this book as a present when we were undergraduate students in the science department in the University of Western Sydney. Even the title of this collection was new to me. In Iran, we have at least six or seven nationalities living side-by-side. Each nationality has its own culture and language or specific dialogue which is reflective of their heritage. But I never came across a book or selection of writings by any specific nationality. For example I hadn’t come across a collection of writing by Azerbaijani writers or Kurdish writers. Reading this collection, and also reading books such as *Who Am I, The Diary of Mary Talence* written by Anita Heiss, was a heart wrenchingly engaging experience to me. Those writings which mainly were about the Aboriginal Stolen Generation were an eye opener, something about my new home and history which I hadn’t known about before.

I started reading migrant and other Australian writers I had never read in Farsi; writers such as Brian Castro and Yasmine Gooneratne. These writers gave my Australia blood, flesh, skin and soul. Castro’s *Birds of Passage* and Gooneratne’s *A Change of Skies* were about contemporary Australia with immigrant themes. These two books were written as if they were about me and my experience; they resonated directly with my personal experiences as a migrant in Australia. They were a kind of portal to my new identities, my new life.

One thing that came up again and again as an issue in migrant writing was how migrants described feeling uneasy in this new home. In *A Change of Skies*, Gooneratne writes “‘It’s the Australians!’” I cried, clinging to him. “The Australians have come! They’re throwing stones on the roof, and breaking all the windows.” (Gooneratne 81). In a further passage Padmini’s husband warns her about
the violent Australians and warns Padmini to be vigilant all the time. Although I had experienced no direct hostility of the kind described by Gooneratne’s character, Padmini, I personally had feelings of uneasiness inside me. On the one hand, I had the feeling of being disconnected, alienated from the culture, the language, and even the weather; on the other hand, I was fascinated and intrigued with the massive body of water that surrounded the vastness of the land. As for my first impressions of Australia, I identified with Ania Walwicz’s *Australia*:

> You big ugly. You too empty. You desert with your nothing nothing nothing. You scorched suntanned. Old too quickly. Acres of suburbs watching the telly ... You go crazy on Saturday night. You get drunk. You don’t like me and you don’t like women (Walwicz 90–91).

I found Sydney’s massiveness empty, its people loud on Saturday nights, and a lack of depth in almost everything; and the unfriendliness and dislike towards women that is always embedded in the eyes of the usually white Anglo-Saxon policemen, guards, and bus drivers, who watched me with my afternoon pram, carrying my baby in the streets so that my husband could get some sleep after long hours working in a tyre factory. But I was also glad to be in Australia, seeing my son safe at childcare while I was preparing myself for exams at the University of Western Sydney. I was happy in areas of my life which for millions of women in the world were an issue – considerations such as dressing as I wished and travelling with my Australian passport without any need for my husband’s permission.

The writings by Aboriginal and migrant writers were all directly or indirectly political but also deeply intimate and personal. Their personal stories interested me. My earlier literary reading, especially of novels with political themes, was all of writers who wrote about the working class or the bourgeoisie. But in these new
writings, I found people were writing about themselves, in and out of the society and at home.

In *The Immigration Experience in Australian Literature*, Annette Robyn Corkhill describes how Australian superficiality has been a topic for migrant writers. Corkhill refers to Lolo Houbein’s character, Nguyen, a Vietnamese immigrant in her book *Everything is Real*. Here, the character complains that Australians are reluctant to discuss philosophy, religion or anything beyond the mundane:

> There is no religion ... and no philosophy. Nothing that can penetrate beneath the mere surface of one’s thoughts to the waiting fullness and nothing that widens the new language beyond what one already understands. Australians have no time for philosophy ... Why then this hazardous flight to freedom at the expense of memories and the wages of three generations? Here one may think what one likes and say what one thinks, but who is interested enough to listen? (Houbein qtd. in Corkhill 76).

In my early days, I felt that before I learnt to locate myself in this new home, I constantly had to tell Australians where I was from. Many Australians in the late 1980s confused Iran and Iraq, and anytime I mentioned that they were two different countries with different cultures and languages the first response was ‘but they sound the same to me’. My response was that Australia and Austria also sound the same but I know they are two completely different countries. Daily, I faced the mundane conversations and lack of interest in anything outside Australia and Australian-ness. I also read the work of writers who were foreigners in other places in the world, writers such as V.S. Naipaul, Hanif Kureishi, and Amin Maalouf. From books such as *The Enigma of Arrival* by V.S. Naipaul, I copied out passages and carried them with me:

> That idea of ruin and dereliction, of out-of-placement, was something I felt about myself, attached to myself: a man from another hemisphere, another background, coming to rest in middle life in the cottage of a half neglected estate, an estate full
of reminders of its Edwardian past, with few connections of the valley, and I a further oddity in its ground. I felt unanchored and strange (Naipaul 13).

Being unanchored and strange are feelings that many migrants relate to. This book captivated me, haunted me with its dreamy and melancholic sceneries and descriptions of loss. Perhaps by reading those writers who had somehow had similar experiences to mine, I was trying to invent a literary tradition for myself. Migrants often think of themselves as uprooted and transplanted in alien or unfamiliar terrain or soil. I definitely was in the process of searching for myself; I was searching for my literary roots. In losing my hope of return to Iran, I could only go back to my first literary education, use that knowledge and experience wherever possible, and learn the literary culture of this new home to begin my own journey.

**Beginning 3**

In high school in Tehran, the focus of our literary curriculum was classic Persian literature. Our literary education was mainly based on synopses of writings and poems by famous poets such as Nezami, Hafez, Sa’adi, and Ferdosi, which we had to memorise. The teacher was someone who played the role of our moral guardian rather than a literature teacher. So my experience from the school literature program was to memorise the poems to get good marks in my final exams. There weren’t any literary courses on how to analyse the poems or discuss their composition.

Most of the poems were loaded with philosophical ideas and complex Sufi beliefs, which needed to be considered. They were also very complex linguistically because of the influence of Arabic on the Persian language. What we gained from our literature classes was our teacher’s hermeneutic interpretation of that literature. If
a teacher tried to describe the meanings of those poems and prose to us, it was only to give us a moral lecture.

Most of the epic poems were set in the time of a glorious Persia, facing an enemy, with a devastating love story as their centrepiece. The lovers usually came from opposing tribes or empires, so eloping were their only option. One of the best known epic poets was the 11th century poet Nezami from Azerbaijan, and we studied his love stories, such as Leyli va Majnun. In this romance, Qays and Leyli fall in love with each other when they are school children, but when they grow up Leyli’s father won’t allow them to be together. Qays becomes crazy about her and that’s the reason his name is changed to Majnun, which can be translated as ‘the man who loves too much, to the point that he becomes crazy’. Nezami’s work has been translated into many languages and has been adopted in a variety of cultures such as India, Tajikistan and some Arab countries.

Before the 1979 Revolution, it was quite common for male teachers to teach in girls’ schools. While most of the science and maths teachers were men, women usually taught literature and other humanities subjects. In my school, however, we had a male literature teacher. Every week we sat in our classrooms, listening to the history of our Persian Empire as written in poems and read by our teacher. But, sometimes, the teacher took a detour and read to us some parts of the poems that were not in our curriculum. On those days we sat quietly, staring into the eyes of our old teacher (perhaps in his thirties but he seemed old to us fifteen- to sixteen-year-old girls) as he read to us line after line about how a young man had seen his beloved for the first time in the city bazaar while the young beauty was guarded by her servants, or he saw her for the first time in the hall of her father’s palace, or bathing naked with her friends in the river (the scene always happened at the lake or riverside, the
only possible place for him to meet her naked). And we heard how the young beautiful girl cried night after night because she had been told that her love was nothing but the illusion of a young mind.

Their love was always love at first sight. When, later, I learned about the role of a plot in the construction of a story, I thought those poets had really mastered this essential requirement of storytelling. Love was always love at first sight because the poet (read ‘society’) would not have allowed any second meeting to happen. So the intensity of the lovers' passion had to be established, and then, when the poet made all the options impossible for those two young hearts to unite, the only option left was to elope. It seems that, since ancient times, poets have known very well that love united would soon die but catastrophic love would last forever. So, perhaps that is the reason why stories such as Leyli and Majnun, Vis and Ramin and Romeo and Juliet eternally occupy our minds, at least in adolescence.

In my parents' home we had a collection of the epics written by the most famous and well-respected poets. Nezami was particularly popular in my family. Although Nezami was an Azerbaijani, he wrote in Farsi because it was the dominant official language in Persia. My parents talked about him being an Azerbaijani as if this 11th-century poet was their close cousin. On special occasions, such as the ceremony of the night of Yalda when all members of my family sat around the kursi, a big wooden table with three or four blankets spread over the table, my father loved to read poems and remind us, as he did every year, that he had seen Nezami’s shrine at Ganja in Azerbaijan when he went there on business for the first time.¹ Some of Nezami’s lines were his favourites, such as:

Time passes, but true love remains. The life of this world is, for the most part, nothing but a succession of illusions and deceptions. But true love is real, and the flames which fuel it burn forever, without beginning or end (Guinhut 33).
As a teenager, I read a lot of romances published in instalments in the Zaneh rooz, a periodical similar to the Australian Women's Weekly. In the long hot summer school holidays, my friends and I used to sit around the shallow pool in my backyard, dangling our feet in the cool water and quietly reading those semi-erotic stories to one another.

One famous story was called *Fetneh chakmeh push*, *(Boot-wearing Fetneh)*. The name *Fetneh*, a female name, was an ironic choice. It means temptation and sedition. *Chakmeh* means boot. The title of the story suggested a femme fatale. The plot of the story was of an innocent girl who came from a small conservative town to live in the capital city. Fetneh falls in and out of love with different men, and so did we as we followed in her footsteps. We travelled around the city with our protagonist, went to late-night parties, and learned a great deal about love and relationships. The periodicals were written for adults, so the censorship of their explicit intimacy and sexual content was minimal. Our parents, who never read those magazines, saw our gatherings as a safe haven for their girls. We were not outside our homes, that dangerous corrupting outside world was something all parents feared and prohibited their girls from exploring. And they regarded all reading as educational. Where else could a bunch of teenage girls learn about the dangers and excitement of love if they were not allowed to experience it personally or didn’t see any opportunity to obtain it? In our parents' minds there wasn’t anything mischievous happening. Literature, or in this case, those shallow simple romances, became a good source of personal, if vicarious, education for us.

As young girls, we couldn’t easily relate to the epic stories from the ancient times of the Persian Empire and their sometimes romantic appeals. But we could relate to these romances in daily women’s magazines, which were set in a city
similar to ours and whose characters resonated as if they were our closest friends. Most of the periodical romances were written by men. There wasn’t the classical *Majnun* character, a madly-in-love male who was so obsessed with his beloved that he would become almost mad, and speak to the animals about the turmoil in his heart, as was the case in Nezami’s epics. Instead, here was a female character living in the city, facing its dark and satanic forces. The theme in most of the novels was the effect of the metropolis, as a symbol of the dark and corrupting force of modernity, on the female character who, as well as keeping her innocence (in this case her virginity), had to learn to survive by using her seductive looks and wearing modern fashionable clothes such as long black leather boots. This was the main plot in *Fetneh chakneh push*.

After the 1979 Revolution, female writers also began to write fiction more seriously, and once again the theme of modern life and big cities became part of the plots in their novels. If women were represented as the ‘other’ in the novels written by men, that is, as subject to men’s designs, ideas and desires, now these women writers brought their own styles and themes, including the struggles and challenges they faced, to their stories. One example was Zoya Pirzad’s bestselling novel, *I Turn off the Lights*. Written in a realist style, the plot of the novel is about the everyday life of an Iranian-Armenian family in the 1960s.

Ellham Ghaytanchi wrote of this famous novel: ‘The novel brings out the anxieties of a modern life as lived by the ‘other’ whose cosmopolitan life in Abadan – the quintessential modern city in Iran’s 1960s – reflects the ambivalence felt over the conflation of religion, nationality, politics and sexuality’ (Ghaytanchi 7). The ‘other’ in Ghaytanchi’s analysis is Pirzad’s protagonist named Claris, a Christian Armenian-Iranian woman who lives with her family in cosmopolitan, multicultural
Abadan, a city in the south of Iran, which was populated predominantly with Iranian Muslims and also Muslims from Arabic-speaking countries such as Bahrain.

One of the major contributions to modern literature in Iran was translation. After the Constitutional Revolution in 1905, travel overseas, to mainly to European countries and later to the United States for education, became customary for upper middle-class families, and especially for male children. So those who had the linguistic ability and intellectual interest, mainly those with secular views, started translating novels and other literary genres into Farsi. The first novels to be translated into Farsi were from French, English, Russian and some from Turkish and Arabic. In those days, the two most popular languages were French and Russian – French, because Iran’s modern education system was adapted from the French education system. Some of Iran’s most famous intellectuals, such as Nima Yushij, known as the father of Iran’s modern poetry, and Sadeg Hedayat, known for his modernist style of writing (I will discuss Hedayat later in this essay) were graduates of St. Louis, the French Catholic missionary school for boys in Tehran. The popularity of Russian was perhaps for two reasons: one was that the Russian Empire, before the establishment of the USSR, had an interest in Iran. It was an important neighbour, both economically and politically, so the Russians always promoted institutions, organisations and cultural exchanges between the two countries. The second reason was that Iranian intellectuals with Marxist-Leninist points of view who became popular in the early twentieth century were influenced by the Soviet Union’s revolution and this led to an interest in Russian culture and language.

During the Cold War however, from the 1950s on, Iran’s relationship with the United States became increasingly close, both politically and culturally. Economically, the United States had interests in Iranian oil and it also wanted to
cultivate Iran as a watchdog over its rival, the Soviet Union. The Shah needed the United States to back his dictatorship, with the help of the CIA and SAVAK (Iran’s Secret Police). The relationship had cultural effects too because during the Shah of Pahlavi’s regime (1941–1979), it became a common practice for Iranian students to go to American universities. The resulting cultural exchange brought new translations of American writers to the list of English language literary works available to Iranian readers.

During the Pahlavi regime, when there was systematic state censorship on writing about contemporary historical events, having access to the translated works of novelists and writers from other cultures was pivotal for Iranian literary readers. Translation brought new styles into modern Farsi literature such as surrealism, stream of consciousness and magic realism. Also, the translation of writers such as Edgar Allan Poe caused mystery thrillers, science fiction, and horror stories to flourish (Yavari 3). Translation also created a new foundation for critical writing and literary theory, which found a growing readership among mainly secular middle class readers and provided fertile ground for local writers to examine the practice of their writing. So the translation and imitation of the different styles of European and United States authors was very productive for Iran’s modern literature. As a result, some writers, such as Sadeg Hedayat (1903–1951) were able to make a name for themselves locally and even internationally. Others, however, produced work that was clichéd and of poor quality.

One of the challenges for Iranian novelists was how to adopt new styles while, at the same time, still writing a Persian narrative. One very successful example of this was Sadeg Hedayat’s short novel Buf-eKur (Blind Owl), published in 1937. Hedayat’s French education, first in Iran and later at university in France,
equipped him to write modern literature. His awareness of concepts of time and space in modern literature is evident in his writings.

The structure of *Buf-eKur* is divided into two parts. It is narrated in the first person voice; the main character is a traditional artist who is obsessively engaged with the figure of a woman in his painting. In the second part of the novel, the woman transforms into the woman he marries, and ultimately murders.

Yavari, an Iranian academic at Colombia University, writes about *Blind Owl*:

> Throughout the novel, scenes and events reflect and echo each other, time does not follow a linear progression and dream and reality remain intertwined. The very ambivalence of the novel gives it a haunting effect that remains with the reader long afterwards. It has been translated into many languages and has generated a considerable amount of literary criticism. It was praised highly by the founder of the surrealist movement, Andre Breton (Yavari 7).

Yavari refers to critical writers such as Yarshater (1988 332) and Sepanlu (1989 27) who have commented about *Buf-e Kur* that while it draws on the ‘sources and resources of world literature’, it also ‘remains strikingly Persian’ (Yavari 7).

*Blind Owl* strikingly resonates due to its use of Persian imagery, such as miniature paintings on ceramics, reflections of images on mirrors and the language of the characters. Hedayat was interested in Persian folklore and Iranian colloquial language. He studied and researched old texts using modern linguistic techniques and was also a professional translator. His genius lay in his ability to bring together this knowledge of old literature with modern literary forms to create a new style and aesthetic in the Farsi language.

Hedayat’s themes were mainly to do with despair, psychological problems and death. Most of his characters were those who had had some experience of being
in a mental asylum. For example, one of his masterpieces: Se Gatreh Khoon (Three Drops of Blood, 1933) opens in this way:

> It was yesterday they moved me to a room apart. Am I really completely cured now, as the warder promised I would be? And shall I be free in a week? Have I in fact been ill? It’s a whole year now, and all that time however much I begged for a pen and paper, they refused me (Hedayat 1).

In the last few years of his life Hedayat was depressed most of the time and his financial situation was bad. Finally on April 9, 1951, when he was in a small room in a Paris hotel, he committed suicide by gassing himself. Hedayat was only appreciated as a gifted writer after his death. There were a lot rumours about his psychological issues and at that time, nobody talked about Hedayat’s homosexuality. Unfortunately there is no information about Hedayat’s youth or about how and exactly when he had started considering writing as a serious occupation. One of the best books written about Hedayat’s life is Ashnaie ba Hedayat, Friendship with Hedayat written by M.F. Farzaneh. This book is mainly about Farzaneh’s memories about Hedayat when he was a young high school boy and Hedayat was a known writer. Farzaneh’s memoir is the first document about his homosexuality and it is one of its kind about this taboo issue. I was surprised to see that this book was published almost eleven years after the 1979 Revolution. In this book the conversations between young Farzaneh and Hedayat are not only about intellectuality, literature and translation but also sexuality, drugs and alcohol.

The first time I read Hedayat’s novels I was in high school; I borrowed his books from family members. I didn’t really grasp the context of his books at that time. In 1998, almost half a century later, I visited his tomb at Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. Because I was coming to Paris, I had chosen to take Hedayat’s books with me. I had Blind Owl and his other masterpiece, Three Drops of Blood.
As my understanding and knowledge of literature has grown, I have found Hedayat’s writing more and more compelling. Both these novels are surrealistic in style and approach. Pessimistic and psychological monologues are part of their mood, a hallmark of his work. Both novels have two parts, life in the present and in the past. The atmosphere in both books is surreal, with deliberately vague and elusive language, as if someone is talking during a hallucination. The story details the despair of a young man after losing his mysterious lover. As the narrator gradually drifts into madness, the bleak vision of the human condition unfolds for the reader.

There are sores which slowly erode the mind in solitude like a canker. It is impossible to convey a just idea of the agony which this disease can inflict. In general, people are apt to relegate such inconceivable suffering to the category of incredible (Hedayat 1).

One of the achievements of the 1979 Revolution was a short-lived democracy, which gave an opportunity to the literary world under Iran’s suffocating censorship to flourish for a short while. Many books which had been translated or written since the early days of Pahlavi’s dynasty, but had always gone out of print or were banned, came on to the book market again. It was in this period that university students like me gained access to a wide variety of books. For example I read William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. Although *The Sound and the Fury* has been translated into Farsi by different translators at different periods of time, it was Bahman Sholevar’s translation in 1951 that captured my attention. Sholevar is a novelist, critic and translator who translated Faulkner at the age of eighteen or nineteen. He also translated T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Iranian critics agree that these translations are still two of the most important modern classics translated into Iranian literature. One reason is the way Sholevar successfully captures in the Farsi translation
Faulkner’s ability to create the American South’s colloquial voice, and the quality of thought and feeling in his characters.

Later on I read a book by an Iranian female writer, Moniroo Ravanipour, whose novel Kanizoo, published in Tehran in 1989, won acclaim for its author. Ravanipour is from the south of Iran and is familiar with the culture of that region. She has used this cultural knowledge creatively in this novel, and also in her other novels, which are mainly focused on local scenes, or the customs and folklore of the south. Her language is distinctively painted with the colour of the local dialect of the south of Iran. On one occasion, in our reading group at university, we had students that were from other parts of Iran such as from Khozestan, a southern province, or some from the north of Iran. Naturally, these students had their local accents. We used to read sections of the novel out loud and then discuss them. It was interesting to listen to a Khozestani student who had a strong southern accent when he was reading some of Kanizoo. I took that experience with me and at home I asked my uncle, an educated man who spoke Farsi with a strong Azerbaijani accent, to read me some passages from Kanizoo. The experience was amazing to me. The characters became more pronounced and more alive as a result of the writing being read with an accent. All these books, which I have described here, helped me to learn about different styles of writing, and as any reading can do, shaped the basic seed in my mind about novel writing.

**Beginning 4**

In 1977, when I was in the first year of my university education, events happened that changed and shifted the way I thought about Iran’s literary culture. The Association of Iranian Writers, with the cooperation of the Goethe Institute,
organised an event that became known as *Dah Shab-e Sher (Ten Nights of Poetry)*. The venue was the Goethe Institute in Tehran. At that time, no university would have dared to risk hosting such a controversial event where real authors connected physically with a live audience. Because the Goethe Institute was considered a foreign cultural space, it meant police raids were less likely. So, it seemed that the audience and organisers would be free to perform the program without interference.

I had just started university and the excitement I felt is still indescribable. During those ten nights, for the first time, students like me were seeing writers who for years we had read but never had the opportunity to meet. It was during that event that my generation was able to meet and talk with writers and poets such as Golam-Hossein Sa’edi, an Azerbaijani writer whose novels and screenplays brought a new wave cinema to Iran before the 1979 Revolution; Simin Daneshvar who is considered the first major female novelist in Iran; and Sa’id Sultanpour who was a political activist and a revolutionary poet. Shams Langaroodi, a poet who had been to prison himself has written a four-volume work titled *An Analytical History of Persian Modern Poetry*. In his section about the *Ten Nights of Poetry* he writes that when the time came for the revolutionary poet, Sa’id Sultanpour, to read his poems, the audience was so excited and their applause was so long and loud that he had to stop four times. Sultanpour had recently been released from prison for the fourth time. He was executed by the Islamic Government in 1981, after being arrested at his wedding ceremony.

*Ten Nights of Poetry* was an unimaginable event in our collective history and in my personal history, considering the regime’s fear of intellectuals, and particularly communists, gathering together for poetry readings during that time. Unfortunately, I can’t find any documents that indicate how many people were in the audiences each
night. In his study Langaroodi recorded that the fifth night was the most exciting night. During the Ten Nights, sixty writers, poets and literary intellectuals participated. Afterwards, some of the writers, organisers and participants were arrested and interrogated by SAVAK. But, even with this fear in our minds, the level of participation was astonishing; an event of its own kind, a unique event. Those nights inspired some of the more eager students to begin organising their own reading and writing groups.

The period from 1977 to 1979 was charged with political activism. Any intellectual gathering which aimed at being a demonstration was seen as being against the Shah’s regime. I personally continued my reading of whatever was available. During the early days of the 1979 Revolution, the reading and writing groups were mainly organised by students and intellectuals who held Marxist views. We used to get together and discuss novels and other books. Mikhail Sholokhov’s *And Quiet Flows the Don* (three volumes in Russian which became ten volumes in the Farsi translation), Romain Rolland’s *Jean Christophe* (ten volumes) and *The Soul Enchanted* (seven volumes), Maxim Gorky’s *Mother*, and Herman Hesse’s *Siddharta* were on everyone’s reading list. It was clear that as members of communist reading groups, we were being introduced to the socialist realist form. The themes of these writings were mainly about the decadence of the bourgeoisie, the resistance movements and the struggles of the working class, and about social movements that enhanced the awareness and interests of the masses.

I soon found the outlook of some of these reading groups to be very narrow and limiting. Some organisers wanted to discuss only those writers who were directly Marxist or from Russia or the Soviet Union. This limitation extended to the point that some people felt uncomfortable discussing any writings not categorised as ‘radical’
or politically important. They feared ridicule and being labelled vulgar or not intellectual, that is, simple-minded and with shallow tastes in literature.

In 1980, almost a year after the Revolution, the war between Iran and Iraq started. I still participated in our gatherings and rallies but this was done more as a duty because it has been an important part of my social and political life. Emotionally, however, I was feeling disconnected and so, quietly and secretly, I began to take refuge in reading romances again. During the long nights of curfew, with a blanket over my head and a small torch in one hand, I sat reading them over and over again. Perhaps my retreat from ideological belief made me feel emotionally or even intellectually limited, but I didn’t want to admit it. By reading popular fiction, which was written for pure escapism, I could feel free of the war, politics, and other problems of the real world. There was also something inherent in the Marxist prose that I couldn’t figure out at that time; all I felt was that there was something innately dull behind all the big issues they had to discuss and write about. Although I enjoyed reading novels with Marxist views in the beginning, I gradually became less and less interested in them. Their stereotyped characterisations, where the hero was always saint-like, kept appearing in most of the novels. I still made it my intellectual and political responsibility to read communist novels, but at the same time I felt that my creative and inspirational vitality was being stifled.

Gradually small groups of like-minded people began to come together to discuss all sorts of literary fiction. In the years after the 1979 Revolution, these reading groups, which were organised by university students who were interested in literature, became more systematic and structured. We started with novels written by British and American writers translated into Farsi. We used to meet at a café next door to our university or at bookshops in the street named University Street.
Although there had been translations of many writers in Farsi before the Revolution, these were being reprinted after the Revolution to cater for a growing readership. Gradually, as we began discussing elements of the novels such as style, theme, plot, how to create or develop characters, what is the role of dialogue in character development, and my knowledge and understanding grew. In particular I started to understand the role of an accent or specific ways of speech in developing a character. I developed my embryonic critical abilities by reading and discussing these writers.

**Beginning 5**

Any revolution brings its own literary culture and the 1979 Revolution brought a new class of writers to the Iranian literary landscape. Although there were female writers who had already proved they could create works of acclaimed quality before the Revolution – writers such as Simin Daneshvar, the female novelist I have mentioned in the previous section – they were outnumbered by the male writers. This wave of female writers had participated in the Revolution and had the courage and confidence to tell their own stories about the Revolution, their participation in the social movement, and also about their personal lives and interests. As a result of all those translations, and also the accessibility to writing and reading groups in this period, the novel became the most popular genre of creative fiction. A larger readership developed as better-educated middle and working class people gained access to the books they were interested in reading.

Yavari reminds us that these women writers emerged with their own agendas and their own issues: ‘And finally it heralded the establishment of women writers as a powerful literary force with their own concerns and ideologically varied but distinct identities’ (Yavari 14).
I believe that my thirst for literature came basically from a drive to find myself, more than from a desire to become a writer or wanting to write. By taking refuge in reading novels, all I wanted was to find myself, myself and myself. In epic stories, I did well enough to get good marks at school but classic Persian Literature unfortunately remained abstract in my mind as the school system at the time didn’t encourage any interactive engagement with the classics. I remember rehearsing the long poems for exams and then forgetting them a few weeks later in the school holidays. During my teenage years, if someone had asked me who could be my role model as a woman, I probably wouldn’t have been able to name more than a few writers and poets. One female poet who influenced my generation was Foroug Farrokhzad. Farrokhzad was poet and film director. She was and still is one of Iran's most influential female poets. She was a controversial modernist poet and an iconoclast. I still have my first collection of her poems. The poem I used to recite to myself on long summer days was Tavalodi Digar, ‘another birth’. The English translation of this poem is posted in the audio video by Karim Emami on Farrokhzad’s special webpage. It started with:

My whole being is a dark chant
Which will carry you
Perpetuating you
To the dawn of eternal growths and blossoming
In this chant I sighed you sighed
In this chant
I grafted you to the tree to the water to the fire (Emami).

Society didn’t offer much in the way of role models for most young girls at that time and although some might argue that this was not an important issue, it was to me,
and I tried to look for models in my reading. It was the woman in the city who most interested me, for example Clarice’s character in Pirzad’s best-selling novel *I Turn off the Lights*, perhaps because in all those readings I was searching for someone with whom I could identify. In his book, *The Preparation of the Novel*, Roland Barthes writes: ‘The great writer isn’t someone you can compare yourself to but someone whom you can, whom you want to, identify with, to a greater or lesser extent’ (Barthes 3).

Not only was I looking for that woman as a character in the novel, I was also searching for a female writer whom I could identify with.

With the translation of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1975, magical realism became a style of writing used by many Iranian writers and some writers went on to create masterpieces in this style. One female writer, who attracted a wide readership after the 1979 Revolution, was Shahrnoush Parsipour, although she had already begun writing prior to the Revolution. When after the Revolution state censorship was lifted (at least for the first few years), the publishing and reprinting of authors flourished. Parsipour’s first publication – *Sag o Zemestan-e Boland* (*The Dog and the Long Winter*) – was published in 1976, but her second book *Tuba wa Ma’na-ye- Shab* (*Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*), which was published in 1988, brought her instant fame. Yavari has argued that this novel is one of the first magical realist novels in the Persian language. The novel covers the time span between the Constitutional Era and the 1979 Revolution through the long life of the protagonist, Tuba.

I read Parsipour’s books here in Australia in the ’90s when they were reprinted in Iran and also in the United States, by Iranian publishers. Parsipour was in Evin prison at the same time as I was and I heard she was even in the same
section. The first time I met her, however, was in Sydney in 2004 when she was visiting for an event organised by one of the Iranian cultural programs to launch her memoir of her life in prison. She also gave two lectures about the history of the modern literature of Iran. One of the highlights of her second lecture was her discussion of Hedayat’s contribution to modern Persian literature. At the time, I was running a writing workshop for a group of Iranian women so I invited her to participate in one of the sessions. In this session, we had a master class about magical realism and discussed Parsipour’s novel, *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*. The novel is set in the first decade of the twentieth century and is narrated in the third person. Tuba is the daughter of a traditional scholar of classic literature. She is named after the tree of divine light and wisdom in Persian legend. Tuba loses her father at the age of twelve and, to save her mother from a forced marriage, she offers to be the bride instead. When her prince husband marries another woman, she takes refuge in weaving carpets, and in the remaining years of her long life she confines herself within the walled space of her house. In this workshop Parsipour elaborated on her own process of becoming a writer. She explained the influence of reading Iranian writers, such as Hedayat, on her creative imagination as well as Old Persian literature. She also emphasised the importance of knowing other styles of writing such as magical realism. She encouraged the group to read not only Farsi literature but also those texts that come from other cultures and languages to grasp the concept of modern literature.

*Beginning 6*

Today, Iranian women writers are publishing numerous books in Iran and abroad, mainly in the United States of America, where the community of Iranians in exile is
large. In Iran, women are writing fiction, and nonfiction which was traditionally the domain of male writers. Milani writes, ‘it is exciting to see women moving into traditionally male literary genres. Today poetry is no longer the only literary genre open to women. For instance, women write some of the most interesting and provocative fiction in Iran (Milani 184). Milani provides the statistic of there being approximately a dozen published women writers in 1930s to the 1960’s to 370 women novelists in mid 1990’s, thirteen times as many as ten years earlier; the number of male-female novelists in 1990’s are almost equal. ‘Iranian women writers in the Diaspora are producing highly acclaimed best sellers and attracting remarkable attention from main stream Western media’ (Milani 185).

These writers enhanced and expanded my experience of reading in English. Although I was familiar with Iranian women writers who wrote in Farsi, I did not begin reading fiction or non-fiction written in English language by Iranian writers until I had acquired the feel for English in Australia.

In the introduction to Writing Iranian Americans into the American Literature Canon, Persis M. Karim and Nasrin Rahimieh write:

In the realm of fiction, the preoccupation with the past manifests itself in the occasional thematic focus on the time of the revolution, a dramatic event in Iranian history that caused great disruption in society and personal lives. Among the most prominent examples are Farnoosh Moshiri’s Against Gravity (2005), Anahita Firouz’s in the Walled Gardens (2002), and Gina Barkhordar Nahai’s Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith (1999) and Cry of the Peacock (1991). These works concern protagonists caught up in the events of the revolution and sometimes remember neglected chapters of its history (Karim et al. 7).
I will focus on *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* by Gina B. Nahai (1999); and *In the Walled Gardens* by Anahita Firouz (2002). Nahai’s novel examines the cross-cultural dimensions within the fictional inherent in her work. Firouz’s novel covers the years before the 1979 Revolution and is set in Tehran.

*Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* is a tapestry of Persian and Jewish culture, narrated by five-year-old Lili. One night Lili witnesses her mother, Roxanna, sprout wings and disappears into the sky for ever. At the heart of this lyrical story, are a group of women who are rooted in their homeland but trying to shape their lives in exile. The story describes also the life of Roxana, born as an accused child in the Jewish ghetto of Tehran, who travels to the opulent world of Iran’s aristocracy, then to the whorehouses of Turkey and finally to the recent past in Los Angeles, where Iranian exiles settled at the start of the Revolution.

Nahai’s writing recalls that of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Amy Tan, yet her prose bears its own stamp of inventiveness and vivacity, “A modern-day Scheherazade.” – Orlando Sentinel (ginabnahai.com/press-reviews/)

And as “Gina Nahai works in elegant contrasts, the spellbinding extremes of the best of the magical realist tradition, conjuring a story that glows as if lit by a subtle, internal fire.” – Portland Oregonian

(ginabnahai.com/press-reviews/)

Her style makes the reader feel as like they are flying over different suburbs of Tehran on a magic carpet. She has created the world of a child and this world has been enhanced as pages take the reader all around the different cities. In the chapter, The Exile, 1971: Nahai writes:

WHEN SHE OPENED her eyes, Roxanna was standing in the Karaj River, waist deep in water and surrounded by darkness. She was ice cold, miles
away from Teymur’s home, fighting the strong current that threatened to wash her almost-weightless body away at any moment (175).

This is a dramatic passage as Roxanna is running away from her husband’s home by crossing a border, river border. Karaj River is one of Iran’s most important rivers originating from the Alborz Mountains. It covers the Tehran province, like an internal border. This is the story of a journey, from one place to another, from Iran to Turkey to the United States, from childhood to adulthood, from girlhood to womanhood. In her narrative, Nahaie weaves the complex web of geographical, historical and personal borders in her innovative style.

In this chapter it is 1971, during the Pahlavi dynasty. In the coming passage, Roxanna finds a young driver who drives towards Tabriz and then crosses the border to Turkey:

When they started on the road again, a heavy fog made it impossible to see the road beyond the car’s headlines. The man reached into the backseat and gave Roxanna a blanket. She thought that he, too, was running away, that he felt in danger and feared being discovered, that a woman, probably his mother, had packed him that lunch of smoked fish and garlic, knowing she would never see him again (177-178).

Crossing the border, Roxanna comes to Van, one of Turkey’s oldest cities; it was the capital of various tribes. She sees the city as:

Its men were fierce, cold, hopeless—raised on memories of loss and defeat, forever by foreign schemes and stronger nations, but there were no women here. On the streets and in the shops, in doorways and in cars, Roxanna saw no women. Van had the feel of a city under siege, of women and children hiding from the enemy (Nahai 181).

Like *Fetneh Chakmeh push*, Roxanna faces the danger of the city, the dark and corrupting force of metropolis. In this town she was brought to a whorehouse by
policemen who were supposed to help her. Roxanna had often heard about
whorehouses in the border towns of Turkey. The whorehouses employed girls from
age eleven to fifty. She could smell the rotting limbs and dried cow dung, cold
semen and fresh sweat against unwashed sheets; here she faces the owner of the
brothel.

When she saw the policemen, she smiled, revealing two rows of perfectly
lined gold teeth. “Brought you something,” one of the men announced.
“She just arrived here. Doesn’t speak a word.” The woman threw Roxanna
a threatening glance, moved away from the door enough to let her squeeze
in. “Wait in the hallway,” she said. And Roxanna, who had lived all her life
in the fear of becoming, in the words of her mother, “a woman of ill
repute,” walked at last into the whorehouse (Nahai 183).

This novel, and her first novel, *Cry of the Peacock* gave me a deeper insight into the
about Jewish community. Although Yousef Abad, the area I grew up in Iran had a
Jewish community I didn’t know that there was “ghetto generation” in Tehran. In
*Cry of the Peacock*, Nahai writes:

I began with my own memories, and then asked questions. I spoke to
hundreds of Iranians, Jews and Muslims, old and young. Through years of
interviews and volumes of books, I became familiar with a history-albeit
recent-that had been buried by the last of the ‘ghetto generation’ as if to
wipe away three thousand years of suffering (Nahai 341).

*In the Walled Gardens* also start from pre-revolution time in Iran. At the centre of
the story is Mahastee, a woman who grew up living a privileged life within an
aristocrat family. She had a childhood sweet- heart, Reza, a son of one of
Mahastee’s father’s workers. Reza and Mahastee find see each other after twenty
years being apart. This visit rekindles the love once Mahastee once felt for Reza but
now this already volatile love takes an even more complex because Reza is anti-shah revolutionary who is on the SAVAK’s black list.

This novel focuses on on class division and its plot leads to revolution. The story is narrated by the two main characters, Reza and Mahastee and their voices reflect and embody two different distinct socio-economical classes. The author focuses on the character of Mahastee. Through several confrontations with workers of working class communities Mahastee, both as an adolescent and later as a mature age woman, faces the intensity of the love she felt for Reza and the deep dissatisfaction she felt through years of her married life.

In both the Nahai and Firouz narratives the domestic environment of the home is limiting and creates a central motif for the female protagonists to search for freedom by running away from home or by searching for lost love of their childhood. In both cases, the sub-textual concern is selfhood, life worth and destiny. In both novels, the female protagonists are trying to break the isolation of their home life to have access to broader lines of personal, social and political existence.

In the Foreword for an anthology Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been, the editor Persis M. Karim reminds us how Iranian women have used their isolation creatively:

Ironically, one of the most interesting by-products of Iran’s revolution has been the explosion of women’s writing both in Iran and abroad. While women in Iran may have been confined to a less public role, they have sought quieter places to express their individual identities, aspirations, and resistance. Women have developed successful and clever ways to respond to and manoeuvre around the forbidden spaces drawn by their government and society. Writing has been one of the public arenas to which they have been drawn (Karim xix-xx).

Nahai and Firouz have created female protagonists that break the stereotypical idea Iranian women. They question and examine the ‘space’ of the woman in Iran at that
time. Both authors depict women who refuse to accept their home as a place that defines them. At home, their identity had been defined by a patriarchy protagonists refused to accept. For example, in The Walled Garden, young Mahastee was thinking:

My three brothers, not married yet, went out with a lot of girls and brought many of them home. That summer of my sixteenth year, I watched them go out into the world and watched them return. Always triumphant. I couldn’t decide if it was their freedom that made them that way, or the privilege and certainties of home (Firouz 3-4).

Although Mahastee shares the same privileges at home with her brothers, the outside world does not belong to her, only to her brothers. In her adult years, she had problem at home too.

I GOT IN BEHIND the wheel and threw my heels in the back and lit a cigarette. I could have sworn a man was watching me from the other side of the street. Now I was getting paranoid. Whoever it was got into the backseat of a navy blue Peykan that swerved down Pahlavi. I rolled down the window, dragged on the cigarette, fretted with the gold lighter Houshang had given me. My husband always gives me expensive presents when he gets back from abroad. He thinks I suspect nothing as long as I enact the role he’s deemed suitable for me and let him conduct life as he pleases (Firouz 10).

Mahastee’s story ends with her life in exile as it was the case with Roxanna:

Sometimes late at night, with the oud playing, I open the window facing the square. I recite from the poem, the verses breaking in my throat: “My hometown has been lost ... With feverish effort, I have built myself a house. On the far side of the night ...” (Firouz 324).

Beginning 7

I come from a literary culture where novel writing has a short history. Storytelling in the Persian language is as old as Persian culture itself. The name of the world famous
narrator, Shaharzade, is Persian and it is still used in contemporary literature. However, novel writing in the style and form known as contemporary literature is something that came to Persian culture from Western literature. In his book *Beginnings*, about novel writing in Arabic, Said wrote:

> There is no tradition out of which the modern works developed; basically at some point writers in Arabic became aware of European novels and began to write works like them. Obviously it is not that simple; nevertheless, it is significant that the desire to create an alternative world, to modify or augment the real world through the act of writing (which is one motive underlying the novelistic tradition in the West) is inimical to the Islamic world-view (Said 82).

Said gives us the meaning of the word heresy, which translates in Arabic language as ‘to innovate’ or ‘to begin’. In Islamic doctrine, the world is seen as being a plenum; there is no space for diminishment or amplification. Therefore, in prose such as *The Arabian Nights*, there is no variation on the world, no completion of it. The prose is mainly ornamental. My reading of Farsi indicates that the progress of novels in contemporary Farsi literature has followed more or less the same pattern. The Farsi word for heresy also means ‘to innovate’ or ‘to begin’. Iranian literature has been influenced by Arabic language and culture since Islam became Iran’s dominant religion, and our structure of storytelling and novel writing followed the same pattern as Arabic literature.

About the literary success of Iranian women writers, Karim writes:

> Iran’s long and rich literary tradition has historically been the domain of men. Women writers who left Iran after 1979, however, found themselves in the new literary landscapes of Europe and the United States. They perhaps felt more liberty in expressing themselves, even while some may have lost their Persian-speaking readers by choosing to write in English or another European language. For the generation of young Iranian women who immigrated to the West or received their university education abroad,
writing held entirely different possibilities than it had previously in Iran. Similarly, for young women born outside Iran, writing was no longer bound up in the predominantly male literary traditions of Iran. The urgency of their writerly mission grew out of the self-imposed silence of the Iranian exile experience and the struggle to acquire a voice and identity as Iranian Americans. For many of these writers, the English language became the best possible or only means of expressing themselves and their hyphenated identities (Karim xxi).

She also responds to why a few Iranian men in America have been published:

Perhaps in conforming to the expectations of their parents and the exigencies of immigrant life, they have been too busy becoming engineers and doctors to write poetry and memoirs. But it is more likely that the dramatic increase in the number of women writing and publishing outside of Iran is an outgrowth of Iranian women’s specific experience; they have felt compelled to respond to the view of Iranian women purveyed by both the Islamic Republic and the Western media (Karim xx).

Fictional narrative is one alternative to theological narrative, relinquishing divine reference in order to create something new within the boundaries of human life. Given Iran’s recent government, a theological Islamic government which tries to control every aspect of the creative activities of its citizens, anyone who writes a novel is considered to be creating an alternative world, questioning the view of the world as a plenum, giving herself permission to create characters and societies that will perform according to the will and imagination of the novelist.

From all those romance and novel readings, both in Farsi as well as in English, one thing that remains with me is a kind of obsession about the meaning of the place of women in the city, and the city itself – the shape of houses, old and new, the outside frames of buildings, and the layout of public buildings, how they
influence domestic lives. All have become engraved inside me and have emerged in the shape of the novel I have written here.

Stories are important for self-understanding. When we share them with others in a different language, how we produce them is important, and so is how our listener or reader validates them. This psychology of the story is the horizon of the story, the place which we might not be able to locate physically but one that we can imagine, one that is somewhere between absence and presence, somewhere we usually contemplate to reach our understanding of self; our self is somewhere between absence and presence.

As adult human beings, to have a coherent connection with others, we try to define our childhood and tell stories from memories, that mysterious reservoir of our mind. Part of the process of becoming a writer occurred for me during my time in prison, a time of being blindfolded, being forced into the position of remembering. But I did not write fiction in Iran. It took the second imprisonment of exile, the second blindfold of language, for me to become a writer of fiction.

Further, in terms of place the search for my sense of self has always been defined in relation to the cities I have come from, lived in, and had stories and memories about; those times in Tehran, Tabriz, Karachi and Sydney are part of the journey I started with *Fetneh Chakmeh Push*, a woman wondering in the city, and later made with Sorraya, Ayda and Hadji Khanoon, the three main female characters in my own novel. As a writer, I have tried to translate the memories which occur in Farsi into English prose, to reach a new home or homecoming through my novel. The *blindfold* of the English language and the time gap or division created in my personal and cultural calendars forced me to create a third, literary place as a bilingual writer.
Notes

1 Yalda, also known as Shab-e Cheleh in Persian, is celebrated on the eve of the first day of winter (December 21) on the Iranian calendar, which falls on the winter solstice and forty days before the next major Iranian festival ‘Jashn-e Sadeh (fire festival)’.

Works Cited

Introduction


Chapter One: The Idea of Home: To Go Home or to be on the Way Home


Chapter Two: Memories: Remembering and Forgetting


**Chapter Three: Public and Private**


**Chapter Four: Fragmentation: Beginning again**


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The Merchant’s House: A Novel
**Prologue**

Yousef Abad was a city of a thousand streams. On both sides of the streets open canals of water flowed into underground reservoirs, serving the city like a seductive butler pouring fresh drinks. These reservoirs were the heart of Yousef Abad. In the old days, the only systems of water supply were the channels and the underground storage tank. Every Wednesday night the local council announced that water would be released into those channels and it would flow down to fill the reservoirs that were under every house. In times of drought, which happened occasionally in those long ago days, these canals brought up water from underground streams in the depths of the earth, serving the residents of Yousef Abad like a solicitous cupbearer.

Winding around the base of the wide skirt of Mount Toechal, the streets of Yousef Abad were laid out on steep slopes connected to each other by stairs. There were mulberry orchards all around the city. In the early summer, the sweet smell of white mulberries attracted pregnant women, who would come to feast on them till they almost fainted. Children climbed the high walls of the mulberry orchards to fill up their empty matchboxes with silkworms from the mulberry trees.

The houses of Yousef Abad had a distinctive design too. On the south of the streets were flat-roofed, two or three storied houses. On the north side were street courtyards and two or three storey dwellings. The streets of Yousef Abad had been numbered but after the revolution and the eight year war with Iraq, they were baptised with the names of Islamic martyrs.

The gardeners fetched water for the mulberry orchards by pumping it up from backyard wells. The grandmothers used to say that water sprites lived in those pumps, and that underground sprites would appear on the edge of the wells and play
with the pump handles. Sprites would die if separated from water and the first warning of an oncoming drought was when they disappeared underground. Anyone who lived in Yousef Abad learned to recognise the penetrating red eyes of the water sprites. They listened for their whispering dreams of water, plentiful water, the water that the sprites carried in their toothless mouths.

A pyramid of sparrows in tall old trees used to sing songs that were so loud they deafened the birds themselves. No matter where you started out from the four corners of Yousef Abad, you would end up facing labyrinths of stairs, led from one street to another, from streets to parks and waterways, then from waterways to the foothills of the mountain and back into the city centre again. Then you see Shafagh Park with its life-sized bronze statues and leafy avenues, and a library that attracted all the children of Yousef Abad. From there you could go on to Saei Park, which in winter was often covered in heavy snow and where lovers would go to avoid being seen by the curious residents who might be looking out of their windows. And in the hot, dry summers there were fountains that attracted everybody. On windy days, sprays of water would mist the faces of passer-by with their sweet smelling coolness. When a woman passed by, although she was covered with her black chador, each time the wind revealed her face and her ageing body like an unexpected gift you could imagine what she had been like when she was young, and see that even in youth she had not been simply a beautiful woman, but a charismatic and magnetic one; yes, a fatally graceful woman. There wasn’t any shortage of women like that in the four corners of Yousef Abad, making their way to the Imam Amir Al Moamenin mosque to pray and make a wish, and pay 'nazr' - oblation.

A hypnotic woman has great potential for catastrophe - a great catastrophe that has the capacity to create havoc. Like a gypsy quilt maker’s eyes she could turn
something within you into crystal. It is not a part of your body or your memory, it is
crystallised imagination. An imagination like that makes space for creation and it
allows disastrous, deadly love; like the one that happened in another corner of
Yousef Abad, hidden in the hearts of two young lovers whose religion did not allow
them to have it. In the middle of the night, the big gate of Yousef Abad’s Kanise
banged shut, or to use the name of the other religion, the gate of the Sukat Shalam
Synagogue. The Muslim girl ran away with the Jewish boy and even Mr. Avraham
Yusian, the community leader, couldn’t stop them. The only thing both families
could do was to stop their story from appearing in public notices, which always
happened when a young person disappeared. Nobody remembered exactly when they
fell in love. They guessed it might have been in the year of 5726, which was by the
Jewish calendar or maybe 1965 by the Western calendars; but in reality it was 1332
by the Muslim calendar.

Imagine you are a traveller. If you survive these women and their graces, as a
traveller and a stranger who has just moved to this area and knows nothing about its
stairways, you will find yourself sitting beside the children who play in the streets of
Yousef Abad endlessly, day and night. They will tell you stories they have heard
from grandmothers on long snowy winter nights, stories about water sprites, stories
that come to the surface in times of drought. Or you can speak to those adults who
take their politics seriously. They will tell you that, once upon a time a legendry hero
called Khosro Golesorkhi lived in Yousef Abad. Then they will point out a young
man; you will see that young man running from the secret police and hiding behind a
big stone; you will see many young protesters going deep inside the heart of Yousef
Abad. Some will survive while others will go shoulder to shoulder with death and
their shiny black eyes will turn white and dead. That’s when you see the spark of
grace and desire; to remember the dignity of those people. Images that are passed orally from generation to generation by covered women who mourn for their children. They explain to travellers how they take the bodies of the young ones to their families and how their mothers bury them at night, quietly praying for them and wishing that their dreams may come true. They tell their grandchildren that the only ones who survive forever are the water sprites.

One day in the Goldis Cinema, the only cinema in Yousef Abad, they were showing *Last Tango in Paris*, uncut. All the teenagers were queuing up to see the show even if they were not eighteen yet. The theatre became so crowded with young people that no one noticed those lovers who took the back seats and whispered into each other’s ears. It was the day after the chief of police was killed and most of the university students had gone underground. The reservoirs and those students were the city’s lifeblood. Now, thinking about those days, it seems like a moving picture, as if it happened thousands of years ago; old stories like the city itself. As a stranger, if you ask that old man as he prepares a pipe of opium, he will remember what happened then. But you don’t remember because you always were a passer-by, with no attachment to the city.

This is the landscape of Yousef Abad: a busy, lively neighbourhood with dwellers of every kind and faith, from all parts of the country, Azeri, Kurdish, and Fars. If you don’t believe me ask the fortune-teller. Life always was a trick, the woman tells you if you take your time and spend a moment with her. Many women are fortune tellers now and they like to chat, especially this old one, wrapped in a black chador, smoking like a chimney and smelling of mint. She was the one who predicted that life would be like this. She is not demanding or asking for credit for her abilities. She just wants to be left alone to live her life and tell her stories. She
knows all the stories have a bit of love in it, and plenty of cruelty. She was the one who predicted that one day a devastating war would destroy Yousef Abad.

Listen, you can hear a drunken man coming out of Mr Khachaturian’s bottle shop, bent over, moving slowly, trembling at the side of the street and still fumbling for the bottle in his pocket, he realises that he has left it in the bottle shop. Nowadays there is no bottle shop there. You look at the lives of these people and learn their habits. You can recognise the old man who was always sleepless, who walked around the borders of the district every night looking for a drink.

Life changed in Yousef Abad. There wasn’t any sign of two or three storey buildings, the terraces of which were connected to each other by small brick walls. Nobody made their tomato paste or lime juices at home anymore. Water came from taps, which were installed inside people’s houses. There were shops selling electrical goods, for cash or lay-by. And no sooner had people got used to this way of life then Yousef Abad changed again, with revolution and war. The music that was part of daily life was banned and the people of Yousef Abad listened to their music secretly. Windows, which were framed with beautiful curtains and would be opened in the summer heat, were closed and covered with dark fabrics. The life of Yousef Abad became a fugitive one. Soon the sound of shooting took over the area, filling the afternoon silence, and the young women and men, the city’s lifeblood, ran away again, disappearing underground.

Something was running through the people, like the water sprites who made strange noises on nights of drought when the underground water sank in the reservoir bed. They came to the surface in the wells outside the city and waited for the council to announce that water would be released to flow through the streets again.
Sorraya woke up in the middle of a dream. In the dream she had a piece of long black fabric in her hand. She wanted to stitch it with white thread but each time she looked at the needle, the thread was black.

War changed everything. People covered their windows with thick curtains and black cardboard paper every night before dark, before the curfew started. Sorraya’s family moved to the middle room in the house, where they ate and slept. Winter started and there wasn’t enough fuel to warm the house. Everything was rationed, electricity, oil, sugar, salt; every single item would need hours of queuing up for in the cold streets.

Yagoob had returned from his business trip yesterday and his suitcase was open, his presents scattered all over their bedroom.

He had to go out again, to the Tehran’s train station. One of their neighbour’s sons had been killed on the battlefield in the south of Iran. When his family asked about his body, the army authorities told them that the bodies of the martyrs would be returned to Tehran by train. They had to go and see if their son’s body was one of them. The father couldn’t bring himself to go by himself and asked Hadji Agha, Yagoob’s father and his sons to go with him. Hadji Agha was very ill and Younes, Yagoob’s brother had to take care of him. So Sorraya insisted on going with Yagoob. She fixed her scarf in front of her bedroom mirror and put her portable radio in her Islamic dress’ pocket; she took her key from the swan crystal bowl and followed him out.
Tehran’s train station was in the south of the city. When their taxi stopped, Sorraya accidentally stepped on melted snow, which had made a creek on one side of the street. Regardless of the chilly weather, a big crowd had already been gathered there since early morning. There were segregated areas for men and women - the women had already started mourning. It wasn’t clear who they mourned. They were crying and keening, calling out the names of missing relatives then repeating the same slogans coming from the men’s section. Sorraya stood in the middle crowd, watching the men’s section. The chill air was penetrating inside her body; Sorraya crumpled her body into her wool coat. The men were quiet except for the revolutionary guards who were trying to rouse the people into a proper revolutionary spirit for the lost martyrs but the gloom at the station was overwhelming. Each time a train stopped the crowd became dead silent. Worried eyes watched as the doors opened and closed but there was no sign of their loved ones. Finally, the death train arrived.

The crowd ran towards it. The revolutionary guards tried to stop them but the human storm pushed them out of the way. The wailing women in black chadors tried to reach the train, to overtake the men in front of them, some with babies in their arms and others with toddlers clinging to their garments. Some stepped into the creeks of melted snow and splashed muddy water in the air. Sorraya was running too, to make sure that she didn’t lose sight of Yagoob in the crowd. The train was covered in black fabric. In some windows there were green flags with verses from the Quran in Arabic and war slogans in Farsi. It took great effort for the guards to control the crowd and get on with their job. An endless stream of bodies was taken into the hall; then the doors were shut. The crying women started screaming, beating their chests, men were pushing the others to get closer to the hall’s door, and children were
running around, crying, some missing the hands of their parents. A mother sat down to tie the shoe laces of her little girl; an elderly woman took a piece of bread and pushed it into the mouth of a crying girl, a man walked around spraying rose water on the crowd. Finally the names were called one by one so the relatives could enter and identify the bodies.

Sorraya watched her husband and their neighbour enter the door. After ten minutes a collective moaning emerged from the hall. A family, which had lost three young ones, was crying. A group of men came out, dragging an old man with them as the women of the family followed them beating their chests. The revolutionary guards prevented agitated groups from congregating by firing their guns towards the sky outside the station. At the same time a low chanting started, *Allah-o-Akbar, Khomeini Rahabar* ‘God is great, Khomeini is the leader.’

It took more than two hours for Yagoob and their neighbour to return. They looked both relieved that there had been no body for them to identify yet unsettled about the lack of information about the son. The three of them were absolutely silent in the taxi from the train station to Yousef Abad. Each of them looked out as they passed long lines of people who had chained tins and plastic buckets to a long rope to collect petrol or fuel; at other corners were queues for bread and sugar. This had become a routine sight in the city.

Gradually Sorraya became aware of muffled sounds - Yagoob was rubbing his neighbour’s shoulder and the old man was crying. When they arrived home, they saw a funeral ceremony in progress. A few streets up an eighteen-year-old volunteer had been brought home to be buried as Yousef Abad’s first war Martyr from Khoramshar. It was sunset when the car reached Yousef Abad; the giant sun was
hiding behind the back of the Toechal Mountain range as if it was a giant turtle hiding her head in her old shell.

At home, Yagoob went upstairs to visit his father and report to him what had happened at the station. Sorraya closed the curtains where black cardboard covered the windows then went into the bedroom to shut out the last rays of light coming in from the street. Outside her window, the children of Yousef Abad were playing behind sandbagged trenches and from her ground floor bedroom window she could see the endless revolutionary posters flapping on the flat landscape. In the poster a woman in a chador lifted up her child as if offering it to the heavens. Blood trailed from her back and poured into the road, leading to a giant red tulip. Above the tulip, the frowned face of the saviour, the great leader, framed by white expanses of fabric or paper. These posters bisected the whole of Yousef Abad. When Sorraya closed the window, the posters and the children of Yousef Abad were wrapped behind the black cardboard, as if packed like a gift.

Then she started trying on her presents that Yagoob had brought back for her; a long blue dress, low cut on her shoulders; sandals with cotton platform, perfumes. While trying them on she was tearing the gift wrapping and dancing around, looking at herself in the mirror. In the candlelight she looked like a dervish, circling around, and the flames from the candles were rising and sitting on the walls, and tearing apart the darkness of the room. Then she noticed another gift wrapped in paper. She looked at the colour; it was light red with heart shaped designs on it. She wondered why Yagoob hadn’t given it to her and then she thought that perhaps this one was supposed to be a surprise for her. She carefully removed the sticky tape from a corner where she thought it wouldn’t damage the wrapping if she looked at what it
was. The softness of the material inside was exiting. There, in her hand, was satin, pink lingerie with black lace around it. She put it on and stood in front of the mirror. The room was dark and she wanted to see the whole of her body, so she went to the living room where she was allowed to have a light on and brought down her mirror, which had come with her from her wedding ceremony. The fit of the lingerie wasn’t right and she looked at the size; it was two sizes too big.

She turned the light off and ran to her bedroom and sat on the corner of the bed, feeling like her heart was growing and pressing inside her chest. She put out the candles and remembered looking through a half open door when she was a child - she hadn’t been able to see the woman’s face, only her legs, wide open. She could see her black lace and the shimmer of her pink satin, and she couldn’t see her father’s face, only his hands, moving all over those long legs. She could hear small voices, mixing into each other. She ran to the hallway, pursued by the smell of fresh paint. Finally she reached the backyard. There, she pushed her paintings and paint brushes into the big shallow pool and then opened the fountains - four fountains jetted out. Then she ran inside her father’s studio and jumped into her nanny’s arms, and cried.

The house was in darkness and silence. Then she heard her apartment’s door open. Quickly she took the lingerie off, carefully wrapped it again and put it back in the suitcase. For a moment she couldn’t tell where Yagoob was and then a pair of hands reached and held her tight. Her tiny waist was measured by her husband’s big hands. To find each other in the dark they murmured a swarm of words, repeating, not searching for any meaning; they rolled into each other’s bodies. When they returned from the deep breath of their climax to the surface of calm, they fell asleep.

Their sleep didn’t last long. Yagoob’s mind was heavy with the dark images of the dead bodies he had seen.
‘Death is so close, walking in our streets. You don’t know what I saw today; smashed faces, burnt heads. Someone was so deeply burnt that they collected his ashes and put it into a box. ‘Bechareh mardom,’ ‘Poor people;’ these poor relatives had to open each of them and check them to find their loved ones.’

Sorraya was in tears. The darkness of the room and the quiet air in the house was suffocating.

‘Let’s go out. C’mon, get dressed, we’ll go out,’ he said, and in the dark searched for his clothes.

‘Now? There’s a curfew. Where would we go?’ Sorraya asked.

When they drove out of their street they were stopped by a revolutionary guard, a young boy with a gun pointed at Yagoob. The guard checked the car and then started asking questions about their relationship.

‘She is my wife,’ Yagoob said. He was trying to remain calm. The whole city was watched by young men who identified themselves as the soldiers of Hezbollah. These were people who were out of work or had left high school to become full-time revolutionaries. Most of the time they had just a few weeks of training on how to use the gun in their local mosque and after they had passed their oral tests on the shareih law they were eligible to patrol a location in the city. Yagoob was trying hard not to say anything to anger him.

‘Where is your document?’ the young revolutionary asked.

‘What document brother?’ Yagoob addressed him as brother. All revolutionary guards were addressed as brother or sister instead of Khanoom or Agha. According to the new rule, unacquainted men and women couldn’t socialise together without the presence of a chaperone. Not only did the soldiers of Hezbollah check every car and everybody to ensure the safety of the country but they also had
to perform the religious duty of checking people’s personal relationships. Yagoob wasn’t used to this kind of scrutiny. Since the revolution and then the war, each time he was in the country he quickly had to learn the new rules and regulations. Now Sorraya, watching her husband and seeing his temper rise, stepped in to resolve the issue.

‘Brother, I was in a hurry because my mother is very sick and I forgot to take my marriage certificate with me. We live just on the corner; if you follow us I can bring it and show it to you.’ Now it was Yagoob who was watching his wife with wide open eyes. The revolutionary guard was convinced and let them go. They were both laughing now.

The streets were empty except for security guards and the Hezbollah patrols. They cruised about then came to a stop in an area unknown to Sorraya.

‘Where are we?’ she was looking around the dark streets.

Someone shouted, ‘Turn the lights off. Turn those damn lights off.’ Yagoob turned the lights off. They sat for a while in silence then someone knocked on the window. Sorraya nearly jumped out of her skin and Yagoob barked out a short, nervous laugh.

‘Don’t worry. I know him.’ He opened the window. The unknown face shook hands with Yagoob, handed him something, collected some money and disappeared into the dark as if evaporating into thin air. Again they drove in the dark - it felt as if they were in a time tunnel. They seemed to be the only residents in a ghost city. Yagoob stopped at the edge of a highway and took out a bottle, had a swig and then offered it to his wife. Sorraya still couldn’t believe that her husband had bought booze so easily, under the noses of these representatives of good morality. But drinking wasn’t something Sorraya was interested in.
‘No, you have it. I don’t like the smell of it.’

‘Come on, try it. You are Bagher Khan’s daughter; show me that you have his blood.’ With a big smile on her face, Sorraya took a sip. Her wedding ring clinked against the bottle. Yagoob took the bottle.

‘That’s my lady. Now, we will both go to hell together. This is the only thing left for us.’ He took another gulp. ‘See, life is becoming more uncertain every day. Who knows, maybe right now someone will explode a bomb and then poof, we're gone. Chance is the breath of life, my darling. This is our chance. We are alive by chance. This is our real asset.’ Once more he offered Sorraya a drink but when she declined he downed the whole bottle. ‘And now, to make sure we are both going to hell together, I am going to kiss you here.’ As he was giggling, he leant toward Sorraya and kissed her.

There was another knock on the window, this time they were both scared. He opened the window; the midnight chill rushed inside and pinched their skin. There was another young man, asking for their documents. Just then someone called the young man on his Basiji cordless phone, asking him to move to another station and he waved them on. Yagoob and Sorraya drove off immediately.

A few days later Yagoob had to go on another business trip.

‘I am always alone,’ Sorraya said.

‘Don’t worry. I have told Younes to take you out sometimes,’ Yagoob said while packing his shaving bag. ‘Besides, you should try to be close to my mother too. Go out with her, she would love to show you to her close friends.’

Sorraya wanted to argue with him but a knock on the door stopped her and Yagoob quickly kissed her goodbye. She turned on her portable radio. There was news. She looked at herself in the living room mirror, fixed her hair then turned the
music on. The voice of a female singer followed her to the kitchen, crying for her lost love. She heard her husband talking to his brother, giving him instructions on how to run the business in his absence. She submerged two vodka glasses in a tub of water then pressed the Palmolive liquid soap on top of them and put her hands in the water. She felt the warmth of the water on her skin and the smell of alcohol disappeared into the water. When she returned to the dark room again, there was another knock on the door. It was her brother-in-law Younes.
October 1978

Bagher Khan’s house was built at the turn of the twentieth century. On the day that Yagoob had come to ask for Sorraya’s hand, he had been told that it had originally been built on the orders of a Qajar travelling from Tabriz to Baku. The prince commissioned the building as an art school but it had never been used as one until it came to Bagher Khan’s family. It had always been owned by Bagher Khan’s family since Pahlavi’s regime, the only thing left from his inherited fortune. Two separate buildings faced each other with a big garden in the middle and a long shallow pool, as was common in old Iranian houses. There were four fountains in the middle of the pool, which was flanked by low flowerbeds blooming with red and pink petunia. A wide path surrounded the bushes, which had been set up with scores of seats for the wedding guests. Along the boundary walls apricot and cherry trees were planted on one side, and tall poplars with their yellow and red leaves covered the flowerbed soil with their fermenting fall.

Yagoob was looking at Sorraya through the tall, glass window from his wedding room. She was moving around the big pool in the courtyard and greeting her guests in her long, white wedding dress; Ayda, her younger sister, followed in a bright yellow dress carrying Sorraya’s train. They looked like giant butterflies flitting among the petunia bushes in the garden. Yagoob was supposed to be outside with them for a photo shoot with close family members before the other guests arrived but he had quickly sneaked back into the *Otagh-e-aqd*, the wedding room, where his younger brother, Younes, was pouring the whiskey.
‘Did you bring something to get rid of the smell?’ asked Yagoob, while his brother put in two heart-shaped ice cubes. Younes pointed to a plate without losing his focus on making the drinks. Munching quickly and nervously on the cucumber and yogurt dip, Yagoob said, ‘That’s good. The last thing I need right now is a religious lecture from mum.’

The autumn leaves of the poplar trees outside the windows made the Otaghe-aqīd seem dark, even in the afternoon light. Yagoob knew Bagher Khan, his father-in-law, was drinking with his own guests in one of the many rooms at the other end of the long corridor, but he preferred not to join them yet. Although he knew that Sorraya’s family seemed to be more liberal than his own, he had his reservations as a groom.

Younes handed his brother a drink then drank his in one go.

‘So, this is your new family,’ Younes said without taking his eyes away from the bride. Soon Yagoob would leave Tabriz for Turkey to continue their business interests. Yagoob wanted to leave instructions with his younger brother about what should be done in his absence. Younes could see that Yagoob was already drunk. Both brothers sat for a while, drinking in silence, looking at their surroundings, feeling like a pair of strangers in this house. ‘Such an old house!’ Younes commented, feeling a bit dizzy. He wasn’t a frequent drinker but today he wanted to please his brother.

‘Yes, it is. Bagher Khan is broke; he has lost all his fortune. The only thing left from his family’s glorious time is their name, and also his reputation as an artist.’ He continued, ‘Apparently the cost of repair and maintenance was high and Bagher Khan couldn’t afford to use both sides of the house for living. So he locked one side and lived in the other, which was his studio and living area.’
The side that had been arranged for the wedding was sometimes leased by different artists but no one lasted long. Being a famous artist himself, Bagher Khan was also bad-tempered with strangers, especially since his wife had passed away from an unknown illness and he had been left alone to raise his two beloved daughters. He came from an old and respectable Azerbaijani family, which had migrated from Baku to Tabriz in the first years of the twentieth century, but he lost all his fortune and gained a notorious name for himself because of his close ties with Azerbaijani intellectuals who supported a separate state of Azerbaijan.

Sorraya and Ayda had prepared the wedding room because they didn’t have a close female relative, except their old nanny, to help them. On the floor, as was traditional, their mother’s hand-sewn aqd cloth was spread out, and the customary mirror and candle holders, which had been purchased at the old bazaar. Traditionally they were supposed to be passed from generation to generation, but Sorraya’s mother’s belongings had all been sold.

‘How did you meet her?’ asked Younes, preparing another drink for Yagoob.

‘One day I was here in Tabriz for business. A friend of mine was coming here with his father to visit Bagher Khan and he said we could go together and have a drink. I came and I saw Sorraya here. We talked and I liked her so I came back a few more times and then I proposed, she accepted and here we are.’

‘So, you lied to mum by saying that they were religious and Bazaari?’

‘I always tell her what she wants to hear. She didn’t even know that Sorraya’s mother died when Sorraya was a child. She would never accept a daughter-in-law who grew up without the good supervision of a mother. She didn’t know Bagher Khan was a painter and not a merchant. She accepted because she knew their name but she didn’t know them closely.’
‘And Agha joon?’ This was what they called their father, Hadji Agha.

‘If I continue to grow our business, as I did before, Agha joon will turn a blind-eye to anything I do. He is worried about the family business and knows it is in safe hands. He also liked Sorraya’s family name: it is well-known. The only thing I hope is that Bagher Khan won’t do anything silly to spoil it.’

Younes listened to his brother, measuring his voice to find out if he was happy or not and asked, ‘Why? What do you mean? It is not about drinking, is it? I mean, obviously Bagher Khan is a drinker but at least he knows he should hide it from sight.’

Younes was looking around the room. The decorations and the setting of the Sofre-e-agd seemed too detailed, feminine even for someone like him who wasn’t a stranger in the realm of female gatherings, having been born prematurely and having spent most of his school time at home with his female relatives. Now he scrutinised all the objects with his trained eyes. Gold and silver leaf was sprayed on the walnut and almond shells, small bunches of sugar-coated almonds were wrapped in shimmering colourful gauze to be taken home by the guests. To the eyes of men this room was only for sitting on the groom seat, and then signing the legal papers. But for the women it meant months of preparation: buying decorative ingredients, colourful laces and painting nuts to decorate the setting in front of the bride and groom.

‘I see that you are not happy. It doesn’t seem to me that you are ready for this marriage. You can cancel it. I mean, you can go and never continue with it. This is just a simple ceremony; the major event is in Tehran. Here nobody knows us that much, except Mr Cohan, and I am sure he will support us too. All you need is to find an excuse and call this wedding off. I can find an excuse for you.’ Younes said all
this in his mind. He kept listening to his brother but didn’t say a word to him. He never crossed boundaries with Yagoob.

On one side of the aqd cloth was a basket of sugar-coated almonds, walnuts and a bowl of honey. There were homemade sweets and also a Nan-o-sabzi tray, a platter of feta cheese, herbs and flat bread decorated with the words 'congratulations' and the names of the bride and groom on it. His head already felt numb and now he just stared at the design. Yagoob could hear people calling him from the yard, his mother’s voice raised above the others each time she called out for him. Yagoob gazed at his younger brother. He tried to guess what Younes was thinking.

There were seven years between them and he knew his family wasn’t yet looking for a suitable wife for Younes, but still raising his glass to salute his younger brother, he said ‘To your wedding. Soon it will be your turn.’ Both brothers drank to that. ‘As soon as I am out of mum’s reach it will be your turn. Then she will start making stuff for our little sister while she is growing up.’ Yagoob stopped for a while, checked himself out in the mirror and continued: ‘My dear brother, I know that you felt disappointed that I didn’t include you in the courting ceremony. You know that I tell you everything but this time is different. The issue is I had to do it myself. If I had let mum choose for me you know what kind of family she would have chosen. At least with this family I know her father drinks too and he is not religious.’ Their mother always followed the families who were religious and had at least a number of mullahs. The girl had to be pious according to her standards and all the women in the family had to go to her Sofreh parties. Yagoob and Younes called these gatherings parties because the women who came to their mother’s religious gatherings were all dressed up instead of being piously veiled and restrained. They
found this hypocritical and made fun of them. ‘He doesn’t have money, that’s true, but I am hoping that will work in my favour. At least she'll appreciate me more.’

Younes didn’t argue with Yagoob and he went out to join his family. Yagoob sat in front of the mirror; his handsome face framed in the mirror. He finished his whiskey and left the room feeling drunk.

There were a few more hours before the evening party; Bagher Khan and his friends were singing *Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan*. Their singing made Yagoob worried. I hope these dear friends don’t spoil my wedding plans tonight, he thought to himself. He was worried that they might get drunk and become louder and louder.

Ghoncheh, Yagoob and Younes’ younger sister, felt like Alice in Wonderland in this house. She had a great time exploring this strange rambling building with its many doors and corners. In one long corridor, she stood in front of a tall antique mirror and saw a beautiful girl. She became so engrossed with her own image that she forgot where she was. Suddenly she heard noises coming from a room behind her. Slowly she walked towards the door of the room, which was half open. There was a strange smell and hushed voices, talking, giggling. Before she could help it she had sheepishly pushed the door. Smoke and the smell of alcohol emerged from the room like a jinee from a bottle. The voices without faces gave her little fingers courage, although her heart was already jumping out of her white dress, and she pushed the door a bit wider. Through the haze of cigarette smoke she saw the blurred faces and bodies of men and women. Some of the women were drinking and smoking, some sitting on chairs, some leaning on a big table as if half seated with open legs. She didn’t recognise any of the faces except Bagher Khan. He saw her and
before she could run away, he reached for her, almost pulled her with his big hands, kissed her face and shook her.

'Otoor, gizim, ottor.' His Azeri accent was too strong for Ghoncheh’s understanding but when he pulled out a chair for her, she sat on it while staring at him with her big hazelnut eyes.

Ghoncheh had never seen a man who looked like Bagher Khan. Since she had arrived with her family in Tabriz and had been introduced to Bagher Khan by her brother, the man had become a puzzle for Ghoncheh. With a pair of big green eyes and long gray hair that was pulled into a ponytail at the back, this giant looked more like a lion than a real man in the eyes of Ghoncheh. The rest of the guests were no less strange. Women came to her saying cute things in Azeri, which again she half understood. Some men tried harder and spoke in Farsi with a strong Azeri accent, which made her giggle. She made fun of her parents’ strong accent whenever they talked to her in Farsi at home, but here she intuitively understood that would be rude, so she just giggled. The guests thought she liked it and came up with more jokes and cute sayings.

She wanted to go but at the same time she wanted to see more. The only thing she couldn’t stand was the smell, their smell. She knew the smell of cigarettes but didn’t know the smell of alcohol. She knew that she would be in trouble if Hadji Khanoom knew where she was and what she was seeing. Fortunately, just then Bagher Khan came and rescued her. He sang an Azerbaijani song, took hold of her and danced with her, kissing her forehead and saying he was proud to see such an Azerbaijani beauty. Then she ran away to her mother as if she had escaped from an unknown universe to return home. But even outside, she kept watching the window where Bagher Khan and his guests were still drinking, smoking and talking. The fear
was gone now and she was tempted to go back again. But then she saw Sorraya and went to her.

Hadji Khanoom had told her not to address Sorraya by just her name. Ghoncheh refused to address her sister-in-law in a formal way so Sorraya suggested calling her Sorraya joon, dear Sorraya. Sorraya asked Ghoncheh to hold her flower bouquet. Feeling important, Ghoncheh walked about showing off her sister-in-law to the guests’ friends. The sound of singing Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan was coming from where she had been before.

Although there would be a big wedding ceremony in Tehran after the next two holy months of mourning, Moharam and Safar, Hadji Khanoom saw it as an insult that for the Tabriz ceremony only her immediate family had been invited. From Hadji Khanoom and Hadji Agha’s side, only Mr Cohen, Yagoob’s father’s best business friend was there. He wasn’t family but he happened to be in Azerbaijan on a business trip and it was easy for him to come to the Tabriz part of the wedding. Even though it had been her son’s request to keep the first ceremony small, Hadji Khanoom blamed the bride’s family for what she considered to be an unforgivable insult.

There weren’t segregated male and female sections as was common at their ceremonies back home in Tehran. The live band struck up the beloved Azerbaijani opera, Arshin Mal Allan, the story of a rich merchant who preferred to wander about and find his love rather than accept a marriage arranged by his family. Guests were moving around, dancing. Hadji Khanoom, particularly, was shocked to see how things had changed in her homeland since she had married and left Tabriz. Women wore low cut dresses, short skirts, heavy makeup and strange hairdos that seemed to be straight out of Tehrani television rather than Azerbaijan. The men were not any
less surprising, with long hair, colourful shirts, cigarettes, talking and dancing in the
garden. Of course, she never saw them drinking because Bagher Khan had arranged
the drink section out of sight of his son-in-law's family.

Now as the wedding got busier and more guests arrived, some people, mainly
men but a few women too, disappeared inside one of the many rooms in the long
corridor. The photographer was busy, constantly moving around and asking people to
line up in groups and get photographed. As Sorraya and Yagoob mingled with the
guests, they were showered with ceremonial wedding coins and sugared almond
slivers. The kids scrambled about, collecting them from the floor while little girls in
lace dresses with white blossoms in their hair danced about. Ghoncheh, was in a
white dress too. Her round face and big hazelnut eyes were even more striking with
her hair gathered at the back and tied with white Persian roses. Moosa, Mr Cohen’s
only son, followed her about. He was a year older than Ghoncheh but looked much
younger. Aware of her importance on this special day, Ghoncheh bossed Moosa
around. Meekly he tagged along, carrying two empty baskets for her to collect
shabash, the petty cash that the guests gave for the musicians. Before dinner,
Ghoncheh and Moosa went inside the wedding house to count it.

In the big courtyard Sorraya moved around, paying her respects to people she
had known since her childhood, thanking them for their blessings and presents. She
was also trying her best to ignore her father’s repeated disappearances to the drink
room, aware that he was as nervous as herself around her new family.

While taking photos, he looked at his daughter and compared Sorraya to her
mother; 'San manim mahboobama okhshosan.' ‘You look like my mahbooba;' He
referred to his wife as his beloved.
Younes danced with Sorraya and then Ayda as Yagoob sat with his parents. He could see his mother wasn’t happy.

‘Don’t worry mum, our wedding in Tehran will be the way you want it.’ Younes volunteered to help Ayda with gathering up the presents. She wanted to put the diamond rings, necklaces, and chokers, bracelets, gold and precious stones wrapped in their decorative boxes somewhere safe. When she opened the door to the living quarters in the other building, the smell of old paint hit Younes. For him all the houses in Tabriz had a certain smell, especially old buildings like this one. It was as if the long winter had somehow penetrated the walls and made home inside the clay painted walls forever. He remembered how, when he was a young boy and whenever he came to Tabriz with his parents, he became sick because of this smell.

While Ayda went to bring the khatam box for the jewellery, Younes took the chance to scrutinise the room closely. The walls were covered all over with paintings, mainly nude female bodies, posters, enlarged photos, unfinished sketches. There was an old calendar with photos of Tabriz’s architecture; some photos of famous Azerbaijani revolutionaries, especially Satar Khan and Bagher Khan; two men who rose during the time of revolution known as gheyam-e-Azerbaijan, the insurrection of Azerbaijan. The revolutionary Bagher Khan didn’t resemble Soraya’s father; he looked calm and melancholic. It was evident that most of the art was by Bagher Khan. He was infamous for his nude paintings. On large drawing paper, charcoal sketches of female bodies - all without heads and all in provocative poses - were stuck on the walls. There were also photos of Tabriz’s constitutional house and groups of gun-toting revolutionaries standing in front of it. This was a side of Tabriz that Younes knew nothing about.
The autumn air was making it difficult for him to breath. He flopped down on an old Polish chair, his eyes involuntarily fixed upon one of the nude paintings. There were books, magazines and papers everywhere. In their house all the walls were bare except for the yearly calendar indicating the mourning and celebration days. If there were any papers scattered in their carpeted rooms it would be his father’s business ledgers. He heard Ayda’s footsteps; her high heels echoed in the old corridor.

Ayda put the *khatam* box, a traditionally encrusted box with old style inlaid glaze, on the table; while testing the size of the box she took off her high heels, pulling them off one by one with her toes.

‘Well! I knew it would be too big. At my wedding I hope I get enough jewellery to fill this up.’

‘Some of these boxes are small but cost a fortune,’ Younes said, feeling offended that in the eyes of Ayda his family hadn’t provided valuable enough gifts to her sister. Both of them became quiet for a while.

‘Are these all your father’s work?’ Younes asked, walking slowly around the room and looking at the paintings one by one.

‘Yes, they are. People think he is very good,’ Ayda said, matching him step for step. He could smell her perfume and sometimes her hand carelessly brushed his.

‘*People* think, how about you? Do you do art too?’ he felt his question was awkward. He wished he had said 'Do you paint too', but instead he had said art, which sounded stiff even to him.

‘No, no I don’t. Sorraya did but I didn’t. I don’t like painting. I am not good at it anyway. I am not good at any kind of art. I think I have disappointed papa. Sorraya was always interested in his art and she wanted to arrange exhibitions for
him.’ Then she pressed the encrusted box to her chest and said, ‘I prefer this to that. I hope I get lots of jewellery on my wedding day. That is what I would like.’

The wedding party was over by midnight. Yagoob sat in the garden waiting for Sorraya while holding her wedding shoes; the small pair of white satin shoes with golden pencil high heels in his manly hands felt light and soft. He examined them for a while; smiled at the size as he measured them with his palm. Sorraya appeared in the garden holding her father’s hand. They were ready to go to their hotel room.

The noisy big courtyard, which an hour ago had been the ground for dancing feet, was now silent. A cold breeze heralding the beginning of autumn blew in from the mountains of Sahand and Sabalan. Tabriz workmen took down the wedding setup and decorations. Along with the falling leaves of the poplar and the melancholy mountainous air, it seemed that autumn was percolating into Tabriz and bidding Sorraya farewell.
When *Moharram* and *Safar* were finally over, Sorraya prepared herself to go to her home in Tehran. Yagoob had sent his apology for not being able to come himself. He has been stranded in Turkey. Instead he asked Younes to bring Sorraya to Tehran.

Younes waited for a while at bus station and finally they arrived, Bagher Khan with Sorraya and Ayda. The first thing Younes noticed was how little Ayda was wearing. She was in a dark blue mini skirt with a matching turtleneck jumper. She had on a light brown overcoat and was wearing fishnet stockings with tall, shiny, black high-heeled leather boots. She was the first person who saw Younes and reached to shake hands with him. In comparison to his scrawny body and sickly look, she looked taller and that embarrassed him.

When it was six o’clock in the morning the coach driver, a short chubby Azeri man called for all the passengers to Tehran to be ready at station number ten. The early arrival of the blizzard from Sahand and Sabalan made this city’s winter chillier than ever. Tabriz Terminal had been refurbished recently to accommodate an increasing amount of tourists and travellers. Although the tea house’s heater was on, the chill crept through Younes’ heavy overcoat and many layers of wool. It was a dark winter dawn and although the terminal had just opened it was already crowded. Tabriz was an important point of crossover from the Iranian part of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. It attracted many travellers going to Turkey and Europe.

The borders of Tabriz also attracted those who wanted to escape the country, especially these days. Jails were full of communist members, Islamic groups and
National front party members. For the first time, all the different groups were united against one common enemy, the monarchy.

Since August, cinema Rex in the city of Abadan in the south of Iran was burnt down and strikes were arranged by the victims' families. Four hundred people had been burnt while watching the movie. The government blamed Islamic militia but the entire nation blamed the government. Extra secret police watched every step that people took. On the streets, SAVAK, the shah’s intelligence service, even though they were in civilian clothes the people could smell them everywhere. Both the government's secret police and the revolutionaries had left ghostly, inky footprints on the feelings of the society.

There were coaches and travel agencies at the Tabriz terminal trying to attract tourists by posting enticing and exotic posters of the whole country. All the offices had four glossy pictures of ancient Persia; the Ruins of Persepolis, Shiraz, Isfahan and Yazd covered the walls in celebration of ancient Persia. There were no posters of Azerbaijan.

The first thing the café owners did was to turn the television or radio on so that the passengers were bombarded by the government’s achievements. On the colour television was re-run of the old documentary of 2,500 years of Persian civilisation, which culminated in the monarchy’s crowning ceremony. All the offices and corridors were covered with pictures of the King and Queen and their oldest son, the Prince. Passengers were moving around in chaos trying to find the right platform in the long terminals. The coach drivers ran around making sure they didn’t leave any passengers behind.

They went to a café. Ayda, sitting next to her father, had already ordered her hot chocolate and was chatting with Younes as if she had known him for years. It
pleased him and at the same time annoyed him. He felt clumsy while she joked on in 
Azeri and drank her hot chocolate. He ordered more tea and sweets although neither 
Bagher Khan nor Sorraya were eating. Opposite to Ayda, Sorraya was quiet. In her 
mind she had already started the game that she had played with herself since she was 
a little girl. The game was this; if papa smokes only four cigarettes before we go then 
it means I will have a happy life in Tehran with Yagoob.

Soon the time to say goodbye would come. Younes was sitting in front of her, 
watching her every now and then, stealing looks rather than gazing at her directly. 
She looked different from her wedding day. She had no makeup on at all; her pale 
face looked beautiful. Both sisters had their father’s green eyes, each in a different 
shade. Ayda’s colour was bluer, something Azerbaijani is called Goyjooz, sky eyes. 
Soraya’s were earthier, like a lake or a lagoon, almond shaped and bordered with 
thick, curly eyelashes. She was small, unlike her father and her younger sister, 
something she perhaps got from her mother’s genes. She had a bob haircut, which, 
with its light brown shade, made her look younger than she was. In comparison to 
her younger sister she looked at least two sizes smaller. Younes thought back, 
recalling his dance with her at her wedding. He couldn’t tell if she was looking at 
him while dancing but now she was looking directly at him.

‘I’m sorry that I booked a very early departure. The other bus leaves at ten 
o’clock but I thought if we left earlier we could get to Tehran by early evening.’ He 
could see Sorraya’s father scrutinising and watching him while he talked to his 
daughter. Sorraya responded to Younes in Farsi and Bagher Khan responded to 
Younes in a formal Azeri way, which made him feel even stranger. Younes knew the 
language but, growing up in Tehran, he had lost his native language. He felt 
especially clumsy when he tried to respond to Bagher Khan in a formal way. When
he had arrived a few days ago he'd preferred to stay in a hotel room rather than
staying with Sorraya’s family.

Bagher Khan kept referring to Sorraya as *manim aziz gizim*. He had a heavy
male voice which, when mixed with those sweet words, was spiced with an intimate
and compassionate fatherliness. Younes found this a bit odd; too intimate.

His own father was caring too but whether one would say he was kind and
loving, he wasn’t so sure. His father cared for his family’s financial needs and he was
successful in delivering them but there was a lack of warmth in him; in all of his
family, a pervading sense of disinterest. Younes addressed his father as *Agha Joon*,
‘dear sir’.

Not having had any exposure to art, Bagher Khan’s interest in art was an
alienating topic for Younes. What *he* was good at, money and bookkeeping wasn’t a
matter of interest for Bagher Khan at all.

The time was approaching for most of the coaches to depart. Through the
window, Sorraya could see a group of backpackers rearranging the gear in their
massive bags. In the café was a woman who sat on a chair right beneath the Queen’s
photo, as if kneeling at the Queen’s feet to receive her crown. She looked stiff the
way she was dressed; heavily made up and pinned down with loads of jewellery.

It was time to leave. Younes asked a man to carry their luggage and the old
man carried their four big black suitcases to the bus. Bagher Khan squashed his fifth
cigarette in the ashtray and opened his big arms for Sorraya; Sorraya noticed her
sister’s flirty good-bye to Younes. Younes could feel the playfulness in Ayda’s
gestures, pretending to be shy. She slid her soft fingers into Younes’ warm and bony
hand. The softness of her skin remained in his head, as if it had a pulse.
Sorraya sat by the window with Younes beside her. She made another game in her head; if the last person that comes in is a woman it means I will be happy in Tehran with Yagoob. People were coming in, taking seats, looking at their numbers. In front of them, an elderly man arranged a couple of blankets around himself and shut his eyes. Next to him was his wife. She was much younger than her husband and had dyed blond hair and a mini skirt; she was rocking a baby in her arms. The last few back seats were taken by the backpackers; all English speakers. The middle seats were occupied by people from Azerbaijan, Tehran, and a few Turkmen. An old man entered, the door closed and the engine started roaring.

Chilled air was coming from every corner and Younes offered her a small blanket then put his bag and a backgammon box in front of her feet.

‘Bazardan aldooz?’ ‘Did you buy it from the bazzar?’ Buying backgammon from Tabriz bazaar was a common souvenir. She took the box and looked at the carved wood. They exchanged a few more sentences and then Younes leaned back; he looked exhausted. ‘Eshkali dareh man yek shortbezanam. Dishab nakhabidam.’ ‘Is it ok if I close my eyes for a while, I haven’t slept last night?’ Sorraya said she didn’t mind if he had a short nap.

The journey was to be sixteen hours long, including stops for lunch and dinner. A freezing coldness descended. The driver asked the passengers to pray for their safe arrival, as was customary. Those who understood him prayed to Allah, the prophet Mohammad and all the twelve imams to help the driver reach his destination safely. Sorraya looked back to see the reaction of the tourists; they were busy talking loudly. She leaned back and looked outside. The bus passed through Tabriz, buildings, parks, schools, all the familiar textures of her life were running in front of her eyes. She saw the Tabriz university covered in white snow, then Toobaeyie
cemetery where her father’s favourite revolutionary - with the same name as her father - Bagher Khan was sleeping in the white bed of snow. In wintertime this city was dressed totally in white, like a bride. The streets were empty but she knew this city in its busy hours. She knew those long, wide boulevards with their strata of famous petunia gardens and Lombardy poplar trees. They were all bare, naked and chilled with winter's heavy breath. She turned to Younes to show him the city he didn’t know much about but he seemed deep in sleep. She looked at his skin, bones, hair. When his eyes are closed he looks more like Yagoob, she thought; he looks so thin, a thin Yagoob, like you've take one or two layers of flesh off him. She felt her hands, touching her wedding ring and the diamond rock sitting on her finger. I am married, she reminded herself, perhaps to comfort herself or say good-bye to the life she had had in this city, or maybe just from frustration. Then she burst into tears.

Younes woke up.

Younes was confused; he didn’t know how to console her. The only thing he could think of was to offer her a handkerchief or food, or to talk about how everyone in Tehran was waiting to see Yagoob’s wife.

Finally she became calm again. She cleaned her face and smiled at Younes, apologising for her behaviour; Younes just smiled. She took out some chewing gum and offered some to Younes; he declined. She took one herself and when the mint flavour filled her mouth she started another game in her mind: if this snow stops when I reach Tehran I will have a happy life with Yagoob. Younes looked out the window and watched the frosty Azerbaijan countryside passing by; he read newspapers for a while and found out about the King and Queen’s vacation in the United State of America. He tried to distract Sorraya by asking questions, he tried a
few lines of conversation but she barely replied. Then he suggested a game of backgammon.

As soon as the game started some of the passengers became curious to see who would win but the sound of bus engine soon distracted them and most fell asleep, except for the backpackers who went on talking.

First Younes was not sure if he should let her win, but straightaway he found out that he had to play hard to reach the level she was playing at. As the game continued he started to take it seriously. It was obvious she was accustomed to the game.

‘I learned from my father. Whenever he wasn’t busy painting in his studio, he played with us.’

The game succeeded in breaking the ice. It was common to brag during the game and Younes found her Azerbaijani bragging sweet; he laughed. She took offence and boasted even more. ‘Bir shish besh vermana,’ ‘give me a five and six,’ and the game continued, as did the snow. Whenever she got frustrated her shyness disappeared, pulling his hand to take the dice out of it. Gradually they were touching hands and pulling sleeves, or even showing a fist to win the game.

It was almost nine in the morning but the road ahead of them was unclear and dark. The windows in the bus were dark too. The Sahand and Sabalan mountains were disappearing behind the heavy snow and the radio in the bus announced more snow and bad weather ahead. The driver, who had been talkative when he started the journey, was now quiet and fully attentive to the road. Soon they stopped at a roadside café.

The café was typical of an Iranian roadside café; a large space with many chairs and tables packed with passengers from previous busses. A group of women
with children were sitting around a big table with only one man with them. Next to them was a table for four. Younes rushed to take that one to make sure they had some privacy. Waiters were running around and taking orders. The smell of rice, kebabs, tea and spices were wafting all around. After eating, Sorraya and Younes went out, but it was chilly and they went back to the bus. The heater was on.

‘Have you talked to Yagoob?’ he asked.

‘Yes, we talked yesterday. He was in Turkey. He said he might be in Tehran before us.’ Her Farsi was tinged with Azeri, pleasant to listen to.

When they were back on the road, the driver changed the radio station to some music. Soon a female voice was crying out for her lost love. The bus was moving much slower than in the early morning and the heavy snow was like a cotton blanket in front of the bus.

Soraya, in a simple light yellow jumper and pair of jeans, looked more like a high school girl than a newlywed bride. Her brightly coloured clothes and her necklace made of glass beads gave her a gypsy flavour. Younes tried to imagine her next to his brother.

Since Yagoob had turned twenty-one, doors were opened to him; parties where almost every female member of the extended family and the clan started match-making for him. Younes was twenty-three now and no one even mentioned his future wife yet. He knew he was very different from his older brother. Even at twenty, people stood up respectfully wherever Yagoob appeared.

The coach stopped again for a short break. Most of the passengers left the bus for a hot tea or to use the rest room; Sorraya left the bus too. Younes tried to tidy up around their seats and moved Sorraya’s scarf, her jacket and a few notebooks from
the bus floor and put them on her chair. He smelled her perfume on her handbag and notebooks.

One item was a sketchbook; the other, a notebook, which had some personal scribbling and poems by the famous Iranian female poet, Forough Farokhzad. He quickly flipped through the notebook, reading her handwriting. Sorraya had copied Forough’s poems, captured them in blue ink in her beautiful script. Some sketches of different objects relating to the poems were scattered all around the pages.

The driver called for everyone to get back on the bus and the driver’s assistant checked the chains on the tyres. When Sorraya sat in her seat, the first thing she did was to take a second notebook and pencil something in it. Younes knew girls often kept notebooks; his female cousins all had one. They continuously talked about their 'him' in their notebook. He had stolen their notebooks a few times and had a look through them. Everything was about that 'him'. He knew from overhearing the girls’ conversations that most of the time the 'him' was an imaginary lover; usually based on a boy they had seen on their way home from school, or someone in the family who they had crush on - secretly of course - or just simply based on a famous movie star. But Sorraya’s notebooks didn’t seem to be of the 'him' kind.

The bus was moving slowly now and the heater wasn’t warming up the inside anymore. A chilly draft came right in and Sorraya shivered uncomfortably so Younes offered her a light blanket. Soon people were sleeping again. He wanted to engage Sorraya in conversation again but she was dozing.

Younes had been born prematurely. His body was fragile and susceptible to Tehran’s snowy winters, and he suffered from exhaustion in the hot, dry summers. At home he had a nurse and his mother. It hadn’t been unusual for his mother’s
female friends to see Younes going to the public bath with his mother till he was almost ten, until one day a woman stopped them by complaining to the owner. After that it was their maid who took Younes to the public bath. They had a bathroom at home but it was a family ritual to go to the public bath a few times a year.

He knew their father had never considered him to be a proper merchant. That was Yagoob's job; Yagoob was always respected by everyone because of his business ability. He had the opportunity to marry any girl from a rich family. Sorraya’s father wasn’t rich and his family was in political trouble, something that Agha Joon wouldn’t approve of at all. Younes’ family always kept themselves away from what their father called 'trouble'. Yagoob’s choice still puzzled him but he was excited with this responsibility. He respected Yagoob like he respected his father and bringing Yagoob's wife from Tabriz to Tehran to live with them pleased him.

He looked at Sorraya as if just now he realised who she was. The colour of her eyes registered in his mind. Her eyes were green and sparkling; as if they were made out of pieces of small crystals. Yes, her eyes were like millions of shattered crystals.

Sorraya’s face was pressed against the cold bus window; the air inside the bus smelled of onions and kebabs. The driver was keeping himself awake by listening to a female Turkish singer, who was calling her lover and cursing him simultaneously in a husky voice, on the cassette player.

A new chill was creeping in through the window seams. Younes covered himself tightly inside his overcoat. He felt sleepy but with all those strangers around and Sorraya beside him he couldn’t sleep.

He looked at Sorraya again - her face looked cold. He shifted her head from the window and she turned and leant her head on his shoulder. He covered her
shoulders with the blanket. Soon the bus stopped, the road in front of them was blocked and the radio announced another heavy snowfall in Azerbaijan.

Then there was a sudden noise and then there was pitch dark in the bus; the bus was buried under an avalanche. Screams and cries could be heard everywhere, everyone was calling for the driver to turn on the lights.

Next to the driver’s seat, the woman with dyed blond hair leaned towards her bags on the floor. One of the tourists asked in broken Farsi what was going on and the old man tried to explain in English that it was an avalanche. Sorraya was awake and shivering but trying to keep herself together. Younes himself was shaken at first but then quickly reached inside his suitcase, took out a big jacket and wrapped Soraya in it. She accepted the offer without resistance and he added another wool jumper to his own existing layers.

The driver was trying to calm his passengers and trying to explain in Farsi, but his heavy Azerbaijani accent was getting heavier under the stress and he was answering questions in mixed Farsi and Azeri.

Soon the heater went off. Luckily, the engine was still working, so was the radio. Under the dark mountain of snow they listened to the commentator, who was predicting more heavy snow in Azerbaijan and the rest of the country. The metal body of the bus began to feel like a long, chilled corpse.

Younes was trying to keep calm; Soraya just stared at him as if he was a stranger, as if in the few hours of sleep she had forgotten why Younes was there or who he was. The children were growing restless, their voices rising and the adults started to realise that they might be in the cold without food for a while. Some passengers were blaming the driver and he was trying to explain the situation. Younes was focusing on only one thing - Sorraya. He was doing whatever he could
to comfort her. The fake blonde and her husband huddled their bodies over their baby; they were rubbing their hands against each other.

It had been three hours since the bus had stopped in the snow and already the air inside was chilly, Sorraya was shivering. Younes was holding her soft hands in his palms and warming them by blowing hot breath against her skin. Every now and then he would bring them close to his lips. All of a sudden there was a loud noise outside and the passengers became quiet immediately; the old man shushed the children who were still crying. The sudden quiet brought the sounds of outside in; from under thick layers of ice and cold they could hear people shouting. A burst of jubilation filled the bus, Sorraya burst into tears.

'Sorraya, torokhoda gerye nokon; ‘Sorraya, please don’t cry,’ we will be all right, we will be at home by tomorrow, I promise.’ He pulled her into his arms and kissed her head. He inhaled the smell of her Coco Chanel perfume, which sank into some corner of his mind.

The stranded bus was found by the rescue teams. People were screaming, clapping happily and saying Salavat. Younes and Sorraya were laughing with excitement. Younes pulled Sorraya toward him and kissed her chilled face.
End of summer (August-September) 1979

When Sorraya woke up, Yagoob was already getting ready. He was in his light blue shirt and dark blue tie; he was still in his underwear and he was smoking. The smell of his smoke in their bedroom made Sorraya dizzy.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Out.’ He put on his pants.

‘Do I get ready?’

‘No. I have a business meeting.’ He leant towards his wife and stared into her green eyes. ‘I can smell forest in your eyes.’ Sorraya watched him as he dressed, picked up his keys and left. The sound of his footsteps tattooed in her ears till they disappeared somewhere.

By now it had become clear to her that there wouldn’t be a close bond between her and her mother-in-law. One thing that pleased Sorraya about her mother-in-law was the Azeri language she spoke at home and Hadji Khanoom was also a lampooner. Sorraya hadn’t realised how the Azeri language was filled with delectable curses until she met her mother-in-law. Her father-in-law also had a strong tongue but his Farsi was equally advanced because of his profession and his time outside the house. The rest of the family spoke Farsi except when they were in the presence of a relative who didn’t; Hadji Khanoom’s sisters and cousins were in this category.

The family had Tehrani maids, Agha Mohammad and his wife Zahra Khanoom. They had four daughters, all married and living somewhere else. Everyone in the family, even Hadji Agha, addressed them as Agha and Khanoom,
Mr. and Mrs, except Hadji Khanoom who simply called them by name. The maids also addressed them politely except that every now and then they giggled about their strong Azeri accent. Having Tehrani maids was an odd thing, usually it was the opposite. In every Persian soap opera the maid was Azeri who spoke their broken Farsi with a strong Azeri accent. In the Farsi dominated media, Azeri was used to stereotype outcasts, seasonal workers, members of the lower class in society.

Hadji Khanoom had lived in Tehran since she was sixteen and still anytime anyone came to her door she would ask one of the maids to come and translate for her what they wanted, but she wouldn’t admit that it was because of her language problem that she was asking for their help. She also invented phrases and metaphors that weren’t part of the Farsi language, and her children used them secretly and had fun with them. Occasionally some of those weird words or phrases actually became part of the family vernacular and everyone knew how that word or phrase should be used without mentioning the origin of it.

Soon Sorraya found that her Azeri language could be used to get closer to her mother-in-law. Hadji Khanoom enjoyed having someone at home who could be her equal; whenever she was boiling with gossip she could only let it out in Azeri.

To Hadji Khanoom her new daughter-in-law had to be either cooking or cleaning the house and she decided to check up on Sorraya. When she found out that Sorraya was sitting at home with piles of paintings she had brought with her from Tabriz to decorate her home, Hadji Khanoom knew that Sorraya would never be her favourite daughter-in-law. One day she walked in and saw that Sorraya was trying to sort out piles of butcher paper, which had charcoal drawing on them. At first Hadji Khanoom didn’t know what to make of them but gradually the images became clear; all sorts of sitting and standing positions of totally naked women without faces.
'Belar nadi?' ‘What are these?’ She screamed at her daughter-in-law, asking what they were.

‘These are my father’s art works; I want to make an exhibition from his collection.’ Then she looked at her mother-in-law’s face, which looked so disgusted.

‘A private exhibition, of course.’ She knew this information didn’t do anything to change this old woman’s mind but she didn’t care very much as she knew her mother-in-law didn’t know anything about art. Sorraya also knew that her mother-in-law didn’t have a high opinion of her father. ‘These are my wedding present.’

Hadji Khanoom repeated, ‘Wedding present? Mashaallah.’ Hadji Khanoom’s sarcasm smeared her breathless response. Sorraya knew that Hadji Khanoom already took this information as an insult. It was insulting for Hadji Khanoom’s older rich son to have a wife who, instead of bringing expensive jewellery or carpet to her new home, brought a pile of butcher papers with disgusting paintings of nude female bodies. But Sorraya didn’t care very much what her mother-in-law thought about them. ‘Even the poorest man can manage to give his daughter a good present and this is what he gave you? When I heard your father’s name I thought at least my daughter-in-law is from a respectable Tabrizi family. But now, now the only one I can blame is me, I let Yagoob choose you.’

‘I have enough gold and carpets, Yagoob had already furnished my house with it and I don’t need more.’ Sorraya said. Hadji Khanoom was annoyed; she wasn’t used to being answered back to. And in other ways Hadji Khanoom could see that Sorraya was not completely under her control. She didn’t like that Sorraya had already become friends with Nahid, their neighbour, a family who Hadji Khanoom had never approved of. Worse still, she saw with dismay that her daughter-in-law was going to explore life in Yousef Abad.
Yagoob was either overseas or in other states on business. Whenever he was at home they were busy with parties and gatherings, which didn’t interest Sorraya. Men got together, drank and talked about business or second-hand politics, which they had heard here or there. Women gathered in the kitchen, cooked, took care of the noisy children and gossiped about everyone else while admiring their men for qualities, which, as far as Sorraya could see, didn’t exist.

One evening at the end of summer, Sorraya, as usual, went with her husband to a party. He had a new car, a BMW, metallic blue. In the car, Googoosh sang from Yousef Abad to the Saltanat Abad, an affluent suburb north of Tehran. They didn’t speak a word; they just inhaled and exhaled the frozen air of their year old marriage. As the car was reaching the north of Tehran, they watched the sun set; the giant sun was hiding behind that ancient turtle summit of the Toechal mountain range. They were both dressed up and looked their best but inside those beautiful shells the pearl of their life together was rotten already.

When they arrived at the party they rang the bell; under the bell a sign in a golden frame read: Beware of Dog. When the gate opened they walked up the wide cement pathway. The music was loud and the host’s big black German shepherd was barking. The four fountains in the middle of a large swimming pool surrounded with rose, jasmine and cherry trees, sprayed water on their faces. They ran to prevent getting wet. The garden was saturated with the smell of roses and jasmine flowers. They followed the loud music and entered a big living room where the party had already started with people drinking, smoking, and dancing. Sorraya didn’t know many people at this party. People greeted them and those friends who had not been at their wedding, or had not been invited, took the opportunity to congratulate them. Yagoob didn’t waste time to start drinking, vodka with ice; Sorraya refused to drink.
‘This family is doing very well,’ Yagoob said, putting his cold hand on Sorraya’s bare leg. He moved her short skirt with the corner of his finger, looked at his wife and smiled. Sorraya, feeling ticklish, smiled back at him, gently pushed away his hand and pulled her skirt down on her legs. She looked around, it was a massive room filled with antique cabinets, expensive furniture, carpets and family photos framed in silver frames.

‘This family is doing very well,’ Yagoob told his wife, again. ‘The owner is a car dealer, expensive cars, BMWs mainly but he has his own Italian collection. I went to school with their two sons. They are very good surgeons now and I am still just a merchant.’ This was the first time Sorraya realised that Yagoob felt self-pity. She looked in the direction where the two sons were standing. Tall and handsome; but that is not the reason for his jealousy, she thought. He is tall and handsome too. She looked at him and smiled.

Money is not the issue for you darling, you have enough. So you are jealous because they have status as educated men and you don’t. Her thoughts were interrupted by a loud female voice, ‘Bah, bah, bah shah damad;’ ‘well, well, well darling groom.’ Sorraya watched as a pair of long, tanned legs with red high heels crashed into her husband’s arms. Yagoob returned the greeting.

‘Yes, you are looking at the lucky groom, and this beauty is the one who had made me the lucky one. Sorraya, this is Miss Coco and this is Sorraya.’ Sorraya looked at a pair of shapely charcoal black eyebrows unsealing a pair of big hazelnut eyes. ‘She has a pair of beautiful legs with a pair of beautiful eyes; she is already rich even if her pocket is empty. She is called Coco because her family was the first family to bring European perfume to Iran; rich, rich, rich lady,’ Yagoob was talking
to Sorraya but moving his hand on the back of this rich, rich, rich woman. ‘Your beautiful perfume comes from this lady.’

‘Yes that was my great-grandmother who had the first perfume shop here with perfume purchased in Paris. She was a merchant herself; she left three fashion shops for my mother, which I run now. You should visit me, maybe I can help you.’ Then she started walking around Sorraya, looking her up and down. ‘Yes, I think we have a few pieces that would fit you perfectly, what size are you? I think you are two sizes smaller than I am.’ Sorraya didn’t respond. Someone called Miss Coco over to the other side of the room.

‘How do you know her?’

‘Business and family, I knew her family first. I know everyone through our business.’

The party continued with more food and drink, and then all of a sudden there was the sound of shooting. They turned down the music; there was another shot and then sporadic shouting, ‘Allah-o-akbar, allah-o-akbar;’ ‘God is great, God is great.’ Everybody rushed towards the balcony but there weren’t any visible signs to show where the shooting and shouting were coming from.

‘Who is that?’ Sorraya asked, while taking a glass of wine from Yagoob; without drinking any she put it back on the table.

‘He is a business man, a jeweller,’ Yagoob said, drinking his vodka and then he took Sorraya’s hand.

‘All this jewellery you are wearing, I bought it from him. He is also a devoted monarchist.’

The mood of the party changed to politics.
‘They can’t do anything. Our army plus the Monarch’s army are going to crush them in a minute,’ a young man said from the other side of the room.

‘But dear gentlemen, with all respect for your opinions, I believe the people will win. They have had enough of all the injustices they face every day,’ one of the doctors said.

‘Which people? Who? Those koon nashours in the bazaar or a bunch of university students? Those spoilt mainly rich students that use government funding to travel abroad for free and come back with big ideas instead of spending the time to educate themselves. If they care about people they had better focus on their education rather than storming the streets and breaking and burning buses.’ The jewellery business man said.

‘No, he is not talking about them. He is talking about those children we treated in the South during our internship for diseases related to the polluted water, malnourishment; those mothers who don’t have milk to feed their babies. Just get into your car and drive to Tehran’s shanty houses, see what is going on in our glorious, shiny capital city. His voice became dry; he drank two more shots quickly. The two brothers’ comments caused a lot of talk in the room. Yagoob was obviously bored, but Sorraya was interested to see who was saying what.

‘Come on let's go home.’ Yagoob didn’t have any interest in the topic. Just before they left the gate they heard footsteps, the tick tacks of pencil high heels. Coco reached them.

‘Why are you leaving so early?’

‘My father is not feeling well, we should be home.’ Yagoob could see the disbelief in Coco’s beautiful eyes; her quiet smile was shaped with silent sarcasm.
‘So, since I know you are not going to contact me again, I suppose I have to
give you your wedding gift right here.’ Then she ran to the car park and brought
them a gift wrapped box.

In the car, Googoosh continued singing about sparrows and her waiting for
him to come home.

‘When you go away for business where do you stay?’ Sorraya asked him.

‘In the hotel darling, I stay in the hotel.’ He answered half drunk, coming
closer to kiss her.

‘Don’t you get bored?’ Sorraya asked.

‘No, because I know I will come home to you. I have you to think about.’

He took her small face in his hands.

‘Before me? What did you do?’ He pressed his hands against her face.

‘Then, I thought about something else. There is always something to think
about.’ As he was talking he accelerated. The BMW’s new engine roared and its
sound scared Sorraya. ‘Be careful, for God sake, you will kill us. Are you drunk?’

* * *

At home Sorraya opened the gift, a crystal swan bowl. The house was quiet. Yagoob
went to the bathroom and there was a knock at the door. Sorraya jumped and
dropped the crystal bowl; the corner of one of the wings broke.

‘What was that?’ Yagoob asked from bathroom.

‘Ah, bebakhsheid, I dropped it, it’s broken.’

He came to the living room, ‘What is broken?’

‘Our wedding present,’ then she put the crystal swan bowl on the entrance
table and dropped her keys into it; the crystal reverberated the sound of the metal in
the room.
One afternoon a few weeks later, when Yagoob was sitting beside his sick father’s bed chatting about business, they heard noises coming from Fifth Street. From the second floor they watched people running; Yagoob saw Nahid and her family.

‘What is happening, Mrs Nahid?’ Yagoob asked from the open window.

‘They took the prison. People took the prison,’ she shouted, running after her husband.

Yagoob ran to the television. The usual programs were cut off.

A man announced in an excited voice; ‘Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to announce that this is the people’s voice.’

In a matter of a few months, everything changed. The old regime took revenge, tanks were everywhere, and soldiers were shooting people. Most people left their doors open day and night to help demonstrators and revolutionaries. They were shouting, ‘Allah-o- Akbar, Khomeini Rahbar.’ And then all year long there was only the Muslim calendar.

When Yagoob was away, Younes felt that it was his responsibility to take care of his sister-in-law, especially when he could see that his mother was giving her a hard time. One day Younes got ready to go out but his mother stopped him.

‘Where are you going?’ Hadji Khanoom asked with her usual authority.

He said hesitantly, ‘I am going to a movie with Sorraya.’ She was shocked.

Ever since Younes had brought Sorraya from Tabriz, he had felt especially responsible for her. From time to time he even took her out to show her their neighbourhood.
Since Yagoob’s wedding, Hadji Khanoom could see that it was Younes who was changing his behaviour and not Yagoob. She had a sixth sense; she was powerful and loved her power, and she had a nose for smelling danger. But at that moment she knew from her son’s tone of voice that it wasn’t a good time to fight so she took a step back.

‘Ok, it is good. Take Ghoncheh too. Your father is not home and I want to go visit your auntie.’

‘No. You take her with you, this is not a movie for children,’ he answered with the same reluctant voice as before. He knew that wasn’t the end of it but he didn’t care.

‘What kind of movie is that? What do you mean it is not for children? What kind of movie do they show these days, which a family member can’t see? These cinemas are temples of Sheytan, these evil houses showing all indecent scenes, corrupting Muslim children. Ensha-allaah, God burns them all. See what happened in cinema Rex, all those innocent people burnt there? Can’t you just stay at home and watch television? Outside is dangerous.’ Younes wasn't in the mood for his mother’s lectures or advice. Sorraya was waiting for him. He hadn’t told Sorraya that he was going to take her to a movie; she thought they were going for a walk.

It was early autumn but the weather was still warm. When they left Fifth Street the warm sweet air followed them, breathing the smell of last summer days into their skin; the smell of cherry blossom, apricot blossom and jasmine. When they reached the end of the road he started telling her about the area.

‘This ice-cream shop has been here since I was born. Yagoob used to bring me and Ghoncheh here.’ The smell of boiling milk and cream penetrated Sorraya’s nose and made her mouth water.
‘I want some.’ In her jeans and blue T-shirt her petite features looked even younger than she was. In his black pants and grey shirt, compared to her, Younes’ thin lanky body looked even more out of coordination. Licking their Akbar Mashdi ice-cream they looked like a couple of teenagers sneaking out of school. Her carefree attitude made it easy for him to make jokes and even talk about issues in his life that he had heard women talk to one another about. He was walking by her side, trying to be close to her and yet not cross the line in public, as was the decent thing to do.

‘He was more like a father to us than an older brother.’ It was obvious who he was talking about but to Sorraya this was a piece of the family puzzle. She jumped to reach a branch of a mulberry tree. ‘Yagoob is very kind. When I came to Tabriz to bring you to Tehran, I was very worried that you might not be happy here but believe me: your life will change when he comes back from work. You two will be happy.’ Younes walked slowly to keep pace with Sorraya. ‘And you two will have cute children. You know, mum and dad are waiting for that.’

‘I know. But I still need time to get to know Yagoob a bit better. You know, since our wedding day we haven’t spent a lot of time together. A few friends of mine, who married before I did, complained that after a year or two their life was boring because they spent a lot of time together. They went everywhere together; they ate together, sat together, but that for sure is not my life.’ Sorraya was talking softly and Younes couldn’t tell if it was because she was complaining or because they were walking in the streets.

‘See, he keeps your relationship fresh. At least that part is good, no?’ he said with a weak smile, embarrassed for his brother’s constant absence and his own joke. They walked through the maze of stairs that led down into Yousef Abad. In Shafagh Park they sat on a bench, the leafy pathways with benches scattered about attracted
young couples who sat shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand. A group of young boys and girls were having a picnic, playing loud music, dancing and eating. A thin ribbon of water lapped at the silver-coloured stones of a creek that ran down both sides of the park’s street.

‘And this is our library.’ Younes pointed to a glass door with a library sign on it. In front of the library was a big shallow pool, Sorraya took her shoes off and put her feet in the cold water. Younes sat next to the bronze statues that were there and watched her. He hung Sorraya’s handbag on the shoulder of one of the life-sized statues and then looked at the time. ‘Come on, we have to go. The movie will start soon,’ he said, feeling his energy running out too. Sorraya dried her feet and put her shoes on. After a while of walking they reached the cinema.

‘Here we are. This is our Goldis cinema. Last Tango in Paris, do you want to see it?’

‘Of course, I love Marlon Brando. I didn’t know we were going to see a movie,’ said Sorraya, obviously excited. ‘I thought I would die from boredom here but obviously you know where to go for entertainment.’

After the movie they walked back towards Fifth Street. The scent of roses, climbing jasmine and wisteria hovered over Yousef Abad. Noisy children were playing in the streets, kicking their plastic ball to each other. As they walked, they saw families having dinner while listening to music, mainly Old Persian jazz, but here and there were some who were listening to Azeri songs. Sorraya turned back to stare. The memory of home was everywhere in Yousef Abad.

‘Can we stop here? I want some corn.’ asked Sorraya, pulling Younes by his sleeve towards an old man who was cooking on a charcoal flame. People were attracted to him from all over the park and the green gardens along the boulevards.
Sorraya noticed how many people in the area knew Younes and came up to say hello. The view from the corner where they were standing was beautiful. Through the smoke and the aroma of sweet corn, Yousef Abad sloped upwards, its four corners framed into a picture by the skirts of Mount Toechal behind it. Young men on the rooftops were releasing pigeons from their little pigeon towers, white pigeons fluttering in the air, filling their lungs before returning to their cages.

‘How do they know which one is which when they all fly together and mix with each other? How does the owner know, which ones of these pigeons are his?’ Sorraya asked while eating her second corn cob.

‘They don’t. The pigeons know which one is their cage.’

When they reached Fourteenth Street, the curtains of Mr Khachaturian’s shop were drawn but the light inside was on. Through the light fabric they could see the outline of men sitting at the bar, their backs to the street. It was late when they were walking back home; walking in the quiet streets listening to the sound of her high heels echoing in the last of the summer day's warm air.
I want a divorce. Sorraya was in Yagoob’s arms when she had this monologue in her head. It was the smell that was provoking it, the smell of his young, fresh skin mixed with his everlasting smell of alcohol. It took me four years to blink, to wake up and see this fairy tale is finished. Why didn’t his affairs wake me up? Why didn’t those long business trips wake me up? Not even the loud sounds of Allah-o-akbar or shooting woke me up; only this, this smell of his booze has made me blink. He will never give up his liquid demon.

When Yagoob left she covered her naked body with a big blanket and walked to the kitchen. She looked at the kitchen sink; Vodka bottles were there, lids off, smells in the air. She looked inside the blue folder to make sure all the documents were there. She collected the bottles from the sink and put them in plastic bags. These are the documents that I have but I can’t use them against you in the court, they will shoot you or put you behind bars. All I want is to leave you. The monologue was becoming more and more pronounced in her head. I can’t tolerate you anymore. You are better off without me; I am better off without you.

It was a gloomy, dark winter day. There wouldn’t be any electricity for at least another two hours and their gas ration was running out too. She checked herself once more in front of the mirror; dark blue pullover with blue jeans, no makeup, no high heels. She put on her black chador, put her blue folder in her handbag, took her key from the cut crystal bowl and left the house. She didn’t know the exact address but knew it was close to the US embassy. She decided to walk down street in front of
the US embassy and ask for directions; these days everything starts from there, she thought.

Her taxi came close to the US embassy. The driver stared at her in his mirror while she was preparing to pay.

‘Do you want me to wait for you?’ he asked, collecting the money; his hand brushed against hers.

‘No, thanks.’

Maria Callas’s voice and Vivaldi’s four seasons were playing on the cassette players of the street corner vendors; their voices were mixing with the afternoon Azan coming from the US embassy. She had to walk the rest of the way to the court. Since ‘daneshjoyanekh khatreh imam,’ “students of followers of imam” took the US embassy and forty Americans as hostages. They had closed both ends of the street to prevent traffic but people used this street as a platform for gatherings. A few groups of intellectuals gathered there and were discussing politics; Sorraya had to pass them by force; bebakhshid, bebakhshid, she swam from one group to the other. On the quieter side were the sellers of food, books, music cassettes and cigarettes; there were also children's clothes, nappies, infant formula, medicines, socks and women's lingerie; all in the back of small hatchback cars. In this black market circus, between Vivaldi’s four seasons and the afternoon Azan, Sorraya heard a familiar voice. She stopped and paid the money and received a pair of white Nike socks. She didn’t need them. She bought it because of his strong Azeri accent calling for customers. She stuffed the socks in her handbag and pulled her blue folder out.

She walked up the malachite steps. In front of the court, before entering the building, she made sure that her black Islamic dress was perfect. She took a moment to look down at herself, a pair of flat heeled sport shoes covered with the long
corners of her black chador; she held her blue folder tight under her arm. At the door she was stopped by a woman wearing a black chador who asked her to enter a box, which was set up next to a table. She was body searched by a pair of white gloves worn by the woman wearing a black chador and then entered a long hallway that was crowded mainly with women; men were sitting on the other side of the corridor. She sat on a plastic green chair and waited; then another woman in a black chador came and took her into a room, there the woman took her folder, signed it, stamped it and gave her a number: four. Through a curtain of black fabric and thick black eyebrows, a female voice ordered her to wait till her number was called.

The hallway was covered with war slogans, posters of religious leaders and war martyrs. A few women with their children were sitting on the floor; one of them was breastfeeding a baby. Revolutionary guards were coming and going with guns on their shoulders. A big pile of books, music records and cassettes, which had been confiscated from vendors, were collected in a corner. These were considered *harram*, un-Islamic material. Finally her number was called, number four.

The room was empty except for a desk at the end of the room. It was a big room, light green in colour. Behind the brown wooden desk was a clergy, a judge. Sorraya couldn’t tell if he was young or old, he didn’t raise his head. He ordered her to sit and continued with his business, looking at her folder. Above his head was a big photo of Ayatollah Khomeini. On sides of the photo were two spaces with missing photos; it was the Queen and the Prince’s missing photos. The room hadn’t been painted since the revolution. The only thing on his desk was a volume of the Quran and a new flag. A round moon shaped *Allah* was printed on the three coloured flag rose on a small golden stand. Without raising his head he stamped her paper for her court day, the fourth of next month, and returned it to her. In the hallway, the
mother who was breastfeeding asked her for money. Sorraya gave her some change.  

‘Khooda moshkeleto hall koneh.’ ‘God helps to solve your problem.’ While the mother was praying to God to help Sorraya, her baby opened her palm in front of her face, mimicking his mother, asking for money. Sorraya gave her a chocolate. The mother asked one of the women when she had to go to the room. The woman in the black chador ignored her. Sorraya looked at her number. ‘You go inside when they call number ten,’ she told the woman, then left the building.

On the street she walked past intellectuals then food sellers. Here and there she heard whispers: Perfume? Stockings? New Hollywood movies? Old flag? Then she saw a middle-aged woman with a strong smell of perfume buying the old flag; the image was still fresh in the minds of people, a lion and sun printed in the middle of the tri-coloured flag. She was looking at books and listening to peddlers who were calling for buyers everywhere. Cigarettes were everywhere, Winston, Marlborough, Kent, long and short, mint flavoured, and Bahman cigarettes (the only Persian cigarettes); Sorraya stopped for a while and inhaled the smell.

‘These are Bahman cigarettes’ ‘Khanoom, Bahman, Bahman, va Bahman ham mimoneh’ ‘Ma’am, bahman, and its name will remain bahman.’ It will remain Persian, no matter what the government does they can’t do it to Ali cigarettes, or Mohammad cigarettes or Husain cigarettes, it will remain a Persian cigarette, and it will remain true to its meaning - avalanche in Persian.’ She looked at the boy who was talking about Bahman cigarettes as passionately as the intellectuals were talking about politics. She bought a packet.

When her taxi stopped at her door, the driver turned the music off and waited for his pay. The sound of an explosion burst suddenly in the heart of the street, then the sound of sirens and then the sound of Allah-o-akbar echoed in the air. ‘Zood bash
khanoom,’ ‘Hurry up lady,’ said the driver and left the street as if he was a ghost.

Sorraya pushed into her building and, with shaky fingers, opened the door and dropped her key into the swan crystal bowl. She sat, feeling a vacuum inside her ears and a heavy mass of air inside her head. She shook her head to take it out. In the kitchen she turned on the tap. She couldn't hear anything; she ran outside, panicking.

People were coming from every corner, running, pulling, pushing; she could see their wide open eyes and wide open mouths but still she couldn’t hear anything. Her body felt like a cluster of gel. Gradually she pulled herself to the other side of the door and then her hearing returned. When her strength came back she found a way through the crowd, passed a few young boys, her neighbours, and reached the bombed building on the other side of the street. A three storey brick building was cut open in the middle, like an open shell. Furniture in the living room was hanging half broken, there was broken glass all over the rooms, electrical wires cut through everywhere, and small shiny white pieces of glass glittered as if they were crystal pearls. The sound of sirens came from every corner of the city. Then a group of Hezbollah arrived and dispersed people.

When she returned to her apartment, she heard Hadji Khanoom call her but she ignored it. Her radio announced that ‘shenevandeganeh aziz, sedayi ke mishenavid,’ ‘Dear listeners, the voice you are hearing’; and warned that the danger was not over yet; a voice called for pious Muslims to fight the infidel Sadam at the front lines. Then the Quran was recited while the chanting Allah-o-Akbar, Allah-o-Akbar came from the roofs. As usual, instead of hiding in their basements or going somewhere safe, neighbours ran to their roofs to see in which direction the bombing was coming from.
She covered her windows with black fabric then looked at the date stamped on her folder. In the kitchen the vacuum puffed air into her face when she turned on the tap, and then water hit her in the face. She shouted at herself for constantly forgetting that whenever the water was cut off for rationing, air built up in the pipes; she was constantly forgetting it.

For a week, day and night, war roared like an impetuous eagle into the ears of the city. She listened to the Azan, coming and going, changing the time of living, listening to the sound of bombing, changing the time of dying. Through her kitchen window she watched four Hezbolla build a sand trench on the other side of the street; the street boys watching them while keeping their plastic ball under their arms. A quiver of dried tears was building inside her; she felt a stone in her heart. She decided to go back to Tabriz without a divorce but she knew that if she went to a terminal to buy a ticket they might ask for her husband or they might ask for his permission, with check-points on every corner that was a possibility.

It was only the sparrows who knew that it was spring and they had to fly again as a group and sing their prehistoric songs in the free air of the tall poplar trees’ green leaves. She couldn’t see them but she could hear their everlasting cry behind her thick layers of curtain. She was listening to the sounds of war coming from her portable radio inside her blue dress pocket, thinking about home in Tabriz. She lit a cigarette, inhaled and felt dizzy, restless and shaky. She felt a dark ball inside her; she wanted to go home. The only consolation in her life was the exhibition she was planning. She had created a folder that she wanted to use as an invitation to her father’s exhibition.

She had decided to contact some of her father’s friends in Baku and Armenia, somewhere where I can exhibit his favourite pieces, nude bodies, she thought.
Days passed; she sat in the cold dark room, listening to Hezbollah putting up revolutionary posters while singing revolutionary songs. The poster was of a woman in a black chador lifting up her child as if offering it to the heavens. Blood trailed from her back and poured onto the road, leading to a giant red tulip; above the tulip a frowning face of the saviour, the great leader, framed by white expanses of fabric.

For a week she ignored whoever knocked at the door. At night, when it was curfew, she sat in the dark and cried. She lit candles in the middle room and sat there on the sofa looking at the candle lights, moving and dancing with the shadows of the objects in the room. Her wedding mirror doubled the images as if showing their ghosts. She walked and followed her own shadow, getting taller, shorter, fatter and slimmer, no eating or drinking. Once or twice Hadji Khanoom came to her door, but she jumped up quickly and double-locked the door. She heard Hadji Khanoom’s footsteps in her backyard, and saw her shadow appear and disappear behind the glass window

‘Sorraya darobazkon,’ ‘Sorraya open the door,’ but Sorraya ignored her and didn’t care that her food coupons expired or that it was time for sugar, meat, rice and oil. She didn’t respond. She heard Hadji Khanoom’s Azeri curse words become thinner and thinner under her plastic slippers and footsteps, breathing heavily as she walked upstairs.

In the dark room, war followed her. The rations of electricity, water and gas became shorter each time the sound of Saddam Husain’s air raids echoed in the cities. In the mornings, she didn’t even remember which day on which calendar it was, but she knew on the Muslim calendar when it was the fourth of the month, and she took her blue folder and ran out of the house. She put on her Islamic dress in
front of her wedding mirror and went out; a group of basijies were writing a slogan on their long white wall.

At court, the same man was sitting behind the same desk. The same Ayatollah Khomeini was watching from the frame. The clergy didn’t move his head to answer her hello or acknowledge that she entered. He just pointed to her to take her folder. ‘Rejected’, was written in red pen. ‘Hadji Agha shoma ke hanooz az man naporsidin;’ ‘Hadji Agha, you haven’t heard my reasons.’ He wasn’t interested in what she was trying to say.

‘As I see it here, your husband is a good provider, he is not drug addict, he is from a good pious family and he hasn’t taken a second wife without telling you. So go home and live your life. You should be ashamed of yourself for putting this request forward. Our soldiers are giving their blood for the glory of Islam and you are wasting my time with this. Come on, take it and go home.’

Her taxi stopped at her door. She saw a young Hezbollah collecting his brushes and paints then go to a four-wheel drive, which was waiting for him at the other side of the street.

On the long white wall of her building, in a beautiful nasta’liq script, he had written; ‘A woman is like a pearl and the hijab is like the protective shell.

She entered her apartment and dropped her key into the crystal swan bowl, the sound reverberating in the air - she heard a knock at her door. Then she heard footsteps; it was Hadji Khanoom.
1983

Hadji Khanoom had a feeling that she was losing control over her family. She felt none of her powers worked their motherly power, such as cursing her children with harsh words but a sweet voice, telling them God won’t ever forgive a child who has hurt the heart of their mother, as her children hurt her heart. So she turned to her ceremonies, religious gatherings and endless, long prayers to soothe her pain, as well as to get her children’s attention.

She put down her most elaborate prayer mat that she had brought from Mecca, on her last religious visit with her husband. After her namaz finished, she read her Quran with a loud voice and made sure Ghoncheh heard, since she knew Ghoncheh was waiting for her to finish her prayer so she could ask for permission to go out. Hadji Khanoom prolonged her already prolonged namaz. But Ghoncheh knew how to get her mother’s attention and when her music started her mother finished her namaz, quickly wrapped her prayer mat and went to her daughter’s room.

‘Don’t you respect anything? Don’t you know you shouldn’t turn on your music when someone is praying? Not only do you give up praying yourself but now you want to destroy my prayer too?’ Ghoncheh simply smiled and moved around her room, listening to strange music and trying on different clothes in front of the mirror. To Hadji Khanoom it was as if she had been thrown into a strange home. She picked up a few t-shirts. ‘Who gave you these? Where did you get all these clothes from?’

‘Younes bought them for me. And this one, and this one, and this one. Yagoob brought them from Turkey.’
‘You are all in on this intrigue. I must congratulate myself; my own children under my own roof united to destroy me.’ Then she looked at her daughter. Through those big, hazelnut eyes she entered another era, the year was 1350 on the Persian calendar, when she was almost Ghoncheh’s age. For a moment she thought that Ghoncheh who was standing in front of her was Hadji Khanoom herself. ‘Why? Why are you doing this? Aren’t you ashamed of your God? Why? Why? Aren’t you scared of Allah? You are doing this because your father is sick and you think I can’t control you. Because you think I can’t do anything.’ Hadji Agha either was in hospital or sick in bed in his room, but Hadji Khanoom was already playing the role of a heart-broken widow. ‘And your brothers are in it with you, all against me.’ She burst into tears and left the room.

For a few days she kept her eyes wet, at least in front of her children. She continuously mumbled about her situation as a widow.

‘Mum, you are not a widow. Stop talking about it all the time,’ Ghoncheh told her mother. ‘What am I supposed to do after your father goes? You are not listening to me now, imagine my future with you.’ She could see everything in her house was changing; she hated it but didn’t have the power to control it.

Yagoob was supposed to be the head of the family but his presence in this house was more like a ghost. Whenever he was home, and that wasn’t often anymore, he would spend four days at his apartment with his wife, shared a few hours with his mother, brother and sister, and then disappeared into that unseen sinful environment, which Hadji Khanoom had always feared. She knew that no matter what, Yagoob would find his liquor. Although there weren’t any bottle shops anymore, and Mr Khachetorian’s bottle shop was closed down, she knew her older son had enough connections to get his hands on alcohol. But at the moment, Younes
was her main concern. She was upset that Yagoob left his young wife home alone most of the time.

‘My dear son, you have to spend some time with your wife too.’

‘I am busy mother; I have a business to run.’ Hadji Khanoom was familiar with this excuse; her own husband had used it on her.

‘You have to think of your family too. You should think of us, me and your father.’ And when Yagoob responded to this request with a long cold look on his face, she said, ‘We are waiting for our grandchildren. We are waiting to see your son.’ And when Yagoob ignored his mother’s advice, she made it her own responsibility to watch her daughter-in-law when her son was away. She constantly dropped into Sorraya’s apartment to check on her.

But now, it was Younes that occupied her old mind. She didn’t like that Younes believed it was his responsibility to entertain Sorraya in his brother’s absence. She found it inappropriate for *namahrams*, a strange man and woman, to be close and friendly with one another. Sorraya encourages him, she thought.

She could see that since Sorraya had come to this house, Younes paid more attention to himself; his new haircut and new clothes confirmed that to her old mind. He was not the quiet and reserved Younes she knew. He was agile and ready for fun. He has changed since he's been out with Sorraya, ever since the wedding day, she thought. After her *Namaz*, she decided to go downstairs to check on Sorraya. I can pretend I need something from the basement, she thought, that would give her an opportunity to stop by at Sorraya’s and see what she was up to. Perhaps she is busy with her father’s stupid drawings.
Younes was sitting in Sorraya’s living room, waiting for her to bring him a hammer.

‘Where do you want me to hang it?’ He was holding a framed painting. Sorraya watched as the heavy hammer banged on the living room wall. When the frame hung stable on the wall, Younes threw his weak body on the sofa.

‘What's happened Younes, are you alright?’

‘I am ok, give me some water please.’ The coldness of the glass and Sorraya’s fingers sent a small shiver through his body.

‘What happened? You are covered in sweat.’ Sorraya took the glass from him, kneeling in front of him. He could smell lavender lotion on her arms.

‘Oh, it’s my lungs. I always have this problem.’ He wasn’t sure if telling her about his sickness would be a good decision or not. He asked her for tea, to send her away so as he could collect his strength again. Finally, when he felt that his breathing was back to a normal rhythm, he decided to help Sorraya clean her home. He went to the cupboard, took the Hoover and started to vacuum. Sorraya watched him with surprise. Seeing a man so easily handling the household chores wasn’t something familiar to her. She rushed to stop him but then she changed her mind.

‘I can see you are very good at cleaning.’ Then she thought she needed to say something more. ‘So, what can I do for you? Don’t ask me to clean as you can see I am very clumsy.’

He pressed the vacuum cleaners cable, the wire rushed back inside its body.

‘You can play backgammon with me but this time, no cheating.’ They sat on the light green Persian carpet, playing. When Sorraya was ahead in the game, she used it as a weapon to tease him.

‘So, you think I won because I was cheating, how about now?’
‘You never won. Even in the bus from Tabriz to here, I let you win because I was too shy to win. I thought ‘what would she think of me if I let my dear sister-in-law lose the game?’ As the game continued so did their bragging. Bragging made them flirt, teasing each other verbally and, every now and then, physically. Soon their voices became louder and mixed with jokes they threw at each other. Sorraya made more tea. While she was in the kitchen he looked at the surroundings, piles of papers, folders and some notebooks. He recognised some of them; he knew the covers, those he had looked at on their trip from Tabriz to Tehran. They were enjoying their time.

Then the main door opened. Younes and Sorraya were watching Hadji Khanoom from where they were almost lying down on the floor, the backgammon board in front of them, and sweets and a tea tray around them. Hadji Khanoom’s surprise was printed in her wide open eyes.

‘Younes to key omadi inja?’ ‘Younes, when did you come here?’ Her question asking Younes when he came here sounded inappropriate to Younes. There was an itching anger in Younes’ throat but he didn’t want to show it in front of Sorraya. He returned his mother’s question with a question showing equal surprise.

‘Why didn’t you knock, Mother?’

‘I...I...’ It took a few seconds for her to answer the question. Everyone in the family knew that Hadji Khanoom kept a set of keys to the house. The fact that this was now Yagoob’s private home didn’t change anything for her; so she didn’t expect Younes’ question.

‘I...I did, but you didn’t answer the door.’ She stared at Sorraya, as if by saying ‘you’ she meant ‘my daughter-in-law’. ‘I wanted to get some upholstery from the basement, then I heard a noise and I just knocked on the door to see what was
going on.’ Quickly she realised that that comment didn’t go well. Her upholstery excuse wasn’t convincing either. ‘I wanted to come to see you, Sorraya joon. I wanted to see if you are ok or if you needed anything.’

Sorraya thought, there is nothing quiet about her, she loves a noisy entrance; but she knows how to give herself excuses.

Younes was sitting on a chair wearing his shoes. Hadji Khanoom took the chance to teach her daughter-in-law a lesson. She knew how blazing her gaze was. Sorraya didn’t say a word. She found something bizarrely fulfilling in keeping her silence when she knew her mother-in-law expected a verbal response. Instead, Sorraya just stared back at her. She knew nothing would make her mother-in-law’s bright day as dark as a nightmare as the return of a steady gaze.

Back in her apartment, Hadji Khanoom couldn’t wait to open her mouth, but to say what?

‘I think it is about time for them to have children,’ she said while pouring tea for Younes. Younes was playing with the TV remote control to find something worth watching, ignored his mother’s comment.

‘Who?’

‘Them; Yagoob and Sorraya. I think your brother should spend more time at home. I can’t blame Sorraya if she keeps herself busy with those silly paintings and papers she brought from her father’s home. A woman needs to be a mother.’

‘I think it’s their business not mine.’ He didn’t say neither is it yours but he knew he was understood.
So she said, ‘You are right, it’s not our business. Now we’d better leave Yagoob aside. I am sure he knows how to keep his wife happy. Now my issue is you.’

‘Me? What do you mean?’

‘Why don’t you ask Ayda to marry you?’ This sudden suggestion surprised Younes.

She doesn’t like Sorraya and she doesn’t approve of her father’s behaviour or profession, and now she is suggesting that I marry the other sister, he thought.

‘Ayda? Why Ayda? What happened that all of a sudden you are thinking about my marriage?’ Younes remembered his brother’s wedding day. Yagoob had said that after his marriage, their mother would start courting for Younes, but Ayda? Why her?

‘Well, she is beautiful and I noticed that on your brother’s wedding day you two were dancing and talking to each other. It seems to me that you might be interested. You like your sister-in-law, don’t you? Don’t you?’ Hadji Khanoom walked towards the window. Younes couldn’t tell if it was a kindly observation or a vicious warning - his mother’s style. He reviewed his behaviour in his mind to see if he had done anything that might raise his mother’s suspicions about his feelings for Sorraya. Nothing came up.

‘What? Yes, of course, she is my brother’s wife. But don’t you want to go on visits to find the best wife for me, isn’t that what you always wanted to do? You lost your chance with Yagoob so here I am, you have my permission to wear your best dress and chador, and go around the town to visit the best named families and find my future wife.’ His mother ignored his sarcasm. She was well aware that her sons didn’t believe in her traditional values.
‘I know I can do that and believe me, nothing interests me more than those courting visits but why should we bother when we already have someone close to us? What I mean, son, is always when the older sister is good and well-behaved, the second sister follows her sister’s footsteps; so we already know her, and you and your brother approve of her, so why risk it and go to another family?’

‘I thought you didn’t like her father, or her family for that matter.’

‘Well, at first I didn’t but now that I see she is good, and Yagoob and you like her. Obviously I don’t have any objections.’ She sat next to her son and looked at him as if he was twelve years old again - the son she had always had to protect from the outside world because of his weak body and endless physical sicknesses, and now she was protecting him from something deep inside him - his love for Sorraya.

‘If you want I will talk with your father to arrange the courting meeting.’

When she returned to the kitchen, the maid ran after her to take the dishes and wash them.

‘Don’t worry, I'll wash them myself.’ She needed some time alone in the kitchen; she wanted to see if her suggestion had any impact on Younes. She put the tea cups in the sink and submerged her hands in the warm water. She knew that she would be successful in her persuasive decision. She always believed on her divine, motherly power. That magic hadn’t worked with Yagoob’s decision to choose his own spouse but she knew her powers worked on Younes. She placed two tea cups and gold framed saucers in the water then pressed the Palmolive liquid soap on top of them and again put her hands in the water. Her gold ring touched the edge of the sink and the sound of it rang in the Younes’ ears like childhood music. He was standing at the doorway of the kitchen.
A few weeks ago, both brothers had gone to the Amir Al Momenin mosque and submitted their papers for army service. As the war continued, men who were exempted before were considered again for conscription and those who had done their services before had to register again. The age limit was changed so as to include young boys and older men as soldiers. Younes was exempt because of his medical condition. Yagoob wanted to apply for exemption because he had done service before and also because he was head of the family.

‘My father is sick; here, this is my documents and this is my brother’s medical certificate.’

The young bearded Hezbollah wasn’t listening; he was busy tidying up his desk, which was covered with many army documents.

‘My brother, everyone is head of a family. I am the only male in my family but Islam and our dignity is in danger. We all have to fight this infidel Saddam till we reach Karbala. Till that day, every Muslim has a responsibility. This is not about the country, this is about Islam.’

Yagoob didn’t accept this decision and started to argue with him. As Yagoob’s temper rose Younes tried to calm him.

‘When I am not here who will take care of my family? You? Hah! Who is going to take care of my family? If I am shot in the forehead, what will happen to our family? You see the battle raging on all fronts and that’s the reason they need us.’ Younes pulled the edge of Yagoob’s heavy wool coat.

‘Let’s go. Don’t shout at him. They are all impudent. If you push it he will tell you things shamelessly,’ then he whispered into Yagoob’s ear, ‘let’s go and see one of your friends, get a drink and you'll feel better.’
“Do you think so? Do you think that will fix everything? Don’t you see? Look around. Look. What do you see?’ They both looked around. At the other side of the mosque was a line for janbazaneh enghelab, young men in wheelchairs, with sticks under arms, men without arms, some men sitting in wheelchairs with family members, some shell-shocked, all waiting to receive their special coupons. ‘So what do you think you can do if I am one of them, or if I never come back? What would you do?’ Younes kept control of his anger till they reached home.

In their living home he shouted, ‘Who do you think you are? You think you are Yagoob Khan, older son of Hadji Agha. But to these people you are nobody. These are a bunch of thugs who have a gun and the gun is their power. They don’t know what respect is to you or to anybody else, they don’t show mercy even to their own mothers and fathers. You think you deserve the best of the best because you are Yagoob and I am sick of it; sick of you, sick of this house, sick of this family.’

Yagoob stood up and his mother came between them.

Now, she had the feeling that she was getting her control back again.

‘I will talk with Hadji Agha and convince him to move to the upper floor. Younes can live here with his family; I can keep an eye on them.’ She was washing the cups with a smile on her face. ‘You are harvesting your honey in the wrong hive, dear Sorraya. Yagoob may have chosen you without my permission and consent, but this is my house and these are my children. I tell them who they should love or hate. Yagoob is not here to control you but I am. You should learn that I am the key holder in this family.’

‘I will talk to Sorraya about Ayda.’ Younes said.
‘Oh, no, no, let me talk to her. ‘Bojour Ishlarada rasmiat lazimdeh.’ ‘Matters like this one need a formal approach.’ He agreed that if his mother talked to Sorraya it would be considered more official. In the evening she walked downstairs. When Yagoob decided to marry she would leave the ground floor apartment and move to the first floor. In this way she could use a visit to the basement as an excuse to pass Sorraya’s apartment, to spy on her. She was aware that the sound of her three centimetre high heels would keep her daughter-in-law on her toes whenever she stepped down to go to the basement. She had powerful footsteps. She knocked on the door a few times. Sorraya didn’t answer. She took the bundle of keys from her pocket and looked at them.
Sorraya woke up in the middle of a dream. In her dream, she had a piece of long, black fabric in her hand. She wanted to stitch it with white thread but each time she looked at the needle, the thread was black. She reviewed this dream in her mind to find out why it was coming back again. She found no reason for it.

Sitting alone in her bedroom she looked around. Yagoob’s black shirt was hooked on the metal frame of their bed, the white face of the wall clock tick-ticking; it was five in the afternoon. The heaviness of the portable radio in her robe pocket reminded her that the war was still on and soon she would have to draw all the curtains.

Sorraya looked at her suitcase; already the excitement of seeing her father and Ayda was mounting. Sweat poured off her body. She shut her bedroom window to keep the sun away but the heat still penetrated, sharp and strong through the layer of dark fabric and black cardboard. Low music from her old cassette player was still playing in her bedroom. Sorraya drew back the curtains, moving the black cardboard aside. Some of the windows outside were already covered in black, either with fabric or cardboard, although curfew was at least an hour away. She turned the cassette player off. Music wasn’t allowed, banned by the Moral Police.

The radio inside her pocket announced that soon it would be curfew, and a female voice instructed citizens on what they should do when they heard the siren; they had to find refuge in a safe place, in basements or in door-frames, which collapsed later than the rest of the building during bombing. Someone recited the
Quran inside her pocket. Sorraya turned the radio off. She drew all the curtains; three layers of them - a few layers of black cardboard would save lives.

She shut the window and all Yousef Abad remained outside, except the sound of the gypsy quilt maker who was passing by on his bicycle.

‘Klaft Midoozin,’ “quilt making,” he called out for customers in incorrectly pronounced Farsi. Next to her, four big suitcases were open, half in order and half not; she couldn’t decide what to take with her. Azerbaijan was always colder than Tehran but with this heat she couldn’t decide if she should take warmer clothing. She sat for a while, allowing her sweaty body to cool.

In the quietness of the room she could hear someone showering upstairs. It had to be Younes. She knew nobody was home except for him and the two maids. It was Ramadan, Hadji Agha and Hadji Khanoom were in Mashhad for their yearly pilgrimage. It was the family’s custom to visit Mashhad and then Tabriz every year in the summer. This summer it happened to be Ramadan too.

People and peddlers also vanished inside the underground reservoir of Yousef Abad, and soon after the afternoon Azan the smell of food would remind the little town that people were alive, and they were returning from their prayers to break their fast. The smell of fried onion, garlic, deep fried eggplant and tomato paste would dominate the summer air, promising a new day that would start with a big feast.

She could hear Younes coming down the stairs to go out. On the way, he stopped to tell the maid when to have dinner ready. His voice came to Sorraya from his second floor apartment. The suitcases were open on a corner of the bed. Sorraya had packed Ayda’s presents: three pieces of silk, two pieces of wool, three pairs of shoes and three handkerchiefs. Sorraya took the presents out and closely examined each of them by touch and smell. She herself had received the same four years ago
when Yagoob’s family sent the suitcase to her father’s door in Tabriz. She held a light blue silk fabric in front of her face.

‘My little Ayda,’ she whispered to herself. The heat inside the room made her pant, she went to the balcony and then to the backyard. The summer was still in the air. She put her legs in the shallow pool and felt the cold water.

After their mother passed away, Sorraya used to sit in the shallow pool’s corner, making small circles and talking to the goldfish. The sound of loud Azeri opera and her father’s crying, and sometimes roaring, was coming from four corners of the house. Every now and then her nanny would let her hold the baby. When Ayda was two, Sorraya used to take her for walks around the pool. When she reached the opposite building she would stop, look through the closed window into the dark building, squeezing her little sister’s hand with both excitement and fear. Whenever her father wasn’t home, she used to steal her mother’s room key from her nanny’s keys and spend hours in her mother’s room. She used to wear her mother’s crepe dress, the one she remembered her mother wore for her last birthday. She wiggled into the oversized dress, trying to hold it up over her waist, moving around, her lace, pink undies showing her legs; the high heeled, black shiny shoes tick tacked when she started slowly dancing to the Azeri music, which was playing on the kitchen radio where her nanny was cooking dinner. She walked to the dressing room mirror; there she sprayed herself with her mother’s favourite perfume, Nina Richi. Her mother smelled of perfume and cigarettes - she was a chain smoker. Since her mother got sick, her family arranged this room for her. Before her sickness, this room was a spare room and used as storage for her father’s paintings. The room was covered with lots of paintings, and her dressing room and two big wooden tables were covered with her photos from when she was a little girl in Baku till the time she was
almost three. When her sickness took all her strength, she never stood in front of a camera. There weren’t any photos of her with Ayda.

During long summer days, when his father didn’t have university students to train, he locked himself in his studio; Sorraya took care of Ayda when nanny was out for the daily shopping. She piggy-backed her and sang Azeri songs to her and whenever Ayda was sleepy, Sorraya took a small quilt and wrapped her sister in it. She stretched her legs and put Ayda on her legs, slowly rocking her as she sang an Azeri lullaby, the only song she remembered from her mother.

One day, when she thought her father was out, she went to her mother’s room; she found her father sitting in her dressing room crying. She looked at her father’s face and then she saw that while crying he had bit her mother’s lipsticks. He had a smear of red lipstick all over his mouth; then he took a bottle of perfume, sniffed it and cried, ‘Mahboobeh, Mahboobeh.’ Her father calling for his beloved always remained inside her head like a constant echo. Since then, Sorraya saw that without his mahboobeh, beloved, this man was almost a mad man.

She knew her father had accepted Ayda’s marriage, as he did with her own marriage, because he knew he couldn’t afford to give them a dowry. She also knew her father didn’t like Yagoob and Younes’s cultural status.

The family had bargained when they asked for Ayda’s hand in marriage. Her father wouldn’t have minded; although he wouldn’t have been happy either. Sorraya knew this well. His financial condition was bad, as always. Sorraya knew that her father wasn’t happy with her marriage, as he wasn’t happy with Ayda’s. But marrying his daughters off into a rich merchant family gave him hope that his girls wouldn’t have to deal with poverty. He knew they had grown up in poverty because
of him, because of his art and his connections with intellectuals. His studio wasn’t a suitable place for his girls to spend their entire lives.

In the kitchen she wanted to make tea. The electric kettle went on and off four times before she made the tea. She felt free. If her in-laws were here they would complain about everything she did; why was she wasting electricity if she wasn’t ready to make tea?

It was the middle of the night. In a matter of a few hours, people about to fast would wake up to prepare their food before the early morning Azan, and all the Muslims who were fasting would have to stop eating till the evening’s Azan. She could hear the maid upstairs preparing food in the kitchen. The early morning smell of food made her a bit queasy.

When Younes returned home he went to the basement. The sound of him shouting echoed in the hallway. Sorraya ran downstairs. “These locks are broken. Someone tried to break in.” He was playing with the lock although the door was still locked. Then Hadji Khanoom arrived.

‘What is happening?’ she was shouting.

‘Nothing mother, nothing,’ Sorraya said. She didn’t mean anything but this was her way of calming down a mother-in-law who was shouting.

‘Mother, someone tried to break in,’ Younes said, still examining the lock.

‘And you think it’s nothing?’ Hadji Khanoom said, pushing Sorraya aside to see for herself. ‘Well, what do you expect? Yagoob is always away and you are always busy. I am upstairs and I told Sorraya to always close the door. We didn’t have breaking in these things before,’ and she looked at Sorraya.
Soraya looked back at her, offended. Younes checked around the place. All the windows were closed and looked as if nothing had happened. Then, at the corner of the one storage room he found a soccer ball.

‘Here, it is those rascals who have nothing to do except kick their football. We have to keep an eye on these neighbours.’
Bagher Khan was standing in the bus station. This time he was saying goodbye to Ayda too. But unlike Sorraya’s wedding present, instead of giving Ayda some of his nude drawings he brought her an emerald ring, something for which he’d had to borrow money to purchase. After the wedding, Sorraya, Ayda and Younes spent three extra days in Tabriz and now it was time to say goodbye.

It was a bright, warm summer day when the coach driver called passengers for Tehran to get ready. He spoke with a heavy Azeri accent, as did most of the voices that were calling for passengers through megaphones. There weren’t any announcements from the offices anymore, which were covered with revolutionary and war posters. The lack of electricity and water made the air inside the waiting area hot and stuffy. From where Younes was sitting he could see his future wife at the news stand where she was buying a magazine. Above her was the image of a veiled woman, her back to the viewer, holding her child up as if offering it to heaven. Her back was the colour of blood, as was the road she was standing on. Along the road were giant red tulips, and above the tulips in the sky was the face of the leader, the saviour, frowning down. Sorraya was sitting next to Younes, quiet and thoughtful. Ayda came for some change.

‘What are you buying?’ he asked.

‘A magazine, they have some articles about interior design. I want to decorate my home like this.’ Then she opened a page in front of him and Sorraya; her excitement excited him too. Already they are planning how to decorate their home, Sorraya thought, the sign of a good marriage.
Younes was sitting under another revolutionary poster, which covered almost half the wall of the station café. The same poster was pinned on the walls of almost all the travel agencies around the Tabriz terminal. Last time, seven years ago, when Younes was in this same place waiting for Sorraya, the café’s name was PARADISE. Now it was BEHESHT, Persian for paradise. After the revolution almost all the names were changed, converted from mainly Western words to either the name of a local martyr or a name related to revolutionary ideals. Tabriz underwent a baptism too, but none of the new names were Azeri, the official language of Azerbaijan of which Tabriz was the capital. A Persian ice-cream was melting in a glass in front of him, a brandy balloon that had been baptised by the revolution as an ice-cream glass. Younes remembered the day he bought ice-cream for Sorraya when they were visiting Yousef Abad.

‘Would you like ice-cream?’ Younes asked Sorraya.

‘No thanks, I feel a bit sick in my stomach, a strange feeling.’

Two young Basiji, the paramilitaries, lurked in the shadows in their khaki uniforms, holding automatic rifles. Soon they were joined by two women in black Islamic dress and the four of them emerged from the shadows to appear in front of Younes. For a moment he thought they were there to warn Ayda, who was now sitting next to him and holding his hand. To avoid attention he took his hand away and warned Ayda with a stare that lasted a few seconds.

‘Don’t worry, they are not coming for us, they are after them.’ Ayda indicated the other side of the café where two young women were sipping orange juice from champagnes glasses. Although she hadn’t drawn the attention of the Basiji, Ayda pulled her headscarf forward to deflect Younes’ warning. ‘Did you fix our apartment?’ Ayda asked in a soft voice.
‘Yes, my parents moved to the upper level.’ Her blonde fringe was still exposed and Younes said quickly, ‘Ayda, move your headscarf further forward, your fringe is showing.’

Ayda’s temper flared, ‘I didn’t know you were Basiji too,’ she responded under her breath. She was offended. ‘If you are Hezbollahi, let me know now, then I’ll give your ring back.’ Her bright diamond didn’t move. He looked at the ring he had given her, the diamond ring. It was difficult to find a good quality ring these days, there were lots of jewellers who swindled. In fact, since the revolution, the level of cheating on every deal increased, but Younes had used the right sources to make sure he had a good deal. He remembered Ayda’s saying at Sorraya’s wedding, ‘I want this box to be full on my wedding day.’ That realisation brought a smile to his face.

‘I can’t wait to reach Tehran,’ Ayda told her husband, facing Sorraya to get some reaction from her as her sister was very quiet. ‘You know what I want to do first? I want to learn to drive, and I want a BMW.’ Before anyone had a chance to respond to Ayda’s obvious ambitions to live a different life in her husband’s home, a broadcast interrupted her.

‘What you hear is the announcement of a red alert, meaning that the enemy will attack. Leave your work and go to a shelter.’ Sorraya touched the radio in her pocket. All the other radios and televisions in the offices of the Tabriz terminal repeated the announcement. But people ignored the warning and continued to go about their business as usual. The four paramilitaries came up to three other women who were waiting in the café with their children. They ordered them in the Farsi language to fix their headscarves. No one responded, either because they didn’t understand Farsi or they preferred to ignore them and pretend that they only spoke
Azeri. One of the Basiji made a call on his phone and immediately another woman arrived. She spoke Azeri and her attitude was harsh.

Ayda moved her headscarf forward but sat three seats away from her husband; Younes called home to Tehran to make sure everybody was all right. That was a custom during the war, each time there was an air raid every family member called each other to make sure they were alive and their houses safe. His sister Ghoncheh answered the phone and said everybody was all right.

Bagher Khan was a dynamic and engaging speaker, and spoke Farsi with the thick Azeri accent that was common in this area. But now, in this café, he was freely talking in Azeri and openly criticising the authorities for suppressing the Azeri culture and language. That made Younes uncomfortable.

He was trying to ignore him but Bagher Khan shook his lanky shoulder and said, ‘Manim gisimnan meatoll.’ ‘Take care of my daughter.’ He was a chain smoker and heavy tea drinker, and so compassionate and caring, a proud father. When Younes and Ayda finally had to board their bus and say goodbye, he kissed his daughter with tears in his eyes. ‘Ozonan meatol, bajovon oozoonan op.’ ‘Take care of yourself. Kiss yourself for me.’

When all the passengers were settled in their seats, the driver asked them to pray for a safe journey. The harmonious sound of Salavat filled the bus when Ayda and Younes sat down next to each other; Sorraya took a seat on the other side of the aisle. In comparison to Tehran, the atmosphere of war was less in Tabriz, but not the religious mood. On the radio, a religious preacher was attacking the enemy, promising glory to the soldiers of Islam in the battlefield. But no one was paying any attention. As they boarded the bus, not only were their tickets checked but also their ID, an excuse to monitor people’s movements. A couple Younes had noticed in the
café seemed nervous. They pushed ahead of Younes who ignored them, but Ayda wanted to get involved. They apologised and sat down, but the moral police and the four Basiji arrived and asked for their documents. They showed their tickets but the Basiji asked for more documents - birth and marriage certificates. When they didn’t have any documents to show they were asked to get off and taken to a police vehicle while the rest of the checking was done. Ayda and Younes were asked to show their documents and were safe. Then they checked Sorraya’s documents. Next it was an elderly man’s turn. They didn’t ask for his marriage certificate but, because he had five big bags of turmeric with him, he had to show all the papers relating to their purchase. It took two hours to investigate him. He didn’t speak Farsi and none of the Basiji spoke Azeri. No one else was willing to help. They found another old man to translate for them and finally, when all the checking was finished, the bus moved off.

The radio issued another warning:

‘What you hear is the announcement of a red alert, meaning that the enemy will attack. Leave your work and go to a shelter.’ Sorraya took her radio from her pocket, turned the volume down and put it back. Then she felt a rush of pain under her dress. Must be bad food, she told herself; she didn’t want Ayda or Younes to find out about her sickness.

The bus stopped and the driver quickly got off. A male voice apologised over the radio in Farsi with a Tehrani accent that it was a false alarm. A woman in the front seat turned round to Ayda and asked in Azeri what it was all about. The driver tossed his cigarette away, got back into his seat and started the engine again.

The woman in front kept asking questions in Azeri, some of them personal questions. Younes and Ayda ignored her; they had at least sixteen hours ahead of them and they weren’t in the mood for the intrusive curiosity of other passengers.
But she was not the only one. Most of the passengers were from small towns in Azerbaijan who were going to Tehran for doctors and medicine that couldn’t be found in Tabriz, or else they were looking for work, the seasonal jobs, especially in tailoring and building; that brought many poor Azeri to Tehran.

The bus had left the terminal three hours late. The sound of salavat grew longer and louder each hour. Some sleepy people moved their lips without repeating the prayer. The bus stopped somewhere on the way and four women and their children got off, their places were taken by some soldiers, unshaven, in dirty uniforms, with arms and legs in casts. The man next to them looked healthy and agile by contrast. They were going to Tehran for medical treatment.

Strange feelings were growing inside Younes. He was sitting next to his wife and yet he felt like a stranger. Seven years ago, when he was taking Sorraya home to marry Yagoob, he felt excitement and happiness. He looked at Sorraya, her eyes were closed, head back. He smiled. ‘She must be tired,’ Younes told Ayda.

The back seats of the bus were occupied by the wounded soldiers. Soon bus had to stop for refreshment and using toilets. It took almost an hour to take the wounded soldiers to the toilet, one by one. When they returned, the bus moved on again to the sound of salavat, and then the Quran being recited on the radio filled the air. After two hours, when almost all the passengers were snoozing, the driver turned the radio off, leaving only the sound of the engine.

Ayda’s head was on Younes’s shoulder - there weren’t any moral police around to notice them. The hum of the engine and the whirring fan combined like a running sheet of smooth silky fabric, and then all of a sudden everything became chaos.
One of the soldiers ran from the back seat to the front and grabbed Ayda tightly, holding her and crying, ‘Don’t shoot, don’t shoot!’ He was talking in a mix Farsi and Azeri, both with a thick accent. His carer ran after him, but the one-handed soldier pushed him away and pulled Ayda by her head, closer, as if to save her from bombing, from shooting, to take her to a safe place, to shelter.

Younes jumped from his seat to release her but the soldier was too heavy and too strong, he pushed Younes away. And then from behind he was grabbed by the big hands of his carer who managed to free Ayda and drag the soldier back to his seat.

He told the other passengers that the soldier was shell-shocked and asked them to pray for their religious leader and to curse the seditious enemy of Islam who caused young men such grief. Salavat filled the bus as everyone joined in, except the soldiers who were watching Ayda with anguished eyes. She fixed her dress and cursed the revolution quietly; Younes tried to silence her with his gaze but it took a while for Ayda to settle. She fiddled with her earphone, set up her Walkman and fixed it under her headscarf in a way that would not attract attention. After checking with Younes to make sure that her music couldn’t be heard by anybody but her, she opened her magazine.

The bus was peaceful again. Younes wanted to sleep but the seat was uncomfortable. He rolled up the floral curtain with the white elastic tie. Through the window he imagined that Sahand and Sabalan were following him. So many legends and bandit stories poured down from the misty peaks of these mountains.

The route from Tabriz to Tehran covered many towns and small cities, all sitting on the flat skirts of the mountains. Ayda was listening to her music. She was also looking at the magazine she had bought at the news-stand. The glossy, imported
fashion magazine was Islamised by blacking out women’s faces, legs and breasts, leaving basically the shape of clothing in a vacuum. Not seeing a woman’s face in the photo wasn’t strange anymore. Sorraya's eyes opened with another pain, but this pain wasn’t a physical pain; it was a realisation that brought pain to her heart. She checked her diary; in the diary calendar it was 1362 on the Persian calendar and 1404 on the Muslim calendar but inside her body there was another planet with another time calendar. In her body calendar she was five weeks late; it is not bad food, I am pregnant.

Sorraya watched her sister tear the samples of Poison and Seduction perfume, which were glued to the advertisement page of her magazine, and put them in her handbag. Younes smiled at her action. They had another eight hours to go.
Sorraya named her daughter Mahtab.

Every day the war worsened. Yagoob used the war as an excuse to come home less and less. At home, as her relationship with Hadji Khanoom got worse, she found hope with Ghoncheh and Younes. Younes was upset seeing how his mother treated his sister-in-law and tried to protect her from the rest of the family. He felt sorry for Sorraya being lonely most of the time. He also loved his little niece and used her as an excuse to visit Sorraya often. But even that was reduced to minimum visits since he had married.

It was Shabeh-Yalda, the last night of the autumn, one of the most ceremonial nights of the year. Under normal circumstances it was supposed to be a celebration but six years of war had changed the way people celebrated.

The shortage of fuel brought the return of the old-fashioned way of warming houses, by using a Korsi. Korsi was covered with four blankets, the top one a beautiful green and orange silk. Underneath the platform was a tray of burning charcoal that warmed people’s feet and bodies.

Hadji Agha and Hadji Khanoom’s Korsi was big enough to accommodate the whole family.

Hadji Agha was the first one who sat a on the Korsi. His body was fragile and he was drugged with his heavy, prescribed medicine. He was sitting with his hand on his chin grinding his jaw; he had jaw cancer. Whenever he moved his thick lips he gave the impression that he was being thoughtful, and he was.
Then his daughter came with their next-door neighbour’s daughter. Hadji Agha watched as Ghoncheh and Farzaneh sat next to each other in front of him. He watched both girls leave their sewing baskets and pieces of fabric on the Korsi; the cuttings that the girls had piled up to make a quilt. Most of the fabrics were familiar to him; samples and cuts from his shop. Ghoncheh and Farzaneh were making a patchwork quilt for little Mahtab. He could smell their colours; the smell of printing ink on fabric was something he’d carried in his head since he was a little boy. As a young boy he’d sat on piles of fabric in the old bazaar in Tabriz while his father was dealing with customers. Little Hadji Agha used to take the metal measuring line and pretended that he was working too; he would watch the customers coming and going; mainly women who did the purchasing. His father opened the fabrics to show them and the women took the corner of the fabrics, testing with their fingers, squashing it to check its flexibility; some even wet the corner of the fabric to see if the colours would run. Then they held it in front of their faces while looking at themselves to see if the colours suited them. His father watched them with admiring eyes from behind his desk. Then, using his arm length as a measuring tape, he took the heavy steel scissors, made a slit at the corner and then pulled the two sides. The sound of fabric renting mixed with the smell of fabric ink became part of his daily life on long summer school holidays.

His gaze returned to this room. Two girls were laughing, pushing one another with their shoulders while stitching fabrics for their forty-piece patchwork quilt, whispering into each other’s ears. Hadji Agha watched their rolls of threads.

‘Do you know how much I paid for this?’ Farzaneh asked while carefully taking the end of a yellow silk thread in her mouth. She wet it then tried to pass it through a needle. Ghoncheh spread pieces of different coloured patches on the Korsi;
he watched his daughter and remembered the day she was born; suddenly, in his mind he mixed up the time when he was a little boy and the time when his daughter was a little girl.

His deep mournful eyes gazed at the carpet and he asked himself, where has that past gone? The sound of an explosion came from outside; he looked at the closed window to trace the path of the sound. This bloody war, he thought, bringing his shaken gaze back inside again. Both girls watched him while unpacking their basket, sorting out the right fabrics with the right colour threat.

He looked at Farzaneh and thought; her decency will bring a good suitor to her father’s door, then he looked at his own daughter; she had her mother’s full lips. He knew his daughter already had many suitors but he hadn’t accepted anyone yet considering her young age. From the wall, a woman woven in a green and blue silk carpet holding her harp was smiling at him. He smiled back at her. The decorative carpet was his wedding present from his close friend Mr Cohen. Both Hadji Agha and Mr Cohen had been friends since they were very young; their fathers were friends too, a business relationship, travelling abroad together to different parts of Asia. Both Hadji Agha and Mr Cohen came to Tehran’s bazaar when they were teenagers. Now he was thinking about his business as always and looking at his surroundings, which were basically a gleaner from his youth; wall-to-wall, light pink Tabriz carpet; a tall, oak glass cabinet he’d brought with him when he travelled to Baku at age twenty; crystals from Eastern Europe he’d bought from Uzbek merchants who used to travel with him and his favourite Chinese-made calendar. In most business deals, Hadji Agha and Mr Cohen were together. They also participated in each other’s family ceremonies. Hadji Agha learnt a great deal about Jewish culture
just as Mr Cohen learnt about Hadji Agha’s Muslim culture. They marked special
days on each other’s calendar.

It was war then too, he told the eight-year-old boy inside his mind. He looked
at an old calendar hanging on the other side of the carpet. His father gave him this
calendar; on a one metre by one metre piece of green silk fabric all twelve months of
the year in a Chinese, Persian and Christian calendar were printed in black ink, side
by side. His father himself had received this as a present from a fabric merchant who
came from Manchuria to Azerbaijan.

The Manchurian merchant was walking up and down the road; young Hadji
Agha was sitting opposite his father’s shop, on the corner of a closed shop. They
were all closed, the whole bazaar was closed because the constitutional
revolutionaries had organised a riot for the day. On the way from home to the bazaar,
the state sheriff stopped their droshky and checked their documents. His father paid
them to open the road for them. No one was allowed to open their shop or they
would be considered to be traitors by the revolutionaries. So his father entered the
back door to bring the merchant his goods. As soon as his father came out the riot
started and the constitution revolutionists and the sheriff’s men were fighting. His
father held his hand and pushed the Manchurian merchant to let him know they had
to run. They ran and right outside the bazaar, next to the hammam, his father got
shot. With the help of the Manchurian man he pulled his father inside the public bath,
where his father opened his eyes and then, without a word, closed them forever.

All the members of his family were home now. Around the Korsi, the mood
was ceremonial regardless of all the shortcomings of war. In the distance there was
war, shooting and then Allah-o-Akbar. The war came inside the house first as a
sound and then as darkness. It was curfew announced by the radio commentator.
Younes was sitting on an old ottoman couch preparing some papers for his father to sign for a meeting with a customer the day after. Ayda was sitting next to him. From where Sorraya was sitting at the Korsi, she could see her sister was rubbing her shoulder with Younes, smiling at him, whispering, and every now and then he gave a small giggle.

Younes showed a piece of paper to his wife, Ayda whispered a few words and then, with an almost suppressed shout said, ‘This is not enough.’

The sound of a shotgun came from somewhere close by, perhaps from the mosque. Yagoob and Younes both looked at their father.

‘This bloody war, these people,’ Hadji Agha mumbled to himself while grinding his jaw. To take his mind from outside he gazed into the face of the harp playing woman in the carpet again. He felt Younes’ warm hand on his own.

‘It will finish soon, Agha joon, don’t worry.’ His father looked at him and his eyes lingered on his face for a while. Younes was born in this room. His fingers trembled when the midwife put his newborn son in his hands; it was the smallest body he had ever seen.

‘Why is he so light? Is he sick?’ he asked, begging for a negative answer.

‘I am sorry Agha, he has been born prematurely and we have to immediately send him to hospital.’ At that time he didn’t know that sending Younes to hospital would become a routine in his life. Quite different to Yagoob, Younes didn’t resemble him in appearance or business talent, but he learnt to like and respect him for his talent with money and bookkeeping. His son’s traumatic birth somehow softened Hadji Agha’s heart. Every evening, when he returned from his Hojreh, he came right here to this room, where the nanny took care of his son, fed him and bathed him. He watched that lax, naked body, moving from side to side in the
mucilage basin. The body moved in nanny’s hand as if she was making a Turkish meat loaf. Then she wrapped him in his towel, powdered him, dressed him and made him ready for his injection. Then Mr Nazeri, the next-door neighbour came and put his old, brown leather medicine bag on the table. He watched how he boiled the needle in the small brass basin, sucked the medicine into it and then injected it into his son’s arm. He wondered to himself what kind of sin he had committed that made Mother Nature be so cruel to him. Every winter he worried that his infant would die from pneumonia; but Younes survived.

Yagoob was looking at his father while talking on the phone, searching those bright brown eyes he knew were once part of his father’s grace, now those eyes were buried behind the thick gray shade of his eyebrows. It was in this room that his father had reached out and pulled his ear. Hadji Agha had pulled fifteen year old Yagoob’s ear when he smelled the alcohol coming from his face. He saw his mother coming in from the kitchen. Hadji Khanoom rushed to rescue her son, cursing her husband with Azeri words. She pulled Hadji Agha’s coat begging to Imam Ali and the eleven Imams, asking her husband not to tear her son to pieces, cursing and shouting. But Hadji Agha wasn’t listening; he pulled his belt out. She screamed and cried, and begged Imam Ali and all the other Imams to break his arms. By then, fifteen-year-old Yagoob had reached the door to run away, hearing his parents’ shouts in Azeri while racing down the stairs and he slammed the door. He didn’t come back home for weeks, but finally with Mr Cohen’s meddling he came back home, where he promised his father that he would never drink again. In return, his father gave him the keys of his business. Since then, Yagoob had run the business and continued to drink.
He looked at his pulverised face and felt hopeless not being able to help his father. From an early adolescent age he did business with his father but learnt to socialise outside of his family circles. Now he looked at Ayda and with his eyes admired his sister-in-law’s body shape, which was tightly framed in blue jeans and a yellow wool jumper.

He nodded to Ayda, held the mouthpiece of the phone with his hand for a while and quietly whispered, ‘don’t worry darling, I have ordered a new car for you. If your husband doesn’t give you enough money, I'll pay it for you.’ Sorraya saw this dialogue, without being able to hear it.

Before curfew Farzaneh went home; everyone should be home with their family on Shabeh Yalda. Now Ghoncheh was with her father, trying to comfort him by hugging him, kissing him, holding his long hands, which were so bony and slim; the surface of his skin was as if he was wearing a glove made of green veins. Her mother came with pomegranates and nuts. Ghoncheh knew her mother’s tongue was filled with delectable curses although she really didn’t understand the Azeri Turkish her mother and father spoke with one another. Her father had a strong tongue but his Farsi was better than her mother’s because of his job. But her mother never learnt Farsi, except for limited words, which she spoke with such a strong accent that sometimes people didn’t understand her.

‘Stop being a spoilt baby. Go and do some homework. Don’t you have anything to do for school?’ Hadji Khanoom was wearing a new set of gold again and she knew her husband would question her about buying new gold. A torment was growing inside her about how to describe to her husband her new purchase but that was overshadowed by how to put her daughter in her place.
Ghoncheh could see that her father was listening with enjoyment. When it came to small domestic quarrels between females in his family, he enjoyed sitting quietly and listening as if he was watching a small spectacle.

‘I want to go to Farzaneh’s party,’ she said quickly, thinking this was a good chance to get a positive answer. It was a good opportunity to go out and probably see Moosa. She knew her father was in a good mood with her so she wanted to play innocent; she lowered her eyes and lowered her voice when she asked a second time. This infuriated her mother because she knew that Ghoncheh was asking in front of her father to get a response from him and not her.

‘Basdi.Yeghicdir. Sahardan akhshama chochlardasin, bas dayir?’ ‘That’s enough. From morning to night you are outside. Isn’t that enough?’ ‘You want to go to a party too. Stay at home and help me. Can’t you see? It is war. Outside is dangerous. Nobody knows who their next door neighbour is anymore. As soon as it gets dark, as soon as curfew starts, these thugs go out after people’s girls, after innocent girls. There is no shame anymore.’

Hadji Agha sipped his cold tea. Since the war had started they ate and slept in a different manner. No longer did their samovar boil day and night. Instead, the maid made a new tea after breakfast and kept it in the thermos.

Each time Hadji Agha drank it he commented, ‘This is not tea, this is an insult.’ Sugar and tea should be purchased with coupons, although Hadji Agha’s money and connection with the black market could buy much more than the government allowed. After she got her father’s unspoken permission, Ghoncheh called Farzaneh.

Finally everyone was around the Korsi. Every leg was under those warm quilts except for Agha Mohammad and his wife Zahra Khanoom, their Tehran
servants, who were sitting on the mattress but were too shy to stretch their legs in the presence of the family. Not that they always respected them; in fact, Agha Mohammad and Zahra Khanoom secretly made fun of this Azeri family’s accent but publicly they knew what was allowed and what wasn’t. It was a strange arrangement because in Farsi dominated Tehran, usually an Azeri was the one who was the servant.

Hadji Agha was sitting next to Hadji Khanoom and his daughter, facing Agha Mohammad and Zahra Khanoom. Yagoob was sitting next to Sorraya facing Ayda and Younes. Their legs all stretched, toes close to each other. Sometimes someone would pull in her or his leg because of too much heat, but mainly it was cosy and comfortable. Here and there was an accidental touch but it was either ignored or moved with quiet, shy eye contact; then Ayda kept her toes firmly where she felt Younes’ feet were. Younes saw the effects of those warm toes in her eyes. He returned the smile. After dinner, Ayda took a wishbone and dared Yagoob to break it.

Hadji Agha sighed a deep ah, and his gaze stopped on the green satin of the quilt on the Korsi, remembering the day one of his sons was conceived there, under the warmth of those Lahafha. He remembered the day that gypsy quilt-maker asked him for a donation because his sigheh wife was pregnant; he was a boy. He named him Ahmad. When he gave him some money, Hadji Agha said to the gypsy, ‘Don’t forget to pray for the safe arrival of another baby.’

He liked the taste of this memory; all his children were conceived here in this room. The weather was chilly and overcast as it was now, but the Korsi was warm and inviting, just as it was now. He rubbed his tall thin fingers together and touched the green satin that had felt like skin on that day.
Early one morning Sorraya was woken by noises. She looked out of her kitchen window. It was a chilly winter day and Fifth Street was covered with snow. In the distance, sandbags trenched the front of their street. Since the war had started there were sandbags piled into trenches everywhere, making the whole city look like army barracks. A slogan in white above the trench promised the enemy an end he would regret. But the woman in the black chador who was holding her child as if offering him to the sky looked as she had before. Although there were rumours that there would soon be a ceasefire and the war would finally finish, the dark mood of war still pervaded the city. Noises were coming from the street, from behind her kitchen window. She could hear her sister and Younes arguing.

It was Moharram, the month of martyrdom, when Imam Husain and his seventy-two loyal followers were martyred, and Hadji Khanoom was in the holy city of Mashhad for her second yearly pilgrimage. Sorraya wanted to open the upstairs internal stairs and check what was going on.

‘Come and help me,’ Ayda whispered to her husband, dressed fully in Islamic covering as if she was going on a pilgrimage too.

‘I told you Ayda, if you buy this stuff you will be in trouble. Do I have to come and get you out of jail? Is this the life you want? For you? For me?’

Sorraya was watching with wide eyes. Five grand pianos, three cellos, ten violins, five piano seats and ten boxes of music books were in the middle of the big hall of the basement. Sorraya was shocked to see Ayda jumping up and down excitedly, taking off her hijab and kissing her sister.
‘What are these Ayda?’ Sorraya asked.

‘These are musical instruments,’ Ayda answered while flicking away some dust from the arm of one chair.

‘What are they here for?’ Sorraya sat down on a chair.

‘I will sell them,’ Ayda answered, trying not to look at Younes. But Younes was trying to make his point clear.

‘Where? Where are you planning to sell them? You are out of your mind.’

‘I told you, I don’t like the way you talk to me.’ Younes lost his temper, his lanky body shaking he rushed towards his wife, shouting at her.

‘And I hate that you lied to me. You asked me for money to buy your BMW, not this garbage. If they find out we will lose everything.’

‘Don’t shout at me. You have no right to talk to me like that. Besides, it was my money; I can buy anything I wish.’

‘You lied to me. You told me you needed money to buy your car and then you spent it buying these. Then I realised that you asked for money from Yagoob to buy your car.’

‘Yagoob lost that money to me, we broke a wishbone.’ Younes was gnashing his teeth, sweating.

‘He lost three million tooman for a stupid wishbone?’

‘Calm down Younes,’ Sorraya pulled her brother-in-law away. Ayda saw that there was no way she could continue this.

After a bit she said, ‘I borrowed money.’

‘From whom?’

‘From Mr. Cohen.’
‘Are you out of your mind? Do you know what my father or my brother, or worse, my mother will think of this? Did you borrow money to buy these? Do you know what will happen if the Moral Police see this, if they bring in the Hezbollah? What will happen to us? They are arresting people for having a music cassette or any small musical instrument, and you buy grand pianos? Already some neighbours are looking at our house. How much did you pay for this stuff?’

Not that Ayda didn't think there were danger involving buying pianos; she knew very well how dangerous it could be. But Ayda had little regard for those people outside her door. Since she had married Younes she had tried to learn about the business whenever she had the opportunity. So, I am part of the universe she was worried about, Sorraya thought, remembering the Shabeh Yalda and the whispering Ayda had done with her husband, being worried people would notice. She wasn’t only worried about Hadji Khanoom, I was included too. Sorraya’s eyes were still wide open and then she looked at Younes. Younes was included too. She had married Younes for his money.

Younes felt breathless. He left the basement to get his medicine. Just last month the Moral Police had arrested a music teacher at the corner of their street. He had lived in the area for more than twenty years and was well-respected. After the revolution, he had been dismissed from all his jobs. In order to survive he took in private students at his home, secretly of course, until one day some neighbours loyal to Hezbollah heard the music and reported him. Ayda knew how dangerous it was to have a basement filled with musical instruments. At the same time, she knew that the restrictions were not as severe as when they were first introduced after the revolution.
‘I know, but things will change when the war finishes. Everything is changing gradually. Look at how the boys and girls dress now. Remember how restricted it was when the war started, but look now,’ said Ayda, trying to convince her older sister that purchasing and hoarding the musical instruments was a good decision.

‘But look what can happen when they go out. Yesterday, when I was coming home from lining up to buy sugar, I saw the Moral Police brutally arresting a group of girls for wearing makeup. They were insulting them loudly in the middle of the road, right in front of everyone and you know what? People didn’t dare to say anything. They arrested them. God knows where they took them. What has changed Ayda? Tell me.’

‘Relax, that happens every day. You think I don’t know what is happening outside,’ said Ayda, raising her voice. She was quite upset that her older sister, who spent most of her time inside the house, thought she knew more about the outside world than her. ‘Yesterday was different. Because it is Moharram there are more moral police patrolling the streets. It will change when this bloody war finishes.’

Sorraya was looking around while talking to Ayda, looking at all the items which Yagoob and Younes started to buy and sell, and now her sister was doing the business. Sorraya sat down next to three suitcases that were standing open on a table. She hooked her finger in the strap of a bra and pulled it out. She held it in front of herself and put it back.

‘Take it. It is your size.’ Ayda said

‘Thanks, I don’t wear this style. Where did you buy them? Do you think people buy this stuff these days?’ Sorraya said her eyes still fixed on them.
‘Pity, I think it is nice. You have no idea how many women buy these things. Out there people are living big time, my dear. Last week I had a phone call from a woman who was asking for more. She is married but her boyfriend pays for it. I am sure. I have found a good business man who brings them from Europe. His sister is in this business too but she imports from Turkey.’ Ayda said, trying to move things to make more room for the goods she wanted to buy.

Ayda’s tone annoyed Sorraya. It bothered her that their survival had fallen into the hands of her younger sister. With Younes’ sickness and Yagoob’s absence, Ayda had taken charge of almost everything. Sorraya knew she didn’t have the business skills herself and she had no desire to learn them either so she knew she had to compromise. Sorraya also knew that without her sister’s help she could not handle Hadji Khanoom’s constant intrusiveness in every matter of their life.

‘Sorraya, listen to me. Your husband is never around and mine is not well. We didn’t follow-up on our education. This job is the only way we can survive. These keys are the only things we have.’ She shook the heavy bundle of keys in front of Sorraya’s eyes. ‘These are our key to the future, but unfortunately that old witch has the same set of keys. The other day, I saw our dear mother-in-law bring one of Hadji Agha’s old friends in and she sold a good deal of velvet to him. I am sure the expensive gold jewellery she purchased was from this money, our joint money, our family money. Whatever is accumulated here belongs to us as well, but she steals from us and buys gold for herself.’

Ayda stopped to check her sister’s reaction. She was expecting Sorraya’s reaction to be different from hers but to her surprise her older sister was on her side.
‘I noticed that too. When I told her that her new jewellery was beautiful, she quickly commented that it was not new. And also she is travelling to Karbala regularly. I am sure she is up to something.’

‘She is an old witch and she is a pretentious hypocrite too. Whenever it suits her she is religious, but she is only a liar who is after the goods in this basement. The danger is that she has keys to all the doors, so whenever we are not around, she brings buyers and sells our goods and then immediately buys gold because nobody knows how much gold she has and she can claim it is all hers. Sorraya, we have to watch her,’ Ayda said breathlessly.

Ayda was right. The sisters had left school too early, her husband was never around and Younes was so sick that both sisters knew there wasn’t any hope for his health. The cost of living was rising like those ugly high-rises going up in the streets of Yousef Abad. Although she didn’t know anything about business, and had no interest in it, Sorraya had seen enough to now agree with her sister.

‘You are right,’ said Sorraya, watching her sister try all the locks with the heavy bundle of keys to make sure they were locked properly. When she had made sure that all the doors were locked, Ayda turned to Sorraya.

‘One day, when this situation changes, I will sell these grand pianos for ten times more.’

The snow was covering the courtyard with a thick white fabric. Sorraya felt tired. It was already six o’clock in the morning but it was still dark.

‘Come and help me, we have to clear the way. In the evening more merchandise is coming,’ said Ayda, rolling up the sleeves of her thick woollen jumper.
Sorraya thought to herself, how close our lives always were and are. We’re more than two sisters.

She whispered, ‘Once I was your mother too.’

‘Are you talking to yourself?’ said Ayda with a smile on her face. ‘You still do that, don’t you?’

‘What?’

‘Talk to yourself. I remember when we were kids you used to do that. On the way to school you used to talk to yourself, as if you wanted to remember things.’

Sorraya was surprised and pleased that Ayda was talking about the past. She knew that Ayda didn’t like the way they used to live. Their father’s lack of ability to make a good living didn’t bother Sorraya much but Ayda hated to be teased at school for being poor and dressing shabbily. Now Sorraya observed her sister’s eagerness to control the financial life of the household. It was her revenge. It wasn’t easy for Sorraya, yet at the same time she couldn’t help but admire her sister’s ability as a businesswoman. But a sense of resentment was part of her feelings too.

In the hallway inside the basement was a big whiteboard where she pinned her invoices and the list of lay-bys. Sorraya looked at the amounts closely.

‘Do you trust these guys? This is a big amount. Isn’t it better you sell in cash? Look how much they talk in the news about con men. Bad cheques, they might not give you your money.’

‘They will pay, trust me. They need me as much as I need them,’ said Ayda, now standing on a chair to pile up some pharmaceutical boxes. ‘They will pay.’ Her sister’s confidence was reassuring.

‘And this stuff, how do you know what will sell and what won’t?’
‘Azizeh delam,’ ‘my dear,’ everything sells in Yousef Abad. ‘As sheer-e morgh gerefteh ta jooneh adamizad,’ ‘from the chicken’s milk to the human life.’

‘Where have you learnt all this?’ Sorraya asked. Ayda came close and whispered into her sister’s ear.

‘Don’t you know how much I hated being poor? This is my passion. See, your sister is a smart learner.’

‘Indeed, I never doubted my little sister was smart, but this is more than that. You’ve become cunning and sharp. I have to admit, I feel I have lost the Ayda I once knew.’ She meant; I have lost the Ayda I raised. At this point Ayda could see how uncomfortable her older sister was. Not that she believed she had done or said anything wrong but nevertheless she thought she had to justify herself to Sorraya.

‘When we were children, we were like any other children of our time. But times have changed. We can’t categorise people as either angels or demons. War and revolution have stolen happiness from us. These days, this new generation prefers today rather than tomorrow. To be honest with you, I would do the same if I was their age. See all these goods? I am collecting them because I am scared that one day I will wake up and the cost of one injection for Younes will be a hundred times higher than it is today. That’s why, I am warning you again: this despicable woman would leave us on the streets with nothing if she could. We should be careful.’

For a while both sisters sat in the basement’s corridor and chatted while the outside air came through the window bringing the chill inside, but there was promise in this basement. These days, when there were shortages of almost everything - fuel to heat the house, power to light the house, medicine for Younes - the basement was a haven for the Azeri sisters, a terrestrial heaven to which Ayda held the key in her hand.
When finally Ayda locked the doors, the sun was up and sparrows were chirping on the snowy branches. Both sisters were on the stairs where the radio in Sorraya’s pocket announced a bombardment warning and immediately the sound of sirens broke into the early morning quiet of Yousef Abad. As they ran, Ayda became breathless and sat on the stairs.

‘Are you ok? Let's go.’ Sorraya was pulling her sister’s arm but Ayda pulled her arm out.

‘I am pregnant,’ Ayda said.

‘Really?’ Sorraya said, sitting down next to her sister, smiling. ‘Ah, wonderful, man khaleh misham.’ The idea of being an auntie excited her.

Ayda said, ‘Don’t tell Younes.’ Sorraya stared at her. ‘I haven’t told him yet.’ There was the sound of bombing. Both sisters ran towards their apartments.
By now, some high-ranking clergy, who were once part of the structure of the Islamic revolution, were under house arrest. But Sorraya was facing another challenge, her daughter, Mahtab, was sick. Younes had spent hours at the black market and finally found some medicine for her. Sorraya didn’t trust the calendars but even by the Western calendar this medicine was too old to be used on her baby. So, seeing her baby was melting and evaporating like a volatile precious perfume, she called Younes and Ayda for help.

Only sparrows continued their way of life. It was only sparrows who knew that it was spring and they had to fly again as a group and sing their prehistoric songs in the free air of the tall poplar trees’ green leaves. Sorraya couldn’t see them but she could hear their everlasting cry behind her thick layers of curtain. It took two days till Mahtab’s colour returned to normal. One night Sorraya wrapped little Mahtab in a blanket and went to the roof-top.

Before the revolution, as soon as the first breeze of warm air came the people of Yousef Abad would use their roof-tops as a gathering point. And on summer nights they slept there. Since the war started, they gathered on the roof tops if there was a spectacle, shouting *Allah-o-Akbar, Khomeini rahbar*, or just watching the sky and listening to the sounds of the bombing. It was as if in the dark they wanted to see the face of their enemy.

When she arrived at the door to the rooftop she found it open. It was difficult to see in the dark as the entire street and house lights were turned off. But gradually
she could make out a shape - it was Younes sitting on the bricked edge. She could identify Younes by his slim body and he noticed her arrival too. From far away came the sound of shooting and explosives; they both ignored it as those sounds had become part of life now.

‘What are you doing here?’ they both asked at the same time.

‘Come on, sit here,’ Younes offered her a place next to him while asking to hold Mahtab, covering her fragile face with a corner of the soft wool shawl.

‘You scared us, you little beauty,’ Younes said.

‘She scared us but thank God her fever has settled now,’ Sorraya said, while trying to sit on the brick edge. The edge had a space of about forty centimetres.

Finally they both sat on the edge and put the baby on a wooden chair next to them. They sat for a while, listening to the far away sounds; the fading Allah-o-akbar, the sounds of passing cars, sudden gun shots, crying babies. One by one the babies quietened, and the force of the dark night plunged the ordinary life into beds so they were tucked in till tomorrow, another day, another struggle.

‘Why are you here?’ Sorraya asked Younes, knowing that he'd had another argument with her sister.

‘I just need some alone time,’ Younes said, kissing his niece.

‘Why are you and Ayda arguing all the time?’ Sorraya was watching how tender Younes was with Mahtab. Younes didn’t answer. They looked at their neighbourhood; their dear Yousef Abad had been transformed. Some points or signals they could recognise - the barracks, which before the revolution was home to many soldiers who were serving their two years compulsory duty, those who were not from Tehran. These days it had been transformed into one of the main stations that managed the events organised by Hezbollah in the old hospital on the other side.
of the main road with a Red Cross sign on it. They could see the two minarets of Imam Amir Al Moamenin mosque, their close neighbours and the moonlight reflected in Nahid’s shallow backyard pool. The scent of violet bushes, which people planted in their garden every spring, was in the air as well as the smell of roses, which blossomed in the spring and reached full flower in the summer. Yousef Abad was quiet now but every day the queue for food and fuel was getting longer, and the trust people had developed in the early days of the revolution was fading away with the ongoing war. The fear of being spied on, being watched and being arrested in the silence of the night was back again. The freedom people felt was short-lived and what replaced it was even more horrifying than before the revolution. It was as if the whole country was laced with invisible razors.

As night progressed, the noise outside disappeared and the moonlight fanned out as if to protect them. The weather became colder. The baby started crying.

‘I better take her downstairs.’ Younes looked at Sorraya who was fixing Mahtab’s blanket.

‘Sorraya, I think I have made a mistake,’ Sorraya was watching him. ‘Marrying Ayda, we made a mistake.’ She sighed and pressed Mahtab harder to her chest.

‘I think there is a way to fix a bad marriage. All marriages in one way or another are wrong, you have one and I have one. Marriage comes with a white package of dresses and parties to seal the darkness. We are supposed to make it work somehow but we don’t know this at the beginning.’ She looked at Younes who was sitting quietly, more engaged with Mahtab than her.

‘Happiness is the lure; we are all doing this to be ‘Khoshbakht,’ ‘for prosperity.’ Her sarcasm remained without response too. Younes moved closer to
Sorraya; brushed his hand against hers. Sorraya pulled herself away, pretending not to know his intentions. ‘I have a kid. That changes everything. I don’t know how, maybe because of our responsibility.’

‘Kids are not the only ones who have the right to live.’ He quickly came off from where he was sitting and held Sorraya. This time she didn’t have a chance to pretend that she didn’t understand his intention; so she quickly said:

‘Yagoob is my husband,’ she shivered. ‘He is my husband and he is your brother.’ She rushed towards the steps and turned back. ‘Ayda is my sister, Younes. Ayda, your wife, is my sister.’ And she disappeared into the dark. He ran after her.

At the doorway, where there was a landing for the steps, he said with a lowered voice, ‘Sorraya, I am sorry.’ Sorraya had disappeared into the darkness but he knew she had heard him.

He sat down on the edge again. The red light of Imam Amir Al Moamenin mosque was the only light he could see. On the other side of the street a baby started crying; a light went on. ‘Khamoosh kon. Khamosh kon oon cherageh lamassabro khamoosh kon,’ it was the voice of a man, swearing and asking for the lights to be turned off. It was four am and cold. He listened to the silence. The neighbourhood he knew was submerged in total darkness. The only point not affected by this war was Mount Toechal with its peak still covered with snow. In the dark it looked more like a lighthouse than a mountain peak.

Younes’ mind was boiling although his body was getting cold. Since their bus trip from Azerbaijan to Tehran his emotions had tormented him but at least he could lock them inside his head. Like those soldiers on the frontline who were playing with danger.

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He went back downstairs. For a while he stood outside Sorraya’s door, listening.

There was no noise but a small light from a candle made a line under the door so she still had to be awake. When he returned to his room, it was still dark. It was time for morning *Azan*. His bed was warm from Ayda’s body. He took his shoes off, his toes were frozen.
When Mahtab ran ahead of her mother to reach the bell on her uncle and auntie’s door, Sorraya stopped on the landing between the two apartments to close the big glass window. The cleaner had finished cleaning all the windows and hallways for the coming of the Persian New Year. The last two days of snow had left a chill in the air. Four boys were kicking a ball against the wall. Through the crisp, clean air the peak of Mount Toechal was sparkling as if it was a giant diamond made of snow and ice. Sorraya looked at one of the buildings that had been damaged by the last heavy bombing. The top floor of the three-storey building was damaged; the family had left when their home was destroyed. On the other two floors, women were cleaning the windows, preparing their homes for New Year. When Sorraya reached Ayda’s door, Mahtab was already in.

Younes was sitting next to the grand piano in an umbrella of bright sunlight from the large windows in the living room, which opened onto the Tabrizi green colour carpet, holding his baby son Maziar. A Mother Care blue blanket was spread on the floor with two bottles, three Bugs Bunny bibs and a bag of dummies, all with Mickey Mouse printed on them. Ayda had paid a local post office employee to make sure he delivered her parcel intact, without opening it and taking stuff out of it. The smell of baby powder, milk and baby wash saturated the large living room.

Little Maziar was two months old now and had a mild flu. Younes gave him the milk first and then he gently mashed a baby aspirin in the belly of a spoon and gave it to his baby. The toothless lips took them, and the soft forehead crumpled. With a Mickey Mouse handkerchief he cleaned Maziar’s mouth. Mahtab was sitting
beside her uncle watching her little cousin, sometimes touching those little fingers, which looked like baby octopus.

Sorraya was almost five years old when she watched her father feeding little Ayda. She was constantly asking her dad to let her hold her little sister and whenever she had a chance she would put her hand over Bagher Khan’s big hand and pretend that she was helping to feed Ayda. Sorraya’s mother was in her pink silk robe, walking around slowly. In the last few weeks she had said she felt better. To Sorraya she looked much weaker than before and soon after Ayda’s birth, their mother lost a lot of weight, but still her big green eyes glowed and her cheekbones looked sharper than ever. Every now and then, while holding onto the table, she would caress Sorraya’s head.

Bagher Khan was smiling while feeding his little girl, ‘Sannan bi balaja giz manim gozimin nooroozooz,’ ‘You and this little girl are the light of my eyes,’ Sorraya repeated her father’s words in a funny childish way, praising little Ayda’s beauty while putting her hand on her father’s, holding the bottle for Ayda. Ayda’s little fingers were planted against the big island of Bagher Khan’s hand, playfully making sounds while drinking the milk. Those days Sorraya’s father spent most of his time with his family; he didn’t let many people come to visit because of his wife’s health. Ayda was one year old when their mother died.

After their mother passed away, Sorraya used to sit in the corner of the shallow pool, making small circles and talking to the goldfish. The sound of loud Azeri opera and her father’s crying, and sometimes roaring, came from four corners of the house. Every now and then her nanny would let her hold the baby. When Ayda was two, Sorraya used to take her for walks around the pool and when she reached the opposite building she stopped, looking through a closed window into the dark
building, squeezing her little sister’s hand with both excitement and fear. Whenever her father wasn’t home, she would steal the key to her mother’s room from her nanny’s keys and spend hours in there. She used to wear her mother’s crepe dress, the one she remembered her mother wearing for her last birthday. She wiggled into the oversized dress, trying to hold it up over her waist, moving around, her lace pink undies showing her long legs; the high heeled, black shiny shoes tick tacked when she slowly started dancing to the Azeri music, which was playing on the kitchen radio where her nanny was cooking dinner. She walked to the dressing room mirror where she sprayed herself with her mother’s perfume. Her mother smelled of perfume and cigarettes; she had been a chain smoker. Her family had arranged this room for her since her mother had become sick. Before her sickness this was a spare room and used as storage for her father’s paintings. The room was hung with lots of paintings, and two big wooden tables were covered with her mother's photos from when she was a little girl in Baku till the time Sorraya was almost four. When her sickness took all her strength, she never stood in front of a camera again. There weren’t any photos of her with Ayda.

Younes had the baby on his shoulder, tapping little Maziar’s back for burping. Sorraya watched how carefully he touched his baby’s forehead. It seemed to her that as a father Younes had strength. When Sorraya decided to go back home, Mahtab wanted to stay longer.

In the hallway Sorraya lost her balance and gripped the metal banister, her hands were moist. She opened the window. The chill air sat on her face. She took a few deep breaths and then quietly walked to her apartment.

* * *
Norooz had just finished and it was 1367 on the Persian calendar. Sorraya wasn’t in the mood for anything and even without doing much she felt exhausted. She went to her bedroom and moved the corner of the bedcover on the left side of the bed. She closed her eyes and tried to remember when the last time had been when Yagoob was home. She couldn’t remember. She pressed her hands on his side of the bed and reached for the wall calendar looking at the black pen mark; almost five months ago. Then she pressed her hands on his side again, rolled on her side and closed her eyes. When she opened them she stared at the chandeliers and remembered the last time she had moved under him to take off her bra, staring at those shiny, light green crystals. She tried to sleep a bit. Either her exhaustion or desire wouldn’t let her sleep. She went to the kitchen.

She sat a long time with her tea, looking through the kitchen window. The revolutionary poster framed her window. There wasn’t any noise in the street; the footballers were not out anymore. She stared at the revolutionary poster; the kitchen clock ticked away her eroding heart.

It was the end of May which, on the Persian calendar, is known as Khordad; which refers to the God who protects all waters and gives health or wholeness. On the Western calendar, somewhere far away from Yousef Abad, those at the head of the UN and those who had an interest were talking about how to end this eight year war. But regardless of all that, the war continued and Yagoob had been home since the New Year.

Since evening, Sorraya had moved around her bedroom and, while looking at herself, she was singing, the same song as the singer was singing. She didn’t realise that it was four am until she heard the key. It was Yagoob. She moved quickly to
reach him and greet him. The smell of alcohol disgusted her. He zigzagged to her bedroom where he crashed on the bed. Sorraya closed the door and went to the living room. She slept on the sofa.

She woke up in the middle of a dream. In the dream she had a piece of long black fabric in her hand. She wanted to stitch it with white thread but each time she looked at the needle the thread was black. Tormented by her dream she went to the kitchen to drink some water. Early in the morning she decided to go out and on her way out she saw Ayda and Younes. At first she thought something had happened to their son but soon realised that they were arguing. She stopped behind her door, waiting for them to go upstairs but she couldn’t help hearing them. To make sure they didn’t see her she sat down on the floor, holding Mahtab in her arms. Her eyes were fixed on her wedding photo, which was in a golden frame hanging on a big wall in front of her; she had a smile on her face and Yagoob was standing next to her, shoulder to shoulder.

‘If you want a divorce that’s fine but you have to leave Maziar with me.’

‘You can’t take my child.’

‘Ayda, I am tired of all this buying and selling you are doing. You have to stop, are you listening to me? You have to stop. I can’t wait for this to finish, maybe you are right, and divorce is the thing we should go for.’

‘This marriage was mistake,’ Ayda said firmly. Sorraya looked at the wedding photo again. She heard Younes slap the door and go out, then she heard Ayda’s footsteps, walking upstairs, her high heels were rhythmic like a church bell.

Sorraya decided to go out for a walk but first she sent Mahtab to her friend’s home. Nahid accepted her with open arms. The early April air was already warm and the sun was coming out like a giant turtle with hot breath, beating down on the
streets, when she locked the door behind her. Sweaty boys were running after a soccer ball. During the three month school holidays all the streets were occupied with noisy children who had nothing to do but being about from dawn to dusk.

By the time she reached Shafagh Park she felt hot and thirsty. A gardener was working in the corner of the garden. The smell of clay mixed with the smell of a variety of broad beans, beetroot, corn vendors who were selling on the streets. There were a few young people on the sidewalks. She found a long shallow pool and sat there for a while, then went home.

When she returned home, she found Hadji Khanoom waiting for her in the hallway of her apartment. For a second she thought she had left the door open.

‘Salam, shooma inja chikar mikonid? Haletoon khobeh?’ ‘Hadji Khanoom, what are you doing here? Are you all right?’ She was upset that Khanoom had opened her door.

‘San hardeydoon? Sanoon aron evdadayer, man sana masoolam.’ ‘Where have you been? Your husband is not around and I am responsible for you.’ Sorraya couldn’t believe what she was hearing. The humiliation of being treated like a child made her shake with anger. I am Bagher Khan’s daughter; I have grown up free like the air. Now she wants me to ask for permission to go out, she thought. Hadji Khanoom rushed out to prevent her daughter-in-law from fighting with her for her intrusiveness again.

That afternoon she heard Younes and his mother arguing and after a while there was a knock on the door.

‘I am sorry for my mother’s behaviour,’ Younes said watching her face, heavy and upset, and her green eyes red and puffy.
‘She can be quite rude. I shouldn’t put up with this. She has no right to do this to me. She is my mother-in-law and elderly, but if she wants respect she should change her behaviour. She doesn’t see my life is empty and I am on my own all the time in this house.’

She went to the kitchen. His eyes followed her till her summer blue dress disappeared behind the wall. After a while he heard her crying. He went to the kitchen and at the same time she returned to the room with a tray of tea in her hand - they almost bumped into each other. Quickly Younes took it from her hand, almost dropped it on the table and then reached out for her arm. He held her arm and then she burst into tears again. She was sliding towards the floor and he was following her, still holding her arm.

‘I don’t know what to do Younes; I don’t know what to do.’ He cleaned her tears.

‘Middonam azizam, midoonam.’ ‘I know my dear, I know.’

He pulled her into his arms; she stood up immediately and remained still against the wall. Above her head, one of her father’s paintings, which she had framed, hung on the white wall. Her head bumped against the glass of the frame. He gathered her body and pulled her to an empty wall but didn’t let go. She managed to free her arms but the rest of her body remained boxed tight against his. He locked her in his gaze; all she could see was him. They were breathing into each other’s face, feeling the heat of the electric summer air. She could smell the skin of his face.

A footstep echoed in the main area corridor.

Sorraya’s heart beat so fast against his body that Younes thought she would collapse. His face and hair were all wet with sweat and his hands were shaky. Sorraya thought that she had heard the footsteps getting closer then heard a key turn
in her apartment’s door. Her gaze frozen on her apartment door, she heard the main
doors opening slowly and then she saw the shadow of her mother-in-law in her black
chador walking in from the glass door of her room. Sorraya made a fist - she wasn’t
sure what for. To protect herself, to punch Younes in his face to show her mother-in-
law that she was forced into it, or even to attack Hadji Khanoom.

The silence of the apartment was broken by a passing car in the street, the
roaring engine’s sound swept through the kitchen window. And then dead silence
came back. A vacuum filled her ears again and then she heard a whisper.

‘Don’t worry, it was Zahra Khanoom.’ Younes’s head was pressed into her
long neck again. They both remained silent, listening to the noise outside her door.
He moved his head and stared into her eyes and then moved his eyes onto her
breasts. He stared at her white bra lace through the light summer dress, curtaining the
beating heart and sweaty skin. He had his index finger on her lips, feeling that if he
removed it the heart inside her chest would explode.

The plastic slippers came closer and closer on the landing and then stopped.
Then there was the swishing sound of shopping bags. They felt Zahra Khanoom’s
heavy asthmatic breathing. Then Zahra Khanoom walked up step by step in her
plastic slippers, one by one.

When the sound disappeared, Sorraya’s gaze was still on the door. Younes’s
long forefinger pressed on her soft, wet skin and pulled her towards him. He stared at
her.

‘Nobody will come, I promise.’

‘Your mother has my key,’ she said, licking the dry skin of her lips. He
threw a bundle of keys on the table. She felt his body on hers like an avalanche. He
curled one leg around hers, and then both bodies slid onto the bare marble floor. Her
light summer dress rolled up, her thighs feeling the coldness of the floor. His hands were travelling all over her hot and wet body, kissing.

When he left Sorrya’s apartment, he sat on the stairs for a moment, holding his head, which felt ready to break open. Shakily he stood up, got himself up the steps and reached the second floor landing. There, in the hollow silence, he could hear the main door open and the echo of footsteps. He leaned down and saw a shadow receding into the storage area under the steps. He ran downstairs; it was his sister who just came in.

‘Koja boodi?’ ‘Where have you been?’

‘I was with Farzaneh.’ Ghoncheh said.

* * *

For the past few weeks Yagoob had been checking their books and Younes had brought his books for a check. Both Yagoob and Hadji Agha knew that Younes always kept meticulous details but still had to make sure they kept the accounts intact; they had to work with their Mirza, traditional Bazaari bookkeepers. From early morning the four men sat in the big living room, checking big thick accounting books. Maids prepared tea constantly and preparations for lunch started the day before. Yagoob read Younes’ agitated behaviour as a result of the work they were doing. Younes, on the other hand, found his older brother’s cool and calm behaviour irritating.

‘Be careful, you are reading them wrong,’ Younes warned Yagoob while he was going through with a calculator. Mirza was using his Chorktkeh, abacus; and the sound of it was tick tacking in the room.
Sorraya couldn’t remember how many times she had packed and unpacked her suitcases. She looked at herself in the mirror. The long white dress, which had been stored in the wardrobe for ten years, pressed on her skin. Even on the day she wore it as a young bride she had felt like a stranger in it. Other women might consider it a dream come true dress, but even on that wedding night, when she had walked through the hallways; she knew it was her runaway dress. She had to marry Yagoob to come to Tehran to start a new life. 'You marry, love comes next,' she could hear a woman telling her. The mere thought of this advice made her laugh. Love did come but from the wrong door.

After all these years of marriage she still couldn’t decide what her feelings were for her husband. He never gave her a chance because of who he was rather than a deliberate act. But to Sorraya it meant confusion in her married life. Yagoob’s departures from home disturbed her.

‘It is not because of you. You don’t understand. I can’t live here, in this country. Look at this country.’ Yagoob pulled open the kitchen curtain. Fifth Street sliced into their home. He stood there and looked at the children who were playing behind the sand trench. Eight years of war slogans were printed all over the walls of people’s homes. From far away various sounds of daily life were echoing in the air. He looked inside, watching his wife who was busy packing different items, mainly Mahtab’s things; three pair of small slippers, a Mickey Mouse, pink flower shaped roses. The whole house actually looked like a child’s castle. Her bicycle leaning on the hallway wall, her childish paintings pinned all over the walls in the house, some
framed. He went to Sorraya, held her, stopping her, pulled her hair back and smelled it, then framed her in his arms. “Let’s go abroad.” She turned back, her hands slightly resisting his. ‘Let’s get out of this country. I have travelled the world; you won’t believe what kind of life we can have. It is good for Mahtab’s future too. She will grow up free, not like here.’

He listened to the outside noises for a while, and then took out his whiskey, which these days he kept in a thermos. He drank. The sounds of the afternoon Azan was coming from the mosque. The sound of the afternoon Azan was coming from the radio too, it was ahead of the Azan outside.

‘Look, they are turning all of us into a bunch of hypocrites. The answer to everything in this country is death, killing. They chase you till you are dead.’ He looked outside again and almost pushed her into his arms and kissed her, each time finding a new enigma at the corners of her lips. ‘Ha? What do you say? Let’s go and live in Turkey, or even further, Europe, far from this country.’

To all of that Sorraya only smiled, and then started sorting the items and packing them in different suitcases. Yagoob was walking around the room. She knew that soon he would find an excuse to go and have a drink with his friends.

‘You had better hide that before you go out. Mahtab will soon be home and it is not good that she sees you with that. These days even the kindergarten teachers bring a bottle, showing kids and asking if they have seen their parents drinking this. So make sure you hide that before you go.’

‘Rascals, they use our two and three year old children to spy on us,’ Yagoob said, while chewing a few pistachios to hide the smell of his drink. Then he kissed his wife on her head.
‘Now, my dear lady, I will go out to visit my profane friends. When I come back we will talk about our plan. Ha? What you say?’ He wasn’t looking for any answer and, as always, he left home.

Each time he left she thought, maybe this time will be the last time. She decided after visiting her father in Azerbaijan that she would ask for a divorce. But each time she decided to leave him he appeared. This time she was serious.

The house was quiet without Yagoob and Mahtab; Mahtab was at a birthday party. She could hear her sister and Younes through her living room wall; the argument had started a while ago. She couldn’t hear the exact words but every now and then the name of someone would come to her like the smell of a flower, Maziar, their son. She was making tea when the two-tone doorbell rang.

It was Younes, he’d brought Ayda’s presents for their father. She brought him tea. A droplet on the washed tea glass sat in the saucer like a love note. Younes touched it and then dried the glass with a tissue. While drinking his tea he looked around.

‘Where is Yagoob?’ he asked. She just stared at him, knowing that he knew Yagoob wasn’t home. Nevertheless, he asked to make sure. For a while he quietly drank his tea and she continued tidying up, putting things away that needed to be packed. Younes noticed her wedding ring was on the table, next to her other jewellery. He picked up the ring feeling the coldness of the gold. ‘Where is Mahtab?’

‘At a birthday party, she will be home soon,’ she reached for the empty tea glass. Far away there were explosions. Then a few shots, neither of them paid any attention. Eight years of war had made these noises routine. What wasn’t routine was the love he felt for her. The guilt and confusion he felt the first time he had slept with her seemed a faraway memory; it was as if it was another man. His love for her, and
his disappointment with his own marriage, overshadowed the guilt he felt before.
The only thing that kept him with Ayda was their son, Maziar, whom he adored.
‘Yagoob asked me to go overseas with him,’ Sorraya said. When she walked away
her scent went too, as if all possibilities evaporated in the air. He followed her to the
kitchen, when she walked back he grabbed her arm and pulled her to him.

‘I want to divorce Ayda. Divorce Yagoob and marry me.’ She rescued herself
from his hands. ‘Sorraya.’

‘Go, please just leave. He will be home soon.’

‘No he won’t. You know that. He is a ghost; coming in the shadow,
disappearing when the light is on. Why are you defending him so much?’ He reached
for her again; took her small face with both his hands. He cupped her face; the
softness of her skin was so familiar under his fingers, and then bathed her neck with
kisses. He reached her stomach through the thin layer of her cotton summer dress; it
was like a small desert, hot and dry. She pressed his arm and felt the sweat on his
dark hair. All of a sudden the sound of a siren echoed from everywhere.

She pushed his hands away; the fresh air soothed her hot face as if an iron
mask was opened. She reached her kitchen window and covered them with black
cardboard and then covered all the other windows.

‘Sorraya, don’t wait for someone who will never be part of your life.’

‘I was, but I am not anymore.’ Her voice was soft. It was as if, in the dark,
her voice was carrying a secret, a light magic, like those sprite stories he had heard as
a child, which both scared and excited him. He looked at her face under the spray of
candlelight, which she had lit after she'd turned off the light. He looked at the
smartness of her face. He thought, at night her beauty changes, increases with a scent
of her secret sensuality. Daylight is too blind to see through the darkness of that beauty, the mysteriously velvet passion hidden deep inside her.

The bell rang again. When Younes opened the door, a bunch of fluffy softness jumped into his arms.

‘Salam amoo Younes,’ he kissed his niece. Mahtab giggled and then, like a little golden fish, slipped from his arms and ran to her room. Her mother called for her to take her medicine.

Sorraya looked at her and remembered Yagoob’s words, 'She grows up free.' She took her medicine and ran to her room again. Younes’ gaze returned to Sorraya, waiting for an answer.

‘I have to go to Tabriz. My father is very ill. He needs me Younes. He is very old now.’

‘I need you too. I am getting old too,’ he said and they smiled at each other. She went to Mahtab’s room to pack her bags.
The old house was squeezed between tall new buildings on each side. Gholam, the driver, parked his taxi outside and pressed the doorbell. Ayda answered.

‘Just a minute.’ He sat in his taxi, put on his favorite cassette and sipped his tea while he waited. I’m lucky to be working for Ayda Khanoom, Gholam thought. It was almost two years since the war had finished and left many people jobless. He had a regular job when most men his age were unemployed or had to do many odd jobs to make ends meet. Not Gholam. He looked at his watch and checked the front door to see if she was coming. The house was white with a smart black door, matching black window frames and expensive curtains. It was the best-looking mansion in the area. Still, Gholam couldn’t understand why the family didn’t sell it and move to a better area, like the other new rich. Yousef Abad wasn’t the best address any more, and the house looked out of place among all the new developments that hugged together in ugly brick, all built with new money after the war.

Yellow leaves covered the walls of the house and the street had a special hustle and bustle at this time of year as kids went back to school after the long hot summer holiday. After the 1979 revolution, the schools were so crowded that a generation had gone to school in shifts. These days there were family planning slogans all over the city in beautiful Farsi script, it’s a better life with two children’. The driver looked at his watch to see if his own kids would be home yet, then he checked his phone and got back in the taxi. The air conditioning made the
temperature just right. He always had to make sure his car was clean and felt good, Mrs. Ayda had told him. She sometimes used the taxi for meetings with male customers she couldn’t meet in public. That was another reason he liked working for Mrs. Ayda. He could play his music without worrying about getting into trouble. The singing of Ramesh filled the car.

When Mrs. Ayda appeared she was wearing a pair of those very dark, high fashion sunglasses. He asked the face in his mirror where she wanted to go.

‘How come you like Ramesh?’ Mrs. Ayda asked. Ramesh had been famous during the old regime. Rumor was that she was lesbian. She was singing now about kneeling to pray to God to see her beloved again.

‘Is it wrong to like her?’

‘No. I just thought you might like something different. Nowadays the younger generation likes all that new music, you know, the kind that Iranians in Los Angeles produce every day.’

‘I’m a bit old-fashioned. Me and my wife like old Iranian jazz.’ Gholam turned up the volume and they cruised north into Tehran’s traffic. They drove across the city to the bazaar. Gholam drove fast, passing the old cars on the new highway.

‘See, Ayda Khanoom, you should buy one of those.’ Gholam was referring to the cars passing by, BMWs, Mercedes, and all the other Japanese and European cars, which, as soon as the war finished, were imported with the new rich people. It all disappeared behind them in the polluted air and the only thing that remained from the north of Tehran were the snowy peaks of the Toechal Mountains range that stayed in sight all the way to the south.
‘I have to pick up some clothes from the tailor,’ Ayda explained as she
changed her headscarf to something plain, dark blue and ordinary. She had been to
the bazaar before, either with her in-laws or her husband, Younes, but never by
herself. When she came with the family, she had to follow their rules as they went
around the Hojre, the small gold and fabric shops where all the shopkeepers knew
them. Her father-in-law used to have Hojre in the bazaar and whenever her sister’s
husband, Yagoob, was in Tehran, he called on them. On those occasions the
shopkeepers were very polite, giving excessive thanks to Allah and the twelve imams
for the opportunity to host such honorable guests. In some shops they had to sit for
hours while food and tea were served. Her husband's family was respected by the
most important men in the bazaar, which was still, after all, the heart of business in
the city, an important old-style financial centre.

She had learned about finances as a member of this family and was good at
buying and selling, but she did her business in the houses of other dealers and in the
more modern parts of the city, away from the old bazaar. She knew the bank
managers in the best districts, where there were dealers who played with big money.
In the early stages of her married life her husband's name and money had protected
her, but gradually she had come to feel comfortable in her own skin as she did
business, mostly with men. She enjoyed sitting on a leather lounge in a bank as she
signed or received bank cheques and deposited them in her own personal account.
She understood the business environment and that made her proud.

The bazaar was different. Every corner smelled of carpets, textiles and sweaty
porters who didn't look like business men, not like the bankers and dealers in the
better parts of town. When she came to the bazaar with her family, Ayda was
irritated by the formal manner with which they were received. Now, by herself, she was free of all that politeness. In the taxi she had changed her headscarf and her sunglasses so as to avoid attention. She dressed modestly, with no flashy jewelry or costly clothes. She wanted to remain unknown to the people in the bazaar. But as soon as the taxi left her at the entrance she regretted her decision. Her big mantoo, her Islamic dress, made her look small. Cars honked at her, stopping to shout insults. Contemptuous laughter and rude whistles erupted in her face as she walked alone into the narrow alleys where cars were not allowed. She wanted to feel comfortable in this environment too, telling herself she was a capable woman who knew how to handle things. But the eyes of the market followed her on every side. The few other women there wore the long black chador. It might have been wise to do the same but her natural impulse to challenge things had taken over. She felt the stares of the porters who could not imagine why a woman of her class, as defined by her dress, would walk through the busy part of the bazaar by herself.

She had grown accustomed to this sort of stare since she started doing business with men. She felt the implicit threat in it, from thugs who whistled at her and said insulting words. But she also felt that she was a woman of power now, a woman who employed such men. Her old fears in the face of their insults were allayed by her money; was it wrong to feel strong because she was rich? Thank God she was rich and therefore strong, stronger than them, stronger than those men. It did not make them lower their eyes, as would have been the custom when a decent woman passed. On the contrary, Ayda used her power to make them to see her more fully, especially those men whose religion told them they should avoid eye contact with an unknown woman. She forced them to look at her, to respect her in that way, through the strength of her purse. Her power was primed by money and she knew
that these men had great respect for that kind of power. She knew that her money disturbed them.

The tailor's shop that made the dress consisted of a huge warehouse and two offices with windows facing the main road. The main owner wasn't there, so one of the sewing machine operators led her to an office that was little more than a corner of a huge space filled with rows of tables and men operating their machines. At the sight of a woman the machines stopped. In the silence there was only the hummmm of the electricity. Then the man who had ushered her in ordered the other men to continue their work and another man came with a tray of tea cups. On the big tray was a smaller tray with a tea cup that looked cleaner than the rest. She would have preferred to drink nothing but she worried that if she rejected their hospitality they would think she was snobbish and rude, so she took the clean cup and a sugar cube.

The man who offered her tea had a strong Azeri accent but he listened to her way of talking without commenting on any Azeri accent in her speech. There were Azeri accents everywhere. Most of the sewing machine operators in this tailoring company were poor migrants from Azerbaijan and Baku who came for seasonal work. It wasn't a surprise to hear this strong accent all around as the workers asked for certain colors of thread to swap, or for a cutting pattern, or just joked. They were harmless jokes at first but quickly got rougher, with a sexual edge. Although that might be normal in a male dominated workplace like this, it became clear to her that the jokes coming from the corners, the raised voices, the emphatic laughter, were all brewed from her presence there among them, a female. Male voices called out raw-throated remarks and laughed strongly, crudely in response. She was annoyed.
It happened that the man nearest to her was a driver who knew her family. He didn't recognise her at first but after a long sleazy scrutiny, during which he switched from Farsi to Azeri on the assumption that she must be a nanny for one of the children and therefore Tehrani and wouldn’t know Azeri, he started a string of rude cracks that caused a shower of gross laughter to burst from every part of the warehouse. Ayda acted as if she did not understand a word.

After a while the man sitting next to the driver stood up and headed towards the toilet, which had a sign on the door of a little boy pissing. The sound of shouting and laughter changed to whispers and short giggles. And, as if that wasn’t enough, there was suddenly a blackout. It was as if the whole warehouse had gone into a vacuum. A dim light came through from the small warehouse windows. The only sound was that coming from the toilet. Ayda tensed. It was too late for her to find an excuse to leave the room. A youth was kneeling in front of her with a package that had a dress in it. He wanted Mrs. Khanoom to check the dress to make sure everything was done the way she had ordered, the buttons, the size of collar, the length of the skirt. The tailor's assistant was explaining the details and the cost to her but her ears were blocked. She couldn't hear a word. The only noise she heard was that coming from the toilet. The man there was breathing more and more heavily, loudly, fast and short, fast and short, then there was a grunt and the breathing died away behind the door.

It was as if an explosion had happened inside Ayda’s ears. No matter how hard she tried not to look at her surroundings, she failed. She wanted to say something and run out of the place, but her feet were glued to the grimy floor. She was trying to hold her hijab on her head, but that became a burden too. Her headscarf was sweaty and stuck to one side of her head as she struggled to fix it. She thought if
she moved she would only encourage these men. She tried not to look at their faces, their greasy hair, their dirty oily hands, their gaping mouths and eyes. Then, like another explosion, the electricity came back; the sound of machines once again filled the air. The head operator ordered everyone back to work.

The man was making his way back from the toilet. He was gaunt and ugly with a big Adam’s apple and a big nose. He came over to Ayda and handed her the receipt for the dress. His voice was loud, almost shouting. She grabbed the receipt and ran outside, down the stairway with its smell of fatty air and urine, to the street. The evening Azan was playing for prayer. Shopkeepers were closing their shutters and the colours of fabrics and gold were disappearing behind metal rollers. The images of such finery were fresh and alive, of newly made dresses, dresses for bodies, shapely bodies, bodies to fill them and touch them, to be as close to them as an envelope, a tight skin. The idea of touching a body made her nauseous and jittery. As she saw the salesmen confidently closing their shops and walking softly out of the market, she despised them, their skills, their abilities, and their power. Not the power of money but the basic male power of being able to be there and to feel free about it.

Gholam was waiting for her outside the bazaar. She turned on her heels to slide inside the car. She felt people watching her and she rolled up the window - the driver knew to take her home. Through the car window, she watched the lines of men walking home with their bags of groceries, with bread and fruit, and she pressed her body back in the seat trying not to think. She imagined she was passing through a ghost city, holding the dress on her lap, her palms wet from sweat. She wanted to calm herself but didn’t know how. The anger and fear that had built inside her were
not going away and to cover her tears she changed her sunglasses to the dark ones she had been wearing when she left the house.

‘Mrs. Ayda would you like a drink?’ the driver asked. ‘There is a fruit juice shop near here. They have excellent carrot juice and ice cream. Do you have time to stop and get one?’ His face was framed in the same mirror as Ayda’s. But Ayda declined the offer, saying that she had to be home to help her husband with his medicine and washing.

After a few quiet moments, the driver tried to engage her in conversation again. He wanted to get out of the awkward situation he felt he was in.

‘Ayda Khanoom, excuse me if I am being intrusive but why don’t you move out of Yousef Abad? I know a guy who has built a beautiful high-rise at one of the best addresses in Tehran. I can talk to him to see if any of his apartments are left. You can come and have a look at them. I can negotiate a good price for you. Just today I was looking around in Yousef Abad while I was waiting for you. Really, it’s not a good place for you anymore, especially now that your son and your niece are growing up.’ It took a while for Ayda to reply.

Finally she said, ‘Thank you for your offer but no, we are not selling. I mean, I don’t mind. Actually, I would prefer to move to the north side where most of my business is, but I share this house with my sister and my sister doesn’t want to sell it.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to be intrusive,’ said the driver to the face in the mirror.

‘No, I’m grateful for the offer. We’ll have to move eventually. I don’t like the area anymore either.’
When she got home, Younes put Maziar in his bed. The baby moved a bit around the white bed sheet and then went into a deep sleep.

‘Did you get what you wanted?’ Younes asked while still looking at the baby. Ayda pressed the back of her heels and one by one took off her high heels.

‘Yes. Can you please help me to take Sorraya’s dress to her?’ At the door, Younes took a key from his pocket and opened the door. No one came to the door. Then he realised his mistake. He looked at his wife’s frozen face.

‘How come you have Sorraya’s key?’ Ayda felt that it took years for these words to come out of her mouth.

‘Ayda, sabr kon, Ayda.’ ‘Wait, Ayda, wait.’ She ran upstairs, went inside and shut the door. ‘Daro baz khon, Ayda.’ ‘Open the door Ayda.’ He was whispering.

She sat behind the door for a while then went to her bedroom and shut the door. Younes came in and stood in the doorway for a while, feeling a pain pressing in his chest. Ayda sat watching television. Remote control in hand, she cruised through local channels, mainly religious programs, moral lectures and third-rate, heavily censored European and Chinese soaps. She switched to satellite. Azeri music took her to the time when her father used to listen to Azeri opera. The image of herself and Sorraya playing with clay in their father’s art studio came to her from faraway days. She looked around. The grand piano, which she had troubled herself so much to bring into this room, reminded her of her and Sorraya in the basement. With this memory she took a corner of her hair and played with it. She looked at her sister’s photo, which had been taken on her own wedding day. Her long wide dress looked brighter against Sorraya’s dark blue dress, which was standing next to Younes. She looked around her room, this personal shrine she had created over the years.
She felt exhausted and went to bed. She tucked the blanket around herself in a way to make sure that Younes’ hands couldn’t reach her. Behind the blanket she felt his weak, bony body slowly stretching towards her. Younes moved closer to her, smelling walnut lotion on her smooth neck. She felt his desire, his need for love.

‘Ayda.’

‘Leave me alone.’ She thought of the men in the tailor’s shop, the gross man in the toilet. There and then Ayda realised how all these years she had focused on what was in men’s pockets, but not what was in their pants.

* * *

Early the next morning, Sorraya heard a whisper behind her door. She waited silently assuming that it might be Hadji Khanoom. What does she want? Then she heard Ayda and Younes, arguing.

‘You can’t take Maziar with you.’

‘I will. I will go to the court.’

‘Listen to me Ayda. We should divorce, I agree, but I will keep Maziar.’ He stopped a second then continued, ‘You don’t have a choice here and you know that. There is no way that the court will give you custody. I won’t let that happen.’

‘Oh, yes, they will. I will tell them that you have committed adultery.’

‘Are you threatening me?’ his voice was strong and loud enough to be heard behind the door. Sorraya’s heart drained of blood; barefoot, a chilled air rushed into her mind and nausea built in her mouth. Oh God, my God she knows. She sat on the floor and listened to the rest of it.

‘If you say anything like that I will say that it is an accusation. I will tell them you have made this up to get money from us,’ he stared into his wife’s green eyes, feeling that their green colour was washing away behind the thick tears.
‘I will go anyway.’ She was pushing him away to make way to go out.

Younes held her arm and pressed it.

‘Goosh kon.’ ‘Listen.’ Then he pressed Ayda’s arm. ‘I won’t let this happen and you had better believe it.’ Then he left and banged the door. Sorraya opened the door.

‘Ayda!’

‘Leave me alone. I don’t even want to hear your voice.’ She took a step but Sorraya reached her and pulled her.

Ayda goshkon beman, ‘Ayda listen to me.’ Sorraya checked the corridor to make sure nobody listens to her. ‘Come inside, come inside.’ She almost threw her sister into her living room. She knew that there was a possibility that Hadji khanoom could hear them, so to prevent any regret she preferred to be physically aggressive. Ayda, her tall body wrapped in her Islamic dress, was now sitting on the floor, tears in her eyes. Above her head was one of their father’s paintings, framed by Sorraya, hung by Younes.

‘Ayda!’ Sorraya came close to her sister, stretching out her arm to fix Ayda’s hair, but Ayda pushed her sister’s arm away. Sorraya’s hand banged against the wall, pain drilled inside her.

‘How could you do that to me? You Sorraya, my dear older sister, you always said you were my sister and my mother. Why?’ Ayda’s shout hammered into Sorraya’s head. In tears, she came a bit closer.

‘Jig nazan, Khahesh mikonam,’ Sorraya’s attempt to keep her sister’s voice down made Ayda’s rage even thicker.

‘Cherra?’ ‘Why?’ Her voice rose into a loud cry, ‘Why? Why? Tell me why?’ Sorraya held her, pressed her sister into her chest, both out of affection, care
and also to make sure that if Ayda shouted again her body would prevent the noise from travelling. I am sure she is listening; Sorraya’s mind was still talking to her, warning her about Hadji Khanoom’s alertness. For a while Sorraya rocked her sister in her arms and then Ayda pulled away and stared at her sister, watching Sorraya’s lagoon green eyes in tears. ‘You know, I always thought you could protect me from everything; from papa’s anger, from being ridiculed at school, from storm, from heavy snow. You were my Sorraya.’

‘Ayda, I can’t tell you how I regret this, please forgive me, please Ayda; this is the only thing I can say.’ Sorraya was shaking, trying to keep her voice down but emotion was stronger than her ability to control it.

‘I want a divorce.’ Ayda said in tears, ‘but he doesn’t want to give me Maziar.’

‘Oh, no, no, no please Ayda, don’t do this. Don’t do this to yourself, to Maziar. I beg you, I beg you. Don’t destroy your life for one mistake.’ Sorraya was pressing her sister’s hands in hers. ‘One mistake? He has slept with another woman.’ Sorraya’s face went red when Ayda referred to her as another woman. She was upset but she knew there wasn’t any place for her to complain to Ayda for this insult. She went and got her blue folder.

‘Look, I decided to divorce Yagoob too. Do you know what they will tell you? They will say that your husband feeds you and your child; he is not an addict so he is an ideal husband. You are not going to get custody.’ Ayda stared at her sister’s blue folder. ‘Even if you show them that he was not faithful to you, it is not enough for you to get custody.’ Ayda was still staring at her sister’s folder; her eyes fixed on a certain point. Sorraya continued ‘If you tell them that he had affair with your sister, a married woman, then you might get something out of it but it won’t be your child.’
There wasn’t anything else to say. Both sisters sat in the quietness of the room; then
Mahtab came from her bedroom, crying. Ayda left her sister.
Yagoob stood in front of the big black metal gate and rang the bell three times, as was their code, and stared at the BMW parked on the other side of the street; the car had foreign number plates. The door opened to the sound of music. Three days of heavy snow had been shovelled to both sides of the wide cement pathway from the gate to the main building. He ignored the barking of the big brown German shepherd, which was chained to a large cherry tree on the other side of the big pool. The pool was covered with blue plastic to prevent leaves and snow getting into it over winter. He noticed a piece of meat sitting on the plastic cover. He took it and threw it to the dog; the dog stopped barking. Yagoob could hear the beast chewing the meat. When he entered the hallway, he ran up the stairs to the second floor two at a time. He knew his friends were waiting for him and he was late. The warm air in the big living room pinched the chill skin on his face.

‘Why are you so late?’ one of his friends asked as he took a spoon full of yogurt and potato chips after his vodka.

‘Wife, dear friend, wife; you guys have no idea how lucky you are that you are single.’ It had taken him longer than usual to convince Sorraya that he had to go to another business meeting. ‘I only just arrived from Turkey two days ago and she is expecting me to be with her all the time.’ His two old friends were already preparing the brazier for their opium. The smell of vodka and cigarettes was in the air.

‘Here, take this to warm your body. Soon I’ll fix your emotional and family problems, my darling friend.’ His friend was referring to opium. ‘Who was it that said religion is opium for people? Who was that?’
‘Karl Marx,’ said the other friend, tipping vodka down his throat.

‘Yes, him; now dear friends, because in this filthy country we have enough of religion, we smoke opium to get rid of the other opium. Soon we will feel relaxed.’

They smoked for a while then reclined in their armchairs, which were covered with white bed sheets. It wasn’t until his toes felt cold that he realised there weren’t any Persian carpets.

‘Where are the carpets?’

‘In the basement, when my parents went to California they knew I wouldn’t be able to take care of the house. Our maids all left because I didn’t pay them.’

‘Are they coming back to Iran?’ Yagoob asked, looking around and remembering the day he was there with his wife.

‘I don’t think so. When the war finished they thought things would return to the time before the revolution, but now they know that nothing will be the same.’

Yagoob walked towards the big glass window. The house was in the area of Saltanat Abad, one of the most affluent areas in the north of Tehran. When the revolution started, most of these mansions were left empty and now the owners were living all around the world. Big gates, security cameras, ‘Beware of Dog’ signs were part of the buildings in this area. He returned to his chair, feeling the effect of the opium on his body.

‘Even without war this country won’t be the same again; the new government is too strong to be changed. ‘Man be in migam naasheam.’ ‘I call this ecstasy.’

‘Me too, nothing is as big as this ecstasy I feel now,’ his friend said, eyes closed, head back, legs wide open while lying down on a big armchair.

‘Aren’t you supposed to take off your uniform when you leave hospital, Mr. Doctors?’ Yagoob asked watching his friends.
'Yes, but you're supposed to do so many things and we don’t. We've had this habit since the war started. During the war we were so busy that we didn’t have time to change our clothes. Now the war finished years ago but we still don’t change our clothes when we come out of the hospital.’ He inhaled his cigarettes and drank his tea. ‘We were so busy in the operating room that we didn’t have time to breathe. You should have seen the bodies that they used to bring to the operating room, all hands and arms gone. The war is finished now but we still smell the shit it left behind. You know, during the last month of the war I saw hundreds of internal organs in bodies torn open by bombs. I felt like I was a butcher those days not a doctor. Sometimes I had to cut some pieces and stitch them again to be able to cover their stomach.’ He moved to the opium layout, burned some, inhaled and moved back to his seat.

The smell of opium, alcohol and cigarettes made their heads feel dizzy. One of them moved to the opium layout.

‘Do you want more?’ Yagoob refused the offer. He walked towards the window again.

‘Have you guys heard anything from Miss Coco?’ Yagoob’s eyes were fixed on the plastic covered swimming pool. The pool was surrounded by fruit trees, mainly cherry, the owner’s favourite, which all were bare and naked; bones without blood and skin.

‘I haven’t heard from her but I know she is in the US, in California.’ One of the doctors said, inhaling his opium as if it was black breath, keeping the smoke inside the cavity of his mouth and talking through locked teeth.

‘He is right, he knows. He knows because she rejected his marriage proposal,’ the other doctor said, talking in the same way as the first one.
‘She rejected me, but she told me, perhaps as a joke or just to hurt me, that if Yagoob had asked the answer would have been different.’ Again Yagoob noticed the BMW on the other side of the street. He returned to his seat, smoked some opium and smiled.

‘Really? Is that what she told you?’ No one answered. Yagoob continued, ‘your car still has German registration plates.’

‘Yes, I have sent all the papers and documents to get local plates; apparently someone has said that all the BMWs we import are sold to foreign diplomats and you know how suspicious they are of anything foreign. I have told them that this is my own car, I bought it for myself. Anyway, so far no one has responded. I might sell it. Apparently some clergy, I don’t know his name, is interested. They should pay good money because nobody is importing cars these days.’ Then he came to the window too. When they returned to their seats again, loud music burst into the room.

‘What was that?’

‘Next-door neighbour, every night they have a party here. I don’t know why they don’t care about being caught; perhaps they pay the local Hezbollah to keep their mouth shut about it.’

To keep suspicious eyes away, Yagoob’s friends had suggested not turning the lights on. The room was dark, a small candle brought a bit of light inside; two or three candles had been placed around the other room by one of the doctors.

‘Tell me about yourself, how is married life? Let me tell you something right to your face. When I heard that you went to Tabriz to get married, I told myself that you were running away from your mother again.’

The music next door was louder now and the sound of laughter was breaking the rhythm. Yagoob turned to the opium again and his friend burned some for him.
Yagoob felt thirsty. In the half dark room he found his way to the bathroom and opened the tap. The water splattered out and splashed out of the sink. The water rationing made the councils in different areas turn the water system off and on, and this built air in the plumbing. Yagoob jumped with shock, then dried his pants with a towel and returned to the room.

‘Mordeshoretoon ro. Parond azam.’ ‘Go to hell, they destroyed my ecstasy.’ Yagoob said. The doctors laughed at his comment and suggested he have more smoke. He agreed; more opium would build his inebriety again.

‘Yashaseen Yagoob Khan’, one of the friends saluted Yagoob with Azeri words and a heavy Farsi accent. His voice disappeared into the loud music. The three of them returned to the armchairs to let their smoke take charge of their moods. Yagoob started talking.

‘You guys complain about war but I am telling you, you are lucky; you are doctors. But me, I have no future in this country; business is horrible at the moment. Now I realise that I should have gone to university too.’

‘What are you talking about? Since the war finished you are the one everybody needs. This country is so poor and broke that we will need everything, from small goods to big staff. In our hospital we have to beg nurses to get some gauze patches or even a bandage. God knows what our future will be.’ At this stage he lost his patience, the music was eating at his nerves. ‘God, I have to go knock on their door. Turn down that music!’ He shouted; his voice didn’t penetrate the thick brick walls.

‘I saw your wife and Younes the other day at the hospital. I just quickly said hello and went inside, I had an operation to do. Is everything all right? How is his
health? I always remember we used to come to your home and he'd want to play soccer with us but your mum wouldn’t let him.’

‘Yes, he's been sick since he was a boy. He was born with some undiagnosed childhood sickness.’ Yagoob said. From where Yagoob was sitting he could see two glasses of vodka in the hands of the two doctors. He remembered the day his father found out that he went to monsieur Khachaturian’s bottle shop with these two guys. The owner of bottle shop was an Armenian so instead of Agha, locals called him monsieur. Yagoob still remembered the punishment he received from him; first a slap in his face and then he started to take off his belt and rushed to his disobedient, sinful son to punish him. Thanks to his mother’s interference he didn’t. Since then, drinking alcohol and keeping his distance from home to protect his habits had become part of his life.

‘My mother always was too protective of us. As you, my dear drinking friends, are aware, that’s the reason I went to marry Sorraya. Otherwise she would have chosen one of those girls from very well to do, very well-known and very pretentious religious families to be my wife.’

‘Is she content here? Doesn’t she complain about being away from her family?’

They were too relaxed from smoking to realise how much noise was coming from outside. They could only hear the music but not the shouting from the Basijis as they entered the house next door. Then a flash of lights was dancing in the room. They went to the window and realised that the Basijis had entered next door and the street was blocked off with their cars. Then the sound of women screaming, shouting and crying came from the backyard next door.
‘Come on, we have to get out of here,’ the host said, while packing the vodka glasses and opium into his medicine bag. They didn’t have time to clean up and one of the friends went out to prepare the car.

‘Just open the door, don’t turn on the engine, then we’ll come out one by one, just be prepared.’ One by one, they left the second storey and came down to the front yard. Two of them left the building, checking to make sure nobody saw them. The last one was supposed to be Yagoob. As he walked to the path in the front yard, someone jumped from the wall of the neighbour’s yard in front of him. In the dark, Yagoob heard one Hezbollah in the yard next door shout to other Hezbollah, saying that one of the guests had run away. Yagoob moved back a few steps, moving back into the garden. He walked into the heavy snow that was covering the garden and the snow crunched. He stopped and looked back, then saw the prints of his shoes in the snow. He held his breath with fear and stopped, making no noise, so as not to attract the Hezbollah’s attention. From there he saw a Hezbollah jump the wall and, on the other side of the garden, reached the long hair of the young man who had nearly come face-to-face with Yagoob a minute ago. The young man was struggling as the Hezbollah pushed him out of the garden. The whole time the German shepherd was barking. When they left and shut the gate the garden fell silent again.

Then Yagoob heard a cracking noise and a small whimper coming from the swimming pool. When he focused his gaze towards the noise, he noticed a hand with long nails and red nail polish. Sheepishly, he leant over and pulled back the corner of the pool’s cover. When he moved towards the pool the dog started barking again. Then he saw the face of a woman. ‘Komak kon, Khaheshmikonam, komak kon,’ ‘Help me, please help me.’ He pulled the hand. They both stood in the dark for a while then ran towards the gate; the dog was barking and jumping up and down on
the end of his chain. By then the street was crowded with guests from the
neighbour’s house who had been brought out by the Hezbollah; all the guests were
gathered on the corner of the street. One Basiji had spotted them and informed his
friends, who followed them. Yagoob grabbed the woman and ran to the BMW.

'Borro, borro, borro,' ‘go, go, go.’ Yagoob pushed the young woman into the
car and he jumped in as the car was moving off. The car roared off into the darkness
and disappeared at the end of the street. The Basiji spoke into his phone.

‘A blue BMW with foreign number plates, suspicion of being an American or
jasoos.’ Since hostage taking the word jasoos or spy was used by Basijis to refer to
anything that was suspicious in their mind. One of the doctors was driving as fast as
he could and the Hezbollah was trying to reach them in the same road. In the car, the
wet woman was shivering. Yagoob took his jacket and put it on her shoulders. Her
frozen fingers were shaking; she started apologising for causing trouble, swearing
and cursing the Hezbollah.

‘We came for a birthday party. It is my friend’s daughter’s birthday. We were
in the basement because we thought it would attract less attention but someone must
have reported us, you know, one of the neighbours.’ Yagoob felt frozen without his
overcoat but he was too shy to say anything. He was shaking his legs to get warm,
and his legs touched the woman; her long, black, shiny boots were covering her
lengthy legs.

The four-wheel drive was chasing them, faster and faster and sometimes the
car was losing its balance. The driver took a back alley and drove till it got onto
another main road. There weren’t any cars on the road except for this one. The driver
turned the lights off to prevent attracting the checkpoint Basiji. As soon as they
passed the Basiji, another four-wheel drive approached with speed and hit the BMW.
The driver lost control. Because of the speed, the car skidded and hit an electricity pole and then spun around and hit the cement wall of a house.

'Boten birron,' ‘come out, come out’ the Basiji was shouting but his warning remained without response. He pointed his gun towards the car while he asked for extra help on his phone. Soon the two other four-wheel drives reached the car. One of them opened the passenger door at the back and a long, shiny, black boot dropped out. The other two Basiji checked the other passengers. ‘They all are dead.’ He reported on his phone.

* * *

The Moral Police reported that all the passengers had died because the driver was drunk so he couldn’t control the car. But Younes had talked to those doctors family and knew that they were followed by the Basiji because they had attacked a party. In the eyes of the Islamic republic this meant ‘Khane-ye- Fesad’, the house of vitiation.’

His funeral was in Amir Al Moamenin Mosque in Yousef Abad. When Sorraya approached from the female section, accompanied by her sister who was holding her baby Maziar a crowd approached them from the male section. Sorraya couldn’t believe the crowd. Men from many professions were there to give their condolences. Sorraya greeted everyone but the only real consolation for her was Mahtab’s little hand, which was now pressing inside her palm.

The family returned to the mosque two more times, for the seventh and fortieth day. On the fortieth day, in the Mosque the year was 1409 on the Islamic calendar, and the mosque was filled with the beautiful voice of a man who was famous for his Quran recitals. Outside, the chilled air of the last days of winter welcomed her and reminded her that it was 1371 on the Persian calendar.
It was the anniversary of the revolution and, although it was years after the war, the mood in Yousef Abad was as gloomy as everywhere else. Seven years had passed since the war ended, leaving whole cities with crippled young men, young widows and mothers dressed in black. Some families never received any news about their young soldiers; they never received their dead bodies. They simply left their doors open day and night because maybe, one day, they would return home without their keys.

The young people who had participated in the revolution and the war were disillusioned. Not only had the revolution not delivered what it promised, but it had also crippled the economy, leaving them jobless and without hope. Those who had lost their beliefs and their hopes started to demonstrate against the authorities, and consequently were being jailed or killed. And those who still had hope and faith were waiting for change, as if waiting for God.

The days knitted together as people waited. The promising slogans became blurted threats on every corner. Days became as dark as night and Yousef Abad sank under clouds of suspicion again.

At seven o’clock in the morning, the streets of Yousef Abad were already occupied by young military men, who all looked like Imam Husain and Imam Ali’s own sons. The black fabric and cardboard curtains had been removed from the windows but all these young people, part of the militia, were in black. Two big barricades made of sandbags had been set up for tonight’s anniversary of the revolution. Sorraya and Mahtab waited outside for a taxi to take them to the terminal.
The sound of Quran recital was coming from the cassette player of a young Basiji man at the corner. Sorraya looked at his tapes; music tapes, most probably confiscated when the Basijis and Hezbollah raided people’s wedding parties, birthday parties or other gatherings. Mahtab was playing with her Game Boy; her mother made sure that her hair was covered under the dark blue headscarf.

Two Basiji women came over and said, ‘Tell your daughter to go home and change her shoes. How dare you? Our young people went to war and sacrificed their lives for Islam and you ladies,’ said with sarcasm, ‘walk on the street as if you are in Paris. Well, my dear sisters, you are not in Paris, you are in Tehran, the capital city of a great Islamic country. The war is over and now it is time to clean up the streets of those infidels and misbehaving women like you.’

Sorraya looked at her daughter’s shoes, a pair of sports shoes with colourful laces.

She asked one of the Hezbollah sisters, who not only wore a long chador but also a black headscarf under it, ‘What is wrong with her shoes?’

And Mahtab repeated her mother’s word with a more assertive voice, ‘Yes, what is wrong? What do you want?’ Her mother was worried that her daughter’s assertiveness would provoke them.

‘It is shameful for a woman to dress like this, to attract the opposite sex’s attention with improper dress. She should learn to get attention by means of other values, Islamic values. Islam respects women so much that it doesn’t let them appear on the streets in improper dress.’

‘First of all, she is not a woman, she is only nine. Secondly, they are only shoelaces. What do you have against colours?’ Sorraya knew that if she started
arguing more they would give her a hard time. They had to catch a taxi to the terminal to travel to Azerbaijan. She grabbed Mahtab’s arm.

‘Berim Mahtab jan, bayad kafshato avaz koni. Let’s go, dear Mahtab. You have to change your shoes.’ Mahtab wanted to argue but there was no opportunity for that.

‘We’ll take your shoes to Tabriz. You can wear them there,’ Sorraya promised. She made sure Mahtab’s hijab was proper; she pulled her daughter’s headscarf forward a bit and tucked her hair away inside the scarf.

It was five’ o’clock when finally the bus moved off after checks of ID, marriage certificates, birth certificates and any other form of identification. She had brought enough food and blankets to make sure Mahtab was comfortable but the only thing Mahtab cared about was her colourful shoelaces, which were packed too. Since her marriage, Sorraya had never travelled by herself and it frightened her.

She let Mahtab have the aisle seat so she could walk around anytime she wanted to. Soon Mahtab felt asleep; Sorraya put her daughter’s Game Boy in her handbag and pulled out her notebook. In the front seat there were three young girls, giggling quietly while trying to push their big carpetbags into the overhead boxes. Watching them, Sorraya remembered her father’s home and the time when she was their age.

Every semester a group of boys and girls came to her father’s studio for art classes, playing with clay and making sculptures. In the evenings after class, their father made food while the students breathed on the glass windows and made shapes on them, or talked and sang with the statues of Venus and David.
In those days Sorraya and Ayda had witnessed the female models that used to sit in the middle of the studio while their father sketched their bodies, starting with a sheet around them, then gradually becoming half then fully naked. The girls grew up seeing sketches of the naked female body pinned on the studio walls. Their father involved them in discussing how the drawings should be done.

‘Ghizy, najade? Sovosan?’ ‘My little girl, how is it? Do you like it?’ It was mostly Sorraya who had an opinion. Ayda was too young to be interested and later, as she grew up, she basically never showed any interest in her father’s work. She preferred the outside world to her father’s small world of canvases, painting and sculpture. Sorraya looked after her little sister but also involved herself with her father’s work.

Bagher Khan loved his daughters. Both girls were always covered with paint and dirt, and Nanny Khanoom always complained about their excessive access to his studio. But Bagher Khan believed that children should grow up without restrictions, even if this was just an excuse because he simply couldn’t be bothered or whether it was his true pedagogy. At any rate, his way of parenting suited both him and his children who loved to be with him and play as they liked.

In the school holidays there were no workshops. The children would wake up to the smell of the omelette their father was making for them. In summer, the extreme light outside made the inside darker than usual; every light in the studio would be on and a loud Azeri opera singer would be crying for her lost love. You could see for a few metres but further off everything looked smeared and unclear.

In the middle of the studio, close to the statues that the students used for their drawings, paintings were scattered everywhere. The female model had left the studio early in the morning and the girls were playing with black charcoal on straw paper.
while they waited for breakfast. The smell of tea filled the room; the air was suffocating. The colours became blurry and indistinct. The tall statues of David and Venus became indistinct; they disappeared under their cloth covers.

He took the girls out for a picnic, something they all loved, especially when they could sit on their father’s shoulders as he tried to teach them to swim. And then they put their tadpoles into his pockets because he would always forget to bring a bucket for the girls to collect insects, little animals and wild flowers. The girls were his wild flowers and he was so much in love with them.

But it was impossible to be close to him when he was in a bad mood. He was pensive most of the time, just drinking and painting. If his mood wasn’t cheerful, the girls could see that. Sorraya knew how to keep her little sister busy. She could sense something had changed; he wasn’t even painting. He had visitors but just a few of them; special friends who spent their time together inside, hiding under the skirt of night’s darkness and leaving like ghosts. Then one day SAVAK came.

When they came nobody noticed at first. The two sisters were playing with clay; the nude model was sitting in the middle of the studio, their father was sketching on a large piece of paper. The sound of the charcoal pencil on paper dictated to the sisters that he shouldn’t be disturbed. Then three men barged into the studio. First they went to the model, who was still sitting in position in the middle of the studio. They asked a few questions and when they were convinced she wasn’t part of the group, one of them stood beside her to make sure she didn’t do anything wrong.

Then they went to Bagher Khan and whispered a few things to him, which he answered in a whisper, ‘I don’t know, maybe. Yes of course.’ Sorraya knew something was wrong, and she was sure it was about those night-time meetings.
They checked every bit of the studio. Sorraya was watching her father who was being held by one of them. They broke things and put a sharp thing into the wet clay. Then they checked all the cabinets. They broke the clay statues that the students had made during their class; white ceramic dust and plaster was everywhere. The man who came close to Bagher Khan had a gun. He held his gun to his head for a while and then shot into the air. A bullet hit David’s dick; David’s genitals broke and fell. With the second bullet he resisted for a while and then collapsed to the floor. The white powder from the broken body of David covered Bagher Khan’s face, his skin, his black moustache and eyelashes. He looked white and old and sad. When they didn’t find what they were looking for, the men started to accuse him.

‘Don’t think you can fool us. We know your type, you and your communist friends, you stupid separatists. We know all about your plans. You want to have your Azerbaijanestan, don’t you? You get your orders from your northern neighbour, your comrade Stalin.’ At this point one of them pressed his gun to Bagher Khan’s head again. Then they took him away for interrogation. Nanny Khanoom took care of the girls.

Bagher Khan came back late at night and after that their lives changed. They were under watch all the time and nobody came to visit them anymore. It was 1964 and Sorraya’s father didn’t send her to school. Most of his friends had been arrested, executed or had left the country, mostly to the USSR and from there to Europe. When Sorraya was in high school and Ayda in primary school their father was almost broke. He didn’t have a job, his art wasn’t selling and his workshops weren’t popular anymore because of his political involvement. When Sorraya graduated things became even worse. Her father became lonely and moody, sometimes his
moods changed to the point of madness. He would walk around the house and shout for no particular reason and at no particular person.

There was a rumour that Azerbaijani intellectuals were organising underground groups to fight for a free state, for the right to speak their native Azeri, and cultural equality. Their house was watched by the secret police until the revolution in 1979 and the situation didn’t become any easier after that, when most of Bagher Khan’s new friends also left Azerbaijan, going either to Tehran or abroad. He was lonely but didn’t have any desire to leave his home.

One morning, some of Bagher Khan’s friends came to visit him and they brought Yagoob with them. Yagoob was a young, handsome and successful merchant from an Azeri family in Tehran. When he saw Sorraya the first thing in his mind was; she is a perfect wife for me, she is Azeri and she is beautiful. He proposed. Sorraya accepted simply because she didn’t have any plans for her future.

It was seventeen years since she had come to this terminal to go to Tehran to marry Yagoob. She took a cab home. When she arrived her father was listening to his favourite opera. He was smashing clay statues with a hammer. She reached for his hand and tried to stop him.

‘Papa, what are you doing? Why are you breaking these statues?’ He put down the hammer and embraced his daughter and granddaughter. He was kissing Sorraya and Mahtab and crying aloud. Mahtab had no memories of her grandfather. The only time he had seen Mahtab was as a one-year-old baby. When he calmed down Sorraya turned off the opera on the old record player.

‘Papa neynisan? Eshihda englabjonodeh, haryan dolodieh pasdararinarin, o mosiginieh yavashla. ‘What are you doing, papa? Outside is the anniversary of the revolution and the moral guards are everywhere. Turn down the music.’ ’
Bagher Khan reached for his drink, ‘Bale, boloram’ ‘Yes, I know, those filthy, useless men can arrest me for anything. Everybody can arrest me for anything. They are acting as if they created God. They have a claim on everything. Every one of them out there is acting as if they are Imam Husain’s own son, just because they don’t shave and they have a gun.’ She looked around and saw the boxes everywhere. He was packing.

‘Papa, what is this, what are you doing?’

Instead of answering her, he asked, ‘Oh, dear little one, how was your trip?’ Then he pulled Mahtab by the arm towards him, pulled off her headscarf and tickled her. ‘How are Ayda’s family?’

‘But Papa, tell me, what are you doing?’ asked Sorraya, taking off her Islamic dress. She looked at her father’s face, covered with white dust, and remembered the day when the monarchy’s secret police came to this same studio and arrested him.

‘I have decided to go abroad.’

‘Abroad, to where?’

‘I have a friend in Armenia. He has written to me. Now that Armenia is an independent state I can go there. He says his wife is dead too and he lives by himself. He even suggested that I have my exhibition there. Or I can go to Baku, I have friends there and artists are doing well there.’

‘But, Papa, how will you live there? You can’t teach or work there.’

‘Work? Can I work here? Can I do anything here? Can I exhibit here? Look at your surroundings. Since you were a baby I have been working on paintings and sculptures. I haven’t been able to exhibit since you were a little girl. With the previous regime I was labelled a separatist, and with this one, this regime doesn’t value anything except their made up religion and God. Over there at least I can
exhibit my works. They are not accusing me of doing something immoral because of my paintings. So tell me what is happening in your life?’ He didn’t wait for an answer before he asked another question. ‘How are you doing? How is Mahtab? Does she ask about her father?’ Then he put his big hands on Sorraya’s.

She remembered how, when she was a little girl, those hands were her refuge. She could hold them and nothing mattered to her. But now they were so fragile and shaky.

‘Yes, of course she asks about Yagoob. It is not easy for a little girl to accept that her father is gone.’

‘Have you thought of marrying again? Don’t make the mistake I did. After your mother I thought it would be easier for me to live only with her memory, but now look at me. At this age it is difficult to be alone.’ It was surprising for Soraya to hear her father talking about his loneliness. She was always close to her father but he tried to keep up a happy face in front of his girls.

‘What are you going to do there? Don’t tell me you fancy an Armenian girl?’ They both laughed. The studio had been her home and she loved spending time there. She opened all the windows to let the fresh air of Tabriz dance in. She packed a bit here and there. The sunshine was inviting and she loved the weather in Tabriz. Unlike Tehran, which was polluted, every now and then there was a crisp cool breeze from the mountains, even on hot summer days. There was promise in the air here. In the yard goldfish were swimming up and down in the big shallow pool. She remembered how one day little Ayda had almost drowned in this pool. Both sisters were playing at the corner of the pool while Nanny was doing their washing and then suddenly Ayda got excited when some goldfish swam through her little legs. She
giggled and her hand came free from Sorraya’s hold. In panic Sorraya shouted for help. Nanny jumped into the water and pulled Ayda out.

She wanted to tell her father that she wanted to come back, to pack up her place in Tehran and come and live with him. But when he told her about his decision to go abroad, she didn’t say anything. So many things had hurt her father, too little money, too much alcohol and his lack of success with his work. Above all, since the revolution he had lost his hope for the future.

She wanted to ask, why didn’t you stop me from this marriage? Why didn’t you do what any other father would do, oppose my agreement to this marriage? Why did you let me go?

The ocean of wrinkles on his face quietly held those two blue eyes like peaceful shores and she knew she would never ask those questions. She knew he wanted her and her sister to marry rich men, to be taken care of, to have a secure life.

She felt at home, at ease, peaceful. She walked around the studio and when she was tired she took a small blanket and sat in the middle where the models used to sit and pose. She looked at the high ceilings and the windows, half of which had been painted by her father. The reflection of the light passing through the coloured glass covered the walls. Gradually, feeling warm, she took her shirt off, and then her skirt, and then her underwear. She sat as if she was posing naked. She remembered as a little girl how she sat watching those naked bodies transferred onto paper with her father’s magic charcoal. Each woman brought with her an image of a woman, a mother who was always there with the presence of her absence. She had never wanted any of those women to be her mother because as a child she had a mother, an image inscribed deep inside. There wasn’t a single photo of her mother in the house. This was the way their father wanted those little girls to get over their loss,
something he himself wasn’t capable of doing. She wrapped herself in a white sheet and went outside. She sat in the yard without moving, full of intense feelings, desiring rest. The sun stirred her shadow to her right and to her left and then to the centre, as if it was her spirit. When the shadow moved to the centre, she became shadowless, or the shadow became her, translucent, rich and concentrated. Madness, hot and tense, was building inside her. She rushed inside and dressed.

Bagher Khan told Mahtab he had heart pain. It was time for a delivery. He told Sorraya to watch the door because the delivery man would be there soon. When finally the man came to the door, her father opened the door himself. A young Basiji delivered a package and collected the money. He wasn’t Azerbaijani so he wasn’t local; he had a Tehrani accent. While there was a short exchange to make the scene seem normal, Sorraya noticed that the young Basiji was actually making fun of her father’s strong Azeri accent. She understood her father’s passion for his native language and culture.

This jerk comes here, delivers alcohol, wears his beard long, pretends he is a loyal religious person and makes fun of my father. What hypocrites are ruling us? Most probably he couldn’t do this in Tehran where someone would know him, but here in this city he is a stranger. Nobody sees his wrongdoings. They all operate this way, Sorraya thought to herself. He was too old, and too much of a drinker to give up. Anyway, what was the point? Alcohol was the only thing left for him.

Around four o’clock in the afternoon, when her father and Mahtab were taking a nap, she went out into the yard, her favourite refuge. She let the shadow come back again and this time it was an evening shadow. The shadows were different at midday, thick, concentrated and fluffy, but now, in the late afternoon, her shadow became narrow, long, lanky and restless, as if a shift occurred inside her and
they were the reflection of that restlessness. Her shadow was closer to her body, as if touching her.

She thought she heard her father and rushed inside. It took a while for her eyes to get used to the dark corridor. When she could see again, she saw Bagher Khan sitting, smoking and drinking, and crying quietly. Sorraya was scared of the storm that had been locked inside him for so long. She wished her mother was alive to take care of him. She was watching her father’s shadow coming towards her, then it was his body, then his crying, and then he collapsed right in front of her, at her feet.

She was alone at her father’s funeral. None of his friends came as he requested. Ayda didn’t come either. Sorraya spent a week in Tabriz to sort out his house and his painting stuff. She took all his nude paintings and sent them to her own address. On the way back to Tehran Sorraya sat in the bus with Mahtab next to her. The girl was wearing her sports shoes with the colourful shoelaces. Sorraya was watching her daughter and thinking; now, my dear girl, I am an orphan. I loved my father; I am not sure what you feel about yours. Then she thought about Younes and the desire rode with her all the way.

At home she dropped her keys into the crystal swan bowl; the sound reverberated in the hallway. She opened her headscarf, took her radio out of her pocket and dropped it on the sofa. Then she saw that something missing; her father’s paintings. She rushed to Ayda’s apartment.

‘Someone broke into my apartment,’ Sorraya’s breathing was fast and short.

‘Someone came in and took my paintings.’

‘You mean Papa’s paintings?’ Ayda’s coolness made Sorraya’s voice loud.
'Yes, mine, Papa’s. Did you hear what I just said?'

‘Yes, I heard. I took them.’

‘You! Why?’ She was so surprised that she couldn’t find the words; then quietly asked ‘I mean, how you got in?’

‘With your key,’ she came close to Sorraya and in front of her eyes the keys looked blurred and sounded loud. ‘With your key, which Younes keeps in his pocket.’

Ayda looked at how her sister’s beautiful lagoon green eyes, which were always warm, her house of protection, were drowning in an ocean of sadness. Her lips quivered, like someone whose body shivers from chilly water, or someone whose blood becomes cold. Sorraya knew that her sister hadn’t forgiven her but this delayed revenge reminded her that things would never be easy between her and her sister again.

‘Ayda bavar kon.’ ‘Ayda believe me.’

‘No, I don’t want to hear that you are sorry; I didn’t believe Younes either.’ Then she came even closer. Sorraya didn’t recognise her sister’s new perfume but the softness of her hair was still the same as when she was a little girl. Ayda whispered with a condensed anger that made her voice heavy, ‘it took me a while to find something that would hurt you, although the scale is not the same.’ When Sorraya returned to her apartment she started to get angry with herself, with Younes, with Ayda and much later with Yagoob.

‘While I was busy with my husband’s funeral and our father’s sickness and funeral, you were breaking into my home and stealing from me.’ She was marching around the room and talking to herself. She cried and shouted to herself for hours.
Then she felt tired and the exhaustion took her energy. A great thirst was building inside her.

She walked to the kitchen to make tea and while boiling the water she looked outside through her window. A few boys were kicking their plastic ball. On the other side of the street she saw a parked white BMW. ‘Ayda has bought that car,’ she was talking to herself. Then a thought cut through her mind, where did she get money? She punished herself for the answer, which came so clear that she shouted in her own mind, from selling my paintings. She reached the crystal swan bowl to take her key and as her trembling fingers touched the swan, the crystal moved and it fell down. She watched as the shattered crystal danced in the air and then covered the floor.

She saw a shadow behind the window, moving from the hallway to the basement. She knew the footsteps, ‘Fozool Khanoom,’ ‘Mrs Interloper,’ She opened the door to the hallway and went to the basement. Her mother-in-law was there. Hadji Khanoom talked to reduce the awkwardness she felt at being caught.

‘I heard a noise; I came to see who it was.’ Sorraya looked around, walked inside the basement and then returned to the doorway.

‘I can’t see anything. I am sure if there was any noise I would hear it. Where were you when you heard the noise?’

‘Why are you here?’ Hadji Khanoom asked in a firm tone of voice.

‘Because I heard your footsteps and saw your shadow in the backyard.’ She was staring at her mother-in-law’s old face. ‘You see, Hadji Khanoom, I always hear your footsteps. I can hear you from my room, but what you have heard from your home on the third floor was noise from the second floor.’ Hadji Khanoom heard an icy tone in Sorraya’s voice. Sorraya saw the effect of her directness on Hadji Khanoom’s shaky eyelids. She knew that her mother-in-law craved to know more.
and it would ache her mind forever. ‘It was in Younes’ apartment, it was between Ayda and I. You heard us.’ Then she left the basement.
Sorraya and Ghoncheh were sitting under the vaulted veranda in the front yard of the synagogue, watching the wet garden. The two women were vigilant to make sure nobody saw them. The strong rain had washed people into their homes and cars.

Ghoncheh got up and walked on the sandy pathways around the main building while Sorraya sat and watched. Her movements were still childish. That was the way Ghoncheh always was. There was a childish jubilation in her movements that suited her tiny body. Although she would be thirty soon, she looked like a high school girl. Her way of dressing and makeup added to this quality. Perhaps those qualities made it difficult for Sorraya to talk to her about love. Ghoncheh always gave the impression that she was shy and ignorant about emotional matters. It surprised Sorraya to realise how serious and determined she was.

‘Sorraya, tell my family I’m not coming back,’ she said. Then she walked about on the sandy pathways for a while before returning to say, ‘I love him.’

The thunder came again and the rain. Sorraya hadn’t slept the night before. Not that she thought she was going crazy but she felt everything was running away from her; Mahtab, Younes, her husband, the house, her father’s paintings. Everything was running away from her, even the house’s furniture was flying out of the window, noisily, as the thunderstorm roared. Everything was running away, even her father’s artworks on the walls. The walls were moving far away and taking all her life with them.

She remembered the day she had walked here with Younes for the first time, after seeing Last Tango in Paris and visiting Shafag Park. Younes was excited to
show his sister-in-law all the new things in Yousef Abad. This synagogue was one of them. He had reminded her of his father’s Jewish friends.

‘Don’t you remember Mr. Cohan and his wife? They were sitting next to my father most of your wedding night. Their son, Moosa, was playing with Ghoncheh all the time. Imagine it would cause chaos in both families, the love of a Muslim girl and a Jewish boy. Not that it is so strange here in Yousef Abad.’

‘How come?’ asked Sorraya.

‘Well, look at our neighbourhood. Yousef Abad is famous for having mixed groups of Jews and Azeris. How do you tell those people, don’t cross the street because you might fall in love with the wrong person?’

All that was changed by the revolution, many people in Yousef Abad packed up and left the neighbourhood and the country. Mr Cohan’s family had considered leaving the country too. How Moosa hadn’t brought this up with Ghoncheh was puzzling to Sorraya.

Sorraya had an umbrella but Ghoncheh refused Sorraya’s offer to sit under her umbrella, was freely letting her Islamic dress to soak totally wet and glued to her body. She was shapely and beautiful. Soon Ghoncheh stood up, smoothed her dress and her headscarf and took a short steps walking around; every now and then turning to see if her sister-in-law was following.

‘Come on, we have to go home. Come under the umbrella, you will catch cold,’ said Sorraya, trying to walk faster to catch up with her.

‘Why? There is no curfew anymore,’ Ghoncheh said, almost dancing in the rain. They walked around Yousef Abad through the maze of steps and returned to the Synagogue again. The streets were even quieter, with fewer cars and fewer passer-
by. Ghoncheh sat at the corner by the main gate of the Synagogue chewing her fingers.

‘I will talk to Younes,’ Sorraya said. ‘I am not sure it is a good idea if I talk to your mother but I will ask Younes to talk to her.’ She sat back and waited for Ghoncheh’s reaction. The girl was shaking. She looked thinner in her Islamic dress and her quiet crying broke Sorraya’s heart. She pulled Ghoncheh towards her. Then she stopped crying and everything became silent again. Ghoncheh had spent the last few days with Farzaneh’s family with the excuse that she was helping her friend make her wedding dress. The drizzle got heavier. Ghoncheh wiped her face and gazed at the garden.

‘I love him. Tell them I won’t give up till they accept my marriage with him.’ She waited another moment gazing at the garden again and said, ‘Would you do that? Would you give up your love just because others think it is not a correct love?’ This time she looked into Sorraya’s eyes. ‘Would you give up your love for Younes just because you were Yagoob’s wife?’ A shiver went through Sorraya’s body, cutting through her concentration like an electric shock. She couldn’t talk. ‘Did being Yagoob’s wife stop you loving Younes? Don’t look at me like that. I knew that you didn’t love Yagoob.’ Ghoncheh stopped for a minute and then continued with a quiet voice ‘I think Yagoob himself knew that too. My heart didn’t ask me if the man I am falling in love is a Jew or a Muslim. Like your heart, your heart didn’t tell you that if you are one brother’s wife you shouldn’t fall in love with the other brother.’ Sorraya sat motionless feeling that she has been betrayed. Someone has poisoned her secret. ‘For me, it just happened to be him and he is Jewish and I am not going to stop loving him because of that. I am not religious anyway. I don’t care what my parents say. I don’t have any beliefs.’ She paused, and then said, ‘we are getting married
anyway, whether they like it or not.’ Sorraya jumped out of her seat, almost pushing Ghoncheh.

‘Are you out of your mind? Do you realise what that means to your family? Do you? Are you crazy or what?’

‘I know. I know. Wait, see, I knew you would react like this, but...’

‘But what? I am telling you, you are mad. This will destroy both families. Your family will kill you.’

‘No. They won’t.’ She waited and looked at the garden again. Now it was pouring and her voice came through a tunnel of rain and cold wind. ‘No, they won’t. We are leaving this city.’

Sorraya was trying to stay calm. She tried to convince Ghoncheh to change her mind.

‘Look, I know you are in love. Believe me, I understand. But marriage is something else. Just be in love, be friends for a while. What is the rush? You are both young. You don’t know what will happen next. Just stay friends for a while and see if you really want to get married, and then marry.’

Moosa Cohan was the son of a close family friend whose friendship with Hadji Agha’s family went back further than three generations. Both families had known each other through business last century in Tajikistan and since then they had maintained a strong and unique family relationship. Business relationships between merchants from different religions were not uncommon, but these two families respected each other to the point where they participated in each other’s family events, ceremonies and even religious occasions, and, no less important, they relied on each other’s good reputations to make large contracts. Once Mr Cohan’s business had been sabotaged by some members of the bazaar and this had almost bankrupted
him. They shut down his shops. It was Hadji Agha who went from shop to shop and used his status to ask the other merchants to sign cheques to pay the deed to allow Mr Cohan’s shops to reopen.

Although marriage between merchants was often used as a contract to make bonds stronger, and of course bank accounts bigger, these two young lovers knew that theirs would not only not help any bank accounts, it wasn’t going to make the family ties stronger. Quite the contrary, their marriage would be a source of conflict.

Mr Cohan’s practice of Jewish rituals was equal to Hadji Agha’s practice of Islam. Both families paid large sums of money to their religious communities and both received double if not triple in return. They both had strong commitments to the rituals but neither was so strong in terms of belief. This situation was fine within their own circles, but outsiders would see such a marriage between the two families as to mean the loss of everything, which for merchants meant deals and contracts.

‘Where?’ Sorraya asked hopelessly, believing there would be no answer. But she was wrong.

‘To Baku.’

‘Why Baku?’

‘Because we can’t be husband and wife here and he can work there. And I can work too, my Azeri is very good. I need your help. You will help me, won’t you?’ Sorraya didn’t know how to answer her sister-in-law. She still couldn’t believe how blatantly Ghoncheh had brought up her love for Younes.

‘Of course I will help you.’

‘Please Sorraya; promise me to keep this secret. I have kept yours.’ Sorraya was in shock again. Was Ghoncheh threatening her? Was she using her relationship
with Younes to cover her own? She couldn’t believe what she was hearing but at the same time she had no choice.

‘As you wish. I advise otherwise but if you want me to keep it to myself I will.’ Then Ghoncheh kissed her and left the synagogue. She followed Ghoncheh as her wet scarf and Islamic dress disappeared behind the synagogue. As she disappeared into the end of the street, the dark image of Ghoncheh’s Islamic dress remained in Sorraraya’s tired, sleepless vision. She felt dizzy, tired, but still didn’t have any desire to go home. She needed to collect her thoughts.

How did Ghoncheh know about her and Younes? Did Ayda tell her? No that’s impossible. How much did they know, or who else knew? She felt sick to her stomach, lonely and hopeless. Walking the streets had always helped Sorraraya but this time she just kept walking because she was scared to go home.

The rain had stopped. The sky of Yousef Abad looked higher and bluer than ever. She sat on a bench, cloaking her tired, fragile body in her Islamic dress. The cats in Yousef Abad were out and their night cries sounded like loud sarcastic laughter, making her hair stand on end. She wished she could disappear somewhere, somewhere safe, like into the reservoirs of Yousef Abad. She wished she could save herself like the day she had saved the university students. She wished Younes could be there to stop her from drowning in the water of the reservoir. She wished the drought would come to destroy everything, Yousef Abad and all its amazing water channels. Before she had one secret to handle and now she had two. This one she couldn’t even share with Younes. She felt she loved him more than ever.

She kept walking until she emerged from the maze; she was sitting in the Synagogue’s sandy courtyard again. The light from the building framed the beautiful Persian writing, ‘SUKAT SHALOM SYNAGOGUE, 5726 (Hebrew Calendar), 1343
(Persian calendar), 1965 (Western calendar).’ The sand underfoot was loose and slippery. When she reached the old water pump she drank, kissing the lips of those water sprites. Walking home she looked at Yousef Abad’s houses, south and north, at the dirty windows draped with layers of colourful curtains to keep the gaze of outsiders away, to keep the sound of their music inside. It was difficult to imagine that just a few years ago all those windows were cleaned every New Year and light came through the curtains, reflecting a safe and secure life. Now they all were dirty because of the shortage of water.

At home she took off her Islamic dress and brushed her hair in front of mirror, then she lit a cigarette, which made her dizzy. She hadn’t smoked for a long time. The light filtered through the thick smoke from Sorraya’s tired lips. The quiet sound of the apartment was broken every now and then by the sound of the freezer fan, which wasn’t working properly. She put her favourite music cassette on and curled up on a sofa, more like a cat than a woman. She pressed the remote and the TV came on, and then went off. With the rationing in her area soon there wouldn’t be any electricity for the next three or more hours. She looked at the corner where she used to keep her father’s paintings, those that Ayda took from her. I have no one; I am so lonely. Yagoob is dead, Papa is dead, Ayda hates me and steals from me, and Younes is sick. I have only Mahtab, my child.’ She was talking to herself. She felt exhausted and dizzy. She remembered her conversation with Ghoncheh. She was a child on my wedding day, now she is a grown up woman who is in love with her childhood friend. Contemplating her own childhood made her feel sad.

As a little girl she didn’t have a close or best friend. She remembered bringing home a friend on one occasion. His name was Mohammad, a Farsi speaking
Tehrani whose father had come to Tabriz to take up a position in the Department of Education.

‘Papa, this is my friend Mohammad.’

Two big hands had greeted the boy’s shoulders like an earthquake. As they shook hands, the man could see the boy’s eyes fixed on his model’s breasts. She was sitting half naked and Bagher Khan was moving around her, drawing, smoking and drinking excitingly. The whole scene was alien to this boy who couldn’t take his eyes off the model. When Sorraya asked him to go into the yard, he followed her like a sleepwalker. At any excuse the boy’s eyes went flitting back into the studio and the model’s breasts.

When the time came for the boy to leave, Sorraya’s father came to the door with an apple in his hand. He bent his big, tall body towards Mohammad and tweaked his ear.

‘Son, what was your name again?’ The boy was in tears and trying hard not to wet his pants. He said with a strong Farsi accent, ‘Mohammad, Mr Bagher, my name is Mohammad.’

‘Right, Mohammad. Do you understand Azeri?’ The boy nodded. ‘This apple is for you.’ He put the apple in Mohammad’s hand, which was damp with sweat caused by fear. ‘If you talk about what you have seen in this house, I will cut your ears off. Do you understand?’
Although, here and there the Moral Police hustled the young ones about the dress code, the breeze of universal youth culture was reaching into their lives too. Every year millions of colourful Valentine’s Day cards were sold on the streets of Iran.

Teenage Mahtab was sitting in the corner of her room, examining her Valentine’s Day cards, two of them; she couldn’t choose which one to send. Maziar and Babak were there, making fun of her. ‘You girls are silly, so what? What are you trying to say? That you have a boyfriend?’ Maziar was teasing her while kicking his soccer ball.

‘None of your business. How about you boys with your games? Aren’t they silly?’ She didn’t raise her head to answer. Each year Mahtab and a few of her school friends bought a Valentine’s Day card and mailed it to themselves. Fifth Street was noisy. School children were kicking soccer balls while walking home. She finally decided - two red hearts woven into each other.

She’d finally had enough and she wanted to push the two boys out of her room. Both boys were teasing her by resisting going out and kicking the ball. She was shouting and calling her mum. Finally she opened the door. Then she saw her uncle was standing in the hallway, close to her mum.

‘Ah, amoo Younes, please kick them out.’ Then both Mahtab and Maziar looked at each other. Younes’ face was white, without blood.

‘Dad, are you ok?’ Maziar let his ball go and reached for his father.

‘Amoo, what is the matter?’ Mahtab asked with quiet voice, looking at her mother.
'Nothing dear, amoo is a bit sick but nothing serious. You guys go and do your business. I will cook him something and Ayda went to get his medicine.’ Sorraya said. Her voice was calm. She gave him some water. Both boys left the house and Mahtab went back to her room, to her fantasy world of Valentine’s Day.

She wanted to make sure the address was correct. Writing her street name, Shahid Malek Nazeri, always troubled her, heart-wrenching memories returned to her with this name.

The youngest son in the Nazeri family was Malek, another six year old who could turn the street upside down with Mahtab’s help. They also had a daughter, Farzaneh. As in most of the houses in the street, Malek’s family lived in a three storey house. The family was very important in the neighbourhood. Unlike most of the families in the street who were merchants or self-employed, Mr Nazeri was partially educated in basic medical services. He was a kind of mobile emergency unit, a short, chubby Tehrani who carried his medical services inside a medium sized, old-fashioned doctor’s bag. He collected samples for pathology and could do quick stiches on a child’s cut, an injection or vaccination, circumcision too, and the delivery of babies when the midwife was late or the family didn’t believe women should go to hospital to give birth. Children in the neighbourhood both respected and feared him. He used to say, ‘I am the one, who made you a man,’ referring to the circumcisions he carried out on boys for almost every family. He was the one who pierced the girls’ ears when they were babies and passed a piece of cotton thread while his wife or a grandmother recited from the Koran. But the real respect for Mr Nazeri came from his religious contributions. Although he wasn’t a clergyman, every year during the mourning time of Moharram he and his family financed a ‘Tekieh’, a huge temporary tent divided by a long curtain into two sections. In one section the
men who participated in the ceremony of Moharram prepared themselves, while the
other section was used by cooks and catering people to deliver free food to the poor.

In the city of Yousef Abad, children were like children anywhere else in the
world. They were noisy, playful, innocent, sometimes innocently brutal and
sometimes innocently stupid. Mahtab was born and grew up in Yousef Abad, and,
like all the other neighbourhood kids, she loved the place. Although all those
thousands of channels had dried up during the war and most of the gardens that lined
the streets had become nests for rats, still the games went on, especially soccer with a
plastic ball.

There weren’t any secret police on the maze-like stairs or in the parks and
there weren’t any corner bottle shops run by the exiled Armenians who lived close in
Madjedieh. Instead there were Moral Police, Basiji and armed Hezbollah everywhere
to make trouble for children and teenagers, or even to arrest them. Still, Yousef Abad
was a good place to live.

Mahtab heard about her Auntie Ghoncheh when she was growing up. Sorraya
told her daughter that she was the only one who knew about it.

‘The day Ghoncheh called me at home to see her in the Kanise, the
synagogue’s court shook under my feet,’ her mother told her. But her mother didn’t
tell her why she had helped Mahtab’s auntie to run away with her Jewish lover. That
was something Mahtab knew, even as a child, but kept to herself. The reason was she
loved her uncle Younes so much she actually wanted to protect him.

She was playing with Malek under her omelette quilt, a colourful patchwork
of many yellows and oranges and reds that Auntie Ghoncheh made for her when she
was taking sewing classes with other friends, including Farzaneh, and experimenting
with colours.
The whole area was under the hegemony of the children all day long. They could set a bar across the road to block the cars if they wanted to play soccer, or they could stop in the middle of the road because they wanted to learn how to do wheelies, or simply close the road and slow the traffic just because there were so many of them. Boys were the main residents of the streets but there were a few girls whose parents didn’t believe that the streets belonged only to boys. Mahtab was one of them, and Malek was her best friend.

The most interesting work they did was as Farzaneh’s bodyguard. Farzaneh was Malek’s only sister. She had a small attic room on the roof of the house, kind of like an Anne Frank of the Muslim world.

In Mahtab’s house there was religion but it was more related to the big feast at Ramadan, or placing the Koran in the New Year Sofreh, or giving Sofreh to the poor. But during Moharram the family members were just observers and participated in the street marches as a way to spend time with neighbours, especially her mother and her auntie Ayda, who were not accustomed to these kinds of ceremonies.

Malek and Mahtab loved these religious ceremonies. Like all kids their age, they were permitted to stay outside of the home and watch the cooks preparing food in big coppery pots that sat on huge fires in the backyards of the Tekieh. Most of the girls were not permitted in the men’s section but because of Malek and her role as his friend she could come and go, watching the men and adolescent boys getting ready for mourning ceremonies. By sunset the streets disappeared under the feet of these men, chanting, ‘Husain, Husain’, followed by women and children crowding the roadsides, either as part of the ceremony or just listening to the monotonous story elaborated from centuries back.
The men told the story of *Ashoura* by incarnations of mourning performed by their leader, who marched in front of them carrying a massive flag, which needed four men to help carry it. For many years this strong leader in front of the many men was Reza, Mr. Nazeri’s oldest son. He was well-respected too and kids were both scared of him and admired him. They were amazed on *Ashura* to see him carry that massive flag, wearing black clothes and with an unshaven face that gave him a look of both religious piety and a strong fighter. The four men next to him were always his uncles and his two brothers. The other boys, except Malek (because he was too young), took lead roles in other parts of the ceremony, either in the streets or inside the Tekieh. Of the three brothers, Amir, the third brother, was the one who always had fewer responsibilities because of his health. Born with an unknown childhood sickness, he looked fragile, thin and less muscular, which separated him from the rest of the males in the family. He was also different in his beliefs and ideas. Against his family’s wishes he trained to become a radio presenter and later on became a radio producer. His voice was wonderfully melodious, hesitant and mid-range in strength and pitch. Amir didn’t stop there. He was in love with Evelyn, a beautiful Christian girl who worked at the radio station.

At night-time, when food was distributed, it looked like the whole of Yousef Abad had turned into one big ceremony. Men and women gathered outside their doors to eat or talk about the Moharram, or shifting the topic to their daily lives. Mahtab and Malek would be at their usual place at the corner of the street, dangling their feet into the water channels and eating ‘*Nazeri*’, a food prepared to share with the poor and everyone else. Usually it was Malek holding the plate and feeding Mahtab and, as usual, she tasted food and his fingers.
In the Nazeri family, the female members, Farzaneh and her mother, had to be accompanied by a male whenever they went out. Because all the males were busy, the responsibility of accompanying Farzaneh fell to Malek. It didn’t matter that he was six and she was seventeen, still she had to go out under the protection of a male. On all these chaperoning expeditions with Farzaneh, it was Mahtab with Malek. They would catch a double decker bus to go to the dentist and during the journey, or while they were waiting for Farzaneh to come out of the surgery, they kept themselves busy by playing with other kids or stopping their games. They were expert at disrupting soccer games in the street. The soccer ball was treated like a sacred object by some of the boys in the neighbourhood.

On one of those pilgrimages, Farzaneh let them come to her attic room on the roof of the house. The family wanted to give their only daughter a bit of privacy by giving her that room. Mr Nazeri was strict. All the boys had to work as soon as they reached adolescence, not solely for financial reasons (the people they worked for didn’t pay much) but to keep them out of trouble and away from sin. During the long hot months of summer, any Satan, big or small, could boil up inside you, starting in your body, or worse, in your mind and the family could see it coming.

Yousef Abad was growing too, with more noisy children, more soccer games, more bicycles, more runaway teenagers and also more Moharrams. Another thing coming to Yousef Abad was politics. Mahtab’s family would do anything to keep this away from the children, who were not allowed to ask questions about politics and were told by the adults at home not to talk about politics at school.

As a child, whenever she was upset or wanted to ignore her surroundings or be ignored in turn, Mahtab would get under her omelette quilt. She would do it with Malek and make discoveries. With Malek under the omelette quilt there was a new
universe for the two young friends. They played there and ate there and took care of
the cat with the different coloured eyes, which a hunchbacked old woman had
wanted to drown in the reservoir because she thought such cats were evil spirits. One
evening they were eating tomatoes that Malek had brought. The end of summer was
tomato sauce making season and there was a big pile of tomatoes in the courtyard.
The little kitten was sitting between their tiny legs. Malek squeezed tomato juice into
Mahtab’s mouth and into his own mouth, and before they ate the flesh he squeezed
the juice into the kitten’s mouth. They shared everything under her quilt. Mahtab
brought homemade cookies. There weren’t any homemade cookies in Malek’s home
where preparing three daily meals took all day and night, even though Mrs Nazeri
had a cook and a gardener to help her.

Under the quilt they could hear voices from underground, from the reservoir,
from those fables their grandmothers had told them, some exciting, some terrifying.
Cruel adults told children scary stories so they could have their afternoon siesta.
They needed their rest, their quiet time, and they did anything to get it even if they
had to invent horrifying stories about underground witches and demons coming up
through the water pumps to take naughty children to the reservoir where they would
be moist and slimy for the rest of their lives.

Mahtab and Malek hid under their quilt whenever they felt Yousef Abad was
too big. There were so many old women out there to punish them for no reason, just
because their old age permitted them to be cruel, and they used that cruelty so freely
and so easily.

Mahtab grew more towards the reservoir and Malek towards the sky. On one
of those steamy nights of Moharam, when the lunar calendar lines up with the solar
calendar making the Moharam nights hot and steamy, while eating a pastry in syrup
that her grandmother used to make for this religious ceremony, she heard Mrs Nazari screaming.

Mr Nazari’s Tekieh was on fire and Malek was the only one in the kitchen. It was too late to save him. So, although he was too young to be a martyr of any kind of war, the people who set up the Tekieh honoured him as Shahid Malik Nazeri.

A few days later, early in the morning, a few men shouted ‘Allah-o-Akbar, God is great’. The voices came from the next-door roof and went on down the street. Mahtab and Maziar went to look. Fifth Street had a martyr. Malek was the youngest martyr in Yousef Abad.

‘The name of our street now is Shahid Malek Nazeri,’ Maziar said. That night Mahtab went under her omelette quilt and cried till morning.
April 2001

At daybreak Hadji Khanoom walked down the hall to her bathroom. She opened the window and felt the first wide rays of sunlight on her dark eyes. The cold air touched her face. When she returned to her bedroom she rested for a while and then, as if remembering something, she stood on her bed, slid the palm of her hand up and took the wall calendar from its hook.

She felt that since her last eye operation her eyesight had improved but things were still blurry. In the room next door her sick husband was asleep. The doctor had said that with his heart condition there was no hope for his recovery.

She looked through the calendar page by page until she reached the day she had marked with her eye pencil. It was the 21st of December 1957, which in reality was the first of ‘Dey Mah’, 1336. She gazed at the landscapes of Switzerland, and then returned the calendar to its hook.

Hadji Khanoom had come to this house at the age of fifteen. At that time, Yousef Abad was outside the city centre and all kinds of people lived there. Most of the streets were unpaved. There was a major electricity line and lots of pirated extra lines that gave light to dark houses. The water came through narrow street canals controlled by the local council. Everywhere there were brooks on both sides of the dusty streets, which made the area look fresh. Yagoob was born when she was seventeen. For two years she endured her mother-in-law’s complaints about her not falling pregnant. Her mother-in-law stopped insulting her daughter-in-law only because the first child was a boy. Yagoob was welcomed with open arms and happiness. His mother had the right to crown her son. He was a crown prince for the
next two years. Then one day news came from a source that people don’t expect but which in reality is the most reliable source of all: her maids. She heard them talking in Farsi. At that time she could only pick up a few words here and there, but she made a sentence of it: She is pregnant. *She*, not her. And so she learnt of her husband’s temporary wife, ‘*sigheh*’. Those nine months went too quickly on the one hand and too slow on the other for the young Hadji Khanoom. Then she heard the maids talking in Farsi again: The baby is a boy.

She missed her home in Azerbaijan. She spoke just a few words of Farsi but that wasn’t the reason for her homesickness, as there were many Azeris in this area. Her close friend was the other next-door neighbour, from the *Tehrani* family, Khanoom Va Agha-ye Nazeri (Mrs and Mr Nazeri). When she found out that her husband had a boy with another wife (although their ‘marriage’ lasted probably only one day, or even less), she went to Mrs. Nazeri. Young Hadji Khanoom described in broken Farsi what had happened. That was the year in which her husband came back from Uzbekistan and brought with him the beautiful wall calendar. He gave the gift to his wife with the hope that he would be forgiven for having a boy with another wife. Young Hadji Khanoom loved the glossy wall calendar that had English words on it, which she didn’t understand, and the dates of the Western calendar, which were useless to her, and magnificent pictures of never-ending Swiss farms. She looked at them page by page and dreamed that one day she would travel to all those farms with her husband. The promise of travelling to all the farms in Switzerland was made by her husband so she would forgive him for having yet another *Sigheh* wife on his recent business trip.

To get to Mrs. Nazeri, young Hadji Khanoom had to pass the sleepless old man who walked around the borders of the rooftops every night. He was a quilt
maker and a gipsy. Now he was sitting under the tall Lombardy poplar tree. On those
tall, old trees pyramids of sparrows sang songs, all singing and crying at the same
time. When the birds sang the old man cursed them. Hadji Khanoom knocked on the
gate and entered the big backyard. She curled her tiny body into Mrs Nazeri’s flora
chador and cried. Mrs. Nazeri consoled her the only way she knew how.

‘Don’t cry. You are young. You will have more boys. He is a man. This is
what men do. Come on, have some tea. It will make you feel better. Then go home
and pray.’

After leaving Mrs. Nazeri’s home young Hadji Khanoom went to the mosque.
The only one at that time was the Imam Amir Al Momenin mosque. To get there she
had to walk to the upper hills of Yousef Abad. The stairways led up through the
streets, from the parks to the water channels, and from there to the foothills of the
mountain skirts and then back down to the city again.

It was only on her way back home that she noticed how many fountains there
were in Yousef Abad; four fountains in the middle of each pond in the parks and
gardens that on this windy day bathed her face with spray and mixed with her tears
and the sweet rose water perfume she was wearing. And when a woman passed her,
she noticed exactly the same smell on her. Although the woman was covered in a
black chador, Hadji Khanoom imagined her mother. When her mother was a young
woman she could hide, as a child, inside her mother’s chador for protection. She
rushed to the woman.

‘Mama Mama!’

The woman took her hand and said in Farsi, ‘I don’t speak Azeri. What is it
dear, have you lost your way?’
Young Hadji Khanoom answered in broken Farsi, ‘No, no, I am ok. Don’t worry.’ And then she hurried home where the only thing on her mind was how she was supposed to collect the money for the two sheep she had promised to sacrifice if God made her husband stay only with her.

She asked her husband to take her home to Tabriz, to Azerbaijan, and he promised to do that.

‘When?’ She asked.

‘When I have a deal in Azerbaijan I promise to take you with me.’

It was not until four years after that promise that he had a deal. At that time young Hadji Khanoom had to go to Azerbaijan to take part in her mother’s funeral. After that she had a few pieces of her mother’s jewellery to sell to pay for her oblation. Then, a few months later her husband brought his sigheh wife and the son to live in one of the rooms in their basement

Young Hadji Khanoom was pregnant again. She used to sit under the mulberry tree and eat them unripe. When she recovered from the stomach pain caused by the white mulberries, she made ‘Nazr’ (oblation) to God to never make her poor again. After that she never complained that her husband was away on business.

As long as he brought money home she was happy and grateful.

During those long days she spent most of her time doing the housework, cooking three times a day and keeping her children clean. She didn’t have any electrical appliances. She swept all ten big rooms in the three-storey house with a long-handled broom. She cooked with meat and vegetables that she bought from the peddlers who came to her door every morning. She also managed special religious rituals called ‘Sofreh’, a big gathering only for women who were solemnised to God. The most popular one was ‘Sofreh Hazrat Fatemeh’ and ‘Sofreh Imam Ali.’
Quilt makers used to come to her door too. They were gypsies who came as if from the sky with their bicycles and children, eyes burning as if they had electrical coils in them. They spoke a language she didn’t understand. None of them spoke Farsi, but they all knew what they wanted from one another. For almost a week her special quilts with red, purple and green satin and wool filling would be opened, aired and covered again with needles as big as her broomstick. Her children liked those moments too. They played with the gypsy kids, hid inside the newly opened quilts and chased each other.

The copper cleaners would come too. They would sit outside her door on the pavement with their burner and fill the street with the smell of copper, covering the inner layers of big pots and dinner pails. When the quilt makers and copper cleaners came, the whole of Yousef Abad got excited.

One day, in the middle of dusters and brooms and quilts and copper, Hadji Khanoom saw something she had never seen before - a drunken man. An old unshaven figure came out of Monsieur Khachaturian’s bottle shop, croaking, moving slowly and trembling at the side of the street while still trying to find the bottle in his side pocket. Then he realised that he had left it in the bottle shop. He went back and disappeared behind the mist of the glass door. Young Hadji Khanoom didn’t even dare to imagine what could possibly be inside. The only thing she did, like all the other women, was never walk on that side of the street again. From that day on, the people in Yousef Abad knew that their place was changing.

From then on that drunken man was always on the streets in Yousef Abad. He was old and rugged up for all seasons. He attracted the gaping eyes of adolescent boys as if he were a seductive woman. Boys followed him in the darkness of the streets. He emerged as if from out of a cloud of smoke, like a forbidden idea. Boys
knew this and when they collected their money to give him to buy drinks for them, they lined up in a chain to keep watch and report if any of their fathers came by. The rugged-up drunkard knew this too. So with any bottle of Smirnoff (that was his request, the boys had no idea about brands), he drank a third of it before handing over the remainder to be shared between the boys. They drank it as if it was holy water.

Yousef Abad was changing, the streets were paved and the dust disappeared. Tall electrical poles stood along the streets. There were boulevards and parks for evening picnics. Gradually all homes, rich or poor, could buy electrical goods with cash or layby. Schools in the district flourished, attracting young teachers who preferred to live far from home for the convenience of both work and also the evening visits to Monsieur Khachaturian for a shot of alcohol without being seen by those who forbade it. At that time, Yagoob was only fifteen and too young to go anywhere if he wanted to have alcohol with his friends without being caught. One night, Hadji Agha got hold of Yagoob by the ear; the boy was dragged along by his strong father, almost across the living room. He let the boy go only when Hadji Khanoom intervened, pulling her husband’s coat, begging to Imam Ali and the other twelve Imams, asking her husband not to tear her son to pieces. And when he pulled out his belt to punish the boy, she started cursing him and begging Imam Ali and all the other Imams to break his arms. By then Yagoob had reached the door and run away. The next time his father found out about Yagoob joining other boys in Yousef Abad for a drinking evening, he wanted to punish him again. But by then the boy was almost twice the size of his father and his strong body was ready to defend himself no matter what. They were in the kitchen. Hadji Agha was by the sink and Yagoob was close to the knives. But the father could see that his son would not use
the knife. He didn’t need to. Instead they sat and talked. Hadji Agha handed over the storage room keys to his son.

‘Now I have to believe that you have grown up and you have to take care of our business. Here, these are the keys. From today I wait for you to feed me, I did my duty.’ That night when he went to bed, Hadji Agha was in tears, hiding his face from his wife. The sight of Yagoob as he stood in the kitchen had broken him into pieces.

That same night, the local council announced that water would come through the houses from the reservoir for the last time. The people of Yousef Abad celebrated the arrival of fresh water plumbed through pipes and taps into their homes. Every house had fresh water; there were no longer any water sprites to scare the children. Instead, new evils were coming to Yousef Abad in the form of new money, electricity, water on tap, and inside each house things were changing too. There were telephone lines, and boys and girls on the phone. Yagoob had keys and money, he made phone calls and he was out of the house most of the time.

Hadji Agha and Hadji Khanoom may not have seen the new evil in their home but they could feel it. Yagoob was drinking outside of the house and, whenever he couldn’t find a comfortable corner in the city, he would travel abroad using business as an excuse. On each return he would take a few days off work to recover from his excessive drinking.

The Yousef Abad she had known as a young bride didn’t exist anymore. The basements that had been reservoirs were converted into apartments to rent, or to extended kitchens. In her case they were converted into storage that was now filled with all sorts of goods. As she sat on her bed, the Swiss landscape for the month of March was green and bright. It was 1955 but in reality it was 2001. The Yousef Abad locked behind her unseeing eyes remained intact, but in reality outside was changing.
People were building houses of four, five and six storeys. There were cranes on every corner.

The sounds of Yousef Abad had changed too. From her bedroom she could hear radios and satellite TV as if from a distant planet. She could hear Sorraya vacuuming and felt a rush of anger. She didn’t even try to hide her malice towards her daughter-in-law anymore. She called for a maid to help her get dressed and to go with her to the cemetery.

The cemetery, called Behesht-e-Zahra, welcomed them with its flower sellers, miles before they reached the cemetery itself. From rows of old metal buckets set on the street corner, men, women and mainly children ran after cars and motorbikes to sell flowers. Hadji Khanoom asked for a big bunch and paid the little girl a bit extra. She believed children were pure and innocent spirits and she felt good about this small act of charity.

The car passed the tree-lined streets of the cemetery until it stopped at a quiet corner. Tombstones, mainly marble, stood in the ground. Hadji Khanoom sat by her son’s grave and recited the Fateh-e, to pray for his resting soul. As she said her Fateh-e, Yagoob’s face appeared in the darkness of her vision, young and almost drunk. She felt as if the smell of alcohol was emanating from his grave, a strange, unknown smell. Hadji Khanoom had never known people who drank alcohol. She felt like a stranger to her son for this reason. She couldn’t make any sense of the smell except that she knew she hated it.

Then she remembered her son’s face in the kitchen, Yagoob standing in front of the drawer where she kept the knives, his hand shaking behind him. The louder his father shouted in his face, the closer his hand got to the drawer. She still felt the punch her husband gave her when she pushed her fragile body between the two of
them. And then she blamed herself later. Why hadn’t she let her husband punish her son that night to help him give up his drinking?

Then another child appeared and offered to wash the grave for her, and just when she had finished a middle-aged man appeared and started to say prayers for the dead. She thanked him and put a few coins in his palm. The man wanted to continue but she stopped him. ‘Thank you, I know the prayer.’

A group of young women nearby, all in black veils obviously didn’t know how to pray. They asked him to do it for them. He left Hadji Khanoom and kneeled next to the grave where the young women were standing and crying. When he had finished, each of them paid him separately with loud appreciation for his professional prayer.

When the graves were washed, the prayers recited, the memories unleashed and the tears shed, Hadji Khanoom wished she could pay her respects to all those martyrs who had died for the revolution or during the war. She knew some of them personally, they were her neighbours. She knew their resting places. When they had been buried she was there, holding their mothers' hand and reciting the Qur’an quietly to herself without interrupting the loud prayers being said in the ceremony. That one was a prayer about the heaven promised to martyrs. The one she recited quietly was about parenting and the responsibility of children. That section of the cemetery was covered with black and white flags covered in beautiful Farsi calligraphy of sentences from the Quran in Arabic. The sweet breeze made them dance swiftly on the air. That and the sunshine took the dominant gloom away. She found her way by walking down the aisles, which were lined with young men’s faces. They were looking at her through camera lenses.
She kneeled down, put her hand in the form of a cup on one tombstone and said, ‘Fateh-e’. The young man gazed at her from his photo frame. She moved to the next one and did the same. When she finished, the car was waiting to take her home. She couldn’t stop thinking about those boys who had lost their lives. She felt angry for losing her son. On the way the maid told her they were passing lines and lines of graves of the martyrs of war, those who were promised a paradise and carried a key with them as a symbol of entering heaven if they fought on the frontlines. The weather was cool when they reached Yousef Abad, and Hadji Khanoom felt that the world was locked behind her eyes again.

Early the next morning her maid knocked on her door; screaming and crying. ‘Hadji Khanoom, Hadji Khanoom, bidar shoo.’ ‘Hadji Khanoom, Hadji Khanoom, wake up. Hadji Agha, Hadji Agha.’ The maid couldn’t continue any more. Hadji Khanoom ran to her husband’s room, pulled his blanket away and threw herself on his body. Hadji Agha’s face was cold and stiff. She quickly removed herself and started reciting some verse from Quran. When she calmed down, she asked her maid to call her children.

Hadji Agha’s funeral was held in the Amir Al Moamenin Mosque in Yousef Abad. Yagoob and Younes were standing outside in the backyard, receiving condolences from friends and families. They could hear their mother’s wailing coming from the female section.

The family returned to the mosque two more times, for the seventh and fortieth day. In the mosque it was 1420 on the Muslim calendar, outside of the mosque it was 1378 on the Persian calendar.

When the family arrived home from the fortieth day ceremony, the sound of an explosion came from far away. It was curfew. They covered the windows with
black cardboard and thick curtains, and turned the lights off. That night, Yagoob, Younes and Hadji Khanoom sat till morning to sort out the future of the family. There was no will, or request, or any paper to be considered. The family business would continue as it had before. Right before they finished their meeting, Hadji Khanoom brought a Khatam jewellery box and opened it. The box was full of gold, jewellery, rings, ear rings, necklace ‘The only thing I request is that you boys don’t touch this box. Your father collected this jewellery with your sister’s dowry in mind. I'm keeping it for her,’ and then she locked it, took out its key from the rest of the keys and pinned it to her chest. Both brothers looked at each other and smiled.

Then Mr. Cohen came with his condolences. While looking at Mr. Cohen’s face, her husband’s face appeared in front of her almost blind eyes. Hadji Agha’s face appeared in the darkness of her old eyes. He was young and agile, the young man who came to ask her father’s permission to marry her. She said thank you to him and then she realised that it was 5760 on the Jewish calendar.
After Hadji Agha's death, Hadji Khanoom expressed herself more religiously. This wasn’t a passing phase or just from being a widow, but her way of continuing to be seen as the head of the family. Her morning, lunch and evening prayers became longer, and more religious gatherings were organised. When she realised that she couldn't gather her sons and her daughter for prayer time, she focused on her social groups.

Hadji Khanoom started to host Sofreh more regularly. This religious gathering was unique; it belonged to women. Usually the gathering was dedicated to one of the many children or cousins or close relatives of the twelve Imams. ‘Balam vaghdidee chi bir sofra achakh.’ ‘Dear, it is the time to arrange a Sofreh.’ It was a time for women to come to listen to a Ghari, a woman, recite verses from the Qur’an. The verses were chosen depending on the occasion, sometimes to pray for a sick person or for someone’s wishes to come true, or even to ward off demons.

Hadji Khanoom dedicated her last Thursday of each month to her Sofreh. The Ghari or verse reciter was Hadji Marzieh Khanoom, one of Hadji Khanoom’s close cousins. She had been married four times, her first three rich merchant husbands had died from an unknown illness and the last one died in the war, not on the front line and not even in the last line, but during the ceremony in which he was reciting the Qur’an to wish the young soldiers of true Islam a place in heaven. Heaven, he used to say, was the right place for martyrs or for those who didn’t die but killed as many enemy soldiers as they could. He was in the middle of reading when their camp was
bombed; Hadji Marzieh Khanoom’s husband died instantly. Those four marriages brought her seven boys and enormous wealth.

So as she used to say while collecting her money after each Sofreh reading, ‘Balam san boolosan chi man allahdan othor sofra saliram, savabina otor. ‘Dear, you know that I am doing this only for God, for Savabesh, as a pious act.’ Then she continued. ‘Otherwise you know that not only am I not needy, alhamdulillah, but I can throw enormous Sofreh myself.’ Then she hid the money she'd received inside her corpulent bra.

On that Thursday, Hadji Marzieh Khanoom arrived first. She was greeted at the door by three Tehrani maids, the three daughters of one of the live-in maids. Two of them were waiting to receive other guests. The one who received Hadji Marzieh was already frustrated with her. Hadji Marzieh wanted the floral chador, which was in the middle of hundreds of others. The maid had to be careful to get the right one and not mess up the rest. Receiving guests’ black chadors and giving them a light-coloured fresh cotton flora chador in exchange was part of the ritual of Sofreh. Every woman should arrive in the black chador. This is the rule regardless of the guest’s age, class, or belief. It has to be followed. Not that there was any specific rule written down anywhere to dictate this, no specific verse, for example, in the holy book about how to attend such a gathering, no. Most of the women actually took pleasure in it because somehow it felt special. Three girls had to wait at the front door, greet the guests and take their black chadors and fold them in a special way that didn’t crease them. The creasing of the fabric was very important because the younger and richer ones used to wear black chadors made from the most expensive, almost see-through fabrics. They wore them not for religious purposes but more as a fashion statement. So it was important for the maids to fold five meters of fabric into the size of a
pillowcase without creasing it and after that the maids offered each guest a floral chador. The maid finally reached the one Hadji Marzieh wanted to wear. The rest of the guests were waiting politely but were annoyed.

‘Hadji Khanoom, I love coming here for Sofreh, not only do you throw very good Sofreh, you also offer the most beautiful chadors. Where did you get these ones? They are gorgeous.’ Hadji Khanoom was clearly pleased to show off her family business.

‘Well, dear, you know this is my poor husband and our son’s business, God rest their soul.’

Then she looked at Sorraya and Ayda who both ignored her. Sorraya and Ayda were standing a distance apart. Ayda was clearly not ready to forgive her sister. The first woman Sorraya noticed was Miss Coco, and Miss Coco acknowledged her with a faraway smile.

The women were directed to sit on the floor, which was covered by narrow mattresses with white fabric covers and oriental cushions. Some had to wait for those in front of them to sit first. Large French doors were opened to connect three massive living rooms for the occasion. From where Sorraya was sitting she saw a few neighbours whose sons had, years ago, tried to break in and steal goods from their basement.

Forty ladies had arrived in all. Hadji Marzieh sat beside Hadji Khanoom and next to them the other five most senior, all of them at an age when it is profitable to give up outside social life and look for a good place in heaven. The rest were younger. They all sat around a long white fabric (which is also called sofreh) that was spread on the floor for food. After they drank tea and ate halva of many types, shapes and flavours, Ash-e-reshte, a special Persian soup, and saffron rice with
chicken, the time came for reading. When Hadji Marzieh started her reading, everyone went quiet. As they listened, some closed their eyes. The rest sat quietly, gazing at one another.


‘That is Bolour, her new daughter-in-law,’ whispered Aghigh into Ahoo’s ear, gazing at Akhtar Khanoom with a smile. She received the same acknowledgment in return from the other side of the sofreh.

Jamileh whispered into Gisou’s ear, ‘Did you notice Bahar’s face? She's had her nose done.’

Gisou nodded quietly, rotating her rosary to finish the first round of Salavat. ‘Her sister did it last year, this year it was her turn. I remember last year she made fun of her sister at Hadji Zahra’s Sofreh. But look at her now.’ Gisou nodded again.

Afareen and Hengameh were fixed eye-to-eye although both kept smiling. Each accused the other one of having an affair with her husband. Both husbands denied it, of course. Afsoon noticed and reported to her sister by writing on her hand; *Look at Afareen, how she is looking at Hengameh. Her sister responded by writing back; I think both of them are donkeys because I think both husbands are cheating and I know with whom.*

Her sister couldn’t sit still anymore. ‘Who? How do you know?’

‘Be patient, later,’ said Afsoon, adjusting her long blonde hair to make sure everyone could see her diamonds. She noticed that Dorri, Elaheh, Elnaz and Farah, four sisters who were sitting next to each other were staring at her earrings. Afsoon was pleased because those four sisters were the ones in the group she wanted to
impress the most. All four sisters had their own jewellery shops and at any Sofreh they sat together. Opposite them were another four sisters who were completely different. Fatemeh, Firouzeh, Ghodis and Behrokh sat apart from each other. Each hated the other three for accusations that they were dishonest about their children’s failures in their marriages and personal achievements. The strangest one at that moment was Pouneh who had covered her beautiful body in a loosely held light blue chador. Her chador matched the tight blue dress she had on, which matched her blue eyes. She was staring out the window, supposedly looking far away. One could think that she had chosen the blue sky to match her eye colour but what she was really looking at was the face of Katayoun beside her. In Pouneh’s mind it was Katayoun’s fault that she and her little twins were still sitting at this Sofreh instead of strolling through the centre of Paris. Pouneh and Katayoun’s husbands were business partners and the way Pouneh’s husband explained it was that it was Katayoun’s husband’s fault that they got involved with a business that, not only produced no profit but put both of them in jail. Pouneh remembered how one night, in a fashionable sushi restaurant, Katayoun encouraged the two men to get involved.

‘My dears, without risk there is no money, you have to aim at big fish to catch big fish. Here, I have a business plan.’ Then, while she was teaching her husband how to eat sushi she said, ‘Chegad to dehati hasti.’ ‘You are such a vulgar.’ Her husband’s churlishness was something she always brought up in public. ‘When I was at Harvard, I learnt a lot about this stuff. Let’s face it, we all know that big deals are in the hands of untouchables, but if we know one then that is the key for us to swim deep into that ocean, and you all know that I know one of them very well. As a matter of fact, I have one of his deeds in my handbag. So what do you think?’ She didn’t get a chance to carry out her plan of revenge because Hadji Marzieh Khanoom
had finished the recital and was calling for everyone’s attention to pray loudly with her.

‘Khodaya tamam marizan ra shafa deh. Dear God, please cure those who are sick.’

‘Amen,’ ran a unified voice through the three big rooms.

‘Khodaya rafteganeman ra rahmat kon. May God bless those who have passed away and let them rest in peace.’

‘Amen.’

‘May God bless those who were martyrs and gave their young lives for the cause of Islam.’

‘Amen.’

‘May God help those who are poor never to sleep hungry.’

‘Amen.’

Then she sent one of the women around to collect the charity money and oblations. Tea and sweets were served. One by one, they exchanged their light coloured floral chadors for the long black chadors with which they covered themselves.

Gita, Katayoun’s cousin looked at Mahasti and commented, ‘Your chador is so see-through that I think you need ten layers of that material to cover yourself. How did you dare to come with that? Aren’t there any Moral Police on your planet?’

Mahasti answered in a sweet Azeri accent, ‘Oh, there are plenty. In fact, in my street there are two offices but you are safer under the enemy’s nose. They look at you but don’t see you.

‘I always loved your brain. I think you deserve a Harvard degree, not that clumsy Katayoun.’ Mahasti was indeed very intelligent. Married to a rich merchant
at the age of fifteen and bullied by almost all the members of her husband’s family, she now had four children. Away from her husband’s eyes she studied with the help of a teacher who lived next door. Gradually she learnt about midwifery and when one night, during the wartime curfew, she saved her husband’s sister’s life and baby, she became a hero. Now she was a gynaecologist.

By evening only Marzieh Khanoom was left. Both friends rose after hearing the sound of Azan and started their evening prayer. Still seated on their prayer mats and wearing their colourful, bright chadors as they played with their rosaries, they had their final chat, speaking in Azeri to make sure that their maids didn’t understand their gossip.

‘Jormadim jalilarim jalsalar sana yakheen.’ ‘I didn’t see my daughters-in-law come to you for help.’

‘No, they didn’t come to me and when I tried to talk to Ayda about having some prayers for Younes, she ignored me. Not directly of course but by using an excuse. She said she was busy serving guests and would contact me later. Sorraya was more interested in talking about Younes’ health. Are those two acting the way that you described to me last week?’ Marzieh Khanoom asked with a sarcastic voice.

‘Oh yes, what kind of spell she has over Younes I still don’t know. I am worried that my dear son will leave this world without me knowing why he was always so protective of Sorraya. My poor son,’ Hadji Khanoom said with the dramatic voice and body language she used whenever she talked about her sons.

Marzieh Khanoom knew this so she consoled her friend with her usual soothing words and asked, ‘and how about your daughter? Have you heard anything from her?’ Hadji Khanoom was upset to see how calm and quiet Marzieh Khanoom was as she asked this question.
‘I don’t know what you are talking about. I don’t have a daughter.’

‘You have to learn to forgive Ghoncheh before you leave this world. God won’t take you to heaven if you leave this life with anger in your heart towards any of your children,’ Marzieh Khanoom whispered to Hadji Khanoom with her voice that soothed the spirit.

‘Do you think God would forgive my reconciling with a girl who has turned her back on her religion and run away with a Jewish man out of love?’

‘I am sure God will punish Ghoncheh with the maximum penalty for betraying her religion but, my dear sister, that punishment is God’s job not yours. God will do what God will do and you should do what a mother should do, forgive her wrong doing,’ Marzieh Khanoom whispered again and for some reason Hadji Khanoom found her friend’s voice even more spiritual and soothing, and that, of course, bothered her.

‘That is easy for you to say. You don’t have a daughter with clouds instead of hair on her head. Since she was born she has disobeyed me. She was born premature and she didn’t breathe for the first ten seconds. When she started using her hands, she started with her left hand. That was the sign. I knew it right then and there. Tell me what I did wrong to deserve this? First my dear Yagoob marries this nonchalant Sorraya and then my dear Younes marries this greedy Ayda, and then my only daughter vanishes with a Jewish boy, and my dear son’s tragic death, my Yagoob, my dear son.’ She burst into tears.

‘Come on, Yallah, Yallah, let’s get to that quiet corner and I’ll recite a do’aa for you. Today I didn’t have a chance to make a special prayer for you and your family. Now I will recite a special Do’aa just for your family.’ Then she took her friend by her arm and helped her to sit on a cushion in the other corner of the big
sitting room. She wrapped her friend’s body, which was exposed, in the floral chador. Then she fixed her own chador around herself and, moving her rosary, started to recite Do’aa. Her spiritually soothing voice went into Hadji Khanoom’s sensitive ears and then took over her body. She felt touched and moved, and then again she burst into tears and collapsed into Marzieh Khanoom’s big arms.

‘Tell me, what is wrong with my family. Where did I go wrong? First it was Yagoob and his drinking problem, after that, it was Younes with his sickness. Then Ghoncheh and her devilish love, and now this issue with Younes and Sorraya. I know I haven’t seen them doing anything wrong, believe me, I am not accusing them. There is just something there whenever I see those two together. I can feel it, I can smell it. You know how a mother’s nose and ears are sensitive, very sensitive; like an animal’s.’ Her crying got louder and louder each time she mentioned Younes and Sorraya.

‘I know. Family is very difficult. But God is testing us all the time. You should learn to forgive them and prepare yourself for the other side. Pray more and start sitting and praying in solitude more. You should prepare yourself. Come to my classes and go to more Sofreh. Give Sadageh, charity is always good.’ By now both of them were tired. ‘Why don’t you do what you planned?’

‘I have to talk to Ahmad to organise it for me.’

‘Who is Ahmad?’

‘Do you remember my step-son? ’

‘No. I didn’t know you had step-son.’

‘Yes, you do. Do you remember Hadji Agha, God bless his soul, had a sigheh wife who had a son that was born the same year as Yagoob?’

‘Oh, yes, the one who lived in your basement for years.’
‘Yes, that’s him. He has grown to love me as his mother and I love him now. These days he visits me a lot and I trust him.’ Hadji Khanoom asked one of the girls to bring some drinks. It was then that she realised she hadn’t seen her daughters-in-law. She called to one of the maids. ‘Go downstairs and check the basement.’

‘Chashm Hadji Khanoom, chisy mikhayn biaram?’ ‘Ok, Hadji Khanoom, do you want me to bring something?’ asked the maid, while feeling the weight of the bundle of keys.

‘No, I don’t want anything from the basement. I just want you to check and make sure everything is there and nothing is missing.’ Because Hadji Khanoom was jittery, the maid guessed that checking was to do with her daughters-in-law but she didn’t dare to ask anymore.
After his lung cancer operation, Younes looked as if his body never had dimensions. When his family brought him back home from hospital, Sorraya suggested bringing Younes downstairs to her apartment and setting up a bed for him there.

‘He loves the courtyard; it is good for his spirits. Besides, most of the time you are not home and it is easier for me to take care of him here,’ she explained to her sister. To her surprise, Ayda accepted. These days Ayda could see how Sorraya held her husband but she didn’t react badly because she knew that Sorraya was capable of taking better care of Younes than she herself could. She has forgiven Younes because of his sickness but not me, Sorraya thought.

Sorraya felt that if she pressed her hand a bit harder into his skin she could take his heart in her hand. A pair of closed eyes without eyelashes, no eyebrows, a thin upper lip that had disappeared and left a thin line on the lower lip. Radiation and chemotherapy had changed him as if turning him inside out, his bones visible under his thin skin. How long will he be able to take it? Sorraya wondered to herself.

The warm soap and water touched his hair-less chest. Sorraya mused how over the years those hairs had turned from dark and thick to thin and white and now he had lost them all. He was quiet, watching his sister-in law washing him. A melody was coming from her portable radio. When she had finished washing Younes’ body, she went to the kitchen with the washing tray. Younes watched her curly gray hair brighten in the sunlight.

Ayda had just left for a business appointment, after having a big quarrel with Sorraya and Younes over buying more goods for her business. The effect of the
argument still lingered in the room; both Sorraya and Younes were quiet and thoughtful. Finally Sorraya broke the silence.

‘Ayda has stolen my paintings and I want them back. She doesn’t value them anyway but you know how important they are to me.’

‘The two of you have to find a way to make peace between yourselves. We can’t blame everything on her. When I go, you two will be on your own and my mother is not an easy woman to deal with,’ Younes replied in a weak, low voice.

‘Don’t talk like that.’ She handed him his medicine.

‘We all know it will happen sooner or later so better you prepare yourself too. I know it is annoying to hear Ayda talking about money all the time, but if it wasn’t for her I don’t know what would happen to us. The cost of medicine rises not daily but hourly. Yesterday she was very frustrated. Before going to hospital we went to the black market to get my medicine and the dealer at the black market was blackmailing her. He backed off when he saw me and because a man was there he changed the price,’ Younes laughed. ‘See, even a sick and weak man in this country seems to be stronger than a woman.’

‘Shut up,’ Sorraya said, laughing too.

‘Yes, it was a silly joke but I am serious, Sorraya, you should stop being stubborn. You should accept that soon I will go and the two of you will have to deal with the cost of living in this country. The economy here is haphazard, unpredictable. You plan something today and the market uncertainty destroys it for you the day after. So prepare yourself. Plus you and Ayda must make sure you have enough money for Mahtab and Maziar’s future.’

‘Yes, I know we have been fed by her money, she reminds me of this every opportunity she gets. But stealing my paintings is something else.’ Sorraya checked
the tray to see if there was any other medicine for him, her hands were shaking.

Younes raised his arm to reach her but he couldn’t and she moved to the other side of the bed to fix his pillows. ‘It is good to make money but it is equally good to have integrity and quality. I still can’t believe that in those early years of the revolution she went and bought the Ba’hai’s torched house. She justified it by telling me that if she didn’t, someone else would. Haven’t we seen enough extortion here?’ She moved back to the other side again, leaning towards Younes to move his head. He could smell her perfume; the sound of music was coming from her pocket.

‘This is her way to punish us.’ She stood straight and looked at Younes then brushed her hand over Younes’ bald head to make sure the small hairs were combed back. ‘To punish me, this is her way to punish me.’

‘We can’t blame her. Be a bit easy on her.’ Sorraya pretended she didn’t hear what Younes said. She leant towards Younes’ carefully to make sure she didn’t put her whole weight on his weak bones. He is such a different man, she thought.

‘It’s not that I don’t appreciate what she is doing for us. But it just bothers me that sometimes when I talk to her I feel like I am talking to a grocer, always talking about the cost of living.’ She sat for a while on the side of his bed and then watched Younes’ eyes become heavy and sleepy.

From where Younes was sitting in Yagoob’s apartment he could hear his son’s heavy metal music coming from their upstairs living room. The image of his son passed through his mind, tall, handsome Maziar. Then he thought about Ayda; her beautiful green eyes stared into his mind’s eyes. Soon he could hear the sound of water running in the pipes that came down through the white walls, as if a ghost was chasing his ears.
Sorraya took her pocket radio from her summer dress and started to navigate for news, a habit that most people had. She played with the radio to find the right station for afternoon news, BBC, Voice of America. Distrust had become part of daily life. While she was navigating for a reliable source of news (she didn’t believe any of them) the sounds of Qur’an recitals and some Azeri and Persian news jumped in and out. Disappointed, she turned the radio off and returned to the kitchen.

Younes liked his older brother’s apartment more than his own. Although it was on the ground floor it had better natural light and a panorama window that allowed a full view of the big courtyard, its high walls covered with climbing roses. Living on the ground floor was Sorraya’s choice. She loved the courtyard with the long shallow pool in the middle with surrounding flowers. He covered his tall bony body with the blanket and went outside. Sorraya came out too, leaving the tea tray on a wooden garden bench.

Younes asked, ‘Do you regret that you didn’t have more children?’ The question surprised Sorraya. Why he was asking such a question at this moment.

‘No,’ said Sorraya.

‘Why not?’

‘Look at the world. I am scared of war, war again. Besides, how could I have had more children with a husband who was away on business trips most of the time? You know how Yagoob was. He wasn’t a family man.’

‘But if you had more children, you wouldn’t be alone now. What will you do after Mahtab leaves home?’

‘I will survive. Besides, if I had more children they all would leave me one day anyway.’
‘Why didn’t you tell me that you wanted to divorce?’ Sorraya was offended with this question

‘I didn’t see any reason to tell you.’

She left her radio with him and went inside. He had some tea and started to fiddle with the radio, searching for some music. He was disappointed. All is mourning, mourning, religious preaching and propaganda. Don’t these people need some enjoyment, some happiness and some music? Something inside hurt him, perhaps Sorraya’s answer.

He missed those old days, the time of Sorraya’s marriage when she was always homesick for her hometown Tabriz, and he used to come to her apartment to play backgammon or cards, or just to chat. When she came back he was listening to Azerbaijani opera on a Baku station. They both smiled at this familiar music. She brought some water with mint.

‘Do you regret marrying her?’

‘No but I regret that I didn’t marry you.’ He became quiet. She sat next to him and held his hand.

‘What have we done?’ she said. He didn’t understand the reason behind the question, but gave her the answer he wanted.

‘We haven’t done anything wrong. We were in the wrong place, that’s why things happened this way. I made a mistake marrying her. But when I thought there was no chance for us, I childishly thought I could create someone like you for myself. That was wrong.’ She pressed her soft hands in his bony, fleshless hands. He leant towards her with difficulty and kissed her hands while looking into her eyes.

‘My love for you wasn’t wrong and neither was yours for me. What is wrong is the
way this life is. Look at our surroundings. To survive we have to lie because it is more acceptable than the bare truth.’

Sorraya went inside and the same heavy, brooding silence descended on the courtyard as in every late spring, hot and brooding. He was happy that Sorraya had left him there.

He walked around the courtyard listening to the music from Sorraya’s radio playing at low volume. He felt content, the way he always felt when he was with her, in complete osmosis. He wasn’t strong enough to walk as fast as he desired. The fresh air gave a sudden push of energy to his medicine-polluted body but his legs just didn’t have the strength to walk fast. He sat at the corner of the long shallow pool watching goldfish come to the surface and then dive back to the blue bottom of the pool. An air of relaxation was filling his bones. He always felt comfortable being around Sorraya, but it had taken years to get to this point, to feel free being with her.

Through the glass door Younes watched a pair of hands dusting the oily green colours of the indoor plants. It pleased him to see how Sorraya took care of them as he had taught her. It pleased him that he didn’t need an excuse to stay here as he had before when the rest of family was close by. His mother never hid the fact that she didn’t like him spending time in Yagoob’s home. ‘A strange woman and man are not allowed to sit together behind a closed door. It is a sin. They are like cotton and fire.’

His mother was too sick these days to move out of her apartment. She was planning to go to Karbala. It will be good for Sorraya and Ayda to be away from her venomous words, Younes thought to himself.

He walked to the basement and stared at the long metal fence they had put up when Mahtab and Maziar were taking their first steps. He tried to open the door. It was locked. He slid his bony hand over the top of the door and found the spare key.
When the door opened there was an echo. Although they had converted the water reservoir into a basement there was still a hollow echo. An architect had suggested that it would be costly to convert the ceiling, so the family decided to leave the basement as it was. There was a moist, mossy smell in the long main corridor. He sat on a stone step where it was as quiet as if the air had stopped moving. He felt far away from Sorraya’s apartment and from the courtyard. There was a sense of fear and insecurity inside him, something so familiar, like those fears he had felt when his grandmother told him stories of the water sprites. For years he was scared to push the pump handle for water from the reservoir. He wet his pants many times when the water sprites poured out and took over the streets of Yousef Abad where all the children were playing.

It was also in the basement that one summer afternoon he saw Yagoob kissing the maid’s daughter. The scene came to him in his dreams over and over again. He had wet dreams about the girl. It was here that he spent time with Sorraya after Mahtab was born.

Through a small window he gazed at the yard with its climbing arc of roses and the vines covering the front wall. The houses in Yousef Abad were taller these days. From far away came a foggy sound of construction machinery. It seemed as if, in the fabric of the blanket, he could feel the floor vibrating. In his dream Yagoob’s hands were wrapped around his brother’s bony body and with a big smile on his face he was saying, ‘Now, be a good boy and sit here quietly. I’ll go to that room with Masomeh and when I come back I’ll take you to the park. Then I’ll take you to Cinema Goldis and there I’ll buy you ice-cream.’ He watched his brother as this chain of promises exited him. Later on his brother let him kiss those maids that were working in their house. It was here, in this part of the mansion’s basement that he
learnt how to kiss girls. In those days it was their father who was away on business. Yagoob was in Tehran most of the time and when he was at home every one treated him as head of the family. As a child, Younes knew his older brother more as a father than a brother. Yagoob was capable of everything and anything. Like a child who sees his parents as gods, Younes believed in his ‘god brother’.

When Yagoob left home to pursue his career as a successful merchant, Younes found himself alone and lonely. His mother was there, but mostly as an external part of him. Here in this basement he was surrounded by all the goods which were collected over the years and stored with the hope of selling them for a better price.

When his brother asked him to go to Azerbaijan to bring Sorraya to Tehran for their marriage, Younes felt honoured and happy. But what followed between him and Sorraya, their constant relationship, damaged him inside. So many times he had tried to gather the courage to tell his brother the truth, but he never did have the courage, nor did he think it was a wise decision. A safe lie was better than a dangerous truth.

‘My dear brother, remember when the time comes to choose your future wife, choose from a small province and ideally from the small towns of Azerbaijan, where there are lots of sweet flowers that are protected by their family’s watchful eyes, not like the girls who grow up here in Tehran. We both have grown up here. We know how Tehrani girls are, don’t we, my dear brother?’ Then he burst into laughter again, longer and louder than before. He was clearly drunk.

At this memory Younes smiled quietly and murmured to himself, ‘Loyal and housewifely indeed.’ He remembered his mother’s constant complaints.
‘Are you doing her cleaning too? Doing her shopping and acting like her driver is not enough? Now you do her housework too? I can’t believe what kind of girl Yagoob is married to.’

‘Mum, stop nagging. I am not doing her housework. I am just helping her. She is pregnant. It would be good if you had some consideration too. You keep all the maids busy because you don’t want to send them downstairs to do her house.’

It was here in this basement that he had helped Maziar with his toddler steps. She is a good mother. He didn’t know why he needed to remind himself. He never had doubts about Ayda’s love for their son but he regreted that he didn’t spend enough time with Maziar. He wanted to make sure Maziar had someone after he was gone.

‘I will call him tonight. I will tell Maziar we should travel together. Go out together.’ The thought of this made the desire stronger and he felt he needed all his ability and energy. He thought he wouldn’t waste any time and energy; he would spend it with his family, with Maziar, with Ayda.

He tightened his slim body on the stone step, as if he were a boy again, a young boy who felt weakness in his body all the time. He felt the way he did the day the doctor told his mother that his heart muscles were very weak. His immune system was affected in childbirth. He felt pain all over his body. He felt his heart became smaller and smaller till it seemed to disappear in his chest. Younes had imagined that one day he would die this way; he had known it ever since he was a child.

The key to the basement dropped from his hand.

When Younes opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was sunlight on his drip; the reflection on the liquid made strange shapes on the curtain. The sound of a car
passing and sparrows singing came from outside. He reached for a mirror on his bedside table and stared at his eyes, which had lost their eyelashes, and a thin upper lip that had disappeared.

All those bloody chemicals, what's the use, he thought to himself. Then with great difficulty he moved his blue robe around his sticky body and, holding the drip, moved towards window. His room was empty. In the next bed, a sixteen-year-old girl had died two days earlier and no one had occupied her bed since then.

From his sixth floor hospital room he watched the plane trees, already turning an ochre amber colour. The peak of Mount Toechal was framed in the autumn sun and the colour of the trees made the purity of the mountains appear to be closer, as if he could reach them from this window. The sound of Azan was coming from every corner of the city, colliding in the air, reverberating through mountains and clouds.

Yesterday was Eid-e-gorban and this festival of sacrifice made the city cheerful. Eid-e-gorban was on the Muslim calendar in 1423 but when Younes checked his wall calendar by his bedside, it was 1381 on the Persian calendar and he had been in hospital for the last two weeks.

His morphine saturated body felt cold. Weak from the drugs, he pushed his body into his blanket and pressed his head into the pillow. He felt like the sound of sparrows was coming from the feathers in the pillow.

The sound of high heels walking in the corridor came closer and closer and then distant from his room. It seemed as if, in the fabric of the blanket, he could feel the floor vibrating. In his dream he could feel Yagoob’s hands wrapping his bony body with a big smile on his face.

He was twelve years old. The doctors didn’t expect to send him home. When he opened his eyes he felt someone pulling his arm. He watched the young face
while the nurse changed his drip. His gaze made the nurse nervous; she pulled her headscarf even further towards her eyebrows. He still stared at her. She quickly finished her work. When she moved her tray his eyes lost their strength and closed again.

‘You scared that poor girl,’ his mother said while she changed the old purple dahlias with new ones. ‘You shouldn’t stare at the girls, it is rude.’ The scene came to him in his dreams over and over again.

His mother sat next to him. She could hear his lungs making a gurgling noise. After his operation, Younes looked as if his body had no dimensions. His mother combed his hair; put a mirror in front of his face. The twelve-year-old had bright eyes; those eyes stared at his sick face. He blinked and the face in the mirror blinked back. A sound of screaming and crying woke him up.

Next door an old man had passed away. Four women in black chadors were sitting beside his bed and they were crying. In a matter of a minute more people arrived; Younes could hear the sound of their high heels against the mosaic of the hospital floor, which reverberated in his head. He pressed his head into his pillow; his body was hot from the effect of the morphine. He was quiet, watching his father and his mirza’s. A musical melody was coming from the living room where Yagoob was sitting and playing different tapes. Younes had his school books around him calculating problems. Every now and then Younes stopped and watched those sliding beads moving up and down noisily to calculate the profit and expenditure.

Soraya leaned towards him carefully to make sure she didn’t put her whole weight on his weak bones. She looked at his face, feeling those bones were saying
something but she couldn’t understand them. The doctors had told the family that not only was there no progress in his condition but his days were numbered.

Sorraya helped the nurse to move Younes’ right arm for another injection. She sat for a while on the side of his bed and watched Younes’ eyes become heavy and sleepy. Each time the nurse injected his medicine his body moved deeper, deeper to the heart of the house in Yousef Abad, to the reservoir, to those sprites. He felt their movement in his body.

He stretched his slim body out on the hospital bed. He felt the newly injected morphine running in his body, taking away his pain. The medicine also ate away his strength. In his sleepy body, he felt his heart became smaller and smaller until it seemed to disappear in his chest. His lungs made some strange noises. Sorraya came towards him, first pressing the help button and then pressing her soft hands in his fleshless hands, pressing her fist against his fist, which now was totally motionless; his head was pressed into his pillow. When he breathed his last breath his eyes were still open. By the time his nurse arrived, his breathing had stopped.

At Younes’ funeral only Maziar stood as a man of their family. Men from every walk of life came and shook his hand while quietly whispering their condolences to him. But at the Amir Al Moemenin Mosque, the women's section was loud and noisy. It was Hadji Khanoom who was beating her chest and calling her last son’s name again and again. As was the custom, the family returned to the mosque two more times, for seventh and fortieth day. On the fortieth day, in the women's section Hadji Khanoom sat at the top end; Mahtab was sitting next to her mother and Ayda was sitting on the other side, separated from the other three women. When the door closed the Persian calendar remained outside. Inside the mosque the calendar turned
into the Islamic calendar. The sound of verse recited from the Quran was played in both the men and women's sections.
The two sisters reached the building where hundreds of other worried parents were waiting for a response. Ayda was relaxed in her usual dress and wore a headscarf. Sorraya was dressed in the manner of almost twenty years ago, a long black Islamic dress. On the way in the taxi Sorraya criticised her sister.

‘Don’t you think it would be better if you dressed more strictly? They will look at us and say, yeah, your children are the ones who break moral laws.’ Ayda ignored her sister’s comments. The two sisters hardly talked to each other. The last time they had spent time together was to prepare for Younes’ funeral and as soon as the funeral was finished, Ayda ignored Sorraya again.

She had her property deed and a big bunch of cash in her designer handbag. Sorraya was uncomfortable at her sister’s cool handling of the situation. Unlike her sister, she was already sweating under her heavy Islamic dress.

‘How can you be so cool? I am dying. What will we do if they keep them and send them to jail?’

‘I know them very well. They only want money and real estate. I will give them what they want and they will give me what I want. I always do that. I know this kind of authority very well. We will bail them out, ‘Ayda said, fixing her light makeup in her hand mirror.

‘That real estate deed,’ said Sorraya. ‘I hope they are not taking our home.’

‘No, this is the deed you blamed me so much for buying. This is my own property,’ Ayda said. She asked the driver who the singer was.
‘You mean that Baha’i property?’ Sorraya asked as the driver spoke about the new band. He labelled them as underground and said they usually organised rave parties. He used words that were completely alien to Sorraya and it scared her. Listening to this new band reminded her how alienated she was from the world of the young, including her own daughter and nephew.

The taxi stopped in front of a grey marble building. The taxi driver didn’t bother to turn off the music. Ayda asked him to wait.

‘I’ll call you as soon as we finish here.’ A revolutionary guard in olive-green uniform and five-day stubble came out of the building. He called a few names and some parents rushed forward. Ayda and Sorraya had to wait. Finally another Pasdar came and called their names. The sisters were admitted into a courtroom where a cleric was waiting for them. He cited the charges against Mahtab and Maziar. They had been arrested at a party where there was loud music, alcohol was served and the opposite sexes mixed in one room. They were the offences and he stated the penalties. He asked Ayda for bail, which she paid. Then he asked Mahtab and Maziar to sign a letter of repentance with an oath not to repeat the offence again.

At that they started to protest.

‘Why, what we have done? We haven’t done anything wrong. There wasn’t any alcohol at that party. It was just a university gathering.’ Mahtab and Maziar were shouting. The security guard tried to subdue them. The cleric sat quietly as Ayda tried to convince him to let them go.

‘Please Hadji Agha, they are just kids. They are sorry, they have already told you. Please, I’ll pay you extra if you want.’ The man was cold as ice.
‘Sister, writing the letter of repentance is a legal requirement. They have to do it, otherwise they stay in jail.’ At this point Sorraya lost her patience. As she watched her daughter in tears of anger, her own temper boiled over.

‘So if they had to sign the repentance letter then what was the point of us leaving our property deed and all that cash with you?’

The cleric, as icy as ever said, ‘That’s part of the law too.’ Ayda and Sorraya begged their children to sign the repentance letter so they could all go home. Mahtab and Maziar finally relented and signed, and the cleric signed their release. He was the prosecutor and judge as well. When the release papers were finalised, the Pasdar took the sisters to the waiting area while he prepared Mahtab and Maziar for release from detention.

Hundreds of other parents were waiting outside. The women were fanning themselves with their documents, their deeds to bail out their children. One young and beautiful mother had clearly had enough. She was cajoling someone on her mobile to bring her more cash to release her daughter.

‘I told these lice, I told them she is only fifteen, and I told them she was there in that area by mistake. They arrested her for her make-up. When I asked the others how much the fine is for makeup I brought it here. But these filthy mullahs, because I argued with them, want three times more for her nail polish as well. Yes, yes, of course I told them she is innocent, but who is going to defend her? There is no lawyer for detainees, where do you live my brother? In Paris? Now listen, my battery is running out. Can you please send the amount I asked for? Quickly please, don’t say anything to Mum.’ She closed her pink mobile and dropped it in the pocket of her tight-fitting coat. The woman was furious. She swore at the revolutionary authorities at the top of her voice. Sorraya was shocked.
‘Did you see her makeup? Her daughter was arrested for makeup and she is paying to release her and look at what kind of makeup she is wearing. Isn’t she scared she will be arrested too?’ Ayda just smiled at her sister’s anxiety.

‘The revolution and the war are over. These are their cash cows. People don’t care about them anymore. That’s life. Anyway, let’s go and pick them up. I think they called our name.’

In the main hall Maziar and Mahtab were talking to a group of youth their own age who apparently had just been released too. They were laughing and talking loudly, describing to each other the circumstances of their arrest as if they were talking about a movie they had just seen. They were actors in their own lives. The whole of their life was a big stage. A Basiji boy the same age as the young detainees came to send them away. He had an automatic rifle and handcuffs hanging from his military pants pocket. The closer he got to the group, the louder they were, continuing their laughter and their jokes. Sorraya and Ayda were scared and told Mahtab and Maziar they were ready to go home. But the pair wanted to know what would happen to their friends with whom they had spent the night in a collective cell.

‘Mom, can you help my friends? Their parents can’t afford the bail.’ Ayda made it clear that it was impossible. The sound of Azan was coming from all the city’s mosques. The heat was building higher and higher as the day moved on. Ayda and Sorraya fanned themselves while they waited for their taxi. Maziar and Mahtab were smoking.

‘Throw that out,’ said Ayda. ‘If they see you smoking they will arrest you again. Can’t you see how difficult it was to release you from the hands of those creatures?’ She grabbed their cigarettes. As soon as they got in the car, the driver closed the windows, turned on the air-conditioning and put the music on. They drove
from the fringes of the city towards Yousef Abad, the choice of music squarely aimed at Mahtab and Maziar. Ayda started planning again. She faced Maziar and Mahtab and said, ‘I think you two have to consider going to overseas. Go somewhere that you don’t get in to trouble for silly things like this, like going to the parties.’

These sudden suggestions took everyone by surprise. Obviously Mahtab and Maziar became excited about it, but Sorraya was hesitant to accept it; she wasn’t sure what her sister’s motivation was. Of course both sisters were worried about their children’s future but Sorraya thought may be Ayda was planning to send children overseas to have more freedom for herself to expand her business the way she wanted.

‘Overseas, to where? To Europe?’ Asked Sorraya.

‘No; everyone says all the European countries have their issues with foreigners. I think other countries, like Australia.’

This time three of them were surprised.

‘Australia?’

‘Yes, I have heard it is a wonderful country for young people who are interested to build a new life for themselves. It is a migrant country. One of my friends has her home there; she says it is the land of opportunity. She is in contact with universities and she has properties which she provides for student accommodation. So it is possible that through her connections you can get a visa.’

Then she turned to Maziar and Mahtab again.

‘So what do you think?’

Ayda suggested contacting Australian embassy to find out what they need.
Back in Yousef Abad, both sisters went to their own apartment. Sorraya reached her door first and then listened to how her sister’s high heels clacked up the newly washed steps until she reached her door. Sorraya hesitated at the doorway for a while then went upstairs. Ayda opened the door, already covered in a bath towel.

‘We have to talk,’ Sorraya almost forced her through the door.

‘I have nothing to say,’ Ayda fixed her towel around her chest.

‘I have and I want you to listen.’

‘I want to have a shower,’ Ayda said, her voice cold.

‘You can’t ignore me forever,’ Sorraya countered, looking around to make sure Maziar wasn’t there. ‘I want to sell my apartment and I want you to buy it,’ Ayda looked at her sister with surprise.

‘Sell it? To me? Why?’

‘I can see that you have already planned my daughter’s life. I thought I have to have a plan for my life.’

‘You mean my suggestion for kids to go to Australia? Sorraya you should thank me for that, not blame me as you always do. Didn’t you see what they went through for just going to a party?’

‘I saw it. I think you are right. They will have a better future if they leave this country. So are you sure your friend can help them to get a visa?’

‘I am sure.’

‘When Mahtab goes to Australia, I want to go back to Tabriz. I don’t have anything here. I want you to buy my apartment and then I will be able to buy your share of our house in Tabriz. I want to keep Papa’s house.’
Ayda sat curled up on a sofa and started scratching her head softly. With the white shower robe she looked like a cat sitting on the sofa. She could see that Ayda was thinking seriously.

‘How about Hadji Khanoom?’

‘It is not her business. The first floor is mine, the second floor is yours and the third floor is hers. She can do whatever she wants with her property and we can do whatever we want with ours.’

Sorraya knew that this plan would work for her sister because Ayda needed a bigger place so as she could store more goods and she knew that Ayda didn’t store some especial items, such as her expensive lingerie, in the basement anymore.

‘Ok, but we have to talk to her anyway. I will organise a meeting. I will try to make it formal. That way she will take us seriously. I will even tell her that you and I have a lawyer to deal with the legal documents.’ Sorraya was relieved and she could see that Ayda was satisfied too. Sorraya felt that there was no more room to stay any longer. She opened the door; Ayda was still seated. Sorraya went out and then knocked on the door again.

‘I want my paintings back.’ Sorraya’s request had a spice of begging. She thought this would give Ayda a warmer heart. She was wrong.

‘Nagashihayeh to?’ Ayda screamed at her. ‘Your paintings? You took them from Papa’s studio and all of a sudden you become the owner. You are very good at clamming ownership on something which doesn’t belong to you my dear sister, aren’t you?’

‘You never cared about his works. They mean a lot to me.’

‘You know Sorraya; you always sit on my throat reminding me who I am, money greedy little sister. Like today, you were trying to play the decent motherly
role. But at least I don’t wear a mask.’ Ayda turned her back and went to her big walk-in wardrobe, stood in front of the mirror and started to clean off her makeup, first her lipstick then her eye shadow and mascara. Sorraya followed her.

‘I will buy them from you if you buy my apartment.’ Sorraya thought that Ayda’s Lancôme makeup remover smelled of fresh baby milk; when Ayda wiped off her makeup, a smear of red and black spread on her pad. ‘What I did was wrong but I am still your sister, we are still sisters.’

‘What you did, and continue to do, wasn’t only wrong; it was something that you will never be able to fix.’

‘What do you mean, I continue? I took care of him because of you. You asked me to, for God's sake, he was a half dead man.’ Ayda ignored her and went to the shower. The sound of the water whirl pooled into Sorraya’s ears and all went far away. She stood for a while and then left. At the doorway she saw Hadji Khanoom’s shadow. Hadji Khanoom receded backwards to prevent being seen but it was too late. Sorraya ignored her and walked downstairs, she heard her own footsteps.

* * *

In the evening there was a knock at the door.

‘Khaleh Sorraya, biayid bala, mamanam marizeh.’ ‘Aunt Sorraya, come up, mum is sick.’ It was Maziar who started pulling at his auntie while talking about his mother’s health situation.

‘Ayda, Ayda, what is it?’ Sorraya jumped the distance to reach her, pulling her long hair away from her face. Maziar was fanning his mother with his book but the sweat came on her face as if a new reservoir of water had found access to the surface.
‘Ghorsam, ghorseh galbam ro bedeh.’ ‘My tablets, give me my heart tablets.’

Ayda managed to say.

Ayda’s chest pain was growing and her face was getting paler than before.
Sorraya moved her sister to the bedroom; Maziar was holding his mother’s arm too.
Gradually Ayda’s natural colour returned but her voice was still weak.

‘Ayda,’ Sorraya held her sister’s hand and squeezed it, tears running down her face. ‘You have to slow down Ayda. The way you work, the way you are stressing yourself will kill you.’ Ayda was smiling at her older sister.

‘I am ok, I am ok.’ Sorraya left her sister and asked Maziar to stay with his mother till she recovered.

Back in her own apartment Sorraya heated up some food. She stood in front of the kitchen window and listened to the microwave. When the food was ready she put on her favourite CD, listening to Maria Callas. This time she played the music loud without worrying about the spying neighbours. Standing in front of the government building and asking for the release of her daughter and nephew had increased her courage. Listening to her music turned up loud made her feel free.

On the coffee table was a photo in a frame of Yagoob holding baby Mahtab with the Toechal Mountains in the background, covered in snow. As she held the photo the voice of Maria Callas rose from the kitchen. Tears were running slowly and steadily down her face. It was the first time since Yagoob’s funeral that she had cried like this. She missed him. She was talking to his photo as if he was alive and sitting there in the living room, as if he was home on one of those rare occasions when he returned from business trips and spent some time in Tehran.
The music finished and the room was quiet in the dark. Sorraya took a family photo album from the drawer and looked at the photos of her wedding day, herself in a white bridal dress, Yagoob in a black suit, Younes and Ayda on her other side, Ghoncheh as a young girl with a flower bouquet in her hand. The sound of crickets monotonously chirping filled the room. She remembered the day she came to the house in Yousef Abad as a young bride. She remembered how she helped Ghoncheh run away with her Jewish lover. She missed Ghoncheh who must feel very lonely now, away from her family, away from home. For a while she listened to the crickets then burst out sobbing.

The next day she went for a walk through Yousef Abad. The houses no longer looked the way they did before. In those days Yousef Abad was a vibrant neighbourhood, full of life. Younes used to walk with her and baby Mahtab to Shafag Park. When Yagoob was away on business, Younes would take Mahtab and Maziar to the park and teach them how to ride their little bicycles. In those days the neighbourhood was more relaxed. The five and six storey buildings with basements converted into apartments didn’t exist and there were still the reservoirs from when Younes was a little boy. Now Yousef Abad was overpopulated and polluted, like the rest of Tehran.

Sorraya didn’t know how long she walked but when she reached the steps of Shafag Park she felt the need to spend some time there. She recalled the day when university students had protested against the revolutionary guard who wanted to remove two life-sized bronze statues that were part of this beautiful park. She remembered this as a gathering point for revolutionary students, a place for family picnics and how every quiet corner was occupied by lovers hiding behind the tall poplar trees and whispering in each other’s ears. She saw the hearts carved on the
soft bodies of trees, each with an arrow passing through it. She read the names and
dates. Some dates belonged to the time of the last dynasty when the official calendar
had changed to an old historical calendar. Some were made during the revolution and
some during the war. She walked and walked until she reached a particular bench
where she sat and remembered Younes.

Gardeners were watering the trees and every now and then the quietness of
the park was broken with bird song. She took her socks off and entered the shallow
pool. The coldness of the water hugged her feet. She felt shy at being exposed to the
water, as if exposed to the public, but no one else was there. She wasn’t like Ayda,
who was daring with tight jeans, short Islamic overcoats, fashionable sunglasses,
colourful nail polish and designer handbags. She hated being seen in public.
Whenever she came to the park with Younes she was careful not to attract attention.
She stepped out of the pool and put on her socks and shoes again. She walked
through the park until she reached the two statues. She felt tired and exhausted. She
sat on the lap of the bronze man, covered him and herself in her Islamic dress and
burst into tears. She wished she had never been married.
Sorraya arrived at one of the cafés in the street that used to be parkway. Now it had changed to Shahid something, as had the rest of the streets. Ayda had found a suitable lawyer to deal with their property documents.

‘He is very good and I have also asked him to work with us about the rest of the inheritance. It is about time that each of us takes our share and does whatever we want.’ Ayda told her that morning. Now Sorraya was waiting for them. ‘It is better that we meet outside.’ She gave Sorraya the name of this café. She sat in a quiet corner and ordered an ice-cream coffee. She looked at the menu pinned on a small board in front of her. Expensive! She thought. She looked around and listened to the sound of cars passing by in the street. The customers were mainly young people interested in making money because it gave some meaning to their lives. The atmosphere was relaxed. There was no sign of the Moral Police. Through the wide window she could see the peak of Toechal and the many small towns that now spread over the slopes of this beautiful mountain range. Their satellite dishes made a little planet of their own, untouchable and protected by money.

Another satellite dish brought the other planet, the West into the big flat screen in the café. Sorraya didn’t know the close-up face of Pamela Anderson, who was holding her gun in front of her big breasts that were showing through her tight shirt.

There were a few young couples, they sat intimately together. One couple was watching TV inside a curtained room. A girl held her mirror up to her boyfriend’s face, who watched as she plucked his eyebrows. The waiter brought her
ice cream in a brandy glass. The coffee shop was located at the upper section of a major expressway, where the passing cars were clean, brand-new BMWs and Mercedes Benz, or Japanese and Korean cars navigating Tehran’s highways. Across the street was a pomegranate juice stand that was open until 4 am. This place had a reputation amongst the youth for anyone who needed a late fix. Sorraya had heard this from her daughter when she was jokingly teasing her cousin. ‘Garage chemist’ was another term she had heard from the young ones in the family, her daughter and her nephew.

‘How far is there between us, the two generations? How many times a day or week does she come here? Who with and what do they do?’ The reality of her daughter's private life was alien to her. It was frightening. She remembered Australia and the embassy and made a promise to wake up early and go to the embassy again the next morning.

On the other side of the highway a car had stopped and three young Pasdar were checking the car. They were looking for anything; alcohol, drugs or indecent behaviour. But anything could become the red line, depending on your luck. ‘Moharram is on its way again. These pasdars are out there to hassle people,’ Sorraya talked to herself.

The table next to Sorraya was occupied by two slim young boys who were red-eyed and drunk. Was Mahtab hanging out with people like this? Even the thought sent a chill down her spine. I hope not. She is a reasonable girl. Again under the curtain of her motherly heart she prayed quietly. She felt really lonely, lonely and helpless. Her father was dead, and her husband and Younes were dead. Her relationship with her sister was little more than a financial tie. She trusted nothing and there was no one she could talk to about her feelings, pinned and crippled by her
loneliness as she was. Mahtab will go soon too, she reminded herself, as if to put her
mind at peace, to make sure her daughter wasn't in danger anymore, wouldn’t be
hanging out in places like this, with people like these. She stared across at the table
where the two boys were discussing money, their voices running over the top of the
stereo on which Shaggy was whispering ‘Hey Sexy Lady’. The young girl with them
was playing with her Versace sunglasses and looking in the mirror as she moved her
scarf even further back.

Outside, at the check point, two girls were being stopped for their improper
dress. Under the autumn sun a young officer walked up and down as cars passed at
more than 100 km/h. How much everything has changed since I was their age,
Soraya thought, wondering where Mahtab was now. She felt tired. She placed her
arms straight by her side. There was a spring coiled tight across her chest, a heavy
thing inside her chest instead of her heart, something like a piece of metal, a bullet,
something that could be triggered to shoot her from inside.

She opened her bag and took out an envelope, and looked at the piece of
paper inside it. It was an invitation from Baku for an exhibition.

Soraya was waiting for her sister and lawyer. She fixed her scarf tight and
left the café, passing the pomegranate-juice café where two young girls, who looked
like Iranian versions of Danica Patrick in their bright pink veils and designer
sunglasses, escorted her with their gaze until she reached the other side of the road
where she hailed a cab. It was cold but it wasn't cold that caused this inner agitation.
That was jitteriness, a sort of stage fright about her future. She pictured herself after
Mahtab was gone. Something vibrated inside her Islamic dress’ pocket.

‘The lawyer can’t make it today, but he asked me to prepare some papers for
him. You had better come here.’ Ayda’s voice moved fast into the oncoming traffic.
When Sorraya’s taxi stopped at Fifth Street, the boys of Yousef Abad were playing in the street. A group of boys were running after a soccer ball. A group of girls were at the next door, watching them, giggling and, to Sorraya’s surprise, whistling to those boys.

In her sister’s living room, Maziar and Mahtab were watching a movie with their friend Babak. They watched as a thief disguised in Islamic garb escaped from jail. It was a scene from the controversial hit movie *Marmoolak*, ‘Lizard’. Sorraya had heard about this movie but had never seen it. Babak was telling her about it.

‘My mum says the director has done something that was unimaginable ten years ago, using the clerical garb in a comic context. I think more and more people are aware of the hypocrisy and empty promises of the revolution, it has become easier to show it. Maybe one day we will make a movie about our time,’ Babak said jokingly while popping popcorn into his mouth, then threw one towards Mahtab. Sorraya smiled at them and went to the living room. She heard her sister’s voice and the sound of the electrical kettle came at the same time from the kitchen. From where she was sitting she could see, in the glass topped coffee table, her sister’s trembling shadow putting the tea on the table. The heat of the glass estekan came out like a jinnie.

‘Do you remember how some traditionalist mullahs believed that making films and going to the cinema was Harram? They even suggested burning down the cinemas for showing such indecent movies. Look at this generation now,’ Ayda said, looking into her sister’s eyes with challenge. Sorraya knew her sister was teasing her, referring to the time, years ago, when she had asked about buying a piano and
musical instrument for sale. ‘The lawyer needs our marriage certificate, children’s birth certificate, and our husbands’ death certificate.’

When the thief became a real Muslim clergyman in the movie’s contrived ending, Sorraya put her Islamic dress on, fixed her scarf in front of mirror, kissed Mahtab and Maziar, shook hand with Babak and went downstairs.
In the scorching heat of *Mordad*, August, Ayda had to make sure her Islamic dress was perfect. She ran for a taxi. A crowd followed her after the same taxi. But Ayda reached the door first and swung her body in as the driver was braking. The sound of the brakes was hair-raising as she shut the door. Then, on the pavement of downtown Yousef Abad, the taxi drove through thousands of young boys and girls who were running from the Moral Police. Ayda pulled her headscarf forward and moved her hand to her forehead to make sure all her hair was covered under the thick black fabric. The last thing she needed at that moment was attention from the Moral Police. Then she wiped off her sweat with a tissue.

She checked her mobile phone; there weren’t any messages. Her personal taxi driver was sick, which was a hassle. Since she had her own driver she didn’t have to wait for taxis. She had forgotten how chaotic the taxi lines in Tehran’s streets were. The driver asked her if it was okay to listen to music. She didn’t mind. The cassette player started with a female voice crying for love. At the corner of the street the driver stopped and suddenly the air inside the taxi was filled with female perfume as four young women climbed into all the seats including the one next to Ayda, squeezing her towards the driver. It was uncomfortable but it was too late to complain. She should have asked for *darbast*, a common practice in Tehran where a passenger could buy the rest of the seats for herself. She had totally forgotten about it and now it was too late. The girls were noisy and happy. The girl next to Ayda asked if she minded if they closed the window.
‘Then we can listen to the music without those ugly, dirty moral guards bothering us.’ She didn’t wait for Ayda’s answer as her beautiful hand with its long manicured nails turned the volume up higher.

‘You ladies have been chased by those bastards in four-wheel drives?’ asked the driver, lowering the volume to be able to hear those who were sitting in the back, lighting their cigarettes. Ayda could hear the excitement in his voice.

‘We were sitting at the café, the one up the road, having coffee and one of my friends started to smoke a cigarette, and then they came, those dirty faces,’ one of the girls said breathlessly.

Now Ayda could see the girl who sat beside her. She was slim with a round face and bright brown eyes covered with a thick, black curtain of curly eyelashes, a beautiful smile with a nice chin and fresh peach-coloured skin. Any mother’s dream, Ayda thought to herself.

The girl was asking for songs and singers that weren’t familiar to Ayda but the driver knew them, and now the beautiful girl and the driver were communicating with each other by turning the music high and low. Ayda could see that she was a problem sitting between them as each time the soft polished nails moved the volume high, the hairy hand touched it in turn to turn the volume down. While in the front seat the driver and the young passenger were flirting over the volume, in the back seat the three girls were talking loudly into their phones. The one behind the driver moved herself forward while pulling the back of his seat toward her and asking, ‘Agha mishe sar autoban baadi vastid man as doostam ye cheezi begiram? Mr Driver, is it possible for you to stop at the end of the highway so I can get something from my friend?’ The driver was more or less the same age as the girls and couldn’t
bring himself to say no. He didn’t even consider checking with Ayda, who was his first passenger.

‘Albate khannom, hamechi to in taxi shodanieh. Of course, dear miss; in this taxi everything is possible.’ The car was going at an alarming speed. The girl who was in the seat behind the driver was talking to her friend on her phone. They were all excited and talked flirtatiously with the driver as they described how they had been cornered by the female Moral Police because of their makeup. Every now and then they turned to Ayda to include her in the discussion. They openly insulted the leaders and authority. Ayda only responded with a silent smile. She was trying to sit firm and not lean on the driver each time he used the gears to take a bend and speed up again on Tehran’s newly knitted highways.

The warning signs the police had posted here and there were replaced by billboards, which showed portraits of religious and government leaders, and election candidates. As they drove the candidates came after them. Then one of the girls asked the driver to follow the BMW in front, which was their friends’ car. Now the taxi, the candidates and the BMW were racing down the highway together with the portraits of religious leaders following them. The taxi finally caught up with the BMW in which there were four young men who were as noisy and cheerful as the girls. Their heavy metal music was so loud that Ayda thought half of the car’s movement was coming from the music. All the girls were talking to them by mobile while they could all see each other and wave. The girl behind the driver moved forward again and asked him to get closer to the BMW. As soon as the driver reached the car, one of the boys in the BMW passed a small packet to the girl then accelerated and disappeared down the highway towards the mountain peak. The girls
cheered and screamed in excitement and asked the driver to drop them at the next exit.

The back seat girls got out with the same level of noise and laughter. Ayda thought her brain was sitting in her hands. Her skull felt empty but heavy and painful. She had never been in a car at such terrifying speed. Her eyes felt sore and she had broken into a sweat. Three of them immediately lit cigarettes and the girl next to Ayda fished in her handbag for some notes. Ayda looked at her beautiful round face in a loosely worn headscarf, her blond-dyed fringe and deep purple lipstick that matched her overcoat and nail polish. She remembered the day she had gone to the courtroom to release her niece and her son. She had heard about the parties young people went to these days, with loud music, dance, alcohol and drugs. The image of her son and niece being arrested and sent to prison shook Ayda all over and she looked at the girl and thought; Every mother’s nightmare. The girl was paying while flirting with the driver.

‘This is for the drive. This is for being kind and chasing the BMW. This is for saving our lives from those smelly Hezbollah, and this extra is for a nice carrot juice and ice cream.’ The driver brushed his hand over hers as he took the money. Their shouts and screams echoed through the thick air as the taxi drove away.

When Ayda calmed down a bit and felt that her brain was inside her head and not inside her hands, she told the driver not to take any more passengers and she would pay him three times his regular fee. The driver accepted. A singer on the cassette player was rapping for social justice and returned peace. But Ayda’s thoughts were now preoccupied with the business she was going to do. This meeting was different to other business meetings. She knew Abbas Agha through formal
family meetings but she had never considered having any business with him. She was very nervous.

Abbas Agha was a metal merchant. He had lost two sons in the war, and his third son was mentally ill and spent most of his time on the roof playing with white pigeons. He'd lost most of his business when they had arrested his brother for trying to bring down the regime. These days he did business in any field, from buying and selling rice and spices to mobiles and even satellite TV. He was a genius of a kind because he had lost almost everything, even his home, but one magical business deal had saved him. Abbas Agha had a cousin with a hotel in the centre of Tehran. The hotel was the hub for Western tourists before the war and revolution. One night when the lobby was packed with tourists waiting for a flight to escape the war zone, Abbas Agha was talking with a group of young guests who were saying they had used all kinds of drugs while travelling in the Middle East, in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey and Iran. Abbas Agha started to tease them by saying he bet they hadn’t tried the Persian aphrodisiac.

‘No,’ said the curious blue eyes that peered at Abbas Agha’s black eyes through thick reading glasses and mascara-thickened eyelashes. ‘We want to try it.’

That evening Abbas Agha mixed a portion of the turmeric he had accumulated in tons in his basement with the hope of one day selling it for five times more. And he wasn’t wrong. He mixed it with rose water and burned opium. Then he put cushions on his living room floor in the old Persian style and served his guests the potion. The day after he had more customers and gradually his business grew. Of course, he couldn’t continue with the Persian aphrodisiac so he started to sell pure opium to those tourists who were waiting in the hotel to find a way out of the war situation. But selling opium wasn’t the business he had in mind for Ayda.
Her taxi stopped at the corner of the pavement on a leafy green street lined with magnificent plane trees. This area was one of the rare streets, which, after revolution, wasn’t rebaptised and kept its original name. The taxi driver took her hand with the money she was paying him. Almost pulling her a bit towards him, he looked into her green eyes and said, ‘Mikhayn inja montazeretoon bemonam?’ ‘Do you want me to wait here?’ Ayda found the suggestion useful as she knew when her meeting finished she would have to wait in the queue for a taxi again. But his voice discouraged her from saying yes.

Abbas Agha received Ayda with a warm welcome.

‘Ayda Khanoom mekhahid yek cocktail baratoon dorost konam?’ ‘Mrs Ayda do you want me to make you a cocktail?’

‘No thank you, just a glass of water.’

Mr Abbas said; ‘Agar negaran oon bironiha hastid khodam ranande daram. Meresoneh shomaro.’ ‘If you are worried about those outsiders, I have my own driver to take you home.’ She explained she had to go somewhere else after her meeting with him and, because there were Moral Police everywhere at the moment, she didn’t want to get into trouble. So she asked for a glass of water again but Abbas Agha’s kind, quiet wife offered her a chilled can of Cola, which was itself an expensive commodity.

While Ayda drank her Cola she looked around the living room. This was the first time she had been to the house of one of the merchants that her husband and her brother-in-law used to work with. It was a big apartment - designed before the revolution - with a glass cabinet full of wine glasses and next to it a built-in mini bar. A grand piano was next to the wide window that framed the dusk. Above the piano were two of many photos of Abbas Agha’s martyred sons, smiling, holding a football
under their arms, waiting to turn eighteen. The brothers were twins. Their photos
covered almost the entire space of this large living room. Ayda was surprised that she
hadn’t notice the photos when she first came in. Now she realised the entire room
was populated by shadows, which reflected the absence of those faces. Some of the
photos were almost life-size, printed in black and white as if shouting a
claustrophobic awareness of absence, or the severed presence of its cause, the war.
Ayda was growing cold inside.

Mr Abbas noticed her looking at the photos when he entered the living room
with some of the samples for sale in his hand.

‘Can you see how young they were? What a waste. I still blame myself for not
stopping them from going and participating in this bloody war.’ Ayda just looked at
him, unable to utter a word.

The time came to talk business. Abbas Agha was always a bit cagey at first,
or a bit shy, or perhaps careful. With Ayda he was a bit careful. She was the wife of a
decent merchant and from a good family. To talk about the items he wanted to sell he
preferred to have his wife come and sit with them. His reluctant wife sat there beside
Ayda without saying a word from beginning to end. Abbas Agha was worried that
the items he had imported with the help of his fashion designer sister in Europe
might cause a misunderstanding.

But Ayda was pleased when she heard him say, ‘Ayda Khanoom, with your
connections to all those wealthy women, this lingerie will sell like a piece of cake.’
Then he became nervous. ‘Dar masal monageshe nist. There is no dispute in
analogy.’
The sound of the evening Azan was coming from a portable radio, which the ice cream seller was carrying in his van. She finally found a taxi. Through her window a hand offered her a pair of socks.

‘Bekhar arzoneh.’ ‘Buy it, it’s cheap.’ The driver drove faster to stop the peddler offering her more cheap socks. She closed the window but the landscape of vendors remained as they crossed the streets to catch a buyer at the red light, or any passer-by. She watched the vendors through the dust and diesel fumes, old cars, new cars, and the honking, jumbled noise and shouting. Some had spread out their wares on an upturned drum, a cardboard box, or piece of cloth on the ground. In the background were newly built boulevards and lines of fashionable boutiques with Western names selling famous brands. One peddler was selling bread and cheese, lavash bread and boiled eggs, as a group of young boys clustered around him. At a red light an old man with a small head and one hand offered her plastic packets of dried seeds and figs through the closed window. She decided to buy a bag. Not that she needed it but because she felt bad looking into his eyes and not buying. But she didn’t get the chance. The light turned green and the taxi drove off faster than the other cars. It moved along the highway, past speeding cars and through narrow streets where people were walking in groups, and again along another highway. Tehran’s different areas were stitched together with highways and narrow old streets, new and then old, new again, old again.

Ayda reviewed Abbas Agha’s suggestion in her mind.

‘Ayda Khanoom, with your help and connections we can make millions selling this lingerie. You just have to hold parties for those ladies and I guarantee I will import more and more of this stuff from abroad.’ Ayda looked out at the street and thought, the war finished decades ago, but in some areas it still looks as if the
bombing has just happened; poor people in the middle of rich areas, buying, selling, shouting and stealing. It was all happening under the one big roof of Tehran’s blue sky. What was running out was some people’s religious belief, which had become as thin as a strand of hair.

On the corner of a narrow street the taxi stopped suddenly. A group of peddlers were running trying to escape the trucks that had stopped to arrest them.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Ayda.

‘Nothing Khanoom, this happens every day. The government arrests those peddlers. They want to stamp out the black market for small business.’ Then he laughed with a hysterical note. ‘Out there in the streets the big sharks are roaming free while they are arresting those whose hands are not even long enough to reach their own hungry mouths.’

At the next red light, a motorbike stopped next to the taxi with a man, a woman and two children on it. Then the bike raced ahead of the other cars and disappeared into the polluted air of the highway.

‘Who are these drivers, driving like this?’ asked Ayda, feeling the road shake under her feet when the motorbike took off.

‘Khanoom, they are not drivers, they are angels of death.’ The driver laughed again. In this jungle, who buys expensive lingerie? Ayda thought to herself. The taxi finally broke through the traffic and reached one of the recently built highways.

In the familiar pharmacy Ayda waited for the doctor to bring her prescribed heart medicine. She was buying it at ten times more than its real price but in this way she was sure the packaging hadn’t been replaced and the use-by date was correct. The years of Western sanctions had had an effect on how medicine was imported.
into the country. On the black market she wasn’t sure what she was buying. Instead of the doctor himself, a young woman in a white coat gave her the box of medicine.

‘Once a day,’ she said with a soft Farsi accent.

‘I know,’ said Ayda. The woman was looking at the scarf Ayda was wearing. She knew how expensive it was, a famous name scarf, and famous name perfume and her jewellery. The young woman noticed Ayda taking note of her expression. For a panicky moment she thought maybe Ayda was working for the Moral Police, but soon they were chatting about fashion. She paid the young doctor her money. It was the whole amount of the last deal she had made selling almost three hundred metres of a velvet fabric to a tailor.

On her way back home, the taxi moved fast through the thinning traffic. Ayda looked out at the streets thinking; there might be peddlers and beggars on this side of the city, but for sure there are many young doctors who are rich enough to buy Mr. Abbas’s products.’

The next morning she was sitting in the kitchen listening to Azerbijani opera music. Her breakfast table was still laid for her son to eat. Maziar had been on the phone since early morning, talking to Mahtab about their plans to go to Australia.

‘Ok, this is the deal, if you get a visa and I don’t you will marry me. And if I get a visa and you don’t, I will find a hot Australian girl and forget about you completely.’ His mother was watching him. He was shifting his mobile from one hand to the other to block out the hot sun and also to be able to smoke his cigarette.

‘Ok, Mahtab, I am serious now. We have to sit and talk about the best way to get our visas. I hope this Australia is worth all these hassles. After all, it was your idea.’ He finished one cigarette and lit another one. His mother always complained about his
smoking but he ignored her. ‘I am serious. If it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t have considered Australia. I could have been in the USA by now. Babak’s family could arrange everything for me, for you too.’ He finished another cigarette. ‘Oh, Mrs Rosa Luxembourg, don’t worry, I am not going to entice you to go to the USA. I will follow you to Australia, wherever that is’ Maziar said while checking on his mobile phone, and then continued, ‘I have to go, Mum needs my help.’

Inside the air-conditioned room, Maziar was checking his mobile phone while listening to the music, which didn’t interest him but brought him good memories. It reminded him of those sweet childhood days, those days when Younes’ health was still good enough to cope with the energetic Maziar. He remembered as a young boy that his father had been passionate about playing with him although he never had perfect health. He watched his mother’s beautifully manicured fingers going through some papers.

On a side table his newly married parents looked at him from their photograph. Maziar came and put his hands on Ayda’s shoulders. She felt her son’s strong, manly hands and told herself; if I only could I would never let you grow up and fly far away from me. She looked at Maziar as if she had just realised that he was her son. I didn’t spend enough time with him, with my family. Maziar sensed his mother’s disturbance but couldn’t see what it was. I regret it now, Ayda told herself. Maziar could sense what his mother didn’t say aloud.

‘Mum, don’t worry. Everything will be all right.’ He pressed her beautiful hands. ‘Mum, do you remember there were days that you used to listen to the music quietly? I used to ask you why and you told me there were bad people who didn’t like music.’

‘I know dear. Thank God those days are gone.’
‘You are my angel, Mum. You know that.’ Mother and son had coffee together. Maziar kissed her once more. ‘Don’t you know how much I love you, Mum? You are a real angel.’

‘Now come and help me.’ She wanted him to help her transfer boxes to the basement store. On the way to the basement Maziar heard the heavy jangling of his mother’s bundle of keys. ‘What are these?’ he asked, looking at the cartoon mouse and dog on the packaging.

‘Children’s clothes from France, Germany and Turkey.’

‘Do you think they’ll sell well?’

‘Of course, everything sells well. You just have to know how to sell it.’ The noise of the opening door vibrated in the air of the corridor.

‘Mum, is it okay if I ask you something? Don’t get upset,’ said Maziar, walking around the basement past piles of stored goods looking for a space to store the boxes.

‘Azizam, ask whatever you want. Why should I be upset?’ Ayda was looking for space too.

‘Why do you want to buy Khaleh Sorraya’s apartment? Isn’t she upset with you for that?’

‘Azizeh delam, she wants to go to Baku. She is not upset. She asked me to buy her apartment. She always wanted to have an exhibition of our father’s work, but she can’t exhibit here. She has found a gallery in Baku that is daring enough to exhibit your grandfather’s nude paintings. That was his dream. So she wants to do the exhibition.’ She moved a few bags here and there took a big deep breath and said, ‘When you and Mahtab go to Australia, she wants to go back to Tabriz.’ Both mother and son were moving boxes around to make space for the new boxes.
‘How about you? What is your plan when we go?’ he asked, looking around for more space. He could hear his mother breathing heavily.

‘Me? What do you think my plan is?’ she asked her son with a smile. Both had a smile on their face for knowing the answer. ‘I want to make my business even bigger than this.’

‘How about Grandma?’ Maziar asked, sitting on a piano stool and playing with the keys, playing no specific tune.

‘What about your grandma? She will keep her apartment. Of course I will move all the goods to a new basement, but don’t worry about her. She will continue to live in her own apartment. I have also heard that she has bought a house in Iraq to be close to Imam Husain’s shrine in Karbala. That is her dream anyway.’ Ayda was struggling to find a place for the last box. ‘Come here and give me a hand.’ Maziar helped his mother. While Ayda was busy fitting the box in, Maziar took a box of condoms and looked at them.

‘Where do you sell these? Please don’t tell me in the streets.’

‘No, silly, I sell them to Mahasti. Do you know her?’

‘I don’t know her, but I definitely know her beautiful daughter, Ziba. I have heard she got one hundred out of one hundred for her university entrance exam, but she wants to go to Harvard to do medicine. A very brainy and beautiful girl,’ said Maziar, moving around the big box of condoms, reading the instructions in English.

‘Yes, she is. Exactly like her mother, Mahasti is an excellent gynaecologist. I am very thankful to know her. Business with her is fantastic for our family.’

They finished up and Ayda locked all the doors, checking to make sure they were all properly secured.
Ayda, conscious of her hijab, listened to vintage Iranian jazz as the faces of government leaders looked back at her through the window, drier than ever. The poor were still chasing cars to peddle their wares. The taxi manoeuvred through the traffic, but the peddlers followed. One young boy reached her taxi and was quick to put his hand through the open window, shaking a bunch of Iranian flags in Ayda’s face.

‘Bekhar khanoom, madaram goshnashe, man ham goshname,’ ‘Buy lady, my mother is sick, and I am hungry.’ When Ayda asked what she was supposed to do with so many flags, he said, ‘Burn them.’ To her surprise the crowd around him burst into laughter. Ayda looked at the driver who spoke to her from the front seat.

‘Baaleh khanoom, mardom khaste shodan as vaadeh va vaaid. Yes, dear lady, people are tired of empty promises.’ Ayda remembered the President when he was the Mayor of Tehran. One day she had gone to the town hall to have documents certified for her property. The man at the door stopped her.

‘Na khanoom, oon asansor baraye bradarhast, shoma khaharha bayad savar onyeki asansoor beshid. No, lady, that elevator is for brothers. You sisters should get in the other elevator.’ She didn’t have time to argue and didn’t want to stir up the atmosphere or attract unnecessary attention. She couldn’t wait to get home as soon as possible. But the taxi driver, like so many others, used the privacy of his car to continue to complain and express his views.

‘Khanoom, people are hungry. Life is difficult for so many of us. We don’t care if America lives or dies. We have enough problems at home. They make promises so they can win votes. I am not even sure if people voted or not. Whoever I
talk to, they say they didn’t bother to vote, they say what difference does it make?
One of these Shazdeh will win anyway.’

*Shazdeh*, a Persian word for prince, was used to mock corrupt members of the
government.

‘The Shah’s regime was a monarchy and after the revolution we were
supposed to be a republic, but now each high-ranking member of the government has
made their own empire.’

People kept pushing their wares through the taxi window whenever the car
stopped at a red light or in the traffic. Ayda watched the crowd. One of the billboard
faces was always looking at her; the supreme leader, then the president, then the
martyrs, all looking at her before their faces disappeared in the distance and was
replaced with another one. They were like the passage of time, reminding her that
she was forty-eight and a widow.

Ayda remembered some of those days when she was eight months pregnant
in the seventh year of the Iran-Iraq war in 1987. She slept with the rest of the family
in the basement for the entire period of the war. Maziar was born by candlelight in a
hospital with the windows blacked out. As Saddam Hussein’s air raids reached their
peak, Maziar came wrinkled and prematurely into this world, without much fuss.
There was only one incubator for premature babies. Ayda was lucky. When she
arrived at the hospital her waters had already broken. While other women who came
before her were in the waiting room shouting at the air, swearing at what was
happening, asking all twelve Shiite Imams to help with their excruciating pain, they
took Ayda to the labour room.

So it happened that according to the principle of first come first served, which
applies even in war-time, they took the wrinkled Maziar and put him in the life-
saving incubator. When the nurse handed her the bundle for breast-feeding, the first thing she did was unwrap her baby and check him. There were ten toes and ten little fingers. She wrapped the baby and fed him.

During her pregnancy she had woken in the middle of the night, if she could sleep at all, because of the air raids, sweating and shaking, waking up her husband because she had dreamed she had given birth to a baby with no fingers or toes. There was no electricity so they couldn’t circumcise her baby. That had to wait another two years and finally Mr Nazeri circumcised her son.

Her taxi was stuck in heavy traffic again, the billboard martyrs following her like shadows of the dead visiting in dreams. Peddlers were following her too, like a contagion. She was trying to ignore them, though sometimes it was impossible to ignore the shouts they threw at her through the windows.

Her taxi driver kept talking. Ayda thought maybe he was talking just to be polite; otherwise they could listen to the music. She felt bizarre; uncertain whether she was in physical pain or whether it was her memory troubling her.

The driver, however, was enjoying talking to the sunglasses he could see in his rear view mirror.

‘You know, Khanoom, last night my wife and I were checking all the websites. Everyone was suggesting, and that includes those who once were children of the revolution, even some founders of the Islamic government who now believe in reform, all were saying, don’t vote for this one. Even my father says he won’t vote. Once he was very devoted, he even went to war voluntarily but these days, you should see how he talks about this president.’

Everyone of his generation uses the internet these days, rich, poor, doesn’t matter, she thought to herself. It was last month that some young business women
had asked her to visit their website to promote her goods. She was still dealing with business the way she did almost twenty years ago. She remembered how much she enjoyed being out there doing something other than housework.

It was one of Tehran’s chilliest days that year. Ayda was going to collect her passport. She was excited. Her brother-in-law Yagoob was taking her with him to Turkey on a business trip. It was during the war and the government controlled the amount of money going out or coming into the country. The government allocated a certain amount of business currency per individual passport. Yagoob asked Ayda to go with him on condition that she gave her foreign currency to him. Just going out of country, being away from the war and its horror was so appealing that Ayda accepted the offer. She asked Sorraya to take care of Maziar, and Sorraya agreed to take care of her sister’s baby and her husband. Yagoob was frank with her. ‘I am taking you because I need the foreign currency they put with your passport.’ On that trip to Turkey she didn’t have money to spend but she did her research on goods that were cheap to buy, easy to import and, most importantly, of high demand at home during the war. And she found them: children’s clothes. Since no one would give her money, she sold her jewellery to purchase the goods. The first profit she made was a modest US$5,000, but it was a lot of money for her. Now, watching those peddlers who were pushing their wares through the taxi window made her smile. These days she spent US$5,000 almost weekly.

The taxi stopped in the traffic again. A billboard face stared at her. She rolled up the window and clipped the edge of street noise from her ears. She watched the street silently. The poverty outside seemed more pronounced and debilitating than ever. The thing missing were the Hezbollah thugs who were usually harassing young
kids over their dress code at this hour, or for gathering at street corners, or for holding hands.

The streets of Tehran, and all the other major cities, went through a metamorphosis each time there was a presidential election. This time was no exception. The candidates have a makeover. The more conservative they were, the more they attempted to convince young people that if they gave their votes to them they would consider their needs, needs that were considered basic human rights elsewhere in the world. Opposing the use of force in dealing with women who did not wear full *hijab* was a common promise, and never delivered.

This president in the first round said that the Islamic Republic had not imposed the *hijab* on women. Rather, Iranian women chose the Islamic dress code of their own free will. He should check websites and Facebook and then he will know the true answer.

It was promise time again, that was the reason there were no *Hezbollah* men or women on the streets. The streets looked like catwalks, crowded with colourfully dressed boys and girls. The moral measures of the past were far from the minds and behaviour of these young ones, when the streets had been crowded with girls who from the age of seven, in their first year of primary school, had to wear heavy black headscarves, and boys who had to read the Koran from an early age. There were boys during the eight years of devastating war who were stolen from their families and sent to the front line. She remembered the day Younes was so sick that they needed an ambulance but there weren’t any available for ordinary people.

How many of these young boys and girls were born in the shelters, in basements, at the base of a doorframe? She asked herself. Perhaps most of them didn’t know.
In fact, most of the baby boomers of the 1980s, the war babies, didn’t know much about the war itself. All they knew was that they loathed the system. The religion they had been forced so much to believe in had alienated them from any belief or ideology.

Thinking about Younes took her far inside herself. She felt she was choking; she felt lonely and empty, as if a chasm had opened between her mind and her body. Tears were running down her face. She wiped her tears and fixed her dark glasses on her face. She was becoming a stranger to herself. A few business contracts were on the way but she couldn’t make herself focus on them. Sorraya and her questions in Baku were repeating themselves over and over.

She just didn’t understand. She wasn’t even upset about changing the locks. She is so naive, trusting that old woman. We are so far from each other. We are so different that it feels strange to say we are sisters, she thought.

At last she was home. The gigantic sun was descending behind the mountain like an ancient turtle hiding his head inside a shell of rock. The taxi driver leaned over and handed her the change. Ayda saw a pair of young hands, manly yet lean and delicate.

‘That’s ok, keep it,’ she said. He thanked her, looking all the time at the dark designer glasses that covered and revealed at the same time. The orange taxi moved away through the maze of Yousef Abad, slowly, slowly.

Before going into her apartment, Ayda wanted to check the basement for some goods. She had totally forgotten that Hadji Khanoom had changed the locks. Out of habit she used her own keys. But the door was unlocked. She stopped at the door feeling it was not good news. Had she changed her mind? Did the old woman
come to her senses while I was away? She was asking herself these questions as she found the courage to enter the room.

The echo of her footsteps on the empty floor dried her skin. The room she entered was bare and empty. She shook and felt a severe pain in her chest. It felt as if there was a storm under her feet, erupting to the surface. The whole of the basement was empty. Since she had come to this house as a young bride, Ayda had never seen this basement empty.

There was a desiccating smile on her face that she couldn’t remove. Not that she could see it, but she could feel it. Then she burst into loud, draining laughter and sank to the bare floor, which felt cold under her Islamic dress. She looked around. This was her basement for many years of marriage. Before her husband got sick and was confined to bed, she came here in the middle of the night to do her banking, bookings, listing and even made phone calls to organise contracts. The basement was her place to manufacture love and passion, to manufacture her dreams. And now all was empty and evacuated. She sat on a stone chair where the fresh air brushed her face.

She cried loudly. Whatever she had made was gone and she knew she was going too. For a moment she felt panic. She felt the pain in her chest grow stronger. Sorraya reached her and took her body into her arms.

'Alaaneh mian, allaneh miresan.' Sorraya was trying to comfort her sister by telling her the ambulance was on the way. But by the time ambulance stopped at Fifth Avenue in Yousef Abad, Ayda had had her second stroke, stronger than the first, and died in the arms of her sister.
Early in the morning Hadji Khanoom walked through the hallway to her bathroom. When she opened the window she felt the rays of sunlight penetrate the darkness of her vision. The cool air touched her face. She started her morning prayer even before \textit{Azan-e-Sobh} started. By the time the morning call to prayer began, Hadji Khanoom had been sitting on her prayer mat for more than an hour. She wore one of her many floral chadors, passing the rosary beads through her hands, and said \textit{salavat} for the souls of lost ones, for her own health and for the operation on her eyes. When she finished, she reached across the carpet for her Koran, kissed the holy book and slipped some money inside.

‘For Ghoncheh’s health, where ever she is.’ She even made a \textit{Nazr}, a vow to hold another \textit{Hazrat Rogeyeh Sofreh}. When Azan finished, the morning quietness moved through the room. Yousef Abad was waking up slowly. Nowadays, for her, the changes in the street were no more than shadowy noises. Every now and then a car passed leaving as little impression as if she were a sleepwalker. In her blind eyes there was a single bright point, her past, her youth, the time she came as a young bride from Azerbaijan to Tehran. She could hear the sounds of construction making her aware that she was alone. She went back to her bedroom when she remembered something. She reached for her bundle of keys. Then she tried to reach her wardrobe where there was a safe that only her bundle of keys would open. Her memories increased the pain in her eyes. In those quiet surroundings the tick tuck of the clock only added to her pain.
The Yousef Abad that Hadji Khanoom had known for years was locked up in her lost vision. She missed the life she had lived in this house. Here she used to sit around the Korsi with her three children on snowy winter days, eating granulated pomegranate and telling stories about the water sprites. How protective she had been and how she missed them now. Thinking about the loss of her children made her resent her daughters-in-law even more. Old age hadn’t softened her toward Sorraya or Ayda. She liked her grandchildren but not enough to feel well-disposed towards their mothers. She blamed Ayda for her loss of control of the family business. In Hadji Khanoom’s mind, Ayda had come into this house with the ambition to get rich and take over the fortune. Also, it was Ayda’s fault that Younes became sicker and then died. She hated the Jewish lover who stole the innocent heart of her Ghoncheh. But the most unforgivable of all was Sorraya. Since she came into my family I lost all my children, she thought.

She sat on the bed in Ghoncheh’s room where everything still smelled of her lost child, her fugitive daughter. She could see in her darkened vision the shadow of the daughter who used to sit in this room and sew patches with Farzaneh, the next-door neighbour’s daughter. She made the omelette quilt for Mahtab here. She still remembered the day that the gypsy quilt-maker opened it up and remade it again. She wished she could return her memories to where they came from; to lock them inside her head, but images of the past came into view instead of the present.

With Yagoob and Younes at least she knew where their graves were. She could go to Behesht-e-Zahra and visit them in the cemetery. But with Ghoncheh, she had lost her to thin air.

The noises outside seemed to burst into the living room, fireworks, marching bands, shouts of celebration. Allah-o-Akbar, Allah-o-Akbar, the chanting was carried
across the rooftops. From the window the rainbow colour of fireworks appeared and disappeared inside the living room. Those neighbours who were still loyal to the cause of revolution and war were outside serving sweets to passers-by. Most people ignored them, using this opportunity just to be happy and free. Now it was Hadji Khanoom’s turn to feel free and happy. Her suitcases were sitting in the living room, open. Her big handbag had enough money for her to live the rest of her life comfortably in Karbala. She was waiting for her taxi.

When she heard the doorbell without checking who was there behind the door, she pressed the door open.

‘Were you going?’ Her daughter-in-law’s voice froze the sweet syrup of freedom inside her chest. She slowly slid her hand to find the right seat to sit on. ‘What are you doing here? Where did you get my keys from?’ Sorraya said, the wheedling of her voice angered Hadji Khanoom but she kept it quiet. ‘You are the one who sneaks into other people’s homes with their keys, not me. I entered when you opened the door, you are surprised.’ Sorraya said. She came closer to her mother-in-law to make sure she could feel her presence. ‘You thought I went to Baku and then you planned to rob us and run away. You stole from Ayda and me.’

‘If you cared so much about your sister you wouldn’t be disloyal to her by cheating on your own husband and hers. Do you think I was blind, do you think I didn’t know?’

‘No, I was quite aware that you knew, but I also knew you wouldn’t say anything because you knew how much Younes loved me.’ She used the word love with a long pause. ‘And you will never, ever talk about me and my sister again. Our adversity in our lives comes from you. It was you who planned Ayda and Younes’s
marriage because you lost on Yagoob’s choice and you wanted to take control of Younes’ life, as always.’

‘San bi eva fetnani jaterdoon,’ ‘you brought Fetneh to this house.’ Hadji Khanoom’s voice was getting more and more aggressive, almost shouting.

You brought calamity with you to my family. I had to report you; I had to disgrace you. You and your sister brought scandal into my house. You are like your father, shameless and without any morals, he and his disgusting paintings.’ Sorraya allowed her mother-in-law’s anger to settle and then she created another storm.

‘Yes, you had to but you didn’t.’

‘Because I am a woman who believes in God. I know he is mighty and I leave your punishment to Allah’s mighty judgement.’ Hadji Khanoom ignored Sorraya’s cachinnation.

‘Your submission to God is from your selfishness. You didn’t report me because you already knew your family’s name and your name as a mother was already out there, the topic of ridicule at those Sofreh parties you attended as a pious Hadji Khanoom. You knew how Ghoncheh’s eloping had already destroyed your name.’ Sorraya was marching in the big living room. She looked outside, thinking, you can’t run away from it.

She watched the fireworks of the anniversary of the Revolution in orange, green and red coming from the dark; the explosive sound of fireworks was mixed with the sporadic sound of Allah-o-Akbar, echoing around the skirts of the ancient mountain.

‘The other day I saw you with Ahmad in the basement. I know you are the one who stole all the goods and sold them.’ Sorraya said. ‘Be man tohmateh dozdi mizany’? ‘Are you accusing me of stealing?’ Sorraya’s accusation of stealing made
Hadji Khanoom shaky, she wanted to swallow her anger and deal with this calmly, but the fact that Sorraya had seen her made her feel there was no use, nevertheless she decided to play with her anger.

‘As khoda Khejalat nemikeshi? Aren’t you ashamed in front of God?’

‘The one who you should be ashamed of is you not me. What happened that all of a sudden you became so nice to the son of Hadji Agha’s sigheh woman. I know you are lying. I am sure you are planning something with him, but I don’t know what yet.’

The noises outside seemed to burst into the living room - fireworks, marching bands, shouts of celebration. The Allah-o-Akbar, Allah-o-Akbar chanting was carried inside. Sorraya was breathless and exhausted but still felt that the revenge hadn’t been achieved yet.

‘So, tell me, Hadji Khanoom, what is your plan? What did you promise Ahmad? Talk. I am sure you have promised to find a good wife for him, the kind that you want the kind that you failed to find for your own sons. And I am sure you are using him to sell all those things you stole from the basement.’ When Sorraya said the word basement, she suddenly remembered something. Then she rushed towards the old body. ‘Where are my paintings? Where is my father’s art? Talk! What did you do with them, you old Ajozeh.’

Hadji Khanoom knew that the word Ajozeh was used by both sisters all the time, especially by Ayda who constantly referred to her as an old witch, but that didn’t hurt as much as mentioning Hadji Agha’s concubine hurt her.

‘I burned them. I burned those disgusting works. You and your family make me sick. I don’t know why on earth Yagoob married you. You made him drink alcohol and the alcohol killed him, you killed him!’ ‘He married me to run away
from you. You and your husband pushed him to alcohol, not me. He hated coming home because of you, because he needed to drink. You pushed away all your children. And you wanted Younes to marry Ayda because you wanted to keep him away from me. You wanted that little sick, weak Younes. You couldn’t see that he was a grown up man and he was in love, in love with me!’ Sorraya stormed towards Hadji Khanoom. She was shouting; sometimes her voice reverberated in the quietness of midnight and sometimes it was mixed with the melody of fireworks and *Allah-o-Akbar* coming through the window.

Sorraya looked around feeling exhausted, consumed. She tried to regain her stamina by sitting on the corner of the windowsill; the colours of the fireworks flashing in, dancing on the roof and sitting on the surface of the light green Persian carpet. Her gaze was glued on Younes’ wedding photo on the corner coffee table; it was of the four of them, Younes in his black groom jacket, Ayda with her long white dress and a tiara, Yagoob in a black jacket and light blue tie, and she was in her dark blue pregnancy dress. The four of us, we could be happy together. A feeling of wanting to harm her mother-in-law’s spirit was growing in Sorraya’s chest; a kind of fetidness that was eating in her chest like termites.

‘I know where Ghoncheh is now.’ The effect was as she had guessed.

‘Where? Where is she? Please Sorraya, I beg you, ’*Denah hardadeh? manim gizim hardadeh?’* ‘Where is she? Where is my daughter?’ Hadji Khanoom was on her knees in front of her daughter-in-law, as if she had fallen down on her knees to praise her or even pray to her.

‘You give back my father’s paintings and all the money you took from us, me and my sister and our children; then I will tell you where she is,’ Sorraya said. She was still seated on the corner of the windowsill that now felt as if it was her seat of
coronation. Hadji Khanoom could see that Sorraya was the winner and somehow she had to show her daughter-in-law that she accepted the defeat.

‘I am going to Karbala tomorrow. When Ahmad comes I will tell him to bring back your paintings. Now please, tell me where my daughter is, how I can contact her.’

‘I think you have forgotten something, how about our money?’

‘Okay, here it is.’ Hadji Khanoom walked on her knees towards her handbag. Her legs were numb and her walk was clumsy. She gave Sorraya a bundle of tomans. ‘Here, take it.’ And to justify herself, she said, ‘I was going to give this to Mahtab anyway. She knows that I love her and that I want her to live a happy and safe life in England.’ Sorraya was counting the money.

‘She is not going to England, she is going to Australia. This is nothing, come on Hadji Khanoom, tell me where the rest of the money is and where the rest of the goods are.’

‘Believe me this is all I have. When Ahmad sells all the goods I will send you the rest. Mr. Cohen has found good customers. Where did you say Mahtab is going?’

Sorraya could feel that Hadji Khanoom was distracting her from requesting the rest of the money, so she quickly answered, ‘To Australia, now, where is the rest of the money otherwise no Ghoncheh,’ she said, curling her lip as if it was an opened flower, something like ghoncheh, blossom. For the second time, Hadji Khanoom had to show she accepted her defeat. She gave Sorraya all the money. ‘I will come back tomorrow morning to get my paintings and the contact names for the rest of the goods.’
Sorraya woke up in the middle of a dream again. In her dream she had a piece of long black fabric in her hands. She wanted to stitch it with white thread but each time she looked at the needle, the thread was black.

At six o'clock in the morning she was to meet Ahmad, who was supposed to take Hadji Khanoom to the airport for her flight to Iraq and her visit to Karbala. She turned on the jug for a cup of tea and, while waiting, looked at the street through her window. The sun was rising from the back of the Mount Damavand. The passing-by gypsy quilt makers were calling for work. After the tea, she put her Islamic dress on, fixed her headscarf in front of the mirror, put her mobile phone and keys in one pocket and her portable radio in the other. When she locked her door, she heard footsteps. She thought it was Hadji Khanoom. It wasn’t.

‘Sobh bekheyr Sorraya Khanoom.’ ‘Good morning Sorraya Khanoom.’ Ahmad was in his work clothes, overcoat and dust covered jeans.

‘Do you want me to call Hadji Khanoom to come downstairs?’ She asked while she was checking her SMS. Ahmad answered with an edge of surprise in his voice.

‘Soraya Khanoom, Hadji Khanoom went to Iraq this morning. I am here to move the furniture. Where do you want me to send Ayda Khanoom's and your furniture? I will bring my family here next month.’

‘What?’ Sorraya felt this one word jet out of her mouth.

‘Didn’t you know?’ Ahmad said while trying the keys to make sure they were the right ones. ‘Obviously you didn’t. She left at 2.30 this morning. I arranged a pick-up taxi for her yesterday.’

‘She can’t do that.’ Sorraya’s voice was purplishly angry.
‘Yes she can. You know this house was in her name. My deceased Hadji Agha never divided this house. He always was worried about Yagoob. He thought if he gave any assets to him he would sell them and buy his devil liquid. And Younes, to be truthful, no one thought that one day Younes would have his own family. He always was a sick boy, and Ghoncheh Khanoom.’ Here Ahmad sighed. ‘She broke everybody’s heart with her eloping.

Soraya was sitting on the step, tears in her eyes, feeling a meaty fat anger emerging from inside her.

‘My poor sister had so many plans for her future business. She was right, not to trust this witch.’ Soraya was talking to herself but it was more like a mumble, it didn’t make any sense to Ahmad. ‘What about my paintings, she told me she gave them to you.’ At this point Ahmad looked at Soraya with joy.

‘Soraya Khanoom, thank God, I burned them last night. What would happen if someone saw them and called the Basiji. You shouldn’t keep those kinds of things at home. They were mischievous and evil. Who paints like that? This is a dignified family. I am sure some juggler had deceived Ayda Khanoom to buy them.’

‘They were not Ayda’s. They were mine, my father painted them. What do you know about paintings, you foolish man.’ She was screaming right into Ahmad’s face and then she ran outside.
Epilogue

2008

Sorraya had to leave Ayda and her own apartment in ten days. Hadji Khanooom had sold their apartments and her own as one house. The property was never divided as three separate properties. Hadji Khanoom was the owner. Mahtab and Maziar were out looking for a place to rent.

Inside Ayda’s apartment was a brooding silence. Three days of heavy snow had finally stopped but the frozen air was breathing inside the walls of the apartment. Since Ayda’s death, Maziar spent most of his time either at Babak’s or with other friends. Sorraya checked the radiator in the hallway; it was off.

In the kitchen, she put the electric kettle on. She put her cold hands in her Islamic dress, feeling the heaviness of her radio in one pocket and her bottle of vodka in the other. Listening to the hissing sound of the kettle, which was getting louder as it got hotter, she took her mobile phone and two packs of Ayda’s medicine out of her handbag. She looked at the instructions on the medicine, which suggested it was dangerous if taken with alcohol, and then checked her messages on her mobile phone. There weren’t any. The time on the phone showed 1.30pm.

She turned the radiator on but the chill was penetrating. She took a woollen shawl and wrapped herself in it. Her fragrance was already embedded in the body of her turquoise blue shawl. The house had been cleaned by a maid that Ahmad had paid, but he didn’t pay for fuel although Sorraya had sent money for that. She looked around, nothing had moved from its place. She walked towards the window and pulled the heavy curtains back. Toechal Mountain stood as a proud monument in front of her. Its snowy diamond peak was shining under the day's bright sunlight.
Ayda and Younes’ apartment, which once was her daily place to visit, felt like a strange place without them. A place where she couldn’t feel comfortable although the memories were coming and going in her mind from every corner of the house, like the backgammon games they played here. She looked at the dark wooden space of the game, which was still set open on one of the corner tables. She picked up the dice, felt their coldness and threw them in the wooden box. When the sound of the dice settled, the numbers three and one appeared. The sound of the whistling kettle took her to the kitchen. She poured hot water into the golden edged estekan and looked for tea. All four tins of Ahmed tea were empty. Instead of tea, she took a gulp of the vodka; the sharp sensation burnt her throat.

In her sister’s bedroom, the fig plants had overgrown the big pot, their double in the mirror of Ayda’s dressing table. She sat on the edge of her bed. She looked at the suitcases, which Ayda had bought in the last days of her life to sort them out for sale. She took a piece of lingerie and looked at it.

She walked around the house and in the dining room she put music on. Googoosh’s old song filled the room. Man va Gongishkhayeh khoneh, me and the Sparrows. She took some of the medicine and drank a few more gulps of her vodka. While singing quietly with Googoosh she sat on the marble steps, which connected the living room to the dining room, and looked around. The room was Ayda. It breathed the strong image of her personality. Every item was her, the silky carpets and rugs, the plump velvet cushions, the grand piano with all the silver and crystal photo frames, Italian silver cups and sugar jar, ashrays. The only thing that was bought for her was her wedding mirror and two candle holders, which had been Sorraya’s choice but bought by Younes and which were now sitting on the
mantelpiece. The only item of their father's was one of his early paintings, a nude painting which was framed by Sorraya for her sister as a present for Maziar’s birth.

At the junction of the living and dining rooms, the goldfish raised their heads, open-mouthed to the air, looking up from the big aquarium. Maziar has taken care of them, she thought. A car passed in the street, the roaring engine crying over Googoosh’s singing. She checked her messages again, nothing. The mobile phone showed it was 5pm. She sat at the edge of the chair, looking outside through layers of lace curtain. Outside the sun disappeared behind the mountain and a sudden darkness came in. She picked up a crystal candleholder and lit a candle. She went back to the bedroom, holding the tall candle. She put the candle on the dressing table and opened the doors to the big walk-in wardrobe. Two mirrors on the doors multiplied her.

She looked at the side that belonged to Ayda and touched her sister’s clothes while walking through the sections of dresses, shoes, handbags and boxes.

The sound of her mobile phone brought her back to the present.

‘Mum, we are going out; we are going to Tehran University. There is a demonstration around there. We will be back a bit late,’ Mahtab said. Sorraya could also hear Maziar, laughing and joking. The political disturbances had started again. Most of the university students were in demonstrations and some had gone underground.

‘Basheh, movazeb bashed.’ After advising her daughter to be careful she hung up and dropped her mobile phone on the bed. Her head felt heavy, she took a few more pills and drank more vodka, then dropped them on the bed too and went back to the dressing room again.

She looked at Younes’ side. Shirts, suits, ties - all were sorted according to Ayda’s sense of cleanliness. She touched and felt his clothes; she pulled the sleeve of
a grey jacket and smelled it. She pressed the sleeve to her chest, which she felt was becoming smaller and smaller; then a physical pain merged in her chest and tears were running down her face. She looked at her image in the mirror. Her image was reflected on both sides. She stared at herself, and gradually she let the sleeve go and stared at herself. Chilly air in the room brushed the blood onto her cheeks; she touched her nose and felt the icy air coming out of her small nostrils as they made a round fug on the mirror. Regardless of the chill, she felt a rush of heat inside her body and then the cold sweat came.

She took her jacket off and then her jumper. Her face in the mirror looked at her; the face in the mirror looked older as if it belonged to another calendar. She looked at herself as a whole; that petite body in blue jeans and long sleeved T-shirt looked at her strangely. The face looked old but the body looked like a teenager’s body. She took off her pants and shirt, and then her underwear. She stood on her clothes that had been stripped from her body and gazed at the body of which there were a million copies in both mirrors. Her frozen fingers needled her skin, pressed her neck, her arms and her nipples. The naked body matched the face now; aged, soft fleshy arms and belly, her skin still firm and bright.

She felt as if those lagoon green eyes belonged to someone else, staring at her naked body. She pressed her finger on her image in the mirror, pressed her nipples and moved her hand on her belly; her other hand moved down and pressed her hair, brushed it with her fingers; with her nails she scratched her body. Her fingers in the mirror moved around her body, her neck and her face. Her other hand moved up and both hands hugged her. While trembling, she slowly sat on her knees and remained motionless. After a few minutes, her breathing returned to normal but she felt dizzy and a rush of heat passed through her head. She looked at herself again. The
candlelight from the bedroom was dancing around her. The darkness was bringing the secret whispers of loneliness.

She put on her clothes and covered herself in the chador and ran outside. She ran until she got to the Shafag Park; she sat on a bench. A park gardener was cleaning the shallow pool, which was empty of water. The old snow sitting in the pool looked grey. He opened the plastic over the fountain’s pipes, to check if the winter chill hadn’t damaged them, and then turned on the water. The spray of water reached her face. He turned them off and reached for three baskets of violet flowers that were waiting for the gardener to plant for a spring blooming.

‘Do you want me to read your future?’ Sorraya turned her head, frightened. A fortune-teller was sitting beside her, pulling her hand. She pushed him away and ran again. She ran and ran until she returned to the Akbar Mashdi ice cream shop. Exhausted and breathless she sat. Two boys and two girls were eating ice cream on the other side of the shop.

One of the girls leaked her ice cream, the taste of sweet saffron sat on her mouth. She watched Sorraya.

‘Who is she?’ she asked.

‘A stranger, a traveller,’ one of the girls said; ‘she walks around Yousef Abad and talks to herself, I think she is mad.’

There was Azan, the time was somewhere around evening. It was 1430 on the Islamic calendar but nobody knew what was on the other calendars any more. When the two boys and two girls left the ice-cream shop, the land shook under their feet; Sorraya heard the water sprites roaring from the underground of Yousef Abad.