

Sand/Snow

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By
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Abstract

Sand/Snow is a mixed-genre novella that incorporates conventional prosaic structures, with Iranian poetic structure, and romantic vocabulary. Themes of cultural transgression, loss, and intergenerational trauma permeate this work, meant to demonstrate the difficulties of immigration and integration. This novella follows the lives of a small family of Iranians who move to Canada during the Iran-Iraq War. Struggling to find a place in the present, the microcosm of their family life is shattered when the youngest child of the family commits suicide.

Dedication

This is to my family, whose struggles, and my own, inspired this thesis, and whose encouragement allowed me to finish it.

Roshan, A Study

A scent permeated their family home, which had, for quite some time, been rather empty. This scent was different from the others: thick, unpleasant, burning. It was the scent that clung to the skin of each member left in the house, a scent that told of churning stomachs, quick beating hearts, and cold sweats.

It was the scent of fear, of anxiety. It overpowered the lilacs in the vase by the door, and the smell of meat, stewing with herbs, onions and garlic. Some, like Roshan, were accustomed to this scent. She wore it every day, as if she'd woken from a long night's sleep and doused herself in its perfume. But to smell it on others unnerved her. Her father, Abbas, her mother, Fereshteh – they were afraid.

That morning, like all mornings, Roshan went to work. Her husband would sleep in, and she and her son would get ready together, eat together, laugh together. She would comb his hair and straighten his shirt, and he would plead to stay home and watch television.

“Please, *Maman*,” her little boy, Mostafa, would beg, and all she could do was smile, and kiss his round cheeks. “Not today, my love. School is important, okay? Very important. Going there while you still can, it matters.” Convincing her child was easy; he was a simple boy, with very boyish aspirations: playing professional soccer, eating junk food, and making his parents proud. Together they'd walk, after a quick breakfast and a mumbled prayer, to their respective places of business. Mostafa would be dropped

off at school, and Roshan would walk a bit further down to grab the bus, and head to the hospital.

Public transport in Iran was a risky business. Buses usually never stopped, merely slowed down, gave you a brief moment to jump on, then continued on their mad trek. They were overcrowded, smelly things. But that morning, Roshan entered a nearly empty bus. This was it, she realized, what the death of a city looked like. The buildings abandoned and crumbled, the streets shaken with fear, the leaves of trees dried and coiled, seeking to return into themselves, to become seeds once more, safe in the ground. For the first time in all the years she'd taken the bus, Roshan sat down. The last seat, on the row by the left-hand side, belonged to her in that moment. In front of her were three men in suits, and two women clad head to toe in black *chador*. One of the women, an old mother whose curved back showed the weight she'd carried in her youth, was praying. Agile, crooked fingers worked the pale blue beads in her hand, and Roshan found herself praying in time with every falling bead. *God is good. God is great. God will come through for us.*

The ride was unusually quiet, the customary traffic of Tehran solemn, as if it feared being too loud. She had reached the hospital two hours ahead of her scheduled shift but, of course, it was already bustling. Doctors and nurses hurrying, frenzied. Shouts danced in the air, hectically bouncing off every wall. Blood splatters on the floor crawled about, searching for the body from which they'd burst. It took Roshan mere seconds to dip into the employee's room to change and put her belongings away. Now clad in proper attire, she washed her hands vigorously, her large, thoughtful eyes inspecting her appearance in the mirror. She looked tired; the same fatigued eyes as her mother.

Quietly, she turned off the tap, comforted by its familiar creaking. Her hands wiggled free of water before she reached for paper towels.

Dressed head to toe in white, another pale ghost among the chaotic living, she rushed towards the intensive care unit of the hospital and got to work. Each room she passed held tears and silence. Each colleague haunted, somehow, by something, someone. Demons roamed freely now, more so than ever. They were tired, as Iran was tired. Each exhale was laboured, each clipboard heavy with the weight of injury, loss, disease. Body after body would roll in, hoping to walk out. These days, they seldom did. Sadness was their quotidian; it had settled itself in all of their hearts, on their skin, gripping them so tightly they felt its cold fingers wrapping around their bones.

Try as it might, joy could no longer reach them with its warmth and positivity. The world had become too bleak. Sirens had replaced laughter, marching had replaced playing. Ash had replaced rain. Mothers felt the absence of their sons as they cooked their favourite meals.

Roshan tossed the paper towels into the bin. She took a breath and pushed past the double doors into the emergency waiting room. One thing she would always be thankful for would be the lack of familiar faces in the crowd. All those she loved—Elaheh, Fattaneh, brothers, sisters – they were gone. Settled in some distant country, safe and sound. It was only she who remained of their clan. Her, *maman* and *baba*. Two, too old to move, and one, too frightened to. Iran was her home.

It was the soil from which she'd bloomed, and it would, inevitably, be the soil in which she'd be buried.

The Perfect Recipe

Iranian dishes are quite basic, Elaheh would tell her daughters, as they enjoyed the meal she had cooked over the span of a few hours. But Persian cuisine demanded effort, patience, and passion. It was not for the lazy, nor the light-hearted. Dishes like *tachin*, *koofteh*, and *mirzaghaseemi* demanded gravitas. Love of craft, and memories of your mother's cooking were keys to making the most savoury dishes. On that day, Elaheh chose to cook her homeland's most beloved dish: *Ghormeh Sabzi*.

She pulled out tomatoes, cucumbers, and an onion. The first step to any good meal is a side dish that compliments it. *Salad-e-Shirazi* was a simple concoction, sour and fresh, that kept hearty stews in check. It was the perfect side for any lamb dish, including what Elaheh planned to make for supper. A family favourite, this meal tore away from the stereotypical *kababs* and rice most imagined to be the center of Middle Eastern cooking. When she longed for home, she cooked this.

There were many steps to *ghormeh sabzi*. First, you had to argue with your husband until he bowed to your desire. Once defeated, you had to remind him to do the groceries: "Don't forget the *shambelileh*. Or the *tareh*." Second, when he returned with what you'd asked for – and more you had not— you merely gave him a glance before moving to wash and cut the plentiful, fresh herbs. There was no space in that creaky house that truly belonged to Elaheh, except for the kitchen. It had been a domain forced upon her by cultural and patriarchal demand, but soon it evolved into a kingdom only she ruled. Her refrigerator was her armoury; her pantries were filled with ammunition. While she lacked these skills in youth, as a mother, Elaheh had devoted herself to the art

of cooking. Hers was a name spoken of fondly, in relation to food, by all members of their family.

Spinach, parsley, fenugreek, chives, and coriander were rinsed not once, but twice in ice cold water. The counters were adorned with them, bright and odorous, as they dried. Fortresses are prone to invasion. This was the also the case for Elaheh's kitchen. Over her shoulder loomed the overlord of the kingdom. "What are you making? *Ash-e reshteh?* Or *coocoo?*" A knife was retrieved, but this is not her weapon of choice. Light caught the steel and reflected brightly in Ali's eyes. She was quiet, reaching for her cutting board. "Nope. Don't you have better things to do than crowd me? Move. You're in the way." Her elbow jabbed him gently in the side as Elaheh reclaimed her space. It was her indomitable wit and sharp will that allowed Elaheh to wound and slay him each time Ali encroached on her territory. His lips pursed slightly, a look of unsatisfied curiosity. Defeated, complacent, he backed away, shuffling off to his office. Tension melted away from her knuckles and shoulders and, patiently, Elaheh began to chop.

Chop. Cut the stems, cut the roots. This isn't your mother's kitchen.

Split. Separate the leaves from each other; break them off. These are not your sisters anymore, these are not your aunts or uncles.

Mince. Turn everything into One thing. Nothing can be discernable. You do not stand out in a crowd. You fold and crunch and water comes out of you, green and fresh to the taste. Everything fits into one large bowl. Elaheh shoved and pushed. Not a single leaf dared to resist the pressure of smooth palms.

Fresh lamb sat on the counter, thawing. Innocence butchered, cut into bite size chunks, ready to be cooked and consumed. She often thought of eating the meat raw.

Would the blood restore her naiveté? Would it return her childlike wonder, her purity? Who knows? Maybe. No. Those things were in the compost bin, beside all her stems and roots.

Elaheh retrieved a large onion from the refrigerator, and a dried lime from the pantry. She contemplated the lime, rough, hardened by time, and a raging sun. Whenever she looked at her children, she felt like the onion: full, fresh. When she contemplated Ali, she felt like the lime: bitter, wrinkled, filled with sourness. She set these beside the lamb, cleaning and cutting the onion, then using the tip of her knife, she poked small holes inside the lime.

Finally, the time had come to start cooking. The saucepan she pulled out had been one she'd brought with her from Tehran. Sara liked to joke about how, of all the things she could have brought, Elaheh chose a steel saucepan. It wasn't because the pan was particularly good: it burned the food easily if you weren't careful. Nor was it because the pan bore a particular memory: she'd gotten it at the *bazar-e-Tehran* on a whim. Elaheh had kept the saucepan because she was the only one it answered to. With Ali it burned everything he put in it. The children were frightened to use it in case the same happened to them. It was *Maman's* good pan, the only pan that made stews.

Somewhere in its metal it held the memories of stews past, flavouring each new dish with the same passion, the same essence. Setting it on a medium heat, Elaheh covered the bottom with canola oil, and once it was hot enough, she poured in the onions. There was a comfort in the scent of cooking onions. The way it clung to your skin and clothes once you left the kitchen; you carried it with you. When Elaheh found herself in situations of discomfort, the familiar scent locked in her shirt would bring her the

calmness she needed. It reminded her that all her pain and anxiety was ephemeral, because she would once again return to her kitchen, her sanctuary, and cook the dishes that warmed and soothed her.

Once the onions were on the edge of golden, she added the lamb. Its scent and sizzle filling the air almost instantly. It was important to let the meat brown, but not fully cook, before you began the next step. Elaheh reached for the turmeric. King of spices, turmeric had no time for the uncultured, or inept. It was a fickle thing, with a bright yellow colour that could stain one's flesh for days and days. Turmeric was to be treated with respect, used only by skilled hands. Too much, and your dish became irrevocably bitter. Too little, and all you had was colour, not taste. It took trial and error for Elaheh to gauge the perfect quantity, and even now it was all done with a feeling in her bones, and a glint in her eye.

Now, it was just a matter of mixing meat, spice, and onions over medium high heat until the lot was a beautiful, bright clementine colour. Her work was not finished yet, however. Oh no. She lowered the heat on the meat and onions before retrieving a second pan, shallow, for frying. On medium high heat, she doused the pan with oil, and once it was hot, she dumped in herbs, fresh and dried, quickly tossing them around to keep them from burning. The sound of violent sizzling was intoxicating; her pupils expanded, the short hairs at the nape of her neck stood on end. Her heart, strong and ready, beat with nervous elation. Twirl, shove, push, pull. Fresh herbs bled their life water. Dried herbs absorbed them and lived again. When moisture had all but left the mix, Elaheh lifted the pan, and transferred the herb mix into the mixture of meat and onion.

The high excitement ended there. The rest of the process of *ghorme sabzi* was a quiet, bubbling ordeal. Once Elaheh added the lamb bone broth she'd prepared the night before, everything became... silent. The rage of the artificial fire dulled, and nothing could be heard but a soft gurgling, and the whir of the range hood. Suddenly the world outside her kitchen began to bleed in. She could hear the television was on, unsure as to when that had happened. Sitting on the couch, side by side, one with legs propped up to her chest, the other sprawled, taking up more than his half of the space, were her children, Saman and Leila. Leila and Saman. They left no room for another to sit on their three-person couch.

"Scoot," Sara would say, forcing herself—always, forcing— in between them. Trying. But there were only so many times you could push against a wall that did not wish to crumble. Elaheh had wondered where her third child had been. Hers was not a demure arrival like her siblings. Hers was a cacophony of laughter, thundering steps and whining, asking "What's for supper?" or "It smells great in here!" There had been no such presence, no such sunlight in the small factory of a home. Only hypnotized gazes, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reruns, and Elaheh, behind the double mirror, contemplating it all.

Hissed whispers emerged from the pan on the stove, and the *ghorme's* enchanting spell would pull Elaheh back into her little microcosm. The next step was to add the beans. Traditionally the recipe called for the robust, thick-skinned red kidney bean, but Elaheh disliked its resistance. Its taste was not worth the work it required to chew and digest. Instead, Elaheh used the much more manageable Roman bean. She had

rehydrated them the night before, and then, still firm, she dumped the beans into the simmering mix, along with the dried lime she had pierced moments before.

The rest was a waiting game. *Ghormeh sabzi*, like any other stew, required time to sit, to develop, to bubble and melt. Forty-five minutes was the sweet spot; it allowed enough time for flavours to come into being, mesh and meld together, and it gave Elaheh just the right amount of time to cook some rice, with a crispy *tahdig* to boot. The mother of three would put the electric kettle to boil, and then reach into the spice cupboard for the most sacred of ingredients.

Jewel of the East, mother of flowers, God's herb, her mother always said. *Zaferoon*. Saffron. It was a precious delicacy, found at the end of the world. Packages going for fifteen to thirty dollars for barely even a gram. If there was one good thing about Ali's obsession with the Return Home, it was the copious amounts of Iranian goods he brought back. According to Ali, the prices never changed. Either that, or there was always money to buy the highest quality. Where he got it from, she didn't know. She had never been privy to his finances.

Elaheh stirred the stew. She thought often of what she would do if, one day Ali returned to Iran, and stayed there. She imagined wild things like buying the clothes she liked, or driving herself to wherever she wished to go, regardless of the hour. The very thought made her want to laugh! Her? Without the fine chain around her ankle, keeping her tied to that man? Impossible. But one could dream, of course.

The kettle finished boiling, and Elaheh poured a bit of hot water into a small, shallow bowl. With the very tip of her teaspoon, she collected a pinch of saffron, finely ground with sugar, and tapped it into the steaming water. Immediately, a bright, vibrant

orange burst to life. The liquid would become a bit thicker, and would smell of a subtle, but noticeably earthy scent. She set the mixture aside before she moved to wash the rice and pour it into a large pot. Salt was added, and some butter for good measure, and the fire was turned on high beneath the rice pot. Then, the waiting game began. Minutes ticked by slowly. The rice boiled. And bubbled. She took it off the heat, drained the water, and dumped a copious amount of butter to the bottom of the pot before carefully setting down perfectly cut pieces of *lavash* bread. The bread sizzled. Elaheh managed a genuine smile. The other half of the *tahdig* would be rice. She poured the par-cooked rice over the bread she'd just placed and quickly covered it, wrapping the lid in a dishcloth to help it steam.

She stirred the *ghorme*. It had changed colour a bit, from a vibrant green to a dying, blackish green. In any other context, this would be cause for alarm, surely. But in the case of *ghorme sabzi*, this simply meant the herbs, spices, meat – everything was finally becoming One.

“Smells good, Mom,” Saman announced, creeping behind his mother, hand on her shoulder, lips to her cheek in a gentle kiss. Elaheh smiled. “It’s almost ready. Set the table, would you?”

He nodded, a sharp whistle escaping him, calling Leila, who turned the television off, and marched to help Saman set the table. It was an easy job for one, but those two never did anything alone, Elaheh remarked. It was eerie. She loved her children, but when they were together, she loved them less. The table was set. Almost on cue, Ali reappeared, waddling over to the dinner table, like a king to his feast. Elaheh faced the stove, turned off the *ghorme*, and plated it. She retrieved a large, perfectly circular

serving dish, which comfortably covered the mouth of the pot she'd cooked the rice in. With practiced hands, she flipped pot and dish, and the buttery rice dislodged itself. Elaheh set the dish aside, removed the pot, revealing a beautiful crust of fried rice, and *lavash*. She peeled the *tahdig* off the rice, set it on a separate plate, and retrieved the mixture of water and saffron she'd made before. She broke the shape of the rice, until it was an indistinct mound, then poured the saffron water over the top, and gently tossed the rice, coating it. A spark of sunshine on a dull, immaculate surface. Everyone sat down at the table, Elaheh included, at Ali's right hand side.

They began to eat. Elaheh did not move, as children and spouse quietly began their meal. There was an empty chair.

"Where's Sara?" Elaheh asked, grabbing spoon and fork.

"I don't know. She's gone somewhere." Leila mumbled, brushing a piece of lamb with her fork.

Sara, Meeting Roshan

“*Doust nadaram*,” Sara muttered, head snapping back, avoiding the deft fingers that tried to tuck loose strands of hair beneath thin, white fabric. “I don’t like it, *Maman*, it’s so hot outside! This is stupid!” Whining children were nothing new to Elaheh, who shushed her youngest, as they prepared to leave the house. “Shh, stop moving. It’s only for a little while. Don’t worry, it’s not so bad.” Sara huffed, and soon Elaheh zipped Sara’s coat, pulled away, satisfied with her daughter’s appearance. Sara didn’t like this place. It was dusty and smelly and they always had to cover up when they went out. All the other women in her family seemed used to it. Leila donned her hijab like it was an old friend; Elaheh, like it was a heavy burden.

They were going to see someone. Sara wasn’t sure whom, but then again, it didn’t really matter. Ever since they’d come to Iran, all they’d been doing was visiting this person, that person. It was an incessant flurry of cheek pinching, wet kisses and reciting the pre-revolution national anthem that she’d learned on the plane there. Quietly she hummed it then, swaying from side to side, enjoying the flow of her airy *chador*. Soon her mother and sister were ready to go, her father close behind, and Saman leaning down to pick her up, hoisting her over his shoulder, to Sara’s elation. The family filtered from the small home into the street, towards the car Ali’s brother had lent them for the duration of their trip. Ali, of course, assumed the position of the driver, and Saman opened the back door, tossing Sara in gently, before climbing in himself. Elaheh joined Ali in front, and Leila closed the door behind her as she settled next to her brother. The two began to animatedly chat, while Sara sat on her knees, looking out the window as Ali drove off.

“Saman, *begiresh*,” Elaheh called, glancing in the rear-view mirror at her youngest, and immediately Saman acted, hand on the hem of Sara’s *chador*, as he continued to speak, then argue, with Leila.

The roads of Tehran were unique: in the little streets of Jannat Abad, life was calm, almost peaceful, but the moment you peeked out of the small suburban streets, all semblance of serenity was left behind in favour of a wild, jerking, motorised world. Order had no place here, the chaos functional, lawful. Each car fit in the puzzle created by other motorists almost flawlessly, and each driver had developed the habit of not only watching his own back, but that of the people in his direct vicinity. The Hemmat Expressway was a wild adventure for Sara. One moment they were rolling quickly, a good few feet of distance between the cars before and after them, the next they were sitting still for a prolonged period of time, while people crisscrossed between cars, selling their wares: stuffed toys, fruits, underwear, cigarettes, gum---anything and everything could be bought, and in the comfort of your own vehicle.

“*Maman*,” Sara called, bouncing on her seat, “*Maman* I want the toy! Can I get the toy?”

“No, Sara, now sit down, the police will get angry,”

“Aw, but please!”

“No means no, Sara, *azizam*. Now sit, *beshin dokhtar-e khoob, beshin, afarin*.”

Huffing, Sara settled, frown deep, arms crossed. Saman and Leila had stopped arguing now; they merely sat in annoyed silence. Sara hadn’t even noticed until now.

Eventually they left the Hemmat Expressway and drove onto the Bakeri Expressway, winding their way slowly towards Azadi Town. Sara already missed the expressway hawkers. They had wonderfully colourful toys.

Eventually Ali pulled up to an apartment complex, neat and well kept, although not particularly new looking. One by one they filed out of the car, and Sara felt her heart sink into her toes. What would she be expected to do now? Sing again? Dance like a monkey? She wanted to go home. And not the dumb place her father's parents owned, but *her* home, back in Montréal, with her friends Fanny, Camille, Simon and Dieudonné. Home where she could run in the grass in her shorts and t-shirt without anyone telling her the army would take her away. Home where she could sit and watch hours upon hours of Saturday morning cartoons, all in a language she could easily understand, and speak.

Here, it was too foreign. She got it, though. This was where all of them were born: Mom, Dad, Leila, Saman. This was meant to be her home, too. Saman said this was the "Motherland." Did that mean that it gave birth to her, too? Maybe. She still wasn't sold. Ali leaned down and scooped her up, and Sara sat placidly in her father's arms. Sara didn't want to spend another day here, let alone another three weeks. Plus, who went on vacation during winter break, somewhere that also had winter? It was stupid. Granted, there was little to no snow here. but it was still cold. She still had to wear the thick pink parka she usually wore back home.

One by one the family stepped into the building, Elaheh at the front. She pressed a white button that buzzed loudly, then just as loudly, saluted a crackling voice through the intercom. Soon, the door clicked open and the family was let into the marble complex with high ceilings and a narrow staircase. Sara found herself staring up, mesmerised by

the cracked stone, the lines of gold and black, grey and brown. After climbing two flights of stairs, they arrived at a small, unassuming door. It creaked open and a jovial, fat man greeted them. His skin was the colour of crispy burnt rice: a rich, glistening brown. His moustache was as formidable as Ali's.

“*Bah bah bah!* Welcome, welcome!” His deep smoker's voice boomed as he stepped aside to allow them all in. The moment Sara crossed the threshold, the smell of cooking spices, meats and other delicacies filled her nose. Soon, other people appeared from various parts of the small home: a woman, clothed in a dark blue hijab, smiling toothily and firmly kissing Elaheh on either cheek, and a teenager, about Saman's age, thin and tall like a string bean.

Sara hated the greetings the most: all these kisses made no sense to her. These people were all strangers.

“Oh, and this must be Sara!” Siamac, the man who'd opened the door called, as he lifted her out of Ali's arms, and jostled her a bit, bringing her down to kiss either cheek. Sara remained placid, mustering a fake smile that showed off her dimples and three missing teeth. He smelled like tobacco, Sara thought, just like *bababozorgi*. Maybe Siamac smoked the same pipe that her grandfather did. Eventually Siamac put Sara down, and Elaheh unzipped her coat, her gaze firm yet loving. “Be good, okay? This is my very loved sister. So don't be shy. Go say hi.” Sara nodded, sneaking out of her coat, and shuffling out of her shoes. “*Salam,*” the six-year-old called, as Roshan, Elaheh's younger sibling, knelt down to make her acquaintance. The two merely studied each other for a few minutes, Roshan's eyes shining with joy. Sara noticed that she and Leila

had the same flower pinning their hijabs beneath their chins. Sara reached out to touch it. Roshan laughed. “Do you like it?”

“I like flowers.”

“Me too. Maybe after lunch I can show you my other pins.”

“Are they all flowers?”

“Mhm. Different kinds.”

“Leila has one like yours.”

“I gave it to Leila.”

“Can I have one too?”

“Of course.”

Sara liked this woman. She nodded, and they hugged. Roshan’s gentle hand smoothed over Sara’s head. She smells like Mom, Sara thinks, pulling away, comforted and warm. Like fried onions and perfume. “You should meet my son,” Roshan offered, as Sara tugged at the knot of the chador beneath her chin. It was too tight. Roshan laughed, and tugged it open, releasing Sara from her fabric prison. “I can see him, he’s over there,”

“Aah, hello *koochooloo*,” Mostafa called, waving at Sara, who waved back, smiling, despite thinking that she was, in fact, not *that* small. He had his mom’s eyes. They were trusting eyes: like Elaheh had, too. Mostafa ruffled her hair, then left to join Leila and Saman, fitting in with them almost as if they were three parts of one whole. The older kids, Sara had come to realize, really didn’t like playing with her, and once they found each other, she was a thought at the back of their minds, only brought back to the surface when she pushed her way into their circle.

The greetings were finished, and suddenly the area around the front door was freed. The home was small, enough for three people and not much more. Everyone dispersed; the teenagers together, the adults and Sara together. The women filtered into the kitchen, which was three sections of wooden counter separating it from the rest of the apartment. Animatedly, the sisters spoke, squeezing each other's arms, throwing their heads back in joy and laughter. Sara watched them, hoping to catch a peek at what was cooking. Several pots and pans littered the counters, some whistling on the stove, others cooling just beside it. Siamac and Ali sat on the floor, a section of the wall lined with thick embroidered pillows, upon which they leaned. Beneath them, laid across the floor, was a thick Persian carpet, with cotton threads of gold, red, navy blue, black and green, all woven together in the traditional style of Heriz in northwestern Iran.

Sara tiptoed to see what was sitting on the counter, waiting for her to pick at. Elaheh, ever the vigilant mother, prepared a small plate of samples for Sara as she and Roshan continued their conversation.

"Bia, maman. Eat this for now,"

"Yes! Thank you."

Sara accepted the small plate, topped with a piece of meat, potato, carrot and herb patty, fried to optimal crispiness, alongside a stuffed vine leaf. Sara settled herself down; crossing her legs as tiny fingers picked the food apart and carefully tasted it. The *cotelette* settled warm on her tongue, moist and heavy with the taste of cumin, coriander, turmeric and lamb. She polished it off quickly, before biting into the *dolmeh*, with its tough leafy exterior. Eventually her teeth broke through, and her mouth was filled with sour and salty marinated rice and ground meat. She looked up and studied her mother

and aunt, both reminding her of Saman and Leila, two halves of one whole. Somewhere in the fabric of the universe, at some time in existence, Roshan and Elaheh had been part of the same glowing ball of gas in the sky. Sara wondered briefly if she'd ever be half of something. What if she was already half of something? Then what had happened to her other half? Was it gone? Dead? Lost? For a moment Sara was worried. When she looked at her mother, aunt, sister and brother, she saw a closeness she envied. As if one were the ocean and the other the motion that brought it to wave. Sara felt like the sand on the shore, always brushed, but never truly immersed. It was like they loved her in a different kind of way, not necessarily bad, but not good either.

It didn't matter really, she supposed, feet wiggling as she finished every last crumb off of her plate. Her aunt was, decidedly, of the same level of culinary expertise as her mother. "*Tamoom shod,*" Sara called, going unnoticed for a few minutes before her mother took the plate from her hands, and handed her a folded tablecloth instead. "Go spread it in the *hall*, we'll be eating in just a minute. "

Now this was something she'd never done before. Back in Canada her mother would often lay a thick, plastic tablecloth on the living room floor so she could clean the lamb and watch her soap operas at the same time. Here she saw the very same kind of table cloth, and was asked to spread it across the floor, undoubtedly because the dinner table was extremely small.

Once the cloth was spread, Roshan came to her side and together they lined the blue tablecloth with plates, utensils, and cups. One by one Elaheh brought dishes to them, and Roshan and Sara smiled to each other as they placed the steaming rice beside the vine leaves, beside fried meat patties, beside a pitcher of yogurt drink. There were smaller

bowls with a variety of pickles in them: cauliflower and carrots, garlic aged in vinegar, sweet mango and poppy seeds. Fresh vegetables were brought, tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce, and white onions. It was a meal Sara was used to: plentiful, filling.

Quietly the family reunited, Roshan lifting Sara and settling her atop her crossed legs, wordlessly grabbing a plate and piling it high for her. Saman, Leila, Mostafa and the others chatted, all serving themselves politely.

“*Cotelette* is my favourite,” Sara chimed in, fingers working a slice of pita bread open, her aunt shoving a half of the grilled meat patty into it, adding cucumber and tomato, and pickled carrot at Sara’s behest. “Mine too,” Roshan agreed, feeding her the morsel, Sara’s small hands wrapping around Roshan’s, helping her aim properly. Lunch continued, jovially, and when it was over the teenagers washed the dishes together, and as promised, Roshan took Sara to her room, and showed her all the pins in her collection.

“Where do you get them?” Sara asked, sitting on the bed, fingers gently prodding and poking each crocheted flower. Quietly, Roshan made sure there were no exposed pins, before answering. “I make them, with a little thought and prayer in each,” she said, picking out a red, bubbly petaled flower with a pearl at its center. She put it aside and searched through the others with Sara, asking which caught the young girl’s eye, and putting it alongside the ruby coloured one she’d picked herself. Minutes trickled by but their silence was comfortable, and their words soft, as if they’d been friends for a very long time. As if Sara were, perhaps, some part of Roshan.

“This one is for good luck, always,” Roshan declared, picking up the red petal flower pin, setting it in Sara’s hand. “And this one, for happiness.” A purple flower joined the red one, this one having a plastic blue diamond at its center. “And this one, is

for health.” The final flower was green, with a wooden button in the middle. Sara contemplated them all, feeling each flower pin, brown eyes taking in the bright colours, the pretty centers. “This one,” Sara finally said, picking the red flower, “is my favourite.”

“Then it’s yours.”

“For keeps?”

“For keeps.”

“But it’s your lucky pin.”

“I know.”

“But what if it makes you unlucky? What if something happens and you don’t have your pin and you can’t be lucky?”

“I’ve been lucky a long time, now it’s your turn. Whatever happens to me, well, that’s all a part of God’s plan.”

Saman, Alone

There is a hole in the ground. I look at it and think that this hole is too full. That this hole is too rectangular. What an appalling thing to look at. The sun is very high in the sky. It's warm. My suit is too starchy. I can't move in it. I don't think I could move without it. We look at the hole, all five of us.

Four of us.

We look at the hole and I notice the shining wood. I notice the bundle of flowers, a carefully crafted bouquet of orchids pinned together. I hate looking at this too-full-hole. I hate how it makes me feel. I hate to look at the others and see how the hole makes them feel.

The hole isn't vanishing quick enough.

I remember the warmth against my chest. It was an odd sensation, but I'll never forget it. A tolerable, small weight. It didn't fidget or cry. It rested on my chest and breathed. It slept. She slept, and her lashes were so long they rested on her cheeks. She looked like those dolls you found in Wal-Mart, the ones you gave five-year-olds so they could pretend to have their own baby. But she was a real baby. A real flesh and blood baby, sleeping, drooling, on my chest. Her heartbeat was very quick. The only way she would

stop screaming was when she slept on my chest. Not Mom's, not Dad's, not Leila's.

Mine.

The doctor said she had stomach aches.

I'd kill whoever gave them to her.

They filled the hole. There's no one but the five of us now. There's nothing to stare at now but the ground. Like nothing had been there before. I get it now, this act. What it means. How it soothes. It's erasure. I don't like it. In my heart, it'll never be erased. But I'm thankful.

Thankful I don't have to look at the too-full-hole. I look at them— Mom, Dad, Leila— and I want to leave. They're looking at the filled hole and they're not saying anything. It's just a mountain of dirt. Let's go, I shout at them in my head.

LET'S GO. I want to go, I want to go, *mikham beram, maman. Bebaramet, maman?* Do you need me to take you away, Mom?

No.

She wants to go too. We have flowers. I forgot I was holding them. Suddenly, they burn my hand. I put them down on the now filled hole. "*Berim.*"

"*Khoda maaro bebakhsh.*"

God, forgive us.

She'd cried every night this week, curled onto Mom's lap, clutching her stomach.
It was annoying. *You can't have stomach aches every night, Sara.*

But it hurts!

Dard mikoneh, Saman!

It hurts, Saman. My stomach hurts, Saman.

Sikheh shatereh bekhor, Sara.

Drink it. Drink that weird herbal home remedy that tastes like ass and liquorice. It might not help, but it can't make things worse, right?

Mom thinks it's cancer. Dad thinks she's faking. I'm just mad she keeps me up on school nights with her whining.

Where'd Leila go?

She's still clutching the flowers. Everyone else put them down but Leila can't. She's sobbing. It's okay, I want to tell her. I want to cry too. But I'm not going to.

What if she's just faking it again?

Whatever. Put your flowers down, Leila, we're leaving.

I'm glad to turn my back on that thing. I'm glad I don't have to look at it.

Or think about it, anymore. At least not today.

Leila puts the flowers down carefully.

She's crying on the pile of flowers. Get it together.

Mom is crying with her. Stop it. You look so fucking stupid stop it.

We're not doing this. What's done is done.

"Berim, nakonin, nakonin basse, basse dige,"

Let's go.

Don't do this.

Don't do this, it's enough.

It's enough, already!

Dad is lifting Mom.

She's a ragdoll. She doesn't want to go.

I grab Leila. I didn't think I was going to be gentle about it. I was.

We hugged.

I hadn't hugged Leila since we were kids.

We're sitting in front of the television and there's wrapping paper everywhere. Sara is tearing away all the wrapping paper. Her arm is bruised. I feel bad.

She screams when she sees it. I smile.

Presents mend wounds.

"Ballerina Barbie! Thank you, Saman!"

She hugs me. I pat her little shoulder. It's too little.

She runs back to Mom and they unbox it together.

Leila got her the Black Eyed Peas CD. It's blaring from the stereo.

Where is the love?

I don't know.

Where is the love?

Here, I guess.

Where is the love?

It's them.

Leila, Blooming

Leila's fingers worry the small white tissue in her lap, tearing strips, and then curling them between thumb and index, flicking small bits across the floor. She feels her mother tense at her side, her anxiety and Leila's always attuned to one another. "Leila, stop that." She stops. Sneaks the tissue into her pocket. Glances up, her hands moving to smooth her hair underneath the silk of her *hijab*. The clock reads half past six. Back at her grandmother's home, in Tehran, it's time for afternoon tea. Black leaves and cardamom seeds.

Leila crosses her legs at the ankles. She did not wish to be here, and yet, here is where she is. Around them children cry, mothers rock back and forth, slapping their breasts, wailing. Husbands stand solemnly, eyes hollowly contemplating the linoleum floor. Leila imagines this is what Hell feels like. *Jahanam*. Clinical, deafening, a blazing off white. "Mrs. Salehi?"

Elaheh bolts upright, her daughter with her. Their hands find one another clumsily as they follow the man in the white lab coat, who exchanges courteous trivialities, the same as he had with the fifty people before the two women. They were shaking. No, Elaheh is shaking. Leila is merely connected. Their steps echo off the walls, which, as they walk, become cleaner, and narrower. The voices the two had been surrounded by are now distant whispers. Things are calmer here, the air filled with odd beeps: the havoc and mayhem of the last few days almost settled. Leila looks at her mother's back as she walks, her winter coat big and fluffy, unnatural on her small frame. Her shoes have stopped squeaking. The doctor has stopped. He looks at mother and daughter gravely,

eyes slightly sunken into their sockets, tired and worn, his lips pursed, hiding beneath a thick moustache. The door swings open. Before them, under flickering neon lights, a line-up of steel tables. Leila's stomach tightens, and twists. In her mind, she hears laughter; she feels fingers gently rubbing circles on her back.

Memories of Roshan usually come and go like a wave on the beach, brushing toes, reminding Leila, then pulling away again. But now they come flooding, like the dam in her mind has burst with the pressure of memories demanding to be revisited.

She recalls the taste of ripe, sour cherries, bursting on her tongue; of how she could just stick her hand out the second story window of their family cottage and merely pluck. Leila sees mountains, with wispy clouds floating at their peak. She thinks of a small field overflowing with fruit trees, and fresh sea bass cooking on a charcoal fire. She sees smooth hands folding vine leaves stuffed with rice and meat. She sees *her* hair, mousy and frizzled, poking out from beneath her bright, flowery *chador*. And worst of all Leila sees Roshan's eyes, large dark irises, and with crinkles on either side from years of smiling. They were kind eyes. They were eyes her mother said Leila had, too.

Then there was her Worry. The lines between Roshan's eyebrows, so pronounced, settled there like monuments. Leila sees other lines there. Of laughter, of sadness, each a deliberate addition to the drawing that was Roshan's face.

Leila takes a step back, separating her hand from her mother's, severing their bond, scurrying back into the hallway. Through the small window she sees Roshan, frozen in place, in time. Leila feels her heart racing, feels it beating in her ears, her neck, her head. The wall halts Leila's retreat, and she presses her hands flat to it, sliding down

as she settles there, in the off-white corridor, across from the room with steel tables, and the bodies strewn atop them, separated from her world by nothing but a sheet.

“Leila! Leila, please get down from there.”

“Aw, *khaleh* don’t worry I’ll be fine.”

Arms extended, Leila walked, teetering, along a narrow stonewall, too short to really block anything from view but high enough to cause her sweet aunt’s anxiety to flare up towards the clear blue sky. Her arms, extended to catch, followed her niece in her quest to walk the entire length of the wall. Leila paused, eyes drifting to Roshan, her body turning to face Roshan’s, and notice *It* there, where it always was, nestled between her eyebrows: Worry. Leila grinned, and Roshan relaxed, returning the gesture. The girl jumped, Roshan caught her, and they laughed. Her Roshan; she held Leila tightly to her chest. Quietly, she swung Leila in her arms, then set her down, and hand in hand they walked back towards the cottage, an hour and a half away from Leila’s Great Stone Wall.

“So,” Roshan began, tucking Leila’s bangs behind her ear, carefully tightening pigtail one, then pigtail two. “What should we do today? Go visit the goats, or pick some fruit?” Leila kicked the dirt and shrugged, her arm wrapping around her aunt’s waist, head pressed to the bone of her hip. “Goats are smelly.” Roshan chuckled, petting Leila’s head. “Yes, they are. But the babies are cute to see, and there are some cows, and turkeys too. We could stop and get some fish for dinner on our way back.”

“What kind of fish?”

“Rainbow fish.”

“Does it have lots of colours?”

“Mm, its scales are very shiny and pretty.”

“And we’re gonna eat it?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll say a prayer for it then. So it can be shiny and pretty in heaven, too.”

“That’s a very good idea. I’ll pray with you.”

Together they walked along the unpaved roads of Pooloor, the Damavand Mountains overlooking them. Leila pressed her nose to the fabric of Roshan’s *chador*, inhaling the light scent of her lilac perfume and laundry detergent. *Khaleh*, as Leila called her, looked down at Leila then, the lines between her brows still so pronounced, despite her beaming smile, and her bright almond-coloured eyes.

The cottage was in their sights, located on an incline. The two-story home was bursting with life: Roshan’s only son, Mostafa, her husband Siamac, Leila’s brother Saman, her infant sister, Sara, Leila’s parents. Beneath the cottage, guarded by thick walls, sour cherry trees as far as the eye could see, grape vines, walnut trees, and blackberry bushes. Elaheh called it paradise, between those four fences, where nothing could touch them, where nothing disturbed the chirping birds and bleating sheep. There the water was always clean and cool, the air always pure. The wind lifted the dust from the roads and tickled Leila’s ankles.

Roshan and Leila marched along the winding road, waving to their family who saw them pass by below. They heard the boys screeching as they played soccer together, the plastic ball smacking hard against the dry, mud wall that separated Roshan and Leila,

from everyone else. It was simply she, and Roshan. Roshan and Leila. Adoration and love.

Later that night, after they'd spent their day hiking, fishing, cooking, Roshan cradled Leila in her arms, and hummed a warm lullaby until her niece fell asleep. Her arms, thin as they were, held Leila steadily, the drumming of her heart a soothing back up to her silky voice. As Leila lay somewhere between dreams and wakefulness, she felt the press of Roshan's lips to her forehead, and perhaps imagined the warm tears against her cheek.

"I thought I'd never see you again," she'd whispered against Leila's temple, and her relief would melt into her niece's very cells, ushering her into the Sandman's arms.

"Leila." She looks up. From behind the door Elaheh emerges, and Leila realizes then that she somehow had the strength to stand again. Elaheh's hazel eyes are puffy, red, her nose sniffing incessantly, though it doesn't keep snot from trickling down her cupid's bow. Leila pulls a tissue from her pocket and presses it to her mother's upper lip. Gratefully, Elaheh takes it from her daughter's hand, kissing Leila's fingers. They stand there, for a moment. No doubt the doctor had asked them to wait while he prepared her. Leila's hand squeezes her mother's too tightly. Elaheh looks at her daughter, and crumbles, head pressed to her shoulder, arms folded against her chest. Leila holds her. There are no tears from her, there's really no time for them. Not when her mother reverts to a child in her arms, not when she, the bearer of her mother's deepest thoughts, her

darkest secrets, is needed most. She is her mother's keeper, and right then, she must keep her standing. "It's okay, *Maman*. I'm here." The ringing in Leila's ears subsides, as Elaheh pulls away nodding, remaining speechless, agonizing in silence. The doctor re-emerges, walking towards them, whispering in well-practiced sympathetic tones. "It might take awhile for you to get out of *Bam*, but given the cold weather the body should be just fine."

Leila stands by the open grave, peering into its fathomless darkness. Her *chador*, unlike the others, is navy blue, not black. She refuses to wear black. To be a part of the sea of bobbing ghosts that haunt Roshan's final resting place. Their crying and moaning permeate the air; chants of peaceful rest mingled with dust and dirt.

"She rests now in the grace of the Almighty God, where she duly belongs. Her soul now knows boundless joy, and eternal comfort. Let us not weep in sadness, but in joy, that she has met the most magnificent end, and stands now in the glory of God."

Leila resists the urge to scoff. Religion had always baffled her, but remained harmless enough in her family, in her life. It was now, as they all stood beneath the sharp December sky, that Leila realizes she has no heart for it. God is merely an excuse, a being to blame when things go terribly wrong, and to thank when they go terribly right. A solace to the poor, and a tool of the wealthy. God did not take back His children into Heaven; tectonic plates collided and crushed them under hundred-year-old rubble.

Leila's *chador* waves through the air like a tell-tale flag: *See me, I am traitorous, I am not like you.* She stands among these zealous believers with rage and guilt bubbling, putrid, in her heart. But this religious lie she will tolerate. She will swallow it like a rose's briar, for *her*. For Roshan. She, who in her life, had been as devout as any of these masochists who now lingered around her grave.

The ceremony was brief. Before Leila knew it, the sun had risen to high noon, the strangers had scattered, leaving her mother, and Elaheh's remaining sisters, to pursue their haunting. Sadness, like a cloud, lingered above their bowed heads, ushering rain in the form of bitter tears. You couldn't really see the tiny casket. It was far too deeply hidden in the earth, despite it laying atop another: Roshan's mother's. Men carrying a thick, dark stone slab advanced. They showed respect for the deceased in their countenance, and even more so to the women who shook with loss. Quietly, the hordes backed away and the grave was closed. A beautiful block of the blackest marble sealed Roshan away. On this slab lay words of prayer, and a picture of her face, her forehead creased, and between her brows, that all too familiar Worry.

Elaheh, in Youth

To nemidooni dokhtar, chejoori mikoshtan.

As if this was something she was supposed to know.

Know how they killed teenagers, mothers, fathers in the street because they saw fit to protest injustice. As if it was an experience she had carried with her from another life, the death of people.

Her father had never been a man of many words or many emotions. But on that day, he'd come home crying.

“You don't know, Elaheh, oh God, they're killing us, they're killing us!” His tears soaked the tissues he crumpled to his eyes. All Elaheh could do was watch. She thought of where she'd been yesterday, the day before, standing in an angry crowd, pumping her fist in the air.

Leave us alone, she'd chanted. Death to the *Shah*, death to the United Kingdom, death to America. It was supposed to mean something to be there, yelling for your rights, screaming for change. She soon realized however that their fists raised in the air were not meant to do much else apart from making them easily located targets.

But here was the crux of it. She liked her life. She liked the short skirts, the opportunity to protest for her rights as a free woman, the capacity to sit next to her fiancé in their business class at university. She wasn't for the long veils, the religious fascism, the end of liberated voices. She'd felt for an Iran that was being cheated.

But it'd been in vain. The people never win in affairs of state, this she found out the hard way when she baked in the summer sun under layers of clothing made to keep

her modest, built to keep the vile male gaze from coveting her body. Covering up hadn't been a problem until her *chador* had deprived masses of men of the curve of her thighs, and the curl of her hair. Evil existed in many forms, in all regimes, but the nature of evil had shifted, and suddenly Elaheh, her sisters, her mother, they all became aware of a malevolence they had never before encountered. The nature of people had changed. It was the beginning of a new, and frightening, world.

Elaheh sat at her father's feet, brushing hair behind her ear, knees pulled to her chest. She was getting married next month, supposedly. The way things were going she doubted it would happen. Part of her was glad, and another disappointed. She told herself she was excited to be a blushing bride and a doting wife but, now and then, when she lay in her bed, with the steady breathing of her sisters close by, she would turn her eyes from the ceiling and spy their shadowy forms in the darkness. Moments like those, alone in her bed, surrounded by the people she loved the most, would become rare. There would be no more late-night gossip sessions, or deep conversations about love, loss, and faith. She would not fall asleep between her sisters, on the mattresses they pulled to the floor to share. Roshan would not doze with her hand wrapped loosely around Elaheh's.

A soft sigh escaped Elaheh as she sat there, enduring her stoic father's panic, brown eyes pinned on the shining skin of his scalp, peppered with tiny spikes of greying hair, with an odd mole she'd never really noticed before. Most of her life had been spent being unsure of what to do. What to say when soldiers question you, what the capital of Peru was, what plant is useful in calming the itch of a bug's bite.

What to do when your *baba*, this man, this statue, this solidity, crumbled under the weight of the very same uncertainty you had always navigated? It had been all right

for her not to know what to do because her father always knew. But now, he was shaken. He did not know.

Elaheh found herself slipping forward on the soft navy blue carpet until her feet touched her father's, her toes pressed against his.

“Roos-a e Roshan, Khoda Hafez,” she began to sing, her voice dreamy, as her hands gently brushed her father’s hair. His soft crying stuttered to a stop, as he sang with her.

“Sarzamin-e man, Khoda Hafez.”

Roshan, A Conclusion

The wind blows, and with it travels my breath, carrying a sigh of finality. I lie, beneath this scorching winter sun, wrapped in soft cottons. I look to the sky and stroke the worn material that protects me. It occurs to me suddenly, after so many years spent living, that I was not given the freedom I was promised. That this land of sand and prayer was no longer my country. It had become something other, as had I.

Her fingers gently smoothed the line of her veil, pushing any hair from sight. Carefully they folded inward the dark blue fabric, to ensure nothing escaped her hijab's hold. Satisfied, Roshan then grabbed her pink toothbrush and continued her morning routine in relative silence. In the bathroom she could hear her husband's snoring through the door. Her small, two-bedroom home was tidy, although compact. The walls were covered in art and inexpensive tapestry, the floors with thick, soft, Persian carpets. She was mindful to turn the lights off as she left the bathroom, carefully padding along, stepping into the kitchen to start on breakfast. This was her favourite part of the day. The house warmed and opened with the scent of fresh bread, and steeping tea.

Sesame seeds fell off a fluffy loaf as she cracked it in half, slipping it into the oven to warm up. Atop the stove, a porcelain teapot kept hot a mix of black tea and cardamom pods. Small plates adorned their dining table, crowned with homemade jams, cheese, butter, and honey.

The snoring had stopped. She heard footsteps shuffling about in her bedroom, a door opening, and then closing. Another door opening, closing, and soft mumbling. This was

their morning routine: She awoke first and prepared breakfast before work. Her husband, Siamac, would rise around eight. Roshan took that as her cue to wake up Mostafa, her son. This was always her most daunting task: no power on this Earth could wake up a tired teenage boy. Nonetheless, she tried, relying on her gentle nature.

“Mostafa, *azizam*. My love, time to get up.”

Roshan’s voice was a meek whisper, never the type to be assertive or hard toned. Nimble fingers pried the covers from over his head just slightly, to reveal a thick head of hair and a tanned forehead. Her lips quietly dipped to kiss Mostafa’s curls firmly, twice.

“Come on, up, up. I finally got your favourite jam—”

She was cut off by a brisk elbowing, followed by a guttural groan. An accident, she knew, as she clutched her chin, which he’d struck. Her free hand rubbed circles onto Mostafa’s back, and even from that touch, he jerked away. She sucked in a breath and pulled away then, knowing when she was not welcome.

“Okay, *eshgham*, just five more minutes.”

“Mm,” Mostafa whined, shifting yet again, tugging the covers back over his head.

Roshan shook her head, giving the covers yet another kiss, and left her son to rest. She hadn’t the heart to bother him any longer and knew her husband would provide the firm hand she could not. Leaving Mostafa’s bedroom, Roshan left the door ajar as her husband emerged from the bathroom, reassuring her lovingly that he’d take care of their son.

The city of Yazd was always slow to rise, unlike Roshan. Carefully she pulled out the warm bread from the oven, and wrapped it in a cloth, setting it on the table. Mostafa and Siamac emerged soon after, the former groggily wishing Roshan a good

morning. She kissed her son's head tenderly as he sat down to breakfast and squeezed her husband's shoulder on her way to grab the teapot.

"So," Siamac began, fixing himself a bite, bread wrapped around cheese, sour cherry marmalade, and a walnut. "What time is the bus today?"

"Ten," Roshan answered, pouring full cups of amber tea for her boys, then herself, before finally sitting down. "Then it's six hours until Bam."

"How long are you gone this time?" Mostafa interjected, reaching across the table for honey.

"Only a couple of days. I should be back by Monday."

Both men nodded their heads, and the meal passed in silence. When the time finally came for Mostafa to head to school, he vanished without so much as a goodbye. *Kids*, Roshan thought as she noticed his absence, *always in such a hurry. And for what? Life will pass them by in the blink of an eye regardless.*

Siamac was staring at the small calendar on their fridge, leafing through the upcoming months, adding things here, scratching out things there. The year read 1382, and beneath 2003. The current date was clearly marked for Roshan's departure that morning, the twenty-fourth of *Dey or*, December. Roshan had planned today's voyage a month ago, when an old friend of her late mother's had told her of an operation she was to undergo the twenty-third of the next month. Roshan, a nurse, knew that her aid would be crucial, given that this elder woman, Soudabeh *khanoum*, lived alone in her small, ancient home.

Ever the charitable soul, Roshan had not waited to be asked, but instead immediately offered to take a few days leave in order to assist Soudabeh *khanoom*, and the other had happily accepted.

“Alright, grab your things, I’ll go bring the car out,” Siamac announced, leaving the calendar, while Roshan fussed in the kitchen, cleaning up their breakfast and washing the dishes. Everything had to be tidy before she left, because she knew her boys weren’t the type to clean up after themselves. In the freezer she’d packed two days worth of food: lamb and celery stew, and chicken and eggplant stew, slow simmered and sour, just how they liked it. Reassured that everything was picture perfect, Roshan scurried off to her room to retrieve her bag, before heading to the door to slip into her black loafers. Gloves, hat, and an old hand-me-down coat were put on, before she turned, contemplating her cozy little home, smiling and sighing happily. Under her breath she murmured a quick prayer, one she quietly blew across the home with sweet breath. It would keep her boys safe until her return. She left then, reassured, and locked the door behind her.

They said, on the morning of the twenty-sixth of December 2003, that a great tragedy had occurred. That, for the first time in a decade, a magnitude seven earthquake had struck Iran. That, what was once a UNESCO protected heritage site, was now nothing but piles of rubble and ash. They said that walking among the debris was harrowing: arms jutting out from beneath large chunks of adobe, frenzied wailing echoing through the streets from dawn to twilight, dolls ripped and bloodied, some, still clutched by their owners’ little fingers. A once peaceful city now ravaged by noise and blinding lights.

They said a total of 26,000 people had died that day, in Arge-E-Bam. Women, children, husbands, brothers. Death had not discriminated, there was no pick and choose, no lucky draw, no volunteering.

Death had merely come, and dug his bony fingers into the soil, and shook it with all his might, taking whoever would drift his way.

The wind blows, and with it travels my breath, carrying a sigh of finality.

I lie, beneath this cold stone, wrapped in soft cottons. As the cloth suffocates my body, I look to the sky and see nothing but darkness. I stroke the worn material that imprisons me. It occurs to me suddenly, after so little time spent lifeless, that this land of sand and prayer, will forever be my tomb. Together, melting, we become a small grain in the sands of time.

Elaheh, A Crescendo

Nemikhastam.

In zendegiro nemikhastam.

I didn't want it.

This life, I didn't want it.

Vali in shod zendegie man

Entekhabesh kardam.

Male man hast.

But this became my life.

I chose it.

It is mine.

And this showcase could be yours

If the price is right.

But what if the showcase is wrong?

Doroogh gofti, Ali ?

Did you lie too, Ali?

Did you?

Was there even a war or was it

Your heart yearning so desperately to escape

That it broke our kingdom into pieces?

Man dorooghgoo nistam!

I am not a liar!

But did you lie to me?

Was any of it real?

All of it was real. It still is real.

Why are you being this way?

Why are you doing this to me?

Are you a liar, Ali?

I am not a liar.

Then where's all the money?

For the funeral?

For the burial?

Where did it all go?

I don't know.

Ali

Yes?

Dooroogh nagoo, Ali.

I'm not lying, Elaheh.

Mikham dokhtaramo khak konam, Ali.

Do I still have a daughter left to bury?

Ali! Ghalbam dare mishkaneh, Ali !

It's breaking, Ali, my heart is breaking!

Chekar konam?

What do I do?

Do I tell you the truth?

Did you lie to me Ali?

Ali?

I want to bury my daughter, Ali.

Where's all the money?

What happened to the money?

Why can't I do this on my own, Ali?

Khak to saret!

Damn you!

The money is safe.

Where?

Man doroooghgoo nistam.

Kojah?

Where?

Man dooroogh nagoftam.

I haven't lied.

Ali, was there ever a war?

Was it all a dream?

Did you lie about that too?

There was a war.

There is still a war.

It rages in different places.

Man hichvaght be to dooroogh nagoftam, Elaheh .

Ali, did you ever love me?

Did you?

I did.

I do.

I can't remember, Ali.

We used to be so happy.

When did I start hating you?

Nemidoonam.

I don't know.

I want to bury my daughter, Ali.

Give me the money.

Can't you see?

She's already buried

In the garden.

Under the sunflowers.

That's why they rot.

Are you sure?

Would I ever lie to you?

No, I suppose you wouldn't.

Man douroughgoo nistam , Elaheh.

Vali too omram dorooogh goftam.

Midoonam.

Nagoo pass.

I know, I know, I know

But don't admit it

For your sake

For mine.

I'm not a liar, Elaheh.

But I have lied.

Nagoo, Ali. Nagoo.

Elaheh.

Don't say it, Ali. Don't.

Is this the life you wanted, Elaheh?

It's the life I wanted.

Man dooroogh nemigam.

This is not the life I wanted.

I don't want this showcase.

Please pass it on to someone else.

The Price is Right

She sat, eyes transfixed to the television before her, and watched. “Maureen Hilton, come on down!” Bright colors flashed against Elaheh’s pale skin, against the flesh of her children that lay soundly against her bosom and lap, cradled each by one, soft, maternal arm. It was dark, within that small one-bedroom hotel room. The carpet, ash grey and cigarette burned, was rough against her legs. The annoyance it caused, and its unmistakable dirtiness, no longer bothered her. After four days cluttered in room number 105, she had grown accustomed to its lack of charm and warmth.

This was not her home. Not her land. There were no idle cats pawing at her fig tree, or gusts of wind carrying sand into her garden. There was no aching hot sun shining over her head, or thick, soft Persian carpet beneath her feet. The night’s quiet had all but vanished and for the first time in her twenty-eight years of life, Elaheh was overwhelmed by noise. Cars humming, people screaming, new-fangled music bursting through the cracks in their walls. “*Beat it, beat it – beat it, beat it -- No one wants to be defeated!*” She wished, as Michael Jackson sang, how she wished she could just beat it. Leave this country of loud men, chaos, and snow. Beat it. It (unclear) meant to leave, but also to attack. She wished she could beat Ali, sometimes. To let him know, very clearly, that she existed, that she was real, that her submissiveness was a choice, and not a permanent state of being. She raged for now, in silence. Some days, rage screamed and tore at the meat of her heart, the walls of her mind, erupting inside of her in hurricanes of vile words and floods of tears, but on the outside, she was unmoved, immaculate. Elaheh was the perfect

wife. She followed, where her husband took her, regardless of how far from her hearth and home. The children loved it, but always looked forward to the Return.

“My uncle Carl, my aunt Maggie and my friends out in the audience, Bob! Oh— oh my God, oh I spun a dollar!”

Elaheh’s dark eyes broke away from the show of utter, crazed elation. Her gaze fell onto soft, plump cheeks, dark lashes and matching blue pyjamas. Sadness swept over the mother of two as she studied her offspring, sleeping soundly with the hopes that this would be just another vacation. That they’d wake up, find a nicer hotel, and explore Canada. Eventually, after their father had had his fill of maple syrup and poutine, they’d return to their sunny home in Tehran, worry free. Return to their grandmother’s warm hugs and occasional snoring, to their aunts and uncles aplenty, to their friends, neighbours. They slept, dreaming of fresh, warm sesame bread and clotted cream, of hot tea, and grandpa’s hairy toes. Gently, Elaheh stroked her daughter’s back as she leaned down to kiss her son’s curls. She didn’t have the heart to tell them that home was here now: this gloomy hotel off the corner of rue Jean-Talon.

The door opened, and briefly the yellow light of the hall spilled into their room. Elaheh’s eyes flickered towards the entrance, hearing curt words exchanged in broken English, before the door closed once again. The noise of gentle rustling and laboured effort arose, and after a few minutes in came Ali, the prodigal husband, with two grocery bags in hand. She glanced, out the corner of her eye, as he set their week’s food on the counter. “*And the actual, retail price is—*”

“There was a sale,” a deep baritone murmured, mindful of the sleeping children. “Huge sale. Two for one dollar on the bread, bananas for fifty cents.” He always

spoke with such assurance. Every word that left his lips rung true, confident. Every statement was a revelation, and Elaheh knew what Ali said was undeniably the truth. In her mind, that mouth which had spoken their vows, which had proclaimed his love to her, was incapable of lies. If he lied, even just once, then everything he'd said before, and every word that came after, would become questionable. Her home, her life, this place; everything was already far too questionable. Her marriage was something the mother of two liked to think impenetrable, strong. After all, it'd been Ali's words that had brought them here, where snow fell from the sky, not bombs. Where churches, synagogues, and mosques stood mighty, and welcoming, where children laughed and played and lived carefree. Yes, in this country there were no shootouts on the corner, or airstrike drills to the basement. No reassuring your crying children that the ceiling would hold, no convincing them that yes, the neighbours made it out before their home crumbled to the ground, even though you remember seeing that tiny hand, jutting out from beneath the rubble, almost as if it wished to wave hello, before sneaking back into the mass grave that had become 8 *Azadi* road.

Azadi.

Liberty.

Wasn't it ironic that the first house in your neighbourhood to go was the one right beside yours? Apathetically, Elaheh had laughed, when she thought of how close the end had been. How close they had been to never being able to eat two-for-one-dollar bread, or fifty-cent bananas. If Ali hadn't promised them a better life abroad, they would surely be dead now, wouldn't they?

“We’ll go somewhere else, tomorrow,” Ali chimed, fussing around the kitchen, putting cans in the cupboard, and fruits in the small wine fridge. “Much nicer, it’s an apartment, on a street called Forest Hill.” Leila stirred. Elaheh held her breath. An apartment meant permanence, meant no Return, and perhaps this statement had roused her sleeping child, her eldest. “*Maman...*” Elaheh sighed in relief, smiling as her daughter sat on her legs, dark hair matted slightly, plump lips curled into soft, pink “o.” “*Maman, bed.*” A mother’s duty was never done, it seemed. “Okay *azizam*, okay, bed.” Elaheh stood, and with the help of Ali, both children were tucked into one of the two beds the hotel room offered. The lack of their presence against her body sent a cold chill through Elaheh. She felt detached, incomplete. In this foreign land, her only connection to home, to herself, was her children. Saman and Leila. Leila and Saman. Two equal parts of the whole that was Elaheh’s heart. She tucked them in, kissing each head twice, and merely watched them, as in the background, her husband shuffled, and Debra won a new car.

Elaheh then began to hum. Her warm hand rubbed up and down Saman’s back, as her soft lullaby filled the air. This was it for her, she knew. Bound to her husband, made happy solely by her children. She couldn’t predict the future that lay ahead of her, but felt the inevitable settle in her bones; like a cancer, it would gnaw at her. Elaheh couldn’t predict the future, but she could guess, and little did she know how accurate her assumptions would be. She would try, in the beginning. Try to make this life one her children would like, try to show them the upside of a liberal, socialist government, and freezing temperatures. They’d go sledding, make poor meal choices, and laugh about it later. Then, as the children grew older, they’d all move. Move to where Ali invested next

and try to make a life there. Then boredom and bitterness would begin to settle in and the only solution would be a third child: Sara. Once Sara was born there'd be a high for all of them, but as she'd grow, she'd grow Canadian. And things would be so difficult, and so confusing, and tears would flow and words would be yelled. Eventually, inevitably, Elaheh would stop trying. She'd stop trying to curl her hair and look well-kept and fancy. She'd stop trying to love her husband because she wouldn't, for the life of her, ever remember loving him in the first place. But she'd be all right, the kids were all right, Ali was alright. Then Ali would go and he wouldn't come back. The money would keep coming, but Ali would not. And that would be how their lives would be, how they would continue, how they would end. Westernized and un-Iranian. Fifty-cent bananas would cease to exist, and cigarettes would be twelve dollars a pack.

Elaheh cried. Tears rolled off the red apples of her cheeks, onto the floral printed sheets bellow. Her lullaby had turned into a soft sobbing, as she believed, now more than ever, in the utter futility of her life, and how this journey, this life as a refugee, would surely mean the slow death of her. There would be no more family diners at eight in the evening, no more military men patrolling her street, no more stray cats, no more airstrike drills, no more towering minaret songs, no more tiny pale hands sticking out of the rubble. There would be nothing of whom she had been, and there would be nothing for her to become, and this knowledge clouded her, melted into her cells to claim its permanence. No amount of soft tears or whispered prayers would ever change that.

“And this showcase can be yours, *if* the price is right.”

Ali, Reflective

He never really cared for flowers.

Except for one.

Flowers were brittle, fragile things. One moment they were buds, small and promising. Then, they bloomed into their full, authentic selves, aweing any passer-by, an intrinsic part of the enchantment of nature. Then, they withered. They would dry, and inevitably, they would die. Not to mention that life on a shelf in a warm home, was the ideal life. The best of the best. What of storms? Earthquakes? Tsunamis or hurricanes? How were flowers to survive the tumults of the world? They couldn't. The slightest brisk wind would snap them. People trampled them. This logically meant (to Ali at least) that flowers were not worth one's time.

Except for one flower. His flower. *Golam*.

Ali Salehi was a diligent man. Everything he did, he did with precision. Ali was not what one would call particularly passionate, however. But he was unable to give up on something he'd endeavoured to start. When Ali was given his first flower, he did the only thing he knew how to: He cared for it. Watered it, changed the earth inside its pot every once in awhile, made sure it got plenty of sun. Ali read to it, drank his afternoon tea in its company.

But eventually, this flower began to change. It was evolving, as plants are wont to do, into something new. Suddenly the soft purple flowers that used to bud plentifully stopped doing so. Less and less each year, until they were no longer able to. Eventually, the purple shamrocks began to grow taller, thicker stemmed. They bent, heavy with the

weight of their petals. Not a single one leaned towards him anymore. Instead they curved in self-destructive angles, towards the sun, the outdoors. It came to the point that, what water he gave them, they would not absorb. When he touched the earth to change it, flowers died. Defeated, and frankly annoyed, Ali relinquished the plant to his wife, Elaheh, who took much better care of it. The plant was less averse to her touch than his.

The second flower Ali received was a tulip. A solitary bulb, hidden deep beneath the brown soil that would nurture it. He hadn't expected to adopt another flower so soon after the last, but when life and God bestow you with a task, he thought, you undertake it. The temperament of this tulip was different from the shamrocks he'd grown before. It was slow to come to life; slow to peek a green stem out of its earthen home. He admitted that with this tulip he became too lazy to care for it. Elaheh would often be the one to water it, to speak to it, to change its spot from time to time, ensuring it received the sunlight it needed. He'd visit the tulip from time to time, inspect its vibrant petals, and dust off its pot. Tulips were delicate in bloom. To keep them alive, they required constant, specialized care, acknowledgement, and temperate weather. Eventually the tulip, once mature, was given away to a more suitable home in a local greenhouse, where it thrived, independent of them, of Ali. It no longer had to endure his tantrums, that left it dry-soiled and barely hanging on, or overwatered and slowly suffering in an attempt to absorb every last drop. Many times, the tulip nearly keeled over, but it persevered until it found a better home.

Years passed before Ali thought of getting another flower. The thought crossed his mind, often enough, and Elaheh's as well. They'd done well with the other two, despite the rough road, and now, they seemed better prepared to take on the task. So, one

day, a third plant was brought into their home: a blooming orchid. This was it. This was the flower, his flower, *gol-e-man*, Ali thought. This time, he would do it right. When they purchased it, the seller reassured them that its care was minimal. They'd merely have to set it on a sunny ledge and let its natural beauty radiate and fill their home and hearts. Ali enjoyed the idea of a self-sufficient plant. Finally, he thought, a plant that I can take care of, indefinitely, all by myself. My plant. *My own, real, plant.*

But like all living things, plants were not as predictable as one would like. No, things endowed with life, however conscious or not, lived however was most beneficial to them. Elaheh had read somewhere that plants knew pain, that grass cried out in agony when it was cut, that lettuce excreted hormones that told other heads of lettuce they were being eaten, chewed, ripped, torn and swallowed. If this was true, it meant that to some extent, flowers were sentient. Did they feel pain as you plucked their petals? Maybe. Did they feel themselves age, and wither? Perhaps. It meant that care affected potted plants. It must; that is why Elaheh remained skeptical that all the orchid needed to survive was sunlight. All things needed love and care; flowers should be no exception to this rule.

Ali, however, refused to understand this notion his wife put forward. Elaheh was too attentive at times and, more often than not, her attentiveness was bred from a need to create purpose. Now that she didn't have to be vigilant, she sought to create the opportunity to be. "It needs water, Ali," she would scold, giving it a little, then a little more, unsure how much this temperamental plant required. Each time Ali would glance over his shoulder, tell her to leave it alone, then return to whatever he'd been doing before: reading, watching television, carpet shopping. The other plants in the house

leaned towards the orchid as if to fill in, however they could, the love that was absent from Ali.

Of course, Ali had no reason to grow suspicious regarding the integrity of the flower. Its stem was dark and sturdy, its flower a bright, pale violet. But beneath the sphagnum moss, the roots were gorged with water, splitting and rotting. The plant was diseased but appeared iridescent. Each time Ali passed the shelf it sat on he would glance the orchid's way, a smile on his lips. He would nod in its direction, noticing how well it kept, and go about his life as usual. Elaheh, on the other hand, felt the need to compensate for Ali's lack of attention and watered the orchid every other day, dusted its pot, and made sure it always faced the sunlight. But as days, weeks passed, the orchid began to show mild signs of sickness. Its stalk began to pale, its flower dulling, tipping away from the stick to which it was strapped.

Eventually, Ali noticed its declining health. It infuriated him, and at first, he blamed Elaheh and her useless watering. "It didn't need anything! But you just had to do something, always! *Mord!* You killed it! *Koshteesh!*"

"Don't you yell at me! I did my best to keep it going. I paid attention to it! It needs water. It's a living thing, did you think it would survive with nothing? *Khar!*"

The fighting lasted a good few minutes before the two calmed and realized, after all, it was merely a plant. They could heal, regenerate, start again, and sometimes, better than they were before. And so Elaheh heeded Ali's warning and watered it less, still keeping a close eye on the plant, and Ali went back to what Ali did best: assuming he was in the right and continuing as if nothing had changed. But the orchid did not seem to recover, as it should have. Its stem dried and dried until its flesh was rigid and ashen.

Eventually, the dried husk of the flower dropped from its stem. It took Elaheh a few days to notice it had truly, verily died: stem, roots, all of it. And she only saw when, vacuuming the kitchen, she elbowed the shelf the plant was on, and it fell to the hardwood floor, shattering. Jumping in shock, Elaheh turned to the source and noticed the split pot and the plant, strewn across the floor. For a moment, she remained quiet, speechless, and the next, she began to cry. Seeing this soft, resilient plant broken down and killed by the negligence of its owners, it struck a chord within her heart she hadn't known was there.

“Chi shod? What was that, what happened?”

Elaheh was quiet as Ali stepped towards her and observed him as he looked at the flower and the mess. He knelt, soundlessly. After many minutes, he picked up the dried stem. “I thought this time”—he started to say, hand trembling ever so slightly, voice a steady whisper— “I thought that this time, I had it.” Elaheh put her head on his shoulder, both remaining speechless for a time before, together, picking up what was left, careful to clean every piece of ceramic shard, every granule of moss, every curled, sickly root. Together they threw out what was once their prized, blooming orchid and vacuumed any remnants they might have missed. Ali and Elaheh then returned to their abandoned tasks, faces masks of stone, trying to pretend as they always did, that nothing had happened, and everything was all right. It worked, for the first hour or two, but the weight of this failure weighed heavily on Ali's heart. Had he tried, this time? Or had he made the same mistake a third time, much more gravely than ever before? Was it his fault? Was everything his fault? For the first time in his life, Ali seemed to acknowledge that it was. That night after coming home from work, Ali sat in the kitchen, staring at the spot that all

three of his flowers had occupied. Each flower let down in different ways, one irrevocably so. Moved by the darkness and the absence of floral life, he removed his glasses, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose, as he softly sniffed. Quietly he pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes, to prevent the sadness that overwhelmed him, from entering the physical world. He'd wanted, desperately, all his life, to be a man that lived in an abundance of greenery and natural beauty. But all he endeavoured to raise, to love, shunned him. No, he shunned it, to the point of death, in one case.

Silence shifted its feet in awkwardness, left alone with Ali. It knew not how to envelop the defeated, how to console weighted hearts. But it was not defeat Ali felt in that moment, as he wiped his face, and straightened his posture. It was a resolution. A law he would bind himself to. Never again.

Ali vowed never to buy a single plant, ever again.

A New Day

Elaheh placed the mirror on the *haft-sin* table, adjusting its angle. The mirror sat amongst a small circle of plates, each filled with one of the seven traditional ingredients that composed the *haft-sin*. A head of garlic: *seer*; a bowl of vinegar: *serkeh*; an apple: *seeb*; sumac: *somagh*; Iranian coins: *sekeh*; Buckthorn: *Senjed*; Grass: *Sabze*. Each had its own meaning: longevity, vitality, light, wealth, wellbeing. Each served a purpose, surrounding the thick, ornate *Quran* that sat majestically on the golden lace tablecloth beneath. Warm brown eyes surveyed the table and immediately Elaheh knew something was missing.

Quietly she stood, tucking a strand of grey hair behind her ear, and moved towards the large oak buffet on the other side of the living room. From within it, she removed three things.

The first item she set on the *haft-sin* spread represented compassion. It awakened in her memories long settled beneath layers and layers of dust. Her smile was fond, and gentle in nature, fingers stroking gilded edges. Though merely the memento of something far greater, it symbolized to all of them a time of trial, but a difficulty overcome. “*Khoda bi-moraz*, Roshan, my love.” The smiling picture of her younger sister sat comfortably on the rightmost side of the table. Roshan had been nothing but a giving hand, a source of true kindness, and warmth. She was the type of human Elaheh had aspired to be. Ceaselessly generous, constantly loving.

Another picture joined the first, which she placed to the left. Her smile to this one was less warm, but understanding. Though the figure in the picture had not passed on, she

knew that he would no longer play the same part in her life as he once had. Sure, Ali called every once in a while, sent money from Iran without fail every week, but his face would not be one she would see again, or stroke, or slap. She did not wake up to his residual warmth on the mattress, nor did she hear Iranian soccer announcers yelling their joy at three a.m. as he watched a game. She had not for some years now. She was tempted to fold his picture down, to hide it, but she didn't. Ali had been many things in his life. He, like everyone, was flawed. But what he had always symbolized for her, for their children, was hope. Hope that life would continue, that things would move on and get better. His place on the *haft-sin* was just as earned as Roshan's.

The third, and last picture Elaheh placed at the very center, just in front of the polished mirror. "Hi *azizam*," she whispered softly, overwhelmed at the sight of her youngest child, Sara, smiling happily at her. Hand atop her heart, Elaheh contemplated Sara's birthday picture with pride. It was difficult, Elaheh knew, for her generation to be open with their emotions, to encourage their children, to be mindful of their surroundings. She had spent most of her life living in a very small place, in which she herself had felt small. It disgusted her that the loss of her youngest child had been her means of achieving some semblance of freedom. She worked for herself now, running a café with Saman and his wife. She did what she loved, which was cooking, and sharing her culture in the dishes she created, all inspirations of the day, except for one, single dish.

It was called "Sara's Special," and was her favourite Persian dessert: *shirini panjerei*. Window sweets. The concept was simple enough: thin, rosewater batter, coating metallic moulds that Elaheh gently tapped into a pot of hot oil. She would watch as stars, hearts, snowflakes wafted about, as they turned golden. It was best to eat them warm, and

so Elaheh made them fresh to order, finishing each plate off with a sprinkling of icing sugar mixed with a pinch of saffron, and crumbled pistachios. They were, as Elaheh knew they would be, the house speciality. She loved making them for her customers; she'd loved making them for Sara.

Elaheh stroked the picture longingly, lips pursed, tears teetering on the edge of her lash line. There were many lessons Elaheh had learned after Sara was gone. There was one, among many, that she had learned of Sara's life. And that was strength. It was a strength that Elaheh had not seen immediately, one that had simmered subtly beneath a rocky surface, but it was a strength that grounded Sara. And now, it grounded her.

"Hi, Mommy," a gentle voice chimed in, appearing from behind the front door. Leila smiled happily, spotting her mother in the living room, child on her hip, husband behind her. "Hi, hi! Welcome, *bia to, bia to!*" Awkwardly, Leila walked in, and behind her family, Saman and his wife. The clan was finally reunited for the New Year.

Soft kisses to either cheek, followed by laughter and quaint conversation, the family moving into the living room to admire that year's table.

"*Saal-e no mobarak* everyone," Elaheh said,

"*Saal-e no mobarak, maman,*" the others joined in.

Sara, Transcending

You don't do it because

You want to hurt people.

You do it because

Well... for a lot of reasons.

I did because

I was angry

I was sad

I was tired of looking at that

Giant brick wall.

It wouldn't crumble.

It wouldn't fall.

It was always there.

When I was a kid I tried

To climb it.

I feel like Humpty Dumpty

What a Big Fall.

I did it because the wall

Was moving towards me

Suffocating what space I had.

Trying to crush me.

I didn't do it to make you cry, *Maman*.

I might have done it to make you suffer, *Baba*.

I did it because it was never Saman, Leila, and Sara

It was, is, and always will be

Saman and Leila

Leila and Saman.

I think it's wrong of me to

Always blame the rest of the world

For my weak constitution.

I was never as tough as

My siblings wanted me to be.

As tough as they needed me to be.

I enjoy not having that weight on

My shoulders any longer.

I never wanted to be Atlas

So I quit.

I was not born with poetry in me

I did not grow with romance and
Rhyme in my blood and skin cells
I was no Hafez
I was no Rumi
I lacked the fundamentals of
My culture my history there was
No song in me
No *setar* with tightly wound strings
The only *chang* I held were the claw
Marks on my lungs and heart the ugly
Scars left from my nails as they pulled
And tugged searching for
Music
For something
The harp in me has broken strings.

I think about pain a lot
Not my own pain god no I lived
With that for twenty-five years I know
My own pain.

No, I think I remember I reflect
On the pain of my parents
Of my siblings
Of that squirrel I ran over
During my driver's test.

I think about the pain I caused
I think about the pain I didn't
Sometimes I think I hear crying but
Is it my own? Can I cry here?
I like to think I left behind
A devastated world.
Like my absence has affected
The very climate of the country

I hoped it rained
When I was buried
I hope it rains every year
On the same day
For
Me.
It's stupid how I

Crave it.

Thought.

Care.

Concern.

Do you miss me?

Delet Tang Shodeh, Baba?

Is your heart tightening, daddy?

I died on a

Friday night.

There was soap

On the edge of the bath

I sat and stared as the

Bubbles popped.

There were

Red flowers

Pushing out from

The seams in my skin
Dahlias and roses and chrysanthemums
Petals dripping into the bathtub
Drip drip drip
Like the leaky faucet
Like my leaky eyes

I remember *Maman's*
Song.
Her favourite song
I hum hum hum

Roos-a e Roshan
Khodahafez
Sarzamin-e man
Khodahafez

To bright days,
I say goodbye.
To my homeland,
I say goodbye.

The Fundamentals of Regret

There is a wedding picture, stuffed inside an old plastic album, gathering dust on Elaheh's shelf. The photograph is sepia toned, but clear and well preserved. It shows a smiling scene: Elaheh in her wedding dress, arm wrapped around Ali's, with their parents at either of their sides. It was, in all respects, a beautiful picture, with nothing particularly strange about it.

Yet every time Elaheh came across it, she was not filled with nostalgic joy or fondness. Her reaction instead was bleaker, impartial even. She remembered the day of her wedding as the day something broke. Familiar bonds, pride, habit. It was as if the ring around her finger severed her ties to the past, cemented her in those pointed high heels and that itchy white veil. There would no longer be nights of laughing with her sisters until the dawn, or arguments with her mother about how much butter to add to rice before you serve it. Now, her world had narrowed to one man, tall and broad shouldered, with visions of grandeur always sparkling behind his eyes. Ali was intelligent, an entrepreneur, a telecommunications major at Tehran University. And she, well, she had studied numbers and shapes. She had aspired to draw bridges and towers. Elaheh was just shy of graduating but, now that she was married, what use was her degree? She would become the matriarch of a new household, and although the towers in her dreams crumbled to ash, she envisioned building a house in its stead. A home near her family – no, near his, it would seem—filled with laughter and joy. There would always be something simmering on the stove, and life would be as picturesque as Ali promised it would be.

But that had been a fantasy for the both of them. Elaheh remembered thinking life was perfect the way it was and nothing would ever change. But things changed drastically. The rain tasted thick with soot, and the sun burned your skin. Iran, its fertile earth, began to decay and embitter itself. Everything became dry. Everyone became suspicious. Towers crumbled for real.

Elaheh had resigned herself to ignoring the ghoulish whispers of the poor, the poetry that fell from the rotted lips of victims of war. She lived life complacently, because it was easy. It was how she'd always lived her life. Yes dear, no dear, maybe dear. Did she ache? It would pass. Was she happy? It wouldn't last.

She dusts over the album without putting much thought into it, but her forced nonchalance causes the album to fall from the shelf, onto the floor. She's done it now; forced herself into taking a look. Crouching, she picks up the old album, turns it over in her hand, and sighs.

When she opens it, what she expects is something different. Dread, perhaps a vague nauseated feeling. But, surprisingly, she feels...elated. She knew this was the album with her wedding pictures. On its cover, in elegant Farsi, was written "*Aroosi*": wedding. But, upon opening the album, the first image was not that of her, in her too-white dress, smiling tightly at the camera as her husband held her arm. It was a picture of her children, Saman, Leila, and Sara. Grinning toothy grins, hugging each other closely. In the middle, her youngest child, Sara, thin arms hooked around her siblings' necks, squishing them to her for a picture. It was a warm picture, honest, but most important, happy. Flipping through the other snapshots, Elaheh didn't see the snippets of her honeymoon in Kish, or her gaunt expression as she held Saman in her arms in a hospital

bed. She didn't see the memories of past things that haunted her like cruel ghosts. She saw the three people who had brought her true joy, the three people that made all the evils she'd experience simply melt away. Nothing else mattered but them.

Saman, Leila, Sara.

Sara, Leila, and Saman.

Elaheh closes the album and sets it back where it was. Her dusting continues, but there is lightness to her gestures. As if finally, she has buried something and now has the certitude that it will remain six feet underground.

Ali, Burdened

The sheets are cold as he strokes them. The sun filters in through a pale grey curtain. The room he is in is too orderly. There are candles here and there, most melted, indiscernible lumps on the desk. Clothing is hung neatly from hangers, and books are shelved on the windowsill, bookshelf, and dresser. *Mrs. Dalloway*, next to the *Shahnameh*, next to the *Pocket Dictionary of Canadian Law*. He blinks. Birds are chirping outside the window. Ali strokes the bed sheets. He stands, realizing that the world around him continues to turn. People were moving furniture, packing away cups, pictures, anything really belonging to *her*. Ali leaves her bedroom, heavy with the scent of his daughter, and wanders into the living room, noticing Leila removing each picture frame on the wall with trembling fingers. There is one family photo. It is torn in half.

Ali feels out of place. He doesn't know what to do, what to grab, what to leave. He reaches for an empty box. He takes it back to the bedroom. First, he looks at the books. Fiction, non-fiction, autobiography, comic books. There is no cohesion. He takes Harry Potter, and sets it in the box. Next, he tucks the *Shahnameh* beside it. Ali remembers reading the *Shahnameh*, the *Persian Book of Kings*, to his children at night. The stories, the poetry, had always enthralled Ali. Ali, who had known a utopian Iran, an Iran of opportunity, lushness and luxury. In Ali's eyes the beauty of an untouched land would sparkle.

In Saman and Leila's gaze, the shadow of war, and fear, would always hang like a dark veil. But for Sara, oh Sara, she had never known of the war, nor of what came before it. Her Iran was freshly settled, imprisoned, changed. But to her, the bobbing

black chadors that roamed the streets, were as commonplace as the passionate minaret prayers at dawn. Hearing the stories of the *Book of Kings* didn't sadden her or confuse her. She saw in them the same beauty Ali did.

Sara's eyes had always been like mirrors reflecting his own. She was, out of all the children, the most like him.

Also, the least.

He tucks away book after book. Moves on to the clothing, and feels himself sighing, fingers trembling as he folds. Shirts they'd bought together. Shirts he'd scolded her for wearing. Dresses, she hated dresses! Would cry and cry when her mother put her in one for *Norooz*. But Sara wore a dress to her prom, and one to her cousin's wedding. She wore one to her first job interview, and she was buried in one last week. She hated dresses.

"*Baba*," she'd whine, tugging his pant leg. "I want jeans like you!"

Like him.

The clothes are gone now. The books are gone. The sun is gone. There had only been one box but now there were several. Nothing of her remained, no memory of her lived in this empty little room any longer.

Saman came in and carried her clothes away.

Leila followed, carrying her knick-knacks.

Ali took the *Shahnameh* from the box he'd set it in. He flipped through the novel. to pick it up. A forget-me-not. He smiles and tucks the flower in his shirt pocket.

He leaves the *Shahnameh* on the windowsill. There is only one box left. Ali picks it up and leaves the room. In darkness, they march Sara's belongings into a U-Haul in the parking lot. He has enough of her, Ali thinks, closing the truck's doors.

Let others have a part of her, too. Let her have a part, of this place she loved, Ali's heart sings, as he climbs behind the steering wheel and turns on the truck, hand wiping at tired, wet eyes, before pulling away – Saman and Leila at his side.