

Lily Monadjemi was born in Iran. She was educated in England and the United States. She holds a degree in Social Welfare and an M.A. in Educational Psychology and is recognized as the international voice of Iranian women.

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This is for Betsabeh and Parissa, Julien and Joerg.

Lily Monadjemi

THE SCENT OF LOVE

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Those of you who feel no love
sleep on.

Those of you who do not feel the sorrow of love
in whose heart passion has never risen
sleep on.

Those who do not long for union
who are not constantly asking, 'Where is He?'
sleep on.

Love's path is outside of all religious sects
if trickery and hypocrisy is your way
sleep on.

If you don't melt like copper in your quest
for the alchemical gold
sleep on.

If like a drunkard you fall left and right
unaware the night has passed and it's time for prayer
sleep on.

Fate has taken my sleep but since
it has not taken yours, young man
sleep on.

We have fallen into love's hands
since you are in your own
sleep on.

I am the one who is drunk on Love
since you are drunk on food
sleep on.

I have given up my head and have nothing more to say
but you can wrap yourself in the robe of words and
sleep on.

Jalaledin Rumi 13th Century.

Chapter 1

June 30th of the year 2009

Fifth Street is a dull cul-de-sac running off an avenue christened in the honour of the liberator of India: Ghandi. Like his build, the avenue is narrow and long. It languidly inclines uphill, towards the north and then suddenly is aborted by a busy highway that cuts its head off. This quarter used to be a prestigious residential area, but no more. Teheran, with a population of twenty million, has spread its periphery in all directions, particularly, up the wide breast of mount Alborz, where the air is cool and fresh and the price of land astronomically high. However, the commercial section of this avenue has been modernized and is celebrated for its fashionable restaurants catering to the rich who, on their way, pass an endless strip of jewellery boutiques with display windows lit by the glutinous glitter of eighteen carat gold pieces and diamond-studded jewels tastefully exhibited to lure them in. Lunching at a restaurant along Ghandi Avenue is a double joy for most females as it often coincides with the purchase of a luxury good. Women in Iran, particularly the nouveaux riche wear jewellery to exhibit their husbands' love, loyalty, and success in business. In turn, their spouses indulge their whims without a whinge. This, most of them do to hide their infidelity under the guise of attentive generosity, which in reality is a commercial prudence. In a country with an annual inflation of almost thirty percent, investment in gold and precious stones is safer than holding cash.

Fifth Street tilts downhill. On its right side, just before the road ends, a set of steps descends to the noisy Africa Street. Close to the ridge of the cliff stands a moderately tall apartment block that has seen better days. The entrance hall of this monument to bad taste is as cold as its stained white-marble façade. It has a lift that hardly ever works and inhabitants who hardly ever use it – so old and disillusioned are they. These folks find peace and security only within the confines of their four tired walls. Outside is no longer a familiar and affordable place to shop or take an afternoon stroll to purchase an ice cream or some pistachio nuts from a favourite confectionary shop that has changed hands and decor several times; thus losing its intimacy. These disillusioned souls belong to the social segment that was strangled by the indiscriminating tentacles of revolutionary zealots. Through persistent struggle and some luck, they had managed to break loose and scrape a meagre sustenance out of the limited resources they had salvaged out of the grip of a Foundation or two – in a city recognized as one of the most expensive in the world.

Now, almost thirty years after the dawn of the Islamic Republic, their only affordable social activity is to meddle in each other's affairs or take an afternoon tea with the neighbour they are on speaking terms. Mostly out of touch with the outside world, gossip is the flavour they savour most.

Regardless of the cheerless ambiance of their community, these folks are all thankful that none of the apartments has changed hands. To have a fundamentalist neighbour would have been a kiss of death – even in spite of their, by now conforming life style.

They are aware that within the stronghold of an autocratic rule, whether monarchy, religious or military, treacherous faults in foes are found quicker than a wink of an eye. The strangers, could not only disturb their peace, but offend their sights and olfactory senses by the smelly shoes they discard in front of their flat's entrance before stepping inside. They are pedantic about the cleanliness of the floor upon which they spread their prayer mat and pray to a God they fear more than they love. Many of these pseudo-believers, live comfortably in confiscated properties which in a true religious term were 'usurped'. In Islam, property ownership is sacred and unjust confiscation sacrilegious. Nevertheless, anything, even crime can be justified, if an appropriate cause, however fraudulent, is improvised, or like a miracle descends from heaven.

Fortunately now that the revolutionary fervour has thawed, many people have been able to repossess their properties.

Turan and Shamsi are the sole owners of the fifth floor flats. These two widows went through the anxieties of the Revolution and fears and shortages of an eight-year war together. Time, the struggle to survive, and loneliness were instrumental in binding them in a sincere friendship which now-a-days is a rarity in Iran.

Turan lives with her rather simple-minded son Homayon, and Shamsi is taken care of by Tirdad, her unemployed, perpetually drunk younger son; the only one of her three children in Iran.

When Shamsi was well, her joy was to bake, and her pastries were celebrated as the tastiest, even by those who had tried Lenotre's pastries in Paris. The two neighbours used to pass pleasant afternoons on one of their balconies that face the city's crisscrossing highways and avenues that were beleaguered by ancient vehicles entangled in traffic jams, with carbon monoxide puffing out of their exhaust pipes further polluting the air engulfing Teheran. With all sorts of sanctions hanging over the country, in those days, few new cars traversed the roads.

Flirting with their afternoon tea and enjoying Shamsi's treat, the two ladies used to gab about the bygone days, when they could laugh from the heart and Shamsi could earn money from her highly valued skill. She used to be an envied cook; had taught cooking at a high school and published a cook book. But now, almost incapacitated, God knew what Tirdad was feeding her. To the chagrin of Turan, she had become skin and bones. From her pretty face remained a long Roman nose spidered with veins and a pair of large, lifeless eyes that stared into nothing but a dark void.

Turan, old and frail, irrespective of her own problems, was a conscientious neighbour. She had lost a son in the Iran-Iraq war, and thus was the recipient of several government benefits. Yet, every time her heart warmed up to God she asked him to put some compassion, mercy and forgiveness in the hearts of those in power, so that they would stop, twisting his commandments to suit their selfish purposes – as though there would be no Day of Judgement. All the

mayhems that had affected people's lives seemed to her utterly senseless. After her husband had seen the remnants of his bomb-blasted soldier son brought back in a wooden box for burial, and amongst all the razzmatazz and cries of Allah Akbar due to a martyr, carried through the street leading to the local mosque for a requiem; he had grieved himself to death. Now in the wide world she was left with an intellectually handicapped son and an almost senile neighbour for whom she was grateful. Such was her nature – always content – never complaining. So she lived and enjoyed the brilliant rays of the morning sun pouring in through her bedroom window, fluttering over her creaking old wooden bed, waking her up by their brilliance and pleasant warmth, to face the challenges of a new day – with an open heart and a clear mind.

Although the tea sessions had become a sweet memory, yet out of concern, she made sure to be aware of what was going on in her friend's flat in case her assistance was required. She often heard Tirdad's joggle of keys when opening and slamming the door shut, and then yelling and swearing at his mother. Unfortunately, she could say nothing and do nothing. What does one say to a drunkard? Besides, he was so mean that he had not even opened the door to her knocks on the few occasions she had lost patience with his blasphemous language that had been loud enough to reach her ears and offend her sense of propriety. She had not seen Shamsi for almost a month now. Nevertheless, she knew Tirdad spent the nights with her rather than at his own home with his family. It was common knowledge that his was not a happy marriage and his wife and mother never saw eye to eye. But to spend the nights away from home was strange for a middle-aged man. Didn't he need the company of a woman? She wondered often with a wistful sigh. She never understood why Tirdad did not commission a domestic for his mother and find an occupation for himself. She knew that Datam, Shamsi's oldest son, had offered to contribute to the cost – so it was not a question of affordability. Even once, when in Iran, Datam had actually employed a mature lady who seemed pleasant and capable. But alas, as soon as he had left for London, the woman had been dismissed.

Once, desperate to be of help to Shamsi, she had sought the advice of Amir Khan, their neighbour upstairs and Tirdad's Arak (homemade vodka) mate. Amir Khan had shaken his bald head in sympathy for Shamsi's situation and divulged that Tirdad took care of Shamsi so that he could pocket her monthly pension to support his own family and keep a respectable roof over their heads. Unemployable because of his prison record, the man had no other choice. An aid's fee would devour a good portion of the pension and leave him with little to fulfil his primary obligations. The information had broken her heart and kept her quiet for a while. Yet, vigilant she had remained. Often, when she heard footsteps on the stone floor of their landing, she opened her door a slit to see if Shamsi had a visitor.

This morning, a week had passed without hearing a single sound of activity floating out of Shamsi's apartment, nor any light flickering through its entrance door gap. That was strange indeed. At first she had thought perhaps Shamsi was bedridden – as often as she was. But not hearing Tirdad's noises was bizarre – in fact worrisome. Her curiosity reaching its ebb, she gave vent to a heavy groan, dropped on her sofa, picked up the phone from the side table and dialled

Shamsi's number. When no one responded, she banged the receiver on its cradle, pulled up the shawl hanging over her shoulders, spread it over her head and hastily moved to rise. A sharp pain shot through her arthritic limb and paralyzed her for a second or two. Then, she gripped the arm of the sofa and forced herself up. Once on her feet she stood still to catch her breath. Now-a-days the slightest hasty movement exhausted her. She waited a bit longer and then limped towards the door, opened it and stepped out. Just at that moment, she heard Homayon's deep-voiced call.

"Mother, where are you going?"

"Not far son."

Hating the thought of being left alone, he sat up in bed and began contemplating whether to get out and follow her, or remain in, and carry on teasing his erect genital. Getting up also meant following her orders which he detested. He just wanted to be left alone so that he could remain in bed, dream of his girlfriend and masturbate. He made no demands from his mother and expected her to do the same. But, alas! He had to set the table, help with the dishes and do the shopping. The last was the most difficult chore. Often, while carrying all those heavy grocery bags, he had got lost in the streets that kept changing names. Disoriented, he had to wander around for hours before he could navigate his way back home and face her reprimands for being late.

Homayon had led a normal, healthy life until the age of thirteen, when a dreadful disease, no one could put a name to, had sent him into coma for six weeks, and then, when he had opened his eyes, most things had seemed foggy, unrecognizable and meaningless. He was kept in hospital until the fog in his head had cleared and he could recognize a few people, utter a few simple words and move his limbs. That is when his father made a pilgrimage to Mecca to thank the Almighty for the miracle.

Now, he was thirty five, with almost the mind of an adolescent in the body of a pleasant-looking, tall and well-built man. Agitated, he brushed his sticky hand over his bottom sheet, threw away his blanket and was about to rise when he heard his mother say: "I am just going to see what has happened to Shamsi." Shaking his head, he wondered why on earth she wanted to know what had happened to the neighbour.

In the empty corridor, Turan reached Shamsi's door. She rested a palm on the wall for support, took couple of breaths, and then slowly bent and put her good ear to the key-hole and listened. The stillness accelerated her heart beats, rushed blood into her head and tensed her facial muscles. Her eyes wide with worry, she slowly unbent her back, leaned her gross bulk against the wall and stared at the doorbell she knew had stopped functioning months ago. Suddenly the cold empty corridor seemed like a deserted sepulchre. Horrible thoughts assailed her and she began to shiver. To calm her nerves she started to murmur the Fear Prayer she knew by heart. It soothed her a bit. She looked at the door again, a barrier between her and dear Shamsi. She clenched her fingers and with her crooked knuckles began knocking at the door. The loud tapping sound echoed in the corridor and died down.

What on earth could have happened to them? She kept asking herself while waiting for the door to open. And when it didn't, a terrible feeling of

helplessness beset her. Her eyes began to sweep the corridor in search of help. No one was around and besides, no one cared about their neighbour's welfare anymore. In fact they had become weary of each other's problems.

Desolate, she became aware of the awful pain in her knuckles. She grabbed her aching fingers with her good hand and tried to squeeze the pain out without success. Lost in dark thoughts, like a retreating soldier, she hobbled back into her domain; banged the door shut, dropped on her withered red velvet sofa and shook off her shawl. It slipped down over her stooped shoulders. Aggravated by its weight, she pulled it off, threw it on the sofa's arm and picked up her address book that lay next to the telephone. Impatiently she flipped through its pages until she found Golnar's number. She laid the book on her lap; picked up the phone and, staring at the digits, dialled.

Golnar, the unmarried daughter of Shamsi's eldest uncle, the late Mohammad Hassan Khan, is the family's lawyer. She attends to the affairs of their various estates, which due to the change of regime have become notoriously difficult to manage. In spite of all the hassles involved, the task not only gives her a feeling of importance but also is favourable to her branch of the family's interest. Her father, having been the eldest son of a landed aristocrat, had inherited the right to supervise the affairs of the farmland and needless to say none of the siblings, out of respect for his seniority, dared to question his annual account. They all thanked him for the pittance they received and then whispered their complaints behind closed doors. Now, Golnar was doing the same as her father had done, albeit under such complicated circumstances that one wouldn't wish for an enemy. The first and some of the second generation having passed away had left their shares to their numerous descendants who were now scattered all over the world. In such a situation and with all the rivalry that exists amongst the various cousins, nothing tangible can be achieved within a reasonable time, if at all. Many believe this suits Golnar but not Shamsi who, when still in command of her mental faculties, had given her a total power of attorney to deal with all her affairs. Turan knew that Golnar was the only reliable relative Shamsi has. The rest had either left for safer shores or were as old and as ill as she – or in their graves. So she was her only hope for help.

Out of bed, hair unkempt, face black with stubbles, eyes drowsy, Homayon aimlessly wandered in his untidy room wondering why his forever calm mother had banged the door. Something must have angered her? He surmised shaking his head side to side. Then, he heard her desperate voice: "No one opens the door, nor picks up the phone."

"Who doesn't open the door?" he yelled in concern.

Turan put her palm on the mouth of the receiver, turned her face towards the narrow corridor that led to his room and replied: "I am on the phone, talking to Golnar Khanum."

She turned back and removed her hand. "Sorry Khanum joon (lady dear), Homayon thought I was talking to him; and no, I do not have the phone number of Tirdad's flat. Can you hold on please, I have to get something to write with?"

Homayon heard sounds of shuffling which made him imagine his mother searching for something.

"Son, hurry, give me something to write with."

“Yah, I was right! The old bitch is summoning her servant again!” He whispered tying the waist strings of his blue-striped pyjama pants. He delved his feet into his frayed cotton sleepers with such ferocity that one toe tore the fabric and popped out. He sent a curse and dragging his feet on the hardwood flooring, skulked into his mother’s bedroom where he knew he would find her eyebrow pencil next to her looking glass on the window-sill. He picked the pencil up and holding it like a gun aimed to kill, carried it to her. He knew this would annoy her. It made him feel good to see her lined face crinkle and her thin lips twitch. Perhaps one day she would understand his resentments and stop treating him like a servant. He was an Agha (gentleman), like everyone else.

“Here you are, Mother,” he said, a sardonic smile tilting on his face. Unshaved he looked more like an ape than a man.

Turan looked at the pencil pointing at her heart and then at him with a frown on her narrow forehead. She swallowed the obscenity that was about to fly out of her mouth; shook her head in disappointment and grabbed the pencil. She bit her lower lip hard, dropped the receiver on her lap; pushed the phone’s loud speaker button down; leaned towards the telephone table on which sat an old newspaper waiting to be discarded and said: “Ok what is his number Golnar Khanum?”

Golnar’s soft voice flowed through the loudspeaker.

Homayon towered over Turan and focused on her scribbling. He noticed the trembling of her hand and felt a pang of guilt which quickly turned into a frustrated irk.

Turan finished writing and straightened her stiff back. “Thank you Golnar joon. I shall call you as soon as I know what is going on there.”

“I wait for your call Turan Khanum and I hope nothing is wrong. And also thanks for your concern.”

“Nothing at all. Shamsi is like my own sister,” Turan replied before returning the receiver on its cradle.

“Can you read your squiggles?” Homayon ridiculed.

Holding the pencil up, she whispered: “Son, please return this to its place.” The sound of her voice was as rueful as the feeling in her heart. When she looked at him, she only saw the brilliant child that he had been before that dreadful evil eye settled on him. But his callous words always took the joy out of her fantasy. Why was he so nasty to her? Why? She couldn’t figure that out. She shook her head in despair and heard him snap back: “Do it yourself.”

Wordless, she just watched him turn and walk to the kitchen. Then she murmured an ‘Allah Akbar’ (God is great), placed the pencil over the address book, leaned her head against the back of the couch, closed her eyes and prayed to be forgiven for the resentment she had felt towards her son. Had he died from that awful disease, she could not have been able to live this long. Suddenly she remembered Shamsi. Her eyes opened wide. Hurriedly she sat up. A sharp pain shot through her back and came out as a moan. She picked up the phone again, consulted her squabbling on the paper and dialled.

“Hallo?” A seductive voice whispered.

“Salam Nary Khanum. I hope you are in good health.”

“Thank you Turan Khanum and I hope you and Homayon Khan are well too.”

“Not really my dear. I am afraid something is amiss at Shamsi’s. No one picks up the phone, or opens the door and I haven’t seen Agha Tirdad for some time now. Have you seen or heard from either of them lately, my dear?”

“No. We are not on speaking terms.”

“Sorry to hear that. Dear, I am terribly worried about Shamsi. Could you please come here and help me to find out what is going on behind that locked door?”

Nary paused and then replied: “I am terribly busy these days. What can I do that you cannot?”

“I do not know. You are a kin and know better than I. Please come?”

“OK. But I cannot stay long.”

“Just come please. You are family and I am just a neighbour my dear.”

“I am not much of a family either. But to rest your mind at ease, I will drop in.”

“Thank you Khanum.” Turan said before disconnecting.

“What a wife to have. No wonder he lives with his mother!” Turan whispered before dialling Golnar’s number. Anxiously waiting by the phone Golnar took the call, heard Turan’s report and promised to join her immediately.

Relieved that the burden was off loaded from her conscience, Turan stretched on the sofa and closed her eyes to relax.

An hour elapsed in serenity. Then the ding-dong of the bell disrupted her nap. Disoriented, she opened her eyes and looked around. Consciousness crept in. The bell rang again. Carefully she swung her legs and rested them on the floor. Then she put her hands on the arm of the sofa and very slowly stood up. She heard the ding dong again and swore. She lumbered to the door and asked: “Who is it?”

“Salam Turan Khanum. It is me, Golnar.”

Turan unlocked and opened the door to a sweating, panting Golnar, whose flushed cheeks were pulsating with exhaustion.

“The damned lift doesn’t work again!” She mumbled while loosening the knot of her black scarf.

“Come in my dear, come in,” Turan invited, spreading her arms around her round shoulders and kissing her on both cheeks.

“Thank you for coming. Thank you,” she whispered into Golnar’s ears before unfolding her arms.

“Imagine climbing all those steps clad in these heavy layers! Summer is an awful season for us wretched women,” Golnar complained, unbuttoning her black coat.

“I never wear a coat – just my chador (long veil). It is ugly but cooler and more convenient.”

Golnar who would rather die than appear in a chador gave her a timid smile.

Turan closed the door without locking it and then pointed to the sofa. “Sit here dear; I’ll be only a minute.” Golnar dropped her black handbag by the side of the sofa, sat down and fixed her concerned eyes on the kitchen’s open door. Soon Turan emerged carrying a silver tray on which was a cup of tea and a

tarnished silver sugar dish filled to the brim with sugar cubes. Careful not to spill the tea, she placed the tray on the coffee table.

“It’s a bit on the strong side. It has been brewing since breakfast time.”

“Thank you Turan Khanum. I like strong tea,” Golnar replied, picking up the cup and looking at her hostess, who warily lowered herself onto the sofa and when lodged comfortably, released a sigh of relief.

“What do you think has happened Turan Khanum?” Golnar asked before taking a sip of her tea.

Turan shook her head in wonder. “I really do not know. Shamsi never goes out, but I usually hear Tirdad’s noises, at least twice a day – but now, it is a good while, I have heard nothing at all, nor seen any light flutter through the door gap. Tirdad usually leaves the light in the hallway on.”

“This is strange indeed. Shamsi calls me once a week and I have not heard from her for almost three weeks now. I have not called her myself because sometimes Tirdad picks up the phone, and I really do not want to talk to him. He is always so rude and aggressive, as though we are to blame for his misfortunes!”

“Do not talk about his rudeness! He is just awful to everybody, especially poor Shamsi. When he starts shouting at the dear woman, he uses words that make my hair stand out. He is so unlike his father!”

Golnar nodded her agreement and placed her empty cup on its saucer.

“And of course his better half is no better,” Turan added, shaking her head in repugnance.

“She is another wrong choice. They are not birds of the same feather. We do not even know who her real father is – such distinguished family!” exclaimed Golnar, wrinkling her round nose.

Turan exhaled, pursed her lips, and shook her head in consent.

“And all the airs and graces she gives herself – utterly repulsive! The worst is that he always backs her, even when he knows she is wrong. Poor Shamsi, from among three children, she is left with the black sheep.”

“Well, that is her fault. I know for a fact that Datam, before leaving Iran, asked them to go and live with him in London. But no, cousin Shamsi had to remain with Tirdad – the rotten apple of her eyes.”

Turan sighed wistfully, changed the position of her legs, and began to massage her left thigh.

Homayon, sitting on his bed with a French text on his lap, could, to his annoyance, hear every word exchanged between the ladies. Their voices were disrupting his concentration and he couldn’t make head or tail of the sentence he aimed to memorize. Frustrated, he threw the book aside, dived for the door, kicked it shut and swearing under his breath returned to the task at hand. He was rather proud of his elementary French skill. Through persistent endeavours he had managed to learn a few sentences by heart. This achievement he had kept from his mother whom he knew, didn’t believe him capable of learning anything at all and had angrily scolded him for wasting his pocket money on the purchase of the book, even though second-hand. It hurt him to think she considered him an imbecile. Deep down he knew he was, but not all the time. He picked up the text and looked at the sentence he was trying to memorise. Now he couldn’t

even read it, let alone commit it to memory. He focused harder to no avail. Nothing entered his head except the aggravating noise from the sitting room. Exasperated, he threw the book on the table, dropped on his bed, folded his hands behind his head and leaning on them murmured: “Well, today is one of those bad, imbecile days!”

In the sitting room they heard the sound of footsteps echoing in the corridor.

“I hope it is Nary,” Turan said patting Golnar’s knee. It jerked up.

“Dear, you must be very nervy.”

“Who isn’t Turan Khanum? Life has turned into a repertoire of problems for all of us. Just look at your elevator. With all the maintenance charges you pay to the management, they should, bloody well have changed it by now.”

“Management – my foot! No one really knows what they do with the money, and no one has the sense or the audacity to question.”

“Why Turan joun?”

“Because we have to save face and also we do not know with whom we are dealing. No one wants to jeopardise his or her safety. At our age we like to die in our own homes my dear! Our own homes! And a wrong word to the wrong person, your home can be confiscated and you thrown out into the street.” Turan stopped and began massaging her bad leg.

“Surely it isn’t as bad as that?”

“It is worse than that my dear.”

“But, you know all your neighbours. Shamsi told me that none of the apartments have changed hands.”

“No – they have not, but people have changed. The new social system, with its new values, has affected most of the people, at least all those I know. They are not the same anymore. Some have turned pseudo-fundamentalist, some anarchist and some, like me, weary, waiting to die in peace.”

The bell rang.

“It must be her,” Turan murmured, rising to open the door. When she reached it, she looked through the security eyelet.

“It is them.” She whispered, pushing the handle down and opening the door to a puffing Nary behind whom stood her son Ahmad.

“Salam Nary Khanum.”

“This is awful – having to climb up so many steps,” Nary blurted out, shaking her loosely wrapped foulard off.

“I know and I am sorry about it.”

“Salam Turan Khanum,” Ahmad greeted in a warm tone to compensate for his mother’s rudeness.

As Nary’s eyes fell on Golnar her frown tightened.

“Salam Nary Khanum.”

“Salam Golnar Khanum,” Nary replied, her tone as cold as clay.

“Nary Khanum please sit down. I will get you some tea.”

“As I told you, I do not have much time and really do not know why I am here. My so called husband hasn’t called me for a long time now, and I have not seen him since Kobra left for Paris.”

“This is not strange is it – given your relationship with him?” Turan replied, her frank eyes on her long face.

“No Khanum, it is not strange, but all the same a fact. And now, I see our marital problems have been publicised by my very dear mother-in-law!”

Golnar, tensed, straightened her shoulders and looked at Nary with distaste, “my cousin cannot ask for a glass of water, let alone gossip behind you. Please do not be insolent about my family members or else I will leave.”

Nary, shook her plump shoulders, fixed her audacious eyes on Golnar’s stern face and replied: “Do as you wish. I did not expect to find you here. Had I known you would be present, I would not have bothered to come – you are the one who has power of attorney from Shamsi Khanum – so it is your responsibility to see if she is dead, alive or whatever else.”

Turan, ever so discretely, hit her thighs, bit her lips and shook her head at the sharpness of the woman’s tongue.

Clearly embarrassed by his mother’s unnecessary insolence, Ahmad pinched her arm and whispered: “Enough is enough.”

“You are right Nary Khanum. I am here to see what has happened to my client and you, my dear, should be here to see what has happened to your husband, by grace of whom, you have socially climbed high and lead a comfortable life. You were just a widowed secretary when Doctor Tirdad Amiri married you my dear. Be grateful for your luck and act according to the demands of your acquired status – like a lady.”

Not expecting such an assault from a usually reserved Golnar, Nary paused to collect her thoughts. Then throwing Golnar a venomous glance she replied: “I am not going to grace your stupid remark with a response. You are all the same – heartless and arrogant.”

Shocked, Turan watched her turn and walk out.

Golnar, swallowed the insult with a pinch of salt, picked up her bag, stood up, took Turan’s arm and together they followed her out. Neither uttered a word.

By the door, Nary, covered her hair with her foulard and then pushed the bell button.

“It doesn’t work Khanum. Had you been visiting your husband and your sick mother-in-law, you would have known.” Commented Turan, a sarcastic smile on her thin lips

Nary shrugged off the remark and whispered: “Trust him not to have had it fixed.”

“Bang at the door, Mother.” Ahmad suggested impatiently.

She did – with all the frustration inside her. The echo in the corridor compounded their irritation.

“Stop it Khanum. It is useless. No one is there.” Said Turan, snatching Nary’s hand.

Nary pulled her hand out of her grip and threw the old woman a nasty glance.

“I think we better break the lock,” Ahmad suggested, his bushy eyebrows creased in genuine concern. He loved his step-father. The man had been exceptionally kind to him. He was only four when a bomb- blast had turned his biological father into a martyr. The only father he had known was Tirdad: kind, caring and genuine until lately.

They were all contemplating what to do, when Homayon who had quietly joined the crowd, ran inside and returned with a hammer which he proudly offered to Ahmad with both hands.

“We need other tools as well, not just a hammer Homayon Joon!” Ahmad said in a kind tone. Embarrassed, Homayon hid the hammer behind his back, dropped his eyes to the floor, then mumbling incoherently ran indoors, threw the hammer on the floor, rushed to his room, sat on his bed and began to cry like a despondent child. Blushing, Turan turned her gloomy eyes to Ahmad and whispered: “Son, run to the kitchen where you will find the tool box in the bottom drawer, on the right of the sink.”

A few minutes later, Ahmad returned with the same hammer and various screw drivers.

He knelt by the door and began to work. The noise of repetitive pounding exploded in the corridor, alerting the neighbours to an unexpected calamity. Eventually the lock gave in. Satisfied, Ahmad set aside the tools and stood up. As the door slit open a loathsome wave of odour gushed out churning their stomachs. ‘Oh my God.’ They cried, stepping back and colliding with each other.

None uttered a word. None dared to think of what to expect, and none dared to take the first step in.

A few long, frightful minutes passed before Golnar summoned her courage and ventured into the darkness in which the interior was drowned. The stink was too pungent to bear. Hearing the thumping of her own heart, she swallowed the bile in her mouth, withdrew a handkerchief from her coat pocket, exclaimed a noiseless “Ya Allah”, covered her nose and took another step in. The others took courage and followed suit.

Only thin wisps of light whizzed in through the slits of the drawn curtains.

As their eyes became accustomed to darkness, Nary turned left and switched the light on. The surrealism of the illuminated scene forged out yelps of horror from each of their throats. The noise frightened the cockroaches parading in the kitchen. Their peace disturbed, the insects rushed towards safety. A few hastened out, into the living area, a gruesome mess in which even a derelict could not have survived. Stained dining chairs were strewn around and on the dining table remained two moulded, malodorous plates, some cutlery and a large takeaway container filled with dead flies which must have feasted themselves to death. Dead ants lay on the tablecloth that once must have been white muslin, embroidered in pistachio green. A thought, uglier than the scene in view occurred to Nary and made her whisper: “Oh, please God prove me wrong.”

At the far end of the sitting room, next to a wall, Tirdad, in his creased, blue-striped pyjamas sat on a spread of dried blood. His head was skewed to the left and his deeply cut forehead was coated in blood. Fear was frozen on his open eyes and an expression of pain sculpted his grey, swollen face on which streaks of blood had scabbed over his skin and unshaved barb. There was a disorderly trail of blood between him and the glass coffee-table, the edge of which was also blood stained. On an aged, pink sofa lay Shamsi, her grey hair long and rumpled, her skin a pallid, crinkled sheet of parchment paper punctured by a set of closed eyes sunken in a deep inky cavity. Her toothless mouth was half open,

her pale lips chapped; a peppery beard on her narrow chin; her skinny right arm dangling down the side of the sofa and her chipped nails longer than those of a card's joker. By the sofa lay a pair of soiled dentures on which couple of ants had fossilized.

In the open space, patches of loose excrement were buried under mounds of dead ants and cockroaches.

Turan let out a loud scream and began hitting her head with both hands. Golnar rushed to the toilet to vomit and Nary, steadily walked to where her husband sat and stood staring at him with awestricken eyes. Images floated in her head and words rang in her ears making her heart gloat inside her chest. No tears moistened her eyes.

Tears streaming down his pinched face, bent under a heavy load of guilt, Ahmad slumbered to the phone and dialled 110 for police and ambulance.

Golnar, as grey as ash, returned from the toilet, knelt by the sofa, took Shamsi's cold hand, kissed it several times and then instinctively searched for her pulse. After a few seconds of intense concentration, she detected a faint beat. She focused further. Yes it really was a heartbeat. Gently she placed the hand on Shamsi's thigh; stretched up; put her cheek against her nose. A tinge of warmth brushed her skin. To make sure that the sensation was not illusory she remained still. Then sure of the breath of life, she shouted: "Shamsi is alive – quick – call an ambulance."

"I have already done that Golnar Khanum." Ahmad responded from under his breath. He was kneeling by his father and stroking his head with love, wooing him in his heart and letting his tears drop on his lap. He stole a kiss from his cold face, placed his head on his swollen stomach and kept cursing himself.

Nary walked to the window, drew the curtains, opened the window and then glided away to inspect the bedrooms. On the right-hand side of the narrow corridor was Tirdad's. Its door was open and an awful smell drifted out of it. She entered and switched the light on. Shocked, she took a step back and with her palm muffled the cry of horror that was about to escape her tight lips. Patches of dried faeces on which lay dead insects were all over the grey carpet. At the right corner, facing south, Tirdad's wooden bed was broken, feathers of its torn quilt everywhere and its crumpled sheet terribly soiled. A dusty, torn, blue curtain hid the window and creased clothes were scattered all over the single chair that sat by the bed acting as a table.

He must have had bad diarrhoea or perhaps was food poisoned? And why did not the stupid man call me? She wondered with a touch of guilt. The broken bed did not surprise her at all for he was prone to violent behaviour especially when drunk. She stepped in and began searching for his wallet which she found under his dirty skewed pillow. She took it and shoved it in her pocket. She swept the area with her eyes. Nothing of value lay there, so she left for Shamsi's bedroom. There, nothing of interest attracted her attention, except couple of suitcases lodged on the top of the wardrobe. She would inspect them later.

In the kitchen, behind the fridge, she found several empty bottles of white alcohol. It didn't surprise her. She knew he used to mix it with lemonade as a substitute for vodka which he could not afford to buy. Alcohol poisoning – an inevitable end for an alcoholic on white alcohol. She mused, her voluptuous lips

parting in a smile that appeared and disappeared swiftly. In her mind, the earlier suspicions vanished and she exhaled with ease.

Nary was in her mid fifties, still sexy and appealing to men who have a preference for blonds. She had inherited her ivory skin, blond hair and power of deception from her Georgian mother. A mask of grief on her face, she returned to the living room, knelt by her son, threw him a strange glance, took Tirdad's cold clenched hand and tried to pull his wedding band off. The finger was too bent and swollen for the band to move. To save face, she kissed the hand, gently placed it on the dead man's thigh, turned her eyes to Golnar who had been watching her, and whispered: "There are several empty bottles of white alcohol in the kitchen – white alcohol is what he mixed with lemon juice or lemonade to drink – that must have poisoned him."

Disgusted by her ignoble act, Golnar gave her a cold, demeaning look and ignored her remark.

The news had already travelled through the building and the landing was raucously crowded by inquisitive neighbours. Turan, unable to remain in the apartment was spread on the corridor's floor, her head cupped in her palms, crying ceaselessly. By her stood Homayon, busy describing his perception of the events for those snooping for information. Suddenly sounds of purposeful footsteps announced the arrival of the police. The buzz turned into a hush. Eyes turned to the stair-case. A tall youngish officer, followed by a pair of petulant policemen reached the landing. The officer, his posture erect, his pleasant shaved face serious, swept his large, curious black eyes over the crowd and politely, yet firmly, ordered the non-relatives to disperse. He had prominent cheekbones, probably growing sharper with age, and a look of calm but determined authority, as if he was used to taking charge of situations. He turned to Ahmad who appeared at the door and asked: "I assume this is the Amiri residence?" "Yes sir. Please come in." Ahmad replied stepping aside, to let him go through. As the officer entered, the stench hit him hard. He paused for a minute, decided against covering his nose with a handkerchief, (a sign of weakness for a man of his rank) and introduced himself to the audience, as Sarvan (officer) Amir-Hussaini. Everybody rose and whispered their greetings. Amir Hussaini, endeavouring to disguise his horror at the state of the interior, roamed his eyes around, forming a first impression of those present. Then he focused his attention on the two victims, assuming both dead. No one spoke. The silence was as thick as the film of dust covering the furniture. He turned his eyes back to the crowd. Golnar's dignity and composure captured his attention. He took a step towards her and politely asked: "Khanum what is your relation to these victims?"

"I am the cousin of Khanum Amiri who, God be praised is still alive."

"Alive?" Amir- Hussaini exclaimed, astounded. The woman seemed as lifeless as a statue.

"Yes, God be praised. She breathes, Sarvan."

Regretting his reckless assumption, he went to Shamsi, bent down, took her pulse, and concentrated. Then he turned his eyes to Golnar and said: "You are right Khanum. What great luck! "

Golnar gave him a serene smile and then turned her sad eyes to Tirdad. “Doctor Tirdad Amiri is her son. This morning Turan Khanum, the next door neighbour and a close friend of the family, having been unable to get in touch with anyone in the flat, called me. And since I too, had not heard anything from either of them, I hurried here to see if anything was amiss – and this is what we found after breaking the lock.” Golnar paused and then with her head gestured towards Nary, without looking at her face. “That lady there is doctor Amiri’s wife, and the young youth standing by her, his step-son.”

Amir Hussaini threw Nary a compassionate glance and then turned and knelt by Tirdad. He swept his eyes all over him and then released a heavy sigh. There was no need to check his pulse. The man was as dead as stone. He stood up thinking how he could have met his end. The signs were contradictory. The door had been locked from the inside and they had to break its lock to enter. So there had been no intruder unless he had had a Key. The pool of blood indicated obvious injury and the excrements disease. It was lucky that the old woman was still alive – a miracle indeed – but what had really happened? If the son had been sick, the mother could have asked for help from her friendly neighbour. If or when he had fallen and hit his head on something, most probably the glass table, again she could have sought help. Why had she not done so? Something must have happened to incapacitate her, or both of them, before the death occurred. Could she regain consciousness and remember? She must have seen what had happened. And the room’s shocking state! Even a pig couldn’t live in it – let alone respectable folks. The pictures on the walls indicated class and wealth and yet the outfits on the mother and the son were shabby, craggy and dirty. What tragedy had caused this drama – what? He felt his left eye twitch – as it always did when distressed. He had an old, sick mother, as frail as Shamsi. For a second he visualized it was her on the sofa and felt a whisper of Allah Akbar fly out of his mouth. He shook his head to get rid of the bad thought.

No one spoke. Staring at the Sarvan, they waited for his opinion, assumption or questions. As he moved his head, they straightened their necks and sharpened their ears.

He turned to Nary and asked: “Khanum, when did your husband become ill?”

“I do not know Agha Sarvan. He was living here taking care of Shamsi Khanum. He hardly ever came home.”

“Hmph!” Exclaimed Amir-Hussaini and turned his attention to Golnar.

“Who saw the victims last Khanum?”

“Agha Sarvan, you should talk to Turan Khanum. She lives here and knows more about what goes on in this flat than the rest of us.” Golnar replied turning her eyes to the door.

“Shall I fetch her for you Agha Sarvan?” Ahmad volunteered and then without waiting for any response headed for the corridor.

A few minutes later Turan leaning on Homayon’s arm entered the room, her eyes closed, howling in a grating voice: “God make me blind so that I won’t be able to see my Shamsi in this state. My poor, poor Shamsi!” Golnar went to her, took her free hand and together with Homayon led her to the nearest chair to the

standing officer. She sat down, released a deep sigh and opened her tormented eyes, focusing them on the interrogator.

“Khanum, I understand you called Golnar Khanum for help. Can you please explain why?”

“Homayon give me your handkerchief.”

“I do not have one, Mother.”

Ahmad, now standing by the dining table, saw a box of Kleenex there. He withdrew a tissue and respectfully handed it to Turan.

“Thank, you son.” Turan whispered before blowing her nose and wiping her tears.

Ahmad stepped behind her chair and gently began rubbing her shoulders. She threw the tissue over her lap, turned to the officer and said: “Agha Sarvan, Shamsi Khanum is like a sister to me. I love her very much.” She paused, sniffed and then began shaking her head and hitting her chest with her fist. “Oh my God! Why has this happened to my poor dear friend? Why? No one can imagine the hell we went through – together. The poor, poor lady! Against all my counsel, she took life far too serious – so serious that she made herself ill and dependent on him.” She swung her head towards Tirdad, threw him a quick cold glance and began shaking her head in pity. Amir-Hussaini did not miss the derogative tone in her voice when referring to the dead man. It surprised him. Turan, hysterical now, began beating at her laps.

“Please calm down Turan Khanum. You will make yourself sick.” Golnar implored, taking hold of her hands. She composed herself, picked up the wet tissue from her lap; wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead, fixed her eyes on the Sarvan and continued:

“As her health deteriorated, our visits became less and less frequent. The last time I saw her was when Kobra was here. After she left I heard nothing from her and then didn’t even hear the noises Tirdad made in the corridor and inside the flat. That is when I became concerned; came to the door and knocked. No one responded. I returned home and phoned. When no one answered, I called Golnar Khanum.”

“Khanum who is Kobra?” The officer asked.

“She is Shamsi Khanum’s daughter who lives in Paris and works for a pharmaceutical company. She often comes here to visit us all.” Homayon, so far reticent, volunteered in a voice laced with pride.

The arrival of the ambulance paramedics stopped the interrogation. Faced with two victims, the senior paramedic politely addressed the Sarvan: “Your Excellency we can only take one corpse.”

“Call for another ambulance. You take the lady who is alive to hospital and we wait here for the second ambulance to take the dead to the morgue.”

The man pulled out his mobile from his pocket and called his centre.

As the two paramedics were heading out to go and bring up their stretcher, the Sarvan, with his hand gestured them to stop. “Don’t waste any time. She might finish at any moment. The two of you carry her down right now and do what is necessary in the ambulance. Also never come to a scene such as this without your stretcher.”

Mummers of “sorry Sir,” reached Sarvan’s ears. To compensate for their negligence, the men hastily set to work. They gently lifted Shamsi up, one holding her shoulders and the other her legs. At that moment Golnar ran to Shamsi’s bedroom, picked up her Islamic coat that was hung behind the bedroom door, brought it in and spread it over her. Then she thanked the Sarvan, adjusted her foulard, buttoned her coat, picked up her bag and ran after the paramedics down the stairs. Fortunately they were taking Shamsi to Mehr Hospital which was nearby.

In the flat, Amir-Hussaini thanked Turan for her help and then ordered all present to leave so that the police could start their search. Ahmad and Homayon, each took an arm and helped Turan out to her home, ignoring the questions that were thrown at them by a prying bunch still lingering in the corridor.

Once the flat was under his control, Amir-Hussaini asked one of the policemen to draw a line around the corpse and the other to follow him looking for clues. They went from one room to the next, pulling out drawers, opening cabinet doors, making the mess messier without finding anything that pointed to violence except the broken bed which was ancient and the torn quilt. So at some stage there must have been a struggle. Between whom only God knew! Amir-Hussaini extracted his note pad from his coat pocket and noted his observation.

The search proved futile. The team gathered around the corpse, eyeing it with pity while disputing over the cause of death. Dysentery, food poisoning, giddiness, heart attack – all of which could have caused a loss of balance and a subsequent head hit on the sharp edge of the glass table which was evident from the cut on the victim’s forehead and the blood stains, extending from the table to where he sat. Amir-Hussaini listened with care and smiled at the way their minds worked. None of their theories seemed plausible to his rational thinking. If death was caused by a fall, how could the corpse be sitting upright, leaning against a wall? Why so many dead insects accustomed to feasting on filth? And why was the mother in that state? He smelt a rat, but in the absence of solid evidence he couldn’t surmise murder without an autopsy now that the bloody lazy forensic pathologist had refused to accompany him because he had to go to a funeral. Restless, he took out a cigarette and was about to light it when the second ambulance paramedics arrived to take the corpse to the morgue. Once they had placed the body on the stretcher, he bent over it, fixed his eyes on the dead man’s face and tried to see if he could decode a message from the midst of its folds. All he could detect, especially from the open eyes was emission of deep suffering. He sent a silent ‘Allah Akbar’ and with his head pointed to the door. Then he turned to his team and ordered them to go down and wait for him in the car. He wanted to go through the flat once more. Perhaps he had missed something. A disturbing feeling was haunting him. A voice in his ears was telling him that the key to the riddle was within his reach and he could find it if he used his sixth sense. For the second time he went through the flat, like a dog sniffing for drugs at an airport. His instinct led him to the kitchen and the garbage bin where a very small glass container with a foreign label caught his eyes. He picked it up, smelled it and threw it back, assuming it to be a medicine container probably brought or sent by the chemist daughter for her mother or

brother. Had it been containing a poison, the murderer wouldn't have left it in the garbage bin, unless he was an imbecile.

At a secluded corner, almost hidden behind the fridge, he noticed a row of empty bottles some with labels and many without. He picked one up, took it to his nose and sniffed through its mouth. A slight smell of alcohol tickled his nostrils. He smiled. Nowadays everyone including, him, kept a couple of arak bottles at home. That wasn't a crime as far as a policeman was concerned. He put the bottle back and stepped out of the kitchen terribly annoyed – annoyed at his own inability to resolve the enigma that was challenging his capabilities as a professional. The rational man that he was, he decided to report the death as 'accidental', hoping the autopsy might prove him wrong. There was something disturbing in the ambiance of the flat. And, he definitely did not like the wife. Her eyes were cold and her behaviour void of any grief. There was something about her air that repulsed him. But the death happened behind locked doors without her knowledge! Shaking his head in bewilderment, he walked out of the kitchen, closed the windows, switched off the lights and opened the door to leave when he came face to face with Nary and her son. Surprised, he heard himself say: "Folks please accept my condolences. I believe the deceased died hitting his head on the table."

Nary shook her head and in a wistful tone commented: "He must have been drunk."

"Did he drink heavily?"

Looking at the Sarvan with sad eyes Ahmad replied: "He had become an alcoholic Agha Sarvan."

The information lifted a heavy load off the Sarvan's conscience. He shook his head left and right, cut the air with his index finger and in a definitive tone exclaimed:

"That is it then. Now everything makes sense."

"What makes sense Agha Sarvan?" Both Nary and Ahmad asked simultaneously.

"Assumption of an 'accidental' death: inebriated he lost his balance, fell and hit his forehead on the sharp edge of the glass table. Injured, he crawled to the wall where he sat and bled to death. His mother saw his fall and the shock sent her to coma." He paused, smiled at his logical conclusion and then looking at the two, added: "Alcoholics often meet with unpredictable deaths." He paused again. Thought for a second or two and then asked: "Did the chemist daughter ever send her mother or your husband any medicines?"

"Yes Sarvan. She sent all the medication her mother needed because she could get them without paying. She is a French citizen and apparently they can get all their medicine free."

Amir-Hussaini shook his head in envy and exclaimed: "Lucky them!"

Then he pointed to the door with his head and suggested:

"Khanum joon you should bring a locksmith to repair the lock and forbid anyone entering the apartment until you receive the morgue's report. It will, roughly, take a month."

"Thank you Agha. I shall follow your advice as soon as I can."

“Enshallah God will grant you patience to bear your loss.” Amir-Hussaini consoled, bade them farewell, turned and ran down the stairs. Outside suddenly he stopped, looked back at the building and whispered: “But what about the bloody excrements and the dead insects?” He hit his temple with the heel of his hand regretting not taking any samples for the lab.

“What is wrong Sarvan?” asked one of the policemen in the car.

“We didn’t collect any samples of the filth on the floor and the dining table.”

“Don’t worry Sir, the doctor at the morgue won’t need our samples and if he does, he will send someone himself.”

Amir-Hussaini climbed into the jeep, “let’s go,” he commanded, utterly confused.

The traffic to the hospital was light and the ambulance reached it within twenty minutes. There, in that overwhelmingly crowded place, Golnar, running behind Shamsi’s stretcher, came face to face with Dr Mehran, Shamsi’s physician and the Managing Director of the hospital.

“God be thanked that you are here, doctor!” Golnar cried, before grabbing the man’s arm.

Conscious of his rank in front of the crowd, the doctor gently shook her hand off his arm, whispered a low Salam, and looked at the patient’s face. Instantly recognising her, he turned to Golnar and asked: “What happened to her?”

“I do not know doctor. We found her like this.”

Mehran turned to the senior paramedic and ordered:

“Take her to the operating room this instant.”

“God bless you doctor.” Golnar whispered.

“Wait for me in the waiting room Khanum.” The doctor said hurrying after his patient.

During the long hour that dragged on and on, Golnar paced up and down the corridor, trying to figure out what had caused this inconceivable tragedy. The more she thought, the more her head ached. Then she saw the doctor coming towards her, his eyes smiling. “She will live, won’t she doctor?” She asked him in hope.

“Yes Khanum.” He replied, with a nod acknowledging a passer-by’s greeting. “Shamsi must have a very strong constitution – probably it is all the fruit and vegetables she kept eating. Nothing but a strong constitution could have kept her alive under such acute dehydration. Nevertheless, she will have to stay at the Intensive Care Unit, until she gains consciousness. Go now, and rest assured that her chance of waking up is great.”

Golnar controlled the impulse to kiss the doctor, something not done in public. Instead, she heard herself say: “Thank you dear doctor and God bless you and your family.” The doctor smiled and walked away.

Golnar flew out of the hospital, hailed a taxi, negotiated a fair fare and climbed in, accidentally banging the door. “Khanum be careful another bang and the door will fall apart.” “Sorry Agha, I did not mean to bang the door. It just happened.”

“Then be careful it won’t happen again when you leave.”

“OK Agha, and again I am very sorry.” The driver looked at her through his rear view mirror and when he saw her tears, he became guilt ridden.

“Khanum please do not cry. I did not mean to upset you. You know how expensive everything has become, particularly now that they have increased the petrol price, introduced coupons and rationed petrol purchase. I have several mouths to feed and any additional expense takes the food out of a mouth.”

“I understand Agha.” Golnar whispered, wiping her tears with the edge of her scarf.

Soon he reached her home, and when Golnar handed him twice as much as the sum negotiated, he forgot about the mouths he had to feed and refused to accept the money. Frustrated, Golnar dropped the notes on the front seat, opened the door, got out and closed it as gently as possible. She waved him a good bye, walked to her gate, took out her key and let herself in.

Inside the courtyard she took no joy in seeing her pistachio tree inundated by fresh nuts in their green skins, nor the roses perfuming the dusty air. Her servant, who had seen her enter from the kitchen window, opened the door to the building with a “Salam Khanum.” She didn’t even hear her. Her mind was elsewhere; in that awful room where she had witnessed drama in its most odious form. Suddenly a fit of nausea hit her. She ran to the bathroom and let the bile of distress gush out into the toilet bowl, brutally hurting her throat and inducing tears of pain in her sore eyes. Relieved, she took couple of deep breaths, rinsed her mouth; undressed and took a long cold shower. The chill of the water relaxed her a bit. Then she dressed in a loose comfortable gown; went to her neat kitchen where she knew tea was being brewed. The maid asked if she wanted a large glass. “Yes,” was her answer. The maid poured the tea and handed it to her. Golnar walked to her sitting-room, placed the glass on the low mahogany table, sank deep into the couch, closed her eyes and began exercising yoga breathing. For five minutes her mind stopped wandering. Then feeling in control again, she opened her eyes and in peace enjoyed the taste of her tea. She let a further, few tranquil minutes pass while savouring the feeling of safety she always enjoyed within her own space.

“Khanum would you like more tea?” Asked her servant concerned about her mistress who seemed in distress. She stood by the door looking at her with inquisitive eyes.

“No thank you Zahra.” She replied, picking up the telephone from the side table.

In Paris, Kobra was concentrating on the report she was writing. As the phone started shrieking, a deep frown formed on her wide forehead. “Merde,” she exclaimed picking up the receiver and into it murmuring a curt, “Allo.”

“Kobra joon, Salam.”

“Salam Golnar.”

“I am sorry for disturbing you at your office.”

“It must be something urgent? Has anything happened to my mother?”

“Yes. She is in hospital and Tirdad dead.”

“Oh, my God!”

Golnar swallowed the lump in her throat and then recounted the story as gently as possible.

“This is just devastating.” Kobra exclaimed, sounding shocked.

“It really is. I cannot close my eyes without seeing Tirdad in that tragic state. Yet we must be thankful that Shamsi is alive. You know that I love her very much, don’t you?”

“Yes, yes. We all know that, Golnar joon.”

“You know that you have to come to Teheran as soon as possible.”

“Yes. Unfortunately I am inundated by work at the moment, but I will come.”

“When would that be?”

“I cannot give you a date right now. I have to talk to my boss.”

“Ok, my dear.”

“Thank you Golnar joon and God be with you.”

The phone went dead, leaving Golnar stunned beyond conception. She was expecting some sort of emotional outburst from a sister who had been so close to her brother. Her coolness was indeed odd. She put the receiver down, closed her eyes and recommenced her yoga breathing – for one day, she had had enough of tragic surprises.

Kobra had no intention to cancel her long weekend at Mount St. Mitchell with her new boyfriend! Her mother was in good hands and the burial had to wait. Still holding the phone, she consulted her watch. It was 9.30 a.m. which meant 8.30 in London. She dialled her older brother’s number.

Rose, lingering in bed, picked up the phone and whispered a cloudy, “Hallo.”

“Good morning Rose.”

“Good morning Kobra joon and how are you my dear?”

“As well as I can be, under the present circumstances. Tirdad is dead and my mother in hospital.”

“Oh my God!” Rose exclaimed, tears welling up in her large black eyes. Her voice trembling with grief, she asked, “What happened?”

“I do not exactly know and I do not know why Golnar delivered the news first to me instead of Datam, the eldest of the family.”

“Wait, I will pass you to him. Please break the news gently. He is not well today.”

“He seems to be ill all the time. What’s wrong with him now?”

“Just a bad cold,” Rose lied, throwing off her bed-cover. She slipped her feet into her silk slippers and hurried to the TV room where Datam, his breakfast tray on his lap, was watching the news. From behind the sofa, she stole a kiss from his bald patch and handed him the receiver.

“Darling it is for you.”

“Who is it?” He asked, looking up at her, his amber eyes glowing with love.

“It is Kobra.”

“What does she want at this time of the morning?”

Rose did not answer. Silent, she removed the tray from his lap; put it on the table and sat by him.

“Salam Kobra joon.” Datam said into the phone, his voice kind and warm.

Rose fixed her eyes on him. As he listened, she saw the remnants of colour vanish from his face and the veins in his temple throb hard. Her heart bled for him, for she knew how much he loved and missed his family.

Then, in a husky voice she heard him say: “Do not worry Kobra joon- I will leave for Teheran as soon as possible. See you there my dear.”

He disengaged the phone, threw it on the table and fell into a deep silence.

“Darling, I am so sorry for your loss – such a tragic end for poor Tirdad. Nevertheless we must be thankful for your mother.”

Without looking at her and in silence, he leaned back, rested his head on the back of the sofa and closed his wet eyes. She stretched across and hugged him tight.

They had been married for forty years and she had been not only his wife but friend and mother – totally in charge of their life – totally. She had no other choice. He was suffering from three different cancers, unrelated and progressive. She wanted him to live in peace for as long as possible. She believed by removing all responsibilities from his shoulders and allowing him to do what he wished during his borrowed time, he could live longer. Without him life would become meaningless for her. She had no one – no one at all in the world – except him and God.

After a little while, she unfolded her arms and let him deal with his grief in his own peaceful way.

Looking at the TV screen without seeing anything, she heard herself whispering, “The poor man.”

“Yes. The poor, unlucky man!”

He, too, whispered shaking his head in grief.

Rose picked up the TV monitor, pressed the off button, threw the gadget on the table, picked up the phone and dialled their travel agent’s number.

The booking was made for the day after Datam’s medical check-up.

Kobra was the first to arrive in Teheran. She lodged at Golnar’s and then went to her mother’s flat. Surprised, she found its door without a lock. She gently pushed it open, stepped in and then out. She stood still, her heart pounding savagely, her mind frozen by an emotion hitherto foreign to her – guilt. ‘What had gone wrong?’ She asked shaking her head left to right and right to left. Finding the smell too overpowering she withdrew a lavender infused tissue from her bag, covered her nose, entered and opened the nearest window. Then, she walked to the chalk- drawn human shape, stood by it and stared at the void in between the lines. Memories paraded in her mind – good and bad. Suddenly, in spite of the suffocating heat surrounding her, she felt terribly cold and began to shiver. She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths of the foul air that upset her stomach and made her sick. She ran to the toilet and spewed. Feeling better, she washed her face with cold water, and looked for a towel. There was none. Then her eyes fell on the heaps of clothes in the bath tab. Instinctively she began throwing them out, as though searching for something. Yes she had to look everywhere and make sure that the flat was indeed clean of clues to a murder. The police had found nothing! Perhaps she could? So she started with Tirdad’s room. There, the mess and his broken bed surprised her. By habit he had been a tidy man, then what had happened to induce this

carelessness – what? Probably another row with his bitchy wife, she assumed, leaving the room with a groan of disgust. In her mother’s bedroom, on the floor, she found the suitcases that were usually lodged on the top of the aged wardrobe, opened and almost empty. That bitch Nary and her bastard son must have done it. She murmured kicking the edge of one, as though it was Nary’s shin. In fact nothing of value had been in the suitcases except couple of table cloths, some towels and a few blankets which were now in Nary’s linen cupboard. She, herself had taken most of her mother’s valuables before becoming accessible to Tirdad. Yet the thought of Nary, this once, having had the upper hand, flared up her forever hatred of the woman. From the bedroom’s window she saw plumes of dust spiralling up like a whirlwind and making visibility difficult for the drivers. The heavy traffic had come to almost a halt. The wind was strong, lashing at everything in its path. She heard the window latches clack and the entrance door bang.

In her sitting room, Turan was knitting a jumper for Homayon and swearing at the wind that was whiffing through the window sills, bringing in all the pollution and dust in the air when the loud banging of a door made her jump out of her skin. Her zigzagging hands stopped and she murmured: “It must be Shamsi’s – still without a lock!” Shaking her head in disgust, she put her knitting on the sofa, slowly rose, walked to her door, opened it and popped her head out. She was correct. It was Shamsi’s. Again someone must have been there and when leaving hadn’t closed it properly. She growled in annoyance, lumbered back to her sofa, took her foulard from over its arm, threw it on her head, took a few steps and with the tip of her shoe pushed the door stopper in place so that the wind could not lock her out. She ambled to the neighbouring flat and as she stretched to grab its door knob her eyes fell on Kobra’s back. Surprised, she let out a cry. Frightened, Kobra turned with a jerk, saw Turan, and ran to embrace her. At that precise moment, they both heard Homayon’s yell of: “Mother, where are you?”

“Kobra Khanum is here. Come and express your condolences to her.”

“Heaven above!” Exclaimed Homayon from behind his desk where he was doing his French exercises. He threw his pencil on the desk, jumped up, pulled off his dirty shirt, threw it on the floor; sprayed some deodorant under his arms, took out a new T-shirt from his drawer and wore it with utmost care. He combed his hair, checked his appearance on the wall mirror; satisfied, dashed to meet Kobra; savouring the delicious feeling rising in his loins.

Inside the flat, smiling salubriously, he leered at her with eyes that sparkled with desire. ‘Salam Kobra joon, it’s so great to have you back so soon.’ The words flew out of his mouth and settled like thorns on his mother’s mind. She threw a measuring glance at Kobra and detected a flutter of unease pass over her countenance. A wave of presentiment hit her heart. She sent a silent ‘astakh-far’ (God forbid), bit her lower lip, and giving her son a chiding glance said:

‘Dear, you address this lady as Khanum and not joon.’

Homayon was about to say something when Kobra intervened with a sweet smile: “Do not worry Turan Khanum. We all know Homayon joon well.” Then, she threw Homayon a warm glance which sealed his lips. His eyes fixed on Kobra, his hand, discretely, pointed to his erected organ. Kobra threw it a quick

glance, paled and immediately diverted her eyes to Turan who had been watching them.

As wise as ever, the old lady controlled her shock, faked a smile and asked: "Dear would you like to come and have tea with me?"

Ready to run away Kobra replied: "Thank you Turan Khanum, I cannot right now. I arrived late last night and must go to the hospital and see my mother – perhaps tomorrow." Then remembering the door needed a lock, she asked: "Turan Khanum do you know of a nearby locksmith?"

"Yes Khanum, I do, and I am surprised Nary has not taken care of the lock as yet."

"She doesn't care what happens to this flat anymore – after all, it is not hers."

"But she is family."

"She never was Turan Khanum, never!"

"Do you want me to call him for you?"

"Yes please, but I cannot wait until he comes"

"Never mind, I will deal with him, keep the keys and when you return come and get them from me and not Homayon. You want two sets, won't you?"

"Yes please: one for me and probably one for Golnar."

"Come as soon as you can Kobra joon – Khanum." Homayon demanded, his lascivious eyes gleaming with lust. Kobra pretended not to have heard him.

Turan caught the glow in his eyes and a whisper of 'God forbid' followed by a curse escaped her mouth and melted in the stinking air. The pain in her joints intensified. She bit her lip and grabbed her son's arm as though protecting him from harm. Kobra assumed an air of innocence, took Turan's free hand and leading them towards the door said: "Turan joon, I really do not know how to thank you for being such a decent human being. Had it not been for your caring, my mother would have died." The duplicity hidden in her soft voice was not lost on Turan. Avoiding her conniving eyes she stepped out, and replied: "Your mother is my single friend in this wide world. Enshallah, she will recover soon."

"Enshallah Khanum joon." Kobra replied closing the door behind them.

Once inside their own apartment, Turan grabbed Homayon's arm, stared into his eyes so that he couldn't lie and asked:

"Is there anything between you and Kobra that I should know, son?"

"Yes, a close and pleasurable liaison."

Feeling faint she let his arm drop and leaned against the closed door.

Frightened by her pallor he asked: "What is wrong mother?"

The door knob was pushing against the hollow of her waist. She twisted her torso to avoid the protrusion. Then she put her palm over her aching forehead and massaging it whispered: "Whatever is between you and her must stop."

"Why mother?"

"Because she is not for you."

"I do not understand what you mean?"

"Just trust me, son. She is no good for you."

"Do you mean I am not good for her, because I am not as clever as others?"

"No. No son! No. Please don't get me wrong."

Agonized and humiliated, Homayon frowned, turned his back to her and ran to his room. There he fell on his bed, closed his eyes and began to cry – like a child robbed of his treat.

In the kitchen Kobra found the bottles. They did not surprise her. On the dining table she saw the sickening mess and moved to clear it. Then she stopped. She shouldn't touch anything until they receive the morgue's report. The police might want to inspect the flat again. She returned to Tirdad's bedroom, to check if there had been any important documents that had missed her perusal. Again, she went through the drawers one by one. In the depth of the last drawer she found an unsealed envelope addressed to Nary. She took the envelope to the sitting room, sat on a chair; took out the letter and began to read it.

10th Khordad 1388. (May 2009)

My darling Nary,

I hope you are well and happy. It seems when with you, a curse seals my lips preventing me to tell you how much I love and miss you azizam.

Once upon a time, Rumi made these verses for his beloved Shams. His words express what I feel for you:

You are my life, my senses, you are everything!

Be the rising Moon in my dark nights

I am thirsty for your light.

Use my hands, look through my eyes,

Listen with my ears.

You are the soul of every living thing.

Come, come back dancing like the rays of the Sun

And chase away the shadows.

Come back my love

My broken heart cannot bear more passion,

No more promises.

I've had enough of sleepless nights,

of my unspoken grief, of my tired wisdom.

Come my treasure, my breath of life

Come and dress my wounds and be my cure.

Or else I will die my Nary.

Azizam I have made many wrong decisions in my life for which I only blame myself. I loved my country: I ended up on the side of its greatest enemy. I loved my family and managed to harm them all: I sent my father to his grave; I betrayed my brother and Rose's trust, and I ruined your life.

I am taking care of my senile mother, within the best of my ability, so that she can forgive me. I am stealing from her to provide a comfortable life for you, so that you can love me back and I drink because I cannot live with myself. I know one of these days your absence and alcohols will kill me. That is why I implore you, for the sake of the good times we have shared – by the goodness that I know dwells in your heart, forgive me and believe that only for you I have struggled to continue with my wretched life.

Please forgive me for not being the husband you wanted me to be. Only in your forgiveness can I continue to breathe. Come back to me, my darling, and let us try to find some semblance of what we used to have, during the short time that is left to me. I am very ill and will die soon. Be generous and let me die a happy man. The sun of my life, please, let your rays illuminate the abyss I am drowning in. Come my love – come back to me and let me die with my lips on yours.

Forever Yours,
Tirdad

“The sentimental bastard was pathetic to the end!” Kobra whispered, tearing the paper into pieces and throwing the scraps into the overflowing wastebasket that surprisingly still stood erect.

Two days later, Datam and Rose arrived early in the morning and lodged at Esteghlal hotel. Datam took a quick shower, changed and left for the hospital. Rose did not accompany him. She wanted him to have some private moments with his mother.

He found the hospital as jam-packed as ever with a long, creeping queue by the reception desk. Nurses, doctors and all sorts of staff in uniform were rushing around or talking to people. In that hectic environment he stopped three personnel, asking each for direction. All in a hurry referred him to the Reception. He was too tired to join that unruly queue. Lost in thought, he stood in the middle of the corridor, his eyes aimlessly roaming around. No one paid him any attention. Suddenly it occurred to him to ask for doctor Mehran. He spotted a matronly nurse coming out of a room. He dashed to her and politely asked: “Khanum Salam. Could you please be kind enough to help me? I have just arrived from overseas and am searching for my mother, Shamsi Amiri who is doctor Mehran’s patient.”

“Salam Agha and welcome to Iran. Of course I will help you. I work with doctor Mehran and have been taking care of your mother myself. Thank God she is responding well to treatment. Please follow me. She is still in the Intensive Care Unit.”

Datam smiled his gratitude and followed her with long strides, hastening towards the end of the corridor where the Intensive Care Unit was. She pushed the double door open and hung to one until he was inside. Then she let the door swing back and led him to Shamsi’s bed where, he found her, tied to various tubes and monitors. The sight stabbed his heart with million shards of grief. A bombshell of guilt blasted in his head, causing an excruciating pain in his eyebrows and eye sockets. He stared at her shrivelled, sunken face, tears streaking down his quivering cheeks. Toothless and pale, she resembled a breathing skeleton. Fortunately the beard had been removed, and the nails trimmed, but the expression of horror and suffering that had remained frozen on her face shocked him beyond measures. ‘What did she see that was so horrific?’ Datam asked himself bending to kiss her forehead. Suddenly he remembered the other time, when he had kissed her forehead. It had been as cold as now. But she had been awake and alive – though pregnant. Pregnant! He pushed the ugly

memory out of his mind and replaced it with forgiveness and compassion. He gently stroked her grey hair spread over the white pillow; kissed her hollow cheek and then turned to the nurse and asked: "Will she return to us again?"

"Her condition is steady. That is all I can say to you Agha. She will live but in what state I do not know. It is all in the hands of the Almighty."

He nodded his understanding and whispered:

"Thank you for your frankness Khanum."

Then with shoulders hunched, he turned and walked out of the Unit.

Outside it was getting hot. Yet he decided to walk to Nary's. She lived nearby. A walk could clear his mind. He hoped in vain.

He knew the neighbourhood well. It only took him ten minutes to reach his destination which was an impressive apartment block. He smiled his satisfaction. After all, Tirdad had been able to maintain a respectable roof over his family's head. Knowing how he had been financing his lifestyle, he felt no resentment.

He pushed button three. "Who is it?"

He recognized Nary's voice echoing through the intercom.

"It is me, Datam, Nary joon."

"Come in."

The door clicked. Datam pushed it open and entered a well-lit hall. He took the elevator to the third floor. Stepping out of the lift, he saw her waiting for him. They shook hands and he expressed his condolences before stepping inside her apartment. He had never been in his brother's home. The open space in which he found himself was furnished well, and adorned with his mother's antiques and valuables. Then at a corner, he noticed a display cabinet exhibiting several of Rose's antique objects that had been left in the custody of her in-laws. Suddenly he remembered his father's remark in the park and sighed. Nary's eyes following his, noticed them rest on the porcelain plates with Nasser Al-Din Shah's portraits painted on them in blue and gold. "Your mother bought those for us when she was selling Rose's household belongings, stored at our previous apartment."

"They go well with your furniture Khanum." Datam remarked sitting on an armchair.

He is very different from his brother, she thought before asking him if he wanted any tea. "No thank you Nary Khanum. I have come to talk to you about the funeral and see if you have received any news from the morgue's doctor." Without responding, Nary turned her back, walked away and into a room that was just off the sitting room. She returned with an envelope she handed to Datam before sitting down.

"This arrived three days ago. According to the morgue doctor's report, the cause of death was an accident – a fall."

Datam read the report and then threw it on the table. He had never seen such a brief, legal document. He raised his eyes to her, "this report is so short and vague that cannot possibly be taken as a genuine legal document. Cause of death a fall. What fall?" He asked staring at her in awe.

"I do not know. I am neither a doctor nor a pathologist. Somehow, he must have fallen and hit his head on the edge of the glass-table. His forehead was slit

open and the edge of the coffee table smudged with blood. We all saw that. I am sure you know that your brother was an alcoholic?" Datam found her tone strangely cold and bitter, and he was too tired and shaken for any kind of dispute. He moved in his chair, intertwined his long fingers together and looking into her cold eyes asked:

"Nary Khanum, how can I help with the funeral arrangements?"

Lifting an eyebrow she replied: "Well, you can pay for it. Your brother was perpetually broke. I had to borrow money to buy his grave. He was buried the day his body was released from the morgue. He rests at Behesht-Zahra cemetery."

Astonished, Datam found himself raising his voice. "Khanum you had no right to bury my brother without us. Golnar told you when we would be arriving in Teheran. Out of respect, you should have waited for us."

Narrowing her eyes, she gave him a long, taxing glare; then leaned forward, and shaking her index finger under his nose said. "Do not ever raise your voice at me again." To avoid her hand touching him, Datam moved backward. "Did you ever think about the welfare of your brother?" As Datam opened his mouth to reply she answered: "No. None of you did. You let him become the slave of your demanding, selfish mother who destroyed our marriage and eventually caused his death. Now, Agha, you come here and dare to raise your voice at me – me who has received nothing from any of you except blames, humiliation and insults." She removed her blazing eyes from Datam's flushed face, turned them to the door and with her hand pointing to it urged. "Please leave my home and forget that your brother ever had a wife." Stunned by her unexpected hostility and rudeness, Datam withdrew his pen and cheque book from the inside pocket of his jacket and put them on the table. With an unsteady hand, he wrote down the sum of a hundred thousand rials. He tore off the cheque, slid it on the glass table towards Nary, returned his pen and cheque book to his pocket, rose, and wordless, left the house, feeling like dirt. He had gone with all the good intentions in the world and parted bearing the weight of universal guilt on his thin shoulders. Almost delirious, he kept asking himself why the woman had behaved so begrudgingly; why she had buried him in a hurry and why the letter from the Morgue's doctor was so brief and hastily delivered. A bureaucratic correspondence usually takes at least a month to reach the recipient. This had taken less than a week.

As Datam waited to catch a cab, Nary picked up the cheque and called out: "Hashem, come out and let's take this unexpected gift to the bank.

Chapter 2

Summer of 1936

As the Air France plane finished bumping on the airport's tarmac and came to a complete halt, a whisper of 'thanks to the lord' filled the air turning the passengers' anxiety into a sense of relief. A hasty commotion broke the hushed silence and even though the 'fasten seat belt' sign flashed red they moved to unbuckle their seat belts, stand up, open the luggage compartments and pull out their bags and boxes. No one paid any attention to the air-hostess's stern warnings. They just wanted to get their feet on the ground as soon as possible. Those days, people were still in awe of flying, being considered a daring venture, attempted out of necessity.

One of the first to exit the plane was a tall, smart, young man, his name Mohammad Amiri. A beige rain coat over his arm and a brown leather brief case in hand, he descended the landing steps with the air of a man in command of his destiny. On the ground, he stopped to inhale the dusty air he had longed for during the past five years. How much he had missed his country, its air, its noise, its intimacy, even the donkey driven carts and doroshkehs (hooded carriage) that worked the streets, side by side the handful of newly arrived motor cars and buses that were frightening the beasts of burden and their owners!

Contented, he turned his glittering, amber eyes towards the milky sky, and whispered his thanks to providence and not God. He was an atheist believing, like Carl Marx, that religion opiates the mind. Suddenly a hurrying passenger bumped into him. The man gave him a dirty look for barring his path and passed him without a word of apology. Mindless of the insult, he straightened his thin shoulders and joined the wave, but with a steady pace. Unlike the rushing crowd, he was not expecting any family members waiting to welcome him. That knowledge did not disturb him at all. He was one of those lucky individuals with an understanding and forgiving nature. All he thought about was his best friend, whom he knew, would come for him. The two had shared several wonderful years of bachelorhood – a prince and almost a pauper – an odd couple, yet true friends. Amongst his peers, the Prince was the only one, genuinely enchanted to see him receive a doctorat d'état degree in nuclear physics, the thesis of which he had written under the supervision of doctors Marie and Pierre Curie. Marie had been so fond of him that she had given him, as a souvenir of their teamwork, a gold biro with her name etched on it. That pen was guarded with outmost care, secured on a hook in his brief case.

In Isfahan of those days, hardly anyone, including Mohammad's relatives, knew what nuclear physics was, let alone knowing the Curies and their contribution to science. Therefore Mohammad's relatives, ignorant of their kin's privilege of studying under such luminaries, remained envious of his luck for having been sent to France. From the tone of the few letters he had received

from them, Mohammad had sensed their resentment, but without a single pang of bitterness. He had just smiled at their naiveté and shrugged off their envy.

A superior student, he had been among the Dar-al-Fonoon (the Centre for all Sciences) graduates whom Reza Shah had sent to France, to study at the University of Paris. These students, financed by government grants, were under obligation to return and work at a government institution, preferably to lecture at the Faculty of Science, in the recently inaugurated University of Teheran, which had replaced the ancient Dar-al-Fonoon established in early nineteenth century by the order of Nasser Al-Din Shah Qajar.

Mohammed was born into a respectable family, none of whom had ever cared for higher education, in its modern sense, except him. During those days, wealth and power were held in the tight grips of the landed aristocracy, the successful merchants of bazaars and the clergy. He belonged to none of these groups. He was orphaned at an early age and his elder brother had robbed him out of their father's inheritance. Not interested in the accumulation of wealth, even in adulthood, he had not fought him for his due. He wanted to become a scientist like his ancestor who had been astrologer to Shah Abbass the Great, (1571-1629) of the Safavid dynasty. He loved the world of academia – non-existent at the time, in his home town. Now, with a secure position at the University and an acquired taste for French lifestyle, he planned to forget about life in Isfahan, marry a damsel from an established family and settle in the Capital city where he was a total stranger. He was prepared to face facts for what they were. He knew where he came from and where he wanted to go. Yet, he was unaware of the social strictures that prohibited his entrance to the class he aspired to enter. Nevertheless, luck was on his side. His best friend, Mohsen Mirza was a prince of the expired Qajar dynasty. An extraordinary individual for his era, the Prince, to his chagrin, was aware that no one of inferior blood could socially climb high. Even Reza Khan, the first Pahlavi Shah, in order to acquire a semblance of national grace, had married two Qajar aristocrats. However to Mohsen Mirza's delight, the value of education was becoming nationally recognized and that played on his friend's favour.

Mohammad passed through the visa check point, ignored a porter's offer of assistance, picked up his shabby suitcase, and hearing his own heart beats carried it through the custom area without a glimpse at the custom officer busy pulling out the contents of an unfortunate traveller's suitcase. Before exiting the zone, Mohammad put his loads down, took a deep breath to relax his mind. His eyes glittering with mischief, and as jubilant as a naughty teenager, he congratulated himself for successfully smuggling in, an extra bottle of Armagnac to share with his friend. He lifted up his luggage and with steady steps entered the bustling arrival hall where his expecting eyes began to sweep the area for his friend. Suddenly he became conscious of the admiring eyes of young girls on him. Self-conscious, he felt blood rush into his cheek. He dropped his head for a second, then, lifted it up, corrected his posture, elongated his neck and recommenced his visual search, this time with an air of indifference. After ten minutes', anxiety settled in his mind and he wondered what had happened to his reliable friend. Mohammad did not have a rial in his pocket, nor did he know where to go. Fear made him resent the crowd. The area

was packed. It seemed as though half of the city's population had come to the airport – an outing to boast of. Iran was on the modernization path, a progress happily welcomed by the population in general. The only segment of society that begrudged change was the clergy. Reza Shah, in his earnest endeavours to modernize Iran, had recently, prohibited Islamic Hejab, and subsequently curtailed the power of the clergy – albeit ruthlessly.

Apprehensive that his friend may not have received his telegram, he lifted up his case aiming to go to the telephone booth when from behind a boisterous group Mohsen Mirza emerged, his waving hand cutting the air. As their eyes met, the Prince exclaimed a loud “Bienvenue mon ami.”

Mohammad, beaming with delight, let go of the case's handle and spread his arms wide. They embraced, kissed each other's cheeks, separated and stared at one another with brotherly affection. Then they burst into a joyous laughter.

“Let me help you mon ami?” Mohsen Mirza offered, patting his friend's back.

Mohammad handed him his brief case and together they marched towards one of the few cars parked under the shade of an acacia.

“Where are you taking me Mohsen joon?”

“To my cousin, Farhad Mirza's house. He was posted to London last month and I asked him if you could stay in his house until you find something for yourself. And he agreed. He is a rather accommodating fellow.”

“That is kind of him. What does he do in London?”

“He is our Ambassador there.”

Mohsen Mirza opened the boot, put the brief case in a corner and allowed Mohammad to fit in his suitcase. Then he shut the boot's top and unlocked the two front doors. They climbed into the white Cadillac. Mohsen Mirza ignited the engine and headed north, towards Zafaranieh, one of Teheran's most fashionable suburbs. In their view lay the majestic Alborz range with its peak, crowned by a thick layer of snow. Damavand is so high, that from a distance it seems it kisses the sky.

Their conversation was light and moist with juicy gossip about the girls they had left behind and those Mohammad had to meet.

The Prince was aware of his friend's desire to marry well. The task was indeed difficult but he liked a good challenge. It added spice to his boring life. Mindful of Mohammad's pride he had to be extra cautious. Teheran was not Paris where men could allure the girls by their charm and good looks. Here blood and land were the determining factors in the choice of a spouse.

Their drive was pleasant and fast. Mohsen Mirza stopped the car in front of an impressive building half of which was hidden behind a high red- brick wall. He blew his horn couple of times before the gate opened wide and the caretaker in his white shirt hanging over a pair of black pantaloons stepped out bowing to the Prince. Mohsen Mirza waved his acknowledgement and drove in. The domestic shut the gate, rushed to the huge oak entrance door by which he stood to catch his breath. Then, he pulled out from his pantaloons' large pocket, a bundle of keys hanging from a narrow chain. He found the one he wanted and with it unlocked and opened the door. Quickly he rushed back to carry the

luggage. He faced the Prince and with both hands offered him the keys. "Welcome shahzadeh (Prince). I am at your service." he said politely.

The prince took the keys, handed them to Mohammad and then smiling said: "Thank you Hamid. We can manage the luggage ourselves. Just prepare a light dinner for us; look after doctor Amiri while here and feed him well."

Mohammad stretched his hand to shake Hamid's. The rare gesture of respect embarrassed the old man. He bowed first before taking Mohammad's hand.

"Sir, please let me know what you like to eat."

"Anything you make will do Agha Hamid."

Surprised and impressed by the guest's affability Hamid bowed again, turned and returned to his quarters with a light heart. Others who had stayed in the house had been so arrogant and demanding. This one seemed different – a genuine Agha. Folks thought rank and money brought nobility. They did not know that even a pauper could be an Agha. A noble soul was far more respectable and loveable than a soulless noble – which most of those he knew were. Thus he decided to serve the gentleman well and cook him good, nourishing food. He seemed as though he had been fasting all his life. The thought gave him a reason to become active again.

Mohammad watched Hamid until he disappeared inside his room by the gate. Then he turned to Mohsen and asked:

"Is Farhad Mirza a millionaire?"

"No. Just well off. He inherited this from his father. He believes it to be a burden; but nonetheless, he keeps it because of his childhood memories."

"Lucky guy!"

"It all depends what you call luck Mohammad?"

"I assume so."

They stepped inside a wide and bright hallway from the high ceiling of which hung a large crystal chandelier. Mohsen Mirza led the way to an elaborately decorated bedroom, with a large window framing the garden view.

"This is your room." Pointing to a half-opened door he added: "And that is your bathroom."

Awestricken by the breathtaking luxury Mohammad paused to admire its movie style decor. Then, he turned his smiling eyes to his friend and exclaimed: "A bath? That is just what I need right now. Would the bathtub be porcelain and the taps pure gold?"

Mohsen Mirza smiled and teased: "Almost!"

Half an hour later, refreshed from his shower, attired in cream cotton trousers and a white shirt, both slightly creased, Mohammad joined his friend in the large but neglected garden, where he was sitting on a bench reading an old magazine. The sky had remained cloudless, the sun rays warm and the birds happily chirping away. It was such a pity that the lawn had overgrown and there was nothing in the swimming pool except dead, shrivelled leaves, and some garden refuse lodged there by the wind.

The two men, delighting in true friendship and parading in paradise, went through the bright morning speculating about the position that would be offered to Mohammad and the brilliant future that lay ahead of them both – all positive stuff of sweet dreams.

As the sun's rays became warmer and their stomachs craved food, they rose and walked to the nearby kebab restaurant where they enjoyed tender pieces of lamb and chicken marinated in saffron and lemon juice, followed by a large portion of Persian Ice cream tasting of cardamom and smelling of saffron . Mohsen Mirza paid for the feast and knowing that Mohammad had no Iranian money, took him to the nearby Currency Exchange shop belonging to a Jewish friend, so that he could change his francs to rials without being cheated. Then, they walked home for a short siesta.

The sun had set, leaving behind an inky blue sky and a horizon edged by a thin thread of gold. The Muezzin had already called the pious to prayer and the stars had begun their dazzling parade when the door bell sounded. The two smartly dressed gentlemen, whisky glasses in hand, winked at each other, and raised their glasses in honour of the pleasures the evening promised. Mohsen Mirza, swallowed his drink, put the crystal vessel on the nearby mahogany table, hurried out of the sitting room to open the door. Hamid having served dinner had been given the rest of the evening off. A waft of delicious French perfume preceded the reappearance of Mohsen Mirza, holding the bare arms of two smiling French beauties. Mohammad immediately recognized one of the ladies – his Air France hostess. They smiled their recognition and automatically gravitated towards each other.

Wine, music and pleasurable intimacy, under the moonlight, lasted till dawn when the early morning breeze made it too cold to remain outdoors. Mohsen Mirza and the girls parted in the Cadillac and Mohammad went to enjoy the luxury of sleeping in a gigantic bed, covered by a colourfully embroidered silk spread.

Mohsen Mirza always went to bed after midnight and rose past nine in the morning. He did not have to work. He supervised the foremen who managed his father's several agriculturally prosperous villages and collected the income to pay for his mother's upkeep in Iran and his father's lavish lifestyle in Monte Carlo. In fact, not many aristocrats worked for a living. They just went through their inherited wealth turning it into ash that later covered heaps and heaps of regret. Some sought solace in opium others in alcohol and those with self-respect committed suicide. However, the world was changing and so was Iran.

It was Friday and Mohsen Mirza was at his Aunt's house gossiping with his cousin Shamsi, when suddenly he had a brain wave: why not her for Mohammad? She was nineteen, pleasant looking, only a bit short and reserved. She had finished high school and was impatiently waiting for her prince charming – none other than her handsome cousin – she prayed and he knew. Conscious of her infatuation, Mohsen Mirza felt rather uncomfortable when in her company. This idea of introducing her to Mohammad relieved his guilt. Why he should feel guilty at all was a mystery in itself, which at times bothered him. Perhaps it was because he did not want to hurt anyone – the way he had been hurt.

Shamsi, her large, black eyes on him was chatting away without being heard. He never participated in her female gossips; it bored him particularly now that he was preoccupied with his grand plan. His silence didn't bother her at all.

She just wanted to have his attention, be near him and inhale the deliciously scented breath that exuded out of his shapely nostrils.

His teasing eyes on her, he was thinking about her elder sisters who were married, one to an aristocrat, and one to an engineer from Isfahan. This indicated that his Aunt was prudent enough to value education. Therefore, she may not reject Mohammad. The thought produced a bright smile on his handsome face. Shamsi presuming it was for her blushed and stopped talking. Suddenly the air became perfumed by the aroma of spicy food being carried in large trays. At the same time, a commotion commenced towards the large rectangular dining table, dressed in white embroidered cotton cloth, about to be brimmed with mouth-watering dishes of rice, stews and kebabs. Determined to have a chat with his Aunt, Mohsen's eyes meandered around till they fell on her standing by the pool. Frowning she was disputing something with one of her unfortunate domestics. She was known for being an unfair mistress, especially towards those who were not endowed with pleasant features. Which servant ever was, particularly in the Middle East? The poor souls, almost all, bore the marks of poverty on their faces, or figures. Trachoma, small pox and polio were the prevalent diseases of the underprivileged. Often Mohsen Mirza pondered upon justice in this world and often he was convinced that it did not exist.

At the age of fourteen Aunt Afsar had been given away to a respectable lawyer who was short, plump and crossed-eye, with a bulbous nose smothered with red veins. She had hated the union in which she had had no say. Soon, to everyone's delight except his wife's, the gentleman proved to be a tolerant, kind and considerate husband. Now that he was dead and buried, Afsar was displacing her life's grudges on those whose appearances offended her discerning eyes. Anyone, not endowed with beauty, had no claim to respect. They were just beings to be abused, as though they had to pay for reminding her of her husband.

Mohsen, feeling sorry for the poor skinny, pockmarked fellow, who most certainly was being reprimanded over nothing of importance, gently padded Shamsi's round shoulder, "My dear, I must go and say hello to your illustrious mother before part-taking of her salt." Then, without waiting for her response, he turned his back and ran down the steps, fully aware of her burning eyes chasing him.

Humming an Edith Piaf tune, he loitered out of his Aunt's vision until her discourse with the wretched, one-eyed, young fellow ended. Then, like a jinn he appeared in her sight with a loud: "Salam Aunt Afsar."

"Salam Mohsen joon. It is always such a pleasure to set eyes on your handsome face."

"Thank you Aunt. From what I see on the table you have surpassed your usual hospitality. Are you feeding an army?" He asked raising an eyebrow.

"No, I am shutting up gossipmongers."

"You must never worry about them. Even if you offer them the world, they will find something amiss. Aunt, your hospitality is renowned and I wonder how any of us could ever match it."

He paused, produced a playful facial expression, scratched his head full of black hair, and fixed his teasing eyes on her plain complexion, wondering why

her nose seemed larger than ever. Even though she was chubby and short, yet she was not as ugly as his other aunts. Besides she knew how to dress and that he liked. He believed elegance gave grace and grace was more appealing to him than beauty for it lasted while beauty faded. Aunt Afsar certainly did have grace. She was a nice person and, in spite of her abominable treatment of her servants, he liked her very much. He knew her only worry was to find a decent husband for Shamsi who was getting on in age – as the saying was, soon to be “pickled”. This fact was a trump in his matchmaking scheme.

Flattered, Afsar smiled and lifted a thin, arched brow, (Greta Garbo style brow was a la mode). She took a deep breath, fixed her eyes on him and shaking her head, replied: “I do not need anyone to match my hospitality. You my dear, to please me, can find Shamsi a husband, as eligible as yourself.” Smile still tilting on his tanned face, he replied: “Aunty that will be very difficult. But, if you lower your expectation to just as educated as me, I have the right man for her. He is handsome, elegant, tall, complexion light and a lecturer of physics at the University of Teheran.”

“Do not joke with me boy.” Afsar exclaimed, frowning her eyebrows in jest.

“I am not joking at all. His name is Mohammad Amiri; he comes from Isfahan, his blood is not blue, but his background outshines that of your existing Isfahani (from Isfahan) son-in-law. His family is well established and respected in Isfahan.”

Afsar suddenly noticed her servant lingering within hearing reach. Her countenance blazing with anger she demanded: “Why are you still standing here, you lazy imbecile?” The humiliated man, crimson with shame, dropped his good eye to the ground and replied: “Your ladyship, I was waiting to be dismissed.”

“Do not lie, you ass. You were eavesdropping. Now run; Jafar Khan needs your help with the dishing out of the desserts.”

Mohsen, dumfounded, marvelled at her unreasonable insolence. How could a woman who is so kind to her family members be so cruel to her servants? He wondered in vain.

Cursing his luck and the unreasonableness of his employer, the servant rushed away. Afsar relaxed again, grabbed Mohsen’s arm and pulled him away from the crowd, towards a private notch, under a weeping willow, a short distance from the pool in the midst of which a fountain danced joyously, its tear drops bouncing on the water like tiny translucent marble balls. There, in the shade, she stopped, looked into his serious eyes and asked: “Are you sure he is worthy of my daughter?”

“Aunty, would I dare to propose a man unworthy of your daughter – my own cousin – would I now?”

“I wouldn’t know. You always have a trick or two up your sleeves.”

“Not when such serious matter as marriage is concerned. Mohammad is a good man. His only fault is that he is a bit thrifty – but one cannot blame him because he lived on government grants in Paris and did not enjoy the privilege of having a rich father like mine. He will make a good husband for Shamsi.”

Afsar, turned her gaze on the rose petals floating on the pool surface, contemplated for a short while and then returned her concerned eyes to him and

suggested: “Why don’t you invite him to dinner with us at your home, without mentioning anything about the matchmaking to any one – in case I do not approve of your choice?”

Mohsen bent and stole a quick kiss from the powdered cheek of the contented lady, raised an eyebrow, and shaking his index finger at her conditioned: “I will do so only if you promise to be less unreasonable to your servants.”

“Don’t be naive son. They need to be reprimanded at all times. If you compliment them, they will feel indispensable, demand privileges and a wage increase. Learn Agha: never be nice to the class below. They are a non-deserving lot. Always remember the saying: God knew the ass and that is why he didn’t give it horns!”

“I do not agree with you Aunty, but I am not going to argue with you either. The feast on the table is getting cold and I do not like cold food. Voila!”

“When are you going to arrange a meeting with this professor friend of yours my dear Agha Voila?”

“Do you know what VOILA means?”

“No and I do not want to know. I want to know when I am going to meet your professor friend.”

“He is not a professor yet – but soon will be.”

Afsar, who did not know the academic meaning of ‘professor’, frowned, pondered and then asked: “Well if he is not a professor, what is he?”

“Aunty, it takes years of lecturing and publishing before an academic earns the title of professor. At the moment he is only a lecturer.”

“Is that respectable enough?”

“Yes Aunty dear. Nevertheless since in Iran all who teach at the university are addressed as ‘ostad’ (professor), no one would know the difference. So if he becomes your son-in-law, you can address him as ‘professor’, and boast about his position in front of your friends who, I am sure, will be impressed, since none of their husbands would have even passed through Dar-Al Fonoon.”

“Don’t be impertinent young man.”

Mohsen smiled, patted his Aunt’s shoulders and asked: “What about this coming Thursday evening?”

“That will do well – we often come to you on Thursday evenings, so no one will suspect anything unusual, would they?”

“No dear Aunty. No. And do not fret so much over what people might think or not think. Their opinion should not bother you and besides, life is too short to worry about unimportant things such as gossipers’ vicious tongues!” Mohsen replied taking her sagging arm and gently leading her to the dining table which had become less tantalizing. The dishes were half empty and the elegant tablecloth stained by stew drippings and saffron infused rice grains. But the kebab aroma was still lingering on. He inhaled it deep, savoured it with delight, walked to the square table on which china crockery and silver cutlery were neatly laid. He picked up a plate, knife and fork, returned to the dining table and attacked the kebab dishes, being particularly selective with the pieces. He only liked chicken breast and filet kebab, very few pieces of which were left. The hostess headed towards her other guests who were still by the table either eating,

or chatting while waiting for desert which they knew would be ice cream, topped with shredded pistachio, pomegranate jelly with fresh cream and Noon-Khamei, (Persian cream puffs). Mousse, cream caramel and other European deserts had not as yet conquered the Iranian desert menus.

Thursday morning arrived sooner than Afsar had expected. Her widowhood days flew away so fast that she sometimes lost count. Without a husband or a son, she had to deal with the boring male chores of accounting, running a large household, minding the incessant family disputes over their inherited villages, dealing with demanding tenants and pickling of Shamsi.

Those days, in the absence of hair-dressing saloons and beauty parlours, beauticians performed their various tasks at clients' homes. Thursday afternoons were dedicated to preparing the wealthy socialites to outdo each other, during revelries. Afsar Khanum's expert was punctual. She always arrived at four, when her client had had her siesta and bath. Usually she was taken to the bathroom to curl Afsar's hair, trim her eyebrows and remove her facial hair; and, once in a blue moon, cut Shamsi's long, wavy hair. But today, she was ushered into the dining room where her arrogant and fastidious client was waiting to have tea with her. Perhaps, the sun rose from the West today! Thought Fatimeh, while kicking off her shoes. "Salam Khanum," she said stepping in. Afsar, smiling at her for the first time in five years of service, acknowledged her greeting with a nod of her towel-wrapped hair and gestured her in. "Come my dear and have tea with me." In a way intimidated by her familiarity, Fatimeh took couple of quick steps, dropped her heavy work bag by the chair facing Afsar, took off her foulard, neatly hung it around the back of the chair and timidly sat down, not knowing what to do with her hands. Afsar turned to Mariam, her new maid and ordered tea.

Fatimeh Khanum used to be a Dalak. Dalaks or better say masseuses worked in public baths, where they scrubbed and battered their clients with olive soup and removed their unwanted hair with strings or honey wax. As people began getting accustomed to bathing at home, in their modern bath tubs, their visits to public baths became less frequent. This reduced the income of the Dalaks. The enterprising ones left the occupation, called themselves 'beauticians', and visited their bath-clients at home. There, they cut, washed, hennaed and curled their hair by heated metal rollers; removed body hair with home concocted honey wax or threads and plucked and shaped eyebrows.

A few minutes passed before Mariam arrived and placed her tea tray on the table.

Afsar looked down at the tray, and then up at her. "Why there are no tea spoons?"

Mariam handed them each their cups and then looked at her Mistress and replied:

"Your Ladyship, neither you nor Fatimeh Khanum put cubed sugars in your tea. You always suck them. That is why I did not bring any tea-spoons. Any extra washing will use water and soap, both costing you money."

The girl's rational response silenced Afsar for an instant and then forming a tight frown she chided: "That is not for you to decide. Etiquette requires tea spoons on the saucers."

“Khanum joon, I am just a village girl. I do not even know the meaning of this word ‘etiquette’. I just know one has to save when one can.”

“She is right Khanum.” Fatimeh volunteered, smiling at the girl’s courage and prudence.

More important things on her mind than wasting time on a servant girl, Afsar threw her a dark glance and in a harsh voice ordered: “first go tell Shamsi Khanum to come down, here, and then wait on Fatimeh Khanum.”

Afsar picked up a piece of cubed sugar, put it in her mouth and took a long sip of her tea. The sweet taste relaxed her a bit. She put the cup down and began scratching her itching head from over the damp towel. Then nervously she untied the towel and threw it over the dining table. Somehow a horrible feeling was nagging at her. She was terribly anxious about tonight. Arranging a marriage was something she did not like. What if her daughter became a victim of social necessity as she had been? But, on the other hand, she couldn’t bear people assuming her pickled. Scratching her head again she turned to Fatimeh and ordered: “Do my hair first. Then, spend the rest of the afternoon on Shamsi. We are going to the Marble Palace for dinner and she must outshine all the other damsels there. If she does, than all the mothers present will be asking me for the name of her beautician, won’t they?” Afsar asked, raising, an eyebrow. Fatimeh, a bright smile parting her thin lips, moved her head up and down.

“Do you know what that will mean for your business, my dear?”

“Yes Khanum joon I do, and, I promise you will not be disappointed with the outcome of my endeavours today.”

“Enshallah! Now, drink your tea quickly. You have a lot to do this afternoon.”

Fatimeh Khanum pushed away her cup and in an ingratiating voice said: “I will have tea later on Khanum joon.”

Thus, dreaming of stacks of money, Fatimeh set to excel herself. Afsar’s hair did not take long to do. It was almost dry. On Shamsi, she had to work hard. The girl was as hairy as an ape. First she asked her to sit and rest her head on the back of the chair. Then she turned to Mariam and asked her to bring a bowl of boiling water. From her bag she extracted a plastic container in which was her home-made honey wax. Mariam returned with a steaming bowl on a tray which she put on the table. Familiar with the process, she took Fatimeh’s container, unscrewed its cap before gently dipping it into the bowl. The only sound that could be heard while waiting for the wax to melt was of Shamsi’s nervous breathing. Like a dummy, her head was fixed on the chair’s back, her frightened eyes on Fatimeh and her hairy legs crossed stiff. After a few minutes Fatimeh took out a wooden spatula from her bag, delved it into the container, twisted it around and pulled it out with a thin layer shining on its width. She blew over the wax to cool it a bit and then set to work. The inflicted pain rushed tears to the girl’s eyes. Once finished, Fatimeh pulled out from her bag a little mirror and handed it to Shamsi to look at herself. The girl, unaware of the reason for such suffering, refused. “Look at yourself my dear. You are very beautiful.” Fatimeh insisted. Reluctantly Shamsi took the mirror and gazed at her crimson but pure and glowing reflexion. Her joy evaporated the pain. She touched her face. It felt

as soft as a skinned peach. She turned her happy eyes to Fatimeh and said: "I cannot believe how different I look."

"You look like an angel my dear."

"Thank you Fatimeh Khanum. Thank you." The girl's genuine rapture touched Fatimah and made her more diligent. Once beautification was accomplished she dressed her; tidied the back of her hair that had slightly moved out of shape; took her hand and led her to the Khanum's chamber. There, they found her sitting behind her dressing table, applying rouge to her cheeks. As she saw Shamsi's reflection on the mirror she swung around and exclaimed: "How beautiful!" Then, smiling her satisfaction she looked up at the Dalak and remarked: "You have done well my dear." The complement surprised and delighted Fatimeh. She expressed her thanks, turned to Shamsi, "dear turn around so that Khanum can check everything."

Shamsi swung around and then sat on the edge of her mother's bed. "Madar you should thank Fatimeh Khanum. I never knew I could look so nice."

"You were born nice. Fatimeh Khanum only did her job for which I am paying her ample money."

Uncomfortable with her mother's comment, Shamsi turned to Fatimeh and with her lips mimed another "thank you".

"Mariam bring my handbag. It is in my closet."

The maid obeyed. Fatimeh was paid without the expected gratuity. However, in view of what she thought awaited her, she forgave the frugality. She had her tea at the servant's quarters where she felt more comfortable than in the sitting room, and left dreaming of becoming the Court's beautician.

Sharp at seven thirty, Hussain Agha, the senior domestic, brought a doroshkeh by the gate and up climbed Afsar Khanum and Shamsi, leaving behind a trail of delicious aroma where one could only inhale the scent of dust. At the time, the popular perfume was Balmain's Jolie Madame and if you did not stank of it, you were not considered fashionable enough to deserve a glance. This Afsar knew and hence had Mohsen Mirza bring two bottles for her from Switzerland, where he had gone to ski.

Reza Shah had prohibited Hejab and everyone had to appear in western clothing and hats or a foulard. Most women of taste did have a matching hat for each suit that made them look like the movie stars in movies just arrived in Teheran. And there were also those who did have a few, without knowing how to wear them. Fortunately Afsar had enough sense to seek the advice of the French couturier commissioned by Reza Shah to train the royal family in the art of Western elegance. Thus, both she and her daughter, looked perfect in their (uniform like) black suits, white shirts and black silk hats, decorated with a large white bow that sat at the right corner of the hat's delicate brim.

Once Hussain Agha saw his charges comfortably seated side by side, their backs erect and their arms resting on their side of the carriage, like two princesses on an official parade; he gave the coachman the address and made him promise to drive cautiously.

The carriage commenced its wobbly ride, through Avenue Shademan to Old Shemiran Road, towards the north, and Mohsen Mirza's palatial villa, on Avenue Ehteshamieh. After a shaky ride, almost giddy, they reached the gate of

their destination, in front of which was parked two American cars, one white and the other black. Their chauffeurs were standing face to face, by their vehicles, boasting to each other of the wealth and importance of their respective employers. The presence of these two Cadillacs signified the presence of Prince Ehtesham, a cousin of Afsar Khanum and Prince Salari another relative. At the time, there were only twenty cars in the whole of Iran and those who owned a Roll Royce, hid it from the covetous eyes of Reza Shah, apprehensive of his demand for a Royal gift that no one dared to refuse – such was the fear of the Pahlavi Shah.

The coachman brought his horses to a smooth halt, jumped down, and opened the carriage door. The mother first and then the daughter, holding his hand for support stepped down, mindful of not laddering their expensive French silk stockings. Afsar Khanum paid him his tariff without a rial more. Then she turned her attention to her daughter, who, like a meek poppy, was watching her. “Come close girl.” She commanded, while adjusting her own hat that felt skewed.

Shamsi took a step and faced her with a timid smile. Afsar hastily smoothed the crease on her collar. “Do not forget to walk straight, keep your head up and do not smile at strangers.”

Shamsi tucking her black clutch under her arm shook her head in obedience. Afsar extracted her perfume bottle from her handbag, sprayed a little on her own wrists and behind Shamsi’s ear-loops. She paused, sniffed the fragrance and finding it redolent enough, returned the bottle to her bag, straightened her hunched shoulders, elongated her neck, took Shamsi’s arm and led her through the open gate. The illuminated garden was breathtakingly beautiful with its masterfully designed luminous waterway that rushed down its smooth path, dividing the terrain into two zones joined at intervals by arched wooden bridges – a design Mohsen Mirza had borrowed from Monet’s garden at Giverny. The artificial rivulet seemed endless – so long was its bed.

The two-story white-washed house, its oak entrance door impressively wide and high, nestled on an elevation. The edifice was engulfed by a wide veranda allowing for placement of beds that in the evenings were enclosed within mosquito nets. Sleeping outside was a pleasure most Iranians indulged in during hot summer months.

Like all buildings in Iran, this mansion faced south, towards Mecca. Wooden beds covered by Persian rugs were arranged in an ad hoc fashion, under the shade of tall ancient trees that aimed to reach the star- packed sky. There were also plenty of cushioned garden chairs set around colourfully clothed tables. The south-facing veranda belonged to the musicians tonight and the famous Ghamar Vasiri was singing to Maestro Mahjoobi’s violin; her voice so enchanting, that even the frogs had come out of their aqua-habitat to listen. A mild jasmine scented breeze was fluttering the leaves of various fruit trees and caressing the petals of flowers in full bloom. One uniformed waiter carried around a tray of alcoholic beverages, another Caviar on Sangak bread and the third, tea, for the teetotallers, mainly the ladies. It had not become fashionable for females to drink alcohol in public yet.

Afsar Khanum smiled at the copiousness of the glittering assemblage. It promised a great evening during which enshallah (putting all hopes in the hands of God) a match would be made. Relying on Providence, she found her way towards the host who looked his princely self. He was in a black suit, crisp white shirt and bow tie. His jet black hair was parted in the middle, slightly brushing against the edge of his shirt collar and his moustache, thin and meticulously shaped upwards, quivered as he spoke. Posture majestically erect and slightly tilted to the left, he was standing within the right distance from the gate to greet his guests. His eyes twinkling with innocent mischief, he was talking with a slender, tall and well groomed man whose back was to her. As soon as Mohsen Mirza caught sight of his aunt and cousin, a quick frown appeared on his forehead and then turned into a smile. Appraising their appearances which at that particular moment mattered, he wondered why they wore hats to a soiree. The intelligent man that he was, he immediately realized that Western sense of elegance had not as yet matured amongst the ladies who were just out of Islamic Hejab. Ashamed of his own rash judgement, he bowed to his aunt and while kissing her cheek whispered: "Aunty, no one wears a hat coming to a soiree. Just act as normal as possible now and then go inside and take it off. No one will notice."

Too excited to feel embarrassed, Afsar whispered back: "Shall do, Agha voila." She returned his kiss and stood erect waiting for the introduction. Mohsen Mirza turned his bright eyes to his cousin who looked exceptionally beautiful, bent low and kissed her rosy cheek. She blushed. Then he turned his playful eyes to his companion and introduced the ladies.

Mohammad, distinguished looking in every sense of the word, and as proud as a peacock, abstained from the usual bow. Instead he stretched his hand and Afsar Khanum took it, in her heart praying for him to become her son-in-law. Then their eyes met and instantly they became friends forever. Mohammad turned his attention to the petite, pretty girl with the largest eyes he had ever seen. Mesmerised, he drank in with glad eyes, her shy smile, the slope of her shoulders, the poise of her head; and at once a thrill ran through his body like an electric current. With new intensity he felt conscious of himself from the elastic spring of his legs to the rise and fall of his lungs as he breathed. She was close enough for him to smell her scent which he immediately recognized. At that moment, he knew he must have her. He took her hand. Shamsi, eyes downcast by modesty, sensed the shiver that ran through him. It made her uncomfortable. Quickly she withdrew her hand, threw a guilty glance at her cousin and wordless, glided away, aiming to join her sisters who were standing near the artificial waterfall, busy speculating about Mohsen's handsome friend they had never seen before. Usually, strangers were not invited to the parties of the nobility, as their uncouth behaviour, very often, disturbed their sense of decorum and made them feel uneasy.

As they saw Shamsi leave their mother, Farideh, her eldest sister, with her hand beckoned her to join them. "Who is that good looking man Shamsi?" Farideh asked in a hurry. Disinterested, Shamsi shrugged her shoulders. "I assume Mohsen Mirza's friend."

“He is handsome.” Farideh commented wondering at her pickling sister’s naivety.

“I do not think so. He seemed very arrogant. He didn’t even bow to Madar, let alone kiss her hand.”

“It seems Madar didn’t take any offence. Look at the smile on her face. She is enchanted by him.” Farideh remarked in a teasing tone.

Afsar was indeed in an elevated mood. She had already sensed Mohammad’s interest and noticed the flicker of disappointment pass over his face when the stupid girl parted so abruptly. To sow the seed, she set to work. “Does Dr Amiri reside in Shemiran?” She asked of her nephew.

Guessing the reason for the question, and too proud to let his lack of wealth tarnish his image, Mohammad took the words out of Mohsen Mirza’s lips, “Khanum I have just rented a very small apartment near the University. It is big enough for a bachelor and allows me to walk to work.”

“You have chosen sensibly doctor, and where do your respected parents live?”

“I am from Isfahan. My parents passed away when I was a child. My siblings and their families still live there.”

Thank God for that she thought, believing in-laws are pests, especially if they come from a province where most folks are traditional and narrow minded. The man she liked and he certainly was presentable, but were the members of his family? On this issue she reflected with great sensibility. But no one better had yet asked for Shamsi’s hand. With that reality in mind, she gave him an affable smile and exclaimed: “Oh – so you are alone in Teheran. Therefore we must look after you.” She swung her head to Mohsen Mirza. “Must not we Mohsen joon?” Smiling at her wiliness, Mohsen Mirza shook his head, threw a congratulatory glance at his radiant friend and replied: “Of course Aunty.”

Afsar shook her head in delight and turned her shining eyes to her ‘already’ son-in-law, “doctor, if you have no prior engagements, would you like to join our family lunch tomorrow. It is Friday, and you would have no classes to attend to. Mohsen Mirza is coming, so you won’t feel alone amongst strangers.” Afsar turned her eyes to her surprised nephew and gave him a quick wink.

My aunt should have been a diplomat and not a house wife. Mohsen Mirza mused with a wondering smile. He was thoroughly enjoying her conniving manoeuvres.

“Khanum Aziz, I would be honoured to join your family circle. I am staying the night here and we will come together.”

“Fantastic. Now I must leave you young men to those of your own age and join my friends.” Afsar said with a sweet smile while offering her hand to the doctor to kiss. He took it, gave it a tender squeeze, slightly bowed his head and then released it.

Wounded by his arrogance, Afsar threw a cynical glance at her nephew and walked away – sure that her daughter wouldn’t pickle. Suddenly she became conscious of her hat. She changed her direction and hastened towards Shamsi, still chatting with her sisters.

When Afsar left, Mohsen turned to Mohammad. “What do you think – she is very pretty, isn’t she?”

“Indeed! I also like your Aunt – she is a lady with a head on her shoulders.”

“A bull, my aunt is – but a reasonable one. If you want to ingratiate yourself to her, next time, do kiss her hand!”

Smiling, Mohammad nodded his head and teased: “If you insist I will.”

At that moment one of the waiters approached with his tray. Salubriously, they each abducted a glass of whisky on ice, touched glass; chin chinned and drank to happiness. HAPPINESS!

Two months later Shamsi became Mohammad’s wife. The wedding took place in style, at Mohsen Mirza’s house with only the closest relatives of the bride in attendance. To Afsar Khanum’s delight, the Isfahani relatives were prudent enough to provide ample excuses for their absence – not because they didn’t want to celebrate Mohammad’s happiness; but because the class difference was too intimidating.

The couple moved into an apartment prepared for them at a separate wing of Afsar Khanum’s large house which neighboured her other daughters’ private homes. Mohammad, too proud to be called a ‘damad sar khaneh’ literary meaning ‘a homeless son-in-law’, became even more thrifty. He had to save enough money to buy a house for his grumpy wife. He loved her passionately and wanted to make her happy.

From the start of their union Shamsi, her dream of marrying her cousin dead, objected to her fate and closed her heart to Mohammad. She looked down on his background, his occupation and his inability to make as much money as her brother-in-laws; even though the man had almost abandoned his relatives and was endeavouring to the end of his wits, to provide her with a secure and comfortable life. Resentment and jealousy blinded her to all of his admirable qualities and efforts to make her happy. She shunned his relatives whom she met in Teheran; and detested his shy aloofness that she took for lack of attention. She never realized that, having been orphaned at infancy, he had never learnt how to pamper and show love. She knew her brother-in-laws were spoiling their wives with gifts and expensive European holidays; but was unaware that the gifts were to shield their infidelities. It had become fashionable for men of means to sleep around and keep mistresses now that they could not maintain an andaroon (harem). As the saying went, ‘a man could not be fed kebab every day.’ Only a few men were content having Kebab daily and Mohammad was one amongst them. Even though surrounded by beautiful and willing students he had eyes for none save his petite Shamsi who envious of others’ felicities put his behaviour under a microscope and found fault where there was none. She never had a smile for him and he kept wondering why. Gradually brooding gave her permanent frown and her sense of inferiority in marrying below her rank, diminished her desire to socialize.

Mohammad was a fun loving man; fond of his glass of whisky and an affordable game of bridge or poker; habits his wife detested and avoided.

Those days, the babies of the rich were weaned by wet nurses or Naneh’s who acted as surrogate mothers and often lived with their charges until their dying days. Unfortunately, Shamsi’s Naneh was an ignorant, mean and money-minded individual who had made it her business to interfere in Shamsi’s marital relationship. Out of spite for her thrifty Master, she endeavoured to add fuel to

fire whenever possible. As much as Shamsi was envious of her sisters's prosperity, her Naneh was of the Nanehs of her sisters, who were being pampered by their generous masters. Therefore, their home, instead of being a castle was a battle ground. Thus Shamsi, moaning and groaning wasted two years of her youth while Mohammad saved enough money to buy a four bedroom house with a small yard, close to Afsar Khanum's. This acquisition enchanted his wife and made her feel equal to her sisters. Once again, she began to socialize and smile at life.

It was a Thursday evening and they were going to dinner at Mohsen Mirza's. In the sitting room, Mohammad kept glancing at his watch. She was late as usual and he abhorred this habit of hers. He hated unpunctuality and thought of it as a lack of respect for people's time. But tonight, he already had one shot of whisky and the alcohol had subdued his rigid standard. He was about to pour himself another drink when Shamsi appeared in a new black satin dress with a low cut neck exposing her creamy flawless skin and the cleft of her large breasts. Even though her infatuation had turned into friendship for her cousin, she still wanted to impress him by her beauty. Thus she took extra care of herself when meeting him and tonight she really looked very sexy.

Enchanted by her appearance, Mohammad's irritation turned into pride. Smiling at her, he placed his glass on the table and exclaimed: "Wow! You look absolutely ravishing ma petite."

She threw her arms up like a ballerina, swung around, stopped and fixed her questioning eyes on his shining face, fishing for more praise. "You are just beautiful!" He said and then stepped closer, softly brushed his fingers around the front of her neck and added: "A necklace would enhance the elegance of your ensemble." Shamsi frowned, pouted her lips, looked straight into his flirting eyes and complained: "I have no worthy necklace to wear Agha."

He lifted her chin up with his index finger, stole a quick kiss from her lips and in a tender tone assured: "Tomorrow I will buy you one, ma cherie." Thrilled, visualizing a pearl necklace just like the one Farideh had worn the other day; she gave him a bright smile, locked her hand in his arm and led him to the door.

That evening, Shamsi, glided in the air. She engaged in conversations, laughed at the jokes she often had found insipid and kept glancing at her image on the wall mounted antique mirror, forgetting all about impressing the host. Surprised and delighted by her sociability, Mohammad wondered what had caused the change.

At home she wore a clean night gown, perfumed the zones she knew he loved to kiss and gave herself to him willingly – without closing her eyes and counting the minutes for the end of the intimacy.

The next morning she made an effort to rise early so that she could have breakfast with him. At the table, the smile did not leave her lips. She ate with appetite and when he rose to leave she kissed him goodbye – something she had never done before.

For Shamsi, the day dragged on, and when it began to dissolve into dusk, she went out into the court yard and sat on the garden chair staring at the sun languidly sink beyond the crimson horizon letting the stars glitter their existence

and crescent of a moon announce the change of the lunar month. Down below, Shamsi could sniff the odour of cooking wafting out of open kitchen windows, making the air welcoming for the hungry husbands returning home. She kept glancing at her watch. Mohammad was late. She rose and headed for the kitchen, her mind on the gift she would be showing off, particularly to her sisters who had been looking down on her. She hated their sarcastic tone when referring to his treatment of her and their repeated remarks that husbands had to clothe and bejewel their wives, not just feed them! Thanks to the Lord, now she could prove her husband was like theirs – generous and thoughtful.

Much later than usual, Mohammad arrived, gift in hand. He found Shamsi in the kitchen helping Naneh with the preparation of the dinner which was chateaubriand with French fries and salad – his favourite dish. He took a long sniff, almost tasting the meat in his nostrils and shook his head in approval.

“I see you have decided to spoil me, ma cherie?” He said beginning to believe in miracles. She threw him a bright glance and a shy smile. He bent and kissed her forehead before offering her the beautifully wrapped box she was eyeing.

Childlike, she snatched the gift, unwrapped it quickly, and opened the box. Her hungry eyes fell on a smart necklace of black crystal beads. Her smile turned into a frown and her colour faded. She raised her disillusioned eyes to him and whined: “This is not real.” “No, it is not. But it will go well with all your décolleté robes.” He replied with a broad smile.

A sneer deformed Shamsi’s countenance. She threw the necklace in its box; ran up the stairs to her room, contemptuously threw the box into the garbage bin, dropped on her bed and began to cry. In the kitchen, Naneh turned her myopic eyes to her bewildered master, “khanum deserves real gems not fake ones.” He shot her a derisive glance and retorted: “Both you and your Khanum know well that on my wages I cannot afford gems.” Then he turned his back to her and walked out of the kitchen, banging its door on her malicious face. In rage, he climbed the stairs, two at a time, and barged into their bedroom to change. He found her sprawled over their bed crying. He sat by her, stroked her curly hair and gently asked: “Why are you so upset – you needed a necklace and I bought one that I know will go well with your clothes. You, my love, are so beautiful that you do not need gems to turn heads?”

“Shut up you stingy man. If you could not afford me, you should have not married me – you have made me miserable and an inferior in front of the whole world. You....” She stopped and started hitting at the mattress with her clenched fists. Shocked and hurt by her rudeness and unkind words he withdrew his hand and brushed it over his pants as though cleaning it from dirt. He rose to his feet and whispered: “Khanum I took a wife and not a whore.” Head up, he walked to his side of the bed and in silence, undressed, pulled out his pyjamas from under his pillow, put them on, hung his clothes in his closet, extracted his navy blue satin dressing gown from its hanger, put it on and head up walked out of the room. With measured steps he descended the stairs, entered his study and closed the door behind him. He picked up his evening paper from the coffee table, sat and tried to lose himself within the folds of its pages. To his chagrin, he couldn’t

make sense out of the simplest sentence. He threw the paper down, leaned on the back of the sofa, swallowed the lump that was choking him and closed his eyes.

Naneh, hitherto spying on her Master from the adjoining room, tip toed to her khanum's bed chamber; sat on the edge of her bed and rubbing her shoulder whispered: "Dear child, he doesn't deserve a wife like you. He should have married a woman from his own rank not a lady like you." Shamsi turned around, sat up and fell within the fold of Naneh's arms. Her warmth was still as comforting as when she was a little heart-broken child seeking the love her mother had denied her. Naneh kissed her long curls, patted her back and whispered in her ears the words she knew would heal her wound. They remained engulfed until Naneh's sharp nose smelt burning meat. She unfolded her arm, looked at Shamsi's haggard face and said: "Come child, we don't want to waste good meat because of an undeserving man." Shamsi wrinkled her nose, shook her head in disgust; pulled a tissue from its box, cleaned her eyes, blew her nose and clenched the wet tissue. Slowly she rose and with slumped shoulders ambled to the door and out. Naneh followed her and then as though remembering something returned inside, went to the garbage bin, lifted the box out, extracted the necklace from it, threw the box back and secured the trophy in her pocket. Her daughter would love it. It was very pretty and foreign made.

In his study, feeling less than an ant, Mohammad chewed his tough, burnt meat, tasting nothing but the dirt thrown at him. "Disgusting" he murmured and threw the fork with the beef piece dangling from it, onto the plate, chipping its rim. He pushed the coffee table away, stretched on the couch, closed his eyes and hoped to die.

As time passed and Iran became more prosperous the entrepreneurs became wealthier and the wage earners struggled to pay the rising cost of living. Shamsi's brother-in-laws climbed the ladder of financial success, each on his own merit, while her husband's rapid academic achievements brought in nothing but prestige and a slight salary augmentation. By now a full Professor, to meet the demand of rising living costs, Mohammad taught evening classes and summer courses, at various universities. Work had become the focus of his life and he enjoyed it.

In the absence of any means of birth control except withdrawal, Shamsi, became pregnant and gave birth to a son his father wanted to name Datam, an ancient Persian name belonging to one of Iran's most famous commanders of the Achaemenian era. Shamsi hated the name for its unusualness. Nonetheless, the first born son was to be christened by the father. Mohammad was an atheist and a nationalist. He did not want to give his children any Islamic names which were Arabic. So his son was called Datam and that name made Shamsi pour out her pent up resentments for the father on the baby who was gifted with the sweetest of tempers and the milkiest of skins. The boy was so lovely that everybody except his mother adored him. Two years later, a second son was born. He was named Tirdad, another Persian name. But, by now, these sorts of names had become fashionable and both Shamsi's nephews bore names of Iranian heroes. Tirdad became his mother's apple of the eyes. She doted on him all the love and attention she had refused Datam and Mohammad.

The Second World War spread its bloody wings over Iran. Allied forces occupied the country, exiled the pro-German Shah and put his young son on the Peacock throne. It took years before peace and stability returned to Iran. Mohammad managed to buy another property which he rented quickly. He also bought a car, engaged an instructor to teach Shamsi and when she received her licence allowed her to drive the vehicle during the weekends. This was a huge success for her. Now she acted like a European lady, sitting behind her own car and going wherever her fancy took her. There were only few women behind the wheel those days and Shamsi was one of them. Nevertheless her happiness vanished when a jealous friend told her that her husband had allowed her to drive because he could not afford the salary of a chauffeur. Suddenly Mohammad's rational and broadminded act turned into a punitive, self-centred deed. Angry with him and feeling demeaned she became more resentful of her fate. For days and sometimes weeks, man and wife did not speak and then when they did, it was with half sentences and catty remarks. Mohammad kept his cool and increased his night outs. Shamsi refused to accompany him and was left alone knitting away her bitterness towards the entire world. Afsar Khanum, concerned about her state of mind, summoned her for a discussion.

It was spring and her garden was filled with flowers of different kinds, over which fervent bees buzzed ceaselessly. The fruit trees were dressed in pink and white and the air sweetened by their blossoms' fragrance. The fish in the pool playfully swung their tails under the droplets of the fountain that danced joyously to the whisper of the breeze. Beauty of nature had absorbed everything in its captivating power, creating an atmosphere of tranquillity in which even the gloomiest heart would light up. Under her weeping willow Afsar Khanum was taking tea when Shamsi, her murky aura disturbing the existing harmony, arrived, followed by Mariam carrying her tea tray

"Salam Madar." Shamsi greeted, taking her cup and sitting on the chair facing her mother. Mariam, took Afsar's empty cup, put it on her tray and walked away.

"Salam dear and why are you in black and looking so glum?"

"I am mourning my fate." Shamsi murmured, sipping at her tea.

"Rubbish, you should be in white and celebrating your fate. You have a wonderful, loving husband and two healthy, gorgeous sons. You have your own roof over your head, a car and your husband earns good money. And above all, is well respected in society. What else do you expect from life?"

"All that my sisters have and I do not." She replied banging her empty cup on its saucer.

Afsar, well informed of the infidelities of her two millionaire son-in-laws, threw her a piteous glance, shook her head in wonder and said: "Dear, grass is always greener on the other side of the hedge. A wise wife never compares her marriage with that of others and God hardly ever gives one everything at the same time. So, to be happy one has to find contentment within one's own means."

She shook her head again and then continued, "Child, life is too short to be wasted in umbrage. Try to appreciate the gifts that surround you. Smile and let the world smile back at you."

“Madar, why do you never support me – Why?”

“I cannot support you when you are unreasonable child.”

“I am not unreasonable. My husband is parsimonious, uncaring and selfish. He never buys me anything of value and he is out playing bridge or poker most of the evenings. I have nothing, nor anyone to smile at. Do you call this a happy union, Madar dear?” She leaned back, “I wonder what your reaction would have been if one of my sisters was in my situation?”

Afsar groaned; slapped the top of the table and shouted: “You are filled with envy. It has blinded you to all the good things you have and your sisters don’t. How do you know what goes on in their homes? You only see their smiles which makes you pity yourself because you are unable to smile. Do you know why they are able to smile and you are not? Because they are wise enough to take the good with the bad. If you had half of their wisdom you would do the same. But no! Shamsi has to have everything her own way!” Exasperated, Afsar threw her arms in the air with her palms flapping. The sudden movement frightened Shamsi. She moved back, her eyes darting hostility at her mother. Afsar picked up the napkin on her knee and wiped off the foamed saliva from the corners of her mouth. She threw the napkin on the table, leaned back, fixed her softened gaze on Shamsi’s flushed face and tamed her tone: “Khanum joon, you are married to a man who loves you and that my dear, by itself is sufficient to make any woman happy. Besides, he is handsome and elegant. He gives you an adequate pocket money with which you can buy what is necessary and when he goes to his gambling sessions why do you not, like the wives of his friends, accompany him?” She paused for a breath and then shaking her head added: “It is because you are stubborn, pig-headed and self-absorbed.”

Shamsi narrowed her eyes and peering at her nodded her head left to right and right to left. Then she stopped and in an icy tone said: “As ever, you are so wrong Madar. I do not go with him because I hate gambling, not because I want to force my agenda on him. What is my AGENDA?” She glanced skyward, “I wish I did have an agenda to force on him.” The lump in her throat burst and tears rolled down dropping off her quivering chin. Afsar leaned forward and gently patted on her limp, cold hand.

“My dear don’t cry. Crying doesn’t solve any problems. Just be wise. You do not have to play cards. Some of the other wives don’t gamble either. From what I have heard from Mohammad, these ladies chat, joke and enjoy the evening together. He loves to have you with him and show you off. He is so proud of you my dear and it breaks his heart to see you prefer Naneh’s company to his.” Afsar stopped tapped Shamsi’s hand again, looked deep into her glistening eyes and added: “Besides, they don’t gamble as such. They just play for distraction and you cannot deny a man for wanting to have some innocent fun!”

Shamsi pulled her hand away and scoffed: “So the two of you have been back-biting me?”

“No my dear, not at all. In fact we have been trying to find a way to make you happy. I personally think you are unhappy because you have no friends, you do not socialize with anyone and do nothing that occupies you except knitting and chatting with that malicious Naneh of yours. Perhaps it would be a good

idea for you to take a course in something that pleases you. Now-a-days many ladies have classes in their homes where they teach others what they are good at. You can take a cooking course or learn a language. Amongst my son-in-laws your husband is the most educated. He values education and loves to see you learn what you wish.”

Shamsi leaned back, pondered and then let the muscles of her contorted face relax.

Afsar Khanum noticed the change and sent a silent prayer.

“Madar, I think you are right. I should break the monotony of my life by learning something, perhaps cooking. I will talk this over with Mohammad and I hope he won’t say no because he has to pay for the course’s tuition.”

“Do not be too harsh on him. He will do anything to make you happy – I know that for sure, child. You really are very lucky to have a husband like him. Not only he is handsome, he is also a fine man, wonderful father and a loving husband – very rare indeed. Lucky you my dear – I wish I had your luck.”

Shamsi leaned back and let the breeze tease her long hair.

Two weeks later she enrolled in a course given by a lady at home and subsequently became an excellent cook and baker. The qualification provided her with the opportunity to become financially independent by teaching Domestic Science at a high school near home. For a while her relationship with Mohammad improved. Proud of her new skill, she prepared for him all the French dishes he was missing and in return he praised her talent, reduced his night outs and took her and his sons to the newly inaugurated Kafeh Shardari, a large entertainment complex with a cinema and several indoor and outdoor restaurants. For once their home became happy and their children began to laugh. Neither parent had realized how traumatising their interactions had been for their sons. A year passed in blissful contentment and both children did very well at school. Then Shamsi’s younger brother-in-law doctor Farahi became a deputy Prime Minister. A distinguished gentleman and very sociable, he charmed his way to the Pahlavi Court. The Shah married his third wife, Farah Diba and Shamsi’s young niece, Safoura Farahi became a bride’s maid. The wedding was televised and she saw Safoura standing behind the Queen. The sight was like a sting of an asp on her ego, the pain of which resurfaced all the subdued bitterness she bore against her fate. She had to get rid of the perpetual pain in her heart and mind, caused by being married to a non-entity without any connections, or back bones. But how? Her restless mind began to search for a way, albeit without success. For days sleep was lost to her, her appetite vanished, her dreams turned into nightmares and life with Mohammad became absolutely intolerable. She could bear it no more. So one morning, when he had left for the University and the boys for their schools, she packed her suitcase, wrote him a brief note informing him of her decision and together with Naneh left home for her mother’s.

Afsar Khanum, stretched on her sofa, was enjoying her program on the television when Shamsi appeared case in hand, tailed by Naneh carrying her own bundle. Astounded, she glared at them for a minute or two and then asked: “What is this?”

“I have left Mohammad and have come to live here, with you Madar.”

“Don’t joke with me, dear. I am too old and might have a heart attack.”

“I am not joking at all. I am dead serious. I can no more live with a man I do not love or respect.”

Afsar turned the TV off, sat up and asked: “What does love has to do with marriage Khanum? I lived with a man I did not love for twenty five years. This I did because he was a decent man and a good father.”

“That was your mistake Madar. You wasted twenty five years of your life senselessly. I am not you. You forced me to marry Mohammad just to get rid of me. Now you have to do with me until I find someone worthy of me – who will make me laugh, instead of frown all the time.”

“Who do you think, of your own rank, would marry a divorcee with two teenage boys?”

“Someone will.”

“Yes, someone with a leg in his grave.”

Shamsi let go of her case, dropped on a seat and burst into tears.

“Azizam, you are making a gross mistake. Please wise up and don’t ruin a good marriage. Here is your home as much as mine. Stay until you are over your anger. Then return to your family and be a good mother to your children – as I was to you.”

Shamsi stared into her shrewd eyes and mocked: “To me Madar?”

Afsar, conscious of her own discriminating behaviour dropped her eyes, ignored the question and asked: “Which room would you like my dear?”

“My own room, the one I grew up in and not the quarter I shared with that man.”

“You shall have it. But Naneh has to go”

Naneh, listening to every word exchanged, looked at Shamsi with enquiring eyes, believing that she would insist upon keeping her. But, Shamsi was not in a mood to fight her mother for an additional mouth to feed. So she avoided her eyes and remained silent. Let down, Naneh turned her spiteful eyes to Afsar, “thank you Khanum for your appreciation of my diligent care of your daughter all these years. She ‘was’ dearer to me than she ever was to you.” Naneh pointed at Shamsi by a half turn of her head and toss of her chin, “I am the only mother this khanum ever knew, and, I hope you can live with your conscience for having been such an unfair mother.”

Astounded by Naneh’s audacity and the venom in her tone, Shamsi opened her mouth to rebuke her, when the woman picked up her bundle and walked out of the room leaving behind an air of petulance.

“What an ungrateful bitch?” Afsar whiffed before summoning Mariam to come and carry Shamsi’s case to her room.

That day, Afsar waited until dark, when she knew Mohammad would be home. Then under the pretext of having to visit Farideh left for his house. Lingering by the gate she took a deep breath, sent a silent prayer and then pushed the bell button.

At that moment desolate and despondent, seeming as dead as a corpse, Mohammad was unconsciously paging the evening paper without being able to read a single line. His mind was a bowl of fire and his eyes clouded by the agony that was kneading his heart. Impatient he threw the paper on the table and

was about to pick up his whisky glass when he thought he had heard the buzz of the bell. His ears pricked up.

Afsar pushed the bell button again.

He heard it. He jumped up and rushed to the gate, hoping to find her returned. With quick movements of his shaking hand, he unlatched the lock, and opened the door to a miserable looking Afsar, staring at him with gloomy eyes. Trying to hide his disappointment he stepped aside for her to enter. "Salam Khanum." He greeted her in a whisper, as though guilty of some misconduct.

"Salam son, am I still welcomed here?"

"You always will be welcomed here Khanum Aziz."

Afsar stepped in and looked around. "Where are the children?"

"I have sent them to the cinema."

"Do they know?"

"Yes, I told them. Tirdad wouldn't stop crying. But Datam took it with his usual calm."

For support, she seized his arm and together they sauntered to the familiar table, under the persimmon tree. Afsar's eyes fell on the three red fish that aimlessly floated in the green water of the pond. To her, they seemed as lost as she was in the larger scheme of affairs. Pulling a chair out for her, Mohammad asked:

"Is she with you?"

"Yes son."

Relieved, he sighed. "Can I make you a cup of tea Khanum?"

"No thank you. I have just had dinner. It has given me indigestion." She sat down. "Son, I don't know what to say to you. I am so sorry for what that stupid girl of mine has done – in fact shattered." She extracted a handkerchief from the pocket of her dress, wiped her eyes, blew her nose and clutched at the wet cloth. Looking at her with affectionate eyes he realized her anguish was as profound as his. He crossed one leg over the other, tilted towards her and trying to console her said: "It is not your fault that my wife has left me." He sighed, "It must be mine. But I really do not know what I have done to deserve this abrupt abandonment."

The specks of his sorrow waved in the air and settled on Afsar's arms as goose pimples. She grabbed his cold hands that lay limp on the table and pressed them with all the empathy in her heart.

"Son, you have done nothing at all. You are a fine man, good father and understanding husband. It is her and not you at fault. I should not have let her be weaned by that dreadful Naneh whose milk has poisoned her mind." She blew her nose again, tucked the kerchief into her pocket and continued: "My daughter is blinded by envy and cannot see the blessings that are within her grasp." In regret, she dropped her head and saw a strand of black hair curved on her white dress. She nervously brushed it away with her fingers, and then looked up into Mohammad's eyes. In them she read a deep sense of loss which made her mad at her daughter. Gently patting his bony thigh she asked: "My dear, is there anything you want me to do or say to her?"

"You are a wise lady. I am sure all that has to be said, you have already said. I will try to adapt to my empty life, but it is the children I am concerned about. I

do not want them to become delinquents because they do not have a proper home.”

“With a father like you, they will never become delinquents. Besides, we are all here for them. You know that, don’t you?”

Nodding his head Mohammad lifted up the glass he was fiddling with and greedily drank its entire content. He put the glass down, threw Afsar a loving glance and teased: “You should start drinking whisky. It will calm your nerves and make you sleep well.”

Afsar huffed at his joke and rising to leave wistfully countered: “Nothing at all can calm me down. I am just exasperated. You know that among all my son-in-laws I love and respect you most, don’t you?”

He rose and gave her a warm hug, patted her back and whispered: “Yes, I know and you are the mother I never got to know and love.”

She gently moved back, held him at an arm’s length, looked deep into his sad eyes through which she reached his soul and infused it with the warmth of her affection and respect. For a few minutes they stood as one soul in two bodies sharing the same grief. They each were scared to let go, in case it might be their last encounter as relatives.

“Thank you my son. You are the finest man I have known in my life.”

He gently squeezed her arms before letting them go. Then he took her hand, brought it to his lips and kissed it. She smiled and taunted: “How come, you never kissed my hand before!”

“Kissing is an act of love for me and not a show of finesse.”

She smiled at his ingenuity and followed him to the gate which he opened for her.

Soon the news of the separation gave the gossipmongers plenty to mull over. It made the foes happy and put the friends in a difficult situation. They had to choose between the two and needless to say most sympathised with Mohammad. No one could understand why Shamsi had left a perfect husband, two lovely children and a respectable life.

Practically ostracized, she became more self-centred and deeply self-righteous. She asked for divorce. Mohammad kept the children and granted her request. When the divorce document arrived for her signature, she took it to her lips and kissed it as though it was her key to happiness. Triumphant and exuberant she began to pamper herself. She bought beautiful outfits, changed her hair-style, rouged her cheeks, perfumed her wrists and enrolled in an English class.

Mohammad asked his eldest sister, a widow, to move to Teheran and take care of the teenage boys. The divorce affected Tirdad more than it did Datam. Hugging and smelling his mother’s pillow, he cried at nights until he fell asleep. At school, he became a dangerous truant fighting with other boys, breaking windows he blamed on others and one day he crept into the college gardener’s truck, put the gear in neutral, jumped off, gave it a push and watched the vehicle slide down, cross the street which fortunately was without any traffic and collide into the facing shop. Luckily it was siesta time and the shop was closed and shuttered. Had it not been for the friendship between doctor Mojtahedi, Alborze’s Head Master and doctor Amiri, the boy would have been expelled.

Nevertheless, he was suspended from class for two weeks. Instead of feeling ashamed he felt superior to his peers, cousins and emotionless brother.

Unlike Tirdad, the introvert Datam, ashamed and forlorn wore a mask of tranquillity. Angered by his mother's desertion, he felt for his father whom he knew had locked his shame in his chest and was putting up a brave face. He grew closer to him and adopted his habit of gambling at nights. Kind and calm, he was liked by his friends and domestics. Since Dr Amiri's bridge nights had become regular, the boys' poker games became regular too. The house-boy for ten rials a night acted as a gatekeeper in case the doctor arrived earlier than expected. One evening he did and the boys, engrossed in their bidding, did not hear the warning coughs and whistles of their watchman. They heard the doctor's footsteps too late to put away the cards and the chips and pretend to be studying. The door opened with a yank, Mohammad entered into a room cloudy with cigarette smoke; littered by filled ashtrays, sandwich crumbs and empty beer cans. The boys froze in their positions, none daring to look up at the doctor who was seething with anger. A terrifying silence reigned until the doctor overcame his initial shock. Raucously he ordered the four boys to get lost and never appear in his sight. Datam burning with shame dropped his head and fixed his eyes on the paisleys of the Isfahan carpet. The players, without bothering to pick up their cigarette packs and matches or lighters, collected themselves, forgot about changing the chips, swept their money from the floor with shaking hands, rose and hastily whispered their apologies and head downcast, one by one, brushing against the towering doctor, crept out of the room, ran through the yard and disappeared into the darkness of the night.

"Look at me you idiot." Mohammad shouted.

Datam raised his head and with eyes that implored forgiveness stared at the twitching face of his father.

Searching for the right words, neither broke the silence that was choking them. The boy knew he had done wrong and the father knew he could not rebuke his son for doing what he had just been doing himself. It would be unfair to teach the boy to have a double standard and yet gambling at that age was not an appropriate habit to form. 'What then?' Mohammad asked himself. And then he heard himself say: "Son I am sorry for my nights out. They are just to divert my mind from seriousness of life. We do not gamble to win money; we play to have fun. Besides, bridge is like yoga for me. It relaxes me. Please forgive me for this indulgence – and my silly outburst just now."

Caught by the flames of his father's blazing sense of desolation and his own guilt, Datam let out a loud cry, covered his distorted face by his quivering palms and let his pent up tears pour out. He had been holding them for too long.

Mohammad knelt by him, hugged him tight; pushed his hands away; kissed his wet cheeks and gently rubbing his back murmured: "I love you Son – I love you very much and tomorrow invite your friends to come and have dinner with us."

That night Datam could not keep his eyes closed at all. With every attempt he saw his mother turned into a witch trying to scratch his father's heart with her long dagger like nails. The sight was so frightening that he once sat up in bed and turned the light on.

The broken home affected both boys' behaviour. Scholastically they suffered to the extent that Mohammad planned to send Datam to the United States, hoping a new environment would improve his studies. In spite of finding concentration difficult, Datam managed to graduate from high school and by a stroke of luck, was accepted at New York University to study economics. The same was planned for Tirdad, after he finished his high school. In the meanwhile Shamsi's wandering soul kept searching and searching. Eventually, a tall and bulky Romeo by the name of Ramezan Afati materialized in her English language class. At first, he threw her inviting glances which made her blush. Then he began following her home and standing at a corner watching her disappear inside the house. This routine lasted a month and then stopped. Flattered by the attention she began to miss it. Then one afternoon, she noticed him again. This time she purposely stopped by a shop window hoping he would join her and say something. She lingered on until she saw his reflection on the glass. She turned and came face to face with him. A happy smile lit his round face and his narrow, grey eyes began to sparkle with triumph. Shamsi collected her courage and asked: "Why are you following me Agha Afati?"

"Because your beautiful eyes have captured my heart. I want to be near you and know all about you, Golam (my flower)."

Shamsi's starving heart began to palpitate.

"You cannot find out much about me by just following me."

"Then may I walk you home – we can talk and walk?"

Scared to be discovered, Shamsi refused his request with a negative nod.

"Then how can I get to know you my beauty?"

"We can get to know each other during our lunch hour; only if you promise not to follow me home again."

"And why should I promise that Golam?"

"My sisters live in the same street as my mother and I do not want them to see me being regularly followed by a stranger. It is not good for my reputation."

"I am sorry. In my selfishness, I did not think of your reputation."

"I forgive you. Now please go." Shamsi said giving him a glance full of promise.

"I will go, but I will take you with me."

Frightened, Shamsi replied: "No way. I am going home right now."

"You may run away from my sight, but not from my heart azizam."

These words, she had been dreaming to hear were music to her ears. A desire to touch him rose in her. Unconsciously her hand moved but she managed to control the impulse.

"Till tomorrow then." She whispered turning and walking away.

He stood there watching her until she turned left and vanished from his sight.

That night Shamsi's dreams were sweet and his lascivious.

Tomorrow came and passed away, leaving Shamsi's mind in a euphoric state. For once she had felt totally and absolutely happy in the company of a man who had made her laugh the entire lunch time. What bliss that had been?

What bliss!

Happy days passed swiftly. Amusing conversations during lunch-time led to afternoon tea at secluded coffee shops and then strolls to Ramezan's nearby flat and eventually his bed.

Then her liaison was discovered by Farideh's chauffeur who had seen them regularly having tea at a tea-house near Shamsi Khanum's language school. Hoping for a salary augmentation, he made up a juicy story and pretending to aim to preserve the honour of the family he whispered it to his mistress, in private. That same day the news was delivered to Afsar Khanum and its resultant shock sent her to bed with shingles. Soon the information reached most ears and Shamsi was ruthlessly attacked for dishonouring the family name. However Mohammad turned a blind eye but he couldn't stop tongues wagging about a woman he still loved. Gossip became so hot that the lovers were forced to marry at a notary office.

A business man from an ordinary background, Ramezan appeared to be everything Mohammad was not: flattering, charming, attentive, generous, and selfish. Together, they went through life as though there was no tomorrow. They dined out, took vacations to Ramsar and made love to their hearts' desire until Shamsi became pregnant and the novelty of the relationship wore off. Ramezan turned inattentive, selfish and cruel. The day he beat her, she packed her case and once again knocked at her mother's door. She was allowed in but albeit reluctantly.

Dejected, remorseful and ashamed she kept silent and became more reclusive and bitter towards the world. One day it was her mother to blame because she had paid more attention to her sisters than her, and the next, it was Ramezan who, with his lies had conned her to marrying him. As her tummy grew the list of the culprits extended to include even those who had once said 'Salam' to her.

Her family was furious with her. One divorce was bad enough – two was unacceptable. No one more than her mother suffered. Still in bed, she kept scratching at her spots and murmuring: "Pregnant from that bastard! What shame – what disaster?" The situation was more intolerable, because Mohammad had maintained a civilized relationship with them all. The man was more of a gentleman than all those with blue blood running in their veins. Embarrassed beyond measures Afsar didn't dare to telephone him anymore. How she wished Mohsen Mirza was alive! The poor fellow had died in a car crash. What a waste of life – of such a kind, generous and useful man! Now she had no one trustworthy enough to use as a go-between to see if Mohammad was forgiving enough for reconciliation. In that stuffy room, with the itch of those red spots on her tummy driving her crazy, she kept wondering and wondering until she remembered Datam was returning home for the summer holidays. She could talk to him. The boy loved his father dearly, and he would be able to persuade him to take his mother back, even though pregnant. Datam was so gentle that no one had ever been able to say no to any of his requests. "Voila." She heard herself exclaim. Suddenly she felt invigorated and well, as though there had never been any itchiness. Within a week the spots vanished and five kilos lighter, she became her active and spirited self again.

July arrived sooner than Afsar had expected. Gardeners began to irrigate their territories so that they would be verdant and colourful for the parties to be held, in honour of the overseas students returning to spend their vacation at home. Persian gardens are famous for their beauty and lushness. The word 'paradise' comes from 'paradis' which in the language of the ancient Iranians means 'garden'. Depending on their size, these paradises are cultivated with various kinds and colours of roses, jasmine bushes, and fragrant bulbous, violas and fruit trees. However, the main feature of all these lush areas is a pond or a pool in which a fountain rejoices the gift of life. For Iranians 'water' symbolizes light which is the source of life.

One cool evening, Afsar Khanum and Shamsi found themselves in Mohammad's car heading for the airport. It was well past the rush hour, so the long drive was fast. Shamsi withdrawn and sombre sat on the back seat. Her posture was tense, as though expecting some sort of calamity. Oblivion to the presence of the other two, she was gazing at the advertisement posters that ran away from her inattentive sight. There was no joy in her. The second divorce had shaken her hard and killed in her any hope of happiness. In fact she felt nothing except the occasional movements of the life growing inside her.

Mohammad aware of her presence monitored her movements through his rear view mirror while engaged in conversing with a cheerful Afsar Khanum, sitting next to him. Their talk was light and mainly concerned the plans each had to make the vacation enjoyable for their visitor. It was the first time he was returning home and they both wondered whether he had become totally westernized or had maintained his Iranian grace. Every time they mentioned Datam's name, they heard the sound of a sigh coming from the back seat.

It was a pleasant evening. Above the clear sky was smitten by a canopy of shimmering stars and a pleasant mountain breeze fanned the carelessly happy folks who had already heard the Pan American's landing announcement. As the passengers started arriving, the hustle and bustle increased in intensity and suddenly Afsar Khanum spotted Datam, smart in a white shirt, navy blazer, grey pants and a bright smile. "Here, he comes." She announced waving at him vigorously. He saw her and then his eyes fell on his mother and her protruding belly. The joy in his heart turned into bafflement. No one had told him that she was pregnant. Yet, as calm as ever, he opened his arms and hugged and kissed her first and then the others. Mohammad had sent an adolescent away and now to his delight he found a man returning. Eyes glowing with pride, he took hold of his trolley and they negotiated their way, amongst the crowd, to the car. Datam fitted his suitcase and travelling bag in the car boot his father had opened for him and then closed the top and took the front seat which his grandmother had relinquished. Men always sat in front and women in the back. That was the most respectable sitting arrangement in cars, which Afsar often ignored when travelling in Mohammad's vehicle.

"How was your flight son?"

"Long and uncomfortable, but the food was good. Where is Tirdad Baba joon?"

"I got him a summer job at the University in Rezaieh. Unfortunately you won't see him on this trip."

“I am happy to see you look fine son.” Shamsi interrupted Mohammad.

“Fine is not the right word. He looks irresistibly handsome.”

“Thank you Afsar joon.” Datam said turning his head back and giving his grandmother a loving smile.

“I am so proud of you Azizam; with your education, handsome face and athletic built, you are going to win the hearts of all the eligible girls in Teheran. Enshallah I will be alive to celebrate your wedding.”

“Khanum he is too young to even think of marriage.” Mohammad remarked, glancing at his mother-in-law, through the mirror.

“Do not contradict me doctor. I am not going to live a hundred years. My grandson must marry and produce a son like his father-while I am still alive.”

Shamsi’s jaw dropped. Here was her thoughtless mother at work again. How she resented her stupid remarks! She sighed again.

“Afsar joon, I will marry when I fall in love.”

“Son – love has nothing to do with happiness in marriage. You must marry a girl who is prepared to accept you for who you are, is wise enough to appreciate your good qualities and is willing to become your partner for life.”

“I hate you, Madar.” Shamsi’s inner voice screamed. She turned her back to her mother, closed her eyes and prayed for her death.

“Grandma, I will only marry for love – only in love one can find happiness, for better or worse.”

Afsar sighed. The boy was right. How she had longed to feel love and how disappointed she had become to have to close her eyes and fantasize when her husband made love to her – how could anyone call that physical torture lovemaking? How?

Mohammad parked the car in front of Ghamar Khanum’s house and hooted for Karim, the new domestic, to open the door.

The entrance door slit open and Karim’s head protruded out. He opened the door wide, came to the car and bowed. “Is our dinner ready?” She asked in a harsh voice.

“Yes Khanum.”

“Serve us immediately. We are famished.”

“Chashm Khanum.” Karim announced his obedience, opening the car door for her. She stepped down and the rest followed. Inside they went through the corridor that led to the veranda. There, they descended a set of steps to the garden where the dinner table was set by the rippling pool on which the face of the moon waved. A few frogs sang their songs and from the neighbour’s house noise of a party in progress whiffed through. They took their seats. Staring at her mother, Shamsi frowned and complained:

“They always have parties in that house and sometimes the loudness of their music drives me crazy.”

“Why do not you put some cotton wool in your ears – then you won’t hear them.” Afsar rebuked with a wink at her grandson.

Shamsi was about to say something when the appearance of the servants shut her up.

Karim hastily placed the rice dish in front of his mistress and his wife the bowl of lamb stew.

“Why there is not sufficient saffron on the rice Karim?” Afsar asked her tone intimidating.

“Khanum I put as much as I always do.”

“Afsar joon, the rice is practically gold with Saffron and it smells delicious.” Datam remarked feeling sorry for poor Karim.

“No, it is not, and this stupid man always makes me lose face in front of my guests.”

“Khanum there is sufficient saffron on this rice. And besides, we are not strangers at your table and know what a generous hostess you are.” Mohammad remarked, while offering his plate to the old lady to dish for him. Busy serving, Afsar forgot about Karim who lingered on for a few more seconds before turning his back and fleeing away. For posterity’s sake he had learned to accept his mistress’ unreasonableness with a pinch of salt and turn a deaf ear to her reprimands. He was young and intelligent and besides his wife was pregnant. They had replaced Mariam who had eloped with the neighbour’s gardener.

Taking delight in the presence of his son, Mohammad flooded him with all sorts of questions regarding his studies. It was of utmost importance for him that Datam excelled. A good education was the only inheritance he could leave his sons. Afsar Khanum listened to the exchanges with joy and Shamsi sat mute, plunged in remorseful thoughts. With every fibre of his entity, Datam was conscious of his mother’s movements. He loved her dearly even though wounded by her selfishness. Never judgemental, he was trying hard to find an excuse to exonerate her for abandoning them. But with a father like his, he could find none.

Dinner was followed by a large bowl of summer fruit brought in by Karim’s wife in a loose gown that hid her belly. They did not know what their mistress’s reaction would be to her condition. So they were hiding it for as long as it was possible and diligently saving money in case they were sacked.

Dessert consumed Mohammad didn’t wait for tea. He politely asked the hostess for permission to leave. They all rose and at the door Afsar Khanum hugged Datam and in his ears whispered, “Dear, can you come here first thing tomorrow morning?”

“Of course I can – Granny.”

That night Granny hardly slept – the thought of Shamsi giving birth to that man’s child, under her roof, was eating her heart like a mass of maggots on a corpse. How could she ever raise her head in front of her equals? Sometimes she couldn’t even look into her closest friends’ eyes so humiliated she felt.

At the crack of dawn she rose, went to her bathroom where she performed the ablution ritual; returned, took her prayer mat from its place by her bed, spread it on the carpet, covered her head with her chador, tied the ends under her chin and stood to pray to Allah who seemed to have forsaken her. She begged and begged him for an end to her torment – even death would be better than what was awaiting her family. Eventually calmed by the power of prayer, she took her breakfast of goat cheese, bread and cucumber in the garden where the breeze was fresh and the dews sparkled on the lawn like diamond studs. Pensive she sat alone, looking at the jasmines that were in bloom and the climber roses that had invaded the entirety of one long wall. Her annuals were surviving the

heat but their beds were as dry as desert sand. Why had the gardener not irrigated them yet – the lazy idiot? She thought, shaking her head in despair.

The train of her thought was broken by a hug from behind. The suddenness of the embrace rushed a cry of fright out of her mouth which was drowned in Datam's happy laughter.

"Sorry Granny, I did not mean to scare you." Datam said kissing the crown of her head.

"Son, next time you will kill me."

"Granny love never kills anyone." He pulled a chair away from the table and sat on it, his smile as bright as the sun above.

Then he remembered the gifts he had put on the floor. He rose, picked them up from behind her chair and placed them on the table.

"Who are these for?"

"You and Madar."

"It is your mother that I want to talk to you about."

"My mother?"

"Yes your mother. I want you to become the instrument of reconciliation."

"How Grandma? My mother has broken all the bridges behind her. She left us without a good reason. She married a man none of us ever met, and then left him pregnant. No abandoned husband with any pride can take back such a woman?"

"Your father will. He is an extraordinary man with a heart of gold. And I know he still loves her. He loves his sons even more and wishes them to have a normal family life. He is a forgiving man. I know with all your smiles and pretences you have not forgiven your mother. Please remember we all make mistakes and those who love us must be generous enough to forgive us. What kind of a future will your mother have with a baby and no breadwinner? People will look down at her – they already do. Most of her friends have discarded her like their dirty clothes. No one will ever want to marry her again. She is worse than a pickled virgin!" Shaking her head in pensiveness she paused.

In thought, he remained silent.

"I want you to talk to your father and persuade him to take your mother back. She wants to reconcile but does not know if he will take her back. Will you do this for us all, my child?"

Datam stopped fidgeting with the edge of the table cloth and looked up at her.

"Certainly I will try Granny. But will my father listen to me?"

"Yes he will listen to you – he loves you more than anyone else in this world. Of course he will listen to you."

"Enshallah Granny. I promise I will do my best." He picked up one of the parcels and placed it in front of her. "This is just a little souvenir from America."

"You shouldn't spend your money on me son."

"Who is better than you, Granny? It is only a black cotton shirt – I have got the same for mother, in cream."

Afsar, inquisitive like a child, tore off the wrapping and pulled out her present; shook its creases out and smiled her approval.

“You have inherited your father’s good taste. I will put it on this afternoon when I am going to Mrs Mansour’s house. You know that her son has become the new Prime Minister. They live at Avenue Ehteshamieh, near where late Mohsen Mirza’s villa was. How I miss him! He was like a son to me.”

“How did he die Granny?”

“On the way to Chalous a bus collided with his car. Fortunately he died instantly – the dear soul.”

“He was my father’s best friend. They were like brothers.”

“Yes. And his matchmaker.”

“I did not know that.”

“No one did except him, me and your father.”

“Perhaps if he was still alive, he could have prevented the divorce.”

“Perhaps – he had a persuasive way with people.”

“He was handsome, charming and so rich; why did he never marry Granny?”

“He had a French girlfriend he loved very much and his father did not permit him to marry her. She married someone else and he could never get her out of his system. That is what we were told. There were also malicious rumours, but one can never believe rumours. Of course your father would know the truth, but one can never get a word out of him.”

“You are right Granny. My father hates gossip. Pity about Mohsen Mirza’s love affair and I certainly am glad norms have modified now. I would hate it if my father stopped me from marrying the girl I love.”

“It is always good to listen to your parents and benefit from the wisdom they have earned through experience.”

“Granny that is a different story from being forced to marry someone you hardly know because your parents have chosen her for you.”

“Son, whichever way you look at marriage – it is a gamble – arranged marriages are less risky than love marriages because investigations are made, matters are discussed and problems resolved before the commitment that should be for life is made. Some people are lucky and some are not. I hope you find a woman who will make you very happy son; and I hope I will be alive to put your hand on hers.”

“Enshallah, and Granny I will drive you to Mrs Mansour this afternoon myself. At what time shall I pick you up?”

“That is a treat son! Come at four. Now go to your mother, but not a word of what we have discussed.”

“That will be our secret my lovely Granny.” Datam promised standing up.

“Go now and God be with you.”

Datam crossed the roofed veranda, turned right into a narrow passageway at the end of which was his mother’s quarters. He opened the door and was hit by a heavy stale air. She was still in bed. He went to the south-facing window and opened it. She tried to rise. He gently pushed her back; sat on the edge of her bed, kissed her face, stroked her untidy hair and gently patted her belly. Their eyes met and she read forgiveness in his. A serene smile illuminated her sunken countenance and her eyes began to glitter with tears. He bent and kissed each one of them. She hugged him tight and began to cry.

“Hush Madar, it is not good for you to get upset.”

She released him from her hold, pulled herself up a bit, and leaned against her cushioned headboard.

“Madar, I am taking Afsar joon to Avenue Ehteshamieh this afternoon. Would you like me to take you to Darband for an ice cream by the waterfalls?”

His words were like running water, its current sweeping away her fears of rejection. Suddenly she felt light. Her breathing became easier and more regular. Her face relaxed and she enjoyed the freshness of the air that had invaded the room. It was soothing. It was in fact just divine. She smiled. He smiled back at her. She stared at him with eyes glimmering with the joy of returning to the world of the living.

“No, thank you son, motion makes me sick. But you can buy a barbequed corn dipped in salt water for me.” She requested like a spoilt child.

“I will, but by the time I get home it will be cold and stale.”

“You are right my love. Never mind. Just come and visit me every day.”

“Shall do Madar joon. You do not have to ask me for that!”

She dropped her head and murmured: “Son, are you able to forgive me ?”

“Yes Madar, because my love for you is unconditional – never doubt that.”

She raised her grateful eyes to heaven and uttered, “Thank you my God for returning my son to me.” He bent and gave her a huge hug.

Sharp at four, Datam parked his father’s blue Peugeot in front of his grandmother’s gate; got out and rang the intercom. A few minutes later, smart and without a hat, Afsar appeared smiling at her favourite grandson.

“Afsar joon, what have you done with all the hats you had?” He asked opening the door for her. “They went out of fashion as quickly as they had become fashionable,” she got into the car, “they are gathering dust in the storage room.”

“Overseas, ladies still wear hats but mostly in winter when it is really cold or during church ceremonies.” He started the car.

“Here we wear scarves.”

“The next present I bring for you, will be a woollen scarf Granny.” Afsar smiled at his profile, her eyes admiring the modern buildings that had grown on both sides of the asphalted road on which cars, taxis and buses raced against each other.

“This is a luxury to be driven around in a private car – much better than the wobbly Doroshkeh’s.” She commented, affectionately patting his thigh.

Their drive was pleasant and their talk light and amusing. As Datam turned right from avenue Marvdasht into Avenue Ehteshamieh, a pleasant feeling gripped his heart – as though somehow his life was connected to this road. Facing him was the majestic Alborz range reaching heaven. The avenue was tree lined and moderately wide. It ran North South from avenue Doulat to Old Shemiran road. Adjoining this Avenue’s pedestrian pathways, were stately homes secured behind high brick walls, some capped by flowering creepers. As he was driving up hill, on his right, a large square blue tile caught his eyes. On it was etched Rose cul-de-sac. What a beautiful name to give a cul-de-sac he thought.

He stopped the car by the impressive gate of Mrs. Mansour's house. The presence of rough necks in cheap suit and tie meant SAVAK (Iran's secret service) vigilance, signifying the presence of the Prime Minister at his mother's home. He got out of the car, opened the door, helped his grandmother out, jumped back and hurried to meet his friends. The tea party was the last joyous event for the Prime Minister. The following week he was assassinated by a member of a fundamentalist group who opposed his progressive plans for Iran.

The afternoon turned into dusk, the setting sun dusted the horizon with gold and the air became pleasantly cool. Datam arrived home from having met all his school friends, at the new Ice Palace belonging to a famous millionaire. The establishment had a huge restaurant and an enormous ice-rink. Being the first of its kind, it had become the place of rendezvous for the well-to-do and a place to see and be seen.

He found his father in his study, lying on the couch, his face hidden behind the double page spread of his Keyhan newspaper.

"Salam Baba."

"Salam son." He replied, his bespectacled face becoming visible from above the pages he lowered.

"Baba, can I talk to you please?"

"About what son?"

"About Madar."

Mohammad threw his paper on the floor, took off his spectacles which he secured on the arm of the settee, sat up and then with his hand gestured him to sit. Datam, his heart hammering hard, dropped on the comfortable chair opposite the couch. Staring at his father he noticed the sudden colour change on his face. A sense of panic rippled inside him. He sent a silent prayer and quickly asked:

"Baba joon, do you still love Madar?"

Mohammad threw him a pensive glance, his mind racing to find an honest answer. A poignant silence fell and dragged on. Datam kept his anxious gaze on his father's tight face, praying for a miracle and Mohammad, his eyes closed, fought against his injured pride. Memories rushed in and out swiftly – good and bad, each competing for dominance. Datam noticed the quivering of the veins on his neck and the slight tremble of his hand. Now worried about the state of his health, he sent another prayer, this time asking forgiveness for his interference.

Mohammad opened his eyes, moved in his seat so that Datam was in his direct line of vision; licked his lips, shook his head and replied: "Yes – I love her, because she is my sons' mother."

Datam released a sigh of relief loud enough to make his father laugh.

"Thank you Baba joon, and for our sake will you take her back?"

"Yes I will – if it will make you happy." The phrase flew out of his mouth like an imprisoned butterfly.

Datam rose, took a step, knelt by the couch, took his father's moist hand and kissed it several times.

"Father, I am so proud of you. You are a wonderful human being. Thank you, and thank you a thousand times."

Mohammad broadened his smile, squeezed Datam's hand and together they rose.

“Now let’s go and have dinner. I am famished.”

“Baba you are the kindest, most forgiving man I have ever known. I am so proud to be your son and bear your name.”

“Well well now! What about a bottle of Shiraz?”

“Indeed why not!”

Three weeks later Mohammad remarried Shamsi at a notary office.

Datam returned to New York, a happy man.

Overjoyed more than anyone else, Tirdad celebrated the reunion with his friends at a restaurant in Tabriz.

And Afsar Khanum fed the poor at the local mosque.