

CENSORING AN IRANIAN LOVE STORY

DEATH TO DICTATORSHIP, DEATH TO FREEDOM

In the air of Tehran, the scent of spring blossoms, carbon monoxide and the perfumes and poisons of the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* ~~sway on top of each other, they~~ whisper together. The city drifts in time.

In front of the main entrance of Tehran University, on Liberty Street, a crowd of students is gathered in political protest. With their fists raised they shout, “Death to captivity!” Across the street, members of the Party of God, with clenched fists and perhaps chains and brass knuckles in their pockets, shout “Death to the Liberal . . .”

The anti-riot police, armed with the most sophisticated paraphernalia, including stun batons purchased from the West, stand facing the students. Both groups try, before they come to blows, to triumph over their opponents by shouting even louder. Drops of sweat ooze from faces and specks of spit spew from mouths. Fists, before pounding on heads, rise without miracle towards the sky.

It is perhaps because of these fists that from the sacred sky of Iran no miracle ever descends. Since one hundred and one years ago – when the first revolution for democracy triumphed in Iran – fists similar to these have risen towards the sky of a country with the greatest number of holy men, with the most prayers, tears, and religious lamentations; and today, I believe, the greatest pleas to God for speeding up the day of resurrection rise from Iran.

A short distance away, on the pavement, with her back to the steel fence lodged in the three-foot-tall stone wall surrounding Tehran University, stands a girl who, unlike most girls in the world but like most girls in Iran, is wearing a black headscarf and a long black coat as a coverall. She possesses a beauty common to all girls in love stories, a

beauty that many girls around the world, and in Iran, who read these stories want to possess. If the ghosts of the thousands of poets who died a thousand years ago, seven hundred years ago, or four hundred years ago, and the spirit of those yet to be born – who, unlike the living, in the democracy of death amicably and tolerantly wander the streets of Tehran – see her large black eyes, they will liken them, as is customary of their poetry, to the sad eyes of a gazelle. An old simile for a pair of Oriental eyes that stole Lord Byron's heart, and Arthur Rimbaud's, too . . . But contrary to this clichéd simile, there is a mysterious look in this girl's eyes. It is as if they possess the power to traverse time, the power to pass through the golden walls of harems or perhaps the fire-walls of websites and Internet filters.

But the girl does not know that in precisely seven minutes and seven seconds, at the height of the clash between the students, the police, and the members of the Party of God, in the chaos of attacks and escapes, she will be knocked into with great force, she will fall back, her head will hit against a cement edge, and her sad Oriental eyes will for ever close . . .

The girl attracts the attention of mysterious people who, during political demonstrations in Iran, monitor the scene from discreet corners and identify people. They point her out to one another. One of them, from a very professional angle, takes a photograph and films her.

I know **this girl is not a member of any political party, but she is timidly holding a sign that reads**

DEATH TO FREEDOM, DEATH TO CAPTIVITY

It is a strange slogan that I don't believe has ever been seen or heard under the rule of any dictatorial, Communist, populist, or even so-called liberal regime. And I don't believe it will ever be heard under the rule of any future regimes that for now remain nameless.

When they pause to catch their breath in between shouting their slogans, the students seeking freedom and democracy point to the girl and her sign and ask, "Who in the world is she? What is she trying to say?"

The more experienced students, old hands at political protests, respond:

"Completely ignore her. She's an infiltrator. The Party of God has paid

her to create distrust and division among us. To defuse the conspiracy, just act as though she doesn't exist."

On the opposite side, the fanatical members of the Party of God also point to the girl and ask, "What's that prissy girl trying to say over there?"

They hear from their leaders:

"The lewd hussy is one of those Communists who have recently come back to life. Their Big Brother in Russia is gaining strength again . . . but the pathetic slobs only have a handful of members in their party. This is how they hope to attract attention . . . Just ignore her. Act as though she doesn't exist."

With their two-way radios, the secret police pass along the girl's location and ask, "What does this mean? We have no instructions for such cases. What should we do with her?"

And they receive instructions:

"Watch her with extreme vigilance and caution. This is most definitely a new conspiracy and a new plot for a velvet revolution orchestrated by American imperialism . . . Keep her under surveillance but do not let her suspect anything. Let her think she doesn't exist."

Nameless shades of rage and hatred, voiceless cries of blood and hope and darkness hang in the air. From one direction, meaning Anatole France Avenue, and from the other direction, meaning Revolution Circle, the police have blocked all car and pedestrian traffic to this section of Liberty Street. In Revolution Circle, there is a logjam of hundreds of cars, anxious and overwrought drivers blow their horns, and among the cars curious people stand peering towards Tehran University. It was right here that more than a quarter of a century ago, on a cloudy winter's day, the people of Tehran for the last time dragged down the metal statue of the Shah sitting astride a horse. Of course in those days, when it came to dragging down metal statues of dictators, American tanks sided with the world's dictators.

The student protesters, aware that they are about to be attacked, break into a heart-rending anthem:

*My fellow schoolfriend,
you are with me and beside me,
. . . you are my tear and my sigh,
. . . the scars of the lashes of tyranny rest on our bodies,*

*our uncultured wasteland, all its wild plants weeds,
be it good, be it bad,
dead are the souls of its people,
our hands must tear down these curtains,
who other than you and I can cure our pain . . .*

In the lyrics and melody of this anthem lies an age-old Iranian sorrow that brings tears to the girl's eyes . . . She raises her sign even higher. From behind the veil of her tears, the world is transformed into undulating buildings, severed shadows and rippling reflections on water . . . The young girl's isolation and her fear of strangers heighten. She looks up to find some solace in the blue of the sky. She sees a winged horse that, like a white cloud, ignoring the people below, flies by. Terrified, she sees flames rising from the horse's back. The blazing horse disappears behind a high-rise. The girl waits, but the horse does not reappear . . .

Then she imagines that in the midst of the shouts of anger and spite, a muffled voice is calling her name.

"Sara! Sara!"

The girl wipes away her tears and looks around. There are people and shadows moving in every direction. It seems they are afraid of coming close to her.

"Dimwit! Dimwit! I'm talking to you!"

The voice bears the same chill and odour that gust out of a refrigerator that has not been opened in a month. The girl looks behind her. A dark face, with no neck or torso, is suspended in the air. Two of the steel bars in the green fence surrounding Tehran University that have broken out of the stone wall have sectioned the face in three . . . She thinks this face belongs to one of those sprites her grandmother said have parties in the city's public bathhouses at night and that the only way to tell them apart from humans is by their hooved feet . . .

"Hey! Dimwit! Get rid of that sign and escape! I'm talking to you!"

Again the girl looks behind her. She sees that same fluid, dark face on the other side of the fence. She thinks perhaps someone is squatting down behind the wall and has lifted his head up to the fence.

"Hey! Daydreamer, go home! Today death has it in for you. Go home! . . . Do you understand? It's been half an hour since death fell in

love with you. It's sharpening its sickle to stab into your body. Run while you can . . . Do you hear me . . .?"

No, this face and its cobwebbed voice cannot be real. Sara peeks through the fence and behind the stone wall and sees the figure of a hunchbacked midget dressed in clothes that seem to belong to centuries ago . . . She opens her mouth to ask:

What in the world do you want from me?

But her words choke in her throat. Petrified, she realizes that at this moment, any question and all the words in the world will seem absurd and meaningless. There appear to be no eyeballs in the round eye sockets in that face. They resemble two wells with moonlight reflecting on the dark water at their pit.

"What do you want with my eyes? Think of yourself. You will be killed . . . Do you understand? . . . Run! The fighting will start any minute now."

The scuffle begins. The shouts of slogans and obscenities and the screams of boys and girls being beaten down in the daily clamour of the city of eleven million.

We skip past this scene because it seems to have nothing to do with a love story. However, if you have paid attention, you will have noticed that I, with that notorious cunning of a writer, have described the scuffle between the police and the students in such a way that I cannot be accused of political bias.

If you ask me who I am, I will say:

I am an Iranian writer tired of writing dark and bitter stories, stories populated by ghosts and dead narrators with predictable endings of death and destruction. I am a writer who at the threshold of fifty has understood that the purportedly real world around us has enough death and destruction and sorrow, and that I did not have the right to add even more defeat and hopelessness to it with my stories. In my stories and novels there are men whom I have created with a body and romantic valour that I do not possess. Similarly, there are women whose bodies and personalities I have reproduced from the body and soul of the woman whom I have seen longingly in my dreams – although I have never had the sincerity to give this fantasy woman a permanent face so that I don't confuse her with certain real women. Between you and me, I have on occasion even cheated on this fantasy woman and imagined and written of her blond hair as black,

and once as auburn. At any rate, I hate myself for sending characters that I like, that I have scrupulously created word by word, towards darkness or bloody death at the end of my stories, like Dr Frankenstein.

For these reasons, and for reasons that like other writers I will probably discover later, I, with all my being, want to write a love story. The love story of a girl who has never seen the man who has been in love with her for a year and whom she loves very much. A story with an ending that is a gateway to light. A story that, although it does not have a happy ending like romantic Hollywood movies, still has an ending that will not make my reader afraid of falling in love. And, of course, a story that cannot be labelled as political. My dilemma is that I want to publish my love story in my homeland . . . Unlike in many countries around the world, writing and publishing a love story in my beloved Iran are not easy tasks. Following the victory of one of our last revolutions – during which our shouts for freedom, with the assistance of the Western media, deafened the universe – to make up for two thousand five hundred years of dictatorial rule by kings, an Islamic constitution was written. This new constitution allows the printing and publishing of any and all books and journals, and strictly prohibits their censorship and inspection. Unfortunately, however, our constitution makes no mention of these books and publications being allowed to leave the printers.

In the early days following the revolution, after a book had been printed, its publisher had to present three copies of it to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to receive a permit for it to be shipped out of the printers and to be distributed. However, if the ministry deemed the book to be corruptive, the printed copies would remain imprisoned in the printers' dark storage, and its publisher, in addition to having paid printing costs, would either have to pay storage costs, too, or would have to recycle the books into cardboard. This system had driven many publishers to the brink of bankruptcy.

In more recent years, to limit their financial risk, and for books not to remain in storage houses for years and grow mouldy waiting for an exit permit, based on a semi-verbal, semi-formal agreement, prior to actually printing a book, the independent Iranian publisher will voluntarily, with his own two hands and feet, deliver three copies of the manuscript prepared with the latest typesetting and page design software to the Ministry

of Culture and Islamic Guidance to receive a permit before the book is actually printed.

In a particular department at this ministry, a man with the alias Porfiry Petrovich (yes, the detective in charge of solving Raskolnikov's murders) is responsible for carefully reading books, in particular novels and short-story collections, and especially love stories. He underlines every word, every sentence, every paragraph, or even every page that is indecent and that endangers public morality and the time-honoured values of society. If there are too many such underlinings, the book will likely be considered unworthy of printing; if there are not that many, the publisher and the writer will be informed that they must simply revise certain words or sentences. For Mr Petrovich this job is not just a vocation; it is a moral and religious responsibility. In other words, a holy profession. He must not allow immoral and corruptive words and phrases to appear before the eyes of simple and innocent people, especially the young, and pollute their pure minds. Sometimes he even tells himself:

“Look here, man! If one word or phrase escapes your pen and provokes a young person, you will share in his sin, or worse, you will be just as guilty as those depraved people who produce pornographic films and photos and illegally distribute them among the public.”

From his perspective, writers are generally devious, immoral and faithless people, some of whom are directly or indirectly agents of Zionism and American imperialism, and they try to deceive him with their tricks and ploys. Given his profound sense of responsibility, while he reads the typeset manuscripts, Mr Petrovich's heart beats wildly. As he advances page by page, slowly the words begin to make strange movements before his eyes. In his mind, among the echoes of the words, he hears mysterious whisperings that put him on his guard. Suspicious, he goes back a few pages and reads more carefully. His face begins to perspire, and his fingers start to tremble as they turn the pages. The more he pays attention, the more devious the criminal words become. They move around; the sentences intertwine. Implicit expressions, explicit expressions, innuendos and connotations concealed in shadows begin to parade around in his head and create an uproar. He sees that some fucking words are lending letters to one another to create vulgar words or raunchy images. The sound of the pages turning resembles the sound of a guillotine blade

falling. Mr Petrovich hears the hue and cry of the words explode in his ears. He yells:

“Shut the hell up!”

He puts pen to paper to underline the word “dance”, but realizes that the writer himself has instead used the expression “rhythmic movement”. He pounds his fist on the page. A few of the more cowardly and conservative words quiet down, but amid the racket of the others there is sarcastic laughter. Overwhelmed, Mr Petrovich gets up from behind his desk.

It is because of these emotional tortures that at times examining one book can take as long as a year, or five years, or even twenty-five years.

So it is that many stories, especially love stories, in manoeuvring their way through the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance are either wounded, lose certain limbs, or are with finality put to death.

In the love story I want to write, I will not run into any difficulties as long as in the opening sentences I depict the beauty of spring flowers, the fragrant breeze and the brilliant sun in the blue sky. However, the minute I start to write about the story’s man and woman and their actions and conversations, Mr Petrovich’s perspiring, irate and reprimanding face will appear before my eyes.

Ask:

What do you mean?

So that I reply:

In this love story, I must have a feminine protagonist and a masculine antagonist, or vice versa. Now surely, with an *Unbearable Lightness of curiosity* you want to ask, Shouldn’t there be a man and a woman in an Iranian love story?

Ask, and I shall answer:

Well, in Iran there is a politico-religious presumption that any proximity and discourse between a man and a woman who are neither married nor related is a prologue to deadly sin. Those who commit such prologues to text, and such texts to sin, in addition to retributions that await them in the afterworld, will in this world too be sentenced by Islamic courts to such punishments as imprisonment, the lash and even death. It is to prevent such prologues and deadly sins that in Iran, females and males in schools, factories, offices, buses and wedding parties are kept apart. In other words, they are protected from each other. Of course, several revered clergymen have opined that pedestrian traffic on streets should also be segregated.

They know that in the modern world they must present plans founded on scientific research; therefore, based on the findings of their experts, they have presented their plan as such: In the morning, for example, men will be permitted to walk along the pavements on the right side of the streets, and in the afternoon, the women. Conversely, on the pavements flanking the left side of the streets, in the morning women, and in the afternoon men, will be allowed to come and go. As a result, both sexes will have access to shops on both sides. A few of these clergymen even object to and criticize films that have received a screening permit from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance because in rare scenes the actor and actress playing husband and wife, or brother and sister, are shown alone together in the kitchen or the living room. These gentlemen reason that a man and a woman who are not *mahram* – meaning neither married nor immediate kin – should never be alone together in a room or in any enclosed space.

In response to such criticisms, numerous experts and ministers from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, as well as film directors, cinematographers and other crew members involved in film-making have in lengthy and frequent articles and interviews explained, “Gentlemen! Don’t worry. In scenes where it appears that an actor and an actress are alone, there are, in fact, behind the scenes, meaning a little farther away from the camera, tens of crew members present – including the director, the assistant director, the stage assistant, the cameraman and his assistants, lighting crew and . . .” Despite these explanations, several of the complaining gentlemen have suggested:

“Let us assume it is so. But the audience only sees a man and a woman alone in a room. And the fact that a man and a woman are alone in a room will lead the audience’s imagination to a thousand sins.”

I hope this introduction has helped you understand why publishing a love story in Iran is not a simple undertaking . . .

Now ask me how I hope to write and publish a love story, so that I can explain:

I think because I am an experienced writer, I may be able to write my story in such a way that it survives the blade of censorship. In my life as a writer, I have come to learn Iranian and Islamic symbols and metaphors very well. I also have plenty of other tricks up my sleeve that I will not divulge. The truth is that a long time ago, I never really intended to write a love story. But that boy and girl who meet each other near the main

entrance of Tehran University and in the chaos of political demonstrations stare lovingly into each other's eyes have convinced me to write their story.

They have known each other for about a year and have shared many words and sentences. But it is on this spring day that the girl for the very first time casts her eyes on that boy's face . . . Don't be surprised by the paradox in my last two sentences. Iran is a land of paradoxes . . . If you ask:

Did they meet on a matchmaking website?

I will emphatically say:

No . . .

And even more emphatically I will suggest that these two characters are far too innocent and fictional to meet on a matchmaking website or on websites where one seeks a sex partner . . . In fact, such websites are banned in Iran. But allow me to tell my story.

As you have realized, the girl's name is Sara. And the boy's name is Dara. Don't ask: I confess, the names are pseudonyms. I don't want the real characters to face any problems for sins or illegal acts that they may commit in the course of my story . . . Of course, selecting Sara and Dara as pseudonyms from among thousands of Iranian names has its own story, which I must tell.

Once upon a time, long ago when I was at primary school, Sara and Dara were two characters in our first-year reading books. Sara was there to introduce the letter S and Dara to introduce the letter D . . . Long ago in Iran, not an Islamic regime but a monarchist regime ruled. From that regime's perspective, there was no problem for Sara and Dara, after having been introduced to schoolchildren, to appear alone in a room in other lessons to talk, for example, about a parrot so that the letter P could be taught. In those bygone days, Sara was illustrated with long black hair and wearing a colourful shirt, skirt and socks, and Dara was drawn wearing a shirt and trousers. They were beautiful, but we schoolchildren used to draw a moustache for Sara and a beard for Dara . . . Years later, I mean, when I was a student at Tehran University, we Iranians grew tired of the monarchist regime and started a revolution. Our reawakening began when the Shah, following the advice of US president Jimmy Carter, claimed that he wanted to give the people of Iran political freedom and freedom of speech and thought, and to demonstrate his goodwill he dismantled the Rastakhiz Party – the only political party in the country,

which he himself had created. We shouted “Freedom!” . . . We shouted “Independence!” . . . And a few months after the start of our revolution, to our shouts we added “Islamic Republic!” . . . Across the country we set fire to banks because, according to the covert and overt propaganda of the Communists, banks were symbols of the bloodthirsty regime of bourgeois collaborators. We set fire to cinemas because, according to the covert and overt propaganda of the intellectuals, cinemas were the cause of cultural decay, the spread of Westernization and the increasing influence of American Hollywood culture. We burned down nightclubs, bars and brothels because, according to the covert and overt propaganda of the devout, they were centres of corruption and propagated deadly sins . . . Well, a few years after the revolution’s victory, in first-year reading books, there was a headscarf covering Sara’s black hair and a long black coverall hiding her colourful clothes. Dara was not old enough to grow a beard, therefore only his father had one. According to our religious teachings, a Muslim man must have a beard and must not shave his face with a razor lest he look like a woman.

If I remember correctly, a few years later Sara and Dara completely disappeared from the reading books, and another girl and boy replaced them – siblings with no recollection of the Shah’s corrupt and tyrannical regime . . . Now I think you have come to understand that selecting the names Sara and Dara is an Iranian storytelling trick. Without giving Mr Petrovich an excuse to chastise me, they will remind my Iranian readers of the appearance and disappearance of Sara and Dara from reading books, rather like Mr Clementis, a persona non grata whom Soviet censors airbrushed out of a photograph, yet the hat he had lent to a man posing with him remained on that person’s head.

By the time Sara and Dara were being transformed, my daughter was in first grade, and there were nights when my powers would fail and I could not come up with a new story to tell her. I had therefore bought her storybooks with tales that were better than mine because they came with illustrations. One night when I opened *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to read to her, I saw to my horror that Snow White was wearing a headscarf and two thick black lines were covering her bare arms. My little girl asked:

“Why aren’t you reading?”

I closed the book and said:

“We don’t have a story tonight. Sleep so that you will have a beautiful dream, my girl . . . Sleep, Bārān.”

We called our daughter Bārān at home. But her name in her birth certificate is something that neither I nor her mother intended to name our daughter. Hence, the name Bārān too has a story, which I will tell you another night. Now, with your permission, I must return to my love story.

Ask me, given that an encounter between a man and a woman is so unlikely in Iran, how do Sara and Dara meet?

As I said before, although Sara and Dara come face to face for the first time on the fringes of the students’ political demonstration, they had in fact started writing their love story a year earlier. And this is the story that I now want to tell you.

Sara is studying Iranian literature at Tehran University. However, in compliance with an unwritten law, teaching contemporary Iranian literature is forbidden in Iranian schools and universities. Like all other students, Sara has to memorize hundreds of verses of poetry and the biographies of poets who died a thousand, seven hundred, four hundred . . . years ago. Even so, Sara likes contemporary Iranian literature because it stimulates her imagination.

This literature creates scenes and words in her mind that she has never dared imagine or utter, and of course, this literature too has not dared write those words and scenes openly and explicitly. In fact, when Sara reads a contemporary story, she reads the white between the lines, and wherever a sentence is left incomplete and ends with three dots like this “. . .”, her mind grows very active and begins to imagine what the eliminated words may be. At times, her imagination goes farther and grows more naked than the words the writer had in mind. If she is as clever as an intelligence agent and has the power to decipher the codes that lie in the shadows of the petrified phrases and in the hidden whispers of the conservative words of Iran’s contemporary literature, she will find the very things she likes. Sara loves these three dots because they allow her to be a writer, too . . . But she never borrows any contemporary literature from her college library or the central library of Tehran University. Even if she wanted to, I don’t think she would find any books by writers such as me.

Ask me why, so that I can explain.

I hope that, in countries where people are proud of their democracies and live confident of a secure future, no one ever has to worry about the

books they borrow from a library. I pray that whenever they want, without fear of the future, they can at least read *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair or the dull and artless *The Iron Heel*, a bad work by a relatively good writer who drank too much whisky and wanted to replace American democracy with *Animal Farm* democracy.

As I was saying, we Iranians, having lived under the dictatorial rule of kings for two thousand five hundred years, have expertly learned that we should never leave any records or documents behind. We are forever fearful that the future will bear even harsher political circumstances, and hence we must be extremely vigilant about our lives and the footprints that linger in our wake. It is for this reason that records of our history are often limited to the travelogues of Westerners and reports by Western spies. Sara knows that the circulation system at Tehran University library is computerized, and that any book she borrows can someday be used as evidence against her and she could be expelled. Of course, circumstances in my dear Iran still allow a few crumbs of freedom, but Sara prefers to borrow her favourite books from a public library and has become a member of the one in her neighbourhood. Exactly a year before the political demonstration I told you about, on a spring day – and in most old Iranian love stories there is a beautiful spring day with the song of nightingales and other pleasant-sounding birds resonating from sentences – Sara appears at the public library. The small reading room in this library has been divided into two sections by the library catalogues so that the boys and girls seated at the tables cannot see each other.

Now you probably want to ask, What are the boys and girls supposed to do if they need to discuss a school project or exchange ideas?

If you ask one more question like this, I will be forced to say:

Madam! Sir! Why can't you imagine any culture other than your own? What kind of a question is this? Clearly girls and boys in Iran have no school-related discussions and no need to exchange educational information. Like everywhere else in the world, discussing Derrida's "Différance", debating the Planck wall or chaos theory and the butterfly effect are consciously or unconsciously excuses for a girl and a boy to establish a private relationship that will end in sin. For this very reason, if they speak to one another on university grounds, they will receive a written warning from the Disciplinary Committee. They are not only prohibited from talking to one another in libraries, but they cannot even climb over the Planck wall

with the language of their eyes to exchange information . . . So please let me continue with my story.

Sara walked towards the librarian's desk . . . With this sentence the love story I want to write and hand over to Mr Petrovich continues.

Sara asked the librarian:

"Do you have *The Blind Owl*?"

The librarian firmly replied:

"No, miss. We don't have *The Blind Owl* at this library."

Sara did not give up.

"Of course I know you don't have *The Blind Owl* on the shelves. I meant, if it is among the books you have removed from the shelves, could you make an exception and lend it to me for a few days . . .? I study literature and I have to read *The Blind Owl* for an important project."

The librarian, this time more sternly, said:

~~"Miss! I told you we don't have these banned books, and by the way, you're the idiot, not me. I know there is no way they would give you a project on *The Blind Owl* at the university."~~

Sara, having given up on getting her hands on a copy of *The Blind Owl*, walked out of the public library. She didn't notice that in her wake a young man walked out from the protected men's section and at some distance followed her all the way home. Consequently, the next day when she saw the same young man near her house, she did not recognize him. The young man was selling second-hand books, which he had laid out on a few sheets of newspaper spread on the pavement. Surely the paperback edition of *The Blind Owl* was among his books. But Sara, proud of her beauty and accustomed to ignoring the people around her, walked to the university without stopping. The neighbourhood butcher was skinning a green baby dragon hanging on a hook suspended from the ceiling . . .

The next day, the same young man was sitting in exactly the same spot. Of course he had fewer books. The same was true of the days that followed.

In Iran, book lovers distrustful of the entire world sometimes think that the street pedlars who sell banned or rare books are agents assigned to identify and track readers.

On the seventh day, Sara finally stopped at the pedlar's spread and browsed through the books and, suddenly, she saw *The Blind Owl*. She

asked its price. Contrary to the general practice of selling rare or banned books at a much higher price than the list price on the back cover, the young man asked for very little money. And in a trembling voice he added:

“ . . . The price of one Winston cigarette, miss. On the condition that you read it carefully. Please cherish this book . . . Read it very carefully, much more carefully than you would other books . . . Carefully, accurately . . . ”

No street pedlar or bookseller had ever spoken to Sara in this manner. She thought, Here's another one of those mentally disturbed people whose numbers are growing in Iran. She happily bought the book and put it in her handbag. The book was transmitting a mysterious energy to her. During her first class at the university, while the professor was busy explaining and explicating a lengthy poem composed seven hundred years ago that was replete with complex and unfamiliar Arabic words, Sara opened the book under her desk and started to read that surrealist story, which in Iran is famously believed to make its young readers lose hope in life and commit suicide – the same way that years ago its writer, Sadeq Hedayat, committed suicide in Paris. However, aside from the strange power of the opiate and carnal words, the book seemed to hold another secret, a secret that Sara thought she had seen in the book pedlar's eyes. That day, Sara went home from the university far more quickly than usual. She closed the door to her room, ~~lay down on her bed,~~ and began reading the book from the beginning.

I guess by now you have realized that the crossed-out words in the text are my own doing. And you must know that such fanciful eccentricity is not postmodernism or Heideggerism. In fact . . .

And by now you have surely grasped the significance of “. . .” in Iran's contemporary literature.

On page seven, Sara noticed several purple dots. She paid no attention to them and continued reading voraciously. *The Blind Owl* is a novel that begins with the nightmarish incidents in the life of an Iranian artist who paints on ewers. One day the artist goes to the storage alcove in his house to fetch a bottle of old wine that he has inherited from his mother – an Indian dancer who danced with a Nag serpent in a Linga temple. As he reaches for the wine, he sees a hole in the wall to the

wasteland behind the house. He sees a stream. There is an old, bent man sitting under a willow tree, and on the opposite side of the stream there is a beautiful woman, as beautiful as the women in Iranian miniatures, leaning forward and holding a single black lily out towards the old man. The next day, the artist realizes that in fact there is no hole in the wall of the storage alcove. But he has fallen in love with that ethereal woman, and now spends his days wandering across the wasteland around his secluded house searching for her, for the stream, and for the willow tree . . . **On page seventeen, Sara thinks that whoever the previous owner of this book was had either not valued it or was a book abuser to have marked and defiled its pages with purple dots . . .** And the blind owl who cannot get that ethereal woman out of his mind continues to search for her. One night, returning from a disappointing search, he sees the woman sitting next to the front door of his house. He takes her home and gives her some of that old wine. A wine that we learn is laced with poison from the fangs of a Nag serpent. The woman dies with a taunting look in her eyes, leaving the mysterious image of her gaze for ever etched on the artist's mind. The blind owl cuts up her body, which is surrounded by golden bees, and puts the pieces in a suitcase. Outside, it is as if the world has been transformed into a nightmare. In the dark, an old man with a rickety horse-drawn hearse is waiting for him. The cart travels to the ancient ruins of the city of Rey. While burying the suitcase there, they discover a centuries-old clay pot with the mysterious eyes of a woman painted on it . . . The same image that the blind owl will for the rest of his life paint on clay ewers . . .

On page sixty-six Sara realized that the purple dots were not random, and that in fact they had been placed with great precision under certain letters in certain words. She went back to the first dots on the first page of the book. They appeared under the letters S, a, r, a, H, e, l, l, o. It did not take her long to realize that the first four letters spelled her name and the rest spelled the word "hello" . . . The mystifying tale of *The Blind Owl* had a maddening lure, but Sara had fallen captive to the marked letters on the pages of the book. She turned page after page and carefully found them. She wrote them all down on a sheet of paper and began connecting them together. At times she would connect one or two letters too many, and at times too few . . . But finally, eight hours later, the complete letter lay before her.

Hello Sara,

As I mark these purple dots, I pray that you will discover my secret code. That day when you were asking the librarian for *The Blind Owl*, I was there. For a long time now, whenever you go to the library, I am there, too. The card catalogues don't allow me to see your face, but from between their legs I can see your shoes. I know all your shoes very well. I have given each pair a name. For example, your brown shoes that have a scratch on them, perhaps from a barbed wire or the thorn of a rosebush, are Rainy, because you wear them on rainy days. That library doesn't have *The Blind Owl*. It doesn't have many of the other great novels either. According to the new librarian, they have weeded out all the immoral novels from the shelves. I had a small library of my own at home which I treasured. But then I started selling books near your house so that I could give you *The Blind Owl*. To make sure people believed I was really a street pedlar, I had to sell many of my books. I sold my *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, I sold *Anna Karenina*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* . . . They even bought Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* from me. I sold the collected poems of Lorca, Neruda and Forough. But I put such a high price on *The Blind Owl* that people laughed at me. If this letter is of no value to you, at least value this book. To break free from our hypocrisy, its writer fled to Paris and committed suicide there. I wish I was as powerful a writer as he was, so that I could write a beautiful and extraordinary letter to you. If I could write a letter to you that no man in love has ever written, I would want nothing more of my life, and death would be easy for me . . . Please don't be scared. Just as I have been in love with you for a very long time and you have never noticed me, trust that you will never sense my presence unless you yourself allow it. Next Thursday, when you go to the public library, borrow *The Little Prince* if you like . . .

Sara tried to remember the young man's face, or at least his voice. But strangely, she had no image of him in her head. It was as though a hand had erased it.

Sara borrowed *The Little Prince*. In her first reading she didn't grasp much of the beautiful story because her entire attention was focused on breaking the code of the letter contained in the book. That letter read:

Hello Sara,

Why have you started to turn around suddenly and look behind you ever since you read my letter? You will never recognize me among the people on the street.

I have studied make-up. The day you bought the book from me I had really changed my face.

I am always very far from you. But following you, even at a distance, gives me the pleasure of knowing that I breathe the air you have exhaled. Sometimes – of course, not often – I walk towards you from the opposite side of the street so that I can catch a glimpse of your face, to see whether you are happy or sad. I know all the expressions of your face. I can even tell by the way your long, beautiful fingers hold your books whether you are tired or full of energy. Those nights when I wander the streets, I sometimes pass by your big house. Don't worry, I don't stop. Not even for a second. I just walk by and look up at your window. I don't like its heavy curtains. Why do you keep them drawn most of the time? Open them. Let the moon shine into your room. The ultramarine moonlight will create a beautiful new colour on the walls. At night, when the light is turned on in your room and I know you are there, your room becomes my star. But this one star is different from all the other stars in the sky for me because there I have a red rose that is different from all the other red roses in the world for me, and with all my heart I wish it happiness. I learned this from *The Little Prince*. Now that I have someone in my life for whom I wish happiness with all my being, even if I am never to be a part of that happiness, my life has found a beautiful new meaning. Now I can at last cope with people. I have even grown to like them, because I think among them there are people whom you like and who make you happy . . . It doesn't matter who I am and what my name is. I used to be a student at Tehran University, too. I studied film-making. But I was expelled. As for my name, just pretend it is Dara. It is an alias that the writer who will one day write about my life will conjure up without giving it much thought. They will not hire me at any company or factory. I cover my expenses with the little money I earn painting houses. Whenever I paint a wall, I first write your name on it in ultramarine blue, and then I cover it with the colour the wall is supposed to be. Just last month, I was painting a newly built house and the contractor turned up unexpectedly. He saw how all the walls had *Sara* written on them . . . We had an argument. He fired me . . . I will write the next letter in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The people who decide which books belong in libraries sometimes miss a few, or maybe they don't understand these types of books. If you would like to write back, mark the letters in this book in blue ink. If not, in the *Dracula* letter I will let you know which book will have my next letter . . .

Sara had to wait two weeks to borrow *Dracula* because someone had already checked it out of the library. She read the third letter, but she didn't write back. Whoever was writing these letters really meant what he said, and moved so ghostlike on the fringes of Sara's life that despite her curiosity she couldn't guess his identity. Sometimes, after walking home along her usual route from the university or library, she would run up to her room and from the narrow opening in the heavy curtains she would look out to see who was following her. Pedestrians, young and old, walked by, but none of them showed any interest in her window . . . For seven consecutive nights Sara sat by the window and peered out at the street. But to no avail.

Sara liked the story of *Dracula*.

Hello Sara,

I really like your trainers, the ones with the blue stripes. Your beautiful stride has a wonderful weightlessness to it when you wear them. I have named them Shirin Walking on Water, and sometimes I call them Ophelia. Has anything changed at the university that they now allow you to wear colourful shoes? Sometimes when I follow you down the street, I try to step in your footsteps.

~~I wish I had the powers of Count Dracula. Not so that I could come up to your bedroom at night and suck your blood, but so that I could protect you for the rest of your life without you ever knowing.~~

The supervisor at the public library has grown suspicious of me. He threatened that if I don't watch myself, he will call the patrols from the Campaign Against Social Corruption and they will arrest me. I didn't react to any of his insults. I was so angry my blood was boiling, but I even managed to apologize to him. ~~If I were a Dracula I would have drunk his blood.~~ So now when you leave the library, I wait awhile, and then I run to catch up with you somewhere near your home. I wish I could come to your class at the university and just sit in a corner and watch you. But at the university they consider people like me to be vulgar and filthy monsters. In Francis Ford Coppola's film version of *Dracula*, which you can easily find on the black market, there is a scene in which Dracula, in love, turns Mina's teardrops into emeralds in the palm of his hand. Even if I was once a hateful beast, even if I was once a Dracula, I have changed since I got to know you. I found a strand of your hair in the pages of *The Little Prince*. I don't believe it was there on purpose, but it is now my treasure . . . This single strand of black hair means the world to me. You are my

Shirin. I only wish I were your Farhad. I wish I had a mountain to carve into a castle for you with nothing but a pickaxe. Borrow *Khosrow and Shirin*.

In many Iranian mystical poems, some of which date back almost a thousand years, the Sufi poet – most classical Iranian poets were Sufis – speaks of an earthly heavenly beloved, a beloved who can be a woman and yet is a representation of God. He uses many words to liken his beloved's beauties to nature, fruits and flowers; of course not directly, but by using familiar similes. It starts with her figure, which is often likened to a cypress tree. To understand this Iranian simile, do not bring to mind the extreme tallness of a cypress tree; instead look at the wideness of its bottom and the narrowness of its top. Then our poet will compare his beloved's eyes to narcissus flowers, or to the eyes of a gazelle, and if they are Oriental eyes, he will compare them to almonds. Her eyebrows he will compare to bows that let fly the arrows of her eyelashes towards her lover's heart. Her lips, if they are thin, he will compare to a narrow wisp often woven of silk, and if they are plump, he will compare them to rubies that of course are as sweet as sugar. Then the poet will liken his beloved's breasts to pomegranates. The Iranian Sufi poet does not normally travel any farther down and self-censors the rest of his similes, allowing the reader's imagination to travel south on its own. The few who have dared travel below their beloved's breasts have again used the language of nature and erotic foods. Evidently, in those days Iranians were not familiar with the banana, or with the orchid or, for that matter, with the flower in the film *The Wall*. About nine centuries ago Nizami, a great Iranian poet, created two beautiful yet strange scenes in a famous romantic poem called *Khosrow and Shirin*. This narrative in verse is the love story of Khosrow, one of the greatest kings of Persia, and an Armenian princess named Shirin. Shirin has undressed and is bathing in a pond. Khosrow is out hunting and by chance arrives at the pond and starts ogling Shirin from behind the bushes:

A bride he saw as ripe as the full moon . . .

. . .

*In cerulean water like a flower she sat,
in cerulean silk up to her navel wrapped.*

. . .

*From that flower's substance the entire pond,
an almond blossom an almond at its heart.*

. . .

*To each side her tresses she combed,
violets crowning a blossom she combed.*

. . .

*She a treasure chest its treasure pure gold,
her wavy tresses a snake upon the chest coiled.*

. . .

*From the gatekeeper's hand has fallen the garden-gate key,
her pomegranate breasts in the garden revealed.*

. . .

*Unaware of the king's gaze that jasmine lingered,
for the view of her narcissus the hyacinth hindered.*

. . .

*When the moon from the dark cloud emerged,
Shirin's eyes the king discerned.*

. . .

*But this that pool of sugar saw no means,
than her hair like the night to spread upon the mist.*

. . .

In this romance, as in all romances, there are many incidents and events that impede Shirin and Khosrow from meeting each other and from being alone together, away from the eyes of the fiercely devout who behaved much like modern-day censors.

Finally, however, Shirin arrives in Madayen, her beloved's capital city . . .

In those days, Madayen was the wealthiest and the most splendid capital city in the world. Remnants of the massive arched roof of its royal palace can still be found in Iraq – I mean, that country that was once part of the Persian Empire and that today, because of the unrelenting war there, those Americans whose knowledge of geography is not very good no longer mistake for Iran.

A long time has passed since Shirin and Khosrow met and fell in love, but they still haven't done anything. On their long-awaited wedding night, Shirin lectures Khosrow: After all the wine you have drunk in your life, on

this one night do not drink. However, by early afternoon, from the intense excitement of consummating their marriage, Khosrow starts to drink. By nightfall, completely drunk, he waits for Shirin to walk through the doors of the nuptial chamber bathed, made-up, perfumed and wearing a negligee that the trend-setting Victoria's Secret has yet to dream up . . . Imagine the nuptial chamber, not with your own strong and scientific imagination, but with the unscientific and idiotic imagination of a film such as Oliver Stone's *Alexander*. Imagine the chamber with an Egyptian-Arabic-Indian-Iranian-Chinese decor, with a bed that has so much gold or so many emeralds or diamonds strewn on it that there is no room to lie down. In one corner there is an Indian Shiva, somewhere else there is the figure of Ra, the Egyptian deity, and in yet another corner smoke rises from a Chinese incense burner. And there, in the middle of the bed, lies Khosrow, the emperor of Persia, all sprawled out. I cannot find an Iranian imagery for Khosrow; therefore, like those Hollywood movies that jumble everything together, I will compare him to Ganesha, the Hindu patron of arts and sciences and the god of intellect and wisdom whom I like very much. Ganesha has an elephant's head and a human body. He loves sweets, and in Farsi the name Shirin means "sweet". But I have chosen this simile because Ganesha's trunk is likely to bear similarities to Khosrow's manly trunk.

Regardless of the elephant's trunk, when Shirin realizes that Khosrow is drunk on this historic night, out of mischief she sends her stepmother into the nuptial chamber instead of going in herself. The description of the old woman is thus:

Like a wolf, not a young wolf but an old one, with a pair of sagging breasts that resemble two sheepskin sacs, an old hump on her back, her face as wrinkled as an Indian walnut, her mouth as wide as a grave and with only a couple of yellow teeth in it and no eyelashes on her eyes . . . The old woman enters the room. Khosrow, drunk, is taken aback. What is this? How did pretty Shirin suddenly turn into this? He concludes that it is because of his inebriated state that he sees Shirin like this, and he gets his hooks into her. The old woman screams out in pain, Shirin save me! Shirin enters the room and Khosrow realizes his mistake.

Here, the poet again offers a lengthy description of Shirin's beauties. He compares her body to all sorts of flowers and all sorts of rare sweets and foods. Of course, from the standpoint of literary ingenuity and poetic creativity, the descriptions are truly rich and beautiful.

The poet writes that Shirin's lips and teeth are of the same essence as love. Her lips have never seen teeth, nor have her teeth ever seen lips. This half-couplet offers one example of the ambiguities of Iranian literature because one can derive various interpretations from it. Perhaps Shirin's lips are so plump and protruding that they do not touch her teeth. Or perhaps they are, as we say in Farsi, like a finely tapered braid and so thin that no teeth could bite into them. In other words, this half-couplet could imply that no man has ever bitten Shirin's lips, or that her lips have never touched a man's teeth, or even that her teeth have never bitten a man's lips. Do you think there is any better way to describe a woman's virginity than to suggest that she has never experienced a stolen kiss?

In olden days and current times, when Iranian men search for a spouse, they search for a woman whose lips have never touched teeth and whose teeth have never touched lips. And when they seek a lover, they want someone with extensive experience in biting. Unfortunately, often-times either they don't find her or they end up with her opposite . . .

In subsequent verses Shirin's body is progressively thus described:

Her face resembling flowers . . . The front and back of her body akin to soft white ermine, and her fingers reminiscent of ten elongated ermine tails . . . Her body, milk and honey; her eyebrows, arches stretching as far as her earlobes; and the curve of her double chin draped down to her shoulders.

Given the information the poet offers, we know that Shirin is from Armenia, and given that Iranian men generally prefer fair-skinned blondes, women from Armenia – which at times was and at times was not part of Iran – were and remain symbols of beauty. However, given the similes I have described, this Shirin is definitely not this century's fashion.

In any case, the old woman escapes from the room and Shirin appears before Khosrow. Now Khosrow's eyes widen at the sight of all that beauty and sex appeal. This, in fact, is the story's climax. *Khosrow and Shirin* is made up of six thousand five hundred verses. Approximately four-fifths of it recounts how Khosrow heard praise of Shirin's beauty and desired her, how Shirin travelled to Iran from Armenia, how they met, how they fell in love and how eager they were to fall into each other's arms. The verses also relate how an innocent man named Farhad, ill treated and poor, who did not possess the position, power, or sexual wherewithal of the emperor Khosrow, falls in love with Shirin, how the romantic affair turns into a

love triangle, how Farhad, in demonstrating the magnitude of his love for Shirin – or perhaps to exhibit his manly prowess – begins to carve a passageway in a massive mountain with only a pickaxe. Which one of her two lovers do you think Shirin should have picked: the sleeping drunk or the mountain-carver?

Throughout these verses, numerous obstacles and incidents and even separations bar Khosrow and Shirin from lying in each other's arms. But after all is said and done, like all lovers across the world, be they in Mogadishu or Sarajevo, in Tehran or Baghdad or Paris, at last Khosrow and Shirin come together on that long-awaited night and they start planting flowers and drinking milk sweetened with honey . . . In other words, the poet has composed five thousand two hundred verses and developed scores of incidents before Khosrow and Shirin finally join in the nuptial chamber and make love.

Can you guess what happens on this night?

In a half-couplet, the poet suggests that when Khosrow perceives Shirin's sensuality, he turns into a beast that has seen the new moon – or, were we to find metaphors consistent with Anglo-Saxon culture, he turns into a werewolf who has seen the full moon.

Guess!

Please do not refer to your own personal experiences.

I suspect you have guessed wrong. No, Khosrow does not attack Shirin. Instead he flops down on the bed and falls asleep. Yes, precisely at that tender and fateful moment . . .

Now I'm thinking that perhaps one reason Macedonian, Arab, Turk, Mongol, Afghan and English invaders could so easily and effectively occupy the magnificent empires of Iran was exactly this. Our kings had the habit of falling asleep precisely at tender and fateful moments, moments when they had to be men, to be strong, to be hard, and to occupy something small and sweet, and by the time they woke up, all was lost, and not only their kingdom but their wives, slaves and sisters had been occupied.

Fortunately, however, at least in Khosrow and Shirin's story, the king does not wake up to the angry face of a Macedonian or a Mongol or an Afghan. Instead he sees his Shirin sleeping beside him like a flower; and at last, he begins the much-delayed labour.

In an old Iranian text, about four hundred years ago, at a time when censorship was still not so powerful and institutionalized, in describing a scene of 66, an Iranian writer used weaponry and warfare metaphors quite successfully. He wrote: He raised the meaty mace and pounded it against the tallow shield.

However, Nizami, that delicate-natured poet, did not favour such violence. Instead he depicted scenes of lovemaking in this manner. Khosrow loses patience and begins to kiss and fondle Shirin. In other words, he begins to lick sweets and suck candy. Beside these comparisons, like the slow-motion replays of scored goals in sports matches, the poet again compares these actions to planting and gardening:

*At first he began gathering flowers,
like blooms on that face laughter blossoms.*

. . .

Then together, the poet and Khosrow begin picking fruits:

*Of apple and jasmine sugar-plums he made,
at times with pomegranates and narcissus he played.*

. . .

I assume you can discern the body parts that apple and jasmine represent. To increase your knowledge of fruitology, I reiterate that in Iranian literature, pomegranates are generally used to talk of, or not to talk of, small firm breasts that fit in one hand. Narcissus is generally a reference to beautiful eyes, but I doubt that Khosrow, at the height of his excitement, can be bothered to play with Shirin's eyes. Therefore, narcissus could be a simile for Shirin's orchid.

The replay of the scored goal sometimes extends to wildlife:

*Now and then the white falcon the king's grasp fled,
now and then the pheasant upon his chest perched.*

. . .

*Now and then such pleasure came from flight,
that the dove prevailed upon the hawk.*

. . .

These verses are a work of genius in depicting a sex scene in which the woman is active.

*The doe and the lion together travailed,
upon her at last the lion prevailed.*

. . .

Then comes the act of plunging into the jewellery store:

*Wondrously to the treasure-trove's depth he went,
with his ruby her agate seal he rent.*

. . .

Meaning Khosrow tore the agate seal of Shirin's virginity.

Then again we come to a description of Shirin's food products, and we read of a boneless date, which means a seedless one, that penetrates her. No, it is not over yet. The account of their lovemaking now becomes slightly more human, and in very poetic, beautiful and perfectly rhyming words we read that a body has coiled around a body and a soul has reached a soul. No, it is still not over yet. In fact, it is time for the sea and scuba-diving:

*An oyster cradled upon a coral horn,
now water and fire together conjoin.*

. . .

And at last it is over:

*From fire and water's colourful scheme,
with cinnabar and quicksilver the nuptial chamber teemed.*

. . .

Meaning there is silver and cinnabar-coloured water everywhere.

The garden-trekking, zoo-travelling, fruit-picking, and scuba-diving of the two lovers takes an entire day and night, and then the two sleep for an entire day and night . . .

This too is another discovery of why invaders could occupy our country so easily. When the king spends twenty-four hours in the flower bed, the garden, the zoo and underwater, and then he sleeps for twenty-four hours, when does he ever find time to run the country?

I hope that after this rather lengthy example, you have come to understand why censorship is so complicated in Iran, and why Iranian literature, which is quite rich, is so difficult to translate and to read.

Reading six thousand five hundred verses can take a long time, but Sara quickly finished the book. Contrary to her expectations, Dara's letter in this book was very short.

Sara, you probably love Khosrow, a wealthy king, handsome, frivolous and yet also a strong and brave man who has won many battles and wreaked havoc on the Romans. I don't think you could love Farhad. A sincere, timid and poor lover who kills himself when he loses hope of ever having Shirin. Yet he never cheated on his love in order to forget . . . But I think Khosrow and Farhad are two sides of the same coin. They complement each other. It is when the two are joined that they create a true lover . . .

The next book was Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. It was impossible for this politico-erotic novel to be among the books at the library. But Sara, following the instructions given to her in the letter, found it hidden behind a stack of dusty books by Avicenna, the legendary tenth-century Iranian philosopher and physician. She first deciphered the letter, and after reading it several times, she read the novel. She read ravenously, and of course in many places she became terribly stressed. Many scenes in the book had been censored and replaced with the infamous ellipses.

Two months have passed since Sara read that first novel, and now the curtains in her room are always open, except for times when she wants to change her clothes. The image of a beautiful girl sitting at the window of a beautiful house is a romantic and male-attracting scene throughout the world. As a result, Sara found a few new admirers. As soon as they saw her at the window, they would line up on the pavement opposite her house and stare at her. But Sara was sure Dara was not among them, because they were all so boorish-looking. Some of them were even vulgar; they would whistle at her, or they would make funny gestures with their hands, eyes and lips. Sara's father, a traditional man who took great care of his daughter's untouched flower, had become extremely angry by the constant

presence of the young men, and had made up his mind to call the police. However, three days later, the pestering admirers had all disappeared.

Sara was growing more restless and curious by the day to see Dara. Of course, she herself had labelled her emotions as mere curiosity. She had created a vague image of his face in her mind, and with the aid of her imagination she would add features to this hazy image, and this further fanned the flames of her curiosity.

In the next letter she read:

Don't worry about those pests. They don't even dare walk past your house any more. But you shouldn't spend too much time sitting at the window either. Not that I don't like it, but I'm afraid your next admirer may be a thug. My left eye is still bruised from one of them punching me . . . Why don't you write to me? Haven't I convinced you that you can trust me? What trouble could you get into if you only encode a few words to me? The letter won't even be in your handwriting, and you can completely deny it whenever you want . . .

A bruised left eye was a good clue. But she didn't find Dara. Instead, she saw several women with bruised eyes or cheeks from the beatings of their husbands' fists.

She had completely given up hope when one day, near her house, she suddenly felt her heart explode and her knees weaken. It was walking towards her. A left eye with a conspicuous black bruise under it. Excited and embarrassed, Sara looked the other way. She even considered turning around and changing course. However, when she managed to regain her composure, she turned and looked at the young man's face again. She recognized him. He was one of the pestering admirers who used to stand in front of her house. He would hold his thumb and pinky up against his ear mimicking a telephone, and then he would point to the wall behind him where in red paint he had written his mobile phone number and drawn a broken heart next to it. Sara was shocked and disappointed. She worried that this ugly, vulgar and undignified man was the Dara of her dreams. The pestering admirer saw Sara, too. But he quickly turned around and with long and rapid strides walked in the opposite direction. In effect, he ran away. Sara breathed a sigh of relief. She was now certain that the man was not Dara. In that last moment

before he turned around, Sara noticed the young man's right eye. It too had a bruise under it.

Hello Sara,

Thank you for writing that two-sentence letter. I am truly honoured. But it really did me in. By the time I searched every single page of *War and Peace* to find the fifty-nine letters you marked, my eyes were all swollen. Even Natasha wasn't as mischievous as you. To make sure no one discovers your letter, even though it is very unlikely, I rubbed out the dots and returned the book to the library; just the way all the dots from the letters I have sent to you have been rubbed out. Life isn't so pleasant these days. I may not be able to write to you or to even see you any more. ~~I used to be in prison. I was released on the condition that I would not leave the city. Once a week I have to go and show myself and sign. These days, the more I swear that I am no longer involved in political activities, the more they suspect me. I have even confessed that I have fallen in love, and now detest any and all ideologies but . . .~~ As always, I wish you happiness . . .

This was the last letter Sara decoded from the pages of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. This book too had been carefully hidden for her behind a stack of dusty books. Sara no longer saw a sign or a dot from Dara . . .

Dara disappeared.

Something was lost in Sara's life. She felt lonelier than ever before. She read more novels and stories than ever before. She told herself that Dara had read them too, or was reading them now. Unlike in the past, she looked at the faces of the people on the street; she felt she liked them because one of them may have spoken to Dara or perhaps knew him. She especially looked at the faces of the street pedlars, but she saw no sign of familiarity in their eyes. Sometimes she thought Dara may have had some sort of a physical handicap. Sometimes she thought Dara had tricked her: anyone else would have shown himself to her at least once . . . Until at last, on that spring day, in front of the main entrance of Tehran University, on the fringes of the impassioned student demonstrations, Dara introduced himself to her and their adventure began . . .

Years before Sara and Dara's first meeting, I had the honour of meeting Mr Petrovich. In those days I was a young writer who in his solitude had

spent years carefully reading novels and stories. I had even extracted the styles and techniques of all sorts of classical and modern writers from their books and had noted them on index cards. I had then concluded that every writer must have his own particular worldview and philosophy. I therefore read as many books on philosophy as I could. To analyse my characters successfully, I read the equivalent of a university degree in psychology. I had Freud and Jung and their followers in one hand, and Pavlov and his followers in the other, until I arrived at American psychology. Next, I told myself that a great writer will never become a great writer if he is not well versed in world history and politics. Therefore, as a social and literary responsibility, and despite my family's trepidations, I chose political science as my field of study at the university.

Before I left Shiraz for Tehran and Tehran University, my father, who was a wealthy, self-made man, pulled me aside and said:

"Look, son, there's no future for you in political science. The best jobs for political science graduates are at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But positions like ambassadorships and director generals and whatever else belong to the relatives of the Shah and his royal court. They won't even make you a mere clerk."

My father was absolutely right, and that is why I disagreed with him. He went on to say:

"What's more, if you study political science, because you are a very emotional person, there is a good chance you will end up joining some anti-government political group, you'll become a Communist, an urban guerrilla, and you'll end up having to deal with the secret police. By the time they're finished with you, if you have not been executed or sentenced to life in prison because of the hot baked potatoes and the Coca-Cola bottles they have shoved up your arse, you'll be walking funny for the rest of your life . . . Go to America, study engineering or medicine and become the pride of your family and your country."

At the time, I could not tell my father that I did not want to become a Communist, nor did I want to be an ambassador . . . Therefore, against his advice, I went and studied political science. I wanted to go as far as a doctorate degree, but first came the revolution, then the war, and I who wanted to become a great writer told myself that many of the world's great writers have experienced war, and so I signed up for military service and volunteered to go to the front. The first outcome of the Iran-Iraq War was

millions of dead and disabled; the second outcome was that soon after peace was established, we realized that we were two Muslim countries and therefore brothers. It seems the war also wanted to offer the world another great writer, and for this reason, after eighteen months, it sent me back to my hometown, Shiraz, alive and well. And I, who even in the trenches had spent my time reading novels from the farthest reaches of the world – *The Soul Enchanted*, *David Copperfield*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Resurrection* and . . . and . . . and had not stopped the exercise of writing, was fully armed and ready to write my first masterpieces and to present them to the world.

Ask me:

Was all this self-adulation, as with other big-headed writers, just to claim that you are a great writer?

And I will answer:

You are wrong again. No, I didn't say all this to suggest that I am a great writer. I said it all to explain why I have *not* become a great writer. In other words, I want to say that I was just another young man with *Great Expectations* of my future as a writer. In 1990, I was thrilled to learn that on the advice of Hooshang Golshiri, one of Iran's great writers, a reputable private publisher had agreed to publish the second collection of my short stories, titled *The Eighth Day of the Earth*. Every day I sat waiting for the telephone to ring so that I could hear my publisher's voice tell me that my book had been printed. I waited for almost a year, until one day I finally heard his voice on the telephone.

"Shahriar! We're screwed! I'm ruined . . . The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has complained of thirteen separate points in your book – all sexy words and phrases . . . You have to come to Tehran. What a mistake I made investing in a young writer. My capital . . . I'm ruined!"

I kept thinking, When did I ever write sexy stories? I could not come up with an answer, so I quickly got on the bus and headed for Tehran. The six-hundred-mile road between Shiraz and Tehran passes by the two-thousand-five-hundred-year-old ruins of Persepolis; it passes by Isfahan, one of the most beautiful cities in Iran which some five hundred years ago served as the capital city of the Safavid Dynasty; it passes by the religious city of Qom, which is the centre for educating and producing clergymen, and it passes by two great deserts as well. During the night, when the two opium-addicted bus drivers would change shifts somewhere in the divide

between the two deserts, I had ample time to calculate how many pages of the book had to be replaced in order to revise thirteen sentences on thirteen different pages. I concluded that approximately one hundred and ninety thousand pages had to be replaced.

You will likely say:

Don't ridicule us! Like all bad writers, some of whom even become bestsellers, you too take your readers for fools! What is this? You who claim to have prepared and armed yourself to become a great writer, didn't you know anything about mathematics?

As a matter of fact, not only had I studied mathematics, but I had even hammered into my head *The Meaning of Einstein's Theory of Relativity* by Russell. It is you who lack knowledge of mathematics . . . Look here! These were the early post-revolution days when publishers would request a permit for a book to leave the printers after it had actually been printed, and three thousand copies of this sinister book had been printed and bound and were waiting for their exit permit from the printers. My publisher had explained that to change one word or one sentence on one page, sixteen pages of a book had to be replaced because books are printed in sixteen-page forms. Now let's assume that to revise thirteen sexy phrases, four sixteen-page forms had to be extracted from the book.

Four multiplied by sixteen makes sixty-four. Now sixty-four multiplied by three thousand.

It is your turn to calculate. Even without accounting for the cost of ink and the salaries of the printers' employees, figure out how much oil must be extracted from the belly of my beloved motherland and sold, and its oil dollars sent to Brazil to purchase paper, and how many trees in Brazil have to be sacrificed to make all this paper.

A book for which so much damage is inflicted on nature, whether a masterpiece or rubbish, is a murderer.

Now I understand why I was inspired to name the book *The Eighth Day of the Earth*. And now I understand that if God had not stopped to rest after he created the world, and had instead taken on the toil of writing stories and novels himself, there wouldn't be so much damage done to the beauties of the nature he created.

In any case, on an autumn day when the air in Tehran was a mixture of carbon monoxide, the scent of rain and the fleeting perfume of a girl who

years later would be named Sara, I, with all my ambition, climbed on the back of my publisher's dilapidated motorcycle and together we headed for the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The rain had just stopped. Mud and slime flew at us from the wheels of passing cars. We rode past Tehran University. There were no demonstrations in front of its main entrance because by then all anti-government students had been purged and the preferred students had already enrolled. Of course, much later, they too would become opponents of the government.

On our perilous journey through the terrifying jungle of Tehran's traffic, my publisher was thinking that if, instead of publishing literature and supporting stupid young storytellers, he had published guidebooks for wise young people on passing university entrance exams, especially for the engineering and medical schools, he would have been rich by now, and instead of riding this ten-year-old Yamaha, he would be driving a brand-new Mercedes. And I was telling myself that if, instead of all this labour for literature, I had listened to my father and studied engineering or medicine in the United States, instead of riding this dilapidated motorcycle, I would be driving a Porsche, and I would have stopped in front of this publisher's bookstore and, just to make him happy, I would have bought precious yet unpopular books for my private library. But the truth is, I was ashamed. It was no small sin that in an Islamic country thirteen sexy phrases had been discovered in a one-hundred-and-forty-page book. At last, with such thoughts of *Fathers and Sons* and *Crime and Punishment*, in an office in the grand and majestic headquarters of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, like two Joseph Ks we sat facing Mr Petrovich.

Mr Petrovich, part detective, part criminal court judge and quite imposing, was sitting behind a large desk. He was about thirty-five years old, with sharp eyes and a closely trimmed beard. He ordered his secretary to find and bring the file for *The Eighth Day of the Earth*. During the thirty minutes it took to produce it, Mr Petrovich was discussing advancements in print technology in the West and the unbelievable speed of new printing machines with a bearded middle-aged man sitting in an armchair next to his desk. The middle-aged man's composure suggested that he was someone important and someone whom Mr Petrovich held in high regard. At the time, I foolishly hoped that the man would leave before the file containing the sexy phrases lay open on that desk. Luckily, he did not. Mr

Petrovich handed a sheet of paper to my publisher with a list of page numbers and lines that were problematic. Then, like a father who has seen his newborn child for the first time, I laid eyes on my book. However, just like the dark-skinned father who suddenly sees that his child is white, I too was shocked. My book had no cover.

The first sentence that was underlined as sexy and provocative was this:

“My eyes shift from her face to her neck and then move farther down, and I am disgusted by the feelings her breasts do not awaken in me . . .”

You probably think the sentence is obviously sexy. Ask me if the breasts are naked, and I will say no. The sentence is in a short story entitled “Thursday’s Sara”, I mean, it was. In the story, a young officer, wounded at war and paralysed from the waist down, as he does all his other days and nights, lies on a bed in his mother’s house. It is raining and his sad fiancée who has come to visit him is standing beside the window drawing lines on the fogged-up glass. The man’s spinal cord has been severed and he has told his fiancée that it is over between them. But his fiancée, a nurse at a mental hospital, continues to visit him every Thursday and talks to him about a girl named Sara – Sara’s first appearance in my stories. Sara is a lively, emotional and playful girl who can awaken the courage to fall in love in any man. But it seems Sara has no memory. Every Thursday, the nurse recounts one of Sara’s escapades for her paralysed fiancé. At the end of my story, the young man suspects that if Sara really exists, she exists only in his fiancée’s fantasies, and that, in fact, the young woman is only articulating her own lost dreams . . .

It is in such a setting that the man looks at his fiancée’s face, neck and torso.

The argument between Mr Petrovich and me began. I said:

“Sir! What is sexy about this sentence? It is just the opposite. The man is paralysed. He has lost his manhood. That is why the sight of his fiancée’s breasts disgust him . . . Please pay attention to the word ‘disgust’. Who in the world is going to be aroused by reading this sad story and the description of a feeling of disgust?”

Mr Petrovich had his own reasoning and was particularly sensitive to the word “breast”.

The next sentence, in another story, was something like this:

“. . . Suddenly the woman, as though she had gone mad from thirst and the hellish heat, wildly ripped off her clothes and poured the

remaining water in the ewer – their only reserve for the next few days – over her head. Her husband, weak with dehydration, was sprawled out in the corner of the hut. Passively, he watched as the drops of water trickled down the wrinkles and lines on the woman’s pale thighs and plunged to the thirsty earth . . .”

With a look of reproach Mr Petrovich said:

“What about this? It is truly a vile and filthy scene.”

And I, as though defending the rights of the woman in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, with passion and literary conjecture, actually legal conjecture, in defence of every single word of that story, said:

“My esteemed sir, you have read the story. There is a drought. There is a shortage of water in this southern village. Misery and death have befallen the people. One night the villagers all have the same nightmare, a nightmare as black as tar; and it happens on the night when the American coup d’état succeeds in Tehran, and Mossadeq is arrested for the crime of nationalizing oil and the Shah is supposed to return to the country. What’s more, the woman in the story is at least sixty years old . . .”

I apologize to all the beautiful sixty-year-old ladies. In those days, there were no Internet sites to post photographs of the ten sexiest Hollywood stars over fifty.

Tirelessly I argued.

“Sir, imagine the wrinkles on dehydrated skin, the white lines underneath withered skin, the filth and grime of not having bathed for months . . . Greasy, gross . . . What is so sexy about all this? The only beautiful woman in the story, as you have read, has been compared to a flower with absolutely no description of her face or figure.”

Unconvinced, Mr Petrovich said:

“I just don’t understand why you writers insist on depicting such filthy scenes and presenting them to the reader’s imagination.”

“Sir! It is not about insisting. It is life. Believe me, to make a story believable, its characters have to be portrayed, otherwise the reader will not find them credible . . . You yourself have read how the location of the village is described in detail. Its surrounding deserts have been illustrated in many sentences, even the animals and the men.”

“Well, I never said we are against descriptions. What we say is that you should describe the beauties of nature, the glory of the sky and the galaxy, meaning all the beauties that God has created. Writing of such images

you will be blessed in the hereafter as well, because if your readers are intelligent, from your writings they will discover the greatness of God and their faith will be strengthened.”

I blurted out:

“Sir, it isn’t the writer’s fault if there are also ugly things and unbathed women in the world . . . By the way, aren’t they also God’s creations?”

Mr Petrovich glared at me. His knotted eyebrows were saying, You’re getting too big for your boots. His angry eyes were saying, You’re running away with yourself.

But perhaps because I was a young writer and he didn’t want to drive me towards the anti-revolution camp, he masked his anger and continued.

“Well, in this section, if you had not described the woman’s body, your story would not have suffered at all.”

“It certainly would have suffered. I think the scene where the water drips onto the dirt is good literary imaging. I think stories are written so that such images can be created.”

“As a matter of fact, these lengthy illustrations make the story dull and boring. In a story, events have to take place one after the other. For example, you should have just written, ‘She empties the ewer over her head’.”

“That’s not possible, sir. Then the reader will wonder whether the woman has gone mad.”

“Well, in your story you want to show that the woman has in fact gone mad.”

“Sir, these two madnesses are completely different. In a weak story, characters go mad without logic and literary sense, in which case it will seem as if all the bones in the story are broken. To write a good story, we have to try to make sure that even characters who go mad have a rational reason for it . . .”

Mr Petrovich walked out of the room and returned with a glass of water filled with ice. To quell the flames of his rage, he drank it all in one gulp. Mr Petrovich is not alone; many of us Iranians are terribly angered when someone teaches us something we don’t know. But my excitement and passion in defending my stories were so great that I didn’t realize I was being offensive. Our argument dragged on to other phrases in the book. In those too there was either the word “breast” or words used to describe the beauty or ugliness of the lips, arms or thighs of a woman . . . By then my face was drenched with sweat and I was swearing to God and to the

Prophet that for a reader familiar with these stories, such descriptions would not be sexually arousing at all, and that if someone is looking to be aroused, he is far better off looking elsewhere. I mean, instead of reading the word “breast”, he can just go out into the street where there are plenty of breasts and thighs . . .

After an hour of heated discussion, neither I nor Mr Petrovich had been convinced. Finally, Mr Petrovich, who perhaps still wanted to avoid breaking the heart of a young writer, fed up and exhausted, said:

“No. No matter what I say, you come up with ten justifications for it.”

And without any apparent forethought he blurted out:

“As an impartial observer, let’s ask this gentleman’s opinion.”

And he offered my book with the underlined sentences to the dignified gentleman.

“As a fair-minded reader, you be the judge.”

The dignified gentleman began pensively reading those thirteen notorious lines . . . Ten minutes . . . fifteen minutes went by. My heart was pounding in my chest. I knew the moment of the verdict was at hand. Drops of sweat, like drops of water dripping off a wrinkled thigh, dripped onto the floor. My publisher was still sitting there, quiet and meek, and the dignified gentleman had gone back yet one more time to reread from the very first instance . . . Twenty-three minutes . . . I couldn’t figure out what he was doing with the breasts and thighs of my story . . . And all the while, Mr Petrovich sat there looking at me with an air of victory. The ice in his glass melted . . . Half an hour . . . Finally the dignified gentleman spoke.

“What can I say . . . It is not easy to judge . . . In any case, perhaps . . . I don’t know . . . Perhaps for men of our age it would not be arousing, but for the young . . . What can I say?!”

Impulsively, I said:

“Dear sir, you are still young. Were you really aroused by those sentences?”

This was one of those rare moments in my life when I was shrewdly clever . . . It was obvious that the dignified gentleman, even if he had been aroused, could not confess to three men that he was sexually stimulated by reading a few sentences. Hence he said:

“No.”

And I in turn said to Mr Petrovich:

“You see, sir . . .”

Now in an environment awash with mutual understanding, our discussion continued for another twenty minutes. Mr Petrovich agreed to forgo censoring several sentences. I did not want to give in on the others, but my publisher whispered that I had gone far enough and that I should not make him any angrier and any more tired.

We left the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. I climbed up behind my publisher on his motorcycle and we rode off. Small drops of water from the wrinkled thighs of the clouds above Tehran rained on our faces. The drivers of hundreds of polluting motorcycles and cars were blowing their horns, cutting one another up and cursing at one another. On the crowded streets people were going about their daily headaches and responsibilities. No one paid any attention to the noisy passage of one of the greatest and most honoured publishers and one of the future's greatest writers of their country. In those days, many middle-class and working-class people were forced to take on two jobs just to make ends meet, and they hardly gave a damn if in some scene, in some story, a man's gaze moved across his fiancée's breasts or not, or whether the man's manhood was intact or not, or even whether his fiancée had any breasts or not. And for this reason, the pithy three-thousand print run of books was shrinking even further. But still, I felt as though I had lost some part of my soul, as though parts of my body had been stripped naked, stared at and severed.

I said to my publisher:

“Mr Petrovich forgave us three breasts and two thighs.”

He did not answer, and to escape the traffic he turned into a side street. Perhaps he was wondering why, instead of publishing troublesome books by young writers, he didn't publish instructive books on religion or books on the writs and principles of Islam in laymen's language that millions of people seeking government jobs and admission to universities would buy to prepare for the multiple-choice questions of the Islamic selection process . . .

If that is indeed what he was thinking, then I would have had to be thinking: in addition to the millions of job seekers and university applicants, thousands of Communist Tudeh Party followers purchase these books and memorize them far more scrupulously than any non-Communist, so that they can infiltrate government offices and universities.

We rode past a beautiful modern high-rise building with elements of ancient Greek and seventeenth-century Iranian architecture. The motor-

cycle's groans suddenly stopped. The startled publisher cursed at the raindrops. We climbed down. He started fiddling with the spark plugs.

Next to the front stairs of the building with its postmodern façade, a street pedlar wearing clothes reminiscent of eight hundred years ago was sitting on the pavement with a box in front of him. We Iranians are used to such characters. In their boxes they have magic for sale. Talismans for rendering the enemy mute . . . Potions to pour in front of a foe's door so that the sound of laughter will never again emanate from it . . . Snake's eggs to make someone fall in love . . . Hyena's pussy to be mixed with the bones of a hundred-year-old cadaver and fed to a husband so that he does not fancy taking another wife . . . Scraps of paper with spells written on them in strange script to be steeped in water as a cure for the ailing . . . Rings for becoming rich . . . The pedlar raised his head. Our eyes met. I thought, One day I will write your story too. And I heard his voice somewhere deep in my ear, Write! I also have Indian elephant's testicle powder dissolved in syrupy Ganesha potion. Any writer who drinks it will win the Nobel Prize . . . If you win it, write in your story that the potions, talismans and spells of medicine man Jafar ibn-Jafri are more potent than those of all other medicine men . . .

Miraculously, the motorcycle engine started. We climbed back on. We were moving away from the witchcraft-selling medicine man. I turned around and stared at the path of his dark gaze and said to my publisher, "It didn't turn out too badly . . . Three breasts and two thighs . . ."

My publisher still didn't express any joy. We passed in front of a hospital affiliated with Tehran University. Above its main entrance, on a huge thirty-foot-by-six-foot banner, in large, beautiful calligraphy, was written

**MEDICAL SEMINAR ON THE CAUSES AND PREVENTIONS
OF BREAST CANCER**

Let us return to Tehran University . . .

~~The students are still being beaten up . . .~~

No, this sentence will not appeal to Mr Petrovich at all. What's more, from the standpoint of Iranian literature, it is not at all exciting because in my country, since the founding of the first university, getting beaten up and thrown in jail have always been among the required credits for students . . . Therefore, this is how I will transition back to my story. Let us together return to that beautiful spring day on Liberty Street . . .

The efforts of the anti-riot police to disperse the students continue. There are exactly three minutes and three seconds left until the moment when Sara will be thrown to the ground and her head will hit against a cement edge. To escape the terrifying face of that timeless hunchback, she moves a few steps closer to the conflict, not knowing that she has moved a few steps closer to the location of her death. Sara, her eyes still brimming with tears, raises her sign with its strange slogan even higher, and by doing so attracts even greater attention and graver danger. In Iran, any action, innovation or even non-cliché art that is not based on our traditions or on our so-called modern traditions attracts the greatest threats, attacks and hatred from all fronts. It is at this very moment that Sara again hears:

“Sara! Leave this place . . .”

Aggravated by the pestering hunchback, Sara once more peers behind the fence. There is nothing there but the trunks of the old sycamore and cypress trees of the university campus . . . Then she hears:

“I’m Dara . . .”

Sara looks to her left and sees a young man standing three steps away leaning against the short stone wall and looking in the opposite direction from her. Dara, without turning to face her, says:

“What are you doing? Everyone here belongs to some political group. They’re looking out for one another. You on your own are in more danger than anyone else . . .”

Now our love story is slowly approaching its first incident.

Dara continues to talk to Sara in a way that no one will notice.

“Please throw away your sign. Let’s leave this place.”

Sara, confused, her eyes brimming with tears, still has not clearly seen Dara’s face. She sees him pass in front of her. She realizes that as he walks by he takes the sign from her hand and throws it behind the university fence. And then she hears:

“Please follow me at a distance . . .”

Mesmerized, Sara begins to walk ten steps behind Dara. She’s not scared of losing him in the crowd; she is certain he is keeping an eye on her. They leave behind the anger and chaos of Liberty Street. The dust of decay from flying carpets hovers in the sky above Tehran . . .

Finally, Dara stops in front of the ruins of a cinema that, years ago,

during the days of the revolution, was burned down. Sara involuntarily stops next to him. Dara has a brand-new beautiful handkerchief that his late grandmother had given him as a keepsake. He doesn't know why he always carries it with him. And all I know is that this handkerchief will play a key role in my story, just like Chekhov's gun hanging on the wall. **The edge of the white silk handkerchief is embroidered with delicate red roses. Sara dries her eyes with it, and in this magnificent moment, for the very first time, she sees Dara's face . . . which in our story is a kind and gentle face. A high forehead, thick eyebrows, large black eyes, thirsty curved lips, teeth as lustrous as pearls from Bahrain and ebony-coloured hair with locks tousled on his brow.**

I am teasing you. My story's Dara doesn't look like this at all. If you are really interested in picturing his face, then set your imagination in motion. As a hint, I can tell you that in this novel Dara has a hazy face.

~~And for the very first time in this universe, their eyes meet.~~

It is right here that I, the writer, run into a few snags. In all probability, at this very moment Mr Petrovich's exactitude has heightened, and he will immediately underline the phrase "their eyes meet". My second problem is that even in front of the ruins of a cinema that is not playing any romantic film, a few blocks away from which political demonstrations are under way, an Iranian boy and girl cannot simply stand in the street and stare into each other's eyes; chances are the patrol from the Campaign Against Social Corruption will arrest them.

My one hundred and first problem – I still don't know what the third to the hundredth problems are – is that Sara and Dara are not familiar with those opening lines of dialogue between a man and a woman that throughout the world and in all love stories are identical and equally tedious. Even if they are familiar with Danielle Steel's novels and their Iranian equivalents, at this moment those clichéd discourses seem dull and idiotic . . . You may not believe me, but it is true that many of Danielle Steel's novels have been translated into Farsi, and together with their Iranian imitations are reprinted tens of times in large print runs. I really would like to meet Danielle Steel some day and, straight off, ask her, What have you done for Mr Petrovich to issue permits so generously for your novels to leave the printers – of course, after having deleted the kissing scenes? What if Mr Petrovich is smart enough to know that such

novels breed tame citizens who never question anything? Or did you perhaps buy a talisman for stirring benevolence in his heart from Jafar ibn-Jafri?

Sara wants to complain:

Where did you suddenly disappear to?

But she doesn't. And I write:

In this strange moment, every word, every sentence, seems hollow and absurd . . .

From the late Henry James, may God rest his soul, I know that to heighten the dramatic energy of my story, I have to limit its perspective to either Sara or Dara. But then to respect narrative candour, I will have to write of the secret thoughts and desires of that character. Should I fall into this trap, I will also fall prey to Mr Petrovich. On the other hand, I really don't want to portray my story's character as cold, or to conceal his or her emotions in the vein of Hemingway and his American successors. So what am I to do? In your opinion, what can one do with words that are at times idiotic when writing a simple scene of a young man and woman looking into each other's eyes in some street in Tehran? Let's leave it up to these old words and see what they themselves will write.

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning flashes from Sara's black eyes and sets fire to the wheat fields of Dara's soul . . .

I did say words sometimes become dim-witted. Since Madame Bovary's death, such sentences seem rather inane.

Let us write:

Four pupils like four black mirrors facing each other . . .

Four windows open onto each other's darkness . . .

But where in the world is there something called a nose between two mirrors or two windows? We therefore have to forgo such clichés and nose-y portrayals. I will write:

In want for words, two pairs of pupils together darken a long silence.

I think if we Iranian writers continue such exhausting exercises, at long last our syphilis-stricken dream of winning a Nobel Prize might become reality. I should remember to tell that fortunate writer, or unfortunate writer, because in Iran he or she will surely be accused of collaborating with Western intelligence services, to make sure and thank Mr Petrovich when addressing the Nobel Committee.

Anyway, perforce, Sara and Dara, start to walk side by side . . .

In step with the united steps of the two characters of our story, destiny changes. **In the chaos of the clash between the students, the police, and government sympathizers, the frail figure of the hunchback midget receives a hard blow from a person who is either beating an escape or rushing to strike. The midget falls to the ground, his small head smashes against a cement edge, and his eyes for ever close . . .**