

# PART ONE

## ESCAPE

(on good faith, credible risk and opportunism)

## I.

We became refugees. Somehow it felt more settled than what we had been for the past ten months, hiding out in the United Arab Emirates. There, we were illegal: all the same dizzying displacement, uncertainty and need, but we had to find our own shelter. Without a state to say, ‘Yes, we will be responsible for you,’ we were so unmoored it was hard to fathom a next step. Maybe that’s why every move had been last minute, someone’s kindness or a stroke of luck. Miracles. And so, when we landed in Rome in winter 1989, I bubbled with love for Italy and every Italian; it was unlike anything I had felt for Dubai or Sharjah. This airport was so European, so brimming with leisure; I wanted to run to every kiosk and smell the Western chocolate and touch the expensive fabrics. But a man in a black suit held a sign with Maman’s name and we were led away to a car.

My mother, younger brother and I bundled in the back seat, cold and dirty from the long flight. I tried to stay awake for the ride through the Italian countryside. Finally, after an hour, we spotted a house on a hill, breaking up the rolling valleys in the distance. We had been told that we’d be taken to ‘a good refugee camp’, a temporary safe space for transients seeking asylum outside Italy. It was

called Barba and it had once been a hotel. The Italian government had leased this building to house the likes of us, political and religious asylum seekers and passers-through with particular need: elderly family, children. It was exciting to watch Barba appear and to know that, even though our clothes and bedding and daily routines would be those of refugees, though we would be confined there, our house would be on a hilltop, in the husk of a pretty hotel.

We pulled up a winding hill road after dinnertime. Our room was small, perhaps even smaller than the cockroach hostel in Sharjah, and we had no fridge or hot plate this time. Only a bathroom and a bed. We sat on our bed and wondered where we'd get money, if we'd find friends among our neighbours. Would we meet Farsi speakers? How long would we stay? Which country would finally take us? We wondered about that night's meal.

We considered walking to a store in Mentana. Then someone knocked. An Italian woman, young, with a punkish haircut gestured to us that we had missed the dinner call. That night, for the first time, I saw the canteen, a glass circle overlooking all that lush valley. Now empty and dark, in the morning it would fill up with displaced families like us, Iranians, Afghans, Russians, Romanians. It would buzz with many languages, many kinds of prayers. There would be children, mothers, grandmothers. But for now, the room was silent. We ate bowls of leftover pasta in semi-dark and heavy silence and thanked God that meals were provided here.

Despite its grand skeleton, Hotel Barba was a refugee camp and we had to stay put, as we had no status in Italy. We were served soup, pasta, coffee, bread at precise times

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each day and we sat in the winter chill, praying that by summer we'd be gone from there. Every day when the postman arrived, we would swell outside the mail cubbies, jostling for a good view. We wanted to know, 'Who got his letter today?' When someone did, the crowd would hush as he opened the envelope, fingers trembling, eyes scanning, then either wept quietly into his palm, muttering curses, or loudly on his knees, thanking his god. Everyone was frantic for a letter from America or England or Australia or Canada (roomy anglophone countries). A letter would mean the wait was over; our lives could now begin.

In the absence of work or school, all we did was dream, a maddening state, and battle loneliness. We ate with people from our own countries; we prayed in our own ways, some before eating (sitting, heads bowed) and some after (standing, holding hands). On cool days, the children snuck into a neighbouring orchard to steal unripe peaches and plums, because our tongues were itching for something sour and there was nothing else to soothe the craving. I tried to teach some English words to a handful of burly Russian men, skipping around the yard in my pink skirt and pointing to a tree, a fence, a chador, a babushka (the men indulged me by taking notes).

We fought boredom in increasingly desperate ways: an Afghan grandmother collected bricks from a nearby construction site and carried them back to her room under her chador. Her daughter read our fortunes from the left-over sludge in mugs of instant coffee. A young Iranian soldier with his face half-bleached from a wartime chemical burn taught us how to play soccer. Despite his new kind of whiteness, he was as interesting to me as the princes in my storybooks. Perhaps I sensed that he was

attracted to Maman. And wasn't she just *me*, in another body? Here was a man who wanted *us*, who wanted to play games with me, to make me laugh and then to look out of the corner of his eye to see if Maman was watching.

We had left Baba behind in Isfahan. I began to understand, bit by bit, over years, that I would never live with my father again. I was beginning to understand other things, too, to peek out from inside my own skin. I spent time with loving grandmothers from many countries. I joined Maman for tea and oranges in the rooms of Russian Christians. I read English books and played hopscotch and became obsessed with having a home again, with ending the wander days, rooting, and with the mysteries of adulthood. I craved everyone's stories – I was becoming some later version of myself.

In a refugee camp, stories are everything. Everyone has one, having just slipped out from the grip of a nightmare. Everyone is idle, without permission to work or run away, reckoning now with a new place in the world. Everyone is a stranger, in need of introduction. And tea is cheap (at Barba, we all came from tea-drinking countries). What better conditions than these to brew a pot, sit on pillows around a low table and talk? At Barba, I learned to listen and to savour startling details, byproducts of a strange confluence that may never recur: a grandmother hiding bricks in her chador, a splash of cream across a handsome face, a stampede for jam.

It wasn't just a pastime. Our stories were drumming with power. Other people's memories transported us out of our places of exile, to rich, vibrant lands and to home. They reminded us of the long, unknowable road. We couldn't see yet, fresh from our escape, but other sharp

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turns lay ahead. We had created our life's great story; next would come the waiting time, camp, where we would tell it. Then struggle for asylum, when we would craft it. Then assimilation into new lives, when we would perform it for the entertainment of the native-born and finally, maybe in our old age, we would return to it, face it without frenzy: a repatriation.

For two decades, our escape defined me. It dominated my personality and compelled my every decision. By college, half my life had led up to our escape and the other half was spent reliving it, in churches and retreats where my mother made it a hagiographic journey, on college applications where it was a plea, at sleepovers where it was entertainment and in discussion groups after public viewings of xenophobic melodramas like *China Cry* and *Not Without My Daughter*, films about Christian women facing death and escaping to America. Our story was a sacred thread woven into my identity. Sometimes people asked, *But don't a lot of Christians live there?* or, *Couldn't your mother just say she was Muslim?* It would take me a long time to get over those kinds of questions. They felt like a bad grade, like a criticism of my face and body, an unravelling of that sacred thread: *I am rescued cargo; therefore, I am enchanted. I have purpose. With every good work, I repay the universe.* If I didn't have that, then I would be faceless, an ordinary person toiling for what? Soulless middle-class trifles?

Once in an Oklahoma church, a woman said, 'Well, I sure do get it. You came for a better life.' I thought I'd pass out – a better life? In Isfahan, we had yellow spray roses, a pool. A glass enclosure shot up through our living room and inside that was a tree. I had *a tree* inside my

house; I had the papery hands of Morvarid, my friend and nanny, a ninety-year-old village woman; I had my grandmother's fruit leather and Hotel Koorosh schnitzels and sour cherries and orchards and a farm – life in Iran was a fairytale. In Oklahoma, we lived in an apartment complex for the destitute and disenfranchised. Life was a big grey parking lot with cigarette butts baking in oil puddles, slick children idling in the beating sun, teachers who couldn't do math. I dedicated my youth and every ounce of my magic to get out of there. A better life? The words lodged in my ear like grit.

Gradually, all those retellings felt like pandering. The sceptics drew their conclusions based on details that I had provided them: my childhood dreams of KitKats and flawless bananas. My academic ambitions. I thought of how my first retelling was in an asylum office in Italy: how merciless that, with the sweat and dust of escape still on our brows, we had to turn our ordeal into a good, persuasive story or risk being sent back. Then, after asylum was secured, we had to relive that story again and again, to earn our place, to calm casual sceptics. Every day of her new life, the refugee is asked to differentiate herself from the opportunist, the *economic* migrant.

Like most refugees after a life-threatening escape, my family and I were compliant, ecstatic, grateful. But we had sustained damage. If the rational mind is a clean road, ours had potholes, pockets of paranoia and fear. Yes, I could summon joy and logic and change. But a single triggering word could trip me up for a day, a week, make me doubt my worth, my new place in this world. Am I a *real* refugee? The implication burned.

Why do the native-born perpetuate this distinction? Why

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harm the vulnerable with the threat of this stigma? It took me decades to know: the instinct to protect against competition from a talented horde. To draw a line around a birthright, a privilege. Unlike economic migrants, refugees have no agency; they are no threat. Often, they are so broken, they beg to be remade into the image of the native. As recipients of magnanimity, they can be pitied. I was a palatable immigrant because I programmed myself with chants: *I am rescued cargo. I will prove, repay, transform.* But if you are born in the Third World and you dare to make a move before you are shattered, your dreams are suspicious. You are a carpetbagger, an opportunist, a thief. You are reaching above your station.

There's something unnatural and sinister going on here.

My mother didn't think to question people's hardwired distinctions. Were we really refugees? She fended off that question by telling our story: she was almost murdered by the regime, so she shouldn't have to deal with people's prejudices. She fumed at stories of religious asylum seekers who had lied and she asked new arrivals about the Bible and their underground church – but unlike the native-born around us, she never asked anyone to prove their fear. A tortured mind, terror of a wasted future, is what enables you to abandon home, it's a prerequisite for stepping into a dinghy, for braving militarised mountains. No one who has lived under a dictatorship, who has scooped up their children and run to a bomb shelter, doubts the fear. To my mother, Christianity is too sacred to lie about and it's hard to accept that a rigid, illogical system leaves some no other choice, but, at the same time, she knows that the reasons for escape are complex and muddled. They always include a fear *and* a tangible hope. It's a reinvention that

grows out of your nightmares, but also your drive and agency. And so, the bureaucratic parsing of dangers from opportunity is grating and absurd. Where is the humility? The compassion?

And what is a credible danger in a country that hangs apostates and homosexuals and adulterers and where a hateful finger in your direction is enough to make you one? A country so corrupt that one mullah's whim can send you to the firing squad or the crane, your gallows, and the sunrise after challenging a *pasdar* can find you framed for drugs? A country where record keeping is a farce; where, in whispers, the land's riches are divided among a few; where young men languish without work; where young women wither with unspent ambition and desire; where the enchanting whisper of opium is always in your ear and despair fills your lungs so thickly that your best chance is to be your own executioner?

What is escape in such circumstances and what is just opportunistic migration? Who is a true refugee? It makes me chuckle, this notion that 'refugee' is a sacred category, a people hallowed by evading hell. Thus, they can't acknowledge a shred of joy left behind or they risk becoming migrants again. Modern Iran is a country of refugees making do with small joys, exiled from the pre-revolutionary paradise we knew. With the Iraq war over, their plight is often considered insufficient. Syria is hell. Afghanistan, South Sudan, Eritrea are hell. Iraq is . . . a bit less so? And Iran? What is hell enough for the West to feel responsible, not just as perpetrators of much of the madness, but as primary beneficiaries of the planet's bounty, who sit behind screens watching suspicious and limp-fisted as strangers suffer?

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Meanwhile, we assign our least talented, most cynical bureaucrats to be the arbiters of complicated truth, not instructing them to save lives, or search out the weary and the hopeless, but to root out lies, to protect our fat entitlements, our space, at any moral cost – it is a failure of duty. More infuriating is the word ‘opportunism’, a lie created by the privileged to shame suffering strangers who crave a small taste of a decent life. The same hopes in their own children would be labelled ‘motivation’ and ‘drive’.

And while we grumble over what we are owed and how much we get to keep, the displaced wait at the door. They are painters and surgeons and craftsmen and students. Children. Mothers. The neighbour who made the good sauce. The funny girl from science class. The boy who can really dance. The great-uncle who always turns down the wrong street. They endure painful transformation, rising from death, discarding their faces and bodies, their identities, without guarantee of new ones.

A Dutch officer asks an Iranian refugee, ‘Do you fear for your safety?’

He says, ‘Yes, my two friends and I were arrested as communists twenty years ago. Each week we check into the local police headquarters. Last week, both my friends disappeared after their check. I ran.’

‘Have you become involved with underground communists again?’

‘No,’ says the petitioner. He isn’t a dissident. But he *is* hunted.

‘Then you’re safe,’ says the officer. ‘It seems your friends resumed their political activities. But you didn’t, so you have no reason to fear.’

The assumption of the office isn't just thoroughness and justice on the part of the Iranian government (laughable), but also infallibility. How is one to honestly navigate such a dishonest, self-serving system? The savvy ones who have asked around know not to explain how the Islamic Republic works, how often innocent people disappear. They simply say, 'Yes, I got involved again,' so that the officer can check a box.

Escape marks the first day of a refugee's life. On the day we left home, I was told that I could live however I wished, that my gender would no longer limit my potential. And this was true. I was born out of Maman's Three Miracles. But already a limit had been imposed. Until now, the world waited for me to define myself. Would I be artistic or analytical? Shy or bold? Religious or secular? But now, my first category had been assigned: refugee, not native-born. I didn't realise it then, because escape is euphoric. It is a plunge into fog, a burning of an old life, a murder of a previous self.

Escape creates a chameleon, an alert creature always in disguise. What does that first blush feel like? An itch. For me, it was a daily, unrelenting discomfort in my mind and skin. It inflamed my OCD. I developed a tic in my neck. Changing colour soothed those pains for a time.

Now, thirty years have passed; I have so much to say. The world no longer speaks of refugees as it did in my time. The talk has grown hostile, even unhinged, and I have a hard time spotting, amid the angry hordes, the kind souls we knew, the Americans and the English and the Italians who helped us, who held our hands. I know they're still out there.

What has changed in three decades? A reframing is in

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order. I want to make sense of the world's reaction to us, of a political and historical crisis that our misfortunes have caused. I feel a duty: I've lived as an American for years, read Western books. I've been both Muslim and Christian. There are secrets I can show the native-born that new arrivals don't dare reveal. I've wished to say them for thirty years and found it terrifying till now.

In 2016, I began a journey to understand my own chaotic past. I was a new mother and confused about my purpose. I had changed my face and hair, my friends, my education, my country and job, so often that my skin felt raw. My memories had grown foggy and I had combed them ragged for fiction. I had prided myself on being a chameleon, as many immigrant children do, but now I felt muddled by it – I felt like a liar.

I spent months travelling. I went to refugee camps in Greece, to communities of undocumented Dutch. I visited immigration lawyers and homes of new arrivals. I drank tea with refugees and asylum seekers and naturalised citizens. I spoke with mothers, lone travellers, schoolchildren. I was looking for stories, for whispers of stories hidden by shame or trauma and for lies too. I searched for people from my own refugee hostel, Hotel Barba. I spoke to my parents, who reminded me of the many complications of point of view. During my travels, I came across dozens of stories; I have chosen a few to follow in these pages, tales all the more harrowing because they are commonplace now and, in the asylum office, often disbelieved.

And so, I've left out the story of the Syrian man I met in Berlin who floated with a child for seven hours then found himself cleaning a slave ship, or the jailed scholars or activists who are hit with public fatwas – even your

everyday Trumpian admits that those guys deserve rescue. I'm interested in doubt, in the feared 'swarms'. These are stories of uprooting and transformation without guarantees, of remaking the face and the body, those first murderous refugee steps – the annihilation of the self, then an ascent from the grave. Though their first lives were starkly different, these men and women were tossed onto the same road and judged together. Some of their stories are far from over, but they have already repeated them so often, practised and recited them so much, that these dramatic few months (or years) have become their entire identity. Nothing else matters to their listeners and all suffering seems petty after the miracle of escape. But did the miracle happen? Now their struggle isn't to hang on to life, but to preserve their history, to rescue that life from the fiction pile.

Though the truth of these stories struck me hard, I know that I, a writer, was peeking in different corners than the authorities. I wasn't looking for discrepancies. I abhor cynical traps that favour better translators and catch out trauma victims for their memory lapses. I don't have accent-verifying software. I saw the truth of these stories in corroborating scars, in distinct lenses on a single event, one seeing the back as vividly as another sees the front – no flat cutouts. I saw truth in grieving, fearful eyes, in shaking hands, in the anxiety of children and the sorrow of the elderly.

And yet, to recreate these stories, I was forced to invent scenes and dialogue, like retouching a faded photograph. Writers and refugees often find themselves imagining their way to the truth. What choice is there? A reader, like an interviewer, wants specific itches scratched. You will see.

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In the meantime, where is the lie? Every crisis of history begins with one story, the first drop in a gushing river. Consume these lives as entertainment, or education or threats to your person. It is your choice how to hear their voices. Use all that you know to spot every false stroke of the brush. Be the asylum officer. Or, if you prefer, read as you would a box of letters from a ruin, dispatches from another time that we dust off and readily believe, because the dead want nothing from us.

## II.

### DARIUS

Darius took a last drag from his cigarette and stamped it out on the tiles outside the tea shop. ‘Has she texted today?’ his friend asked.

‘No,’ said Darius. They were standing under Isfahan’s famous Thirty-Three Arches after an evening coffee and water pipe. ‘Let’s hope this means . . .’

‘Yes,’ said his friend. ‘A shame, though. Such a piece.’

Darius chuckled and said goodbye. On the way home, his pocket vibrated. Nowadays, each text sent an icy rivulet down his back. He glanced at his phone. It was her. *Dariuuuuuus. What’s going on?*

He stopped in the road to reply – quick disavowals. No games. *Please, Miss, stop texting. I’ve had so much trouble.*

She wrote again: *It’s fine. I just want to say bello.*

*Please delete my number. You’ll get me killed.*

He switched off his mobile and quickened his pace. It was already past ten. He was three streets from his house,

crossing a narrow alley, when they came. 'Hey, Seamstress!' a voice called. Darius was a tailor, a good one. He didn't care that they found it low. He was tall and handsome, and he knew how to make clothes that fit. One day he would have a chain of shops. One day he would make beautiful Western suits. Before he could turn, someone had punched him in the side of the neck. Then a baton bludgeoned his leg and he was down, holding his side to stay their kicks.

In the chaos, every detail detached from reality. The world narrowed to a series of sensations and his aching brain could only make room for snippets: that they were Basijis, the pitiless volunteer militia. That they were four, or five, young men. That he was so close to home that his parents could probably hear his screams. That one of them said, 'Leave Iran or die.'

He slept in the alley for an hour after they left. The last thing he heard was a distant echo down the alley, 'Don't let us see you again.'

Then he went home. The next day, the doctors stitched his face, arms and legs. His mother cried in her room. 'What a world these young people have inherited,' she wailed to his father. 'Twenty-three and our boy has known no other life. Remember the days before the revolution? Remember 1978?' Darius was born in 1992. The paradise of old Iran gave him no nostalgia, only curiosity and some pride. Still, he wished for a chance. To make a business, a life, a family. He wanted to tell that girl that he liked her company, though he rejected her two or three times a week. He wanted to take her for coffee, to see the wind tangle her hair, to watch her laugh in a cinema. Maybe they would fall in love. Maybe they wouldn't. They'd never

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know, because her parents, both Sepâh, both militant and revolutionary with jobs in the ministry, had found out and decided to kill him.

They had no interest in questioning their daughter, telling her their plans for him or hearing that she was the aggressor.

In a year, they returned for him. Darius's wounds had healed, but he had scars on his arms and face. He hadn't spoken to the girl again, though she tried. Now he sat at his mother's *sofreb* cloth, eating dinner with his parents. They knocked hard and his father answered. They tore into the house, knocking a vase over and stepping on the *sofreb* with their shoes.

'Have you texted the young lady again?' one of them barked.

'I swear, only to beg her not to text. I swear. You can look.' Darius tried to tell them that she didn't understand; that she felt safe because of her parents and so she thought he was safe too.

'So now it's the young lady's fault?' said the most senior Sepâh. They lifted him off his feet by his shirt and dragged him to their headquarters. He waited for hours. The Sepâh opened the door. He didn't ask questions, just lobbed accusations and waited for a reaction. Darius kept his gaze on the table. 'You have disgraced the daughter of Mr Mahmoodi.'

'No, sir. I didn't,' he said to the table.

'You are a communist operative.'

'No, sir, I'm a tailor. I make shirts.'

'You have been drinking.'

'No, sir.' He was so tired. It didn't matter what he said. A guard entered, whispered to the Sepâh about drug

trafficking. They intended for Darius to hear. He wanted to weep – they would never let him go. He would die on a crane or facing a firing squad, before he turned thirty.

‘You’ve been drinking and you attacked Basiji officers in the street,’ said the guard. When he shook his head, the Sepâh knocked him in the temple with the butt of a huge rifle. Darius toppled off his chair. He gripped the table leg and pulled his legs into his stomach, like a newborn. Before he lost consciousness, he felt another two blows to his head, then one to his back, just behind his heart. They were striking to kill.

He woke in the hospital with his parents standing over him. His body felt light, his mouth dry. He had been in a coma for three months.

‘You can’t stay in Iran,’ said his father. ‘They’ll kill you.’

His mother had explained that they had visited the house almost weekly. ‘Your son is anti-regime. He has problems with Islam. He’s a drug dealer. An apostate. An underground operative. His blood is halal for us.’

It seemed that was all they wanted – to establish that Darius’s blood was halal. When his parents went to complain of harassment, every officer said that Darius had attacked Basijis in the street. ‘If they get you in the street again,’ said his father, ‘you’ll be dead. Please, I have some money. Take it and get out and live some kind of life. You can make home anywhere if you try. Find happiness away from here.’

Darius spent two weeks letting his siblings feed him as he recovered some of the fifteen kilos he had lost. He took his pills. Pockets of black formed in his memory. His body was covered in scars now – his arms, face, neck, legs. Every morning his parents begged him to leave.

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When asked to describe his journey, Darius forgets things. He recalls details out of order. His head pounds. Once, in a halfway house, all his muscles clenched and a tic twisted up half his body for hours. He is a single man; he looks fit and isn't yet so jaded that he can't laugh now and then. But he stumbles into dark patches; he loses details as a liar would. He is rarely believed. 'Economic migrant,' they call him, seeing only his youth and potential. In newspapers and on his iPhone, Europeans are always debating how much refugees will contribute; they claim to *want* the economically beneficial kind, the 'good' immigrants. And yet, they welcome only those with a foot in the grave. Show any agency or savvy or industry *before* you left your home and you're done. People begin imagining you scheming to get out just to get rich off an idea (or a surgery or an atelier). They consider the surgery or atelier that doesn't yet exist as property stolen from *them*. The minute you arrive, though, even if you *did* have a foot in the grave, God help you if you need social services for a while.

Darius drove to Urmia, an Iranian city near the border with Turkey. From there, with the help of a smuggler, he crossed the mountain on foot. He wore trainers and the mountain crossing took him forty-five minutes. Every few steps he thought he felt the gunshot in his leg or back. If he fell, he knew, the smuggler would leave him. 'Now you're in Turkey,' said the smuggler, somewhere on the mountain. 'I turn back here. Good luck.'

In the Turkish village, he was driven to a mud hut and taken for twice the agreed fee. 'Call your family and ask for more,' they said. 'The journey was more treacherous

than expected.’ He recalled no hardship that hadn’t been explained before the trip, but single young men from Iran rarely stir up sympathy – economic migrants, exploiters, opportunists. He paid. He sat in the hut for four days, awaiting the next step, though this one was already disappearing into the dark patches, the spoiled, battered parts of his brain.

The first airboat was too full. Sixty, including many exhausted children watching Darius with shy eyes. A few metres in, it toppled, releasing its occupants into the Aegean. All luggage washed away. The strong swam back, not daring to imagine what had become of the others, those tired children. Darius ran into the woods, where Turkish officers picked him up and took him to jail.

He wasted away in a Turkish jail cell for two months. He had no papers, gave a false name and spent his days in a delirium. Trapped in a fever dream, he remembers little – it is so easy to doubt him. He spent that time with his eyes closed. They released him when his brain medicines ran out. Too much trouble. ‘Get out of Turkey,’ they said, and he tried to oblige.

On his next try, Darius’s boat made it to Lesbos. As joyful men jumped out and began pulling the boat ashore, a voice nearby whispered, ‘Don’t celebrate too soon. This is where the hardship really starts.’

‘We’re in Europe,’ said Darius, to the dark. ‘We’re on free soil.’

‘But we’re not going into Europe. We’re going to Moria.’

III.

I was born in 1979, a year of revolution, and grew up in wartime. The itch in my brain arrived as war was leaking into our everyday – sirens, rations, adults huddled around radios. It announced itself one lazy afternoon in our house in Isfahan, between the yellow spray roses and the empty swimming pool, whispering that I might take a moment to count my pencils. Then, that night, it grew bolder, suggesting that the weight of the blanket be distributed evenly along my arms. The itch became a part of me, like the freckle above my lip. It wasn't the side effect of *this* blistering morning at the Abu Dhabi United Nations office or *that* aimless month in an Italian resettlement camp. Those days simply made it unbearable.

Even in Ardestoon, my father's village, where I tiptoed with my cousins along a riverbank, picked green plums in leafy orchards and hiked in mountains, the itch endured. It made me tuck my grandmother's chestnut hair into her chador with the edges of my hands, circling her face and squeezing her cheeks until I was satisfied. It took up space in my personality, as the freckle did above my lip, so that now and then I tried to straighten the papery skin of my ninety-year-old nanny, Morvarid, pressing my palms across her forehead as one would an old letter. I picked everyone's scabs. Zippers had to be forced past the end of the line. Sometimes when furious, the itch showed up as a tic in my neck. At other times, it helped me be better. It made me colour inside the lines. It made my animals sit in a row. I didn't miss any part of a story, because I triple checked page numbers.

Now and then Maman joked that I was becoming fussy like Maman Masi and Morvarid, that I was becoming a tiny old lady. This was fine with me – I loved their floral chadors that smelled of henna, their ample laps and looping, gossipy stories, their dirty jokes. As a toddler, I marched around in an old flowery chador that Morvarid had sewn for me. I wore it so much it started to make my hair fall out. In a fit of anger, Maman tore it to pieces.

At school, my scarf was lopsided and my handwriting a disaster, but my math was perfect. The teachers in my Islamic Republic girls' school were witchy creatures who glistened in brutal black chadors. They didn't lean down and tuck in your stray hairs. They billowed past. They struck rulers against soft palms. They shouted surnames at six-year-old girls: *Nayeri*. *Ardestani*. *Khalili*. *Shirinpour*. The minute you turned your headscarf inside out to cool your damp neck, they appeared, swaddling your bare skin again with their own hot breath. The school was stifling and militant women were empowered to steer girls away from Western values – this made them cruel. If they didn't like your work, they tore it to shreds as you sat humiliated, picking splinters off your unsanded desk. They taped weekly class rankings to the grey cement wall outside the classroom window. Every week twenty girls rushed that wall. The schoolyard was a concrete block. Opposite the classrooms was a putrid cave of water fountains and dirty squat toilets, the ground a mess of wet Kleenexes and cherry pits and empty tamarind packets that oozed brown goo into the drain. I liked to keep my back to it. But that meant facing the rankings, and if you turned another way you had the nightmarish Khomeini mural and, on the fourth wall, the enormous bloody martyr fist (and rose).

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The only way to have a safe place to look was to be number one on the rankings.

One morning, Khadijeh, whose name routinely appeared at the bottom of the list, released a quiet river of pee at her desk. She never moved. She sat still as her grey uniform slowly darkened below the waist, as drops of sweat released her bangs from her scarf and she wept without a sound. She had fallen three sentences behind in the dictée and given up, not just on the test, but on the whole business of civilisation. What a quick, uncomplicated solution, to go feral: to sit there, leaking, waiting to be dragged out by a murder of Islamic Republic schoolteachers, listening for the snap and swish of the principal's chador down the hall.

On the day of Khadijeh's quiet surrender, I was number one on the list so I had a place to look.

At day's end, I took the short way home, down alleyways lined with drainage gutters where live fish travelled the old city. I ran to my room and thought of Khadijeh, how she had just let go. I pitied and envied her. I knelt to examine my pencil tips, then checked the bookshelf for the seven books I had recently bought and the four I had bought before that. It wouldn't be right to count to eleven – I had to count the seven books, then the four. And the next time I bought books, say three of them, I would count the three, the seven and if I still remembered them, the four, each time I left my room. When I was finished, I breathed deeply until the thing floating too high in my chest (I imagined a metal bar) had moved back down, away from my throat. Years later, when I heard the story of Sisyphus, I said, 'like pushing down the bar,' and tapped my chest; my teacher frowned.

The following week, during silent reading time, a present arrived for me. This was custom. If you ranked high, your parents could send a gift to be presented to you in front of the class. Ms Yadolai, my first-grade teacher, an old woman I loved and whose name is the only one I remember, brought in the gift to my third-grade classroom. She was Baba's dental patient, so he must have delivered the package to her. Baba never bothered with details; he entrusted everything to friends. It was a book of constellations. Everyone clapped. I lifted the lid of my desk and slipped the book inside next to my pencils and the tamarind packet I had squeezed from a corner and rolled shut, like toothpaste.

Khadijeh never came back.

I was instructed to work on my handwriting. I sat with Baba on the living-room carpet, an elaborate red Nain knotted on Maman Masi's own loom; we ate sour cherries with salt and we practised. I asked Baba about Khadijeh. He said that everyone was made for a certain kind of work and maybe Khadijeh had realised early that school wasn't for her. This is why I had to earn twenties in every subject, to distinguish myself from the Khadijehs of the world and to reach my great potential. 'You are the smartest,' said Baba. 'You can be a doctor or engineer or diplomat. You won't have to do housework. You'll marry another doctor. You'll have your PhD.' His voice contained no doubt or worry. It was just how things were destined to be. 'Your mother came in seventeenth for the Konkour. Not seventeenth percentile. Seventeenth person in the country.' If I had to make a list of mantras from my childhood, it would certainly include: *not seventeenth percentile, seventeenth person*. My mother's national university

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entrance exam result was legend. I came from test-taking stock.

We did such good work, Baba and I. He emptied his pockets of pistachio and chocolate and sour cherry and we sat together on the floor, cross-legged and knee-to-knee, whispering secrets and jokes as we drew bold, stouthearted Ks and Gs. I clicked our finished pages into my rawhide messenger bag and, the next day, I took them to show my teacher, a woman whom we called only by the honorific *Khanom*.

Khanom scanned my pages as I straightened up in my chair, my hands tucked beneath my haunches. She frowned and exhaled heavily through her nose. Then she glanced at the girls watching us from the edges of their scarves, tapped the pages straight against my desktop and tore them in half. She reached for my practice notebook and tore the used pages in that too, taking care not to destroy any unused ones. This was to show me that my work was worth less than those unfilled pages.

Tears burned in my nose. I imagined a metal storm-door shutting over my eyeballs, so that nothing could get out. I reminded myself of Khadijeh, her watery surrender. I imagined that under her chador Khanom's skin was dry and scaly and she needed girlish tears to soften her, as she couldn't afford black-market Nivea Creme. I tried to pity her for that.

A few years before first grade, my family had spent three months in London. There, my mother had converted to Christianity. Since our return, teachers had been probing me for information. Maman and Baba were respected in Isfahan. They had medical offices and friends and degrees from Tehran University. Maman had round, melancholy

eyes and Diana haircuts in jet-black. She wore elegant dresses and a stethoscope. Her briefcase was shiny polished leather. No schoolgirl rawhide and click-buckle for her. But Maman was an apostate now, handing out tracts to her patients, a huge cross dangling in her windshield. Baba may have remained respected and generous and Muslim, but that wasn't enough to protect me from abuse when I declared myself Maman's ally.

'What is your religion?' the teachers would ask, every day during recess. They would pull me aside, to a bench between the toilet cave and the nightmarish Khomeini mural and they would ask this again and again.

'I'm Christian,' I would say. In those days, I thought Muslim literally meant 'a bad person', and no individual or event helped dispel that notion – not even Baba or his mother, Maman Masi, who was devout. We lived under constant threat of Iraqi bombs. We endured random arrests, executions, morality police roving the streets for sinful women (*Gashte-Ershad* or 'Guidance Patrol', they now call it). Though they were picked off and dragged to gruesome fates, the underground Christians we had befriended seemed consumed with kindness. Meanwhile, my teachers pecked hungrily at us all day, looking for a chance to humiliate.

Later in life, far from Isfahan, I would meet kindhearted Muslims and learn that I had been shown half a picture: that all villainy starts on native soil, where rotten people can safely be rotten, where government exists for their protection. It is only amongst the outsiders, the rebels, foreigners and dissidents that welcome is easily found. Since our return from London, we had lost our native rights; we were exiles in our own city, eyes suddenly open

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to the magic and promise of the West and to the villains we had been.

In 1985, when I was nearly six and hadn't yet attended my Islamic girls' school, we visited my beloved Maman Moti – Maman's mother – in London. Years before, Maman Moti had run away to England, leaving all but one daughter behind. That spring, we went to watch my Aunt Sepideh, Maman's youngest sister, marry an Englishman. Our stay was temporary, a visit followed by a half-hearted stab at emigration. It only lasted a few months, but I was enrolled in school for the first time. I spoke only Farsi.

At the airport, the guards tore through our things. Baba seemed unbothered as he unzipped his suitcases and buttered up the guards. 'Ei Vai, did I leave an open pack of Lucky Strikes with my shirts? Agha, you have them. The smell will ruin the fabric . . . I smoke Mehrs, but people give the strangest things to their dentist.'

We were surrounded by so much clamour and haste. A guard picked up Babaejooon, a beloved stuffed sheep, and turned him over in his hand. He took out a knife and ripped open its belly, pulling out its stuffing while my brother, Khosrou, cried on Maman's shoulder. 'Be brave, Khosrou jooon,' Baba said. 'They have to check so bad people don't smuggle things.'

Though Babaejooon had been my gift after tonsil surgery, his death became my brother's trauma, because at the time of his disembowelment, Babaejooon was Khosrou's sheep. I soothed myself by reciting everyone's ages: Aunt Sepi was nineteen. Maman was twenty-eight. Maman Moti was forty-four. I was five, Khosrou two. The airline served saffron rice pudding.

That night, I slept beside Maman Moti, whom I called my city grandmother. With her rolled hair and silky blouses, she was the opposite of Maman Masi, whose henna hair I had never seen below her temples. I heard a noise. Maman Moti was praying. ‘Can I pray too?’ I asked. She told me about Jesus and love and freedom and I believed. Soon, Maman became a Christian too. Everything was a miracle after that. Maman’s metal allergy? Gone. Because of Jesus she could wear bangles again. Every night, I heard Baba shouting through the wall. What was this insanity? Didn’t she have enough sense to know that all religions were manipulative and irrational? Hadn’t she just watched her own country fall into religious madness?

My parents had a terrible marriage, screaming-throwing fights that lasted into the early hours. He was addicted to an unnamable demon something. She would stage detoxes for him and he would sit shaking for a day or two, until some animal part of him burst out and chased her for the keys. At first, these were medical rages. Later, they were rages of coming loss. I heard stories of their courtship when Baba used to hide raw almonds around the house and write clues in verse for her to decipher, because he knew she loved riddles. He was as addicted to poetry and riverside picnics as he was to his pipe. At family meals or parties, eyes flitted to the door until he arrived. And yet, I was afraid of him. When I was two he had pulled out my front teeth because the tonsil surgeon had broken them on his way into my mouth.

In London, Baba sensed a looming danger in Maman’s new calling. Devotion to a faraway god, too, can be a powerful addiction.

For many nights, Maman sat up with her distant mother,

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a woman young enough to be her peer and whose elusive love had been Maman's lifelong grail. They drank tea and discussed purpose and belief. My mother, Sima, was Moti's second daughter: she wasn't the infallible, beautiful eldest, Soheila, after whom Moti pined most, or her only son or the precious youngest she had scooped up on the day she ran away to England, the only person she hadn't left behind and in whom she had invested all her English hopes. Maman was only the dutiful second. The one who read her medical books and cooked for her broken family. The one who obeyed. No one had taught her that this is how you get overlooked. She married young and found herself tricked: he was an addict. Maman hated being a doctor. Seventeenth on the Konkour meant the family gave her no choice but medicine. If she had confessed that sometimes she dreamed of owning a farm, they would've laughed – her father was a mayor. She went to medical school, married Baba. She found kindness with Baba's Maman Masi, a sweet farm-woman with turmeric-stained fingers who hugged and kissed, fed and praised. Maman Masi was old enough to be a mother to grownups.

By the time we arrived in London, Maman was strung out and ready for life to start meaning something fast. Trapped in the Islamic Republic, she craved rebellion, freedom. Too conservative for feminism, she reached for the next best thing: Jesus. Now she shared something more vital with her mother than Soheila ever had. Now she stood for an ideal that even the Islamic Republic couldn't take away, because she was willing to die for it.

Maman Moti boasted that she had the gift of prophecy. She had dreamed that, one day, her four children would gather around her in the West and they would all be true

believers. Having fulfilled her duty, Maman smiled and started on dinner.

What does it mean to believe *truly*? I don't know any more, though I did then. Maman believed in Jesus more than I had seen her believe in anything and that made him real. Every night, we both spoke to him, either alone or together, with more passion than we'd spoken to anyone.

We celebrated my sixth birthday with strawberry cake in the park in Golders Green. We let ice cream drip onto our fingers. We saw ginger hair, platinum hair, dark-coffee skin. We bought bananas and wandered the city without fear of bomb sirens or morality police. Maman and Maman Moti let their over-brushed curls fall onto their shoulders. I learned to write from the left side of the page and bought three new toys: a ballerina that danced on a podium, a Barbie doll and a row of penguins that climbed some steps and slid down a curly slide. Baba had paid a tailor to sew and pad tins of Iranian caviar into the lining of his suitcase. He passed them out one night at a pre-wedding celebration.

When the suitcases were stashed away, I began to imagine a free life in England. I believed that we had moved to be with my dear, elegant Maman Moti and Gigi, her pompous cat. I was going to school. I would learn English. They let me believe this.

The children were welcoming at first, teaching me English words using toys and pictures, helping me figure out the cubbies and milk line. But after a few days, a group of boys began to meet me in the yard and, pretending to play, pummel me in the stomach. Each morning it seemed a little less like play. They followed me in the playground and shouted gibberish, laughing at my dumbfounded looks.

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Maman Moti told me to pray and imagine God protecting me.

One day, I was playing with some girls, pretending the door handle to the art studio was an ice cream dispenser. The art studio was a freestanding room (like a shed) in the middle of the blacktop and we often ran in and out of it during playtime. As I pulled on the handle, a boy grabbed my hand and shoved it into the doorjamb. Another boy slammed it shut and I heard a sickening crunch.

At first it didn't hurt – just a prick at the base of my pinky nail and a numbness spreading up through my hand. But then there was blood – a lot of it – seeping out of the hinge and creeping down the doorframe. The teachers ran across the playground, shouting foreign sounds. I felt my breath changing and climbing to the top of my throat where it grew quick and shallow. When I pulled my hand away, a piece of my pinky dangled by a shred of skin and fell to the ground. The boy looked ill, all pasty and slack-jawed. He didn't run away. I was sticky with blood up to my elbow, the red smears covering the front of my shirt and now my face, too. I had wiped at my tears without thinking. That's when the fire sparked in the place of my missing nail and shot up my arm and down the side of my torso.

I howled.

If I had been seven, maybe I would have handled it better. Maybe I would have collected enough English words by then to keep that gang of blond boys from tormenting me every day, from punching me in the stomach, from grabbing my ponytail at lunch. Maybe, if I were seven, I would understand the words the teachers were shouting at me now.

I soaked through the first napkin, then a second, until the springy blacktop under my feet was covered in red blossoms. Amid the chaos, one of the adults picked up the tiny piece of my finger. She wrapped it in another paper napkin and gave it to me and that made sense. It was a piece of my body. I should keep it. I held my finger-bundle tightly against my chest as I was rushed to the hospital.

No one asked me about it, until it was my turn to be with the doctor, a broad-shouldered man my parents' age. More blond hair, this time over a kind face. I held the napkin out to him. He examined the nub and smiled at me. I didn't understand what he said, but my mother was there and she said that it was very clever of me to save it. I closed my eyes as he sewed the tip of my finger back on. 'The nail won't grow back,' the doctor said to my mother, and I saw the grief in her face when she told me instead that it might not grow as fast as the others.

We drove home through the foggy streets, the same streets I had seen in cartoons and picture books back in Isfahan, with bananas sprouting from fruit stands, bunches of helium balloons and ice cream with two sticks of Flake. What miracles England had offered me in just a month. Despite the ache in my hand, I still loved these streets. I wanted to walk up and down my grandmother's road in West Hendon, looking for change so I could buy Maltesers and real KitKats (with the logo in the chocolate) and Hula Hoops. I wanted to go to the park in Golders Green and visit the incredible Mothercare shop and the adjoining McDonald's in Brent Cross. I wanted to keep collecting English words so I

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could ask my classmates all the questions I was storing up for the day my tongue adjusted and we could be friends.

*Did you know it takes a week to eat through a pack of tamarind?*

*What is at the bottom of shepherd's pie and why does it resist so nicely when I put my fork in it?*

*Who is Wee Willie Winkie? Am I the only one who finds him sinister?*

*Where are your hammams? Why do you bathe next to the toilet?*

*How can you bring yourself to sit . . . on a toilet?*

*I love your yellow hair; your red freckles; your chocolate-brown skin.*

*Do you want to come to Maman Moti's and meet Gigi, her snooty cat?*

But I didn't do or ask any of those things. I didn't know the words.

That night Maman Moti told me to pray. 'Thank God he could sew it back on,' she said. I dreamed Jesus was sitting by my bed. Again, I believed.

In the chatter of grownups from my grandmother's church and in my parents' soothing whispers, I heard a steady refrain about gratitude and my lucky finger. God had protected me. It was my moment to shine! But I was furious. *Why isn't anyone angry? Someone should punish that boy.*

I never went back to that school. I kept wondering why those boys had been so nice to me that first day, before they began stalking me in the yard. Years later, I figured that must have been how long it took them to tell their parents about the Iranian girl.

A few weeks later, we were back in Isfahan. I was sent to an Islamic school for girls and told that no cruel British boys would follow me. Here at home, I was safe. The

school issued me a headscarf that obscured my neck and hair. They draped my body in a shapeless grey *manteau*. Nothing was simple or practical; nothing was as I liked. And so, one day in the first grade, I started counting things on my lucky fingers.

We returned altered. Now we were converts in the Islamic Republic, illegal Christians in an underground church. We endured three nightmare years before the day of our escape – three years of arrests and threats, of armed revolutionary guards (*pasdars* or Sepâh) slipping into the back seat of our car at traffic stops, bursting into Maman’s medical office. Three years of daily terrors and Maman’s excuses about faith and higher callings.

It was a daily whiplash. The idyllic village life of my father on Fridays, sitting in my sweet grandmother’s lap, kissing her henna hair, listening to her reedy voice, eating her plum chicken or barberry rice, then travelling back to the city, to another phase of Saddam Hussein’s War of the Cities (a series of missiles that killed thousands in 1987 alone) that waited at our doorstep. Every few days sirens blared. We taped our windows and ran to basements, where we chatted in the dark with our neighbours.

That Maman chose this moment to become a religious activist out of her medical office baffled Baba – they fought night after night. Making a life after the revolution had been hard work. Baba had learned which patients to prioritise, which palms to grease, which tailor altered suitcases, whom to smoke with in relative safety. But now Maman hurried down unsafe streets pulling two children along, her scarf falling back as she slipped into strange doors to meet Christians. She broadcast her story over an illegal

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Christian radio station, tucked tracts into women's chadors under the nose of the morality police and did everything a person could do to draw attention to her apostasy. *Maybe she feels guilty*, Baba thought. She had once been a devout Muslim and though she was never political, preferring to make her strict, conservative father happy, Maman *had* joined other medical students in the streets to protest the Shah, willingly covering her hair.

Teachers began to pull me away at recess. When I tried to opt out of weekly Islam classes, they held me in the schoolyard and told me that Maman would be jailed, beaten, maybe killed.

When I told Baba that Khanom had torn our proud, far-reaching Ks and Gs, his eyes flashed. My Baba was known for his pleasure-seeking ways: his riotous humour, his sumptuous feasting, his devotion to poetry. We were kindred spirits in our secret excesses. His vices, though, weren't all bright and merry. He loved the poppy and it made him rage. His anger was slow to ignite, but God help you if you were the one to light him up.

The next day in the schoolyard, we lined up by grade and performed our required chants, straining our small lungs. An older girl, a fourth- or fifth-grader, pressed her lips to a bullhorn and led us in muffled pledges we didn't understand: *I am the daughter of the revolution. I am the flower of my country. Death to America. Death to Israel.*

Then Baba stormed through the metal gate, striding in his Western shirt and tie past the Khomeini mural. In seconds the principal and two teachers were surrounding him, nodding, lifting and lowering hands. I could only hear snippets. 'Yes, Dr Nayeri . . .' ' . . . I'll speak with her . . .' ' . . . Sir, we're in the middle . . .' When old Ms Yadolai

arrived, he calmed down, because she was sweet and harmless, like Maman Masi, his mother.

Then Khanom stepped out from in front of our line and started toward him. Suddenly she looked small, like one of us. Was she twenty? Twenty-five? She was trying to look strong, professional, but Baba was on a crusade. He wanted her heart. ‘She’s just a child!’ he shouted across the blacktop as he approached her at twice her pace. ‘You’re a grown woman. She isn’t responsible . . . She’s not your enemy.’ Khanom began muttering that this was only about the handwriting. Baba railed on. ‘She worked hard and I checked the work. How dare you! Where did you go to university?’

I noted that the last question was germane to the proceedings. That it affected her credibility, her allotment of power against my father. Baba was no sexist. If she had lifted her shoulders, bellowed out ‘Tehran University’ and defended her actions, if she had said, ‘Dina is chatty, fussy and odd. She has an itch in the brain and bad handwriting and one of her eyes is too small,’ he would have shown *some* respect for her methods. I know this because Baba – though he smoked opium and beat my mother and was incapable of lifting a finger for himself – instructed me never to cower to men. If you flinch, they will hit harder. Show your fangs, not your throat. But this was 1987 Isfahan and most Babas didn’t teach their daughters these things. The poor woman didn’t have the training.

She cried. She leaked before a man who shook his head at her and walked away, stopping to wave to his daughter who stood spellbound in a row of muppetty grey heads, quietly growing a coarse new skin.

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That night we walked along the Thirty-Three Arches and Baba took us to Hotel Koorosh, my favourite restaurant, where Baba and other local doctors had a membership. We ate schnitzel and crème caramel on white tablecloths. We drank yoghurt soda with three sprigs of mint. I knew now that my teacher wasn't scaly or witchy or a demoness and that it was important not to bend. And I knew that I was capable of rooting for someone who wasn't totally on the right side of a thing. In war, villainy and good change hands all the time, like a football.

A few days later, Maman was stopped in the streets by the *Gashte-Ersbad*. We were at a traffic stop and my younger brother, Khosrou, opened the back door and jumped out into the madness of Isfahani morning traffic. I was in the front seat beside Maman, so I didn't see him do it. All I saw was Maman throwing the car into park and hurling her body out of the car, dashing across three lanes and snatching him up. In the process, her scarf slipped back a few inches revealing half a head of loose hair. Then we heard the shouting, a *pasdar* was pointing and ranting at Maman. 'Watch your hijab, woman!' As he crossed the asphalt, his shouting grew louder, angrier. He began to curse, calling her vile names.

'My son ran into traffic,' she said. She had already fixed her hijab so that every strand was tucked away. But he towered over her, threatening, spitting. They stood by the open driver's side door. If he had leaned in, he would have seen the huge cross hanging on her rearview mirror. Maybe he would have made an issue of it. He shouted a few more times, gave Maman a warning and returned to the other officers watching us from their car.